

Jane Ramseyer Miller

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

Q What kind of music was present in your home, in your family or in your school or church growing up?

A I grew up in a Mennonite community and a Mennonite home and I have to say that that primarily really influenced who I am as a musician, and particularly as a choral musician. The Mennonite denomination comes from a strong background of four-part harmony and particularly acapella four-part harmony. So my memories of growing up were pretty much singing, singing a lot of the time – singing while we were doing dishes and while we were working in the yard and on family trips while we're camping, that kind of thing. I...the congregation I was born into started doing the Messiah many, more than 50 years ago...actually maybe almost a hundred years ago. And at the time that they started singing Messiah in that congregation, instruments were not allowed – they were seen as worldly. But they wanted to perform the Messiah. So in this particular congregation they performed the Messiah without any instruments, without a piano, and the congregation and choir hummed the pastoral symphony. They actually hummed the orchestral parts underneath the soloists. That's...I think back to that and that's sort of the heritage that I come from and it's a part of what keeps me kind of going as a choral musician.

Q It's interesting that choral music was much more widely prevalent in lots of different ways, before the advent of the symphony orchestra, which now tends to dominate the classical music scene in terms of the funding and the audiences. Also in the earlier years, the 1800's and before that, people sang but they didn't come to a hall and sell tickets and sing to an audience. It was much more part of their everyday life. Talk a bit more about your growing up experience, when you were singing, but it wasn't for an audience.

A I have great memories of singing with my sister while we were washing dishes. They were the kind of songs we would learn at church or at school and early on...I don't know but I think it might be in the genes, but we learned to harmonize. So I was able to improvise. I remember the day, actually, that a friend of mine started singing melody and I made up a harmony to go with it. And I was a little kid. It was sort of like, ah ha, I can do this. Then soon after that I was able to improvise on instruments as well. And it was so much a part of my culture and growing up that I didn't even realize that was sort of a skill that many people didn't have as a young child.

Q Talk about the next step when you began a more formal path of music education. What prompted you to take music from being a fun, everyday pastime into a more intense professional level?

A When I got to college I didn't know what my major would be. I studied for a number of years and then I decided I was going to be a psychology major. The irony was that by the time I graduated in psychology, I had more music credits than I did psychology. As I reflect back on it, I think I had sort of subtle messages from my parents and family that music wasn't a practical degree unless you wanted to teach and I was pretty clear I didn't want to teach. So even though I studied a lot of music throughout college, it actually wasn't my major. Then my first job was in administration, doing

nonprofit work. But I kept doing music on the side and then eventually I got a church choir and eventually music sort of took over my life. I was hired by Calliope Women's Chorus and One Voice Mixed Chorus and worked with both of them and eventually realized I really wanted to continue my studies. So I went to the U of M and did a master's in choral conducting at that point. But I often feel like, I often say, the master's was really important work and my psychology degree is...I use it every day in my work as a community chorus director, because in this work we need to work with people and we need to work with communities. And those are skills that are equally valuable to me.

Q Talk about One Voice. In the TC alone we have countless opportunities for people to sing in groups of different sizes and configurations, mixed choirs, male choirs, female choirs. Talk about the role of One Voice in the context of this very rich choral community we have.

A One Voice began 20 years ago; this is our 20th anniversary, and it actually started as an outgrowth of the AIDS movement in some ways. Twenty years ago there was very little interaction between the gay men's community and the lesbian community – pretty separate groups. And the founder of One Voice had this vision of bringing these two groups of people together. And it was starting to happen because women were starting to care for friends who had contracted AIDS. And it was really out of that movement that this group of people formed. I think partly gay men and lesbians were looking for a social place to be together, a sense of community. Many of them were no longer welcome in their churches. I've had many, many singers say that One Voice is their church and is their spiritual community since they have left or been asked to leave their own spiritual communities, or sometimes their families. We have people who have joined us who have been kicked out of homes. We had a young man who was 17 years old and homeless because his family had kicked him out, and joined us as a singer and sang with us for a number of years and he's now a student at Hamline, going to college on a full scholarship. So it's really amazing to see some of these young people, and elders, coming out and finding a sense of wholeness and community within our chorus.

