AMERICAN CHORAL REVIEW

JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN CHORAL FOUNDATION, INC.

VOLUME XXVIII • NUMBER 1 • JANUARY, 1986

AMERICAN CHORAL REVIEW

The AMERICAN CHORAL REVIEW is published quarterly as the official journal of The American Choral Foundation, Inc. The Foundation also publishes a supplementary Research Memorandum Series.

Membership in The American Choral Foundation is available for an annual contribution of $27.50 and includes subscriptions to the AMERICAN CHORAL REVIEW and the Research Memorandum Series and use of the Foundation's advisory services. All contributions are tax deductible.

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THE AMERICAN CHORAL FOUNDATION, INC.
Administered by the Association
of Professional Vocal Ensembles
Janice F. Kestler, Executive Director
251 South 18th Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19103
(215) 545-4444

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Third-class Postage Paid — Philadelphia and additional mailing offices
Postmaster: Send address changes to American Choral Review,
251 South 18th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19103
ISSN 0002-7898

AMERICAN
CHORAL
REVIEW

January, 1986

CONTENTS

Edward Elgar: Music for the Catholic Liturgy

by PERCY M. YOUNG

It used to be the case that any general perception of the music of Edward Elgar took in little more than the first of the *Pomp and Circumstance* Marches (with the tune that is concomitant to American High School Graduations), which was often thought to typify British imperialism and a supportive patriotic stance on the part of the composer. Nowadays, however, the common understanding (in England, that is) is that the Violoncello Concerto, poignant and reflective, is the key to the man if not to the nation. But the truth is that no one work symbolizes Elgar, nor was he or his music "typically English." (Overall I believe we need some revision of critical and musicological attitudes within the dangerous territories of musical nationalism.) Because of the circumstances of his life, Elgar was, indeed, quite atypical; not least because he was a Roman Catholic and, as such, belonging to a minority whose disadvantages were not even at an end during the greater part of Elgar's life. Since the Reformation of the sixteenth century, English Catholics were the victims, sometimes of violent and physical persecution, always of legal restraints, and consequently of various forms of discrimination. Even after the Act of Emancipation of 1829 vestiges of discrimination remained.

These facts did nothing to decrease the neuroticism that was one part of Elgar's make-up and led him frequently to assume that the world was against him. Thus, after the first — and far from perfect — performance of his masterpiece, *The Dream of Gerontius,* in 1900, he did what Job did not do: he cursed God, writing to his editor and friend, August Jaeger of the editorial staff of Novello, " . . . at the last, Providence denies me a decent hearing of my work: so I submit — I always said God was against art and I still believe it." In due course he recovered from this terrible despondency and, as will be shown, proclaimed the relationship of art and religion as absolute, the principles of religion being the foundation of art.

That this thesis is literally true with respect to some music, at least, is not in doubt: sacred music is sacred music (irrespective of the aesthetic rank it may be supposed to hold). For sacred music only exists by right of

function, which is to serve liturgical purpose; in so doing it necessarily acquires its own character in the ears of the worshippers for whom it is intended. Those works that are based on ideas and texts of religious significance but not disciplined by sanctuary requirements are related to sacred music but, in the strictest sense, are not properly to be regarded as such.

The basis of sanctuary music is simplicity. The patterns of versicle and response, of small melodic inflections, of antiphony between priest and people, of popular tunes attached to popular verses (such as those of the *Ave Maria,* for instance, once were): such music reflects the lights and shades of buildings, the gestures of liturgical drama, and takes on its own mystical quality. There is a part of Elgar's music that by design belongs to such circumstances, meriting attention for its own sake and also for its relevance to his creative philosophy as a whole.

Most English Roman Catholic churches were built during the nineteenth century, and those with which Elgar had some special connection in themselves illustrate the pattern of post-Emancipation development. In his native city of Worcester he attended St. George's Church (1830), in which he succeeded his father as organist; he was married at the Oratory Church (1884), Brompton, London; Newman wrote the poem *The Dream of Gerontius* in the Oratory which, in 1848, he founded in Birmingham, and it was to this foundation that Elgar presented the autograph score of his setting of Newman's work. The Elgars lived in Hereford from 1904–12 and here they worshipped at the parish church of St. Francis Xavier (1839) and occasionally at the nearby Benedictine monastery of Belmont (1849). In 1903 the first London performance of *The Dream of Gerontius* was given (to aid the establishment of a choral foundation) in the then not finished, Byzantine-style, Cathedral of Westminster.

Until the nineteenth century the only institutions in England where it was possible to hear music for the Catholic rites were the chapels of embassies of certain European powers. It was in the Bavarian, Sardinian, and Portuguese chapels in particular that masses by Mozart, Haydn, and other Continental composers, were heard, often sung by foreign virtuosi engaged to sing in opera in London. Among musicians, Samuel Webbe (1770–1843) — pupil of Charles Barbandt, organist of the Bavarian chapel from 1760 — and his pupil Vincent Novello (1781–1861), at the Sardinian and Portuguese chapels, made strenuous efforts to provide music for Catholic worship, and their own works — masses and motets — being affected directly by southern European idiom, contrasted vividly with the literature of the Church of England. With small and generally inexpert singers in parish churches in mind, Webbe and Novello kept within discreet bounds, although Novello became more adventurous when considering the opera singers — themselves Catholic — who were available for the

Embassies. Other music in use in Catholic churches was by such composers as Carl Ludwig Droboisch, Anton Diabelli (whose *Landmessen* were intended for simple country choirs in Austria), and Johann Ernst Eberlin, of Salzburg.

From an early age Elgar assisted his father with respect to the music at St. George's Church (he also used to listen to the music of the Anglican tradition, as sung in the great cathedral church of Worcester). He was just twenty when he composed what he termed his Op. 1 — a *Salve Regina*, which was sung on the occasion of the jubilee of the church. Two motets, *Domine salvam fac Reginam nostram Victoriam* (which engaged Elgar's other loyalty — to the Queen) and *Tantum ergo* (British Library, Add.MS 49973 A) were sung on the Feast of SS.Peter and Paul in 1879. A series of liturgical works, as well as a few organ pieces and some hymn tunes, were produced for local use over the first decade of Elgar's composing career. It is in the various pieces extant that the descent of method and manner is clear. Sensibly — Elgar was nothing if not totally practical — he took as model the music to which he and his singers were accustomed. Thus there is little affinity with the "English church music tradition" as exemplified in the anthems and Services sung at the cathedral. Characteristics of the early Elgar, liturgically speaking, were from Novello and Webbe, and show: the frequent presentation of initial themes by solo voice, or voices in unison, accompanied by organ, and immediate repetition in full harmony; harmonic security (for the sake of choristers about whose capabilities Elgar was realistic) in straightforward chording, but with considerable richness induced by spacing and by unusual chordal relationships; counterpoint generated from within chordal textures (this shows in inner parts in the orchestral works) in contrast to a reverse process; above all, detail in dynamic shading — this being from the beginning integral to any composition.

