

René Clausen

Interviewed by Peter Myers at Landmark Center, July 10, 2008

Q It's been a fun warm-up exercise to get a sense of people's childhood musical experience, what may have triggered their lifelong choral passion. What was your childhood musical experience like at home, at school or church?

A My father was a church organist and choir director, so there was a lot of music around the home, although we never had a piano growing up which is kind of interesting for having a father who was an organist. I did, however, really not grow up around a lot of choral music; it was primarily instrumental. I was one of those kids who was formed by the elementary band program. I think nationwide there's been many instrumental programs started in the summer of the 5th or 6th grade year and that's how I started; playing saxophone in the summer band program the summer after my 6th grade year of elementary school. And my sisters then also started on the French horn and the trumpet. There was a system called the Rubank Methods – they were these old blue books that had all of the fingering systems, etc. – and I learned to play instruments by checking out the fingering charts and then learned to play...my instrument was the saxophone. My sister played the trumpet and the horn and then I would practice on their instruments, too, and learn how to play those instruments. We really didn't have the money to take lessons, but the band director would give me the books to take home. So I would learn to play those instruments. Then later on, when I got into high school and junior high, the instrumental directors were very gracious about letting me check out school instruments and bring them home to learn how to play. So actually all of the interest, through most of junior high and high school, was all instrumental music. I did sing in choir, but it was not the rich experience for me that instrumental music was. It makes some sense, early on, because the instrumental programs tended to start with a band director that gave summer lessons or something like this. So you could get a start earlier. Often the choral programs began later, or developed later, as voices began to mature and develop or who you might have available as your choral director. So it wasn't really until high school that choral music began to catch my eye.

Q At what point did you see vocal music as perhaps your greatest calling – I know you're also a composer and arranger, but at what point did the vocal profession really come into your mind?

A I was very interested...in high school I had a very fine director in Southern California. I actually spent junior high and high school years in Los Angeles city school district. I had a very fine high school choral director. And that was really the opening for me, starting at about 10th grade. We did great literature; we had a wonderful group of singers and a fine conductor. So that was really one of the first experiences I had. And I had kind of an interesting shaping, what wound up being a very shaping experience. In my junior year our conductor who's name was Don Gustafson – and there were several of us who were very interested in choral music at this point – and he said well at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in downtown Los Angeles, there's one of those Midwestern choirs is going to be coming – the St. Olaf choir under Christiansen. And so my best friend and I – who wound up going to college together and sang in the St. Olaf Choir together – went to the concert. It was on a Sunday evening and we're looking for this conductor named Chris Johnson. Its funny now, but we thought it was this gentleman C-

h-r-l-s J-o-h-n-s-o-n – he was obviously saying the Norwegian pronunciation of F. Melius Christiansen, or his son who I replaced at Concordia went by Christiansen. In any case we were kind of left in the dark about what that name even meant. And then we went to the concert and there it wasn't any Chris Johnson at all. It was 1968 and it was the first year of Kenneth Jennings. And that concert really blew us away. It was really...we had never heard a college choral sound like that. So actually Mike and I went to Riverside on Monday night to the choir concert and then was it to La Jolla or something on Tuesday night, but by Wednesday night they were too far away and our parents wouldn't let us drive anymore. But the two of us did go to see the St. Olaf Choir three nights in a row in the Los Angeles area and were very captivated by the precision, the beauty, the elegant musicianship, attention to all the refinements of unaccompanied choral singing that were not so present on the west coast; more of the Midwestern choral tradition, especially hearing the St. Olaf Choir – and at that point it was Ken Jennings first year, so that was still a very highly influenced by the Christiansen era in terms of sound. But when I look back at it, that was a very formative experience for me, was to hear Ken's choir and then as I said my friend and I actually wound up going to St. Olaf, being roommates and singing in the choir. We had a wonderful experience in our junior year in choir because we were going on a western tour and we sang on the same stage, together in the choir, that we had first heard them with Ken Jennings. So it was kind of full circle the way that came about; it was quite a powerful moment.

