
Pro Rege

Volume 50 | Number 3

Article 1

March 2022

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Recommended Citation

DeMol, Karen A. (2022) "De Profundis: Deep Personal Grief Precipitates Musical Masterpieces," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 50: No. 3, 1 - 8.

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De profundis: deep personal grief precipitates musical masterpieces



by Karen DeMol

Introduction: *De profundis clamavi ad te Domine!*

In the annals of human crisis and sorrow, what can possibly compare with the death of a loved one? Other crises are devastating, indeed; yet latent within them is hope of recovery, restoration, or justice. But death is irreversible, final, without recourse. In grief, humans cry out in multiple ways—in laments of action, art, music. Mysteriously, grief can precipitate higher levels of artistic mastery, as this study will document in the works of two choral composers, Dale Grotenhuis and Herbert Howells.

Loss and sorrow have generated a wide range of musical repertoire, much of it well-known. Some pieces mourn the death of victims of violence,

such as Penderecki's *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima*. Other pieces have been occasioned by the death of persons close to the composer, such as Verdi's *Requiem*, composed in commemoration of Manzoni, and Brahms' *Ein Deutsches Requiem*, written after the death of his mother. Closer yet are situations when the composer faces his or her own mortality. Heinrich Schütz, anticipating his own death, requested that a friend and former pupil compose music for the funeral, while he set himself to compose works—Psalm settings and a Magnificat—that he understood to be his *Schwanengesang*. Some of these works have become staples of concert repertoire. The listener, distanced from the grief and pain of death, can experience these pieces primarily for their musical aesthetics; the composer, not distanced from that grief and pain, can perhaps find, if not relief, at least inspiration for the musical aesthetics.

Uniquely poignant and wrenching among all losses are the deaths of children—untimely and out-of-order losses. Philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff, who lost his son Eric in a mountain-climbing accident, writes, "It's so wrong, so profoundly wrong, for a child to die before its parents. It's hard enough to bury our parents. But that we expect. Our parents belong to our past, our children belong to our future. We do not visualize our future without them. How can I bury my son, my future, one of the next in line? He was meant to bury me!"² King David's cry echoes down through the centuries: "O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom, my son, my son!"³

Composers too have suffered the death of chil-

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dren; and we have inherited the music they wrote in response. Very early in his career, Giuseppe Verdi suffered first the death of his daughter, then that of his son, followed shortly by the death of his wife, Margherita, all within three years. He wrote that he had decided never to compose again; it took persistent efforts by a mentor to entice him back into composing. Gustav Mahler lost a daughter. His well-known *Kindertotenlieder* (1901-1904), ironically composed before that loss, was inspired by, and set to music, five of the 428 personal poems written in 1833-34 by Friedrich Rückert, who was responding to the deaths from scarlet fever of his children Luise and Ernst. (As was the case a century later with Herbert Howells, Rückert did not intend these poems for publication.⁴) But when Mahler's own daughter, Maria, died of scarlet fever, Mahler wrote to Guido Adler that in composing *Kindertotenlieder*, he had "placed myself in the situation that a child of mine had died. When I really lost my daughter, I could not have written these songs any more."⁵⁶ To cite one more instance, Gospel and jazz musician Thomas Dorsey suffered a double loss: his first wife, Nettie, died in childbirth in 1932; the child she bore, Dorsey's first son, also died. The song he composed in his grief, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," has become one of his most well-known and well-beloved.

Two examples of music composed in response to the loss of children are the subject of this paper, in both instances choral pieces by 20th-century composers. Dale Grotenhuis, a late-20th-century choral composer, composed his *Song of Triumph*, arguably his best and certainly his best-known piece, after the son he believed would become his musical successor was killed in a motorcycle accident. Herbert Howells, a mid-20th-century English composer, composed his *Hymnus Paradisi* in response to the sudden death of his young son, Mick; in pain, he kept the score hidden for almost a dozen years before allowing it to be performed.

Bereft parents, like all who mourn, grieve in widely different ways. Grievers may confront their own mortality, wrestle with their own identity, or re-focus their core beliefs and values. In recovery, some are galvanized to develop cures or to fight injustice. Some work out their grief in artistic endeavors and even reach new levels of artistic richness.

