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# A Tribute to Walter E. Buszin

Kirby L. Koriath

Early in his career Walter Buszin asked himself what it meant to be a Lutheran. Was it Lutheran people listening to Lutheran sermons preached by Lutheran pastors in Lutheran houses of worship? Was there nothing more? Did not the Lutherans of the sixteenth century leave a legacy larger and more expansive than religious beliefs, attitudes, and scriptural expositions? Did not the heritage include things artistic, aesthetic, and cultural as well? Buszin and others in the early decades of the twentieth century came to the conclusion that they were members of a church which, it seemed to them, through either negligence or indifference had forsaken part of its valuable heritage. To these men it seemed incongruous that the church could rally around the words of Martin Luther concerning "faith" and "grace," yet not sing many of Luther's hymns; that the liturgy of the Lutheran church seemed to embrace more characteristics of American Protestantism than it did the truly catholic features of the liturgies drafted by Luther and his successors; that virtually the entire treasury of beautiful sixteenth century song had been displaced by English and American hymns and anthems.

Walter Buszin was one of these who questioned the incomplete heritage of his beloved church. And he dedicated his entire life to that segment of the heritage most notably lacking—the hymnological, liturgical, and musical practice of sixteenth to eighteenth century German Lutheranism. Wherever possible and in whatever measure seemed proper, he sought to reintroduce that heritage to the modern Lutheran church. Or, to put all of the foregoing in the words of a slogan served up to Walter Buszin several times during his career—"the sermon is the meat and potatoes; the music, jello"—he directed his energy toward that which at least the nutritionists of his day, if not all of the theologians, could agree on—the balanced diet.

It is good to know that Walter Buszin was largely successful in his efforts. It is also gratifying to know that recognition—both formal and informal—came to him within his lifetime. In 1966, soon after Dr. Buszin retired as Professor of Hymnology and Liturgics at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, messages of appreciation came in personal letters. One noted the effectiveness of his teaching:

. . . so much of the work that you have done for the

state of church music within Lutheran circles has gone unnoticed and unsung. However, you do have the conviction that the seeds which you have sown are definitely sprouting up and some of them are already bearing fruit. I suppose that is the greatest reward that can come to a good teacher.<sup>1</sup>

One recognized the breadth of his work:

Your leadership and influence have reached out in many directions, and your professorship has been one of your most fruitful fields. In relinquishing this you can take deep satisfaction in the great work the Lord enabled you to do, much of which will be a continuing force in the life of the Seminary and the Church.<sup>2</sup>

And one spoke pointedly to the nature of Buszin's work:

I have felt you to be one of the very few people in the English-speaking world who has taken seriously the theological concerns of music and has attempted to begin conversation at this point.<sup>3</sup>

Formal recognition of his achievements also was given. Three doctor's degrees, *honoris causa*, were conferred upon him; one of them, in May, 1967, by this institution, Concordia Theological Seminary, then in Springfield, Illinois. Also in that year Wittenberg University, Springfield, Ohio, conferred upon him its first Canticum Novum Award, citing his distinguished contributions to Lutheran church music.

In June, 1967, at its national convention in New York City, the entire Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod took the occasion formally to thank Walter Buszin for his twenty-seven years of service on the church's Commission on Worship, Liturgics, and Hymnology, with these words:

Whereas, Dr. Walter E. Buszin has served the church with unstinting zeal in the fields of church music, liturgics, and hymnology; and, Whereas, Dr. Buszin has served the Synod for many years as Chairman of its Commission on Worship, Liturgics, and Hymnology; therefore be it resolved, That the Commission on Worship, Liturgics, and Hymnology be commended for having named him its honorary chairman; and be it further Resolved, That the Synod in convention assembled commend Dr. Buszin for his many years of faithful service and bespeak God's continued blessing on his chosen fields of endeavor.<sup>4</sup>

Also in 1967, Buszin was honored with a *Festschrift*, the supreme accolade for the seasoned, scholarly man of letters, entitled *Cantors at the Cross-roads: Essays in Honor of Walter E. Buszin*. Fittingly, the work was published by Concordia

Publishing House, St. Louis, a publishing concern the music editorial policy of which Buszin had greatly influenced.

The year of 1967 seems to have been a good one for Walter Buszin. Reflecting on the tributes he had received, Buszin wrote to his friend and confidant Walter Hinrichsen, President of C. F. Peters, New York, in July, 1967:

. . . since March I have received a Festschrift, a Canticum Novum Award . . . an honorary doctorate . . . and a rising ovation from my church body. What more could I want?

