

Weston Noble

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

Q I've asked everybody questions about their earlier years in music.....talk about the track you were on and how that experience may have shifted your direction.

A I'm at a point in time in my life where I like to reflect on certain events that took place and the meaning of those events, which I didn't understand fully at the time. I entered Luther as a hopeful piano major and I had started piano when I was five and so on and so on. One day our men's chorus director asked me if I wanted to take the rehearsal the following day because he was going to be gone. Oh, yes of course I would do that because anything that had to do with the word choir did something to me and there's a Norwegian hymn that talks about behold the host arrayed in white and the heavenly choir. Well, that became my favorite hymn. So we went up and had the rehearsal. I don't remember what piece we sang. I know that I was very energized and excited that I could do this. Following the rehearsal I went back to my room, which was in the same building and sat down and I said to myself, you know, this is what I must do. I am going to cease striving to be a pianist. I have not felt like this in any other way or matter of contact with music. So this will be it.

Q So you went to Luther and then you almost went to Juilliard but decided to teach, look for a high school teaching job. You got the job in Luverne, Iowa. Talk about what you were doing in Luverne and the phone call you got from Luther.

A Again as I reflect upon my events in the past, I was all set to go to Juilliard when I was discharged from the service. I was very excited about that, of course, and so in the beginning of September, one Monday morning, I was going to leave on the noon train. And I was packing, but I was having some trouble packing. And all of a sudden I sat down on the edge of the bed and I said to myself, I'm not going. And I surprised myself by saying that. And I went downstairs to my mother and I said, Mom, I've decided I'm not going to Juilliard. What? You're not going to Juilliard? No. What are you going to do? I'm going to find a high school that needs a music teacher. And this is in September so schools had started. I'll look in the Des Moines Register and that's what I'm going to do. Now as I reflect back, why did my mind come to that conclusion? Because I didn't have the depth of perception to understand that. Now I know. Who has the choir at Juilliard? How important is the choir at Juilliard? Do they tour? Do they sing in like (?) places like that? It was just no, no, no, no, no. But I, my mind was guided to realize what I needed right then was experience to go out and start, in a sense (?) you know? Well, now it's the most understandable thing in the world but at that time it was quite a major trauma in my life to make that decision.

Q So you had this job in Luverne and then one day Luther called.

A So I found the job in a little town called Luverne, Iowa. There were 93 in high school. The most expensive meal I could buy in town was a 75cent steak. Of course, this was in 1946, but... But they had kind of a nice little music program going there. Well, so I knew that what was important was also my advanced degree. So after teaching at Luverne for one year I decided to go back to enter the University of Michigan and pursue my Master's degree. I went back to Luverne for the second year, went back to Michigan then for the second summer and was ready to stay and finish my degree.

Well, one day in July the phone rang and it was the dean at Luther saying that the choir director at Luther College – of the Nordic Choir – had suddenly resigned because his wife had been accepted at New York City Center in New York. Well who's going to turn that down? So would I consider coming for a year? So I went to all of my instructors throughout the week and asked them what I should do. And it might surprise people to know that every single one of them said, stay here and finish your degree. Until Friday afternoon – I had a piano lesson from Mary Muldowney – so I asked her and she said, well what do you really want to do? I said well I really want to teach in college. Well, for goodness sakes, take the job, get some experience. You can always come back and do your graduate work. I remember running down two flights of stairs and calling the dean and saying, is that job still open? Yes. Well, I really would like to accept the offer. And that's history. Remember...I remember that that was going to be for one year. Turned out to be a rather long year.

Q You were there for better than 50 years. Were there ever times during that tenure when you felt like things were becoming a little bit repetitive or too predictable?

