

Jere Lantz

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

Q What kind of music was present in your home growing up and in school or church? When did you start having musical encounters?

A When I was a little guy, I would sit with my mother on the piano bench. She was a pretty good pianist. By the time she was out of high school she was doing Chopin Polonaises and things like that. And she had the old little Chickering baby grand that she had grown up on and learned on was in our living room. So I and my older brother and my younger sister would sit – sometimes all three of us on the wide piano bench – next to my mom. Then she would play piano music but then she would play hymns out of the hymnal or she would play old songs like, I've Been Working on the Railroad or On Top of Old Smokey. And there was something magical about her being able to hit those keys and make music happen from that old piano. So I wanted to do that. So when I was 8, I started taking piano lessons. The fascinating thing was that my brother and I took piano lessons together. Instead of each taking a half hour lesson, we took a combined hour lesson. If you can imagine competition between two guys who are at least a little bit talented, we got done with three years of piano work in less than one and then went on to do a lot of rapid piano. It was just great. And then there was a great band program in my community. So when I was in 5th grade I started playing the trombone and I really hadn't really thought much about choral music and singing. But I got into junior high school and senior high school and there there were real choruses, not much in the youth choir in my church, but in school there were. So I began singing there and when I could I played piano to accompany, too. And by the time I was out of high school I was really roarin' for music.

Q You pursue both choral and instrumental in terms of your conducting activity. When you headed off to college and started more serious about your musical work, did you have in mind being primarily one or the other, or were you always looking to do both?

A The interesting thing about the way I focused in music is that I was primarily an instrumentalist. So I played in the band and orchestra in college and the only acquaintance with choral music I had was what I listened to and what I would accompany as part of an orchestra. In fact, I majored in economics in college. It wasn't until I went to graduate school that I began to study music in earnest. But between college and graduate school I had a job at a prep school called St. George's in Newport, Rhode Island. Typical New England prep school. And there I was in charge of the choir, and played the organ for the Episcopal services that the school was affiliated with, and I taught music courses – theory and history and that sort of thing – as well as teaching math, of all things. So when I went back to graduate school, my degrees turned out to be in Orchestra Conducting. But since I had had choral experience, I was always the guy that would put the chorals together to work with the orchestra and so...and I had a church job as well, as part of my graduate school getting through, church choir. So I ended up doing choral and orchestral – almost equal from the beginning – and it's been that way ever since.

Q As you look back on those years, who were some of the mentors who, at various stages, inspired you and urged you on in this career?

A Because I didn't study, at any time, a serious curriculum in choral work, my choral experiences and mentors came in small, intense experiences. When I was in high school I was accompanist for the Pennsylvania All-State choir. Robert Page, who was then at Temple University and conducting the choruses for the Philadelphia Orchestra, was there. And he was so inspiring and so energetic and so magical, I just loved working with him and with the choir. Later I had the chance to work individually with Robert Shaw on a couple of special projects which were very fascinating, including the centennial of the birth of Charles Ives, which was celebrated at Yale University – part of the Ives heritage. And he and I created some concerts there together. And I worked with Margaret Hilles – Chicago Symphony Chorus – and many other choral experiences on her project with the American Choral Foundation, something she had established to develop choral conductors. I helped her to teach in that. So I guess Margaret Hilles and Robert Shaw were the two choral conductors that I really worked with closely in an intense way, but not over a long period of time, I'm sorry to say.

Q If you think back on all of your many encounters with choral music, whether it be as a conductor or maybe as an audience member, can you think of any concerts that were especially memorable, in which a program really moved you in some major way?

