

Dominick Argento

Interviewed by Peter Myers at Hennepin Ave. United Methodist Church, April 24, 2008

Q It's always interesting for me to hear a little bit about the earliest experience that people have had with music. Talk about your musical memories from childhood. What kind of music was in your home or in your school and how did you start to develop your love of music?

A Perhaps the most common question I ever am asked has always been what was your childhood like? What were your first musical experiences? I don't understand how to answer the question. I had no musical experiences when I was a child. I came from probably the most un-musical family. My father...I think thought it was singing...all I remember, he was an immigrant to America but I remember mostly when he first could afford a car we used to take rides on Sundays and he would sing as he looked at the landscape, "America, America," and that's all he said. There were no other words. I think it was more delight at having become an American citizen. But apart from that, there was no music. We had no piano. I did start taking piano lessons at 16, but up until then...there was nobody in the family, either. We checked back on that. My grandfather thought there might have been a priest somewhere back but I don't think that necessarily counts as being musical. Not the ones that I've heard sing.

Q At what point did you really become a more serious musician and music student? Was it college or beyond?

A I started taking piano lessons at 16 and I made a lot of progress rather fast. As a matter of fact, my teacher was silly enough after two years to have me doing Appassionata Sonata of Beethoven, which was way over my head. But luckily I was drafted so I never had to learn the rest of that sonata. But in the Army I guess I had enough time to think about it that I wanted to take music seriously. When I was discharged I had the GI Bill and at that time, of course, my father was opting, letting me out between being a lawyer or a doctor. And I said, what about a musician? It didn't sit too well, but he was not anti. He said, ok it's your life. You want to do it. So with the GI Bill I went off to Peabody Conservatory, which is only 50 miles, I think, from my hometown.

Q At what point did that turn into more of a composing direction?

A When I entered Peabody, I thought I was going to be a piano major because I had done relatively well in two years. But in that very first year, with student enrollment of about 600 there were 599 people who played far better than I played the piano and that included singers and drum players and everything else. I realized I was not going to make it. Fortunately – I guess it was a stroke of luck – I had harmony lessons and they were given privately at Peabody in those days, with a gentleman named Nicholas Navakoff – actually a first cousin to the famous writer. He thought I was doing swimmingly in harmony and he had me pass all four years within that first year. At the end of that year he gave me some strange advice. He said, now, you've written some music, haven't you? I said, well I put my little piano concerto.... At that time I thought the pianist that I was going to become had to be like Rachmaninov or Chopin or Prokofiev or Bartok – you write your own concertos and then you go out and play them. But it was getting to look very dim but I said I'll write some pieces.....and by the way read the

letters of Mozart. And that's what I did over that summer between freshman and sophomore year. And when I came back I switched majors to composition. He looked at my pieces and said, yeah I think you should be a composition major. And that was a real change.

Q When you first came to MN on rather short notice to accept what you thought might be a one- or two-year position at the University, what were you expecting to find here and what did you actually discover about MN and music after you'd been here for a time?

A When I first was offered a job here, I was given something like two days notice. I was in Pennsylvania and I got the phone call and I think it was like Sunday night and I was told I would have the job if I could be in MN for Monday morning classes. And I didn't even know where MN was at that time. I knew you aim toward the setting sun, but beyond that...I made it here and I was determined. I found the whole experience...I was bawled out for being late; I missed some classes on Monday. I said to my wife, I just don't think I'm going to like it here very much. Let's not unpack our suitcases immediately. And little by little, my attitude was changed just by Minneapolis-St. Paul. The area I began to understand and see was very congenial, at least to new music. We were having a lot of concerts at the Unitarian Society, at the Walker Art Center, within a year or two Tyrone Guthrie was visiting and talking about building his theater which I later wrote some music for, and the St. Paul Orchestra was developing into an international...in three or four years being here all the jobs that I had hoped I'd be offered at Berkeley or Juilliard or Curtis and so on – a couple of them had actually come through, at least tentative feelers. But by that time I was really very much – I'll use the word – in love with Minneapolis. And I still am. I've loved the atmosphere here more than anything else and the kind of support that I think artists have received here. Most of my students...I feel so good for them that they can live here. People like Libby and Steve and Carol and all of them and they're doing quite well. And I don't know that that'd be the case had I taken a hotshot job somewhere else.

