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# AN INTERVIEW WITH ROGER WAGNER

by William Belan

**R**OGER WAGNER WAS BORN IN LE PUY, France, the son of the organist at the famed Cathedral of Dijon. The Wagner family immigrated to New York when Roger was seven, and three years later moved to Los Angeles where his father became organist and choral director at the Church of St. Brendan. Roger was organist and choral director at the Church of St. Ambrose in Los Angeles at the age of 12, and was a boy soprano in his father's choir at St. Brendan's. By the age of 14, he was often called upon to substitute for his father as organist at St. Brendan's. In 1929 Roger entered the St. Anthony Seminary in Santa Barbara for studies in the priesthood, but returned to France in 1932 where he completed his undergraduate studies in music at the College of Montmorency. During this period he studied with the distinguished organist Marcel Dupré and also conducted detailed research in church music at Dijon and Lyons. He also was an active sportsman and participated in the 1936 Olympics as a competitor in the decathlon. He spent his last year in France serving in the French Army.

When he returned to the States from France in 1937, Roger first found work in Hollywood as a member of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer chorus. He was soon, however, engaged as the music director of St. Joseph's Church in downtown Los Angeles. He spent more than 20 years as the church's music director. Their annual choral concerts brought such recognition to the church and to its music director that in 1945 he was asked to be the Supervisor of Youth Choruses for the city of Los Angeles' Bureau of Music. He began with a madrigal group of 12 voices that, by 1946, had grown to 32 singers; they debuted professionally that year as the Roger Wagner Chorale.

The Chorale has achieved an enviable international reputation, and it has been called upon

for concerts, radio and television appearances, motion pictures, recordings, performances with orchestras, debuts of new compositions, and numerous national and international tours. In 1953 Wagner and the Chorale were invited to participate at the coronation festivities of Elizabeth II in London. In 1956 the Chorale made its first national tour. In 1959, and again in 1964, the Chorale was selected to represent the United States in concerts throughout Latin America. In 1965 the Chorale made the first of nine tours to Japan. In 1966, the United States State Department, through its Cultural Exchange Program, again sent the Chorale on tour, this time to the Middle East, Turkey, Yugoslavia, France, and Italy. In Rome, the Chorale had the honor of singing for Pope Paul VI at an audience in St. Peter's Basilica — the first non-Italian choir to do so in 25 years. In May 1986 the Chorale sang at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia and at Carnegie Hall in New York under the baton of André Previn, conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, after which Maestro Previn said, "I can say in all honesty that I've never had the privilege of conducting a better chorus, anywhere in the world."

The Roger Wagner Chorale has made over 70 recordings representing every genre of choral composition from Gregorian chant and Renaissance motet to folk songs and works by contemporary composers. The *Virtuoso* album won a Grammy award, and *Joy to the World* sold over 500,000 copies to become a Gold Record Album and the biggest selling album of the Capitol Records classical division. The Chorale's newest recording, a CD of Stephen Foster songs, was recorded for Toshiba EMI.

In the midst of all his successful work with the Roger Wagner Chorale, Roger founded (1964) the Los Angeles Master Chorale. Since then, the Master Chorale has given many performances around the



world. In 1964 they sang with the Philadelphia Orchestra, Wagner conducting, in a performance celebrating the inauguration of President Johnson at the Kennedy Center. In 1974 they toured the Soviet Union.

Even with his many activities involving the two Chorales, Wagner has found the time to expand his career into other fields. He is well known as a composer and arranger, in much demand as a symphonic conductor, and is a highly regarded authority on the religious music of the Medieval and Renaissance periods. He was awarded a Doctor of Music Degree from the University of Montreal for his dissertation on the Masses of Josquin des Pres. As a result of his great contribution to sacred music he has been knighted twice — first by Pope Paul VI as Commander Knight of St. Gregory and then by the Archbishop of Naples with the Order of St. Bridgette. In addition to his doctorate from Montreal, he holds a Doctor of Music Degree from

Westminster Choir College and he has conducted their famed choir on a national tour.