A I look back on my college days and I heard choral concerts that were just purely choral – a lot of it acapella, a lot of it just the joy of singing. I'm thinking of the Yale Glee Club, for example. And my daughter's singing in that now. And it's so exciting to hear them now and to have heard them then. They were all males then. Now, of course, it's a mixed choir. But the energy that comes out of those young voices and the enthusiasm for what they're singing is just spectacular. I also remember the first big collaboration I did; putting choruses together myself, here in Minnesota. When I took the Rochester Symphony Chorale and Orchestra, combined it with the MN Chorale and we did the Berlioz Requiem at Orchestra Hall. Now in recent years, the MN Orchestra put that together and they said it was the first performance of the Berlioz Requiem in Orchestra Hall, and I know better. It was 1982. I remember very well, we had over 200 in the choir, 110 or so in the orchestra with extra brass and all that. It was just a spectacular, uplifting experience. Not necessarily because it was so gargantuan, but because so many people got their spirit into the event, both in its performance in Rochester and its performance at Orchestra Hall that we were just elated when it was done. And because it was my first huge collaboration, I realized how much I would look forward to these forever and still do.

Q Why do you think MN has always been such a hotbed of choral activity? MN seems to have a disproportionately large number of high quality ensembles and just the number of ensembles – there are over 100 choruses in MN that are not affiliated with a church or a college.

A I think the fundamental background has to do with our state's heritage. We have great choral music in MN because people who cared about choral music came to MN. We think of the Scandinavian ones, of course, but in fact there are more German immigrants into MN than there are Scandinavians. And my background. I married Scandinavian. My background, personally, is more in the Germanic side. Both of those traditions – Germanic and Scandinavian and a lot of it Lutheran, we have to admit – had a great, great deal of music in the background; deep roots in quality choral music. They brought it here. That was step one. Step two was it became institutionalized, both

through colleges and universities here – and we think, of course of St. Olaf, but there are many colleges who contributed to that – and through organizations that cared about choral music. Because if you look back at the programming of organizations like the MN Orchestra when it was the Minneapolis Symphony, it was performing more choral music in collaboration with choruses in the earlier programs than you'd find in other orchestras throughout the country. So it was cultivated here. People cared about it. And I can't say that the churches weren't a big influence. They were; they were a tremendous influence. Not just the Lutheran churches, but the Catholic churches and the Presbyterian and Methodist. All the church choirs wanted to have a really high quality and a significant choir. So those elements together, I think, really make choral music not only come alive but stay alive and continue to grow, when in other places it might have been fading.

Q Let's talk about Rochester for a minute. Give me a little history of the Rochester Chorale. Was it always attached to the Symphony? Did they grow up as separate institutions and then combine? How did the Chorale come to be?

A I've been working with the musicians in Rochester for 28 years. Throughout that time there's been an orchestra and a chorale, both together. And there aren't that many orchestras in the US that have an affiliated chorus. That's been a great thing. The orchestra has been one thing or another for over a century. The organization that was the immediate ancestor of the orchestra today was the 1919/1920-year was its first year. But then the chorus came along some years later; I think in the 1950's. And it became affiliated with the orchestra right away. Not that it never performed without the orchestra and not that it couldn't do a capella work, but that its primary function was to be with the orchestra. An oratorical chorus if you would or another element of what the orchestra's presentation was. That tradition remains today, although other choruses, including the wonderful choral arts ensemble, have been founded in the Rochester area and thrive. It's nice to have all of that happening. But it's also really nice when I, as the music director of a symphony orchestra, if I want to perform a choral work I've got a chorus to do it. And if my chorus isn't quite large enough, there are plenty around to collaborate with to make a big noise.

Q Does the chorus still perform occasionally without the orchestra and other program or does it still exist primarily to serve the orchestras program?

A In recent years the Rochester Symphony Chorale has actually done more performing separately. A couple of years ago the late president of the board, Carl Schroedl, Reverend Carl Schroedl, wonderful gentleman and a wonderful choral and solo singer, came up with an idea. We have wonderful churches with fabulous pipe organs and wonderful organists in southeast Minnesota. So why don't we take our chorale, combine it with members of church choirs throughout the area and with the organists throughout the area, and we created a series of concerts that featured the organists, the organs and choral singing at the same time. So all of the pieces in the concert would have organ on them – half would be choral and half would be solo organ. I came up with the name, Piping Hot, for that. I understand that name has been used by other groups since that time. But I think we used it first several years ago and we had a great time. We've had it several times since then and I think it will be an idea that's going to continue to flourish.

