

MENTORS & MEMORIES
A CHORAL STORY
OYER, SHAW, HILLIS, PAGE, HERFORD, WERNER-MÜLLER
BY VANCE GEORGE 2007

1930s - THE BEGINNINGS

A choral renaissance began to unfold quietly in 1938 when Fred Waring invited twenty-two year old Robert Shaw to New York City to work with The Pennsylvanians on his radio show, *Pleasure Time*. The fifteen minute show aired live five nights a week, performed once for the East coast and an hour later for the West Coast. *Pleasure Time* aired for the next five years, its music arranged, rehearsed, and performed without aid of recordings, reels, tapes, cassettes, photocopiers, faxes, computers, ipods, or cell phones. Choral music prepared by Robert Shaw and performed live, coast to coast. Amazing!

Robert Shaw said, “We could never have toured Bach's *Mass in B Minor* had it not been for Waring’s radio shows which made choral music a household word”. Waring used his clout to advertise Broadway musicals. He even said one of his greatest musical experiences was a rehearsal with no costumes and only a pit piano for accompaniment. The singers? Mary Martin and Ezio Pinza. The show? *South Pacific*! You might also recognize Waring’s name because during intermissions, on tour with The Pennsylvanians, Waring the inventor and nutritionist sold his Waring Blenders in the lobby. And, they may still be found in the finest stores today.

1940s - THE FIRST PROFESSIONAL CHOIR IN THE LAND

In 1941 Robert Shaw was invited to guest conduct the Collegiate Chorale at Norman Vincent Peale's Marble Collegiate Church. This experience gripped Shaw with an almost evangelistic fervor. And, it was with these singers that he began to forge his famed choral techniques. An original Collegiate Chorale member recounts the passionate and emotional Robert Shaw. He might storm out of a rehearsal, leaving the singers to believe he was angry at them; but I think his frustration early on was because he had not yet discovered a way to get what he wanted vocally and musically. Granted, later on, he could also show a petulant side; on the Russian tour of Bach’s *B Minor* the union representative asked him not to swear in rehearsal. His response was to conduct the next performance, head lowered, ignoring the singers.

In 1944 Robert Shaw spent a year on a Guggenheim fellowship studying with

musicologist, Julius Herford. Neither teacher nor pupil ever recovered from the experience. In 1946 William Schuman appointed Shaw to be the Director of Choral Music at Juilliard. In the same year, conductor Margaret Hillis (1921-1998) and renowned arranger, composer, conductor Alice Parker (1925 -), both arrived at Juilliard to study conducting. Alice recalls: "I had just graduated from Smith. Margaret seemed so mature and self assured, so organized and self-directed in everything she did." During World War II Hillis suspended her music studies at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana, to train pilots as a flight instructor. Margaret, Alice, Robert Shaw, and Julius Herford formed a tight circle and it was difficult to tell teacher from pupil. Alice recalls "Anyone caught up in Shaw's world had no time for anything but what he was doing." He required everyone to commit themselves to music as a way of life. That passion and genius would eventually touch each of us as we see in the burgeoning choral movement today.

Toscanini praised Robert's preparation of the *Beethoven 9* saying it was the chorus he had always dreamt of. Shaw was now conducting and recording an amazing list of works including the Hindemith *Chansons* (1945), the Christmas albums (1946 and 1952) and the Bach *Mass in B Minor* (1947). As a freshman at Goshen College I'm sure I wore out his recording of the Hindemith *Chansons*. I avidly collected Shaw recordings but gave them to my favorite high school students in Mendon, Ohio, when I left for three years in India. I have none of those original recordings. However, Mark Stenroos, a former Kent State student and a Shaw fan, reissued the Christmas recordings along with other works in 1994. As head of BMG Mark interviewed Shaw giving us a unique glimpse of the difficulties of recording in the early days. *Christmas with the Robert Shaw Chorale* may be found today (Musical Heritage Society No. 524314Y, (732)531-7000. Review: <http://classicstoday.com/review.asp?ReviewNum=3894>. To paraphrase Shaw, "There were three carols in each band and we had to record them in a row without any pitch or text errors or elevator noise. If that happened we had to stop, shave the head and start all over."

THE 1950S - ROBERT SHAW CHORALE TOURS AND THE FIRST SYMPHONY CHORUSES IN CLEVELAND AND CHICAGO

The Robert Shaw Chorale was the first professional choir in the country. I heard them at my alma mater, Goshen College, when I was eighteen. Shaw strode on stage, a commanding presence, to conduct a spellbinding performance of Schubert's *Mass in G Major* with Lois Marshall, soprano, Tommy Pyle, bass and Clayton Krehbiel, tenor. Florence Kopleff, an Armenian-American contralto, sang folksongs with a depth of spirit and vocal color that is still unequalled and may be heard on

the MHS recordings mentioned above. She could crescendo color without increasing the dynamic level. The Chorale was our favorite in our College Lecture Music Series which also included the Trapp Family Singers, the Cleveland Orchestra, Marian Anderson and Rudolph Serkin.

In 1951 I entered Goshen College, a Mennonite college in northern Indiana, and I graduated in 1955 with a double major in voice and piano, having given recitals in both. I liked to pretend I was a student of Rosina Lhévinne because I studied piano with Francis Clark and Ruth Robbins who were Lhévinne disciples. James Levine and Van Cliburn were Lhévinne's most famous students. Both she and her husband Josef were concert pianists who also taught at Juilliard.

I'm told that, as a child, I draped clothes over chairs and got up on another chair and conducted them. Julia, my big sister, accompanied me as a toddler as did my Mother as a boy soprano. I remember singing in three parts for the first time in Junior Choir, arranging tunes in high school for our barber shop quartet under our wonderful choir teacher, Dorothy Zimmerman, and being the student band director for Mr. Habegger. In college, after seeing Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors* on TV, Christmas 1951, I rented the music from G. Schirmer for our sorority and fraternity performance, designed the set, borrowed costumes from a local mason, cast, staged and conducted the first opera ever presented at my alma mater. Mary Oyer, faculty mentor, attended a rehearsal and, amused, she said, "I can't see a beat pattern but it's very musical".

