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Richard Sparks conducts Swedish Radio Choir

By Richard Sparks

After my trip to Sweden this past November to conduct the Swedish Radio Choir and to give various lectures I sent an account of my travels to some friends, including Howard Meharg. Howard asked me to edit the account for NW Notes, so here goes . . .



My trip originated in a conversation with Stefan Parkman, the new Chief Conductor of the Swedish Radio Choir and Eric Ericson, Professor at the Choral Centre in Uppsala, almost a year and a half ago.

Stefan knew I would be presenting sessions on my book (*The Swedish Choral Miracle—Swedish A Cappella Music Since 1945*) with Eric Ericson, along with Gary Graden and his choir, the St. Jacob's Chamber Choir, at the IFCM Symposium this past summer in Minneapolis and wanted to find a way to share this work with a Swedish audience.

Like many of you (if you're close to my age and able to remember LPs!), I came across Swedish choirs and the name Eric Ericson with the big "blue box" set of 4 LPs titled "European Masterworks of Five Centuries." I first heard the Radio Choir live in 1983 at the ACDA Conference in Louisville.

Eric then came to PLU (with his Conservatory Chamber Choir) in both 1984 and 1988 for our summer choral workshop. My first trip to Sweden was in 1989 (done to find a dissertation topic and observe Swedish choirs) and I spent the entire summer of 1990 in Sweden, researching my dissertation (which wasn't finished until 1997).

My wife, Kathryn, and I arrived in Stockholm late Tuesday evening, November 5, 2002. In preparation for working with the Radio Choir I wanted to observe Stefan rehearsing the choir and to have a chance to see how the choir responded, how Stefan worked with them, etc. I have to say that observing a couple rehearsals first made conducting them much easier (or at least less anxiety-making!).

It's a fairly young choir in some ways, perhaps not as strong as the Radio Choir of old, but pretty amazing, nonetheless. Their reading is excellent and the level of vocal ability is at a *very* high level—big voices who can really crank the sound out when it's called for, but also able to sing incredibly soft pianissimos and know how to blend and sing in tune.

Friday I watched the first part of the rehearsal, and then took over from Stefan after the break. The program I chose was about 30' of music, to be recorded for later broadcast (not a live concert): Morten Lauridsen's *Madrigali*, Eric Whitacre's *Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine*, and Lionel Daunais' *Le pont mirabeau*. Lauridsen and Whitacre are certainly among the most popular composers in the US today and both pieces play with ideas from renaissance Italy, so I thought they complimented each other well. The Daunais (a French Canadian composer) is just plain beautiful and a nice contrast.

Monday, my *real* rehearsals began with the choir. The singers are great people and were very easy to work with—they have a nice attitude and are very willing to work hard on the music, which (luckily) they really liked.

Essentially, I worked with them as I work with my choirs here. Some things go faster, but choirs are choirs and music is music and we all have the same problems to solve, whether it's intonation, ensemble, or musicality. In case you're wondering, I rehearsed in English—they all speak it incredibly well, so no language problems—I used Swedish now and again, but my Swedish isn't strong enough to rehearse).

Again, I'd have to say that the extraordinary thing standing in front of them was again the sound—with an incredible dynamic range, especially.

Wednesday we pushed pretty hard, as Gunnar Andersson (the choir's long-time producer) and I had decided to record the Lauridsen on Thursday, so we wouldn't be under so much pressure to record everything in the Friday session.

I also spent the last 30' or so rehearsing a piece by Sven-David Sandström for Stefan that was on his program for a Nordic Festival in Berlin. This is a quite difficult piece, with some extraordinarily loud, sustained, high singing (basses on high F's, tenors and sopranos on Bb's and C's, with some soprano D's and E's).

Another amazing thing about the singers in the Radio Choir is their endurance, as well as power. It was at the end of a 3-hour rehearsal and they sang multiple repetitions of some passages, some at slow tempi, then up to speed, and everyone was full out.

Thursday we worked to record the Lauridsen and managed to get all six of them done and still leave 45 minutes or so to work on the Whitacre (we hadn't worked much at all on the final section yet).