Q What do you look for when you're auditioning singers?

A I listen first of all to the voice, but almost as soon as I listen to the voice I listen to the ear. And that's an interesting thing to do because some people have a beautiful voice but don't necessarily have a great ear. They don't necessarily match pitch, they don't match style, they don't match vibrato and they won't blend. And oh, goodness, you need a voice that blends. Secondly, I look for reading, because we can't teach by rote anymore in a high quality chorus. Once we've read it through a couple of times, you need to know it. And we like to have leaders who can lead that reading. And third, I listen for flexibility. I always ask an auditioning singer to do something different. Even if I like everything they're doing, I ask them to do it differently so that I can see how easily they adapt. Some people, once they learn a piece, can only sing it one way. And that's death in a choral situation. We need people who can take instruction, take guidance, and say, ok I can change it and make it happen this way and then we have a unified performance. Those are the three things I look for.

Q Once you get your singers together in an ensemble, how do you keep them inspired and motivated week after week of rehearsal, going over the same pieces? How do you try to organize your rehearsals and repertoire in such a way that it keeps singers fresh and motivated and willing to keep coming back?

A My major motivation to create energy for myself is the music. So if I program fine music, then I will have a choir that wants to continue to be active in that music. Second I want to work carefully with singers to pace how a series of rehearsals go and how an individual rehearsal is put together. And third, I have to keep my enthusiasm high. One of the greatest lessons I learned in my career as a choral conductor came after I had been with the Rochester Symphony Chorale for several years. Frankly I was getting a little tired of going every Monday night, dragging myself through rehearsal and dragging us through the notes and pounding out and correcting some of the same mistakes I had done the week before. And one particular Monday night I was dragging myself to rehearsal saying, I wish I were doing something else, and I found a note on my music stand, in a sealed envelope. And I opened it up and read it and it said, thank you for the enthusiasm and energy and the good music you bring to us. These two hours are my favorite time of the week. And right now in my life, this is the most meaningful thing I do. And I looked at myself in my metaphysical mirror and I thought, you fool. These people are relying on you. This music is relying on you. How dare you come to rehearsal without a full head of steam, without absolute energy to make it happen? And that changed my life and I've never gone to a rehearsal with a choir since, with that attitude.

Q Great story.

A And it's true. It happened just that way.

Q And where was it?

A It was in Rochester.

Q People often speak of choirs as a great means of building community. Talk about the sense of community that you see in some of the choirs that you've worked with.

A Singing in a choir is not only a mental, intellectual thing. It's an artistic thing, it's a physical thing, and it's something that reaches into the soul. So when you are dealing

with that broad an aspect of the human experience and you're dealing with it together, with a lot of people, it's natural that these people form a community and feel together. And what surprised me the more and more I worked with choirs, along with orchestras, is that choruses develop a much more tightly knit set of emotions. They feel much closer to each other than instrumentalists do. One of the reasons is they simply don't have that instrument that's between them and the other person. Another is that they don't spend hours and hours outside – sometimes I wish they would – but they don't spend hours and hours outside practicing every note of the music. And third, they haven't spend all those weeks and months and years in the practice room, alone with their instrument so that their major relationship, when they're performing in an orchestra, is still me and my instrument, as opposed to the major relationship being my voice combined with other and my experience combined with others as well. The experience of a choir from physical to mental to musical to getting right down to the soul, is unlike any other. And that's one of the reasons that choir music has continued to be very popular and choruses have been staffed and expanding when other social organizations have been fading.

Q When you start to prepare a piece of music for any of your choirs or any musical group, how do you go about preparing yourself to understand the music and to decide how to interpret that music to your performers?

