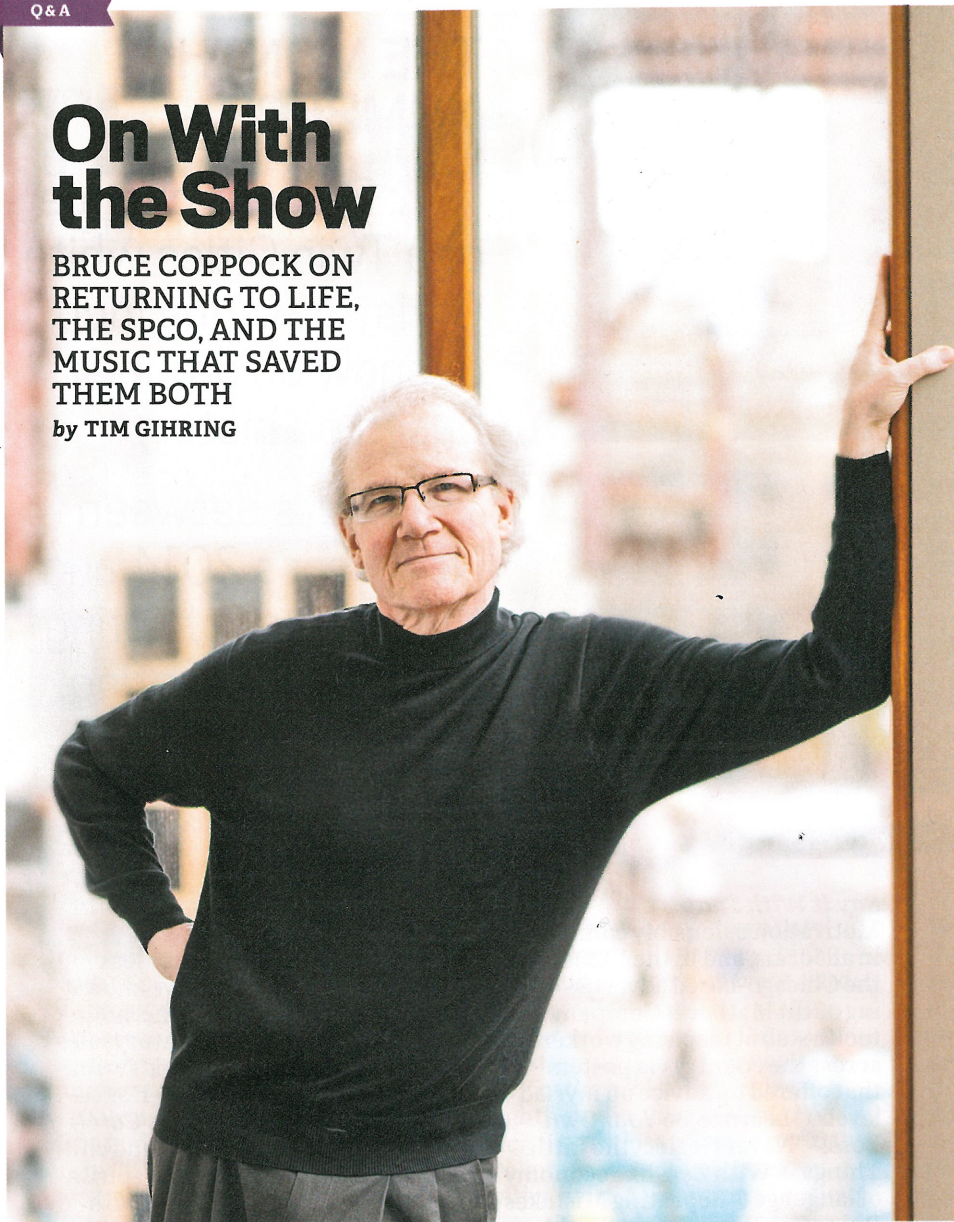


Q&A

On With the Show

BRUCE COPPOCK ON RETURNING TO LIFE, THE SPCO, AND THE MUSIC THAT SAVED THEM BOTH

by TIM GIHRING



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HE WASN'T SUPPOSED to be here: lunching, working, breathing. But five years after Bruce Coppock received a medical death sentence and gave up his gig as president and managing director of the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, he's back in his office, having resumed his former role. Though it's hardly the same: About a third of the orchestra accepted a retirement package in July after a bruising lockout. And he's hardly the same person: He survived a disease with odds on par with taking a bullet to the brain. He explains his experience and the impact it's had on his life.

In June 2008, I was given a profoundly severe diagnosis. The cancer I had, of the bile duct, had taken a turn. I had three or four months to live. But there was one remaining treatment, at the Mayo. I'll never forget the doctor saying, "If you

do this therapy, there is a 10 to 15 percent chance that it might extend your life by a couple months." But it completely wiped out the tumor.

Fewer than one in seven with my diagnosis survives five years.

But someone has to be in that percentage.

I wasn't ready to stop fighting. But I also was reconciled. I'm not wired for self-pity. You're either wired that way or you're not. The

most bizarre phase of it was when it didn't happen. Then what do you do? It was so weird.

I read a lot of books, I listened to a lot of opera, I traveled—all the bucket-list stuff. I played games with myself in my music room: If I was going to listen to pieces I knew, I would only listen to performances that I didn't know. Spent a lot of time with the Ring cycle by Wagner. A lot of time with *Carmen*. My single biggest artistic discovery, though, was the choreography of Pina Bausch. I'm not a dance person. But there's a 3-D film called *Pina* by Wim Wenders—the most breathtaking choreography I've ever seen, so musical, so earthy.

