Patricia A. (“Arlene”) Long

Interviewed by Lisa Louis

June 16, 2019

Corpus Christi, Texas

Transcribed by Lisa Louis

**Lisa Louis:** This is Lisa Louis. It’s June 16, 2019 at about 2:45 in the afternoon. It’s a Sunday, um, and I am here on the campus of Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi interviewing Arlene Long, who is the Artistic Director of the Corpus Christi Chorale. And thank you for being here.

**Arlene Long:** I’m so happy to be here. This is fun.

**LL:** Um, just sort of to start us off as kind of a fun question. (both laugh) What is your favorite, um, choral group of all time?

**AL:** Oh, the one I’m listening to at the moment! Actually, several, I can’t narrow it down. Robert Shaw Chorale was the first one I was aware of really, uh, in my young adulthood when I became really interested in this. And it was spectacular, and you’d get the CD and play it. Um, the Atlanta Master Chorale on Youtube these days, and I’m from Atlanta, they are stunning, and I love his choice of repertoire. The Angel City Chorale, which is a big group in Los Angeles, is, um, adventurous in their repertoire, they do some amazing stuff classically and some pop, jazz, global music. And then of course, here in Texas, Conspirare—that’s to die for.

**LL:** Great! So, I wanted to sort of start out finding a little bit more out about you and your background, um, and you just mentioned Atlanta, so were you born in Atlanta?

**AL:** I was born in Atlanta, I grew up in Georgia, in Atlanta. I didn’t know there was another place on the planet, um, except for Florida, we went to Florida on vacation. I am an only child. Uh, I took piano lessons and, when I was in third grade, the music teacher at my elementary school came into everybody’s classroom and said, “Is there anybody here who takes piano?” And I did, and another girl did, so we raised our hand and she said “Okay, you two are going to play for our choir which we’re starting.” A-ha! And what that consisted of then was playing the melody. She was beginning a program; it was a perfect way to start. I was—I will forever be grateful to her for starting it that way. And we sh—the two of us shared pieces so it was not stressful for us. Um. I played for church choir, youth choir, I played for high school choir, I went to college and played for college choir. Um, I’ve always lived with singers.

**LL:** So you said third grade was when this was, like, 8 or 9 years old, something like that?

**AL:** I started taking piano when I was in first grade and—and now this was third grade and um, they were starting a little choir at my elementary school, that’s when it began.

**LL:** When did you actually start to think: “Hey, I want to do this, like, for my life, for a living” or not just for a living but “This is my passion?”

**AL:** Oh, I knew that when I was a little girl. Uh, I got very unhappy when we went on vacation if I could not play piano in the, you know, where we were in Florida, there was, I didn’t have a piano in the house, and I started crying and my parents said what’s wrong? And I said, well, I want to play the piano. So, bless them, they took me every afternoon into the piano store in the town and let me play, and that made me very happy. And, so, I—I could not imagine myself doing anything else ever. It’s like I came here to do this.

**LL:** So then you went to college and you studied music?

**AL:** I did. I was an organ major initially because I was really interested in church music. And, um, actually I was a piano major for a bit and I was not doing some things technically correct and so it was bothering my body and I discovered that if I practiced organ I could go longer on the organ ‘cause it didn’t take the muscle that I thought, at the time, that piano took. So I switched to organ, got really entranced in, um, church music and went to a church school, played for the *a capella* choir for rehearsals and then, since it was an *a capella* choir on tour, I had to sing, which was a hoot, but they let me go anyway so that I could sing. So, lots of choir stuff.

You get to be the sound engineer. And the interviewer. And the editor.

*pause in recording*

**LL:** All right. So, what was your experience of music study like in college? You talked a little bit about your switching from piano to organ, um, what else—what else do you remember of that?

**AL:** It was just like a kid in a candy store most of the time. It was fun. I was terrified of the theory teacher. I would duck in the women's restroom when he came down the hall my first year. By the time I was a senior he was my hero. I really struggled with music history—I still struggle with history. I know Bach's dates, 1685 to 1750, beyond that I don't know very much. My ears served me well.

**LL:** I can imagine that you listened to a lot of music when you were in college?

**AL:** Oh, yes, and I could tell you bad stuff I did that way, but I won't. (laughs) Well, I will. Music history “drop the needle.” My roommate and I both had perfect pitch and we thought, This is ridiculous. I'm not gonna spend hours in the library listening to all that stuff. We just would memorize the keys they were in and figuring out okay that's the relative major or minor or whatever. And our teacher, who happened to be my organ teacher, figured it out and he must have spent hours. The third test we had, he had monkeyed with the turntable at that time, slowed it down or sped it up, I don't remember which. Nothing was in the right key that we ever recognized. We both flunked. He called us in. “I know what you did. You need to really listen to the pieces that you're supposed to be listening to.” Oh, I was so embarrassed! That was a moment. Um, I did lots of accompanying for singers. Um, I was very lucky to be in a class that was just good people and so it was—it was a fun time in my life.

**LL:** And then you went on to do a master’s in music—

**AL:** I did. I went to the University of Michigan to get a master’s degree in organ with Marilyn Mason and Ted Tibbs, who had been my teacher—undergrad teacher and he was now a doctoral student at Michigan. That experience in Michigan opened me up to so much music that I didn't know was there. Uh, it was a growing time musically and personally. There were lots of people there that I didn't know existed, so it was all—all good. Fabulous concerts. Stravinsky had come, uh, Duruflé and his wife came, had some really stellar people! So. It's a good thing to do grad work—grad school work at a really fine institution.

**LL:** So then you came to Corpus Christi—

**AL:** I did.

**LL:** In 1969?

**AL:** I did, um-hm.

**LL:** Was that immediately after graduate school or did you—

**LL:** No, after grad school I—I worked. I went back to the school where I had been as an accompanist for one year and I had a church job at the largest Baptist church in Birmingham, actually in Alabama, I think, Dawson Memorial Baptist. Beautiful organ, wonderful choir director. I—it was a good place for growing some new teeth. And I worked there and taught public—taught private lessons for four years and then married; went to the—went back to Michigan with my husband who was working on a doctor's degree in voice for a year and then we moved to Corpus because he got a job here.

