

**Composing a Life for God: Regina Holmen Fryxell
Augustana Heritage Association Gathering 2012**

by Ann Boaden

I'd like to begin with a story.

Picture it: A little girl with big eyes sits listening intently as her mother plays the reed organ. It's Sunday afternoon in Essex, Iowa; the house and the whole countryside are steeped in quiet. The mother's skilled fingers seem to be shaping that outward silence into sound that interprets it, deepens it. Peace must sound like this, the little girl thinks. Or happiness. Or love. At that moment it seems to her that if she too could make that sound, it would be, of all things, most wonderful.

But this is no tale of a Midwest prodigy. The child is no youthful Mozart. She finds that her own fingers are too small. They stumble between the notes her mother shows her. The music she reaches for dissolves in fumbling discord, and finally in her tears.

This is the story of Regina Holmen Fryxell's first organ lesson.

But the little girl soon wiped away her tears. Frustration grew into determination, and determination into achievement. At the age of 90, just three years before her death, Regina Fryxell could look back on a lifetime of shaping sound—sounds of joy, of solemnity, of triumph, of thanksgiving—all in the service, and the services, of the church. She was an accomplished organist. She retired only at the age of 83, when eye surgery had made reading difficult and arthritis had bent and slowed the always-small fingers. But more, she was a nationally recognized liturgist and composer of church music,

chosen by her alma mater Augustana College to receive an honorary doctorate, and praised by church leaders for her “cultivated talents, consecrated spirit, and...high [musical] standards.” In particular, the Augustana Synod knows her as the woman who preserved the musical heritage of its ethnic liturgies in the Second Setting for the Red Hymnal of 1958.

Regina Holmen was born November 24, 1899, in Morganville, Kansas, and grew up in Lutheran country parishes across Kansas and Iowa, where her father the Reverend Dr. J. A. Holmen ministered. That first disheartening experience on the organ taught Regina that music making was hard work. But it also taught her determination. Now on those Sunday afternoons she'd go over to the church and practice on the organ by pumping it full of air, then running around to the keyboard and playing as many chords as she could before the air supply ran out. She laid long and short wooden blocks on the rug below the parsonage piano to simulate an organ pedal-board. And soon she knew the joy of music-making. As a teenager, Regina filled the parsonage with that music, and her delighted laughter, her younger brother Reynold remembers. By the time she entered Augustana College, Rock Island, in the fall of 1918, Regina was aflame to learn more about the music she loved.

She had other gifts and loves as well, though. She loved literature, the rhythm and ring of words; and she had a natural aptitude for languages. She managed to combine the two areas of study. In doing so she created her own unique niche in

Augustana College history. She was the first student to graduate from both the college and its sister institution the Conservatory—with top honors in both. Then she was off to the prestigious Juilliard School of Music in New York City, where she studied with some of the most distinguished performers and composers of the day. Three years later, she'd earned her diploma in organ.

She returned to Augustana community in 1928, when she married her classmate, the internationally known geologist and mountaineer Dr. Fritiof Fryxell. Dr. Fryxell, as many of you know, founded Augustana's geology department in 1929. But she didn't abandon her professional life. And officials in both college and church were paying attention to her achievements as organist, teacher, and composer.

So here's another story. It's a fall day in 1948. A car noses its way up the narrow drive to a large gray stucco house near Black Hawk Park in the west end of Rock Island. Two men, dark-suited, with crisp white shirts and sober ties, emerge. They are two of the most distinguished representatives of Augustana College and Seminary, Dr. Conrad Bergendoff, president, and Dr. Otto Bostrom, professor of religion. They have come to the Fryxell home to discuss the proposal that will change Regina Fryxell's life and the life of the church.

The Fryxell home is gone now, but in its heyday it was a veritable museum. On this afternoon in 1948 Bergendoff and Bostrom ease themselves onto a sofa stacked high with books and manuscripts. Regina's grand piano, music spread across its rack—she's

probably just been practicing—occupies pride of place in the long living room. Sunlight slants through the west windows. And here, they present their proposal.

A new synod, the Lutheran Church in America, was being organized at that time. Smaller synodical bodies were being collected into that larger synod. Each of these smaller synods reflected a specific ethnic tradition. Among those traditions, powerfully, stood the words and music of their liturgies—the resonant Lutheran Chorales worshippers sang every Sunday. Each liturgy differed as languages differed. Bergendoff and Bostrom were both members of the Joint Commission on a Common Liturgy. What they envisioned was a liturgical setting that would preserve the Chorale tradition in one common language, English. Would Regina undertake to create such a setting?

Regina Fryxell was a thoughtful and reserved person. I can imagine her sitting motionless for a few seconds after hearing this request, while her mind moved rapidly. What a project that would be!

About a decade later, in her pamphlet *The Story of Setting II* she explained with characteristic precision and objectivity what was being asked of her. The new hymnal—*Service Book and Hymnal*, to give it its full name— was to feature two settings of the liturgy. Setting I derived from Anglican Chant, a musical line that developed when English replaced Latin as the liturgical language of the Church of England. Setting II, as Bergendoff and Bostrom and others conceived it, would instead develop from the Lutheran Church, and would embody its diverse cultural and linguistic tradition. Regina's job, then, would be to examine, select, and adapt to the English language materials from a variety of national backgrounds, and so create one unified text and

melodic line for congregations to sing. She was, essentially, shaping a history of worship to a sound for the present.

And who better? She was a daughter of the church, a church musician, multilingual.