Q Talk about your time with Ken Jennings. We interviewed him about two months ago on his 83rd birthday. Talk about your years at St. Olaf and how that further propelled you on to the choral world.

A I have so much to thank Ken Jennings for. I just always felt a kind of musical kinship with him, from the time I saw him conduct. He has the most elegant, beautiful hands. Really the most beautiful conducting hands I've ever seen. Extraordinary musician. His intuition into phrasing, tone, balance, style – all of those – particularly interpretative elements of score – and then his methodology and getting that tone from the choir. I just immediately hooked into that and it felt very natural to me. Conducting has always felt not like an academic experience so much for me so much as one as my hands just went where the music told them to go. When I saw him I just felt this musical kinesthetic experience happening. And being under him and his choir and studying with him and conducting all amplified those things in my own sense of conducting style and musicianship. He was a tremendous influence on me.

Q Who else influenced your career in terms of mentors after the St. Olaf experience?

A I would still have to say that was the primary experience. I think for many conductors the primary experience, at the undergraduate level, is so important because that is where the hook comes. I think that is where you decide, where you have these experiences in performing this literature under great musicians that amplifies all that within you; it's a synergism of all that happens. So I don't need to overdo that, but I think that was a very primary emphasis for me. I went on to graduate school at the U of Illinois. That was a very different experience because there were several conductors there, you were pursuing masters and doctoral degrees – it was more academically based. I learned a great deal about performance practice issues, some aspects of rehearsal technique, of comparisons of varying points of view. When you come out of the MN Lutheran choral tradition, it's very easy to keep the blinders on. And as great a

tradition as it is, and identifiable as it is, graduate school should be a widening experience. And that's what that was for me. It provided lots of different points of view about how choral music can be made. And for anyone the widening, deepening experience of working with more than one conductor, of having various points of view, widens your viewpoint then from which you can make the choices that are going to sustain you in your musical decision making. And I found that was very important in my life, too, because otherwise you become a robot or an automaton or one who is a purveyor of only that which you have been taught from a certain point of view. So you don't know why you're making decisions. And if you're going to expand the tradition both from which you come from and that which you are engendering, it's so important that you have an intellectual as well as intuitive basis for making the decisions you make. So I look at both of those experiences as being very primal. The educational experiences in both undergraduate school and graduate school, and of course then experiences with other major conductors. Preparing – when I was at Wichita State University – prepared a choir for Robert Shaw and watching him work. Helmut Rilling came and worked with my choir at Concordia on Bach Motet and that was a very learning experience. Every time you watch another college of yours – any one of them – you learn something. There is so much to learn. Choral music is like opening a door and finding that there are two more behind it, and we learn how much we just don't know about this great art and there's always something to learn from every one that you see or meet or listen to their choirs or talk about literature; it's unending.

Q How did you come to first be associated with Concordia, and was Paul J. still there at that time or were other people between him and you?

A No, I took over for Paul J. in 1986. That's an interesting story and one I'm not quite sure I know how to answer. I was teaching at West Texas State University at the time and I had taught at two universities. I wanted to be at one of the Lutheran colleges. It was part of my background, I identified with it, it was something I really wanted to do. I saw it as a calling in my own life. And when that opportunity arose and I saw the announcement I know that was quite a while ago because a stamp was 23 cents. I recall going home to my wife and saying, well this may indeed be a Concordia graduate that they're looking for, but it's worth putting a 23 cent stamp on my credential and setting it up. The rest of that is history, I suppose. But it has been a magnificent place to be. The very, very strong choral tradition that Paul left there for 50 years – he built that program and had that same kind of magnetic, indefinable, Christiansen charisma that I think all of them had. And in their own way; they were different. Olaf and Paul and F. Melius had very different points of view about tone quality, about interpretation...I think what they had in common was these were leaders and these were strong personalities and these were people with definite opinions. But they all differed from each other. I think that is something that is really quite telling, too, about choral music and choral musicians. Even within this family of very strong musicians, they were most definitely different from each other.

