

Paul Brandvik

Interviewed by Peter Myers at Minneapolis Hilton Hotel, December 21, 2008

Q What are some of your first memories of music as a child?

A We had some music in the home. My father sang in choir for a long time until he was in his '70's. And my grandfather – I used to go out to his house and I'd play the piano and he'd sing these old Norwegian folk songs – into his '90's, which I thought was just thrilling. My brother's a musician, has been for a long time. So there was some music in the house. I also sang in a church choir, of course. Like a lot of Lutheran kids growing up, we sang in church choirs. So I heard a lot of things. One of the things I heard when I was still in high school, I heard Adagio for Strings at Island Park swimming pool with the Fargo-Moorhead Symphony and I remember having my hands on...I can still remember the feel of this chain link fence that I was leaning against, hearing that in this starry night. It was just marvelous. I was just blown away completely and I think that had a real influence on me.

Q At what point did you first begin your interest in choral music?

A I sang in high school choir at Fargo High and that didn't really steer me over to choir. But I played in a band also and when I went to Concordia, I auditioned for the band and I really blew it and I thought, "I didn't get into this band." So I figured well I'd just as well go sing in a choir then. Sort of presumptuous. So I went and auditioned for the choir and got into the choir. And like so many other kids that got into the Concordia Choir in those days were just sort of pushed towards or pulled towards choral music. It was just wonderful, the experiences that we had in that choir. The ways Paul J did things and his desire for excellence and desire for perfection were just absolutely something for a young person. I hadn't experienced that before.

Q Talk more about Paul J – the kind of person that he was and how he coached and taught the choir and what he was striving for....

A In those days.... **Paul J** seemed to be two people. The one, the private person that we didn't see very much really in those days. Later in his life, after he'd retired, we did see him a lot. But in those days what we saw of him was in rehearsal and in concerts and he had this absolute feeling for perfection and feeling for getting things right, and for listening and for phrasing. People might now disagree with some of the phrasing he did but it was still absolutely beautiful. And he had such a lush sound in his choir. He preferred basses, second basses and altos, so everything was built kind of on a pyramid with this rich under-texture of sound. That was really thrilling to hear that, thrilling to be a part of that. I think we sang, when I was at Concordia, I think we sang in about 48 of the 50 states or something...some incredible touring things that we had, too, which was awfully exciting.

Q From what you know of his father, do you think Paul J carried forth most of the same vocal philosophy as F. Melius, or did you see some sign of little differences here and there?

A I think Paul J had really a unique philosophy of sound, I think different from his father. I didn't know his father, of course, but from what I've heard of recordings and all I think Paul J went for a darker sound, a richer sound. He really dealt a lot with tone – more with tone than he dealt with rhythms or other things, dealt with intonation a lot. So that's kind of what happened with his sound. He had the best alto sections of any choir in the world, I think, just this rich, rich sound. That was really impressive to me. I don't think Olaf went quite in that direction. I think he headed more toward being rhythmically accurate and pure. Paul J bent things more towards the sound of the choir and his own interpretation of the phrasing and the structure.

Q At what point did you decide that you wanted to go into choral music as a profession?

A Well, I think probably about my second year in college. I ended up with a job...as a sophomore I conducted a church choir in Fargo. That was really fun. You know I was a young kid and got to work with all these sounds and in fact I got to write some of the music for this church choir. It was really fun. And the more I got into it, the more it seemed like this is where I should be headed and this is what I should do. And I loved it. I'm glad I went into choral music.

Q What do you think the reasons why MN has developed into such a rich environment for choral music?.....

A I think the choral environment in MN is entirely goes back to F Melius. I think absolutely he's the father of everything – from his students to his sons to his sons' students and to his sons' sons' students, going on and on. It's just really a web of people that really believe so sincerely in choral music and the power of choral music to enrich people's lives. I think that probably all went back to F Melius.

Q Going back to college - one more question. Any stories about Paul J?

A What sticks in my mind regarding Paul J...I can't remember specific incidences. I remember one tour in Norway when it was like 95 degrees and everybody was really perspiring and people were going like that and I remember him not being terribly happy with that, but.... The music they made just all went up, it took care of them. That was the important thing. I think he gave us a feeling that when we did the concerts that that was the only thing in life right then, there was nothing else. The concerts were the most important things. And watching his face and watching his direction and watching Paul J's feeling for the music. When you watched his face it was always a deep feeling that he was really right into the core of the music, that the music and Paul J were one, which is a great thing for a conductor to be. He was never distracted. There wasn't anything else happening in the world at that time. And for singers it was just great, absolutely great.

