

THE ROBERT SHAW READER

THE
ROBERT SHAW
READER

Edited by
ROBERT BLOCKER

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PREFACE

Most people who knew Robert Shaw first met him through his music. Some were acquainted with him only in this way, while others had the experience of knowing him as friend, or conductor, or cultural leader, or educator, or raconteur—or more than one, or even all of those roles he embodied. As a musician, however, he belonged to the world. His musical signature was—and still is—an extraordinary sound that touches one’s deepest emotions.

His thoughts and words also belong to all humanity. In letters, lectures, and addresses, a plethora of musical topics are explored alongside Shaw’s philosophical musings on other subjects. For many years Shaw spoke of a book he contemplated, and this was certainly not surprising in view of the fact that he organized a complete conservatory curricula for the Collegiate Chorale. His commitment to education was unwavering throughout his career, for Robert Shaw was the perpetual student. His intellectual curiosity was insatiable, and he continued to seek answers about questions most musicians had dismissed as inconsequential.

This is Robert Shaw’s book. Each word is his—wisdom, wit, and immediacy from a treasury of writings and musings. It is a volume that reflects the unique perspective he brought to the podium. While a body of information can be drawn from the letters, the detailed analyses of several major works provide unusual insights. Addresses on the general theme of “The Role of Worship and the Arts” show yet another dimension of his personal credo that “the Bible teaches of a divine miracle when the Word became flesh. Is it no less a divine miracle when the flesh—the arts—become word?” The humanity of Robert Shaw is also fully revealed in his eulogies for national leaders and personal friends.

The Robert Shaw Reader attempts to record the primary themes of his musical journey and the manner in which a larger-than-life personality shared life with “his people.” The efforts of many associates contributed to Shaw’s book, but the devoted work of Eddie Barrus and Nola Frink is paramount in this

PREFACE

regard. During the Atlanta years, Miss Frink ensured the legacy of his archival papers and scores with consummate administrative skill. To her we owe a great debt of gratitude.

Many others gave immeasurably to this volume. We can be certain that Robert Shaw's talent was nurtured lovingly by his family—Caroline, Alex, and Thomas—as well as by his many choristers, orchestra members, administrators, and assistants. Norman Mackenzie, Ann Jones, Nick Jones, and Jeff Baxter readily come to mind.

In the preparation and distillation of these materials, many of my colleagues have provided assistance and counsel. Harry Haskell and Lauren Shapiro of Yale University Press have been superb editors, and both possess deep reservoirs of patience. James McElroy, as my associate editor, has brought his excellent literary and technical skills to this task. William Thomas served as assistant editor for part II, and his insights were invaluable. Steven Hegarty lent his graphics expertise to help render Shaw's sprinkling of musical notations throughout his letters. Rosamond Hamlin and Eileen Kim have been invaluable administrative assistants, and others too numerous to name have offered counsel.

Finally, I thank my wife, Serena, for her encouragement, wisdom, and love.

Robert Blocker
New Haven, Connecticut

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of his long career, Robert Shaw must have raised more than a million voices in song—voices young and old, trained and untrained, in classrooms, churches, and concert halls across the country. He was equally at home with spirituals and symphonies, with Stephen Foster melodies and Paul Hindemith premieres, all of which he conducted with the same inspired—and inspirational—energy.

When Shaw was on the podium, he came across as somebody who had discovered exactly what he was put on the planet to do and was doing exactly that. With a motion of his hand, he could take a chorus of fifteen or five hundred from the tiniest of whispers to the most jubilant of shouts. His performances were remarkable for their energy, articulation, and sheer sonic grandeur.

Fortunately, Shaw left an impressive legacy—numerous recordings, some wonderfully instructive filmed workshops, and the mixture of articles, speeches, letters, and spontaneous jottings that make up the volume you hold in your hands. Robert Blocker has sifted through the magnificent and daunting piles of Shaw material in Atlanta and New Haven, and *The Robert Shaw Reader* is one of those rare musical compilations aimed at just about everybody—scholars, conductors, and choristers, of course, but also the fabled “general reader” with an interest in music and a respect for clear, vigorous prose.

From the very first page, there is no mistaking Shaw’s sense of moral mission. It was bred into him from earliest childhood, for he was the son of a minister, Shirley Richard Shaw, and his wife, Nellie Mae Lawson Shaw, who was usually the leading vocalist in her husband’s church choirs. Imbued with an evangelical spirit, Shirley Shaw changed pulpits so regularly that every one of his five children was born in a different California town. Robert Lawson Shaw, who entered the world in Red Bluff on April 30, 1916, was the oldest son and regularly helped his father with his musical duties. As a result, the young man was already an experienced choral conductor before he was in his teens.

INTRODUCTION

It was Fred Waring, an enormously popular songwriter and bandleader, who led Shaw into professional music making. Shaw was then a member of the Pomona College Glee Club, and when Waring came to town with a variety show and invited the club to participate, he was so impressed that he offered Shaw a job.

Shaw turned him down. “I was studying comparative religion and English literature and I planned to go into the ministry,” he explained in 1998. A year later, he changed his mind, moved to New York and assembled the Fred Waring Glee Club. Before long, Shaw had founded his own ensemble, the Collegiate Chorale, an amateur chorus with two hundred singers, which made its debut at Carnegie Hall in 1942.

That same year, he attracted the attention of Arturo Toscanini, who was then at the height of his fame and influence and perhaps the most admired musician in the world. “There were all sorts of stories about the Toscanini temperament, but I always found him very kind and very modest,” said Shaw. “We met to prepare a performance of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, and he seemed gloomy about the prospects. ‘Oh, Maestro,’ he said—here I am in my early twenties and Toscanini is calling me Maestro!—‘Oh, Maestro, I’ve never heard a good performance of this work. The soloists are always wrong, the chorus is never quite precise, something always goes wrong.’”

But Toscanini was thrilled with Shaw’s preparation of the highly difficult choral music. He released a statement to the press—“I have at last found the maestro I have been looking for”—and worked with him thereafter whenever he could. The two men went on to record the symphony and the *Missa Solemnis* for RCA Victor—classic interpretations that have hardly been out of print for a moment during more than half a century.

Some of Shaw’s other early performances were recorded with his own Robert Shaw Chorale, which could deliver nuanced and exciting renditions of everything from Masses by Poulenc and Mozart through Broadway show tunes, Christmas carols, and, of course, the hymns with which the conductor had grown up. For two decades, the Robert Shaw Chorale was the country’s premier touring choral group and was sent by the U.S. State Department to thirty countries in Europe, the Soviet Union, the Middle East, and Latin America.

By the early 1950s, Shaw was without doubt the most famous of American choral conductors. He appeared regularly on radio and television and brought much of his father’s evangelism to the propagation of choral music throughout the country. But he was increasingly interested in symphonic conducting as well, and held posts with the San Diego Symphony and the Cleveland Orchestra (where he served as associate conductor under George Szell). Ultimately, he became the music director of the Atlanta Symphony, where he led the orchestra from 1967 to 1988.

Thereafter, Shaw appeared regularly as a guest conductor throughout the world. He was a champion of contemporary music and led first performances of works by such composers as Aaron Copland, Benjamin Britten, Samuel Barber, Charles Ives, Darius Milhaud, and Philip Glass. In 1991, he was a recipient of one of the Kennedy Center Honors, and the following year he was awarded the National Medal of the Arts in a White House ceremony. He died on January 25, 1999, in New Haven, Connecticut, at the age of eighty-two.

It is only proper that Shaw's thoughts on the volunteer chorus should open the book. The letters he wrote to the Collegiate Chorale are not only full of what Glenn Gould called "those home truths that you never actually get at home" but engaging musical history as well. Like Jay Gatsby, Shaw may be said to have sprung from his own Platonic conception of himself, and it is exhilarating to relive those formative days with him, as he rushes from project to project, testing limits, setting down rules, creating a place at the table for himself in the musical hierarchy of long-ago Manhattan.

From the beginning, Shaw displayed a welcome American practicality in his music making. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the way he prepared rehearsals. "I bring in text, rhythm, dynamics and intonation one element at a time," he once explained. "We might sing the text on a monotone until it's fully learned. And we will rehearse at a speed where it is all but impossible for anybody to make a mistake. That way, nobody can memorize errors. If you prepare this way, you will ultimately end up with a steady, unified, assured and beautiful sound." In short, he took the music apart and found out how it worked, rather in the manner of the legendary little boy with the alarm clock. But there was one important difference: when Shaw put everything back together again, it was better than ever—indeed, better than his musicians ever thought it could be.

Shaw's marvelous general prefaces to Bach's Mass in B Minor, Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, the Berlioz Requiem, and several other works makes one regret that he never undertook a full-scale introduction to the choral literature. Especially in the *Missa* essay, Shaw gives us not only the forest and the trees but also the bark and its lichen, as he takes us through this great and difficult music, measure by measure, illuminating tiny beauties that others have neglected.