**LL:** So then once you came to Corpus, I believe you—you became involved with Del Mar, like, almost immediately?

**AL:** Yes. I was doing some accompanying for his students and then eventually whoever was doing their accompanying left and I got the accompanying position. I taught some theory, taught some piano; I just sort of slipped into the department gradually as they needed people. I was very part-time because at the time there was the nepotism law that two people of the same family could not be in the same department full-time, so I was part-time, but it was full-time.

**LL:** So Del Mar has always had a good reputation for their music department—

**AL:** Um-hm, um-hm.

**LL:** And they were extremely well thought of and really that was the major music department—is this correct—the major music department in Corpus Christi?

**AL:** The only one at the time. And Ron Shirey was the choral director. He was a giant, musically. Just a giant. I was so lucky to have him for a couple of years. He left and went to New Mexico and they hired several other people who were here for various amounts of time. I was in and out of accompanying at that time but always accompanying for voice students and it was a great place to grow. Just really a good place.

**LL:** So what was the—okay—what was the actual point at which you became involved specifically with Chorale, then?

**AL:** Hmm, a few years later.

**LL:** Okay.

**AL:** The second year that Gene McKinley was here. I had played for Chorale occasionally with Ron Shirey but not all the time. Gene came, they needed an accompanist, that's when I started weekly, and they were doing *Messiah* every year and so Symphony asked me to play harpsichord and I was terrified but I did it anyway and, you know that thing about some things are just going to scare you and you just have to go do it while you're scared, that was one of those. I was astonished at what Chorale could do. I had never seen a group of adults, who just did it for the fun of it, work so hard. But it was—it was really a good growing time.

**LL:** And so can you talk a little bit more about what you remember of the Chorale back then? What was the group like?

**AL:** Mmm. More public-school music teachers in there because they weren't so terribly busy as they are now. Dentists, nurses, an oilman, a lot of students came. At Del Mar, the choir kids, many of them, also sang in Chorale because it was their opportunity to experience this—major choral works which Chorale was doing more than little, smaller works which the kids did in their college choir, which was a growing thing and then they would get to the Chorale and do these major works. It was very much a community body. People who loved singing in their church choir, many of them, would come and sing on Tuesday night in Chorale. We—we did some amazing things. We went to New Mexico City [Mexico City, Mexico] to sing Beethoven's Ninth, um—

**LL:** That was during the Beethoven's 200th birthday celebrations?

**AL:** I think it was, I think it was. That was—actually I was not playing for them then. Ron Shirey was directing, but my husband and I went as chaperones for the students in the group. That was a hoot. So, Chorale was very much a part of the music department and a part of the larger community, and was really an outlet for so many people who loved to sing.

**LL:** And today in the Chorale we do have some students but not very many students, it's mostly adults and so you could call it a multi-generational choir, I guess, but are there benefits to that, to having a mixture of the young and old in a group?

**AL:** I think so, the—the young people discover what it's like to be in with adults and the adults are very happy to mentor younger people as long as they behave, and they do. The choral sound of a younger voice sitting next to an older voice is really a good thing, too, if it's managed well, and I'm sad that we don't have more students here, but the students are busy in their student groups and that's probably where they need to be. But it does change the texture, the choral texture somewhat.

**LL:** Assuming that some of the people who might eventually listen to this aren't necessarily musicians or aren't choral musicians, could you talk a little bit about the differences between a younger voice and an older voice?

**AL:** Hmm. An older voice generally is deeper, perhaps slower, um, seasoned in terms of reading and artistic growth, perhaps. Students have a younger, lighter voice; sometimes so clean that we—the older people need the cleaner sound. Students have great energy, enthusiasm; they think quicker than adults so there's this balancing thing that has to go on between the ages and that's a good thing, I think.

**LL:** What was the proportion of students to adults when you were at Del Mar? Can you remember, or do you have a feeling for what that was like back then?

**AL:** Well, I've looked at some pictures of when we went to New York City, and there were probably ten or fifteen students out of about sixty-five or seventy people in the Chorale, so, about like that generally. Probably some students who did not go to New York because of the money and I don't—I don't remember, that was a good many years ago. (laughs)

**LL:** Have the standards of musicianship changed, do you think, at all between now and then and when we're saying then I mean, I guess, if—if you began accompanying the Chorale regularly after McKinley came—

**AL:** Early seventies.

**LL:** Yeah, so, do you think there's any difference?

**AL:** Yes, there is less worry today, at least in my book, on being, um—let me say that another way. There is more worry today about being absolutely correct. I'm not crazy about that. Early on, we were—we were correct, and we did a lot of hard, hard work and I'll talk about that in a minute, but there was also a more, a “deeper human character” feeling, I think, than we have today. Today is all about “get it right because we all have a doctor—doctor's degree and it has to be so right.” It's very litigious these days in my book. That's why I'm kind of a dinosaur but—there we are. There was something I was going to say, what was it? It'll come back.

**LL:** You mentioned Ron Shirey, and I was going to see if you remember anything interesting

about—about him. You mentioned he was sort of a giant.

**AL:** He was a giant. He was—would not take no for an answer. He did not know the meaning of stop. He, um, was a phenomenal, phenomenal director, singing—voice coach; he was really a giant. I was very sad when he left here. And we had the good fortune of him coming back several times, um, to put what's now the two—the Corpus Christi Chorale eventually split. Some of us came to Texas A&M [note: Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi], some stayed at Del Mar, and—and the symphony wanted to do some big choral works and so, smartly, John Giordano, who was the symphony conductor, knew Ron Shirey from Fort Worth, and brought Ron down here to put the two groups together and that was just like “Oh, this is real choral work.” Ron was fierce and kind and demanding and all of that, and he was just so inspiring and so brave to take us all on. (laughs)  He was good; it was wonderful.

