Richard Westenburg's Last Published Interview

The following interview appeared in the December 2007 issue of the Choral Journal, The Official Publication of the American Choral Directors Association. It is reproduced here with the express permission of the publisher and Jonathan Babcock, interviewer and author. The interview took place at the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew, New York City on April 30, 2007.

Babcock: What were your early experiences in music?

Westenburg: While I was growing up in Minneapolis, my mother decided that I had talent, and since I had nothing to compare myself to, I believed her. She taught me piano for a year or two, and then decided that I had surpassed her abilities as a teacher and began to search for an appropriate teacher. Then the story gets interesting because my mother had incredible nurturing skills. She spent eight or nine months looking for an appropriate piano teacher and you have to remember, this is for a child six or seven years old! Most parents would ask a few friends and find someone in the neighborhood, and that's whom the child would study with. My mother made it a priority to find someone who taught a great deal of music theory, and piano technique. She found the perfect teacher. The first day I went to Louisa Heike, she gave me a little chord progression, and assigned me to be able to play it in any key the next week. I didn't understand. She explained, "Start in C and work through the keys. It will be tough at first, but practice and you'll get better." Every week I got a new progression. This went on for ten years. Heike encouraged her students to participate in piano competitions, and I progressed to national level auditions. I also progressed at more and more complicated theoretical processes. She was a gift. I never would have met her if it hadn't been for the efforts of my mother. Our neighbor had a little reed organ, and I loved the sound of it. I loved the idea of getting different sounds and colors from one instrument. I asked my parents if I could start taking organ lessons. Again, my mother looked for the best organ teacher she could find. This was when I was a senior in high school. I got up at five in the morning to practice. We were regular churchgoers, so I had the opportunity to hear a lot of organ repertoire and decent playing. I also had a fabulous choral program in my high school led by Oscar "O. B." Dahle. Libby Larsen and I went to the same high school, and I love to trade stories with her about the great things that he used to do with the choir. All of this musical activity led me to apply to Lawrence University in Wisconsin as an organ major. So much of my life was luck. This college had a great organ teacher named LaVahn Maesch, who was very strong with discipline and understood all of my particular issues that needed attention. The choral program was outstanding, as well. It's a great example of the fact that we are all just products of the people we meet. After attending Lawrence, I came back to Minnesota to get a musicology degree with Johannes Riedel at the

University of Minnesota. I also did some organ study there but mostly musicology. I earned a minor in film as well. My hope was to be an organ player like Virgil Fox. I wanted a job in church music and organ performance. I emulated Fox. While I was working on my master's degree, I had a job as organist at the First Congregational Church in Minneapolis. The second year I was there, I asked the world-renowned French organist Pierre Cochereau to come and perform a recital at the church. One of the pieces he played was the Bach Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor. I knew that piece "cold." I listened to him play and picked up everything he did with the registrations. When he finished the piece, he asked if I would go to the console and play the piece so he could go into the church and listen. So I played it from beginning to end from memory with every single registration change that he used. I played it well, too. I got to the end and he said nothing about my playing! Not even thank you. We went out to supper, he played the recital and that was it. But the story was not over. The following year I got a job teaching at the University of Montana. I was there for three years. In the third year I invited Pierre to come and play another recital. At dinner one night he said to me, "I was just thinking about the last time I saw you in Minnesota. I asked you to play for me. Do you remember that?" (Of course I remembered it!) He continued, "I never have heard anyone play like that. I don't know another young organist that could do that. With the gift that you have, you really have to come to Paris. I will teach you for free, but there are others you should study with as well." Talk about surprised! It was an opportunity I couldn't pass up, so I went to Paris. Cochereau provided me with lessons for free, and set me up in a small apartment. He introduced me to the greatest musicians France had to offer —Nadia Boulanger, Marcel Dupré, Alfred Cortot, Olivier Messiaen, Jean Langlais and the list goes on. I studied regularly that year with Cochereau, Boulanger, and Langlais, but didn't fully realize what a great opportunity this time in Paris was until I left. These were connections and experiences that profoundly shaped the rest of my career. Until I went to Paris, I didn't really know where I "fit in" to the organ community in terms of talent, skill, and accomplishment; I learned in Paris that I fit in at a high level. After leaving Paris, I took a job at a Unitarian Church in Worcester, Massachusetts. While in Worcester, I wrote to Nadia Boulanger and asked her to come perform at my church. She came and did a big evening event, which was a long, public rehearsal of the Fauré Requiem.

Babcock: Who are your primary musical influences?

