

# Ragnar Bohlin

*Conductor*

(updated February 2014 – please discard any previous version)

Ragnar Bohlin is renowned as one of the leading choral conductors of the world. He was named Director of the San Francisco Symphony Chorus in 2007, conducting them regularly in such pieces as *Carmina Burana*, Handel's *Messiah*, Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* and the *B Minor Mass* and preparing this ensemble for performances under internationally renowned conductors. His outstanding work has been recognized with three Grammy Awards for Mahler's *Symphony No. 8* with Michael Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony including Best Classical Album and Best Choral Performance of 2009.

Mr. Bohlin has worked frequently with The Swedish Radio Choir and conducted them on their 2010 tour of the United States. He recorded the album *Visions and Non-Thoughts* with the Swedish Radio Choir for Caprice that year. He has also conducted the Ericson Chamber Choir and the Opera Chorus of Stockholm. He was choirmaster of Stockholm's Maria Magdalena Church and appeared regularly on Swedish radio with the Maria Magdalena Motet Choir and The Maria Vocal Ensemble. Mr. Bohlin toured internationally with his Swedish choirs - the KFUM Chamber Choir, the Maria Magdalena Motet Choir and the Maria Vocal Ensemble - earning prizes in international competitions and many distinctions, including the prestigious Johannes Norrby Medal in 2006 for expanding the frontiers of Swedish choral music making. In June 2010 he made his Carnegie Hall debut conducting Brahms' *Ein deutsches Requiem*. Guest conducting engagements have brought to many parts of the world, including the Sao Paulo Symphony in Brazil where he returns in 2014 and the Malmö Symphony Orchestra in Sweden. In October 2014 he will make his conducting debut with the Stavanger Symphony.

Mr. Bohlin has prepared choruses for some of the world's foremost conductors, including Michael Tilson Thomas, Herbert Blomstedt, Valery Gergiev, Esa-Pekka Salonen and Alan Gilbert. The conductor of a variety of other ensembles, his professional chamber choir, Cappella SF, made its debut in February 2014.

In October 2007 Ragnar Bohlin conducted the world premiere of a new *Requiem* by Fredrik Sixten, broadcast on Swedish Public Radio. His recording of this work with the Swedish Radio Choir was released in 2013. His recordings of a Saint Mark Passion by the same composer and "Mysterium," of a cappella music, were released in Sweden in spring 2008.

Mr. Bohlin studied conducting with Jorma Panula and the legendary choir director, Eric Ericson, piano with Peter Feuchtwanger in London on a British Council scholarship, and singing with the great Swedish tenor Nicolai Gedda. He holds a masters degree in organ and conducting and a degree in conducting from the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm. Mr. Bohlin is on the faculty of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. He has taught at the Royal Academy in Stockholm and was Visiting Professor at Indiana University, Bloomington in 2008. In 2013 he was awarded the Swedish America Chamber of Commerce Cultural Award.

### **Press Comments:**

“Bohlin sized both vocal and instrumental forces to allow all of Handel’s contrapuntal intricacies to surface with crystal clarity. He achieved this affect through well-paced tempo selections and nuanced control of the dynamics. The SFS Chorus was in top form with an interpretation that could not have been fresher.”

San Francisco Examiner - December 20, 2013

“Ragnar Bohlin's Symphony Chorus sang superbly throughout - in the radiant ‘Pie Jesu Domine,’ in the brawny outbursts of the ‘Libera me,’ and in the breathtaking conclusion.” San Francisco Chronicle - Nov. 28

“Besides almost uniform excellence in performance, Semyon Bychkov's direction of an orchestra at it’s best Ragnar Bohlin's brilliant SFS Chorus gave an utterly moving War Requiem without a smidgen of sentimentality. That's an exceptional accomplishment.” San Francisco Classical Voice - Nov. 30, 2013

“The results were tremendous - poised, dynamic, and cohesive, Ragnar Bohlin’s 120-member chorus singing with pristine tone.”

