

Robert Berglund

Interviewed by Peter Myers at Plymouth Congregational Church, April 21, 2008

Q Let's to start by talking about your earliest musical experience as a child. What kind of music do you remember being in your home or in your school?

A I recall – its quite a few years ago – but I recall as a child probably from 5 or 6 years old, having quite a bit of music in the home. My mother grew up in Rochester, NY, and she went to Eastman School of Music there and studied piano and she was really quite a good pianist. So there was a lot of classical music practiced as well as church music – hymns and so on. We had groups that would come in – quartets, trios, instrumental groups. We lived in a brownstone downtown Chicago and there would be friends of my folks' that would come in and rehearse or prepare for performance or else we would just have a little musical at the house. So there was a lot of music that I grew up around. My dad worked in Chicago at Moody Bible Institute. He was an executive there. And there was a radio station that was tied in with it. So some of the musicians were doing double duty – besides being performers in Chicago as well as being performers on that radio station. I just grew up with lots of music. But it really didn't...I loved it, as I look back on it; it didn't have much of an impact from a professional standpoint at all. I went on through school; I got transferred out of Senn High School in Chicago because all the schools became unaccredited at that time. So my folks put me in a private school, college prep school. There was no music offered at that school at all. Then we moved from Chicago the beginning of my junior, to California where my dad had a new position. I was more interested in sports – played football and things like that. My senior year I got involved with the choir, which my first choir experience. Now I had seen my dad conduct because he was a church choir director so growing up I was in rehearsals and on Sunday mornings hearing his choir sing. But I really didn't get involved in any music experiences personally until they twisted my arm and got me to sing...I had a lead in a spring musical in high school, as a senior. And it turned out to be kind of fun. And I thought, well maybe there's something here. So then I went on, after I graduated from high school I went back to Moody and went into the Church Music Program for three years there. Did not complete the work because at that time the Korean War was going on and I dropped out of school so I wouldn't be drafted and joined the Naval Air and spent 30 months on active duty doing that. And while doing that...by the way, while I was there one of the assignments we had we were to have a church choir. So my first choir was in Jackson Park, Chicago, on the south side. That was one of the assignments that I had as a...in a choral conducting class at Moody. I did sing in the Moody chorale, with Don Hustad – some folks perhaps would know that name – he's had a wonderful choir. It was an excellent college level choir. And we toured every year. So that was the first place where I thought, you know this might have possibilities. To make a long story short, after I got out of the Navy I went to the University and did one degree there and then I went out and taught at Annandale for a year – did all of the choral music, vocal music in Annandale for one year. Then I was asked to come back to the University for graduate work and be a graduate instructor. So that's where I hooked up with some very fine people in the music department at the University and from there an offer came from Bethel in 1959, after I completed my master's degree. As I say, the rest is history.

Q Talk about your experience at Bethel – you came in there in '59 – was there a strong culture of choral music at that time or did you help to invent that?

A Well, it was a small choir and the director was an organist, a fine musician. Not as much as a choral conductor as such. They had about 40 members in the choir to begin with when I came. I was much more interested in the tradition already established by the Lutheran colleges and so on and had friends already by that time that were out conducting – Lee Sateren was a friend and Wes Noble – my wife had sung for him at Luther. So that was a pattern that I wanted to establish over there. Within the first year I had, I think, 55 members and by the end of the second year I was there we had 65 members, and I had actively begun to recruit. So we did change the direction of the choral program early on. And I was hired, really, for that purpose. It was an agreement that we had when I was hired.

Q Minnesota has such an incredible history of choral excellence. To what do you attribute that phenomenon? What do you think were some of the factors?

A There's no question that it does have a wonderful history and I have to say that the years prior to my retirement in '95 were really quite...it's an exciting place to be in choral music. Just so many opportunities and so many fine conductors. But I think it all started with F. Melius Christiansen at St. Olaf. My feeling was there were a lot of wonderful conductors that were out in the high schools that had either graduated from St. Olaf or Concordia and also Augsburg with Lee. And the job with the high school choirs – they were just young college choirs, really. Memorizing major works...my first experience when I went out to student teach was with C. Wesley Anderson at Roosevelt High School. And when I entered the class Wes said to me, now Berglund do you know the Third Motet of Bach? And I said, well, yes I've been studying all six of them. And he said, well the choir has it all memorized. Go ahead and take it. And I walked up to the front of the choir and we started right out and they sang very beautifully. I was so impressed with a high school choir that would be that advanced. But that was common, that was typical here. So that again inspired me to see what I could possibly do with college kids.