Q You directed one of the prominent college choirs in MN for a few decades or so. Over that time you had singers coming to rehearsal day after day. How did you keep your singers motivated?

A I think at Bemidji State to get them motivated...after they got into the choir it was just kind of an ongoing thing...what I liked most is they loved making music. Part of that is the music that I picked and we worked on and we worked on. From my history in

college of what, how a rehearsal should be done, kind of worked from that standpoint and they responded to it very well. In fact now we have a Bemidji State University Alumni choir down in the Cities and we get together for two months, once a week, and I have somebody from every year that I taught in that choir and they still just love to sing. There's a core of about 30 singers that are just there all the time. It's just a wonderful, wonderful feeling. I think part of...I heard somebody say that the essence of teaching is to put something that you love in front of your students and then tell them why you love it, or show them why you love it, or show them what it is. And I think that really was pretty much the aspect. I think it was the music. You can't do, get a sustaining choir and a choir that really loves to sing if you don't give them good music. We tried to give good music all the time.

Q Did you have a process you went through each year in selecting repertoire....

A In choosing music...I think that's one of the hardest things I did because you're not completely sure what you're going to have walking in the door. So you want to make sure that it's music that will fit your choir. I think it's important to have a variety of music. We tried to get a lot of variety. In each concert we focused one section of the concert on the chamber singers, which is a group of 14 singers and they did one of the sections. And we'd just try to get a variety in the other sections – some things accompanied, some things not. And over the period of the year we always did an oratorio once a year, because I thought that was so important for our students to experience that. And the select 14 got to do madrigals every year, music for small choirs.

Q Speaking of madrigals, you really helped to regenerate interest in the madrigal dinner. How did you get your interest in the madrigal format?

A In Bemidji you're faced with competition from all the other colleges in the state. We wanted to do something special around Christmas and you can't do a Concordia concert up there and you can't do a St. Olaf concert or an Augsburg concert – those are all different and unique to their schools. So I tried to think of something that would work. And we had one of our faculty came from Indiana University and he said, explained what they did as far as a madrigal dinner, and I thought that would be really the ticket. So we started out and it just worked very well. It was sold out for 30 years after that. The format was nice because you could do some secular. We actually did 98% sacred in all of our concerts because that's where all the good music was. And it gave me a chance to write for different kinds of groups. So I carried it on from there.

Q And you put together entire books on madrigal dinners and how did people respond to those?

A I wrote a book about how to do madrigal dinners, kind of really just a how to do it book because I thought all the things that we went through and we learned by making mistakes and then doing it different the next time. I thought this could be helpful for other people to go through that. The book is extremely well received, it's used all over the country and I get letters back all the time. In the book there were two scripts that I'd written. Because all of the madrigal dinners are scripted so they have...the people know what they're going to say and it's not just ad lib when they go out and try to pretend that they're 16th century. It's more fun to write it and we know where the laughter is going to come and where the emotional parts are going to come. And there were two scripts in that book and after people had used those two scripts they wrote to me and said do you

have any more scripts. And I thought, well maybe we should start a little company. So we started a little company. It's called Night Shtick Press, a Division of Extremely Limited, and we've sold scripts all over the country and a lot of other countries too, which really amazes me. There are more madrigal dinners being done now than ever. I think on any given weekend in December there's probably about 250 madrigal dinners across the country, which kind of blows my mind that there would be that many people doing them. But it's a great way to get music to people because...kind of like missionary work you know? You give them food and then they'll listen to your music. We wouldn't give it to them – we'd sell them food and then we'd do some humorous things and then we would get into a real serious concert and we'd be able to bring them right down, you know you could kind of pump up the emotions and then just kind of take it like this. Towards the end, the last thing that they did was they recessed, like every choir does, recessed to Silent Night...Christmas, sing Silent Night and hum it. So we did that in the end, but the last verse we kind of stopped singing halfway through, we got softer and softer and then we'd just let the people imagine that we were still singing. They thought we were still singing but we weren't. I thought that was a wonderful moment after all this kind of laughter and fun and this food and this candlelight and this warmth, and we could bring them right to that point. It was just a beautiful moment in the madrigal dinners.

