Leonard Van Camp: A Legacy of Success

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A Legacy of Success

Are you a success as a choral conductor?

That question titled a 1978 Choral Journal article by Leonard Van Camp, then director of choral activities at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville.1 In the decades that followed, Van Camp personified the success he outlined for readers. This year marks the 50th anniversary of Van Camp’s first academic appointment, as assistant professor at Luther College in 1962. This article is part of a larger project to honor Van Camp’s legacy by alumni of his collegiate and community choirs. This article is focused on some of the measures of success Van Camp held as guiding principles for his life—a life characterized by the seamless integration of personal experiences, exacting musical standards, commitment to family, and the resulting love of those who sang for him.

Van Camp (known affectionately by his initials, “LVC”) passed away on May 27, 2003, at the age of 68. His home office remains largely untouched except for careful tending by his wife, Marlene. The office is filled with file drawers overflowing with Van Camp’s writings, marked scores, teaching materials, and conducting memorabilia. The authors of this article, one a former Van Camp choral singer and the other drawn to his writings, were given access to LVC’s office by Marlene Van Camp for the purpose of gathering data for this project.

Upon spending time in his office, it became easy to recognize books that LVC used again and again. He’d underlined passages, circled key ideas, and written in the margins in efforts to glean every good idea offered by the book and its author. The volumes of personal notes demonstrated that LVC worked tirelessly to find ways to employ the best of those ideas in his own teaching, reshaping and reworking them until they became uniquely his. Though the resulting rehearsal techniques became associated with LVC, they functioned as musical and instructional scaffolding to support the artistic successes of his choirs and, more important, the individual singers in the ensembles.

About Leonard Van Camp

Leonard Van Camp served as director of choral activities at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville (SIUE) from 1963 to 1999. Van Camp held a BME and an MME from Wichita State University, and a doctorate from the University of Missouri Kansas City. He was elected the first president of the Illinois chapter of the American Choral Directors Association, with his wife Marlene serving as secretary. In 1971, Van Camp served as national convention chairman for the first independent
national convention of ACDA, held in Kansas City, Missouri.

Van Camp’s university choirs appeared across the United States and Europe in such varied venues as Avery Fischer Hall, (New York), the Mozarteum (Salzburg), St. Peter’s Basilica (Vatican City), and the Dormition Abbey (Jerusalem). SIUE choirs competed in a number of world festivals and competitions, placing first (Austria, 1974) and third (Wales, 1982), were featured performers at the national conventions of the American Choral Directors Association and the Organization of American Kodaly Educators, and appeared on national television and world wide radio broadcasts.

Van Camp was the recipient of numerous awards and recognitions, including the SIUE Teaching Excellence Award, the Harold Decker American Choral Directors Award, and the University of Missouri Kansas City Outstanding Alumnus Award. He published several bibliographies of early American choral music in the Research Memorandums Series. His arrangements and editions of choral and solo literature, with emphases on music of early American composers and music of the Renaissance, and major works for choir and orchestra, number over 170 publications. These works include his edition of Messiah, which was premiered by the Los Angeles Symphony Chorus. He wrote a companion book to the edition titled A Practical Guide to Performing, Teaching, and Singing Messiah and he contributed editions of Brahms’s Requiem and Mendelssohn’s Elijah, both with companion rehearsal guides. The overwhelming majority of Van Camp’s original works for choir are set to sacred texts, including the cantata Behold the Lamb of God for choir and orchestra and the song cycle Men of the Old Testament: A Narrative in Song.

Van Camp was an active guest conductor, clinician, and baritone soloist. He guest conducted the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and numerous all-state and regional honors choirs throughout the United States. As soloist, Van Camp appeared with the Gregg Smith Singers, the Kansas City and Indianapolis Symphony orchestras, the St. Louis Philharmonic and SIUE orchestras, the St. Louis Bach Society, and in numerous solo recital settings. He was a featured presenter at state and national conventions of the MENC and ACDA and had 30 articles appear in the various journals of those organizations.

During his tenure at Southern Illinois, Van Camp arranged for a series of guest conductors to work with his choirs, including Harold Decker, Howard Swan, Gregg Smith, Gerrold Ottley, Paul Salamunovich, Roger Wagner, Daniel Pinkham, Kirke Mechem, Paul Drummond, and many others.

