

An Interview with Craig Hella Johnson

Jos Milton

Since 2009, I have had the distinct pleasure of singing tenor with Conspirare Company of Voices, the dynamic Grammy®-winning professional vocal ensemble founded and led by Craig Hella Johnson. Before our rehearsals began for a recent run of concerts and recording sessions, I welcomed the opportunity to interview Craig in his Austin studio.



JM: When we meet for Conspirare engagements, our time together is intense and brief, and there's not a lot of time available for conversation. I am grateful for this opportunity to discuss your creative process and Conspirare.

CHJ: It's a pleasure.

JM: Conspirare is averaging two compact disc recordings per year. Is this a high priority for you?

CHJ: Yes. I've jokingly said that I want us all to have a really beautiful collection of CDs when we get time at the nursing home. Selfishly, I am looking forward to someday sitting down with all these beautiful recordings that you all have sung and enjoying them. Seriously though, I really want us to be a repertory ensemble, to be committed to the music. We're craftspeople—craftsmen and craftswomen in what we do, and this is one of the ways we show up to the workstation and do our molding and crafting and shaping. And the demands of the recording, wanting to take that opportunity to imprint something with more attention to detail and even more care than you're able to when you're just preparing for performances—that's very

The
**CHORAL
SCHOLAR**

The Online Journal of the National Collegiate Choral Organization

Volume 5, Number 2

Spring 2016

interesting to me and it demands, a deeper level of commitment from everyone—so we're committed to that. I would say on average, two recordings per year; sometimes it's one, sometimes three. But as a way of sharing music that we feel is of great value and, for one set of reasons or another, music that's not as known, this is of interest. So, for all kinds of varying reasons, we approach this with a real commitment to the recording repertoire.

JM: You mentioned wanting to record things that are new. Is this a specific criterion for your choosing repertoire that you want to record?

CHJ: I think it's a factor in what I consider. We don't record only new music, but it is a deep part of our commitment to bring voices out into the world that haven't been heard or haven't been heard as much. It's a part of our service as musicians to composers, to the body of music itself, and to choral music. I'm interested in a really broad and diverse spectrum of offerings that we will be a part of creating, but new music is a big commitment for sure.

JM: Is there some sort of process that you go through that guides your selection of what you want the ensemble to perform?

CHJ: Nothing is hard and fast in terms of an approach or a structure. What I would say at the core of my own experience and interest is that the choices are based on listening, and kind of listening within, listening to cultural contexts that we find ourselves in, listening to the ensemble itself. What is the ensemble? How are they singing right now? What is it that they can best fulfill in terms of the music?

So it's a lot of listening to external factors, and it's a lot of inner listening. I am interested in what doesn't become over calcified. I am more interested in the process of listening, both personally as the conductor, and as a musician, and with you, my fellow colleagues—listening to what it is that appears and continues to appear more and more strongly in our field of listening and our field of vision, if you will. I'm more interested in that, and how that unfolds in us than I am in any hard and fast notion about what it is that we ought to interpret, or we ought to have the final word on. Those kinds of things become heavy and laden, in my experience, and I'm more interested in seeing what is singing *in us*, and what appears *to us*. That being said, I would say, in all aspects of my life I experience myself as a Gemini, and from the very beginning we've said we're really committed to the canon. There's something about knowing where you come from in any context, but musically certainly. Whose shoulders are we standing on? What music are we being fed and shaped by? So this is absolutely a big part of my thinking and choices, is the commitment to the canon.

At the same time, I am curious, and just want to explore. I want to know the next spark, the next thing that leads us on, and what important voices are speaking from a compositional standpoint - exploring who is writing now in a way that feels unique and distinctive. There's a particular resonance when we say we listen for an authentic voice. What does that statement mean? It can't mean any one thing, but that's what I am listening for, that expression of an authentic voice from a composer, someone who's really in his or her own skin. We all know what that means, where we're at times in our lives when we really inhabit ourselves, and say that I'm resonating in some way with what my purpose is here. And when one senses that from

a composer, really a clear voice, an authentic voice, one that is just simply and truly themselves, that's really interesting to me. I'm always listening for that, and so much of what we do in life is in part imitation, but the real authentic voice takes that imitation and somehow finds a way to speak from within whatever might have started as imitation.

So, authenticity, clarity, strength of expression and gesture - all these factors come into play. And again, I'm interested in that spectrum. I remember when we did the Herbert Howells Requiem and there was a Requiem CD, a collection of things that was a beautiful set of repertoire for the Requiem CD. I felt that the recording to follow was going to be something contrasting, and was in a sense reflecting from that work, and yet taking a new direction. It's back and forth, sort of an ongoing dialogue for us, too.

