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The Music of the Mennonite Brethren of Saskatchewan to 1923

Among the first European homesteaders to successfully settle the open grasslands of the Canadian prairies were groups of Mennonites, German-speaking pacifists who, in 1874, had left their colonies in the southern Ukraine for North America, in search of religious and cultural freedom as well as more land for their large families.[1]

The Mennonite migration of 1874 split into two main segments, each of which would later play a part in the settlement of that part of the Northwest Territories that would become the Province of Saskatchewan in 1905. The more conservative portion, which came to be known as the Old Colony Mennonites, chose to go to Manitoba, where immigrant families could settle in the closed communities they considered necessary for maintaining their traditional way of life. About 10,000 of the 17,000 immigrants chose Minnesota, Nebraska, Kansas, and the Dakotas, where economic prospects were brighter, even though the opportunities to settle in closed communities were not as good, thus making assimilation more likely. Among these settlers were Mennonite Brethren, members of a denomination that had broken away from the main Mennonite church in Russia in a quest for a more satisfactory spiritual life.[2]

Canada's westward expansion into the Northwest Territories, the area stretching from the Great Lakes west to the Rockies and north to Hudson Bay, had received new impetus soon after the Hudson's Bay Company relinquished its authority over the territories in 1869. This vast land now came under the control of the government of Canada,

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a country established only two years before in 1867, and consisting of the provinces of Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia. The plans that eastern Canadians had for the rich hinterland did not necessarily coincide with the aspirations of the people already there, and a series of conflicts involving the Metis, people of mixed French or Scottish and Indian ancestry led by Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont, and Indian tribes, led by chiefs like Poundmaker and Big Bear, produced much turmoil in the years between 1870 and 1885.

One result of this turmoil was the formation of a new province, Manitoba, in 1870. But the preoccupation of the government in Ottawa with the building of a transcontinental railroad, and the political and financial pressures arising from this huge venture, served to thwart the desire for autonomy and justice among the citizens of the prairies, despite their having gained provincial status. A second Metis-Indian uprising broke out in 1885 but was unsuccessful, and with the hanging of Louis Riel on November 16, 1885, and the completion of the railroad in that same year, the Northwest Territories came firmly under the control of the federal government.

An important reason for building the Canadian Pacific Railway, despite almost overwhelming obstacles, was the fear that if the Canadian government failed to establish its presence on the prairies, the land might very well come under the influence of the United States. In keeping with this policy, the railroad also made it possible for the territory to be opened for settlement, now that the buffalo had disappeared and the Indians had signed treaties and been moved onto reservations.

In 1890 a railroad from Regina through Saskatoon to Prince Albert opened up the Saskatchewan Valley to settlement. Impressed with the achievement of the first wave of Mennonite settlers on the grasslands of Manitoba in the mid-1870s, the Canadian government made two large blocks of land available for Mennonite settlement in Saskatchewan, one in the Hague-Osler area north of Saskatoon and the other in the Swift Current area in the south. These two reserves were settled in 1895 and 1904, respectively, by Old Colony Mennonites from Manitoba,[3] but they were soon joined by Mennonites more open to contemporary influences, many of them Mennonite Brethren from the United States.

The musical traditions that the two groups of Mennonites brought to their new home were very different. The Old Colony Mennonites sang hymns from a hymnal first published in 1767 in Königsberg.[4] This *Geistreiches Gesangbuch* was reprinted virtually unchanged in Russia and North America and is still used today by Old Colony Mennonites in Canada and Mexico. The melodies had been transmitted orally from

generation to generation, with the ornamental accretions inevitable in such a process gradually obscuring the outline of the chorale tunes.

