THE ART OF THE CHORAL CONDUCTOR

William J. Finn

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Volume One

CHORAL TECHNIQUE

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PREFACE

The history of music in the United States during the Twentieth Century, when written, will contain an important chapter on the renaissance of choral art. This country has fostered the oratorio since the early years of the Nineteenth Century. Large mixed choruses have been established in many of the great cities and in some of the smaller ones, without, it must be confessed, paralleling those qualities of precision and refinement that distinguish our important symphonic ensembles, which began a few decades later.

Not until the first decade of the Twentieth Century did the chorus begin to revive, in this country, those splendors that are its ancient heritage. In church and in concert hall, in the public schools of some communities, and even in the colleges and universities where the living arts long had languished, music lovers encountered, most of them for the first time, those expressions of beauty which it is the prerogative of the finely wrought vocal ensemble to initiate. There followed a growth, especially of unaccompanied choral art, that is the most important musical phenomenon of the age. Colleges, especially the smaller sectarian groups, made the chorus an agent of cultural publicity second only to the football squad, and actually more important than the track team.

Since the greatest choral music, ancient or modern, is ecclesiastical, it was inevitable that leadership in the movement should have developed in the Church, mother of the arts and preserver of all learning in ages more barbarous but not more ruthlessly materialistic than the present. That leadership, assumed by right of talent and achievement, devolved upon The Reverend William J. Finn, C.S.P., who founded the Paulist Choristers of Chicago in 1904 and speedily made this group the foremost of its kind, not only in this country, but actually in Europe as well by the unanswerable test of competition with the great choirs abroad.

Removing to New York, Father Finn repeated in that center the great service he had rendered in Chicago, carrying his evangel of pure choral art to the radio as well as to the concert hall. His activities were not limited to the choir of men and boys. Great mixed choruses engaged him

with profit so that his experience as choral conductor presently embraced the whole field.

Every great conductor is a great teacher. From the training of choristers to training of conductors is a short step and one taken early in his career. The fruits of this vast practical and pedagogic experience were recorded in the two volumes of "The Art of the Choral Conductor," a work of authority and importance because it solves the problems, not only of ancient ecclesiastical music, but of all the interesting and exciting modern schools.

These books should be in the library of every choirmaster, whether his medium is the choir of men and boys, or the mixed ensemble; for the churches of all denominations lag woefully in the important department of musical culture. Music has achieved expressions of the devotional spirit that are suggested but not realized by the drama of ritual or the word of Holy Writ.

To ignore this great music is to worship God in the ugliness of illiteracy (of a kind). There is nothing, in all the world of tone, that defines with similar completeness those mysteries of faith, which forever escape verbal statement but which Palestrina, Byrd, Lasso, Dowland, Lotti, Ingegneri, and other polyphonic masters have stated in tone. Wrought of intermingled melodies this music rises like sounding incense before the high altar bearing the spirit of man to that other world which he seeks. Or, if this idiom omits certain accents of modern feeling, there is the vital new school of Russia, poignant and dramatic, or the interesting American school just coming into life and discovering its own kind of beauty. Sooner or later this music must replace the Mendelssohnian school of our grandfathers, at least to the abandonment of much that is sterile and platitudinous.

Whether he is bound by the conservatism of his congregation, or by pecuniary limitations, the choirmaster still must perform his functions to the best of his ability. In "The Art of the Choral Conductor" he will find all his problems stated and solved and at the same time will be stimulated to a realization of the dignity of his art and the wealth of its literature.

GLENN DILLARD GUNN

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CHORAL TECHNIQUE

CHAPTER I

Choral Musicianship

"There is not any musicke of instruments, whatsoever, comparable to that which is made by the voyces of men, when the voyces are good, and the same well-sorted and ordered."

