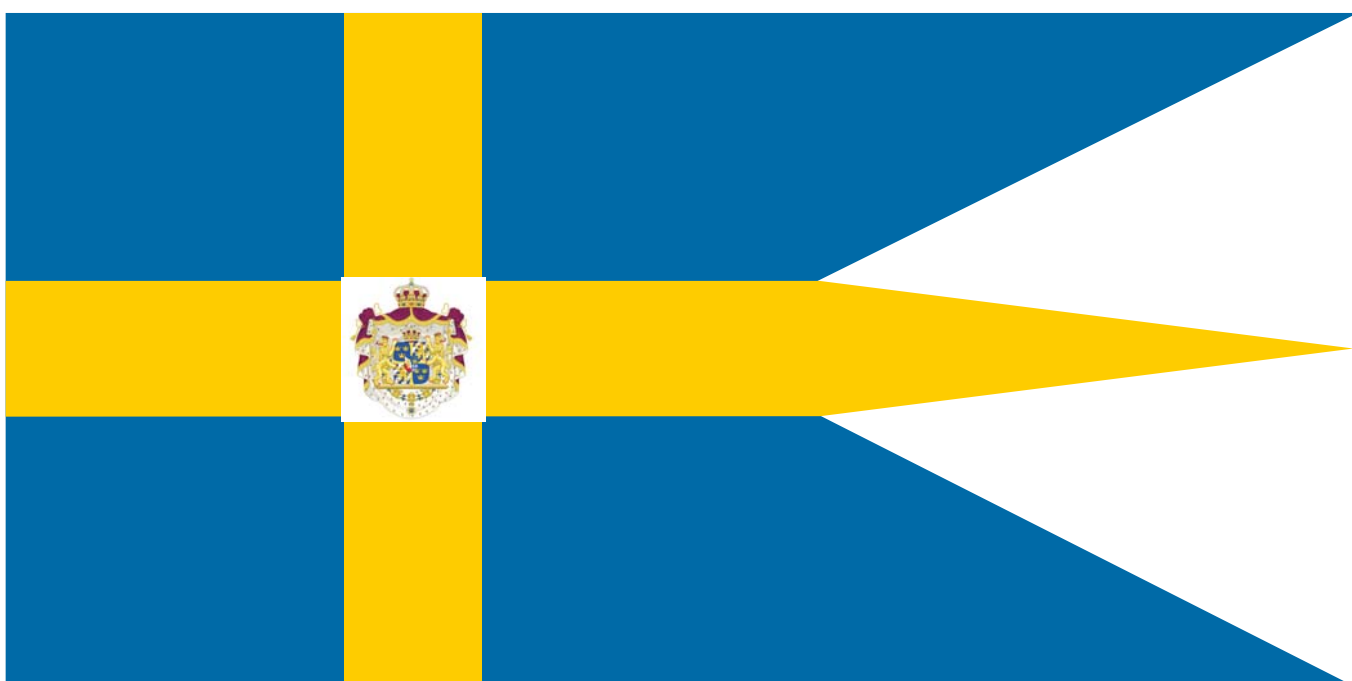


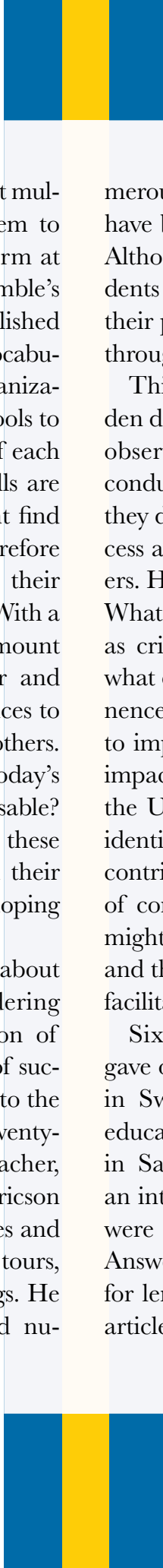
TRAINING CHORAL CONDUCTORS IN THE CHORAL CULTURE OF SWEDEN

INTERVIEWS WITH SEVEN PROMINENT SWEDISH CONDUCTORS

R . P A U L C R A B B



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Successful conductors exhibit multiple qualities enabling them to communicate and to perform at a high level. Regardless of the ensemble's age or level of proficiency, accomplished conductors possess a large gestural vocabulary, knowledge of the score, organizational skills, and the psychological tools to motivate and to develop the talents of each ensemble. While some of these skills are easily identifiable, conductors might find some factors less tangible and therefore more challenging to implement in their own practice and in their teaching. With a long list of priorities and a limited amount of rehearsal time, each conductor and conducting teacher must make choices to include some factors and to exclude others. What skills and talents do some of today's successful conductors find indispensable? When and how did they acquire these skills? What would they include in their list of priorities necessary for developing future conductors?

