

An Interview with Vance George

by Dr. Susan Medley

When the 2005-06 season closed for the San Francisco Symphony Chorus (SFSC) last summer, it marked the end of an era. Vance George, the conductor, who led them for 24 seasons, retired at the conclusion of the Chorus's June Verdi Festival. Under George's leadership the Chorus won four Grammy Awards, an Emmy, and gained a reputation as one of the finest choruses of its

kind in the world. At the close of his tenure with SFSC, I sat down with Vance George to reflect on his career, his chorus, and the next chapter of his life.

SM: Let's begin with an overview of your career.

VG: Well, I started very, very young, first year out of college [Goshen College, Indiana], and I taught two years at a little school in Mendon, Ohio, just across the Indiana border, population 400. I had a mixed chorus. I probably had eight basses and six tenors, 15 altos and 20 sopranos, but it

balanced. And, I directed the junior and senior class play, and we had a band, and we went to the Pumpkin Festival and marched.

SM: You conducted the band?

VG: Yes. And I taught all twelve grades, and I loved it. I had a little Army collapsible harmonium that I carried from room to room. I taught there for two years. I am a pacifist, and during the Korean War I was drafted. I taught to the end of the year, and I got on a plane and flew to India and taught for three years as my alternate

service. It was in an international school called Woodstock, located in the foothills of the Himalayas, 40 miles from Tibet, “as the bird flies.” Just this past year, they celebrated their 150th anniversary, so I went back, and they dedicated a choir room in my name.

After three years in India, I came back, taught for six months in Canada, and then went to Northside Junior High School in Elkhart, Indiana. Doris Corns, one of the best junior high teachers ever, was my great mentor there. After two years of teaching at Elkhart, I decided to

go to graduate school at Indiana University to become a junior high specialist. When I walked in the door, there was a brand new degree titled "Choral Conducting." I thought, "Wow! That sounds really interesting," and it was. I studied music history with John White and Julius Herford, Robert Shaw's teacher. I had a sort of musicological bent, so I just loved their classes, especially Herford's idea of structural analysis. I had a great introduction from Mary Oyer at Goshen College, who, in my freshman year, gave us a grounding in structure that is with me today; I still include her in my

biography, as well as Julius Herford, Robert Shaw, Margaret Hillis, and Robert Page. She was really the musical beginning of who I am professionally.

After two years in graduate school, I got a call from Madison, Wisconsin, for a job interview (University of Wisconsin – Madison). I got the job and taught in Madison for seven years. While I was there, Margaret Hillis formed her Choral Institute. The first one was held in Madison, Wisconsin, and I organized and ran it. She had them annually after that. She titled me her ballet master because I taught

conducting. I was learning conducting from a new person in town, who is now very famous in the world of young conductors, Otto Werner Mueller. Margaret met him and was in complete awe of him. I was probably 34 or 35 when I met Otto and worked with him. He was terribly kind to me, and really taught me baton technique and a firm grounding in conducting, which I feel I have passed on to other choral conductors. He insisted that we always use the baton. "Use your hands because the hands are more expressive" was not allowed. He taught me the idea of

conducting within a picture frame and staying within that picture frame. He separated parts of the arm into shoulder-joint, elbow-joint, and wrist-joint, so that we were aware of a large ball and socket (shoulder), large hinge (elbow), small ball and socket (wrist), and small hinges (fingers). This separation gave a distinct language to baton use that varied from shoulder to elbow to wrist to fingers. We learned the same thing with the left hand. His concern was that conducting a solo clarinet should be from the tip of the baton (wrist, fingers), and not like you were conducting the

whole orchestra (shoulder). In other words, you were constantly scaling your gesture for the desired result. “No more energy than for the desired result” was Otto’s motto.

During the seven years at Madison, Wisconsin, they tried desperately to get Robert Shaw to come, and like many large universities, they couldn’t understand why Robert Shaw wouldn’t want to drop his career and come to Madison, Wisconsin. They invited Margaret Hillis, and her response was the same. In the meantime, I was getting one-year contracts, and finally they

hired Don Neuen. Soon after, they hired Robert Fountain.

