Karle Erickson began teaching in 1960 in St. James, Minnesota. After a successful two years in St. James, he moved to Sterling, Illinois, and accepted a teaching position at Sterling Township High School. Sterling had a fine program, a beautiful campus, and a wonderful music facility. Although he had no thoughts about doing graduate study, while teaching in Sterling, he learned that the school district paid teachers $40 per semester hour for going to summer school, so he started working on his master’s degree at the University of Illinois. While studying and writing papers, his professor, Dr. Charles Leonhard was impressed with Karle's philosophy of teaching and with the way he thought. He encouraged Karle to get his doctorate. He was now 24 years old and never actually thought of himself as an “academic,” but went ahead with the decision to work on his doctoral degree. In the fall of 1967, having completed everything but his dissertation, he accepted a position at Lawrence University and completed the degree in 1970. He taught there until 1980, and from 1980-1994 he was Professor of Music and head of choral studies at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, MN. After Gustavus, Karle was the Interim conductor for National Lutheran Choir and conducted the Bach Society of Minnesota in the Twin Cities. His desire to conduct a semi-professional chorale led him to established an ensemble focusing primarily on the performance of multicultural global music. Karle founded, World Voices and enjoyed a thirteen-year tenure with the ensemble. He now directs the adult Canticle Choir, Festival Orchestra and Brass at St. Andrew Lutheran Church in Eden Prairie, Minnesota. He stays actively involved in ACDA of MN and is still sought after as a clinician and adjudicator for festivals around the country.

Editor’s Note: The following is a transcript of an interview with Karle Erickson, conducted by his friend and former student, Sarah Boehlke Gilbertson. The interview opens with a brief statement from Ms. Gilbertson. Sarah is the director of choral activities at Chanhassen High School, in Chanhassen, Minnesota.
It was the summer of 1988 and I was on the campus of Gustavus Adolphus College as a member of the Minnesota All-State Choir. I have never experienced such an emotional week, musically, in my life. I was brought to tears by the music I was making with the other singers and inspired by our conductor, Dr. Karle Erickson. His energy and sincerity during my time at All-State made a huge impact on me and there was no doubt in my mind that when it came time to pick an institution after high school, I wanted to go to Gustavus. I was thrilled, excited, and couldn’t wait to start singing at GAC. Auditions rolled around immediately after moving into my dorm room. I was shocked and honored to have made the Gustavus Choir as a freshman. I travelled to China, across the Midwest, to Texas, and out east with the choir. My work study job was working for Karle in his office for four years. I enjoyed going to work every day. I helped with recruiting letters, I filed his music (and he always gave me extra copies with his comments on the cover), I would talk with him, learn from him, it was a great time for me as a future choral educator. I learned a great deal from Karle and still to this day think about my years of study at Gustavus. I am thankful for the opportunity to study with such a fine conductor, teacher, and friend.

Sarah Gilbertson: When did you first decide to become a choral director?

Karle Erickson: It was not until I was part way through my junior year at St. Olaf College. I went to St. Olaf to become a band director. During my high school years, I had many opportunities to conduct the band whenever my high school director needed to be gone. The band program at my high school was the stronger program. I was a clarinetist and my high school band director was immensely supportive. He would bring me to Minneapolis for clarinet lessons because he knew I needed more of a challenge than he could present. I had lots of opportunities in the choral world, too, filling in for the choir director at the high school and at my home church. I would direct the choir at Christmas and Easter when the director went home to be with family. I loved it. I remember singing in the high school choir starting in 7th grade because they needed boys in our small town. But it was when I heard the choirs at St. Olaf, which was very moving for me, that I could present. I had lots of opportunities in the choral world, too, filling in for the choir director at the high school and at my home church. I would direct the choir at Christmas and Easter when the director went home to be with family. I loved it. I remember singing in the high school choir starting in 7th grade because they needed boys in our small town. But it was when I heard the choirs at St. Olaf, which was very moving for me, that I knew that was the direction I wanted to go.

SG: What were some of the ideas you implemented to build and recruit students into your program?

KE: While teaching in Sterling, Illinois, I was determined to get more guys in choir. I asked permission to look through the study hall rosters. I thought it would be a good idea to get some of the more academically disciplined boys in choir, so I checked grade point averages and asked the principal to announce in study hall the names of 42 guys to report immediately to the choir room. I spoke to them and identified some of the current boys in the choir (the star quarterback on the football team, for example). I gave the boys a choice to stay with me in the choir room or go back to study hall. Thirty eight of them decided to stay and I immediately had a sophomore boys’ choir. I made myself very visible at football and basketball games. I would come in late so people would know I was there. I would catch the players after the game; congratulate them on their success on the field or court. My presence at all the school events made a good statement about who I was as a person and teacher. I was supportive of everyone in the building and others saw I was a “whole” person. I also enjoyed playing basketball on the faculty team in the mornings.

