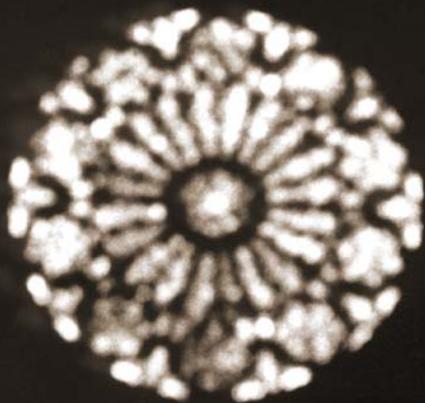


ESSENTIAL BUILDING BLOCKS

*The Rehearsal
Techniques of
Robert Shaw*



BY PAMELA ELROD HUFFMAN

I am frightened to death not only by concerts—but by rehearsals—the fear that I will not find the answers to what score study, my ears, and my heart tell me should happen.

(San Diego Choral Art Workshop, San Diego State College, 1953)

The above statement was written during a series of workshops conducted by Robert Shaw, who was, at the time, only 37 years old. The insecurity evident in his words—insecurity certainly shared by many of us—is surprising when one considers the towering musical figure who wrote it. Thankfully, however, the same mind that produced those words also very consciously and deliberately developed techniques to overcome that insecurity.

Throughout his career, Robert Shaw believed that choral ensembles should exist on the same level of artistic competence as professional orchestras. This belief was manifested through his rehearsal techniques—preparation of a work was a process of gradual transference of accountability from the podium to the singers. Skills were layered one element at a time. He believed that attempting to teach everything at once would only lead to a confused and imprecise product where the music could not be revealed in a truly honest fashion. The following describes the process Shaw developed and believed in—a process to which he unfailingly adhered, regardless of the repertoire.

What you know won't hurt you.
(San Diego Choral Art Workshop,
San Diego State College, 1955)

BEFORE REHEARSAL

To emulate Shaw's artistic approach, detailed preparation is clearly required:

- A. Thorough score study and analysis.** Edit the score with painstaking care. Make as many musical decisions as you can prior to the first rehearsal.
- B. Voice testing.** Listen to every singer. After hearing all the singers, Shaw ranked them from highest to lowest voice in each section and assigned each person a number that corresponded to their placement in that section (e.g., fifteen singers in the alto section would be A-1 through A-15).
- C. Create a seating arrangement.** For every rehearsal create a seating arrangement that is best suited to the singers in the group or the rehearsal plan for the day. Shaw employed the following seating arrangements:
 - Block sections: S1 S2 A1 A2 T1 T2 B1 B2.
 - Large circle: beginning with the highest soprano and seating singers from highest to lowest voice by section. Or create a double circle with singers still in descending order from highest to lowest; however, alternate them between inner circle and outer circle. Another variation is to place the tenors and basses in the outer circle and the sopranos and altos in the inner circle.
 - Sectional circles: Create a four-leaf clover shape with the conductor in the middle of the clover.
 - Mixed formation in SATB quartets.

Do you usually begin your rehearsals with a warmup?

Yes. I suppose like other people, I used to do “mee-ah, mee-ah...” and I found that this was not nearly as important as educating the mind to what a unison sounds like. (Q&A session, “Robert Shaw’s Discussion Hour,” date unknown)

THE WARMUP

Shaw spent about ten minutes of every rehearsal addressing tuning, ensemble blend, and development of the dynamic palette. Singers were expected to vocalize prior to rehearsal so that the warmup could be used to tune the ears and the minds. Establishing this warmup discipline was crucial to the ensemble's maturation into a truly expressive musical instrument.

Because this topic is too extensive for a comprehensive review here, go to www.singernetwork.org to find my article *Choral Warm-Ups of Robert Shaw* for notated warmups, aural clips of each warmup, and a detailed explanation of how and why each warmup is used.

Let the composer be the interpreter. Let him say what the music is about. We get clearer if we handle technical problems; the spirit flows . . . Build rehearsal so they make as few mistakes as possible. (Q&A session, “Conducting Seminar,” Cleveland, Ohio, November 3, 1958)

THE REHEARSAL PROCESS BEGINS: COUNT-SINGING

Count-singing is a procedure that teaches pitches and rhythms simultaneously and trains the singers to share a common pulse. The premise is that all beats and subdivisions are chanted on proper pitches, changing pitches as the rhythm dictates.

Numbers are used as follows, “one-and-two-and-tee-and-four-and,” substituting *tee* for three because the consonant group in the latter takes too long to articulate. The example below illustrates the notated music on the top staff and what is actually sung on the lower staff:

Ex. 1:

The example shows three staves of music. The top staff is the vocal line with lyrics: "What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul?". The middle staff shows the count-singing: "tee - & - 4 - & - 1 - & - 2 - & - tee - & - 4 - & - 1 - & - 2 - & - tee - & - 4 - & - 1 - & - 2 - & - tee - & - 4 - & -". The bottom staff shows the count-singing for the second phrase: "1 - & tee - & - 4 - & - 1 - & - 2 - & - tee - & - 4 - & - 1 - & tee - & - 4 - & - 1 - & - 2 - &".

