Choral Conducting

BY

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To

THE MULTITUDE OF SINGERS

WHOSE FORBEARANCE AND COÖPERATION THROUGH MANY YEARS

HAVE AIDED ME IN FORMULATING

THE PRINCIPLES LAID DOWN IN THIS BOOK

PREFACE

HAVING completed some thirty-five years of choral conducting, and being now on the point of giving myself over to the enjoyment of music which it has not been my duty to prepare for public performance, I am venturing to set down my own convictions regarding good choral singing and to record the methods by which I have tried to make those ideals articulate. To many, my way with a chorus will seem extreme, even fantastic, perhaps, and I can well believe that few will care to try it. But, for me, one of the real satisfactions of choral work has issued from the gradual building up of a technique which is my own, the product of experiment and the consummation of my artistic beliefs.

If this book has any value, then, it will not be for the veteran conductor whose opinions, already fixed, I have no slightest wish to alter; it will be for the beginner to whom my experience may offer some aid, particularly in those matters which concern the relations between conductor and chorus, relations upon which success so greatly depends. Where technical matters are concerned, I would urge no one to accept my viewpoint unless, after adequate trial, he finds reason to agree with me.

To Sir Adrian Boult, conductor of the orchestra and chorus of the British Broadcasting Corporation, I express my heartiest thanks for his painstaking reading of the text, as well as for many valuable suggestions.

In the illustrations, as in the book, I have necessarily omitted much, being content to stress details which seem to me to be of prime importance. If I have contributed anything that is helpful to the untried choral conductor, I shall be happy indeed.

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I have often felt that the precepts found in books like this one

are too likely to be interpreted in the light of the reader's own point of view, and that illustration, perhaps by means of phonograph recordings, would at least reduce the number of meanings which might be attributed to the author who is permitted only the resource of the printed word. It seemed to me, in any case, that the experiment of recording choral rehearsals as guides to conducting procedure was worth trying.

By far the simplest and most sure-fire method would have been to record the rehearsing of an experienced chorus which had been instructed to sing badly and to correct its faults at the conductor's direction. I felt, however, that I ought to set myself as nearly as possible the problem which would face an inexperienced conductor who had succeeded in assembling an amateur chorus of average musical ability. The sixteen singers who volunteered their assistance had had no choral experience beyond the high school. Their ages averaged seventeen years and six months, and all of them were in their first year as members of the Radcliffe Choral Society and the Harvard Glee Club, which began rehearsals almost simultaneously with the preparation of the records.

I could not, in the beginning, foresee all the difficulties which lay ahead. I ought to have realized, though I did not, that no conductor can ask a chorus to spend rehearsal after rehearsal on only two selections without running the risk of destroying interest in the music. Indeed, it is much to the credit of the singers that they persisted to the end, though neither they nor I will care to hear Morley's *Now is the Month of Maying* or Clément's *Adoramus Te* for some time to come.

Because of academic engagements, rehearsals were necessarily brief and could not be held oftener than once a week. Even weekly rehearsals were rare, however, for holidays, vacations and examination periods sometimes caused an interruption of two or even three weeks. Including rehearsals and recordings the chorus devoted a total of about ten hours to the project.

A larger number of voices would better have concealed bad intonation and deficiency in breath control; but it was important that these and other shortcomings should be heard distinctly, and the very smallness of the chorus helped to bring this about.

I wish the rehearsals might have sounded more lifelike; they were not in the slightest degree "staged," but in spite of that fact the necessity of observing all the mechanical conditions attendant on recording resulted in such self-consciousness on the conductor's part as to make him, I fear, almost unrecognizable to those who have worked with him in normal surroundings.

My profound gratitude goes first to my faithful chorus, who gave themselves most generously to the task in hand: M. Anastos, A. Dennison, M. Hill, B. Wilson (sopranos); H. Bell, M. Cunningham, H. Green, H. Stone (altos); R. Coombs, R. Geehern, H. Hageman, D. Moore (tenors); H. Kramer, W. Maas, J. Schevill, and M. Yohalem (basses). To Mr. G. Wallace Woodworth, conductor of the Radcliffe Choral Society and the Harvard Glee Club, who undertook the organization of the chorus, and to Mr. Elwood Gaskill, who took care of the many details connected with the rehearsals, I am also greatly indebted.

Finally, these records, which are issued by the Harvard Film Service, are not offered as artistic productions but as illustrative of faults common to choral singing and of ways to remedy them.

A. T. D.

CAMBRIDGE
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CHAPTER I

THE CONDUCTOR

THE CONDUCTOR whose activities are confined to the field of choral music is frequently looked down upon as a musician with a professional equipment so limited that it denies him a major role in any large musical enterprise, and automatically relegates him to the unenviable status of a musical specialist. The very term "choral conductor" is sometimes used to suggest a lack of those varied capacities which it is taken for granted a thoroughgoing musician should possess, and this derogation is, alas, too often a just one. The choral conductor "type" is a familiar feature of amateur musical effort. He conquers by personality rather than by musicianship. His acquaintance with the literature of music is far too small, and his resourcefulness in making available a wide variety of works lacks the support of scholarship. His sense of discrimination between good and bad music is generally intuitive because it has not been trained, and he crowns all by disregarding the canons of conducting as musicians know them, substituting therefor a system of his own made up of interpretative gestures which are meaningful only to his own group.

