



LELAND B. SATEREN **(1913 – 2007)**

Photo courtesy of Augsburg
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... along with others of his generation, explored the transit from the immigrant Lutheran culture to a new sense of church, piety, and musical style in America. That required a rethinking of music, art, and faith.

Born to an Everett, Washington, Norwegian parsonage, he schooled at Augsburg College, then briefly worked as a public school music director. Along the way he flirted with interests in zoology (Augsburg had no music major at the time) and athletic coaching (thwarted by a back injury) before settling on the music he had favored already during high school years in Wisconsin. Graduate study at the University of Minnesota became a threshold to a career at Augsburg College, where he taught from 1946 until his 1979 retirement.

Sateren established an enviable “Augsburg Tradition” in choral music by setting a high artistic standard for himself and his successors while will playing a role within the Lutheran church. He was successful enough that he was voted by choral colleagues in

1965 as one of the three most influential choral conductors in Minnesota. (The other two were Paul Christiansen and Olaf Christiansen.) In addition to several other academic and professional distinctions, he was further honored when Governor Al Quie named 3 February 1979 as Leland B. Sateren Day in the state of Minnesota.

Sateren also left a considerable catalog of choral compositions and other publications, including *The New Song: A Guide to Modern Music for Use in the Church Choir*. He also translated the authoritative Grieg biography by Schelderup-Ebbe and William Halverson's *A History of Norwegian Music*. Sateren acknowledged Bruno Walter, Arturo Toscanini, and Leopold Stokowski as the sources of his conducting style, adding also F. Melius Christiansen in the choral field.

Sateren and those of his era struggled to assimilate the competing values of their European heritage, musical "modernism," and the American church experience. They had to recreate a sense of what church music was all about. Sateren never forgot Norway while steering himself in this environment. He studied in Europe on occasion, then led summer choral schools both here and in Scandinavia. He was awarded the St. Olaf Medal by King Olav V. He took seriously his mission to introduce Scandinavian music to Americans.

He also felt a somewhat Romantic vocation to "elevate man" by music of such high artistry that it aroused an enduring experience of beauty. That would move people toward refinement and clarity, thus overcoming vulgarity and coarseness. Music performance, therefore, had a high purpose. Sateren consequently believed that the choral singer relinquished all personal freedom in vocal style and interpretation to the artistic, religious vision of one person: the conductor.

These considerations, however, bumped up against newer ideas in both church and culture. For Sateren devotion to artistic accomplishment was balanced with genuine piety, both in choral concerts and church music. As his former students affirm, he had a sense that each concert was something of a service to praise God. Moreover, while Sateren was known as a choral taskmaster, he also stepped away from the older image of the unapproachable maestro. Some who knew both Sateren and F. Melius Christiansen considered Sateren more approachable than the older master. On choir tours, he both traveled and joked with his students. His insistence on discipline also made room for a sense of individual freedom and artistic partnership, noted consistently by those who studied with him. They linked this ambiance to the Lutheran free church tradition. Art and modernity also led him beyond some of his choral colleagues to explore progressive aleatoric and electronic compositions, including works by his Augsburg colleague Robert Karlen and the Norwegian Knut Nystedt.

Sateren brought his ideals to service within the church. The director of avant-garde works also wrote many church anthems. A number of his hymn tunes appeared in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (5) and *Lutheran Worship* (1) along with several hymn settings. After a first experience as a committee member producing the *Service Book and Hymnal* (1958), he later served faithfully on the Hymn Music Committee of the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship (ILCW) prior to publication of *Lutheran Book of Worship*. During the work on LBW he noted to some confidants that he had to be an advocate for the Scandinavian tradition against the liturgical vision and newer musical outlook of “the big guns” in the ILCW.

Sateren’s insistence on artistic value and commitment to faith remind us of the

careful balance which all church musicians struggle to discover for themselves in each generation. On one side we can define “sacred” so mechanically by idiom (perhaps a “safe” church sound), nature of text, or liturgical function that God’s good gift of musical expression fades out. Too much “church music,” including the stream of “easy-to-learn” anthems from today’s publishers, flirt with this hazard. The theologian–musician Jeremy Begbie might label such music “atrociously harmless,” unengaged with the world addressed by the Gospel. Art (here referring to musical values) and the church dare never be enemies, as Sateren’s work reminds us.

Conversely, identifying the sacred in music with the highest artistic expression — with “artistic” defined by the cultural elite — can leave music accessible only to an obediently awed audience. Such music risks losing its soul. As Jaroslav Pelikan put it, the Holy God refuses to be taken captive by the Beautiful. There is a difference between the beauty of holiness and the holiness of beauty. One draws forth our worship; the other risks idolatry.

Retracing the steps taken by Leland Sateren and his generation to define a true course for our time and the future, whether we agree with their individual choices or not, reminds us to take both faith and art seriously as we bring God’s good gift of music to people assembled for worship.

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Further Reference

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