

Thomas Rossin

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

Q Let's start by talking about your musical background.

A I was born here, in Minneapolis, but didn't live here very long. I grew up in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which was headquarters of the Reformed Church. So we had blue laws and on Sunday you didn't dare even wash your car much less do the grass or anything. So very, very strict community. I went to parochial grade school – Martin Luther School – Lutheran, I grew up Missouri Synod, so it was very, very strong biblical base. And that's my first impressions of choral music. I had a teacher by the name of Ethan R. Brower and he was very much a disciplinarian and we had an elementary school choir that sang a four-part harmony. We sang Bach chorales and those kinds of things. So I heard it from very early on – fourth grade we were singing in parts and absolutely loved it. Partly because it was so disciplined and partly because I was hearing, that was my first hearing of part-singing and what harmonies were. I was fascinated by the harmonies and all that. Then I traced back one time and I have actual, I have full scores, orchestra scores of Bach Brandenburg Concertos, with my own notes written in them before I even knew what crescendo meant, or decrescendo, I've written in there, louder here, or where the three oboes are playing in the first concerto it says, I wrote in, all three parts should be the same in volume. So I was hearing things and then conducting records. So that was age 8, age 9. So I can't remember a time when I didn't want to conduct – it was that early. In high school I started my own choir while I was still a high school student and we sang concerts actually. Then went to Valparaiso University. Larry Fleming was the conductor there and ended up being a very strong mentor for sounds, hearing sounds. He had gone to Concordia Moorhead, so he was steeped in the Paul J. Christiansen tradition of being very, very careful about vowel sounds and color of sound. So I learned a great deal from him about that. So Valparaiso, then came directly to the U of M for a master of fine arts in choral conducting and started teaching – my first job was in Brainerd, Minnesota, at Brainerd High School. I was there 8 years and in that 8 years I still look back on that as being...it was a mecca. There was so much support from the community for choral music and for the music department in general that it was just, it was magic. We made 13 record albums in 8 years from high school. We went to Europe twice. Represented the US at festivals. Sang for the national ACDA convention in 1979. Had Meet the Composer things where we had Ken Jennings and Paul Christiansen and Lee Saturn and Larry Fleming and those types who came in as guest conductors. It was just a really rich, rich tradition. That's where I learned how to listen. And for a choral conductor that's the absolute number one – your ears are what it is. I admit I stole from...part of the reason for inviting these people as guest conductors are I went to their concerts was to steal, as we all do – every choral conductor does – steal what we think is good and through out the bad and then develop your own style. So from Larry Fleming and from Paul J. I learned about color and the color of the sound and from Lee Saturn I learned about power and basses and the big (word?) sound and from Ken Jennings I learned about line and just beautiful musical phrases and how to do that because I'd ask them how to do that and observe how they did it. So then you develop your own style and that's the way it goes.

Q Why do you think MN has such an especially strong choral tradition both in terms of quality at the collegiate and professional and community levels, but also the sheer

numbers of choruses. What do you think is going on here that made MN one of the very top choral states in the country?

A I think the German heritage – they're singing in Germany and there are lots of Germans here, in fact there's more Germans than Norwegians although we wouldn't know that by...then of course the Scandinavian tradition, too, of choral singing. But I'm sure you've heard this a dozen times: the main thrust is the Christiansen family – F. Melius, whose first job was really at Augsburg College, so he was the director several before me. I was at Augsburg after him. But that family did more for choral singing in MN than any other influence. And the choral a capella sound that came from those people and then their students and that built, built, built, has been rich tradition. There is no other place like MN in choral music. This is the mecca of choral music in America, at least. There are some fine choirs in other places but nowhere near the number of excellent sounds being heard anywhere else. So that's why I came back to Minnesota, having gone to Valpo and decided...I didn't know where I was going to go and Larry Fleming was my mentor, teacher at Valpo and I went to him in my senior year and said, I want to teach college level, because you cannot make music at the high school level. I had never, ever heard music – real music that moved the soul – from a high school choir. Therefore, logically, I thought it was impossible. And I'm sitting in chapel, and at Valpo it's the largest on-campus chapel in the world – it seats 3000 people and it's just a massive kind of thing. I'm sitting there on one morning in chapel at Valpo and there, lo and behold, there's a high school choir who's come and they're going to sing for the chapel service. So I'm sitting there and all of a sudden I hear the Brahms motet, Oh Savior Throw the Heavens Wide – sung by White Bear Lake High School Choir, under the direction of Bud Engen, who is now, who's passed on and was a fine, fine high school choir director. I heard this thing and there was music and I was so flabbergasted that you could actually make music at the high school level that I ran up into the balcony afterwards and gave the guy a hug, having never met him. I just said, I can't believe this. And we became friends, lifelong friends, from then on. And of course I just said immediately, it obviously can be done. I'm going to Minnesota. So I came to Minnesota.