In 1894 Elgar composed a work for organ, strings, brass, and timpani — *Sursum corda* (Op. 11) — which was played in Worcester cathedral on the occasion of the visit of the then Duke of York. In 1901 this piece was given its first performance in a concert hall — the Queen's Hall in London — and the *Malvern Gazette* (Elgar's local paper) noted: "The piece belongs to a Mass produced some years ago. . . ."

Between 1894 and 1901 Elgar moved forward into the wider world as a composer. Relinquishing his organ duties, and aided by helpful (but generally profitless) commissions, he undertook more and more ambitious projects. The "Enigma" Variations (Op. 36) and *The Dream of Gerontius* (Op. 38) made him famous.

To the end of his life Elgar entertained affection for his youthful essays. In 1902, probably in response to a suggestion from Novello, he took out the score of a *Pie Jesu,* which had been composed on January 28, 1887 in memory of a Worcester lawyer, William Allen, who had died on the previous day. (Allen had once given Elgar early, if short-lived, employment.) Originally for treble voices and organ, the revised version was accommodated to the words *Ave verum corpus,* and an expanded score gave the main themes twice — once for solo and once for full choir — while a beautiful, characteristically Elgarian, coda of six measures was added. On January 20, 1902 Elgar wrote to Novello, "I send you the 'Ave Verum' again . . . the Music is too sugary I think but it is nice and harmless and quite easy." He wondered whether the words he used were in any authentic form. About this Novello wrote to Dom Samuel Gregory Ould of the Benedictine Abbey at Fort-Augustus, Scotland, editor of the series *Cantiones Sacrae: Musical Settings of the Roman Liturgy,* in which Elgar's motet would appear. Ould replied thus instructively on March 3:

> There are different readings of the *Ave verum,* and composers are at liberty to set any of them. "Tu nobis miserere" is not very commonly used, and I have not found it ever used with the version that Dr. Elgar has set: it is certainly not essential, and has probably crept in through composers who found that their musical ideas were not finished when the words came to an end. Here is a proof of the theory: Gounod wrote an *Ave verum* in C (for four voices) for his Special Choir; it *was* published by Goddard, and is now published by Weekes: (I think he must have written it after Easter, with the Sequence *Victimae Paschali* in his head, for he extended the line you mention still further, thus: — "Tu nobis, victor Rex, miserere," which is actually the last line of the Easter Sequence, and these words occur nowhere else in our liturgy).
>
> . . . Originally (it only dates from the XIV. century) the *Ave verum* was a hymn of two stanzas of four lines each, and even in Mozart's time it had not grown bigger: cf. your own edition of Mozart's setting. But since then it has developed a tag, and even that has different readings. . . .

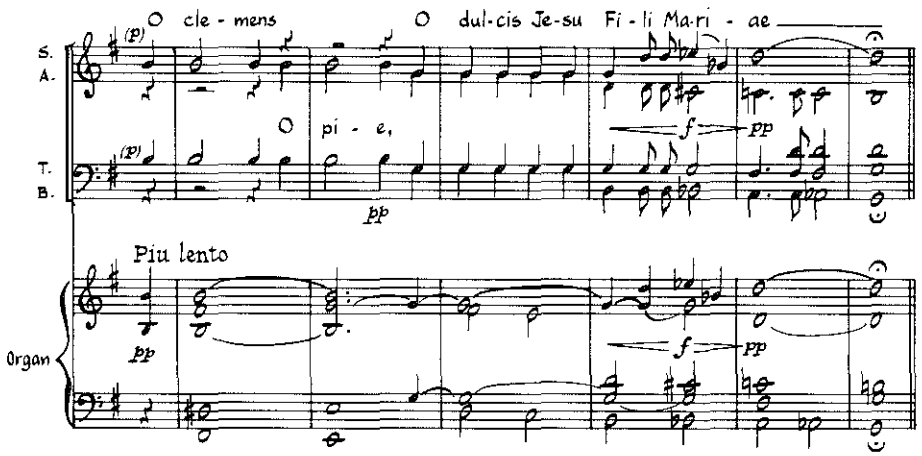
Elgar's musical ideas overflowed the two stanzas to the extent that his coda embraced the words "O clemens, O pie, O dulcis Jesu, Fili Mariae" (Example 1).

On March 25 Elgar wrote again to Novello concerning the work:

> As this is an early work I would like to let it be unobtrusively known that it is so: may I therefore call it Op. 2 No. 1. It's not long enough for an Op. all to itself — and amongst the heaps of similar things I wrote when a youth I may find something which may do for further numbers.
>
> If you wd. rather this did not appear as Op. 2, No.1, as Nos. 2 and 3 are not ready, no Op. number need go in.

In the end *Ave verum corpus* came out later in 1902 as Op. 2, No. 1. It was five years before Nos. 2 and 3 were ready, and on his way to their preparation, as well as enjoying ever increasing fame both at home and

EXAMPLE 1



abroad, Elgar passed through a number of experiences, patently of a heightened spiritual quality.

Early in September, 1903, Elgar was on the point of realizing an intention planted in him by his old schoolmaster, whose telling of the lives of the Apostles so fired the boy's imagination that the idea of composing an oratorio cycle on this theme became increasingly imperative. Having almost reached the end of his score of *The Apostles* (Op. 49), which was to be performed at the Birmingham Festival in October, Elgar, with his family, was staying in Hereford for the Three Choirs Festival at which the "Enigma" Variations and *Gerontius* were being given. On September 3, according to Lady Elgar's Diary, Elgar and two friends — A.E. Rodewald and Frank Schuster — "walked through fields, bright sunny morning to Belmont. Heard the *Ite Missa Est* to the tune of the Angel in *Gerontius.* Both men [sic] much impressed by all they saw and heard. This beautiful church out in the country. . . ." Three days later the Elgars walked back from Mass at Belmont, the daughter remembering how her father had stopped on the way to talk with a poor woman "sitting in the ditch, making tea and eating raw turnips." On September 13 the family again attended Mass at Belmont:

> The Litany was being chanted as we arrived, the same as in *Gerontius,* then we went in, lovely sunny morning. After the Mass the Preacher came across to E[dward]. and asked to take him over the Monastery. We waited and the monks filed out. The grounds looked lovely. E. asked if he could go and stay there sometime. Glad assent.

