

Retired and Refueled:

An Interview with Conductor, Teacher, Composer, Arranger, and Pianist, André Jerome Thomas

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André Jerome Thomas

For more than 50 years, conductor, teacher, composer, arranger, educator, and pianist, André J. Thomas has been in high demand as a choral adjudicator, clinician, and director of Honor/All-State Choirs throughout North America, Europe, Asia, New Zealand, Australia, and Africa. Thomas began his collegiate teaching career in 1981 at the University of Texas at Austin. In 1984, he joined the College of Music faculty at Florida State University, serving as Director of Choral Activities and Professor of Choral Music Education for thirty-four years. In 1999, Thomas was awarded the endowed position of Owen F. Sellers Professor of Music in honor of his outstanding contributions to choral music around the world. Recently retired, André Thomas took time to answer some questions about his career; mentors and colleagues who have inspired him; his teaching and rehearsal philosophy; and advice to conductors looking to enter the field of choral music education.

BB: Dr. Thomas, for more than 50 years, you have traveled the world extensively, conducting university choirs, church choirs, All-State choirs, as well as professional and community choirs and orchestras around the world. Do you mind sharing how it all began?

AJT: My conducting career began with my church choir at Tabernacle Baptist Church, in Wichita, Kansas. I gained an interest in conducting at the age of four. I remember coming home after services and pretending to “have church” as I mimicked Lenora Bethel and Vera Crane, two ladies who conducted our church choir. I can recall putting on a choir robe and banging on my toy piano as I conducted my imaginary church choir. I became more invested at the age of fourteen, when I assumed the leadership role over choirs at the church, which is where I learned how to work with people. It was through my years as a student in public school that I gained access to Western European choral music. I sang in my middle and high school choirs, later joining the Singing Quakers of Friends University conducted by Cecil Riney.

BB: Who were or are some of your mentors that helped shape your life and career as a conductor?

AJT: It was no one mentor; instead, I had a village of mentors that impacted my career and ultimately, my life. Each person came along at the right time during my development

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as a person and a musician. The mentors at Tabernacle Baptist Church were crucial at that time, stimulating an interest in choirs and music that would eventually change my life and give me a career. As mentioned previously, Lenora Bethel and Vera Crane inspired me as a child. As a young church pianist, I had mentors like Robert Taylor and John Meeks who deliberately modulated between hymn verses to ensure that I could play in keys other than F, B-flat, and G. Of course, there were a host of public-school teachers from elementary through high school.

After high school, the man that completely changed my life was none other than Cecil Riney, Director of Choral Activities at my alma mater, Friends University. Even as a young college student, I was always impressed by his excitement about conducting and repertoire. Riney was responsible for hosting countless guest conductors and composers on campus. One of those guests, Charles Hirt, came to campus to conduct Howard Hanson's *Song of Democracy*, which I've performed on numerous occasions since that inspiring introduction. Riney also introduced me to the choral works of Norman Dello Joio, which were right up his alley. Another conductor that Riney brought into my life at age 17 was Jester Hairston, which ultimately shaped my research interests. I was also able to work with composers such as Vincent Persichetti and Salli Terri, who were both on campus as composers-in-residence. Friends University was a small liberal arts college that one would not believe would have all of these opportunities. But for a young musician like myself, the one-on-one encounters with world-class musicians made a huge impact on me.

After I graduated from Friends University, I enrolled at Northwestern University's Bienen School of Music to study with the chairman of piano, Pauline Lindsey. It was there I met Margaret Hillis, who helped me establish how

to approach score study. Ms. Hillis was very detailed; she gave me some hard lessons. She introduced me to color-coding, even making me carry my cigar box, which had all of my colored pencils to mark my score. For example, I recall conducting Bruckner's *Te Deum* from a choral score in her conducting class. Immediately after the run-through, she stopped and pointed to a pitch and asked, "What instrument is playing this note?" Honestly, I made a guess. She responded, "That was a lucky guess, but don't ever walk into my class conducting a choral-orchestral work with a choral/vocal score." She was tough, but that was Ms. Hillis.

Now we get to the last man who completely opened my sphere from public school into collegiate repertoire, and that was none other than Harold Decker who I met through his grandson, Danny Decker, who was in my junior high choir. After the concert Mr. Decker asked if I was interested in getting a doctorate, which I declined. He then asked, "Could you see yourself doing what you're doing now at age 55?" I knew the answer was "no". I later enrolled as a choral conducting doctoral student at the University of Illinois which broadened my life immensely. It was there I met my best friend, Anton Armstrong, who was a master's student at the same time I was working on my doctorate. Mr. Decker modeled how to run a graduate conducting program.

As a university professor it has been my many colleagues throughout the years that gave mentorship, support, and encouragement and also the hundreds of students I have taught over the years that continue to provide me with inspiration and pride.