The name of the chorale conducted by Shaw varied depending upon the recording company who hired it: the RCA Victor Chorale, the CBS Chorale or the ABC Chorale. In 1948 Shaw used his own name for the first time when they replaced an ailing Edgar Bergen, ventriloquist. Thus the Robert Shaw Chorale was born. Thirty singers; eight sopranos, seven altos, seven tenors, and eight basses comprised the tour group. Their first concert of the season was often at Goshen College because the Mennonites so loved choral music and Shaw respected their singing tradition. In the middle of the Indiana cornfields, fifteen miles from our farm, this little Mennonite College annually engaged the Robert Shaw Chorale. The Chorale's sonority and unique color moved me deeply. That quality, that vocal color is still in my ear. They sang with a vitality, commitment, and soul which were utterly riveting. Their intonation was excellent and, dear reader, they sang with vibrato and a richness of vocal expression that I miss with groups who use only one tone color, or who sing with a straight tone. Should a phrase not bloom with color, crescendo, roundness, and the warmth of vibrato? Today American choirs sing with straight tone to create an "early music style" which, to me, sounds more like an affect. It is

an influence from European and English choirs and recordings. When is straight tone appropriate and in which style period? We choral folk have more stylistic concerns than any other group of musicians. Shaping and coloring a phrase is what interests me. Curiously often only the women sing with straight tone while the men sing with vibrato.

The Chorale's stage demeanor was elegant, the soloists bowing to Shaw and he to them, and their appearance very classy. In those days choirs wore choir robes but the Robert Shaw Chorale women wore evening gowns designed just for that tour. We waited breathlessly each year for the new "look". The men of course wore tails. Concerts were held in our gym which had excellent acoustics, attested to by pianist Rudolph Serkin. Today the College boasts a new concert hall, Sauder Concert Hall, with acoustics as fine as you will find anywhere in the world including Frank Gehry's in L.A. or the stunning halls in Japan. And, the Mennonites are still singing and aiding in disaster relief all over the world.

While Shaw was on tour, Margaret Hillis took his New York rehearsals. So, while I was listening to the Shaw Chorale in Goshen, Indiana, MH was rehearsing the Collegiate Chorale in New York. In 1950 Margaret founded The New York Concert Choir. She also conducted the City Opera, the American Opera Society, and taught at Juilliard and Union Theological Seminary. Robert Page, a young tenor, was her protégé at Union and an original member of her Concert Choir. He was a part of the new choral scene and would become an important person in Margaret's life and an unbelievable force in my life. Bob recounts Margaret's rehearsal of Schoenberg's *Friede auf Erden* held in a loft around 39th street. It was not going well. Out of patience, Margaret announced in her deep bass voice "Some of you seem to have vocal problems. I would advise that you solve them by tomorrow's rehearsal," i.e., go learn the notes!

In 1956 George Szell invited Robert Shaw to found the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus and two years later Fritz Reiner persuaded Margaret Hillis to come to Chicago to found the Chicago Symphony Chorus. Robert Page recalls, "Margaret took 80 of us from her American Concert Choir to Chicago to sing Mozart's *Grand Mass in C* and the Bruckner *Te Deum*. In the Midwest, the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus with Robert Shaw, and the Chicago Symphony Chorus with Margaret Hillis, and on the west coast Roger Wagner's Masterworks Chorale in Los Angeles. All happening in the USA – serendipitous simultaneity!

Shaw quickly established the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus, employing the techniques he had used with the Collegiate and Shaw Chorales. Following each

rehearsal he would send love notes to the chorus. In 1983, when I left the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus to go to San Francisco, I was given copies of these letters as a farewell gift. They are witty, full of Shavian quotes and ideas about Bach articulations. In rehearsal Shaw's brain raced as he searched and stammered to express himself. It was as if there was a storm brewing inside, one which would then erupt into words which were outrageous or downright risqué; but they made you think and laugh.

Shaw spoke regularly at Unitarian gatherings in Cleveland and hated any air of pretension in anyone. For a public lecture in Northwestern University's Milar Chapel he began, "How nice to be back among the sherry sipping, mink-coated ladies of Chicago's North Shore Center of Condensing Affluence." Yes, he really said that! Szell brought him to Cleveland to train him as a conductor and in that venue Shaw conducted all choral works plus subscription, holiday, and kiddy concerts. But the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus and the Robert Shaw Chorale were his first loves. Robert was a human dynamo that championed new music to the end.

THE 60S AND TRANSITIONS

In 1961 I began graduate studies at Indiana University. That very year Choral Conducting, a brand new degree, was offered for the first time anywhere in the world. I signed up for it and took every music history course offered, along with ballet and organ. What fun! I sang in Chamber Singers, the Early Music Group and of course in the opera chorus. In fact it was in Wagner's *Meistersinger, Act III* quintet, with Rachael Day Kessler singing Eva and Paul Matthen's Hans Sachs, that I realized opera could be deeply moving music. I wept. During long breaks, against all rules, we'd sneak out in costume and makeup to the local bar for beer and boiled eggs. I had gone to become a Junior High specialist but completed course work for the Master's and Doctor's degrees in Choral Conducting. Life has a way of teaching or offering forks in the road, choices.

About that time Julius Herford arrived from New York to teach analysis of Haydn masses and the large Bach works. My colleagues Peter Bagley, Don Moses, Robert DeMaree, Fred Renz, and I were aware that Wilfred Bain, Dean of the School of Music, along with Indiana University's administrative leadership, had done something great for us: we were able to study with the man who, twenty years earlier, had taught the same Haydn and Bach repertoire to Robert Shaw.

To earn a few dollars while at I.U, I announced the classical radio show and conducted the Hillel Choir at the Jewish student organization. Our Rabbi wanted to present something special to the campus so I suggested an all Schoenberg Concert

which I organized with members of our Schoenberg class taught by Professor John Reeves White. Schoenberg stopped composing and painted from 1910 to 1911, exhibiting with The Blaue Reiter group which included Kandinsky, Braque, Picasso and Matisse. So I called Mrs. Schoenberg in Los Angeles and asked her if there were any of her husband's graphic works she might be willing to loan us. Since the entire collection had just returned from the *Maggio Musicale* Festival in Florence and was still in crates, all the Rabbi had to do was pay the freight. Thus the Lily Library became a gallery exhibiting the complete graphic works of Arnold Schoenberg for two weeks. And, we gave a smashing concert. I'm very grateful to our Rabbi and to the Schoenbergs. I was becoming an entrepreneur.

