

Voices in the Desert: The Trombone Choir at the Martinez Indian Mission¹

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The customary Moravian services, adapted for the needs of the place, are now used [in the mission churches of southern California], and the Easter service, held in the grandeur of spring, in a land that is ever green, adds to the beauty of that service which is distinctive of Moravians the world over. At one station, Martinez, there is a *trombone choir* of no little merit, the result of much hard work on the part of Bro. Delbo [emphasis added].

– Edmund de Schweinitz Brunner²

The Moravian Church (*Unitas fratrum*, or Unity of the Brethren) has a long history of missionary work. Barely ten years after the establishment of the Renewed Church in Saxony in 1722,³ Moravian missionaries began spreading the word to the far corners of the globe. Following initial efforts in the West Indies and Greenland, they moved on to Surinam, South Africa, West Africa, Ceylon, Arctic Russia, Labrador, and continental North America.⁴ These missionaries carried with them strong convictions concerning Moravian worship and culture. My article recounts the establishment of a thriving music program along traditional Moravian lines, complete with a trombone choir, at an Indian mission in the California desert in the early part of the twentieth century.

Moravian mission work in southern California began in earnest in 1889, when the Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Heathen, an organization based in Bethlehem and supported largely by Moravians of the Northern Province, established a mission station among the Cahuilla Indians at Potrero, California, near Banning. Missionary activity in the region expanded over the next two decades, with the establishment of a few additional missions, including Martinez, straddling the Riverside-Imperial County line near present-day Thermal (see map, Figure 1).⁵ During the second decade of the twentieth century, Martinez was the largest of the Moravians' southern California mission stations, though it was just slightly larger than Potrero, which served a different branch of the same tribe.

The Torres-Martinez Indian Reservation, as it is called today, lies near the north end of the Salton Sea, along the western shore. The Salton Sea has a curious history. Over the centuries, abnormally high levels of rainfall coupled with overflow from the Colorado River occasionally created small lakes in the lower reaches of the Cahuilla Basin, the lowest parts of which are more than 200 feet below sea level. Because crops could be grown year-round in this virtually frost-free region, investors began to explore ways to irrigate it around 1900. The year 1901 saw the opening of the Imperial Canal, which

diverted water from the Colorado River, some 50 miles to the east, into the Basin. In 1904 the entrance to the canal silted up, thereby stopping the flow of water. Engineers created a new diversion of the Colorado River in order to compensate for the water lost to local agriculture, but soon the river flooded, escaped its banks, and changed course. It flowed into the basin, destroying a chain of small lakes, thereby threatening the incipient agricultural industry in the valley. The Salton Sea continued to grow in size until the Southern Pacific Railroad closed the breach in 1907. The Rev. W.H. Weinland, superintendent of the Moravian missions in the region, feared that the rising water level might force the residents of Martinez to relocate to Potrero.⁶ The floods and the ensuing efforts to close the breach were recounted in a popular novel of the time, Harold Bell Wright's *The Winning of Barbara Worth*.⁷



Figure 1: Schematic map of southern California, showing locations of Moravian missions in relation to major cities.

The federal government established the Torres-Martinez Reservation for the Torres-Martinez band of the Cahuilla tribe in 1876, with a grant of 20,000 acres of land. In 1909, thinking the Salton Sea would evaporate and disappear within a few years, as it had done in times past, the government granted another 10,000 acres to the reservation, all of it at that time under water. But new irrigation sources—and a few years later, a new canal—continued to feed water into the Imperial Valley basin, and the Salton Sea became

a permanent fixture of the landscape. Here, in a harsh climate where temperatures in summer could reach as high as 127 degrees Fahrenheit,⁸ the people of Torres-Martinez lived and worked during the early decades of the twentieth century, a time that saw the mission reach its high point of attendance and influence in the local Native American community. In 1907 the Martinez mission had fifty-nine communicants.⁹

