

CHORAL CONVERSATIONS



An Interview with Anton Armstrong

by Connor Boritzke Smith



Anton Armstrong, Tosdal Professor of Music at St. Olaf College, became the fourth conductor of the St. Olaf Choir in

1990 after ten years in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he served on the faculty of Calvin College and led the Calvin College Alumni Choir, the Grand Rapids Symphony Chorus and the St. Cecilia Youth Chorale. He is a graduate of St. Olaf College and earned advanced degrees at the University of Illinois (MM) and Michigan State University (DMA). He is editor of a multicultural choral series for earthsongs Publications and co-editor (with John Ferguson) of the revised St. Olaf Choral Series for Augsburg Fortress Publishers. In June 1998, Dr. Armstrong began his tenure as founding conductor of the Oregon Bach Festival Stangeland Family Youth Choral Academy.

You're celebrating your thirtieth year at St. Olaf College and conducting the St. Olaf Choir. How have you seen both the college and the choir grow over that span of time?

In the last thirty years, the complexions of St. Olaf and the St. Olaf Choir have changed a great deal. When I was a student at St. Olaf from 1974 to 1978, the college community was quite homogeneous. But over time, that homogeneity has expanded into a more diverse and vibrant population of students, faculty, and staff. This has been the result of an intentional commitment to recruit students, faculty, and staff that cross socioeconomic, ethnic, racial, religious, and political backgrounds. The St. Olaf Choir is a microcosm of the college that reflects this shift. This greater diversity has made us stronger—both as people and musicians.

Another change has been the increase in access to technology. Technology has allowed me to avail

myself of literature that never would have been accessible in 1990 and communicate with conductors and composers from around the world by bringing them literally into the classroom during rehearsal. But this current generation of singers has grown up in the age of technology, which means that the type of art we practice right now is more of a challenge for our students. They can't just get instant access and instant success. It means that they must spend days and weeks perfecting a score. And so I am teaching a different type of life lesson than I was teaching thirty years ago.

Even though we have seen vast changes over the last thirty years, I would also say that St. Olaf has not lost its commitment to being a college of the church but has reexamined how a college, nourished by Lutheran tradition, should look in the twenty-first century. A reality we still face, in terms of choral music, is that a great deal of what we sing is sacred music. We must figure out how current students—from many

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different religious and non-religious backgrounds—can understand and embrace this music and look at things in a new way. At St. Olaf, we challenged ourselves in this way two years ago with the premiere of *The Path* by my colleague Justin Merritt, which explores his own faith through choral and orchestral explorations of ancient Buddhist texts.

What makes the St. Olaf community so special, having chosen to remain a part of it for three decades?

My relatives say that I have a hole in my head for staying in the cold for so long, with my father being born and raised in Antigua and my mother having spent her early years in St. Thomas. When I visited St. Olaf College in high school, everything was white. The students were white, the architecture was white, the snow was white, and even the food was white (Swedish meatballs, boiled potatoes, and cauliflower).

But as I got beyond that surface impression, I found a community that possessed so many of the values that had been instilled in me while I was raised in an African American home, neighborhood, and church. Faith in God, care of neighbor, and care of creation. The desire to have people serve in the world while not expecting that they were owed something in return. The faith in a God that would walk with you through whatever challenges you face in life. These same tenets have remained at St. Olaf and with me for the past thirty years.

St. Olaf is not perfect, but it is a

place where people come to study, work, and strive to have a place of belonging. We live in a world that is so divided, where people are so quick to find the things that separate us. One of the great things about working in music—especially choral music—is that we can all find a place of belonging and a place where we can express ourselves and find community with those around us.

As someone who has traveled the world as a guest conductor and clinician, how have these international experiences shaped your view of choral music, and what are the most important things you've learned from these experiences?

I first traveled abroad as a member of the American Boychoir but didn't travel again until I was invited to go back to my parents' home region in the Caribbean and work for the Ministry of Culture and Education of the British Virgin Islands between 1985 and 1990. It was an incredibly validating and grounding experience to have my first international work be with people from my own roots and develop a deeper connection to the music I often heard as a child.

My international experiences have helped me learn that our work can help build bridges and heal wounds. The songs we sing from different parts of the world are often the way we enter a cultural experience very different from our own. If we can treat that music with respect and do our best to understand how and why that music originated, we

start to understand the people who created it, and we find a commonality in how we exist together. Once we begin singing together, our differences of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and experience don't disappear but instead cease to become barriers.

What do you find most challenging when guest conducting? (This question was supplied by the previous column's interviewee.)

I strive to go in knowing my music and knowing my score. As I tell my own students, I live on a very simple game plan of score study. I try to predict where the problems are and then I plan what strategies and teaching techniques I can have at hand that will help prevent errors from happening. The challenge of guest conducting goes beyond making a beautiful sound or having all the notes, texts, and rhythms correct. If I can't somehow relate this music to the lives of the people that I'm conducting, they will never take ownership of it. And in the end, the only way the music will be successful is if the singers take ownership of it.

