

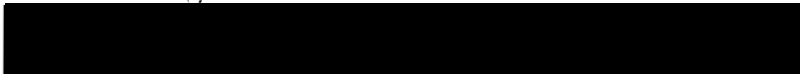
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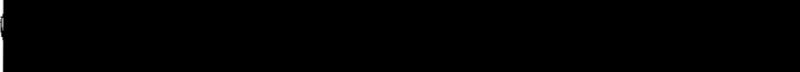
Application Cover Sheet


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Department and course number Honors - University Honors 450

When course was taken Spring 2008

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Application for Student Research Excellence Award

**Rachel Waniata
February 27, 2008**

**The Choral Styles of F. Melius Christiansen and Robert Shaw:
A comparison**

Summary of Research Process

My research questions are important for me personally because of my career choice. I plan to become a choral conductor and in order to do this successfully it is important to examine the rehearsal processes of others in order to use their proven methods to develop an effective method of my own. I carefully chose my research problem based on an analysis of the conductors who have prepared renowned choirs in the United States. After some study, my question became three questions: **What are the differences in choral tone produced by choirs directed by F Melius Christiansen, and Robert Shaw? What specific rehearsal techniques did each conductor use? What impact did these men have on the history and future of choral music in the United States?** I chose F. Melius Christiansen and Robert Shaw because both developed a school of choral singing with specific parameters that are still used to define choral sound today. Many writers have stated the basic concepts associated with the two choral schools I studied. They are famous schools with many disciples. However, when I listed my question on an online choral forum, I received replies from choral conductors in the field stating that a comparison between these two choral schools has not yet been attempted. This is why my questions are important ones.

In beginning my research, I found that the information on such a specific subject was somewhat limited. For this reason, I had to become creative with my research methods. Simple online searches were unhelpful and so I began to use the many varied resources available to me through Holland Library. I began by checking out many books from Holland library but found that I needed to dig deeper to find information that could contribute to my unique research. I solicited help from Paula Elliot Holland's music librarian and she showed me many of the options for resources that I could access through Holland's website and other databases. I began to use more inventive methods to find the information I required. I used online databases available to me through Holland Library such as JStor and search resources such as "citation linker" to locate other e-journals. I was also able to use the paper journals found in the library, especially Choral Journal. Then I found that I needed a few more books to add to my research and so I turned to both Summit and Interlibrary Loan. I contacted the music librarian at St. Olaf College and she gave me a list of titles she thought would help. I then used our interlibrary loan resource to locate and borrow several of these books from St. Olaf. I also found that a couple of the books were available through our Summit program and borrowed these as well. Finally I needed CD recordings to complete the listening rubric section of my research. I found that WSU had several recordings of the Robert Shaw Festival Singers and I used these to write the listening evaluations for the appendix. Without the many resources I was able to access through our expansive research library, this project would have been much more time consuming as well as very expensive. I found that the project was a successful one because of the numerous sources I gained access to through the WSU Libraries.

The Choral Styles of F. Melius Christiansen and Robert Shaw: A Comparison

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Introduction

Group singing in America began as a device for worship in church services of our nation's early settlements. The singing in these church services eventually became so desperate that teachers such as William Billings and Andrew Law developed "singing schools" in the early 18th century. These schools were models of their English counterparts and were intended for amateurs who wanted to convey their feelings of devotion more eloquently. Choruses after this time existed solely in an amateur arena. It wasn't until the mid-twentieth century that choruses became artful means of expression for professional musicians. With the advent of *a cappella* (unaccompanied) choirs, choral music developed into its own precise musical art form.

This *a cappella* movement gave rise to two prominent choral directors who developed such recognizable choral sounds that their "schools" continue to be emulated today. These two directors were F. Melius Christiansen of St. Olaf College, and Robert Shaw, who founded the Collegiate Chorale and later the Robert Shaw Chorale. Christiansen was in the prime of his career in the early to mid part of the twentieth century while Shaw was most active during the 1980's and 1990's. The trademarks of their practice became and remain pillars of choral technique in America. F. Melius Christiansen was known for the impeccable blend of his choirs and the fairly "straight tone" sound (singing that has little or no vibrato) produced by his singers. Robert Shaw's choirs were known for adherence to stylistic authenticity and the use of rhythmic diction. This technique is based on a method of pinpointing the exact subdivision of the beat on

which each sound in a word will occur. This made Shaw's choirs sound extremely precise.

As a future choral director, I think it is important to develop my own philosophy about choral tone by learning from outstanding choirs and their conductors. My study of rehearsal techniques used by these two renowned choral directors will provide essential material to help me shape a methodology that I can use with my choirs. Therefore my research question is really three questions: **What are the differences in choral tone produced by choirs directed by F. Melius Christiansen and Robert Shaw? What specific rehearsal techniques did each conductor use? What impact did these men have on the history and future of choral music in the United States?** I will attempt to answer these questions by using a rubric of choral elements designed to critique the sound produced by Christiansen and Shaw. These elements include tone quality, intonation, rhythm, balance/blend, technique, musical interpretation and diction. I will present my findings on the subject based on the writing of others followed by my own audio analysis of sound recordings using the same rubric.

Tone Quality

There has been a fair amount written about F. Melius Christiansen's philosophy of choral tone. He is regarded as an innovator because of his exclusive use of straight-tone singing and immaculate voice blending. Both of these have become hallmarks of the "Lutheran" choral sound. Joe Shaw notes, however, that the use of straight tone, or singing without vibrato, is an old style that originated in churches in Germany.¹

¹Joe Shaw, *The St. Olaf Choir: A Narrative*, (Northfield: St. Olaf College, 1997): 218.

Christiansen was forthright about the fact that he was not the first to promote this type of singing. While Christiansen was not the inventor of the style of singing, it has been fairly controversial. Many voice teachers will agree that a slight vibrato or “spin” in the tone is a sign of good vocal technique. However straight-tone singing can be done in a healthy way as long as the singer is mindful not to hold the vocal mechanisms in a tight position to maintain a straight tone. This straight tone will be discussed later, in the section dealing with Christiansen’s belief and methods concerning intonation in choral singing.