How can that be? What processes of mind and heart convert pain into richer artistry? Classic studies of the stages of grief, such as Elizabeth Keebler Ross' work,⁷ and personal accounts of grief, such as C.S. Lewis' *A Grief Observed*, do not explain this mystery, even as they acknowledge it. A number of studies in the field of psychology and psychoanalysis affirm the connection, although they too do not explain it. Bernard C. Meyer, in positing factors in creativity, states, "one of the most profound specifically psychic influences is that of death and grief"; he cites instances in the work of Joseph Conrad, Alban Berg, and Bela Bartok.⁸ George H. Pollock, who has extensively studied grief and creativity in the lives and works of gifted artists and scientists—such as Gustav Mahler, James Barrie, Käthe Kollwitz, and Jack Kerouac—has concluded that "the successful completion of grieving might result in increased creativity."⁹ That increased creativity may explain a change of style. It is reported, for instance, that after the death of his son in 1964, the American composer George Rochberg found serialism inadequate for the expression of his feelings; he changed to an eclectic style based on borrowed material from composers from Mozart to Berio¹⁰ and continued this musical eclecticism to the end of his career.

It might also be that creative and artistic efforts not only result from "the successful completion of grieving" but also are an important step in that grieving.¹¹ Pollock writes, "I have evidence that suggests that at times the creative product is not the end result of the mourning process, but represents an attempt at mourning through creativity."¹² That seems to be true for Howells and Grotenhuis, for whom the tragic death of sons somehow spurred greater compositional richness. Howells himself wrote, "The sudden loss, in 1935, of an only son—a loss essentially profound and, in its very nature, beyond argument—might at any time be of such an impact as to impel a composer, after a time, to seek release and consolation in language and terms nearest and most personal to him. Music might well have power beyond any other medium to offer that release and comfort. It did so in my case."¹³

None of the psychological studies consulted address *how* the psychic processes resulting from grief precipitate higher levels of creative mastery. But it is possible to document *that* it has done so in these

instances, resulting in choral pieces commonly judged to be these composers' masterpieces. In addition to a shared origin in grief, these works have seeds in previous works and include both painful darkness and soaring alleluias.

The pieces themselves are quite different. They differ in scale: one is an anthem of three-minutes' duration, the other a work of forty-five minutes. One is unaccompanied, the other employs a full orchestra. One comes out of an English/Anglican

best comforted by those who have been their predecessors in the valley of the shadow of death; the comfort can come not only through the presence, words, and actions of those fellow grievers, but also and uniquely through their music.

Part I: *Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine*¹⁶: Dale Grotenhuis composes in response to the sudden death of an adult son.

How does one document, how measure the increase in creativity precipitated by the loss of a loved one?

tradition, the other out of an American Protestant (Reformed) tradition. One was written immediately after the funeral, one three years later. But for both composers, as in the case of Verdi, it was a committed supporter—a daughter, a wife—who urged the composer back into composing.¹⁴

How does one document, how measure the increase in creativity precipitated by the loss of a loved one? There are, of course, the perceptions of those who heard these pieces within the chronology of the composer's life—"ear-witnesses," as it were—who noticed a profound change. There is also the witness provided by analysis—objective theoretical study of the differences of musical materials and compositional techniques between the pieces written before and after the crisis. In that pursuit, this study documents the differences in texture, range and tessitura; vocal demands; melodic shape; chord vocabulary and progression; consonance and dissonance; use of pre-existing material; and the relationship of the music materials to the text.

Such analysis can serve to corroborate the testimony of the "ear-witnesses," showing that what they heard is not imagined but inherent in the piece. Such analysis can also set the stage for exploring the profound identification of the listener with this music; it can affirm the embodiment of music that allows and enables the listener personal identification with the music.¹⁵ In these and no doubt other instances, the compositional depth of composers was enriched and, in the process, their healing assisted. Their music then became a comfort to other mourners. Those who grieve are often

The circumstances

Dale Grotenhuis (1931-2012) was an American composer known principally for choral anthems and arrangements. In addition to his personal passion for choral music, he worked in a region and a culture that highly values choral music. A prolific composer, he had over 350 choral works in print by a variety of publishers, as well as a long list of unpublished works. He also wrote hymn harmonizations, instrumental arrangements, and works for symphonic band. His career was spent principally at Dordt College (now University) in Sioux Center, Iowa, where he served as Director of Choral Activities from 1959–1994 and taught a variety of courses in theory, composition, analysis, and choral music education.

