

# American Choral Review

Journal of The American Choral Foundation, published by Chorus America | James John, Editor

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *In this issue of American Choral Review David DeVenney writes about two great American conductors, Theodore Thomas and Robert Shaw. Thomas is virtually unknown today, and though he was primarily an orchestral conductor his contribution to the establishment of high-minded musical culture in the United States did much to create an environment in which choruses could grow, thrive and be taken seriously, paving the way for major figures such as Robert Shaw to emerge. In many ways what Thomas did for orchestras in the nineteenth century, Shaw did for choruses in the twentieth, raising standards to a level previously unimaginable while building an enduring and enthusiastic appreciation for the art form in audiences across America—not to mention exerting extraordinary impact on a younger generation of conductors. Robert Burris's new biography of Shaw, *Deep River* (reviewed by DeVenney for this issue), provides insight into Shaw's inner motivations and sheds light on his singular influence.*

## Theodore Thomas: Building American Orchestras and Choirs

BY DAVID P. DEVENNEY

The classical musical landscape in the mid-nineteenth century United States was relatively barren. There were few full-time ensembles devoted to the first-rate performance of classical music, and those orchestras that did exist usually hired their players from dance bands and theatre orchestras, players who often had little experience with or knowledge of symphonic repertoire. Visiting soloists or chamber groups from Europe occasionally supplied music of higher quality, but many, like the violinist Ole Bull,<sup>1</sup> made a great deal of money by pandering to the popular taste for familiar tunes and virtuosic show music. Onto this stage came a young German immigrant, Theodore Thomas, who almost single-handedly built two of the premiere orchestras in the country, in New York and Chicago. He also cultivated a taste for and educated his audiences to appreciate symphonic music of the first rank, and was one of the first conductors to treat the chorus as a serious ensemble and to foster performances of large choral-orchestral works. Sadly, few musicians today are aware of his enormous contributions.



Theodore Thomas

<sup>1</sup>Ole Bull (1810-1880) was a famous Norwegian violin virtuoso and composer. Thomas toured with him in the Western and Southern United States in 1858-59. See *Theodore Thomas: A Musical Autobiography*, ed. George P. Upton, 2 vols. (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1905; reprint in 1 vol., New York: Da Capo Press, 1964), 48 (page citations refer to the reprint edition).

Born in 1835 in Esens, Germany, Thomas was ten when his family sailed for the New World. He soon began playing the violin in theatre orchestras, rising rapidly from section player to concertmaster. Thomas had little formal education and was probably taught to read and write at home. At fourteen, he made a year-long tour of the South, playing his violin in taverns, restaurants, and hotels for anyone who would listen and for anyone who could pay. When he ran out of money, he simply moved on to the next stop. By 1850, he was back in New York where he made a well-received solo debut.

Thomas's reputation spread as his abilities developed, and in 1859 he made his conducting debut in opera. His activities as a conductor increased, and by 1862 led to an association with the Brooklyn Philharmonic Society, where he shared the conducting duties with another man, Theodor Eisfeld until 1866, when he was named principal conductor. Thomas held the Brooklyn post for nearly thirty years.

Although Thomas achieved notable success with the Brooklyn orchestra, he remained dismayed that the group had an unstable membership and that he had little control over artistic matters other than programming, such as contracting with players. Consequently, in 1862, he organized his own ensemble, five years later re-named the Theodore Thomas Orchestra.

In 1864, Thomas initiated a series of symphony soirées with his new orchestra, performing principally in Steinway Hall. Soon, summers for the orchestra were spent giving nightly concerts first in the Terrace Gardens on the east side of Manhattan, and later in Central Park. Initially comprising a number of "popular" selections, Thomas gradually introduced first movements of important symphonies, until finally performing symphonies in their entirety. These nightly concerts, in which Thomas rarely repeated a given work within a season, lasted for a dozen years before losing out to the less refined offerings of the brass and military bands who rode Thomas's coat tails.

As successful as both undertakings were, Thomas remained unable to offer his players enough work to earn a stable living and consequently had difficulty retaining them and building a first-class ensemble. He solved this problem in 1869 by discontinuing the evening concerts during the winter season and touring with his orchestra throughout the Eastern and Midwestern United States. Playing in cities and towns both large and small, along a rail route known as the Thomas Highway, the young conductor was

in this way able to earn enough money to keep his players together and busy, while at the same time educating the nascent American symphony audience, his continuing goal.