The singing style preserved by the Old Colony Mennonites in their migration to North America was that of the main Mennonite church in Russia when the Mennonite Brethren broke away in 1860. In rejecting the formalism and spiritual sterility of the main group, the brethren also rejected that group's hymnody. Apart from the sound of the singing, "from which even the angels turn away in offense," according to a Mennonite teacher of the time, the texts of the chorales stressed the objective, corporate aspects of the worship experience instead of the warmer, more personal expression of faith sought by the brethren, who were influenced by Pietism and the Moravian Brethren. In their search for a substitute they turned to the spiritual folksong of the German Protestant churches,[5] and especially to the German translations of the Moody-Sankey gospel hymns that were winning souls by the thousands in the United States and England during the 1870s.

With the new way of singing and the new repertoire of hymns came an interest in the contribution a choir had to make, both in enriching the church service and in providing a wholesome activity for young people of the congregation.[6] Choral singing spread very rapidly among the Mennonite Brethren of Russia, and the practice was brought to North America in the migration of the 1870s.

The first reports of large-scale choral activities began to appear in 1889 and 1890.[7] Although Sunday schools had been unknown in Russia, the institution soon became common among the Mennonite Brethren living in the United States. Conventions at which teachers gathered to receive instruction and inspiration were an integral part of the Sunday school tradition, and it was at these conventions that choirs first began to gather for informal choral festivals. Choirs from churches in each district would sing separately and as a mass choir, and by 1903 the musical portion of the convention had assumed such importance that a separate day was devoted to a choral festival. The convention generally took place in May, with the choral festival on the first day and the Sunday school convention on the next.[8] Very early in the century the Mennonite Brethren in the Midwest began to hold choral festivals apart from the Sunday school convention. On November 12, 1902, for example, a festival was held in Washita County, Oklahoma, with songs from individual choirs and a mass choir. Between choral numbers there were papers on church choirs and congregational singing.[9] The abundant newspaper reports of musical activities in Kansas and Oklahoma are a clear indication that music was important to these Mennonites. Although the prospect of cheap, plentiful farmland persuaded many of them to become pioneers in Canada's Northwest, the musical habits

that had been formed were retained in their new homes, and organized musical activities soon resumed despite the hardships of pioneer life.

The first Mennonite Brethren families in Saskatchewan came mostly from Manitoba, where congregations had been established as early as 1884, and they settled around the town of Laird in the Rosthern area in 1898. Others, coming mainly from the United States, settled in the following areas: Bruderfeld (1901), Dalmeny (1901), Borden (1904), Aberdeen (1906), Hepburn (1910), and Waldheim (1918). In the Swift Current area the principal settlements were Main Centre (1904), Herbert (1905), and Gnadenau (1907). The two regions were known as the North Saskatchewan District (Rosthern Kreis) and the South Saskatchewan District (Herbert Kreis).

The tradition of Sunday school conventions with a large musical component continued, the first gathering taking place in Ebenfeld (North Saskatchewan District) on June 23, 1902, only four years after the first Mennonite Brethren had arrived. Choirs from Ebenfeld, Springfield, Osler, and Bruderfeld were present to sing during the sessions. Three years later in 1905, the year Saskatchewan became a province, a correspondent to *Zionsbote* gave a detailed report of what was probably the first choral festival held in western Canada.[10] The leader of the sessions was Aron G. Sawatzky, a man who had participated actively in the rapid development in choral singing among Russian Mennonites from 1890 until his emigration to Canada in 1903 and who was now in a position to provide leadership to the scattered communities on the Canadian prairies.