I don't think I would ever call Robert Shaw my colleague, but he was definitely a mentor. Mr. Shaw changed my life immensely. He taught me the importance of delving into a score and the

acoustics of sound. Mr. Shaw was an extremely generous man; he would loan me copies of his scores to assist in preparing the choir and orchestra, or even when I needed them for my own performances as a young developing conductor working with choirs and orchestras around the world. One of the unique things about Mr. Shaw was that he understood the anxieties of a choral conductor stepping into the world of orchestral conducting. He knew that choral directors did not conduct orchestras every day. Some conductors were lucky if they were able to collaborate with an orchestra once a year, and others once every five years. I was very fortunate in my career to have the chance to conduct an orchestra three to four times a year. It was even more fortunate having a monumental figure like Mr. Shaw as a mentor. I was able to witness the conscious and deliberate rehearsal techniques that ultimately transferred accountability from the conductor directly to the singers and instrumentalists.

Personally, the two other mentors that are quite important were my older sister, Zenobia Washington, and mother, Wille Mae Thomas. My sister provided the model of the person I wanted to be. She was a teacher; therefore, I wanted to be a teacher just like her. I tried to achieve academic success, just like her. I wanted to get advanced degrees, just like her. My mother was the person who said, "You better do it!"

BB: We know you as a conductor, educator, composer, arranger, but your career began as a pianist. What was the turning point that shifted your interest to choral conducting?

AJT: I learned that we, as mentors and teachers, have to be very careful as we encourage young people who may have an affinity or natural ability in an area or discipline. Having a skill or interest does not guarantee the constitution or

passion for sustaining the demands of the art; this was certainly the case for me as a young pianist. As a graduate student at Northwestern studying piano performance, I had to decide whether or not playing with orchestras and practicing, on average, six to eight hours daily was the life for me. I quickly learned that was not who I was on the inside. I enjoyed working with people too much to have a lifestyle of isolation in a practice room. After playing a piano recital or concerto with the orchestra, it was over. However, after conducting my junior high choir concerts, I reflected and re-lived the students' accomplishments for up to a week. I knew that teaching and conducting choirs fed my soul very differently than pursuing a career as a pianist.

BB: How did you maintain an international conducting career with full-time employment as the Director of Choral Activities/Director of Graduate Conducting studies at Florida State University?

AJT: Florida State University helped to curtail some of my international conducting. Undoubtedly, it is essential to have global visibility as professors move through the ranks of assistant professor, associate professor, and eventually a full professor. But for the sake of the students at FSU that I loved dearly, this meant that I had to decline some international invitations I may have wanted to accept. In a couple of instances, I was offered principal guest conductor roles for professional choirs and had to decline to maintain my college teaching. Honestly, the summer was a prime time for extensive travel, especially for trips lasting longer than a week. In a couple of instances, it worked best to overlap extended trips to weekends with holidays. The key was planning in advance and keeping a balance between my position at Florida State and traveling on the road.

BB: In your book, *Way Over in Beulah Lan': Understanding and Performing the Negro Spiritual*, you discuss a wide variety of topics on Negro Spirituals, including defining folk-songs, coded messages, use of dialect, choices in tone quality, arrangers' perspectives, and other performance practice considerations. What inspired you to write this resource text?

AJT: I wrote *Way Over in Beulah Lan'* after receiving so many questions about the topics covered in this text. In those days, conductors would send me letters and telephone calls, then later emails, but now I still receive Facebook and even some text messages. It was my honest desire that two things would come as a result of this document. First, I was hoping to stimulate conductors to consider performing older spiritual arrangements, which I thought were still of high-quality instead of only programming and performing the newest arrangements to get a crowd cheering or up on their feet. To me, it was necessary because sometimes we as conductors tend to forget about the essential pieces of the past. I was also hoping that some titles that were no longer in print would have a resurgence. I wanted to highlight earlier resources on the Negro Spiritual, such as *Slave Songs in the United States* (1867), so that arrangers would not re-arrange arrangements. I hoped that by having earlier source material, young arrangers would not be tempted to take the first twenty bars of "Rockin' Jerusalem" and think that that's the original spiritual because it's not, it's an elaboration of the original Negro Spiritual.

BB: As a composer and arranger, how do you think the music of the African-American diaspora influences your writing and arranging?

AJT: Well, you are talking to a Black man who grew up in a Black church where the choirs sang anthems, spirituals, excerpts from oratorios, and gospel music. I don't think I had much choice. In my writing, the most influential arrangers would be Jester Hairston and William Dawson. Not that I attempted to write or arrange like them, but I think more so of their influences on my life. The only obvious attempt to borrow from their styles of writing was in my setting of "Rockin' Jerusalem," where the opening was evoking Jester and the contrapuntal ending was my attempt to make Mr. Dawson happy.

BB: Would you consider yourself a teacher-conductor or a conductor-teacher?

