

# **Living Water: The Musical Soul of Ananda**

A Conversation with Keshava Betts

We spoke with Keshava at the Ananda Church of Self-Realization in Palo Alto, California on February 12, 2020. A singer, cellist, actor and choir director, Keshava is deeply involved in the arts as a path of personal transformation and service. He is on the staff of Ananda Sangha.

## **Early Years**

Q: Were you born at Ananda Village?

Keshava: That's right.

Q: So were you hearing this music literally from the cradle?

Keshava: Yes, definitely. My dad would put us to sleep by chanting to us every night, and when I got older I would try to stay awake because I enjoyed the chanting so much, and when he would leave I would fall asleep. [Laughs]

Q: When did you begin singing Swami Kriyananda's songs?

Keshava: I actually don't remember, because being in an Ananda school, it's hard to say when it began. I imagine I started singing some in kindergarten or first grade. But then it sort of came out that I could sing, because David Eby was my cello teacher from when I was five. I'd met him at Ananda Portland and studied with him briefly, and then my family moved back to the Village, and a few years later he followed us.

So my music education continued with David. But then he

became the music teacher at Ananda school, and he discovered that I could hold a pitch and carry a tune, and it's a good quality to have in a seven-year-old when you're doing a concert. So I started singing solos in our school concerts when I was very young, and that's really when I started having to pay attention to Swami's music. Because all of a sudden I was singing it alone, and I couldn't just sort of go on autopilot for those performances and rehearsals.

Then David started trying to get me to sing more and more beautifully, and I wasn't necessarily tuned into the consciousness of it deeply at that young age, but it was a really fun experience, because I had a boy soprano voice, and I started singing soprano solos for the oratorio, singing all the soprano parts. And then as I got a little older and my voice started changing, I started singing alto, and then as I got a little older I started singing tenor as I bridged into high school. And then what was sort of amusing was that when I went to Los Angeles there were no basses, so I had to learn bass. So I've sung all four parts in the choir at varying stages of my life, and that was very useful when I started conducting the music, because I'm familiar with all of the parts.

But, really, it all started coming into a clearer focus one year when David had me sing "The Annunciation" from the oratorio, as a boy soprano, and I remember really enjoying it.

When I was younger I had this quirk that music didn't necessarily speak to me in rehearsals because my awareness wasn't keen enough. But in performances I was really lucky that there was always a wave of grace that would descend and flow through me. It was an ongoing joke that I would perform better than I would rehearse, by the grace of God, and perhaps due to some old samskars.

I remember singing those solos as a young boy and feeling the peace that came from them, or the inspiration, even when I was seven or eight.

I remember before a play at an Ananda family camp one summer they had me sing “Invocation to the Woodland Devas.” I was probably nine, and Chaitanya coached me, and I remember when I got up to sing, there was so much power that I could feel in the invocation. It felt like a divine incantation that I was intoning on behalf of the audience, just before the performance of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. And that was another powerful experience that helped me realize that this music has more in it than just melody and words.

Q: Did you have any formal music training along the way?

Keshava: I started studying the cello with David when I was five, and I continued with him for almost twelve years. And as I got a little older and started singing more, he was also the conductor of the choir. I would go over for a cello lesson and he’d bug me to practice my singing. So I did have that formal education, and I competed in classical music for about ten years and played a lot of chamber music. I was in a really excellent trio of piano, violin, and cello, so I got exposed to, maybe not a lot of classical music, but I was lucky to be able to play with some really excellent players. I played with some youth orchestras and even as a guest performer with the Nevada City orchestra a few times.

For a while people thought I was going to go into music professionally, but I didn’t. [Laughs]

Q: What did you study?

Keshava: I ended up studying acting in Los Angeles. The arts were always an easy outlet for me, and it was a tossup, which

one it would be.

But coming back to the music, I had a fun experience when I was probably twelve, which is an interesting time from an astrological perspective, because it's your first Jupiter return. So perhaps that's when some of your latent spiritual tendencies might be coming into focus.