In 1908, as the Salton Sea was rising and submerging valuable reservations lands, The Rev. and Mrs. R.M. Stavely relinquished their work at Martinez because of ill health and moved to Banning, about sixty miles northwest of Martinez, close to the Potrero mission. The Rev. Arthur Correll Delbo (1871–1961) assumed pastoral duties at the Martinez mission, originally on a temporary basis.¹⁰

Almost nothing is known of music at Martinez prior to Delbo's arrival. In 1907 The Rev. Stavely reported that "The Easter services were well attended.... A Sacred Duet was well sung by two young men, one an Indian—the other a Mexican."¹¹ When Delbo assumed his post in late 1907 or early 1908, musical activities at the mission began to expand. In 1908–09 Delbo reported that "Both our Easter and our Christmas celebrations were made enjoyable by special singing by a choir of Indians trained by our Indian organist, Miss Annie Morongo. At Easter the special service 'Bells of Hope' was produced; at Christmas, 'The Angel Chorus.'"¹² Delbo, however, wanted a trombone choir, and he communicated his desire to Moravians in Bethlehem. On 24 May 1911 *The Moravian*, a weekly church-related newspaper published in Bethlehem, printed a report by Delbo on activities at Martinez, commenting on the seemingly endless land disputes, mentioning plans for a new church, and concluding with an appeal for instruments.

As it now stands they [i.e., the residents of the Martinez Reservation] are in a very much unsettled state over the land question. To the untutored the land question means nothing; but to us on the field it is a sore spot and we hope for a speedy settlement....¹³

The Indians, of their own free will and accord, have undertaken a plan to place a petition before the board for a new church, which we need very badly indeed....

We are also very anxious to start a trombone choir, but we lack the funds to secure the instruments. We have the talent, however.

Any one interested in helping this cause will please confer with Bro. C.H. Neisser, of Bethlehem, Pa.; he will take your money and secure the instruments for us.¹⁴

Just a few months later Delbo's hopes came to fruition, for he reported that

This Autumn [1911] a Trombone Choir was organized and likewise an orchestra. This was made possible through the interest of our esteemed brother, Dr. Augustus Schultze¹⁵ and his Class in the Central Sunday School at Bethlehem, Pa.; the Bethlehem Indian Association and the untiring ef-

forts of Bro. Augustus H. Leibert,¹⁶ of Bethlehem, Pa. With the exception of \$5.00, Dr. Schultze's Class contributed the entire cost of the trombones and of shipping them to Martinez.

Judging from the present interest manifested, there is every reason to expect the development of an efficient Trombone Choir. No Indian has as yet been found for the soprano instrument so the missionary is playing that. This will doubtless encourage one of the Indians to attempt it, and then all the musicians will be Indians.¹⁷

In spite of Brother Delbo's lament that no Indian could be found to play the soprano trombone, a photo that accompanies the above report graphically illustrates that not one, but two members of the native population were persuaded to take up that instrument (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: The trombone choir at the Martinez mission, 1911. *Proceedings of the Society for Propagating the Gospel Among the Heathen*, 1911, frontispiece. Reprinted by permission of the Moravian Archives, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Later that same year, Delbo reported that

Christmas at Martinez was a most joyous festival. After much labor the Sunday School, together with the vocal and trombone choir and the orchestra, succeeded in rendering the cantata “Christmas” in an admirable manner. The Indian is very fond of music and very teachable. He seems to be able to learn to play almost any instrument. If our boys stick to it, the trombone choir will effect a great deal of good on this Reservation. Every available space in our inadequate chapel was occupied at the Christmas exercises.¹⁸

Mention of an orchestra in both of Delbo’s accounts comes as something of a surprise, and it is unfortunate that he did not elaborate on it. But there were still other innovations at Martinez in that year. In the same issue of the mission publication, an anonymous writer reported on the consecration of a new church building on 21 April 1912 (see Figure 3). Many of the Indians’ Anglo neighbors attended, witnessing “the cornerstone laid by Bro.



