

## **Abbe Betinis**

Interviewed by Peter Myers at the SPCO Center, January 29, 2008

Q Talk about your childhood music experience. What kind of music was there in your household, or in your community or school that may have sparked your interest in music?

A I grew up on a non-working dairy farm, 20 miles from Stevens Point, Wisconsin; outside of the town, where my parents enrolled me in Suzuki lessons at age four. So I started the piano right away, basically. As I was learning how to read words, I was learning how to read sound. Not necessarily music but how the sound transfers from the pattern of a keyboard to the pattern of my mind. So I had always had that experience and that direction of training and it was not so hard then to turn it around into the pattern of my mind to the pattern of a keyboard. It was later on, in elementary school I guess, that I started to write music; just small things.

Q Talk more about that; it's fairly unusual, at least in my view. People often start singing in elementary school, but what prompted you to start writing at that age?

A We started playing the recorder in third grade – I think that was my first group musical activity. As a piano student I was always on my own, practicing. But in third grade in my public school we started the recorder. It was a world opened up to me. It sounds silly now because everybody plays the recorder in school, but I was mesmerized by the instrument and all the things I could do and I started to try to figure out the songs I knew already so that I could finger them on the instrument. And then I soon started to make up my own. I don't know if you want details on this – they were stupid little songs. I wrote a piece called, The Happy and Sad Clown.

Q Talk about that and talk about the words.

A I think the first song I wrote was the Happy and Sad Clown. I had developed it, developed it on the recorder and then took it to the piano so I could create a left hand or a baseline for it. The catch for The Happy and Sad Clown was that, of course, there was a nice happy part, there was a little B section, a contrasting minor sad clown and then when the happy part came back again there was this little (sings) and it went on and on. And I wrote a little score and it said, do this till Mommy screams. And there was a little tri-tone and inevitably, from the kitchen or the living room or wherever she was, Abbie...and then I'd get to resolve it. Of course she had no idea it was actually written in the score.

Q Can you recall the first time that one of your pieces was actually performed by somebody else other than you?

A I think I had to wait until college for that opportunity. I had written some incidental music for a high school theater collaboration. But other than that, it wasn't until I was actually studying composition for the first time at St. Olaf that I heard my works performed by someone other than myself. And it was thrilling. It was a little song – soprano and piano – with very specific stipulations by my composition teacher. Eighth notes running throughout the whole thing, it had to have a Neapolitan chord, it had to

have an augmented sixth. I followed all the directions; I was so happy with it. And it sort of started a journey for me. What could I do with my own stipulations? I was hooked.

Q Take it from there. Give a quick synopsis of your musical career from the time you began at St. Olaf up to the present day.

A I started St. Olaf college in the fall of 97 where I was determined to be either a piano major or in music ed. It wasn't until my sophomore year that I started to be really invested in writing music. And that happened as a result of actually my being diagnosed with cancer. I had gone home for a semester – to Stevens Point, Wisconsin to have chemotherapy treatments, basically. It was during that time that I got really interested in the way that the human body can be its own musical instrument through the voice. That was when I started to discover musical acoustics. I was taking a class at the time – I didn't want to be in bed or hooked up to a machine, I wanted to be doing something useful – so I took an acoustics class. It was a great opportunity because it was collaboration between the psychology department, the music department and the physics department. So with all of those disciplines connecting, I was able to not only understand what it was like as a singer, which I had been for many years, to know what happens in my own body but to know what happens in the air and to know what happens in the mind. And that started to get me thinking about how the human voice might be able to actually help me in healing. So I became just fascinated by...I would spend hours in the practice room just experimenting with my voice, experimenting with dissonance with the piano and harmonic relationships that made me resonate in certain ways. It sounds kind of new age, but I don't mean it like that at all. I was going basically on what made me feel better and what could make me get through this difficult part of my life. So when I got back to St. Olaf in my sophomore year, I changed course completely and it was composition from there on out.

Q When you were at St. Olaf, in addition to composition, were you involved as a performer in any of the musical activities?

