



AUGUSTANA

SCHOOL OF MUSIC

A Brief History of Augustana Christmas Vespers

by Dr. Lisa A. Grevlos

In 1920, as Augustana College moved from its former home in Canton, SD to Sioux Falls, SD, President C.O. Solberg hired, Carl Reynold Youngdahl to serve as the first Dean of the Augustana School of Music. Dr. Youngdahl's first initiative was to form and direct an a cappella choir that would eventually become known throughout the nation as The Augustana College Choir. As the choir attained both national and international renown under Dr. Youngdahl's musical care and nurturing, he also established a religious impact on its student members. It was this spirit of worship through song or "sermon in song" that set the Augustana Choir apart.

In 1938, Dr. Youngdahl and a small committee in charge of general arrangements such as lighting, staging, and publicity created the first Christmas Vespers service at Augustana. This one-night service featuring the Augustana College Choir, a string trio, a girl's trio, a vocal duet, and a reading of the Christmas story by President C. M. Granskou was held in the Old Gym with 1800 students, faculty, and community members in attendance. In a December 21, 1938 article published in The Augustana Mirror it was stated that "The concert was so well received that it is expected that it will become an annual Christmas highlight." Little did Dr. Youngdahl or the small committee involved in its inception, know that the Augustana Christmas Vespers tradition would continue to grow and prosper well into the 21st century.

As time moved forward into the 1940's, Augustana Christmas Vespers continued to evolve and became the highlight of the Christmas season, both at Augustana and throughout the Sioux Falls community. An additional service became a necessity to accommodate the swelling numbers of individuals who desired to take part in the beauty of advent and Christmas song and scripture. The staging and art work illustrating the message of the choirs during the service became more elaborate and the yearly inclusion of F.Melius Christiansen's arrangement of Beautiful Savior was established.

At the end of the 1940's and beginning of the 1950's a Chapel Choir, directed by Dr. Arnold Running was added to the Augustana Christmas Vespers program, along with the Augustana Orchestra and Madrigal Singers and the service was moved to the Sioux Falls Coliseum in order to accommodate the sell-out crowds. In the fall of 1953, Dr. Arnold Running became the 2nd director of the Augustana College Choir. During Dr. Running's tenure into the 1960's the Women's Choir and a brass ensemble were added to the annual Augustana Christmas Vespers services.

By the 1970's, as the baton of the Augustana College Choir was passed on to Dr. Olaf Malmin, Augustana Christmas Vespers had blossomed into a full-blown weekend celebration of the birth of Christ and included a smorgasbord, multiple choirs, brass, and orchestra, all proclaiming the Christmas story with dimly glistening murals, campus pastors, Bible passages, music, and faculty scripture readers. The establishment of the Collegiate Chorale, which is now known as the University Chorale, was added, as was the Brasswind ensemble, which later became the Brass Choir.



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As time moved forward into the 1980's, Augustana Christmas Vespers was produced annually by the music department, pastoral committee, and the Augustana public events committee and seated over 4500 people in 5 services held at both Our Savior's Lutheran Church and St. Joseph's Cathedral, including a dress rehearsal that was open to the public. The service was also video-taped and broadcast on cable TV and on radio stations throughout the region during the month of December. Services included the Augustana College Choir and the Collegiate Chorale, as well as the Augustana Chamber Orchestra, and the Brass Choir. Dr. Malmin was quoted as saying "Christmas Vespers is Augie's gift to the community." And indeed, what a gift, it continued to be.

In the 1990's, as Augustana Christmas Vespers moved toward its 60th Anniversary, the event continued to expand into six sold out services that now had special themed titles and which began to rotate yearly between Our Savior's Lutheran Church and First Lutheran Church downtown. Dr. James R. Johnson became the 4th conductor of the Augustana College Choir in 1992 and several new ensembles and traditions were established, such as the addition of liturgical dancers, a Chamber Choir, and the formation of a large cross by all of the choirs while the Brass Choir performed "A Children's Prayer" and "Cathedral Chorus." A statement from the 1994 Edda reads, "Vespers has long been an Augustana tradition and many members of both the college and the Sioux Falls community anticipate the performances as a key part of the Christmas season each year." 1997 also marked an historic change with ticketing. With the continued demand for more tickets and sell out crowds, the Vespers committee decided that a ten dollar ticket price would be established, with students and faculty still receiving their tickets for free.

During the turn into the new millennium, and with the impending renovation plans for St. Joseph's Cathedral, Augustana Christmas Vespers moved out of their traditional two Sunday services at St. Joseph's Cathedral and back to 5 services at either Our Savior's Lutheran Church or First Lutheran Church to lessen the strain on the students during the first weekend in December.

In 2012, Dr. Paul Nesheim began his tenure as the 5th conductor of the Augustana College Choir. Augustana Christmas Vespers continues to develop and grow under his leadership and saw its first "on the road" travels to Rapid City, SD and to St. Andrew's Lutheran Church in Mahtomedi, MN, a suburb in The Twin Cities, performing to sizeable crowds. The return of F. Melius Christiansen's arrangement of Beautiful Savior to end each service is a special tribute to Dr. Youngdahl's early tradition of its inclusion.

Today, Augustana Christmas Vespers is a culmination of months of planning by the Vespers committee and is led by The Augustana Choir, The Augustana Chamber Choir, The University Chorale, Angelus, The Augustana Orchestra, and the Augustana Brass Choir. As the tradition continues to develop, at its heart will always be the unique and sacred celebration of the season.

The year 2020 is no different, despite the challenges of a world pandemic. Augustana Christmas Vespers, though virtual in form, still has "at its heart" the reverent, pure, and worshipful message of the birth of Our Lord and Savior. We hope that Augustana Christmas Vespers 2020 – Risen with Healing in His Wings, will fill your hearts with hope and the love of Christ.