Defining Success

The topic for this article became obvious during dinner at a restaurant in Edwardsville on one of the authors’ trips to the Van Camp home. Accompanied by Marlene Van Camp, the two authors were stopped six times between the front door of the restaurant and the dinner table. Each time, Marlene was greeted by well-wishers offering uniquely personal stories about the impact of LVC on their lives. Some of these folks were former choral students and some were civic leaders, but most had been audience members during concerts conducted by LVC. The most remarkable things about this sequence of greetings were that Van Camp had passed away six years earlier, the restaurant visit was unplanned, and Marlene was not identified by any kind of name tag or announcement. This was a genuine (and oft-repeated) expression of admiration for LVC and the success he embodied.

In his 1978 article about success, Van Camp wrote of specific factors related to choral conducting and teaching. The article’s concluding section contained these paragraphs:

True success is an inward feeling. It may be triggered, for example, by the return of a proud alumnus who recalls what you did for him or her through music. Or by the hush that falls over a choir and/or audience after an unforgettable “ah ha!” moment you have helped to create in concert or rehearsal. True success...
is not necessarily shouted about, engraved on plaques, or awarded at civic or school functions by grateful community representatives.

It may instead take the form of quiet reflection as you watch a talented protégé bearing aloft the same aesthetic torch which you received from someone else and have passed on to him or her. The receipt of a spontaneous note from a grateful parent or appreciative listener can be more satisfying than the acquisition of some of the commonly accepted “status symbols” of the profession.

Only a few conductors attain international fame. A few more become nationally known. Recognition in a state or large city comes to some others. But many, very talented and truly successful conductors simply stay at home and work daily at bringing beauty into the lives of their choir members…

You do not have to be acclaimed internationally, nationally, or even regionally to be deeply appreciated by a choir whom you love, and on whom you lavish your talent and your time. If you fail to recognize this fact, you may waste a lifetime looking for success somewhere “out there,” when it is actually right under your notes—at home.

Successful Teaching

Van Camp’s home office is filled with pedagogical materials. He was prolific in his production of rehearsal guides for his singers in the same manner as other conductors of his generation before professional publishing houses began producing similar content. LVC’s passion for teaching is easily seen in the rehearsal handbooks, syllabi, lecture notes, and pedagogically oriented journal articles that line his bookshelves. For example, LVC wrote philosophically about the relationship between pedagogy and leadership:

— Bernard Krueger, Director of Music, Kearney College, South Africa

At birth, human beings are perhaps the most dependent offspring in the biological world. We are dependent on parents for food, shelter, and protection. We are LEANERS. As we grow to school age we gradually...
become less dependent and more self-reliant; we move into the next stage as LEARNERS. This is the time of preparation for the remainder of our lives. Having completed the second stage of life we become, ideally, LEADERS, and we take responsibility for raising the next generation of LEANERS and turning them into LEARNERS who will then become LEADERS.

We must make every effort to give the LEARNERS becoming LEADERS a calm and comfortable environment in which to absorb and interact with beauty. If we believe in the power of education and particularly in the importance of music and the other arts in education, we must dig in and redouble our efforts to give those LEARNERS we are privileged to teach, an experience that will affect them when they become influential LEADERS of our society.

A well trained individual who has no skills in appreciating beauty will objectify an already sterile world in a very mechanical fashion and will fail to see the importance of beauty and the arts for their own children and the LEANERS and LEARNERS whose lives they affect. It is vital, therefore, that we who believe in the power and the essential nature of music and the arts take a fresh look at our jobs and consider how to become more effective in doing them. Teaching is a demanding job... If we do not keep our commitment to excellence, we might again join the LEANERS.9

Leonard Van Camp was an avid gardener, and he created an extensive network of terraced gardens on the hillside behind his home. He was perhaps as renowned within the Edwardsville community for his horticultural skills as for his skills with choral ensembles. LVC often gleaned connections between the activities of gardening and teaching:

Last fall, I spent a cold Sunday afternoon planting 200 tulip bulbs in my yard. When I finished five hours of work, I stopped and looked around and saw nothing! I had nothing to show anyone else. The peat moss, bone meal, and bulbs were all invisible. Much of our work as music educators, especially at the elementary and middle school levels, is just like that. We plant and sometimes see very little at the time. But, if we plant no bulbs there are no blossoms. We must plant in our students a balanced program that includes music of the masters and first class arrangements in order to view these blossoms.10

It was for this reason that Van Camp was meticulous about the editions of repertoire he prepared for his choirs and those he submitted for publication. While preparing his edition of Elijah, LVC had a microfilm copy of Mendelssohn’s original, autographed manuscript sent from England, had it printed on paper at considerable expense, and then spent a full year parsing every note and marking to determine which were Mendelssohn’s and which had been added by others at later dates. While researching his edition of Messiah, Van Camp bypassed the postal mail system and flew to London to view the original scores. He then obtained facsimiles of the manuscripts and began work on the monumental task of correcting the various errors that had existed in every previous publication of the work.

