

Lift Your Hearts!

Conversations with Ananda choir directors and singers

Note: This is an ongoing project. Other interviews will be added. Your suggestions are welcome! If you know of Ananda music resources not listed at the end of this document, please let me know. Thank you. - Rambhakta (nayaswami.rambhakta@gmail.com)

VERY IMPORTANT: Please don't post any part of this on the Web - we'll be using these interviews for a Web project related to Swamiji's books, and we can't have the same material appearing in two places. Thanks for understanding.

Contents

Swami Kriyananda: Uplifting the World Through Music	1
Asha Praver	2
David Eby	2
Karen G.....	2
Mari Baughman	2
Ramesha Nani	2
Raghu Clark.....	1
Cindy Gottfried	1
Krishna Dewey.....	2
Chaitanya Mahoney.....	2
Chaitanya: A Syllabus: Conscious Devotional Singing.....	2
Nirmala Shuppe	2
Dambara Begley.....	2
Anjali Gregorelli	2
David G.....	2
Dharmadas Schuppe	2
Rambhakta Beinhorn	2
Rambhakta: How I Learned to Practice	2
Resources	2

Swami Kriyananda: Uplifting the World Through Music

The Ananda communities share divine harmony through song.

(from a talk)

An emperor in ancient China would tour his provinces once a year to see how they were faring. He never inquired about the honesty of the officials, nor did he try to find out how things were being run. He didn't even ask to see their financial records. Instead, he listened to their music, because he knew that if the music was right, it was a sure sign that everything was going well. But if some disharmony had been allowed to creep into the music, some dissonance, some element that was contrary to the higher laws of harmony, then he knew that there was cause for concern.

A nation that loves martial music is bound to go to war. A nation that loves sensual music is bound to fall into decadence. It's much easier to change people's hearts through music than through words. And if we can introduce into our civilization a kind of music that expresses harmony and divine joy, we can have a great impact.

The music that's popular today gives us cause for a certain amount of fear. The violence they're expressing is centered in the lower chakras. It's very disintegrating, and it's getting worse all the time, to the point where I can't see it ending anywhere but in a big bang.

We've got to introduce something different. Ananda's music is a wonderful ministry, because it

helps people understand high truths directly. When you teach people with words, they can stand back and say, "Yeah, well, but what about this over here, and what about that?" And so the mind comes in, and their doubts take over. But when you express it through music, they understand it more directly.

Our singers have performed in many places where we couldn't talk openly about our teachings. For example, the choir sang at one of the biggest churches in Assisi, Italy, and the priest there was at first very stand-offish. He was saying, "Well, let's get it over with." But after the concert he did something that priests in Italy never do. He bowed and said, very sincerely, "Wonderful!"

When I write music, I never say, "Let me see how *I* can do it." Never! I pray, "God, show me what You want me to do. Tell me what You feel will express these wonderful teachings in music!"

Let us try in all humility to open ourselves as channels for God's love and peace to all mankind. On wings of music, let us bring the harmony, light and joy that God has given us, and make it a living reality that people can deeply feel. For even if they can't believe, yet experiencing God's love directly, who can doubt it?

Asha Praver

(Asha is co-director, with her husband David, of Ananda Sangha in Palo Alto, California.)

Q: You talk to many people who come fresh to Ananda. What's your impression of how the music affects them?

A: I'll go back a bit in time to answer your Q: In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Swami Kriyananda asked me to go out on the road and give talks about our teachings. So I began driving mainly up to the Northwest to talk at our centers in Portland and Seattle. But I would never go without at least one of our Ananda singers, because I knew that it would be impossible for people to really grasp Ananda without listening to our music.

I traveled with one of our experienced singers, usually Agni Ferraro or Lakshman Simpson, both of whom sang and played the music beautifully. I used to joke with them, "I'll talk for 90 minutes and I'll be lucky if I can bring people to the same point you can bring them with a three-minute song."

Words have to be interpreted by the mind, but music reaches us directly. When people hear the music, they can very quickly sort out for themselves whether this path is for them. When I went out and gave talks, I knew that if they could *feel* what Ananda is, they would be able to hear what I had to say, because they had experienced Ananda's vibration.

You couldn't possibly love this music unless there was something about this path that resonated with you. The music expresses our vibration very precisely – it's very specific to our path that way. People occasionally have issues with this path when they first learn about it – either the ideas are unfamiliar, or they resist religious organizations, or they question Swamiji's authority, and this and that – but they nearly always love the music. And that's why Swami said, "If you want to know me, listen to my music." The music is his way of helping people cut through their mental doubts – "Who is Swami?"

"Who is Master?" "Who's really in charge here?" "I don't like authority." And so on.

Listen to the music. If you like the music, you've met the man. And if you like the music, you've met the ray that he represents.

Q: Swamiji has said that consciousness *is* feeling. It is not the intellect. Do you think the music may be even more central to his expression of Master's ray than his books?

A: It is. We are made of Aum, and music is a direct expression of Aum. The ideas are the wisdom aspect of God, and heaven knows, we do need to open ourselves up to God through all dimensions of our being, including the mind. Here in America at this time, when there are so many crazy ideas floating around, finding true ideas is a tremendous blessing. Nevertheless, he doesn't say "If you want to know me, read my books." And again, it's because the music gives a direct transfer of consciousness. Even if you spoke only German, I could sing these songs to you in English, and you'd have a good chance of knowing what I was singing about.

Q: Swamiji has remarked that the melodies of certain popular songs have a lovely feeling – he's mentioned "Moon River," for example. But much modern music seems cold-hearted, whereas there's a quality in Ananda's music that feels deeply true and of the heart.

A: It's very sincere. Swami made the statement that he's never written a note that wasn't utterly sincere. He's never written for effect, and he's never written from a purely mental concept. Every single note is a sincere expression of his consciousness, of his feeling.

Q: If the music is an expression of Master's ray, does that mean it would be helpful for people who want to get in tune with that ray to become involved with the music by singing it?

A: Oh, there's no substitute! Swamiji has

commented a number of times that he wants everyone to sing the music. You can listen to it, but it's very different when you sing it, because then you're using your voice, and those tones are running through your physical body. Really, it's a form of "sound healing."

At one point, Ananda got involved with a woman who was an innovative sound healer. She would read "sound auras" the way other healers read auras of light, and then she would add the "missing" tones by using her voice. She discovered her talent when her daughter was severely injured at a distance from a hospital, and she realized that when she toned in a certain way, her daughter stopped bleeding. So she "toned her" all the way to the hospital and kept her from bleeding to death.

Quite a few people of Ananda were interested in her work, and it was lots of fun, but in the end it went nowhere, because it was a difficult skill to transfer to others. And also, after we had been involved with this for several months, she casually remarked, "Oh, you don't need this, because you have your music." She said, "Your music does the same thing I'm trying to do."

When we sing it, it heals us. It fixes our sound aura, and when your sound aura is fixed, it helps heal you from within, physically and emotionally and spiritually.

Q: Not long after I joined the choir, I asked Chaitanya, "How are you able to sing the high notes so purely?" And he said, "Singing this music changes your voice."

When I work through a song, it seems to etch new grooves in my brain, so that the song becomes easier from then on. I'm sure it "etches grooves" in my consciousness so that I'm vibrating with the blessing of that particular song. Dambara told me that when he's facing a difficult issue or question in his life, a phrase from a song will often come into his awareness and help him know what to do.

A: In the 1970s, Swami was the only one performing the music. But then he stopped singing,

so that other people would get involved and develop a performing group.

He more or less had to insist that we sing his music. At the time, people were interested in lots of other kinds of music. His insistence was controversial in the community, because people were saying "Why do we have to sing only his music? There's lots of other good music."

I remember him delicately saying, "Lots of people sing that music, and no one else sings this music, so this is something we can specialize in." He had to try hard to get people to accept that the music was a central focus of our service.

I remember that he would interrupt the singers during Sunday service. If they were singing badly, he would stop them and correct them. I watched this happening, and I realized he was telling the singers that it isn't enough to sing halfheartedly, because you have to concentrate, and you have to do it right. He felt obligated to help them perform the music right because he had *heard* it. He hadn't created it; he had heard it, and there was a specific way it needed to be done.

Mukti Deranja is a talented pianist at Ananda Village. She was learning Swami's sonata, and at one point he sat with her at the piano while she played it. He went over it with her phrase by phrase, telling her, "No, it needs to be a little bit more like this..."

He told her, "Forgive me, I don't mean to be so picky, but I *heard* this, and this is what it sounds like." He said, "It wasn't possible to include these nuances in the score." But he had a crystal-clear memory, note by note, of what it was supposed to sound like, and he felt a sense of divine obligation to play it that way, because it isn't his music and any slight change alters the vibration.

Lakshman told me recently that someone had asked Swamiji what his greatest accomplishment was, and he said, "Love is a Magician."

Q: "Love is all I know, sun rays on the snow..."

A: Yes. After he wrote "I Live Without Fear,"

he called me on the telephone and sang it over the phone. He said, “If I had never done anything, or never do anything else in my life, this song will be enough.”

I think the music is ahead of its time. The vibration of the music is too refined for this age. It will probably be a long while before it captures the public imagination. But music is so ugly now that eventually there will be a reaction, and people want something better.

Another thing that is lovely about the music is that he wrote it so that anybody can sing it.

Q: Almost none of his songs are hard to sing. They can be a bit tricky to learn, but after you’ve practiced for a while they pose few technical difficulties. A bare handful of songs come to mind that are a bit trickier, because the parts are subtle – I’m thinking of the tenor parts of “Memories” and “Where Has My Love Gone?”

A: He did it on purpose, because he wanted to create music that everyone could sing. He remarked that a great deal of music is written so that people can proudly say “Hah – I can sing that!” But this music is the opposite. Anybody can sing it, if they have basic skills.

Q: What’s your advice for somebody who wants to join the choir and start singing this music fresh and new?

A: I think they should keep in mind that it isn’t about performance. It’s sadhana – spiritual practice. And the most important thing about sadhana is that we enjoy it. And to pay attention to the details. Pay attention to the meaning – really hear and be conscious of what you’re singing.

As a “word person,” I find an extraordinary thing about the music is the power of the words, and the unity of the words and sound. I would advise new people to be deeply conscious, all the time, of what you’re saying.

During an Easter retreat one year, I gave a class on the Oratorio. Since then, I’ve given it every year. Somebody transcribed that first class and sent it to

Swamiji. In my talk, I said that Swami always writes the melody first. When he read the transcript, he told me that it’s almost always true, with the sole exception being the recitatives for the Oratorio, where he had to write the words first, because he had a story to tell, the story of Christ’s life. Otherwise, the melodies come first.

When he was writing the Oratorio, David and I went on a lecture tour to the Northwest. We were living in what’s now the guest house at Crystal Hermitage. Before we left, the builders began remodeling Swami’s apartment in the hermitage. And when he came back from wherever he’d been, probably Italy and the Holy Land, his house was a mess.

We had moved into our house a couple of weeks before, but someone said to Swamiji, “Oh, well, you can live at Asha and David’s, and they can move over here” – in this cave of a construction site. I really didn’t want to do it. It was one of those times where I just didn’t want to. And he felt it – he kept saying, “No, I can’t possibly do that.” I was silent for a day, and when I finally mastered myself I said, “*Of course* he can have this house.” So I went over and said, “You should move into our house.”

“No, no, no.”

“*You should move into our house!*”

“No, no.”

“Sir – move into our house!”

He knew exactly what I was doing. And then he said, “Okay.”

This is all just back story. But while we were away in the Northwest, not only were they doing this construction, but a pipe burst and flooded the whole downstairs. So by the time we returned, it was bare floorboards. The rug had been ruined, and all the furniture was stacked up in a corner. There was just a tiny livable space with a throw rug, and it was the dead of winter, and the stove didn’t work.

Anyway, we were living there and he was staying in the guest house, and he was working on

the Oratorio day and night. One night, at about one in the morning, he called and asked me to come over. I went over, and he was writing “You Remain Our Friend.” He showed me the words, and he said, “What do you think?”

The words were okay, but I could see that he was strained, and you have to be delicate when somebody’s doing creative work. You have to be honest but supportive, and it’s a delicate line. So I said, “Well, you know, sir, it’s all right. Not every song in the Oratorio will be your best song.” He said, “That’s what I wanted to know.” And by morning he had it worked out.

His commitment to complete the Oratorio was amazing. He never really stopped. Devi remarked at the time that Swamiji was so immersed in the music that whenever he looked at people, you got the feeling he was trying to figure out if they were a B-flat or an F-sharp. It was as if he couldn’t think in words, because he could only feel the music. He nearly died – he got congestive heart failure, and his body was retaining fluids. But he said, “Satan’s trying to stop me.”

He said, “If I have to, I’ll die trying to write this, but I won’t stop. Whenever I try to do anything important, Satan tries to stop me.”

Q: For ten years in the 1980s and early 1990s, I did medical transcription for Dr. Peter Van Houten at Ananda Village, and I was flabbergasted at Swami’s medical chart. At the time, it was thirteen pages of serious ailments, and I’m sure it’s much longer now.

A: Of his thousands of patients, Peter says that Swami’s case is far more complicated than anyone else’s. And Swamiji’s responses weren’t always what you’d expect from most people. You can often tell the seriousness of a person’s symptoms by their emotional responses, but with Swamiji, Peter couldn’t tell. He gave the example of when he was examining Swamiji’s heart, and Swami was saying,

“No, listen carefully – oh, there it is – see how my heart speeds up to 180 and calms down again? Did you hear that, Peter?” (laughs) Nobody can just *say* that when their heart is in fibrillation – they react to it.

Q: They’re upset emotionally.

A: Yes. Peter said that with Swamiji, he had to be more like a veterinarian, because a horse can’t tell you what it’s feeling, and Swamiji didn’t respond from personal emotion.

Swamiji says the reason Ananda is so harmonious is because of the music, and the reason Ananda is unified around the world is because of the music. The reason the culture of Ananda is able to transplant so easily to other countries, other languages, and other cultures is because of the music.

Because we sing the same music, we’re on the same wavelength. If we didn’t have the music, the culture wouldn’t be as strong, and aberrations would soon set in. It’s astonishing to see how, as Ananda has expanded from city to city and country to country, people’s spirit has been the same. And Swami said it’s all because of the music.

The success of our colony in Palo Alto has been due to the music. That’s always been clear to me. I don’t think we could have accomplished a fraction of what we have, without the music, especially in this area, which is so mental. The music has been able to cut right through that. It has brought everybody into a sense of unity.

I didn’t give Sunday service yesterday, and so I sat in the congregation. I like to sit in the back and feel what the service is like when I’m not giving it. And it was interesting to me how sweet the music was, and how it was filled with the power of the inspiration that Swamiji received. Here in the middle of Silicon Valley, you have this sweet innocence, and I know it touches people and changes them.

David Eby

(David is the music director at Ananda Village.)

Q: You've had a long career as a cellist and music teacher. Did your involvement with music begin at an early age?

A: My Dad is a Presbyterian pastor. When I was growing up he was in charge of the youth group. We would have gatherings at our house, and I well remember these evenings, and all the young voices singing beautiful, heart-opening songs from *Godspell*, *Pass It On*, and *Prepare Ye The Way Of the Lord*. This was when I was about five or six, and I loved being in that energy.

A strong seed that was planted by the music that made me feel so good. When I was six, I had an incredible experience at a production of *Godspell*. After the performance, I got to meet the cast, and the character who played Jesus knelt and gave me one of the balloons he was handing out. In that instant, I felt an energetic connection pass from him to me, and it was an incredibly inspiring moment in my pre-musical career.

Not long after that, still at age six, I started playing cello. I don't have a clear recollection of saying "I want to play the cello because it's shiny, and because there's a bow." It was always just a feeling – "That's my instrument. It's what I need to play."

I stuck with it, and I ended up going to Eastman School of Music and getting my bachelor's in cello performance, and then I went to Indiana School of Music for a master's.

In my junior year in college, I suddenly woke up to the fact that not everybody will have a brilliant solo career, accompanied by fame and fortune. I had had opportunities to play in a couple of smaller-town orchestras nearby, and I did not like what I saw as a possibility for my future. The orchestras were not filled with joyful, exuberant, happy people. In fact, many orchestras are full of cynical, burned-out

musicians who are brimming with frustration.

It was a rude wakeup call. I went home to my dorm, and I said, "My gosh, what am I doing? I want to make a *difference* in this world. I don't want to be stuck playing in a rinky-dink orchestra for octogenarians!" I didn't even have a choice of what music I could play, and I dreaded being stuck playing music that I didn't like.

I've never been a classical music aficionado. (laughs) That's been a dark secret of mine – don't tell anybody! I'm kidding, of course, but I would go to orchestra concerts and I would feel, "Well, it's okay. It's all right. It's a nice way to pass the time." But I never felt "Oh! I *have* to listen to this Mahler symphony, because it will change my life."

Don't get me wrong, there are incredible pieces that can move me to tears and take me to a new level of consciousness. But they are far and few between for musicians in orchestras.

Nowadays, there's an effort in the classical music world to get new music out, in order to show the continuing vitality of orchestras. But a lot of the music isn't filled with inspiration. It's mostly written from the brain. Early in the twentieth century, there was a reaction against the Romantic period of the 1800s and early 1900s, and a tradition was set that when it came to composing music, the brain was the way to go. Composers were suddenly saying, "Okay, we've expressed as much as we can from the feeling of our hearts, and now it's time to tune in to the brain." So they began composing all this twelve-tone music, and they thought it was the way of the future. But it charted a course for classical music, so that if you were asked today what style you wrote in, and you said, "Oh, I write tonally," they would look at you and say "Hmm – that's not music."

I was looked down on by other musicians, honestly, for wanting something that wasn't all from the mind. At one point, I was in a new music ensemble where we were playing all this really

strange stuff, where you have to count like crazy and play these weird, obscure notes all over the place. And after a concert I remember saying to a friend, “How did you like it?” She said, “Well...it was interesting.” (laughs) I could tell she was a person who could tell things like they were.

Intellectually it was fine, but it wasn't something that moved me. So here I was in my junior year, thinking “My gosh, what am I going to do?”

I confided in my teacher about my angst. I said, “Should I join the Peace Corps? I want to make a difference in the world. I see that I'm good, but there are lots of good players.” In fact, the number of jobs for musicians is diminishing as we speak, because in tough financial times music is among the first things to go. Also, musicians are getting better and better as the teaching improves. So there's an ironic situation, where the demand for classical music is diminishing as the number of really excellent players is rising.

My teacher said, “Well, David, you have to look in your heart, and you have to do what your heart is telling you to do.”

I wondered, “What? What are you talking about? My heart? I don't want to go in there.”

When you're growing up, you have all these wonderful heart-opening experiences, and then somewhere along the line, usually in pre-pubescence, something happens that makes us lock up our feelings. And, well, I wanted to try to be at least approaching cool in some way. So I locked up that special part of me. It would come out once in a while, but it wasn't really until I came to Ananda that it opened again.

I said, “Well, okay, I'll take a look inside my heart.” And I had no idea what I would find in there. But I opened up just enough to see that, yes, music was a good thing to continue to follow, and I should keep doing it.

So I kept going, and I went to graduate school. (laughs) And then, once again, that nagging worry hit me, “What am I really doing?” Fortunately, at about this time I connected with a musical

storytelling troupe in southern Indiana, called Tales & Scales. There were seven of us, and we would tell stories with our instruments while we acted out various parts. I would have a cello strapped to me, and we would do *The Pied Piper*, where I was the mayor of Hamlin, walking around playing my cello while we were moving and dancing. We performed in lots of school gyms and libraries and museums. And that really took care of my need to help save the world through music. Because I've always seen music, and my musical career, as a way that I wanted to serve.

I remember a conversation I had with the artistic director of the group. I said, “I think we should do something that has a really good moral, and that can really speak to the kids.” The director looked at me strangely, and she said, “David, what we're doing is art for art's sake. We don't need a moral.” And I knew at that point, okay, this is the beginning of the end. And before long I decided to call it quits.

I had grown up with the Suzuki method, which is a fabulous ideal. Shinichi Suzuki did a great service for humanity, and especially for his country, in developing the Suzuki method. One of the things I love about it is that he said, “We are not out to create professional musicians. We are out to create beautiful people with beautiful hearts through music.” And that ideal deeply spoke to me.

So I got some training, and I made the transition to doing a lot of teaching. In fact, I got to teach at some Suzuki institutes. But I was very disheartened to find that not everyone was on the same page. There were a number of typical music teachers who happened to call themselves Suzuki teachers because they used the method, but they weren't living that life of inspiration.

So I felt like that soldier in a story that Swami loves to tell. This man was in the Army and behaved very strangely. He would walk around the post all day, picking up pieces of paper and saying “This isn't it.” Finally, the camp psychiatrist recommended him for a medical discharge, and when he got the paper he said, “Yep, this is it!”

When I finally got to Ananda, I walked into a Sunday service one morning and I just cracked wide open. From the instant I walked in the door, I knew I was home. During the chanting, my eyes were streaming with tears. And then I heard Swami's music. There were six or eight people in the choir, and I thought, "Oh, how nice that this man Swami Kriyananda wrote some nice music." And, "Oh, it's really sweet." But, you know, I didn't think much of it.

Then I thought, "Well, maybe I could join the choir and give them some help." Little did I know that I would be the one who needed help. Poor Mari Baughman had to put up with my endless musical nitpicking. "Excuse me, but this is a *dotted eighth and sixteenth*, whereas we seem to be singing it in kind of a triplet way..." You know, just really technical, and she didn't know what to do with me, because I was still so much in my head at that point.

But we would give concerts, and I would notice that the people standing next to me might not even be singing in key, but they were in joy, and here I was, thinking – "I'm trying to sing all the right notes, and they're just kind of singing away and feeling joy, but they aren't even really singing very well. What am I supposed to do?"

I knew at that point that I needed to open my heart. And the real change came when I was driving home on night after a horrible rehearsal. I was playing with the Portland Opera, and the orchestra had been down in the pit for hours, suffering under this horrible conductor who didn't know how to inspire us, and everybody was just in a funk.

So I was driving home, and I thought, well, I'd better practice my solo for the concert. It was Swami's song "This Is My Son." And I sang it, and it's maybe a minute long. It uses eighth notes, in the diatonic scale, and it could have been written by an elementary school kid, given those notes and those rhythms as building blocks. It's just very simple. But at the end of the song I nearly had to pull off the road because my consciousness had changed so dramatically that I felt my energy rise up with an

incredible vibration of awareness, energy, and consciousness. My consciousness had changed so dramatically! And, here I'd been playing for thirty years and nothing had changed me so dramatically and instantaneously as that simple song did.

I thought, "Oh...kay. I really need to find out *what* is going on here!"

And so I went home and I started diving in, just singing songs and playing them on my cello, and diving as deep as I could. And I discovered this wealth of consciousness. And I really knew that I wanted to commit my life to discovering why music can change our consciousness, and how it changes our consciousness. Because it can't just be this specific set of notes – there has to be something else.

Soon after that experience, I attended a class that Agni gave, and I remember sitting in the front row and hearing him sing all these songs of Swamiji's. He would sing a song, and he would say, "Okay, now feel for the energy. Feel for the inspiration behind the song." And I could *feel* different resonances for each song, whether it was a dynamic sense of opening in my heart, or more in my throat chakra, or just a beaming stream of energy up in my spiritual eye.

For each song it was slightly different. But I was thrilled to find that there were all these songs that had genuine inspiration in them. If we truly believe that inspiration is like a waterfall, and that its highest source is at the top, and here we are listening at the bottom, then the possibility of tapping into that inspiration as a performer, and climbing even higher to consciously bring ourselves to that place of inspiration where Swamiji first felt these songs – that must be our true goal.

As I've worked with the choirs, I've come to understand that the notes are simply a means to an end. If it were doing something else besides singing, we would be doing that, if it would bring us to the same place of inspiration, and help us feel that change in consciousness.

Of course, the music is important. And of course it's important to present it as best we can, and to

bring out the meaning of the words, and shape the notes, and shape the phrases. But underlying all that is the inspiration. And it's truly the inspiration that gives us this direction, and that gives us the music its intelligence.

Chaitanya has spoken of this as well. I was amazed to hear him say things like, "It's the inspiration that can show you how to do things." But I've learned that it is entirely true, because the music increases our intuition.

As I'm conducting, I could say "Well, okay, let's see, in this part you go up, and then, well, maybe we'll go down. And, oh, it would be *really* interesting if we were soft here..." But I no longer approach it like that, because I'm trying to listen intuitively to the inspiration and how it should speak to me and through me, and how it's asking the choir to sound.

So that's always the leading force. After we sing a song, we always make it a point to sit down and feel the energy. Because not only do we need to practice singing the notes, but we need to practice increasing our receptivity so that we can dive deeper and deeper. And if we were to spend the whole evening just practicing the notes, we would be developing only one part.

So for someone who's learning to sing this music, that would be one of the highest priorities I would suggest, to take the time to feel. One of the things I love is to practice a song, then sit for a minute and feel the vibration of energy start to awaken.

