

Musicians as Strangers: Mennonite Church Musicians in the 1990s

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Every two years since 1975 the two Mennonite Bible Colleges in Winnipeg have been organizing a church music seminar in the month of January. The seminars consist of workshops on various aspects of church music—choral literature and conducting, hymn composition, service playing, hymnology—and mass choir rehearsals culminating in a public performance. More recently, the seminars have included performances of major works with the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, under Robert Shaw in 1985 and under Helmuth Rilling in 1989 and 1993.¹ The participants come from across Canada and the central United States. Most are drawn from the denominations represented by the two colleges, the Mennonite Brethren (now Concord College) and the Conference of Mennonites in Canada; some come from other Mennonite denominations and a number of participants have no formal Mennonite affiliation.

One of these gatherings seemed to provide an ideal setting for a survey of Mennonite church musicians. Information was gathered at the eighth church music seminar that took place from January 22-28, 1989, by means of a questionnaire devised and distributed by Carol Dyck, a graduate student in the Department of Music at the University of Alberta, in consultation with Wesley

Berg.² In this article we present some of the information gathered at the seminar, place the findings in the context of more general research into Mennonite attitudes that have appeared in the past few years, and bring the findings up to date with observations made at the tenth and most recent seminar held from January 11-17, 1993.

There were several aspects that merited investigation. The first task was to compile a basic demographic profile of the participants. (There is no reason to believe that the demographic profile of the last seminar of 1993 was significantly different from the one held in 1989.) The second was to seek information about attitudes towards church music, feelings about recent trends in church music, and desires and hopes for change. Once these things had been done it was possible to make some comparisons on the basis of conference affiliation, gender, and age.

Of the 281 questionnaires distributed in the information packets handed out at the time of registration, 122 or 43% were returned. The sample of respondents corresponded closely to the general profile of the larger group with respect to provincial representation, gender, and conference affiliation. Of the people responding to the questionnaire, 47.1% were affiliated with Conference on Mennonites in Canada (CMC) congregations, 35.5% with Mennonite Brethren (MB) congregations, 13.9% listed non-Mennonite affiliations, and 3.3% indicated other Mennonite affiliations. Table 1 provides information on the age, marital status, occupations, income, and residence of the respondents. Although the average age was 37.1 years, it is interesting to note that 38.5% of the respondents were under the age of 30, and that persons from 20-29 years of age represented the largest single group in the sample.

As might be expected, the general level of education of the participants was slightly higher than the levels given in Kauffman and Driedger's study of 1991. Their survey indicates that in 1989 6% of Canadian Mennonites had attended Mennonite colleges, 6% had attended graduate seminaries, and 48% had attended a non-Mennonite college or university, for a total of 60%.³ Of the participants in the seminar, 50.8% had completed undergraduate degrees, 13.9% had completed graduate degrees, and 13.9% had partially completed undergraduate degrees. No attempt was made to distinguish between Mennonite and non-Mennonite institutions, but the proportion of participants who had attended a Mennonite high school or college would undoubtedly have been much higher than the national averages of 20% and 6% respectively given by Kauffman and Driedger. The event clearly serves at least in part as a homecoming for the many alumni of the two colleges, and it is mainly in Mennonite secondary schools and colleges that choral singing has recently been cultivated and musical training has taken place.⁴

There was a significant but not unexpected difference in the specific kind of education the participants had received. Just over 40% of the participants had completed degrees in music: 22.1% in performance, 11.5% in sacred music, 4.9% in conducting, and 1.6% in musicology. As shown in Table 2, the extent of