Within a decade, following Shaw's lead, Margaret Hillis, had established the Chicago Symphony Chorus as one of the finest in the country. She received Grammy awards for nine recordings, all of which she had prepared for Solti. In 1977 she made her famous appearance conducting Mahler's *Symphony VIII* in Carnegie Hall, as a last-minute substitute for an ailing Solti. With this concert she became an icon. As a fellow Hoosier I felt great pride; Margaret Hillis mounted the podium of a male dominated world and, even more, a "European" male dominated world of conductors! Only in the latter half of the 20th century were American orchestral conductors finally appointed; Loren Maazel in Cleveland, Leonard Slatkin in Washington and Michael Tilson Thomas in San Francisco, a huge step forward for American musicians. And, dear reader the importance of choral music, choirs, and choral conductors grew very, very rapidly in the latter half of the century.

Miss Hillis was quite reserved, even infamous for strictness in rehearsal. The requirements for auditions were specific. One day an unusually bouncy auditionee was ushered in to present her talents to the great lady. After speaking to the accompanist she turned to Margaret as strains of *There's No Business Like Show Business* began to fill the audition space. MH looked up startled. The singer, undaunted, broke into a tap dance and, in mid-turn, shouted over her shoulder "How'm I doin' Miz Hillis?" Miss Hillis would tell the story and conductor Margaret Hawkins and I would laugh 'til we cried.

When I joined the University of Wisconsin-Madison faculty in 1963, Rudolph Kolish, Schoenberg's brother in law, was on faculty. For his retirement I planned a year's festival of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern, bringing in Rene Leibowitz from Paris, a Schoenberg specialist, and Stefan Auber, from New York, the cellist from the Kolisch quartet. Rudi had premiered many contemporary works and played the violin concertos of Schoenberg and Berg. So I programmed both for the University

Orchestra. We were bringing 12 tone music to a whole new generation and we did zany programming like performing *Pierrot Lunaire* twice, once in German and again after intermission in English. Schoenberg and Stravinsky were so cutting edge in 1963 and now after forty-four years history is telling another story.

UW-Madison hired me at the last minute because the former conductor was taken ill. I was hungry, brazen and didn't care if the job was one year or five years. They wanted someone famous. I was not. After they received refusals from Shaw and Hillis, Don Neuen came in for a few years. But, my contracts just kept rolling over until after seven years they engaged Robert Fountain. In the meantime I was having a great time; musicologists, Eva Badura-Skoda, and Solange Corbin, introduced me to a medieval drama, *The Play of the Three Maries*. The New York Pro Musica had recorded and toured *The Play of Daniel* and, having sung it at Indiana University, I knew audiences were ready for more. I staged, costumed and took our *Play of the Three Maries* to New York where Richard Westenberg hosted us at his Central Presbyterian Church. The play, originally sung in Latin and old French, was sung at Easter Matins. It tells the story of the Maries going to the tomb and finding it empty on Easter morning.

Margaret Hawkins (1937-1993), classmate and good friend at Indiana University, had studied with both Hillis and Shaw. Hawkins suggested I should meet Miss Hillis so I attended a rehearsal of Stravinsky's *The Wedding, Svadebka*, in the bowels of New York's Avery Fischer Hall. The rehearsal was already in progress when I arrived. I sneaked in, sat on the floor behind the chorus and peeked between the singers to observe the conductor, Thomas Schippers, who was giving instructions and conducting, or so I thought. Following the rehearsal Tommy Pyle, Alice Parker's husband, introduced me. But, when Margaret spoke it was the bass voice I had thought was Schippers. It was Margaret's voice and it was she who had run the rehearsal while Schippers conducted. My jaw dropped as I stammered, "I, I thought you were...!" She laughed heartily, relishing every moment of my embarrassment over the mistaken conductor identity. "Never sing louder than beautiful," was her motto in that rehearsal and many others.

That weekend I also heard my first live *St. Matthew Passion* conducted by Tommy Dunn with Albert Fuller, harpsichordist. Tommy Dunn was on the cutting edge in the mid 60s when performance practice was in its infancy. I had proudly purchased a harpsichord in Germany on my return from India which I later sold to pay the rent. Dunn then moved to Boston to head the Handel-Haydn Society. In 1983 I engaged him for the Blossom Festival and later he went to Indiana University where Jan Harrington headed the Choral Department.

After the New York introduction to Margaret Hillis in 1965, I began to study with her in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, where she conducted the Oshkosh Symphony. Yep, overalls from Oshkosh B'gosh! I drove two hours from Madison and she from Chicago where, over a dinner of duck à l'orange, we would study scores: my treat and her only compensation. Margaret was very generous to many young conductors and would even sneak us into closed Chicago Symphony Orchestra rehearsals. I now enjoy extending those same privileges to young conductors.

In 1967 Hillis held her first Choral Institute for singers and conductors which I hosted in Madison, Wisconsin. I introduced her to my new conducting teacher, Otto Werner-Mueller, who had just arrived from Germany via Canada. Margaret was taken with Otto's teaching and from then on we were a teaching team. She called me her ballet master because I taught the baton basics which I had learned from Otto; a technique which was a synthesis of ideas and influences from Toscanini and his teacher Igor Markevich. Otto toured with Markevich as his assistant and conducted most of the concerts when Markevich was taken ill. This was long before Otto became the famous teacher of many of today's young orchestral maestros.

Otto Werner-Mueller and I spent many, many hours together marking his orchestral parts, drinking too much scotch, and smoking too many cigarettes. His technique is easy; he defined large-small ball and sockets (shoulder, wrist) with large-small hinges (elbows, fingers). Conducting in a figure eight beginning with the shoulder then going to the elbow followed by the wrist and finally to the fingers, this simple exercise quickly separates the parts of the arm for conducting clarity. Otto's motto was, "Never use more energy than necessary for the desired result," that is, use the smallest gesture possible. Conducting with a baton was expected.. It is curious that today some orchestral conductors put their baton down when conducting a choir; this enlarges their gestures which makes them less clear. Several orchestral conductors have put down their batons, including Kurt Masur, but he uses his forefinger as a baton. The baton keeps me honest. Orchestras stop watching if your gestures have too many points of reference. Clarity comes from the tip of the baton not from elbows, knees, hips and feet. Remember, "Never more energy than for the desired result".