Care should be taken to give each syllable equal emphasis and duration, avoiding the inherent strong/weak/strong/weak accents that naturally occur when singing subdivisions. A somewhat *poco staccato* articulation is used to keep the underlying pulse steady and rhythms clean. This holds true even for music that will eventually be *legato* (count-singing with *legato* articulation can produce too imprecise a result, impeding the goal of singers sharing a pulse, and it can inhibit forward motion and rhythmic accuracy). During the initial stages of learning, singers should never sing louder than *mezzo forte*—to do otherwise can tire voices and compromise rhythmic accuracy.

During count-singing, the following principles are also applied:

- Sixteenth notes are counted as “one-ee-an-duh, two-ee-an-duh,” etc. A dotted-eighth note followed by a sixteenth note should initially be counted as “one-ee-an-duh” (applying a slight *marcato* accent to the final sixteenth-note pulse so that the singers agree on its precise location). Then have singers count it as “one...an-duh,” (absorbing the second sixteenth-note pulse) and then finally “one...duh” (absorbing the

second and third sixteenth-note pulses).

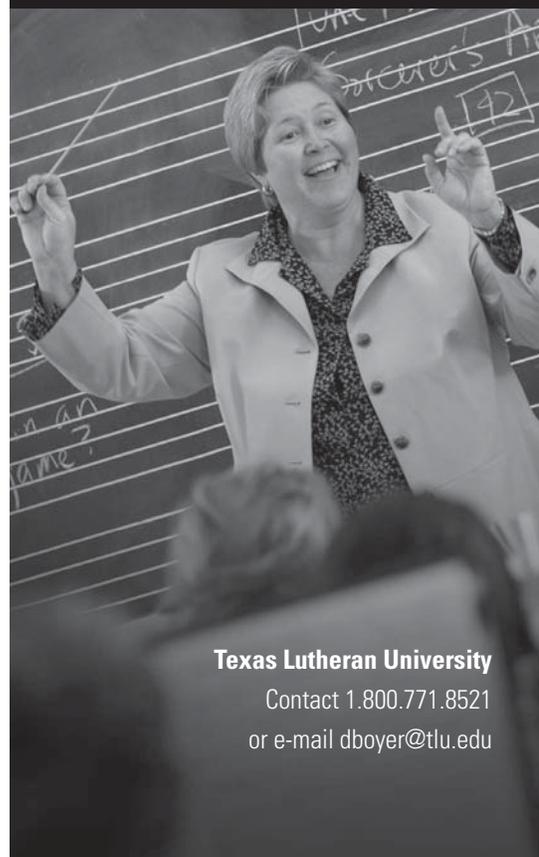
- Adjustments should be made to keep the counting as simple as possible. For instance, a passage in 4/4 that contains complex sixteenth-note patterns might be learned more quickly if the singers are instructed to count to 4 twice (i.e., the eighth notes assume the beat and sixteenth notes assume the half-beat [see ex. 2]). Also, compound meters may be counted as a series of 3s.

Ex. 2:



- For musical passages containing longer note values (half and whole notes), there is a common misconception that singers should sing the main beats without any subdivision. Doing this for an extended period of time, however, can negatively affect vocal stamina. Maintaining the subdivision not only keeps the voices active and supported, it also helps ensure the consistent tempo and intonation.

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- If a voice part moves above the staff for any length of time, sing down an octave to save voice (sopranos especially).
- In dotted rhythms, dots are dropped or at least decayed; a rest is inserted in place of the dot or the dynamic should diminish somewhat through the dot, so that the shorter note following the dot can be accented (the rationale is that the shorter, final note value in a dotted rhythm is often lost in the overall texture).
- When a note functions as an anacrusis (i.e., a pickup), it should be accented slightly.
- If there is a rest, observe that rest just as you would when singing the printed notation. Then resume chanting beats or subdivisions with the next notated pitch (see ex. 1).
- Cut-time may be counted as 4/4 at first (depending upon the ability of the singers).
- When possible, put final consonants in the proper place. This saves valuable rehearsal time when the words are added to the texture.
- Once pitches and rhythms are in place, begin to add dynamics, avoiding *forte* levels (dynamic extremes can be established in later rehearsals, once singers have moved on to either text or neutral syllables).
- To alleviate boredom, have half of the choir count-sing while the other half sings an appropriate nonsense syllable, and switch periodically.

