



GRETCHEN TATGE

Celebrating the Genius of Maestro Richard Vogt:

AN UNASSUMING SHOWMAN

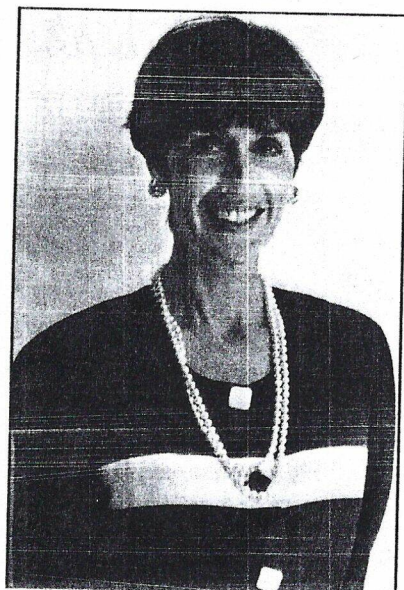
BY JANE SEEL

Creative, colorful, enigmatic, irascible! Just a few of the adjectives his many admirers summon up to describe Richard Vogt, music director of the Greenwich Choral Society, who, as one critic put it, "has probably done more for music in Greenwich than anyone alive." Along with taking a suburban amateur chorus on the road to national recognition, with stops

along the way at Carnegie Hall, Caramoor and England's Aldeburgh Festival, the unassuming "choral genius" has energized the music program at First Congregational Church of Old Greenwich, which he serves as music director, and has long been a connecting link to Manhattan's lively music scene and composers, soloists and celebrities of the first rank.

This season, as the Greenwich

Choral Society celebrates Vogt's twentieth year as music director and conductor, his singers are pulling out all the stops to fête him. At their recent Oktoberfest concert at SUNY Purchase, he was presented with a "bouquet" of fanfares written in his honor by composers who have worked with him over the years. Among them was Rob Mathes of Greenwich, best known as a rock musician, who



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brought along his band to perform "Vision on Vision," his special tribute in the classical vein. "I love all music," the surprised and delighted Vogt said.

"It was the hand of the Lord," said former president Sallie Williams of Vogt's appointment, recalling a time of upheaval when the society found the need to change directors. The chorus's board chose the Eastman School of Music graduate from a field of talented contenders, among them a youthful Roger Nierenberg, now the conductor of the Stamford Symphony.

Trailing superlatives from his work as choral director with the American Opera Society and with Julius Rudel at Caramoor, his experience in the Robert Shaw Chorale and New York Pro Musica, as well as from his innovative program at First Church, Vogt confronted a chorus of unwieldy size — made even larger by the arrival of most of his admiring church choir. Biting the bullet, the choral society voted for the first time to audition its entire membership. Sallie, then a board member, remembers the "pangs of fear" that rippled through the board as each contemplated his or her own moment of truth. As it turned out, most had little to fear — the chorus continued at a healthy size and in fact has always had at least 130 singers on the rolls. From that point on, the society has never looked back.

Pulling polished performances from amateur singers, even those chosen by audition, is never a simple process. Many arrive at evening rehearsals directly off the commuter train, tired from a day at the office. "It is often like starting at ground zero every time we rehearse a piece," Sallie said.

While accustomed to working with large vocal forces (the GCS, an over-size community chorus at his annual *Messiahs* at First Church and until recently the Choral Society of the Hamptons), Vogt perhaps hears in his head the lean, disciplined sound of a small professional chorale. If he senses inattention, if tempos sag or when, God forbid, his sopranos sing with vibrato, he is known to lose his cool.

"We have been called cement sacks — and worse," said soprano Barbara Gallagher, who sings in the choral society and at First Church, "but



BOB CAPAZZO

The choral society began performing at SUNY soon after it opened in 1979. According to Vogt, Greenwich lacks a local venue that can suitably accommodate a large chorus and orchestra.

Richard gives 100 percent and expects 100 percent in return." The results speak for themselves. His chorus, like a finely tuned Rolls Royce engine, can throttle back to hushed *pianissimos* under his direction and, turning on a dime, rattle the rafters when *fortissimos* are indicated.