At that point, Kent State University and their Blossom Festival, which is like Wolftrap and Tanglewood, hired me. Robert Shaw came to Blossom every summer, so I took the job so that I could be around him and watch him work. I was very fortunate to head a six-week program with a chamber choir of 24 singers every summer for 13 years.

Sometimes we think we do something for a reason, only to find that life has something even more amazing in store. I hired

Robert Page to come to Blossom. Bob [then conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus] said to me, “I need an assistant. Would you like to be my assistant?” I had never really conducted large works, except Haydn’s *Creation* and Bach’s *St. Matthew*, but not the barn burners *Carmina Burana* and Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*, and that sort of thing. So when Page said, “Would you like to assist me,” I said, “Yes, that’d be great.” In Cleveland, I was exposed to repertoire and “sat at Bob’s feet,” which was like sitting at the feet of Margaret Hillis, because he had

sung tenor in her New York chorus. Bob did a lot of guest conducting, so I was left on my own to do the rehearsing. He really trusted me, which I didn't realize then. Those experiences turned out to be seven years of great exposure to major repertoire – 13 in Kent, and the last seven of those in Cleveland.

In July of 1982, Margaret Hillis called and said, "The San Francisco Symphony Chorus has hired me to be an interim conductor. Could you do the first four months?" I said, "My bags are packed!" Edo de Waart had decided he wanted a different

conductor for the chorus, which had been organized in 1973. The very first piece I conducted for Edo was Beethoven's *C Major Mass*. He said, "Well, why don't you come for a full year?" I said, "Fine." That invitation grew into three-year contracts, and after that, it was essentially a green-light contract, so it just kept going.

Shaw came to San Francisco the first full year that I was there, and conducted the Brahms *Requiem*. I was scared to death. Here I am, watching Shaw, my idol from college days, conducting my choir. After the first hour he got down off the

podium and said, “Vance, this is a fine chorus. In five years it can be a great chorus.” Five years later I was sitting in a Brahms *Requiem* rehearsal and was reminded of his words. I thought, “He was right. That’s a really great chorus. They have grown so much.”

I think it’s really just because of the amount of repertoire we sing and the number of concerts we sing that the chorus has grown musically so quickly. Is 23 years quick? Yes, even serendipitous. I’m not claiming that I created this grand instrument. Sure, I was absolutely there. I was really

involved. I worked on tone quality, language, and understanding what they were singing about. And yet it took singers, personnel, and people wanting to devote that kind of time and hours. It's a huge commitment – between 35,000 and 40,000 volunteer hours annually. It's been a gradual artistic growth together with visiting maestros and our resident maestros: Edo de Waart, Herbert Blomstedt, and Michael Tilson Thomas. I just feel enormously grateful and happy that I could be a part of the growth and evolution of the SFSC.

SM: As you've talked about these various people, is there one person or one opportunity that really gave you the chance to blossom and to have a sense that this is indeed what I want to do?

VG: Well, moving to San Francisco I learned I was naïve about everything. I never thought "This is what I want to do" or "This is where I'm going to go." Everything just seemed to unfold – from Mary Oyer at Goshen College to Julius Herford at Indiana, to a fine chamber group in Madison, Wisconsin, to Otto

Werner Mueller and Margaret Hillis, then Kent State University, working with Robert Shaw and Bob Page. The Kent Blossom Festival was life-changing, and working with wonderful New York voice teachers from whom I learned a lot about building the voice and what to do with the voice. I wasn't a strong singer, and didn't learn to sing in graduate school. Then the good fortune to have Margaret Hillis and Bob Page express their faith in me and to recommend me to Edo de Waart. There have been signposts and very important people in name and in stature in

my life that line up amazingly as I look back. At the time, it just seemed like a very natural part of my being.

I think the choir and I are constantly learning. Last time we performed Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, I thought, "The basses' opening 'Freude' has bothered me for years. It lies in the middle register, and I've never gotten the R to trill properly." So I thought, "Fuh-rrroid, fuh-rrroid, fuh-rrroid," and had them sing "fuh" an eighth note early, scooping from an octave below where notated – it just about knocked me right off my feet.

SM: You have spent some twenty years preparing your chorus for other conductors. How do you work that relationship with the conductors? Do you typically communicate with them beforehand?

