

ROBERT SHAW (1916-1999)

## VOICE OF AUTHORITY

Donald Rosenberg on the man who defined choral singing in America

George Szell, the prickly perfectionist of Cleveland, was not in the habit of lavishing colleagues with praise. But the splendid chorus that Robert Shaw created at the behest of the Cleveland Orchestra's musical director brought a rare show of Szellian approbation: 'It is astonishing – like some sort of magic. Simply by the quality of the beat one can make an instant change in tone, tempo, balance or colour. This chorus is simply more responsive than an orchestra.'

Shaw had such a galvanizing effect on choruses whether they were allied with orchestras or not. He wasn't the only choral director to have a decisive impact in America and beyond. Yet Shaw changed the way both musicians and the public perceived choruses, establishing them as amateur ensembles dedicated to the highest 'professional' standards. 'To be an amateur means, I suppose,' Shaw noted, 'to be unwilling or unable to set a price upon the effort and love which attends the creation of beauty.'

Musicians and administrators who worked to create beauty with Shaw during his 60-year career encountered a brilliant, moody, funny, acerbic, kind and compulsively self-effacing man who put music above himself as he toiled to achieve a semblance of mortal perfection. He was the favoured choral director of three orchestral titans – Szell, Stokowski, Toscanini – and an artist whose endless search for meaning led him to techniques that have influenced generations of musicians, choral and otherwise.

American conductor James Conlon, who calls Shaw 'a beacon of inspiration', was a student at the Aspen Music Festival in 1969 when he and conducting colleagues were recruited to sing in the chorus for Haydn's *Mass in Time of War* and Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* under the legend's baton. 'I understood in the course of several hours how a chorus is an instrument and how a great master of the instrument makes a chorus run,' says Conlon, who would go on to immerse himself in choral repertoire as



longtime music director of the Cincinnati May Festival. 'And the incredible spiritual depth. All of that packed into one experience simply marked me forever.'

#### Dedication which demanded dedication back

Shaw achieved his mesmerizing ends by keeping up with scholarly developments, studying with major musical figures (Szell, Julius Herford) and blending intellectual rigour with homespun wisdom. The son of a preacher, he gave up plans for the ministry to devote himself to music, though he made good use of oratorical gifts he inherited from his father. Shaw followed rehearsals with long letters full of literary and poetic wit (usually beginning 'Dear People') that chastised his choristers for musical misdemeanours, lauded them for their dedication and elaborated on lessons he shared in person.

On one occasion, he told the members of his Collegiate Choir that they weren't paying sufficient attention to short notes. '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!' On another, he motivated the Atlanta Symphony Chorus by enumerating the life experiences he wanted his charges to bring to the Verdi Requiem: 'Think Michelangelo, da Vinci and Donatello. Think St Peter's, San Marco, La Scala and Pizza Hut. Think Othello, Falstaff and Marlon Brando. Think sunshine, cannelloni, Alps and olive oil. Think Sophia Loren, Arturo Toscanini and Two Ton Tony Galento. Think beauty. Think sub-cutaneously and sing same.'

Shaw's impact on choral matters can be heard on dozens of recordings, made from 1944 to 1998, that explore a remarkable range of styles. A native of Red Bluff, California, he was as devoted to music by American composers as he was to Europeans. With the Robert Shaw Chorale, which he led on grueling domestic and foreign tours for two decades, and ensembles in New York, Cleveland, Atlanta and elsewhere, he programmed

– and recorded – everything from Bach motets and Mahler's Eighth Symphony to spirituals, Christmas carols and show tunes. He commissioned Paul Hindemith's *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd* in 1946 and championed it for the rest of his life, finally recording the score four decades later for Telarc, while serving as music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra.

