

# A Century of Singing

**Widely traveled and internationally known, the nearly 100-year-old St. Olaf Choir continues to delight audiences, enrich student-musicians, and offer music as a form of worship and praise.**

For nearly a century, the St. Olaf Choir has performed in hundreds of towns in dozens of countries across the world. Building upon the foundational ideals of sharing choral music that stirs the souls of listeners, the St. Olaf Choir in recent years has expanded its outreach and sound, globally and culturally. The choir has become a leader in the international music community and, according to current conductor Anton Armstrong '78, "one of the beacons of light of the college."

The art and craft of music — as practice, as performance, as a way of celebrating religious faith — has always been a vital part of St. Olaf College. The campus has been populated by instrumental teachers, voice teachers, piano teachers (every music major is required to be proficient in piano), and student singing groups since its founding in 1874.

Today St. Olaf features eight choirs, two bands, and two symphony orchestras, in addition to more than a dozen other musical ensembles. Nearly one-third of the college's 3,000 students are involved in music, and the music department of 50 faculty members is three times larger than those in most liberal arts colleges.

As the college prepares to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the St. Olaf Choir as well as the centennial of its annual Christmas Festival, those entrusted with continuing the legacy of music at St. Olaf are determined not only to carry the torch that was lit 100 years ago, but to fan its flames ever brighter.

## In the Beginning

In 1912 St. Olaf Choir founder F. Melius Christiansen first took his group of 45 singers (both students and townsfolk) to the towns and cities of the Upper Midwest. He went with the mission of "singing the familiar music of the church in the manner in which it should be sung." He wanted to reacquaint listeners with the church's heritage of chorales and a cappella music.

Christiansen's choice of spiritually profound music resonated with audiences, and the choir frequently participated in local church services and college gatherings. Christiansen put the choir on the map, first with a tour of his native country of Norway in 1913 and then with a momentous 1920 East Coast tour. There he introduced sophisticated listeners in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C., to what the *New York Times* called

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— F. Melius Christiansen**

one of the "few 'virtuoso' choirs that have been heard here in recent years." The small choir from Northfield, Minnesota, was now a national sensation.

While the ensemble's fame was spreading across America, the St. Olaf Choir continued to build traditions at home. These years witnessed the inception of the St. Olaf Christmas Festival, which today is one of the longest-running observances of its kind in the world. More than 12,000 alumni, donors, parents, and townspeople come to the St. Olaf campus each year to share in the music and celebration of the season.

Neither the tours nor the Christmas Festival would

The first St. Olaf Choir



The St. Olaf Choir with Norwegian dignitaries during the 1913 tour of Norway



A stop on the 1913 tour of Norway



An early choir trip by train to Spring Valley, Minnesota



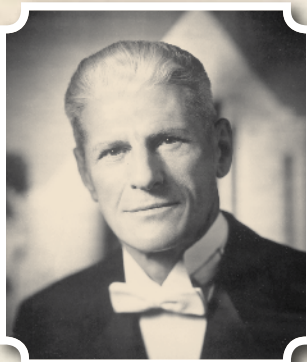
1930 tour to Stavanger, Norway



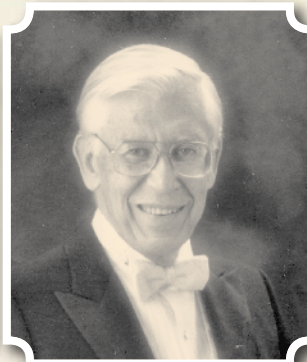
## St. Olaf Choir Conductors: 1912–2010



F. Melius Christiansen  
1912–43



Olaf Christiansen '25  
1941–68



Kenneth Jennings '50  
1968–90



Anton Armstrong '78  
1990–present

have been possible without the work of Paul G. Schmidt, St. Olaf College's first manager of music organizations. Schmidt traveled with the choir, planned all of its tours and concerts, and even sang in the bass section. His position as the touring manager became a foundation in the St. Olaf Choir's formula for success, and the Christiansen/Schmidt collaboration served as a model for future conductors and managers.

From Schmidt's son Frederick '31, who succeeded his father and continued in the position until 1972, to the current manager of St. Olaf's music organizations, Bob Johnson, the touring manager has seen to all the mechanical details and has shared the conductor's

vision of a final production. "The choir is only as good as its next performance," Johnson says. "It's only when people hear the choir sing that the legacy lives on."

Legendary for his high standards of performance, F. Melius Christiansen also saw music as a way to encourage students to cherish the rich gifts of human nature. His belief in the universality of music set the tone for the diversity and originality that have come to distinguish the choir. "Art itself is above nationality and above sect and denominational considerations," he declared. "Art stands above and alone."

With this in mind, Olaf C. Christiansen '25 joined the St. Olaf faculty in 1941 to share musical direction of the St. Olaf Choir with his father. In 1943 F. Melius handed the reins of leadership to Olaf. Under a new conductor for the first time in its history, the St. Olaf Choir not only maintained its reputation of excellence, but also began to explore new genres and interpretations of music.

