Jordan Sramek
Interviewed by Peter Myers at Plymouth Congregational Church, April 22, 2008

Q I'd like to start out talking about your early childhood memories of music. What kind of early experiences did you have with music – vocal or otherwise – growing up in your home and school and church?

A I came from a really musical family, but it wasn't in the sense that I think a lot of people think of. I didn't have brothers and sisters running around singing three-part harmony. I certainly didn't have – at least in my dad's case – a parent that could really hold a tune. Although he would argue with that. But I think my mother's side is probably the most musical of them all. However, I have to say that when I was visiting relatives in the former Czechoslovakia, I was amazed at how many of my relatives – both on my mother's and father's side – were musical people. And my background is Czech. Some people say that the Czech people inherently, it's in their genes that they will break out in song and they've never had a lesson in their life. But there was something extra there. So I think that there must be something that's a part of me that does that.

Q Keep on going from that point. What first hooked you into music?

A I was encouraged by my family to pursue what I think I was displaying as some musical talent. I grew up on a farm; I grew up in a town of 150 people in northern Minnesota. To put it into perspective, this was a town that hardly had an art center and the high school – the school I went to was actually a K-12, about 16 kids in my class. We didn't have a choir. We had a band, but only for the purpose of playing at football games. So there was hardly a music program. So my musical encouragement came from within my family. I think even though my folks probably didn't understand what exactly it was that I was interested in – I was…this was a farm, this was a beef farm and most of the kids there were talking about baling hay and feeding the cows, not playing the piano. But what my parents did do, was they realized that I had a really good ear and I think it was because my mother herself was a musician, decided to get an old piano. They bought for something like $100 bucks and they put it out in the old grain depot, which was on the land of our farm. When I say grain depot, it was a train depot where we kept grain, actually. I played that old piano, which was never tuned, and I played it and played it and played it, and I would learn songs that I heard on the radio and I would just start plinking them out by ear. And I think my parents realized that I had some type of musical talent and being a good, Catholic family they decided that it was my duty to become the church organist. So at age 9, which to them was not strange in any way, they put me up there on the organ. I think I played Kumbaya or something like that and I just kind of taught myself chords. And from then on I really…I became obsessed with learning guitar chords, but for piano. So I could read charts, I could read guitar chords and things like that and I just kind of made up accompaniments as it went. Then finally I got piano lessons. But singing – really not a part of my life. It was not that I wasn't encouraged. I sang well, I was in choir in various forms – hardly in school, of course – but I was singing a lot, especially when it came to high school because my family had moved away from the farm. We moved to Duluth, which was a haven for us, when I was about 12 or 13 and I joined a real, live choir. So I not only started accompanying the choir, but I was also singing. And thankfully I had a lot of teachers who were extremely encouraging to me and really helped kind of shape my interest in

choral music. Although at the time you didn't really call it choral music; you just knew you liked to sing and that was that.

Q And where did you go on to higher education when you left Duluth?

A I have really nothing to hide, when I think about it. I heard that Peter Jennings was a high school dropout, so I hereby now proclaim to the world that I, too, am a high school dropout. In the latter part of my senior year…I was living on my own since I was 16. So I had my own apartment, I had my own job, I was a fairly independent young man and I just came to the point where I decided that high school was just not my thing and I really wasn't pursuing much music at that particular time. So I quit high school, I sold most of my belongings, what I had, and I went to Europe. I traveled around Europe for many, many months and I not only visited relatives in at that time what was still Czechoslovakia, but I visited friends that I had met – you know the German exchange student that I had met in high school and a friend who happened to be staying in Italy and one who lived in London and the list goes on and on. I just kind of pieced together a little backpacking trip, grew my hair out nice and long and I just traveled. And I think that was when I realized that there was more in the world, I realized that I loved architecture; I realized that I loved old churches. I couldn't get enough of the great European cities. The first thing that I would do is walk into a church. I'm not even sure if it had anything to do with music. It was just there was something about being in an old, ancient space that captured me like nothing else. I felt like I had finally realized something about me. But it wasn't until I left Europe – I had received news from my family that my grandmother on my mother's side was very ill – she was still living on the farm and she needed someone to take care of her or she was going to be put into a nursing home. And I decided to take on the task myself. And I spent a summer with her and then realized – at that time I was in my early '20s – that it was time to pursue an education. So I got my GED and then I started studying at the College of St. Scholastica in Duluth, which ironically enough had at the time one of the nation's only undergraduate programs in early music. I didn't know what early music was to save my life, really, and I thought I was just going to go in as a piano major. But a very fine, wonderful, incredible nun named Sr. Monica took me under her wing and not only taught me theory after most of the students in my freshman theory class had dropped out, but also told me under no circumstances was I going to do anything but sing Gregorian Chants. She said, Jordan Sramek you were born to sing Gregorian Chant. And you know, when a nun tells you this, you listen. Little did I know that I think her prophecy would come true in myriad ways.

