

## An Interview with Eric Alatorre: The Master of *Basso Profundo*

By Michael Murphy

Eric Alatorre's iconic *basso profundo* voice and mustache inspired Chanticleer audiences for twenty-eight seasons. Equally impressive, he has been involved in forty of the group's commercial recordings. Recently retired, Eric took time to answer some questions about his early years as a singer, what he has learned from his tenure with Chanticleer, and advice to singers preparing for a career in music.

**Murphy:** Describe your early musical training. How did you get started in singing, particularly choral singing?

**Alatorre:** I didn't grow up in a particularly musical family. What I did have was an exceptionally good choir director in high school. All of my siblings went through his program before me, and my brother was even inspired enough to become a music major at UCLA. He went on to become an educator and administrator, eventually becoming principal of the Orange County High School of the Arts. I was singing in choirs from junior high until the present.

**Murphy:** Do you recall developing from a treble singer to singing lower

during adolescence? When did you first realize that your voice is unique in how low you can sing?

**Alatorre:** My voice was a bit of an anomaly even as a child. It was exceptionally low. I was often mistaken for an adult when answering the telephone. There was not the typical voice change that most boys experience. It just slid down from something low as a child to an unusually low voice without condition. At fourteen years of age, I had essentially the range I have now. My high school choir director was a bit surprised to have a freshman with a solid low A1.

**Murphy:** How did you become a part of Chanticleer?

**Alatorre:** I moved to San Francisco to finish my bachelor's degree. I auditioned for the San Francisco Symphony chorus and sang for their assistant conductor, Sanford Dole. It turns out he is a founding member of Chanticleer and suggested I audition for the group, with a few caveats. I should finish the degree, get some experience, and when I was feeling at the top of my game, I should audition. I sang with the Symphony Chorus for three years, each year au-

ditioning for Sanford, and him lowering the list of things to prepare until he finally looked at me and said, "Just call Joe (Jennings) already!" I had one audition and waited to hear back for a few months. Eventually, Louis Botto gave me a call and with two days' notice, I showed up for callbacks. I felt a bit outmatched with singers from many well-known music schools and advanced degrees vying for these positions. I just had fun singing some great music with amazing singers. The rest seems to have fallen into place, and twenty-eight years later, here I am.

**Murphy:** What do you attribute to your success as a singer?

**Alatorre:** Any success I have singing is tempered with the work I feel I need to still do, even at the end of my tenure. Tenacity has as much to do with my "success" as anything else. I stuck to the job and tried to improve as my understanding of the job grew. Physical maturity has helped with my particular voice type as well. Mostly, I think being in the company of amazing and inspiring musicians has been the main reason for my improvement. There is something special about bonding with this musical band of brothers. You don't

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want to let your colleagues down, especially the ones you admire and who inspire you. And there is also the process of working through difficult times together with your colleagues. You learn what you are capable of and what it takes to get past your limitations to achieve more than you thought possible.

**Murphy:** How do you maintain your extreme low range? Are there vocalises/warm-ups that have been helpful to you either in developing or maintaining your range?

**Alatorre:** I get asked often how to increase one's low range. I don't have any insight to this. It is a roll of the dice, and you get the voice you are given. What is more important is that you learn to maximize the potential of your voice. If you have low notes, you can learn to have more options with them. For example, you can work to form more colors, tim-

bres, and dynamic textures. Physical maturity helps, and more importantly as a singer you have to learn what your body responds to. Several considerations a singer must confront are more or less sleep, more or less exercise, more or less dietary restrictions, and more or less warming up/down around a concert. I don't believe there is one answer to all these questions. You have to know yourself better than anyone else.

**Murphy:** Do you have a daily regimen for taking care of your voice?

**Alatorre:** When we were traveling, there was a lot of singing. On a concert day, there are about three to three and half hours of singing; I personally didn't do a lot of warming up prior to the concert. Several of my colleagues did. For myself, I found that the "warm up" before a concert, where we worked on pieces that needed attention and probed

the acoustic of a venue, was a sufficient amount of singing prior to the performance. Once again, everyone is different.

**Murphy:** What advice would you give young singers who would like to be a part of the professional choral scene?

**Alatorre:** Nowadays, it is possible for a singer to make a living solely from being a professional chorister. It is still an evolving lifestyle and requires a lot of hustle to make it work. In order to have the skills to succeed, I would suggest the following:

- *Have as much knowledge as you can get.* This will inform the way you make music and give you the tools to figure out what you need to do musically. This includes history, theory, and especially listening to as much music in as many styles as you can. Everything can relate in some way.

- *Be as versatile as you can.* Applying the knowledge that you have is the point of acquiring it in the first place. The more versatile you are, the more desirable you are to potential employers. If you are able to look at a piece of music in several different ways, you will be able to sing it in a number of different ways and hopefully find common ground with the interpretation of the director and other singers.

- *Have a collaborative attitude.* The more you are willing to work with others and not just show that you know more than someone else, the better the experience will be for everyone. The object is for everyone to get

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across the finish line together. You are all there to accomplish something together. That is the meaning of ensemble.

