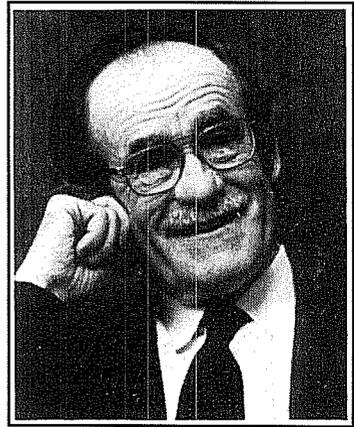


# Benjamin Horch (1907-1992)

by Peter Letkemann,  
*Winnipeg, Manitoba*



Ben Horch participated actively in the musical life of the Canadian Mennonite community for over 60 years and did more to determine the nature and direction of musical development within that community in this century than any other individual. He built on the work of previous conductors—especially Aron Sawatzky, John P. Wiebe, K.H. Neufeld, Franz Thiessen and John Konrad. Ben was not the first to lead choral workshops nor the first to conduct oratorios with orchestral accompaniment. There was a long tradition of “Dirigentenkurse” and “Saengerfeste” both in Russia and in Western Canada. In the 1930s both Franz Thiessen and John Konrad performed *Paulus* and *Das Sühnopfer*, respectively, with orchestral accompaniment, but these oratorios were sung in German and performed within the context of Mennonite churches and thus never came to the attention of the dominant English-speaking society of Winnipeg.

Through his participation in the Winnipeg Music Festival, both as singer and as conductor of the North End MB Choir, through the public concerts of the MBBC Oratorio Choir and the Mennonite Symphony Orchestra, and later through his

work at CFAM and CBC radios Ben brought Mennonite choral singing and music-making to the attention of the Winnipeg and Canadian public. He did not ask whether Mennonites wanted this attention; his musical vision for the Mennonite community didn't ask "why?" as much as "why not?": "I saw the need for Mennonites as a whole to be represented by something that would find acceptance with that which was the highest in the dominating culture around us and I knew it was music. If our message of the gospel is going to be heard with respect in this city, there must be something at least that is acceptable first if our gospel is to find an ear. Music at its highest level has given our people this satisfying experience."

It may seem ironic, but Ben was only able to accomplish what he did for Mennonite music because he was not an ethnic Mennonite! Ben was born in the small German Lutheran village of Freidorf, nestled in an isolated and peaceful valley about 80 km north-west of Odessa (Ukraine). The family emigrated to Canada in 1909. Feeling a lack of evangelical zeal in their own church, his parents became members of the North End Mennonite Brethren Mission in Winnipeg. While Ben grew up in the evangelical religious atmosphere of the Mennonite Brethren Church and learned to love the gospel song tradition fostered there, his cultural background was and remained Lutheran. "At home we continued to be Lutherans and names like Bach, Schubert, Beethoven, Brahms and even Richard Strauss were all familiar to us from our home library of recordings. Even as a boy-soprano I could belt out quite a few of the themes from *Ein Heldenleben* by Richard Strauss. This netted me nickels and dimes in shows I put on for visitors in our family living room.... The musical background of my Lutheran family environment precluded any foreknowledge that what I was doing in the service of the church was 'trail-blazing'; I was simply doing what came naturally. It was only years thereafter that I became aware that it wasn't all considered the natural thing to do...."

Unlike the other prominent Mennonite choral directors of the time, who had received their training in Russia, Ben received all of his schooling in the Canadian school system, with its strong British orientation. His vocal and acting talents were encouraged at St. John's Technical High School by his English teacher Ada Turner, and the principal George Reeves. In order to prepare Ben for roles as a singing clown in school productions of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* they provided vocal instruction with Burton Kurth, one of the leading voice teachers in Winnipeg at that time. Ben suspected that they paid for these lessons out of their own pockets—he certainly had no money to pay for lessons. Later he sang in Kurth's Choir at Broadway Methodist Church (now Young United Church) in exchange for voice lessons.