Well though he knew these pieces, Shaw never stopped learning. "The real joy in working on the *B Minor Mass* is that there is absolutely no end to the refinement which the work inspires and commands. One cannot live long enough—or encounter so frequently conditions appropriate to its performance—that one exhausts it or becomes immune to its marvels."

Shaw's wry and sometimes agreeably ribald wit finds full play in his letters. During one Atlanta Symphony concert in Montgomery, Alabama, a stage

INTRODUCTION

manager seems to have been watching a televised baseball game in the wings. Unfortunately, the television set was well within the orchestra's line of vision, leading to some predictable distraction and at least one furious letter. While apologizing wholeheartedly ("I cannot believe I should have missed the television's presence and potential hazard"), he took a humanist view of the matter: "If [the set] was positioned on an elevated light platform off-stage and tuned to the game, it seems to me as naive to expect orchestra brass players to avoid looking as it would be to expect a troop of Boy Scouts marching past a nudist colony to look only at their Scoutmaster."

It is sometimes said that geniuses are just like everybody else, only more so. Shaw the heaven-storming Maestro was also Shaw the earthy raconteur. Within these covers you will find high solemnity—and even higher aspirations—set cheek by jowl with endearingly awful jokes and Shaw's own inimitable brand of doggerel verse. "Who touches this touches a man," Walt Whitman, who provided texts for so many sumptuous choral works, once observed of his own *Leaves of Grass*. Much the same may be said for *The Robert Shaw Reader*.

Tim Page
Washington, D.C.

We believe . . .

that in a world of political, economic and personal disintegrations *music is not a luxury but a necessity*—not simply because it is “therapeutic,” nor because it is the “universal language,” but because it is the persistent focus of man’s intelligence, aspiration and goodwill.

We believe . . .

that music is always a community enterprise. The solo performance does not exist. Even its creation is an attempt to communicate, and every performance an effort to unite the minds of men even of different generations.

We believe . . .

that music . . . is *one* art. The chorus, the symphony orchestra, the virtuoso recitalist and the string-quartet are not competitive “attractions” for the public fashion in patronage, but are instruments of a single craft with similar responsibilities.

We believe . . .

that music is peculiarly a *doer’s* art, and its benefits are in direct proportions to active participation.

We believe . . .

that it is the performer’s business to get out of the way of music. His craft is to “reveal—not to interpret.”

We believe . . .

that the choral art stands in a unique position to be of service to man and music because it offers the most immediate and accessible avenue of active participation.

And we believe . . .

that the choral instrument should assume a position of respect and musical responsibility commensurate with the distinction of its literature and comparable to that of the major professional.

—Creed of Collegiate Chorale, early 1940s

PART I

ORGANIZING AND SUSTAINING
THE CHORUS

March 4, 1964

Half-ideas are transient-shaped
Or else they must dissolve somehow each into each.
If only they would stand completely still
Until one found the words their size.
“I see, your measurements are thus and thus –
That’s clear enough.”
You inventory your entire stock
“Now this should fit”—and turn to find
It really doesn’t fit at all.
You have a cubed suit
For a sphered thought.

You were sure that thought had corners.

I tried to get down on paper some of the things that are jamming my mind with reference to music and the spiritual qualities.

We have, almost from the beginning of the COC, assumed the function—if not the particularized truths—of that relationship, and now with a frightening clarity and in a flood of specific detail I begin to understand that music is spirit.

I guess the first Bible verse I learned “by heart” in the Beginner’s Class at Sunday School was “God is love.” It must have been at least twenty years later that it occurred to me that what it probably meant was “You know what God is—Love.” And the same thing happens now with “Music is spirit”—but this time in overwhelming detail.

We began years ago by assuming that song was a story—it had a tale to tell, an argument to deliver, or a mood to convey. Its function was dramatic. Song was drama. Our first understandings of spirit in music were limited then to understandings of the text; and our techniques centered around systems of enunciation and a practical speech discipline, if also text was seen to qualify tone and sonority.

We understood spirit, too, as synonymous with our own corporate enthusiasm for the music we sang. It was very evident in concert performance that here was a group of people who loved to sing together and who somehow believed their song.

But at this point and from this time on the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus begins. I have never felt so sure of anything in my life. The ends for which we have assembled take shape; the pace and manner of their achievement grows more conscious and clear.

ORGANIZING AND SUSTAINING THE CHORUS

I believe that the essential musical properties—harmony, melody, rhythm, tone, and dynamics—under whatever critical microscope—are to be understood finally only as relations of qualities.

I believe that the relation of a note to its octave is the relation of one-ness to two-ness (which it is in terms of vibrations per second) and that at the same time the fact of their recognizable unity is a qualitative symbol knowledgeable only to men's spirits.

I believe that when voices switch functions for even the span of two notes, so that one voice sings what the other sang and what the second sang the first now sings the human spirit is involved. And the fact of a fugue wherein voices propose identity in alteration is a spiritual phenomenon.

I believe that form in music is a symbol of relations and values, not a blueprint of construction technique.

I believe that intervals have quality; that good intonation is the result of sensitivity to truth and untruth in tonality.

I believe that the voice is fantastically responsive to musical understanding, and that in every instance the sense of What must be precedes the How.

And I am no longer so concerned about the inability of any choir (including the COC) to master the long line of a long piece in a single sitting; for there are a hundred miracles in every measure worthy of the whole of a man's understanding.

I believe, then, that spirit in music is not the wholesale emotional orgasm that weeps appropriately in public, but rather the marshalling of one's keenest, most critical intellectual and moral forces to the point of complete consciousness—'til one hears in terms of values and the movements of values, until the most pedestrian minutiae of pitch and rhythm are heard inwardly in relation to adjacent minutiae; and finally in relation to wholes of form, tonality and intent.

I believe that we are only at the beginning. I believe we can scale and direct every rehearsal to this end, and that in those hours will lie the "life we have lost in living—the wisdom we have lost in knowledge—the knowledge we have lost in information."

December 2, 1948

In the last three weeks I've been reminded of the importance of the time-consuming non-musical mechanics of building and maintaining a chorus. Chief case in point would be this business of increasing membership, and the operation is as far removed from the golden glow of art as one could get. You need fifty

new members—mostly men; so you send out 1,500 letters with 3,000 announcements knowing a few hundred will find a small response, you send announcements to 7 newspapers knowing 2 or 3 will find space for it, you post 80 or 90 posters understanding that they may be taken down in twenty-four hours; and from all this you get 30 to 40 hours of auditions, of which a fourth to a third are men. During the auditions it seems like it's women, women, and more women; but at the end of the day, you discover you've found 3 baritones and 2 tenors—and it's all worth it. – Because all the noble musical dreams don't make a choir. People make a choir. If you have people, you sing.

On the road this fall, it seems to me that I did my most important work not conducting but during the 3 or 4 hours before every concert setting the stage—moving platforms, improvising ceilings, back-drops and walls, setting up chairs, altering seating arrangements.— More productive, I'd imagine, than dreaming beautiful sounds and admiring the dream.

So also it is with all of us in the Chorale. All of us have unromantic and non-artistic responsibilities, things that have nothing to do with the music—but there's no music if they don't happen. The first one would be the simple leg-work of rehearsal attendance. I've known many of our people to come to rehearsal when they couldn't sing a note—laryngitis or something. Well, that makes sense in ways other than the possibility of learning while listening. All of us are disturbed by empty chairs. If the room is packed, we know we're ready for work. At least we have 11 men on the field.

I have an idea also that if, say, even 80% of us were in our seats by 7:30, it would save us close to 30 minutes of rehearsal time. It's not only the time lost before beginning, it's the time half-used trying to get under way. Now, that's an unaesthetic mechanical angle if there ever was one; but I bet there aren't a dozen of us who couldn't be at rehearsal at 7:15 as easily as 7:35. And I know we could get more done in the first 15 minutes of rehearsal under those circumstances than we could in 30-plus at 10:15 or 10:30. Being there, and being a few minutes ahead of time—mechanics and leg-work—but it makes choirs.

Here's another angle. Group sense is a fine thing, and it has a host of implications for choral tone, rhythm, enunciation and intonation. But there's something that's more important. That's individual sense and individual responsibility. I'm speaking musically now. A lot of us relax into our section and into the huge choral sound. That's dangerous. What we need to do is sharpen our own critical individuality: That is, listen each one to himself, each one deciding how intense and controlled his tone is, how secure his rhythm, how precise his articulation. In this respect a group of soloists does make a chorus. If we can arrive at that state within the next two weeks it will be a great concert.

