

This interview was held on October 31, 2024, in the Beth Israel Synagogue basement. The interviewer is Cheyenne Antell (CA) from the Portage County Historical Society. The interviewee is Deborah Barr (DB), executive director of the Monteverdi Chorale. The interview was 19 minutes and 55 seconds long.

CA (00:01): I am Cheyenne Antell with the Portage County Historical Society, can you introduce yourself?

DB (00:07): Yes, I am Deborah Barr, the executive director of the Monteverdi Chorale.

CA (00:12): How did you get involved in this?

DB: (00:17): I had heard of the Monteverdi Chorale. I came to Stevens Point in 2015 for college. I graduated in 2019 with my bachelor's in music and vocal performance. Being on the college campus, which is where the Monteverdi Chorale rehearses, I had seen promotions for their concerts. I think some of them were hosted at the university, here and there. I had heard of the Monteverdi Chorale and after 2019 I stayed in the area. Of course, the Covid pandemic happened and I became a mom, too, so I was isolated for a while and not involved in music. In 2022 in the fall I realized I missed being in a choir and I started seeing on Facebook that there were open rehearsals for Monteverdi, and I remembered that the Monteverdi Chorale is there for the community and I joined as a singer. I sang for the first season of mine in 2022, and towards the end of the season the executive director position became open and I started getting all sorts of ideas about what we could do, so I applied. I got the executive director position! I not only run the organization but I am a singer, too.

CA (01:46): This feels like the sort of job where, if you didn't have passion for the arts, you wouldn't have even applied. Before you even got to UWSP, how were you involved in music or the arts before then?

DB (01:56): It was choral music, for me. I fell in love in high school. I did all sorts of choral programs. I was involved in the Wisconsin Music Educators Association, the state honors choirs for two years, the summer music clinic in Madison, I participated in the Dorian Festival hosted at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. I was so, so passionate about choral music. The piece that started it for me was Faure's Requiem, which my choir did as a major work concert. Now it's cool that this fall the Monteverdi Chorale will be performing Faure's Requiem. I had this love for choral music. I was very involved with helping my school district's middle school program and then came to Stevens Point, toured the music department and really loved it. It's always been choral music, and I feel at home being surrounded by choral music.

CA (03:03): That music, I feel like it is kind of timeless. You get a lot of the same songs that in 10 years can be sung again and they get that same emotional response.

DB (03:11): Absolutely! There are so many staple pieces of repertoire and text that are constantly being put into new settings. We just did our spring concert, English Poems and Music, and you see these timeless works of poetry and literature put into new interpretations. Maybe I'm just a nerd.

CA (03:43): The Monteverdi Chorale is not a new organization in Stevens Point, although the way that you as an executive director are boosting this is new. What is some of the history of this chorale that has either resonated with you or that you think has shaped the Chorale up to now?

DB (04:02): The Monteverdi Chorale was named after the Italian renaissance composer, Claudio Monteverdi. I think, over the years, that we have accumulated an incredible music library. Between these Renaissance and Baroque and Classical pieces of music to present-day. Throughout our time we have had artistic directors bringing their own compositions to Monteverdi as well, and we are growing our own music library to

encompass more of the choral music catalog. There is so much out there! So many histories and stories to represent.

CA (04:52): When did Monteverdi Chorale get started? Was it always here in Stevens Point or Portage County?

DB (04:58): Monteverdi organized in late 1986 and presented our first concert in the spring of 1987. This was our madrigal. Monteverdi Master Chorale and Monteverdi Madrigal singers. It was in Stevens Point. Our rehearsal location has shifted throughout the years. There are some churches in Point that have opened their doors to us to rehearse, and now we rehearse at the university.

CA (05:36): If you're rehearsing at these churches and the university, are these also the places where you perform?

DB (05:42): Not always. Now we are trying to branch out of just Stevens Point and do concerts in surrounding communities to involve residents in different parts of central Wisconsin.

CA (06:00): What are some of the changes that you have seen in the Chorale, either since you have become executive director, or before then?

DB (06:10): Our executive directors and artistic directors that we've had, I can probably count on one hand. We have people who come in and they stay for a while to really shape what Monteverdi is doing. We had Gary Bangstad for a long time, he was our first artistic director, who then left in the early 2000s. Then we had Jim Carpenter come in. With any shift in artistic direction there is a shift in your programming. The last five years have brought the most change. Not only because we had turnover in the executive director and artistic director position, but we had the Covid pandemic. It really turned things on their heads. As you can imagine as a performing arts organization, we had to rethink how we do things. For a little bit we had virtual concerts and we had to think about how we not only reach our audience but how we reach singers too. I was just reflecting on this with someone in another community choir. Our singing is something that we come together to do, so having our community disrupted by not being able to be together was a big deal. These last five years we've been starting to reshape our artistic vision and deciding what chorale traditions we want to establish moving forward, because with any change in artistic direction we will always have a bit of change.

CA (08:02): It's tough too when something like a pandemic comes through and forces you to change, because I'm sure, like many other organizations, you had plans before that Covid just steamrolled.

DB (08:14): Absolutely. From the business side, the pandemic also really shook up how we get our support. As you can imagine with everything going on during the pandemic, grant dollars became a lot more competitive and it became a lot more challenging to find support from our donors because there was a lot of donor fatigue. It was hard to choose which organizations to support through the pandemic. That was something that has taken us until last year to recover from, financially. We've been having to think about what initiatives we need to have to further support us.

