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GRADUATE COLLEGE

A HISTORY OF THE CHICAGO SYMPHONY CHORUS,

1957 – 2000

A Document

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

DOCTOR OF MUSICAL ARTS

By

STANLEY G. LIVENGOOD

Norman, Oklahoma

2001

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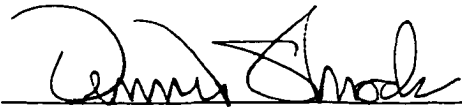
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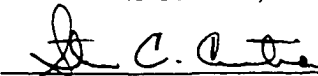
A HISTORY OF THE CHICAGO SYMPHONY CHORUS,
1957 – 2000

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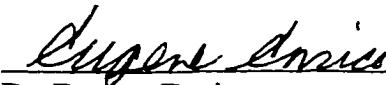
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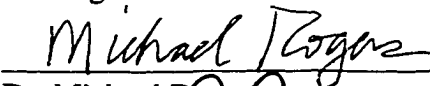
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to those singers and administrators of the Chicago Symphony Chorus who assisted me through interviews during two trips to Chicago and myriad questions afterwards so that I could gather all the information I needed: Former chorister Jane Scharf, choristers Cathy Weingart-Ryan (who also fed me a delicious meal), Lorene Richardson and Richard Livingston, CSC Associate Conductor Don Horisberger, CSC Music Director Duain Wolfe (a soft-spoken, gentle man), former Principal Accompanist Elizabeth Buccheri, CSC Executive Director Karen Deschere (plus assistance from CSC Assistant Manager Angela Grimes), former Chorus Manager and current Ravinia staff member Joe Fabboli, former CSO Vice President of Finance Tom Hallett, current CSO Vice President of Finance Isabelle Goossen, and the top brass Henry Fogel, the President of the Chicago Symphony Orchestral Association, who oversees the dance of all of these amazing organizations. Special mention should go to the staff of the Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony, who performed research while I was 800 miles away and sent materials, provided me with boxes of tantalizing information when I was visiting, and answered the most obscure questions with aplomb. The primary staff in the Archives who assisted me were Archives Director Brenda Nelson-Strauss, Archivist Alison Hinderliter, and most especially Frank Villella, who, as a Chorus member and an Archivist with a penchant for detail, proved to be a font of knowledge. *All copyrighted materials from the Rosenthal Archives have been used by permission. I found most of the staff at Orchestra Hall to be helpful, with one or two exceptions, and I appreciate their interest in this project. My gratitude also extends to former WFMT Program Director Norman Pellegrini who pointed me in all the right directions from the beginning and worked with me on the transcription of his most valuable interview with Margaret Hillis, her final interview before her death. Dr. Bill Carroll, Director of Choral Activities at the University of North Carolina – Greensboro, provided valuable assistance with using their library in my early research. My thanks also goes to CSC founder Margaret Hillis herself. Although I never got to talk with her or see her work, she left a wealth of information to dig through at the Archives and a rich legacy of excellence for the Chorus to live up to. Her hard work and creative genius gave Chicago and the world a valued cultural jewel. I also want to thank the members of my committee for their participation and my advisor Dennis Shrock for his patience in guiding me through this endeavor. My deepest gratitude is reserved for my family for their support, particularly my parents, without whose help my education would not have been possible. They encouraged me through the lengthy process and always believed in my ability to succeed. They showed their love through many small ways to make my journey easier, and their sacrifices can never be repaid. My father also made a wonderful editor. Finally I want to thank God for my faith and strength, and for showing me that the treasures of earth will never lead to contentment.

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ABSTRACT

Founded in 1957 by Margaret Hillis at the request of Chicago Symphony Orchestra Music Director Fritz Reiner, the Chicago Symphony Chorus grew to become considered one of the world's greatest symphony choruses today, and one of the finest of any type of chorus. Through the determination and personality of the Chorus' founder and long-time director, and the high expectations and new opportunities presented from conductors of the Orchestra such as Sir Georg Solti, the Chorus developed a degree of ensemble precision, clear diction, vocal power, and musicality that was unheard of for large choirs. Resources were provided for many of the singers to be paid as part-time professionals, and it remains one of the largest professional groups in the country, though it retains a body of volunteers. Through appearances at Carnegie Hall, two tours to Europe, and the recording of over 50 albums, the Chorus and its directors gained international reputations for excellence. In addition to winning the Grand Prix du Disque for its first recording of Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust*, the Chorus has won nine Grammy® Awards for Best Choral Performance, a record in that category, and has appeared on numerous other Grammy-winning recordings. Today the Chicago Symphony Chorus continues its excellent singing and is working to expand its audience and increase its value in the community by an ambitious series of outreach and educational programs under its second Music Director, Duain Wolfe. This study goes through each season's programs through the year 2000, giving highlights of the more important events in the ensemble's history, and following the growth in the organization that made its quest for excellence possible.

Chapter I

Introduction and Background

General Description of the Chorus and Its Accomplishments

One of only a few choruses directly affiliated with a professional orchestra in the United States, and the second oldest of such choruses,¹ the Chicago Symphony Chorus is considered one of the finest choruses in the world, particularly known for superb diction and ensemble precision. Highly acclaimed among audiences, critics, and professional musicians, the Chorus performs the gamut of the choral-orchestral repertoire as part of the organization of the world-class Chicago Symphony Orchestra, itself considered one of the best ensembles of its type in the world.

Founded in 1957 at the request of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's conductor Fritz Reiner, the Chorus has sung under most of the famous orchestral conductors in the world, including Bruno Walter, Jean Martinon, Pierre Boulez, Claudio Abbado, Carlo Maria Giulini, James Levine, Daniel Barenboim, Seiji Ozawa, and Sir Georg Solti, in addition to Reiner. The Chorus has been led by only two conductors: Margaret Hillis, its founding conductor, and Duain Wolfe, its current conductor. Along the way, the Chorus has presented several world premieres, performed numerous times in Carnegie Hall, made two trips to Europe with the Orchestra, and won 9 Grammy® awards for Best Performance of a Choral Work, a record number for any chorus.² One of those recordings, featuring Berlioz's *Damnation of Faust*, also won France's prestigious Grand Prix du Disque. The Chorus also prominently appeared on the 1981 Grammy winner of the Best Orchestral Performance (Mahler's *Second Symphony*, conducted by Solti), the

¹ N.B. – the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus predates the Chicago Symphony Chorus by several years.

² N.B. – the Atlanta Symphony Chorus is the next closest contender with 8 Grammys in this category.

1985 winner of the Best Opera Performance (Schönberg's *Moses und Aron*, conducted by Solti), and the 1997 winner of the Best Opera Performance (Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, also conducted by Solti).

General Musical Biography of Margaret Hillis and Duain Wolfe

Margaret Hillis, the Chorus' founder, is credited with building the group into the eminently regarded instrument that it is today. The daughter of a well-to-do, politically connected family in Kokomo, Indiana (her grandfather, Elwood Haynes, was an early inventor of the horseless carriage and of stainless steel, and her father, Glen Hillis, narrowly lost a race for governor), she grew up listening to classical music on records and the radio, live concerts in the area, and organ music from a pipe organ at her grandmother's home. Hillis played numerous instruments—studying the piano and saxophone, but self-taught on string bass, tuba, and others—and graduated from Indiana University with a degree in composition. Desiring to be an orchestral conductor since she was a child, her composition teacher warned her that there were no opportunities for women as orchestra conductors, and recommended that she get into conducting through the choral music world, a "back door" path. She then studied choral conducting under Robert Shaw and Julius Herford at the Juilliard School of Music, and began to build her formidable reputation in the New York area. An important early accomplishment was her founding of the Tanglewood Alumni Chorus in 1950, which quickly became the New

York Concert Choir (a.k.a. the American Concert Choir and Orchestra)—the first professional resident choir in the United States.³

Already a renowned conductor in New York City with her New York Concert Choir and other conducting and teaching posts when she began the Chicago Symphony Chorus at the request of Fritz Reiner, her high expectations and superior musical ability enabled her to set a few milestones herself. She became the first woman to conduct the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, an unusual achievement in the classical music field, and for many seasons was allowed to conduct the Orchestra on a yearly subscription concert, a privilege reserved for the most renowned conductors. As a result of her astonishing late substitution for an ailing Sir Georg Solti, she conducted the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus in a performance of Mahler's *Eighth Symphony* in Carnegie Hall in 1977, bringing her instant fame and numerous invitations to guest conduct for choruses and orchestras around the country. Initially believing she would establish the Chicago Symphony Chorus and leave after two or three years, she stayed with the Chorus until her retirement in 1994, after 37 years as their conductor.

In addition to her duties in Chicago, Hillis served at various times as conductor to several regional orchestras, chamber ensembles, and other symphonic and opera choruses. Besides founding and conducting the New York Concert Choir, which folded in the 1960s, such posts included: Choral Conductor of the American Opera Society (1952-1968), Assistant Conductor to Robert Shaw's Collegiate Chorale (1952-54), Choral Director of the New York City Opera Company (1955-56), Music Director of the New York Chamber Soloists (1956-60), Conductor of the Santa Fe Opera Company (1958-59),

³ N.B. – Robert Shaw and Fred Waring had touring choirs, although Hillis' ensemble did some touring as well.

Music Director of the Kenosha (Wisconsin) Symphony Orchestra (1961-68), a resident conductor of the Civic Orchestra of Chicago (1967-late 1980s), Conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra Choruses (1969-71), and Music Director of the Elgin Symphony Orchestra (1971-85).⁴ Also known as a teacher, she taught at several institutions including The Juilliard School of Music (1951-53) and Northwestern University (1968-77). She served on numerous state and national arts boards, including a stint as a panelist with the National Endowment for the Arts. She was a charter member of The Association of Professional Vocal Ensembles (now Chorus America) and used family funds to create the American Choral Foundation in 1954. Throughout the middle and latter part of her career, she received numerous prestigious awards in recognition of her musical achievements, and Chorus America's highest ensemble award is named for her. Already a rising star in the conducting world when asked to found the Chicago Symphony Chorus, Margaret Hillis' work with the Chorus served to bring her greater personal acclaim and visibility, which in turn brought greater notice of the Chorus itself. Shortly after her retirement, she became ill with cancer (she was a heavy smoker) and died in 1998.

Although not a history of Miss Hillis, this paper will deal somewhat with her story, as it is closely intertwined with the history of the Chorus itself. Ensemble and conductor gave each other opportunities and accolades as their respective reputations grew.

Hillis' replacement, Duain Wolfe, has been Music Director of the Chicago Symphony Chorus for a relatively short time, but he has proven to be a fine musician

⁴ Program Booklet of Margaret Hillis' Memorial Service, 14 March 1998, Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, Ill.

with a heart for outreach and development. He had a strong background in founding choruses and creating educational outreach opportunities in Colorado prior to his appointment in Chicago, including the founding of the Colorado Children's Chorale (1974) and the Colorado Symphony Chorus (1984). For his work in Colorado, he received a number of awards, including a Governor's Award for Excellence. In addition to continuing the CSC's reputation for superior skills and art, he has broadened the mission and taken the Chorus in a new direction during his tenure. He will increase the visibility of the Chorus in Chicago and enhance the value of the Chorus in the local and world communities.

Purpose and Need for the Study

As the second oldest symphony chorus in the United States and one of the most highly acclaimed symphony choruses in the world, this ensemble has significant historic value for the choral profession. The story of how it was founded and how it developed is noteworthy in what it can teach us about organizing and building a strong choir, as well as issues such as using paid professionals and volunteers, and affiliating with a major orchestra. Such an important ensemble deserves to be studied. Yet only summary histories have been written, the most significant being a history with highlights of important events, published in the 40th Anniversary program booklet. No detailed, academic history has been attempted of this ensemble.

More complete histories have been written of other significant ensembles, including a multi-volume tome about Boston's Handel and Haydn Society, and a

commercially published book about the New York Philharmonic. Even so, there are few published, thorough histories of important ensembles, and this approach may serve many students and researchers looking for interesting topics. Certainly one of the greatest symphony choruses in the world deserves similar treatment in the interest of our national cultural and musical scholarship, as well as for the enjoyment of choral laymen and fans of the Chicago Symphony Chorus. Since the name “Margaret Hillis” is nearly synonymous with the Chorus, as founder and conductor for most of its existence, the author’s approach will be to concentrate on the Chorus’ development and work under her leadership. The reputations and histories of both Conductor and Chorus are inextricably linked. Less can be written on their current conductor, Duain Wolfe, who has led the Chorus only for the past 7 years, but new developments and trends with the direction of the Chorus will be summarized, and recent high points described. Mr. Wolfe, in agreement with the administration’s philosophy, has certainly made his mark, particularly in the area of community service and audience development. His innovations will enrich the culture of Chicago and expand and diversify the audiences for the Chorus, insuring a long and productive life for the ensemble.

Procedures and Limitations of the Study

No books have been written about the Chicago Symphony Chorus itself, and only a few portions of books are devoted to Margaret Hillis. Thousands of pages of information regarding some aspect of the Chorus, its conductors, and administration can be found in the Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Such items

include scantily documented newspaper articles and reviews, magazine articles, programs, memos, lists, charts, etc. It would be impractical to cite all of these bits of information individually. Little documentation exists regarding major administrative decisions, primarily because the Chorus has no Board of Directors of its own. It functions as an auxiliary of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, which determines, for the most part, the Chorus' concert programming and schedules.

Much information has been gleaned not only from the Rosenthal Archives, but also from private scrapbook collections and personal interviews with those closely involved in the Chorus, either as performers, leaders, or administrators. Information provided by interviews is anecdotal in nature, but useful in fleshing out facts. These busy people naturally had limited time with which to speak, and an attempt was made to cover the most important facts and events. Although there are a number of interviews of Chorus founder Margaret Hillis that are helpful as primary source material, the unfortunate fact of her death several years ago precludes the author from seeking certain clarifications and filling in a few holes in the story that only she could address. Therefore this paper is not intended to be the last word—not an exhaustive study with details of every event from each season, an impossible task. Rather, the purpose is to put together information from various available sources to give a more complete picture, with greater documentation, of the history of the Chicago Symphony Chorus than had previously been attempted.

Chapter II

Establishing and Building a Symphony Chorus

Fritz Reiner Discovers the Need for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's Own Chorus and Acclaimed Conductor

Founded in 1890 and first performing in the fall of 1891, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (CSO) has had the reputation of being a top tier American orchestra, performing all the standard orchestral literature (that is, instrumental) and occasionally presenting national and world premieres of new works. Its first two conductors, Theodore Thomas and Frederick Stock, had long tenures and were highly respected as musicians and orchestra builders. (See Appendix IV for a list of Orchestra and Chorus staff and corresponding tenures.) At Theodore Thomas' insistence, the CSO's governing board, the Orchestral Association, agreed to an early attempt in 1896 at starting a chorus to be associated with the Orchestra in order to perform choral-orchestral works.⁵ Thomas brought in Arthur Mees to be the chorus director, a man with whom he had worked at Cincinnati May Festival and the American Opera Company. Eventually numbering 125 singers, the chorus appeared on four programs during the 1896-1897 season and five programs the following season. The group disbanded after the 1897-1898 season, "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."⁶ Despite this early failure, Thomas and Stock continued to build an excellent orchestral ensemble and made do with other local choirs for occasional choral-orchestral repertoire.

The CSO's reputation suffered somewhat in the 1940s and early '50s during a

⁵ Frank Villella, "The 'First' Chicago Symphony Chorus," CSO Program Book (celebrating the CSC's 40th anniversary), November 1997, p. 18.

⁶ Ibid.

period of several music directors of short tenure and unsatisfactory work, with performances often earning the ire of the powerful Chicago critic Claudia Cassidy, among others. But by 1953 the Orchestra had engaged the famous German conductor Fritz Reiner to restore the reputation it had previously enjoyed. With his experience in operatic conducting, including a stint at New York's Metropolitan Opera, he was sure to bring some drama to the musical performances, and pay more attention to programming vocal music.

As with most major orchestras, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra periodically delved into the choral-orchestral genre, an area of music including many works considered among the greatest compositions in music literature. Having no chorus of its own, the Orchestra continued to turn to numerous community and school choral ensembles for vocal talent. Over the years, the CSO engaged such ensembles as the Apollo Music Club, the Swedish Choral Club, the Chicago Musical College Chorus, the Chicago Lyric Opera Chorus, and choirs from Northwestern University, the University of Illinois, and local public schools.⁷ This arrangement was clearly less than satisfactory. There were no choirs in Chicago that could meet the level of professionalism and quality of the Orchestra, resulting in performances that were far less than ideal. Scheduling rehearsals to meet the needs of both the Orchestra and guest chorus was nightmarish, and rehearsal discipline and attendance were probably comparatively lax, a reflection of both the volunteer nature of the choirs and the state of choral singing in the United States at that time. There were no truly professional, high quality choirs in Chicago that the

⁷ Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, Ill.

Orchestra could call upon. As a result, a number of season ticket holders and regular patrons stayed away from any performances involving a chorus.⁸

Though the Orchestra still occasionally used area amateur choirs out of necessity in order to perform certain masterworks, this state of affairs hampered the programming of choral works. The final straw occurred late in 1953 when one of the Northwestern University choirs had been engaged for a December program. Reiner had scheduled a conductor's piano rehearsal over the Christmas holidays when all students had gone home and, according to Hillis, no one thought of the impending disaster until about 2 days before.⁹ Despite dozens of desperate telegrams and long-distance phone calls, only about one-third of the chorus showed up for the rehearsal. Reiner cancelled the program, substituting it with an instrumental one, and left the rehearsal hall fuming. The following February Reiner traveled to New York to find a more reliable, professional quality choir.

By 1954 the New York Concert Choir and its conductor had been building quite a strong reputation with audiences and critics in performances at Town Hall, specializing in seldom heard Baroque and contemporary masterworks. Reiner was familiar with the reputation of Margaret Hillis and her choir, and made an appointment to attend a rehearsal that February. He came into the rehearsal, introduced himself to the conductor and choir, and asked whether they had the Verdi *Requiem* or Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*. They didn't have enough copies of those pieces, but did have Bach's *B Minor Mass*, so Reiner asked to hear the first Kyrie from that. The Choir had done the *Mass* a couple years before, but most of the personnel had changed since then, so Hillis

⁸ Jane Scharf, interview by author, 23 June 2000, Highland Park, Ill., tape recording.

⁹ Margaret Hillis, interview by Norman Pellegrini, 6 October 1997, Wilmette, Illinois, tape recording, Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, Ill., transcribed by author.

proceeded with some trepidation. She relates the events:

. . . we started [the Kyrie] and after the first four measures I looked at him and I saw his hand moving, so I took his tempo and they sang it absolutely beautiful. When we came to the end of it, I saw his hand moving so I took his ritard with him and he said, "fine, fine." I then saw him over to the door and he said, "Tell me, do they sight-read?" I said, "Yes, of course, they do very well." There was silence, thank God, behind me in the room. Then he said, "You will hear from me," and the door closed behind him and when I turned around to the chorus they just went bonkers. I said, "How many of you have ever done this piece before?" and there were about four hands raised out of 44 people. All the rest did it by sight-reading.¹⁰

Hillis and her group evidently made an impression, as Reiner engaged them for the following season in Chicago. Since the CSO had to pay for rehearsals in New York and Chicago, plus rehearsal space and pianos—and since Hillis wanted this new relationship to work so badly—Hillis chose not to accept a fee, at least for that first year.¹¹

The 60 voices of the New York Concert Choir first came to Chicago to perform Barber's *Prayers of Kierkegaard* and Orff's *Carmina Burana* with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra on March 17 and 18, 1955. Prior to the performances, Hillis was rehearsing the group when Reiner came in to see her "bag of tricks." Hillis was having difficulty getting the choir off of a fermata correctly, so Reiner took to the podium. ". . . He got to the fermata, and he just flipped his baton and they moved all together. I said, 'How did you do that?' He said, 'I have my bag of tricks, too!'"¹²

The performances went very well, receiving excellent reviews in the press, though the Barber drew mixed reviews as a composition.¹³ Regarding the Orff performance,

¹⁰ Margaret Hillis, interview by Jon Bentz, 19 September 1989, transcript, Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, Ill., p. 9.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Margaret Hillis, interview by Norman Pellegrini, p. 10.

¹³ N.B. - Newspaper clippings came largely from clipped articles in various archives and holdings, usually missing page numbers and sometimes even newspaper title, making standard academic documentation impossible.

Roger Dettmer wrote, ". . . it was Miss Hillis' magnificent choir of 60 which matched most closely the orchestra's astonishing virtuosity by giving Dr. Reiner the fullest measure of choral artistry."¹⁴ Irving Sablosky's review was equally glowing: "The Concert Choir (a professional group from New York) has exceptionally pretty voices to begin with, and its director, Margaret Hillis, has blended and polished them to a unified luster. We're not used to hearing choral singing of such refinement and nuance in symphony concerts. I hope we'll hear more."¹⁵

Reiner was pleased with both Hillis and the choir, and a deep respect between the two conductors began rapidly growing. Despite the expense of importing a professional choir from New York, he invited them back for the following season to perform Mozart's *C Minor Mass* and Bruckner's *Te Deum* on January 19 and 20, 1956. The latter work, quite sizable in scope and forces, was normally tackled by much larger choirs. Hillis' group held its own with the CSO, but Reiner's performance received mixed reviews. Not caring much for the Bruckner piece, Roger Dettmer referred to the Mozart performance as "one of [Reiner's] best in 30 months spent among us," and acknowledged that Hillis' group was "easily the finest professional chorus in the country today."¹⁶ Liking the Bruckner piece better, Irving Sablosky found the performance of the Mozart piece "boring" compared to a livelier rendering by the Swedish Choral Club several years

¹⁴ Roger Dettmer, review of *Carmina Burana* by Carl Orff (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and New York Concert Choir, Chicago), Chicago Sun Times, 18 March 1955.

¹⁵ Irving Sablosky, "Unfamiliar Program Packs Orchestra Hall," review of *Carmina Burana* by Carl Orff (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and New York Concert Choir, Chicago), Chicago Tribune, 18 March 1955.

¹⁶ Roger Dettmer, "Extravaganza at Orchestra Hall," review of *C Minor Mass* by Wolfgang Mozart and *Te Deum* by Anton Bruckner (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and New York Concert Choir, Chicago), Chicago American, 20 January 1956.

earlier, but indicated that singers and players performed with "care and devotion."¹⁷

Claudia Cassidy complained about the performer placement and acoustical problems in Orchestra Hall's shallow, wide stage, saying she had not heard the choir "in its proper perspective, because our hall simply doesn't have the distance to display it. It is admirably trained, and it can be brilliant in attack, but I have not heard from it much beauty of sound."¹⁸

Although this performance was not as well received by the critics, Reiner was still having a better musical experience, all under his control, with this professional group. In using the New York Concert Choir, he was finding a more successful formula for performing some of the great choral-orchestral works, but budget considerations forced him to continue to use local groups for other programs throughout the year. His sites, however, had been set even higher. At least as early as 1955 Reiner had written memos expressing an interest in programming the Verdi *Requiem* and made several attempts to put it on the calendar, but difficulties in scheduling soloists and performances, and possibly difficulties in finding an appropriate choir, temporarily put off this dream.¹⁹ However, this goal would later be the final element in the impetus to create a chorus for Chicago's Orchestra. He needed not only the right choir, but also the right conductor with the talent and high standards to prepare the choir.

¹⁷ Irving Sablosky, "Mozart Mass Gets Plodding Treatment," review of *C Minor Mass* by Wolfgang Mozart and *Te Deum* by Anton Bruckner (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and New York Concert Choir, Chicago), Unknown newspaper, ca. 20 January 1956.

¹⁸ Claudia Cassidy, "Mass in C Minor, Bruckner Te Deum in Mozart Commemoration," review of *C Minor Mass* by Wolfgang Mozart and *Te Deum* by Anton Bruckner (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and New York Concert Choir, Chicago), Chicago Tribune, 20 January 1956.

¹⁹ Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, Ill., various dates.

Engaging Hillis and Birthing a Chorus

The Verdi *Requiem* was finally scheduled to be performed towards the end of the 1957-58 season. Early negotiations led to a tentative agreement to use the chorus of the Chicago Lyric Opera (then called Lyric Theater), facilitated by a special financial arrangement with the American Guild of Musical Artists union (AGMA) and agreement by Lyric Theater General Manager Carol Fox to make available the singers. Press announcements were made regarding this collaboration, released in March of 1957. Reiner had in fact initially requested this ensemble. But with a strong taste of success with the New York Concert Choir, he changed his mind. Known as an autocrat who often made decisions without consulting others, Reiner made a lunch appointment with Fox and stated that he had decided not to use the Lyric group after all. This news came as a surprise to CSO General Manager George Kuyper, and he later found out that Reiner was plotting to once again obtain the services of Hillis and her New York group.²⁰

Kuyper dutifully contacted Hillis in New York about this possibility. Hillis, realizing that the Chicago Symphony Orchestra would overwhelm her group of 60 voices singing the Verdi, refused to do it with less than 100 to 120 singers.²¹ (Some sources suggest her insisted minimum was 80 singers, but in several interviews with Hillis, she used the 120 figure.) Initially Hillis was embarrassed to even quote the cost, but under pressure from Reiner, Kuyper called back the following week. Hillis said she couldn't bring such a group for less than \$18,000—a tremendous sum in those days—and that

²⁰ George Kuyper, Memo to Dr. Eric Oldberg, 20 May 1957, Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, Ill.

²¹ George McElroy and Jane W. Stedman, "The Chorus Lady," *Opera News* (16 February 1974): 11.

didn't include her own fee. Knowing this was out of the question, Kuyper offered \$14,000, but Hillis said she couldn't do it for that price. She then made the historic suggestion to Kuyper that the Orchestra keep that money in Chicago and invest it in a chorus of its own.²² That way they could get several performances each season for that type of investment. Kuyper left the conversation at that to regroup.

Anticipating the possibility of another call from George Kuyper requesting suggestions on how to proceed with developing a chorus, Hillis went to a nearby hotel and found a copy of the Chicago Yellow Pages. She checked it to see what choral groups they might draw from, believing the city must have glee clubs and choral societies. Hillis relates this story of the following events in an interview with Chicago Public Radio personality Norman Pellegrini:

Next morning the phone rang, 9:00. "Margaret?" "Yes?" "Reiner," as if I didn't know. And he said, "Vere ve get de singers?" I said, "Well, first you set up the repertory. Set up the date for the concerts."²³

She explained to Reiner how to plan the rehearsal and audition schedule going backwards from the performance dates, and offered to help Kuyper with the organization and scheduling, even in auditioning a conductor. That wasn't good enough for Reiner.

He said, "No, ve don't have it unless you conduct." Well that had not crossed my mind. I said, "May I call you back in the morning?" So I looked through all my date books, and of course you're booked for a year-and-a-half, sometimes two-and-a-half years in advance. I had nearly every Monday night free. And the week of the Verdi I could be in Chicago. And so I called him back, and I said, "Yes, I can do it."²⁴

Reiner wanted a chorus worthy of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and knew he needed a superior conductor with the drive, talent, and proven record to make this happen. He

²² Margaret Hillis, interview by Norman Pellegrini, p. 11.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

had found such a musician in Margaret Hillis, so with that agreement, the Chicago Symphony Chorus was born.

With a new chorus now definitely planned, Hillis' first task, of course, was to find the singers. Ads and articles appeared in the local newspapers announcing the formation of a new "Chicago Symphony Community Chorus" and inviting singers to make an appointment to audition in September, 1957. It is known that a letter of invitation, signed by Fritz Reiner, went out to music directors at area churches, and it most likely was sent to the leaders of area community choral groups as well. Anyone with singing and reading skills was invited to audition, regardless of whether or not they were professional musicians.

Prior to auditions, Hillis had to decide whether she was looking for quantity (a large group, perhaps 150+) or quality (settling for around 100 singers). She had already been warned that Chicago suffered from a "Second City" inferiority complex despite strength in its local orchestra and opera, and that either she would get singers who couldn't read, readers who couldn't sing, or people who could do both but wouldn't want to rehearse.²⁵ Unable to abide this "dilettante" standard of music-making, she decided that good voices were most important, so she held initial auditions looking for singers with strong vocal and reading skills, plus a deep commitment to the group and its demands. She wanted to begin building a professional-level ensemble before even entertaining the idea of paying singers. Singers had to come prepared to sing two songs

²⁵ Margaret Hillis, interview by Jon Bentz, p. 11.

and take a sight-singing test. After hearing around 300 auditionees, Hillis ended up with 106 singers that first season.

Jane Scharf, a church organist with a small volunteer choir, was one of the recipients of the letters of invitation that first year, and decided to audition. Ms. Scharf relates her audition experience:

. . . I took my best little soprano voice and myself and went down [to the audition]. Miss Hillis was such a smiling, wonderful person that she put you at ease right away, and I thought, 'if I make it, fine, if I don't, fine,' because I'm not a singer. So I sang a couple of little songs, little German Lieder and so on, and took a sight-singing test, which was a snap for me. I just breezed through it, and she said, "I need big voices, but I need a few people like you who can read, so I think we'll say yes." So she told us right then and there I was in it. And then she called me a couple weeks later [and asked me] would I take attendance for her at rehearsals, and so I was happy to do that. So I stayed in. I auditioned each year, but I guess through the kindness of her heart, I was able to stay in.²⁶

Miss Hillis also recognized the value of a committed and responsible member. Ms. Scharf was the longest serving member of the CSC, remaining with the group until Hillis' own retirement in 1994, and taking attendance most of that time.

The First Season

Following this audition period, the newly constituted Chicago Symphony Chorus was ready to begin functioning. The nascent Chorus, at this time an all-volunteer group, began their first Monday rehearsals in October of 1957. As Orchestra Hall did not have a rehearsal space for a regularly meeting chorus, the group had to rent space elsewhere.²⁷ The CSC's official debut was scheduled to be a performance of the Verdi *Requiem* in

²⁶ Jane Scharf, interview by author.

²⁷ N.B. - Until a recent renovation to Orchestra Hall, the Chorus spent most of its years rehearsing in a building one block away.

April the following spring, and Hillis got to work on the Verdi immediately. Later in the fall, these preparations were interrupted by a request to do part of a private Christmas program with the CSO for sustaining members and guarantors.

This program was presented on Saturday, November 30, 1957 and marked the unofficial debut of the CSC, at that time referred to as the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Chorus. According to a document in the CSO's Rosenthal Archives, the program was performed once at 2:30 in the afternoon.²⁸ Fritz Reiner conducted the first part of the program, a Bach fugue and a Strauss oboe concerto done with the CSO. Hillis then took the podium to conduct the Chorus. They sang the final chorus from Purcell's *1692 Ode for St. Cecilia's Day*, Thompson's "Alleluia," Billings' "Modern Music," and ended with the "Servant's Chorus" from Donizetti's opera *Don Pasquale*. The first and last pieces were done with the Orchestra and Chorus together, the middle two being unaccompanied.

Critic Roger Dettmer actually reviewed the private performance, calling the Chorus' debut "better than promising."²⁹ "Miss Hillis' choristers were fresh-voiced, musically sensitive, already balanced internally. . . . Only in the diction department was Miss Hillis' infant chorus remiss; otherwise, she has accomplished much in the briefest time-span."³⁰ This is an interesting early observation on a weak area—diction—that in later years the Chorus turned into a renowned strength.

Though not a public performance, this quiet informal debut of the Chorus marked another milestone: Hillis became the first woman to ever conduct the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Clearly, Reiner had a high degree of confidence in his choice of conductors,

²⁸ Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, Ill.

²⁹ Roger Dettmer, "New Chorus, Lyric Finale, Serkin Meet Expectations," review of concert of various works (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Chicago American*, 2 December 1957, p. 10.

³⁰ Ibid.

resulting in an unusual opportunity for that time. In fact, he was so pleased with his new chorus and conductor that before they had ever performed he considered scheduling both the *B Minor Mass* and the *Missa Solemnis* the following season.³¹ Evidently this proved to be too ambitious for the abilities of the young chorus and for the budget, as these pieces were not performed in the second season.

A second disruption on the Verdi preparation took place early in 1958. Sometime during the season the famous conductor Bruno Walter, who was scheduled to do some guest conducting in March, heard about the new choral group and requested to use it to perform Mozart's *Requiem*. One wonders whether Reiner felt that Walter stole a bit of his thunder in performing with the Chorus first, but he apparently agreed to the arrangement. Hillis now had to teach both requiem masses to the new Chorus. Closer to the performance dates, Jane Scharf remembers working with the 81-year-old Walter:

He was a very wary, wonderful person, but I think he was a little hard of hearing at that stage in his life. When we sang that great big word "Rex," he could not hear the "x." He said, "What is this 'Reh, Reh?'" He actually didn't hear it. We had to stress that so much, and Margaret told us in rehearsal, "I'll give you all towels." We really did stress the "x." When Fritz Reiner came back, we did it again, but only in the Verdi, of course. It made him shudder. It was too much for him.³²

The Chicago Symphony Chorus made its official debut with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Bruno Walter, in performances of the Mozart *Requiem* on March 13 and 14, 1958. Soloists included Maria Stader, Maureen Forrester, David Lloyd, and Otto Edelmann. The following list is the first official roster of singers of the CSC, listed in the program for the Mozart concert:

³¹ Margaret Hillis, Letter to chorus members, 20 November 1957, personal collection of Jane Scharf.

³² Jane Scharf, interview by author.

Table 1 – First Official Roster of the Members of the Chicago Symphony Chorus³³

Sopranos

Joan Louise Anderson
Doris A. Archer
Janis A. Barrington
Marcia Bass
Anita Burns
Sophia Vera Cantu
Louise Chamberlain
Anada Cosgrove

Barbara Gilbert
Geraldine C. Glover
Ford Goodlette
Alice Hooft
Carol N. Hyman
Robert Kilanowski
Stephanie Komaniszyn
Carolyne L. Larson

Joan R. Lusk
Mary Lou Murphy
Gloria Glenn Pugh
Jane Scharf
Robert L. Schuttloffel
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. Bilkey
June C. Gilson
Joan Horvath

Jean K. Hurst
Alletta Kovalchik
Patricia Kreutzer
Elaine LaVieri
Valerie R. Nizich
Nancy Osborn
Grace Orr Osborne
Helen S. Pollak
Anne Porayko

Martha Sabransky
Betty Ann Schmelling
Marlene H. Stahl
Marie Strahl
Ellen Thro
Maria B. Vanderhaar
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. Gidlow
Nathaniel B. Green

John E. Hoelm
Billy D. Hopkins
Joseph Kreines
Edward Lieberman
John W. Lobsinger
Ronald E. Locke
Terence H. Noble

Robert J. O'Mara
Wallace R. Ostlund
Ed Quistdorff
Jerome Rothenberg
Richard H. Snow
Kenneth D. Westerdahl
James Wilson
Manfred F. Ziemer

Basses

Charles Bridges
Howard Donaldson
Robert W. Frazier
Joseph Gardner
Harry E. Gudmundson
Ronald C. Harm
George O. Hinnens
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. Rothe
Jerry Seyer
Alfred Schoepko
Robert P. Thompson
John L. Vollbrecht

Preceding the *Requiem*, Walter conducted Schubert's *Symphony No. 8*, the "Unfinished Symphony." Like many performances of the CSO, the performance of this concert was recorded for broadcast, though it was not commercially released. Many

³³ Chicago Symphony Orchestra Chorus Roster, *CSO Program Book*, March 1958, p. 32, Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, Ill.

years later, the Lacrymosa movement from the *Requiem* was placed on a compilation album with other works of the CSO produced for a fundraiser, creating the earliest released recording of the CSC.

With the festive nature of the evening, and the popularity of Bruno Walter in Chicago, the capacity audience gave enthusiastic ovations at the end of the Thursday performance. Upon hearing the first performance of Chicago's new chorus, critics gave generally positive reviews. Newspaper reviews of the day generally focused on the compositions, conductor or the soloists, but the performance of the new chorus was worth comment. Don Henahan indicated the Chorus sang "with power, intelligibility, and good intonation."³⁴ (This was not often the case with many choruses at that time.) He continued, "Its director, Margaret Hillis, has done well with her young and promising group. Except for a few strained top notes in the sopranos and a ragged entry in the 'Sanctus,' the group's debut was auspicious."³⁵ Roger Dettmer noted that the orchestra sounded nervous and ragged, and 3 of the soloists seemed to be straining, but said the evening belonged to Walter, his "heroic chorus, and its invaluable drillmistress."³⁶ He wrote that the Chorus "sang with devotional response, clearly, strongly, freshly. Miss Hillis' sopranos still push too much in forceful passages, which hardens and tightens their tone, but the male platoon is uncommonly good and the whole group finely drilled."³⁷ The powerful Tribune critic Claudia Cassidy gave a more glowing review of the entire collection of forces, and was particularly enamoured with the Chorus.

³⁴ Donal Henahan, "Walter Conducts Moving 'Requiem,'" review of *Requiem* by Wolfgang Mozart (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Daily News, 14 March 1958, p. 24.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Roger Dettmer, "Spontaneous Ovation Greets Beloved Bruno Walter, 81," review of *Requiem* by Wolfgang Mozart (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago American, 14 March 1958, p. 12.

"The evening's card up the Mozartean sleeve was the new Chicago Symphony Orchestra Chorus of about 100 voices, expertly chosen and admirably trained by Margaret Hillis. It had balance and glints of brilliance, it was adroit in attack, and it had moments of reassuringly imaginative song. The Confutatis in particular caught the haunted terror that was Mozart's when the mysterious commission for the Requiem convinced him that the death knell he wrote was his own."³⁸

Critic Robert C. Marsh witnessed the process from the rehearsals with Orchestra and Chorus together to the performance, and was impressed with the results all around. Of the Chorus, he wrote, "The Chicago Symphony Chorus, trained by Margaret Hillis, sang with exceptional enunciation, accuracy, and tonal quality, establishing itself as a major asset to the community."³⁹ With these positive acknowledgements of its work, the Chicago Symphony Chorus was off to a good start, and was poised to give a convincing performance of the Verdi.

The CSC and CSO performed the Verdi *Requiem* on April 3, 4 and 8, 1958 with Fritz Reiner conducting. Earlier Hillis showed her ability to creatively solve a musical problem that appeared in the rehearsals with the Orchestra. (Such a solution would likely be unnecessary with today's Chorus.) During the Tuba Mirum, the brass section was playing heavily and only the Chorus basses were supposed to be singing. However, Hillis knew they wouldn't be heard, so she had added the tenors to the sound. The line

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Claudia Cassidy, "Bruno Walter and the Chicago Symphony in a Memorable Mozart Requiem," review of *Requiem* by Wolfgang Mozart (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Tribune, 14 March 1958, sect. F1.

