



DONALD ARTHUR BUSAROW (1934-2011)

When Thrivent Financial published an audio/visual repository of sacred music “. . . to help Lutheran congregations and educational institutions honor and celebrate this tradition,” Donald Busarow was chosen as one of only nine composers representing Lutheran church music of the twentieth century.¹ As a scholar, performer, composer, and parish musician, his life and career exemplified that high vocation of the Lutheran Kantor.

Busarow’s paternal grandfather came from Lithuanian stock, having emigrated from Russia in 1914, from where his wife and children were unable to flee until after the war. The family was finally able to reunite in Racine, Wisconsin, where one of his sons, Nikolai, married Dorothy Borgardt in 1925,² a union to which Donald Arthur Busarow was born on 10 April, 1934.³ He commenced musical study at age seven, his musical affinity cultivated by one of his teachers, Leslie Zeddies, at St John’s Lutheran School in Racine, who allowed Busarow to hold keys during routine

organ tunings. Of these formative experiences Busarow would later note, “I knew in third grade that I was going to do church music.”⁴ He graduated from Racine Lutheran High School in 1952, having excelled as a baseball player, and where he was inducted into the school’s hall of fame in 2017 for his musical career achievements.⁵

Busarow enrolled in what was then Concordia Teacher’s College in River Forest, Illinois, studying with Victor Hildner, and from where he would graduate with a degree in music education in 1956, having received a scholarship “for proficiency in piano and organ”⁶ and where he sang in the acappella choir⁷ and toured with “The Foresters”—a vocal quartet in which he sang second bass.⁸ During these undergraduate years, he also served as music director at Faith Lutheran Church in Arlington Heights. The summer following graduation, he married Margaret Elizabeth Johnson, also a recent Concordia alumna, in a ceremony which included Ralph Schultz, future hymnwriter, professor of music, and eventual president of Concordia College, Bronxville, New York, as organist, and his wife Dorothy Schultz as soloist.⁹

Thus would the Busarows begin their professional and family life, moving to Detroit to teach at Bethany Lutheran Church and School, where by 1959 Busarow, as parish musician, would direct an adult choir of forty members and a children’s chorus of sixty four voices.¹⁰ In 1961, Busarow pursued a Master of Music degree at the Cleveland Institute of Music, studying organ and church music with Henry Fusner and composition with Marcel Dick and Jere Hutchinson, graduating in 1964. From 1961-1963, Busarow served as an eighth grade teacher at Luther Memorial School in Cleveland, and was organist at Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in Cleveland, whose organ, built by the German firm von Beckerath and installed in 1956, was the first large mechanical action instrument built on historic baroque principles in North America.¹¹ After graduation, he returned to Detroit to commence duties as Minister of Music and Youth at Outer Drive Faith Lutheran Church, where he would hone his abilities to think creatively toward music ministry and

liturgical composition. From the late 1960s, under Busarow's direction, the church had introduced Sunday evening youth services, drawing as many as 350 youth to "pray, sing, read Scripture—and clap hands," often with guest choirs leading the proceedings, Busarow himself noting of these events that "Good music is guaranteed."¹² At this time he began work toward a DMA at Michigan State University, East Lansing, studying with Corliss Arnold,¹³ with additional study with Robert Noehren at the University of Michigan.¹⁴ In 1968 he was appointed conductor of the Detroit Lutheran Singers, at which point he had already begun composing and publishing music for choirs, instruments, and organ. Although he would not complete his DMA until 1974, in 1972 he was appointed Chairman of the Department of Sacred Music at Concordia College Milwaukee, where his duties included teaching organ, theory, and directing the college choir, while simultaneously serving as organist at Hope Lutheran in Milwaukee.¹⁵ During these years he would regularly perform organ concerts around the nation, but particularly in the Midwest, where his recitals would routinely include the "art of improvisation,"¹⁶ which he studied with Jan Bender during the mid-1970s.¹⁷ Paul Manz only recently had laid the formative groundwork for the whole notion of a "hymn festival," but Busarow continued to develop the concept in his own trajectory, utilizing many of his own compositions, themselves certainly having begun as improvisations, and continuing to explore liturgical improvisation as a legitimate and contemporary form of sacred music.