In 1983, Grotenhuis was looking forward to exciting events in his family life. His eldest son, Jack Michael, was completing his doctoral studies in music at Arizona State University in Tempe. In November, 1983, Dale flew to Tempe to attend Jack's doctoral conducting recital, at which Jack conducted some of Dale's music. An early January interview was already scheduled for Jack for a music position at Dordt College. Watching any child come into his own is a delight for any parent; having a son become colleague and successor in one's own field is a rare and special joy.

This scene of success and anticipation was abruptly shattered. On December 6, 1983, Jack was struck by a car while riding his motorcycle, suffering severe brain damage. The injuries were so massive that Jack's wife, Kathy, together with Jack's

parents, made the agonizing decision to release him from life-support systems and to donate his organs to others.¹⁷

In grief, music turned to ashes for Grotenhuis. He became frightened, for his passion for music had become a vacancy. He reports that he did not ever want to write again. But within days of the funeral, in late December 1983, his wife, Eleanor, concerned for him, insisted that he make the effort. “She kicked me out of the house,” Grotenhuis says.¹⁸ He sequestered himself in his office at the college to compose, choosing to set a text framing the sermon at the pre-funeral family service, Revelation 15:3-4:

Great and marvelous are your deeds,
Lord God Almighty.
Just and true are your ways,
King of the ages.
Who will not fear you, O Lord,
and bring glory to your name?
For you alone are holy.
All nations will come
and worship before you,
for your righteous acts have been revealed.
(NIV)

Eleanor reports that he did not come home for lunch, nor for supper; after sixteen hours he re-appeared about 11:00 at night, a completed anthem in his hand.¹⁹

The music

When asked to recall the process of composition, Grotenhuis reported that he did not remember the process of writing it and that he always heard the piece as if somebody else had written it, as if it were not his. He also remembered that he never revised the piece; like most creative artists, he usually changed something, however minor, about his pieces in the process of completing them. But *Song of Triumph* remains as it was at the end of that long day.

Grotenhuis has stated that stylistically he had not written anything like this piece either before or after. When pressed for what he himself heard to be different, he mentioned that he considered his usual style to be “fresh traditional,” but that this piece was more complex, its beginning full of pain.

Grotenhuis noted two specific compositional aspects of *Song of Triumph*. The final cadence, appearing at the end of the first and last sections, had been composed by son Jack, who wrote it for a setting of Psalm 17 he was entering in a hymnal contest.²⁰ Grotenhuis discovered the work-in-progress on Jack’s piano, with a penciled note, “Eat your heart out, Dad.” Although it used harmonically a relatively traditional pattern, Grotenhuis found it to be fresh and noted that many listeners commented on it. Jack’s cadence, in addition to being published in a denominational hymnal, lives on in this well-used choral anthem.

Grotenhuis also noted that earlier in his composing career, he frequently wrote choral music with eight voice parts, a popular texture at the time. Eventually he wrote mainly for four parts; the eight-part beginning and ending of the unaccompanied *Song of Triumph* is a return to an earlier practice. His later work is again for four parts, and accompanied.²¹ Significantly, while most of Grotenhuis’s music was composed for a specific performing group or a commission, the composing of *Song of Triumph* had no specific performers in mind; in all this composer’s work, this piece stands alone as “pure composition.”

Song of Triumph is of a suddenly different style than his works immediately preceding it. In fact, some of Grotenhuis’s composer friends have doubted that he actually wrote it; Grotenhuis wryly reported that they claimed it to be “too good” to have been written by Grotenhuis.²² This remark indicates that Grotenhuis’ style was consistent enough to be recognizable, while this piece is noticeably different.

