

My life in choral music so far

by Vance George

Printed in the Chorus America Journal, June 06

“After silence that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music” writes Aldous Huxley. True! Musicians know this with certainty, with enthusiasm, from the Greek, “entheos”, enlivens our inner god, our passionate inner self with a conviction of worthiness that gives life meaning. We make a difference in the world. And, we get paid for it!

Why do we do what we do? Do we have a choice? I think not! We teach what we need to learn. Composer, Pauline Oliveros dazzled me with her comment “music should be good for you”! I had to admit music-making was killing me. I slowly changed during fifty years of work running the gamut from teaching 12 grades including chorus, marching band and orchestra to vocal chamber music in the university and 30 years with the great choral/orchestral works. Today music *is* good for me! Stop, take a breath, be and receive who you are.

At seven I sang solos, mother accompanied, at twelve I bought the Preludes and Fugues, at thirteen I played horn in the H. S. band. Oh, how the melody of *Bist du bei mir*, played by the horns, soared through our gymnasium. It was my cathedral and I was transported. Then came chorales and cantatas in College and later the *Mass in B Minor* and the *Passions*. It has been a long and wondrous journey with Bach, a composer that has always plumbed faith with a depth and confidence that constantly teaches. Even as a boy soprano I felt a direct bond between singing

and a higher power, the connection between the human and the divine, the temporal and the eternal.

What drew you to music? Which choral canon is your favorite? For me the *B Minor* followed by the *Requiems* of Brahms and Verdi and Mozart, Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, Haydn's *Creation*, Mozart's *Mass in C Minor*, Mahler's *Choral Symphonies* and the works of Schubert, Liszt, Dvorak works. Don't forget Verdi's *Quattro Pezzi Sacri*, Brahms *Nänie*, *Triumphlied*, *Schicksallslied*, and *Alto Rhapsody*. And from

the 20th and 21st century; Lutoslawski's *Trois Poèmes D'Henri Michaux*, Schoenberg's *Friede auf Erden*, Poulenc's *Stabat Mater* and *Gloria*, Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalm*, Penderecki's *St. Matthew* and *Credo*, John Adams *Harmonium*, *El Niño* and the 2007 premiere *A Flowering Tree*, and the unique choral voices of Meredith Monk and Tavener. These are all masterpieces that have stood the test of time and may be savored and enjoyed over and over.

Text makes choral music unique!
The singers carry the meaning,

the language inflection and, if there are instruments they may underscore with colors, rhythms and dynamics. Together they reveal the truth beyond the notation, the truth beyond the vision. And, if we work hard we realize that vision. Margaret Hillis used to say “music happens between the notes”. As artists we seek to perform the truth. I believe the experience of this truth changes performers and audiences and can change the world. .

I listen to music that moves me; the form and style in Purcell's *Lament* from *Dido*, the

passacaglia in Bach's *B Minor Crucifixus*; Monteverdi's arresting harmonic shifts of lower major-minor mediant that expand and make your head swim, the harmonies of "Poor Jud Frye is Daid" from Oklahoma. For sheer virtuosity and effect the fugues and the final "Gloria" shouted to the cosmos in Beethoven's *Missa* are stunning contrasts with the profound decent of the Holy Spirit scored for two flutes and solo violin. In Bach's *St Matthew* strings draw the listener to Christ's words and Haydn's polyphony for low strings depicting the creatures in

Creation stirs ones limbs. But for sheer, sensuous sonority Schubert's *Gesang der Geister über den Wassern* for eight men's voices, contrabass, cello and viola wins the prize. I choke back the tears when conducting the finale of Bernstein's *Candide* or the minor 7ths in *There's A Place For Us* from *West Side Story* or Faure's *Pie jesu*. And, my breath is taken away by the grandeur of the *Hymn* opening Mahler's *Eighth Symphony*. And to close the symphony Mahler paints a vast, spiritual landscape depicting angles bearing Faust's essence to heaven.

Music touches our hearts and teaches our vulnerable, inner beings and shapes our humanity. I suspect for many of us our choir becomes our life. I have struggled to separate my life from my work. After fifty years my mantra is “I love it and I let it go”. I say this aloud to myself under the applause with every bow at the end of a concert. It is a kind of harbinger of the big letting go. Respect your values, and your skills. Your life reflects these qualities but we are, you are more than your work.

The wondrous beauty and sheer brutality of life is what we bring to audiences; everything we know and feel is ours to express, the love requited and unrequited, the hope and the gratitude. We mortals search for the transcendental and eternal, a mystical experience that honors the reasons that reason does not know.

Coda: I am guest conducting, presenting workshops on conducting, vocal techniques, traveling and enjoying life. I have turned a page and as long as health, and

energy are there – I will make music. Let's make a difference!

—VYG, 2006