An Interview with Robert Shaw: Reflections at Eighty

by Jeffrey Baxter

Robert Shaw

Robert Shaw's distinguished career began in New York City in 1938, where he prepared choruses for such renowned conductors as Fred Waring, Arturo Toscanini, and Bruno Walter. In 1949 he formed the Robert Shaw Chorale, which for two decades reigned as America's premier touring choir. Under the auspices of the U.S. State Department, the Chorale performed in thirty countries throughout Europe, the Soviet Union, the Middle East, and Latin America. During this period Shaw also served as Music Director of the San Diego Symphony and then as Associate Conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra, working closely with George Szell for eleven years. He served as Music Director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra from 1967 to 1988, during which time the orchestra garnered widespread acclaim through national and international tours and award-winning recordings.

Throughout his career Shaw has received abundant recognition for his work. His honors include degrees and citations from forty U.S. colleges and universities, thirteen Grammy Awards, England's Gramophone Award, a Gold Record for the first RCA classical recording to sell more than a million copies, four ASCAP Awards for service to contemporary music, the first Guggenheim Fellowship ever awarded to a conductor, the Alice M. Ditson Award for service to contemporary music, the George Peabody Medal for outstanding contributions to music in America, and the Gold Baton Award of the American Symphony Orchestra League for distinguished service to music and the arts.

Jeffrey Baxter is Choral Assistant at the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Adjunct Professor of Music History at Georgia State University, Atlanta.

In 1979, Shaw was appointed by President Jimmy Carter to the National Council on the Arts and he was a 1991 recipient of the Kennedy Center Honors, the nation's highest award given to artists. *Musical America,* the international directory of the performing arts, named him Musician of the Year for 1992, and during the same year he was awarded the National Medal of the Arts in a White House ceremony. He was the 1993 recipient of the Conductors' Guild Theodore Thomas Award, in recognition of his outstanding achievement in conducting and his contributions to the education and training of young conductors.

A regular guest conductor of major orchestras in this country and abroad, Shaw also is in demand as a teacher and lecturer at leading U.S. universities. He founded the Robert Shaw Institute to foster excellence in music-making, especially in the choral art. The Institute's summer festivals have attracted admiring attention from the international press and produced a number of recordings from the Robert Shaw Festival Singers. Currently he serves as Music Director Emeritus and Conductor Laureate of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and performs and records with the Atlanta-based Robert Shaw Chamber Singers. The following interview took place December 21, 1995, in Atlanta.

Jeffrey Baxter: Mr. Shaw, you are widely regarded as one of the first conductors to elevate American choral singing to the level one finds in great American orchestral playing. When you first arrived in New York in the 1930s, what kind of choral singing did you find?

Robert Shaw: As regards the niceties and disciplines of intonation, enunciation, and balance, it seemed to me that the colleges and universities of California were equal, if not superior, to the institutions of the East. Howard Swan for some years had been active in southern California and, with others, had raised choral singing to a remarkable degree. I also found two vastly

different vocal traditions present (in the East and throughout the country): that of F. Melius Christiansen, which was substantially without vibrato and concerned primarily with music for religious services; the other was the tradition of John Finley Williamson and the Westminster Choir, which was based on an operatic vocal style. There also were two principal literatures: the Renaissance literature arranged for male voices in the Archibald T. Davison-Harvard tradition and, from Marshall Bartholomew at Yale, the American folk-song tradition—principally spirituals arranged by Bartholomew and others. In New York City, choruses performed the great classical European repertoire of choral/orchestral works, but as far as the disciplines of *a cappella* singing were concerned, the West Coast was as strong as the East.

J.B.: Some of the notable characteristics of your performances were, and are, rhythmic precision and metric exactitude. Exactly how did you develop the methods that you use to instruct a chorus in these techniques?

R.S.: The first basic assumption was that if one wanted to "communicate," one had to establish a "community" in the performing group. Others came from the understanding that music was uniquely a time-art distinct from the space-arts of sculpture and painting. Therefore, one of the principal disciplines had to be the organization of the elements of time. It also became obvious to me as I began to work with professional and nonprofessional choruses that almost all the problems of enunciation were cured by an attention to metric precision, and most intonation problems were vastly improved by having people arrive at the same moment of music simultaneously. Matters of articulation and accentuation depended completely on time. Therefore, the rehearsal techniques that were developed were simply practical devices used to establish an absolute integrity of metric utterance.