The music world has long known about Sweden's singing culture. Considering Sweden's relatively small population of nine million, an impressive number of successful Swedish performers came into the spotlight during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The conductor, teacher, pedagogue, and innovator Eric Ericson gained attention in the United States and the world through his master classes, tours, film (*The Magic Flute*), and recordings. He also commissioned and premiered nu-

merous choral compositions, many that have become a part of the choral canon. Although he passed away in 2013, his students have continued his legacy through their prominent positions in choral music throughout the world.¹

This author spent two months in Sweden during a semester-long research leave observing and interviewing prominent conductors in an effort to discover what they deem most important to achieve success as conductors and conducting teachers. How did they get their start in music? What talents and abilities do they identify as critical for successful conductors? To what do they attribute their rise to prominence? Could their experiences help us to improve our craft and more positively impact the training of future musicians in the United States? This author hopes to identify common threads that may have contributed to the success of this group of conductors that we in North America might incorporate into our own practice and the education of our students to help facilitate their careers.

Six of the interviewees generously gave of their time for personal interviews in Sweden. Ragnar Bohlin, born and educated in Sweden but currently living in San Francisco, graciously agreed to an interview via Skype. The interviewees were asked the same series of questions. Answers were transcribed and then edited for length to fit into the structure of this article.



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Conductors Interviewed and Current Positions



Lena Ekman Frisk is assistant professor at Malmö Academy of Music. In addition to her teaching duties, she is director of the Southern Choral Center, chair of the Swedish Choral Association, and conductor of Motet Choir of Kristianstad. She spent one year as an exchange faculty member at Bowling Green University (Ohio).



Erik Westberg is professor of choral conducting and choral singing at Piteå College of Music, Luleå Technical University. His professional choir, the Erik Westberg Vocal Ensemble, is well known through their recordings and their many commissions of new works. He also taught for one year at Wesleyan University (Connecticut).



Mats Nilsson is associate professor of conducting at Royal College of Music (RCM), Stockholm, and also directs music for the Maria Magdalena Church. He formerly conducted and taught in Australia and Norway.



Gary Graden was born in the United States but has lived in Sweden for more than thirty years. He is director of music at the Stockholm Cathedral and St. Jacob's Church and also performs with his trio, WÅG, exploring improvisational repertoire for voice and instruments. He teaches summer sessions in the United States at Westminster Choir College (New Jersey).



Robert Sund retired from a career as a performer (Eric Ericson Chamber Choir, Kvintetten Olson, and several instrumental ensembles) and as conductor (Allmänna Sången, Orphei Dränger, La Cappella, Uppsala Musikskolas Kammarkör, Robert Sund Chamber Choir,

Professor at RCM) but continues to compose and to conduct choirs internationally.



Cecilia Rydinger Alin was recently appointed vice chancellor and professor at RCM. In 2008 she became the first female conductor of the renowned men's choir Orphei Dränger, which began in 1853. She has freelanced regularly in opera houses across Europe.



Ragnar Bohlin was appointed director of the San Francisco Symphony Chorus in 2007. He teaches at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, is artistic director of Cappella SF, and has served as visiting professor at Indiana University.

How did you get your start in music? Who were your major influences?

Frisk: My mother was a piano teacher and my father was an organist and church choir director, so I grew up playing piano and singing in my father's choirs in church. My father was also a good jazz pianist, and he discovered a very good jazz pianist at the Malmö College of Music. I admired this man, Kjell Edstrand, and I took private lessons from him. I actually practiced much more jazz piano than classical!

Westberg: Singing with Eric Ericson was most important. Not so much his lessons, although they were very nice, but just to see him rehearse—his hands and his way of playing the piano. He meant a lot to me, and we became very close. I often visited him at his home over the years and then at the hospital during his last years. Also, the Ear Training and Orchestra teachers at *Alfred Fredriks Musikklasser*,² and Kjell Ingebretsen,³ a Norwegian opera conductor, had a great influence.

Nilsson: My piano teacher, Greta Ericson, was influential, and of course Eric Ericson. Another influential conducting teacher was Anders Öhrwall. I don't know if that is a known name, but I sang in his Bach Choir, which is where I got my first interest in Baroque music. He was

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very important for me when I moved to Stockholm and started my studies. But Eric, of course, was a major influence during my training. I must mention his [Ericson's] beautiful hands that could attract the highest level of singing but also just how he worked with people, his generosity. And he always was able to make music filled with joy. Technically, he could achieve the ultimate balance or fix intonation by focusing on one tone and drawing that tone to the choir's attention. Immediately the chord would fall into place. He did teach us about chords and the hierarchy of chords, the fifths and relationships of intonation.

Graden: I already had a lot of passion when I was a child in Rhode Island. I started in the boys' choir, and the director was also my piano teacher and singing teacher, and he showed a love for choral music. He toured with the boys' choir in Europe for a six-week tour in 1968 and that was really important. Influential conductors would include Gerald Mack[†] and Eric Ericson. After I finished at Hartt, I came to Sweden. I wanted to take one course with Eric for three months or so, like one can do in the States. I wasn't in school, but I was a good tenor, and he asked me to sing. I told Eric I wanted to study conducting, and he told me I couldn't. The other students had auditioned for these spots and I had not auditioned, and before I could study with him he required me to audition. So I waited from October until March to audition and was immediately accepted.

Sund: My first major influence was the leader of a dance orchestra in which I played as a teenager. Many groups at that time worked the whole orchestra, but our leader released the piano, bass, and drums and worked just us winds. He told us how to phrase, how to listen to each other for balance, and how to make music together. I also started writing arrangements for this group. I wrote about fifty pieces—mostly arrangements—by the time I was fourteen. I had not taken lessons—and still have never taken composition or arranging lessons!

