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Fuse Interview: A Window on the Divine – Jennifer Lester, Founding Director of The Seraphim Singers

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by **Anthony J. Palmer**

Recently I met the ebullient and irrepressible Jennifer Lester, founder and music director of The Seraphim Singers, and enjoyed asking her about the group and her personal views after 15 years as its leader. The troupe began as six to eight singers who were called to help Richard Bunbury bring transcriptions from early notation into realized contemporary performances. Specializing in presenting masterpieces of sacred music as well as newly created works, The Seraphim Singers, formed in 1997, has become an admired staple in the highly competitive Boston choral scene.

One of the qualities noticeable in the Seraphim's repertoire is the thematic development of its programs. Under the rubric that "all is one" and "we are all connected," the performances express a collective spiritual vision that, by the end of the season, becomes revelatory. Thus Lester and I inevitably talked about the value of sacred music, because she feels that music should furnish a window on the divine.

The key for Lester as the founding/director of The Seraphim Singers was to find vocal works whose level of difficulty goes well beyond the normal church choir repertoire, scores that challenge even professional musicians. Lester has been praised by critics for her "ingenious, intrepid and imaginative programming." Lester suggested that another attraction, pointed out by one of her organist/choir-director members, is the opportunity to forget all the usual responsibilities of conducting a church choir—church boards, various committees, etc. He just wants to sing, to simply concentrate on the music.

In residence at the Basilica of Our Lady of Perpetual Help (known widely as the Mission Church) in Boston, The Seraphim Singers usually perform three concerts per season, all with worked out themes.

I asked Lester about the present size of the group, given that its ad hoc first performance drew on six to eight singers. "Depending on the concert, depending on the season, anywhere from about 20 to 28 singers make up the group," she replied. Is that a conscious decision, to keep The Seraphim Singers from growing to the size of a large chorus, with the problems that inevitably come with the latter? Lester answered: "We always thought it would stay small. . . . I like the

small thing, I like the repertoire we do . . . it's definitely a niche market, but we do what we like to do and to share it [with audiences]. It's what we do with sacred music in sacred spaces with a particular emphasis on contemporary music."

Because the voice is such a flexible instrument, many different choral styles are possible. From a straight tone to moderate vibrato, from deeply resonant sounds to light airy tone, the conductor has a variety of choices. Of course, specialized repertoire requires a certain sound, particularly Renaissance music that was originally sung with boys' unchanged voices. I'm always interested in what individual conductors have to say about their approach to the choral medium relative to tone quality. With some hesitation to put herself into a category, Lester talked about what school she favors: "I like a fairly straight tone, I've worked with boy choirs, and you can get a fairly straight tone; a lot of singers know how to do it; it's not strange [to them]."

We discussed some of the English choirs and the differences within their tradition as well as the German boys choir sound. I mentioned Robert Shaw and his approach of melding voices together rather than aiming for a preconceived sound. I compared that to the minimal vibrato tone, such as the West Coast Roger Wagner sound that is emulated by his musical progeny. Lester developed the idea, "I would say that if I picked a couple of American people to emulate, it would be Philip Brunelle, and it would definitely be more of the sound that I have in my head [in trying to obtain] a cleaner sound." "For that reason," she concluded, "I tend to go back and forth between singing in mixed quartets . . . and singing in sections. Quartets totally help the tuning but in [sections, that] helps the blend." We agreed that singers hear each other more easily when standing within a section.

Seraphim Singers usually rehearse two and a half hours per week and plan to have about eight rehearsals per concert. Dealing with professional musicians carries the assumption that they will come prepared. Lester responded with a qualification: "They're supposed to. The people who are good musicians tend to rely on their sight reading skills, and then there are people who are very conscious of not wanting to be the weak link—and they're the ones who will put in the [time and effort to be prepared]."