J.B.: Another hallmark of your style is textual clarity, whether in unaccompanied or choral/orchestral performances. In this regard, how much of an influence was your early work in radio with Fred Waring?

R.S.: Fred Waring, of course, was responsible for the term "tone-syllables," but already for some months, if not a few years, John Finley Williamson had been talking about phonetic enunciation. I imagine, because of the Westminster Choir's performances with the New York Philharmonic and other orchestras, that a good deal of this phonetic enunciation might have evolved to extend to English the techniques that are absolutely necessary for singing in foreign languages. People became conscious of how American speech was constructed, rather than assuming it would take care of itself. There is no doubt that Waring's great popularity in the popular song literature was an impetus to many choral organizations around the country to strive for better enunciation. There also is very little doubt in my mind that techniques like his exaggerated use of hummed consonants were extraordinarily and handsomely suited to the popular song and established a group-

The Hartt School 1996

Summerterm

Al Holcomb, Director

WEEKLONG SUMMER CHORAL WORKSHOPS AND SPECIAL PROGRAMS

- **Sustained Survival:**
  Middle School Choral Excellence in a Changing Education World
  June 24-28
  Clinician: Sandra Chapman
  Explore the many facets of middle school music, including world music literature, choral masterpieces, motivational activities, National Standards and curriculum, and preparing for the first day of choir.
- **Folk Music in the Choral Setting:**
  Finding, Evaluating, Performing, and Arranging
  July 1-5
  Clinician: Nina Gilbert
  Come learn how to find, evaluate, perform, and arrange folk music for your choir that reflects style and integrity.
- **Caught in the Middle**
  July 1-5
  Clinician: Al Holcomb
  This course will address difficult issues associated with middle school singers including inaccurate singers, changing voices, vocal development, and motivational strategies.
- **Choral Conducting:**
  Gesture and Application
  July 8-12
  Clinician: Michael Yachanin
  This comprehensive seminar is designed to examine conducting, literature, and performance practices for the secondary choral professional.
- **Choral Music Experience:**
  Conducting Workshop for Teachers
  (Certification Levels I - III)
  July 15-19
  Clinicians: Janet Galván, Francisco Núñez, David Elliott, Kathy Armstrong
  Utilizing diverse and artistic literature, participants will explore choral artistry through the study of vocal technique, score analysis, conducting, rehearsal methods, and philosophy.
- **Choral Solutions**
  July 22-26
  Clinician: Carroll Gonzo
  Focus on three crucial choral topics - sight-singing and how to teach it, preparing your choir for adjudication, and achieving a healthy, expressive choral sound.
- **The VoiceCare Network:**
  Impact Course
  August 2-9
  Clinicians: Axel Theimer, Leon Thurman, Elizabeth Grefsheim and John Cooksey

SPECIAL PROGRAM

- **Hartt Kodály Certification Program**
  (Levels I-III)
  July 15-26
  Clinicians: John Feierabend, Jill Trinka, Ildikó Herboly, and Al Holcomb
  Come experience an innovative approach for teaching music literacy, explore folk music, and improve your musicianship.

We make summer study easy!

- Air-conditioned housing availability
- Shuttle service
- On-campus travel agency
- Graduate credit
- Centralized registration, housing and parking

For more information about these and other Hartt Summerterm workshops and special programs, contact:
HARTT SUMMERTERM
University of Hartford
200 Bloomfield Avenue
West Hartford, CT 06117
Tel: 1-800-955-4278 or 860-768-5020
Fax: 860-768-4441

The University of Hartford admits students of any race, age, color, creed, gender, physical ability, sexual orientation, national and ethnic origin to all rights, privileges, programs, and activities generally accorded or made available to students of the University.

