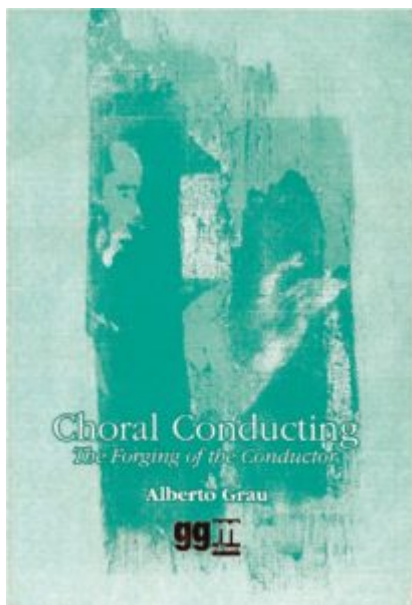


Alberto Grau: Choral Conducting – the Forging of the Conductor

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Editores/Earthsongs

Alberto Grau (b. 1937), one of the most influential figures in the musical life of Venezuela, has reached every corner of the world as a composer and conductor. As the Founding Director of the Schola Cantorum de Caracas, Grau has not only achieved many outstanding highlights for the organization, but more importantly, he has assisted in the development of an organization that has provided an integrated system to promote and encourage choral music in Venezuela. With his attention to creating a field of choral conducting and placing its

importance alongside that of orchestral and chamber music, Grau has influenced more than just the institutions and musical figureheads in Venezuela. He was one of the driving forces in creating the International Day of Choral Singing (World Choral Day), an event held annually on the second Sunday of December (promoted by IFCM), and he was integral in establishing programmes such as Building Singing, Conductors without Borders, and Andean Voices Choir.

Grau's compositional output combines a sense of Venezuelan nationalism with global internationalism. His œuvre extends from works for children to ones for mixed choral ensembles. A distinctive language has evolved in Grau's compositional style, valuing the importance of eurythmics (harmonious body movement) and its connection with the singing voice.

In the general field of conducting, there are many published texts ranging from books dealing with the technical aspects of conducting, to rehearsal techniques, to memoirs of the greats, Robert Shaw and Sir David Willcocks to name a few. Each offers its individual slant on the art of music making created by a community of singers.

Choral Conducting – The Forging of the Conductor, published in English in 2009 (original version in Spanish, published in 2005), provides its readers with a gestalt view of what is involved in “being a conductor.” From the outset, I particularly liked the layout of the book and the order in which the chapters were presented. The book, as a whole, looks at the complete package of a conductor, with an emphasis on choral conducting. The ultimate goal of any conductor, as stated by 20th century Catalanian musician Pau Casals, and highlighted on several occasions by Grau in his book, is to have every performance “awaken pure emotion and profoundly penetrate the soul of the audience.” (p. 117).

Grau begins his discussion in Chapter One with the pure essence of music. As the chapters progress, he moves from the

general to the more specific. Grau states that music is a sound tapestry of five dimensions: time (duration), breadth (harmonies and contrapuntal structures), height (registration and dynamics), depth (historical context – period, style, history, intention of the author), existence in the present moment which brings together all of the previous dimensions. As a conductor studies the score of a piece of music for the first time, the tension and release of the musical flow becomes apparent. It is at this point that the conductor formalizes his or her ideas, interpreting the ideas of the composer through the dimensions that Grau presents. The “sensitivity, intuition and knowledge of the interpreter who clarifies, explains, translates, organizes and makes sense of what is written, can give concrete meaning to the mystery of its symbols, facilitating the understanding of its message, and drawing aside the veils that separate us from its contents.” (p.24). In presenting these thoughts in the first chapter, Grau places the importance on the immense knowledge that the conductor must have of the musical score, in order to produce energized rehearsals and performances that will engage singers, and in turn audiences, in a deeper understanding of the musical masterpieces we perform.

Chapter Two, ‘Music as a Fluid’, continues to explore the ideas from the previous chapter. This chapter acts as a link between the qualities inherent in the printed music, to the perception of these sounds when heard, first by the choral singers when they are learning a piece of music, and secondly, by the audience when it comes to performance time. An idea that prevails throughout this chapter is the importance of communication. A conductor can be technically proficient, the singing can be executed with precision, but the listener will not be completely moved, generally speaking, without the expressive qualities that accompany the precision of a performance. “Through careful study, understanding of all the elements of the poetic and music language and their relationship, intuition, diligent work, professional

experience, and the human and personal maturity and sensitivity of the conductor" (p. 57), a performance can be truly memorable.

At this point in the book, Grau turns to the more technical aspects of the conductor. Chapter Three, 'The Conductor's Leadership', and Chapter Four, 'The Choir', emphasize the importance of appropriate repertoire, a thorough preparation of the score, and the rehearsal techniques used to engage the singers. Grau places value on encouraging the singers to give their best both in performance and during the rehearsal process, and to create an environment where the singers continuously have a need to explore the music beyond what is written in the score. Grau mentions a few times in his book that music cannot be defined, and if we try to define it, we destroy it. Music is so much more than what is printed on the page. An energetic rehearsal will have many moments which go beyond the page, and "perhaps one of the greatest challenges for a conductor is to know how much can be demanded from the choristers, and how to convince them to commit themselves fully to the ensemble." (p. 87)

Chapters 5, 'Essential Elements of Music', 6, 'Technical Aspects of Conducting', and 7, 'Rehearsal Techniques' read more like the stereotypical texts on Choral Conducting. Yet, although Grau does include the beat patterns and addresses such things as the weight and force of the arm, his focus is still concentrated on the internal creativity and spirituality that forms the conductor's gestures.

Alberto Grau has created a manual that challenges the conductor to go beyond the printed music and into a creative realm that connects the conductor to the singers, communicating a passionate communal message to the audience. The title is well chosen, *Choral Conducting- The Forging of the Conductor*. It is a well written text which should be read by all conductors, but particularly young conductors just starting in the art of conducting. It is apt to finish with a

section of the 'Introduction', penned by Daniel Salas Jiménez:

“Alberto Grau has found a way to blend his work as a conductor and composer in order to communicate his love for creation, his endless desire for peace, and his commitment to work for a fuller, fairer, and untroubled world. A citizen of the world.” (Introduction, p. xi)

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