

Carl Frederick Halter

(1915-1989)



Church musicians by nature labor in dual worlds. One modern philosophy of the sacred music vocation posits that church musicians must be craftspeople and technicians, historically-informed, and masters of the academy, but they also must converse and move in theological realms, able to function effectively in the ecclesiastical world. Modern graduate sacred music instruction to a certain extent takes for granted the musician's role as a theologian, but such an approach was borne

out of many years of discovery that a thoughtfully-constructed, systematic theology was integral to the application of the church musician's more practical skills. Carl Halter's career demonstrates a complex and continual interplay between a vocation as a trained musician and skills as a university administrator he acquired later in life, all while nurturing theological thought in those he influenced.

Born on Sunday, 15 October, 1915, in Cleveland, Ohio, to Carl and Clara (Nehrenz) Halter, Carl Frederick Halter early "felt that his greatest calling was to make music in praise to God."¹ A graduate of Concordia Teacher's College with both a high school diploma followed by equivalent of an associate's degree in 1936, he consented to remain on the campus for an additional year as an instructor of music.² From 1937 until 1942 he served as music director and as a teacher at Trinity Lutheran Church in Houston, Texas, while simulatenously pursuing his undergraduate studies at Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea, Ohio,³ where he was a student of Albert Riemenschneider, himself a student of Guilmant and Widor, and from where Halter graduated with a bachelor of music in 1941.⁴ In 1942, he was called to Grace Lutheran Church in River Forest, the campus church of Concordia Teacher's College, as principal, music teacher, and minister of music. Graduating from Northwestern University in 1945 with a masters degree in music, studying composition, he married Miriam Luecke in 1946.

Grace Lutheran Church and School in River Forest represented a significant ecclesiastical appointment at the time. Pastored since 1922 by Rev. Otto Geiseman, president of Walther Memorial Hospital, occasional Lutheran Hour speaker, a director of the LCMS, and a writer who contributed to the *American Lutheran* and *This Day* magazines,⁵ ". . . Grace School served as the lab



Carl Halter during his college years.

school for Concordia's teacher education program, and many faculty members and their families were members at Grace.”⁶

Although the church's music ministries benefitted from the talents of college faculty and students, and its E.M. Skinner organ, Opus 833, had led the congregational singing since 1930,⁷ its liturgy, while from the hymnal, was generically Protestant, with infrequent communion and a congregation with a limited palate for musical development.⁸ During his tenure, Halter endeavored to expand the choir's role and repertoire in the liturgy. To that end, in 1945 he instituted the annual “Day of Spiritual Music,” a Sunday which encompassed more choir music than usual in the Sunday services, with a choral and instrumental concert in the afternoon, followed often by perhaps an organ recital and evening choral program, all designed to present unfamiliar music winsomely to the congregation. The headline notice in the *Chicago Tribune* of the 1945 event sums up precisely how anachronistically the community viewed the proceedings:

“Play Archaic Church Music Today in Suburb: River Forest Lutherans to Hear Old Works.”⁹ In this case, plainsong and

some Latin anthems constituted the afternoon program, while organist Paul Bouman, then still at St Paul's in Melrose Park, played two Bach chorale preludes and the Concerto in G Major. Carl Halter led the senior choir in singing Bach's Easter cantata, “Christ Lag in Todesbanden,” that evening. Although Bach chorales had been a staple of the choir's repertoire for many years, these events marked the first time that entire cantatas, with their complex polyphonic movements, would have been learned by the choir and performed for the congregation, albeit outside the context of

worship.¹⁰ Nonetheless, Halter thoughtfully entitled these days of “spiritual” music so as to make a conspicuous connection between the sacred and potentially liturgical nature of the music. From these events would develop Grace’s longstanding Bach cantata series, and thus was Halter and Grace at the forefront of a liturgical renewal.

