

CHORAL CONVERSATIONS



A Conversation with Pearl Shangkuan

with Mary Tuuk Kuras



Dr. Pearl Shangkuan is a highly sought-after conductor, lecturer, and clinician nationally and internationally. She is the current national president-elect of ACDA, and previously served on the board of directors of Chorus America,

and as president of Central ACDA Region and Michigan ACDA. She is the chorus director of the Grand Rapids Symphony, editor of Hinshaw Music, and professor emerita of music at Calvin University. She has conducted numerous all-states and headlined several ACDA conferences. She has received awards from Michigan ACDA, Michigan YWCA, Calvin University, and an Honorary Life Member Award from the National Collegiate Choral Organization.

In 2024, you stepped down as professor of music at Calvin University. What aspect of your outstanding tenure there makes you smile most as you reflect on your work?

Taking my choirs on international tours to four continents! I have so many wonderful memories of concerts in amazing venues. But the spontaneous singing during

a tour stands out as well—visiting the Great Wall of China and singing *Lift Thine Eyes* by Felix Mendelssohn. Singing all over South Africa, including at Robben Island where Mandela was imprisoned for many years; singing in an AIDS hospice; and singing and dancing our way through airport security at the request of the airport personnel! Singing in a very poor church in the township of Soweto—a two-hour-long service in a simple structure that was their church building and yet one of the most powerful glimpses of heaven for my students and me. My students singing in a *favela* (slum) in Brazil and seeing the pride on the faces of the Brazilian children who sang for us.

Introducing my students and leading them in performing movements of the monumental *B minor Mass* by Bach. Hosting residencies at Calvin of the Bach Collegium Japan, Stephen Paulus, Moses Hogan, Dan Forrest, and bringing in guest conductors for my students to experience like Anton Armstrong, Maria Guinand, and my own teacher, Joseph Flummerfelt. Commissioning new works and bringing these to life. In all these experiences, the underlying goal of helping to broaden the minds and hearts of my students was ultimately met.

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Now that you are no longer at Calvin University, you are rebalancing your professional endeavors. What do you look forward to the most in this new stage of your career?

My husband, in jest, predicted (correctly) that I would be even busier after letting go of my day job. My travels for guest engagements nationally and internationally have increased significantly in recent years. I truly enjoy traveling to all different places, interacting with local choir directors, and learning about their cultures and their choral communities—appreciating the commonalities as well as each other’s struggles.

I continue to greatly enjoy my work as chorus director of the Grand Rapids Symphony and continue to grow in my work as editor of Hinshaw Music. This editor position allows me to “connect multiple dots” and have fun while at it! It gives me great satisfaction to be able to provide a platform for composers and arrang-

ers, especially those who are starting out, and creating new series for the catalog to expand our resources for choirs of all types and levels.

Your work as chorus director of the Grand Rapids Symphony requires you to prepare choruses for different styles of music and conductor expectations. How do you prepare for each production to ensure the chorus is ready to be turned over to the conductor of the production?

Not only am I preparing the symphony chorus—a dedicated all-volunteer chorus that spans a wide range of abilities and experience—to know the notes and rhythm, but I also prepare them to be very flexible and to respond to the conductor. This can be tricky, as we don’t see the conductor until the week of the performance. Except for only one time in two decades that I’ve been doing this, I have never received any advance

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information from the conductors of the productions. I study and try to figure out the different ways a conductor could approach the music artistically and historically. In studying the score, I also look at it like a conducting teacher—for example, knowing various ways a tricky transition can be conducted, explaining to the chorus, and preparing the chorus by conducting these spots in a different way each time while rehearsing them. This helps the chorus to be able to read and understand the gestures of a conductor and keeps them on their toes.

I often tell them that the greatest compliment I can receive as one who prepared them is when they “become like the regular ensemble of the conductor and are no longer mine.” I also occasionally “translate” to the chorus to help them achieve what the conductor wants in ways that they can understand and produce.

