GAIL BURNAFORD  
Florida Atlantic University

The legacy of Choral Director  
Robert Shaw: Beyond  
technique to music in  
communities

ABSTRACT
The article examines Choral Director Robert Shaw’s approach and explores whether these innovations constitute a lasting legacy for amateurs and community singers beyond the world of professional choral directors. After a brief biographical overview of Shaw’s contributions and achievements, the author outlines four specific innovations attributed to Shaw and his work with choruses all over the world. The author sang with Shaw for ten years and introduces her own personal notes from musical scores, as well as videos and Shaw’s Dear People letters to describe his preparation and warm-up approaches, attention to the spiritual in music, use of metaphorical and imagistic language to teach choirs, and his explicit belief in the power of community in choral singing.

KEYWORDS
choral music  
amateur chorus  
community  
choral technique  
choral director  
music education

I am a professor in a college of education, not a choral director. I sang with Robert Shaw in the Atlanta Symphony Chorus and Chamber Chorus for ten years, from 1978 to 1988, and have been thinking about Keller’s questions for over a decade, not because I am curious about the lasting impact on choral directors, but because I am interested in what amateurs and audiences, people like me, can glean that informs our lives and our work. So, in order to start writing, I reread my own musical scores filled with scribbled quotes from hundreds of rehearsals with the maestro. I reviewed the Dear People letters that he wrote to his choruses through the years and viewed the set of nine DVDs commissioned by Carnegie Hall between 1990 and 1998, in which Shaw brought together choral directors from around the country to focus in less than a week’s time on preparing and performing the Brahms Requiem. ‘There is only one Robert Shaw and we want to share him with as many people as possible’, Judith Aaron, Executive Director of Carnegie Hall, noted in the DVD series, who is that ‘one Robert Shaw’ and why should we care about his legacy?

ROBERT SHAW’S LIFE AND WORK

Robert Shaw was born on 30 April 1916 in Red Bluff, CA. For more than half a century, he set the standard of excellence for choral music. Shaw conducted the Fred Waring singers, his first chorus, in his early twenties, and then served as music director of the San Diego Symphony Orchestra until he was recruited by George Szell to conduct the choral section of the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra. He served under Szell for eleven years, during which time he shaped the Cleveland Chorus. The Italian conductor Arturo Toscanini was conducting Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony with his NBC Symphony Orchestra. After hearing the chorus, which had been prepared by Robert Shaw, perform the fourth movement, Toscanini turned to his players and said, ‘In Robert Shaw I have at last found the maestro I have been looking for’. He founded the Robert Shaw Chorale in New York in 1948, and is most familiar to audiences for his arrangements and recordings of familiar Christmas music.

In 1967 Robert Shaw became director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. During his 21 years in Atlanta, he conducted both the orchestra and chorus. Shaw won four Grammy awards and was nominated for two more. The recipient of 40 honorary degrees and citations, the George M. Peabody Medal, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the National Medal of Arts, Robert Shaw was inducted into the American Classical Music Hall of Fame at New York’s Juilliard School of Music last year. In 1991, he received the Kennedy Center Honors, America’s highest award for artistic achievement.

Upon his death in 1999, music scholars, professors and performers praised his contributions to the field. ‘He was the greatest choral conductor we had, beyond a shadow of a doubt’, said Yale music professor Lawrence Smith, conductor-in-residence at Yale’s School of Music. ‘Robert Shaw is without doubt the leading choral conductor in the United States’, Isaac Stern said. In Atlanta, long lines waited patiently to enter the hall for the Shaw Memorial Concert. People shared Robert Shaw stories and marvelled at the impact he had on professionals, amateurs and audiences. I still believe there is something that distinguishes a choir prepared and led by a member of the Shaw choral legacy. Concert programmes note if choral directors have studied with him. Shaw-trained singers gravitate to each other, exchanging knowing glances,
listening to the sound and nodding – or grimacing – as the Shaw standard either holds up – or fails. Those who know this sound can often detect it, even on the radio. There is a sense of an inner circle for those who have been exposed, or some might say, subjected to the Shaw approach.

THE CHORUS: AMATEURS IN INTELLECTUAL COMMUNITY

I can’t be sure in my own mind whether the musical culture of a society is better judged by the half dozen highly professional musical instruments in metropolitan centers of the greatest wealth and the greatest density of population. Or whether it’s better judged in the schools, the churches, the synagogues, and oratorio societies and amateur groups.

(Robert Shaw, Carnegie Hall DVD Series)

The word ‘amateur’ derives from the French and Latin amatores/amare meaning to ‘to love’, or amator, meaning ‘one who as a taste for something’. Amateur singers love to sing. Robert Shaw believed in amateurs. He believed in the power of commitment to something for which you received no money, gave time and received intangibles in return. The chorus, for Shaw, was a place to learn about commitment and community. It was a place to sharpen one’s intellectual engagement to a task for which your actual endowed instrument, i.e., your voice, might not be ideal.