It's like a musical phenomenon called sympathetic resonance. Sympathetic resonance is where a musical string will vibrate in sympathy when you play a note on another instrument. If I sing into a piano with the sustain pedal down, I'll hear my voice resonate in the piano, because the string says "Ooo, I know how to vibrate like that note." And we, as vibratory beings, can vibrate with the inspiration of this music. I like to think of it that way – that as we begin to vibrate, and as we start to feel our chakras vibrate, we can dive ever deeper into that inspiration.

So I'll sing a melody, and I'll stop and feel, and I'll sing it again, and it goes deeper and deeper. And the more I tune in to that inspiration, the easier it is to hear the direction, and to know intuitively "No, no – don't do so much on this note; go a little bit less on that note, and a little bit more on this one." The more I sing or play, the more my intuition and receptivity open up to that ability to channel the inspiration clearly.

Sometimes I'll forget to work with the choir this way, and it doesn't go nearly as well. We'll sing through a song, and we'll start to feel it, and we'll sing it through again, or just take a phrase and dive deeper and deeper into that phrase. And then I don't have to say "Okay, get louder...get softer...slow down...speed up." It's an incredible timesaver. But I've had rehearsals where I've forgotten to do that, and we'll just dive into a piece from the technical side, and the inspiration isn't nearly as deep. But I've seen in working with these Ananda choirs that the technical roughness tends to be self-correcting when we do these things to attune ourselves ever more deeply. It's been an incredible new approach for me, and it's amazing to see the results.

I feel very blessed to be able to offer my musical experience in this vein. Having done just about everything in the music world, I value so much what we are doing, because I feel it's one of the most important things going on in the world today.

We gave a concert in Seattle several years ago where Swami was present. And after the concert, we were applauding him and he was taking a bow, and in an instant I had a realization of how empty my life would be without this music. That instant of revelation brought me to tears, because I was so thankful that we have these tools.

Q: If someone wants to start singing this music, do they need to have any special qualifications? Who can sing the Ananda music?

A: Everybody. Swamiji said, "If you want to get to know me, listen to my music." In other words, if you want to know his consciousness, sing this music. He also said that he would like everyone at Ananda

to sing the music, because it would be very helpful for their attunement.

The choir is truly a microcosm of community. Somebody said, “Well, what if I don’t want to blend my voice? What if I don’t want to blend my energies?” I said, “Well, that’s what we’re doing.” Because there are lots of venues to sing solos, where you don’t have to worry about blending. But we’ve had incredible experiences through blending our voices, and it actually expands our awareness. And it begins to happen when we start listening to the voices around us – “Oh, there’s somebody standing next to me, perhaps I could blend my voice with them.” “Oh, there’s somebody over here, too.” “Oh, it’s a whole choir!”

A fun thing we do in choir practice is we’ll pair up and one person will start singing while the other person sings and tries to blend with their voice. Then we switch and the other person leads. Then they’ll both lead and co-create at the same time. Then two pairs will get together, and you go around and one person leads each time. Then one pair leads and another pair blends, and then all four create a blend at the same time, and then eight, and then sixteen, and then the whole choir, until we feel that we’re all creating this together.

We all have individual voices, but the source of inspiration is the same for us all. To be part of a huge orchestra is one of the greatest joys, because you can feel that sense of expansion. And, of course, any time we’re expanded, we feel much better, and it’s more enjoyable for us. So I absolutely highly recommend choir for anybody who can sing.

Q: How can someone get started? Say, if they’re a person with an adequate voice but they might not have sung formally.

A: Here at the Village, the first thing would be to connect with the training choir, and talk to Krishna

Dewey who’s the director. In Palo Alto, they can talk with Karen Gamow, who directs the music there.

I highly recommend Ramesha’s online voice lessons. (See <http://livevoicelessons.com>.) It’s a wonderful source for learning to sing well. Also, we are in the midst of creating a CD of the parts for the songs, with binders of sheet music for all the songs. We’ll have separate binders and CDs for sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses. For information about this project, see _____.

I would also recommend, as an easy way to start, that people buy two Ananda music CDs, *Windows on the World* and *An Evening in Italy*, and just start singing along with Swamiji. If you aren’t an experienced singer, it’s easier to start singing melodies than parts. But it’s a wonderful way to tune in to his inspiration, and to get in tune with the songs.

Years ago, Swamiji asked me to write a book about music and consciousness. Another book I would love to write is tentatively titled *The Spiritual Path of Music*, for classical musicians. There’s so much that meditation has to offer to musicians. What are we really doing as musicians? Are we just playing notes for notes’ sake?

When I was new on the path, I was on fire for Swamiji’s music, and I remember telling a friend about it. She looked at me and said, “But, David, all great music does that. All great music leads us to higher consciousness.”

I could tell that Divine Mother was trying to speak to me, because I like to urge people to explore this music, because I love it so much. But people need to have bridges so that they can understand where this inspiration comes from, and how to get greater joy out of performing, as well as how to develop and use intuition, and how to get beyond the ego.

Karen G

(Karen is the music director for Ananda Sangha in Palo Alto, California.)

A: My parents were professional musicians. My father was a violinist and my mother was a pianist and violist. I was introduced to violin very young, about age four.

My father taught me a simple way to read music, by associating the notes with numbers. It was a very fast way to begin to associate 1 to 3 as a third, for example. I may have had an inclination for music, but as I reflect now, it seemed like a great way to learn to sight read.

I was performing occasionally when I was five. Children rarely are self-conscious at that age, and for the most part performing was anxiety-free. That early experience no doubt made standing in front of an audience easier, even as I grew into adolescence when self-consciousness strikes with a vengeance.

At around nine or ten, I became interested in the piano. I taught myself for a year, and then my parents realized I was serious and found me a teacher.

So I've been immersed in music for a long time. When I was a baby in a basinet my folks used to play classical quartets in the living room, so music has been very much in my consciousness, from my earliest years.

Q: When you came to Ananda, did you immediately jump into the music?

A: Not right away. Swami Kriyananda's music seemed a little simple to me. Classically trained people often come to Ananda and say the same thing. It was beautiful music, but it seemed kind of simple. But then I got involved with singing, I think this was around the time Swami was composing his Oratorio, *Christ Lives*. That was about a year after I arrived. Asha had heard that I sang, and she made every effort to include me in the group that was learning the Oratorio – it was the very first group that performed that music.

It took years for me to really get involved with Ananda's music. In part, I think that's because the music scene wasn't very well organized at the Village to include new people. But at a certain point I organized a new ensemble so that there would be a second group. And through that I began to enjoy the music more. Singing in a smaller group allows so much more nuance in the expression of the music than a big choir does.

I've sung in ensembles ever since, plus quite a bit of choir singing. What I've noticed most over the years is that no matter how many times you sing these pieces, as simple as they seemed when I first heard them, they retain their power. I'm never bored with them, and it shocks me a bit, because I'm bored very easily. But not by Swami Kriyananda's music.

So the music grew on me gradually. I loved hearing Swami sing, but honestly, listening to music isn't nearly as interesting for me as singing, and the more I sang, the more deeply I was touched by it.

Q: What effect did it have on you?

A: For lack of a better word, it was uplifting. When I sang it, I felt a sense of expansion. When I sang certain songs I often felt a shift in mood. I was particularly drawn to the minor-key, Indian-flavored songs, like "I've Passed My Life As a Stranger," and "Mother of Us All." When I sang those songs, I felt a lot of devotion, more than I would normally be able to generate on my own.

Q: As the choir director, you work with new people. Do you find that getting involved with singing Swami Kriyananda's music is good for them?

A: From what I've seen, it's good for people. I've seen people benefit from the music, perhaps more than they initially expected. One of our newer sopranos is a good example. She was relatively new to singing when she joined the choir, and she comes whenever she can, because she loves how it makes

her feel. You can see the effect it has by looking at people's faces when they sing, which is one of the pleasures of being in front of the choir as the director.

One of our newer tenors also loves it. After his first Oratorio performance, Graham said, "Let's do it again – the whole thing!"

It wasn't until we moved to the Mountain View community that Chaitanya asked me to take on directing the choir. I've had the choir for about three years, and it's been a big shift for me to focus more on people, and less on singing myself. But I love coaching. I love seeing people go through experiences that are personally transforming for them. I love seeing them get better in their musicality and their expression.

Being a director brought my own music experience to a higher level. It's fun to sing by yourself, but I find it's *really* fun to help other people.

Q: What is it like standing at the director's podium?

A: It's coaching. A good conductor is, I would say, in most cases an enthusiastic coach.

Q: You're very accurate about the music, but you seem able to enjoy the challenge of making the best use of the talent that's available.

A: Yes, you work with the available materials. You don't pound on the details harder than people can take. Many of Ananda's choir directors are trained on instruments, like David Eby, who's a professional cellist, and Cindy Gottfried in Seattle, who's an excellent guitarist. Instrumentalists have an awareness of flow and phrasing and expression, more so than vocal singers usually do, because in instrumental music it's all you have. You have your instrument, and it's your job to make it express. Directors who don't have that training aren't always able to bring it out of the choir. As an instrumentalist, it's been important to me that the phrase is moving and the notes are alive, and that the music is going somewhere energetically.

That's the musical end of it, but the other side is working with people and whatever training and ability they have. Bringing out the best in them, given their limitations as singers, and not being disappointed if they can't produce more.

Swami Kriyananda says that the only way we can be authentic is by coming from our origin, from our spine, from our center. I think choir singing is like that. But, at the same time, once you've identified your core and you're in your spine, you're also expanding your sound, until it's merging with the sound of your neighbors. You don't want to express your own sound without taking that other sound into account.

So "ears as big as an elephant's," is what I would advise new singers who join the choir. You're generating your own beautiful sound, but your ears are all around the choir, until you feel you can't really identify the boundary between your voice and the voices around you. That's the joy of choral singing, when you can expand beyond yourself. Most choir singers wake up to that along the way. They'll say "Wow, that was great – I disappeared!" Or "I became bigger than I thought I was."

It's not an easy thing to do, because people tend to be critical, and so their minds are thinking "Oh, she was flat," or "I don't like their voice." But those things just hold people back. If you love your neighbor, and you open up, suddenly something huge can come through.

Q: Can you talk about the two sides of the music? One being the work of learning the notes, so that you can sing well technically, and the other part being how to prepare yourself.

A: Everyone has their own way of preparing. I'm a very technical musician, so I like to warm up my voice as if it's an instrument. Nothing fancy – I just sing. If you hear my voice before I warm up, it's raw and gravelly. And you want to move all the "gravel" out and sing a bit until the voice has a pretty tone and you can move seamlessly from one note to another. When I get to the point where it's all seamless, then I'll sing the piece. If it's a solo that I'll

be performing, I'll sing it over and over until I get the nuance of expression just right.

It can take some time. In "I, Omar," for example, there's a quatrain – "The moving finger writes, and having writ, moves on, nor all thy piety nor wit..."

And, well, do you breathe after that phrase, or do you hold it out to the end? Because the sentence keeps going: "...shall lure it back to cancel half a line, nor all thy tears wash out a word of it." It's an unusual quatrain. The last two words are quite un-beautiful to sing – "of it." I breathe or break right after "wash out," because people are thinking about the meaning of the words, thinking about their regrets for things in the past. And I want a break there to catch their attention. But Chaitanya would probably sing it completely differently.

I'll run it, run it, run it, until I feel – how would I say it? – what has the most power to convey the idea to the listener. And so those are some of the things I'll think about when I'm getting ready for a solo.

Q: Can you share a bit more about how you try to give the audience the meaning of the song?

A: When you perform a song, you want to sing it in a way that lets the audience hear it fresh, as if somebody were reading it dynamically to them. The words to Swami's music are as important as the music. He doesn't want us to get up and sing without thinking about the meaning. Some of his songs are packed with meaningful words, and it can be hard to keep up with the meaning. "Truth Can Never Die," for example, or "To Death I'm a Stranger." "Some men call it progress – down with those who doubt! To join the causes others join, and shout when others shout!" The meaning is dense. You have to work hard on your own understanding.

Q: Or even "The Christ Child's Asleep." "Our pleasures, our pains, our losses, our gains, have kept us long bound. The ropes of yearning hemmed us round..."

A: It's true. That one, at least, is slow enough that you have a hope. But, yes, it's not easy, it's very

much not easy. When you're doing instrumental music, the mood of what you play is supposed to convey hidden meanings. But it's so easy for the audience to miss it. With classical music, the audience's experience will be very subjective, but with Swami's music, there are words, and it defines the meaning more clearly.

David was saying something quite beautiful to me about singing with Anand, who lives in the Ananda community in Italy. Anand joined our group for a while when we were there, touring with a group around Europe. We had only the two of them on bass. Anand has a beautiful voice, and David was singing with him, and he felt Anand's consciousness reaching out to him, trying to find him. And he felt so joyful about it – he just felt it was the most fun you could have when you're singing: to feel the person next to you reaching out to you, in a sense embracing you with their consciousness and trying to sing together.

Q: I've felt that with Chaitanya. Of course, it's not hard with him, because he has such a magnetic presence when he sings. But I've wondered if this is a regular part of what we're doing in the singing groups. In my research for a fitness book that I wrote, I found some studies showing that people's heartbeats tend to synchronize their rhythms when they're standing at a distance of up to five or six feet apart. There are many examples of this phenomenon. It's known as "entrainment," and the concept was first described in the West by a Dutch scientist in the 17th century, Christian Huygens. He had two pendulum clocks on a wall, and he noticed that the pendulums would synchronize their movement, due to vibrations carried through the wall. Since then, there have been many discoveries of how things synchronize through such obvious physical or other means – for example, female college roommates whose periods become synchronized. But it reinforces Master's admonition to keep good company, because bad company can bring you down. It often feels that when we sing, that there's a certain synchronization that's happening. But that leads to the thought that there may be certain things

we do that prevent us from having that experience, as well as a certain combination of attention and effort and relaxation that helps it to happen.

A: Knowledge, too, because when you're building your knowledge of the music, it's less likely to happen. I couldn't have done it during my first few years of singing the choir music, because I was so busy learning the words and the parts. But once you start getting those under your belt, it's easier.

Q: Dambara and Chaitanya have created practice recordings for the tenors, and listening to them is wonderful, because you can feel yourself gradually synchronizing with the way Swami Kriyananda wants the music to be sung.

A: It's something I'd like to do with the choir, some exercises along those lines, to help people avoid remaining only in their own awareness, and experience the music in a more expansive way.

Q: Another quality that I've noticed in experienced singers like you and Chaitanya and Dambara is that you seem to be right on the money with your placement of each note, and with the feeling of the song. It sounds very concentrated and one-pointed. I wonder if it comes partly from long practice.

A: I think that's part of it. Those guys are natural singers. They've sung since they were kids. I have, too. I was singing when I was tiny. In fact, I got thrown out of my first choir, because we were supposed to sing in unison, and I made up a part that I thought would make it more beautiful. And they said, "Oh, bad girl! Out of the choir!"

Q: Oh gosh, they dumped on your creativity.

A: As far as unevenness of tone, you can smooth it out over time by working at it. But I'm sure some people have an instrument, a vocal instrument, that's a very good one, you know, without any kinks in it, so that the sound comes out more easily.

Q: You've said several things that I'm sure will be encouraging for people who are relatively new – that you can work out the fuzziness in your voice, and that even experienced singers such as yourself

still have to smooth out their voices when they practice. That tells me that the rest of us aren't condemned to stay as rough as we are forever.

A: No. You've probably heard Swami talk about vocal quality. He says he can listen to somebody's voice and tell how their meditation practice is going, how they're doing psychologically, and what path they're on.

A great deal gets reflected in our voice, and I imagine we can work at it from both directions – we can work on our consciousness, and our voice will improve. And we can work on our voice as a way of improving your consciousness.

A lot of it is breath support. But, for Swami, he also says that he draws the energy of his voice up over his heart chakra, like a violin bow being pulled over the heart, and it creates a lot of beauty and resonance in his voice.

I don't know if very many people consciously do that. I use the instrument I have, and I do the best I can. Sometimes it sounds really good, but sometimes it doesn't sound quite as good, and it's fun to experiment with it.

Q: When people join the choir, how much time do they need to put into improving their singing?

A: Not very much. It's good to warm up for a few minutes just before they sing is good. Also, many people speak with low energy. So you'll hear more gravel and creaks and moans in their voice. But if you speak as Swami speaks, really fully letting the air come all the way through, and you really relax the throat, your voice completely changes. That takes energy, but if you do that all day, I imagine your vocal quality will be beautiful, because you're practicing all day. You're using your diaphragm and fully expressing the sound, without hesitation, through the vocal box.

Q: Swamiji says he hums all the time. Another "trick" I've noticed comes from an experience I've had over the years as a runner. I find it's extremely helpful to work hard to straighten my upper spine, because I've noticed that blocks there are fatal. And

I've found that it helps my singing also – that when I can get really clear through that area, to where the energy can flow more easily, that not only can I run more easily, but I can sing better, with less hesitation or impairment of feeling.

A: That is good advice. I like that. We don't talk about posture very much. But of course Swami sings with perfect posture. And you run in that way, you can feel the difference?

Q: Yes. I try to breathe energy into the area of the heart. Because I've done all this research on the importance of harmonious feelings for health and exercise and sports performance. Researchers at Heartmath Institute discovered that it's very important for physical health, emotional well-being, and spiritual awareness to harmonize the vibrations of the heart. They've also found that the physical heart can function far more efficiently when our feelings are harmonized.

The heart changes speeds continually, and the pattern of those speed changes accurately reflects our feelings. In the presence of expansive feelings such as love, compassion, and kindness, the heart's speed changes make a lovely, regular, sine-wave-liked curve. But when our feelings are negative, the heart speeds up and slows down chaotically, waylike a car that's running out of gas. For an athlete, it means that harmonious feelings allow the heart to work harder, so that we can exercise harder with a sense of ease.

Also, the heart's electrical power output jumps by up to 500% in the presence of expansive feelings, compared to negative feelings, or even relaxation. These findings are quite amazing, and they apply to singing as well.

I've noticed that totally in running – I can run more easily and faster when my feelings are expansive. But it seems that for singers it would be useful to know as well. I've noticed that if I go out on the freeway and sing or chant for an hour in the car before we sing with the choir or in a small group, and if I'm able to chant and sing successfully, with sincerity and energy and focus, I can sing so much

better because my consciousness has been expanded. Also, if I'm chanting something by Yogananda or Swamiji, it has their vibrations in it, and if I sing it for a long time I'm basically running Paramhansa Yogananda's or Swamiji's vibrations through my body, my brain, and my heart for a long time. Which is not a bad thing to do.

A: That's a wonderful warmup. Chanting is fantastic.

Q: But I'm learning to warm up now by singing the songs as well, because it seems important to try to get saturated with Master's ray as it comes through these songs, as a service to the people in the audience.

A: The songs, to me, are so complex. You have to work at it – the left brain has to work at it, whereas with chanting, you hardly have to, because they're simple.

Q: Ishani suggested that when people practice in the studio, they can put the headphones on and sing along to the mp3 part recordings. I had never thought of that.

A: It's a great idea. Everybody is so individual. Most of the choir members benefit from technical work to improve their hearing, improve their singing quality, things like that. One of the things Swami said to the small singing group that toured Italy some years ago, right off the bat, was that we all needed professional training. All of us. ALL of us. He looked right at me when he said it. He said, "You all need lessons from a pro. You're singing for the public, and you should learn to sing properly." So we all did. We took lessons from Jody Mori, an American woman living in Florence who teaches professional singers and is a long-time Ananda member. We would all drive two hours to Florence and see her, and she was wonderful. I've never been with a more supportive, encouraging voice teacher.

I had the most training of anyone in the group, and she was deconstructing my voice the most of us. She said, "I want you to sing with a natural tone. You're doing too much with your voice. You've had

too many lessons. You're doing too many techniques, you're contracting, there's too much tension. I want you to just let it rip, just let it flow." And it was hardest for me, I think. She loved David's voice. He has this nice, easy, resonant sound. She gave him a little bit of instruction, but not much, really. And I found that very interesting.

Q: What kind of lessons did she give you? Did she run you through exercises?

A: Yes, she gave us simple exercises. Just "Ah-eh-ee-oo-uu-ee-eh-oh-ah." Like that. I don't remember exactly the vowels. But she would vary it depending on people's needs. With one of our singers, she had her just do long "aaah" sounds, with no change in vowel. And with others she had them change vowels as they went along, because maybe certain aspects of their expression were tense and needed to be loosened up. So a good teacher is a great thing.

Q: In the mid-eighties I had an experience with Swami. I wanted to take some good portrait photographs of people at the Village. Which turned out to be not a very good use of my money and time. But I got hold of a book by a top professional beauty photographer named Nancy Brown. She'd been a model and was working as a successful studio photographer. And she was earthy in her approach, and her technique was completely simple. But I borrowed her methods and took some photos of Ananda people that turned out well. And at about that time, Swami remarked during a satsang that Ananda can borrow from methods that people use for worldly ends, and apply them to serve Master's work.

A: Swami is a fan of expertise. You might not think so, because he's always encouraging people to come from their center and not copy. But he was firm about our need to learn, and to do this properly.

Well, I have one last story to share. I hope it will be helpful to others.–

I was scheduled to sing a solo at the Village. It was at an event that was outdoors in the

amphitheater. The amphitheater was full, and Swami was there. I was going to sing "John Anderson," and I was sitting off to the side as I waited to come up. And as the time draws close, sometimes your nerves start getting a little frazzled. But I was so surprised by this nervousness, and quite angry with myself. Silently, I said, "I am completely sick of your self-involvement!" I said, "I've had it!" I closed my eyes and visualized a sword, and as fast as you can imagine, I cut myself to bits, until there was nothing left.

It was a very powerful experience. And when I was done – it didn't take long – I felt fabulous. Whatever was left felt fabulous. As I went up on stage, "I" was completely non-existent, and the song just came through, and it was beautiful – beautifully felt, beautifully expressed.

There was a break in the concert, an intermission, and someone came running up and said, "Swami wants to see you right away." So I went over and knelt down in front of him. His face was filled with tears, and he said, "Karen, I just have to tell you, that is the most beautifully I have ever heard you sing. And it's the most beautifully I have ever heard that song sung. Thank you so much."

Why? Not because I sang it so well. But because God was finally the doer.–

Interestingly, that night, I heard from more people than ever (before or since) how touched they were by the song. Swami wasn't the only one who could feel the difference.–

So that's the advice I would give singers who want to sing Swami's music as soloists, is to take seriously Swami's advice to let "God be the doer," and find a way to move the ego over enough so that God can really come through.

Swami said that sometimes you have to do violence to the ego. I don't think everyone has to do violence to the ego, but I don't know. Unfortunately, it's hard work to move out of it, to the extent that it's no longer in your way. But it's good work, and it's what we're here to do.

Another approach can be through devotion and love, which help us move beyond the ego without the need for more drastic methods. It would be

interesting to learn how other singers do this, like Chaitanya or Dambara. I look forward to reading their interviews!

Mari Baughman

(Mari is the music director for Ananda Sangha in Portland, Oregon.)

Q: Tell us about your background in music.

A: My Mom said that I started singing before I started talking – so it was obviously something that I came in with. In fact, singing was when I always felt closest to God.

As I was growing up, singing was my church. I went to church to sing. I sang all the way through school, and when I left school I sang with community choirs, but I always felt something was missing, and I stopped singing for a time before I found Ananda.

When Hanuman and I met, we were both coming out of relationships in which our spiritual quest wasn't understood. So we were very consciously looking for a spiritual relationship – in fact, a number of our first dates were to satsangs and kirtans at the former Ananda ashram in Atherton, on the San Francisco Peninsula.

At one of our dates, the Joy Singers from Ananda Village performed, and I was deeply touched and inspired by the music. I remember asking Nirmala afterward, “What do I have to do to get to sing this music? I’ll do anything – just tell me what I have to do!”

She looked at me so sweetly and said, “Oh, just hang around for a few years...” (laughs) It was very sweet, and it was probably the best answer anyone could give me then, because I needed time for my attunement with Swamiji and the music to grow and mature. When the time came that I was given the chance to sing, I appreciated it more deeply than I would have, had it been given to me right away.

Music had always come easily to me, and I think that having to wait several years to be part of the music was good for me spiritually. It made me stronger, more disciplined, and focused on my spiritual path.

A few years later, the Joy Singers touring group was out touring on the road a lot, and there needed to be a new “home team” to sing at Sunday services. They held auditions, and that was when I started singing, probably in 1984.

I was incredibly moved by the music. It became my closest connection to God, and it has always been the place where I have felt His presence the most powerfully in my life.

Q: In the Ananda music?

A: Yes. I learned the music and sang with this small group for five years. We then moved to an Ananda center, where I was asked to direct the music ministry. I took it step by step, because I didn't have any formal training, but had just picked up the kind of tips you get from good choir directors. But mostly learning to direct came by grace.

After I had been directing for some years, we were asked to return to the Village, and for several years I just attached myself to Jeannie, who directed the music. Jeannie took me to the lessons where she helped the singers, and she basically taught me how to teach.

Q: That must have been a wonderful apprenticeship.

A: It was amazing to learn to put in words what I had formerly done by intuition. It was the most fulfilling piece of the puzzle, to learn to share the music, and share it deeply. It's been my joy for the last 12 years.

