

5-22-2012

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Recommended Citation

Thimmesh, Hilary OSB (2007) "Saint John's University and Minnesota Public Radio," *Headwaters: The Faculty Journal of the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University*: Vol. 24, 17-18.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/headwaters/vol24/iss1/3>

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Saint John's University and Minnesota Public Radio

Saint John's radio went on the air on January 22, 1967. It was a 40,000-watt classical music FM station with the call letters KSJR. In a few months it was bumped up to 150,000 watts. Bill Kling '64 was the manager. Gary Eichten '68 was the announcer. Dan Rieder was the engineer. Tom Kigin '70 was to do *Preview*, the monthly program guide. This was the original staff.

The station was the brainchild of Father Colman Barry, OSB, appointed president of Saint John's University by Abbot Baldwin Dworshak, OSB, in 1964. The idea of radio at Saint John's did not originate with him. Father Peter Engel, OSB, abbot from 1894 to his death in 1921, was a scientist who was fascinated by wireless telegraphy when it came along. He was responsible for constructing a science building — the first on a private college campus in the state — in 1910 and erecting an 80-foot radio tower next to it in 1915.

Unfortunately Abbot Peter's radio tower had a short history. The wave of anti-German feeling that swept the country after a German submarine sank the ocean liner *Lusitania* resulted in an order from the War Department to close down the radio operation at heavily German Saint John's after the U.S. entered World War I. The tower collapsed in a high wind seven years later. The next abbot, Alcuin Deutsch, OSB, did not approve of radio and discouraged "the silly and pernicious habit" of listening to it.

Father Colman's idea was to bring historic Benedictine culture to surrounding communities by broadcasting classical music and public affairs in central Minnesota and the Twin Cities. It doesn't appear that he thought of statewide coverage at the beginning. He had to sell the idea to the monastic chapter, the monks of Saint John's gathered as a deliberative body with the authority to allocate corporate funds. He was adept at persuading a body already inclined to favor the idea — he argued that Mozart from Saint John's would be a boon to Stearns County farmers as they went about milking the cows on dark winter mornings — but his stroke of genius was to enlist William Kling to design and build the station.

Bill has written his own description of the founding of Minnesota Public Radio in *Saint John's at 150*. What I remember as an interested bystander in the summer and fall of 1966 is the reconstruction of third floor Wimmer Hall as a radio station. The

building had been constructed by Abbot Peter in 1901 for multiple use as a library, music department, and photography studio.

Sixty-five years later, music and photography had long since departed and the library floors stood empty following completion of Alcuin Library the year before. The dusty museum on the third floor now yielded to progress as carpenters, bricklayers, and electricians remodeled the floor to Bill's specifications, including a good-sized soundproof studio for live music broadcasts that turned out to be a useful all-purpose workroom once the station went on the air.

I don't think it was ever used for musical performances. Music came from transcriptions of concerts around the country and a library of LPs that grew rapidly. Braving Abbot Alcuin's disapproval — by now he had been dead sixteen years but his spirit lingered in the regulations of the Benedictine congregation Saint John's belongs to — I acquired a small FM radio and became an avid KSJR listener. To show how home-grown the station was in its first years, Michael Barone and I did a half-hour prime time poetry and music program for a few months in 1969.

Bill Kling is generous in his recognition of Father Colman and others with whom he worked to create Saint John's radio and put it on the way to network status as Minnesota Educational Radio. What he does not say is that he had and has continued to have as president and CEO of Minnesota Public Radio a sure grasp of the technical side of radio as well as a consistent commitment to a broadcasting service of the highest quality. His early appointment of Michael Barone (Oberlin '68) as music director and Garrison Keillor as morning disc jockey was typical of the caliber of staffing he achieved as the enterprise grew.

MER became MPR in October 1974. By then the gradual transfer of headquarters and operations to St. Paul was underway. Music was the last to go, mostly because the record library at Collegetown had grown to 30,000 albums and was hard to move. In St. Paul the collection kept growing and almost doubled in size. But with the advent of the compact disc, those LPs eventually found their way back to Collegetown and the basement of Alcuin Library.

There they remain, now silent reminders of the dawn of a new age forty years ago when Mozart came to mid-Minnesota in FM stereo from Saint John's.

Hilary Thimmesh, OSB, is President Emeritus of Saint John's University and Professor of English.