Always concerned that the public hear the best of contemporary composers, especially European and to some extent American, Thomas championed the music of Beethoven, Liszt, Wagner, and others—in addition to a staple repertory of Mozart and Haydn. His first all-Wagner program was played in 1870 and throughout his career he premiered works by Wagner and other late Romantic composers around the country. In some cases, he performed these works in America before they had been heard in Europe. Among these, his friend and biographer George P. Upton cites Bruckner's Third and Seventh Symphonies, Franck's Symphony in D Minor, and Dukas's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*.<sup>2</sup> The major choral works he introduced to American audiences included Bach's *Magnificat*, Beethoven's *Choral Fantasy* and Ninth Symphony, Brahms's *Alto Rhapsody*, Bruckner's *Te Deum*, Dvořák's cantata *The Spectre's Bride*, Gounod's oratorios *Redemption* and *Mors et vita*, and Schuman's *Paradise and the Peri*.<sup>3</sup>



*Opening Concert of the Cincinnati May Festival, May 1873*

As Thomas's reputation spread, he received invitations from various cities to conduct. In 1873, he began a series of early summer festivals in Cincinnati, later named the May Festivals, which he continued conducting until the end of his life. It was in Cincinnati that Thomas first had a choral ensemble of the first rank to work with, and he began a series of choral-orchestral performances that even today constitute the backbone of May Festival programming. He was the first conductor to regard the chorus as

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 228.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 353-376 passim.

an artistic ensemble, treating chorus members as capable musicians rather than mimics, summing up his approach as follows:

*I think there is no difficulty in training a chorus if the leader is careful to develop the intelligence of the singers. It has been an old custom to treat a chorus of singers like a body of children, telling them simply to do so and so, or repeat a phrase as directed, as if they were so many bullfinches to whom a tune was whistled. What can you expect from that kind of training? Treat them like bullfinches and they will be little more than a body of those imitators of airs. But if you appeal to their intelligence, force them to read their music and to think it out; directing, not dragging them in the right direction; promptly correcting, but intelligently explaining their errors, you will have, at last, a thoughtful, accomplished body of singers, who comprehend what they undertake and succeed in its accomplishment. Treat them like musicians and they will become musicians.<sup>4</sup>*

In 1876, Thomas was invited to head the musical celebrations of the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. Other invitations led to a series of summer festival concerts in Chicago beginning in 1877, modeled on his earlier concerts in New York's Central Park. An offer to be the Musical Director of the newly formed Cincinnati College of Music came in 1881, which appealed to Thomas: he could continue to work with great choruses and orchestras at the May Festivals, but he could also educate a new generation of students and at the same time regularize his income. Both the Philadelphia and Cincinnati positions were artistically unsatisfactory, however, due in large part to the meddling in musical affairs by the two boards of directors. In Philadelphia, Thomas resigned his duties early due to the poor financial condition of the celebration (but not before commissioning Wagner to write a Centennial March for the Exhibition opening, a third-rate work that Thomas called an insult, for the then grand sum of \$5000). He resigned from the Cincinnati College of Music after only nineteen months to return to active concert life in New York, precipitated by a poorly planned prospectus for the college, and following a series of disagreements with the college's directors.

His return to New York was sweetened by the renewal of an offer to conduct the New York Philharmonic, where he had been a member since 1854. Thomas had rejected the baton in 1874 because the Society's directors were uneasy about ceding control over artistic matters to him, and they were fearful of

competition from Thomas's own orchestra. However, by 1877 the Society was nearly in financial ruin and the directors realized that the only conductor with the personality, public acclaim, and vision to rescue them was Thomas, and they voted overwhelmingly to hand the reins over to him. In his first season, Thomas not only saved the orchestra from immediate ruin, but raised its standards of music making and ensured its financial solvency for the future. He continued to conduct them while working in Cincinnati, and resumed complete control upon his return to New York.

For the next several years, Thomas conducted concerts not only with his own orchestra, but also with those in Brooklyn and New York, leading over one hundred performances a year without repeating repertory (not counting his continuing responsibilities in Cincinnati and Chicago)—a prodigious amount of work for a conductor who, by his own account, insisted on rigorous score study and began his analysis anew each time he conducted a work he had previously performed. Thomas was careful to avoid conflicts of interest among these groups, and with his own ensemble spent most of the time touring away from New York City. He organized “festival” choruses in both Brooklyn and New York in an attempt to replicate the experiences he had in Cincinnati, but these were an administrative burden as well as an artistic one (he insisted on conducting too many choral rehearsals). Eventually, they were discontinued in favor of bringing in outside choruses, like Boston's Handel and Haydn Society, when needed.