San Francisco Chronicle – May 12, 2013

“Missa Solemnis rests on the shoulders of the chorus, and Bohlin’s ensemble sounded magnificent throughout the evening. His singers were exemplary.”

SF Classical Voice – May 11

“The 120-member chorus, singing like a ball of fire, with stamina and finesse.”

San Jose Mercury News - May 11, 2013

“Ragnar Bohlin's Symphony Chorus made a robust and technically assured contribution.” San Francisco Chronicle – April 7, 2012

“What the audience heard - and rewarded with a justified standing ovation - was an assured, majestic performance by MTT and the orchestra, and something even beyond that by Ragnar Bohlin's Symphony Chorus. Besides the power required for the ‘Ode to Joy,’ a great choral performance must also be seamlessly unified and yet with distinguishable layers of tonal beauty, and that was the case here. In addition to the accustomed excellence from the women, the men also shone this time, particularly baritones and basses (not usually singled out, but starring tonight). Bohlin himself conducted the chorus in the evening-opening Ligeti’s a capella ‘Lux aeterna,’ one of the composer's best-known works, thanks to *2001: A Space Odyssey*. A fiendishly difficult work of ‘voice clouds’ and ‘sonic fog,’ ‘Lux aeterna’ lasts nine minutes, but feels as if time stopped. That is especially true at the end: after the concluding five bars the sound disappears and the score calls for seven bars of conducting in silence. The audience was mesmerized watching Bohlin conduct and no sound from the chorus.”

San Francisco Classical Voice - July 3, 2012

“The Chorus, led by Ragnar Bohlin, sounded superb.”

San Francisco Chronicle - January 14, 2012

“Directed by Ragnar Bohlin, the chorus shined throughout this taxing performance; the male

chorus was especially well balanced and firmly blended.”

San Jose Mercury News - January 13, 2012

“This year's concert turned out to be the best party in town and the place was packed. Among the performing guests were sixteen brightly-voiced members of the San Francisco Symphony Chorus, led by its multi-diverse director, Ragnar Bohlin. The traditional and popular numbers were highlighted by the outstanding choral arrangements of Bohlin. Recognized as one of the best symphony choruses in the world, Bohlin's leadership garnered the 2010 Grammy for Best Choral Performance in the company's multiple award-winning recording of Mahler's *Symphony No. 8*. For this yuletide gathering, his version of ‘Go Tell It on the Mountain’ allowed even a chamber-size ensemble to fill the loftiness of the great hall and deliver a highly charged and refreshing take on the traditional Gospel favorite.”

San Francisco Examiner – December 25, 2011

“The full Malmo concert house met the captivating work with cheers. It was well-deserved appreciation. Ragnar Bohlin, a son of Lund's music life, transplanted to California, now a prophet in his father- and mother-land, was the conductor. He has conducted the piece in the New World, he masters it, he was victorious in the power of his over-arching authority and his sparse but engaged conducting. I listened with a mixture of awe and admiration. The sight of the 100-person large chorus was overwhelming. It brought a transparent, clear sound with great presence. The four choirs reached impeccable homogeneity, and Bohlin was able to play dynamically on this instrument.”

Sydsvenskan- November 6, 2011

“Ragnar Bohlin's Symphony Chorus, singing with impeccable breath control and command of dynamics, began the piece in near-silence, letting Brahms' harmonies seep into the hall in a disembodied pianissimo. The ensuing music unfolded in a series of sumptuous swells and falls, as if the entire chorus and orchestra were a single breathing organism; at moments of utter stillness, it sounded as though the whole world caught its breath. There were still other delights to come - a thunderous but clear-toned account of ‘Denn alles Fleisch,’ a generously lyrical rendition of ‘Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen.’”