A How does one handle routine? When you've had the same position for 57 years, there's an element of routine involved. And I've been asked to reflect on that many times and I think I have somewhat the answer; I'm not sure. But part of the answer has to be that I'm a Type-A personality. Ok, I Type-A personality, once they have a commitment they'll follow through and they'll do it and they will usually take care of all the details involved. There's something in me that gets satisfaction about repeating...if I can just improve it, just a little bit, you know? Or do this a little different and see how it affects other things. So that has to be part of it. I just get a sense of satisfaction out of that. The other part, of course, has to do with the excitement of seeing students respond. And yet when I reflect on that, that could take place no matter where I'm teaching. So it has to then boil down to the second major point and that is I truly felt a mission to make Luther the finest school it could be. See, the music Luther started in 1904 with a Norwegian sailor who decided he wanted to become a minister and chose to come to Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. And he was a fine musician. And the result was being he was such an outstanding percussion player and all, and his father was the head of the Norwegian Opera also. He built or was able to bring together an outstanding concert band, which toured Europe – 1914 they were already that good. Remember there were no high school bands at this time. And in 1936...in 1925 they were booked in a town – Minot, North Dakota – the night following an appearance by Sousa's band. Well, nobody's going to come and hear the Luther band. They were kind of bummed out. They had a larger crowd than Sousa did. Sousa kept his band over to hear them because he'd heard so much about them. And that night the piccolo part on Stars on Stripes was played by a tubist. And even in our present day and age that would be an accomplishment, let alone 1925. So I knew that I had a foundation that was solid in the alums and I had been a member of that band as well. So I just felt almost a mission, a calling to do everything I could to restore that from after the decimation of the war. And I think that's the reason that I have been able to repeat and repeat and repeat. And every so often finding a benchmark...see that's a little bit harder than it was before and this is a little bit easier than it was before.

Q There seemed to be a bit of a pattern in your life and this is that you have perceived some kind of calling.....

A I mentioned earlier that for some unknown reason I could not pack, and I didn't really know why but I sat down on the edge of the bed and I said, I am absolutely convinced that there was divine intervention at that moment because there is a plan and in this plan certain steps have to be taken. And if we – I want to say allow that, but sometimes we don't even really know its happening but as we look back it seemed about the logical thing to do. When I did, then, come to Luther to be on the faculty and could be there as it ended up for many years, more and more and more I saw that this was absolutely to be my purpose in life. Would I not be tempted to go to Yale or would I not – and I had an opportunity to apply – and other schools like that? I had answered in my letter to Yale in 15 minutes that I would not come because I could not be who I really feel that I am. Not just externally, but internally – the very core of why I exist, so to speak, or the plan that is for my life – and I could not fulfill that at those schools, flattering as it was. I don't think there's any question at all that that's the case. And now that I'm in a different phase of my life, which is moving around now to several schools, I'm asked well, what are you going to do next year? I say, I'm just as anxious to find out as you are. I don't know what I'm going to be doing next year. God knows exactly where I'm going to be next year. So yes, that's a very core principle in my life.

Q What do you think it is about singing in a choir that seems to attract so many people and gives them fulfillment?

A I was a band director for 25 years at Luther, as well as being the director of the Nordic Choir for 25 years. I enjoyed both of them and particularly understand, though, that I would enjoy the Luther band so much because I was a member of the Luther Band and that's the rock upon which the Luther program was founded. But I found an added ingredient in choral called the text. And I also found that the voice is absolutely the essence of intimacy. My clarinet isn't quite the emphasis of intimacy, but the voice is. And I was able to take the demands of rhythmic solidity, which you get from the instrumental, and then add to that and that is why I have found deep satisfaction in the choral. Well then, if I want to transfer this satisfaction to another person and I'm dealing with the most intimate part of who they are plus a text that is worth reflection, then the answer becomes rather obvious. Just this week, if I may, I was recognized by the leading instrumental award that's given in the United States. So you see, the instrumental part of me is alive and well even to this day. It wasn't an exclusion of one or the other; it was just the wonderful building of one upon the other – taking the strengths of one and bringing it into that area and vice versa. Music is music, you know? But the intimacy...I was just talking in the rehearsal yesterday from the Sing Along Messiah – the cellist was sitting right in back of me and I turned to him and I said, you know if I could start my life all over again I'd like to be a cellist. Now I didn't totally mean that. I didn't want to conduct. But nevertheless, rather than being a pianist or something.... And he said, oh absolutely. And I said because you can express any emotion you want with that cello – you can be pensive and reflective, you can be sad, you can be happy, you can be joyful. It is so close to the human voice. And he said, I couldn't agree with you more. So there's other examples of where the instrumental and the choral come right together, you know? But I find that avenue – I'm repeating here – of the intimacy of the voice plus the text. That's pretty hard to beat.