#### The secret of his success

The keys to Shaw's choral art are to be found, at least partly, in his iconoclastic approach to balance, intonation, enunciation and rhythm. Lois Mitchell, an alto in Shaw's Cleveland Orchestra Chorus in the mid-1960s, recalls the fastidiousness of his warm-ups, when he would have his choristers painstakingly 'move from F to G in 26 segments. That's how he honed people's ears. Mr Shaw loved that pure, white tone.' Early in his career, he went against prevailing choral winds by dispersing voices rather than clumping sopranos, altos, tenors and basses in separate sections. By doing so, and by anchoring the sound with more basses than other voices, he achieved a broader spectrum of choral colour. The technique drew criticism, but Shaw held his ground. Joseph A Mussulman, author of a Shaw biography, says the conductor insisted that 'the direction from which the sound comes is a negligible consideration' and 'there is an optimum arrangement of voices unique to each piece of music and to each stage in its preparation'.

This preparation involved constant, often tedious honing of words, which Shaw believed crucial in revealing the story they were trying to tell. Taking his cue from Fred Waring, who hired him as a student at Pomona College to work with his famous Glee Club, Shaw used a 'tone-syllable' system that illuminated words phonetically, in whatever language, by linking the last consonant of one word to the first consonant of the next. The effect heightened what Shaw referred to as 'enunciative clarity', which his half-century's worth of recordings as conductor and/or choral director reveal to an extraordinary extent.

### Shaw and some legendary musical partnerships

Shaw prepared choruses for many Toscanini performances with the NBC Symphony that are available on remastered RCA releases. ('As for Robert Shaw,' Toscanini proclaimed, 'I have at last found the Maestro I have been looking for.') These recordings include viscerally thrilling and authoritative versions of Verdi operas and the Requiem, and Beethoven's *Missa solemnis* and the Ninth Symphony, in which the choral artistry equals Toscanini's compelling urgency. Listen to how the Robert Shaw Chorale lends explosive, yet balanced vibrancy to the text in the triumphal scene in *Aida* (1949) or achieves utmost transparency even in the softest passages of the Requiem (1951).

Shaw's special touch graces the Ninth Symphony on no fewer than five recordings spanning almost 50 years, starting with a 1947 Koussevitzky interpretation with the Boston Symphony and Tanglewood Festival Chorus, continuing with Toscanini/NBC, Szell/Cleveland and Shaw/Atlanta and ending with Shaw's live 1995 performance (his last ever of the work) with the Cleveland Orchestra and Blossom Festival Chorus. The latter is included on a seven-disc Shaw commemorative set which the orchestra is releasing

this autumn: it includes forceful and warmly inflected performances of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* (1960), Handel's *Semele* (1967, with Beverly Sills in sensational voice in the title role) and Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem* (1991).

The multitude of recordings Shaw made first for RCA and later in naturalistic digital sound for Telarc (41 releases, from 1978 to 1998) only skim the surface of his contribution to choral lore. Throughout his career, he held workshops, including a series at Carnegie Hall during the last decade of his life, that went beyond singing to embrace music theory and related subjects. He created the Robert Shaw Institute in 1988 for study of repertoire (mostly *a cappella*) and techniques with American choral directors and teachers in southwest France, as well as for performances and recordings as the Robert Shaw Festival Singers.

### In front of the orchestra

In the purely orchestral realm, Shaw never reached the exalted level of conductors for whom he prepared choruses. His tenure in Cleveland as the associate conductor to Szell was invaluable yet torturous – a roller-coaster of glorious choral performances rubbing shoulders with frustration in the shadow of a master. Even so, by talent and sheer gumption, Shaw

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TULLY POTTER

changed the face of music in Atlanta as the orchestra's boss, programming with adventurous flair and ruffling more than a few feathers over his choice of 20th-century fare, which led to a failed attempt to oust him. His greatest achievement there was (and still is) the Atlanta Symphony Chorus, one of the world's great choral ensembles, as is gloriously evident on the many superb Telarc recordings they made together.

Shaw spent a lifetime preaching to real choirs and others, proselytizing for the democracy of choral singing and stressing the important place of the amateur. 'The chorus is peculiarly

representative not of an elite – of skill, or class, or intelligence – but of what Lincoln and Sandburg call the people, yes, the people,' he told the Atlanta Symphony's board of trustees. 'A chorus reaches deep into community life, crosses all sorts of social and economical lines, and makes a contribution not only to a city's aesthetics, but also its humanity.'

