

Carol Barnett

Interviewed by Peter Myers at Westminster Presbyterian Church, May 12, 2008

Q I'm always curious to know of people who are in music professionally, how they got their first inkling that music interested them. Growing up as a child, what kind of musical experiences did you have with your family, your schools?

A I grew up with music from the time I remember. My father was a piano teacher. He taught at home and his studio is right on the other side of the door, with two pianos in it. So we heard all the students come and make their mistakes. When they weren't playing the pianos, my sister and I would go in and play the pianos ourselves. Of course, we had no technique and so we got started in lessons ourselves very early so we would get the proper technique, and play with thumbs, not just three fingers. What else? We had a lot of classical records at home, in Northern Minnesota. We lived in a spot where the radio waves sort of skipped over us, so we didn't really get a lot of popular music; it was mostly classical. I did the usual thing in high school. It was a small high school, a small class so we could do everything – band, orchestra, choir, small ensembles. We did it all, which was a great background.

Q Was that your first introduction to vocal music, singing in school?

A Yes, and church – children's choir, youth choir.

Q At what point in your life did you decide that you wanted to go into composition as your primary professional endeavor?

A It's hard to say when I first realized that I wanted to be a composer because my father, in his piano classes, had everybody composing. So we all were started with little snippets of poetry which we would set to music and if we weren't able to write it down yet he would write it down for us. Then we progressed through little theoretical exercises and formal exercises and some of us just took it farther than others. So it was a natural progression. I think I figured out fairly early that music...the people at the top of the music pile are the composers, followed very closely by the performers – especially the conductors – and then after that there are the music lovers, who are the audience.

Q Who have been some of your most important mentors along the way?

A Mentors. Well I'd say my dad, at the beginning. Then in college two really important people: Dominick Argento, my teacher and also my boss because I was a theory TA for a while, and also Dr. Frank Bencriscutto because I was an instrumentalist – I played flute and piccolo in the band – and went on a couple of important tours with the band to the Soviet Union and to Eastern Europe. Since then I would say probably Dale Warland. He was the one who hired me to be his

composer in residence, and that turned my attention dramatically to choral composition. It was like going back to graduate school, to listen to all of the piles of CD's that he kept getting in and trying to figure out which pieces on those CD's he would be likely to program.

Q Talk about your experience with Dale when you were hired on as their composer in residence. What was it like? How did the two of you work together and how did you exchange ideas back and forth about possible text for new pieces?

A When I was first hired as the composer in residence for the Dale Warland Singers there were a couple of years of testing and am I really allowed to do things. But as we went on, I was honored to be sitting at the same table as Dale programming and to bring in my notes from listening to those CD's and saying...by that time I had also been sitting in a lot of rehearsals so I knew what the choir sounded like, what they sounded good doing, and what Dale's tastes were. I could sort of predict what he would like. Text...it varies. The choosing of the text varies with every piece and so it would depend on what the piece was meant for. The last commission that I did for the Dale Warland Singers, for their last season, was for a Thanksgiving themed program. Of course he didn't want originals. He wanted arrangements. But all of the other composers got all of the usual Thanksgiving things, so he said, ok go and find something that is Thanksgiving. So I went through the Sacred Harp book and actually started looking for texts first. Out of the 20 that I found that were Thanksgiving themed, I looked for interesting melodies to go with those texts. That was one example. You always have to have an approval of whoever asked for the piece in the first place, for the text.

Q When you're looking for text, when you see something you like, do you start to see musical possibilities early on in terms of the length of the phrasing and all those things? When you see text do you start to imagine whether it would work well with music or whether it might pose a lot of problems?

A Well, sure. When I look at text with an eye towards setting it, I look first of all for an absence of proper nouns, proper names that might be problematic for the listener to think, or it might be distracting. Who is Adonis, anyway? Then I think to myself, well do these words paint good pictures that might be enhanced by musical sounds? Some texts are so perfect that they don't need music. And I love them, but I would not consider setting them. Other than that, I think that looking for a good text means looking for a text that with a lot of ahhs and ohhs and uhhs and not a lot of ees and aaas and all that sort of displeasing sound, sung.

Q Minnesota has produced a huge volume of new choral compositions in the past 30 or 40 years and a lot of composers have made a good share of their reputation by writing choral music in particular. What do you think it is about the

culture here that has been so supportive and nurturing to so many composers like you, who have written extensively for various vocal ensembles around the country?