Q Numerous people that we've talked to referred to F. Melius and what he did....but nobody's actually said why he's important. You knew him....talk about your perception of him.....

A As one studies the history of choral music, you see that in the late 1920's, acapella singing really...well before that they were singing societies because they couldn't sing in tune so they sang with an orchestra. I'm being a little simplistic, but still, in essence. But along comes a choir that can sing acapella and sing in tune. And I'm not quite sure what there was in F. Melius's thinking that led him to the purity of the acapella. Now Paul J, in some ways wouldn't even allow an instrument around – it just had to be so purely acapella. Or can it be also that this was F. Melius's way of reaching the parishioner in the church and going out to the churches and giving a gift to the church per say? Well, I think that's true. Then add to the fact that Bach is the great Lutheran musician. So there's something in the genes of the Lutheranism, you see. Well look at Martin Luther – music is second only to the word. So here is a church willing to sponsor this choir, to bring them into their community, to edify them. Now I was a Methodist. That's not in the Methodist genes. Of course they appreciate music. Then also the strong ethnicity of the Norwegians and here was a gift that was particularly unique to the Norwegians. I'm going to segue here just a little bit, but I've always found it so interesting – why did F. Melius and then Carlos Sperati who founded the band at Luther – why did they both come from Norway? Why not Sweden or whatever? I haven't figured that one out yet. So having a receptive church, used to singing chorales – Bach chorales and things like that, wanting then to enlarge this as much as possible – a receptive administration at St. Olaf that said, yes we will send you to New York; yes we will take the risk of you singing at the Metropolitan Opera House – filling it the first time. Well, the word just starts to ripple all around. And that was in the early '20's, I think. So the acapella tradition, then, was beginning to become a germ in all areas of acapella music and that's manifested in about 1928 at the National Convention of Music Educators.

Q In a couple of sentences, why was F. Melius so important....

A We must remember of F. Melius and the Portsmouth tradition, that on a sabbatical he went to Leipzig, Germany, and St. Thomaskirche, and he heard the men and boys choir there. And he came back to St. Olaf and said, well you sopranos you're going to sound like boys. It might be a little simplistic, but that's basically what happened. Now that promotes excellent intonation and you put those two together and the acapella tradition – because he was the violinist and had a very fine ear. All those ingredients together, plus a receptive church and administration established a camp of singing. We call it Camp A, which is the – I'll use the word "straight tone" – versus the choir that was really growing in those times which was the Westminster choir, now the Westminster Choir School in Preston, NJ. They had a totally different type of sound. They were singing with an orchestra so they had to have a big operatic sound. That's Camp B. These two camps start to really grow side by side and F. Melius championed one of those schools of thought. It was inevitable that he would have such a profound influence. Plus, his faith.

Q If you were to describe to somebody the essence of the F. Melius sound.....

A To characterize that sound, it was to be as pure as it could possibly be. And if you take that approach and put it in the realm of theology, then whatever gift we give back to God must be the finest that we can perform, in a sense. And that was very much in his thinking. It was very much in Olaf's thinking – Olaf Christiansen – and why not? He's the son of his father. So the desire for perfection, which the so-called straight tone allowed – versus the wider vibrato of the other school...the two just melted right

together. And the St. Olaf Choir was born in the church, wasn't it? They were basically a church choir that finally decided to go out and become public. Well it couldn't fail; just couldn't fail.

Q How would you describe the evolution of the St. Olaf choir sound over the decades.....

A An individual is an individual that makes his or her own stamp upon a product and it's inevitable that this stamp is going to take on different characteristics. This was a natural evolution of the growth of choral music, the growth of sound concept, the growth of repertoire. Really there was very little choral repertoire at all. That's why F. Melius arranged the church hymns so much, and John Finley Williams did a lot of his transcriptions or editions I should say...well these bring about different things and you don't really sing a Brazilian psalm with quite the same style. So those things kind of come in through the back door, so to speak. And then there becomes an awareness of the strengths but maybe certain limitations of a certain style. So we make adjustments to accommodate this and gradually you have an evolution that the desire for perfection is just as strong in that school of thought now as it ever was. It has not changed. But in bringing about the element of perfection, the approach to the tone, to the aspect of rhythm – and here I must interject – comes along the great Robert Shaw. And what is Robert Shaw's great gift to music? It's rhythm. What is the St. Olaf choir's gift to music? It is tone. And then if these two streams start to come together, there's going to be a little change and maybe a change for the better. And I think that's exactly what has happened.