I still direct a little, but I'm mostly teaching singers to use their instruments now. It's an eye-opener for many beginning singers when they start to understand why Ananda places so much emphasis on music.

I've also enjoyed learning how to teach directors. Usually, by the time it becomes a person's dharma to lead a group, they've already made a

strong connection to the inspiration of the music. Then learning to bring out the inspiration through others brings a deeper appreciation for the music and its role in our lives, as a tool for self-transformation.

Q: Are there particular methods you use when you teach directors?

A: The most important things aren't technical, but vibrational. Ananda's other directors know this, because it's the key for what we're doing. We all discover that the details will take care of themselves if the inspiration is there. But, having said that, there are lots of tricks for helping people learn to use their instruments, without having to understand music theory. The thing we emphasize most is tuning in to the vibration, and feeling what a particular piece of music is trying to say.

I encourage people to take the music into their meditations. I suggest they take a song into seclusion, and spend a whole week going ever more deeply into it, and feeling it. It can be an awesome practice.

Q: I remember a meditation where I sang one of Swami's songs mentally, and it took me very deep.

A: I spent a week in seclusion once, singing and meditating on "Emerald Isle." It was wonderful.

In teaching singers, I think I've had the most fun helping them get past the form of the music. Once that happens, we begin to realize that the true reason we sing this music is that we are learning to fine-tune our instruments as tools for transformation. For many people, it's a new concept, and it takes a while to truly begin to believe in it. But it's fun to watch when that light bulb goes on.

As far as taking it deeper, I think it's partly a question of realizing that the exercises we do in choir are basically the same ones we do when we meditate. We're learning to use our emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual bodies consciously to transform ourselves into a connection to the Divine. I find it so inspiring, watching people as they begin to understand this.

Q: Ramesha remarked that beginning singers

tend to make singing more work than it has to be.

A: That's why I stress that we're not actually here to sing. Getting to sing is the icing on the cake, but the important thing is the practice of getting our selves out of the way, learning to become clear channels, and allowing God to flow through us.

People can get too caught up in the details. It can be hard for people who've had formal training. I find it's important to stress letting go of the details and feeling the music, to get an experience of stepping out of the ego and letting God flow through us, instead of trying to push the energy out to fill the room. I encourage singers to practice taking their egos out of the picture, and see what it feels like to relax and be God's instrument, in the moment.

There was a time when I was sad that I didn't have more musical training before coming to Ananda. Now, I appreciate that I was able to learn to use my intuition first, and then fill in the details later.

Q: Is it more about singing with the heart than the mind? Or singing as a whole person?

A: It is actually about getting out of the way. People can get stuck in their hearts, too. When that happens, they tend to sing, and live, with lots of emotion. And where there's too much emotion, they can really stir up the world around them. We focus on singing with devotion instead of emotion, by feeling the energy flowing up the spine, just as when we meditate. As it flows through each chakra, the energy and consciousness can take on the positive qualities of that chakra. Then we offer it to God at the spiritual eye. That way, the heart quality and devotion can flow through us as an expression of God's pure inspiration.

There's a tool I use that I find most people can easily connect with. I'll have them focus their energy so that they're in their center, in their spine, and think about the song, the vibration of the song, and the message that is trying to come through the words and music. Then I'll ask them to take a physical step to one side, and as their feet rest on the floor, feel that

they're stepping out of their ego self, their little self, and stepping into that piece of music.

The physical movement, combined with the conscious thought of leaving the little self behind, can be very effective in helping people understand the difference in how it feels to sing with ego, versus letting the Divine sing through you.

For me, that was one of the most important concepts I needed to learn, and I feel it's important to share with others.

Another puzzling concept, for me, was something that directors usually say. "Fill the room with your music," or "send your energy out to fill the room."

It just didn't make any sense to me. It felt like reinforcing the ego's control, to think of pushing out and filling the room that way. But I finally realized that it means exactly the opposite – instead of filling the room with your own energy, you must get your self out of the way, so that the divine energy can expand outward through you. It's a small difference in how you say it, but the feeling is completely different.

Q: Are you able to describe how that feels?

A: One day I had the experience of feeling myself open and very present in the moment as I sang. I could feel the flow of energy moving through me and expanding outward into the room. It was a pivotal moment, the kind that gives you goose bumps. It's the difference between pushing and relaxing. If you're pushing your energy out, you can be pretty sure that you're doing it with your ego. But if you can relax, and visualize that flow of energy expanding through you, allowing yourself to be the instrument, that's letting God sing through you.

And people do get it, over time, on deeper levels. Once they get the sense that the ego isn't what we're working with, that the ego needs to be set in the corner for a rest, then it comes much more easily.

Q: Among the people I've interviewed, their approach to getting rid of the ego seems to vary.

A: I'm looking forward to hearing what the others have said. The more ways you can describe something, the more likely you'll be able to reach people quickly. If I say it one way and people can't relate to it, perhaps one of the other directors has figured out a way to say it that they'll be able to get right away, and there won't be that lag, of trying to figure out "What does she mean?"

I believe that learning to use our instruments is a lifelong task. I am constantly understanding new depths in this music, and how to use my own instrument, and understanding it in different ways. I think this point is really important for new people to hear. It's not something that you take a class in, or that you sing in the choir for a few years, and then you've suddenly "got it". It's a process of unfolding layer upon layer of deeper understanding.

Q: When Ramesha and Chaitanya talk about the process of getting out of the way, they're describing the same experience but their approach is slightly different. Ramesha's focus is on helping singers learn to relax their throat, as a step toward being able to let the Divine sing through them. He said that when you're relaxed and the throat is open, it's almost like doing Kriya. Chaitanya talks about relaxing and letting the energy rise through subtle channels into the back of the head and beyond.

A: The physical posture we use when we sing is very similar to when we meditate, particularly when we practice Kriya. We use our spines and lungs the same way. We form the inside of our mouths the same, and we focus our attention in the same place. Once you realize this, it becomes very clear that singing isn't just something we do for entertainment. Singing is something that we do to find God. For those of us who vibrate with singing, maybe it's a little bit easier for us to understand it in these terms.

So it is really important. Feeling the energy rising in the spine as we sing helps us get our egos out of the way and place our voices properly. The more relaxed we are, the easier it is to sing. It's the same thing we tell people when we teach them to meditate: "sit upright with a relaxed posture..."

(laughs)

I believe that if I can help others understand how to better use their instruments when they sing, they'll be able to meditate that much better, as well.

Q: Do you ever suggest that Master will help them get out of the way if they pray to him?

A: I use a number of visualizations to illustrate this. One is to feel Master standing with us, inside us, surrounding us, filling us, and let him sing through us. It's another way of getting ourselves out of the way. You can't be there as your little self, when you're filled with Master.

When we're getting ready to sing, we pray that Master help us get out of the way, and use us as his instruments. We do put a lot of emphasis on that. It's good to have it in the front of our consciousness before we begin to sing.

Q: Do you suggest that the singers think of the audience? That they visualize one person, or the whole audience? Or should they bother about that at all?

A: It depends on how we're singing. If we're singing as a choir, which means we're being directed, I ask everyone to focus on the director, and allow the director to be the channel through which the energy flows. Have you seen the lovely painting of Krishna as he drives the chariot for Arjuna? Krishna is the director – he's holding the reins. We as singers are the horses. We can decide to give the director the reins, or we can hold on tightly to them ourselves! If there's resistance to letting the director have the reins, we talk about consciously giving up our control and letting the director guide us.

When we sing, we visualize the energy, or the vibration of the song, going out from our spiritual eye. The director can then act as the focal point for the vibration expanding outward into the room. In a choral group, I don't suggest that people focus directly on an individual in the congregation, because as soon as one singer's eyes wander, it can be a distraction to the audience.

In our small groups, and in solo singing, we

have a different approach. Once singers are really able to get themselves out of the way and share without nervousness or anxiety, they can act as channels to consciously offer the vibration of the song to individuals in the room, sharing on a level of soul to soul, like saying "Namaste" as they sing.

If people are dealing with anxiety or nervousness and feeling self-conscious, I suggest they pick a point just over the audience's heads. There's a picture of Master on the back wall of our temple, and I'll say, "Sing to Master. Consciously give it to him." That way, the energy is flowing across the whole room, and it can help take away some of their anxiety.

Q: You have three directors in Portland. How does that work for you?

A: Our music program has been growing, and what has evolved is a team of five. We all have our areas of expertise, and we work well together with great results. It's wonderful because it gives us the wealth of information that each person's experience brings to the table.

One of us will do a warmup to help get the group's energy together, and perhaps give the choir a tidbit of technical training at the same time. Then the director will take over to run through the songs. We ask each other for feedback about what we can do as a choir to improve our connection to the vibration of the song.

Q: Are there other areas of the music that you'd like to address?

A: We use a technique given to us by Swamiji, that he formulated into five steps. It's called "Say-Singing." I've found this technique works wonders for helping singers tune into the music very quickly. It also "cures a world of ills" as far as helping us learn the technical aspects of singing, in a very simple way.

Many of our choir members haven't sung much, but they've tuned in on some level to how special the music is. It's a group where a purely technical rehearsal would sail over their heads, and they'd be

deeply bored and would probably leave. (laughs)

It's wonderful to have rehearsals focused primarily on tuning into the vibration of the music. It's amazing, and really lovely – the sound that's coming out, the attunement the singers have. We form deep soul friendships singing together.

The music seems to be touching people here deeply, in a way that it rarely has before. It's exciting to see this level of interest. Our choir has doubled in size in just the last three months, since March! (laughs) We had an Oratorio concert here in Portland, conducted by David Eby. The Ananda Seattle singers joined us, along with a smattering of

singers from other Ananda communities. It coincided with the opening of our new community at Laurelwood, and that fresh influx of energy.

With the growth of our directing team, we now have the potential to share the music in more ways. One of the things I'd most like to see is the start of a sing-a-long group, for those who want to sing the music, but may not have the inclination or the time to memorize and sing in parts. A children's choir would also be such fun! The more ways we can share the inspiration and soul-growth that comes from sharing this wonderful music, the better the world will be.

Ramesha Nani

(Ramesha and his wife, Bhagavati, are full-time singers and musicians and part of the LA Joy Singers based in Los Angeles. Ramesha offers singing lessons through his website www.vocalbliss.net.)

Q: How did you get started in music?

A: When I was four or five, we lived in Lugano, Switzerland, and I decided I wanted to play guitar. My parents bought me a toy guitar, but I wanted a real one. And so I started taking lessons.

When I was 13, some friends of our family had a son who was an accomplished violinist (he's now very well-known in Europe), and I was inspired by hearing him practice. So I decided to switch to violin. And an interesting thing is that my violin teacher was the one who introduced me to Paramhansa Yogananda. He was a disciple of Master's through SRF.

So through a series of serendipities I became interested in the path, and I took the SRF lessons and got more involved. I didn't find Ananda until I was 26 or 27, but I took Kriya through SRF and was pretty well engaged with the path.

When my violin teacher left to pursue his career, I had various other teachers until I was 25 and graduated from the conservatory. In the meantime, I had started taking voice lessons from an accomplished opera singer, and I studied with her for about seven years, until she passed away.

Singing became my main passion. Of all the instruments I had learned, it was the one that felt closest to my heart. After graduating, I didn't touch the violin for about nine years. It had taken so much energy and will power to finish my studies, that I just felt I was done with it.

In about 1996 I discovered Ananda. I would visit the center in Assisi, but I never told anybody I was a musician. I remember listening to the choir and thinking, "Oh, that's cute." It was pleasant to listen to, but for the longest time, I really didn't get why the

choir was so important.

Then, in 2002 Bhagavati came to Lugano on tour with a singing group, and in 2003 I was in Assisi and we became good friends. When she found out I was a musician, she said, "Wow, you have to come back for the Festival of Joyful Arts in July!" she told Shivani I was a violinist, and Shivani got excited and wanted to put on Swami's string quartet. The quartet needs two violins, a viola, and a cello, but there was only one violinist floating around Ananda at the time, so they'd never been able to perform it.

Neither of them knew that I hadn't played for many years, and for me to put together the First Violin part of the string quartet was an *endeavor*, let me tell you! I practiced for a whole week, there in Assisi, and it was hell, because after nine years without playing I was very rusty. It wasn't perfect, but we managed to get through it somehow.

Swamiji came up north with some people from Ananda Assisi to give lectures in Milan and Como, and I went. Bhagavati was there, and they were struggling to arrange some music for the program at the last minute, but they didn't have enough singers. So I learned the tenor parts for some of the songs and performed with them, and that was when I began to take more of an interest in singing Swami's music.

It was through Bhagavati, I have to say, that I got more involved with Ananda and the music. I had a job in Lugano, so I couldn't move to Assisi, but I would travel down there often, and Bhagavati and I got to know each other better and we became engaged and got married. We lived in Lugano for a couple of years, but we would travel to Assisi to help with the music and the events that Swami would put on.

After a time, we felt guided to go to the U.S. and I took a year's sabbatical from my job. After we had been in California for a couple of months, Jyotish and Devi asked if we wanted to move to the Village and help with the music. So it gradually became

more and more my dharma, and we never left. I finally resigned from my job, and here we are.

Last summer, Swami asked us to move to Los Angeles to help build the music ministry there, because there was no music here at all – not even chanting. They were doing great things, but the music was totally neglected – they couldn't even do the Festival of Light on Sunday, because nobody could play the songs.

Q: By the way, every person I've interviewed who has a professional background in music has said the same thing – they came to Ananda and heard the music, and they thought, "Oh, that's nice." But they didn't feel how central it is to the teachings and to Ananda's work. Was there a landmark moment for you, when you began to take it more seriously?

A: Bhagavati gave me a couple of CDs of her playing the flute, and that's when I started to actually hear the music. Then the Oratorio that really got my attention, because it was so deep and powerful, and the more I listened to it, the more I began to understand what the music is about.

When we got married, and Bhagavati moved to Lugano, she started a choir at the center, and I began singing and playing guitar. By actively doing the music, rather than just listening to it, I started to understand more deeply what it meant.

To some extent, I have to admit that, even now, I don't think I "get" the full scope of it. So I guess it's a learning curve.

Q: On the website, you say that you've begun exploring ways to help people deepen their attunement to the inspiration in the music.

A: Living at the Village, I've worked with lots of singers, many of whom have sung this music much longer than I have. Yet I realized there was something I could help them with, and that's how to use their instrument better.

I realized it's possible to be inspiring even if you don't have solid technique, but you might not be able to go as deeply into the inspirational flow if the technical aspect is getting in the way.

I realized that if I could help people make their singing easier, then their experience of being a channel for inspiration could be deeper, because they could focus on that, and take for granted that their instrument would respond in the right way to any technical challenges that a certain song might have. I realized I could help them get to a point where they didn't have to be worrying – "Oh my God – that high note is coming!"

All of the singers are meditators, so of course they're engaged in trying to sing with devotion. However, I realized that sometimes it can be more dynamic if, besides that, you can open up and deeply focus on the meaning of the song, and let the song "decide" how it wants to be sung.

It's a way of singing where you're focusing on what you're saying. You focus on the energy that's behind the words, and try to open up as you sing, and let it flow through you.

When I'm able to do that, I find that I can feel a stream of consciousness flowing through me, and I'm no longer aware "Oh – I'm singing – I have to make this happen." No, no – the song has an intelligence of its own, because Swami wrote it with that consciousness. And if we can open up and tune in to that consciousness, realizing that every word and every note is there for a reason – then there's no way we can sing the song "wrong." Because what we're doing is what's trying to flow through us.

But in order to do it, you have to get rid of the burden of all these worries – "Oh my God, how am I going to sing that high G?" You know, because that's totally of the ego.

On one side, you focus on your technique and try to get the most out of your instrument, and on other side – okay, you've practiced the technique, and now you can forget about it and focus on the inspiration, knowing that your instrument will respond because it's trained to do that.

Q: An obvious question presents itself: How can people practice that? In your online sample lessons, where you sing "Life Is a Dream," you sing it with a

very round, rich and relaxed tone. It feels as if you're opening your instrument consciously so that the song can "sing itself" through you. Do you think it's a question of people doing a volume of that kind of singing, until they get used to it?

A: On the technical side, yes. It's about physically opening up, and trying to stay as relaxed as we possibly can.

Ninety-five percent of the people who try to sing make the mistake of doing too much. They put out more energy than is necessary, and then the first thing that happens is that the throat gets tense. You're trying so hard, but the harder you try, the worse it sounds. So the whole training in singing is basically about relaxing. Relaxing and trying to create a sound that is round and smooth. But in order to produce that kind of sound, you have to open your throat and stay relaxed.

If you could analyze the spectrum of frequencies that your sound has, you would notice that the more your throat is relaxed and open, the richer the sound becomes. So that's really all there is to it – as far as the technical aspect goes.

And it's a training, you know. It's not that I can simply say "Okay, relax your throat." It doesn't work that way. It takes time to develop the ability to use your voice with that relaxed throat.

For some reason, most of us are conditioned to use the voice with a certain strain. If you listen to Swami, his voice is always full. He's the only speaker I listen to that I never have to adjust the volume. Whether he's speaking softly or loudly, you can always hear him. Why? Because his voice is open and free to flow, so it can project outward all the time.

This is where the technical aspect of singing merges with consciousness. Not only does Swami have a very refined technique, but he's obviously inspired, too. This is what I'm trying to help people understand. You must develop your technique, but try to open up also in a deeper way.

Q: Swami has said that everybody at Ananda

should sing the music. Can you share your thoughts about why he says that, or how people can benefit from singing the music.

A: I think that singing Swami's music is a form of sadhana. At the Village, people like Seva have been singing this music for 40 years. I used to think, "Boy, don't they get tired of singing 'Life Is a Dream'?" But I realized that it's a form of sadhana.

If you can think of the music in this way, then you never get tired. "What is trying to flow through me, and through the song? What kind of consciousness is trying to spread out to the world through this music?" You never get tired of doing Hong-Sau every day, because you can always go deeper, and it's satisfying.

Chanting is between you and God – it's a form of devotion, but it doesn't matter how you sing, since you're focusing on the words and going deeper in them. But singing Swami's music is translating spiritual communities into music.

Whether you sing in the choir, or as a soloist, the purpose is to tap into the inspiration of communion with God, but not go so deep that it's only between you and God. You have to share it. You have to connect with your inner Self as deeply as you can, but then you have to stay very alert and not let yourself go too inward, but open up to share that vibration with everybody.

If you're singing in a choir, it also means tuning into the realities of the people around you. It's what we do when we blend. We expand our aura to try to match the energy and consciousness of the people around us. So we aren't saying "Okay, I'm singing pretty well, see you later – I don't care what other people are doing." But we're trying to blend with them.

It's amazing to see how it can be a sadhana. There's no limit to how deep you can go in it, and get even more out of it.

Q: Can you talk about what you offer people in terms of helping them learn the Ananda music. For example, if someone loves the music and wants to be

part of it, but they haven't sung formally. Or they're more advanced, and would like to deepen their technique.

A: For those who've never sung, and maybe they're a bit shy about singing, I would say that singing this music is not about how well you sound. It's not about how beautiful a voice you have. It's really about tuning into something bigger and becoming an instrument for it.

It might sound like I'm contradicting everything I do with my teaching! But I'm really not.

I run into so many people who are shy about trying to sing. They would *love* to, but they don't dare. Who knows – maybe because when they were in school somebody told them they had an ugly voice, and they've carried that rejection all these years. But I always try to convince them that even if they can't carry a tune, they should try it anyway.

It's really not about how well you sound. As I said, it's about opening up to a flow of consciousness, and the music can be such a powerful flow in that way.

So that's the first thing I would say. Then, after they gain a little confidence and they think maybe they would like to try, then I'll offer them basic vocal training, which is doing some exercises to help them develop their voice, get to know their voice, and learn to use their instrument.

Then I can help them learn the songs, note by note – as you saw in the sample videos, where I go through a song very slowly. I can record it for them, or I can help them download the part from the Ananda music website, so they can practice and learn it note by note, and get it into their head. We can record it and put it on their music player or burn a CD, so they can listen to it until they learn.

The next step is to take that knowledge of the melody of the song, and I'll help them make it more beautiful, so they aren't just singing the notes but applying what we've been learning in our basic exercises to an actual song.

That's the preliminary part. Then, if somebody's

more advanced, it's a matter of refining their technique. For example, I've been working with Dambara. He has one of the most beautiful voices in the Ananda world, and I've always thought it would be wonderful if he could learn to use it a little better, because it would make such a big difference for him.

For somebody like Dambara, who is already so advanced in singing, and so deep in the music, all it takes is to learn a few tricks to help them use their instrument better, and get more out of it with less strain. Because that was his problem: he couldn't sing for very long before he would get tired and his throat would get sore.

It's interesting to me how Chaitanya was able to solve lots of technical problems by himself. Which, I must say, is very rare. In my experience, very few people discover these things by themselves. But he was following his intuition, and it guided him very well. He can go up high in a very relaxed way that's so pleasant to hear. It took me years of training with my teacher before I could understand it. So it does happen, but it's rare.

So far, of the people who've come to me for training, I can remember only one, where I thought, "I don't think I can teach him anything." It may sound presumptuous, but unless somebody is a very accomplished singer, there's almost always something that I can help them with.

Most singers are only interested in singing in a way that shows off their voice. It's all about the beauty of the tone. And I don't mean necessarily in an egoic way. Maybe they don't put much ego into it, but the focus is on the beauty. And the approach we have is so different. It's pleasant to hear a Dambara with his beautiful sound, but that's not the whole thing. If you took away the depth and inspiration he conveys and just heard the beautiful tone, we would probably get tired pretty quickly. But the reason we don't is that there's so much more there.

For most singers, even those who try to go deeper in their singing, it's very rare that they tap into superconsciousness. It's usually about conveying an emotion, not taking you deeper and

higher. And it doesn't make you feel better afterward. As Asha put it, it brings your energy into movement and motion, and when the song ends, bloop, it drops you on the sidewalk. (laughs)

This is why what we have with our music is really so amazing. It's a new approach to singing and music. It's about giving people an experience of what we can all aspire to. And no other music that I'm aware of does that.

We're trying to take this music out here in Los

Angeles, and I'm realizing that the music has its own agenda. In recent months, Swami has told us many times that it's time for the music to go out. I realize that it doesn't matter who does it, but the music is trying to go out, and if it's not us, somebody else will do it. It's all about consciousness – it's not about the people who're doing it, it's about this conscious flow of energy, from Yogananda through Swami, that's trying to go out into the world.

Raghu Clark

(Raghu is the musical director of Ananda Sangha in Sacramento, California.)

Q: Tell us how you got involved with Swami Kriyananda's music, perhaps going back to before you came to Ananda.

A: I started listening to music on an AM transistor radio in the 1960s. I was 9 or 10, and I would come home for lunch and listen to the AM station in Buffalo, New York. I would sing along with the songs, but mostly I listened. I was able to catch the melody line quickly, and it would stay in my consciousness. What I didn't understand is that I was actually tuning in to the song itself, and the consciousness that it expressed.

When I was in high school, my older brother and sister were in college, and they would bring home records of the latest soul groups, or groups from Chicago where my sister was in school. So I started to expand my horizons from AM to FM radio, and I did the same thing – I would hear the songs and start singing the melodies and get the songs into my consciousness. I listened to Chicago rhythm and blues, soul bands, and singers like Wilson Pickett.

I would enjoy the music for a while, but then I would be ready for something else. I would listen, sing the tunes, and move on. I was always looking to find what else there was in the world of music?

My brother returned from the West Coast with lots of San Francisco music, and it opened another door for me. Listening to Moby Grape, Quicksilver Messenger Service, the Grateful Dead, and Jefferson Airplane showed me that, okay, this is good music, too. It's just a different kind of music.

In college, another avenue opened, which was Appalachian folk music, and from there I went to country music, then country-western. But I kept exploring different types of music.

When I returned to Buffalo after college, I

would go out and see the latest bands in the nightclubs. I had gone from Appalachian music, to country, to jazz – Coltrane, Charley Parker, Thelonious Monk – you name it, I listened to everybody. Then Jazz Fusion with electric groups like Return to Forever, and the Mahavishnu Orchestra with John McLaughlin.

In college, I would come home from class and spend the evenings with friends in a basement where we had wall-to-wall record albums, hundreds of them, and the latest quadraphonic sound system.

Eventually, there came a time when I began to pull away, because the music wasn't fulfilling me anymore. It kept me questing and searching, which was fine, but I realized I was looking for a sound that I just wasn't finding. Everything I listened to was good – the musicians were incredibly talented – but it left me hanging, because there was nothing that I could truly lock onto.

Then, sometime in the early 1970s, I read *Autobiography of a Yogi*. I had been searching for a way to balance my life, and reading the Autobiography changed my direction. I didn't recognize Yogananda's path as a new vocation yet, but reading that book changed my inner direction. I began to pull away from the late nights of going out to hear the latest bands, and I started to become quieter. And in becoming quieter, I more or less gave up listening to music on the radio.

Around 1976, I discovered that Swami Kriyananda had a community in northern California, and that it was called Ananda. I knew it was a cooperative village, but for some reason I didn't realize that it was an actual piece of land. I read *Yoga Postures for Higher Awareness* and *Your Sun Sign as a Spiritual Guide*. Then I read *Cooperative Communities – How to Start Them, and Why*, and that's when I saw that there was an actual community of about a hundred people outside Nevada City, California.

