

Axel Theimer

Interviewed by Peter Myers at Golden Valley Lutheran Church, April 27, 2008

Q Talk about your experiences growing up in Austria. What was it like and what kind of music surrounded you there?

A My parents managed a home for children in the summers, mostly in the summers. Originally my parents were from, lived in Czechoslovakia, in Bohemia, and at the end of the Second World War they fled and fled across the borders to Austria. Since at that time they were not Austrian citizens, they were not able to get work and through some connections they were asked to manage the children's home, which was from the city of Innsbruck in Tirol. The children would come for three weeks, in the summer especially, in order to get away from the city and enjoy country life and get more food, really. A lot of them came very, very starving and then the city provided the food. So after three weeks it was the goal to have everybody leave having gained at least seven or eight pounds or hopefully more. There were quite a bit of competition, like who could gain the most weight in that short time. But it was...the home was up in the mountains and about an hour to walk from the train station. There was a lot to do outdoors but there was no radio and there was no television, so there was a lot of music. There was campfires. So my earliest exposure to music really was joining or hearing a lot of kids sing folk songs and play the guitar. My brother and I, we were very little at that time – I was born in 1946 – and we were exposed to music a lot in that kind of context. When we were a little bit older – I was four, I remember that very distinctly – my mother who always was very interested in exposing us to music and giving us some music education because music had played an important part in her life, not necessarily as a performer but as a person who enjoys music and had studied music. My parents bought a piano, an ancient...well an upright piano, and we were so excited when it was brought up the mountain. It was actually on a horse cart and drawn by a horse. That was really the beginning for formal music education. My mother encouraged us a lot. There was never, you have to do this, but encouraged us a lot doing this and she played some piano so in a moment you see another alter parent play, you want to do it too. So it was really a way to get us to enjoy music. Singing continued and then we started to be enrolled in what we call the Music college, or kindergarten – a musical kindergarten – where we would travel a couple of times per week to a neighboring city – to (city name?) and we would spend the morning just making music with other children. When I was 4-1/2 or 5 we started taking piano lessons, which again were down in the valley, so we always had to walk. Down was always much easier and on the way up then again about an hour to get home. I had a wonderful piano teacher. She was...these days I don't know what I would think about her. I remember she was a very mystic person. The room where we had piano lessons was all dark curtains, heavy curtains, and she was a lady...long, gray hair and she wore always some large but very dark not really in your face jewelry. These days I would expect that there was incense

being burned as well. But she was wonderful. She encouraged, again, just playing the piano. I think I've been so fortunate over the years that as important as it is to play, eventually you arrive at something that is "correct" that the road how you get there...there are so many different ways that you can arrive at...not a must, not a drive, or this is wrong, this is right. It was always, you do, already what you can and I remember most distinctly at the end of every lesson we would play four hands. That's how I learned sight-reading. She would play very slowly her parts and I had no clue where we were and occasionally I would, she would just keep on playing and I would keep on reading and then I could play a note and I was right with her and it was one of those exciting moments because I know I had hit something and it fit and she was never saying, oh why can't you do this? Or you should practice more. It was really always encouraging, do what you can and always being very, very encouraging and very positive. And that has stayed with me, I think, in my approach in music making that I have arrived at a point where I say – especially when it comes to performances, eventually – wherever you are at that moment, as long as you know you have put your time in and you have spent time with the music and learned it, now its time to share with where you are at and not making a huge effort to do everything right at that moment. Because I would feel that this will, it would interfere with the experience, experiencing the music.

Q How were the opportunities in the U.S. different than in Austria?

A I was amazed at how much music there always was in the high schools and the grade schools and junior high, because back home in the school system you get a general music class but you don't get all of the performance opportunities that you have here. If you want to do that, you have to join an organization that is outside of the school system.

Q Talk about your experience as a member of the Vienna Choirboys. How did you get into that and what was that like? How old were you when you entered that?