Choral rehearsals under Van Camp’s leadership were planned with similar care. LVC regularly distributed minute-by-minute rehearsal schedules to his singers, especially for complicated sessions requiring various combinations of small and large group ensemble work. The results can be viewed in many of the rehearsal videos found in Van Camp’s office. Singers and instrumentalists regularly come and go, unprompted, during these videotaped rehearsals as they follow the previously distributed plan. Van Camp understood that every rehearsal moment was necessary and he aimed to utilize each second to its fullest potential. He honored the musicians with a clarity of scheduling that allowed them to manage their multiple commitments. A reporter for the SIUE student newspaper attended a conducting class where LVC stated,

There’s a lot of power in the hands of the conductor. He decides which piece will be done, when and how it...
Rehearsals with Van Camp could make indelible impressions, especially for new freshmen joining the university choral ensembles. As one singer recalled,“I was a seventeen year old freshman, experiencing the first rehearsal of the Concert Chorale season. Van Camp stepped into the room and announced, “This is probably the best choir you’ll ever sing with.” The choir had just returned from an award winning competition in Wales. He then proceeded to teach us the Shaw/Parker arrangement of *Ride On, King Jesus,* and I mean, teach! We learned each other’s parts as well as our own, circled the dynamics, rehearsed the imitation in the B section, pounded the accents to achieve the style he wanted, and quickly learned to rehearse with our eyes on our conductor. And this was only the first 20 minutes of rehearsal! Leonard rehearsed his choirs like he lived his life … full speed ahead.12

Van Camp’s rehearsals also provided opportunities for his sense of humor to come into full view. A St. Louis newspaper reporter commented, “Humor is a valuable asset, too, particularly in the second hour of the rehearsal. When one section of voices gets ahead of the rest of the group, Van Camp halts the singers and carefully explains: ‘Folks, this isn’t a contest. You can’t possibly win.’”13 Two of LVC’s memorable quips, mentioned repeatedly by alumni from his methods classes, were: (1) “Nobody likes change except a baby with a wet diaper, but sometimes change is inevitable. Once a plan is set in motion, review and change course as needed;” and (2) “Conducting a chorus is like throwing a ball. If it doesn’t bounce back, you don’t feel like throwing it again. What can you do to help your chorus bounce back after every rehearsal and every performance?”14

**Fostering Success for Singers**

Van Camp often told the story of how, after his first year of teaching at the Argentine Junior and Senior High School in Kansas City, MO, he selected music for the second year based on the skills the students had mastered under his direction. It proved to be a disaster; LVC assumed that he could pick up where the students left off during the previous term, thinking that he could select and have the students perform ever-more challenging repertoire. He assumed wrong. But, he learned the lesson that conductors must begin the teaching and rehearsing processes with whatever their students can do at that moment and begin building from that point. For choral conductors with choirs whose memberships constantly change, that may mean starting at the beginning—wherever that beginning may be—each year.

For LVC, every moment of every rehearsal was a moment to make music. He would often begin rehearsals with a verbal countdown to alert singers that rehearsal was about to begin:

> Every alumnus mentions the countdowns. Chorale members who weren’t already in position could hear LVC bellowing as they ran down the hall to their seats, “10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.” An E♭ would be played on the piano, and we’d proceed into the first in a set of warm-ups. And, we’d launch into our two-hour rehearsal. And this went on for 36 years!15

Van Camp thoroughly planned his rehearsals. He was fond of saying, “Plan your rehearsal, then rehearse your plan.”16 He found that some rehearsal plans led to failure, especially those that simply listed items in rehearsal order but without accompanying instructional strategies. LVC incorporated excerpts from choral literature into the choral warm-up so that singers could utilize their skills within an authentic musical con-
Leonard Van Camp

text. Once the rehearsal began, he would seamlessly transition to address unexpected problems as needed. But, he felt this was only possible with a solid rehearsal plan that allowed him to know as much about what had not been accomplished as what had been rehearsed. As he stated, “There’s nothing wrong with changing course midstream, but showing up at the river without a boat just doesn’t make sense.”

Van Camp’s approach to rehearsal organization presented his singers with a model for success, regardless of their career path. Recalls one, “I just remember the disciplined way he ran the rehearsal. I wasn’t worried about being a prompt person until I met him. Then I realized how wonderfully successful a well-disciplined man can be. He demanded remarkable discipline from himself, his students and his singers.”

In addition to his university choirs, Van Camp conducted Edwardsville’s Community Choral Society. This ensemble attracted experienced choral conductors who wished to rehearse and perform with a highly skilled ensemble. One elementary school chorus teacher wrote to Van Camp about the opportunity to learn through his example.

