

CHORAL SINGING

Thinning Chorus Ranks Fill Again as Americans Rediscover Their Voices

By ROSS PARMENTER

THIS country's first great period of choral enthusiasm began last century. Boston had its Handel and Haydn Society as early as 1815 but it was not until after the Civil War that the snowball really began rolling. The progress can be seen in the establishment of the various Apollonian clubs. Boston's began in 1871, Chicago's in 1872, Brooklyn's in 1878, Cincinnati's in 1882 and St. Louis' in 1893.

The organizations named after Mendelssohn tell the same story. The Mendelssohn Glee Club of New York was founded in 1866, the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia in 1874, and in Canada the Mendelssohn Choir of Toronto was formed in 1891. That the enthusiasm reached the West, too, is demonstrated by the fact that it was in 1889 that the Mormon Tabernacle Choir of Salt Lake City was enlarged to 300 and began making concert tours.

The movement threw up massive festivals. Worcester's began in 1858. Growing out of the German Saengerfest, the Cincinnati May Music Festival began in 1873. In 1882 the Bethlehem Choral Union laid the foundations of Bethlehem's annual Bach Festival and the University of Michigan's Festival at Ann Arbor began in 1884.

Dwindling Forces

The enthusiasm that spawned these clubs and supported these festivals persisted into the present century. But that it was a sadly dwindled force by the late Thirties was apparent to concertgoers of those years. White-haired conductors were leading largely white-haired choruses. Season by season the choruses seemed to shrink, with the tenors and basses dropping away more rapidly than the harder altos and sopranos. Hardly any young singers were joining the

"City" movement in Philadelphia is another straw. The success of Elaine Brown's Fellowship House Choir was what gave a number of sponsors the idea. The development began in the 1943-49 season, with Fellowship House, Settlement Music School and Temple University as the chief backers. Now 100 choruses are involved.

Closer to New York has been the increasing success of the "Summer Sings." These have been informal sessions at which great works are sight-read under trained leadership. Brooklyn College gave them for a third time this summer. The Oratorio Society of New Jersey began them. And the Desoff Choirs, which began them in 1943, broke all previous records. The average attendance at each of the seven sings was 235, with a total of 880 singers participating.

Dufay and Josquin

The final one was given on a very hot night. Yet the rehearsal hall was crowded. Men sat in two blocks of chairs in the center. Women, divided into altos on the left and sopranos on the right, sat on three raised tiers on the side. And, led by Harold Brown, they sang a Dufay Magnificat and a Mass by Josquin Des Pres. When it was over, most of them retired to a near-by tavern, where they went on singing.

One remembered Elaine Brown's words. "The college age is terrific. Those kids would sing at the drop of a hat. The bigger the challenge, the more they'll give you. On tour I have all I can do to keep them quiet. They sing in the buses, and in restaurants they like to walk in and take over." Choral singing, the summer singers all agreed, has a double appeal. One participates in making music, which is satisfying in itself. And one is part of a group, which is so cheering in an age where there is so much individual isolation.

Church Choirs

College choral singing has helped feed the enthusiasm. So has singing in church choirs. In some cases it has led choir members to join concert choruses so they can sing a wider repertory of more ambitious works. Also, some of the church choirs have developed into choruses that give public concerts.

The boom in high-fidelity phonograph recording is given some of the credit for the new enthusiasm. Having been stirred to a fresh interest in music by recordings, many people who don't know how to play any instruments have found themselves wanting to participate actively in music. They have turned to choruses because they provide the easiest form of participation. Also, some of the more musically sophisticated turn to choruses because they find choruses tend to do more unusual music than they can hear at symphonic concerts.

Singers who wanted to be solo artists and who, for one reason or another, never managed to have careers, also are drawn to choral ranks. The sociability involved and the friendships that form are important, too.

