

Erick Lichte

Interview by Peter Myers at Westminster Presbyterian Church, March 10, 2008

Q Tell me a bit about your childhood musical experiences. What kind of music was there growing up in your home or in your school?

A Well, I grew up on a steady diet of Kenny Rogers and Barry Manilow, which is not necessarily akin to what I'm doing now in my professional career. But early on my mother always sang. My father's completely tone deaf. But we did sing and that was always in the house. One of the fundamental experiences that I had was I went and saw the Appleton Boy Choir sing. They did a nine lessons in carols every year. I think I must have been in second or third grade or something like that and my mom said, do you want to go and see this concert? I said, well sure that's fine. I went and I was really impressed with how professional the boys were that I saw there. I'm like, this seems like a really good crew of people. I'm really impressed that they can stand there and not fidget and pick their nose and do those sorts of things. And after the concert my mom said, would you think about maybe joining them? And I said, yeah I would do that. So that was one of the first experiences there, especially of me singing. I also then picked up the cello and played that very seriously for about 12 years. So kind of both of those experiences really came together to form my musical life.

Q When did you first start getting involved in choral music yourself?

A Well it was through that initial experience with the Appleton Boy Choir which I did up until my voice changed. And then I was really serious about the cello and orchestral music and chamber music. Those were the things that I was really, really passionate about. When it came time to go from junior high school to high school, there was a really fine men's choir at my high school, which had about 85 guys in it at the time. It was really the only thing my parents ever made me do. They said, Eric we'd really like you to be a part of that. They've never pushed anything like that on me. I've always been a big self-starter. And I'm like, nah I don't want to be with those choir kids. At that point I was a very serious orchestral guy. You know there were the musicians and then there were the singers – that sort of distinction. So I ended up getting forced into doing it. I said...I only had to do one week of the men's choir and really within about three days it was just a fantastic experience. And in some ways – in many ways – that was the experience that I had of singing that men's choir repertoire, doing it at a very high level, experiencing that camaraderie and the energy that a bunch of guys getting together can have – is really some of the impetus of why Cantus came into being.

Q Take it from high school and talk about St. Olaf. What attracted you to St. Olaf?

A It's interesting – the vocal program really wasn't the thing that brought me to St. Olaf College. I had been in the Wisconsin State Honors Orchestra and Steven Amundson came in and was the guest conductor for the State Honors Orchestra, and had just an amazing experience with him. He was such a kind man, a real taskmaster too, but he's just a fantastic musician. And I had such a good experience with that, that I thought well I should go there. And I knew they had a good theater department and the singing was good, so it seemed like a good fit for kind of all of my endeavors up to that point. So I got to St. Olaf and literally I remember sitting in front of the office where you would sign up for lessons. I got there early – I'd read the schedule wrong or something

– and I got there about ½ hour early. However, I was first in line so I wasn't about to give up my spot so I'm sitting there and I was really thinking about my life and what I wanted to do and it just dawned on me – really in that moment, sitting there in that hallway – that I really enjoyed...I loved music, I really enjoyed the idea of vocal music because of the idea of dealing with text and dealing with words and the expressive elements that can happen in all of that. There was just...something went through my brain right then and there that I switched. I had auditioned for bachelor music for cello and I switched. I signed up for all my lessons the opposite way and had to work it all out afterward. But that was sort of my road to Damascus was sitting in the hallway at St. Olaf College was figuring this out. So that was really the experience and ever since then, I know I made the right decision.

Q Talk about a few of your highlights at St. Olaf – things that happened to you that further propelled you into a musical career.

A Of course I had amazing experiences with the St. Olaf choir. You learn so much by modeling, I feel, in every aspect of your life. To be around people that are doing things at an incredibly high level and if you're paying attention, that will rub off on you. And you learn...in that instance, with the St. Olaf choir, I learned both how a really fine ensemble is put together, what really high musicianship is like, what it is like when a group of people can get together and really be on a common plane as far as what they want to express and how they want to express it. But also, you got to see – they're almost a professional choir in some respects for what they do at the college level and there are very few other places in the country that are like that at the collegiate level. So then we also got to see a little bit of the business side and how do you make a tour run, how do you promote yourself, how do you do some of these things, how do you make CD's – all of that sort of almost professional-level experience – really rubbed off on us at an early stage and allowed us to be able to do what we were able to do as 18 and 19 and 20 year olds.