ORGANIZING AND SUSTAINING THE CHORUS

Looking forward to seeing you Saturday, (some) Sunday and Monday. Remember—left-foot, right-foot—be there—and we'll make music.

Bob

January 29, 1949

To members of the Juilliard Chorus:

I'm going to try another letter—in an attempt to straighten out some things before Tuesday's rehearsal. It appears to be a dangerous procedure, judging from the reaction to the last one. Anyway, let's dispense with the Juilliard letter-head, and make it person-to-person. If it were possible to write one hundred twenty-two individual letters, that could obviate the mimeographed form. – But it isn't—so this is.

In the first place, I regret greatly my inability to attend Thursday's rehearsal. People sometimes get sick—and I had two days of it.

In the second place, let's review that note of last-week. It said three things: one and obviously, that the Rogers *Passion* can't be prepared by a "part-time chorus"; two, it said "thanks to all who have been active and regular"; and three, it said that "dilettantes and absentees" might expect "full penalties." Evidently the last line of the letter got no laughs at all.

Now my thinking runs along these lines:

First, I would have expected the majority of people in the chorus to have been pleased and gratified, to have reacted with, "It's about time somebody cracked down on absentees. The habitually absent are the ones who slow down rehearsals, and the piece is certainly tough enough without having to re-rehearse it for those who attend haphazardly."

Second, I admit that I am very much perplexed by the non-professional habits of a large percentage of those enrolled in a presumably professional school. This really is difficult to understand. Digest this fact: there are eight persons in the Juilliard Chorus I *know* to be qualified for professional work. (There undoubtedly are more, but these I know well; some of them have worked with me professionally for as much as three years.) These *eight* persons had a total of *four* unexcused absences for the first semester. One-half [the] absences per person for those who probably have least to gain from rehearsal, who know the work best, and who certainly carry the heaviest vocal load. Not one of these persons was absent from last Thursday's rehearsal—when there were 25 absent and 10 tardy out of a total of 122 enrollment.

Organizing and Sustaining the Chorus

I just don't understand that. Here are some more figures: 82 members of the chorus have had a total of 160 unexcused absences—which certainly is fair enough; but the remaining 40 have had a total of 245 absences—which isn't at all fair. (If I were one of the 82 I'd kick.) And if you take into account the excused absences the overall is a hard average to cope with in the preparation of a difficult work like the Rogers.

The problem of discipline in a school situation is a thoroughly confusing one. Somehow, both professional and completely amateur regimens are easier to handle. The professional's pay stops, and the amateur simply drops out. But a school is more complex. One contracts to take certain courses, and if they are ensemble courses with performance as their objective, then attendance must be counted one of the contractual obligations. (One cannot balance an unbalanced group, for instance, when the conditions of imbalance alter from week to week.) And it seems reasonable to me that those who break that contract-of-sorts should not expect the benefits of credit and/or performance. If that is unfair, I'd like to know it. — And you'll just have to take my word that it is not representative of ill will.

I happen to believe in the Rogers *Passion*. I feel a little lonely, but I feel less lonely having heard what some of the soloists are making of this music when placed within the orchestral frame. Any time that the orchestra has played what Rogers intended, this work has proved its right to be heard and respected and loved. There is no lack of craft or heart on Rogers' part. The weaknesses are ours—conductor's (most of all), then instrumentalists' and singer's. The only question is whether we have—or can acquire in the next three weeks—musicianship sufficient to the music.

I'm certainly going to try, and it would be nice to know that you were also.

R. S.

September 1960

Dear Sir:

The Cleveland Orchestra Chorus is again announcing its annual auditions for membership.

This particular letter is addressed to educational, industrial and social institutions throughout the city.

It may well be that your organization already sustains a musical program for

ORGANIZING AND SUSTAINING THE CHORUS

its members; and we would not like to offer it in competition in any matters of time, energy, or attention.

If such is not the case, however, and if members of your organization might enjoy association with the musical program of the Cleveland Orchestra, or if—as is felt by some—such association might increase their value to your own musical program, we should be grateful if, through your customary media, you could bring announcement of our auditions to their attention.

Scheduled for this season are:

Brahms—*A German Requiem*

Barber—*Prayers of Kierkegaard*

Bach—*Magnificat*

Schubert—*Mass in G*

Christmas Festival Program

Beethoven—*Symphony No. 9*

Interested persons may phone or write for audition appointments to: The Cleveland Orchestra Chorus, Severance Hall, Cleveland 6, Ohio or telephone CEDar 1-7300.

With deepest thanks for your courtesy and attention in this regard.

Cordially,

Robert Shaw, Director

The Cleveland Orchestra Chorus

September 21, 1960

Dear friends –

It is my unpleasant duty to inform you that your re-audition for the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus has been successful, and you may expect to resume orbit sometime between 7:30 and 7:45 P.M. next Monday, September 26.

You may wish to know some of the considerations which have guided our evaluations and have qualified you for re-admission. Believe me, it ain't been easy.

Number One: Any good-looking woman was admitted *ipso facto* and *sans souci*. This might sound to you like a pretty personal way to go about this sort of thing—but I assure you that George and I had either (1) to agree, or (2) voluntarily disqualify ourselves before a decision was reached and as George says, “A chorus is a pretty personal sort of instrument—let's keep it that way.”

Number Two: Anybody who was really scared made it. I mean *really* scared. George and I get a big kick out of seeing some of you who *really* suffer: you know—clammy hands, all choked up in the voice, stomach muscles shaking like crazy, stumble up the steps or trip over the electric fan, start sight-reading from right to left and all that—anybody who gave old George and me a sort of pin-the-butterfly chuckle had it made.

Number Three: Anybody who had a cold got in. Almost all the great singers we know are hypochondriacs—and we didn't feel we could afford to pass anybody up here. (I remember one person who's had throat trouble at every audition since 1956, and that's the kind of sensitive person we like to have around.)

Number Four: There are always a few special rules for tenors. For instance, their reading test would be a little more accurately described as "sight improvising." I ask them to make up a note and hum it—and if George can find it on the piano, they're in. (I try not to look when these things are going on because I don't want to be unduly influenced by appearances or things like that, and George says three tenors made it this year just by blowing their noses.)

Number Five: Husband and wife teams stood a good chance this year, particularly when one partner to the marriage (and here we accept their word completely) was a bass or a tenor. This is a sort of insurance policy. Remember last year when the churches got mad because we had scheduled a *St. Matthew Passion* for Easter Sunday—well, suppose one of our concerts happens to fall on Mother's Day! From here on we have our own built-in mothers—and fathers—and anyway like George says you can't win 'em all.

These things—plus little things like giving preference to people who were studying medicine or engineering or math—because they'd have lots of free time and could make extra rehearsals, or to folks who lived fifty or one hundred miles from Cleveland—so that their families could learn independence—these are the things my friends and fellow-Americans which lead me to believe that this year's chorus will be the chorus of 1960–61, and I'm sure we all know how we all feel about all that.

Pox nobiscum,

R. S.

ORGANIZING AND SUSTAINING THE CHORUS

February 11, 1954

I

Whereas, it's the only way choruses can be understood, and
Whereas, it settles half the problems of intonation, color, balance, and phrasing,
and
Whereas, I'm going to keep on hollering 'til it's settled
Be It Resolved: Leave us save our ears and voices a helluva beating.
Leave us –

- (1) Exaggerate the duration and loudness of consonants having pitch: like M's, N's, NG's, L's, B's, G's, D's and J's.
- (2) Exaggerate the duration and loudness of the maker-uppers of diphthongs and triphthongs: like say-ee for say, so-oo for so, lah-ood for loud, bah-eet for bite, ee-oo for you, oo-awk for walk, fee-uh for fear, vaw-ees for voice.
- (3) Phrase ideas as well as melodies, breathe according to sense, not whimsy.

Meld words together; tie final consonants across to the next word. Leave us have no solo sibilants.

Practice by reading any newspaper paragraph in a monotone, steady, sustained, no breaks except at ends of sentences.

II

I've written and talked a lot about the Timeness of Music and the wonderful directives to choral singing which derive from that awareness. Time providing Music its medium, its "matter" to be shaped—not doubling back on itself fresh every instant, each song a new song, and every performance a first performance . . . the here-nowness of Music, its Going Somewhere-ness.

If any stray soul has missed those eternal verities send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to *And The Truth Shall Make You Inc.* (same address).

Anyway, I've got another pearl –

Department of Antithesis:

Time's contradictory quality is that of *Recurrence, Pulse, Rhythm*. It's the extension into Music of the heart-beat, the seasons, the tides, the biped, gestation, and when you get right down to it—whether by confirmation or denial—most of man's religious mysteries. It's the beat the beat the beat! It's the here it comes again-ness.

