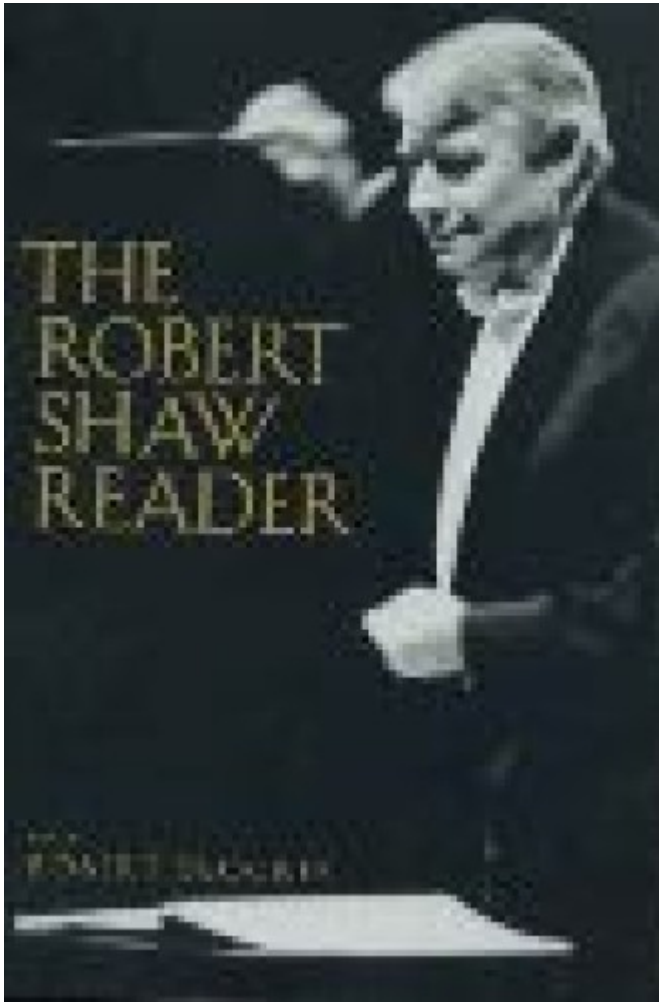


The Robert Shaw Reader

reviewed by [Gena Caponi Tabery](#) in the [May 3, 2005](#) issue

In Review



The Robert Shaw Reader

Robert Blocker, ed.
Yale University Press

Robert Shaw's father was a second-generation evangelical minister with the Disciples of Christ, and Shaw said that his mother "was the best singer of gospel

songs and spirituals I ever heard.” Although he intended to become a minister and served for a time in his father’s pulpit, Shaw (1916-1999) spent most of his life behind a conductor’s podium as the most influential choral conductor in American history, wielding a baton instead of a Bible and preaching the love of music for over six decades.

Shaw served as music director of the San Diego Symphony, associate conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra, and conductor of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and its chorus and chamber chorus. In later years, Shaw organized annual choral workshops at Carnegie Hall and created the Robert Shaw Choral Institute to encourage high standards of choral performance. Though he was a giant among American conductors and larger than life to his singers, Shaw was a man of short stature who tried to avoid a cult of personality.

Shaw wrote almost weekly letters to his choral groups, and these, along with some of his public lectures, are collected in *The Robert Shaw Reader*. Although the rehearsal letters were necessarily addressed to a large group, they are extraordinarily specific, particular and personal. “Group productivity in art is not mass production,” Shaw wrote, and he insisted that those who thought they had a handle on the “Shaw technique” of choral conducting were far off the mark. “All I was doing was sewing up the next rip in the gunny-sack,” Shaw wrote. “I headed only towards what seemed to me needed fixing; and, obviously, that varied from situation to situation.”

Like most conductors, Shaw occasionally lost his temper. Unlike most, he knew how to apologize and did so in writing. “For the most part conductors of choruses get mad when they don’t know how to fix the fool thing—so they kick its tires,” he wrote to his singers.

On many occasions Shaw remarked that “the Arts, like Sex, are too important to leave to the professionals,” and he was fond of reminding his amateur chorus that the root of the word “amateur” is the Latin verb “to love.” He believed that a community of amateurs who gather for the love of music and one another could perform miracles, and that amateur performers could be the greatest evangelists for the arts and could possibly secure the survival of civilization. In a 1981 lecture at Harvard, Shaw accused professional artists of lying down on the job. “Scarcely believing their own gospel, they have not proved to be irresistible missionaries.” To his chorus he wrote, “Amateurism may have to stay after school to meet today’s

symphonic performance standards—but it also is our greatest gift to our civilization . . . as well as our own great personal joy and accomplishment.”

Shaw believed that the greatest works of art are “unqualified and unparalleled acts of worship.” “Art is the Flesh become Word,” he wrote, a human creation that becomes spirit and can change lives sometimes centuries afterwards. Most important, the arts continue the creation and are “confirmation of a Creator’s hand still at work in the lives and affairs of men.” Shaw often equated choral singing with worship; he saw a chorus as a community gathered to raise voices in praise of or in search for God. Most telling, he believed that the truest art and worship is necessarily a community activity: “The Lord our God is One, but it takes two to find him.”

What a delight it must have been to hear a public lecture by this erudite, witty and occasionally hilarious man, who once declared to an audience at Harvard that the “self-righteous alliance of evangelism and show business that can send a Southwest Conference football band marching through Buddhist Japan” has to be “a flat-out denial of Christ’s compassion for the souls of men.”

Writing about a performance of Bach’s cantata *Christ Lag in Todesbanden*, Shaw summed up his admiration for Bach and the seriousness with which he took choral singing: “Each of the six verses is a miracle; but if the eyes do not moisten during Verse Two, either you are dead—or we should be.”

At times, such marvelous commentary falls flat because it comes out of nowhere. This is not the fault of the ebullient Shaw, but due to the editor’s failure to provide a chronology of Shaw’s life and career and offer more explanatory notes. Nevertheless, if by the end of *The Robert Shaw Reader* you are not inspired to sing, play or listen with greater dedication and intensity, either you are dead, or you haven’t been paying attention.