

INTERVIEW WITH ROGER WAGNER
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT LOS ANGELES
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Excerpt from a Research Study by Douglas R. McEwen,
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McEwen First of all, I would like to get some idea concerning your background. Where did you take your training?

Wagner Let me break it down like this: I think I gave you a souvenir program that will give you a pretty accurate biography. I was the son of a musician. My father was a choral director and an organist and I have been singing since the age of eight or nine. I was a boy soprano in the choir and had a solo quality of voice.

McEwen Was this a church activity?

Wagner Yes, in church. I was practically born in a choir loft. My father was a fine musician but he was not a great technician on the organ. I remember I always resented his romantic approach to organ music. However, he was of that period of the twentieth century with Guilmant and Dubois. I remember when I was ten or eleven years old I reacted very strongly to this sentimental approach to music. I had a sense of style already and also a sense of choral blend. I used to tell him when I was ten or eleven years old that his tenor stuck out too much. The tenor had a good voice and he always tried to prove it on Sundays. I became a director of a choir here in Hollywood at the age of twelve and a half.

McEwen Choral director at twelve and a half?

Wagner Yes, I directed a choir here on Sunday mornings at the St. Ambrose Church at the age of twelve and a half.

McEwen Were they children?

Wagner Well, I had a junior choir and also I had some adults. I remember I had an adult group and I always bawled the men out because they could not read music. I remember very well, right here on Fairfax.

McEwen And you could read music?

Wagner Oh yes! I was taught to read music when I was four years old. I went through the first two years of my elementary school in France, and in France you have solfeggio every day, whether you are going to be a musician or not. You learn how to read music because they feel that whether you are going to be a musician or not you should have the knowledge of how to read

music and to be able to read at sight the simple things—at least those of medium difficulty.

McEwen Did they use “fixed do”?

Wagner Always, we were taught “fixed do.” “Moveable do” was not used then. I still think that “fixed do” is the answer because more and more, “moveable do” is not usable. In music that becomes atonal, you cannot find “do.” I would say that 50 per cent of all contemporary music we do cannot be read by the “moveable do” system.

McEwen Did you have any music reading instruction in this country?

Wagner Oh, some, but you see I was an instrumentalist because I then took up the piano. I became fanatically interested in organ and I had a piano made which had organ pedals on it. A man made up this concoction—though it was not original because they had them years ago—which made it possible for me to practice the Bach fugues and contrapuntal music with the pedals. I had to be extra careful because every pedal had to be hit, while on the organ you can sort of slide. But then this gave me an opportunity to really work on Bach, and on that period of music, on the organ. So naturally my knowledge of “solfege” was far superior to that of the average singer who was not an instrumentalist. After my work in Fairfax High School I went to Europe. I was seventeen and a half years old then.

McEwen Was Fairfax High School here in Los Angeles?

Wagner Yes, here in Los Angeles. As a matter of fact, I did not graduate from Fairfax. I did not finish my last year here because my father decided that I should go to France—not to learn anything, but to learn *how* to study. That was the way he put it. He said here in this country they are so concerned about football that you end up, after four years in college, working in a service station. There was a lot in what he said, so I went to France and studied there. I studied for two years and my studies were mostly in French Literature. During the first two years of college work I still had hopes of becoming a priest. All my life I had had an urge to become a “man of the cloth.” But my interest in music was always foremost so I was confronted with deciding whether to be dedicated to the ministry or dedicated to music. I had to make a choice. Prior to going to Fairfax High School, I had attended the Seminary in Santa Barbara to become a Franciscan. I thought it wasn’t strict enough so I went to a Clerician Seminary in Compton where I had my Latin and my Greek. I was the

organist there. I used to spend a lot of time practicing and they would tell me that I spent too much time on music—though my studies and grades were good. They wanted me to be more active in other things and not to spend so much time on music. So when I left and went to Fairfax High School with the intention of completing my high school work, I had by then pretty much decided that music was going to be my forte. Then I went to Europe, but the urge was still there. I went to a college that was an *attache* of the Sorbonne, called the College of Montmorency, which is about six miles from Paris. They have some of the same teachers that the Sorbonne has and some of the same courses. There, I was able to do some work with the famous musicians. I was able to do some work with Marcel Dupre, but not as much as I would have liked to because he was quite expensive. I was able to dabble into different kinds of music and to learn much about Gregorian chant and much about early Renaissance music as well as Bach. There in Paris was the greatest school of organists in the world. I mean right in that city there were six or seven of the greatest organists in the world who played the literature all the time. So it was a great thing! Then I came back to the United States.

McEwen That was after two years?

Wagner That is right.

McEwen How old were you then?

Wagner I was then seventeen and a half. My father was terribly sick in the hospital with cancer so I had to replace him as organist at St. Brendan's for six months. He died and I went back to France to complete my studies and I was drafted. When I was drafted, I was still able to continue some of my work while I was in the Army. One of my jobs was a teacher to warrant officers that wanted to become officers because I had some educational background that they did not have. I was also an organist in a Jewish synagogue. This was in Thionville which is about ten miles from the city of Metz. I also got to play quite a few of the great organs and to continue my work. When I was released from the Army, I proceeded to study for another year in France.

McEwen Was this the French Army into which you were drafted?

Wagner Oh yes, you see once a Frenchman, always a Frenchman. My father was a Frenchman and the French do not recognize any other Nationality. If you are the son of a Frenchman, even if you were born in the States, you are drafted. It is quite a strict thing. So I served in the 15th Regiment of the artillery and I learned very much. I got to do more work than the average person be-

cause of my interest in music and my ability in it. Then, I went to Paris and returned here in 1937. When I came back in 1937, I had a gift for mimicry and for popular music. It was very difficult at that time to make a living, and I was still quite young. Let me see, I was twenty-one and a half, my mother was a widow, and I had a younger brother Jack. He is now a very successful disc jockey. I went to night club work where I did an act in which I imitated all types of personalities at the piano. A man by the name of Boris Morris heard me and took me to Paramount where he gave me a short-term contract as a singer. There I appeared in a picture called *Zsa Zsa* with an Italian star, Miranda. I was unfortunately with a studio that never made me sing but made me dance. So I was a dancer. It was then that I met Leo Arnold who is still around here. He heard me and asked me to come to M.G.M. as a singer. So I worked for M.G.M. for a year where I was on first call as a singer with the Nelson Eddy pictures. Since I was the only one who could read music quickly, all the singers who took voice lessons would crowd around me to get their notes at the recording sessions. It was wonderful.

McEwen Again, because you could read.

Wagner That is right, and I didn't have the voice that they had. That is, I had had no real, formal training. These were people who could sing like Lawrence Tibbet, but they knew only whether the notes went up or down. I was there for quite a while until I got very fed up with this commercial type of music. I really had a background for a very serious type of music. So I went downtown one day with Richard Keys Biggs, the organist, and as we walked by the church, I was overwhelmed by the beauty of the church. He said, "You know, they need an organist and choir master here so let's go see the Father." The Father was William Clark, and it was on Thanksgiving, 1937. I had returned in April of that year. I was still working at M.G.M. and the priest said, "Yes, I would like to have someone here who could have a good choir." So I took the job, which was twenty-three years ago. I got together Mexican boys and built a fine boys' choir, and I became sort of a scout leader and coach. We won city championships in basketball. The first year that I was there we won the grammar school championship among all Catholic schools. In basketball the girls were runners-up in the finals and lost in the finals by one point. I took the boys on vacations for a month during the summer. They were underprivileged kids, but very musical. We did a lot of recordings for studios aside from what we did in the church. I built a real good organization which I held for ten years, then the parish moved out and it became an

industrialized type of area where there were no homes, so I had to get my boys from all over. We then decided to just have a men's choir. I gave up the boys' group as I could no longer afford to spend that much time because I was getting only \$150 a month for all of these activities.

McEwen This was your main source of income?

Wagner Yes, that was all my income. Of course I had weddings and funerals. I was also doing some research and doing post-graduate work again at U.C.L.A. and at U.S.C. I worked with Max Krone and with Lucien Cailliet because I was vitally interested in orchestration. I worked with Al Salor for two years, so that I did quite a bit of work in both of these universities.

McEwen This was graduate work in succession to your work in France?

Wagner Yes, I had decided to go ahead and further my studies for a degree. I was then teaching the Gregorian Chant and the Renaissance music all over the country, at odd times of the year whenever I could get away, for the Gregorian Institute in Toledo, Ohio. They had workshops in Oregon and in many other places. I did several of those things for them. Eugene LaPierre was then the Dean of Music at the University of Montreal and he was extremely interested in the things I had done. He asked me if I were interested in working on my doctorate at the University of Montreal. I told him that it would be very difficult for me because I had to make my living here. I had two children and I couldn't get away that long just to study on a doctorate. I said that if I got a doctorate, I would get it at U.S.C. or some other place around here. He stated, "Well, I am going to request an unusual thing. If you are able to do all your work there in Southern California and submit it to us in Montreal, in view of your background and your transcripts, would you be willing to do your doctorate in absentia from Montreal University?" It was not an honorary; I did all the work. This is the way I got my doctorate. The dissertation was on the works of Josquin Des Pres. I had done a lot of research before this, you see, and I had done a great deal of post-graduate work. They took all this into consideration and granted me what I think one of the rare things—a doctorate when all my work was in absentia. This is the way I went through the scholastic part of my life. Of course, I kept on studying and going to different things and "hob-nobbing" around with all the choral men interested in daring things, you know. I remember way back when we used to have those meetings of the Choral Directors' Guild. Most of the men we knew were pretty sedate,

conservative, and untalented. I found the Choral Directors' Guild a very unprogressive thing and it did not interest me at all. I knew, right then and there, that I could direct a choir better in five minutes than they could. I heard their repertoire and choruses in the churches. They were big and heavy and there wasn't very much interest in it at all. Therefore, I went my own way and just decided that I would build a group. After that I became attached to the City of Los Angeles. I took an examination in music with the Bureau of Music which was just beginning under Mayor Bowren. I got number one in the exam out of all the applicants. I built thirty some choruses in the Los Angeles and surrounding areas and at first I tried to conduct everything.

McEwen You did all the rehearsing?

Wagner I did all the things at first. Then I appointed a staff of some twenty conductors and would interview these men and tell them what we were trying to do to raise the standard of music. We did an N.B.C. broadcast every year which gave me opportunities. I became interested in orchestras and I did a Beheimer Memorial and an all-Mozart program at the Philharmonic. And of course I began to "get the ball rolling" on repertoire. I believe seriously that repertoire is the food of the musician. He grows with it as a body grows with good food. If he doesn't do great repertoire, he ceases to grow. I talked to those men in school, Doug, and they are all good people. They are all potentially fine artists but they become terribly frustrated with the limits of talent they have in the high school, for instance. Yet economically they cannot do anything but teach there because that is their only livelihood. Instead of saying, I will do the best I can do with what I've got, they get so frustrated when they look at people like myself who deal with people outside of school, who have more talent, with better voices, and under better conditions. And what I did, they can do if they have what it takes. No one handed it to me on a silver platter. I just decided I was going to make my own group and I started with the Bureau of Music.