SG: Who were the choirs and conductors that inspired you in those early years?

KE: For me it was Roger Tenney, who was at Owatonna; Curt Hanson, with whom I student taught in Brainerd and who was a founding members of ACDA; Olaf Christiansen, my college mentor and the director who inspired my love of choral music and who had an uncompromising commitment to the art and taught me what quality was in choral music. He was insistent that music is either in tune or out of tune – there was no in-between. A few years later, another model was Charles Hirt, director of the University of Southern California Chamber Singers. His chamber singers were musically stunning in performance. Working with Robert Shaw was, of course, as influential as anything could be. I heard recordings by these ensembles and was so moved by the quality of sound and musicianship.
SG: Who are the choirs and conductors that continue to inspire you today?
KE: At this point, it’s the recordings that I have of some of the conductors and choirs I have known over the years: Robert Shaw, with whom I had the privilege of working during my doctoral studies; Eric Ericson and the Swedish Radio Choir; the St. Olaf Choir both past and present; and Helmuth Rilling, with whom I worked one summer at the Oregon Bach Festival. Helmuth conducted J.S. Bach St. Mathew Passion with such energized emotion that the performance was like witnessing an opera. I had never heard anyone else do it with such attention to the dramatic and ongoing whole.

SG: How did you go about selecting your repertoire, and from what sources did you seek ideas?
KE: I realized early on that I was greatly influenced by the compositions I had sung in college. That was a very positive thing, but it was also limiting. I attended every ACDA convention for almost 50 years to hear fine choirs performing literature, and I got on the publisher lists to receive complimentary copies of music. The primary deciding factor when choosing literature was that I needed to like the piece. If it didn’t speak to me, I could not share it with much enthusiasm with my students. I chose literature that I could use to help my students learn about the whole spectrum of choral music from pre-Renaissance to the present. I would often program chronological concerts to educate the audience and students. I wanted them to leave a concert feeling like they learned something about the history of music and had their spirits lifted from the performance.

SG: How did you conduct auditions?
KE: I listened to singers individually. For me, two basic skills were critical. To be in the best choir, every singer either had to have good sight reading skills or be very good at pitch memory. The best singers were often those who took piano lessons or were in the band. I had students sing “My Country ‘tis of thee” to hear them sing as comfortably as possibly in their best voice. You could easily determine their acuity of the ear and the quality of instrument they had by singing this simple song. In my early years of teaching, I was often quite lenient. I believed I had to have greater numbers singing before I could become more selective. It worked. Before I left Sterling, I had four choirs in grades 10-12 based on skill levels.

SG: Back then when you were teaching high school and in the early years, what style of multicultural repertoire was being performed?
KE: Really, the only multicultural music being performed seemed to be African-American spirituals; that was pretty much it to my awareness. There was not a plethora of global choral literature published. A typical concert often ended with a spiritual, which, of course, was a crowd pleaser. Spirituals were more rhythmic in nature and more accessible for the average listener. Spirituals arranged by William Dawson were commonly heard.

SG: In those early years, what was the typical balance of sacred and secular music on a concert?
KE: 75% sacred and 25% secular would be my best estimate. My main influence came from my St. Olaf experiences where most of the music I sang was based on sacred texts. It was only in the spring concerts at St. James, MN, and Sterling, IL, that I focused on secular music and it was mostly songs from Broadway musicals with a little bit of staging.

SG: What was it that really turned you on to choral music?
KE: My parents spent a lot of money on good quality instruments so each of their four sons could play in the band. I had a top of the line Buffet clarinet. My mother made sure that I took piano lessons from an outstanding teacher who taught me good piano technique and the fundamentals of music (scales, keys signatures, etc.). I practiced the clarinet and piano religiously. At the same time, I always enjoyed singing in the school choir and, during my high school years, in the
adult choir at church. It was not until I went to St. Olaf College that I became really enthused about the very personal nature of choral music. Singing in the St. Olaf Choir under the tutelage of Olaf Christiansen is what really did it for me. I'll always remember the weekend when Dr. Christiansen needed to be away and he asked me to conduct the St. Olaf Choir for morning worship in chapel. I was both thrilled and frightened. Fortunately, it all went very well and I knew the direction my future would take.