**LL:** And you also talked about the Mexico City trip, um, mentioned that. We had a conductor at one time named Dr. Shearer—I don't believe he was *Dr.* Shearer when he started here but he—

**AL:** C. M. Shearer.

**LL:** Yes, do you have any memories?

**AL:** I don't, much. I was not playing for Chorale at the time very much.

**LL:** We also—I was—as you know I've been I've been doing some research in old *Caller-Times* archives and I discovered that there used to be a contemporary music festival here in Corpus Christi

**AL:** Yes, yes—

**LL:** And some amazing composers even participated in that—

**AL:** It was a big deal.

**LL:** Mm-hmm, like Ginastera and—

**AL:** Yes—

**LL:** And Penderecki maybe?

**AL:** Yes—

**LL:** Ned Rorem—

**AL:** Yes, every year, some—some big composer that we had studied even came and we usually did some works of theirs and they would coach whether it was a cello concerto or a sonata or a choral piece or a band piece, they were very generous with their giving and their mentoring of faculty and students as we worked together to perform their pieces in front of them and that is called pressure. But it was a good kind of pressure because we got instant feedback from the composer. That was huge. It was a big deal at Del Mar and the music school just sort of stopped during those—those times and just did rehearsals and listened to his [note: the composer’s] lectures. It was a fabulous program that happened once a year. I believe Bill Sch- Bill Schroeder who was the head of the theory department engineered that and it was—it was a smart thing to do. We all got to see and be around a living composer, which was a plus.

**LL:** And that was more or less in the 70s? Do you remember—did that continue into the 1980s? I have—

**AL:** I don't know. I don't—my sense of timing is so foggy. It went on for a while and I don't know what stopped it. Maybe money, maybe a different chair, I have no recollection of why it stopped. But it was amazing for little Corpus Christi, with our little students, to get to rub shoulders with a famous, big conductor [composer] whose name we knew and whose music we had listened to. It was a fabulous experience.

**LL:** And contemporary music is not the easiest music to do.

**AL:** Oh, we sweated. It was hard. Um. Recently, Bill Doherty came to conduct his *Requiem—*two years ago, I think—and that was a lot of pressure. He conducted it himself. We learned it and I asked him to conduct and that was a wonderful experience but it—it makes you really pay attention when it's the composer that you're looking at. And we get instructions, you know, from the horse's mouth. We don't have to wonder.

**LL:** I think you did that as well at one point with the *African Sanctus*?

**AL:** Oh goodness, yes, forgot about that one. David Fanshawe, this wild man, he had spent considerable time in Africa recording African music in various tribes, and he had used those recordings as sort of a jumping-off place to write a mass, a *Sanctus*. I don't think it was the whole mass, I really don't remember, but it was just thrilling, and you'd hear the Africans on tape and then all of a sudden, the living Chorale would jump in and sometimes sing with; sometimes we'd exchange antiphonal work. David was from Australia. We flew him over to Corpus Christi from *Australia*. It was a hard week, but it was a good week, and there's nothing like that, you know. We had—most of us had not experienced African music very much. It was kind of at the beginning of global music beginning to come into its own, and this was just really new for the singers and for the city. It was heavily advertised and well attended, and just blew us out of the water, all of us. It was—it was a good, good experience.

**LL:** There's often a lot of difficult rhythm in African music, right?

**AL:** Oh!

**LL:** Polyrhythms and that kind of thing.

**AL:** Oh, we—we— it was hard. I don't remember much about how we worked it out, but we did.

**LL:** So, I was noticing in a couple of articles that I read about performances featuring Gene McKinley as the director that in 1981, which I believe is his first year, you started with 35 singers and in 1982 there was a review of a concert where the reviewer was very excited that there were, um, like, 80 people on stage. Do you have any memories of that? That's a pretty dramatic increase within a two-year period.

**AL:** It is. I played for them on their last concert the year they had 30 something. They did the Bernchester—Bernstein Chichester Psalms and—down at First Methodist and I played the organ for it, and it was a struggle for everyone, and then the next year I became their accompanist, and Gene had worked very hard to recruit people. It's like the new—new coach comes to town, and a

whole bunch of team players want to play on that team, and so the attendance picked up; heavy advertising, new director in town, that always happens. It's like a church when the pastor leaves, uh, and they get a new pastor. Everybody comes out to see what—what's about the new guy. That's what happened, and it just happened that Gene as the new guy was an amazing wizard about music. Amazing. And so, the people that came to see about the new guy were really attracted and—and Chorale for many years was quite solid and grew tremendously during that time. I'll tell you one thing, Gene—Gene went to Robert Shaw workshop every summer and came back with all kinds of goodies. The goodie that we thought we would lose our mind over was count singing. If you've ever been in Gene’s choir you have done count singing. Uh, it's an amazing skill. Instead of singing words, you go “one and two and three and four and” or “one-ee and a two-ee and a” or some such, so that you're counting it. And it—I don't know what it does to the mind, but instead of thinking pitch so much, you're focused more on rhythm, and the mystery is: the pitch gets more accurate and in better tune immediately. Intonation is not a problem any more. And when we were worried about pitch, intonation was a problem. Now, you're losing the language, but until you get the music piece of it you shouldn't be putting language with it anyway, unless it's really, really, really easy. I thought we would lose our mind learning to count sing. We had various mutiny forms coming along. I was one of them. I learned as the pianist that if I could repeat, like, if it's a dotted quarter note that would be “one-and-two” and you have to say the “two” even though that's the dot. I discovered that if I played “ding-ding-ding” for each eighth note that they had to count, so I was—I was count playing not just them singing, it really helped get the idea across, and then I knew better where they were too. So it was a phenomenal growth that happened over several years, really. We begged Gene: “Don't make us do that anymore,” and we lost every time. We did it, and did it, and did it, and now it's become a thing, and it's remarkable the results that you get. I will forever be grateful that we had to learn how to do that because he just wasn't g— some people quit! They just weren’t gonna do it. “Okay, goodbye!” It was a phenomenal tool. I still don't understand exactly why, but it’s—it works.

