**Thirty Years of Excellence and Inspiration at Mt. SAC with Bruce Rogers, Director of Choral Activities Episode 188**

00:00:00 **Bruce**

I never believed we could actually come as far as we've come and accomplish what we've done. We've been to South Africa, we've been to China, we've been to Australia, we've been all over Canada, all over Europe, and we've won competitions everywhere we've gone.

00:00:12 **Bruce**

Could I have envisioned that when I started here with zero program and nobody in there? No. But I hoped we could achieve something special. But the students, they just work so hard and they're so wonderful and they are completely dedicated to my vision in this program. And so, because of that, we've been able to exceed more than I could have ever thought.

00:00:35 **David**

Welcome to the Mt. SAC Podcast, your window into the vibrant world of Mount San Antonio College. I'm David Sloan.

00:00:42 **Tania**

And I'm Tania Anders. And we are your hosts on this journey through the heart and soul of our institution.

00:00:49 **David**

Mt. SAC is not just a campus, it's a thriving community field with dreamers, innovators, and trailblazers. Whether you're a student or alumni, faculty member, or other employee of the campus, this podcast is designed with you in mind. We're here to keep you connected and informed about all the exciting happenings on and around our campus.

00:01:08 **Tania**

In the spirit of unity, the Mt. SAC Podcast aims to be a hub for communication, engagement, and collaboration. We want to hear from you. Please share your experiences.

00:01:19 **David**

Subscribe today, and stay tuned for the fascinating stories, insights, and updates coming your way. Mt. SAC is more than a college, it's a community, and we're thrilled to share it with you. Welcome to Mt. SAC Podcast.

00:01:28 **Tania**

Welcome to the Mt. SAC Podcast.

00:01:36 **David**

Today, we have the honor of diving into the extraordinary world of choral excellence with a luminary in the field. Joining us is none other than Bruce Rogers, the maestro behind the harmonies at Mt. San Antonio College. As the Director of Choral Activities, Professor Rogers oversees a musical empire guiding diverse, vocal and choral programs that span the musical spectrum from classical to jazz.

00:01:58 **David**

Bruce personally directs the award-winning chamber singers and the elite vocal jazz ensemble Singcopation. Under his direction, Mt. SAC has achieved top rankings in national and international competitions across the globe, gracing concert halls from the United States to China, from Scotland to South Africa.

00:02:16 **David**

Professor Rogers has left his mark conducting in the Netherlands, Australia, Vienna, Budapest, and headlining the Australian National Choral Association Convention. He has also been recognized at the faculty member of the year at Mt. SAC and also received the prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Collegiate Choral Organization in 2023. So, it is my pleasure to welcome Bruce Rogers to the Mt. SAC Podcast.

00:02:40 **David**

Who are you?

00:02:47 **Bruce**

I am the Director of Choral Activities here at Mt. SAC. This is my 30th year that I've been here, and actually my final year, I will be retiring in June of this year.

00:02:59 **David**

First off, congratulations.

00:02:59 **Bruce**

Thank you.

00:03:01 **David**

I hear word on the street is you've been recognized for your lifetime achievement award.

00:03:06 **Bruce**

I did the NCCO, which is National Collegiate Choral Organization. It's the organization that every collegiate choral director is a member of in the United States. They honored me this year with the Lifetime Achievement Award, which was very special. Whenever you get something like that from your peers, it's obviously very special.

00:03:27 **Bruce**

And I received it in Atlanta at Morehouse College where Martin Luther King Jr . went to school, Spike Lee, went to school, and many others. And it's just such a historic college and it's meant even more to me to get it there.

00:03:41 **David**

You say this is voted on by your peers. So, who are your peers? Is this from every colleges all-

00:03:48 **Bruce**

All over the country. Yep.

00:03:48 **David**

Like from junior to Harvard, from Mt. SAC to Harvard, and you got recognized?

00:03:53 **Bruce**

And it was history because I'm the first two-year college director to ever get voted in for a lifetime award. So, everybody else is from major universities like you just mentioned.

00:04:03 **David**

Well, congratulations on that again. Alright. So, then let's start with your origin story. What led you down this path?

00:04:10 **Bruce**

It's a very interesting story, actually. It's very different than any choral director I know. I grew up playing guitar singing, and my dream was to be a rock and roll star. So, grew up in Connecticut and loved music and sports my whole life and participated in both.

00:04:25 **Bruce**

Was one of those people who went to college just so I would have something to fall back on and never thought I would really want to be a teacher. Like I mentioned, I wanted to be a rock star. So, I graduated from the University of Connecticut in 1981.

