

Dan Kallman interview at the time of MSAB's 150th celebration, 2016

(Music)

Brittany: Hi, I'm Brittany, and I'm currently a student in our Academy Plus transition program here at the Minnesota State Academy for the Blind. Welcome to our podcast here at MSAB. This podcast will highlight some of our school events that are taking place throughout the year as well as some interviews that we had with some of the students, staff, and people from the community. This podcast today will feature an interview we did with Dan Kallman, who was commissioned to write a piece for our school's 150th Anniversary, which took place in 2016. He has composed several songs for vocal and instrumental groups, and we were happy to have him write a song for us. Here is his interview. You will hear my friend, Ali and I, asking him a lot of questions about how he composed this piece along with his other works and other compositions that he has done.

(Music)

Brittany: Tell us about yourself and the work you do?

Dan: Well I, um, live just south of here in Northfield MN, so not far to commute up here to the school which has been a fun thing to do these past few ah, rehearsals while we are putting this song together. I work as a composer so that means that I write music of course but I write music and I'm commissioned by various um, churches, or youth choir, or bands, um, orchestras whoever wants to have music written for them, um, they often ask a composer to write a special piece often for a special occasion like this, and so that's what I do for my work. So, this is just one of several projects that I've had this year, um, but this has been a really special one for me because of the big celebration down here that you were talking about.

(Music)

Ali: What inspired you to be a composer?

Dan: Well I think it was probably just growing up around music. My father was a band director primarily elementary. He started thousands of students on their instruments in the course of his career. And so, ah, because he was involved in music and we also had a lot of music happening in our church when I grew up, I just grew up with music all around me. So I started playing the trombone in fifth grade, I started singing long before that, um, not in choirs; we didn't have a children's choir at our town, but I sang a lot of solo's in school, in church and things like that. And so I just grew up in music. We had a wonderful high school music program where I went to high school in Austin Minnesota, back in the 1970's. And ah, mainly because of that I just decided to continue into music because I liked it so much. And I wasn't composing a lot when I was in high school but I started to write music in college and especially when I got to be in my mid-twenties I started to write music just about every day then on a pretty serious basis.

(Music)

Brittany: Tell us about composing, can you describe, that process for us?

Dan: Ah, yeah it would be really boring if you came and watched me compose because it's (laugh) um, it's a lot of work it's not really the kind of thing where... um, I guess I think probably before I was a composer I thought most composers just had it all kinda beamed down to them from God directly into their head and they just wrote it out, but it doesn't happen that way. Most composers um, it's like writing a paper where you, you try to get as much down on, on the page as you can one day. Then the next day you might wake up and decide "Oh, I don't like most of this but I'm gonna keep this little part here." And I, I cross off a lot of things, I use a red pen a lot and um, and I rework things all the time, so it takes quite a while to compose even a short-ya know, a five minute piece like this might take a couple months to write.

(Music)

Ali: What are some challenges that you inquire (encounter) when composing music?

Dan: I think the main thing is just um, getting to the point where I like what I'm writing. (laugh) Often times with ah, depending on the nature of the commission um, some music is different because it has lyrics or, or ah, just different instrumentation and things like that, so every project is different. But I often have to get to the point where, I say well, this isn't perfect the way it is right now but I have to keep this section and move on and go onto the next section. And then when I have a chance I can go back and rework the whole thing again but, so I think one of the main challenges is just um, getting a composition that I'm writing to the point where I, I really am um, pretty happy with it. But that often takes a long time and sometimes I'm not really happy with the music I write until I hear somebody perform it, and then I'm usually happy with it. There are a few projects I've done where I, I'm not happy really (laugh) with the final project but most of the time I'm pretty happy by the time it ends and, and the performers are um, if they like it especially then I feel pretty good about it.

(Music)

Brittany: Ok, so our school commissioned you to write a piece in celebration of our 150th anniversary last year. How did you come up with the piece "We Follow that Vision" for our school?

Dan: Well, this was a case where I um, I wrote both the music and the words. And often times when there is a song um, that has words to it, the poet or the lyricist writes the words first and then the composer, a different person, will come in and write the music. But um, often times composers will write both words and music and I've done that with some of my projects so that was the case here and I think for the most part I wrote most of the words first for this one but I was free to change, of course, the words as I was writing the music if I wanted to. That's one of the nice things about doing both--is that you are able to do that. If I was working with somebody else's poem I wouldn't change any of the words because that wouldn't be fair to them. But if it's my poem um, I'm able to do that. So, um, part of the process for this was first of all meeting with