Most musicians have their favorite works; conductors especially enjoy the demands of certain compositions. Lester was quick to come up with faves. "Durufié *Requiem* is definitely at the top of the list and the *St. John Passion* (of J. S. Bach). Of course, normally that would not be a Seraphim thing because it's big, but we combined with my church choir at the time. It was a dream that I've had for some years. The combined choruses did the chorales together, the big choruses at the beginning and the end, and a couple of the simpler [sections]. We had a great cast, we had a marvelous Evangelist, Mark Sprinkle, and all the aria solos were taken out of the Seraphim personnel, which was great because everyone got an aria or part . . . and I had such a variety of voices that I could really cast according to type."

The nature of a small group dictates that each person has to be highly independent. I asked about Lester's approach to auditions. "Usually what I do in the audition process," she explained, "I vocalize them first, so that they [relax] and [I can] get an idea of their range, their color, and their basic sound. To them it's a warm-up. I have them do a prepared piece . . . I always get into sight

reading . . . along the lines of a Palestrina mass. If they can hold a part in sixteenth-century polyphony, that's a pretty good sign."

For many musicians music became an imperative in their lives after an epiphany. When and how did Lester make that decision?

"Well, my Mom in particular had gotten [lessons on] piano when she was younger," she recalled, "but later gave it up. She was a firm believer in arts education for us (myself and my sister). I remember, when I was probably four or five, she put us in dance school. Fortunately for us, our instructor was one of the surviving direct descendants from the Isadore Duncan school of dance, which is very much music centered. So we did dance, my sister and I, a lot of interpretative dance, a lot of stuff from the classics. Without knowing it, that was when I was first introduced to real improvisation, because she would come up with a scenario or a story to dance out and the pianist would also be improvising the music, snatches of the classical [repertoire] as well as straight improvisation, and I didn't figure it out till years later. The neat thing about that was that it was before I started taking piano lessons, around seven."

And what influence did it have on her style of conducting? "I was already getting a start on the idea that music and self-expression go together," Lester insisted. "Dance is easy because there is not a lot of technique involved. You know, you just move, and that's what I tapped into. I think that's one thing that's important in my conducting, expressively, and tapping into making an emotional and expressive connection with music."

"Then I started piano at seven and did oboe in high school. As every kid does, along about the end of the grades [boredom sets in], and my mother said, 'Well, you could try organ', and I said Oh! That's a cool idea. My Mom's church had a graded choral program. They had a big, three-manual Austin and somebody who knew how to play it. I used to love going to the Christmas pageant and seeing that, so I started organ playing and I didn't look back after that." Lester received a bachelor's degree in organ with honors from the New England Conservatory, was a Fulbright scholar, which enabled her to study organ at the Academy of Music in Vienna, and went onto attain a master's degree in conducting from Yale University.

The Seraphim Singers is also noted for performing contemporary works and commissioning numerous new works. Elliott Gyger has been a staple in the Seraphim concerts over the years, but Eric Sawyer, Margaret McAllister, Julian Wachner, and James Woodman are among those whose works have received premieres by the group. When asked about successes and failures (we all have those), Lester remembered Gyger's *The Temptation (of Christ) in the Desert* posing peculiar problems because of its difficulty. She was on the verge of putting the work off for a later concert when the group members insisted they were ready. The composer and wife sang in the concert, and the final performance, for Lester, was worthy of the applause it received.

The Seraphim Singers resume their 2012–13 season dedicated to the Germanic tradition in a program that features works by Bach, Mendelssohn, Schein, Reger, and Distler. Two concerts will be given on October 21 at the Mission Church of Boston and October 23 at Saint Cecilia Parish. They continue with *Icons and Music: Windows on the Divine* featuring works of Rachmaninoff, Tchaikovsky, Gretchaninoff, Sviridov, and Penderecki on February 10 at the First Church in Cambridge. The final concert will be held in the Mission Church on April 21 and at First Parish in Bedford on April 28 with a theme of *Persecution, Transformation, and Triumph* with a new work plus an iconic piece by Messiaen, *Quartet for the End of Time*.