It was the first year I sang the entire oratorio with the Ananda choir, and one of my more vivid memories was when we sang "Living Water," and we got to the phrase, "He can redeem you from every evil." And it was amazing, because there I was, twelve years old, and we're singing this song, and often I would just sing the words and notes without realizing what we were saying. But in that moment the music sort of broke through my lack of understanding, and I had a real taste of what that promise was, and I could feel Christ's compassion and Christ's promise to be the Redeemer for all souls. And I remember, after we sang that song, I had to sit down because I was weeping and I couldn't sing anymore, I was so overwhelmed by the feeling of Christ's presence.

It was a startling experience for me because then I would go to school and none of my peers could relate to that kind of thing, so I had to sort of sit with that experience and not know what box to file it in. And the only time it would make sense was every Tuesday night when I'd go back to choir rehearsal, and I'd go, oh, yeah, this is what that's all about.

It was a really profound experience, and then I ended up performing the oratorio, and the same thing happened. Whenever we would perform the oratorio, I remember just getting swept up in the energy of that whole piece of music, and by the end of it I was in such an exalted state of consciousness that I again just had to sit

down because I could feel so much energy rising up my spine.

Being twelve or thirteen at the time, I had no idea what to do with that inspiration, so I just sat down feeling a little overwhelmed for maybe forty-five minutes.

I was blessed with a few of those experiences that really sold me that this music was something special, and that it was different from other classical music.

Around that time, David organized an entire orchestra to play “Life Is A Quest For Joy” at Spiritual Renewal Week. And I was, again, maybe ten or twelve, and I wasn’t good enough to play the melody, so it meant that I was relegated to the supporting string parts, which are very boring. It’s just bum-bum-bum-bum, bum-bum-bum. And if you do that for twenty-seven minutes, it’s pretty boring when you’re ten years old, especially without the context of the melody.

I remember, in rehearsals, how we would be playing it and I just didn’t get it. But I vividly remember the evening of the performance.

I remember because Steve D’Amico was sitting behind me, and it was the first time I’d met Steve, and we played that piece. David played the melody, and I don’t remember who was on violin, but we had twelve or fifteen musicians, and we played that whole piece of music, and it was transcendent.

It brought me into a different state of consciousness, and I could really feel the joy coming out of the music. And even though the part I had to play was so simple, I was just utterly delighted to get to be a part of that moment. Afterward, I walked up to David and said, “David, I’m sorry for complaining. I’ll play this every year if you want me to.”

It was an incredible experience because I was learning complex classical music at the same time that was very technically challenging and virtuosic, but it wasn't as satisfying as that performance.

Just as an aside, I had a beautiful full-circle moment last year when David again organized a group of us to play "Life Is A Quest For Joy" for the fiftieth anniversary of Ananda. It was David, myself, some friends of mine from high school, and Steve D'Amico, and it was like the band had come back together ten or twelve years later, with the difference that we could actually play music now. [Laughs]

We were more sophisticated. And that was such a blessing. We had just one rehearsal and a sound check before the evening. But in that one rehearsal we played an introductory measure, and then David came in with the melody, and my heart just went through the roof, and I felt a soul intuition that it was one of the reasons I had decided to take incarnation, so that I could play that piece with David and these other musicians in a moment like that. Because it spoke so much to the quest, to man's eternal quest – Life Is A Quest For Joy, and it transcended the intellect.

When we got to play together at the 50th anniversary, it was the absolute highlight of the celebration for me, and it felt like the coming together of a lot of tapasya by a lot of different people, including David.

It was such a beautiful experience, because we were playing with musicians who'd been in Swami's vibration for ten or twenty years, and we'd finally also matured as musicians and devotees enough to be able to tune into the music deeply.

## **Teen Years and Beyond**

Q: What about your teenage years and early adulthood? Did you leave Ananda during those years?

Keshava: I stayed at the Ananda school until the end of my sophomore year. I was getting a little frisky and beginning to experiment with some extracurricular activities. But what was interesting to me was that I was really bad at being bad. I would go and have my extracurricular activities and get in trouble with my friends, but on Tuesdays I'd go back and sing with the choir, and I'd sing the oratorio.