Q Tell us a little bit more about your experiences there.

A One of the other odd things that happened when I was at St. Olaf as a freshman, is I show up for Viking chorus the first day, which is the freshman men's choir. And I'm looking over down at the tenor section and I see this guy and he looks vaguely familiar and I'm like, where is he from? How do I know this person? And I finally figured out his name was Brian Areola and he had played in the Wisconsin State Honors Orchestra with me in the cello section, and we hit it off and he also, along with three of my other buddies from the Viking Chorus are what started Cantus – those four guys. So again it was this very strange...it was this very strange anomaly that we had of these orchestral guys coming together to create this vocal ensemble. I think that's been a big part of what's made us unique.

Q Talk more about how Cantus came to be – you were all at St. Olaf where there were many excellent choirs already. When did you first start talking about forming yet another choir?

A We sat down and definitely said to ourselves, you know what this place needs? A good vocal ensemble needs somebody that really knows how to sing. No, that's not what we said. We really just, over dinner, it was four guys – Shel Stenburg, Brian Areola, Al Jordan and myself – were having dinner one night. We were freshmen, we

were getting to the end of the year and realized that we would be in mixed choirs from here on out, which is great because there's nothing like singing with women. But we also said...I just sort of mentioned, there's a bunch of really great men's repertoire. We should just get together for fun and sing that sometime. And everybody between mouthfuls of food said, yeah let's do that. So believe it or not, we did. We actually had the summer and we came back that next fall and really one of the first weekends we would just get together, generally on a late Saturday morning and rehearse for an hour or so. It was just the four of us initially. We had the real goal of singing the Franz Biebl Ave Maria, which was made famous by Chanticleer. You need seven parts to do that, so that began our recruiting process, already at those stages, and we started begging, borrowing and stealing – we've got to find somebody who's a second tenor, we need a bass, those sorts of things. So we were able to get the group up to seven people and sing the Franz Biebl Ave Maria. And really, that was the end goal. We probably could have and should have stopped right there. But we just had tons and tons of fun. And I think the other part of it was, again, being around that really high level of music making and ambition for what the St. Olaf choir wants to try to achieve, really spurred us on and want to continue on and just see what we could make of this, with no real professional aspirations at all.

Q So at the time did you have any notion that this would continue after you graduated? What were you thinking about the future? Or was there a future?

A We had an inkling that there was something really special going on here. We felt like we had a niche in a couple different ways. There wasn't really a professional men's group that was just singing with tenor, baritone and bass voices. Both Chanticleer and the Kings Singers used male altos and it's just a different model of sound than what we were going after. We also felt like we did some unique things as far as our programming and the sorts of repertoire that we did and that we could traverse all the way from medieval music and renaissance music to pop songs and folk songs and world music, and that the energy was really boundless in that respect. So we just had this feeling that we were doing something different than anybody else. And you're young and you don't really know what's all going on in the world, but we just kind of kept on keepin' on. The real turning point was in the summer of 1998 we did a tour of eastern US for six weeks. It was 13 of us in a 15 passenger van, with a cello in there too, a lot of together time. And we toured all up and down the eastern US and made that our summer jobs and were able to make as much money as we would have done flippin' burgers someplace else. So that...once we got to the end of that tour we had a kind of a come to Jesus meeting at of all places Westminster Choir College. We were recording an album at the end of that tour and we hunkered down in Princeton, NJ, for about a week, which was a great place to do it. In one of the student lounges in one of the dormitories that they allowed us to stay in – again we were begging, borrowing and stealing just to have a place to sleep at that point – we had a meeting in the student lounge and we just kind of looked around and said, who would be up for trying to do this professionally? And there were a number of guys for whom this was just a fun college thing to do and we couldn't fault them for that whatsoever – this was just not part of their major life plans. But we had 8 guys that really wanted to continue doing this in a professional sense. So we just continued on from that point. That was after the oldest members of the group had graduated. So we had two more years to wait until the youngest guys were going to graduate. And in the meantime we became a nonprofit organization, we got management out of NYC, so that by the time we hit the fall of 2000 we were able to make this a big part of our job. Basically it was almost full time that first season – that

2000-2001 season – but really did become a full time venture for all of us that 2001-2002 season.

