

## **Louise Miner**

Interviewed by Peter Myers at Landmark Center, St. Paul, July 10, 2008

Q Talk a little bit about what was happening in your family, your church or your school while you were growing up.

A Sure. Great. So I grew up in a family that really loved music. My mom came from a family that loved music; my dad came from a family that loved music so we sang a lot in my family. Dad played the piano. We stood around the piano and sang and we sang on car trips and we... In my dad's family – and I learned this just before he died – his father arranged music for my dad and his two brothers. They all played instruments and he...so they played and they sang and it would be a big rite of passage at a family reunion to sing a part along with one of them; that was really a cool thing. In my mom's family, her dad – actually both of her parents – really loved the opera. They lived outside of New York and they were...they listened a lot to classical music and my mom was classically trained as a pianist and not necessarily much of a singer. But after college she sang in a big chorus in New York. So she still comes out to hear the MN Chorale. She thinks that's really cool. So we still...I've just come back from a family reunion and we still sing. We sang every night, late into the night and have learned a lot of songs together as a family. It's fun.

Q Talk about your singing in more recent years here. I know you've been in a number of choirs. Talk about your MN Chorale experience, maybe a high point or two. And also lets talk about what you did when you joined the gospel choir for a time.

A As an adult my singing really has focused, my choral singing has focused with the MN Chorale. I've been in the MN Chorale for 27 years and gotten a chance to sing almost all the big works on my life list. So it's very exciting. And along the way we did a project – an outreach project, one of the Bridges programs with the African American community – we've actually done two. But the first one we did was just a knock your socks off, fabulous program. I don't know if you, Peter, were involved in that but there were a number of choirs – the Leigh Morris Choir, Sam Davis was one of the directors – that we came together with and collaborated. We worked at the church on 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue. One night we were in a rehearsal there and a guy walked in off the street, a young man looking for help. I think Sam Davis was working with us and he's a minister and he worked with this man right in front of us and it was just, it was so powerful. And I thought, you know there's something...we learned so much of the stuff by rote that we worked with the other singers on – the big massed numbers – there's something about this that I don't understand, but its really important. So I went and joined the Twin Cities Community Gospel Choir in an outreach project that they had and I got a chance to sing with them a few times and that was really something. No music. No music at all. Everyone's sitting in rehearsal holding

up a tape recorder to tape what goes on and to learn everything by ear in your car or at home. Not even a word sheet. And then, in the moment, it gets created. The choruses get repeated and repeated, different sections coming out of A and B sections, and every time different. It was really a blast. I turned out to be something I couldn't kind of keep up, couldn't really be in two choruses that had a weekly rehearsal forever. Or not even for very long. But that was a fabulous experience.

Q That was quite a shift for you, going from largely classical, European repertoire with a fairly studious approach to learning music, to the gospel choir where you learn by rote and it's not an auditioned choir. Talk about how you felt joining that kind of group and those kind of people who had very different backgrounds than you probably sang with normally.

A Well it was an interesting process to join the Twin Cities Community Gospel Choir with Robby Robinson. I did know one singer – we have a singer in the MN Chorale who has sung in a number of choruses all at the same time, Judy Dworkin – and so I knew Judy and she's an alto. So I could ask questions of her because it really...the whole rehearsal process is really different. Each section has a section leader and the section leader basically teaches the section and sings the part along with the section and the section learns from the section leader. The leader walks up and down the rows, kind of exhorts the section to greater heights, three parts and not parts that I...not really soprano, alto, other, but sort of high, medium, low and different...not divided men and women. So plenty of women on a low part. The director would say what we were going to sing and we'd stand up and he'd teach it and we'd learn it. We'd have our section leaders that we could watch and we'd be taping away. It wasn't like anything I knew. I was real...I thought I was going to be great at it, frankly, because I love learning stuff by ear. But this was really harder than I expected by miles. I hardly went anywhere without my tape, in my car particularly, just playing these songs over and over again. The first concert that we did, we probably did 20 songs and each of them was...had its own stuff. And they weren't...I'd never heard of any of those titles before; not one. So that was just really exciting. I had heard them...they would perform all over the place. They would get gigs and whoever could go, would go. I heard them perform at a wedding. That was sort of the other thing that was exciting to me about them. It was like, I want that; that is remarkable. How are they doing that? And we also had to learn how to move. They teach how to move with the music and it is really, it's something to be learned if it's not in your body, and it wasn't in mine. But it was really, oh gosh, it was really, really a fun experience. Very moving; I wept through these concerts. I just was amazed at the power of this music to just be so soul-filled, so physically compelling, so emotionally compelling, not very sophisticated lyrics, not even very sophisticated musical patterns. But put together it was just a total experience; just fabulous. Yeah.