Then on Wednesday afternoon I'd have my voice lessons with Ramesha, and he was a real kindred soul. We would sing and talk about God and spirituality and devotion, and I felt so at home with him. Then I'd go spend time with my friends, and I felt like I was only able to present half of myself because I had to keep the other half hidden – that I knew in my heart that I loved God.

I was trying desperately to fit in and be a teenager and be influential, and all these sorts of things. And then, you know, it all crashed down on me and I suffered a lot. But all the while the music never left me.

In fact, music was one of the things that tossed me a lifeline when that experimentation got me in real trouble and caused me some pain.

I actually got suspended from the Ananda school for two weeks, and it was perfect timing, because it was just before my biggest music competition. So I was like, I'm suspended from school and I'm at a low point and I'm ostracized from my friends and my community, and I don't know what I'm going to do with myself, but I've got this music competition coming in two weeks and I guess I'll just play a bunch of music.

What was particularly fun was that I was preparing to compete with a piece of music that David Eby had written. It was his first solo cello piece, “Celtic Passage,” and he’d written it before he came on the path, but it’s a very joyful piece of music.

So I practiced three or four hours a day, and I mostly played that piece over and over, trying to refine it, and that experience helped me rediscover that joy is my inherent nature, and that I don’t have to do things like drugs or alcohol or partying to experience that enjoyment, and that the music was a doorway for me to recognize my soul nature.

So, anyway, then I ended up leaving Ananda school, and I went to an early college high school for a bit in Grass Valley. I ended up leaving high school early, because I had taken an exit exam. So then I went to Los Angeles when I was seventeen and joined an acting conservatory.

The music didn’t go on pause, because I was living in the LA ashram at the time, and I was singing with the choir. I lived with Ramesha and Bhagavati, who both are singers and musicians, so music was still very much alive for me. But I was going to school and I was deeply invested in trying to become an actor, so it sort of took a backseat for a while.

And then I graduated from school, and I was trying to pursue a career in acting, but it wasn’t really happening, and eventually Ramesha and Bhagavati left Los Angeles, and it left a vacuum in the music ministry, and there was a big question of what would happen next with the music? I was a little reluctant because I was just nineteen, but then I thought, I have all these skills – I can sing, I know the parts, I’m a musician, and I’ve been around this music for ten or twelve years – I’ll do it.

So I volunteered to take over directing the music in Los

Angeles. Which was sort of a joke, you know, to call myself a music director, since it was just five people if we were lucky, and most of the time it was just Narayan, Dharmadevi, and me, and we'd sing four-part pieces with three people. [Laughs]

But that was the beginning. That was the origin story of my life as a music director.

## **Storm Clouds and Sunny Weather**

So that was an interesting time, and what was funny was, I actually went through a very hard period in those years. I'm bringing it up in relationship to the music, because I got into powerlifting, which is a very intense sport. And, aside from getting into powerlifting I had been slowly getting into hard rock music, then metal, and then heavy metal. And I was in this place where I felt really alone and isolated and sad, depressed, and powerless. That was one of the keywords, I felt very powerless in my life.

I had started listening to that music because it has a lot of power, just untamed willpower, and I reveled in it because I liked the sensation, so I was listening to that music more and more and more, and it went hand in hand with powerlifting, where I was doing my utmost to develop my will.

I think it was useful, but I took it too far. And there was this ironic dichotomy, because in my personal life I was listening to heavy metal, this really intense music, and then I'd go to Sunday service and sing Swami's music, and I would try to tell people that they should listen to his music and that they should come sing in the choir. [Laughs] And after enough time I finally realized that it was kind of hypocritical.

I'll fast forward a little bit. Years of this went by, and some karma got expunged, and I matured and worked through a lot of

my griefs and pains and wounds. But there came a moment when I started realizing that I could actually effect positive changes in my life by practicing intelligently the techniques that Master and Swami taught us.

So I started trying to take more control of my life. And I realized, wait a minute, I'm telling people at Ananda that this music affects their consciousness, and that if they listen to Swami's music they'll be uplifted, and that if they chant Master's chants they'll become attuned to his vibration.

And I knew it for myself, because when I chant, I feel it, and when I play "Life Is A Quest For Joy," I feel it. But I thought, well, why don't I start listenening to my own advice and actually try this.