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of respondents

Characteristic	N	%
Age in years	N = 122	
10-19	5	4.1
20-29	42	34.4
30-39	28	22.9
40-49	20	16.4
50-59	20	16.4
60-69	5	4.1
70-79	2	1.6
Mean: 37.1 years		
Range: 18-72 years		
Standard Deviation: 13.3		
Marital Status:	N = 122	
Married	89	73
Single	33	27
Occupation:	N = 120	
Professional	49	40.8
Clerical	9	7.5
Skilled labour	19	15.8
Housewife/husband	11	9.2
Unemployed/Retired	4	3.3
Student	28	23.3
Annual Income:	N = 119	
Less than \$25,000	38	31.9
\$25,000 - \$50,000	57	47.9
More than \$50,000	24	20.2
Residence:	N = 122	
Urban	74	60.7
Secondary Urban	39	31.9
Rural	9	7.4

musical training is also indicated quite clearly by the number of university or college courses in music that participants had taken. Only 21.9% had no such courses, while 43.9% had taken from 10-14 music courses. The number of years of instrumental or vocal training is equally revealing: 31.4% had 5-9 years and 38.1% had 10-14 years of instrumental training, while 47.8% had 1-4 years and 32.1% had 5-9 years of vocal training. One other area of musical expertise was measured by asking participants to indicate the number of years of choral experience they had. The average number of years of choral experience was 21.3. Nearly 88% had ten or more years of experience singing in choirs, and 50% had sung in choirs for more than 20 years.

Urbanization has also been a concern of sociologists studying Mennonites. Three categories were provided in the seminar questionnaire: urban (population over 60,000), secondary urban (population between 1000 and 60,000), and rural (population under 1000). Fewer than 8% of the participants came from rural settings. Approximately 32% came from smaller towns and cities and 60% came from large urban centres. According to Kauffman and Driedger, 25% of prairie Mennonites were rural in 1989, this figure representing an approximate mean between the more heavily rural Eastern and the more urbanized Pacific areas.⁵ Although the categories used in the respective surveys do not correspond exactly, the seminar participants were noticeably more urbanized than the average.

A central task of the study was to determine the degree to which participants were integrated into Mennonite churches. Nearly 86% of the participants

Table 2
University education of respondents

Characteristic	N	%
Number of Courses:	N = 114	
0	25	21.9
1-4	17	14.9
5-9	12	10.5
10-14	50	43.9
15-19	8	7
20+	2	1.8
Degrees in music:	N = 122	
Performance	27	22.1
Musicology	2	1.6
Conducting	6	4.9
Sacred Music	14	11.5
	49	40.2

considered themselves to be associated with a Mennonite congregation. The average length of attendance at a Mennonite church was 30.7 years, with over 80% having attended for more than 20 years. These findings appear to be in keeping with those of Hamm and Kauffman and Driedger, who show that high levels of education result in higher degrees of participation or "associationalism."⁶ Eighty percent of respondents also indicated that participation in Mennonite churches and institutions had encouraged their interest in music and had contributed to their musical growth. Table 3 shows the different ways in which respondents were involved in their congregations, both as musicians and as congregational members. In response to a question designed to discover whether or not their musical activities were confined to the church, 73.7% indicated that they were also active in music-making in their communities.

Although the performances of the mass choir are not the primary focus of this article, the preceding information does reveal why some of the most eminent choral conductors in the world have been eager to work with the chorus of seminar participants, the Mennonite Festival Chorus. Howard Swann told Robert Shaw that there was a choir in Winnipeg that he really should work with; Robert Shaw then took the initiative in persuading the organizers of the seminar of 1985 that it would be a good idea for him to come. Shaw then asked to have the Mennonite Festival Chorus come to Toronto to perform Beethoven's *Missa solemnis* with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra in the International Choral

Table 3
Roles filled by respondents in the church

Role	N N = 122	%
Teacher	43	35.2
Deacon	5	4.1
Pastor	4	3.3
Committee member	76	62.3
Musician	119	97.5
Musical Roles:		
Conductor	84	68.9
Choir member	100	82.0
Small group-vocal	98	80.3
Song leader	76	62.3
Vocal soloist	81	66.4
Pianist/organist	57	46.7
Instrumental ensemble	33	27.0
Instrumental soloist	29	23.8

Festival held in Toronto in June 1989, and again asked to have them perform the War Requiem by Benjamin Britten with him in Toronto in June 1993. Helmuth Rilling, of course, has come to Winnipeg twice to work with the choir.

