

Sigrid Johnson

Interviewed by Peter Myers at Landmark Center, Saint Paul, July 10, 2008;
and at St. Olaf College, January, 2009

Q Can you talk about your musical education and early musical influences?

A I was raised in Bismarck, ND, and it was a very rich musical community at that point. My mother played the piano – had never had any lessons, but played by ear. And my dad was a real natural tenor. So I kind of have that musical background from my family. I started piano when I was about 4-1/2. I had two older brothers – one played cello and one played violin. So all the years growing up, from the time I was 5 on, we played piano trios – all the classics. That was a real rich part of my development, I think, in terms of what I was taking in early on – classical music and classical style. All I did in high school was play the piano and sing and do all of those things. I played in the band and the orchestra, I played flute and bassoon, and took organ lessons. So I was filled early on with a lot of culture in that area and fully supported by my family. They were always eager, there was always money for music lessons and music camp and all of those wonderful things.

And I had a high school choir director that was just fantastic. He was a real fan of the Christiansen's and actually our high school choir sang at Concordia and I was enamored with that whole experience and so I went to Concordia and studied and played with Paul J. Christiansen, who was a big influence on me in many ways. And from there I went to St. Cloud, because I got married and my husband had a teaching job in Monticello, MN, and worked in the opera program there; not the choral program. From there I went to the University of Michigan, where I did opera and also a wonderful chamber choir, and we had fantastic opportunities. And it was an entirely different experience from Concordia in terms of concept and what we did and how we rehearsed. So that was an additional experience to how I approached my music. My degrees were in voice performance all the way through my career. But I did take all of the conducting that I could when I was at the U of Michigan. So that's how I kind of got interested in that.

Q At what point did you really go into the choral field as your primary focus?

A I taught voice at the U of M and then at Gustavus Adolphus College. When I was at Gustavus they asked me if I would conduct the Lucia Singers, which is their women's choir group. And I said, sure I'll do that, because I'd done a little bit of conducting in my church with little kids and cherub choirs and that sort of thing. So I took the Lucia Singers and I remember the first piece we did, which was very naïve of me, was the Britten Ceremony of Carols. And they did a fantastic job. They were fairly untrained at that point, and had a wonderful time doing that. Then when I was at Gustavus the woman who conducted the Manitou Singers – Alice Larson – retired from that job and they asked me if I would come in and take it over while they could search for another director. And since it was more convenient, because we lived in Northfield, it was great not to have to commute. So I took that and the rest is history; I've been there ever since.

Q Talk about your work with the Dale Warland Singers and that phase of your life.

A Oh, that was fantastic. I was with the Dale Warland Singers from 1980 to 1990 and I sang with them and was the associate conductor and also conducted the symphonic group. It was a very exciting time for those singers. I remember us performing at a national convention and just sort of a whole heightened awareness of that group and what they were able to do and the beauty of it. And I will always remember very fondly those times and the work that I was able to do, that Dale allowed me to do with the group.

Q Talk about your involvement with VocalEssence and about your particular role vis a vis Philip's role.

A In 1990 I came to work with VocalEssence and the idea was to start a new paid ensemble, plus the volunteer symphonic chorus. And that was a very challenging, rewarding time as we watched that group develop. And when I came over to work with Philip I mentioned that it would probably take about ten years for the choir to really establish an identity because initially you have quite a bit of turnover and until the group sort of solidifies and develops a sense of their sound and what they're able to do and the concept of the directors, in this case, it takes a lot of time. And they have developed into a beautiful, beautiful group and my relationship with Philip is so unique and so rewarding because we come to our music from different backgrounds. He is an instrumentalist, primarily, a percussionist. Mine is all vocal background, although I played instruments, but primarily vocal. So we are able to team up and do great things. We have such mutual respect for each other, I think, that we can just interrupt each other and no one is offended and the dynamic is really extraordinary.

Q You were talking off camera about how Philip is looking at the bigger picture, the rhythm in particular, and the whole arc of a piece. What's your role? Talk about what he does and what you do.

A When we initially start rehearsing a piece, Philip is very interested in the rhythm of it, how the piece is put together, getting all the right notes, getting all the right articulation, all that sort of stuff. And my role is more the sound. That's what I'm in this business for, because that's what I'm enamored with – the potential of the sound and how it relates to style, language and just the beauty. Philip and I come to our music from two very different places. He is trained as an instrumentalist, a pianist; he comes from the instrumental side. And I have had a lot of training in vocal, so that interests me a little bit more, the sound of what we do. I think it's a wonderful marriage because we can fill in the blanks for each other in terms of what's missing and what needs to be done.

Q When you have 100+ singers all with different voices and different levels of experience, how do you work on getting the sound you want when you have a fairly disparate group of voices out there?

A I'm interested in each of their colors. In other words, I don't necessarily want them to all sound the same, but I want their color in there and I try to just make the harmonic.... The balance comes more from the overtone series, so that they're all filling in what they need to fill in and then we try to just create the least amount of distractions. That's basically what our job is, I think, because as we ask an audience to listen to our group we don't want them concentrating on the fact that the intonation isn't good or Sally is sticking out or they can hear things that are keeping them from hearing the music and the text. That's my job.

Q Talk about the role of both the professional and the volunteer singer and the value that each brings to the process.

