

LEGACY

Kenneth Jennings Conductor Emeritus of the St. Olaf Choir



KEN JENNINGS

Kenneth Jennings is the Tosdal Professor Emeritus of Music at St. Olaf College. An alumnus of St. Olaf College, Jennings holds a master's degree from Oberlin Conservatory and a doctorate from the University of Illinois and was the third of four conductors who have led the St. Olaf Choir.

F. Melius Christiansen founded the St. Olaf Choir in 1912. He was succeeded by his son, Olaf Christiansen, in 1943; Kenneth Jennings in 1968; and the current conductor, Anton Armstrong, in 1990.

Under Dr. Jennings' direction, the St. Olaf Choir inspired audiences in the United States, Europe and Asia, with six international tours covering twelve countries. In 1988, the St. Olaf Choir was one of only five choirs in the world, and the only non-professional choir, invited to participate in the Olympic Arts Festival in Seoul, South Korea.



Jennings meeting Pope Paul VI

Illuminating the Past Informing the Present Inspiring the Future

Two years earlier, it celebrated its 75th anniversary with a four-week tour to Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the People's Republic of China.

The 1970 tour to Europe included performances at music festivals in Holland, Belgium, and France, including the International Strasbourg Music Festival, which had never previously invited a non-professional group. The St. Olaf Choir was then invited back to Strasbourg to open the 1972 Festival, with Jennings conducting the Choir, the Strasbourg Philharmonic Orchestra, and international soloists in J. S. Bach's monumental *Mass in B Minor*.

Members of the St. Olaf Choir spent three weeks studying and performing in Vienna in January 1975, and then, with an invitation from the Vatican, left for Rome to participate in events for the Week of Christian Unity. The St. Olaf Choir's 1980 tour to Norway included a performance at the Bergen Music Festival and a concert in Oslo with members of the royal family in attendance.

In addition to a regular schedule of performing and yearly tours, Dr. Jennings and the St. Olaf Choir were often invited to perform with the Minnesota Orchestra, beginning in 1970. Over the next two decades Jennings prepared the Choir for performances of twelve major choral/orchestral works with the Minnesota Orchestra under the direction of Stanislaw Skrowaczewski and Neville Marriner, including the Bach *Magnificat*, Bruckner's *Mass in E Minor*, Haydn's *The Creation*, *The Seasons*, and the "Lord Nelson" *Mass*, the Mozart *Requiem*, Rachmaninoff's *The Bells*, and Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloe Suites*. The Choir also traveled twice to New York and once to Washington D. C. to perform with the Minnesota Orchestra.

Through Dr. Jennings' efforts, distinguished composers and conductors also came to St. Olaf. As part of the celebrations marking the opening of the new Christiansen Music Hall in 1976, Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki spent a week at St. Olaf as Visiting Composer-in-Residence, rehearsing and conducting a concert of his works, including the Midwest Premiere of his *Magnificat*. Others of international reputation included German conductor Helmuth Rilling and American conductor Robert Shaw, who prepared and conducted a performance of Bach's *Passion According to St. Matthew* in 1985.

Among many attributes in Dr. Jennings' musical legacy, he is widely respected for his sensitive phrasing, sense of line and elegant conducting. Jennings' tour programs, while still largely from the repertoire of a *cappella* music, expanded the choir's repertoire to include music with instrumental ensembles for Baroque and Classical repertoire, and occasionally music with piano, organ, or other instruments.

In August, 2010, Rebecca Wyffels, who studied conducting with Kenneth Jennings at St. Olaf, interviewed him for the MN-ACDA *Star of the North* Legacy Series. Rebecca acknowledges, with gratitude, questions for this interview that were contributed by Rene Clausen and Mike Smith, conductors at Concordia College, and other former students of Dr. Jennings.

RW: When did you first decide to become a choral conductor?

KJ: That specific decision came as the result of a number of experiences over time. Even in my undergraduate and graduate work, I was interested in various aspects of music. My undergraduate performance major was piano though, of course, I was involved in singing; and my master's degree at Oberlin was in composition.

But there were early experiences that fostered my interest and developed my understanding of music, dating back to my childhood. My parents, not musicians themselves, bought a piano for my brother and me, and when I was six I began lessons. When I was ten I had my first job: playing hymns, prelude and postlude for Sunday school worship. Later I played organ for some of the church services.

Then, when I was a freshman in high school, I had my second job. A fine former professional singer, who had heard me play, asked me to accompany her twice a week, for seventy-five cents an hour. We went through an incredible amount of vocal/piano literature.