Q Stan referred to that same thing in the sense that sometimes when they're planning a touring engagement or looking for a venue for a performance, when people find out who they are all of a sudden they're not so welcome. But he also told some great stories about how they may have helped open somebody's mind. I'm sure you must have some stories where your group - by nature of your musicianship but also your social message - has helped to broaden somebody's thinking. Can you think of an example?

A Yes, we were the first gay/lesbian/bi/transgender chorus to ever sing at MN ACDA. This was I think in '93 and it was right after one of the major national elections where there were the gay marriage amendments had passed all through the US and ACDA happened a week later. And we came on the stage – the first time a group like ours had ever been there – I was very nervous, partly because here are all my colleagues in the audience, but also because of who we were as a GLBT chorus. When we were announced there were a number of people that left the room. My partner was sitting near a person that said, well I don't need to hear this group, and took off. But we started singing and I had programmed this set to include a lot of music that talked about diversity and social change, we used some quotes by Dr. Martin Luther King, and there was something that happened in that moment at ACDA – people just started weeping in the middle of our set. It was a very, very powerful moment. There were people from all

over MN and I think just the common themes that we sang of – peace and diversity – were very, very moving for the audience. I still – when I go to ACDA events – I still have people come up and say, I remember when you sang at that event.

Q When you're choosing repertoire, how do you go about finding a mix of pieces that are musically challenging and satisfying to the group but also have a particular message or philosophy you wish to convey?

A In programming a concert I always say that I want to make sure that people laugh and want to make sure people cry and that people leave being touched by something, that their hearts have been changed by coming to one of our concerts. That's really where I start and I look for music often on some kind of theme that ties together, but that will play that role throughout a concert. I always try to look for some kind of classical repertoire, also pieces that are just easy for my chorus to pick up. In addition to our main ticketed concerts we do a lot of outreach, so I'm always looking for a few pieces that people can learn very quickly that we can take out on the road. Don't know where that's going.....

Q You mention that you came from Indiana originally and your Mennonite background and you were all of a sudden finding yourself surrounded by this wave of Lutheranism and Scandinavian and German cultures and the type of music they typically brought with them from their home countries. Has it been at all challenging to be a music director of a choral group here with a somewhat different background and a different kind of mission to your chorus?

A I think one of the biggest challenges for me when I started working with One Voice, which was 13 years ago, was that in my chorus people – singers – did not want to perform sacred music. And it was connected to their experiences of being excluded particularly by the Christian church. And here I came as the new conductor to this chorus, and 80% of the music that I was familiar with came from the Christian tradition. So I tried to be sensitive to the group and hear the concerns and also try to figure out a way that this really important repertoire would not just be erased from their experience. A few years into working with One Voice I programmed a concert of spiritual music and I included spiritual music from all different – from the pagan community, the Christian community, Jewish community, we included some Sufi pieces – and I also invited singers to do some journal writing about their spirituality and sexuality and how they kind of bring those two mediums together. The concert turned out to be incredibly healing for my singers and I ended up using these journal writings throughout the, mixed them throughout the music in the concert. After that concert, there was a different kind of openness. People seemed to understand the importance of spirituality in birthing choral music and I have much more freedom as a conductor now to include Christian music and I also try to balance it with music from other spiritual communities.

Q Who were some of the important mentors along the way in terms of your musical training?