A Certainly the value that the ensemble singers bring are experience, leadership – musically – because most of the time they have a little more background in that, a little more training. Our volunteer chorus in VocalEssence is phenomenal. They can achieve – with just sheer will – way past what their individual abilities might be and they have a wonderful spirit and camaraderie and they’re just really worker bees in their music. And they have done some extraordinary singing – both technically vocally and technically musically.

Q What do you think are some of the keys to running an efficient rehearsal, especially when you have a lot of volunteer singers, a 2 or 3 hour block of time, it can be pretty slow if you’re not managing it well. Whether you or Philip are leading the rehearsal, what are some of the things that you think make for a productive and energizing rehearsal?

A I think if you know Philip and me, you know that we are not very static. We’re pretty energized people, so we run a pretty fast-paced rehearsal. I think we’re both efficient in what we’re able to do. I think the main thing with volunteers is not overdoing any section of music and let them kind of learn it by repeating. I’ve learned that over the years. I used to beat a dead horse and I don’t do that so much anymore. I’m a little bit more aware of what they’re feeling. I’m getting a little more sensitive that way. But on occasion, I will be known to stick with something ad nauseum.

Q Talk about the audition process. You and Philip audition singers together. What are you looking for in a volunteer singer?

A While we’re auditioning, we’re looking for fairly solid vocal technique, so there aren’t any problems with intonation, basically, and a good amount of sound that we’re going to reap some rewards from having this person singing with us. And some musical skill, some sight reading ability, some tonal memory, efficiency, and basically a wonderful human being. Because in our work, that’s about 75% of all of it and we want the atmosphere in the rehearsal to be warm and inviting and an environment for learning and growing and working together. So we’re not looking for divas and we basically want to have all those skills at some level. We do quite a bit of difficult music. In other words, compared to doing a Messiah every year, where they can learn it almost by rote, we’re commissioning very avant-garde things and we do need to have a certain level of musical skill – sight reading – because there is not a lot of rehearsal time for some of the music we do. And that’s why I just am such a champion of our volunteer chorus because they are phenomenal at rising to the occasion and learning that music and it’s very, very difficult at times.

Q You have a major role with VocalEssence and also with the Manitou Singers. Switch gears for second and go to the St. Olaf side. Talk about your work with that group.

A The Manitou Singers are a group of 100 first year women and it’s a new group every year. So that’s a challenge in itself. But I love working with that group because they are first of all intelligent, eager, ready to work hard and some come with some

degree of skill. And as you can imagine there are, there's a lot of variety to the skill level because some students come from very small schools, some maybe didn't even have a choir, they've only sung in church choir, other people have had private voice study. So bringing that group together is a challenge every year but one of my favorite things to do.

Sigrid Johnson - second Interview at St. Olaf College, January, 2009 (primarily about the evolution of the St. Olaf Choir sound)

Q Most people credit F. Melius as really helping to establish this very strong choral tradition in MN. In your words, why do you think F. Melius was so important?

A I could state the obvious and say that he started the acapella choral tradition in MN but I think what's interesting about F. Melius is that he comes from a band background and instrumental. I think early on with the choirs, that influence was in the choral sound. In other words, the purity of the tone of an instrument, he would look for in the voices and the background was not vocal. And as we've evolved in our choral training, more and more there is a concentration on voice and the training of the voice. As we've evolved in our choral work, there is more of a concentration on the training of the voice so we've learned some things about that that make us, I think, get that same result in probably a more healthy way than what originally was sought.

Q Say more about his musical background.

A I think what's interesting about F. Melius is that he was trained as a violinist and his background was really with instrumental works and conducting orchestras and bands. As we have gone on in our choral training through the decades, we have learned to spend a little bit more time on vocal production. So I think what he heard in his ears we have learned to do in a really healthy way with emphasis more on vocal production.

Q Let's talk a bit about Paul J.

A Two of F. Melius's sons went on to prominent choral positions: one at Concordia and one at St. Olaf. We all know of Olaf, of course, and I went to school at Concordia College in Moorhead, MN, where Paul J. – one of the other sons – was the director. I must say that Paul J. Christiansen was probably the most influential person in my life in terms of choral music. He was one of my first mentors and I sang in his choir and I think what I learned from him most was to step outside of the box of music. I also learned incredible listening skills. He was a masterful conductor and musician and although some might argue that he went outside of stylistic elements, he really encouraged us to reach from the inside out to make our music. I will always be so grateful for that because I'm not sure that I would have come up with that on my own.

Q When people speak about the "St Olaf Sound," what are they referring to?

S When people talk about the St. Olaf sound, they often talk about a straight tone and that's very curious to me because I sang with Paul J. and the Concordia choir and never was there any mention of "take out the vibrato." It was more trying to unify the sound so that there were no distractions in terms of intonation or people's color sticking out or things of that nature. Since that time I think that we have learned more about

vocal production and how that embraces a unified sound enabling everyone to sing to their own vocal potential.

Q What can you say about Minnesota audiences?

S What I would say would be something like the fact that we do have so many choirs in MN, that either they're in church choir or in a community choir or they're in a college choir, and their kids have sung in choir and so we have this ongoing thing, just like we have the tradition of the St. Olaf choir being so old that we have a long standing tradition in MN of choral singing and just about everybody sings.