

THE YEAR OF ROBERT SHAW: LESSONS FROM A ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME APPRENTICESHIP

BY RONALD KEAN

Editor's note: The following article originally appeared in Cantate, the official publication of California ACDA, edited by Eliza Rubenstein. It is reprinted here by permission. Photographs of Robert Shaw are property of the ACDA National Office Archives.

My life completely changed the first time I sang for Robert Shaw—and not just my musical life. He was conducting the first of three summer workshops at the University of Southern California in 1977, and I was about to embark on my second year of teaching as the choir director at Valencia High School in Placentia, California. These summer workshops at USC combined the talents of student singers and conductors from USC and southern California, conductors from all over the United States, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, all performing at the Hollywood Bowl. The first week we learned and performed Berlioz's *Requiem*, and the second week we learned and performed Verdi's *Requiem*. The great Howard Swan—who I later learned was Shaw's high school history teacher—sat in on the first rehearsal and bowed in homage to Shaw when he was introduced. Before that summer, I had no idea that Robert Shaw's level



Ron Kean in the early 1980s

of musicianship or his knowledge of the score, the voice, theology, and literature were possible. I had discovered a model for lifelong learning.

The second summer we learned and performed music by J. S. Bach: the *Magnificat* and the *St. Matthew Passion*. Bach and Shaw were the perfect marriage of rhythm, soul, and spirituality, and the all-day rehearsals seemed to pass by in a matter of minutes. Each day at lunchtime, the singers walked off campus to the nearby food court and restaurants, but one day I found that I couldn't

eat and couldn't talk to anyone following the morning rehearsal; it had transported me into another world. I sat alone outside of Booth Hall on the steps with my head in my hands for five or ten minutes, trying to process what I experienced.

"Are you all right?" said a voice next to me.

It was Robert Shaw. Evidently he couldn't eat either, and we started a conversation that lasted on and off for more than twenty years.

During the dress rehearsal of the *St. Matthew Passion*, I noticed a discrepancy in ornamentation between the violins and the sopranos and brought it to Shaw's attention. He asked me to take his score to the copyist to make the change, and a day later, he suggested that I borrow his choral and orchestral scores of the piece for a month so that I could

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study how he edited and studied his scores. I was stunned, and I mentioned on my way out of his dressing room that I didn't know his address. "I am sure you'll find a way to return them to me," he replied. "If not, you'd better try another profession!"

I didn't just study his scores; I copied every last detail into my choral score and spent money I couldn't afford on a Bärenreiter full score so I could transcribe his edits into my copy. (I once heard a radio interviewer say to him, "Every time you conduct a choir the product is miraculous. How do you do this?" Shaw responded, "I just make the singers do what the composer indicated in the score. The composition is the miracle!") I recalled the stories of Bach copying the scores of others to better understand the inner workings of their music. Robert Shaw, with one act of trust and generosity, validated my love of learning and created a lasting bond between us.

The third summer at USC, we learned and performed Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, and by now I knew for sure that I was in the presence of greatness and that somehow I had to expand my studies with Robert Shaw. I took out a loan and flew to Atlanta, not knowing if he would meet with me but certain that I didn't want to look back and see a missed opportunity. I planned a trip that would coincide with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus performance of Brahms's *Requiem* and arranged to meet Shaw's secretary, Nola Frink. She was protective of his time but finally agreed to ask him if he would meet with me. He agreed and invited me to sing in the chorus for the Friday night performance in place of a missing tenor.

The performance was powerful, but time was tight; I had an early-morning flight on Saturday, so we set up a time to meet at 6:30 a.m. I showed him what I had learned from three summers of study with him and explained what I wanted to learn from him. Much to my surprise and delight, he invited me on the spot to become the copyist of the Atlanta Symphony Chorus and to sing in the chorus. The meeting went longer than expected, so he drove me at breakneck speed to the airport, arriving in the nick of time. Once aboard my flight, I finally took in what had just happened. As the plane soared through the clouds, I was right there in the clouds with it. I resigned my teaching position at Villa Park High School at the end of that school

What I Learned from Robert Shaw

Robert Shaw's rehearsal techniques have been documented by many other conductors and by Carnegie Hall videos. Words are not sufficient to describe the experience of working with him, but I offer the following notes from my firsthand experience in rehearsal, performance, workshops, and as his copyist and a member of the symphonic choir that received a weekly "Dear People" letters.

On Blend

- Don't ever sing more loudly than you can sing beautifully.
- Try for a little less singing and a little more listening.
- After four seconds of singing, gravity and lack of blood flow will cause the pitch to sag and the tone to be thin. Constantly refresh the air supply by staggering your breathing.

On Phrasing

- Energize weak beats in each meter to maintain tempo and to generate forward motion. This is especially true in triple meter.
- Short notes should lead to their next longest "brethren." Therefore, slightly separate a dotted note from the next shorter note so that the shorter note has an exact place in time. Then energize the shorter note with same energy as the dotted note.
- Invite the tone...sing through each note...blossom the sound.
- Each phrase should have a sense of urgency, a sense of mission.
- Repeated notes may need a slight crescendo to keep the line moving and to keep the pitch from sagging.

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- Energize the lower note of a melodic leap and arrive elegantly at the higher note.
- Make the phrase sound inevitable by understanding its shape and color.
- Delight in the physiological sound of the text and explore text as color.

On Rhythm

- Begin the learning process by “count-singing.” This technique accomplishes extraordinary things for intonation because it requires the singers to initiate the pitch of each note multiple times. It does even more for rhythms: it makes it impossible for a singer to sing through a rest; and it lines up every measure vertically in terms of the smallest unit. When the appropriate dynamics are added, the singer is forced to consider where, how much, and how rapidly a change in dynamics is to be accomplished.