SG: Name five choral chestnuts or repertoire that you would recommend to the conductor of today?
KE: Try to pick five?
• *Wake Awake*, F. M. Christiansen
• Brahms’s *Liebeslieder*
• Bach Motet 4 (*Furchte dich nicht*)
• Alexander Gretchaninov’s *O be joyful*
• Alexander Gretchaninov’s *Our Father*
• Alessandro Scarlatti’s *Exultate Deo*
• Hugo Distler’s *Psalm 98*
• Gustav Schreck’s *Advent Motet*

SG: What were some of the special performance events (festivals, conventions, tours) that your choirs participated in?
KE: In my early years at St. James and Sterling we didn't tour except to go to conference festivals in neighboring communities. While I was in St. James the extent of travel was to take the choir on an overnight trip to Minneapolis where we shared a concert at another high school. In 1979 the Lawrence Choir was invited, through audition, to sing at the National ACDA convention in Kansas City. The 68-member choir performed the Frank Martin *Mass* for double choir, and this performance in particular was a professional peak for me. The choir performed exceptionally well and I will never forget Charles Hirt coming up to me after this performance in Kansas City. He said, “Karle, don’t do that to me.” It had moved him greatly. Leland Sateren came to me and said, “Karle, I want you to be my successor at Augsburg College,” but instead, I took the Gustavus job a year later. For twelve summers while at Lawrence University, I directed the Wisconsin Youth Chorale. We travelled all over Western and some of Eastern Europe, the British Isles, and Scandinavia every summer from 1968-1980. Of special note was our performance for mass at St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome.

I distinctly recall the demonstration recording the Gustavus Choir did with the King’s Singers. That was an experience that stands out in my mind as something quite special. My main touring experiences were with The Gustavus Choir that had not done very much international travel. If I recall correctly, there had only been one or two musical ensembles that had travelled internationally. I decided the choir would do a foreign tour every fourth year in order to call attention to the quality of the music program as a recruiting tool and an ambassador for the college. I made the foreign travel experience a course of study for the choir during the J-term. The students studied with another professor before we went and during the travels about the areas we visited. I became aware after the fact that these experiences became somewhat of a model across the campus for other courses of study. Christmas in Christ Chapel at Gustavus was always a special time for me. It became the equivalent of St. Olaf’s Christmas Festival. We presented stunning performances including all the choirs and orchestra with differing topics and décor as the focus from one year to the next.

SG: In your view, how has the programming of repertoire changed over the years?
KE: There is far more global literature performed as a result of the strong graduate programs across the country that emphasize global music and the performance of all types and styles. Choral directors are better and more broadly educated. The main change from years ago; however, may be the wealth of literature and the accessibility of music from many publishers. You also hear a wide variety of choral music performed at conventions. The electronic age is helping. You can get your hands on music from all across the world instantly. Back in the early 60’s, you often heard many choirs performing the same standard literature.

SG: As you listen to choirs of today, how have the components of choral music performance evolved? (tone……..blend……diction, etc.)
KE: When I began teaching, there were the two schools of choral thought – the Westminster choral philosophy and the St. Olaf choral philosophy. You were either a St. Olaf enthusiast or Westminster enthusiast. Today, directors can gain an awareness of the whole spectrum of choral music and perfor-

Karle with Simon Carrington of the King's Singers
The time I was there was one of the few outstanding performances of all musical styles. The University of Illinois at the time I was there was one of the few outstanding graduate programs in the country, thanks to Harold Decker who headed the program. Most of the choral directors who went on to develop top-ranking choral programs around the country were at the University of Illinois working on their graduate degrees. Today, there are many quality graduate programs across the country for aspiring choir directors to attend.

SG: What has been the most inspirational ACDA convention performance you heard?
KE: That’s a tough one, as there were so many. I would say the Swedish Radio Choir conducted by Eric Ericson. There was perfection and drama all wrapped together. In my very first years, I was inspired by performances by Curt Hansen’s Brainerd High School Choir, Murray Freng at Alexandria, Bud Engen at White Bear Lake, and Roger Tenney at Owatonna. Those directors were the early ACDA influences for high school choirs in Minnesota.