Six months later Elgar was approached as a leading Catholic when, on March 28, 1904, Prior Cuthbert McAdam, head of a house of Canons Regular of the Lateran, at Blandford, Dorset, after seeing a newspaper notice of Elgar wrote to him in the hope of enlisting his support for the

building of a new church. Next day Prior McAdam, after noticing further newspaper mention of Elgar, wrote again. He had learned that the Elgars were moving to Hereford, to a house named Plas Gwyn, in which McAdam's brother had once lived. He also drew attention to the Catholic churches in the nearby villages of Bullingham and Rotherwas, adding, "You will be near that beautiful place Belmont where the Ritual of Holy Church is so well carried out."

Hereford is an ancient city, of great beauty and tranquillity, set on the River Wye, and circled with villages of distinctive charm. The Elgars lived here for almost eight years, during which Edward reached the peak of his achievement with his middle-period orchestral works. In Hereford he came to associate himself with the life of the community more than elsewhere, and in 1905 he was invited to become Mayor of the city. A naturally reticent man, he felt obliged to decline the honor. So far as religious life was concerned, the family worshipped at the church of St. Francis Xavier and developed an attachment to the parish priest, Charles Vincent Dolman (1842–1918), a Benedictine belonging to Belmont Monastery. Son of a distinguished Catholic publisher, Dolman was a good scholar, a man of compassion, ecumenical in disposition, and responsible for the beautifying of his church and the enlargement of its organ on the occasion of the church's jubilee in 1889. There is a significant entry in Lady Elgar's Diary for January 19, 1906: "Canon Dolman came (long talk with E.): beautiful new tune for Priests." Elgar was busy at the time with *The Kingdom* (for the Birmingham Festival of 1906) and the "new tune" mentioned is the climactic chorus "O ye Priests." Two days later Elgar took the chair for an Oxford University Extension lecture on Renaissance Art. It was reported in the *Hereford Times* that, "He congratulated the students on the choice they had made, and said that it always struck him very forcibly that the basis of the whole of art was religion." *The Kingdom* like *The Apostles* of three years earlier bore the dedication "A.M.D.G." [*ad majorem Dei gloriam*].

At the beginning of 1907 the Elgars went to Italy, and during February, while in Rome, Elgar spent some days visiting the Vatican in the company of Lorenzo Perosi, the music director of the Sistine Chapel. Perosi, the first Italian composer to refer back appreciatively to the splendors of pre-Classical Italian church music, himself contributed many works to the liturgical repertory, the best of them being on a small scale and intended for general use. Lady Elgar's comment on this visit was succinct, but significant: "Rome beginning to impress us deeply."

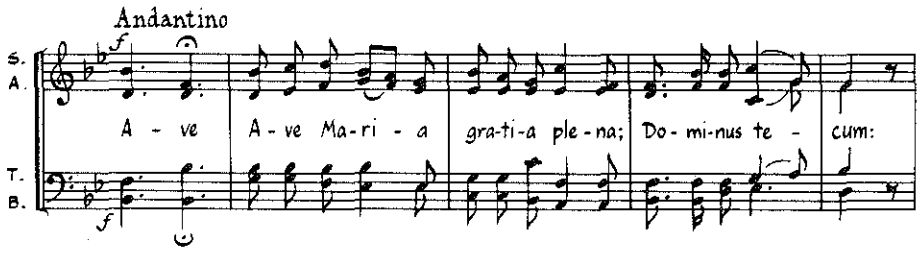
After another American visit — he conducted *The Apostles* and *The Kingdom* in New York — Elgar returned home, and towards the end of May, 1907 was again, with some difficulty, busying himself with composition. On May 24, according to the Diary, "E. very busy writing his two Church musics." At the same time he was occupied scoring the second of his *Wand of Youth* suites and the fourth *Pomp and Circumstance* March

(dedicated to G.R. Sinclair, the Hereford cathedral organist), and also with a new part-song, *Love,* and the basic material for the First Symphony. In almost all of these works older matter, rescued from the sketch books, appears, and it is remarkable how frequently Elgar found the right context for what formerly had not seemed to merit particular attention.

The evidence for the earlier existence of the substance of Op. 2, Nos. 2 and 3 is deducible from the character of the music, but is confirmed by the content of the letter of March 25, 1902. The question is, why did Elgar turn to these motets at a time when he was both nervous of commitment to composition and fired with inspiration? There are, I think, two reasons: On the one hand he was aware of the sincerity, if not the innocence, of his boyhood pieces, which qualities gave a special beauty to the *Wand of Youth* Suites, and the *Nursery Suite* of 1931, where a hymn tune of 1878 is to be found, and also to the motets. But there was also a sense of commitment to the principles of the Faith that had both inspired and haunted him.

In *Ave Maria,* dedicated to the wife of his oldest Worcester friend, Elgar shows the sense of wonder that suffuses his children's music with a gently undulating rhythmic pattern bearing a berceuse-like melodic contour (Example 2). The result is a charming madonna reflection. The motif is extended, *tranquillamente,* but with more urgency in the organ accompaniment, until it is lifted up a third into minor tonality. Now it becomes a cry for aid, *molto espressivo* and *fortissimo;* but at "nunc et in hora mortis nostrae" Elgar returns to the quiet contemplativeness of the opening.

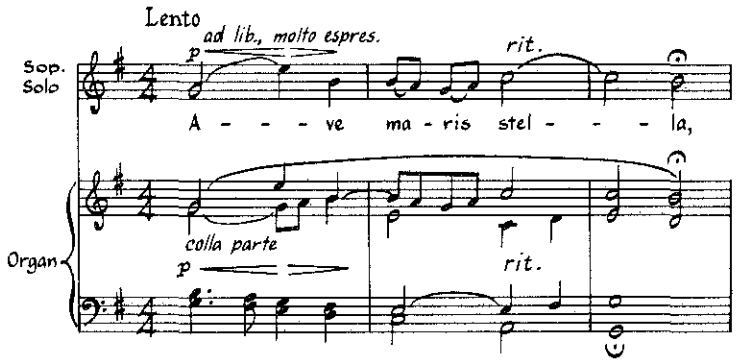
EXAMPLE 2



In 1888 Elgar dedicated four Litanies to Father Thomas Knight S.J., the then parish priest in Worcester. In the following years Father Knight gave to Elgar, as a wedding present, a copy of Newman's *Dream of Gerontius.* In February, 1907 Elgar dedicated a fine setting of Tennyson's "There is sweet music" to Canon C.V. Gorton, a Church of England vicar who had founded the Morecambe Musical Festival which was a great inspiration to Elgar. Canon Dolman, of Hereford, was the dedicatee of *Ave maris stella,* the third and last number of Op. 2. As in the other cases the dedication was a tribute to an influence not otherwise to be expressed than in music. A medieval hymn (ascribed in the St. Gallen manuscript of the

ninth century to St. Bernard) popular in England, *Ave maris stella,* calls for the simplest musical treatment. Elgar captures the pictorial mood of the evening star above water in a lovely looping, reflecting, motif which carries through the whole piece (Example 3). But there is also some enthusiastic shifting of tessitura and tonality of the main theme and a splendid hymn in conclusion.