What it boils down to for members of the COC is that we don't sit around

listening to our beautiful voices when we're supposed to be in the next bar. Time's tides move right along, and we move along with them. "Rests" are not what comes after *releases*—rests are what comes *before attacks*. – And both releases and rests are dramatic *accents*. It is *rhythmic integrity* which gives motion and vigor to music. We're going to shade and color within that frame, not without it. Here comes that brass ring again—get ready *now*.

R. S.

March 10, 1964

I

It is perfectly possible to have vowel definition without grotesque facial contortion and the fracture of vocal line. The vowels are formed at the "voice box" (or whatever you want to call it), not by the teeth, nose or position of the tongue in the mouth. Their chief resonator is the throat column directly adjacent to their point of origin; and though in particular instances the mouth and jaw may aid clarity and facility (as in the difference between OH and OO; or *prestissimo*, *pianissimo* passages of calculated dexterity) the fundamental vowel area is before the mouth. Try it. Put your hands up alongside and forward of the hinges of your jaw. Drop your jaw slightly and naturally. Now say all the vowel sounds you can think of. Note how firm, full and virile they sound. For contrast's sake try to form them by facial gesticulation; try to cut off all resonance before the mouth. Note how whiney, thin, reedy and emasculate they become.

Actually—all it takes is a little mind.

II

We will exaggerate the intensity and the duration of the distinct vowel sounds in diphthongs and triphthongs. We'll sing them louder and longer and more clearly. We will never—never sing one vowel sound where two belong.

Always for "ay" (as in *say*) we will sing "ay" (almost "eh") and "ee."

Always for "ow" (as in *cow*) we will sing "ah" and "o."

Always for "oy" (as in *boy*) we will sing "aw" and "ee."

Always for "I" (as in *sky*) we will sing "ah" and "ee."

Always for "yoo" (as in *yoo-hoo*) we will sing "ee" and "o."

Always for "ear" (as in *ear*) we will sing "ee" and "uhr."

ORGANIZING AND SUSTAINING THE CHORUS

Note that this holds no matter how fast the tempo, or whatever the duration of the diphthong. Break it up; sing both parts separately and distinctly.

III

We will exaggerate the intensity and duration of the consonants that have pitch. We will sing M's, N's and NG's longer and louder.

A—If the hummed consonant is an initial consonant and preceded by a vowel (as in “new Masses”) (what a lyric!) we will sing the “m” as though it belonged to both words, thus “newM-Masses.”

B—If the hummed consonant is a final consonant and followed by a vowel (as in “I’m asleep”) we will sing the “m” as though it belonged to both words, thus “I’m-masleep.”

C—We will be conscious of the fact (chiefly for the sake of intonation) that the “sub-vocal” consonants have an initial pitch, and that they are to be sung on the pitch they are supposed to be sung on. Thus B, D, J, G, L, V, Z all have a fragmentary initial pitch. Sing it.

IV

All explosive and sibilant consonants will be pronounced as though they began syllables, not as though they ended them. Thus, “what is this all about anyway” becomes “hoouh-ti-zth-saw-luh-bahoo-tehn-nee-ooayee.”

V

We will give always *proportionate* (that is, rhythmic) time value to the various portions of speech sound that make up a word. That is to say, hummed consonants and the final vowel sounds in diphthongs will always have an actual rhythmic allotment, varying up to $\frac{1}{2}$ of the full time value, and depending upon tempo and style.

This is hard to illustrate, but suppose you had the word “home” on a half-note in fairly rapid time. We would sing the first quarter-note value “Ho” and the next quarter-note value “oom,” coming immediately to the M. Thus, count “one-two, one-two,” “Ho-oom, Ho-oom.” Or take the opening line of the “Star Spangled Banner.” Now, instead of quarter-note values on “Oh, say can you,” think eighth-note values on “Oh-oo say-ee ca-aN-you-oo.”

There is one further refinement of this; and it’s also tough to put on paper without musical notation. It is that hummed consonants and the final vowels of

diphthongs do not fall (except in very fast tempi or short note values) exactly on the rhythmic sub-division.

For example, sing to yourself in a slow tempo, “Oh come all ye faithful.” Now, instead of half-notes on “come” and “faith,” think quarter-notes on “Kuh-uhM” and “Fay-ayEM.” Note that if we sang “Kuh-M” and Fay-EE,” it would sound quite artificial, but if, on the second-quarter value, we preface the M and the EE with just a fragment of the main vowel sound, most of the angularity and artificiality disappears. This allows then an enlarged duration for the secondary vowel or hummed consonant, but maintains the normal accent of the primary vowel. OK?

Enunciation –

- I. Pure, vigorous vowels.
- II. Carefully broken-up diphthongs.
- III. Long and intense hummed consonants.
- IV. Explosive consonants always exploded as though they began a syllable.
- V. Rhythmic, proportionate allocations of hummed consonants and secondary vowels.

Now what all this issues in is –

1. Musically, the legato phrase, which is the substance of melody.
2. Dramatically, a continuous intensity of mood and sense. There are no spasmodic, diverting interruptions of the song’s story. We end phrases where it makes it make sense textually and beauty musically. If someone has to breathe, he does so in the middle of a vowel or hummed consonant, and jumps back in the middle of a vowel or a hummed consonant.
3. Uniformity and discipline. For instance, in the case of the exploded consonant, the technique of tacking it on the following syllable places it *on the beat* or sub-division thereof. So far as I can tell, that’s the only instant capable of absolute definition and unanimous understanding. – And, people, that’s the point of a chorus; doing the same thing together at the same time.

– Which brings us 4:00 A.M. and the Second lesson. From here on it comes slower.

- A. The cardinal sin of singers and choruses is their unmusicality.
- B. I’ve heard people quote Mozart something like this: “What is music? Music is first of all Rhythm; in the second place – Rhythm; and finally—Rhythm.”
Q.E.D.: The cardinal sin of singers and choruses is their lack of rhythm.

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I'd like to be able to tell you all I feel about Rhythm and the Time-mess of music, and make it sound fresh and exciting. As a matter of fact, I've written to you so many times about it that I'm sick and tired of the whole subject. It all sounds like *slogans*. – Or the “Infatuation with the Sound of Own Words Department.”

– Yet I *know* it's right. And I know it's the one absolutely necessary, basic, urgency of the choral art—(or any other musical art).

Up above it says “sick and tired of the whole subject.” That's not quite true. I'm not tired of *doing* it, only tired of talking about it. It's always fresh and exciting in the music. We work always with new rhythms, new patterns, new accents. That's the wonderful invigorating part. These excerpts, analytical and critical, are awfully shy of the intense practical organic excitement that comes with actual performance; but it ought to do us good to review them.

I can think of a couple of emphases that haven't been emphatic enough up to now. The first is that little notes are just as important as big notes, that they have places, and that they should be put in their places. Sixteenths and eighths and quarters are not just things that come between bigger things. They are not “introducings” or preparations or pick-ups. I get a horrible picture from the way you sing of little, bitty eighth-notes running like hell all over the place, to keep from being stepped on. Millions of 'em! Meek, squeaky little things. No self-respect: Standing in corners, hiding behind doors, ducking into subway stations, peering out from under rugs. Refugees.

Dammit, you're all a bunch of Whole-Note Nazis. And dots! Poor little dots! Oh—(I can't stand it!) I just thought of a *double* dot!

Look, this is a democracy. Little people count. They're included in the census. Eighth-notes can vote. They carry ID cards. They belong.

Dialogue:

Sixteenth note marches up to a bar, “Gimme a glass of beer.”

COC, “I'm sorry, my little man, that's only for whole notes.”

Moral: Give 'im a drink.

R. S.

November 14, 1961

This letter is considerably more difficult to write than the long and arduous ones which have to do with some phase of the music we are performing or some complex matter of choral technique.

What makes it difficult is that any worthy amateur choral organization is built around only a single idea extended two ways: a mutual and high regard for

the music which is being performed, and a mutual and high regard for all the people with whom it is being performed. A distinguished amateur chorus is so materially the product of devotion and self-discipline that when these cease to be present there is no chorus. They were woefully absent from the first twenty-five minutes of last night's rehearsal.

When, at a critical rehearsal of music of the stature which we faced last night, only half of the choir is present at the moment the rehearsal is supposed to begin, and when even among those present there is inattention and persistent chatter then there is no Cleveland Orchestra Chorus.

I am not unaware that the previous week's schedule had been a demanding one, nor that performances had been on a high level. These have no effective bearing on the childish and destructive lack of responsibility of Monday night. We have had better and more prompt attendance during blizzards. Given that wasted time Bach's *Dona Nobis Pacem* might have been a truly affecting prayer rather than a damnable gamble.

I believe that the quality of this chorus' musical aspiration and the quality of its performance justify devotion and responsibility from its members, and I believe there are two hundred people in this area who would go along with that. All we have to do is find them.