I made a commitment to move to Ananda Village, but I spent a year cleaning up loose ends, and I began practicing hatha yoga. I had met a teacher from India, and I would drive across the bridge to Canada and do yoga postures with him.

On my way home from a yoga session, I stopped in Buffalo to visit a friend, and he said, "Have you heard Yogananda's voice?" I said no, and he pulled out an album of chants and prayers and put on the first cut, "Prayer at Dawn." And when I heard Yogananda's voice, I thought, "That is what I'm looking for."

It was so expansive and far-reaching. Hearing his voice, and hearing the harmonium lifted my consciousness. I realized, "This is the sound I'm looking for. This is the sound that I have the potential to resonate with."

I fell in love with it, and I gave up all the other music. I bought the album and listened to it over and over.

A year later, I was on the bus to Ananda. I joined the apprentice program, and every once in a while somebody would come over to the apprentice village to lead a kirtan. The one who came most often was Lakshmi. And it was a whole new sound that I wasn't used to. I was familiar with Yogananda's chants, and I realized that other people could chant, too. And I thought, "This is very good." (laughs)

I discovered that after chanting, I was inwardly very still. I had tried meditating before moving to California, but it had never quite worked for me. Even in the meditations with the apprentice group, I felt very restless, but after chanting I found myself feeling very calm, and I thought, "This is a good combination!"

I decided I should learn to play the harmonium. I would listen to the person who led the chanting, and late at night I would leave my tent and walk down the hill to the temple at the apprentice village and start plucking out the chants. I would hear the chant in my mind, and find the first note, sing the note, hear it in my consciousness, and slowly string the notes

together, one by one, using my index finger and pumping the bellows.

That was how I learned to play the harmonium. One chant led to another, until I had built up to four, five, six, or seven chants.

Soon after I arrived, I heard the Gandharvas sing some of Swamiji's songs before a class at Spiritual Renewal Week. One of the songs was "The Secret of Laughter." Coming from the kind of music I'd been listening to for years, I thought, "This is ridiculous – what a goofy little song!" (laughs) I thought, "This is so simple – I cannot believe it..."

I was comparing it with the sophistication of jazz and jazz-fusion, and the talented musicians, and I thought, "The Secret of Laughter? Lu-ru-lu-ru-lay-roh? Joy will come to anyone...?" And I just didn't get it.

That was the first week I was at Ananda. But I told myself to shut up and listen. (laughs) I told myself to keep the ego at bay, and listen to what was being sung. And whenever I would hear the Gandharvas, I would shut up and just absorb the singing.

But I really liked chanting, and over time I gradually acquired a taste for Swamiji's "Songs of Divine Joy." It was a bit of a slow road for me to begin to like his music, Then after about six months I found myself invited to sing with a little performing group. I had never sung a song in my life. But I said yes. There were six of us, and they told me I was a bass. I said okay – I didn't know what it meant, but I realized I could sing low. And the first song we worked on was "The Secret of Laughter."

It was a big eye-opener. I learned the bass line and practiced singing it until I had memorized the part. And then I had the same experience as when I heard Yogananda's voice for the first time, that singing this very simple song was changing something inside me. I had memorized the words, and I had the notes down correctly, and I was changing inwardly. The vibration of the song was having an effect on my consciousness, and it was

something completely new for me. It didn't give me confidence to sing, but I found that I felt really calm and inspired after singing these songs, even in rehearsal.

We premiered our new singing group at a Sunday service. We sang "The Secret of Laughter," and I was so embarrassed and self-conscious! The basses were in the back row, and I deliberately stood behind somebody with lots of hair. I remember it being very frizzy hair, and I remember trying to hide behind it, and how my knee was moving because I was so nervous, and how I kind of moved it to the rhythm of the song.

After the service, a long-time member of Ananda asked me if I was hiding. (laughs) I said, yes, I was. She grabbed my knee and said, "And don't move your knee like that." She said, "You can't hide. You just have to sing!"

I said, "Okay." And I slowly accepted the role of singing in a small group, because my doubts and self-consciousness weren't strong enough to prevent me from singing, and the joy and peace I felt after singing was so strong.

Yogananda assigned particular qualities to many of his chants. In the first edition of *Cosmic Chants*, which was published in 1938, he described what each chant was good for. For example, he wrote that singing "Thou Art My Life" is good to "sweeten a sour disposition." So anytime I was in a sour disposition, I would sing that song, and I would come out of it.

I learned more of the chants and songs, and I learned that when I was chanting, it was not really I who was doing the chanting, but that the vibration of the song or chant was coming through me. Over the years, I learned that, in fact, it's better if Raghu doesn't participate in the chant.

If it's one of Master's chants, I visualize Yoganandaji at the point between the eyebrows, and if it's one of Swamiji's chants, I visualize Swamiji, and feel that he's singing with me through the chant. If I'm singing a bhajan to Ganesha or Shiva or

Krishna, I visualize one of the deities and offer the chant to them.

I've realized that chanting is ever-new. I've sung some of the chants hundreds of times, yet it always feels new and fresh, because they chants are so expansive. It's never quite the same. Yoganandaji said that his Cosmic Chants are registered in the superconscious. When I'm chanting, I try to tune in to a superconscious state that's coming through the chants. Sometimes I chant with my eyes closed, even if it's a kirtan, and sometimes I visualize that I'm chanting above the planet, and chanting out into the cosmos. I learned that you can't space out, and this is why at our kirtans we have brief meditations, to give people a chance to go inside. The chants are very deep and expansive.

The experience of singing in the small group evolved over time. I realized that when everybody was spot-on with the music – when we're all in sync and on pitch – that the group has a unique vibration. I also realized that the vibration doesn't sit with the individual, but it comes out through the individuals. It feels as if it's in front of us, going out like a wave. If you're singing in a concert, and you're in tune with the group, you feel a connection with everybody you're singing with. And when everybody is singing in sync, it creates a special vibration for each song. The people in the audience are touched by it, and it feels like it's going beyond the audience and spreading that vibration into the universe.

When I lived in Palo Alto, I had the good fortune to sing with some fine people – Sabari, Chaitanya, Ishani, Dambara, Karen, Pavani, and Amara. It was a great group, and we evolved together over the years. We sang for a long time together, and it was a joy. They were topflight singers, and they were all very much in tune.

I remember a thrilling experience that we had together. Swamiji had recently written "Life Mantra," and our group were practicing it in the back room of the Palo Alto temple. We were rehearsing to sing for Swamiji who was coming to Palo Alto to speak.

After our rehearsals, we always chanted OM. As we were Om-ing, I heard a voice singing, “Life is a mission from above... Life is a quest for inner joy...”

We took a breath and OM-ed again, and I heard, “God is life... God is joy...” It wasn’t a sound that was coming from the physical plane.

After the third OM, we didn’t say anything. Finally, Chaitanya said, “Did anybody hear that?” And we all said, “Yes.”

It was thrilling, and at the same time it didn’t seem unusual. It was like, “Of course – it’s the OM vibration.” But it helped us realize that the songs that Swamiji has written are part of the OM vibration, and that if we sing them together, and do the best we can, it opens us to the vibration of OM, and it can open others to the vibration of OM.

Swamiji has often said, “If you want to know me, get to know my music.” Many of the people in the choir have been around Swami for years, but some haven’t. Speaking for myself, I find that singing Swamiji’s music has helped me tremendously to know him ever more deeply, and to meditate better and deeper. Our choir in Sacramento has been singing at Sunday service, and they’re getting to know Swamiji better. The choir has gone light years toward the OM vibration. We know it from the feedback we receive, when they tell us after service how inspiring the singing was.

We certainly have Sundays when it doesn’t click perfectly, but we keep moving forward, because we don’t associate ourselves with the praise or the mistakes. We associate our songs with the OM vibration. Chaitanya would always tell the choir before a performance, “Expect a lot of grace.”

In the beginning, I judged the music with my mind. But I was strong with myself. I told myself to do what I had done all my life – just listen and don’t judge. After listening, I would sometimes wake up in the morning with a melody in my mind, and I would feel there was something beyond the borders of what I had labeled as too “simple.”

I realized that the vibration of music is everything. It’s why I urge new people to set the mind aside and tune in to the music – listen to the notes, listen to the words, and think about what’s being said, and how it registers not so much in the mind as in the heart. Then lift the heart to the spiritual eye, and that’s when you start to have the experience. And it will be different for everybody. It calmed me so that I could meditate better, and it made me realize that there’s much more to music than the complications of jazz.

The more complicated the music, and the more impressive the musicianship, the more I liked it. But when I heard Yogananda’s chants, and when I started singing Swamiji’s songs, my heart started to open. My heart connected with the spiritual eye, and the music began to realign my awareness to an experience of depth and never-ending expansiveness.

That’s why I tell beginners that it’s good to just listen. Listen to what’s being sung. Bring the vibration into your heart, and don’t put a judgment on it. Don’t put the mind on it. It’s heart music. It’s “clarity of the heart” music. It can change your consciousness. And it will change your consciousness.

When I was growing up, I loved classical music. I particularly loved choral music – Chanticleer, and the King’s College Singers. But now I’ve given up even that. I don’t listen to it anymore, not because it’s bad, but because my consciousness has changed, and now I just listen to Swamiji’s music. I have it playing in the background, and I have it playing in my consciousness.

I can’t even call it “Swamiji’s music,” because he receives it and shares it. He’s often said that it isn’t his music. It flows through him, and it flows through us, and when it flows through us it changes us. It changes our consciousness. And that’s the biggest thing. It can work on many levels. It’s a healing tool. It’s a great meditation tool. If you have problems meditating, it will give you depth. It can change your life.

Cindy Gottfried

(Cindy is the choir director for Ananda Sangha in Seattle, Washington.)

Q: Tell us about your early background in music, and how you became interested in Ananda's music.

Cindy: I came from a family that loved music – my mother started teaching me ukulele when I was eight, and from there I started reading chord charts and then began to teach myself guitar. I started out learning from pop books and singing and accompanying myself on the guitar. But I did not like singing. Singing hurt, and it felt strained. So that's actually how I got into classical guitar, because I didn't need to use my voice. (laughs) Which is ironic, because in the Seattle Ananda Sangha I'm now known as a singer.

I really enjoyed music. It wasn't my only thing, but it's where my energy flowed pretty well, and where opportunities opened up as I got older. I was also interested in science and now computers – I manage the website for Ananda Seattle, and I've always had an active left brain that went along with the right brain.

But music has always been part of my life. I took private classical guitar lessons from age 15 to 17, and then the teacher I was taking lessons from said I'd more or less reached the level where he was on the guitar, but was lacking in my knowledge of music theory. So at that point I decided to major in music, and entered the music program at UC Santa Cruz, which is where I grew up. For my first two years of college I did general studies in music, since there wasn't anything in classical guitar at the time. For my ensemble work, I did Javanese gamelan, which was fun, and I had an interest in ethnomusicology and music from around the world.

After I studied music for two years, I changed my major to philosophy. I've always had a philosophical bent, but in those early years I was thinking of music as a universal language. But I was

thinking of it in a way that didn't quite work, in terms of physical properties such as, for example, the major fifth being a physical resonance that you can figure out mathematically and apply to a harmonious emotional effect on the listener. I thought that was something you would find in all music.. And then you could explain why music is pleasurable, using objective principles that way. But when I learned about ethnomusicology I found that not all instruments use the principle of resonance in the same way. For example, an instrument like the didgeridoo doesn't use harmonies in the way that we're used to. And of course when I reached the point in music theory when we learned about the tempered scale in western music my perplexity only increased.

And that sort of threw me for a loop, because it got me thinking that maybe music isn't a universal language after all. In Javanese gamelan, for example, there is a planned dissonance that is an important part of the whole. If the intervals, the fifths and so forth, were exactly tuned together, the music would be considered flawed. It's the imperfection of the overtones that makes a unique characteristic of the music.

So it was all sort of throwing me for a loop, and I was thinking that maybe music isn't a universal language, and maybe it's more culturally based.

And then as I studied philosophy, there was the influence of postmodernism, Foucault and all that, and my world view was being kind of taken apart. I began to wonder if there is any order that you could rely on at all.

So, in terms of both music and philosophy, I experienced a breaking down of the sense of meaning, and I ended up dropping out of college.

I then worked with Deaf people for 10 years. I wanted to experience what life would be like without sound, because when I was in high school and taking guitar lessons, I was so immersed in music, practicing at least four hours a day, and often more. On weekends when I wasn't working I might practice eight hours. But then when I started to think that maybe music wasn't a universal source of

inspiration, I went to the other extreme. I wanted to see, if sound and music isn't a universal thing, what is a life like without music, and what type of fulfillment would someone have without sound.

I learned American Sign Language, and I pursued that for 10 years, and I was still working with Deaf people when I came to Ananda.

So I deliberately threw music out of my life. I even got rid of my guitars. I had a partner who was Deaf, who needed to remind me to stop being so immersed in the Deaf community. But I do tend to get immersed in things, and I went as far as always having the sound off on the TV, because I didn't want to have experiences that we couldn't share.

When I found Ananda, the music in the Seattle Ananda center was at an ebb, because Dharmadas and Nirmala had just left. So I actually was not drawn in by the music initially. I don't think I was ready yet, and I was drawn in more by meditation and the search for God.

Q: Were you putting the world back together after Foucault destroyed it for you?

Cindy: I actually ended up pretty depressed. But nothing ever happens in a vacuum. I was going through some life experiences that magnetized me toward a fairly dismal view of life. I had this world view of "Nothing is meaningful. Nothing is worth living for." But I grew up in an area strong with alternative and metaphysical influences, and my mother did astrology. So I've always had some alternative perspectives, and when I saw that I was approaching my Saturn return in the years leading up to 30, I just knew that I was at a point where I needed to figure out what to do with my life.

I knew I had a good left brain, and I decided to go to a community college and learn computers. And so, at 28 I started to learn about computers, because I thought it would be a good career for me. I did really well, it was all effortless, but toward the end, the depression came right back, and I felt like I wasn't doing the right thing.

While working with Deaf people, I realized that

what really does have meaning for me is service. And I decided not to go into a computer field and earn a lot more money, but just keep on with service. And that awakened an expansive attitude that may have been there all along, but I came to realize that it was important. And that was just a few years before I found Ananda.

From there, good things started coming through the back door. I used to listen to rock music. I no longer do, but at the time it was a normal part of my environment. I had a co-worker who was an enthusiastic born-again Christian, and he would always change the radio in the van at the group home to a Christian rock station when he drove, and I would always change it back to a regular mainstream rock station when I drove. But one time when I got in the van it was playing Christian rock and I just started feeling a real thirst for it. And eventually I came to realize that I was very thirsty to drink in spiritual influences.

I had studied *A Course in Miracles* long before, and I began carrying around some phrases from that to look at while I was in the work van, like at stoplights, waiting for clients at their workplaces, and so forth. And I started to feel a growing hunger for the Light. At one point, I started to feel "I really wish I believed in Christianity, because I would love to be a nun." (laughs)

I had relatives who were Catholic and some were Jewish, and I felt I couldn't follow either of those paths because I was drawn to something more universal.

I decided to take a meditation class through Ananda's East West Bookshop in Seattle. I wouldn't have taken the class through the church, because I wasn't interested in churches, with all the baggage I associated with them. But after three class series I found out that it was connected to a church, and by then I was hooked.

After about a year, when my schedule opened up, I started going to service, and I was soon asked to play guitar, since there was a need for guitarists.

So that's how I got into Ananda. It was pure magnetism, and music sort of slid in there with me, though I wasn't drawn in by the music initially.

Soon afterwards, Larry and Prem-Shanti Rider moved to Seattle, and there was finally someone to guide the music.

Because of my background, with the philosophical stance of "nothing matters," and a sort of inner anarchy, listening to rock music and so forth, there was a coarseness that came through my playing. But I was inspired by the Festival of Light, and I wanted to tune in to that, more as a meditation than as music.

At one point, I decided to just listen. I thought to stop trying to put out the music, because I felt something in me that was getting in the way. I decided to be quiet and just experience for a bit.

I think it was a real inspiration. When Larry and Prem-Shanti arrived, the music was in disarray, and the word went out that they would do all the music, and everybody else should step back for a bit. I was pleased and thought, "Well, great – I just want to listen for a while anyway." After a while they started to ask me to do the music with them.

That period of listening was wonderful. We think of music as self-expression, something you do, something that people admire. The way we experience music in this culture is an exhibitionistic thing. And it was so valuable just to listen, not just listen to the music but listen to the environment that the music came out of, and to see that the environment was even more meaningful than the music.

I remember Agni Ferraro saying Swami had told him, "It's not about the music." And I feel that's a really important thing to hold onto – it's not about the music. The music is an expression of an original inspiration. It is a part of the environment that expresses that inspiration. So it was very helpful to me to take the time to tune into that for a while.

The next step came for me when I joined the choir for a wedding, and that took me even more

deeply into the music.

Q: How is your time split now between guitar and singing?

Cindy: Guitar is something I basically do as a service. I don't have a lot of investment in it. Still, I must have some karma around it as it gives back so much to me. But because I studied classical, and I had to buy my first steel-string guitar when I started playing music here, I've had trouble between the differing demands of classical guitar technique and folk guitar technique. With classical technique, it's more centered, you're less off-balance because the guitar is more centered in front of your body and you don't have one arm stretched out as far to the side or for as long a period (since you tend to play up the neck more). And you're pulling back with the entire hand and arm, whereas with a steel-string folk guitar you're squeezing more with your fingers and thumb. So I actually can have a lot of physical discomfort playing folk guitar, especially since I don't practice a lot. I generally try to deal with this by increasing the energy flow through me so that my focus is on the inspiration instead of the discomfort. Focusing on the spiritual eye helps.

But the thing about singing, I mentioned that I've always been uncomfortable singing. When I was young, I didn't like to sing. I have a low voice, I'm definitely an alto, and I did not have the higher range developed at all until recently. When I was a child, I remember times in grade school, when all the classes would get together and sing holiday songs. But I was always dropping an octave when the notes got too high, and if the teacher heard me, she would say, "Get back up there with everybody else." And that was part of the reason I didn't like to sing.

But then, the first time I went to Ananda Village, it was for a Kriya retreat, and while I was there, somehow my throat opened up and I realized that I had a rich, resonant voice. Something about Kriya relaxed it really quickly. I don't know if it was the Kriya technique itself; it may have been that it loosened up some karma. But it was a very nice experience of opening the throat chakra. I like telling

that story to emphasize that it's not about the music, it's about the vibration.

Now I've been leading the choir in Seattle for close to ten years. About a year ago I started really tuning into the fact that people are more uncomfortable singing high notes than they need to be. Partly, it's having yourself exposed in the effort that it takes, the ego and all, but then it's also the physical strain in underused muscles. And I've been very interested in how Chaitanya brought in the techniques of "bubbling" and "trilling," and how some of those techniques can help you relax the throat and reach notes that weren't accessible before, because of certain muscles being tight.

These, and other, techniques are helping me sing with more ease now, and it's an area that I've been actively exploring the past year. I find it's very helpful as a way of following the principles of tensing and relaxing in order to get past the muscles to what our souls are trying to express through our voices. At this point, it's a personal exploration, but I think it does follow naturally from being aware of how my voice has always been tight, yet is freer when I am in tune with a higher vibration. Music for me is part of the path, and I'm trying to see how it can be more relaxed physically in order to let the soul essence come through more clearly.

Q: This is an area that others have talked about in these interviews, and they all say it's very helpful. I once asked Chaitanya, "How are you able to sing the high notes with such ease and smoothness?" He said, "Singing this music changes your voice." Also, Karen Gamow had me try some of the things you're exploring, like bubbling and trilling, because she said these exercises help smooth her voice before she practices or performs.

Cindy: I feel a lot of it is learning how to sing not from the heaviness of the body. It's been interesting to see how the choir may be struggling with a song in practice, but then in a performance with our energy completely committed to it, the result is beyond our expectations. When we focus more on the vibration than on discomfort or

nervousness, the high notes come loud and clear. So the principle we go by is that when the energy is right, it tends to come through. This choir errs more on the side of relying purely on vibration, and giving less energy to technique to back it up. But it has taken us an impressive distance.

Part of what I'm trying to do with the choir is see how we can further blend the two, technique and inspiration. Somehow our souls put us in the situation of doing this music. So how can we use that aspiration to work together with the physical act of applying our bodies. We do have to remind ourselves to open our mouths. (laughs) And so there are mechanics that can bring us closer to the vibration, bring us closer to our angelic singing selves. But it's tricky, because people don't like talking about mechanics. So it's a trick to do it without it making people feel that we're going off on a tangent from the inspiration.

When I was young and practiced for hours a day, I could easily get into technique, so it's a balance for me as well from the opposite end. I guess I'm learning to bring all those elements in without being distracted by the techniques.

Q: Is there a process that you teach, for smoothing out your voice? For warming up?

Cindy: What I'm mostly emphasizing these days is, before you open your mouth, be aware of what you're doing. I tell them to first listen. I'll play a note on the guitar and have them wait and sing it mentally before they do anything. Then after a moment I'll have them sing it. The response has been pretty dramatic. Before I started to emphasize the listening, the energy was a lot more scattered, and the choir might be as much as a half-step off. They weren't even aware that they were singing a completely different note. But by listening, and making the effort to take the note in mentally before singing it out, they've gotten to where they sing the note almost right-on.

At Sunday-morning rehearsal, where we don't have much time, I try to condense our warm-ups into quickly warming up our awareness through focused

concentration. For our regular practice, depending on what the energy's like, I might follow the prayer with a brief silence, and tune into the silence that the music comes from. Then I'll say, "Now, from that silence, let's start singing."

As far as mechanics, it depends on what songs we're singing. We've recently been practicing Oratorio songs, and because it makes it easier to sing the high notes, we're doing a lot more bubbling these days to warm up. And then when they get into the song, if the sopranos are straining on the high notes, I'll have them bubble those high notes. Then they find it much easier to sing them.

Generally I'm trying things that seem appropriate in the moment, so they can see results right away, instead of feeling that we're doing exercises for the sake of exercises.

Q: The idea of consciousness and music – are you saying that when our consciousness is in the right place, the music tends to come out better?

Cindy: Oh, yes. And then the whole reason we do the music – well, it's in a way backwards to do the music and then see what the results are. It's more useful to see how much more inspiration we get if we start by aiming for a certain consciousness, and trying to put our voices into attunement with that consciousness.

I love the way David Eby brings that out. I love how before we do a song, he'll say, "Think of the energy behind the music, and the energy behind the first phrase. Now, sing the first phrase with that energy."

But, yes, it's starting *with* the consciousness. It's wonderful to start a song and see what it does to our consciousness. It's an incredibly wonderful and valid thing to do. But then if we already know what we want to do with it, I think it's even more powerful to tune into an inspiration, and then let ourselves be a channel for that consciousness to come through our voices.

At Ananda, we're not always trying to do things the most "efficient" way. If we're given a task that

feels a bit counter-intuitive, or impossible, you know there's got to be a way. (laughs) So there's a bit of bootstrapping that goes on. And that's something we use the music for as well. We set the energy and then the form follows.

Q: Do you find that the music changes people in beneficial ways?

Cindy: I think everybody experiences that. But to be honest, there isn't anyone committed to the choir here who is not also doing several other things that changes them deeply. So it's hard to separate the factors. It's truly a package deal.

Q: In one of Swami's books, he says that music isn't a peripheral part of Ananda, that it's central. Do you sense that, or feel that it's true? When you're conducting or singing, do you feel you're doing something that Master blesses? That it's a spiritual service to people?

Cindy: When you listen to a Sunday sermon, it's easy to get caught up in the interesting connections to science, philosophy, or useful hints. But music brings in a dimension that can't come through with the spoken word. Music bypasses certain parts of the brain that we get stuck in. It can give a feeling of pure inspiration, and a pure reminder of the goal. Of course it's not the same as the experience of cosmic consciousness, but there's a hint of remembrance in it, enough to grab our attention.

Here's a more mundane example of music's power that I read in a book called *My Stroke of Insight*. The author had a brother who was psychotic, and as a brain researcher she had been dismayed to find that data about this group of people was sadly lacking. She made it her personal mission to speak to groups of people with mental illness and try to convince them to donate their brains to science when they died, so that the researchers could learn more about the structure of the brain in this population. But she found it awkward and not very effective to stand up in front of a group of people and ask for their brains. So she wrote a humorous song for her presentations, and she found that her singing helped

people overcome their resistance. As a result the number of brains donated to that particular institute increased astronomically. (laughs)

We tend to have our own fixed ways of thinking, and we can get stuck in that, but music can push us

into a more expansive view. The music very subtly pushes us past limitations we may not even realize are there. I think in that way the Ananda music does work on us – it clearly creates an opening, a crack for the Light to come through.

Krishna Dewey

(Krishna is director of the training choir at Ananda Village.)

Q: When did you first get interested in music?