Q When you came in to succeed him, you were stepping into some pretty big shoes, and not only his but by extension his father's and brother's. You were stepping into the shoes of a very prominent musical family with a 50-year legacy, or more, in Minnesota. How did you take what you found and then gradually begin to shape it in some different ways with your own ideas?

A Yes it is always a...I think with anyone coming in to replace anyone that's been there for a long time, but particularly I think it's the lengthy of tenure of Paul J. Christiansen with 5 decades there, and again his unique and very identifiable point of view about how he made choral music – it's not going to happen all at once. I remember as a matter of fact talking to the president at that time – Paul J. Dovrey was president of the college – and talked about well there's big shoes to fill here and I said, well I have big feet. And my size 14 double A shoes. And he said something really important to me at that time, which is I should bring my own shoes. So we really didn't think so much about filling shoes as bringing my own and being a teacher. I think a choral director has to think about himself or herself as being a teacher of young people and they're going to be new every year. They're going to be depending upon you for what expertise you're going to bring them, a point of view that hopefully has been tested by time and endurance and shaping and well-thought-out points of view. And that's what I think I brought to Concordia and worked at bringing them was a sense of vocalism that was based on a healthy vocal technique, that these students could use not only in choir, but in their own personal vocalism. It's always an area where choral directors tread lightly but have to also tread honestly, is how does vocal technique and the act of making personal sound impact the choral sound? And to what extent does one influence and affect the other? And developing a choral point of view in terms of choral tone; that can make a happy and healthy relationship there. I worked to increase the repertory and variety of style of music that was did. I did have a little different point of view than Paul did in creating choral tone and so again it took some time and patience to allow that to develop, to watch it grow from the inside out as I got new students every year. And allow simply my point of view how we should go about creating tone to develop within the choral ensemble. So I just moved slowly and smiled a lot. Kids are kids everywhere and I find more the same than different, from one college to another. So there's that time of just getting the belief system on your side, especially these students who had been under two regimes, of knowing where they came from, what they were facing in their college career – you had two people now that were...and have some...and various differences about them. So I knew that that was also part of what I had to understand and have patience with. But I look back at every year, actually, that I've had the choir, as being rich and robust experience. Even the very early years. If you focus on teaching and focus on what you're supposed to be doing as a conductor, which is largely teaching, then you keep your face that way and most of the shadows fall the other direction.

Q How many different choirs are there at Concordia?

A I'll give you the rundown here. We have the Concordia Choir, which is sophomores and older; and then the Chapel Choir, which is a larger group – right around 90 to 100 and again those are upperclassmen, sophomores and older. The freshmen...when the freshmen come in they go into two gender-based groups. We have the Mannerchor, which is our men's glee club or men's choir, and then Cantabile, which is the freshmen women's choir. Then additionally there's another women's choir – Bel Canto – which is the upperclass women's choir. Of course, it always seems like there's more women in about everything than men, so we have the three mixed choirs and the two women's choirs and then there are also two vocal jazz ensembles that are upper level and lower level, or freshman/sophomore, junior/senior level jazz, vocal jazz choirs that are small and specialized in that type of literature.

Q When you are building a choir – Concordia choir or any other ensemble for that matter – and auditioning singers, what are some of the key things you look for in the audition process?