CA (09:10): Are there any changes coming in the next few years, or next decade, for the Chorale?

DB (09:17): We're really working on getting out of just Stevens Point. Performing more in the broader central Wisconsin community. It's something we did a lot more before the pandemic. Last year we performed in Wisconsin Rapids and that was our first performance outside of Stevens Point in quite a while. Turning more towards collaboration, too. There's a lot of collaboration to come for the Monteverdi Chorale, whether it's with

other community choirs or the Wausau Lyric Choir. We're trying to incorporate more youth programming, too. Whether that's offering something ourselves for kids in school to be involved in or inviting other existing children's ensembles to come and perform with us. Again, that's something that we did a while ago, but with so much change and instability we haven't been able to seek that out. There are a lot of cool collaborations and partnerships that are to come for Monteverdi. Especially with our artistic director. We are very lucky to share Dr. Cruz, who is also the director of choral activities at UWSP, and he is making so many wonderful musical connections in and around Portage County that he's bringing to Monteverdi.

CA (11:00): Even with you branching out, how does Portage County support you?

DB (11:05): We have a lot of long-time supporters in Portage County. From inaugural members, founding members and any of their remaining family who still come to concerts and still support us. We are very lucky to have music library space that was donated to us and we have close to 600 different pieces of music in this library that was very generously donated to us. Now we are continuing to find those partnerships to sync up our programming and initiatives in the community to not only get that support from folks in Portage County but to give it as well.

CA (11:58): If you have people in our community who haven't seen your shows, haven't donated before, or haven't been involved, how can they support you and find you?

DB (12:10): We are pretty active with our online presence. We have a website, Facebook, Instagram, which is all taking off. We are working on putting more of our recordings and music out there for people to enjoy. We are also really increasing our visibility in general. I think online is the place to start.

CA (12:42): Do you have any words you would use to describe the Chorale?

DB (12:47): Like the people, the organization?

CA (12:51): Any and all!

DB (12:52): Oh man. It's definitely a community. A caring, passionate community full of very creative and sensitive people who are just so caring. Not just caring in the way that they treat the music, but caring as individuals. There's so many friendships and connections not just among the singers but with our supporters and our audience base as well.

CA (13:29): Do you have any stories that would help show some of that community and caring side that you've seen?

DB (13:35): Yeah, I think back to my first rehearsal. I was a new mom coming out of the pandemic, joining this community ensemble. It was the first thing I had really done for myself since becoming a new mom. Walking into that rehearsal room, I wish I could remember who the singers were, because I know they still sing with us, just talking about how excited they were to work on the music, and how beautiful the concert was going to be, and it felt like home. Being in the rehearsal space, connecting with other people. A lot of our singers are seniors and from time to time they'll be going through something with their personal health. We've had singers go through strokes, knee replacements; a big range of what happens in that season of life! And hearing how other singers have shown up at that singer's house with soup, taking each other their music so they can rehearse while recovering from their cataract surgery or knee replacement surgery, I think of those instances.

CA (15:01): What does the Chorale mean to you?

DB (15:08): It means that, for me, I can really be present and feel the love for music without needing to be anything more. As someone who studied music for a long time and had that pressure as a college student, everything felt so high stakes. It's so wonderful to be somewhere where everyone is there purely because they love music and being together to perform something they are proud of, for our community.

CA (15:45): Is there a legacy or a mission that you want the Chorale to live, in Portage County?

DB (15:54): Yeah! We have a beautiful legacy of performing great music. A part of our mission statement is not only presenting opportunities for singers to perform great music, but instrumentalists. We've been so lucky throughout the years to be able to partner with local skilled and talented instrumentalists to play with us on our programs. With our growing artistic vision and new artistic director, we are really dedicated to keeping that up as we keep shaping our role in the community. Having opportunities for musicians offers something very enriching and valuable for our community members who come to our performances.

CA (17:00): Creativity sparks creativity.

DB (17:03): Yeah, absolutely.

CA (17:05): Is there anything else about the Chorale, or your position, or anything related that you'd like us to know?

DB (17:12): It's growing. It's growing and it's changing. We have new artistic visions and a very talented artistic director who is passionate and who is coming into our community and learning from our community as well, so he can think "how are we serving our community in song?" because that's really what we're doing. Everything we do is to serve our community in song. Whether that's by giving singers a place to sing, instrumentalists a place to play, or bringing these programs to our audience to educate and enrich and stimulate them, we do this for them. There's so much collaboration and learning ahead of us while we learn from our community and try to teach everybody something as well.

CA (18:23): I think you've given people who do not know the Chorale a great place to start. Thank you for sharing these stories!

DB (18:31): Of course! It's a pleasure. The Midwest is, as a whole, a very rich place for choral music. I say this a lot; you could throw a rock anywhere in the midwest and hit a great choir. In a bigger picture, it's really great for Monteverdi to be part of these excellent choral traditions. We're just here to keep it going.

CA (19:00): Seems like you've had a great start so far. We can't wait to see what's in the future.

DB (19:04): Thank you for giving us space for us and for music in Portage County. It's a great place to be.

CA (19:12): If anyone is interested in joining the Choir or the Chorale, is there a certain way they should reach out?

DB (19:20): Yes! We offer auditions in the fall and sometimes in the winter, too. We are always looking for more tenors and more basses! That's very common in the choral world. We usually post on our website, we try to get the word out that we are offering auditions. We are always welcoming new members.

CA (19:51): Thank you for your time today! I appreciate it.

DB (19:55): You too!