Q Talk about the choral scene in the Twin Cities. The Twin Cities is full of choruses of every stripe and size and color. Talk about the origins of Exultate – how did you come up with this notion, has it always had a chorus and orchestra together, did it start as just a chorus? Talk about the origins of your group, especially in the context of all these other choral groups.

A There are so many choral groups in MN and in the TC area – why start another one? Well, I'm sure some of it is an ego thing and is a selfish thing that conductors like to conduct excellent music. I was the chair of the music department at Augsburg College and that was fine and it was going wonderfully but I wanted even more of a challenge and even a higher level of singing. So I decided that I would start another choir. But how are you going to start a choir when there's a dozen like it and how are you going to make yourself different than they are? So I decided that, you know, there isn't a choir...in fact looking throughout the whole nation there isn't a choir – still isn't – that is both combined orchestra and choir together. It's logical the reason why: because it's very expensive to have instrumentalists and choral singers on line so to speak. I said, well let's try this. I also wanted to expand my own horizons as a conductor and start hearing other sounds besides choral singing. I wanted to hear instruments with voices because there's a huge amount of repertoire and the repertoire is really not being done very often or when it is done a choir will decide to do let's say a Bach cantata. And

so then they'll go out and hire instrumentalists and they come in for one rehearsal or two rehearsals and they do it. But they don't get the community kind of spirit and the cohesiveness that you can by rehearsing over and over together. And I said I really would like to try this but I really want to go all the way and have both orchestra and choir. And I'm so glad that I did it because my ears have increased in their hearing capacity so much by hearing all of that – not only choral sounds, but also instrumental sounds with it. And we've been doing it for twelve years now and it's been a labor of love and never would I have been able to do the repertoire that we've done at such a high level and such a cohesiveness of having the group not just know the notes but know the meaning behind the notes and know the whole structure – what the composer was trying to do – and be able to spend time in that. So we don't rehearse once or twice with orchestra. We rehearse five, six, seven times with orchestra. And orchestra alone and then orchestra will have six or seven rehearsals by themselves, before we put it together. It's a whole new ballgame, because then each phrase, each part...you get into the music at such a level that you could never do in the norm.

Q Talk about the process you go through in selecting repertoire for a season. You're looking for repertoire that will be appropriate and challenging for both the singers and your orchestra – how do you put together your season?

A Exultate is...first of all Exultate means to leap for joy. So that's what we named ourselves – to leap for joy. We will never perform music that does not move the soul. We all know – whether you're a musician or not – that there's some music that moves you and some music that doesn't. Some music is appropriate for muzak and then there's other music that is appropriate to actually really reach your heart. And that's...since music, the definition of music is the language of emotions, if it does not move us, we don't do it. So in choosing repertoire obviously if it moves me, then I think it could move somebody else. So the primary focus and primary choice in it is to do music that moves the soul. And that's our motto. Exultate: Music that Moves the Soul. And that's a hard thing to define because moving your soul is different than moving my soul or someone else's. But there are some universals. If I shout at you say, You're not good! No matter who I say that to, it's going to affect them. Some more severe than others. And the same thing comes with music. Since it's a language and it's the language of emotions, it has to do something. If it does nothing it's like, I'm sorry but the black piece of artwork on the wall that's just simply a black square doesn't move me. Whereas something else will move me. So if it is really actually becoming a language of emotions then it's considered. So we're not one to do...we will do commissions and we'll do new works, but new works only that have a part in moving someone's soul, to make a difference, make them have an emotional response. So people who come out of our concerts often have, they say, I can't believe that choral music could be like that, or there were things over and over. I just, I laughed, I cried, I was mad, I was happy, those kinds of things. That's what we want to do. We want to move people's souls.

Q What's your process of selecting singers and instrumentalists? Are the singers volunteers, and the instrumentalists paid? What is your method of selecting your ensembles?

A Exultate, as all arts organizations, struggles for funds. There isn't one that doesn't struggle for funds, no matter what level, no matter how much money they do have it's still not enough. Same with Exultate; it's not enough. We have some paid singers, we have some paid instrumentalists, we have some volunteer instrumentalists,

we have some volunteer singers. So it's a mixture of both. At some point it would be fabulous to be able to pay all of them. They all get remuneration in some way. For example they'll get free CD's or free tickets and those kinds of things. So technically they're all paid performers. But in choosing them, every singer must audition every year. So if they audition and they make it into the choir or the orchestra, they're in for one year and then they re-audition. That keeps all of us honest. It means that the singers, as we continue to improve – and we do – some people are left by the wayside because they don't improve with us and then others continue to improve and we have people who have been in there for 12 years and they continue to.