"Always use your own set of marked parts," Otto warned, and I find this is especially important for us choral conductors who are not string players. He would say, "Hire the best violinist you can find and mark your own parts, meet with the concert master before the first rehearsal to discuss bowings, don't talk in rehearsal, be prepared, and enjoy making music". Margaret Hillis was taken with Otto's

genius and she remained a disciple to the end. In 2006 I had the pleasure to teach with him, again in a Chorus America Conductor's Workshop in Philadelphia. He continues teaching at Curtis, the master teacher of so many conductors in the U.S. When we met in 1967 he guided me through Haydn's *Creation* and my swan song at the UW-Madison, Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. I consider myself so fortunate to have worked with Otto. He really took this choral conductor under his wing. Thank you Otto. I think it is important to thank the people who were influential in your life. Contact them and let them know, now!

Robert Shaw titled Margaret Hawkins the 'nice' Margaret because he and Margaret Hillis were always at odds grappling for Grammys. At Indiana Hawkins called herself summer trash because she only attended summer sessions. But, she also studied with Hillis privately and traveled to Michigan to study with Shaw at the Meadowbrook Festival, where he divulged his secrets to aspiring conductors: singing nonsense syllables on pitch or counting "One ee and uh two ee and uh tee ee and uh four ee and uh." He seemed happiest establishing a uniformity of rhythm, pitch and listening skills. But, that was half a century ago and choirs and conductors are much better trained and more sophisticated today. We are in his debt; but I could never buy into those long hours of count singing before the singers were allowed to sing text. I'm a singer, I speak other languages, I am interested in textual expression. I want to know what the text is about and I want it in the choir's mouths, minds, and hearts early on not two rehearsals before the performance.

Rhonda Cundy, teaching with me at UW-Madison, said, "You should meet Robert." She had sung in the Chorale and Shaw had taken a shine to her voice and mind. Rhonda and I had first met at Indiana in 1961, then we taught together in Madison where she sang the arias in the *St. Matthew Passion* and, later at Kent State University, where she sang the arias in the *St John Passion*. To return to Robert Shaw, I had just conducted and recorded Bruckner's *Mass in E Minor* which I hoped to play for the man. So, before heading to Meadowbrook for our meeting, I persuaded Rhonda to call Robert to make sure he had a reel to reel player. Rhonda recalls, "When we arrived at Robert's place near Meadowbrook, he sauntered over to my side of your little, white Triumph, greeted me, then peered in and said, 'You must be Vance George.' With stunning obsequiousness you said, 'Yes sir, I am, and what a great, great honor it is for me to meet you.' Shaw, sounding like a despondent Eeyore on the verge of losing all his sawdust stuffing said, 'My tape recorder is broken.' For a split second you were visibly crushed but quickly masqueraded your deep disappointment and said, 'Oh Mr. Shaw that doesn't make any difference, I'm just so very, very honored to meet you.' Shaw responded, 'Good, my tape recorder is not really broken!'" There's the playful, teasing Robert.

We went into the house, poured drinks and listened to the Bruckner. I could hardly believe I was playing my performance for the man whose work I had admired from age 18. I was coming to him like a child for approval. He was kind, made comments and poured another drink. The whole scene was too overwhelming and I burst into tears. He hugged me and said, "You've never had anyone love you musically." I had bared my vulnerable, musical soul. He poured more drinks and invited us to devour four inch thick T bone steaks, rare! Thanks Rhonda!

Rhonda has many Shaw stories and recounts *Messiah* and *Sing to the Lord* recording sessions during the summer of 1966 in Webster Hall, an old dance hall on 13th Street in New York City, following a *Messiah* tour of the south and Midwest – around thirty-eight performances in forty-two days. She notes, "We did eighteen takes of *His Yoke is Easy*. It was hellishly hot and no air conditioning because that noise was picked up by RCA's recording equipment. Huge galvanized tubs with blocks of ice were brought in for us to stand in to cool off between takes. The image of the Chorale, some in swim suits, was priceless. Robert sweat profusely and always had a stack of towels near his podium. By mid-afternoon he became a human waterfall."

Margaret Hawkins and I were interested in ACDA when it first split with MENC. In 1960 ACDA held its first national convention at the Ambassador Hotel in Atlantic City, New Jersey, with the support of MENC. For a more complete and historical account of ACDA see the article by Russel Matthis in *The Choral Journal*, 1999, *ACDA's Forty Year Journey*, 40 (4), 9-23. During the early years Roger Wagner, Robert Shaw, and Margaret Hillis lent support to ACDA as well as many other choral luminaries. Roger Wagner closed the 1962 convention in Chicago conducting Orff's *Catulli Carmina* and Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Mass in G Major*. In 1965 Margaret Hawkins and I hopped in my little VW and drove twelve hours to one of the first ACDA conventions where we heard Hillis speak, whom we knew well but with choral legends Charles Hirt and Howard Swan we were too timid to even introduce ourselves. We stayed only one night in a lurid, pink Flamingo Motel. It probably cost thirty-five dollars but it was all we could afford. After Saturday's sessions we drove another twelve hours home drinking coffee, telling family stories, and brushing our teeth and spitting out the window to stay awake.

In 1969 Margaret Hawkins left her beloved Pewaukee High School in the Milwaukee area to conduct the Chamber Singers and Conservatory Singers at the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music. In 1976 she formed the Milwaukee Symphony

Chorus which is now conducted by her protégé Lee Erickson. She conducted many concerts and worked closely with Lukas Foss and many other conductors until her death in 1993. Margaret was a brilliant and funny human being with a wit and tongue as wicked and sharp as Shaw's. She was a great friend and I miss her.

Shaw continued to tour, record, and guest conduct. He was now Mr. Chorus in the USA. However, in 1967, he decided to head his own orchestra, the Atlanta Symphony. His sidekick, Clayton Krehbiel, took his Cleveland Chorus for a year, followed by Margaret Hillis who took it for the next two years, 1969-1970, commuting weekly from Chicago. At her last Cleveland performance she announced to the chorus in her booming bass voice, "Ladies and gentlemen, the next director of the first symphony chorus in the land, Mr. Robert Page!" Shaw had created the chorus, Clayton and Margaret interim conductors, and Robert Page would continue the Cleveland tradition for almost 20 years. Little did I know that one day I work with that same Cleveland chorus.