McEwen Well, we are going to be interested now in what it takes.

Wagner That is interesting. Well, you see, I became affiliated with the Bureau of Music, and I got to know practically all these youngsters in all of these schools who had come after school to join in additional chorus activity. I noticed that in each group there were two or three that were very talented. The rest were mediocre. Oh, they sang, but there was no real talent. For instance, I went to Dorsey and I had a girl there by the name of Marni McKatherine. She was a nice girl. Her name is now

Marni Nixon. She had perfect pitch and was a violinist in the Merenblum Orchestra. I heard several others. I heard another boy called Dick Robie (Richard Robinson) who is well known here.

McEwen Oh yes, very well.

Wagner He could read music very well and now I imagine he can out-read anybody in the business.

McEwen He sings so much of Stravinsky's stuff now.

Wagner Yes, well, he is a superb musician. Much more so than a singer. We got together a number of those people and I created a madrigal group of about twelve voices and then went to KFI and said that we needed an incentive. To get people together once a week without an objective is deadly.

McEwen Was KFI the NBC station here?

Wagner Yes, the NBC station but this was a local broadcast. I asked the public services to let us do a half hour of madrigals each week for a year so that we could go through as much of it as we could. We did get to do the broadcast for a half hour each week in which I covered hundreds and hundreds of madrigals by Byrd, Wilbye, Morley, by John Dowland. You name them! All the works of Edmund Fellowes, that great man who wrote this masterly book on madrigals. So my knowledge in that field was quite good. Then we had to give a flexibility to my group, an ensemble feeling which was the nucleus of the Chorale. I tried to stay away from dramatic music for a long time. One of the little girls who used to come to me—she was twelve years old but had tremendous talent—was a girl named Marilyn Horn. She has just scored a great sensation in *Wozzeck* and was called the woman of the year in music in the *Times* yesterday. She was a girl that I really raised with this idea in mind of gradually letting the voice grow and letting the taste build into these kids of the best music. She sang with us constantly for six years and she never missed a rehearsal. We would use an old room in St. Joseph's near Main Street in Los Angeles where we had no heat and yet they still came. We were not subsidized. I had to talk the Father into letting me have the room since he had a convert class there. He said that was more important than my people singing and I told him that I thought it was a matter of opinion. He let us have the place and so it was my choir room. It was terribly cold and it was in the poor district of town. But there we worked for two years without doing a performance. We just worked and worked and worked.

McEwen For two years?

Wagner Yes, I did do a program once the first year, a thing in St. Joseph's Church. Also, I did another thing at the City Hall for all the City Fathers. They didn't understand it but they thought it was very worthwhile. At these things came a lot of people like Max Krone who were greatly interested. But at this time I was building something that had no limitations in color, race, or creed. You could be the Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, or atheist and I couldn't care less as long as you could read music and you were interested and you had some voice. I think I can make people sing even if they have very little voice. In an ensemble, sometimes too much voice can be a handicap rather than a help. I did try to get good voices and people that were really talented and that is the way we built the Chorale. After two years of work, I got a call from Alfred Wallenstein, who stated that a man named Peterson Greeley of the *Examiner* had said to him that he thought we had the best choir in town. I told him that I didn't know how he could have known that because I had made only one or two appearances in the two years that I had organized it. I said we weren't ready to do anything great, and I also said that he was right, "there wasn't anything in town that could touch us but it isn't anything in comparison to what it will be." He said, "that is very refreshing," (the modesty). He wanted to come and hear it that night and stated that he knew we had a rehearsal scheduled. I said, "that is right, we rehearse at the Elk's Club." (Because then I was directing a men's group there, and in exchange for this they let me use their facilities for pictures that we had made of the Chorale and to rehearse.) He came with Mr. William Hartshorn, Supervisor of Music for Los Angeles, and was very impressed. He waited for me until midnight to discuss two appearances with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Then Franz Waxman asked me to do several things, like Honegger's "King David" and "Joan at the Stake." We did many things on the Los Angeles Music Festival including Stravinsky's works. I worked with Stravinsky on his "Mass" and did one of its first performances here. We also performed his "Les Noces." We worked with Stravinsky quite a lot. I was interested in modern music of Schoenberg and we did a lot of that too. From there on it was just a matter of time until Capitol Records came to me and asked me if we were interested in making one record, the "Pope Marcellus Mass" of Palestrina.

McEwen Yes, I remember.

Wagner It never set the world on fire commercially but it got

wonderful notices. I got a great letter of praise from Shaw who heard it on Easter Sunday, and who said that it was the greatest thing he had ever heard. It was a good recording. The sound wasn't what it is today but it somehow caught fire. Capitol wanted to build up the group and to sign me to a long term contract which I've held ever since. The rest is history from there on, tours and the whole thing.

This should give you some idea of the background. Now what makes a man do this? Well I will tell you, Doug. I am a very competitive man, very competitive. I have been in athletics all my life. I suppose one first starts to say that you are trying to reach an objective because you want to accomplish something. Then, it becomes a little more than that. It becomes a necessity because you know what you have to offer and you cannot take "no" for an answer. You just have to go on with it and you go through all kinds of obstacles but that seems to be the most important thing in the world. To me the Chorale was the most important thing. I planned my rehearsals very carefully. I bought music that I could not afford to buy. I did all sorts of crazy things on \$150 to \$175 a month and I owed more money than I made. They took my car back but I still bought music. I took the street car and the bus. I always felt that it was a matter of perseverance with me, to try not to make the same mistake twice. I made a lot of mistakes, but the trial and error method is the only way to learn. I don't care if you go to school until you are fifty.

McEwen So long as you learn by it.

Wagner As long as you learn. But some people just will not learn because they are not made of that kind of stuff. Where twenty or thirty people will start out in the world of music, maybe one or two will be left. The rest are selling insurance. They come to me with the same story, that it isn't worth it. After all, they have their own life to lead. My life without music would have meant very little. I had to do it. I also feel that one attracts people by doing great music. When I say great music, and you can rationalize this, but I mean music of the masters that has been proven good. Music that has form, logic, and that you can work and work on and there just isn't enough time to get it perfect enough. If you work a year on one piece like the B Minor, you still feel wonderful about working on it.

McEwen Yes, I understand.

Wagner Then if you have the element of conviction, you are a first class musician, and you know your metier, from year to year

you will attract more intelligent and discriminating people. Then I had to think of course of the organizational factors, and of the commercial factors. In order to survive you had to be a good businessman. When I got these offers I was very careful when I worked it out. I would always try to do good things with very little compromise. I stuck it out and this is the story. Here we are.

McEwen Would you say that your choral ideas have been very largely developed as a result of this trial and error method?

Wagner Yes, I think that in every man's life, once you observe around you what is being done, you basically have in mind a certain choral ideal, a sound, which represents the certain sound that you want for music. You watch people singing and you say to yourself, "What is wrong with it? Why doesn't it sound the way I want it to sound?" And then you get at the root of it. Unfortunately, you go to many of these choral workshops where most of the talk is about how to start a choir and how to finish it. How to attack and how to release. They do trite music and affective music and they try to do things that will stun people. This to me is not choral art. We all have to go through that in school at some period and the less we do, the better off we are. I try to impress upon the high school directors, particularly, not to compete with T.V. entertainers. They are educators and they should do good music. At the beginning, I listened to things that I thought were well done. I heard the St. Olaf Choir. I was fascinated by the "owly" sound—the lack of vibrato, but it just didn't suit me. I thought it was amazing the discipline that he got from the choir, and I was very impressed with the precision, and his fine musicianship. I also heard the Waring Pennsylvanians and I thought they did an awful lot at that time to instill into conductors a feeling for technique, a tone syllable which I thought was exaggerated but nevertheless had some merit. I thought Robert Shaw had some good ideas. I know he has affected my way of thinking at times. There were others in colleges that did good work, but with all that I heard I still know there was something that was missing which I thought I had. I still think I have, although we are very bad judges of our own work.

McEwen How much of this, if any of it, resulted from your earliest work, your study in France, any of your post-graduate work, that is, from the time you were in the classroom?

Wagner Well, I would say that probably the major factor, Doug, in whatever success I have had has been the hard times that I experienced as a student. Not so much what I learned in music,

but the moments when I almost starved, when I would go days without food. I had to do menial jobs to earn my way. This gave me a sense of responsibility, and a desire never to be in that position again. The only way that I could find, not only for economic security, but in order to get to a point where I was in a position to do what I want to do, was to make a success of that which I loved most. I believe that it is a matter of character, really, because knowledge is easy but character is not. How many people will work into the night and do the menial things that I had to do? I had to work with poor underprivileged and unfortunate kids and still keep on toward a higher goal and not get lost in the thing. When I quit high school work, I did it simply because I knew that I had reached the point where I was going to either remain as a school teacher or I was going to make the most out of my talents with the finest possible available material. I had to quit and economically it was a difficult thing to do. I had no money and so I had to work twice as hard in order to survive. You know we accomplish a lot out of survival. Most of our greatest composers wrote their best pieces for money. They wrote them because they had to make a living. I would work terribly hard so that my choir would be successful. While I was working out all those problems it was getting better all the time and my economic position was getting better at the same time. I could afford better music to do better things. I could hire better singers, and I could rehearse in better places. I could be more particular because I could afford better things that I couldn't afford before. I would say that the character angle and difficult times I had in Europe which I couldn't begin to enumerate, were probably the greatest determining factors in any success that I have had. As far as my music was concerned, it definitely was affected by it. I had my roots in chant. This is the greatest thing. From the chant stems almost everything that I have done. I learned the modes; I learned the simplicity of unison singing; I learned those beautiful melodies that have gone all through the ages. I learned all these things that have been an inspiration to the great composers and I had my roots in the real classics. I worked in a monastery and even directed and sang the chant. Then, I had Bach on the organ. The roots that I have found were those of the chant, of polyphony, Palestrina, Vittoria and that whole school. I found that the complexity of the pre-Bach period led up to the great Bach, and his works on the organ gave me a facet of musicianship I think choral men sadly lack. Then, the opportunity to develop organizations, and learn how to get people together, how to work out

problems with untrained singers, all of those things helped. The opportunity to direct orchestras which I had, made it possible for me to conduct programs with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. I feel it is just as easy to direct an orchestra as it is to direct a choral group, easier as a matter of fact.

McEwen Now, related to the music that we are talking about, do you have any kind of philosophy as to the nature of music or its purpose, particularly choral music, of course, but not necessarily limited to choral?