EXAMPLE 3



On June 7 Lady Elgar wrote to August Jaeger: "Edward's head has been full of music ever since his return and he has been continuously sketching and playing. He has sent Messrs N [ovello] 2 lovely motetts. . . ."

It is, perhaps, significant that — in view of the wide popularity of Elgar's works at the time, and especially the choral pieces — no review of the Opus 2 motets appeared either in 1902 or 1907 (or later). This omission in *The Musical Times* (the Novello house journal) is particularly remarkable: despite the fact that Novello published the series *Cantiones Sacrae,* it is difficult to escape the conclusion that Latin motets were still provocative to a considerable section of the Protestant majority.

During his creative life Elgar composed works for the Church of England. He was closely associated with the Three Choirs Festival. He loved the cathedrals of Worcester, Hereford, and Gloucester, where these Festivals took place. A year after his death a memorial window, based on the theme of *Gerontius,* was placed in Worcester Cathedral. The last word, however, should be with Elgar, who, on February 22, 1928 wrote a letter of congratulation to the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson, on the occasion of his twenty-five years as Primate. In this he said:

> . . . Bred in another form of religious observance I stand aside, unbiased, from the trivialities with which controversies are mostly informed [at the time there was bitter argument concerning a new Prayer Book]; whatever differences exist there remains the clear, vital and refreshing Christianity, desired by all men, but obscured by the little darkness of their own imperfect vision. To the better understanding of such broad Christian feeling I am thankful to have been permitted, in a small way it is true, to exercise my art. . . .

Editorial

A Document from the Organ Renaissance

In Memory of Rudolf Maack

An earlier issue of the *American Choral Review* (Volume XX, Number 2, April, 1978) contained an article on the twentieth-century organ renaissance and an explanation of how profoundly this phase of the revival of Baroque music had influenced the modern ideals of choral sound. Our thoughts returned to this discussion when we received the sad news that Rudolf Maack, long-time correspondent of the *American Choral Review,* had died in Hamburg at the age of eighty-one.

A brilliant Anglicist and connoisseur of art and music history, he had obtained his doctorate from the University of Hamburg when he was barely twenty. His dissertation dealt with the English Baroque writer Lawrence Sterne, but in succeeding years his interests turned more and more to music criticism. When he joined the correspondents staff of this journal, he was introduced to our readers as an author who had been active for the Hamburg press for more than forty years. In time, we changed this description to read "more than fifty years," and when we last saw him, he remarked whimsically that we would soon have to change "fifty" to "sixty."

As he began his writing career, he entered upon a musical scene in ferment from post-war struggles between obsolete Romanticism and twentieth-century critical objectivity. The ideas of authentic performance practice were born, and Rudolf Maack soon became one of their most articulate spokesmen. But what made him famous was a brief sharp-edged review of a small book dealing with the celebrated Schnitger organ that had been rediscovered in his home town. It was an instrument that Praetorius had singled out as a paradigm of the art of organ building by printing its disposition in his *Syntagma Musicum* (1619). Through this documentation it became possible to recognize the rare situation that the old instrument was, in fact, still there once all the layers of misguided reconstruction that had occurred over the ages were torn away.

The rediscovery proved a sensation, but Maack's essay shows that it did not take hold without obstinate delays.

It may seem unusual indeed to select a polemic piece of writing to commemorate the work of a writer. But nowhere in this work is the pioneer spirit of a new era more apparent than in the article, rendered here in English, with which the young journalist earned his laurels by courageously taking the lead of a generation in his orbit of musical letters:

RUDOLF MAACK

INFORMATION ABOUT AN ORGANIST

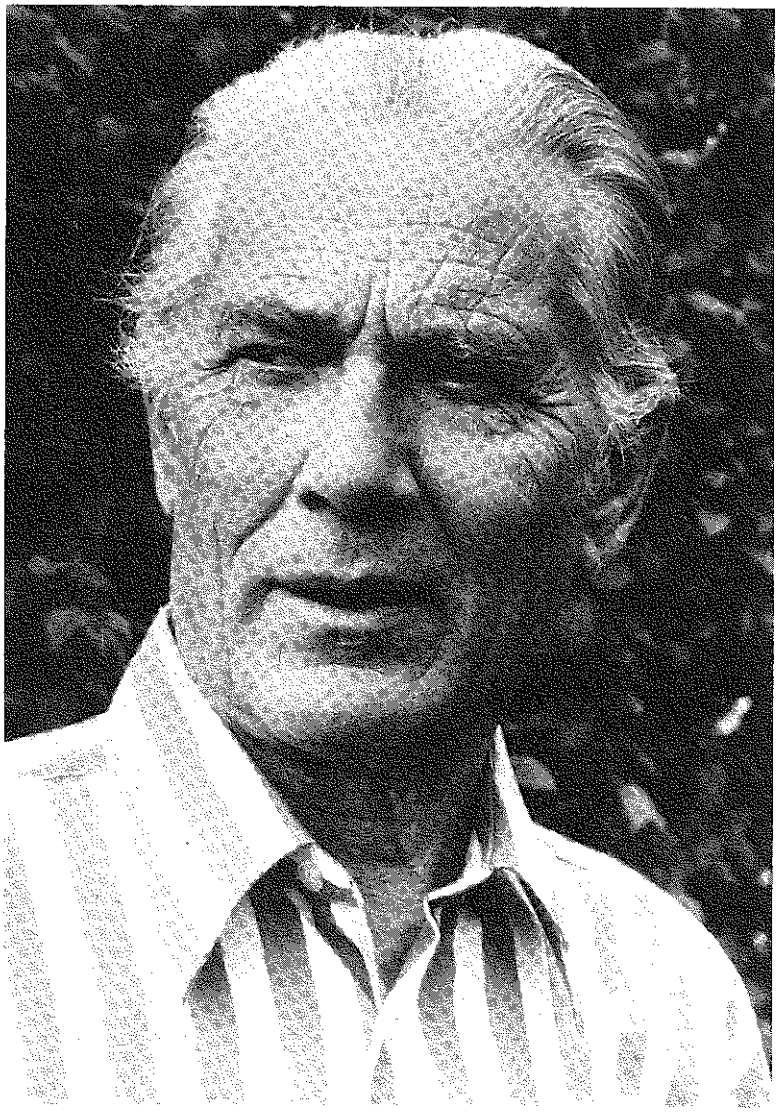
Who among you knows the name Karl Mehrkens? Karl Mehrkens, organist at *St. Jacobi?* Please raise your hands. Let's see — two, four, seven, nine, fourteen — very well, thank you. And now a sincere plea to those whose hands didn't go up: Don't read these lines — it doesn't matter all that much. They were just written for those who happen to know the name and who keep seeing in the papers: Karl Mehrken's next organ recital . . . Karl Mehrken's next Vespers at *St. Jacobi* . . . Karl Mehrken's next demonstration of the world's most famed baroque instrument. . . . Those who read these notices, and who happen to wonder about them, might go on to read the following. All the others are urged again: Please skip this section and move on to the ads. So much for that.