A I had wonderful mentors all along – high school choir directors and college choir directors. I think one of the most influential people was a woman who was a song leader in the Mennonite church where I grew up, named Mary Oyer, and she is a hymnist and a musician and she also spent – right around the time when I was in grade school – she spent a number of years in Africa. So this Mennonite woman with gray hair and her hair

in a bun, came back from Africa all of a sudden bringing drums and dressed in a muumuu and brought this into our Mennonite congregation. This was a Mennonite congregation that was very liberal compared to most and this was accepted but also pretty cutting edge in that community. And she was up there every week, leading and teaching and I, through her experience, came away with a love of global music and an interest in exploring it and exploring kinds of music that are not familiar to me. Mary was also – is, she's still alive – Mary is also a perfectionist and a person who's very passionate about her music. So I remember sitting in the congregation and she would be leading a hymn and she would stop the congregation and say, no let's try it this way or let's take this tempo differently or let's do this on verse two. And it gave me sort of a freedom as a conductor to really listen to what my chorus is doing and try different things and play and explore music in some really fun and wonderful ways.

Q When you have to teach and interpret a piece to your choir, how do you go about developing your idea of what it ought to sound and feel like, especially if it's one that hasn't been performed a lot?

A When I first have a piece of music I often play through it, try to sing through the parts, sometimes I find recordings of a piece. Then I take it to my chorus and I think the longer I'm conducting, the more freedom I feel to try different things with my chorus. So sometimes I'll head into rehearsal with sort of a preconceived notion of what I think this piece is going to be like and the longer we rehearse it I think, it's not quite right. And I'll sometimes play with things and I'll say, chorus try it this way or try it this way and try to listen and see what I like best. Sometimes I'll ask the chorus, what do you like best? What feels most comfortable? Because I tend to program a lot of global music, one of the great things in this community is that we have so many resources. So I try to bring in people from the community who can help with language, with culture, I often do a lot of workshops along the way. For example we were doing some Native American pieces and I brought in a man from the Native tradition – a gay man – who just did a workshop for us on native tradition and how native cultures treat and welcome GLBT people. Or we're doing a piece right now in Mandarin, so last week I brought in a woman who is a singer and also speaks Mandarin to just talk with us about how the tones work in Asian languages and also to help us with pronunciation.

Q When you look at the composition of your audience, some people I presume come because they want to hear that kind of repertoire, they want to hear the music you're doing. Others may come because of who you are as a group. Tell me about your audience and what about your group appeals to them?

A Many people come to our concerts because they are friends or family of the chorus. But as we do more and more outreach in the community we're also bringing in audience members who hear us at various events or when we sing at a school there are students who will come back and bring their families to our concerts. Ticketed concerts tend to have pretty different audiences than when we're doing outreach. For example, every spring we do a day of outreach concerts in schools, usually in St. Paul Public Schools and try to connect with schools where we will have a good chance to meet students that may not have much contact or interaction with GLBT people. So this past January, for example, we did a collaboration with Central High School. At Central High School there are 22 languages spoken in people's homes, so it's a very, very diverse community. We actually rehearsed with them over a period of three months and then they came and performed with us in our January concert. We did a bunch of Brahms for

that concert. A part of what we do in this outreach with our audience and with our collaborators is try to find ways that we are interacting, so every time we rehearsed with Central High School we had refreshments and we had food and invited them to a potluck. So a part of the music is also building community and we work at that very, very actively.

Q Community is something that a lot of singers mention as the prime reason that they're in a chorus, no matter what chorus it is. Talk about when you got together with Central. What kind of reception were you expecting to get from these high school kids, and what did you actually witness once you had a chance to get together with them?