The second was, of course, Eric Ericson, who was really my only conducting teacher. By the time I became his student, I had been his associate conductor for three years. I already had a career as a psychologist at that time, but more and more music opportunities came to me. In 1970, I was elected conductor of Allmänna Sångens and

I was young and stupid and said “yes.” I realized then that I must learn something about this. I had taken piano lessons, but I didn't know anything about theory, history, counterpoint, conducting...nothing. I applied at the Royal College, and they accepted me even though I was twenty-nine and the age limit was twenty-eight.

Alin: There were one or two more teachers who influenced me not just for “what” and “how” we played but by developing my thoughts and my ideas of the possibilities, bringing together aesthetics and ethics. And of course Eric did too, but with Eric I learned the repertoire, the way of handling a choir—not only the conducting technique but the sound space he had under his own elbows. I sang with him for six years in the Chamber Choir at the Royal College. Eric was the one who helped hire me with the Allmänna Sångens, I got to know many years later. This was my first step for a professional career. Without Eric I probably would have been a church musician instead of what I do today. I remember in 2012 I went to see Eric (age 94) and mentioned some of the conducting jobs I had scheduled. I said, “I guess I'd better be prepared for these jobs.” He turned to me and said [approximate English translation], “Damn you if you don't!” He said it with love, but he never lost that intensity or lowered his expectations!

Bohlin: I grew up with a choral background because both parents were choral musicians. There were choir concerts, choir parties in our house, choir tours... When I was seventeen I took my first trip that was not a choir tour! My main interest at the time was piano, but I also played cello and organ. I did a lot of singing, but conducting was far from my mind. I sang under Ericson in the Royal College Chamber Choir, and then I got my own choir and organist job so I was able to develop my own style using things I saw Ericson do. It was his inspiration that led me to go on to earn my diploma in conducting. That gave me the chance to apply the things I learned in his rehearsals and to try them with my own ensemble.

What aspect of your training has been most valuable during your career?

Frisk: As a choral musician, I consider four skills the



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most important: voice skills, conducting skills, piano skills, and teaching methods. I was taught in so many different subjects—I sang in choirs and took piano, voice, cello, and recorder lessons. At Malmö College of Music, I had three different piano lessons from three different teachers every week: classical piano, jazz and improvisation, and a class that taught transposing, playing from scores, playing by ear, and reading harmony. I also had voice lessons at the same time, along with music history, theory, etc. We could not choose a genre—we sang classical, jazz, and folk music. That was a very good education, but we don't do that today because it's too expensive—students choose one or two types of music to study.

where I learned about all the necessities of the nonmusical activities that made the music possible. I also use skills I learned from my piano teacher. I would say that teaching my students to observe my rehearsal is most important. And also, I've done so many recordings, which has been the second most influential part of my training. My producer has listened with precise ears, and I've learned much from him; I pass on that information to my students. I will take the students where they are—I don't even care if they are good or not—but if they have something to show, I go from there. They must be able to stand in front of a choir and do something interesting. It's taken me quite a while to be a good teacher.

Westberg: I think often of the way Ericson created music. Singing with him was 55-60% of my education. Just looking at his hands ... And of course it was very important to be part of the board of the Chamber Choir,

Nilsson: Well, I think everything I learned from Ericson: his musicality, his ability look *into the music* more than *oneself*, and his ability to totally devote himself to the music. I learned the most from him by singing with him.

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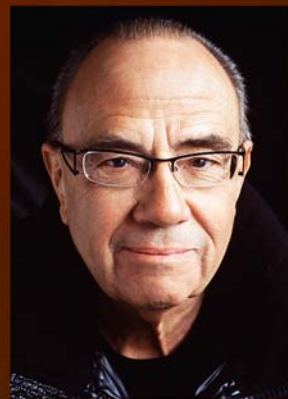
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Sund: One word that is important to me is “energy.” I’ve seen talented conductors with little energy, and they don’t get results. You have to be very energetic all the time, working constantly to keep people engaged. Call it charismatic—if you can get people to do what you ask them, it is more important than anything else. Of course, you have to know what you’re doing. If you don’t know what to say, or if you wait too much (before giving instructions), it’s difficult for your choir. Knowledge. But more and more I find myself thinking this [knowledge] is less important.

Alin: First thing—and it may sound pretentious—but one should always be true and honest to your own music-making, your own musicianship, and your own personality. We must show honesty in presenting ourselves as a conductor and a willingness to work together with others. Technically, there is not one truth. There are millions of conductors, and they each communicate through their bodies, arms, and faces, so that must be personal—their own body language. From Eric I learned to think about sound, to think about balance and intonation, to think about warmth without the vibrato of Russian choirs or non-vibrato of maybe Gardiner, but something in between. Also, he taught me about use of the language, the knowledge of vowels and consonants. Of course, all conductors must have a deep knowledge of the score and a deep knowledge of what your hands are doing.

Bohlin: Having Ericson as a model to observe with an ensemble at a very high level. It’s so true—you learn by just observing. But to see that process on the highest possible level ... I think that would be a valuable thing for a young student. Being able to play the piano is very valuable. I know that not all choir directors do, but I find it a great help. I also think it’s important to have training as a singer [Bohlin studied with the legendary tenor Nicolai Gedda]. Again, I know some very fine conductors do not sing, but I find it helpful to have a good understanding of the voice. That way you can tell conducting students to sing the tone, then let that tone flow into your arms and create gesture.

