



## Thomas A. Sokol

July 28, 1929 – April 28, 2019

Thomas A. Sokol, professor emeritus of music and Cornell's former director of choral activities, who taught at Cornell from 1957 to 1995, died April 28, 2019 in Ithaca, New York at the age of 89. "Professor," as he was called by his students, was responsible for transforming the Glee Club from an independent men's club, whose repertoire then featured show tunes, college songs, and other popular ditties, into an official ensemble within the Department of Music. Three years after his arrival at Cornell he created the Cornell University Chorus out of the remnants of the Women's Glee Clubs, and led both the men's and women's groups into challenging repertoire performed at a high musical level. The choral program as it exists today owes its foundations to his organizational and musical leadership.

Tom was born in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania on July 28, 1929 to John and Mary Sokol, immigrants from Hungary, and was raised in the small town of Sewickley, Pennsylvania outside Pittsburgh. He studied trumpet from the age of ten and began leading the choir at St. James Catholic Church by the time he was fourteen. After graduating from high school, he attended Virginia Military Institute on a football scholarship, before transferring to Emory and Henry College in Emory, Virginia in 1951, where he continued to excel in sports as well as music. He earned an M.A. in musicology and composition in 1953 from George Peabody College (now part of Vanderbilt University) while also directing choirs; after studying conducting at Harvard and Tanglewood, he became assistant conductor for the Harvard Glee Club and Radcliffe Choral Society. While in Cambridge he also occupied acting positions at Newton College of the Sacred Heart, New England Conservatory, and with the Handel and Haydn Society, in addition to cofounding Cambridge Records.

In 1957, Tom was recruited to organize the choral activities at Cornell, which then officially included the University Chorus and the Sage Chapel Choir. Invited by the Musical Clubs Council to also conduct the Glee Club, Tom accepted only with the proviso that doing so would be part of his university duties, a position in which he was supported by President Deane Malott. His new vision for the Glee Club was put on display in December-January 1960-61 when the

group became the first American university ensemble to give formal concerts in the Soviet Union; their repertoire included pieces in French, Latin, Italian, English, and Russian (Shostakovich's "Song of Peace" and the Russian national anthem). After one soldout concert, the *Sovyetskaya Cultura* newspaper reported that "for the students of Moscow State University, the artistry of their comrades from across the ocean spoke straight to the heart. And this is understandable; congenially to the soul, it is better to sing of peace and work than to prepare for war." In 1966, the Glee Club was invited by the U.S. State Department to tour Southeast Asia, where over the course of three months they performed in 10 countries and gave 49 formal concerts, not to mention many informal performances.

Another international tour, nine concerts in West Germany in 1970, produced a memorable addition to the Glee Club's repertoire. Following a recording session at the Frankfurt Radio Network, the network's music director, Franz Biebl, offered Tom some of his own choral compositions. Upon its return, the group gave the American premiere of Biebl's "Ave Maria," a sumptuous setting for seven-part men's voices. Not only did the work enter the permanent repertoire of the Glee Club (it was performed during the 2019 Homecoming concert), it was soon adopted by other choirs, mostly notably by the San Francisco-based professional choir Chanticleer, and has become a staple of the twentieth-century choral repertoire.

In his role as director of choral activities at Cornell, Tom oversaw and frequently himself conducted the Cornell Chorale, the Sage Chapel Choir, and the Chamber Singers, as well as the Chorus and the Glee Club. In addition to programming works from the centuries-long repertoire for unaccompanied voices, Tom was committed to giving his students the opportunity to perform major choral works with orchestra. In 1962, the combined Chorus and Glee Club performed Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with the Philadelphia Orchestra, conducted by Eugene Ormandy, who wrote afterwards to the students: "I want to send you my heartiest congratulations on your superb singing with our orchestra, both at Cornell and in Philadelphia. I do not exaggerate when I say you made choral history... You have an inspiring director in Mr. Sokol." The collaboration was repeated in 1966, at the opening ceremony for the Saratoga Performing Arts Center, summer home of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Tom collaborated frequently with his colleague and friend, composer Karel Husa, who conducted the Cornell Symphony Orchestra for many years, including Beethoven's Missa Solemnis, Poulenc's Gloria, the Berlioz Requiem, Mahler's Symphony No. 2 ("Resurrection"), Orff's Carmina Burana, and Husa's own Apotheosis of This Earth, which Cornell students performed not only on campus, but at Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center. With outside orchestras Tom prepared his Cornell choirs for major works such as Honneger's Le Roi David, Handel's Messiah, the Verdi Requiem, Bach's Mass in B Minor, and the Monteverdi Vespers.

Tom's activities as a conductor outside of Cornell included directing the Dessoff Choirs in New York City (1968 to 1972) and the Buffalo Schola Cantorum. Honors include a Ford Foundation grant in the Humanities and Arts, the National Orchestral Association's Conducting Award, a Carnegie Fellowship in Teaching, and grants from the New York State Council on the Arts.

In his 38 years at Cornell, Tom led the choral ensembles in animating virtually every major university event: the annual commencement ceremonies; convocation; presidential

inaugurations; freshman orientation; homecoming; parents' weekend; senior week; and countless events for the Board of Trustees. He served as chair of the Department of Music from 1985 to 1992 and mentored several generations of Cornell graduate students in conducting, including prominent composers David Conte (San Francisco Conservatory) and Byron Adams (UC Riverside).

Upon Tom's retirement in 1995, the united Chorus and Glee Club performed Beethoven's Missa Solemnis with the Cayuga Chamber Orchestra in Bailey Hall to a standing ovation by an audience that included large numbers of his former students. In 2005, to honor his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, Glee Club alumni initiated an endowment in his name whose proceeds go to commissioning new choral works; this legacy continues to nourish the choral repertoire not only at Cornell, but at other institutions as they adopt these works.

Thomas Sokol is survived by his wife Donna, his former wife Nancy, and their five children.

Rebecca Harris-Warrick, with help from William Cowdery, Neal Zaslaw, and Michael Slon's book *Songs from the Hill: The History of the Cornell University Glee Club* (1998).

*Written by Rebecca Harris-Warrick*