A perfectionist in all things, Vogt is a stickler for pronunciation and enunciation, often bringing in linguists to drill the chorus in German, Russian, Polish, French, or whatever language they happen to be singing in, as they explore choral repertoire from Bach to Bernstein, Mozart to Mussorgsky. The choral society has also commissioned works from well-known contemporary composers. *So Hallowed was the Time* by Stephen Paulus, premiered at a 1981 Christmas concert, is now widely performed. It also sang *The Mighty Casey* by Greenwich's late Pulitzer prize-winning composer William Schuman.

"The great thing about the choral society and the board is that they accept a variety of music," Vogt com-



LEE PAINE

Richard Vogt celebrates his 20th anniversary as choral society director this year.

mented recently. "We just don't do Haydn, Mozart and Verdi all the time as most choral societies do. I think that is one reason why our audience has built up over the years."

Highlights are many. Perhaps the most dramatic occurred in 1976 when the society sang at Aldeburgh, its first appearance at the highly regarded English music festival. The chorus performed for an audience that included Benjamin Britten, only hours after the ailing composer's elevation to the peerage was splashed across front pages in Great Britain and the world. Tipped off two weeks before by tenor Peter Pears (who, having heard the group in Greenwich, was responsible for their invitation to the prestigious festival) that "something significant" would happen on the day of their concert, Vogt guessed that Britten was to be named in the Queen's Birthday Honours List on June 12. In Norway at the time, the director quickly phoned Sallie Williams (then GCS president) back in Connecticut, asking her to track down orchestra and chorus parts for Britten's unusual arrangement of the British national anthem and bring them with her to England.

Massed onstage at the Maltings concert hall in Aldeburgh for their

American Bicentennial concert, the singers will never forget the electrifying moment when the curtain opened to reveal before them a sold-out house and the new Lord Britten seated with Pears in a box at stage left. In the hushed silence, Vogt raised his baton and the Americans began "God Save the Queen," first whisper-soft in a minor key (G-minor), then modulating to B-flat major and building to a stirring finish.

"Britten didn't know about it and the audience hadn't expected it," Vogt said. "It was very moving."

The concert that followed, an all-American patriotic potpourri featuring Gershwin, Scott Joplin, Rodgers and Hammerstein, as well as Robert Russell Bennett's rousing arrangement of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," was a huge success.

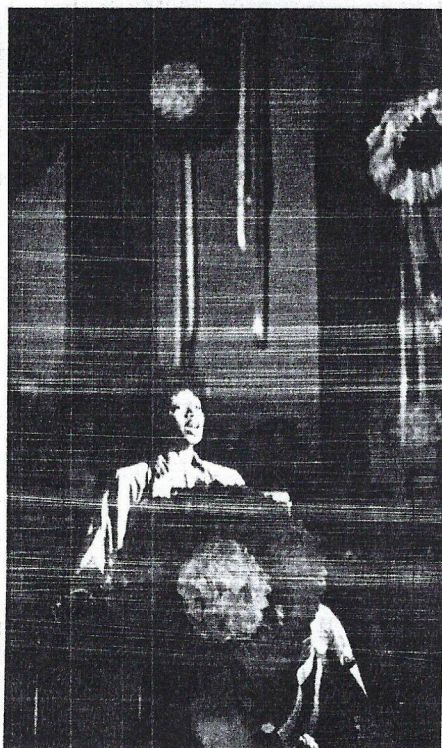
"The audience just adored that concert," Sallie recalled. "I'm sure they had never heard anything quite like it."

Benjamin Britten died only six months later. In 1985 the choral society was again invited to Aldeburgh, this time for a concert celebrating the seventy-fifth birthday of Pears; Sir Peter was to die seven months later. "They were eerie coincidences," Vogt remembered.

As the Aldeburgh concert demonstrated, Vogt is a master at choosing music to fit a chosen format. He also designs his own over-size concert programs, writes the text and sprinkles the pages with imaginative illustrations. Showmanship is a big part of the Vogt persona. Serapes and sombreros were the order of the day at Dave Brubeck's *La Fiesta de la Posada*, a jazz-flavored classical piece commissioned by the Honolulu Symphony and previewed here by the choral society before its official debut in Hawaii. Brubeck himself was at the piano, winging it in improvisational parts of the work.