Q Minnesota's the land of 10,000 choruses sometimes, it seems. Why do you think Minnesota has been such a fertile place for choral music and choral music at a very high level?

A From what I understand about it, it really does go back to F. Melius Christiansen and going to that little cow town of Northfield, MN, and starting something amazing. When you realize that it actually came out of kind of a college/church choir environment and what he was able to do to take these Norwegian folks and whip them into shape in a way that they could then go tour out east and play Carnegie Hall and do those kinds of things, is really remarkable and completely inspiring. So I think there's a little bit of that immigrant, can-do attitude that this is my opportunity here, in this new place, to do something new and to do something incredibly well. I think a little bit of that entrepreneurial spirit has carried over into a lot of the organizations and ensembles that you see out here, that you can start from very meager, small places and end up someplace wonderful.

Q MN has all these good choruses – how does Cantus distinguish itself from all the other choral ensembles that are out there?

A There are a number of ways in which Cantus is different. First of all, we're all male, which is a little bit more rare in the world. We also sing as a chamber ensemble, which is a very important aspect. Of the guys that started the group, three out of four of us were cellists and we played in cello quartets. So the idea from the get-go was to find ways that we could bring that level of investment – that chamber musicians have – and apply that over into the singing, which is something that not a lot of groups do. Most groups are centered around the conductor and that is, that's been a great thing. We've had absolutely some marvelous people all over the country and the world that have done things. But what we really find important is creating a process in which the singers, the performers, are completely invested in what it is that they're singing on stage, at all times. Especially when we do as many concerts as we do – you get to the 70th concert of the same program and if you don't have a personal investment in it, it becomes a little bit more challenging to summon a fresh performance out of that. I think the other way that we are different is in our repertoire. Our mission statement says that our mission is to exalt the human spirit. It is not about doing a certain kind of repertoire or promoting any other aspects of life. It is simply and, I think profoundly, to be able to create an evening of music or a CD of music that people will have an incredible emotional experience to. Hopefully, people can come to our concerts, hear our CD's, and be uplifted in a way that is meaningful to them and allows them to go into the rest of their life as richer, fuller human beings. That really is the goal all the way through. To that end, we'll use any means possible to do it. We'll use pop songs, folk songs, world music, new commissions, medieval music, renaissance pieces, romantic works. You name it, we try to put it together in a way that's not just your typical survey of choral music, which some concerts can sometimes be. You begin with the chant and progress to the renaissance and so forth. So we really try to mix things up in away that the emotional experience is first and foremost.

Q Talk about how you function artistically without having a traditional conductor. How does that process work?

A It is a very interesting process. We have various means by which we have meetings all the time and we talk about repertoire and I'm generally the guy that has to go and do the research and I kind of try to see which way the wind is blowing with the ensemble. What in general are we feeling like we want to tackle, what would be a good fit for us? We have a lot of conversations about that. Then we create the program and the pieces then get distributed among different individuals within the ensemble, who we call the producer of that piece. It is their responsibility to shepherd that piece through the chamber music process. So some initial score study things will happen at the beginning of the process, with the producer, and then it is his job to be able to sort of siphon together and put together all the various suggestions and comments that people will through out in the rehearsal process. Its terribly inefficient, terribly messy, but a whole lot of fun. Again, it really creates a great sense of ensemble and togetherness. And all of the different parts are...especially when I was a singer with the group one of the things that was remarkable to me is you'd be going through a piece and you'd get to bar 26 and you'd realize, oh, Brian over there came up with what we're doing right here. And you'd kind of look over at him and you'd have that moment, oh this is your spot Brian. Oh, then Allen over here – he's got this spot that he said we're going to do this this way and he's leading that. And you were able to share those types of moments across those the circle with the rest of your cohorts. That's really, really gratifying as a musician. And I also think it's very gratifying for the folks that come to our audience. We get told lots and lots of times that...we perform in various different formations and ways that we present to the audience, but when we're doing that chamber music thing people are really drawn into the conversation that is happening on stage and the audience feels like a little mouse sort of overhearing this conversation that these musicians are having.