Q Tell that again...what Jennings had talked to you about....

A I was with Ken Jennings in the receiving line where the Westminster Choir had sung, in Rochester, MN. So I was right in back and I heard his comments to (name?) and he said, you know, I really think that maybe you sing more like St. Olaf than we do now. But we introduced some opera in the interim at St. Olaf and I just can't get those sopranos corked back up again. I really think I'm giving it exactly what he said so that I wouldn't embarrass him.

Q During your 57 years, you had lots of rewards....what was most rewarding?

A Music affects people differently and they express their being moved in different ways. Of course we remember some of the dramatic ones particularly. The captain of the football team felt that he had attended enough Messiah rehearsals that he could sing in the chorus. I had no limitations on the chorus; it was open to anyone and a large segment of the student body would participate. So on this one Sunday afternoon, after the Saturday game, he sang. Came leaping out of the bleachers afterwards and came down and grabbed me with those big muscles and hugged me and he said, Mr. Noble tell me what happened to me. I've never felt like this ever, in my whole life. Now tell me right now, why couldn't I even feel that I was up there on the risers? Well, am I exaggerating when I say that changed his life? No I'm not at all. He'll go to every Messiah performance that he can find to find that feeling again. Will he find it again? Not as easily as the first one, but it'll be there. OK, but then you might also see the quiet performer and you just see a little trickle coming down their eye and they have been just as moved as this football player. Now the football player says, I never felt like that when

I made a touchdown. Of course not. That's an adrenaline rush that's from a different source. But when you get this kind of a thing in music, call it a joy rush, call it goosebumps, call it tears, whatever. All of a sudden we have, just for that moment, become whole. That's why we never forget it.

Q If you were mentoring to an aspiring young choral conductor today...

A I was being interviewed for a DVD three years ago and my interviewer was an exceptional person. First of all, he was an amateur musician. Secondly he was a Christian. And thirdly he was a devotee of Carl Jung and that fits me to a "T." So he said to, now give me the main characteristic of an outstanding choral director. Now that could be band director or orchestra, but lets take the situation of choral right now. So I started to poke there for this, and I said this, and I said this. And he looked at me and he smiled and he said, Weston are you trying to say "**vulnerability?**" And I didn't expect that at all, but I distinctly remember a chill going from my head right out through the bottom of my feet and I knew that was right. So my next challenge then was trying to verbalize for myself and for others why vulnerability was the key, not piano playing, not ear training, but vulnerability. Well now, this is my answer to that in a lecture – one has to constantly be checking on their inner person, checking upon your soul. Because if you go to the podium, you're going to take those problems right along with you, and if you take those problems with you then you're negating a certain area where the power of the music is diminished. So this is a constant study and I have felt this very much in my life – that I must do everything that I can to deal with my shadow, which could threaten something on my effectiveness at the podium. Now that's quite a trip and that's quite a journey. The second one is that I must, then, be vulnerable to the score and I have to look at that piece of music and say, what is the composer trying to say? Why did he or she write this. What analogy is present? How can I, in other words, discover the emotion that's there? Well my creed says that a choir sings with emotion and the tone, which we want, only through the gift of imagination. You have to imagine the setting of that text, what is going on in that text, what the composer may have been thinking about. So its vulnerability, then, to the score; just the studying of the score. And the third element if we must be vulnerable is with your choir – to set up a relationship of vulnerability with your choir. And in that relationship it can be explained by one simple word – love. And if any member of any organization or any student knows that the person in charge has a high regard for them, wants the best – in other words, loves them – then they become vulnerable with their feelings and you get a really special experience. So I would say its vulnerability. I wouldn't have said that for years, but now I do see its true.

Q It's like a certain letting go and trust..... So when you step up to the podium today, what are you feeling?