00:04:40 **David**

Go Huskies.

00:04:41 **Bruce**

The go Huskies, and pretty good basketball program. They do now. They didn't when I went to school, but they do now. And so, yeah, I actually hitched a ride on a semi truck with 80 bucks in my pocket and my guitar and the truck dropped me off in Upland and I never left.

00:05:01 **David**

Wait, Upland, California. I was going to say drove me to the Village, Greenwich Village and that's where I-

00:05:07 **Bruce**

No, dropped me off in Upland. And I ended up taking my guitar and playing at some nightclubs in the areas and making some money a little bit. And the person I was dating at the time, who's now my wife for 42 years, she didn't come out with me because she said, "If you're not going to marry me, I'm not giving everything up and following this guy who wants to be a rock star to California," once I came out here, I realized, I really do want to marry her and not lose her.

00:05:34 **Bruce**

And so, when she came out to visit, I proposed, we got married, I thought I'll do the good husband thing, get a real job instead of just going in and doing auditions and things. And so, I landed this job at a middle school in Riverside, Central Middle School and was doing mainly the band program there and choir and things just started happening from there.

00:05:54 **Bruce**

I fell in love with teaching within the first few months of doing it. Saw how successful I was becoming and I just gave everything up and focused on that and went on from there to Upland High School where I was there for seven years after five years at Central Middle School. And again, Upland High School, where I had been dropped off with a semi-truck.

00:06:13 **David**

Insane.

00:06:14 **Bruce**

I went on to get my master's degree from Claremont and did doctoral studies at USC.

00:06:20 **David**

Okay. You trained to be a rockstar. Could you read music at the time? Were you like-

00:06:24 **Bruce**

Yes. Through high school I was always in the choral music program and so I learned how to read. And of course as an undergrad at Yukon, I was a music ed major and so all of that. So, I graduated education degree, but I really was one of those people who thought, I'm just doing it for something to fall back on. And little did I know that was really my calling in life.

00:06:42 **David**

You're still waiting for that? Your next thing?

00:06:45 **Bruce**

Yeah.

00:06:45 **David**

Because I mean, middle school, that's tough. I look back on those days and I can't believe that there was an actual music teacher. I was in the junior band and when I think about how we were and what our teacher had to go through and what we thought we sounded like, and then in real life what it actually sounded like, teachers have to have a lot of patience. So, that's a good training ground.

00:07:07 **Bruce**

Yes, I do have a lot of patience when it comes to teaching and I think you have to at any level really. But I don't always have a lot of patience with other things in my life. But with teaching, I always have, so-

00:07:18 **David**

So, choral activities, is it just voice that you're working with?

00:07:22 **Bruce**

Yes.

00:07:22 **David**

So, tell me about, I'm sure you work with different groups, like different choral activities ranges, tell me what those are.

00:07:29 **Bruce**

Well, I am kind of unique as well in the country in that I do both vocal jazz and classical. Most people are trained in one or the other and they don't do both. It's very unusual to find somebody who specializes in both.

00:07:42 **Bruce**

I started off actually classical. That's what I was trained for as an undergrad and fell in love with jazz after I started teaching and didn't start a vocal jazz group until I came here at Mt. SAC. And I think it was about my fifth year here that I started a vocal jazz program. And since then we've become the most successful vocal jazz ensemble in the United States, so-

00:08:02 **David**

And is it acapella?

00:08:04 **Bruce**

No, it's both acapella and accompanied.

00:08:06 **David**

Oh, okay. So, I would imagine just classical, it's with piano and is there strings or is it jazz? I'm just trying to get my head around what's-

00:08:14 **Bruce**

Sure, well, the Chamber Singers is the classical group that I do here on campus, and that's mostly acapella music. It's music from the Renaissance era, from the Baroque Romantic period, all the way through brand new pieces that are written now.

00:08:25 **Bruce**

We have pieces that are written specifically for us now because we're known throughout the world. And so, composers are sending me compositions all the time. So, we do music from every, every era. Vocal jazz is different with that it's one on a microphone.

00:08:40 **Bruce**

We have 12 people that sing in the group. It's called Singcopation. Play on words there, Singcopation. They're Singcopation. We have a great band that plays with this rhythm section as well. And we have a concert coming up in December with that, as well as with our classical groups. We put on the Wassail Dinner Concert every year, which is a huge deal here at Mt. SAC's, December 7th through 9. But I'm afraid it's all sold out completely.