Regarding technique, I don’t really feel like I ever went into a process where I was in front of a mirror and figured everything out. I observed Ericson and other conductors and then applied it without much thinking. I worked

from a practical aspect that I had a group of singers in front of me and I needed them to make music. “How do I make them come together on a downbeat? How do I shape a phrase there? How do I create a line there? How do I get the ‘t’ together on the cut-off?” Of course I did the analysis, the “dry swimming” as we call it in Sweden, practicing on my own, but not very much. The things that I do came to me almost subconsciously. When I teach, I tell my conducting students who are singers to draw upon their own knowledge.

Can you comment on your experience with American choirs and conductors, perhaps mentioning some of the differences you’ve noticed?

Frisk: I had a fantastic time during the year I was at Bowling Green and learned so much. First, the circumstances in American universities are good—not so many contact hours, time for research and creative activity, and time to prepare for classes. Teachers in America seemed to be highly respected. The sabbatical year option is great! And having an accompanist during rehearsal like many American conductors do allows the conductors to accomplish so much more.

In general, it seems like you have many students singing and large choruses. You can create so many different types of choruses. The status of choir music was high, maybe higher than here. The conducting students I had were quite good and were very interested. But one thing I did notice was less respect for various genres. They study and respect traditional western classical music almost exclusively. I think it’s sad.⁵ I also really hated the system of grading. The system is easy for applying a number, but it doesn’t necessarily reflect learning or profound thinking. Many times the paperwork and the system was more important than students’ growth, discussion, and questioning of things. I do think the system here is better—we don’t have grading at all in the College. You pass or you don’t pass. While in America, I saw people turn in papers and have a good grade but no understanding.

The other thing I learned is that American education doesn’t teach enough about other languages at an early age. As a result, sounds other than their American English pronunciation are sometimes very challenging. It would be good for culture and musical life if students could study



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more language than one or two years in college.

Westberg: I have always been impressed with American choirs because they sing without music. It's astonishing to see choirs at an ACDA convention singing without any music at all. One of the main differences I've experienced with American choirs—although I have limited experience—is that vibrato seems to be a more constant part of the sound. In my *Erik Westberg Vokalensemble*, I sometimes have to ask them to use a little vibrato when singing with orchestra or in an opera chorus program, for example. But for us, you can turn it on or off, and in Sweden I don't talk much about vibrato.

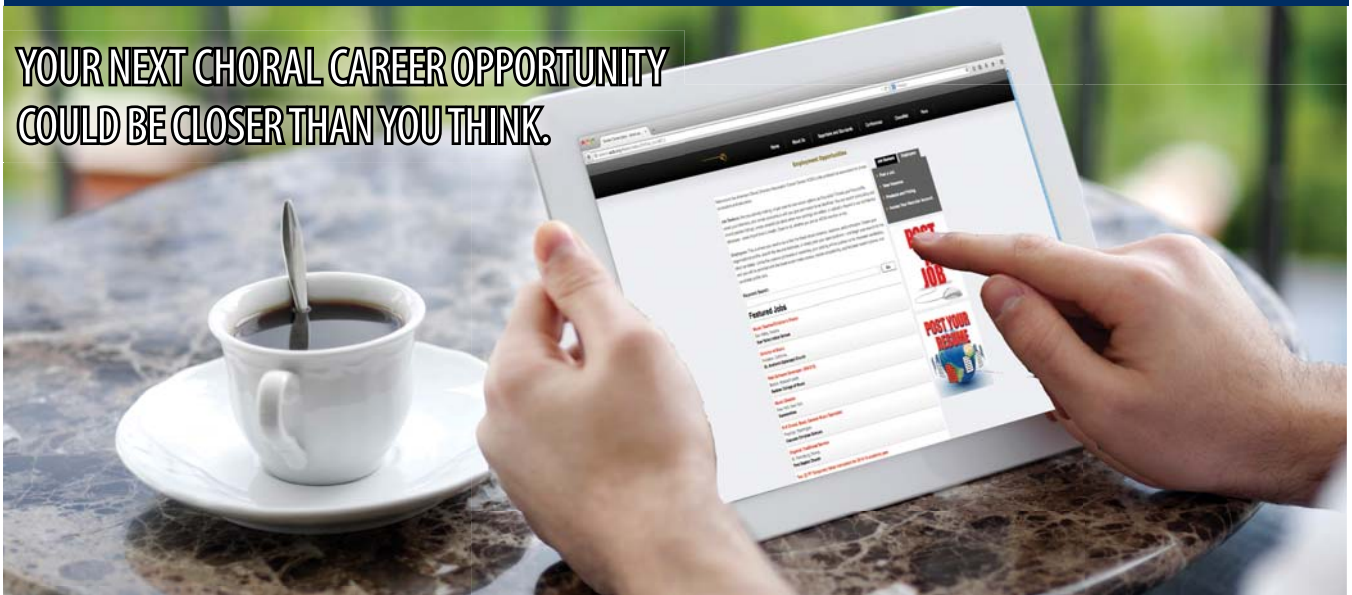
Nilsson: I haven't had much experience with American choirs, but I have had some workshops with them, and I've been on the jury for many European choral competi-

tions, where I have heard good American choirs. What I find is that they are always very well prepared. I don't always like the sound, because I find that sometimes they have this "static" vibrato. I don't know where this comes from, but to me this doesn't sound natural—it is not the natural sound we are familiar with in Scandinavia. To me it's a little artificial to create timbre. Some think our sound stems from our language—we don't have so many diphthongs, and our language is quite far forward in our mouth. We really don't talk very much about sound in our rehearsals.