**LL:** So, that's a great example of how a technique, um, can be brought to a group, you know, by someone who's committed to that technique and how it can, um, improve things, change things.

**AL:** It did. Some of the—some of the high school kids—high school teachers in the group started count singing with their kids on their level; it spread, only beca—all because Gene went to the Robert Shaw workshop and brought it back and was too stubborn to let us off the hook. So it works. It was amazing.

**LL:** The word that you used earlier was, I think, a “wizard” of choral directing.

**AL:** (laughs)

**LL:** Is there anything else that you can remember that—that was really special about his approach?

**AL:** His sense of text and how text plays with the melody and the harmony and vice versa was intuitive, I think. He, um, could really access the depths of the text. He had the keenest ears of anybody I've ever known. He, um, knew exactly what to tell somebody about their voice, and a whole section; people didn't always want to hear it, but the sound got better and better. His sense of phrasing and beauty was remarkable and moving. So many times, we'd all go home after Chorale just so deeply moved because we had had these experiences together that we didn't know we could have until we got there.

**LL:** Something that Gene McKinley appeared to enjoy because you did it several times, I think, while he was here, and he was here for about 20 years, I think—

**AL:** Something like that—

**LL:** Was P.D.Q. Bach—

**AL:** Oh! (laughs)

**LL:** And it's—it's so interesting because it's not—obviously it's not the regular classical repertoire, right? It's sort of a comic take—

**AL:** It is comic!

**LL:** On the classical. Can you talk a little bit about his enjoyment—obvious enjoyment of P.D.Q. Bach and how you all brought that to life on the stage, in the concert hall?

**AL:** (laughs) After we got through laughing!

**LL:** (laughs)

**AL:** We endured a certain amount of laughter in Chorale rehearsal because it was just so fun and so funny and—and we had to get over the laughter so that we could make it happen. Uh, yes. we did several P.D.Q. Bach programs. It was sort of a relief from working on stuff that was really demanding and hard; not that P.D.Q. Bach was easy. It's really tricky sometimes but it has a lighter feel to it. It's really quite sophisticated because it has a lot of, um, playful references to other pieces of music or other styles that if you're not a musician you might not get the—the cleverness that it is. It'd still be enjoyable, and we got to do costumes and we—we used, uh, kazoos and we just had a hilariously good time making fools of ourselves in front of people at a concert—what was called a concert—you know, that was fun. All the time it would not have been fun, but it was a great relief from working so hard on something so serious and I think that's the—that's one of the artistries of Gene’s programming was he knew when to push and when to back off. And went to go light and when to go deep and serious, and that's a skill and an art that not everybody has. It's really tricky. He spent a lot of time doing that.

**LL:** Do you feel like people thought differently of the Chorale after Chorale did things like the P.D.Q. Bach, I mean, maybe members of the Chorale or even audience members might have perceived the group differently?

**AL:** Hmm. Interesting question. Yes, I think we all discovered that we were human; that it was okay to laugh and still be a good musician. Um, most of the things that Chorale does, most of the repertoire is serious subject matter or virtuosic subject matter. P.D.Q. Bach is virtuosic but in a different way and very, um, well, humorous. It's just funny! It's funny to do, it's funny to listen to, and I think the audience gets a big kick out of watching these dead serious musicians making fools of themselves in such a jolly, fun way! So, yeah, that was a—that was a thing.

**LL:** So, uh, Gene McKinley left in 2001—

**AL:** Um-hm.

**LL:** And I think there was a little bit of a difficult period then for a couple of years—

**AL:** There was. I was not playing for Chorale then. Uh, I had quit playing right—shortly before he left, and so other people can tell you about that. I have no—no memories at all of those years until, um, Chorale moved out to Texas A&M [note: Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi] and Sam Logsdon was the director and the Chair of Music, and so I started playing for Sam when we moved out here and, um, that was a good move. Hated to leave Del Mar. The move was done mostly because the Performing Arts Center had just gotten built, and the symphony had moved into the Performing Arts Center on campus, and if you have been in the PAC you understand what I'm talking about, but it is a temple of sound in my book. I—the first day we walked through it, they took the music faculty on a tour and I almost burst into tears when I walked in there, and I'm not a crier, but it was beautiful visually and, the most remarkable thing, you could hear the life in the silence in the space. Nobody was making music, we were all still and quiet, but you could hear uh—a vitality in the room and you just knew that was gonna be a good place and it is a remarkable acoustic environment. Dr. Bob Ferguson was a very wise man, uh, who wanted the best, and he got the best, including an acoustic team who came down here and spent a week, when we moved into the building, listening to all of us playing our instruments, uh, all the different groups. They accommodated many different needs, sound needs, for different groups: big, little, horns, flutes, nothing, voice, piano. I was the piano player at one point and they—they said “Just sit down and play” and I was playing and I couldn't hear myself very well but they were walking around and after a while they came up and sat next to me and said “What do you hear?” and I said “Not much” and they said “Keep playing!” So I did, and they went around and adjusted some of the curtains in the—in the room, changed the sound quality in the room. Ah! Now! I hear better and they would check with everybody and gave us several different sound settings for those curtains and they gave us a wonderful performing space, so we are so fortunate to have this place. It—it's—it could be anywhere. It doesn't have to be in Corpus Christi. We are so fortunate to have the Performing Arts Center and hooray for the University for doing that and Dr. Bob. He did it. We're grateful.

**LL:** Would you say that that is the best space that we currently have in our city for classical music performance? For a music performance?