Moving from Fairfield to Westport, Connecticut, I was fortunate to be asked to accompany a professional singer who was tenor soloist at Norman Vincent Peale's church, Marble Collegiate Church, in New York City. As his rehearsal accompanist I learned a great deal of oratorio, opera, and song literature. Later, during college summers, I served as staff accompanist in his voice studio.

These experiences gave me opportunities to develop a sense of style, pacing, balance, and how to work collaboratively to create a musical performance. Even so, I studied chemistry and physics in high school because I thought I might want to be a doctor.

I continued my piano studies, and sang in the high school choir, where I was often at the piano, since our conductor was a fine violinist but not a pianist. One of his yearly objectives for the choir was a trip to New York City to hear a first-rate choral performance. Indeed it was first-rate: the young Robert Shaw conducting the Fred Waring Choir in a live radio broadcast.

When I finished high school I was eighteen and World War II was in progress. I enlisted in the Army, knowing I would otherwise be drafted, and was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia, for training. Upon arrival there I went to the chapel and volunteered my services as organist. The chaplain's assistant was a 1937 graduate of St. Olaf College, Luther Onerheim, who, as a student, had founded the Viking Chorus. He accepted my offer immediately. I also sang in the male chorus he organized at Fort Benning – all volunteer, so we had to have permission to take time for rehearsal. This group became the Fifth Infantry Soldier Chorus, an outstanding musical ensemble, which would eventually perform for audiences and military dignitaries in Europe after the war was over, including the newly reopened Salzburg Festival.

You can begin to see the connections. After the war, the GI Bill provided funds for veterans to attend any college or university where they were accepted. I applied to two: Colorado College, where Roy Harris was Composer-in-Residence, and St. Olaf. I was accepted at Colorado; St. Olaf indicated they were full. Nevertheless, traveling by train to Colorado, I got off in Chicago and headed north to St. Olaf. I met with the Dean of Students and boldly said, "I know they're still drafting people, and I'd like to take the place of one of your students who had to leave." The Dean found my credentials in the file, looked down the list of "A" grades, and said, "I guess you'll be a good enough risk."

Being a four-year member of the St. Olaf Choir, and tenor section leader for three years, was of course a formative experi-

ence. And being a voice student and often an accompanist also contributed to my continuing musical development. But it was the St. Olaf Choir experiences that really set my course toward choral conducting.

RW: What were some of your musical experiences after you graduated from St. Olaf?

KJ: First of all, as a composition major in the Master's program at Oberlin I was able to draw on many of my previous experiences, and add others. My organ study there was significant, I think, in broadening my understanding of timing and phrasing without the flexibility of dynamic control.

The Korean War broke out just as I finished my Master's Degree. I interviewed for a position at Mitchell College in North Carolina, and was hired to replace a faculty member who had been called back into active duty. My responsibilities at Mitchell included teaching piano, voice, and theory, and conducting a choir of eighteen students. This was my first formal experience as a choral conductor.

In this small college, far away from St. Olaf, I was surprised to find twenty-five St. Olaf Choir Series anthems in the choral library! An earlier faculty member, before the Second World War, had attended Christiansen summer choral schools in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, and had performed these anthems with the community choir he directed.

One disturbing aspect of my time in North Carolina was the segregation I encountered. I decided to try to do something about it. So I invited the choir and conductor from the Black high school to come and sing for the Mitchell College Choir, and we sang for them, and then we sang something together, and had cookies and punch together afterwards. Prior to this, Blacks were only allowed in the balcony at concerts, so to join together on stage was unheard of.

In the summer of 1952 – I was still at Mitchell – I attended the International Oslo Summer School, which had its administrative office at St. Olaf. Lorraine Carlson, the administrator, suggested I form an Oslo Summer School Choir in exchange for reduced tuition. It was mostly Americans, ages eighteen to sixty, and we began rehearsals on board the Stavangerfjord, in the third class lounge of the ship. Every time we began rehearsing “Ja, Vi Elsker,” the Norwegian national anthem, the Norwegian-American passengers would stand up. If we stopped after a phrase or two they would sit down. When we started



again, they would stand again. But I finally explained we were only rehearsing and they didn't need to stand. While in Norway, the choir sang at various events, including a radio program.

RW: When did you return to St. Olaf as a faculty member?

KJ: I was invited to return to St. Olaf in the fall of 1953, to teach voice, music theory and ear training, and conduct the Manitou Singers. The following year I was named conductor of the Chapel Choir and assistant conductor of the St. Olaf Choir, in preparation for the Choir's 1955 tour to Norway. My schedule that year included, besides Chapel Choir, theory and ear training, music appreciation, and thirty-nine voice students. I was also responsible for coordinating the music for the Sunday worship services.