THE 1970s

In 1971, after seven years at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I was attracted to the Blossom Festival of The Cleveland Orchestra and Kent State University where Shaw guest conducted the chamber choir for 2 weeks. As head of the vocal program of the Festival I engaged Mr. Shaw as well as his Cleveland Chorus successor, Robert Page. I had never met anyone like Bob Page – perhaps the most dynamic person, singer, genius voice teacher, super ears, coach, pianist, and conductor I have ever met. He used his own techniques to get the job done; he was engaging, aggressive, smart, a fine musician; and the Cleveland Chorus adored him. Bob Page – as outspoken a person as you could find – fearless, fun, without pretense, and down home Texas, pronounced Tex-ass. One day at lunch during the Blossom Festival Bob casually asked me if I'd like to assist him with the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus. Who? Me? He was a Taurus; I, like his wife and daughters was a Libran. Could we work together? I was so scared I almost said no!

For the next seven years I worked with Bob's famed Cleveland Chorus, both of us protégés of Margaret. What a small world! Page was kind, caring, helpful, and more supportive than anyone had ever been to me musically and personally. Here was an opportunity to learn the large masterworks which Margaret Hillis had taught Bob. So I can claim a lineage that springs from Shaw through Hillis and Page. That's how it's done folks. Bob would often cook a scrumptious dinner of pork chops or chicken or steaks before rehearsal. He is an excellent cook and we ate and drank well. Food and music go hand in hand. I learned so much in those seven years. Bob

was with Cleveland 1971-1989, while also conducting the Mendelssohn Choir in Pittsburg, 1979-2003, and the Robert Page singers in Cleveland. He continues to teach at Carnegie Mellon Institute in Pittsburg.

The summer festival of the Cleveland Orchestra included a six week festival for students featuring a chamber choir of 24, an orchestra and an opera program. I engaged Page, Shaw, Martin Katz, Margaret Hawkins, Dr. Alfred Mann, Julius Herford, and Tom Dunn, among others, to join us for Bach's *B Minor Mass* and *Magnificat*, Ravel's *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*, Hindemith, Debussy and Ravel *Chansons*, Brahms' *Nänie*, *Liebeslieder*, *Neue Liebeslieder* and *Quartette*, plus scores of madrigals, motets, all great vocal chamber ensemble repertoire.

In addition to the Blossom Festival at Kent State I directed the choirs and restaged the play of *The Three Maries* for the Spoleto Festival, Charleston, and even got to meet the composer of *Amahl*. Eddie Maeder built the costumes and my good friend Bill Bertolas was liturgical advisor. Rob, Pam and Patricia Dickson hosted us royally but it was hot, and steamy. To be authentic we wore actual wool vestments and medieval garb and performed every night for a week and recorded it for TV. Our huge galvanized tubs were filled with ice to cool gallons of Gatorade!

Dear reader, imagine a time when there were no cds, no ipods, no computers. Imagine a time when the only choral performances were Fred Waring's shows, touring college choirs, or high school and church choirs. Then came the Robert Shaw Chorale and his recordings and the Roger Wagner Chorale. Shaw's original Christmas recording was 'monoral' but when RCA rerecorded Volume I, Alice Parker arranged the carols and it was called 'stereophonic recording'. Shaw's only arrangement was *Sit Down Servant*. All the rest were collaborations or totally Alice's.

Early music groups began to be record and tour; The New York Pro Musica with Noah Greenberg and John Reeves White while in Europe Roger Norrington and his Schütz Choir, Munich's Carl Richter, in England Sir Charles Macerras and Neville Marriner began recording a vast range of music utilizing new approaches to performance practice and faster tempi. I'll never forget Neville Marriner's tempi in *Messiah*. No one had been so adventurous. The recording industry was creating an awareness of stylistic options and changing our lives as seen in the straight tone in American choirs today.

But, in 1971, Eric Erickson's *500 Years of Choral Music* shook the choral world like a big California quake, it literally shook the choral world from Robert Shaw to

yours truly; the repertoire was monumental and the performances exquisite. Erickson (1918) organized the works by country: Germany: Brahms, Reger, Schoenberg's *Friede auf Erden* and R. Strauss's *Deutsche Motette*; France: the *Chansons* of Debussy, Badings, and Ravel; England: Britten's *Hymn to St Cecilia*; Hungary: Bartok and Ligeti; and Italy: Monteverdi, Rossini and Petrassi. The seventeen women and sixteen men were each trained by Eric at the Conservatory. Eric had formed his group in 1945 a year before Shaw recorded his Christmas albums. However, it was not until Eric toured Europe with his choir in the early 70s that his star was revealed to the choral world. He released his second set *Virtuose Chormusik* including more Poulenc, Strauss, Monteverdi and the Frank Martin *Mass*. Eric came to the States several times, once to conduct *Messiah* with my choir in San Francisco. Many American conductors were influenced by and went to Sweden to study with Eric. The Dale Warland Singers grew out of Dale's experience with Eric. Richard Sparks, who more recently studied and conducted in Sweden, has written *The Swedish Choral Miracle* which features Swedish choral music since 1945 (Hal Leonard, publishers). Soon a host of conductors including Helmut Rilling, John Elliot Gardner, Ton Koopman and others began recording monumental collections of Bach, Monteverdi. And, the interest in repertoire continues to grow as musicology brings more to light and as composers of new music write.

At Kent my swan song was the *St. John Passion*. But there were many other creative projects I worked on while there; concerts of early music, Monteverdi, Menotti's *Unicorn, Gorgon and the Manticor*, and *Carmina burana* staged and danced by Marc Ozanich, Bob Page conducting. Ann Waters, one of my closest friends and a fine musician, understood and was most cognizant of the Brahms and Bach I was conducting. Herself a conductor, Ann gave me unbridled encouragement. It did not hurt that she was a great organizer of entertainments and superb cook with the energy of three people. She even arranged for me to return to conduct performances in Kent long after I had left Ohio. A thread running through these paragraphs is confidence, claiming who you are. Only you can do that. You never know when a word of encouragement will make a difference in another's life. And, a big thank you to Terry Kuhn, Kent faculty, who is responsible for my honorary doctorate.