And so she agreed. And the rest is pretty interesting history.

Regina soon found herself in a world of the past—a world of old hymnals with fragile, yellowing pages—hymnals from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Germany. The sounds of the past, music from voices and instruments long stilled, haunted her mind. She prepared herself systematically and extensively to deal with these materials as historian as well as musician, through a series of courses and workshops on liturgy, plainsong and plain-chant.

And she worked, carefully and tirelessly. The process itself was an exacting one, but, as Regina described it, fun, too—a sort of detective adventure. First she'd compare the different settings, then trace various melodies to their source. The Joint Commission on Liturgy would then determine which particular form of that melody would be used in a certain part of the liturgy. And that was when Regina's work really began. She faced the challenge of adapting this melody to the English language. How did you get the melodic line to sound like the rhythms of speech, so that it would be both sensible and singable? How did you produce the right "shades of emphasis"? Rhythm, harmony, tempo, and dynamics all had to be balanced. Sometimes she'd prepare as many as twelve versions for the committee to consider. But she was adamant about her underlying goal:

the music must “help and not hinder the understanding of the text.” The enterprise was not about displaying a composer’s virtuosity. Rather, it was to make music that people could sing. “The service,” Regina emphasized, “was to be the people’s service; congregational participation was to be the objective.”

Sometimes the work went slowly. Portions of it were revised as many as 20 times before they suited the exacting standards of both the committee and Regina Fryxell. A full decade after she’d agreed to undertake the task on that autumn afternoon in 1948, the new *Service Book and Hymnal*—what congregations came to refer to as the red hymnal—came off the presses.

EXAMPLES OF LITURGY: JACK SWANSON

Regina Fryxell was an unlikely dynamo, small, reserved, dignified and deliberate in manner. But she had enormous drive. She was tenacious. She was tough-minded. She refused to abandon a project until it met her standards—and those standards were uncompromising. And she worked with a concentration and intensity that obliterated all *but* the work.

These qualities make her creative output in the years of the 1950s and 60s both astonishing and understandable. Almost yearly, beginning in 1953, a new work by Regina H. Fryxell appeared under the aegis of publishing houses the caliber of H. W. Gray, Carl Fischer, Fortress, Westminster, and Abingdon Presses. These works, like her

liturgy, singable and well-loved, found their way to hearers' hearts in denominations throughout the country and abroad. Her youngest son Redwood, for instance, discovered a church in London, England, using one of her anthems. In 1961-62 Augsburg issued her settings of Introits and Graduals for three Sundays in the Lutheran Service, and later, in 1967-69 Fortress published her complete series of Introits and Graduals (4 volumes).

Perhaps some of this work served as a response to events in her personal life. On Thanksgiving Day of 1953 her oldest son John, a brilliant scholar just embarking on graduate studies at the University of Illinois, was killed by a drunken driver. Later, in 1974, she was to experience the loss of another son, the nationally known scientist Dr. Roald Fryxell, also in a car accident. Regina was always rigidly self-disciplined. So she fronted this pain with silent stoicism. Not tears but music gave expression to her feelings. And music channeled those feelings into an order that reached beyond bewilderment, grief, and doubt, to the great and holy mystery that shapes our lives.

Her music has touched others. Like Regina herself, it moves with quiet depth and authenticity. Persons in distress of body and mind have found in its movement—in lines that haunt with their yearning, but ultimately resolve to serenity—a way back to healing.

TO THE CHRIST CHILD: PETER LUNDHOLM AND JACK SWANSON

Despite personal tragedies, the radiant smile shone through the years, and attracted people from scholars to seven-year-olds. In the small wand-straight woman

with the round face and rosy cheeks I think children saw all the fairy godmothers of story. Regina liked children, too. Despite her intellectual and artistic sophistication, her humor was direct and child-like.

So in her eighties she began composing songs for children. In this enterprise I was fortunate to collaborate with her as lyricist, and to experience first-hand the way she worked. Dealing with my simple verses, she was as meticulous as if she were setting a poem by John Milton.

By the 1980s the gray stucco house had grown a bit shabbier than when Bergendoff and Bostrom visited in 1948. The steep driveway was narrowed to a slit by a thick row of trees that edged the property. A magnificent dogwood, coaxed into blooming life by the magic of Dr. Fritiof Fryxell, stood beside the drive. In the big living-room, the piano still dominated; the sofa was still piled with books and manuscripts. I learned to sit down very carefully lest I topple them over.

Here I would arrive with my modest verses, about small ordinary things I'd learned to appreciate from my time with the Fryxells: wildflowers in the nearby woods of Black Hawk Park, some of which they'd planted in their back yard; animals, birds, and vegetables; the faces of the seasons. Regina would peruse each verse carefully, quietly, over and over. Then she'd ask me to read the lines aloud because "I want to hear how you hear them." Perhaps a day or so later I'd get a phone call asking if I could listen to a setting—just the melody line. She'd lay the receiver down close to the piano and play the melody, then return to ask: "Was that what you had in mind?" It always would be, of course. And so the may-apple or the cucumber or the rainy night would move into music,

lyrical or comic as the text demanded. And the next time I visited, Regina would have added harmonies.

“CORN”: JACK SWANSON AND SESSION MEMBERS!

Once she was asked where her compositions came from, where she found the right phrase to turn the rhythms of speech into music. She simply smiled. “Who knows? But you listen to it and let it lead you.”

Like the liturgy, her words hold the mystery and the music of grace.

