

Robert Morris

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

Q Talk a little bit about your earliest musical experiences.

A My earliest experiences in music were...I took piano lessons. My parents really sacrificed so that I could have piano lessons and I think they did that because when the radio would come on, I would sit to a table and play...make finger movements. And my older cousin was taking piano, so he took me to his piano teacher and we started. I was with my first piano teacher, Mr. James Phillips, from early years through high school. As I grew older and older I realize how much he really taught me. He was, at that time, one of the few neighborhood teachers who was doing just a singularly excellent job, so that by the time that I went to college I knew the things that I needed to know in order to get in if I wanted to be a piano major. And there were things that I didn't know until I went to college, about the community where I grew up. I grew up solidly in the city. Now, when I say in the city people say, oh that's code for something else. But I grew up solidly in the city, but I never knew all of the wonderful, wonderful things that were happening until I went to school and studied what was happening in my extended community. I joined a little church – not a little church, at the time it was a big church – I joined a church choir of young people who sang and they had rehearsals on Fridays and Saturdays and Sundays after church. I'd never heard young people sing like this before. I went to a rehearsal and a friend of mine, who was not a member of the church, took me, and I said, ah this is the church for me. They were singing beautiful music – anthems and spirituals. They did not sing gospel. I was told that in one year that church choir went to the Chicagoland music festival and won first place. That didn't mean too much for me. All I knew is that when I heard them sing I said, oh this is great. I said, how can you get so many young people in a room that read music? But that was part of my growing up. I sang in high school, I sang in every chorus that I could get including the symphony orchestra chorus under Margaret Hillis. So had a lot of choral experience before I left Chicago.

Q At what point do you recall making the decision that you wanted to pursue music as a career and not only as an avocation?

A Well, that was kind of dramatic. I was going to go into romance languages and I had gotten into about the second year of college and I was taking Spanish and a certain young lady walked into the room and she was a native speaker and she was taking Spanish, of course, for grammatic training – learning the grammar. And at the end of that year I got a B and she got an A and I was angry so I marched down to the other end of the building and joined the music and I never got away.

Q Continue from the time that you sang with Margaret Hillis to the present day.

A The singing with Margaret Hilles was singularly excellent, especially because I was there with Margaret Hilles singing in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Chorus in its second season I believe. A good buddy of mine joined in the first season and encouraged me to join and I went down and auditioned. Even though the two of us were in high school, for some reason she accepted us. When I think about singing in the symphony orchestra chorus – I was in the tenor section at that time and in the bass and baritone section there sat Sherrill Milnes, you know, and he was roaring away. But I learned all the standard literature there. I learned a great deal of the music that comes out of my particular heritage from high school and church and yes, I worked for some churches and did that. Then I taught in high school and I went to DePaul and I went to Indiana and there was the great opera traditions at the time. So I had a wealth of learning of different kinds of choral genres and that stood me in good stead for eventually teaching and exposing music to people who may want to know something about choral music.

Q Who were a couple of your most important musical mentors along the way?

A Well, my mentors in choral music were almost anybody who was a conductor over me. There were so many. Of course my church choir director, my high school choir director – I had two high school choir directors and they were both very good for their different personalities. The first one was...you know, he was the disciplinarian and I guess the technical one. The second one was the expressive and interpretive. So I got both of those and with Hilles it was that great exposure to all of the literature and the various different things that she did to make a chorus pop into shape. And then there was my piano teacher, Mr. Phillips. I saw him as my piano teacher but a couple of times I went to where he was conducting music and I saw how he took a really just ragtag group and built a choir out of them. In fact I was at the church one time and the minister said, I used to be ashamed to hear the choir. He said, now it's the treat of the Sunday because he knew how to build a choir. I decided after having talked with both my piano teachers – Mr. Phillips and the young man who assisted him, Charles Walker – that I would go into music education because at that time and still probably til today there were cab drivers who could play piano better than anybody in the world, you know? And I figured that at that time and in the social situation, it might be best for me to go into music education where I could get a job, and if I wanted to play the piano I could still play.

Q So did you come to MN in '92 to accept the position at Macalester?