This chorus has been and will continue to be understanding [of] and sympathetic to occasional and unavoidable absence. – But it cannot tolerate tardiness and inattention and remain true to its aspiration, or valuable to the probable majority of its members to whom the experience has some meaning.

A little tardiness is inexcusable. – And since it is also lethal—as witness Monday evening—it merits the most stringent of remedies and penalties.

It takes a certain amount of time to prepare one's own mind for the artistic and technical responsibilities of rehearsal. I cannot see that five to ten minutes prior to the beginning of rehearsal *spent in one's proper place*, reviewing or examining the materials to be rehearsed, is too much to ask, or can help but add enormously to the joy and accomplishment of rehearsal.

R. S.

October 24, 1962

It has consistently been our hope and endeavor to make the rehearsal experience as productive, interesting and exciting a part of belonging to the COC as the actual performance itself. Where much is demanded—with reason and necessity—then much is learned.

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To each of you there should now have come an alertness to rehearsal techniques and procedures. These latter are short-cuts to learning: the ability to listen when other sections are rehearsing, to jump back and repeat appropriate numbers of measures without breaking tempo, to isolate rhythmic problems from problems of text and sonority; to make rhythm clean and steady, intonation true, tone both more uniform (better conceived and supported) and more responsive to variety in color.

Increasing efficiency means at least two things for our pleasure: first, we should be able to perform more of the great works in any given season; and second, I see no reason why we shouldn't build into our rehearsal sessions periods of reading for pleasure—rather than for imminent performance.

The assumption upon which all this increased pleasure is based you know probably as well as I. It is that a chorus is not a lump of human talent and energy chipped, sliced, rolled, moulded and stamped into a maneuverable manikin of the lowest common artistic denominator, but a group of unique and varied human beings, voluntarily congregated, who accept personal responsibility, and bring to a performance of the whole each his utmost endowment, preparedness and sensitivity.

Group productivity in art is not mass production.

Art by the many, perhaps like government by the many, is at its best when it not only allows but inspires the greatest possible individual participation, self-discipline and self-expression.

R. S.

Closely allied to this business of your enjoyment of the COC experience are the ground rules—practical do's and don'ts—to hang on to, to steer by, the that-which-you-can't-tell-the-play-(er, players) without.

Absences: These we hopefully will never have, but necessarily do. You are allowed four (4) unexcused absences during the season. Slips are available so that the unavoidable absences (excused ones) may be recorded before they occur. If they are unexpected and very last minute just telephone.

Guests: You are welcome to bring guests to Monday night rehearsals, but we must know in advance how many you wish to bring and on what date. Fire laws and available seating being our main concerns. We ask you not to bring, or request to bring, guests to Sunday [rehearsals]—these are the cut-'em-apart-diagnose-the-dilemma-sessions. – Nor are guests permitted at “with orchestra” rehearsals or pre-concert warm-up sessions.

On those occasions when you spy people in the auditorium it will be because management has made some special arrangement for them.

Monday
night's
rehear-
sal was
betray
ed. //
//So
there
!!
R

October 4, 1968

Friends and ASOCciates –

I have been thinking the past two days of writing a note in confirmation of the value—and necessity—of our marking of choral scores at rehearsals; and I find myself—without going very far afield at all—examining that ancient canard about *singers* as distinct from *musicians*.

The values of personal annotation to ensemble performance are obvious, practical and immediate. No one of us can remember every musical or interpretative advice, caution, definition or correction. – But a note in one's own handwriting (as to duration, accentuation, enunciative device or modification of tempo or dynamics) nine times out of ten will guard us against repetitive error and the consequent danger of its memorization.

Let's examine for a moment the suppositions behind this practice of personal markings: The first is that musical ensemble is *not* primarily the product of "following the conductor." Rather, it is the product of both of them *following the composer*. In thirty years of public choral performance—from professional concerts, recordings, radio and television to amateur festivals, workshops and "clinics"—it has seemed to me essential and honorable to insist that singers work with music in front of them. It is not the conductor's prerogative to establish a willful or whimsical musical dictatorship, but rather by solid education to arrive at a satisfying and productive relationship to the composer through his printed page. Anything other than this is thin-ice morality and chaos-courting. (I give you a for instance: Try conducting an all-state high-school choral festival: 1,500 to 1,000 singers from 125 to 250 different schools, all of whom have arrived "with the music memorized"—but without the music.)

The ensemble singer's responsibilities to the score is like that of the conductor, and each is further responsible to the other for visual contact at critical points of attack and release or changes of tempo or dynamics.

The second supposition upon which individual marking rests is that musical notation—at *best*—is less than half-that-asked. A composer may mark "crescendo," but the questions remain: "From what level—how quickly—for how long—to what level?" A composer may mark "diminuendo," but in addition to the questions above must be asked: "Is it to be accompanied by a change in vocal color or texture?" The composer sets the text—"underlays" it syllable by syllable—but never really tells us where to put the final consonant, or how to deal with adjacent explosive consonants, or how long and/or loud to sing the hummed consonant, or what to do about diphthongs.

For years the greatest teachers of solo woodwinds have been examining the structure and scale of dynamics within the musical phrase: not merely which

note of a phrase is to be the loudest, but *how loud*? And how does one get there? And how leave there?

What they've been trying to do, of course, is relate great instrumental art to great singing. – This, then, is the nitty-gritty. For it behooves us to remember that the greatest vocal artists are those who best know what they are doing. (Isn't it a strange aspect of the American political and religious heritage that it credits intuition, good intention and "dumb-luck"—all those factors in man's know-how which are easily arrived at (and fun to have)—and denigrates those elements which are hard to come by. "Intellectual" is the dirty word for November.

By constant "re-editing" of one's choral scores, each of us will add heightened consciousness—and a deeper conscience—to his solo repertoire.

See you Monday—R

December 5, 1968

At our rehearsal two weeks ago I said half-jokingly something about it being "the last time we would be together." At that moment I was not quite sure that we indeed did have another time together prior to orchestral rehearsals. – But, of course, we did, and it was last Monday night. Since when I have spent most of the day pondering my premonition, and wondering how we might have spared ourselves that experience—or reconstituted it.

Following the rehearsal two weeks before—wherein I had not known what to expect, since we had spent so little rehearsal time on *Messiah*, and even that so fragmented—I was ecstatically delighted with our choral discipline and involvement, and with the progress of the evening, feeling that they assured a beautiful and secure performance. And I laid that accomplishment to the conditions first, that *Messiah*, after all, was a familiar part of everyone's experience and second, that though we had not spent numberless hours on its particular preparation, we had spent a good many hours in the preparation and performance of other works, and probably had acquired certain common senses and sensitivities. – Which abruptly last Monday night were absensitivities.

I said at the end of that disconcerting period that "there are no bad choruses, only bad conductors," and that has to be true. It simply is the conductor's responsibility to deny lethargy access to rehearsals: This could be done, I suppose, by "overwhelming" an occasional, inexplicable, intractable group psyche or, more productively, I would imagine, by showing so clearly the *necessity* for such and such a musical procedure that apathy flees before enthusiasm "one by one by one."

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Conversely, I have known occasions wherein original and equally inexplicable group enthusiasm was so strong that a conductor's fatigue and dullness simply were stripped from him, and he found himself bewilderingly alive, perceptive and persuasive. – But for the flip-side there has to be some answer beyond "Mother told me there'd be days like these."

I came across a great line quoted in a news magazine this week from a sonnet of Michelangelo; and its pertinence to our problem is eerie. "My soul can find no stair on which to climb to Heaven," he wrote, "unless it be earth's loveliness."

It accuses your conductor, I feel, of thus far being unable to convince his chorus of the *necessity* of achieving their own particular "earth's loveliness." – In this instance, the delicate fragile perfection of tone and time, of timbre and texture which make up Handel's musical language. For me, this admittedly "earthly" accomplishment is the *absolute unavoidable minimum prerequisite* for the "climb to Heaven."

I witnessed last Sunday in a televised church service something which still is hard to believe: a night-clubbed and travestied, sanctimonious but pulpitted performance of unmanly and ungodly swill entitled "When Children Pray." Considering the occasion and the place this would be difficult to match for obscenity and filth.

Perhaps eighth-notes and exactitude, and transparency and oh-so-sweet-but elusive simplicity don't matter "all that much"—*unless* one is charged with the responsibility of actually beholding and achieving "earth's loveliness," and unless his "soul can find no other stair on which to climb to Heaven."

R. S.

January 31, 1973

Dear Friends and Collaborators:

A chorus in performance is an overwhelming, apparently spontaneous, combustive unison of hearts, minds, physical energies and sound. Such spontaneity is a lie. The real reason for that fantastic eruptive communion—which for many of us has provided the central exhilarating and moving experiences of our lives—repeat, the real explanation is the week after week tenacious, restless search for discipline in rehearsals. In art, as in a good many other affairs of men, miracles don't just happen. They're earned.