A: I guess I was ten. I was at school and they showed us the instruments we could choose to play. I looked at them and thought, “Well, there’s one with just three buttons!” (laughs) It was the trumpet. I said, “I’ll take that one.” And it turned out to be one of the most difficult instruments – I think French horn is the hardest. But I started playing and had a great time, and when I graduated from high school the band director encouraged me to study music at a liberal arts college in Ohio. He thought that majoring in music education would be a great choice for me.

At college, I got lots of encouragement from my professors and had a great time playing jazz. After graduation, I taught for a year as an elementary school band director in Catholic schools. I enjoyed it – I loved how the children would light up with the music and discovering that they could play. But I decided I didn’t know enough about teaching, so I earned a master’s at the University of Illinois, focusing on psychology and learning how to help people through music.

Graduate school was a rich experience, because some great musicians came to teach and give clinics and concerts and meet with the students. We had people like Duke Ellington, Van Cliburn, and Charles Mingus. The best trumpet player in Russia, Timofei Dokshizer, gave a workshop with ninety trumpet players, and I got to be in a smaller group of thirty that learned from him.

Then I taught in a variety of settings all over the country for a decade, in grade school through college. I loved instrumental music, but I was a voice minor, and I was totally dissatisfied with the voice experience because it was very shallow. I remember Swami Kriyananda describing how he took voice lessons when he was young, but he didn’t want to sing those histrionic operatic arias – and neither did

I. The teacher literally asked me to put my hand on the piano and look soulful and sing in a dramatic “professional” manner. (laughs) My teacher actually made me do that!

When I got to Ananda, I was very intrigued. Being classically trained and into jazz, which is very complex, I listened to Ananda’s music and thought, “How simple!” But, looking back, I realize I missed the point. Then at some point I got out the big book of sheet music of all the Ananda pieces, and I proceeded to play them all on the trumpet. And that’s how I first started to connect with the music.

My first thought was, “Oh, how sweet that Swami Kriyananda sings.” But I didn’t understand how deep it was until I internalized the music for myself by playing all the melodies with focus and openness. By playing it on the trumpet, over time I began to understand the vibrational side of Swami’s music.

At that point, I had completely let the voice go, because it was uninteresting to me. But I started chanting, and that’s when I realized that the voice is a key component of our spiritual path, and finding our deeper spirituality, because there are no barriers when you use your voice, either speaking or singing – there’s nothing between you and anyone. You’re emitting sound, you’re emitting OM, and Swami’s music teaches us from the deepest aspect of OM, because of his inspiration. And the voice is how we express OM.

So I was finally turned on to the music, and I began helping the choir director in every way I could. That was in 1990, when I first caught fire. I had come to the Village from Palo Alto for a year to take the monastic training program, and then I went back and helped with the music in Palo Alto and got even deeper into it.

Something that inspired me from my directing days with the large choir in Palo Alto is how inspiration can flow from the source where Swami’s

music came from through each singer individually. When you direct, you're facing the singers, and it's a unique experience because you're connecting with them all, not individually, and you're connecting with them in an inspirational flow that's unique every time you come to choir. You show up, and the message of one of the songs can be a transformative experience in the moment that can increase your knowing of your own higher Self.

Master said, "Chanting is half the battle." And then Swami's music adds another piece. Chanting and singing Swami's music, plus meditation, is possibly the most powerful thing we can do to quicken our spiritual evolution.

But, as I said, it's a different experience each time. It's one of the things I find inspiring about choir, and I think it's why so many people are addicted to it, and just really want to sing every chance they get.

Q: You direct the training choir at Ananda Village. If someone expresses an interest in singing, but they're shy and they've never sung in a group, how do you help them?

A: We start with exercises that pull you out of your idea of how you sing. Of course, we practice learning the parts as well. But the exercises pull you out of any pre-conceptions you may have of trying to sing in a certain way.

We try to get the new singers to learn to blend right away, and we explore the voice. We explore what the voice can do, and in that way we get in touch with the inspiration, and with the people around us.

As people learn to blend, I've seen that they get more comfortable with themselves. In the beginning, they're shy, but then they come into their own, knowing that they can sing the music, and that they can truly feel it.

After each piece, we sit and absorb the experience, and that's when I see most people really begin to get it. We'll work on the simpler unison songs, like "Cloisters," with blend, volume, and

technical things, but then we'll always sit and go back to the inspiration from where the piece came.

That's more or less in a nutshell what happens to people. And, of course, they learn the parts and they gradually get more comfortable, and then they're addicted. A small, very loyal group of people come to the training choir practices, and they find that taking the extra time to practice with the training group deepens their experience with the big group.

Q: Chaitanya said that singing this music changes a person's voice. Have you found that to be true?

A: Yes, it's very true. What happens is that you open up. It's also a physical thing, because you're opening your heart to the feeling of the music, and then as you relax, it feels like a cellular memory. Instead of holding on to the muscles or tissues in your body, the longer you sing, the more you learn to be open. And then the body opens up and the throat relaxes, and people speak and sing in a more melodious way. It isn't necessarily that they're singing in a different way, but it's more melodious and harmonious. They begin to sound comfortable in themselves, and clear. I think clarity is one of the main things that comes out in their voices.

Q: Harmony is a hallmark of Swami's music, isn't it? Inner harmony.

A: It's true. And once people lock into those harmonies, they can go deeper. Sometimes in practice we'll sit on a note for a long time; for instance, a four-part chord that sounds unusual and beautiful. Or we'll sing a phrase and hold the last note, and if you tune in, you can feel a recalibration of your cells. But it tends to happen most easily when you're dwelling on the harmony, and when you aren't moving on a series of notes. When you're focusing on the harmony and the sound of the chords, you're opening your ears to a broader vibration. It actually recalibrates, I think, your brain.

Q: David Eby mentioned that he'll have people sing for a bit and then be quiet, as you described. And he said that when they come back and sing again

it's as if

your system has learned something.

A: It's true, above and beyond the music. Also, after you pause and stay quiet for a while, you can focus more on the inspiration when you sing. You work on technique, but by and by those technical difficulties go away when you're focusing on the inspiration more than the technicalities. The technical side is certainly part of it – the altos have this note, the basses have that note, or whatever. But then we always go back to the inspiration, because that's where people really get it, and when that starts to happen, it becomes a different expression of the music.

Q: What are your thoughts on how people can learn to give themselves more fully to the music?

A: I think the main thing is to keep doing it. Keep singing. Keep blending with the group, especially. And keep listening. Also, something I've used to aid that process for myself is to listen to recordings of Swamiji singing, and try emulate his voice. When you sing along, after a while the voice you're listening to disappears. But I try to emulate Swamiji's voice in all of its qualities.

As I look back, I see that it took me years to get beyond the technical part. I would think, "He's going up to a high note, so, okay, you open your throat, and you increase this, and you do that." But then I'd try it and it didn't work. (laughs) You're thinking "How can I make it sound like that?" And I guess it's like a sculptor, that you chip away all the parts of the stone that aren't the sculpture.

Q: How do you recommend that newcomers practice?

A: It's important to relax. Watch your voice and be sure to stay relaxed, rather than holding tension. If you're trying too hard for the notes, you'll forget about relaxing the voice. The parts recordings are great, because you can listen and sing along with a good model. I've found that when people don't listen to a practice tape, or when they sing on their own, they can develop habits that aren't helpful. It's good

to have a practice recording, because it helps you develop habits that help key you right into the inspiration of the song. Or if you can play it correctly on a keyboard, that's all right, too.

Practice as much as possible. I've seen that the people who take the time to practice between rehearsals make progress very quickly. The people who don't have as much time certainly get the vibration and move along just fine. But practice does help.

Performance is about giving out what you've received. When you practice on your own, you become more aware of what's coming out of you, and then when you go to practice you're more comfortable. You're more comfortable with blending, and singing the song with everybody in harmony. You get more joy, and of course you give more joy. If you give more to it, it's simple math that you'll have more to give, and people can feel it more.

Q: If you can get the mechanical things out of the way, there's more space for inspiration to flow?

A: There sure is. People are sometimes a little disappointed that David discourages us from holding the sheet music when we sing. The reason is that when your attention isn't divided, you can more easily feel the energy and inspiration.

Q: Are there people who want to join the choir, but need to work on their voice before they can sing with the group?

A: I'm working with someone now who experiences tension in the voice, and we're helping them work through that. But they're very dedicated to singing. Swamiji commented to this person, "Why aren't you singing?" It seems he recognized that it would help this person's spiritual life, and be a way that they could grow by giving to people.

People starting out in the music find that it helps them discover their own magnetism, so that they can start to refine it. We work to make the voice relaxed and harmonious. Sometimes people join the choir who don't hear very well and can't match pitch well, and it takes time for them to learn to listen and

calibrate their ears and voice to be able to sing better. Every year, there's at least one person who is working to improve their singing that way.

Q: Dambara suggested that people who are starting out can go to kirtans and practice singing that way.

A: Yes, it's perfect!

Q: Do you find that when people begin singing Swamiji's music, they experience a personal transformation? Or that it helps their meditation?

A: I think it does. I don't recall a specific example. But I know from my own experience that, for one thing, you can breathe better, and it transfers to Kriya. In choir this week, I suggested that they think of Kriya breathing when they inhale and exhale, to make it relaxed while they sing, and perhaps even think of a musical phrase as a Kriya breath. They seemed to like that, and it changed their sound when they thought of it that way.

Q: Chaitanya's final words of advice to the singers in Palo Alto, just before he moved to the Village, was to breathe in and then breathe out into the song.

A: That's a wonderful analogy.

Q: Can you think of other ways that it's been personally transforming for you to sing the Ananda music?

A: I've worked through a lot with the music. Much of it had to do with letting go of tension, both mental and physical. Coming in as a trained musician, I found all kinds of things that I was holding onto that were preventing me from letting go and really experiencing the music.

I feel I've become a different person as a result of meditation and singing the music, and of course listening to Swamiji. Listening to Swamiji speak, I feel, is like listening to music. I don't believe that the path is primarily about philosophy, or tools for changing myself or improving situations with others. It's more of a flow, and I think that's something the music has taught me, that I can flow with inspiration

and with what the music has to give to others, and that I can let go.

I find that the path is largely a process of learning to let go, until at the end of life you let go and rise through the spiritual eye. And the music aids that process because you become used to letting go.

Music is perfect for developing that attitude. You're standing up before others like a transparent window pane, and everybody can see right through you. They see you, they hear you, and you have nothing to hide. It's very transforming. I've overcome tremendous obstacles of holding onto things, and it's been a freeing experience.

Q: Has that happened, in part, by being asked to do solos?

A: Well, yes and no. Yes, because it helps you get there faster. I think it was in 1992, we performed the Oratorio with Swami, and I played the trumpet. And for some reason, I was petrified. I had performed for years, but it challenged me to work out a lot of tension and holding on.

Before the performance, we went to the theater and sat down and Swamiji prayed with us. He said, "Help us to sing and play this music so that all who hear the music will receive what they need, not what we think they need." Isn't that wonderful? That's it! Don't hold on to anything, so that people will receive what *they* need.

Q: In a recent talk, Swami mentioned that he's never felt self-conscious or fearful about getting up and speaking because he always has an attitude of giving. Have you noticed that it helps with stage fright?

A: Yes, that is absolutely the key. You get up in front of the microphone, and you think of the grace for *them*. That's what you think of, instead of how you'll do, how it will sound, and how you'll be perceived. You focus on them, and that's what frees us from ego. And, again, the music is like a stained glass window. They're looking right through you. You're standing there, and you are also becoming clear, and you realize that you're transparent, and

that it's the goal.

Q: Two of the people I've interviewed mentioned that being part of the choir is like becoming part of a community.

A: I feel strongly about that. Swami tells the story of a Chinese emperor who would send his officials to the various provinces to see how they were doing. He said, "Listen to their music." Because if the music was harmonious, the emperor knew that things were all right in that province.

Sometimes we'll have a choir rehearsal that will be a bit too chatty. People will talk, and you can tell how everybody's doing, or what's going on in the community – if, for example, a family or a person is facing a challenge. Or they're tuning in to something that Swamiji is going through. And you can more or less tell how people are moving through it.

But it does drive me nuts. I want to say to people "Stop talking and give all your attention to David." Because the music is coming from such a high place, and we're tuning in together to that high place, and everything else is a distraction. Even a little twitter – someone will get distracted and say "Oh, the basses need to go – and they'll sing a phrase." If that could be kept to a minimum, it would be great.

Q: Can you share more about the experience of feeling a sense of oneness with the others in the choir? Is it an important part of being able to give to others? That there be a feeling in the choir of singing as one voice?

A: It's a definite plus. We saw a choir recently that sang as one voice, to the extent that you couldn't pick out one voice among the whole. The Ananda choirs do the same thing, by tuning in to the music itself, and the inspiration coming through the music in the moment. And then it creates a vibration in addition to the music. It's another vibration that's created in the moment. And then people are able to tap in and convey that.

It's uncanny what can happen with the Ananda music. We find that the singers in each of the Ananda communities are getting the same results from the music. And it has little to do with technical skills. You're hearing inspiration purely through a soul. I think that would be the answer to your question, that the soul's inspiration comes out, and then we become something else. Our souls unite with the people in the choir, and something else becomes real. It's an entirely different way of being free, with, as you said, a kind of community experience. One voice, one sound, and one dissolving back into the oneness of God.

Q: Do you have a particular prayer that helps you get out of the way?

A: Well, simply those words, "Help us to get out of the way." Each prayer is different, but if you're about to get up and perform, you can ask Master to bless each one in the choir, so that we can bless others. That would be a simple and powerful prayer.

Chaitanya Mahoney

(Chaitanya teaches voice at Ananda University at Ananda Village.)

Q: Tell us how you got interested in singing.

Chaitanya: It was at St. Francis de Sales High School in Columbus, Ohio. I think it was during sophomore year that I tried out for a variety show and found out I could sing. I sat next to two guys, and at rehearsal one day they said, "Let's start a barbershop quartet."

We knew someone whose father was a barber-shopper, and we started learning the music. I sang with them for seven years.

At one point, we were doing amusement park gigs in Cincinnati, and that's when I first saw *Autobiography of a Yogi*. While we were doing a show in Washington, DC, I picked up the *Autobiography*. Later, we were doing a summer gig at a Gay Nineties restaurant in Cape Cod. It was making me unhappy, because it wasn't what I thought I wanted to do. So I finally picked up the book and read it, a year after I bought it, and that's when I got into spirituality.

To cut a long, complicated story short, I came to Ananda Village for a program, and one day I visited the boutique where Nakula was working. I told him I wanted to buy some music, and he asked me what kind of music I liked. I told him I liked harmony, and he gave me *The Joy Singers in Concert*.

I returned to Upstate New York and listened to the tape and thought, "Oh, that's nice." But I thought it was kind of hokey. Then while I was driving back from visiting friends in Montreal, I listened to the tape again, and when I heard "Cloisters," it just struck me – it hit my heart, and I thought, "Wow," and on the two-hour drive I learned both parts and memorized them.

Years later, I moved to Ananda Palo Alto, and I hadn't been there long when Kirtani told me, "You ought to join the choir." And I remember I turned

and said, "It's inevitable." (laughs) That was in 1990. I had actually lived to Ananda Village and worked at the dairy for a while in 1990, so I'm giving you the shortened version.

I started singing Swami's music and taking lessons from Agni Ferraro. I was also setting up lessons for Agni when he would come to Palo Alto to teach.

Q: Did the Ananda music feel like a good fit from the start?

Chaitanya: Oh, yeah. Once I had the "Cloisters" experience, I was hooked. I really like harmony. I love barbershop. We don't have the same "ring" in our music, but of course you don't get the depth of spiritual experience in the chakras from singing the stupid words in barbershop. (laughs)

I sang some barbershop recently. It was fun, but I was still singing in the Ananda choir and in an ensemble, doing solos and teaching. I did the barbershop as vocal training, because singing those close harmonies you have to be very accurate.

When Swami wrote the Oratorio, he came to Palo Alto and we performed it at the Mountain View Performing Arts Center. Then some years later he wrote the recitatives. While I learned them, I recorded myself, and I realized that there wasn't enough energy in my voice. So I kept recording and listening until I could change one song, then I'd do the same with the next song, until it had energy. I did that with all of the Oratorio songs, and it really changed my singing. I discovered that you need ten to twenty times more energy in your voice than you think. (laughs) It's internal energy. It's hard to talk about it, because you have to experience it.

Q: Did you feel it was a process of attuning yourself?

Chaitanya: Oh, absolutely. You know, Swami gives us the melody, and when we tune back into it, we try to get in front of the window that it came

from, that inspiration where that window is, and try to tune into that. But it takes a lot of energy to do that.

Q: Is it a process, as you said, of going over and over a song until you find the inspiration?

Chaitanya: The process with the Oratorio was to get enough energy so that I could get a flow going inside myself. But then there's always the issue of "getting out of the way." So there's a constant balancing of will power and surrender. But I didn't really understand it until later.

Q: Do you find there's a point where will power and surrender merge in a flow, where you actually feel that you've gotten out of the way?

Chaitanya: It does happen sometimes. I've developed an exercise that allows me to – I talk about it in the syllabus I give students when I teach singing classes. [See Syllabus at the end of this interview.]

Most singers are not conscious when they breathe. Whenever I talk to singers, this is the only thing I talk about. (laughs) It's very simple – to be more conscious when you breathe, to breathe in through your heart, and bring that energy up onto your face, and then it becomes *prana*. It's a packet of information that has its own intelligence, and it has its own direction. It's always changing depending on who's listening. Does that make sense?

Q: It does, in a subtle way. I can see why it would be hard to talk about.

Chaitanya: I spent a lot of time writing the syllabus. The words didn't flow easily, but I kept revising it until it got to a point where I could say "I like that." Everything that's in that syllabus is something I like. It's concise, but it says what my experience is, and what I can teach. My experience with the young students here at Ananda University is that it's teachable.

Q: That brings another point. In my practice, I learn the songs by listening to the mp3 recordings of the tenor parts that you and Dambara have made. First it's just scrambling to get the notes right, but then I begin to pick up the melody that Swami wrote

for the tenors. But, beyond that, it seems there's a quality in the way you or Dambara are singing, as if you're wholly immersed in the song. There's no distraction, no doubts – all your attention is in the song. It's like a song "being sung," where I'm listening and I'm not aware of any personality factors or distractions. I'm wondering if that's a state you strive for consciously when you sing, to be one with the song.

Chaitanya: I hear what you're saying. I'll see if I can break it down a little.

Q: It seems a question of experience also.

Chaitanya: That's definitely true. When I breathe, I'm trying to take in the energy consciously. And then by feeling that energy going out to the audience, it doesn't get stuck in my body. That's when you get nervous, if you're just singing from your body, without that flow, then the nerves take over and it starts to affect your voice, and then you hear your voice get affected, and it makes you even more nervous. I always get nervous in front of a crowd. But if you take that energy, the adrenaline that's created, and put it into that flow, it expands the flow of breathing where you connect and then express it to the audience. You deepen and expand it because of the adrenaline factor. If you get stuck in your body, that nervous energy snowballs – it cascades in your voice and makes you more nervous.

Q: Are you saying you're trying to get out of the ego?

Chaitanya: Well, what I'm describing is a very technical way of doing it. But it's not technical if you're getting into that flow. What I feel when I'm truly in this flow is that Divine Mother really loves everybody. (laughs) You can feel that, and you try to let that love express. When you take a breath and you start to sing, if you're not playing your own tape in your head, She'll express it a certain way for whoever is in front of you. If you're doing a solo especially.

When you're singing in a group, you're really tuning in to the whole group, with the consciousness

of the group. You'll have experiences with the group where you think "Wow, that was amazing." You won't always have that experience, but that's when She's expressing. And She's expressing something for the particular people out there.

That's what I talk about at the bottom of the syllabus, where you ask and you ask and you ask to serve, and it allows the energy to come and serve through you.

Q: I was going to ask you about that next, the last part of the syllabus, because it seems an essential part of the process.

Chaitanya: Well, yes. I'm teaching students at the Ananda University who are Buddhists, and not necessarily part of Ananda. But they all like Swami's music, and they're not much interested in doing other music. And I wrote that last part of the syllabus and handed it out, and they liked it.

It's all spiritual, but some of them have different paths. Some are on our path.

Q: Did you write the syllabus as a shortcut to help people learn more quickly what you've learned over the years?

Chaitanya: Nischala wanted something to put on the Ananda University website, but it's what I've learned, and what I teach.

In the world, they say that "inspiration can't be taught" – you either have it, or you don't. But in our teaching, you can learn it over time, how to connect and sing from inspiration.

Q: What would you say to a person who's come recently to Ananda, and they're sort of timid about starting in the music, but they're thinking, "Maybe I can do this." How would you get them started?

Chaitanya: The first thing I would say is that most of the people in our choirs are not soloists. They're not going to be able to stand up by themselves and sing a part. But they can stand next to someone and sing, and feel the inspiration, and expand the inspiration. At least 50 percent of our

choir is like that.

Say, 50 percent aren't great singers. And sometimes some pretty bad singers float through the cracks. But I like to let people think that it's possible for them. I'll ask them to let me listen to them. I'll take them into a private room and start singing with them. I'm very comfortable with that, because of barbershop. In barbershop, you go anywhere and sing with anybody, and you only need four guys. So I'm very comfortable singing with people, where most people are not.

I'll start singing with them, doing scales and something they know, so they feel comfortable and can sing, and then I can hear how good their ear is, and how good their tonal placement is, their intonation, and so on, and I can make a decision whether they're ready to sing in the choir.

The best thing people can do if they don't "make the cut" is to chant. If they play the harmonium and chant, over time the wires will start getting connected and they may be able to join the choir.

Q: What would you advise people about improving their singing – the quality of their voice, getting in tune with the inspiration of the songs, learning to channel it to others? You cover a lot of this in the syllabus, but I'm wondering if you have any other thoughts.

Chaitanya: They can ask for help. Karen has taught some people in Palo Alto, and Ramesha teaches classes on person and online. Ramesha has very good tonal placement, and he's very good at helping people learn to sing.

What I teach is how to sing from inspiration. That's another approach. You can learn a lot about tonal placement by learning to sing from inspiration, because inspiration improves everything.

Q: It's refreshing to hear you say that.

Chaitanya: The choir might be singing a little flat, and lots of directors would point upward. But Agni Ferraro used a different approach – he would stop the choir and tell a story. (laughs) It would actually improve the quality of the singing, because

they would feel inspired. By telling an inspiring story, he was able to turn things around vibrationally. He would tell stories about his experiences singing with the choir that's based in Assisi. Many of the stories would have humor in them, but there would also be stories with a serious theme, and it was very interesting how people would be able to hit the notes after that.

The breath is important, too. The breath is conscious – it has information about placement. But it's very demanding. Sometimes one of Swami's songs will require that you sing a series of high notes very softly, and you'll think "I can't do that!" But if you don't think about it, but work with the breath, all of a sudden you find that you're doing it. You think "Wow, how did I do that?" And, well, you don't know how, but it doesn't matter, because if you stay connected, you can do it.

You don't have to do this or that, but if you get the placement right then it's more a question of staying connected. The right flow of energy will support singing a high note softly.

Q: As you sing, are you always aware of your breathing?

Chaitanya: I'm trying to be. But it's not easy. Fortunately, music has melody, rhythm, and breathing. So there's a cycle that allows the mind to come back to a starting point. When you're singing, it's easier to keep the mind focused than when you're meditating, because the melody is captivating. And if you can develop the habit of taking a breath consciously, then it deepens the whole experience. It makes it all more alive and inspiring.

Q: Is that kind of like an experience where you're out in public and you want to get calm, and you've been doing kriya and yoga for years, and you know that if you breathe deeply for a while, that there will be a gathering of energy in the heart. And once you have the energy gathered in your heart, you can direct it to good thoughts, expansive thoughts, praying for people, singing, or whatever. Is that the same thing, that gathering of energy in the heart and then using it to sing?

Chaitanya: Yes. I always recommend that people practice it in the Festival of Light when they're singing "Father, Mother, Friend, Our God." It's fairly easy to do then, just practice breathing. And it's easier in rehearsal than in performance. A performance has all this adrenaline and activity that activates the mind. But if you keep practicing, it has an effect over time.

Q: Do you reach a point where performance becomes relaxed, like practice? Where you aren't running down your checklist of things to remember, and you can just sing?

Chaitanya: Well, I have a certain level of consciousness when I sing, but I think the potential for tapping that higher consciousness is unlimited. (laughs) We can always deepen and expand that awareness, and I don't think I've gotten close to being fully aware of the source of the music. I don't look at the process as being easy. I look at it as something that I have to work at.

That's how I look at it – that there are no limits to the inspiration. If you feel the hand of God coming through your heart, and going out and affecting people, then that would be something to aim for. I definitely feel energy moving, but I don't always know what it's doing exactly. I feel inspired, and I feel love for the audience, and I realize that that love isn't coming from me.

Q: Is it going inside and finding some oneness with Divine Mother's love?

Chaitanya: I don't know, it's all in the flow. As I deepen and expand the experience of the breath, I feel more of it. It is a oneness, yes, that reaches out to help everybody who wants to be an instrument. Because, you know, Divine Mother is looking for instruments.

Q: Is there is a process that you use to prepare yourself spiritually before you perform? Do you meditate or pray?

