

Joan Oliver Goldsmith

Interviewed by Peter Myers at the SPCO Center on January 28, 2008

Q Looking back at your earliest memories of growing up, what kind of music did you have in your house and what other early memories can you think of that may have started to cultivate your interest?

A I grew up just outside NYC and my parents were both big Broadway fans, so...in fact the legend in our house was that I have two sisters – an older and a younger – and each of us was taken to the original production of My Fair Lady. That's how long it ran. Only my older sister was the only one to see both Rex Harrison and Julie Andrews. So it was mostly Broadway, Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald and then Julie Andrews, the great Broadway singers, and my mom was a big Joan Sutherland fan. So it was an interesting combination. I got hooked by classical music when I was 13 or so and my parents, bless them, sent me to an arts camp in Stockbridge, Mass. I was a drama major because my mom was an acting teacher. But the musicians who were teaching in the music part of the camp were all from the Boston Symphony Orchestra and they forced us to listen to chamber music concerts. And there's something very different about listening to chamber music when the person who's playing it is two feet away from you and you can just hear the rosin on the bow and besides you're eating breakfast with them tomorrow morning. And that's really what got me hooked.

Q What kind of music, if any, did you have in your school growing up?

A Elementary school I don't really remember. Junior high and high there was a choir; there was madrigals, which I did. One of my happiest memories, actually, is walking to school early in the morning – madrigal started at 7:15 – so I sang alto because I could sing that high at 7:15. But it was nice to have that solo time to myself, walking to school. I collected songs that were the right pace to walk to, that I could sing myself to school with and then getting there and having the collective thing of madrigal singing at 7:15, before everything else started.

Q Talk about the overall progression of your musical career.

A Really the trajectory of my musical career started in nursery school where they would say, Joan would you sing Thumbelina a little bit louder so everybody can hear, because I had a voice. And that followed me through high school, the choir, madrigal singing, doing the senior musical. It was very heady to have the choir director come up to me and say, Joan are you going to audition for the senior musical this year because if so, we'll do The King and I. That was quite something. And then I did go to music school. I went to the Overland Conservatory and studied voice there. What I really wanted to do was Broadway and got out and auditioned for everything, found that mostly what I got work at was doing voice over for commercials – speaking voice. But the sense of timing that I had as a musician was really very helpful then because it was not electronic the way it is now. Everything was tape. So they would say, wonderful reading but it was 31 seconds and we need 29. So I could do that. And actually then after not making it in theater, I went into the business world for a while, what I call my Blue Suit period. Then went into a real tough time in my life, when I was going through a divorce, my husband and I had been working together so I was out of a home, a job and a marriage all at once. And also at that time I was doing a lot of thinking about, who am I

out side of this marriage and this job? And one of the things I realized that I had been – from day one – was a singer. So I'd heard of the MN Chorale so I picked up the phone – I hadn't sung with a chorus for 10, 15 years at this point – and I said, when are auditions? And they said in two weeks and I went, eee, and called up a previous voice teacher and she got me in with somebody and I walked in and I sang two things that I'd learned in high school. One was, Out of My Dreams from Oklahoma and the other was from Marriage of Figaro. And they took me. It was so wonderful because as I say, I was out of a home and a job and a marriage and floundering. But I had rehearsal Monday nights. And when they handed me that score – it was Messiah – and I felt the smooth, velvety feel of those pages that had been turned by choral singers year after year after year. I just thought, I'm home. I'm gonna make it.

Q You probably have a lot of memorable choral experiences, but if you can think of one or two in particular that you can describe that have really touched your soul in a very deep way.

A One of the most poignant and exciting choral experiences I had in my life was in college. The college I went to – Oberlin – was about a 20-minute drive from Kent State, and the first year I was at Oberlin, the shooting at Kent State happened. And the Conservatory got together – the college was on strike and was planning a demonstration in DC and a bunch of Conservatory students got together and said, what should we do? And somebody said, how about the Mozart Requiem? And we had a week to prepare and Robert Fountain did an astonishing job with a bunch of young singers and we went down to Washington, DC, sang it at the National Cathedral – it still makes the hair on my arms stand up – and after we finished, the ending – that open 5th – neither major nor minor – it's sort of a question – the bells started tolling for the dead of Kent State. And what I've learned since then is when you sing in a chorus, you mark your life by pieces and pieces by your life. Because that whole experience came up again at my 25th college reunion. We did a kind of a reunion sing of some of the movements of the Requiem and someone on the audience, at the end when we were discussing it, raised their hand and said, yes I'm from Kent State and I came to the concert, I saw a flyer. She said, it was the first time in my life that I realized that anger could become music.

Q Who have been your most important musical mentors?