The initial gatherings were fairly casual in organization—Sawatzky had been asked to come but could not make it on the scheduled day because the ice was breaking up on the South Saskatchewan River, so he came unannounced at Easter—but before long a desire for more formal associations became apparent. The first meeting of the Nördlichen Sängervereinigung der Mennoniten Brüdergemeinde von Nord Amerika (Northern Association of Mennonite Brethren Choir Directors in North America) was held in Neu Steinbach from Saturday, February 10, to Sunday, February 11, 1906.[11] An association of choir directors from the Rosthern area, its primary goals were stated in its statutes:

> 1. To make possible the mutual advancement in church music, and to help us so that our choirs might be a blessing, that, through their singing, sinners might repent and come to Jesus, and that the name of the Lord might be glorified.
> 2. To hold workshops from time to time, at which business matters can be dealt with and work in theoretical and practical subjects can be undertaken.[12]

At first the meetings of the association were held in winter, for most

of its members were farmers.[13] The sessions would include lectures on various aspects of music theory, practical work in conducting, and rehearsals with the local choir and a male chorus composed of the workshop participants. The meetings would normally conclude with a choral festival in which the choirs of the district would participate. Later, they were held in conjunction with the annual conferences of the northern district of Mennonite Brethren churches in June, after seeding had been completed.

Whether they took place in summer or winter, it was a long time between sessions, and the association soon began to sponsor visits to member choirs by the more experienced conductors in the group in order to provide fresh inspiration and to renew the knowledge that had been gained in the workshop of the previous year. In providing this kind of support for local choirs and their directors, the Mennonite Brethren were following a well-established practice in Mennonite circles. The Russian Mennonites had instituted the office of itinerant pastor (*Reiseprediger*) by the middle of the nineteenth century, and the itinerant Mennonite choir director can best be compared with such a person. According to Harold Bender, "Its purpose has been essentially to furnish pastoral ministry to individual families, often widely scattered, and to supplement the work of the local preachers with a special preaching ministry for various special occasions."[14] By substituting the word "choirs" for the word "families" in this quotation, one gets a fairly accurate description of the role fulfilled by Aron Sawatzky, J. P. Wiebe, and others in the musical life of the Mennonite churches of the prairies.

During the first three years of the association's existence, the membership was drawn from the North Saskatchewan District Conference, with meetings in the Rosthern area. By 1909, however, the invitation the association had extended in 1907 to choir directors in the South Saskatchewan District and in Manitoba had borne fruit; and the workshop held from June 10 to June 12, 1909, in Aberdeen, Saskatchewan, had two visitors: Johann P. Wiebe, representing the southern district, and J. A. Kroeker, director of the Mennonite Brethren choir in Winkler, Manitoba, since 1906, representing the Manitoba choirs.[15] By 1911 the attendance had climbed to thirty from approximately ten in 1909, with eight representatives from the Herbert area; and in 1914 five choirs from Manitoba, Winkler, Winnipeg, Steinbach, Grossweide, and Burwalde were accepted into the association. The result of this last development was to make joint meetings much more difficult because of the long distances to be traveled by train. Each area, therefore, began to hold separate workshops and festivals at various times in the winter, with the annual general meeting continuing to take place in conjunction with the June conference. Not content with an association spanning two provinces and a thousand miles, contacts were also made with

choirs and choir directors in the United States. Aron Sawatzky, of the North Saskatchewan District, and Johann P. Wiebe, who had studied with Sawatzky in Russia and who had since settled near Herbert in the South Saskatchewan District, were occasionally called upon by congregations and choral associations in North Dakota and Minnesota to assist in building their choirs. On one or two occasions, as in Winkler, Manitoba, on November 4, 1915, choir directors from Oklahoma, Kansas, Oregon, and California joined the Canadian delegates for a conference.[16]

As early as 1910 the association recognized the need for finding some way of maintaining contact between its members and friends, soon to span two provinces and several states. Its solution was the publication of *Sänger-Bote,* which first appeared in May 1911, edited by Aron Sawatzky. In it were found articles reprinted from German church music periodicals and the texts of papers read at choral workshops. In addition to this educational material, *Sänger-Bote* printed letters from its subscribers and reports from various choirs and conferences in Canada, the United States, and occasionally from Russia, thus providing a rich source of information about musical activities among Mennonites during the second decade of the twentieth century.[17] By 1912 it had 800 subscribers, and publication continued until 1919, when a combination of factors—the influenza epidemic, crop failures, the censorship of German language periodicals, and Aron Sawatzky's impending move to California—forced its discontinuance.

