



## Interview Article

### An interview with Jason Paulk: the choir and the voice

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#### Abstract

Jason Paulk is Director of Choral Activities and Professor of Music at Eastern New Mexico University. He conducts ensembles of University Singers, Chamber Singers, and Swanee Singers and teaches beginning and advanced conducting classes in addition to choral methods. He has received awards from important institutions in the field of music education. In this interview, he shares important codes about music and music education about choir and voice.

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**Michael F. Shaughnessy:** Dr. Paulk, can you please tell us a bit about your education and experiences?

**Jason Paulk:** I grew up in Cartersville, GA, and was blessed with amazing music teachers in the school system. From Cloverleaf Elementary school, to Cartersville Middle School and High School, the education and enrichment was outstanding. Some of those wonderful teachers include Ms. Stockhausen, Ms. McDonald, and Charles Nelson—who truly ignited my passion for conducting and teaching, and gave me my first opportunities to learn how to lead.

I was elected the “student director” of the CHS Choirs and took this role seriously; from about 7<sup>th</sup> grade on, I knew I wanted to enable others to make great music.

Stetson University in DeLand, FL, was my undergraduate collegiate destination. It’s still a hidden gem in central Florida, approximately 20 miles from Daytona Beach. My mentors there included Duncan Couch, Bob Rich, and an amazing voice teacher named Mollie Rich. She was a bulldog and wouldn’t accept less than the best from her students. Duncan

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gave me so many incredible opportunities as a young and aspiring conductor, including rehearsing and conducting our concert choir in performances from my freshman year forward. While at Stetson, I founded our student chapter of the American Choral Directors Association and won the 1997 National ACDA Conducting Competition. This opened some doors for graduate school after my graduation that spring.

I attended the world famous Westminster Choir College for my master's degree and sang in the Westminster Choir. Joseph Flummerfelt was my main teacher, but I had the opportunity to work with so many amazing musicians—including Andrew Megill and Frank Abrahams. As a matter of fact, one of my master's colleagues was a teacher from Farmington—Virginia Nickels Hircock—and continually talked about how amazing the Land of Enchantment was. Years later, I would learn she was right. I graduated in 1999 with two masters degrees—one in Conducting and one in Music Education.

My first teaching job was in Deltona, FL, where I was the choir director at Deltona High School. I had a very supportive administration, eager students, and we all learned so much from each other. For three years, we explored amazing repertoire, worked diligently, and during my third year we were honored to sing in a festival at Carnegie Hall—during which we sang a feature “recital.” It was a really wonderful experience to share these experiences with my kids from Deltona. They were hard workers and I could have stayed there forever and been happy.

As it happened, I had a wonderful opportunity to pursue my doctorate in choral conducting at the University of Oklahoma on a University Fellowship from 2002-2005.

Dennis Shrock was my mentor and director of choral activities at the University of Oklahoma. He was also the director of the Santa Fe Desert Choral, which allowed a rich blend of educational and professional work with him during that time. I was the director of the OU University Chorus and assistant director of the Chorale while in Norman. I had the opportunity to complete my dissertation during the third year of my studies there, as a contingency of the fellowship, which was an incredible blessing.

Since 2005, I have been the Director of Choral Activities at Eastern New Mexico University in Portales, NM. During these 18 years, I have been constantly supported by our administration and have been surrounded by dedicated and gifted colleagues. My professional life has been very rich, and our choral program has experienced some wonderful successes: we've traveled for performances in China, London, Paris, Spain, New York, and regularly throughout the southwest. And the choirs have been invited to perform for national conventions of the American Choral Directors Association and National Association for Music Education (Oklahoma City and Dallas). We host over one thousand public school students on campus each year for choral singing events—including a men's choir festival, all-state prep days, solo and ensemble, and a very successful choir camp each summer.

**Michael F. Shaughnessy:** Your most recent accolades- tell us about them.

**Jason Paulk:** I was just named the 2024 Music Educator of the Year by the New Mexico Music Educators Association. I'm very humbled and appreciative of the recognition and it has been a really nice opportunity to pause to reflect on the incredible mentors I have had throughout my life. Similarly, it has been nice to reflect on all the great students I've had the opportunity to teach in New Mexico since 2005, many of whom are now in classrooms throughout the southwest and who have gone on to do some wonderful performing.

There are too many to name individually, but one of my most enjoyable activities yearly is visiting with them and their own students, and hearing the progress they are making with their choirs. It's incredible to work in a field where you can continue to have contact with your students, and they continue to send their own students to ENMU. And so it is that the proverbial “song” never ends—it just continues on through the lives of so many. I think that's what keeps me going: I know my work has an impact and will continue to inspire and shape others for many years.

**Michael F. Shaughnessy:** Now conducting a choir-where does one begin?

**Jason Paulk:** There are as many departure points to conducting a choir as there are opinions about music. LOL. In my opinion, most importantly we begin with the composers' intentions as the baseline. Then we enable our singers to

uncover the structural and musical elements and lead them to sing it as artistically and beautifully as possible. This process is really enjoyable because uncovering great art in rehearsal is probably my favorite thing to do.

Conducting, in my opinion, equals empowering others to accomplish great things. That's my job. It's about providing a format, structure and an environment where the ensemble can excel. It has little to do with my physical gesture—except in the ways the gesture allows them to sing artistically and freely and beautifully. Too many get caught up in how beautiful their gesture is, when in reality if it's not efficient and functional it often just wastes precious rehearsal time. I try to teach my own conducting students to be precise, pithy, and efficient gesturally and verbally.

