The Making of a Symphony Chorus

By Frank Villella

Margaret Hillis, Fritz Reiner, and Walter Hendl (associate conductor) with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus in 1959.

Recognized as one of the finest choral ensembles in the country, the Chicago Symphony Chorus is celebrating its fortieth anniversary this season. Chorus member Frank Villella delved through the archives, and reports here on the founding of the Chorus and its early history.

One of Fritz Reiner's primary goals early in his tenure as music director of the Chicago Symphony was to schedule and perform major choral works. During the Orchestra’s first sixty years, local choral groups had been engaged, including the Apollo Chorus and several ensembles from nearby colleges and high schools. However, the repertory Reiner wished to perform was, in his opinion, too demanding for amateur groups.

In February 1954, he went to New York in search of a professional chorus and observed a rehearsal of the New York Concert Choir, under the direction of its founder, Margaret Hillis. At the rehearsal, Reiner asked to hear excerpts from either Verdi’s Requiem or Beethoven’s Missa solemnis, but enough copies of these scores were not readily available. He then requested Bach’s B minor mass, and Hillis obliged. The chorus began to read through the opening Kyrie, and, as she conducted, Hillis noticed Reiner conducting as well: “After the first four measures, I saw his hand
THE "FIRST" CHICAGO SYMPHONY CHORUS

At the insistence of music director Theodore Thomas, on July 3, 1896, the board of trustees of The Orchestral Association decided to proceed with the organization of a chorus with the hope that Arthur Mees would agree to serve as the Orchestra's first associate conductor and chorus director. Mees previously had worked with Theodore Thomas in training the Cincinnati Festival Chorus and also was assistant to Thomas at the American Opera Company.

Arthur Mees (1850-1923)

Mees agreed and began to audition singers on September 8, 1896, but interest was much less than expected. According to Philo Adams Otis (a member of the board and the author of The Chicago Symphony Orchestra: Its Organization, Growth, and Development 1891-1924), the timing was off—it was just before the presidential election and Chicago was "afame with excitement over the rival parties—[William J.] Bryan and 'Free Silver' [William] McKinley and 'Protection'—but it was not a favorable time to talk of symphony concerts and chorus rehearsals."

Despite the sparse turnout, the Chorus of the Association began rehearsals on October 5, with ninety-five singers. Membership gradually increased (after the election), and the chorus made its informal debut on the second concert of the season on October 31, leading the audience in The Star-Spangled Banner in "recognition of the presidential election, then near at hand." By December the ranks had increased to 125, in time for the Chorus's formal debut in the Choral Fantasy and the chorus from The Ruins of Athens on an all-Beethoven program in December.

The Chorus would appear three more times during the Orchestra's sixth season (1896-97)—in Grieg's Olaf Trygvason, Nicolai's Festival Overture on Ein' feste Burg, and selections from Wagner's The Flying Dutchman, Tannhäuser, and Parsifal—and then on five occasions during the following season—the chorale and chorus from Bach's Reformation Cantata (no. 80), Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, Brahms's A German Requiem, and Mendelssohn's 114th Psalm and selections from A Midsummer Night's Dream.

The Chorus was disbanded in the fall of 1898, most probably as a result of the Orchestra's deficit following its seventh season and the departure of Arthur Mees, who returned to New York.

moving so I took his tempo and they sang it absolutely beautifully." Reiner liked what he heard and told Hillis she would be hearing from him.

For Reiner's second season in 1954-55, he scheduled Barber's recently composed Prayers of Kirkegaard and Orff's Carmina burana—both works new to the Orchestra's repertory—as well as Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. For the Barber and Orff works, he convinced the trustees to hire Margaret Hillis and her Concert Choir; and, for the "less demanding" Beethoven, the local Swedish Choral Club.