Q You had mentioned before that you thought MN was very conducive to your writing because it wasn't so heavily influenced by the latest trends. Talk a little bit about that.

A The one thing I think that Minneapolis offered me that I would not have had in New York is silence. By silence I mean that I was not being bombarded with all the latest trends, I was not being told that you realize that you're about two steps behind the pack. I didn't know what was going on and I really at that point realized that I didn't care. I was trying to find what I wanted to write or wanted to learn who I was in writing and that more or less meant not paying attention to anything else and doing what.... And I could do that here in a way that I don't think I could have in New York or Los Angeles and in addition to that this area was sort of very sparsely populated with composers. New York I think the density would just be overwhelming.

Q Among other things, Minnesota is known for excellence in choral music and many of your prominent students have made a good part of their early careers out of writing for choral ensembles. When did you first start writing for choral ensembles and what was it about choral - or vocal music in general - that appealed to you?

A I never really thought I'd wind up doing much in choral music. I wasn't expecting to write it. I mentioned a while ago that originally I thought I'd be a pianist and I'd be writing nothing but concertos. When I realized that wasn't working, I was going to be writing symphonies and string quartets – obviously something far more practical. When that didn't work out, I married a singer and Carolyn sort of got me interested in writing for the voice and opera, but not chorus. However, I did meet her when she...I had, as a student I had to write some choral pieces and I wrote three madrigals and our composer's forum got together an ad hoc choral group and the lady who was going to become my wife was one of the sopranos. There's a sense of gratitude, I guess, to all that and to choral music – that's how I met her. But in any case it wasn't until I was out here and had done a fair amount of other things that I got interested in...mainly the influence was by choral music on me because you could hear such wonderful choral singing here, which was not part of my experience at hometown, in Pennsylvania, or even at Peabody. But here one couldn't help...even the church choirs were head and shoulders above most church choirs I knew.

Q What factors do you think have made MN such a center for high quality and, in some cases, exceptional quality choral music? What's going on here?

A I've always attributed it to the ethnicity. I think that first of all, Lutheranism sort of encourages it. I don't know how; I don't have that background, but the Scandinavian aspect I think has been very significant. I know the Welsh have a kind of fame for producing choirs and singers. But I think the Scandinavians are almost equal to that. And I think so many of the great conductors here in town that I have known have all had Scandinavian backgrounds, at least they have a name that would encourage you to think that. I haven't used the word but it always wants to come out when I talk about Minnesotan's – there's something very honest about this area. I see it in politics

A quality that I don't think I've mentioned yet, that I find very endearing and very significant, is the honesty. I think that I feel that in the way that people react when I'm sitting at the symphony and I'm in their midst. I feel that when I go to the Guthrie Theater or to plays...none of these are for show or because this is the thing to do. It's because they're honestly deriving something from it. And I feel that when...the kind of service I get in restaurants, and clerks and oddly enough it just seems to permeate...it goes all the way up to politics or down to politics, depending on how you look at it. You think of people like Humphrey and McCarthy and Mondale...that kind of attitude. It might not win you office as a politician, but it does impress people.

Q Many of your conducting students have gone on to have very successful careers. To what extent does the existence of groups and individuals like Dale Warland, Philip Brunelle, and all the choral groups help to nurture the careers of your students?

A First of all, I think it's almost...not unique here, but it's certainly very, very obvious. People like Dale and Philip have just commissioned work after work. I think together, combined they must be up to a thousand works by now. And that's equally true for things like St. Paul Chamber Orchestra....I'm getting off the subject of choral works, but there's that idea here that artists are useful people and that you're not merely throwing them a sop. When a chorus commissions you, you know perfectly well they want to sing your piece. It's not because, well it's time we commission a work, we make a record.

