

The Making of a Choral Conductor

Art Wenk grew up in a small town in New Jersey where he sang (successively) soprano, alto and tenor in a variety of church and school choirs. At age 18 he went to Amherst, described in its official literature as “a small college nestled in the heart of the Pioneer Valley.”

The Amherst College Glee Club went through four directors in the four years that Art attended, and he noted with interest (but without learning anything from the observation) that the man the college finally retained was musically the least competent of the four, though politically the most astute.

In the years before Amherst went co-ed, the glee club would give joint concerts with various women’s colleges, giving Art an opportunity to observe a number of different conductors in action. Harold Ax, director of the Sarah Lawrence choirs, favoured the “winning through intimidation” method. When a wrong note occurred in rehearsals, he’d have each singer perform the passage in question until he nailed and humiliated the offender. When asked whether his wife was a singer, Ax said through clenched teeth, “If I’d wanted a singer for a wife, I would have held auditions!”

During Art’s senior year the Amherst Glee Club made a concert tour of Puerto Rico with a choir from Bennett College, a woman’s college now defunct. The repertoire for this tour included the Bach 79th Cantata, the Fauré Requiem, Gershwin’s “Porgy and Bess”, the Schütz 84th Psalm and the usual collection of college songs and sea chanteys. (Pablo Casals is reported to have wept at the singing.) Ruth Glazer, Bennett’s choral conductor, was a crotchety, grey-haired woman who, when frustrated with the choir’s performance, would lay down her baton and exclaim, “I don’t know why I waste my time listening to you when I have a husband who plays Beethoven like a god!” The god in question was Frank (Fingers of Steel) Glazer, who left pianos in ruins all around the island.

This was not Art’s first acquaintance with crotchety grey-haired women. The choral director at Mount Holyoke, Amherst’s sister college to the South, was too short to be seen by the singers in the back rows, so instead of beating time in the usual manner she would simply shake her fist above her head. Except when she became enraptured with the sounds her charges

were producing: then she would lower her hand and allow a beatific smile to pass across her wrinkled face. The chorus never seemed to notice whether she was conducting or not. She belonged to the visceral school of music appreciation. On one occasion when Amherst and Mount Holyoke were collaborating on the Haydn *Harmoniemesse* she stopped to tell the group about the sublime qualities of the work they were performing and asked spiritedly, “Do you feel it?” One freshman tenor at Amherst earned the eternal gratitude of his companions by falling to his knees and shouting, “Yes, Miss Douglas, I feel it, I feel it!”

The moments of greatest musical satisfaction came in joint concerts with Smith College, whose Glee Club was directed by Iva Dee Hiatt, a greyhaired but decidedly uncrochety lady. The first impression of the Amherst Freshman Glee Club with Iva Dee Hiatt was stupefaction. They never imagined that a woman in her forties could be so, well, sexy. When Dee directed, you responded not only to her superb musicianship but to a kind of chemical attraction as well.

Miss Hiatt taught a choral conducting class at Smith which Art joined in his senior year. The first assignment was to compose a twelve-tone row and be prepared to conduct and correct mistakes as the rest of the class sight-sang it. (If this sounds easy, I invite you to try it.) Each week one was expected to conduct passages of Webern, Stravinsky, Dufay, Josquin and plainsong, cueing all entrances and cut-offs and sustaining a clear beat while maintaining eye contact with the chorus. “The score in the head, not the head in the score” was one of Miss Hiatt’s mottos.

While Miss Hiatt remained encouraging and sympathetic at all times, she set high musical standards, and an element of fear accompanied one’s appearances at the head of the class. Practicing in front of a mirror just wasn’t the same—for one thing, the mirror never sang wrong notes. Occasionally the strain of listening and conducting would befuddle a student who, after repeatedly failing to coordinate a tricky entrance, would turn in despair to ask Miss Hiatt how to do it. Dee would stand before the group and make some magical gesture that left the students muttering, “How did she do that?”

The class wasn’t limited to arm-waving. Performance practice, rehearsal technique, score preparation, all belonged to the conductor’s craft. What

do you do when there are three tenors in a chorus of sixty? (Put them in the front row.) What do you do when a chorus is tired? (Speak to them softly.) Dee insisted that we use the best editions, sing in the original languages (providing texts and translations for the audience), plan programs with some artistic purpose, and rehearse the music until it was perfect. “Until the chorus is doing what you want them to, you haven’t taught them.”

From Amherst Art went on to Cornell, far above Cayuga’s waters, to become a musicologist. During his first year the Glee Club was invited to make a twelve-week tour of the Far East: would Art be interested in going along? Imagine Bangkok and Singapore and Hong Kong! How could anyone refuse such an offer? But Art had the idea that if the university had given him a fellowship to study musicology he’d better stay home and do it, so while the other tenors came back at term’s end with cameras and stereo sets, Art ended the semester with reams of analysis graphs and boxes of file cards.