Wagner Well, Doug, the way I feel naturally we come to a certain philosophy after twenty-five years. I am basically a performer, you understand, so that I realize how terribly important technique is. I worked on technique with my choir over and over until I felt that if I didn't make it clear by then, that they just were not capable. I always try, also, to blame myself if anything is bad, because the director is truly responsible for everything; for the selection of the singers, for the selection of the music, for the way they are trained, and for his ability to make them be present on time. Now, my philosophy. I would say it is tone production. You know, you attended one of my courses, that I am bitterly against any methodized school of thought on tone production, for the simple reason that all the schools have a certain tone quality which they apply to all sorts of music. To me the greatest achievement of choral art is when you can make the tone fit the music and the message. I certainly would never let my Chorale sing with the same tone a Bach work that they did on a Palestrina work. The writings are different, the energies are different. The long lines of Palestrina need a different type of sound. The only reason I do not have a vibrato in the voices on the Palestrina is not because it is something I made up or is tradition, but it is simply because it is a long line which must be preserved. There must be no jagged edges in the sound. It is like a great Gothic arch which must be uninterrupted in its flow. With Bach music you have small energies. There, the tone must be different. You must have a little vibrato to set on fire these little energies. The technical approach there is different, too. It cannot be too legato or too staccato. It must be musical at all times. It must be clear and convincing. All of these things must be in the directing and the director must know the music well. He must be gifted enough so that he can bring all this out of his singers. My philosophy is that all music represents the expression of something. Therefore, we must fit our tone to the message we are bringing. The degree of greatness in the conductor is directly related to how deeply he can go into the music, how greatly he can influence his people

to do better than they are really able under normal conditions. So that he leaves no stone unturned and tries to follow faithfully the wishes of the composer, and if he finds that the composer has reason for what he says. I certainly do disagree with some composers and I do not hesitate to say that there have been many times when I have gone against a composer's wishes because I thought I could do better some other way. Most composers who have heard us do their works have agreed 100 per cent that it was better, because they are not performers.

McEwen Yes, that has been a very interesting thing.

Wagner George Antheil wrote "Eight Fragments from Shelley" for us and I worked and worked on it. I said to George, "we are ready now, so why don't you come and hear it?" I had changed dynamics. He came and he said it was much better this way. "You know," George said, "we are the worst judges at times in what should be done, and this is the one time when I feel that my music is better than I thought it was."

McEwen You described something about tone for Renaissance, for chant, as well as for Bach. Now, how would you characterize something of nineteenth century, of romanticism?

Wagner Well, you see, in romanticism, the voice must have in it the quality of romance. In other words, if it is romantic music, naturally a straight tone, which is the most objective sound known, is as far from romanticism as anything I know. The element of romantic music is not in the contrapuntal writing but rather in the often used word, and often misused word, "warmth," which is sentiment, and sometimes sentimentality, unfortunately, but nevertheless, it must have the elements of the romantic. We must then, when we hear those voices, associate it with the romantic idiom. It is hard to describe tone. When a person speaks "romantically" he does not speak like a preacher; it has to have real drama behind it. If I had a conservatory of Choral Music which I hope to get eventually, a Conservatory dedicated to Choral Music (probably the only one of its kind anywhere in the country) with the greatest people on its staff, I would make a requirement of at least six months of drama training for all singers.

McEwen Drama training?

Wagner Dramatics. Singers are stones. They listen to themselves sing and they think people are interested in their voices; they are not. People are interested in what they have to say. We must not be conscious of the voice because when we hear a great artist

we are not conscious of his technique, we are only conscious of what he is saying and the same should be true of ensemble singing.

McEwen Were you exposed to any of these concepts when you were a student or have you grown into this thinking independently?

Wagner I have found that there was a terrible lack of this consciousness at the time that I was beginning. First of all, most men who were in music were functionaries, almost like civil service. They were doing this job as a means of livelihood. They wanted to do it well but they were not going to kill themselves, they were not going to be heroic. You have school teachers who are heroic; they are in the minority—those who will stay after school to coach a few of the less-gifted pupils, who will spend their weekends studying or doing research rather than going to Palm Springs and basking in the sun. I was in that category who ate and lived music—morning, noon and night. I was searching. I think I will always search. I believe I am getting closer to what I really feel is good. But, I think that, with the human angle, no matter how much you are convinced of something, if you do not have the adequate tools, you just cannot do it. Sometimes good tools are not available. But on the other hand I found that there were very few who were really that interested—that dedicated. It became sort of a fanatical thing—that we must find the truth behind this. We must restore the love of ensemble music which has existed in Europe for many years. In this country we are more orchestra conscious than choral conscious. In England they are much more choral conscious, even though their technique is not as good as ours. I found out more about what *not* to do than what *to* do in my discussions with people.

McEwen How did you decide what not to do? You implied that by discussing this with people they would make a comment or suggestion and you would say to yourself secretly, "This is not so; this is not good!"

Wagner I have been asked to judge, to be an adjudicator at a festival and I always found that they didn't know how to sing an interval in tune. The old story, the major third was always low and the fifth too high. Choral directors did not listen, and became so used to hearing such flat singing that they came to accept it. It is like being a band director; directing the first semester of band is a good way of going deaf. You don't know whether they are in tune or not after a while. If you play a piano that is out of tune, you won't know whether the piano is in tune or not after a while. A lot of these directors did not listen and were

much the same way. When I got through making these remarks on paper they would come to me almost in tears and say, "Do you mean we sang that much out of tune?" I would say "consistently out of tune" and the reason they are singing out of tune is that they don't know the difference. Of course, I didn't make many friends. I think people considered me brashly frank but I also am my own worst critic and I don't mind. I was not diplomatic at all and I did not want to be diplomatic. I felt that people who wanted the truth should have thanked me and few of them did. Out of my group there stemmed some awfully good choral men who are honest with themselves. I resent after a poor concert anyone telling the director, "You did very well!" when they didn't do well at all. People have flocked to me because they realize that I am honest with myself. I think we always have to strive for perfection. We have searched for years and years and we are not satisfied with mediocrity. I think that honesty is one of the main qualities that is needed.

McEwen These ideas that you have certainly must find their way into your conducting as well as your selection of literature. And the interpretation of the music must stem from your philosophy of music's function and what you consider to be central in it and, of course, in its ultimate delivery as you conduct.

Wagner Yes, I feel that a man owes it not only to himself but to the people who are working for him, as well as the audience, to do the very finest music. A choral director who goes through life without doing the B Minor Mass, conducting the orchestra, the chorus, and soloists the "Missa Solemnis," the St. Matthew Passion, the St. John Passion, and other works, is just not in the "big leagues." He is not developing, he cannot have the vision nor the experience to cope with real music unless he does these things. And believe me, it is not easy to do those things because it is difficult music. It is taxing music; it is music that needs analysis. It is music that you need to get into. I don't mean a musicological analysis always. I don't go for the 4/4/8 all the time. We do a lot of things by musical intuition and when I sit down at the piano and play the "Missa Solemnis" through, I analyze the "Kyrie." I see the ABA form. I don't have to be told this. After you have done three or four hundred major works you certainly begin to appreciate form without having to spell it out always. Too many times they work at it like a stamp collection and they go through these formulas as in an algebraic equation. It no longer becomes a part of the performance. However, those people that teach it say it does. There is a limit to that. Our greatest problem is music intuition and if you do not

have it then you are not going to make it, you are lacking this very quality.

McEwen Can this be developed?

Wagner Yes, it can be developed. Everything can be developed if you have the seed there. Also, some people mature more slowly than others. I, for one, matured very slowly. It wasn't until I was thirty-five that I began to see the dawn. I worked slowly at it. Maybe because of my methods, I don't know. It was just that I grew slowly and I am very grateful that I did because I was really more prepared when I came to do the great works. I was probably better prepared than others when they first attempted them. I have done six performances of the B Minor, seven with full orchestra. I have done several performances of the Missa Solemnis. Also I have done several of the St. Matthew, quite a few of the St. John's. I have done Handel's works galore. But you know I have only done the "Messiah" once.

McEwen Once?

Wagner Only once, because everybody else does the "Messiah." Instead I had done things like the "Saul" and "Israel in Egypt" and "Acis and Galatea," which most choral directors do not do. I am always looking for a challenge. You must look for this challenge, things that have not been done. You may find something you have never heard which will help you to develop. There is more challenge in doing something that you don't sing in the bath tub all the time.

Now, how could the directors, even though the "Messiah" is a great piece of music, how can they be so unoriginal as to do it three hundred and forty performances? As they are done here in Los Angeles in December. Why couldn't they do "Judas Maccabaeus"? Why, because, it is not of the season. But there are other things that are of the season which could be done. Is the "Messiah" a religion? If you are a musician you must go after new materials. You cannot keep doing what the boy next door does. I know conductors that have not done one thing they have not heard at concerts.

McEwen Now, this brings us to a very good point. I think we should discuss what kind of a measure or what kind of device, intellectual or what have you, do you have for making this selection of music? What constitutes good choral literature by your musical measure?

Wagner I think that we can say regarding good choral literature that first of all you have to think about the composer. You know

when you see Bach that ninety-nine chances out of a hundred what he wrote was pretty good. Now, if you see Beethoven, you know he was the worst choral writer in the world, but who had more to say than anybody. You know that when you get into his music it is going to be the product of an insane man but what comes out after you have worked it out is going to be the most glorious.

McEwen Now, what you say implies a knowledge of composers?

Wagner Yes, we must get to know composers. We must know their works. For instance, the Renaissance Period and the work of Palestrina. The vocal writing is astounding in its logic, in its naturalness.

McEwen Logic?

Wagner Yes, so that after a while, if you get good musicians in your group, you have done many of the works of Palestrina, they can sight read it at a performance almost with dynamics. They can read it just by watching the conductor, the intervals and the style of writing are so well known to them. Take Vittoria, for instance—there is nothing in the world in vocal writing that is as graceful and that is as beautifully written as this. What it has to say is mystical and profound and wonderful in its simplicity. You also learn by doing contemporary music. We did things by Samuel Barber, for instance, we did “Reincarnations.” I think most of it is terrible choral writing, but nevertheless, it has a message of its own. It is awkward to sing, like most contemporary choral music, because they have lost the real gift of writing for voices. Everything is instrumental and has been since Bach.

McEwen Wasn't that one of Beethoven's troubles as far as choral music is concerned? Didn't he like to write instrumentally—and also Bach?

Wagner Yes, but nevertheless, with Bach there is so much to say that you have to put up with it. It is up to you to make the singers sing that way. Singers can be made to sing well instrumentally if you have the technique to make them do so. It is difficult, but it is possible. Get to know your composers and look into repertoire. Look to see if the music has a message to say, and if it is written in such a way that it will be a great piece of art after you have worked it out. You can see this by the way it is written, that it has form, that it has meaning, that the text is not banal, that the music is not banal, that it doesn't stray from here to there, but that it has direction. I believe that this is the way you select music. I was so critical in my adjudications

of the type of terrible music they select for these high schools. These conductors that go to some of these workshops. We cannot say that they have not done something for choral music; that would be unfair. I think they have done something. They try to help these people by giving them a knowledge of blend, as though you always have to have blend. Can you see me directing the Verdi Requiem with the Philharmonic and the Chorale and saying that in the "Dies Irae" the blend isn't good? Who cares about the blend? It's the drama! There are moments in music when the blend is a terribly important thing, but some choral directors think that everything must sound like a barbar shop group. That shows they are absolutely lacking in imagination. They are not getting to the depths of music, the drama in the music. And these are the things which we must emphasize, the superficiality of most people. They are not getting below the surface.