Dr. Wagner taught at UCLA for 33 years, and was "Distinguished Professor of Choral Music" at Pepperdine University, Malibu, California for two and a half years. He has received 11 Grammy nominations, is represented with a star on Hollywood Boulevard, served three years as the music director of the "I Married Joan" television show, and has recorded the sound tracks for many movies.

The philosophy of Wagner requires that his musicians be equal to his demands, so he has always sought only the finest talent. Such famous stars as Marilyn Horne, Carol Neblett, Karen Armstrong, Claudine Carlson, and Theodor Uppman were once members of the Roger Wagner Chorale. The combination of superb talent and inspired leadership has produced what Leopold Stokowski once said is simply "second to none in the world."

**BELAN:** Tell us about your musical heritage — the influences that helped you develop as a musician.

**WAGNER:** First, I don't think it's generally known that I was born in France, not in the United States. Actually, I did not become an American citizen until I was 25, after serving my compulsory period in the French Army.

I was born in Le Puy (Haute Loire). It's really a charming little town which is slightly southwest of Lyon, France. Its principal landmark is a large statue of the virgin overlooking the city, and it is said that it is one of the few French

towns which has never been invaded by foreign armies. After only a few years, my family moved to Bourges and then to Nice, situated right on the Mediterranean. It was most pleasant. My parents invested in a movie theater in Nice, but decided that France did not have the opportunities they wanted for their children, so they chose to move to the United States. We were one of the many families who walked through Ellis Island as immigrants to the United States. I was six or seven years old at that time.

We first settled in Hornell and later in Syracuse, New York. We were there for a couple of years. The

weather was terribly cold and my father suffered from pneumonia twice, so we moved to the West Coast. Personally, I was delighted because I almost froze to death in New York.

Much of my early musical training came from my father, who was a musician — a good one. He leaned toward Romantic music, whereas I was more inclined toward Baroque music. However, he's the one who taught me from the very beginning how to play the piano. I was told that he played the organ at the Dijon Cathedral, but I do not know for how long. When we came to the United States, it was difficult to get work, so he took a position playing in a movie theater called the "Happy Hour Theater" in Syracuse, New York. I used to go there and watch silent pictures with movie stars such as Milton Sills, Vilma Banky, etc. My father was really a serious organist, but he was compelled to play theater music to support his family.

**BELAN:** Did you have an interest in music during your early youth?

**WAGNER:** Yes. As a matter of fact, I still have a composition in my desk that I wrote in French at the age of six. At this time — age six or seven to about age 11 — I studied piano



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with my father. We had a duo-piano team with a repertoire of two-piano arrangements that he made. By the time we moved to Los Angeles, I was working very seriously on the piano and began to get terribly interested in the organ.

**BELAN:** How did you begin to conduct?

**WAGNER:** My first job conducting was at St. Ambrose Church on Fairfax Avenue, Hollywood, California. I was put in charge of the children's chorus. I was then barely 13 years old. My father was organist and conductor at the beautiful St. Brendan's Church in Los Angeles. He wrote the church's

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*I think one of my main qualities is temperament, which I consider to be the ability to get drama out of people.*  
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dedication Mass and I found it quite good. I realized at that time that my father could not hear voices as I heard them. There was a tenor in his choir who stuck out like a sore thumb and it annoyed me terribly, even at my age. I used to ask my father, "Pappa, why do you keep this tenor? He has a terrible sound!" He would answer, "What tenor?"

I was always attracted to choral music. Then I started taking organ lessons from Richard Keyes Biggs, who was organist at Blessed Sacrament Church in Hollywood. Dick was the father of the composer John Biggs and, as a matter of fact, I carried John Biggs home from the hospital when he was only two days old. Dick Biggs and I became very good friends and I worked very hard with him on the organ. One day he called me and said, "Roger, I don't feel very well at all. Could you possibly take my rehearsal for me tonight?" Well, up until that time I

had not had any great choral conducting experience except for my St. Ambrose job with the children's chorus when I was 13. I went to Blessed Sacrament as requested and rehearsed his choir. Mr. Biggs sat there all wrapped up. He listened to me for an hour and a half, and after I was through, he said, "I'm amazed. What are you doing studying the organ when you have a gift like this to conduct?" I said, "I had no idea that I would impress you with it. I wasn't trying to." He said, "You have a certain inborn talent that makes people sing well."

