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## Preface

Shortly before the opening of the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood, Serge Koussevitzky, its director, decided that the special occasion called for a special ceremony. The inaugural piece he commissioned, written and presented on the spur of the moment, became a veritable symbol of American choral singing — Randall Thompson's *Alleluia*. Characteristic of the composer's style, the work is at the same time characteristic of a fundamental process in twentieth-century music by which the choral art regained the stage. With the decline of the symphonic ideals of post-Romanticism, choral music rose again to the role of a principal creative medium, and such European names as Kodály, Vaughan Williams, Pepping, and Distler found their American counterparts, represented above all by one name: Randall Thompson.

The chapters of this volume were reprinted from two earlier volumes, which appeared as special issues of the *American Choral Review*.<sup>1</sup> One of these, planned as an offering at the occasion of the composer's seventy-fifth birthday, contained articles by colleagues and friends; the other, issued at the time when Randall Thompson had completed his eightieth year, was a selection of his own essays. The latter, written for the most part as much as twenty years earlier, were newly cast in the form of readings in which the composer presented comments on his texts to David Francis Urrows, his assistant, who acted as compiler of these essays.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*The Choral Music of Randall Thompson*, Volume XVI, Number 4 (October, 1974), *Randall Thompson: On Choral Composition*, compiled by David Francis Urrows, Volume XXII, Number 2 (April, 1980).

<sup>2</sup>The comments appear in italic type. The essays were concluded with an article written by the compiler, which also concludes this reprint. The reference to "the present volume" appearing on page 81, and left unchanged in this printing, is therefore to be understood as applying to the original publication of Randall Thompson's essays, *American Choral Review*, Volume XXII, Number 2. The references to Volume XVI, Number 4 contained in this same article were consequently also left unchanged.

Elliot Forbes and James Haar, contributors to the earlier of the two mentioned volumes, were close associates of the composer during the years he served on the faculty of Harvard University, the former being the author of the article on Randall Thompson in the recently published Sixth Edition of *Grove's Dictionary*. The editor was Randall Thompson's assistant while he held the directorship of the Curtis Institute of Music.

A span of more than half a century is covered by the works discussed in these pages. "Randall Thompson has created his own legacy," writes David Francis Urrows, "a legacy that is personal for the sake of sharing his experience with others and that will remain of ineffable quality."

— A.M.

# Writing for the Amateur Chorus

## A CHANCE AND A CHALLENGE

At the height of the Renaissance, Lorenzo de' Medici wrote a wonderful poem which opens with these words:

Chi non è innamorato  
Esca da questo ballo.

It is easy Italian, but a hard couplet to put into English. One might say it meant "Anybody not in love will now please quit the ballroom." Or: "Let anyone who is not lovesick leave the dance floor."

I quote this because, by analogy, if there is anyone here who is not in love with choral music, now is his chance to slip away. If he is not in love with choral singing, let him leave. I am a passionate devotee of choral music. I always have been. But as I set out to tell you what I think and feel about it, I must warn you: I'm on fire about it; and if you don't want to hear what a fanatic has to say on the subject, please go away.

*These opening remarks of an address delivered before a meeting of the Intercollegiate Music Council at Yale University in May, 1959, had a curious effect: though written with the best intent, they were frowned upon by some of my distinguished listeners who had doubtless not expected such a tone. The discrepancy of opinion showed that choral music and choral composition had arrived at a crossroads in America, and this phenomenon had arrested my particular interest.*

The history of music has taken many turns. Sociological factors, political events, historical incidents, philosophical ideas have changed its course, conditioned its content, brought about its popularity, enlarged its scope, determined its media, opened opera houses, closed churches, closed opera houses, opened churches, silenced — then released — singers, forbidden the intrusion of folk music, then made folk-music a rock on which to build.

*It is only today that the latter remark might be construed as a pun. But if so, its truth holds: "Rock" has become one of the many new departures — one*

*that is characteristic of the constant regeneration of music with which I was here concerned.*

The ups and downs of music — and of the evolution of music — have been at once more violent and more abrupt than those of any other art. Sometimes it took centuries to effect any change at all; sometimes change was effected overnight. In the United States we have witnessed a mighty change — and a relatively quick one. What has happened in the last hundred years in this country is more rapid than ever happened in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, or the Baroque. This, of course, has to do with the situation of a young country. But, as Oscar Wilde said, “People have been saying that for 300 years.” And of course they are perfectly right.

It is natural that we should not, from the moment Columbus landed, have produced a “school” of musical composition. Columbus didn’t stay very long; he didn’t come here to teach music.