McEwen What are your best sources for literature? We know what we are looking for. Let us say we have some criteria in mind. Now, where are our best chances? When you are really looking for material, what do you do?

Wagner Well, Doug, all you have to do is go up to my library over here where I have some 75 Bach Cantatas in quantities. All you have to do is look. I have something like 100 Masses by the Renaissance composers. I have maybe 200 Motets. A man could spend the rest of his life just doing Renaissance music. Personally, I would do Renaissance and Bach for the rest of my life and be a very satisfied man except that I feel that it limits one to only do that period of music. For instance, what could be more remote than a Palestrina Mass and the Berlioz "Damnation of Faust"? Yet, each one is a world of its own. The excitement of the "Damnation"—the excitement that lies in the music! Here is a composer that was so unorthodox, and yet he was a great genius. Everything he writes is not great, to my own way of thinking, because sometimes his orchestrations lack a certain fullness, where they are sparse, but he had the gift of color and imagination. The same with the Verdi "Requiem." I remember twenty years ago I was on a Renaissance "kick" where all music, the Alpha and Omega of music, was Renaissance, because it was so perfect in its writing. I criticized the Verdi "Requiem" terribly, but today I see it's a great piece. It's a great, great piece of music. People say it's operatic. Naturally it's operatic. Who wrote it? An opera composer. But what form, what logic, what drama, what mastery in the way he writes this thing! This "Dies Irae" is like the heavens and the earth coming out and the fire

coming out of the earth and a great judge standing there; the way the voices wail and come out. And yet, almost a Gregorian approach to the "Agnus Dei." This music is not stupid. Verdi was not only steeped in spirit, he was a great composer and at times a mystical composer. The "Agnus Dei" is almost like a Gregorian chant and the "Liberans" is a chant.

McEwen Even in Berlioz where he takes that half step on and on.

Wagner You mean in the "Damnation?"

McEwen Well, I was thinking of his "Requiem" in that section where the girls simply sing a half step.

Wagner Chromaticism. Well now, here's an example. Now the Berlioz "Requiem" is not a great masterpiece all throughout. He was a very inconsistent composer but it's very worth while doing. I find a trombone solo very ludicrous. But again, and this is my taste, when I compare him to the B Minor, when I compare it even with the Verdi "Requiem," I think the Verdi "Requiem" is a great piece for what it says. And the "Requiem" of Mozart (which is mostly Süssmeyer)—there are great moments in that. The "Benedictus" for solo voices and the orchestra is something of sheer beauty.

McEwen Would it be fair to say, then, about this literature choice, and about sources, that this choice coupled to the search for literature might stem from a knowledge of the composers and styles much more importantly than where to look or to say, "this is my source," or to say "these people are the best," or "I always write to so and so when I want literature"? You look *everywhere* with this in mind?

Wagner Of course, Doug, you know that there are composers, no matter what they write, it is going to be bad. So why keep on? They just don't think right. Once in a while, with research, you will come upon some things that are wonderful that are by people you don't know too much of. I know some musicologists who think "Belshazzar's Feast" of William Walton is a terrible piece. I happen to think it is a very exciting piece for what it has to say. It is a terribly technical piece, but it has excitement of rhythms, it stems from American jazz. It is sincere in its expression and it is written by a first-class craftsman. I will do "Belshazzar" once in a while out of sheer excitement.

McEwen How can we develop these criteria for determination among students—among undergraduates—who are going to go out and do all these things and who will have to wade through all of these things from all manner of publishers?

Wagner Well, we should first impress upon the students that all publishing houses are out to make money and, therefore, they are anxious to get new materials out. That much of the tastes, unfortunately, are developed in the students inadvertently, because of the commercial aspects of music. Did you know that 80-90 per cent of the music we hear is designed for commercial profit rather than for art? And the taste of our young people is developed along these lines. Now, you have gone through the Saturday afternoon thing when you go to an Octavo place and go through 500 pieces of music and you come out with one, maybe two, you *think* will be O.K. Now this is a sad state of affairs, isn't it? Every Tom, Dick, and Harry wants to write an arrangement. They don't know how to write one and they don't have anything to say. So why do choral directors waste their time? Why don't they first go through the mill of things that have proven to be great and then go through the challenge of doing contemporary music that, to their judgment, needs to be done? But stay away from these pathetic, morose anthems that go on for ever and for ever and that have nothing to say? When they have 385 Chorales by Bach that are twice as good as anything they've seen.

McEwen How important is the text?

Wagner It all depends, Doug. The text is very important, but the understanding of the words is not always that important. I mean by this, for instance, sections of the B Minor Mass. In the "Crucifixus" it is established, once you have heard the word "crucifixus," that the section means "and he was crucified for us." Whether you understand that every voice should say "crucifixus" or not, is not important. Whereas when you are dependent upon a piece of music to tell you the story, rather than to set the mood, then the words are important. But too many people expect to hear words out of contrapuntal music. When you have a four-part writing where the soprano says "A," the altos say "Ah," the tenors say "E," and the basses say "O," how can you understand that kind? What is interesting about the piece is that you set a mood and then you are interested in the writing.

McEwen The text should be consistent with the mood of the music? And vice versa?

Wagner Exactly. This is typical of the madrigal school, the voices come in 'Fa la la la la.' "Fa la la" means to express joy. I think in a choir there is no reason why you shouldn't understand the words because the voices move together. But in other kinds of music, the mood is much more important.

McEwen Now you have selected the piece of music and you have determined in your own mind that it is worthwhile. What do you do to make the most effective use of that rehearsal with this piece of literature.

Wagner Most conductors that I speak to—I ask them if they prepare their rehearsal. Nine out of ten of them say, “I would like to, but I don’t have time, and first of all I am brighter than anyone in my choir so that by the time they learn I’ll learn it.” Now if I’m doing a very simple piece of music, which is almost self-explanatory, then, of course, I just have to glance at it once or twice and I know the problems that are there. But if I do a major work, I sit down at the piano and I go over it thoroughly. I try to analyze in my own way what it says, prepare what I have to bring out—the technical difficulties involved. I will have to work on technical passages. Many times I will have to use foreign syllables to be able to bring out the clarity and impress my choir with the contents of the music. Now I don’t believe in talking too much at rehearsal. That’s always a danger with people who are extroverts, and some people talk in rehearsal too much, and sing. But there are certain moments when talking is very valuable, but what you have to say must be important, the choir must listen to it, and it must add to what you are doing. Even in the middle of a rehearsal, a sense of humor is very important. After I have prepared my work here, and I feel that my choir has given an awful lot, I don’t “time” when I am going to stop to say something, but I will try to bring out some interesting thing pertinent to what we are doing. The first time I always, for them, sing without stopping, I don’t care if they make mistakes or not, but they must go through it. I would feel terribly neglectful of my responsibility if I stopped them after four bars, unless they disintegrated completely. It’s always a challenge for them to negotiate the notes the first time. I don’t expect them to sing a thing of difficulty the first time without a mistake. But I know that every time we do something like this they get better and better, because they are acquainted now with how they must look forward to the notes and rhythmical idioms are a little more familiar to them from the past works. I am more particular the second time and the more I go over it the more I go into detail. Then I stress the values, right now! Now the sixteenths are not detached enough. The violins are going to bow this with separate bows so it must be much more detached. You hear it, for example, in the Fugue of the “Missa Solemnis,” where every voice sings right with the phrasing of the instruments. There you must have a knowledge of orchestral and choral works to be able to do this

because the average A Cappella choir director doesn't stress this. Nothing is more ineffective than an A Cappella choir singing with orchestra on an accompanied work, because the technique is so much more different. And also I then am ready to know the technical difficulties. I sometimes use the pieces for vocalises rather than waste fifteen to twenty minutes vocalizing. I use different vowel sounds. One fugue I use "la" when I feel they need more brilliance, or "le," "lo" when I want more darkness or more flexibility. "Mo, mo, mo, mo." to bring out the resonance in the voice. "M's" and "n's", liquescents we call them, to bring out resonance because most singers pronounce a very dry "m" and "n" with no resonance to it. I try to show the value of the piece, the excitement we must find in it, the clarity that must be brought out, and the importance of what it has to say, and from there I take it over.

McEwen That's very good. Do you feel that your chorus needs to understand completely what's in your mind? Do they have to have any kind of insight in order to deliver successfully?

Wagner It's always good to give them an insight. It all depends on how interested they are and I'll tell you something—there are always some interested people. I try to make them interested if they are not. I do not believe in giving away everything that I know, not because I don't want to, but because I don't have the time in rehearsal to do it. But I do feel that there are certain important things that must be stressed with them. But I don't tell them one tenth of the things that I find in the music, because then I would be a lecturer.

McEwen But would you feel that it would be incorrect to say that technical accuracy is sufficient?

Wagner It can be, I suppose. It can be. I mean if a choir is beautifully rehearsed technically and then the director has a great knowledge of the score, and the ability to inspire, certainly he can come out with a wonderful performance. Actually if you ask the average singer, "How does this piece go?" if it's an alto, she will sing the alto part, and if it's a bass, he will sing the bass part.

McEwen How much personal identification with the music is necessary for a collegiate organization?

Wagner Don't forget that most young people will only love the music as much as the director loves it. I could take a piece by "Joe Blow," and if it had anything in it which I felt had merit, then I could build that piece up until they would die for it. But we must not forget that most of these singers do not have the

background that we do and it is not up to us to tell them everything that's in the music; they should be able to discover it for themselves.

McEwen But this reflection of the conductor's point of view on this thing and his own enthusiasm for it becomes the expression of the group?

Wagner Yes. I am sure this is not the original, but I think that most serious choral directors don't like to do music they have to apologize for. I try to stay away from that. Once in a while I run into a situation where we are obliged to do something I don't feel is truly great, but I try to make it second great. I try to find the very best in it and many times—for instance, Goldberg, in his review said, "The piece is not great, but Wagner directed it as if it were." Which makes me feel happy because why am I wasting my time if it is not good? But I have to give it a "go" and see if there is something in it. There must be *something* in this music which is good.

McEwen We have been talking about the group here, and this is a logical time to ask what do you look for? What vocal elements do you look for in selecting your singers?

Wagner All right. In my girls I try to find voices that will integrate easily.

McEwen What makes them integrate?