**AL:** For a large group, yes. First Methodist Church is a great place. Chorale has gone to First Methodist Church a number of times; they have a fabulous organ. In fact, last year we did Dan Forrest’s *Requiem for the Living* there because we needed a good organ. We have also performed at Good Shepherd, church up on the bluff, but those are the best places in Corpus and the Performing Arts Center is just my favorite place. First Methodist is good, too. Um, I know some years ago I took a small choral group to Paris and we sang in Notre Dame and, um, La Madeleine, and then we went to the American Cemetery which is a whole other experience of singing which—we were all in tears, it was so dynamic and dramatic. But La Madeleine, which was Fauré’s church, ah! We warmed up in the church itself, and we started looking at each other going “Oh my goodness this is so easy, and it's so—we can hear ourselves so good, and it's so easy to sing!” It was an amazing, amazing concert which we didn't get recorded because the—somebody had forgotten to charge the record player, the tape machine, whatever, so it only lives in our memory, but I came back to Corpus going “Gosh, I wish we had La Madeleine here.” The PAC is a pretty good—it's pretty close. Acoustics make such a difference. You can't appreciate it if you have never been in a wonderful place but it's—it makes everybody's voice and ears—probably ears more than voice—work so effortlessly and that's what a choral group needs. Probably an orchestra needs that too, but an orchestra is much bigger, louder forces, more colored, varied instruments. A chorus is [a] fabulous, intimate, small-scale group. So it's doubly important, I think, for a chorus to have a great acoustic space because the range of pitch and dynamics is just gonna be smaller because the voice is a smaller instrument than an orchestra’s instruments, whatever they may be, they're so—colored so differently. So we are very fortunate to be able to sing in the PAC. My dream, in heaven, would be to rehearse in the PAC every week but that's not going to happen, but I'm just grateful that we can sing our concerts in the PAC. It's remarkable.

**LL:** You mentioned being able to hear—being able to listen as well as—as singing and I think people what they watch—when they watch singers—they watch a choir—it's obvious that they are singing but the listening is sort of invisible to the audience. Can you talk about the importance of the listening part of what singers in a choir do?

**AL:** Hmm, that's an interesting question. Listening is done better with the eyes closed and yet in today's society, we are so visual that we want to watch, and I think that's one reason in old churches the singers—the choir was behind the congregation. You didn't see them; you heard them. Um. So singing requires that we sort of damp down our visual sense and focus on our ears more and we're not used to doing that, so it takes a great deal of what I call active listening. Today, most of us are used to sitting listening to the radio and doing something else, or watching a TV screen or some kind of screen, and we're watching and the sound and movies, too; we’re almost—the music is almost “oh by the way” because we're really focused on the visual. Now movie soundtracks, if you watch a movie without the sound, it's not the same. The sound gives the emotional component in a movie so many times. You—you know that here comes the crook, or here comes the sad place, or here comes the horse that's going to win or—the music gives an emotional clue, but we're not used to accessing that so much. And choral music demands a great deal not just of the singers but of the audience. *How* do you listen? When you hear a choral concert, you should go home mentally exhausted; probably emotionally exhausted. The singers do. They're high as a kite sometimes, but they're also, um, exhausted. If you listen with the whole body it is, that's how you get the most out of it, but it takes a lot out of both singers and audience. And I'd like to tell the audience sometimes: “Can you practice active listening?” because we go plop ourselves down in a chair—I do it, too—and we take it in and it's kind of like background music for our thoughts as they go through our head. The idea of meditating or damping down the monkey mind so that you give more of your mind to what you're actually hearing and what it's about is a very—a skill that has to be developed, let's put it that way, and we have not very many ways to develop that today. So put me on a soapbox someday and I'll talk about that but probably not today. (laughs)

**LL:** That's almost like choral singing as a mindfulness practice.

**AL:** Ooh, that's a good way to say it. Yes, Lisa, a mindfulness practice. Singing and listening! It takes the audience, um, the willingness to give a great deal, and they don't know always what's coming and so it's a constant surprise and an—and an unfolding as you journey through this music. It's an amazing experience and, uh, we need to have more of that.

**LL:** Can you think of a Chorale performance that really stands out for you—

**AL:** (laughs) Oh—

**LL:** And tell me a little bit about why?

**AL:** Oh, yikes, how many can you stand?

**LL:** (Laughs)

**AL:** Years and years ago, we did the—the Beethoven Ninth Symphony, uh, with Corpus Christi Symphony in Selena Auditorium and the explosion at the end of the last movement—musical explosion—is just overwhelming. I would not have been surprised, and I was a young woman, I would have not have been surprised if I’d have had a heart attack right there. It's so powerful when you're on stage in the middle of that sound. Uh, we did the *Messiah* every year for Christmas with wonderful solo singers that the symphony brought in, that was a good experience for a very long time. Uh, we did the *African Sanctus* that Lisa asked about. We brought in—in the early nineties, we brought in the Paul Winter Consort—the whole group—to do *Missa Gaia*. The music was not published yet, so we were reading off of manuscript paper, and that was hard, but it was a phenomenal experience. Uh, we did several Brahms *Requiems*. If you've never sung the Brahms *Requiem* it is a dense, loaded piece of Romantic literature that is just over-the-moon, uh, beautiful. Um, since I've been director we did the *Gospel Mass* by Robert Ray which, actually, 30 years ago we brought Robert Ray the composer to Corpus and did that program at First Methodist with Robert Ray conducting.  It is git-down gospel that's just so moving and so much fun, and then we did the *Gospel Mass* several years ago in the PAC and brought back—we had two Corpus soloists: Ada Godley, who still sings in Chorale and Willie Hurd, who is in New Jersey now but Willie is phenomenal—singer, human being—so is Ada; the two of them, we could have we could've—we could’ve stayed and heard them all night. They were fabulous. I already mentioned the Bill Doherty *Requiem,* that was wonderful. We brought Sam Reynolds who was a boy from Port Aransas. He went to Del Mar and finished at TAMU [note: Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi] and went on to grad school and now he lives in Florida where Bill, uh, works in music and so Bill, conductor, came to do his *Requiem* and Sam came to do the baritone solos, that was a fun time. Every season has goodies and some people like one thing and some people like another. It's kind of like preparing a—a meal. You just hope that somebody likes carrots, you know, gotta have it! Somebody else may prefer brussels sprouts but some people want a hamburger. You just make it—make it all work.