Among the most important functions of *Sänger-Bote* was the provision within its pages of music for use by choirs in a time when printed music with German texts was very difficult to come by in the center of the North American continent. In the April 1915 issue of *Sänger-Bote,* Aron Sawatzky announced the publication of a collection of hymns and choral pieces also entitled *Sänger-Bote.* The book contained more than 160 numbers suitable for a variety of occasions and was published by the Mennonite Brethren Publishing House in Hillsboro, Kansas. Normally a choral anthology would not rate more than passing mention—there have been so many both old and new—but *Sänger-Bote* was different. Not only did these homesteading pioneers make sure that their choral singing tradition was maintained, they also composed both text and music for many of the numbers included in the collection. More than seventy original pieces and a few arrangements were produced by the most prolific Mennonite hymnist, editor Aron Sawatzky. Other names such as Wiebe, Barkman, Klassen, Bargen, Siemens, Enns, Schroeder, Dyck, Thiessen, and Priebe, found at the upper right-hand corner of the songs, indicate that Sawatzky's Mennonite brothers and sisters were also not above dashing off a song when needed. Especially interesting is the inclusion of hymns by two

women, Marg. Enns and Agatha Funk. (There is evidence that women were allowed to take part in the conducting sessions at workshops,[18] one indication that female Mennonite Brethren in Saskatchewan were perhaps more emancipated than their sisters in many other Mennonite congregations.) *Sänger-Bote* was used by many Mennonite choirs in the United States and Canada in the 1920s and 1930s, going through at least a half-dozen printings.

The new hymnody of the Mennonite Brethren, with its reliance on the gospel hymn, has already been mentioned. In Russia they found these hymns in hymnals published by German Baptist and Presbyterian churches; in North America they used a book called *Evangeliums-Lieder,* a translation of Sankey's *Gospel Hymns,* edited by Walter Rauschenbusch and Allan Sankey and published in New York by the Biglow and Main Company in 1897. These songs constituted the standard fare of Mennonite Brethren congregations in the first thirty years of the twentieth century, and it was this gospel hymn style that provided the framework within which Sawatzky and his colleagues produced their hymnal.

The quality of both the music and texts of the gospel hymns has often been questioned,[19] but for Mennonites, as for many others, the gospel songs of Sankey, McGranaham, and Bliss, often with texts by Fanny Crosby, served a purpose. They met the need for a more spirited, personal expression of faith than was possible in the old chorales, and they also provided a substitute for the long, drawn-out chorale melodies commonly heard in many Mennonite churches. The quick, catchy gospel hymns were especially appealing to young people, who filled the ranks of the church choirs and about whom the Mennonite Brethren were especially concerned. The gospel hymns, therefore, became the means by which many Mennonite congregations cultivated and perpetuated the role of singing, even after the traditions of their forefathers had become meaningless, and they provided the foundation for further musical growth.

It should be pointed out that no great claims are being made for the music of this group of Saskatchewan hymnists. As gratifying as it may be to have discovered a valuable body of choral music to edit and reissue, a closer look reveals that such hopes are not realistic. One distinguishing feature of many of these prairie gospel songs—internal proof of authenticity, perhaps—is the presence of irregular harmonic and part-writing practices not to be found in Sankey's *Gospel Hymns.* Most of them are in the gospel hymn style, with rudimentary harmonies centering on the tonic and dominant; symmetrical, predictable melodies; refrains; and subjective, often sentimental texts. "Abschiedslied" by Aron Sawatzky, editor and most prolific contributor, reveals most of these characteristics, although one also finds examples of dominant-

seventh chords resolving to the subdominant, with attendant parallel fifths, clearly setting them apart from their models (see ex. 1).