Q In the world of composing, the way you compose, talk about the relationship of text and music. How do you normally get started?

A The question of what comes first, the words or the music and what inspires what....I have found I think at least in the last few decades that everything really begins with the commission. Either the commissioner tells you what they want or would like to have and in the case of choral music it's almost always a matter of text that either they will suggest and I will turn down as I have done. For example Dallas wanted something about a...they wanted to commission a work about cowboys. Well I just don't think I can write music about cowboys. But when I actually get down to it, people are surprised to learn that I spend about two-thirds of my time looking through a text than I do composing it. It takes me much longer...you've heard a recent work of mine, the Evensong. I have a feeling that putting that and assembling that text was much more of a chore than writing the music for it. I'm presently doing something for the ACDA and they had started out, oddly enough, five years ago with a commission that's going to be for next year their 50th birthday. And since they knew they were going to double-bill it on a concert with Vaughn Williams' Dona Nobis Pacem, they thought maybe something about war or peace would be an appropriate match. I was a little haughty at the time. I said, I don't do war music, because I'd never written about war and I didn't think war was anything you could find – at least I could find musical. I have been looking...they said well take whatever you want...and I have been looking when I have time before my other commissions. And believe it or not, after about a year, I'm coming back to the idea of war. I have found some interesting anti-war, not anti-war so much as anti-military poems, mostly written after World War I and I found a shape...it's not enough normally to have a text, but there has to be a shape to it as well, and I've been trying to do that, mold it. And I think I have something now. But I know that the music will be a lot simpler than this long hunt for getting the appropriate words.

Q You referred to Evensong. Once you had agreed to accept that commission, were there any strings attached from the Cathedral Choral Society about the parameters of the piece or the text? Or was it largely in your hands to come up with something that you felt would inspire you?

A The commission I guess was actually a single person, Reilly Lewis, a conductor who's the only one I talked to. He had understood at first that I did not particularly want to write a celebratory work for the 100th anniversary and I was prepared to just turn the commission down. And he kept insisting and said, what about a memorial for your wife or something, which changed the parameters. And after thinking about that I decided to do it. The only condition that ever came out of our discussions was that, by the way he said, have you ever used the organ with the orchestra? And I said, no I haven't. I don't particularly like the organ very much. And he said, well, we have a fine organ here and it would be...and I thought about it and I thought, yes there were times where I thought the organ could enrich the orchestral sound. I don't know if you're aware, but there weren't very many spots, but there are one or two places that I think are significant it shows up. But that was the only condition placed on that work. Normally I don't think very often people have asked to have this or that in the piece. I remember my wife once asked a painter about doing a painting. She loved his work and she more or less kindly hinted it's going to be sitting...we have in mind over the blue sofa. And I think the artist was taken aback like, you mean you want something to match your sofa. And she said, yeah, I wasn't thinking about...I just wouldn't like something like orange above the...but that's the closest. And I can understand why he felt taken aback and I thought I would if

somebody would say, could you write me something but keep it below the staff or above or whatever.

Q So you had largely free reign on Evensong. What was the first thing that came to your mind? Was it the inspiration of the pool at Bethesda?

A That was the idea, that's the germ of the idea, just seeing that word every day for six, seven months. Inside, as a matter of fact, they even have the inscription from the chapter in John, chapter 5 I think, where it talks about the angel that troubled the water. There's another link here that I don't think I would even have mentioned and that is that there is a very short play – three pages long – by Thornton Wilder that is called, *The Angel that Troubled Water*. It's one of his earliest, one of his...he wrote a lot of little bitty plays and this is one of them. I have known that for a long time and I'd even thought one time I'd try to turn it into an opera but it requires hundreds of invalids around a pool and for a five-minute opera it's a bit extravagant. But anyhow, that was in the back of my mind, too, when I saw the word Bethesda. So I thought well one could use that idea of the angel that troubled the water and just expand on it.

Q So the Bethesda story clearly got this going. Once you had decided on that, then how did you go about building a whole piece around that? Did the sermon come first and then you went out on both ends?

