

CHORAL CONVERSATIONS



An Interview with James Benjamin Kinchen, Jr.

by Stanley Bochat and Timothy Keith Griffin, Jr.



James Benjamin Kinchen, Jr., is a veteran choral conductor and educator. Kinchen is a native of Jacksonville,

Florida, and is presently professor of music and director of choral activities at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside in Kenosha, Wisconsin. He also directs the Milwaukee Choristers, an eighty-seven-year old, self-sustaining community choir. Besides directing choirs, he teaches conducting, choral methods and materials courses, does clinical supervision for choral teachers-to-be, and, occasionally, teaches courses in African American music. Before going to Wisconsin, he taught music and directed choirs in Florida, Illinois, Virginia, and North Carolina. He has served ACDA as a Repertoire & Resources chair at state, regional, and national levels and as a Wisconsin Choral Directors Association President and North Central ACDA President.

How did you first become involved with choral music?

My first involvement with choral music was at the beginning of seventh grade. My father took me to register at Darnell-Cookman Junior High School in Jacksonville. Registration was in the auditorium in those pre-computer days. We had registered for all of my classes, and then I saw the choral director sitting over at the music table. She was also on the music staff at our church. He said, "Let's go over and speak with Mrs. [Ruby] Askew." We got to the table, and she looked at me and asked, "Boy, are you going to sing with me?" I don't know to this day what I was going to say, but when I opened my mouth, my father spoke and said, "Yes, he'll sing," and that was the beginning of my involvement with choral music.

I enjoyed choral music in junior high school, but I had no idea that it would later become a career path. The discovery came later when I was in tenth grade when I had a fabulous all-state and solo festival experience.

That is when I began to understand that music was what I was called to do. I did undergraduate studies at Jacksonville University. Then, I was hired at the age of twenty to teach high school choral music in my hometown for three years. I had a three-year plan: three years of teaching, then on to grad school. I did graduate study at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale and completed my doctorate at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro.

How have your mentors helped shape and mold who you are and what you do now?

That is such an important question, and I could go on and on reflecting on my many mentors. Everything starts with my parents, J.B. and Bertha Lee Kinchen. We did not have much in the way of money or stuff. Still, they mixed in copious amounts of love, belief in me as a person, discipline, character building, encouragement, and faith in God. The combination of all those things put the structure in place for

everything that I have ever attained. Ruby Askew, my junior high music teacher who ran a tight ship, but most importantly, understood young people enough to make learning fun. Alpha Hayes Moore, my director at Stanton Senior High School (also home of “Lift Evr’y Voice and Sing”), quite the taskmaster, was also a very important mentor.

Beyond that, there were people in my community who were choral directors, maybe ten or fifteen years ahead of me, who were also mentors. Another name that comes to mind is Virdell Jakes, who was so passionate and functional in what he did as a teacher. I always thought that he could go into a grocery store at four or five o’clock in the afternoon and round everybody up and have a choir going in a few minutes.

I am so grateful to the late Vernon Smith, a high school director at the time, who gave me lots of opportunities to do things with his singers as a college student; this was an even bigger deal than I realized as it related to my development. Edward Bryan, my college director who reputedly worked for one dollar a year because his family owned this large life insurance company and didn’t need it, deserves mention. He was well versed in quality literature, which translated to his ensembles’ repertoire. We have to keep in mind that at that time, there were only a handful of African American students at JU. However, he noticed my talents and gave me opportunities for leadership and musical experiences while segregation was still alive in many places. I assisted Robert Kingsbury, my graduate choir director who allowed

me to conduct a major performance of Mendelssohn’s *Elijah* in his stead when he became ill.

Then there’s the great William Dawson, who honored me by calling me his friend. I planned the last performance of his music that he ever heard sung. It was at the Southern Region ACDA in Birmingham in 1990. I recall sitting next to him as he listened to this incredible HBCU Honor choir conducted by Brazeal Dennard, mainly singing his “spiritual” settings. My friend, Robert Harris, whose Northwestern University performances, especially of the masterworks with orchestra, were breathtaking. The list goes on and on, and I owe so much to all of those who spent time with me, who gave me advice, and modeled for me their excellence.

