



Hugo Gehrke

(1912-1992)

Throughout the twentieth century, Lutheran church music in the United States advanced as a result of the efforts of clergy, parish musicians, and college professors who, steeped in the Lutheran liturgical tradition, conveyed to their students the heritage of composition, performance, and singing in the Lutheran Church. In many instances, these hard-working visionaries, teaching hundreds of students collectively, had been raised and trained within the Lutheran educational system themselves. These schools may have

been “parochial” in orientation, but they imparted solid academic and performance skills to generations of church workers. Hugo Johannes Gehrke exemplified both the ideal Lutheran student—a product of Lutheran schools until graduate school—and the Lutheran college professor, having served much of his career in two Lutheran colleges.

Hugo Gehrke was born on 20 March, 1912, in Mayville, Wisconsin, to Otto and Marie Gehrke,¹ Otto a publisher who had purchased the town paper in 1907² and who had endeavored to involve his children in the printing business, a venture which Hugo had resisted.³ Music was integral to the Gehrke household, Otto singing bass in the church choir, occasionally venturing into “singing operatic excerpts,” while Marie Gehrke played piano and just generally appreciated fine music.⁴ Although Hugo Gehrke would later recall that his early musical training was admittedly minimal, he studied organ occasionally in Maysville with local organist Otto Gersmehl, who was also his teacher for eight years at the Lutheran elementary school. Gehrke nurtured a furtive desire to learn theatre organ, imagining himself playing a Mighty Wurlitzer to accompany a silent film, admitting late in life that he would still “. . .enjoy hearing one of those beautiful Wurlitzers, and even playing on ‘em.”⁵ (This notion likely receded with the advent of talkies in 1929.) Enrolling in Concordia Teachers’ College (now Concordia University) in Chicago afforded him new opportunities, studying organ with Andrew Gaertner and Martin Lochner, music professor at CTC for 32 years and musician at neighboring Grace Lutheran Church, whose EM Skinner organ, and

Lochner's deft handling of it, inspired Gehrke to acknowledge that his "... greatest moments at CTC. . . revolved around the new Grace Church. [Lochner] did such a good job with the new Skinner organ and choir."⁶ Gehrke likewise played tenor saxophone in the college band, graduating with his associates' degree in 1932.⁷

His first call was to Concordia Lutheran Church in Chicago, where he taught third, fourth, and fifth grades and where Paul Manz, seven years Gehrke's junior, would attend, engrossed with Gehrke's masterful organ playing.⁸ In 1939, he was called to Immanuel Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, upon Arthur Stellhorn's death, whose "... choirs of well-trained youthful voices is said to be one of exceptional quality and it has come to be one of the outstanding musical groups of its type in Milwaukee."⁹ Gehrke would continue the choir's touring appearances and radio broadcasts throughout his twelve-year tenure at Immanuel.¹⁰ His duties at the church included playing organ, teaching fifth grade, and directing the other choirs. He further developed his singers as the Lutheran A Cappella Choir of Milwaukee, as the ensemble came to be known, even singing twice with the Chicago Symphony under the direction of Frederick Stock.¹¹ His time at Immanuel was marked by significant personal milestones, including his marriage to Stellhorn's daughter, Selda, "... a glorious soprano and excellent violinist and recorderist." He finished his bachelor's degree at Northwestern University in 1943, earning his master's degree there in

1945.¹²



Hugo Gehrke and the Milwaukee Lutheran A Cappella Choir at Immanuel Lutheran in 1948. (Photo courtesy of Hal Rutz.)