**LL:** So, um, when I was preparing for this interview I was doing a little bit of reading and I found a quote in an article from *Choral Journal* that I thought was pretty cool. Um, the quote was “Is there anything more fully human than the act of singing?” Do you agree with that? Do you think there's something “fully human” about singing?

**AL:** More than, more than. It, uh, the act of singing for one body combines body-mind-spirit so beautifully. It addresses more of the brain than almost anything and then you put a bunch of people in a room doing the same music together; you have this community experience that is really hard to describe. I suspect that sports teams have something close to that, dancer troupes have something close to that, theater people—the act of doing a big project that takes many people to bring into existence, so that we all need each other to do what we can do. Uh, Gene used to have a wonderful saying: “Nothing sings like people.” That is true, and it takes all of us and it is a gift that we give each other to show up every week at rehearsal. Sometimes you don't want to, but you go anyway, and that's what makes it happen. So yes, it is a very human, opening, connecting, unifying activity. You may not like the people that you're singing with or making music with, but during the music-making you get over it and you make the music, and that's—I think that's one reason musicians generally get along pretty well with each other. They have to practice getting along when the—they make music and that just sort of extends into real life. See where we are? [Addressed to the interviewer]

*pause in interview*

**LL:** All right, so, um, we've talked a lot about, sort of, the history of Chorale and the different performances you've been involved with and obviously over the years many, many different singers have been involved with Chorale and different conductors and different accompanists; in your opinion, why do people want or—or maybe need to make music together.

**AL:** Both want and need, sometimes, I think. Most people want to be part of something bigger than themselves Most of the time we're after community feeling of some kind. Singing actually makes one feel better physically and emotionally, usually. It kicks in endorphins and all kinds of things that are good for us. Um, we like being together to create beauty or to create fun or whatever it is we're creating at the moment. Hmm. Some people have a real need to express something that cannot be expressed so well as one person but as a group can do something amazing. That make sense? Okay.

**LL:** Sorry, I had to plug my headphones back in.

**AL:** Ah.

**LL:** So there's also been a lot of research studies that document various benefits to, um, performing music as a group, performing together; things like being better able to tolerate pain—

**AL:** Um-hm—

**LL:** Building social networks or social connections with other people—

**AL:** Yes, yes.

**LL:** Improving and—maybe this is more particularly true of aging members of the chorus, but, you know, mental agility, keeping your mind strong—

**AL:** Yes, yes.

**LL:** And well-being, a sense of well-being. What would you say are the benefits? Does that resonate with you and—

**AL:** Oh, totally, totally. Whenever we're working together, if it's on a good project like singing, people are going to feel good about what they're doing even when it gets hard, even when you have to work harder than you want to. There's still—the trajectory you're on is towards something good and we all need that. We all need that uplift of feeling like we're making a difference in the world. Um, you know, some of the studies say our hearts get, um, synchronized when you're singing to the sa— everybody in the room is singing to the same beat, and we've all experienced that. We don't usually think “Oh, I'm being synchronized with these people” but that is what happens. It's—it's remarkable. So many times after Chorale, people have been rehearsing for an hour and a half or two, after having done a day's worth of work and they're tired, but they—I cannot tell you how many people say “I feel better leaving than I did when I got here.” And that, to me, says we all needed this experience of being together doing work on the same something, putting our minds and hearts and physical energy into something together. It's the—it’s the connection, I'm sure, that's so good for us. It's just amazing.

**LL:** If you look at mindfulness practices that people recommend, it strikes me a lot of times, one of the mindfulness practices that's where you often start is breathing.

**AL:** Ah!

**LL:** “Take a deep breath,” right?

**AL:** Yes.

**LL:** So then you think about singing in a choir: breathing is essential and breathing together, often—

**AL:** Has to be.

**LL:** Do you see a connection, maybe, there, between the fact that—the centrality of breathing to singing and the choral experience for lack of a better word?

**AL:** Totally. Well the word “in-spire” is opposite of “ex-pire,” and “-spire,” “spirit”—to inspire is “to take in spirit.” Spirit is breath. The—the word—this morning in church, he talked about “ruach” as the breath. Conspirare—I love the name of that choral group—“with breath,” “with spirit.” So, yes, breathing together begins synchronizing. It's like the—in baseball or tennis you—there's the preparation with the racket or the ball or the bat. You—you—can you see me while I'm doing this—you pull back, that's the in-breath. And then you strike the ball and that is the beginning of the out-breath and then the ball or the musical phrase takes off and goes somewhere. So, yes, breathing is absolutely phenomenal. We all need to breathe to—for one thing, singing takes air; for another thing, it fuels our muscles. It relaxes our emotional being and feeds our muscles so that we can do—it's very physical work that we do. It—I mean, singing seems so prissy, in a way, but it's not. It's really physical, heavy-duty, big work as much as any athletic endeavor. So. Yes, I think breathing is a huge thing and I don't pay enough attention to breathing, honestly. Usually when the conductor's hand comes up that's a signal for the—for the people to breathe and the conductor will give an upbeat—that's to take a breath in—and then the downbeat comes and that's generally the s—the beginning of the sound. So yes. Breath is—breath is life.

**LL:** Um, so choral singing—we've been talking about these benefits to the musicians, to the singers. But what about audiences? Do audiences derive a specific benefit from choral singing? From listening to a choir?