What conductors influenced you as a young conductor?

Robert Shaw’s work became for me, as for many other choral conductors, the standard (and “unreachable star”) for serious choral singing. I had the chance to go to Indiana University to sing and study under Robert Shaw and Julius Herford. What an experience. Shaw’s ear was absolutely uncanny. His mastery of the score in all its detail and ability to focus in rehearsal on those details without ever losing sight of the whole as a work of art was something I marveled. But it did inspire me to try and be the *best* choral artist I could be.

William Dawson was an influence long before I ever met him. While working a summer job, I met a man

named Mr. Jones, whose wife was a member of Dawson’s Tuskegee Choir. Upon gauging my trustworthiness, he offered to loan me his wife’s original recording of Dawson’s Tuskegee Institute Choir for one night. When he loaned me the recording, I recall him saying to me in dead seriousness, “If anything happens to this recording, I will have to leave home.” To hear the choir sing these songs of my heritage with the right mix of earthiness, expressive sincerity, and nuance totally entranced me. As a young conductor, I admired Donald Neuen and Dale Warland. And there is so much integrity and musicianship in the work of John Rutter, whom I first interacted with in the mid-1980s at a North Carolina ACDA workshop. I have to give props to my conducting teachers: William McNeiland, my first conducting teacher, Robert Bergt, John Locke, Richard Cox, and Peter Perret, a really fine symphony conductor with whom I studied privately.

What principles and core values guide you in your conducting and your teaching?

Choral music is a vocal art. My work honors the centrality of the human voice and the appreciation of the beautiful range of colors and timbres that the voice can bring. I am excited by the capabilities of the voice. Choral music is also an ensemble art; we are not a group of undisciplined singers singing together. Choral singing is the ultimate experience of a team effort. The composer must speak. I believe very

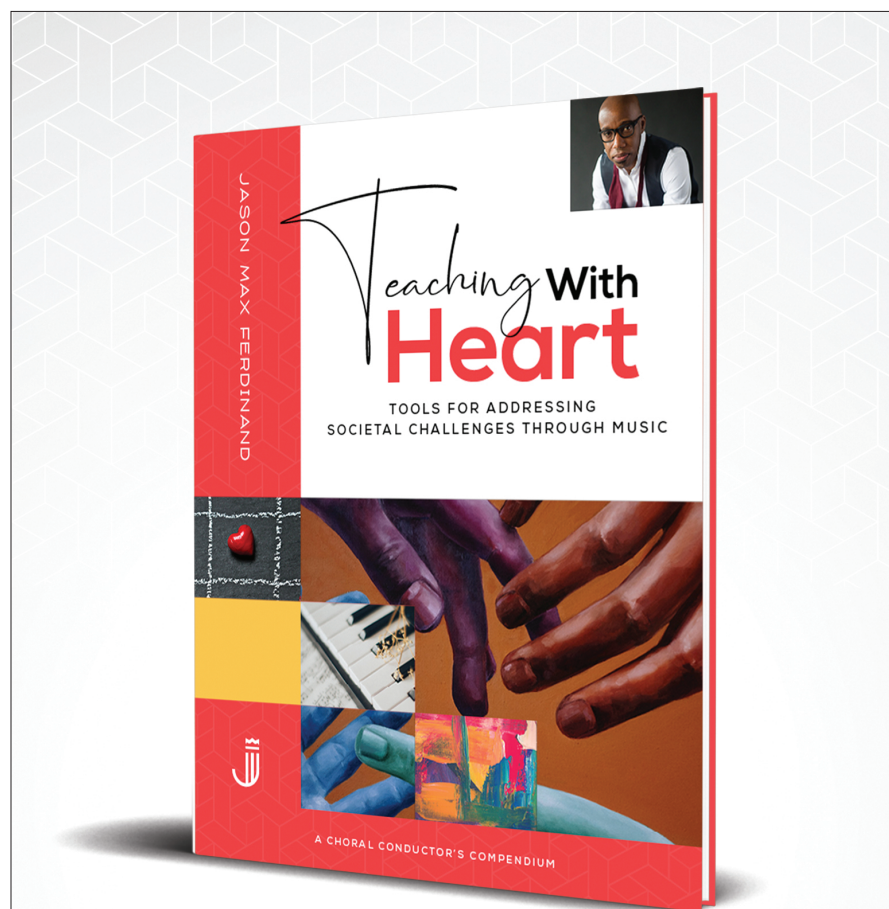
firmly in trying to understand what the composer wanted by studying and knowing the score. I think these are my best moments as a choral artist, as a conductor, as a teacher. I have discovered enough of what the composer wants and how I might achieve it to aid the singers and orchestra in that direction so that the composer speaks to the audience. Choral music is, above all, a human expression. As a conductor, I want a balance of head and heart in the art so that there is this intellectual piece of music-making right alongside this emotional/spiritual component. Most often, the best of what we do is the result of hard work. The sweat has to be there to enable the inspiration to happen.