WILLIAM BYRD (1542–1623)

It is the purpose of the writer of this treatise to set forth the principles and practices of choral technique by which a high degree of ensemble artistry may be achieved and maintained. These elements and agencies will be presented as systematically and comprehensively as possible in the two major aspects of the choral art. One aspect concerns the vocal development of the choral unit, the other concerns primarily the conductor in his role of interpreter. Mastery of the very considerable subject matter comprised in these two distinct but inseparable phases of choral direction is essential to the conductor, if he would escape mediocrity. His chorus must be free from the inartistic blemishes of poor vocalism, unsuitable timbres, inadequate blending and imperfect balance. His readings of the compositions must be guided by the interpretative needs of many and diverse schools of music.

His first task is, obviously, to build his chorus into a singing instrument of musical quality, for if the director fail to produce an aesthetically convincing choral tone, the cultivation of merely technical excellences, and facility in interpreting many styles of music correctly, will be necessarily futile.

The primary requisite for choral effectiveness is beauty of tone. Any degree of ugliness in any of the single lines of a chorus will prevent the ensemble from being an artistic musical agency. Beauty, in one or other of its many forms, is the only medium through which music can successfully address the aesthetic instincts of listeners. Beauty is of the essence of music; without it, one can produce only a counterfeit of the art; according to the structure and mood of a composition it must manifest itself in elegance, grace, charm, sympathy, elegy, brilliancy, radiance or sublimity.

The ultimate basis of choral artistry is sheer loveliness of tone. Except in bravura, grotesque and violent episodes, where simulation of emotional reactions is indicated, this must be its pre-eminent virtue.

Just as no degree of finger-technique and interpretative virtuosity can make Chopin sound well on a piano out of tune, so no measure of skill in interpreting Gregorian Chant, 16th century Polyphony, Bach or modern music can compensate for the unmusical sounds which are the handicap of the average poorly trained modern chorus.

Therefore, the choral director must be a master of vocalism and ensemble singing. He must know how, scientifically, to train the voices of the single parts of his unit and how to merge all the parts in a homogeneous blend. Also, he must understand the relationship of instrumental accompaniment to choral singing; this means that he must know organ registration and orchestration. The fact that different styles of music require different vocal timbres for their proper performance indicates that the choral conductor must also be skilled in developing and employing opportunely the resources of what I shall refer to in this volume as the choral color-scheme. The special needs of *a cappella* singing furnish another field of inquiry.

The interpretative requirements of the conductor's technique include facility in the artistic application of the general principles of interpretation: such fundamentals as the proper reading of rhythmical forms, the choice of correct tempi, the use of rubato, the determining of dynamic intensity and the subtle art of enhancing aesthetic effectiveness by *crescendo* and *diminuendo.* These factors of interpretation must assert themselves variously in the various schools of composition. A definite erudition is required for each specific art-form. The structure of the many forms being academically different and the aesthetic intentions of classes of composers diverse, it is clear that a conductor must be well schooled theoretically and practically in the structure of the forms which he essays to direct. Gregorian Chant, Polyphonic music of the sixteenth century, madrigals and motets of the seventeenth century, Hymnody, Bach, Oratorio, Operatic choruses, modern Russian works, the choral opus richly embroidered with orchestral figures and the choral opus depending on its vocal content solely—all these and other types of choral music must be analyzed carefully, their distinctive features discovered, and facility in revealing these qualities with a group of singers achieved. The study of the art of choral conducting involves, further, at least an acquaintance with relevant facts established by the science of acoustics, for proper performance often depends upon a cognizance of these facts.

Altogether, the array of subjects of which a thoroughly qualified choral conductor must be master is formidable. His art is more complex than that of an orchestral conductor. The latter, generally, is free of the need to teach the players the technique of their instruments; the former faces the necessity of teaching the choristers the technique of singing as a primary and persistent demand. The choral conductor requires most of the information and technical facility of the symphonic virtuoso, plus a profound knowledge of some phases of music about which the latter can remain successfully in ignorance. In spite of this, the orchestral conductor is conceded a higher rank than his colleague of the chorus; perhaps, because "symphony" is the vogue, or perhaps because of the more theatrical and overwhelming musical moments over which the *chef d'orchestre* presides, or just perhaps because choral conductors have failed to acquire the broader musicianship and the greater technical equipment which would establish their pre-eminence. The noble oligarchy of professional critics may reasonably maintain a patronizing mien towards the choral conductor, for, generally he presents himself as the poor relation of the musical hierarchy, proving his poverty and *gaucherie* by ill-fitting musical habiliments and his clumsy knocking about of *objets d'art.*