Q People often talk about choral music as a great means of building community and camaraderie. How does that play out in the group that you lead?

A Singing is such a natural occurrence for the human. Singing is different – especially now that I work with instrumentalists and singers – I see the difference and it's a difference of mentality, it's a difference in the, I'll say even the aura around the performer. Not one is better than the other, but its just simply different. The instrumentalists usually approach it from the instrumental side. They're looking at their notes and their phrasing and their lines and all of that. And that's what they're looking for to produce the best sound that they possibly can. And they get – most of the time – they get their social life from something else. The choral singer is completely different. They get a great deal of community from singing, from the conviviality with other singers. And I think partly the reason is singing, your instrument is your body. And the instrumentalist has to bring their instrument with. The vocal person has it with them all the time. So for most people, singing is a more personal emotional output than it is for an instrumentalist. So they're singing from their heart and the instrumentalist is singing or playing from their mind most of the time. It's not always the case. There are people, we've had instrumentalists who are in tears because the music is so gorgeous that it just gets to their soul. But far more it happens with the singer because when you sing, you're whole body is involved. And a singer can be a flute, it can be an oboe, it can be a trumpet, it can be a French horn. And as conductors we ask them to be that from time to time – OK I want you to sound like trumpets here, or I want you to sound like oboes, whatever. That brings up a whole other subject in the language of describing sound. We have such a poor vocabulary for describing sound. We describe sound using words from other forms of art. There is no way to...when I talk about the color of the sound – is it green? Blue? No, its not; its something completely different because we have no vocabulary. I say it's a shrill sound, it's a bright sound, well the lights are on? It's too bright? No. It can be something completely different. We don't have a vocabulary that's adequate to talk about sound. Sound is such an elusive thing and so we borrow words from other forms of art in order to describe it. That's a troublesome thing for a conductor because we have to use language that doesn't really quite fit what we're talking about, so explaining things using metaphors is much, much easier. Choral conductors are well known for using metaphors like they'll say, sounds like a trumpet. We all know what a trumpet sounds like, so we sound like a trumpet. You wouldn't say to a trumpet player, sound like a trumpet, or sound like an oboe. Trumpet doesn't want to sound like an oboe. But the singer has to be able to do all of that.

Q Good observation. I've always kind of sensed that, but not articulated it. Of course you're with them all the time and you can see directly the difference in the styles both singers and instrumentalists bring. The Twin Cities has all these different choral groups and they each have, they're all competitive up to a point, they're looking for some

of the same audience and funding. But it's also a pretty collaborative community. A lot of groups will work with other groups from time to time on various projects. Can you think of any collaborations with other music or any kind of artistic group that you've had that's been especially rewarding?

A Yeah, there've been several really rewarding things. We have done things, concert with the Klezmer Band, which is really a kick, I'll say it's a kick because here we have this rich tradition of the Klezmer really laid back, sloppy jazz...I don't know what you would call it, and these stoic singers. To get them to be in that kind of a mood and to perform that music well was a challenge but a great deal of fun. We've also done – with Celtic Harp – we've done a concert with bagpipes. Bringing in odd combinations or combinations not usually seen in order to do authentic folk music, authentic music of the people. And that's been really rewarding. We did a collaboration with a community band, just made up of people who love to play and we got them to such a high level of performance doing Frank Bencriscutto from the U of M, we did his Psalm 98, which is a very difficult piece for choir and band, but we had a very, very high level of performance because this community band suddenly was thrown with a professional group and they really rose to the occasion and we did too and it was a delight to do that.

Q What can we do to instill passion for singing in the next generation?

A I think young kids need to hear more choral music; they really do. They need to hear singing and be instilled with the magic that it is. And if they go to concerts where there is moving of the soul, their souls may...and kids will say, I want to a part of that. That's something I want to do. Exultate has a summer youth program called, The MN All State Lutheran Choir. It's been in existence since 1969 and I've been doing it for 18 years. The enthusiasm for choral singing among the students that we have every year is absolutely amazing. And we take them on a three-week program in June every year. The first eight days we rehearse eight hours a day – believe me – eight hours a day of singing. And they don't get sick. And we get an entire concert ready, of classical choral music, and then take it on tour 14 concerts. That's been happening for 39 years, which is really amazing. The love of singing choral music is so powerful by the end of that tradition, by the end of that whole time together, that those kids they want to come back again, they want to be in choirs, etc., etc. There are other programs around the state like that – the MN All State Choir, through the public school systems. There are honors choirs from ACDA, all of those things. And Exultate is actually starting a brand new one now that's going to be called the Twin City Choral Academy. GTCYS – Greater Twin Cities Youth Symphony – has been in existence for a long time right here in the mecca of choral music. There has never been a high-class choral outlet for high school students who have higher gifts than others in the Twin Cities. And here we have a mecca. So this is going to be an honors choir throughout the year, going on and on every year, for high school students in the seven-county metro area. Never been done before. It's going to be ongoing; they'll come for individual lessons, music history, music theory, and choral singing. And we are starting that in January of 2009 and its, I'm sure its going to be a success because there are many, many high school students who have gifts that are far above the average. And this is going to be an outlet, another place, where they can experience that. That's what we can do as Exultate, me as a choral conductor, a lover of choral music, to instill that kind of thing for the future. If we don't do it and if we don't get kids at concerts and hearing that and experiencing it, we won't have it in the future.