In 1948, he had accepted a call to the Concordia Teachers’ College music faculty, although he would continue his work and association with Grace for a number of years. His work at Concordia Teachers College began as a professor of music, teaching applied music, including organ lessons.¹¹ The LCMS teachers’ colleges required that all students study music, particularly organ, assuming that the role of a church musician was integral to the teaching office to which they would officially be called. The Chicago and Seward colleges were at the forefront of this model, but the Chicago college was particularly unique with its intentional emphasis on music:

There are more organs for teaching and practice purposes at Concordia Teachers college, River Forest. . . than at any other school in the nation. Yet this institution of 635 students has no music school.

All its students are required to take music courses; 175 of them currently studying organ, and a tenth of the student body is minoring in music. Yet, a music major is impossible since all Concordia students must major in education.

This close relationship between music and religion is a tradition stemming from Martin Luther himself, Carl F. Halter, music department chairman, explained.¹²

The journalist continues by describing some of the twelve practice organs and the four larger teaching instruments, for which Paul Bunjes had consulted, and which “. . . are of modern classic in tonal design. This means, Halter added, that all are modern re-interpretations of the organ in its greatest period, the 18th century.”¹³ Halter’s administrative abilities allowed him to excel in the university environment, and over the next twenty six years he would combine teaching duties with stints as music division chair, dean of students, assistant to the president, and twice as interim

president. After Paul Bouman was called to Grace, Halter was appointed to St. Philip Lutheran Church in Chicago.

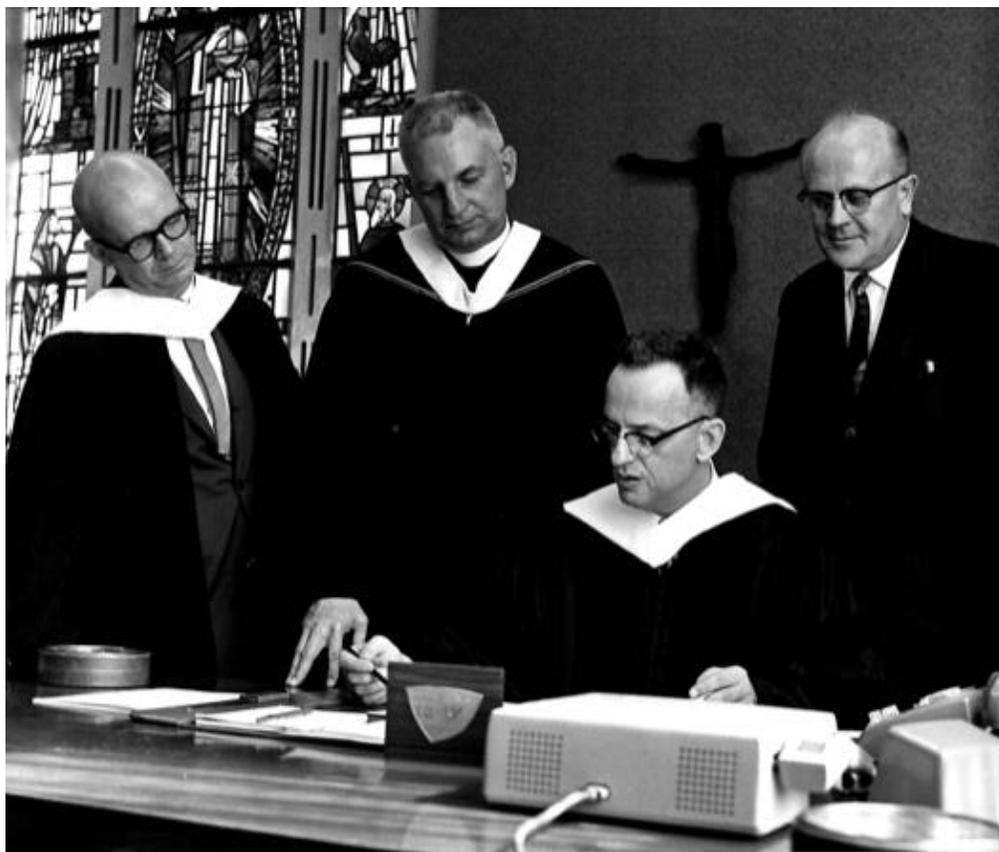
The postwar period represented a sort of Renaissance in liturgical exploration and musical scholarship, with study in Europe now a practical possibility, the organs and church music practices of the continent now enlightening American students as to the riches of their own heritage. A number of professors midcentury cultivated musicological interests consistent with their Lutheran heritage: Carl Waldschmidt's dissertation dealt with Georg Böhm, Evangeline Rimbach's with Johann Kuhnau, and Paul Bunjes' explored the Praetorius organ.¹⁴ According to Carl Schalk, who studied with Halter beginning in 1943, "It was an exciting time to be a student."¹⁵ Part of the excitement might have been that the professors, they themselves highly acquisitive for professional knowledge and skills, were only slightly more advanced in knowledge than their students. Carl Halter taught worship classes at the college, but these were largely practical, focused more on service playing and liturgical mechanics. His first book, *The Practice of Sacred Music* (1955), put forth some of this practical knowledge needed by the average, neophyte church musician, which all students were expected to become.¹⁶ Similarly, in his booklet "The Christian Choir Member" of 1961, Halter suggests organizational and spiritual practices required when singing in a chorus.¹⁷ Halter's thoughtfulness as a teacher was evident to Carl Schalk during his own organ study:

