

FEATURE

B r i n g i n g a

Robert Shaw and the

M u s i c a l M o n u m e n t

Carnegie Hall Professional

T o L i f e

Training Workshops

By Carol Thomson Clements

Witnessing renowned conductor Robert Shaw working with a chorus, one beholds the almost magical transformation that occurs as an assortment of voices gradually materializes into a single psyche, creating a massive instrument of overwhelming power and expressivity. The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chorus and the Robert Shaw Festival Singers provide but two examples of extraordinarily refined and flexible vocal music-making under the direction of Shaw, progressively extending the parameters of choral expertise. The technical methods he employs to achieve his musical aims are not magic in themselves, but the results defy replication when the force of his artistic personality is factored in.

Still, much can be learned from the two videos released thus far of *Robert Shaw: Preparing a Masterpiece* as part of the Carnegie Hall Professional Training Workshops. Both are fascinating documents of Shaw at work. The first volume covers the rehearsals and performance of A German Requiem by Johannes Brahms in honor of the Carnegie Hall Centennial. In the more recent volume, Shaw leads the chorus through the bewildering intricacies of Ludwig van Beethoven's Missa Solemnis, Opus 123 in preparation for the culminating performance in Carnegie Hall with vocal soloists and the Orchestra of St. Luke's.

It almost goes without saying in choral circles that the Missa Solemnis is extremely awkward to sing. In 1840, British music critic George Hogarth wrote the following in regard to the work:

The mass was generally regarded as an incomprehensible production, the depths of which (if they really were depths) it was impossible to fathom. This opinion, I confess, I adopted; but however mistaken, it was conscientiously formed. Nobody in England tried to perform it...

Shaw has had a long association with Missa Solemnis, from his early days under Julius Herford to his tenure with the Collegiate Chorale and later in preparing choruses for Arturo Toscanini. In talking with Robert Shaw, it is apparent that he gives its difficulties just due. Once a chorus has tackled its formidable challenges, he feels that the mass really deserves to be performed more than once: "You don't get the Missa Solemnis ready and then push it off the desk — it's too big a work. Obviously, the preparation of the thing calls for a little bit of conductorial common sense in not wearing out the voices in the first fifteen minutes of rehearsal. It's very demanding of the human voice."

Both videos devote considerable time to Shaw's method of "conserv-

ing vocal gold," as he puts it. Elements of pitch, rhythm and nuance are addressed separately, at a soft dynamic level. His well-known technique of count singing, in which the chorus sings correct pitches using the syllables "one and two and tee and four and —" establishes ensemble precision before text is added. That precision is particularly critical for the Beethoven, which requires extraordinary vocal agility. How are the requirements of the Beethoven different from that of the Brahms? Shaw's response comes as somewhat of a surprise: "The Beethoven demands a sort of athleticism, a lot of vigor, vitality and ability to move rapidly, but it doesn't call all the time for the rich resonance — the rich dark brown creamy color that the Brahms profits from. I find it less demanding than the Brahms Requiem, because the Brahms demands a richness of color that's sort of unceasing."

Shaw also makes important distinctions between the two works in the role requirements of the voices vis-a-vis the instruments: "There is a lot more responsibility in the Brahms Requiem to get the instruments to sing than there is to get the singers to play — and in the Beethoven, there is a lot more responsibility to get the singers to play than there is to get the instrumentalists to sing," he remarks. "I think this getting instrumentalists to sing and singers to play is a sort

of rephrasing of a quote from Toscanini who used to say to his orchestra, 'Sing, you pigs!' He was always trying to get his orchestra to sing, and one of the problems with the choral instrument is that it's a mushy instrument, and particularly en masse, there's such an overlapping of imprecisions, that everything begins to be blurred a little bit. So you have everybody shorten their articulation so that they can land on successive eighth notes at the same time."

The *Missa Solemnis* has endured some hostile criticism due to its improbable length and alleged inappropriateness for church use, according to musicologist Denis McCaldin. Shaw finds its subjective treatment of the mass text endlessly intriguing. He views Beethoven's conception of the work as "kind of iconoclastic — breaking up of the mass text not into its theological elements, but the bringing in of *ideas* — in sort of a breath of freedom and of almost secularism — the freedom of the human mind that came with the Renaissance." The outcome is a sort of reversal of the creator and creation. "As man is made in God's image, in a certain sense Beethoven is making God in man's image. The almost Satanic vitality of the life after death that ends both the Gloria and the Credo — those extraordinarily vital measures would incline one to say, 'Look, if it's going to be that busy, I don't want to go!'"

The participants in the Carnegie Hall choral workshops are selected by competitive audition, and include choral conductors, auditors and members of the Robert Shaw Festival singers. The majority of them have a history of working with Shaw, some going back forty years. "By the time you get to be my age," he notes, "and with as much teaching as I've done around at universities, and as many festivals, there's an enormous backlog of people who have sung with me." Interspersed with rehearsal and performance footage in the videos are brief interviews with the soloists and choristers, some of whom are obviously familiar with Shaw, (particularly in the Brahms video), and a few of those singing under him for the first time. The

viewer of either of the videos quickly discerns that the participants are first-rate musicians and well-versed in Shaw's techniques. In reference to the first rehearsal in the Beethoven video, he says, "Within fifteen seconds it was clear that everybody knew what to expect in terms of warmup — they knew how to count sing. All of these tools, particularly in the last dozen years, have had such a currency in the United States with other conductors using the same methods, that the conducting world is well prepared to use those tools now."

While there are basic similarities, there are also some striking differences between the Beethoven and the Brahms videos. The Beethoven tape is 90 minutes long, concisely tying together the rehearsal and performance footage, interviews, and voice-overs. At 160 minutes, the Brahms video takes a more leisurely (albeit occasionally ponderous) approach, giving the viewer the feel of a moment-by-moment account of the workshop. Although it becomes protracted at times, the experience of watching the Brahms video is more akin to actually participating in rehearsals and working with Shaw. There is more sweat and spontaneity. We see the ensemble count singing until nearly the end. Chorus members are depicted in all of their incorrigible humanity as they frolic to and from rehearsals and the performance. The *Missa Solemnis* video is tighter and more analytical, the camera periodically training its lens on the musical score and lingering just long enough on each segment to communicate its essential points. A highlight only to be found on the Brahms video is a series of seminars led by Shaw in which he fields questions from workshop participants, providing yet another personal angle, one that gives substantial insight into the "why" as well as the "how" of his approach.

Due to financial and union considerations, the performance footage in both videos is limited. To devote more time to coverage of the performance would have been a frustrating endeavor in any case as the sound quality of videotape is unable to do justice to the glorious acoustics of Carnegie Hall. Furthermore, a video record consisting mostly of performance would be missing the point. In the Carnegie Hall Workshops, the focus is on intensity of the process, not just on the product. "One works with a choir like Atlanta — I haven't been doing it as much as I had been in the early years, but one works with it for a whole year every Monday night, nine months out of the year. You still don't have as much experience in any three or four months as these people got in three or four days." Reflecting on the workshop, Shaw attests that "I can't imagine a group that would be more stimulating to conduct than that group." In both volumes of *Robert Shaw: Preparing a Masterpiece*, the enthusiasm with which the singers celebrate the learning experience with Shaw and honor the music itself underscores how mutual that feeling is. □



Robert Shaw conducting the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra