I interviewed James Brown, Music Minister, at the Independent Presbyterian Church in Memphis, TN. We discussed his work in Choral music and his training. We also discussed his use of the Memphis Symphony in the church’s programs.

This interview will be helpful to people interested in Choral music and the challenges that face a musical director in taking untrained laypeople and training them to sing complicated Choral music. People interested in understand the complexities of running a large Church musical program will find pertinent information in this interview.

I will refer to James Brown as JB throughout the interview.

0:00 JB introduces himself. He was born in Tuscaloosa, AL. He spent most of his time in Alabama till he was 21. He went to University of Georgia for graduate school. After graduate school he ministered at a large church in Birmingham and the came to Memphis 17 years ago.

1:05 JB talks about some of his early musical memories. Both of his parents were amateur musicians. They both studied voice and played various musical instruments, mainly piano. The whole family took piano lessons. He got his first guitar at 12. He grew up in the church. His grandfather was a Baptist minister.

2:22 JB talks about his parent’s musical roots. They were “classical oriented”. They were active in their school and church choir. Music was bigger in schools then.

3:40 JB talks about his enjoyment of his early piano training. They family possessed a music gift. From his early childhood he was a member of the church choir. The late Fifties and the early Sixties were a time of new development in Baptist church choir programs.

It was a big part of my life, because it was something I could do well and the same thing with my siblings.

5:15 The youth choir was the beginning of his interest in Choral music. His church had a big youth choir, and it was a “big thing” in his church. The choir toured and traveled
across the country. In the last few years of high school he was assistant director and was able to learn from that experience.

6:12 JB talks about going to a revival in his junior year of high school, and being led to dedicate his life to music ministry.

   The evangelist probably gave an invitation for people to dedicate themselves to full-time Christian service. Something just hit me at that point, and I said, “That’s what I need to do”.

7:43 JB talks about choir directors who influenced him as a youth.

8:57 JB talks about choosing a college. He chose Sanford College, because his mother taught there and his grandfather had also been associated with the school. He received free tuition.

10:00 JB talks about his secular musical influence at the time. He was a devout Beatles fan. He performed “Where Have All the Flowers Gone” with his younger brother at a school talent show. He learned the folk standards of the day. He also had a high school garage band in which he concentrated on playing Beatles songs.

12:00 JB talks about how his early experience playing in bands affected his ideas in his college years as far as arranging and harmonies. He now tells his students and parents to expose their kids to quality popular music. This will help them become discriminating listeners.

   Listening will then extend to choices in all of life after that. Choice of recreational music. Choices of worship music.

13:41 JB talks about the lesson he learned from fellow students in college. There were about 75 music majors so they new each other well.

15:33 JB talks about working an office job after undergraduate, and his decision to continue on to graduate school at the University of Georgia. His wife was also a music teacher. They were interested in the University of George because of its music therapy program, one of only three at the time. JB had another experience were he felt God leading him in the direction of Choral music. JB talks about doors opening up after he made that decision.

18:01 JB talks about getting his first job as a part-time choir director while in graduate school. He also worked in a large college choral group as the college Choral director. JB talks about the work load not being too heavy because of his great passion for it.

   It was something that I immersed myself in, totally, because I knew it was my calling. All these doors opened up, and it was like everything was just set there and I could not, probably, get enough of it.
19:09 JB talks about his life after graduate school. JB and his wife looked for jobs in the Atlanta area. They both took jobs teaching music in elementary schools.

   It is the most fun I’ve ever had since graduate school…They learn so quickly; they are up for anything. It was an absolute joy to do.

20:32 JB talks about how he and his wife met. They were both in the same choir at Sanford, and they started dating soon after. They were married a few years later. JB talks about the importance of having a musical partner for thirty plus years. His wife works with the children’s choirs.

22:17 JB talks about being drawn back into the ministry after teaching one year. He received a call from the largest Presbyterian in Alabama about becoming the choir director. The church was located in Birmingham, AL. There was also a Christian school there, where he and his wife taught.

24:10 JB talks about the responsibilities of a full-time church job. He was the first full-time music director, so he was able to implement his own ideas and methods for leading a large ministry. He could create his own job.

   I became an administrator as well as a full time musician teacher…It’s just learning how to use your time. How to use people. How to delegate.

27:03 JB talks about the challenges of taking untrained church members, with little time to practice, and shaping them into a great choir.

   I think working with elementary school children helped me a lot, because it kind of scales back the expectation level a little bit, and it helps you simplify. Teachers need to find simple ways to communicate concepts…Basically you take the raw material that you have. A guy told us several years ago at a workshop I went to, he said, “There are three steps in this process. First of all is warm bodies, and that’s important. Second of all is to get a sound out of those warm bodies. The third is to refine that sound. And that’s basically what you do.