Working with Robert Shaw on a choral masterpiece for the first or tenth time meant bringing every ounce of that intellectual commitment to the task. I can recall coming to a rehearsal in the 1980s when we were preparing the Mozart Mass in C. I had heard that Shaw had conducted this piece more than 250 times. How could it be fresh, interesting to him, engaging? He mounted the podium that night, wearing the perennial navy blue long-sleeved shirt (part of his consistent rehearsal garb through most of his career), and made it clear that, for him, this performance was still like the first. The work was just as challenging, the responsibility still as daunting as it was the first time. Amateurs, whether they are rock climbers, gardeners or chorus members, are only successful when they understand this dogged persistence and determination to be better.

One evening, we were rehearsing a straightforward Bach chorale, familiar to most of us from church hymnals, so we probably just sat back a bit in our seats and relaxed. ‘I know this; no problem, it’s just a four bar hymn’, many of us were probably thinking. Mr Shaw, frustrated, brought his palm down on the podium, and announced, ‘This is terribly difficult. And you’re not making it difficult enough’. The apparently simple is complex; the amateur is challenged to be better than he or she imagines is possible. Part of Shaw’s legacy is the commitment to intellectual collective persistence even when something appears easy. It is never that simple when it is important.

PREPARATION AND WARM UP

I am convinced that the unanimity of the sound comes from the very beginning of the rehearsal. We don’t want to wear out voices in rehearsal … to waste vocal gold.

(Robert Shaw, Carnegie Hall DVD Series)
Dancers stretch; actors improvise; painters sketch; singers vocalize, move and breathe. Shaw’s choral warm ups had a particular character; they were meant to be directly related to what was to follow in a rehearsal or performance; they were carefully orchestrated and were meant to be done with full focus and concentration. Warm ups with Shaw were part of the work. He expected transfer of the sound, the physical experience, and the pitch sensitivity into the music. What were some of those warm ups? Overhead stretches, back rubs, back cat scratches, thumping and yawning.

One rather well-known warm up vocal exercise was to sing a note in unison and then raise it a half step evenly over eighteen counts. Are there actually eighteen gradations between one note and another? Who can hear them, if so? Why bother to try to hear them? Shaw himself admitted that the task was probably an impossible one. But the concentrated effort of a hundred plus singers to do so evokes a certain acuity and awareness that few other exercises evoke. ‘No note stays the same’, he would say. It is always going somewhere, flatter, sharper, louder, softer. ‘Improve the pitch’, he reminded singers.

Before the first rehearsal of a piece, singers were expected to mark their musical scores with directions, clarifications and changes; unmarked scores meant unprepared singers. Preparing a piece meant count singing instead of singing words; preparing a piece meant singing everything softly and slowly for a long time. As Shaw noted, the goal was to get into the habit of ‘rehearsing slow and piano in order to go fast’. Only after these steps were secure would Shaw add words. Dynamics, the loud and soft interpretations, come last.

Preparation is as important as performance. Preparation is performance. One cannot learn all necessary skills at the same time. These concepts are a part of the legacy of Robert Shaw.

TECHNIQUE IN THE SERVICE OF THE SPIRIT

If we fracture the tone, we fracture the spirit.

(Robert Shaw, Carnegie Hall DVD Series)

Robert Shaw’s technique may be what choral directors find most memorable. But in a Shaw chorus, technique is in the service of the spirit. ‘There shouldn’t be single tone that lacks spiritual expression’, he commented. Shaw’s father and grandfather were both ministers. Shaw considered becoming a member of the clergy at one time, but was also an avid lover of literature and studied English at Pomona College instead. Both facets remained with him throughout his life.

Shaw taught this blend of technique with a higher purpose through an exercise as simple as asking choral singers to turn around in a circle while singing a single note. He explained:

We’ve always worked in circles simply because they can hear the total product ... turning around while one is trying to tune ... is to see that each member of the chorus is facing a different acoustical environment ... two things are happening – getting used to the space, getting used to the impact of hearing different sounds ... (and) relating one voice to the other.

(Carnegie Hall DVD Series)
There is, of course, the goal of precision. But there is also the goal of connecting to the Spirit through that precision. ‘Certainly the flesh becomes word in something like this ... the right quality, the right acoustic, the right vibration, the right physical apparatus becomes Spirit’, he commented to his chorus. ‘The whole psychology and philosophy of a chorus is community and unity - then the choir becomes a single psyche’. When he heard a sound from the chorus that approached unity, Shaw would look up and smile, saying, ‘None of that cohesiveness is truth yet, but the point is you’ll never get truth without it’. Technique and precision enable both listeners and performers not to settle for less than such spiritual unity. That search for truth, with a small ‘t’, is certainly part of the legacy.

