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Book Review

Dennis Shrock. ***Choral Monuments: Studies of Eleven Choral Masterworks***

New York: OUP, 2017
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Reviewed by Peter Campbell

Choral Monuments forms a companion volume to Dennis Shrock's earlier *Choral Repertoire* (OUP, 2009) containing performance annotations for over 5,000 works, and *Choral Scores* (OUP, 2015), presenting short works or movements from 125 compositions ranging from plainchant to Eric Whitacre. In this latest book, Shrock delves deeper into just eleven influential choral works, providing detailed notes on the composer, the historical period and issues of performance practice relevant to each.

This is a very useful book, both for the beginner—whether chorister or conductor—and the seasoned professional. It is dense without being turgid, instructive without being overly dogmatic, and focussed without losing sight of broad cultural considerations and the practical problems faced by modern choral organisations. Shrock's long experience as a choral director and clinician is brought to bear directly on some of the most important questions of style that beset directors. His personal pedigree includes studies at the Westminster Choir School; he is currently Samuel Roberts Noble Presidential Professor of Music and Director of Graduate Choral Studies at the University of Oklahoma.

In a recent interview, Shrock said of the historically informed performance movement today that it was rather 'stuck in period instruments'; if you have assembled the right instruments, then you might feel that you are 'doing' historical performance. But, says Shrock, this is only the beginning: we have also to understand the *notation* much better in order to present a 'correct' interpretation for the performance; and the meaning of that notation may change

considerably depending on the particular composer, and the period and place in which the score was written.[1] Much of the book thus expounds on Shrock's own research of contemporaneous treatises and other writings relating to performance practice.

The eleven masterworks chosen for his extended essays are amongst the most famous choral works known today from each of their historical periods. Palestrina's *Missa Papae Marcelli*, for example, is his selected work of High Renaissance polyphony. This composition is especially important for its almost certain creation 'in a new manner' conforming with the strictures of the Council of Trent that intelligibility of the text was paramount.[2] The most recent work surveyed is Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* dating from 1962, now more than half a century ago. It is hard, admittedly, to think of a more recent work that has had the same impact on choral composition, but perhaps a minimalist piece, or a 'new simplicity' work from Tavener, Pärt, Górecki or Schnittke would have rounded out the volume.

Limiting himself to just eleven works may have allowed Shrock to provide more detailed investigations than otherwise would have been possible within 450 pages, yet the omissions are telling. His choices necessitate skipping directly from Palestrina to Bach, less than one hundred years from the death of one to the birth of the other, yet, entirely overlooking the important works of the early-to-middle Baroque from masters such as Schütz, Lully and Purcell. Also missing are works such as the Berlioz Requiem and Te Deum (in fact, French works are notably absent, although discussed in passing in the chapter on Stravinsky's Mass), Rachmaninoff's *All Night Vigil* (Vespers), Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius*, Orff's *Carmina Burana*, Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast*, Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms* and John Adams's *Harmonium*. Schrock has made his criteria for selection clear in the Introduction—the works are all remarkable, groundbreaking, epoch-making or revered, then or now—but the lacunae do cry out for filling. That said, the only unusual choices, speaking in terms of those works most commonly performed today, are Mendelssohn's *St Paul* rather than *Elijah*, and Igor Stravinsky's Mass (1948) when his *Symphony of Psalms* (1930) is the one that appears to have gained wider performance as one of the few neoclassical compositions in the repertoire of most large choirs.

Shrock's writing is straightforward and easy to understand, befitting the book's intended general audience, and each work is interestingly situated in its historical period and within the oeuvre of the composer. From such an acknowledged expert in the application of historical principles to performance, however, there are some curious oversights. The opening chapter on Josquin's *Missa Pange Lingua* mentions that the original performers included adult males on the Alto line, and assumes for modern performance that 'all the parts would be sung by adults' (that is, that sopranos would replace trebles). But Shrock then glosses over the many issues that arise from this statement, such as the pitch of modern performance, what pitch modern editions might be published in, whether performance ought best be at that printed pitch or another (perhaps determined by investigation of a likely contemporaneous pitch), and the consequent implications for who sings what, particularly the Alto parts that lie both high and very low. Scholarly and practice-based research in the area is plentiful and would have

[1] "Conductor Conversation: Dennis Shrock", *Westminster To Go*, online, podbay.fm/show/270808850/e/1289245805

[2] See the dedication in Palestrina's *Missarum liber secundus* (1567), where the Mass first appeared. Pope Pius IV had issued his Bull *Benedictus Deus* in 1564 promulgating the determinations of the Council of Trent. See Shrock, pp. 46–47.

provided much useful practical guidance (such as the suggestion that both the inner parts be sung by a mixture of altos and tenors).[3] Similar issues affect the performance of Palestrina's masses, and some comment on pitch is made in Shrock's succeeding chapter, where he gives pertinent advice on tempo, musica ficta and syllabic stress (which he calls 'oratorical phrasing'), in particular where this seems to conflict with the barlines of modern editions.