I was working as a personal trainer, I had a business with a friend of mine, and I was powerlifting, preparing for a competition, and I was in the stunt industry. And then I was serving at Ananda as the music minister, but most of my energy was out in the world, and I decided, you know, I might not be able to change everything about myself, but I can change at least one habit.

So I decided that for the next month I would stop listening to everything, cold turkey, and the only thing I'd listen to would be the Gayatri Mantra and the Mahamrityunjaya Mantra, and that was it. And I wouldn't avoid listening to it. Every moment that I would normally be listening to music, I was going to listen to those mantras. So on the way to work, and working out, and on my way back from work, I would be listening to it, and when I'd be doing research and reading articles about the industry I was in.

So I had the willpower to, just cut-and-dried, make the transition, and it was challenging at first because my nervous system was so used to being stimulated. And I forgot to mention

that what also helped me make the switch was that I had started experiencing what Swami said about that music. He said it burns your nervous system. And I could actually feel that my whole nervous system was getting overloaded from all the things I was doing, and I could feel that the music was aggravating my whole system, like drinking too many cups of coffee, where you feel like your skin's burning.

And I knew the music would do that to me eventually, just burn up my nervous system. So I said, I have to do something different, and that's when I started listening to a recording where Swami chants those two mantras. I remember being in the car on my thirty-minute or forty-five-minute commute to work, listening to those mantras, and sometimes thinking, "Oh, my god, I am *so* bored! I just want to hear that awesome metal song that I had a few weeks ago."

## **Allegro**

But I stuck with it, and I was so amazed to discover how much I had changed in that month. I felt so much lighter, I felt so much freer. I could think more clearly, and I suddenly became more and more joyful. There wasn't as much rage in my heart or anger or indignation, and I could just accept life. I became more me. And I was just blown away, because the only thing I had changed was that one thing – the music. And I thought, "I'm never going back."

Why would I? Why would I ever go back to that music? It was poisoning my consciousness. And so that's when I started getting on this adventure of wondering, well, what other things could I change that might positively affect my life? I started energizing six times a day. And then my whole life just took off. But it was a very direct experience of the power of music on our

consciousness.

It was interesting to me that, even though I had stopped listening to the metal music, four or five months later I would still wake up with it in my head, because music sticks in my consciousness.

I was laughing with Saiganesh yesterday, because we were trying to have a meeting and there was music softly playing in the background, and he got up and turned it off. I said, “Oh, thank you, Saiganesh.” Because if there’s music playing, my mind will go to it and not to the conversation. And he said that it’s the same for him, that he can’t concentrate if there’s music playing.

But because I had listened to some of those songs so many times and with such concentration, they were carved deeply into the grooves of my brain, and I would wake up with those songs in my head or with those lyrics in my mind, or they would be going through my subconscious while I was driving or working, or anytime I would become subconscious. And it was really disturbing to me, because here I was, energizing six times a day, meditating two or three hours a day, starting to teach classes, and then I’d have these absolutely heinous lyrics going through my head. And I thought, I want to get these things out. But I couldn’t seem to do it. I was doing affirmations all the time, and I was chanting all the time, and they were still in there.

And then I sat down to meditate one night after a long day of service. And in my meditation I had done my Kriyas and was just sitting and trying to absorb myself in the inner stillness. And I don’t normally have deep supernatural experiences in meditation, but this was one of the clear instances where I feel that grace came to me in answer to a prayer. Because I suddenly perceived a blue light that entered my brain at the spiritual eye, and, like a surgeon,

it went into my brain and it cut away all of those negative thought patterns that had been created by listening to the metal music. I felt the light removing the memory of the lyrics and the memory of the melodies. And, I kid you not, when I came out of that meditation, I couldn't even remember the lyrics that used to haunt me, and that I couldn't get out of my head for the last six months.

They were just gone. And I thought, "I have no idea what they even were." There was just one sentence of all the lyrics that I could still remember, and I guess it was the one that the light missed. But the light took everything else, and it was an incredible experience of how we need to be really, really careful about what we listen to because it will cut grooves in our brain. And it took divine grace and intervention, and the light of God to come in and wipe it out of my consciousness.