VG: It's very kind if they communicate beforehand. Almost no one does; almost no one sends a score. Shaw was the only one who sent a score that was clearly marked.

SM: Do they give you an idea what the tempo is going to be?

VG – It's my job to prepare them for anything from a fast to a slow tempo. My chorus is enormously flexible. I prepare them so the conductor can say, "Do this," and they can do it. The choir has tremendous pride in their flexibility, rather than thinking anyone is wrong; there is no wrong. The conductor's right, I'm right, and the singers are right. We just have to come to an agreement.

SM: Is this a source of frustration for you?

VG: Sometimes. But I so often get new ideas and feel really invigorated. Conductors always say, “What a phenomenal chorus! I just love this chorus!” And the chorus is elated, and I’m happy.

SM: You have a wonderful opportunity that many choral conductors would probably think they would die to have, but temperamentally how do you deal with the fact that so much of what you do, such as the repertoire, is out of your hands and then you’re rarely the one on stage conducting your chorus in performance?

VG: I deal with it in the way that Bob Page does, or Margaret Hillis did: knowing that one is dealing with the best of the best; working with quality repertoire and consummate artists. How many people get to prepare *St. Matthew Passion*, *St. John Passion*, *Missa Solemnis*, and the *C Minor Mass*? When people ask me, “How much conducting do you do?” Once, twice, maybe three times a year – a Mass in B minor, a Christmas concert, perhaps a Summer Pops or *Carmina burana*.

SM: Working with that repertoire might be a once in a lifetime experience for some conductors, or they may never have that opportunity because of their circumstances.

VG: Absolutely, we come back to it over and over again. In Cleveland we did two performances: Friday, Saturday. Then I came here and we perform four times a week: Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday. The chorus just grows exponentially because we sing so much. Sometimes we sing as many as seven performances of

Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, seven Mozart *Requiems* or six Verdi *Requiems*.

SM: There are obviously works that you've done many, many times. How do you keep them fresh? When you go back to something, do you ever think, "Oh not this again!"

VG: No, I know there is someone in the chorus and in the audience who is hearing it for the first time. I try to listen with their ears. I don't think it's unlike a relationship, where you're grateful every day for that person in your

life. We have sung *Messiah* many times. The only thing I would say about *Messiah*, for me, is perhaps “He was despised” might be banned for a decade. Other than that, it is a virtuosic masterwork that is devilishly difficult. Every year I have to reinvent those sixteenth notes in my voice in “For unto us a child is born.” The discovery, the freshness, is always there. Maybe that’s a gift. Certainly it’s my attitude.

SM: What is the most difficult work you’ve had to prepare?

VG: Certainly *Missa Solemnis* and *Harmonium* are candidates. They both require a great deal of work.

SM: What are your favorite choral works?

VG: I suppose *Mass in B Minor* and the Brahms *Requiem* come to mind instantly, but which one to choose? Well, how do you make life choices? Do you most enjoy making music, cooking, eating, or making love? Probably all of them, and the one that I'm doing at that moment is the best.

There's also a creative bent in me that is fed by new music or staging a medieval drama – the things that really spark your inner being and take you outside the predictable. I'm very comfortable being musically stretched, going beyond the standard repertoire. I enjoy that.

SM: How has the choral field changed during your career?

VG: When I started my career there was no choral field. It didn't exist. When I was in college, the Robert Shaw Chorale came every year. We would have whomever

Sol Hurok had on his roster: Westminster, and Henry Veld and the Augustana Choir; they would come through and sing concerts every year. Those performances were a tremendous influence upon me. The Shaw Chorale was becoming more well known and doing more recordings, and there was also the early music that was beginning to surface with Noah Greenberg. I found that terribly fascinating. Then came the English conductors such as Roger Norrington and his Gabrieli ensemble. Choral music was emphasized at Lutheran schools, as well as Oberlin and

Westminster Choir College. Of course, that's all changed since colleges started offering conducting degrees. ACDA, IFCM, and Chorus America have played a huge part in choral music. I went to Kansas City for an early ACDA Convention. I can remember Charles Hirt and all those white-haired guys standing there. Now, I'm the old gray-haired guy!