A I want a feeling of a surge..... When I start to conduct, I want a feeling of deep excitement within me. And that excitement is if that is translated out to the singer, he or she may have a moment that truly will change them. And I want to take then that text and give it all of the power that it has. But that power really is going to come out of me through my beat maybe, but more than that through my eyes and my face. So I want to be in the best position possible to be the go-between, the transmitter of that to the student and if I see one face that I know is right there, a spark can go on, then it becomes history.

Q Is there anything else that you would like to say to a young conductor?

A You know...what can we do to improve our capacity to respond. Because that...Jung calls that the feeling function, and that does vary from person to person. But what can we do to make it grow and to make it blossom as what we would like it to be? We must expose ourselves to as much beauty as we can. We must go to the Metropolitan Opera, we must listen to Richard Tucker sing about Mimi dying at the end of the opera and we must be willing to cry. Nordic Chorus would see me cry a lot. That's when the magic can happen. We must go to art museums, we must read good things, we must surround ourselves in this because we can't just be involved in some negative things and then all of a sudden step to the podium and there it is - um um. It's checking carefully what dominates our thinking and dominates our thoughts. That plus the constant inner search.

Q You've done a fair amount of that, it seems.

A I'd like to have you ask me one question. You should ask me...well I'll just ask myself the question: **what is it that causes a physical reaction when this happens?** I've read and read and read and I've never found one single hint as to why we do that. This gets maybe...you'll have to judge when it gets a little bit too technical, but I'll give it a try. I have been fascinated by the nature of a musical experience, as we call it, when it's manifested in the body. How does this happen and why is it so important? I see our lives as a pyramid and the pyramid has three sections. The top pyramid I label spirit; the middle pyramid I label soul; and the bottom pyramid I label body. Now going back to spirit – it can be a small “s” because the Egyptians were concerned about the spirit of the Pharaohs so they built the pyramids. It's always been there. Or it can be a capital “S.” We go to the word soul – I use the Greek definition, which is our mind, our will, and our emotion. The body is the senses. OK? Now there is a relationship there that is not mine, but it's not thought of and found too much – the spirit, which is here, has the ability to inspire the soul. So, the spirit is touched and the emotions in the soul or even the mind and the soul are inspired. OK? Then the soul, which is inspired – it has a definite function. And its function is to rule the body. Well the soul, then, as it rules the body you get tears, you get joy rushes and so forth. What starts this in the spirit – that to me is an element of individuation. It could be the pitch of the moment, it could be the tambour of the moment, it could be the rhythm of the moment couldn't it? Any element of music could set that off according to the individual. But when the spirit inspires the soul and the soul rules the body, then we get this. We are for that moment in time, whole. Everything in our person is all lined up. And that's why we never forget it because our life is a search for wholeness every day, isn't it? Every day we search for that. But when that happens, it is so powerful that we never forget it. My first one was at 8:20 in the morning, May 5th, on a Monday, in 1936. And that's why I'm talking to you right now. I was whole for that moment. I didn't know what it meant, but I knew it was something great.

Q How do you account for the fact that it's an individual thing....but it seems like some people don't get the same kind of wholeness as others.....

A Go back to the spirit for just a moment and that can be it affects people in such different ways. Here I happen to be a devotee of Jung because Jung says we live on these different levels each day – one, the intellectual; two, the sensations; thirdly, the intuitive; and four, the feeling. Well maybe certain people who have the real gift in the

intellectual, they don't quite respond the same way in the feeling area. So its these other areas in which we are reached that figure into that. We were on tour and this one person was giving his devotions and he said, I'm so jealous. In a concert I see Weston Noble crying and I see you people crying and I just can't cry and I'm really jealous of you. And at that moment he started to cry. See he let those feelings free and he cried so hard that we had to start the concert late. That's somewhat the answer to that, I think.

A Another interesting side to that is the fact that maybe the person that is not affected by a performance just plain has a headache or just has had a bad experience that day or something like that, you know? And here I am, my first experience comes the day after we got a Division 3 at contest. Well, the director wasn't inspired at all.

Q Do you think some conductors never allow themselves to be vulnerable because they think they need to be in control?

A Oh, of course. It happens all the time.