Chaitanya: I'm embarrassed to say that I don't, other than I try to breathe consciously. When Swami wrote the recitatives for the Oratorio, there were four

soloists who sat in front and sang most of those solos. Sometimes Swami sang bass and I sang tenor. One time he was singing bass, and he said, “I wrote this for a bass – here, you sing it.” (laughs) Because some of the songs were a bit high for a bass.

That’s just a little aside. But I noticed that before a concert he would always meditate. He would sit up here and start doing alternate breathing, with the fingers on the forehead, where you close one nostril and breathe through the other for a count, then hold and exhale through the other nostril. He did that for 15 minutes. So that would be a good thing to do, and I’ve thought about it, but I’m embarrassed to say that I haven’t done it.

Q: But you are thinking of the audience.

Chaitanya: I do think of the audience. If we’re singing at Sunday service, it’s easier, because we’re meditating during service. And whenever I pray, I always ask to be able to open and for Divine Mother to shine through us. That’s the only prayer I pray, really – to breathe and be open to that energy.

Q: I remember once asking you how you were able to sing the high notes purely and with a nice, full energy. And your answer was, “Singing this music changes your voice.”

Chaitanya: I did say that, because it’s a real experience. The more you sing – especially drawing the breath through your heart, connecting the heart chakra to the throat chakra where the voice is – the more it affects the quality of the sound. And then Divine Mother demands a pure tone up on the high notes. So you keep singing until it sounds beautiful. Keep practicing and singing the music until it sounds nicer. And then, all of a sudden, if it’s making that connection, it’s happening. And then when it’s not happening, say you’ve got a cold or something, it’s frustrating.

I teach an exercise that helps a lot. It’s for stretching out the floating ribs. Swami once had me put my hand on his back while he sang, and when he breathed, his ribs came apart. It was like huge – his the chest was expanding in all directions, 360

degrees. When you breathe like that, you can feel more of the diaphragm. That’s my experience after doing this exercise – you feel more of the diaphragm, and then you can create more support, which makes it easier to sing the higher notes.

This is technical stuff that I teach. I usually start by having the students do the Half Moon Pose, where you breathe deeply, into the back part of the ribs, which they call the floating ribs, and you try to expand that range. Then, when you exhale, you come down sideways and it stretch those ribs. Then you breathe in again, and you exhale and stretch. You do that maybe four times on each side, and then you keep your chest erect.

Then we do bubbling and trilling. In bubbling and trilling, you do it while you’re breathing in deeply and expanding the rib cage so you can feel the diaphragm. Then you sing more from the diaphragm than the throat. The breath for singing a note starts with the diaphragm squeezing in on the air, instead of from constricting the throat, and it allows the throat to be more relaxed.

Bubbling allows you to be aware of the various passages of sound in the head, and go in and out of them more easily. The main passage for everyone is straight up, and then for the men, when you get up as high as E-flat, it goes back. It’s like an air column that rises from the diaphragm and then turns back. You get the air up and then it goes into different chambers in your head. When we go really high – men don’t sing that high, but the women do – there’s another passage that’s even further back.

But you do the exercises – the trilling and bubbling – because they allow you to go in and out of these passages smoothly, with support from the diaphragm. It makes a natural connection. The vibration of the bubbling and trilling also relaxes the face and opens the cavities that resonate with the voice. When they open and your throat’s relaxed, there’s no distortion.

We sang in Palo Alto at some event, and Joan Baez sang. I was about 20 yards away, where I could hear her voice clearly. There was no distortion, just a

clear, ringing bell. It was like a Stradivarius instrument.

I've had to help people learn to sing, starting with an average voice where there's lots of tension in the throat, and using these methods with the breath to make the voice pure, without distortion. Does that make sense.

Q: It does. I find it's hugely helpful to do any kind of exercises that open the rib cage. I had spinal surgeries, years ago, and that area can get tight. I find that loosening the spine by stretching backward and sideways and opening the rib cage makes a tremendous difference in how the energy can flow – I feel almost like a different person. It makes it much more harmonious and smooth.

Chaitanya: We usually aren't aware of the back half of our bodies. Bt in singing, if you're aware of the heart chakra in your back, and you breathe into that, then you have a different experience. I've practiced this for four or five years, and I can feel the heart chakra as a flower, and it shines upward when the breath comes across it, then it makes me smile.

It's from consciously doing this exercise over a period of time. That's been my experience. But then it gets easier as all of a sudden these things are working for you, without a lot of boredom of doing an exercise over and over without much response. The inspiration of the music really helps. (laughs) You keep coming back and having the opportunity to do it.

Fortunately we have the Festival where we sing things that demand it. I look forward to the Festival,

and that's why I recommend it as a chance to practice these things. I have a powerful experience of the Festival every Sunday, because of the singing – because I engage it, I don't merely sing it, I engage it. I'm trying to deepen and expand it. When a song's over, I say, "Oh, the song's over – shucks." By the time they do the touch of light, I am in tears, usually. That's my experience. That's why I recommend the Festival as a way of practicing.

Formerly when I would teach, I noticed that nobody practiced the technical stuff. I thought, "Well that's stupid. I've got to figure out something else." And this exercise came to me.

If you listen to Swami's voice when he sings, he has it. in a video and audio of his called "The Voice," he said one sentence that's a part of who he is, and that's become my whole teaching. I expanded my whole syllabus from that one sentence. He talks about using the body as a "sounding board." I extrapolated from that simple statement, and this whole practice came to me, that eventually became the syllabus.

It definitely works. I'm thinking particularly of the young college students who come to this place that's unusual. I'm thinking of one student particularly who's very talented and could do what I taught him, though he couldn't do it all the time, and so it was frustrating for him. But he knew it was a real thing. If his experience is like mine, and he keeps practicing, I'm sure it will be easier for him, over time. Every week, I get new insights into the "method."

Chaitanya: A Syllabus: Conscious Devotional Singing

1. **Singing Technique.** Learn to expand the area of the floating ribs, and aware of how the diaphragm connects to this area, and how a flow of energy that starts there and creates power in the voice. Certain exercises will help you make this connection, and help you learn to move in and out fluidly through the different registers of the voice.

2. **Breathing.** Most singers “go unconscious” when they breathe. In this particular style of singing, you learn that when you breathe is when you need **to be the most conscious**. If you can develop the habit of using **conscious breath**, all the other aspects of singing will become easier.

3. **Connecting.** Once you can make a habit of conscious breathing, you can begin learning to connect to a greater awareness that gives direction, power, devotion, and humility to the voice.

4. **Conscious Devotional Singing.** It then becomes a matter of practicing and enjoying your practice, which changes the quality of your voice. You gradually begin to “Self-Realize the Divine Voice” as you, and unique only to you.

5. **Performing.** Finally, if you wish to perform with your voice, you can work to overcome nervousness and stage fright – which this style of singing will help you naturally transcend. Conscious Devotional Singing is (a) opening to the **breath (inspiration)**, (b) directing your **will power** with **conviction inwardly** upon a phrase, which then (c) creates **an experience of consciousness** that you can (d) direct outwardly to **touch people**.

Further Steps

The purpose of Swamiji’s music is to serve!

How does one do that? How can we learn to serve through singing Ananda’s music?

By asking, asking, asking, and asking to serve, before one sings!

When you are able to do this correctly, the energy of the Divine Mother comes from the back, supports and shapes your instrument, then moves outward to express Her qualities and touch the people in front of your instrument, as she chooses.

This is done through the in-breath, where Divine Mother will enter as prana, giving power, direction, devotion, and humility to your voice.

Through practice and experience, the instrument then begins to feel love (Divine Mother) entering on the in-breath and then Her love moving out on the out-breath, as you observe it (without judgment or thinking) to touch the people in front of you. You feel Her loving the audience.

Anyone can do this, no matter what your voice is like. (Bharat is a glorious example of this!!! His instrument may not be able to sing in tune, but spiritually he is very much in tune with this practice. He is a great example for all the Ananda singers. When I sit near him at Sunday service, I am inspired by his devotion, because I’ve learned to look past his instrument and feel the Divine Mother expressing devotion through him.

The lesson is that if you say you cannot do this style of singing because your instrument gets in the way, it is simply not true. Your voice can be transcended, if you truly want to – and through transcending, everything will improve, including the instrument, and especially the soul’s expression.

She is the greatest teacher!

Nirmala Shuppe

(Nirmala is the co-spiritual director, with her husband, Dharmadas, of Ananda India. She also directs the Ananda music ministry in India.)

I arrived at Ananda Village in August, 1975, and joined the apprentice program. Because I had studied piano as a child, I immediately began playing the harmonium and learning to chant. Soon, I was asked to help lead chanting for the group, and I got very involved in Master's music and devoted my free time to chanting on my own.

A few months later, I joined "The Gandharvas," which was the name of Ananda's small singing group at the time. (The Gandharvas are the "Celestial Singers" from the Hindu scriptures.) Shivani had told Swamiji, "Nirmala has a 'true' voice," meaning that I could carry a tune – and I was enlisted!

As I concentrated on Swamiji's music, chanting was put on the "back burner" for several years. Later, when I got involved in chanting again, I found that my attunement with it had deepened because of my work with Swamiji's music. Master and Swamiji are highly important influences in our lives as devotees. Working with their music helps us to attune to them in amazing ways.

In those early days, copies of music weren't easy to come by – it was the age of the mimeograph machine. Even after Xerox was invented, we had to drive 16 miles into town to get copies made. When we did manage to get those precious copies, they were in Swamiji's original handwritten notation, Xeroxed from his originals. Since these copies were scarce, I learned most of the songs by having Parvati, or another gurubhai, sing them in my ear as I sang along. It worked just fine.

In those days, the Gandharvas sang at Sunday service, which was held at the Seclusion Retreat. We would wait outside, and when it was time for us to sing, we would come into the temple. One morning, as we were waiting, a large black bear came walking

on his hind legs toward us through the trees. That morning, we entered the temple a little early...

In 1978, Swamiji led a nationwide lecture tour, accompanied by the Gandharvas, followed by another tour in 1979. I went on the second tour. Swamiji often related this story about our experiences:

"The singers would start the evening program with a couple of songs, which would take about 5 minutes. Then I would speak for an hour and a half. The singers would close the program with a song or two, lasting another 3 to 5 minutes. As I stood at the door shaking hands with people as they left the hall, people would say to me: 'The music was wonderful!'"

The point Swamiji was making is that music cuts through all the intellectual barriers and touches people's hearts. Even though the singing took just a few minutes compared to the 90 minutes of his talk, it was memorable for people.

Soon after that tour, a group of us moved to Palo Alto to "get the music out there." We sang in churches, schools, and for many civic groups.

The group dissolved after a year or so, when Ram and Dianna were asked to move to Italy to head up our work there. The rest of us moved back to the Village, where we continued the music outreach with a small group called "The Joy Singers": Jeannie, Lakshman (Michael Simpson), Nirmala, Vasudeva, and Tricia. (Linda and Agni joined us later.)

We traveled up and down the West Coast giving concerts, staying with devotees, sleeping on couches or the floor in their homes. It wasn't an easy life, but we were totally committed to bringing Swamiji's music to a broader audience.

One dark night, as we were driving to an engagement, someone in the car next to us on the freeway started gesticulating wildly to get our

attention. We thought the person was either drunk or crazy, so we ignored him.

Then another person started doing the same thing. Eventually we realized that the window in the tailgate of our station wagon was open, and our performance costumes were flying out the back!

We pulled over and spent a hilarious half hour dodging traffic as we gathered up our precious clothing. When we got to the engagement, we found that everything was fine except for Vasudeva's white shirt, which had a black tire track etched diagonally across the front – and we had ended up with one extra shoe! (Vasudeva kept his guitar strapped in front of him the whole night, so we got by unscathed.)

In 1985, I accompanied an Ananda pilgrimage to the Holy Land as the choir director. Everyone on the tour learned to sing Swamiji's oratorio, "Christ Lives," which he had composed to highlight the major events of Christ's life. We wanted to be able to sing the songs in the actual places where those historical events had occurred.

It was a thrilling prospect, but some of the people on the tour had NEVER sung before – and preparing everyone was an interesting challenge, to say the least.

It turned out to be an amazing blessing to sing in the holy shrines. Even if we weren't technically perfect, other people who heard us often asked if we were a "professional choir" because we sounded so good. Devotion + the good acoustics in those holy places = an incredible sound.

We ended the pilgrimage in Italy, where we visited the shrines of Saint Francis in Assisi, and then stayed at our fledgling Ananda center in Como. While we were in Italy, Swamiji asked Michael Simpson and me to stay on and start the music ministry there.

That winter, we lived at the center in Como, where we worked with Ram, Dianna, and Kirtani as the other members of our singing group. It was during those cold winter days, while I played the

harmonium with gloves on, that we discovered how beautiful the guitar and harmonium sound *together*, and we began working out the chords for Master's and Swamiji's chants to facilitate their union. (Originally at Ananda, only the harmonium was used to lead chanting. In the mid-1980's, the guitar started to be used, but the two instruments didn't play together. The marriage of the two instruments was a match made in heaven: the guitar stimulates devotion in the heart, while the harmonium provides the deep vibration of Aum: an unbeatable combination.)

A memorable moment for the Joy Singers came that summer, when we sang for a Veglio Blood Bank event, which took place near where we lived. It was an evening performance on an outdoor stage, and I remember we were introduced – in Italian, of course – as "Ananda! They don't eat meat! They don't drink alcohol! They don't have children!" These American yogis were indeed an oddity!

Since it was the height of summer, and the brilliant spotlights shining on the stage seemed to be the only lights for miles around, every flying insect in the country seemed magnetically drawn to land on us! It was sheer tapasya to keep still, keep smiling, and keep singing with all that crawling, buzzing, and tickling. Those insects were out for our blood at the Veglio Blood Bank!

Sometimes, singing for God is martyrdom.

Later that year, we moved our Ananda Europa center from Como to its permanent home in Assisi. During my time there, we continued to build the music outreach, touring with various singing groups throughout Italy and Germany.

In early 1988, I returned to Ananda Village, where I led several small Joy Singers groups. I got very involved with chanting again, and it became the focus of my sadhana. Our chanting group created a book called "Chants for Guitar and Harmonium" that mapped out the chords for many of the chants so that both instruments could play them together. We enjoyed many happy session with Swamiji confirming the chord choices. (The book gradually

evolved, and it took a big step in the late 1990s with the help of Lakshman [Alan Heubert], Jeannie, and a devotee in the Southwest who helped put the music into the Finale notation program. In recent years, David Eby and Jeannie have developed it further.)

It was truly a blessed time in my life: a couple of times a week from 7-9 p.m. we would have singing rehearsal to work on Swamiji's songs, and then we would chant together late into the night and early morning. Our chanting group was invited to lead meditations and kirtans, and we would go anywhere, anytime, for the opportunity to chant.

I remember a particularly cold, snowy Saturday morning: we had been asked to lead a meditation starting at 5 a.m at the Seclusion Retreat, six miles away.

In the pre-dawn darkness, we piled into our rickety old van that didn't have a heater and headed up the slippery road. When we got to the temple, it was stone cold. As we began chanting, I noticed that one of my friends was hitting a wrong chord on the guitar at the same point in every repetition. I couldn't understand it since he was an excellent guitarist. I glanced over at him and realized that his hand was frozen, and he couldn't form the chord! I knew the effort he was putting forth to play the guitar in the cold, and joy filled me. Rare are times when "mistakes" are thrilling, but this was one of them. What an incredible blessing is satsang!

During this period, I was asked to lead the music ministry at Ananda, and I spent several years focused on creating programs for special events. The music overlapped with other entertainment, including Reader's Theatre performances of stories by the British humorist, P. G. Wodehouse, a favorite at Ananda.

We created theatrical vignettes from Master's *Autobiography of a Yogi*, from the Bible, and from Swamiji's music and his "Festival of Light" and other writings, to celebrate holidays, the Masters' birthdays and mahasamadhis, themed weekend and week-long programs, etc.

We performed excerpts from Shakespeare's plays to highlight Swamiji's Shakespeare songs: a vignette from "A Midsummer Night's Dream" around the song "Fairies' Lullaby," for example.

We had fun acting out other songs of Swamiji's as well: "Hawaiiana" (performed by someone who had studied hula dancing), "Dracula's Castle" (with two ladies dressed in black capes), "Cherry Blossoms in Kyoto" (with kimonos and Japanese umbrellas), "It's Time to Go to School" (singers dressed as ducks in sailor suits, just as Swamiji dreamed the song as a child), "The Philosopher and the Boatman," "If You're Seeking Freedom," and so on. It was all great fun!

The story I have heard most often during my years as a choir director is this simple one, with varying details: "I almost didn't come to rehearsal tonight because...(fill in the blank) but then I managed to get myself here. I am SO glad I came! I feel much better, more in tune, and happier! (Again, fill in the blank!)"

Having Swamiji's music flowing through us is an unfailing way to raise our energy and feel inspired again.

In 1991, Peter Schuppe, who was in charge of the music at the Ananda center in Seattle, invited me to do a music weekend there. Shortly after, we were married. We lived in Seattle until 1994, when we returned to the Village and began working for Crystal Clarity Design and Publications, helping publish Swamiji's books and music.

For the next nine years, we continued to be very involved with the music at Ananda, including the Christmas season group, "The Victorian Singers," that has provided excellent public relations for Ananda by singing at many venues throughout California since 1980. We also led Ananda's "Joyful Arts Ministry" until Swamiji invited us to come to India to help him start Ananda's work there.

So far in India, our singing groups have performed at Swamiji's major speaking events, as well as performing excerpts from his play, "The

Peace Treaty.” We have performed Wodehouse plays, and have sung regularly for satsangs and other programs.

Still, much, much more is needed to help develop the music in India.

Ananda’s music is an indispensable way for people to develop attunement on this path. Together

with chanting, it provides a strong foundation for the devotee’s spiritual life. It has been our great blessing to work with Swamiji’s and Master’s music, and we strongly encourage everyone to take advantage of this wellspring of divine joy.

Oh, Indian devotees, come join the choir!

Aum, n.

Dambara Begley

(Dambara Begley is active in the music ministry at Ananda Sangha in Palo Alto, California.)

Q: When did you first come to Ananda?

Dambara: It was 1987. A friend told me about a flyer for a slideshow about India – this was in Palo Alto – and I was thinking of walking around the world looking for truth. So this was God's hook for me to see this slideshow, which turned out to be about the first Ananda pilgrimage, with Asha Praver narrating. I enjoyed the slides, but I especially enjoyed Asha's clarity. I asked her afterward, "What *is* that?" And she graciously pointed me to the boutique, where I found some info on the classes they offered. I also got a copy of *The Path*, Swami Kriyananda's autobiography. They were handing out the paperback edition for free at the time, and I took it home and read up to the point where he meets Paramhansa Yogananda, then I bought Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*, and I was just sold. Eventually I took the meditation classes, and here we are.

Q: What sold you about it?

Dambara: First of all, I was ripe. I was a truth seeker. I had wanted to be a priest as a kid — I was raised in the Catholic church, but as a teenager I thought it was all kind of naïve – what I heard them teach, and how they would answer my questions. So I threw it away and decided to go off on my own and seek answers.

I was joking with the friend who'd told me about the flyer — I said, "I'm going to get a personalized license plate that says 'ICKTCHR.'" "I seek a teacher." Looking back, I can see that on some level I knew what I was talking about. I was thinking, "I've done everything I know how to do, and I'm still not getting the answers I want, so I need a guide. I need a teacher," without really knowing what that meant. But the soul knew – and I think it shows that I was ripe for it to happen. And, as they say, when you're desperate enough that you're ready to go anywhere, your teacher comes to you. So I didn't have to travel

around the world, and it saved a lot of time and expense.

When I read *The Path* and *Autobiography of a Yogi*, I knew it was "mine." I knew it was true, and it was true in a way that my heart was overjoyed with, because there were answers that I hadn't seen or heard anywhere else. I had asked lots of people, been lots of places and heard lots of things, but this spoke to me. And once I recognized it, I dove in.

Q: Did you visit Ananda Village after that?

Dambara: A year and a half later, I had a counseling session with Asha, and at the end she mentioned a program for newcomers that was being resurrected at the Village. It was called Cities of Light. It resonated with me, and so I called Bent Hansen to ask about the program, and he said, "Well, that's nice, but we haven't really even printed the flyers yet." But I ended up going, and when two months had passed, I knew I wanted to move there. I returned to the Bay Area and made some more money, then I moved to the Village.

Q: Did you get a job at the Village right away?

Dambara: I went through the monastic training, where you spent a year living at the Meditation Retreat to give you time to go deep in the teachings. Then I got a job with a database marketing company that was owned by an Ananda member. It was an intense, involving work environment. Meanwhile, the program at the Meditation Retreat was continuing. One night, Prakash was giving a class on Kriya Yoga, but there were some things that came up at the company, and I figured I needed to stay late. So I called Anandi and told her I wouldn't be able to make the class. And I was surprised by her response. It was very direct and severe — she said, "That's not reality! *This* is reality!" I've since realized, of course, that it's true, that what seems so urgent and impressive in the outside world – compared to the spiritual life and understanding Kriya and how it applies – that's much more eternal and much more real. So it was a good lesson.

Q: Had you been interested in music before you came to Ananda?

Dambara: Yes, I'd always enjoyed singing. In our house, my mother would sing along to record albums of Broadway musicals. She and her brothers and sisters loved singing, and they would sing together and have lots of fun. That was the environment, the joy of singing that I picked up from her. She would always harmonize – there would be a melody on a record, and she would harmonize with it. That was the background that inspired me; I ended up singing a lot and enjoying it.

Q: Were you happy to discover that there was a big music scene at Ananda?

Dambara: Oh, totally. I had done some minor rock band gigs in high school, and it was all fun, but it was very ego-oriented – “Here I am on the stage, and everybody’s looking at *me*.” It ran its course, like other kinds of music did – you’d get into it for a while, but it would run dry. I had studied piano for several years, but all of it petered out after a point, and when it no longer had any creative inspiration for me, I would lose interest. So by the time I got to Ananda, I had dabbled in many things, but none of them stuck. When I heard the music that was coming from Ananda, it overjoyed me.

At the Meditation Retreat, the whole idea was not to get outwardly involved for the first year, just focus on the teachings, go as deep as you could, and build a good foundation. Which to this day I recommend as a good way to start. But after that first year, when I was invited to be part of the choir rehearsals, I loved it.

The music that I heard from Swami Kriyananda was finally music that was worthwhile to sing. When Swami describes his early musical training, he remarks how lots of classical songs have nice melodies, but what are you really singing? Nothing hugely uplifting. So, finally, here was music that *was* hugely uplifting. It was a joy, and it continues to be a joy.

Q: It hasn't gotten old for you?

Dambara: Uh-uh. I mean, I still want it to be creative. I don't know if it's a fault that I need to work on, or if it's a common thing that everyone feels, but I thrive on challenge and creative stimulation. And, of course, you can't just be passive and rely on other people to always provide that for you.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I'm always hoping that there'll be something new coming along within the Ananda world to challenge me. Like the rare occasions when Swami would come up with a new piece of music, or new arrangements for the parts of a song. He would walk in and hand us the music, and for me it was like, “Yes!” All of my molecules would rise to the occasion to study it and learn it. To me, that's a really fun moment, learning something new. Like the things David Eby is doing up at the Village, to me that's an example of something new and creative. [David is a professional cellist who's deeply involved with the Ananda music.]

Q: What is he doing? New arrangements?

Dambara: Well, yes. He's taking the talent that exists and seeing how we can use it creatively to interpret Swami's music. And what's brilliant is that he's not only done incredibly amazing, creative things, but he's put so much energy into helping people learn to do new things, learn to play new instruments, and giving them ideas for all kinds of new things they can learn. And the different sounds, the different groups that have come together are very impressive, and lots of fun.

Q: Does it reflect what Swami Kriyananda has said, that restrictions often tend to promote creativity, instead of hindering it? The example he gives is Muslim art, which doesn't allow depicting living forms, yet it led to an explosion of creativity in abstract design. Do you find that it works like that with Ananda's music, with a strictly defined repertoire of about 400 pieces?

Dambara: Earlier, when I was talking about feeling less inspired than at other times – that doesn't apply to the music or the message in the music. To

me, it applies to re-doing the same things *I've* done before, personally.

It's like the Festival of Light. You can come and listen to it every Sunday morning, and some people might say, "Oh, this is the same thing I heard last Sunday." But others might say, "Wow – this is ever-new." I find that when I listen to Swami's songs, the inspiration behind them never ceases to inspire me.

Q: He says that every note of his music comes from superconsciousness. I see a mental picture of music that's coming from a higher dimension. Does it strike a chord with you that perhaps you're trying to do the same thing, reach into that higher dimension and channel the same inspiration when you sing the music? Drill a new hole?

Dambara: Oh, gosh, that may be. I think what strikes a chord is that it's a little too easy to be passive and cruise and rest on the laurels of what you've done before. But that's not what channels joy for us. What provides the joy is lifting our energy up. That's our task, to learn, by trial and error, to do that. And just keep putting out the effort. Any effort you put out to be fresh and creative is never wasted – ever.

Q: Swami Kriyananda has also said that people occasionally come to Ananda and don't appreciate what's offered. They try to be creative, but it's ego-driven. What is creativity?