Graden: The American conductors I've observed work in a scholastic environment and must be good teachers. You develop a skill of teaching and you're good at it! You have a rehearsal plan, you know what you want to do, and you do it! It's impressive to see. If they'd see my rehearsal, they

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might say, “What?” I don’t do warm ups, I don’t carefully select the first piece—I do the piece that needs the most work. I have some things (planned), but most of things I say are about tuning, following the work of Per-Gunnar Alldahl.⁶ I start the work as if they know the piece—I act like they *can* read it. Ultimately, *they* have to do it. I can’t do it for them. I’ve really enjoyed my experiences with American choirs—the students are very talented. Perhaps sometimes I hope my ideas about intonation and tuning will be retained better than they are, but I must take some responsibility for this too.

Sund: There are so many different American choirs that it’s difficult to give one description for all. Different choirs in different parts of the country sound different. But here we have some trouble with American choirs because of the vibrato. The best university choirs often attract the best solo singers, and opera singers who study solo singing have vibrato and have difficulty getting rid of it. Small vibrato works well, but the bigger vibrato cannot be tuned effectively. But I must say I’ve been very impressed by the development in the United States since the first time I came to a convention in the ‘80s. I think I’ve been there every two years since then, and choirs are much better and more interesting now, I think.

Alin: I have been on juries and heard some fine American choirs. They have fine expression, know the music by heart, and they “present.” It disturbs me sometimes that they have too much vibrato. Sometimes I would like a more polished sound—sometimes it’s a bit all over the place. It seems that the expression overtakes a more balanced performance. But the vibrato is the most prominent feature. It must have something to do with the singing culture, what you learn at school, or with the language. The singing culture in Sweden is unique, and I think it contributes to our sound. Many children were formerly brought up singing, but now we have so many different cultures living in Sweden our challenge will be to bring these people into the musical culture.⁷

Bohlin: I’m often asked to compare American choirs with European choirs, and I usually dodge it. There are so many choirs and so many different approaches it’s impossible to generalize. Perhaps in a small country like Sweden

you can generalize more, but I hesitate to generalize about American choirs. My first ACDA conference was in 1986, and the first thing that struck me was that even high school choirs had a lot of vibrato. It wasn’t natural—they put it on because they thought it sounded nicer. But of course, even some of the different American schools had less vibrato many years ago, Christiansen, for example.

Much of the better choral singing in the United States occurs in American universities, but in Sweden we formerly had so many funds (from the state) for church music that we were able to perform at a professional level even though the choir was volunteer. In Sweden we have choral schools like *Alfred Fredriks Musikklasser*, giving young students an opportunity to go to a regular school that has choir within the regular curriculum where they sing in a choir every day. What a huge thing that is! That means every year students are graduating with a huge choral background already. They are well trained and they have a great understanding.

In the States there is more focus on the academic side of music in conductor training. When I visited American university choir programs, I saw some of the profound, academic themes they were studying and the focus that they had. They had great choirs, and student conductors got a lot of podium time. I don’t remember that from my training—it was sparse academically and focused on the practical application. I did learn a lot from my practical studies outside of conducting that I use now.

Who are the prominent Swedish composers, both past and present? Who do you recommend as a composer who appeals to performers and audiences?⁸

Frisk: First, I’d recommend a website: KVASt.org. This is a compilation of Swedish female composers. We need to recognize and promote them because the scene is so dominated by male composers. I’d specifically recommend: Karin Rehnqvist, Fredrik Sixten, Otto Olsson, Waldemar Ahlen,⁹ Anna Cederberg-Orreteg, and Anders Edenroth.¹⁰

Westberg: [Author’s note: Westberg has commissioned over forty new choral works, about one-third of which are now part of the regular choral repertoire.] I have



very close connections with my colleague in composition here, Jan Sandström, and his students, some who will be wonderful composers. Jan's former student Emil Råberg has written non-experimental music and is very clever. Johannes Pollack is another student who writes very nicely for choirs. He writes music that one seems to recognize, even if one hasn't heard it before! Kristen Hannsén is another student who seems to have a good talent for choral composition.

Nilsson: I am still fond of the older generation, like Ingvar Lidholm.¹¹ He wrote only one piece every ten years, but all of them are fantastic, beginning with *Laudi* in 1947. Sven-Erik Bäck is another. In the current generation, Sven-David Sandström, Thomas Jennefelt,¹² and Karin Rehnqvist, who teaches here [RCM]. She does things in her own way, often using what we call *Kulning* [calling]. We have some very good composers in Stockholm, Emil Råberg, for example. I'm always looking for more young, talented composers, but many of them write 16- or 32-part music, and I'm looking for someone who can write really good music—maybe just four-part. Something that is excellent quality, not just complex.

Graden: Bo Hansson, Michael Waldeby, Martin Larsson, and Sven-Erik Bäck.

