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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK: Coming of Age in Berlin

On the road with the Atlanta Symphony chorus: A travel diary

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Berlin --- The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chorus, invited to make its debut with the Berlin Philharmonic, spent a week in the German capital, Dec. 7-14. In three rehearsals and three performances, the 192-voice ASO Chorus triumphed on a world stage. They sang Benjamin Britten's "War Requiem," led by ASO principal guest conductor Donald Runnicles and performing with three distinguished guest soloists. Reviews were ecstatic in their praise of the chorus. Suddenly, the ASO Chorus is the global gold standard for symphonic choruses.

The volunteer choristers come from across Atlanta's spectrum of employment and background. They must pass a rigorous audition and rehearse every Monday night. Their singing has earned the ASO a clutch of Grammy Awards, and their performances in Atlanta's Symphony Hall are among the most anticipated events of the season.

Yet they're still an amateur choir --- they sing for the love of their art and must hold day jobs. For schoolteachers and office workers, this December Berlin tour was a schedule-shuffling hassle. For church musicians, shirking responsibilities during Advent required fancy planning.

And the tour had ripple effects: Alto Cheryl Vanture's husband had to take one week off his job to care for their two Labradors at home. Even for this history-making trip, the choristers received no stipend. (Their airfare and hotel costs were paid, however, by Atlanta philanthropists and corporate sponsors.)

At full complement, the chorus is 200 strong. Six of the singers couldn't arrange to leave work or family life --- or couldn't afford the loss of pay --- for the Berlin trip. (Two more got sick in Germany and didn't perform.)

At the center of this story is Norman Mackenzie, the spotlight-shunning ASO director of choruses, who drilled the singers to their lofty accomplishments. Mackenzie's chorus, as we found out, is the peer to the greatest orchestra in the world. The ASO Chorus' triumph in Berlin was, in largest part, Mackenzie's triumph.

The other, silent, center is Robert Lawson Shaw (1916-1999), a former ASO music director and the founder, in 1970, of its chorus. Shaw is universally acknowledged as the greatest chorus master of the 20th century, the man whose iron will and insights into group singing animated almost everyone he touched. Conductors will come and go, administrators will serve and be replaced, but the ASO Chorus, to this day, answers to a higher power: the legacy of Robert Shaw.

He remains the godhead, the guru, for the chorus. Like a biblical apostle, Mackenzie carries the authentic word, yet Shaw's power is messianic.

While adoring Mackenzie's current work, the choristers behaved like true believers, often invoking the revered name of "Mr. Shaw" during their weeklong tour of Berlin. I traveled with the chorus --- as an "embedded" arts reporter. What follows is a day-by-day chronicle of their journey.

Monday, Dec. 1

Atlanta's Symphony Hall, one week before the Berlin trip. The chorus performed the "War Requiem" in Atlanta two seasons ago, and for the last few weeks have returned to the score, but tonight is Runnicles'

first rehearsal with the singers. First comes a warm-up under the direction of Mackenzie and rehearsal pianist Todd Skrabanek, including atomized microtonal practice, where they sing 16 tones within a half-step interval. This is seriously subtle singing.

After warm-up, Runnicles takes the podium. His comments are telling. The chorus breezes through a particularly tricky passage, in lurching 7/4 time. The conductor stops them, exasperated: "This is supposed to sound difficult! You make it sound too easy. There needs to be struggle in this." So they sing it again, adding a hint of hesitancy and grit. The conductor nods his approval, and they continue, deconstructing passage after passage, through the score. The Berlin Philharmonic might toss them some curveballs; they know Mackenzie's regimen has prepared them for anything.

Sunday, Dec. 7

Travel day. In the E Terminal waiting area, someone jokes that the airport should be renamed Hartsfield-Jackson-Shaw. The 230 Atlantans --- singers, managers, patrons and guests --- fly in three groups, on Lufthansa and Delta. ASO choral administrator Jeff Baxter, who sings tenor, explains it's simply a logistical matter, getting a herd of airline reservations for one day. But some of the choristers whisper it's because of The Curse --- remembering the 1962 Orly Airport tragedy in Paris that killed a planeload of Atlanta arts patrons and recalling a planned 1986 ASO European tour that was canceled due to fear of terrorist reprisals, as the United States had just bombed Libya.

Still, the mood is both jovial and introspective --- a swirl of emotions. Sarah Ward is an alto who works at a rare-book and map store in Buckhead, and this is her first year in the ASO Chorus. "There's something about choral singing, there's a real sense of community when we sing, perhaps because of the words attached to the music," she speculates, ready to go deeper. "Here are some 200 people who come together of their own volition, people who feel music can alter your consciousness. We're a group of people who like to sit in the middle of in-tune fifths --- that's a spiritual experience for a lot of us."