Since that time I've been very careful about the music I listen to, and I basically only listen to Master's and Swami's music. Swami said, "You shouldn't hang art on a wall unless you would have the artist over to your house for dinner." And I don't know many artists' consciousness, but I want Swami over to my house for dinner. I want Jyotish to my house for dinner. I want Master to my house for dinner all the time.

jjSo I've had a few experiences that have shown me how imperative music is to our consciousness, and how we need to be very conscious about what we consume in that way. And even though classical music can have an uplifting vibration, some classical pieces can be very rajasic. And with folk music, I can be fun and peppy, and the musicians can be very good, but after five minutes I want to turn it off, because it's just rajasic for the sake of being rajasic, and I don't need that in my life.

At any rate, that was an important moment. And as the

years went on, and I was taking the music ministry seriously, I realized that the only person who could set the bar for the music in Los Angeles was me, because nobody else had experienced it the way I had. I don't mean that egotistically, but I realized, "No one else is going to do it if I don't step up."

So I started trying to dive into Swami's music as deeply as I possibly could, and Yogananda's music. Because when I was in the acting field, I learned that if you are able to experience something on a deep level, people will pick it up. When we would perform Shakespeare, for example, it wasn't imperative that the audience understand every word you say, because what's important is that they understand the human experience you're going through. And as an actor, what's important is to understand that moment of human experience, and to be able to live it authentically and completely.

I realized that with the music, if I could dive into the consciousness of the song or the chant so completely that I became engrossed in it, everybody around me would be pulled into that consciousness to some degree by the power of magnetism. And I made it a personal quest to try and not just chant, but try to spiritualize the chants, and go so deep in them that they would unveil themselves to me.

I looked at the spiritual qualities that Master had assigned to each chant, like "Desire, My Great Enemy" – "to overcome all material desires." And I thought, well, that sounds pretty awesome. Let's chant that. So I sang that chant every day for six months, thirty minutes every day, just trying to get into an experience. And I found that when I went deep enough in the chant, it wasn't just music anymore, it was pranayam. I could feel the energy in my heart changing and expanding, and it became an experience of

expanded consciousness.

The same with “Swami Ram Tirtha’s Song.” It’s not only an energizing song, it’s a divine power moving through you. And “Ever New Joy” – what does it actually mean to experience ever new joy. Or “Thousands of Suns” is a chant for wisdom – and what’s that about? I sang that chant for six months straight, just trying to taste God as wisdom.

When I would lead sadhanas or Raja Yoga classes, I would invite people verbally, but then mostly by magnetism, try to draw them into an actual experience. Because it’s through their own experience that they’ll recognize it’s a tool to transform their lives.

Swami wrote a short list that is now being expanded, of the ways his songs can be used as antidotes for specific negative tendencies, and I found them to be very effective. And because I was desperate at the time, going through some trials, I would look at that sheet and say, okay, what am I experiencing? Okay, a little bit of bitterness. Okay, what’s the antidote for bitterness? “Have You Seen Sorrento?” And I would sing it over and over, not mechanically but trying to get deeper into the vibration beneath the words, under the music, and asking myself constantly what was the consciousness that Swami had when he wrote it?

“Have You Seen Sorrento?” is about gratitude and appreciation for the beauty and joy and wonder of God’s creation. And, of course, that’s the antidote for bitterness, because if you’re engrossed in appreciation for everything around you, how can you be bitter?

## **A Soul-Healing Ministry of Music**

I became just thrilled to discover how the music could be applied in these ways, and I began using it in my own life, trying to

learn how to touch into that essence deeply myself. And then because I'm someone who shares the music, trying to learn to be a transmitting station for that consciousness, as the next step.

It became a thrilling journey, and of course one that those of us who sing this music are all walking and will always walk.

But that's been the exciting part of Swamiji's music for me, that it's not just brilliant as music, and it's not just entertainment, it's a key to higher consciousness, and to inner freedom.

For example, "The Hill That Was Tara." I can't remember exactly what he says about that song. Of course, it's for courage, and, I think he said, for overcoming the fear of death.

I sang that song every day for a long time, just trying to tune into it. And as a funny example of how magnetism seems to work, I didn't tell anybody that I was singing that song, but I could feel a very real, moving power in it, and it was always deeply touching to me to sing it.

