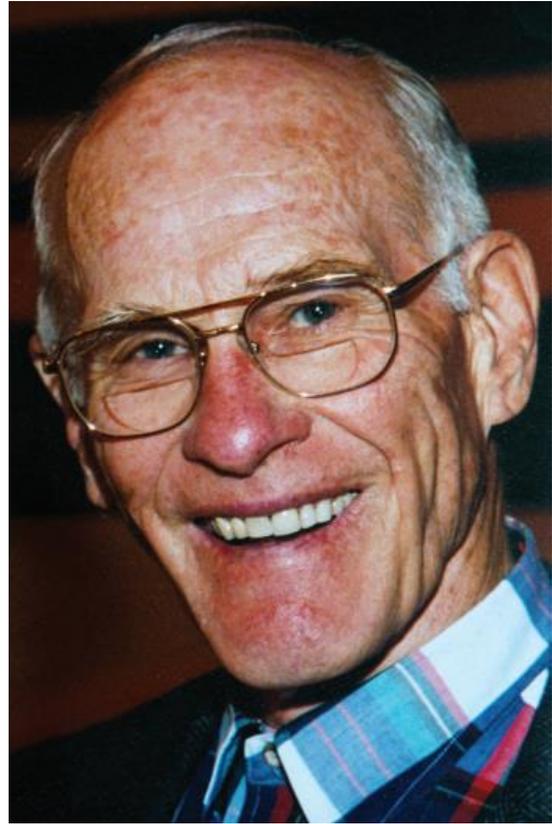


## Dr. Bernard Gastler (1929-2009)

A Lutheran musician of the caliber of Oliver Bernard (“Bernie”) Gastler could have elected to express his musical vocation in manifold ways, whether as a performing organist, or as a soloist, or as a composer. Ever flexible as sacred musicians must be, Bernie Gastler’s professional life followed the dual paths of a church musician and educator; yet, as his career grew and developed, his contribution to the musical world would become ever more clearly focused. As a university professor, but even more so as the founder and director of the Austin Children’s Choir, Bernie Gastler would increasingly dedicate his



effort toward teaching “children to love music enough to make it an important part of their lives.”<sup>1</sup> Finding practical inspiration from noted Hungarian music educator Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967), Gastler believed that “. . . it is in childhood where the most important things happen with us as human beings.”<sup>2</sup> Gastler’s own legacy of musical teaching stemmed from his own childhood, in which he “grew up singing.”<sup>3</sup>

Bernie Gastler, the second of four boys, was born on 14 August, 1929, in the farming community of Wellsville, Missouri, to Leo and Thelma Gastler, where his childhood was filled with song and by a deep connection to Trinity Lutheran Church, where he was baptized and confirmed.<sup>4</sup> His love for music having been nurtured by his parents, he would recall attending as a child an organ recital on the Kilgen organ at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Wentzville, Missouri, an experience

which he would could recount with joyful passion . An old Estey pump organ in his grandfather's home provided his first keyboard inspirations, and after high school graduation in 1947 he continued studies at Concordia Teacher's College in Seward, Nebraska, where he graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Education degree in 1953.<sup>5</sup> In 1952 he married Ruth Meyer in Powhattan, Kansas. Ruth had been teaching at Trinity Lutheran School in Houston, but would subsequently accept a call to teach at Trinity Lutheran in Port Arthur, Texas, where Gastler already had been serving as a parish teacher, organist, and choir director.<sup>6</sup> He had begun teaching at Trinity before graduation, relieving a teacher on maternity leave, but had completed his studies in Seward during the summers. The Gastlers remained in Port Arthur for twelve years, where they welcomed children Connie and Gregory, both of whom began early piano studies with their father, later singing in his church choirs.

In 1957, Gastler commenced studies for a Master of Music at the University of Texas at Austin, from where he would graduate in 1963. He accepted a call as teacher and musician at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Austin, founded in 1890 and by now one of the preeminent congregations in the Texas District of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.<sup>7</sup> In 1959, the congregation had built a fine new church building constructed from Austin cutstone, hand cut and trimmed at the site, providing a lofty sanctuary, chapel, administrative offices, choir room and basement undercroft.<sup>8</sup> Although the new building lacked a pipe organ, the lively acoustics of the new space certainly opened the ears of many in the congregation and in the Austin community to liturgical and musical possibilities.

In courting Gastler for the position at the church, Pastor Albert Jesse, himself a vocal proponent of quality Lutheran sacred music, must have anticipated the wariness any trained musician would have working at a church with only an electric organ, writing to Gastler in his call documents: "Plans are underway to obtain a pipe organ to cost not more than \$25,000. . . The