In 1951, California Concordia College called him to establish a music department.¹³ Located in Oakland and established in 1906, the college, a six-year institution modeled after the German “Gymnasium” prototype, offered four years of high school with an additional two years of college instruction, all in a semi-classical, Latin-inspired format, not unlike other LCMS institutions of the time.¹⁴ Here he developed the choral program at the college as he had in the Milwaukee church, honing the ensembles’ abilities through a rigorous rehearsal and touring schedule. One reviewer noted that his choir of “. . . young people were extremely responsive to Gehrke’s quiet commands and these commands were marked by a sense of drama and variety which gave a lot of punch to the program.”¹⁵ Gehrke taught for five summers at the Concordia Seminary St Louis Schola Cantorum, assisting Robert Bergt, and was

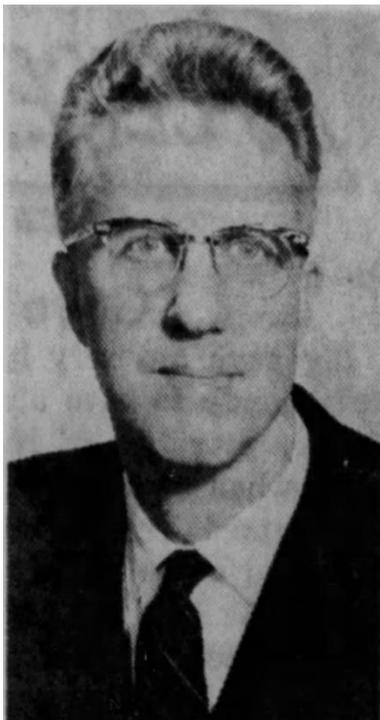
increasingly in demand to perform organ recitals and to teach church music workshops.¹⁶ In 1964, The Lutheran Hour Choir, directed by Carl Schalk, commissioned Gehrke to compose a setting of the Lord's Prayer for SATB choir, flute, oboe, strings, and organ.¹⁷ While at California Concordia College, as his children matured musically (three of whom were born in Milwaukee), the "Gehrke Family Concerts" were formed, featuring the family in various musical performances on organ, recorder, voice, and violin, playing around the San Francisco area. During these years, he was organist and choir director at Zion Lutheran, Piedmont.¹⁸

As a result of his prominence as an organist, churches often sought his services as a consultant or designer when initiating a new pipe organ project, with most of such efforts concentrated in the Midwest or on the Pacific coast. A press notice for his dedication of the new Reuter organ at First Lutheran Church in Pasadena, CA, in 1966, tantalizingly refers to him as ". . . one of four outstanding designers for organ[s] in the Lutheran Church,"¹⁹ although no mention is made of who the other three might be! Gehrke was one of the first proponents of neo-baroque organ building on the West Coast, and his influence was particularly notable in the LCMS. He designed the 24-rank Austin organ for California Concordia College in 1952, which, although utilizing electric key action, unmistakably exemplifies *Orgelbewegung* principles with tonal color provided through a vertical orientation of mutations, mixtures, and thin-scaled reeds, even lacking an 8 Principal:²⁰

Great	Swell	Pedal
8' Gedeckt	8' Konzertflöte	16' Subbass
4' Prinzipal	8' Spitzgamba	8' Prinzipal
4' Rohrflöte	8' Gamba Celeste	8' Rohrflöte
2 2/3' Nasat	4' Spitzflöte	4' Choralbass
2' Waldflöte	2' Prinzipal	II Rauschquinte
1 3/5' Terz	1 1/3' Klein Nasat	16' Fagot
III-V Mixture	II Zimbel	8' Fagot
16' Fagot	8' Fagot	4' Fagot
Chimes	Tremulant	

In 1951, Gehrke developed the specification for the Aeolian-Skinner organ at St John's Lutheran Church in Forest Park, Illinois, which G. Donald Harrison would execute in the creation of Opus 1235, dedicated by Gehrke in 1954. This 54-rank instrument, although not nearly as neo-baroque as the California Concordia College organ, has a cornet on both the Great and the Swell, with independent mixtures on all manuals and pedal. A Schalmey was prepared-for, as was a Positiv with a Quinte and

Scharf.²¹ Gehrke knew that most Lutheran churches were unable to afford an Aeolian-Skinner, so he often collaborated with the German builder Werner Bosch, represented in California by organbuilder John West, to design and build a number of mechanical action, neo-baroque organs on the West Coast. These instruments were particularly attractive due to the favorable exchange rate with West Germany at the time. Of the approximately twenty Bosch organs built between 1959 and the mid-1970s in California alone, seventeen were placed in Lutheran churches, including one mechanical action instrument for Concordia College in Oakland (1966)²² and a 28-stop instrument at nearby Our Redeemer Lutheran (1969).²³ Gehrke's influence secured a number of Midwest installations as well, including a 35-rank instrument built under his direction for Concordia College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1964.²⁴



Hugo Gehrke, 1966.