A I've had so many musical mentors. One I'm remembering right now was Larry Weller at the U of M, who I was studying voice with at this time, when I started singing with the MN Chorale. And I came to him and I said, Larry this is crazy. We have one piano rehearsal with the orchestra conductor. We had rehearsed with our own conductor before that, but one piano rehearsal with the orchestra conductor. One rehearsal with the orchestra, dress rehearsal and we're on. There's just no time. And he said, there will never be enough time. Get used to it. And I thought that was a great life lesson. I think of so many conductors we've had who were musical mentors. Kathy Romey when she was assistant conductor of the MN Chorale. There's a quality in making music in live performance that I call "this-ness." You have to seize the moment, whatever that moment is. This chorus, this orchestra, this audience, this hall. One time we were singing Carmina Burana and Kathy was about 6 months pregnant and we just were not cutting through the orchestra. We were singing loud but we weren't doing that kind of laser cutting through that you need to do. And Kathy just said, I need it louder but I need it focused. I want to feel fetal movement. And nobody else in that time or

place could have said exactly that thing. And it taught me so much about being in the present moment.

Q Let's go back to the mentors. Give another example

A Another great musical mentor for me is my voice teacher, Marian Hoffman. What she does so well in every lesson is find what works and keep working more with that. She has about a dozen or maybe two dozen ways to get to what works. It's taught me so much about practice, because you don't practice what you do wrong. You say, that's not working and you move towards what you really want to do. And that's such an important concept in learning how to do something. So in a way she's taught me how to practice and how to learn, just about anything.

Q Talk about how music and choral music in particular has sustained you and uplifted you as you go through life's inevitable ups and downs.

A Music is always there. It's always been a part of me. I think maybe it was part of my genes. My maternal great-great-grandfather was a cellist in Queen Victoria's private orchestra. And you find as you keep singing – you know that song, How Can We Keep From Singing? – it's too big a question. I think where it's easiest to think about how music sustains you, is sometimes if you think about one song or one piece. If you sing in a Mozart chorus you will sing the Mozart Requiem many, many times and you can go back in your mind and say, ok there was Kent State, there was the Aspen Music Festival, there was the time we did so and so's arrangement. Another way to think about how music sustains you is to think of the big events in your life. There was a great deal of making music after September 11th in this town and it was so important. I was very interested – I've sang at a few of those concerts after 9/11 and what they chose for the Brahms Requiem was not Wie Lieblich, which is this great comforting thing, you know, How Lovely Is Thy Dwelling Place – but it was here we have no continuing home, death where is thy sting? And man, we sang it! So it's there. It expresses what we want to say. I think the great composers do that and the great composers are sometimes Brahms and they are sometimes the person who composed a spiritual, who's name I will never, ever know, but who felt like a motherless child and said that for me so that I can sing it and know that I'm not alone.

Q Let's talk about the book. What was the genesis of the book, what inspired you and what did that whole experience do for you as you went through all the interview and information gathering process?

A There's several ways to talk about why I wrote a book on choral singing. For about five years I've been making my living as a writer, writing in the business realm and singing with the MN Chorale. So as a writer I felt like I was using my brain. As a singer I was using my soul. And after about five years of that I began to get kind of itchy and wanted to combine the two. But the great barrier for me was that I thought, I'm not a conductor, I'm not an opera star. I'm just this random alto on the second row of the alto section, of a very fine chorus. But you know, if I'm sick the show goes on and nobody notices. And then finally it occurred to me that maybe my weakness was actually my strength, because most of us at some point in our lives are one of the anonymous, passionate people who make the great things of life happen. Most of us sometimes are followers, not leaders. And most of us – I hope – are amateurs. Most of us – I hope – do something we love. The word amateur doesn't mean can't make a living at it. The

word amateur means lover. And that's what we are in the chorus. So once I got to that point I said, yeah. I'll write this.

Q Say a little more about the book and what kind of stories you found that came as a surprise to you.

A What I decided to do with my book was write about what chorale music teaches us about life and what life teaches us about making music. So I took a musical piece and a topic, a question that I had for myself – like what does it mean to be an amateur – and started exploring that through music and exploring that in other ways. And one of the most surprising and wonderful things that happened when I was doing the chapter on amateurs – which is called Too Important to Leave to the Professionals, it's an old Robert Shaw line that sex and music are too important to leave to the professionals – I did a lot of research in addition to talking about research, a lot of research on the Olympics. Then I found myself getting into astronomy and found this great story about this person who had actually seen Haley's Comet....which was the comet we had then? Was it Haley's? Anyway...who had actually seen a comet before it was officially reported and wasn't quite sure what it was so didn't report it until 10 minutes after. So it didn't get named after him. And he saw the book. And he wrote me and he said, it was my privilege to actually be there and see this comet. I didn't need the recognition. And it was really a wonderful, wonderful moment.

