Unlike Bob Dylan, I neither disdain nor dismiss the honor of receiving an award. Although, as many of you know, the reward for making music is simply the joy, the indescribable pleasure of making music – for yourself and for others.

I hadn’t think of myself as old enough to receive a “lifetime achievement” award. Until now, I guess. I look at the list of past recipients and I see my teachers, Eliot Forbes, Daniel Pinkham and Lorna Cook DeVaron. And many other very distinguished colleagues. I’m flattered to be in their company.

I should also thank my parents. Although they’re no longer with us, they would have *shepped* lots of *nakhas* today. They would have been very proud. They were both artists, and for some reason never objected when I told them I wanted to become a professional musician. I thank my wife Ronda for her unstinting support, her love (that’s the most important thing), and her acceptance of “I can’t tonight – I have a rehearsal.” And of course I owe a great debt to the thousands of singers who have sung under my direction, in Zamir, at Northeastern University and in the various festivals I’ve been privileged to guest conduct. I have learned more from you than from any textbook. You are my teachers.

And a special shout-out to my co-conspirator for 44 years, the incomparable accompanist, Edwin Swanborn.

Cathy asked me to give a little personal history.

Well, when I was a teenager, I didn’t want to have anything to do with classical music. I told my mother I did not want to take piano lessons any more. I wanted to play the guitar. Folk music. Hey, it was the 60s.

But all that changed when I was 14 years old. I would still play guitar and sing folksongs for another decade or so. But there was a new music counsellor at camp that summer of 1962. Stanley Sperber. And he had us singing choral music. That’s it. I was hooked. And Stanley had recently started a choir in New York City called The Zamir Chorale. Fast forward seven years. 1969. I had just graduated college. Stanley invites me to start a Zamir Chorale in Boston. I guess you’ve already figured out what I said.

Much of what I have done in my career has been in reaction to an inferiority complex. It seemed there was Jewish music — and there was real music. Jewish music was relegated to the multicultural bin. For most conductors, Jewish music was some dreidel song that you were forced to include on your December Christmas concert.

And then I discovered Salamone Rossi. He became my role model. Here was a Jewish musician who lived in Mantua at the turn of the 17th century. Rossi was employed as a violinist and composer at the court of the duke of Mantua, working alongside his colleagues Claudio Monteverdi, Giovanni Gastoldi and Lodovico Viadana. Not bad company. And Rossi was also a member of the Jewish community of Mantua. He composed several books of madrigals, trio sonatas and dances. But he also composed the first ever collection of Hebrew motets for the synagogue, published in Venice in 1622. He not only lived in both worlds, but created beautiful choral music for Jewish worship.

**Two quotes.**

The first is from François Tissard, a Christian intellectual, born in France in the late 15th century, who traveled widely throughout Europe. He visited a synagogue in Ferrara, Italy in 1502, and wrote “You could hear one man howling, another man hee-hawing like a donkey and another man bellowing. They make such a cacophony of discordant sounds! Considering this with the rest of their rituals, I almost became sick.”

Second quote. 100 years later. Rabbi Leon Modena, a friend of Salamone Rossi in Mantua:

“And now shall [the Jews] become objects of scorn among the nations? Shall they say that we no longer have talent, that we cry out to the God of our fathers, sounding like dogs and crows? There is a very talented man in our Jewish community, a skillful singer, who has performed music before princes, dukes and nobles. He set the words of the Psalms as polyphonic choral music, to be sung joyfully in the synagogue on Sabbaths, festivals, and all sacred occasions. No longer will arrogant opponents heap scorn on the Hebrew people. They will see that we too possess talent, the equal of the best endowed.”

Rossi was my man! I too wanted to work in the big world – I wasn’t hired by the Gonzagas in Mantua, but I was fortunate to land a job teaching and conducting at Northeastern University. And 44 years later, I’m still at Northeastern, where I get to conduct the great Christian masses and requiems and cantatas and oratorios. And, at the same time, for more than 47 years I have been conducting the Zamir Chorale of Boston, and have managed to establish a bit of a niche in what we might call, for lack of a better term, Jewish Choral Music, both sacred and secular.

I was faced with **two challenges**. At least.

The **first** was too much success too early. I remember one of Zamir’s first concerts. In 1970 we put 45 Jewish college kids on stage to sing for a Hadassah meeting. Well, it didn’t matter whether we were good or bad. The Hadassah ladies ate it up! Just being there was enough for tremendous applause. But it wasn’t enough for me. Both the repertoire and the performance had to be able to stand on their own—in front of any audience.