Since his undergraduate days, Gehrke had fervently pursued further educational opportunities for himself, garnering an impressive, eclectic pedagogical lineage. Perhaps satiating his latent desire to play theatre organ, he studied with acclaimed Hammond organist Porter Heaps, a student of Dupré, at Northwestern University, while he also coached with Frederick Marriott at the University of Chicago.²⁵ He studied with Leo Sowerby, the “Dean of American Church Music” at the American Conservatory in Chicago, while masterclasses at the Methuen

Organ Academy afforded him the opportunity to coach with E. Power Biggs and Carl Weinrich.²⁶ He ventured into vocal study at Milwaukee State Teachers College, piano pedagogy at San Francisco State University and Mills College, and performance



Tom Gieschen and Hugo Gehrke. (Photo courtesy of James Freese)

practice at Stanford University.²⁷ His educational sojourns even took him to study choral conducting with F. Melius Christiansen at that iconic conductor's annual summer "Christiansen Choral Schools."²⁸ He, Selda, and 16-year-old son Rodney spent 1971 on sabbatical in Hereford, Germany, where they studied at the Westfaelischen Landeskirchenmusikschule, living in a home supplied by the Lutheran cathedral. Here Gehrke was assistant organist and accompanist to Arno Schoenstedt, his organ professor, and friends with great contralto,

Frauke Haasemann.²⁹ In Gehrke's recollection, "It was a wonderful year of music making, visits with many dear people, trips to Holland, England, Austria, Switzerland, Bavaria, East Germany, and Denmark. Many organ factories were visited, and many organs tried out."³⁰ Only a few months before their scheduled return, California

Concordia College announced its closure, corresponding to the subsequent establishment of a new Concordia to be built at Irvine.³¹

Thus, in 1973, Hugo Gehrke was called to succeed Donald Busarow at Concordia College in Milwaukee, then a two-year institution, to teach music and to direct the choirs, as he had his entire career. He led the choir in annual spring tours, taught advanced organ and piano students, oversaw the service playing and curated the campus organs. During this time he served on the planning committees for *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) and *Lutheran Worship* (1982). He retired in 1983, moving back to California to be closer to his children. The recipient of numerous awards and recognitions, he was awarded an honorary doctor of letters degree in 1979 from Concordia College, Seward, Nebraska, was presented the Spiritus Christi distinguished alumnus award by Concordia College, River Forest, and was made an honorary life member of the Milwaukee Chapter of the American Guild of Organists in 1983. In 1987, under the guidance of Kenneth Kosche, who had replaced Gehrke in 1978 as music department chair, Concordia University Wisconsin established the Hugo J. Gehrke Parish Music Endowment, benefitting promising sacred music students.³² He died on 15 February, 1992.³³