00:09:08 **David**

I have to go on StubHub to get some tickets.

00:09:09 **Bruce**

Something like that. Yeah.

00:09:12 **David**

How do you choose your program? You say that people are pitching you new music, you have thousands, you like literally a thousand years worth of music to choose from, what is your process?

00:09:23 **Bruce**

And that's the million-dollar question that I get asked a lot actually. That's one of the things that I focus very hard on is programming. So, I spend my summers just pouring over music scores and going on YouTube and looking at what people are doing at different international competitions in different countries.

00:09:40 **Bruce**

And we go to international competitions all the time. We just won the Spittal competition in Austria this past summer. So, I'm hearing all this repertoire from all over the world and I start to grab things and say, "Oh, I'd love to do this someday , or I'd love to do that."

00:09:53 **Bruce**

And then during the summer I just kind of start putting things out on the floor all over the place. And all of a sudden something just hits me that, "Oh, this piece would go great with this, or this theme would go." And I come up with different concepts.

00:10:07 **Bruce**

On top of the repertoire that I choose, what's unusual about what we do with our Chamber Singer group here is we do a lot of staging and movement. It was my goal when I started classical music here at Mt. SAC in 1994, I was determined to make classical music not boring for the general person who comes to our concerts.

00:10:26 **Bruce**

And so, because of my rock and roll background and theater background, I decided, "Why can't I bring a little rock and roll to classical music?" So, I went out of the box and I did things that nobody had done before as far as, instead of just being stodgy and holding your choir music and singing this classical music, I thought, how about if everybody memorizes everything?

00:10:48 **Bruce**

And I get them moving around the stage if it works with the text and I make different formations so people have a visual thing, levels and all sorts of things. So, we started doing that and we kind of have made our signature name because of those things and people seeing what we've done visually as well as how well the students sing.

00:11:09 **David**

So, are you choreographing as well?

00:11:10 **Bruce**

Yeah.

00:11:10 **David**

You're doing everything.

00:11:11 **Bruce**

Yeah.

00:11:11 **David**

And when you're choosing music, like for a football team, they design their offense based on the players. Do you know who your players are? And that's how you choose the music as well? Is that-

00:11:24 **Bruce**

Absolutely.

00:11:25 **David**

Oh, okay. Yeah.

00:11:25 **Bruce**

Absolutely. I'm one of the only two-year college directors that I know of that audition their group the year before. So, I audition high school seniors in May as well as current Mt. SAC students for the following year. That way when the summer starts, I know exactly who I have in my group.

00:11:42 **Bruce**

I know I've got this killer tenor soloist, so I'm going to do that song that's always had a great tenor solo. And I've been waiting for this kind of quality person to come in , that kind of a thing. So, yeah, I do know who I have to work with during the summer so I can set the program up for success.

00:11:58 **David**

Wow. Okay. And so, you're also recruiting then, I guess.

00:12:01 **Bruce**

Always.

00:12:02 **David**

Always. So, that's kind of unique to what you do too, I would imagine.

00:12:07 **Bruce**

Well, every choral director, no matter whether you're a university to your college or whatever, high school directors, anybody, you all got to recruit. I mean, you can be a wonderful director, but you can't do anything unless you've got those people in front of you.

00:12:20 **Bruce**

So, luckily, now we've got such a reputation that top students want to come here to study because of the choral program. But when I first began here and there was really nothing going on in the choral department and built it from scratch, recruiting was my everyday thing.

00:12:36 **David**

Did you know what to aim for when you came? Or was it just kind of like, "Oh, here's an opportunity, and then you kind of raised your game level or?

00:12:43 **Bruce**

I had a vision when I came here. And the vision, Dr. Feddersen was here and the president at that time, and I had a vision that I shared with him and he believed in me and my vision and that's why he hired me. And I never believed we could actually come as far as we've come and accomplish what we've done.

00:12:58 **Bruce**

We've been to South Africa, we've been to China, we've been to Australia, we've been all over Canada, all over Europe. And we've won competitions everywhere we've gone. And this'll be our sixth time at Carnegie Hall. We've been invited to more conferences to perform than anyone.

00:13:14 **Bruce**

We've won more DownBeat Magazine awards in the large ensemble vocal jazz category than anyone in the country. Could I have envisioned that when I started here with zero program and nobody in there? No. But I hoped we could achieve something special.

00:13:28 **Bruce**

But the students, they just work so hard and they're so wonderful and they are completely dedicated to my vision in this program. And so, because of that, we've been able to exceed more than I could have ever thought.

