

Remembering George Buelow

David Schildkret

On March 30, 2009, the night before what would have been his eightieth birthday, musician, scholar, author, and teacher George J. Buelow passed away. Elsewhere,¹ you can read the details of Buelow's long and productive career: how he grew up near Chicago and began his higher education at Chicago Musical College; how he went on to NYU to study with musicological giants Martin Bernstein, Gustave Reese, and Curt Sachs; how he taught at the University of California at Riverside, the University of Kentucky, and Rutgers University (where I first met him); and how he joined the musicology faculty at Indiana University in 1977 and completed his career there, retiring in 1999. You can read of his many scholarly and editorial efforts, including the 100 articles he wrote for the *New Grove Dictionary* (an accomplishment of which he was very proud and which he often mentioned in class), and his oversight of an important series of musicology books, *Studies in Musicology*, published by UMI Research Press.

What you won't read—without reading between the lines—is how important he was to the world of choral music. He was a musicologist and keyboardist rather than a conductor, yet he taught for many years in the Choral Department at Indiana University. I studied with him there from 1978 to 1983, and he supervised my final doctoral project.

You also won't read in biographies and obituaries about Buelow's genuine love for music. His prize possession towards the end of his life was a grand piano he had picked out himself at the Steinway showroom in New York

City. Buelow loved personal treatment, favoring restaurants and other haunts where the staff knew him by name. Steinway naturally gave him a royal welcome, and it was this as much as the piano itself, I suspect, that made the instrument so special to Buelow. It occupied a central spot in his spacious Bloomington home—in a room he had more or less designed to hold the piano years before he actually owned it. He loved things that were elegant, and he always did things with style: several times, he hired my wife and me to come to his home, she wearing a long gown and I dressed in my tux, to pour champagne and serve canapés at a reception. Usually these parties honored one of his colleagues—he loved teaching with celebrated performers whose work he admired, an opportunity IU provided in abundance.

Buelow joined the Choral Department at Indiana through a somewhat circuitous route. For years, graduate studies in choral conducting at IU had been presided over by the titanic presence of Julius Herford. Herford, who had taught Lukas Foss and Robert Shaw, led classes in score study that even the rest of the Indiana choral faculty conscientiously attended until

The
**CHORAL
SCHOLAR**
The Online Journal of the National Collegiate Choral Organization

Volume 2, Number 1

Spring 2010

¹ <http://www.music.indiana.edu/som/choral/>

Herford retired in 1980 at age 79. His departure left an enormous void in the graduate choral program that no one was entirely sure how to fill.

George Buelow was already coaching some choral students on various conducting projects. I myself had sought him out when I wanted to conduct a pick-up performance of Handel's *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day*. I was a neophyte in Baroque performance practice, and I knew that Buelow was a leading expert in this field. Though Buelow could be cantankerous in class, he patiently took the time to explain to me some very basic matters of continuo realization, ornamentation, and other fundamentals of historically based Baroque performance. He gave me the confidence to undertake what was for me at that stage of my education a very new style and endeavor. I'd like to think the concert was a success. If it was, it was in large part due to Buelow's help.

Robert Porco, the newly appointed chair of the choral program when Herford retired in 1980, planned a performance of Handel's *Messiah* for the end of the first semester of the 1980-81 academic year. Having the score-study class (normally Herford's assignment) focus on *Messiah* was, therefore, a logical choice. And, since there was no more logical person on the IU faculty to teach such a course than George Buelow, Porco asked him if he would be willing to do so. Professor Buelow led the seminar with characteristic thoroughness, guiding the doctoral and master's students in choral conducting in a rigorous examination of Handel's works, including the Chandos Anthems, the Coronation Anthems, and several of the oratorios. He seemed genuinely enthusiastic about this teaching, and he later told me how exciting he found it to teach conductors—people who really wanted answers to questions and who were genuinely curious about the music they encountered.

