



Rehearsing with Robert Shaw, Legendary Conductor, Meadow Brook, 1966

Martin Kessler

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It is 9:30 and every seat in the rehearsal hall is filled. Mr. Shaw insists on promptness from his hand-picked choir of high school all-star singers. Even adults can receive his thunderbolts for being late. He once addressed a tardy Cleveland Orchestra Chorus tenor with the following comment: “There are plenty of good reasons for a busy adult to miss a rehearsal, but really, how many good reasons are there for being five minutes late?”

The normal “buzz” of 148 adolescents in an enclosed space is not apparent this morning. The last few rehearsals for the upcoming performance of the Bach *B-minor Mass* have been tense. Shaw had reached a breaking point the previous day. His disappointment with the progress of the singers manifested itself quite unfairly into criticism of the rehearsal accompanist. Boies Whitcomb had worked with Shaw for years and normally could put up with his famous mood changes but recent attacks had taken on a savagery that even he could not withstand.

When an upset man with a magisterial power over language directs that power at one individual, the effect can be shocking. Whitcomb was reduced to tears, and Shaw, shaking with impotent rage at the universe and at himself, stormed out of the hall. The stunned choir sat for minutes

before the assistant conductor resumed the rehearsal. His first words were telling. “That wasn’t Mr. Whitcomb’s fault nor was it Mr. Shaw’s. It’s your fault for not being as devoted to this great work as he needs you to be.”

At this juncture, a week before the first orchestra dress rehearsal, some of my colleagues were disengaged, maybe even bored. For six weeks, they had spent a minimum of five hours a day on the Bach, mornings with Shaw and evenings in sectionals with his assistant, Clayton Krehbiel, or with section leaders like me. Some of us had large segments of the great masterwork memorized. But individual vocal mastery does not necessarily lead to a masterful choral performance. It was this that Shaw was stressing about.

At precisely 9:32, Robert Shaw takes the podium. A middle-aged man (Shaw) with no outstanding physical characteristics except for eyes so light-blue that they seem translucent, is dressed, as always, in khaki slacks, a blue turtleneck and a blue cotton overshirt. There is a white towel over his shoulder and he is carrying a satchel containing the orchestral scores and a baton case made from a cardboard violin string tube. His baton is wooden and unremarkable except that the grip is made of twisted rubber bands with which his nervous fingers are constantly playing as he talks.

We begin with stretching and—a Shaw specialty—group backrubs. From his seemingly infinite assortment of vocal warm-ups, the chorus begins to sing. His goals are always the same in warm-ups: rhythmic precision, pitch accuracy, and ferocity of diction and attack. Shaw rarely talks about tone; yet, all of his choirs sound alike, whether professional, such as the Robert Shaw Chorale, or this festival youth chorus. They sound like humans singing as if their lives depended on it. I have heard him get this sound in less than an hour with an ensemble with whom he has never previously worked.

Today, we are tackling the middle of the Bach Mass and working to the end of the huge Symbolum Nicenum sequence—the entire *Credo* text set in nine movements. Shaw begins with “Et incarnatus est,” a slow and relatively easy piece of Baroque word-painting. The incarnation by the Holy Spirit is depicted with a descending b-minor chord while the Virgin Mary is presented in chromatic rising lines.

Shaw conducts every minute of every rehearsal as if it were a performance. His beat is at once graceful and muscular. His cues and cut-offs are crisply choreographed. His head is cocked to the left as if he is listening with his right ear only. He is sweating profusely, and his eyes are closed in an expression of concentration. After a read-through, he says, “Why do you sing so much better when the music is fast, loud, and technical? Right now, your descending chords are almost a quarter-tone flat, and the rhythm is mush.”

To correct the intonation problem, he has us sing the music *a cappella* and asks that we end a half-tone sharp. Even with a roomful of prospective conservatory voice majors, such a request is a challenge. It is a challenge to our collective musicality and indirectly, an exercise in team-building to our singers. After all, no group of section leaders could force that many voices to go sharp. Shaw’s message becomes clear. No group of section leaders can keep a chorus from going flat either. Intonation is every singer’s responsibility.

For the flaccid rhythm that he perceived, he has us sing the section without text, singing on eighth-note counts throughout the triple meter—one-and-two-and-three-and etc. While in some ways counter to the expressivity of the original, this gives the music a pulse, an almost dance-like inner life. When he asks us to sing the section again like a performance, the difference is astounding. Every singer is now thinking on multiple levels and trying as hard as possible to please a demanding maestro. This is the essence of the Shaw sound—passionate, totally committed precision.

The next movement might be the western canon’s most

perfect 53 measures of sacred musical art, the *Crucifixus*. Perhaps because of the difficulties he encountered in getting a worthy performance out of the previous slow, quiet movement, Shaw begins with a homily.

“When we sing *piano*, the only thing that should be *piano* is the volume.” (He towels off his drenched face and head. He continues). “The rhythm is *forte*, the diction is *forte*, the intonation is *forte*, and the intensity is *forte*.” (His fingers play with the rubber bands on his baton, perhaps to keep his hands from shaking. He continues). “Piano singing is *forte* singing through a clenched mind.”

This is an image worthy of his old drinking buddy, Dylan Thomas. A recent biography places Shaw in the White Horse Tavern the night Mr. Thomas drank himself to death. Anyhow, it works. Our *Crucifixus* is nearly flawless, although not an ideal performance in my view.

Shaw conducts this movement in a trudging six-beat pattern, as if the repeating ground bass were penitential steps to Calvary. But there is an irony in doing the movement this slowly. If one chooses a slightly faster tempo, the beat becomes the three *lento* half-notes instead of the six *moderato* quarter notes, thus, the movement’s heartbeat slows by speeding up its pulse.