On Tempo

- Rehearsal tempi should be calculated to prohibit the singer from making a mistake. Errors should not be allowed to happen or they will accumulate and require un-learning.
- There are three tempos in every choral/orchestra piece: one in your inner hearing during score study, one when rehearsing the choir, and one that best suits the orchestra in the acoustics of your performance hall, which becomes the “real tempo” of the piece.

On Text

- Stay away from text until notes and phrasing are right and ineradicable!
- Enjoy every sound of every word.

On Warm-Ups

- Yawn before vocalizing and rub the sides of your jaw to create a relaxed atmosphere for the air to resonate.
- Always learn music at piano dynamic to hear the tonality.
- Sing quietly enough to maintain a good unison.
- Concentrate on pitch first and sonority second.
- Unifying the vowels will unify the pitch.
- The experience of singing unison is more instructive than warming up the voice, and warming up the brain is more important than warming up the voice.

On Conducting

- Robert Shaw gestural language indicated proper breathing and phrasing. The ictus of the beat was clear and comparatively small; the energy of the inner pulse of the music generated by the “weak” beats was fuller and conducted horizontally with the elbows. This conducting style is related to the chironomy of Gregorian Chant. The vocal line is always in motion; there is always ebb and flow. As a result, there wasn't a rehearsal or performance that didn't leave me feeling vocally stronger afterwards.
- And finally, when asked to name the most important skill for a beginning conductor, Shaw replied: “You must like people. And if you don't, then pay a professional to find out why you don't!”

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year and moved to Atlanta in August of 1980.

Shaw put me to work right away. One day he called me to his home and showed me his music library, which was stuffed with more scores than it could hold. He asked if I would build him more shelving and organize all his scores while he was out of town for a week; I said yes, and with some help from the local hardware store, I went to work. I knew that he was a stickler for detail, so I spent days constructing brick-and-board shelves and carefully centering

them according to the spot where he sat at the piano.

When he came home, he sat on his piano bench, looked around, and said to me, “You centered the library on the room, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” I said, pleased that he had noticed.

“I would prefer that it be centered on the light fixture,” he replied.

I measured the difference, which amounted to about one half inch; he saw the look of disbelief that I tried to hide. He went upstairs and returned in his traditional blue French farmer’s

uniform. Together we took the library apart, moved it to where he wanted it, and put it back together. This took most of the day, and that half inch turned out to be a blessing—it gave me the opportunity to ask him every musical question I could think of while we hauled shelves and scores together. His sense of space was matched only by his sense of time. One day I went for a walk with his wife, Caroline, in the area where she and Robert lived. “When I take this walk with Robert,” she said, “we stop at this exact spot on the street. He



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picks up a rock and throws it about fifteen yards at that hole in the pavement. I've never seen him miss the hole...oh, and when he wakes up in the middle of the night, he can tell you exactly what time it is without looking at a watch."

As his copyist, my job was to copy the edits from his choral score to twelve master copies so that the 240-voice chorus could have these edits in their score by the first or second rehearsal. I copied three scores per section. On the first one, I double-

checked every measure as I went. The second score was easier, and by the third I understood why he edited the parts the way that he did, and I no longer needed to double-check my work. It was a fantastic education and a true apprenticeship. That year I

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worked on scores ranging from Bach's *Mass in B minor* to Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder*, from Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* to Britten's *War Requiem*. Every choral rehearsal was a master class from one of the greatest musicians of our time. I could have stayed forever, but the time had come for me to put into practice what I had learned. I returned to USC to complete my graduate studies in choral music.

I turned forty in the middle of my fourth year as director of choral activities at Porterville College, and though I didn't have a full-blown mid-

life crisis, I did sense that I needed to "recharge my batteries." I phoned Robert Shaw's secretary, who suggested that I come to Atlanta; the choir needed more men to record Mahler's *Symphony No. 8*. (Shaw's supernatural sense of time played a part in this recording: Bob Woods, then-president of Telarc and the producer for the CD, reminded him of the importance of keeping the recording under 79 minutes and 42 seconds so that it would fit onto a single disc; Shaw's rendering clocked in at 79 minutes and 39 seconds.) My college president

allowed me to miss class for a week and a half to make the trip, and it was this opportunity that helped me to finally become comfortable in my own skin. I was in the midst of developing a repertoire of multicultural music that would represent my student population, the majority of whom came from non-western traditions. Rekindling my relationship with Robert Shaw reminded me that non-Western music demanded the same level of musicianship, score study, and performance practice as Western art music. Back home in Porterville, our


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program and our abilities grew. And me? For the first time, I was content to know that although I was not going to be exactly the same as Robert Shaw, I could take what he had taught me and grow where I was planted.

This year marks the centennial of Robert Shaw's birth. His legacy as a teacher remains as strong as his legacy as a conductor. He shared everything he knew, and I have spent my entire adult life as a conductor using what I learned from him. When I asked him why he accepted me as a student

(when thousands in our profession would line up for such a chance), he said, "Because you asked!" Robert Shaw was a self-taught man who spent a lifetime learning his craft. When I returned his orchestra score of Bach's *Mass in B minor* to his home after studying it for a month and copying the edits into my score, he gave me a funny look and said, "Well, what did you learn?" I talked about balance, articulation, form, phrasing, tempi, and bowings, and said, "But I don't really understand all of this."

He replied, "What makes you think I do?"

If Robert Shaw was still learning and growing, I figured there was hope for me too. 

Ronald Kean is emeritus professor of music at Bakersfield College. He is a past president of Western ACDA Division and the Music Association of California Community Colleges. rkean@bak.rr.com



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