JM: This season we perform Joby Talbot's *Path of Miracles*, written in 2005, and then Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* a few months later.

CHJ: Well, I also think, we do this because we *can*. Very simply, we're here; we're in our lives and in our musical lives; it certainly reflects my interests and I think as I listen within the ensemble there's a sense of a collective interest. But, there are certain pieces and composers that come through that we want to have kind of an invested stake in, and perhaps we might want to at least do our small part to try and have a defining stake in sharing an interpretation.

But, sometimes that approach can become so bogged down with a type of self-consciousness, and so there's a way in which I love thinking

of the recording process as just part of who we are, and part of what we do. It helps us, at least in some small part, to overcome this obstacle of live performance, which, as you know, is so fleeting. A live performance is special *because* it's fleeting—it comes and then it's gone. But, making recordings is a chance for us to also let something last a little bit longer, and it's very meaningful.

JM: What are some of your criteria for bringing singers into Conspirare?

CHJ: It's always a fun process, this incredible opportunity to meet people, to *really meet* them. I feel like when you meet someone as a singer, you know, a potential exists for an even greater opening. If singers are really willing to reveal themselves through their singing, it's awesome. I think of Conspirare, or of choral music in general, and the way we make chamber music; it's a little different than a string quintet, but it's the same principles, in that we hope everybody brings their full game in this professional setting.

In this ensemble, each singer is a soloist in his or her own right, so we come with that solo talent, that artistry, that experience. So, I think I look for a basic readiness just musically, because this group works at a very fast and high level. There needs to be a readiness musically, but it's very much also about what kind of chamber music partners that we're going to identify, and there is a generosity of spirit that is required. I think, in really great chamber music-making, on the one hand, you want to see that there's a real perspective there from the singer; that there's a sense of established artistry, a sense of musical identity, a sense of ego strength and courage that's needed for all the stuff that singers do. And, at the same time, there needs to be an openness, a responsiveness,

a willingness to be a part of something larger. Not everybody at every time on one's path fits that mold. I think there are times when you're really into building your own skills just to get out there and be an individual artist, and I would say one thing in *Conspirare* that is consistent and needs to be, is that these are all individual artists who have considered this, and it's a very conscious choice. I don't think you just fall into *Conspirare* and stick with it if you're not interested in making chamber music in this way, if you don't want to be a part of the ensemble *craft*.

That was one of the goals from the beginning—to find a group of soloists so gifted and artful who, as solo artists, made the clear conscious choice to say, *I want to be part of this vocal orchestra; I want to be part of this chamber music group, and I want to explore in terms of vocal color; I want to use my instrument to explore with other human beings*. So, it's all these things I'm listening for. The conversations with the singers are really helpful, just to get to know someone and where they are. And it's totally fine if a person is in a place where they don't feel that this is the right fit at that right time in their life. It's a very specific kind of thing to have to get into an ensemble, share a vowel with some precision with your neighbor, an equally fine tenor on your left or your right, and share the pitch, and share a dynamic and share an intention of a phrase, and share a rhythm, frankly, with nuance and real attentiveness. So, all these elements are things that you have to be curious and interested in to really engage in this experience, I think. And we each do it in our own way; everybody's got to come saying *I want to collaborate*.

JM: Can you address how you approach the diverse aggregate of voices and efficiently “mold” them to the collective intent of the ensemble?

CHJ: Well, we do have the advantage now of having some years under our belts. So, there's a way in which there's a culture that gets developed, a culture within the ensemble, and that factor really makes a huge difference. It was very different eighteen years ago than it is today. I would say there is even a self-regulating aspect within the ensemble right now. There are things that are a core in terms of musical values for the ensemble, and I had to be the one that initiates sharing and inviting and persuading. Now, those attributes, in large part, go without saying, because there's a sense of an internal regulating. But yes, it's a big leap of faith, a big risk to dive in and take all kinds of solo singers, all kinds of different colors, approaches, and styles—and to know how are we going to gather around this, and not just be a gig choir that blasts out a lot of sound but not a lot of shape or nuance.

