

Philip Brunelle

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

Q Tell me a little bit about your childhood musical experience. What kind of music there was in your home – I know your dad was a minister – what kind of music did you grow up with?

A My earliest memory of music would be when I was three because I was a boy soprano from age three. There are recordings of me from age four on, going around in Austin, Minnesota, where we lived – singing, my mother accompanying me, until we moved at age 7 to Minneapolis. Then, of course, I continued doing it. I started piano lessons when I was four. My mother did not take lessons, but she taught herself. She was a wonderful pianist – sight read music, played of course for a lot of the church services. As you mentioned my father was a minister and so there was music in the morning service and the evening service and the missionary meetings during the week...so lots of music from the very beginning.

Q Who would you say were some of your most significant musical mentors along the path of your career?

A Well I would say first of all, of course, my mother who encouraged me a great deal. My father died when I was young and there were several people who in my teenage years really were unique in helping and guiding and mentoring me. Theodore Bergmann, who taught piano at MacPhail for years. I started with him when we moved to Minneapolis, in second grade, and stayed with him until I finished high school. He taught at MacPhail and he was really regarded as one of the fine teachers and pianists around town. When I went...in fact one of the stories about my days with him...when my father died we were, as one would expect in the 1950's – there was no income, there was no pension, there was no insurance, etcetera. My mother had five children to raise. And Mr. Bergmann called her up and said, I know that Philip is going to have difficulty now because of your financial situation. If you will not tell him, I would like the lessons from now on to be free. I never knew that until I finished high school and when I left high school to move to college she said, you should know something. And this was one of those kind of special people to me. Another one was Arthur Jennings, who was the University of MN organist and the organist and choirmaster at Plymouth Congregational Church. I came to Plymouth Church for my organ lessons starting in 9th grade and I remember that he was, again, a wonderful kind of disciplinarian about playing the organ but a great guy. Then the third one was my high school choir director, Harry Opal. A great musician; a wonderful man about the choral art; highly regarded in the Twin Cities for many years; great bass baritone soloist; sang with any kind of thing that was needing somebody of his stature around town. So I was with him for four years at Minnehaha Academy and he was of inestimable help and encouragement to me.

Q When you left the University and began your time with the MN Orchestra, you were then...

A I was a sophomore. I was 19. I was going to school.

Q So you had an orchestral bent as well as a vocal track. At what point did you start to get back more into vocal music? Or were you always doing both?

A The first concert I remember going to hear singing was when I was 6 and my mother took me to hear Handel's Messiah down in Austin, Minnesota, and I was just bowled over by this whole thing – choir, orchestra, the whole thing. I remember when the concert was over, I said to her, oh what I'd really like more than anything for Christmas was a gift is a score of Messiah. And I got it. I remember year's later thinking that probably that wasn't a common request for a six year old. But I got the score, I still have the score. I was always interested in choral music. When I was in junior high I had a paper route. The money I earned, I bought madrigals. I remember that. Probably, again, something that most paperboy kids didn't do. But madrigals had a...and I was always just interested in choral music. I got my first job as an organist and choir director when I was in 9th grade and I have had one ever since. So I love the idea on one hand of working with amateur singers and realizing how high a potential they can develop given encouragement, given training. And then, when I came to the university I kept singing in groups in the university. But then in my second year, my sophomore year, I had the opportunity to join the MN Orchestra. So I played piano and percussion with the orchestra. So I was the baby of the orchestra for five years. Then came a chance to go and study at the Metropolitan Opera on a Rockefeller Grant, came back and was offered the job as music director of MN Opera. And all of that happened at the same time that then I was offered the job at Plymouth Congregational Church, which of course, had been where my organ teacher had been. And as a kid I remember thinking, wouldn't it be amazing some day to be in a place like this? Because it had this huge history of great music. So I came here when I was 25, to Plymouth Church and immediately wanted to start a choral society outside the church, because in those days, back in 1969, there weren't a lot of things happening outside of the university structures. There were a few things, but not a lot. So when the MN Orchestra would do a choral work, they would ask the U of M chorus to sing or they would ask Augsburg College or one of the others. And I looked around and realized that the orchestra had a very important mission to do the classics. But who was doing all the other music that was out there? And nobody was. So I thought my mission needs to be that we celebrate choral music, but not the ten or twelve warhorses – they will get done, they don't need a champion. But who is going to champion all the other music?

Q Minnesota is well known as being a hotbed of choral activity. What factors do you think have contributed to the richness and the openness of MN to virtually any and all types of choral music – new and old?