San Francisco Chronicle – November 17, 2011

“The chorus (prepared by Ragnar Bohlin) blended and glowed with subtlety and conviction throughout the performance, though there were instances when the sopranos could have used additional fullness and punch. The orchestra, which played with such warm precision, managed to muddy the finale's final chords; well, life isn't perfect, either.”

San Jose Mercury News - November 18, 2011

“In addition to Conlon, the evening's heroes were the members of Ragnar Bohlin's Symphony Chorus, who sang with gusto and an exquisitely calibrated dynamic range. That opening was almost translucent in its still-breathed sense of wonder, and the explosive passages of the ‘Dies Irae’ thundered magnificently.”

San Francisco Chronicle – October 21, 2011

“The chorus must sing with hushed reverence in the Requiem Aeternam, roar in the Dies Irae, and dance lightly through the rapid, fugal Sanctus. This the Symphony Chorus did, and more, with glorious sound that was miraculously both transparent and massive; all this, and with exceptional diction as well. All hail the superb preparation by Ragnar Bohlin.”

San Francisco Classical Voice - October 19, 2013

“The final offering of the 2010-11 season had its moments of splendor and emotional radiance - most, if not all, courtesy of the Symphony Chorus, which gave a first-rate performance under director Ragnar Bohlin.”  
San Francisco Chronicle – June 25, 2011

“Summarizing the night's greatest strength: the chorus, directed by Ragnar Bohlin, stood out -- lushly colored and passionate throughout, its sound gorgeously pouring through the strings in the opening ‘Kyrie’.”  
San Jose Mercury News – June 24, 2011

“The San Francisco Symphony Chorus is among the finest vocal ensembles in the country. Scrupulously prepared by director Ragnar Bohlin, the 142-member chorus brought daunting power to the heaven-storming climaxes, handled MITT's bracing tempo for the ‘Gloria’ with aplomb and sang with rapt sensitivity in the moments of spiritual repose.” The Classical Review – June 24, 2011

“The happening was one of the most viscerally thrilling choral performances in my experience. I have become a fanatical fan of Bohlin and the Symphony Chorus, but even from that self-admitted position of prior bias, I didn't expect the transporting experience of this concert.” San Francisco Classical Voice - May 24, 2011

Headline: **“The Thrill of a Great Choral Performance”**

“Ragnar Bohlin's San Francisco Symphony Chorus provided a blessing for Davies Symphony Hall audiences last weekend in performances of Mahler's Symphony No. 2, establishing the highest standard against which all future performances will be evaluated. It's impossible to put in words the thrill of 132 singers "speaking" with one voice, a voice coming from far and yet as if from deep inside the listener. It was not a matter of spirituality, religiosity, hope-against-hope defiance of death, but an expression of ultimate humanity, an exaltation of music. A performance exceeding the SFS's own previous accomplishments, something from the same domain where true greatness dwells, the preparation for the concluding sonic orgy Leonard Bernstein had put his stamp on. Is this excessive praise for the SFS Chorus? Don't take my word for it. Ask anybody from the audiences. Listen to former choral conductor Robert Commanday: ‘The chorus entrance was the most sensitive single moment of the performance, as Mahler intended, and the singing continued to be beautifully balanced and spiritual.’ Or The Wall Street Journal critic David Littlejohn's unrestrained characterization of the chorus as ‘sublime, best I've heard it, micromillitone control.’ These are famous choruses - Czech Philharmonic Choir Brno, Choeur de Radio France and Gulbenkian Choir - but can they equal our people, the San Francisco Giants of choral World Series? Not likely.”

San Francisco Classical Voice - May 10, 2011

“The hands-down, on-your-feet stars were members of Ragnar Bohlin's San Francisco Symphony Chorus.”  
Bay Area Reporter - May 19, 2011

“The heroes of the evening were the members of Ragnar Bohlin's Symphony Chorus which sang with power, transparency, and a marvelous responsiveness to the text.”