With the Chapel Choir I initiated the yearly performance of a major choral/orchestral work with the St. Olaf Orchestra, beginning with the Bach *St. Matthew Passion* in the spring of 1955. St. Olaf did not have a harpsichord at that time, so [Professor] Winston Cassler, the keyboard continuo player, stuck thumbtacks in the hammers of an upright piano. Some in the audience were sure they had heard a harpsichord. The series eventually included the Bach *St. John Passion*, the Mozart *Requiem*, several Bach cantatas, the Poulenc *Gloria*, the Faure *Requiem*, Honegger's *King David*, and Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*, among others. These were wonderful, challenging learning experiences for the students, and important for my own continued musical development.

In the mid-sixties I started a third mixed choir, which we called Campus Choir at the time, and I asked several students from other choirs to serve as section leaders. The choir met once a week, in the evening. I don't remember that the group ever sang in public during its one-year existence, but it was a worthwhile venture, providing a choral opportunity for students who couldn't be accommodated in the other choirs. When it was later re-started, it became an ongoing standard ensemble at St. Olaf.

RW: What were your early goals, as the first person who was not a Christiansen, conducting the St. Olaf Choir?

KJ: First of all, I wanted to continue the strong tradition of excellence that had preceded me.

I was also interested in an expanded repertoire, including more twentieth-century music. In the spring of 1968, after I had been named conductor of the Choir, Olaf Christiansen and I went to hear the Oberlin Choir in Minneapolis. Their program included Schoenberg's “De Profundis,” his last completed composition. This twelve-tone work, with Sprechstimme, was striking. I remember Olaf saying to me, “You can do this.”



Ken Jennings receiving the F. Melius Christiansen Award from ACDA-MN President Bruce Becker in 1989.

I did program that work in two different years, and also Schoenberg's "Friede auf Erden."

I was also interested in programming more music from other cultures. Now, of course, a wide variety of world music is available in useful editions. Incidentally, Undine Smith Moore, who came to one of our rehearsals when we were working on two of her arrangements, said that it was fine to sing spirituals as folksongs; one didn't have to know every nuance of pronunciation in order to communicate their meaning.

And I was interested in expanding the choral repertoire with occasional use of instruments, both music specifically written for instruments and also use of instruments as they typically would have been used in earlier music.

In terms of basic sound, Olaf Christiansen's choirs were extremely disciplined. I was interested in a freer vocal approach, with more flexibility.

RW: Who were some of the choirs and conductors that inspired you in the early years?

KJ: Luther Onerheim, of course, whom I have mentioned, was an early inspiration. And Olaf Christiansen was an inspiration. He was a fine, sensitive musician who cared about communicating music and text to an audience, without distractions. And he always encouraged me to be myself. Robert Shaw, another fine, sensitive musician, was an inspiration. Also Eric Erickson, long-time conductor of the Swedish Radio Choir, and Helmuth Rilling, a teacher/scholar/conductor with incredible rehearsing skills.

RW: Which choirs and conductors continue to inspire you today?

KJ: Many of my former students are active in the choral field, and I am truly inspired by what they are accomplishing. It's gratifying to hear the fine work they are doing and to observe their continuing development since their student days at St. Olaf.

RW: How do you define and create blend?

KJ: I never used the word "blend," but rather "agreement." In rehearsals, we did talk about agreeing on vowel and pitch. I remember when the St. Olaf Choir sang a concert at U.S.C. and then presented a workshop the next day, someone asked about "blend". I had each soprano, in turn, sing an "a" vowel. There were fifteen different "a's" in terms of vocal quality. Then I asked them to sing together and agree, and they did, each with their own vocal quality. It was a perfectly fine "blended" sound. I believed, and still do, in a freely produced sound. Sometimes if a singer had less control in the high range, I would place that singer in a lower voice part.

RW: How has the programming of repertoire changed over the years?

KJ: I did program a wider range of music than my predecessors, including music from other cultures, more contemporary music, and occasionally some secular music. If we had fine student pianists or organists in the Choir, I occasionally programmed music with keyboard accompaniment, such as the Brahms *Liebeslieder Waltzes* with piano duet, and the dramatic "Motet for the Archangel Michael" by Bengt Hambraeus, if the tour venues had a pipe organ. We sometimes took a small instrumental ensemble on tour, for performance of a Mozart or Haydn Mass or a Bach Cantata, or for *colla parte* performance of some of the early music.

RW: Over time you led the St. Olaf Choir in concerts in twelve different countries: in Europe in 1970 and 1972, Austria and Italy in 1975, Norway in 1980, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Japan in 1986, and Korea in 1988. Among your international tours, which was the most memorable?