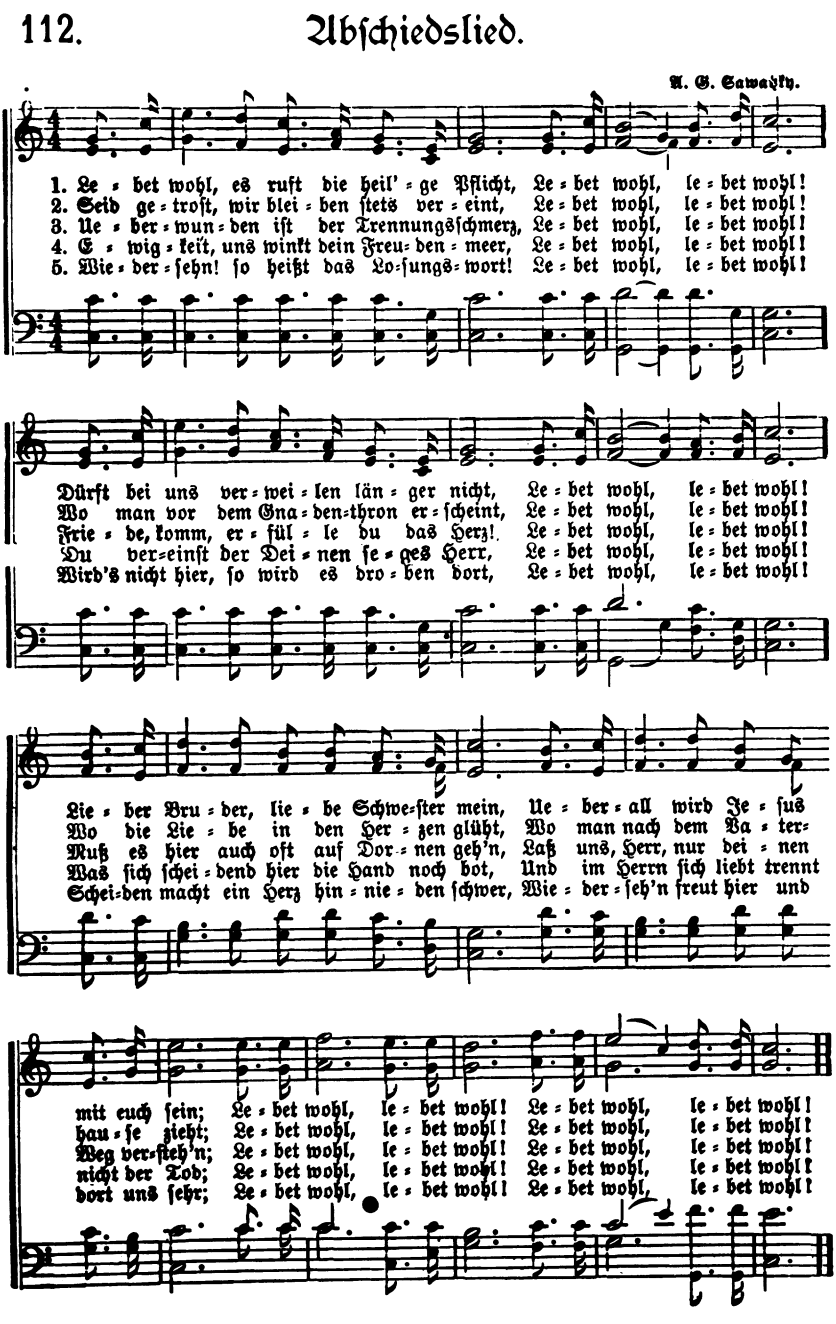
Some numbers show that these Mennonite composers were, in fact, prepared to go beyond the very simple style of *Gospel Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, whose hymns were designed so that even the musically illiterate could sing along. Examples include "Das Vater Unser" (no. 29), a setting of the Lord's Prayer; "Kampf und Sieg" (no. 83), a ninety-three measure setting of a twelve-stanza poem; "Erlöst" (no. 109); and "Das Lied Mose" (no. 148), which contains solo sections for soprano, tenor, and bass and two sections in which the soprano and alto sing a duet. The imitative opening of "Das Lied Mose," a setting of the song of Moses from the fifteenth chapter of the Book of Exodus, is remarkably ambitious; the unusual cadences of the first few lines, with open fourths, etc., are characteristic (see ex. 2).

