
Chapter 35

Crying Holy unto the Lord: Midwestern Sacred Musical Traditions

Program 35 Performances

1. Gymanfa Ganu Choir, "Crug y bar."
2. Moses Morgan, "Uncle Joe."
3. Lee Morgan, "Uncle Joe."
4. Charles Karye and Lempi Luoma, Finnish Apostolic Lutheran hymn.
5. Bethany Swedish Baptist String Band, "Lofven Gud."
6. Ruth Zemke Flaker, "Liebster Jesu, wir sind hier."
7. John Kezele, "Radujte se narodi."
8. Bernice Barnak and Mary Stelmach, "Pojdźmy wszyscy do stójki."
9. Alvin Styczynski, "Pojdźmy wszyscy do stójki."
10. Father Frank Perkovich, "We Offer Bread and Wine."
11. Alfred Vandertie, "Estiz là, quand."
12. George Dybedol, "Den store hvite flok vie se."

Songs, Cycles, Seasons

In the 1920s and 1930s, when Alexei Siedlecki and Pete Suminski were young men in the east side Polish neighborhood of Ashland, Wisconsin, christenings, weddings, and wakes all demanded religious songs. Babies were welcomed at backyard gatherings, married couples were feted in the Polish hall, and souls were sent off in the parlors and kitchens of survivors. At the wake for Alexei's uncle, Frank Chmielewski,

they had three fellows up from Duluth that sang songs all during the wake at night—all night. And then they come out in the kitchen, they had a table and it was just full of food. And they got drunk and sober and fed and everything else at the wake. You've heard of the Irish wakes? The Polish wakes were right next door. . . . All songs in Polish—religious: on death and where they were going to go. (Siedlecki 1981 I)

The childhood neighbors of Alexei Siedlecki and Pete Suminski, Bernice Barnak and Mary Stelmach, likewise attended such events. All four looked forward to house visits and Polish carols during the Christmas season, and to the egg decorations and songs of rejoicing that accompanied Easter (Barnak 1981 I; Stelmach 1981 I).

Elsewhere across the Upper Midwest, European-American Christians sang sacred songs in their native tongues. Catholics and Eastern Orthodox adherents, in keeping with the natural orientation of their liturgy, celebrated life cycle and seasonal rituals. Protestants observed these occasions with equal enthusiasm, but they were also likely to possess a wider range of devotional songs and to

sing them at gatherings outside the cycle of life rituals or seasons. Some of the religious verses favored by ethnic Upper Midwesterners were folk songs, others were the work of prominent composers; some were learned by heart from another's singing, others were acquired through songbooks; some have persisted into the present, others have been forgotten or replaced by newer compositions. And they have been performed in a wide range of vocal and instrumental styles.

Singing in the Spirit

The Welsh Presbyterians and Calvinistic Methodists who settled southern Wisconsin in the 1840s and 1850s brought the tradition of the *gymanfa ganu* (hymn-singing festival) to such communities as Oshkosh, Neenah, Wild Rose, Red Granite, and Cambria. Theirs was a choral tradition that relied on hymnbooks with both words and music, four-part harmony, an organist and, often, a singing master or director.

The journalist Fred Holmes who roamed ethnic Wisconsin in the 1940s was mightily impressed by what he heard at the Peniel church in rural Winnebago County.

Assembled in and without the country church were 400 men and women arranged in groups—sopranos, altos, contraltos and basses—all eagerly responding to the directions of the choir-master who had been brought from some distant city for the event. As noonday approached the people warmed to the occasion. Greater enthusiasm became manifest. Then, like the quick whipping about of a wind, an exultant participant turned the orderly singing into an encore, repeating one of the [English] verses already sung except in the Welsh tongue. Words no longer soared from the lips but from the heart. The whole congregation burned with renewed spirit. The purity of natural voices scored new heights. Again and again other verses were repeated until it seemed the singers' voices would break in the wildness of enthusiasm. The organist and chorister must always be alert to renewed outbursts once this *hwyl* (spirit) appears. Pausing only for meals, served picnic style from huge baskets, the festival proceeded. Darkness fell at last to send the people home. (Holmes 1944)

Holmes's description might easily have served for Cambria's *Gymanfa Ganu* of October 1989. Olwen Morgan Welk and her brother, Lee Morgan, whom we recorded for Down Home Dairyland, were among many who were at both events and have helped maintain their ancestral tradition.