Q It really is like a conversation and I always wonder when you are looking around at each other if you are looking at a particular person at a particular time, who may be giving a little sort of nuance or...are those looks random or is there some rationale behind how you're looking at each other?

A When the guys are looking at each other there's definitely a method to the madness. There are moments in which you can just be singing and looking at anybody because you're in a tempo and it's just fine. But there also are moments where certain people will be designated to lead a section – you have a ritard or something like that, or a certain word that you're going to just hold out just a little bit longer, and they become point people for that. And we try to make that even a little bit less obvious in some ways to the audience because it's not as good if everybody just sort of looks over at this guy – they think he might have done something wrong or something like that. But we do get a sense of really sharing that musical experience throughout the group. And there are key moments in which certain connections have to be made with certain people.

Q If each person has a responsibility for one piece, how do you arrive at the order of your program?

A As the artistic director, that's mostly my job. The order of the pieces in a program mostly falls upon my shoulders as we're putting this together. I have lots of conversations with the guys about this. There are also considerations...because we perform so much, about vocal health and can we go from this piece into this next one and you're still in a good vocal place. There are a lot of times that I want to hear things in a certain way and the guys will try it and just say, this is just really, really hard. And

we make concessions. So there is that kind of back and forth but ultimately that kind of falls upon my shoulders to put that together. But it is, again, a very collaborative process and we try to keep it that way.

Q Talk about collaborations.

A There are three real collaborations that stand out in my mind for various reasons, the first of which was our collaboration with the group Trio Mediaeval, which is a group out of Norway – three women – they have the same management as us and they come to the US very often and sing. I think we worked with them last November and we were just incredibly struck by their warmth, their incredibly fine musicianship. I think it was one of those moments that just, again, being in their presence for a couple of days was transformative for us. It made us reassess what was important and what could we glean from what they do that we could put into what we do to make what we do better? The second one was last year we did a concert with Robert Bly. He's a wild man, he's in his 80's but he has not lost any bit of his vigor and he found ways to bring together the spoken word of his own poetry into our concert. One of the most meaningful times that we had with him...he just impromptu said, I want you to improvise while I'm reading this poem – give me some E vowel, give some A vowel. And he would just sort of orchestrate these impromptu improvisations; we didn't even know we were going to be doing half of them. It was absolutely just magic because the guys knew the poems and were able to weave together this music that just happened completely spontaneously with his great poetry reading and his sort of gruff, kind of froggy, bear-like voice works so well against the sort of sweetness that we did. It was just a marvelous evening. I think people just laughed and cried the whole time through. Then again this last December we had a chance to work with the Boston Pops. We did a fourteen concert tour with them all over the eastern US and it was amazing. It was unlike anything we'd ever done before. We were on mics – the little Britney Spears kind of mics – and we were playing hockey arenas sometimes, for 7000 people. And the musicians and Keith Lockhart were so warm and so wonderful, they treated us so well, they made us feel right at home. And it was an amazing step to see if we could take what we do – which in some ways is a very subtle art form – it's nine guys, it's not this huge chorus, it's not this bombastic thing that we do on stage – and could we find ways to take what it is that we do and what's special about us, and sort of translate that to full symphony orchestra, on-mic, with the lighting like a rock concert for 7000 people in a hockey arena? It was an incredible learning experience. We found that we could do that sort of thing and again I think it's transformed what we do even in our normal repertoire.