UNIVERSITY OF HARTFORD
200 Bloomfield Avenue, West Hartford, CT 06117

art intimacy in repertoire that was really more suitable for the solo singer. That is, the popular love-ballad is fundamentally "inappropriate" for a group of men—except for the fraternity-sing literature. All these elements of enunciation somehow made it more emotionally acceptable as well as more understandable.

J.B.: Arturo Toscanini and George Szell are two names that loom large in your past and the past of American music history. What were their major influences on your music-making?

R.S.: The influence of Toscanini was the impression of his personal passion, and the influence of Szell was one of his precision—in particular, how meticulously he edited his performing materials. The elements of pride in Szell's orchestra stemmed from his personal desire to make it the largest string quartet in the world. Consequently, he marked all his music so meticulously that had everyone been able to play all the nuances of dynamics, articulation, and accentuation at the first rehearsal, the rehearsal would have surpassed most rehearsed performances. He used to say to his orchestra that they *began* to rehearse where other orchestras finished rehearsal. He also was a man not without passion. The overriding impression of Toscanini was one of extraordinary emotional commitment to the product and an arching, overall vision where he found the passion to get where he was going, which was the last note of the piece. On the other hand, Szell found his happiness and satisfaction in the construction of the piece and in each measure of every movement. A third person who also influenced me greatly was Julius Herford, with whom I did structural and analytical studies. I think of the three, Herford's influence most profoundly affected my development.

J.B.: You created your fine choral/orchestral discography with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chorus and Chamber Chorus—two volunteer ensembles. What has been your guiding principle in maintaining their "amateur" status?

R.S.: It has been a guiding fact of *life* rather than a guiding principle, in that there simply is not enough money to support a year-round professional chorus of this skill and artistic competence. On the other hand, it is not a given that the

> *Julius Herford, with whom I did structural and analytical studies, . . . most profoundly affected my development.*

musical level of any civilization is going to be judged by a few thoroughly professional institutions in large cities more than it is liable to be judged by the artistic level of church choirs, school choruses, and volunteer recreational activities. There's no doubt in my mind that the amateur motivation of music ("amateur" derives linguistically from the Latin "amo, amare," to love) is extraordinarily precious, even to professionals. One of the sadnesses of a professional career in music is that it puts great strains on one's "amateur" commitment. In a symphony orchestra, for instance, one is always playing at someone else's behest, if not dictation. One therefore lacks the freedom of self-expression that great art always should entail. The choral art's unique advantage, however, is that it allows participants to begin at an extraordinarily high level of creativity. That is, one can begin with a Bach chorale or a Brahms motet and not have to go through some fifteen to sixteen years of "finger exercises" to gain happiness and competence. The great choral repertoire for some three to four hundred years has been justly acclaimed as one of the flowers of man's artistic and creative life, and to be able to participate in the expression of those creative masterworks is a great and ennobling experience for anyone. Certainly the art needs both professionals and amateurs: amateurs need professionals to learn professional technical accomplishment, and professionals need to remember their early amateur commitment.

J.B.: Do you find it a positive sign of artistic growth and music education in this country that many of the works arranged by you and Alice Parker for the professional Robert Shaw Chorale are now standard repertoire for many high school and college choruses?

R.S.: Certainly Alice Parker's arrangements have both skill and taste, fit the human voice, and, in certain ways, edify the human intelligence. I find it even more satisfying, however, that high school and college choruses are singing

Musica Mundi
Concert Tours
"The Artistic Alternative"

Experience Counts!

Concert Touring Specialists on 5 CONTINENTS
with custom tours arranged in over 40 COUNTRIES

Experience the Tradition!
Tuscany International Children's Chorus Festival
July 8 - 13, 1996, Doreen Rao, *Conductor/Clinician*
July 14 - 20, 1997, Jean Ashworth Bartle, *Conductor/Clinician*

Musica Mundi, Inc.
111 Main Street, Suite 2 • Los Altos, CA 94022
Phone 415 949 1991 • Fax 415 949 1626

1 800 947 1991

Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*, Poulenc's Mass in G, and Schubert's masses. I find this to be an even more significant sign of artistic growth.