What did Walter Buszin do? He was trained as a theologian and as a church musician. But that does not say it all. He wore so many hats. He was a hymnologist, a liturgiologist, a writer, an editor, a teacher, a preacher, a husband and father, a church organist and choir director. How did this multi-talented gentleman seek to effect change in the worship and music practices of the Lutheran church?

First, he lectured. Buszin was a man of many words. He had to be—he was a classroom teacher. But, he was a teacher of uncommon insight and perception, to the degree that his words were valued outside of the classroom as well as within. Over fifty lectures did he deliver in America and Europe. To European audiences Buszin usually spoke about developments in the American Lutheran church; the continuing acceptance of the chorale, the production of new hymnals, advances in liturgics and worship, and new educational curricula. When addressing church music conferences in this country, he often based his essay on one or another of the composers from the Lutheran heritage.

Many of Buszin's addresses focused on the practical matters of conducting a worship service—good organ and choral music, proper liturgical practice. Members of Buszin's own church were the recipients of these messages—the ministers, teachers, and lay musicians. Typically, he began these lectures with words to the effect, "We have some in our midst who. . ." He then proceeded to catalogue the errors, errors of commission and omission, of extremism and apathy, and to supply a corrective.

Buszin sought to effect change also through his articles and review. Over fifty articles and 350 reviews of books and music were published. This, by anyone's standards, is a remarkable achievement.

Buszin's writing and his desire to be of assistance to laymen coalesced in another area, his personal letters. "Hardly a week passes by," he once said, "in which I do not receive at least one letter from our pastors asking for my opinion on liturgical, hymnological or church-musical problems."<sup>6</sup> Buszin's

correspondence file suggests that he answered these requests in consistent fashion; requests not only from pastors, but also teachers, graduate students, organ committees; people wanting possible dissertation topics; couples wanting ideas on wedding music. Buszin's letters always were detailed and lengthy; in fact, so lengthy (five-page single-spaced typewritten letters are not uncommon) that the letters themselves drew considerable comment. Buszin's return mail often started with sentiments like this: "Your letters are so detailed and explicit that it is with reluctance that I send you these hasty scribblings."<sup>7</sup>

If it is true that talented, hard-working, busy people are often viewed as the ones most likely to complete satisfactorily additional assignments, then it must be said that the church considered Walter Buszin to be an unusually gifted, industrious person. Besides his full-time teaching and writing, Buszin continuously was called upon by his church to render additional service by way of committee responsibilities and service on various commissions and boards. He was a member of the Synod's Commission on Worship, Liturgics, and Hymnology for twenty-seven years, from 1940 to 1967. His tenure of office saw the production and introduction of *The Lutheran Hymnal*, and he helped launch the endeavor which has resulted in the new *Lutheran Book of Worship*. He was a member of the Inter-Lutheran Spanish Hymnal Committee, the efforts of which, in 1964, resulted in the hymnal *Culto Cristiano*, for Latin American Lutherans. And he was a member of the Commission of Music of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. For this commission he helped produce the book, *Christian Hymns*, a paperback hymnal published in 1963.

And what about the Lutheran Society for Worship, Music, and the Arts? In 1955, in an address he delivered at a conference of the Music Teachers National Association, Buszin expressed one of his deep concerns:

In the entire United States we do not have a single first-class inter- or supradenominational periodical on church music, hymnody, liturgics, and church art which, in its own field, might, for example, be put aside *The Musical Quarterly*. We in America need a good quarterly. We have several publications, but they are largely newsy in character and restrict themselves chiefly to the organ and to choral music. Christian hymnody should be included in said periodical; likewise, church art and architecture.<sup>8</sup>

Buszin's wish for an American periodical on Christian worship and the arts was to become a reality in the late 1950's. In November, 1957, thirty men met in Chicago and founded

a pan-Lutheran organization, the Lutheran Society for Worship, Music, and the Arts. The society held its first meeting in Minneapolis during June 1958. Regional meetings also were held as local chapters developed. Within two years the society had about 1,000 members. In 1959, at Pentecost, the society published the first issue of its journal, *Response in Worship—Music—The Arts*. That the lead editorial of this volume is remarkably similar to an address delivered four years previously at a Music Teachers National Conference is understandable—the same person, Editor Walter Buszin wrote both.