*It is tempting to pause here and reflect for a moment upon what would have happened if Columbus had tried to share with the Noble Savage the art of music of that day — the mysteries of vocal counterpoint. He would have had a hard time, if my own experience in trying to teach the natives five hundred years later is any criterion.*

Five hundred years is a long time. We made very little progress for about four hundred of those five hundred years. True, our early singing teachers gave us a modicum of musical literacy; true, there are fine documents of creative strength in early American choral music; true, the Handel and Haydn Society was founded in 1815, only a few years after Haydn’s death.

By and large, however, we built our towns and our churches without any serious consideration of the music of Tallis, Byrd, Weelkes, Wilbye, Purcell — or of Monteverdi, Corelli, Vivaldi, Couperin, Rameau, Bach, or Handel. They lived and died without this country paying any attention to them. Thomas Jefferson’s musical library extended from works of Purcell’s father (also a composer) to Weber’s *Der Freischütz*. But Jefferson was an exceptionally cultivated man. It would be unfair to expect many of his compatriots to have had such breadth of musical interest. Throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century, the level of musical cultivation was extremely low, with only one or two exceptions and only two or three torchbearers.

Our debt to those torchbearers can never be repaid — how they fought and how much of the expansion of music in this country is

due to them! I think of Oscar Sonneck, of John Knowles Paine, of Frank Damrosch, whose Oratorio Society at the turn of the century sang his editions of Lassus, Palestrina, Gabrieli. I think of Thomas Whitney Surette and of two outstanding leaders in twentieth-century college choral music: Marshall Bartholomew and Archibald T. Davison.

I could hardly hope to portray the struggle and the enlightened guidance that has brought about the present totally new state of choral music and through it, I believe, of all music in America. The truth is that while many a serious composer has been working in seclusion — doubtless producing fine works — a whole new medium of expression has come into being: nobody ever before had such a medium of communication as composers have today in the amateur chorus.

There are now an immense number of amateur choruses in this country — college and civic choirs, glee clubs and madrigal groups extend across the face of this continent. They have high musical ideals, high musical ambitions. They want to excel: excel in what they sing and in the way they sing it. This is a very special phenomenon of the twentieth century. An immense offering of work and great enthusiasm went into creating it. As a result, here is a new and a truly vast outlet for composers.

Now, composers are very special. They grumble about having no “market”; they grumble about being “unappreciated.” Granted, they may be unappreciated. But *not* granted they have no “market.” Nothing could be farther from the truth: boys and girls, men and women all across the country and around the world are ready and waiting, eager for new music to perform, fully as eager for it as an Esterházy prince ever was to have a new quartet!

In point of fact, the “outlet” for composers, their “market,” is far larger than you and I could possibly estimate with any degree of accuracy. Great though it is, it will be much larger when capable leaders, desperately needed, move into hitherto silent, inert, potentially musical, vocal communities and “unlock their silent throats.” This will have to come to pass. There are many more choral groups that want to sing well — and could sing well — than there are good choral conductors to lead them. And the end is not in sight.

*Though written twenty years ago, this statement still holds true. The reason is in large part the greatly raised general level of musical education: while a new generation of choral conductors and while professional choruses have come into being, the demand for choral music continues to grow. But a*

*principal reason is the quality of choral music itself. And this is a point that particularly occupied my mind at the time.*

What do these people like to sing? Not an antiquated, trite repertory. They want to sing William Byrd, Bach, Beethoven, Berlioz, Brahms. Above all they want to sing more *a cappella* music.

Now there are two things about *a cappella* music. The first is that no chorus can really sing well with an orchestra, or even with piano or organ, until it can sing well by itself without accompaniment. The second is that if a chorus can sing well *a cappella*, a vast body of beautiful music is opened up to it. The whole *a cappella* literature from Dunstable to Monteverdi and extending into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is the chorus's private domain.

For a long time we did not realize this. Much was done to bring great choral music to our attention, and it did a great deal of good. Men's colleges, taking the lead, sang many hitherto unheard masterpieces. But it was only a step in the right direction, as those responsible for it were the first to say.

I would defend the sensitive "arrangement" of great choral music — the transposition, the change of color and range. I would also defend the good arrangement of folk music — really, for centuries, a subdivision of choral composition. Arrangements can be very useful. But they have their limitations, and they can be carried too far. The chief value of choral arrangements was, and still is, that they enabled choruses of men's voices or of women's voices to enlarge their limited repertoires and thus broaden their experience through acquaintance with a great literature. As co-education has spread in this country, the old-fashioned *Männerchor* organizations and ladies' singing societies have become far less common and far less popular.