**BELAN:** What was your formal education?


**WAGNER:** I began high school here and then my parents decided to put me into a seminary. They wanted me to study for the priesthood, partly because as an altar boy I seemed to enjoy the church. However, I was not beyond pulling some of my tricks. Once I tasted the wine before putting it in the cruets. This bothered me terribly, so I went to confession and told the priest that I had committed a mortal sin. He asked, "What did you do?" I answered, "I drank a couple drops from the wine cruet." He answered, "That's not a mortal sin! It's not even a venial sin!" The next day, while filling the cruets for the mass, realizing what the priest had told me, I drank half a cruet.

I spent one year in the seminary at the Mission. (St. Anthony's Seminary was located directly behind the Mission.) I enjoyed the studies very much there but somehow found the rules not strict enough, and I was not particularly fond of certain priests, so my parents put me into a very strict seminary, Dominguez Memorial Seminary in Compton with Clarician Priests. We were not allowed to have visitors except once a month when parents came on Sunday afternoons, and we were allowed to visit our families at their houses once a year for half a day. It was very strict. Actually, it sounds almost inhuman, but it was very good for me. It gave me character development at a very important age.

Fortunately or unfortunately, I had a prefect of discipline who was called Poochby, and this fellow was always on my tail. I picked a fig from one of the trees once. He called me in and had me kneel and said, "Roger, you committed the sin of Adam." I immediately answered, "No! You're wrong father. Adam took an apple, not a fig." He then said, "For your insolence you will

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kneel for two weeks during the meals." I decided this was a little too much. I called my parents and said I didn't think I wanted to become a priest if I had to associate with people like Poochby. So they took me out, much against the wishes of the superior who liked me very much. I then went to Fairfax High School to try to finish my schooling — which by the way I didn't do. I was, however, given my degree and put on the chart of honor after I gained a reputation from performing nationally and internationally. Incidentally, this came after having earned my Master's Degree from USC and UCLA, and my Doctor's Degree for my research and thesis on the works of Josquin Des Pres from the University of Montreal.

My parents decided that I should return to France. This was in 1932 when I was almost 18 years old. The first place I went was the Benedictine Abbaye de

Fontgombault to study Gregorian chant for a year and a half. The place is not far from the city of Le Blanc and not too far from the Abbaye Saint-Pierre de Solemnes. I studied seriously at Fontgombault with the monks. My studies also included French, Latin, and Greek, and I had the pleasure of being named the organist there.

After having studied Gregorian chant for some time at Fontgombault, I decided that I would like to be closer to Paris because I wanted to study organ with Marcel Dupré — even though I was not thrilled at his evaluation of my talent as an organist. During my audition he commented: "You have big hands, and you have a natural sense of rhythm which will come in handy. If you study seriously for seven years, you'll be a good organist."

I studied with Dupré on and off for two years while going to a college called Montmorency, located

right outside Paris, which had several members of the faculty from the Sorbonne. I found this very good for me because I wanted to take philosophy from the outstanding Sorbonne faculty, and I was also very interested in theology. I was named organist there, but did not do any choral work.