I had been drilled into playing baroque music with a metronomic tempo retained, and the danger was that one would play like an automaton. Halter said you could bend and stretch with the music, using ritardani and allargani. This was a whole new world for me. Halter was no romantic, but he was musical.¹⁸

Halter's thought on organ design evidenced a fondness for neo-baroque ideals, informed by that post-war musical renaissance of which he was an early harbinger, noting that "After decades of striving for orchestral magnificence, churches are permitting the organ to be its noble self." He claims this dates from the 1930s—identified in modern terms as the *Orgelbewegung*—in which "... a

few of our organ buffs went to Europe and studied the great classic organs of Germany, France, Holland, and Sweden. . . Slowly and against massive opposition, the classic ideas gained ground.”¹⁹ Halter’s ideas would influence generations of students; even those who did not study with him directly would experience his service playing during his years at Grace. By all accounts, his playing was solid, thoughtful, always sensitive to the text, liturgically-appropriate, and never self-aggrandizing.

Yet, Halter was increasingly concerned that sacred music be approached (and taught) from a theological, rather than merely practical, point of view. His 1963 book, *God and Man in Music*, trod new ground for a church musician, as it was a collection of philosophical and theological essays on church music.²⁰ Carl Schalk contends this volume represents the first instance in the LCMS of a church musician publishing theological ruminations about music. Clergy had been writing historical pieces and devotionals for decades, but this was new territory into which a musician had never before sojourned. Like his textbook on parish music ministry, his thoughts may now seem antiquated to modern minds. But this book in particular strove to encourage musicians to think of and justify their vocation theologically.



L-R: Martin Marty, unknown, Carl Halter, Martin Koehneke.

In 1964, Concordia Teachers' College in Seward, Nebraska, bestowed upon him the Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*, in recognition of his "competency as a church musician, his professional skill as a writer, and his academic achievement in the administrative field."²¹ From 1965-1968 he served on the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations, served as acting president of Concordia River Forest from 1965-1966, continuing as executive vice president until 1968.²² In 1969, he took his family to Hong Kong "where he served as a consultant for teacher education to the Lutheran churches there," also administering programs of education at the seminary in



While interim president of CTC in 1972.

