

# Minnesota's "Occasional" Composer: An Interview with Kenneth Jennings

By Joshua Shank

Ask any choral fan to name a choir from Minnesota and, almost without hesitation, the one you're most likely to hear is, "the St. Olaf Choir." Choral music fans from these parts have known this for years, of course, but it's rare that we get to hear about it from the perspective of one of its principal architects. In his adopted state's 150 years as a member of the Union, Kenneth Jennings has been at the forefront of his art as a conductor and composer for over 50 of them.

## **Biography**

Jennings was born in 1925 in Bridgeport, Connecticut. In that same year the Chrysler Corporation was founded, Scotch tape was invented, New York City overtook London to become the world's largest metropolis, and a native of St. Paul, Minnesota named Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald first published his landmark novel about the Jazz Age, *The Great Gatsby*.

Jennings was raised about an hour northeast of New York City in the town of Fairfield, Connecticut and attended Staples High School about six miles away in the town of Westport. After graduation he headed 1,200 miles west to study music at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. During his time there, he performed with the world-renowned St. Olaf Choir under the direction of Olaf Christiansen (the son of the choir's founder, Norwegian immigrant F. Melius Christiansen). After graduating from St. Olaf, he went on to receive a master's degree in composition from the Oberlin College Conservatory of Music in Oberlin, Ohio and eventually became the first doctoral student from the University of Illinois to graduate with a degree in the field of choral conducting.

He returned to his alma mater in 1953 to teach music and, in 1968, rose to one of the most sought-after podiums in choral music as the third conductor of the St. Olaf Choir. During his tenure with the choir, Jennings was noted for moving the ensemble away from its Lutheran church choir heritage and maturing it into one of the most respected choral ensembles in the world. Although its history and traditions were never forsaken, he began to incorporate instruments into the traditionally a cappella performances. He also brought in noted conductors and composers from around the world and led the choir in front of more audiences (both at home and abroad) than any of its previous conductors. For 22 years he and the voices of the St. Olaf Choir criss-crossed the United States and the world until Jennings handed the baton over to his former student, Anton Armstrong, in 1990. During his retirement, he accepted interim posts at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota and the University of Arizona. He and his wife, Carolyn (a noted composer herself, as well as former chair of the St. Olaf music department), still live in Northfield during the warmer months, where he continues to compose.

## **The Lord is the Everlasting God**

In 1996, Dr. Jennings was commissioned by Luther College (St. Olaf's sister school in Decorah, Iowa with a similarly thriving choral program) to write something in honor of conductor Weston Noble's fiftieth year leading the Luther College Nordic Choir. The resulting piece, *The Lord is the Everlasting God*, was premiered in 1998 during a gala celebration held at the college.

Noble, who retired from his post after 57 years, handed the baton to Jennings' former student, Craig Arnold, in 2005 and remembers the piece simply: "An emotional intensity pervaded the entire choir—their eyes, their voices—and the audience was deeply moved. Ken Jennings enriched my life forever."

Former Nordic Choir member Eric Hopkins (who currently sings with the Minneapolis-based professional choir, Cantus) remembers it this way:

I was a junior at Luther during the year of Mr. Noble's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. I already had one year in the Nordic Choir under my belt (including a tour of the Midwest and Russia) but almost nothing could compare to premiering that piece. It meant a lot to us as a choir and was the backbone of our touring program that year along with other great choral literature by Rachmaninoff, Palestrina, Bach, and Randall Thompson. It became the anthem for all the celebrations throughout the academic year in honor of Mr. Noble and, every time we sang it, we grew stronger as an ensemble. It still has a special place in my heart to this day.

The piece itself is in two movements (the second of which will be performed tonight) lasting about six minutes in all. The first movement consists of prolonged wandering through modes and aleatoric murmuring from the choir as it makes the accusation, "Have you not known? Have you not heard?" Although it eventually settles down to a comforting C-major chord by the end, the general effect is an obvious mood of unrest.