Q So how did you go from that point to the Rose Ensemble, which you founded?

A After I left college I realized that I was really hungry to just sing. I spent so much time in college grabbing fellow colleagues and saying, here I've got this stack of madrigals, I've got this stack of Renaissance motets; let's all just sing them. To me that was fun and it was exciting. The whole…the thrilling experience of picking up a piece of music and sight-reading it was something that I just loved. It sounds so geeky, I know, but this is choral music so… I really realized that I wasn't going to be able to really fulfill my interest in being a singer and I don't even know if I was thinking professional singer, I just meant a good singer – without leaving Duluth and moving to the Twin Cities. That just seemed like the right thing to do so I auditioned for a couple of early music ensembles that were in existence at the time. That was I think about 1994. And I started singing with them and it was just the most exhilarating thing. I could not believe

that I was actually singing with other people who liked early music. It was like finding my long lost tribe or something. I can't explain it. It was just so magical and so wonderful. But that was short-lived. Both groups I started singing with had kind of folded and I found myself in this sea, this pool of incredible talent, choral talent, with no real vehicle. There were, of course, the professional ensembles. At the time I don't think I felt that I was good enough to get into them, although soon thereafter I ended up singing in Vocalessence and others, Plymouth Music Series. But I really wanted to do early music. I really wanted to sing early music and I knew there were other people in town who felt the same way. So I just grabbed a couple people, I threw together a show, and I learned a lot about myself and I was encouraged by a lot of people who said, you not only have a great musical talent but you have a programming talent. That was something that really struck me and it stays with me to this day – that the whole art of programming, of creating a concert program and assembling it is really an art form. And I think it's, quite frankly, an often overlooked and underestimated, undervalued if nothing else, art form. But I also realized that I loved ensemble singing. I could solo; it would be fine. But there was something about putting together an ensemble, a small ensemble that was comprised of musicians who were extremely independent and that could only be, that would be only challenged to sing one on a part. That was the exciting thing for me. And it was way beyond singing madrigals. It was all about being that soloist and being that ensemble member and switching gears very quickly that I found as exciting as anything.

Q Having sung in VocalEssence and other groups, you've obviously sung other great repertoire – contemporary and perhaps Mozart and Bach and Brahms and everything else. But after singing all that music, what is it you think that really draws you to early music? Is it a connection with those great cathedrals and imagining those pieces being done there 300 years ago?

A I wonder a lot about what it is about early music that grabbed me. I think that I've had a…I wouldn't say a love/hate relationship with early music, but I'm still trying to figure out what it is about early music that really grabbed me. I think it's medieval music. I mean, early music is such a strange genre and it's a strange title. People in the choral world and the musical world, more appropriately, know what early music is. But it refers to a time – everything in western terms, from before 1750. And when you look at that time frame, it's a massive amount of repertoire. That encompasses the medieval, the renaissance and the baroque periods. So to think that that's all being lumped together so people say, oh Jordan. He's an early music specialist. And I think, you mean to say that you're saying that I'm a specialist in both Gregorian Chant – Palestrina, for example – and Bach? That's just crazy. I don't think anybody really could be, but I think that we – for better or for worse – have been kind of lumped together in this great world of early music. And I'm fine with that and I think our programming really exemplifies that, and beyond for sure. But personally speaking, it's medieval music that I think really grabbed me. The idea of the earliest forms of polyphony. The idea that harmonies were just beginning to be used. I have this wondrous imagination of what it must have been like when those monks or nuns or whoever they were that were chanting and chanting for centuries and then all of a sudden brother or sister so-and-so decided to start singing another note, a harmony, two notes sounding at the same time. That, to me, is just fascinating to think what it must have been like. Obviously, there were things evolutionally speaking, if I can use that word, that led up to that. But when harmony first started being used, that must have been the most wondrous – or quite frankly it could have been the most horrendous – musical moment. And I think that when we bring ourselves to that moment and realize what the real musical foundation is for western