³⁹ Robert C. Marsh, "Walter's Return is a Triumph," review of *Requiem* by Wolfgang Mozart (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Sun-Times, 14 March 1958, p. 59.

still couldn't be heard in the first rehearsal with the Orchestra. Reiner turned to her, and she began thinking some more. For the next rehearsal she added the altos on the line, and the Chorus could be heard, but only barely. For the performance, she added the sopranos as well—the full Chorus singing the bass line. That time the line came through the brass clearly. Hillis relates Reiner's humorous reaction to her solution:

And after that performance, Reiner called me backstage, and he said, "That was a very beautiful job you did." I said, "Thank you." He says, "But on the Tuba Mirum you. . . you 'schvindled!'" I said, "Yes, I did." He said, "Keep on 'schvindling.'"⁴⁰

Though critics seemed to concede that it wasn't the best performance of the work that they had heard (some soloists were less than ideal and the interpretation lacked some fire), under Reiner's baton it was still considered excellent. Claudia Cassidy wrote,

It was a performance with a brilliant master plan, superbly executed. It had the orchestra at its Verdi peak, the new chorus stirring more and more admiration as it took the diabolical 'Dies Irae' in sulphuric (sic) stride, yet had the light, voluminous textures for the double fugue of the 'Sanctus.'⁴¹

Henahan had less to say about the Chorus, but stated, "The Chorus once more proved that it will be a valuable addition to the orchestra's resources, showing up especially well in the intricate 'Sanctus' fugue for double chorus."⁴² Calling the concert "one of the finest musical events of this year," Robert C. Marsh admired the new Chorus' consistency when he wrote, "Miss Hillis' chorus proved its virtues earlier this season. Again its excellent enunciation, reliable intonation, and intelligent response were praiseworthy."⁴³

⁴⁰ Margaret Hillis, interview by Norman Pellegrini, p. 11.

⁴¹ Claudia Cassidy, "Manzoni Requiem in a Formidable Performance of Great Beauty," review of *Requiem* by Giuseppe Verdi (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Tribune, 4 April 1958.

⁴² Donal Henahan, "Verdi's 'Requiem' a Grand Opera," review of *Requiem* by Giuseppe Verdi (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Daily News, 4 April 1958, p. 15.

⁴³ Robert C. Marsh, "Verdi Work Nobly Performed by Chicago Symphony, Soloists," review of *Requiem* by Giuseppe Verdi (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Sun-Times, 4 April 1958, p. 39.

The Chicago Symphony Chorus survived its first season with good press and much promise of a bright future. The choristers were so pleased that a group of them established the Margaret Hillis Fellowship Fund in appreciation. Created from funds from Chorus members and matching funds from Hillis, the Fund's purpose was to provide aid to Chorus members to improve their vocal and musical skills, primarily in the form of scholarships for private voice lessons. The Fund continued for many years, eventually obtaining funding from various outside sources, the Orchestral Association's Development Department, and through special benefit concerts.

More Seasons Under Reiner

After a new round of auditions in 1958, the Chorus grew to around 127 singers for the second season. Four CSO subscription concerts were designated for the Chorus. In an unusual move for the CSC's second season, Reiner scheduled the chorus for both the CSO's subscription season opener and the season finale. (Most orchestras reserve these special concerts to show off the orchestra alone or have a famous soloist.)

Just days on the heels of an East Coast tour with the Orchestra, the CSO season opened in October with a performance of Beethoven's monumental *Ninth Symphony*, a composition that the Chorus would eventually perform more than any other by far.⁴⁴ At this first performance the reviews were mixed. Of the four newspapers in Chicago at that time, two gave high praise for the Chorus' performance and two had some negative comments. Robert C. Marsh declared that, "The chorus had a well schooled quality. It

⁴⁴ N.B. - As of this writing, Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* has been performed by the CSC on at least 18 different occasions.

knew the text in German and it sang it with good pronunciation and fine enunciation.

What it did not know was how to shape a big phrase and capture the full wonders of what it was given to sing."⁴⁵

At the warm-up rehearsal on the Saturday following that Friday's opening, the choristers passed around the four reviews and mused over the different opinions. Hillis told them, "Don't worry about the reviews. They're all wrong."⁴⁶ She taught them to ignore reviews, as she and the choristers would know much more about what they did well or poorly.

The repertoire for the other subscription concerts for the 1958-59 season included Honegger's *Une Cantate de Noël* in December, Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky* in March, and Handel's *Judas Maccabæus* in April.⁴⁷ The Prokofiev program was recorded and released by RCA, becoming the first commercial recording by the CSC. The Honegger and Handel pieces both included the use of the First Unitarian Church Children's Choir, the CSC's first collaboration with another choir. The Honegger performance was significant for another reason. Reiner conducted the Prokofiev and Handel concerts, and had some instrumental pieces to begin the Honegger concert—compositions by Bartók and Stravinsky. But Margaret Hillis conducted the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus on the Honegger piece. Though it was only for part of the concert, she was now the first woman to conduct the CSO on a subscription concert. In coming years she would conduct the Orchestra on special concerts but would not do another subscription

⁴⁵ Robert C. Marsh, "Symphony Launches Season with Ill-Prepared Beethoven," review of *Symphony No. 9* by Ludwig van Beethoven (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Sun-Times, 24 October 1958, p. 55.

⁴⁶ Jane Scharf, interview by author.

⁴⁷ N.B. - Specific details of CSC concerts can be found in Appendix I.

performance until 1972. Of her performance, critic Seymour Raven stated, "The orchestral playing under Miss Hillis' hand was more to the point than it is when most other choral specialists try to function in depth, but not noticeably eloquent."⁴⁸ Hillis was known for precision and clarity in her conducting, but not so much for her expressiveness.

In a mid-season letter to chorus members, Hillis continued to remind them of important rehearsal disciplines, urging them to listen, count, sing well, phrase, mark the music, and study at home.⁴⁹ She noted remarkable improvement made in the first four areas, but said the choristers needed to do more of the latter two. In March, a letter to choristers praised Chorus members for the excellent performances and recording of *Alexander Nevsky*. She had listened to the play-backs with Reiner, who was so happy that he laughed the entire time.⁵⁰ "As for me, I have never been so proud of any chorus with which I have worked. I can't imagine a more perfect rendition of *Nevsky*."⁵¹ Critics continued to notice fine work by the Chorus, even noting continued improvements. Regarding the Handel performance, Robert C. Marsh wrote, "The finest enunciation and musicianship they have shown this season made the singing of the Chicago Symphony Chorus, prepared by Margaret Hillis, noble and triumphant."⁵²

Repertoire for the 1959-60 season included Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette*, the Bach-Stravinsky piece *Chorale Variations on the Christmas Song*, "From Heaven Above to

⁴⁸ Seymour Raven, "Christmas Concert at Odds with Self," review of *Une Cantate de Noël* by Arthur Honegger (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Chicago Tribune*, ca. 27 December 1958.

⁴⁹ Margaret Hillis, Letter to chorus members, 28 January 1959, personal collection of Jane Scharf.

⁵⁰ Margaret Hillis, Letter to chorus members, 12 March 1959, personal collection of Jane Scharf.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Robert C. Marsh, "Another Handel Oratorio Given Fine Performance," review of *Judas Maccabæus* by G. F. Handel (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Chicago Sun-Times*, 24 April 1959, p. 59.

Earth I Come," Mendelssohn's *Music from "A Midsummer Night's Dream"* (CSC Women), and Brahms' *Ein Deutsches Requiem*—all conducted by Reiner. Reiner again scheduled the first and last two pieces to be the season opener and finale, a proud display of his young chorus. The first three compositions were all performed in the fall, making for a faster turn-around between concerts than had previously been experienced. The Brahms was the lone piece in the spring, allowing plenty of time for solid preparation. The Brahms *Requiem* would become another favorite, being performed on at least 9 different occasions over the years and recorded twice.

Reviews for the Chorus were somewhat mixed over the season, but offered more positives than negatives. Upon hearing the Brahms performance, one critic felt that "Both orchestra and [chorus] performed with a luster and pride not encountered previously,"⁵³ while another remarked that the Chorus "sang admirably at full strength, but without the quality of tone to spin a phrase to its lovely shadow."⁵⁴ A third contradicted this latter comment, saying the performance was "beyond any question the finest performance of this music in my experience," adding that the Chorus "gave stress to nuance and line rather than German diction, with the result that the text was sometimes sacrificed to valid musical requirements. I shall not be the one to protest, so beautiful was the result."⁵⁵

This third season marks a key event that would affect the direction of the Chorus

⁵³ Roger Dettmer, "A Masterful Conclusion," review of *Ein Deutsches Requiem* by Johannes Brahms (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Unknown newspaper (probably Chicago American), ca. 22 April 1960, p. 16.

⁵⁴ Claudia Cassidy, "Brahms' Requiem Puts Somber Period to Orchestra's 69th Season," review of *Ein Deutsches Requiem* by Johannes Brahms (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus) Chicago Tribune, ca. 22 April 1960.

⁵⁵ Robert C. Marsh, "Symphony Superb in Sign-Off," review of *Ein Deutsches Requiem* by Johannes Brahms (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus) Chicago Sun-Times, 23 April 1960. p. 29.

for the rest of its existence. Although Hillis wanted a chorus of professional quality, she had initially resisted paying singers until she felt she had built the quality and discipline to a point where she could justify paying a stipend. "They did not understand how to place a 16th note after a dotted 8th note and could not sub-divide."⁵⁶ The American Guild of Musical Artists, the union that would represent such professional singers, had been pressuring Hillis to pay the singers. The union insisted that she couldn't have amateur singers singing with a professional orchestra, and they would have to do something about it.⁵⁷ The concept of a symphony chorus was new to the United States and such details of organization were still being worked out, though at that time the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus was an all-amateur group.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Hillis resisted the union for the first two seasons, but mid-way through the second season she began to feel the time was right. By the time the Chorus was singing *Judas Maccabaeus* at the end of the second season, the members finally demonstrated their ability to subdivide the beat and correctly place a 16th after a dotted eighth or evenly distribute a triplet. This verified to Hillis that it was time to begin professionalizing the group.

To immediately begin paying all members of the CSC would be financially impossible, so Hillis tried to set up a plan where she would pay more and more singers until it was completely professional over a five year period.⁵⁹ The first AGMA contract was signed on 26 February 1959, to become effective April 1 of that year. It stipulated that 10% of the singers needed to be AGMA members the first year, 30% the second, and

⁵⁶ Margaret Hillis, interview with Jon Bentz, p. 12.

⁵⁷ Jane Scharf, interview by author.

⁵⁸ N.B. - The Cleveland Orchestra Chorus may have some paid singers today, but it is at least a mostly volunteer group, and perhaps completely so.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 4.

on up to 100 % by the end of April 1963.⁶⁰ This ultimately proved to be unfeasible for the Orchestral Association, and later they somehow managed to alter or redo the contract so that there would always be a collection of volunteer singers in addition to paid singers. But the third season began with 16 paid professionals drawn from the ranks of the Chorus, and the number would gradually increase. The AGMA contract usually ran for one to three years at a time, with new contracts often negotiating salary increases, added benefits, and/or clarification of how to deal with various scenarios that might occur. Current Chorus members were given the first opportunity at filling professional positions before outside singers, and it took five years before Hillis had to turn to outsiders to fill positions.⁶¹

With its growing success, the Chicago Symphony Chorus was finally invited to perform at the Ravinia Festival in the summer of 1960. Held yearly at suburban Highland Park, north of Chicago in the exclusive "North Shore" area, the Festival was the summer home of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Such invitations were sporadic in the early years of the Chorus, but later on they received annual invitations to sing at the Festival. For its debut at the Festival in 1960, the Chorus performed Mahler's *Symphony No. 2*, the "Resurrection Symphony," conducted by CSO Associate Conductor Walter Hendl.

While the 1960-61 season brought only three different programs instead of four, it nevertheless was an ambitious one. Reiner finally scheduled Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* for November 3 and 4, 1960, and scheduled another Beethoven's *Ninth* for another season

⁶⁰ AGMA contract, 26 February 1959, Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, Ill.

⁶¹ Margaret Hillis, interview with Jon Bentz, p. 12.

finale on April 27 and 28, 1961. These performances were CSO subscription concerts. The *Ninth* was recorded by RCA, marking the second complete album with the CSC.

The November *Missa Solemnis* program was the first complete performance of that work by the CSO. It is additionally significant because Fritz Reiner became seriously ill some weeks before the performance and was unable to conduct it. He had a bad heart and his health was gradually declining. Few people would both know the Beethoven and be available to conduct on fairly short notice. The substitute conductor chosen was Hillis' mentor Robert Shaw, who had made a national reputation with choirs himself and was building orchestral experience as the Associate Conductor and Chorus Director for the Cleveland Orchestra. Except for the CSC's debut performance with Bruno Walter, Shaw's appearance was the first time the Chorus had worked with another orchestral conductor outside of Reiner. CSO Associate Conductor Walter Hendl prepared the Orchestra in the initial rehearsals, and Robert Shaw made several weekend trips to work with the Chorus closer to the performance dates. This turned out to be a brilliant move.

Some critics claimed the result was a better performance from the Chorus than from the Orchestra, a situation blamed on Shaw's inexperience with instrumentalists. Jane Scharf fondly remembers Shaw's humility during the warm-up for the second performance. "He stood and looked at us and said, 'I took it very slowly last night, and it was stupid, stupid, stupid.'"⁶² In a foreshadowing of a future situation, one critic asked why they couldn't use their own "choral director of the foremost rank—Margaret Hillis,"

⁶² Ibid, p. 2.

or even the CSO's Associate Conductor.⁶³ Nevertheless, the Chorus received excellent notices on a difficult work. Claudia Cassidy seemed to be gushing when she wrote,

What is crucial in the *Missa* is the chorus, and this one was magnificent. I had not known it could sing like that, and still do not know whether a fresh batch of good voices came along this season or whether Mr. Shaw, a choral mesmerist from way back, simply hypnotized them. The fact remains that they sang, with brilliance, with subtlety, with dynamic attack and the joy of shadow play. For the first time in its brief existence that chorus really belonged on the same stage with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. They complemented and displayed each other in a performance some of us will not forget for many a year to come.⁶⁴

In the opinion of some, at least, this performance marked the beginning of the Chorus finally coming into its own.

The third program mentioned, scheduled for January 28, 1961, was the first of many non-subscription concerts that would feature the Chorus. This particular program was part of an on-going series entitled "Popular" Concerts, but they featured single performances of "popular" classical pieces that may otherwise not fit into a subscription program, rather than a "pops" program like the Boston Pops might perform today. Reiner conducted an instrumental program in the first part, but then once again turned over the podium to Hillis. She conducted Bach's motet *Jesu, Meine Freude*, Poulenc's *Messe en Sol Majeur*, and Mendelssohn's *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*.

In an item of historic interest, at least three of the four soloists came from the Chorus membership, including a young Sherrill Milnes. Milnes began as a volunteer singer in the CSC (Hillis didn't like the term "amateur"), and quickly improved enough to

⁶³ Roger Dettmer, "Why Not a Local Guest?" review of *Missa Solemnis* by Ludwig van Beethoven (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), (unknown newspaper, probably Chicago American), ca. 4 November 1960, p. 16.

⁶⁴ Claudia Cassidy, "A Powerful and Mystical 'Missa Solemnis' Enriches Orchestra Hall," review of *Missa Solemnis* by Ludwig van Beethoven (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Tribune, ca. 4 November 1960.

be a paid singer, then an occasionally featured soloist. He spent about five years in the Chorus, three of them as a paid singer. Hillis believed in helping the careers of promising young singers, and of course Milnes later became a leading baritone on the world's opera stages. Over the years, a number of choristers went on to professional solo careers, including Isola Jones, who would return several times as a soloist on major choral-orchestral works.

The 1961-62 season also had only three programs for the Chorus. Beginning a relatively easy autumn, the first program was a December Popular Concert program consisting of Kraehenbuehi's carol "There is No Rose," Bach's *Magnificat in D Major*, and Haydn's *Lord Nelson Mass*, all conducted by Margaret Hillis. The two subscription concerts were performed in February and April of 1962, another season finale.

The February program was conducted by Carlo Maria Giulini, a handsome conductor of whom Chorus members became fond. Jane Scharf mentioned that many of the ladies gave extra attention to dressing up for Guilini's "conductor rehearsals," and she credits him with later aiding the Chorus to progress musically.⁶⁵ Giulini conducted Verdi's *Quattro Pezzi Sacri* as part of the February concert.

The April Season Finale program consisted of Handel's oratorio *Israel in Egypt*, conducted by Reiner. This would unfortunately be Reiner's personal finale with the Chorus. His health continued to decline, and after one more performance with the CSO in April he had to retire from conducting for the 1962-63 season, retaining the official title of Musical Advisor. He died on November 15, 1963. Although cheered early in his Chicago tenure, by the 1960's Reiner had been the target of some severe attacks on

⁶⁵ Jane Scharf, interview by author.

occasion by local critics, musicians, and citizens who did not understand his ways. He was harshly chastised for canceling a plan for the CSO's first tour of Europe, but failed to strongly defend or explain his decision—privately based upon the administration's poor venue selection (mostly small, unimportant towns) and overly ambitious performance schedule (nearly every night, and he was expected to conduct it all despite his heart condition). But upon his death he was nearly universally acknowledged as a great conductor who was not fully appreciated by many in Chicago.

The 1962-63 season would be one of transition for the Chorus, as they had a different CSO Guest Conductor for each performance, but this situation was useful in teaching them to be flexible enough to execute any conductor's interpretation. The season proved to be one of their most ambitious to date. Fauré's *Requiem* was performed on a November subscription program, conducted by Hans Rosbaud, and Bach's *B Minor Mass* became the subscription program for a March performance, conducted by William Steinberg. The Bach had been one of Reiner's goals to conduct sometime with the CSC, a dream he was unable to personally fulfill. Hillis was assigned another Popular Concert program in February, and she conducted Haydn's oratorio, *The Creation*. This was probably done in English at that time, but the printed program does not make this clear.

The Chorus was invited for only the second time to perform at Ravinia in June of 1963, and Pablo Casals conducted one of his own compositions—*El Pessebre (The Manger)*—for that program. The Chorus then enjoyed a summer break and prepared to return to a new season and a new CSO Music Director—Jean Martinon.

Seasons under Martinon

Following a search for a conductor due to Reiner's retirement, Jean Martinon was appointed as the new Music Director for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and began his tenure with the 1963-64 season. His tenure was unfortunately short—after only four years, some harsh treatment by management led to his decision to retire—but highly productive for both the Orchestra and Chorus. Jane Scharf recalls some initial trepidation among some Chorus members about working with a new CSO Music Director.⁶⁶ His different accent seemed exotic, and he didn't have the timing down in rehearsals with both Chorus and Orchestra. The Chorus often would sit for extended periods while he worked exclusively with the Orchestra.⁶⁷ So he was not a favorite with the Chorus, but many of his performances received strong praise from the critics.

During Martinon's first season with the CSO (1963-64), he planned two subscription concerts with the Chorus, which he conducted, and two Popular concerts, which Hillis conducted. The subscription programs consisted mostly of pieces they had already done, plus their first performance of Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*. The Stravinsky was done with the Mozart *Requiem* in November of 1963, and presented in memory of Fritz Reiner who had died two weeks earlier. Martinon conducted Beethoven's *Ninth* in May of 1964. This latter piece was not the Season Finale, however; Martinon was extending the CSO's season.

In February, Hillis conducted Mendelssohn's *Elijah* on the season's first popular concert. Her May concert, performed two weeks after the Beethoven concert, was an ill-

⁶⁶ Jane Scharf, interview by author.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

conceived hodge-podge of choral masterworks, incorporating a full group of 140 voices. Beginning with a *cappella* works by Victoria, Scarlatti, Monteverdi, Vecchi, and Debussy, the latter part of the program was done with the CSO and included Beethoven's *Elegy*, Brahms' *Nänie*, and Haydn's *Theresian Mass*. This particular program did not receive favorable reviews. Although Hillis was known for her skill in preparing choruses, she was less successful as a conductor and designer of concert programs, and especially in conducting orchestra and chorus. Critic Robert C. Marsh indicated as much:

She is less satisfactory as a program builder, least satisfactory as the director of combined choral and orchestra ensembles. In the common failing of her craft, she seems unable to command the instrumentalists with the skill and authority she is plainly able to apply to the singers before her. . . . Combine this with a program of music in slow tempos, and it makes for a long evening.⁶⁸

Thomas Willis noted there were many vacant seats and found flaws typical of other choruses but not the CSC: "Too many women, sopranos blasting on top, tenors inaudible or with ugly tone, diminuendos unevenly scaled, soft passages indistinct, balances between orchestra and chorus out of adjustment."⁶⁹ Donal Henahan agreed that it was a dull evening and was particularly disappointed in the Haydn performance.⁷⁰ Such reviews proved that Hillis was not infallible, and both she and the Chorus still had some work ahead of them before they were to achieve great critical acclaim.

The 1964-65 season included three subscription concerts conducted by Martinon: works by Vivaldi, Debussy, and Ravel in November, the Brahms *Requiem* in February, and Haydn's *The Seasons*, sung in English, in late April 1965. On the printed program of

⁶⁸ Robert C. Marsh, "The Symphony Chorus Loses Some Luster," review of performance of various composers (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Chicago's American*, 25 May 1964.

⁶⁹ Thomas Willis, "Many Vacant Seats at Choral Concert," review of performance of various composers (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Chicago's Tribune*, 25 May 1964.

⁷⁰ Donal Henahan, "Symphony Chorus in a Drab Program," review of performance of various composers (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Chicago Daily News*, 25 May 1964.

the Brahms concert is the first mention of a new staff member and position for the Chicago Symphony Chorus: Robert Schweitzer, Assistant Director.⁷¹ In recognition of the growing expectations and responsibilities with the Chorus, Hillis was finally getting some staff help, though in these early days she still took on nearly all of the rehearsal conducting. One of the most important jobs of Assistant Directors was to take copious notes of problem spots during rehearsal, which Hillis could address next time. According to Archivist Frank Villella, Schweitzer began his duties in 1964.⁷²

Perhaps the highlight of this season was the sole Special Concert. On a program of works conducted by Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft on April 17, 1965, some of the men of the CSC sang Schönberg's *Six Pieces for Male Chorus*. These pieces were recorded for Columbia Records, becoming only the third major recording by the CSC.

The Ravinia Festival invited the CSC to perform on two occasions that July. Aaron Copland conducted the Bach-Stravinsky piece *Chorale Variations on the Christmas Song, "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come"* on July 6, and Seiji Ozawa conducted Orff's *Carmina Burana* on July 18. This was the first time the CSC had worked with either conductor. Sherrill Milnes sang on the Orff piece, returning to the CSC in the beginnings of his own professional solo career.

In September of 1965, Martinon opened the CSO's 75th anniversary season in grand style with Berlioz's dramatic choral symphony, *La Damnation de Faust*. In addition to the CSC, a newly constituted Chicago Children's Choir was used. This would become one of two children's choirs that would usually be called upon to sing with the CSO when needed (the second being the Glen Ellyn Children's Chorus). The Berlioz

⁷¹ Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, Ill.

⁷² Frank Villella, email correspondence, 4 May 2001.

piece would be the CSC's first performance in what would become an important staple later in its history, though Martinon's version had several cuts imposed upon it. Robert C. Marsh found the performance a bit lack-luster and the Chorus a bit detached from the music,⁷³ but Donal Henahan believed the performance to be more exciting. Though not singling out the CSC for particular remarks, Henahan mentioned that the program included Hillis' "meticulously trained chorus."⁷⁴

The rest of the fall was probably spent on the next challenge, a program of Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* and Stravinsky's *Les Noces*. Martinon conducted this in January of 1966. Only five weeks later, Hillis conducted another Popular Concert. Consisting mostly of *a cappella* works. This program included five madrigals by Monteverdi, Brahms' *Fünf Gesänge, Opus 104*, Dallapiccola's dodecaphonic *Canti di Prigionia*, and Bruckner's *E Minor Mass*. The latter work likely featured wind players from the CSO. The CSC ended their season with Martinon conducting Bach's *St. John Passion* on another subscription concert. The CSC would not perform this piece again for over 3 decades.

The 1966-67 season would be somewhat of a turning point for the CSC, with a greatly expanded season and more rapid turn-around between performances. Most probably Hillis needed to add additional rehearsals in order to prepare the season's large amount of repertoire. Included in this was a series of concerts for a June Festival, apparently unrelated to Ravinia. The programs for this season additionally give the first

⁷³ Robert C. Marsh, "The Symphony's 'Faust' Never Catches Fire," review of *La Damnation de Faust* by Hector Berlioz (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Sun-Times, 24 September 1965.

⁷⁴ Donal Henahan, "A Rare 'Faust' for the Symphony," review of *La Damnation de Faust* by Hector Berlioz (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Daily News, 24 September 1965.

mention of a manager, George Hinnners, who served in this part-time position while also acting as the librarian. The following year the positions would be split among two other people.

The group's first program of the season was in early December, in which Martinon conducted his own composition, *Le Lis de Saron (The Rose of Sharon)*. The next performance was a Popular Concert program on February 11, 1967. Conducted by Morton Gould, this performance is significant for several firsts. The piece was the American premiere of Ives' *Second Orchestral Set*, the first time the CSC had been involved in an important premiere. It used only 14 choristers, so the program used the term "Members of the Chicago Symphony Chorus"—one of the smallest groups ever pulled from the membership for a special performance.⁷⁵ Finally, the ensemble for this program was prepared by the Assistant Director of the CSC, Ronald Schweitzer—the first time a CSC event had been prepared by someone other than Margaret Hillis, so far as is known. It is likely that this ensemble was rehearsed independent of the other performance preparations being made by the full Chorus.

The full Chorus performed Cherubini's *Requiem in C Minor*, conducted by Giulini, later in February, and the Women of the CSC performed Mahler's *Symphony No. 3* the third week of March, conducted by Martinon. The Chicago Children's Choir were guests at the Mahler concert. Merely one week later, on March 31, Hillis conducted the CSC in a Popular Concert commemorating the Chorus' Ninth Anniversary, the group's first concert so designated in its honor. This program consisted of three motets by

⁷⁵ N.B. - This term would be used for later programs in which a relatively small group of CSC members was used (e.g. 40 members or so), but there is no official policy for how small the group must be in order to use that term. One program had used only 8 members of the Chorus.

Josquin, Bach's *Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied*, Brahms' *Vier Gesänge, Opus 17*, and two Schönberg sets: *Six Pieces for Male Chorus* and the difficult *Friede auf Erden*. In May, Martinon gave the CSC the honor of being featured on another Season Finale when he conducted Honegger's *Jeanne d'Arc au Bûcher (Joan of Arc at the Stake)*. Sung in English, this rarely done piece again had the Chicago Children's Choir as a guest ensemble.

As their most busy season to date wound down, they prepared for performances at a music festival called the "June Festival," possibly a one-time Chicago event. Consisting of a series of operas and operettas, it is likely that the Chorus was divided up into smaller groups, assigned to one or two of these different programs, and rehearsed separately. This procedure was definitely used years later for a series of Mozart operas. The first program, on June 2, was Rossini's *L'Italiana in Algeri*, conducted by Henry Lewis. On June 7 and 9, Lehar's *The Merry Widow* was conducted by Franz Allers. Three Offenbach operettas were sung on June 14 and 16, also under Allers' baton. Finally, on June 15 and 17, Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* was performed with Antonio Janigro conducting. To cap off an intense summer, the CSC performed one Ravinia Festival concert in August. Seiji Ozawa conducted the CSO and CSC in Bernstein's *Symphony No. 3, ("Kaddish")*. Though 1966-67 was a difficult season with a seemingly unending series of performances, the CSC successfully proved that they had the stamina, professionalism, and corporate commitment to rise to the occasion.

Margaret Hillis had now put ten years into building the Chicago Symphony Chorus—drilling, building skills and discipline, and raising expectations. She could call

upon more than 160 good singers—with considerably more professionals now, but still many volunteers—when the program called for the full complement. They were trained to be highly responsive to any conductor, and showed that difficult problems of diction with a large chorus and orchestra could be overcome with extreme precision and sharp attack of consonants. The existence of a professional orchestra's own chorus was quite rare, unheard of even among older and wealthier orchestra's such as the New York Philharmonic, and a "professional" symphonic chorus was completely unique to Chicago.

Hillis later would recall how in the first six years or so many season ticket holders would turn in their tickets when they heard the Chorus was to perform, much as they did when other local ensembles performed with the CSO before the CSC was created.⁷⁶ Over time the ensemble continually improved its results to where the press and audience were beginning to take more notice. Hillis herself indicated that it really took nearly ten years to hone the group into the pristine instrument it is today, imperceptibly coming into its own during the Martinon era.⁷⁷ The season of 1967-68, the Chorus' 11th season and their 10th anniversary, would be a watershed year for it and for the Orchestra.

Jean Martinon built upon Reiner's success with both the Orchestra and Chorus, and planned to finally give the groups the showcase they deserved. For the Chorus' first subscription concert of the season, November 2, 3 and 4, 1967, he planned two fairly modern works: Hans Werner Henze's new *Musen Siziliens* (a concerto for chorus, 2 pianos, winds, and timpani) and Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* ballet music (a colorful

⁷⁶ Jane Weiner LePage, "Margaret Hillis," chap. in Women Composers, Conductors, and Musicians of the Twentieth Century: Selected Biographies, (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1980), p. 78.

⁷⁷ Margaret Carroll, "Hillis' Artful Compromise for a Passion," Chicago Tribune, 11 April 1976, sect. 5, p. 2.

orchestral piece with atmospheric wordless choruses). Chicago critics raved over the performances. Thomas Willis wrote,

. . . the "Daphnis" was one of those performances seldom heard, the 160-plus voices of the symphony's exceptionally well-trained chorus catching the edge of the impressionistic intervals in the opening *a cappella* section and sailing thru (sic) the closing five-four without losing either the style or the color.⁷⁸

Bernard Jacobson noted the rich sound of the Chorus: ". . . this is a superbly responsive choir, and its tone is exceptionally full and pure, unmixed with the baser matter of breathiness to which even some good choruses are prone."⁷⁹

The following week, both Orchestra and Chorus made a historic trip to Carnegie Hall in New York—the first such trip for the Chorus—performing this program on November 12. (The CSO had made its Carnegie debut in 1898, but apparently had not performed there in quite a few years, as at least one critic made comments that seemed to designate this as a debut performance for the Orchestra as well.) Although some singers could not be away from job and home responsibilities, most of the choristers were able to go on the outing, as did some of the Chicago critics. Chorus members discovered that the New York audiences could be even more responsive than Chicago's, as the final ovation was thunderously enthusiastic and complimentary. Though Hillis' New York/American Concert Choir had folded in the mid-1960s, the New York audience still had great love for her. Chicago critic Roger Dettmer gave high praise to the Chorus on this event: "The Chorus, on its first outing, is the best to date that Miss Hillis had recruited and drilled—no mean compliment since hers has been, almost since founding in 1957, high on the list of

⁷⁸ Thomas Willis, review of *Daphnis et Chloé* by Maurice Ravel and *Musen Siziliens* by Hans Werner Henze (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Tribune, 3 November 1967.

⁷⁹ Bernard Jacobson, review of *Daphnis et Chloé* by Maurice Ravel and *Musen Siziliens* by Hans Werner Henze (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Daily News, 4 November 1967.

this hemisphere's best."⁸⁰ Former Chicago critic Donal Henahan, now writing for the New York Times, also had a glowing report:

. . . the French conductor led his orchestra and the Chicago Symphony Chorus of 132 voices through a night of old and new music that on the performance scale rated all the stars it is possible to give. Margaret Hillis' delicately tuned professional chorus. . . was making its first New York appearance since she began building it in Chicago 10 years ago.⁸¹

Later writing for Bravo magazine, Alan Rich was able to objectively look back on the importance of both this individual event and of the existence of the Chorus in general:

Not many people were aware of it at the time, but a kind of milestone was passed at Carnegie Hall last November 12. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra played there. . . and along with it in its New York debut, was the 132-voice Chicago Symphony Chorus. For the first time in modern history, a major American symphony orchestra appeared in New York with a full-time, fully professional choral aggregation. . . .⁸² There are plenty of choruses around on the map, and some of them are very good. . . but the professional chorus, the aggregation of trained singers which stays together year after year and works out an ensemble style with the care and expertise that goes into the building of an orchestra—this, alas, is a rarity. And that is why the decision of the Chicago Symphony, 10 years ago, to build and maintain its own professional choral group was an important event.⁸³

Closely following the New York success, Hillis conducted the Orchestra and Chorus in a Special Concert on December 17, 1967. Designated as the Chorus' 10th Anniversary concert, she chose the *B Minor Mass* to show off the group's skills. Though the group had already performed the piece in 1960 under the baton of Robert Shaw and in 1963 under William Steinberg, it had to learn the piece in only four weeks this time around. Some critics gave this performance even stronger reviews, certainly owing to the

⁸⁰ Roger Dettmer, review of *Daphnis et Chloé* by Maurice Ravel and *Musen Siziliens* by Hans Werner Henze (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago American, 13 November 1967.

⁸¹ Donal Henahan, review of *Daphnis et Chloé* by Maurice Ravel and *Musen Siziliens* by Hans Werner Henze (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), New York Times, 13 November 1967.

⁸² N.B. - The Chorus was neither full-time nor fully professional, but it must have seemed so compared to the few other choruses attempting to fulfill the same role.

⁸³ Alan Rich, article in Bravo, 1968, quoted in a page of reviews in the Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, Ill.

musical growth of the Chorus.

The Chicago Symphony Chorus celebrated its 10th anniversary . . . with a monumental performance of Bach's *Mass in B Minor*, which few of us will ever forget. In fact, you wanted to stop breathing for fear of missing something. Seldom has any chorus recreated every mood and meaning so convincingly as did Margaret Hillis' superb group Conductor Hillis, the wizard behind Sunday afternoon's magic, maintained correct balance, gave every idea its appropriate importance, and achieved cohesion thru (sic) well-founded tempi.⁸⁴

Hillis herself praised the Chorus in a later letter, dated January 8, 1968.

For the past three weeks I have been trying to write to you about your performance of the *B Minor Mass*, and each time I have found that words fail me. That you mastered this work in four weeks is unbelievable. That you sang it with such superb sensitivity to its vitality and beauty gave to all of us—the orchestra, the audience and me—a far richer inner life. For me, this will always be a landmark for future musical growth. I cannot thank you enough for having given Bach the best of yourselves.⁸⁵

As the season continued on in the New Year, the Chorus found itself nearly as busy as the previous season, and Hillis' above letter concludes with an exhortation to continue their musical growth and be prepared for the upcoming demands. Three more subscription programs were performed in February, April, and May 1968, each conducted by Martinon. The February program used only men of the CSC in Brahms' *Rhapsody for Contralto, Male Chorus, and Orchestra*, with CSC Assistant Director Ronald Schweitzer receiving partial credit for the preparation. The April program, a nod to Holy Week, consisted of selections from Karl Heinrich von Graun's cantata *Der Tod Jesu* and Fauré's *Requiem*, with Agnes Giebel and the famed French mélodie singer Gérard Souzay. (The Fauré was released in 1998 on a compilation album from the Archives on the CSO label.) Past criticisms of straining sopranos had long since disappeared. "The Chicago

⁸⁴ Kenneth Sanson, review *B Minor Mass* by J. S. Bach (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Chicago American*, 18 December 1967.

⁸⁵ Margaret Hillis, Letter to chorus members, 8 January 1968, Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, Ill.

Symphony Orchestra and Chorus gave the [Fauré *Requiem*] a stunning performance at the first of the holy week concerts. . . . As prepared by Margaret Hillis, the ensemble had tuned each pitch, vowel, and consonant to maximum beauty, floating the tone with what seemed total ease."⁸⁶

The May program was another CSO Season Finale, and Martinon chose to use the Chorus in another production of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*. The Chorus seemed to even outshine the Orchestra, according to Thomas Willis: "The symphony chorus was the star of the evening, for not only did Mr. Martinon enforce the strict demands of the score, he required extra inflections and super-broad dynamics ranging from a whisper whose presence was felt rather than heard to a rafter-ringing shout."⁸⁷ Following the official end to the season, Martinon conducted a special June 1 concert with the Orchestra and Chorus. This all-Bach program included cantatas 50 and 55, plus the *Magnificat*. There is no record of a Ravinia performance by the CSC this year.

Although Martinon would return next season to conduct the Orchestra and Chorus together, the Bach program would be his last performance as Music Director of the CSO. He had had some difficulties with management, and they had delayed renewing his contract as they considered the possibility of hiring another conductor. Although that never came to fruition, Martinon tired of the delays and apparent lack of respect, so he decided near the end of the season that he would not return the next year as Music Director. The following season would be another one of guest conductors until a new Music Director could be hired.

⁸⁶ Thomas Willis, review of *Requiem* by Gabriel Fauré (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Tribune, 12 April 1968.

⁸⁷ Thomas Willis, review of *Missa Solemnis*, by Ludwig van Beethoven (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Tribune, 17 May 1968

With the strong performances of its 10th anniversary season, it could be argued that the Chicago Symphony Chorus had become a fully mature ensemble, and that the critics and audiences in Chicago were beginning to recognize what a true jewel they actually had, at least the equal to their own Orchestra. No one could have foreseen the even greater heights of glory that would be achieved in the golden years of the next CSO Music Director.

Early Organization and Operation of the Chorus

As an arm of the Orchestral Association, the Chorus was not an independent entity like the typical community chorus, but performed almost exclusively at the whim of the Association, to be available for any choral concerts the Association and CSO Music Director may plan. The Chorus did not even have its own constitution, purpose statement, or Board of Directors. These functions were covered by the Orchestral Association as the controlling body of the Orchestra and its affiliated departments and organizations, so the Chorus simply used the same documents and statements of the Orchestra, a practice continued to this day.⁸⁸

When Margaret Hillis agreed to create the Chicago Symphony Chorus, she still lived in New York and continued her teaching and conducting activities there, so she needed to keep the operation highly organized and rehearsals efficient. She planned on staying long enough to get the chorus off the ground, about two, three or four years, then

⁸⁸ N.B. - With this situation, there are unfortunately no meeting minutes or organized documents of the behind-the-scenes administrative operations or decisions of the CSC, making later documentation and research rather difficult.

turn it over to someone else.⁸⁹ But she fell in love with the group and realized how much they needed her in this pioneering endeavor.

She never dreamed that the Chorus would end up being her primary concern for 37 years, so initially she commuted to Chicago via commercial jet, returning on the midnight flights every Monday evening after rehearsal so she could teach on Tuesday mornings. This commuting would last five years, until she landed a local orchestra job in Kenosha, Wisconsin and moved to Illinois permanently.

