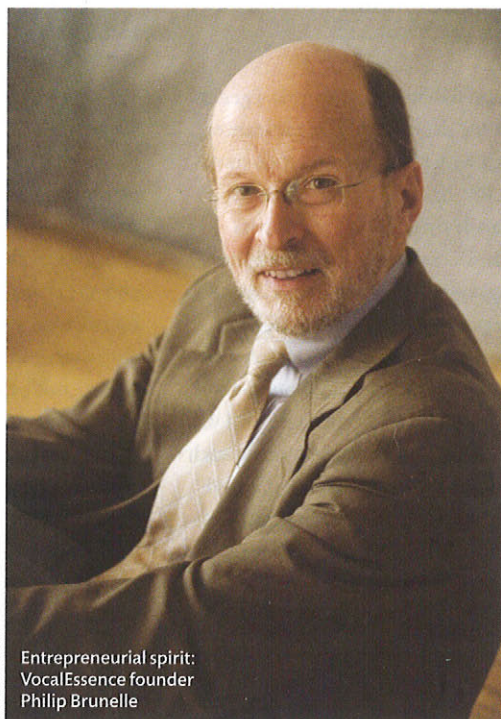


# The essence of community

For 40 years Philip Brunelle has been at the cutting edge of the US choral scene. In his innovative work with VocalEssence he challenges preconceptions about music from different racial backgrounds, writes **Shirley Ratcliffe**

**I**'m a person who is filled with curiosity about music and what you can do with it. I guess I would often say "What if...?", which takes me in new directions.' It's the 'what if?' that led Philip Brunelle to found the Plymouth Music Series in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1969. 'I started with a very good church choir in Plymouth Congregational Church downtown Minnesota, because I knew I needed some kind of base to begin with, and an audience. Very soon it became obvious that this had to be a separate entity from the church, where anyone in the community could come for an audition.'



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Entrepreneurial spirit:  
VocalEssence founder  
Philip Brunelle

This entrepreneurial spirit of Brunelle's has seen his organisation evolve over 40 years into VocalEssence, which champions every genre of choral music. It has a 100-strong volunteer choir – the VocalEssence Chorus – and the 32-voice professional Ensemble Singers. Diverse programming, commissions and total involvement with the local community have proved a recipe for success; and not surprisingly the 2008–09 40th season ended with a bang.

'The Twin Cities of Minnesota and Saint Paul are known as choral country because of the wonderful community, church and educational choirs that are there. I felt it was important to celebrate that choral music is here not just because of VocalEssence. I invited six community choirs to sing two pieces each at our concert. When we met, the choirs suggested that one of the pieces they would each sing should come from the 130 works we have commissioned and they would choose their own second piece. I asked Dominick Argento to write a new work for 500 voices and he set Thomas Hardy's poem *The Choirmaster's Burial*. It was a great success – Orchestral Hall, which holds 2,400, was packed.'

In May VocalEssence mounted a community concert to celebrate the conclusion of the first year of a three-year-long celebration of Mexican culture. Cantaré is a programme of cross-cultural exchange between Mexican composers and schools and churches in Minnesota. After seeking advice from a committee of Mexican Americans, Brunelle travelled to the country and interviewed ten composers. From these he selected three: Sabina Covarrubias, Jorge Cózatl and Jorge Córdoba. 'My idea was for the composers to work in schools and institutions in the Twin Cities, writing music specifically for them which would be performed at our anniversary



concert. With sponsorship we made the concert free, because a lot of the people I would love to see there could not afford it. Something like 90 per cent of the packed Mexican American audience had never been in Orchestra Hall before. The Mexican people were so proud and the Consul General was overcome. She said, "This has never happened in the USA before." It's important that schools learn differently about Mexico from what they usually hear in the media. As it will be the bicentenary of Mexican Independence at the end of our second year [in 2010], it will be a different programme with new composers. After the third year we will evaluate and decide whether to continue or focus on a different country.'

How does Brunelle foster community involvement? 'I'm very concerned to involve the audience as much as possible in what I'm doing, having them feel they are coming inside the music.' This approach means he doesn't design a programme to fit his audience, but rather the other way round: 'I have to think where am I going with this music, who would it appeal to and how do I reach them? A few years ago I did an all-Russian concert. I knew there was a big Russian immigrant community but I didn't know how to get to them.' Brunelle doesn't avoid seeking advice, and this time he was recommended to put the concert information in the tabloids that Russians read in their grocery stores – and it worked! 'Hundreds of people came who had never been to our concerts. There are two kinds of audiences: those who come to our concerts no matter what they are, and those who come for a particular event. For me one of the fun challenges is to find out who the repertoire will appeal to.'