While these methods were certainly part of Shaw's successful process, it is important to understand that he often stated that this technique was not appropriate for *all* types of music and in some instances could even be counterproductive. For instance, music that is highly complex rhythmically or set in rapidly changing or asymmetrical meters might just as effectively be taught on nonsense syllables. The important thing is to establish accurate pitches and rhythms, so take the simplest and easiest route to that goal.

DYNAMICS

Dynamic shading can and should be added during the count-singing phase. As stated above, however, extremely loud dynamic levels should be avoided; rather, the singers should apply a *suggestion* of the dynamic shading in *forte* passages.

Once pitches and rhythms are in place, the choir can move from count-singing to nonsense syllables and begin to add more true dynamics. The rhythmic "pacing" of dynamic shading has already been established somewhat—now the full range of dynamic shading can be built into the voices.

TEXT

Just as the chorus has agreed on the production of the other elements in a piece of music, so must it agree on matters regarding

The theory of successful choral enunciation is that each of the multitude of vocal sounds which in proper sequence combines with others to make up the human language (however unconscious, unnecessary, or undisciplined it may become in everyday speech) in the formal fabric of music, is to be clearly identified, positioned precisely as to time and pitch, and uttered with distinction, enjoyment, and ardor. (Handout "Drills for Choral Musicians, Enunciation #1," date unknown)

the production of text. Shaw emphasized the following axioms:

- Every syllable in every language has a beginning, middle, and end. Each of these must be pronounced clearly and correctly.
- Text is joined with rhythm before it is joined with proper pitches.
- Initiating vowels must occur on their respective beats or sub-beats. Consonants that precede these vowels must occur *in advance*.
- For additional clarity of consonants, add a neutral syllable (the "schwa"), and assign it a rhythmic value, much like one would do in expressive solo singing.

Text can be added to the texture of the music in several ways, *none of which include speaking*, and all of which require that singers maintain accurate tuning as they progress through the series of vowels and consonants. Shaw's methods included:

- **Homophonic texture:** text is sung with proper rhythms on a unison pitch. If possible, a keyboard accompaniment of shifting chordal harmonies (that employ the selected unison pitch) should be included to support the voices.
- **Contrapuntal texture:** text is sung with proper rhythms using the whole-tone cluster of D, E, F#, and G#. This somewhat dissonant combination of pitches permits the conductor and

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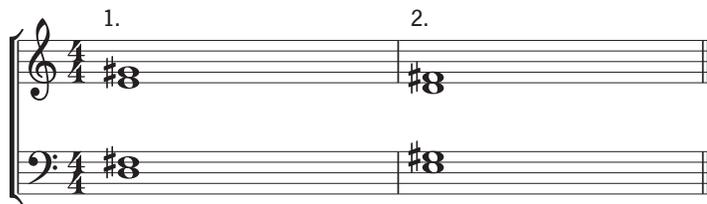
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the singers to clearly hear the structure of the counterpoint. Using a more consonant combination of pitches (e.g., a major triad) or a unison pitch obscures that potential clarity. Shaw used the pitches in two ways (SATB divisi and from highest to lowest pitch):

Ex. 3:



Again, keyboard support at this stage is helpful. The accompanist should play the assigned pitches according to the rhythms of the voice parts rather than simply repeating all of the pitches on a continuous basis.

Note: To keep things interesting, Shaw would sometimes begin a series of modulations every few measures, ascending by a semitone each time in all voice parts.

- If the singers are not unified in their pronunciation of a text, assign one beat to each syllable and chant on a unison pitch or a whole-tone cluster. This will enable you (and the singers) to hear more clearly where the inconsistencies are occurring.
- Ask half the choir to sing text with proper pitches and half to count-sing (counters should be the predominating texture),

and switch periodically.

- A variation of the above is to have half the choir sing on a nonsense syllable and half sing text.

Perfect music without inspiration is soulless. Truly inspired performances cannot happen without adequate preparation. Robert Shaw realized the necessity of a strong partnership between the practical and the emotional when it came to great choral artistry, so he would lay the groundwork for the music in the same way that the composer did. Then, once the choir became fully accountable for the structure of the piece, the true magic of emotion and interpretation could emerge.

And magical it was . . .

RESOURCES

The quotes included in this article came from documents housed in the Robert Shaw Papers at Yale University, New Haven, Conn. (this collection is open to the public by appointment). Many documents are handwritten or typed notes loosely compiled in folders, so specifics of dates and places are not always available. An additional resource for learning about Shaw's techniques is the series of DVDs entitled *Robert Shaw—Preparing a Masterpiece*, available for purchase from www.carnegiehall.org. Finally, the author acknowledges the assistance of W. John Proft in creating the musical examples included in the article. ❏

Pamela Elrod Huffman is Director of Choral Activities at SMU Meadows School of the Arts. Images of Robert Shaw are by Charles M. Rafsoon. Images provided courtesy of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Archives.



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