In several ways, *Song of Triumph* does bear similarities to other Grotenhuis anthems and is consonant with his style. Those similarities include its ternary form and big multi-voiced ending, as well as smooth vocal lines, which lie comfortably for the voices and are enjoyable to sing. But in significant particulars, *Song of Triumph* is unique in the Grotenhuis *oeuvre*. There is, of course, the use of son Jack’s signature cadence. In addition, *Song of Triumph* is characterized by high vocal ranges, an absence of suspensions, more non-triadic passages, an uncharacteristi-

cally high percentage of dissonance, the use of mixed meters, and greater use of contrapuntal writing—all a marked change from the compositions immediately preceding it and from Grotenhuis’s usual style.

A detailed description of these characteristics is in order. First, there is the “signature cadence” of son Jack. The progression consists of the tonic, the subdominant with a 9th (or added 2nd) in the alto, a penultimate chord of multivalent nature, and the tonic. The pitch collection in the penultimate chord is the same as in the subdominant chord—CEG and D. The D moves to the bass voice as if the foundation for a dominant chord. It seems a stretch, however, to call this chord a V11, as it lacks both 3rd and 5th. The chord retains a plagal feeling, the D in the bass carrying both the suggestion of V and the powerful continuance of the dissonant 9th of the IV chord²³ (Ex. 1).

Ex. 1. Jack Grotenhuis. Psalm 17, “Lord, Listen to my Righteous Plea,” mm. 7-12²⁴

In *Song of Triumph*, Dale Grotenhuis both quoted and transformed Jack’s final cadence, which appears at the end of the first section (mm. 13-14) and at the final cadence, mm. 58-60. Its transformations include expansion to seven and eight voice parts and clarification of the penultimate chord: the voicing reveals this chord here to be clearly a dominant 11th chord (Ex. 2).

Ex. 2. Dale Grotenhuis. *Song of Triumph*, mm. 60-61

The use of this cadence, despite Grotenhuis’s claim of having no memory of the compositional process, is both a tribute to his son and a seed for

the piece.²⁵ Its unique chord—the subdominant chord with added 2nd or 9th—appears to be specific to *Song of Triumph*. In the four-hymn arrangements and anthems immediately preceding *Song of Triumph*—*May the Road Rise Up* (1982, published 2009), *How Long, O Lord* (1983), *He Came Singing Love* (1983), and *I Sing the Mighty Power of God* (1983, published 1984)—there is only one such chord (*I Sing the Mighty Power of God*, m.2), but the 9th here could also be understood as a suspension.

The soprano range of *Song of Triumph* is uniquely high, venturing higher than in other anthems, notably at the end and in the set of *alleluias* at the center of the piece. No sweet *alleluias*, these. After a quiet declaration of the text “For you alone are holy,” set in the lower register of all the voices except tenor, the choir bursts out in loud and high *alleluias*; the sopranos hover around A-flat 5, capping a bright, even piercing major-major subdominant seventh chord. The basses also sing very high, circling C4 and D-flat 4—itches with vocal intensity and even strain—before beginning long descents in pitch and volume. The final soprano note of the entire anthem is A-flat 5. In none of the anthems immediately preceding *Song of*

Triumph are sopranos given so high a pitch. In two of these anthems, basses are required to sing C and D-flat 4 (*He Came Singing Love*, m. 27 and 39, and *How Long, O Lord*, m. 33, 35-37, and 47); however, the soprano pitches at these points are in their mid-range. The combination of high-register singing with strong volume and a bright major-major chord gives this passage piercing brilliance and intensity—an out-of-the-depths cry uniting praise and pain, recalling for this writer Job’s cry, “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him.”²⁶

The chord vocabulary and chord progressions of *Song of Triumph* are largely the same as those of the immediately preceding compositions. In all, the basic language is triadic, the progressions traditional. In *Song of Triumph*, however, there is some use of quartal harmony, unprecedented in Grotenhuis’s music, which carries weight by appearing at the very outset of the piece in a passage that reappears twice later. In this passage, the upper voices present a series of fourths moving in parallel motion over a stationary bass (Ex. 3).