During these early years, Hillis worked on finding and adding quality singers to increase the size of the Chorus, building rehearsal discipline, and generally raising standards. She taught them to listen to each other more, telling them, "Don't make it [the sound] perfectly, make it perfectly beautiful."⁹⁰ She was a stickler for crisp diction, feeling that consonants were to a chorus what tonguing or bowing were to orchestra players.⁹¹

She not only auditioned new singers hoping to join the Chorus each year, but also required current members to re-audition annually, with the expectation that they would improve their skills. One important aspect that she looked for in auditionees was the ability to admit mistakes and learn. Other qualities included:

. . . well-schooled voices, even throughout the range, with a well-controlled vibrato. Singers must be good sight-readers and, above all, possess I.Q. and a feel for voice color. . . even more, a sense of shape, of proportion and directions. "Knowing where you are going is the important thing; where you have been must be carried along." Whatever their religion elsewhere, she tells her singers, "Here you must be Presbyterians and have a strong sense of predestination." For this bump of direction she is willing to overlook deficiencies in volume if necessary.⁹²

⁸⁹ Margaret Hillis, interview with Norman Pellegrini, p. 10.

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 13.

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 14.

⁹² McElroy and Stedman, p. 12.

Part of Hillis' organization of the Chorus included the use of a numbering system corresponding to individual singers. All sopranos were in the 100's, altos in the 200's, tenors 300's, and basses 400's, with second sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses starting in the 50's within their corresponding 3-digit number, such as 250 for second altos. Singers within their sections were ranked according to Hillis' judgement of ability, with the top first soprano being ranked as 100, the top second soprano being 150, and so on. She initiated this system the first year, and each year after auditions the singers would eagerly check to see what their number was. This system was taken seriously by the choristers, and some would cry in disappointment with the results. According to Jane Scharf, "It wasn't that you had to be ahead of everybody else, but you wanted to at least get better than you were the year before."⁹³

By 1964, the growing use of professionals mixed with volunteers inspired Hillis to refine her numbering system. Volunteers then received an extra "1" in front of their 3 digit number, while the paid members retained their 3-digit number. These "1000's" were clearly identifying the volunteer members, and they naturally had the lower-ranking numbers most of the time. Audition requirements for professionals were more stringent, as they were also required to pass a theory test and generally were expected to be taking private voice lessons, with steady vocal improvement each year.

As the size and variety of the CSC's repertoire increased, it became clear that some programs called for less than the complete roster of CSC members, especially when the roster grew to around 160 members or more. Depending on the repertoire used, the Chorus might use approximately 120, 80, or even 40 singers or less. At some

⁹³ Jane Scharf, interview by author.

indistinguishable point, when a small number of singers was used, then the program would refer to the group as "Members of the CSC." In the mid and late 1960s an informal chamber chorus was formed to perform special programs as the need arose. There is little documentation as to dates and works performed, but much of the repertoire was likely *a cappella*. One performance is documented through a memo mentioning a performance in the foyer of Orchestra Hall on May 16, 1967.⁹⁴

Naturally the professional singers would be the first ones asked to perform concerts, and their AGMA contracts guaranteed a minimum number of performances each year. These singers had the first right of refusal, but if they gave up a program, then the Orchestral Association was not required to compensate them even if they didn't sing the minimum number of programs. Programs that used only small numbers of choristers used all or mostly professionals, so volunteers may have had fewer performances over any given season. As the ranks of professional singers developed, Hillis began using some of them to understudy the solo parts of major choral works. This came in useful for conductor's piano rehearsals before the scheduled soloists arrived, and on a few occasions over the life of the Chorus, a CSC soloist was allowed to replace an ailing professional soloist, thus launching their own solo career.

During rehearsals, Hillis systematically drilled for precision, particularly focusing on consonants and cut-offs, and prepared the Chorus to follow whatever interpretation the conductor demanded. Most of the first rehearsal of a piece usually consisted of the Chorus members going through the entire score and marking the music—circling ending

⁹⁴ Margaret Hillis, memo to chamber chorus members, 20 April 1967, Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, Ill.

consonants, putting arrows on beginning consonants so it would be sounded early, marking dynamics, precise cut-offs, phrases, forward movement, etc.⁹⁵ Cathy Weingart-Ryan, a CSC member since 1973, remembers a rehearsal for a later performance of the Verdi *Requiem* in which Hillis was working on the first two pages with the men singing "requiem." She was trying to get the men to sing it in a whispered fashion and roll the 'r.' Hillis told them to do it again until they got it right, and she spent 45 minutes on those two pages. Though this method and the high expectations may have exasperated some members at the time, they now seem to acknowledge the magnificence of the result.⁹⁶

Choristers were gradually learning the discipline of creating a professional level chorus. Attendance and tardiness policies were instituted and enforced, a level of expectation unknown in other Chicago choruses. Punctuality was a problem at first, with one good tenor in particular showing up consistently 15 minutes late. After several warnings, Hillis fired that individual, and the other choristers took note, making an extra effort to be ready to rehearse on time or even early.⁹⁷ To better help the less trained choristers, Hillis eventually instituted classes in musicianship, theory, foreign language diction, even conducting and score study. These met for about one hour prior to Monday rehearsals, and many classes were taught by Hillis herself. Local language experts were eventually brought in for foreign language diction. Dr. Gertrude Grisham was an early foreign diction coach and became a familiar presence at rehearsals up to the present time, focusing on German diction and occasionally French diction.

Monday rehearsals themselves were 3 hours, and weekend sectionals would often

⁹⁵ Cathy Weingart-Ryan, interview by author, 23 June 2000, Highland Park, Ill., tape recording.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Margaret Hillis, interview by Jon Bentz, p. 10.

be called so the Chorus might better prepare more difficult works. Each of the four voice parts would be called for a separate three-hour rehearsal—the sopranos and altos on Saturday afternoon and the tenors and basses on Sunday afternoon. One of those three hours would sometimes be an overlap with the next sectional so all women or all men could rehearse together. Extra rehearsals could even be called during the week as necessary. Reaching the level of excellence expected required a heavy investment in time for choristers, but the results paid off over time. Naturally the hardship of this commitment also led to some degree of turn-over each year.

To further help with rehearsal organization and encourage homework by choristers, Hillis created her well-known home study charts. These mapped out which movements or choruses of a multi-movement work would be rehearsed each meeting over the entire rehearsal period up to performance. Included were indications (via check marks or x's) of the level of difficulty of the movement, according to Hillis' judgement. This usually ranged from one or two checks (simplest) to eight or even ten checks (nearly impossible).⁹⁸ In theory, choristers would use these charts to know what to prepare for prior to its next rehearsal, paying extra attention to more difficult sections. In practice, it seems that most choristers did little at-home practice unless absolutely necessary, but in time the singers' musicianship had grown to where they would learn their parts well enough in formal rehearsals.⁹⁹

At least in the earlier years, Margaret Hillis often sent letters and memos to

⁹⁸ N.B. - one study chart of the Mahler *Eighth* done in 1984 used 15 x's for the "Uns bleibt ein Erdenrest" section!

⁹⁹ N.B. - Chorus members interviewed for this paper indicated that they did little or no home study, feeling none was actually necessary with such thorough rehearsals, but did use the charts to know what would be rehearsed on a given evening.

choristers, heavily borrowing an idea from her mentor Robert Shaw, down to the salutation "Dear People." Such letters, besides occasionally simply passing on important information, usually consisted of praise for recent work and reminders of problems to correct and obstacles still ahead. One of the earliest examples, dated 17 December 1957, follows on the next page:

Dear People:

Thanks again for a series of excellent rehearsals. You have covered a vast amount of material, and you've made great strides technically, all in less than two months work!

As you know, the aim of this chorus is to do great performances of great music. In order to do this, we must be technically equipped to meet the challenge of the composers whom we serve. The building of a technique can be done only with diligent and sometimes nerve-wracking practice. This practice must be guided by the strictest criticism. Without constant examination and analysis of all the elements with which a musician must deal, the result cannot be a musically intelligent performance.

Each individual must take his own responsibility for his best contribution to the total sense of the ensemble. Following is a list of some of the musical elements, with which you must deal in order to make that contribution:

1. Rhythmic clarity (do you count?)
2. Intonation (how intensely do you listen?)
3. The vibrancy, the color, the beauty of the sound (do you like it?)
4. Diction (did you cross that last T?)
5. Phrasing (can you do it better?)
6. Do you understand the text as it relates to the composer's vision?
7. Criticism (before you sing, do you project your imagination into the music's future?)

Each of these points needs thorough discussion, and I hope during the rest of this year to write a series of essays to you covering each topic in detail. My responsibility to you is to see to it that you know what you are doing in as great detail as possible. From our short period of working together, it is very clear that you are capable of learning well.

Again my thanks to you for your good work. May we have many more such stimulating rehearsals!

See you Monday –

Margaret Hillis¹⁰⁰

This was not the only sort of paperwork Chorus members would receive. As part of her efforts to prepare new members for the rigors of her "professional" chorus, Hillis

¹⁰⁰ Margaret Hillis, Letter to chorus members, 17 December 1957, personal collection of Jane Scharf.

wrote a document of several pages outlining procedures and expectations. Also included were sections on how to mark the music, and on French, Italian, German, and Latin diction with the use of the International Phonetic Alphabet. Called "At Rehearsals," this document was turned into a pamphlet and published in 1969 by the American Choral Foundation (via a local Illinois company) expressly for the members of the Chicago Symphony Chorus.¹⁰¹

Even with part-time managers and various types of assistants being added to the growing organization, Miss Hillis had to do much of the administration herself in the early years. Perhaps Hillis' most frustrating aspect of the administration of the Chorus was dealing with the budgets. From the beginning the Orchestral Association expressed concern about the extra costs of operating a Chorus in addition to the Orchestra, and made frequent attempts to cut costs. Early memos showed CSO manager George Kuyper raising monetary concerns. Eric Oldberg, the President of the Orchestral Association during the earliest years of the CSC, suggested to Fritz Reiner in 1958 that the "maximum of choral performances per year probably should not exceed three" in order to keep costs down.¹⁰² Depending on the number of performances and types of repertoire, the budget for one year could be higher or lower than the previous year, but the general trend was for costs to go up, especially as professional members were added and AGMA contracts increased salary and benefits. Table 2 indicates expenses each year during an early period in the Chorus' history, with figures derived from the Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. (Financial information for 1974-1987 is unavailable.)

¹⁰¹ Margaret Hillis, At Rehearsals (Barrington, Illinois: The Letter Shop, for the American Choral Foundation, 1969).

¹⁰² Eric Oldberg, memo to Fritz Reiner, 29 April 1958, Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, Ill.

Table 2 – Expenditures of the Chicago Symphony Chorus, Fiscal Years 1958-1973

FY	Total Expenditures	Change From Previous Year
1958	\$ 9,651.00	
1959	\$ 11,936.00	\$ 2,285.00
1960	\$ 16,740.00	\$ 4,804.00
1961	\$ 21,346.00	\$ 4,606.00
1962	\$ 14,099.00	\$ (7,247.00)
1963	\$ 12,184.00	\$ (1,915.00)
1964	\$ 13,073.00	\$ 889.00
1965	\$ 21,093.00	\$ 8,020.00
1966	\$ 24,008.00	\$ 2,915.00
1967	\$ 29,545.00	\$ 5,537.00
1968	\$ 50,021.00	\$ 20,476.00
1969	\$ 50,087.00	\$ 66.00
1970	\$ 68,837.00	\$ 18,750.00
1971	\$ 97,762.00	\$ 28,925.00
1972	\$ 117,774.00	\$ 20,012.00
1973	\$ 129,007.00	\$ 11,233.00

Expenditures were scrutinized by management, and Hillis frequently wrote memos justifying and carefully documenting expenses, sometimes explaining the necessity to exceed her budget. Other times she showed ways in which she was able to save money, usually by cutting rehearsals or splitting the professional singers into two groups, with each group covering a different program. A comparison of expenditures

from year to year shows wildly different figures in the above table, going up and down as needed. The differences are mostly explained by the number and type of programs in a given year, with such difficult programs as *Moses und Aron* requiring extra rehearsals in later years. Over time, the general trend was for expenditures to increase.

By 1968, John Edwards, then General Manager of the CSO, requested that Hillis put together a multi-volume report on the operations of the Chorus. The 1968 Report on Operations gives a good indication as to the high level of organization that had evolved in the first decade of the CSC. Included in this first full documentation of the inner workings of the ensemble were sections on auditions, rehearsals, general administration and job descriptions, forms, conductor's function in rehearsals, sight-singing materials, operations charts, and budget procedures. Hillis mentions a position called a "Chorus Coordinator," filled by Charlotte Chapman, but this position is hardly mentioned in printed concert programs until 1966.

Preceding her rough draft of the 1968 Report, Hillis' introductory memo implies that this and various other administrative positions had been around nearly since the inception of the Chorus, but the titles and personnel are not well documented in the earliest years. She gives a job description of what the Coordinator should have been doing all along—and asks to change the job title to Chorus Manager—but indicates that there were many of these duties that she had to address herself as the Orchestra administration had greatly "limited [the] time assigned to the administration of the chorus."¹⁰³ It would appear that the positions Personnel Manager and Chorus Coordinator both evolved into the Chorus Manager position, but the Personnel Manager is the position

¹⁰³ Margaret Hillis, memo to John Edwards, 1 April 1968, Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, Ill.

most often acknowledged in the concert programs. The list of Chorus Staff in the 1968 Report is interesting for their job titles and indication of which ones were volunteer, the rest being part-time paid positions:¹⁰⁴

Table 3 – List of Chicago Symphony Chorus Staff for 1968

Chorus Director	Margaret Hillis
Assistant to the Chorus Director (title later became Assistant Director)	Ronald Schweitzer
Chorus Coordinator	Charlotte Chapman
Auditions Receptionist	Elizabeth Burton (On loan from the American Choral Foundation)
Personnel Manager	Richard Carter
Assistant to the Personnel Manager	Jane Scharf (Volunteer)
Librarian	Virginia Schrade
Women's Costumes	Cora Alter (Volunteer)
AGMA Representative	Ward Smidl (Volunteer)
First Pianist	Mary Sauer

The list then gives several names of substitute accompanists. (See Appendix IV for a historic list of primary CSC personnel.)

In using pianists, Hillis created a hierarchical system. As Mary Sauer was the pianist for the Orchestra from 1958, she got assigned to be the Principal Accompanist for the Chorus, a position she held for 20 years. As Principal Accompanist Sauer got first right of refusal on the rehearsal schedule, so if there was any individual rehearsal she

¹⁰⁴ Margaret Hillis, 1968 Report on Operations (rough draft), 1 April 1968, Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, Ill.

couldn't do, or any program she chose not to participate in, a substitute pianist was used. Since these were part-time positions, the pianists had other jobs that occasionally would conflict. Also there were so many Chorus rehearsals, plus hours of auditions, that it was too much to expect any single individual to make them all. Hillis kept a list of several substitute accompanists to use as needed, but she worked most closely with the Principal Accompanist.

As the Chicago Symphony Chorus grew in membership and quality, and as expectations increased, more human and financial resources were required for its operation and organization. Such growth would become an important factor in the group's success in the next decade, but would also contribute to financial difficulties and reorganization later.

Chapter III

The Golden Years: Seasons Under Solti

1968 through the 1970s

With the departure of Jean Martinon, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra spent yet another year in transition as they looked for a new music director in the 1968-69 season. Irwin Hoffman served as Acting Music Director during this time. But this transitional period did nothing to slow down the newer frenetic pace of the Chorus. It was scheduled for seven different programs for this season, six of these on the CSO Subscription Series. The seventh was on the Allied Arts Series, which was the series designated for performances of soloists and ensembles other than the CSO. The printed programs for this season indicate that the Chorus had grown to around 180 singers at full force, with 60 professionals.¹⁰⁵

The CSC opened their season in November with another performance of Verdi's *Requiem*, with the return of Jean Martinon as guest conductor. The Allied Arts program followed in December, a Christmas concert led by Margaret Hillis. Following a holiday break, the Chorus began preparations for a rigorous spring season. Carlo Maria Giulini conducted two programs with the Chorus in early March—Debussy's *Nocturnes* (for women's chorus) and the Mozart *Requiem*. Robert Frisbie, Assistant Director of the CSC, prepared the small group of women for the Debussy. Performed three times in Chicago, this program was then taken up to Milwaukee for one performance. The CSO had built a tradition of occasional run-out concerts in Milwaukee, but this was the CSC's first time to participate. They would infrequently return on later occasions, making Milwaukee the second main location for run-out concerts, besides later visits to Carnegie

¹⁰⁵ Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, Ill.

Hall. Run-outs to other locations by the Chorus were rare and poorly documented, and often were without the Orchestra. Apparently such rare performances were not considered important.

An early April performance of Mahler's *Symphony No. 2* ("Resurrection") marked another important milestone with the CSC: the first collaboration with Georg Solti, soon to be the new Music Director of the CSO. The CSC rounded out an intense season with an April performance of Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky*, conducted by Irwin Hoffman, and a May season finale performance of Orff's *Carmina Burana*, conducted by Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos. The Chorus then continued its whirlwind schedule with four different programs at the Ravinia Festival in July and early August, including performances of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* and Verdi's *Aida*. Preparing for the number and diversity of programs from January to August was an astounding accomplishment. Additionally, from this year forward, the Chorus was invited to Ravinia every year.

During this interim season of 1968-69, Georg Solti had been named the new CSO Music Director, to begin his official duties with the 1969-70 season. Such a choice was particularly promising for the Chorus, as Solti's experience was largely with conducting opera in the great opera houses of Europe. A native Hungarian, he was coming to Chicago while concurrently serving as Music Director of the Royal Opera Company at Covent Garden in London, a position he retained until 1971. Additionally, opera conductor Carlo Maria Giulini was already serving as Principal Guest Conductor of the CSO. Solti clearly had an affinity for vocal music and singers, and with himself and Giulini on staff he promised that the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus would perform concert operas, something that had previously been done only rarely, and usually

at Ravinia. He declared in one early press conference, "It seems to me that if you have two of the three best opera conductors in the world available, you ought to take advantage of that. You want to know who I mean? Well: Karajan, Giulini, Solti—not necessarily in order of preference."¹⁰⁶

Solti brought tremendous charisma, authority, vision, confidence, decisiveness and respect to the position of CSO Music Director, a combination that clicked with management and filled Orchestra Hall when he was in town. He insisted on getting what he wanted in the music, but he was always a gentleman and treated the players with respect, and the Orchestra grew to love him deeply. With an expressive and ebullient conducting style and a trust of the musicians that enabled him to rehearse entire movements without disruption, he helped create what would be the trademark Chicago Symphony sound: beautiful, well-balanced pianissimos and rich, full-bodied, thundering fortissimos dominated by what many considered to be the best brass section in the world. Solti's specialties were the large Romantic era pieces, particularly Mahler. He also insisted that the Orchestra would be doing more recordings and more run-out performances, especially with trips to Carnegie Hall. In 1970 he and the Orchestra made the first of many trips to Carnegie, with him conducting Mahler's *Fifth Symphony* on this early performance. Critic Winthrop Sargeant recalled the events of that evening several years later in an issue of the *New Yorker*:

This time, something had happened to both the orchestra and its conductor. Solti's remarkably flamboyant conducting, which caused one critic to compare him to a beleaguered tennis player, and the enormous power, accuracy, and intensity of the orchestra—its cohesion of ensemble and its variety of tone, ranging from the subtlest pianissimos to fortissimos in which the Chicago brass sounded like all Michigan

¹⁰⁶ Georg Solti, quoted by Bernard Jacobson, "Sir Georg Solti in Chicago: The Early Years," *Georg Solti: A City Remembers* [the memorial concert program], 22 October 1997, p. 3, Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, Ill.

Avenue bursting through the auditorium—brought the most critical listeners up short. Nothing like this had been heard since the days of Toscanini. Conductor and orchestra seemed to be a single unit. From that concert on, performances in New York by the Chicago Symphony and Mr. Solti were sold out long before they took place. They were the sensation of every symphonic season, and Mr. Solti and the Chicagoans suddenly became known as the finest conductor and the greatest orchestra active in America.¹⁰⁷

His approach to music, his choice of literature, his expressive conducting and the new opportunities he presented all affected the course of the Chorus over the next two decades.

With his knowledge and appreciation of the voice, Solti added a degree of high expectations and standards hitherto unknown in the Chorus, further aiding in its increase of quality. The team of Solti and Hillis seemed to work particularly well, aided by a similar desire for excellence and a mutual respect for the other's abilities. Early on, Solti consulted with Hillis on only a couple occasions in preparing for some performances, but he quickly realized that Hillis understood the scores thoroughly and was a consummate musician, so he largely left her to her own preparations of the Chorus. Former CSC Principal Accompanist Elizabeth Buccheri remembers the days with Solti as being very exciting.

The combination of his particular personality and Margaret Hillis' way of working—which was very slow, steady, meticulous, some would say boring but she really got the job done—then he would come to rehearsal and electrify the room. . . . I think with his charisma and the excitement that was being generated by him, people wanted to join [the Chorus]. The competition to get in, especially for sopranos, got very intense, and the quality . . . went up.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Winthrop Sargeant, article in *New Yorker*, 27 May 1974; quoted in CSO program book, 30 May - 1 June 1974, p. 41, Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, Ill.

¹⁰⁸ Elizabeth Buccheri, interview by author, 22 June 2000, Highland Park, Ill., tape recording.

Hillis was proud of the progress of the Chorus and continued to push for perfection during the Solti era. She had long before determined that she had found her mission in life: "I decided that I would try to prove that choruses can be as reliable as orchestras, that singers can sing as well as orchestral players can play—and orchestral players can play very well. . . . And if we fix something in this chorus, it stays fixed! I worked hard to get that."¹⁰⁹ She realized that her attention to detail sometimes annoyed the singers, but knew they were committed to doing the best job they could, for the love of the music. She kept rehearsals moving with the use of patience, cordiality, and energy. Although she did not make small talk to anyone before rehearsals or during breaks (she was strictly business on rehearsal nights), she did allow musical questions from the members during rehearsals. With Hillis' abilities combined with Solti's own powers, this team would prove to help the Chicago Symphony Chorus achieve some of its greatest successes in the years to come.

The 1969-70 season, the 13th year of the Chorus, would be another busy one, with five subscription concerts and two special concerts. The fall season began with preparations for a December performance of Haydn's *The Creation*, sung in English and conducted by Solti. His first outing with the Chorus as CSO Music Director was well received in the press, which pointed out not only excellent playing and singing but also good judgement in tempi and a "joyous exuberance." Thomas Willis indicated,

The symphony chorus—around 150 strong—sailed into the zesty choruses of praise with the spontaneity of amateurs and the precision of professionals. . . . Almost everyone appeared to be having a good time, and if the exuberant performance made

¹⁰⁹ Jane Samuelson, "For the Love of Music," interview with Margaret Hillis, Chicago Magazine, April 1980, p. 194.

Haydn's 1798 work sound more like its cornball 19th century successors, so be it. It never hurts to set the musical peerage straight.¹¹⁰

Robert C. Marsh was equally delighted:

Solti brought his listeners a superb orchestra playing with great skill and style, and combined with the remarkable Chicago Symphony Chorus, once more splendidly prepared by Margaret Hillis. In the great choral passages, such as "The heavens are telling the glory of God," the effect was enough to put the true oratorio lover into rapture.¹¹¹

The Haydn piece was the only program scheduled for the fall, but as the winter and spring portion of the season would have another densely packed series of performances, the Chorus may have started looking ahead at some of these pieces as well. January brought a subscription concert of a contemporary piece by Earle Brown entitled *From Here*. Brown did the Chorus preparation for his piece, and conducted the Chorus while Bruno Maderna conducted the Orchestra. The day after those two performance dates, Hillis conducted the Chorus and Orchestra in a Popular Concert. This program consisted of Brahms' *Alto Rhapsody* and Beethoven's *Choral Fantasy*.

Bigger programs were in the works, relating to Beethoven's bicentennial. In February, Giulini conducted both groups in another production of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, and in March, Solti continued the Chorus' season with a concert version of Beethoven's *Fidelio*, holding true to his promise to conduct opera. The *Missa* program got generally strong reviews. Robert C. Marsh believed it was the CSO's finest account of that piece to date, but not yet up to the standard set by Toscanini and Klemperer. The Chorus' work was so regularly good that it rated barely an acknowledgement: "The

¹¹⁰ Thomas Willis, "This 'Creation' smiled with joyous exuberance," review of *The Creation*, by Franz Joseph Haydn (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Tribune, 12 December 1969.

¹¹¹ Robert C. Marsh, "'Creation' is Solti's show," review of *The Creation*, by Franz Joseph Haydn (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Sun-Times, 12 December 1969.

chorus, as we have come to expect, was excellent. . ."¹¹² The *Fidelio* performance received even stronger reviews. Calling Hillis' choristers "continually remarkable," Thomas Willis further stated that ". . . Georg Solti and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra gave the magnificent music a better performance than it has probably received here during anyone's lifetime."¹¹³ Although Roger Dettmer complained somewhat of intonation problems and a thin tone from the Orchestra, he was particularly pleased with the Chorus: ". . . the symphony's choristers sing their best for Solti. . . . Under his urging, their tone gathers focus and impact, and their rhythm firms. The final 'presto molto' was a brinksmanship demonstration of aptitude and aplomb."¹¹⁴

Following the success of these larger programs, Hillis celebrated the Chorus' 12th Anniversary with a special May concert featuring works by Poulenc, Lutoslawski, and Hindemith, apparently an *a cappella* program. Later in May, Solti placed the Chorus on the CSO's season finale by conducting Janáček's *Mša Glagolskaja* (*Glagolitic Mass*). The programming and scheduling of this season showed the prominence with which Solti clearly intended to place the CSC.

Interestingly, the Chorus gave two Ravinia programs that summer of 1970, both also being operas (Verdi's *Otello* and Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*). Honing such areas as ensemble, balance, and blend to a degree that most opera choruses seldom achieve, the Chicago Symphony Chorus had the potential to be the best opera chorus ever

¹¹² Robert C. Marsh, "Giulini's Missa Solemnis: our grandest yet, but . . .," review of *Missa Solemnis*, by Ludwig van Beethoven (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Sun-Times, 13 February 1970.

¹¹³ Thomas Willis, "Symphony best part of 'Fidelio,'" review of *Missa Solemnis*, by Ludwig van Beethoven (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Tribune, 13 March 1970.

¹¹⁴ Roger Dettmer, "Solti 'Fidelio' brilliant," review of *Missa Solemnis*, by Ludwig van Beethoven (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago American, 17 March 1970.

created, and likely was the envy of many an opera house.

The following season, 1970-71, the CSC was scheduled for seven subscription concerts and one special concert. The fall portion of the season saw performances of Beethoven's *Mass in C Major*, conducted by Giulini, and Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, conducted by Solti, but was not particularly noteworthy. This would change with some of the winter and spring concerts. Claudio Abbado conducted Mahler's *Third Symphony* with the CSC women and the Glen Ellyn Children's Theatre Chorus, directed by Barbara Born. This would be the start of a long relationship with this ensemble, later called simply the Glen Ellyn Children's Chorus. The children and their director were dedicated to excellence like the CSC, and developed a national reputation, partially aided by their work with the CSC.

In March Giulini conducted contemporary composer Donald Denniston's *Sun Song*, a world premiere by a major orchestra. Participation in such a performance would be another proud accomplishment by the CSC, and later they would present other premieres. Giulini conducted another production of Verdi's *Requiem* later in March, and then in April Solti conducted a special Holy Week performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. This latter program was dedicated to the memory of Igor Stravinsky, who had died shortly before, and it once again included the Glen Ellyn Children's Theatre Chorus. This was the first performance of Bach's monumental work by the CSC, but would not be the last.

The week after the Bach performance, a small group from the Chorus had the honor to participate in the world premiere of Alan Stout's *Fourth Symphony*, commissioned in recognition of the CSO's 80th anniversary. This small group was again

referred to as "Members of the Chicago Symphony Chorus" but the entire ensemble benefited from the prestige of the distinction of another world premiere. CSC Assistant Director and Manager Ronald Schweitzer prepared the ensemble for this performance, which was conducted by Solti.

Meanwhile, the full Chorus began preparing for its own monumental season finale in May, 1971—its first production of Mahler's *Eighth Symphony*, the "Symphony of a Thousand." Orchestra Hall had always been a cramped space for large groups of choristers and orchestra together, so Solti had arranged for this to be performed at the Civic Opera House. Joining the CSC were the Northwestern University Concert Choir (Margaret Hillis, Director), North Park College Chorus (David Thorburn, Director), and the Glen Ellyn Children's Theatre Chorus (Barbara Born, Director). The upcoming Ravinia season included only one concert, a performance of Mahler's *Second Symphony*, but was still important as the first CSC performance conducted by James Levine, the new Music Director of the Ravinia Festival. Another opera conductor (famous for his work at New York's Metropolitan Opera), Levine worked well with the Chorus and became a favorite conductor.

CSC members were thrilled to perform the Mahler *Eighth* at the end of their regular season, but a related controversy would ensue in the following months. In the fall of 1971 the Chicago Symphony Orchestra put together their first European tour. Solti was anxious to show off this great American orchestra to the rest of the world. Among other repertoire, the CSO performed Mahler's *Eighth Symphony* in Vienna with several Viennese choirs. To add insult to injury, the program was commercially recorded with these guest ensembles. Chicago Symphony Chorus members and their director did not

understand why they had not been invited to go on tour and perform this same work, since they had just done it in May. Jane Scharf indicated that management just hadn't considered the possibility and hadn't figured in the extra expenses.¹¹⁵ When the recording came out later (perhaps late 1972 or early 1973), it won the 1972 Grammy® Award for Classical Album of the Year—Solti's first of many Grammys with the CSO. Cathy Weingart-Ryan, a member of the CSC since 1973, remembers how the hurt feelings had finally led to Margaret Hillis writing a letter to the administration, which she read to the Chorus at one rehearsal early in that 1973-74 season. With the support and presence of CSO General Manager John Edwards, Hillis indicated that if the Orchestra ever recorded another choral work without their own Chicago Symphony Chorus, she would find her position there "untenable."¹¹⁶ Solti was sympathetic to the Chorus and its situation, and around this time in the early 1970s he promised to take them on a trip to Europe sometime. It would be nearly two decades before Solti would be able to fulfill this promise. Although the Chorus would perform Mahler's *Eighth* on several more occasions under Solti, it never recorded this work, a fact that Associate Conductor Don Horisberger said many choristers believed to be the "greatest injustice in the world."¹¹⁷

On a happier note, 1971 was the year in which Solti gave up his post as Music Director for the Royal Opera, and Queen Elizabeth honored him with a knighthood. From then on, the CSO's music director was Sir Georg, a distinction that made players and singers fill with pride.

¹¹⁵ Jane Scharf, interview by author.

¹¹⁶ Cathy Weingart-Ryan, interview by author.

¹¹⁷ Don Horisberger, telephone interview by author, 18 July 2000, tape recording.

The 1971-72 season continued the trend of asking more time and commitment of the choristers, with eight subscription programs, three run-outs and one special concert. As the CSC began the season, they began preparations for a November performance of a piece that Hillis would refer to as the most difficult composition in the choral repertory, and one that few choruses and orchestras could even attempt: Schönberg's opera, *Moses und Aron*.¹¹⁸ Continuing his vow to perform opera, Solti chose this 12-tone piece which was seldom performed—a piece in which the chorus had a particularly prominent role. This program would challenge the Orchestra, Chorus, and Chicago patrons alike, yet the three Chicago performances were sold out—a rarity in the city. For this first CSC performance of the work, the Chorus was given one small consolation: the piece would be performed in English instead of German. The choristers spent weeks in intensive rehearsals with the full group and in sectionals, including extra work with various small ensembles called for in the score.

Following the first evening's performance, the audience rose to a 10-minute, wild standing ovation for all participants, the first such ovation in at least ten years.¹¹⁹ Critics seemed to struggle to even find the words to express their most profound praise. In addition to being a monumental achievement for the Orchestra, Bernard Jacobson added that "it was enhanced by the presence of a superb line-up of soloists and by the fearsome vehemence and overwhelming bravura with which Margaret Hillis' chorus fulfilled its

¹¹⁸ Margaret Hillis, interview by Norman Pellegrini, p. 7.

¹¹⁹ Heuwell Tircuit, "'Moses and A[a]ron' Proves to be Fantastic Success," review of *Moses and Aaron*, by Arnold Schönberg (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), San Francisco Chronicle, 13 November 1971, p. 40.

important role."¹²⁰ Robert C. Marsh made note of the Chorus' prominent role in this triumph:

... the real active force in this opera is the Chosen People, and here the Chicago Symphony Chorus, after two months of intensive study with Margaret Hillis, not only sang some of the most difficult choral music ever written with extraordinary beauty and skill, but acted their various roles in a manner that turned the choral ranks into a dynamic part of the drama.¹²¹

Calling the performance "1971's supreme event," critic Roger Dettmer wrote an entire essay of fervent accolades for Solti and the performers.

Given the treasure of last night's surpassing, indeed stupifying comprehension of the work by conductor Georg Solti, and the inspired response, to the limit of their capacities, of 17 solo singers, multiple choruses, and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, words become almost enemies of expression. You don't talk about "Moses und Aron"—you experience it, applaud until your palms are reddened, shout until your voice hoarsens, and then collapse. . . . The chorus that Margaret Hillis trained has surely no peer group in the world, even among fulltime professionals. . . . Solti's praise for his singers, resident instrumentalists, and choristers transcended words when he applauded them, his back to the audience, suddenly turning to lead the audience in greater applause, beckoning all who remained to stand. The ovation continued for 10 minutes, punctuated by shouts from all levels of the hall—but none more resounding than an outburst when the Maestro himself finally appeared alone. Chorus and Orchestra joined with the audience, and no amount of pressure or cajoling could budge Sidney Weiss from the concertmaster's seat. Standing alone, Solti heard in Chicago—perhaps for the first time, following a work certain to have soured the stomachs of sheeplike subscribers who want their concerts to be a succession of desserts, prepared in the museum—a tribute such as the rest of world has paid him. If a greater conductor lives and works in our time, his presence has yet to be known.¹²²

Chicago citizens and critics, if not CSO management, at last seemed to fully realize that they had a combination of conductors, players, and choristers that were second to none. The Solti-Hillis team seemed indeed to be a musical miracle. After three successful performances in Chicago, Solti took the production to Carnegie Hall to further

¹²⁰ Bernard Jacobson, "'Moses and Aaron' Solti's finest," review of *Moses and Aaron*, by Arnold Schönberg (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Chicago Daily News*, 15 November 1971, p. 19.

¹²¹ Robert C. Marsh, "'Moses & A[a]ron' a new triumph for Solti," review of *Moses and Aaron*, by Arnold Schönberg (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Chicago Sun-Times*, 12 November 1971.

accolades.¹²³ The Schönberg piece would later become a prominent part of the Chorus' and Orchestra's repertoire, as it would be used to show off their superiority in a much-lauded European tour years later in 1999.

Over the rest of this season the Chorus performed Bach's *B Minor Mass*, Holst's *The Planets* (CSC women), a *Requiem* by Wilfred Josephs, Handel's *Jephthe*, Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*, and Liszt's *Eine Faust-Symphonie* (CSC men), all on separate subscription concerts. The Holst and Handel performances were given run-out performances in Milwaukee. The Handel performances were interesting in that Margaret Hillis conducted these, substituting for an ailing Rafael Kubelik. These would mark the first time she had conducted a complete program with the CSO, though this was not a planned debut. The Beethoven *Ninth* was recorded, becoming Solti's first recording with the CSC. In these early years with Solti, the recording schedule for the Chorus would be light, but a few years later it would increase as part of Solti's quest to record many of the CSO programs and win Grammy awards.

The Chorus ended their season with a special concert in June of 1972, a celebration of its 15th anniversary, conducted by Hillis. Included were Bach's motet *Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied* (with members of the CSO), Schönberg's *Friede auf Erden*, and Roberto Gerhard's *The Plague* (with full CSO), the featured piece. The performance of this latter piece was the American premiere of the revised version done in English. Sadly this excellent program had a small audience, a fact one critic attributed to

¹²² Roger Dettmer, "1971's supreme event," review of *Moses and Aaron*, by Arnold Schönberg (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Chicago Today*, 12 November 1971.

¹²³ N.B. – Although such run-out performances were expensive, Solti seemed determined to get the Chorus out more, as he was doing with the Orchestra. Eventually he would take the Chorus once or twice a year to Carnegie, until the expense of such trips slowed the pace down.

the time of year, unfamiliarity of the program, and especially a lack of emphasis and advertisement from the CSO management.¹²⁴

I must have received at least a half-dozen pieces of direct-mail advertising to hawk Henry Mazer's Saturday Special of last weekend, but no such volume of advertising arrived for this event which was, in fact, a more distinguished program in every way. "The Plague" indeed should have been a subscription concert. Surely it was [a] better piece of music than either of the new scores offered the Thursday-Friday customers this week.¹²⁵

It seems that despite the Chorus proving its worthiness many times over, it was still treated as a minor appendage to the Orchestra's organization—not yet fully receiving the respect it deserved. Nevertheless, the reviews were good for this anniversary program.

From Bernard Jacobson:

. . . Miss Hillis' chorus . . . responded to Gerhard's multifarious demands with all the sensitivity, strength, and dazzling dynamic flexibility we have come to expect from what is quite possibly the world's best choir. . . . Whatever anyone's individual conclusions about "The Plague," Miss Hillis deserves our thanks for giving us the opportunity to hear a work of this stature and I suppose we must also be grateful for the excellent performance of Schönberg's *Friede auf Erden* that preceded the Gerhard. . . . Margaret Hillis and her chorus have merited our admiration for many things, and for this exquisite piece of music-making not least.¹²⁶

From Thomas Willis:

As a 15th anniversary present from the singers, it was as moving an experience as we have had in Orchestra Hall this season. . . . With Miss Hillis thoroly (sic) in command and a stage full of committed singers and players, neither the music nor the message was lost.¹²⁷

And from Roger Dettmer:

Ms. Hillis led a performance as fervent, organized, authoritative, and chorally stunning as the sung portions of "Moses und Aron" last autumn. In addition, it was

¹²⁴ Robert C. Marsh, "Choral-orchestral triumph plays to undersold house," review of *The Plague*, by Roberto Gerhard, and other works (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Sun-Times, 19 June 1972.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Bernard Jacobson, "Symphony chorus in grand finale," review of *The Plague*, by Roberto Gerhard, and other works (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Daily News, 19 June 1972.