A The very first thing is the ear and the quickness of the ear. I think almost more than anything else, a choral ensemble singer needs to have a very accurate and precise ear and secondly and nearly as important as that – I really think of it as a two or three step process, with two of them relating to the gift itself. Following that ear what I look for is the breadth of the technique across the range. So an evenness of color throughout the vocal range. Doesn't really do any good to be able to sing only four notes in the middle beautifully. So I look for this flexibility of technique, a genuinely warm sound. F. Melius tended to classify voices as a flute, reed or mixed, so I would lean towards especially an upper and higher voices...the very best voices are really mixed in color but toward the warmer, toward the easily produced sound. I like to think of choosing voices which can sing relatively throughout their range with an easy dynamic, and how do they come through the (word?) area in their voice, what is the nature of their vowel production? I really listen carefully to their vocal technique. Good technique does generally not stick out. Yet bad technique can be sung pianissimo and you hear it across the room. So for me a crucial element – these are really the two crucial elements I think – are the ear and the quality and quickness of the response of the ear and then the quality of the vocal technique. The better the vocal technique, generally speaking, the more that voice is going to be able to fit within the ensemble. The third part of that process does not really have to do with voices or production, but what I always call the lyricism of the personality. To be in ensemble you have to be willing to give to ensemble. There has to be that willingness of spirit; to give to a cooperative effort. You know that's a very different persona than a soloist persona, and that's not to say that a soloist cannot also sing in a choir. I think it is making that mental shift, that willingness to give that says, what do I need in order to fit within the section, and then within the section within the choir. So I think there's that part of the spirit that has to be...I think in all really good choirs and with very good choral singers there's an aspect of their soul that is very communally oriented, that has to do with "we" rather than "me," that willingness to give to ensemble. And that's why often really good choirs aren't necessarily made up of really good soloists, but maybe a combination of those types. And of course I have, I feel like I need various types of instruments within the choir and even within the eight parts of the choir, from soprano one to bass two I'll be looking for a very specifically different qualities among all of the eight parts to make the composite sound of the choir.

Q Once you have your choir assembled and they rehearse on a daily or weekly basis, how do you keep rehearsals productive and keep singers energized and coming back week after week for more?

A That's a great question. I remember when I was in the St. Olaf Choir, one of the things I always admired...well I had so much I admired about Ken Jennings, but he had the same level of expectation for us every day. I remember thinking don't you ever have a fight with your wife or your kids or something...and yet he must have had normal kinds of issues with everyday life. But yet he came into that rehearsal always with the same level of expectation. And I have carried that with me in my life as a conductor, that yes, students will have the ups and downs of everyday life – we rehearse from 4:30 to 6:00 in the afternoon every day, they've gone through the academic day. The Concordia Choir has about half music majors but half non-majors, meaning that they're going to come

from a variety of backgrounds that day, variety of types of personalities, also. Yet, when you establish right away – and I think it really begins with day one – that you establish right away when you walk into choir, this is now choir time; we leave everything else at the door. That part of the...one of the features I think of the MN choral tradition, which is so striking and perhaps separates itself sometimes from other traditions, is its discipline; it's addressed to discipline. It doesn't happen by magic. It's not like Harry Potter with the magic wand – it doesn't happen like that. Most of magic is in the work and in the daily discipline. I establish that every year in the choir. That at 4:30, it is time now to work. And it's also competitive to get in the group. There's always someone else who would like to have had their spot. I think that that has a great deal to do with the success of most of the MN collegiate Lutheran choir traditions, is they are competitively based, there's a work ethic that goes along with it and the colleges then support that with giving us the appropriate amount of rehearsal time to create that ensemble. So I think that's a real key issue.

Q You may have answered the question I was going to ask next. It's interesting to ask different people why they think MN has such a strong tradition of choral excellence. You just mentioned the discipline, which I suspect goes back to a lot of the Scandinavian and German roots. Do you have any other thoughts about some of the factors, including the great collegiate institutions? Something else about MN has kept an awful lot of those students engaged after they graduate – the non-music majors. So there must have been enough of a spark during their college years to make them want to keep singing.