Q Thinking back over your career, are there any special incidents as a conductor that still stick in your mind?.

A I think probably first of all, letters that we get back or comments that we hear from former students of how singing in the choir changed their lives and they're just very thankful for that. And that's wonderful for me to see. But if I look at concerts...one time...we toured Europe a lot and one time we were in Chartres Cathedral, which is to me the most beautiful cathedral in the world. We came in the afternoon and there was nobody in there and it was getting dark and we sang, we were able to rehearse in the space where we were going to sing in the cathedral. And they started singing and it was just like magic, like they weren't doing anything, they just opened their mouths and the music poured through them and I thought, oh wow this is really something. And that evening we sang, we started with a very beautiful Ave Maria, which is not a big gangbuster type of opening – it's very soft and very linear and very sophisticated piece. And the reaction to the people after that, I would look out and there would be...some people started applauding but more people were kind of wiping their eyes. And I thought, wow! That really meant a lot. It's a concert that I'll always remember and we'll never be able to do it again. We've sung in Chartres since then, but you can't redo something, an experience like that. I think there are times also, conducting in Carnegie Hall where for me, you think of Tchaikovsky doing the first performance there and you think...a sacred place to go out and that was a wonderfully warm feeling to do that. We had one...I did a series of madrigal concerts in there with singers from all over the country and you'd see these 200 singers all in Renaissance costumes, singing all this stuff from memory and they sold it well because there was always a full house. It was just amazing, the impact of that on the singers and on me – that was a great experience for me.

Q Did you tour pretty regularly with the choir?

A Our choir toured fairly regularly. We did every year shorter tours, not the length of some of the other schools in the state. But then every third year we went on a foreign tour and we went I think 9 times, 10 times to Europe and twice to Israel, once as part of

Israel Festival. It was just a great experience for them. I've thought everybody should have that experience because when you look back to your old college career, I look back to my old college experiences and I think, what really made a difference to me? And the touring was just something that's so extraordinary and the one tour we went to Europe was so extraordinary and I thought every student should have that opportunity to do that, to sing in different countries. We worked it out...usually we'd be invited to go to a festival called Europa Cantat, which was held, every three years was held in a different country. We were invited to sing in those for about eight different places so we got to stay in one place for ten days and get to meet the other people from the other countries who are singers and you had a lot of times just people singing for each other spontaneously. It was so rewarding to get to know those people and get to see how they made the music and the different ways of making music. Sometimes you go to a college – any college – and you come out with a feeling that that's the way to make choral music. Then you go to listen to other people sing and you say well, that's another way to make choral music. And you see another and another and it is so great to experience that. It's so great to have our students experience that. So I thought that's one reason why we toured. It was just great.

Q People often talk about choruses as great community.....

A I think singers in a choir really establish a feeling of community. I think that you see them maintain friendships for years and decades after they get out and connections which they always really treasure. We saw, as most college choir directors do, you see students...you get an alto marrying a bass and soprano marrying a tenor or whatever. So you get these marriages that come through the choir. But you've got also this wonderful bond between them. That's what we see on this alumni choir that we work with. Some of the students, the older students are old enough to be the parents of some of the younger singers, but there's still kind of across generations and it's a community that they really care for each other. And that is so remarkable to see; they just really love each other. I think its because they have the same experience. You know, you tend to like people that have experienced the same kind of things that you have experienced and I think that's kind of where it goes.

Q If you think about the next generations coming along and what we do in schools....

A I think there are some ways you can encourage good quality choral music. I think the first is to have them experience it, to have them do it, to have them be a singer in this kind of thing. When I was at Bemidji State we tried to structure the curriculum and we were able to bend curriculums to fit what we felt the students needed. I knew the different methods, courses they would need. I knew they'd need literature courses and I knew they'd need experience singing these things so that they could go out and do it. Also you look at a director and its just kind of a sense that you have of that person, aside from their music. I mean if you took the music away, they'd still be this kind of person that would maybe draw other people to them. I think that's part of it. I think they see leader in every director that you've had. I've never seen a student come in and say I didn't like my director. They always come in and say, wow I had a great director in high school or a great director in college. So I think that's part of it. And I think that what I mentioned about putting something in front of them that you love, and then explaining why you love it or showing them why you love it and having them get the same experience – I think that's really important. I think the idea that they get from you as far