One of the most memorable festivals Thomas conducted in New York took place in May 1882. It included a chorus of nearly 2,500 singers made up of Thomas's own New York-Brooklyn chorus, the Handel and Haydn Society of Boston, the Caecilian Society of Philadelphia, the Musical Association Chorus of Worcester, the Oratorio Association of Baltimore and the Choral Society of Reading. Performances took place over a period of five days, and included Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, Handel's *Israel in Egypt* and *Utrecht Jubilate*, Bach's Cantata No. 80 (*Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*), as well as choruses by Liszt, Berlioz and Wagner. A review of *Israel and Egypt* describes the exceptional level of choral excellence achieved by such large forces, and credits Thomas as the driving force behind it:

*This is a body of singers possessing all the good qualities of a chorus in very high degree. Their volume of tone is overpowering. Their purity of tone surpasses everything within our experience. Their precision is irreplaceable. They are*

---

<sup>4</sup>Rose Fay Thomas, *The Memoirs of Theodore Thomas* (New York: Moffat, Yard, and Co., 1911; reprint, Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 195-196.



Theodore Thomas with his orchestra in Steinway Hall, New York City, c. 1890

*never at a loss, never uncertain, never confused, never afraid of their music. They sing with an elegance of expression which would do credit to a glee-club, and a finish of style which artists might envy. What justness of sentiment, what poetical sensibility, they showed in the contrasts of their manners last night...and the whole body took their beautiful style and their animation from Thomas. It did not need this festival to prove that he is not less great as a leader of choruses than as a master of the orchestra, but the fact is now brought home to thousands who have been slow to realize it. To the best of our belief there has never been chorus singing in New York to approach the splendor of what he has given us this week.<sup>5</sup>*

Thomas's activities in New York also included a disastrous three-year stint in 1885 as the director of the American Opera Company, formed to present grand opera in English with a stable cast of singers, in opposition to the star system then in place at other opera companies. But the audience never responded, the enterprise was under-capitalized and badly mis-managed, and it was eventually dismantled under the burden of various lawsuits. Although not financially responsible for the undertaking, Thomas spent a great deal of money defending himself against charges of financial wrongdoing that were later dismissed. A sizeable portion of the failure can be attributed

to Thomas's lack of knowledge regarding operatic conducting, his autocratic podium manner, and his many commitments to other enterprises.

One of Thomas's long-held aims was to find a permanent home for his own orchestra. He realized that it was impossible to successfully lure a permanent audience for symphonic music without a building expressly suited to the physical needs of an orchestra and its audience. While numerous schemes were floated in New York to remedy this situation over the years, they never reached fruition; although Boston, partly due to Thomas's pioneering work there in earlier years, had since founded a permanent orchestra of its own with its own performance hall.

The competing responsibilities of conducting several ensembles took their toll on Thomas (as well as events in his personal life, especially the premature death of his first wife, Minna, in 1889) and he looked for a solution. Opportunity presented itself in 1890, with an invitation from the leading citizens of Chicago to form and conduct a permanent orchestra in that city. He moved the Thomas Orchestra with him as the sixty-member nucleus of the new group, filling out the remaining members with thirty local players. One of the mandates from the Chicago board of trustees was that, as music director, he was "responsible" for maintaining the highest musical standards. No

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 230-232.

more was he encouraged to program lighter literature in order to placate larger audiences, but was told to play only first-rate, serious music.

The Chicago Orchestra first performed in an all-purpose civic auditorium, erected through subscriptions for hosting conventions, musical concerts, and other public events. The 5,000 seat hall was enormous and not acoustically suited to the new symphony. There was the additional problem of so many seats, which made it difficult to sell season subscriptions, as people knew that even at the last minute they would be able to get a seat if they so desired. Nevertheless, Thomas forged ahead undaunted, designing physical changes that helped the acoustics and working hard to draw an audience.