As I said, I didn't tell anybody I was singing that song, but I was just trying to develop my own understanding of it, and the latent magnetism in it. And then two years ago at Spiritual Renewal Week Ramesha came up to me and said, "Keshava, somebody was supposed to sing 'The Hill That Was Tara,' but they didn't show up. Can you sing it? I said, "Do you mean in five minutes?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Actually, yes, I can sing it." [Laughs]

So I got up and I shared that song. But what was particularly beautiful for me was that I felt the magnetism that I had developed with that piece going out and seizing that opportunity to share itself with others. And a number of people told me afterward that it was their favorite rendition of the song.

So I went back and listened to it to see, well, okay, was it that good? And I saw that I had made some vocal mistakes because I was nervous, and you could hear it in my voice. But what I think transpired was that the undercurrent of Swami's consciousness was able to come through because I had spent so much time deeply pondering, what's this really about? What are we singing about? And how can I convey that consciousness as I sing this piece? And that was just utterly thrilling to me.

We're preparing for the oratorio now, and each of the songs is a treasure. I don't know what others have felt, but there have been lots of times when I've listened to some of those songs in the audience, or I've sung them, and there are a few songs that I might be tempted to check out on, especially some of the instrumentals, like "Land of Milk and Honey," I'm sorry to say, because I don't really get it yet.

But I have to wonder, what would the experience of the oratorio be if every single song was that deeply investigated? If it was that fully invested with our interest and our wonderment and our devotion until it really blossomed.

Every song has the potential to be a soul-stirring moment, and we have forty-nine of them in the oratorio, and that's going to be a significant experience, and people have been very receptive to getting into it this way.

Q: As far as educating people, and attracting them to Swami's music, do you have any thoughts about that, and what it can do for them?

Keshava: Well, what it can do for them is a lot, and I've had varying degrees of success trying to convey that. For whatever reason, the choir in Los Angeles tended initially to have its ebbs and flows, where it would build and then crumble, and I would

build it all up again, and it would crumble. And what I learned from that is that the music can never stand on one individual's personal magnetism alone. I learned that whenever I tried to build the choir off my own magnetism, it would collapse eventually, because I couldn't sustain that kind of energy.

But where I think the choir begins to have more magnetism is when the emphasis is placed on the sadhana – the spiritual practice – of the music, because that's an ever-new experience. And then it doesn't depend on whether the choir director is peppy that day, but it's up to each individual to go in and feel the music.

As far as how to work with people to get them to have that experience of the music, I think the best thing is to just start singing.

Of course, people are often really scared to sing, and so I think chanting alone or in kirtans is a great opportunity to have an experience – “Oh my God, this music can really move me.” It's a safe environment, and there are lots of people around you, and it's simple melodies, and it's easy to get into the vibration through repetition.

And then, I think teaching people how to chant on their own. Because I've noticed that when I chant alone it's a lot easier to be sincere, but as soon as I'm chanting with other people, there's an awareness that it's not just you and God.

That's something I'm working on, how to get to the point where it doesn't matter if I'm chanting in my closet or in front of a hundred people, because it's always just me and God.

Aside from that, just helping people sing Swami's music and understanding what they're saying – that's been something I think that has helped the most.

Because the poetry in music isn't always obvious. Swami is very clear in his meanings. But, for example, with the song "Living Water," which has been one of my favorite pieces for fourteen years, I only really understood the opening lyrics two weeks ago. "Though fallen deep in sin, by men abandoned, if longing for His grace, truth be your guide..."

I was thinking, "I understand most of that, but what the heck does that mean, 'by men abandoned'?" And I might be the dunce here, but Karen finally helped me figure out what it's saying: "Though you've fallen deep in sin and your fellow men have abandoned you, if you're longing for His grace, and taking truth as your guide, He can redeem you from every evil."

Anyway, it's funny that the song suddenly makes more sense to me now, and when I sing it, it has more relevance for me.

It's something that I did a lot with the singers in Los Angeles, and it was reflective of my training as an actor. I noticed that people would sing the music, or they would sing Swami's or Master's chants, and they would be doing it sort of subconsciously, without really asking what it all means? And how can I sing these words with sincerity?