KJ: All the tours were memorable, in different ways. But my most memorable experience was conducting Bach's *Mass in B Minor* as the Opening Concert of the 1972 Strasbourg International Music Festival, with the St. Olaf Choir, the Strasbourg Philharmonic Orchestra, and international soloists from Italy, Switzerland, Germany, and France. A very attentive and appreciative audience of 3,000 filled the Cathedral. We had sung a solo concert at the 1970 Festival and on the basis of that concert we were invited back to open the 1972 Festival.

Memorable experiences, as other conductors know, do not always happen easily. When I arrived at the first orchestra rehearsal, all eighty-five of the orchestra's musicians sat there before me, although I had specifically indicated the numbers for a small group. These professional musicians were predictably

skeptical of any choral conductor from the United States. Also, while I had prepared from the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe*, quite new at the time, I discovered they were using a highly edited nineteenth-century score. After that first rehearsal I indicated they needed to have the *Neue Bach* scores, which they were fortunately able to get before the next rehearsal. When I brought the Choir to rehearse with the orchestra the next day, the orchestra was ready: pared down to appropriate numbers, and with the *Neue Bach* scores on their stands – but still skeptical. As a warm-up, and perhaps to establish our credentials, I had the Choir sing part of Bach’s “Jesu, Meine Freude.” The orchestra listened and quickly shaped up. Then, our final rehearsal, which was in the Cathedral, was interrupted and cut short by unexpected jack-hammering from construction elsewhere in the building, making it impossible for the musicians to hear each other.

However, all went well in the performance, and I think it was rewarding and meaningful for all who performed and all who listened.

RW: Do you think being director of the St. Olaf Choir was a blessing or a curse?

KJ: I loved doing it. It was a very fulfilling and rewarding career, creating fine music together with dedicated, talented students.

Besides solo concerts and tours we also had extraordinary opportunities to perform major choral/orchestral works with the Minnesota Orchestra – twelve altogether – under Stanislaw Skrowaczewski and Neville Marriner.

RW: Does the *a cappella* choral tradition, so much a part of St. Olaf, have a viable position within the realm of modern day music?

KJ: Yes, more than I would have thought twenty or twenty-five years ago. Professional and semi-professional groups, large and small, continue to flourish, sometimes regrouping and evolving over time. It doesn’t have to be an “either/or” situation. Some ensembles, and most at St. Olaf, incidentally, perform both *a cappella* and accompanied works. But *a cappella* singing still has its unique rewards, both for performers and listeners.

RW: What are your top three choral works you love to conduct?

KJ: Gretchaninoff’s “Our Father,” and any of the Bach motets. When I heard Rilling work with “Komm, Jesu, Komm,” which I did only once, I thought, yes, I wish I’d done that one more often.

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OUR LEGACY: A DISTINGUISHED PAST...A VIBRANT FUTURE

In conducting, I always tried to create a new musical reality in each performance; not to recreate exactly what we had done in rehearsal or a previous performance. So there was always, for me, a freshness in each performance.

RW: What advice would you give to a student considering a career in choral conducting?

KJ: First, develop yourself as a musician, as broadly as possible. You need wide experience in music making, something other than just short pieces. Larger works, such as a Beethoven Sonata, give you a sense of musical scope, and the responsibility for all the interactions of melody, harmony, rhythm, dynamics, [and] nuance. Study voice and learn a lot of art song literature. Sing in a fine choral ensemble, where you can observe the learning process as well as participate. Learn about different musical styles and epochs. Plan to be a learner all your life.

Secondly, write some music. Composing gives you a sense of the structure of music. When you are crafting music, you sharpen your understanding of other composers' work.

Then, be grateful for what you see as your strengths, and work to improve anything you see that can be improved.

Finally, develop yourself as a person. Each individual has unique perspectives. And develop your own skills for making musical decisions. It's fine to have role models, but in the final analysis you don't want to be copying someone else's ideas; you want to have your own.

RW: Of your own many choral compositions, which are your favorite?

KJ: Usually whichever one I am working on or have most recently completed. I've recently completed a composition on an intriguing poem by Vassar Miller, entitled "Morning Person," which Magnum Chorum will premiere in the spring of 2011.

RW: Reflecting on your own legacy in choral music, what are the gifts and contributions you have made to the choral art?

KJ: Each of us lives in a very small space of time. We have our few years in this stream of music history, of which the choral art is a tiny part. In terms of legacy, I am proud of the many students I have taught and conducted who are now doing outstanding work in the choral field, and others who have distinguished themselves as solo performers, and all those who continue to find choral singing a rewarding part of their lives.

Kenneth Jennings recently celebrated his 85th birthday and the St. Olaf Choir celebrates its 100th anniversary this year. On the occasion of these celebrations, Minnesota ACDA members join ACDA members throughout the country in acknowledging and thanking Dr. Jennings for the depth of his contributions to the choral art.

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