A As I mentioned earlier, one of the features – among several – has been a discipline about it, that the art of creating choral music cannot really be based on an entertainment model. It's not like Nelson Riddle and the orchestra. I remember the pop singer groups that were small choral groups from the early '60's, as much...it grows out of a disciplined tradition one of the concomitant features of that is that it goes back many student generations, familial generations, with parents who sang...from the Scandinavian background and in this large area the Scandinavian roots are very strong. So that was brought with them from Norway and Sweden, Germany – so many strong choral traditions there that settlers brought to this region of the country. And these were also people who believed strongly in education and so many of the Scandinavians began, started these schools, these colleges with both academic interest and then a very natural vehicle for identification for these schools was their choirs. It might not have the wherewithal to develop instrumental programs early on – now that's not the case anymore – but early on singers were everywhere and you could bring singers together with that disciplined technique, that F. Melius for instance brought to the St. Olaf Choir. That was a unique sound. There was the Westminster school on the East Coast that had a very different approach, but one of the primary features that began this choral tradition was F. Melius kind of shaping the clay just through the dynamo of his personality, as much as his great musicianship. It was a galvanizing personality. And when you have a person that can galvanize singers into this very fundamental and disciplined approach to singing – of course he made a very impressive impression and sonority. Also – and I see this even now as we've gone into a new millennium and these students who are seemingly younger to me every year, yet they grew up singing. Many of them singing in their school choirs and their church choirs – the support that music has received in Minnesota is not all that common in many other states in public school music, where many communities feel that music programs – choral and instrumental music programs – are important. So when you learn that from an early age and you

tasted what I always call the elixir of music – choral music to me is an elixir – that once you’ve tasted it and you taste how good it tastes, well you have to have it then. And when we speak about all these other choral groups that have sprung up, especially since the ‘70’s, many, many of the graduates of the Minnesota private Lutheran colleges needed a place to keep singing. They brought with them these strong traditions and strong expectations – they had high expectations placed upon them as singers and realized that was, that elixir was something pretty good. So they want to continue with that. Earlier on I think there was also the possibility of church choirs and fine church programs, but we find that less now. There are still strong programs, but far fewer than there used to be with the advent of contemporary Christian music, the bands that...worship band experience, and the almost predilection in worship style moving, has moved largely that direction, has had a negative impact on the quality of choral church music. As a result of that, also, I’ve seen more of a push towards the community/civic organizations. We see these springing up all of the time and these are the outlets then for the collegiate level singers who have come from a strong choral background at their college or university – they’re finding these semi-professional groups populated by these singers. And I think that’s wonderful. There’s still a part of me, as a church musician in my soul, that feels badly about that and I’m hoping that the quality of church music will turn around. You see evidences every now and then of that happening, and of course there are the pockets, yet of very strong programs. But I do think the reality is that with all of these singers coming from a strong choral background at their college level are now populating these other ensembles, these civic and community groups that have a high level of singing.

Q Very true to me, from my experience. Talk about repertoire – how do you go about selecting a good variety of repertoire that is appropriate and challenging enough for the kids you’ve got to work with?

A Repertoire and choosing repertoire is always one of the most difficult, yet enjoyable, jobs that I have. The two most difficult are choosing the choir – I always find that the most difficult process – and then choosing literature. You’re doing it all of the time and I would guess that most of my choral colleagues would chime in that you’re always looking for quality new music. Of course we have the whole European background. We’ve had five centuries of choral music – mostly from European background – that still is a rich tradition from the early Renaissance through the early 20th century. However, since...move into the 20th century and beyond, and now into a new millennium, the choral music influences have become, and the influences upon choral composers or those who write music for choruses in particular, has really widened. Normally choral music falls behind instrumental in its level of technical difficulty. It just tends to be more conservative compositionally than instrumental music does – historically that’s true. However, as more and more – especially the college choirs and university choirs in this country – have gained technical expertise, more of the music written in the last 40, 50 years for choruses has increased in its level of technical difficulty, has become more idiomatic to the voice, making use of even a non-traditional vocal sounds, and the width and breadth of vocal technique that has placed far greater demands on the choral instrument – both in terms of hearing and in terms vocal technique, expanded ranges, expanded density of sound, chord clusters, dense chromatic writing, more rhythmically advanced – I would say luxuriant writing in terms of rhythm. Generally a higher level of difficulty in this music. so we have that component that is there, and among many younger American composers especially.

Q You were just talking about the more recent evolution of choral music as a little more complex.