Despite some concerns about the health of straight tone singing Christiansen’s unique choral sound is a respected approach that has inspired hundreds of conductors since its inception.² Leola Bergmann asserts that Christiansen’s choral sound has led some to describe his choirs as unified, intense and having a quality of “celestial purity.”³ To achieve this, Christiansen was extremely deliberate in his choice of voices for the choir. He thought about every chorister he chose and had a fairly prescribed method of constructing each section to produce the purest and most blended tone possible. Bergmann writes that he often looked for the lightest or more “reedy” voices to make up the majority of the soprano section.⁴ Christiansen was very careful in selecting singers in the soprano section because this section often overpowers the other three sections (because of the range) and the individual voices are most prone to “tremolo” or overly active vibrato. This “reedy” sound has been likened to that of an oboe while heavier voices are described as more flute-like. Though Christiansen preferred “reedy” lighter voices, he filled out all of his sections with a few “fluty” or more brilliant, heavier voices

² Leola Nelson Bergmann, *Music Master of the Middle West* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1968): 144.

³Ibid., 144.

⁴Ibid., 146.

to achieve louder and more dramatic dynamics when needed.⁵ He placed these singers in the center of the section between singers with smaller voices. For the alto section Christiansen looked for darker-toned voices that sounded “cello-like” and expected them to sing an E below middle C.⁶ This section was easier to match and blend than the soprano section because an alto’s vibrato is often slower. The tenor section was thought to be equivalent in many ways to the soprano section.⁷ For instance, the faster speed of vibration made Christiansen’s requirement of purity slightly more difficult to attain. Therefore, he preferred to find smooth reedy-toned voices that could sing a high A or B-flat without falsetto. Baritones were asked to sing a major sixth—a skill which Christiansen found tested the lyric quality of the voice (as baritones were often given a melody line). Basses needed to have a low D without sounding bottomed-out (meaning the voice hardly reaches the pitch because of a type of growling sound that prevails over good tone). Because Christiansen was originally an instrumentalist, he was predisposed to classify voices in the same manner as instruments. This is an interesting technique because it is true that all oboes (and every other instrument) are made up of the same parts, keys and shapes, but voices come in all different shapes and sizes. Each person’s body is his or her instrument therefore the parts of the voice are of different sizes and ratios. The shape of the oral cavity, the nasal cavity, and the larynx all contribute to a singer’s vocal quality. These parts of the body are obviously quite different for each singer. For this reason, many choral directors classify individual voices by color or along a spectrum with dark tone on one side and bright tone on the other. Christiansen’s method

⁵Ibid., 147.

⁶Ibid., 147-8.

⁷Ibid., 148.

of classifying voices can in part be attributed to his expectation that all of his voices sound extremely similar because of an emphasis placed on blend.

This flawless blend was another prevailing characteristic of Christiansen's trademark choral tone. Christiansen expected his singers to blend with one another to such an extent that this was the vocal attribute he was most interested in. For this reason, Christiansen's audition process was thorough and extensive. Bergmann outlines that he submitted singers to an initial screening in which he tested voices by playing a scale for the singer to sing back.⁸ He looked for voices that were uniform in color throughout the range and possessed smooth tone and flexibility. He found that most voices were prone to breathiness and variation of texture and color. However, those asked back for a second screening were tested in quartets of existing ensemble members to determine blend and color. These new candidates were expected to "intone" with those around them and some students would be asked back for third and fourth auditions before being given a place in the coveted "first choir." Auditions of new singers could take two to three weeks. At this point, new members were accepted only on a trial basis.⁹ This audition process is obviously a vigorous one. Christiansen was extremely selective when choosing voices for his ensembles and this is part of the reason they blended so well.

Christiansen was also known to have chosen fairly small or lyric voices to make up his ensemble.¹⁰ This preference contrasts with the approach of many directors Robert Shaw in particular—who believed in choosing the most professional voices available. Christiansen's preference for small voices is probably connected to the fact that he

⁸Ibid., 148.

⁹Ibid., 151.

¹⁰Ibid., 144.

expected his singers to forsake personal identity to contribute to the ensemble's collective goals.¹¹ This would have been difficult to achieve with large-voiced singers with self-entitled personalities. In fact, Christiansen would occasionally dismiss a singer from the choir when he or she became particularly presumptuous. Leonard van Camp explained that Christiansen's method turned ordinary singers into extraordinary ones: "The choir just grew. Most of the children were too poor to buy band or orchestra instruments. The voices were there and singing didn't cost anything."¹² With these comments Van Camp emphasizes two points: that choir can provide a place for everyone but also that Christiansen did not insist on the best voices available, only the most moldable ones.

In contrast, Robert Shaw expected his voices to be exceptional and his method was a practiced one while Christiansen's was more experimental. Shaw had several fine-tuned warm-up techniques to address different aspects of the ensemble sound. Pamela Elrod illustrates that to work on tone color Shaw would have his singers begin with a unison pitch on "nee."¹³ Then he would ask singers to make the vowel too bright and crescendo while darkening the vowel. He would then have them do this in reverse starting with an excessively dark color and moving to a brighter one. Shaw believed that the warm-up period should be used to help each singer focus on important issues such as tone color. He worked less with issues of tone color while he was focusing on literature. Perhaps this was because he believed that his singers, once prompted to pay close attention to tone color in the warm-up period, would regulate it themselves.

¹¹Ibid., 144.

¹²Leonard van Camp "The formation of A Cappella Choirs at Northwestern University, St. Olaf, and Westminster Choir College" *Journal of Research in Music Education* 13/4 (Winter 1965): 234.

¹³Pamela Elrod, "The Choral Warm-ups of Robert Shaw." *MasterSinger* (online Journal of the Association of British Choral Directors), Summer 2003, < <http://www.abcd.org.uk/robert%20shaw.pdf>> (June 12, 2007).