A Yes, I did. I'd worked at two schools in various parts of the south – one in North Carolina. I came to MN in '92 after having worked at Jackson State

University a number of years, where I had a singularly excellent choir. And I guess maybe there was a tug that said, you know, you're from the Midwest. You need to go there. Even though...I didn't have a bad time in the south. I guess people who met me said, well this is a crazy man; let's just leave him alone, you know? And I will say – without being bragadocious about it, without bragging – that I formed a choir that they couldn't say, well this is a good choir for....when my choir walked in the room they said, oh here comes Morris's choir. We're going to hear some singing. So I had a pretty good time in both North Carolina and Mississippi with my choirs. But I came back to the Midwest and spent the years from '92 to 2004 here.

Q Why do you think MN has a reputation for having such an abundance of very high quality choral music at every level, from college up to the top professional choruses?

A Among the experiences that I had while I was in Chicago one of them that stands out...I went to hear all the college choirs that I could hear. And of course among those was St. Olaf. Every time St. Olaf came downtown to Chicago Orchestra Hall I was there and I saw Olaf C. Christiansen do the things that he did with that choir. But not being a native of MN, I guess as an outsider the thing that I could see culturally is that you had a lot of people who perhaps are not so particular about shining individually, but corporately. So they are happy to be in choirs because they feel that they can be expressive enough in a choir, in the unison of a choir, so that that happens. And I think other people who don't have that tradition perhaps notice that well there are a lot of choirs here and even though we may not have that particular kind of tradition, we do like the idea of singing in choirs. So you have this, you know, this area is known as choir and organ country. So now you have all of these choirs and it doesn't seem to be a situation that will run out. It seems like the more choirs that are started, it's like there's an unending space. We want to hear more choirs. And I enjoy that.

Q People often talk about the sense of community they get in choirs. Do you think that has something to do with the fact that MN has this abundance of choral tradition?

A People who want to be in a choir, to me, have faced a certain reality. Among the other things that I did while I was teaching, before I came here I taught voice, and I have students that have made their place in metropolitan opera auditions and so forth. But the fact is that people who go to school and learn to play violin and instruments often go with the thought that I'm going to get a job in an orchestra and make money. One of few of them will say, I'm just the best thing since sliced bread and I'm going to out and make a solo career. Well how many Joshua Bell's do you have across the country, you know? So singers need to think in terms of, ok if I want to sing there are just a very limited amount of professional jobs I can get. And the Metropolitan Opera only takes a few people. They go across the country but they only take a few. So if a singer is

smart enough to say, I can sing solo but I can also sing in a choir, he or she will get the musician's popularity. Let's get this or that person because not only do they read music but they can sing in a choir and they don't have to be the soloist. Or let's get such and such because such and such can come out of the choir and do a wonderful job. Then that person is using his or her skills that they learned in school and – hopefully making money, but definitely satisfying that urge to sing. So I think that's why a lot of people will sing in choirs. A great many of the people that sing in the choirs can do really, really great solo work.

Q When you came to MN you were entering this choral land that is often dominated by the great Lutheran traditions of the Christiansens and their descendants. How did you bring your own musical identity to your work at Macalester, with students, introducing them to other musical styles – African American culture or other contemporary musical styles. How did you put your own mark on your choral conducting work?

A I was aware when I came here that there was a strong Lutheran tradition. But you don't have to be in MN long to know that there are other traditions, too. And a great many of the people in that Lutheran tradition want to know and are hungry to know about other styles of singing. So I, of course, really respect that tradition and know a great deal about it having come from Chicago where, which is, a lot of Lutheran traditions are there, too. But I also feel that everybody should share as much as they can possibly share of those traditions and what I did was I taught the kids that I taught at college level, little by little, another way of expressing things and the fact that if you're going to sing choral music from different traditions you have to find out how to immerse yourself in what's valid for that tradition. Sometimes I've made people angry when I said, especially when I left south and I told my friends, I said here I am at a choral competition and I'm supposed to give this choir a first place rating because they sang a spiritual and sounded like the Vienna Boys Choir on a bad day. And here's a little choir that sings rhythm and whatever else they sing and I'm supposed to give them a four because they can't sing Palestrina with a straight tone. I said, you really need to think about this. There's a middle path and you have to take into account a person's culture and traditions. And in that I don't ever ask people to give up anything. I ask them to add to and enrich what they already have so that if you don't want to hear spiritual with straight tone then you have to figure out how do you make this work for this tradition. If you don't want to hear Palestrina with too much vibrato, then you have to figure out how do you make this work? And the fact is you have some of the people who are major choral icons that have done that, you know in the Robert Shaw's and the Wagner's and the Luboff's – they've done it. Now whether you can satisfy everybody or not – because some people will not be satisfied unless everything is their way – then that's another question.