00:13:42 **David**

Wow. Okay. And so, you're kind of a rockstar. I mean, I'm ready to jump in the van and go to New York because it's sold out here and head to Carnegie Hall. When is that show? What is that? What is the performance?

00:13:52 **Bruce**

Actually, it's a wonderful opportunity. I've been asked to be the guest conductor for this work with orchestra soloists in choir. It's called the Illuminare by Elaine Hagenburg. And it's about light versus darkness, good versus evil. It's about a 30-minute piece with orchestra and solos, as I mentioned.

00:14:07 **Bruce**

And so, I'm guest conducting and there are different choirs who are auditioning from throughout the country to be part of that choir. So, Mt. SAC is going to be one of the choirs that are in there. But on top of that, Mt SAC's been asked to do a showcase and do a few songs on their own as well. So, that's kind of how that came to be. So, we'll do our own little set, but then also they'll be part of the main festival course, if you will.

00:14:29 **David**

Is that the most intimidating stage or?

00:14:32 **Bruce**

Yes, it is one of the most intimidating. The very first time I conducted at Carnegie Hall, and you're in that dressing room and you're looking around at Leonard Bernstein's photo on the wall and all these greats, and you think, "I'm sitting here."

00:14:44 **Bruce**

I will tell you a funny story about Carnegie Hall. The first time I was so nervous and I'm looking at my score, I was doing the Mozart Coronation Mass, and I pretty much had it memorized. Because I wanted to do such a good job at Carnegie Hall. And I'm pacing in the room and I remember this elderly lady knocked on the door and I opened it up and she goes, "Is there anything else I can get for you Mr. Rogers? Do you need any food or can I get you some water or whatever?" And there were flowers in the room and everything.

00:15:10 **Bruce**

I said, "No." I said, "Thank you very much. Everything is wonderful. I really appreciate it ." And she goes, "Oh, thanks. You're very nice." And I said, "Oh, thank you." And she goes, "And James Taylor was here last night and he was very nice to me too." And I was just like, "James Taylor was sitting here last night and now I'm here tonight."

00:15:28 **Bruce**

So, yeah it's pretty crazy to be in that situation and know that you have that opportunity and what an honor. And then you walk on that stage and you see all the balconies full and everything, and you take that bow and you just go, wow, I don't know of any artist in history who's ever taken that for granted, when you walk on that stage and take that bow and think of the history.

00:15:49 **Bruce**

And then you turn and you face the orchestra and you raise your baton and your heart starts pounding about a million miles an hour. And you realize, "Okay, let's get this going." And then once the downbeat comes in, you're ready to go.

00:16:01 **David**

Because the heart is pounding. Is it faster pace or is it-

00:16:03 **Bruce**

You try not to. Because you get that metronome clicking in your head. And so, you got to calm yourself down and get ready to go.

00:16:10 **David**

Do you ever use a click track? Or is it-

00:16:12 **Bruce**

With jazz you do. Classical, it's pretty much just in your head. And with jazz it's there too, but the click track you use a lot in class. So, the students get that kind of inner metronome going with them too, because it's different. With classical groups, I'm in front conducting them. With jazz groups, you don't, you just count off one, two, oh, one, two, three, and that's it. Then they're on their own. And I could go sit in the audience and have a sandwich while they do the rest of the song.

00:16:37 **Bruce**

So, it's very different. I'm not in front of them conducting. So, you want them to have that inner metronome going, if you will.

00:16:43 **David**

Okay. So, I would imagine these students are incredibly talented. Where have they gone from here? Do you have some good stories to share?

00:16:50 **Bruce**

Some great ones. We've had people who've gone to Broadway. We have a student, Avi Kaplan, who sang in the Pentatonix. He was the low base for the Pentatonix for their first years together. And then he left and he has a solo career now.

00:17:03 **Bruce**

We have a student, Babatunde Akinboboye, who was here and he's now started this hip opera thing, which is all the rave on YouTube. And he's got a whole product that he does. And he's combined hip hop with opera. And he's an opera singer. He's a fabulous, legit opera singer.

00:17:18 **Bruce**

And we have Lia Booth, who is a jazz singer who's out there just killing it in the clubs and is thought of as one of the top vocal jazz singers anywhere around. And so, yeah, we've had a lot of people that came out of this two-year college and is out there really doing great things on top of conductors who are now at university, who've had people come out here getting their doctorates in music.