Although successful, the initial seasons annually ran deficits of amounts up to \$50,000, which the trustees dutifully covered, never insisting that Thomas lower his standards in order to make box office receipts cover the shortfall. But the situation showed no signs of improving, and by 1902 Thomas decided that it was time for a bold stroke. He accordingly sent the following letter to the trustees:

*It is useless to attempt to make an orchestra permanent without its own building. I found this to be the case in New York, and was obliged to give up my orchestra there for lack of one. Conditions in Chicago are similar to what they were in New York when I left there. We now have here a large and cultivated public, which demands the highest forms of music, and, I believe, would not be willing to give up the orchestra. But what is everybody's business is nobody's business, and the people will do nothing unless the situation is brought before them very strongly. I therefore ask you to announce to the general public that, unless a sufficient endowment can be raised to provide a suitable building in which to carry on the work of our institution during the next six months, I shall resign my position here and go elsewhere. I take this course because I believe it is the only way to arouse the public to quick and decisive action, and also because if it fails to do so, I think it is better to disband the orchestra now, before it piles up another large debt for the Association to pay.<sup>6</sup>*

A campaign to inform the public was successful and a subscription was raised from nearly 8,000 donors (astonishing both the trustees and Thomas) in support of the plan. The Theodore Thomas Orchestra Hall was opened with a gala concert in late 1904, with

a program that included Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration* and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Thomas had been ill for weeks, but refused to rest until every minor problem of the hall was worked out. His condition worsened and he contracted pneumonia, from which he died on January 4, 1905, having at last achieved his life-long goal of a permanent place of residence for his orchestra.

---

It would be difficult to overestimate Theodore Thomas's contribution to the musical life of the United States. He nearly single-handedly transformed the symphony orchestra of nineteenth-century America into a modern ensemble, raising the standard of musical taste from that of entertainment to an artistic level.

Thomas learned well from his early experiences. From Karl Eckert, the conductor of the Italian Opera Company in New York in 1851, Thomas (who played principal second violin) learned how to manage orchestral players with tact and learned how to run the business side of an orchestra. From Louis Antoine Jullien, the famous European conductor who spent much time in America, Thomas learned how to program to popular tastes without sacrificing musical standards (although he did not like Jullien's P.T. Barnum-like histrionics, feeling that they detracted from the music and insulted the public). It was while playing under Jullien's direction that Thomas remarked that he had learned a great deal about wind instruments, having heard players of which "New York never saw the like, before or since."<sup>7</sup>

It was playing for singers like Jenny Lind and Henrietta Sontag in the Italian Opera Company that Thomas learned most about the quality of sound he could make on his violin. The prevailing tone was often described as harsh and strong, Germanic in character. From these singers, Thomas conceived a tone that was purer, richer, and more sensuous, which he later transferred to his orchestral players.<sup>8</sup>

Thomas's musical legacy in the United States was deep and long-lasting. The defining characteristic of his symphonic performances, what most differentiated his concerts from those of his contemporaries, was undoubtedly his insistence on precise ensemble playing. Toward that end, he insisted on adequate rehearsal and, among other things, he instituted uniform bowings in the string sections, long before such a practice was consistent even in Europe. He was autocratic on the podium, although he treated

---

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 510-11.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 10-11.



1893 Cartoon depicting Thomas, entitled "Harmony Reigns at the World's Fair"

the players fairly and many of them stayed with his orchestra throughout their careers. He detested showmanship, replacing it with seriousness of purpose and well-rehearsed musical nuance.

Around 1900, he initiated a lowering of concert pitch in the orchestras he conducted by a bit more than a half-step, to the so-called "reformed German pitch" of A-435. He gave the wind players two seasons in which to either modify their instruments or purchase new ones. The immediate benefit of this change was a warmer, fuller tone, particularly for the string instruments. The large force of his decision, because of his touring activities and guest conducting of music festivals, meant that every organ in every hall where he played on tour (as well as any player who wanted to play for him) needed to conform to this new standard; so with his decision he standardized musical pitch throughout the country. This obviously applied to choral pitch, as well, since choirs in each of these cities often performed concerts in the halls housing these organs.

In his programming, Thomas championed the music of the great, late Romantic European masters. He also frequently commissioned and performed works by American composers, notably John Knowles Paine, Horatio Parker, George W. Chadwick, Dudley Buck and other leading composers of the late nineteenth century, ensuring that their music would be heard by the public in first-rate performances.

Thomas turned down offers to conduct in Europe, notably from the London Symphony, in order to pursue his goal of founding a permanent symphony orchestra in the United States. His travels to Boston, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and other major cities eventually led to permanent orchestras in each of those cities. The end result of this, especially in Boston, was to lose financially valuable touring destinations for his own group to the new upstarts.