Wagner Let me see if we can pin this down. A voice that is pure in quality, that has flexibility, that doesn't have distortion of over-nasal quality or guttural quality, or those elements in vocal production which do not absorb easily in a section. After you have had choruses for a long time, you know pretty well the types of voices that blend (if you will excuse the expression) because at times you have to think of that too. One of the joys of an ensemble, for the most part, is to hear the choir sing without hearing solo voices protrude. You want them with vitality, but a vitality where they are able to restrain it. Now, some of the best voices I have heard, supposedly best, were voices that I would never take in my choir. They have a vibrato that vibrates low or vibrates high. As a soloist they can get away with it because a soloist needs some of that.

McEwen Would you consider a soloist with an excess in any of those directions to be a really fine voice?

Wagner No, I wouldn't think an excess of any of these makes anyone good. But one must admit that when a soloist sings he

must use more vibrato than the ensemble because there he has no problem to blend his voice with another voice. He is a solo instrument and he is on his own. In back of him there will be a string accompaniment, or whatever accompaniment, but he points his voice out as a soloist and therefore doesn't have the problem of matching, always carefully, with the other voices.

McEwen You think this matching is a pretty significant thing?

Wagner Yes, in the early stages particularly. For instance, I have my people in quartets, always. On tour we rehearse in six or seven quartets depending on how many voices I have. I do it, too, with the A Cappella group as much as I can, but there they are on their own. They have to listen more carefully. I think it is a mental approach with a lot of them. You have people who are just not ensemble people. I know some voices—I had a boy, and to get him to blend in a section was like tearing your hair out. He was always saying that he could sing a high "C", but I rarely heard him sing one. He would always stick out in a section and he would distract me from interpretation because I would always have to worry about whether he was going to come out too much. But you see, he didn't have the "ensemble love." Some people don't like to sing ensemble. Now others would die for it. There is a certain humility, a certain desire to make your voice part of a group, which some people just don't have. I think it is a mental approach.

McEwen How about your men?

Wagner In the men's section your problems of blend are not as great as in the extremes, except for the high tenor section. You can get away with voices in the lows, in the basses, which are perhaps less blending than in the extreme top because individual quality is not heard so much and it assimilates much more easily in the lower register. I try to find tenors who can sing with a head tone as much as a fundamental tone. The ideal is to get those boys with the real brilliant tops who can still go into that beautiful—call it falsetto, or anything you want,—but rarely do I have them sing legitimately up in the top register because the tenors just will not blend unless it is a dramatic thing where they need to sing full voice, as in the "Triumphal March" from "Aida" or something where you really need voices, but for the average work in the Renaissance music, they never sing full voice, never.

McEwen Do you make any type of specific vocal suggestion that affects the tone of your group?

Wagner Oh yes! I work with them on tone quality a lot. For instance, I vocalize my tenors and altos clear up to E flat above high C, in the falsetto, so that we can integrate the sound of the altos and the tenors together as one. In the Monteverdi "Magnificat," here at the Philharmonic Thursday night, you'll hear it. They sing high B flats. It is not a real, full, legitimate sound, but it is a strange and marvelous sound. You can't tell whether it is a woman or a man singing. The best falsettos are from the lowest voices and my basses and baritones can sing a higher falsetto than my tenors because they have to go into the falsetto earlier, whereas the tenors carry up the legitimate sound. You should stay away from all voices that have difficulty in singing that kind of sound.

McEwen Have trouble with the head tones?

Wagner That's right. Those are the worst.

McEwen Are you interested in an especially broad range, for your U.C.L.A. singers, for instance?

Wagner Always. Of course if you have a broad range then it helps enormously. There, of course, you have a lack of the lowest voices and the highest voices. It is rare to find good tenors in college. You have to sort of fabricate them by nursing them along and not attempting music which is too dramatic because they just don't have it.

McEwen How much of a requirement, if any, do you make of music reading?

Wagner That's the first requirement. If a person knows the vocabulary of music, you can cover a lot of ground. It continues to be interesting when you don't have to "woodshed" so much and teach people intervals. They have more vocal security because they are not looking for their interval and they have a musical consciousness which is, to me, a more primary requisite than the vocal.

McEwen Do you find that you have any problem at U.C.L.A. with a substantial number being inadequate from that point of view?

Wagner Of course. It seems strange to say this, but it is true. I think that most people you talk to will agree that the best singers are usually the worst musicians. I humorously quip about the empty head furnishing resonance. It is because they are conscious of the vocalism more than they are of the music. It is inevitable, when I audition people, that if they read like crazy

they have no voice. If they are good singers they miss notes all over the place. They are always thinking of production. I think maybe it is like most beautiful women who are dumb because they are conscious of their beauty. They think their beauty is sufficient unto all things. I think good voices think this is the alpha and the omega and that's it. So long as they have a good voice they don't need to stress anything else and they have neglected that part of their education.

McEwen Have they neglected it or where do you think the responsibility lies?

Wagner Doug, look, I have been on a twenty-five year crusade about teaching solfege. Everywhere I go they say, "Oh, yes, we must stress this," but they don't. They have night classes here at U.C.L.A. and I attended one of these "funny" classes where people want to learn to read music. They spent five minutes reading solfege and they spent the rest of the hour singing arias from Victor Herbert. In our system there is not enough stress on solfege. There just isn't enough. You cannot give too much solfege.

McEwen What do you consider to be a minimum requirement, if there is one?

Wagner Well, I'll tell you something. We should have solfege in grammar school, starting with the second grade. We should teach kids how to read notes, at least so that they know if it goes up or down, with at least two half-hour periods a week—an hour a week. And in high school there should be two 45-minute periods at least a week.

McEwen For everybody?

Wagner For *everybody* whether tone deaf or not. They should teach them notes. This should be a requirement. They have it in Europe. In college we should have two hours a week of solfege. They should take music and not go through it twice, because people depend upon their ear so much. When they have a good ear, this seems to be an apology for not reading. You know that. I have auditioned thousands of singers and when I ask them if they read music, they say, "not very well, but I have a good ear." You never hear a musician who can read say, "I have a good ear." That's understood. The fact that they can negotiate a fifth at sight or a fourth means they have a good ear plus knowing music. Solfege must be stressed. How can you make singers musicians when 90 per cent of all vocal teachers—I use that as a criterion—cannot read music any better than the student? They think they

are physical education teachers. They say, "Now I'm not going to teach you music, I'm going to teach you how to produce." You can't teach voice well unless it is hand in hand with music and interpretation. That's part of it. It has to do with musical values. It's not like doing setting up exercises. There is a certain amount of physical element in it, of development, but that goes hand in hand with music. I studied voice with a teacher who played the worst piano I've ever heard; she plunked wrong chords. How could I sing well when I heard these false harmonies? She couldn't negotiate the notes. She just dropped her jaw and said, "Sing AAaaah," and this was the answer. Now maybe she knew how to give me B flat but to me this is bad.

McEwen Is it your observation that this deficiency is pretty wide spread?

Wagner Yes, Doug. It's very wide spread. Musicianship is not stressed enough. It's not stressed enough in our schools. Of course, it all stems, too, from those colleges which approach music as stamp collectors approach a stamp collection. Musicologists are no longer interested in hearing music. They look at it as a sort of professional hobby in which they are more interested in the historical significance of something than in the actual music.

McEwen What musical implications do you think a strong solfeggio program in the public schools and in the teacher training institutions would have in our country?

Wagner First of all, they could cover ten times more ground in ten times less time. They could do music they have never done before because they have more time to devote to difficult and good music. They do not have to become impatient and bitter about their work because the first time through their kids could give a pretty honorable reading of what they have to do. Everybody would have more interest because they do not go through the drudgery of being taught by rote. All of this would happen. In other words, there is no question about it. We have "goofed" all along the line and I have preached this from the coast of California to New York; from Florida to Canada. I tell them, they nod their heads, and very few of them do something about it. It was so bad that five years ago I had a girl that we call Salli Terri who is a pretty well-known artist and an excellent musician and has a wonderful scholastic background. We started three and four solfeggio classes at night in my studio where we had as many as fifty and sixty people in the class. I have some of the biggest stars today who came to me to audition, like Harve Presnel, who were bad readers and I said, "If your name was Caruso, I wouldn't

use you. Who's got this much time to devote to teaching you your notes? Would you ever think of going to school and having to be taught every word by rote?" I said it is the same thing if you want to be a professional musician. You're just going to have to know something about music. Now, mind you, I don't say that sight reading is a criterion of artistry, but it is a means by which we are able to do many, many things and keep interest. Harve Presnel studied for three months and became one of the finest musicians in my Chorale in a short time because he was naturally musical. He just needed to be disciplined into this, but he worked every day at it. And now he is a star on Broadway. He learned "Te David" by Milhaud, which is almost an impossible piece, in a relatively short time, in three languages. He would never have been able to do this unless he had learned solfege. This was the determining factor in his career. And today with professional groups, imagine we pay \$12 an hour per person to record. \$12! Now you multiply that by 30 or 32 and you have \$500 or \$450 an hour. Should I spend \$450 an hour of my money to teach people things they should know as professionals? If I have to work on a piece of medium difficulty, it will take me an hour to teach a bunch of numbskulls who have no education, but if they read, I can do four pieces during that hour. I save \$1,000, thus I am able to use them more often because they are economical and they permit me a profit. The whole thing is a saving factor if they are musicians. I just cannot accept people who cannot negotiate these things. You see the importance of it. The interest it gives people, the amount of music you can do, the economic factors involved in professionalism along these lines. But this doesn't seep into the minds of educators and they keep saying "yes;" everyone of them says "oh yes, we think you are right!" They don't do a damn thing about it.

McEwen Are you aware that some are trying but are barking up the wrong tree?

Wagner Well, they have unmusical principals who should have nothing to say about these things because they are not experts on the subject. Unfortunately, churches have boards, which I don't believe in. I have never had a board in my church and I have been there twenty-three years. We do some of the best music in the country—every Sunday! Nobody is going to tell me, an expert in my field, whether I can do Vittoria or not. Why should a board tell somebody, "We want this soloist," or "We want this person and not someone else"? Why should a principal, who is a physical education major, tell a musician that he should not teach solfeggio? These are things that should be determined by musi-

cians who are in the Board of Education, knowing full well the necessity for it. But the whole thing is wrong. We can sit here and say everything is fine, but it isn't. It's awful! And every choral man has to suffer with this inadequacy. They look old before their years because they sit there and pound on the piano. They become disinterested and bitter, and the kids, just as much because they have to work so hard just to learn a simple piece.

McEwen That's fine. That's a wonderful treatment of the subject here. Are there any nonmusical factors that help somebody in your organizations? Let's say that the voice is mediocre. Is there anything else that is significant to a good delivery of what you want?

