

BOB, THE SINGAH

"We are the music makers, and we are the dreamers of dreams ..."

~ Arthur O'Shaughnessy

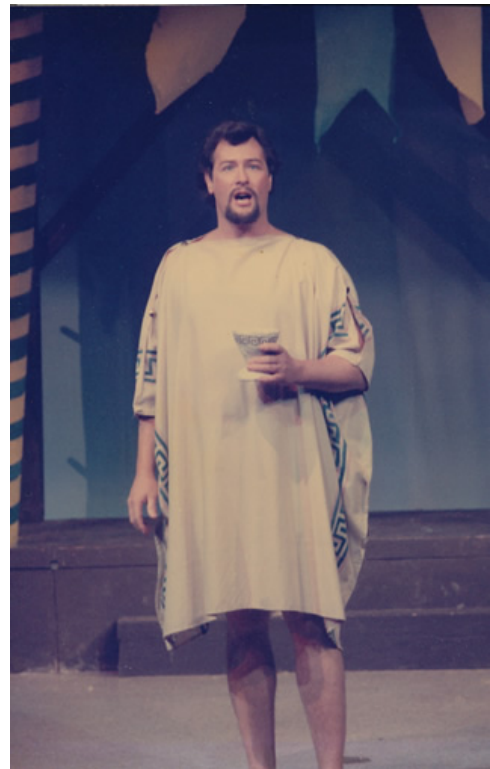
The First Few Notes

In the "rather this than that" parlor game of a few years back, I'd say, "Rather be blind than deaf." Yes, I'm sure. As I grew up, we had a piano in the house. My mother had taken lessons as a kid, and she occasionally dug out her fifth grade lesson book and played. She seemed to have only one piece committed to memory and that was the ballad "[Deep Purple](#)." It has a lovely, lilting, rangy melody. It was not the bubble gum 70s remake of the tune, but rather the richly harmonic, contemplative original. Of the four of us kids, only my sister Laurie and I could pick out the tune, and we played other simple things by ear.

I confess that my first encounter with classical music, namely a healthy dose of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, made me slightly nauseous. My fifth grade ears were not accustomed to all that was going on. I took piano lessons that year and found that I could get my clumsy hands coordinated only with great difficulty – clumsy hands and one nearly useless eye due to amblyopia. In one more year though, my music appreciation would turn around.

We sang in three-part harmony in sixth grade and I loved it. Of course, we boys and girls all were singing soprano, but it was the chirping out of standards like "I've Been Working on the Railroad" in Soprano I, II, and III that grabbed me. I wasn't totally sure which part I was singing most of the time, and I could not have cared less. [Right: While teaching high school, I sang for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*]

We had music class for parts of seventh and eighth grades taught by Mr. K., Pius Kaltreider. He made composers come to life, and gave us the basics of reading the notes and rhythms. My voice was ranging lower; however, I probably didn't do it any favors trying to reach the low, low bass notes in the [Navy Hymn](#), but I couldn't resist trying.



High School Happenings

In ninth grade I was goaded into joining the senior high choir – goaded by the same buddy that talked me into trying for the wrestling team. The reason I was “available” for a new sport was that I had been cut from the 8th grade B-level basketball team because of the same clumsy hands and weak eye. Wrestling results first: he dropped it in a few days, but I stuck for four years that I spent mostly on my back. And I continue to shoot baskets just as a wrestler would.

The buddy was Steve Coupland or “Coops,” and we sang in the choir through high school. Mr. K had us tackling really good repertoire – spirituals, carols for Christmas, and the classics of Haydn, Brahms, and others. Music kept us sane through the bomb shelter era and shattering events like the Cuban missile crisis and the JFK assassination. On that fatal weekend, I watched TV coverage of the Philadelphia Orchestra and Singing City Choir performing Brahms’s A German Requiem. That piece made a scratch on me then, and etched itself in me when our chorus sang “[How Lovely is Thy Dwelling Place](#)” the following spring. The Requiem has remained my all-time favorite, whether hearing it or singing it in English or German.