Figure 3: Moravian mission church, Martinez, California, completed 1912. From *Proceedings of the Society for Propagating the Gospel Among the Heathen* 1913, p. 95. Reprinted by permission of the Moravian Archives, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Wm. H. Weinland, Superintendent of the Mission, assisted by Bro. A.C. Delbo, pastor in charge.”¹⁹ Music figured prominently in this joyous ceremony:

The Indian choir of the Martinez Mission rendered several choice selections, with great credit to their leader, Bro. Delbo. The Indian trombone choir also assisted in the music, and though their playing was not absolutely perfect, they did remarkably well, considering the short time since they received their instruments. The entire service lasted two hours and a half, yet the closest interest was manifested to the end.²⁰

The following year we hear of the trombone choir playing for the Christmas and New Year’s Watchnight services. Delbo reported that

Our Christmas festival was a pronounced success. The music, both vocal and instrumental, was fine. The orchestra and trombone choir are a great help at our services.

New Year’s Eve was celebrated in the usual manner. The people gather about dark; we have a big camp fire in the yard around which the Indians gather to spend the last hours of the old year. We also have music and singing in the church, and about 10.30 we serve lunch of buns, sandwiches and coffee. The services proper began at eleven o’clock. Promptly at midnight the trombone choir rendered two hymns from the belfry. Thus we closed the old year praising God.²¹

Celebration of New Year’s Eve “in the usual manner” refers to time-honored Moravian traditions dating as far back as the eighteenth century. The serving of a simple meal of “buns, sandwiches, and coffee” refers to the service known as the Love Feast. As concerns the trombones, precisely at the stroke of midnight, the trombone choir (or, in many churches today, the church band) intones the chorale *Now Thank We All Our God*, intentionally interrupting the orderly progress of the service. The fact that the trombones played “from the belfry” provides a further indication that the Martinez trombone choir took as its model the Bethlehem choir, which even today performs from the belfry of Central Moravian Church.

Sadly, the accounts recorded here marked not only the beginning of the trombone choir at Martinez, but its zenith as well. In 1914 ill health forced The Rev. Delbo and his wife Mary Ellen to retire to Banning. The Rev. R.M. Stavely and his wife, who had left Martinez in 1907, expressed their willingness to resume duties there, and were given a temporary appointment following the departure of the Delbos.²² It seems unlikely that the trombone choir survived Delbo’s departure, for it is not mentioned in subsequent reports from Martinez. Subsequent reports in *PSPGH* mention musical activity at Martinez only occasionally. In an item from 1923 we read that

The Christmas exercises were held on the evening of December 25th.... The singing was very creditable. Our Indian orchestra, consisting of piano, violin, cornet and trombone, added greatly to the enjoyment, and everybody was happy.”²³

Concerning a service on 2 November 1924, a visitor, The Rev. Karl A. Mueller, wrote,

One of our Indian members, Brother Lomas, presided very ably at the piano.... On Sunday evening an extra “treat” had been planned: the recently organized band was to play after the service, but the musicians were still rather diffident and began the “concert” only after most of the congregation had dispersed. Then, however, they played several pieces very creditably. The leader is one of our Indians.²⁴

By 1923, it seems, only one trombonist was left, and by 1924 there was a band, perhaps including the lone trombonist—though how the band differed from the “orchestra” mentioned the previous year is not clear.