Wagner Of course—the interest. I have found people with mediocre voices who were a greater contribution to my group than others, because they were there every minute. And by their attitude and their morale, they made things easier so that we could really do things well. Whereas, you have these people who are prima donnas who have no humility, who come into a group for glorification of their own egos. They are a cancer to the outfit. I have had very few, but I have had people like that on tour almost ruin my organization and ruin my performances, because, no matter how much you told them to do something, they were not obedient. It's much more difficult in professional groups. It's a relatively simple matter to direct a college group and do some real good work with them, because you have no pressure of unions, you have obedient kids for the most part with no prejudices in vocalism or in music, and who are still interested. So the college director has an advantage. But every time I call my people in, my professional choir, it's a terribly expensive thing. We have to work under pressure. Then you have people who have sung all kinds of music and who are in this for the job. They happen to have a good instrument. I try as much as I can to make them interested and dedicated, but after all, they are running out of my rehearsal to go sing Dubois' "Seven Last Words" in the church, because it pays. I can tell them it is lousy music but they say, "But I eat." And still they don't realize that even though they have to do this, it affects their taste. So the college people have it easy. I think it's a picnic at U.C.L.A. I enjoy every minute of it. Imagine, I walk in there and there's no union man to tell me to stop. Not only this, but the kids look at me and they are waiting for me to give them something. They are interested. You saw the other day when we did these things. Of course we had to do this on a minimum amount of preparation because we were

asked at the last minute if we would do this. But they tried. Wonderful spirit!

McEwen We were talking about little elements of organization; we should probably pop through a couple here in a hurry. Do you prefer a particular seating arrangement for any reason?

Wagner It depends on the music, Doug. In Russian music, for instance, where the music moves homophonically, I find that the mixed quartet is a wonderful thing. It's real good. I am even using it in counterpoint. You say, "How do you cue your voices?" I say if you know the music well, you don't have to cue them. I should cue them, why? They can count. Too many times we nurse them too much. I am guilty of that, too, at times, but with difficult music it is necessary to be very accurate with them because they just cannot be that responsible. We can try to make them that responsible, but we are not going to take a chance. The choral director subdivides much too much—he gives every note and ruins the phrase. If he did a little more orchestral work he would get away from that. I change. One time I have the sopranos and tenors on the same side and altos and basses on the other, and other times I will put my extremes, my sopranos and basses, together. Sometimes I will put the men in the middle, girls on each side. I have no format. I only know that I think the quartet arrangement is the most satisfactory because no matter how bad the acoustics in the hall, they always have the four parts close to them and they can tune. And then I work with each unit as an individual unit, and then blend that unit, and then put them together.

McEwen Generally you like the quartet, but actually is it of great significance one way or the other?

Wagner I get more sound in quartets.

McEwen In your college groups do you find it effective to use students in any capacity to implement your policy? Do you use officers?

Wagner I think that this can be good but I am not one of those followers of the great organization thing. I am sort of a "dictator" and I don't have too much patience with this because I feel that I have to do pretty much of everything myself. Now, fortunately I have one or two men who handle my library in the university, or take charge of the robes. But to have a president, vice-president, a secretary and treasurer, and all that nonsense, ultimately I have to tell them what to do anyway, you know. I save myself a lot of work, probably. I don't know. I haven't experimented that way.

McEwen Does U.C.L.A. have much of the scholarship program in music?

Wagner No, they don't and that's one of the troubles we have over there. The problem is this. It's a state school with pretty high scholastic rating and they try not to take any people with less than a "B" average. That's the rule. They turn down a lot of people who have to go to junior college before they can enter there. Also, the tuition is very reasonable. So, actually, when a person earns a tuition scholarship there, he doesn't get an awful lot of money. It only means \$50 a semester, as compared to a private school like U.S.C. which is \$250 or \$300. We don't have a very great scholarship program for applied arts, anyway. I think this is one of the reasons why it is so difficult to maintain a good orchestra. As far as the choir is concerned, we haven't had too much trouble because a good part of my choir there are people who work at the university and who give up their lunch hour to come and sing. I have a lot of postgraduates who are employed by the university who are a part of my A Cappella choir and audit without unit credit. I think that only maybe 50 per cent or 60 per cent of my choir gets credit. They come for the love of the music and to do good things.

McEwen Do you have any viewpoint on this matter of scholarship business? You speak of those who come to your group to sing out of the love for it. Is it conceivable that a scholarship affair can amount to almost hiring your group?

Wagner Well, I believe strongly that in cases where a needy person needs this assistance, they should grant scholarships to people with real ability. I think all of us would like that to happen because, first it gives you better material and you are giving an opportunity to someone who really deserves it.

McEwen Is there any danger of the feeling being developed among high school students that the state owes them an education?

Wagner They do feel that way. I know some very talented people who wouldn't think of paying to go to school. Unfortunately, I am afraid they are right because if you get a really good cellist, you are going to give him a scholarship because you need that cellist. They've put in a lot of money in lessons, too; when you consider that, I don't think this is unreasonable.

McEwen Is there anything that works very well for you in respect to rehearsal attendance?

Wagner Rehearsal attendance is always a problem in this day and

age when people have so much to do. But I find that my attendance is quite good. As a matter of fact, on actual figures of my choir, in school, it is almost 100 per cent because I grade the A Cappella choir on attendance. I can't go through the whole choir and say one is better than this one. I'm pretty rigid about this. If they are sick, there is just no excuse. I'm sorry, you know. I mean I can't go through a whole dossier to find out who was sick and who wasn't sick. They're either there or they're not there and if they are there, they are going to get an "A" because they're there, and that proves they know the music and they have worked and have put in their time. If they miss once, they can't get an "A."

McEwen This the most effective way to keep them coming?

Wagner Yes. In school you don't have much problem because they want a good grade and those who come for the love of it would be defeating their own purposes if they didn't make rehearsals. But in the Chorale it is a different story. We have people in business who have the pressures of business. We keep our attendance throughout the year at almost 90 per cent, which, I think, is quite high when you consider there are 140-150 in the group. That is a very high degree of attendance.

McEwen Is it possible to ask a group to perform too often?

Wagner Yes.

McEwen What happens if it does?

Wagner That's almost as bad as not performing enough. Not quite. When they are asked to perform too often—here is a typical example: this coming week the Chorale sings Monday night, which is tonight, three or four hours; tomorrow with orchestra three hours; Wednesday night, performance; Thursday night, performance; Friday afternoon, performance; Friday night, recording; and Saturday, a morning and afternoon Christmas recording. If anybody's loaded, they are. This is unusual. It is a lot, and a lot of them will not take this kind of thing, and reasonably so. But we try to explain to them, this is a great thing we are doing. It doesn't happen often to be that crammed. And they do the best that they can. A lot of people give up a lot. Women have to hire baby sitters. You have men who have to give up \$30, \$40, and \$50 for a day's work in their business to be able to do it. They have adopted this as their favorite—how should I say—not pastime, but this is to them a great hobby. They love it very much and they would do almost anything to do it right.

McEwen But too much performance is not good. Would you consider frequent performance with a college group, using the same literature, to be more detrimental than frequent performance using new literature; that is, a new concert every so often?

Wagner I think a frequent performance of the same literature is worse than frequent performances of different literature. From a developmental point of view, it is worse to do the same music all of the time. From a standard of performance, to do different music is worse. I think that this is one factor I have harped about. I, for instance, have gone two years here when I have done one performance a year. Like the "St. Matthew Passion." That's four hours long. A large work. Or I will work six months on the "B Minor" which is little enough, a whole semester. To me this is better than to try to work all the time, and I think that college groups sing too much, play too much. They put students under pressure. Students have a lot of other things besides music to do in school. They have, not only their social life—fraternities and sororities, which one must respect whether you like it or not. They have their family to think of, they have their twenty units they are carrying, or whatever it is, and they have a history teacher who is a real "dog," and they have mid-term exams, and so on. They still have to fit in music. Now if they are talented, they are asked to do everything. And this is unreasonable and I think they have overdone it. At U.C.L.A. it has been a great concern to us. When you have five or six fine violinists in the department, they are asked to play everything. These people have other things to do, too, and it is unfair.

McEwen What happens to this student, in your view, when he is pressed too hard? What are the results?

Wagner His grade average begins to drop, and he is not happy about it; he cannot get all of his work in, his subjects suffer; and he becomes very unhappy about the whole thing. It gives him a wrong "steer" on music, too.

McEwen Can he grow to resent music?

Wagner He does grow to resent music. I know some of them who have. They feel that they have become a sort of indispensable factor, and a lot of things they do are not particularly engaging to them either, you see. I think that this is a danger in college—of overtaxing the people. I think they should hold down their own performances. Instead of doing six or seven concerts a year, limit it to a couple or three and do them well.

McEwen Two or three would be optimum?

Wagner That's right. It would if it is a big work.

McEwen Do you exercise with your college group any kind of selectivity in scheduling concerts and tours? How do you determine which concerts, which circumstances, are the most desirable?

Wagner First of all, you must know that I do not try to cater to public taste. I mean by that, I do music which I think is so great that if anyone disagrees with me, the limitation lies with him and not with me. If I do a program I try to balance the program. For instance, I will do certain programs this coming year. We will do in one section, the "Requiem" that takes maybe forty minutes, then I will do Brahms' Liebeslieder Waltzes, and maybe I will do some work of a contemporary composer at the end. This will be my program. But I will have given them different kinds of music, but the best I know. I do not agree with all these many "selections" that they put on. For instance, some college choir conductors think it is good to do fourteen selections always, and end with "Oklahoma!" I used to be told by impresarios that we had to sing something the people understood. Well, that's nonsense. First of all, it doesn't give the kids a real feeling of accomplishment when you have to do all these short selections. Once in a while if you are doing a special program for an auditorium or assembly or for the P.T.A. or something, maybe you want a few two or three minute selections. That's fine. But a whole program of this, I think, is a waste of time on the college level. I think you have got to give them a sense of the large forms, of the real expression in music, and keep away from all of these short little selections that are meant to keep people from being bored.

McEwen Would you say that this kind of work is one of the elements that contribute to the morale of your organization? What elements contribute to keeping up a group's spirit and enthusiasm?

Wagner The personality of the director, his sense of humor, his knowledge of his subject matter, his dedication to the music and to his students. Basically, these are the elements. If a man has a personality which is lacking, say, humor, he may be a big flop. If a man has humor but has not got something else, he may be a big flop. In other words, an ideal personality is made up of many ingredients. He has to be a man who is "hep" to the current day thoughts, too; who is not, to put it their way, "a square." Sometimes students think a man is a "square" when they are wrong. You must have the conviction to tell them, "you may think it is square, but I'll tell you, you're square," which is the way I talk. A man who has convictions and who has a background which justifies authority is an accomplishing man and looks at music as a

vital means of expression. One who is a master at what he does, but is a man who is fair, strict, and considerate. A conductor has to have a vivacious personality because the average student is a deadhead—a nice, wonderful deadhead. Their blood pressure is low, they are tired from sitting in those boring classes where they are taught by people who feel that any insertion of personality distracts from the exposition of their erudition. Most of them are pedantic anyway. This is not a vitalizing type of thing for a student. So when he comes into a class of applied arts, like A Cappella choir, or orchestra, you must have someone in front of them who just overflows with enthusiasm for the music—one who is not pleased at everything that happens, who is extremely critical, who always tempers his criticisms by humor without detracting from their meaning. I criticize my students probably more than anyone. I've never heard anyone more critical and as strongly critical, but my students still like me. A couple of years ago I was voted one of the most popular men on the campus. Yet no one is as strict with them as I am. I say how mediocre they are, but I shall try to put up with them. They know in a sense that I mean it very much but I am humorous about it. I don't become bitter. I always try to be fair about their grades when they make an effort.