In our senior year and in a folk era, Coops picked up the banjo – he played several instruments well – and started picking out Kingston Trio and Peter, Paul and Mary tunes. We were joined by good friend Jimmy Fine, who would strum his guitar. Mr. K let us do a set of three folk songs in our last spring concert and students seemed to like it. We were in demand all of a sudden, playing at schools and parties. Tragically, Steve was killed in a car crash during his first year of college.

Jimmy was late in getting an ear and a singing voice, and his eventual success was a lesson for me. Most people can learn to sing in spite of what they think or have been told. Later when teaching, I applied the lesson to help boys after the change adjust to their new range. Case in point was in getting the sailors of South Pacific, high school eighth and ninth graders, in shape to gripe about the lack of “dames.”

Singing Applied

Jimmy attended St James Episcopal Church, where I started doing things along with their youth group. This led me to join their adult choir and stay in it while I commuted for two years to Drexel. Yes, the older singers had wobbly voices, but it was good experience for me in being one of only 3 basses, or in covering a tenor part alone. At Drexel I joined the summer glee club, and at Fort Bragg I sang in chapel choir. While

still in Bristol, I joined the volunteer fire company and led a dozen or so mostly non-singing guys tromping out for two successive Christmas carol seasons. These activities made a bridge from high school to my later college singing, and today they allow me to say that I've been "in the choir" almost continuously since 1961. That's 57 years and counting.

After the Army discharge, I worked a couple of jobs before Claire convinced me to finish school. She had been in her graduate program in Vermont and began teaching in Orford, NH. I applied to Plymouth State College, NH, and received some aid from the G.I. Bill. As previously noted, while I was at Plymouth, Earl Norwood, a voice PhD, was the Music Department chair. I signed up for Plymouth Singers and took voice lessons and later a voice class with three other male students. I learned some technical things and had opportunities to sing in ensembles and perform solos. Now at age 68, my appearance is pretty close to how my 25-year old face was made up to play the Magus Melchior in Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. In between shows, I went home with the makeup on and fooled, first the neighbors and then, even Claire.

The Singing Goes On

With a teaching certificate in hand, I found a math job at Orford Middle School, so Claire and I carpoled to work for the rest of the 70s. We were in our Haverhill house less than two years when we heard that the regional [North Country Chorus](#) would do the Brahms Requiem in May 1976. The venerable group was founded in 1947 and had been led all but the first two years by Mrs. Mary Rowe of Wells River, Vermont. She retired from leading the group after 50 years and 6 tours abroad. Her son Alan has led us since 1999.



Claire and I surprise the lads and lassies in Cork, Ireland.

The strength of the Chorus is in its numbers. We've been able to hire orchestras for many performances and raise the money to support the group and its individuals in touring. They have been to Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales, Hungary, Austria,

Poland, Sweden, Finland, Italy, and the Maritimes with Claire and me along for most of them. Thanks to connections made with other choruses, we have sung with other groups. With the Nashua (NH) Chorus, the Aldriches – see next chapter – and Claire and I toured Belgium, and France, and the two of us ducked into Germany as well.



On many of these tours we were hosted by choruses and sang joint concerts. Some of those groups paid similar visits to us in the States. [Left: Claire enjoys the green, green Irish countryside.]

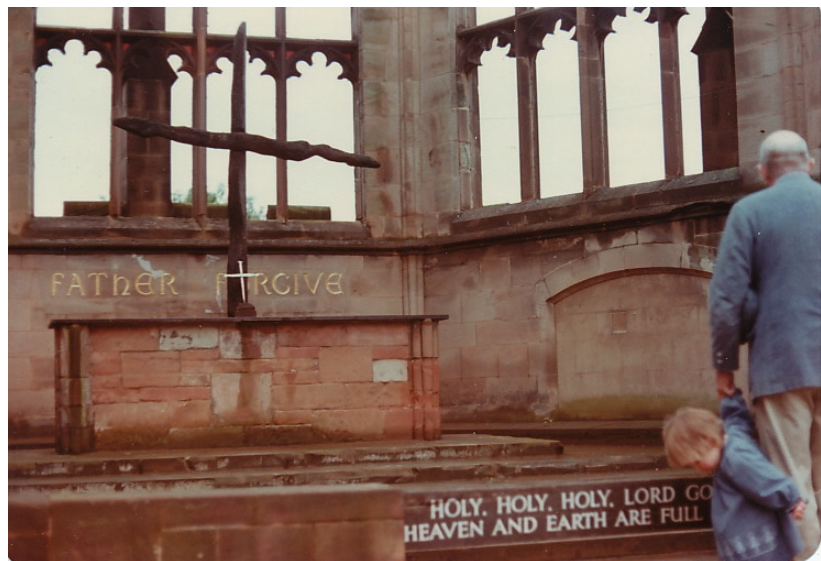
Those tours and visits, and the various workshops we attended have given us some awesome experiences. I do not exaggerate. I sang the baritone solos of the [Fauré Requiem](#) in the new Coventry Cathedral in England which stands next to