Kowloon, and where he founded and directed the Bach Choir of Hong Kong.²³ In 1971, he returned to Chicago where he assumed the positions of Director for Public Relations and head of the Center for Continuing Education at Concordia Teachers College, which in 1972 appointed him as acting president upon the departure of Martin Koehneke. The school's chairman of the board praised him: "The Board is fortunate that it can draw on Dr. Halter's experience at a time like this."²⁴ At the same time he was

hired as organist by Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Des Plaines, Illinois.²⁵

Halter's next appointment took him even further afield from sacred music when, in July, 1974, he was hired as Director of Continuing Education, with the rank of professor, at Valparaiso University in Indiana, where he would coordinate evening and summer sessions, as well as direct conferences. During these years he not only remained strongly connect to church music through his part-time service as organist at Trinity Lutheran Church in Valparaiso, but demonstrated a robust work ethic with his editing, along with Carl Schalk, the *Handbook of Church Music*, a compilation of essays collected from a variety of scholars, intended for "organists and choir directors, pastors and

church music committees, members of congregations with a particular interest in worship and church music, all who are interested in growing in their understanding of what church music is about.”²⁶ This was not Halter’s and Schalk’s first collaboration, as they had launched a journal, *Church Music*, in 1966, “for church musicians, organists, choir directors, pastors and layment interested in current issues related to music in the life and worship of the church,” with Schalk as editor and an editorial advisory board comprised of church musicians from Concordia and Valparaiso.²⁷ By this time, of course, the liturgical movement had matured, *Lutheran Book of Worship* was launching, and its related offshoot hymnal, *Lutheran Worship*, was in preparatory stages, both of which evidences strides in liturgical scholarship of which prior hymnals had been devoid. Some of this can certainly be attributed to Halter’s years of influence.

Halter’s increasing involvement in university administration must have only exacerbated his yearning to return to church music, heightened by the dedication of the Hendrickson mechanical action organ he designed for Trinity in April of 1979,²⁸ and by June of that year he had announced his resignation from the university in order to work full time at Trinity, saying “I like music best. A new organ was dedicated in April that has enlarged and enriched the musical life of the congregation. They figured this ²⁹required a full time person.”³⁰ He retired from full-time music ministry in August, 1981.³¹ Carl Halter died on Reformation Day, 1989.³²

Although he had studied composition, he composed relatively little, which he regretted.³³ Some of his more popular choral anthems included “Now Let the Heavens Be Joyful,” “In the Dark of the Night,” “O Holy Child,” “When Jesus Christ, Our Lord and King,” and “A Virgin Most Pure,” along with a collection of a few organ preludes. His most enduring influence in sacred music was likely his teaching and his copious writing encouraging church musicians to approach their craft not simply mechanically, but theologically. As a wordsmith, “He knew how to write gracefully,” according to his student and collaborator, Carl Schalk.³⁴ Halter’s career as a musician, theologian, and university administrator aligned with the burgeoning liturgical revitalization, and his multifaceted

positions in the service of the Church allowed him to promulgate these new thoughts to reach and affect a new generation.

--Benjamin Kolodziej



¹ Funeral Bulletin, 3 November, 1989, Trinity Lutheran Church, Valparaiso, Indiana, courtesy of Pastor Tim Leitzke.

² His roommate during this year of teaching was Paul Bouman, his colleague and eventual successor as Director of Music at Grace Lutheran Church in River Forest.

³ Robert Cecil Cook, *Who's Who in American Education: A Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Living Educators of the United States*, Volume 23, Part 1 (New York: Who's Who in American Education), 338.

⁴ Interview with Carl Schalk, 24 February, 2020. Schalk also indicated that Halter, unsurprisingly, always utilized the Riemenschneider *Orgelbüchlein* with his own students.

⁵ "Rev. Geiseman Dies; Lutheran Church Leader," *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, Illinois), 8 Nov 1962, 106.

⁶ "History," <http://gracriverforest.org/welcome/history-of-grace/>, accessed 21 February, 2020.

⁷ See the Organ Historical Society Pipe Organ Database, <http://aeolianskinner.organhistoricalsociety.net/Specs/Op00833.html>, accessed 18 February, 2020.