Moreover, symphony choruses have developed. The Cleveland Chorus began in 1956 because Szell wanted Shaw to come and conduct. Two years later Reiner asked Margaret Hillis,

“Why don’t you bring your New York choir to Chicago?” She did that for a year or two, and then established a choir in Chicago and the rest is history. So it went from Cleveland to Chicago, then Atlanta and Roger Wagner in Los Angeles. The San Francisco Symphony Chorus was established in 1973. Now there are lots of symphony choruses and community choruses. Community choruses hire an orchestra to play for them and symphony orchestras tend to either have their own chorus under their own umbrella such as San Francisco, Atlanta, Cleveland

and Chicago, or as in Los Angeles, where the Los Angeles Philharmonic hires the LA Master Chorale to sing with them. We now have that sort of exchange. None of that musical activity existed then.

Simultaneity is a very interesting concept; at the time that Shaw and Hillis were creating major choral changes in the world, Roger Wagner was doing the same thing through the recreational department in Los Angeles. Amazingly, Marilyn Horne was, at age 18, one of Wagner's mezzo sopranos. Shaw

was really the peak. He really set the bar.

SM: What are the hallmark experiences of your career?

VG: I think of moments in my musical life such as singing under Mary Oyer on tour – Bach Motet No. 4, *Jesu, Meine Freude*, 10 performances, 10 little Mennonite churches, and realizing that every performance could be more wonderful and a deeper experience than the last; realizing that I could translate that keyboard experience of Bach into the voice, and I could train

choristers to do what I had learned on the keyboard; going to Madison, Wisconsin, and conducting Bruckner's *E Minor Mass*. It was for MENC, and one of the orchestra conductors came up to me and said, "That's the first time I've ever 'gotten' Bruckner." And I thought, "Wow! I could die!"

St. Matthew Passion in Madison, Wisconsin, under Otto Werner Mueller's influence; Kent State University producing medieval drama for Spoleto for Menotti and creating the Blossom Festival School into what that chamber choir became, and the influences that I felt there; and

coming to San Francisco, and conducting the *Mass in B Minor* were all peak experiences for me.

SM: What do you see as your most significant accomplishments with SFSC?

VG: Translating all the tools of the trade that I learned under Margaret Hillis and Robert Shaw, Bob Page, Julius Herford, and Mary Oyer – making a synthesis of that and the conducting I learned from Otto Werner Mueller. What I took was that synthesis and added my own particular interest in language and colors of

language. One of the things that I do best is to honor the style of the music. Let the music come up off the page, and try to stay out of the way. Let the music speak for itself. This is what has made it possible for this choir to develop into what they are. It's just such a natural quarter of a century of growth.

SM: You are leaving behind a very fine instrument.

VG: I'm leaving a brilliant instrument, there's no question. I think my chorus is one of the best in the world. They love what they

do. They have an emotional and a familial connection. It's really like a family.

One of my altos came to me about five or six years ago and said, "I just want you to know how much singing in this chorus means to me." She had just finished a course called Landmark, an ontological study of how to be, where you go for a weekend, and you do exercises. "I'd like you to come to one with me." I went with her and discovered that the chorus was the first community she had ever been a part of. It was at that point that I said, "I really have to get off

this humble kick and accept the responsibility of who I am and what I do.” I took four Landmark courses after that.

SM: What made you decide to retire now?

VG: Wanting to guest conduct, travel and live. I want to conduct what I want when I want. The SFSC is in rehearsals and performances 11 months of the year. Basically, I'm doing now what my mentors did very much earlier in their lives. Hillis and Shaw guest conducted all the time. Maybe I should have left

after the first or second Grammy, but I really felt like this was my home and family.

SM: What advice do you have for developing conductors?

VG: Follow your heart. Do your job to the best of your ability and with the greatest integrity, even if it's something that is not considered by the world to be great music-making. You can be just as proud of doing a little German folk song with a junior high choir in three parts as conducting Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. I've done both, and

it's all the same. It can be in any place in the world. It doesn't have to be in any grand city or edifice, because what's in the heart of the conductor is what is imparted to the hearts of the singers and, in turn, to the hearts of the audience – that's where it lies. If the heart is there, it's going to speak to moms and dads and audiences of any kind, of any size, anywhere in the world. Beethoven said, "From my heart to your heart." And I agree.

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