29:00 JB talks about how he chooses material for all the different choirs.

   You start simple first.

29:37 JB talks about his accomplishments at his first church. JB feels that his greatest accomplishment happened at his first church because he started with nothing and built it into an award winning outfit. The music critic from the Birmingham newspaper began coming to their performances every year, and they received great notices. They began to go to national Choral contests, culminating in a concert at the Mormon Tabernacle in 1985. It was a concert for the American Choral Directors Association. They were the only church choir to receive that honor.
We had a choir that was fired up and we had a church that supported what we did, because they underwrote a lot of those expenses.

33:55 JB talks about how a great choir affects the health of the church.

It allows you to draw people to the church who wants to hear fine music. They have the opportunity to get involved in the life of the church if they choose to. It allows the church members themselves, who are not in the choir to hear great music done well, and to worship through that great music, and the choir is drawn into that directly. You have an opportunity to experience spiritual truth on a grand level and to have an opportunity to glimpse the greatness of a God through music that has been judged, in an objective way, essentially, as the greatest music of the century, because it’s lasted.

35:08 JB talks about how it affects him personally. The vision of the music reflects the beauty of God and of that found in the Bible.

Handel’s Messiah never gets old. You could do it for 150 years and never get tired of it…The music that he has allowed people to create reflects his own greatness. His majesty. His variety. The many facets of his character, personality, and being. So you become more in touch with those things.

37:06 JB talks about teaching others to lead and direct choirs. He has had four or five students go on to direct choirs. JB says that training people for the future is his big calling right now.

37:39 JB talks about coming to Memphis. He and his family prayed about moving and an opportunity opened up in Memphis.

39:37 JB talks about teaching his own children music and encouraging them to play and sing.

40:43 JB talks about working with the Memphis Symphony. They had previously worked with the Alabama Symphony prior to coming to Memphis.

41:05 JB talks about how the collaboration works.

We called a contractor-one of the members of the symphony-and that person begins to recruit for us. So we hire him to hire others to work our job, so to speak.

41:46 JB talks about the development of the relationship with the symphony over time. Initially, they used only a few pieces, and gradually they began to use more and more until they were using a whole orchestra.
42:49 JB talks about combining the orchestra with the choir.

Your choir works for four months. The orchestra works for two hours, and does the program. So you’re working with people that are very fine professionals in the orchestra side, and you’re working with mostly amateurs in the choir. So it’s a challenge, because you have a very short time to put those two groups together. And the instrumentalists, sometimes, have never heard this music before, a lot of it they have, but they might not have ever heard it. And so in a two hour rehearsal they have to get caught up to speed with what the choirs been doing all the time… It helps to be comfortable with directing groups like that. Mixing them up. Working fast. Knowing that you’ve only go a short period of time. There is a lot of pressure involved.

43:37 JB talks about his fears, early on tat the choir would embarrass themselves, but many times it turns out to be the other way around, because he always has the choir prepared so well. JB talks about the problem of balance. Micing becomes important in assuring balance. Recording brings its own problems.

45:12 JB talks about the challenges of motivating a choir. Explaining the music to the choir helps in motivation. The choir director must be excited about the music first before the choir can catch the excitement.

46:55 JB talks about preparing for a regular Sunday service. First he selects the music. He selects the music twelve weeks in advance. Much of the music is familiar to the choir simple because of the time factor. JB divides the rehearsal-half devoted to Sunday service and the other half to special programs. The music that is furthest away is done first so the people coming late don’t miss the most pressing material.

48:15 JB talks about the Sunday night music. He now has a group consisting of a violin, cello, flute, organ, and two guitars. JB talks about that group. It was inspired by a work they did several years ago called “Light Eternal” by John Michael Talbot. It is a symphonic work with a folk base, as well as ancient music. It also has element of the chant. This makes for a more reverent and quiet service while utilizing the guitars and strings like folk music does. He uses contemporary song writers, including his son, as well as his own compositions.

50:52 JB talks about leading the congregation as well as the choir. This is a very important part of his job.

51:57 JB also has a “school of rock” for the young people’s choir. JB talks about this being a way to keep the boys singing, and keep them interested in the choir. So far, the plan has worked. The younger boys have been moving on to the youth choir. They start the process with children 18 months of age. For them they have a music listening experience. They start a children’s choir at age 3. In the “school of rock” he shows the boys how simple rock songs work to keep them interested in music.
54:22 JB talks about their next big event, which is this year's Christmas program.

55:21 JB talks about his future plans. He would like to write more and continue to mentor future ministers, and send young people out to serve. He has been training interns and wants to concentrate on that. JB wants to spend more time working on theological study and writing about music. JB sees a need in the Independent Presbyterian Church for this kind of study and writing to help bring focus and identity to the Church in the changing times.

56:55 We said goodbye and the interview ended.