

Book Reviews

Andrew Crow, Editor

Choral Monuments:

Studies of Eleven Choral Masterworks

Dennis Shrock

Oxford University Press, 2017

438 pages, \$150 hardcover, \$55 paperback

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Noted choral conductor and scholar Dennis Shrock's recent publication presents thorough studies of eleven large-scale choral works spanning from the Renaissance to the Twentieth Century. While the repertoire chosen includes many familiar masterworks, Shrock surprises somewhat by balancing expected selections with works notable for historical significance over modern performance frequency. In individual chapters averaging thirty to forty pages in length, Shrock explores *Missa Pange lingua* (Josquin), *Missa Papae Marcelli* (Palestrina), *B Minor Mass* (J.S. Bach), *Messiah* (Handel), *The Creation* (Haydn), *Symphony No. 9* (Beethoven), *St. Paul* (Mendelssohn), *Ein deutsches Requiem* (Brahms), *Messa da Requiem* (Verdi), *Mass* (Stravinsky), and *War Requiem* (Britten). Shrock asserts, "All of the works were epoch-making; they came to define the era in which they were composed, and they are considered to be exceptional masterpieces today." (xiii) Overall, then, the book traces landmarks in a 500-year development of large-form choral music.

Each chapter covers three areas: historical background and context; analysis; and performance practice considerations. Bringing these perspectives together in one manageable source is one of the book's most valuable assets. Beyond this broad organizational plan, however, there is no *pro forma* approach. Shrock explores topics and attributes he deems important to understanding each work individually, though many subjects do apply to multiple pieces. The chapters can easily be read as individual essays; topics shared between different works are introduced anew each time.

Reading this book, one gets the impression of Shrock as an excited professor, eager to share as many interesting facets of the topic at hand as he is able, even if they sometimes seem idiosyncratic. Nonetheless, it is interesting to see where his focus will turn with each work. The history sections often use a wide-angle lens to place the work in the context of the composer's career and historical era. For example, the chapter on Palestrina includes a history of the papacy in the sixteenth century and its effect on church

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practices. For Beethoven, we get a summary of all nine symphonies. The Stravinsky chapter covers topics such as “Masses Based on Historic Models” and “Stravinsky and Musical Styles of the Past.”

The analysis sections likewise take individualized approaches to exploring the musical scores, highlighting salient compositional traits of each. The role of text receives due attention, notably in the chapters on *St. Paul* and the *War Requiem*. Formal structures are a focal point throughout, and Shrock frequently presents structural overviews in list form. These are helpful snapshots, though some could benefit from a table format to clarify the material provided.

Ample musical examples illustrate Shrock’s points. An editorial quibble, though: the examples themselves are not labeled by their content; the reader must refer back into the text to identify them. In addition, Shrock often avoids referring to locations in scores by measure numbers. While understandable, given the variability of numbering among editions of earlier works and reliance on rehearsal letters in other scores, this practice sometimes requires excessive prose to describe a location or passage.

Perhaps the sections addressing performance practice represent the book’s most valuable contribution to the literature on choral repertoire. Some of the most interesting nuggets of information for conductors come from these pages. Readers familiar with Shrock’s *Performance Practices in the Classical Era* (GIA, 2011) and *Performance Practices in the Baroque Era* (GIA, 2012) will recognize a similar approach in *Choral Monuments*. General concepts of an era are applied to specific works, while issues unique to a particular piece also receive attention. For each work, Shrock discusses performing forces and stage configurations complete with diagrams of either historical or proposed arrangements.

He provides numerous quotes from primary sources to support his assertions, though in some places the reader must simply trust Shrock’s interpretation and synthesis of the historical record. A bibliography is supplied at the end of each chapter.

In total, Shrock provides a wealth of information useful to conductors, teachers, students, and even just connoisseurs of choral music. His writing style, unencumbered with theoretical jargon, should prove accessible to many. Though probably not practical as a stand-alone textbook for most choral literature courses, this book could be a helpful supplement. For students, it provides a model for writing about repertoire in a way that is not simply a blow-by-blow account of musical events; rather, Shrock draws an effective picture of the whole. Shrock, who notes with gratitude the many opportunities he has had to encounter the masterworks of choral literature through study, teaching, and conducting, expresses hope that his readers gain “greater comprehension and appreciation of these works, and further, that the knowledge of histories, analyses, and performance practices will result in enhanced personal fulfillment and more meaningful performances.” (xvii) This book constitutes a valuable resource in that effort.