One of the hardest groups I've ever had to work with was an internationally renowned youth choir. They could sight-read anything, but it was about getting them to go past just making the notes. We eventually did that, but it was a real challenge because they thought, "We have the notes, rhythms and everything on the score. Right? Aren't you satisfied?"

I told them, "You're not part of this yet. You haven't invested your-

selves—your heart and soul.” Many of the singers told me it was the first time they were challenged to experience the music not just intellectually but emotionally. It’s a challenge and the goal.

What do you find most challenging when preparing for the premiere of a new choral work?

Unlike preexisting compositions, there are likely no performance models to use as a study guide for premieres—whether it be an audio recording or performance video. Without that model, it’s squarely on your shoulders to find the interpretation of the piece that works best.

In my experience, I have learned that it’s essential to *trust your own instincts*—whether or not it perfectly aligns with what is written on the page. This can be quite a challenge, especially for young conductors and individuals working on their first premiere and learning to manage the conductor/composer relationship.

To address this challenge, I believe it is essential that conductors create honest and open communication with composers from the very beginning of the process, so that both can come to an understanding on the interpretations of a piece and forge a mutual path on how a score should be rendered. At minimum, my process includes a phone call with the

composer. If I’m working with a local composer or we have the ability, I’ll invite them to St. Olaf to attend rehearsal so that we can delve further into the piece together and with our singers.

The process isn’t always easy, especially if your vision isn’t congruent with the composer’s work. And occasionally, what a composer hears in their head may not be what works best for the piece when it’s actually brought to life.

About eight years ago, I had the pleasure of working with Libby Larson on a premiere of her work commissioned by the Alaska Chamber Singers for their twenty-fifth anniversary. We both flew to Anchorage

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together, and I asked her *not* to be at the first rehearsal, so that I could work with the resident conductor and choir to ensure our initial interpretations and feelings on the piece were if not aligned, at least discussed. But that night, we sat down with Libby and went page by page through the score and were able to work through questions and artistic opinions in order to find what would work best for the piece. Although this level of collaboration and communication isn't always possible, it's an example of how open and honest dialogue about your instincts and artistic expressions can lead to the best possible premiere

of a new choral work.

In your opinion, what are some of today's biggest challenges facing choral music around the world and where do you see it moving in the future?

The St. Olaf Choir holds a revered and respected tradition in the choral world. We still do a very traditional choral concert in the sense that I don't use a lot of other things to enhance the concert experience. I don't use visual illumination or have them moving all over the place, and I realize that can seem antiquated. In

the end, I think we can let the music speak for itself. We don't need other very valid expressions of art to enhance it. When done well, however, I do appreciate the models where varied art forms are incorporated, whether it be visual art, interwoven narrations, dance, or other creative expressions pulled together. I think we're going to see a further breaking down of walls between not only sacred and secular music but also between folk, art, and popular music.

We also face the challenge of finding new places to form singing communities—and not just a choir, but opportunities for people to simply get

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together to sing together. Throughout history, the natural place for us to join in song was in the church. But with fewer people participating in organized religion, how do we find new ways to create more communal singing?

I hope we can continue to break down more barriers and provide greater accessibility for individuals to sing together. I hope that our societies will change enough so we won't have to have so many segmented choirs, and that people feel welcomed to sing in any group no matter their race, gender, sexuality, or specific learning or physical challenges. And of course we want to be more multicultural, but we need to know who we are. Those "dead white composers" as many of my students call them are why we have this art form. But there also needs to be room for more female composers, more people of color, and quality literature from a global perspective.

As a professor at a liberal arts college and conductor of students who aren't solely studying music, how do you view the role music has in providing a holistic education?

There's a popular acronym in education that we hear all the time, called STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics), but I feel strongly that it should be STEAM. The arts have to be a central role in education, because instructors do more than educate a person's mind. We need to teach them not only how to think but how to feel.

We offer music to students as a

way to deal with the struggles of the reality of youth. Education in the arts can provide students with a foundation for excellence, where they are free to form feelings of value and self-worth and find a place where they're respected and don't have to wait until they're twenty-five or thirty to feel as though they've made a contribution to the world.

I greatly appreciate my students and choir members who don't solely study music. Rehearsals are refreshing for them—it's not just one more event of music they're doing. They bring an energy and insight from their other studies that enhances our music, whether from language, or from history or a new analysis of text.

We aim to educate the whole person. And that's what the arts help do, especially choral music.

As an educator, you've mentored and been a role model for thousands of students. Who are the role models and mentors that have influenced you the most?

My parents, Esther and William Armstrong, supported my interest in music. They made extreme financial sacrifices for me, which included lessons, private schooling, and being a member of the American Boychoir.