It was probably Kurth who introduced Ben to Hugh Ross, conductor of the famous Winnipeg Male Voice Choir, and in 1926, at the age of 19, Ben became that choir's youngest member. He continued to sing in the Male Voice Choir and its counterpart the Winnipeg Philharmonic Choir under succeeding conductors Douglas Clarke (1927-29) and Peter Temple (1929-31). In exchange for voice and theory lessons from Peter Temple, Ben sang in the choir at Holy Trinity Anglican Church for one year.

George Wiebe has made the perceptive comment that Ben applied the fluency of Anglican chant, its approach to diction, and the Romantic warmth and flow of the lyric singing he experienced in Anglican church choirs to the performance of his beloved Mennonite *Kernlieder*. "He couldn't have done the *Kernlieder* the way he did had he not had that particular background."

Burton Kurth also encouraged Ben to compete in the Winnipeg Music Festival. In April, 1929, he won the Baritone Solo (Grade B) class. The adjudicator was Mr. J. Campbell McInnes; according to the report in the *Free Press*: "The winner was praised for his good verbal emphasis and rise and fall of the musical cadence... the voice was never overloaded and quite in keeping with the reverential mood required. The singer was sensitive to the idiom of the song. His performance was an almost perfect conception of the subtle and reverential mood [of the song 'An Old Carol', by Roger Quilter]." Ben went on to compete in the Tudor Bowl that year and placed second.

It is obvious that Ben did not restrict his musical contacts and activity to the Mennonite community. He participated in music-making at the highest level possible in Winnipeg at that time, and led an almost dual existence: singing both with "the English" downtown and with the Mennonites in the North End. He felt no antithesis between the "pragmatic" evangelical outreach of the gospel song and the more refined "serious" music of the Lutheran or Anglican traditions. He synthesized in his own experience the musical expressions of home, church and school.

It seems almost unbelievable, but true, that Ben **never** applied for a job in his life! He did not apply to become director of the North End MB Choir, nor to teach at the Winkler High School or Mennonite Brethren Bible College; neither did he apply for radio positions at KWSO (Wasco, California), CFAM (Altona) or CBC (Winnipeg). Each of these positions came as the result of a "call" or an invitation. "I did not seek for a career among Mennonites, but I found acceptance, which surprised me... Actually I was forgiven a lot simply because I was not an ethnic Mennonite and didn't know better!"

Ben's first "call" came in September 1928. Mr. H.H. Neufeld, conductor of the North End MB Church choir, became ill and could not come to rehearsal. The choir president Jacob Wedel asked Ben whether he would take the rehearsal that evening, since he was the only person in the choir at that time who had had musical training. Mr. Neufeld remained ill for some time and never returned as conductor. Ben's tenure eventually stretched to eleven years. He continued the gospel-singing tradition of the mission church as found in *Evangeliumslieder* and *Ausgewählte Lieder*, but with the support of Mr. Wedel and other Russlaender he also introduced "classical" repertoire from Heim's *Sammlung Kirchlicher Lieder* and other sources. He also expanded the work of the church's Wayside Chapel Orchestra, started in 1924 by Rev. Erdmann Nickel, to include accompaniment for choral programs.

Through his work with the North End MB choir Ben came to the attention of K.H. Neufeld and Franz Thiessen, who were the most prominent Mennonite musical leaders at the time. They invited him to participate in several choral

workshops in Niverville (1934), Grunthal (1936) and Winnipeg (1937) — where his involvement was restricted to teaching notation and theory.

Ben conducted his first solo choral workshop at Flowing Well, Saskatchewan, in July 1936. According to Mary (Neufeld) Barkman, the initiative for the invitation to Flowing Well came from her uncle, Nels Priebe. He and other community leaders had first met Ben and Esther Horch at the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Conference in Herbert several years earlier. They had been impressed by Esther's beautiful singing of the song "Christ is all I need" and by Ben's flamboyant piano accompaniment. His impact as a workshop leader was also enhanced by the fact that he was C.N. Hiebert's son-in-law.

