

# CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

## *Lighting the Way*

ST. OLAF OBSERVES ITS 100<sup>TH</sup>  
CHRISTMAS FESTIVAL

ON DECEMBER 17, 1912, a Christmas program was offered to a large gathering of family and friends in Hoyme Memorial Chapel shortly before St. Olaf College closed for the holidays. The brief Tuesday evening program included a speech by the Reverend R. M. Fjeldstad



and special music by tenor Sigurd Erdtman, violinist Adolph Olsen, pianist Eulalie Chenevert, and the Delta Chi Quartet. In the dim light of the chapel, members of the St. Olaf Choral Union, established in 1902, stood solemnly and sang like angels. Their first three songs were sung in Norwegian.

What began so long ago as the “St. Olaf College Christmas Program” evolved into a “Commemoration of Christmas” and, by the 1940s, became the “Christmas Festival at St. Olaf.” Nearly 100 years after the first concert in Hoyme Chapel, the Christmas Festival has become a treasured holiday tradition.

Today, under the artistic direction of St. Olaf Choir Conductor Anton



Armstrong '78, five choral ensembles and the St. Olaf Orchestra — a total of nearly 600 student musicians — perform four concerts that offer a rich repertoire of classic Advent and Christmas compositions along with familiar carols and hymns from around the world. The music is chosen to provide eternal messages of hope, peace, and healing.

It can be bitterly cold and windy on the Hill in early December. Concert-goers arrive on campus wearing colorful, warm Norwegian sweaters that heighten the air of festivity. Buntrock Commons, traditionally decorated for the Christmas holidays, is a hub of pre-concert activity, from the Merry Tuba Christmas Players in the atrium and book signings in the St. Olaf Bookstore to the bountiful Scandinavian buffet in the Black and Gold Ballroom that offers lutefisk and lefse, meatballs, rommegrot, fruit soup, rosettes, and riskrem. For countless Oles of all generations, the Christmas Festival serves as a

spiritual homecoming.

“It’s a kind of pilgrimage for the vast majority of people who attend the Christmas Festival,” says John Ferguson, the Elliot and Klara Stockdal Johnson Professor of Organ and Church Music and the conductor of the St. Olaf Cantorei. “It articulates in the best way possible that [the festival] is something we do as a college of the church. We value the message of the incarnation, and we think it’s worth slaving over and struggling over. The festival from its origins has always been a strong statement of what St. Olaf College is.”

#### HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

The St. Olaf Christmas Festival is one of the longest-running observances of its kind in the world. Its origins date back to F. Melius Christiansen, the celebrated Norwegian immigrant who became director of music at St. Olaf in 1903 and is credited with founding the St. Olaf Music Department that same year. Under Christiansen’s visionary leadership, hard work, and artistry, the Christmas program ran annually in Hoyme Chapel for its first decade before undergoing a number of changes.

In 1922, to accommodate a growing audience, the concert moved from the chapel to the college gymnasium, located in what is now the Theater Building. That was also the year that the St. Olaf Orchestra first participated in the program, adding a deeper dimension to the overall performance. The concerts generally included a processional,



official Christmas greetings by college president Lars W. Boe, a Gospel reading, a mix of traditional Christmas carols and lesser-known choral pieces, and the musical gifts of various St. Olaf College choirs. Often there was at least one Christmas hymn, usually a traditional Christmas carol such as *Joy to the World*, for the audience to sing, although audience participation didn't become a regular practice until the late 1920s.

*Beautiful Savior* first appeared on the program in 1924, but not as the closing or recessional hymn. From 1930 to the present day, a portion of the hymn has been sung from the back of the gym after the recessional when the lights were dimmed. However, there was an occasion in the 1970s when it wasn't sung at all. Today's audience couldn't imagine a Christmas Festival concert without *Beautiful Savior* as the haunting final hymn.

The annual Christmas event gained momentum in the mid-1930s and 1940s, and while its Depression-era concerts didn't offer much in the way of sets and decorations, the music still enchanted audiences, says Joseph Shaw '49, professor emeritus of religion and the author of several books about St. Olaf.

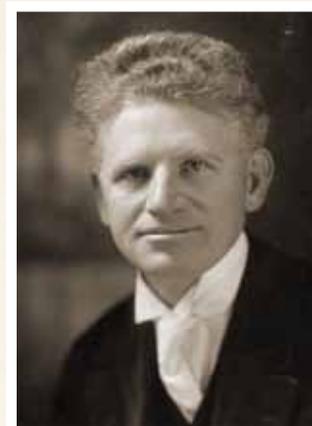
From 1936 onward the college offered two nights of the concert, and Christiansen added a third night in 1941. The exceptions were during the World War II years 1942 and 1943, when the program had only one evening concert, and 1944 when two concerts were offered. Shaw notes that it was around this time that audiences began to hear

a broader selection of music: "The respective directors would build in new pockets of contemporary music that fed into the festival program little by little."

F. Melius Christiansen's son Olaf, a 1925 graduate of St. Olaf, became co-conductor of the St. Olaf Choir in 1941 and, as had become the tradition, artistic director of the Christmas Festival concert, fully taking the helm in 1943 when his father retired. The younger Christiansen made a few subtle changes, including organizing the music around a theme to give the program a cohesive spiritual and artistic sensibility.

Professor Emeritus of Music Robert Scholz '61 remembers his years as a student musician singing in the Christmas Festival when it was still located in the wooden gymnasium. The audience was packed onto the gym floor and temporary bleachers were set up on the elevated track. Singers traditionally would descend from the staircase located off the running track singing "From heaven above to earth I come."