From where did your interest in the negro spiritual come?

It is a connection that goes back to junior high, where we performed many of the classical arrangements of the “spiritual.” (Negro *folksong* was the term that Dawson always used.) Growing up, I heard them sung as folk pieces in our church, too. But in junior and senior high school, while we performed the sacred and secular music of Western composers, we also did the “spirituals.” It seemed so natural for us. As we did them more and more, I came to appreciate them more—mainly when I understood where they came from. They were utterances of my ancestors, profound expressions of faith in religion (Christianity). Even though given to my forebears by their subjugators, they were able to turn it upside down to make it become something rele-

vant to them and their situation. So, they knew whose side God was on when they sang, “Go down, Moses.” They understood that they were the

people who needed to be let go and be made free. Even in our nearly *all-white* choir in college, the director understood



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that this was a part of the American heritage and that these white kids, many of whom had not experienced any of this music, needed to be able to experience it for its artistic and human value. And so, I was proud that we got a chance to sing some of *my* music in that setting. And not as “gimmick” or something exotic, but in a very respectful way. The songs of our slave forebearers say so much. They express so many things, and they do it with such incredible humanity. They were primarily songs of faith but could function in many ways, including communicating hidden meanings when needed.

“Steal Away” could be a call to prayer, or it could signal an escape attempt. Harry T. Burleigh, Robert Nathaniel Dett, Hall Johnson, William Dawson, John Wesley Work, Undine Smith Moore, to name some of the older generations, and people of more modern vintage all the way up to folk like Moses Hogan. He was a giant of the genre, and to think of people like Stacy Gibbs, who is being very fruitful and enjoying tremendous success today. They have built on the foundations and stand on the shoulders of older masters to keep expressing the “spiritual” so that there is creative freshness, while respecting the music and preserving its spiritual and artistic integrity. I have gladly given a good deal of effort and energy over a career as a conductor, clinician, and presenter to help people understand and better appreciate this tremendous music—to help choral singers and artists who are not Black see themselves as choirs and conductors who could perform this music even though it

had African roots, maybe the same as I do with Palestrina and Bach.

Emerging research in the impact on motivation and engagement in our profession suggests the importance of using a culturally responsive repertoire and pedagogy in the choral classroom. But what does that mean?

This is a great and challenging question. For me, primarily “classically” trained, it is helpful to have roots in the African American church and popular music. As a kid, I was part of a little “pop-soul” group that we called “Versatile Keys. I think everything had the same chord progressions. We changed the words and rhythm from song to song in our attempt to be responsive to some important “non-classical” cultural elements at that time. When I first started teaching high school, I taught my choirs gospel music even though you couldn’t find any of the sheet music commercially available. I learned the songs and taught them aurally. I taught my choirs some of the popular “top 40” R&B pieces like “Stairway to Heaven,” “Let’s put it All Together,” and songs like that.

I’m fortunate to have some of that cultural flexibility programmed in me. One of the great things today about popular songs, world music, and music of non-western cultures is that the availability of sheet music and well-recorded models make those kinds of music a lot more approachable to “foreigners,” so to speak. There are so many workshops and opportunities to learn different

performance practices that respond to the norms of different cultures. It is an exciting time to be a choral director. Exciting in the sense that there is music available to us that explores outside of the western “traditional” choral canon.