The 80s and San Francisco

Margaret Hillis was invited to San Francisco in 1982 as interim conductor, and Bob Page suggested she take me along as her assistant. When she telephoned me to ask if I could go four months I quipped "my bags are packed". The next season, 1983, Edo de Waart appointed me chorus director in San Francisco. It is rare that anyone

steps from academia into the professional world. I will always be grateful to Edo for believing in me. For a few years I continued my summers with the Blossom Festival and the Cleveland Chorus.

In leading a chorus, singing, understanding vocal production and vocal-textual nuances are imperative! I really learned to sing with Bob Page and the Cleveland Chorus, and at Blossom with famed voice teachers Marlene Malas and Phyllis Curtin. I finally learned to breathe, sing, and develop my ideas about vocal colors, registration, and covering. I am also indebted to Ken Phillips, a vocal pedagogue par excellence and writer who came to Kent to study and teach. Today I use many of his ideas. Ken's *Teaching Kids To Sing* (Schirmer Books, 1992), and his other books on conducting and voice are worth considering if you are looking for easy to teach concepts. Margaret Hillis never joined us at Blossom Festival. Her summer schedule with Chicago's Ravinia Festival was so busy that I never invited her. In retrospect I wish I had given her the opportunity of refusal.

During my 23 years in San Francisco Robert Shaw conducted three times. The first, *Ein Deutsches Requiem*. was an absolutely terrifying. I had just arrived. It was 1983, my first full season. The chorus was new, a bit raw, certainly not ready for the great choral father to appear. At the end of the first hour he got off the podium dripping with sweat, both T shirt and the ubiquitous blue shirt soaked. Mopping his face and head he said, "Vance, this is a mighty fine choir and in five years it can be a great choir!" I almost collapsed and bolted to get him a glass of water. This was before the era of bottled water. He was right, it took five years to make the choir mine and our second Grammy was *Ein Deutsches Requiem*. For his next concert with us Robert suggested the requiems of Fauré and Duruflé which he had just recorded, a fine idea for a recording but deadly for an audience. I argued and he acquiesced with Verdi's *Quattro Pezzi Sacri* and the Duruflé. A slight conducting glitch occurred which made for a less than happy occasion, but I loved it all and had a great time throughout all four performances. He returned a last time in 1992 to conduct Bach's *B Minor Mass*; the chorus especially pleased him but the orchestra's lack of stylish Baroque playing left him wanting and provided a bumpy ride.

THE 90S

Ever the altruistic teacher, Margaret Hillis created The American Choral Foundation, an organization she formed to raise the standards of choral performance. She engaged Dr. Alfred Mann, as editor of the *American Choral Review*, a quarterly, and the late Walter Collins to edit the *Research Memorandum Series*. Today that information is published in by Chorus America in *The Voice*.

Chorus America is another organization that Margaret, Bob Page and others helped Michael Korn found. The 24 charter members read like a Who's Who of choral music including Greg Smith, Roger Wagner, and Richard Westenberg. While Robert Page was off at Chorus America board meetings, I took his rehearsals in Cleveland. After I came to San Francisco I attended the conferences, was elected to the board and in 1987 hosted the 10th anniversary celebration of Chorus America. And, with my chorus I got to perform the Strauss *Deutsche Motette*, a work I had first heard on Eric Erickson's recordings. Paul Hill was president and we had a whopping 120 registrants.

Choral festivals drew many young conductors in those days before universities were offering summer choral programs. Greg Smith's Saranac Lake Festival was a great place for conductors to come and conduct chorus and orchestra in performance. Hillis, Hawkins, Page, and I were often faculty all beautifully organized by organist, Dennis Keene. It ran smoothly for a number of years and then Dennis created his own festival which ran for a few years, using much the same format. Many conductors tell me how life-changing those experiences were. Chorus America is now providing the same opportunities with superb conducting and management workshops.

Royce Salzman, a fellow Goshen College graduate and former ACDA President, convinced ACDA to broaden their view from a national to a world view of choral music, thus founding IFCM. You may know Royce better as the man behind the Eugene Bach Festival. In 2007 he and Helmut Rilling will have held festivals performing Bach and the standard classics as well as commissioned works for 38 years. It is perhaps the most influential festival of its kind in the world, offering opportunities for conductors and singers. Kathy Romey Salzman, Royce's daughter, prepares the chorus for Rilling. There is also a fantastic 80 voice high school contingent with Anton Armstrong.

Chorus America began in 1977 as The Association of Professional Vocal ensembles whose primary interest was paying professional singers and dealing with the nuts and bolts of running an organization and board building. It was clear the National Endowment would be drawn to our cause with a less cumbersome title. Chamber Music America and Dance America had set a precedent therefore Chorus America seemed to me a logical choice though there was nothing in the name that mentioned the payment of singers. Stunned silence met my suggestion in a 1993 board meeting. But, it was voted in and I was chosen to chair the committee for the design. I am very proud of the G clef logo which is still in use today. Eventually Chorus America welcomed gay choruses and children's choruses into their fold and

the group grew from 45 members in 1977 to 650 members in 2007 and payment of singers is still a hot issue.

Choral music and choirs are alive and well in the U.S.; today there are 280 million adults and children singing in 280,000 choruses; 200,000 church choirs, 38,000 school choirs, and 12,000 community and professional choirs. Those statistics are absolutely amazing and encouraging. If you want more fascinating statistics on the choruses in America see www.chorusamerica.org for CEO Ann Meier Baker's presentation at the 2007 Miami ACDA convention.

In 1992, the Margaret Hillis Achievement Award for Excellence was established through Chorus America, recognizing Miss Hillis' many years of professional achievement and outstanding dedication to the field. Well connected and involved in things political, it was her influence that created a choral category for the National Endowment for the Arts. Margaret also possessed an extensive music library which she donated to the Chicago Symphony Archive, where it is available for study today. Robert Shaw's library is housed at Yale University.

