



# Everyone a winner

US choral luminary, Anton Armstrong, has worked over many years with *Malcolm Bruno*. Now Armstrong tells him about his life and association with the St Olaf Choir

The townsfolk of Northfield, Minnesota each year re-enact the great bank robbery by the infamous Jesse James, the bandit that once held this gentle midwestern town hostage. The bank is still there, though in an era of plastic and supermarket cash points it has become the local historical society. Two blocks eastward the bustling Cannon River, that brought the first European settlers to Northfield,

runs parallel to a Hopperesque 'Main Street USA' forming the axis of town life. But Northfield is known beyond Minnesota as the home of two prestigious schools, one of which is St Olaf College. Bearing the name of the patron saint of Norway, it was founded in the late 19th century by Norwegian immigrants braving the hard life of a new world northwest of Chicago. Uniting their Scandinavian

Anton Armstrong conducts the St Olaf Choir in repertoire as diverse as polyphony, Bach motets and folksong from the Pacific Rim Photos courtesy of St Olaf College



heritage with aspirations for knowledge and a better life in America, one of their first priorities was the establishment of a college in their new homestead in the plains just south of Minneapolis.

In 1912, as a new century beckoned, a choir was formed at St Olaf by a recent Norwegian émigré from Trondheim, F. Melius Christiansen. Within a few decades his choir would become one of the Midwest's finest, influencing not only the American Lutheran tradition from which it had emerged, but the fledgling choral world within Protestant America at large, not least of which was John Finley Williamson and his Westminster Choir. Since the mid-20th century, St Olaf has become one of the top-ranking choirs on the North American continent. Christiansen was followed by his son, Olaf, who broadened the repertoire from the

tradition of Lutheran hymnody to Renaissance polyphony and American music and gave the US premieres of Milhaud and Jean Berger. In 1968 he was succeeded by Kenneth Jennings, during whose 22-year tenure secular works and instrumental accompaniment appeared in the repertoire. On his retirement in 1990 this accomplishment was handed on to one of his most esteemed protégés, surprising many who had imagined the St Olaf Choir to be forever lost in its Nordic roots – to African-American New Yorker Anton Armstrong, St Olaf Choir's fourth director in succession to Melius Christiansen.

I am keen to learn how this powerful partnership came about. 'I was born of immigrant Afro-Caribbean parents,' he is delighted to begin, 'and grew up in Hempstead, Long Island, only a few



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there is a huge musical and social responsibility, whatever size the concert.' And again Armstrong's own budding leadership skills would find exceptional opportunities. 'In my final year at the boychoir I was head boy and had two opportunities in which to assist: in preparation for the North American premiere of Penderecki's *St Luke Passion* in Toronto and as John Nelson's assistant for a *Matthew Passion* in New York the same year.'

By the mid-70s, as he looked ahead to university, Armstrong felt compelled to unite his interests in theology and choral music. Coming from a Lutheran background, St Olaf College was the obvious destination. 'Ken Jennings had settled in as director, and I participated in his exceptional 70-voice main choir as well as conducting a 24-voice liturgical ensemble.' Both Jennings and recently retired Robert Scholz became his mentors. Academic studies continued from 1978 in the Midwest: a master's degree at the University of Illinois, working with Harold Decker; and in 1980 an invitation to Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where covering a one-year sabbatical slid imperceptibly into a decade and a DMA at Michigan State University. Then in 1990 Kenneth Jennings retired, leaving open the directorship of the St Olaf Choir. Armstrong was an uncontested first choice.

'I inherited in essence a tradition that Christiansen had founded. Ken [Jennings] had discovered a new elasticity to the sound, but he had also uncorked the vibrato bottle – something he would spend the next 21 years re-corking. But I knew the sound I wanted: a wider tonal palette that no one would call a "white sound", conceived in the vocal perspective of singers 19 to 22 years old. Ken had expanded the repertoire, but I sought to keep the tradition of Lutheran hymnody and Bach motets, there from the start, at the centre of our music making.' Christiansen was versed in that tradition from study with Gustav Schreck in Leipzig in 1897–9 and 1906–7. 'I also wanted to look at music, folk music especially, from outside the European canon, from Africa to the Pacific rim. There is a sense of "celebration of life" just as in a Bach motet; the same "lord of the dance" hovering over both! But it is a question of realisation. It takes technique in either expression for the power of music to become the conduit. It is the whole

dozen miles from New York.' Early experiences included singing in the choir of the local Lutheran Church of the Epiphany, playing for chapel services and leading a nearby girls' school choir and stepping in to direct choir and orchestra in the Fauré Requiem. But his most important musical influence before university was the American Boychoir.