¹²⁷ Thomas Willis, "A Tribute to a Great Composer," review of *The Plague*, by Roberto Gerhard, and other works (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Tribune, 19 June 1972.

orchestrally exceptional. . . . Those who did bestir themselves to come . . . remained to give Ms. Hillis a standing ovation for her uncommon achievement not only as chorus director for 15 years, but as conductor of Saturday's difficult music.¹²⁸

This anniversary performance was the third program in as many weeks at the end of a busy season. Such an intense schedule of performances is practically unheard of in the choral world, and an amazing feat with a large chorus that included many volunteers. Certainly there would have been a number of weekend sectionals added. Fortunately the Chorus had a more relaxing summer, with only one performance at Ravinia—that of Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*.

The Chorus' next season (1972-73) would have five subscription concerts and one special concert. This season would be the first in which the Chorus would be taken twice in the same season to Carnegie, marking an increase in such run-outs despite the added expenses. The Chorus opened the season in October under the baton of Giulini, performing Vivaldi's *Gloria* and Rossini's *Stabat Mater*. In late November and early December Solti conducted the Chorus in Berlioz's *Damnation of Faust*, taking this production to Carnegie on December 6. The Chorus sang the Brahms *Requiem* in January, 1973, under Daniel Barenboim's direction. This would be Barenboim's first outing with the Chorus, significant as many years later he would become the CSO Music Director.

In March, Margaret Hillis conducted another special concert, marking the Chorus' 16th anniversary. She conducted Haydn's *Lord Nelson Mass*, Dallapiccola's *Canti di Prigionia*, and Stravinsky's *Les Noces*, using CSO players. Solti returned in April and conducted the CSC men in Act III of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*. CSC Assistant

¹²⁸ Roger Dettmer, "Chorus' birthday programs," review of *The Plague*, by Roberto Gerhard, and other works (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Chicago Today*, 19 June 1972.

Director Richard Boldrey prepared the group. This performance was the second production taken to Carnegie that season, performed on May 2. At the end of that month, Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos finished the Chorus season conducting Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast*. The following Ravinia season gave the Chorus four separate programs including another *Missa Solemnis* and Bellini's *Norma*.

Season 1973-74 was somewhat shorter for the Chorus, partially due to scheduling and partially due to a late start of the season because of a labor dispute between the Orchestra and administration. The season had three subscription concerts, including a repeat of the *Missa Solemnis* in the fall (conducted by Solti) and two subscription programs in the winter—Schönberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw* in February (Abbado, conductor) and Schumann's *Das Paradies und die Peri* in March (Giulini, conductor). The other two programs performed that season were special concerts. Hillis conducted the 17th anniversary concert in December, a performance of Berlioz's *L'Enfance du Christ*. The final choral program of the season was another performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, a special concert performed twice in April, with one concert being a make-up for subscribers who missed programs during the labor dispute. Solti again conducted the Bach. James Levine scheduled a big Ravinia season for the Chorus. Although only involved in two performances, the Chorus again sang Mahler's *Eighth* and returned to opera in Verdi's *La Traviata*.

The CSC had another five programs in the 1974-75 season, four subscriptions and one special concert. The special program was another anniversary concert conducted by Hillis in February, with Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* and Mozart's *C Minor Mass*. Gennady Rozhdestvensky led the first subscription concert in October, conducting

Alexander Nevsky. Solti conducted the Debussy *Nocturnes* in December, and Giulini led the seldom-performed *Mass in E-flat Major* by Schubert in April.

Later that month Solti conducted the Chorus' last concert of the season, an important production of Verdi's *Requiem*. Two of the opera world's biggest names participated in this production: Leontyne Price and Luciano Pavarotti. This was their first work with the CSC, and the choristers were quite excited. The Verdi was performed twice in Chicago, then taken to Carnegie in the Chorus' first trip there in a couple years. The Chicago performances, particularly the opening night, were brilliant and very well received by audiences and critics, leading to talk of recording the production.

Solti's grasp of the over-all architecture of the score, the grand design in which each climactic moment prepared us for a greater one to follow, until the ultimate denouement, was that of a master musician, a master dramatist. . . . So much superlative singing and playing went into this performance that it would be pointless to attempt to catalog it. . . . The orchestra and chorus were totally at Solti's command. This kind of tightly controlled performance demands an unusually high level of precision and clarity, fine dynamic shadings, and a firm sense of phrase outlines. It was all there, Verdi's apocalyptic vision fulfilled.¹²⁹

By contrast, the Carnegie performance did not seem to go as well and received mixed reviews from the critics, although the New York fans gave Solti and his Chicagoans their usual extended, boisterous ovation.

In trying to determine the difference, some CSO players suggested that Solti was nervous and that they were trying too hard, or perhaps the Chicago opening was so perfect that it was simply too hard to beat.¹³⁰ Part of the blame was also placed on Carnegie's acoustics, which supposedly took away some of the "clarity and brilliance"

¹²⁹ Robert C. Marsh, "Solti a master dramatist with Verdi's Requiem," review of *Requiem*, by Giuseppe Verdi (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Chicago Sun-Times*, 25 April 1975, p. 82.

¹³⁰ Karen Monson, "Symphony rates its road show," review of *Requiem*, by Giuseppe Verdi (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Chicago Daily News*, 2 May 1975.

heard in Chicago.¹³¹ Some critics, while agreeing that the performance was certainly very good, believed it "lacked emotional fire,"¹³² that Solti's "shaping of the melodic lines was impersonal,"¹³³ or that balances were off, where the Chorus or soloists could "scarcely be heard in the softest parts and were often covered by the orchestra in the thunderous 'Dies Irae.'"¹³⁴

Nevertheless, critics unanimously agreed that the Chorus itself was excellent, contributing greatly to the evening. "Miss Hillis' chorus saved the night by its intensity and the clear, strong beauty of its sound. There were also the intangibles of expressiveness created by color [and] nuance . . ."¹³⁵ "That other crucial link, the chorus—Chicago Symphony's own—had been superbly prepared by Margaret Hillis; they were impressive contributors to the evening's excellence."¹³⁶ Critic Byron Belt, writing for a family of papers called Newhouse Newspapers, was the most generous in his praise of the Carnegie performance, particularly of the Chorus:

. . . Solti led a performance of almost painful beauty and grandeur. In a galaxy of greatness, Verdi was served with special magnificence by the Hillis Chorus—surely the finest in the land, and possibly the world. For Georg Solti to have a chorus as responsive, sensitive, and virtuoso as his incomparable Chicago Symphony merely caps the glories of the musical scene that puts Chicago at the top of the current symphonic heap. The large, supple choir prepared with such brilliance by Margaret Hillis was the proper star of Verdi's choral masterwork. From the whispered mystery of the opening 'Requiem aeternam' and the final hushed 'Libera me,' through the most thrilling outpourings of the 'Dies irae,' 'Tuba mirum,' and 'Sanctus,' the chorus sang with sumptuous beauty of tone and astonishing control. . . . the Chicago Symphony

¹³¹ Karen Monson, "Symphony a letdown in Carnegie," review of *Requiem*, by Giuseppe Verdi (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Chicago Daily News*, 1 May 1975.

¹³² Thor Eckert, Jr., "Solti, Ormandy orchestras excell in New York," review of *Requiem*, by Giuseppe Verdi (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Christian Science Monitor*, 8 May 1975.

¹³³ Harriett Johnson, "The Chorus Was the Thing," review of *Requiem*, by Giuseppe Verdi (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *New York Post*, 1 May 1975, p. 57.

¹³⁴ Thomas Willis, "Symphony gets big New York welcome," review of *Requiem*, by Giuseppe Verdi (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Chicago Tribune*, 1 May 1975, p. 57.

¹³⁵ Harriett Johnson, "The Chorus Was the Thing."

¹³⁶ Thor Eckert, Jr.

plays circles around the Vienna Philharmonic in such music, and the Hillis chorus is far superior to the European counterpart.¹³⁷

With famous soloists, pristine Chicago performances, and another trip to New York, the choristers certainly had a memorable experience with this production of Verdi's *Requiem*, and proved that they could even outshine the great Chicago Symphony Orchestra on occasion.

The Chorus' Ravinia season was considerably busier in 1975, consisting of six separate programs. The programs included two Mozart operas, Lehár's *The Merry Widow*, the Mozart *C Minor Mass*, two Stravinsky pieces, the Brahms *Schicksalslied*, and Mahler's *Third Symphony* with the CSC women. This latter piece was recorded with Levine conducting, beginning a tradition of his making a few recordings with the Ravinia group of the CSC.

The 1975-76 season presented some interesting firsts. Originally seven programs were scheduled, six of them subscriptions. The Chorus' final concert was to have been the CSC women singing Holst's *The Planets*, but for reasons that are not documented, that program was changed to an all-instrumental concert just weeks before the performance. However, the Chorus still performed five subscriptions and a special concert that season, though no CSC anniversary concert was included. Rafael Kubelik led off the season with Dvořák's *Stabat Mater* in November, the only concert of the fall. In an unusually early return, Solti conducted a program in January featuring Sessions' *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd* and Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*, the latter piece with famed actor Werner Klemperer as narrator. February saw a performance of Mahler's

¹³⁷ Byron Belt, "A galaxy of greatness . . .," review of *Requiem*, by Giuseppe Verdi (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Newhouse News Service (Washington, D.C.), 1 May 1975.

Second Symphony, led by Abbado, and Giulini conducted another Beethoven *Ninth* in March. Claudio Abbado recorded the Mahler program. From this point on till the late 1990s, the pace of recording picked up, paralleling that of the Orchestra and fulfilling Solti's desire for giving a permanent record of the greatness of his Chicago groups. The CSC would record at least once nearly every season until 1997, and some seasons saw as many as four or five recordings.

In April, Margaret Hillis conducted the world premiere of Alan Stout's *Passion*, using a large group of choristers for this work commissioned for the Orchestra. The piece was said to be one of the most difficult ever undertaken by the Chorus, requiring about as many rehearsal hours as the preparation for *Moses and Aaron*. Perhaps more significantly, this performance was a subscription concert, Hillis' first full subscription concert that was planned that way. (She had substituted for Kubelik in a subscription concert several years earlier.) This marked a debut for the conductor of the Chicago Symphony Chorus, a sign of respect for her abilities and her work with the Chorus. Critic Robert C. Marsh believed this recognition to be long overdue.¹³⁸ Hillis would be given the privilege of conducting one subscription concert nearly every season until the late 1980s.

Sadly, the *Passion* performance received poor reviews. Marsh primarily criticized the work itself, saying it lacked in drama and intensity and was too long (at two and a half hours with intermission).¹³⁹ He indicated that about half the audience left at intermission, with the performers receiving polite applause afterwards. Karen Monson

¹³⁸ Robert C. Marsh, "Stout 'Passion' badly needs major overhaul," review of *Passion*, by Alan Stout (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Chicago Sun-Times*, 16 April 1976, p. 67.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

quipped that ". . . much of the audience opted to re-enact another Biblical saga, the one called Exodus."¹⁴⁰ Thomas Willis suggested the reason for this reaction: "[The piece's] unfamiliar idiom, lack of strong independent instrumental parts, and, above all, its uncompromising intellectuality . . ."¹⁴¹ Monson also indicated that the composition was too long, stating that ". . . much of the time, the score goes on and on without sufficient punctuation or differentiation."¹⁴² She further complained that the 15 pages of Latin translation made following the story difficult. She credited the Chorus with saving the evening:

All the available drama and most of the words, however, came through Thursday, thanks to the evening's saviors, the members of the Chicago Symphony Chorus. Virtually all of the work fell on the shoulders of our excellent assemblage of singers, and they stayed fresh until the end. Neither difficult intervals nor strenuous fortissimos detracted from the beauty and glory of the choral sound.¹⁴³

The 1975-76 season ended on a higher note with a special performance of Wagner's *Der fliegende Holländer* in May, garnering a better reception than the Stout piece. This concert opera was again taken to Carnegie Hall and conducted by Solti. The production was also recorded, marking the first time the Chorus had recorded two programs in one season.

The 1976 Ravinia season was another full one with six programs. The first three programs were heavy classical fare that included a performance of Berlioz's *Damnation of Faust*. During this bicentennial year the Ravinia Festival inaugurated the idea of often scheduling lighter programming for the Chorus towards the end of the season, so the last

¹⁴⁰ Karen Monson, "'Passion' by Symphony also produces Exodus," review of *Passion*, by Alan Stout (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Daily News, 16 April 1976, p. 11.

¹⁴¹ Thomas Willis, "Passion's premiere hits some difficult high notes," review of *Passion*, by Alan Stout (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Tribune, 16 April 1976.

¹⁴² Karen Monson, "'Passion' by Symphony also produces Exodus."

¹⁴³ Ibid.

three choral programs consisted of popular Broadway and film songs. Ravinia documentation is not fully available during this period, so it is unknown whether Hillis prepared the Chorus for these lighter programs. It is highly likely that she turned these programs over to her Assistant of that time, Richard Boldrey, a common practice for her.

The CSC would get only a short break before the next season, which would prove to be its most significant season to date. The Chorus' 20th season of operation, the 1976-77 season would include six subscriptions, two special concerts, and three run-outs, including two to Carnegie Hall. The Chorus opened with a November production of Verdi's *Quattro Pezzi Sacri* and Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast*, which Solti took to Carnegie. (The Verdi pieces were recorded, but on a much later schedule, for reasons that are not documented. They were recorded in May of 1977 and May of 1978 at Medina Temple.)

In reviewing this Carnegie concert, New York critic Harold Schonberg described the accomplishments of the Chorus: "It is a big group, but never an unwieldy one, composed primarily of young voices, superbly trained by Margaret Hillis. In matters of articulation, tone color, and unified ensemble, there can be little to find fault with. Indeed, one might call this group the Chicago Symphony of choruses."¹⁴⁴

In December, Hillis programmed and conducted the first "Do-it-Yourself Messiah" concert. Although not an official program of the CSC or the Orchestral Association, she used members of the CSC in the massive volunteer choir and as soloists. This became an annual event and continued for a number of years, using different venues around the city.

Again packing most official CSC performances into the first six months of the calendar year, the next concert wasn't until January 1977, when Hillis conducted a special 20th Anniversary concert. Acknowledging this milestone for the Chorus, she chose Bach's *B Minor Mass* for the occasion, and dedicated it to Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley, who had died the previous month while in office. The entire group of nearly 200 singers was used, though the Orchestra consisted of a reduced group of about 40 players. The hall was full for the performance, and critic Thomas Willis reminded the public that,

Even [Hillis'] most ardent supporters in 1957 could hardly have predicted the chorus' longevity and success. . . . Its mastery of languages satisfies the most finicky foreign-born conductors. Its intonation, top to bottom, is nearly perfect. A disciplined precision and musical intelligence informs any work in its repertory. If it has any flaw, it is the very homogeneity which makes it so valuable. Passion is sometimes best expressed with timbral variety.¹⁴⁵

Although he considered the performance superb, Willis did remark that many musical details were left unemphasized and that the internal tempos sometimes seemed unsteady.¹⁴⁶ Critic Phillip Huscher felt just the opposite, showing the highly subjective nature of artistic criticism: "Particularly in the solo movements and instrumental interludes, where [Hillis] is evidently less at home, her beat was as inflexible as a metronome."¹⁴⁷ Still, Huscher also noted the high regard in which the Chorus was now held, and felt the performance was indeed a superlative accomplishment.

Tuesday evening's concert was a demonstration of what great choral singing is all about, and a fitting tribute to one of Chicago's most honored musical institutions. . . . Normally, doing Bach with 200 singers is a little like flying the Concorde on a puddle-jumper run: it's just too big for the job. Too big, that is, unless you have

¹⁴⁴ Harold C. Schonberg, "Music: Chicagoans Bring Chorus," review of *Quattro Pezzi Sacri*, by Giuseppe Verdi, and *Belshazzar's Feast*, by William Walton (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *New York Times*, 9 November 1976.

¹⁴⁵ Thomas Willis, "Bach program sadly doubles as Daley memorial," review of *B Minor Mass*, by J. S. Bach (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Chicago Tribune*, 6 January 1977.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Phillip Huscher, "Hillis, chorus great with Bach," review of *B Minor Mass*, by J. S. Bach (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Chicago Daily News*, 5 January 1977, p. 47.

Hillis' unique chorus, capable of the utmost refinement in technique and sound. When Bach's contrapuntal lines get crossed, here is a chorus that can sing them with the clarity of a solo ensemble. And when light, bouncy textures are called for, here is a featherweight champ of choral sounds. . . . Miss Hillis obviously has taken the group through their paces, and they respond like a well-oiled machine. With the flick of a wrist, she can calm them to a hush or send the sound straight for the rafters. She knows the score like the back of her hand, and everything comes off like clockwork.¹⁴⁸

Following the CSC's triumphant anniversary celebration, Abbado conducted the Chorus and Orchestra in *Alexander Nevsky* in February, and Gennady Rozhdestvensky used the women of the CSC for Debussy's *La Damselle Édue* and Ravel's *Pygmalion*, *Acte de Ballet*. This latter production was taken up to Milwaukee for a performance. Just a few days later, Rozhdestvensky and Henry Mazer co-conducted the groups in Ives' *Fourth Symphony*. Giulini returned in April to conduct Stravinsky's *Les Noces*.

May would be a particularly significant month as Solti returned to conduct two big programs. He conducted another *Missa Solemnis* in early May, taking the production on the second run-out to Carnegie of the season. This production was also recorded in Chicago. The Chorus finished their season at the end of May as Solti conducted a special concert benefiting the Musicians Pension Fund. Giving a one-time performance of Verdi's *Requiem*, Solti also recorded this production. Hillis remembered an anecdote about that recording with the Chorus, where they had just finished a take of the Sanctus. It was done well, but certain spots were still not clear and crisp enough, so she told them, "Look, there's only one chorus in the world that can sing this better than you just did, and that is you!"¹⁴⁹ This was a point she was often fond of making with the Chorus. Without being specific, the group sang the section again, with great success.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Margaret Hillis, interview by Norman Pellegrini, p. 20.

These latter two recordings were among the most noteworthy facets of an important season. The Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences recognized the Verdi recording with the 1977 Grammy® Award for the Best Classical Performance – Choral, an accolade that singled out the Chorus. Margaret Hillis was given one of the actual trophies, but both she and the Chorus received their first national recognition for their work. The choristers felt great pride and excitement over this acknowledgement, and over the years as their Grammy wins were announced at rehearsal, they often had parties afterwards.

As the Beethoven *Missa* recording was released later, it was eligible for the same award in 1978, and won. The streak would extend into 1979 for a recording of Brahms *Ein Deutsches Requiem*, recorded in 1978. Three Grammy Awards in a row was unprecedented in this category, yet the Chorus would repeat such a feat in the 1980s.

After the Chorus won their first Grammy, Hillis became concerned that the choristers would feel they were as good as they needed to be and would "rest on their laurels." She warned them of such an attitude in a letter to the members, telling them something like, "You think you are good and as soon as you think that, you aren't anymore. That's it, because the next one is even harder. You are only as good as the next performance you are doing, not the last one."¹⁵⁰ This was said to have the desired effect on the Chorus members, and they renewed their work ethic.

The year 1977 would continue to be highly productive for the Chorus. The Ravinia season gave it six different programs including Haydn's *Creation*, Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette*, and Mahler's *Second Symphony*, among other pieces. The choristers

¹⁵⁰ Margaret Hillis, interview by Jon Bentz, p. 17.

would get a short break before the start of the 1977-78 season, an auspicious beginning that would give rise to the most famous event in the history of the Chorus.

The 1977-78 season began with preparations for a series of non-subscription performances of Mahler's *Eighth Symphony*. This was the work that had been performed at the Civic Opera House in the early 1970s and recorded by the CSO in Europe with Viennese choirs. This time the ensembles would be squeezed into Orchestra Hall, with the stage extended over eight rows of seats. In a review after the opening performance on October 27, Chicago Tribune critic John Von Rhein wrote:

Sir Georg Solti and Gustav Mahler. The combination, as the people in the Chicago Symphony box office and the folks who run London Records will tell you, is potent—nay, formidable—box office. That it is also a union capable of summoning the finest qualities of musical inspiration each artist has to give is a fact less often stressed but far more significant. That central point was hammered home with heaven-storming finality Thursday night in Orchestra Hall. . . . With his impeccable command of the subtlest details of Mahler's often chamber music-like instrumental and choral writing, Solti could do no wrong Thursday, and neither could his massed forces. All expressive markings were carefully observed, Mahler's tricky problems of balance and clarity were all neatly vanquished, and everyone seemed caught up in the fiery intensity of Solti's conception. . . . Margaret Hillis' Symphony Chorus and Doreen Rao's [Glen Ellyn] Children's Chorus could legitimately take bows for their urgent, expressive singing all evening. One was especially impressed with the choristers' hushed eloquence in the pages immediately preceding the grandiose final pages.¹⁵¹

Sun-Times critic Robert C. Marsh praised,

If ever there has been more sound, or a greater ovation, in Orchestra Hall than the Thursday night performance of this music produced, I would be at a loss to say when it occurred. . . . This was the most fully realized account of Mahler's musical ideas. . . . The chorus, including the children, who were marvelous, proved itself to be a perfect vehicle for the transmission of Mahler's intentions. It is difficult to imagine how these pages could be more gloriously sung. . . . It was in the interaction of Solti with the

¹⁵¹ John von Rhein, "Solti masses his forces to serve splendid Mahler feast for ear, eye," review of *Symphony No. 8*, by Gustav Mahler (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Tribune, 29 October 1977.

musicians and singers he has been leading for nine years that the unique qualities of the performance were best found.¹⁵²

Solti conducted the Thursday and Friday performances on October 27 and 28, and had been scheduled for a Saturday performance as well. The groups were then scheduled to travel to New York and perform the work at Carnegie Hall on Monday, October 31. However, on Saturday, Solti fell at his hotel and injured his shoulder. He would be unable to conduct for several days, including the Saturday Chicago performance and the Monday Carnegie concert. Hillis got to Orchestra Hall at 5:30 that afternoon to prepare for the evening's warm-up and to give notes to the Chorus. She meticulously took notes during every performance so the next one would be even better. This time her preparations were interrupted as she was called into the office of CSO Manager John Edwards, who had been consulting with Solti. Upon learning of the situation, she guessed Edwards would be asking her to conduct the piece that evening. Although she knew the choral sections well, she was not intimately familiar with the rest of the piece, which has long sections of solo work. Before he even could ask the question, she answered him:

"John," I said, "I cannot conduct tonight." I hadn't been in on any of the soloists' rehearsals and I didn't know where they breathed. I hadn't paid attention to the beat patterns and I wasn't prepared for the tempo changes, which come very suddenly. I didn't have the piece in my arm! But I said, "If I am needed on Monday night, I will be ready." I had dual motivations. One was that I couldn't let my musical family down. There had been a lot of money, a lot of time and effort put into this performance, and it was unthinkable that it be canceled. The other motivation was that I had to find out whether I *could* do it."¹⁵³

¹⁵² Robert C. Marsh, "Symphony's handling of Mahler a Solti triumph," review of *Symphony No. 8*, by Gustav Mahler (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Sun-Times, ca. 28 October 1977.

¹⁵³ Jane Samuelson, "For the Love of Music," p. 234.

Edwards agreed to give her this chance to conduct the Carnegie performance and cancelled the Saturday concert. Most Chorus members found out about the Saturday cancellation when they arrived at Orchestra Hall and found a note on the door.

Hillis immediately went home and began studying the score, working from about 7:00 PM until midnight. She then thought it would be best to get some rest, so she slept for about seven hours, got some breakfast, and continued her study on Sunday. At some point, Elizabeth Burcher, Solti's accompanist, called Hillis and offered to come over to help with tempos and Solti's interpretation. There would be no opportunity for a rehearsal with the full Orchestra, so she needed to follow Solti's interpretation as closely as she could. Hillis gladly accepted, and worked with Burcher for a while, later crediting her with some important help. In the afternoon, Solti's wife Valerie called and wondered whether Hillis would like to come to the maestro's room and go over the score with him. Hillis jumped at the chance. She later recounted this session with him. "'Over here you have to take the sound out, let the soprano get a big breath, then you go on.' If I'd not known that, it would've been a disaster. And he says, 'Over here, it's too long a phrase for the tenor to do in one breath, so you have to do an unnoticeable accelerando. And then you gradually slow it down afterwards.'"¹⁵⁴ She credited such guidance from the maestro with helping to save the performance. He left her with a word of encouragement: "My dear, this takes a great deal of courage on your part." "The same goes for you," she replied.¹⁵⁵

Hillis flew to New York on Sunday evening, studying the score the whole way.

¹⁵⁴ Margaret Hillis, interview by Norman Pellegrini, p. 21.

¹⁵⁵ John Von Rhein, "Hillis stands on her own as a stand-in for Solti," Chicago Tribune, 3 November 1977, sect. 2, p. 3.

Although she would not have time in the schedule to rehearse the whole Orchestra and Chorus, she would have a one-hour rehearsal with the Chorus, soloists, and the off-stage brass on Monday morning. She told the soloists that if she were going too slow or too fast, just push or pull the tempo and she would follow. She cautioned all the musicians not to try to help her do her job, but to just do things the way they've always done them. "Your job is to sing and play. Mine is to keep the whole shooting match together."¹⁵⁶ Despite this brief time together, the concert would essentially be conducted without rehearsal. [In a display of typical dry humor, Hillis conducted the piece two years later at Indiana University, stating at the first rehearsal of the orchestra and chorus, "As you know, I have conducted this piece before, but I have never rehearsed it."¹⁵⁷] Following this rehearsal she went to her hotel to study for another 90 minutes, then rest before the performance.

The Chicago choristers were quite excited that their own director would have the chance to conduct them at Carnegie, giving the potential for great recognition for both them and Hillis. Chorister Cathy Weingart-Ryan believed she was a bit of a "wreck" over the situation,¹⁵⁸ and Hillis later admitted to some nervousness. She also privately feared for the morale of the Chorus in case the audience would be disappointed that Solti would not be there.

The time arrived for the performance to begin on Monday night, and most of the New York audience was unaware that there had been a problem with Solti. The capacity audience always looked forward to Solti and his Chicago musicians with deep

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Jane Samuelson, "For the Love of Music," p. 324.

¹⁵⁸ Cathy Weingart-Ryan, interview by author.

anticipation, and one wondered how the audience would react to the announcement of a change in conductors. Jane Scharf described the scene:

...when we were on the stage, everybody ready to go, a gentleman [Julius Bloom, Director of Carnegie Hall] comes out and makes an announcement, and says that Georg Solti will not be there tonight. And the whole audience, "Ohhh," we could hear this moan from the audience. "And in his place will be Margaret Hillis," and they cheered! They loved her in New York.¹⁵⁹

The New York audience remembered her from her days with the American Concert Choir and other local work. Perhaps they also realized the enormous opportunity for her that this represented.

Just before going onstage, Hillis prayed to Mahler: "Mr. Mahler, you have conducted here before. Please come down and help me tonight."¹⁶⁰ The conductor then got to work. Solti had told her not to worry about cues in one difficult section of the first movement, but just beat time, as the Orchestra knew how the piece went. So although she had nearly memorized the score by this time, she largely kept her head in the score and followed his advice during that section. Otherwise she helped everyone as much as she could. She later said that she was "concentrating like crazy. Anybody who needed help, I had to be with. When the baritone got up to sing his solo I looked straight at him, did everything I could to give him confidence. I wasn't at all intimidated. But once we had reached the last note everything was a blank. I didn't even think of bowing."¹⁶¹

She not only got through the entire Mahler *Eighth* without any problems, she actually did quite well. Typical of her more reserved conducting style, what she may have lacked in Soltian passion she made up for in clarity and precision, and she clearly

¹⁵⁹ Jane Scharf, interview by author.

¹⁶⁰ John Von Rhein, "Hillis stands on her own as a stand-in for Solti."

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

knew the score. Immediately upon the final cut-off, the audience jumped to their feet and erupted into a deafening roar of "bravas," cheers, and applause. The players and singers joined the audience in standing and cheering. Jane Scharf counted 12 bows for Hillis, with the mayhem continuing for about 10 minutes.¹⁶²

The reaction of this historic triumph was both swift and prominent. The New York Times placed its review on the front page, a spot normally reserved for the top "hard news" stories. Time magazine put Hillis on the cover of its next edition. She was flooded with telegrams and calls offering congratulations from other conductors and musicians including Leonard Bernstein, who had a similar career-jolting experience years earlier when he substituted for Bruno Walter. He wired, "Congratulations. I know what it feels like. More power to you."¹⁶³ She received some good-natured ribbing from friends, such as Seattle Opera director Glynn Ross who joked, "Are you sure you didn't trip the maestro?"¹⁶⁴ She was inundated with numerous requests for interviews and even appeared on the Today Show and later in a prominent story in People magazine.

All the critics praised her for this feat of conducting tour-de-force on short notice.

Donal Henahan's front page New York Times review drew a picture of awe:

What an improbable scenario. Even a militant feminist editor might reject it as just too much. One of the world's most lionized conductors, scheduled to lead one of the great orchestras in a Carnegie Hall performance of Mahler's most complex and philosophically ambitious symphony, injures his back and is forced to withdraw. His place is taken by his woman assistant, and she conducts a triumphant performance that wins her a standing ovation. . . . What her Mahler Eighth sometimes lacked in Soltian fire and tension, it made up for in poise, clarity, and ethereal detail. If the foregoing does not yet strike you as the fevered dream of a woman novelist, consider in addition that this is a symphony that closes with a Mystical Choir singing the final, famous words of Goethe's "Faust": "Das Ewig-Weibliche zieht uns hinan" – "the Eternal Feminine leads us on. . . ." Miss Hillis could hardly have chosen a more likely

¹⁶² Jane Scharf, interview by author.

¹⁶³ Giovanna Breu and Sally Moore, "Arts" section, People, 28 November 1977, p. 84.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

work for showing what she could do. . . . Wisely opting at first for certainty and control, which lent a rather metronomic feeling to much of Part I, Miss Hillis gradually loosened up and by the last ecstatic pages she had her forces working for her and Mahler with a burning enthusiasm that radiated a fine flow over the Faustian finale. . . . Miss Hillis' performance proved worthy of the occasion. She did not attempt to imitate Mr. Solti's tempestuous Mahler, but her professionalism was evident in the fact that her Eighth Symphony ran within a minute or two of the one recorded by the orchestra and its regular conductor in Vienna a few years ago.¹⁶⁵

Remembering the Chorus itself, Henahan goes on to call it "exceptionally polished and responsive."¹⁶⁶

Knowing that such success didn't just happen over the weekend, John Von Rhein proudly reminded his Chicago readers of the fruits of Hillis' 20 years of labor, stating, "Under her direction [the Chorus] has taken its place as one of the best trained, most responsive choral groups in the world."¹⁶⁷ Although Hillis had been highly respected in choral circles for her work with the Chicago Symphony Chorus and other groups, this event in particular catapulted her to fame in the larger conducting world, leading to many guest engagements with orchestras and choruses around the country. As her personal fame increased, so did the recognition of what she had quietly accomplished in Chicago. She had clearly built one of the best choral groups in the United States. The only remaining hurdle to jump over would be to earn the respect of the world music community by some sort of international tour.

Following this blazing start to the 1977-78 season, the rest of the season may have seemed relatively tame to the members of the Chicago Symphony Chorus. Nevertheless, it was a busy one with seven subscription concerts, two trips to Carnegie Hall (including

¹⁶⁵ Donal Henahan, "Woman Steps In for Solti, Wins Carnegie Hall Ovation," review of *Symphony No. 8* by Gustav Mahler (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), New York Times, 1 November 1977, sect. 1, p. 1.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ John Von Rhein, "Hillis stands on her own as a stand-in for Solti."

the Mahler *Eighth*) and two trips to Uihlein Hall in Milwaukee. Solti clearly had convinced the Orchestral Association to spend more money on both its Orchestra and its Chorus. November saw a production of the Mozart *Requiem*, conducted by Giulini, and December had a production of Debussy's *Nocturnes* and Berlioz's *Te Deum*, conducted by Barenboim. Each of these programs had some involvement of the Chorus' two Assistant Directors in preparations, perhaps as Miss Hillis continued media and public obligations following her Carnegie triumph. Leonard Slatkin conducted Bartók's *The Miraculous Mandarin* in January, with a run-out to Milwaukee. This program was entirely prepared by the new CSC Assistant Director James Winfield.

Hillis then conducted Handel's *Dixit Dominus* (a chamber chorus of 36 voices) and Roberto Gerhard's *The Plague* (full chorus) in February, a subscription concert rather than a "special" concert. By this season, she had been given the privilege of conducting a subscription concert each year, an unheard of accomplishment for other chorus masters in the USA, and equally unusual for a female conductor with a major American orchestra. Solti returned in March and conducted the CSC women in Holst's *The Planets*, a program also taken to Milwaukee. Winfield prepared this program as well.

To finish the Chorus' season, Solti conducted Brahms' *Ein Deutsches Requiem*, taking this program back to Carnegie Hall. CSC Associate Director Don Horisberger and long-time chorister Richard Livingston both remember this particular production of the Brahms to be one of the most memorable highlights in the history of the Chorus. For Livingston, that experience even rises above the later international tours. He remembers something mystically coming together from the first rehearsals. "[Hillis] seemed to be able to capture a more musicality somehow in the rehearsals . . . than often was the case,

where it was [normally] more drill work and that sort of thing."¹⁶⁸ Of Solti's conducting, Horisberger stated that "He just knew what he wanted out of that, and could convince anybody that it was the only way to do it."¹⁶⁹ Horisberger indicated that they received strong applause and standing ovations in Chicago, which wasn't the norm in those days.¹⁷⁰ Chicago critic Robert C. Marsh called the performance a "concert of noble thoughts, nobly conveyed" and "an exceptionally eloquent account of Brahms' score. . . ."¹⁷¹

This experience culminated with an even more emotional performance in New York.

The Carnegie Hall performance of that work was one of those absolutely breathtaking moments. Something happened with that performance that nobody quite explained. Solti didn't do anything really different from what he had been doing before, and yet everybody knew it was just one of those magical performances where everything transcended everything that had happened before.¹⁷²

Don Horisberger said that the Carnegie audience rocketed from their seats and gave a "deafening yell, just cheering so loudly and then applauding and refusing to leave. . . . I all of a sudden realized I was crying, there were just tears coming down my face because I thought . . . this was truly history-making."¹⁷³ New York critics were equally enthralled with the performance, and acknowledged that the Chorus was the star.

While nobody could deny the contributions of the great Chicago Symphony and soloists . . . it was the Chicago Symphony Chorus, trained by Margaret Hillis, who had the most important part to do and who took top honors. Sir Georg was obviously aware of this as he insisted that Miss Hillis take a solo bow. . . . Miss Hillis' chorus had such pure, ethereal tone and such vitality, and the men such solid virility, (in its

¹⁶⁸ Richard Livingston, interview by author, 19 June 2000, Chicago, tape recording.

¹⁶⁹ Don Horisberger, telephone interview by author.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Robert C. Marsh, "A concert of noble thoughts, nobly conveyed," review of *Ein Deutsches Requiem*, by Johannes Brahms (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Sun-Times, ca. 5 May 1978.

¹⁷² Richard Livingston, interview by author.

¹⁷³ Don Horisberger, telephone interview by author.

way , pure too, in a sense of unity,) that the collective quartet became like four gleaming transfigured soloists.¹⁷⁴

Raymond Ericson wrote even stronger words of praise:

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus . . . capped their Brahms festival in Carnegie Hall on Friday night with the best performance of *A German Requiem* that this writer has ever heard. It is possible to experience very moving presentations of this noble and beautiful work under special circumstances—in churches, for example—but they are not likely to be so wholly satisfying as this one was in musical as well as emotional terms. . . . Mr. Solti, with a superb orchestra and chorus at his command, seemed to do everything exactly right. . . . The star of the performance was the chorus, trained by Margaret Hillis—a fact obviously realized by the audience, which cheered it at the end. From the merest whisper of tone to high-flying fortés, the tone was ravishing. The choral texture never thickened, and the smallest expressive devices were meticulously brought off.¹⁷⁵

This memorable production of the *German Requiem* was recorded following the series of performances, garnering the CSC's third Grammy in a row for Best Classical Performance – Choral (1979). This is the first recording that choristers such as Richard Livingston recommend to anyone wondering what CSC recording they should purchase.

A few years after James Levine became the Artistic Director of the Ravinia Festival in the early 1970s, he began to program more works that used the Chicago Symphony Chorus. The 1978 Ravinia season was the most concentrated to date, with five different concerts between June 24 and July 16. Included in this series were performances of Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, and both parts of Berlioz's *Les Troyens*. Thus from August 1977 to July 1978, the CSC had rehearsed and performed 12 programs, one of the most productive years in the history of the Chorus. The rehearsal schedule must have been staggering, and a well-deserved break and easier

¹⁷⁴ Harriett Johnson, "Solti sparks 'Requiem,'" review of *Ein Deutsches Requiem*, by Johannes Brahms (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), New York Post, 13 May 1978, p. 29.

¹⁷⁵ Raymond Ericson, "Brahms Requiem Caps Solti's Series," review of *Ein Deutsches Requiem*, by Johannes Brahms (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), New York Times, 14 May 1978.

fall season followed.

The 1978-79 season was a lighter one, particularly for the women, but still filled with important performances. The programs for the season began with December performances of Mozart's *C Minor Mass*, conducted by Solti. In January Hillis conducted a subscription concert that included Handel's *Dettingen Te Deum* and Russell Woollen's *In Martyrum Memoriam*. In February Abbado conducted the CSC men in Stravinsky's *The King of the Stars* (sung in Russian). The CSC performed two programs in March. Barenboim conducted a Bruckner program which included the *Psalm 150* (full Chorus) and *Helgoland* (CSC men), with these pieces also being recorded. Two weeks later the CSC men performed Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 1*, conducted by Gennady Rozhdestvensky.

The remaining two programs of the season were special concerts. Earlier Margaret Hillis had been invited to bring the CSC to perform for the annual White House Correspondents' Association dinner. On April 20 a group of members of the CSC and Hillis fulfilled this rare invitation to perform at the White House, singing a medley of patriotic songs accompanied by members of the National Symphony, one of the rare occasions where the CSC has performed with another orchestra. To complete the honor, President Jimmy Carter attended and met Hillis, giving her a plaque by which to remember this occasion. The final program of the season was another concert opera. Solti returned to conduct Beethoven's *Fidelio* in May, again taking this production to Carnegie Hall after its Chicago performances. This Beethoven opera was also produced as a recording.

James Levine programmed another full Ravinia season for the CSC, with five programs including Verdi's opera *La Forza del Destino* and all three Mahler symphonies that use chorus. The first movement of the Mahler *Eighth* was released much later on a compilation recording from the Rosenthal Archives (the CSO's 12-CD Centennial set in 1990-91), but technically it was Levine's second "recording" with the CSC and his first with the full Chorus. With his operatic background and understanding of the needs of the voice, he was becoming a favorite conductor for the choristers. The season ended on a lighter note with a program of excerpts from Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, conducted by Franz Allers.