SG: What has kept you active in ACDA throughout the years?
KE: First, hearing outstanding choirs at conventions that kept on raising the bar for me, and second, the collegial relationships that I developed. There was no hierarchy. I could sit and converse with Paul Salomunovich, Charles Hirt, or Robert Shaw just as easily as with my contemporary colleagues. I had the opportunity to be in the mix with many of the finest choral directors in the nation. There was no ladder I had to climb to rub elbows with conductors that I held high on the pedestal.

SG: What kind of conductor do you consider yourself? What do you consider to be your greatest strength?
KE: I think of myself a teacher of music, whether as a choir or orchestral conductor. Perhaps my greatest strength is my effectiveness and ability to inspire singers of any age to achieve their very best as a choral singer and to guide them through expressive performances that affect them deep in their souls. That same gift has made it possible for me to be very effective conducting choral festivals and All-State Choirs.

SG: When did you first become involved with ACDA?
KE: I joined in 1960, just a year after ACDA’s inception, and decided to buy a lifetime membership, which at that time was $100. I made the commitment to myself to join the best professional organization that existed in my field. I knew I should be part of it, and it was the wisest decision I ever made. I paid for it in five yearly installments of $20. What a deal, but at that time it seemed like a lot of money.

After my first year at Lawrence University in 1968, I was elected President of the Wisconsin chapter of ACDA. I realized after observing the model set in Ohio that we could bring more money into the state organization if we established WCDA as a separate entity. I made it a focus to do extensive recruiting to expand the membership of the organization. I had the privilege to serve as North-Central President from 1972-1974 and served as the National Chair of the Repertoire and Standards Committees.

SG: What has kept you active in ACDA throughout the years?
KE: It is critical to keep people involved personally. After all, ACDA was founded to enable directors to share ideas first-hand and hear each other’s choirs. As an organization we must be careful, in my opinion, not to allow electronic communication to destroy the interpersonal face-to-face connections that are vital to an organization that deals with such a personal art as choral music. I am concerned about the depersonalization that is taking place in society in general because of the modes of communication that have become so prevalent. I cherish all that I learned from having volunteered my time and effort to ACDA over the years. I got back much more than I gave.

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existed long before it developed in the United States. This was due in part to the leadership of Estonia’s early icon of choral music, Gustav Ernesaks, who I had the privilege of hosting at the ACDA’s Celebration of the U.S. Bicentennial at Interlochen, MI, in 1976. I realized I was a part of something that was immense – choral music was a global phenomenon. I was able to attend four World Symposia, the first one held in Vienna. Each one expanded my horizons, my zeal for doing my best to have an impact on my students so that they, too, could experience the essence of choral music.

SG: Reflecting on your own legacy to choral music in Minnesota, what are some the contributions and gifts you have made to the profession?
KE: I was pleased to serve as the President of WCDA, the President of the North Central Division, and the Chair of the National Repertoire and Standards Committees. But, perhaps my most important contribution occurred during my 27 years at Lawrence and Gustavus, preparing students to become outstanding choral conductors/teachers, who are enjoying much success, are active in leadership positions in the profession and who will have a distinct influence on generations of students to come.

SG: What advice or words of wisdom would you give the emerging choral director of today?
KE: My number one word of advice is to teach your students (and yourself) at all levels of instruction to read the language of the art with the use of solfeggio in order to prepare your students to independently participate in choral music for the rest of their lives. If you do not do it, they will constantly be at the mercy of learning by rote and not be able to successfully audition for the better ensembles that will challenge them to continue to grow. Only if they can read the language can they be fully independent singing musicians. Our consciences should rise up in horror if our profession continues to accept the reality that if our singers studied piano or played in the band or orchestra, they can read music, but if they did not, they will continue to be “dumb singers” and the fault will be ours.

Second, listen to and analyze live and recorded performance and often as possible sit in on other conductors’ rehearsals to learn from analyzing their skills. A good place to do this is with All-State conductors. Sing in the Director’s Chorus at conventions with the same motivation. Bring in guest conductors to work with your choir.

Third, study and practice conducting as the performance skill that it is. Hone your gestures so that they communicate exactly what you intend. Know what your performers see by studying your conducting on video and in the mirror. Ask your performers to watch in silence as you conduct the music being studied so that they visually learn your conducting “language.” After they have watched, invite them to “sing that.” Dare to be dramatic with your conducting gestures to adequately communicate the emotional content of the music.

Fourth, challenge your singers to perform a cappella with excellence right from the start. Resist the temptation to use the piano as a tuning and rote-learning crutch.

Fifth, become an active volunteering member of ACDA and allow yourself to be influenced by all the splendid people who are part of this incredible professional organization.