For most of the second movement, Jennings weaves through the key of E-major but conspicuously avoids planting the basses firmly at the root of its namesake major triad. However, with a unison B, a rising sound finally starts in the choir on the text "but those who wait in the Lord shall renew their strength," and the transcendent moment that inhabits every Jennings score brings the basses inevitably to the bottom of that chord the whole choir has seemingly been avoiding. The result is as powerful as any composition represented here tonight, and that same accusation from the first movement is changed instead into news anxiously waiting to be shared.

From his winter home in the Phoenix suburb of Sun City, Arizona (where temperatures were hovering in the low 60s), he spoke about his time at St. Olaf, life as a composer, and the piece performed here tonight.

**Joshua Shank: When did you first begin to write music?**

**Kenneth Jennings:** I've always done a little composition all my life (even as a piano student in grade school) but I have no idea whether any of it was any good. My piano teacher encouraged us to try writing things and I learned all the intervals and keys and harmony before I began high school.

We had no major in undergraduate work, and a number of us who were interested in this kind of thing would take a course, usually from [St. Olaf Choir conductor] Olaf Christiansen, and we would do fugal writing one semester and then a little composition another semester. I wrote some things and got Kjos to publish a couple of my pieces while I was still in college. So it's been an ongoing thing.

**JS: What is your compositional process like? Do you revise much or is your first draft fairly close to the finished product?**

**KJ:** Most of the pieces I've written are rather short and most of the time connected to texts. There are some things that I work over quite a bit and other things that come quite quickly and without too much revision along the way. I call myself an "occasional composer" because most of the time I've written for certain occasions rather than "I have to write, write, write all the time." [Most other composers] are much more prolific and they really work at it. Writing a lot is something you need to do if you want to become a good composer. It develops your resources.

**JS: What was it like to study with Olaf Christiansen?**

**KJ:** You would only put down the bare essentials. Everything was quite tight. No "elaborations" as he called them: eliminate everything but what was absolutely necessary. It wasn't necessarily the best pedagogical

development for a young composer. That's a sort of neoclassic approach and his father, of course, was the old late 19th-century extensive kind of writing...some of it very interesting.

**JS: Would you say you had any other influences as a composer?**

**KJ:** They had no choral major at [the University of Illinois] at the time. They wanted us all to have advanced degrees if you wanted to get into a college education situation. Either you had to be a composition major or some performance major or musicology and that's it. But no one ever got through the degree. They never awarded any doctorates!

Within three months we had a new [conducting] program and I was the first one in it. They created this program and the person they hired was Jean Berger. Olaf Christiansen did [Berger's] *Brazilian Psalm* and that put him on the choral "map" and then he started writing lots and lots and lots of choral music. I was interested in some of his things and so I started programming [Berger's works] after that.

[Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki] came around. I met him down in Florida while I was on leave. He was composer-in-residence at Florida State University and one way or another I got him to come to St. Olaf for several weeks. We did the second performance of [his *Magnificat*]. That was a very exciting and exhilarating sort of thing and, after that, I programmed a number of his choral works. That's 20, 30 years ago so I don't know if it influenced any of my own composition. Perhaps a little bit, but it's hard to say.

**JS: You worked with Penderecki after his *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima* made him into a very influential figure in classical music. What were your interactions with him like?**

**KJ:** He came [to St. Olaf] with his very beautiful wife at the time and we put him up in the middle of the dormitory apartments. He was there for 2 weeks. His process was to compose in the morning and then he was happy to rehearse his music in the afternoon and then enjoy a relaxing dinner in the evening. One of the first times I went to pick him up he invited me in and he said, "See! Bar lines! Meter signatures! Just like everybody else's music." He had moved off of that avant-garde kind of thing that he was somewhat famous for in his earlier pieces.

He was pretty much satisfied with our performance. We had worked very hard on that before he came. There were quarter steps to sing, extreme ranges, etc. It was good fun to put it together. Those pieces were very evocative. His music was changing as he was moving out of his earlier style. He was in the process of writing his [*Concerto for Violin and Orchestra No. 1*] for Isaac Stern, and he finished it in those two weeks he was at St. Olaf.