A It's a very different thing to prepare a piece that is by a composer we all know well – a Mozart or a Bach – with who's music I've had a lot of experience, and a brand new piece, which no one has ever heard before – which is a special thrill. When you get the music, you read it, you read the notes and you know that when you play it, it's the first time anybody's played it, except the composer. And when you bring it to your chorus, it's the first time anybody's sung it. And when you finally sing it for other people – in the church or in a concert – that it hasn't been heard before. That's a very different experience. When I pick up a new piece of Mozart, more of who's music I've done than any other composer, it flows into me immediately. I can tell what time of his life he wrote it and what sort of thing he was after and what the function was and all that sort of thing. It just becomes part of the shape. Everyone is unique, but it fits into the context of that. And I know how to shape that music, having done so much Mozart over the years. I have a brand new piece – my hair stands on end, it's so exciting – even if it's not a wonderful piece, it's just a thrilling experience to go through it. And even if the only performance of this piece that will ever be done is the one I'm going to do with my group, it's still a thrill to try to make that happen. And I explore it with my choir. I say, I don't know what this is like; I don't know what this is going to be. When I prepare Mozart I said, well take an ? here and a breath. But only the tenors.... I don't know. I said, let's see what it's like with a breath here. Let's see what its like without a breath. I don' t know what's going to work. And we all get to be part of the experience of figuring out how this music is going to work. And that experience becomes a mutual thing and becomes all the better because we've explored the music not with my telling them what to do, but we've decided things together.

Q We've grown up in MN largely with a very heavy influence of European, Scandinavian music and singers and culture. But I know you've programmed a lot of variety both in Rochester, with pops concerts and that sort of thing, and the World Music Choir, at church. When you've got singers that have been reared pretty much on classic European repertoire, how do you get them to open and embrace musical styles that may be quite foreign to them?

A One of the wonderful things about America is its melting pot aspect, or its tossed salad – however you want to look at it - the variety of people we have here. So that we hear constantly a variety of music. It's very interesting, for example, to perform with a European choir or orchestra, music that's based on jazz. They don't hear jazz as much as we do. An American orchestra can swing in jazz. Although frankly the brass players swing more than the winds who swing more than the strings. But choruses here have a natural affinity for doing a variety of music. And we hear more music now, both on the radio and in concerts; that's from a number of different of choral traditions throughout the world. So the idea of bringing a piece from Africa or from Latin America or from Asia, is not nearly as foreign as it used to be. When I did that as a young conductor, I often would have to convince them, and my enthusiasm and my getting inside the music and saying, look how this is put together. This isn't put together the way Mozart's put together, this isn't put together the way Tchaikovsky's put together. It's put together in a special way, and we have to understand that. The voice parts work together differently, the rhythms work together differently, and the attention one pays to specific choral things is different. Here we're going to slide. We're going to slide with our voices, rather than sing everything with clear, pure tone. And if we don't all slide the same way, that's ok. That creates a richer texture. It makes more variety. You sure that's alright? We've always been told never to slide. Once people get into that and the variety of it, both vocally and intellectually and spiritually, it's great fun. And nearly every experience I've had has been an opening up one and a celebration. Occasionally you get a dunderhead in the group that says, I don't like that stuff. Well, that's the way people are. That's ok. But the majority of the people love the broadening of experience.

Q Talk about the power of music to open minds and broaden people's horizons and address social issues.

A When people are singing together, they're not fighting with each other. There's a simple thing there and it's often the case that people who might normally not see eye-to-eye, can get together and sing. One of the great unifying things that I've done musically lately – and I didn't start this, it started before I became a part of it – but as a church choir director in Minneapolis, we get together with all the downtown churches regardless of their creed, various different denominations, and we sing together. We might go out and have debates about theological issues or governance issues within the church, we might not agree on those. But we sure can agree on how to sing a piece together. And that means we can talk to each other much better. And I think that's always been the case. There's also a great role for music - choral music - in getting to the psychological issues, the things that are in the psyche of the American people. I remember 9/11 all too strongly. And with the Minnetonka Choral Society, a community chorus on the west side of the Twin Cities, we thought, what can we do in our spring concert to bring focus on that event and yet to give some solace? We came up with two pieces. One was a natural, to be expected: the Mozart Requiem. Lovely piece. It talks about rest for the departed, but it also gives a great deal of rest and peace for those who are here and a great deal of positive sense, a positive going into the world after the performance. But we wanted to know what to couple with that. And I discovered a piece called, The Holocaust Cantata, which was put together by a conductor from Washington, DC, with materials from the Holocaust Museum. All the texts were writings written in the camps, in the concentration camps that the Nazis held before and during World War II. And all of the music came from either music that had been created there or music that was traditional there, that would have been melodies sung by people who were inmates of