A It was while I was sick, actually, that my mom drove me back to St. Olaf, back to campus, for my St. Olaf choir audition. And so I showed up bald and thin and sang my heart out because that was always the goal – the St. Olaf choir. Anton Armstrong let me in. I was grateful and still am. It was a chance to really understand from the inside, some of the repertoire that I had heard and had influenced me already, but now I had understood what made it work. I could watch all the parts go by in the octavo and know exactly why I was feeling what I was feeling when I heard that music. And to be on the inside of an organization like that, that was programming such great music and changing the way people felt in a room at the same time. It's so much fun. It's such a thrill. That was one of the major influences on my college life. After college, actually it was my senior year, end of my senior year – I had no idea what I was going to do, where I was going to go, if I might go to grad school or move back home for a little while – Libby Larsen came to my composition class and talked about her life as a composer and did a little workshop with a few of the student works and mine was one of them, drawn from a hat of all things. I sat on the floor and she kind of sat there with me. In my memory the rest of the classroom is gone. I was so focused on what she had to say and what she might think of this strange instinct to put your soul on paper, you know? And that was my second major influence, I guess, after the St. Olaf choir. I was determined to learn more about this amazing woman and how she could make a career of being a composer. It just seemed marvelous to me. I'd never met anyone so passionate,

consistently passionate, determined, and with so much energy. There was a little fire. It just went, poof! Oh yeah, this is what I want to do. So I got a job in her office. I had the great fortune of her taking me on and I learned more from watching her in the professional world even than from the work she gave me, which was wonderful work. After Libby, of course...at the same time as I had just gotten this job in Libby Larsen's office, I auditioned for the Dale Warland Singers. I had come straight out of college where we had had ear training and I was determined to sing that 12-tone row at the audition. I'd heard about it; its reputation certainly preceded it. This is the hardest audition you'll ever have, they all said. And it was. It really was. I went in and I just...I sang the pants off that 12-tone row. I still feel good about that. And Dale let me into the choir. And that changed the course of – certainly my career – and therefore my life as an artist.

Q Talk about your time with Dale and how your musical instincts perhaps grew during those three years in the Warland Singers.

A I started singing with the Dale Warland Singers in fall of 2001. They, of course, disbanded in spring of '04, so I sang with them up until the end. In that time the thing that actually meant the most to me was the Choral Adventures Program. This was a program that Dale had begun to connect composers to the performers they were writing for. It was a fascinating thing. It was a competition, essentially, where three to five composers would be chosen to come and work with the choir and we got to see them and they got to see us and they got to experiment with us a little bit, in front of a live audience. I was just...I was inspired by all the pieces, always, that he chose, and learned a lot by what worked and what didn't work with the chorus. Dale has an amazing sense of vision and risk that work together in a way that keeps whatever he does vibrant. It's a really wonderful balance in a personality and certainly as the director of an organization like the Dale Warland Singers. He took a tremendous amount of risk inviting a few composers he didn't know to come and work with his group. It was just a marvelous experience.

Q Talk about how your work as a singer may have influenced your composition.

A One of the best things about being a singer and a composer of vocal music is the fact that everyone you're hanging around all the time knows that you're in both roles, which means as a singer with the Dale Warland Singers – which is made up of a lot of educators, music educators – they all knew I was a composer and that's where I started to form these relationships that have now lasted...commissioning relationships that have lasted for me and have sustained my career so far. The Dale Warland Singers was where I first met Matt Culloton and he was one of my very first commissioners. Should I talk about Dale commissioning me?

Q Sure.

A So it was then, in the last season of the Dale Warland Singers, that Dale called me up in his typical Dale way. It was a voice mail; he left me a voice mail and I saved it and he says, Abbie, Dale; I'm ready to talk turkey about a commission for Christmas. I just about fainted when I heard the voice mail. I called him back and we decided, in his very last season that he wanted to take a huge risk on a composer he didn't know very much about. But he knew that I was a student at the U of M, studying composition and he asked me to write a piece. Of course, the money thrilled me too. I thought, oh this is

the big time. It is. It was the big time. And I wrote a little three minute piece for flute and chorus, which he has now published with his series with G. Schirmer, just came out this last year. It was one of those central commissions that really developed into a whole network of people around me that started to realize that they could commission me. Dale – even with his high stature among choral composers and choral organization leaders – the fact that he could take a risk like that on the most important season of his career with the Dale Warland Singers, essentially – it was such an honor for me to be a part of that.

Q Let's do that part again, what you just said.