Westenburg: In every part of my musical brain, Nadia Boulanger was by far the biggest influence. I studied organ with her in Paris. I didn't hear her do any choral music there except for what she covered in classes in her apartment. When she came to my church in Massachusetts, I served as her driver for the week she was in the area. While she was with me, she traveled to Brown and Harvard Universities to give lectures, and she

conducted the Boston Symphony. I took in every moment. Everywhere there was choral music. The musicianship that I gained from her was everything. She has been called “the tender tyrant,” and that fits perfectly; she was absolutely demanding and encouraging, all at the same time. Then, it’s kind of trite to say, but Roger Wagner and Robert Shaw were very big influences on my choral music. They, of course, couldn’t be more different. Roger Wagner was trained as an organist; an enormous talent and a quick learner. A wonderfully communicative conductor, full of phrasing and spirit. Shaw, on the other hand, was the technician. All of us tried to emulate his methods, but to no avail. He was a charismatic person with fabulous rehearsal techniques. When I first met him, I asked him if I could come watch him rehearse Handel’s Messiah. He was taking it on tour, and it was going to be his first RCA recording of that work. He agreed to let me come to every rehearsal. I went to thirty hours of chorus rehearsal, plus solo, orchestral, and tutti rehearsals. I saw every single minute of every rehearsal. I also heard the first and last tour performances, and then attended every recording session at Webster Hall. I immersed myself. The discipline that I was able to learn was miraculous. When I first came to New York, I started theological studies at Union Seminary. I had no aspirations of being a minister. I just wanted to study. I had wonderful professors. After a year, I was made Richard F. French’s assistant in the School of Sacred Music, and started study in the doctoral program with him. At the end of that year, he told me that he wasn’t happy with my work and needed to find a new assistant. I was hugely disappointed, of course. But at the end of that summer, we happened to run into each other on the street. He told me he wasn’t able to find anyone better, and asked if I would be willing to come back. Frankness was one of his trademarks! That started a relationship and a friendship that existed right up to his recent passing. Although his influence was not a musical one, he has had an enormous influence on my scholarly career. He was a master teacher and taught us precision of thought and exactness of expression.

Babcock: What are some of your most memorable musical experiences?

Westenburg: The first Saint Matthew Passion I conducted, back in the 1960s, was a key moment for me. During the bass aria Komm, süsser Kreuz [Come, sweet cross], I remember in that moment, feeling a compelling wholeness and thinking “this is for me.” Up until then, I had a very active career as a recital performer. My best organist buddies were John Weaver and Bill Whitehead. We were called “the three ‘W’s.” But along with my new feelings about conducting, I realized “those guys play recitals better, easier, and enjoy it more than I do. I’m going to let people like them be the organists and I’m going to concentrate on conducting.” I would now call that “following my bliss.”

Babcock: Describe your process of studying and preparing a score for performance.

Westenburg: It depends so much on the individual score, but I'll tell you this, the longer I conduct the fewer marks I use. What I want to do is think it through and have the markings in my head. Shaw used to mark every single bow stroke for every player in the orchestra. This worked for him. One day I was continuing that process while working with a concertmaster. We worked for about an hour, and she stopped and said, "we shouldn't be doing this. When we all get together it's going to be very different. We should be able to tell what you want from your conducting." Margaret Hillis was a tenacious score marker. She had color coding, and everything. She did great work this way, but it just got in the way for me. For me, the printed score already has so many details—all necessary, to be sure —that it is almost hard to find the music, so I don't want to complicate it further. Bernstein's scores have very few of his marks, and the same is true of Zubin Mehta; and Herbert von Karajan didn't put any marks in his scores at all. So one finds two ends of the "marking" spectrum; I just find myself more and more at the "fewer marks" end. I was looking at my copy of the Verdi Requiem recently, and I thought, "too many marks." There are really two reasons why. The first is that I mostly work with professional singers and secondly, these professionals know me, and what my gestures mean. For me, the music, as opposed to its details, seems to take its shape best when there are fewer little marks to be preoccupied with; then it has a better chance to be serendipitous. What I do like to do is listen to recordings. I know that this is not something everyone agrees with. The first time I conducted Strauss's Deutsche Mottette, I must have listened to Eric Ericson's recording at least 50 to 100 times. What happens is the music becomes part of your inner soul. I had a student at Juilliard working on the Verdi Stabat Mater. She came to me and expressed that she was having a terrible time memorizing it. I told her to listen to Riccardo Muti's performance seventy times. I just made up the number, of course. She was doubtful, but I convinced her and she did it. She was a different person after this exercise. The piece had become a part of her intuition. That's what music really is. Notation is merely a lousy way of representing sound on a page. The years of experience do wonderful things. Every passing year allows me to hear more of a score than I ever could before. I can take a new piece, and my first period of time with it is not at a keyboard. I look at it and hear it in my head. When you play it, your attention isn't on hearing it. You are concentrating on playing and seeing the score. When I have studied primarily away from the keyboard, I can then conduct a rehearsal and really hear what's happening in front of me, and compare that to what I want to hear. When I look at the score first and then listen to it, I'm not surprised by what I hear. I may sound like I'm making myself out to be a genius or something, but I'm not. If you start with something simple such as a major chord, you don't have to play it to know what it sounds like. More complicated things work similarly. That is, the principle is the same, except for the complication. It's just a matter of expanding your skill to include complications.