—Kerry Glann

In Their Own Words:

Slave Life and the Power of Spirituals

Eileen Guenther

MorningStar Music Publishers, 2016

492 pages, \$28.00 paperback

ISBN: 978-0-944529-71-3

The African-American spiritual is one of the most performed choral genres in the United States. Most, if not all, choral singers have experienced these songs. The history of the spiritual and its development into mainstream choral music began with the violent, discriminatory, and heart-rending events of the forced migration and enslavement of Africans. Eileen Guenther's book, *In Their Own Words: Slave Life and the Power of Spirituals*, urges the reader to understand and connect with the sorrowful context that created this genre. Through primary sources including first-person written narratives and interviews with slaves (and former slaves), Guenther provides an opportunity to better comprehend this painful period so that performers may approach their lives and the spirituals from a more authentic perspective.

Throughout the book, Guenther provides direct accounts, without interference, of the cruel realities of slave life and the powerful music it bore. Through elegant formatting, Guenther features primary source accounts as the centerpiece of the book. She explains, "Words of those enslaved, whether spoken to someone else or written by themselves, appear in italics" (p. xx). Nearly every page includes these italicized quotations, bringing credibility, authenticity, and depth to the entire book. Guenther's commentary contextualizes the quotations, rarely distracting from the heart behind the speakers' voices. Her commentary and juxtaposition of quotes from white slave owners, overseers, and justices alongside the italicized accounts of slaves often provide the most powerful and revealing passages.

The book divides 19 chapters into three parts with two appendices. The most substantial part of the book is Part II (chapters 8–16), which justifies words from the book's subtitle: "Slave Life." Each chapter of Part II explores a different aspect of the slaves' daily reality. These chapters and the quotations within them give every choir director who programs spirituals reason to acquire this book. Although not related specifically to spirituals (Part I and Part III achieve that), the context provided in Part II brings more meaning and power to these songs' performances and simultaneously dignifies the songs' creators.

In her introduction, Guenther notes that chapters 5, 18 and 19 are quickly applicable to an overscheduled musician who may not read the entire volume, and they are probably the most important chapters of Parts I and III. While chapter 19 offers a synopsis of the book's longer exploration of the slaves' lives and circumstances, chapters 5 and 18 focus specifically on individual spirituals, giving accounts of the music's themes and appearance in daily life. The appendices are literal and thematic concordances between the text of 100 selected spirituals and biblical scripture. They are particularly useful to the church musician who intends to pair a spiritual with scripture in a Christian church service.

André Thomas's influential book *Way Over in Beulah Lan'*: Understanding and Performing the Negro Spiritual has become an essential resource to aid conductors and their ensembles in authentic performance of spirituals. Eileen Guenther's new book is similarly valuable and provides even broader context to that performance practice. The book is useful as a reference for programming and performing specific spirituals, but it can also be read from beginning to end. The tone is approachable and often conversational as it moves frequently between quotations and brief commentary. Extensive endnotes for

each chapter and the bibliography provide an invaluable resource for us to continue grappling with a terrible period of history that conceived an emotionally powerful oeuvre. Guenther states it best: “Context is the prism that allows us to appreciate fully the songs of religion, the songs of protest, and the songs of despair and hope that created the slaves’ community and continue to move our spirits today” (p. xix).

—Brian Stone

Composers’ Intentions?

Lost Traditions of Musical Performance

Andrew Parrott

The Boydell Press, 2015

421 pages, \$25.95 paperback

ISBN: 978-1-78327-032-3

With the publication of his most recent book, *Composers’ Intentions? Lost Traditions of Musical Performance*, Andrew Parrott has assembled essays published throughout his lengthy career into a thoughtful treatise on discerning the performance intentions of composers and reflecting those intentions in performance. An Oxford-trained specialist in the performance of pre-classical music, Andrew Parrott founded the Taverner Consort, Choir and Players in 1973, with which he has made numerous recordings. The arrangement of *Composers’ Intentions?* as a collection of essays, rather than a more traditionally organized book, allows the reader the flexibility to start from the beginning or dive into later chapters on a specific topic. Indeed, those who have studied music history and performance practice may very well have read some of these essays before; but to have them collected in a single volume offers both convenience and a means of comparison on how the author’s views have developed over time. Although Parrott discusses performance

style, he takes the view that much of what can be learned of past performance practice instead concerns “those fundamental *pre*-performance factors that determine not only a composition’s intended medium (the performing body) but also the multifarious conventions by which that composition is tacitly expected to operate.” (ix)