So, what I really try to do, and I think it serves us well, is to just stay really close to the basics. There are those building blocks; rhythm, pitch, vowel, and dynamic: those four factors, and sometimes we also add an intention of the phrase as well. But, the most clear-cut are the first four. So, you stick close to those four building blocks, and if we all focus on those as just tools in our kit, then those are the potential tools for some transcendent artistry, rather than me having to tell any individual singer, not that color here, not your color here, etc. It's not like that: it's very practical, and I think what that then gives us is a really foundational platform from which the singers can really listen and hear. And once the singers start hearing and feeling that sense of unanimity, or shared color, or shared vowels, then the listening just deepens and it starts to generate on its own.

I also often say that I'm really interested in an ensemble that can bring a commitment to shaping

like an art song solo singer would. I had the opportunity to hear Janet Baker, I got to hear Fischer-Dieskau, and Peter Schreier, and many others. Of course, Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, and many artists who are singing and living today now who are such extraordinary art song singers who have such a broad imaginative palette, and a broad color palette. I'm really interested in the idea of how do we explore that as a group? I mean, when you think about all the voices that are within an ensemble like *Conspirare*; all of a sudden you just multiply the spectrum of possibilities, because of all these individual voices. So we have not only this singer's individual color, but we also have those other fifteen singers and their color. And then we have the combinations of those colors. That's starting to seem endlessly fascinating. And if we can sing poetry with that broader range of color, it just starts to become unimaginably fantastic, in terms of what's possible. So, this is kind of the exploration, and sometimes I like to also say that those building blocks get us all kind of looking at the fire. It's as if we gather around a campfire and those building blocks get us there in a very basic way that don't feel personal, in a sense; actually, they don't feel problematic or challenging. We just realize, *oh yeah, I see what we're doing—we're trying to see what this living breathing essence is that wants to come through this piece of music, and through our bodies, together.* And then, once we're all engaged, the fun really begins.

JM: You are fearless in your exploration of new types of color and timbre - sounds that I personally have not been asked to do in other choral experiences. Also, you ask in such a respectful manner, often through moments of imagery. You hint at what kind of ideas that you want, and then leave it to our own devices to do what we need to do technically to try to make that happen. It seems as if we're all kind

of carving, using our tools collectively, but also individually, in an effort to create that special sound, something that we as singers don't often get to investigate.

CHJ: But it's something as human beings that we *want* to investigate. I mean, we're making sounds as part of both our response to life, but also part of our inquiry is to say what are these bodies? What is this experience of inhabiting a body, being somehow spirit and breath inside of a body form like this? What kind of sounds do we make, and what do we make together, and how do these sounds examine, how do they ask questions, how do they declare?

You've probably heard me say a hundred times, that wonderful Bernice Johnson Reagon quote. She said, *when we sing, we announce our existence.* I love that. As we make sounds, we're in the process of declaring and announcing just our very *being-ness*. It's profoundly interesting, and then the fact that we get to do this in and amongst one another, in this community of singing friends, and then in and amongst and through the voices of fine composers who are bringing care to their craft—it just exponentially continues to expand and grow as an experience.

JM: The sound that you're wanting: do you have it in your mind before we gather for the first rehearsal?

CHJ: Well, I think it's a conductor's job to imagine the sound in silence before musicians arrive. That's what the score study is for, that's what the imagination play-time is all about, just to get the sound palette really developed. But it's not sound itself—it's just the imagination of sound, the idea of sound. So I have something

in mind, but it's not something that I say, *this is my sound and we rehearse until that sound is achieved, and once that sound is achieved our work is complete and now we're ready to perform*. My own experience isn't that at all; it's much more than that. I come because it's my job to prepare with a soundscape in mind, but as a listening musician I have these beautiful partners—all of you who I want ideas when the sounds get produced. If there's another idea that enhances that or that shifts gears even and goes in a different direction, that's of interest to me. So it's really starting to mix in, and then a sound that develops. But I think that there are some choral approaches that really are sort of conductor-centric, in the sense of *this is the sound the conductor wants*, and it's sort of even very ensemble-centric in a way. And that's one approach, to say this is the choir, this is what the conductor wants them to sound like. Or people will often say, what kind of a soprano sound do you want? I don't really accept the question; I'm not going to lay a narrow, thin idea of one soprano sound on a group of individual singers that may come and form a wide variety of sounds, depending on the rep and depending on the acoustical context.

So I'm more interested in that type of exploration, and there's plenty to still put your feet down on and feel firmly clear about. But it's not that idea of *here's my idea of a sound which I want all of these human beings to fall into or we haven't achieved it*. I think it's more interesting the other way to me.