absolute deadline for the installation of the new organ would be the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the church.”<sup>9</sup> Since 1951, the church had been in discussions with organ builders, and a loft suitable for a pipe organ had intentionally been included in the church designs. Thus was Gastler fortuitously able to enter the congregation’s life at a point in which they had taken concrete steps to secure an organ, and in 1964 St. Paul executed a contract with Otto Hofmann for a 43-rank organ at a cost of \$28,460. Hofmann was an important local organ builder, and the instrument at St. Paul was one his most important, and certainly most successful.<sup>10</sup> Gastler enthusiastically logged organ progress during the spring of 1967 in a written journal, happily recording “First sounds of installed set of pipes!” or conversely lamenting “Organ builders did not work this week at all!” Nonetheless, the organ was finished enough for a short dedication service the morning of May 28, 1967, Bach’s “Ein Feste Burg” the first official piece to be played on the new organ, of which Gastler recalls in the third person, “Thrilling experience for organist.”<sup>11</sup> The main service at 11am was televised, with over 900 people in attendance.<sup>12</sup> The organ, still one of the most significant church instruments in Austin, was frequently employed in the service of the parochial school, and in November, 1968, would feature in a concert-recital by the children’s choirs of the school, an event notable as it was the “first recital ever for Mr. Gastler,” which he enthusiastically entered himself into his diary for the day.<sup>13</sup>

During the 1970s, while continuing with his parish music and education duties at St. Paul, Gastler began teaching music part-time at the adjacent Concordia Lutheran College, which for many years had utilized St. Paul’s nave for musical programs. He likewise embarked on studies for a Doctor of Music degree at the University of Texas at Austin, graduating in 1982, after which he accepted a full-time position at Concordia.<sup>14</sup> His dissertation entitled “A Survey and Evaluation of the Musical Suitability of the Sacred Songs Used in Church Related Preschools of the United States” offered an analysis of that which most compelled Gastler in these years as a musician--namely, the teaching and directing of children’s choirs.<sup>15</sup> The idea of forming a community children’s chorus had

been germinating in Gastler's mind, and an early iteration of such a chorus aimed to serve as a "lab" experience for his sacred music students at Concordia. However, what may have been initially an ad hoc community children's chorus developed into what would become the Austin Children's Choir, founded in 1986, initially dually organized as a training choir for the younger students (starting at age 8) and a performing choir for the older singers (who could remain until about the age of 15.)<sup>16</sup> Sponsored by Concordia University, which provided rehearsal space, Gastler understood ". . . the new group as neither substitute nor competition for public school choirs," but rather that it "will be an organization for students who are quite musically capable and interested in working after school. I hope to give them a professional experience as well as a chance for them to gain in knowledge of music literature, history, and musical perspectives."<sup>17</sup> Gastler maintained that the goal of the Austin Children's Choir would be to provide a "refined choral experience, to have fun with it, and to enrich the community with the kind of sound that only a children's choir can give."<sup>18</sup> Gastler auditioned singers for the chorus, maintaining a high standard, but always seeking any reason to accept a student if he sensed even a modicum of potential. Gastler justified his generosity by noting that "We are not going to be too restrictive about a child's vocal finess—we can work with that."<sup>19</sup> For an audition, "Children are asked to sing a simple song alone and to perform simple rhythmic and melodic tests."<sup>20</sup> Gastler would inform them right away whether they would be accepted. Families were expected to pay an annual modest fee to cover music costs, for which scholarships were available, and to commit to two weekly rehearsals for the concert choir (for fourth graders and up) or to one weekly rehearsal for the younger training choir. Gastler thus donated four after-school rehearsal hours a week to this venture, not including the additional time spent in recruitment and musical preparation. In 1987 alone, the choir performed ten local concerts and drew children from 20 local schools.<sup>21</sup>



*Bernie Gastler training two young singers in 1988.*

Originating as a chorus of 30 children, the ensemble steadily grew in numbers and reputation throughout Gastler's tenure, as he led them in local concerts, in tours around Texas, in a performance at the 1991 Texas Music Educators Association conference in San Antonio,<sup>22</sup> and at the Princeton International Choir Festival as part of a 1994 East Coast tour.<sup>23</sup> Gastler's repartee with his young singers earned him their respect and affection. Even though he taught them a variety of music, both sacred and secular, including some folk songs and children's music, Gastler always sought to instill in them a love for the "challenges of Brahms, Mozart and Bach."<sup>24</sup> He recalled, "The older group does more classical stuff. They really surprise me. There was a concert recently where we did an arrangement of 'Alexander's Ragtime Band.' I picked it because I thought they would like it—it had some handclapping. They asked me at the next rehearsal, 'couldn't we sing some Bach or something like that?'"<sup>25</sup> In teaching the choirs these masterworks, Gastler employed the utmost discipline in rehearsals, a quality the children and parents largely seemed to appreciate.