"Richard and I have had a long and good musical association. He is a wonderful guy," said the jazz legend from his home in Wilton, who expects to perform *La Fiesta* this season with the San Francisco Symphony.

"Actually, opera is my first love," Vogt admits. A fan since the age of eight, when his older brother Howard



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Cynthia Clarey in *La Fiesta de la Posada*

took the awestruck New Jersey youngster to hear Kirsten Flagstad in *Tristan und Isolde* at the old Met, he introduced opera choruses and excerpts to the choral society's repertoire in 1975. Then he invited the Met's Francis Robinson to narrate a gala concert at the Greenwich High School auditorium celebrating the society's fiftieth anniversary. "Not many choruses do opera. It is different and our audiences enjoy it."

But the choral society no longer sings at the high school. "It's a disaster. I refuse to perform there," said Vogt of the auditorium, long plagued by air-conditioning and heating problems. "I think it is terrible that the Greenwich Symphony, which is a great group, has to perform in that awful atmosphere."

"People say that a Greenwich performing arts center wouldn't get used. I think it would be overwhelmed." He concedes, however, that a generous benefactor is probably not on the immediate horizon.

In the absence of a local hall, the choral society has sung regularly at the Performing Arts Center at SUNY, most recently with its Oktoberfest evening of Viennese songs, opera and operetta highlights. "We went to SUNY

in 1979, as soon as it opened," Vogt said, "but we can hardly get into it anymore because of their busy schedule."

As their search continues for a concert hall, the society has looked at facilities in neighboring Stamford, where some years ago they sang at the Palace Theatre. They found its backstage space inadequate and the pit too small for the sizable orchestra they assemble from a talent pool of Greenwich Symphony players and New York instrumentalists. Last summer they auditioned the Stamford Center for the Arts' attractive new Rich Forum. Designed for theatrical productions, it also lacks space for a chorus with orchestra.

Norwalk was chosen for their April 1994 concert, "A Grand Night for Singing." The Greenwich choristers will sing at the Georgian-style Norwalk Concert Hall, a high school auditorium recently transformed into a state-of-the-art concert facility.

Meanwhile, December finds the choral society in town, in the candlelit setting of Christ Episcopal Church, for four performances of their holiday program — a well-loved tradition that for many hundreds of local families marks the unofficial opening of the Christmas season. "Wonder Tidings," on December 4 and 5, will include the premiere of two Christmas carols by Marjorie Gifford, childhood music teacher of William F. Buckley, who is a longtime friend of the GCS.

"Bill Buckley wrote Richard," said current President Betsy Lawrence, "asking him to visit his eighty-six-year-old teacher and look at her compositions. Richard decided to incorporate two of her charming carols into our program." It is expected, she added, that the "very sprightly" musician's former pupil will be on hand to applaud.

At the heart of Vogt's musical life is his connection with the First Congregational Church, whose ministers have supported their director of music since 1966. A man of faith whose writings in the *Meetinghouse News*, First Church's newsletter, reflect his thoughtful concern for social issues, Vogt uses his flair for the dramatic to underline the religious experience. →



Dave Brubeck at the keyboard, in rehearsal.
Right: A chorister in sombrero for *La Fiesta*

"Richard is one of the great creative geniuses of the world," enthused Dr. Thomas L. Stiers, senior pastor of First Church. "With his sense of programming and theological insight, he has developed a community of celebration that is quite extraordinary. The way he coordinates hymns and anthems with the sermons gives a thematic unity that is remarkable." Vogt's annual Music Sundays, he said, have been like "twenty-seven musical gems."

Entire families, done up in fanciful animal costumes, participate in Vogt's productions of Benjamin Britten's colorful *Noah's Fludde*, signing up at the church at whimsically named *Fludde* Rally casting calls, where the maestro distributes animal crackers. Performed at four-year intervals since 1969, the production brings together people of all ages. Those who sang as youngsters now enroll their own to hear Metropolitan Opera basso Ara Berberian, a memorable Noah, retell the familiar Bible story. One deeply impressed small boy later made singing his career. Thomas Woodman, now an operatic baritone who has sung at the Met, still joins his parents in the church choir when he is not traveling to fulfill engagements.