**JS: One of the first choral CDs I ever bought was the St. Olaf Choir's *Reflections of Norway* performance live at the 1980 Bergen International Festival and Knut Nystedt's *O Crux* was a track I think I probably wore out before I graduated high school. It seems he found a champion in the Jennings St. Olaf Choir.**

**KJ:** I got to know him a long, long time before [that performance]. When the choir toured Norway in 1955, the Norwegian Soloists Choir [conducted by Nystedt] sang for us when we arrived up there. I was Assistant Conductor under Olaf at that time and I got very interested in his music and had a chance to sit with him. From then on I kept in touch with him and he often sent me scores and let me know about his pieces and so on. *O Crux* was one of the great ones that he did.

He's a man of about 90 now. He was an engaging composer and I liked a lot of his things. He came for four or five weeks and conducted the choir while I was on leave and I also commissioned a piece for us.

**JS: Are you writing any new pieces now?**

**KJ:** Nothing at the moment. I call myself an “occasional composer” because, for the most part, I only write when I have an occasion to do so.

When I had the St. Olaf Choir I did not write very much. In the last 8 to 10 years I’ve done more writing than in the previous 20 or 25 years. I edited some things because I felt that some of that repertoire from the nineteenth century was not being heard and, if you tried to get it from Europe, it cost you an arm and a leg to buy the piece.

**JS: What do you remember about the commission and composition of *The Lord is the Everlasting God*?**

**KJ:** I had heard about [the commission] a year or two before the event when I was at a wedding and a member of the Luther music department was there. They were all having a fine time and he said, “We’re talking about commissioning something for Weston’s fiftieth anniversary and your name came up.”

Once I got the commission, I asked what text he was particularly interested in and I got the verses from Isaiah. It’s about six verses long and it was his favorite.

I sometimes write several pieces on the same text. I try different ideas and I did actually work on one for most of that summer and I wasn’t particularly happy with it. I sat down and started looking ahead and looking back to see how this text would set, and I began to realize that there were some possibilities to introduce it. And so it sort of developed I would say a kind of “dramatic recitative principle.” And [the singers] were all pyramiding these little lines—murmuring this and murmuring that—to kind of hint at the realm of things in the text, and this developed.

The first movement inspired the second and it became kind of a long introduction. When I got to the second part, it evolved out of that in one sitting.

Weston called me and asked me if I could come down and talk about the piece as his choir was preparing it. His biggest question was, “Why the C major at the end of the long recitative section of the first movement?” and what was the significance of that because they were interested in why it went off from there to *E major*. I just felt that this was the right finish and preparation for that and it just turned out to be C major.

**JS: Are there any of your own works that you’re particularly fond of?**

**KJ:** (*Laughs*) I usually like the last piece I’ve been working on.

**JS: Have you been influenced by being married to a composer?**

**KJ:** Mostly, I’ve been astounded! She writes wonderful music and has published many more pieces than I have. She always writes a nice line for the altos, by the way. They always appreciate that.

**JS: Thank you so much for your time.**

**KJ:** You’re very welcome.

**Conclusion**

Kenneth Jennings directed the St. Olaf Choir for 22 years and has influenced choral music in America in innumerable ways. The choir under his direction sang for the Pope, members of the Norwegian royal family, and was one of five choral ensembles in the world invited to participate in the Olympic Arts Festival in Seoul, South Korea. Not only did he train his own successor, but he also served as mentor to a growing field of contemporary musicians who operate at the leading edge of their field today. Many of his finest moments at the podium are still available at St. Olaf's gift shop nearly 20 years after his "retirement" and, while he already has dozens of editions, arrangements and original compositions already published, the 82-year-old composer patiently waits (as all good Lutherans from Minnesota know how to do) for that next "occasion" to write his finest work.