San Francisco Classical Voice - May 7, 2011

“The real vocal star was Ragnar Bohlin's magnificent Symphony Chorus, singing with glorious vitality and precision.”  
San Francisco Chronicle - May 9, 2011

“The most striking thing about Wednesday's often potent account of Bach's B-Minor Mass was the mastery with which conductor Ragnar Bohlin managed the surge and flow of the work's weightiest

sections. It was a virtuoso display of musical hydrodynamics. There were other rewarding aspects to the performance. But Bohlin shone most impressively when wrangling Bach's dense contrapuntal textures into fluid, eloquent shape. The chorus responded with alacrity to Bohlin's leadership, and the orchestra sounded superb throughout.” San Francisco Chronicle - March 17, 2011

“Bohlin conducted with a love of every twist and turn in Bach’s inventive capacity. The result was a performance both stimulating and informative for contemporary audiences that never fell short in honoring the overflowing inventiveness that Bach could summon.”

San Francisco Examiner - March 17, 2011

“Ragnar Bohlin arrived from Sweden only four years ago, and he has already brought the organization to new heights. The triple-crown concert last month — Mozart Requiem, Urbaitis' *Lacrimosa*, and Feldman's *Rothko Chapel* — was just the most recent example of affecting excellence. This week, Bohlin and the Chorus are meeting their ultimate challenge in performing Bach's B minor Mass. The result is a delightful surprise. Using minimal forces, Bohlin presides over an intimate, gentle, and lyrical performance of this majestic expression of yearning for peace and the good of all humanity. Choral balances and dynamics were superb. With everything understated, the few big forte passages of the Mass were all the more effective; especially the triumphant, joyful sound greeting the Resurrection, and the delight in the Hosanna”

San Francisco Classical Voice - March 16, 2011

“The evening opened with Urbaitis’s *Lacrimosa*, a gorgeously ruminative, a cappella effusion that, makes much of modest materials, and concludes with a statement of Mozart’s *Lacrimosa* motif. The chorus, under the sage leadership of Ragnar Bohlin, made one eager to hear more from the Lithuanian composer.”

Financial Times – February 24, 2011

“The program began with Ragnar Bohlin leading 50 or so singers in a performance of ‘Lacrimosa’ by Ukrainian composer Mindaugas Urbaitis. The music's permeating stillness, redolent of Eastern Orthodoxy, was leading toward the program's next piece. In fact, Urbaitis's voices -- Bohlin seemed to pull long streamers of sound through one another -- finally coalesced in the very words and melody of the *Lacrimosa* portion of Mozart's Mass.” San Jose Mercury News – February 24, 2011

“Last night’s program began with a setting of the ‘Lacrimosa’ text from the requiem mass by the Lithuanian composer Mindaugas Urbaitis completed in 1994. This work was scored for eight-part a cappella chorus; and its overall logic is one of a gradual accumulation of fragments, all of which are based on the diatonic qualities of plainchant. Ragnar Bohlin conducted this portion of the program, and it was clear that both he and his ensemble had internalized a sense of the overall progression of this music. The initial fragments were introduced in such a way as to arrest the listener’s attention, after which that attention was capably guided, first through the gradual buildup of those textural clouds and then through the dispersal of those clouds to reveal a familiar source. This was the first San Francisco Symphony performance of this revelatory effort, and one can only hope that more will follow in coming seasons.”

San Francisco Examiner – February 24, 2011

“This *Lacrimosa* (1994), masterfully directed by Ragnar Bohlin, clearly pointed ahead to the Mozart. Becoming more “vocal” as it progressed, it gave new life to the key of D minor.” San Francisco Classical Voice – February 15, 2011

“A solid and often alluring account of this holiday standard. Ragnar Bohlin led - fastidious and appealingly attentive to detail. Bohlin's tempos tended toward the deliberate, with one or two exceptions. That paid off in the oratorio's most reflective passages - "Behold the Lamb of God" sounded especially fine.”