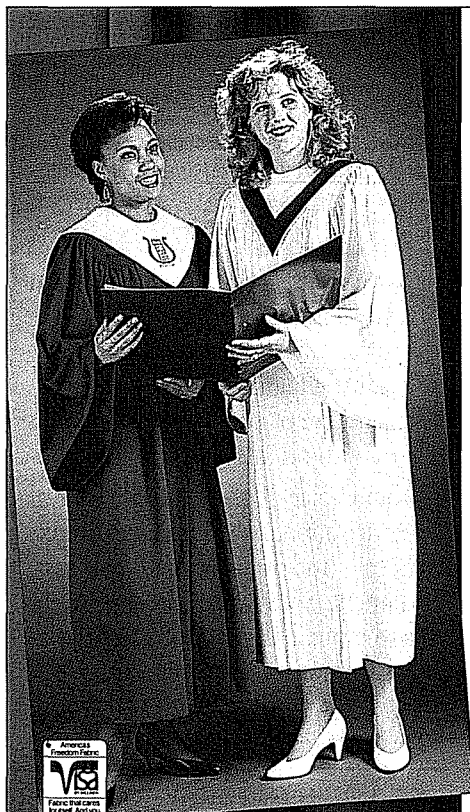
Within the next year, I got word that my father was very ill with cancer and I was compelled to fly home. He died about three weeks after I got there. I stayed for about three months with my mother and little brother, and then returned to France and entered into the French army. When I got out of the army I spent several months studying with Marcel Dupré, visiting Solemnes,

*I have a reputation for being almost cruel when it comes to getting the thing right. Now I am much more gentle, but I still get what I want.*

and living there with the monks for a couple of weeks at a time. They were very nice to me and I got to know the chant master, Dom Gajard, who became one of my closest friends. That was about the extent of my musical background before I came back to this country.

BELAN: You also had the opportunity to meet some famous musicians while you were in France.

WAGNER: During my last year in France, I had some wonderful acquaintances with famous composers. I was able to meet Poulenc, and I became very good friends with him. It was also my pleasure to get to know Arthur Honegger. In addition, I became very close friends with Darius Milhaud, whom I got to know better when we both were in the U.S.A. He and his wife taught at Mills



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College in Oakland, California. I knew Milhaud because he lived in Place Clichy in Paris where it was easy to visit him any time. Incidentally, Place Clichy is almost next to the cemetery where Berlioz is buried. I performed one of Milhaud's biggest works, *David*, at the Hollywood Bowl. It calls for two orchestras, eight choirs, and 17 soloists. Twenty thousand people came to hear it, and I truly don't think there were a hundred who understood what the music was about.

I had also become acquainted with Mme. Salabert, the famous publisher. She used to invite me to her house for dinner, and inevitably some of the famous composers she published would also be there. On one occasion, Poulenc and I were looking at Mme. Salabert's art collection. He analyzed in great detail one certain painting to describe the greatness of Renoir. He then turned to me and said, "Roger, I think I know more about painting than about music." I had been so impressed by his description of the painting that I answered, "I think so." He said, "What?" He seemed a bit miffed that I had agreed with him.

Honegger also influenced me considerably. When I was there, he performed his *Joan of Arc at the Stake* with Vera Zorina. I performed the same work with Zorina no less than six times in Los Angeles.

Basically, the people who influenced me most were: Poulenc, Honegger, Milhaud, Boulanger, certainly Dupré, and of course Maurice Duruflé, whom I did not know when I first went back to France. It was only after World War II that we met. Duruflé proved to be a great inspiration to me.

In the States, there were others who deeply influenced me, like Bruno Walter and Otto Klemperer. I certainly cannot forget Julius Herford, with whom I studied for years in New York. Incidentally, my colleague Robert Shaw and I studied with him at the same time and would often run into each other. Julius owned a dachshund who found it most entertaining to bite our pants at the calf. Somehow the neighbors knew we studied with

Herford when they observed the torn pants.

When I returned to Los Angeles, I met a man from Germany who was very gifted and a top notch conductor. His name was Fritz Zweig. His wife was a very famous voice teacher named Tigarmo. I used several of her pupils in my chorale. Dr. Zweig worked with me on orchestral conducting for two and a half years.