Q The era of the late '60's to mid-'70's in particular was a very strong time for the start-up of several wonderful choruses here in the Twin Cities – MN Chorale, Plymouth Music Series and Dale Warland all got going at that time. What do you think was happening in this culture in that post-Vietnam era that led to such a surge in choral activity?

A I think, to me, it was fairly obvious. There were so many fine college choirs that were producing singers and when they'd graduate, where would they go? As a matter of fact, Dale and I got together on a number of occasions back in those days just talking about what the options might be and where are all of these fine singers going? Some of them to church choirs, to be sure. So I got the idea, along with two very good friends at the time – Gloria and Fred Sewell – to start the MN Chorale. And I had great assistance from them as well as some others and we got it started. And Dale, of course, was working on getting the Warland Singers going. There were just great opportunities for all of us in those days. And Phil, of course, was very active as he has always been – Phil Brunelle, that is – everybody knows him by Phillip, I'm sure. So that was the climate in which these choirs were getting started.

Q Talk more about the formation of the Chorale and what you can recall. What was the driving force behind the creation of that ensemble?

A I had done some work with the MN Orchestra prior to that. The Bach Society, by the way, was also going strong at the time. They sang with the MN Orchestra. But in those days, MN Orchestra was doing a lot of choral works. Through some of the contacts that I had there, we felt that there was the possibility of having a choir that would be available to sing some of the major works with that orchestra. As a result of that, we wanted to do our own series, so we just started to audition – advertised and set up auditions. I think in the first year we had probably close to 100 singers that made the choir and it even grew beyond that. I was there from '72 through '76. I would like to have been there longer, but I had a ruptured disc – cervical disc between 5 and 6 in my neck – and had to have surgery, have that removed, and went through all the hassle. I was conducting about 25 hours a week between my church job – I was at Mount Olivet Lutheran Church – Bethel Festival Choir, Bethel College Choir, and then the MN Chorale. And the doctor told me, the neurologist said, you're really doing damage to yourself and you've got to make some major changes. I would suggest you cut one of them out. I did not feel comfortable cutting out Bethel and Mount Olivet was going strong for me and it just seemed as though because the MN Chorale was the last group that I had worked with – I loved them dearly and it really was painful to make that change. But that was ultimately what had to happen for me. It was a great experience. I've got fond memories. In '76 we did a bicentennial performance at Orchestra Hall and made a recording there. I still have that recording which I listen to on occasion – still love it. Some fine singers there. That was a smaller group; it was the chamber group out of the large choir. I look back on those days with great fondness.

Q Do you have any particular thoughts about one of your early concerts in which you prepared the chorus for a MN Orchestra concert that you can recall?

B There were a number of concerts that I did prepare for in those days. We did...I'm trying to think now...we did some of the orchestral works, let me see...Mussorgsky was back with Antal Dorati, with Skrowaczewski we did some major work, but off the top of my head I can't...I wasn't conducting so it's a little different when you're preparing a choir for one of the other conductors. The Heinz Werner Zimmerman piece that we did with Henry Charles Smith was certainly a high point for the choir. Not as much so when you're not conducting it yourself.

Q Choral conductors often are preparing a chorus for somebody else to conduct in the ultimate performance, if it's a symphony collaboration. Talk about any differences in preparing a chorus that you're going to conduct in a performance as opposed to preparing it for somebody else.

A It's a different experience as you're suggesting. First of all, you prepare the score yourself, to be ultimately familiar with the work. And then you meet with the conductor or perhaps the assistant conductor – most of the time it would be the conductor for me – to get a feel for what they're looking for and what they're hopes were for the performance. Then you rehearse the choir in preparation for that conductor. And you rehearse them up until just the week of the final rehearsals with the orchestra. The conductor normally would come in and rehearse with the choir maybe once or twice, just to touch things up in terms of interpretation, primarily, hopefully no wrong notes. Then you stand backstage and sweat it out until the performance is over, hoping that everything went really well. I've had wonderful experiences with that and became a great admirer – it started with Antal Dorati, for me, and then Maestro Skrowaczewski and

then Henry Charles Smith and George Trautwine and a large number of the conductors that I've prepared for.