McEwen Well, you suggest that your remarks are not directed to them as personalities.

Wagner Exactly! They know that I am suffering frustrations of music—not about them.

McEwen In a lot of places, especially with reasonably developed departments, where they have an instrumental program, they frequently during the year do the larger works that use chorus and orchestra. The orchestra man is putting in time preparing, and you are working like crazy with the chorus. Who conducts this? Where does the primary responsibility lie, or is there one?

Wagner That all depends on where this happens, Doug. At U.C.L.A. there is an understanding that any time I do a major work with orchestra, I conduct. Naturally I should, because I conduct the Philharmonic on the same thing. If a man has the ability, he should do it. Unfortunately, in some places, it is thought that an orchestral man has the knowledge to conduct orchestra and chorus more than a choral man, and that is a very false impression. Some orchestral men are worse at conducting choruses than choral men at conducting orchestras. Now we also know that there are a lot of choral men who have no "beat" for an orchestra. This is something which should be remedied be-

cause actually, it is more simple to conduct an orchestra than a chorus. At least musicians are routined to count. I do not think that a choral work should be conducted by an orchestral man in a college setup. In a professional setup, you have some choral men who are very good, but cannot conduct orchestra, and therefore, should not be put into the situation of direction. They are not acquainted with the orchestra portions as well as they should be.

McEwen In your rehearsals, getting to technique here, do you arrange your literature in any kind of sequence to pace the rehearsal?

Wagner Sometimes. I pace it only when I feel that my group may be too tired to attack a difficult section at the end of the rehearsal and, therefore, I sometimes take the most difficult things at the first.

McEwen Do you predetermine to any extent what you are going to try to accomplish, or where you are going to place special emphasis, today?

Wagner Yes. On the great works I do. For instance, tonight I have planned my rehearsal so that I know the exact sections I am going to take first. The ones that need the most work. I have also worked out the problem of divisions of beat and a very taxing place in the Monteverdi "Magnificat," so that I will have them count it out so there is no chance of mishap.

McEwen Are you able to describe the nature of the choral tone that you consider ideal, that is the kind of tone which you can call upon to do a variety of things?

Wagner To put it into words would be less effective than to have you hear it. I would like you to hear what I consider to be the ideal tone for a college choir which I have here on tape and which typifies, with no apologies, what I consider to be the finest sound that I could imagine. It is a pure tone, it is an integrated tone, it is a tone that still has vitality but never sounds forced.

McEwen Does your ear ask for a particular kind of balance among choral sections as men to women?

Wagner Always, yes.

McEwen What kind of balance could you describe?

Wagner In a question like this, to be perfectly honest, it depends on the type of music I am doing. In four-part work I always use tenors because the tenor protrudes more than any other. You have to watch that the altos do not get a guttural, chesty sound

in the middle register which does not blend. And if the girls go to extremes in the high register, be careful they do not sing flat on the top tones and do not shake and do not protrude like a lot of church choirs where you have forty sopranos, two tenors, one baritone and five altos. And that the basses do not curl up their tongues and think they sound rich when they are the only ones that can hear the voices. Things of that kind. What we must do then is establish a fusion of sound in which, as you point out, the balance must be created in a certain way.

McEwen Do you like a particular ratio of men to women in your chorus?

Wagner Oh yes. For the most part I like a little more men than women.

McEwen Heavier in the basses?

Wagner Yes.

McEwen Do you put much stress on the uniform handling of vowels?

Wagner Yes. In the earlier stages of rehearsing I come to some understanding about the unification of vowel sounds. Whether they pronounce "oh," "ah," "a," "e." The only vowel they can pronounce correctly at the beginning and sound good is "ooo." the worst is "ah" and "e." "Ah" would be an open vowel, and "e" a pretty open one. They spread the tone. They do not focus it, so I try to keep the tone in the same place.

McEwen Is this one of the significant elements as to what you think of as a professional sound or as your ideal sound? Is this one of the central things?

Wagner Yes, definitely. I've a tape here which typifies exactly what I am talking about. You hear no spreading of sound. The unification of vowel sounds is vitally important because your whole approach to choral ensemble is unification. The more they think together and do together, the better it is going to be.

McEwen Does this enhance what we sometimes refer to as choral "line"?

Wagner "Line" would have to do more with the horizontal thought in the phrase, but it would be sound integration, sound fusion. That's what I think of basically.

McEwen Do you find that "line" offers any problem for the collegiate people?

Wagner Of course it does. I don't know of one collegiate group that I have heard that has a really good "line." This is because

they don't have their roots in the chant and in polyphony, and that's where you get it.

McEwen Do you find that attacks and articulations, that sort of thing, are significant elements in the refinement of your choral sound?

Wagner I think that all of these things you speak about stem from the rhythmic consciousness of the conductor. If the conductor is rhythmically conscious, he will automatically point these things out. Off beats, so that they learn to come off the beat. And all of these exciting rhythmical things are part of the conductor's personality and his consciousness of the importance of these things.

McEwen "Line" would be involved in the musical phrase. Is this refinement of the phrase something that needs to be adhered to pretty carefully?

Wagner I think this kind of a thing in certain music is almost indispensable to choral art and unless the conductor has that sensitivity for the "line," he is missing one of the most essential qualities of the choral artist.

McEwen We were talking about conducting a second ago and I think maybe our chance to enlarge on this may be here. Do you have any theory concerning the special function or unique responsibility that conducting can convey?

Wagner Yes. I am bitterly opposed to anything that has to do with "gimmicks." For instance, there is the retarded beat. That's where the conductor conducts and then the choir comes in. That's unnecessary. I hate any mannerisms because one of the essential qualities of a conductor is simplicity, naturalness, and all of these qualities which are unaffected. Any time it becomes affected then it is not real. Many directors go through life without working on their style; therefore, they get into terrible habits. They begin directing with the shoulders, they get little "hooks" into their conducting, little mannerisms which they think are "cute."

McEwen What is wrong with these extraneous little habits that they get into?

Wagner It detracts from the music. It adds nothing, although it does satisfy a little ego. It gets in the way of the music. It shows that they have not applied themselves to the importance of working on their conducting. I have stood in front of a mirror for months conducting large works to be sure that my beat was right.

I have had pictures taken of myself. I was horrified at first at things I would do. I would ask myself, "Why did the phrase not come so well?" Maybe it was the way I conducted.

McEwen What should conductors do then?

Wagner Conducting should transmit to the instrumentalists, or the singers, the spirit and the technique of the phrase. The thought behind the whole thing; not only with the hands, but with the eyes, with the face, and with the body. Too many conductors are the "great stone face." They have no expression and, therefore, cannot inspire anyone. They must live in their eyes and their face, they must reflect the whole thought behind the phrase. Their hands are only a means of indicating to the choir the progress of the phrase or to help them to be more authoritative in their entrance. Maybe they will signify drama with a fist, maybe they will caress the phare gently. All of these things will affect what comes out.

McEwen Would you say that you feel your conducting needs to come as close as possible to looking just as the music is to sound? Extra movements would imply music that isn't there?

Wagner Exactly. I have seen at the end of something where the choir and orchestra had pianissimo and the conductor gave a sharp cutoff which was not in character with the music at all. It was terribly distracting, and not good. Another, as you know, who tried to amaze people with little gestures too small for the music, simply because they were trying to impress people that they had a dynamic personality which did not need need gestures to be able to make people sing. We come to the basis of honesty and sincerity. It is lack of affectation. It is sincerity to oneself and to the performers, to the people and to the music. It is a basic honesty and directness and frankness which is not venerated by egotism, by false values, by artificiality or frills—by all sorts of things which stand in the way of true art.

(Following the playing of a tape-recorded concert of sixteenth century polyphonic music, the interview resumed.)

Wagner Conductors must realize that they have to steep themselves in early music. There is a "mystical" quality which they can only produce if they understand it. The lack of understanding is the big weakness of most performances of Renaissance music. I have told many conductors this. I have said, "So you begin with Bach, but you are starting with a composer who is way down the line in music history. He is tops in his field in his period, but what came before him? The real vocal music. They don't know

enough about this. They go into Brahms' "First Symphony" and into other works before they know. They are already studying Shakespeare before they have learned to write. I'm so thankful for this background. You take music right from the beginning up to the present day and cover every phase of it. You heard the sound that came out of a bunch of kids.

McEwen How are we to impress the importance of early music upon undergraduates?

Wagner A lot has to do with the bad publications of the work. They are unreadable. Conductors take little trouble to study the early chant, yet when you hear it done well, it is so perfect—and look what it does to your sound. It gives a feeling of unison and oneness, so that when you go into parts, you have perfect unison. My men's unison there is just about perfect, in the girls, too. When you put these into parts we carry the thought right through and there it is.

McEwen What does this do to the musical architecture, if you please?

Wagner Well, it just carries that "line" as though it spirals to the heavens. You never hear an interruption. I said, "Die first, before there is an interruption in that song. Die first." I would say it like this to them. It has to keep moving—and moving up and upward. I would like to get this record out and send one to all these choral men. I want them to listen.

McEwen Would they do that as an educational project over there at U.C.L.A.?

Wagner Well, we have our "St. Matthew" on records for the students. The whole performance with the orchestra from U.C.L.A. and the chorus. Marilyn Horn is soloist.

McEwen We certainly enjoyed her work down at San Diego.

Wagner She certainly has a wonderful background. I yelled at her for six years that she was flat. "Your vibrato is below; get it up, girl, get it up," and she's never forgotten it. You can hear now how true she sings. She has developed on operatic lines because she has the organ there. Don't forget she has six, seven years of great choral work behind her that gave her musicianship. A good choral background never hurts these good singers.

McEwen Probably the critical element exercised upon them there resulted in some bases of criticism of themselves. If there a significant difference between choral and instrumental conducting? Two conducting courses so often exist.

Wagner Basically, no. If there is any difference it is brought about by people who decide to do things their own original way. An orchestral director, usually, in his treatment of the music and his approach to rhythm, is dealing with people who are used to playing a note off beat. For instance, when there is an eighth rest on the downbeat, the conductor gives a strong downbeat and they come in after the beat. Whereas choral directors nurse their people along and give them each note. It is a matter of training and routine which promotes the kind of conducting in a choral director.

McEwen But if we were to break this down into lowest terms, so to speak, in spite of what is done or what habits people get into . . .

