

**Cantus in Choro**  
A GLOBAL VIEW OF CHORAL SINGING

# Leaving an incredible legacy

*Malcolm Bruno* talks to Joseph Flummerfelt as he retires after 33 years as choral director of Westminster Choir College, Princeton



**I**t was before the great fireplace of the Nassau Inn – still greeting a thirsty traveller as he enters by the massive oaken door – that George Washington and John Adams sat to make plans for the defeat of an invading British army some 230 years ago. Downstairs in this ancient hub of Princetonian life is the tavern, complete with stools, settles and tables and another great hearth, and it was there that I would find Joseph Flummerfelt, artistic director and principal conductor of one of America’s most celebrated choirs. For aside from boasting its University and Theological Seminary, Princeton is home to the Westminster Choir College.

After some 33 years at the helm, a deeply loved Dr Flummerfelt will step down from his full-time position, leaving behind an incredible legacy – as much for the college as himself. Hearing his gentle mid-western accent, one can tell immediately that this esteemed professor (with four honorary doctorates and countless accolades from conductors, and especially from the New York Philharmonic) comes from unassuming origins.

‘My mother was a music teacher in my native Vincennes, Indiana, and my first piano teacher. One of the earliest musical experiences I can remember was composing my own pieces, or I should say dictating them to my mother who dutifully wrote



them down! By the age of five I was playing hymns by ear and about two years later I heard a real organ with pipes in the local Presbyterian church. My own church had a Hammond, while the nearby Masonic lodge had a small undistinguished two-manual instrument where I began to teach myself to play.'

By the time Flummerfelt was 13 he was sufficiently accomplished to become organist at the German Evangelical Church. 'I just loved playing hymns and though I had no repertoire, I could improvise freely for a congregation that thought I was playing real pieces. \$7.50 in 1952 for a boy's weekly pay wasn't bad. A year later I moved to the First Baptist Church, which gave me \$10 a week, and by the next year I'd moved on to the First Christian Church at \$15!' By this time his conducting ambitions had been firmly lodged. 'Sound recordings were great treasures in those days, and I remember my family getting at vast cost a three-record set of *Messiah* – that great post-war recording by Sir Malcolm Sargent and the Huddersfield Choral Society. The sound seemed so magnificent that I was easily lured to spend hours in front of a mirror in the living room conducting to this wonderful recording.'

Quite unexpectedly for so natural a musician, Flummerfelt decided consciously to stay away from the world of the conservatoire as he left school. 'I enrolled at DePauw University in Indiana, nominally to study the organ and church music. Numerous courses in history, literature, philosophy and religion still left me with plenty of time for music. By my third year I became director of The Collegians, my own choral group. At the same time there were opera projects to direct as well: *The Medium* (Menotti), *Bohème*, *Fledermaus* and *The Saint of Bleeker Street* (also Menotti). And with all

this activity going on, I managed miraculously, though still with organ as a major study, to evade my senior recital!'

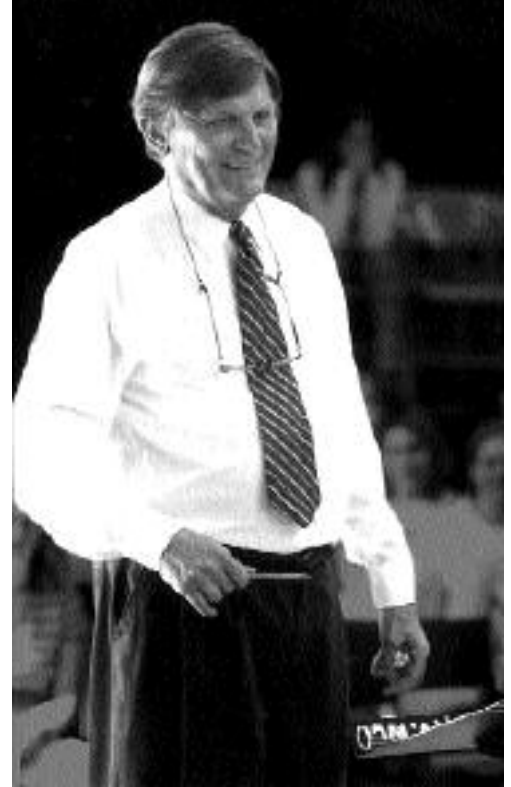
Remaining in Indiana after his BA in 1958, there was an opportunity for a position on the musical staff at Purdue University. 'But the most important event for me that same year was meeting Robert Shaw after a rehearsal of the B minor Mass with the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus. This meeting brought about the suggestion to work with Julius Herford – Shaw's own teacher – at a summer course in San Diego the same year. Herford, like so many great musicians during the war years in America, had escaped Nazi Germany to find a new life for himself. He was a brilliant musician and pedagogue

**'and with all this activity going on,  
I managed miraculously to evade  
my senior recital!'**

and the summer course in California included the *Missa Solemnis*, *Damnation of Faust*, *Christ lag in Todesbanden* and the *St Matthew Passion*. It was simply a life-transforming nine weeks, which was equalled a few years later with a course of summer study with Nadia Boulanger.'

Completing a master's degree in the Philadelphia Conservatory, from 1960-2, gave Flummerfelt the chance to work with Elaine Brown and Singing City, the main symphonic choir in Philadelphia. Immediately afterwards he returned to the mid-west to work for a doctorate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. 'The timing worked well because the head of the music department at DePauw had promised me the position as director

*opposite stepping down:*  
**Dr Joseph Flummerfelt,**  
*above left reviewing a score with*  
**Krzysztof Penderecki during a**  
**rehearsal at Westminster**  
**Choir College**



of choral activities when it became vacant in 1964 – a position I held until 1968.’ But a tidy, tenured mid-western life was not to be Flummerfelt’s ultimate destiny.