Q Let's run that again. Tell the story of finding your tessitura

A One of the most exciting essays in the book – and the one that was first published actually, before the book was published – was something that was called Harmonium and Tessitura. Harmonium is a piece by John Adams that uses an awful lot of repetition over and over and over in the very beginning of it. When I sang that piece with the Chorale my voice was a little, not too healthy. I had had a big upper respiratory infection a week before but I wanted to sing. What happened in the course of doing that is I simply lost my voice. It was really frightening. I didn't know whether a sound would come out or not. So I had to drop out of a performance and went to see a voice doctor and all that sort of thing and he said, all you need is rest. You're fine. It's just an upper respiratory thing. So I said ok. So I rested and gradually the voice came back. But when I went back to my singing lessons, my teacher said, you know you've got those notes at the top of the staff. But if you sit there for a long time your voice is going to get really tired. Why don't you sing alto for a while? They make more money anyway. Which was kind of funny because I wasn't making any money anyhow. So I did that and I found that when I sang alto, my voice took on all these wonderful qualities of warmth and depth that I hadn't known that it had. Because I'm kind of in the middle – I'm a mezzo. From that came the idea that there is a sense of "home" in various things in our life. The word in music is Tessatura. You can look at a musical piece and say, what's the range? What's the high note, what's the low note? Well I can sing up to a high B flat. But I sure wouldn't want to sit there. My voice would get too tired. I would get too tired. So it came to me that there's a tessatura in life as well. The things that...there are things that...as you get older you learn to cope with everything. You just do. But there are things that feel right and leave you energized and strong. And there are things that you do well that...god if somebody would just take it away from you, that would be wonderful. Your tessatura are the things that feel right, that energize you, that make you feel stronger. I found that that concept resonates with an awful lot of people. I was doing a reading of How Can We Keep From Singing at a café and this guy came up to

me. He was pierced everywhere and he goes, yeah, I'm a rock singer. I get it. And I thought, ok. We all get it.

Q People often say that chorale music offers a unique opportunity to build community and friendships through common experience.

A Choral music builds community in a number of ways. I'm going to start with the unusual point of view. First of all physiologically. You're breathing together. And there have been theater directors who have started the warm up by having everybody breathe together. In addition to that, in order to be a good choral singer you have to be every bit as good a listener as you are a singer. It's one reason why when we hear opera singers do quartets sometimes people go, hmmm and then they start listening again when the chorus comes in. It's because the opera singers are so used to funneling their solo self out there. And that's their job. That's fine. But when it comes time to do a quartet or time to be in the chorus, you have to be listening every bit as hard as you are singing. So that brings you together. Then there is, of course, the fact that every Monday night you're getting together with the same people. Or every Wednesday night or whatever it is for you. And then there can be simple experiences. One of my friends from chorale – I wasn't there—but she talks about the time when they were singing *Die Fledermaus* – and a bat swooped across the stage. Well, that's not something that you're ever going to forget. So all of those. And then, if you have the chance to go on tour with your group, that's when you're facing all sorts of life experiences together. The bus you miss, the water that was no good, being in Mexico City and dealing with people getting sick and how are you going to reconfigure things. All of those things. It's those communal experiences. Even more than...there are some people who like to go out and socialize after rehearsal. I'm too tired. But still I know I'm part of this community.

Q Can you talk about a specific example of community and friendship that has resulted from your singing? In your book you mention your Aspen Quartet group and your Mexico City trials and tribulations.

A In terms of forming friendships within music we were invited to sing at the Aspen Music Festival. There were three years – I was actually in on the second and third. The third year they decided that they would ask everybody to rent cars. So I ended up carpooling with three other women. There were three of us altos. Two of us knew each other fairly well because we were the same height. When we talk about forming community in choirs it's interesting because you tend to know the people who sing your voice part who are your height quite well. And if it's somebody who's a foot taller than you, you may have no idea they're in the choir unless you turn around. And then you're not looking at the conductor. But anyway, the four of us went to rehearsals together, drove from the Denver airport to Aspen, and just really had time to get to know one another. And that was in '92. And we still get together about every six weeks and have dinner and check up on one another. Only two of us are still in the Chorale but we still all keeping touch.

Q MN with its wealth of choruses and choral traditions has been grounded heavily in the Scandinavian and German tradition. Talk about some of the ways in which you have come to know music from other times and places.

A I think in MN we have this impress – illusion – that we are Scandinavian German. But if you look a little deeper, we have a marvelous barbershop quartet tradition here –

very, very active. We have people who get together every Sunday afternoon to sing in Welsh. I had a friend who did that and I went there. Welsh is one of those languages I think it helps if you've heard it from birth, but the Welsh National Singing Convention was held here about 10 years ago and I went to that. We also have a tremendous and wonderful African American singing tradition here and I've been very privileged to be part of some of the Bridges community programs that have happened through the MN Chorale, where we've teamed up with other choruses. So the German's here, the Scandinavian's here, but there's a lot more here if you just check around a little bit.