JM: It shows a high level of respect for your singers, to allow for this sort of color to evolve *as we're doing it*. You don't address the ensemble with any firm directive, saying things like '*this must be sung with core resonance*', or '*this needs to be sung with vibrato*', '*this must be straight tone*' or other types of styles; your suggestions always

seem to emerge through a collaborative process *as it happens*.

CHJ: It's interesting hearing you speak about it, and I do find this of great interest, to hear sound develop from within. I do have tremendous respect for the singers who are here in the ensemble, so there is great trust, and I lean into that—I don't ever question it. There may be some practical times when it is to be questioned, if we have eight singers who are with laryngitis or something that's not going to be the ultimate trustworthy sound for singing a Strauss motet; but that's a practical matter.

People think of this only in the professional realm. It has its unique implications with professional singers. But I'm also interested in this process when working with an all-state choir, or a children's choir and I'm standing in front of them. It's of interest to me also with those young singers or with amateur singers, to know what kind of sounds they are making. There's certainly a time and a place to model, or to suggest a sound ideal that's based on health and good vocal production. But if I go out and guest conduct, whether they're professionals or not, it's a collection of beings that will make a particular sound, and I don't want to rule out the possibility that we might have a very unique experience with this particular collection of beings.

There are basics to address—like, this could be sung more in tune and this can be sung with more of a shared vowel and all those practical things again. But I'm interested in this particular sixty people, who are gathered for this civic chorus of wherever, doing whatever. What sounds are they making? We have a little phrase that you're familiar with, I'm certain, with *Conspirare*, called *We Sing Life*. We say *Conspirare*, we sing

life, and another phrase we add to the end of that, which is actually even more true, is *Life Sings Us*. And this idea that Life itself, with a capital L, is in us, moving through us, and this is true whether we're singers or whether we're carpenters, whether we're dancers or whether we're taking a walk. There is life itself moving through our being. And so, in a singing context, how could we ever be bored when we have this rich potential palette of varied colors and varied combinations to play with? I mean, I want to honor that those are worthy of our attention, and there are aspects of any style of singing, or if we're preparing a Beethoven *Missa Solemnis*, there are certain aspects stylistically that we want to put in place in order for the texture to be heard. But, beyond those very basic fundamental things, what kind of sounds are we making as human beings? We do our best singing when we're not adding layers of tension, fear, and those mental voices that create tensions as well. So yes, it's a dialogue, it's a process, but it kind of stems from the core in an interest in natural singing.

JM: Can you talk about how you maximize our limited rehearsal time and decide what music gets *worked* during these few days before the concerts happen?

CHJ: Well, it all started out as a big experiment, really, to know if we really could come together for these short periods and still really grow together as an ensemble, and not just to be a lot of singers performing a quick gig kind of in and out; could we co-create an ensemble sensibility together? Could we become a real choir with an inner core nature? And, I'm so happy to report that this has happened. We don't come together and just jump off the airplane and sing some notes kind of independent of each other and leave. There is a real growing ensemble aesthetic that continues to deepen.

The rehearsal process, in the way you're asking about in terms of efficiency, just needs to be really practical. It's very straightforward. I just need to prepare as best I can prior, in terms of knowing the music, really being prepared with scores. And, having given thought to all the potential eventualities: that may sound like this, this may happen—kind of as any conductor does. There's sort of preparation about how things might go, where that response might be; but basically once we're all here, it's to have a plan, begin with the plan. But then, just listen. Listen, respond; listen, respond. One thing that I'm aware of—strangely, it's very easy to forget to *really* listen. Because all conductors—I mean, almost any circumstance you could ask—middle school choral teacher or you know, someone conducting New York Philharmonic—and I bet each of them will say it never feels like we have enough time, in a sense. So what does everybody do with that problem? And because of that sort of need to get work done intensely, or at least the perceived thought that you have to really be very intense and get a lot done, I think conductors will have a plan that we've got to get down these fifteen things to get all the bases covered. We've got to rehearse according to a plan. We have things we have to accomplish: rhythms have to be clarified and other things that define the mechanics of a rehearsal need to be addressed. But, it's too easy to forget to really *listen*; that our main job in that practical way is to really listen, and then respond to what you're hearing. Respond to the actual sound, rather than kind of pre-responding to my imagined outcome.

JM: Each time we arrive for rehearsal, there's a detailed seating list; sometimes we sing in mixed formation, sometimes we sing in sections, sometimes we're segmented, different sorts of things. What attributes in the music inspire your choices on how we stand?