The 1979-80 season was scheduled to be one of the busiest ever with nine different programs, eight of them subscription concerts. Even the fall portion of the season was filled with performances. The Chorus' season opened with Solti conducting a Beethoven *Ninth* in October, followed by Erich Leinsdorf conducting some seldom-done Richard Strauss pieces in November: *Die Tageszeiten* and *Der Bürger als Edelmann*. James Winfield prepared the December performance of a modern piece based on a Scriabin composition, Alexander Nemtin's *Universe, Part I of the "Prefatory Action" of Scriabin's Mysteries*, conducted by Gunther Schuller. This performance was the American premiere of the piece, another small hallmark for the Chorus.

Hillis' annual subscription concert was a performance of Mendelssohn's *Elijah* in February 1980, and Rafael Kubelik conducted Mozart's *Coronation Mass* in March, this latter piece being commercially recorded. In early April, Franz Allers conducted a special concert benefiting the Musicians Pension Fund, with the Chorus singing a lighter program of Broadway songs. Later in April, Solti returned to perform and record

Mahler's *Symphony No. 2*, taking the Orchestra and Chorus again to Carnegie Hall to show off his Chicagoans. The New York critics, as usual, found a few flaws to criticize, but overall found the performance to be one to remember, with more kudos for the Chorus.

The Chicago Symphony's claim to overriding excellence does not necessarily reside in its silken smoothness or hair-trigger ensemble virtuosity. . . . The strength . . . lies both in its remarkable principals and in the sheer richness and authority of its various sections. . . . Even more impressive was Margaret Hillis' chorus. It's *a cappella* entrance was the most sublime moment of the evening, and the power at the end reaffirmed that this chorus can have no American peers.¹⁷⁶

The Mahler was commercially recorded and earned not one but two 1981 Grammy Awards: for Best Classical Performance – Orchestra, and the prestigious Album of the Year. Though the Chorus was not singled out with these awards, it certainly was an important part of the overall success of the album.

The Chorus had its final two programs in May. The first, a Vaughan Williams program, included *Serenade to Music on Words from Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice"* and *A Sea Symphony*, conducted by Raymond Leppard. At the end of May, the Chorus Women sang the CSO's season finale with Mahler's *Symphony No. 3*, conducted by Edo De Waart. CSC Assistant Director James Winfield prepared the Chorus for this final piece and for the Broadway program.

James Levine scheduled the Chicago Symphony Chorus for four programs in the 1980 Ravinia season. They included several of the largest pieces in the choral repertoire—the Berlioz *Requiem*, Schubert's *Mass in E Flat*, Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*—and ended with another evening of Broadway tunes.

¹⁷⁶ John Rockwell, "Music: Chicagoans Offer Mahler's 'Resurrection,'" review of *Symphony No. 2*, by Gustav Mahler (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), New York Times, 4 May 1980.

The end of this season marked the end of the first half of what would be Solti's tenure as Music Director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. During this time the Chorus became a far more prominent part of the organization, appearing in more concerts and recordings, going with the Orchestra on more run-outs, and earning a well-deserved national reputation for excellence in performance and recording. The Solti-Hillis team had become a powerful combination, with still greater things to come.

The 1980s to 1991

The 1980s under Solti's and Hillis' leadership would see the Chicago Symphony Chorus continue down a path of great success. The recording schedule would intensify and the Chorus would earn more Grammy Awards. Strong reviews would be the norm, with local recognition that Chicago was privileged to have such a Chorus. And at the end of the decade the Chorus would finally see the fulfillment of Solti's promise to take the Chorus to Europe.

The 1980-81 season was a bit more modest than the previous, with a total of six subscription programs. The CSC had the privilege of opening up this CSO subscription season in October of 1980 with another production of Mahler's *Eighth Symphony*. In addition to the usual three subscription performances, a special non-subscription performance was added. Perhaps there was even greater interest in this piece following the publicity surrounding their last performance of it in Carnegie. Hillis' subscription concert this season was placed in December, so she turned it into a Christmas program. She conducted the CSO and CSC in Berlioz's *L'Enfance du Christ (Infancy of Christ)*,

which was sung in French. Georg Solti made an unusual mid-season appearance and conducted Holst's *The Planets* in January 1981. Abbado conducted a program of various Mussorgsky choruses and Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* in early March, and later in March the Chorus sang Beethoven's *Choral Fantasy* and Bruckner's *Te Deum* under the direction of Daniel Barenboim. The Bruckner was recorded and released on the Deutsche Grammophon label, but the Beethoven was not included.¹⁷⁷

The season ended with Solti conducting another large piece, Berlioz's *Damnation of Faust*. This was designed to be a flashy finish to the Chorus' regular season with two performances in Chicago and two at Carnegie Hall. The actual experience was rather a nightmare for the performers, conductors and administration. In this jet age of singers flying to gigs in cities all over the world, those coming to Chicago would sometimes find themselves fighting off sinus and throat problems, either due to the dirty air, climate change or combination of the two. In this case it seemed that one soloist after another was succumbing to "Chicago throat." This kept management desperately busy trying to find replacements, and Solti trying to fit replacements into his interpretation. This series of four performances went through three different sopranos and two tenors. Despite the difficulties, the performances went well and the program was recorded and released. The recording earned the Chorus another Grammy, the 1982 Award for Best Classical Performance – Choral. This would be the beginning of yet another three-year streak for that award. Moreover, it won France's prestigious Grand Prix du Disque.

The 1981 Ravinia season was likely less stressful, with only four programs. It included a concert version of Verdi's *Macbeth* (with famous soloists plus singers from the

¹⁷⁷ notes from Frank Villella, Archivist, Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, Ill.

Chicago Lyric Opera), the complete ballet version of Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*, Haydn's *Die Jahreszeiten*, and a concert of Broadway tunes. It was becoming traditional for the Chorus to sing one or two popular music programs towards the end of the Ravinia season.

The 1981-82 season was a milestone as it marked the Chicago Symphony Chorus' 25th season. This year's schedule included six subscription concerts and one special concert. They had sung Haydn's *Die Jahreszeiten* at Ravinia that year, and opened their fall season in November with Haydn's other late oratorio, *Die Schöpfung*, conducted by Solti. This latter Haydn program was recorded, and proved to be another winner for Hillis and the Chorus, garnering the 1983 Grammy Award for Best Classical Performance – Choral. In December the women sang Debussy's *Nocturnes*, conducted by Raymond Leppard.

In the midst of that December series, Hillis conducted the CSC in a single special concert, a benefit for her Fellowship Fund. This was the fund established by supporters after her first season with the CSC, a fund that provided scholarship assistance for voice lessons for worthy singers. Though contributions had come from outside sources, this benefit was the first formal effort at fundraising. Such benefit concerts, like those for the musicians pension fund, were made possible by the donation of services from the members of the CSC. These benefit concerts weren't performed regularly, but would be an occasional way to boost the Hillis Fellowship Fund. They did not involve the CSO, but sometimes used a few of the players, as well as other guest ensembles. They were usually executed as a Christmas season program, but tended to consist largely of heavier fare rather than the lighter holiday repertoire more common today. The program of

December 1981 included Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*, Schönberg's *Friede auf Erden*, and familiar carols, including an audience sing-along.

The subscription concert series in February 1982 was particularly important for the Chorus. Although the printed program did not seem to indicate the significance of the event, the unusual performance showcased the Chorus mostly with *a cappella* selections and a final piece with the CSO, perhaps a nod to the CSC's 25th anniversary season. Previously such programs had rarely been done, and only as single special concerts. Hillis conducted, and the program included the following choral classics: Poulenc's *Mass in G*, Debussy's *Trois Chansons*, Ravel's *Trois Chansons*, Schönberg's *Friede auf Erden*, and, with the CSO, Mendelssohn's *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*.

The Chorus' Silver Anniversary season continued later in February with a subscription program of Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* and Berlioz's *Te Deum*, conducted by Claudio Abbado. Solti led the CSC in Bach's *B Minor Mass* in April, the first time he had ever conducted the piece. Even at his advancing years he was still learning new pieces, particularly in the choral repertoire. The CSC participated in the CSO's season finale in June with another Beethoven *Ninth*, this time conducted by Eugene Ormandy. The following 1982 Ravinia season was an easier one for the Chorus, with only four programs. Two of those were masses by Haydn and Mozart, and the other two were pops concerts of Broadway tunes.

The following season was smaller for the Chorus, with five programs, all subscriptions. Sir Georg Solti led off the Chorus' 1982-83 season with two programs in November of 1982. The first program was a Mahler *Third* with the CSC ladies, which was also recorded in sessions in 1982 and 1983. The second, two weeks later, was a

mixture of several composers. They performed Bartók's *Cantata Profana* (done in English), Kodály's *Psalmus Hungaricus* (also in English), and Verdi's *Quattro Pezzi Sacri* (in Latin). This program was taken to Carnegie as their fall run-out concert. The Kodály was released on a compilation CD years later from the Rosenthal Archives.

Finishing out the calendar year, Hillis conducted a subscription series in December featuring Handel's choral vehicle, *Israel in Egypt*. Hillis and the Chorus both received excellent reviews, with Robert C. Marsh exclaiming that the Chorus "had a night in which it was not merely in its element but could demonstrate beyond all doubt its superiority as a musical organization."¹⁷⁸ Marsh even commended Hillis for her control of the Orchestra, writing,

In the past I have complained that she sometimes demanded a high standard of performance from her singers and then settled for less sensitive playing from her instrumental forces. Thursday the orchestra was playing very well for her, the performance was well unified, and she seemed to be firmly in charge of both the largest outlines and the smallest detail, the mark of a real conductor.¹⁷⁹

The Handel piece was also recorded for broadcast, and released as excerpts of the oratorio on a compilation CD years later.

The CSC concluded their season with March concerts two weeks in a row. The first was a hodge-podge of pieces conducted by Claudio Abbado, and included Mozart's *Kyrie in D Minor, K. 341*, some of Gabrieli's *Sacrae symphoniae*, and a selection from Act II of Wagner's *Lohengrin*. The Rosenthal Archives placed the Gabrieli pieces on a compilation CD years later. The final program of the season included more Wagner, with Erich Leinsdorf conducting selections from *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. There is no

¹⁷⁸ Robert C. Marsh, "Powerful, noble 'Israel in Egypt' by Hillis, CSO," review of *Israel in Egypt* by George F. Handel, (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Sun-Times, 17 December 1982, p. 83.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

documentation describing why this was a program of excerpts, but perhaps it was felt that the full concert opera would be too long. Certainly Solti, the opera conductor, would have performed the entire work.

The 1983 Ravinia season was moderately busy, with James Levine conducting three classical programs, Erich Kunzel doing two Broadway pops programs, and Franz Allers conducting excerpts from Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. Levine's programs included Verdi's *Requiem*, Brahms' *Requiem*, and Handel's *L'Allegro ed il Penseroso*. Although Solti had recorded the Brahms several years before and had won a Grammy, Levine chose to record it again with the CSO and CSC. Incredibly, the recording again won a Grammy, the 1984 Award for Best Classical Performance – Choral. The CSC would not record anymore for 1983.

The CSC's 27th season, from 1983-84, quietly began in October 1983 with the CSC ladies singing a small portion of Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. This was followed by a second Fellowship Fund benefit concert in December, the first special concert in two years. Hillis once again used the opportunity to perform a program of mostly familiar Christmas carols and invited the Glen Ellyn Children's Chorus and The Christmas Spirit (an *a cappella* ensemble) to share in the performance.

Although the fall portion of the season had been inauspicious, the winter and spring portions would make up for this. In January 1984, Solti made another unusual mid-season return to conduct Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*. A favorite piece with the choristers, they had performed the *Missa* under Shaw, Martinon, Giulini, Levine, and twice under Solti, the last time including a trip to Carnegie and a Grammy Award for the subsequent recording. Making this production special after the subscription series was

another run-out performance, this time the CSC's first and only trip to the John F. Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. Although one Chicago critic enjoyed the solo and choral singers at the Chicago opening, he believed the Orchestra sounded rusty, but felt that with several more performances they would have the music better in hand.¹⁸⁰ By the time they got to the Kennedy Center, they apparently had improved, as the Washington press gave effulgent reviews to all. Washington Post critic Joseph McLellan wrote:

The Kennedy Center Concert Hall was the scene of an epic psychodrama last night: Ludwig van Beethoven wrestled with God for nearly an hour and a half. Some music-lovers would say that Beethoven won. . . . At the end, the standing ovation was one of the most enthusiastic in the Kennedy Center's history. If Beethoven was a winner, the Chicago Symphony, complete with its 160-voice chorus, was a superb ally. . . . To do full justice to this music requires almost a superhuman effort—not so much in technique as in intense, concentrated dedication. It was done full justice last night. . . . Like the soloists, the orchestra had essentially a self-effacing role. Its moments of self-assertion are dramatic, but the drama spotlights Beethoven's art, not the performers.' If there are any gee-whiz virtuoso moments in the music, they belong to the chorus, which leaps from effects of titanic power to passages of exquisite delicacy. Choral director Margaret Hillis has developed a virtuoso ensemble for the Chicago Symphony, but the virtuosity is controlled with a microscopic finesse.¹⁸¹

Regarding this series of performances, Milwaukee critic Lawrence B. Johnson wrote that Hillis had "brought those voices [of the Chicago Symphony Chorus] once again to the pinnacle of discipline, flexibility, and sheer brilliance."¹⁸²

The season continued with another world premiere by the CSC, this time involving the full chorus with Hillis herself conducting. Entitled *A Mass for Cain* by Ezra Laderman, the piece itself received mixed reviews in the Chicago press, but the

¹⁸⁰ Robert C. Marsh, "Voices superb, orchestra rusty for Solti's *Missa Solemnis*," review of *Missa Solemnis*, by Ludwig van Beethoven (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Sun-Times, 13 January 1984.

¹⁸¹ Joseph McLellan, "Solti Powerful & Solemn: Chicago Symphony's Heaven-Shaking Return," review of *Missa Solemnis*, by Ludwig van Beethoven (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Washington Post, 17 January 1984, C1.

performance of the Orchestra, Chorus, and conductor Hillis was the subject of high praise. Earl Calloway exclaimed,

With a carefully guided artistic sense of its architectural form, the role of the symphony and chorus, Miss Hillis blended the human elements and instrumental sounds with great sensibility, bringing life to music so that its inner meaning would be revealed with a passionate imagination. . . . Miss Hillis is an amazing artist of the highest calibre and she led the musicians with a flexible unanimity, and her scrupulously refined interpretation spoke to us in human terms. . . . A masterful conductor, Miss Hillis brought to "A Mass for Cain" moments of indescribable beauty. The chorus was remarkable for its articulate clarity, engrossing terror and the sublime poignant expressions of its themes. It also manifested throughout the work an impeccable manner of phrasing and injected when needed a radiant force.¹⁸³

Hillis and the CSC clearly showed the Chicago audiences that they could be trusted to give a fine interpretation in the first performance of a difficult work—a high honor indeed for both conductor and ensemble.

This season continued with two more subscription programs of difficult contemporary works: Schönberg's 12-tone opera *Moses und Aron*, conducted by Solti, and Berg's 12-tone opera *Wozzeck*, conducted by Abbado. The CSC had performed the Schönberg piece in the early 1970s, but this would be their first time singing it in German. Critics, recognizing the challenging nature of the work and the amount of time spent learning it, declared the performance an overwhelming triumph.

It is unlikely one will ever hear a better realization of the formidable choral part than what was given here by the CSO Chorus, prepared with exacting musicality and polish by director Margaret Hillis. Whether in song or declamation, single lines or intricate antiphonal dialogue, the chorus surpassed itself. With orchestral playing of similar high-gloss virtuosity, this stood as one of the greatest musical achievements Solti has given us.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² Lawrence B. Johnson, "Margaret Hillis meets Beethoven's Challenge," review of *Missa Solemnis*, by Ludwig van Beethoven (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 20 January 1984.

¹⁸³ Earl Calloway, "'Cain' was awe-inspiring," review of *A Mass for Cain*, by Ezra Laderman (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Chicago Defender*, 23 March 1984.

¹⁸⁴ John von Rhein, "'Moses und Aron' a CSO triumph," review of *Moses und Aron*, by Arnold Schönberg (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Chicago Tribune*, 21 April 1984, p. 12.

The subsequent recording of the Schönberg piece, the first since the Brahms *Requiem* the previous summer, again won a Grammy, this one the 1985 Award for Best Opera Recording. The Chorus again was not singled out in this award category but still shared in the success of the recording. The piece would become a significant part of the Chorus' repertoire later in an important European tour.

Using a smaller group, CSC Associate Director James Winfield prepared the Berg opera—a special privilege for him as a conductor, given the challenging nature of the piece. The performance was partially staged with members of the CSC and of the Glen Ellyn Children's Chorus.

The 1984 Ravinia season was one of the biggest for the Chorus. James Levine scheduled 6 programs, including two recordings. The Chorus began their participation with another production of Mahler's *Eighth Symphony*, followed by Mendelssohn's *Incidental Music to "A Midsummer Night's Dream,"* both conducted by Levine. The latter production was released on Deutsche Grammophon. DG also recorded Levine's next choral program, Orff's *Carmina Burana*. This recording would go on to win the 1986 Grammy Award for Best Classical Performance – Choral. This would be the second recording made that year that was cited with a Grammy. Levine followed this program with a performance of Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette*. The season concluded with Kunzel conducting another Broadway program and Kurt Masur conducting a Beethoven program, which included the *Choral Fantasy* and the *Ninth Symphony*.

The 1984-85 season began with a quickly scheduled pre-season concert on 24 September that was a memorial to CSO General Manager John Edwards, who had unexpectedly died in August. Edwards had been the longest-serving Manager in the

CSO's history, having worked in that capacity since 1967. He had been well-liked and respected by instrumentalists, singers, conductors, and administrators alike, a situation that didn't hold true for all who had held that position. This memorial program consisted largely of instrumental works by the CSO, but also included the Chorus in the "Hallelujah Chorus" and "Worthy is the Lamb" from Handel's *Messiah*. Solti conducted. CSO Assistant Manager Paul Chummers was named Acting Manager while a job search was begun for this important position.

Three days following the memorial concert, the Chorus opened the CSO season with the full *Messiah* oratorio, conducted and recorded by Solti. Abbado conducted the Chorus in a concert version of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* in November. The "Coronation Scene" was released years later on a compilation album from the Archives.

In December, Margaret Hillis planned another concert benefiting the Hillis Fellowship Fund. This one would be a larger project for the choristers, as it was performed twice and involved just the CSC. They filled out the program with more songs, a variety of classical and traditional Christmas carols. In an unusual move from Hillis, she also used five other guest conductors alternating in the first half, including two who were already on staff as Conducting Assistants (James Winfield and Richard Pekela) and two others who later would serve in that capacity (Cheryl Frazes-Hoffman, later Frazes Hill, and Don Horisberger). This was a generous gesture from Hillis, giving her Assistants more exposure and experience. She conducted the second half of the program herself. Later in December she gave her annual subscription concert, this one featuring a variety of choral classics. Pieces included Bach's Cantata No. 50, *Nun ist das Heil und*

die Kraft, Hubert Parry's *Blest Pair of Sirens*, Poulenc's *Gloria*, and Honegger's *Une Cantate de Noël*. The latter once again included the Glen Ellyn Children's Chorus.

The Chorus didn't have any more performances until April 1985, but that month saw two large productions. Early in April Solti conducted two performances of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. Later in the month he conducted the Chorus' last program of the season, a concert version of Verdi's *Falstaff*. Performed three times in Chicago, this production received another run-out performance at Carnegie Hall.

The following Ravinia season was more modest than the previous season. Levine conducted Haydn's *Die Schöpfung* at the beginning of the season. Later in August, Kunzel led the Orchestra and Chorus in two lighter programs. This first, a program entitled "A Choral Spectacular" highlighting the CSC, was a collection of lighter choral classics and patriotic numbers. The second was another Broadway program. The Chorus ended their Ravinia season with a selection from Ives' *New England Holidays Symphony* and Mahler's *Second Symphony*.

Over the course of the 1984-85 season, Paul Chummers had served as Acting General Manager of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra while the Orchestral Association searched for a permanent replacement following John Edwards' death. The Association selected Henry Fogel, and he started his tenure in August of 1985. Eventually his title became President of the Orchestral Association. When he came on board, the Association had been losing more money each year during mid 1980s, climaxing at a \$2 million deficit in FY 1984.¹⁸⁵ Fogel was forced to make changes in the operation of the Orchestra and Chorus to save money, leading to a cut-back of number of programs,

¹⁸⁵ Henry Fogel, telephone interview by author, 14 August 2000, tape recording.

recordings, and run-outs over the next several years. The Chorus would not be quite as busy as they had been in previous years, but would still be performing masterpieces of the choral-orchestral repertoire.

The CSC appeared on the second and third weeks of the CSO's 1985-86 season. The ladies performed Debussy's *Nocturnes* on the first program, and a mixed group performed Mozart's *C Minor Mass* on the second, both conducted by Solti. Hillis presented another Fellowship Fund concert in December, with typical Christmas selections and several guest ensembles and some members of the CSO. It would appear that this would be the last Fellowship Fund concert until 1994, but documentation is a bit uncertain.

The CSC men and Solti tackled Liszt's *Eine Faust-Symphonie* in January 1986. This program was recorded, the choristers' first recording in over a year, and once again they helped make it a winner. It won the 1986 Grammy Award for Best Classical Performance – Orchestra. Also in January of this year, the Chicago Bears football team had made the NFL playoffs, and they would go on to play in and win Super Bowl XX. Excitement was growing in the city. In an unusual acknowledgement of these non-musical events that had captured the imagination and interest of the local public, Solti had the Orchestra, Chorus, and staff members perform the football team's theme song, "Bear Down, Chicago Bears." This was done as an encore for the January subscription concerts.¹⁸⁶ Choristers came in for those performances, even though they were not otherwise involved. This song would be twice recorded: once at a live performance on January 23, which was released later on a compilation CD under the CSO label, and

¹⁸⁶ Frank Villella, email correspondence, 27 June 2001.

again a few days later in a studio with the Star-Spangled Banner, released with other pieces on the London label. For the live performances, a playful Solti even came out onto the stage in bear ears, to the delight of audience members and musicians alike. The Super Bowl was so important that year that the CSO concert that conflicted with that game was moved to an earlier starting time so the audience could go home to watch the game.

A much larger choral production followed in February, with Leonard Slatkin conducting the Orchestra and Chorus in Britten's *War Requiem*, their only performance of that work. Hillis' annual subscription concert was performed in April, featuring the CSC in Rorem's *An American Oratorio* and Rachmaninov's *Kolokola (The Bells)*, sung in Russian. Hillis was known for championing American music and musicians, and like most of her concerts, she used local talent for the solos. The Rorem piece was released as a commercial recording. The Chorus finished their season in May as Michael Tilson Thomas conducted Ives' *Symphony: New England Holidays* and Bartók's *Tri Dedinské scény (Three Village Scenes)*. Hillis served as co-conductor in the Ives piece, which also was recorded and released. The Bartók piece, for women's chorus, was performed in Slovakian, expanding the languages in which the Chorus sang.

The 1986 Ravinia season was one of the Chorus' larger ones, with six programs performed over that summer. It began with members of the CSC singing in a concert version of Richard Strauss' *Elektra*, conducted by James Levine. The Chorus was prepared by Richard Weitach, perhaps a specialist with this piece. Levine conducted three more programs with the CSC, including performances of Berlioz's *Damnation of Faust*, Poulenc's *Gloria*, and Mozart's *Requiem*. The Berlioz was becoming an important

staple for the Chorus, and would be a significant vehicle in a few years. Another pops program followed, conducted by Kunzel, and the young conductor James Conlon ended the Chorus' Ravinia season with Liszt's *Faust Symphony*.

The Chicago Symphony Chorus began their 30th season in 1986-87, though it wasn't their 30th anniversary. In the past, the season number and the anniversary number were considered the same in some years but not in others. Technically the following season would be their 30th anniversary. Nevertheless, the Chorus participated in the CSO's festive season opener in 1986, singing yet another Beethoven *Ninth*, led by Solti. In addition to the standard three subscription performances of the *Ninth*, the musicians also had a special benefit performance for the Musicians Pension Fund. This year, Solti chose to record this CSC staple, and he again turned out a Grammy winner. This recording won the 1987 Grammy Award for the Best Classical Performance – Orchestra. The years 1984 and 1986 both turned out two Grammy winning albums on which the Chorus participated.

A fairly modest season ensued, with only two big concerts over the entire season. In November, the Chorus sang two programs, with Abbado conducting the Verdi *Requiem* and Sir Charles Mackerras conducting the men in the Busoni *Concerto for Piano, Orchestra, and Male Chorus*. A slow winter-spring season saw a special concert program of Broadway songs in February, but ended on a higher note with Solti's March performance of Bach's masterpiece, the *St. Matthew Passion*. The Broadway program just used a small group of choristers and orchestra members on a series called Allied Arts. This series had begun in the 1970s to cover chamber groups and soloists—anything not the actual CSO. Michael Morgan led that performance. The Bach had been

performed several times in the course of the CSC history, but this time was also recorded and released. This would be the last CSC recording until 1989, possibly due to budget considerations.

The Chorus enjoyed an early break after this modest season, but this enabled them to prepare for and participate in two June programs at the beginning of the 1987 Ravinia season. James Levine led the first three Ravinia programs, which included Schönberg's *Gurrelieder*, Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, and Mahler's *Eighth Symphony*. The last two programs were pops programs led by Erich Kunzel.

The 1987-88 season would have four subscriptions and two special concerts, beginning with an October special performance in celebration of Solti's 75th birthday. The concert was also a benefit for the Musicians Pension Fund. The Chorus performed excerpts from Act I of Verdi's *Otello*, conducted by Solti. The following week, Hillis conducted the Chorus and Orchestra in a performance of Martin David Levy's *Masada*, the world premiere of the complete version. (An earlier, shorter version had been presented elsewhere in 1973). The oratorio tells the story of the Jews in ancient times that rebelled from their captors and escaped to a high fortress, where they were held under siege by the Romans. Interestingly, one of the soloists was Yaël Dayan, the daughter of the famous Israeli General Moshe Dayan.

The Chorus spent the rest of the fall preparing for two more subscription programs. In November they performed a piece by another contemporary American, William Schuman. The piece, *On Freedom's Ground*, was conducted by Leonard Slatkin. Conductor Michael Tilson Thomas then led the Chorus and Orchestra in December performances of Haydn's madrigal *The Storm*, sung in English, and Janáček's

Mša Glagolskaja (Glagolitic Mass), sung in Church Slavonic. The winter and spring portions of the season were less congested but nevertheless still significant. Solti conducted the Brahms *Requiem* in February, and Hillis was given another special concert in March. This final concert of the season was a recognition of the Chorus' 30th anniversary, and featured the Chorus with the Civic Orchestra of Chicago, the training orchestra of the CSO. Hillis conducted Mozart's *Requiem* and Verdi's *Quattro Pezzi Sacri*, again making use of local talent for soloists.

The Chorus participated in three programs during Ravinia's 1988 season. Levine conducted Mozart's *Don Giovanni* on July 8 and Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette* on July 9. With such programs back to back, the Chorus was likely split into two separate groups. Hillis prepared the Berlioz, but Daniel Beckwith prepared the Mozart. Beckwith was also the harpsichordist for the production, so was likely an early music specialist that could prepare a small group from the Chorus. The Chorus' Ravinia season ended with another pops program conducted by Kunzel, by now a long-standing tradition.

During this period, Solti was getting up in years and nearing the end of his tenure. At some point in the late 1980s (around 1988 or so), Solti signed a contract that indicated would be his last as Music Director of the CSO, giving a retirement at the end of the 1990-91 season. (After consideration by the Orchestral Association of possible successors, most of whom had already worked with the Orchestra, CSC Assistant Guest Conductor Daniel Barenboim was named the Music Director Designate, which would insure a smooth transition without a year of interim conductors.) Solti wanted to make his final seasons a series of hallmarks, climaxing with a couple more foreign tours. Henry Fogel's spending cuts and success with fund-raising and development had turned

the financial crisis around and strengthened the entire organization. Solti still desired to take the CSC to Europe to show them off to the international community, in fulfillment of the promise he had made all the way back in the early 1970s. Such tours had been expensive for the Orchestra to take, as hotels, meals, travel, and performance stipends all had to be covered, and they had taken relatively few tours over the years. Adding Chorus members would greatly increase each of these expenses, as even the non-professionals would be paid performance stipends and have expenses covered.

But with greater financial stability, the administration in 1988 finally agreed that the time had come to include the Chorus on a European tour. While the Orchestra would be on their sixth European tour in August and September of 1989, they agreed to allow the Chorus to accompany them for a portion of the tour, with the entire tour expected to cost \$2.4 million.¹⁸⁷ The Berlioz *Damnation of Faust* would be the piece performed at two venues. The Chorus members were ecstatic to finally take part on a European tour, especially knowing that this was the beginning of the end of Solti's tenure and his final European tour. (He would take the CSO alone on a final overseas tour to Japan in April of 1990.) The choral parts in the Berlioz were quite important and would be a good showcase for the CSC. Naturally this large-scale Romantic piece played to the strength of Solti and his Orchestra and Chorus. It was a staple of the CSC and their 1981 recording of it had won the 1982 Grammy for Best Choral Performance as well as the 1982 Grand Prix du Disque.

With the tour to look forward to, the Orchestral Association still had to consider saving money. The 1988-89 Chorus season consisted of only five programs, with two

¹⁸⁷ Robert C. Marsh, "European tour marks the beginning of end of the Solti-CSO era," Chicago Sun-Times, 27 August 1989.

programs in the fall. Solti conducted the first choral program in October, Verdi's Prologue and First Act from *Simon Boccanegra*. He was continuing to give strong representation to operatic repertoire. In November, Zubin Mehta conducted Mahler's *Symphony No. 2*. Erich Leinsdorf led a program of pieces for the CSC women in February 1989, including Debussy's *Nocturnes* and Brahms' *Four Songs for Women's Voices, Two Horns, and Harp*. An April program was a bit unusual, consisting of Ives' *Symphony No. 4* and arrangements of five American hymns, using a group of 60 choristers called "Members of the CSC." Michael Tilson Thomas conducted this program, with assistance from conductor James Sinclair on the Ives, and a recording was produced of the entire program. This was the first recording made in nearly two years, but the Chorus would produce five albums in 1989. In May, Solti put the Chorus on the Orchestra's season finale, a program of Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust*, in preparation for the upcoming European tour.

Prior to the tour, however, the Chorus still had a Ravinia season in which to participate. Amazingly, this 1989 Ravinia season turned out to be one of the Chorus' busiest ever, with five classical programs and three pops programs. Of course, the Festival is governed by a separate board with its own fundraising and budget, so it has little bearing on the Chorus' regular season. Levine conducted a performance of Verdi's *Requiem*, followed the next day by Holst's *The Planets*. The next week he conducted a program with Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* and Orff's *Carmina Burana*, again following with a program the next day, Mahler's *Symphony No. 3*. Levine recorded the Holst and Stravinsky pieces, releasing them on separate albums. Later in July James

Conlon led a performance of Beethoven's *Ninth*. Kunzel then led the three pops programs, with one evening of operetta selections and two Broadway programs.

The Ravinia season had finished, but preparations were still being made for the coming European tour to begin at the end of August 1989. The Orchestra would present 14 concerts in 11 cities, and with the addition of choristers, staff, crew, guests, and spouses, around 450 people had to be moved.¹⁸⁸ The Chorus would be on the first leg of the tour, in which they would sing the Berlioz *Damnation of Faust* at two prestigious festivals: the famous London Proms Festival at Royal Albert Hall (the Henry Wood Promenade Concerts), and the Salzburg Festival at the Grosses Festspielhaus. The British are particularly known for their own choral tradition, so the Chorus had a challenge ahead to impress the British public.

The Proms performance was to be on Monday, August 28, and the Chorus traveled to London two or three days before. They had one or two rehearsals (at least one in the Hall, and possibly an earlier one at the BBC), and then prepared for the big night. Royal Albert Hall was a vast arena, with audience seated all around the performers and the main floor full of standing room patrons. As the choristers came out to the performance platform, the crowd began chanting in rhythm, "Chicago, Chicago." Tuxedoed orchestral players led to audience chants of "penguin, penguin." These affectionate chants were a traditional part of Proms performances. Royal Albert was filled to capacity with around 6000 patrons.

But during the actual performance, the audience was absolutely quiet, unlike American audiences. These patrons tended to be educated listeners, many following

¹⁸⁸ Clifford Terry, "Orchestrating the logistics of the CSO's trip to Europe," Chicago Tribune, 27 August 1989.

scores in hand, and many also able to understand the French language being sung. These were observations made by choristers, who compared the experience with performances back home and were amazed at the attentiveness of European audiences. During the humorous "Flea Song" in the Berlioz work, chorister Jane Scharf noticed a boy who could obviously understand it and was laughing.¹⁸⁹ Even the standing room patrons, who were crowded together by the hundreds, didn't move during the entire concert or even intermission for fear of losing their spot or disrupting the performance. At various times a couple of standing patrons fainted from standing so long. Their neighbors would help them sit, place a coat under their head and make sure they were OK, then turn quietly back to the performance so as not to miss a note.¹⁹⁰ The players and singers apparently felt the electricity of the evening, and gave a particularly stunning performance. The tenor soloist even sang his part from memory, as did many choristers, though the choristers used books to look uniform. The performance was not only broadcast live on BBC television, but also recorded and released on the London label.

Upon the final cut-off, the audience erupted into deafening applause, cheering for singers and players alike, and especially for Solti. He took four or five "curtain calls" as the audience continued their ovation. Finally, Solti disappeared for a seemingly endless period while cheers continued, then he returned to the stage having changed into his street clothes. It became apparent that the audience didn't want to leave, so he had the musicians stand and take a final bow, grabbed the Concert Master's hand and led him off

¹⁸⁹ Jane Scharf, interview by author.

¹⁹⁰ Elizabeth Buccheri, interview by author.

the stage. (Solti had done this on occasion in New York as well.) With that signal, the Orchestra and Chorus finally left the hall.¹⁹¹

Immediately following the performance, David Siegel, a British artist manager, came up to CSO Executive Director Henry Fogel and commented, "Well, so much for the famous British choral tradition."¹⁹² After leaving the hall, the musicians attended a private party at London's Windy City Bar and Grill, a local establishment serving Chicago fare. Solti and his wife Lady Valerie even danced the twist in celebration while the others cheered. Solti then made a speech to the crowd, saying, "I've always been proud of you, but I've never been so proud in my whole life as I am tonight."¹⁹³

Reviews of most of the London critics were overwhelmingly glowing. Although critic Tom Sutcliffe felt Solti was a bit mellower than what they might have expected in his earlier years, he still marveled at the Orchestra's accuracy of playing, crisp rhythms, and ability to immediately change moods at Solti's "slightest indication."¹⁹⁴ Sutcliffe also singled out Hillis and the Chorus for accolades:

And what a chorus the Chicago Symphony has, to comply with Solti's needs, youthful, beautiful in tone and robust in attack, every word totally clear, understood and stylishly enunciated. Well, Solti's chorus master is Margaret Hillis—simply the best. I'd forgotten it was her chorus, until she strode on stage, the presiding first lady of American large choirs: a few hours watching her rehearse, as I did this summer, quickly shows why. She makes ordinary amateur singers want to give her their all, and this Berlioz was made even more special by such faultless and moving and witty chorus singing, fulfilling a crucial dimension of Berlioz's vision.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹¹ Lorene Richardson, interview by author, 19 June 2000, Chicago, tape recording.

¹⁹² Henry Fogel, telephone interview by author.

¹⁹³ M. M. Hitchcock, "Solti's wife, Symphony kick up their heels at after-concert party," Chicago Tribune, 29 August 1989, sect. 1 p. 16.

¹⁹⁴ Tom Sutcliffe, "The devil wins, sublimely," review of *La Damnation de Faust*, by Hector Berlioz (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, London), Guardian (London), 30 August 1989.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

In a somewhat mixed review (he felt the performance lacked the needed savagery and torment), Jan Smaczny was particularly enamored with the Chorus: "Despite its size, the choir came closest to capturing the heart of the work. If occasionally their French vowels were a little coy, they covered the range from drunkards to angels with great panache."¹⁹⁶

Chicago's critics had followed along for this important event, and were equally pleased. Tribune critic John Von Rhein said that Solti could "hardly have wished for a more resounding sendoff to his 21st and penultimate season with the Chicagoans."¹⁹⁷ Of the Chorus, he acknowledged that it

was an unknown quantity [in Europe], except on recordings. It can be said without qualification that the 175 voices, prepared by Margaret Hillis, sang in a manner worthy of comparison with any of their greatest Chicago successes. They—and the remaining vocal and instrumental forces—were saluted with five standing ovations from the Proms audience to certify their world-class status.¹⁹⁸

Amid these strong reviews from the London performance, the Chicago groups still had to travel and prepare to perform at the Salzburg Festival. They journeyed on Tuesday to prepare for the performance on Wednesday, August 30. Elizabeth Buccheri remembers a peculiar incident as part of that experience. At the Chorus' piano warm-up in the hall, a man came in and jumped up on the stage. He bowed to Hillis and stated that he represented the mayor of Salzburg and wanted to welcome the musicians. Buccheri later saw the same man at the concert sneak down on his hands and knees to the front of the stage and squat at Solti's feet. They were to later find out that this man had nothing to

¹⁹⁶ Jan Smaczny, "Polite devilry," review of *La Damnation de Faust*, by Hector Berlioz (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Independent* (London), 30 August 1989.

¹⁹⁷ John Von Rhein, "It's knockout night in London with 1-2 punch of CSO, Chorus," review of *La Damnation de Faust*, by Hector Berlioz (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Chicago Tribune*, 29 August 1989, sect. 1, p. 16.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

do with the mayor's office. He just liked to elude security and sneak into concerts without purchasing a ticket.¹⁹⁹

In Austria, the musicians had the honor of closing the Salzburg Festival with their performance. This performance also went well, though the choristers say it didn't feel quite as electric as the London performance. The acoustics were drier than at Royal Albert Hall, and the Austrian audience was a bit more fidgety and reserved but still quite enthusiastic. Solti again came out in his street clothes, told everyone to go home, and led the Concert Master off the stage. Conductor Daniel Barenboim, who had served as Assistant Guest Conductor of the CSO and had been named to replace Solti as Music Director in 1991, had attended this performance. Apparently he understood how special this trip was for the Chorus, and the first person he asked for was Miss Hillis, to congratulate her.²⁰⁰

The Salzburg critics agreed that it had been a special performance, and many of the reviews were even stronger than those in London.