Delbo developed in the space of just a few years a thriving music program at the Martinez Mission, complete with a trombone choir. Obviously Delbo was a trombonist himself, for he wrote of playing the soprano instrument in his report of 1912. Probably he had been a member of one of the Moravian trombone choirs in the East, perhaps in Lititz, where he grew up, or Bethlehem, where he attended Moravian College and Seminary, 1893–98.²⁵

Delbo was clearly the driving force behind the creation of the Martinez Trombone Choir, but there may have been other factors at work as well. Brass bands were popular in the early years of the twentieth century, in California as elsewhere, among whites as well as Native Americans. In 1898 the *Los Angeles Times* reported a performance by “the Indian Band” at a patriotic celebration and parade in Riverside, where a large government Indian school was located.²⁶ In 1899 the same publication reported a performance by the Perris Indian Band at a Wild West Show at Bay View Park in Los Angeles.²⁷ More to the point, *The Mission Indian*, the house organ of St. Boniface’s Industrial School, a school for Native Americans in Banning, published the following item in July 1906:

The clamor of the band boys is now trombones. Trombone I., II. and III.
The angels at the end of the world will not be in it when the Indian boys
will play trombones.²⁸

Considered in the context of the notices in the *Los Angeles Times* cited above, this last report suggests that there was more than a passing interest in wind instruments among the Native Americans in southern California. Perhaps this interest also affected the young men of Martinez. St. Boniface was a Catholic school, but there was a Catholic mission at Martinez;²⁹ moreover, the Potrero Moravian mission, which served another

branch of the Cahuilla tribe, was nearby.³⁰ It is possible that some of the Moravian boys from Martinez attended school in Banning³¹—or perhaps they had heard trombones, played by whites or other Native Americans, at some other location in southern California. The Rev. Delbo may simply have capitalized on a growing trend.

Conclusion

For their time, Moravian missionaries were relatively enlightened in the respect they showed for the traditions of the populations they served, yet they could not resist imposing their own cultural and religious values and traditions. Brass instruments in general—and trombones in particular—are to some extent symbolic of the culture and music of the Moravian church. Moravian missionaries took brass instruments with them to many of their mission stations—to Greenland in 1733, Labrador in 1771, and also to southern Africa, Australia, Nicaragua, and Surinam.³² In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many Moravian churches in the eastern United States had homogeneous trombone ensembles.³³ During the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, brass bands and mixed wind bands gradually supplanted trombone ensembles, until by the mid-twentieth century, only Bethlehem could boast a continuous tradition of trombones.³⁴ The Martinez Trombone Choir may have been the only such ensemble ever established by Moravians at a mission church—that is, a homogeneous trombone ensemble comprised of converts. Moreover, at its zenith around 1912, the Martinez Trombone Choir must have been one of a bare handful of Moravian ensembles consisting exclusively of trombones anywhere in the world.³⁵

POSTSCRIPT: The Moravian mission on the Martinez Reservation (today known as the Torres-Martinez Reservation of Desert Cahuilla Indians) ceased operations in the 1940s, in part due to dislocations and gasoline rationing during World War II.³⁶ The Torres-Martinez Reservation today has fewer than 200 members, many of whom do not actually live on the reservation.³⁷ The former mission church building still stands, but it is in a state of disrepair. The reservation council operates the Red Earth Casino near Salton City, California.³⁸

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Notes

¹ This essay is a revised version of my article, “A Voice in the Wilderness: Brother Delbo’s Trombone Choir at the Martinez Indian Mission,” in *Proceedings of the Seventh Bethlehem Conference on Moravian Music* (Winston-Salem, NC / Bethlehem, PA: Moravian Music Foundation, 2007), 51–58. I thank Nola Reed Knouse, Director of the Moravian Music Foundation in Winston-Salem, NC, for permission to publish this revised version. The original publication was not widely circulated.

² *History of the Moravian Mission to the Indians of Southern California, 1889–1914* (n.p.: n.d.), 27. Brunner’s accounts of the missions appeared originally in the 1914 issue (for the year ending 19 August 1914) of the *Proceedings of the Society for Propagating the Gospel Among the Heathen* (hereafter *PSPGH*).