Q Great answer. Talk about the Leigh Morris Chorale. There are dozens of choirs of all different types in the Twin Cities alone, let alone throughout MN. What is the particular mission of the Leigh Morris Chorale?

A The Leigh Morris Chorale started out of a program that started with the MN Orchestra many years ago when they started the Kaleidoscope Series because they wanted to diversify their audiences. Some of the persons in that choir that they got together said, you know we ought to do, we ought to have a choir because what is happening here now only shows one part of our tradition. And I said, well ok we'll try it for a while and we'll see. And that one part of our tradition is what happens with commercial media. The other part, which we often call the written tradition, where...and some people call it the classical tradition where people sing classical anthems and compositions based on spirituals, is not seen. So we got together a few people and we decided that we have a group that...we have groups, rather, that do the gospel music, we have groups that do the classical music, but we don't have an authentic group that can show the progress of the black written music and classical tradition. So we stayed right in that. Now in this I have to name some names: at the time there was Dale Warland who sticks rather closely to his tradition and of course Philip Brunelle, who has his aggregation of singers and players. And on the others side let's say, The Sounds of Blackness, who will do gospel and some other kinds of music. And then of course now we have other gospel choruses. I said, but we don't have what is needed in the middle. We don't have the spirituals as written by Burly and Dawson and Boatner and Bonds and so forth, and we don't have the works that are written as classical music traditions, you know. And we need somebody who comes out of the tradition to sing this music. So we started and I can honestly say that during our earliest years people were genuinely surprised because they would say, well we don't know this music. I'd say, yes but its here and its part of your tradition and you need to learn it. And it's still an uphill journey.

Q When you are auditioning singers for your chorale, what are you looking for in the voices that you invite to sing?

A What I would most desire is people who have a generous amount of music reading ability, clear voices, and a good concept of pitch and rhythm. I'm not always able to get that, so that means I have to do a lot of teaching. It's not like some of the professional groups where you give them music; they come, learn the music and you put it together. Sometimes I really have to do a great deal of teaching, more than I think some of my other choral conductor friends would have to do. So we make a product that way. But basically if there were more people showing up that had the particular kinds of skills I wanted, it wouldn't be very much different from what the other groups do. The difference would be in the kinds of voices and voice usages that have come with being in their cultural background.

Q How do you teach a new piece to your group?

A When I introduce a new piece to the choir, it depends on what the piece is. Now, if it's a spiritual that I'm teaching to the Leigh Morris Chorale, the first thing I try to do is to just guide them through the whole piece so they can know start to finish what it is. And then as I go through again, I may tell them about certain little parts that happen musically. And then after that, I'm rehearsing sections and telling them as many anecdotal things as I can to make the music come alive – where this came from and where that came from and why this is important and why its absolutely necessary to have this done a certain way, you know? If it's a piece of music that comes out of the tradition that's European tradition, then actually it's almost the same way. Sometimes, though, you can't always sight read some of the pieces right through. You read as much as you can and then you have to decide on things. For example if we're doing Bach or some of the more (word?) things by composers, then not only here's how the line goes, here's where it starts, here's where its going and here's how to get there. And after you've done that, who else does what in the choir to make the piece come alive, so that they understand that there's a certain way that this music fits together. Then I develop exercises to, so that they can hear what's going on in other parts of the choir and know what they are in relationship to that other part of the choir. Especially with college kids, and more especially before I came here, my choir always found that a lot of fun because they were force to hear what was going on in the choir and they had to figure out – not only because I told them, but then they would hear it – what is it that I'm supposed to do relative to this? Here is a statement. What do I do in relationship to this statement? My two choirs before here were black choirs, so I had to teach them a tonal concept to do adequately well song like Bach cantatas and motets or Stanford's The Bluebird and so forth. And that was what made my choirs in the south so exceptional. People were expecting one tone quality for everything and we didn't do that.