**AL:** Well, when I'm in the audience, I always feel like I've received something that I didn't know was there or gotten a new perspective on something. Um, often experiencing beauty is hugely important to us as human beings. Um, again, it takes the audience's active participation in listening and they get out of it what they give it, and so if they are just tired and come and sit in a seat for an hour, okay, that’s fine, they can—they needed to do that. If they can do that and give themselves over to really take in the text, and the text is riding on the harmony and melody, it's a beautiful mystery how all of that happens together to affect our response. So, yes, if the audience can experience all of this together—what comes to mind is the—the protest marches. If one or two people went out and walked down the street, so what? If ten thousand people get out on the street, it says something, and so I think the audience doing it together, listening together experiences something that is different than if they each experienced probably the same—same exact music but not together. There's great power in being in community, both for singers and audience. Pavarotti used to talk about the circle that he could feel happening between his singing onstage and the audience’s receiving his music, and the energy circle that that created. He fed the audience; the audience fed him. And that generated the—the energy exchange, really. Can you see my hand going around in the air? And so, yes, the audience is absolutely as essential as the singers on stage to how the concert goes. I don't know that the audience always knows that. But I'm gonna tell them: they are as important as the singers because, without them, we could have a good time but it's different when somebody is listening. I think about the picture of children sitting in the pet store or the dog pound reading books to the animals. The children need an audience. That is a clever, beautiful thing to do. The dogs are probably happy to have the attention, and I'm not comparing audience to dogs *at all*, but there is this relationship that happens between singers and audience, so that we're all in this space, in this time, in this experience together. And I can't think of anything more human and more uplifting than having a together experience. That's what we yearn for.

*pause in recording*

**LL:** Sorry, I'm looking at my notes here.

**AL:** That’s okay!

**LL:** So that kind of suggests to me that while recorded music certainly has a place and it's—it's wonderful to be able to hear you know the great symphony orchestras and the great conductors the great choirs like you mentioned—the Robert Shaw Chorale or, you know, even Conspirare on YouTube—we're watching these videos, it's nice to be able to do that. But it sounds like there's a value in hearing live music. Can you talk ab—I mean—

**AL:** Oh!

**LL:** Is there anything else to say about that?

**AL:** Yes! There's a lot to say about that! My dad was a big baseball player and we got a TV mostly so he could watch baseball and we would sit in the living room and he would whoop and holler and howl and all of that. That was not the same as getting in the car and driving to the baseball park and sitting in the pews—in the pews! (laughs) —in the—in the park and eating a hotdog and yelling and screaming and watching baseball. A choral s—concert is exactly the same and I'm so grateful that we have YouTube and cds and all of the amazing things. Can you imagine, two hundred years ago, five hundred years ago, you didn't hear music at the drop of a hat. You had to go somewhere and not all the time. It was a big deal. Almost, our access to it is too easy now. We sometimes don't appreciate it. But to actually be there, in person, with other persons, um, is—there's nothing better. It's—I think it's—it's trouble. You have to get up and dress, drive somewhere, fool with other people, probably spend money, sit in an uncomfortable chair, perhaps, all of that and it's just easier to stay home, but—. And staying home is okay, but you don't get the broader experience of all the benefits of being in the place. There's nothing like being here now—you know, that wonderful book by Ram Dass, *Be Here Now*—applies to choral music so beautifully. Does that make sense? (laughs)

**LL:** I found another quote and I'm going to run this one by you as well. It mentions a conductor—choral conductor named Weston Noble.

**AL:** Ah!

**LL:** And the quote goes: “Conductors have the opportunity once or twice each week to unite people of different generations and talent levels into something larger than themselves by creating what Weston Noble refers to as the special world”—and that's in quotes—”’when everything is in line and we are momentarily whole’”—so those are Noble’s words—”conductors can guide choir members beyond social and generational divisions and toward oneness with each other.”

**AL:** I had the pleasure of meeting Noble and watching him work sometimes.  He was a human angel—don't know any other way to describe him. He lived in that special world. I don't think he ever left it, that's who he was. That's how he saw people. To be in an experience that makes us whole is, I think, one of his—his primary—I won't say objectives, because that's just who he was. But he used music to do that. With people, it takes all of it. It's not just about the music, it's not just about the people. It's—it's about the mystery of all of this put together. I—it's—it's a great way to live. I think he—I think Weston was right. He's the one that did—I’ve seen him do this—the voice matching within a section and in 15 minutes you can transform a section by who sits next to who—and you may not like the person you're sitting next to—but vocally, if your voices have a certain color, then the sound of the section smooths out in a way that it doesn't otherwise. So, Weston was um—really just a human angel. Remarkable. He was another giant like Ron Shirey; very different than Ron but both choral giants in this century, in our country, along with Robert Shaw. There have been a lot since then; I think those were the—the older generation who really set the stage for so much good choral music that we hear today of second and third generation down from those guys.

**LL:** So Corpus Christi Chorale has been around for 75 years. It was begun in 1945—

**AL:** Um-hm.

**LL:** At the same time that the symphony was started and with the same spirit. The idea of creating really sort of preeminent, I think, cultural institutions—

**AL:** And good for those people for doing that; we stand on their shoulders.

**LL:** The—I think the people who were really involved with this saw Corpus Christi on the verge, I think, of becoming sort of a regional center for South Texas and, thinking culturally, what does— what does Corpus Christi really need to go to that next level? One of the things was an auditorium, (laughs) which took a while, actually, to build, but the other was to have a stable, lasting-from-year-to-year Symphony and a choir. So what—what do you think a choir does for a community?

**AL:** Hm. Well, it is a symbol that people in this community value the arts, and that's a tricky word. It has become kind of an elite word and it shouldn't be. It should be the right of every human being to be an artist in some way. Singing is a good thing, symphony is a good thing, all the arts help us be truly more human than we might be otherwise. We need to feed that part of us that—um—can think higher and live more fully and more in harmony with the rest of the world. How do you like that word: “harmony?” It's a good word that we borrow from music so that we get along better. And to be in a community that has arts groups is a real plus. I was—I'll never forget when this community worked so hard to get our public radio TV station there was a huge drive for a lot of months—years, a lot of people working hard. That was a—that was an effort to make our community more able to access the musical arts and—and the TV arts. And different people have different choices but it's there for us to partake and enjoy and give to, and Corpus would be a poor—poor-er place without Del Mar, Texas A&M [note: Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi], the symphony, Chorale, the Arts Center, the Art Museum, the ballet, on and on and on, Harbor Playhouse, the theaters.  We are—for the size city that we are I think we're doing very well, and I look for it to only get bigger and better and more rich and—yes, there are ups and downs, but the general trajectory is up and that's because we're human and we need that.