Q How do you select your singers?

A We're in a stage right now that we do have turnover. It's the touring lifestyle that maybe has a limited shelf life for some folks and we understand that, so we've had to do auditions pretty much every year now for the past few years. Those are nation-wide auditions. We send stuff out through various means across the country – sometimes its voice teachers, sometimes its online networks for singers. And we get auditions now from all over the country. Most of the guys that are singing in this group have come from all over the US.

Generally what we do is have them submit a tape, CD, even MP3's we'll take these days, and we will listen to those and decide from that if we would like to hear a live audition. Generally what we do is bring them in, they sing two solo works for us and then we do a number of vocalise and those sorts of things. Part of our process is very

interesting in that in the audition its not just hearing these things and you get no feedback, which is what most auditions are. You know the people are sort of in black, in the back of the hall, their voice from beyond, you never get to see them. We give a lot of coaching through this, so if they're singing a vocalise we'll say, try that "ah" a little bit taller or I'm hearing this fall a little bit away or watch the third scale degree, that's a little flat. What we're trying to see is, is this a person that could be a part of an ensemble in which notes are given from all of the rest of your colleagues, which is a very interesting dynamic and you need to see if people can handle that. We've had a few auditions that have been very good auditions but you can tell folks that's not a very comfortable thing for them to do, so that's not the direction that we can go. So they're very interactive. We have them sing with the ensemble because its really about finding folks who's natural voices, their natural singing is going to work in the rest of the ensemble and to have the variety of colors that we need to do this as well as ranges, to make the ensemble work. So it's a very complicated process. We do sight reading and we generally have them also prepare some works from our repertoire – generally some lesser known things – to see is this somebody who can be a self-starter, can they learn music by themselves because that's generally the expectation for what we do is that you'll show up for the first rehearsal and have all your notes learned. So we need people that have those kinds of musicianship skills in order to keep a full time process like this rolling and to not be a liability for the learning process.

Q How do you structure your rehearsal process?

A There are two ways in which we structure the rehearsal process. The first is on the macro level, in which a lot of times what we start with is what we call boot camp, which is me coming in and just listening to the guys sing the stuff and all we're caring about at that point are – is this in tune, are these the right notes, are we together singing all of this stuff, and listening a little bit to vowels and all of those sorts of things, but its really to the fundamental basis to really get the base of the pyramid built upon which the foundation of the interpretation will be made. At that point it then goes over to the producer system, in which the producer will shepherd the process through. There'll be a lot of feedback during this time on the...this is a little bit then when we get into the micro level of things what each producer does is assigns, says I want 30 minutes on this day, I need 20 minutes on this day and we kind of structure the week out that way so that we're allowing the right amount of time for the pieces that need it and all of those sorts of things. We also have a committee of guys that will put that together for us, with the rest of the producers and the singers. So at that point the producer has to kind of manage his time for all of this. If he's got something that he really wants to hit it becomes a little bit of tension sometimes because someone in the group will say, well I want to work on this, I have this idea that I want to do and the producer will say, no today we've got to work on this element. So it's this kind of fine balancing act between indulging ourselves and all of the little nuances that we want to do, while still keeping the big picture together. Then generally we come back for rehearsals...I'll come back into the mix and listen and sort of see if the interpretation that the guys have decided upon is actually getting across to the audience. One of the things I think early on in this ensemble, because we had no outside ears, it was very difficult to tell if what we intended for the audience to hear was actually getting out there. So I'm able to provide a little bit of feedback to the guys and just nudge them along their way and allow what is really good about what they want to do, to really get across to the audience.

Q MN has this great choral tradition, a lot of which is based of course on the Lutheran, German, Scandinavian traditions. Your repertoire runs the gamut. From your time at St. Olaf, how have you been able to broaden your repertoire to encompass all these other wonderful traditions?