A Obviously I had a religious theme with Bethesda and the angel troubling...and again it was a matter of putting the idea into some sort of form. Also it was going to be done at a cathedral. One could have thought of things like a requiem, which I didn't want to do. Eventually I guess it occurred to me an evensong service might be possible. I did a little research and I didn't know this evensong service that well, but discovered its various parts coincided with a number of ideas I had and gave me one or two other ideas as I was doing it. So it fed me after I had discovered it. The sermon, of course, is the heart of the piece. That was the most difficult part. But obviously a sermon is where everything gets to be explained. The other parts, which surround it I think, are pretty obvious like the *Nunc Dimittis* and so forth. But Evensong turned out to be exactly what they were looking for – a 45 minute piece, most evensongs are about that long. The subtitle was my own addition, of course – of love and angels. The reason for that is pretty simple and that is that if you've ever been to our house you'll see that you can just keep stumbling over angels everywhere. Carolyn's favorite icons were angels. Our kitchen has, I think my last count was 200 plastered around the walls. They're not on the ceiling because I think we would have joked about that. But there are a lot of them.

Q Now for this piece, you essentially served as your own librettist. In previous operas you worked with librettists, but...did you ever think that you might want to find somebody else to write this or did you just feel from the beginning that you wanted to write this yourself?

A Actually, I became the librettist of Evensong unwillingly. I originally had two things that I really wanted to have in the work – one was a quotation of the last few lines of Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, a rather famous line – two or three sentences, I guess. And then I had run across a poem by Maya Angelou about angels and an angel who troubled the water...I thought I would use her poem for the final anthem, it just seemed quite appropriate. I should take the advice I give students: don't ever take anything for granted as copyright, but I thought well, certainly, it's just a

poem...I was almost at the end of my piece, I'm ready to set it, and it occurred to me I better clear this with my publisher. Publisher contacted her – nothing doing. She would not give permission, she did not want it used. And that was not the only thing. The heart of the sermon was going to use the quotation from Thornton Wilder's, "there's a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love. The only meaning, the only survival." It was appropriate for that sermon. Two or three lines. I asked the publisher who Nappy Wilder, who lives in New York and runs the estate. Didn't think it would be any problem at all. He said, no. I said, what do you mean? He said, no. I already set the...he's got to say yes. And he would not budge. And it turned out that he had given the rights to the novel to be turned into an opera to some woman in New York – I didn't know who it was, I'd never heard of her, and so far I haven't heard anything about the opera. But he simply refused to give the rights so I had to reinvent lines to fit that. And in the case of the final anthem, I had to just complete my own. I thought at this point I'm not going to find anything any better than what I can make up. I'll just do it. So it was really by force that I became the final librettist on that.

Q When you're writing a piece like that that involves chorus, orchestra, soli when it comes to setting the text how do you decide the role of the various soli versus the role of the chorus?

A I think of solo voice versus chorus as a distinction between private and public. In other words, if a poem, if I see a poem say by Keats, I can set that for chorus because Keats intended it to be public, he meant it to be published and there would be hundreds of people looking at it. So it's a public piece. That, to me, means that a group such as a chorus, a plural, plurality, can do it. Where it's a letter say by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, that she meant for her sister and nobody else, to me that's for a soloist, that's private, that was never meant to be read by more than one other person. I've tried to follow that pretty much. And things like text, if I'm setting letters or journals you'll use a solo voice, if it's chorus I try to find something like a well-known poet or writer or something that's intended...it's never a question of whether the text uses the word "I" – I think a chorus can say "I" and I think a soloist can also say "we". I know some composers think the distinction is "I" or "we" that's solo song or plural, but I think my idea of the private versus public is for me a little more pertinent.

Q In situations where you are working with a new text by a living librettist who's working with you, such as most of your operas, how does that working relationship typically unfold? I assume that some version of the text starts the process, but there's probably some give and take. How does that work?

