

CHORAL CONVERSATIONS



On Resilience: A Conversation with Darla Bair

by Nicholas Sienkiewicz



Darla Bair is an accomplished musician, teacher, conductor, writer, composer, and clergy person, who happened to wake up one morning totally deaf in her left ear. Darla is the founder and artistic director of the Amadeus Chorale Youth Singers, along with the music director for the Robert Dean Chorale. Her wit, enthusiasm, and passion for choral music has brought her choirs to sing at Madison Square Garden, on the field of the NFL's Buffalo Bills, and even opening for the Rockettes at Radio City Music Hall. Bair places a particular emphasis on sign language, and all Amadeus singers perform with sign language on at least one of the pieces in each of their concerts. She currently maintains a private piano studio and teaches piano and music theory at the OASIS program in Rochester, New York. Darla and I sat down for a casual Zoom conversation to learn more about her story of musical excellence and resilience.

Where did your musical training start?

My mother is a professional pianist, and I played piano even before I knew what I was doing. I took voice lessons in high school from a woman who started the local opera company, and I initially went to college not as a music major, but as a math major. I was rebellious and did not want to follow the same career path as my mother. I still love math, and I think that's why music theory tickles me a lot. I ended up taking a music class to fill an elective. The professor approached me later on in the semester and asked me to apply for the music program. Initially, I was like "no, no, no." However, I ended up at the audition and was accepted into the music program. While I was student teaching in upscale New York, one of the women in the music department collapsed a week before her Christmas concert. The department chairperson asked me to go home, graduate, and come back as a full-time substitute until he could

figure out how to fill the position. He ended up hiring me full time.

When did your hearing loss develop, and how did this first affect you?

It happened on June 4, 2016. I already had a decades-long career in choral music and public-school music. I was actively teaching, while also serving as the artistic director for the Amadeus Youth Chorale, the music director for the Robert Dean Chorale, and maintaining a private studio. I woke up on that morning and my senses began to come alive. I initially thought that my ear was clogged. I ran to the mirror and started checking myself for symptoms of a stroke. I called my doctor, who told me to go the hospital right away. Since I thought I was having a stroke, I called an ambulance, as I didn't want to drive. It was true panic. I had a CAT scan, an MRI, and all kinds of bloodwork.

They sent me to Strong Memorial Hospital, our nationally recog-

nized teaching hospital, and I saw the established auditory specialist. I walked in and told the audiologist that I didn't have any hearing in my left ear. The actual diagnosis for this is known as Sensorineural Hearing Loss (SSHL), and colloquially known as sudden deafness. It is not an age-related illness and can happen to anyone at any time. Since then, I've had so many more tests, but there is no definitive cause, and there is no treatment

What were some of your initial reactions to your hearing loss?

Being a spiritually grounded person, I don't ask, "Why me?" But I did ask, "Why did this happen to me on the day of one of my largest concerts of my life?" It was the Amadeus Chorale's Twentieth Anniversary Concert. After spending the day in the Emergency Room, I had to conduct that concert. I was proud of my kids as always. I told my executive director and my pianist about my hearing loss, but I did not tell my choruses. After that concert, I continued with scheduling, rehearsing, and conducting for the next season. I asked my team to give me ruthless and raw feedback. I promised myself I would not continue with choruses if I got feedback that said I wasn't doing my job. I realized that this could be temporary, or it could be permanent, but I thought to myself, how am I going to deal with it today? I worked through the Five Stages of Grief fairly quickly. This was not life threatening, but how much of it was going to be life altering?

How did you feel to conduct a concert on the same day of a life-altering incident?

I adapted. I was not nervous, and I was not scared. My singers were performing their signature song that year, *What a Wonderful World*. That night, I couldn't tell you that I even heard a thing they were singing. I was concerned about not getting dizzy and falling over. My cellist sat on the left side of me, the ear in which I lost my hearing. I had no idea she was even playing that night. My goal was to push through the concert. But, as always, I was proud of my kids.

What were some changes you noticed as a result of your hearing loss?

When I'm conducting, I find that I turn to listen with my right ear, so I can listen through my good ear. I also walk through my choir much more than I used to. Through this, I've had to encourage my choruses to be much more independent and do a lot more learning on their own. I make a lot of tutorials so they can come to rehearsal prepared. It is very apparent to me that I could lose my other ear's hearing any day, so I have become a very efficient rehearsal director. When we get together to make music, I want to focus on the nuances. I've realized that my singers actually increased their musicality, and it's really beautiful.