Q How do you keep singers motivated and engaged and excited week after week, rehearsal after rehearsal?

A Well that's an answer to... How do you, how do you keep singers interested? You know, I would be willing to listen to all the other choral conductors that you will interview to find out how that is done, because its not easy to do. It's not easy to do. Sometimes it gets down to what you might say is choral room shenanigans, you know, to keep them going. There are a certain amount of people who can take details a long time and then they lose interest because there is so much detail in a certain amount of music. It may not be the actual notes; it may be what's behind the notes. I've found that when I was working with the Leigh Morris Chorale in the early years, when I would stop to talk about music there were a few people who were just in rapt attention because they were learning stories and anecdotes about the music. And they found that after that, they're spike for learning was up. Other people...sometimes I have to

let the choir go off into a little foray. I remember a few times with the Leigh Morris Chorale I turned my back to do something and they started joking around and when I turned around the whole choir was just in bales of laughter, you know? I had to let that happen. And when I came back, their energy was up again because they had a release from the tension that was going on with the choir. Choral conductors have to learn to use a lot of tools, to have them at their disposal. And sometimes it's the most unlikely things. Sometimes, yes, let the choir have a good laugh. And sometimes you will find choral conductors who will tell a saucy joke and you'll go like, oh wow this is not what you do in choral rehearsals. But the purpose of it is a certain kind of balance of tension and release; to balance that, to keep them actively engaged in the music because some people reach a point of they're not going to take any more in if you keep grinding their nose in the music. So you learn all those different things.

Q Do you approach music making with a college choir in a different way than you do with your Leigh Morris Chorale, which has somewhat older singers?

A Yes. I have to. I approach teaching a college choir different from community. To a certain extent the college choir has to be there – they have some holds over them, a grade or social status within that group or whatever. The community people come because they want to and likewise when they don't want to come, what can you do? You can't say, I'm going to flunk you. You can't say that. Yes, there is a difference how you approach them. Even within the college choir unless you go to some specialized schools, all of your members may not be music majors. A great many college conductors will find that students who are not music majors are probably more dependable than their music majors and more fervent about singing; they just love to sing and they'll take out almost anything that you put out there so that they can sing. So they'll be there at the rehearsals and they'll put up with whatever good, bad or indifferent things happen in the rehearsal room so that they can sing. Community people have so many things – they live in the community. They have relatives, they have affairs, they have things that happen. Least of all is, most time they have to work. So you have to take this into account when you start making demands on their time. Most of the groups that are professional or semi-professional here, the singers have made that part of what they figure that they have to do. So when they come to rehearsal, they're prepared for the amount of time that we've got to spend. Community groups sometimes have to spend more time than is, that's allotted. You say, ok we're going to have a two-hour rehearsal each week. And then you get close to a performance or a project and you say, I need another half an hour. Well that doesn't mean anything to some people. But to a great many people I've got to go home, the babysitter, I've got to go home for this, I've got to go to this meeting. So you have to take these things into account. So there is a big difference and I think that most all of the choral conductors will...you'll have as many different answers to as why they treat choirs differently as you have people being interviewed. I think that the best thing that I can say right now is: one, yes I treat them differently according to the

community or college choir, and two it's absolutely necessary for me to be cognizant of the fact that the demands on their time in and out of my singing group absolutely demand that I have that difference and that play for their time in this activity.

Q You mentioned the Kaleidoscope Project – that was a collaboration. You been involved in many collaborations with other musical partners. Can you think back to one of your most rewarding collaborations?