In 1968 a position at Florida State opened up for a head of choral activities that included conducting the Florida State University Singers. ‘This had for a long time been the finest music school in the South, and the autumn that I arrived my chorus was invited to perform with the Atlanta Symphony.’ This invitation led to Robert Shaw, who by then had extended his own hand to orchestral conducting with the up-and-coming Atlanta Symphony. ‘It was an amazing opportunity: Shaw asked me to prepare a programme of Haydn (*Creation*) and Ives (Psalm

‘new pillar’ of his Spoleto festival both in Charleston and in Italy. ‘At last count I’ve done 50 festivals – 22 in Italy and 28 in Charleston, where I am now Artistic Director for Choral Activities.’ It is clearly now a way of life, and as we speak he hands me a prized letter from the Italian composer, Luigi Dallapiccola. ‘It was also in 1971 that I directed his *Canti di prigionia* in Italy. The Italian press was hugely enthusiastic, though sadly Dallapiccola was unable to attend.’ A 33-year-old letter’s treasured words spring from the page as a life-long blessing from a musical patriarch to his young protégé:

These lines signify above all my profound gratitude to you for the love which you have brought to my music. The love and enthusiasm you instilled in your collaborators is the Leit Motiv of the press which I’ve seen. And it is just these qualities which are so rare today, particularly among professional musicians... My profound thanks and very best wishes to you in your work and throughout your life, believe me.

## Menotti insisted at once that Flummerfelt would become a ‘new pillar’ of his Spoleto festival both in Charleston and in Italy

90 and *Harvest Home Chorale*). And then, to my astonishment, he invited me to conduct the Ives works in performance. But Psalm 90 was so much his piece I felt I had to decline, though I did conduct the Chorale. This led to a number of important collaborations with him, including in 1971 the American première of Penderecki’s *Lukaspassion*.’

The Flummerfelt good fortune continued the same year when Gian-Carlo Menotti visited Florida State and heard a performance of his *Unicorn, Gorgon and Manticore*. Declaring it the best performance he had ever heard of the ballet, he insisted at once that Flummerfelt would become a

In the same watershed year, the 33-year-old Flummerfelt would receive a call from Ray Robinson, the then president of the Westminster Choir College in Princeton. ‘Since the departure of its illustrious founder John Finlay Williamson in 1958, it had lost some sense of direction as an institution under a rapid succession of choral directors. To be able to assume the choral leadership of this important college was a remarkable opportunity for me and these past 33 years have been filled with all manner of extraordinary musical activities.’

I try in vain to get Flummerfelt to identify a

above left & opposite top  
during a recording session with  
Leonard Bernstein,  
opposite bottom  
with Zubin Mehta in a rehearsal  
at Westminster Choir College

Photos Westminster Choir College of Rider University

single apex of his career but only memory after memory comes back. 'Although Bernstein had officially left the Philharmonic by the time I had taken over, he made many return visits. Mahler especially was an unparalleled spiritual experience with Lenny. Meeting Philharmonic players in the men's room afterward was unreal, they seemed as if they'd been to church for hours and achieved a sort of nirvana. Then there were incredible performances of Beethoven Nine with Abbado, both with the Vienna and Berlin, a Brahms Requiem with Giulini and the Los Angeles. And I was particularly fond of Masur. He invited me as his guest in 1985 to Leipzig and gave me the grand tour: the Gewandhaus, Thomaskirche, Dresden – all before unification.'

The first American performance and recording of Messiaen's *Transfiguration* (with Antal Dorati and the National Symphony) in 1972 was unforgettable. 'It is such amazing music; it belongs to a mystical world of its own.' As he speaks I see the programme inscribed by Messiaen with the composer's highest praises hailing 'Joseph Flummerfelt's musicality, dynamism and magnificent choir... magnificently sung.' Flummerfelt's close relationship with Menotti led to Samuel Barber and working with him many times, including preparing the choir for a Grammy award-winning *Antony and Cleopatra*. 'Sam loved the Westminster Choir and at the end of his life I was deeply touched to learn that he had requested that we sing at his funeral.'

I have to ask the inevitable question at this stage to a man who has just been named Musical America's Conductor of the Year: Isn't it frustrating most of the time to be preparing a choir for someone else – always to be in the front, but at the last moment in the passenger's seat? 'Of course it would be, had I been in a lesser place than Westminster: without the touring, without the symphonic choir and hundreds of collaborations with so many of the world's great orchestras and conductors and dozens of recordings, without Spoleto. But I also love the process of rehearsing, and who in the world has had the chance to work closely with as many musical giants as I?' I pause to think: because of the proximity of New York and the unique role Westminster has created for itself, it is an exceptional musical life. 'And by disposition I'm a teacher as much as a performer. I've worked with some 200 graduate choral conductors over the past three decades as well as many very talented young singers. As I always say to my students: "You're the reason I've stayed!"' □



Choir & Organ is published bi-monthly by the Orpheus portfolio at Newsquest Specialist Media Ltd  
This version copyright © 2008 Newsquest Specialist Media Ltd, 30 Cannon Street, London EC4M 6YJ, England, UK  
www.choirandorgan.com