

# Bach B-Minor Mass--Robert Shaw (1947)

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Essay by Nick Jones (guest post)\*



*Robert Shaw*

With his health and vision failing in what was to become the final decade of his life, Johann Sebastian Bach sought to summarize his musical art for posterity. “The Art of Fugue” and “A Musical Offering,” collections of related pieces that could be sampled or excerpted at will, were composed as his instrumental statements, and the Mass setting in B minor (1747-48) became the summation of his vocal writing.

This composition, which we now regard as one of the great monuments of Western music--the master’s longest composition and perhaps the most extensive mass setting ever created--was compiled largely by adapting other Bach works composed over the previous quarter-century. To individual movements composed for earlier occasions, he added a largely new credo and portions of several cantatas reworked for new words, producing a seamless composition bearing the unity of key structure of a complete work and covering all the words of a typical mass celebration.

Some musicologists have argued that the “B-Minor Mass” (a title Bach did not use) is in fact four separate cantatas never intended for continuous performance. Still, Bach clearly felt they belonged together, binding all four manuscripts into a single book in the order they would occupy in a regular setting of the Latin mass. A complete performance was not possible in his own lifetime, and in fact the first occurred more than a century after his death.

Robert Shaw reasoned that:

unity in a work of art probably never is a result of intention alone. The greatest forces toward unity are those attributes of inspiration and technique of which the artist is most unself-conscious during creativity. Bach was a *whole man*, and his work shows a wholeness which no musicology wants to deny. As the text of the Mass provided a common source for its large episodes, so did Bach’s unwavering religious conviction and his staggering musical craftsmanship provide inevitable unity.

Shaw was descended from a line of Disciples of Christ preachers and was himself training to be a minister when the radio choral director Fred Waring discovered him filling in as student leader

of the Glee Club at Pomona College in California. Waring brought Shaw to New York and put him in charge of preparing and conducting the Waring Glee Club's weekly broadcasts. Shaw eventually struck out on his own, forming a choral group he named the Collegiate Chorale and leading it in a strenuous schedule of rehearsals and concerts in New York.

The energy and excellence of his performances brought him to the notice of the city's classical musicians, and before long Shaw was preparing choruses for concerts and recordings by Serge Koussevitzky, Leonard Bernstein, Fritz Reiner, Arturo Toscanini, and other great conductors. After Toscanini checked out a rehearsal of the Collegiate Chorale, he remarked that in Shaw, "I have at last found the *maestro* I have been looking for."

Shaw's honors included a 1944 Guggenheim Fellowship, intended to assist the largely self-taught leader's studies in advanced music theory and conducting techniques. This allowed him to spend a year working closely with Julius Herford, a German-born conductor and pianist who taught him to study a score and seek its essence through its structure. More and more he came to believe that the form-derived elements of a piece of music embodied the composer's vision and intentions and that understanding its formal construction was the key to finding its spirit.

By the time he came to perform and record Bach's B-Minor Mass in 1947, Shaw was already being promoted by RCA Records as "the top choral director in the country." The previous summer, he had conducted the NBC Symphony in the radio broadcast of a non-choral concert, leading one prominent music critic to write, "He is a sincere musician with considerable gifts and an infinite capacity for taking pains," and suggesting that in his field he was a genius. A few months later, Shaw was signed as an RCA Victor Red Seal recording artist.

The Bach mass was to be the high point of the Collegiate Chorale's 1946-47 season. Following Herford's advice, Shaw organized his performing forces like those typically used in Bach's era: 60 carefully selected voices and a comparably reduced orchestral contingent, 35 pieces including harpsichord and organ. Above all, rhythmic accuracy, attention to pitch and intonation, and clear enunciation governed every sound that was made. When the five vocal soloists were heard in solo and duet movements, he reduced the accompaniment to one or two instruments per part. Although some critics missed the sentimental, strings-heavy orchestrations or the massed voices of earlier interpretations, composer-critic Virgil Thomson praised the result: "Rhythmic courage, tonal exactitude, pretty balances, and sweetness all around allowed the proportions of the work to take on full majesty without any heaviness."

For the RCA recording that followed, Shaw used largely the same forces, transformed--presumably through the magic of a signed contract--into the RCA Victor Chorale and Orchestra. According to Shaw biographer Joseph A. Mussulman, "It was a prodigious undertaking. The best available recording site with a pipe organ was Town Hall, but the audibility of street noises made it unsuitable during the daytime, so the job had to be done between midnight and four in the morning. It took a total of five nights' work."

RCA thus produced the first complete recording of the B-Minor Mass made in America, requiring no fewer than 17 twelve-inch, 78-RPM discs divided into two volumes. Herford was credited as music consultant. The set was immediately recognized as a landmark recording,

widely discussed by reviewers, and awarded a citation by the “Review of Recorded Music.” The later re-issue in 33-RPM format occupied three LP vinyl discs.

Shaw had already made a few shorter recordings for RCA, but it was the Mass in B-Minor and the Brahms “German Requiem,” recorded later the same year, that solidified his stature as a conductor of note. With his elite Robert Shaw Chorale, formed in 1948, he would tour throughout America and the world and make dozens of still-revered recordings. As music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, 1967-1988, he would found the ASO Chorus and the smaller Chamber Chorus to perform, record, and tour with the great choral-orchestral masterworks. Since his death in 1999 his reputation has only continued to grow.

*Nick Jones began singing with Robert Shaw and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chorus early in Shaw's tenure as music director. In addition to participating in all of Shaw's recordings with the ASO Chorus, he has contributed liner notes to more than 70 recordings by the ASO, the Vienna Philharmonic and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestras, the Cincinnati Symphony and the Pops Orchestras, the Baltimore Symphony, pianist John O'Conor, and organist Alan Morrison, among other artists.*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.