For example, "I Live Without Fear" is a straightforward song. There are no hidden, layered allusions, or anything like that. "Though green summer fade, and winter draw near, my Lord, in Your presence I live without fear."

And it's really a question of just asking people to stop and ask, what would that feel like? What would it really be like to feel the presence of God so palpably that you were unafraid? And the funny thing is, when I asked that question, people would usually go, "Oh!" like they hadn't thought of it before.

Understanding the poetry intellectually doesn't do it for you. But when we put our intellectual understanding together with the music, the music informs the heart, and then you don't have to wonder what this would feel like, because the music shows you what it feels like.

That song is one of my favorites. I think it's such an incredible piece of music because the overall journey of the song is so thrilling. But I found in Los Angeles that helping people understand what they were singing, and then actually sincerely singing to the Lord, transformed their musical experience, from being just mundanely interesting to being spiritually very beneficial.

So that was one of the best things I discovered. But for new people who are just looking to get started with the music, I think the first thing to do is simply start listening to it a lot, and then start singing it as much as you can, as often as you can. And I would recommend singing it with great focus, as much as you're able, because Master said to sing a chant until we've pierced the veil of superconsciousness with the chant.

He said that about *Whispers from Eternity*, too – to go after that seed until you can crack it open and get to the oil of inspiration.

Master said that he had spiritualized those chants – that he had chanted them until he went into samadhi – God-consciousness. I haven't planted them until I've gone into God-consciousness, but I've had glimpses, and those little glimpses are now permanent doorways for me that remain open to the Divine.

It's gotten to the point where chanting is such a powerful technique for me that I said to my girlfriend, "If I ever get in a bad mood, just make me chant."

I said, “I don’t care – even if I resist, and I get all grumpy, just make me chant.” And, obviously, we shouldn’t put the responsibility on other people, and I should be able to hold that for myself. And, in fact, I’ve used chanting that way many times.

But there was an occasion when I got really grumpy and down and sad, and she said, “Keshava, you should go chant.” I said, “No!” And she said, “Keshava, go chant!” And finally I said, “Okay.” So I went and I sat down and started chanting, and thirty minutes later I felt awesome. I got up and said, “Thanks for making me go chant. Let’s go have a nice day.”

Chanting and music can become very powerful tools in your spiritual kit. I’ve gotten a lot out of them, and I know that everybody can.

There’s also the thought that unless you have a beautiful voice you can’t really sing, but that’s not the purpose of chanting or singing. We have to remember that the power comes not from the sound but from the vibration. And you could sing like a crow, but if you’re singing with the right vibration and sincerity, it’s going to totally transform your heart.

One of the most rewarding kirtans I’ve led was a Diwali kirtan to Lord Rama. It was a great group of forty or fifty people, and then there was just me and a harmonium, with not even any microphones – just old-school, let’s chant, and we’re going to call Lord Rama to come here and be with us. And I remember hearing people who could sing, and people who absolutely could not sing. But everybody was so moved. And so many people would bump into me over the course of the next year and say, “That was the most inspiring kirtan I’ve ever been to.” And it was all because we were just calling Rama to come and bless us. And to those people who couldn’t sing, it didn’t matter to them anymore.

I'm thinking of one woman in particular. The kirtan was her first experience of Ananda, and she ended up coming back and taking Raja Yoga. So I got plenty of opportunity to hear her voice, and she can't sing, but dang, she loves chanting, and it was really effective for her.

We would sit down and chant. Or I would lead a chant in our Raja Yoga class, and she would be singing with so much fervor, just chanting, chanting, chanting, and every single time we chanted she was completely off – her tone and her pitch were off because she was practically tone-deaf. But she was so sincere, and she got so much out of it. And she wasn't self-conscious of the fact that she didn't have the technical skills of a singer, so it didn't get in her way, and the chants really grabbed her and revealed a lot to her.

So I guess I would say that, yeah, the tonal quality of the voice isn't the limiting factor, it's really just how sincere we are, and our heart and our receptivity, and attuning our heart to the vibration.