One fourth grader observed that she most loved “all the hard work,” despite all the “rules” to which Gastler required adherence. She continued that the conductor is “. . . funny, then he’s stern, then he gets funny again.”<sup>26</sup> For their part, the parents appreciated Gastler’s influence in their children’s lives and the opportunities he provided them. One father of a ten-year-old singer noted that “The children are affected in so many ways. . . they always sing the ‘Star-Spangled Banner’ at UT basketball games, but singing the national anthem now has a more profound meaning for them. . .”<sup>27</sup> Gastler’s love for his singers was inimitably palatable, one reporter having observed that “Talking to Gastler may remind you of an important teacher you had in elementary school: he’s soft-spoken, endlessly encouraging and enthusiastic, and with a sense of values that places a great deal of importance on simple things. . .”<sup>28</sup> These simple things might best have been most manifest in the Austin Children’s Choir’s local concerts. As glamorous as their national tours might have been, Gastler emphasized their home concerts to family and friends:

What I tell the children is that the thing we really want to focus on is what we are doing right here at home in our own community. . . That’s where we want to do our best concerts. That’s where our lives take place. Some people may become stars out of this, but we are not working for stardom—rather we are working to build this noble capability in the lives of ourselves and other people around us. We miss out on a lot by not doing the things that are of a folk nature, and singing with one another is a wholesome part of our everyday lives.<sup>29</sup>

Gastler penned an article entitled “Children’s Choir/College Partnerships: Unlikely but Successful Bedfellows” in the November, 1993, *Choral Journal*, in which he discussed the development, structure, and benefits of a college-supported children’s choir, including an analysis of twenty-eight such cooperative ventures, data on which he obtained from a sabbatical. He retired from Concordia and as founding director of the Austin Children’s Choir in 1995, but remained active in the

organizations he most cherished—at St. Paul Lutheran Church, at Concordia College (now University), and with the Austin Children’s Chorus, where he remained on the governing board. He maintained memberships in the Texas Music Educators Association, the American Choral Directors Association, the Texas Choral Directors Association, the Music Educators National Conference, and the Choristers Guild. Gastler served on the worship committee of the Texas District of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, worked tirelessly with colleagues Hal Rutz and Robert Achterberg to lead the annual Concordia Summer Church Music Workshop, which brought Lutheran musicians from throughout the region to the Austin campus for the opportunity to learn from nationally-prominent church musicians and liturgical theologians.<sup>30</sup>



*Dr. Bernie Gastler rehearsing the Austin Children's Choir at Concordia Lutheran College in 1994.*

In 2009, Texas State Representative Sylvester Turner recognized Dr. Gastler’s achievements with a proclamation stating that:

Whereas, though it is impossible to gauge the full effect of a man’s life, some individuals leave their unmistakable mark on the world as they move through it, and

Dr. Gastler's outstanding contributions to his community continue to resonate in the lives of all who know him; now, therefore, be it

Resolved, that Dr. Bernard Gastler be honored for his notable achievements and for his many years of service in behalf of his fellow citizens.<sup>31</sup>

In April, 2009, Texas governor Rick Perry bestowed him with an honorary appointment as an admiral in the Texas navy!<sup>32</sup> Bernie Gastler died on 21 November, 2009.

The Austin Children's Choir, perhaps Gastler's most enduring legacy, continues to this day, its concerts still inspiring Texas Hill Country audiences and, while no longer associated with Concordia, its future certainly still shaped by the vision of its founding director.<sup>33</sup> Bernie Gastler once suggested that ". . . his ultimate goal in life is to make a mark in the music world. But Gastler says he probably won't do it with an instrument or his voice or by composing. Instead, Gastler said he just hopes that he can teach children to love music enough to make it an important part of their lives."<sup>34</sup>

--Benjamin A. Kolodziej, MSM, MTS

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<sup>1</sup> James E. Garcia, "Man Makes His Mark Through Teaching Children to Love Music," *Austin American-Statesman* (Austin, Texas), 29 September, 1988: 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Jerry Young, "Classical Music," *Austin American-Statesman* (Austin, Texas), 30 July, 1986: F6.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Gastler's obituary from his funeral service, 27 November, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Communication from Greg Gastler, 30 August, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> "Meyer/Gastler" (wedding announcement), *The Atchison Daily Globe* (Atchison, Kansas), 27 July, 1952: 10.

<sup>7</sup> Obituary.

<sup>8</sup> "History of the First Fifty Years" [of St. Paul Lutheran Church.] Document from the files of Kathy Achterberg

<sup>9</sup> "Hoffman Organ Installation Diary." Typed document provided by Greg Gastler.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

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- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Obituary.
- <sup>15</sup> Communication from Greg Gastler, 30 August, 2021.
- <sup>16</sup> Young, "Classical Music."
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> "Children's Choir," *Austin American-Statesman* (Austin, Texas), 1 September, 1988: 3.
- <sup>19</sup> Young, "Classical Music."
- <sup>20</sup> "Children's Choir."
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Elaine Ayala, "Austin Children's Choir Finds Harmony in Discipline," *Austin American-Statesman* (Austin, Texas), 8 February, 1991: E1.
- <sup>23</sup> Jerry Young, "Children's Choir Bursting in Song," *Austin American-Statesman* (Austin, Texas), 23 April, 1994: 15.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> "Austin Children's Choir Finds Harmony in Discipline." The quoted child was Krista Achterberg.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> "Children's Choir Bursting in Song."
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup> Communication from Greg Gastler 30 August, 2021.
- <sup>31</sup> Undated document provided by Greg Gastler.
- <sup>32</sup> Document provided by Greg Gastler.
- <sup>33</sup> See the Austin Children's Choir website: <https://austinchildrenschoir.wordpress.com/> (accessed 1 October, 2021.)
- <sup>34</sup> "Man Makes His Mark Through Teaching Children to Love Music."