00:17:40 **Bruce**

So, I'm very, very proud of all my alumni. I've just mentioned a few, but you don't have to be a star for me to be proud of them. I'm proud of the fact that they're just wonderful human beings and giving back to society and doing wonderful things.

00:17:54 **David**

I love it. Well, it sounds like the fire is still in you, but you're retiring. What are you doing, man?

00:18:01 **Bruce**

It's the toughest decision of my life. Deciding to have children, that was pretty easy. Deciding to get married to my lovely wife was pretty easy compared to deciding to retire. But I've been teaching for 42 years here in California.

00:18:13 **Bruce**

I've got four lovely, wonderful grandchildren. It's time for another chapter, play some more golf, just spend time with the grandkids and it'll give me an opportunity now to do a lot more guest conducting and clinicking and adjudicating and those kinds of things.

00:18:29 **Bruce**

I've done some adjudicating overseas and clinics and so on and guest conducting, but I want to do a lot more of that internationally as well as domestically. And yeah, just hoping to do things on my timeline and a lot of travel. Robin, my wife and I, we both like to travel and so we want to start doing traveling that doesn't necessarily include my students along with us all the time.

00:18:49 **David**

Well, you're going to Ireland, I hear. Is it?

00:18:51 **Bruce**

Yes.

00:18:51 **David**

What is that the occasion that's for?

00:18:53 **Bruce**

Okay. We've been invited for two things. We're going to the Irish Institute of Music & Song, which is just outside of Dublin. It's a wonderful music facility, and they're bringing us in to host us, and we're going to do concerts in their brand new theater.

00:19:07 **Bruce**

We're going to do concerts in Dublin. We're going to maybe work with some of the youth in Dublin and show them some things as well. So, we're doing that. Then we're going to the city of Cork where there's the Cork International Coral Competition, where we'll be competing against choirs from throughout the world and also giving friendship concerts as well.

00:19:27 **David**

Amazing. I would imagine since you've had quite a career here, that you were able to handpick your successor, or has that-

00:19:34 **Bruce**

No.

00:19:34 **David**

No. Okay. I'm just assuming that you get to, "I bequeathe to you."

00:19:41 **Bruce**

No, talk to the hiring committee about that. But yeah, I think they're about to fly the position in another month or two. And hopefully, we'll have somebody hired by May. I will not necessarily be on the hiring committee.

00:19:53 **David**

Is that right?

00:19:54 **Bruce**

Maybe they will seek out some advice from me if we're able to work that out. But otherwise, yeah, I built this program, but the future is going to be with the music faculty that are here. And so, I really want them to be comfortable with who they choose to be their colleague and move on.

00:20:10 **Bruce**

And we just hired Dr. Jeremy Fox last year, as I mentioned. I do both jazz and classical, and that's not usual. So, my other colleague, William McIntosh, who has been here a long, long time with me, he retired. And when that happened, we decided, you know what, we should have a vision and split this up.

00:20:30 **Bruce**

So, when you retire, when he retired William McIntosh, we decided to hire a jazz specialist. So, that person would then take over all the jazz. And now when I retire this year, we're going to hire a classical specialist, and that person will take over all the classical ensembles, and that way we're in great shape. And Dr. Jeremy Fox is doing an incredible job so far.

00:20:50 **Bruce**

This is his first year here, and he's a fabulous colleague and incredibly talented and known throughout the world for his arrangements. And so, I'm excited about how we drew up that future and now we just need to find my replacement. And then onward they go.

00:21:04 **David**

Onward and upward. Well, that's wonderful. So, thank you so much, and congratulations for everything. It's truly an amazing accomplishment, just career. Just to know that you got recognized from your peers, it's wonderful.

00:21:16 **Bruce**

Thank you. And I have so enjoyed my time at Mt. SAC. I've had nothing but support since the minute I came here. As I mentioned, Dr. Feddersen was one of my biggest fans when I first came. He was a cheerleader for me. He came to all the concerts and really believed in me, and I never wanted to let him down. And I promised him I'd build something special here, and that's what I've tried to do. So, no regrets at all.

00:21:37 **David**

Clearly, you have. So, congratulations.

00:21:39 **Bruce**

Thank you.

00:21:39 **David**

Wonderful. Thank you.

00:21:40 **Bruce**

Thank you.

00:21:44 **Tania**

Thank you David and Bruce for that wonderful conversation. Next, we would like to take a moment to honor Bruce Rogers by sharing a piece by the Mt. SAC Chamber Singers, please enjoy White Christmas.