The contemporary choral singing of Finnish Apostolic Lutheran congregations in northern Wisconsin is equally compelling in its power, and it is similarly combined with a dinner on the church grounds. Yet its style is quite distinct. The Finnish Apostolic movement emerged in the northern regions of Sweden and Finland in the mid-nineteenth century when Lars Laestadius, a Lutheran minister, "underwent a spiritual awakening and started a fervent campaign of preaching contrition and repentance" (Swanson 1970:2). In Finland, the movement has remained within the state Lutheran Church, but in the United States the Apostolic Lutherans have broken away from the official Suomi Synod and have further subdivided into numerous sects.

In the early 1980s the Pollarite Apostolic Lutherans in the Marengo-Highbridge area of southern Ashland County, Wisconsin, held services the last full weekend of each month. Gathering in an old school building, resembling the plain parish halls preferred by old-country Apostolic Lutherans, the Wisconsin faithful sang both during formal liturgical services and informal song services. Spurning organs as "worldly" and disdaining the arrangement of voices into discrete parts, the Apostolic Lutherans sang unaccompanied, with unrestricted volume,



The Polish Conversation Class singing Polish carols in Holy Family Catholic Church, Ashland, 1990, with Bernice Barnak and Mary Stelmach (second and third from the left) Photo: Jim Leary

and in unison. Their words were preserved in such regionally published song-books as *Uskovaisten Lauluja* (1948) and *Uskovaisten Virsia* (1953), but tunes were maintained entirely through oral tradition.

Charles Karye, whose parents had been cantors both in the old country and America, had mastered many religious songs as a three-year-old in 1906 and, in his role as hymn singer for the Marengo congregation, eventually expanded his repertoire to 328 songs. This number hardly exhausted the body of songs active among Apostolic Lutherans, especially since new ones were being composed all the time. Richard Kumpula, a full-time meat cutter and a part-time preacher at the Marengo church, did not claim to be a songwriter, but reckoned "sometimes songs just come to me" (Kumpula 1981 I). Although not incorporated into liturgical services, Kumpula's Finnish-language songs, circulated in mimeographed form, were an active part of song services—as were Finnish versions of such nineteenth-century English-language gospel songs as "Rock of Ages."

Similar changes—both from within the ethnic community and as a result of cross-fertilization with religious features of larger American life—have occurred throughout the Upper Midwest. Parlor bands relying on autoharps, guitars, and violins were common among Scandinavians in the late nineteenth century. The parallel country gospel string-band tradition of Anglo-Celtic southerners, promulgated through radio and recordings since the 1920s, won immediate converts among Scandinavians. African-American quartet singing, likewise dissem-

inated through mass media, inspired ethnic interpretations like Alfred Vandertie's Walloon rendition of "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" Meanwhile the guitar-based "folk mass" that emerged in the Catholic church in the 1960s prompted first Slovenians and then Czechs, Germans, and Poles to compose squeezebox-driven polka masses. These remarkable syntheses have kept sacred traditions of the Old World vital in the New.



The Polish Conversion Class singing Polish carols in Holy Family Catholic Church, Astoria, 1950, with Bernice Barlow and Mary Steinhilber (second and third from the left) from the class.

and in union. Their words were preserved in such regional dialectal songs books as *Die deutsche Lieder* (1940) and *Die deutsche Lieder* (1953), but many were maintained entirely through oral tradition.

Charles Karye, whose parents had been cantors both in the old country and in America, had mastered many religious songs as a three-year-old in 1905 and in his role as hymn singer for the Marango congregation eventually expanded his repertoire to 325 songs. This number partly exhausted the body of songs active among Apostolic Lutherans, especially since new ones were being composed all the time. Richard Kompa, a full-time music center and part-time preacher at the Marango church, did not claim to be a songwriter, but reckoned "sometimes songs just come to me" (Krusovska 1981: 1). Although not incorporated into the local repertoire, Kompa's French-language songs, described in minoritized forms were an active part of song activities—as were Finnish versions of such nineteenth-century English-language gospel songs as "Rock of Ages."

Similar changes—both born within the ethnic community and as a result of cross-fertilization with religious features of larger American life—have occurred throughout the Upper Midwest. Taylor parts, relying on autoharps, guitars, and violins were common among Scandinavians in the late nineteenth century. The parallel country gospel string band tradition of Anglo-Celtic southeastern provinces migrated through radio and recordings since the 1930s, won immediate converts among Scandinavians. African-American gospel singing likewise dissem-