³ For the history of the Moravian Church prior to 1722, see Edmund de Schweinitz, *The History of the Church Known as the Unitas fratrum or the Unity of the Brethren, Founded by the Followers of John Hus, the Bohemian Reformer and Martyr*, 2nd edn. (Bethlehem, PA: The Moravian Publication Concern, 1901).

⁴ See J. Taylor Hamilton and Kenneth G. Hamilton, *History of the Moravian Church: The Renewed Unitas Fratrum 1722–1957* (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania / Winston-Salem, North Carolina: Moravian Church in America, 1967), esp. 42–59.

⁵ According to Brunner (*Moravian Missions*, 29), Moravian missionaries in California also worked at Rincon (in San Diego County, near Escondido), La Jolla (a few miles east of Rincon), Pechanga (in southeastern Riverside County on the border with San Diego County), Soboba (on the outskirts of present-day Hemet), Agua Caliente (near Palm Springs), and Capitan Grande (east of San Diego). The last three of these locations did not see the establishment of an enduring Moravian mission station, however.

⁶ Report in *PSPGH* 1905 (for the year ending 23 August 1906), 41–42. Weinland, who also served as pastor of the Moravian mission at Potrero (present-day Morongo), near Banning, was a vigorous advocate for Native American rights. The Huntington Library in San Marino, California holds a large volume of Weinland’s personal papers, potentially a rich resource for an enterprising researcher interested in the history of Native Americans of southern California. I am grateful to Jon Fletcher, curator at the Agua Caliente Cultural Museum, for information on Weinland’s papers.

⁷ Chicago: Book Supply Co., 1911.

⁸ A.C. Delbo, untitled report in *PSPGH* 1908 (for the year ending 7 October 1909), 38.

⁹ W.H. Weinland, untitled report in *PSPGH* 1907 (for the year ending 20 August 1908), 61.

¹⁰ Delbo and his wife, née Mary Ellen Hoyd, had been posted to the Moravian mission at Potrero in 1898, the year of their marriage and also of his graduation from the Moravian Seminary in Bethlehem. See *Periodical Accounts Relating to the Foreign Missions of the Church of the United Brethren (“Moravians”)* (report for December 1898), 638, where Delbo’s wife’s name is mistakenly given as Ellen Floy.

¹¹ *PSPGH* 1906 (for the year ending 29 August 1907), 55.

¹² Delbo, in *PSPGH* 1908 (for the year ending 7 October 1909), 34.

¹³ I have omitted some portions of Delbo’s report relating to the land question. Disputes between the residents of the Martinez Reservation and the U.S. government over land form but one chapter in a long story of broken promises on the part of the government. Not long before Delbo’s report in *The*

Moravian, the government had opened two sections of Indian land to homesteading. Reservation residents entered into several treaties with the government, but Congress failed to ratify any of them. See *PSPGH* 1907 (for the year ending 20 August 1908), 68.

¹⁴ *The Moravian* (Bethlehem, PA), vol. 61, no. 21 (24 May 1911): 331–32.

¹⁵ Augustus Schultze (1840–1918) joined the faculty of the Moravian Theological Seminary in Bethlehem in 1870, serving as its president from 1885 to 1918. A.C. Delbo certainly knew Schultze while he was a student at the Seminary from 1893 to 1898.

¹⁶ Augustus Leibert (1848–1921) was Director of the Bethlehem Trombone Choir for many years, and also served as Director of the Bethlehem Home Missionary Society. For additional information on Leibert and the Bethlehem Trombone Choir, see Stewart Carter, “Trombone Ensembles of the Moravian Brethren in America: New Avenues for Research,” in *Brass Scholarship in Review: Proceedings of the Historic Brass Society Conference, Cité de la Musique, Paris, 1999*, ed. Stewart Carter (Hillsville, NY: Pendragon, 2006): 77–109, here 89 and 102.

¹⁷ Delbo, in *PSPGH* 1911 (for the year ending 22 August 1912), 38.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 38–39.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 39–41.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *PSPGH* 1912 (for the year ending 21 August 1913).