I also learned a lesson through my hearing loss. I learned to view my life with a wider scope. That is to say, if one piece of it is gone, I don't feel devastated or that my life is over. I've

always thought, do I have enough breadth of activity, or the scope of what my life really means? What really makes up a person? I also believe that this has to do with identity. If one identifies solely with their career, for example as a conductor, then the hearing loss could be crushing. Rather, I don't identify with my career. I'm a spirit, I'm a soul. I identify as an entity of joy. I believe that I am a co-creator of my own life.

Can you tell me more about the incorporation of American Sign Language into your choirs?

The Amadeus Youth Chorale is actually known as the "Sign Language Choir of Rochester." This was even before I had lost hearing in my left ear. We felt there was a need for this in our community. As of 2012, Rochester, New York, has the largest deaf and hard-of-hearing population per-capita in the United States. In Rochester, we have the National Technical Institute for the Deaf. It is very common to see people signing in our community, at restaurants, and at stores. Sally Martin, our preschool program director, had already been teaching signs for words in the songs she used, and we simply expanded the program.

Let me be very clear: We are not teaching American Sign Language; we are only teaching vocabulary words, not syntax. The first song we did with signs was the *Star-Spangled Banner*. On every concert, we include at least one song that incorporates signs. We were honored to receive the first grant from the Greater Rochester Choral Consor-

tium, which allowed us to hire a professional Sign Language Interpreter to teach our choirs.

How has studying at Seminary informed your music-making process?

I am ordained as an Interfaith Minister. I learned that my concerts cannot be only a set of unrelated songs just because they are quality repertoire or entertaining. At least some of the music on every concert must have a profound message of either social justice or personal growth. Music has to change in order to help others change, as music is the voice of our culture. We could teach history by studying only music if we wanted to. We, who see what our culture could be in the future, are going to change it. We will change the music and the art and the literature to reflect the world we want to see. We have to change it and cannot be silent. This is the gift we have been given, and we must use this gift to impact the larger world.

What are a few times in your career in which you felt most proud?

One of my most impactful experiences is when the Amadeus Youth Chorale sang for General Colin Powell, the former Secretary of State. We sang The Star-Spangled Banner for him when he was visiting our city. When they were done, he looked at my children and said, "I have heard that this is one of the most difficult songs to sing. I have to say, I've never heard it done better."

I was so proud.

Why music?

I believe that the purpose of music, especially in times of uncertainty, is best reflected by Bernstein's quote: "This will be our reply to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before." The purpose of music, not specifically in times of violence, but in times of unrest, is to do it more passionately. We do it because we are the voice and the heart of the people. We don't hold back.

What does it mean to be resilient?

Resilience is being able to stand or sit in any situation and know that you will be okay; possessing the skills of self-understanding, patience, history, and intelligence to know that we as humans can withstand a lot. The pandemic has proven this. At the beginning of this process, there were many younger individuals who were gravely concerned about how to cope. However, I saw a lot of the older generation who seemed to adapt and overcome with resilience because of their experience living through other large world events.

Resilience is enhanced both through compassion and through grit. This is one of the trickiest things about resilience; knowing when to activate these processes is also part of developing resilience. They both work, but they may be needed more in one context than they do in another context. Resilience can be scary, as it often involves a feeling of

discomfort, of uncertainty. I do believe that if we take the leap, the net will always appear.

Resilience is also built naturally with age. Resilience is built by being aware and growing your own confidence. My life mantra is "make it work." We as humans can work through and figure things out. We can become resilient by working through opportunities that are not comfortable. To those that are struggling right now to make music, I would say to do what you need to do. If you need to go on hiatus, go on hiatus. If you absolutely need to make music, make music. But most importantly, take care of yourself. We all have a unique view of what is needed for ourselves. Looking at Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, there are so many people struggling with food, water, safety, and security. For some of our neighbors, it can be incredibly difficult to make art when food insecurity and safety are a person's daily concerns. We, who are privileged, must help to address those issues as well.

How has 2020 shaped your perspective on life? (This was a question posed by the previous Choral Conversations interviewee.)

We are trained as musicians to listen. We are given two ears and two eyes for a reason: for perspective. Since we are trained that way, the thought of losing that hearing might just terrorize a professional musician. I want to let people know that it need not be that way. Whether we are looking at the lack of the arts,

COVID-19, or an ear going deaf, we must hold up hope. We must hold up one another. And we must listen, truly listen, to one another. Hope cannot be cancelled like a concert. In the arts, we have a very special opportunity to hold hope up for others. Whether it's two people singing a duet six-feet apart or a virtual chorus, we have the great opportunity to share hope in a magical way. Let's make it work. 🎵

Question for next interviewee:

What are your strategies for building community and respect among chorus members?