Wagner There is no difference between a choral "beat" and an orchestral "beat." In dealing with voices sometimes you have to smooth out your "beat" in order to get a flow of sound, but you do the same thing with a violin section and get it. When the music is rhythmic you should be just as precise with a chorus as with an orchestra.

McEwen Does it still need to look the way the music sounds?

Wagner That's right. You have got to be in character. Your beat and your whole attitude has to be in character with the music. I really am very impatient with people who are not clear and precise just because they are directing voices. You can probably get away with a little more percussive beat with the orchestra whereas with the chorus you might make it sound a little harsh. But again there is such a slight difference.

McEwen Is it a matter of training again?

Wagner Yes it is. When I conduct the Beethoven "Missa Solennis," I have to conduct the chorus and the orchestra together; here is the proof. So when they sing the "Fugue" I direct the chorus exactly the way I direct the orchestra. They feel the impact and the meaning of the music. There is no difference.

McEwen Do you have any way, when you are working with your group, of speeding up their response to what you show, so that you don't have to talk about something?

Wagner Oh yes. I begin to get terribly excited. My eyes start to flash, I shake my hand at them, I try to "spark" them. One of my hands shakes at them while I spark them with more intensity. Or I point to them to say "now." You have got to be a driver all of the time. It is this "follow through," this intensity towards an objective that they have to get into the music. Once you get that urgency, that feeling of continuity, that tension in a choir,

then you have great performances coming. If that's missing, then you just get a community sing.

McEwen Does this involve two things? First, an insight into what it is, precisely, that you want, and then anticipation of the weaknesses of your group? To call their attention to something before it arrives?

Wagner The whole answer to all the problems facing a choral director can be summed up into two statements. *Know what you want*, and *Know how to get it*. That's all. Take a great piece of music. Know what you want out of it, know what the composer wants, know how to get the results. Once you understand that, you "have it made." Of course, under these headings come the enormous amount of qualifications necessary to do justice to it. To be able to make your group sound right, to be able to make them do justice to the music, to stress the intensity of the words that mean so much. This "energy" in the group—I even have them link arms at times on a fugue to be able to feel this "pull" into the music. On the Mozart "Requiem," the "Cum Sanctis," we link arms. They sounded as though they were doing a Vittoria "Motet," and I said, "This is not it at all. There is an excitement and an energy in this fugue which escapes you completely. It doesn't drive. It is not flowing. You must feel like a great chain." Then I thought "Great chain—link arms," and said "I want you to sing and pull arms." and they smile at you as if, you know, you're out of your head. But they got it. It worked.

McEwen Have you done it since?

Wagner Yes.

McEwen That's a very interesting idea. What do you think are the chief causes of bad intonation?

Wagner There are several. First, lack of pitch consciousness by the conductor. The conductors lack discipline in this matter. They should always correct them even when there is the slightest indication of faulty intonation. Also, the preparation to the note. The thinking process. They must think before they sing. The others are faulty production, fatigue, wrong key signatures, wrong acoustics. All of these lead to faulty intonation. You know some people say there is no such thing as bad acoustics. I heard my impresario, Sol Hurok, on the Jack Paar Show, say, "There are only bad acoustics for bad artists." That's not true, Heifetz will sound dead in a dead hall no matter how great his violin is and so will the greatest choir in the world, if they do not have the proper acoustics that do justice to the "instrument." A

violin played in a piece of velvet has no resonance. Neither does the voice have any resonance in a hall that is "wired for no sound." Therefore, that's why I am so particular about acoustics. Everywhere I go I tear down curtains and I try to situate wood around my people so that they have something to help them sing, as well as being heard. Our stages in this country are built all wrong. They are built for everything but music. Some tone always escapes. There are some places in Europe and on the East coast, like Symphony Hall in Boston or the Royal Festival Hall in London, where there is no proscenium. There's an elevation at the end of the hall which is part of the hall and that's where the concert takes place. There are none of these curtains that eat up the sound. No proscenium that goes up forty feet where your tone escapes you. This is silly. You can't have these kinds of things.

McEwen Well, now fatigue overtakes a group and they begin to sag. When you are working with a group what do you do?

Wagner I lighten up the sound rather than asking them to sing out too much. I have them lighten up the sound and, if possible, if it is a cappella, transpose the music up. Sometimes we do that. There are certain signatures they just hit. It depends on the place.

McEwen We talked about festival choruses a few days ago. When you go into a situation where you are not responsible for the training a group has had, what are the central considerations in choosing literature?

Wagner We must choose literature to which they can do justice. It must have an element of challenge but it must never be literature which will be out of the compass of their vocal limitation, or which is beyond them. Too many times they attempt things that are either too easy or too difficult. Also, avoid trite literature. Some of those Russian arrangement which are so impressive need low D's and you can't find them in high school. They attempt those things with high A's that shriek, or B flats. In choosing literature there should be quality to the literature, by wonderful composers, things that have been tested to be good. We cannot experiment with these kids. After all, we are giving them an education. They must do good things. Keep away from the trite things. No matter where I go they are going to choose things that they think kids will "enjoy." An arrangement of "Jingle Bells" or the same old "Madame Jeanette's." They think this is just wonderful.

McEwen Given any particular style would you say you want something that is more or less straightforward, clear cut?

Wagner Yes. I want things that are not transcriptions, for the most part. I want things that are the product of a "Master" and I have recommended such things to all my festivals. They always want something light. Light music is music that people will understand, supposedly, and heavy music is music people are too "dumb" to absorb. Music is not heavy to a person who understands it, so it is a matter of education. If they would raise their standards in repertoire, then I am sure the children would surprise the teachers by accepting it. My kids never enjoyed a concert more than the 16th century concert we did here, and they came from all walks of life.

McEwen Are there any primary aims that you try to accomplish with a big chorus? Do you want them to respond in a certain way, or be able to develop a certain facility?

Wagner The first thing you do is you win them over by the ability to hold them together and to unify them in a short space of time. You attack the problems first that are the worst. When I directed the All State Texas High School group (a marvelous bunch of kids) I had trouble with the tenors at first. They were trying to sing out and were flattening. So I lightened the sound and I gave them exercises on "purr" and things of that kind, which developed that head sound and their pitch problems were solved right there. I worked with them very hard. The worst thing that happens with festival choruses—they are badly prepared. They are only prepared in those things that they sing as a group, alone. When the ensembles get together, you find out they have not had the preparation. I don't think that I have had more than one group in my whole life that was well prepared and that was a group I directed up in Portland. It was superbly prepared. Girls. There were 150-175 girls doing a very challenging program prepared by Nuns in Catholic Schools. The most superb thing you have ever heard. I went to a festival in Oklahoma that had 4815 voices. It was like a circus. They had three different editions of each copy, in preparing them. So you could not put some of the numbers together. The whole thing was a farce because when you get that many voices you are trying to make them sound like a 100 voices. They are so far removed from each other that there is no possibility of really getting rhythmical pulsation in the thing. It is just a big, massive array. They had 600 instruments. Half of them played out of tune. The thing was supposed to inspire you but it didn't. It was just that they wanted to have the biggest festival in the world. I told them, there in front of 200 teachers, that they were mediocre and I never wanted to come again. I

told the kids: "Work hard. I don't want to discourage you, but you work hard and learn how to sing well and you won't have to sing 5000 together to do it well." But the teachers were responsible.

McEwen Does a matter of dynamic range constitute any difficulty with a big group like that?

Wagner No. You can work, dynamics being relative, you can get a wide dynamic range. But it is just a matter of cueing by "radar." Getting precision and getting ensemble. I did a thing for years with a thousand voices in Stockton and we got some pretty good results there because of the physical setup, but that's about the limit. But that's a lot of voices together.

McEwen In your adjudications that you just talked about, what are the choral weaknesses that you see most often?

Wagner Musicianship of the choral director; the lack of taste in selecting good repertoire; the lack of stress as to fundamental things such as pitch, intonation; a completely distorted quality of tone production which does not fit the music they do; a sort of "methodized" adherence to a "vocal school." I heard a high school group, for instance, sing everything like a Negro spiritual. And when it did a Negro spiritual, it was very effective because they had a Negroid sound about them, and they weren't Negroes. They were white. But the woman had dedicated years to making them sound as if they were thirty years old. These sixteen year old kids! There was a very big vibrato of the voices and a hollow sound, but when they did sixteenth century numbers, it was tragic. It was so tragic they couldn't go on.

McEwen Are these implications of faulty teacher training or does most of this stem from a personal inadequacy, do you think?

Wagner Part of it is personal inadequacy and part of it is bad training. We are not thorough. For instance, how many school teachers know how to teach the unchanged voice in junior high? I spent ten years of study in this field. I went with the greatest teachers: Father Finn, Father O'Malley—who were experts in their field—Tertius Noble. You can make thirty boys well trained and get it to sound like the most heavenly thing in the world. But you hear festivals from the Board of Education with 300 boys, it doesn't sound as large as twelve. They haven't developed the tone. They make the boy think his voice is lower than the girl's. That's nonsense. The boy's voice is exactly the same as the girl's until the age of change. The vocal cords are exactly the same length and, therefore, they should be made to sing soprano and be trained exactly as a boys' choir should be

trained. You must know how to make them sing through the change. My best men were boy sopranos who have never stopped singing since the age of eight and who are professionals today. But you must know how to prepare for the change by the meeting of the two registers on a downward scale. Stay away from "Ooo" and all these vowels that characterize head qualities and bring up the man's voice that is already starting and meeting the two so there is no break.

McEwen You mentioned musicianship and choosing literature—elements of that sort. They would certainly have implications for teacher training, would they not?

Wagner That's right. And a responsibility as an educator not to try to compete with TV and personalities and entertain with music. Music is a serious business. There is humor in it, too, but you are educators, so there is no necessity to try to "stun" people with the "gimmicks" and "rabbits out of the sleeve" and quick closes and "dinning-donning" things.

McEwen Some other things we have talked about today apply to this very thing. Well then, in conclusion, would you have any advice or recommendation to young choral conductors with respect to the pursuit of a certain "kind" of experience or a particular "kind" of study that would be most effective?

Wagner Study the great works and as soon as possible perform them. *Do* steep yourself in the tradition of ancient music from the very beginning of the chant through the polyphonic period—all the way through. Through the baroque period right through to the romantic period, right through to the contemporary idiom. *Experience* all of these things. Have a feeling for musical values. Have a respect for the phrase. Have a feeling for musical values. intentions. Also know when he is right and know when he is wrong. *Do* a lot of music. Do not become stagnant; have great hopes and treat your high school groups or your college groups as if they were professionals. Don't apologize for them, because they are going to be as good as *you* are. The chorus is as good as its conductor.

McEwen There's a good point.

Wagner It always is. I mean this. And I mean taking everything into account, it is as good as its conductor because he is responsible for the selection of the singer. He is responsible for the selection of the music. He is responsible for the training; for the presentation; for the whole thing.

McEwen Thank you very much.