A Minnesota is a place that has a lot of conductors who like to ask for composition. And there's nothing that grows composing better than asking for it. It's great as a composer to live in a community – greater MN, whatever – that has a reservoir of such great ensembles. You sort of feel supported. There are the possibilities of more than one good performance – many good performances – from these ensembles. So even if a particular ensemble didn't ask for it you think, well maybe some day they'll sing it. When I write I might be hearing voices from that ensemble, I might...it's just having the sound of excellent ensembles in your ear, being able to hear them on a regular basis, as a part of the tapestry of music in MN. It's very supportive and very wonderful for composers.

Q You've been involved in many collaborations, obviously with Dale, with librettists, other performing groups. Could you talk about one of the more rewarding collaborations that you've been a part of in your composition life?

A I think one of the most rewarding collaborations in my career, so far, has been the Bluegrass Mass Project that was commissioned by VocalEssence, funded by Mike and Kay McCarthy. I worked with Marissa Chamberlain as librettist. That project seemed in almost every way to be meant to be. It was wonderful to work on and it wasn't until I got to actually, physically duplicating the parts that I ran into problems of major proportions. But other than that, it was wonderful. To work with the commissioners – who were a very active part of choosing the librettist and listening to the first and second drafts and saying, oh yes we love it, and working with Philip who when we first started to float the idea – Mike McCarthy and I – of bluegrass for VocalEssence and a bluegrass group – he was sort of intrigued but he didn't quite know what it might be and how it might fit into his programming. But when – I think it was Kay McCarthy – came up with the concept of Bluegrass Mass, he was interested. He was hooked and it just went on from there.

Q What's your process – once you've identified a poem or a piece of literature or have a libretto to work with – is there a regular process you go through? How do you get started when you start to write?

A Well, to start after I've picked the text, it's a question of what is the text saying? What kind of mood is it setting up and how can I enhance that in the music? I think that's really the starting point. Then, of course, there are the actual words to be set and as many composers do I just think them over and over and listen to what they have to say and maybe get the first phrase. Then it's just a question of going through that in your mind and listening to what might come next. It's out there in the air someplace.

Q Talk about the MN Voices project (multiple commissions in honor of Minnesota's Sesquicentennial). Talk about the origins of that whole project and then go into your actual role creating one of the pieces that will be sung by all the choirs.

A MN Voices is a fun project. Back when it was first thought about, nobody else, I think, was thinking much about the MN sesquicentennial and how that might be celebrated in music. So the American Composers Forum came up with the bright idea to commission a piece for each of the six regional MN regions and then have a composer for each one of those and then bring all of the choirs together and have everybody singing one piece. So I was honored to be chosen for the massed piece. That was great. The euphoria lasted for a couple of minutes and then I thought, what about text? Because to celebrate MN Sesquicentennial is a big thing and I remember – I still remember the Centennial of MN celebration, and perhaps it was easier at that point because MN had diversified so much in the last 50 years that I looked for texts and all the text I found were from the Centennial and they were all about pointy firs and pristine lakes and loons and stuff. I thought, well it doesn't begin to describe how MN is today. So I went back to my favorite librettist, Marisha Chamberlain, and I said, hey Marisha we need help here. And she whipped up the most wonderful text, all about immigrants coming in and making this their home. She has a refrain that has couples' names – Ole and Lena, White Elk and Magina, Jose and Martina, Joachim and Adina, See Sing and Yung Yee, Ismael and Amina – and the refrain just brings in all those names and makes it a diverse community. And then the verses talk about food – various ethnic foods – wild rice and fry bread...it goes on, there's a whole list. Then the second verse is natural resources and third verse is natural disasters. But it all ends up with, yes we came here and we love it and here we all are and let's celebrate.

Q How will this piece come to life later this summer?

A Actually it's already coming to life a little bit, this piece. It's being rehearsed in each of the six regions, by each of the six choirs. Kathy Romey is going around teaching them – well at least listening to each of the choruses being taught. In fact, my mother who lives up in Bemidji, just said that she had been to the Bemidji chorale concert and now that they'd finished their last concert of the season they could start working on the Sesquicentennial piece. So they all work on it separately and then they come down and I think they gather at the Fairgrounds on the 23rd of August, practice in the morning, sing for each other the pieces that each of them get to sing, and then they just go and do it in the afternoon at the Bandshell.

Q How often have you had commissions for works to be performed outdoors?

A Not very often.

Q Was being outdoors part of what you had to deal with when deciding what to write?