Perceptively, Parrott used the first chapter of *Composers’ Intentions?* to defend the relevance of performance practice. If we as performers have no hope of achieving true historic authenticity, and our audience has no hope of perceiving such performances in the way an audience of the past would have (the two arguments Parrott puts forth as the most common against attempting historical recreation), then why go to the trouble at all? To answer this question, Parrott presents dozens of quotes from historical composers themselves, revealing their thoughts on all aspects of performance practice. He closes the chapter with the powerful statement that “those pleas from composers for their performance intentions to be heeded are no less relevant today than when their works were new.”

Parrott has organized *Composers’ Intentions?* thematically, beginning with lengthy discussion on vocal scoring that will be of particular interest to choral conductors. Much of this discussion centers around how the male *falsetto* voice was employed (or rather, in Parrott’s opinion, *not* employed) in choral and operatic music of the Renaissance and early Baroque. This discussion is perhaps more theoretical than practical for the modern conductor who works exclusively with mixed voice choirs, but is nevertheless stimulating in that it provokes re-evaluation of our modern aural preconceptions of the music of that era. Of perhaps greater practical use to the university choral conductor is Parrott’s short essay on the anatomy and evolution of choirs through the time period, which deals with matters such as vocal numbers, ranges, and types (including the later addition of female voices).

The core of *Composers' Intentions?* deals with three major composers: Monteverdi, Purcell and Bach. In a quartet of essays on Monteverdi, Parrott examines at length the issue of at what pitch to perform works and movements written in *chiavette* (the author prefers the term *high clefs*), using research into the 1610 *Vespers* as the primary evidence. These essays, written over a 28-year period, argue not only for the downward transposition of high clef music, but also for the specificity of the downward interval (a 4th, according to Parrott). The argument is convincingly researched and presented; and later defended against rebuttal by other scholars. This defense is one of the more interesting aspects of the book as the reader is treated to Parrott's formidable and logically ordered powers of argument in debate with other well-respected musical scholars.

In his lengthy essay on performing Purcell, Parrott once again presents an organized approach to considering the aforementioned "pre-performance factors" and "multifarious conventions" which would have been enacted in Purcell's day; but there is also a welcome discussion of in-the-moment performance issues, such as ornamentation, vibrato and other vocal technique practices. The latter half of the 20th century saw a revival of performances on "period" instruments, and Parrott explains that he wrote this essay because "it seemed to me that the distinctive character of Purcell's own music was at risk of being masked by an all-purpose Handelian manner of performance." (xi) Indeed, Parrott enjoyably interweaves rich and varied primary sources that are specific to a late 17th-century pre-Handel England throughout the essay to support his findings.

Those readers who are familiar with Parrott's earlier book *The Essential Bach Choir* (The Boydell Press, 2000) will recognize familiar themes in the collected essays on Bach. Parrott tackles the ever-controversial issue of the number of singers

per part and defends the one-voice-per-part theory first advanced by Joshua Rifkin in 1981. In fact, rather than argue for Rifkin's theory of reduced choral forces, Parrott begins with acceptance of it and then uses the position to discuss instances when Bach might have employed ripieno singers to support the concertists. Parrott presents this discussion through a detailed analysis of the *Mass in B Minor*; classifying each movement by compositional style and the vocal forces required. Regardless of whether one agrees with Parrott's (and Rifkin's) scholarship supporting reduced vocal forces overall, his thorough analysis of Bach's summative work is valuable for any conductor planning a performance of the *Mass*.

Parrott closes the book with a collection of miscellaneous shorter essays taken from or based on recorded broadcasts that deal primarily with issues of recording Renaissance and Baroque music. These essays also focus on specific works. *Composers' Intentions?* is a valuable collection of research which is useful to any conductor wishing to present historically informed performances. In a university setting, this text could find a home not only in classes related to performance practice, but also in any research methods course. Parrott's skill for presenting his research in a concise, well-ordered and helpfully annotated manner provides an excellent model for students undertaking theses and dissertations.