Karl Mehrkens, organist at *St. Jacobi* in Hamburg, has written a little book entitled *The Schnitger Organ at the Principal Church of St. Jacobi in Hamburg* and has issued it through a highly reputable publishing firm. We welcome this little book. In an unexpected manner, and to an unexpected degree, it confirms our opinion of the author. It offers the public deep insight into a mind bound to prove engaging to the critical reader, for it will afford him an excellent opportunity to study the distinction between good and bad, noble and pitiful. The little book by Karl Mehrkens, by way of example, is pitiful; not so much for lack of style as for lack of general intelligence — the same lack to which we owe the quality of his long career as a performer.

The book is divided into two sections, one written by the author, and the second by others. The latter, not surprisingly, is good; the former, not surprisingly, is bad. The book contains specifications for the *St. Jacobi* organ beginning with the year 1618, programs marking its historic rediscovery, testimonies by Albert Schweitzer and Christhard Mahrenholz, a list of workmen who helped to restore the instrument, thirteen pages of text by Karl Mehrkens, a dedication, and two pictures.

Let's begin with the pictures. Any guesses as to what they might be?

"Now, that shouldn't be so difficult. The book is called *The Schnitger Organ at St. Jacobi* — it'll probably be the organ itself that is pictured."



RUDOLF MAACK

1902 – 1983

Good for you — one of the pictures shows the organ and choir loft, as seen from the nave. But what about the other one?

"Well, it's probably the console, or one of the rows of pipes — or. . . ."

No, no — you're on the wrong track. Let me give you a hint: it is a person. What we have before us is a regular portrait.

"No problem then — it's Arp Schnitger, who built the organ."

Too bad, you're wrong.

"Then it must be Hans Scherer who had built an earlier organ in the church."

No, it's not Scherer.

"Perhaps one of the early organists, or Bach who had applied for the organist's post at *St. Jacobi?*"

None of them either.

"Then Hans Henny Jahnn who rediscovered the organ — or Schweitzer, or Mahrenholz who gave the estimates — or Gustav Kemper who rebuilt it?"

Sorry — all wrong.

"But it must be someone connected with the organ and the story of the book!"

It is.

"The publisher?"

No.

"The minister?"

No.

"One of the workmen?"

No.

"St. Cecilia?"

No.

"The bellows blower?"

No — I see this is too hard. I'll tell you who it is: Karl Mehrkens.

"Karl Mehrkens?"

Himself.

"In his own book?"

In his own book — what's so funny about that? It is Karl Mehrkens, shown in a handsome photograph. He wears a brightly colored necktie and

a smile on his face. We are far from considering the picture a superfluous addition to this book. On the contrary, we think it is a good idea to have an author show his face.

Now to the organ itself. Built by Arp Schnitger in 1688, it was — especially since Schnitger had made use of earlier material preserved in the church — one of the most exquisite instruments that the art of North German organ building had produced. Like many of its sister instruments, it fell victim to the nineteenth-century craze of "improvements" — until Hans Henny Jahnn and his associates restored it, against the expressly stated wish of the organist, Karl Mehrkens. When he did not give up his stubborn insistence on maintaining modern innovations, it was the statements made by Schweitzer and Mahrenholz that saved the original instrument — statements that represented an authority to which, in the end, he had to bow. Now he, unwillingly blessed by good fortune, presides over one of the most beautiful organs in the world, and plays on it so badly that one might weep.

With good cheer, and not without unintentional irony, he relates the history of his instrument as well as his own, gives an account of "decisive changes" made in 1865 (the damage referred to above) which "added much to the instrument's quality," only to reflect two lines later that the additional stops were removed again "since they clashed with the old ones." Then he praises the sound of the organ (i.e., the nineteenth-century version) although he regrets that it was not suited for modern registration ("in those days the 'old' masters were not yet 'modern' "). He chats about his memories from World War I, stops for some "funny incidents," and gets around to the organ renaissance whose reverberations penetrated even his well-closed doors. He has only good things to say about Jahnn whose "efforts, time, and even money served the noble cause," and about Schweitzer and Mahrenholz (whose statements prevented further damage he had intended). Having reported that the rediscovered organ was restored in 1930, he closes by praising the Lord.

In reading this little book, one gains the impression that it might well have been written by the bellows blower (whose services, incidentally, were relegated to a wind motor in 1904). Not only the anecdotes would suggest such authorship (for instance, the story of the Dutch prince and the "quick-witted" organist who got away with listening to only one Sunday sermon just as the prince managed to eat at only one of his receptions) but also the seemingly serious portions of these thirteen pages. The attempted objectivity of their text gives way again and again to meandering tales, such as that of the patriotic service with "The Watch on the Rhine" for an opening chorale — it is a hodge-podge that might pass for casual chatting by an old-time bellows blower, but not a publication by an artist holding a distinguished post.

But what were one to say of a bellows blower presenting the following account:

> A special joy to me were the Vespers Services where many people from the slums attended — people who could never afford to buy a concert ticket and who probably attended church on no other occasion. One day the sexton came to me saying that a shopkeeper in that area had refused to display our poster. I took it out of his hands and went to the shop, asking if such courtesy could not be extended in connection with a concert that was offered to the community free of charge. A girl leaning against the counter laughed in my face and said "Can *we* come, too?" I calmly answered: "Yes, I give the concert for you — you, too, may come to this church concert and feel the equal of everyone else." She made no reply and left, but to my surprise, later the sexton said he had noticed that she was present at the Vespers, though she may not have been deeply impressed. I gave special thanks to the Lord for this evening.