A My favorite story concerns Postcard from Morocco, which was composed for the Center Opera, then already MN Opera. It was their idea that maybe we could have John Donahue direct it from the Children's Theater. That was fine with me and I got together with John and I thought...he had written a number of plays that I had seen and had admired, even children's plays, very imaginative things. I wondered whether he'd be interested in writing the libretto because I had no idea at the time. And he said, oh yeah, that'd be fun. And a couple of weeks later he called and said, I have this idea. He said, do you know the Stevenson poem, Child's Garden of Verse? He said there's a line or two in there where, Tom and I played upon a stair and Tom fell out and hurt his knee and no one was left but me. I'm quoting it badly. I said, you want to write an opera on that? We built a boat upon a stair....Tom fell off.... I didn't know what he had in mind. I said go ahead, let's see what happens. He came over with about 11 pages of nothing

but dialogue, sentences, not assigned to anybody or anything. All of them were interesting lines of words that I could set to music. What I did was actually cut it into strips and then reassembled them as I chose and then assigned them to different characters. That was a case of where the librettist wrote something, the libretto as it stands today had very little to do with what appeared. Other libretti I've not changed a word and not monkeyed with. But that one was just...because it is surreal in a way, allowed that kind of tampering.

Q Back to Evensong for a minute. You were going to tell the story about the choir raising the funds. Talk a little bit about that – that's a great story.

A One of the memories I will always retain of the premiere of Evensong was the chorus's commitment, the conductor's commitment. I had never seen anything like it. When I got there for rehearsals I realized it. But before I even went to rehearsals I was getting it over the phone from the conductor who would talk about he had had a rehearsal last night and they were very excited about it. And at one point he said, you know we like the piece so much we've got to get a CD made and we're applying to various foundations. And they did. And then maybe a week and a half before the actual premiere, Reilly called up again and he said, we got some money from foundations but it's not enough to make a CD with orchestra, chorus, soloists and so on. It's a very expensive procedure. He said, we're shy...would it embarrass you if at tonight's rehearsal I asked the chorus for donations because they want to record it, too, and I know they'll be unhappy if we can't make it. He said there's a chance we can just raise enough money. I said, well you won't embarrass me. I'm in Pennsylvania, you're...I mean, he called me at Christmas time. He said, we'll do it. The next day he phoned back and he said, you're not going to believe this. At rehearsal last night I told them that I really didn't have enough money to make the CD and if it was ok with them he would like to ask for donations and see what they...and he said, Dominick, you know how much we raised? I said, no. He said, \$30,000. I just couldn't believe it. I said, you're making that up. Nope, he said. And we're over the top. We have enough money, we can go ahead with the CD now. And he said, they just took out checkbooks. One of the choristers simply took out a checkbook and made a check out for \$5,000. And I don't imagine that person had ever heard my music before and I hadn't met him or her or vice versa.

Q If I could indulge you to tell the first part of that again because there were some horns outside and I'm afraid we have some interference...

A One of the things I will always remember about the performance of Evensong in Washington was the commitment I felt from all of the singers and the conductor. Later when I got there for rehearsal, even from the orchestra. For me the most impressive aspect of it was that shortly before the premier the conductor was determined that he wanted to make a CD and he had appealed to various foundations...I think the Copeland Foundation, NEA and so on. And he got something from each of them but not enough to make the recording. And he called me up and asked if it would be ok with me – he wanted my permission – to ask the chorus if they would be willing to donate some money. And I said, you don't need my permission and it wouldn't embarrass me. It's your chorus. He did ask and he called up the day after the rehearsal where that happened and he said, we did manage to raise enough money. He said, what do you think we made? And I said, I have no idea. He said, \$30,000. Wow. And he said, that's more than enough. We're going ahead with the CD.

Q Speaking in general of choruses and how choruses have reacted to the various works you have written over the decades, what's a range of comments that you've gotten from actual singers who have sung your new works?