2000 AND TRANSITIONS INTO THE TECHNO ERA

The years in San Francisco flew. I worked with all the great maestros from the world over, watched the chorus and orchestra grow, accepted four Grammys and an Emmy, and conducted everything from the *B Minor Mass*, *Messiah*, *Solomon* and *Carmina*, to holiday and pops concerts. It was just incredible!

You might find the story of our first Grammy amusing. It was the first time the San Francisco Symphony had been nominated for a Grammy and it was for Best Performance of a Choral Work! I thought it would be fun to go to Hollywood for the nomination party and the awards ceremonies. I called Paul Salamunovich, conductor of the Los Angeles Master Chorale, to have coffee. He said the Chorale would be busy all day rehearsing Handel's *Hallelujah* from *Messiah*. Woops. Boston Camerata had been nominated for *Messiah*? Those who perform often get the Grammy. I thought "I'm not going", but then thought, "Vance it might be your only time." The nomination party was fun but very Hollywood, held in a cavernous sound studio, everyone looking like you should recognize them because they were famous or about to be famous. Classical awards are usually given in the afternoon, however the afternoon passed with no award for Best Choral Performance. Other classical categories were awarded including a Grammy to a gospel group who had recorded a gospel version of *Messiah*.

That evening while waiting for the TV show to begin I spied Michael Jackson

sitting ahead of me on the right, K. D. Lang nearby, the hall peppered with stars. I was sitting 5th row center on the aisle with my designer friend Eddie Maeder. In each of the three aisles a TV camera was poised to catch the surprise on the winner's face. No one knows which of the five nominees will win until the red light on the TV camera goes on and flashes the winners surprised countenance on the screens at the side of the stage. The director is the only person who knows the winner. The Red Hot Chili Peppers finished their deafening set and the Los Angeles Master Chorale and orchestra rolled in on a stage, each singer and player with a contact mike. Martin Pearlman conducted the *Hallelujah Chorus* which was equally as deafening as the rock groups. At the moment of *King of Kings* the gospel group which had won in the afternoon for *A Gospel Messiah* began to sing their version, dancing their way down the aisles in colorful dashikis and head gear. The Los Angeles Master Chorale and Gospel Choir began to improvise against a solo black tenor ending in a frenzy of hair raising *Hallelujahs!*

And that, ladies and gentlemen, was the production number they made out of the pillar of occidental choral music, Handel's *Hallelujah Chorus*, and also the reason the choral award was presented in the evening and not in the afternoon. Flutist, James Galway, announced the winner while fumbling in his pocket for the envelope. By this time one of the cameramen was kneeling in front of me when a lady turned to me and said, "Are you famous"? I laughed nervously as Galway opened the envelope; the seal got stuck on his index finger and would not come off so he stuck it in his hair and said "This is too much for me." The audience laughed as he opened the envelope and read *Carmina burana*, San Francisco Symphony Chorus, Vance George, Director. I beamed and walked to the stage in an altered state of disbelief. My speech of gratitude quoted Sir Georg Solti, "Singing is the basis of all music making," and received the fake Grammy viewed by four billion. The real Grammy is engraved and mailed six weeks later. I made phone calls to my mother, Bob Page, the San Francisco Symphony, and went to the Biltmore Hotel for Wolfgang Puck's delicious offerings, seven cuisines and four dance bands. But, I was alone, no one with whom to share the moment. Next morning when I told the stewardess we had won she upgraded me to first class.

That evening I presented Maestro Herbert Blomstedt, the San Francisco Symphony and the City of San Francisco with their very first Grammy ever! Ironic that the first Grammy was for Best Choral Performance. Two years later the second Grammy was again for Best Choral Performance of Brahms' *Requiem* was presented by Bobby McFerrin. The third and fourth were for Stravinsky's *Persephone* and Mahler's 3rd both with Michael Tilson-Thomas conducting. For those I did not go to Hollywood. An Emmy was awarded for a DVD of a semi-staged version of

Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*. Sondheim was great fun to work with as were stars George Hearn and Patti Lu Pone. The chorus wryly served meat and veggie pies at a cast party we gave. And to show them what we usually sound like we sang Randall Thompson's *Alleluia*, Patti cried.

There were many highlights during twenty-three years in San Francisco: John Nelson's *B Minor Mass*, Edo de Waart's farewell concert of Mahler's *Symphony No. 8*, the first of five times I would prepare it. Trial by fire occurred twice in my second year; Sir Charles Mackerras was taken ill so I conducted Handel's *Solomon* with no rehearsal and the Handel/Mozart version of *Messiah* when Edo's father was taken ill. Both experiences were terrifying. Those four Mozart *Messiahs* were followed the next day by our first Christmas Concert which became an annual tradition. Roger Norrington's *The Missa Solemnis Explored* in 1990 was extraordinary and the tempi hair raising. Roger was brilliant, funny, hated wearing socks and returned later to perform Berlioz's *Romeo and Juliette*. And, his *Messiah* was one of the best in 23 years along with Harry Christopher's. Helmut Rilling's *St. Matthew* was great as was the one by Peter Schreier, who sang the recitatives centered between the orchestras, and conducted from memory.

My arrangement of *The Star Spangled Banner* for eight-part chorus and audience to celebrate the reopening of our hall was a kick. I looked at five other arrangements including one by Stravinsky. Awful. Amusingly the Symphony said it had to be *A Cappella* reserving the first sounds of the orchestra in the new acoustic for Debussy. Herbert Blomstedt's *Ein Deutsches Requiem* was deeply moving as was Eduardo Mata's *Choros* by Villa Lobos and Stravinsky's 20th century classic *Symphony of Psalms*. Michael Tilson Thomas' Stravinsky Festival in San Francisco and in New York's Carnegie Hall were thrilling and his *Beethoven 9* was perhaps the most exciting we ever performed. Certainly our 1998 performances of Mahler's *Symphony No. 8* were our most profound of that work! In fact everything we performed with Michael had freshness and the aura of a first time performance.

John Adam's *Harmonium*, Edo de Waart conducting, was my first recording and scary because we just sang it straight through then chatted. I thought it was pretty good but I was embarrassed at my naiveté and suggested we record it again. Could the first time through be that good? Amazingly, the first take was used for the recording with no edits. The only time in twenty-three years a recording was not edited.