Robert Shaw described the quality of the choir in his folksy way when he said "you can buy the sound but you can't buy the love," and in his comment that it was undoubtedly their common heritage that allowed the singers to assemble from across the continent and still be able to sing "like a choir of cousins" in a very short time. In fact, one of the noteworthy features of the work with these exacting conductors has been the fact that, with the exception of Mendelssohn's *Elias*, a complex and dramatic choral score, a number of rehearsals have either

Table 4
Comparisons according to conference affiliation

Characteristic	Frequency		Difference: CMC relative to MB	
	Overall	MB	CMC	%
Education	N=100	N=43	N=57	
University degree	79	24	38	+10.9
Definition of the role of music	N=36	N=40		
Preparation for worship	20		16	-15.6
Participation	7	19	+28.1	
An act of worship	11	13	+1.7	
Text-carrier	10	9	-5.3	
Emotional balance to intellectual content	2	2	7	+11.9
Education	7	2	-11.9	
Expressivity/creativity	4	3	-3.6	
Pleasure	0	4	+10.0	
Respondent's expectations in attending the seminar	N=100	N=37	N=45	
An educational experience	64	21	32	+14.3
Revitalization/inspiration to continue church work	39	15	20	+3.9
Exhilarating larger-than-life experience	30	7	16	+16.7
A social experience, meeting friends from across the country	26	12	9	-12.4
A worship experience	19	8	8	-3.8
A chance to work with Helmut Rilling	18	10	4	-18.1
A chance to perform Mendelssohn's <i>Elijah</i>	12	6	3	+9.5
No response	22	6	12	-7.0

been cut short or used for other purposes: the choir seems to overcome technical and musical problems in a remarkably short time.

David Dickau, director of choral activities at Mankato State University and plenary speaker and workshop leader at the 1993 seminar, put it another way when he commented that he had never encountered a situation in which excellence and spirituality, two qualities that had heretofore seemed constantly to be in conflict, were united in the way it seemed to him they had been at the seminar. The information gathered about the extent of musical training and choral experience in the group offers a fairly precise explanation for the excellence of the group. Although much less precise as a measure of spirituality, the fact that nearly everyone in the choir, both younger and older, reported having been a part of a church most of their lives, with the church also credited with having been a major factor in their musical development, is a likely explanation of the spiritual side of the group that seems to be immediately apparent to people from the outside.

In measuring the effect of education on beliefs and attitudes, Hamm found that there was a relativization in measures of orthodoxy (except in Anabaptism) and in personal ethics. Anabaptist beliefs were not significantly affected and social ideals were enhanced.⁷ The questionnaire in this study did not include

Table 5
Comparison of female and male: Roles in the church

Characteristic	Female %	Male %
General Roles:	N = 72	N = 50
Teacher	31.9	40.0
Deacon	1.4	8.0
Pastor	1.4	6.0
Committee member	63.9	60.0
musician	100.0	94.0
Musical Roles:	N = 72	N = 50
keyboard player	65.3	20.0
songleader	56.9	70.0
conductor	62.5	78.0
choir member	86.1	76.0
small group - vocal	84.7	74.0
soloist - vocal	72.2	58.0
small group - instrumental	22.2	34.0
soloist - Instrumental	20.8	28.0
accompanist	38.9	20.0

specific measures of theological orthodoxy. There were, however, several questions that provided a general sense that participants had a relatively traditional religious orientation. When asked to define the role of music in the church, by far the largest number described it either as a preparation for worship or as an experience of worship, and a large number thought it was important as a carrier of text. Smaller numbers of respondents suggested that music provided an emotional balance to the intellectual content of the service, thus involving the total person. Others saw music as an opportunity to reflect divine creativity. Only the few respondents who suggested that music should be present because it gives pleasure and creates beauty stand in danger of being seen as "secularized," as valuing music for its own sake or for purely sensory reasons. But perhaps they were expressing a theology of the healing power of beauty that Mennonites in general, in spite of their love of singing, have been hesitant to articulate.