There are some irritating infelicities in the OUP editing—only an Editor in Chief is mentioned in the acknowledgements (p. xi)—and, while none produces a serious barrier to comprehension, their presence is disappointing. Is it too picky to suggest that Shrock's observation of Bach and Handel, that 'both were born in towns only about eighty miles apart' (p. 72) is nonsensical, 'both' being meaningless in this construction? Surely, he means 'compiled' when talking of the B minor Mass being 'composed as a complete and independent composition in 1733' (p. 81), seeing that he has just stated that each of its four "entities" (parts) had been 'composed at a different time in Bach's life.' The statement that it is 'estimated that approximately twelve' of the movements of Bach's Mass are parodies of earlier works is vague and to an extent tautological.[4] There is a bad music typesetting error in example 3.5 (p. 84) where half a bar is on the wrong line. On page 91, Shrock states that the first performance of the complete Mass was not until 1861, yet the list immediately below begins with one in 1859. A note on page 203 incorrectly gives a related figure as 5.10 when it should be 5.12, a mistake repeated on page 205. Beethoven's early piano trios were 'published as opus 1, the first of his publications to receive an opus number': how else could it be, although I suppose I can see what he is intending to say. Listed in the German sources that Beethoven 'might have known' is one by Hummel published, as Shrock lists it, only in 1829 (thus after Beethoven's death); this is actually the date of the English translation, not the original German publication, which did appear in 1827, although, as Beethoven and Hummel were not reconciled until the former was on his deathbed, it is doubtful Beethoven could have made any use of Hummel's work. The opening of the chapter on Verdi's Requiem (p. 322) states that Verdi composed twenty-six operas, listing *Nabucco* as from 1842; but two pages later the number of operas Verdi had composed by 1869 is already twenty-nine, and the largely repeated list of the most significant places *Nabucco*, incorrectly, in 1841. (*Grove* gives a total of only twenty-eight operas, plus several revisions and translations.)

Shrock is at his best when being didactic. His observations are keen and backed up by evidence, although they are sometimes obscured by a level of detail of the structural and textual aspects of the works that adds very little to our understanding of the pieces. Here, as one example, is Shrock's description (p. 102) of the final section of Bach's Credo:

> This movement, like so many in the *B Minor Mass*, is in five sections. The two white-note imitative B sections are clearly related, as are the melismatic C sections. The first C section ends with material from A, which has the same function as the end of the first A.

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[3] See, as just one practitioner example, Barbara L. Hall, 'The "Missa Pange Lingua" of Josquin Des Prez: An Approach to Renaissance Performance Practice', *The Choral Journal* 26.7 (1986): 5–10.

[4] Donald Tovey identifies nine parodied movements in his volume of essays that in a number of ways parallels Shrock's: *Essay's in Musical Analysis*, vol. 5 "Vocal Music" (London: OUP, 1937), 20–49. George Stauffer puts the number of parodies at eleven, but noted that "two other movements are most probably derived from specific, now lost sources": *Bach, the Mass in B Minor: The Great Catholic Mass* (Yale University Press, 2003), 48–49.

A (1–9, extended to 17)
B (17.5–41)
C/A (40.5–53, extended to 61)
B (61.5–87)
C (87.5–end)

In the chapter on the Brahms Requiem, Shrock devotes more than five pages to a discussion of the texts Brahms chose for his other choral works. This holds some interest, but adds little to our understanding of why Brahms chose the particular, chiefly Biblical, texts he used in the Requiem. Shrock's use of the rare word 'concinnity' meaning the skillful combining of things, further alienates the reader.