I have always believed, been taught by, and taught my students the principle that pacing is the key to accomplishment, discipline, and motivation. Your choral rehearsals move at the same speed as my elementary general music classes. It is a joy to sing under a teacher who always has more to teach us and does not waste time because she might run out of things to do!

The Choral Journal’s announcement of Van Camp’s passing began with a stanza from a poem LVC had written for his Concert Chorale in 1972. Van Camp recited the poem, “I am Music!” to his choir just before they walked onstage for a performance in West Frankfort, IL. The reading of the poem became a tradition that continued through LVC’s career, perhaps because it places the focus for choral success within singers and away from conductors as in these excerpts:

I am Music! I can speak in simple ways, through the heart.

Many who wish an easy path to perfect me will falter and fall.

But diligent musicians who are willing, ready, and open channels will allow me to flow through them, soothing and uplifting performers and listeners alike.

I am more than sharps, flats and quarter notes; I am exaltation, mystery, and magic. I speak not only in major and minor keys. I am a key to the secret of living and loving, I speak in ancient modes—and I am a mode of life, ever renewing the youth in each heart.

Yes, I am Music! Yet, without you, I lie alone and lifeless—black spots on sterile paper. I need you to fan my smoldering embers into a fire in the hearts of today’s men and women.

Are you willing, ready, and an open channel? Will you give yourself to me, and let me flow through you to ignite that spark of hope that lies waiting in each heart?

Leveraging Success

In 1987 and 1988, the Choral Journal published a series of articles in which Leonard Van Camp explored issues facing North American choral music education. Van Camp had taken a sabbatical for the purpose of traveling the United States and Canada to gather qualitative and quantitative data about what he perceived as a decline in the number and ability levels of male singers expressing interest in his university ensembles. His surveys and interviews involved teachers and conductors from each state in the United States and several Canadian provinces. He reported that the total number of participants in school choral programs had declined significantly in the years prior to the study, and he focused much of his attention on the lack of male singers in choral programs. Van Camp’s respondents suggested many reasons for the decline of male involvement in school choral music, including a lack of role models, a preponderance of female music teachers, repertoire with inappropriate vocal ranges, and a host of related issues. In his 1987 open letter to the profession, Van Camp wrote,

We must find the time to get better acquainted with the students with whom we work. What are they seeking? Where are they going? What are their hopes, fears, dreams, and desires? How can we serve (and
that’s what teaching should be) if we do not know those whom we are serving…? We had better be listening all the time. They are trying to tell us how to help them.23

Van Camp listed the results of his project in the articles, stating, “I am convinced that we are, in fact, in the middle of a serious crisis.”24 Based on his research findings, LVC offered a number of recommendations and remedies such as having separate choirs for boys and girls, encouraging more males to become music teachers, enlisting the support of adult male singers in the community, and providing teachers with information about the changing adolescent voice. In these articles, LVC illustrated the magnitude of the crisis and pointed toward underutilized strategies for understanding and addressing the problem. Van Camp called for researchers to ask boys to relate their perceptions of singing and performing in choirs, talk about their experiences and responses to various instructional methods, and offer suggestions about how teachers might better serve their needs. Several researchers have followed the lead recommended by Van Camp, and there are now multiple long-term research projects involving male choral singers in the United States and worldwide.25

Leonard Van Camp was ideally positioned to engage in his research project and the ensuing conversations about needed reforms. By the time of the project, Van Camp had established himself as a leader in the profession, had served long enough to document ongoing enrollment trends of male singers, and had made the personal connections necessary to facilitate a project of such magnitude that it attracted the attention of national news reporters.26 In short, Van Camp leveraged his success toward a broader goal. This type of leverage is a consequence of success, and it is an example of how multiple, disparate types of successes can result in the leadership skills that contribute to a legacy.

Other influences of Van Camp’s research project were readily apparent. In 1987, Van Camp organized his university’s first “Boy’s Changing Voice Symposium” with 183 boys and clinician John Cooksey. Shortly after concluding his sabbatical, LVC wrote a series of pedagogical songs for voice teachers to use with boys in the midst of vocal change. Even so, as Van Camp traveled the world to speak about his project, he encountered both supportive and derisive choral conductors. LVC’s personal journal entries from those trips relate how, despite his intentions, his research project was occasionally mocked for its inference that adolescent boys could make music of high artistic quality. Van Camp nonetheless persevered and developed other strategies to ameliorate the shortage of male choral singers in his hometown of Edwardsville. These included sponsoring school tours by Missouri’s top barbershop quartets and a male quartet of SIUE voice faculty, organizing a series of Young People’s Concerts, developing a summer choral camp for young singers, and creating the Helping Young Voices Symposium to assist teachers in their understanding of young adolescent voices.