**LL:** I'm pretty much through the questions I was going to ask but something did occur to me earlier that I was going to ask about. Was there ever any discussion of putting an organ in the PAC—

**AL:** Oh, yes,

**LL:** When they built it?

**AL:**  Initially the PAC was going to be very much different than it is. Yes, there was discussion of an organ and I don't think that's going to happen in my lifetime. Money is the big issue. It will happen at some point, I'm confident. It takes a whole lot of work. Kim Bryce over at Ray High School talks about it takes nuclear energy to get something—to bring something into being that was never there before. We have this miracle in the PAC and I'm grateful for that. I would like to see more rehearsal spaces in this town; the university is working really hard to make space and we're going to run out of island at some point. The PAC is a glorious space. It initially was supposed to have an office for a maestro, a rehearsal space or two, something for the art exhibit people and it doesn't, but what it is, is a glorious, as I call it, the temple of sound, and we're so fortunate. And so we have to know that the other is in the future, and we have to leave something for the new generation to chew on. They've got to do something. We did this; what's next? And “What's next?” is my favorite question. “What's next? What are you all going to do?” And so I'm grateful for the people who gave us the PAC and who persevered in building a symphony and a Chorale. Chorale’s first years were rocky. They were called different things, as you know because you're the one that's done the research. They would do this and that, and it took them awhile to settle on a name and how they were going to do business, and still yesterday we had a Choral—Choral Board—Chorale Board retreat. There’s still ongoing plans and tweaking and so it's a living being, I think. Chorale is a living being and I'll just leave it at that.

**LL:** Well, you mentioned what's next, so what would you say: what's next for Chorale?

**AL:** Oh, well, this is our 75th anniversary. We have a good, good season planned, although you don't know this, Lisa, I heard a new piece this morning, I'm not even going to mention it but the season may not look like it was gonna look. Forever until we walk out on stage or until we start rehearsals, I don't know for sure, and my church choir gets really frustrated with me changing things, but until it gets right, it's not right and, you know, sometimes you need to have parsnips instead of carrots and you thought you were going to cook carrots so, it's going to be okay. It's going to be an exciting year. We can always use more singers; we have a good, wonderful group, particularly of women; we could use another few men. I'd love to have some more men if anybody's out there who wants to sing. You need to be able to understand your voice and you

need to be able to read something about music, not totally good but know where to look, and be able to work together in achieving something that we cannot do by ourselves. It's going to be a good year.

**LL:** Is there anything Chorale hasn't done that you think Chorale should try to do at some point? Can you think of anything?

**AL:** Hm! I'd love to have more concerts in the season. I think that's not possible given our present personnel, who are people who don't get money at all; the only reason people sing in Chorale is for the fun of it and the pleasure of doing it. Actually, it costs them something because they have to buy their music and a parking pass and raise money to pay instrumentalists, blah-blah-blah, but there are—there's an endless list of pieces: major works, small pieces, maybe small groups breaking off sometimes. We've just started Corpus Christi Youth Chorale this past year. Nan Borden has driven that and will continue to have that next year, bringing up younger children to sing. The—the list of music is endless and there's so much new music coming out. I'm really excited about the choral music that's being written these days. It is—it is—when I was in grad school, I had a theory teacher say, “You just”— and this was back in the late sixties—“you just wait”—and the music was terrible then raucous, not appealing at all, had no meaning, that kind of thing. And he said, “You just wait. Before the turn of the century”—I'm telling you how old I am now—“the music will take a turn back to romanticism.” And boy has it! But it's not the gooey romanticism that we think of. Now the music coming out is full of comfort, of a larger awareness of our environment and how to treat each other, of our global community. We have passed through a time of being split into little areas of the world. We're becoming a global community and the music tells us that. The style of music tells us that. I'm so excited about the new music coming out, I just cannot even tell you, but it's good.

**LL:** I'm glad you mentioned the Corpus Christi Youth Chorale because as far as I know from the research I have done, this is the first time the Chorale has ever sponsored a group specifically for young voices—for children—

**AL:** It is.

**LL:** To learn how to sing in a choir—

**AL:** It is, it is.

**LL:** Can you talk about that? Where that kind of came from and the rationale behind that?

**AL:** Well, it came from some parents who wanted that experience for their children after a really good church choir director, Lee Gwodtz, left town and left this group of children who love to sing, and their parents thought that was good, and they had no place to go and so we adopted them! And that's going to be a wonderful thing for this town. It's kind of like the Youth Symphony. When Jose Flores and Melissa came, there was no instrumental group other than struggling orchestras in a couple of the high schools. Jose and Melissa have transformed that landscape: there's a Youth Orchestra, there's a prep Youth Orchestra, there's the Suzuki training. It's a whole program so that the—making music passes along and moves through, so it's not just the older people doing it, it's the younger people. Chorale’s getting young people in it! I love it! And now we’re starting to raise up y—new younger singers who in a few years will be the Chorale and it's, um, I can't say enough good about that. We have to—we have to love our art enough to give it away.

**LL:** So would it be accurate to say that Corpus Christi Chorale sees that it should provide a service to the community of Corpus Christi? It's not just—we're not just here to sing because we want to be onstage and sing?

**AL:** It's—that's almost none of it. It is a service to become more human, to create beauty, to offer experiences that we would not get otherwise. The educational component of Corpus Christi Youth Chorale is huge. We—we don't really know when we're born exactly how to sing. I mean, all children do it, but we need to learn how to do it together. We need to learn things about how to use our voice, how to find music, how to treat ourselves making music; it's endless, and so I'm so happy that these children are—are going to be experiencing at a young age what children's choirs all over the world, really, mostly in churches, have had. That's how music gets passed down and it's a good thing.

**LL:** All right—

**AL:** Thank you!

**LL:** I think—thank you very much! This—this was great! I really appreciate your time.

**AL:** Keep singing! No matter what you, do keep singing!

*end of interview*