A The best part about it was, of course, that I was writing for a choral ensemble that I knew intimately at that point. I had sung with them for three years and I knew the range of the tenors, I knew when the sopranos might complain about when it got too high, I knew when the altos would be really happy with a nice low note. And I was able to take what I knew of their personalities and put it into a piece that they at least all told me that they enjoyed singing and that Dale eventually then published in his series. Just a marvelous experience.

Q Minnesota is filled with composers and has generated a huge volume of new choral music over the years, especially in the last 30 or 40 years. What do you think it is about MN that has fostered such a rich culture for the commissioning and performing of new music, and particularly choral music?

A I think MN is in a very rare position in having that nexus, I guess, of an audience, commissioning parties that are willing, and composers that are talented. And the funny part about the last 35 or 40 years is that the major organizations that have provided those three aspects of our culture all began then – VocalEssence, which was of course then the Plymouth Music Series, the Dale Warland Singers, major choral commissioning bodies in our state. The American Composers Forum, begun in the early 70s, just a few years after those organizations, which was committed to joining or connecting the composers with the commissioning parties. And then, the radio I think was really what sealed the deal, I guess. Minnesota Public Radio, which was begun, I think also in 1973, and that was what made the Dale Warland Singers and VocalEssence have a national audience. St. Paul Sunday and Prairie Home Companion are the two that come to mind immediately. Choral music is in an unfortunate place, I think in our country, in that it doesn't get a national listening audience like orchestral music or even wind ensemble music.

As much wealth of choral music that we have in this state, it doesn't get the same amount of public exposure, broadcast time, or touring as orchestras do, chamber ensembles do, solo artists certainly. I think the fact that MPR is committed to choral music as well as all of these other wonderful genres of music, really has done us a wonderful favor in the choral music world, as a chance to get our music out to a national listening audience. It's rare and wonderful and that combined with the composers and commissioning parties in our state have really made this choral culture what it is.

Q You had mentioned Dominick Argento's influence...

A The other major influence on choral music, vocal music, in our state is Dominick Argento. I think his influence has extended so broadly, nationally, and the fact that he

lives here in Minneapolis and has collaborated with a lot of our local organizations – the Schubert Club, the Dale Warland Singers – has really brought some national reputation to the Twin Cities. And more importantly, I think he's raised the bar. His music – his choral music – is different from other choral music I know. He has developed, essentially, choral symphonies, multi-movement works for chorus that are tough to sing, that are made for the professional chorus and that hold that chorus – the performing ensemble – to the highest artistic standard. Not a lot of organizations can perform them, which means they're written for professional ensembles. And to do that you need a wealth of professional ensembles and our state is ripe for that. It's just a wonderful thing that he's decided to make his home here, I think, and that he had an influence over so many students of his, especially Libby Larsen and Stephen Paulus, Carol Barnett, Craig Carnahan, a lot of choral composers that still make the Twin Cities their home, who were influenced dramatically not only by his willingness, but his adeptness at setting text.

Q That's a great segue into the next question. Describe the process you go through when starting to write a new piece – selection of text, how that influences your writing, or do you sometimes have a musical thread in mind and then you find a text. Which way does it go?

A I guess when I start a piece, the text is always first. Oftentimes a commissioning party will say we want a text that has to do with a certain subject matter – spring, love – and then I go straight to my poetry bookshelf, which is getting heavier and heavier and the shelves are starting to kind of sag down. I just keep shoving more poetry books into my collection; I can't get enough of it. I probably read through...well for this most recent commission, I think I've read through over a thousand poems, now, just to find the perfect one that has to do with...of course they want a piece about singing. To find one that's not cheesy, frankly, is a challenge. I've read through thousands of poems for this one commission and I love it. The music, then, takes its form from the poetry, takes its lilt and its style from the poetry, in most cases. In some cases I've been able to remove myself from the text and those commissions I find the most rewarding, actually. An example would be using a text that's not in my native language. For the Rose Ensemble last year I wrote a piece in Persian, and I really had to study the language, I had to study the intonation and the stresses and the patterns of their poetic stresses in the Gazalle, which is what I was setting. That made me think about the text in a more removed way, so that I was able to concentrate on the music having it's own form, separate from what the text might dictate, actually. When I'm too close to a text, I can find it impossible to set. If it means too much to me, if it's too dear or cherished somehow, it starts to get...I start to milk it and it just doesn't move like music should. So finding a text is really difficult. Of course when you hit upon the right one, you know.