In five years at Cornell Art had a variety of opportunities to practice conducting: Assistant Conductor for Sage Chapel choir, Assistant Director of the Glee Club, Assistant Director of the Cornell Choral Institute, director of his own summer choir at the church back home.

Tired of awful summer soloists (he may have put it more diplomatically than that—then again, maybe not), Art persuaded his local church to let him form a summer choir of college kids with whom he performed music borrowed from Sage Chapel. To end the summer he decided to put on a Bach cantata, and to that end rounded up a string quartet and recruited soloists from among his friends: a tenor from Tennessee, a soprano from Connecticut, and a bass who flew back from Vienna a few days early in order to participate in the festivities.

When the director of the Ithaca Civic Opera Association got drafted into the army, Art formed a pick-up choir and conducted performances of *Dido and Aeneas*. When a college friend got married in Chicago, he put the University of Chicago Collegium Musicum at Art’s disposal to produce a Bach cantata. After the first rehearsal one singer turned to her companion and asked, “Who is that guy anyway, one of Bill’s musicologist friends?” “No,” came the reply, “I think he’s a real musician.” It was Art’s finest hour.

Art's first teaching job after leaving Cornell took him to a small state college in San Bernardino, California, a spot, according to the official literature of the college, surrounded by olive groves from which deer emerged at night to drink from the college fountains. Art, with the advice of the Cornell choral director, planned for a chorus of 60 and a madrigal group of 25, and went ahead and ordered music for the entire season based on those figures. He planned a Christmas concert of German baroque cantatas, French carols, Latin motets, and Gregorian chant—not one word of English. For the Madrigal Singers he laid out an Advent concert of eight-part settings of the chorale “Nun komm der Heiden Heiland,” with works by Scheidt, Praetorius and Schütz, ending up with the Bach cantata on that chorale. What a great beginning this was going to be!

Come August Art arrived in San Bernardino, a smoggy industrial town on the edge of the desert. He had the art department make up attractive posters announcing auditions for the two choruses and waited for the singers to come streaming in. For the sixty-voice college chorus there were twenty-eight applicants. Art accepted them all. For the twenty-five voice madrigal group there were eight volunteers—not even the eight best singers in the chorus, just those who happened to have that hour free on their schedules. And these eight were supposed to sing eight-part music!

At the first rehearsal Art discovered that half the chorus didn't read music and none of them had ever sung in a foreign language. But the music was bought and the budget exhausted, so Art's course was clear and he charged into the endeavour with reckless abandon. By December the chorus was actually sounding pretty tolerable.

Anticipating that he might have to find a few more singers for the winter quarter, Art innocently inquired whether any of the singers would not be returning in January. Every hand in the room went up! It took some major arm-twisting by the chairman, a lovable bear of a man who drank with the boys and slept with the girls, to persuade the singers to give one more chance to this frenetic madman from the East. And Art began to learn something about the pacing of a choral rehearsal. Back in Miss Hiatt's conducting class students had had to make maximum use of their allotted four minutes in front of the class, and Art had simply extended that same unrelenting intensity to a two-hour rehearsal. A schedule change in the winter quarter enabled the chorus to rehearse three times a week for an hour, an arrangement that made everyone more comfortable.

Another problem remained. For the winter concert Wenk had scheduled a program of music for two choruses and brass—works by Gabrieli, Bach, Schütz, not one word of English—but Art had barely one chorus. The solution was clear—start another chorus; the Choral Society, a community choir drawing on faculty wives, church singers, and a primo don music librarian who constituted most of the bass section. Art rehearsed the two choruses separately then brought them together for the “joyful noise” of the concert with brass. Unfortunately, in conducting class Art had worked only with professional instrumentalists and didn’t realize the necessity of tuning each instrument individually when working with high school brass players, so the glory of Gabrieli rang out against the California night in eight different keys.

Miss Hiatt had imbued her classes with the conductor’s obligation to champion twentieth-century music, and Art had learned his lesson well. For the third concert of the season he took every twentieth-century work he had performed as a singer—with glee clubs, chapel choirs, and semiprofessional choruses—and put them all on the same program: the Ginastera *Lamentations of Jeremiah*, the Britten *Hymn to Saint Cecilia*, the Barber *Reincarnations*, and works by Stravinsky, Hindemith, and Bartok. “Art, you’re crazy,” they told him. And they were right.