Q Next question...who were the most significant mentors in your musical career? Who were the inspiring people that really lead you to have the passion that you have for this type of music?

B When I was in Chicago studying, Robert Shaw had three summer workshops out at Wheaton College, which is west of Chicago, in Wheaton, IL, which I attended. In those workshops you would sit in on lectures during the daytime with him and with several others that he might have with him – Julius Herford was one that he would use for analysis of the score. And then you would perform with him conducting as a singer in the choir, which was...I was a fan of Shaw's from the beginning. I had his records and so on, so it was quite an exciting experience for me. The same thing happened when I was doing my doctoral program out in Colorado. The conductor there who was excellent at the University was one that I had great admiration for and had some great experiences there. But Roger Wagner came in for four summers doing the same type of thing that Shaw had done in Chicago. So I saw a different conductor, eminently successful, stylistically some differing points of view – particularly in Renaissance and Baroque music. So it gave some experiences for me that way that were somewhat more in keeping with what some of the Minnesota choirs were doing, the Lutheran choirs, in terms of total production and so on. So that gave me wonderful experience and certainly injected enthusiasm into my veins for choral music. So that was back near the beginning of my career. From that point on, other conductors in MN that were of great inspiration to me: certainly Kenneth Jennings, Olaf Christiansen, Weston Noble, Paul Christiansen, Lee Sateren – a dear friend – I was a great admirer of his work as well and his music. All of them composers and arrangers – not Weston but the others were. So that kind of encouraged me to use any talents I might have for arranging and doing some writing. My interest always has been beyond a capella choral music – I've done a lot of a capella work – but I've always like orchestral because I did start out playing trumpet and instruments when I was young. Then I did quite a bit of work in my graduate programs on the orchestral side as well as the choral side, so that has been of real interest to me. And many of the concerts that I've done at the Church of Mount Olivet, with Bethel and so on have all been major works, choral works with orchestra.

Q Did you notice any major differences between the Christiansen Scandinavian approach and the Germanic approach?

A Yeah, I became aware of that...the Lutheran approach in Minnesota was quite a controlled tonal approach. And I think some of that they picked up from Scandinavia, initially, because F. Melius went over there and got going in choral music that way as an organist, originally. But Helmuth used a more free tone on a lot of things. The vibrato was controlled, but it was not totally straight. It had kind of a nice warm vibrancy to it that wasn't common to the...a different kind of beauty, a different kind of esthetic that existed with the Norwegian background here in Minnesota. And also I was privileged to hear some of the fine choirs in the cathedrals in Germany, in particular, as a result of the friendship and the times I traveled over there with Heinz Werner Zimmerman and noticed that there were some similarities but there were also some differences, both in interpretation as well as the tonal approach of the choirs.

Q Talk about how you came to go to Germany to study with Helmuth Rilling. Talk about what kind of impact that experience had on you.