The critics realize that the average orchestral conductor is a *graduate specialist,* and that the average choral conductor is not, is far from this. The modern choral conductor, generally, is unprepared for his office. Floundering about, he proves his lack of preparedness in every measure sung, in every idle motion of the baton, and most of all in the chauvinistic *fortes* which he supposes will successfully conceal the blemishes and inadequacies—if there be any!

Of course, there are some great choral conductors today whose profound understanding of their art and whose practiced control of the resources of choral singing elevate them to the fraternity of master craftsmen, but these constitute a very small minority. The majority has not been inspired with zeal to inquire into the technical demands which an artistic exercise of the baton makes upon choral conductors. Programmes frequently announce that the music to be sung is by Palestrina, Ingeneri, Gabrielli, Byrd, etc., but seldom is the music of these masters *actually* performed, the efforts of the conductor and chorus usually producing a counterfeit. The notes and the text may be those of Palestrina, etc., but the tone-quality of the ensemble, the lack of blend, the tempo, the absence of dynamic variations or the misapplication of them, probably all concur to neutralize the composers' intentions, distorting the effect and thus dissociating the music actually rendered from the conception of the composers.

A Tudor madrigal performed with the tone-quality and dynamic intensity proper to the choruses in "Faust" loses so much of its inherent personality in such disguise as to cease to be a madrigal. The programme may assign the number to Byrd or Morley or Wilbye, but the sounds purveyed in reality to the listener have no kinship with the music-fancies of the Elizabethan period.

Since the analysis of chorophony[1] to be undertaken in these pages is based upon the conviction that chorus singing is music's sovereign instrumentality of expression, it seems advisable at the outset to examine the premises from which such conclusion has been drawn.

The comparative effectiveness of each of the many instruments by which music discloses itself is determined by the ratio of its inherent powers of expression to the attributes of music as a whole.

Academically, music may be considered a science, related to both mathematics and physics; in practice, however, it is an art, involving relations with emotions and aesthetics. Therefore, music is a synthesis of the scientific and the artistic, and can function successfully only by a proper fusion of both the scientific and the artistic factors.

Music, being a means of expressing imagery, is a kind of language. But it is a language without vocabulary; for sounds, unlike words, cannot be defined univocally; they may mean many and different things, each individual listener determining his own interpretation. The effects of any single piece of music upon a group of individuals are admitted to be diversified and even contradictory. Likewise, the reactions of people to music generally are diversified, some people being profoundly moved and others reacting superficially. Occasionally, the extraordinary phenomenon of an individual who dislikes music is encountered, but the race as a whole is more sensitive to it than to any other of the Fine Arts. Music does not appeal directly to the intellect; its direct appeal is to the emotions and therefore its processes are subtle; they have not yet been comprehended.

Explain, for instance, why a specific style of music delights one while irking another.

Even upon persons of the same temperament and of equal culture the effects of music are frequently dissimilar.

The acceptability to earlier generations of scale-forms and harmonic

[1] The bibliography on the technical phases of chorus training and conducting being scant, the nomenclature of the subject is therefore meagre, and in order to escape the handicap of much paraphrasing, the writer presumes to coin such words as may seem desirable for clarity and brevity. Thus, "chorophony" and "chorophonic" will connote the choral art just as "symphony" and "symphonic" have come to connote the orchestral art.

relationships which are disturbing and in some instances abhorrent to modern ears, is not easily understood, and the explanation of the satisfaction experienced by almost all occidental peoples today in the major third, this interval being in the physics of sound one of the lesser consonances, is still subject for conjecture. The absence from general usage of so important a current factor as the leading-tone until the seventeenth century is perplexing,[1] while the ultra-discords, clashing cacophonies and quarter-tone progressions of the prevailing "new freedom" in music will long impress the majority as inexplicable deviations from aesthetic normalcy. It is clear that the faculty of discerning and enjoying beauty in music is an indeterminate disposition or predilection except to the extent to which culture may direct taste; it is equally clear that there are certain fundamental elements which concur to make music agreeable to the ear and affecting to the emotions.