A Choristers, if we're talking about choristers, I think, I'm pretty sure that the majority of people who've performed in choruses where my stuff has been done would say it's pretty tough. It's not the easiest thing, but they actually don't mind it. They realize that it will pay off if they learn to do it. I like to think that I'm pretty considerate when I write for the voice, having been married for 50 years to a singer one of the things you learn to do is be polite to singers. And in writing for the chorus I tend to do that. I know it's a little difficult. It's not the usual Sunday morning choral pabulum that we have a lot of. I think if it's imaginative it usually will catch their attention. There's a piece that I'm rather fond of – the last piece I wrote for Dale Warland – called Walden Pond, which has some very tricky things at the very end – very dense harmonies for one. But as Dale said, they'll love that, he said, it's going to be a surprise for them to try to find their entrances and pitches there, but when they get it I know they're going to love it. And they did. It's a matter of sometimes familiarity, which is what we're really talking about.

Q Do you have any other recollections from your work with Dale and his group over the years? I'll be interviewing him later on and it's fun just to get some connections. How many pieces have you written for Dale and what kind of interaction do you have with the Warland Singers over the years?

A I've written three pieces. I don't think the first one was commissioned. I wrote a piece for actually SAI, the music sorority or association. They were doing a concert over at Macalester – this was the first time I ever met Dale. This goes back to like 1972. Dale was teaching there and had the chorus there. I wrote a work called...I can hardly remember it...an Easter cantata for women's voices, harp and guitar and really one of the hardest things I think I've ever written for chorus, but I was feeling my oats, I was still young. That was a piece that Dale had to prepare for that concert. And that's when I got to know him and I immediately was impressed. He's the closest thing to a perfectionist I've run across in conducting and he will not settle until he gets the sound that he imagines it ought to be. That was the first piece. Then I had a commission from the group for a work that turned out to be, I Hate and I Love, from ? – I think that might have been for his 10th anniversary. Then there was a 15th anniversary or a 20th – I lose track. I do nothing but anniversaries, you know. I'm having a little sign made called, Anniversaries R Us, with the R backwards. The last piece I wrote for him I guess was shortly before he retired was Walden Pond. But what I remember about both of those works, which he's recorded – they are done magnificently and I don't think I've ever heard I Hate and I Love or Walden Pond done better by anybody. As a matter of fact, Dale had mentioned it to Robert Shaw and about a year or two later Robert Shaw was conducting the MN Orchestra in town and he had asked the management if Dominick would come to the concert. Well of course I did. But would he also come backstage? And I had never met the man, but I admired him. I went backstage and he wanted to present...he had just finished a CD, which included my I Hate and I Love, and signature and everything, and I was very proud. I took it home and listened to it and never listened to it again. It's not nearly as good as Dale and this is one of Dale's own gods. But that's been typical of...I've gone to a lot of concerts that Dale's done, particularly when he's done by former students. And there was just something about the quality he could get out of those singers. They had a real devotion to him and I've never seen it duplicated.

Q If you could just say one more thing about Dale..

A My experience with choral conductors varies a lot, but the one person, I think, who comes closest to achieving choral perfection is Dale Warland. I've never known anyone to work so hard at rehearsals watching him and listening to what he's trying to obtain out of the chorus, the sound he wants, is for me the closest thing you can have to perfection in music.

Q Your other long time friend Philip, who's commissioned I don't know how many works. Talk about your long term relationship with Philip going back to the University and all the commissions that he has given you over the years, mostly for choral pieces.....

A Among the choral conductors that I've had the pleasure of working with, I think one of the most unique people is certainly Philip Brunelle. Unique not only in his own work but in his attitude, the way he has commissioned works, his feeling about new music, his championship of things. He's one of the musicians here in town that makes me feel my age because he was a student when I first arrived here to teach. I knew him as a student, I knew him later as a performer in the MN Orchestra, I knew him later as the choirmaster at Plymouth Congregational, then ultimately as the head of VocalEssence. But he has been remarkable. I owe a great deal of my career to him, through works he's commissioned or works he's performed. I think some of the earliest recordings of my music were made by Philip and he continues to this day to...I saw just yesterday a brochure that came in the mail that had my photograph on it and I didn't even know I was having anything done, but my photograph was there so it must be something.