the camps. The piece has 13 sections. The odd sections – 1, 3, 5, 7 – are choral and the evens are narrative – to be read – from texts that were written in the camps, about the daily life of the camps. And we got either survivors or children of survivors to do those readings. We performed this piece for piano, cello – cello’s a wonderfully expressive instrument to use in this context – and choir. And the performance was so moving that we were asked by the Jewish community in the Twin Cities to be the feature event of the Yom Hashoah, the commemorative that year, of the Holocaust. And we sang that in a temple during Yom Hashoah. They opened up the temple to the...the walls could open so they could have hundreds of people there, and there were 60 or 70 holocaust survivors who came forward to light candles, with tears in their eyes after we had sung. It was the most moving performance I have ever done and it served what we needed in 9/11, and part of the reason for that was our connection with another time and with other people who had gone through even more suffering than our country was going through. And to pull those times together and to share that experience was something that I’ll never forget and no one who was there will ever forget it.

Q I want to talk about Minnetonka now. Talk about the origins of that group – even though you weren’t there then – and what its niche is today in the midst of a whole community full of choruses.

A The Minnetonka Choral Society was something that just kind of happened. Long before I was involved with it, in 1969, there were a number of singers from different church choirs on the west side who got together once a year to sing excerpts from Messiah. And after they had done this for several years, they talked to the guy who had been coordinating it – Jim Dau – and said, why don’t we sing other things besides Messiah once a year. And all of a sudden, a new chorus was born. It was born simply out of the joy of singing and the desire to sing together. So although they continued to do these Messiah excerpts for some years, after a while it took on a direction of its own, it’s own momentum, and the entire world of choral music was open from acapella and piano accompaniment to full symphony orchestra and major things. So we have done, with the Minnetonka Choral Society, all of those things you can mention from the Verdi Requiem, the Brahms Requiem and the Mozart Requiem, down to tiny little pieces that are just acapella. Our most recent concert was an American concert, taking all the American solo, the old American songs that Aaron Copeland originally arranged for William Warfield to sing as solo pieces – they’ve been rearranged for choir. We did those with chorus and orchestra. And then we did a wonderful new medley of seven spirituals called, Feel the Spirit, by John Rutter the great English composer who somehow seems to arrange American music quite well, thank you very much. And that was a great celebration of American choral tradition with symphony orchestra, though we dropped in a couple of acapella pieces along the way. Next year we’ll be doing very serious choral works by major European composers, going back to that tradition again. The wonderful thing about these community choruses in Minnesota is that they can do everything and they do. And that presents a wonderful palette of musical experience to them as performers and to audiences who want to come and listen.

Q Apart from the experience that you had with the singer who left a note on your music stand in Rochester, can you think of any other stories about either singers you worked with or audience members who have told you that what has been performed has really made an impact on them?

A Occasionally...after a concert people always come up to you and tell you things. And because you're the conductor, they almost always tell you good things. But there is the occasional time when someone comes up and tells you, you know my wife isn't with us anymore but we met singing that piece, 45 years ago, in Rangoon, Burma, or something like that. And I've heard exactly that story. Or, my parents always used to sing and I can't carry a tune, but I loved to listen to them sing and I know they loved to sing this kind of music, and that took me...the connections that music has made with people over the years come back. I don't feel as if we're doing something that's unique and now. We're doing something that's part of a long tradition. And people can think back generations before I was born and I know there are young people there that will be telling those stories, kids who come to concerts who'll be telling their stories about hearing this music or singing in it as we collaborate with kids choirs or whatever, many years to come. Part of a great continuity of the human experience. And that is more moving than I can say.