• *Do not give up easily.* The longer you stay with something, the more opportunity you have to learn and grow. Even a passive member who isn't as actively involved will still learn. Active members will learn even faster.

• *Remember why you are doing this.* As a singer gets wrapped up in the challenges of making this life work, it can be easy to lose focus on what brought them there in the first place. Don't forget to step back from time to time and enjoy the music. Enjoy the camaraderie of making music with others. Enjoy seeing an audience reveling in familiar favorites or learn to love something new or even challenging. These are the things that will sustain you when life is more challenging and less fulfilling. If you look at the long arc of a career, it is made of highs and lows, but the better parts are what make you feel it was a success.

**Murphy:** Describe a typical day in the life as a professional choral singer.

**Alatorre:** Life in Chanticleer falls into two categories: home and tour. At home there is a fairly regular schedule. Rehearsals go from 10:30 am to 3:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, during our preparation for a concert program. We also have occasional educational activities that range from in-school appearances, master classes, and even choral festi-

vals run by Chanticleer. Add to that donor events of varying scale and the normal concert schedule, and our home life is fairly active.

On the road, life is a bit more predictable, if not regular. It is rare that we spend much time in any one place, eighteen hours being pretty standard for a typical visit to any given city. Travel can usually occupy the morning hours. Check into the hotel in early afternoon. Depart for the venue sometime after 5 pm and leave closer to 11 pm. If you are lucky you can find some place with warm food and a beverage to wind down after the concert. Repeat the next day. Travel is by plane or driv-

ing rental cars where planes won't get us. We get around a lot.

**Murphy:** Describe the level of professionalism, motivation, and commitment that is needed to be a part of a professional choral ensemble like Chanticleer.

**Alatorre:** I was fortunate to work with amazing and inspiring individuals. Everyone brings different strengths to the group. The level of knowledge, musicality, and dedication that my colleagues have is a reminder of how much more I have to learn and how much I can hope to offer others. At its best, Chanticleer

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allows the individuals to show their exceptionalism. Whether it's their freakishly wonderful voices (we have a few of those) or knowledge or experience, it allows all members of the ensemble to contribute not only to the shared musical experience, but allows us to more closely convey the meaning and beauty of the music.

**Murphy:** What has changed in the professional choral scene in the years you have been part of Chanticleer?

**Alatorre:** One exciting development that has happened since I

joined the group is that we are no longer the only ensemble of our kind in the United States. There is not only room for another group to survive, but thrive. There are more top-level choral groups traveling around than I can recall from my younger days. And as was mentioned earlier, it is now possible for individuals to make a career singing choral music. My tenure was always something I thought of an exception. Now I hope it will become more common for a larger group of singers to do the same.

**Murphy:** What can higher education vocal programs do to better

equip singers to make a living singing full time?

**Alatorre:** One complaint often heard from students in vocal programs is that the "only" track that seems to be presented is that of the operatic soloist. While this is still a major focus for many college programs, it seems that other tracks are now being shown a bit more attention. Whether it is choral music, jazz, musical theater, or any other style of music, all of these styles can not only inform each other but increase the palette of colors that a singer uses to create music. Of course, at some point most singers will have to focus on specific area/areas, but especially as an undergrad, the more you can experience, the richer your experience will be.

Another aspect to understand is that the music business is actually a business. Understanding how it works and what expectations exist to make it succeed are important things for a singer to understand. It's easy to focus on the art and imagine what a successful career looks like, but understanding the tireless efforts required to keep a career successful—assuming one achieves success—can be not just eye opening but shocking to many singers. Know what the sacrifices of living a peripatetic life can entail. Know how important it is to keep presenters happy. Know how important it is to keep donors happy. Learn to be gregarious and generous with your time and attention when appropriate. There is much more to making a successful career than talent alone.

**Murphy:** You have performed for



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thousands of audiences over the years. What have you learned about an audience that might be beneficial to our readers?

**Alatorre:** Don't forget why you do what you do. There have been many moments where I have been reminded that I am a fortunate vessel for delivering the beauty and power of music. I have sung for people who have been sick and used music to help them heal. I have sung for people who are dying and used music to soothe their souls as they prepare to leave this life. I have sung for people who are starting their lives together or are bringing their

children to share in the joy that they themselves have experienced with music. Ultimately it is about the power of music to enrich and better their lives. The more I have submitted to the beauty of the music and the less I have tried to use it as a vehicle to show off individual talent, the more rewarding it has been.

**Murphy:** At this time, do you have any future plans you would like to share?

**Alatorre:** The first thing I am looking forward to is being dad to my two young girls. Both they, and especially my wife, have been incredibly

understanding and supportive of my singing for many years. Beyond that I don't have any solid plans... yet. I am hopeful that there will be opportunities for me to be involved with some fun projects and perhaps some fun destinations as well. I am excited to see where my voice can take me in the future! 

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