Contrary to Christiansen's steadfast belief that vibrato should be eliminated, Robert Shaw believed that some vibrato should be used in good singing. However, he qualified this, saying it should be done "as a variable to both speed and width—depending upon the nature, style and period of the music."¹⁴

In his rehearsal routine, Shaw used another technique he called *quiet singing*. *Quiet singing* means simply that the ensemble reads and sings through music at a much lower dynamic level than normal with sopranos and tenors transposing down an octave if necessary. Shaw believed that quiet singing helped unify the ensemble toward the common goal of good choral tone.¹⁵

F. Melius Christiansen's choral tone was ground-breaking and well studied, while Robert Shaw's choral tone is not often mentioned by those who studied his work. This is the case because choral tone was a rather new concept in Christiansen's time, while it was an established one in Shaw's generation. Christiansen was an innovator in the realm of choral singing beyond the amateur glee club but his choirs sang only *a capella* sacred music, mostly from eighteenth and nineteenth-century German and Russian Composers or music Christiansen had written or arranged himself. Shaw continued this tradition of choral excellence on a larger scale, producing choirs to bring new precision and energy to the singing of large works with symphony orchestras. Choral tone was perhaps not the trademark of his choirs as it is arguably Christiansen's. However, both men made great strides in many directions for choral music and created a place for choral singing in the realm of professional musicianship.

Intonation

¹⁴Robert Blocker, ed. *The Robert Shaw Reader*, (New Haven: Yale UP 2004): 87.

¹⁵Blocker, 87.

Robert Shaw once wrote in one of the reflections he recorded after each rehearsal: “Without guides such as tuned and stable strings and keyed or valved winds it [the choral ensemble] has to be as conscious of intonation as a first-rate orchestra—which is careful indeed. So, intonation is properly the first concern of group singing.”¹⁶ As Shaw points out, choirs are presented with a specific problem when it comes to intonation. Singers do not have the guides that instrumentalists are given when it comes to “playing” the instrument. Instrumentalists can adjust a string, mouthpiece, embouchure (mouth position) or hand position to better play in tune. Singers are handicapped not only by the inability to see the instrument but also a certain amount of what is heard by the singer does not reflect what is heard by the listener. Singers then must rely on feel to produce precise pitches. Additionally, while a single singer is fairly capable of singing in tune, groups of singers tend to distort each other’s pitch. When one singer starts to drop or raise the pitch, without guides to keep them on track other singers are likely to follow. For these reasons, Robert Shaw worked hard with his groups to achieve proper intonation. As mentioned earlier, Shaw worked on tuning and other important problems during a focused warm-up period. Elrod outlines that during the warm-up Shaw would often ask his singers to begin on a pitch moderately low in the range and sing a neutral syllable moving between semitones in 16 beat increments—assigning the smallest possible rise in pitch to each beat and ideally moving together as an ensemble.¹⁷ This type of exercise helped develop precise intonation and good listening throughout the group. The use of these tiny increments allowed singers to study the large difference between even the smallest of all the intervals (semitones). Through the development of an

¹⁶Ibid., 85.

¹⁷Elrod, 12.

awareness of quarter tones, eighth tones, and sixteenth tones, each singer and the ensemble as a whole constructs defined perceptions regarding intonation. The voice tends to stray from good intonation by moving almost imperceptibly from the intended pitch. Awareness of this helps ensemble members become attentive to intonation in a new and more deliberate way. In addition, each singer is better able to hear the differences in tiny intervals and tune to the middle of the pitch by making slight adjustments.

Elrod notes another exercise Shaw used for intonation: Singers would sing “noo-ah-oo-ah-ooo” in a rhythm of four eighth notes and ending on a half note.¹⁸ The exercise begins with the “noo” and the “ah” a third apart and this interval increases by a semitone until an octave is reached. Then the intervals decrease by whole tones until they are a third apart. This exercise develops good intonation and helps singers unify the tone between registers as well as avoid singing too heavily in the upper registers. It is also important to make sure that the “ah” vowel does not become suddenly brighter. The two sounds should sound equivalent in volume and tone color. According to Shaw’s former assistant Norman Mackenzie, the exercise increased by semitones and decreased by whole tones because this variation forced the singer to stay alert during a rather long exercise.¹⁹ This exercise is extended and a bit complicated. However, when it is attempted one can easily hear and feel that that the move between intervals is a difficult one that forces singers to think critically about the pitches they intend to sing. Robert Shaw’s choirs do exhibit exquisite intonation even in very loud and soft dynamics—musical moments where many choirs will stray from the pitch. His exercises were methodical and perhaps a bit tedious, but obviously effective.

¹⁸Elrod, 12.

¹⁹Ibid., 12.

F. Melius Christiansen was also concerned with the problem of intonation. As noted earlier, choirs are particularly prone to intonation problems. For this reason, fine choral conductors generally hold the belief that intonation is a challenge to be dealt with early and often in the rehearsal process. Most notable about Christiansen's career was that his choirs adhered to principles of pure intonation. He believed that impeccable intonation was the key to good choral singing. In fact, he thought intonation so important that he disliked the use of vibrato because it obscured the pitch. Thus his preference for straight tone singing can be explained through his view that vibrato obscures the pitch because the principal tone oscillates slightly around the chosen pitch.²⁰ Christiansen called a particularly troublesome vibrato a "tremolo." A tremolo is a vibrato that moves too fast and obscures the intended pitch. Christiansen avoided such voices and preferred his voices to be pure and unwavering. As discussed earlier, there is some debate about whether or not singing without vibrato is a healthy vocal practice.

There has been a fair amount of research on straight tone singing in the last twenty years and an article of particular interest comes from Rebecca Sherburn-Bly. Sherburn-Bly explains that straight tone is not in fact completely straight because of the nature of the vibrating folds that produce vocal sound.²¹ Instead, she calls singing that is largely devoid of vibrato "simple tone."²² Without going into the complicated process that results in vocal production and vibrato it is sufficient to note that vibrato is naturally found in all healthy voices and can be smaller or larger depending on the weight of the voice and age of the singer. Sherburn-Bly explains "a thought process that tells the

²⁰Bergmann, 145.

²¹Rebecca Sherburn-Bly, "Straight Tone in the Choral Arts: A Simple Solution" *Choral Journal* 61.

²² The two terms (simple tone and straight tone) will be used interchangeably throughout the remainder of this paper.

laryngeal muscles to contract against the natural impulses coming from the brain is enough to limit vibrato for most singers.”²³ She goes on to say that because simple-tone singing limits the laryngeal muscles, it should be approached with caution. Singers will need more frequent breaths because more air is needed to control these muscles. Additionally, loud dynamics are more difficult to achieve and will need to be modified to allow for safer procedures in simple-tone singing. Finally, vowels should be modified to more neutral versions of the most closed vowels [i] (“ee”) and [u] (“ooh”).