Solti came, he saw, and he mastered; like a sovereign, he triumphed over all the difficulties of Berlioz's extremely complicated score. He is a genius at sound organization, and his ability to control the textures—wonderfully brought to life by his most virtuosic Orchestra from the United States joined here by their own chorus—displayed with utmost precision all the sound colors of a great romantic organ. Showing great lyricism in the soft passages, particularly in Marguerite's ascension to heaven, they ideally combined the kitsch and the ethereal wanted by Berlioz. The Americans had to come here to show us what to do with this somehow delirious piece of Music!²⁰¹

Praising the Chorus, Karl Harb wrote, "Masterful . . . and worth singling out once again is the Chicago Symphony Chorus. Prepared by Margaret Hillis, they were in perfect

¹⁹⁹ Elizabeth Buccheri, interview by author.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Review of *La Damnation de Faust*, by Hector Berlioz (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Salzburg Krone*, 1 September 1989.

control of everything from their Rondo to Hell's language, and in varied situations concerning ghosts, life, heaven, and hell. No wonder the mounting ovation almost felt like a relief, equaling the ovation of a great opera premiere."²⁰² Lending additional credence of the "world-class" label for the Chorus, an Italian critic wrote,

This time [Solti] presented himself with 'his' orchestra, the stupendous Chicago Symphony, which he has directed since 1969 and has raised to great heights of virtuosity. In addition to this impressive group of extraordinary musicians, Solti had at his disposal the talents of the Chicago Symphony Chorus, founded in 1957 and considered one of the most enchanting choral groups which can be heard in the world today. Thus, with this twosome, he created such a sensation—even with an audience accustomed to the talents of the orchestras of Vienna and Berlin—that the conclusion of the Festival took on an exceptional character . . .²⁰³

The traveling Chicago critics also continued bragging on both the Orchestra and Chorus.

That this 'Damnation' came close to matching the success of Monday's performance must be attributed, first of all, to the singing of Margaret Hillis' chorus—firm in intonation, rich in blend, good in French diction, always characterful and expressive. Is there a finer chorus in the world? After six roaring ovations, the choristers won't need a plane to fly back to Chicago.²⁰⁴

Participants in the Chorus at this time remember this tour as one of the highest points in the history of the ensemble. Through live overseas performances, the Chicago Symphony Chorus had at last earned the admiration of the international music community and gained a world-class reputation, perhaps the final great achievement for Margaret Hillis and her Chorus.

On the heels of this triumphant tour, Solti planned a choral program close to his heart—an evening of opera choruses. Performed in November by Solti and the CSO

²⁰² Karl Harb, "20 Scenes in the life of a lonesome man," review of *La Damnation de Faust*, by Hector Berlioz (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Salzburg Nachrichten*, 1 September 1989.

²⁰³ Leonardo Pinzauti, "Solti triumphs over the devil," review of *La Damnation de Faust*, by Hector Berlioz (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Il Resto Del Carlino* (Bologna), September 1989.

²⁰⁴ John von Rhein, "CSO's 'Faust' takes another European audience by storm," review of *La Damnation de Faust*, by Hector Berlioz (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Chicago Tribune*, 31 August 1989.

Assistant Conductor Michael Morgan (on the third performance), this compilation was recorded and released. Hillis did the initial preparation, but Solti brought in a British opera specialist, Terry Edwards, closer to performance time. Solti would use Edwards several more times in preparing for concert operas, but there is no documentation explaining why. Then in December, Slatkin conducted the Chorus in an all-Stravinsky program, including the *Choral Variations on Von Himmel hoch*, the *Requiem Canticles*, and the *Mass*. January of 1990 saw two choral programs. Solti conducted a small group of CSC ladies in Debussy's *Nocturnes*, then the following week conducted the CSC in Bach's *B Minor Mass*. Both of these programs were recorded, and the Bach was recognized again at the Grammys. Although not an "early music" interpretation with small groups of Baroque specialists, it was a beautiful recording nonetheless. Hillis and the Chorus were awarded the 1991 Grammy for Best Classical Performance – Choral.

Barenboim, the new Music Director-designate, returned to conduct the Chorus in Act II of Wagner's *Parsifal* in March. Hillis then conducted two choral programs in a row. In April she gave a program under the auspices of the Merrill Lynch Great Performers Series (part of the Allied Arts Series). Designed as a showcase for the CSC, it consisted mostly of *a cappella* masterworks, ending with an Americana Medley accompanied by members of the CSO. She then had a subscription concert with the CSO and CSC in May of 1990, consisting of Bartók's *Tri Dedinské scény* (*Three Village Scenes*) (performed in English), Bartók's *Cantata Profana* (also in English), and Haydn's *Lord Nelson Mass*, naturally in Latin.

This latter program capped a memorable season for the Chorus. But it was not only their final program of the season, it was also Margaret Hillis' final subscription

concert. Despite generally favorable reviews in the press and tremendous pride from the choristers, her conducting was still considered "metronomic" and not very expressive or flashy, relying instead on simple, precise gestures. Some considered her performances and programming lacking in excitement, after being used to such exuberances from Solti and others of his ilk. Chorister Cathy Weingart-Ryan admitted that the Orchestra did not "warm to her the way the Chorus did," and the players apparently were not particularly thrilled with these concerts.²⁰⁵ Lorene Richardson noted that members of the Orchestra complained, but they complained about everyone to some extent, so Hillis was in "good company."²⁰⁶ Hillis' style lent itself extremely well to preparing the Chorus for other conductors, creating a group honed to the finest precision that could bend to any musical wish of the performing conductor. However, the skills of conducting an orchestra and preparing a chorus for another conductor are different sets of skills, and it was deemed that only the top tier international orchestral conductors should do the subscription concerts of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Hillis' subscription schedule had gradually decreased, with this program being her final one. Though the choristers were disappointed for their director, she was still given special concert projects to do, and continued to guest conduct all over the country.

In the summer of 1990, the CSC was engaged in another busy Ravinia season, with seven different programs. Levine conducted the first two choral programs, performing Mahler's *Second Symphony* and Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*. James Conlon followed with Mahler's *Das Klagende Lied*, and Kunzel next did three pops programs, including an evening of Disney tunes. The Chorus' Ravinia season ended with Christoph

²⁰⁵ Cathy Weingart-Ryan, interview by author.

²⁰⁶ Lorene Richardson, interview by author.

Eschenbach conducting the ladies in Mahler's *Third Symphony*. This was the first time the CSC had worked with Eschenbach, important in that he would later become the Artistic Director of the Ravinia Festival upon the retirement of James Levine.

The 1990-91 season would be significant for several reasons. This season would be the CSO's centennial season, and would also mark Solti's final season as Music Director, though he would continue to return as Music Director Laureate. For the Chorus it would also include an American premiere, a world premiere, and a memorable trip to Carnegie Hall.

With Solti planning to retire at the end of the season, and her own age creeping up on her, Hillis, over the last few years or so, had taken stock of her own time with the Chorus and decided it would be a good time for her to retire as well. She would be 70 years old and would have had 34 years with the Chorus at the end of Solti's tenure. She would miss the excitement and successes that her collaboration with Solti had brought, plus organizational and policy changes at the administrative level had been sometimes disconcerting. Her retirement was announced in 1991, giving rise to a few articles in the local papers looking over her career with the Chorus. However, she promised to stick around until the Orchestral Association found a replacement.

The Chorus' season began with a special concert on October 6, serving both as a CSO gala celebrating their Centennial and as a benefit for the Musicians Pension Fund. Largely an instrumental program, the CSC made an appearance to sing the final movement of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. Later in October, Lorin Maazel conducted a small group of CSC ladies in Holst's *The Planets*. Rounding out the fall portion of the season, Leonard Slatkin led the Chorus in the world premiere of Ned Rorem's *Goodbye*

My Fancy in November. This piece had been commissioned in celebration of the CSO's centennial season. It was a 55-minute piece that made up the second half of the program.

The remaining concerts were scheduled for the next spring, allowing plenty of time for the Chorus to prepare for two noteworthy programs. At that time, Solti planned a series of concerts that would end his tenure as Music Director with a bang. The April program with the Chorus was the biggest, as well as his last program as Music Director. Returning to his operatic roots, and again fulfilling his promise made at the beginning of his tenure, he chose to perform a concert version of Verdi's dramatic opera *Otello*. Hillis would naturally do the initial teaching for the Chorus, but as had been the recent tradition, Solti brought in opera specialist Terry Edwards for the final choral preparations. For extra flash, Solti managed to engage two big names for the main roles. Dame Kiri Te Kanawa agreed to sing the soprano lead. For the title role, Solti engaged perhaps the most famous tenor in the world, Luciano Pavarotti. Such a heavy dramatic role was normally out of Pavarotti's repertoire, a role nearly synonymous with rival tenor Placido Domingo. Regardless, it was a role he had long desired to do, and a concert version seemed to suit his ability. This would be performed twice in Chicago, then done twice at Carnegie Hall in New York.

The following May program would also be important. For that, Barenboim would conduct a varied program that included Bach's motet, *Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied* (sung *a cappella*), Schubert's *Gesang der Geister über den Wassern*, and most of the movements of Pierre Boulez's *Le visage nuptial* (*The Nuptial Countenance*). The two pieces of the first portion of the program were recorded and released, and the latter piece would enjoy the American premiere performance.

The *Otello* program was eagerly anticipated as Solti's swan song and as a chance to again work with Pavarotti. Pavarotti had sung with the Chorus only once previously, a Verdi *Requiem* program in the 1970s. Although it was exciting to have such a famous singer return, he had also begun to lose some of his popularity with his demanding ways and frequent cancellations. Working with him on this occasion proved rather bizarre in the recollections of some Chorus members.

The soloists were provided with chairs upon a platform between the Orchestra and Chorus. Since he was an enormously rotund individual, Pavarotti's chair was specially made for the occasion. ". . . [He] had a great big throne that they built out of something that looked like 4x4's. Great big things lined with leather!"²⁰⁷ He had been having another throat problem or cold at that time, so was provided a table next to his chair, on which sat an apple, water, and various other concoctions. He literally ate and drank these sundries during the Chicago performances. He also had an opera coach in front of him, much like the prompters in the opera performances of yesteryear. Instead of music, he simply had his text in 1-inch high letters, and the coach would cue him when he was to sing and cut him off when he was to stop. The choristers were amazed at this unusual situation, and the use of the text without music seemed to lend credence to the rumor that Pavarotti could not read music. Ever the positive thinker, Jane Scharf prefers to think that he simply had poor eyesight.²⁰⁸

At any rate, the Chicago critics gave kudos to the Orchestra and Chorus, but were less kind to Pavarotti. The soloists in general were considered a bit weak by both

²⁰⁷ Jane Scharf, interview by author.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

Chicago and, later, New York critics. The Chicago performances were on Monday April 8 and Friday April 12, then a few days rest before the New York performances.

By the time the production moved to New York, Pavarotti was still ailing and relying on concoctions but in somewhat better voice. Still nervous, he complained that he was seated too far upstage, saying "The audience will think I am part of the chorus." Someone told Hillis of Pavarotti's whining, and, familiar with his unreliability and inability to read music, she exclaimed, "He couldn't get in to my chorus!"²⁰⁹

The April 16 performance received generally more favorable reviews all around, particularly for the Orchestra and Chorus. Pavarotti was able to dispense with his ablutions for the final Friday April 19 performance. Donal Henahan found room to mention the Orchestra and Chorus, but discussion of the soloists and the occasion of Solti's retirement somewhat overshadowed the performance of both ensembles.

The Chicago, never in our time less than a great orchestra, provided many thrills. In the stupendous opening scene, it and Margaret Hillis' chorus unleashed every erg of sonic energy the hall could tolerate, vividly establishing the mood for violent events to come.²¹⁰

As the first performance was apparently broadcast on the BBC, London critic Edward Greenfield gave his own review, giving more attention to the Chorus.

Whatever reservations anyone may have had about the soloists, the choral singing on this occasion was among the most incandescent I have ever heard from any choir. We owe it to the chorus master, Margaret Hillis—who founded this superb chorus in 1957 and is now timing her retirement to coincide with Solti's—that standards remain unparalleled in the United States, and now our own Terry Edwards, another

²⁰⁹ Andrew Patner, as told by Henry Fogel at Hillis' Memorial Service, "Chorus founder remembered," Chicago Sun-Times, 16 March 1998.

²¹⁰ Donal Henahan, "Pavarotti, Struggling With a Cold and a Handkerchief, as Otello," review of *Otello* by Giuseppe Verdi (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), New York Times, 18 April 1991, sect. C15.

inspirational trainer, has been brought in as guest chorus-master too, a winning combination.²¹¹

At the final performance on April 19, critic John von Rhein described the tumult as Solti laid down his baton for the final time as Music Director.

A mighty shout of approval immediately went up from the house. Audience members leaped to their feet, applauding vigorously. Solti—nearly dwarfed by the combined forces of his Chicago Symphony and Chicago Symphony Chorus, a children's chorus and nine vocal soloists—bowed stiffly several times and quickly left the stage. . . . By 11:23 the volume of applause could have rivaled that of the opening storm scene in "Otello." Nobody, but nobody, was leaving the hall. Solti, returning for a solo bow, was given a huge bouquet and a fanfare from the brass section. Four minutes elapsed, but which time the audience had added foot-stamping to its repertoire. He might as well have tried to stop a tidal wave. The singers took yet another bow with Solti, who then elected to grab co-concertmaster Ruben Gonzalez by the hand and lead him off the stage—a sign for the rest of the orchestra to follow. Reluctantly, the crowd began to disperse. Clearly there was enough gratitude packed into Carnegie Hall to keep the ovations going 15 more minutes. But Solti made sure he did not overstay his welcome. He will, of course, return to Chicago in the fall, and for many years thereafter, as CSO Music Director Laureate. But no Solti farewell will ever seem as emotionally momentous as this one.²¹²

Though Solti received somewhat mixed reviews for his performance, he was given particular notice for his work with the CSO here over the years. He had coupled the Tuesday-Friday Verdi performances with CSO performances of Mahler's *Fifth Symphony* on Monday and Thursday at Carnegie, presenting another large piece. In summarizing his career and his reputation for performing "blockbusters," New York Times critic James R. Oestreich wrote,

With all due respect to the citizenry of Chicago, it is poetically just that Sir Georg Solti's 22-year tenure as music director of the Chicago Symphony should have ended in New York last evening, rather than in Chicago. The Solti-Chicago phenomenon of the early 1970s, which has since lost some of its luster, owed much to the orchestra's sensational concerts in Carnegie Hall and the publicity they generated. As a

²¹¹ Edward Greenfield, "The tenor of change—Edward Greenfield reports from Chicago on Pavarotti's *Otello*," review of *Otello*, by Giuseppe Verdi (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Guardian (London), 11 April 1991.

²¹² John von Rhein, "Solti brings down Carnegie Hall," review of *Otello*, by Giuseppe Verdi (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Tribune, 21 April 1991, sect. 1, p. 10.

transplanted Midwesterner who came east in 1970, I recall not only the clamorous enthusiasm that greeted the orchestra and its new maestro at the time in Carnegie, but also the relatively restrained reception accorded them on comparable evenings at Orchestra Hall in Chicago. . . . Other conductors and orchestras outshine them in certain respects from time to time, and some even do so regularly. But no combination has captured the public imagination in any such intense and lasting fashion. The Solti tenure in Chicago will surely go down as one of the more distinctive eras in the history of an orchestra that, over its 100 years, has had many.²¹³

The occasion was momentous enough that a commercial recording was made for London/Decca, putting together the best moments from performances in Chicago and New York. With so many successes and new opportunities created by Solti, he would certainly be missed in Chicago, not the least by Margaret Hillis and the CSC.

Having another program after the one with Solti could have been seen as anti-climatic for the Chorus, but still provided its own challenges and rewards. The American premiere of the Boulez piece *Le visage nuptial* was another feather in the Chorus' collective cap. Since Barenboim conducted, it was also good to work with him again to get used to his conducting and style; he would be the CSO's new Music Director beginning the next season. The CSC also participated in the Bach and Schubert pieces. Two instrumental works rounded out the program. Best received was Schubert's "Gesang der Feister übert den Wassern" with the CSC men. Wynne Delacoma wrote that the men were "profoundly moving,"²¹⁴ and John von Rhein indicated the men "delivered [the piece] with properly fervent intensity and sensitivity."²¹⁵ The Bach was a bit muddy, and the Boulez piece received more mixed reviews, though part of the problem was the

²¹³ James R. Oestreich, "Solti and the Heyday of the Blockbuster," New York Times, 20 April 1991, The Arts section, p. 13.

²¹⁴ Wynne Delacoma, "It's woolly Boulez for CSO crowd," review of concert of various composers (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Sun-Times, 10 May 1991, p. 33.

²¹⁵ John von Rhein, "Generous halves yield bittersweet offering by CSO," review of concert of various composers (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Tribune, 10 May 1991.

omission of the third of five movements. The orchestral parts for this movement were not yet completed. John von Rhein's overall impression of the concert was that it "provided satisfaction and disappointment in roughly equal measure."²¹⁶ Following this concert series, the Chorus turned its attention to another unusually full Ravinia season.

The 1991 Ravinia season consisted of seven programs for the Chorus, six of these classical programs. Records also indicate for the first time the use of a different orchestra towards the end of the season, the "Ravinia Festival Orchestra." Perhaps some members of the CSO continued to play in this group, but it was clearly not the official CSO. The first choral program was a concert version of Donizetti's opera, *L'elisir d'amor*, conducted by James Levine. The cast of soloists included Luciano Pavarotti, said by the critics to be in much better voice (and closer to his milieu) for this performance than he was for the *Otello* a few months earlier. Levine also conducted the next two programs: a Mozart program including the *Requiem* and the *C Minor Mass*, and then a concert with Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*. Levine recorded the Stravinsky program on the Deutsche Grammophon label. Later in July Erich Kunzel returned to do the traditional pops program, and then three more classical programs followed. Zubin Mehta conducted a Beethoven *Ninth*. Vittorio Negri conducted the two programs with the Festival Orchestra, programming the Vivaldi *Gloria* and Handel's *Messiah*, sung in German. A successful and challenging Ravinia season behind them, the Chicago Symphony Chorus then prepared for a time of transition, with Daniel Barenboim as the new Music Director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. They would also wonder how much longer they would be able to retain their own Music Director, Margaret Hillis.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

Organization and Operation of the Chorus During the Solti Era

The CSC organization grew slowly but steadily during the first half of the Solti era. From the 1960s and 1970s, the minimum number of paid singers grew with almost each new AGMA contract, as Table 4 shows.²¹⁷

Table 4 – Increases in Minimum Number of Paid Singers

<u>AGMA Contract Year</u>	<u>Minimum No. of Paid Singers</u>
1964	50
1967	50
1968	60
1969	65
1970	65
1972	65
1974	72
1976	80
1977	90
1978	95
1979	100
1980	105

The minimum of 105 has remained to this day. AGMA contracts were renewed every one to three years. The pace of the increase in the minimum number of singers particularly picked up when Solti came on board. Whether the increase is directly attributable to him is undocumented, but it seems clear that he had an influence on these figures. He admired and trusted Margaret Hillis, and also wanted the best choral group to

²¹⁷ Data provided by Karen Deschere, Executive Director of the CSC.

match one of the greatest orchestras in the world. He likely gave her more support and leeway than she had previously received.

Though the minimum number of singers rose and was required to be maintained, Hillis continued to add paid singers beyond the contractual minimum, trying to get as many people compensated as she could. This would serve to raise the level of professionalism of the entire Chorus, with expectations rising accordingly. Long-time chorister Richard Livingston, who served as AGMA representative during the late 1970s and early 1980s, remembers the number of paid singers actually rising to around 153 or so by the early 1980s.²¹⁸ Choristers Cathy Weingart-Ryan and Lorene Richardson, each of whom served as AGMA representative later on, corroborated that approximate figure, as did Hillis in an interview around that time (quoted below). The CSC office, however, could not find written documentation to support this high number of paid singers and suggested that perhaps this was only for occasional large projects. At any rate, it would appear that the number of paid singers had gone well beyond the contractual minimum by the early 1980s, though there continued to be a number of volunteers. The Chorus could go up to around 200 if needed, with some singers being on a list of people called on an as-needed basis for large projects.

Naturally the wages for the paid singers also increased from the \$1 or \$2 per hour in the first years. By 1978, rehearsal wages ranged from \$4.50 to \$7.00 per hour, and performances were compensated at \$40 each.²¹⁹ Hillis, in discussing the importance of efficiency in rehearsals, noted that in 1980 the CSC rehearsals cost about "\$3000 an hour:

²¹⁸ Richard Livingston, interview by author.

²¹⁹ "AGMA Information Sheet Regarding Professional Membership in Chicago Symphony Chorus," 2 February 1978, Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Chorus, Chicago, Ill.

150 people are paid about \$8 an hour, there's my fee, the pianist's fee, my assistant's salary, and the rental for the hall."²²⁰ The costs continued spiraling upwards from there. When asked whether some volunteer choristers were envious of those that got paid, the responses were mixed from Chorus members interviewed. Some never noticed such feelings, but others indicated there may have been a little of that amongst volunteers, particularly as the gap widened when the salaries increased. Of course the paid singers had higher expectations in terms of numbers of performances and rehearsals to which they had to commit. They were paid by the hour for rehearsals and a set fee for performances, with higher rates of pay built in for those with more years of working for the Chorus.

During these earlier years of development, the paid singers were paid mostly just for the number of rehearsals and programs they did, with a guaranteed number of different programs. However, in leaner years when programming was easier and required fewer rehearsals, or when they performed extra concerts of the same program, the job was not very lucrative. Later contracts stipulated that they be paid for the number of performances, not programs, with a guaranteed number of performances and rehearsal hours. If the season did not meet the guarantee, they would be paid anyway. But if they opted out of performances or programs, then the Orchestral Association did not have to pay them for a minimum number of performances since they chose to miss some. This seemed to be an equitable solution in trying to professionalize the Chorus and give fair compensation.

²²⁰ Sue Bradle and Tom Wilson, "Music is My Life: An Interview with Margaret Hillis," *Accent*, September-October 1980, p. 13.

Also during the 1970s, the administrative side of the Chorus began to become more organized. Hillis always had one and sometimes two permanent conducting assistants, or Assistant Conductors. One of their primary responsibilities was to make notes in rehearsals and keep a Master Score with notations of interpretation for both Hillis and the performing conductor, but they also kept track of attendance and sometimes helped out with sectional rehearsals or small ensembles. These Master Scores would be kept for future reference if that conductor performed the piece again later. For seasons or individual programs that were particularly big in scope, needing simultaneous rehearsals of different divisions of the Chorus, then a third or even fourth Assistant could be used. Often such extra people were hired only for that project or season, but sometimes they stayed on.

As these conducting assistants stayed with the organization for an extended period of time and had done good work, they received a promotion and title change to Associate Conductor. This was the assistant with the most seniority, and also was given first invitation for responsibilities in leading sectionals or even preparing the Chorus for a performance, though later it was possible to have more than one Associate. Thus a hierarchical system was used, much like the group of accompanists that followed the Principal Accompanist. Particularly after Hillis became famous with her Mahler *Eighth* performance at Carnegie, and began to receive many invitations to guest conduct away from Chicago, the assistants were given more responsibilities. Appendix IV indicates the more permanent conducting staff and managers over the years.

Ronald Schweitzer served as the first Assistant Conductor, from 1965-1968, followed by Robert Frisbie from 1968-1969. Schweitzer then returned from 1969-1972

in the dual roles of Personnel Manager and Associate Conductor (the first Associate). During most of this period, there was a second assistant, another Assistant Conductor. Bingham Vick served in this capacity from 1969-1970, and David Thorburn from 1971-1972. Richard Boldrey appears to have been the sole assistant during the period from 1972-1977, but his name also appears a bit more frequently as Hillis begins to use assistants a little more in the preparation of less important programs. James Winfield began his tenure in 1977, serving until 1985 and being promoted to Associate Conductor in 1980. As Hillis became busier, Winfield gained more responsibility, if the printed programs are any indication. Typically Hillis used her assistants to prepare the Chorus when only small groups were involved, such as a group of ladies for Holst's *The Planets*, or the basses for Shostokovich's *Symphony No. 13*. As Hillis preferred to spend her time in more serious musical studies, she usually also gave pops programs over to these assistants, most typically done at Ravinia. Winfield's name began to appear more frequently in the preparation of such programs.

On the management side during this time, several people served as Personnel Manager from the 1960s. George Hinnners was Personnel Manager from 1966-1967, Richard L. Carter from 1967-1969, and Ronald Schweitzer 1969-1972 (serving concurrently as Associate Director of the CSC). Richard L. Carter returned in 1972 and the position was renamed Chorus Manager. Providing some administrative stability, Carter had a long tenure, serving until 1987. Despite the growth in the organization and busier schedule of the Chorus (at least until the 1980s), the position amazingly remained part-time during his lengthy tenure.

If the 1970s provided a period of relative stability and steady growth, the 1980s were a period of change. One of the biggest changes occurred due to increasing financial difficulties over the entire musical organization from the Orchestral Association down. The United States went through several recessions during the 1980s, perhaps a contributing factor. The year before Henry Fogel began in his position of Executive Director of the CSO (he joined in 1985), the Orchestral Association's deficit had grown to about \$2 million. Richard Livingston and Cathy Weingart-Ryan both indicated that sometime during the early 1980s (exact year unavailable), the Association had to cut the number of paid singers in the CSC to the contractual minimum of 105. Hillis had the difficult job of cutting the roster of paid singers, with some agreeing to remain as volunteers and others choosing to move on to other endeavors. The current CSC Executive Director Karen Deschere even indicates that there was a board level discussion in 1984 of cutting the Chorus all together, but it never moved beyond a discussion.²²¹ Fortunately the Chorus survived, but this indicates the severity of the financial situation at that time.

Hillis continued to fight for the survival of the Chorus and to educate others about its importance to the Orchestra and to the community. Its existence had even spurred a great deal of other choral activity in and around Chicago. When Fogel joined the staff, he was able to manage the crisis by more carefully planning programs (less expensive preparations, fewer programs), cutting back somewhat on recordings, cutting back on run-outs such as trips to Carnegie Hall, and other measures. He was able to underwrite

²²¹ Karen Deschere, email correspondence, 25 May 2001.

the 1989 tour through ticket sales, money from the operating budget, grants, and fundraising.

The CSC saw a clear need to promote itself in the 1980s, and one attempt was seen in the creation of its own newsletter, the Voices of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Chorus. (The CSOC title was still sometimes in use during that period, and use of the Orchestra in the title probably gave an official air to the publication.) The Orchestra had had its own newsletter for years, but seldom included news of the Chorus or its members. Choristers felt unappreciated and decided to produce their own newsletter, with the first issue appearing in January of 1984.²²² The newsletter served the purpose of not only announcing upcoming calendar events or giving praise to recent performances, but also promoting successes of individuals in the Chorus or on the staff. Many current or former members would win auditions or achieve other professional successes outside the Chorus operations, such as when Hillis was appointed to the National Council on the Arts, to begin in 1985. The newsletter kept choristers apprised of these developments important to them, until Henry Fogel agreed that there needed to be more unity among the different organizations under the auspices of the Orchestral Association. It was promised that the Orchestra's newsletter would serve both ensembles and include more Chorus recognition, so the Chorus' publication ceased around the late 1980s.²²³

With the Chorus seeming to be the first target of cuts from the Orchestral Association, the group also experimented with finding its own funding during the 1980s. Chorus leaders formed the Development Committee, though as an independent

²²² Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, Ill.

²²³ N.B. - The last publication found in the Rosenthal Archives was Volume IV No. 3, dated 1988, but this may not be the final publication.

committee there appears to be little written documentation in the Rosenthal Archives of its existence. Cathy Weingart-Ryan provided anecdotal evidence of the operation of this committee, and the first mention of its pending creation was in the CSC's newsletter dated October, 1984.²²⁴ The Orchestral Association gave their blessing to the operation of this fundraising entity, but with the stipulation that the committee not tap the same financial sources that the Association was already using, for fear that the Orchestra would receive fewer funds as money might be diverted to the Chorus.²²⁵

By 1987, Hillis had big dreams for the flourishing of the Chorus, which included "national and international touring, choral recordings, voice lessons for chorus members, a choral chamber music series, and the endowment of as many as two dozen full-time paid symphony chorus positions."²²⁶ Included in these goals were regular trips to downstate Illinois and educational programs in Chicago public schools. At this time, it was not decided whether the Chorus would accompany the CSO on the 1989 European tour, and Henry Fogel wanted Hillis to come up with most of the money if the Chorus was included. Hillis needed an advisory board to spearhead this push for fund-raising and exposure, and got three powerful local professionals to serve in this capacity. Chicago business columnist Lewis Lazare interviewed Hillis and members of the advisory board in an article about this new endeavor:

"The chorus hasn't received the same kind of recognition the orchestra does; we're working to increase it," explains Mary Spellman, president of the corporate services division of Rubloff Inc., the real estate concern, and a member of the three-person advisory council masterminding the chorus' fund-raising drive. . . . The Orchestral Association allots approximately \$400,000 a year from its \$20 million annual

²²⁴ Voices of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Vol. I, No. 4, p. 2, Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, Ill.

²²⁵ Cathy Weingart-Ryan, interview by author.

²²⁶ Lewis Lazare, "At CSO, an unsung chorus is raising its voice," Crain's Chicago Business, 29 June 1987, p. 19.

budget—or 2% of the total—to cover expenses of maintaining a professional chorus. But, "whenever there was a problem in the orchestra budget, the chorus got squeezed," says Russell Baird a partner in the law firm of Sidley & Austin and a chorus advisory council member. . . . The CSO's chorus costs represent only a small portion of the symphony's total operating costs, yet it is considerably more than other orchestras spend.²²⁷

For whatever reasons, most of Hillis' goals remained unrealized. They likely lacked the needed financial and moral support from the Orchestral Association.

As part of this effort to raise money in the late 1980s, the Chorus tried a craft fair, where choristers closed off a portion of Michigan Avenue and used different parts of Orchestra Hall and the street to sell a variety of items including silver, jewelry, and wooden crafts. This took place over two weekends, and the CSC received a percentage of whatever individuals grossed, raising around \$5000.²²⁸ However, with the restrictions and lack of support from the Orchestral Association, the Development Committee of the CSC could not succeed, and it closed down after several years of operation.

As the Chorus fought for not only survival but recognition in the 1980s, the members wondered whether they would ever get invited to go on a trip to Europe as Solti had promised in the early 1970s. Around 1984 or 1985, they were invited to participate in the Göthe Festival in Germany, without the Orchestra. Paul Chummers was filling in as CSO Acting General Manager before Henry Fogel was hired as the Executive Director. He was apparently not very interested in Chorus issues, so offered very little help on financial or organizational needs to get the Chorus to the Festival. The AGMA representation was also rather weak at that time. Meanwhile, time passed with no action. Cathy Weingart-Ryan, acting merely as a concerned chorister, took it upon herself to call

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid.

the contact in Germany. By the time she finally reached him, he had hired another chorus to perform at the Festival. This incident led Weingart-Ryan to become the union representative the following year.²²⁹

One of the more dramatic changes from an organizational standpoint related to Hillis' famous numbering system with the choristers. The numbers were not only used to help Hillis keep track of her best singers, but also for record-keeping and attendance. This ranking system of individuals in each section became a well-known system in the Chicago area. For some, being ranked relatively low was demoralizing. As choristers auditioned for additional work around town, some directors would ask what their CSC ranking was. This infuriated many choristers. Lorene Richardson describes one such situation with another chorister.

One of our people went to audition for some group. . . . She auditioned, and she said she did what she'd done for Margaret. She thought she did a better job. The person had her tapping out rhythms on the piano and doing all kinds of things, and she said next she expected to be asked to tap dance. She was getting kind of disgusted, and then the person said, "What's your number in Symphony Chorus?" This was a soprano, and she said, "401." Then she turned around and walked out!²³⁰

Number 401, of course, would have been the top-ranked first bass. Some choristers preferred to remain volunteers in the CSC so that they had fewer responsibilities and requirements, but this choice gave them a lower rank even if they were an excellent singer. Auditioners would wonder why some singers had a relatively low ranking number or why they weren't one of the paid singers, even though they sang in the best choir in town. As this situation had become a problem for CSC singers in other situations around town by the early 1980s, a group went to talk to Hillis about it.

²²⁹ Cathy Weingart-Ryan, interview by author.

²³⁰ Lorene Richardson, interview by author.

We told Margaret [about them asking for our number], and she says, "Well what do they mean, 'what's your number?' Any number in Symphony Chorus is better than theirs! . . . if they're in Symphony Chorus, they've got to be pretty good." But we were saying, "Perception is important. If they perceive that a group of people are not considered quite good enough to be paid, there is a problem."²³¹

So Hillis agreed to drop the number system all together and revert to an alphabetical system for record-keeping purposes.

Without a numbering system to keep track of more talented singers or people of other leadership qualities, she shortly thereafter instituted a system of section leaders. She had always had a group of people, usually top-ranked in each section, to whom she informally turned to deal with issues in each section. With some advice from knowledgeable singers including these informal leaders, she appointed eight people for these positions, one for each voice section (first soprano, second soprano, etc.). The system evolved so that leaders would serve for two year intervals and rotate off in alternating years. Half of the leaders would change in even numbered years and half in odd numbered years so that each year would have a group with experience. They were mostly responsible for keeping up with musical markings for their section and, as Don Horisberger indicates, act as "ambassadors within the section."²³² If someone didn't like whom she was sitting next to, she could take the problem to the section leader and the leader would deal with the problem.

Despite the financial crisis of the 1980s, the CSC managed to add a second conducting assistant on a permanent basis. James Winfield had served alone in this capacity since 1977, but in 1982, Richard Pekala was hired as an Assistant Conductor. Winfield was promoted to Associate Conductor in 1980, only the third person to hold this

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Don Horisberger, telephone interview by author.

title, and served until 1985. Richard Pekala's name later changed to Richard Garrin. Garrin was promoted to Associate Conductor in 1987, and he served a total of 10 years with the CSC. Doreen Rao, then conductor of the Glen Ellyn Children's Chorus, became an Assistant Conductor for a short period, 1985-86. The year Garrin was promoted to Associate, Cheryl Frazes Hill was hired as an Assistant, and Don Horisberger was hired in 1989. Both had already served as CSC singers, and both continue to serve on staff today as Associate Conductors. As previously indicated, temporary conducting assistants could be hired for special projects, and when the CSC performed the difficult Schönberg piece *Moses und Aron*, up to four assistants were usually used. But two assistants became the norm for the 1980s.

Also unusual during these difficult financial times, the Orchestral Association made an important administrative step forward for the Chorus in 1987. As Richard L. Carter ended his 15-year tenure as Chorus Manager, Joseph Fabboli was hired in that position in 1987. Fabboli indicated that Carter's position may have evolved into a full-time one over that lengthy tenure, but Fabboli was definitely hired full-time, making him at least the first person to take the position with full-time expectations.²³³ He was also the first Manager who did not sing in the Chorus, so he could devote all of his energies into the job. Previously, the Manager position had always been filled by a Chorus member, which would be easier when it was part-time.

As Chorus Manager, Fabboli was responsible for preparing budgets, seeing that choristers knew where they needed to be and when, negotiating the AGMA contracts for the Orchestral Association, seeing that the AGMA contracts were followed, preparing

²³³ Joe Fabboli, telephone interview by author, 26 July 2000, tape recording.

payroll, creating concerts schedules together with Hillis, and generally trying to prevent problems.²³⁴ He remained in that position until 1993, when he temporarily took a job with AT&T. Shortly thereafter he joined the staff at the Ravinia Festival, becoming the first to work with the CSC through both organizations that regularly used the ensemble.

Late in the Solti era, starting with the 1990 AGMA agreement, the Chorus began to add a new category of singer called an intern. These interns were between the professional and volunteer categories in that they did get paid a small stipend, but not as much as the professionals, and had fewer responsibilities. They would not sing in as many concerts as the professionals, but could occasionally substitute for some professionals if the extra numbers were needed and other professionals were not available. The unique nature of this category made the intern something of a "pre-professional" singer, and newly professional singers were often promoted from the ranks of the interns. The AGMA agreement did not stipulate the number of interns required.

Both the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus went through a white-hot period during the years that Solti served as the CSC Music Director. For a while the Orchestra was called by some the greatest in the world, and Solti expected his Chorus to meet similar standards of excellence. He aided this growth with more frequent and more challenging performances, an accelerated recording schedule, and short run-out tours, capped with the 1989 European tour. He gave Hillis and the Chorus the push, the resources, and the opportunities for them to meet the highest achievements, and they took these elements to create one of the highest regarded choral instruments in the world.

²³⁴ Ibid.

Results were seen in incredulous critical reviews, roaring audience approval, and the recording of numerous albums that received Grammy Awards and even one Grand Prix du Disque. Many choristers would agree that some of the greatest achievements in the history of the CSC occurred during this period, with the Brahms *Requiem* performance at Carnegie Hall and the 1989 European tour often being cited as the highest peaks in a period with many successes. Despite the financial scares of the 1980s, the Chorus ended the Solti era with international acclaim and stronger support from the community and the Orchestral Association. The Chicago Symphony Chorus was ready to move into the Barenboim era.

Chapter IV

1991-2000: A Time of Transition

Margaret Hillis Prepares to Retire

Margaret Hillis had already announced her pending retirement from the CSC before this next season began, but had agreed to remain in the position until a new Music Director could be found. Little did she know that this would ultimately be a three-year period. The process of her leaving would stretch out over a considerable period after her retirement announcement, making the situation emotionally more difficult for her, but she handled it with grace and professionalism. As the founder and only Music Director of the CSC, her personality strongly permeated the group and its operation. She continued to enjoy the actual time with the Chorus and also to guest conduct elsewhere.

The 1991-92 season under the new CSO Music Director Daniel Barenboim, the Chorus' 35th season, was an unusually crowded schedule with ten programs. However, it got off to a rocky start with a labor dispute from the Orchestra musicians. The first three subscription weeks were canceled, the dispute was then settled, and the fourth week became the opening of the CSO season.²³⁵ Barenboim himself would have his own difficulties in his first few years as Music Director, coming under fire by some musicians and critics for inconsistencies in interpretation and tempo in performance and unexciting programming.²³⁶ He would not be as endearing as Solti to the Orchestra and Chorus, but would ultimately prove himself a strong musician and good administrator. He focused some of his energies on the CSO's training group, the Civic Orchestra of Chicago, improving that program by bringing in the world's top conductors to lead the

²³⁵ N.B. - The fourth week was renumbered week 1, but the other weeks kept their original numbering.