Table 4 shows comparisons between responses given by MB and CMC respondents in answer to questions about the role of music in the church and the purpose of the seminar. There are several points to consider. The first is that these questions were answered by only about 75% of the respondents, a figure suggesting—especially in the case of the question about the role of music in the church—that it is a difficult question that had not been given a great deal of prior consideration. Another 28% could think of only one function. The second point is that the results, while revealing certain differences—note the fact that four CMC but no MB respondents suggested beauty (sensuous enjoyment) as a function of music while MBs placed more emphasis on education—cannot be seen as reliable. At most they would suggest areas for further research.

Only a few significant differences in the responses of males and females were found. Seventy-four percent of the men had university degrees compared to 58.3% of the women. Musical training tended to be equal in most categories, except that twice as many men had been trained as conductors and women tended to have considerably more instrumental training. Table 5 compares the roles men and women had fulfilled in their congregations. The lower representation of women in leadership roles reported by both Hamm and Kauffman and Driedger is borne out by the fact that women were less likely to have been deacons, pastors, or conductors, and more likely to have been keyboard players and accompanists. On the other hand, in keeping with evidence that acceptance of participation by women has increased significantly from 1972-89,⁸ the responses indicate a high degree of involvement in church activities, and it is possible that music has been one of the important avenues by which women have been able to begin to exercise leadership in Mennonite churches.

Perhaps one of the most interesting comparisons was that between younger (18-29) and older (30-72) participants. There have been significant shifts in musical practices in many Mennonite churches in the past several decades. Traditional choirs have struggled to survive in many congregations and have disappeared from some. The arguments about hymns versus choruses that raged in the pages of the Mennonite Brethren Herald in 1987 and 1988 could be

Table 6
Comparison of younger and older groups:
Attitudes to church music

Characteristic	Younger %	Older %
Level of satisfaction with choir music	N = 43	N = 70
low	23.3	2.9
Medium	14.9	14.3
high	62.8	82.9
Changes desired in choir music	N = 22	N = 43
more traditional/classical	29.6	25.0
more variety/balance	23.1	17.9
no change	7.7	17.9
more committed singers	19.2	10.7
better quality	7.7	7.1
more integrated into worship service	7.7	5.4
a more central role for the choir	3.8	7.1
more popular music	3.8	5.4
better leadership	-	3.6
Level of satisfaction with solo and special group music	N = 43	N = 72
low	18.6	18.1
medium	20.9	29.2
high	60.5	52.8
Changes desired in solo and special group music	N = 22	N = 43
more traditional/classical	31.8	25.6
better quality	27.3	20.9
more of it	27.3	11.6
no change	-	18.6
more integrated into worship service	13.6	9.3
more variety	-	9.3
more up-tempo music	-	4.7

interpreted on one level as an indication of a division between younger and older generations.⁹ It is often taken for granted that the musical tastes of young people are inimically opposed to those of their parents, uncles and aunts. Without having measured the extent to which this might be true in the large population, the questionnaire revealed that among the participants, at least, there was very little difference between the generations. The level of musical education in the younger group was, not surprisingly, slightly higher, and they were more likely to have had the opportunity to acquire advanced training in vocal or instrumental studies. The level of choral experience among the younger group was proportionately just as high as among the older group: 44% had sung in choirs for 15-25 years and nearly 80% of this group had attended church for 20-29 years, that is, for all or most of their lives. Levels of participation in church were equally high.