It is unclear whether F. Melius Christiansen practiced these procedures. He did use stagger breathing and his choirs did not frequently sing at overly loud dynamics. Additionally, young voices are more capable of straight tone than older, bigger voices. Since Christiansen’s demographic was college undergraduates, he was able to find voices that were smaller and achieved purer intonation by way of vibrato control. However, the research on vocal production we now have was not in existence when Christiansen was alive. Despite some questions concerning the vocal hazards of straight-tone singing, we know now that it is acceptable when employed with caution and most choral conductors today approach simple-tone singing in this way. Christiansen rarely demanded full fortissimos from his small-voiced choirs, implying he was concerned with the vocal health and limitations of his singers’ voices. In addition, the long tours and strenuous singing schedule they maintained suggests that the singer’s voices were not overworked.

Rhythm

Rhythmic precision is one of the two most important ideas Robert Shaw imposed upon his choirs, and left as his legacy. He believed that precise rhythm is the building block of all other vocal processes. He wrote that without rhythm that is strictly in time

²³ Ibid., 65.

and together, (“rhythmic security”) intonation, melody, enunciation, sonority and color will suffer.²⁴ This is a bold statement considering that the five elements just mentioned are a performer’s main focus in preparation for performance. Robert Shaw accomplished these ensemble goals by working tirelessly. He realized that the “sense” of rhythm is complex; he notes that it is “physical, physiological, psychological, visceral, etcetera”²⁵—this complexity makes difficult the process of turning the symbols of rhythm into something one can accurately perform.²⁵ Many musicians would agree that rhythm is often the most difficult element of music to execute correctly. It is also an area where mistakes are simply unacceptable. Shaw was aware of this and worked to help his choirs develop good internal rhythmic sense so that the problem was less of a challenge. While he mentions that a choir should impose strict time upon their singing, Shaw also refers to the fact that “rhythmic purpose” will allow the music to be sung most freely and naturally.²⁶ This idea of precise rhythm that is free and natural might seem oxymoronic at first glance. However, Shaw believed that once a choir internalizes the rhythmic purpose of a passage, the ensemble becomes more precise and is free to focus on other more musical concerns like sonority and color.

Shaw highlights an additional problem imposed by rhythm in singing with text: Syllabic patterns in speech are quite natural while those imposed by musical settings are normally very different.²⁷ For instance, a two syllable word might be given seven beats and four notes, a deviation from its spoken pronunciation. This difficulty can be overcome by having one half of each section sing the notes on text and the other half sing

²⁴Blocker, 83.

²⁵Blocker, 65.

²⁶Ibid., 84.

²⁷Ibid., 85-6.

the notes while counting and vice versa.²⁸ This rehearsal practice is an efficient one that helps the choir conceptualize the differences between the natural syllabic pattern of a word and the unnatural pronunciation imposed by the musical setting. This eliminates mistakes and quickens the learning curve. This type of technique is aligned with Shaw's overarching belief that rehearsal efficacy is the key to good performance.

In addition to those already mentioned, Shaw also used a technique he invented called count singing. Shaw's own words explain this most clearly: "[count singing is] the practice of singing each vocal line not on the text apportioned to it, but upon the appropriate beat- numbers, together with the division of pulse on the syllables 'and' or 'and-uh'."²⁹ This practice develops precision in rhythm by removing any doubt about where the sound is to begin and stop—down to a fraction of an instant. It leads to a type of group unity not heard in many choral ensembles. The feeling of rhythmic pulse and forward motion is strongly felt by each member of the ensemble. This allows the group to move precisely together. Additionally, a certain amount of rhythmic vitality can be heard in the performance. It is clear to the listener that Shaw makes rhythm a priority and uses it as a building block for other vocal processes.

Conversely, Bergmann notes that F. Melius Christiansen did not believe that rhythm was the foremost concern of a choral ensemble.³⁰ However, he worked hard to make sure that releases and "attacks" as he called them (a more modern term would be "onset") were precisely together. He once told his choir that he wanted a particular release to be "like the end of a sawed-off log! Clean!"³¹ It is unclear whether this

²⁸Ibid., 86.

²⁹Blocker, 90.

³⁰Bergmann, 146.

³¹Ibid., 160.

expectation of precisely synchronized onsets and releases is an issue of rhythm or choral unity. It is most likely related to both. Christiansen though, attributed his choir's unique technique of the "delayed attack" to rehearsed choral unity. This delayed attack is described as a slight pause after the upbeat before the group lands on the initial chord of a piece. Joe Shaw notes that the decision to begin the piece was made not by the conductor but by the ensemble as a group.³² This type of simultaneous group decision required a great deal of drilling but Christiansen thought it was important for ensemble unity. Therefore the delayed attack became a trademark of his choirs. While Christiansen did not place emphasis on rhythm in the choral rehearsal, his singers certainly thought about singing with a good sense of time or the unity of sound they exhibit would not have been possible.

Balance/Blend

Little has been written about how F. Melius Christiansen accomplished the immaculate blend his choirs produced. An emphasis on blend is one of Christiansen's choirs' trademarks. However, this lack of information could be attributed to Bergmann's assertion that almost everything Christiansen did was an experiment.³³ At the time he was conducting, rules of choral singing were not established, so Christiansen invented his own rules. Bergmann notes that Christiansen studied the physics of sound and worked with unending discipline but maintained that there was no secret formula to producing the superior sound he achieved. In any case, the St. Olaf Choir's blend was indeed quite flawless.³⁴ This could be attributed to many techniques Christiansen used and some (like his audition process) were discussed in the choral tone section. Another one of the

³²Shaw, 214.

³³Bergmann, 144.