The Flowing Well workshop was attended by 20-25 conductors, together with a 75-voice choir of singers from surrounding congregations. Ben often recalled a memorable and amusing aspect of this workshop: "You know, the one thing that shocked them tremendously was that I conducted with two hands." Earlier conductors in Russia and Canada conducted only with the right hand. Ben will never forget the elderly gentleman who stood up and asked, "Mr. Horch, why do you conduct with two hands?" Ben replied, "What do you want my other hand to do, hang like a sausage?" On another occasion Ben replied to the same question in a more practical way, "Look, if you're working with the tractor out on the field, you're not going to work with just one hand—conducting is no different."

Once they had experienced Ben's gifts as conductor and teacher, choirs in Saskatchewan did not hesitate to invite him back again and again. Ben brought to his workshops a new vision for choral singing and music with the Mennonite church. After a workshop in Brotherfield in 1937 a correspondent for the *Mennonitische Rundschau* wrote: "We all had the feeling that before us stood a leader with outstretched arm pointing us to a fabulously beautiful landscape and saying: all that will be yours, but you must master it yourselves; the way requires serious and strenuous effort, by all of you." The allusion to Moses, pointing the way to a new land, was particularly apt for Ben, and he applied it to himself many times during his career. Like Moses, Ben was a reluctant yet dedicated leader who often felt inadequate for his calling.

When Ben's friend and mentor Rev. A.A. Kroeker invited him to start an orchestral program in the Winkler High School in the late 1930s, Ben declined on the grounds that he had never had formal training for such a task. He recognized that there were limits to his intuitive, improvisational and inspirational approach to music. His limited experience as workshop leader and conductor also had convinced him that there was much he needed to learn. And so, with Rev. Kroeker's assistance, Ben registered for classes at BIOLA in Los Angeles in September 1939. He would have preferred to go to one of the larger universities such as UCLA or USC to study with composers such as Schoenberg and Stravinsky, but did not have money for these expensive schools (and Kroeker would probably not have provided funds for secular music training).

After completing four years at BIOLA, Ben had lucrative offers to continue the music ministry of the Hermosa Beach Baptist Church and to teach at a newly

formed Baptist college on the West Coast. In a letter to A.A. Kroeker he wrote: "...well I just didn't know what to say. A purpose makes us strong. I considered *why* I came to California and gave them my answer in the negative. Maybe I passed up a great opportunity, who knows? I prefer to believe still that the Lord has a hand in our decisions, and I cannot feel otherwise."

Ben had a deeply rooted love for young people and an intuitive understanding of their musical needs. Other leaders in the Mennonite Brethren community such as A.H. Unruh, A.A. Kroeker and H.S. Voth also recognized a need. The latter wrote: "Our young people have the need to study vocal and instrumental music in the manner available to them at this time. It is important for us that our hymns, chorales and choral anthems retain their rightful place in our congregations. It is also important that our young people develop a proper taste and understanding for good music."

They recognized in Ben the person to achieve these goals and called him to Winkler. Thus, in August 1943, Ben returned to Canada to teach at the Winkler Bible School and to establish an orchestral and choral program at the Winkler High School. This new initiative at the High School was not without its opponents. At the first concert of the Orchestra later that year, the School Board Chairman introduced the program with an apologetic statement, saying that the initiative was an 'experiment' and if the parents didn't like it, it would be discontinued. Neither Ben nor the young people in the orchestra could believe their ears. They looked to Ben, he gave them a knowing nod, and they played as they had never played before. Needless to say, the chairman had to eat his words when the capacity audience gave the students an enthusiastic standing ovation! Ben continued teaching both in Winkler and Morden, even after taking up his duties at MBBC, until 1951. He would drive south every Thursday afternoon, teach until Saturday evening, and return on Sunday.