Some small differences became evident in the responses of the younger group to the questions about attitudes towards music in their churches. Table 6 shows that they were 20% more likely to express low levels of satisfaction and 20% less likely to express high levels of satisfaction with choir music in the church. The fact that they were more likely to feel that the remedy should be more traditional music rather than more music in popular idioms is somewhat surprising, however. It is unlikely that this can be taken as an indication of musical tastes among the younger church population in general, but it does indicate that the tradition of which these seminars are a culmination is not likely to die out soon if it is properly nurtured by the colleges and their sponsoring conferences.

Needless to say, gatherings such as this reveal more than can be shown with tables and percentages. In the final section of this article we present a series of observations and musings on the present state of music in Mennonite churches and the role played by the church music seminars.

The first question that arises is: Why are 220-275 people willing to take a week away from work or family, to pay registration fees, to travel long distances, and to engage in 13 hours per day of intense activity from Monday to Sunday, even though more than half received no funding at all from their congregations? To be sure, there was a section in the questionnaire that probed these motives: the variety and distribution of the results can be seen in Table 4. But it became clear from some of the open sessions in which participants were able to voice concerns and discuss common problems that there may be other factors at work.

In his book on Mennonite identity, Leo Driedger draws on Georg Simmel's concept of "the stranger" and offers these helpful comments.

We would expect that when the stranger enters the environment of others, he is secure only if he is grounded in a reference group, or if he is socially and psychologically motivated by the norms of such a group. This raises many related questions such as: what must be the nature of the reference group; how often and how much must an individual contact the reference group to sustain his separate identity; what must be the quality of such sustenance; and can an individual make

only occasional forays into the stranger world or can he work there consistently with occasional refresher periods within his own reference group?¹⁰

While Driedger is obviously referring to the ways in which Mennonites have had to adjust to different societies during their centuries of wandering, it does not seem unreasonable to apply the questions to subgroups as well. Indeed, the answers to these questions would seem to be at the heart of the need for academic conferences, the meetings of professional societies, gatherings of ministers and deacons, and other attempts by members of subgroups within society to maintain contact with each other.

Perhaps Mennonite musicians no longer have to cope with the question that frustrated Benjamin Horch in the 1930s and 1940s: ministers asking suspiciously, "Kann die Kunst auch zur Ehre des Herrn dienen?" (Can the arts also be used to glorify the Lord?). But the comments of church musicians in the open forums reveal that many still struggle with misunderstanding and isolation, whether it is in planning worship services with an unsympathetic pastor, trying to urge a new hymnal on a reluctant congregation, or persuading a church council that the fine arts need to be included in the church budget. Or, they may have had to stand alone in advocating that a new sanctuary be built with acoustics suitable for music-making, in an era when all too often congregations rely on the advice of consultants who equate good church acoustics with a good amplification system and there seems to be an urge to apply carpet to everything in sight.

There may be some congregations that have more than one or two trained musicians in their midst. Mostly this will not be the case, and so the musician may feel like a stranger, as someone apart and slightly alien, someone who quite literally speaks a foreign language that sets him or her apart. Driedger suggests that the stranger's security must be grounded in a reference group, or at the very least must be motivated by the norms of such a group. We would argue that for many Mennonite church musicians the biannual gathering in Winnipeg has become an important reference group.

Driedger goes on to ask what the nature of the reference group should be and what the quality of the sustenance must be. Without trying to draw universal conclusions about all reference groups, it seems clear that this reference group serves the musician strangers well in several ways. The reference group should remind the stranger of the best qualities of her tradition, qualities that can easily be forgotten in the everyday routine of congregational life. The excellent musicianship of the Festival Chorus and the opportunities the organizers have provided for performances of great choral works under eminent conductors with a professional orchestra have permitted participants to place themselves firmly in the tradition of a century of Mennonite choral festivals and choral singing while at the same time extending and enriching the tradition itself.¹¹ The organizers have also provided moments of reflection on the history of music among the Mennonites, a history that is not always well known.