Dambara: Hmm. I'll give you my view. It's kind of like religion and politics – creativity has that same charge with people. "Gee, are you restricted to just performing Swami's music? Can you only sing this music?" And so on. When you're having so much fun with it, it's not an issue.

I've always have had lots of fun with it, so I haven't really understood what the issue is about people feeling that it's not enough. But I have seen cases where people felt that they needed to do their own thing, or express something their own way. And it may be that, karmically, for them, their expansion, their next step, was to do that. But usually it meant

moving away from Ananda and doing it. That's what the result ended up being. It's hard to know another person's karma. But I have seen that generally speaking, when folks really felt a strong need to do their own thing, they left Ananda. And I think what we're doing here is that we're trying to surrender the ego. But it's not in the same way as the old monastics, where, in the extreme caricature, you're taught to obey your superior blindly by doing things that are just plain dumb, with the goal of thrashing down your creativity and willfulness. That's not what we're doing. We're trying to surrender the part of the mind that always wants to jump right up and have the first and last word. It's such a strong habit, but it closes off the flow of inspiration. So it's important to take the time to tune in to whatever holes Swami has drilled into the Infinite, to use your terminology, and whatever ray is coming through. And find out how I can tune in to it in a way that will help me get where I want to go.

I love Swami's music, and tuning in to it is so much more fulfilling for me, on an experiential level. In recent weeks I've recorded "Prairie Home Companion" and I'll listen to it sometimes while I'm driving. I think Garrison Keillor is one of the most brilliant and creative humorists alive. And the music is very fun and creative. Yet when I hear the music and it replays in my mind, I realize, "The vibration that this is creating inside me is just not as uplifted as what I'm used to, listening to Swami's music."

I can feel the difference inside. So it isn't a matter of saying, "Oh, bad boy!" and therefore I never listen to it again. It's tuning in and asking "Okay, where does this register, you know, inside of me?" Is my consciousness feeling uplifted and joyful and really, really happy and clear, and poking through to the other side? Or is it just repeating the same old jingles, going around in circles? I've done enough of that in this life. I think I've done way lots of that. And so it kind of hurts my heart inside, when I find that I'm just spinning around instead of lifting up.

So that's the crossroads that I find myself at. And I just don't find any other music that's as

satisfying. So it isn't that I've restricted myself from listening to it. It's that, you know, when you *love* this particular kind of thing, you just *want* to do it – why not? I tune in to other stuff on occasion, out of curiosity and for comparison's sake. But, so far, this is the thing that's been most satisfying to my soul. (Photo: Dambara sings a solo during a performance of the oratorio "Christ Lives.")

Q: You've answered my next question, which is about the effect that the music has on you personally.

Dambara: Oh, it's a godsend. One of the first things I did when I came to Ananda Palo Alto was gobble up every cassette tape of talks by Asha and Swami. I think that, vibrationally, consuming as much of that "nutritional element" as I could was so useful to me. Maybe I'm extreme on the side of relating to things audially, through my ears. But for me, it worked. So, when new people come around, or even people who've been here for a while, I just want to promote listening to talk tapes, listening to music tapes, as often as possible, because it's worked for me.

I don't know whether it works for other people as much. But I know that the message, the inspiration that can come through the music, it bypasses the brain and goes right into the consciousness in such a way that it kind of replays back to you at the right times. I find myself in certain situations where just a phrase of a song will come through, and it's the right answer or comment to a situation that I'm asking about, or questioning inside. It's so much more fun having that kind of jingle going on in your

consciousness, than the really dumb ones that you hear on the phone while you're on hold, or in the supermarket.

Q: It's a kind of music that changes your level of consciousness?

Dambara: Oh, yeah. And again, for me, it isn't something I try to do. It's just something that my heart is naturally drawn to. I love it, so I want more of it all the time. (Photo: Dambara, upper right, during a performance of "Christ Lives.")

Q: Is it an emotional experience?

Dambara: Not so much. Which is kind of a relief. When you hear most popular music, teenage music, and even a lot of classical music, it grabs your heart and stirs it up. It may feel stimulating for a while, but it doesn't really take you anywhere high. I'm thinking of an extreme example, *Phantom of the Opera*. You see the movie, and okay, it's a really well-done movie, and the music is quite dramatic and quite an emotional factor. But afterward I ask myself, "Is this a painting that I really want to hang on my wall and look at all the time?" No, it's not.

In fact, by contrast, it shows me that a lot of the art that's out there is very creatively clever and dramatically emotional, but is it spiritually uplifting? I don't think so. It may be, in the sense that, okay, by comparison with where you were, maybe it moved things along, or moved some energy, or got you enthusiastic about something, or just kind of cleared up the energy channels somehow. But, to me, it's not as deeply satisfying, and it doesn't point to a direction where I want to head. There may be other kinds of music out there, and I'm sure there are. But it's like Swami says, "There may be lots of good mothers, but this one is mine." This is the music I'm going to listen to. Because I can relate to the lessons that I get from it.

Q: A lot of popular music picks you up, spins you around, and sets you back down where you were.

Dambara: Yeah. It's like the difference between having a relationship where your heart

is pumping and you can't sleep well and your mind is going around, and you think that you're in love, but really, after a while you're just exhausted. As opposed to a relationship where you're joyful and fulfilled and happy, and you sleep well and look forward to the next day, and you're healthier and healthier.

Q: If a person wants to sing Swami's music, are there attitudes that will help them get in tune with its message?

Dambara: Hang out with people. Hang out with Ananda people. Hang out with people who meditate. Hang out with people who sing the music. Because, again, you're absorbing the vibrations. I've seen cases where people had some choir background and stepped into an Ananda Sunday service, or a friend brought them, and they thought, "Hey, this is for me. I love the music, I'd love to join the choir." But generally speaking, what we've found is that when people have been given the opportunity to just sort of pop right into the choir, it's like cogs in a wheel that don't mesh. Because they haven't had time to absorb the vibration that the other people in the group have.

The other people in the group are already meditating, they've studied the teachings, they're receptive to the particular ray of inspiration that's coming through. So they're already tuned in to that channel, and when they sing it's just another expression of that. Whereas somebody who's coming in from the cold, so to speak, they're doing their best to join in and sing well, but they're at a disadvantage, both for them and for the group, because they're not tuning in as well as the other people are, and they're maybe wondering why they're feeling a little off. And I don't know whether they're even that conscious of it. But what I've seen is that they don't stick around very long. Maybe they don't come back to Sunday service anymore, because they think, "Oh well, this isn't for me."

I think that's why it's important, and we have an unspoken policy now in Palo Alto that before you consider jumping into the choir, it's important to be on the path, be meditating, attend classes, know the

teachings, and hang out with people. Then I find that if you kind of relax and go with the program, things will unfold in the way they're supposed to. And by "program" I don't mean doing everything the way other people say, or whatever. Because this path is very organic, it has all developed organically through the years. Nobody really knows "the answer," but everybody's always trying to figure out what's going to work for people.

The other thing is that I, personally, love the idea of reading the lyrics to Swami's music as poetry, just by themselves, not even thinking about the music. In the past, there have been books that had the lyrics printed in them, like a book of poems. But it's wonderful, because he's expressing, in every song, the teachings of this path. And it blows my mind. You want to talk about creativity, that's the thing for me that's endlessly creative, is appreciating, over and over, on ever deeper levels, as I get more mature, and as I get deeper, how Swami is always, in no matter what format – even if it's just a little ditty like "Napoli" – he's expressing eternal teachings from so many different angles. And the words themselves are deep in that way.

Q: For people who've joined a group and are singing Swami's songs, do you find there's a best way to prepare for a rehearsal or a performance?

Dambara: It's so individual. You know, it depends on your singing background. I know that for some people it may take more effort to learn parts, where they have to listen to a tape over and over. It depends on what you've done in the past and how easily it comes to you, in terms of the technical side. So I think the answer is that you do whatever you need to do.

Q: What about the attunement side?

Dambara: I think, again, it's something that's individual and spontaneous. It's got to come from the heart. Most people that I see are drawn to sing the music, they do it because they love it. Whether it's loving to sing, or it's the vibration, or a combination – who's to say? But Divine Mother always opens our heart and draws us to the things that are going to be

useful for us. So I think it's really individual.

Q: During a performance, do you feel that you're giving to people?

Dambara: Oh, yeah. You know how sometimes somebody will ask you a question and you feel so happy that you were there at the right time to help them? It's like "Thanks, God, for letting me be a channel for them." But, again, there's a spectrum – are you a pure and clear, hundred-percent channel for the Divine as it expresses through the music? Well, most of us probably are not a hundred percent, but we try our best.

I think that every once in a while there's ego, there are habits, there's fear, all these things that get in the way. But still, given that, so much energy and light pours through this music. And other people feel it. When I've seen a videotape of an Ananda group singing, what strikes me is, yes, okay, the music's gorgeous, and yes, it's technically great, and

everybody's nicely dressed. But what really comes through is the energy in the group, and the sheer joy and smiles and enthusiasm and heart quality. That's what we're really looking for. That's the message that gets through to people, and that's what they feel in the music.

Q: Is there a special energy that comes through at performances, as opposed to rehearsals?

Dambara: Oh, yes. The Oratorio is one example, and then some of the Sunday services and other events, where no matter how good the rehearsals are, when the event itself happens, it goes up several notches and you feel God's grace coming through. I think it's a combination of grace and the group's energy. It's like a long meditation, where it's a higher experience than you ever thought it could be. I think that's what brings many people back, that "high," that spiritual leap. Because it's a great thing. You find yourself opening to God's grace.

Anjali Gregorelli

(Anjali serves as the main choir director in the music ministry at Ananda Europa in Assisi, Italy. She also assists Mantrini and Kirtani, who direct a beginner's choir.)

Q: Did you have an early background in music?

A: I sang in choirs in junior and senior high school, and I studied piano for a year, just enough to easily pick up the harmonium and play starting notes for our choir rehearsals. But that's about it. Most of my experience has been with Swamiji's music. Something that's been amazing to me is that I never – ever, ever – get tired of it, even though I started 33 years ago, in 1978. It's always fresh and new for me, every time.

I was living in Colorado, and we had a little group that was beginning to learn some of Swamiji's music. Then I moved to the Ananda House in San Francisco and sang in a group there with Ram and Dianna. And when I moved to the Village, Jeannie got me involved with the choir.

So I was always singing. The last winter I lived at Ananda Village, our director was on tour with the Oratorio to various churches, so she couldn't lead the choir, and I took charge of the music program at Christmas. This was in 1988, and it was my first experience not only of directing the choir but organizing all the Christmas events, including the smaller musical groups. So I got thrown in at the deep end, but it was a wonderful experience and very inspiring.

Then I was invited to move to Italy because Agni was starting a choir and he needed singers. I sang in that choir for about a year, and when he returned to the U.S. I took it over. For the last 15 years I've directed the choir continuously – I think I may be one of the longest-term choir directors in the Ananda world.

When Claudio and I moved to India, Kirtani and Mantrini took over the music in Assisi. I directed a

choir in India until Dharmini took it over, and I always singing, of course. Then after we'd been back in Assisi for about a year, Mantrini had a baby and Kirtani was the center's spiritual director, so neither of them had enough time and I became the director again.

Q: How is it different directing in Italy than in the U.S. or India?

A: We have an international choir, and we sing in Italian and English. But I think the main difference is that we sing more often. Every week we have a rehearsal, then we sing at guest orientation on Friday evening, and again on Sunday evening, and we do a full concert on Thursday evening. Lots of people have mentioned what a beautiful sound this choir has – even Swamiji has mentioned it – and I think probably there are two reasons. One is that many of us have been singing together for 20 years, and we sing three or four times a week without fail, every week. So there's a harmony and attunement among the choir members. Then, also, singing so much, people learn the parts well and are able to tune into the music.

Q: Has your understanding of your role as a director evolved?

A: Oh, definitely. I see part of my role as inspiring the choir, and helping them keep their inspiration high. I always try to go deeper into the meaning of the songs, and communicate that as best I can.

It's made a big difference for me personally, because every time I meditate on what a song means, I learn something new. We just sang the second half of the Oratorio for Easter. And, you know, we've sung those songs a million times. But I tried to tune in even more deeply. For example, with the song "You Remain Our Friend" – I asked what was happening in that moment. What was Swamiji trying to transmit? Or better, what was he feeling that he was trying to express? What was he feeling from his

inner communion with Christ?

Of course, it's been a deeply inspiring practice for me, and I think it helps keep the songs alive for the choir.

I've also had to think creatively about arrangements, and how to use musicians in various ways. For a long time, we didn't even have a keyboardist. Now, we finally have a young man in the community who's a good keyboardist, and that's been a big help. But that's the creative part of it, for me. It's trying to tune in to Swami's inspiration when he wrote a song, and trying to feel inside what the song is trying to transmit. Then trying to inspire the choir, and trying to draw that inner meaning out of the choir as I work with them.

Q: Are there particular methods you use? David Eby does certain exercises with the singers. The group will sing a passage, then they'll be silent for a bit before they sing it again, and they find that the inspiration grows by taking it within.

A: I haven't done anything like that, but I definitely talk to them. Many people in the choir are Italian, and I always work to help them understand what the song means in English. I've made a compilation of translations into Italian of most of the music, not to sing, because they're not all singable, but as poetry so they can read it and tune into the meaning of the words.

Before we sing, I try to communicate what I see as the message that the song is trying to express. I might have them sing it and talk to them and share the inspiration I'm feeling from the song, then we'll sing it again, and there's always a difference – it's much deeper, and I can tell from their faces that they're feeling it more.

With "You Remain Our Friend," I share that this is the moment of the crucifixion, and of course it's a very serious moment, but there's an undercurrent of hope and joy that we want to transmit, besides the seriousness. And devotion, because the point of the song is that we are finally able to give you our hearts, finally we are able to open ourselves completely to

your consciousness.

Q: Is it tricky to get people to feel something that has to come from inside them?

A: It is, but helping them understand the context of the song often helps it become fresh for them. With "You Remain Our Friend," we sing it every week at the Festival and often in concerts. So it requires energy, and looking inside yourself to find the continued inspiration of a song that you've done so many times.

I also try to add new songs to the repertoire. We're a bit limited in that we only have a certain number of songs that have been translated into Italian. So we always have to do those, because our audience is mainly Italian, and then I keep trying to cycle in more songs in English, to keep it interesting. We recently started doing "Mañana, Friends" and people love it, even though they don't understand the words.

We'll often read the text in Italian before we sing. Swamiji has recommended that we generally not say much in our concerts, but let the music speak for itself. I agree completely, but we've seen that if we briefly read basic meaning of the song, it's more enjoyable for the Italians, and they get more of the message. The music is important, and the message is very important, too.

Q: Do new people come in as well?

A: Yes, Uma and Mantrini are leading a training choir. They meet once a week with people who want to learn the music, and I've posted mp3s of the parts tapes online. I usually tell new people that they can come to the rehearsals and listen, and once they've begun to learn the music I'll let them sing along at rehearsals as best they can. But of course I don't invite them to sing in concerts until I feel they really know the music.

I remember Swami saying, years ago, that he would like to see everybody in the community singing. I agree with that very much, because it's important for people's spiritual lives to sing this music. It helps us to be in tune with him and with the

teachings, because it's all there in the music. And, of course, being music, it touches people deeply on a heart level.

I'm fairly lax – I don't get on people's case if they don't come to rehearsals. Obviously I encourage them to come, but I give people a lot of space. The staff here are serving full-time all the time, and being with guests and around other people sometimes from nine in the morning until nine at night. So when they need a break, or they need a little space, I feel it's fine to give it to them. I think it helps people keep their enthusiasm up, because nobody feels "Oh God, now I have to go to choir practice." But at the same time, of course I encourage them to come. If there's a big concert coming, I'll say, "If you don't come to the rehearsals, then for this concert you won't be able to sing." I want people to sing from their inspiration, and not because it's a job.

Q: How do you handle rehearsals? I've seen various styles. Karen Gamow is fun to watch because she's very fine-tuned to what needs to happen. If there's some distraction, she knows how to whistle very loudly. She'll get people's attention quickly.

A: Well, I have an unruly choir, I have to say, and again I have to say I don't get too much on their case, because we're all really good friends. We've been together so long, and we just love to be with each other. But I do ask for a certain amount of concentration.

I don't talk that much – I try not to, I try to mostly sing. And of course if I'm hearing something that's not working, or we have to go over a part, then I'll do that. And, as I said, when we're focusing on a major concert I'll spend time going over each song and rekindling their understanding.

I want it to be fun, because the joy level is so important. You know, sometimes I have to get on their cases a little. I tease Anand, because he's one of the biggest troublemakers in the choir. (laughs)

Q: Dambara and I were talking about how you'll be going along in your daily routine, and an issue

will come up and you'll think of a phrase in a song of Swami's that applies beautifully.

A: It was his song "Go On Alone" that helped me realize it was time to leave Colorado and move to Ananda. I was listening to the line "Make rich the soil, but once the seed is sown, Seek freedom, don't linger – go on alone!" I had helped establish a fruit cooperative in Colorado, and it was pretty much on its feet, and I realized while I listened to that song that it was speaking to me. I had done what I needed to do, I had sown the seed, and it was time for me to "seek freedom, not linger." That was the moment when I decided in my mind that it was time to move to Ananda.

Q: Do you have suggestions for practicing? For people who want to learn the music, or those who are more experienced?

A: I never studied voice, so I use the warmups that Swamiji gives in his talk on the voice. Every now and then, Mantrini will bring in another one. She has a lot more experience in vocal production, and she's the one who helps people learn to sing, and develop their voice.

Singing has always been natural for me. I must have studied voice in a past life, because I've never had to work at it. So I don't really know on a technical level what people can do. As far as learning the music, what helped me was listening and singing along to the parts mp3s. I would listen to the parts tape, then sing along with the alto part to the recording of the full choir until it became second nature for me.

Q: Do you have opportunities to perform outside the community? Do you go out and perform?

A: We do, periodically. When Swami was here last spring, we went out a lot. We sang in Milano and Rome, and many of us went to Spain when he went there. Otherwise, every now and then we'll be invited to sing at some event in Assisi. They know who we are, and a couple times a year there's a peace conference where we'll be invited to sing. There's a celebration for the Wesac Festival in May, and we're

invited to that. I think it's a pagan holiday, actually. (laughs) It's well-known – the choir's not going, but we're sending a kirtan group. So we do it periodically. I would like to do more, but most of the choir are on the guest retreat staff, so if all go out and sing, there's nobody to be with the guests. (laughs)

But certainly, when Swamiji is here this summer he'll have a book launch in Rome or Milan, and we'll sing for that. He'll also be doing a conference at a yoga festival in Rome, and we'll send at least a group of choir members.

Q: Is the music well-received at those events?

A: Very. People love it. They just love it. If it's an Italian environment we'll sing mostly in Italian, or some of both. But even when we've done the Oratorio in English we've gotten wonderful responses. They just love the music here.

Q: For people who've been singing a long time

with the choir, how do you find that they deepen their attunement with the music? You said you've been singing since 1978 and you haven't gotten tired of it. Do you find that you discover new levels of the music, or facets that are new?

A: Certainly, especially with the Oratorio songs. Asha led an all-day workshop on the Oratorio several years ago, and I have a transcript of that. Whenever we're going to perform the Oratorio, I read what she said about the songs, and it helps me understand more deeply the message in them. I've also helped the people who translate the songs into Italian, and of course I have to understand the song in order to help them understand it.

So I keep trying to deepen my own understanding. I don't know what others do, but I can see in their eyes and their faces if they're feeling inspiration when we sing.

David G

(David and Karen are active in the music ministry at Ananda Sangha in Palo Alto.)

Q: You've sung Swami Kriyananda's music for many years. Can you share your thoughts about the music, and tell us about some of your experiences.

A: I was a philosophy major in college. I like to philosophize and use discrimination to figure things out. It's my approach to the world, to think about things and wonder "How does this work?" When I'm in any situation, I like to try to draw the philosophical principles out of it, so that I can apply them in other areas. And all of that is very mental.

That approach has served me. But if you have a weak eye and you go to the eye doctor, he may put a patch on your strong eye so that the weak eye will get stronger.

I don't take a lot of classes at Ananda, because I know the teachings fairly well, having read and thought about them for 30 years. But it would benefit me to open my heart more, and that's part of the reason I sing. When I sing, I get into a different part of my consciousness.

Now, I adore the music, but I always feel that I'm exercising my "weak eye." I love the music for that reason, because it gets me into a deeply devotional space, to the degree that I sometimes find it hard to get through the songs. So that's what the music has done for me.

At one point, Swami Kriyananda sent me to Italy because he wanted me to join the singing group that would be touring all over Europe. Now, my skill is manipulating the material world. It's what I do well. I start businesses, I manage money, and if it's on the material plane, I'm happy to do it, and if I don't completely understand it, I'll learn it. But when Swami sent me to Italy, he said, "I don't want you handling the finances. I don't want you thinking about marketing. I don't want you to help get the tours out on the road. I want you to go to Italy, and I

want you to sing, and I want you to love. Those are your only two jobs."

When I got there, it was hard. I was biting my tongue so much for the first three months that my tongue was calloused. The next three months, it was only extremely difficult. But after about nine months I started to get it, and I could just live in my heart.

Swami Kriyananda stripped away every impediment, so that my only job was to love, and to watch my own energy. And it was a fantastic experience. When we arrived in Italy, we were singing five or six hours a day, six days a week. Everything else was stripped away. I had no business and no responsibilities, and they fed us, so I could just sort of live in that energy. And even as dense as I am, I got something by the end.

We had a ton of songs to learn, and we had to learn them in Italian as well. And then there were the technical singing skills that we had to master, with voice placement, pitch, and blend, etc. It takes a lot of work to pull a group together. We were supposed to be a professional group, because we were giving concerts on the road.

The first night when we got there, we sang an impromptu performance in the dining room, and we were just awful. Everybody was glancing around, wondering, oh my God, we're sending these people on the road? By the end, we were good. It was a lot of work, but by then we were really harmonized with each other vibrationally, as well as with the music.

Bhagavati was the director, but Karen was also in the group. They were all good musicians, except for me. I had developed a decent singing voice, but not like these guys. Lewis had played bass guitar professionally, and Frank had played guitar for 35 years. I almost wondered what I was doing there. But, for me, it wasn't just about the music but about the lesson I needed to learn, with music creating the right heart-centered atmosphere for me to learn it in.

At one point, after we had been there for about eight months, Swami walked up to me and patted me

on the cheek. He said something I'll never forget, "You're getting sweeter already."

Dharmadas Schuppe

(Dharmadas and his wife, Nirmala, are the spiritual directors of Ananda India.)

Q: Tell us about your musical background, starting as early as you like.

A: Music has always been an important part of my life. In our home, my parents played beautiful music, often classical or sacred, and some popular – but it was always beautiful and uplifting and I had a great love for it. Swamiji describes how, as a child, he would enter a kind of ecstasy by gazing at brilliant colors. For me, music did that – my spirit soared with holy, heavenly music.

In the church that I was brought up in, music was a very big part of our experience. I'll never forget when an engineer came over from Germany to install a massive pipe organ that make the floor rumble – you could feel the vibrations in your whole body when it was played. It was thrilling.

However, as is often the case for Americans, the teenage years represented something of a downturn. I listened to lots of rock-n-roll music and became a little withdrawn and irritable. Such is the power of music.

I arrived at Ananda at the end of Spiritual Renewal Week in 1979. On Sunday, I attended the service at the meditation retreat, where the singers performed “Walk Like a Man,” and time just stopped for me.

It wasn't only the melody and harmony; it was the words as well. They touched me deeply, because I had done exactly that –

*Why court approval, once the road is known?
Let come who will, but if they all turn home,
The goal still awaits you —go on alone!*

Well, I jolly well *was* “going on alone.” It was a very deep experience – I remember tears rolling down my face, and I thought, “This is home.”

I picked up chanting fairly quickly, because I

had a musical background. I had studied piano, and I had played French horn as a child, so I knew how to read music. If someone played a chant, I could sit down at the harmonium and start playing it by ear. So chanting was my first real experience of Ananda's music, and a very powerful and deep one. I started chanting at sadhanas and meditations, and in the apprentice program I would lead a chant when we meditated before lunch, or at morning and evening meditations. Ever since those first days on the path, chanting has been precious and beautiful to me.

Singing Swamiji's music came later. When Swamiji wrote the Oratorio in 1983, I was part of the initial choir that he asked to learn and sing it. I could read music well enough, and I could sing well enough to hold my part – I sang tenor at first, then later tenor or bass, depending on what was needed.

At the time, there wasn't an easy way to join one of the few groups that were singing Swamiji's music. Unlike today, the sheet music wasn't printed and well-organized, and there weren't any practice tapes or mp3s to help you learn your part. So you had to show lots of interest, and you had to be a capable singer.

About a year later, I was able to start singing in one of the small groups. The main “Joy Singers” were on tour, and we needed a group to stay home and sing at Sunday services. Anjali Gregorelli held an audition, and I passed the test. That would have been around 1985.