Thomas was a strong advocate for vocal instruction and choral participation both in the church and in the public schools. In a widely-publicized article for *Scribner's Magazine* in 1881, he wrote:

*In considering, therefore, the present condition of musical development in this country, I am led naturally to speak first of vocal music. Although the contrary has been asserted, I think it is in the vocal direction, and not in the instrumental, that the present development of the art tends. We have no public instrumental performers of American birth who can rank with our singers in public estimation, nor is there at present more than a very limited demand for instrumentalists. New York is the only city in the country in which an orchestral player can make a living, and even here he must give lessons or play at balls and parties, thereby losing or injuring the finer qualities of an orchestral player.<sup>9</sup>*

Thomas felt that, in developing a national musical culture, the place to begin was not with orchestras but with singing as the basis for a fuller flowering of the musical art. His commitment to programming choral-orchestral masterworks was founded on the belief that they opened "a new world of musical thought" to the "intellectually active man or woman" who performed them,<sup>10</sup> and he was able to inspire amateur symphonic choruses to attain the same level of professionalism that he achieved with his orchestras.

No conductor contributed as much as Theodore Thomas to the early concert life of this country; few

<sup>9</sup>Theodore Thomas, "Musical Possibilities in America," *Scribner's Magazine*, March 1881; reprinted in *Theodore Thomas: A Musical Autobiography*, 265-75.

<sup>10</sup>Rose Fay Thomas, *The Memoirs of Theodore Thomas*, 196.

others—indeed, not until Leonard Bernstein’s efforts nearly three-quarters of a century later—can trump his educational efforts. Thomas created and fostered an educated audience for serious music and prepared an orchestral ensemble capable of playing the finest music in a world-class manner. To Thomas goes much credit for the rapid growth and development of symphonic and choral-orchestral music performances in the late nineteenth century. His efforts to secure the scores of new works from leading European composers, and his nurturing of American composers, were ceaseless. Add to these his popular transcription of works by older masters such as Bach, his frequent performances of Mozart and Beethoven, and his calls for wide-spread music education in the schools, and the significance of his contribution to the history of music in American life begins to be appreciated.

### Selected Bibliography

- Curtis, George W. “Farewell to Theodore Thomas.” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, November 1878, 934-5.
- Fay, C. Norman. “The Theodore Thomas Orchestra.” *The Outlook*, 22 January 1910, 159-69.
- Frank, Leonie C. *Musical Life in Early Cincinnati and the Origin of the May Festival*. Cincinnati: Ruter Press, 1932.
- Hassard, J. R. G. “Theodore Thomas.” *Scribner’s Monthly*, February 1875, 458-66.
- Holliday, Joseph E. “The Musical Legacy of Theodore Thomas.” *Cincinnati Historical Society Bulletin* 27 (Fall 1969): 191-205.
- Kellogg, Clara Louise. *Memoirs of an American Prima Donna*. New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1913. Reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1978.
- Orchestral Association, Chicago. *Biography of an Orchestra: An Affectionate Look at Eighty Years of Music and Life in Chicago*. Chicago: Orchestral Association, 1971.
- Rice, Edwin T. “Thomas and Central Park Garden.” *Musical Quarterly* 26 (April 1940): 43-51.
- Russell, Charles Edward. *The American Orchestra and Theodore Thomas*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1927.
- Russell, T. C. “Theodore Thomas: His Role in the Development of Musical Culture in the United States, 1835-1905.” Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1969.
- Shabas, Ezra. *Theodore Thomas: America’s Conductor and Builder of Orchestras, 1835-1905*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989.
- Thomas, Rose Fay. *The Memoirs of Theodore Thomas*. New York: Moffat, Yard, and Co., 1911. Reprint, Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1971.
- Thomas, Theodore. *Theodore Thomas: A Musical Autobiography*. Edited by George P. Upton. 2 vols. Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1905. Reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1964.
- Thomas, Theodore and Frederick Stock. *Talks about Beethoven’s Symphonies*. Edited by Rose Fay Thomas. Boston: Oliver Ditson, 1930.
- Whistler, H. S. *The Life and Work of Theodore Thomas*. Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1942.

NB: Schabas’s readily available biography of Thomas lists a thorough and annotated bibliography of writings about the conductor, including dozens of period newspaper articles, concert reviews, and other source materials.