I had difficulty finding a job as an organist, so I became an entertainer. I did good imitations of Maurice Chevalier, Trenet, and other famous French entertainers, and was hired at a nightclub and French restaurant. One evening there was a man at a table dressed in all the colors of the rainbow. He sent me a note at the piano that he wanted to see me. At my first break, I went to his table and I introduced myself. He spoke up and said, "What this country needs, and especially the movies, is *poisonality*." He told me that he was producer and head of the music department at Paramount Studios and to meet him at his office at 10:30 the next day. He signed me to a one-year contract for good money. I went home and told my mother, "Mom, guess what? I've got personality."

### The Roger Wagner Center For Choral Studies

The Roger Wagner Center for Choral Studies was chartered in 1987 by California State University and Dr. Roger Wagner to promote the field of choral music. Under the direction of Dr. Wagner and Dr. William Belan, Director of Choral Studies at California State University at Los Angeles, the Center has undertaken a list of significant projects including: 1) a national contemporary-composition contest underwritten by The Wenger Corporation; 2) a series of contemporary choral works, published by Thomas House Publications; 3) a *festschrift* to be published by Pendragon Press; 4) a series of workshops on the use of singing in the elementary classroom to teach interdisciplinary subjects — cosponsored by the Los Angeles Music Center and TRW Corporation; 5) a "choral summit" bringing the non-profit choral management teams in Los Angeles and Orange Counties together for dialogue, and; 6) other special conferences and workshops.

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**William Belan**

William Belan has served as Director of Choral Studies at California State University, Los Angeles since 1981 where, together with his colleagues, he has managed the growth of a successful choral program. Responsible for the graduate studies in choral music, Dr. Belan continues to innovate on behalf of the program, as well as in his own fields of interest.

Since 1987 Dr. Belan and Dr. Roger Wagner have developed the Roger Wagner Center for Choral Studies, an innovative program for the pursuit of choral excellence. In addition, Dr. Belan has been instrumental in the development of the National Choral Directors Association of Costa Rica, Central America, where he has conducted and lectured six times. Dr. Belan is finishing a post-doctoral Certificate at the Claremont Graduate School, studying management with Dr. Peter Drucker.

Dr. Belan is regularly in demand as lecturer, consultant, and adjudicator. Dr. Belan and his choirs have toured throughout the United States and Central America, and have presented workshops on subjects of stylistic practice, especially the interpretation of Gregorian chant. Dr. Belan currently serves as Chair for the ACDA Western Division College/University R&S Committee.

I waited for a month and never got a call from the studio, but I got my \$250 check each week. That seemed enormous to me since I was making only \$150 a month at St. Joseph's Church. One day I got a call from the dance director at Paramount who said the producer told him I was a good dancer. I replied, "I dance, but I'm not a professional dancer." He said, "Look, you have personality. You can do anything." I said, "I'll be there." Some of the girls in the company taught me all the steps and I danced in several pictures with the Albertina Rasch dancers. I also wrote music for television — I wrote two years for *I Married Joan* — and I wrote for something like 30 movies — including the entire score for *The Gallant Hours* starring James Cagney.

**BELAN:** So how did this experience influence your work as a serious conductor?

**WAGNER:** It gave me more flexibility and experience in writing. However, it did not affect my interpretations of the classical repertoire. I put that in a completely different light. The entertainment business was money. I needed money and it was an opportunity to get involved in a new type of expression: to write for moods. Whether it's popular or classical music, I always look for the drama. I had my roots in Gregorian chant and Renaissance polyphony. I performed it in its proper *habitat*. For me, this music wasn't just for concerts; it had meaning. Everything

we sang had a dramatic meaning. I had studied Latin and Greek. These languages were more than syllables to me. My philosophy was to always bring out the drama of what the words meant to my singers.