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE: FINDING BEAUTY THROUGH IMAGERY

Each measure is a child.  
(Robert Shaw, Carnegie Hall DVD Series)

Good teachers show and tell their students what they want them to do. Great teachers insist that learners take responsibility for the doing. Great teachers communicate and then trust the students to practice, fail and eventually internalize that concept. In the ten years that I sang with him, I never heard Robert Shaw sing a note. Instead, he wanted his singers to experience producing a sound for themselves. Shaw communicated the potential for excellence through language. He was a literary thinker and he knew that imagery helps people ‘see’ the sound, thereby enabling singers to eventually produce that desired sound for themselves. He would speak of entering ‘the sleeve of sound’. He would admonish the sopranos when they sounded like ‘cats pulled through keyholes’, reminding that ‘it can’t be too loud, but it can be too ugly’. Or, more scathingly, ‘try singing forte (with a) quality of invitation rather than the quality of rape’ (personal score notes). Such imagery conveyed the desired results in a way that demonstration never could.

During one final rehearsal, we were approaching the 7th movement of the Brahms Requiem and Mr Shaw raised his baton and said, ‘after exotic foods, now we must have grains and grasses, enormously healthy fare now’. What do ‘grains and grasses’ sound like? How do we physically and spiritually reach for ‘healthy fare’? The diaphragm expands, the breath comes from deep within, and sound is fulsome and rich. And then, Shaw offered the final image to send us into this music: ‘It must sound like the whole world is singing’ (personal score notes). The language ultimately was the key to unlock the beauty of the music. Living into such beauty, and, more importantly, recognizing it when it is present, is the legacy of Robert Shaw.

THE SHAW TRADITION, MUSIC EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY

Enjoy the possibilities of perfection.  
(Robert Shaw, Carnegie Hall DVD Series)

Nearly 1600 choruses, individuals and businesses are members of Chorus America, an association of amateur and professional choral musicians in the United States. Robert Shaw believed in access to music, particularly choral music. The technical innovations that Shaw introduced only outlive him if
amateurs and audiences continue to have access to choral music in schools, churches and community centers. In one Dear People letter, he wrote: 'This is a contemporary participation which allows a person to contribute at his own completely highest level of personal intellectual commitment, personal physical control, personal technical discipline and only gain new strengths and new self respect through this common endeavor'. Thousands of choral directors who have learned at the baton of Robert Shaw are now working with amateurs who perform for audiences who will never know Robert Shaw's preparation and warm up procedures or stern dedication to technique. What they will experience is a particular encounter with their own humanity that happens when choral music is at its best.

If one takes all of the school choruses, university choruses, church choirs, there just can't be another artistic activity that has so much involvement. It's a community effort by which people even of limited vocal endowment or instrumental endowment can create something which is more beautiful than anyone can do by himself.

(Carnegie Hall DVD Series)

I recently met a principal at a middle school in south Florida who was struggling to maintain even a minimal arts programme in the face of increasing test score accountability and budget cuts while also trying to foster community participation with her students' families. At one point in our conversation, she surprised me by announcing, 'What this school really needs is a chorus'. That sentiment is part of the Shaw legacy. He maintained the belief that singing together can bring communities together in an intellectual and musical set of practices that represent the highest quality. Now, in this twenty-first century, we continue to aspire to such experiences.

REFERENCES

SUGGESTED CITATION
Burnaford, G. (2012), 'The legacy of Choral Director Robert Shaw: Beyond technique to music in communities', International Journal of Community Music 5: 2, pp. 147–153, doi: 10.1386/ijcm.5.2.147_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS
Gail Burnaford is Professor in the College of Education’s Department of Curriculum, Culture and Educational Inquiry at Florida Atlantic University where she directs the doctoral programme and teaches courses in policy, program evaluation and research. Her research is in the areas of arts teaching and learning, teaching artists in non-profit organizations and arts integration. She has conducted program evaluations for numerous arts organizations, including Ravinia Music Festival, Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education,
and Miami Arts for Learning. She has conducted professional development for teachers and artists for the Empire Arts Partnerships, the Palm Beach County Cultural Council and the Music In Education National Consortium. Dr Burnaford presented at the first UNESCO International Conference on Arts Education in Lisbon, Portugal and has participated at numerous arts education conferences in Ireland, Scotland, Mexico, Spain and Singapore. She has sung with the Atlanta’s Symphony Chorus and Chamber Chorus, Chicago’sBasically Bach and currently, the Master Chorale of South Florida.

Contact: College of Education, Department of Curriculum, Culture and Educational Inquiry, Florida Atlantic University, 777 Glades Road, Boca Raton, FL 33431, USA.
E-mail: burnaford@fau.edu

Gail Burnaford has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.