However stealthy the actions and reactions of music may be, and however puzzling the personal affinities which it variously establishes with the biology and psychology of particular individuals, music must be said to have a nature, to be possessed of qualities essential to it, the absence of which would make it cease to be music, and the opposite of which would metamorphose it into an instrument of distress and positive pain.

It is obvious that all the means by which music essays to reveal herself are not equally endowed. There are single instruments and single voices; there are instrumental ensembles and vocal ensembles. Some single instruments are limited to meagre impressiveness by all three of the principal elements of music—pitch, dynamic energy and quality. Thus the bass viol, the tuba, contra-tuba, contra-fagotto, in the depths, the flute, piccolo, flageolet in the heights are handicapped by their very structure first, from functioning with notable effect through the range where the richest beauty may be reasonably said to lie for human ears,

FIG. 1

secondly, by confinement within narrow quantitative limits, and finally, by the monotony of their respective timbres.

According to an anecdote which serves for illustration independently

[1] The Bull of Pope John XXII, 1322, condemning its first appearance as prejudicial to the modal-consciousness of Gregorian music perhaps partially explains this.

of its authenticity, Mendelssohn was once asked:—"What is worse than a flute solo?" to which query he is reported to have answered: "A flute duet."

It is not the intention of the writer to satirize such instruments, for they are essential to orchestral ensembles, and, under certain circumstances are capable of delivering effective utterance in solo-passages.

But it is nevertheless true that there is disparity in the aesthetic worth of musical instruments.

In the family of instruments which are so constructed as to produce music effectively within the range indicated previously (Fig. 1) there is likewise inequality in the degrees of impressibility, due chiefly to difference in quality, although this is in some instances intensified by the difference in quantity. Thus, the string family, violin, viola, violoncello are probably the most highly appreciated single instruments because not only of lovely and variable qualities of tone, but because these instruments are usually heard in a medium dynamic compass—and art concurs with philosophy in approving the adage "In medio stat virtus." The brass family, comprising trumpet, horn, trombone and tuba,—and the reed family, comprising oboe, English horn, bassoon, and clarinet—would not be said by the majority to be as well endowed for general musical effect as the string family. And this, probably, not only because the timbre of the brass and reeds is less suited to the more frequently recurring intentions of music, but because, in spite of the lovely color which they sometimes contribute and in spite of the clarity, resonance, and partial-tone emphasis which they bring to the various orchestral lines, they cannot by their structure, produce as satisfying a tone as the string family.

In their turn, the strings must concede superiority to the ensemble instruments, such as piano and organ. For single instruments depend upon accompanying instruments for their efficacy. With the development of harmony and counterpoint, the human ear has come to require the consonance of several tones sounded synchronously for general aesthetic satisfaction.

People would quickly tire of listening to a violin played without accompaniment.

The ensemble instrument can draw upon the resources of harmony and is therefore more nearly equipped to exemplify the mystic art than any single instrument. The piano sings beautifully in the desirable range—it has an adequate dynamic flexibility and a beautiful timbre. However, the piano is a percussive instrument and therefore can generate

only one tonal-color, albeit with many shades under the fingers of an artist. For this reason the piano cedes rank to the organ.