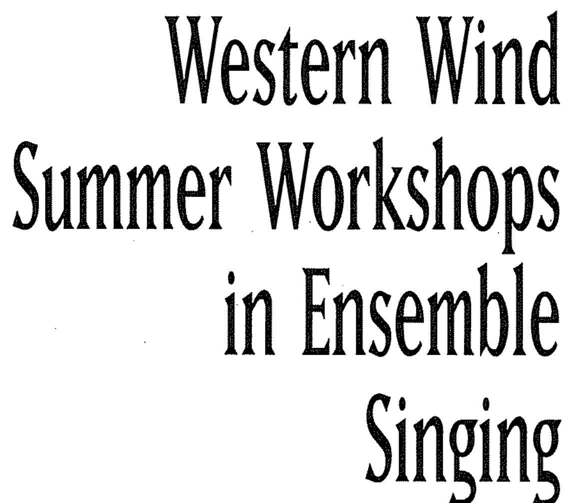
J.B.: Throughout your career you have been known as a champion of modern music, through innovative programming and commissioning new works. How important is it for the future of choral music in America to encourage creativity on the part of composers? Is there an audience any more for new ideas, or, for that matter, much of an audience at all for intellectually and spiritually challenging art?

R.S.: There never is enough of an audience for anyone who is concerned about the creative life and future of mankind. Personally, I feel that I've not done nearly enough to stimulate commission and support of the new and experimental, possibly because I began so late in life to learn those techniques that would have given me a very quick overview of the past accomplishments and then a quick way of studying the daily flood of contemporary music that arrives at my address. If I had been better equipped technically, I might have been able to do more, for instance, to save religious music in our time from the floods of mediocrity that have invaded it, and perhaps I could have found something even in the contemporary entertainment fields (for instance, the vitality and rhythmic vigor of jazz—the intellectual virtuosity of it) to displace the commercial elements that have so sadly vitiated our musical worship.

J.B.: Judging from your tenure as Music Director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra for twenty-one years and as Conductor Laureate and Music Director Emeritus for eight years, do you see the symphony orchestra and its associated choruses as the primary institution representing American musical culture in the twenty-first century?

R.S.: I think that it certainly would be one of the institutions of influence. Equal to it, though, and perhaps surpassing it in time is the "multi-versity." When a major university can support two or three student symphony orchestras, and where experimentation can go on with young minds interacting with a collection of fine teachers—of composition, for instance—it seems to me that such universities can become these "primary institutions." Ohio State University, for example, has sixty-five-thousand students in one locale—which is the size of all but several score American cities. Therefore, such young, devoted, intellectually active talent should create another leg to that institution of influence. I also think that there are a few religious institutions, a few churches—a *very* few churches—that have not been mongrelized, churches that are interested in creative visual, dramatic, and musical arts, and that these three institutions together could form an influence, given societal support, since they are the product as well as the formers and influencers of society. These institutions can't do it all simply by dragging along society. They have to represent a hunger and a desire among the citizenry for that to happen.

J.B.: The word "culture" is used today with all kinds of meanings, from



A Cappella Through the Ages

Join The Western Wind this summer for workshops exploring *a cappella vocal music.*

Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, Early American, Classical, Romantic, Contemporary, Jazz, Pop, and more!

Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts

Session 1: June 21-23; June 25-29; or all 8 days
Session 2: August 2-4; August 5-10; or all 8 days

"I just want to say *thanks, thanks* for a great musical workshop! What wonderful musicalness, singing and artistry!"

—PHIL MATTSON, 1994 Participant in the Western Wind Workshop in Ensemble Singing

"My friends tried to warn me that it would be great, great, great, but who knew it would be this great!!"

—1995 Summer Workshop Participant

Call 1-800-788-2187

for information about workshops, recordings, publications and bookings.

The Western Wind Vocal Ensemble
263 West 86th Street• New York, NY 10024
212-873-2848

"cultural elite" to "multicultural diversity." You have said upon occasion that culture is something that cannot be imported. What do you mean by this?