³⁴Ibid., 144.

methods he used to achieve blend was meticulous *voice placing*. Bergmann writes that he would listen to each new group of singers for a few rehearsals before deciding on the best way to place each singer.³⁵ He would then make up a seating chart which did have a fairly specific formula. He would place singers with thin, light, even voices at the center of each section. Then he would mix in singers with heavier more brilliant voices and blend them within the sound by placing a few more singers with light voices on the outside edges. The middle group of singers was called the inner choir. This inner choir was asked to continue singing when the rest of the group was cut off in order to accomplish delicate passages with purity or to achieve a pianissimo. The sudden use of only a few singers provides beautiful contrast to the fuller sound of the entire choir. When I listened to this inner choir, it sounds as if only two or three people are singing but in fact it was made up of about 15-20 singers in the 60 voice group. The concept of voice placing Christiansen used has been echoed by many choral conductors. As an ensemble singer, one knows when his/her voice is not fitting with neighboring voices and this can be troublesome. Christiansen worked to eliminate problems of clashing voices by placing them deliberately so that the sound was impeccable. This meant that the vocal colors blended together in a harmonious wash of sound.

Perhaps another reason blend was such an integral part of St. Olaf's choral reputation was Christiansen's decisiveness in dismissing singers from the choir. Bergmann points out that Christiansen was not particularly concerned with people's feelings. He once said to a three year member whose voice he felt no longer fit "Will you do me the favor of leaving the choir and not returning again."³⁶ In this way, Christiansen

³⁵Ibid., 154.

³⁶Ibid., 149.

refused to sacrifice the needs of the choir to the feelings of its members. Bergmann explains that he expected every individual to conform to the needs of the choir, forsaking personal identity to contribute to collective goals.³⁷ This ideology is conceivably one of the reasons the choir blended so well. The blend may not be attributed to specific techniques but to a frame of mind.

Robert Shaw, like most choral directors also thought blend was important. Shaw used several techniques to develop blend and balance in the chorus. As noted before, he used quiet singing in the rehearsal to fill a number of functions. He wrote that quiet singing is a good method to accomplish a suitable balance between the voice parts.³⁸ Rather than asking one voice part to be louder (which may cause strain) it is better to increase the number of the section that is lagging. In addition to sectional balance, Shaw makes clear that quiet singing is a good way to eliminate the differences in tone and color between individual voices (which is amplified with louder singing) and establish a blend between voices.³⁹

Shaw also used one of his warm-ups to work on issues of balance and blend. To attain balance in *divisi* textures, Shaw would ask singers to sing on a neutral syllable such as “noo” and then break into whole-step cluster chords (of two, three, or four parts). The use of dissonant intervals made it easier to discern which voice parts were sticking out.⁴⁰ Shaw would then listen and determine which voice parts were overpowering the others and make adjustments to balance the parts. Shaw’s choirs do sound balanced and

³⁷Ibid., 145.

³⁸Blocker, 87.

³⁹Ibid., 88.

⁴⁰Elrod, 11.

individual voices blend within the ensemble but the sound is characterized more by a certain vitality than impeccable blend.

It is important to note that one significant element to the blending of voices is *vowel unification*. Pure vowels that are pronounced the same by every singer are often the key to good blend in choral singing. Both Shaw and Christiansen worked to unify vowels for issues of blend as well as intonation.

Technique

Every good choral conductor encourages the use of proper vocal technique within the ensemble, and Shaw and Christiansen each had a personalized way of achieving this goal. There is little written to indicate that Robert Shaw taught good vocal technique in regard to basic principles such as alignment, proper breathing, and register unification. The lack of focus on basic vocal technique can be attributed to the fact that Shaw worked almost exclusively with professional singers. Still, he was intimately aware of the perils of bad vocal technique and worked hard to avoid them. For Shaw, an essential goal of the rehearsal was to preserve voices. Ann Howard Jones conveys that he called unnecessary vocal use “wasting vocal gold.”⁴¹ Shaw made vocal preservation a priority in his rehearsal because he understood that unlike other instruments, voices often tire and then become vulnerable to damage. Again Shaw touts the functions of quiet singing: quiet singing is a great tool for the individual because one does not feel as responsible for the overall finished product of sound.⁴² This allows one to pay attention to one’s own singing (as it is a complex process). As is illustrated by his thoughts on the individual in the rehearsal, Shaw thought it important that each singer be allowed to pay attention to

⁴¹Ann Howard Jones, “Shaw: Simply and Clearly the Best” *Choral Journal* 36, no. 9 (1996): 20.

⁴²Blocker, 87.

proper vocal technique to avoid tiring the voice and better contribute to the group sound. Shaw also specified the vocal benefits of count singing in rehearsal: Using the vowel sounds found in the numbers “one, two, three, four” (“uh, oo, ee, oh-uh”) keeps the voice from tiring in the same way it would if one were to sing a whole line or piece on one neutral syllable.⁴³ During rehearsal, Shaw strove to preserve and protect his singer’s voices, first by deliberate practice to avoid learned mistakes, and second by using techniques that avoided tiring or straining his “vocal gold.”

F. Melius Christiansen looked for “average” voices for his choirs but expected that singers had already grasped certain aspects of vocal technique. Christiansen wanted voices to demonstrate uniformity of color throughout the range, smoothness of tone, and flexibility.⁴⁴ In order to accomplish this type of sound a singer needs to have steady breath support, good breath management skills, and knowledge of proper vocal placement within the resonating chamber. These tasks may sound simple when presented this way but it often takes singers years to attain this type of technique. Therefore, Christiansen’s voices were perhaps thought of as average because of their small size and lyric rather than operatic quality, but his singers were not lacking in ability. In line with good breath support, Christiansen expected long passages to be sung in one breath and demanded his breathing marks be followed. He expressed regarding breath management: “To develop large lung capacity and control of breath is the principal work of the singer.”⁴⁵

It is clear that good choirs require good voices, both Shaw and Christiansen were aware of this fact. However, the choral rehearsal is a place where technique can be

⁴³Ibid., 90.

⁴⁴Bergmann, 146.

⁴⁵Ibid., 156.

rehearsed and developed along with all the other elements necessary for good sound. While vocal technique is not often the focus of the rehearsal, Christiansen and Shaw exemplify that improving technique can be handled in creative ways that contribute both to the individual and the group as a whole.