A Actually I'm going to shift to a different school we worked with, because it's a better story I think. One of my favorite collaborations was with Community of Peace Academy on the East side of St. Paul, a very diverse student body. I think 80% of their student body comes from the Hmong culture and in the Hmong culture there is no language for gay and lesbian people. It just doesn't exist. So our assistant director is a teacher at that school and their principal has a gay son. So we made a connection with them and they were excited to come rehearse with us and perform. So we commissioned a piece of music together with Elizabeth Alexander and then rehearsed for a free concert that we performed for our families and their families and parents. So the first rehearsal John bussed his kids over to rehearse with us and he said on the bus they were so nervous to come sing with a gay chorus. They didn't want to sit beside us, they didn't...they were just nervous to be around us. And John walked into the rehearsal and said, ok we're going to sit every other person, adult, youth, adult, youth. And I thought, oh boy I hope this goes ok. But he insisted. And we rehearsed for the evening and you know, once you start singing all these barriers just evaporate. And for these kids...these are kids who have not grown up with a lot of choral music and here they are singing beside these adult voices, you know, every other person. And their faces just glowed through this whole rehearsal. We rehearsed with them over a period of probably three months, several times, and at our last rehearsal before the concert I said, ok now we're going to sing for each other so that we can hear what else is going to be on the program. And they performed a piece and I looked at my watch and I said, you know we're out of time. I don't think we're going to have time to perform for you. And these high school students stood up and started yelling, One Voice, One Voice, One Voice. And I thought, here we are three months later; these kids who were scared to sit beside us are now our biggest fans. And we went into this concert just pumped up and so excited to sing together and we've now gone back every year since and sung for this high school ensemble with these students, so we've been able to see these students over a period of four and five years and watch them grow.

Q What does that suggest about what society could do to help break down some barriers?

A Absolutely.

Q People of different religious faiths could do the same thing. Were you here in the aftermath of 9/11?

A Yeah, in grad school.

Q Were you involved in any concerts? There were many concerts around town....

A I'm trying to remember which...I conducted a concert and it was.... After 9/11 – I was actually in grad school at the time and working with a church choir, a Mennonite church choir – and decided to program Haydn's Mass in Time of War and put together a little choir and a little orchestra. Some of my singers from One Voice and some singers from a church choir, a couple church choirs and we just got together for an evening and performed this piece and then a couple other pieces that explored themes of peace and nonviolence. For Mennonites, also, we come – in addition to our musical background – we come from a tradition of nonviolence and peacemaking, so it was a really nice connection and felt like an important response to make in that aftermath.

Q Given the very positive outcome of your collaboration with the school in St. Paul and with Central, what does this suggest about what we could be doing in our schools to use music in the arts as a way of helping to foster greater understanding among people of different cultures or different backgrounds?

A I'm just saddened and shocked by the way that music seems to be fading from our schools. I think its one of the things that I feel really strongly about in terms of our mission as a chorus committed to community building. One of the reasons we go out to schools is because we believe in the diversity and the change that happens when we perform in schools. And it's also just important that school kids have singers to see and to...adults that are coming to perform for them in these settings. I was going to say more about that.....

One of the things that I feel really sad about is the way that music seems to be fading from our school systems, and particularly money for music programs is dying all over this state. Its one of the reasons that we go into schools and perform is because of our mission of outreach, but its also a way when we get into schools to just perform along with singers and let them stand beside adult singers and feel what its like to sing with some mature voices. One of my hopes is that that part of our work is really inspiring for young singers, that they think, when I'm an adult I could sing in a choir too. That it's not just something that stops after school stops, but that it's something that they continue as an adult.

Q Great. Then the related question – singing just for its own sake, regardless of what the text might be – can be a very powerful and valuable thing. But particularly getting high school kids together with a GLBT chorus...talk about how you think more of that kind of activity really might help build understanding and trust.