A Oh, yes. Being outdoors was a big factor in MN Voices. In fact one of the very first things that the Composers Forum sent to me over the internet was a picture of the Bandshell with snow falling on it and, here is where your piece is going to be sung. So we decided early on that it being outside and it being a massed choir and it being in that sort of enclosed, finite space there wouldn't really be any room for accompaniment. Aside from the fact that we're on a very strict time schedule there so to set up and tear down accompaniment would not be a possibility. So it is acapella. And that was a big deal.

Q Thinking back to other pieces that you've written, what can you remember about the first time you actually heard a choir sing the piece you've had in your head, on paper, for months? What does it feel like when you actually hear the voices sing it for the first time?

A Oh, it's always exciting to hear the voices sing it for the first time, after you've lived with it for six months or so. But what's even more interesting to me is that I listen to it and I think, yeah this worked pretty well, and ooh that one worked even better than I thought it was going to. But then the other people who are involved with the project, this is really the first time they've heard it. So its fun and sort of puzzling at the same time to watch their reactions because...well for instance with the Bluegrass Mass I'd lived with it, I knew I liked it and it would probably work, and I listened to it and it did work. But the librettist heard it for the very first time and just went, ooh. That was sort of my reaction six months beforehand and I felt that my life was in that parameter – six months ahead of everybody else's, sort of out of sync with the rest of the world. In a good way, of course. It was exciting.

Q MN is well known as one of the choral capitals of the country. What are some of the factors that you think have given MN such a strong choral tradition?

A All the usual suspects, really, for the strong choral tradition in MN. First of all there are a lot of churches with choirs, a lot of schools with choirs – high schools, grade schools – a lot of really good colleges and universities with choirs. And of course people go through those and get interested in choral singing and some of them become good choral conductors and they have that tradition to draw on and they have a good sound in their ear. Then they go out and become choral conductors and they try to replicate that and they become even better and it just feeds on itself and grows better and better.

Q People often are finding ways in which vocal music, choral music, can address certain concerns in society. Things like peace and social justice. They're not just singing pretty thoughts about life, but they're actually getting into

some really important subject matter. The trend is perhaps more music being written today that is attempting to bridge the gaps between differing social or religious backgrounds, for example, or to draw attention to historic events...like Stephen Paulus's piece about the Holocaust. How do you think that choral music can get people to think more about the deeper issues in the world?

A Getting choral music and choral music practitioners to think about deeper issues in the world, social issues, takes a couple of different forms. One of which is the ensembles themselves can reach out and include more than one social strata, more than one social caste, more than one race, more than one ethnic background. So in that way and it's a very grassroots sort of thing – when you sing with somebody, when you do a positive project of any kind with somebody you didn't know very well, you're bound to forge bonds and get interested in each other's cultures. The other way, of course, is to have texts and ideas that address that subject, those subjects. That's all to the good. Its just a question of is the text excellent or is it just put together, thrown together for that occasion and its sort of schlocky? The product always needs to be excellent, I think. So texts need to be excellent. So does the music. When it is, it's a powerful agent because it grabs people not only as music but as social commentary; double whammy.

Q How can we instill a passion for singing in the younger generations? They're all so tuned into electronics and fast-paced visuals, virtual reality, and computers. How can we keep kids interested in singing as a form of expression?

A I think that its important to keep kids interested not only in singing as a social expression, but in any sort of activity – in sports, in actually getting off the sofa or away from the computer screen and going out and doing anything themselves. So going out and playing baseball in the sandlot is a great thing to do, to get a kid actually doing that. Going out and riding a bicycle, going out and swimming and catching fish and all that sort of thing. And going out and being part of a choir team, which is a good concept. Interacting with other kids. And of course the schools are a good site for this sort of thing because, after all, they're physically there. But it's just a question of starting them early and getting them to realize that they enjoy that sort of thing. And it is a good alternative to electronic aloneness.

Q People often talk about choral singing as a great way of building community. Have you seen evidence of that?

A Of course. In fact, when I was at the University the music students were divided into – self-divided – into the choral people, the band people and the orchestra people. And they each had their own specific kinds of community. And the choral people, of course, were the most gregarious and outgoing. Perhaps it was because they didn't have quite as long rehearsal sessions. They liked to party. Of course, the band did too, but in a different way.

Q If you were mentoring an aspiring conductor today, what kinds of things would you say to them by way of encouragement or direction?

A Aspiring choral conductor, aspiring choral composer, aspiring choral musician, aspiring musician I'd say the same thing: listen, listen, listen, listen; practice, practice; perform on whatever instrument, with whatever instrument you can. More than one – fine. Just get out there and do it and fill your life with as much music and as much reading and as much experience of life as possible. It can only help.

END