But here he is (p. 109) explaining his desire for more authentic performance of Bach's extraordinary work:

> The matching of timbres and volumes between the singer and instrumentalists is rarely heard in modern-day performances, even performances with period instruments; while the chorus is often compatible with the instruments, the vocal soloists regularly sing with robust timbres, noticeable vibrato, and volumes louder than an entire choral section. This disparity between the vocal soloists and the instruments and chorus is unfortunate since the lightness of vocal production is critical to effectively realizing Bach's textures and because the equable interplay of performing forces is such a key element to the realization of Bach' masterful writing.

Later he cautions against taking the 'Crucifixus' movement in 3/2 at a faster tempo then the preceding 'Et incarnatus' in 3/4. Clearly, says Shrock, the metre, mood (affect), key and rhythmic and expressive content of the movement all indicate a slow tempo; to do anything else would be 'nonsensical' (p. 112). Similar reasoning is used to explain the tempo of the *alla breve* movements. In the chapter on Handel's *Messiah*, Shrock tells us that the marking 'andante' is not used in the eighteenth century as an indication of tempo but one that instructs the players to let the notes 'walk as they stand' (that is, as usual or normal) not *inégale*. This is not his own invention, but it is just one of the many vital pieces of information that he imparts, all of which must be more widely promulgated.

While recognising that this is a volume more for the practitioner than the theorist, and acknowledging the substantial quotations from contemporaneous treatises (all translated by Shrock himself), the lack of footnoted scholarship to support many of his statements regarding performance style is problematic; the interested amateur is thus unable to follow through these aspects to current research. A Selected Bibliography is given at the end of each chapter, but a mere twenty-one items for Bach—which includes Chester Alwes's *History of Western Choral Music*, Michael Steinberg's *Choral Masterworks: A Listener's Guide*, and the treatises of C.P.E. Bach, Matheson and Quantz—is far too thin on detail. Neither are concepts such as performance practice, tempo or time signatures listed in the index, although rhythmic alteration is.

As each chapter is intended to stand alone as a self-contained essay, there are times when historical descriptions and quotations, particularly regarding style and culture, are repeated. Where this is done with variety it is possible to excuse it. Where the same material is re-used within the same essay it is, rather, a sign either of poor structure or sloppy editing. The chapter on Haydn's *The Creation* offers the same description of the 'Farewell' Symphony on pages 166 and 184. An extended anecdote from Frederik Silverstolpe who attended the final rehearsal

of *The Creation* in April 1798 appears, essentially unchanged, both on page 172 and on 183, as well as being used (in part) as the epigraph as the head of the chapter.

It is in the chapter on Brahms that we see Shrock's gentle cajoling of us always to be aware of contemporaneous performance practices turn perhaps too far toward hectoring. Yet Shrock's motives always remain true to his ideals and his desire to lift the quality of choral performance. In discussing Brahms's Requiem, Shrock notes that the work has:

> had many critically acclaimed performances … and audiences as well as performers have been transported to peaks of aesthetic enjoyment, even though few of the esteemed performances have paid heed to or incorporated the performance practices discussed here. Some conductors have taken a few tempo liberties not marked in the published score, and [some] have emulated the timbre of the nineteenth century by using instruments of the time. However, most … have been without the integration of nineteenth-century ideals of timbre and vibrato, metric accentuation, tempo fluctuation, and stage set-up with the chorus on the sides of the orchestra … But all forms of art deserve to be presented as they were conceived—to be cleansed of whatever applications have obscured an original identity. (p. 320)

In discussion of works up to the end of the nineteenth century, Shrock has repeatedly called, rightly, for due attention to word stress and phrasing. Turning to Stravinsky, his advice (p. 382) is the opposite: with the composer 'setting text askew from its normal state … [n]o effort should be made to strive for natural declamation in the music (except when this is an obvious desire of the composer).' His comments on the performing forces for Stravinsky's Mass, for which the score specifies that 'children's voices should be employed' on the soprano and alto lines, are also helpful, in that Stravinsky's own premier was not liturgical and occurred at La Scala in Milan with adult voices. What is vital is that the size and timbre of the choir be aligned with the 'aesthetic' desires of the composer.

Overall, there is much to learn from Shrock's volume. It is a pity that the useful content is obscured by the well-intended but often only tangentially relevant historical and contextual scene-setting, and by the deficiencies in the editing of the volume. Shrock's practical experience in the performance of these choral masterworks with the utmost fidelity to the composer's intentions shines through his sometimes overly dense prose, providing today's conductors and performers with much to think about. All our performances might be improved by adherence to the principles—and in many cases the particulars—presented so passionately here.

About the Author

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