

Greg and Julie Aune



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Illuminating the Past ? Informing the Present ? Inspiring the Future

This Legacy article features a husband/wife team. Choral music educator, Julie Aune and Conductor of the Gustavus Choir, Dr. Gregory Aune on the eve of his retirement from Gustavus Adolphus College. This June, the Aune's will move to their lake home near Voyageur's National Park and plan on spending more time with their family and grandkids. Authors of this article are Brian and Shelley Ohnsorg who sang in the Gustavus Choir during Dr. Aune's first years at Gustavus and both served as section leaders and presidents of the choir in '97 and '98.

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An Interview with Julie Aune

Elementary Music Expert and Pedagog

With a love for music and strong background in piano, cello, and choral singing that started at a young age while growing up in Owatonna, MN, Julie Aune followed her passion for music to Concordia College where she received a degree in music education and sang in the Concordia Choir under Paul J. Christiansen. Julie began as a music educator in 1975. She has taught and conducted students and singers of all ages: classroom music, children's choruses, church choirs, and at the collegiate level. The secret of her successful career is her continual exploration of material, strategies and best practices in order to better serve those that she is teaching and conducting. She received a Master's degree in conducting at the University of St. Thomas. For her, the priority of a conductor should always be to strike a balance between challenging the singers musically and allowing the space for them to feel valued, supported, loved and a sense of belonging. Julie's former students remark about the dedication and care that she modeled, and the joy that she sparked in them.



Tell us about the beginning of your career as a choral director?

My early years were mainly K-6 Classroom Vocal instruction, but I always directed church choirs and organized volunteer before-school choirs. In Lindsborg, KS, children had music every day, so my children had time to experience choral singing. Sixth graders sang three part music easily with such a perfect schedule! In St. Peter, I directed high school women and had Robin Hughes as my wonderful colleague and mentor. The directorship of Mankato Children's Chorus opened in 1996, and I was thrilled to become the artistic director. I felt like everything I'd experienced and learned over the years culminated in this amazing opportunity.

Who were the choirs and conductors that inspired you in those early years?

The world of vocal music education and choral singing was dramatically changed for me when I attended a course on children's vocal development at Hamline University, taught by Joan Gregoryk, an exemplary leader in the youth choral world. I also learned a great deal from observing and soliciting advice from Cora Scholz and her work with the Northfield Youth Choirs. I continued to learn from the choirs and conductors at ACDA and MMEA conferences and workshops.

Who are the choirs and conductors that continue to inspire you today?

Angela Broeker, Nancy Grundahl, Angelica Cantanti, and Minnesota Boys Choir-Mark Johnson.

Years of watching my husband conduct taught me that music has to go somewhere, every phrase and nuance being important. And, it's the director's job to show the musical expression in conducting gestures, challenging the singers to sing musically and from their hearts.



How did you go about selecting your repertoire? From what sources did you seek ideas?

In repertoire selection, balance was the goal. Always a variety of styles and periods and appropriate of range and difficulty in order to teach and develop vocal music skill. And sometimes just for fun! ACDA was a goldmine! The Choral Journal, Star of the North, Pick Six, Tried and True Gems and Chestnuts, Reading Sessions and performances at Conferences, and ideas from colleagues provided an abundance of repertoire guidance. Honor Choir repertoire was especially helpful in exposure to wonderful literature.

Please list some repertoire that you would recommend for treble voices?

Bist Du Bei Mir?Bach

Path to the Moon?Eric Thiman

Song for World Peace?Dan Kallman/Nancy Grundahl

Hine Ma Tov?Allan E. Naplan

The Poet Sings?Z. Randall Stroope

Menagerie of Animals?Carolyn Jennings,
Risseldy Rosseldy?Jay Broeker
To Music?Betty Bertaux
Jubilate Deo?Praetorius
Children Blessed of the Lord?Mendelssohn/Grundahl
Be Simple Little Children?Bob Chilcott
Love Is A Rain of Diamonds?Gwynneth Walker

Share some special performance events that your choirs participated in?