Can you share an example of a chorus production that was particularly difficult to prepare? Why was it difficult? What did you do to overcome the challenge so that the chorus “became like the regular ensemble of the conductor”?

There are two productions that stand out particularly. I still break out in cold sweat whenever I think of them! One was preparing the *B minor Mass* of J. S. Bach. I had “bowed” the choral parts in a specific way in preparation for a conductor from a distinct historical approach. The week before the concert, there was an unexpected change in artistic leadership to one with a different approach. Of all the masterworks in the choral repertory for this to happen! Once the conductor arrived and I saw the “flight plan” at the rehearsal, at each warm-up rehearsal that I had with the chorus, I “translated” and made changes in anticipation of what the conductor would want.

Because of certain assigned portions for the soloists and chorus that the first conductor had made (which the second conductor no longer wanted, and which was only rehearsed at the final rehearsal), the chorus had to learn four pages of new music within twenty-four hours of the concert! And this extended portion wasn’t run through at the compressed dress rehearsal. Things turned out very well, but we pulled it

off only because of the dedication and the quality of this chorus that was able to quickly learn and respond to this kind of dramatic change.

The other example is John Adam’s *On the Transmigration of Souls*, a difficult work that required my pulling out all the tricks I know as a chorus director and then even more to work through the very challenging portions. The ending was especially difficult rhythmically. At each rehearsal all the way to the dress rehearsal, there continued to be misalignments where things were on the border of unraveling. At the concerts, I sat white-knuckled and prayed the whole time! Thankfully, everything held together, and all went well.

In both instances, there’s a high level of mutual trust set and cultivated in the chorus environment—the trust of the chorus members that I’ve prepared them for all eventualities and my trust of the chorus members that each will perform at their very best. This goes way beyond notes and rhythm to the environment built over time of high expectations, mutual trust, and respect.

You frequently travel throughout the United States and internationally as a conductor and clinician. How do you prepare for those engagements and what steps do you take on arrival to achieve a successful experience for all involved?

To help me keep track, I create a folder for each of the engagements with the repertoire and all other pertinent details. As a guest conductor, I rely on the preparation of the singers by their respective choir directors, and their having transferred and learned with the markings that I send ahead of time. I then pace each rehearsal carefully based on what I’m hearing and how they’re responding to get the work done and quickly, keeping them engaged and not wearing them out to get to the best level of performance. Programming is fundamental. I strive to balance the levels of difficulty, styles, and moods to create both unity and variety toward an enjoyable and rewarding whole experience for the singers as well as for the audience.

How have you been able to balance your various professional endeavors, especially considering the different professional skillsets they each require?

It makes for a crazy schedule for sure and constant juggling! Time management is key. I must know my different roles clearly—as conductor, as chorus director preparing for another conductor, as editor, etc., and plan and execute accordingly. Whichever choir I stand in front of, I want them to feel that they have my full attention and that I have prepared as best as I can to provide them with a good artistic experience.

Intentionally balancing the active side of things (teaching, conducting, presenting) with silence and solitude (time to think, plan, reflect, and study) is a must. I do most of my score study while on flights, traveling with different scores that I need to learn for different concerts. Being at 30,000 feet can give one a great sense of clarity, a different perspective about the essence of the music and about one's work and life. I truly enjoy the variety of repertoire of the different choirs, both my own and for guest engagements: sacred and secular, treble to SATB chamber, large multi-movement works and premiering new works.

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I also enjoy the challenge of figuring out how best to teach whatever level of singers I'm working with for a particular engagement. To get them from point A to point B as efficiently and effectively as possible (especially with guest engagements where the schedule is very compressed from the time of arrival to performance) is the goal.

My professional endeavors always go in tandem with

my everyday life as a mom with a disabled child. Together with my husband, I plan for the details of our son's daily life—his schedule and activities, his restrictive diet, and for nearly a decade, his struggle with a rare blood disorder. I have learned during the harder days to be able to set the worries aside when I step on the podium. I've been strengthened and nourished by the music even as I conduct and always have that at the back of my mind when I program, hoping that it may be so for the audience as well, especially during difficult times for them as individuals.