Q When did you first hear the TCCGC?

A Got it. I heard the Twin Cities Community Gospel Choir for the first time at a wedding, a wedding of a colleague and they were singing at the reception. It was just a group of them off to the side, probably 12 singers and the director was someone I came to know as one of the section leaders in that group. And they were...it seemed as though they were just manufacturing this amazing musical experience right in front of us. It was so exciting and energizing and enthralling it was hard for me to be in a conversation with anybody, or to get around this wedding because all I wanted to do was pay attention to the Twin Cities Community Gospel Choir – that's what I learned later, was that group and that that's what they did at the time was that they went around in small groups, they responded to requests and performed. Their music is so...people learn it to the degree that you can up and go and do it with any configuration and it works. It was really cool.

Q Tell a story about how choral music has made an impact on your life or on someone that you know.

A Well, it's hard to pick a powerful story from my experience with the MN Chorale because there have been so many of them. I was reflecting a little bit about that and thinking about coming here today and...our trips outside of the Twin Cities were really powerful and we went to Puerto Rico in I think 1985 or '86 to sing at the Pablo Casals festival. That was quite an experience. It was June, it was hot and there we were...one-time performance with this amazing bass Justino Diaz and this amazing joining with a Spanish chorus, instruction in Spanish and the performance night which was really exciting – The Damnation of Faust – and the place was filled with people in furs and jewels, here to hear us and to consider our music so remarkable. They went nuts at the end. It was so exciting to feel like they heard us. And we had that experience even to a greater degree when we went to Mexico City to sing with the National Symphony of Mexico with Enrique Domeque, who was there, the music director – this was like 1990 or so – and we were there for a week and rehearsed every day with a Spanish choir, together – this was Mahler 8<sup>th</sup> Symphony – big, big, big work. We were packed on this gigantic stage and we did it twice and something happened that I have never seen before or since, which is we had this tremendous performance and we had really worked hard – this is a hard piece, you know – Latin, German, so densely scored that there's parts of it where there's probably twelve parts going at once, choral parts, and a lot to illuminate each of the parts and the...he really had worked hard. This guy was perspiring, knocking himself out. And we got done and people yelled and yelled, and bravo-ed and bravo-ed. It was very exciting, we felt very heard. And then a conversation between the audience and the conductor started happening and it's in Spanish and we don't know what's going on. And somebody said, I think they're asking him for us to sing this again. And that, in fact, was the case. We couldn't...it was like, you've got to be kidding! People had just sat there for two hours listening to this huge work; they don't really want to hear it again. Well, really they did. And he turned