After noting the reasons cited



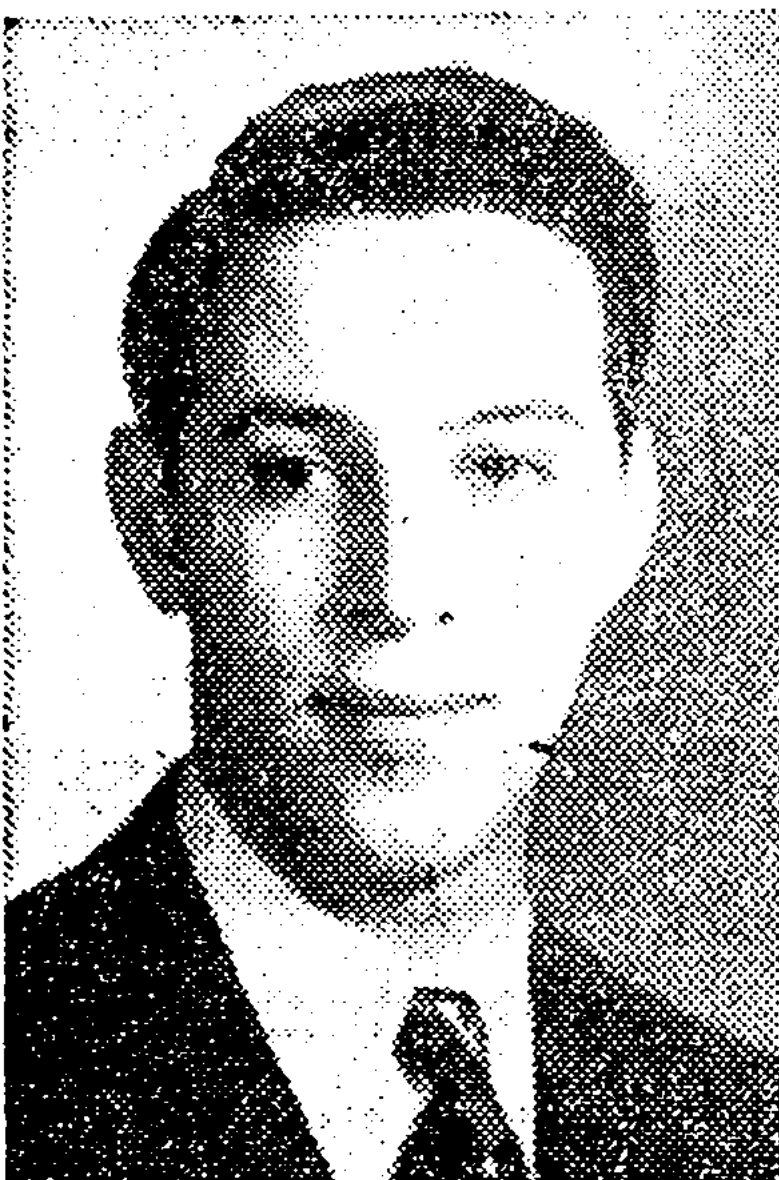
JAZZ IN CENTRAL PARK—Lionel Hampton, in the black tuxedo, left, with his orchestra and L. C. Smith, saxophone soloist, right,

will be in the line-up of jazz musicians who are scheduled to perform nightly this week, starting tomorrow, at Wollman Memorial Theatre.



CHAMBER MUSIC IN THE VILLAGE—Fritz Rlikko leads the Collegium Musicum in Washington Square Park. He will direct the ensemble and

soloists tomorrow night in the last concert of the August series. Works by Purcell, Albinoni, Telemann and others will be performed.



IN CONCERT—Charles Schiff conducts Wednesday night at Morningside Park.

old choral societies. Audiences were smaller, and the choral repertory seemed definitely Victorian.

The truth of the picture is illustrated by the striking effect made in 1941 by the emergence of Robert Shaw and the Collegiate Chorale. Shaw was young, and so were his eager singers. And his group was not just another college glee club. It was a concert choir of such vitality and excellent caliber that it was not long before Toscanini began choosing it regularly for his broadcasts that required a chorus.

World War II made male choral singers, especially young ones, scarcer than ever. A great tradition, it seemed, was coming to an end. America, which had not then become widely fired by opera, looked as if it were becoming a nation that went only to recitals and orchestral concerts.

New Vibrancy

Yet what has one been noticing in the last few seasons? The thinning chorals ranks have begun to swell again. Men have come back to the tiers, so that now they match the women in numbers. The singing has a new vibrancy and vigor. The tired old works of the Victorian repertory are shown to be alive after all. And, mirabile dictu, the singers are young.

One noticed, too, that the choruses attracting the largest number of young people were those presenting the most challenging programs. Renaissance and baroque works, acknowledged masterpieces that have been neglected because of their difficulties, and contemporary works—these were the compositions that elicited the most youthful devotion and enthusiasm.

Has the United States entered a new era of choral singing? And is the revival likely to reach the proportions of the choral movement of the earlier period? These are questions that cannot be answered definitely, but there are plenty of indications that the ground swell of choral enthusiasm is not a minor one.

One telling straw in the wind is that there are now more fulltime choral directors' jobs going begging than there are trained choral leaders to fill them. And this is deeply indicative, because in many other branches of music employment opportunities seem to be shrinking.

The growth of the "Singing

and watching the shining eyes of the young singers, this writer felt surer than ever that one of his own explanations was also valid. There are so many factors in our civilization that make for cynicism. So much of what we are offered is only watered-down sentiment. With so much discouragement of idealism, and so much cheapness in commercial entertainment, people have a hunger both for the spiritual sustenance of such masters as Bach, Handel and Mozart, and for the opportunity of pouring out their own loftiest feelings. Choral singing satisfies both needs. You can soar to the heights singing the Sanctus in the B minor Mass. And in the Ninth symphony, as well as singing of the joy of brotherhood, you feel it.

The New York Times (by Neal Bonzi)