John Adam's *El Niño*, Kent Nagano conducting, Peter Sellars directing, with soloists Dawn Upshaw and Lorraine Hunt Lieberson were inspiring. I went to Paris

to see the premiere and we performed it one month later. John was a great guy to work with, completely real, and the same person from 1982 to 2007 when the chorus performed his new opera, *A Flowering Tree*, which David Xiques, my assistant, prepared so brilliantly. I hired an Anna Netrebko, an unknown Russian soprano, for a *Messiah* I conducted long before she was famous. It was not her cup of tea but the vocal talent was so evident that it was a delight to give her the opportunity. Kurt Masur and Donald Runnicles and Mstislav Rostropovich befriended the chorus and me in a very special way. All the maestros loved the chorus, almost too much. We were so fortunate to have Rostropovich the year before he died, an extraordinary man in every way.

My swan song in San Francisco was Bach's *Mass in B Minor* and a festive Holiday Concert. Twenty students from my India days gathered for a mini reunion in San Francisco to hear the Holiday concert. My departure in May was celebrated by a party of 400 with members of the chorus and orchestra and many former members, all given by the San Francisco Symphony, including great food and entertainment. Alice Parker composed and conducted a farewell tune with the audience, and my mentor Mary Oyer and others from my Alma Mater, Goshen college, were there. I owe much gratitude to Greg Boals, chorus manager for twenty-three years and the one who organized such a grand celebration. I always joked "Greg runs the chorus, I'm just the conductor." As a farewell gift my chorus gave me a week of cooking classes near Pisa, Italy. Big thanks also go to Mary Marsh and Hank Dreger for their constant help as attendance taker and general major duomo of chorus line ups and chorus chronicler.

Maestro Jimmy Conlin closed the 2005-06 season in June with six Verdi *Requiems*. A quarter of a century earlier my first Verdi *Requiem* had been with Jimmy and the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus. Now he was conducting the Verdi six times, my last performances with my San Francisco Symphony Chorus. And, they were the best parting gift of all, the greatest performances of my twenty-three years in San Francisco. Jimmy also gave the pre-concert lectures and afterward ran to each warm-up to thank the chorus, what a mensch. Soloists Christine Brewer, soprano, and Stephanie Blythe, mezzo, were just the best, so human, so divine. Immediately following the Verdi I left for Europe to prepare choruses in Prague, Mannheim, and Basel for performances of Mahler's *Symphony No. 8* with the San Francisco Symphony, Michael Tilson Thomas conducting.

Cooking classes in Italy was held on an olive estate, fifteen of us cooking every day and eating what we cooked. Two more months of travel, museums, concerts, and art acted as an act of separation, departure and grieving. Change and transition are

emotional and difficult. My only regret in San Francisco was that I could not create a Youth Chorus. The high school festivals I mounted in San Francisco and Berkeley were very successful but I wanted to create a Youth Chorus, a mirror of our fantastic Youth Orchestra.

Looking back on today's choral scene Margaret's Chicago Symphony Chorus is conducted by Duane Wolfe, Roger Wagner's Los Angeles Master Chorale is with Grant Gershon, and the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus with Robert Porco. Robert Page retired from his Mendelssohn Choir and the Pittsburgh Symphony in 2003 but continues to teach at Carnegie Mellon. A word of praise for the San Francisco audiences: in Cleveland we performed two evenings, but in San Francisco we sold out four nights to standing ovations and still do. Our audiences dug deep into their pockets to support the Symphony, the Opera, the Ballet, and many other performing organizations. And, one day there will be a San Francisco Youth Chorus.

Choral music has changed tremendously in the past half century with today's technology, cds, dvds, ipods and computers. Even more amazing are the organizations that support choral music today: ACDA (1959), www.acdaonline.org, 18,000 members; Chorus America (1977), service@chorusamerica.org, 650 members; and IFCM (1982), the International Federation for Choral Music, www.ifcm.net, 2000 members. Each organization has addressed specific needs and has made an enormous impact on choral music and the arts throughout the world. Many of us are members of all three and attend their conferences. These organizations validate, encourage and are the cutting edge helping to create the future.

My story is one of lineage, the people that changed and guided my life. I believe I am the only one mentored by Shaw, Hillis and Page who also conducted the their choruses, the first symphony choruses in the land - Cleveland and Chicago. My story honors Mary Oyer, Robert Shaw, Julius Herford, Margaret Hillis, Otto Werner-Mueller, Robert Page, and all the great maestros who guest conducted in San Francisco. But I owe the most Bob Page for his incredible vocal and technical know-how with a chorus, and for his personal nurturing.

We are a sum total of those with whom we have worked and lived and loved. They were gifts, gifts both of giving and receiving to help us understand our humanity and divinity. They taught us the mystery of how to live happily in an imperfect world. They created musical experiences that touched our hearts, and taught our vulnerable inner beings the beauty and the brutality of life. We are a continuum, a reflection of all that has gone before and will follow. I am grateful!

Postscript:

This story is written in a kind of blog style, a chronicle of personal experiences and reflections rather than a literary effort. It has been an emotionally warm and gentle wrap-up perhaps enabling forward movement into the next phase of this glorious experience called life.

VANCE Y. GEORGE

born 1933 Bremen, Indiana

1938-1941 Hall School, a one room country school, 40 students

1946-1950 Nappanee High School, Nappanee, Indiana

1951-55 Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana, B.M., Music Education, double major in voice and piano and voice

1955-57 Taught all 12 grades of music, High School Choir, High School Band and directed the Jr. and Sr. Class plays, Mendon, Ohio

1957-60 Woodstock School, Landour, Mussoorie, India. As a pacifist I was drafted during the Korean war and sent by the peace churches to India to do alternative service, similar to the Peace Corps

1960-62 North Side Junior High School, Elkhart, Indiana

1962-65 Indiana University School of Music, course work for MA, DMA degrees in Choral Conducting

1965-71 University of Wisconsin, Head of Choral Department.

1971-83 Head of Choral Department and Vocal Division of the Blossom Festival School the Cleveland Orchestra and Kent State University

1976-83 Associate Conductor, Cleveland Orchestra Chorus

1983-2007 Conductor, San Francisco Symphony Chorus, won four Grammys and an Emmy over 23 years

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