Performing at KMEA with my sixth grade choirs from Lindsborg Kansas. Many opportunities with the the Mankato Children's Chorus that included two performances at MMEA, twice to the Festival of States in Washington DC, music festivals in St. Cloud and Rochester, and performing the children's chorus part in the Nobel Symphony by Steve Heitzig at the Gustavus College Nobel Conference.



In your view, how has the programming of repertoire changed over the years?

Choral repertoire now reflects a world that has a greater global awareness of and inclusion of a multiplicity of cultures and their traditions. Because of technology, directors can easily access a wealth of diverse, interesting and quality written and recorded music quickly and easily. Directors have developed ways to share ideas via social media.

How did you first become involved with ACDA and what impact has the organization had upon your professional career?

In the early years I sort of 'tagged along' with my husband to ACDA conferences. A performance by or session regarding young voices was a rarity. But that has begun to change. Although I have worked with singing voices of all levels, I am proud to say that elementary voices are my favorite! When we first moved back to Minnesota I had singers involved in the ACDA Honor Choirs and also volunteered to be on the listening team. I worked with the amazing leaders, Lisa Lozito, Kari Werdahl, and Addie Thietje. They encouraged me and talked me into being Elementary Choir Repertoire Chair. While it was a lot of work it was also extremely rewarding. I'm grateful for their invitation! It helped me to connect with other teachers and directors and I got to be directly involved in the valuable work of ACDA of MN. Kari and Lisa's work and those of many others have continued to step up the importance of music at the elementary level in ACDA. In a career where many of us experience burnout, a 'stale' period, anxiety, or frustrations, ACDA has been a source of inspiration and has provided a rekindling of the incredible passion we have for working with young singers.

What has been the most inspirational ACDA convention performance you heard?

Interestingly, I believe I just heard the most inspiring performance I've ever heard at the recent national convention in Kansas City. The Aeolians from Oakwood University in Alabama shared their 'unbridled joy' in a performance that was virtuosic, creative, educational, and spiritual. Their music resulted in the audience clapping and standing the longest time I remember at similar events. As the conductor hoped - the music prompted a 'crescendo of the human heart' - incredible.

Reflecting on your career, what do you hope to have left as legacy to choral music and your students?

My goal has been to encourage and inspire my students and singers to be lifetime musicians. I strived to provide an experience that sparked joy in music making and taught lessons about peace, love, and life. I hope that a balance in that experience also challenged young singers to have the musical skill and knowledge to be music artists.

What advice or words of wisdom would you give the emerging choral director of today?

Seek out mentors and constantly seek help and guidance from others. Be aware that learning and changing is the sign of a good educator. We never totally get it right. If we stop learning and seeking to 'get it right?', we are stagnant and ineffective. Challenge your singers and guide them in a quality music experience but most importantly, love and allow them a sense of belonging and validation.

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An Interview with Dr. Gregory Aune

Conductor of the Gustavus Choir

After graduating from Concordia College, Gregory Aune began working as a music educator in the public schools of Sisseton, South Dakota. Upon his completion of a Doctor of Musical Arts degree at the University of Iowa his career as a collegiate choral conductor began back in South Dakota at Dakota Wesleyan University. He went on to lead the choral program at Bethany College in Lindsborg Kansas and eventually he and Julie would settle in St. Peter, Minnesota where Greg has been the Conductor of the Gustavus Choir for 25 years. It is there that the most invigorating part of his day always began shortly before rehearsal with the buzz of energy from the members of the choir gathering in the hall outside of his office. During his tenure with the Gustavus Choir, the singers and their warmth, care, and daily excitement to be together has been a constant and profound source of inspiration to Greg; this is what he will miss the most. 'What I feel is unique about Gustavus is the kind of student that the college attracts. There has always been a strong core of music majors that served the Gustavus Choir in leadership positions and as section leaders. But there has also been a large group of non-music majors that always helped to bring a fresh perspective.' Having sung in the choir under the conducting of Dr. Aune and now reading through many letters that students have written to him over the years there are some consistent overtones that emerge: That his three most important priorities have been family, faith and the Gustavus Choir. The way his students always felt important accepted and loved. The musical passion, human transparency, sincerity, and humor that he brought to the rehearsal. And the transcendent moments in performance, elicited because of the connection with his students and the musical artistry from his incredibly graceful and expressive conducting.