Sund: I think everyone should know Wilhelm Stenhammar. Finland has Sibelius, Norway has Grieg, and Sweden has Stenhammar. He didn't write very much choir music, but he wrote some very good things. August Söderman is a good composer from the nineteenth century, and Lars-Erik Larsson has much music. His *God in Disguise* for choir and orchestra is sung all over Sweden. I'd also recommend: Hugo Alfvén, August Söderman, Åke Malmfors, Lars Johan Werle, Sven-Erik Bäck, Sven-David Sandström, Jan Sandström, Lars Edlund, Ingvar Lidholm, Bengt Hallberg, Nils Lindberg, Daniel Helldén, Eskil Hemberg, Johan Magnus Sjöberg, Sven-Eric Johansson, Arne Mellnäs, Bo Nilsson, Anders Nyberg, Anders Öhrwall, Otto Olsson, Folke Rabe, Georg Riedel, Karin Rehnqvist, Agneta Sköld, Fredrik Sixten, Karl-Erik Welin, and David Wikander.

Alin: Hugo Alfvén, B. Tommy Andersson, Sven-Erik

Bäck, Lars Edlund, Gunnar Eriksson, Hans-Ola Eriksson, Gunnar Hahn, Bo Hansson, Anders Hillborg, Thomas Jennefelt, Sven-Erik Johansson, Ingvar Lidholm, Olle Lindberg, Åke Malmfors, Gösta Nystroem, Håkan Parkman, Wilhelm Peterson-Berger, Per-Gunnar Petersson, Emil Råberg, Karin Rehnqvist, Jan Sandström, Sven-David Sandström, Fredrik Sixten, Wilhelm Stenhammar, Robert Sund, Joakim Unander, Lars-Johan Werle, and David Wikander.

Bohlin: I think Fredrik Sixten may be the most published composer in Sweden. I've been in close collaboration with him since early in my career. He's very eclectic, mostly tonal but with a twist that surprises you. He understands the voice and the choral medium. Another name is Mårten Jansson. He's based in Uppsala, up-and-coming, and just now started being published by Bärenreiter. Then, of course, Sven-David Sandström, Jan Sandström, and Thomas Jennefeldt. They are all very active and write very interesting music.

What do you see in the future for choral music in Sweden?

Frisk: People know, of course, about Eric Ericson and the Swedish Radio Choir, but I think we can say that we have been resting on this reputation. I remember in 2009 when we were at the International Federation of Choral Music Symposium in Copenhagen, we listened to choirs from other parts of the world and they were fantastic! We Swedish musicians talked to each other afterward and agreed we can no longer say we're the best. There are wonderful choirs from Indonesia, China, South Africa, and America—and they don't necessarily have that heavy tone with lots of vibrato anymore! Some of us thought that our Swedish choirs were almost boring compared to other choirs. We are stiff and not as colorful, and in some ways sound the same as we did in 1940s.

We have problems recruiting singers, especially men,¹³ and it is difficult to keep singers coming regularly to our choirs. Part of the reason for this—and many agree with me—is the trend from collective thinking to individual thinking.¹⁴ When we were in school we got a task from the teacher and everyone did the task. But now we think it necessary to meet each child individually in order to meet

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any problems students might have. A child becomes accustomed to individual thinking and no longer thinks collectively. They focus on themselves and whatever they want to do. If they don't like it, they quit and move to something else. We see this in the choral life. Project choirs are very popular: you decide on a (musical) project, invite people to participate for a short period—maybe ten weeks—and they're done. These groups gather so many people! Also, the "everybody can sing choirs" sometimes use a "clip card." People buy a card and then have it marked when they attend rehearsals. The card entitles them to a certain number of rehearsals, but they don't have to be at each rehearsal. The point is no longer musical training and an artistic concert, it is about social togetherness and personal choice—no obligation to the ensemble.

Westberg: People now frequently organize small ensem-

bles of twelve to sixteen voices. It's much more difficult now for someone to commit to a choir for thirty years as they used to. Sometimes a singer hears of another choir and they decide to change to the other choir. The mentality now is much more self-centered rather than committed to the group. When I was in the Chamber Choir with Eric [Ericson], the thought of missing a rehearsal didn't occur to us. We were expected to be there and we were committed to being there. Now, that commitment doesn't seem to be a part of the mentality.

Nilsson: I think the whole choir area has changed in some ways. People now are interested in (short-term) projects. I do projects with my youth choir at Maria Magdalena Church, and it seems to suit them. In the past you were there every week, but now young people think more like *American Idol*: "What's in it for me? What about

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me? I want to be a solo star!” We have talked about it very much here [RCM] with my colleagues. It used to be, “I have to be at rehearsal! I cannot miss rehearsal!” That is not often the case now. It’s harder to get people to commit to regular rehearsals.

Sund: I’m a bit pessimistic about the future, partly because of fewer children singing in schools. We have fewer boys singing¹⁵ and fewer boys’ choirs now, and it has had an effect. I work often in Germany, and it’s the same way there. People now seem to have less time than we did in the ‘60s, ‘70s, and ‘80s. We have so many things disturbing us now in our lives, like mobile phones. People are always working! I was once on a tour in the United States for six weeks. Can you imagine that now? It is another time.

Alin: It seems we have fewer young people singing; we certainly have fewer people applying to join *Orphei Dränger*.