Spiritual, maybe, but the ASO Chorus is decidedly not a social organization. Baxter, charged with coordinating the Berlin event, says that with everyone's busy schedule at home, the choristers scarcely know one another. "We meet Monday nights, do the music and leave," he explains. "Most of us rush home after rehearsals and concerts. This trip is one of the few chances for us to really socialize."

Nevertheless, the enriching music and identity that come with the ASOC act like a drug. Ike Van Meter, who sings bass and is a physicians' finance manager, feels its effects. Singing with this chorus, he says, "really gets into your head and becomes part of your personality. Singing in this chorus is like a cult."

Monday, Dec. 8

The chorus arrives in Berlin. Late autumn weather in this part of the world is notoriously depressing: blustery cold and wet, low gray skies. We experience comparative balm, with sunshine and temperatures a bit above freezing. Some choristers break into small groups to sightsee; a few walk, moth to flame, toward the Philharmonie. Although in the coming days they'll spend most of their time in Hans Scharoun's mustard-yellow concert hall, opened 40 years ago and shaped like a gigantic tent constructed by aliens, they can't contain their curiosity. They need to experience it immediately.

Others retire to their hotel rooms (most have a roommate) on the rebuilt --- almost everything in central Berlin was destroyed during World War II --- Gendarmenmarkt, a grand square with two reconstructed tall-tower churches and the regal Konzerthaus (formerly called Schauspielhaus), where the ASO and Chorus, under Shaw, performed Beethoven's Ninth nearly 15 years ago. For longtime chorister Charlie Cottingham, a tenor and retired mathematician for Bell Labs, the 1988 trip still holds powerful memories of the former East Berlin: "It was incredible to cross Checkpoint Charlie and perform for a trapped people. They were so hungry for contact with the outside world. After the concert, people were passing letters to Mr. Shaw to mail for them, to their relatives in the West," he recalls. "You can still see the scars."

Tuesday, Dec. 9

An 11th-hour scheduling conflict at the Philharmonie means today is a free day. No rehearsal, a day to rest up from jet lag. A couple of dozen choristers head to Potsdam, home of Frederick the Great's Sanssouci baroque palace, the site of postwar talks between Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin, U.S.

President Harry S. Truman and British Prime Minister Clement Attlee that divided the continent. Other groups head to Museum Island, a rebuilt campus of neoclassical buildings, art history treasures and the city's largest cathedral, the Berliner Dom.

Wednesday, Dec. 10, 9:30 a.m.

Adrenaline overload. Today the chorus finally takes the stage of the Philharmonie for rehearsal. At piano warm-up, Mackenzie listens to the chorus making the most glorious noise anyone can remember --- the Philharmonie's acoustics are warm, clear and true. "Can we take this back to Atlanta with us?" he asks the choir, gesturing to the far corners of the hall. They laugh and applaud. "If we live long enough, y'know, we'll get one of these, too," he adds.

Minutes later, the orchestral rehearsal starts, and it's weird. First a philharmonic manager addresses the full orchestra and chorus and says, no joke, the philharmonic is "honored to have the best chorus in America here for this special project." That takes a moment to sink in. At this administrative editorial, however, a few philharmonic musicians raise their eyebrows and snigger. The mighty Berlin Philharmonic, like orchestras everywhere, is addicted to horseplay at rehearsals. And they grant respect only grudgingly --- despite what their manager says.

The first part of the rehearsal isn't going well. At one point, Runnicles (who speaks German to the orchestra) has to glare at some giggling players to get them to shush. A loud rat-a-tat-tat phrase in the music prompts one young horn player to turn her instrument around and, with the mouthpiece resembling the barrel of a machine gun, mow down her colleagues, gangster style. And when the chorus men sing an idiosyncratic "rehhh-qui-em," with a sweeping whoosh in their pronunciation, a cellist mocks the singing by pretending to cough and wheeze.

Then comes the magic moment, the close of the first movement, the a cappella words "Kyrie eleison" so subtly placed, so fragile yet strong, so unified across many voices. One by one, the silly-willy players sit up, turn their heads and listen. Radiant tones. When the singing stops, they shuffle their feet --- a musicians' form of applause. The ASO Chorus has won them over.

Thursday, Dec. 11, 10 a.m.

The third (and final) rehearsal by day; concert at night. Time for early appraisals. About the Philharmonie acoustic, alto Carole Jacobsen says, "There's nowhere to hide in here." Soprano Mindy Ellis, who sits at the extreme stage right of the chorus, in the balcony, says she had trouble hearing the other singers, but not the orchestra: "I'll have to take my cues from them, and watch the conductor more closely than at home."