February is always Black History month for the US Department of Education, but until recently it included little about African-American classical composers. This inspired Brunelle to do something about it. 'Nineteen years ago I gave the first WITNESS concert featuring the music of African-American composers, to show that their music wasn't just jazz and spirituals. I thought I would only do it for a few years as I would have exhausted all the music, but I'm still doing it! I now have 15 African-American artists working in 55 schools in the Twin Cities. The topic changes every year so my artists have to come up with fresh ideas to fit into the school curriculum. We prepare a guidebook for every teacher. We are the only choral organisation in the USA to have two full-time educational people on staff developing these programmes – it's important to be looking towards the next generation. The next theme is going to involve students, and our WITNESS concert in February will feature the phenomenal women's group Sweet Honey in



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▲ Visiting Mexican composer Jorge Cózatl conducts students at Eden Prairie High School as part of the Cantaré project

◀ the Rock in a collaborative programme with us. We always perform these concerts five times: one for the Sunday subscription audience and four for young people. The school concerts are already sold out. The WITNESS programme always generates this kind of interest and we have recorded four CDs of the music.'

Brunelle's mission is to encourage new music. 'When I first started, the only choral music you heard were the old warhorses: *Messiah*, *Elijah*, the Verdi Requiem – wonderful works, but they don't need a champion. There are thousands of pieces of choral music that people don't know. My motto has always been, you don't know if you don't ask, so for my first concert I called up Aaron Copland and said, "Mr Copland, would you come to Minneapolis and conduct your choral music?" He said, "Young man, I have never been asked to conduct my choral music, only my orchestral music. I love my choral music; tell me the date you have in mind and I will cancel whatever I'm doing and be there." That's how I started out. I did the first performance of *The Dream of Gerontius* in Minnesota for a hundred years – people didn't know it – and I brought John Gardner over when we did his Mass in D.

'At the same time I want to encourage living composers to write for choirs. I'm concerned that not all of our conservatoires and schools are encouraging choral composition. I want choral music to remain alive and well. Eleven years ago we started an annual carol competition by sending out the word through the American Composers' Forum. We ask for a sacred or secular carol accompanied by an instrument. Last year it was the French horn and we had over a hundred entries; this year it's the viola. Looking ahead, we are part of a consortium who will perform a new work by William Bolcom for piano, chorus and orchestra; and a piece by Tarik O'Regan is in the making.'

How has he seen choral music develop over the last 40 years? 'Because of easy access to music and CDs people can hear the quality of music worldwide. Within the USA it has generated a great move toward a much higher standard in choral singing from what we had half a century ago. This has been done through the work of organisations like Chorus America and the American Choral Directors Association. It's been the same for VocalEssence, which started as a humble organisation with a lot of enthusiasm. One great addition, which helped raise the standard, was when I appointed Sigrid Johnson as voice coach 20 years ago, an amazing woman on the faculty of St Olaf College. I could see how we were going to develop and knew I needed a partner. Sigrid saw the dream, and we started the Ensemble Singers. Everyone has to audition yearly to remain in the group – you can't keep the quality by having a lifetime membership. We have a flexibility of vocal styles that helps to keep the group at the top of their game.'

The 41st season, launched on 25 September, includes tributes to Handel and Mendelssohn, Argento's *Evensong: Of Love and Angels*, and the American premiere of Julian Anderson's *Four American Choruses*. The season ends with Stephen Paulus's new commission for chorus and two marimbas, Jorge Córdoba's new work for chorus and four marimbas, and Gabrieli's *Magnificat a 33*, not with brass but with 20 marimbas: 'I have to believe if Gabrieli was alive today and had all those marimbas he'd say, "Do it!"' ■

## VocalEssence 2009–10 season: highlights

### Of Love and Angels

25 September, Central Lutheran Church, Minneapolis

### British Invasion – Simon Halsey Conducts

24 October, Basilica of St Mary, Minneapolis

### Welcome Christmas

Plymouth Congregational Church, Minneapolis (6 & 13 December), Normandale Lutheran Church, Edina (11 December), Trinity Lutheran Church, Stillwater (12 December)

### Witness – Sweet Honey in the Rock

14 February, Ordway Center for the Performing Arts, Saint Paul

### Undiscovered Copland

13 March, Ted Mann Concert Hall, Minneapolis

### Mallets & Melodies

30 April, Cathedral of Saint Paul

[www.vocalescence.org](http://www.vocalescence.org)