Interpretation/Musicianship

Musical interpretation is the most artistic and arguably the most important of all the issues faced by a chorus and conductor. Unfortunately, it is also the most ambiguous and difficult to explain. Therefore, information on the subject is fairly limited.

Christiansen's philosophy of conducting was individual because he believed artistry and individuality to be closely tied.⁴⁶ He thought breaking with traditional performance practices was good if the artist had a clear conception of his own ideas for interpretation of a piece. In this way, Christiansen's interpretations were fairly innovative. This style lends itself well to the sometimes bland arrangements of sacred hymns and pieces Christiansen chose for his choirs. While his choices of repertoire were fine, they are not masterpieces that can be done only in the way the composer conceptualized them. Additionally, Christiansen wrote many of the songs his choirs performed so the piece and its interpretation were completely his own.

Christiansen approached musicality with his choirs often by talking about things in the form of similes and metaphors. He once said "You sing as if you were throwing water out of a pail and splashing it against a wall, instead of letting it drop from a silver spoon like little pearls."⁴⁷ In this case he was asking them to phrase more delicately. On another occasion, he asked his sopranos to sing something more "pink" to avoid a dark

⁴⁶Ibid., 159.

⁴⁷Ibid., 161.

and heavy tone. While it sounds fairly simple, this type of visualization will usually help singers to think of the music in a new, more intentional way and can have great impact on the way a choir sounds. Choral conductors often visit each other's rehearsals so they can glean such ideas to use with their own groups.

Other than these small snippets there is not whole lot written about Christiansen's musical philosophy. It is likely he didn't have a structured philosophy but a reaction to what he heard and a gut feeling about how to make the sound better. Many choral directors treat interpretation this way. They make some decisions about how the piece should be interpreted and then work with what the choir gives them to develop the sound into something musical. This is quite possibly the most invigorating, difficult, and vital task allotted to the choral conductor. Christiansen knew this and his choirs exhibited incredibly expressive musicianship in their treatment of text, dynamics, and phrasing. They expressed slow minor passages with sensitivity and nuance. Their soft dynamics were extremely well executed and make the listener want to lean in to listen more closely. They could also build a phrase by giving it a sense of underlying energy that would explode out into a sonorous chord. Musicality is not always based on methodology, but on listening and reacting. Christiansen knew this, and while his method is not necessarily documented in words, it is certainly recorded in sound.

Robert Shaw is known for his commitment to stylistic authenticity. This means that he always performed a piece in a way that adhered as closely as possible to the original intent of the composer and time period in which it was written. For instance, as previously noted he believed that vibrato was something to be used in moderation and only when it fit the piece being sung. Therefore, in a J.S. Bach piece where the original

treble voices were young boys, vibrato would be minimized. In this way, for many interpretive decisions, Shaw deferred to the intent of the composer. In contrast with Christiansen, Shaw did not believe in breaking with stylistic tradition.

Despite this loyalty to historically accurate performance, Shaw was extremely concerned with issues of musicality and interpretation. Like most musicians he made a distinction between simply learning a piece and making music. This is best described in an excerpt from Blocker's book:

The "finished product" has two additional elements: first, a convincing over-all profile of dynamic flow of ebbs and, second, a multitude of inner accentuations and shadings...After all the right notes—there's still all of art. Unwavering and purposive control of dynamics and accentuation is the means by which a series of notes becomes a musical phrase.⁴⁸

Shaw's rehearsal process was deliberate both in learning the music and molding it into art. His interpretation was extremely detailed and he studied scores thoroughly to pull out every musical feature. Along with the idea of well-controlled dynamics Shaw explains "there are no less than eight hierarchies of dynamics: p, pp, ppp, mp, mf, f, ff, fff."⁴⁹ Shaw's choirs were extremely musical. It is clear that their conductor paid close attention to every detail of phrasing, dynamics, articulation, and accentuation. While it is possible to get some idea of how Shaw accomplished such musicality through his writings, his rehearsal process is described by many as a mesmerizing and almost magical experience. The driving force behind Shaw's success is most likely his steadfast love for music and his commitment to expressing it deliberately and effectively.

Diction

⁴⁸Blocker, 91.

⁴⁹Ibid., 92.

Diction is the element that sets choirs apart from instrumental ensembles. Robert Shaw wrote: “The color combinations available to the human voice through language are literally infinite.”⁵⁰ Robert Shaw’s attention to diction is one of two major contributions he left to the field of choral music (the other is great concern with rhythmic accuracy). Shaw combined these two elements into a concept known as rhythmic diction. In Shaw’s own words, this means: “Each sound [in a word] must be allotted a metric proportion or instant.”⁵¹ In other words, Shaw believed that each sound in a word should be broken down into the number of subdivisions it receives in a given beat. He explains that rhythmic diction is important because consonants must be sung at the exact same instant in ensemble singing because this is the only way audiences can understand the text.⁵² Additionally, it establishes in the ensemble an environment of care about the text, and the piece. Shaw clarifies that the process used to establish this type of enunciation control is threefold: 1) evaluate the succession of phonetic sounds that make up each syllable, 2) assess the sounds and determine their hierarchy of importance and duration in normal speech rhythm as well as their ability to carry sustained pitch, and 3) assign to each of these sounds (“phonetic fragments”) an appropriate instant (duration) and loudness.⁵³ Shaw was aware of these inherent complexities, and expressed the issue in his own way: “The composer allots to each syllable of his text a pitch and a duration; the performer must assign to *each of the several* sounds of that syllable an appropriate instant or duration in the music’s Time order...”⁵⁴ This type of attention to detail is not something one often experiences in a choral rehearsal. If a group is struggling with a particular word

⁵⁰Ibid., 106.

⁵¹Ibid., 97.

⁵²Ibid., 97.

⁵³Ibid., 100.

⁵⁴Ibid., 101.

or syllable, it is often broken down into the type of subdivision Shaw talks about. However, the process of breaking down each word into a succession of syllables, each with their own duration is one fit only for a professional group. This work made Shaw's groups sound extremely precise and the words are nearly always understood. With these types of techniques, Shaw elevated choral singing to a level of accuracy never heard before. All the best orchestral conductors wished for him to prepare their choruses because they were able to articulate words that could be understood over an entire symphony orchestra. This was indeed an accomplishment.