A I think we have this rich tradition because of where our ancestors came from. Many of them came from countries that had an important choral and orchestral tradition. You think of Germany, first of all. And then all the Scandinavian countries that are represented here, as well as England and France. All of these countries had strong choral and orchestral backgrounds and as people came here they realized if we're going to have music we're going to have to make it ourselves. We're too far from any other major center. Imagine in those days how many days it would have taken to get to Chicago. So consequently, let's just do it ourselves. Of course that followed...the choral music followed in the churches and then it followed of course in the colleges and then it followed in the high schools and the grade schools, so that there just became this great infiltration of choral music that has continued to this day.

Q With VocalEssence you are operating an ensemble amidst a sea of other choruses of different stripes and colors. How does the presence of those choruses affect what VocalEssence is and has become?

A I think that the important thing for every chorus is that you need to know what your mission is. All of the choruses in the Twin Cities certainly have the mission first of all, to do the finest singing that they possibly can. No question about that; we start there. But beyond that, then, what would be the mission? Certainly for VocalEssence the mission has always been that given that we will do the finest performances vocally that we can, we want to champion the choral music of the past and the present and the future that is outside this group of classic works that are already there. Handel's Messiah, B Minor Mass, Brahms's Requiem – wonderful pieces. But they are going to get done. But beyond that, who is going to do this other music? Therefore we've made that really our mission for now coming on 40 years. The only thing I have any great regrets about is that we can't move faster because I can see easily another 40 years of repertoire.

Q Why is it important that we keep commissioning and performing new work, given the fact that there is already such a wonderful body of relatively unknown work that already exists?

A I think it's important that we not forget about the creative presence that we have today. The composers who are living in our community or composers living elsewhere, but this whole idea of the choral art – just like the instrumental art – will only stay as fresh and as vibrant as it is, if it is constantly being renewed. So that you look to the past and then you also look to the present and to the future. Certainly every era of music as we look backward we see that they did celebrate what they were but they were always looking forward; they were always commissioning new pieces. So this isn't any different. I think what makes our challenge greater is that we now are at a point in which we have 500 years of choral music to choose from. So we have a lot more than people did in Bach's time. They didn't have very much to choose from. First of all, the music had been put away in libraries; they couldn't find it. So it was a different era, but the fact is we don't want to lose that but it's finding this balance between all of this great music of the past and at the same time encouraging those talents that we know and that are out there, that we feel have something to say in choral music that will help to bring us into the future.

Q The Sixth World Choral Symposium was held in the Twin Cities in 2002. A lot of that is due to your work to make that happen. But why do you think it was important for our musical community here to host an event like that?

A When I was asked if I would be willing to be president of a local volunteer organization to host it, I realized that they wanted it to be in the United States. It had never been here. Every three years it was somewhere. It had been in Australia, it had been in Canada, it had been several times in Europe. But it had never been in the USA. And so when I was asked if I would head this my immediate thought was, the first time it happens in the USA – and who knows when it ever will again – it needs to happen here. This is choral country and if someplace should have it, the Twin Cities is the place to make it happen. It's a huge job and as it ended up in the eight days we did eighty concerts in the community. We invited 29 choirs from around the world. We had about 2000 people representing 67 countries here. So it was an amazing event. But it was the

kind of event that not only brought people here to celebrate choral music but it also said to our community, wow, we really are a place that appreciates and embraces choral music. So it really worked both ways and for that I'm very grateful.

Q What kind of feedback did you get from people that had traveled here from other countries?

A I am still getting feedback. I just came back from Sweden and there are people there who said, I cannot forget, now, six years ago in Minneapolis, that amazing convention, that bringing together of all these choirs. The idea that you could come one place and hear this much excellent music – that what was, of course, was the reason to have a symposium. And I get the same thing from people in the Twin Cities. I will be walking down the street and someone will say, oh thank you for bringing the symposium. I say, that was six years ago. Yes, but I haven't forgotten.

Q You're a terrific collaborator, and there are a lot of great artistic groups in the Twin Cities to collaborate with. Talk about the possibilities that collaboration offer you as opposed to doing everything solely on your own.

A Well, there's a lot of choral music out there and choral music needs different kinds of forces. That's one of the reasons that VocalEssence has two groups – that it has a professional group of 32, the ensemble singers, and then it has a chorus of 120. But even given that, there are works that come up that either maybe need something between 32 and 120 or may need two or three hundred voices to do it justice. So because of that, I've been always interested in collaborating with other choruses if I can see that artistically it really makes sense for us to be together. Certainly when we did our Bolcom festival and we invited MN Chorale to be part of it and then this summer to have the American Guild of Organists convention and I knew for this new piece that we were doing for the finale, that we needed more forces and to involve Magnum Chorum and the National Lutheran Choir. I think, number one, we needed it artistically. But also it's great for people who come to town to realize that we have these other choruses besides VocalEssence and that they are an important and integral part of our community.