A In 1976 on my sabbatical leave, I was privileged to go to Germany to study with two eminent conductors – in my opinion – first of all Heinz Werner Zimmerman, my friend, knew the folks at the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. Of course it was closed to having anyone come in and watch him rehearse and so on, but very fortunately I was able to spend some time – several months there – each day watching the orchestra record, perform and rehearse. I learned a lot from him in terms of how he treated the orchestra. He was very personable, very warm, with the members of the orchestra. Several of the members told me that he had a reputation of being very tough on the outside but to his members for example at the beginning of every rehearsal he would be there early to shake hands with every member of the orchestra and to ask them how so and so was in the family and how the kids were doing, etcetera. So it was kind of a warm, personal experience. I had had a background – up to that point – where I was a little bit tougher, a little bit colder with my performers, tried to maintain a little bit of distance between them. It turned me around completely. And then following that I was privileged to go and spend some time with Helmuth Rilling and see him in action with his choir, both in rehearsal and in performance. His warmth with his performers just sold me on the fact you don't have to be a tyrant to be a conductor. You can really have friendships and develop different kinds of relationships than what I had initially seen with some of the orchestral conductors that I had worked with, as well as some of the choral conductors that I respected. I won't name names, but that was a turnaround for me. Helmuth was so inspirational. Of course his skill in knowing the score, analyzing the score, the dedication with which he brought himself to a rehearsal was extremely exciting. One incident that was fun for me was he would walk when he was memorizing his scores; take walks and he'd take the score and he'd have it in his hand and he'd been conducting. I would just walk along and he'd say, come on – you can come with me, Berglund, if you want to. And he'd work on it for a while and then he would set the score down and we would keep walking and he would continue to conduct from memory. Then when...on just a couple of occasions he blanked out and forgot where he was and needed to...and so then we walked all the way back and by that time it would be several blocks or maybe half a mile or so, back to pick up the book, take a look at it – the score – and then set it back down and take off again. And he'd say, oh yes I remember now. That was how he memorized. And I thought, you discipline yourself to that extent when you're memorizing. It was something that I was introduced to completely different from anything I had seen or learned here in this country. But the discipline for the musicians in Germany that I met and became friends with is enormous. And that again was very inspiring to me. It taught me some very good lessons. And of course I've been an admirer ever since.

A I met Royce Saltzman back in the '70's I'm guessing, maybe early '80's. We struck up a friendship that was not one that was able to be extended much because he was out in Oregon. But we talked about some mutual friends that we had in common in Germany and Helmuth Rilling was one of those friends. Then Kathy, of course, I knew had studied over there as well with Helmuth. My relationship with Heinz Zimmerman, who was a very close friend of Helmuth's at that time, helped me to fill in the blanks between Kathy and her dad and so on. I've run across Royce on several occasions since – haven't seen him for a number of years, now – but have high admiration for his work in Oregon. The summer program that he runs is the best in the United States, obviously. And that is, of course, with Helmuth coming in each year. Former students of

mine go out there and have participated in that as well. Tim Sawyer, who is the choral director at Northwestern College here in town – I think he goes out there every summer to be part of that program.

Q Give your perspective on the different roles of the professional and volunteer singer.

A I've gone both routes and have been involved in both and I think they both have a lot to commend themselves. I think working with amateur singers is a joy because those people are there because they just simply love to sing. There are no other financial incentives. There are only the incentives of the joy of making music and participating in – hopefully – a good choir. The professional side...under normal circumstances – certainly Dale Warland has proven this – that you can reach the highest levels of performance with select singers who are being paid. Generally they are people who are professional singers who are teaching or are performing, have tough schedules, have very busy schedules and you really need to find it possible to reimburse them for their time. So Robert Shaw, of course, did that.

The performances by professional and amateur choirs, it seems to me, is important dimension to all of choral music. Amateurs perform and can be very faithful and achieve high levels by virtue of their love for music, their love for performing. They...you can have a high level of discipline and have high expectations of choirs that are not paid and it's a very satisfying thing for I think the conductors as well as performers and audiences. I'm happy for the fact that they're as successful as they are, particularly in our state here. The need for professional choirs is, again, creates the possibility for performance at even a higher level. Dale Warland certainly has been a model for all of us here in this state and certainly on a national and probably an international basis as well. Dale and I talked years ago about whether you would go professional or amateur. I tried going professional on several occasions and was able to sustain the payment of singers for maybe a year or two or three years, but the pressure is enormous to try to raise the funds for a professional choir. Of course, I marveled at how Dale has been able to keep that choir going as long as he did on that basis. And certainly he proved that the top level of excellence can be achieved if you've got a great conductor – as Dale Warland is – and the kinds of singers that he was able to have. Now Robert Shaw had a...everybody knows in the choral field how he achieved with his professional group – particularly through his recordings but also in concerts. But he also had a great love for conducting amateur choirs. He came in here and conducted the MN...at the University of MN, the choir, the large choir over there. On several occasions I sang, came in and sang on one of their performances of the Brahms Requiem with them. And he always felt that there was a kind of, almost a mystical feeling on the part of the singers, because of their dedication and their great love for singing at a high level but not being paid for it. Just doing it because of the sheer joy of performing at that level. Roger Wagner, by the way, he was not of that perspective. He came in and worked with the University Chorus where I was doing my doctoral program and it was a little bit painful for him. He liked his professional group, he loved that, but it was a little different perspective than what Shaw had. So I think that...my own experience is that we need as much of it as we can get on both sides of the fence.