A About the Boys Choir...If I would have the chance to do it again, I would do it exactly the same way again. We heard them perform in Austria... We heard the Vienna Boys Choir perform in Austria, in Tyrol actually. They came and performed there and again my parents said – both my brother and I – if we wanted to go and hear the choir and we...I don't think we had ever heard about them. I think we were maybe 6 and 7 years old, or 6 and 8 I think we were. And we heard them and it was just a simple question on my mother's part – if we would be interested in joining the choir and trying out for it, and you know as a 6 or 8 year old, you have just heard a wonderful concert and you like music, you like singing...it's like, you think we could do this? So we traveled to Vienna and tried out and my brother who is a couple of years older, he actually...I think we tried out in the spring and in the fall he moved to Vienna. Then I was too young at that time so I stayed in Tyrol yet and then a couple of years later we

moved to Vienna, actually, and so then I tried out again and I joined the choir. I was seven at that time. You joined a training choir. And from that, you stay in the choir...first of all, they find out if you fit, if you can get along with the group and so on and how your musical development is going. And you stay in that choir until there are rooms in one of the traveling choirs. There are four traveling choirs. So when I was nine I was not even...I was not done with grade school at that time, I was in the beginning of fourth grade. The question came up if I wanted to...it was not asked of me first but obviously of my parents, if I would be available already to join, which was unusual. Usually you finished grade school first and then when you went to fifth grade, which then included the boarding school for the choir. So I actually joined in fourth grade and the first thing I did is I went on tour for three months in the fall of...it would have been in 1955, and I missed my first three months of school in fourth grade which stayed with me as a little bit falling behind in some academics for the rest of my life, I think. But it was a three-month tour through Germany, northern Germany, and also into Belgium. From then on, I stayed in the choir and then in fifth grade you move into the boarding school and then you change in the choir, you stay in the choir until your voice changes, which for me was age 14. I had so many incredible experiences. Not just seeing the world, but musical experiences. To be able to be on the Vienna State Opera Stage in operas like in Carmen or The Magic Flute, or sing under the direction of Karian(?) or meet Bernstein. You know, those experiences are just phenomenal musical experiences. At that time I don't think I had planned to possibly stay in music. My brother, who had graduated before me then, was the one destined to continue music. It's always been thought, if one is in music that's enough. The other one should get a real job, a secure job. So he ended up being in music and he followed that course right away and I did a little detour. I went first to veterinary school for a couple of years in Vienna, but continued my musical education. At that time I was taking voice lessons at the academy in Vienna and I had continued my piano studies. I had also joined the adult male chorus from the Vienna Boys Choir – it allows you to continue to stay in touch with the organization and perform with them and do recording with them. Then was asked if I would like to direct the choir. I said, well I've never really conducted much before, but I certainly will try it. And they just said, well you play the piano, right? You know how to sing. So you can conduct. So that was my first conducting experience when I started to direct that choir. During that time the Vienna Boys Choir together with the Chorus Viennensis which is the men's chorus, they had just begun the recording of all the Bach works with Concertus Musikus and Nicholas Hannenkur(?). So the first thing that I had to prepare the choir for was the B Minor Mass recording. I thought, you know, I didn't even know the importance and the magnitude of it. More or less you are a young, young kid and so I think I just walked into this entire process without any fear and any kind of hesitation. So the first thing was the B Minor Mass, the second thing that we recorded was the St. John Passion, and along with that several cantata's every month. I prepared the choir for it, and then also was able to sing with the group during recording sessions. So again, just great experiences by the way, and then through the choir I had the opportunity to join the extension choir in the

Vienna State Opera so whenever they needed additional singers for large productions, I was able to join. So I did Flying Dutchman, I was one of the ghost seamen, so again just incredible opportunities. And still at that time I was pursuing the goal to become a veterinarian until I received – literally out of the blue – an invitation to come to the US and come to St. John's and take over the position that I am still having right now, where I am still at, which consisted mostly...well foremost to conduct the male chorus, the St. John's Men's Chorus. The connection was my predecessor at St. John's had been my conductor in the Vienna Boys Choir and he came to St. John's in 1958. Because of my work with the adult choir from the Boys Choir, those gentlemen seemed to give him pretty good reports of what was going on and because of that and because of the importance of the Men's Chorus and the tradition of the University, my name was put into the pool to be considered for the position. I got it and that's 39 years ago.

Q Great story. Now when you arrived in MN, you were surrounded – here you are at the Abbey of St. John's – you're surrounded by a state that's very heavily Lutheran and very influenced by the Lutheran church and a lot of great conductors from Scandinavia and Germany. What did you think of the choral music scene in MN when you first arrived? What surprised you?

