

Anton Armstrong

Interviewed by Peter Myers at St. Olaf College, January, 2009

Q: Why was F. Melius Christiansen important?

A F. Melius brought a type of choral singing to the US in the cultivation of the acapella choral program that really was distinctive, if not unique, for its day. At that time, when he started the St. Olaf Choir, primarily choral singing happened either in the college glee clubs which were much more of a social element with some singing involved and it still is what characterizes still a great deal of choral singing in the east coast and the university level. Or it was the pattern or the model of the large choral societies based on the English Victorian choral models. Even at that point, we didn't have the volunteer church choir as we know it today. In the Roman Catholic Church and some of the Anglican churches and the very well to do churches out of the Methodist and Presbyterian traditions you might have had paid choirs. Certainly men and boys choirs in the Roman Catholic and Anglican tradition and in the other types of churches you would have had paid quartets, maybe paid octets. But the idea of the volunteer church choir really had not come into its own at this point. It was F. Melius bringing this brand of acapella – unaccompanied choral singing – that certainly had encountered not only in Norway but even more specifically during his two periods of study in Leipzig, that he brought this idea of bringing church music, music heavily based on the choral motet tradition that he had studied and observed during his stay in Leipzig and which he incorporated into his own compositional style, and bringing that to this educational institution. There is a parallel also. If you look at back in the Middle Ages, early Renaissance, when Martin Luther was beginning the Lutheran schools and in each of those situations he cultivated choirs as another means of teaching the faith. And in this way when Melius Christianson came to St. Olaf, he saw this as another primary means of not just preserving a brand of church music. Indeed for him, he was frightened that the younger, new generation of immigrants were going to lose their knowledge and their practice of singing the great chorale melodies. But he brought that as a structural and a foundation to the repertoire of the St. Olaf choir. So it was artistically, yes. But it was also very much his attempt to teach the faith through the music, and the reason that the chorales became such a focal point of his early compositional style.

Q How would you describe the gradual evolution of the St. Olaf Choir sound?

A I think what needs to be recognized is first of all F. Melius was not a singer. He was...his way of making music was first as a violinist, in his very earliest years as a clarinetist but certainly as a violinist, and an organist. So what he brought to the choral environment was, I think, a wider perception of what great musicality was about – good intonation, the understanding of good unisons and how they were achieved and he sought voices that could realize his inner ear, in a sense. But from what I've been told by people who sang under F. Melius and who had contact with him, he really was not one who practiced a vocal pedagogy. And to be honest, in most of his writings you never hear him talk about straight tone. In doing my dissertation I went through most of his writings and the closest thing that I could find was that he described one time his idea tone. Today you might not consider it politically correct, but he talked about it resembling...the sound should sound straight like an Indian woman's hair. That's how he phrased it. But certainly if you go back to his own artistry as a violinist, part of the

idea would be that type of intonation which there was a very clear center to the pitch with little deviation. So he sought voices that would replicate that. The same type of sound you would hear in a violin, the same type of tuning you would hear in a well-tuned organ. Those, I think, are much more the type of things that affected F. Melius. Now as went literally from father to son, Olaf especially had studied voice. He went to study with some very well known pedagogues of his day in New York after his graduation from St. Olaf and then during the years that he taught first Michigan and then later the twelve years he spent at Oberlin, he was teaching voice and conducting and being influenced by that type of sound. And when he came back to St. Olaf he brought, I think, an approach based strongly on vowel color, vowel uniformity, that really brought a type of conformity to the sound. I think certainly within the confines of St. Olaf College, as he brought in more of his students who became his colleagues - namely Kenneth Jennings and Alice Larson in the 1950's, followed by Robert Schulz - these were people who brought in a freer way of singing. Alice Larson herself, while a conductor, known as a conductor, always saw herself really as a voice teacher who extended the aspects of the private studio into the rehearsal hall. I worked with her as a student and she was a mentoring colleague to me in my early years as a conductor and still I would say her influence as a - especially with the young female voice - is still very much part of my inner ear. I sang with Robert Schulz for two years and he was my voice teacher for three years and my colleague for my first 15 years at St. Olaf. And then singing with Dr. Jennings for two years in the St. Olaf choir. And this was always a much more of an art song approach to the voice and the imagery that comes, I think, is especially useful with young singers - 18 to 22 - that's still the primary ages of the singers here at St. Olaf College, would be the art song approach where it's beauty of tone, nuance of phrasing, sensitive to text painting, which characterized some of what went on certainly under the Christianson's but I think have reached a greater degree of importance in the years, certainly in the last 40 years since Kenneth Jennings assumed the helm of leadership at St. Olaf and those of us who have followed in his steps. And during my 19 years here at St. Olaf I certainly have continued this. I have a degree in voice; I studied voice through all stages of my training both as an undergraduate and both masters and doctoral work and I teach voice. And three out of the five of us who do the choral ensembles at St. Olaf teach voice as well. So I think we come at it from the same perspective. I always like to say that the years, I consider more the years of the Christianson's here, more the type of choral approach was one of conformity, having a voice that had to agree with another voice. And by the time Jennings had come into the role as conductor of the St. Olaf choir and he was being assisted with that work by Robert Schulz and Alice Larson, we'd come more to uniformity in which we could allow the voice to be, but by placement in the choir and just a freer sense of who we were as singers - and I mean that as a student - one felt you could sing your voice. You did not have to sound like the voice next to you. And I think that carried through. Paul Christianson, going on to Concordia, again was not as much of a singer even as his brother Olaf. And in all of these institutions you could see the rise of private voice teaching taking place. And that certainly has aided the growth of choral ensembles. I think that was very much the approach that happened up at Concordia during the 50 years that Paul was there and then Renee Claussen being a graduate and a student of Jennings brought many of those aspects to that free, more released, that leader approach of singing to Concordia. And you now see it as you look to Luther College and Craig Arnold, who was a contemporary of mine here at St. Olaf as a student, both a graduate student, he has taken that to that wonderful institution. And as St. Olaf graduates, Concordia graduates, Luther - all of the...I mention those three but there are so many more - who have come through this Lutheran choral system and the same stuff evolved. And as we have been