Carol and Carl Weber (graduates of Westminster Choir College) were the musicians at my home church who started a church choir when I was in kindergarten. If it wasn't for Carol, a major part of my musical journey would never have happened. She gave me my first solo when I was six years old—which I can still sing—

and provided us with incredibly wise training. She also introduced me to the American Boychoir. Singing in that choir lit my fire for choral singing. While there were only three or four African American boys in the choir at the time, we were treated equally and were valued for our talent and how hard we were willing to work. It was a transformative experience and established my standard for excellence in choral music.

Then of course came my time as a student at St. Olaf, where I learned from my predecessor, Dr. Kenneth Jennings, and conductors Dr. Robert Scholz and Alice Larson. I still remember the first time I heard Alice conduct the St. Olaf Manitou Singers. I'd never heard women sing like that. It wasn't this little girl sound; it was a rich, womanly sound. I remember witnessing the way that Kenneth Jennings would take his hands, and in an instant, a phrase would just turn. Finally, there's Bob Scholz, the most pastoral of my teachers, who cared deeply for the music he made but even more for the human beings who created it.

I was also fortunate to be guided in my years of graduate study at the University of Illinois and Michigan State University by inspirational mentors such as Dr. Harold Decker, Dr. Charles Smith, and Ms. Ethel Armeling. Perhaps the greatest gift of my Illinois years was meeting my dear friend and colleague of nearly forty-two years, Dr. André Thomas.

As an adult, a person whose influence has steered my life professionally is Helen Kemp, professor emerita of voice and church music at Westminster Choir College. Her

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mantra, “Body, mind, spirit, and voice—it takes the whole person to sing and rejoice” has stayed with me for more than forty years. I credit her with shaping my calling as a vocal music educator and conductor. I’ve also learned so much from my colleagues at St. Olaf over the past thirty years, and especially my students. They have challenged me to be the best music educator, the best conductor, and the best person I can be, and they continue to do so.

As you look back on your career and ahead, what do you want your legacy to be?


I hope the people that I’ve had

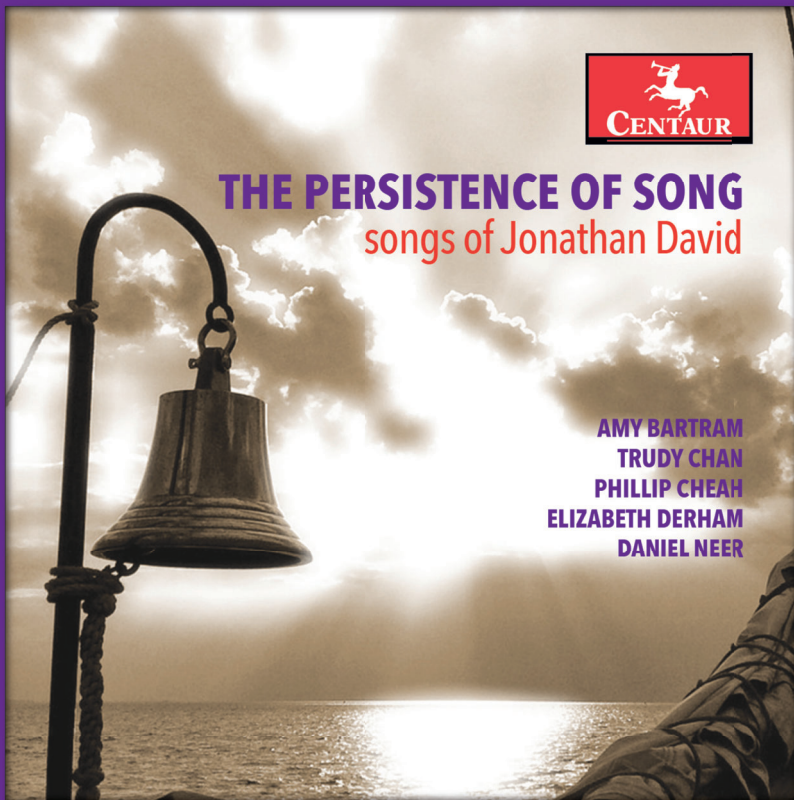
the opportunity to lead in song feel that time making music with me is an experience in which they use all of who they are—body, mind, spirit, and voice. I hope the people who have heard our music were touched and, if we really did our jobs well, left as transformed human beings—a bit kinder, gentler, and with more hope in their lives to address the challenges that they’re facing. I think when choral music is done at its highest level, when we eliminate all of the things that will distract the human mind and ear and enable people to hear the full beauty of the music and power of that text, it can become an inspiration for people to live lives that are full of more happiness, more

hope, and more love. That’s what I’ve tried to do in my work and hopefully done well.

I also hope people view my work at St. Olaf and beyond as a life dedicated to bringing people together, and finding ways for us to learn how to better respect each other, learn from each other, and grow as human beings.

Please provide a question for the next interviewee to answer.

What is the role of choral music as an advocate for social justice in the years to come? 



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