In some ways these Saskatchewan composers are like their counterparts in New England during the time of William Billings, although the analogy cannot be pushed too far. Lectures in the rudiments of music were a regular feature of the annual choral workshops in Saskatchewan, and when time allowed, and participants were experienced enough, sessions dealing with harmony were included as well. This suggests to me that the harmonic and part-writing "mistakes" found in their compositions resulted from a rudimentary training in music theory, one which they were always trying to improve and with which they were not necessarily contented.

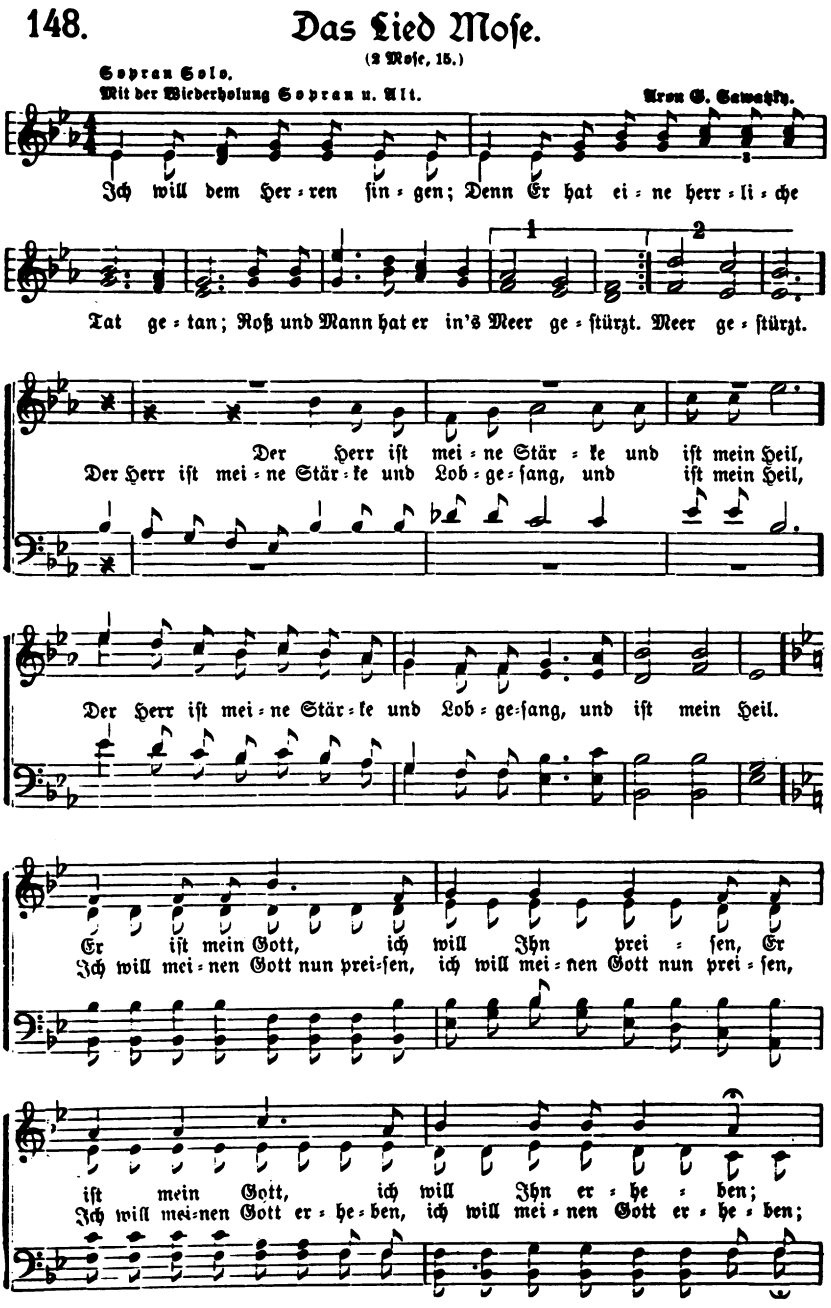
It is useful to compare the works described above with the compositions and arrangements of K. H. Neufeld, a Russian Mennonite musician who came to Canada somewhat later, in 1923. His pieces are especially revealing of mid-century practices because they were all written between 1933 and 1956. Neufeld's harmonizations and arrangements from the 1930s and 1940s are filled with crude harmonies and awkward part writing. Over the years the crudities became less frequent; as a workshop leader Neufeld taught harmony and took courses himself, giving every indication that he recognized the deficiencies of his technique and attempted to remedy them as quickly as he could.[20]