Now, of course, refining our technical skills helps us refine our attunement, but it's not necessary. It's just a helpful tool. I've been amazed, working with soloists for so many years, and working with the choir, because I grew up in classical music, and I have some technical training with the voice, and I know a few things about how to improve voice tone, or whatever – and then it's so hard to get a choir to remember the technical notes, even relatively simple things like dynamics. Like, "Write this down in your book and circle it." And they'll still forget.

But what I discovered is if I could help people feel the vibration that we were searching for, they would get it.

We would sing Swami's song "Peace," which is

deceptively simple on the surface, but then all you need are a few sopranos who are checking out and it will turn into a train wreck really fast. Just on the first phrase, and all of a sudden it's, "Oh, God, make it stop!" [Laughs]

I remember a choir rehearsal in Los Angeles, and it was a disaster. I was working with sopranos who had sung that song for years, and at first I started trying to address the technical issues of pitch, tone, vocal placement, and breathing, just trying to fix the problem through technique. And it wasn't working, because these people weren't musicians and they didn't care. And the more I talked about technique, the less interested they got, and the worse it got.

Finally, by the grace of God, I don't remember exactly what I did. Maybe I sang the first verse solo, just that single note. And I said, "Tune into this vibration. Forget all the technical stuff, just tune into this vibration and let's try and act as channels for this vibration. What does peace feel like in your heart? How can we allow that vibration to expand and come out through our voices?"

So I sang the first verse and tried to expand my own aura as a vehicle to share that vibration of peace, and then we started singing the second verse, and all of a sudden it worked. It just worked. And I was like, oh my god, that sounded good.

So it taught me a big lesson. And it took me years to really figure it out. I can't tell you how many times I made that mistake, but I finally realized that if I started by searching for the right attunement to the *consciousness* of the piece, the singers naturally did the right things. But if all I did was harp on the technical side, we would lack the consciousness and it was always lacking.

I was blown away by how well it worked. And then with the soloists over the years in Los Angeles, it worked really well,

too. The soloists are standing up there thinking “I’m singing all by myself, and I’m so exposed, I have to make sure my voice does all the right things or people will think I’m a bad singer.” But really, I’ve been so amazed by how every single time, my job primarily seems to be just to help the singer more fully understand the vibration and have an experience of it themselves and learn to express that. And if they can do those things, the song will always take care of itself. They naturally then become musicians, and they naturally express musicality, just because it’s the appropriate consciousness.

I worked on a song the other day with one of the soloists here in Palo Alto. It was “Blessed Are They.” [Sings – “Blessed are the poor in spirit...”] And the thing about that song is, it’s very repetitive, and the words are sort of arcane, so it’s easy to check out and just sing the words and melody, and everyone falls asleep for three and a half minutes.

But it’s one of just three pieces in the oratorio where it’s actually Christ speaking, so I think that means we should probably pay attention. And all I did with the singer was, we just went through the Beatitudes, and I said, “What does this actually mean? What is Christ saying?” “Blessed are those who thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” And when we started digging into what each phrase actually means, it was thrilling. It’s just so thrilling. And then, so on and so forth, we went through all of the words, and we said, okay, now let’s sing it again. And it was so beautiful and entrancing.

And then the next song he sang was “In the Spirit.” The words are, “I was caught up in ecstasy. ’Twas a day sanctified by God.” And he sang it totally fine, it was technically proficient. It was fine. But then I stopped him and I said, “What does that mean,

to be caught up in ecstasy?” That this was the day that God came and revealed the secrets of heaven to you? This is samadhi we’re talking about. This is your consciousness expanding beyond all boundaries.

I said, “Just put yourself there. Just imagine that this is the moment that you’re expanding effortlessly through all time and space.” And once he could get into that vibration, I said, “Now sing. But sing from that effortless soul expansion across all space.”

And then he started singing, and it was so different, because every note was like an invitation to join him in that expansion of soul consciousness, and it was impregnated with the power of that consciousness. We were sitting there in the rehearsal studio, and he started singing, and I went, “Oh, this is it!” As if to say, this is what we’re after.

You don’t have to be a professional singer to do that, you know, you can be anybody and tune into that level of consciousness.