Startlingly different from Grotenhuis’s usual style is the amount of dissonance—the percentage of musical time carrying dissonance. The percentages presented here were determined by tallying the number of beats on which pitches counted dissonant in traditional harmony appear on the beat or for the duration of the beat (those dissonances include 7ths, 9ths, added notes, suspensions, and chords dissonant to an on-going pedalpoint—dissonances which in traditional harmony need resolution) and then dividing that number by the number of beats in the whole. In the two earlier song arrangements, about one-quarter of the beats carry dissonance—*May the Road Rise Up* and *I Sing the Mighty Power of God*. Two other anthems have a higher percentage of dissonance, but well below 50 percent. In *He Came Singing Love*, 36 percent of the beats carry dissonance; in *How Long, O Lord*, the percentage is 44 percent; in this anthem most of this dissonance appears in the beginning section of the piece, which poses the title’s question. Thus, in these anthems as a group, less than half the time of the piece is spent in dissonance. In contrast, a whopping 60 percent of the beats in *Song of Triumph* carry dissonance (163 beats out of

270)—no doubt a factor in the piece’s effect as both tense and intense. Interestingly, suspensions, which appear generously in Grotenhuis’s earlier works, appear sparingly in *Song of Triumph*.

Ex. 3. Dale Grotenhuis. *Song of Triumph*. mm. 1-2

In addition, the dissonance appears amid metrical irregularity—the use of mixed meter and asymmetrical meters. All four compositions immediately preceding *Song of Triumph* stay in one meter, and that meter is 4/4. In contrast, *Song of Triumph* uses 5/4, 7/4, 2/4, 4/4, and one measure of 3/4—another contributor to tension and intensity.

In *Song of Triumph* contrapuntal techniques have a somewhat stronger role than in his earlier works. In the four pieces immediately preceding *Song of Triumph*, the texture is chordal; in two the accompaniment is an arpeggiated presentation of the chords. In two—*I Sing the Mighty Power of God* and *How Long, O Lord?*—there are brief passages of parallel triads and parallel thirds, which briefly suspend the sense of functional harmony. None use imitation or other polyphonic techniques. In *Song of Triumph*, there is similarly no use of imitation. However, there are more and longer passages in which parallel motion appears, replacing functional harmony with planing. The passages involved include the passage with quartal harmony, quoted above, which appears three times in the piece; a passage of parallel triads over a pedal bass in mm. 29-30 and 39-40, and a passage of parallel 6ths in mm. 31 and 41. In the *alleluias*, contrary motion and later parallel motion between the sopranos and basses appear, coinciding with their high-register passage (mm. 33-35 and 43-45). While in the ear-

lier pieces the brief instances of parallelism appear almost incidentally, here they are prominently placed at the outset of sections and during the climactic *alleluias*.

Asymmetric meter, mixed meter, a prevalence of dissonance, high ranges, significant passages of non-functional harmony, and the use of a signature cadence set this anthem apart from any of Grotenhuis's other compositions and notably from those immediately preceding the tragedy in his

Asymmetric meter, mixed meter, a prevalence of dissonance, high ranges, significant passages of non-functional harmony, and the use of a signature cadence set this anthem apart from any of Grotenhuis's other compositions....

family. These musical factors combine to produce a piece of intermingled praise and pain that also reaches a new level of compositional depth and richness for the composer.

The reception

Song of Triumph is Grotenhuis's best-known work. It was first performed at the regional conference of the American Choral Directors' Association in spring of 1984. In the summer of 1984, it was introduced to choral directors at the annual Choral Music Symposium at the University of Missouri. Eph Ehly, who had solicited the piece, has stated that at the Symposium, *Song of Triumph* was "a stunning success, the piece of the year."²⁷ Six months later, the Norman Luboff Choir performed it on a worldwide tour. Shortly after, in 1985, it was published by Boosey and Hawkes. Although cumulative sales records are not available, a publisher's representative reports that it continues to sell over a thousand copies a year.²⁸ Now more than thirty years old, the anthem enjoys frequent performances, including those by high school and college choirs and professional choirs, as, for example, the Kantorei of the greater Minneapolis area. *Song of Triumph* has also appeared in many choral reading lists, as, for example, at the American Choral Directors Association meetings in Minneapolis, in spring, 2010, where the session leader chose it

as needing to be known by the next generation of choral conductors.