A One of the first things, when we started Cantus, was we did not want to get pigeonholed. We started the group kind of when the early music groups were really big – the Chant album had come out, there was a real push to try to be...those kinds of groups were really in vogue at the time. And we said to ourselves, we don't want to do that. We want to be able to sing every kind of music. We have really pushed ourselves – especially in the realm of world music – we do a lot of digging from composers and arrangers from around the world. Not just Americans, necessarily, taking that music and arranging it, but we generally try to go back even to the cultures from which this stuff came and how can we translate that to a viable choral or vocal ensemble experience? So we do a lot of digging throughout the world, both in sort of the folk elements and as well as the art song elements or the new commission elements. There is not an enormous amount of men's choral literature when you compare it to the mixed choir literature, which is both a blessing and a curse. It's a blessing in that it allows us to be able to dig deeper into the repertoire and you're focus is more narrow so you're able to go deeper. The problem is, is there's just not as much of it so we've, through this process been able to really find some composers and also know some other groups that sing the same kinds of repertoire. A lot of them happen to be from some of the Scandinavian and Baltic countries. There is a huge tradition of choral singing from those places – I'm thinking of groups like Orphei Dranger from Upsala Sweden, (name) from Helsinki, tons of Estonian choirs, and along the way they have commissioned some of the best composers of their day. These groups have been around for years and years and years. So they have created a wealth of repertoire throughout their years and so we do glean from them – steal from the best is what I always say –and we definitely do that. But we've particularly become enamored with those composers from those regions, especially folks like Einojuhani Rautavaara. We've sung a ton of Veljo Tormis works because they have been pieces that the guys feel so strongly about, that are so satisfying musically, and every single one – even though we never sing in the native tongue of our audience, which is English – it's music that they can get. It's music that they can understand. It generally tells a story or has vivid imagery and we just love singing his repertoire in particular. So through other groups throughout the world we're finding the composers that they have championed, and playing upon the symbiotic relationship that composers and ensembles can sometimes have.

Q MN is also known for encouraging a lot of composition of new work.

A I think all of us in the choral field believe that vocal music is some of the most vital in the world. We know that the process certainly is vital to the folks that are in our ensembles and to the audiences that hear us. But we also want to be a vital part of musical life in our nation and in our world, so it is incredibly important that we are finding new voices of composers that will expand what is great about vocal music. Every few years or so somebody seems to burst on the scene that has a new take on what they can do with the voices. It's an absolutely remarkable thing. I know so many groups that are doing so much commissioning. I think also our singers feel that they are a part of creating something new and something vital and expanding the vocabulary of what it is. I think also we know what choral music is, or the general public – even if they would never go to a choral concert – they have an idea of what choral music is. It's maybe

Handel's Messiah or a Bach Cantata, if we're lucky. But some of the new composers are finding ways to bring what it is that we do best and put it in a way that, to their ear, is fresh and inviting and new and not maybe the sort of stodginess that they would expect from a choral concert, which frankly can happen at choral concerts, at lesser ones. I think the people at the vanguard of our field are doing a remarkable job at making engaging and vital programs, but we need to continue on with the creation of new works in order for us to be able to create new audiences.

Q Talk about your involvement in the Sixth World Choral Symposium.

A Cantus performed at the World Choral Symposium under the auspices of America Fest, which is a men and boys' international festival that was, for years, held up at St. John's University. So we were able to perform a set of music. We had a whole night there with America Fest, but we did our set of music and then did a number of things with other ensembles. It was an incredible experience to have, in town, all of these amazing groups and be able to share what it was that we did with those folks. It was particularly interesting for us, I think, because we were on an evening of men's choirs, so both large and smaller ensembles. It was great – and we still get a lot of comments for this – that we found ways to differentiate ourselves very well from the other groups, both in the repertoire that we chose and our sound. We still get comments from folks saying, oh I heard you at Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis. For me, personally, what was so amazing was that we had been doing this professionally for two years, three years, something like that and already we had met folks from all over the world through various festivals and those sorts of things that we'd gone to, so we actually had a lot of...it was almost a homecoming for some of these folks. We had people that we knew from all over the world coming to us and we'd only been doing this for a very short time by that point. But it was really great to see your friends there and to hear their ensembles and just really feel the interconnectedness of the choral community throughout the world.

