



JAN OSKAR BENDER (1909 – 1994)

. . . (“Jan” to his many friends), lived a remarkable life traced for us in writings by his students.ⁱ Although Jan earned gratitude for forging links between the European church music renewal movements espoused by Hugo Distler (Jan’s one-time composition teacher) and American Lutheranism, there is more than his music to remember. Jan also gave all church musicians a sense of how work and life might become true doxology.

Jan’s doxological life was forged by strong faith in the face of adversity. Born in Holland, he lost his father at an early age, then moved to Lübeck, Germany, with his mother. In his early career as organist he stood firmly against the Nazi pastor who was forced onto his congregation, thus earning three months in a concentration camp. As a military draftee, he participated in the horrific Russian campaign, eventually losing his left eye to a serious shrapnel wound and facing possible death as he lay between track ruts while tanks rumbled back and forth over him.ⁱⁱ Later, while serving on the western front, he became a prisoner of the Americans; and they helped him, a prisoner, to begin writing music again. In all this, Jan held on to a simple faith and thankfulness to God for his good fortunes.

After World War II friendships played a role in launching his eventual American career. Earlier, as a student in Leipzig, he had met Fred Otto (later the founder of Chantry Press). He formed additional links with Daniel Moe (who would become a faculty member at Oberlin

College) and Theodore Hoelty-Nickel (music department head at Valparaiso University). Subsequently these friends supported American publication, largely through Concordia Publishing House, of Jan's biblical motets and organ preludes. These same friends, particularly Hoelty-Nickel, helped arrange calls, first to Concordia Teachers College (Seward, Nebraska) and then to Wittenberg University (Springfield, Ohio). Jan served for short terms also at the University of Denver, Valparaiso University, Gustavus Adolphus College, and Concordia Seminary (St. Louis).ⁱⁱⁱ

Jan was clearly sparked by an adventuresome spirit, drawn to whatever lay over the horizon. He radiated a quiet but persistent sense of humor that could not be missed. Even his glass eye sometimes added to a sense of whimsy as he humorously chided a lax student or noted the apparent lack of diligence in a composition assignment. These personal characteristics might be linked to his emphasis on imagination in music. While he insisted on craft, careful practice, and rigorous respect for the rules, he did not hesitate to break those rules himself on occasion. He might even allow his students to do so for good reason (*only after* the rules were mastered!). It was all part of the adventure, the search for the new thing over the horizon. In fact, it was the inventive breaking of boundaries that gained attention for one of his earliest, successful publications (*90 kleine Choralvorspiele*, Op. 2) and thus accelerated his career.

Jan encouraged his students to explore their own inventiveness while making music that served all people. This version of creativity was not "art for art's sake," but for the sake of the liturgy and worshiping people of every background. He saw his own compositions as a bridge across boundaries that brought music also to non-musical people, a true *Gebrauchsmusik* ("useful music"), affirming that the "gap between very advanced music and the Christian layman becomes [*sic*] so far that it cannot be understood anymore; therefore, I dared to consider my

work as a bridge between them.”^{iv} Life as doxology, then, was achieved in helping others to worship using God’s good gift of music.

Jan’s doxological life extended into the warm, loving home where he and his wife Charlotte (“Lotte”) often received students. He also built bridges of humor and care to his students, even when his German accent proved puzzling or his craftsmanship intimidating. It led him, trained in the highest traditions of the German conservatory and steeped in German culture, to maintain friendships with a Nebraska farmer and with students who became life-long friends.

Of course, there was also his musical influence. Bender brought to the American church what it deeply needed at the time. As Distler’s composition student he was able to show Americans the new sounds of that gifted composer. He taught musical craftsmanship in counterpoint, the importance of the imagination in composing the “new song,” and devotion to the chorale in congregational singing. He was servant enough to create small preludes as well as expansive cantatas or instrumental psalms. He knew, as too few others did, how music could truly serve the liturgy and thus bring forth our common doxology. In many respects he helped us make use of the music of Distler, Ernst Pepping, or Johann Nepomuk David. Because of that American composers such as Ludwig Lenel and Richard Hillert were themselves able to explore new idioms, encouraging us with their own music to live doxological lives like that of Jan Bender.

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For Further Reference

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ⁱ Note especially the early (and therefore partial) biography by David Herman or the "Catalog" by David Fienen.

ⁱⁱ These accounts were reported by Robert Bergt based on his personal conversations with Jan Bender.

ⁱⁱⁱ It was in St. Louis that I became more closely acquainted with Prof. Bender.

^{iv} As quoted by Herman (1979), p. 64.