Buszin wore another editorial hat, which he put on when he moved from typewriter to music manuscript paper. His work as a music editor started in 1934, when at the age of thirty-five Walter Buszin persuaded the Hall and McCreary Publishing Company, Chicago, to make available a small collection of—all things—Bach chorale harmonizations for choirs. That edition plus two subsequent collections of Bach chorales sold in excess of 200,000 copies. It is difficult to estimate the impact which these collections had. Through their use surely hundreds of choirs were able to sample the choral music of Bach for the first time. Undoubtedly it provided for many a first experience with any kind of music from the Baroque period. Buszin realized what he had done; he had helped to inaugurate a renaissance in church music. With these collections Buszin hoped to remove a veil which for many people hung over the music of Bach. In one of the forewords, he said:

To understand and appreciate Bach, one must familiarize oneself with his treatment of the Chorale in his choral harmonizations, in his church cantatas, and in his chorale preludes. When lay people do not understand and appreciate Bach it is invariably due to the fact that they have never sung Bach.<sup>9</sup>

Through his many editions, published mainly by Schmitt, Hall and McCreary, Minneapolis; Concordia, St. Louis; and C. F. Peters, New York City, it seems reasonable to suggest that Walter Buszin lovingly preserved and expertly perpetuated a great deal of music from the church's rich heritage.

So much was accomplished by one man in one lifetime. We ask the question, Why? What motivated Buszin to strike out on a new path, to help begin a renaissance in Lutheran church music?

In the first place, as a young man Buszin became convinced that as a member of the Lutheran church he resided in the best of all possible musical worlds. Already at age thirty-one he could proclaim:

No other church body has been blessed so amply in this field as has our Lutheran church. . . The only church body that has music for the congregation, the choir, and the organ which it can call its own is the Lutheran Church. We have the hymns of men like Luther, Paul Gerhardt, Nicolai, Hermann, Cruger, and Lindeman for the congregation; the motets, anthems, and cantatas of the Bachs, of Eccard, Praetorius, Kuhnau, Schein, and others for the choir; and the masterpieces of J. S. Bach, Böhm, Tunder, Pachelbel, Scheidt, Scheidemann and many others for the organ.<sup>10</sup>

A heritage richer than the Roman Catholics, the Eastern Orthodox, and the Anglicans? Yes, said Walter Buszin. Actually, he never pursued the tactic—which would have been counterproductive—of “proving” the quantitative or qualitative “superiority” of the Lutheran heritage in church music. But he had to say something to nudge complacent Lutheran church musicians!

In the second place, Buszin believed that his church had not demonstrated a good sense of judgment and values comparable to those of Martin Luther. Often Buszin quoted Luther’s motto, “*Quod bonum est, tenebimus*” (“This which is good, let us hold on to”), suggesting that the reformer did not discard the entire medieval heritage because of unsavory associations, but retained whatever was good and allowed of sound, scriptural theology. In his article, “The Genius of Lutheran Corporate Worship,” Buszin argued that Lutherans in America did not appropriate to themselves all the good to come from the German Reformation. They did not appropriate many of the good hymns, the organ and choral music, and much of the liturgy—only the theology. Therefore, as he viewed it, his church was Lutheran in theology, but not in worship practice. The problems could be traced to the very origins of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

When the Saxons emigrated to America and established themselves in Perry County, Missouri, they brought with them the compositions of Rinck, Rolle, Mozart, and others whose sacred choral music was in vogue at that time . . . . Germany had not yet learned to know Bach to any extent, . . . Our theologians were in constant contact with the theologians of Germany and other lands and kept themselves posted on theological developments throughout the world. Our musicians, however, did not advance with the church musicians outside their own circle to any marked extent and while the so-called Lutheran Church in Germany outgrew the music of Rinck, Forchhammer, Graun and others, the

Lutheran musicians of America got into a rut and tried to maintain the early 19th century standards in the 20th century.<sup>11</sup>

In the third place, another significant factor underlying much of Walter Buszin's activity was his thorough knowledge and appreciation of the great strides which had been and were being made in Germany and the Scandinavian countries by Lutheran musicians and musicologists in the areas of organ and choral music, hymnody, and liturgy.