His legacy is unlikely to be matched. Above all, Shaw's generosity of spirit and expressive truth, so pervasive on the bounty of recordings in which he had various degrees of input, raised him to a singular place in the musical pantheon. ●

## DATES FROM A CAREER & KEY RECORDINGS

**1916** Born in Red Bluff, California (April 30)  
**1934** Studies at Pomona College; conducts Pomona College Glee Club  
**1939** Marries college sweetheart, Maxine Farley (divorced in 1970)  
**1941** Organises the Chapel Choir, which becomes the Collegiate Chorale  
**1945** Prepares Collegiate Chorale for performances of Beethoven's Ninth with Toscanini and NBC Symphony. Becomes director of choral departments at Juilliard and Tanglewood  
**1948** Forms Robert Shaw Chorale  
**1953-57** Conductor of San Diego Symphony Orchestra  
**1956** Joins Cleveland Orchestra as associate conductor  
**1962** Takes Cleveland Orchestra Chorus to Casals Festival in Puerto Rico (returns

1963 and 1964). Takes chorus to Carnegie Hall with Casals Festival Orchestra  
**1966** Appointed music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra  
**1971** Marries Caroline Sauls Hitz  
**1977** Conducts Atlanta Symphony and Chorus at inauguration concert for President Jimmy Carter  
**1988** Leads Atlanta SO on its first European tour and retires as music director  
**1988** Founds the Robert Shaw Institute  
**1990** Begins annual series of choral workshops at Carnegie Hall  
**1991** Receives Kennedy Center honours  
**1995** Caroline Shaw dies. Leads Mahler's Eighth in Cleveland and New York  
**1997** Conducts Cleveland Orchestra and Chorus for the last time at Severance Hall  
**1999** Dies in New Haven, Connecticut (January 25)

### Recordings

	Catalogue number (review date)
<b>Bach</b> B minor Mass Shaw	RCA Ⓜ Ⓜ 09025 63529-2
<b>Beethoven</b> Symphony No 9 Szell	Sony Ⓜ Ⓜ SBK46533 (12/89)
<b>Beethoven</b> Symphony No 9. Missa solemnis Toscanini	RCA Ⓜ Ⓜ 74321 55837-2
<b>Beethoven</b> Missa solemnis Toscanini: <b>Cherubini</b> Requiem Shaw	RCA Ⓜ Ⓜ GD60272
<b>Borodin</b> Polovtsian Dances <b>Stravinsky</b> Firebird Shaw	Telarc Ⓜ Ⓜ CD80039
<b>Brahms</b> Liebeslieder Waltzes Shaw	Telarc Ⓜ Ⓜ CD80326 (11/93)
<b>Dvořák</b> Stabat mater Shaw	Telarc Ⓜ Ⓜ CD80506 (2/00)
<b>Hindemith</b> When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Shaw	Telarc Ⓜ Ⓜ CD80132 (7/87)
<b>Mahler</b> Symphony No 8 Shaw	Telarc Ⓜ Ⓜ CD80267 (1/92)
<b>Rachmaninov</b> Vespers Shaw	Telarc Ⓜ Ⓜ CD80172 (10/90)
<b>Verdi</b> <i>Aida</i> Toscanini	RCA Ⓜ Ⓜ GD60300
<b>Verdi</b> <i>Falstaff</i> Toscanini	RCA Ⓜ Ⓜ GD60251 (5/90)
<b>Verdi</b> <i>Requiem</i> Toscanini	RCA Ⓜ Ⓜ GD60299 (5/90)
<b>Verdi</b> <i>Requiem</i> Shaw	Telarc Ⓜ Ⓜ CD80152 (3/88)
<b>Various</b> Hallelujah! And Other Sacred Choruses Shaw	RCA Ⓜ Ⓜ 09026 63709-2
<b>Various</b> The Stephen Foster Songbook Shaw	RCA Ⓜ Ⓜ 09026 61253-2