Tell us where your passion for choral music was born?

My dad was a high school choral director in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, and my mom was a piano teacher and church organist, so choral music was always a part of my life. The Concordia Choir gave numerous concerts in our home church over the years. Paul J and Eleanor Christiansen, manager Kurt Wysick and his wife Eleanor (PJ's sister) would always eat a noon meal in our house prior to the afternoon concert. I remember those visits vividly ever since I was a young boy. But it was not until a year after high school that I felt the call to pursue choral music as a career. I was 19 and feeling somewhat adrift in terms of what my professional life and career would be. On this particular performance the the Concordia Choir drew me into the 'choral sound' in a profound way. I knew this is what I wanted to do. I ended up transferring to Concordia after a year in a junior college and a year at a state school, majoring in public school music and singing in the Concordia Choir under Paul J.

Which mentors and conductors influenced you the most early in your career?

My primary influence and inspiration as I began teaching was Paul J. and the Lutheran choral tradition. When I was a student at Concordia I heard the Swedish Radio Choir conducted by Eric Erickson. I still remember some of the music I heard at that performance, and it was my first exposure to choral virtuosity. My graduate studies with Don Moses at the University of Iowa probably had the most profound effect on my career. He was a master teacher and I really learned the art of conducting and score preparation from him. The opportunity to perform a major choral masterwork every semester as well as significant choral literature study opened up a new world of choral music for me.

How did you go about selecting your repertoire early in your career?

Much of my career was pre-internet and social media. So, many hours were spent at Nels Vogel Music in Moorhead, MN or at Schmidt Music and Groth's in Minneapolis looking at choral octavos and plowing through them on a piano at the store. The Choral

Journal was also a good source for learning about newly published music, but again one needed to access copies of scores to really study the music. It was also very helpful to attend convention concerts to learn about new repertoire.



Which choirs and conductors continue to inspire you today?

There are so many outstanding choral ensembles at every level today, but if I had to choose I would probably say the Monteverdi Choir and its' conductor John Eliot Gardiner. I also think that the Dale Warland Singers in the 1980's and 90's were a wonderful a capella choral ensemble. I absolutely loved that sound!

How do you feel the preparation of vocal music educators changed during your career?

Without question the preparation of choral conductors and choral music educators has vastly improved, especially in the arena of vocal pedagogy and a healthy approach to choral singing. There has been a quantum leap in the training of choral music educators that teach at the elementary and middle school level. There has been an increasing amount of support for these educators from ACDA, by the inclusion of pertinent articles related to developing voices in the choral journal and workshops and honor choirs at regional and national conferences that feature choirs with this age group of singers.

Tell us a little about your time in Lindsborg, Kansas.

While at Bethany College I served as the Artistic Director of the Messiah Festival of Music and Art and conductor of the 250 voiced Bethany Oratorio Society. The Festival centered around performances by the Oratorio Society and Orchestra, specifically, complete performances of Handel's Messiah on Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday, and a somewhat shortened version of Bach's St. Matthew Passion on Good Friday. It was a jewel of culture in the Kansas prairie. We loved it there.

What have been some of your pinnacle musical performances while at Gustavus?

I feel very fortunate that during my career I have been able to do significant amounts of national and international touring, particularly with the Gustavus Choir. South Africa, Italy, Spain, Portugal, the British Isles, Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, and Sweden among the most memorable. Being a part of Christmas in Christ Chapel here at Gustavus will certainly be one of the most gratifying memories of my work. It was also a privilege to be included in the F. Melius Christiansen 135th Anniversary Celebration in Orchestra Hall - it was a wonderful experience for all the choirs that performed and the audience. I've also had the distinct honor of conducting performances at three North Central ACDA conferences, the most recent being the 2014 convention in Des Moines with the Gustavus Choir.