around and he gave us a measure number, which was probably a third of the way from the end, and we sang it again. And it was just so phenomenal to feel so heard; that these people had really listened and wanted more of this music. It was very exciting. Just a tremendous experience. And we did it twice – we did this work twice – and it happened the second time we did it, too. It wasn't just that once and he came to talk to us when we were warming up for the second performance and he was just overcome. He was thanking us and wow this is really terrific and really put his career on...it was the opening of their season. And then to have it again, we were so thrilled for him and then just to be able to do it. So that was really a fun experience. But we have had some great experiences here. The first Brahms Requiem with Joel Revzen, probably in 1985 or so, where we had to...MN Chorale wasn't really performing regularly with the MN Orchestra, time to time, and this was our concert so we had to raise the money to do it. It was a one-time concert at Orchestra Hall and it was really...Joel poured himself into this. And whenever I sing the Brahms Requiem – and I've been lucky enough to sing it four times I believe, four series – I hear him in my head speaking the German and how important each of the phrases was. You should taste that fruit in your mouth, he would say. Anyway, that was just a fabulous experience to do that and I was lucky enough to be part of the fundraising for that. The Chorale said to Joel, yeah we'll do it, but you need to raise the money outside of our normal fundraising channels because we didn't plan it in this year and we can't jeopardize our funding. I remember I wasn't on the board but I was on the advisory board...somehow involved in the organization and he asked, how can we do this? And I said, well let's ask my Aunt Clydie. She's a long-time Wayzata resident and she'll have some ideas. Joel and Clydie and I went out for dinner and talked about how could we raise some money for the Brahms Requiem and we ended up asking people to give money in memory of someone who had died, and the program had all these dedications to all these people reflecting various donors and their gifts. That was a great project. My high point of last year was the sing-along Messiah. We've had these amazing experiences. I hope other people have talked about that because that was really something. You were there.

Q Talk about one of the most amazing experiences you've had.

A One of my most amazing and memorable experiences of the last couple years was the sing-along Messiah that we did with the MN Orchestra at Orchestra Hall actually this past December 2007. I think what was really exciting about it...there hasn't been a sing-along Messiah in town in a long time. The St. Paul Chamber Orchestra did them for a number of years in a row and it was really fun, people would really turn out in numbers to come. And then it hadn't been undertaken. And this was really not just a sing-along Messiah; it was really a concert version sing-along Messiah. The MN Chorale had 44 singers onstage who had already done a run of the Messiah performances as concert performances and then there were probably another 70 singers in the audience, in tuxedos, in concert dress, holding down each of the sections. So already there

was a huge commitment to a high quality of an event. And then Kathy – our artistic director, Kathy Romey – had warned us, had slowed down the pace of particularly the runs, the 8<sup>th</sup> notes which unless they're slow, if you haven't been looking at a score in awhile it might not be able to get every note. And she really wanted people to have an experience of singing it. And the orchestra was prepared for this participative experience. I think the hall was filled. It was a terrible day; it was a snowstorm. It was the kind of thing where if you had to choose to go out and go to Orchestra Hall for a sing-along Messiah or stay home in front of the fireplace, it would be easy to imagine that people would stay home. And in fact the place was packed and people had scores. I know I personally invited about 20 people and loaned out all of the scores that I could possibly find. I think I had 8 Messiah's in my house. I kept...I would buy them every time we had a chance...do you want to buy it? Well I love those markings; I think I'll buy that score. Anyway there was a point early on, Kathy was mostly in conversation with and conducting the audience directly, so we...I was singing from the stage and we were following her direction from behind. And she asked, she said, how many people here are planning to sing? And the whole place stood up. It was so exciting. It was just...I could hardly believe it. And you could tell she was just sort of in shock, it was like, oh really. Because sometimes people just come; it's just an opportunity. But people were there and what was such a thrill from the stage is you could see people clustered around scores – two and three heads bobbing their way, trying to feel every note and hand slapping when they would get it. It was really...it was such a community effort. So it was really exciting. I know, Peter, that you were there and I hope you had as fabulous a time as I did. It was really wonderful.

Q It was great and it was a terrible snowstorm and people still showed up.

A I think Orchestra Hall had oversold it. I think there had been an over-subscription with the thought that people wouldn't come. And its probably lucky there was a snowstorm because really the hall was very full. It was shocking in a way, that that could happen. We would sing it at the Ordway as a sing-along Messiah and get pretty good turnout. This was really a phenomenal turnout from my perspective.