A Yes. I had a good collaboration with Kathy Romey and the MN Chorale and the Leigh Morris Chorale when we did their Bridges project. I think that was a very worthy project not only because of the subject matter and the content – that was the MN Chorale and choirs that come out of the black community – but also because they spent time. It wasn't one of those hit and run things where we learn a few songs and we sing the songs together and then we run away and we never see each other. We were together enough times so that we really got to know each other and I give Kathy Romey all credit and kudos for opening herself and going out to communities that she didn't know about. And I would say in the process she made a lot of friends; real friends who said, ok now we know this person is a genuine person. And I think that was one of the best things. It also gave me an opportunity to tell people about parts of my choral tradition and it also gave me an opportunity to examine how and why sometimes we think differently about other choral traditions when we really don't know as much about them as we need to know. So I think that was a very good, a good collaboration. And I think if more choral groups would do collaborations that last enough time for both groups to meld, then the few little parts that we need to weave into our choral fabric here will be done.

Q If you were mentoring a young choral conducting student, what kinds of advice and encouragement would you give them?

A If I were mentoring a choral conductor and if that person, he or she, were going to be in a situation for any length of time I'd ask them to try to get to know their choir as well as they could. And that has to do with musical abilities. Then try to figure out what music is going to help them develop along the way. I will say I have a little diatribe and I'll take this little tangent because many of our schools teach wonderful choral conductor programs but then when the student goes out, he or she has to learn all over because they've only learned one side and they don't know...well here I am at this school in the city and these kids can't do Beethoven and these kids can't...that doesn't make any less of the kids. It's just that they weren't taught. So they need to learn what to do and then how to get that choir where they want them to be. Now the fact is some people will say, well you should make sure that they're conducting according to Hoyle. But the fact is some of our major conductors are like reading crypts, cryptograms, you know? So choirs can learn to follow almost any conductor. I will not name names, here, because that would be most offensive but there are some major

conductors who are very difficult to follow. So the choral conductor that comes out of school will have to find out what really works as gesture in front of my choir and then how do I get them to go to more standard gestures if, as time goes by. I can say this from experience because when I started, even though I had been through school I didn't use standard gestures. I began to incorporate standard gestures as my choir got to know me and to the point that then they could understand what I was doing when I was doing standard gestures. What I spent most of my time doing is teaching them how to deal with music that was outside the realm of their experience and also teaching them that at some point in time, this music that was outside the realm of their experience was going to come into play in their lives and they would be glad that they knew or were exposed to it. So a young person conducting a choir needs to know his or her choir, how to find music that will make the choir grow musically and how to figure out how to make gestures in front of the choir that the choir understands. Those are some things. There are many other things but those are some basic things for me.

Q What are some of the things we can do to encourage the younger generation to keep up this interest in choral singing that MN is so well known for?

A For young people to be interested in choral music our schools – public and private – this is the harshest thing that I can say: they'll have to stop talking out of both sides of their mouths. If you're going to support a choral program, support a choral program. But I see in so many schools – public and private – that we want to support music. OK, well we'll support the band or the orchestra. The choir will just have to fend for itself. They're going to have to come to an agreement that choral music is every bit as important as any other music. Notice, carefully, I'm not putting down the other music; it's wonderful. But sometimes choral music people get short shrift and I imagine nine out of eight will tell you the same thing that I'm saying. You figure those odds. They'll have to come to grips with that and make sure that there is some program or programs in the school that will teach kids how to handle music. I'm not talking about just the paper, but reading music. Why is it that some of the other countries kids learn to read music and it's valued as important? But it's not valued as important here. And why is it that at college level we teach about all the European masters but we never teach about the fact that they knew math, they were up on science and other things, too? And we take everything else away. I mean we put everything else in front of that kind of abstract thinking that makes it possible for people to come up with wonderful inventions. I think that the people who come up with the wonderful inventions are people who have learned that funny kind of thinking – its abstract and yet it's disciplined. And those are the things that make it possible for people who come up with innovations in computer and brilliant ideas in math and so forth. Because it takes that certain kind of abstract thinking – imagination – and then it takes another kind of discipline to make all of that happen. And we figure if we just teach them eins, zwei, drei they'll be wonderful. But that's not true because that can stunt communication sometimes. So a great many people will disagree with me, but I believe that music is a gift from on high and if we, if we

take that away from people we may have educated robots and not the people who are going to think carefully about what is said, what is done and how each person affects the world.

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