How would one deal with a bellows blower, we ask, who gave such a report; who lays claim to — we might say — such charity; who commits the faux pas of — we might say — such confused extension of equality; who admits the experience of — we might say — such misunderstood rejoinder of silence; who takes satisfaction in — we might say — such a mistaken notion of hospitality; who betrays his lack of respect by — we might say — such naive questioning of impressionability; who adds a comment of — we *must* say — such shamelessness as giving special thanks to the Lord for the episode? How would one deal with him? One would want him excommunicated not only from his church, but from human society.

The original German text appeared in Der Kreis: Zeitschrift fur Künstlerische Kultur, *Vol. VIII, Hamburg, 1931.*

— A.M.

Choral Conductors Forum

PERFORMING BACH'S CHORAL WORKS

by TERI NOEL TOWE

In recent arguments on the performance practice of Bach's works, Joshua Rifkin's publications and their repercussion in the international press have taken a foremost place. The American Choral Review, *having devoted an earlier Choral Conductors Forum column (Volume XXV, Number 3, July, 1983) to some of the discussion that emanated from a novel interpretation of the B Minor Mass, with one performer on a part, resumes the study of this issue with the following interview reprinted from* Ovation, *February, 1985.*

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Until recently, the primary — virtually the only — pieces of evidence as to how Johann Sebastian Bach actually performed his own vocal music were thought to be two autograph documents: a schedule, drawn up in the spring of 1729, itemizing the singers required for the four main churches in Leipzig; and the famous "Short but Most Necessary Draft for a Well-Regulated Church Music," which Bach submitted to the Leipzig City Council on August 23, 1730. In the latter, somewhat convoluted document, Bach sets forth what he considers the necessary numbers of musicians and singers for the adequate and effective performance of sacred music in the Leipzig churches. Both here and in the schedule of 1729, he indicates that each "musical" choir — by which he means a group whose repertoire includes music at least as ambitious as an a *cappella* motet — should have at least twelve singers: three sopranos, three altos, three tenors and three basses. But does this mean that he wanted, or expected, the choruses in his cantatas and other concerted vocal works to be performed by an ensemble of twelve singers, or that he ever had such an ensemble? Are we interpreting his words correctly?

According to Joshua Rifkin, founder and director of the Bach Ensemble, the answer to all these questions is an emphatic "No." Research into the performing parts used by Bach's singers and instrumentalists, as well as investigations into the practice of other composers as diverse as Schütz and Haydn, has led him to conclusions diametrically opposed to our traditional notions of how Bach's music was originally heard. In short, Rifkin argues that all but a handful of Bach's concerted vocal works were sung with but one singer to each vocal line, even in the ensembles that Bach occasionally titled, and we still call, "chorus." Listeners can hear the result in Rifkin's recordings with the Bach Ensemble — notably the Mass in B Minor (Nonesuch 79306) and the *Magnificat* (Pro Arte PAD-185). Not long ago, Rifkin and I met for a series of conversations about the controversial findings of his research. I began by asking him why he put more trust in Bach's performing parts than in the two familiar documents.

JOSHUA RIFKIN: The familiar Bach documents are really not so clear in their implications as a superficial reading might suggest — one can in fact read much of them quite differently from the way to which we're accustomed. The parts, on the other hand, contain a good deal of information that it seems all but impossible to interpret reasonably in more than one way. Now in one sense, this information is innocuous enough: It shows that Bach's singers, much like singers today, read from invidual copies of the music, each singer holding his own part. The problem is that most of Bach's pieces have only one copy of each voice part — only one soprano part, one alto and so forth. If the ratio of singers to parts is one-to-one, then these pieces must have been sung by a "choir" of single voices. It's this, of course, that some people find hard to accept.

TERI NOEL TOWE: Haven't scholars previously assumed that Bach's singers shared their parts, three on each? Why isn't this possible?

J.R.: Strictly speaking, of course, I can't say that it isn't — any more than I can rule out the possibility that Bach's singers performed standing on their heads. But the real question is whether we have any reason to believe it in the first place. Most people do seem not to realize that the idea of Bach's singers sharing parts is a relatively recent one — the invention, if you will, of a German scholar named Arnold Schering [1877–1941]. Schering took it more or less as a matter of faith that Bach had twelve singers in the choral movements of his cantatas; indeed, if you read him carefully, you find that he simply could not conceive of there having been any fewer than twelve. He thus had to find a way to resolve the discrepancy between the number of singers supposedly involved in each performance and the number of parts actually used. But the parts themselves do nothing — to put it mildly — to

encourage belief in the rather cumbersome arrangement that he came up with.

T.N.T.: What do the parts in fact show?

J.R.: Let me start off with what they do *not* show: Bach's parts contain nothing that can be taken as proof that more than one singer read from them. They have no *divisi* passages, for instance; nor do they contain markings that would have told doubling singers reading from them where to sing and where to remain silent — which numbers or passages required them to join the principal singer, and which belonged to the principal singer alone.

T.N.T.: But did the singers actually need such markings?

J.R.: Again, I can't say for sure whether they did or didn't; but it's curious that Bach should omit such information when he took considerable pains to spell out other things that we might think he could more readily have dispensed with — *tacet* indications for entire numbers for instance, or dynamic markings for echo effects and the like. I'll give you an example. Cantata No. 44 opens with a duet for tenor and bass, which leads without break into a four-part "chorus." Everyone today assumes that, say the tenor who sang the duet would have been joined by two additional tenors, reading from the same music, in the chorus. Now if this were so, Bach could have found numerous ways of helping the doubling singers know where to come in — he could, perhaps, have headed the first movement *duetto,* the second *chorus,* or perhaps put the word *solo* over the first movement, *tutti* over the second. But no such markings appear — the music just continues.

T.N.T.: Perhaps Bach didn't have time to put in these markings?

J.R.: Ah, but there's the rub. You see, Bach in fact revised these very parts quite carefully — the second movement even has extensive dynamic indications in his own hand. So we have to ask, why does he take such trouble over the dynamics but none whatever over the entry of the doubling singers — which is surely a more fundamental matter than a few shifts between *piano* and *forte?* Mind you, I'm not saying that this "proves" Cantata No. 44 to have been sung by single voices. But cases like this are provocative.

T.N.T.: Yes, but they remain essentially negative evidence.

J.R.: Of course. But matters hardly stop there. Bach's parts also

contain a number of positive indications pointing to their use by only one singer each.

T.N.T.: Yes: you've discussed several of these cases in print. But as you yourself have observed, it's only a minority of the parts that contain such indications. How can you generalize from them?