While reminding the stranger of the best parts of his identity, the reference

group must not be so insular that there is no connection with the world to which the stranger returns. Here the organizers have had a finer line to tread. We suggested above that many participants felt that the way to improve music in the church would be to increase the proportion of music from the Western art music tradition, the kind of music being performed by the Festival Chorus, for example. On the other hand, as the furor over hymns and choruses indicates, there have been radical changes in the musical styles practised by many congregations, especially of the Mennonite Brethren variety. Traditional hymn singing is increasingly a thing of the past, having been replaced by choruses sung "off the wall" from an overhead projector. The advent of a new hymnal that integrates both traditional and new hymnody in an intelligent manner may slow down the process in Conference of Mennonites in Canada and Mennonite Church congregations, but even there the need and desire for new or different ways of worshipping are being felt.¹² The conflict engendered by these changes is manifested both in the anguish expressed by musicians struggling to serve their congregations while maintaining their own feelings of integrity, and by reports that there are musicians wondering how long they can remain in their particular congregations if present trends continue.

The seminars have dealt with this thorny problem in various ways. Every day begins with a worship service in which new ways of worshipping are modelled and explored. In the eighth seminar in January, 1991, a number of speakers addressed various aspects of worship, suggesting new terminologies to substitute for words that have become laden with complex and occasionally conflicting emotional connotations, discussing the nature of the church and the way in which the church can use a variety of gifts, and struggling with the question of how excellence in the arts can be relevant in the church. Guest speakers have been brought in to bring their insights and experience to bear on the problem of new forms of worship. This is particularly relevant to the second role of the reference group that we have proposed. It is important to realize that these are questions that other denominations struggle with as well, occasionally before Mennonite churches have been forced to do so, and their stories may very well be of some assistance.

One example that had a direct bearing on the conflicts within a number of Mennonite congregations had to do with the question of whether or not to establish two worship services, one contemporary and one traditional. The advice of two experienced church musicians from two different non-Mennonite traditions was that such arrangements served only to create two congregations within one church. They suggested that the challenge instead was to integrate traditional and new materials in a coherent and intelligent way. And through the worship services and workshops, especially those using the new Worship Book, seminar participants were able to discover what might be possible.

Using the concept of the stranger who needs a reference group for sustenance and security has been one way to organize our thoughts about the wider

implications of the church music seminars. It may seem paradoxical to apply the concept to persons who are so deeply involved in their congregations, but it has served to highlight the special training and frequent isolation of the musician in a congregation and it has provided a useful framework for discussing the ways in which the seminars can best serve the needs of the participants. The ultimate goal, of course, is to have Mennonite congregations in which the musician and practitioners of the other fine arts no longer need to feel like strangers.

Notes

¹See Wesley Berg, "Robert Shaw, Helmuth Rilling, and the Mennonite Festival Chorus," *Choral Journal* 32(September 1991):43-48, for a detailed account of the first two events.

²Carol Dyck, "The Mennonite Choral Tradition: An Investigation of Church Music Seminar 8, 1989," unpublished research paper, The University of Alberta, 1991.

³J. Howard Kauffman and Leo Driedger, *The Mennonite Mosaic: Identity and Modernization* (Waterloo: Herald Press, 1991):134.

⁴Wesley Berg, *From Russia With Music: A Study of the Mennonite Choral Singing Tradition in Canada* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1985):102-103, 125.

⁵Kauffman and Driedger, 54.

⁶Peter M. Hamm, *Continuity and Change Among Canadian Mennonite Brethren* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1987):155; Kauffman and Driedger, 240-41.

⁷Hamm, 161; see also Kauffman and Driedger, 241.

⁸Kauffman and Driedger, 207.

⁹See Dyck, "Mennonite Choral Tradition," 2-6, for a summary of the debate.

¹⁰Leo Driedger, *Mennonite Identity in Conflict* (Lewiston and Queenston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1988):51.

¹¹The first known choral festival among the Mennonites of Russia was held 100 years ago in May 1893 in the village of Lichtenau.

¹²*Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press, 1992).