The next thing I want to say is that each of you is important. "How can I

possibly influence the decision—and whatthehell difference does it make?” is the inescapable consumptive plague of our time. Well, I don’t know how you can help the Brothers K arrive at a decent settlement of the one- or no-world controversy, but insofar as the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chorus is concerned you make a difference.

You were selected for membership in this chorus because you seemed to possess talents of voice and musicianship, and—just as importantly—intellectual capacities and human sensibilities which would enable you to join with others and undertake the re-creation of certain great works of musical art—“Intimations of immortality”—unavailable to the solo performer.

The big decision in this whole audition procedure was not made by the conductor. His was secondary and independent. The big decision was, in fact, your initial decision to audition. You proposed, he accepted. This only means that all of us had common hopes and hungers before we met and began living (as in “coming to life”) together rather regularly on Monday evenings, assortedly on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays and—’par’n ’spresshun—occasionally on Sundays.

If our net product—our performance—were arrived at by individual competition, victory and defeat, then each of us would not be so important. (This world insists on *one* winner—even between champions.) But if our product is arrived at by common effort and understanding and devotion, then all of us are diminished by the absence or weakness of each of us.

What is required of you as members of this chorus is not that you bring a standardized, prescribed and unvarying amount of voice, musicianship and mental capacity to rehearsals (music making has little in common with automatic pin-setters), but that you bring yourself—ruffed-up and idiosyncratic as that may be. No one else has that. No one else can bring it. The more varied our heterogeneity, the richer should be our community—if it happens.

What is required of the conductor is that he make available and attractive to his co-workers disciplines which educate—not simply dictate, to the end that each person ultimately is capable of accepting his own honest and entire musical responsibility. Granted, it’s the conductor’s job to teach “notes”; much more important is his responsibility to teach ways of learning notes. If two rehearsals on a Benjamin Britten cantata do not short-cut and simplify the problems of learning a Walton cantata, then the conductor also should leave rehearsal at intermission—and stay away.

– For at the final point music is sound, and you people make the sound. – And the most meaningful sound in music is that which is *self-disciplined*, *self-instructed* and *self-motivated*.

Do you newer members of our chorus begin to see what a maniacal musical

monogamy you've contracted? And on the occasion of our *x*th anniversary, senior heads, are you once more apprised of the strength and state of the union?

In addition to the *War Requiem* just two weeks hence and the *Choral Fantasy*, in collaboration with the delightful and uniquely talented Rudolf Serkin, and the Haydn *Seasons* in the Spring. It can all be learned and joyfully performed—but only if our work is informed with constancy, free from the drip-drop erosion of tardiness, absence, inattention.

Onward and upward, men! Ladies, stamp out sloth: We have nothing to choose but our lanes.

R. S.

May 4, 1973

More rehearsals back to back like Sunday's bi-sectional and Monday's vivi-sectional certainly should qualify us as contenders for the crown of World's Best Losers.

Experiences like these certainly are worth a chapter or two in somebody's book of Choral Conducting. The conductor's opportunities for failure are so manifold that it scarcely is worth mentioning those of his collaborators. In the first place it is the conductor's failure if, by pre-rehearsal information and in-rehearsal procedures, he cannot produce performing skills which are *accumulative, retentive*—and, in the main, pleasurable. His also is the ultimate responsibility of transforming group lethargy and flaccidity to commitment and tonus. — So, few of you can match the conductor's failures.

Consider for a moment, however, some of the strange phenomena of choral life: Amateur choruses, however badly trained or minimally talented, *more often than not* excel themselves in contests or concerts. More often than not even talented, well-trained choruses perform better and accomplish more at a first reading than they do at a second or third rehearsal. More often than not there is a sort of law of momentum in any given rehearsal wherein success pre-disposes toward further success and error compounds error.

This latter "rule" operates, of course, among professionals also, from sports through business to the fine arts; but its scale is much more dramatic in amateur organizations—for the following reasons.

The ratio of commitment to ability *generally* is higher among amateurs than among professionals. This can be due to two factors: first, that the amateur's talent is, by comparison to his professional counterpart, generally limited; and second, that his is a recreational endeavor, undertaken to provide any one of a

number of personal, non-material satisfactions, originally, at least, with high enthusiasm.

The point is that while the professional *may* lose some of his enjoyment and personal commitment to his work without *necessarily* impairing his craft to a dangerous degree, the amateur, if he loses his commitment and moment-to-moment enthusiasm and concentration is in danger of diminishing his abilities by fifty to seventy-five percent.

This is the nature of a “society” such as ours. Unless it is unremittingly committed to success it only adds failure to failure. It is commitment which discovers, enlarges and refines our capabilities—not vice versa. Since it is most of what we have it has to be practiced at every rehearsal—like scales for a Casals.

R

May 8, 1973

Dear Friends and Co-Workers –

In even the most professional of choruses the range of individual musical and vocal capabilities is staggeringly wide. There is always the question as to whether voice or musicianship should be given prime consideration. There are requisites imposed by repertoire (vocal color, size, vibrato characteristic, etc.), size of group, size or nature of performing area (recording studio vs. concert hall) and a host of associated aspects of the singer’s craft.

Therefore, we must accept as one of the “self-evident truths” that the large symphonic choir encompasses even wider extremes of capability. It carries always, thereby, the potentialities of friction, fissure and disruption: some people read faster than others, some memorize more quickly or remember longer, some have better intonation—make your own list.

The only factor which makes the large volunteer chorus able to operate at all is the recurrent convincing demonstration that, whatever its heterogeneity or variety of capabilities, the final product is light years beyond what one person could accomplish by himself. In the successful chorus one learns to move with the tide, to be more tolerant of others’ mistakes—and less tolerant of his own; and, if he is wise, to expect a certain number of hours of fundamentals and drudgery per annual homecoming game.

In principle I’m of the opinion that nothing in music is or need be drudgery. I think “note-learning” ought to be “love at first sight-reading.” – But, humans being what they mostly are instead of what they occasionally are, into every life

falls a little egg-plant. – And some of the most rewarding rehearsals I’ve experienced were those wherein at the start of rehearsal I had the sense to say, “Now friends, no fireworks tonight—just lots of notes. No honeymoon—let’s first find out how the darn thing works.”

So far as I can tell, choral conductors for years have been approaching this problem from the wrong end. Almost all of us began as cheerleaders. What we didn’t know about music—which was almost everything—we attempted to make up with enthusiasm, which meant mostly, of course, enthusiasm for ourselves and our inspiring personalities, or enthusiasm for the “spirit” of the music—by way of our inspiring personalities. (One of the reconciliations that choral conductors find it so difficult to make is that “*This* is the way” is so much duller than “*I* am the way.” – Which should surprise no-one willing to face the prospect that *learning* is so much more of a commitment than *leaning*.)

R (for Really)

October 16, 1974

Friends,

It’s a terribly shaming thing to get mad at rehearsals. Anyone with an ounce of sense or honesty knows that music and anger don’t really mix. – For two very good reasons:

First, nothing technically sick, broken or out-of-sync is cured. On some occasions (I can think of none), when skills and schooling are perfect, everyone may rave to guard against indifference or lassitude, but for the most part conductors of choruses get mad when they don’t know how to fix the fool thing—so they kick its tires.

– And, of course, in the second place, anger is completely alien to the whole purpose of music—or of a chorus, for that matter. The purpose of these is communication (it does seem to me that “communion” is a more suitable word except for its religious connotations) and anger is a barrier, an isolation.

The dilemma of this particular conductor is that though the teaching (and for him, the learning) of “fundamentals” is an extraordinarily pleasurable experience—except when it gets racked up by the pressures of schedules and performances, there’s really not a great deal of stimulus or “point” to learning (or teaching) a performing art unless somebody performs.

Since my failure of Monday night I’ve spent some hours outlining and

starting to assemble a handbook, tentatively titled *Fundamentals of Choral Musicianship*, “a syllabus of drills and exercises for the choral rehearsal.”

For years I’ve written (letters and articles) and lectured on the “principles and rules of choral technique,” and tried, so long as I could stand the sound of my own tape, to apply them to the repertoire at hand. But “principles” and “rules” somehow are convincing principally and as a rule mostly to those who “invent” or “discover” them. And to become effective, efficient and dependable, they need to be isolated from other technical complexities and psychological urgencies, and repeatedly drilled, and comprehended in the “doing.”

So—as your onetime choral-scout bows his way out the door with rue on wry for his inability to lead you sweetly, bloodlessly and drily across Kishon’s brook—lift them eyes—O lift them eyes unto the mountains of exercises that even now begin to take shape hill by drill and from whence if any help cometh at all who can afford to say it neigh?