AJT: Among conductors, some think if you're teaching, you are not a conductor. Some conductors are offended if you call refer to them as a "teacher." I am a teacher. But what I learned to understand is that there are different times to teach at different levels. For me to approach the Berliner Philharmoniker or London Philharmonic and their choruses the same as I would with the Crystal Children's Chorus would be inappropriate. A good teacher adjusts to whom they are teaching and modifies their instruction based on those in the room by assessing the ensembles' needs. That's a skill one needs to have to be successful with all levels of singers, students, conductors, etc.

BB: You have had opportunities to conduct choruses and orchestras all over the world. How have these experiences influenced your teaching philosophy, your views on conducting, and your rehearsal pedagogy?

AJT: As conductors, we all have egos and would like to think we do everything well. Personally, after I get over my ego, when something does not go well in a rehearsal, I immediately go back to the drawing board and ask myself, “What could have been done differently or better?” I vividly remember conducting Brahms’s *Der Abend* with the Oklahoma All-State Mixed Choir the same year Robert Shaw died, and I heard his voice saying, “You have not built the house from its foundation.” I heard it as clear as day. I immediately put my hands down and said to the ensemble, “Ok, everyone we have to go back to the foundation of this piece,” which meant, revisiting the choral rehearsal hierarchy: correct pitches and rhythms, intonation and tone quality, diction and articulation, precision, phrasing and expression, and dynamic contrast, which is closely connected to balance and blend. Instead, in my attempt to keep the energy of the kids going, I began by trying to connect them to the meaning of text emotionally, and it did not work.

One thing I so admired about Robert Shaw was his ability to resolve issues in the rehearsals. I remember having prepared the choirs to sing Igor Stravinsky’s *Symphony of Psalms*, along with two of his motets, *Pater Noster* and *Ave Maria*, for Mr. Shaw’s residency at FSU. The first rehearsal was not going well; he stopped the rehearsal and said, “Folks, I need to stop here because I have some homework to do.” He ended the rehearsal and let the singers go home early. The next day he came to the performance hall at 9:00 am, which was the old Ruby Diamond Concert Hall, where he had every soft surface of the space removed. Believe it or not, at that time, we sang on baseball bleachers. When the choir arrived back in the hall the next evening, he turned the singers around to the back wall, instructed the cellist to give the starting pitch, and he said to the choir, “Begin when you think you can breathe and sing together.” It was magical in every sense of the word. We

performed both motets singing to the back wall; then Shaw gave a downbeat for the *Symphony of Psalms*, and the altos began with “Exuadi.” It was such a startling effect. Shaw understood that what appeared to be a lack of precision was an acoustical issue. He realized that the onset needed a more blurred entrance rather than the precision. It was brilliant! That was Mr. Shaw.

BB: Based on your years of experience in music performance and music education, what would be your advice to someone who hopes to become a comprehensive choral music educator?

AJT: My biggest advice is to do it for the right reason. Some people do things because of the benefit that could result in doing it. Some people think they’re going to be the next Robert Shaw. God forbid, but some even think of being the next André Thomas. The right reasons should be because you love working with people and that you love music. That’s been the goal of my life. Someone else might suggest something different, but I can only be who I am. The music is a tool and vehicle. I try to model it and suggest it to my students wherever I go. I can’t make them take it, but it would certainly be my advice. My other advice is to do your homework and be prepared for the people that meet you on a daily or weekly basis. As you move through your career, there will always be people who’ll want to help you; accept their help, and be grateful. Basically, to develop an attitude of gratitude, which was what my mother instilled in me as a child.

BB: After thirty-four years of teaching at Florida State University, three years at the University of Texas at Austin, and four years of public school teaching, what would you say is one of your greatest accomplishments?

AJT: My most significant accomplishments are my former students. Each time I sit in the audience and watch a student perform, read an article written by a student, or pick up a piece of music composed by a student, I think, "wow." Now that I'm retired, I am receiving more and more requests from students and some teachers who ask me to be their mentor, and of course, I will always say yes. I was never a student of Jester Hairston, but he was my mentor and was in that role at the time I needed him. However, I will say this: I never took advantage of that mentorship with him. That mentorship with him was not to gain fame or advantage as a choral conductor, but rather to learn from his expertise through his advice and experiences.

BB: Now that you are retired from Florida State University, not conducting and teaching, what are some ways you will spend your time?

AJT: I am hoping to write more music, and I am still conducting and traveling. I am scheduled to teach at eleven colleges/universities this year alone. I am conducting All-State choirs in Virginia, Ohio, and Maine as well as three Carnegie Hall Festival concerts with Choirs of America, World-Strides, Manhattan Concert Productions. In March of 2020, I am scheduled to perform a Symphonic Gospel Spiritual concert with the London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus. I am also planning a national convention for ACDA in Dallas in 2021 as Vice-President and Artistic Chairman. I have most recently been appointed visiting professor of choral conducting and interim conductor of the Yale Camerata beginning 2020-2021 academic year. As you can see, I plan to stay very active in doing what I love.