After two years of this Art left California, having lost his job, his wife, and a certain amount of Eastern uptightness. When Art landed in Boston, a few months later, he was wearing sandals, bell-bottom slacks, a rainbow shirt, a long-fringed leather vest with beads, and hair over his ears.

The second year in Boston, while on unemployment, Art founded The Cambridge Singers, a group of young, fearless, gung-ho singers who performed in Harvard houses, the Boston Public Library, and Tufts University, as well as broadcasting over WGBH.

When Art got a job at the University of Pittsburgh, his first act was to start a chamber choir, the Pittsburgh Camerata. As the only chamber choir in this city of 750,000, it attracted all the serious musicians tired of singing in the 200-voice orchestra choir, and broadcast its concerts over WQED. Of course, not everyone understood what this chamber choir was all about. One library where the group performed received telephone calls asking if

the Camerata was a photographic organization. And though the choir kept getting better and better, it took awhile to attract a following. Despite great publicity, the group's third concert, "Twentieth-Century Choral Music by American Composers," attracted only twenty-five souls, which goes to show that once people decide to avoid a concert of twentieth-century music, nothing will deter them.

The Pittsburgh Camerata offered repeated performances of each of its concerts in different parts of the city, not only as a way of reaching out to audiences, but because when you've spent fourteen weeks preparing a concert it seems a shame to have it go by in one night. Moreover, you learn things in performance that no amount of rehearsing will teach, and if you give four performances, it's likely that one of them will be inspired—will rise to another level altogether. (Unfortunately, you can never predict which performance that will be—it's not necessarily the one for which you've engaged a recording engineer.)

At one concert there was no dressing room large enough for the whole group to line up in so we found ourselves assembling just offstage around an enormous pillar. I told the singers to file around the column then onto the stage. One tenor raised his hand and asked, "How many times around?"

Once again, Art lost his job and his wife, and after a year as a Visiting Professor at Indiana University, he took a job at Université Laval in Québec. Upon his arrival Art had two objectives: find an apartment and found a chorale. Consulting members of the musical community, Art learned that all the weeknights were already claimed by other choirs, that it was important to avoid weekends when giving concerts (others told him to avoid weeknights), that one should avoid giving concerts in December, April, May and June, and that it was inadvisable to combine francophones and anglophones in the same choir.

But Art persisted, and attracted twenty-eight singers for the first rehearsal, and an audience of more than two hundred for the first concert, better than the Pittsburgh Camerata had been able to achieve after seven years. In four years with a group of skilled singers with essentially no turnover, La Camerata Vocale became good enough to broadcast over Radio Canada.

When Art came to southern Ontario, he had the good sense to realize that in a city the size of Toronto, heavily endowed with existing choirs, it might be worthwhile to spend a year doing research. So he waited until 1990 to form The Toronto Camerata, which began rehearsals in a function room at the Metro Toronto Reference Library and offered concerts at churches around the city to audiences smaller than the size of the choir. But after a number of years the group became good enough to sing two performances at First Night (to over 600 people each time), record a compact disc at Glenn Gould studio, and perform at the Enoch Turner Schoolhouse for Karen Hall's wedding.

By the time Quodlibet came into being (Art had lost a wife, but kept his job—something of an improvement), Art had foresworn delusions of grandeur and, in place of the \$20,000 budget required for a chamber choir, resolved to create a group that could make do with a budget of \$2,000, thus eliminating the need for garage sales, silent auctions, corporate sponsorship and grants from the Canadian Arts Council. Quodlibet rehearsed in the chancel of St. Leonard's Church in order to enjoy its fine acoustics, sat in a circle in order to appreciate each other's voices, and took as its goal to make every rehearsal a rewarding musical, educational, social, and even spiritual experience, in which process and product would become one.

In trying to help you understand why I would intentionally give up such a fine group (without having lost either job or wife), let me share this notion. It takes eight or nine hours to climb Mount Washington, the highest mountain east of the Mississippi, and you won't want to do any climbing the next day. This summer Adriana and I hope to escort her best friend on an ascent of the mighty mountain. In eight or nine hours with you, I could probably prepare a good performance of Bach's "Singet dem Herren," a work I adore. It would take several times that number of hours to prepare Beethoven's Diabelli Variations, a masterpiece that I have performed in the past and will probably never perform again. You see, you don't just get to do what you love—it comes with a cost in time.

Over the years I've made myself promises to read and write. Eventually you come to the point in your life that you ask just when you plan to make good on those promises. I do believe that you can do everything in life. You just can't do it all at once. So I'm deliberately giving up what I love doing more

than anything else in the world in order to do something else I've always wanted to do.

In every city I've lived in I've sown seeds for new choirs. Much as I hate to leave this one, I'm glad to be able to turn it over to a really good gardener.