A Several years ago we did an outreach concert in Bemidji and part of what we try to do is get outside of the metro area because people are pretty progressive, in general, in this area, but try to get to rural MN and also sing in schools and communities where GLBT people are less supported and less welcome. We sang at a small school in Bemidji and that week there were letters of protest to the editor in the paper and there were some parents who kept their students home from school on the day that we performed at the school, and asked for the resignation of that music teacher who invited us. The school administration felt so strongly about us being there and the statement of welcome and diversity that we offered to their students and they completely back the teacher that invited us. But that's just an example of some of the things that we've experienced. By contrast, when we sang with Central High School this January, I expected some of the same kind of fear and animosity and it turns out the Central

students were very excited to work with us and being a GLBT choir was pretty much a non-issue for that group. It was hard for a couple students but what they were excited about was that they got to perform with a bunch of adults and that we fed them when they came to rehearsal. For that concert I brought in the conductor Vance George from San Francisco – he worked with the San Francisco Symphony Chorus for I think 23 years. Actually he grew up in a Mennonite community and was a colleague of my parents at a Mennonite college, so that's how I knew Vance. And I brought him in to work with our chorus and this high school chorus and for these high school students to work with a four-time Grammy award winning conductor was pretty mind boggling and very exciting. In that case, it was the music that really pulled us together and this experience of performing Brahms together. Being a GLBT chorus was really not an important part of that experience.

Q Talk about the collaborations you've had with other choruses in the Twin Cities. Is there a sense of collegiality, and do you collaborate with other choruses from time to time?

A Yeah, I tend to program often incorporating collaborations with choruses but also with groups that are not choruses, partly as a way of expanding our audience base. So we did a concert with In the Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theater, a concert of puppets and poetry and music. We performed several years ago with Minneapolis (sic) Community Gospel Choir, put our two choruses together. We performed a couple years ago a concert with Mu Daiko, which is a taiko drumming group – one of my favorite collaborations. For that concert and for most collaborations it's important to me when I program that it's not just their group and our group on stage, but we find some way to bring our art forms together. So as a part of that concert I commissioned a piece of music – probably the first ever in the world – for taiko drums and chorus. And we performed it in downtown St. Paul and the piece took a taiko – they call it a melody but basically its drum rhythm – and then I had a singer who was also a taiko drummer arrange this for chorus. So the high pitch drum parts were given to the sopranos and the low kind of drum parts were given to the basses and the text was Kuchi Shoka(?) which is the text that taiko drummers use to teach the different rhythms. It turned out to be just a fantastic collaboration and fun on both parts. Then I incorporated taiko drums in several other pieces that we sang throughout the concert.

Q Were you involved in the World Choral Symposium?

A Yes. The week of the World Choral Symposium I had four other conductors staying at my house and I just remember it sort of felt like camp. We would get up every morning and go to this amazing set of workshops and performances. And because I have a love already of global music, I just felt like I was in heaven sitting there and listening to these incredible groups from all over the world. Partly just listening to the kinds of colors and sounds that we don't hear here in Minnesota, also physical colors, watching what people wore and how they moved on stage. It was...I learned so much just sitting and watching and listening to these groups.

Q Were your visitors from other countries?

A They were from the US.

Q Why do you think the Twin Cities was a logical place to have that, out of all the places in the country?

A I think probably it came to Minnesota because we had the resources to host this kind of event. I know from working at some other choral conferences, you need good venues, you need a good space that can host that many people in terms of housing. Certainly we had the kind of infrastructure here in MN that could welcome groups like that and take care of them and program a fantastic week.

I've got another story to tell you if you want one more. We sang a concert at a middle school in St. Paul and it was a concert of women composers. We actually sang a piece by Mary Chapin Carpenter – Twist and Shout – just a lively piece with some dancers down front. After that piece I introduced us as a GLBT community chorus and the whole room went silent. And then they started talking. It was one of those moments of oh they suddenly realized who we were as a group of adults and a group of performers. And then we continued the concert and to a very receptive audience of middle school kids. But after that concert they served us lunch in the cafeteria and I was sitting there eating lunch and the principal came and tapped me on the shoulder and he said, there's a student that would like to talk to you in the hallway. And I went out and there was a 6th grade boy, very shy, he couldn't even look me in the eye. He just looked at his shoes, but he said to me, it is so important that you are here today. You are all so brave.

Q Great story.

A Yeah, I like that one.