San Francisco Chronicle – December 18, 2010

Conducting the Swedish Radio Choir on tour:

“I'm telling you, the members of the Swedish Radio Choir are the Olympians of choral singing, and if every choral singer got a chance to hear them, the world might hum with gorgeous music for an awfully long time. The balances among the 32 voices in the choir are unimaginably perfect; ditto the phrasing, the purity of their sound, and last, but hardly least, their unerring intonation. This was Ann Arbor's first chance to hear the Swedish Radio Choir in an cappella concert, and on the occasion they were led by the expressive and graceful guest conductor Ragnar Bohlin, who has worked frequently with the choir in the past. The program was as fascinating and ear-opening as the singing was good. “

AnnArbor.com - February 21, 2010

“In their terrific concert Tuesday night at the suitably grand Fourth Presbyterian Church downtown, the a cappella ensemble offered a wide-ranging program under guest conductor Ragnar Bohlin. Bohlin lavished the grateful audience with two lighthearted encores.”ChicagoClassicalReview.com - February 24, 2010

“The Swedish Radio Choir is made up of 32 instruments and their owners play them with the color and flexibility of a chamber orchestra. The Swedish choristers led by guest conductor Ragnar Bohlin made this clear from the very first notes heard on their concert.

The Swedish Radio Choir is one of the finest a capella choirs in the world. Bohlin, who studied with Ericson in Sweden and is now chorus director of the San Francisco Symphony, was a vibrant leader, precise and keenly expressive. The Cathedral's generous (reverberant) acoustics played some havoc with Bach's motet 'Singet dem Herrn,'but the choir made a glorious sound and Bohlin terraced the dynamics skillfully.

The choir's sound was so full and rich it might have been heard in Kentucky, and there was a wealth of color and expressive detail.


Cincinnati.com - February 25, 2010

“Exquisite chorus. The chorus' very opening outburst was nearly everything that Bach can be, criss-crossing voices brilliantly delineated, the music emerging clean and vigorous with its flow and counter-flow, its celestial gears in sync, the chorus and orchestra merging as a single breathing body. Since his appointment in 2007, Bohlin has been molding this chorus, testing and perfecting its proportions to make them pour forth in a heady blend. And if there was a star of Friday's show, it was the chorus itself. Nothing was over-sung or underdone; the group's singing was felicitous, lit up from the inside, organized according to some musical golden mean.”

Contra Costa Times - November 2009

“A consistently reliable ensemble as it is, the San Francisco Symphony Chorus surprised and delighted tonight with the best performance I have ever heard from it. This was a thrilling performance. What has Ragnar Bohlin wrought? A chorus of a single voice, singing with one breath, the pianissimos clearly audible, fortissimos not overdone, everything effortless and 'musical,' diction and projection exceptional. It was one of those rare and wonderful performances when you register





a portion of the Mass on top of a musical Richter scale (by excellence, not volume), and then the next part tops it, and this incredible crescendo keeps going and going to the last note.”

San Francisco Classical Voice - May 2009

“The Symphony Chorus, led by director Ragnar Bohlin, invested Handel's great outbursts with a wealth of tonal color to go with the nationalist fervor.”

San Francisco Chronicle - May 16, 2009

“He had particular, fine assistance from the chorus, which seems to be flowering under the leadership of its new director, Ragnar Bohlin.”

San Francisco Chronicle - May 23, 2008

“Bohlin proceeded to lead Poulenc’s masterpiece entirely from memory and with enormous passion and conviction. The San Francisco Symphony Chorus was in rare form, performing with excellent diction, a wide range of tone color, and exquisite balance.”San Francisco Classical Voice - June 6, 2008

“The San Francisco Symphony Chorus sounded crisp and bright or murmur-sweet, boisterous then refined. Its new director, Ragnar Bohlin, is doing something right; his singers breezed through their continual role changes, from peasants to drinkers, spirits or will-o'-the-wisps. It was an excellent performance.”

San Jose Mercury News - April 28, 2007