'In 1968, when I was 11, I heard the boys singing Britten's very new *Golden Vanity*. After an audition I was thrilled to move to Princeton to become part of the boychoir.' Uniquely in the US, its resident boys tour home and abroad every year and appear in major orchestral concerts in Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Washington DC. 'Performing music in such surroundings lit my fire not only for singing,' says Armstrong, 'but for the choral tradition. With boys alone in three or four parts



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person in the process of performance that is vibrantly transformed by music. For me a smug, slick, superficial "professionalism" is an empty achievement.' He quotes affectionately the mentor of so many choral directors of his generation in America, Helen Kemp: 'Body, mind, spirit, voice: it takes the whole person to rejoice.'

Aside from Helen Kemp, Armstrong speaks of his influences as a musician and conductor: Robert Shaw, Joseph Flummerfelt, Dale Warland and Helmuth Rilling. Armstrong has collaborated with Rilling for some time preparing the Youth Choral Academy (an 85-voice mixed ensemble of high-school-aged singers) at the annual Oregon Bach Festival. Another influential colleague is André Thomas, Director of Choral Activities at Florida State University. 'But training younger voices will always remain centre-stage for me,' admits Armstrong. 'Even before I left St Olaf College, I ran the American Boychoir summer "camp" during the whole of the 80s. If I had not had the chance to sing in the boychoir, I would not be the musician I am today.' And still Armstrong feels the joy in contributing to the youngest generation by directing the Troubadors, a local boys' choir in Northfield. 'It keeps my teaching honest; and it

keeps me in touch with the reality of other choirs. I want to set the foundations for other young men and women in music.' And with it we see Armstrong's ethic of music clearly: 'Music is a vocation not an occupation; music is a vehicle to transform the world, for those who perform it and those who listen to it. Unlike on the sports field where there are always winners and losers, in the performance of music there are only winners.'

A unique musical personality, Armstrong is grounded in the world of ordinary folk, with whom he has never lost touch. Although he rejects a paltry, self-centred professionalism, he is equally critical of the increasingly visible commercial worship music that has no inherent value. 'The world of "praise rock-and-roll" of what's called "contemporary Christianity" is narcissistic, feeding neither mind nor spirit. Pre-record and the non-choral pop band are passive experiences, the adversary of the active joy of human spirit expressed through the voice. They have nothing to offer communities who aspire to sing to the best of their abilities.'

In many ways the St Olaf Christmas festival expresses Armstrong's mission par excellence. An annual event reaching well back into the last century, it combines the whole 660-strong college in readings and music. The music ranges from plainsong to polyphony to Lutheran hymnody and Bach to the folk repertoire so close to its director's heart, to contemporary works exacting great skill, like Eric Whitacre's *Lux Aeterna* heard last year. Locally the devotional event attracts 20,000 each year in four concerts; nationally and internationally the television broadcast reaches a further 4 to 5 million. 'I am indebted to my colleagues: Steve Amundson, whose work with the orchestra could rival that of any music college in the US and to John Ferguson, who directs the St Olaf Cantorei, heads our organ department, and regularly provides new material of his own. The college also benefits a great deal from my other conducting colleagues, Sigrid Johnson and Christopher Aspaas Anton.'

The Robert Foster Cherry Award for Great Teaching, from Baylor University, has been awarded biennially since 1991. At a value of \$200,000, it is one of America's most coveted awards. It went this year to Anton Armstrong. Its creator, a student at Baylor nearly a century ago, might have crafted the words for his bequest as a tribute to Armstrong, who has dedicated his life to teach others whether on campus or the stage: 'The most significant honour for extraordinary teaching, for... a lover of the acquisition of learning who can inspire his students, arouse their imagination, and stimulate their curiosity to desire to learn everything that man can know, and achieve everything that man can reach and grasp.' ■