My friend at the Swedish Radio Choir also confirms that they have fewer people applying for positions. I am partly responsible [at RCM] to produce good music teachers and singers for the schools in order to build this, but it’s also the result of political decisions. Politicians have removed music in the lower grades, and they removed esthetic subjects in high school. Young people who want to apply to higher education must have a certain number of academic points. The politicians made the esthetic subjects fewer points and math more points, which affects the subjects students select. But we must continue to talk about Eric [Ericson] and the Swedish tradition and must develop it and encourage it.

Bohlin: As long as the choral schools flourish, I see a bright future for Swedish choral music. Over the years that I’ve been in the United States, I’ve come to realize that those schools are the key because the churches are



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declining a bit. The choir schools, primary schools, and gymnasiums [high schools] with choir singing in the curriculum are important. The other thing is Eric Ericson and the “Bjorn Borg¹⁶ Effect.” There is definitely that effect with Ericson, but it can only go on for so long. Today there are many young conductors who have not seen or worked with Ericson, but that’s still a vital influence of why the Swedish choral scene is what it is.

Summary

It is difficult to make exact comparisons between two different cultures when studying training and education of conductors. Differences in germane factors such as educational systems and federal funding¹⁷ have a significant impact on the art and on the profession. But what are the critical ideas and concepts our successful colleagues in Sweden have adopted that we might incorporate into our own situations? What were the common threads contributing to the success of the interviewees?

Each conductor spoke of *early* influences—someone who made a strong impression on them as a child. Some received support and training in their home, for others it was an influential teacher in primary school or a special piano teacher or choir director. Providing quality music education and having quality musical experiences at an early age can have a lasting impact on life-long music making.¹⁸ Those of us who are teachers should remember that we can have a personal, powerful, and lasting influence on our students and the profession.

Several interviewees mentioned the importance of their choral experiences in primary/elementary school. They lamented that fewer children are currently singing in Sweden, and we have a similar situation in some parts of the United States.¹⁹ But the presence of Swedish “Choral Schools”—that is, public schools with an active music curriculum—assists in creating a healthier choral culture.

What are the skills these conductors use on a daily basis, and how did they acquire these skills? Knowledge of the score, expressive hands, and the ability to motivate others were frequently mentioned as important. Additionally, we must possess and hone our organizational skills and competence in the nonmusical aspects that enhance the musical activities. Six of the seven interviewees mentioned piano skills as vital to their success. While acknowledg-

ing that not all successful choir conductors play piano, it nevertheless serves an important role in their experience.

Regarding their recommendations for improving conducting and managing rehearsals, *each interviewee recommended observation of good conductors in rehearsals as the best way to learn these skills*. This includes conductors under whom one sings, observation of conductors in other rehearsals, and “guided” observation of recordings for self-analysis. While conducting classes were important, each person mentioned learning by observation as a more effective tool toward building his or her own skills.

The question regarding their thoughts on American choirs required generalization but may provide some insight into comparing Swedish choral tone with American choral tone. Realizing that America is a large country with multiple schools of thought, the Swedish conductors reflected only on the American choirs they have heard; each of the conductors acknowledged this limitation. Many of the conductors mentioned the prominence of vibrato in American choirs, but several mentioned that this trait has evolved over the past twenty to thirty years, with more choirs employing minimal vibrato in their performances. Interestingly, each conductor—without exception—stated that they *rarely* discuss tone in rehearsals. This suggests there is a “tonal tradition” that is so well established that it is expected in a choral setting. Two conductors suggested this may result in a monochromatic, less dramatic sound than choirs from other traditions.

Several conductors mentioned the thorough preparation of American choirs, with many choirs singing by memory. This factor may also contribute to the perception that American choirs sing with more expression and involvement for performances than some Swedish choirs. Training conductors in Sweden seems to focus on practical application and musical training with less emphasis in the academic areas (history, writing, and research) than in America. The one exception was language study, where the European system of education introduces languages earlier and for longer durations than in American education. The lack of exposure to languages at an early age may present challenges for more mature singers, limiting their linguistic flexibility for the increasing amount of repertoire available from various ethnic groups.



Conclusion

Conductors can only benefit from exchanging successful ideas and methods. Each culture and each tradition has strengths worth considering and adapting for unique situations. With so much information readily available from the nearest computer or cell phone, the challenge is to wade through the data and to distill salient information applicable within our own situations. Exposure to

new ideas during conventions, through research journals, and participation in reciprocal programs, such as ACDA's International Conductors Exchange Program,²⁰ will facilitate our understanding of training, repertoire, and our continued refinement of the choral art.

Photo credits: Ragnar Bohlin: Roy Manzanares; Cecilia Rydinger Alin: Steven Quigley; Robert Sund: Nils Nordling;

Recommended Resources for Further Reading on the Choral Culture of Sweden

Gary L. Anderson, "The Swedish Sound," *Choral Journal* 41, no. 9 (April 2001).

Constance DeFotis and Eric Ericson, "An Interview with: Swedish Choral Conductor Eric Ericson," *Choral Journal* 34, no. 8 (March 1994).

Colin Durrant, "Shaping Identity through Choral Activity: Singers' and Conductors' Perceptions," *Research Studies in Education* 24, no. 1 (June 2005).

Stig Jacobsson, *Swedish Composers of the 20th Century: Members of the Society of Swedish Composers*, 2nd ed. (Stockholm: Svensk Musik, Swedish Music Information Center, 1990).