J.R.: Let me try to illustrate that with a hypothetical example. Say we have parts for three compositions, Piece A, Piece B and Piece C. Piece A has four main voice parts, which carry the usual labels *soprano, alto, tenore* and *basso.* In addition, however, there are four extra parts, labeled *soprano in ripieno, alto in ripieno* and so forth: these double the parts of the first group in more fully scored music but drop out elsewhere. Both their musical character and their very presence seem to indicate — I'm putting this as cautiously as possible — that the parts marked simply *soprano,* etc., served for only one singer each.

This is, of course, a relatively unproblematic example, since the doubling singers — the *ripieno* singers, as they would have been called in Bach's day — create precisely what we would now call a choral effect. But let's go on to Piece B. Here we have *only* four voice parts, again labeled *soprano, alto, tenore* and *basso.* In this instance, though, the bass has a dramatic function in the piece, representing the figure Jesus; at the top of the part, therefore, we find the inscription *Jesus.* Surely, this indicates that the part was used by the singer who took the "role" of Jesus — and, by obvious implication, no one else. But what then of the other three parts? Unless you want to imagine a wildly imbalanced vocal setup, you have no choice but to assume that each of them was also used by only one singer each. So now you have a "choral" piece involving a total of four singers.

The real consequences of all this become clear when we go to Piece C. Let's say, first of all, that the kinds of clues about singer-to-part ratio found in Pieces A and B can be found in other compositions as well; and let's remember, too, that we do not find a single piece of evidence in any other composition that would indicate the use of a part by more than one singer. Now, Piece C has only four voice parts, and these carry the usual neutral labels: *soprano, alto* and so forth. From these labels alone, you might say, we can't really tell how many singers would have read from each part — "soprano," after all, could mean an entire section of sopranos, not just one. But consider: In Piece A, the part marked *soprano* was used by only one singer; in Piece B, the part marked *soprano* was used by only one singer; and in a number of other pieces we can make the same determination as well. The soprano part to Piece C looks from every point of view exactly like all those other soprano parts whose scoring we know. Do we have any grounds for thinking that it was nevertheless used by a different number of singers

from any of the others? To paraphrase the old adage: If it looks like a duck, waddles like a duck, and quacks like a duck, don't you need some pretty strong evidence before you call it a chicken?

T.N.T.: And your hypothetical ducks are in fact real sets of parts?

J.R.: Yes — Pieces A, B and C represent real Bach compositions; in fact each hypothetical piece represents more than a single real one.

T.N.T.: But haven't other scholars argued that we have the evidence to turn your ducks into chickens? What of the documents? And aren't there in fact indications of use by more than one singer in the parts themselves — don't some of Bach's cantata parts have *solo* and *tutti* markings in them? What are these if not instructions for *ripieno* singers?

J.R.: Well, to stick to the parts for the moment, the *solo* and *tutti* markings that you mention *are* instructions — but not for singers. With only two rather complicated exceptions, the few sets of parts with *solo/tutti* indications are also those that contain *ripieno* parts in addition to the principal ones. In such pieces, Bach usually had the *ripieno* parts copied from the corresponding principal parts — *soprano in ripieno* from *soprano,* and so on — rather than from the score. The indications *solo* and *tutti* were thus put into the principal parts as a guide to the scribe of the *ripieno* parts, who would copy all the music marked *tutti* and omit the passages marked *solo* — a procedure, I might note, that had been set forth as long before as 1619 by the composers Schütz and Praetorius.

T.N.T.: Are you simply assuming that Bach and his copyists were proceeding along the lines suggested by Praetorius and Schütz, or is there concrete evidence of this?

J.R.: There isn't evidence in the sense of explicit testimony; but it has been demonstrated through textual comparisons of the sort used in classical philology. Let me give you an admittedly complex example. Cantata No. 195 has eight voice parts — four principal parts and four *ripieno* parts. The *ripieno* parts were begun by Bach himself, but finished by a copyist. Those sections that Bach wrote do not simply duplicate the music of the main parts but deviate from it in often subtle ways; the portions written by the copyist simply reproduce exactly what is in the main parts. Now at the very point where the copyist takes over, the main parts suddenly show *solo* and *tutti* markings; but no such markings appear in the passages for which Bach himself wrote the *ripieno* parts. Obviously, Bach did not need markings to tell him where the *ripieno* singers should come in and drop out, but his copyist did. And just as obviously, the *solo/tutti* markings in the main parts

were too incomplete to have been of any real use to the *ripieno* singers — who had parts of their own in any event.

T.N.T.: So everything in the parts points to a ratio of one singer to a part and nothing — or at least nothing substantial — points in the opposite direction.

J.R.: Exactly.

T.N.T.: But this then brings us back to those documents — the "Draft" and the schedule of singers. You've clearly intimated that you don't find these documents to be an obstacle despite what popular conception seems to make of them. Can you explain?

J.R.: Let's start by remembering that neither document is as straightforward as some readers might think. Bach's language is not all that transparent, nor is his frame of reference necessarily ours. It won't do just to trust our first instincts about what his words mean — those "instincts," after all, have been shaped by hearing Bach's music a certain way and thinking about musical institutions a certain way; but do we really know that what's self-evidently true for us was equally true for him? The documents have to be subjected to careful scrutiny and looked at, as much as possible, in the light of whatever contemporary evidence we can get. Only then can we develop some reasonable sense of what Bach is and isn't saying.

Let me give you another of my hypothetical examples — one that will turn out to be not so hypothetical after all. Say that in the year 2085 a scholar is trying to reconstruct the way baseball was played in the preceding century. He comes across a statement saying that each team had around twenty-five men. Now today we know that this figure refers to the entire squad, from which the manager draws his starting lineup. But a scholar a century from now might not be able to take this for granted the way we do — and could well end up writing, "Baseball is a game in which each team puts twenty-five men on the field."

Let's then pursue this a bit further and imagine that a contemporary of our future scholar finds some piece of evidence — a box score, for instance — that leads him to suspect that no more than nine players actually took the field for each side. There is obviously a discrepancy between the implications of this new evidence and the prevailing interpretation of the old evidence. In this situation, two questions have to be asked: Are we reading the new evidence correctly? And, just as important, have we been reading the old evidence correctly? In the case of baseball, at least, the answer to the second question is pretty obvious.

T.N.T.: Are you suggesting, then, that we have something of the same situation with Bach?

J.R.: Obviously. The parts are the new evidence — not newly discovered, to be sure, but new to this particular issue — and the documents the old. The parts say something that doesn't jibe with the documents — as we have read them. So something has to give. If I have read the parts themselves correctly — and no one, by the way, has raised any serious challenges on this point — then the problem must lie in the way we have been reading the documents.

T.N.T.: And there is a way of reading the documents that will fit with the new evidence?