²² Unsigned report in *PSPGH* 1913 (for the year ending 19 August 1914), 15.

²³ Report by W.H. Weinland, *PSPGH* 1923, p. 56.

²⁴ *PSPGH* 1924, pp. 54–62, here 59.

²⁵ Little is known of Delbo’s later life, in part because after leaving Martinez he moved to Auburn, California, and joined the Lutheran Church. See “Records of Moravian Ministers, 1893 to 1903” (ms. vol. in Moravian Archives, Bethlehem), 158. From this source we also learn that Delbo was born in Lititz, Pennsylvania, 18 April 1871, the son of Samuel and Maria Augusta (Sturgis) Delbo. He was married 27 September 1898 in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, to Mary Ellen Hoyd, who died in 1921. The couple had one child, Hazel Irene, born 5 September 1904 in Banning, California. Bro. Delbo’s death is recorded in <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-in/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSln=Delbo&GSiman=1&GSst=6&GRid=43549905&> (accessed 12 April 2013).

²⁶ *Los Angeles Times*, 31 May 1898, p. 11. I am grateful to Albert R. Rice for this information.

²⁷ *Los Angeles Times*, 4 May 1899, p. 15. I am grateful to Albert R. Rice for this information.

²⁸ *The Mission Indian* (Banning, CA) 8, no. 1 (July 1906): 4. I am grateful to Jon Fletcher, of the Agua Caliente Cultural Museum, for this information.

²⁹ See W.H. Weinland, report in *PSPGH*, 1907 (for the year ending 20 August 1908), 61–62.

³⁰ The Potrero Moravian mission survives today as Morongo Moravian Church, Banning, California.

³¹ As a matter of pure speculation, I note that the player of the bass trombone on the far left of the photograph in Figure 2 wears a uniform—perhaps a school or band uniform.

³² I am grateful to Paul Peucker (Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, PA) for calling to my attention a postage stamp from Greenland, bearing the image of a Moravian brass band. Regarding brass instruments at other Moravian mission stations, see minutes of the Brethren’s Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel for 1771, cited in J.K. Hiller, “The Foundation and the Early Years of the Moravian Mission in Labrador, 1752–1805” (M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1967), 85 (thanks to Alice Caldwell for this information); and Ben Van den Bosch, *The Origin and Development of the Trombone-Work of the Moravian Church in Germany and All the World*, transl. C. Daniel Crews (Winston-Salem, NC: Moravian Music Foundation, 1990), 15–16 (regarding Surinam). Hamilton and Hamilton (*History of the Moravian Church*, 499–500) state that trombones played for a ceremony at Lichtenau, Greenland, on 5 August 1900; they further mention trombone

choirs from Moravian mission stations in Mapoon and Weipa, Australia, playing for the dedication of a church at Aurukun, Australia, in 1910 (*idem*, 628 and 675, n. 189), and trombone concerts in South Africa beginning in 1952. There is ample evidence of the existence of Moravian brass bands in all these locations, but no primary sources known to me mention ensembles consisting exclusively of trombones.

³³ See Carter, "Trombone Ensembles."

³⁴ See Vangie Roby Sweitzer, *Tuned for Praise: the Bethlehem Area Moravian Trombone Choir, 1754–2004* (Bethlehem: Central Moravian Church, 2004).

³⁵ See Carter, "Trombone Ensembles."

³⁶ See *PSPGH* 1942 (for the year ending 1 November 1942), 65; *PSPGH* 1943 (for the year ending 1 November 1943), 65; and *PSPGH* 1944 (for the year ending 11 October 1944), 65.

³⁷ See <http://www.sci.sdsu.edu/salton/TorresMartinezTribalCoun.html> (accessed 7 February 2007).

³⁸ See <http://www.torresmartinez.org/TribalNews/Casino/tabid/163/Default.aspx> (accessed 1 February 2007).

