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## **EDWARD RECHLIN (1884 - 1961)**

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... may be one of the least remembered among church music reformers of the 20th century. Roughly fifty years ago during a seminary class, Walter Buszin told his students (I was among them) that he regarded Rechlin as the only true musical genius in American Lutheranism at that point. None of us students had any idea of who this genius was — except for one class member, Mark Bangert, who later devoted his dissertation to the eminent virtuoso organist. Rechlin deserves a stronger memory, for he was one of the key figures in the early and mid- 20<sup>th</sup> century movement to recover a Lutheran musical identity. He passionately advocated for Bach and pre-Bach organ literature, the Lutheran chorale, and an improved church music practice among American Lutherans.

Rechlin's early involvement with music grew out of a German Lutheran tradition that linked the roles of organist and choirmaster with the office of Christian teacher, often in parochial schools. That tradition is still alive and active today and has included recognized church music leaders such as Paul Manz, Paul Bunjes, Walter Buszin, Carl Schalk, Ed Klammer, and Richard Hillert along with a host of practicing parish musicians during the last century and a half. Thus, young Edward followed his father into the office of a Lutheran teacher, graduating

from the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s teacher training institute at Addison, Illinois (predecessor of Concordia University Chicago). His first posting took him to Trinity Lutheran School in St. Louis. Like all pastors and teachers, he took a vow at installation to accept his sacred vocation and to be faithful to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessional writings. It must be recognized that all those musicians, including young Rechlin, who started out this way faced an enormous burden of hard work and financial challenge to acquire the advanced training commensurate with their talents while handling the huge workload involved in school teaching and congregational work.

During his service at Trinity Rechlin had opportunity to perform at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair. He later recalled his nervous anxiety due to inexperience, especially as he was to perform at the same instrument where the famous Alexandre Guilmant had played. He even described the event as a “bizarre performance.” Still, his gifts were outstanding enough to lead a wealthy patron to offer financing for further study with Guilmant in France. It was only later, after struggling with illness and moving to New York City, that study in Paris became possible, first with Guilmant and later with Charles-Marie Widor. In New York, Rechlin’s career veered away from that of the typical Lutheran schoolmaster-musician. He served as organist for many years at Immanuel Lutheran Church in New York but also embarked on a recital career that took him across the US and Europe, sometimes touring with the St. Olaf College Choir or the Sheboygan Lutheran Chorus. He was also designated as a “messenger of American Lutheranism” to perform in Germany at the 1930 anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. His very successful career included appointments as personal organist to the wealthy Duveen and Mellon families, frequent recital appearances with New York’s finest musicians, even a White House appearance as recital accompanist.

His Paris studies placed Rechlin among the heirs of the “true Bach performance” style preserved among the musical disciples of Jacques Lemmens, Widor’s teacher, but dating back to Johann Christian Kittel, Bach’s last and eminent student. As a result, Rechlin joined like-minded friends at the New York-based Lutheran Society in a campaign to reintroduce the Lutheran heritage, defined as the music of Bach and other chorale-based repertoire. Rechlin adopted the title of “America’s Foremost Bach Interpreter” and, in fact, received much critical acclaim for his performance of the Leipzig master’s works. His audiences occasionally numbered in the thousands. That Bach’s organ works are now widely heard on their intended instrument rather than almost exclusively in orchestral transcriptions is due to the efforts of performers like Rechlin, even if we have meanwhile moved on to new ideals of performance practice.

Rechlin employed his forceful personality not only in a recital career but elsewhere as well. During the 1940’s his concertizing abated as he became more involved with colleagues and organizations promoting better church music. With Theodore Hoelty-Nickel (music professor at Valparaiso University), Walter Buszin (musicologist and professor at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis), Paul Rosel (choral director at Concordia University, Seward, Nebraska), and Martin J. Bangert (long-time director of the Sheboygan Lutheran Chorus) — to name a few of his musical fellow reformers — Rechlin energetically promoted performance and publication of the lost Lutheran heritage of chorale-based music. He frequently proclaimed the message of the “true church music” in service to the Gospel through workshops across the nation. Rechlin published articles for the *Walther League Messenger* (journal of a Lutheran youth organization that had wide influence on new movements in the church), and played a key role in the early years of the Valparaiso University Church Music Seminars. There he allied himself with Hoelty-Nickel, Buszin, and Bangert in the crusade for good music, speaking and performing prominently almost

every year. When the University eventually turned to Heinrich Fleischer to fill its organ position, Rechlin was apparently deeply disappointed, not merely about Fleischer but at a perceived change in direction in the church music movement. By 1951 he had retired. Until his 1961 death in Ashland, New York, Rechlin never wavered in his commitment to a revitalized Lutheran church music practice for the “common people,” a perspective that paved the way for the practices we follow still today.

In all this we might learn something of modesty about our own commitments to “good” or “bad” church music, right or wrong ways to play the repertoire, even what is historically accurate. Rechlin, the champion of the Leipzig cantor J. S. Bach, had learned the “authentic” Bach tradition from French masters in Paris. He also expressed strong distrust of recent Leipzig masters such as Karl Straube. Fleischer, however, stood firmly in the Leipzig tradition, as, in fact, did two of Rechlin’s other co-champions, Hoelty-Nickel and Martin Bangert. Even F. Melius Christiansen (though from an entirely different context) found his own way forward after study in Leipzig. All of them, including Rechlin, professed devotion to the quality of German church music exemplified in J. S. Bach.

All this is worth remembering so that we can step back and recognize the inevitable historic framework that brackets our own musical convictions of musical right and wrong. It is not wrong to advocate strongly for the best music in worship or to use Bach as the benchmark. It is wise, however, to recognize that we, like Rechlin, can make the best musical and liturgical choices only among the possibilities available to us in our current historic situation. We need to know where our values and allegiances originated so that we can also grasp the potential of other sources as we find our way forward in devising the church music of the future.

In any event, Rechlin’s crusades for Bach and pre-Bach music served an important

purpose. Such music had long been ignored as a gift to the church. We do not have to deal with the pro- or anti-German attitudes of Rechlin and his generation to credit them with opening doors to new, better church music that has benefited us today. The sources for our commitments and values would have been quite different without Rechlin's pioneering work in bringing Bach and the chorale to — as he put it — the “common people” in America, always — as he also proclaimed very persistently — “for the Gospel.”

*Victor E. Gebauer*

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### **Further Reference and Study**

The primary reference is “Edward Rechlin: Organist and Musician of the Church” by Mark P. Bangert (unpublished dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1984).

For the recovery of the chorale see *The Roots of Hymnody in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod* by Carl Schalk (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, © 1965). Also *God's Song in a New Land: Lutheran Hymnals in America* by Carl F. Schalk (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995), esp. pp. 121-152.

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