Au reve –

R

April 21, 1977

Friends—

On Monday I had thought to write you a letter of thanks for the performances of Friday and Saturday. Somehow that entire day went for study of this week’s scores, and in the evening there was the rehearsal of the Verdi *Requiem*.

I’m glad I waited. – Not that there is anything inherently wrong with words of appreciation—except that they’re habit-forming. – But more because there’s even more now for which to be thankful.

It seems to me that Monday night’s rehearsal was something of a breakthrough. Two things happened which never had happened before—at least to this extent and for an entire rehearsal. In the first place the reading was done *within ensemble disciplines*. So frequently when we read each person sings as though he or she were entirely alone. Our sectional disciplines are fractured and fragmented, and our learning severely impeded. The fact of the matter is that when we read with all of our “togethernesses” in full operation our total reading ability is quicker almost than that of any of us alone.

The second aspect of our reading was equally important. Somehow Monday night we read with the atmosphere and intent of trying to understand the score,

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rather than merely exercising the vocal muscles. This made possible an awareness of style and balances, and enormously speeded the learning process.

I think great orchestras read this way, but it's the first time I've experienced that so clearly with a chorus.

– And that's reason enough to risk the habit-forming dangers of thanks.

Peace,

R

Editor's note: Shaw was a demanding taskmaster, but he also made a point of acknowledging diligence and expressing his gratitude in return. The following exemplifies the esteem in which he held his choir members.

December 21, 1977

Dear Friends –

Idon'tquiteknowhowtosaythisbut—your commitment is showing. – Also your virtuosity.

Most of you will see the video-tape of the 11th Annual Christmas Festival on Christmas Eve. 'Do hope you enjoy—your own performance, as well as video productions, etc.

One should not overly monkey with Christmas, but I did find two weeks ago—and too late for the Eleventh—some wonderful new materials for the Twelfth Night of Christmas: that of 1978 and, hopefully, network TV.

It has occurred to me, as I have pondered from time to time the possible “exploitation” of this vessel of volunteer vocal virtuosity, that of all the voluntary wings that enable any art institution to get off the ground at all—let alone fly—ours is one of the few that returns appropriate reward. So many of the other volunteer organizations are obliged to measure their emoluments in terms as vague and vapid as “prestige” or “standing.”

Ours are as real as they seem—at the time and in retrospect.

So—thank you for your labours and your love.

We hereby highly resolve to return great quantities of same in 1978.

The Shaws

March 7, 1978

Friends –

Nola and the head of our membership committee have asked that I write you concerning the events—choices and decisions—of last Saturday night, together with my feelings and judgements in the matter. Perhaps it is necessary. (At this moment I could better use the time in preparation for our Athens residency.)

There are all sorts of tangential aspects to the situation. (The facts are these: On Saturday night, March 4, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chorus had a performance. On the same night Pavarotti was in Atlanta giving a vocal recital. Some of the chorus members who had rehearsed and, indeed, participated in the Thursday/Friday performance of the Berlioz *Damnation*, chose on Saturday night to attend the Pavarotti recital.)

As I say, there are a score of tangential areas, factors, accommodations and dislocations. – But the nitty-gritty of the problem is as simple as can be.

First, no one of us has the right to decide for another what that person should value most highly. I would also guess that no one of us has the right to pass judgement upon how another person considers his or her “commitment” in an undertaking such as ours. (That’s between a man and his own soul and, as Charles Ives says, “I know of no place where it’s likely to be lonelier.”)

But, the sad fact is that an organization like ours simply has to learn—whether it likes it or not—to struggle along with those people who will show up for performances. I would not in my youth deliver to Toscanini one chorus for rehearsal and a lesser one for performance; and I cannot, being older, treat the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra or its audiences any differently.

Some have urged “sympathy” for those who no longer are members of the chorus. “Sympathy” herein is completely irrelevant. – But I do feel sorry for some people:

I feel sorry for the chorus that has to learn to get along without qualified and potentially contributive members.

I feel sorry for two-hundred-fifty-plus people on the stage at Symphony Hall who, more than any other people in Atlanta, would have enjoyed that recital.

(I even feel sorry for myself; for one of my three very dearest of friends was accompanying that recital and, except for a few choral rehearsals in recent years which we’ve done together “for fun”—as the saying goes—I haven’t heard John Wustman since he’s become the “greatest accompanist in the world.”)

Mostly I feel sorry for one of our members, a teacher of voice and a professional tenor soloist who has been ill with laryngitis the past three weeks, but nevertheless drove 200 miles to and from each and every rehearsal so that he could

mark his score, and as his voice improved, attended also all three performances, making a greater and greater contribution. I wish *he* could have heard Pavarotti.

– Surely, events like this are going to happen. Every day of every year there will appear some item so attractive, so alluring, even so potentially productive, that it seems to wash out the grayer values of the accustomed and the year-in-and-year-out. – At a time like this, I’d guess, one needs perspective most of all—needs to weigh very carefully a particular point of time against time’s coursing.

Perhaps one of the problems is that it is difficult to feel “important” or “essential” in a 200-voice chorus.

– Now, I can’t speak of your own sense of importance to yourself. But I can tell you that each of you is important to me. If, in a warm-up session, I can close my eyes and identify the row and very nearly the seat-number from which a disturbing sound is emerging, and if the sound then stops, *you* know that you can be heard and are important.

Each of you may, indeed, be more critically necessary to an eighteen-voice choir in some other situation. – And that’s fine; and each of you must do—and obviously will do—what you think is most important for *you*; and that will frequently coincide with the time or event wherein you feel most important to yourself. We form our own values, and sometimes we live by them.

– But let me remind you in parting that you’re also important to Beethoven and Brahms and Berlioz. They can’t get along without you—or somebody in your place. Eighteen voices won’t serve a *Ninth Symphony* or a Brahms *Requiem*, and eighteen voices absent will harm a Berlioz *Damnation*—even were they all as bad as mine is.

I said last week at the ACDA convention that the greatest choruses were made up of the greatest solo voices—and I believe that, and will continue to believe it until I die. – But I also have to face the fact that even *my* voice is more helpful than *no* voice.

We want for our continued growth and improvement the finest singer-musicians we can enlist. Your aid in discovering them is absolutely essential. But, let us also be sure that, having rehearsed together, and balanced and disciplined ourselves together, barring unavoidable emergencies, we’ll find ourselves banded together on performance nights.

I close by recalling an earlier paragraph. I can quit my choral responsibilities—and that’s an alternative. – But so long as I continue to accept them, I cannot serve up to the ASO and its audiences one chorus when Caruso is in town and one chorus when he isn’t.

Peace,

R

Organizing and Sustaining the Chorus

Tuesday Morning, May 13, 1980

Ladies and Gentlemen of the ASO Chorus:

Let me begin with two sets of figures:

- (1) There were 244 people in the ASO Chorus which took the trip to Carnegie Hall; there were 195 at last night's rehearsal.
- (2) There are 124 measures of choral singing in the Mahler *Symphony No. 2*. Roughly one-half of these represent 20 measures repeated or slightly varied. Of the remaining 60, 10 are unison, and 45 are half- or whole-notes. There is only 1 measure of moderate metrical complexity. (It happens twice.) The harmonic language is that of the Sunday hymnal. We already have had 3 rehearsals on these 124 measures.

Questions:

- (1) What does the first set of figures tell us about the "commitment quotients" of the 21% of our membership not present last night?
- (2) In view of the difficulties encountered in last night's rehearsal, what does the second set of figures tell us of the "commitment quotient" of those present? Of their self-preparation?

Now, let me conclude with some personal observations:

Rehearsals which culminate in moments like that of last night are not good for the music, and obviously harm both singers and conductor. Such moments destroy music's meaning.

It is clear—by dawn's early light—that we shall have to go through with the rehearsals and performances of next week as scheduled. I will have to conduct, and you will have to sing. I am sure we can make do.

Next season (1980–81) also poses a problem; for I am already announced as conductor of the choral portions of that season, and tickets have been sold on that basis. However, I will see that you have a choral director better qualified than myself to prepare you properly and happily.

For the *B Minor Mass* there will be separate auditions, and in the event that we do not find enough people sufficiently qualified to form a chorus suitable to make the contemplated new recording, we will cancel that, and invite a university or conservatory chorus to perform the work with the orchestra.

– And by the season 1981–82 we should be able to find a conductor with whom you will be happy both to prepare and to perform.

During most seasons I perform, I suppose, with 6 to 10 choruses in addition to the ASOC. Some of them are professional, some are adult volunteer, some are

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student, and some are made up of professional vocal musicians in short-term study situations.