—Sara Terrell

Believe Your Ears: Life of a Lyric Composer

Kirke Mechem

Rowman & Littlefield, 2015

199 pages

\$65.00 hardcover

\$35.00 paperback

\$33.00 eBook

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1-4422-5077-1 (eBook)

Kirke Mechem's recent memoir proves captivating throughout. Often called the "Dean of American Choral Composers," we learn that Mechem fearlessly asked the question "Why?" throughout his career and that question remains central to this volume. Mechem delves into the narrative behind his varied and rich compositional output as well as his personal successes and challenges, intimately weaving biography, philosophy, and humor as he reflects on the why of his life. He states in the prologue, "this book is both a memoir and a serious discussion of how classical music shot itself in the foot" (p. x).

Akin to his compositional style, Mechem's prose is nuanced, lyrical, and is often as humorous and witty as it is serious and cautionary. His elegant voice inspires future generations of musicians to be more reflective and to follow their own path, just as he avoided the trends and fads of the post-war period. Regarding new music, Mechem says to us, "you the listeners are the final judges of whether a new piece lives or dies. This should not be construed as a responsibility, or even an opportunity; it's simply the consequence of believing your own ears" (p. 161).

Chronologically organized, the book consists of twenty-five short chapters, each aligned with a period of Mechem's life or compositional output. The first section narrates the composer's

unorthodox path to the world of classical music. As a boy, he played piano by ear, toured as a tennis player, and worked as a newspaper reporter before first seriously studying music at the age of twenty-two. Of particular interest to the choral conductor are chapters 7–9, as they discuss much of his early choral output. Specifically, Chapter 9 "Choral Cycles" highlights cycles such as *The Winged Joy: A Love Story in Seven Parts*, *Five Centuries of Spring*, *Songs of Wisdom*, and the popular *Seven Joys of Christmas*. Throughout the book, Mechem sprinkles travel accounts of his many times working abroad, artfully telling stories of foreign premieres, of cultural exchanges, and of raising a family in Vienna, London, Russia, and Germany. The reader receives an interesting account of Mechem's life, and also the opportunity to follow recent history through the lens of this American musician abroad.

In the final portion of the book, Mechem dedicates entire chapters to his work in the opera world, namely *Tartuffe*, his most well-known opera, which boasts over 400 performances worldwide, *John Brown*, and his latest, *Pride and Prejudice*, in the chapter "Darcy Sings." The reader should not bypass the details shared in the appendices, most notably Appendix C, "Confessions of a Hymn Bandit: The Amazing Case of 'Blow Ye the Trumpet.'" Here, Mechem unpacks a recent discovery about the original text of the popular choral work from *John Brown*, sharing that he had "inadvertently written a choral piece to a text that is nothing but a list of hymn titles" (p. 183). Hymn titles, or not, the text of "Blow Ye the Trumpet" has made a place for itself in the American choral canon and has sold over 50,000 copies.

Believe Your Ears is a book for everyone from the music enthusiast, to the conductor interpreting one of Mechem's choral works, to the composer-conductor for whom Mechem provides frequent

compositional advice. Such advice and anecdotes illuminate the essence of what this composer values most in music and in life: simply put, an inventive and expressive lyrical melody that supports a captivating story. The book occasionally misses the delicate balance between writing for both audience members and performers. For example, Mechem takes time to define the basic theory behind tonality before charging into a discussion on the challenges and pitfalls of atonality. However, he is quick to alert the musician to this deviation and swiftly returns to the heart of the matter, thus admirably making the book applicable to both amateurs and professionals.

Believe Your Ears provides a powerful example of one man who fearlessly and tirelessly follows his own voice in a world in which it seems popular to jump on the bandwagon of what some consider to be progress. In the context of his compositional process, Mechem does not shy away from sharing his pain and failures as well as his joy and accomplishments. As a cornerstone in American classical music, Kirke Mechem not only greatly contributes to the choral canon but, through this honest, engaging, and remarkably entertaining memoir, he also imparts wisdom and much needed perspective to readers of younger generations.

—*Corie Brown*