In 1944 Ben was called to develop the music department at the newly formed Mennonite Brethren Bible College (MBBC). There was no one else in the Mennonite community at that time who had a comparable level of training and experience. Ben saw his work at MBBC as an opportunity to expand his vision for Mennonite music on a national scale: he desired to institute a full 4-year program of musical studies to train singers, conductors, instrumentalists and above all composers — to integrate all aspects of music in the service of the church and the Mennonite "peoplehood." Ben established an a cappella choir, remembered especially for its moving renditions of *Kernlieder*, and the Mennonite Symphony Orchestra. The orchestra was to perform in its own right and to accompany the MBBC Oratorio choir in performances of the *Messiah* and other larger choral works. Ben was convinced that these larger works would fill a need in the lives of young people for the simple reason that they were talented enough and intelligent enough to do them with ease; they needed to perform larger works not only for musical but also for sociological reasons: to feel a sense of achievement and to gain respect from the dominant society.

Both the Oratorio Choir and the orchestra were intended to be integral parts of

the academic program. During Ben's time, participation in the Oratorio choir was compulsory for all MBBC students. There were some, especially theology students, who objected to this requirement. However, in later years many of these former students wrote or called Ben to thank him for having given them the opportunity to participate in these meaningful performances and give them appreciation for "good" music.

While the orchestra did accompany the oratorio choir for ten years, Ben was never able to get the administration to integrate it fully into the academic program of the college. Within the last years of his life he was still trying to convince the current administrations of MBBC (now Concord College) and CMBC to incorporate the current Mennonite Community Orchestra fully into their academic program. This goal remained unfulfilled at his death.

Another essential component of the music program was Ben's desire to train Mennonite composers. To this end he hired Dr. Franz Niermeyer as instructor in theory and composition. Ben wanted to train a generation of composers who could serve the Mennonite people and transmit their song-roots in classically structured forms.

The response to this multi-faceted MBBC music program on the part of students was overwhelming. The response of faculty and church leaders was mixed. Ben's long-time friend and colleague A.H. Unruh was very supportive and wrote: "The music department has not only increased the number of students, but also strengthened the possibility for mission in our neighbourhood through good singing. The said instruction in singing teaches our students to separate good from bad in this regard... It is valuable that our students obtain a healthy taste for a musical art that praises the Lord. Should our school succeed in winning the ear for the lasting value in music and to open the soul for the same, we will have achieved much for our congregations."

Other faculty and board members were not as appreciative. There remained an undercurrent of suspicion and criticism from those who felt that there was antithesis between "serious" music and evangelical outreach as framed in the question: "*Kann die Kunst zur Ehre des Herrn dienen?*", a question which Ben heard repeated over and over again both in public from the pulpit and in private. With persistent criticism from the faculty at MBBC during his teaching career Ben became progressively more tense; he seemed unable to verbalize his goals clearly enough to faculty. Ben was sensitive to criticism and opposition—sometimes he could forge ahead in spite of them, at other times they led to depression and eventually to a nervous breakdown. In 1954 he resigned his teaching responsibilities and his position as head of the music department, but agreed to continue for one more year as conductor of the Oratorio Choir and the orchestra. Ben resigned "in the confidence that the Lord is leading and undoubtedly He will use me in some other phase of related endeavor."

At that time he had no way of knowing that this "related endeavor" would be in the field of radio. But the invitations came to work at KWSO (Wasco, California), CFAM (Altona) and CBC (Winnipeg). His radio work was in many ways a

continuation of the goals he had set himself earlier, only now they were broadened to include not only Mennonites but other ethnic communities as well.

For over 60 years Ben offered his unique musical gifts to the Mennonite community and remained true to his “calling.” He was convinced that convictions cannot survive if one does not fight for them. He was obstinate, prejudiced and contentious for his convictions. Ben always saw further than he could reach and knew more than he could explain. He agreed with Samuel Johnson that “Nothing will ever be attempted if all possible objections must be first overcome.”

Ben had a vision of where he wanted music to be within his lifetime — and he lived to see this vision fulfilled. Mennonites are recognized for their musical ability across Canada thanks to countless performers, singers, conductors, instrumentalists and broadcasters, many of whom received their inspiration from Ben Horch.