Can you share a few artistic memories over your career that especially fill your heart?

- The long silence that lingered for minutes at the end of conducting the Grand Rapids Symphony and Chorus on *Requiem for the Living* by Dan Forrest in spring 2024. It was a collective, long moment of silent reflection that I'll cherish for a long time to come. The most poignant kind of response!
- Conducting the 300-strong ACDA National SSAA Honor Choir in Cincinnati in 2023... unforgettable! The joy of having composers featured in the program at the rehearsals to interact with the singers.
- Performing with Dan Forrest, festival chorus and orchestra, at Winchester Cathedral in England, the incredibly beautiful space, hearing the reverberation at the end of each phrase.
- Performing *Prayer of St. Francis* (among many other works) at the Cathedral of St. Francis in Assisi, where he is buried, with the composer Allen Pote in attendance.
- Each time I conduct at Carnegie Hall.
- While conducting at mass at St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican, the sense of awe that hit me felt like a physical sensation.

You have touched singers of all ages, audiences, and colleagues across the United States and internationally. You have also served as a tremendous role model. What message do you strive to impart in those interactions?

I never think of myself as a role model...I don't feel I'm old enough yet! I just always try to do my best wherever I go, knowing that it will impact those I am working with during that time. There's the parable in the Bible of the servants with different numbers of talents. I've always felt I have but one talent and should use it diligently and wholeheartedly as a response of gratitude to my Creator. Everywhere I go, I sense a hunger for beauty, meaning, and connectedness that I feel incredibly honored to be a part of.

It's been said to me by participants on many occasions how important it is to see an Asian American conductor and—in conducting large works—a female conductor on the podium. I see my work, especially in my ACDA leadership role, as walking alongside choir directors, encouraging and finding ways to help support their work. During the difficult years of the pandemic, as hard and exhausting as it was being a collegiate conductor, it didn't in any way compare to that of school choir directors and music teachers. At my core, I see myself as a working mom trying my best. I can appreciate how hardworking choir directors must juggle and empathize with the discouragement that sometimes comes with a lack of appreciation for their dedicated work.

If art is supposed to change us, why do you think so many choral conductors program music that simply affirms the morality of their singers and audience? (This question was supplied by the previous Choral Conversation interviewee. See “A Conversation with Donald Nally,” *Choral Journal* October 2023.)


Based on my own experience when I had a community chorus that relied on the concert intake to survive, I had to program toward a certain level of familiarity for that audience, a necessary and pragmatic matter. I would often sneak in some new music (style and con-

tent) into the program to help educate the audience and gradually broaden its taste and experience.

Another aspect I've seen especially in the recent years of global health crisis and societal upheavals is that audiences seek solace in such gatherings. Something familiar makes them feel more comfortable. I found it helpful and effective to speak a few words to the audience—not to talk down or guilt them, but to gently encourage them to expand their hearts toward something that may not be their usual perspective.

People walk in different ways and at different tempos. For some, it may feel like too slow a change; for others, too fast. And yet as a leader (in the choral realm), it's an important part of our mission to bring together as many as possible in this journey of life through the art that we share. Our work is not only teaching the elements of music but also being a persistent guide, which requires great creativity and sensitivity, and sometimes, great patience.

Please provide a question for the next Choral Conversations interviewee to answer.

Looking back at your career, what three things would you tell your twenty-year-old self? 

Mary Tuuk Kuras currently serves as CEO of MTK Practical Leadership and as a board member of Chorus America. A lifelong singer, pianist, organist, and violinist, she has also served as an executive leader in the C-Suite of Fifth Third Bancorp and Meijer Inc., and as president and CEO of the Grand Rapids Symphony. mary@mtkpracticalleadership.com