The pipe organ has a great plenitude of sonority, a diapason cathedral-tone for its own distinctive timbre, but it is also an imitative instrument, copying the tone colors of orchestral instruments. Time was, a decade or two ago, when some impresarios thought to replace the orchestra with the organ in theatrical performances. Their ambition was futile, for although the organ can approximate the instrumentation of a full symphony orchestra, therefore simulating its timbres, the simulation itself places the orchestra above the organ as the supreme vehicle of instrumental color. Likewise, two further considerations concur to emphasize the superiority of the orchestra; the impossibility of imparting real accentual stress to notes played on the organ: and the vitality achieved by the participation of so many individuals in the orchestra. Its diapason tone will always reserve the place of dignity for the organ in church music, but it can never attain parity with the orchestra as an ensemble of emotional appeal. There is only a single human factor revealed in the functioning of the organ, and this single influence, the organist, operates only indirectly, to the extent of choosing stop-timbres managing control-devices, regulating dynamics and releasing keys which allow air fanned by motors to do the actual sounding.

The symphonic ensemble, on the other hand, offers a human factor for each instrument played and for each note sounded. The contact of each player with his instrument is direct, and the vitality of the ensemble result is determined by the contribution of the individuals. The fervor or placidity, the impetuosity or calm of a hundred human beings speaks through orchestral music, while the organ is altogether a robot, a marvelous mechanism executing human intentions under the control of one operative.

But the orchestra, too, is in some degree a robot; it employs instruments of wood and metal. For this reason it cedes rank to the chorus of human voices. The chorus, by the fact of a human personnel making music without the medium of mechanical devices, can give intimation of mysteries captured by instinct and profoundly felt. Because it can appeal to the subconsciousness of listeners with the subtle expression of its own human experience, the chorus is the signally endowed interagent between absolute music and the emotions which, translating and qualifying it, relate it variously to memory or imagination.

Nor does the chorus lack any of the properties required for a convincing manifestation of the elements which the science of acoustics finds

essential to music. It has all the colors of the musical rainbow; it can deliver itself of the most complex harmonic and polyphonic forms; its dynamic energy can be regulated to express any emotion or any degree of emotion; its sensitiveness is as capricious as the human imagination; it weds to melody the eloquence of words. It can blend in its crucible, by a fine alchemy, the most surreptitious forces of art, fusing in the heat of its flame temperaments, instincts, hopes and fears, aspirations and inhibitions. The chorus, finally, can worship, love, hate, plead, threaten and destroy only as human beings can, free from the irrelevance or the impeding influence of mechanical instruments.

The chorus today, generally, fails to show forth its endowment. But its ineffectiveness cannot reasonably be alleged against its possible worth. It is merely evidence that the chorus is not drawing upon its resources. While the art of the orchestral ensemble has been in the ascent, it has been natural to forget the richer art of the chorus, and in this forgetfulness to allow the technique of its development to be lost.

There have been, of course, brilliant flashes of choral splendor, from time to time and here and there. But they have not been brilliant enough or sufficiently long sustained to enlighten the multitudes of the profession as to the richness of the force they have been ignoring. For in metropolitan centers as well as in small towns, a disconcerting majority of directors still affects to conduct choral units in churches, concert-halls, school auditoriums, and radio studios with a minimum of knowledge of or discernible interest in the elements which differentiate chorophony from other kinds of musical exercise.

An aspirant to orchestral leadership can readily secure much information from the literature available; this is extensive; but the musician who would successfully take up the duties of the *Magister Choralis* must face the tedious task of discovering for himself many elements of his specialty. There is practically no bibliography of value on the subject, and the subject, in its entirety, suggests a long list of items for study, many of these presenting definite problems.

Those of the profession who have been engaged in setting forth anew the old ideals of choral virtuosity, have worked out the technical processes which they sponsor, largely by studying the structure of the chorus itself, by analyzing it into its many unsuspected components, and by relating these components to concepts of choral tonality which they have found hidden, like spirits striving to make themselves known, in the vocal scores of the centuries.

The importance of the mediaeval Scholae Cantorum cannot gratui-

tously be denied. In their unwritten codes of technique were the principles of high art which must again be discovered, understood, and applied. The student choirmaster must hie back to the polyphonic period, and by study, meditation and examination of the material found there, plus reasonable deductions, find the only basis upon which a modern technique may be built.