Q Do you have any memorable stories about a choral experience?

A I'll tell a story that happened on a concert tour. In 1990 I took the Augsburg Choir to Europe. 1990 was also the time when the Berlin Wall came down. So on that tour we were actually in Berlin and I was with a chisel and hammer, was pounding holes in the Berlin Wall. It was an incredible experience; one that you can't share it completely in words, because I had grown up in a time when obviously the Iron Curtain was there, people were shot trying to get out of East Germany. I had been to East Germany and West Germany, I had been in Berlin and climbed a tower to look over the Wall into East Germany and seeing the drab, no color, people lined up for blocks to the meat store and turn around and looked at the bottom of the stairway and there are cars bustling by and color and lights and all of that. The stark reality difference was incredible. But we took this tour in 1990 and we came into Torin, Poland. As we entered the city there were people lined in the streets waving at us, the Americans were heroes, because here the Berlin Wall was finally down, the end of it all, and we were getting freedom. Well we went to the cathedral, big Roman Catholic cathedral and gave a concert there. The place was absolutely jam-packed – a thousand people or more were there. We came out and started the concert and when we came out there was a standing ovation, before we even began, which is a really a good feeling for a conductor to have. We got done with the first piece and there was a standing ovation, and it went on and on. And the second piece – standing ovation – it went on and on. Third piece, the same thing. This concert is going to last forever. So the priest was sitting in the front aisle, the front pew and I went over to him and bowed to him to see if I could quell the thing. It didn't work. It was more thunderous. We got done with the fourth piece and there was a standing ovation. And then way down the center aisle there was a little girl who came walking all the way up the center aisle, came right up to me, and gave me her doll. I still have a hard time talking about that, but what it said was the music we were performing, what we represented socially in the world, the freedom that American's had helped the East gain, was so precious that even this little, tiny girl knew how important it was and she gave me her doll. Well, I lost it, then. It was just terrible. The concert went on. We got done with the first half and went downstairs and we just stood around looking at each other; nobody could say anything. Went up for the second half – the same thing. We finally got done with the concert and we were doing a Norwegian folk hymn at the end and I whispered to the choir, sing it again, sing it again, while I'm conducting. While you're singing it, go down this center aisle so we can get out of there. They got halfway down the center aisle and the crowd caught on. We never made it out. They just mobbed us and tears and hugs and joy. It was an amazing, a mountaintop experience; probably never will be repeated again. We collected free will offerings at our concerts in Europe and I got back to the hotel, had two full grocery bags filled with bills – just a massive amount. I dumped it all out on the bed and counted it. The exchange rate was 7000 zloty(?) to the dollar. It added up – this huge mound of bills – added up to \$28.00. The next day I gave the grocery bags back to the priest, which was a huge amount of money to them, but we weren't going to keep that. So the goodwill that was done by that and the moving of people's souls, is what its all about. I wouldn't trade that experience for anything.

Q Where was that performance again?

A Torin, Poland. The next night we were in Berlin, West Berlin, there were 25 people there. The contrast....

Q When was the famous singing of Beethoven's choral symphony, Ode to Joy...that happened when the Wall came down. When did that happen?

A That was after that. On that same trip we went to East Germany, and of course we were met the same way in East Germany because we were heroes. And we gave that concert, in that concert we sang a piece by Lee Sateren called Prayer for Peace. And within the context of that piece there are several people who shout out words like, Hiroshima, or Nagasaki, or the concentration camps from Germany, Auschwitz, Auschwitz, Auschwitz – peace and there is no peace. And then the music would come back and then there was shouting and it was one of those aleatoric kinds of things. That had such an affect on those people from East Germany. We knew that it... it was programmed that way, to have effect, old people with tears running down their faces and then thank you's afterwards for doing that and singing. That concert we ended and we all went downstairs and the kids got out of their robes and got dressed and 20 minutes later somebody came down and said, they're still applauding. You have to go back up there. So I went back up and went to the front and they were all standing and applauding and I bowed and bowed and came back down. They wouldn't stop. The whole choir had to get dressed again, while they're still applauding, went back on and sang several pieces again. It was, that was the same trip. It was just the timing was just perfect. It was great.