Hillis's choir toured during the spring of 1955, giving three performances of the Barber and Orff pieces with the Orchestra in Chicago. Irving Sabisky of the Daily News wrote, "We're not used to hearing choral singing of such refinement and nuance in symphony concerts. I hope we'll hear more." And in the American, Roger Dettmer pro-
CHICAGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA CHORUS
Margaret Hillis, Director

Sopranos
JOAN LOUISE ANDERSON
DORIS A. ARCHER
JANIS A. BARRINGTON
MARCIA BASS
ANITA BURNS
SOPHIA VERA CANTU
LOUISE CHAMBERLAIN
ANADA COSGROVE
BARBARA GILBERT
GERALDINE G. GLOVER
FORD GOODLETTE
ALICE HOOPF
CAROL N. HYMAN
ROBERTA KILANOWSKI
STEPHANIE KOMANISZYN
CAROLYN L. LARSON
JOAN R. IUSK
MARY LOU MURPHY
GLORIA GLENN PUGH
JANIE SCHARF
ROBERTA L. SCHULTZOFFEL
ELIZABETH A. SWANSON
JOYCE M. WELLS
HELEN ROBINS WHITE

Altos
LEONA E. AUSLAND
BARBARA M. BARNES
DOROTHY BYRD
MRS. ROBERT L. FARWELL
LEONA S. FIFE
RAE JANE GIBBONS
MARY R. GILKEY
JUNE C. GILSON
JOAN HORBATH
JEAN K. HURST
ALLETA KOVALCHIK
PATRICIA KREUTZER
ELAINE LAVIERE
VALERIE R. NIZICH
NANCY OSBORN
GRACE ORR OSBORNE
HELEN S. POLLAK
ANNE PORAYKO
MARTHA SABRANSKY
BETTY ANN SCHMIDT
MARTHA H. STAHN
MARIE STRAHL
ELLEN THRO
MARIA B. VANDEHAAR
CORNELIA VAN DER KLOOT
HELEN V. WARNER
SUSAN B. WIEGAND

Tenors
HORST F. ABRAHAM
VERNON BOYSEN
ALONZO D. CHANCELLOR
WILLIAM H. CUNNINGHAM
ADOLPH R. ERST
MITCHELL GAGALSKI
JOSEPH P. GLIDOW
NATHANIEL B. GREEN
JOHN E. HOELM
BILLY D. HOPKINS
JOSEPH KREINES
EDWARD LIEBERMAN
JOHN W. LOBINGNER
RONALD E. LOCKE
TERENCE H. NOBLE
ROBERT J. O'MARA
WALLACE R. OSTIUND
ED QUISTDEFF
JEROME ROHENSBERG
RICHARD H. SNOW
KENNETH D. WESTERDAHL
JAMES WILSON
MANFRED F. ZIEFAER

Basses
CHARLES BRIDGES
HOWARD DONALDSON
ROBERT W. FRAZIER
JOSEPH GARDNER
HARRY E. GUDMUNDSON
RONALD C. HARM
GEORGE O. HINNERS
FREDERIC HOUGHTELING
SOLON A. HUNT
THOMAS B. JOHNS
CLIFFORD H. JOHNSON
NORMAN E. KANGAS
KARL J. LOHRMAN
JERRY McLAIN
FRANK NOWAKOWSKI
JOHN R. OLIVO
RAYMOND PALUCH
TOM PECK
JONATHAN PUGH
EDWARD W. ROTH
JERRY SEYER
ALFRED SCHOEPF
ROBERT P. THOMPSON
JOHN L. VOLLRECHT

The roster for the Chorus's first Chicago Symphony subscription concerts on March 13 and 14, 1958.
claimed that it was "Miss Hillis's magnificent choir of sixty which matched most closely the Orchestra's astonishing virtuosity by giving Dr. Reiner the fullest measure of choral artistry."

Needless to say, Reiner was pleased with the result and wasted no time contracting the Concert Choir for the following season, but Hillis and her ensemble were only available for one week of subscription concerts. They would sing Mozart's C minor mass and Bruckner's Te Deum, and the Northwestern University Choral Union was engaged for Stravinsky's Symphony of Psalms.

The Mozart/Bruckner concerts in January 1956 were another big hit. Roger Dettmer wrote that the Orchestra and "Margaret Hillis's magnificent choir, truly the finest professional chorus in this country today" performed "with uncommon brilliance, and maestro himself was in supremely spirited command."

Only one major choral work was scheduled for the 1956-57 season—Brahms's A German Requiem, conducted by Bruno Walter, with the Northwestern University Choral Union.

Reiner had wanted to program Verdi's Requiem for some time, with the hope of performing and recording the work during the 1957-58 season. Again he contacted Margaret Hillis. Her Concert Choir averaged only about sixty voices, and she told Reiner she would need nearly double that number in order to do justice to the Verdi. But the projected cost was far too great—it simply would not be practical to hire an outside choral ensemble that large for one week of concerts, even with the prospect of recording.