Can you talk about your path to the position as director of choral activities at UW Parkside?

It sort of starts in seventh grade even though I didn’t know where that would lead me. It continued through the wonderful schools of Jacksonville, although they were racially segregated, but I had wonderful experiences there with strong, caring teachers. I was hired to teach high school at the age of twenty at the toughest, roughest of the thirteen high schools in the district. After three years, I went to grad school. My first college job was at Southeastern Illinois College in Harrisburg, which was really a community school that had never had a full-time music teacher, though I was never really full time. I was three-quarter time and, boy, was I glad to get that job.

From there to Hampton in Virginia, where I served a year in the place of a colleague who was on study leave. That was a tremendous experience because Hampton is one of the oldest and most fabled of the HBCUs. Lots of tradition there and opportunity to be immersed in it there. Then to Winston-Salem State, which was another wonderful experience. And from there, at a point where I needed new opportunities for growth, I came to UW Parkside in 1989.

What are some other high points of your career?

When I think about the little barefoot, big-headed boy who grew up on the dirt road called Doeboy Street in the house with the old out-of-tune piano where a third of the keys did not work, I have been tremendously blessed beyond words to be in positions where I feel I had the chance to make a difference. There is a list in terms of repertoire, but I don't want to go through the entire list. The Nguzo Saba Suite, a seven-movement Kwanzaa work that we commissioned Glenn Edward Burleigh to compose in 1994, was a big deal. Over the years, we've performed this work a few times, often collaborating with other choirs, with Glenn coming to accompany us before his untimely death twelve years ago. As our guests, Keith, with your Zest Choir, was an excellent opportunity to create this choral collaboration between my student singers, my adult singers, and your wonderfully trained youthful singers. I am so glad we had the opportunity to collaborate.

Stan, you mentioned *Messiah*, which we do complete in series every three years with orchestra (but will not be able to this year due to the pandemic). But, since what we do in our art is anchored in our literature, some other works that I have enjoyed leading performances of include: Brahms's *Ein Deutsches Requiem*, Verdi's *Requiem*, Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, Bach's *Magnificat in D*, *Gloria* settings of Vivaldi and Poulenc, Mozart's *Confessor's Vespers*, Haydn's *Nelson Mass*, Thomp-

son's *Frostiana* and the *Peaceable Kingdom*, and Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*. Bucket list? Bach's *B Minor*, Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, Robert Nathaniel Dett's *Chariot Jubilee* and *Ordering of Moses*, Undine Smith Moore's *Scenes from the Life of a Martyr: To the Memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*


I could talk about the pieces and trips as highlights, but in the end, it is truly my students that I have worked with, and the lives I have intersected with that have made my career worthwhile. They are the ultimate highlight.

What do you envision the greatest post-COVID-19 challenge for choral conductors, and how would you address it? (This question was supplied by the previous Choral Conversations Column interviewee.)

One challenge is that this particular virus will likely be with us from now on. We will have safe vaccines available to the public in a few months. We will also continue to treat people who have it more effectively and continue learning more about this virus's science. Even so, we in the choral community will keep having to be mindful of what is necessary for us to sing safely together and for our audiences to hear us sing safely. A positive challenge is how we can use this pandemic period to have fresh, creative thoughts about our art—how we teach it, how we practice it, and how we share it. As we have all seen, this coronavirus can restrict us. But we are so creative! I think we will keep finding ex-

citing, novel ways to do this inexorable, irrepressible thing that we have continued to do through plague, war, famine, and the worst of times.

Please provide a question to the next Choral Conversation interviewee.

How has 2020 shaped your perspective on life? 

Stanley Bochat is in his seventh year on the faculty of Nash Elementary School, Kenosha, WI, where he teaches music and directs the choir.

Timothy Keith Griffin, Jr. is excited to have recently been appointed choral specialist at Washington Fine Arts Middle School in Green Bay, Wisconsin.

Don't miss a Choral Conversation with Rosephanye Powell!



See the March 2020 issue, pages 69-74. Perhaps best recognized as one of the United States'

leading contemporary choral composers, in this Choral Conversation, she discusses her music, the compositional process, and reflects on being a prominent African American female composer.