The hymns of *Sänger-Bote* continued to be used by some Mennonite choirs for several decades, but the association to which the collection owed its existence ceased operations in 1923. By this time the Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches was sufficiently well organized in areas formerly governed by the association to assume some responsibility for music, and music in the church was placed under the jurisdiction of the Home Missions Committee. Nevertheless, despite the efforts of men like J. P. Wiebe to continue the work of the association, a period of at least fifteen years ensued during which congregations

Example 1. A. G. Sawatzky, "Abschiedslied," *Sänger-Bote,* no. 112.



Example 2. A. G. Sawatzky, "Das Lied Mose," *Sänger-Bote*, no. 148, mm. 1–18.



did not receive the support they had become accustomed to, and one gets the impression that the level of music in the churches suffered as a result.

In addition to the benefits bestowed upon contemporary and future congregations of Mennonite Brethren in the areas of choral and congregational singing and the education of church musicians, the Northern Association of Mennonite Brethren Choir Directors in North America demonstrated that moving to a pioneer society need not inevitably result in musical decline and stagnation. The history of the Mennonites contains numerous examples of exactly such a process: after leaving Prussia for Russia in 1789, the Mennonites took eighty years to reestablish a thriving musical culture; for those who came to Manitoba in the first wave of immigration in 1874, it took more than half a century to become musically active. For the Mennonite Brethren of Saskatchewan, who moved toward the beginning of the twentieth century, just when methods of transportation, communication, and publication were beginning to improve rapidly, things may have been easier, but their courage and determination to keep on singing despite the hardships of a pioneer's life is inspiring. That these farmers, teachers, and tradesmen were also able to produce practicable, sometimes ambitious choral works for their own use and for the use of others is remarkable, and the fact that only a few of the hymns have survived and now appear in Mennonite Brethren hymnals or choral libraries does not really detract from their achievements.

NOTES

This article is an expanded version of a paper read at a meeting of the Pacific Northwest Chapter of the American Musicological Society in Vancouver in April 1981 and is drawn from a larger study of Mennonite choral singing in Canada.

1. Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786–1920: The History of a Separate People* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1974), pp. 199–201.

2. John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Fresno, Calif.: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1975), pp. 26–50.

3. Leo Driedger, "Saskatchewan Old Colony Mennonites," *Mennonite Life* 13 (Apr. 1958): 63–66; see also Driedger, "Hague-Osler Settlement," *Mennonite Life* 13 (Jan. 1958): 13–16.

4. For a discussion of Old Colony musical practices, with transcriptions of hymns, see Charles Burkhart, "The Church Music of the Old Amish and Old Colony Mennonites," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 27 (Jan. 1953): 34–54; and Burkhart, "Music of the Old Colony Mennonites," *Mennonite Life* 7 (1952): 20–21, 47.