Reiner had another idea. He approached Dr. Eric Oldberg, president of the board of trustees of The Orchestral Association, and persuaded him to hire Hillis to organize a chorus affiliated with the Orchestra. Oldberg drafted a proposal and Reiner personally contacted Hillis. At first, she agreed to come to Chicago only to advise the Orchestra manager, George Kuyper,

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**MARGARET HILLIS COLLECTION TO BE ESTABLISHED IN THE CHICAGO SYMPHONY ARCHIVES**

Margaret Hillis, founder and conductor laureate of the Chicago Symphony Chorus, recently announced her decision to donate her personal collection of scores, books, and other memorabilia to the Chicago Symphony Archives. Included are numerous sound recordings as well as scores and parts bearing Miss Hillis's personal markings and analyses, Grammy Awards and other certificates and mementos, photographs, and personal papers and correspondence. These materials will be housed in the Archives alongside special collections related to other conductors including Theodore Thomas, Frederick Stock, and Fritz Reiner. The establishment of this collection will allow scholars and musicians to examine the materials within the broader context of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, of which Miss Hillis has been an integral part for nearly four decades.

Margaret Hillis, the founder and first director of the Chicago Symphony Chorus.
Music director Jean Martinon leads the Orchestra and Chorus in Bach's *Saint John Passion* in April 1966.

on how to audition a director and choristers. But this was not good enough for Reiner—he insisted that there would be no chorus unless Hillis herself was the director. At the trustees meeting on September 20, 1957, Oldberg reported on successful negotiations with Margaret Hillis to form a "Chicago Symphony Orchestra Chorus." He outlined the details of the proposal and the plan to hire Hillis was officially approved.

On September 22 the *American* announced:

A Chicago Symphony Orchestra Chorus, the long-range dream of conductor Fritz Reiner, has been approved by The Orchestral Association and will come into being this season. Margaret Hillis, the greatly distinguished founder-director of the New York Concert Choir, has been retained to organize and train the chorus, which will sing at Chicago Symphony concerts at least three times this season.

Hillis began auditions promptly on October 5, and in less than two weeks, the *Sun-Times* reported that they had "produced an exceptionally high rate of successful applicants... Skill in sight reading, interpretative ability, and voice quality were the main prerequisites for success. Voices with a tremolo or breathless quality were automatically rejected." (On October 13, the *Daily News* advertised that auditions were continuing: "Men's voices are still urgently needed").

The new ensemble, at nearly one hundred voices, began rehearsals on October 28. (For the first three seasons, the singers were all volunteers, and only gradually did the Chorus become a combination of paid professionals and volunteers. Even today, about one-quarter of the choir is still volunteer.)

It was Reiner's plan to use the Chorus on two weeks of subscription concerts—Handel's *Messiah* in December and Verdi's *Requiem* in April. However, when Bruno Walter informed Orchestra management that his March 1958 appearances would be his last in Chicago, Oldberg insisted that Walter conduct Mozart's *Requiem* with the new chorus. It would have been nearly impossible for Hillis to rehearse the Chorus for all three works in such a relatively short time, and so the Apollo Chorus was engaged for the Christmas concerts.

The Chicago Symphony Chorus made its informal debut at
a private concert for guarantors and sustaining members on November 30, 1957. Reiner conducted the first half of the concert—Cailliet’s orchestration of Bach’s Little G minor fugue and Richard Strauss’s Oboe Concerto. Hillis took the podium—becoming the first woman to conduct the Chicago Symphony Orchestra—for the second half. She led the Orchestra and Chorus in the final section of Purcell’s Ode for Saint Cecilia’s Day, Randall Thompson’s Alleluia and William Billings’s Modern Music (both a cappella), and the Servants’ Chorus from Donizetti’s Don Pasquale. Roger Dettmer reported in the American that the debut was “more than promising . . . Miss Hillis’s choristers were fresh-voiced, musically sensitive, already balanced internally . . . she has accomplished much in the briefest time span.” (Coincidentally, that same evening, Georg Solti, in his second season as a guest at the Lyric Opera of Chicago, was across town conducting Verdi’s Don Carlos.)

Following their first performance, Hillis and the Chorus immediately began work on Mozart’s Requiem. Reiner regularly attended the ensemble’s evening rehearsals, and was very pleased with its development. Hillis instinctively understood exactly what he wanted in terms of choral sound and precision, and their working relationship flourished.