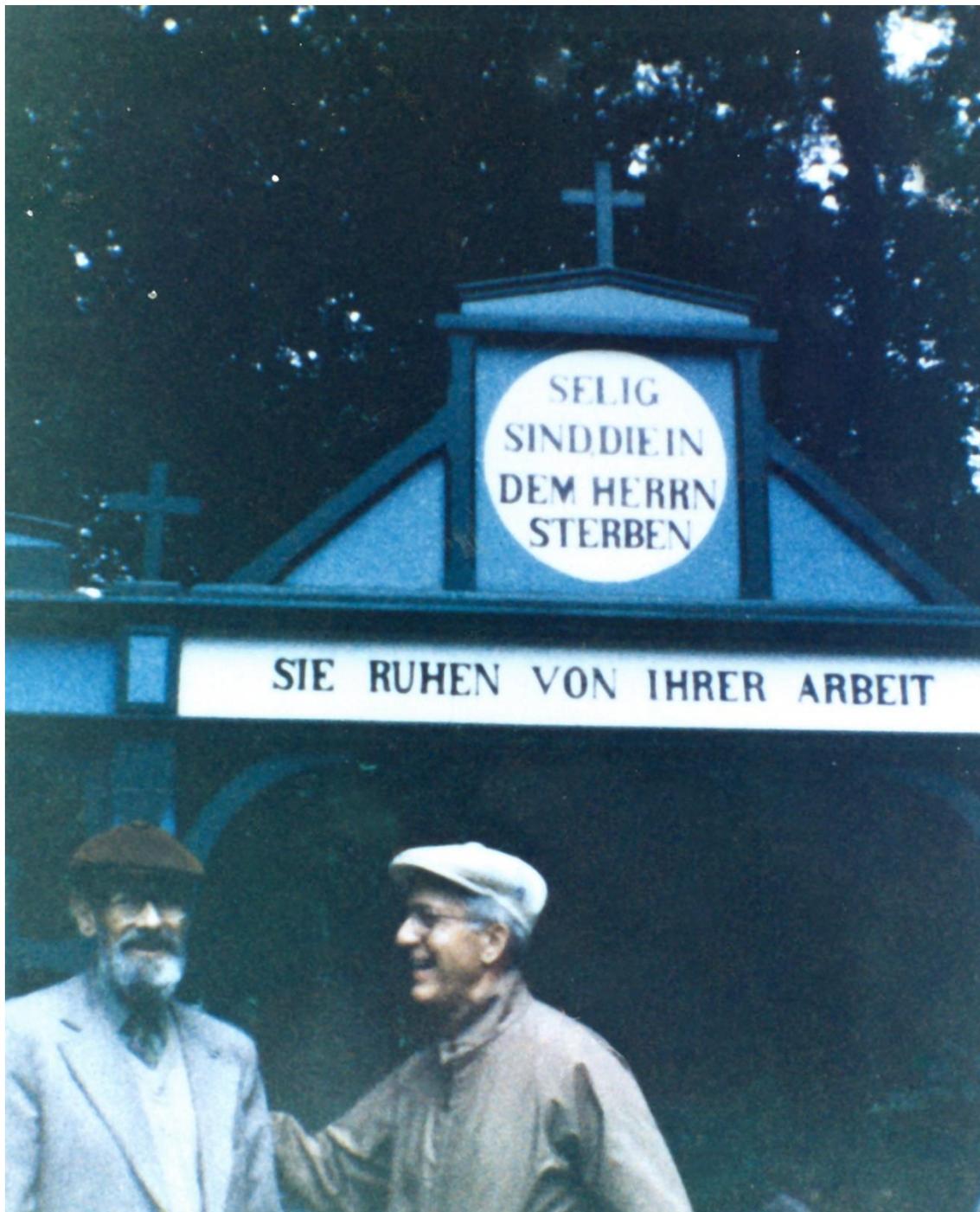
Hugo Gehrke with Kenneth Kosche (L) and Bob Kaun (R) in 1980. (Photo courtesy of Kenneth Kosche.)

As a composer, the concerns of the parish organist greatly motivated Hugo Gehrke, and he produced organ chorale preludes, choral anthems, instrumental music, as well as descants intended for practical use. His several dozen organ choral preludes, many of which were published in *The Parish Organist* series by CPH, demonstrate a simple, neo-classical style which maintains a clear declamation of the *cantus firmus*. His choral anthems are centered around the liturgical year, particularly the seasons of Christmas and Easter. He consciously dedicated his “. . . creative energies to the improvement of the quality of church music in the Lutheran church. He always

inscribed 'Soli Deo glory' (To God be the Glory) on his music and his recital programs. . ."³⁴ Former student Harold Rutz, whose own career would be spent teaching organ and sacred music at Concordia College in Austin, TX, remembered Gehrke as ". . . a consummate church musician and a true gentleman. . . he was by far the most influential person in my development as a church musician and I truly admired him."³⁵ Dr. James Freese, Professor of Music and Director of the Master of Church Music program at Concordia University Wisconsin similarly recalled, "I considered him to be one of the most influential people in my life. He was one of the kindest individuals I have ever known."³⁶ Gehrke's life exemplified that of a church musician in service to his students, congregations, and audiences, catechizing and nurturing the faith of all ages through the great sacred music of the Church.