In 1975, he was appointed to the faculty of Wittenberg University in Springfield, Ohio, where he would teach courses in music theory, composition, church music and organ, as well as serve as university organist. In 1982, he was named director of the college choir,¹⁸ succeeding John W. Williams. Williams had elevated the status of the choir, overseeing tours throughout the USA, Europe, and groundbreaking performances in the Soviet Union, but whose increasing duties as chorus director of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra necessitated withdrawing from university duties.¹⁹ Not undaunted by the new position, Busarow admitted that "The first year as interim

director was tough.” Yet, largely aided by his practical experience in the parish, “In just one year, we doubled the size of the choir, and thanks to contacts I had, we were able to develop four tours.” Busarow programmed carefully, often performing Russian literature as a tribute to his own heritage; yet, he maintained that “Our programs are unique, in my opinion. . . I look for some music that will reach everyone in the audience at some point in the concert.”²⁰ As only the fourth director in the history of this prestigious, 40-member choir, Busarow labored to maintain and then to enhance the quality of the ensemble, requiring auditions each year regardless of a chorister’s past involvement.²¹ Beyond the many notable tours, his leadership of the choir at Wittenberg entailed renewing their involvement in the liturgical life of the campus as he nurtured students’ participation in chapel services, “strengthening the choir’s ties to the Lutheran church and Weaver Chapel during his tenure—before, the choir rarely set foot in the chapel.” Busarow reflected about such a relationship, positing “In my background, the church and the chapel are at the top of my list. . . What better way to showcase them [the choir] than the services?”²²

In 1989, Busarow was appointed Visiting Professor of Church Music at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, where he had designed the seminary’s organ. Concordia University Chicago awarded him an honorary Doctor of Letters in 1996 “. . . for his achievements in music composition and choral conducting.” He was organist at St Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church in Huber Heights, Ohio (1976-2000) and finally at First Presbyterian Church in South Charleston, Ohio (2000-2010.) Busarow died on 24 October, 2011, in Houston, Texas, where he had been receiving treatment for leukemia.²³ Surviving him were six children and fourteen grandchildren.²⁴

A composer whose work is represented by seven major publishing houses, Donald Busarow’s “We Praise Thee, O God,” a concertato for organ, choir, and brass, published in 1963, represented the beginning of a fruitful career for a composer whose catalogue includes music for organ solo, organ with instruments, vocal solos, and hymns and liturgical pieces including psalm

settings, choral anthems, and hymn concertatos.²⁵ Although his compositional focus was primarily sacred and liturgical music, his ventures further afield garnered additional successes; his composition “Death Be Not Proud” for soprano, piano, and horn, received first prize in the International Horn Society competition in 1980, the same year his opera *Esther*, commissioned by Wittenberg University, was premiered.²⁶ Larger works notwithstanding, Busarow is arguably most known for the practical sacred music for the average parish choir and organist he so artfully provided. Busarow followed in a long line of *Gebrauchsmusik* composers represented in the twentieth century, for example, by Distler and Bender. Although he could wax lyrically when appropriate, Busarow tended toward neo-classical, luminous, polyphonic textures which were frequently characterized by driving rhythms and often employing modern-sounding harmonies, employing palatable dissonances which firmly and identifiably situated his music in the late twentieth century. His descants and hymn harmonizations demonstrate his facility to stretch harmonic boundaries while remaining accessible to the average congregant. Busarow’s hymn harmonizations have been included in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978), *Lutheran Worship* (1982), and *Lutheran Service Book* (2006).