repertoire, we have such a better understanding when we look at music like Bach or Mozart or Argento for that matter.

A You know, I don't know if I've ever talked about some of this stuff. In interviews, I'm so used to being asked about how did you start the group and…it just kind of goes from there. But talking about my childhood and my first interest in early music – I just don't remember the last time somebody asked me….

Q It's fun. Most of those things may not be for the actual documentary but I'm just thinking that everybody has lots of stories. If nothing else, this is a little biographical capsule of all these different conductors and singers. Why not, since you're here? I'm also trying to figure out any kind of connections – if any – between having grown up with music at an early age and being totally committed to it as an adult. In other words, how many adults that are totally into music now did not have any good music growing up? Haven't found many. You had to stretch in a town of 100, but you had the organ.

Q Talk about the art of programming, especially given the repertoire that you're working with and the fact that most of it is not widely known. How do you go about putting together your programs?

A I just don't think…the whole art, the idea of programming, it's importance can be stressed enough. I think that it's really what makes or breaks a wonderful program. I mean, you can put fabulous music on stage in a concert program and it can be received in a fairly mediocre way. But I think that if its assembled in a way that really – with the audience in mind, is the most important point – that it can make an otherwise…I don't know, interesting but not so interesting program, a really great program. I learned that early on, that if I was going to be programming early music and I was going to be creating concerts, that I needed some sort of skeleton, I needed a structure, an outline or some type of approach that I would use all the time. It wasn't that I wanted to milk the same idea by any means, but I wanted to find a way that really helped me develop what it was to make a concert program. And the idea of thematic programming, which is not…it's hardly an original idea. God knows most people are always using themes to program, but it goes way beyond that with the Rose Ensemble because I think one of the biggest challenges in the world of early music – locally, nationally, internationally – is avoiding pelting the audience with one obscurity after another. There's just, there's no sense in that. And I think that oftentimes it's a way to completely disenfranchise…I don't know what the word is to describe it, but a lot of audiences will leave feeling really flat about the whole experience saying, well I didn't recognize one piece. Well let's be real folks – most of the time people aren't going to recognize a song. But it's when they don't need to ask themselves that, they don't need to observe that they didn't know anything, and they just say, wow I learned something. And that's where I think the Rose Ensemble's programming really comes in, is that we've been able to use thematic programming to explore a number of different topics and a number of different issues – politicians, historical figures, historical ideas – whether they're war or disease or love or religion and religious ideas and religious events, geography and the list goes on and on. And also language. I think language is one of those things that we forget about when it comes to programming. Language is the vehicle that we use to express music. It's a basic idea, but people forget that language is one of those themes that we can use in a concert program to help people understand, oh that's why Latin sounds this way or that's why Hebrew or Arabic has such an importance in a particular place or time. So our programming in the Rose Ensemble has just exploded with ideas and different genres

and different concepts. And our audience has been incredibly receptive to that. The European audience, of course, is different than the American audience by far. And we even go so far as to say that the Minnesota audience is different than the US or North American audience. But I think that the fact still remains that a great…a well assembled program is oftentimes the key to making a concert program really, really wonderful.

Q Talk more about how the Minnesota audience is perhaps different than the national, US audience. You're operating in an environment that is filled with choruses of every shape, size and color. What is the audience experience like for you in Minnesota?