Name five of your favorite choral music "chestnuts" that you have conducted with the Gustavus Choir?

Prayers of Steel? Paul Christiansen

Der Gerechte (The Righteous)? Johann Christoph Bach

Laudate Dominum?Josef Rheinberger  
Hear My Prayer?Henry Purcell  
The Lord Is The Everlasting God?Kenneth Jennings



You're a cancer survivor: How has that shaped you personally, as a choir conductor, with your professional peers, students, and family?

I will share two items that speak to this question. The first is a part of a conversation that Julie and I had with Bruce Becker sometime after we received the diagnosis, which Julie later posted on our Caring Bridge site. Here is a portion of Julie's entry.

**Bruce:** You two have had two major forces 'invade' your body and spirit these past months...the force of cancer and force of deep and abiding love from countless friends, family members and colleagues..which of the two has been a stronger force in your life?

**Julie:** Greg and I talked about this and admitted that it was a roller coaster, as I'm sure anyone who has cancer would agree. Hope and fear battle each other constantly. But we both readily agreed that 'deep and abiding love' won hands down.

My second response to the question comes from my talk presented at the Gustavus Relay for Life event the year after I finished my treatment. In addition to sharing my story and our journey, I talked about how this impacted my students and my work:

In the fall, after I was diagnosed with cancer, I had to inform my choir and tell them what was going to happen. I remember telling the choir how much I loved them, how much I would miss working with them, and how frightened I was. But I also remember telling them that an occurrence such as this is the part of life that is impossible to prepare for, and that we (they) must try and use events like this as a learning experience. I said that disappointment and sadness is going to come into each of their lives, and how you face it and manage it will depend entirely on you as an individual. The choir would have to welcome and adjust to a new conductor who would be thrust into a difficult situation. The success of this individual, and the choir, would depend on the good will and positive attitude of each member of the ensemble.

I would like to once again acknowledge both Steve Boelke and Bob Scholtz, esteemed colleagues and conductors, who stepped in to superbly lead the Gustavus Choir during my absence. I will never forget their kindness and the great work they did for the choir and Gustavus!



Reflecting on your own legacy to choral music in Minnesota, what are some of the contributions and gifts you have made to the profession?

Well, this is a hard question to answer, as I am not sure if I have a legacy! If I do, I hope it resides with the students that I have worked with over the span of my career. I came to the realization many years ago that my work, the end product of my interaction with my students and singers, must be meaningful for them on an artistic and shall we say spiritual level. Yes, I am the conductor, but the music is made by the singers. So I have always viewed my role as that of a collaborative artist. I have tried to teach my students how musical language works in the context of an interpretation of a particular piece of music, the value of community, the value of hard work in the pursuit of artistic excellence, and the importance of humility in musical performance. I have strived to wear my musical heart on my sleeve when I stand in front of my choirs. I am an introvert, but I hope my students would say that I become open and passionate when rehearsing and performing with them.



How has ACDA impacted your professional career?

I think the greatest value of the organization, at least for me, has been the community that the organization has fostered among colleagues, the educational and professional enrichment that the organization provides, and the yearly opportunities via conferences to hear and experience the best choral singing to be heard anywhere!

What advice or words of wisdom would you give the emerging choral director of today?

Be a lifelong learner, balance your life and find activities outside of work that interest you and give you enjoyment, never make your work about yourself, and be kind.

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About Brian & Shelley Ohnsorg

Shelley teaches vocal music at Olson Middle School in Bloomington and Brian is a vocal music director at Farmington High School. Brian and Shelley also sing, accompany and conduct choirs at Mount Olivet Lutheran Church in Minneapolis.