---

## Recent Books

REVIEWED BY DAVID P. DEVENNEY

Keith C. Burris. *Deep River: The Life and Music of Robert Shaw*. Chicago: GIA Publications, 2013. xxvi, 631 pp.

My brief acquaintance with Robert Shaw came in 1989 at the University of Cincinnati, when I was completing work on my doctorate in choral conducting. Shaw was in town that spring to conduct the May Festival, and, in addition to observing several of his rehearsals, he had a short meeting with the graduate choral conductors. Of course, many of my conducting friends knew and worked with Shaw, some for many years. One of my colleagues in the choral studies

program later returned to Atlanta to become one of his assistants. And of course I had got to know Shaw the conductor partly from the many recordings I had heard over the years.

But apart from these fleeting acquaintances, I was never able to know Shaw the man, nor the whole musician. I am pleased to say that after reading Burris’s new biography, I feel that that deficiency has been remedied. I had read Joseph Mussulman’s excellent biography, *Dear People...Robert Shaw* (Indiana, 1979) some years ago and have returned to it several times. It is highly readable and perhaps even better with

some of the day-to-day details that Burris omits in favor of a larger portrait. But it has the obvious flaw of being written nearly two decades before Shaw's death in 1999. There is also the collection of Shaw's letters, *The Robert Shaw Reader* (Yale, 2004) edited by Robert Blocker. These are highly useful in getting to know Shaw the musician. But it is still difficult to find much of Shaw the man inside them.

And this, in the end, is what Burris's *Deep River* does admirably. He states in the preface that the art of biography is, by nature, incomplete and a writer can form only a partial portrait of one's subject, and not the whole man. Still, I came away from reading this book with a much better understanding of Shaw, what made him "tick," how he worked, the demons that sometimes drove him, and how he achieved his many successes. Burris shows both flaws and triumphs—largely explaining, along the way, how the latter overcame and were in part driven by the former.

Raised in a preacher's household and surrounded by music (lots of it church music), Shaw began to lose his intense interest in organized religion while a student at Pomona College. It was here that he began, with a mentor's help, to replace the religion of his parents with his own—a religion of music, Burris argues, eventually centered on the core repertory of Shaw's working life, the large choral-orchestral works of Berlioz, Beethoven, Brahms, Britten, and others.

*Shaw found at Pomona the near antithesis to the religion of his childhood—the religion of his father and mother and grandfather. He then built upon it and created a belief system of his own. In time, he added two key elements that were entirely his own... : an outright hostility towards organized Christianity, which Shaw came to feel had not only obscured, but cheapened, perverted, and commercialized Jesus; and a substitution of the arts for the church. For Shaw, the arts, especially music, and more specifically choral music, became the proper medium for religious contemplation and praise. (p. 52)*

Throughout his life, Shaw actively sought out mentors and teachers, helping to fill in the holes in his knowledge about music, its structure, how to work with instruments, and other topics he felt he lacked sufficient knowledge of due to his lack of formal musical training. He got his start in New York City with Fred Waring, from whom Shaw learned about the importance of text and its place at the center of singing. Their work in radio also taught Shaw a sense of time—how to control it and how it "spins out" in the listener's ear. While working for Waring, his choirs were heard by Toscanini, who was Shaw's first mentor in "serious"

music making. It was about this time that Shaw founded both the Collegiate Chorale and the Robert Shaw Chorale, two vehicles that allowed him to explore music in differing ways (one larger group, one smaller), and which led quite naturally to working with the professional instrumentalists he hired to accompany his programs. From his concentrated score study with Julius Herford—especially the works of Bach—Shaw learned about musical form and structure. Leaving New York for a position with the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra and George Szell, Shaw became more comfortable working with instrumentalists, coming to understand them more fully, if not as completely or instinctively as he understood the voice and its purposes. Shaw's move to Atlanta, which surprised many of his colleagues and friends, was his foray into building (largely from scratch) the forces that he enjoyed in Cleveland—a first-rate orchestra and chorus—testing himself, in a way, to see if it was possible.

Burris, in an early chapter, describes a world we no longer inhabit: the cultural scene in America in the 1920s and 1930s, from which Shaw emerged. Outside of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and a few smaller cities, culture in the larger sense (full-time symphony orchestras, opera companies, art museums) was absent. Radio brought with it more opportunity for some arts experiences, but one needed to travel to or live in these few places in order to lead a life rich in the arts. Shaw, among others, was desperate to change that. In particular, he wanted to change choral music. "Shaw's own part in the beginning of American classical music concentrated primarily on choral music—raising the standard for vocal musicianship and establishing the audience for choral masterworks, both live and on record. But his role was deeper than that. He was an integral part of a tradition that was creating itself." (p. 102) His many tours and radio programs with the Robert Shaw Chorale made the choir a household name, simultaneously setting a standard for choral singing while creating an audience base for the art form.