Messiah performances at First Church are annual events. Vogt holds open places in the large community chorus for college students arriving



home for the holidays who look forward to singing the Handel masterpiece in the Gothic-style sanctuary. "For some, it is the only musical thing they do in town," he said.

"A lot of churches wouldn't allow what we do at First Church, but I hope I have never done anything to embarrass them," he said, reflecting on Music Sundays that usually end with maypole dancing on the lawn and fish and chips for the congregation and Boar's Head Festivals with costumed singers and dancers accompanying the Yule log down the main aisle. Vogt's British Festival, a month-long series of church-centered events in 1981, began with a delightful "Evening with Hermione Gingold." In October, his commemoration of Thomas Jefferson's 250th birthday and the 100th anniversary of the writing of "America the Beautiful" concluded with a Sousa march and apples for everyone in the congregation. "It has been a reaching out to the community," Vogt said.

Sometimes, he admits, the clergy worries he might go too far. At this year's Blessing of the Animals held inside the church ("my idea," he noted), he saw Tom Stiers visibly blanch as a procession of live animals ambled unpredictably toward the altar down the newly recarpeted center aisle.

Surprisingly, according to Vogt, the church's music budget is less than that of any major church in town. "We don't have paid people in the choir so I can hire occasional soloists." His



The Meyer, Mackell and Pacent families join Jean Watkins, Carol Lang and Gerald Mulhall in costume for *Noah's Fludde*.

soloists, many of whom are personal friends, often come from the roster of the New York City Opera and the Met.

Vogt also relies heavily on volunteers to help him realize his creative vision. Accustomed to unusual requests, they invariably rise to the occasion, although his request for a Venetian gondola two seasons ago briefly stumped veteran Barbara Gallagher. "Try to find a gondola," the special effects coordinator said wryly. Her resourceful solution, a thinly disguised dinghy borrowed from Ole Amundsen Boat Builders in Riverside, provided one of the operetta performance's lighter moments as, towed slowly across the stage on a dolly, it carried guitar-strumming tenor and bass soloists into the wings.

Her search for a "flower-covered, four-foot-high donkey piñata" for *La Fiesta de la Posada* also proved unsuccessful, dooming Barbara and an art teacher friend to long basement evenings spent with chicken wire and papier-maché, crimping pieces of crepe paper into colored flowers — "hun-

dreds and hundreds of little flowers."

For last season's Mozart Marathon, an all-day event at SUNY, Barbara located a crystal chandelier that lit up as it descended from the ceiling and also provided a cascade of paper rose petals to shower down on the singers

*"Richard
gives 100 percent
and expects
100 percent in return."*

Barbara Gallagher

at the finale, cutting up reams of tissue paper into oval shapes when ready-made petals proved expensive — "thousands and thousands of little petals," recalled Barbara. "These are not things I do normally," said the good-humored head of the Summer Youth Festival and former Grace Notes president. "Working with Richard is

always a learning experience."

Now entering his sixth decade, Vogt shows no signs of slowing down. "I have had tremendous support over the years from the church and the choral society, and I love what I do," he explained. Dividing his time between his West Side apartment and a church-owned flat in Old Greenwich, the busy maestro keeps in touch with singers whose careers he has helped, among them soprano Cynthia Clarey and her husband, baritone Jake Gardner, both now enjoying considerable success on the concert and opera stages of Europe. Their son Quinton is Vogt's godson.

"You know," he added, "I still have the vision of doing a premiere concert at the new Performing Arts Center of Greenwich."

For that dream performance, the Clarey-Gardner duo would be onstage, along with tenor John Aler, now with the Met. "And there would be so many others," he added, surely already picturing the program, staging and special effects.



Richard confers with the late William Schuman, composer of *The Mighty Casey*.

The gala would undoubtedly conclude with the Greenwich Choral Society singing the closing section of Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*. It's simple philosophy is meaningful to this musician's musician: "We're neither pure nor wise

nor good; we'll do the best we know; we'll build our house, and chop our wood, and make our garden grow." How lucky we are that Richard Vogt has chosen our backyard in which to tend his garden. □