Buelow gave me a new perspective on musicology. My musical training as an undergraduate had been comprehensive and rigorous, but I

could not see any connection between studying music and performing it. To my naïve mind, theory had been the hunt for chords and chord labels, and musicology had been a list of dates and style traits. I wasn't even sure that some of my professors *liked* music. One unforgettable moment in Buelow's class exploded all my assumptions about musicology (and musicologists) as dry and unconnected to the excitement of music-making.

It was the morning after the performance of *Messiah*. We had all sung in it and were all elated; it had been a sparkling triumph, and the audience had been transported. Robert Porco had trained both the choir and orchestra brilliantly, and he seemed genuinely pleased with the results. But we, of course, were graduate students, and it is the job of graduate students (or so we believed) to find a chink in the armor. We were discussing the performance in Buelow's seminar, and one student asked, "Professor Buelow, what did you think of that big *allargando* Mr. Porco took in the final 'Amen'? Was it authentic?" Buelow paused. "I don't know if it was authentic," he said, "but it sure was effective." He made it clear that, for him, successful music-making was not necessarily at odds with scholarship.

This was in December of 1980. The so-called authentic performance movement was then in full swing, and there had been a lot of recordings that used original instruments and that purported to manifest performance practices from the Baroque era but that just didn't sound very musical to our ears at the time. The performances seemed mannered and affected. What Buelow taught us was that one could be *both* historical *and* modern—that we need not sacrifice one for the sake of the other.

Buelow went on to teach for several years in the Choral Department. I studied the choral music of Berlioz and Liszt (an unusual but illuminating pairing), Beethoven's big choral works, and Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, *B-Minor Mass*, and the second Leipzig *Jahrgang* of cantatas. I also took classes in opera, which

was another of his passions, and courses in the music of Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss—specialties of his not often mentioned in his biography. His teaching was always methodical, rigorous, and exacting. We had to base everything we said on a close study of the score—no obfuscating by using the kind of hyperbole that some of us conductors are prone to in rehearsal (like, “This is a wonderful passage”—Buelow especially despised the word “wonderful,” which he rightly thought we used to avoid saying something substantive). As with Herford, we had to know the structure of the music, we had to know exactly what happened at each instant of the piece and why, and we had to identify the crucial moments—Buelow called them the crux of a movement. With him, we learned how the music we were studying related to the composer’s other music. We learned about a composer’s influences and precursors, about works contemporary with those we studied, and about how those works affected what came after them. In short, we learned to ask all the questions that are necessary to understanding and knowing a score thoroughly.

Beyond this, though, Buelow taught a passion for knowing that our musical decisions were defensible. He wanted us to be sure that the score we held in our hands was edited responsibly and that it accurately reflected what the composer wrote. He expected us to know what assumptions the composers and performers of the time brought to reading a score and to strip away later assumptions about how to read and perform the notes. He wanted us to make conscious decisions, not to fall into an interpretation because of tradition, habit, limited personal taste, or a sloppy edition. He taught that while there was not a single correct answer or ideal interpretation, there was a range of possibilities. Knowing the limits of that range, Buelow felt, would lead the conductor to a valid but unique and compelling performance. He taught these lessons to a generation of choral conductors at Indiana University, and we, in

turn, have shared them with our choirs and our students consistently since.

George Buelow’s way of thinking had a profound influence. During the relatively short period that he and Robert Porco led graduate choral studies at Indiana University, there was a unique synergy between scholarship and performance. This was thanks both to Porco’s talent and energy as a conductor and to Buelow’s love, expressed through his teaching, of what was *both effective and authentic*. In a very real sense, the existence of this journal, so aptly named *The Choral Scholar*, owes a debt to George Buelow’s example and mind-set.

At his own request, he had no services or memorials. There was no moment when his former students could come together and remind ourselves of what we had learned from him and what we still valued. But he gave each of his students a great gift, and I for one still think of him whenever I open one of the scores I studied with him. Even for the scores I didn’t work on with him, I wonder, “What would Buelow ask us about this piece?” I know that his questions would be important, intelligent, and right to the point, and that he would brook no tommyrot in the answers. I hope that I occasionally follow his example.

Good-bye, George. Thank you for all that you taught all of us.

TCS