In the end Ben convinced even his critics about the rightness of his vision. During his retirement years he received numerous letters and visits from former students and colleagues offering words of appreciation for his work. One leading church leader wrote: “Your influence in our brotherhood has been most significant. It came at a very crucial time when our brotherhood was in the beginning stages of acculturation. These changes could have been more unsettling than they actually were. To have people like you (not Russländer) present to guide with sympathetic understanding helped to bridge the gap between two cultures.” On another occasion a former colleague telephoned him to apologize for his earlier critical stance and said, “how could we have misunderstood you so!” Ben received both compliments and apologies with humility, grace and good humour.

The following prayer, written in his later years, sums up some of the major aspects of Ben’s vision for Mennonite music: “Lord, nourish my musical intuition aright, for I have a tongue like Moses, and cannot verbalize adequately for our people. Let me find those things in music that will preserve the values of our forefathers even though we may change outwardly, and the whole world about us. And let our voices be heard in this beloved land in songs full of hope, for a land and world so full of hurt.”

This reminds one of Moses, who at the end of his life is commanded by God to “write this song, and teach it to the people of Israel; put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for me. . . For when I have brought them into the land...they will turn to other gods and serve them...this song shall confront them as a witness for it will live unforgotten in the mouths of their descendants....” (Deut 31, 19-22) For Ben this song was the *Kernlied*. Through all the struggles of his life Ben never gave up hope; he especially found encouragement and consolation in his beloved *Kernlieder*. He found in the *Kernlieder* a very personal expression of life’s hurts framed in the context of hope. It is this hope that shines through in Victor Davies’ *Mennonite Piano Concerto* and Thomas Jahn’s *Kernlieder Cycle* — two of Ben’s most significant commissions. Among other things, both of these works embody one of Ben’s favourite mottos: “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards” (Sören Kierkegaard).

In the days and weeks following Benjamin Horch’s unexpected death on 2 July

1992, his wife Esther received hundreds of cards and letters from friends around the world. The words of sympathy were often combined with expressions of gratitude for the meaningful way in which Ben had touched their lives. The following excerpts from these cards combine to produce a veritable symphony of memories in tribute to Ben: “Ben was one of the finest men I’ve known in my entire life. I respected him and believed in him... He had a gift for friendship and supporting all aspiring musicians with his words of encouragement and continued interest... I became caught up, as many others have, by Ben’s charisma, his musical flair in conducting, his sense of humour and, from my perspective, his inexhaustible knowledge of music... I remember his dashing sense of humour and learned to appreciate the depth of his sincerity. He has touched and enriched the lives of many... what a wonderful, generous and lively man he was — a very special person to me and to so many others. He will always be loved and very much missed...”

“Many years ago he came to the country churches with his laughter and fun and his deep love of music. His gift of inspiration enriched and enlarged our world and awakened the love of music and singing. We are thankful for his life, so richly shared... His excitement about music-making was absolutely contagious... He was such a challenging and fun music teacher and choir conductor. He believed in us... He gave me a confidence I had not experienced before in myself... He was so much fun to sing for and yet so excellent in drawing the best from his singers... He also had the gift of remaining contemporary. The young people still loved him... His ability to interpret and to bring music to life was exceptional... I recall the ease with which Ben moved from technicalities, to humour, to spiritual intensity. I had never ever been so moved by a piece of music. Time and again Ben drew us to the text and through it to a profound soul experience....

“Ben was a bridge and built a bridge for many of our heritage. Other Mennonite conductors may have rallied the musical talents of Mennonites within their communities, but Ben through his years at CBC and CFAM, his work with the Mennonite Orchestra and ever so many other activities, took us into the larger Canadian and world arena....

“The name ‘Ben Horch’ is synonymous with enjoyment of life, a marvelous sense of humour, great musicianship, a love of people — and much more... It may be decades before the massive musical legacy which Ben has left with the Mennonites and other ethnic groups will be properly recognized! Ben Horch — inspiring teacher, exhilarating conductor, explorer and initiator, humorist and actor, trusted friend and encourager to hundreds, above all, a faithful Christian and one of God’s most joyous troubadours!”