Shaw left us with several other innovative principles of diction that are now common practice. He notes (and most choral directors and voice teachers agree) that the principal vowel sound in a word should be phonated for the largest portion of the beat and must begin at the exact instant at which the beat begins.⁵⁵ In order to accomplish this, singers must think of anything preceding the major vowel sound as a “phonetic appoggiatura”—meaning it sounds slightly ahead of the beat. For instance, if one is to sing the word “friend” there are two sounds [f] and [r] that must come before the principal vowel sound [E]. Especially at a fast tempo these sounds become cumbersome. Therefore, the singer must think of the two consonant sounds not on the beat but slightly before it in order to articulate them clearly and move to the most important part of the word. Mr. Shaw also asserted that any sounds (consonant or secondary vowel sounds) that occur after the principal vowel sounds should be given a very short duration at the end of the allotted time for the word. This idea is common practice in classical singing because vowel sounds allow the voice to sound freer because the vocal mechanism is not interrupted by the articulation needed to sing consonants. Though all singers are aware

⁵⁵ Ibid., 101.

that this is the way words are to be sung, it is not the way words are often spoken. For this reason, it is easy to forget and close the sound early to the secondary vowel or final consonants. Therefore, singers usually need frequent reminders to sustain the primary vowel sound as long as possible on a given note.

Another concept that is now common practice is adding shadow vowels to the end of *stopped plosives* (p,b,t,d,k, and g). Shaw explained that these consonants often get lost and need to be given extra attention in order to be heard. He noted that a schwa (the neutral vowel sound in the word “fun”) should be added on the end of words that end in the aforementioned consonants.⁵⁶ He clarified that this sound should be thought of as “an additional fragmentary syllable” and given the smallest possible duration. This added shadow vowel makes word endings sound crisp and clean rather than indiscernible. Shadow vowels also insure that the singer sustains the breath through the entire duration of the note because of the extra puff of air needed to articulate the sound at the end. Robert Shaw wrote extensively about diction and enunciation practice. He thought that it was the singer’s secret weapon in making music and adding color to the choral sound. It is clear through Mr. Shaw’s musings that diction is an incredibly complex problem choral directors will continually work to solve.

F. Melius Christiansen’s first concern was not with diction but with pure tone quality. Some critics have noted that he sacrificed communication of the text for good tone, but many others feel that his choirs’ diction was sufficiently clear.⁵⁷ Though diction was not his primary concern, Christiansen did find that it often impeded his quest for absolute purity of sound. To combat the problems word enunciation often presents,

⁵⁶Ibid., 103.

⁵⁷Bergmann, 155-6.

Christiansen used the classic technique of vowel unification and minimal consonants. Unlike Shaw, Christiansen asked that the consonants p,r,t,s, and sh be sung as lightly as possible. Christiansen felt vowels should be placed back in the throat and consonants should interrupt them as little as possible. For example, in the word “holy” the [l] would be given little importance and singers were required to transition from “o” to a dark “e” without mouth movement.⁵⁸ This idea of placing vowels back in the throat is perhaps a bit archaic. Most contemporary voice teachers and choral directors ask for vowels to be placed forward in the vocal cavity to achieve greater resonance and a clearer tone. Especially in the soprano section Christian’s choral tone can tend to sound a bit pulled back, but this slight covering of the sound is another aid to impeccable blend. While it is true the words can be obscured slightly, Christiansen didn’t want the unvoiced sound of consonants to interrupt his choir’s flow of pure tone. This pure tone is heard on his recordings.

Impact

Robert Shaw and F. Melius Christiansen each made a significant contribution to choral music in America. Christiansen founded a school of choral singing that Shaw himself speaks about as the Christiansen sound. Christiansen brought to St. Olaf College, a new institution at the time, a measure of rehearsal discipline never before seen. His choir tours spread this sound throughout the country and audiences everywhere were mesmerized by what they heard. Christiansen’s sons, Olaf and Paul, took over the choirs at St. Olaf and Concordia College, respectively and further spread their father’s legacy. Christiansen founded the Christiansen Choral Schools beginning in 1935 to teach his technique to choral directors who wished to learn. Today the Christiansen sound remains

⁵⁸Ibid., 154.

as his legacy and is still thought of as one of the main choral schools of thought in the United States.

Robert Shaw produced some of the most technically precise and vital sounding choruses ever heard. He elevated choral music to a level equitable to symphony orchestras—something never attempted before his time. He also left a legacy of practiced rehearsal techniques that can be used with young and old, professional and amateur choirs, to produce methodical, intentional sound. He founded the Robert Shaw Institute to continue excellence in the art of ensemble singing. His work is a gift to the next generation of choral directors and inspires us to continue his quest for excellence.

These two men worked in different parts of the country at different times—Christiansen in the Midwest during the first half of the twentieth century and Shaw largely in the South during the second. They shared common beliefs but held contrary ideas as well. Whatever their similarities and differences, both stand as reminders of the exciting and extraordinary things that can be done with something we all possess: the human voice.

Appendix

Rubric for Analyses of Audio Recordings F. Melius Christiansen St. Olaf Choir “Come, Guest Divine” and “Tenebrae Factae Sunt”

Tone Quality:

Are the singers singing through the core of the sound creating a clear and focused sound? Is the sound resonating through the mask or toward the back of the oral cavity? Do the singers sound like they are using good breath support and vocal technique?

- Clear, focused sound
- Tends to sound a bit pulled back (perhaps in the throat as opposed to the front of the oral cavity)
- Despite Christiansen’s preference for small voices, the sound is energized and full
- Rather distinct colors between the voice parts sopranos are very light and lyric
- Altos are rich and strong (but without vibrato)
- Tenors are a bit less brilliant but blend better into the sound than most tenor sections
- Basses are strong and fill out the tone
- The group sustains quiet notes without interrupting the blend

Intonation:

Are the pitches accurate? Are the parts in line within the chord? Does the tone sound above, below or in the center of the intended pitch?

- Accurate pitches
- Vibrato can be heard in solos only
- Chords are aligned
- Well tuned and balanced men’s section
- Sometimes pitch wavers slightly when the dynamic is pulled back
- Every so often the sopranos don’t float on to the note but sound as if coming from under it

Rhythm:

Is the rhythm precise? Are all the singers taking responsibility for rhythmic accuracy?