CHJ: Just the music itself: what we're hearing, what shapes might get evoked. Particularly with me, there's no science to it whatsoever. I am really blessed to have wonderful colleagues in the production area of *Conspirare*. They have a sense of what I'm envisioning. And, at this point, some of them are so close to the work that they actually kind of envision it with me simultaneously, or even before. They, know me, and know where I might be led with something. So, the truth is, a lot of things get dictated about in terms of shape, and how we might stand or move, just with what's going to make a connection with the listener, what's going to really serve the music to be heard by the person sitting there in that chair. That's my overriding concern, when I think about presentation in concerts and anything that can open a door, that can jiggle a stuck perception loose, anything that can just shift enough is something that has the potential to open a pathway for someone to hear something. Maybe for the first time, you know, to hear something anew, to hear something fresh, to really *hear* something.

So it's all about that connection. It's funny, also, because choral music is sometimes experienced as a somewhat static medium. I mean, it's perhaps two rows or four rows of people standing still, looking at people sitting still. There's a lot of stillness and a lot of, sometimes, frozenness. But the slightest shift in perspective, the slightest movement, can make a difference, because that context has been so still, you know, for a long time, for decades, for hundreds of years. I was at a children's choir concert recently, one of our *Conspirare* children's choir concerts, and the young singers had sung three pieces in three rows. And then, at the beginning of this fourth piece—doesn't even matter what the piece was, I can speak of it out of context it still makes total sense—that there was just something from the

text and from the atmosphere of that fourth piece that had called forth, in this instance, for the conductor to ask the singers to just take two steps forward together—two very soft steps forward. They didn't move far, it wasn't sort of a major event physically, except that it was dramatically so strong. I remember it kind of took my breath away. It's like someone, you know, who may be close somehow steps one step closer, and there's an intimacy that's heightened and, it's an extraordinary thing.

JM: How do you go about building the sense of community, that environment of closeness that *Conspirare* enjoys?

CHJ: Well, it's been said that we show what we love in our lives by what we pay attention to—and I pay a lot of attention to *Conspirare*, and have over these years. I guess I'm just saying I really I love it: I love the singers who gather together, I love the work that we share. I both love the work and the repertoire—that's where this all starts. But I truly love the people who have come to be a part of this, too. So, I try and honor what I love, and there is such a deep honoring and respect for the musicians of *Conspirare*. And frankly, I feel the same affection for everybody who surrounds the work—listeners, audience members, patrons, staff, and board members who are all such a critical and essential part of it. I think a big piece of it is to try and like what we're all doing. We're all living in this mysterious human journey, most of which I don't understand. But one thing that seems pretty consistent is that we find ourselves living a lot in paradox. If whatever is true seems to kind of reside in the houses of paradox, in this context I guess that's to say, both feel very devoted in a sort of tangible, practical, concrete way, just to say, *this is my job, this is a role I've chosen to commit to, these are people I've committed to, this is an art form I've committed to*; those are

very practical, sort of hands-on things. So I'm passionate about that, and I'm very invested. And, at the same time, what feels really essential and really, really completely important, is just trying to get out of the way, just totally staying out of the way. So if it's music I'm really interested in and the expression of music and what it carries, if I'm really interested in that, then all this work just puts me to the test to say *okay, so that's more important than I am; it's more important than my mark on it; it's more important than my interpretation of something.*

So, I don't know honestly the answer to how all this works, ultimately, because I'm showing up and *just doing it*. But at the end of the day, I think what seems to really survive and thrive, is that which can live in freedom. And so, at any time, as a founding director, I'm very aware that for twenty years now it's been a series of kind of an initial idea that I think is mine, and then eventually, for this thing to grow, I have to let go. The *thing* becomes itself, and it's no longer mine, as something I own or control, and that's totally living in the paradox. How do you lead something where you're really relinquishing ultimate control? It's just living in reality, actually, because we don't have control over anything, really. But it's being willing to live in that reality. So it's just freedom. I want to keep asking myself, I believe you, Jos, I believe me, Craig, I believe that anyone hearing these thoughts lives in freedom and *is* freedom. And I want to make music in that freedom. This just feels core, and so that's probably just my biggest commitment out of all this: how do I, as the protector and defender, or one of them, of this culture, rigorously defend that idea of freedom in our expression, in our music making? And so it's dancing all of those components together.

JM: Well, I am so glad to be part of this dance, and I can't wait to see what comes next. Thanks so much.

CHJ: You're so welcome. It's a pleasure.

Editor's Note: The photo of Craig Hella Johnson appears courtesy of Ann McNair and with permission from Conspirare.