Jenny Pelletier who is the person who of course originally contacted me about this. I talked to her a lot about the school, she had only been here for one year at the time or she was in her first year when she talked to me about this, and we talked about what a special place this is. She also gave me this wonderful book called "One Hundred Years of Sight and Sound" that was written um, by the people at this school 50 years ago when the school was celebrating its centennial, it's 100th year. And that was back already back 50 years ago in the 1960's when that was written. So that had a lot of information about how the school began, who some of the original leaders and teachers were and so I tried to talk about those people or at least generally talk about them but I, I do mention the founder of the school Harriet Tucker in the song, and um, so the lyrics kind of came out of that largely out of that book or from talking to Jenny about what happens here, what a special place it is, how special the students are...and of course I found that all out when I came here to rehearse the song, it's just great to get to know people and so the whole project has just been a real joy for me.

(Music)

Ali: How long did it take you to compose "We Follow that Vision"?

Dan: Well, it's always hard to say exactly how long because when I'm working on a project sometimes I'll work um, several hours of a day with it, but other days I won't work as much and I'll be doing something else, working on a different project. But I know that when uh, Jenny originally talked to me it was months before the celebration maybe even a year almost before the celebration she talked to me about doing this and um, we decided what the scope of the project would be. We kind of wanted it to be something that could be sung by a lot of the students here, so it turned out to be ah, sort of a popular style I guess you could say, pop tune in a way, um and just became a process then of getting together and um, once I got it on the paper I came down and spent several rehearsals with the choir here and with the pianist and ah, we put it together that way.

(Music)

Brittney: In terms of writing compositions what is your favorite ensemble or instrument?

Dan: Oh, I think my favorite ensemble to write for is a childrens choir. I write a lot for young singers and that's some of the most satisfying, not, not so much because the music itself although I, I do like writing that kind of music, but I just love hearing kids sing. So if children are singing my music and they're singing it well um, I usually really am happy with it um, even if the song is, isn't, well normally I like the song but sometimes I like it a lot better when I hear kids sing it well. So, I'd say children's choir is probably my favorite but I do like the variety of writing one day for a children's choir and then the next project maybe for a college orchestra or a band or, just something different.

(Music)

Brittany: What else would you like to share with us today?

Dan: Well I think I already said a little bit about how special this was for me to come down here and to get to meet some of you and um, hear some you and I've been to I think three concerts here now, um, all of which have really thrilled me. You had a drummer here from the Twin Cities once, just a wonderful concert with a lot of you, a lot of the students were drumming along. Um, then I came to your Broadway show, um, really enjoyed that, that was a year ago I think, and so I um, I just, every project is this way for me. One of the, one of the most special things about it is just getting to know people and getting to collaborate with people and bring music to life for the first time is always a big thrill.

(Music)

Brittany: That was our interview with Dan Kallman, and we really appreciated him coming into our studio. To close out this podcast today, we have a recording of Dan Kallmans song "We Follow that Vision" that was commissioned for our school. It is performed by some of the students of MSAB but was originally performed with the Faribault High School Choir, and we really appreciate having this song as a part of our schools' history.

(Piano intro)

Brianna solo: One hundred and fifty years ago

Harriet Tucker had a vision of a school she wanted to see.

So many have followed her to pass that dream along

Now we will celebrate and thank them in a song.

Rocky solo: And they shine before us,

As their love still lights the way

That has led to a better day

And will brighten our tomorrow.

In this place of learning

Through the music of speech and song

Where we find we can sing along

Facing the future with heads held high!

Chorus:

We follow that vision of a world we want to see
Where the light is shining, abundant and free.
We believe in that vision, and it's calling us to be
Living where fear and doubt are left behind us.
Living in light is where you'll find us,
In the spirit of this great community of MSAB

(Flute and piano interlude)

Brittany: So we are gathered here this day
To remember and be grateful for this lasting legacy.
And we are here to say the dream continues on,
Over a hundred of us live it every day.

Kira: And we walk in friendship
As we go through the open door
To a place where our spirits soar
And we discover who we're called to be.
And we grow together
With our face to the shining sun.
So we know when the day is done
We were the best that we could be!

Chorus:

We follow that vision of a world we want to see

Where the light is shining, abundant and free.

We believe in that vision, and it's calling us to be

Living where fear and doubt are left behind us.

Living in light is where you'll find us,

In the spirit of this great community where we are free

Free to discover what we know can be

As we follow that vision we all share of this dear Academy!

Ooh...

(piano and flute to end)

Brittany: Thanks to Brent and Ryan for helping us as tech producers and helping getting this podcast up and running. Also, thanks to Ali for helping me interview Dan Kallman when he came for his interview. Thanks for tuning in!