The last movement on this morning’s agenda is the *Et resurrexit*. Bach has planned this to be a piece of musical theatre to reflect the textual drama. The last line of the *Crucifixus* is the only choral passage that is accompanied by the continuo alone--“He died, and was buried.” From this, the softest passage, the full orchestra explodes with the chorus singing the words, “and was resurrected.”

Shaw loves to explore physicality during his rehearsals and for this movement, he instructs each section to stand for its contrapuntal entrances. Whereas one might long for the gravitas of mature voices for the *Crucifixus*, this high-spirited music is perfectly suited to the roomful of young thoroughbreds. We sing and Shaw dances. His feet are never still; his shoulders shimmy; his arms swirl; his eyes sparkle with pure joy.

It is 12:00 noon, and the rehearsal ends with Shaw leaving the hall hastily without speaking to anyone. Even after the unbuttoned, almost bacchanalian pleasure of the last half hour of music making, he appears, in the words of the old spiritual’s paraphrase of Isaiah, to be “a man of great sorrows.”

Because I am on the outer edge of his inner circle, I am acquainted with some of these burdens. His marriage, long a formality maintained for the sake of family and position, was

coming apart. He considered himself an inadequate father to his daughter and suffers guilt pangs over this neglect. He is drinking too much and smoking too many cigarettes.

Also, Shaw has recently taken three professional gambles. He resigned as associate conductor and director of choruses with the Cleveland Orchestra to accept the music directorship of the Atlanta Symphony. He dissolved the celebrated (and lucrative) Robert Shaw Chorale, and, by becoming its director, he has staked his reputation on making the Meadow Brook School of Music the Tanglewood for national choral training. And then, there is the Bach.

Besides considering the Bach B-minor to be the single greatest work of musical art, Shaw always felt it was his signature piece. He took it on a world tour with the Robert Shaw Chorale, a first. He recorded it with the same forces for RCA Victor. An exhausted ensemble had put it on tape in a New York hotel ballroom just days after the tour ended. (According to legend, the Chorale needed to return the rented portable organ; hence, the haste). He programmed it for his last season in Cleveland, and it was the last major work he conducted at Carnegie Hall just months before his death.

Conducting it in his first year at the helm of the Meadow Brook School of Music with young voices, the Detroit Symphony, plus major soloists, and with critics invited was a huge risk. He could just as easily have assigned it to his crack adult chorus, but then, he wouldn't have been able to program the *War Requiem* for the same summer.

If the Bach was Shaw's Sistine Chapel, then Benjamin Britten's 1962 *War Requiem* was his *Guernica*. For the Bach, Shaw was part preacher and part pedagogue in rehearsals. For the Britten, he was all-dramaturge. In this most theatrical, most humanist, most word driven of major choral works, Shaw had found a vehicle for his deepest-held beliefs and possibly, for his most authentic artistic soul.

It is now 2:00 PM. The rehearsal hall has been reset for the adult festival chorus. Because Shaw is the most famous choral director in the world, he has attracted forty American choirmasters to the Meadow Brook Conducting Seminar to study with him. Many individuals are also professional singers. They, plus the thirty-odd adult voice majors at the school, make the core of this ensemble quit superb.

Shaw walks in, prompt as usual, and seemingly quite refreshed. He has changed his sweaty togs for identical dry ones, and his hair is still wet from a recent shower. His approach to this chorus is more collegial, less scolding in tone if not in content. He is constantly challenging our imagination and sometimes, our acting ability. Today's agenda is move-

ments II and III, the *Dies Irae* and the *Offertorium*. Comments/directions follow.

To the basses, one measure before 24, Shaw says to "Just whisper the last syllable, but it must be audible to the whole audience. Stage whisper-*issimo*." For the chromatic rising counterpoint (at measure 30), "This should sound like nausea rising in your throat. The end of the crescendo is a metaphoric vomit." To the women (at 43), "You should sound mechanical as if you were playing this on a xylophone instead of singing it. Don't play a xylophone, play a *people!*" To the men (at 45), he said it should be like "An obscene football cheer."

For the triple *piano Quam olim Abrahae* fugue (after 79), "Hiss all the sibilants. Be as snake-y as possible, especially the "s" at the beginning of "semini ejus. Folks, the soloists have just sung, "but the old man would not do so, but slew his son and half the seed of Europe, one by one. After that, how can you sing the Latin word for seed without it sounding like a curse?"

This extended moment is the black heart of Britten's masterpiece, in my opinion. He has paired Wilfred Owen's bitter retelling of the Abraham and Isaac parable with the original biblical promise of longevity for Abraham's lineage. Before the chorus' final fugue, Britten pulls off a brilliant *coup de theatre*. The boy choir is heard at a distance, singing a haunting stanza from the Latin Requiem text about sacrificial offerings.

They are the ghosts, not so much of the fallen combatants as of their never-to-be-conceived progeny. Against this, the two male soloists (stand-ins for a British soldier and his German counterpart) violently interject the last words of Owen's poem—*One by One*. Shaw reminds the choir that Europe lost one quarter of its male population between the ages of 20 and 40 in the trenches of World War I. He also reminds us that Wilfred Owen, whose poems stripped from battle any justification or glory, was himself, killed just days before the Armistice.

This is a taste of Shaw the storyteller, the moralist, the dramatist, the shaman, using the preparation of great music to heal the world through that most fundamental of human attributes, the voice. He doesn't expect the audience to hear all of the messages he has embedded in his rehearsals, but those messages will be written on his singers' hearts forever. **CT**