Eighty-one-year-old Bruno Walter led the Chorus in its official debut on March 13 and 14, 1958, in Mozart’s Requiem in D minor. In the Tribune, Claudia Cassidy praised the “wonderfully strong performance . . . The evening’s card up the Mozartian sleeve was the new Chicago Symphony Orchestra Chorus of about one hundred voices, expertly chosen and admirably trained by Margaret Hillis. It had balance and

### Chicago Symphony Chorus Grammy Awards*

**VERDI Requiem (RCA)**
Sir Georg Solti, conductor  
1977—Best Choral Performance—Classical

**BEETHOVEN Missa solemnis**
(London)  
Sir Georg Solti, conductor  
1978—Best Choral Performance—Classical

**BRAHMS A German Requiem**
(London)  
Sir Georg Solti, conductor  
1979—Best Choral Performance—Classical

**BERLIOZ The Damnation of Faust**
(London)  
Sir Georg Solti, conductor  
1982—Best Choral Performance

**HAYDN The Creation**
(London)  
Sir Georg Solti, conductor  
1983—Best Choral Performance

**BRAHMS A German Requiem (RCA)**
James Levine, conductor  
1984—Best Choral Performance

**ORFF Carmina burana (Deutsche Grammophon)**
James Levine, conductor  
1986—Best Choral Performance

**BACH Mass in B Minor (London)**
Sir Georg Solti, conductor  
1991—Best Performance of a Choral Work

**BARTÓK Cantata profana (Deutsche Grammophon)**
Pierre Boulez, conductor  
1993—Best Performance of a Choral Work

*The Chorus was prepared by Margaret Hillis for all Grammy Award-winning recordings.
Hillis conducting the Chorus and members of the Chicago Symphony in a Christmas concert presented by the Allied Arts Association on December 15, 1968.

glints of brilliance, it was adroit in attack, and it had moments of reassuringly imaginative song." Robert Marsh in the Sun-Times agreed: "The Chicago Symphony Chorus . . . sang with exceptional enunciation, accuracy, and tonal quality, establishing itself as a major asset to the community.

Even though due to scheduling conflicts, Reiner was unable to get the soloists (primarily Jussi Björling and Zinka Milanov) he wanted for the Verdi Requiem, the Orchestra and Chorus performed Verdi's monumental work on April 3 and 4 as scheduled. Robert Marsh wrote that "Miss Hillis's chorus proved its virtues earlier this season. Again its excellent enunciation, reliable intonation, and intelligent response were praiseworthy." (Reiner subsequently recorded the work with Leontyne Price, Björling, the Vienna Singverein, and the Vienna Philharmonic in 1959.)

No doubt thrilled with the new ensemble, Reiner programmed no less than four choral programs for the following season: Beethoven's Ninth Symphony to open the subscription series, Honegger's Christmas Cantata (conducted by Hillis in her subscription concert conducting debut), Prokofiev's Alexander Nevsky (which became the first commercial recording to feature the Chorus), and Handel's Judas Maccabaeus.

Thus began the forty-year legacy of the Chicago Symphony Chorus, setting the standard for choral excellence across the country. Margaret Hillis served as founder and director until her retirement in 1994 (she initially announced her retirement in 1991, but continued to work with the Chorus until the spring of 1994). Following an international search, Duain Wolfe assumed leadership of the Chorus in June 1994, and continues in her glorious tradition.

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A CHORUS TIMELINE: HIGHLIGHTS OF FORTY YEARS OF EXCELLENCE

September 22, 1957  The Orchestral Association announces that Margaret Hillis, founder and director of the New York Concert Choir, will organize and train a symphony chorus.


April 3, 1958  Fritz Reiner first conducts the Chorus in a performance of Verdi's Requiem.

December 26, 1958  Margaret Hillis conducts the Orchestra and Chorus in Honegger's Christmas Cantata, becoming the first woman to conduct on subscription concerts.

March 7, 1959  The Chorus makes its first commercial recording with the Orchestra—Prokofiev's Alexander Nevsky—with Fritz Reiner conducting, for RCA Records.

June 27, 1963  The Chorus first appears with the Orchestra at the Ravinia Festival in Pablo Casals's El pesebre (The manger) under the direction of the composer.

November 12, 1967  The Chorus first appears with the Orchestra at Carnegie Hall in Henze's Messe of Sicily and Ravel's Daphnis and Chloe under the direction of Jean Martinon.

