

ON CHORAL WORK  
CHORAL  
MUSICIANSHIP  
ROBERT L. SHAW

Palama Settlement  
Music Department  
January, 1956.

## HORIZONS OF CHORAL SINGING

I believe that choral singing is potentially America's great artistic self-expression. I believe that most of us are going to live to see (1) the establishment on a national scale of large community and industrial choruses unrestricted by qualifications of race, religion, economic or social status; (2) the emergence of a standard professional choral instrument on a plane of performance and permanence similar to that of our major symphony orchestras; and (3) the growth of a distinguished American choral repertoire.

I believe this because I believe choral singing is uniquely a democratic art. It is first of all a group art and democracy is by definition a collective community effort. One man is not a glee club. He may be a virtuoso violinist, or a virtuoso painter, or a virtuoso author--but the personalized expression of American democracy is not the virtuoso. It is people doing things together, out of a common regard for each other and a common affection and faith in the task for which they pool their effort. That is true politically, economically and I believe, artistically. When people realize that together they can create a far more beautiful thing than they can as individuals--then you have a chorus--and democracy.

In the second place, the choral art is open immediately to the large masses of quite average people who have never had the time, opportunity, or money to indulge in (or perhaps even the talent to warrant) the long years of specialized training demanded by the other arts. It is not confined to a select group of

thmic significance is to rob it of its emotional significance.

4. Releases are no less rhythmic than attacks. They match attacks style for style, spirit for spirit. Their stress is most frequently determined by the stress of the attacks which follows (excepting obvious cases of dynamic contrast). One lets go to pick up again. Always releases have positive rhythmic significance.

Now, notation frequently is inaccurate. Phrases which call for vigorous on-the-nose attacks frequently are preceded by whole note syllables which allow no preparation. It is obvious that we must assume rest values to be inherent in the whole-note ending. The practical rule is to borrow such rest time from the phrase one is leaving, give the release at that point the spirit of attack which is coming up (in most cases) and never, never be late with the new phrase.

The rhythm must roll on. The lifeline of the music must not be cut. There are never five beats in four-four time.

5. Rhythmic discipline is built primarily not upon the feeling for the larger phrase. That should be the final result. Rhythmic discipline is built first and most surely upon the common awareness to the smallest rhythmic denominator. It is built upon eighth and sixteenth notes.

When the small rhythmic units are felt together not until then--is a chorus in a position to treat the larger phrase. The more florid the movement, the more involved the counterpoint, the more sustained the me-

lody--the more necessary is the alignment of the basic small units. One learns to sing "four-to-the-bar" by feeling eight to the bar.

6. Finally, as has been stated earlier, effective choral enunciation demands a meticulous rhythmic alignment of the sounds of speech. Words must be broken up into their phonetic fragments and each fragment must be allotted its specific time-value, or, in the case of explosive consonants, time-point.

The cardinal sin of American choral musicianship is its lack of rhythmic integrity. We shall remain the status of "styles" and "effective singing" until that is remedied. We could stand much less effect and much more art.

From articles by Robert L. Shaw  
1946