Babcock: Handel's Messiah is a piece you have a particular affinity for.

Westenburg: So I'm told.

Babcock: What is it that has drawn you to Messiah throughout your career? What makes it special?

Westenburg: I have to give importance to my experience with Shaw. I had already started Musica Sacra at Central Presbyterian when I spent my time with him. I had pretty much decided that I would never do it just for the fact that everyone did it. Seeing Shaw work, even in a way I would never do, revealed the value of attention to details. If any piece requires attention to detail, it's Messiah. In order to make the piece your own, you first have to get the cobwebs off of it. It needs more attention before you can see the whole simply because everyone has done it. You don't need to give that kind of attention to Handel's Solomon, because it's all pretty much new material to most performers and the audience. The first conductor to do what was considered a "fast Messiah" was during my lifetime. His name was Hermann Scherchen. It wasn't really that he took it fast, he simply considered its performance at a musical tempo, rather than a choral tempo. People were shocked by the fast tempo, but it wasn't too fast, it was just a fresh way of looking at the piece. And a reasonable way, I might add. This was followed by a series of brisk recordings by Shaw, Marriner, Collin Davis, and Charles Mackerras. These recordings all follow Scherchen's model of a fleet, lighter weight approach. I do think it's a masterpiece. It is not just craft—it's inspiration. I try to see it as a product of a Baroque composer who wrote in a very specific style, but also a piece with a tremendous level of inspiration that does not exist in many other works. It is not fashionable to say, but there is a reason that it's popular—it is great! I once wrote program notes in which I said that the piece cannot be killed. You can do it with no tenors, you can accompany it with harp and piano, you can do anything you can imagine, and it will still be moving. You can even do it slowly and it will still be appreciated. Musica Sacra has performed Messiah every single year since I worked with Shaw. Every year, I get insights that I never had before. A tempo, an articulation, an emphasis or an inner part will come to light that was not apparent ever before. Some have sung this piece with me fifty times, and they have kept markings from every performance. It's amazing to me to see how some of these markings seem completely wrong now. Sometimes I wish my choristers of old had shared my "fewer marks" philosophy!

Babcock: How do you think the culture of choral music and musicians has changed?

Westenburg: What I preach to students, even the most gifted students, is that their focus is too narrowly set on choral music and not on all music. I finished a class in Cincinnati

recently playing a recording of the Berlin Philharmonic under Herbert Von Karajan. As the students were leaving, one very talented doctoral student in choral conducting came to me and admitted that he did not know who Von Karajan was! I must say that I was shocked. And this happened at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, which is the finest graduate choral conducting curriculum in America! Conductors need to be knowledgeable in all fields and in all practices. Their schools can't do this for them; only their innate curiosity and an ingrained wish to be complete musicians can. On the favorable side, the repertoire today is ten times more interesting than it was in my youth. The list of valid composers and compositions for choir is infinite. A choral musician can no longer dismiss a piece because you haven't heard of the composer.

Babcock: What advice would you give to young, up and coming conductors?

Westenburg: Be sure to show intent. The beat is not the intent; gestures that demonstrate vocal technique are not the intent. Mark Gibson, the orchestra conductor at CCM in Cincinnati, told of a game he played as a student. He and his colleagues would all take turns conducting one of the Brahms's symphonies in total silence. The game was for the others to figure out which symphony and which movement they were conducting simply by reading their gestures. This same game can be played with Bach or Handel. Glenn Gould once said, "I don't want the music to happen to me — I want to happen to it." But the main admonitions to student conductors remain the same as they've always been: don't stare at your score; don't beat time; show the music.

Babcock: When considering your entire career, what do you hope to be remembered for?

Westenburg: What a question! I've never really thought of this before, but I suppose I would want to be remembered as a conductor who marshaled talents and techniques to communicate something that inspired because it appeared and sounded natural. That my music represented life. Life makes people, and people make music!

NOTES

1 Donal Henahan. "Musica Sacra Tour of New and Old Choral Works." New York Times 22 April 1988.

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