as how important are rehearsals? I mean, do you start exactly on time and do you demand exactly that they sing in tune? We had so much fun in the choir listening to overtones. I think intonation is a very, very important thing for our choirs and we got so we could hear...they got so they could hear overtones like I do. And that is so wonderful because all of a sudden you hear the sound is way up here.... One time...in fact we were doing a (name?) motet, that Ave Maria, and there's one place where everybody keeps on singing but the sopranos stop. And we were going and I said, sopranos don't sing there. And they said, we aren't singing there. And I said, well you are; don't sing there. And we did it again. We did it like three times. And finally I said, sopranos when you get there I want you all to go like this (covers mouth?) so everybody knows that you're not singing. And they did that and it was just...everybody was dumbfounded because the soprano sounded just as loud as all the other parts. And then we looked at the overtones in it. And then I asked them, point to where that, where you hear that. And everybody pointed to kind of a cloud over the sopranos. And I thought, that is bizarre. I mean it was just, it was kind of a thrilling moment to see that. So I think if you teach them to listen, I think if you teach them that dedication and hard work are important, I think you have to show them by example that every rehearsal you come to you are really prepared and you know what you're going to do and you know how you're going to do this phrase or that phrase or where you're going to breathe or what you're going to listen to and what to dissonance and how you teach them to approach a dissonance in a certain way, how you're going to help them learn to sing this way. I think they'll learn also from you...if you feel it's important, you keep rehearsals moving, you don't stop and you don't talk. I don't think people should talk in rehearsals much – the conductors or the students. I think a lot of conductors make a mistake of trying to talk too much rather than doing. And I think if they know that this is really important because we're not wasting time, we're going about it, we're going to do it and we're going to make it beautiful.

Q If you were mentoring an aspiring young choral conductor, what are some of the things you would recommend?

A If I were mentoring a young choral student, which I have done lots and lots of times, I would again stress that they have to know the music, stress that they have to know the voice. I think a lot of conductors who don't fare well with younger singers are conductors who have never studied the voice well enough, who come from other disciplines – instrumental disciplines or piano – and don't understand what the voice can do. Because I think the voice is such a magnificent instrument and people sometimes don't use it as much different ways as they can. So I would suggest that they really learn about the voice and what the voice can do. One thing we did in our choir, especially in the chamber singers where you have a group of 14 singers who are really musicians, you can meet them halfway and they can come and say how should we make this, structure this phrase and how should it sound and what should the weight be and why does the soprano sound so much louder than anybody else and how do we take care of that? So all along in rehearsals you're kind of mentoring them into the future of what they will be able to listen for and will be able to do. It's really marvelous when you realize and you show them, ok if we're going to do a piece with four verses you can't just do them all the same. You don't want to change the tempos really, but you can change the balance and you can change...we did things like if we had one verse – ok straightforward. We have another verse where the sopranos are louder like an accompanied solo, then you bring the other three parts down so they're not very loud. Or you have the other three voices sing with little or no vibrato – what a lot of people call

straight tone, which may or may not be right nomenclature. But then you'll have the sopranos sing with the vibrato so you have a texture going differently than you had before. So I would show them that and explain how important that is. I think another thing which choir directors – young choir directors – don't realize sometimes the importance of, and that is learning how to find their way around on the keyboard so they can play an open score, so they can play parts and use it as a tool. I think those things are really important.

Q Is there anything else...any other things that you would like to share with young conductors.....

A I think if I were to talk to conductors, young conductors today, I would really stress things like piano ability, vocal ability, being able to know what we are doing. I think the idea of being absolutely, completely prepared before you go into a rehearsal is so important and the idea that you don't use a lot of words – you show them more than you talk to them about things. I think those are really important things that young conductors should learn; probably the most important things, I think. Then again, if you can get them excited about what they are doing and what you are doing, then they'll pick that I think and get excited for themselves. That's so, it's so contagious when you get excited about things and you can hear things. I would also ask them to think of their singers, not just the music, so you know the people that you're working with, so you know what the music is going to do for them and that you consider who they are and what they're doing and what this will do for them, and then you can show them at that point. I think that's really important.