Thus, Walter Buszin became embarrassed, knowing that in many denominations in America there existed a continuously growing appreciation for the music of Bach, and the chorales, organ music and choral literature from the 17th and 18th centuries. But, as he viewed it, such an appreciation was scarcely to be found in his own church. One often heard this rhetorical question from Buszin and others, "Why should the other churches be telling us about our Bach!" This sentiment is contained in one of Buszin's letters to a member of the board at Valparaiso University:

Recent books published in America call the attention of American music lovers to the great Lutheran heritage. I refer to such books as Hugo Leichtentritt's *Music, History, and Ideas*; to Paul Henry Lang's *Music in Western Civilization*; also to the Bach biographies of Spitta, Schweitzer, Terry, and others, which are read throughout our land. And what is our Lutheran church doing? We should be ashamed. Think of the influence Riemenschneider exerts from Berea, Ohio, with his Bach studies. A Methodist leading the way, not a Lutheran . . . they have their annual Bach festival. Where is a Lutheran school which does likewise?<sup>12</sup>

Buszin once recalled a conversation from his student days:

Fully twenty-five years ago, Peter Christian Lutkin, Dean of the School of Music of Northwestern University said to me: "I am amazed. Due to the rise of worship standards, we of the Anglican church are adopting your Lutheran Chorales because of their rich worship value and are rejecting many of our own hymns; you Lutherans, however, are rejecting your chorales and you adopt what we reject."<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, in terms of church music of quality, Buszin's own church had double faulted; it had dismissed its own worthy heritage and had adopted, in its place, the unworthy. It was a blemish to be eradicated before too many knowledgeable people found out. Buszin said, "I cannot help but hold my breath when I think of this, fearing that they will catch on to what the



situation is among us Lutherans before we make an honest and prompt effort to remedy matters.”

Those are the things that troubled Walter Buszin. What could be done? For starters, Buszin said, why not give some attention to the Luthern church’s rich heritage—the liturgical products, the organ and choral music, and the congregational hymns of what he called “The Golden Age in Lutheran Church Music” (1524-1750, from the publication of the first Lutheran hymnal to the death of J. S. Bach)? And while you are at it, Buszin went on, do not neglect the first important musician from that period, Martin Luther. Your allegiance to him, Buszin asserted, has been somewhat selective. Luther wrote voluminously on theological matters. But he also expressed himself often and at length on music and worship practices in the church. These are the utterances which Buszin wanted the church to reconsider. In particular, two of Luther’s ideas served as a foundation for Buszin’s entire ideology.

It is of utmost importance that Martin Luther practically from the very beginning to the very end of his career as Reformer of the Christian Church stressed the importance of two precious treasures of Christendom. The treasures I refer to are the doctrine of the universal priesthood of all believers and the art of music. Both have become a part of our great heritage, both exalt and inspire us as children of God and beneficiaries of an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled.<sup>14</sup>

Buszin had further prescriptions for the cure. He advocated the greater use of the Lutheran chorale, that congregational hymn produced in Germany during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In particular, Buszin argued for the retention of the rhythmic chorale as it had been originally composed with its syncopations, sprightly pick-up notes, and admixture of notes of different value. “Leave them rugged and edgy,” he said. “Don’t chisel them off. That is like chiseling off the impressive and mighty Rocky Mountains in order to improve God’s nature.”<sup>15</sup>

Walter Buszin held in high regard the liturgies of the Christian Church and the study and practice thereof, for these things too were part of the Lutheran heritage. Those who knew him were aware of his esteem. Gilbert Thiele, who delivered the sermon at Buszin’s funeral, knew of it. He remarked:

I never heard any man but this man call the church’s—our church’s—hymnal, liturgy, or missal, Agenda and lectionaries *our holy books*. But that is what they are, now and as they change under the continued influence of his studies he inspired.<sup>16</sup>

Buszin believed that the scholarly study of the liturgies was the

*sine qua non* of sound worship practice; in his words, "Liturgiology is to Christian worship what theology is to a religion and what musicology is to music." Liturgical studies could not help but have a beneficial effect on church music in general. Buszin noted, "Of necessity do we become more deeply interested in better church music the moment we become more fully aware of the great liturgical heritage of the Christian Church."<sup>17</sup> Walter Buszin was a witness to and a factor in the movement which allowed liturgical studies to come out of the closet. This was, after all, rather an ecumenical activity. "Ought we not cease coming to the defense of liturgics," he said, "and just take it for granted?"<sup>18</sup> And gradually the church did, when it became convinced that a serious scholar of the ancient liturgies of the church could also be a denominational loyalist.

For all of his life, moreover, Walter Buszin was an educator. Certainly he spent as much time stressing the need for education in church music as he did detailing the history and practice thereof. In his lifetime, many Lutheran schools throughout America, of course, introduced complete curriculums in church music. For Buszin, this could not have happened any too soon.