- The choir is flexible in quick passages
- The ensemble sounds like its numbers are smaller it is, it has the versatility of a small ensemble and the energy of a larger one

Balance/Blend:

Are the parts balanced? Do some voices sound louder than others or does each part sound as one voice?

- Each voice part sounds as if it is one voice rather than many
- The sopranos are bright in contrast to the darker alto sound
- This same contrast can be heard with tenors and basses
- At one point most of the group cuts out and it sounds as if only a few voices are singing, it sounds almost like harmonic tones (this is perhaps attributed to Christiansen’s use of the “inner choir”)

Technique:

Does the sound seem consistent throughout each register of the vocal range? Are the onsets to each note balanced? Are glottal strokes, vocal slides and other stylistic devices deliberate or inaccurate?

- Consistent vocal range
- Balanced onsets, some glottal attacks are used for style purposes
- A couple of deliberate slides between notes can be heard, these are extremely well timed and cohesive
- Sometimes the parts (especially sopranos) scoop into notes but this is a choice, not an oversight
- The sopranos are able to float fairly high notes quietly (extremely difficult task)

Interpretation/ Musicianship:

Is the piece sung within the style for which it was written? Is the phrasing deliberate? Are dynamics and other markings of expression considered?

- The ensemble is able to express slow/minor passages with sensitivity and nuance
- A wide range of dynamics and colors are used, the piano is sensitive and the forte is filled with energy
- There is a wonderful build at the beginning of the piece as parts enter on top of each other and the end fades out nicely in “Come, Guest Divine”
- “Tenabre Factae Sunt” begins with vitality in the unison sound but then comes down immediately as the parts separate into the strong opening sound

Diction:

Are all the singers using identical vowel sounds? Are the vowels energized throughout the duration of the word? Are diphthongs sung appropriately according to the rules of the language? Do the ends of words line up? Are shadow vowels used? Can the text be easily understood?

- there are many polyphonic sections in the pieces reviewed so the words are often obscured by this
- Consonants are not emphasized but articulated quickly as Christiansen asked
- Vowels are energized but dominate the sound, they are not allowed to close to the diphthong sound too quickly
- Shadow vowels are not used
- Cut offs are accurate and done as an ensemble

Rubric for Analyses of Audio Recordings
Robert Shaw Festival Singers
Four Motets for Christmas, Francic Poulenc

Tone Quality:

Are the singers singing through the core of the sound creating a clear and focused sound? Is the sound resonating through the mask or toward the back of the oral cavity? Do the singers sound like they are using good breath support and vocal technique?

- Pure soprano sound, more rich, full bodied alto, tenor, bass
- Each section has its own specific color: alto is dark and full, tenor characterized by brilliance, bass is fairly dark
- The soprano floats above the rest because of its purity
- There is a brilliance to the sound
- In quick sections more vibrato shows through

Intonation:

Are the pitches accurate? Are the parts in line within the chord? Does the tone sound above, below or in the center of the intended pitch?

- Precise and strong unisons (Shaw worked on this quite often in rehearsal)
- Chords are extremely in tune
- Dissonances are lined up, they sound almost like consonant intervals because of their purity and balance
- Each section is in the center of the pitch
- No deviation from the key center in a capella pieces

Rhythm:

Is the rhythm precise? Are all the singers taking responsibility for rhythmic accuracy?

- Precise rhythm, the chords line up perfectly because the ensemble sings in such unison time
- All singers move together
- Forward motion is strongly felt
- Rhythmic vitality is heard in quick "Alleluia" section
- Whenever a lift is used to articulate a particular spot, the entire choir lifts exactly as a unit

Balance/Blend:

Are the parts balanced? Do some voices sound louder than others or does each part sound as one voice?

- Sections are extremely well balanced, even the alto voice is almost never lost (this often happens as it is an inner part and often in a less audible range)
- Each section sounds as one voice
- Vibratos are allowed in alto, tenor, and bass sections, sopranos don't exhibit as much vibrato
- In the alto section some voices are allowed to show through the rest of the section, especially when the section sings alone, the voices are a bit larger and darker so they don't blend quite as well as the other sections

Technique:

Does the sound seem consistent throughout each register of the vocal range? Are the onsets to each note balanced? Are glottal strokes, vocal slides and other stylistic devices deliberate or inaccurate?

- Sound is consistent throughout the range, does not necessarily get louder as the voice goes higher unless this is the effect desired
- Onsets are balanced, stylistic devices such as vocal slides, glottal strokes, forte pianos, etc. are not used because it would be inappropriate for this genre
- Soprano sound becomes purer as the range extends higher, many times the vibrato shows through in higher ranges but this is well controlled

Interpretation/ Musicianship:

Is the piece sung within the style for which it was written? Is the phrasing deliberate? Are dynamics and other markings of expression considered?

- Close attention is paid to the voice in which the melody sounds
- Care is taken with the style of the piece in terms of tempo, dynamics and even tone color used (less vibrato is used in the more modal piece)
- The phrases have points of climax and decline, great care is taken to balance and shape phrases
- the choir will frequently lean into a particular note and this gives the phrase movement as well as contrast
- Pianissimos are achieved with taste and delicacy
- Articulations are clear and deliberate

Diction:

Are all the singers using identical vowel sounds? Are the vowels energized throughout the duration of the word? Are diphthongs sung appropriately according to the rules of the language? Do the ends of words line up? Are shadow vowels used? Can the text be easily understood?

- Words are understood, especially where there is quick vowel succession as in "piacente"
- "Alleluia" is impeccable, no sound is allowed to mutate
- "s" in "in praesepio" is sung completely as a unit- this is incredibly difficult to achieve especially with an intervallic "s"
- This is the best execution of the word "excelsis" I have ever heard, it is an extremely difficult word to sing because of the quick succession of consonants and most choirs struggle with it, with this ensemble the "s" sounds are all in the same place and this makes it sound very clear
- Energized vowels, but consonants are energized and given attention as well
- The ends of words line up well, cut offs are as an ensemble
- Shadow vowels are not used because it doesn't fit with the language

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