Burris debunks those who would be anointed as the "next" Robert Shaw by pointedly—and rightly—insisting that there is no "next." What Shaw created and the means by which he did so are not reproducible: Shaw changed the choral medium and, once changed, there is no way to repeat or continue the task. His contributions, by their nature, were *sui generis*.

*When asked late in life whether he minded being remembered as a "choral master" instead of, simply, a musical master, Shaw would say "no" (20 years before, it would have been "yes"). Shaw said that the composer Paul Hindemith had told him that one day people would see that choral*



*music was the highest form of music, hence choral conducting must be the highest form of conducting. Shaw probably laughed when he heard this, and he may also have been editing what Hindemith said, but this is what Shaw himself had come to believe.* (pp. 117-18)

Shaw's legacy is still being defined, but Keith Burris has gone to some lengths to cement it. He suffuses his portrait of Shaw with letters, anecdotes, stories, and recollections, many of them told here for the first time. In addition to over five hundred pages of prose, Burris provides a great deal of intriguing information in the appendices: a Shaw timeline; listings of his core repertory; his most important recordings, including those with Toscanini; two sermons Shaw gave as a college student in his father's church; meditations on Bach; Shaw's connections to African-Americans and their music; details on the Chorale tours; and a list of his music commissions and premieres. There is also a wonderful DVD included with the book, of Shaw rehearsing the Brahms *Requiem* at Boston University near the end of his life.

I will admit to being somewhat skeptical when opening the pages of this book, because it is written not by a musician but a journalist. Would he get the "music" correct? I am pleased to say that, by and large, Burris did. That said, I would have appreciated a firmer hand from the editors and better copy-editing. Burris repeats certain ideas many times. While sometimes the repetition occurs in a different context, it rarely changes the meaning of his prose, nor offers new

insight into his subject; indeed, after a while it simply becomes tedious. Take this paragraph, for example:

*Music was not Shaw's profession, but his calling. More, it was not just a religion substitute, psychologically—something to throw himself into and fill himself up with. For Shaw, music was faith. He felt divine presence at the moment he stepped aside in a performance and the music exerted "its own grace."* (p. 412)

It is an elegant summary of Shaw's psyche and offers insight into the man. However, by this point in the book one has encountered (more or less) that same paragraph at least a dozen times—and there are still nearly 150 pages left to read! Is this a major flaw? No; but what is an interesting and enjoyable, even necessary book to read, might have become, with more judicious editing, compelling. Deep River remains an excellent and thoroughly useful tome. It should be on the shelves of every conductor working today.

*David P. DeVenney is Professor of Music and Director of Choral Activities at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. His research into American choral music, particularly of the nineteenth century, has been ongoing for more than thirty years. DeVenney is the author of numerous books, including Varied Carols: A Survey of American Choral Literature, the only comprehensive survey of choral music in the United States from colonial times through the twentieth century, as well as a three-volume series of textbooks on conducting.*

**James John**, *Editor*  
Aaron Copland School of Music  
Queens College, The City University of New York

*Editorial Board*

**Michael Alan Anderson**  
Eastman School of Music

**David DeVenney**  
West Chester University

**William Weinert**  
Eastman School of Music

Multiple back issues of the AMERICAN CHORAL REVIEW and RESEARCH MEMORANDUM SERIES are available through Chorus America. Back issues of the AMERICAN CHORAL REVIEW are available to members at \$7.50; back issues of the RESEARCH MEMORANDUM SERIES at \$2.00. Bulk prices will be quoted on request. All requests for back issues and index listings should be made to the American Choral Foundation, c/o Chorus America, 1156 15th Street NW, Suite 310, Washington, D.C. 20005. (202) 331-7577. An index to all volumes of the American Choral Review can be found at <chorusamerica.org>. Proposals for articles may be addressed to James John, D.M.A., Associate Professor, Aaron Copland School of Music, Queens College-CUNY, 65-30 Kissena Blvd., Flushing, NY 11367, or <jmsjhn@aol.com>.