Q Talk about one of the most memorable comments you've heard about a Cantus performance.

A One of my favorite memories of after a concert, one of my favorite comments that I ever got, came while we were on tour. We always go out into the lobby after the concerts and not only are we selling CD's, but we generally like talking to folks. Inevitably, especially if there are young people there, they want our autograph, which is very flattering and very nice. One of the things that I have developed over the years is if someone wants my autograph I say, I'll give you my autograph but you have to tell me what your favorite piece was on the program and why. So I don't remember where we were, but we were out in the lobby after a concert and this little girl – she must have been 8 or 9 years old – comes up to me and says, can I have your autography? I said, well sure. I'd be happy to give you an autography but you have to tell me what your favorite piece is and why. And I assumed, of course, we were singing, What Shall We Do With the Drunken Sailor and we had this African piece with the animal noises – I was pretty sure that's where she was going with this because that's typically what you get from the littler ones. And she kind of looked up into space and looked at me and said, I liked the Alleluia one. And we were singing the Randall Thompson Alleluia, a complete chestnut of the repertoire, a total staple. I was very taken aback by that. I said, why did you like that one so much? And she said, every time you sang that word, it meant something different. And it was just so powerful, so powerful to see this little girl get that

from our performance. And you realized what sort of impact you are having on folks, even if they don't come up to you and tell you. And the sort of impact you can have on young people, even with music that we think is longhaired and complicated and sophisticated. It was...to me it was a real testament that we really did our job well that night and I'll never forget that little girl.

Q What can we as society do to instill passion for singing in the younger generation, like that little girl?

A Cantus is in a very unique position in that we get to tour around the country and see lots of choral programs, we do a lot of educational outreach – work with over 10,000 kids every year – and we work with a lot of choirs. Some are good and some are not so good. What always comes down to it for me is that we need to make sure that the folks that we have standing on the podium are caring, kind, wonderful, engaging human beings, people that are going to inspire their singers to greatness, people that are great themselves in whatever way that comes out in them. I really think that so much of what we need in order to get kids singing is just excellence and really, really high standards for what we're doing. I think in any aspect of life people want to be a part of something amazing and a part of something wonderful. And choirs offer that in such an incredible way, in a way that you can feel so interconnected with the people around you, with the people listening to you, and to I think even the universe, itself at times, when all the pistons are firing. So it is so incumbent upon us to get our choral professionals really well trained – that they are complete musicians, but that they are also whole human beings and that they are nourishing the folks that they are working with day in and day out. And if you build it, they will come. I've just seen this so many times, that it doesn't matter where you are – we're in MN, but if we lose all of the great talent that we have here, this will die too. So we have to just keep inspiring those folks through, I think, just sheer excellence and an ability to connect with these wonderful ideas and thoughts that we get to experience in choral music.

Q Do you want to give your sense of where you'd like Cantus to be in 10 years?

A One of the things I see Cantus doing more and more of is reaching out to the community. For so many years, we've been sort of holden to touring and doing all the things to just keep a full time ensemble afloat. We're getting to a point that we're building an organization now, around the ensemble, and able to give back to the community. And I see that happening in both our educational endeavors, I also see that happening in some of the commissioning that we're doing, that we'll have works that relate to what is going on in our community and connect with the people there. Just last year we commissioned pieces through the American Composer's Forum in association with the Harriet Tubman Family Alliance – people that work with domestic abuse. And we commissioned works of words of men who were violators of domestic abuse, people who had committed crimes and were there for court-ordered anger management. And the things that we got from these men were just so powerful and so poignant and we just felt so privileged to be able to sing them in wonderful settings by a local composer Maura Bausch and then to be able to tell that story to our audience – people that may not be experiencing that sort of thing. So I see that as a real direction for where we're headed. I also see us working and collaborating with more and more people, increasing our diversity and our experience and bringing more of other artists' talent to what it is that we do.