⁸ Phone interview with Carl Schalk, 24 February, 2020. That Grace was liturgically generically Protestant is no particular indictment—most LCMS churches of the time simply followed the hymnal, administered communion infrequently, and focused on the sermon as the high point of the service.

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- ⁹ "Play Archaic Church Music Today in Suburb: River Forest Lutherans to Hear Old Works," *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, Illinois), 20 Mar 1949, 21.
- ¹⁰ According to Carl Schalk, the introduction of more complex Bach works was not met with unmitigated praise; rather, several prominent parishioners expressed dismay to Halter and his successor, Paul Bouman, about their employment of polyphonic music.
- ¹¹ "Concordia Appoints Acting President," *The Marengo Beacon News* (Marengo, Illinois), 13 Jul 1972, 5.
- ¹² Louise Hutchinson, "There's Music (and Theology) at Concordia," *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, Illinois), 4 Apr 1954, 27.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Interview with Carl Schalk, 24 February, 2020.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Carl Halter, *The Practice of Sacred Music* (St Louis: CPH), 1955. There was even a Japanese translation of this volume: https://www.worldcat.org/title/kyokai-ongaku-no-jissai-the-practice-of-sacred-music/oclc/830680982&referer=brief_results
- ¹⁷ Carl Halter, "The Christian Choir Member (St Louis: CPH), 1961.
- ¹⁸ Ibid, Schalk interview.
- ¹⁹ Carl Halter, "Today's Organ: Integrity Regained," *The Christian Century*, vol. 76, part 2, 15 July, 1959, 826.
- ²⁰ Carl Halter, *God and Man in Music* (St Louis: CPH), 1963.
- ²¹ "Dr Sabourin Speaker at Concordia Commencement," *Lincoln Journal Star* (Lincoln, Nebraska), 13 May 1964, 14.
- ²² "Concordia Appoints Acting President," *The Marengo Beacon News* (Marengo, Illinois), 13 Jul 1972, 5.
- ²³ Electronic communication from Timothy Halter, February, 2020.
- ²⁴ "Concordia Appoints Acting President," *The Marengo Beacon News* (Marengo, Illinois), 13 Jul 1972, 5.
- ²⁵ "Concordia Prof is New Organist," *The Daily Herald* (Chicago, Illinois), 1 Sep 1971, 47.
- ²⁶ *A Handbook of Church Music*, Carl Halter and Carl Schalk, eds. (St Louis: CPH), 1978, 9.
- ²⁷ "VU Faculty on Staff of Music Journal," *Vidette-Messenger of Porter County* (Valparaiso, Indiana), 7 May 1966, 3. The advisory editorial board consisted of Rev. Hans Boehringer, director of the Institute for Liturgical Studies at VU, plus faculty Dr. Philip Gehring, Dr. Richard Wienhorst, and Prof. Joseph McCall. Schalk, Halter, and Dr. Theodore Hoelty-Nickel represented Concordia.
- ²⁸ "Trinity Lutheran Church Announces the Dedication of its Hendrickson Organ," *Vidette-Messenger of Porter County* (Valparaiso, Indiana), 7 Apr 1979, 3. This two-manual, thirty-three rank organ stands squarely within the neoclassical tradition, designed for the performance of historic Lutheran music. See <https://www.pipeorgandatabase.org/OrganDetails.php?OrganID=1747> (accessed 22 February, 2020)
- ²⁹
- ³⁰ "Music Director is Hired," *Vidette-Messenger of Porter County* (Valparaiso, Indiana), 29 Jun 1979, 6.
- ³¹ "Church Music Director Retires," *Vidette-Messenger of Porter County* (Valparaiso, Indiana), 28 Aug 1981, 6.
- ³² "Carl F. Halter" (obituary), *Vidette-Messenger of Porter County* (Valparaiso, Indiana), 1 Nov 1989, Wed, 2.
- ³³ Carl Schalk interview. Schalk remembers Halter expressing disappointment that he had not composed more during the course of his career.
- ³⁴ Carl Schalk interview, 24 February, 2020.

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