Q Doing all this singing and performances and the week after week of long rehearsals and all the commitments even just in one choir, let alone if you're singing in two at the same time...what do you think drives you and so many other people to spend so much of their time and energy week after week going to choir?

A You know, its one of the most fun things I can imagine doing. I know that I have the opportunity when I'm on the stage in every concert to turn to whoever I'm sitting next to and to share the idea – there's nothing better in the whole world; there's no better place to be than where we are right now. Sitting in the best seat in the hall, just about to sing our hearts out, some amazing piece of

music – how could you turn that down? And it is a lot of work. I take lessons. My lesson has been 1:00 on Saturday afternoon for the last 16 years and before that I had lessons at other times but I finally got the right slot for me. I look forward to it; I just love it. I try to sing something pretty much every day if I can because I start to feel uncomfortable if I haven't been singing in a while. I think there's really something about breathing and about heart rate and about health that comes along with singing and being in a chorus requires you to attend to that. You can't really blow it off, you can't come unprepared, you can't get through a week without looking at the score. You have work to do, to be able to stay on the project. And we have really incredible projects. Some of the work is complex and demanding vocally and its really...its stimulating to be there and to do that and to have that many people engaged in the same thing, focused on the same goal, determined to have this thing be the best that it can be. Nobody is sitting in a MN Chorale rehearsal wondering when is this going to be over or how can I get by with the least amount of effort or gosh I wish I were anywhere else. It doesn't happen like that. People...those spots are so desirable. People really wish that they could sing more projects than they can. It's...they're highly sought after seats. And I'm always thrilled when I'm in one of them, able to sing...to sort of sing my heart out if that's what I want to do. Sometimes we're asked to really – depending on the composer and the work and what's going on – to really put our whole...all the vibrato that you have, sing with all the force, and sometimes we're invited to sing very carefully so that we can really illuminate, and very delicate filigree in the music – whatever's going on. So there's a huge range of what's being demanded of the singer. That's kind of fun to work with that, too. Try to have your voice be really the specialized tool that can be adapted for whatever its called to do. I just...I really love it, as you can tell. I've had jobs where I've traveled, I've had so many challenges to keep Monday night open for 27 years and I've done a pretty good job. That's been very exciting. From time to time, it's inevitable that I'm unable to get to rehearsal or do a project if I have to be out of town the week of the concert. But most of the time I'm able to do anything I'm asked to do.

Q If you have any recollection of Kathy's preparation and then handing off to Helmuth Rilling and did he do anything before...can you think of anything about that concert...they were rarely heard works of Brahms.

A This is in reference to a recent project we did this spring with Helmuth Rilling – three works by Brahms, three choral works – one of them a work for women, horn and harp that was really amazing and rarely performed. I think all of the three are rarely performed but some people in the chorus had sung one or both of the other two. Preparing for Helmuth Rilling is always a special thing because he is somebody special to Kathy Romey, our director, who spent time in his home with his children, singing in his choruses, learning under him, and now being in the position of preparing a work for him, which she's done repeatedly. The excitement is there; the tension is a little bit there. She says when family