²³⁶ John von Rhein, "Sour notes at Orchestra Hall," Chicago Tribune, 12 September 1993.

performances.

The Chorus' first concert of the season was a portion of a special Grant Park program in September, in which they sang the fourth movement of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, conducted by Barenboim. The first major program was a four-concert subscription program in October conducted by Andrew Schenck. An all-Samuel Barber program, it consisted of *The Lovers* and *Prayers of Kierkegaard*, the latter piece being part of the first program that Hillis' New York Concert Choir had performed with the CSO in 1955. This was the CSC's first performance of both pieces, and they were recorded on the Koch label. The recording of *The Lovers* won the 1992 Grammy Award for Best Contemporary Composition—not an actual win by the Chorus, but still satisfying to be on a Grammy-winning album.

The performance season continued in December with Pierre Boulez conducting Debussy's *Nocturnes* and Bartók's *Cantata Profana*, performed in Hungarian. This was Boulez's first appearance with the CSC, but he would form an important relationship with the Chorus through future conducting appearances, later being named Principal Guest Conductor of the CSO. Hillis and her Assistant Conductor Cheryl Frazes Hill split the preparation responsibilities in both the December and October programs, for reasons that are undocumented. Perhaps different groups of the Chorus sang each piece; the Debussy calls only for a group of ladies. The two choral pieces on the December program was supposed to also have four performances, but the illness of a soloist caused the Bartók to be substituted with an instrumental piece on the middle two performance dates. Apparently he recovered enough to participate in the recording of the *Cantata*. A particularly strong recording, it won THREE Grammy Awards in 1993, an unprecedented

number for one album in which the Chorus participated. The Grammys earned included Best Classical Album, Best Engineered Recording – Classical, and Best Performance of a Choral Work. This latter award, a newly revised title for the old "Best Classical Performance – Choral," was the Chorus' ninth and last win in that category. This record number of wins in that category has yet to be broken as of this writing.

Barenboim returned in January, conducting the CSC in Mozart's *Requiem*. The program was performed three times in January, then repeated a month later in February, in the middle of another series of performances. The Archives have no documentation to explain this odd scheduling of a fourth performance, but perhaps it was a make-up concert due to the earlier labor dispute. The February series in which that was inserted consisted of three Mozart operas, all conducted by Barenboim. The CSC was divided into three groups to perform *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan tutte*, each prepared by one of the conducting assistants. This may have been a tribute to Mozart in a belated recognition of the 200th anniversary of his death.

Zubin Mehta conducted the CSC ladies later in February in a performance of Mahler's *Symphony No.3*, prepared by CSC Associate Director Richard Garrin. A small group of ladies referred to as Members of the CSC performed Liszt's *Dante Symphony* in March. Barenboim conducted, and their Principal Accompanist, Elizabeth Burcheri, prepared the choristers. She was listed as a CSC Assistant Director since she served in that capacity for this performance, but this was a temporary designation. She was requesting and receiving opportunities to conduct to expand her skills and marketability, skills that would later help her take a position as a coach at the Chicago Lyric Opera.

A group of CSC men got the next performance, Liszt's *Faust Symphony*, performed in May and highlighted by the return of Solti on the podium, his first work with the Chorus since his retirement. Richard Garrin also prepared this program. Solti then conducted another program the following week with a larger contingent of the Chorus, prepared this time by Hillis. This program was Haydn's *Die Jahreszeiten (The Seasons)*, performed in German. The Haydn would also be recorded and released. The program marked the end of a busy season, though many of the performances were with smaller groups of choristers prepared by conducting assistants. No individual performed all ten programs. Two of the recordings made that season ended up with Grammy wins over the next two years, allowing the Chorus to continue to enjoy success in this era of transition.

Although this was the end of the first season with Barenboim as Music Director, the Chorus did have the opportunity to work with many different conductors in performance. Hillis, who had announced her retirement at least by 1991, had agreed to continue serving as needed, and probably enjoyed turning over a large part of the season to assistants. Yet there were no replacements in sight. She was still needed, so continued working with the Chorus.

The Ravinia season of 1992 was a shorter one than other recent seasons, but significant nonetheless. The first program was a Fourth of July evening featuring Members of the CSC and Marilyn Horne singing American folk songs and patriotic tunes, conducted by Levine. After a long stretch, the Chorus sung a couple performances of a Broadway program in August, led by Kunzel, followed by Helmuth Rilling conducting Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. The Ravinia Festival Orchestra accompanied these

latter two programs. Hillis prepared the American folk and Broadway programs, but a candidate for Hillis' position, Amy Kaiser, prepared the *Elijah* program. This would be the first in a series of auditions over the next two years for the CSC Music Director position. Some other candidates under consideration never formally auditioned or prepared the Chorus.

If the previous season was a busy one overall for the choristers, the 1992-93 season would be a relatively light one, consisting of only four programs. This likely was a way to balance a more costly season and keep finances under control to prevent the problems of the early 1980s. Nevertheless, most of the season's concerts were heavily choral programs featuring some of the more famous masterworks. Barenboim opened the Chicago Symphony Orchestra subscription season in September with the Brahms *Ein Deutsches Requiem*. A favorite piece in the CSC repertoire, Barenboim chose to record it on the Erato label, although Solti had already recorded the Brahms and won a Grammy for it in the 1970s. Hillis then took a break while Cheryl Frazes Hill prepared the Chorus for its December Stravinsky program, conducted by Pierre Boulez, the popular Principal Guest Conductor of the CSO. The program included *Chorale Variations on Von Himmel hoch, da komm' ich her*, sung in German, and *The King of the Stars*, sung by the men in Russian.

Barenboim conducted the remaining two programs for the CSC. In January he presented a program of choral classics that included Fauré's *Requiem*, Schubert's *Gesang der Geister über den Wassern*, and Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*. Vance George, another candidate for the CSC Music Director position, prepared the Fauré, and Hillis prepared the other pieces. Barenboim's final choral program of the season was

Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, prepared by Margaret Hillis and performed in late April and early May. The Beethoven was also commercially recorded and released. The season ended with still no definite replacements for her.

The CSC's involvement in the 1993 Ravinia program would be more extensive than the previous regular season, with eight programs, though four of these would be lighter concerts and Levine would conduct only one with the Chorus. He did the first program, a rerun of the *Symphony of Psalms*. Kunzel then conducted the next two programs, selections from Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, and a Broadway program. James Rogner, a CSC Assistant Conductor, prepared the Chorus for the latter

On August 1, Carlo Rizzi conducted a program of opera choruses, a historically important event as the CSC was prepared by Duain Wolfe. An additional candidate for the Music Director position, Wolfe had been invited to apply by CSO Associate Conductor Kenneth Gene, who had worked with Wolfe in Colorado. He was the founder and conductor of both the Colorado Children's Chorus (founded 1974) and the Colorado Symphony Chorus (founded 1984). He also directed the choral work at the Aspen Music Festival. The Colorado Children's Chorus grew under his leadership to a program of six choirs, and tours over the years had taken groups to 47 states plus Europe and Asia.²³⁷ He also worked as a conductor and artistic administrator with the Central City Opera Festival, developing and directing the group's Artist Program and its educational and outreach programs.²³⁸ Clearly he brought not only musical expertise, but also experience in development and reaching the community. All of the candidates for the Music Director position were excellent conductors with strong backgrounds, but apparently

²³⁷ Biography of Duain Wolfe web page, Internet web site of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

²³⁸ Ibid.

something about Wolfe's unique gifts and experiences struck a chord. He would be invited back later to prepare a much more difficult program to see how that went.

On August 20, the Chorus had the rare opportunity to perform with another great orchestra, as Zubin Mehta and the Israel Philharmonic performed Mahler's *Second Symphony* with the CSC. Both Cheryl Frazes Hill and Don Horisberger did preparations. At least the next two programs were with the Ravinia Festival Orchestra. Kunzel conducted another Broadway pops program, followed by a classical program conducted by Franz-Paul Decker, with Strauss' piece for men's chorus, *Der Bürger als Edelmann*. The final Ravinia program involving chorus was another pops evening of Gilbert and Sullivan pieces, conducted by Bramwell Tovey. (Orchestra used is unavailable, but probably the RFO).

By the start of the 1993-94 season, the Orchestral Association had been looking for a new CSC Music Director for nearly two years, but had not yet settled on any individual. When looking for the CSO's new Music Director, the Orchestra had the advantage of having already worked with most of the major conductors in the world, but choruses generally don't use guest directors, and chorus directors seldom travel to guest conduct other choirs. Guests had to be methodically brought in for the occasion, and naturally the Chorus did not perform as frequently as the Orchestra, slowing the search process even more. Some candidates were brought in just for one rehearsal to show how they would prepare a piece, perhaps something already recently performed. The process was time-consuming and deliberate in order to find a good fit for the position. The search committee included representatives from the Chorus, conductors and administrators. Following each audition, the full Chorus membership was asked to fill

out surveys so they could give their input, but the final decision would be made by Daniel Barenboim and the top administrators at the Orchestral Association. With no definite replacement yet, Hillis came to work a third season after her announced retirement.

Barenboim planned a big CSO season opener using the Chorus, and programmed the Verdi *Requiem* in September. Solti then made another appearance with the Chorus for a program of Haydn's *Die Schöpfung (The Creation)* in late October and early November. Both of these programs were commercially recorded and released. The latter program would ultimately be Hillis' final one in which she did all the choral preparations. The Chorus would have no December program this year, an unusual occurrence.

Their next program was in February 1994, with pieces to be prepared by two different candidates for the Chorus position and conducted by Barenboim. Donald Palumbo, the Chorus Director at the Chicago Lyric Opera and a CSC Music Director candidate, shared credit with Hillis in the preparation of Bruckner's *Mass in E Minor* on the program, but a review indicated that illness prevented him from completing his assignment. Hillis did the bulk of the work.²³⁹ This would be her final work in preparing the Chicago Symphony Chorus for a performance. Sometime in the first half of the year (possibly around the beginning of the Ravinia season) she also prepared them for a Disney recording consisting of several Elgar *Pomp and Circumstance* marches, to be used in the animated film *Fantasia 2000*. But these few duties were her last ones with the Chorus.

Colorado conductor Duain Wolfe returned to prepare Schönberg's difficult *Friede auf Erden* on the same program as the Bruckner *E Minor Mass*, and he did most of the

work with the Chorus himself. He later said that was the hardest piece he had ever done to that point.²⁴⁰ Reviewer Wynne Delacoma wrote more about the actual pieces than the performance, but indicated that the Schönberg piece was "eloquently sung . . . by the CSO chorus. . . ."²⁴¹ John von Rhein wrote that "if [the CSC's] reading wasn't quite up to Hillis' standard, they brought out the text's bitter ironies with clear yet warmly expressive tone."²⁴² All Music Director candidates had done fine work, but shortly after this performance the selection was made. Duain Wolfe would be appointed as the new Music Director of the CSC.

Two more programs would round off this season for the CSC. In April the group performed Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*, the final subscription concert of the year. Michael Tilson Thomas conducted, and Cheryl Frazes Hill prepared the Chorus. The final program was a special run-out concert without any orchestra. Conducted by John Nelson, this all-Górecki program of sacred pieces included his *Amen*, *Euntes ibant et flabant*, and the anchor piece, *Miserere*. The performance of the latter piece was the American premiere. Performed at Saint Mary of the Angels Church in Chicago, the Chicago Lyric Opera performed with the CSC in their first collaboration. Nelson himself prepared the choral groups for the program. Critic John von Rhein gave kudos to Nelson and the combined choirs for the performance. Regarding the *Miserere*, he wrote:

This is by no means easy music to perform, but Nelson is an expert choral technician, and under his vital direction the 178 voices did an impressive job of matching,

²³⁹ Wynne Delacoma, "CSO Gives Musical Past a Moving Accolade," review of *Friede auf Erden*, by Arnold Schönberg, and other works (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Sun-Times, 4 February 1994.

²⁴⁰ Duain Wolfe, interview by author, 20 June 2000, Chicago, tape recording.

²⁴¹ Wynne Delacoma, "CSO Gives Musical Past a Moving Accolade."

²⁴² John von Rhein, "Masterpiece makes Orchestra Hall debut," review of *Friede auf Erden*, by Arnold Schönberg, and other works (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Tribune, 4 February 1994, sect. 1, p. 24.

blending and sustaining Górecki's tricky pitches and intervals. Their sound was full of expressive understanding, resounding magnificently in the high-domed church.²⁴³

Elektra/Nonesuch recorded and released an album of the program.

With the 1993-94 season over, Margaret Hillis was gone. Members of the Chorus were saddened to see their founding director leave; it seemed to the world that Margaret Hillis WAS the Chicago Symphony Chorus. She had led them through a period of building skills, becoming locally respected, then with run-outs and award-winning recordings achieved a strong national reputation, and finally with a European tour led them to international acclaim. She had prepared the Chorus for most of the world-famous conductors of the day and had herself been given some measure of success as a performing conductor. She would still have her guest-conducting career to which to look forward.

A few long-time choristers were not interested in singing under another Music Director, and decided to retire with Miss Hillis. One of these was Jane Scharf, the only charter member left in the CSC; she simply felt like it was time for her to give up the Chorus. Like Hillis, she had served the entire 37 years of the Chorus' existence, and her record as the longest serving chorister will not likely be broken. Now the world-class chorus that Hillis built would be turned over to a new director with a different personality and new focus. Mr. Wolfe would have a tricky period of adjustment while he made the organization his own.

²⁴³ John von Rhein, "Solid success: CSO and Lyric Opera choruses join forces for U.S. premiere of Polish composer Henryck Górecki's monumental 'Miserere,'" review of *Miserere* and other works by Henryck Górecki (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Tribune, 26 April 1994.

A New Director and a New Direction

Duain Wolfe had to hit the ground running with the 1994 Ravinia season, preparing the first CSC appearance. The talented Christoph Eschenbach conducted a program that included Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* and Bruckner's *Te Deum*. This was his first appearance with the Chorus, but would not be his last. James Levine had left his position as Music Director of the Ravinia Festival, serving from 1972 to 1993, and Eschenbach would be named the new Music Director of the Festival in September of 1994. The second program with the CSC was a pops program of operetta selections led by Erich Kunzel, but that was prepared by CSC Assistant Conductor Don Horisberger. Two programs followed in August. Ricardo Chailly conducted an Italian program that included Verdi's *Stabat Mater* and *Te Deum*, and Rossini's *Stabat Mater*, all prepared by Wolfe. Another Broadway pops program appeared later that month, conducted by Kunzel and prepared by Cheryl Frazes Hill. This ended the CSC's Ravinia season, and Wolfe prepared for his first regular season as CSC Music Director.

This first season would be challenging for Duain Wolfe, as the full choral roster returned. (Not all Chorus members participate at the Ravinia Festival.) One of the challenges would be some health problems. This may be why some of the works performed by the CSC during the previous Ravinia season and the coming regular season were prepared by assistants and guest conductors, but Wolfe still continued doing most of the preparations. It also took a while for the Chorus members and him to learn to communicate and understand each other.²⁴⁴ They were so attuned to Hillis' rehearsals that

²⁴⁴ Lorene Richardson, interview by author.

they always knew what she wanted. Anyone following in Hillis' shadow would experience some difficulties. But Wolfe worked in his own way as choristers learned to adjust to the new Music Director.

Unlike Hillis, Wolfe preferred that the singers refer to him by his first name, lending an air of informality. He also was more willing to socialize with choristers, attending parties and such. In other ways he was more businesslike. Eventually he decided that choristers should not ask questions in rehearsals, as that disrupted the flow of rehearsal and may be on a topic already covered previously.²⁴⁵ He instituted a hierarchical system of answering questions through section leaders. Individual members must ask their section leader, and if he/she doesn't know the answer, then they can consult with a conducting assistant during a break. (If the assistant doesn't know, which is rare, they might ask Wolfe the question later, but generally they can consult the Master Score to answer a musical question.) Although rehearsals move along efficiently with this system, the questions sometimes go unanswered.

The Chorus found that another difference in Wolfe's rehearsal style was his desire to focus on phrase shaping and musicality, rather than emphasize a mechanical precision. Some would argue that the great ensemble precision and crisp diction that Hillis built have suffered as a result, but others have noted perhaps an improved quality of sound and a refreshing sense of music-making rather than mostly drill work. In another change from past procedure, Wolfe cancelled the week-end sectional program, preferring to do simultaneous sectionals in the first hour of a regularly scheduled rehearsal. This system makes use of the conducting assistants, who must run these sectionals.

²⁴⁵ Frank Villella, interview by author, 23 June 2000, Chicago, tape recording.

Wolfe also changed the hierarchical structures of the conducting assistants and accompanists. He opted instead for a more equitable system, choosing each program's accompanists based on availability and expertise with certain styles, and having conducting assistants all share in responsibilities in rehearsals. Finally, Wolfe instituted a change in audition procedures. Whereas under Hillis' system all choristers auditioned every year and professional candidates had to take a theory test, with Wolfe the singers auditioned only every other year and the theory test was dropped. The singers understood in Wolfe's early days that the Chorus was certainly entering a new era, and they wondered where the experience would lead.

The 1994-95 CSC season began with a monumental program, a series of concerts that included Bruckner's *Psalm 150*, Hugo Wolf's *Der Feuerreiter*, and Beethoven's *Elegy* and *Choral Fantasy*, prepared by both Wolfe and Frazes Hill. Scheduled as the CSO's season opener, the program was dedicated to Margaret Hillis in honor of her 37 years of work with the Chorus. At the first performance on September 17, Hillis was awarded the CSO's prestigious Theodore Thomas medallion, an honor named after its first conductor, and on September 20 Chicago Mayor Daley proclaimed that day to be Margaret Hillis day. Also at this concert series she was named Music Director Laureate of the CSC, although unlike the similar honor bestowed upon Sir Georg Solti, she would not be returning to prepare the Chorus as a guest.

The Chorus next performed a special concert in December, a benefit for the Hillis Fellowship Fund. This is the last such concert mentioned on available information. Wolfe and Frazes Hill prepared the Chorus for this Christmas program, but Wolfe added a number of guest ensembles to create more variety. Later in December, Pierre Boulez

conducted the Chorus in a program that included Bartók's *The Miraculous Mandarin* and one of his own compositions, *Le visage nuptial*. Wolfe prepared the Bartók, but guest chorus master Grant Gershon prepared the Boulez piece, for reasons that are undocumented. The Bartók was recorded and released on the Deutsche Grammophon label.

The winter-spring portion of the season would have three more programs, one large and two with smaller groups, but all prepared by a healthier Wolfe. In January Zubin Mehta conducted the large program, Orff's *Carmina Burana*, with the Chicago Children's Chorus as a guest ensemble. In recent years, the CSC had been using this ensemble more than the Glen Ellyn Children's Chorus. George Solti returned as a guest to conduct Shostokovich's *Symphony No. 13* in February, involving only the CSC basses, and Donald Runnicles conducted the ladies in Holst's *The Planets* in April, finishing the season. Solti recorded the Shostokovich piece, which was released on the London label. He was still a popular conductor and a top seller for London, but classical recordings were getting quite expensive to make and had much smaller return compared to popular styles of music. The years had also accumulated numerous recordings of the same classical works, and the market was becoming saturated. Although the CSC would still record several more albums in 1995, these market realities would force a slow-down in making recordings afterwards. Sometime in 1995, the Chorus and Orchestra recorded for the Telarc label Berlioz's famous arrangement of "La Marseillaise" by Rouget de L'Ilse, but this is not listed on any subscription performance program.

Similar financial forces would begin to cause a cut-back in Ravinia performances for the CSC. The increasing salaries and contractual guarantees were good for the

professionals in the group, but made it more difficult for Ravinia to hire the CSC.²⁴⁶

Ravinia would use the Chorus four times in 1995, but only one classical program with a larger group. Pops programs used smaller forces and were cheaper to produce, plus required less preparation time. Kunzel directed the first program, a pops evening featuring Broadway and operetta selections. Next, Chailly used the Chorus in a classical program of Beethoven's *Choral Fantasy* and Mendelssohn's *Second Symphony*. The final Ravinia programs for the Chorus were two more pops programs, with Kunzel conducting evenings of Hollywood and Broadway selections, using the Ravinia Festival Orchestra.

The 1995-96 regular season was much more significant for the CSC, holding the promise of three substantial programs and one special concert, all prepared by Wolfe. Solti had been given the opportunity to plan a particularly large program in a series of pre-season concerts. On September 23 and 26, he conducted the CSO and the CSC in Acts I and II of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, allowing the Chorus to return to concert opera. He conducted Act III on September 24 and 27.

Critics were enamored with the performance. Tribune critic John von Rhein wrote,

Last weekend you could call the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, without fear of contradiction, the best and most prestigious Wagnerian pit band in the world of opera. Even as Georg Solti blockbusters go, his concert performances of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, presented in segments Saturday night and Sunday afternoon, were an extraordinary experience—painstakingly prepared and powerfully executed. . . . The CSO Chorus covered itself in glory. . . . It would be no exaggeration to call this a milestone in Solti's Wagnerian career to rank with his historic recording of the *Ring*.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁶ Joseph Fabbioli, telephone interview by author, 26 July 2000, tape recording.

²⁴⁷ John von Rhein, "Solti lifts singers, CSO to Wagnerian pinnacle: 'Meistersinger' rivals best on record," review of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* by Richard Wagner (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Tribune, 25 September 1995, sect. 2, p. 8.

This enormously successful Wagner program was recorded live on the London label, and would win the 1997 Grammy Award for Best Opera Recording, another great success in which the Chorus was privileged to participate. Although the Chorus still bore the "strong imprint" of Margaret Hillis, as one critic charged,²⁴⁸ Duain Wolfe derived tremendous satisfaction that his work with the Chorus was so esteemed by the critics and could also contribute to a Grammy-winning album.²⁴⁹ Certainly the Chorus was continuing its tradition of excellence under its new Music Director's leadership. The choristers had no way of knowing that this experience would represent two finalities: the last big program that Solti would conduct with the Chorus, and the last Grammy-winning album on which they would appear.

The December program was another historic first. Modeled after the successes of other large symphony choruses around the country, this series of special concerts were designed to be an entertaining Christmas program that would draw people who may not otherwise attend programs at Orchestra Hall. Duain Wolfe had been asked to take the lead on this new idea and design the program himself. He not only chose the music, he also conducted the four performances, which included the CSC and members of the CSO. This program marked his first appearance as a performing conductor. Songs were lighter in nature, and to further draw in the community and liven up the performance, he used the Chicago Children's Choir and a group of dancers. These "Welcome Yule" performances drew strong crowds (thus the need for four performances), though financially they were

²⁴⁸ James R. Oestreich, "Solti and the Chicago in 'Meistersinger,'" review of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* by Richard Wagner (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), New York Times, 26 September 1995, sect. B1.

²⁴⁹ Duain Wolfe, interview by author.

mostly a break-even project for the Orchestral Association.²⁵⁰ Understanding the lighter nature of this holiday program, the critics seemed to enjoy themselves as well, though some questioned the desirability of using the CSO in this type of program. Guest writer Dan Tucker described the event:

This "first annual" event offered Christmas songs imaginatively arranged and scored, an audience sing-along, gifted young singers and dancers by the score, and the huge, gleaming sound of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus. There was even some good music. While it lasted, the combination was hard to resist. . . . Wolfe himself made an engaging guide for the evening as a combination conductor and emcee.²⁵¹

After discussing the fine performances of the more serious numbers, he thought a bit less of the pops-oriented portion:

With one of two exceptions, the rest of the program lowered its aim to just having fun. It succeeded pretty well, especially in performances by the agile youngsters from Moves Dance Theater. But no musical value can survive "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer," and after that, the evening became the artistic equivalent of corn flakes. It left one wondering whether concentrated cuteness is a really desirable goal for the CSO or any comparable organization. But that question is probably moot until next Christmas.²⁵²

Despite such public questions, this inaugural "Welcome Yule program was deemed a resounding success, and it became an annual non-subscription event.

The Chorus returned to more serious fare with two February programs. The first, an Allied Arts program, was a single performance of Mahler's *Second Symphony*. This was performed under Seiji Ozawa and the Boston Symphony, which was on a North American tour. Such a performance with another orchestra was a rare event, and a treat

²⁵⁰ Tom Hallet, former Vice President of Finance and Administration, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, interview by author, 7 August 2000, Chicago, tape recording.

²⁵¹ Dan Tucker, "Holiday best: CSO stoops to Pops—and lifts it up," review of "Welcome Yule" Christmas Pops program of various composers (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Tribune, 22 December 1995, sect. 2, p. 12.

²⁵² Ibid.

for the choristers, perhaps one of the minor highlights of their history. Critic John von Rhein was sorely disappointed in some of the instrumental playing and in some of Ozawa's interpretation, but again loved the Chorus. ". . . their hushed entrance was a goose-pimpling moment worth waiting for. The massed voices proved the major element of a solidly professional but hardly transcendent Mahler."²⁵³

The following week, Barenboim conducted Beethoven's oratorio, *Christ on the Mount of Olives*, the Chorus' first time performing that piece. The Chorus then performed on the Orchestra's season finale, Mahler's *Eighth Symphony*. Guest ensembles included Waukegan Concert Chorus and the Glen Ellyn Children's Chorus. Christoph Eschenbach conducted, marking his first outing with the CSC on a subscription concert during the regular season. The performance venue was Medina Temple, as Orchestra Hall was undergoing a massive renovation.

The Ravinia season of 1996 would be somewhat disappointing, consisting of two pops programs and only one classical program. Eschenbach conducted a Verdi *Requiem* performance at the beginning of the season, then Kunzel did two Broadway programs, the first of these using the Ravinia Festival Orchestra. Wolfe prepared the Chorus for all of these programs as well.

Choristers would find themselves thankfully more engaged in the 1996-97 season, and also participate in some rather unusual programs. The Chorus season opened with Barenboim conducting an October program of two rarely heard Schubert pieces, his *Psalm 23 for Women's Chorus and Piano*, and *Offertory for Tenor, Chorus, and*

²⁵³ John von Rhein, "Seiji Ozawa returns with a bit of Mahler," review of *Symphony No. 2*, by Gustav Mahler (Boston Symphony Orchestra and Chicago Symphony Chorus [Chicago]), Chicago Tribune, 11 February 1996, sect. 4, p. 11.

Orchestra. The performances were dedicated to the memory of Rafael Kubelik, former CSO Music Director, who died the previous August. In the middle of that series, the Chorus appeared on a CSO chamber concert with brass and other players. Also conducted by Barenboim, the choral pieces included Mozart's "Ave Verum Corpus," Schubert's "In der Tiefe wohnt das Licht" from *Rosamunde*, some Bruckner motets, and some settings of Stephen Foster songs. In early December, Boulez conducted and recorded the Orchestra and Chorus in Scriabin's *Prometheus*. The Scriabin piece would be the Chorus' only recording in 1996. Wolfe's annual "Welcome Yule" Christmas series was performed later in December, again with a children's chorus and dancers. The Chorus premiered a piece commissioned for the occasion, Fry's "Father Christmas Comes to Chicago." That year the number of performances was cut to three, but performances would be added the next year.

In January, the Chorus returned to more substantial music with a program of Mahler's *Second Symphony*, conducted by Bernard Haitink. Another large program was scheduled for early March: a production of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. Choristers found that memorable not only for the beautiful music, but for working with Bach specialist Peter Schreier. Schreier not only sang the role of the Evangelist, but also conducted the performances, and did all of this from memory. After the performance, the audience responded with an enthusiastic standing ovation and numerous "bravos." Reviewer Wynne Delacoma's was none too impressed with the solo voices (including Schreier's), but indicated that Schreier "propelled the drama, bursting with excitement to set up the

next scene . . . "²⁵⁴ Delacoma gave strongest praise to the ensembles.

The CSO responded with vigorous, expressive playing. The music sounded lithe in spots, poignantly heartfelt in others and always suffused by Bach's emphatic lilt. In the passion's crowd scenes, the Symphony Chorus tossed cutting phrases back and forth, bringing to life S. Matthew's images of unruly bystanders. Their tenderness in Bach's gentle chorales was moving.²⁵⁵

Andrew Malone was even more enamored with the Chorus' singing and Schreier's conducting.

This was, in short, a first class piece of conducting, and along with the choral singing, one of the two great glories of this performance. The Chicago Symphony Choir simply outdid themselves. I have seen previous performances of theirs, and though they were never less than distinguished, this seemed at times to be an entirely different choir. . . . All respect should go to Schreier and Duain Wolfe, director of the choir, for forming such an unforgettable experience. . . . I think I pay my highest tribute to this performance by saying it is one of the few concerts that I will remember forever.²⁵⁶

The Chorus particularly enjoyed working with Schreier, and he would become a favorite conductor with the singers.

Solti returned one more time in March to finish up the Chorus' season. He conducted the CSO, CSC, and Glen Ellyn Children's Chorus in Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*, and recorded the program. The program would unknowingly signify several hallmarks. This would be Solti's last performance with the CSC, and one of the last with the CSO. Also, the recording would also be the last one made by the CSC. Solti was a good seller, but other conductors have not been as popular. Making recordings had become nearly cost prohibitive for the Orchestral Association. Sadly, market forces had

²⁵⁴ Wynne Delacoma, "CSO repeats 'Passion:' Peter Schreier conducts, sings in Bach work," review of *St. Matthew Passion*, by J. S. Bach (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Sun-Times, 9 March 1997, Entertainment section, p. 43.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Andrew Malone, "CSO's transcendental *Passion*," review of *St. Matthew Passion*, by J. S. Bach (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Voices: The Chicago Maroon's Arts and Entertainment Journal, 11 March 1997, p. 15.

forced a cut-back on the recording schedule for both Orchestra and Chorus, and as of this writing, there are no plans to make any more recordings with the Chorus for the foreseeable future.

The expense of using the Chorus continued to affect its Ravinia work as well. The 1997 Ravinia season consisted of only one work with the Chorus: the Brahms *Requiem*, conducted by Eschenbach. Prospects for the full schedules of the past looked grim.

The year 1997 would continue to take a downward turn for choristers and the beloved leaders of their past. Margaret Hillis had continued into her career of guest conducting after her departure from the Chorus, but very shortly after her retirement she began to feel sick. A heavy smoker, she was eventually diagnosed with terminal lung cancer, and by 1997 was quite ill. Then near the beginning of the new fall season, choristers had more bad news: while vacationing in France, Sir Georg Solti unexpectedly died on September 5, 1997 at the age of 84. He had been preparing to conduct and record a program of Wagner choruses with the CSC,²⁵⁷ and the *St. John Passion* was one of the scores that had been left open on his desk.²⁵⁸ He had also been scheduled to conduct an all-Beethoven instrumental program, which would have been his 1000th concert with the CSO.²⁵⁹

Many of those who had known him in Chicago went to the Lyric Opera House to make a recording of personal condolences. Elizabeth Buccheri stated that Hillis was "particularly moved by [his death], because he was the Music Director who kind of put

²⁵⁷ John von Rhein, "Sir Georg Solti—the Last of His Kind," American Record Guide, Jan/Feb 1998, vol. 61, p.10.

²⁵⁸ Frank Villella, interview by author.

²⁵⁹ John von Rhein, "Sir Georg Solti—the Last of His Kind."

her on the map."²⁶⁰ Hillis, in poor health and on oxygen, was driven down to the Lyric Opera House to add her voice to the recording for his widow, Lady Valerie. All of Chicago mourned the loss, and many summaries of his accomplishments were written in the international media. John von Rhein referred to him as the last of the great Central European conductors and stated that with the loss of many other top level conductors such as von Karajan and Bernstein,

beleaguered classical music stands almost totally forlorn of senior eminences. Of these musicians, only Carlo Maria Giulini, 83 . . . remains. . . . Solti's passing was noted all over the world of music, but perhaps nowhere as extensively as in Chicago, whose symphony he served as music director for 22 years, from 1969 to 1991, and as music director laureate for six more seasons.²⁶¹

Acknowledging the influence of his hundreds of recordings, von Rhein remarked that his partnership with London Decca records "not only made his name, but it brought the Chicago Symphony, and Chicago, the fruits of cultural prominence and worldwide media success—including a record 32 Grammy Awards, more than any other artist, classical or popular."²⁶² Along with Hillis, Solti had been responsible for making the Chicago Symphony Chorus the superior ensemble that it became, along with the international reputation. To help the musicians and the city remember and thank him, Barenboim planned a special memorial concert in October.

Creating a roller-coaster ride of emotions, the beginning of the 1997-98 performance season was one of the most exciting in many years, keeping Wolfe and the Chorus unusually busy. For the past three summers, Orchestra Hall had been undergoing extensive renovations that stretched into two neighboring buildings. As the overall

²⁶⁰ Elizabeth Buccheri, interview by author.

²⁶¹ John von Rhein, "Sir Georg Solti—the Last of His Kind."

²⁶² Ibid.

organizational structure of the Orchestral Association had grown and new programs recently added, the Association realized the need for improving existing space and even adding new space. The resulting changes created more office space with all offices more centrally located (including an office for Duain Wolfe), a new rehearsal space that enabled the Chorus to rehearse in the building, and a larger stage in Orchestra Hall with improved acoustics. This was accomplished partly by raising the roof and extending the back of the building. Previously the stage had always been wide and shallow, with little room on stage for large forces, and almost no backstage space. In addition to the larger stage, a new balcony above the stage had been built especially to accommodate the Chorus. This meant that both the Chorus and Orchestra would have more entrances and exits (a safety issue) and more room. The Chorus would no longer need to rent rehearsal, office and library space in other buildings a block or two away. They now had a much more efficient operation, plus morale could improve as the Chorus would feel more a part of the Orchestra's organization. Other new amenities in the Center included a radio broadcast studio, an education center, and a restaurant.

The new \$110 million complex was dubbed Symphony Center, and was given a gala opening night on October 4, 1997, designated a benefit for the Musicians Pension Fund. (The opening concert was nearly canceled by the threat of a musicians strike, but this disaster was averted by a signed contract less than 24 hours before the performance.)²⁶³ The nearly four hour performance (with two long intermissions) included several different pieces, speeches, and guest artists. Even critics from New

²⁶³ John von Rhein, "The CSO's new Symphony Center is all dressed up, with someplace to go," review of Symphony Center's Gala Opening concert of various works (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Tribune, 6 October 1997, sect. 5, p. 1.

York and London attended to write for their respective papers. Though the performance had somewhat mixed reviews, all marveled at the visual and acoustic improvements of the building. The Chorus capped off the evening with Bruckner's powerful *Te Deum*. As was common, the Chorus received short but strong notices, though some critics noted that some acoustic adjustment was still needed for the area around the Chorus to help them project. Barenboim had a difficult time finding a suitable configuration for the singers in rehearsal. "Their sound was glorious in quiet, hushed moments. But this chorus is capable of heaven-storming song whose forceful consonants can nail listeners to their seats. That visceral power was missing Saturday night."²⁶⁴

Immediately following the end of the Gala concert, the first annual Day of Music began at midnight, a 24-hour period of free music events in and around the Symphony Center. The Chorus participated in that event as well, and continues to assist with that every year.

The inaugural festivities continued the following week with a series of special concerts. Barenboim again included the Chorus, which sang two of its standards: the Stravinsky *Symphony of Psalms*, and Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. On October 22, the CSO and CSC turned its attention to Solti's memorial concert. That program included the CSO playing two Wagner preludes and the CSC singing Mozart's *Requiem*. A special program booklet was printed that gave highlights of Solti's career and messages from those who knew him. Had he not died, he would have conducted a Beethoven program on October 25th, which would have been his 1000th performance with the CSO.

²⁶⁴ Wynne Delacoma, review of Symphony Center's Gala Opening concert of various works (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Sun-Times, 6 October 1997, p. 26.

The flurry of activity for this season may have seemed to overshadow another milestone, but it was time to recognize the Chorus for another reason. The season marked the CSC's 40th anniversary. Although Duain Wolfe did not conduct a special concert himself with the Chorus specially featured, several of the concerts on which the Chorus appeared were labeled an acknowledgement of this anniversary, including their November program. For that series of concerts, Pierre Boulez returned to conduct several Schubert songs for male chorus and Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloe*.²⁶⁵ Boulez's interpretations received excellent reviews, with Orchestra and Chorus considered beautifully expressive.

In December, Wolfe presented the annual Christmas Pops concert, this time extended to five performances. The popularity of these family Christmas shows was increasing with Chicago audiences, though they weren't a favorite with some choristers. There was some degree of repetition from year to year, and of course with this many performances, they involved a substantial time commitment in repertoire that wasn't as fulfilling as the regular programs.

Following a hectic fall portion of the season, the Chorus would have more time to relax to prepare for only one more large program, a May performance of Beethoven's *Fidelio*. However, another sad event disrupted the winter preparations. On February 4, 1998, just weeks before the 40th anniversary of the Chorus' debut, Margaret Hillis succumbed to her illness. The CSO had an instrumental program scheduled on the day after her death, and added the "Nimrod Variation" from Elgar's *Enigma Variations* in her memory. In a front-page article, critic John von Rhein wrote, "It is no exaggeration to

²⁶⁵ N.B. - Solti had originally been scheduled to conduct Wagner choruses for this program.

say that Hillis, along with her former teacher Robert Shaw, transformed the performance of choral music in the U.S."²⁶⁶ She had been helpful to Duain Wolfe as he went through his initial transition, and he observed, "She was greatly respected by the major conductors of the world and greatly revered by the singers she directed. . . . I appreciated her trust and support as a colleague and, especially, her warmth as a friend."²⁶⁷ Under her leadership, the Chorus had appeared with the CSC nearly 600 times, recorded 45 works, and won 9 Grammy Awards.²⁶⁸ The CSC had also become "known for almost preternatural precision in attacking notes, a lightness and agility in playing complicated virtuoso passages and a talent in making a text immediately understandable."²⁶⁹ Henry Fogel, by now the President of the Orchestral Association, offered, "One cannot overstate the contribution that Margaret Hillis made to the musical life of Chicago—and, indeed, the world. . . . Her untiring devotion to musical perfection led to results in choral performance previously thought unattainable."²⁷⁰ Her mentor Robert Shaw commented, "Her Chicago Symphony Chorus was one of the finest in the world. . . . In addition, she was a strong and lovely human being."²⁷¹ The Chicago Tribune gave a glowing tribute to her in its editorial of February 6.

Margaret Hillis' death Wednesday came only a few weeks before the 40th anniversary of the debut of the Chicago Symphony Chorus, which she founded and which helped focus attention on the city as an international center of musicmaking. It was a towering achievement that combined equal parts of musical genius, grit, and a big heart. . . . Despite the worldwide recognition of the chorus, keeping it going was a constant struggle: To get sufficient funding, to have it accompany the orchestra on tours, even to save it from cutbacks or elimination during a budget crisis in 1984.