the carcass of the one bombed in World War II? A charred cross stands where the altar used to be [below]. Our chorus sang a mass in a Polish monastery while pilgrims circled the altar on their knees?

In a much lighter vein, we had afterglow parties with the Welsh from Port Talbot and with the Harlow, England, choruses. We also maintain individual friendships from these encounters.

One summer, in three NH Festival concerts, we were instructed and led in the Mozart Requiem by [Robert Page](#), alas, now deceased.

This composer and conductor for many years prepared choruses for the Pittsburgh and Cleveland orchestras. He was an amazing detail person. In between those concerts we were still getting instruction on single-spaced, two-sided sheets of notes from him. I later used this communication model, using email with the singing groups I led.





Director Mary Rowe, pianist Jean Anderson, and me

North Country Chorus has been blessed primarily with two excellent accompanists, Katrina Munn of Bradford and Jean Anderson of Peacham, spanning nearly 50 years of service. I'd been blessed with a third. John Koch was a Haverhill neighbor and the Congregational Church organist. We gave several recitals together. Katrina and John were Juilliard and Peabody trained accompanists and Jean is a pianist and music educator who for a time was audition accompanist for the New York City Opera. Needless to say, singers felt perfectly secure with support from those three. Another Haverhill neighbor, soprano Katherine DeBoer, provided me with some vocal instruction and more opportunities to perform.

And Then There is Ogontz

Claire and I have taken most of our summer breaks right from home in the last 26 years. We spend our waking hours for one solid week at a camp 30 minutes away in Lyman, NH. Formerly a riding camp for the finishing school in the Philly area, it had been taken over by a chorus from Westerly, Rhode Island, and their founder and leader, George Kent. He and his wife Lynn host several weeks of music and dancing groups every summer. Our [Choral Workshop](#) is now led by David Hill, a wonderful musician with a perfect ear. Prior to David, we were led by another David – Sir David Willcocks of London, recently deceased at 95 years young. His accomplishments strain credulity. An organist and choir master in the English cathedral tradition and a veteran of World War II, he was music director at Kings College and head of the London Bach Choir. Claire

and I marveled at his teaching ability – the original King's Singers were among his students. We first experienced him as the arranger of many of the Christmas carols we like to toddle around with. [More on Ogontz ...](#)

Hitting the High Ones

With so much music and so little time, I was emboldened to start two of my own small choirs, one in the early 90s we called Valley Singers. More recently, I've led NCC in summer seasons 2011 through 2014. Jean Anderson accompanied each concert and played some classy jazz solos as well.



Here I'm waving my arms at the Summer 2011 chorus. Photos: George Mitchell

At this writing, I'm working to get my voice shaped up for an important solo. I don't do many of them anymore. American composer Matthew Harris has set the beloved A Child's Christmas in Wales, written by Dylan Thomas, for chorus and orchestra. The solo is very high for any tenor, and I'll be using falsetto for some reaches. I was inspired to try it after hearing our long-time friend and fellow boatman – next chapter – Ralph

Aldrich perform it 6 years ago. Now he's stricken with Parkinson's disease and so I take up the challenge. Wish me luck.

An update. The solo went fine, but, sad to say, we lost our friend Ralph in the summer of 2016. Our chorus contributed to his service by offering the refreshments after, and during ... oh yes, singing a large portion of that same Fauré Requiem.