Q Talk a bit more about the Bridges concept and what you have observed as a result of that kind of programming that they wouldn't have in your typical orchestra hall gig.

A The Bridges program that the MN Choral does is one program that we do every year that builds bridges to the community. And every year it's something different. I haven't done all of them. One of the ones I did that was most meaningful to me was a program where we worked with the African American community and I say that because there are very few black singers, unfortunately, in the MN Chorale. But so much of choral singing comes up through the church traditions and churches are one of the last bastions of segregation in this country. Not all of them by any means, but they still exist. So we did this Bridges program with conductors from various African American churches in town. Every time we had a rehearsal we had a presentation on some part of the African American tradition, spirituals, gospel which are different and we should know that, and really where the tradition came from. That was very, very important to me. The other one that I really enjoyed was doing the Rachmaninoff Vespers. The fascinating thing about that was there's a very large Russian community in the Twin Cities. Many came over in the '80's when Gorbachev loosened things up. But to a large extent the Russian community in the Twin Cities is Jewish. So to do an Rachmaninoff Easter piece and invite the Russian community in the Twin Cities seemed to me a very funny thing. But on the other hand, they came in droves. Of course the vespers isn't even exactly in Russian. It's in church Slavonic. But it was so much fun and the fact that we sent out invitations in Russian and all that sort of thing – it was a wonderful thing.

Q Choral music is increasingly being viewed as one way to address some of society's most pressing issues. 9/11 is an example – although pieces weren't written for that specifically immediately. Later they were. Talk about how choral music can help audiences explore and understand some of society's issues that we're all wrestling with.

A I think choral music addresses social issues for the audiences, but even more for the participants. Six years ago I got married and acquired teenagers – two teen-age stepdaughters and it made me very, very interested in what our kids learn to do and how they learn to do it. And that's where I see the biggest...for me, right now in my life, the biggest power of choral music that you're doing something together, you're expressing the emotions, you're learning discipline. I saw the Harlem Boys Choir at one point walking along two by two through a college campus. They got to play sometimes too, but there's a lot of discipline involved. And you learn to do something really, really well. One of the things that happens is that you grow up and you go out into the business world is you're always doing things as well as you can do given the amount of time, given the budget, given what your boss will let you do. But when you're doing music you're often doing it as well as you are capable in this time of your life and craft. I think everybody should experience that.

Q What do you think we can all do to help instill a passion for singing among the younger generations coming along?

A For the younger generation – when I was growing up I sang my way to school. There was no Walkman, there was not iPod. And I would be a curmudgeon and say, all of that has killed singing. But it hasn't. Because my younger stepdaughter sings along with her iPod. And she knows all the words. And the more we can encourage that, I think the better off we are. We still do funky things in the car. We sing, My Favorite Things, and the dad who's a recorder player not a singer, his line is doodly doodly doo. Which he comes in on time on and we all laugh and its part of what we all do together. So the more you can keep them singing. Sing along with the Ipod, play with the Ipod. Absolutely.

Q Can you recount any comments from an audience member who may have just experienced a musical event – whether or not you were in it or not – evidence of an audience member who's been particularly moved by some kind of classical music performance?

A Comments from an audience member – I think what's coming up for me is during that time when my life was so troubled and I called the MN Chorale and auditions were in two weeks, but they were going to sing the Brahms Requiem in three days. So I went. I had never heard the Brahms Requiem on recording before so I had the distinct privilege of hearing it for the first time in a concert hall. There are times when a particular piece and a particular time of your life come together. In that Requiem there is so much sorrow and so much anger and so much peace. In the second movement I think, the funeral cortege, all flesh is as the grass, and it starts out with 150 voices singing so softly you can hardly hear them. And then the sudden fortissimo, I thought, he's got it. He's got how I feel. Cool. I want to do that.

Q Anything else you want to add?

A One of the things I wrote about that I feel very deeply about is followership. Especially right now while we're taping it's an election period so we're so focused on the leader. Who will be our leader? Who will be our leader? And I think what can happen is if the leader you want to get elected doesn't get elected you can think, ahh. I might as well fold up my tents and go home. But I think what music teaches us – and any orchestra player will tell you this – there are times when the conductor slips up, doesn't cue you. Or maybe it's a conductor who you don't even think is all that great. But you love the music, you love the piece, you're here to make music. You choose to do that. And that's being an exemplary follower. You can follow the podium, you can follow the beat. But you're here to serve the music. I think that applies in any part of life. We are here on this earth to serve and if the president you want to get elected doesn't get elected, that doesn't change. You still have the things you believe in and you can still work for them. And that's what I think being a great follower is and that's what choral music teaches us.