The breakthrough happened in 2010 after I'd been taking this new drug (Sorafenib) since September 2009 and it was still working—none of the drugs I'd taken had worked beyond six months. I'm still on the same drug today. I took it this morning.

It was an honor to be asked back—most organizations are done with whoever leaves. It kind of organically emerged over a weekend, after the contract was settled. I really did miss having my hands on the clay, and it was clear the SPCO could use an experienced hand.

Management, the board, and the musicians probably agreed on 92 or 93 percent of what's important. The artistic leadership is intact, and there's a new 1,100-seat concert hall being built at the Ordway that will be the primary home of the chamber orchestra. I think anyone you would get to talk about it here would convey an enormous sense of optimism about the future.

The musicians who took retirement, every single one had been saying in one way or another, "It's getting to be time to retire." It wasn't news. Now we have an opportunity to redefine the orchestra by hiring a transformational group of players. How often does an orchestra get that opportunity? Usually only at the beginning.

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The artistic-partner model we created in 2003 (and launched in the 2004-05 season) is the only viable model for the SPCO. Chamber music is like a rowing team or a basketball team on a fast break: It's only as good as its weakest link. This model puts the onus on the players to choose partners who could be good teammates on a fast break.

As controversial as the pricing structure has been [with tickets as low as \$10], there's no question it has increased the size of the SPCO audience. We have a 30 percent larger audience than a decade ago, and the net revenue is higher than 10 years ago. What orchestra does that?

We haven't cracked the code to sustaining classical music forever. But there's a blog that has compiled the history of reporting on the demise of classical music—it goes back to 1900. And every time they say, "This time it's for real!" What gets focused on are the bricks-and-mortar institutions of classical music, but that's not where the action is. More people are accessing classical music, just not always in the usual places. Steven Copes, our concertmaster, recently performed with his chamber group Accordo for 200 people at the Amsterdam Bar and Hall—a bar!

I'm a great believer in the healing power of music. For me it's a deeply personal and spiritual journey, and I think that's the way it is for most musicians. We've been through a wrenching time. But you know what? Music is powerful stuff. Music is the thing that will heal the rifts.

Tim Gihring is a regular contributor to Minnesota Monthly.

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BOOKS

Spread the Good Word (or Keep It for Yourself)

BOOK IDEAS FOR HOLIDAY GIFTS AND
WINTER READING DIVERSIONS

Hans Weyandt of St. Paul's Micawber's Books has firmly established his credentials as a go-to guy for reading recommendations: In 2012, he edited *Read This! Handpicked Favorites from America's Indie Bookstores*. Here are his book picks for holiday gifts or keeping for yourself to curl up with on a long winter night.

***The Thoughtbook of F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Secret Boyhood Diary*, edited by Dave Page (\$12.95, University of Minnesota Press)**

"For all the lovers of F. Scott, this is a nice, almost pocket-sized compilation of his journal entries from his teenage years."

***The New Midwestern Table: 200 Heartland Recipes* by Amy Thielen (\$35, Clarkson Potter)**

"Whatever your assumptions are about cooking from the 'Heartland,' this book will both shatter and reaffirm them."

***Ola* by Ingri and Edgar Parin d'Aulaire (\$16.95, University of Minnesota Press)**

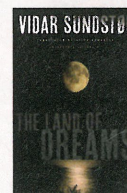
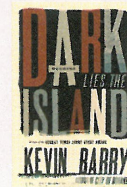
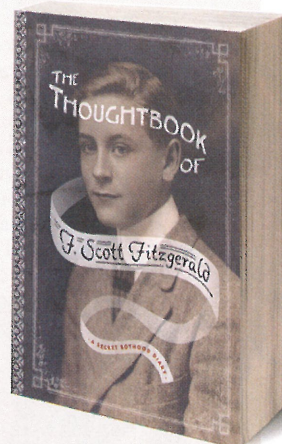
"First printed in 1932, this children's book is a gorgeous winter tale. It also works as a perfect gift for any adult interested in art and design."

***Dark Lies The Island* by Kevin Barry (\$24, Graywolf Press)**

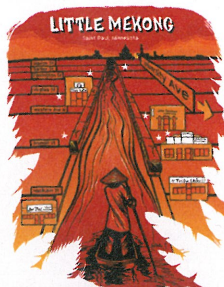
"These stories are dark and deeply troubling in many regards. Yet they always offer a slice of humor and beauty. I finished this book and started over again."

***The Land Of Dreams* by Vidar Sundstøl (First of three in the Minnesota Trilogy, \$24.95, University of Minnesota Press)**

"Sundstøl is an acclaimed Norwegian novelist who lived near the North Shore for several years and fell in love with the landscape and people."



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Heavy Table remains a can't-miss web destination for good reason: It often captures a Twin Cities dining scene that grows in sophistication by the year while remaining resolutely suspicious of pretention. So *The Secret Atlas of North Coast Food*, helmed by Heavy Table editor James Norton, compiles essays and maps (literal, conceptual) in an entertaining push-pull between celebrating the high-end things on our plates with the homeier side of a region's appetites. Thus a spread on the landscape of Minneapolis chefs (Schoenfeld to Bartmann to Flicker) sits alongside the cartography of East Lake, an olfactory tour of TC chow, the experiences of immigrant chefs, and the local origins of ice-cream truck music. Like the scene itself, it's a searching work-in-progress, appealing both for its scope and undertow of affectionate skepticism.