One particularly effective strategy was his mentorship of a group of young choristers. Beginning in 1983 when the students were in fourth grade, LVC regularly worked with the young musicians until their graduation from high school eight years later. It did not matter to Van Camp that none of these students joined the choir at his University. Most of them did join the choir at other colleges, and Van Camp shared in their musical successes for many years afterward.

Leonard Van Camp’s success extended...
well beyond the concert stages where he conducted his choirs and the classrooms where he guided future teachers and choral conductors. LVC leveraged that success to have an impact that continues to expand in communities small and large, near and far.

Recognizing Success
Leonard Van Camp defined success in his writings, in his work, and in his devotion to family and community. Through it all, Van Camp warned that one’s personal ego could deceive conductors into thinking they had achieved success when they had only achieved the trappings of success in the momentary notoriety of convention appearances or awards. LVC wrote,

A conductor cannot allow his ego to get in the way of music making. Nor shall his ego keep him from carrying out the needs of the organism—the hunger for beauty, the need for sharing beauty with others, the need for knowing others, the need for being alone. Can we learn to trust our inner feelings without always asking, “what would other people think?” There is only so much we can do to create an image … Play to your strengths. Know yourself, trust yourself, and be yourself.27

This philosophical approach toward success was transmitted by LVC to his students. One alumnus wrote that LVC had at one point advised her,

Failure is not a failure; it is an information source. Avoid the tendency to compare yourself with others who do your worst thing very well. Find out who you are, what you must do, and have the courage to do exactly that.”28

In his Choral Journal article about success, Van Camp spoke of the frequently unknown impact of conductors on their students and singers. Another of LVC’s choral alumni wrote a note to this effect:

Etched in erasable black ink on a slick monthly calendar are the words, “the Van Camps love you.” I don’t use this calendar anymore, but keep it in a spot where I can see it regularly and be reminded of a life that indelibly touched me. He was my favorite college professor because his passion for music and its ability to inspire, took me daily out of the mundane into a world of beauty and endless possibility. Whenever you talked with Dr. Van Camp you felt like the only person in the room where it had been previously crowded.29

Mark Buske, a SIUE choral alumnus and co-author of this article, writes,

Am I a success as a choral director? Leonard Van Camp is the conductor I aspire to be, even now. Like him, I’m trying to see the positive side of every situation, to create something beautiful and meaningful in every performance, to gently build up every member of my choirs. I hope that they remember me ten, twenty, or thirty years down the road not just as that crazy guy who waived his hands in the air shouting “the last sharp is Ti” but as someone who influenced them for the better just as he changed me.30

Leonard Van Camp believed that individual success, measured cumulatively across a career, could have a profound effect on society—particularly from within the middle schools, high schools, and churches where most choral conductors work. We conclude with this quote from an article that LVC wrote specifically for school educators as he entered the final decade of his career at Southern Illinois University:

In the final analysis, our civilization will be judged not by its war prowess, its technological gadgets or its Super Bowl winners—but by the art we leave behind to show what kind of people Americans were. Let us do what we each can do individually to see that the students we affect have a chance to discover that things of the heart are essential to a complete education … The rewards for our children and theirs will be well worth any effort we must expend.31

NOTES
2 Van Camp wrote eight reports that appeared in the “Research Memorandum Series” that is now published under the auspices of Chorus America. These appeared between 1969 and 1971, and included bibliographies of rounds and canons (Nos. 84 and 90), and bibliographies of polychoral repertoire (Nos. 88, 91, 92, 93, 94, and 99).
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6 Neither Behold the Lamb of God nor Men of the Old Testament is in print or otherwise available as of the date of this writing.

7 Van Camp, “Are You a Success?” 16.


10 Ibid.

11 Kathy Hill, quoting in an issue of the SIUE Focus retrieved from the personal files of Leonard Van Camp on March 1, 2009.

12 Mark Buske, quoted from a speech delivered to the Illinois chapter of the American Choral Directors Association, 2003.


14 Gathered in interviews during visits to Edwardsville, IL (February 27 to March 1, 2009).

15 Unsigned reflection of a note found in Leonard Van Camp’s office on February 28, 2009.

16 Leonard Van Camp, from personal files retrieved February 27, 2009.

17 Ibid.

18 Cory King, personal correspondence, March 20, 2009.


24 Ibid., 15.


30 Mark Buske, personal journal entry, March 16, 2009.