While I was working in the entertainment business, I kept looking for a position that would make use of my talents at the organ. After many weeks of searching, I learned there was an opening for an organist and choirmaster at the beautiful St. Joseph's church located in downtown Los Angeles. The

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*My philosophy has always been to demand the maximum from singers, but to choose singers wisely.*

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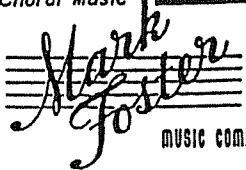
Franciscan fathers offered me \$150 a month for a full-time position comprising innumerable services and masses, teaching at the grammar school, and coaching the basketball and football teams. The choir at St. Joseph's was so bad I went to the pastor and said that I would either form another choir or resign the position. I stressed that according to the church, women were really not allowed to sing in the liturgical services; boys were traditionally used for that purpose. The pastor agreed to my request and this was the beginning of 27 years of truly difficult work.

I studied at that time with a man named Father William Finn, a Paulist priest. I learned much from his classes. One of the statements he made that I shall always remember is: "Usually, when a choir sings above a mezzo piano, beauty goes out the window." I also recall the famous story about his choir competing in the Paris Opera House for the finals of the worldwide boychoir competition. The conductors drew straws to see who would sing first, second, third, etc., and Father Finn was last. He sat

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and listened to all the other choirs, each of which went flat because the hall, loaded with velvet, had very dead acoustics. When it was time for his choir to sing, Father Finn transposed the music up a third and told the boys to sing very softly. They stayed dead in tune and won first place. One of the other conductors went to him and said, "Father, that is terribly unfair. You changed the key to suit the acoustics of the place." But, Father Finn knew how to make things work. I learned a lot from this man, although he was perhaps the most conceited person I have ever known in my life — except maybe for myself. And he had quite an air about him. He would direct workshops with lots of women in attendance (He was very handsome with his Roman collar), and would say, "Ladies, I am carrying you on my arm. I can't do that, you know. I am a priest." He had a British accent. I don't know where the devil he got it; he wasn't British.

He had a colleague, Father O'Mally, who took over his choir in Chicago. O'Mally was an expert in the changing voice. I went to Chicago to study with him because of the frustration I felt after spending years to train my boys so beautifully and then have them come to me and say, "Can't sing up there no more, Rog." They would come to their middle register, and there was nothing. I was also in contact with a throat specialist.

My first ten years I had no women in my choirs, a fact which explains why my women never sing operatically in sacred music, especially of the Renaissance era. When you sing a piece, you have to fit the sound to the piece you sing. My boys sang all sacred music. They were not permitted to have excessive vibrato in the voice because too much vibrato would kill the style of the music. Later on I felt that choral music was enhanced by having that kind of sound. When singing opera or Romantic music, I would ask for more vibrato which made that kind of music more expressive. However, I would not permit my singers to be heard individually in the choir.

The sound for the boys was based on "Oo." This helped develop the head tone. When you train children they usually have a chest tone which they can't carry higher than C above middle C. You train the upper voice,

*I think the combination of my faith in God, my love of music, and my involvement in it still at the age of 76, almost 77, is responsible for my being alive.*

which has never been used, on downward scales. You bring those virginal tones down and match them with the low ones, softening when you get down low. You get a

beautiful sound with this training. That was an important part of the way I trained my boys.

BELAN: What are some of the other features—perhaps personal qualities—that characterize your work?

WAGNER: I think one of my main qualities is temperament, which I consider to be the ability to get drama out of people. I also possess an accumulated understanding of various styles of music, and I'm disciplined. But, I think over and above the things we have talked about is the fact that I won't accept mediocrity. I have a reputation for being almost cruel when it comes to getting things right. Now I am much more gentle, but I still get what I want. I used to be extremely tough on people. If they sang flat, I would go over and over the music to find out why they would do such a thing. Then I would set the singers up as examples of mediocrity. There's no question that I was a disciplinarian,

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and there was no fooling around when you were in my choir. You had to strive for perfection.