In sum, grief precipitated a remarkable deepening of Grotenhuis's style in an anthem generally acknowledged to be his masterpiece, as was true also for Herbert Howells fifty years earlier.²⁹

Endnotes

1. "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord," Psalm 129:1, *Biblia Sacra Vulgate*.
2. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 16.
3. II Samuel 18: 33, *The Bible*, New International Version (East Brunswick, New Jersey: International Bible Society, 1978).
4. Karen Painter, *Mahler and His World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 174.
5. Theodor Reik, *The haunting melody: psychoanalytic experiences in life and music* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young, 1953), 315.
6. Mahler biographer Michael Kennedy suggests that it is the fourth movement of the *Symphony No. 9*, which quotes from the fourth song of *Kindertotenlieder*, that should be seen as the requiem for his daughter, dead two years when he began to compose it. Michael Kennedy, *Mahler* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 170-171.
7. Elizabeth Keebler Ross and David Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss* (New York: Scribner, 2005).
8. Charles Kligerman, "Panel on Creativity," *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* (1972): 24.
9. G. H. Pollock, "Process and affect: mourning

- and grief,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 59 (1978): 255-276, quoted in *Bereavement: Reactions, Consequences, and Care*, ed. Marian Osterweis, Fredric Solomon, and Morris Green (Washington D.C.: National Academy Press, 1984), 53.
10. J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010): 952.
 11. Pollock, “Process and affect: mourning and grief, 270.
 12. Pollock, 270.
 13. Herbert Howells: BBC radio talk December 5, 1968. Quoted in Paul Andrews: “Herbert Howells: a bibliographical and documentary study” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Aberystwyth, 1999): 325.
 14. For an extensive study of the role of specific supportive others in relation to creativity, see *Creating Minds: an Anatomy of Creativity Seen through the Lives of Freud, Einstein, Picasso, Stravinsky, Eliot, Graham, and Gandhi*, by Howard Gardner (New York: Basic Books [Harper Collins]), 1993.
 15. Naomi Cummins, “The Subjectivity of “*Erbarme Dich*,”” *Music Analysis* XVI, No. 1 (1997): 5.
 16. “Grant them eternal rest, Lord.” From the text of the Requiem mass.
 17. Eleanor Veldman Grotenhuis, *Song of Triumph* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991).
 18. Dale Grotenhuis, interview by Karen DeMol, August 7, 2010.
 19. Eleanor Veldman Grotenhuis, *Song of Triumph*, 52.
 20. Psalm 17, “Lord, Listen to My Righteous Plea,” now published in *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, CRC Publications, 1987): 17.
 21. Dale Grotenhuis, phone interview by Karen DeMol, August 7, 2010.
 22. Dale Grotenhuis, phone interview by Karen DeMol, July 5, 2010.
 23. Ralph Turek refers to similar cadences in the music of Debussy and Ravel as modified authentic cadences involving the V11: “the descending-fifth root movement of the authentic cadence is combined with the plagal effect created by the subdominant triad present in the upper voices.” Ralph Turek, *The Elements of Music: Concepts and Applications*, 2nd ed., Vol. 2 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 297.
 24. Used by permission, Faith Alive Christian Resources (Grand Rapids, Michigan).
 25. Psychologists have noted the effect of “memorializing” the lost person through use of that person’s materials in new art work. In his study of the mourning of Käthe Kollwitz, whose artist-son was killed in World War II, Pollock posits that Kollwitz actually sought to continue through her own work the artistic work this son could no longer do. George Pollock: “The Mourning-Liberation Process and Creativity: The Case of Käthe Kollwitz,” *The Annual of Psychoanalysis* (10): 333-353.
 26. Job 13:15, *The Bible*, NIV (East Brunswick, N.J.: International Bible Society, 1978).
 27. Eph Ehly, phone interview by Karen DeMol, January 12, 2012.
 28. Information provided by Emily Crocker, Vice President for Choral Publications, Hal Leonard Corp.
 29. In the winter of 2012, Dale Grotenhuis reviewed the manuscript for this article, verified the factual details, and expressed his appreciation of the tone of the article and the nature of the analysis.