It is, perhaps, because we as choral conductors deal mainly with amateurs and with amateur musical psychology that more has not been demanded of us. This is unfortunate, for it is the amateur who, above all, needs the stimulus which can only be offered by thoroughly competent training; and proof that such direction alone will produce the best results from an organization of untrained singers may be found by comparing the achievement of the average choral conductor with the ac-

complishment of one who represents everything that we mean by the word "musicianship."

First of all, the choral conductor should have a well-trained ear, quick to detect the many and varied departures from musical accuracy of which even the best choruses are sometimes guilty. Solfège supplies the highest schooling in this particular, but even a simple, systematic course in ear-training will reinforce a department in which many of us are seriously deficient. Without a scientifically trained ear, the choral conductor is at a permanent and serious disadvantage; even with the possession of an acute and discriminating aural sense, the beginner will fail to hear much that is important. Self-consciousness and concern with manifold detail — much of it almost mechanical — will so turn him in upon himself that bad tone, flatting, insecure singing, and even wrong notes will not pierce the armor of his preoccupation. At first, he may be — and often is — quite satisfied if the music simply goes on. Page after page will pass by, filled with a multitude of choral shortcomings of which he may be vaguely aware; some instinct tells him, perhaps, that all is not well, but he is helpless, hypnotized by the mere continuity of the music, and he fears to interrupt it, both because he has only a foggy idea of what is wrong and because, if he stops, he must face two of the beginner's most dreaded problems, finding a convenient place to recommence, and after that, putting the music in motion. Little by little the more intrusive errors will force themselves upon him until gradually he will come to hear not the parts, but the whole, correcting not only technical faults, but instructing in matters of style as well. And when, after long experience of choral music and of singers and their ways, he gains that sixth sense which enables him to detect mistakes *before* they are made, listening not only with the ear, but also with the imagination, he will have attained the full stature of a conductor at least insofar as that indispensable member, a highly trained ear, is concerned.

It would seem that the foregoing might have been taken for granted, so necessary is a sensitive and discriminating ear; there are, however, less obvious essentials, one of which is a knowledge of matters orchestral. It is not pleasant to think how many of us are limited by woeful incompetence in this department. Many works are scored for both orchestra and chorus; in some the instrumental factor is almost if not quite as important as the choral, and a musicianly rehearsing and performance of such works presupposes attainments outside the strictly choral field.[1] Of these, score-reading is certainly one. Few of us, it is to be feared, experience the same degree of confidence when conducting from a "full" score that we feel when dealing with the lucidities of a "vocal" edition. Yet intelligent mastery of a composition, a full comprehension of all that it contains, and the final production of a complete and musicianly rendition depend in the beginning on an understanding of everything that the composer has written down, and on the power to transmit that knowledge clearly and readily from the full score at rehearsals and performances.

Indeed, there is no musical fallacy so common to the uninitiated — unless it be that organ and piano technique are identical — as the delusion that anyone who can train an orchestra can train a chorus, and *vice versa*. The physical motions by which both bodies are led are, to be sure, identical, but the

[1] Expert *a cappella* singing is doubtless the final test of a choral conductor's skill; but in many instances where the orchestra is joined with the chorus, especially in eighteenth-century works, extensive modifications in unaccompanied choral style must be made. These concern pronunciation, tone, and many other details, and it is the task of the choral conductor to apply these modifications wisely. Each composition requires separate consideration in this regard, and each composition must be studied with reference to its total effectiveness. The style of the music, the orchestration, and the balance of importance between orchestra and chorus are germane to the question. One does not, for example, follow the same methods of chorus training for the B minor Mass, the *German Requiem*, the *Israel in Egypt*, and *The Blessed Damosel*.

methods by which each is brought to a state of proficiency are quite unlike. The orchestral conductor is frequently at a loss as to how to produce a certain choral effect, and similarly, the choral conductor is too often unable to achieve anything like finesse in the instrumental part of a choral work. Most orchestral conductors depend on the leader of the chorus to prepare the choral parts of a work for them, but the choral conductor, contemplating a performance involving both voices and instruments to be directed by himself, must assume entire responsibility. We should not rely, as we so often do, on the tolerance and good will of professional orchestral players to compensate for our own deficiencies. This is not to say that choral conductors need aspire to a competence that is born of almost daily contact with orchestral forces, but they should understand the technique and capacity of each instrument, should be able to adjust the balance of sonorities both within the orchestra itself and in conjunction with the chorus, and should have at least an adequate idea of how good orchestral results are obtained. In return for such knowledge, and the tactful exercise of it, the choral conductor may justly expect the sympathetic professional coöperation of the orchestra.

In addition to the study of score-reading, then, the choral conductor should take a practical course in orchestral training; and this work he should pursue up to a point where he can effectively direct all the forces involved and command the respect of all the participants.