R.S.: In the years when I was touring this country and others, I had the feeling that, although concerts were successful, we were in a community for a matter of hours, rather than a matter of days, weeks, or years. Each community and each institution has to be responsible for its own growth and cultural life. Another way of saying it would be that simply because a person has enough money to buy a ticket to a concert, he or she is entitled to understand it. You have to bring more to it than the price of the ticket. Any relationship with Beethoven or Stravinsky implies a commitment of more than money. One cannot buy this culture, one must earn it.

J.B.: Aside from your many conducting engagements, what other plans do you have for the future?

R.S.: I want to write two books. One is a technical and practical book about choral tone, rhythm and enunciation, rehearsal techniques, and choral disciplines. The second would be a discussion of about a dozen major choral/orchestral works examined in the light of the relationship between their musical structures and textual qualities and matters. For instance, it's obvious that the Brahms Requiem is a different testament of both music and faith than the Beethoven *Missa solemnis* or Bach's passion settings. They are fascinating and instructive in their differences, and there's a great deal to be learned from the relation of their musical languages to their verbal languages.

I also want to continue as long as I can with the [Robert Shaw] Institute, which was started in France in the 1980s for the study and recording of the major choral repertoire. We also have plans to continue the series of Carnegie Hall Workshop concerts in New York as well as the videotapes created from it.

J.B.: Speaking as a working artist—and former member of the National Council on the Arts—what role do you think government should play in arts funding? How important should supporting the creative arts be to a society?

R.S.: I think it should play the role that democracy deems appropriate. I don't think it can play any other role than that. At the same time, a citizenry concerned about its intellectual, artistic, cultural, and spiritual life will find ways to increase its support of that life. There's no assurance that art and music will escape the bureaucratic problems that we experience in other affairs. I'm not so sure that great works of human art can be subscribed by a government edict. The great works of art will appear or not appear, depending on whether there are great people to write them and a sufficient audience to receive them. Democracy will create its own sponsorships—and it's just that it should—but a great citizenry will see to it that the arts become an important part of human life.

J.B.: You've often referred to the Creative Arts as the Conservative Arts. Is this what you mean?

R.S.: Yes. That's obviously a play upon language, but what I mean is that the arts conserve that which is noblest in human history. Also, insofar as there is a Creative Principle (which some people may identify as God), and if man is created in that particular image, then man has the responsibility of being the Creative Principle. The perpetuation of those values that have ennobled man and made him a contributing benevolence to his universe and to his human environment is a part of his moral responsibility.

J.B.: I've always admired your turn on the phrase "the Word made flesh," that the inverse could be true.

R.S.: I believe that very strongly: that painting becomes spirit, becomes Creative Principle, becomes abstract goodness.

—CJ—

The perfect solution for a perfect performance!

SONG-LEARNING TAPES©

© 1988 by Hammond Music Service

Rehearsal tapes help choirs learn music 5 times faster!

Perfect for learning oratorios, requiems, cantatas - any major work!

Also - inexpensive rehearsal tapes for All-State, Regional & Honor Choirs!
Each tape has a grand piano playing its voice part loud
in the foreground, all other parts soft in the background.
Call or write for a FREE catalog, demo packet/tape, and prices:

HAMMOND MUSIC SERVICE Toll Free: 1-800-628-0855

235 Morningside Terrace, Vista CA 92084 FAX: 619-726-8053

Vocal Jazz for All Ages

with David Riley

June 24–28, 1996

David Riley

Offered by nationally recognized arranger, composer, editor, and clinician David Riley, this workshop is designed for the contemporary ensemble director who works with various age groups in the vocal jazz idiom. Class activities will help participants develop choral techniques for teaching basic jazz styles, articulations, balance and blend of jazz sonorities, and interpretation of jazz choral works for all ages. Class involvement activities will include vocal jazz ensemble warm-ups, simple improvisational techniques, and interpretation of literature provided by various publishers.

2 graduate credits or noncredit. Meets 9:00 a.m.–4:30 p.m., Monday–Friday.

MUSIC AT ITHACA

For more information: Office of Summer Sessions, Ithaca College, 120 Towers Concourse, Ithaca, NY 14850-7141; phone 607-274-3143; fax 607-274-1263; E-mail xconed1@oa.ithaca.edu

ITHACA