A Well, the other major influence is ethnic of all kinds – world music, sort of sometimes it's called world music, however we would like to term that – but as the world as grown smaller in terms of our communication as a world, this area in choral music has grown exponentially. Since I was in graduate school I'm sure that has changed dramatically. I'm sure now in academic classes and literature, ethnic musics of various types would be a required component of what conductors have to study. I find that is another feature of literature that is prevalent in choral music programs all the time. You look for the presence of ethnic music, of music beyond language, beyond the romance languages and German and Latin and what we tend to think of as the four or five major languages that choral music is written in. Now we're looking at pieces that may be in Haitian Creole, or Swahili or various kinds of world languages that never were thought of before. So we're seeing all these influences and so there's much to look through and to wade through.

Q That raises the question – with all those possibilities, where do you even begin to start to look for your repertoire for your entire season? With all of these sort of obscure languages and nationalities and musical styles, where do you get your resources?

A Well a couple of sources are very important, I think, for any modern conductor now and then. The presence of the Internet is really helpful. Most publishing companies have websites and many of them now have sound files and PDF files that you can download and listen to, watch the score or look at the score, and listen to the recording right there. There's advantages and disadvantages to that. I've seen many of my young students have less ability to read open score or to go and peruse music at the piano when they can simply put on the publisher provided CD. So whereas there's advantages to that, there's some skills that I find I need to teach that we still need to have conductors learn. But I think that tool is very important. Also, the publishing companies are very good at getting out new issues and new scores to conductors. I'm always getting new packets of what are called NI's – New Issues – from most all publishers. Getting the music, getting a hold of the music is really not the issue. The trouble is there's so much that it takes a lot of time to sift through it. Because something is new, does not mean its good. Quality does not necessarily, is not necessarily concomitant with it being an excellent new piece. Because something comes from a new performance tradition, again, does not mean – when we're bombarded with all different styles of music – a lot of work has to go into finding pieces which also represent musical integrity, compositional integrity. Easy to produce – as a composer its easy to produce something new. It doesn't mean that what you've produced has a high degree of musical integrity, compositional quality. So I find for myself it is simply not worth the time to do music you're not convinced you want to do. The first thing I try to teach my choral conducting students is don't ever do music you don't love, because you will not be able to sustain your interest in it with your choir. If you love it, they will. They might not right away, but you have to love the music that you do. So in choosing literature also, for myself, it is not only that aspect of it that I've got to keep in mind the several different strands. I may be preparing a tour concert that has to wear well in the voices for maybe 15 or 16 concerts over 16 or 17 days. I have to think about what will keep an audience attention and musical interest. It can't have simply one point of view. I need to be able – not only for my students' sake, but the audience sake – to present a variety of different styles of music, of different languages, of presenting them with a meal. The way we

would have various parts of a very good meal, I look at it that same way. But all of them, every single piece, needs to have its own musical integrity and its own style and stylist consistency. And that just takes a lot of work. And then, obviously, shaping it into the choir that you're...do I have enough low basses to do this piece, do I have enough soprano ones to sustain the high A for 16 bars? And various composers will write – when you look at the style, compositional style of various composers – they will also have predilections and bents upon how they write for various sections. So making sure I'm choosing literature that fills all of those needs.

Q I'm going to kind of a more basic question: there's a book I read called, *How Can We Keep From Singing*, written by a friend in the MN Chorale, actually. But it talks about people's innate desire for the sense of community, camaraderie, producing something that is beautiful. From all your experiences, what do you think are some of the reasons that people just like to sing, particularly in groups?