My philosophy has always been to demand the maximum from singers, but to choose singers wisely: hearing that voices fit the choir before putting them in the chorale, seeing that dispositions lend themselves to development, and sensing a willingness to accept advice. You have some people that are so solo conscious you can't use them in an ensemble. They won't sing softly; they won't listen. These days, however, I am much more mature about how I work with singers. I can get excellent results without being mean. For instance, I just received a letter from a singer on our recent Japan tour:

I cannot begin to tell you how wonderful the tour was for me. First, it was the musical experience I knew it would be. You're right, Roger. I have been around and recognize a great conductor, and you are one. One of the other aspects of

your greatness is, of course, your musical integrity. But the way that you treated each member of the group, and gave us all complete respect, gave us the healthy and productive feeling of being colleagues. I guess from certain aspects of your reputation I expected to be intimidated by you. . . .

There was a time when intimidation was a regular part of my behavior. That came from immaturity. When you can't get what you want, you get mad at people. But I don't do that anymore because I know what to do. I also don't get mad at erroneous criticism like I used to. This is because I understand that some criticism comes from ignorance. I think (Martin) Bernheimer (critic of the Los Angeles Times), for example, is a fine reviewer; but he has fixed ideas. If you are a great choral man, you cannot be anything else.

I feel that if people are going to criticize me then it's got to be justified. If it's justified then I have nothing to argue about. But, if it's not justified, then I say it comes out of their ignorance.

BELAN: Can you talk about your health — how you have dealt with serious illness, and how it has affected your work?

WAGNER: Music has saved my life. I was ready to die two years ago. My face was twice the size it is now. I was in bad shape. The doctor let me go (on tour to Japan in 1988) against his wishes. He did soften up a little bit when I told him I couldn't pay his fee if I didn't go (*laugh*).

I went and felt twice as good when I came back. During that time I was undergoing chemotherapy. That was two years and two months ago, and at my last visit the doctor said that the mortality rate with my illness is 94% within a year. He said

that three years is the period where they consider this cancer gone. I have seven or eight months to go.

I think the secret is getting involved, looking forward to getting well. I do a lot of imagery. "It's going away, it's going away." And I pray a lot. I'm very religious. I don't like to brag about it, because my whole life has not been one

exemplary of a virtuous man; but, I am, at this time, very religiously inclined. I think the combination of my faith in God, my love of music, and my involvement in it still at the age of 76, almost 77, is responsible for my being alive.

BELAN: How has choral music changed during your career?

WAGNER: I think choral music performance has suffered an enormous decline in appeal. There isn't the same interest there used to be in listening to a choral concert. Shaw would fill every auditorium, and so would I. I still do in Japan and Korea, but in former times here in the U.S. 5,000 people would stand up and shriek. It used to be that if you did a *B Minor Mass* or *Missa solemnis* you'd sell out. Today, I'm better known in Japan than I am here in the United States. I'm still well known in this country, but not like Japan. I think the time of the Wagner and Shaw period is over, but I think interest will come back because people will get tired of listening to pop-oriented and minimal music.

BELAN: What message would you like to leave with young people who aspire to conduct choral music?

WAGNER: You have to have the bug. If you have the bug to do choral music that's an incentive in itself. Some people will fall in love with choral music, and really want to do it. Have a goal to achieve and stick to it. But be sure to have goals which are realistic. You must know if you have real temperament. If you do, develop it; if you don't, then get a tape of Leonard Bernstein conducting, and do 10 percent of that.



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The following is a speech given by Paul Salamunovich to present the "Conductor of the Year Award" to Roger Wagner at the ACDA Western Division Convention in March of 1990.

In November of 1937, a 23-year old Roger Wagner was hired as Music Director of St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Los Angeles. He gained this position because of his talents as an accomplished organist, not because of his choral ability since, in fact, he had had no formal training or experience in this area. But, within a few short months, spurred on by a special ambition, confidence, and drive, this self-taught, "by trial and error" conductor formed a choir of men and boys that made its debut on Easter Sunday in the spring of 1938.

For the enormous salary of \$150.00 a month, Roger only had to play nine Masses and three evening services a week, while also teaching academic classes in the Church's grammar school. At the same time, he rehearsed the boys every day, and again on Wednesday nights with the men. To augment this handsome salary, Roger would "moonlight" at local French restaurants, playing the piano and doing his classic impersonation of Maurice Chevalier.

