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The St. Olaf Choir's lifelong friendship with Norway

Founded by a Norwegian-born violinist and choral conductor in 1912,
the St. Olaf Choir's ties to Norway include six historic tours

Founded in 1874 by a group of Norwegian-American Lutheran pastors and farmers in Northfield, Minnesota, St. Olaf College has consistently maintained a strong connection to its Nordic roots. However, when the college engaged the Norwegian-born violinist and choral conductor F. Melius Christiansen to create its new music department in 1903, the vibrant cultural connections between Norway and its performance ensembles blossomed.

The St. Olaf Choir 2013 Centennial Tour to Norway honors the college's academic and cultural ties to Norway, and celebrates the St. Olaf Choir's historic first 1913 concert tour, as well as the five tours that followed in 1930, 1955, 1980, 1993 and 2005.

On that first tour 100 years ago, Christiansen sailed across the Atlantic from New York on the maiden voyage of the S.S. Christianiafjord to Christiania (Oslo) with 50 singers – most of Norwegian descent. A member of the St. Olaf Choir wrote of a “most joyful anticipation of a sea voyage and of a visit to that country of beauty and freshness which has been described to us from our earliest childhood.”

During this first tour words shared by the Americans and Norwegians spoke of the strong bonds they shared. Following the concert in Bergen on July 4, 1903, Reverend T.H. Haugan of St. John's Lutheran Church in Northfield (who traveled with the St. Olaf Choir) offered these words of thanks to their Norwegian hosts on behalf of St. Olaf College:

“We knew that Norway's heart was big and warm but not as big and warm as we have seen and experienced it. We, of course, also realize that mother Norway looks with regret on the many folks that left her shores to establish homes across the sea. But I want to assure you, my friends, that we cherish all that we have received from our mother country. We will preserve this priceless treasure, our heritage, and we will endeavor to make it felt in the community life of the great country on the other side of the Atlantic. To come back to Norway for many of us is like coming home.”

In Trondheim a Norwegian dignitary said:

“You come here not as strangers but as dear friends and kinsmen. Many of you certainly are deeply rooted here through your family lineage. Your forefathers in Trondheim and the Trondheim districts have yielded a rich contribution to that contingent of emigrants who went along to upbuild the transplanted Norway. I am convinced that when you become established in life and shall begin your duties, you will maintain traditions and fulfill your mission for the honor of yourselves and as a heritage for your folks and your country.”

As for the response to performances the St. Olaf Choir, its manager Paul G. Schmidt recalled in his memoirs:

The critics all wrote glowing columns of the marvelous work of the singers and expressed profound admiration for Dr. Christiansen. One of the best known had this to say: "In all Norway there cannot be found a music group that in any way can be compared to this marvelous group of singers from St. Olaf College." Another writer, in commenting on the director's ability as composer, made this statement: "How many in Norway are able to write a polyphonic chorus like *Praise to the Lord* or *Wake, Awake?* If they were written by someone over here they would probably remain unused."

The St. Olaf Choir and F. Melius Christiansen returned to Norway in 1930 to represent the Norwegian Lutheran Church in American at events observing the 900th anniversary of the death of the medieval king who brought Christianity to Norway: Olav Haraldsson (now known as St. Olaf). This tour quickly grew into a three month endeavor that included concerts in Sweden and Denmark, as finally Germany to join in the commemoration the 400th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, the primary confession of faith for the Lutheran church and an important document in the Lutheran reformation.

In 1955 the St. Olaf Choir made its third trip to Norway under the direction of Olaf Christiansen, son of F. Melius ... the ensemble's founder who died the day before the singers departed for concerts on the United States' East Coast and then on to Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Germany.

The St. Olaf Choir's fourth tour to Norway took place in 1980 under the direction of the ensemble's third conductor, Kenneth Jennings ... this time flying rather than taking a steamer across the Atlantic. In Oslo reviewer Reimar Riefling wrote: "We have missed the St. Olaf Choir for a quarter century. Its special characteristic has been preserved, but its standards appear to me have been heightened. Here we are faced with a discipline and vocal quality of the highest order."

Another historical observance brought the St. Olaf Choir and its fourth conductor, Anton Armstrong, to Norway in 1993: the 150th anniversary of Edvard Grieg's birth in Bergen. The St. Olaf Choir was the only non-Norwegian ensemble to perform in the opening ceremonies of the Bergen International Festival in June. In all four Norwegian tours the St. Olaf Choir performed for members of the royal family on its tours, including King Haakon VII and Queen Maud in 1913 and King Harald V in 1993.

The St. Olaf Choir's last tour in June 2005 celebrated both the Centennial of Norway's 100 years of independence from Sweden as well as 100 years of friendship and historical legacy between St. Olaf College and Norway, and it was a joint trip with the St. Olaf Band and the St. Olaf Orchestra. In December 2005 "A St. Olaf Christmas in Norway" television special, recorded during this tour at the Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim, was televised nationally in the United States on PBS and was released on DVD.

For a biography of St. Olaf Choir founder F. Melius Christiansen, visit:

<http://www.stolaf.edu/collections/archives/scripts/myyearsatstolaf/14.html>