But even more than the regard of his co-workers, the choral conductor should esteem his own self-respect as a musician. Many, of course, do achieve measurable results without benefit of those branches of knowledge which do not appear to bear directly on choral training; yet their possession adds to efficiency in untold ways. "What," it may be asked, "is to be gained by a study of musical theory, of form, of harmony and counterpoint? Are these not the composer's business, and, if so, why should it be necessary for the conductor to concern

himself with such details?" The answer is, of course, that an understanding of these branches of music is an essential part of the equipment of every interpreter. The composer is justified in expecting of the conductor an intelligent approach to the technical elements of which his music consists. He furnishes those elements "ready-to-wear" as it were. It remains for the conductor to make those elements articulate; and without a reasonably thorough knowledge of them he cannot properly discharge his responsibility.

Even more important, however, is familiarity with the history of music, especially that part of it which deals with musical literature and styles. More than instinct is needed as a guide to the interpretation of Haydn as a composer different from Palestrina. To present the works of various eras, or even the works of two musicians of the same era, a conductor should familiarize himself with the idiom of each composer as it appears not in one but in many works, setting that idiom, thereafter, against the background of the technical and aesthetic canons of its age.

On the practical side, some ability as a pianist is desirable as well as an intelligent command of the singing voice. In neither field is virtuosity implied, particularly in the case of singing, for there a trained voice is, on the whole, a drawback. There are instances when the leader can instruct much more quickly from the keyboard than from the podium, as, for example, in the early stages of teaching a new and difficult piece, when with even the best accompanists there is bound to be a time-lag where there are frequent corrections. A conductor with a professionally trained voice will more often than not defeat his own intentions because the chorus, not being vocally expert as he is, will nevertheless attempt to match the luster of his illustrations, an especially disastrous type of emulation which can only end by producing the distorted vocal quality inevitable in such circumstances. The effort to superimpose mass voice instruction on a large group is most unwise, partly because all such teaching

involving placement, breath-control, etc., must be applied individually to be effective, and partly because there is no time for any extended drill outside the rehearsing of the music. The conductor does not need to assume the singing teacher's function; all that is necessary is an expressive, well-controlled voice, a kind of common denominator of amateur singing raised to the *n*th power, with which he is enabled to demonstrate to the chorus what he expects from them in return.

While adequate vocal illustration by the conductor may be considered as an essential in chorus training, that is by no means its only virtue. It appreciably diminishes the psychological distance between director and chorus; it makes — or appears to make — instruction much less categorical and, by establishing a reciprocal basis for the work, goes far towards creating that identity of spirit which is requisite to the whole project. To say that conductor and chorus must be in sympathy is not enough. They must be *one*. The conductor should enter into every problem not only as conductor, but as chorister also; sometimes, quite instinctively, he even breathes with his singers, a symbol of his unity with them and of his vigilance in their behalf. Once that unity is established, the chorus, on its part, may be counted on to return a prompt and coöperative response to the conductor's efforts. There are some musicians, alas, who clearly never should have followed the career of choral conducting; they lack the ability to teach, or they suffer from a short-circuited personality to such an extent that they are incapable of a sympathetic approach to their charges. Yet one assumes a grave responsibility in discouraging an unpromising beginner; hopes that he will surmount his personal shortcomings and will blossom forth into an evocative and inspired leader are now and again realized. But without hesitation I should advise anyone who, because of physical limitations, will never be able to express himself provocatively through his singing voice to abandon the study of choral conducting.

Of all the factors, musical and personal, which serve to bring about a community of spirit between conductor and chorus, none is more powerful than the exercise of spontaneous humor. It would be possible to build up an equation having on one side a number of separate qualities which a choral conductor will find indispensable — tact, insight, naturalness of manner, and enthusiasm, for example — and on the other simply humor. But that humor must be subjective as well as objective. The conductor himself, if he is absorbed in his work, will often quite innocently say or do things which amuse the chorus. He suffers no loss of prestige by laughing at himself or even by mimicking himself. A rehearsal should be enjoyable in the widest sense. The conductor or singer who does not anticipate the fun as well as the artistic profit should stay at home. During the course of an hour and a half's rehearsal a score of occasions will arise which suggest some display of humor on the conductor's part, and if those occasions are lost the rehearsal is just so much less a stimulating human enterprise. To take advantage of such occasions is not to waste time; the telling of a story, the interchange of good-humored comment between chorus and conductor, these are the natural accompaniments of a live rehearsal, and they are rewarded by a quickened interest and by better singing.

It should be remembered, too, that the conducting of an amateur chorus is no occupation for the lazy man. The "arm-chair" leader who monotonously intones page, line, and measure numbers, who issues only the necessary corrections and suggestions, and who remains unexcited and impersonal, is inevitably rewarded by "arm-chair" singing. Conducting an amateur chorus is like throwing a rubber ball at a stone wall. There is as much rebound as there is force in the throw. A certain amount of physical exertion must be taken for granted; the easygoing conductor who prefers to sit rather than stand through a rehearsal, and who spares himself every physical exertion, not