A little less than a year later, in the spring of 1939, Roger and his Choir presented their first concert in a small parish in Redondo Beach, California, where I was a member of a very humble boys choir that sang only Gregorian chant. It was a beautiful concert — I know — I was there in the front row as an 11-year-old spectator. I heard the music of Victoria and Palestrina for the first time, felt the overwhelming charisma and strength of the conductor, and reveled in the sheer beauty of the singing. I can still vividly remember how I envied those lucky choir boys!

A few years later my family moved to Hollywood, and I joined the Men and Boys Choir of Blessed Sacrament Church. At the end of my first year in the Choir, much to my surprise, we combined forces with the St. Joseph Choir for the closing Mass of the season, and I had my first opportunity to sing under the direction of Roger Wagner.

I subsequently began taking the streetcar to downtown Los Angeles on Wednesday nights to visit Roger's rehearsals. Since I became a fixture at these meetings, he soon invited me to sing with the Choir. I was 15 years old, and it was the beginning of a 48-year association that has witnessed the founding of the Los Angeles Youth Chorus in 1946 and its transition three years later into the Roger Wagner Chorale with our

first professional engagement, the recording of the soundtrack for the classic motion picture *Joan of Arc*, starring Ingrid Bergman.

How did our three-year-old choir sound back on April 3rd, 1949, when we presented a concert that started with, what else, but the *Victoria Ave Maria*, and concluded with, what else, but the *Requiem* of Gabriel Fauré? The review in the *Los Angeles Examiner* of April 5th,


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1949, as written by the eminent critic, the late Patterson Greene, states:

With lovely old St. Joseph's Church as a setting, Roger Wagner last Sunday night conducted his Chorale of mixed voices, augmented by the St. Joseph Male Choir, in a program of the most beautiful choral singing I have heard in many years.

Perhaps I should simply call it the most beautiful choral singing I have heard; because beyond supreme technical and tonal merits, it had a mood of exaltation that visits itself rarely upon choruses, or upon individuals, for that matter. . . .

Wagner has achieved a style and tonal quality that is depersonalized without being dehumanized. He has avoided the operatic emotionalism that besets some choral groups, and the prim pallor that besets still others. There was no tremolo, no shrillness, no rigidity in the

ensemble, and there was a welcome accuracy of pitch, attack and execution. . . .

The church was filled to its limits, and hundreds had to be turned away. Perhaps means can be found whereby Wagner, who has given new life to choral singing in Los Angeles, may be enabled to bring this program to other audiences.

Within ten years of his daring leap into the choral arena, Roger Wagner had become one of its leading figures. What followed has become choral history.

Concerts with the Los Angeles Philharmonic began in 1949, followed by the recording, in 1951, of the *Pope Marcellus Mass* on the Capitol label, the invitation to the coronation festival of Elizabeth the II in London in 1953, the first national tour in 1956, subsequent world tours, the establishment, 25 years ago, of the Los Angeles Master Chorale as the resident professional chorus of the Los Angeles Music Center—and on—and on—and on.

Because of his great talent and productivity, Roger Wagner can be given a great deal of credit for what I believe was the "Golden Age of Choral Music" — the 40s, the 50s, and the 60s — and is acknowledged as one of the giants in this field.

I had the unique privilege of being present at his first concert 51 years ago, and throughout these 50 years, as a singer, teacher, and conductor, I have been touched, influenced, nurtured, and inspired by this man.

I believe I can honestly bear witness to his entire career in the choral field, and may I be so bold as to say I reflect the training personally received from his gifts.

I consider him to be the most naturally talented choral conductor I have ever known.

For what he has given to the world of choral music—for what he has given me and others like me—and because of my love for this man, I am justly proud, on behalf of the American Choral Directors Association, Western Division, to present "The Conductor of the Year Award" to Roger Wagner. **CU**

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