Q Speaking of continuity, what can we do to help instill a love of singing in the younger generations? It's widely known that public schools have cut back on music programs and our good musical colleges rely on a good feeder system coming from kids who've been inspired in high school. What can we do to help nurture and ensure that people continue to be exposed to great vocal music?

A I'm not nearly as worried about the future of good music and good choral music in particular as a lot of other people are. Because even at a time when schools are cutting back, there are other organizations that are coming forward. There are lots of choruses, boy choirs, girl choirs, youth choruses, that are independent of schools. And I talk to kids all the time. I interview young students who want to go to college for...my college, my alma mater...and I can't tell you how many say, I sing in this group or that group, that may not have anything to do with school. And I meet all sorts of young people who are excited about singing music. And I know that the choral, the choirs that I've heard, the college choruses I've heard lately are as good as they've ever been, if not better. So I don't see a real problem. In the last 50 years there have been more performing arts organizations, theater companies, dance companies, orchestras and choirs or choruses founded in America than in any other 50 year period in our history. So I'm not worried. People want to make music. I'm a little bit worried on the audience side. Sometimes I think we're going to be making music for smaller and smaller audiences and we need to inculcate that idea – of attending our musical performances. But the performances are there to be heard.

Q What do you know now that you wished you'd known earlier in your musical career, that might have helped you?

A When I was a youngster thinking about becoming a conductor, a very wise person – I wish I could remember who it was; I can't – said to me, a conductor really doesn't hit full stride until the age of 50. Now this was an arbitrary number, but the idea was it takes a long time to really get good at this business. And I can point to countless little things that I wish I had known before I started out. But one that I really wish I had known would be to trust the performing artists, to trust the players in the orchestra, to trust the singers in the chorus. That their commitment is to the music and theater they will do their job. I used to get so much more worked up, so much more frenetic, and I would take it out on my groups. And they say, I'm so much more mellow that I was 20 years ago. And I'm sure it's true because I trust them much more now to do their job

and to do it well, and to be working with them. I'm much less of a tyrannical, dictatorial leader on the podium than I used to be. I'm much better at getting along with doing things together rather than being the source of authority and expertise and everything else. And I sure wish I'd known that when I was younger.

Q Do you have anything else that you want to add?

A One of the things we in music love to do is collaborate. And my favorite memory of collaborations, although there have been so many I can talk about, was not a single collaboration but a series of collaborations. I was conducting a group in the early '90's called the Minneapolis Chamber Symphony, Chamber Orchestra. We wanted to play not just in the Twin Cities, where there's plenty of chamber orchestra music, but outside throughout the State of MN where we thought there was a need. But how to get venues, how to get an opportunity to perform there. I thought why not take advantage of the wonderful MN choral tradition? So we contacted community choruses throughout the state and said, we've got a professional orchestra who would love to come and do at least half of a concert with just the orchestra playing and then up to half of a concert with your community chorus, whatever kind of piece would fit a chamber orchestra size and would fit your group of singers. So we went down to Winona, we went to Alexandria, we went to Thief River Falls and Crookston, and collaborated with these choruses. The most interesting one was up in the northwest corner of the state in Thief River Falls and Crookston, because we made the decision with the wisdom of the directors up there, to do a combined concert with choruses from both communities. Now if you know Crookston and you know Thief River Falls, they're huge rivals. Their teams are archrivals in high school sports and there's something about the communities that they just want to outdo each other all the time. So our first rehearsal could be held in neither city, but was held in neutral territory, in Red Lake Falls, halfway between. And when people came from opposite sides of the room to...that first rehearsal...they sure looked each other over. They knew who the ones from their town were and who the other ones were and they looked kind of strangely. And I said, well now we have to put all our sopranos together and all our tenors together, from both, and they got together. But once we started to sing, it was magic. And we did performances in both cities – Crookston and Thief River Falls – and had wonderful time in both places. I frankly don't know if they've ever gotten those choirs together since that time. But for at least one brief, shining moment we had a great time making music in Thief River Falls and Crookston with the united voices of those groups and the Minneapolis Chamber Symphony. It was fun.