

Saluting Robert Shaw, a Conductor of Humanist Spirituality

By JAMES R. OESTREICH (NY TIMES) - APRIL 27, 2016

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Robert Shaw, who died in 1999, conducting the Orchestra of St. Luke's at Carnegie Hall in 1996.

“I am not sure I ever have ‘heard’ Brahms’s ‘Requiem’ — strictly as a member of an audience,” the incomparable California-born choral conductor Robert Shaw wrote in 1997. “At this moment I can recall only performances in which I was a participant — the first, of course, as a singer.” For his many good efforts, Brahmsian and otherwise, Shaw, who died two years later, presumably now occupies some lofty angelic perch, where he can simply sit back and take in the performance of “A German Requiem” that Robert Spano will conduct with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus at Carnegie Hall on Saturday, Shaw’s 100th birthday.

Shaw, who was working on an English translation of the “German Requiem” at his death, loved the work. Brahms, writing after the deaths of his mother and his surrogate father, Robert Schumann, bypassed the standard liturgical meditations on death and judgment — no Dies Irae to scare the bejesus out of listeners — and set biblical texts of his own choosing, intended to console those left behind.

Like Brahms, Shaw founded an intense spirituality on humanism rather than religiosity. Stemming from a line of evangelical ministers and seemingly destined to become one himself, he evolved instead into a fervent secular moralist, deeply flawed in personal character but immensely charismatic and inspiring in his musical evangelism.

Shaw conducted the “German Requiem” perhaps as many as 90 times, if Keith C. Burris’s “Deep River: The Life and Music of Robert Shaw” (GIA Publications, 2013), is to be believed. (But a caveat: This sprawling, numbingly repetitive book is not to be trusted on any number of other counts.)

One of Shaw's most memorable outings with the "German Requiem" was by all accounts the 1990 performance at Carnegie Hall with the Orchestra of St. Luke's, capping a weeklong workshop for choral professionals. I could not attend that concert, but I heard Shaw lead a stunning performance of the work with the same orchestra and the Atlanta Symphony Chorus at Carnegie in 1997, on the 100th anniversary of Brahms's death.

The 1990 choral workshop was the first of eight such events directed by Shaw at Carnegie. They ran annually from 1992 to 1998, allowing Shaw to propagate widely the innovative rehearsal techniques that he had developed and that are still in use by his many acolytes.



Shaw conducting "A German Requiem" in 1997 with the Atlanta Symphony Chorus and the Orchestra of St. Luke's.

Essentially self-taught, Shaw devised methods to drill the various aspects of a choral performance — rhythm, melody, enunciation — in partial isolation. You might find it mechanistic hearing a Shaw chorus count-singing a melody, replacing the text with a syllable on every beat ("one-and-two-and-tee-and-four-and," "tee" because the longer "three" would distort the regularity) to nail down the rhythm, but you could hardly gainsay the results.

Shaw was himself music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra from 1967 to 1988, an often stormy tenure given his persistent advocacy of new music and unusual repertory. In 1970 he founded the orchestra's chorus, which is still directed by Norman Mackenzie, his onetime assistant, and remains perhaps the finest large amateur chorus in the country.

The concert on Saturday will include a work jointly commissioned by the Atlanta Symphony and Carnegie Hall for the Shaw centenary: "Zohar," an oratorio by Jonathan Leshnoff, a composer increasingly familiar to Atlantans. Mr. Leshnoff, knowing that his work would be paired with the

Brahms at its premiere, used the same forces: chorus, orchestra, and soprano and baritone soloists (here, Jessica Rivera and Nmon Ford).

But rather than focusing on death, Mr. Leshnoff conceived “an ecstatic embrace of life,” he said recently. His musical style, too, departs radically from Brahms’s, right down to some Bernsteinian touches of jazz. So the two works together pose a stiff challenge to the flexibility of even the finest chorus, and to its stamina.

“I don’t think Shaw ever put a work in front of the ‘German Requiem,’” Mr. Mackenzie said last week. “It is 70 minutes of brutal, nonstop singing, and now here is another 25-minute piece, 90 percent sung by the chorus.”

The Shaw centenary is also being commemorated by a documentary film, “Robert Shaw: Man of Many Voices,” produced by Kiki Wilson, a longtime member of the Atlanta Symphony Chorus. Though an obvious labor of love, it remains admirably clear-eyed in its warts-and-all perspective.

And warts there were. Only gradually and with difficulty did Shaw tame his demons. As a young man, his drinking and womanizing were renowned; he often seemed to find a greater sense of family with the singers in his various choruses than with at least his first wife, of 34 years, and their children.

But Shaw, the film recalls, could also be a tremendous force for good, and not only in music. He achieved diplomatic coups abroad during the Soviet era and successfully urged — sometimes forced — the integration of musical institutions and public spaces in the South. The documentary, which is to be screened on Thursday at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, is poignant and compelling, and sure to be more so in the wake of Saturday’s concert.

The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra performs Saturday night [April 30, 2016] at Carnegie Hall.