Q Why do you think it's important for us to keep commissioning new works – aside from the fact that you're making a career out of it, but just in general – when there is already arguably a lot of great repertoire out there that we haven't performed very much? So why should we keep commissioning people to write even more?

A It's important to keep commissioning. It's important, not only for the sake of the artists, but I think art is a reflection of the society that we live in and society's change. While it's incredibly rewarding to hear a Mozart sonata played on a forte piano from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it reflects a culture that's not our own anymore. And it's important that we keep supporting new work that can teach us about ourselves. I think it's important that we fund it, too. You ask about commissioning...art will survive. I'm not worried about

art. And choral music, new choral music will keep getting written and it will survive. But the question is, will it survive in a drawer or will it survive in the voices of my generation?

Q Talk about the power that music can have to raise issues of social justice and society's needs and religious and ethnic conflicts. How can music help address that and even sometimes help bring people together?

A I think music is, of course, an important catalyst for social change. I guess I can really only speak personally to how that's influenced me. I'm thinking about, in the St. Olaf choir for instance, you rehearse every day. You go in there every day with the same people, but those people are not necessarily the people you'd see on campus in other aspects. People from different majors, people from different backgrounds, different vocal backgrounds, certainly. And the experience of singing together, of having a common goal, with people that you wouldn't necessarily know otherwise and knowing that everybody in the room is doing their very best – it's such a powerful feeling. You feel hooked in to something that's bigger than yourself and there's a hopefulness that comes from that, that things happen when you're working together. And from there it's not hard to imagine the leap to political change, to religious coming together. It suddenly just seems possible.

Q It's the sense of community that people often get when they talk about singing, that it can bring people together in a way that not too many other things can. Talk about a particularly memorable musical moment in your life.

A There are so many. One of the most memorable collaborations, I guess, I've had is with Kathy Romey of the MN Chorale, who commissioned me to write a piece not for the Chorale, but for a high school group that was working with the Chorale with her Bridges project. This was her particular project with Habitat for Humanity and I was one of five composers that they had commissioned that year. I got to work with the high school chorus to go in and...I'm not a conductor but I went in and sat with them and made comments as they worked through the piece. We had a really good time. And then the premier went off without a hitch. But what I remember the most was that crowded hall – we were in St. Olaf Catholic Church, here in Minneapolis – totally packed church with all the composers sitting in a line, all the performers up on stage, and at the end of each piece the Habitat for Humanity family that had inspired the text was to stand up, wherever they were. And here I was sitting with my roommates and my friends and my Habitat family stood up and they were right across the aisle from me and I had been watching this family throughout the concert, just noting how they interacted together and how it looked like they may not have been to many choral concerts and they were so excited and they were watching the slideshows and they were looking around at all the people. I wasn't supposed to, but as everybody was clapping I ran over to my family – my family – and I just hugged them. They had inspired for me a whole new piece of music and I had finally met them. There was a little boy in the family who only spoke Spanish and I, unfortunately, don't but he had a little photo album with him of what it was like for his family to go through the building of their house. And we didn't speak the same language but he showed me these pictures and I'd say, is this you? And I'd point to him and he'd get all excited. He'd point to himself in each picture and talk to me. During the concert we had this brief exchange – it was a coming together that I would not have experienced otherwise and it was just such a marvelous idea to do that.

Q If you were mentoring an aspiring composer, what kinds of insights would you share with that person?

A I think its important that composers – this will sound a bit strange coming from me and knowing that my catalog is mostly choral – but I think its important that composers don't see themselves as particularly a choral composer. I think what choral composition needs – right now especially – is an infiltration of new ideas. And that can come from these other worlds – the orchestral world, the wind band world, the chamber music world. And if you're a composer that is adept at writing for all these other kinds of ensembles, I think that can only help choral music. I guess if I were mentoring a composer just starting out in writing choral music as a career, I would say make sure to expand, make sure to experiment with other instruments, to think about instruments that could accompany a chorus, that could highlight the voices or set them into relief in ways that you might not necessarily expect. There is a world of possibility with vocal music and with combinations of instruments and I'm excited to see what this next generation will do and how it will explore that.