²⁶⁶ John von Rhein, "Chicago loses its giant in world of choral music," Chicago Tribune, 5 February 1998, sect. 1, p. 1.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Wynne Delacoma, "A vocal leader: Chicago Symphony Chorus founder Margaret Hillis dies," Chicago Sun-Times, 5 February 1998.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ John von Rhein, "Chicago loses its giant in world of choral music."

Hillis' determination won all those and numerous other battles to keep the chorus in business and thriving. Along with her strong will, deep voice, and imposing public persona, Hillis also had a generous heart and a soft touch with friends and colleagues that earned her the nickname Mama Chorus. They, and thousands of music fans, will miss her.²⁷²

The stunned CSC had to prepare for another memorial concert for the second time that season. The program was given on March 14 in Orchestra Hall. A mixture of spoken remembrances alternating with choral music accompanied by piano and organ, the service focused on honoring her playful moments and musical achievements. The Chorus invited alumni to join them for the program, and former singers traveled from all over the country to build a group of nearly 170. The CSC sang each piece under a different conductor, each famous colleagues of Hillis. The music included Brahms' *Nachtwache I*, Op. 104, No. 1 (conducted by Dale Warland), Gershwin's "Fascinatin' Rhythm" and "Summertime" (conducted by Robert Page), Bach's "Wir setzen uns mit Tränen nieder," from the *St. Matthew Passion* (conducted by Dennis Keene), several chorales from Bach's *St. Matthew*, sung by the Chorus and audience (conducted by Duain Wolfe), and Lutkin's "Sevenfold Amen."²⁷³ Following the Benediction, a final piece, not listed in the printed program, was played: a recording of the CSC singing Brahms' "Wie lieblich sing deine Wohnungen" from *Ein Deutsches Requiem*.²⁷⁴ Of course Hillis had prepared the piece herself for the recording of previous years.

With this difficulty behind them, the Chorus needed to concentrate on their blockbuster season finale, Beethoven's *Fidelio*. Conducted by Barenboim in late May, this semi-staged, costumed program was meant to both recognize the 40th anniversary of

²⁷² "Farewell to a Chicago maestra" (editorial), *Chicago Tribune*, 6 February 1998, sect. 1, p. 30.

²⁷³ Margaret Hillis Memorial Service printed program, 14 March 1998, supplied by the Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, Ill.

²⁷⁴ John von Rhein, "Chorus pays soaring tribute to Hillis," *Chicago Tribune*, ca. 15 March 1998.

the Chorus and cap off the new Symphony Center's inaugural season. Barenboim was also the Artistic Director of the Berlin State Opera, and he used some of the production staff from there in the Chicago production. In an unusual move, he replaced most of the spoken dialogue with a newly written, pre-recorded narrative and placed the setting in 1920's Germany.²⁷⁵ Critics were impressed with the overall production and performance. John von Rhein wrote, "Barenboim's firm sense of Beethoven's interior theater give the nearly three-hour performance its musical coherence and continuity. . . . The orchestra comes through in stalwart fashion. . . . The same holds true for the full-throated Chicago Symphony Chorus."²⁷⁶ He regretted that the Chorus had not been part of the staging—the singers used music and wore standard concert attire while on a platform in the rear of the stage.²⁷⁷

With the completion of the acclaimed *Fidelio* production, the CSC's 40th anniversary season ended on a high note. It had been one of many milestones, with events good and bad, and would certainly be one long remembered as a significant one in the history of the CSC.

Continuing a scaled-back Ravinia season, the Chorus had only two programs in 1998, both relatively cheap to produce. Kunzel directed a Broadway pops program with the Ravinia Festival Orchestra, and Eschenbach conducted a Beethoven *Ninth* with the CSO. Fortunately, the following regular season would make up for this lack of

²⁷⁵ John von Rhein, "In 'Fidelio,' the CSO revives Beethoven's salute to the perfect woman," Chicago Tribune, 25 May 1998, Tempo section, p. 1.

²⁷⁶ John von Rhein, "Marriage of 'Fidelio:' Barenboim weds music, drama at Symphony Center," review of *Fidelio*, by Ludwig van Beethoven (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Tribune, 28 May 1998.

²⁷⁷ John von Rhein, review of *Fidelio*, by Ludwig van Beethoven (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Opera News, August 1998, p. 43.

programming.

The 1998-99 season held much promise of a banner year. On the CSC schedule were six subscription programs, two special programs (including the Christmas Pops), and, at last, another European tour. The short tour would take place in late March and early April, and the Chorus would get to perform two different programs at the concert hall in Berlin, known as the Berlin Philharmonie. The guest appearances would be a part of the Staatsoper Festtage (State Opera Celebration) on the Brahms, and the Lindenoper Festival on the Schönberg. The Orchestra would also play two instrumental programs while there. For the CSC's portion, Barenboim and the administration chose to perform some of the most significant German compositions on the German's home turf: Brahms' *Ein Deutsches Requiem*, and Schönberg's formidable 12-tone opera, *Moses und Aron*. Choral writing is prominent in both works, with some jokingly referring to the Schönberg opera as "Moses and Aaron and Chorus." Dr. Gertrude Grisham, the long-time diction coach, was assigned to make sure that the Chorus' German diction would be impeccable.

With the Schönberg program so difficult, the first rehearsals of the season focused on that piece, but Wolfe later in the fall turned to the upcoming concert repertoire.²⁷⁸ The first program involved the CSC women in Debussy's *Nocturnes*, performed in late November and early December 1998. Cheryl Frazes Hill prepared the Chorus and Pierre Boulez conducted. The annual Christmas Pops followed with another five performances, each drawing a large audience. In preparation for the tour, The CSC performed the Brahms *Requiem* on their next program, in February. Those three performances were conducted by Barenboim and dedicated to the memory of Robert Shaw, the pre-eminent

²⁷⁸ Frank Vilella, interview by author.

American conductor who had just died. Several days after those three performances, Duain Wolfe had the honor of conducting the Brahms at two performances for the national convention of the American Choral Directors Association, meeting in Chicago. This was the first time he had conducted the full official CSO, though he had conducted members of the Orchestra in the Christmas Pops and other special concerts. The season continued on March 11-13 with the CSC ladies performing on a program of Mahler's *Third*. Again in anticipation of the coming tour, the Schönberg *Moses und Aron* was given two Chicago performances on March 24 and 16. With that completed, the Chorus began full preparations for the tour to Berlin.

There would be some obvious differences from their first tour in 1989, such as staying in only one city and doing two different programs. Also contrasting with the last tour, a different conductor would lead each program. CSO Music Director Daniel Barenboim would conduct the Brahms, but Principal Guest Conductor Pierre Boulez would do the Schönberg. As a famous modern composer, Boulez was something of a specialist with contemporary classical music.

The difficulty of the *Moses und Aron* program, and its call for numerous small groups and ensembles, led to the use of four conducting assistants. In addition to the regular assistants, Cheryl Frazes Hill and Don Horisberger, the Chorus also hired Elizabeth Buccheri and CSO Associate Conductor Yaron Traub to help out. Buccheri had served as Principal Accompanist of the CSC for many years, but by this time had phased herself out of that position and had left the Chorus for coaching and conducting opportunities at the Lyric Opera. However, she had accompanied this challenging piece twice before when it was performed under Solti, and her knowledge would prove quite

valuable. She agreed to do some accompanying on the condition that she could also conduct some rehearsals, limit her actual accompanying, prepare the small groups, and that she could play the celesta on tour.²⁷⁹ The Orchestral Association agreed and brought her back for this project.

The musicians left the United States on Sunday, March 28 in the afternoon, and arrived in Berlin the next morning, March 29. They had the rest of Monday and Tuesday free to recover from the journey and enjoy some sight-seeing of the area. On Wednesday the 31st, they had a short morning rehearsal in the Philharmonie hall on the Brahms, then performed the *Requiem* that evening. Audience reaction in the sold-out Philharmonie was quite enthusiastic, with a lengthy ovation. Following the performance, Barenboim proudly hosted a reception for the musicians at the Philharmonie, and made encouraging remarks similar to those of Solti ten years earlier. The next day, Thursday April 1, the *Moses und Aron* was given a morning rehearsal—somewhat longer than the Brahms—and then performed that evening. Again a highly enthusiastic ovation followed the performance, perhaps even stronger than the previous night after hearing such a great performance of a difficult work. Chorister Richard Livingston cites one of the more memorable reactions from the Berlin public was amazement that the same choir could perform works of such completely opposite styles, doing both so well, and especially doing them back to back on successive nights. The German speaking people were said to be enthralled with the diction, and some even began speaking to choristers in German, believing that they spoke the language. A story is told that one patron, insisting that he or she had attended every performance of the Schönberg done in Europe in the last 15 or 20

²⁷⁹ Elizabeth Buccheri, interview by author.

years, said that this was the first performance in which the words could be understood.

Choristers traveled back from Berlin to Chicago on Friday, April 2 and eagerly awaited the critic's remarks.

Barenboim's Brahms performance received decidedly mixed reviews, although the Chorus itself received mostly positive remarks. Boulez's Schönberg performance got much stronger praise. The critic called "bec" wrote:

The two evenings in the Philharmonie seemed to occur with two different orchestras. Under Barenboim's direction, parts of the orchestra that were supposed to play together sometimes failed to do so. Boulez's Schönberg opera on the other hand sounded like one solid piece. It was a perfect and triumphantly celebrated performance. On both nights, the brilliant chorus fascinated and the soloists fit the extraordinary class of the orchestra.²⁸⁰

One critic in particular wasn't too impressed with Barenboim's performance:

"The Chicago Symphony Chorus, who sang passionately with the inner quality that Barenboim evidently tried to achieve, felt very superficial under a conductor who seeks tension only in strong up-and-down strokes. On the other hand, the psychology of Brahms is civil, restrained, mediated."²⁸¹ Others were more pleased, particularly with the Chorus. From *Der Tagesspiegel*: "The powerful dynamics of the choir, consisting of over 150 singers, change quickly and easily between roaring out and holding back on the slightest sign from the conductor, amplify the dramatic effect and make this performance a triumph of passion."²⁸² From *Die Welt*:

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's return to the Staatsoper's Festtage . . . accompanied by the huge chorus affiliated with the orchestra, was without question a

²⁸⁰ bec, "Boulez and Barenboim conduct Brahms and Schönberg at the Philharmonie," review of *Ein Deutsches Requiem* by Johannes Brahms and *Moses und Aron* by Arnold Schönberg (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Berliner Zeitung*, 3 April 1999.

²⁸¹ Stephen Speicher, "Almost magnificence: Barenboim and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra play the *Deutsches Requiem*," review of *Ein Deutsches Requiem* by Johannes Brahms (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Berliner Zeitung*, 3 April 1999.

²⁸² Christina Tilmann, "Death, where is thy sting?" review of *Ein Deutsches Requiem* by Johannes Brahms (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Der Tagesspiegel* (Berlin), 3 April 1999.

major musical event. In the sold-out Philharmonie, the guests performed the *Deutsches Requiem* by Johannes Brahms in the most exquisite fashion thinkable, almost delectable in its sampling of all soft shades. Chorus and Orchestra whispered the song of death as if they did not want to startle the living at all costs.²⁸³

These were excellent reviews and tantalizing comments to boost the Chorus' morale. But the comments on the Schönberg performance were far stronger, exceeding all expectations.

The concert of the century! . . . Under the truly magnificent leadership of Pierre Boulez, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and its affiliated phenomenal chorus, prepared by Duain Wolfe, performed Arnold Schönberg's *Moses und Aron*: the "old testament" of the new music. It has to be said: a performance worth remembering at the end of the century that one would have expected here from the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. After the Americans' guest performance, one should not expect to hear Schönberg's most demanding piece in comparable perfection ever again. . . . The voices of the orchestra form the never-ending chain of construction that support the work, and the chorus adapts itself speaking, whispering, screaming to the panorama of Schönberg's thoughts with prudent emotion.²⁸⁴

Critic Manuel Brug referred to the Chorus as "equally formidable" to the Orchestra and called the performance "A collective effort of rarely heard quality."²⁸⁵ He continued:

The difficulty was handled like a walk in the park, especially with the almost perfect pronunciation of the chorus, with magnificent presence in the piano sections, never harsh in the forte. The choir was the sole competition to the dialogues between Moses and Aaron, since the other singers, provided by the Staatsoper, only provided the verbal cues. One would like to hear more of this choir—with Boulez and Mahler's *Eighth* or maybe *Gurrelieder*?²⁸⁶

The Chicago Symphony Chorus had gone to one of the most musically sophisticated cities in the world, performed challenging and contrasting repertoire that was native to the people they were visiting, and came home with some of the greatest

²⁸³ Klaus Geitel, "Requiem under the filter," review of *Ein Deutsches Requiem* by Johannes Brahms (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Die Welt* (Berlin), 3 April 1999.

²⁸⁴ Klaus Geitel, "Worth remembering: 'Moses und Aron' conducted by Boulez," review of *Moses und Aron* by Arnold Schönberg (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Berliner Morgenpost*, 4 April 1999.

²⁸⁵ Manuel Brug, "A sonic walk in the cathedral of belief," review of *Moses und Aron* by Arnold Schönberg (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Die Welt*, 3 April 1999.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

accolades ever given to it. The choristers showed the world that the success of their tour ten years prior was not a fluke. The 1999 tour to Berlin had been a supreme triumph of the highest caliber, one of the most significant events in the history of the Chorus. And Duain Wolfe was given affirmation that he had successfully followed in Margaret Hillis' footsteps and made the Chorus his own.

Shortly after arriving home, the choristers had to come back down to earth to finish their season in Chicago. They had two more programs later in April. The first was another important program, a world premiere of Alan Harbison's *Four Psalms*. This concert series was conducted by Christoph Eschenbach, who was fast becoming a favorite with members of the Chorus. Two days after finishing that series, the Chorus had a special run-out performance at Highland Park High School in Highland Park, Illinois. (This is the community on the Gold Coast where the Ravinia Festival is held.) Appearing on the school's Focus on the Arts celebration, members of the CSC were joined by members of the CSO and members of the Civic Orchestra of Chicago, plus orchestra members from Highland Park and Deerfield High Schools, and choristers from Highland Park High School. The students must have been particularly thrilled to perform with these famous professional musicians. The CSC participated on selections from Orff's *Carmina Burana* and the song "Tonight" from Bernstein's *West Side Story*. Conductors on the program included Charles Emmons, Jr. (probably a high school music teacher), Cheryl Frazes Hill, and Duain Wolfe. Though not all such small run-outs are documented or included in Appendix I, this concert is indicative of a new direction taken by the Orchestral Association, discussed in the following section.

The bulk of the Chorus was finished for the season, but a group of men returned in late May and early June for a performance of Shostokovich's *Symphony No. 13*, conducted by Mstislav Rostropovich. The 1998-99 regular season had been unusually active and most memorable.

By the end of the season, another milestone had quietly passed: the end of the Hillis Fellowship Fund. Created at the end of Hillis' first season, the fund kept going through her personality and desire to encourage singers to take private lessons and improve their skills. The Fellowship Fund had continued for five seasons after Hillis' retirement, and had even survived her by two years. With her gone, nobody was left to take up the cause, and the scholarship funds dried up. The final disbursements were made during the 1998-99 season.

Sadly, the 1999 Ravinia season would be one of the most disappointingly small seasons in many years. The only program documented that season is a concert of Holst's *The Planets*, which only needs a modest group of ladies. Eschenbach presided over the performance.

The 1999-2000 season would not be as intense for the CSC as the previous one, but would still have most enjoyable programs. Slightly smaller than the last year, probably as a way to balance expenditures, it included three subscription programs and two special concert programs. The Chorus' season began with another rare opportunity to perform with a different orchestra. The Berlin Philharmonic and their conductor Claudio Abbado were paying a reciprocal visit to Orchestra Hall, following the CSO's spring tour to Berlin. They would be appearing on a concert series for foreign orchestras entitled "International Orchestras Series" and requested the privilege of using the famous CSC on

one piece. The Chorus management gladly obliged, and the CSC ladies performed Mahler's *Symphony No. 3* on October 18, 1999. That was the third occasion on which the piece was performed that year.

Peter Schreier returned for the CSC's first subscription program, a performance of the first three parts of Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, performed on December 16, 17, and 18. As with his production of the *St. Matthew Passion*, Schreier both sang a part and conducted the program, all memorized. Overlapping that concert series was the annual Christmas Pops program, with five performances beginning on December 18. Clearly one of these performances on the 18th was a matinee. All five Pops concerts were sold out, and the Association decided to add a sixth performance the next year. Wolfe continued to plan and conduct this series himself.

The next half of the season consisted of two subscription programs. In January, Barenboim conducted Mozart's *Coronation Mass* and Bruckner's *Mass No. 3 in F Minor*. This was the Orchestra's and Chorus' first performance of the Bruckner, and it earned a powerful reception from the audience and critics. Wynne Delacoma effused over the Bruckner:

... the real drama came after the intermission. . . . Barenboim and his colleagues unleashed a performance that ranged from rafter-shaking exultation to soul-searching quiet. It's surprising that the CSO has never played this work before, in part because of the orchestra's close association with Bruckner's symphonies and also because the performances sounded so authoritative. The chorus, prepared by Director Duain Wolfe, was especially outstanding, singing with impeccable precision and depth of feeling.²⁸⁷

With such strong reviews in recent years, concerns that the CSC could never sound as

²⁸⁷ Wynne Delacoma, review of *Mass in C Major, K. 317* by Wolfgang Mozart, and *Mass in F Minor*, by Anton Bruckner (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), *Chicago Sun-Times*, 21 January 2000, p. 42.

good under another director should have been alleviated.

The Chorus then ended their season early with a March performance of Krzysztof Penderecki's *Seven Gates of Jerusalem*, sung in Latin and conducted by the composer. This was the CSC's first time to sing one of his compositions as well as work with him as a conductor. Commissioned by the city of Jerusalem for its 3000th anniversary, it received its world premiere in 1997. Typical of his compositions, the piece used a large array of instruments to provide a wide pallet of colors, and had extremes in large and small gestures. The Chorus was challenged by the modern piece, but executed it well.

The 2000 Ravinia season, though still small, was at least a bit more substantial than the previous season. Eschenbach conducted two classical programs with the Chorus: Beethoven's *Ninth* (including a special performance for benefactors, which this author was privileged to attend), and Schönberg's *Gurrelieder*. To save money, Ravinia cut the conductor's piano rehearsal and perhaps also one regular Chorus rehearsal for the Beethoven preparation, but the Chorus agreed to those cuts in order to have the opportunity to perform. The Schönberg piece, a massive two-and-a-half hour late Romantic cantata, called for the full Chorus and extra instrumentalists, plus five soloists and narrator, to total about 350 musicians. Understandably, sometimes hearing soloists and Chorus became difficult, but the performance received generally favorable reviews. "[Eschenbach] and the CSO threw themselves into Schönberg's tale . . . with a gusto that combined precisely shaped phrasing and emotional abandon. . . . When they could be heard over the orchestral frenzy, the chorus added vivid, expressive color."²⁸⁸

²⁸⁸ Wynne Delacoma, review of *Gurrelieder*, by Arnold Schönberg (Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus), Chicago Sun-Times, 31 July 2000.

The CSC's seasons of more recent years have shown somewhat of a slowing down in numbers of subscription programs or performances, but some years have still been very full and exciting to balance the slower seasons, and special concerts and educational performances have been added. The Ravinia cut-backs have been disconcerting to both the Chorus and Ravinia administration, but additional programming has been cost-prohibitive. Innovations in programming throughout the regular season tend to come more from guest conductors rather than Barenboim himself, and Barenboim has still been under some criticism with some audience members and musicians, though others have said he has improved and shown himself to be a great musician. Subscription sales have declined, but there have been no other charismatic conductors like Solti on the horizon to take the world's top orchestras. There are still choral masterworks for the Chicago Symphony Chorus to conquer for the first time, such as Penderecki's *St. Luke Passion*, but as they continue on in the new Millennium, it is sure to meet its challenges head-on and achieve new heights of success.

The CSC Organization Further Evolves in the 1990s

Although the AGMA minimum of professional singers has not increased since the agreed-upon figure of 105 in 1980, by the 1990s the number of professionals had again crept up a bit past the minimum. Today the number hovers around 110 to 120 professionals on the roster, though at any given time some of these singers are on a leave of absence or choose not to do certain programs. An additional roster is kept of professionals who can be called upon on an as-needed basis for large projects. Salaries

have continued to rise such that members with long-term seniority can make over \$25 per rehearsal hour and about \$150 per performance.²⁸⁹ Though still not a full-time job, professional members in the Chorus can find other work around the area and make a living as full-time singers, and some choristers do. A few choristers have been with the group for over 30 years. The minimum number of programs for which the professionals must be paid is around five or six each year, a contractual minimum of 15 performances, but these are not always offered as subscription concerts. Some are special concerts like the Christmas Pops or youth concerts. Some seasons still don't provide enough performances for all professionals, so by AGMA agreement these individuals get paid a stipend to make up for the lack of work. This may seem like wasteful spending, but it is actually cheaper for the Orchestral Association to pay the professionals rather than produce more concerts. For a typical program, it costs around \$60,000 per performance in payroll for Chorus members and staff.²⁹⁰

The number of interns in the CSC is close to 40 but that can vary as well. The rest of the ranks continue to be made up by dedicated volunteers who believe in the mission of the Chorus and love to sing. Chorister Frank Villella is an example of a common way in which singers join the ranks of the professional choristers. He first joined the CSC as a volunteer for the 1992-93 season, was elevated to intern the following year, and became a professional his third year.²⁹¹

As the Orchestral Association was searching for a new CSC Music Director, the CSC staff would see a few small but significant changes in the 1992-93 season. Cheryl

²⁸⁹ Richard Livingston, interview by author.

²⁹⁰ Karen Deschere, interview by author, 10 August 2000, Chicago, tape recording.

²⁹¹ Frank Villella, interview by author.

Frazes Hill was newly promoted to Associate Conductor of the CSC upon the retirement of Richard Garrin, who had been an assistant for 10 years. Frazes Hill became the assistant with the most seniority, and continues in her position to this day. A third Assistant Conductor was hired, the first time to have three regularly on staff. James Rogner filled this position until his death in 1995. Don Horisberger, serving as Assistant Conductor since 1989, was promoted to Associate Conductor in 1997, creating two Associates simultaneously. William Chin, the Director of the Chicago Children's Chorus, was hired as a CSC Assistant Conductor in 1999, creating a third permanent assistant for the second time. Horisberger and Chin continue in their positions today. In addition to keeping track of the Master Score in rehearsals and making musical notations and rehearsal notes, these assistants are also responsible for keeping track of absentee notes of singers, seating charts, and rosters of small internal ensembles, and also conduct sectional rehearsals or prepare small ensembles for performances as needed.

While the conducting staff grew, the Orchestral Association also added a new management position. Sonya Jacobson Starling had served for a number of years as an Administrative Assistant for the Chorus, but from 1992-94 her title became Assistant to the Manager. This title change seemed to indicate an evolution into what would be the Assistant Manager position, providing some additional help for the full-time Chorus Manager, Joseph Fabboli. The organization was still growing.²⁹²

When Fabboli left in 1993 to work for the Ravinia Festival, Sarah Hebert was hired to be the new Chorus Manager, serving for a period of two years. Following Sonya

²⁹² N.B. - the preceding and following statistics were derived from CSC programs in the Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and from conversations with staff in the Archives and Chorus Office.

Starling's departure in 1994, Kathrin Long was hired, with her title intermittently listed as Assistant Manager and Assistant to the Manager, giving further evidence of the evolution of Starling's position. Sarah Hebert left in 1995 and was replaced by Melvin Stuckman, who also served for two years as Manager. Susan Kramer Reddel joined the staff in 1996 after Kathrin Long left, with the clear title of Assistant Manager. When Manager Melvin Stuckman departed in 1997, Susan Reddel first served as Acting Chorus Manager, then was hired as the permanent Manager by November of that year and served in that capacity until sometime in 1998. Late in 1997, Angela Grimes was hired as the new Assistant Manager and still serves today in that full-time position.

Perhaps the most significant management change came in 1998. In recognition of the growing demands of the Manager's position, and in the desire that the duties be expanded to include development and outreach activities for the Chorus and other duties with the Orchestral Association, the Manager position was changed into the Executive Director position. Karen Deschere was hired in 1998 to be the first Executive Director of the CSC, and she continues in that position today.

With a growing organization and increasing salaries, expenditures for the Chorus naturally increased most years, though occasionally decreased in occasional efforts to cut expenses by programming a lighter season. By 1992, total expenditures exceeded \$1 million for the first time, and finally exceeded \$2 million in fiscal year 2000. Table 5 shows not only the total expenditures for fiscal years 1988-2000, but also gives an indication of the increase of salaries and administrative expenses. These data were provided by Tom Hallett, former CSO Vice President for Finance and Administration, and Isabelle Goossen, current CSO Vice President for Finance and Administration.

Presumably the total expenditures includes music purchases, hall rental and other staff salaries not included in the other columns of this table; thus the expenditures totals are much larger than the sum of the first two columns. Note the precipitous drop in expenditures for fiscal year 1998, possibly showing cuts in anticipation of the more expensive European tour of 1999. (Data from 1974-1987 unavailable.)

Table 5 – Expenditures of the Chicago Symphony Chorus, Fiscal Years 1988 – 2000

Fiscal Year	Salaries & Expenses for Director, Chorus and Accompanists	Administrative Expenses	Total Chorus Expenditures	Change From Previous Year
1988	\$ 275,250.24	\$ 133,631.65	\$ 684,132.13	
1989	\$ 291,184.71	\$ 150,322.04	\$ 732,691.46	\$ 48,559.33
1990	\$ 339,339.46	\$ 181,628.66	\$ 860,307.58	\$ 127,616.12
1991	\$ 277,559.69	\$ 202,157.24	\$ 757,276.62	\$ (103,030.96)
1992	\$ 510,015.81	\$ 239,771.41	\$ 1,259,803.03	\$ 502,526.41
1993	\$ 396,997.89	\$ 200,693.98	\$ 994,689.76	\$ (265,113.27)
1994	\$ 479,582.38	\$ 186,118.18	\$ 1,145,282.94	\$ 150,593.18
1995	\$ 585,246.51	\$ 202,506.71	\$ 1,372,999.73	\$ 227,716.79
1996	\$ 487,488.44	\$ 243,639.16	\$ 1,218,616.04	\$ (154,383.69)
1997	\$ 708,447.53	\$ 330,731.00	\$ 1,747,626.06	\$ 529,010.02
1998	\$ 333,633.51	\$ 235,744.35	\$ 903,011.37	\$ (844,614.69)
1999	\$ 806,074.39	\$ 287,676.19	\$ 1,899,824.97	\$ 996,813.60
2000	\$ 921,046.46	\$ 235,018.00	\$ 2,077,110.92	\$ 177,285.95

As previously discussed, Duain Wolfe made some organizational changes in the operation of the Chorus, with the dispensing of the hierarchical systems with conducting assistants and accompanists. By the time Principal Accompanist Elizabeth Buccheri had phased herself out of the position in the late 1990s, Wolfe was using a group of staff accompanists more equitably, as there had been numerous hours of rehearsal and audition

accompanying required in this demanding role. Wolfe was also instrumental in launching the new Christmas Pops series, which he plans and conducts. Using the Chorus, Orchestra, Chicago Children's Chorus, dancers, and guests, this program has become enormously popular, bringing in families and patrons who otherwise may not have attended concerts at Orchestra Hall. It is hoped that these concerts will expand the audience base for other programs at the Hall.

Wolfe states that he is very much interested in being a part of the overall organization.²⁹³ His office is located with other related staff members, and he serves on numerous committees related to planning, development, and operation of the choral program. Although he is free to take on other conducting jobs that don't conflict with his duties with the Chorus, he considers his Music Directorship to be his full-time job. He continued directing the Colorado Children's Choir for several years after his arrival in Chicago, but gave it up in 1999. He takes an active role in the CSC organization, and may spend more time in the various activities of the position than did his predecessor. With his background in developing a children's choir and related activities in Colorado, he has also participated in the organization and execution of outreach programs involving the Chorus, including youth concerts for children.

The most dramatic organizational change of recent years, and in fact of the entire history of the Chorus, has been its participation in the Orchestral Association's new Community Engagement Initiative. As construction was transforming Orchestra Hall into Symphony Center, members of the CSO's administration were brain-storming about ways in which to increase attendance and visibility of the Orchestra and Chorus.

²⁹³ Duain Wolfe, interview by author.

Society's changing demographics and a flood of activities demanding people's time had contributed toward a decline in subscription sales and attendance at concerts. Classical music in the United States still suffers from the misperception that concert attendance at these types of programs is an activity mostly for snobbish, well-to-do white people. Finally, many sources of funding and grants are now interested in more clearly impacting communities, particularly with educational programs that teach rather than simply entertain.

The Community Engagement Initiative was formulated as a visionary solution to counteract these problems. The stated goal of the Initiative is "to achieve a sense of ownership in the CSO organization by Chicago-area communities through participation in collaborative programs in communities, removal of barriers to Symphony Center, and achievement of diversity throughout the CSO "family" and in artistic programs."²⁹⁴

Henry Fogel states that the program hopes to "increase the CSO's presence throughout Chicago, enabling us to become a more integral part of the city's cultural fabric."²⁹⁵

Working at least since 1998, this program systematically targets specific geographic areas of African-American, Latino, and low-income communities—those demographics which have "had the least opportunity to participate in CSO activities."²⁹⁶ Fogel explains why the term "engagement" is used rather than "outreach," which implies a one-directional approach.

For us, it implies multiple levels of exchange between the CSO and community partners, mutual respect and understanding, and a sharing of resources and benefits.

²⁹⁴ Community Engagement Initiative web page, Internet web site of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

²⁹⁵ Henry Fogel, "Comments about Community Engagement," Internet web site of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

²⁹⁶ Community Engagement Initiative web page, Internet web site of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

It implies that the CSO and our community partners will become even better as a result of our partnership. Finally, our approach to community engagement is to "do a few things very well." Therefore, all of our collaborations demonstrate depth instead of breadth in programming.²⁹⁷

Through the Community Engagement Initiative, the CSO and CSC partner with other organizations such as the Chicago Park District, the Sherwood Conservatory of Music, the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, and even schools and churches in the area.

This new mission is carried out through three main thrusts:²⁹⁸

1) **Diversity Initiatives** – The Initiative hopes to increase the number of minorities in the Orchestra and Chorus and on volunteer groups and the Board of Trustees. It also hopes to display greater diversity by featuring more compositions by minority composers and more minority solo artists or small ensemble groups.

2) **Removing Barriers** – Through the AT&T Music for a Lifetime program, 15 community-based organizations in low-income areas receive over 1500 free tickets to Symphony Center each season. Community participants can receive visits from CSO/CSC ensembles, orientation sessions, and discounts on merchandise from the Symphony Center Store.

3) **Collaborative Programs** – Probably the largest and most intensively "engaging" component of the Initiative is the Music Residency Program. At several community hubs around the city, musicians from the Orchestra and Chorus provide leadership for and participate in community ensembles. In addition to these music-making activities, the Orchestra and Chorus musicians and other teachers provide classes

²⁹⁷ Henry Fogel, "Comments about Community Engagement," Internet web site of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

²⁹⁸ Community Engagement Initiative web page, Internet web site of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

in music theory, private singing or instrumental lessons, master classes, lectures and demonstrations, and music appreciation workshops, all for children through adult groups.

As the CSC has become involved in the new Community Engagement Initiative, their focus has expanded. A primary part of their participation is seen at the Music Residency Program at the South Shore Cultural Center in Chicago, part of the Chicago Park District. The Chorus pays eight of their singers to be section leaders of the South Shore Community Chorus, and they themselves perform up to ten times a year as a small ensemble. Duain Wolfe further explains the CSC's involvement:

We essentially help with the overall direction of the [community] chorus, engaging and funding the staff—the conductors, section leaders, accompanists. . . . Other things that we're doing in that area are providing voice teachers, voice instruction, theory and sight-singing instruction, a children's choir, and a very young children's learning program. . . . I'm quite excited about that.²⁹⁹

The program meets each week on Saturdays drawing family members of all ages, so nobody needs to worry about getting a baby sitter. The group would perform about four or five times a year. Lorene Richardson assisted in 1998, the first year of the program. She helped them send out notices to churches, schools, and other community organizations, then sang with them the first season. She relates the immediate success of the initiative:

For the first rehearsal of the grown-ups, there were 60 people present. They didn't even have a room big enough for them. They did not expect that many people. They thought if they get a dozen or 20, they'd be doing great—something good to start with. . . . We learned some music and started performing within about three months.³⁰⁰

Ms. Richardson helped out the first year, then let someone take her place. She then attended a concert at the end of the community choir's second season.

²⁹⁹ Duain Wolfe, interview by author.

³⁰⁰ Lorene Richardson, interview by author.

I could not believe it was the same group. 200% improvement. . . . They started out singing from the Vivaldi *Gloria*, and the diction was so crisp, I said, "Is that the same [group of] people? . . ." Afterwards there was a reception, and I said to the alto section leader, "Do you guys realize that you've gone from mumbling two years ago to really singing in an ensemble?" They said, "Could you hear the difference?" I said, "Hear the difference? It was like a different group!" And they were really elated that people who knew could know that they had improved, and it was just great. So this has been a great success, and it's going to be continued. . . . It's a wonderful thing . . . for the Chorus, because that means we're going out doing things with the community and in the schools that the orchestras were doing for years. That's one way also to get an audience, the next generation. They're out there and we'd better start getting them. . . . I think it's a different era, and once we understand [that], we're on our way.³⁰¹

Ms. Richardson goes on to say that a similar program has been started in a Hispanic neighborhood on the North Side.

Executive Director Karen Deschere has spearheaded this project, but plans to be giving some of the responsibilities to Assistant Manager Angela Grimes. Ms. Deschere will be focusing on a new project at Galaxy 37, a high school where job-training programs are developed for students interested in careers in the arts. The CSC will work with the school to help prepare singers for a career by teaching college prep courses in music theory, music history, and sight-singing. Three CSC members will teach there two hours a day, five days a week.³⁰²

In other projects related to the Community Engagement Initiative, Wolfe has created two resident choral ensembles from the Chorus. The ensembles have six singers and a pianist. They operate independently to perform outreach, singing in such places as community centers, boys and girls clubs, schools, even dinners and fund-raisers. The primary goal is to raise awareness of choral music, particularly in places where they may not otherwise have any. Repertoire ranges from classical to jazz to musical theater.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Karen Deschere, interview by author.

Wolfe selects the repertoire and prepares the group, but they perform without a conductor. Karen Deschere indicated that in the fall of 2001, the CSC had plans for the two Resident Ensembles to perform at 40 Chicago public high schools, coordinating with teachers and administrators to use repertoire that corresponds to ninth and tenth grade history lessons.³⁰³

Although beyond the scope of this historical study, it is known that the CSC vision continues to expand as new artistic endeavors evolve beyond the 1999-2000 season. Wolfe has in 2001 initiated special youth concerts, where children are brought into Orchestra Hall and hear members of the Orchestra and Chorus perform and explain music. The CSC also announced the creation of a 24-singer chamber ensemble called the Chicago Symphony Singers, which will begin with the 2001-2002 season. Repertoire will be widely varied and will include unaccompanied works as well as some accompanied by piano and small instrumental ensembles. Said Wolfe, "These new performance opportunities will enrich the artistic experience of Chorus members and provide us with new ways to showcase these talented singers."³⁰⁴

Concluding Remarks

The Chicago Symphony Chorus was established out of a need for a competent group of singers who could enable the Chicago Symphony Orchestra to perform the large choral masterpieces of the classical repertoire. As the Orchestra grew in both skills and

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ "Chorus Connections" column, The Voice of Chorus America, Winter 2001, Vol. 24, No. 2, p. 6.

reputation, the expectation was for the Chorus to be the equal of its parent ensemble. Under the skills of Margaret Hillis, and especially with the resources and opportunities established early in the Solti era, the Chorus met the challenge and gained national recognition through strong, clean, expressive performances and recordings. The Chorus gained a reputation for an unusually high degree of precise ensemble, crisp diction, powerful sound, and sensitive musicality. Such recognition was further enhanced as it began to win awards for its recordings, winning a total of nine Grammys for Best Choral Performance. The Chorus appeared on a total of 51 commercially released recordings, plus four archive compilations released by the CSO for fund-raisers, according to the information supplied by the Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Fifteen of these albums won a total of 19 awards, including one Grand Prix du Disque.

As the Chorus grew in professional membership and standards, it began to make more trips to Carnegie Hall, then finally two brief tours of major musical capitals of Europe. Superior performances at these run-outs and tours created and enhanced the world-class reputation of the Chorus, where the Chorus received the greatest accolades by audiences, critics, and musicians. This was largely possible due to the resources of a large parent organization (the Orchestral Association) and the strong personalities of Margaret Hillis and Georg Solti, who fought for the highest levels of musical excellence. With the establishment of a large core of paid professionals, and a growing staff to assist with an evolving organization, the level of excellence was raised and maintained, though the fiscal realities of later years caused a sharpening of focus and a cut-back of run-outs and, later, of recordings.

It would be extremely difficult in today's society and fiscal climate to copy the organization and repeat the success of the Chicago Symphony Chorus in the same way, if starting from scratch. Though a relatively small percentage of the Orchestral Association's total expenditures (the Orchestral Association's total budget for fiscal year 2000 was approximately \$54 million),³⁰⁵ the operation of the Chorus now costs around \$2 million per year, considerably more than is spent in other symphony choruses. The advantage of this investment is some assurance of high standards of excellence in performance of the great choral-orchestral literature and an above-average compensation for the professional singers in a large symphonic choir. Unfortunately such expenses make tours of any size, or even performing at the Ravinia Festival, nearly cost-prohibitive.

Under new leadership at the helm of the Orchestra, Chorus, and Orchestral Association, a new vision for these musical organizations has developed. The bold Community Engagement Initiative should prove to not only diversify and increase audience attendance and community involvement, but also to enhance the cultural life of the entire city of Chicago. This initiative should raise the value of these musical organizations and extend their life span well into the new millennium. Conductor Duain Wolfe, while leading the Chorus for only a short while, brings new strengths and directions to the CSC. He has proven that even under a different Music Director, the excellence of the Chicago Symphony Chorus can still continue, and the program can even innovate and expand into new areas never before attempted. The Chicago Symphony Chorus enjoys a prominent place in the history of chorus ensembles in the United States

³⁰⁵ Tom Hallet, interview by author.

and even the world. It likely will continue to have an impact on our cultural life for many years into the future.

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**NOTE: All Appendices have been placed
on the enclosed CD-ROM for ease of use.**

**They should open on any PC or Macintosh
with Microsoft Word, version 1997/98 or later.**