J.R.: Exactly. This is where baseball becomes more than a frivolity. Read Bach's language carefully and you'll see that he is not talking about the number of performers needed for a given piece — a "starting team," in other words — but about the total squad from which he's to draw the forces for specific compositions. When he says a choir should have three sopranos, for instance, he is not saying that all three sing at once — any more than a baseball manager plans to send all his pitchers onto the mound at the same time. Once you can see his numbers in these terms, the supposed contradictions between documents and parts simply begin to vanish.

T.N.T.: But why *should* we see Bach's numbers in these terms? Isn't it tendentious to do so?

J.R.: Well, in a certain sense it is, of course — but the older interpretation is no less so. And at least this interpretation is motivated by some fairly concrete — and, I would argue, fairly incontrovertible — observations from the parts, whereas the older interpretation rests on nothing more than a vague set of prejudices formed by what we're used to. I would argue, too, that the "new" interpretation of the documents offers a better account for many details of their language and structure than the older one could.

T.N.T.: How then would you explain Bach's statement that you need *concerto* singers and *ripieno* singers to sing a cantata?

J.R.: Well, it's a complex matter, but Bach doesn't quite say that. He writes, basically, that a choir whose repertory will include cantatas has to have its singers organized not only according to voice type — which will suffice for assigning parts in a motet — but also according to whether they take concerted or *ripieno* parts. He further seems to say that an "ideal"

choir will have eight *concerto* singers and eight *ripieno* singers. But nowhere does he say that you need all these singers for any given work, or even that you would use them all at once if you had the chance — any more than he says that the trumpets and drums listed in a conspectus of instruments later in the same document would have played in every cantata.

What Bach does seem to have had in mind becomes clear if we take a sideways glance at an institution similar to his — the Fürstenschule in the Saxon town of Grimma. In the 1720's, the repertory of the choir at this school included at least one piece scored for soprano, alto, two tenors and bass, all with *ripieno* doubling, and at least one for two sopranos, two altos, tenor and bass, again all with doubling parts. To perform just these two works with one singer to a part, the total forces available would have to have included four sopranos, four altos, four tenors and two basses — virtually the sixteen-voice group projected by Bach.

Now as this example suggests, there is certainly enough music from Bach's period that calls for *ripieno* singers. But there seems to be just as much that either employs *ripieno* singers as a disposable option or does not call for them at all in the first place. Bach presumably felt that a properly constituted choir should have the resources to encompass pieces with *ripieno* voices; he may even have wanted to write for such an ensemble. But that is not to say that he *had* such a group, nor that, if he did have them, he would have written the same music for them that he wrote for the forces actually available to him. Speculating about what Bach might have done in this regard is about as fruitful as wondering what he might have done if he had modern instruments — or, perhaps, how Mozart might have rewritten his Salzburg music if the clarinets he so loved were available to him.

But this gets away from the central point. Nothing in the documents compels a conclusion about Bach's performances that in any way differs from what the parts can tell us.

T.N.T.: And what do you think are the implications for performance today?

J.R.: That raises a whole new question that is surely beyond the scope of this interview. But I'll say this much: Performers obviously must do what they find most satisfactory musically, whether or not it corresponds to any sort of historical actuality — there's nothing immoral about playing Bach on the piano, or the saxophone, or in Stokowski's arrangements. But historically conscious performers will of course have to take into account these new findings on Bach's practice; and if they do, some may even find the results musically preferable. Certainly this has been our experience with the Bach Ensemble; just as we play original instruments from musical

choice — because we feel the music "speaks" better through them — so too do we find that the music gains considerably from having its original dimensions restored. For all the controversy, I've encountered more than a few people, both professional musicians and more casual listeners, who tell me that they had never really enjoyed the B Minor Mass until they heard our recording! I don't think historical research can have a nicer payoff.

Madrigal Awards

Under the Louise Goucher Madrigal Award program, administered by the American Choral Foundation, recognition has gone to American choral conductors in a sequence of awards whose distribution covered in large outline the map of the United States and the range of the literature.

Indicative of the extensive exploration of repertoire that madrigal studies have thus invited is the opening of a program designed by one of the recent award winners: settings of the famous Renaissance lament *Weep O mine eyes,* which showed, side by side, the work of the sixteenth-century madrigalist John Bennet and the twentieth-century composer and historian Halsey Stevens. The conductor, James Fritschel, Director of Choral Activities at California Lutheran College, Thousand Oaks, and well known on the American choral scene through his recordings, had chosen a program that combined the names of Weelkes and Morley with those of William Schuman, R.L. de Pearsall, and Eugene Butler, and it is characteristic of his work that the selections included a number of his own fine settings, as had his recordings.

With the last two awards the program has returned to its original scope: the Renaissance madrigal. It was the golden age of the madrigal to which the life work of the conductor whose name the program bears was devoted, and it is an intriguing challenge to apply the same wide range of investigation to the music of this epoch in particular.

The July, 1984 issue of the *American Choral Review* contained an essay by Christopher Reynolds, recipient of the award, in which, using the example of Gesualdo's *Dolcissima mia vita,* the true structural nature of Renaissance madrigals was discussed — "musical poems, not so much settings as realizations of a text." It was done by a sensitive reading of the verbal text which might normally escape the attention of the performing musician but which immeasurably helps the presentation of the work in sound.

As the author explained, this approach to madrigal performance is of significance with regard to the large-scale examples of the form and their complex design rather than dance-like pieces such as Morley's *Now is the month of maying* or Lasso's *Matona mia cara.*

It is to the latter aspect of the literature that the most recent madrigal award was devoted. The winner, Paul Torkelson, conductor of the Wartburg College Chamber Choir, Waverly, Iowa, has dealt with the thesis that the dance, with its structural refinements, has formed a basis of the madrigal as important as the text. He studied the influence of Renaissance dance on madrigal performance in an attempt to comprehend the rhythmic complexities of the music. Guided by the *Orchesography* of Thoinot Arbeau (1589), a book that describes the steps to be used in the various dance forms of the period, he paired dances contained in this work with madrigals by Dowland and prepared his madrigal group by combining dancing and singing in actual performance.

Paul Torkelson and Annette Williams demonstrating madrigal dance patterns in rehearsal.

The results, presented in a workshop session, "Renaissance Dances for Your Madrigal Group," at the Tenth Annual Summer Convention and Choral Symposium of the Iowa Choral Directors Association and at a subsequent Festival Concert of the Renaissance Music Symposium held under the auspices of the American Choral Directors Association, proved electrifying. Mr. Torkelson and his group are to be congratulated for their contribution in revitalizing a segment of the madrigal literature with artistry and authenticity.

— A.M.

The Authors

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