It was a thrilling experience that never lost its power during Scholz's 37 years as conductor of the Viking Chorus, the Chapel Choir, and the Campus Choir (predecessor of the St. Olaf Cantorei). "It was hard work because the acoustics in the gym did not support the choral sound, but you had great music and it was inspiring spiritually, musically, socially — all the things that music is supposed to be," he says.



F. Melius Christiansen (top) was the first artistic director of the Christmas Festival. He was succeeded by his son Olaf C. Christiansen '25 (middle, left). Kenneth Jennings '50 (middle, right) became the third director, followed by Anton Armstrong '78. In 2011 the Christmas Festival's conducting team is comprised of (bottom, from left), Steven Amundson, John Ferguson, Anton Armstrong, Sigrid Johnson, and Christopher Aspaas '95.



the St. Olaf Christmas Festival was recognized in the *New York Times International Datebook* as one of the five significant global holiday events, and the *Los Angeles Times* named it one of World's Top 30 Events and Festivals in December.

Another hallmark of the festival under Jennings's leadership was the overall format. He typically structured the Christmas Festival with a focus on each of the participating choirs — Viking Chorus, Manitou Singers, Cantorei, and Chapel Choir, leading up to the St. Olaf Choir singing three or four numbers. Each choir sang individual pieces interspersed with several massed choir compositions, selections by the St. Olaf Orchestra, readings, and more traditional Christmas carols with the audience. The Gospel readings were taken over by campus Pastor W. Bruce Benson, who came to St. Olaf in 1981.

As a St. Olaf student in the mid-1970s and a member of the St. Olaf Choir under Jennings's direction, Armstrong recalls that it was an overwhelming experience to rehearse for the Christmas Festival and sing with nearly 500 other students. "I had never sung with a choir of that size [that had] such control, discipline, and music expressivity. It was exciting and inspiring and very meaningful," he says.

Armstrong returned to St. Olaf in 1990, this time as a member of the music faculty and the fourth conductor of the St. Olaf Choir. Armstrong revised the Christmas Festival format so that the



### NEW MOVEMENTS

In 1967 the Christmas Festival concert moved to the newly completed Skoglund Athletic Center, where it remains today. According to Shaw, while some worried that the larger space would deprive the program of the warmth and intimacy experienced in the old gym, the festival not only grew in popularity but also became "a multimedia production with no loss in the quality of the music."

When Olaf Christiansen retired in 1968, Professor of Music Kenneth Jennings '50 became the third conductor of the St. Olaf Choir and artistic director of Christmas Festival. Formerly conductor of the Manitou Singers for first-year women and then the Chapel Choir, Jennings added his own musical artistry. He began to utilize the St. Olaf Orchestra during the festival concert, often showcasing the orchestra rather than simply using it to accompany the singers.

Under Jennings's leadership,



programming was more organic.

“Anton thought the flow of the program would be enhanced if we placed the ensembles’ pieces where they made the most sense in an overarching thematic sense,” says Ferguson. “It added a dimension of variety of experience and enhanced our ability to explore the implications of a theme.”

While the Christmas Festival traditionally had a theme, beginning in 1938 with “The Morning Star,” it was usually imposed on already-selected musical compositions. Armstrong changed that.

“I wanted to integrate more fully the contribution of every organization, so we would start with the theme first and then find the music that best serves that theme,” says Armstrong. “We also wanted to be more intentional about placing the choirs where their solo selections could best lift up the theme and make a more organic focus to the festival.”

The creative team responsible for bringing the St. Olaf Christmas Festival to thousands each year begins work on the program almost as soon as the previous year’s offering ends. Meeting for the first time in January, the four choral conductors and Amundson, as well

as the college pastor and visual designer Judy Seleen Swanson ’57, settle on a theme for the upcoming year’s festival. They gather several more times through the winter and spring, firming up the musical selections and artistic direction.

With a spirit of collaboration, Armstrong makes the planning process a lively debate about music, theology, pacing, and message, creating a format that even more strongly highlights works from nontraditional composers and cultures. He and his colleagues balance the need to respond to listeners’ yearning for continuity by always performing beloved traditional pieces while sensitively introducing new music that contributes to the program in a meaningful way.

Over the years many St. Olaf faculty members have composed original music and developed new arrangements for pieces, turning them into enduring parts of the Christmas holiday songbook. From F. Melius Christiansen’s arrangement of *Beautiful Savior* to *Climb to the Top of the Highest Mountain* by Carolyn Jennings, and Scholz’s *Nunc dimittis*, the festival allows the college’s musical leadership to

continually shape the Christmas musical repertoire.

The publicity related to the St. Olaf Christmas Festival also cements the college’s national reputation as a place for first-class music while sending other important messages, says Christopher Aspaas ’95, who conducts the Chapel Choir and Viking Chorus. “We’re not just trying to make good music, we’re trying to find innovative ways to share and model collaboration,” Aspaas says.

Making music is a labor-intensive exercise, especially when rehearsals begin for the Christmas Festival in the fall. For the five conductors and hundreds of students who perform in the St. Olaf Orchestra or sing in the St. Olaf Choir, Viking Chorus, Manitou Singers, Chapel Choir, or Cantorei, a rich heritage and legacy surrounds them.

For all, the St. Olaf Christmas Festival is a labor of love, physically and emotionally exhausting but worth the effort. And so, each December when the final concert is over and the last notes of *Beautiful Savior* fade away, the spirit of love and the promise of Christmas linger in the darkened gymnasium. It’s the perennial gift that St. Olaf shares with the world. 🎄