5. See Georg Feder, "Decline and Restoration," in Friedrich Blume, *Protestant Church*

Music: A History (London: Victor Gollancz, 1975), p. 339, for a discussion of this aspect of Protestant hymnody.

6. Wesley Berg, "The Development of Choral Singing among Mennonites of Russia to 1895," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 55 (Apr. 1981): 131–42.

7. For example, *Zionsbote* 6 (Apr. 6, 1890): 3, contains a program for a Sunday school convention to be held in Emmathal, Kans., on May 12, 1890. Choirs from Lehigh, Ebenfeld, and Reno County joined the local choirs in providing the music.

8. See Calvin Buller, "Brotherly Love," *Choral Journal* 18 (Nov. 1977): 34–37; ibid. 18 (Dec. 1977): 30–32; and ibid. 18 (Jan. 1978): 18, for a description of developments in the Alexanderwohl congregation in Kansas. Buller's statement that the first Mennonite choral festival took place in 1929 (Dec. 1977, p. 30) needs to be corrected, however, in light of the evidence presented above.

9. Program in *Zionsbote* 18 (Sept. 10, 1902): 6; report in *Zionsbote* 18 (Nov. 4, 1903): 5.

10. Although not the first to be held in Canada. See W. H. Breithaupt, "The Saengerfest of 1875," *22nd Annual Report of the Waterloo Historical Society* (1934): 136–37, for a description of a festival sponsored by the German singing societies of Berlin (now Waterloo) and Kitchener. Gottlieb Leibbrandt, *Little Paradise: Aus Geschichte und Leben der Deutschkanadier in der County Waterloo, Ontario, 1800–1975* (Kitchener: Allprint Co., 1977), pp. 170–84, has a more detailed account of this event, along with a list of other festivals. One significant difference between these and the Mennonite festivals was the Mennonite emphasis on education and the training of its choral directors and choir members.

11. H. N. Wiebe, "Die erste Dirigentenversammlung in Saskatchewan," *Zionsbote* 22 (Mar. 7, 1906): 3. Much of the information about the association comes from its "Protocol Buch," the book of minutes of meetings from 1906 to 1923. The original is in the archives of the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches in Canada, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

12. "Protocol Buch," June 1908, p. 4. All translations are mine.

13. The difficulty of maintaining a choir in a farming community is reflected in the title of a paper read by J. F. Harms at the workshop of 1908: "Wie kann ein schöner Chor im kalten Winter und in der Arbeitzeit im Sommer bestehen?" (How can a choir be kept together in the cold of winter and in the busy times of summer?)

14. Harold S. Bender, "Reiseprediger," *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* 4 (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1959): 280.

15. "Protocol Buch," June 1909, pp. 9–13.

16. Ibid., Nov. 1915, p. 54.

17. For example, "Bericht von der Dirigentenversammlung zu Fairview, Oklahoma," Mar. 15, 1914, p. 10; "Bericht von der achten Dirigentenversammlung abegehalten in Mt. Lake, Minnesota," Aug. 15, 1914, pp. 5–7; and "Bericht von der neunten Dirigentenversammlung in Mountain Lake, Minnesota," Aug. 15, 1915, pp. 125–26. The most complete collection of *Sänger-Bote* can be found in the Hiebert Library, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, Calif., which has issues for 1914 and 1915 virtually complete. I am grateful to Rachel Hiebert for her kindness in sending me copies of the collection.

18. *Sänger-Bote*, May 1915, p. 62.

19. See, for example, Erik Routley, *The Church and Music* (London: Gerald Duckworth and Co., 1967), p. 189.

20. Wesley Berg, "Choral Festivals and Choral Workshops among the Mennonites of Manitoba and Saskatchewan, 1900–1960, with an Account of Early Developments in Russia" (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1979), pp. 195–211.