A What was exciting was the choral life and the choral tradition in this state. People are always so envious, it seems, of the musical tradition of European countries, and so envious of the involvement of people in music and the interest in music. Then when I came here and I found out what all is offered in music, on the grade school level, in the junior high and senior high with all the choir programs, the instrumental programs – both orchestra and band – I had nothing like this in my high school, once I had left the Vienna Boys Choir. The university – they might have a university choir. But if you go the university and you study music, you study musicology at the university. If you want to study music, you go to a conservatory or you go to a music academy. So although it has been a little bit more combined right now in Austria, at my time in high school we had two hours of music, of general music, a week. But when we wanted to participate in music there were organizations outside of the schools that were available to us. One of the biggest choirs which is for the musical youth and what is even more important we had, through the schools, the opportunity to attend concerts, theater, opera, chamber music, chamber music, solo music, recitals. And we got...the opportunity was given to us to do this for very, very little cost. And there were entire groups from my high school, we went together to those concerts and it was not something that you just did occasionally. Because of the overall attitude of the country, of respecting and really being supporting music and having it so much a tradition, we just continued to live the tradition and made it part of our lives. So that surprised me that on the one hand you have such a saturation of musical life in the high schools and all the way up to high schools, but the country as such doesn't seem to pay as much attention to it. So there is a little bit of a disconnect there. On the other hand, what the universities and the

schools offer in regard to choral music, I was just astounded. I was just thrilled because what a great tradition to come to. At the same time, then, I obviously came from a little bit of a different attitude toward singing and to music making. I think if there were some challenges for me it was to find ways to incorporate my own beliefs in singing and my vocal background and see how I can incorporate it in the music making of the choirs, which in some people's tradition, they're not necessarily vocal traditions, how singing in choirs sometimes used to be approached. I think we have come a long ways. I think the education and how the voice works and how we use our voices and how the voice can be used also in ensemble singing, what some people would say the natural way so that voice teachers don't have to worry about their soloists be members of a choral ensemble and running into vocal trouble. I think a lot of this has just about completely disappeared.

Q What is your philosophy about choral singing? How may it be a little bit different than what other conductors might bring?

A My choirs make a lot of fun of me, I think in a goodhearted way. The main phrase that I use a lot is to sing much more on the breath. If there is one major difference, I think, what I'm promoting is that we can sing long phrases without having to go into a particular way of controlling our breath, which a lot of singers could interpret as holding the breath back instead of approaching it from using the breath. I compare it a lot oftimes with string players. If you watch somebody play a string instrument, before they start to play, before the bow touches the string, there is movement and the bow starts to meet the string while its already moving. If we can think about singing the same way, that as the vocal folds come together, there's already the sense of breath flow and direction in it, not first closure and then like popping it open. So you're going to get a very, very different approach to singing, a very different tone quality, as a foundation of your singing. I think some other people prefer to have first a little bit of closure and then a different kind of onset or attack. That changes for me something very fundamentally about music making because I will base all my singing and all my music making on the energy flow and not energy control. So the breath flow becomes the foundation, not the breath control. You take more chances this way, at first. But once the singers have experienced that and if we also consider that as we become expressive singers or as we are expressive people, the most expressive part of our vocal instrument is how we use our breath. If we want to have something more intensely communicated, we change the amount of breath that we send through our voice, but it's always the sending and never the controlling. To make this a very consistent part of our singing no matter how loudly or how softly you want to sing or how short a note you want to sing, that no matter how short, there still has to be movement in there otherwise it becomes a controlled and what I call a clipped sound, which interferes with the flow of the music and therefore with the expression of your emotions.

Q Talk about Kantorei and how Kantorei is distinguished from other choral groups around here.

A The distinguishing factor may be some of our choices of music, our focus on music from the 19th and 20th century central Europe, like music from Germany, Austria, Czech Republic. We do music from France and we have also done music from English, so that we are not in foreign languages all the time, but especially from, more from central Europe, which I think is a difference from many of the groups that are in the state. Each one seems to have found a niche and I think that's, again, one of the great things in the state. The other difference might be the foundation of the vocal approach that I am promoting. We get...many times the reaction from audiences, not just...and I know a lot of other choirs get it too, and when I hear other choirs perform I love what they're doing. It's not a qualitative statement, but really just a distinguishing statement that our approach to singing a thing makes a big difference in what people hear and how they are being communicated with in a performance. Again, there seems to be less control in our singing, which I think in the way we are trying to promote it, I think is a good thing because again, it allows you to express yourself without being worried about what I have to be in order to be in tune or in order to be rhythmically correct or in order to have really clear diction. I firmly believe, for example, that if I promote singing that is based again on singing on the breath, what is never going to suffer is my diction because any time I produce any kind of consonant it is part of the energy flow and doesn't have to be exaggerated in order to be understood.