comes to town you want to be doing your best. So we all pitch in because we want to get it right for her and for him – he’s so remarkable. This man is such a special conductor. So we worked hard on preparing it. Worked hard on the German, particularly. Worked hard on getting it so that it was flexible enough. This is always the challenge if you’re a conductor – a preparation conductor – getting a chorus ready is to be turning over something where the ultimate conductor has the flexibility to be able to work however they want to work in the moment, that we are conversant enough with the score, that we’ve anticipated enough about what might happen, that we’ve tried a number of things whether it’s the way we’re seated or whether it’s the way we’ve rehearsed it. So in any case we were ready – pretty much – I think Kathy would always like to have a few more rehearsals – but we were pretty ready when Helmuth Rilling arrived. He is the most...he’s a sweet man, very gentle, very soft-spoken. We strained to hear his comments. And he is very clear about what he wants. I think what was really wonderful was to work on the work that was for women and horn and harp with him in rehearsal and how carefully he worked with the harpist and with the two horns to get what he wanted. He never was apologetic about going back and going back and going back and really getting the sound that he wanted. A couple of things he did with the orchestra...in the first orchestra rehearsal he talked about...or at least the first rehearsal where we were together with the orchestra he talked about the history of the pieces. He talked about the poetry that they were based on, he talked about what was intended by the composer and sometimes it seems, it might seem to the orchestra that that’s all very well and good but lets get going. But you could have heard a pin drop when he was talking and then at the end they applauded him. That was...it was very meaningful, very moving. I think he was pleased. It was a three performance run – the Friday night performance was broadcast live – and it was...it’s always sad by the time it’s the Saturday night it’s like, we might never sing this again, so let’s just go to town and give it all we have and offer it up for Helmuth and for this wonderful audience and for Kathy and it was a great experience, really a treat to work with him again. He’s...he loves this music, he just loves this music, he loves it with every pore. I didn’t think of him as particularly an expert in the romantic music because he’s known as an expert in Bach. In fact, I had the opportunity to read a book he wrote about the Bach B Minor Mass – or at least try to read a book that he wrote about the Bach B Minor Mass because it is so complex musically that I could only really sort of follow at the top layer. But in any case I really sort of had him mentally pegged there, but he really...that was wrong. He really, really loves this stuff and it was a great experience.

Q Why is group singing so powerful?

A I think there’s something that is called forth from people when they’re signing in a collective that doesn’t happen any other time. And if they say that music is the...is a way to the soul, I think people really bring their spirit forward when they sing and things happen when people are singing that are magical. Connections are made, they’re energetically...I think we know a lot about

vibration – the whole world is a vibration, everything vibrates at a different frequency, we entrain to stronger vibrations, our heart entrains, our pulses entrain, our breathing entrains – and I think there’s something that physically, emotionally, spiritually happens for people when they’re singing together. It’s a uniting force like nothing else and I...for my money I don’t care if it’s great. I love when its great, but it doesn’t have to be great. It doesn’t even have to be good if people just sing together, it’s special; it’s something really remarkable. Just an anecdote about my growing up, we always had a party at Christmas where people came and we had songbooks and everybody sang through all the Christmas carols and if anybody played an instrument they would bring it. Old Mr. Johnson’s mandolin and Uncle Sam’s tuba – it didn’t matter what you had, it would just sort of go with it. It was cacophonous and nuts and it was so much fun. I have replicated that party and we’ve had it for 17 years and people come and its very few schooled singers. When I invite someone they go, oh no all your friends sing. I say, well those aren’t the people that come to our Christmas party – its our neighbors, its our family, its our buddies – people that this is the only time of the year that they actually sing anything. And you can really...I don’t care how many churches you go to, you cannot sing all the Christmas carols that you love in one season. It won’t happen unless you make it happen and we have a night of it. And Gordy from across the street brings his trumpet and little kids have stuff, it’s multi-generational and people just sing and sing and sing until they are hoarse, until they can’t talk. We sing for an hour and a half and then we take a break. We eat food and then we sing some more. And people reluctantly peel themselves away at the end when whoever it is that’s been playing the piano is done and usually we’ve worn whoever it is out, completely. But I just...I am saddest all year the day after that party because I have to wait an entire other year to do that again. I haven’t figured out how to do that with another genre. There isn’t something that brings people together like Christmas carols. I tried to make everybody sing on the Fourth of July last weekend and we, I got You’re a Grand Old Flag and Yankee Doodle Dandy and Stars and Stripes Forever and then I’d worn people out pretty much. But I do think there...people are glad to, people are grateful for the invitation, people...there’s a song inside people and everybody can sing, everybody can sing, everybody can sing. So why not just invite them to do it and a lot of the time they do. So it’s great. I love it. I know you’ve got to go. This was fun.

Q Fabulous. Thank you.

A Like I said, I could be here for a week.....