**Michael F. Shaughnessy:** How do you go about choosing students to actually perform? I mean, not all students are good singers?

**Jason Paulk:** I think most people have the raw skills to become good singers. There are very few I've encountered who cannot be taught to match pitch—at the very least. That said, no—not everyone is a great singer. However, not everyone needs to be a great singer to be part of a choir. An ensemble is a beautiful democratic environment, which allows everyone to be greater as a whole than as an individual. No “single singer” can accomplish the power of Mozart's “Requiem” or Beethoven's “Missa Solemnis,” but as a group of committed ensemble members, absolute sublimity can be achieved. To answer your question more specifically, I don't usually choose the singers—but I empower those who choose to sing in the ensembles. At ENMU, we have a large non-auditioned choir and a couple of smaller ones that are by audition-only. Those ensembles are chosen by auditions that allow us to hear the voices that are most compatible in a chamber setting.

**Michael F. Shaughnessy:** Bass, tenor, alto, soprano- how do you combine them and get them to “work together”?

**Jason Paulk:** Harmony makes the world go round! It's incredible to see students' faces light up when they hear chords sung in tune, sometimes for the first time in their lives, during rehearsal. The rehearsal experience is really enjoyable and I think singers always enjoy trying to improve—both as an individual—and as a corporate ensemble

**Michael F. Shaughnessy:** Choice of songs- how long do you labor over the choice of music?

**Jason Paulk:** Oh my, that is a good question. I've just finished programming for the fall semester and is truly a labor of love. Millions of pieces of choral music exist from throughout history and one could be overwhelmed by the options available. I sometimes program around a theme. Other times, I try to offer a balance of historical and contemporary choral music with varied styles, keys, modes, etc. The number one goal is to provide students with diverse repertoire that will help them be successful throughout their careers as musicians. A secondary consideration is audience development and enjoyment. Mostly, though, audiences love what is performed well.

This semester, I think our repertoire will include Latin, French, and English languages, and encompass music from the Renaissance era (Chansons by Jannequin and Passereau), Baroque era (Zelenka, a contemporary of Bach), to music composed within the last year.

**Michael F. Shaughnessy:** Sadly, Tony Bennett just died the day I wrote this. How would you mentor a student with a voice like his?

**Jason Paulk:** Truly a sad day to lose a singer like Tony. To be honest, we have probably 20 singers in our program who could have the career of a Tony Bennett. It just depends on what they choose to do with their natural gifts and in what context. I try to provide a context for improvement, continually challenging them to put in the work to improve. Many will recognize the “10,000 Hour Rule” of Malcolm Gladwell. If they put in the work, no doubt they will develop the skills they need to be a professional singer. When I've had individuals who exhibit outstanding potential, I have often tried to provide solo opportunities to feature them. One experience comes to mind. Probably ten years ago, the Santa Fe Symphony came to Clovis for a much-anticipated performance of Handel's Messiah.

I conducted the performance and had hired professional soloists from New York and Oklahoma, but we had student “understudies”—who prepared the solo arias and recitatives. One of those understudies was a wonderful young mezzo-

soprano from Albuquerque (Angela Rudd) and at the very last moment, she had stepped in to perform the alto solos in our performance with the SFSO because our soloist was unable to make it due to illness. As it is said, “luck favors the prepared mind.” (Louis Pasteur)

**Michael F. Shaughnessy:** Often, a choir has to rehearse extensively- but how much is too much?

**Jason Paulk:** Good question. Too much would probably be when boredom sets in or there is no more excitement about the repertoire. I have heard stale performances at conferences and I think that just comes from singers who have become tired of singing the same repertoire ad-nauseum. We rarely have that problem with our ensembles: in an academic environment, we rarely have enough time to become bored. For example, our first concert this year—in early October—will happen after about seven weeks of rehearsal. That’s not much time: ten or so rehearsals for our large choir and about twenty for our chamber ensemble.

**Michael F. Shaughnessy:** New York- Carnegie Hall- just about says it all- ever been there or performed their with your students?

**Jason Paulk:** Carnegie Hall is an amazing venue in which to perform. Fortunately, I have sung there probably a dozen times during my time at Westminster Choir College and have had the opportunity to conduct a number of performances, including several with ENMU Choirs over the years. Last spring, our Chamber Singers performed a feature recital and had the opportunity to sing Vivaldi’s Gloria with a choir of about 200 from around the country. What fun that was! While we were in New York City, two of our amazing supporters from the community paid for our singers to attend TWO performances at the Metropolitan Opera (Eugene Onegin and Madame Butterfly).

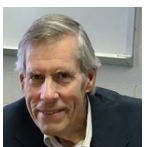
**Michael F. Shaughnessy:** How much training does one need to professionally conduct a choir?

**Jason Paulk:** This is quite subjective because folks arrive in leadership positions by various paths. There isn’t a set curriculum or specific training program designed to end with all the skills one needs to conduct a choir. The most important skills include the following: good interpersonal skills, empathy, enthusiasm, creativity, listening, sensitivity, artistry, and some ability to model good singing. I certainly would recommend to any young people reading this article that a music education degree is beneficial, but it’s not a requisite.

**Michael F. Shaughnessy:** What have I neglected to ask?

**Jason Paulk:** Lots of great questions, Mike. Thanks for the interview. I’ve really enjoyed it.

#### **Biodata of Author**



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