### The Choir Evolves ~

Olaf added contemporary songs, more Renaissance music, and American folk hymns to the repertoire of traditional church chorales. Like his father, Olaf believed in the educational potential of music and stressed the communal power it possessed. "The St. Olaf Choir goes beyond the members and includes both singers and listeners," he said. In Olaf's words, the aspiration of the choir was to "sensitize people" so that when they left the concert they did so "with a different attitude toward themselves, toward others, and toward God."

Kenneth Jennings '50 became the third conductor of the choir in 1968. Jennings, himself a product of the St. Olaf Music Department, was well versed in the tradition he was inheriting, and he continued Olaf Christiansen's



The choir sang at Lincoln Center in New York City in 1968 as part of its final tour with conductor Olaf C. Christiansen

practice of adding new textures to the choir's sound. In 1969 Jennings introduced musical instruments to one of the choir's numbers. Though only a flute and guitar at the time, the instruments opened the door for full orchestral accompaniment in the future.

Jennings retained much of the a cappella repertoire the Christiansens established, but he also appreciated the contrast between voices and instruments. He continued to include more 20th-century works, with a focus on historically informed renditions. And Jennings expanded the choir's global reach. The choir celebrated its 75th anniversary with a tour of Asia in 1986, and in 1988 it was one of only five choirs in the world invited to participate in the Olympic Arts Festival in Seoul, South Korea.

Throughout his tenure, Jennings affirmed his mantra that art does not stand still. He exposed the choir to the oral-based musical traditions of Asia and the cultures of Eastern Europe at a time when the Berlin Wall was coming down. After 21 years, "Jennings demonstrated that the tradition began by the Christiansens was larger than the name of a family or individual," wrote Professor Emeritus of Religion Joseph Shaw '49 in his history of the choir, *The St. Olaf Choir: A Narrative*.



Kenneth Jennings '50 and the choir on their 75th anniversary tour of Asia in 1986

## A New Century

As current conductor of the St. Olaf Choir, Anton Armstrong '78 continues to expand its horizons musically and culturally. A former student in the choir, like Jennings, Armstrong has a deep appreciation of the group's history. "Each conductor continues to open doors," he says. "We take the best from tradition and bring it into the modern age."

The choir's repertoire under Armstrong has become increasingly multicultural. He has included music of the Pacific Rim, Africa, and Latin America in the choir's catalog and added Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Ireland to its tour annals, while also emphasizing a more historically informed interpretation



Olaf Christiansen '25 conducts the choir in 1948



The choir prepares to board a military transport plane in Iceland



The choir performs in Norway in 2005



Anton Armstrong '78 conducts the choir at Carnegie Hall in 1995

of musical origins. At the same time, he maintains the cultivation of the choir's rich traditions, most notably with a 2005 tour to Norway, during which the PBS special *A St. Olaf Christmas in Norway* was filmed.

"The palate is more colorful and broader now," Armstrong says. "It retains the characteristic sound it had under the Christiansens, but now it's not just salt and pepper. There are a lot of spices in it."

The choir also continues to reach out and work with other ensembles, including ongoing collaborations with the Minnesota Orchestra, Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, VocalEssence, Cantus, the American Boychoir, and Magnum Chorum.

The annual St. Olaf Choir tour, which Armstrong describes as an "extended laboratory," moves beyond just the study of music to the "doing" of it, as the choir reaches out to hundreds of listeners with the college's message of faith and hope.

Armstrong acknowledges the special rapport that has characterized music at St. Olaf for more than a century. "The conductor gives inspiration but also receives it from the choir. You hear no sound from my hands," he says, waving them in the air. "It comes from all those wonderful souls who have been part of the choir — all the choirs, the orchestras, the bands — and who have contributed in some way." ❧

## CELEBRATION OF A CENTURY

How does the St. Olaf Choir celebrate 100 years as one of the country's premier choral ensembles? By singing, of course.

The festivities to celebrate the ensemble's centennial will kick off this spring with a reunion that will bring choir alumni back to campus to reminisce and perform for the public under the leadership of Conductor Anton Armstrong '78.

The special St. Olaf Choir Reunion will be held June 3–5 and will be part of the college's Reunion Weekend for all alumni. Former choir members will have plenty of opportunities to reminisce as they stay in the college's residence halls, attend rehearsals, browse a choir memorabilia exhibit, and attend smaller gatherings for alumni from each decade. Choir alumni who went on international tours together also will have

the opportunity to get together and reminisce about their experiences abroad. The gathering will culminate with a concert Saturday, June 4, at 4 p.m. The concert will be free and open to the public.

Registration for the reunion opens February 15. In addition to attending the reunion, alumni of the St. Olaf Choir are encouraged to share their memories of conductors, rehearsals, and tours as part of the St. Olaf Choir Centennial Reunion Oral History Project. More information can be found at [stolaf.edu/alumni](http://stolaf.edu/alumni) (click on the St. Olaf Choir Reunion tab).

At the end of this year, the St. Olaf Choir also will help celebrate another centennial by performing in the 100th St. Olaf Christmas Festival. PBS will televise the 2011 Christmas Festival performance as part of its national holiday programming, and the December 4 performance will be simulcast in movie theaters across the country. More information will be available at [stolaf.edu/christmasfest](http://stolaf.edu/christmasfest) later this year.