A I think the voice is the first God-given instrument. We can...we sing because we can. Some of us sing better than others, but it's amazing what percentage of the population really can sing. It is not very many people that are truly tone deaf. They may have had other experiences, which may lead them to believe that, but really relatively few people can't carry a tune in a bucket, so to speak. I think that ability to distinguish pitch and create pitch is truly a miracle. When I have times in my life where I've lost faith, I often go back to the miracle of singing, believe it or not. And it comes from a National Geographic special I saw once in which there was a gentleman scientist who was going to try and approximate the human voice with machines. So he shaped a human pharynx out of a block of clear plastic and literally carved it with exacto knives to look like the human pharynx. It was clear so that you could see the outline of the shape of the pharynx. Then in the back of the throat of the plastic pharynx he attached a double reed, something that looked approximately like the vocal folds, somewhat similar to perhaps an oboe reed or a bassoon reed. And so then he had the pharynx now and then he had the reed or the vocal chords, and then attached a black tube – I remember seeing it sitting on a desk – and attached to it a black tube, a flexible tube that was connected to an air stream, which was some kind of generator of a constant air stream. So had gone through all of this process and then turned on the generator which generated the air flow which made the reed vibrate which was amplified by the pharynx to make this one, ugly sound. When you heard it, it sounded like someone playing a crumhorn for the first time and it was coyote ugly. But I have often thought about that because what a human being can do, in terms of creating pitch, has to happen in a split second and happens only in their mind. That we decide to go taaa and create that pitch – the vocal chords have to be vibrating at the exact right level to sustain that many vibrations, we have to have the right air flow to sustain that pitch which we have started. When I look at just creating one pitch, from that which we hear, and then creating that pitch and then to do it very quickly as singing a Bach motet or whatever – to me that's virtual proof of the existence of God. It's a miraculous thing that human beings not only can create a pitch, but create beautiful pitch. And this natural thing – this is that first God-given instrument – and then when we put these voices together to form again our most natural sounds, our most basic vowel structures what have we found out? That's a beautiful thing. There is something so earthy, so incredibly indelibly mixed, I think, from that which is our soul. Your voice is your mind, really. Your voice is your mind. When a conductor talks to the choir it's very, it's different than an instrumentalist talking to the orchestral conductor talking to the orchestra, except for in the most professional of terms – when you have a professional choir and you don't need to worry at all about their

vocalism. But yet even I think when I work with the most advanced type of voices, I find myself still using imagery which goes to there, which then produces this. It's a mistake not to think, I think, that the voice doesn't begin in the mind and then when the mind responds to the image that you have placed there, then the technique follows that imagery. If the technique's not there in the first place it can't get there. But I am so convinced that the intuition of what a great conductor has is the intuition into being able to get into the mind of the singer, who imagines that sound, and then from that imagination creates that sound, which then when its together in the choral sound – sometimes I will stop in my choir when it is just right and I'll say, this is really living. I can't imagine anything better than this. Just to hold an eight part E major chord on perfect vowel, perfect intonation – it is what the Japanese call center in their life. It returns you to psychological and even physical center. I think there is a reason why when we look at a spectroscope and we play a pitch into a spectroscope which makes a picture of that sound and we look to what happens with dissonance, and the picture, the actual picture of what happens with dissonance and then what happens with consonants the picture straightens out. Why do we have, why is a perfect 5th sound the way it does on a spectroscope? Why does it look – not only sound, but look – the way it does. There is such a thing as harmony of the universe. I believe that; that there's this harmony, the harmony of the spheres that unaccompanied choral singing can lock into that harmony of the spheres, that pure pursuit of unified perfection. You can't put your finger on that. Why do I think that's beautiful? You can't really know. And there's a part of me that says as a conductor, if I ever really figure it out it's not worth it then. It's part of not knowing why, what creates beauty and why does...these are just whirring sounds in the air, really. These are whirring sounds in the air. But yet, that coalescence of these vibrations somehow has made meaning for us. And its that journey in finding all of that, that I find extraordinary.

Q Great description. That was wonderful. Is there a particular story or incident that you can tell that just gives evidence to the power of choral music, either an experience you had as a conductor or that one of your singers afterwards told you how much this meant to him or her?