April 3, 1969  Georg Solti first conducts the Chorus in a performance of Mahler's Symphony no. 2.

May 15, 1972  The Chorus records with Sir Georg Solti and the Orchestra for the first time—Beethoven's Symphony no. 9.

January 18, 1973  Daniel Barenboim first conducts the Chorus in a performance of Brahms's A German Requiem.

April 15, 1976  The Chorus and Orchestra present the world premiere of Alan Stout's Passion for Soloists, Chorus, and Orchestra, conducted by Margaret Hillis.

February 23, 1978  The recording of Verdi's Requiem wins the 1977 Grammy Award for Best Choral Performance—Classical.

October 31, 1977  Replacing Sir Georg Solti on short notice, Margaret Hillis conducts the Orchestra and Chorus in a performance of Mahler's Eighth Symphony at Carnegie Hall.

Hillis and Sir Georg Solti accept the Chorus's first Grammy Award in 1978.
March 3, 1979 The Chorus records with Daniel Barenboim and the Orchestra for the first time—Bruckner's Psalm 150

April 28, 1979 Members of the Chorus perform for President Jimmy Carter at the annual dinner of the White House Correspondents' Association at the Washington Hilton Hotel in Washington, D.C.

January 16, 1984 The Chorus appears with the Orchestra at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. in Beethoven's Missa solemnis with Sir Georg Solti conducting

April 29, 1987 Governor James R. Thompson declares Margaret Hillis Day in Illinois, celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the Chorus

August 28 and 30, 1989 The Chorus first appears with the Orchestra in Europe in Berlioz's The Damnation of Faust at Royal Albert Hall in London and the Grosses Festspielhaus in Salzburg; Sir Georg Solti conducts

November 8, 1990 The Chorus and Orchestra present the world premiere of Ned Rorem's Goodbye My Fancy, commissioned for the centennial of the Orchestra; Leonard Slatkin conducts

April 16 and 19, 1991 The Chorus appears with the Orchestra at Carnegie Hall in Verdi's Otello, commemorating Sir Georg Solti's final concerts as music director

December 12, 1991 Pierre Boulez first conducts the Chorus in a performance of Bartók's Cantata profana

August 1, 1993 The Chorus, prepared by Duain Wolfe in his debut as a visiting chorus director, and the Orchestra perform a concert of opera choruses at the Ravinia Festival under the direction of Carlo Rizzi

August 19, 1993 The Chorus appears at the Ravinia Festival with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra in Mahler's Second Symphony with Zubin Mehta conducting

April 24, 1994 The Chorus, with the Lyric Opera of Chicago Chorus, presents the American premiere of Henryk Górecki's Miserere under the direction of John Nelson at Saint Mary of the Angels Church in Chicago; that work and the composer's Amen and Euenes ibant et flevant are recorded for Elektra/Nonesuch

June 1, 1994 Duain Wolfe becomes the second director of the Chicago Symphony Chorus
September 17, 1994  Margaret Hillis receives the Theodore Thomas Medalion on her retirement after thirty-seven years as director of the Chorus; Mayor Daley proclaims September 20 Margaret Hillis Day in Chicago.

September 1995  Sir Georg Solti leads the Orchestra and Chorus in performances of Wagner's complete Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg; the work is recorded live by London.

December 20, 1995  Duain Wolfe makes his debut conducting the Chorus and members of the Orchestra in the first annual Welcome Yule! holiday concert.

February 9, 1996  The Chorus appears with the Boston Symphony Orchestra in Mahler's Symphony no. 2 with Seiji Ozawa conducting.

October 22, 1997  Under the direction of Daniel Barenboim, the Orchestra and Chorus perform Mozart's Requiem at a memorial concert for the late Sir Georg Solti.

1998 Radiothon CD a Tribute to the Chorus

The 1998 Radiothon commemorative compact-disc set (From the Archives, vol. 13) will be a tribute to the Chicago Symphony Chorus. Included on the set will be the Lacrymosa from the March 13, 1958, performance of Mozart's Requiem conducted by Bruno Walter. The set also will include selections by Bach, Gabrieli, Fauré, Handel, Rorem, Schubert, and a spirited rendition of Bear Down, Chicago Bears by Jerry Downs. Featured conductors include Margaret Hillis, Rafael Kubelik, Jean Martinon, Sir Georg Solti, Claudio Abbado, and Daniel Barenboim.