A We joke in the ensemble all the time, very lovingly, about Minnesota and MN audiences. And I do mean very lovingly. We are all – for better or for worse – we are all Minnesotans ourselves, and we love it here. We wouldn't be here if we didn't love it here. We joke and say that Minnesota's the Land of 10,000 Choirs. It's obviously not true, but I think it really drives home the point that there is a lot of singing going on in this state. There's no question about it. And there has been for a long, long time. I think that the musical scene, the choral scene in Minnesota in the last ten years or so, fifteen, has really, it's really changed dramatically. There are a lot more groups in town and there's a lot more kinds of vocal music being performed. The Rose Ensemble in one way people refer to as a choir – oh we're going to have the Rose Ensemble, they're a choir, they're an early music choir. But in another sense, people never call us a choir; they call us a vocal ensemble, because we don't operate like the typical choir. I don't conduct. I'm not standing up with my back to the audience doing any sort of thing like this. I'm a singer just as well as everybody else in the ensemble. I may give an upbeat and a cutoff, but that's about it. And we've started to memorize a lot more of our music, even though that's not necessarily unique to us for sure. But because of the fact that we're so small, from an audience perspective we operate much more like say a string quartet as opposed to a choir. What I mean by that is that we have character, we have individual personalities and faces that we bring out through the course of a program. Almost always just about everyone in the ensemble will have a solo in any given program. And that enables the audience to get to know us as individuals as opposed to kind of a wash of faces or a wash of musicians. So the Minnesota audience I think, at first, was very struck by the Rose Ensemble's approach to performing because they weren't used to getting this personality. It's not to say that Minnesota choirs in general have not personality – that's not what I'm saying. It's just that it's different. We're a vocal ensemble that takes the idea of the typical acapella ensemble several steps farther. But Minnesota audiences are easy to perform for. They love choral music – vocal music specifically – and I think they're willing to put up with a lot. I think they're willing to say, ok that's fine. They experimented a little bit with that…and I should say that they're also willing to voice their opinions, which is strange because I think by design, for better or for worse, Minnesotans tend not to want to talk about what they like or don't like. But we encourage that. And it's amazing when our audience decides, hey you know what Jordan? I didn't like that. I didn't like what you did. Please don't do that anymore. I think that's great. I'd rather have them say that, than not say anything at all and never come back.

Q Just for the record, if you had to describe the Rose Ensemble to someone who was not familiar with it, in 25 words or less how would you describe the ensemble?

A One of the most difficult things for me and my musicians and my board and my staff is to describe what the heck it is that we are – that Rose Ensemble. So we always

talk, we joke about our elevator speech – if somebody comes in and you've got 30 seconds, what would you say? I still have trouble with this because there's so much as the director and the founder that I want to say, I want them to know. And I think it depends on who I'm talking to, who my audience is. But I'll say this: the Rose Ensemble is a vocal ensemble that specializes in what's known as early music, which is a general term referring to music from before 1750. But we explore different kinds of spirituality and we, I think, stretch the barriers between the sacred and the secular and the folk and the more structured classical traditions.

Q Lets talk about the European audiences. First, just describe briefly your trip to Spain this past fall, why you went there and what you did and what came out of it all.

A Our trip to Spain in October of 2007 marked our third consecutive trip to Europe. We had been in France, and Germany prior to that and we were, well I have to say, pretty darned excited about going to Europe three times in a row. But this one was different. Prior to that we had been invited to a couple of festivals; we had been on a sister city project with the city of Minneapolis and city of St. Paul, but now we were competing. We are not competitive people in the Rose Ensemble; we're just trying to get by just like everyone else. Our standards are really high, but when it comes to a competition per se, we had no idea what we were getting ourselves into. Do we have any regrets? No, because we won, which was great. But it's…it's certainly not that we didn't take it seriously. It's just that we were going to Europe and we were competing against 20 some other choirs from all over the world, and these were good, good choirs. Granted we were in different categories – we were in a very specific category. We had a sacred competition and we had a secular competition. We were performing against groups that were 16 or fewer and all of which were professional. But let me tell you something. When you hear a Slovenian choir, for example, or a British choir and they get up there like a powerhouse…name one of these groups, a professional group like the Tallis Scholars that's only ten voices and it just kills a room with volume…and here's the Rose Ensemble, us little meager MN musicians. Granted, we joke among ourselves all the time that we don't sing, we shout. Because we're known to put out a fair amount of volume for only 12 singers, but we were really, we were really, we felt daunted by the entire experience. But we thought, we've committed to this and we're going to do the best job we can. The other thing that was great about the competition is the fact that we were required to perform other kinds of music besides the music that we were comfortable with –early music. So we had to do some romantic repertoire, we had to do a contemporary repertoire – both sacred and secular. And I was so excited about this because I thought finally we'll get a chance to sing other kinds of music. Not that we were bored with early music. I just feel like it's so important to branch out. And on the European scene – whether it's a competition or not – you, as an American choir especially are…not required, but you're expected to do American music. People want to hear it. European audiences…I'm sure everyone will agree when I say this, but European audiences when they see an American group want to hear spirituals. And I personally didn't want to sing spirituals, I was against it. I'm still against it, to a certain degree. But we had settled on one that we thought would work really well. And we did the competition and we were fortunate enough to win first place in the sacred and second place in the secular competition. But I will tell you something: there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that we didn't work hard. I'm not saying that we deserved it, by any means, because quite frankly some of these other groups were phenomenal. It's just that we worked so hard. Harder than we'd ever worked in at that time in all of our twelve years of being together. And I felt so immensely proud. And after we left the stage after