A I think all of us who do choral music have those experiences. I would share with you one that always, whenever this question is asked of me I go back to it because it was, for me, that way. It was just very powerful for me. It happened in San Diego, CA, a number of years ago on tour with my Concordia Choir. We were singing at a downtown San Diego church, an evening concert after a very long day. We had also sung several services in the morning and so it was a long day. We had done a group of pieces in the set before the intermission, which were all about war and remembrance. So these were pieces that were very powerful, emotional pieces. And one of them was a composition that was brand new at that time; a composition of mine, called (name?). I wrote it about a month after returning from Auschwitz with the choir, the Concordia Choir was on tour and we spent an afternoon at Auschwitz. For anyone who's ever been there, it is an experience that you don't ever forget. I believe it emblazons upon your mind the things that you see and behold there. And when I came home from that trip, I knew that I had written out a lot of my thoughts and just kind of shedding these thoughts into prose, but I knew at some point I wanted to write some music that would say something about how I felt. And most of the music that has been written about the Holocaust – first of all its instrumental – and most of it is dramatic. It wants to depict the horror and the drama of those events. And I chose to go a different route in (name?), which is written on a John Shepard late 16th century text, which is just really a couple of lines of text with...which

means they shall have peace, or let them be in peace. So I built a rather lengthy unaccompanied choral work, really not about recalling the drama, but that may these souls simply rest in peace. That was the final piece in this set and I usually spoke about the set and introduced it to the audience before doing the set. Well that's all the background to lead up to what actually happened. I remember we did the set and...as per normal, and I went back to my dressing room and I just couldn't wait to get back to my dressing room. I was really tired and I looked forward to those 15 minutes where I could be alone in my dressing room. And I got back there and there was this woman standing outside my dressing room door. I said, no; not now; I just need to be alone. So I was kind of irritated. And I'll never forget her. She was a small woman, looked rather European, had on a purple hat on the side of her head, looked maybe mid-'70's, very expressive eyes, older woman. And she was there at my dressing room door. And I looked at her thinking...I was thinking about myself. I want to get into that dressing room and just rest. And she looked at me with huge tears in her eyes, huge tears in her eyes. And she rolled up her arm and there were the numbers – her Auschwitz numbers. And I just went numb, practically numb. We just hugged each other. She said – it was very personal in a way – she just said, I've just never been able to let go of certain things, and you've helped me do that with your music. And she wrote on the program about her brother – Mordecai – who died in the camp, all of her relatives, parents who died there. I still have that program, where she wrote all the names down and when she was there. It is one of the times in my life when I look back and I thought, both the choral performance and a piece that I had written was able to help someone. I can't think of a better reason to write or to make choral music in our society, if it be not for helping make us more human. Then I remember just feeling embarrassed because I didn't want to talk to her at first, you know, and then it was just an extraordinary moment with this person that I just will not ever forget. And she didn't need...we wound up talking, obviously, but the first thing she did was not to speak to me but just to hold out her arm. And when you have that kind of visceral experience, you can remember every detail of what happened. I look back and I figure I learned a lesson and I learned also about why do this and why work hard to make choral music? It has to really be about empowering people, about making people more sensitive to each other. I've always thought about – I try and teach both in my choral school that I do for adult conductors and to my students – there are two types of choral musicians. You'll either try to be impressive or expressive. And those who usually try and be impressive are just that, and they're never much more than that – just always trying to make impressions. But if you work towards being expressive of the music, let impressive take care of itself. The parallel to that is I think about window and mirrors. There are mirror conductors and there are window conductors. And the mirror conductors are always shining up because they see the light reflecting off of them. But mirror conductors you tend not to notice; you tend to see the choir through them. You tend to hear the choir. You're focusing on the music. You shine by reflective light. I think those are two things to keep in mind for all of us who do this – impressive versus expressive and windows versus mirrors.

Q It's coming from inside and its expressive and not meant to impress...

A Its something I think about all the time because you keep your eye on it, keep your eye on the ball – it means you're recreating the composer's intent. And if you're recreating the composer's intent, then you're the conduit for making the music happen, or allowing that music to happen. And as soon as conductors start to look like they're impressed with themselves, it generally shows up.

Q An audience can usually tell.

A They can tell all the time.