The **second challenge** was a shortage of appropriate repertoire. The first liturgical choral music for the synagogue doesn’t appear until the 19th century. (The great exception, of course, being the beautiful synagogue motets of Salamone Rossi published in 1622.) And there is no secular choral music of Jewish content until the beginning of the 20th century. And most of this music was unpublished or out of print. And unfortunately there was (and still is) a lot of junk. Awful dreidel songs for Chanukah. Insipid synagogue songs appealing to the simplest taste. So I was forced to become a researcher. I found some marvelous music by Israeli composers. I found little-known music from the Russian-Jewish school. I discovered music composed by Jews in concentration camps during the second world war. I dug through the largely ignored collections of 19th century synagogue classics. I found and performed some gems: Jewish music by Kurt Weill, Darius Milhaud, Franz Schubert, Jacques Halévy, Modest Mussorgsky, Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein (not just the *Chichester Psalms*), Arnold Schoenberg, Paul Ben-Haim and of course Ernest Bloch.

Out of necessity I wrote my own choral arrangements: lots of them. Arrangements of Jewish folksongs, liturgical melodies, music from the Yiddish Theatre, and Israeli popular songs.

We commissioned composers to write works for Zamir, works that we would share with other choruses. We commissioned works from established composers such as Daniel Pinkham, Robert Starer and Israelis Yehezkel Braun and Tzvi Avni. And young composers such as Ken Lampl, Mohammed Fairuz, Jeremiah Klarman, David Burger, Meira Warshauer, Benjie Ellen Schiller, Gerald Cohen, Charles Osborne, and Nick Page. (OK, some of them aren’t so young.)

We are living in an era when serious music is being banished from many synagogues. It is often replaced with banal tunes that are easy to sing. Cantors are being fired. Choirs are being replaced by guitars. One thing we’ve tried to do with Zamir is rescue the best synagogue music and at least bring it back in concerts and preserve it on recordings. I suspect synagogues are not the only witnesses to this phenomenon. When my students at Northeastern sing a mass by Haydn or a Gloria by Vivaldi or a cantata by Bach, I doubt that they have ever heard this music in their churches. To quote my esteemed rabbi, Robert Shaw,

The arts are not simply skills: their concern is the intellectual, ethical, and spiritual maturity of human life. And in a time when religious [institutions] and political institutions are so busy engraving images of marketable gods and [marketable] candidates that they lose their vision of human dignity, the arts have become the custodians of those values which most worthily define humanity, which most sensitively define Divinity.

**A metaphor:**

Back when we were students in conservatory we had many exercises and exams in what was called “ear training.” We were trained to hear and identify intervals and chords. Then in rehearsals we learned to listen for dynamics and timbre and rhythm, to identify and correct issues of what we called “blend.”

Only later did we learn the other kind of ear training. Listening to our singers not merely as vocal instruments, but as human beings. As people who join a chorus to satisfy their craving for community, for communion, for social harmony as well as musical harmony. That’s a whole ‘nother kind of listening. And listening to our audiences. Feeling that feedback loop between the performers on stage and the people in the house.

If you and I sing the same melody at the same time we create what’s called a “unison.” If we’re successful, then we agree completely on pitch and rhythm. But most choral singing involves singing in harmony. Not singing the exact same pitches, but creating an ebb and flow of consonance and dissonance, usually resolving back to consonance. Through musical dissonance and consonance, we learn to disagree and agree. We create tension and relief. We recognize the value of difference, the beauty of otherness. It can be more satisfying than always singing the same pitch at the same time.

And sometimes we go one step beyond. We sing in counterpoint. Two contrasting musical arguments, each with its own identity, with unique pitches and unique rhythms. And somehow, wonder of wonders, they create something magnificent. The melody and the countermelody agree to disagree and get along quite well together.

It’s a miracle. Bequeathed to us by some awesome men and women called composers. And people called conductors recreate that miracle week after week in rehearsals with wonderful people called sopranos and altos and tenors and basses. What an amazing privilege it is to be a partner, indeed a facilitator in this process of creating beauty.

I’ll close with my favorite verse from the Bible. It’s the ending of Psalm 90. Many of you will recognize it from the awesome setting by Charles Ives. So you can imagine that transcendent music too.

“And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us,

and establish Thou the work of our hands upon us;

yea, the work of our hands establish Thou it.”