touched after our years in the Lutheran colleges, but holding onto, I think, the foundational elements of the beauty of sound, attention to tuning. And tuning not only at the cadential points, but the type of tuning that happens throughout the composition and especially the importance of text and text painting and the beauty of the sound so that the sound serves the music and the text. So often in vocal music we become almost slave to the vocal instrument, rather than the instrument really serving the music. And I think this was always, this has been key from the very beginning and evolved and matured in the years subsequent to the leadership of F. Melius Christianson.

Q What have you observed about Minnesota audiences?

A I think MN audiences are distinctive in that so many people who attend choral concerts are themselves choral singers. When you go to different parts of the country there are great admirers of choral music, but they still may not be practicing as singers themselves. But in MN you will find people who come who will still be part of an...with adults who are still part of their church choirs or other community choruses, students who are still in their school choirs or community choirs or church choirs. So the people who come are not just simply observers. They are active practitioners of the art and they come with an understanding, often having sung these pieces. So they have a unique insight and when they react – not just simply in applause but sometimes it's their incredible silence – you finish a piece and there's this silence in the room. And Olaf Christianson used to talk about a window silence that framed a piece. I want to tell you in MN that happens usually, on many of the concerts that I've attended, that's the norm. That people will allow a piece to settle and to finish and then they will react. It may be explosive reaction, but they will have given the piece time to settle in and to feed all elements of their being – their mind, their souls, their spirits. I have actually one time, most recently in a trip to New York with the choir at Carnegie Hall; I had to slightly chastise the audience because they wouldn't let the piece quite finish. And indeed I wasn't finished with the composition with the choir and they interrupted with applause. And that was gratifying in one sense, but as a reviewer remarked I had to turn around and say, when you see me step off the podium you'll know that the frame of silence is complete and then you can respond. And I think it was a wonderful response to the choir singing at Carnegie Hall that day, but it also said to me these are people who may be...I'm a New Yorker, I grew up in New York, but I think there's a sophistication of listener that happens here in MN because they have experience. They understand, from their own singing under fine conductors, of what I think true excellence in choral music is about. So it is a humbling experience to come and sing before audiences in this state because you know people will appreciate the art that you are giving as gift. They will appreciate it because they have been through these artistic paces themselves. And they come and they come – I hope usually not to criticize – I think they come truly to enjoy and there is something about this region...I'm not saying...I know great choral music happens throughout this country, I'm not being that naïve. But I do think there's a very special place for the choirs that sing from this region, from this state especially, and for our audiences. They come, I think, with a maturity in their listening and they receive the music in that way and then the response also informs us when we've reached those goals and sometimes when we've fallen short of those goals. But they're wonderful audiences to sing for and to share our music with.

Q Can you recall one of your memorable concert experiences?

A For me, the greatest applause is sometimes that silence at the end, because that's when I know they have been fully drawn into the message and to the beauty of the music and they're listening and that they need time to let it conclude in their own beings and then they can respond. When that happens – I was conducting this past weekend in Tampa, FL, at the Florida All State – and what was so exciting the piece actually was a setting of (name) by Mark Jennings, the son of Kenneth Jennings, my predecessor. And Mark was in the very first St. Olaf choir that I conducted and he is following in his parents footsteps as a wonderful, wonderful composer. He's director of choral activities at Truman State U in Missouri. But we finished this piece and there was an audience of over 2500 people and there was silence. And there had been coughing and all of these things going on and at the end there was just silence. And I released and there was still silence. And the students just looked and when the applause came, it was an honest applause, but they had been, they had been pulled into this. This piece had mesmerized them in a way and the performance by the students really was well, well done. And that was, to me, louder than any standing ovation they could have received. And when that has happened with us on the road, certainly when we come home and that happens to us in our own community, its very meaningful.

Q Talk about some of the experiences you've had on tour with the choir.