Q Speaking of important and integral – talk about Sig Johnson and the very special kind of relationship you have with her and that she has with VocalEssence. How did that come about and how do the two of you kind of operate vis a vis one another?

A As I think about choral groups around the US I don't know any other group that has quite the unique situation that we have at VocalEssence with Sigrid Johnson and yours truly sharing the rehearsal tasks and also the artistic tasks of deciding about the repertoire, deciding about the soloists, etc., that comes into it. Sigrid is known – not just by me and VocalEssence, but throughout MN – we all call her, very affectionately, "Ears" Johnson, because she simply, everybody admits, has the most amazing ears. She's one of those people that if she were to look at someone I always say it's as if she doesn't really see them. She doesn't see their head; what she sees is the skeleton of inside their head and she can tell you why if you're having trouble with an "e" vowel, an "a" vowel, an "i" in singing, where your tongue is placed, what you're doing incorrectly. She's really amazing that way. Fifteen years ago when I invited her to become part of VocalEssence it really was because I wanted to expand what we were doing. Certainly no one person has all the answers and we all know that. So it's really important to find –

if you can find – a person that you trust and that you want to have as part of the team. Sigrid does not want to conduct concerts. She has told me if you want some special thing, I'll do it. But I really prefer to be out listening in the audience. And of course the other thing is that you simply cannot be onstage with a chorus and an orchestra conducting and have any idea acoustically what it sounds like out there. Robert Shaw always had someone sitting out there and he was always turning around and saying what's it like? Can you hear the chorus? Can you hear the strings? He knew that what you hear onstage is not what people hear out there. So it's been wonderful to have her. And Sigrid and I have a great trust for each other and that, of course, is absolutely the most important thing. We listen to all the auditions together. Our auditions both for the ensemble singers and for the chorus are based on the principle that we are listening to find people...half of why they are hired is for the beauty of their voice and half is the beauty of their personality, because you cannot do it on beautiful voices alone. If there's not teamwork, it won't work. This is not that kind of a business. We need that to work together. So she's been a wonderful partner in this enterprise.

Q What inspired you to launch the WITNESS program and to continue that tradition now for 19 years, keeping it fresh and new each year?

PB When I started Witness 19 years ago I truly thought I was going to do it for one or two years. It came about because I remember listening on the radio during February one year and they said, oh its Black History Month. We'll play a little piece...they played something by an African American composer; little short piece. Fine, now we've done our part for Black History Month. And I thought, oh that seems a little strange. And that got me thinking well what do you – Philip – know about the music of African American composers? Of course I knew spirituals, but beyond that. What about the classical music? And so I began to do some investigating and I talked to a dear friend who's African American and asked her, you know I'm not African American. But I really feel strongly about this but I don't want to be pandering to people. And she said, oh Philip, believe me, it will take some years for the African American community to get behind you, but they will. And they will realize that you really are wanting to make this work. So I thought, well I'll see if there's some music out there. And I found some pieces and I thought well there's more than one season worth. So then it became here's another February we'll do it. And then another. And it just has grown. Now I've got so much music; this has become an annual thing not only for the concert but then we started our whole education program in the schools. Now we have 19 African American artists who are in 55 schools in the Twin Cities area. And they're there starting in October all the way through May talking about what the contributions of African American artists have been. And each year a little different theme, so it always stays fresh. It's been just a joy and a real thrill to me to be able to have contributed this important thing to our music. The other thing, of course, that happens is that as we have done it people around the US say, hmm what's happening in MN with African American music? They become interested. We constantly are giving music and ideas to people to share all around the US. It's been a wonderful program.

Q One more follow up to that, just as an example – programming. For example the Ellington program this year. How did you...once you had decided on Duke Ellington's music, how did you go about deciding what to program?

A Well I feel that programming is probably just one of the most important things you can do. You can have the most beautiful singing, you can have the most beautiful

repertoire, but if you put this in the wrong order or it just isn't placed correctly people will come and say, well that was real nice but boy was it boring. No matter how beautiful it was. It's all a question about how you really sense what it is that the music is trying to say and where you place it in relation to another piece. My idea was this year I wanted to do Duke Ellington, but I also knew that there were a number of composers living today who have been influenced by Duke Ellington. So I thought why don't we, in the second half of the program, focus on Duke Ellington's music. But leading up to it, I wanted to do and so I did bring six African American composers whose music has been influenced by Duke Ellington, to be part of the concert, all of it choral of course. So what ended up happening was that five of the six showed up in Minneapolis for the concerts.... So five of them showed up in St. Paul for the concerts at the Ordway. It was a thrill to introduce them to the audience and also for the audience to realize that music of African American composers is not something in the past. It's not just Duke Ellington, but it is alive and it is continuing today. So it's been a really very heartwarming program and one that I'm very much looking forward to continuing in the years ahead.

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