While the art of composition was expanding from the simplicity of the unison Gregorian Chants, through organum and discant to the complex polyphonic idioms of the Dufay—Palestrina—Tudor periods, there must have been a parallel growth in choral technique.

Whereas it is not possible, with the evidence available, to quote written records of the steps, principles, and the systems involved in the progress of choral expression from the tenth century's meagre needs to the faultless and dazzling virtuosity of the sixteenth, it is altogether reasonable to conclude from study of the extant scores of each succeeding generation, that greater demands were progressively made not only upon the technical facility of group-singers, but upon all the resources of vocal timbre, balance, and blend which the groups could develop.

The tonal loveliness, elasticity, buoyancy and the resulting mysticism required to reveal the beauty of a motet to the satisfaction of a Josquin des Pres, a Palestrina, a Vittoria, or a Byrd, were without doubt among the standard resources taken for granted in most of the cathedrals of Mediaeval and Renaissance Europe.

But such qualities of tone are not among the assets of the average modern choir,—cathedral, parochial, or secular. The harshness, rigidity and blare of the vocalism that assails the fair contour of Palestrinesque comeliness today would have inhibited the composition of most music of that style if they had been characteristics of the ensemble singing of the period. The very structure of the music itself indicates the genre of tonal effects preconceived by the composers. It would have been futile to compose music which assigned to each choral line the threefold independence of melody, rhythm and dynamic undulation, if the choirs available were not perfectly balanced units, the parity of quantity and the juxta-position of tone-colors being nicely adjusted between the sectional groups.

The homophonic style, however, requires no such fine adjustments. It is vertical music, the top part being usually the important one; and those below merely the harmonic support. This style indulgently permits some inattention to the graces of blend and balance to escape censure. It was the change from the mediaeval horizontal music to the vertical

style which has dominated music since the seventeenth century, that marked the beginning of choral deterioration.

The gentle rise and fall of voices, trained to follow the restrained melodic curve-lines of the earlier music was as essential to aesthetic performance as the singing of the correct notes. Today this refined undulation has been replaced by bold and noisy impacts with some phrases, and unseemly hushings with others.

The aura, which the older *a cappella* style can create with such indefinable effect, and in the absence of which this music is cold, awkward and unfriendly, can be developed only as a corollary to the choral technique that effaces over-assertive vocal timbres and the advertising of personal reactions by individuals of the ensemble. The incompatibility of individual exploitation with the homogeneity conceived by the weavers of the polyphonic choral texture probably impressed the *a cappella* singers to the extent of restraining the expression of their dramatic consciousness.

The alloy of ego-vocalism took the chorus off the pure "gold standard" in the seventeenth century, and the aura which had conserved to ensemble singing the even emanation of lustre that comes from the rapprochement of one choral line to another was dispelled by the displacements of "dramma per la musica."

That through the "novelties" of the last two centuries and a half music has come into an opulence of aesthetic wealth, no one can reasonably deny. The symphonic, operatic and solo virtuosities have guaranteed the modern exercise of music a fellowship with our richest influences. But we have suffered an unnecessary loss. Perhaps during the *coup d'état* it was necessary to subvert the old order. Revolutions usually banish or destroy a dynasty. But the ostracism of the mediaeval and polyphonic criteria having long since been accomplished, why not recall from exile the commandant-principles of superlative ensemble song, and bid them flourish again in affiliation with the symphony and the opera?

In some places, the old approaches to choral excellence survived for a time; in some places they are being now revived; but generally a lesser technique, a technique unworthy of the history of music, has prevailed. The high achievement of the average modern chorus is mediocrity.

During the current generation, singing units have multipled steadily. Even the smallest communities offer opportunities for vocal exercise and experience. Everywhere, large numbers of men, women and children are participating in the choral activities of the country.

Community singing is a splendid and highly commendable development in many parts of this country; it provides an excellent means of self-