Q Briefly describe what is Kantorei and what do you specialize in?

A Kantorei is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. We started as an alumni group from St. John's and St. Ben's and have since grown into a phenomenal – I would call it professional group, but I still call it semi-professional because we don't get paid – a phenomenal group of musicians who love singing, who enjoy the particular literature that we are focusing on, which is the 19th and 20th century music especially from German descent and Austrian music as well. So we do Bruckner, we do composers that we think everybody knows about but does not hear enough music from. So this would be our focus and this is Kantorei's mission, really, to promote this music and to make more people aware of the rich heritage that comes with that music. If we go back into the background of MN and the heritage of MN we know that the majority of Minnesotans point back to a Germanic heritage. So we are hoping to make some connection to that part of the population of MN and then obviously everybody else as well, because so much of the choral tradition that is part of the MN choral tradition is also based in the German heritage.

Q When you're auditioning for new singers, what are you looking for in a potential singer?

A We're looking for good musicianship, ability to sight read, to learn music quickly, good ear, sense for language, and then vocal flexibility. And what I mean by that is, again, the capability and the willingness of the singer to be flexible in their approach to singing because everybody who has started in this choir, or is in this choir right now, comes from a vocal tradition which might be different from mine, so I need to feel as I talk to the people, as I listen to them sing, I need to feel and hear that there is some interest in exploring other capabilities of the voice – not just being committed to one way of singing, which represents one idea of choral singing.

Q How do you organize a rehearsal and how do you keep singers engaged and energized during the course of a 2-1/2 hour rehearsal?

A Well, yes our rehearsals are 2-1/2 hours long with a brief break in the middle. First of all, we are not rehearsing with piano, which we have been doing now for two years and it has changed our capability, our trust of our own voices. We also do not rehearse in sections. We are rehearsing always in mixed position which, again, challenges everybody to commit to singing right away and not listen to somebody else first and get help from somebody else. They are becoming much more confident singers, much more confident in their own ability. That, I think, becomes already a challenge that keeps everybody a little bit more alert. And then I also think, again, that my approach to saying, I want you to sing and trust that what you think you are saying is, "right," that in our rehearsal I don't expect anybody to sing anything wrong on purpose. I want everybody to feel comfortable to sing and then if we need to change a note, we will change it and I will not call it a wrong note or I will not call it a mistake. I will provide, hopefully, what I would call a more positive learning environment, which allows everybody to gain confidence and sing without hesitation. If a note needs to be changed then we find out which note did you sing and not it was a wrong note, but what did you sing? What's the reason why you possibly sang this note? What led you to this note? So it becomes more of a learning process and not just me telling them, that's a wrong note and then go to a piano and say, this is the note that you should have sung. So I think there's a different kind of engaging of the singer in the learning process and they're taking on more of the responsibility without being afraid of singing something wrong. I think in the moment to provide this kind of learning and practicing environment, the people who are involved in that kind of process are staying mentally engaged in a different way and it provides a different kind of challenge and engagement which, I think, never becomes boring for the brain and if the brain is not bored then the rest of the body is not bored either.

Q I know you've had collaborations with other choral groups or musical groups in MN. Talk about the nature of the choral community here and whether it's easy to collaborate with other groups from time to time.

A Kantorei has been invited over the years to sing with several ensembles, most often actually with the MN Chorale when there were performances of large choral works. We have done some Mahler symphonies, we've done Beethoven 9th. What incredible experiences. And I have to say that whenever we did any kind of cooperative thing like this, it's been just the most wonderful experience for all of us. Artistically, I think Kathy Romey is such an incredible colleague. She will bend over backwards to give you the opportunity and to include you and to feature music, which I think is what we all are supposed to be about. The same when we had an opportunity to work with choirs – we have done some work with VocalEssence, which at that time was still the Plymouth Music Series and so we have done some things with Philip Brunelle and the same there – it's been always great. I think we all know that we all in so many ways we need each other. We are in this together, we are artists, we are sharing the love for an art form which is so old and has such a long tradition, which it is up to us to maintain the tradition and to get more people involved and interested in and excited about. It would be just a foolish thing to not appreciate what everybody is contributing. There might be differences in our approaches, but thank goodness there are. Thank goodness if two conductors get up and conduct the same piece of music, there ought to be differences. We should not look for similarities. We should look at what everybody else is contributing, what ideas they have. We are all eclectics. We have stolen everything that we know is coming from somebody else. If we see ourselves as an island, as a unit by ourselves, its time to quit.

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