Donald Busarow’s attention to musical detail, his striving for musical perfection, and his care for his singers earned him the fierce allegiance from his choristers, one of whom articulated why singing in his choir could be so profoundly inspiring:

This is what made the Wittenberg Choir under Dr. B a religious experience, for he taught us not only to value perfection but to fight the good fight in striving for perfection at all times and in all places—perfection not as its own end; perfection not as a boasting point; but perfection as the only way to approach the source of all perfection—God the Father, and Jesus Christ, his only Son.”²⁷

As a professor, his ideas helped to shape the minds of generations of students, as a conductor, he led his choirs to perform the best of sacred music to audiences throughout the world,

and as an organist and composer, his music was informed by the weekly needs of the practicing parish musician, the combination of which has secured his towering reputation among composers of twentieth-century sacred music.

--*Benjamin Kolodziej*

¹ Carlos R Messerli; Thrivent Financial for Lutherans, Appleton, WI and Minneapolis, MN: Thrivent Financial for Lutherans, undated.

² Karen B Tancil, "God Has Directed Nick Busarow's Life," *The Journal Times* (Racine, WI), 8 August, 1976.

³ Donald Busarow obituary, *Dayton Daily News* (Dayton, OH), 2 November, 2011.

⁴ Karen Saatkamp Gerboth, "After Nearly Three Decades as Choir Director, Don Busarow Bids Farewell," *The Wittenberg Magazine* (Springfield, OH), Spring, 2010.

⁵ Racine Lutheran High School Hall of Fame, <http://www.racinelutheran.org/hall-of-fame/>. (accessed December, 2019)

⁶ *The Journal Times* (Racine, WI), 18 November, 1953.

⁷ *The Journal Times*, 8 December, 1954.

⁸ "Zion Church Singers to Be Heard," *Herald and News* (Klemath Falls, OR), 19 July, 1954.

⁹ "Reception Honors Donald Busarow," *The Journal Times*, 12 August, 1956.

¹⁰ *Detroit Free Press*, 5 December, 1959.

¹¹ This organ is so significant it has its own website devoted to its history: <http://www.clevelandbeckerath.org/index.html> (accessed January, 2020)

¹² "How Lutherans Tap Teens on Sunday Eve," *Detroit Free Press*, 16 October, 1971.

¹³ "Schlicker Recital Set for Monday," *Lansing State Journal* (Lansing, MI), 8 March, 1970.

¹⁴ "Wittenberg Organ Director Featured at Hymn Festival."

¹⁵ "Organist to Perform at Pella Lutheran," *Fond Du Lac Commonwealth Reporter* (Fon du Lac, WI), 4 January, 1975.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ "Wittenberg Organ Director Featured at Hymn Festival." Bender had been Professor of Composition at Wittenberg University from 1965-1976, his tenure briefly overlapping with Busarow's.

¹⁸ "Busarow Named," *The Journal Times*, 18 September, 1982.

¹⁹ John W Williams obituary, *The Indianapolis Star*, 8 December, 2011.

²⁰ "Wittenberg University Choir to Stop at King of Kings Church," *Neighbor News* (Boonton, NJ), 3 March, 2010.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Andrew McGinn, "Witt Choir Director Set to Take Final Bow," *Springfield News-Sun* (Springfield, OH), 19 March, 2010.

²³ See Busarow's obituary above.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ "Donald Busarow," Selah Publishing Company People. <http://www.selahpub.com/SelahPeople/Busarow.html> (accessed January, 2020.)

²⁶ Jeffrey Roth, "Eighth Annual Church Music Workshop to Open this Weekend," *The Gettysburg Times* (Gettysburg, PA), 20 May, 1987.

²⁷ Elizabeth Eshelman, "In Memoriam Dr. Donald Busarow," personal blog, 13 November, 2011.

<https://elizabethanlit.blogspot.com/2011/11/in-memoriam-dr-donald-busarow.html> (accessed January, 2020.)

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