--Benjamin Kolodziej

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Hugo Gehrke with Jan Bender. (Photo courtesy of James Freese.)

¹ "Biographical Sketch," 1982. Handwritten manuscript.

² *The Representative* (Fox Lakes, Wisconsin), 29 November, 1907.

³ Hugo Gehrke Obituary, St Mark's Lutheran Church, San Francisco, 21 February, 1992.

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- ⁴ “Biographical Sketch”
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ibid. For Lochner, see “Martin Lochner Dies in Street; Noted Organist,” *Chicago Tribune*, 7 February, 1945.
- ⁷ “Biographical Sketch.”
- ⁸ Personal recollection from Dr. James Freese in correspondence on 10 February, 2020.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ For a description of the choir as Stellhorn had left it, see “Sacred Concert to be Given on Sunday,” *The Oshkosh Northwestern* (Oshkosh, Wisconsin), 21 April, 1954.
- ¹¹ “Lutheran A Cappella Choir of Milwaukee Will Sing Here Sunday,” *The Sheboygan Press* (Sheboygan, Wisconsin), 3 May, 1951.
- ¹² “Biographical Sketch.”
- ¹³ Obituary.
- ¹⁴ The Concordias were often organized as a high school with the option of staying for two years in college, students receiving an associates’ degree, usually in teaching or in preparation for ministry. See “Silver Jubilee Planned,” *Oakland Tribune* (Oakland, California), 24 October, 1931.
- ¹⁵ “Oakland’s Concordia Singers Continue Tradition of Fine Lutheran Choruses,” *The Sacramento Bee*, 2 April, 1955.
- ¹⁶ See obituary and “Biographical Sketch.”
- ¹⁷ “Gehrke Index” compiled by Barry Bobb, Center for Church Music, Concordia Chicago.
- ¹⁸ “Biographical Sketch” and Obituary.
- ¹⁹ “Dedication of New Organ Slated at First Lutheran,” *Pasadena Independent* (Pasadena, California), 30 April, 1966.
- ²⁰ From the Organ Historical Society Pipe Organ Database.
<https://pipeorgandatabase.org/OrganDetails.php?OrganID=13869> (accessed February, 2020). After the closure of the college, in 1974, the organ was moved to St John’s Lutheran Church, Napa, California, at which time an 8 Principal was added.
- ²¹ <http://aeoliaskinner.organhistoricalsociety.net/Specs/Op01235.html> (accessed February, 2020)
- ²² <https://pipeorgandatabase.org/OrganDetails.php?OrganID=9241> (accessed February, 2020)
- ²³ <https://pipeorgandatabase.org/OrganDetails.php?OrganID=2263> (accessed February, 2020)
- ²⁴ <https://pipeorgandatabase.org/OrganDetails.php?OrganID=2446> (accessed February, 2020) Concordia Teachers College in Seward, NE, also commissioned a 6-rank Bosch tracker organ.
- ²⁵ “Organist at UC,” *Oakland Tribune* (Oakland, California), 16 September, 1962.
- ²⁶ “Dedication of New Organ Slated at First Lutheran,” *Pasadena Independent* (Pasadena, California), 30 April, 1966.
- ²⁷ Obituary.
- ²⁸ “A Capella Choir Sings Here Sunday,” *San Francisco Examiner*, 27 November, 1954.
- ²⁹ Email correspondence with Dr. James Freese, 10 February, 2020.
- ³⁰ “Biographical Sketch.”
- ³¹ “Lutheran College Moving to Irvine,” *Daily News-Post* (Monrovia, California), 17 April, 1971.
- ³² “Concordia University Endowments,”
<https://www.cuw.edu/about/offices/advancement/giving/assets/endowment-list.pdf> (accessed February, 2020)
- ³³ Obituary.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Personal letter from Harold Rutz, February, 2020.
- ³⁶ Email correspondence with Dr. James Freese, 10 February, 2020.