P We talked earlier about the significance of good school programs in nurturing a lifelong interest in music. If we, as a society, want to keep choral music alive and well

and thriving what are some of the things that we can be doing to encourage people to sing and to develop the joy and love of singing that so many singers have experienced?

B My feeling on that is that it goes back to the kind of literature, the repertoire, of a group, of an organization. To me, the greater the music, the higher the level of the art, the more satisfying it is to the performers, and to the audiences. Now this takes some education. It takes...in order to perform masses and motets and the great literature from the repertoire...this motivates people to real heights. If you're working with an experienced conductor who is not only a great musician but can inspire and has the wherewithal in order to put together performances that are very exciting – audiences respond. But you have to have – at a lower level – people filling the spots in those choirs, moving from elementary school into high school into college and then ultimately the community choruses and the professional choirs. Sadly, I think we are on a downward trend presently – particularly in the public school systems – pops music has become very important. I love pops music – I love all kinds of music. But I feel that its so easy to pull those kinds of performances together and what happens, is they're generally very small groups – all of them with a mic in their hand, not developing their voices to the level that their voices can develop if they aren't using mics. And on top of it, it limits the numbers of people that are participating in the music programs. As a result we don't have probably, at this point...at least when I retired in '95, I'd have to say – and I know firsthand there – we did not have the quality of students in those recent years that were coming into, at the college level, for performance in the college choirs. I've heard this from some of the other conductors of the major colleges of our state as well, saying that it's getting tougher and tougher to get some of those good students. There are some fine singers out there. Don't get me wrong. You can find them, but you have to work a lot harder to try to recruit them and get them to come to your school.

Q If you were mentoring an aspiring conductor today, what would be some of the messages you would want to convey?

A If you're lazy, don't try it. First of all, you've got to have an ethic that says, I'll give it the very best shot I possibly can. You have to study hard; you have to work hard if you're on your way up in terms of education. Listen to as much fine performance as you possibly can – both recordings and live performances, so that you develop an insight and inspiration for the potential that might be available to you. Then start a choir or work or get a church job or something where you can start to try ideas out and develop your skills and your talents. Because being a conductor of a choir, as an orchestra, your success will be dependent not only on your musicianship and the technique that you can develop, but also your ability to influence people, to motivate people, to have a great experience with those people, utilizing the medium of choral music. My feeling is that the better the music that you perform and you rehearse and you conduct in performance, the higher the level of experience. And that will just continue to propel you on through life. I can say from experience, personal experiences – 36 years at the collegiate level, 40 years at the church choir level, and then a few years in between with groups on the outside like the MN Chorale and so on – what an exciting life it is. I highly recommend it to any young person that's looking at this as an area that they could be interested in and they have some talent to go with it.

The possibilities for a young conductor that is looking at the option of a career in choral music are enormous. I would certainly give words of encouragement to anyone that has the potential and it can be a find woman conductor, a fine man conductor, young man,

young woman. I've had several students that have worked with me at Bethel University where the talent was just enormous and they're doing great work. But my...so I've had opportunity to say to them some things that a teacher might say, or their director says when they've been singing with them. That is first of all they know by example, if they've worked with you that you can't be lazy. You have to give yourself to the task, which in my opinion is not hard because if you have a love affair with choral music – as most of us have, that have had any success in the field – you are driven. I'm right now spending time catching up with my son and daughter and family and grandchildren because of all the time that I spent those years working with my choirs, teaching and so on. It is a life of discipline and it takes great effort. But if you have the ability, the talent – then study hard, do a lot of listening of recordings by professional conductors and so on, fine college choirs, get to as many concerts as you can so that you are able to observe what is going on, and then develop the skills that it takes to not only have great rehearsals and fast-paced rehearsals and moving things along in a good spritely manner, but also to motivate your performers so that there's an enthusiasm and excitement in the rehearsal itself that will then spill over into your performances when you're ready to perform.