the sacred competition – we had been shaking for three hours in a cold, very nervous room before we went out on stage – and I felt so exhilarated knowing that we did the best we could. And everyone in the group knew it and we kind of just nervously hugged each other and said, you know what? It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if whether we win because we did a great job. And I think winning was only, was just the icing for us. It was really…it was amazing. The whole town was part of this festival. And immediately we were invited to a festival in France and we had other offers that came in within the next month and I thought, wow, this is really nice.

Q Well deserved, I'm sure. Europeans know a few things about choral music. Talk about the role that choral music plays in Western Europe today as opposed to the role it plays in the US. Do you have any knowledge of that?

A I can venture. I feel that when we speak about the European choral scene it's important to recognize the fact that every country and every city for that matter, has it's own scene. Just like in the US in a lot of ways. But generally speaking, I think that choral music is certainly different than it is in North America, for a couple of reasons, big reasons. One is the fact that I think European audiences can tolerate a longer concert. They have no problem sitting down for 2, 3, 3-1/2 hours and hearing a concert. And quite frankly programming – a diverse program with a lot of variety – is hardly on their list of wants. They'll do an all Bach program, they'll do an all Palestrina program, the list goes on and on. And there's absolutely no, there are no complaints. I think European audiences are also not afraid to make a lot of noise. Trust me, I know this. They'll make a lot of noise during a concert. They'll walk in and out. I don't think they're willing to pay nearly as much to hear a concert because it's just an everyday occurrence. But there's one thing I can say: a choral concert in Europe – and it doesn't matter where it is as far as I'm concerned – is packed. It's always packed. And it's not…people would say, oh it's the tourists. It's not the tourists. It's the locals who love the choral music. I think, of course, if you were a group from out of the country and you're performing – in our case, an American choir – you do tend to expect a bigger audience because American choirs are loved in Europe for the most part. But personally speaking, as a group that specializes in early music, we have a big challenge and that is that some European audiences say, wait a minute. They're an American group? What are they doing early music? That's our music. I want to hear a spiritual. I think American audiences, that's where things are very, very different. American audiences, in my opinion, will not tolerate a longer concert. It's incredible to me. We go to movies…we'll sit through a movie for two hours – even longer – but unfortunately there are no car crash scenes in choral concerts and as a result I think our attention spans tend to be a little bit shorter. And that's ok. I think that's the reason why we have to be as inventive as we possibly can in the American scene. I think dumbing down the repertoire is the wrong move. I just think it's the matter of a keenly well managed, well thought out program to really bring your audience along. And that doesn't mean that we have to use a dance company – even thought the Rose has, so I'm hardly insulting anyone else. I think the use of narration – something that we've done – has really helped. But again I just think it's a matter of putting together a program that brings the audience along, brings the listener along on some type of a journey or a story.

Q Talk about the singers in your ensemble. You've got a very unique situation. Very small ensemble, basically a capella except for a few instruments. How do you go about auditioning singers and what do you look for in finding a singer who will fit into this very specialized kind of group?