A When we are on tour with the St. Olaf choir we are truly in a variety of performing spaces, from very small – medium size churches of four or five hundred. There are occasions where we will lead in worship as part of a tour and that might be a sanctuary that will hold maybe 300 and that would be a large sanctuary, to some of the great concert halls in this country, which are between 2500 to 3000. We're about to embark on a tour to the southeastern US and we begin with a pre-tour to Duluth and another concert in the TC area at Mount Olive Church and that's not a huge sanctuary and yet we'll be in several very fine performing arts centers in the southeast – at Jacoby Hall in Jacksonville, FL; the (name) Center of Performing Arts in Miami which is a stunning new hall where our national ACDA conference was held in 2007. These are halls that hold 2500 to 3000 people at a time. The reason I think we continue – one element for continuing these tours – is that it really is a living laboratory for our students. Its one thing to study this music and to perform it once or twice, but when you take it out on the road into these various and hopefully good acoustical environments, the students experience the pieces in a very different way. And our tradition of students memorizing scores really allows them to take ownership of the scores, to live through and after there were a couple of nights when we're trying to make sure that we all have the scores memorized, we come to a point of familiarity. And I think every night we can take off another layer of the music and of the text. And it's incredible for me to hear students years later to say, I can still sing that piece. I still can remember that text. It's been so profound. And in an age when because of computerization and things when students say, why do I have to memorize? I google something; there's the information at hand. This process of singing, committing something to memory is a gift for a lifetime. And I think it's a gift that this generation needs more than ever. I come back to something I may have shared with you earlier. That for me, music is...one aspect of choral music especially is the healing element. I know with my own mother who was a lifelong singer in church choirs and in her final years suffered with dementia, and at times when medication didn't work we didn't have a way to reach her, it was her hearing choral singing or us singing with her that brought her back. And for me, quite honestly, it happened during my last visit with her. I was playing the St. Olaf choir great hymns of faith and it was Beautiful Savior – the F. Melius Christianson setting that she had

actually sung the alto solo on. And when she hadn't talked to me for a whole hour, had looked at me, had not conversed, had not spoken to me, but she heard that and she looked at me, I know that. I really know that. And she began to sing the alto solo and then sang the alto part of the piece. And all of a sudden she looked at me and she said, baby when did you get here? It was the music that brought her back to me. I'm glad that this choral art, especially as we practice it here, so much of it being committed to memory – this will be something that as we have to still deal with this disease of dementia and Alzheimer's in years to come – this may be one of the few ways that generations have to communicate with each other. I've seen this moment of grace in my own life. So yes, I can look at it academically and artistically that it is a living laboratory, they change. But we're giving these students and the audiences who hear this music, I think, a great gift. And the students see from day to day, they see how the music affects the people. They see that they can appreciate the great works of art music that they perform very beautifully. But they can also see when they sing those simple folk songs and folk hymns – they can see the tears on the faces of not only the older people, but the younger people – how their music touches people not just intellectually but as Helen Kemp has said for many years – body, mind, spirit and voice. It's a very profound way and it's something that makes this touring very, very special. It also, I think, brings quite honestly as we interact with other choirs and other singers along the way, they start to understand why it is so important that they spend the time studying so intently this music. Because they become a model for excellence for others, an inspiration. And literally as we go into communities several times on this tour, we will have workshops with area high school choirs and the conductors and the singers will say to me, thank you. This has given us new energy to go back and look at our music anew. So it makes this whole art – we are leaven for other people as well. And we grow from that experience of sharing music together.

Q What can we learn about the human spirit from the writings and teachings of F. Melius?

A One last thing for you.... If you read...we've talked a lot about F. Melius Christianson. Early in his writings at one point he was asked about what is important. And he said, knowledge...he would always say knowledge is authority; knowledge is power. And he always admonished his students and those who studied with him in his choral schools to be the best musicians they could be in terms of study, study of the score, study of their craft as conductors, study of great music to become better musicians. But he also talked about the knowledge of human beings and that in the end I think this was more than his work in offering this music, it was more than just giving great entertainment even if its at the highest esthetic level. It really was about the transformation of the human being. First of all, those people who sang in the choirs and how they were changed. But in turn how their artistry would change the lives of those who heard the music. And so I believe that something that is very distinctive about this element of choral music that has been fostered here in MN and certainly fostered by F. Melius Christianson and those who have continued to pay homage to his ideals of great art is that yes, we do produce great music and we strive for great musical excellence to be the greatest advocate for these composers, for this great music – whether its high art music, whether great folk music, religious traditions – but in the end it's not self-serving; it's so that those who experience and make the music and those who will hear the music will be transformed.

.I very much understand that my role here...I'm a steward for this time and John or Christopher or Sigrid – we're stewards for this time, but...the great thing if I were F. Melius would be to think that, 100 years later these people at least share the values and they've continued to grow. I look at Cantus and those guys all started in this place, making music in this place. Now it's down to fewer than two in the group singing and the couple are still leading it. I hope one of the things that 20 years from now, whether there are any St. Olaf people there, there will still be an element not just...they are a different group than Chanticleer or the King's Singers. And I think its because there are these shared values. And I do know as we've done collaborative concerts and the non-St. Olaf people come into contact they start...now it's starting to make more sense. It's not just the way we make music but it is a certain ethos about why the music comes about...