"I think they were a little surprised by us," says David Hansen, a bass and business manager for a Salvation Army housing project for the elderly. "Some of the players commented to us about our tone and our fine intonation, and that even at our softest we made a warm, resonant sound that is quite like the Berlin [Philharmonic's] string sound."

Hansen continues, "For me, the most interesting thing was exploring the subtleties at the soft end of our range, making sounds which we could never do in Symphony Hall."

Thursday, 8 p.m.

Concert is sold out; stage is overflowing with musicians; the music starts. Runnicles and the chorus seem nervous at first. Gradually, the musicians seem to release themselves within the dark beauty of the "War Requiem." As in rehearsal, the hushed words "Kyrie eleison" are the chorus' first statement of greatness, a transcendent moment. The philharmonic, the most esteemed ensemble in the business, is also the hungriest: In performance every player gives his all, all the time. (And unlike the ASO, the Berlin players put away the crossword puzzles for the concert.)

In hefty passages, like the "Tuba mirum," the full brunt of choir and orchestra sound pins the audience to their seatbacks. Throughout, the giant chorus sings with one luminous voice.

The chorus receives the biggest ovation from the audience; even after the orchestra has left the stage, people are cheering the Atlanta Symphony Chorus: "I think for all of us it was a moment that seemed to last an eternity," says tenor Keith Jeffords, a Smyrna plastic surgeon. "How do you accept a compliment like that? I got a big lump in my throat. We were all tearing up. It was so humbling."

After the concert, vocal soloist Christian Gerhaher, a German baritone, told members of the chorus that Germany's finest was the Bavarian Radio Choir and that the Atlanta Symphony Chorus was simply better. He was shocked that a nonprofessional ensemble could sing with such exacting finesse and musical understanding.

Friday, Dec. 12

No rehearsal. Many choristers are recovering from a late, late night --- first at an impromptu reception the philharmonic players hosted for their admired guests and, for many, a still later night dipping into Berlin's famously debauched nightlife. ("There is nothing like this in Atlanta," reported one chorister of eclectic tastes.) At least one Atlantan has a date with a philharmonic musician. Call it part of the Atlanta-Berlin cultural exchange.

Friday night's concert is altogether more refined and passionate than Thursday's, and the beauty of the work is overwhelming. English tenor Ian Bostridge, another of the three guest soloists and a musical celebrity on his own merits, is an incomparable interpreter of Britten's music. The guy looks like Harry Potter wearing white tie and tails and has an English schoolboy demeanor (and also holds a doctorate in witchcraft folklore), but he sings with supreme authority and vocal tenderness. Russian soprano Elena Prokina, who stands near the chorus for her solos, isn't in great voice this week, but she too is bewitching on Friday. Runnicles makes everything click.

Saturday, Dec. 13

Last performance is tonight. Choristers awake to read great notices from the local papers. The Berliner Tagesspiegel's review begins: "The world is a bit topsy-turvy when our fabulous Berliner Philharmoniker turns around from their orchestral seats to applaud an American amateur chorus." Buoyed, some choristers plan a shopping day at KaDeWe, a deluxe department store that, during the Cold War, was a symbol of the West's prosperity. Baritone Trey Clegg, who's building credentials as a virtuoso pipe organist, has already performed two solo recitals in Berlin churches in recent days. This morning he hops a train to Wittenberg, about 50 miles away, to perform in Martin Luther's home church, the Schlosskirche. Several dozen ASO choristers tag along in support. On Clegg's program is Bach, Liszt and Atlanta composer Sharon Willis' "We Shall Overcome" --- linking one Martin Luther to another.

The Saturday-night concert scores another massive success with the audience --- seven curtain calls and nearly 20 minutes of hearty applause.

After the show, the U.S. ambassador to Germany, Dan Coates, hosts a reception for musicians and guests in the Philharmonie lobby. Foot in mouth, Coates praises his hometown Chicago Symphony. Runnicles, Mackenzie and ASO President Allison Vulgamore all speak in thanks to the Berliners and praise for their own troops. As baritone Clegg later recalled, "It was so moving when [Vulgamore] said, 'We have Robert Shaw to thank for this' and 'We can feel his presence in the room tonight.'" Then comes the giddiest news: A philharmonic director announces that the orchestra has invited the ASO Chorus back for more performances.

Sunday, Dec. 14

Travel day back to Atlanta. As with most busman's holidays, there are mixed feelings: a wish to prolong the glories of Berlin vs. a longing for home. Debriefing and concert postmortems are all that's left to do. Hansen, the bass who's sung with the chorus for almost two decades, calls these Berlin concerts "our first adult step." The trip "was about validation," he adds. "For us to make an appearance, and do so well without the protection of our orchestra, on a world stage --- it was a coming-of-age experience."