A I can say my feelings about auditions are fairly concentrated. I hate them. I hate auditions as a singer, I am nervous beyond belief when I, myself have auditioned. And I should say for the record that I auditioned for the Dale Warland Singers three times and never got in. But I did sing in Vocalessence and that was a great experience. But I think in terms of the Rose Ensemble, I hate auditions also because I don't want to put people through this incredibly nerve-wracking experience but we have to audition in order to find out what they can do. So what I try to do when I audition singers is to make them as comfortable as possible. I rarely have them come in with prepared pieces and things. I start singing with them and I make sure it's a piece that I have not really spent any time with. Sometimes it's a piece I've never seen. I sight read along with them. I let them know that I am a singer as well and I start establishing a very basic relationship. The good news for the Rose in the last several years is the fact that we have had so little turnover so that I normally don't have to audition much at all. And when we do have a need for an extra singer or somebody leaves the group – which is really, we've been so lucky not to have a lot of turnover – I normally just ask my colleagues who do you know, who've you worked with, who are you gigging with these days? And they'll normally say, so and so – great reader, great language ability, can solo, can do ensemble work. And then we'll bring them in, we'll throw them in with the rest of the group and we'll see how they work. With a group as small as ours, personality is really important. It's not that we have to like the person. It's the fact that they have to be able to work well with us. There's just no room for divas, for example, in a group like ours. Although some would say that all twelve of us are divas and that's the reason why it does work.

Q Talk about any collaborations you have had with other musical organizations in MN over your years with the Rose.

A We had worked with a dance company before this, but in terms of other musicians or other artists it's only been in kind of the dreaming stage. We only recently have started talking with Cantus. Some would say, in the choral field, what are you doing? You're sleeping with the enemy. I don't see Cantus as the enemy. I have people joke about this all the time. They say, you know 30 years from now it's going to be Cantus and the Rose Ensemble in the Twin Cities choral scene like Vocalessence and Dale Warland were for so many years. I'm not going to touch that, to be perfectly honest, because some would say that there was I don't know what, some sort of weird vibes, or I don't know, I don't think it really matters. What I do know is that there were weird vibes in the beginning – I haven't talked to the folks in Cantus about this – but I think that they would agree that I think people were feeding us like, oh yeah do you know they're doing all this touring and you're not and then you're doing all this stuff in town and they're not kind of thing. And I thought, well I don't really mind this because it seems to me that this is a really big, it's a big choral scene, there's plenty of room in this town. But more recently Eric Light of Cantus and I have been talking about doing a collaboration. We've been talking about this for a while now. What's exciting to me is that we're taking the time to get to know each other. We're taking the time to understand each others' processes. They rehearse very differently than we do. And they're also a full time professional group and we're not yet. So I think there are some obstacles to overcome. There are some challenges to work through. But I…as far as I know we're planning on doing a collaboration for the '09/'10 season, which I guess we haven't really formally announced and we probably will at some point. But I'm really, I'm looking forward to it and I think that putting all of us onstage, which will equal almost 20 professional singers, is going to be incredible.

Q Is there anything you want to say about the Rose Ensemble or your work?

A If you look at the Rose Ensemble's brand, if you look at our publicity materials, you normally don't see the name Jordan Sramek next to it. You see it sometimes, next to the logo. But my board and my fellow musicians and my colleagues always say, Jordan you never take credit. You never say the kinds of things that should be said about your artistry and about the work that you put in. I just don't think that the name, Jordan Sramek, needs to be next to the Rose Ensemble. The Rose Ensemble is what it is and I am looking forward to the day when people don't use the Rose Ensemble and Jordan Sramek synonymously. There was a conversation I had not that long ago where someone introduced me as Jordan Sramek, the director of the Jordan Ensemble and then corrected themselves. And I thought, no, no this cannot be. But I guess my point is this: I founded the group and I often don't mention that. I think sometimes people as just the artistic director. I did start the group myself. I always tell this funny story about how I started the group in my bedroom and I started it on my credit card and I was hugely in debt – I mean thousands and thousands of dollars in debt. But I just kept at it.