In a way this is a pity, for there is a fine literature for men's voices and for women's voices alone. It is to be hoped that this literature will never fall into disuse or neglect. The literature for mixed voices is infinitely larger, and greater; and the last hundred years or so have gradually put within easy reach a vast literature of music for mixed voices — sacred and secular — music of infinite variety, music of ineluctable beauty. Whole sets of musical monuments have appeared and are still appearing: English, French, Flemish, German, Spanish, Italian — chansons, madrigals, masses, motets. When I was in college, I procured with some difficulty a handful of Monteverdi's madrigals. Now his whole output is accessible to all. More and more octavo editions appear annually; more and more choral conductors prepare their own working editions. Indeed, I sometimes wonder whether it is co-education that is responsible for



the increasing popularity of mixed choruses or whether the beauty of the literature has brought more and more co-educational choruses into being, nourished and sustained them. At any rate, this particular phenomenon — the proliferation of mixed choruses — did not occur, and could not have occurred, a hundred years ago. There would not have been anything to compare with the glory of the presently available literature, either in quality or in extent. Is it too much to say that the literature itself has been the dominant creative and sustaining force in the formation and flourishing of one mixed chorus after another?

Why, under these circumstances, with this unparalleled outlet within easy reach, *why* has there not sprung up in this country a *bona fide* school of choral composers? We hear about the “cultural explosion,” but no such “school” has emerged. Of all the many possible reasons for this lack, I am going to select a few and elaborate on each one of them briefly.

1) *The tyranny of the Doctrine of Absolute Music.* This aesthetic fallacy has retarded choral composition in this country more than any other single factor. It has even done harm to the creation of absolute music, because an instrumental style unleavened by the knowledge and experience of writing for voices can become over-instrumental, even turgid, and in effect lose touch with the human spirit. Let me state at once that I consider, for example, Beethoven’s C-sharp Minor Quartet one of the greatest achievements in music or, for that matter, in all art. It is, unimpeachably, absolute music. But think how much choral music Beethoven had written before he wrote the C-sharp Minor Quartet. Yet an absolute doctrine of absolute music persists in our day. It does infinite harm to choral music.

*It may have been the matter of folk music arrangements, mentioned a little earlier, from which the division of opinion between some members of the audience and myself took its point of departure. But more likely it was this argument of a doctrine of absolute music. Though there was obviously no such intention, it might be applied to the orientation of some of my critics.*

2) A second impediment to choral composition is the *difficulty of applying contemporary compositional techniques to writing for chorus.* Modern idioms — the insistence on dissonance and super-chromaticism, on fitful and irregular rhythms; the vogue for intensity and a peryading *martellato* style (so accented throughout that there remains virtually no accentuation at all); the Romantic cultural lag that characterizes many a new work, a total absence of “inner check”; a ranting in tone or an equally excessive quietism — all such stylistic

traits do not lend themselves *a priori* to the medium of the chorus. And as in writing for any medium, so in writing for chorus: it behooves the composer to understand the characteristics, the limitations and the capabilities of his chosen medium.

3) Certain other reasons have worked against the development of choral literature in this country. Writing for voices shows, for instance, quicker than anything else (except perhaps writing for string quartet) the *shortcomings in a composer's technique*; one reason why we have no "school" of choral composers (such as existed, in one period or another, in virtually every European country from the fourteenth through the twentieth century) may be that our young composers haven't acquired sufficient technical equipment. (Of course one never has!)

Meanwhile, many a composer — young and old — has a hard time earning enough to live on. In this I feel real sympathy for them. But my sympathy gives out when they shake their fists at a cruel world and say, "My art is not *wanted*; it is not *appreciated*; there is no *place* for the artist in contemporary civilization." As with Caesar and Brutus, the fault is not in their stars but in themselves. The acts of humility that they must undergo to enter "In diese heil'gen Hallen" may be hard for them to submit to. But it would be wonderful if they would and did.

Let us consider what trials, what tests these young Taminos must undergo.

The first thing that they should realize is this: many of the greatest composers' greatest works are choral, and they can all be sung by amateurs. What would be the good of writing a choral piece that only professionals could sing? If a piece is too difficult for amateurs to sing, the chances are that it is not good enough. It would be a terrible indictment of contemporary schools of composition if, in this respect, they were accused of failing to do what their forebears did so well.

*This is probably the hardest statement to maintain in my discussion now that another twenty years have passed. They have brought the developments of the modern professional chorus and of totally new choral idioms inspired by it. Perhaps the best comment I could offer is that these new idioms characterize the problem: they are predominantly developments of the Sprechstimme, of sounds that the human voice can produce besides singing. The best way to restate my point might be: the farther we move from the natural limitations of the human voice, the farther we move from the nature-given laws of music.*