The choir does these recording sessions much as you'd do if recording a CD: do a complete take, then go back and fix problems/improve particular passages,

rehearsing a bit or just getting comments from me or from Gunnar up in the booth. Luckily, it's a process I know very well from doing many recordings at PLU, plus those with the Seattle Symphony long ago, or more recently with Choral Arts Northwest.

Things went quite smoothly and I hope the results will be good (it wasn't edited by the time I came home, so we'll see).

Friday morning was the final session with the Radio. Things went well, we did the Daunais first, and then tackled the Whitacre.

Gunilla Luboff arrived Thursday night, so she was there for the session and we had dinner together that evening. For those who don't know Gunilla, besides being an incredible, elegant lady, she's Norman Luboff's widow, owns Walton Music, is Eric Whitacre's publisher, and also published my book. By the time we finished (doing one more complete run-through of the Whitacre at the end), we still had about 40 minutes to work on the Sandström (and of course they kept singing at full voice until the end of the rehearsal).

It's an amazing experience to work with such a choir. Although I've been blessed to work with some truly wonderful choirs here, it's still a step into a different world. I suppose it's a little like stepping up from whatever car you're driving to a high-powered performance vehicle, with amazing power and responsiveness.

Eric Ericson is still an amazing presence in Sweden as elsewhere. Kathryn and I had dinner with Eric and his wife Monica one evening, and Eric had just gotten back from Munich, where he'd conducted the Bavarian Radio Choir. He keeps an amazing schedule and, as always, it was wonderful to talk with him—at 84 he is always curious to hear about what's happening in the choral world.

It had snowed in Stockholm by this time and Eric complained that he didn't like the snow because then he couldn't ride his bicycle!

Saturday brought a concert with Gary Graden's St. Jacob Chamber Choir, which included new or newer works by six different composers. Gary, by the way, is an American who came to Sweden in 1984 to study and never left—he's married to a Swede and they have two boys. There was a decent sized audience (around 250, which Gary said is typical), but a rather important one: all the composers of the night's music were there, Eric and Monica were there, Gunilla, Eskil Hemberg (composer and head of IFCM) and his wife Birgit, Anders Eby (who followed Eric as Professor of Choral Conducting at the Conservatory in Stockholm), and important Swedish composer Thomas Jennefelt.

The concert went well, and I also conducted one piece on the program,

by Joakim Unander. There was a great party afterwards with most of the people listed above, plus Joy Hill, a British conductor who teaches at the Royal College of Music in London. She has a fellowship that's allowing her to study Swedish choirs and music and came to Sweden at this time specifically because of the sessions on my book.

Sunday morning Kathryn and I packed up and caught the train to Uppsala (about 50 minutes away), checked into the hotel, then found our way to the big hall at the Stockholm Cathedral School. Shortly afterwards the lecture (sponsored by the Choral Centre) began, which was much the same format as for IFCM in Minneapolis: Eric and I lectured and Gary's choir sang demonstrations.

We edited it a bit for a Swedish audience, with Eric speaking in Swedish instead of English, allowing him to improvise a bit more. The lecture went very well, although I have to say it was quite a surreal experience to be lecturing to a Swedish audience, including many of the composers who *made* the history, about Swedish music!

Eric is 84, Ingvar Lidholm (*...a riveder le stele* – arguably the greatest Swedish composer of his generation) is 81, Lars Edlund (*Gloria, Modus Novus*) just had turned 80, and Folke Rabe (*Rondes*) also arrived just before the lecture began. I knew all of these composers from interviews done during my research, but this was the first opportunity to see them again, in most cases, for 12 years. It was both a moving and exciting experience.

During the two weeks, besides rehearsing the Radio Choir and the St. Jacob's Chamber Choir, I also spent half of a day at the Conservatory in Stockholm working with Anders Eby and his conducting students and gave a lecture for the Institute of Musicology at Uppsala University.

All in all, it was a tiring, but exhilarating, amazing, and incredibly fun trip. I don't know if I'll ever get to conduct the Radio Choir again (and certainly think this is the end of the run for lectures based on the book), but it was a fabulous experience. Don't get me wrong; if invited, I'd do it again in a second!