One final point—contemporary music in the church. Over the years Buszin laid such heavy emphasis on the music from the German baroque period that the question inevitably and properly arises, how did he feel about modern music? Quite simply, he welcomed it, and vigorously supported it. Important as the music from the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries could be for present day worship, equally important was the spirit which this music radiated, which spirit, if assimilated and understood by contemporary composers, could easily be translated into modern music suitable for the worship service. Buszin said it this way:

In services of worship . . . the new is often put alongside the old and neither of the two will suffer thereby. This is due in part to the fact that our good composers of today have learned from the music written by masters of earlier eras, thereby becoming imbued with their spirit. True, the modern idiom is different, but idioms are external and transient, whereas the spirit remains, affords stability, satisfies and integrates!<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, the Lutheran church had always welcomed that which was new.

To my knowledge, the Lutheran church at large has never adopted or issued official decrees to the effect that her music must be of a certain style, that it must be

unmixed and unalloyed. . . . From Walter to the present, her principle has rather been to make use of the best means available and to fit herself also musically into the contemporary situation of the day.<sup>20</sup>

He said something once which must have overjoyed not a few of his would-be adherents.

There is an element of timelessness in all great art and its age has nothing to do with its quality. It was just as possible for . . . a German to write bad church music in the 16th century as it is possible for an American to write good church music in the 20th century.<sup>21</sup>

Through his teaching, his lecturing, his editing, his writing, and his good counsel, Walter Buszin explored the treasures of the Lutheran heritage, he shared them, and he communicated his enthusiasm for them. Musicians within and without the church have profited by his efforts. In essence, Buszin enabled the church to make wise and informed decisions about its worship life and its musical practice—decisions which could take into consideration the totality of the church's heritage, and not only the most recent part thereof. The Lutheran church today does not incorporate into its worship life all of Buszin's ideas or all of the musical products which he has made available. Many of them, the very best of them, however, it does use—and so do many other churches in America. If the music from the "Golden Age" continues to inspire musicians and dignify services of worship, if the liturgical and hymnological sensibilities of that age are preserved, if contemporary poets and composers continue to reflect a style and spirit similar to those of that period, then Walter Buszin's goals will have been fully realized.

1. Letter from John S. Damm, Academic Dean, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, October 12, 1972.
2. Letter from Luther D. Reed, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, June 10, 1966.
3. Letter from Robert H. Mitchell, California Baptist Theological Seminary, Covina, California, March 22, 1968.
4. *Proceedings of the Forty-Seventh Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, New York, New York, July 7-14, 1967* (St. Louis: LC-MS, 1967), pp. 90-91.
5. Letter to Walter Hinrichsen, president, C. F. Peters Corporation, New York, July 25, 1967.
6. Letter to John W. Behnken, president, Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, St. Louis, Missouri, November 20, 1949.
7. Letter from Paul Henry Lang, Columbia University, New York, May 26, 1946.
8. "The Publication of Good Church Music in Our Day," essay read at the annual convention of the Music Teachers National Association, St. Louis, Missouri, February 14, 1955, p. 13.

9. Foreword, *Anniversary Collection of Bach Chorales* (Schmitt, Hall and McCreary, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1935).
10. "Lutheran Church Music," *Lutheran Sentinel*, XIV (December 23, 1931), p. 406.
11. "The First Step Toward Improving the Standards of Choir Singing in the Lutheran Church," *The American Lutheran*, XX (January, 1937), p. 9.
12. Letter to Dr. Paul F. Miller, Ft. Wayne, Ind., Jan. 30, 1943.
13. "The Liturgy in Worship" (MS), 1945, p. 8.
14. "The Doctrine of the Universal Priesthood and Its Influence Upon the Liturgies and Music of the Lutheran Church," *The Musical Heritage of the Church*, The Valparaiso Church Music Series, II (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1946), p. 96. This article was reprinted by Concordia Publishing House as a pamphlet, n.d.
15. "The Rhythmic Chorale in America," *The Hymn*, published by the Hymn Society of America, New York, XIII (July, 1962), p. 78.
16. From the sermon "Brought Into the Land of Promise," Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, July 5, 1973.
17. "Church Music in Our Day" (MS), p. 3.
18. Letter to Hans Boehringer, Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, Indiana, November 16, 1964.
19. "The Old and New in Church Music," *United Church Herald*, VI (November 21, 1963), p. 14.
20. "Johann Walter—Urkomponist of the Lutheran Church," essay read at the annual national meeting of the American Musicological Society, Michigan University, Ann Arbor, Michigan, December 27-29, 1954, p. 11.
21. "The Publication of Good Church Music in Our Day," essay read at the annual national convention of the Music Teachers National Association, St. Louis, Missouri, February 14, 1955, p. 10.

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