Our group would sing at every Sunday service, and we rotated our small repertoire so we weren't singing the same songs too often. Then, in the late 1980s, I moved to Italy where I sang in Italian and English. I had started learning the guitar, and in Italy I found that I had to play more often because there weren't many guitarists. I took a few lessons and got to where I could play the Festival songs, and for the better part of the next 10 years I played the Festival music almost every week. Then for six or eight years

it was every single week, at first in Italy, then at Ananda Village and later in Seattle.

A highlight of that era was when we got to sing for the Pope, in February 1989. We arrived long before the Pope came out. There was huge audience of 13,000 people, and lots of groups were taking turns playing. Most of them didn't have a very large repertoire, but we did, so over the space of an hour or so we ended up singing 15 or 20 songs. We sang "Thy Light Within Us Shining," and the Pope appeared to enjoy it. Not everyone in the audience could understand the words, because they were from all over the world, but you could tell that they felt the vibration.

We've had the joy and privilege now of singing Swamiji's music in India for nearly eight years. Most Indians are unfamiliar with the western musical form, with four-part harmony and guitar, but it's holy music, and they can feel the vibration, and they love it.

We've also noticed that our American accent can be fairly impenetrable for the Indians, so we'll often hand out the words before we sing. They're more familiar with the British accent, because of India's history.

Something that we find particularly interesting is that they tune in very deeply to the *message* of the songs. In addition to the vibration and melody, the message that Swamiji conveys through the words means a lot to them, and they're very touched by it.

I was in Pune visiting one of our devotees, and in a casual conversation while we were standing outdoors, she quoted a phrase from Swamiji's song "If You're Seeking Freedom." She said, "God's sunlight on your shoulders, the wind in your hair." She remarked that the breeze meant a lot to her, "like that song of Swamiji's." It was very sweet to feel that this part of the work was entering the consciousness of our devotees here.

In February, I was on a pilgrimage to Rishikesh and Hardwar led by Daya and Keshava. And except for we three Americans, the group was entirely

Indian. They were from all over India, so there was nothing that united them. In fact, most of them had just signed up to go on a pilgrimage – this was an organized pilgrimage, they wanted to go to Rishikesh, and they had heard good things about our pilgrimages, so they signed up.

But otherwise, the group was pointed in every direction, and "herding cats" doesn't begin to describe the experience of trying to keep such a diverse group pointed in the same direction. But every time we were together, we would start chanting, and within a few hours of our first bus ride, and the first satsangs, the energy of the group became amazingly synchronized. By the end of our three days together, when we had our little wrap-up meeting, the level of harmony in the group was astonishing.

I had the strong feeling that the music had accomplished that, by our chanting and singing. It was quite striking. I realized that in most Indian ashrams, if they have any music at all, it's usually just one person chanting. Often it's mantras, and there may be some bhajans, but the music isn't usually much of a focus, and there's seldom much devotional feeling. It's a sort of background noise – someone will be chanting, and conversations will keep going, and people are talking on their cell phones. So people aren't connected with it. But with our group, it was a focal point, and it drew people together in a lovely way.

The music is one of the main influences that have helped our work in India to grow dynamically and hold together. I recall Swamiji remarking years ago that Gregorian chant is what held the mediaeval Christian church together, because the power of that music united the monasteries and drew forth a certain spirit, and a certain kind of energy.

If you listen to those chants, you feel transported to the monasteries. There's a palpable feeling that it creates. And Ananda's music and chanting does that, too – it draws us together. It's the reason why, if you visit Assisi or Palo Alto or Portland, anywhere Swamiji's music is a regular part of life, there's a

common spirit that you can feel very clearly.

Swamiji sometimes says, “If you want to get to know me as I really am, listen to my music.” I would add a further thought – if you want to *feel* Swamiji’s consciousness, *sing* his music. Let the music percolate through you and reorganize your molecules, which it will do. It’s very deep and very sweet. It’s been a big part of my spiritual life, and a very precious part.

Harking back once again to my first days at Ananda Village in the late 1970s, I remember I had a cassette tape of the singers that I played to the point where I think it finally fell apart. I would play “Well Done, Lord!” and I knew exactly how far I had to rewind the tape so I could listen to it again. I would often sit in the truck for an hour or longer, listening to that song because it was so beautiful and joyful.

I have lots of wonderful memories of the music. At this point in our work in India, we aren’t personally involved daily with the music except for chanting. But we’re helping others lead the singing groups, because we’ve noticed that when the music is strong, the energy in the group is also strong. And when the music isn’t as strong, the group energy begins to flag. The music is really, really important to what we’re doing.

We had the joy of being on TV in India, every day for five years with our little singing group. It was just a small group of Lila, Nirmala, Kirtani, Anand, and I. And after the program been running for several months, we started to get feedback – one was a serious offer of marriage – “to *any* of the three ladies” who were available! It didn’t matter which one, but this fellow owned a hardware store, and it was a serious and genuine offer. This is not the stuff of play, here in India – he meant it, and he was putting his cards properly on the table.

Several times, we’ve been traveling in India, and people have said, “I remember you from the television program.” Obviously, they remember Swamiji, but the music was part of it.

Q: While Swamiji was in LA, he told the

Ananda singers more than once that he feels it’s time for the music to reach a wider audience. Ramesha remarked that he feels the music has a living consciousness, because of the divine source that it comes from, and that it’s God’s hand reaching into the world, and it wants to do what it will.

Q: I agree – now is the time, and the group in LA can do a tremendous service. It’s a very important time. Every time we’ve put our focus strongly on the music here in India, it has helped our work take a big step. It’s a huge shortcut to creating group spirit, and to being able to manifest Master’s work.

Q: If people have to read a book, it’s a high wall that they have to climb over, or if they have to come to Sunday service and learn about Ananda by hearing lots of talks. Nayaswami Asha laughingly remarked that the singers can perform for three minutes, and people will understand more about Ananda than if she talks for 90 minutes. It seems that the music is the spearhead of Ananda, and that it’s Swami Kriyananda’s language.

A: It’s true. In Assisi, they begin every guest program with a little concert, and during the week there will be a Thursday night concert. They may perform only four or five songs, but people are so much more open once they’ve heard the music. It truly changes their perspective.

With the high wall of reading a book, or climbing the philosophy mentally and intellectually, people just tend to have endless questions. But if you touch their hearts, they can feel instantly “Oh, okay, this is what you’re talking about.”

Q: What are your thoughts on drawing people into the music, or helping them perform once they become involved? Is it something that you address there in India?

A: We have created groups here. I wouldn’t say we’ve done much explaining, but after a satsang, or as part of a class, we’ll usually have a simple music program where we’ll get several harmoniums together, and we’ll say, “Let’s all learn a chant.” So everyone sits down and plays and learns a little bit.

Or we'll say, "Let's learn a song." And we'll sing a very simple song, like "Lift your heart in strength once more..." Or "Move All Ye Mountains." One of the children's songs, or something like "Amalfi Coast" – "Is there anywhere on earth, perfect freedom, sorrow's dearth..."

We'll sing it together several times and let people find their way into it. In India, we've had singing groups of as many as 30 or 40 people, mostly Indian, and then at bigger events we've had an international choir with people coming from Italy and America. But we do have groups that have been singing together for a while now, and it's great.

It's a different challenge in India, because they're not as familiar with the challenges of putting their voices in that mode of blending, where you're singing and listening at the same time, and you're holding your part against the other parts in the right balance. Those things are a challenge anyway, and they take some effort and attunement, but it's even more so here. They may have beautiful voices, but they're used to going off on their own.

I can tell you that, in India, listening is a skill that could be developed more! There's so much noise and commotion. And then, culturally, people are either feel they're too young in the culture to expect that they have anything to say – or they're at a mature age where the whole society is supposed to listen to them, and they can carry on endlessly and you can't get them to stop. (laughs) We've learned to be very careful about who we hand a microphone to, because God Himself cannot pry it out of somebody's hands once it's been given!

But singing in harmony really does help people learn to blend their energies. It creates harmony in the group, and that's why we've worked with it a lot. When Dharmini was here, she would teach people to chant, and Dhyana is doing that in Delhi and Gurgaon now. We do as much as we can in Pune, but our community is so new that we haven't been able to do much yet. We have a wave of new residents arriving to live here in the next six months to a year, and the music will be a very large part of how we

create our life out here together. It's very important.

Kirtan for us, at the moment, is the biggest part, in some ways more so than harmony singing, simply because it's more accessible for Indians.

It occurred to me the other day that, in the same way that Kriya is about using the breath to get to the flow of inner energy and work with it, chanting is about awakening devotion to find inner communion. The words and melody are the beginning, but they aren't the end. They're the external form, but you have to crack through the form to get to the heart of it.

You used a nice phrase, that music is the language of Swami Kriyananda. I do feel that. A point that Swamiji has often emphasized is that Master brought a new kind of chanting to the world. It's not about long, complicated mantras, rather it's individual chanting, with real meaning, and it's heartfelt. It's designed to help us meditate. It's designed to give us a deep inward experience. And it's not commonly known in India. Very few people here in India have chanted that way until they came to Ananda.

Q: Isn't that strange, because it's a strong part of the Indian tradition. We have Master's translation of "Will That Day Come to Me, Ma?" by Sri Ramprasad who lived in the 18th century, and it's completely in the spirit of individual devotional chanting.

A: Chanting here is so often connected with long, involved mantras, and there's usually not much of a heart connection. The mantras have a certain power, but the heart isn't so much there. When people do start chanting in this new way, their lives open up amazingly. You can see it in a day. Once chanting gets planted and they have an experience, oh, it really makes a big difference.

Q: You've been involved with chanting all along.

A: More at the beginning, but more with singing later. In India, though, chanting has been part of everything we do, every sadhana, every satsang. Our

monks love kirtan, and at every retreat we'll have kirtan. But, yes, it's been a thread all along for me. The only thing that has changed is that I don't have much time to chant on my own now, because my sadhana tends to be with the group. The other day I was able to chant for an hour by myself, and it was delightful to be able to dive into one chant for an hour.

It's something I used to do when I was new at Ananda and I was a monk in the monastery, where I could go off and chant for two or three hours by myself. Or we would sing together in a long kirtan, or stay up all night for Shivaratri. Those things were very common then. They're less common for me

now, but still very precious.

Q: Do you find that chanting prepares you to sing Swami's songs?

A: It helps by getting the heart opened up. I've sung bass and tenor in Swami's music, and occasionally even alto, if you can believe it – not well, but enough to get the notes out there. And when I've had to sing high, I would find that I needed lots of warm-up, and chanting was a great way to warm up the voice. Getting the throat opened, and getting the heart and devotion moving, would allow the high notes to come through beautifully, where formerly it wasn't so easy.

Rambhakta Beinhorn

(Rambhakta is active in the music ministry at Ananda Sangha in Palo Alto, California.)

When I moved to Ananda Village in 1976, I was offered a job at “Pubble,” the department where Swami Kriyananda’s books were published. Not long after I arrived, Swamiji invited the staff to his home to discuss some projects.

Swami’s house was on the other side of the ridge from the main part of the Village. I hiked over the hill with two other staff members, Asha and Seva, who were nuns and walked a little ahead.

I was very nervous, mentally biting my nails about meeting the great man for the first time. I thought, “*Gosh, it’s like going to meet the Pope or something!*”

When we arrived, we found Swamiji listening to a humorous song called “The Vatican Rag,” that was playing quite loudly, and laughing uproariously:

*First you get down on your knees,
Fiddle with your rosaries,
Bow your head with great respect, and
Genuflect, genuflect, genuflect!*

*You can do what steps you want if
You have cleared them with the pontiff.
Everybody say his own kyrie eleison,
Doin’ the Vatican Rag!....*

Between guffaws, he sang the refrain, “Genuflect, genuflect!”

My jaw was so far open, you could have driven the Starship Enterprise in my mouth and parked it inside.

*Get in line in that processional,
Step into that small confessional,
There a guy who’s got religion’ll
Tell you if your sin’s original.*

*If it is, try playin’ it safer,
Drink the wine and chew the wafer.
Ave Maria, gee it’s good to see ya’!
Gettin’ ecstatic and sorta dramatic and
Doin’ the Vatican Rag!*

When we finished with our business, Swamiji invited us to gather around the piano and sing a song that he had just composed. Most of those present were part of Ananda’s small performing group, which at the time was called the Gandharvas (“Celestial Singers”).

Swamiji invited me to join in, but I demurred, because I couldn’t read music and felt I would spoil the fun.

Over the years, I felt sad that I hadn’t taken up Swamiji’s invitation to sing. I knew he hadn’t wanted to include me only so I wouldn’t feel left out, but that he was offering me a way to serve that I would find deeply enjoyable and fulfilling. Also, I realized that he was offering me a wonderful chance to be part of Ananda.

In the fall of 2008, reflecting on the loving help he had given me over the years, I felt it was long past time to start giving back – not from a sense of guilt, but from a grateful heart. So, after service one Sunday, I walked on stage during a choir rehearsal and joined the tenor section. I didn’t know the music, but I felt I could learn it later; for now, I wanted to make a gesture.

As I write this, I’ve been singing the music for almost three years. I sing in the choir and two small ensembles, and it’s been a wonderful experience. It’s brought me great spiritual growth, and I feel closer to my Ananda family and to God and Guru.

Swami Kriyananda says that his music is more than an adornment to Ananda’s work, intended only to entertain people at Sunday service. He says it’s

“central to everything we do at Ananda.” He wrote: “At Ananda, people have been drawn to join the community even more through our music than through our teachings. Books and teachings give them ideas, but the music has made them *feel* the importance of the teachings.” He says that every note he’s ever written was received by divine inspiration.

When I joined the choir, I was very conscious of these statements, and I resolved to do my best to make my service as good as possible.

Swami Kriyananda says that when he writes a song, he tries to make each part singable, so that it will be equally beautiful and inspiring for the sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses. I don’t read music, but I was able to start learning the music by listening to recordings of the tenor parts. As I listened and followed along with the sheet music, I gradually picked up the “melody” that Swamiji had written for the tenors, and in time I began to feel the inspiration behind the music.

Most of the practice recordings were sung by Chaitanya or Dambara, both of whom had been part of Ananda’s music ministry for more than 20 years. Swami Kriyananda praised the senior Ananda singers for singing “with understanding.” As I listened, I felt their wonderful attunement with the inspiration in the music, and their whole-hearted self-offering to the songs.

Those recordings were a rich resource. One that stands out is Chaitanya singing “The Christ Child’s Asleep.” I can’t listen to it without being moved.

In India, novice singers train by singing along with the teacher. At rehearsals, I found it enjoyable to stand near Chaitanya and Dambara and “latch onto” their attunement and understanding.

As I learned the music, I seemed to receive help from a higher source. In other projects that I’ve done for Ananda, I’ve also felt that “someone” was helping. A good example is my work as webmaster for Ananda’s Living Wisdom School in Palo Alto. I’m not a graphic designer, yet when I’ve had problems with the site, I’ve often found the answers

coming with surprisingly little effort. It seems I only need to admit my need and the answer is there – “Divine Mother, help! I don’t have a clue!”

When Swami Kriyananda invited me to sing, I’m sure he knew it would be a service that I would love. But I don’t want to paint an overly rosy picture, because there’s a lot of behind-the-scenes work that goes into singing this beautiful music. In fact, serving in the music ministry can be quite demanding. It takes time to learn the music, to “smooth out the voice,” to explore the inspiration behind the music, and to give up the ego and offer ourselves as God’s instruments to help others.

Beyond learning the notes, it takes preparing *ourselves*. Swami Kriyananda urges us to be impersonal when we sing, setting aside personal emotions so that God can use us to waft His inspiration over the audience where they can latch onto it and be inspired.

It’s hardly ever effortless to get ourselves out of the way. I find there are endless challenges, particularly before performances. What if you ate something that disagreed with you? What if someone hurt your feelings? Will you be able to “sing out with joy”?

I find it’s essential not to try to “fix” the problems by myself, but to offer them to God. If I try to overcome them by my own power, I invariably end up just feeling tense and frustrated. But if I bring God into the picture, I find that He is very willing to come to my aid. “Divine Mother, I ate something last night that’s making me feel like a demented person wandering the streets of downtown Chicago late at night with a tummy ache. I can’t remember the words or notes, much less ‘get out of the way.’ I want to help you serve others, but I need Your help!”

Trying to “rise above it” by our own power can be hopeless, especially when our minds and hearts are compromised.

I remember the first time Swami Kriyananda performed with us when I was part of the choir. He was scheduled to give a talk at our temple, and I

looked forward eagerly to singing, because I felt it would be wonderful for him to know that I had finally taken up his invitation.

But on the night of the event, I absolutely could not remember the music! I had eaten something that absolutely killed my energy. Sitting in the audience waiting to go on, I tried my best to get energized and focused, but without much success. At one point in his talk, Swami looked at me with a slightly bemused expression, and I had an image of myself as this empty-headed dodo-bumpkin sitting in the audience. I thought, “Well, isn’t this weird?” But less than a minute before we went up, the words and music suddenly came back. Whew, that was a narrow escape!

We walked on stage, and I was happy to stand half-hidden behind Chaitanya, who’s a big man, because I wasn’t sure I would be able to remember the music all the way through. But then David, who was standing on the highest platform, whispered, “Hey, Rambhakta! You can’t hide behind Chaitanya. Get up here!” So there I was, feeling extremely shaky about the music, and standing with David in the most visible position of the choir. It was quite a joke! The lesson I took from it is that Divine Mother doesn’t care about our problems at all; what touches her heart is our willingness. As Master said, “All you can do is the best you know how!” I managed to rattle through the song somehow.

I often wonder if Divine Mother doesn’t deliberately arrange it so that we aren’t able to behave perfectly, for the simple reason that it forces us to open our hearts and call on Her. In the process,

we realize that all our power to succeed comes from Her. And also, it creates a relationship with Her, far more effectively than if we could always be flawlessly balanced and inspired.

On the other hand, Divine Mother doesn’t reward poor preparation or scattered attention. The more conscientiously I prepare, the more easily I find it to “get out of the way” when we perform. Knowing the music well is a huge part of getting out of the way, because it frees us to concentrate self-giving and the spirit of the music instead of fretting over the notes. It gives God an instrument that’s ready to uplift and inspire others.

I find that if I practice conscientiously and never miss rehearsals, and meditate and pray before we sing, I’ve basically done my job. Having prepared, I can walk on stage and say silently, “Master, I give you my heart. Sing through me.”

After I’d been singing for a year, I received an email from Nayaswami David Praver, who was with Swami Kriyananda in India. He told me that Nayaswami Asha had mentioned to Swamiji that I was singing the music.

Now, I’m sure that Swamiji would have been perfectly justified in saying, “Well, it’s about time!” But he said, “That’s wonderful! It would be so good for him.”

That’s Swami Kriyananda in a nutshell – never placing the needs of the organization over those of the individual; always ready to encourage and help us.

Rambhakta: How I Learned to Practice

(From a conversation with Nayaswami Asha, co-spiritual director of Ananda Sangha in Palo Alto, California.)

After singing Ananda's music for several years, I began to feel that I had only just begun to learn how to practice.

When I started singing Swamiji's music, I had formerly done a lot of chanting, and I realized it was a good way to warm up before singing Swami's songs. The choir in Palo Alto meets early on Sunday morning to practice before service, and I would go to rehearsal, then in the hour before service began I would get in my car and drive and chant.

I found that if I was able to go deep in a chant, I could sing well. I recall a practice where I stood next to Chaitanya. I had just come back from an hour of "freeway chanting." After we practiced, he said, "You should be singing in an ensemble!" Well, I had only been singing with the choir for a month, and I knew it was because I was feeling inspired and my voice was sweet from chanting. The more inspiration I felt in chanting, the more easily and beautifully I was able to sing the Ananda music.

I had the same experience repeatedly, where I would run Master's and Swamiji's chants through my body and heart before we performed and it enabled me to sing well. Yet, after a while it seemed as if Master didn't want me to do that anymore. It became very difficult to find any inspiration in the chants. I suspected it was because Master wanted me to focus on the Ananda music.

One Sunday morning, I was driving on the freeway and finding little inspiration in the chants. I said, "Divine Mother, I'm going to practice the Ananda songs. I don't know if it's right, but here goes!"

I started singing a song that was difficult, because it was in a high tenor range and also the words were tricky. In a conversation I had with

Karen, our director, she described how she practices. She told me, "My voice is often rough or thin at first, and I'll do some scales to get warm, then I'll just sing the song for a long time until it gets smooth."

That was very encouraging to me. Karen sings beautifully; it seems effortless, and to discover that she actually had to work hard to make her voice smooth told me that I might be able to do the same if I emulated her way of warming up. So, in the car on the freeway, I started singing the song and I immediately noticed that my voice was very rough and that it was tight and thin on the high parts.

I asked Master and Swamiji what to do. I said, "What can I do to fix this?" Then I recalled some of the tricks that Karen had suggested to me, like singing only the vowels of the song. So I did that for a while and it got a bit easier. Then I sang the "problem parts" until I could feel which areas needed special help, and then I prayed to know what to do.

One thing that helped was to sing a different song that was equally high, but easier to sing. I'm practicing "Three Wise Men" for a Christmas concert, and I've had trouble with some of the high parts because my voice gets thin and reedy. But I realized that if I sang the tenor part from the Hallelujah Chorus, it was easier to sing "Three Wise Men."

What seemed to work best was to ask for help and do whatever suggested itself. Often it was a question of just praying and singing the song many times until it "got smooth." Sometimes I'll find that it's enough, and that if I just keep singing and offering it to Master and Swamiji for their guidance, it's all I need.

It also helps to sing the song and then be quiet for a while. Somehow, when I return to the song it's easier, as if some superconscious part of my brain has worked on the song during the break. But the physical, mental, and spiritual instruments all need work.

It's also been wonderful to find that I can go to the studio and work for a long time on a song like "Three Wise Men," and that the roughness and thinness gradually leaves my voice, and the problem spots in the song somehow get "fixed." I'll pray for help, then warm up with chanting and a few scales, and once my voice is warm I'll start singing. It may be rough, but at some point it seems the next step is just to sing the song over and over. Then a different level of inspiration and ease of singing comes along. I hesitate to call it a "power" – but perhaps it's a "blessing" that's coming through.

Asha: I think "power" is the right word. It's divine power. Divine power does push people around (laughs), but what you're describing isn't egoic.

Rambhakta: Yes, that's how it feels – it isn't egoic anymore. It feels as if Swamiji and Divine Mother are finally able to sing through this instrument, and there's a better understanding of the music that comes.

The feeling of attunement to something higher that is singing the music makes me feel strongly that it would be a blessing for everyone at Ananda to try singing this music, and gradually go deeper with the songs. Because the songs do have power to help us. It's good to remember that the music is a central part of our work, and that singing helps us get more in tune with Master's ray. The more that people can prepare themselves and receive that power from Master and Swamiji, the better off they'll be.

I don't pretend to have gone full circle with the process. When I listen to recordings of the tenor parts by Chaitanya and Dambara, I think "My goodness!" Because there's no resistance in them, there's no diversion – they're completely immersed in the song.

Asha: They certainly show you where it can go. Their instrument is no longer an impediment, and

they are able to flow with the music in their consciousness.

(The following is from a conversation with David Eby, the music director at Ananda Village.)

Rambhakta: There was a period in my life where Swami urged me to chant, as a way to open my heart. And when I finally took it seriously and started chanting, I spent a lot of time in my car chanting. Over the next five years, I chanted for at least an hour and a half a day, mostly in the car. I put lots of miles on that car, and I wore out three cassette tapes of Swami's first chant recording.

I noticed that when I sang for a long time, it did interesting things with my body. It would make me sit upright. It would expand my chest. I would feel energy rise up into my heart. And while I was doing so much singing my Kriya got much deeper. The music helped my sadhana tremendously.

I'm not a soloist, but occasionally I'll sing short solo part of a song. Next Sunday, Dambara will start off singing "I've been in many countries, I've mixed with many men!" and I'll chime in with "I've shared their days of sunshine, gone with them in the rain." I was listening to one of Swami's talks when he was living in Los Angeles, where he remarked that he's never felt stage fright because he always has an attitude of giving. In fact, I've never felt self-conscious or nervous when I get up and sing, if I'm truly wanting to share something beautiful and inspiring with the people in the audience, not from myself but by giving whole self as an instrument of Master's.

This morning, while I sat next to Ishani in our meditation, I was singing *Brothers* silently, and my consciousness got so sweet. It filled my meditation with great encouragement and blessings and inward help. This music is wonderful.

Resources

[The Joyful Arts at Ananda](#). Articles and videos on the arts in the Ananda communities.

[Music and the Arts at Ananda](#). From the main Ananda website.

[Ananda Garden](#). Practice mp3s for four-part Ananda songs (and seasonal pieces, e.g., Handel's Messiah).

[LA Joy Singers](#). Ananda's main touring group, based in Los Angeles, California.

[Vocal Bliss](#). High-quality instruction for singers, in person or by Internet video. Ramesha Nani is a professional musician and accomplished singer. Try the free sample lessons online.

[Ananda Music Library](#). Sheet music for all of Swami's compositions, and many parts MP3's. To obtain a username and password, email Jeannie Tschantz: Jeannie@ananda.org.

[Ananda Guitar](#). Accompaniments for many of Swami's songs.