Perhaps because less is expected of them, perhaps because they are better prepared—individually or collectively—those occasions are in the main happy and productive. The singers feel they are experiencing something rather special; I feel I’m doing good work. So far, the end results have not matched what this chorus (or what it once was) accomplished in Carnegie Hall a few weeks ago. – But at least we do not abrade or demean one another: We leave rehearsals and performances happy and, as my father would have said in his pulpit pastoral-ese, “lifted up.”

’Sorry that doesn’t happen for us.

– But thanks . . .

R

December 1, 1982

Friends –

The nature and repertoire of this year’s Christmas Festival program were influenced by two factors:

First was the hope of making a significant sum of money for the Symphony by the re-recording of Robert Russell Bennett’s “Many Moods of Christmas” album and its successful merchandising thru new and “creative” channels in the Fall of 1983.

Second was the inability of the Men’s Glee Club of Morehouse College to participate in this year’s scheduled program.

Given the “American musical theatre” ambience of the Bennett materials, some of our traditional repertoire became inappropriate, and the Northside School of Performing Arts’s Broadway-oriented Xmas style and repertoire appeared suitable and communicative—as well as a valid recognition of this institution’s contributions to Atlanta’s cultural life.

I tried to preserve, however, what I have always hoped would seem the four chronological and/or psychological sections of the program. They are:

I —Yearning, Promise and Advent

II —Nativity and the Manger

(This, understandably, always has been the longest of the sections—heretofore ending with “My soul magnifies . . .” and “He, watching over Israel . . .”)

III —The Fun and Games Men Play

(This has been the catch-all for the secular carols, customs and festivities of the holiday season. At its best I have hoped it would have the character of a large family unwrapping, exciting and unexpected presents on Christmas morning.)

IV —Flight for Life and So-What

(In my mind, this meant a return to the manger, to the shepherds' farewell, and to a pondering of the meaning of that Child for Our Time—"a sign that is spoken against . . . that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed.")

In my thinking the program always has ended with the *Dona Nobis Pacem*; and the *Hallelujah Chorus* or *Adeste, Fideles* (or both) are redundant and recessional—albeit conclusive. I would prefer to omit the flowers of bows and applause, but that's not an option in this situation.

This year the presence of Don Smith as producer of the telecast assures the Festival of enhanced visual presentation. It also gives those responsible for materials, both heard and seen, a chance to explore the potentials for 1983, when we return to our accustomed fare.

It ought to be said, before concluding, that the Christmas Festival repertoire, of whatever vintage, does make a unique contribution to our basic choral techniques.

Substantially all of these materials derive from carols, hymns or folk-songs. As such, they are basically strophic (have several verses) and homophonic (are harmonized so that the words occur simultaneously in all voices.)

These conditions force two technical sophistications:

First, they demand extraordinarily precise disciplines of enunciations: When text is the substance of communication—rather than its original inspiration—"words" become more important than "line."

Second, they demand a much richer and more varied vocabulary of phrasing. When the same melody and harmonies must serve two, three or more verses of text, subtle variations of accentuation and dynamics must be contrived to keep the communication clear and fresh. Moreover—and what is even more difficult—the long procession of rhythmic values must be individually and subtly stretched or compressed to accommodate and illumine word meaning.

These matters are a "natural" for the solo voice. – But even the solo quartet begins to experience difficulty. – And for two hundred people to arrive at a point where they can accomplish instant and identical emphasis is some kind of miracle.

With your affectionate commitment that miracle can still occur next week—

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even though, for this year, it may occasionally smack of the Miracle on 42nd Street along with that of Bethlehem.

Peace,

R

November 9, 1983

Friends –

American democracy has a tradition that war is “too important to be left entirely to the military.” (Hence, a civilian commander-in-chief.)

In a similar sense, I have felt for some years that the arts were too important to be left entirely to the professionals.

There can be no doubt that unremitting professionalism puts a strain upon the arts and artists; as, indeed, it can and does upon other human activities, however noble they may be in concept—from sports through religion to sex.

Even with the “best of intentions,” the things that people do “for love” are likely to undergo modification when done only “for money.” – And not the least of those modifications may be in the doer.

I’m leading up to trying to say “thank you” for all the time, energy and talent you poured into the recording of the Brahms *Requiem*—after the time, energy and talent you already had poured into its rehearsals and concert performances.

Our present choral structure is certainly not perfect. It probably is not even “right.” It calls for an extraordinary “giving” on your part—as, also, on the parts of your homes, families and vocations.

Very probably, our most important institutional responsibility is to get this chorus structured so that (1), it gives to everyone as much as it receives and (2), it obliges no talented enthusiast to deny himself the joys of participation because he can’t afford its rigors.

Conceivably, this could mean multiple choruses and multiple conductors. Let’s get ourselves an *ad hoc* steering committee to wrestle with this problem.

But, until we can perceive and mount a safer and saner choral force, I want you to know that somebody not only feels gratitude for your gifts to the Atlanta Symphony and its community, but also is very convinced that your efforts and your attitude towards your efforts are mankind’s therapy for an all-consuming, all-consumptive professionalism in the arts.

Since you sing like angels, anyway, you might as well be on their side.

R

Editor's note: Shaw produced a number of timeless recordings of choral masterworks. In the following two letters, he addresses some of the particular concerns that come up when preparing a choir to record a performance.

November 27, 1985

Friends –

Whatever else can be said about recording sessions, they are certainly a fool-proof prophylactic for/against tears.

Audiences, too, can act as a sort of sterilizing or preventive agent. Although communication in the concert-hall is not specifically proscribed and may, in fact, occur, today's faddish addiction to the instant standing ovation testifies more to a listener's desire to be seen and heard than his wish to be left alone in order to hear. It is the sort of response at which the commercial/popular forms of music are frankly and specifically addressed. – As also are the balletic exaggerations of a fashionable school of performing concert artists so repugnant to musicians as recent—and as secure—as George Szell, Paul Hindemith and Arturo Toscanini.

The inherent danger to the performer in front of an audience is that he may be tempted to consider himself the message rather than the messenger.

In recording, while there may not be the asepticizing temptations to preen and prettify, there are other real hazards.

The most obvious is that a recording, far more often than not, is supposed to be a sort of “last will and testament,” a fixed and final word. For instance, the chances that any of us will again have the opportunity to record the Durufle *Requiem* are very, very thin, and that all of us will have a second chance—non-existent.

This means that we cannot tolerate the inadvertent flaw, the transient blemish—because it will be perpetuated and immortalized *ad infinitum*. – And in our determination to be letter-perfect we run the greater danger of becoming word- and paragraph-sterile. Not a lot of propagation of the species would occur if the act of insemination were interrupted at the critical moment in order that only certain precise and qualified genes were allowed to proceed.

A second inhibition is simply the proscription of extraneous noise, whether it be circuit hum, rain on the roof or creaking risers. A rigid posture, for example—to forestall the third of these disturbances—simply cannot be conducive to free and easy vocal flow.

A third, and frightfully inhibitive, condition is the set of temporal restrictions, however they initially were intended to provide “fair working conditions.”

Artistic “inspiration” is terribly vulnerable to *musicus interruptus*. There is not a serious composer living or dead who has not worked through the night—almost without realizing it—when the ideas were flooding the mind. – Nor a serious solo instrumentalist who has not practiced, unheeding, through at least two normal meal periods, so heavy was the attention on the work itself.

Close to these latter two is a fourth hazard; it is the presence—and critical importance—of non-performing personnel. It would be unthinkable to consider recording without an “engineer” or a “producer.” – But, particularly if they are concerned and talented, these persons will have their own preferences as to placement of the performers, acoustical properties and environment, and even balances, color, tempo and intonation. Recording is “a sometime thing,” and producer and engineer have not lived through the building and preparing processes nor, in some instances, heard the “live” performance. It would be surprising if there were not areas of disagreement between performers and producers as to disciplines, styles and practices, between what is heard in the control-booth and what is heard in the out-of-control-hall.

But, under the contemporary procedures of recording, suggestions for “improvement of the product” have an effect upon the concentration of the performer that a music critic might have were he to interrupt a concert twenty to forty times per evening to offer his evaluation and suggest appropriate correction.

The great danger in recording, however, is the danger of fragmentation.

I doubt that there is a single person in our chorus who, during one or another of the performances or rehearsals of the Durufle *Requiem* did not encounter a tear or two of mysterious origin, but possibly “holy” water.

Not many of us can or would claim the one-to-one relationship with the text or the musical tradition that the composer knew. – Still, we all were moved by some mysterious compulsion. (This letter started out, last night, to be a consideration of the “varieties of religious experience” as encountered by the amateur chorus in the secular concert hall. – More of that later.)

My present point is that when we cut up a Durufle *Requiem* even into movements—it’s really no more serious than cutting up the lives or the bodies of people into parts—like chicken at meat-counters.

So, whatever else can be said for recording sessions, they certainly are a fool-proof prophylactic against tears.

Peace,

R