Nathan Joel Leaf, "Hugo Alfvén and His a cappella Choral Music," (D.M.A. diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 2006).

Mark Munson, "The Music Profile Classes of Sweden: Enriching a Nation's Choral Heritage," *Choral Journal* 48, no. 10 (April 2008).

Sarin W. Peck, (Sarin Christine Williams), "Jazz Elements in Select Finnish and Swedish Choral Music," (D.M.A. diss., University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2011).

Karen Amelia Phillips Soderberg, "A Survey of Selected Contemporary Swedish Choral Composers and Literature," (A. Mus. D. diss., University of Arizona, 1991).

Robert Quist, *The History of Modern Swedish Music: An Introduction to Nineteen Composers* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2010).

Susan Swaney, "Sven-David Sandström: An Overview of His Choral Works and Style," *American Choral Review* 46, no. 1 (2004).

Sarin Williams, "Blending Genres: Elements of Jazz in Finnish and Swedish Choral Music," *Choral Journal* 55, no. 3 (October 2014).

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NOTES

- ¹ For more information on Swedish choral music and Eric Ericson, please see: Richard Sparks, *The Swedish Choral Miracle* (Bynum, N.C.: Blue Fire Productions, 2000).
- ² *Adolf Fredriks Musikklasser* is one of several public schools in Stockholm, similar to the magnet school concept in America. Ages include from four to nine years, and choral music is emphasized at all levels. Approximately ten percent of the students who apply and audition are accepted into *Adolf Fredriks Musikklasser* each year.
- ³ Opera conductor of Royal Swedish Opera, Director of Royal Swedish Court Orchestra and the Royal Academy of Music.
- ⁴ Gerald Mack was professor of music at Hartt School of Music for twenty-seven years (1966-1993).
- ⁵ Sweden's acceptance and endorsement of various styles and genres, including jazz and folk music, has a long tradition. In contrast, in 1998 a study of fifty-eight public universities in the United States found only 1.37 percent focusing on traditional American music. [Sammie Ann Wicks, "The Monocultural Perspective of Music Education," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 44 (9 January 1998): A72.]
- ⁶ Please refer to Alldahl's influential text on intonation for further information. Alldahl, Per-Gunnar. *Choral Intonation*. Stockholm: Gehrmans-Musikförlag, 2008.
- ⁷ In 2014, Sweden had the highest percentage of asylum seekers per capita among the thirty-four countries in the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development which includes the United States. Many Swedish conductors spoke about the increasing diversity in Sweden and the challenges it presents to the traditional culture and traditional choral culture.
- ⁸ For additional information about Swedish composers:
1) http://www.naxos.com/composerlist.asp?country=SE&composer_id=A&countrygroup=S-T;
2) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Swedish_composers
- ⁹ Ahlen (1894-1982) and Olsson (1879-1974) represent the romantic style of the first half of the twentieth centuries.
- ¹⁰ Edenoroth (b. 1963), known as a composer and for his work in the ensemble Real Group.
- ¹¹ Ingvar Lidholm (b. 1921) is considered one of the major composers of the past 100 years. Three choral works mentioned frequently by Swedish conductors: *Laudi, Canto LXXXI*, and...*a riveder le stelle*.
- ¹² Thomas Jennefelt (b. 1954) is Sweden's most frequently performed modern choral composer (according to his publisher, Gehrmans Musikförlag). He was a member of the Eric Ericson Chamber Choir for over twenty years.
- ¹³ The European Choral Association (Singing in Europe, 2015, pub.www.miz.org/dokumente/2015_singingeurope_report.pdf) reports that only one-third of the singers in European choruses are male.
- ¹⁴ Sweden's government moved toward more privatization during the 1990s and continues today. For additional information about this change in education, please see "Privatisation of public education? The emergence of independent upper secondary schools in Sweden" (2011. *Journal of Education Policy*, 26, 225-243.) The change has been gradual and remains controversial.
- ¹⁵ According to a 2004 study of community choirs in the United States this trend occurs in the United States, too: 2:1 ratio, women to men. [Cindy L. Bell, "Update on Community Choirs and Singing in the United States," *International Journal of Research in Choral Singing* 2(1) (2004): 42.]
- ¹⁶ Bjorn Borg was a tennis star from Sweden in the 1970s and early '80s. His success created a new wave of young tennis players in Sweden.
- ¹⁷ The Swedish Arts Council spent \$825,342,520.00 in support of the arts for a population of nine million people in 2013. (Swedish Arts Council, <http://www.kulturradet.se/en/In-English/Areas-of-operation/>, accessed 5/18/15) The American counterpart, the National Endowment of the Arts spent \$154,160,471.000 for a population of 319 million in the same year. (NEA Annual Report, <http://arts.gov/about/annual-reports>, accessed 5/18/15).
- ¹⁸ This would support results of a report by Chorus America that found that most choral singers in America had their first experience at an early age. For a variety of reasons, however, these numbers are dwindling. (Grunwald Associates LLC, "The Chorus Impact Study," *Chorus America*, 2009: 8).
- ¹⁹ Grunwald Associates LLC, "The Chorus Impact Study," 6.
- ²⁰ In 2015, twenty-eight conductors participated in the International Conductors Exchange Program with Sweden. To date, it was the largest contingent of ICEP Conducting Fellows in the history of the program.