

Karl Richter 1921 - 1981 His Life & Work

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Karl Richter's intellectual work had its roots in the classical, musical theological and humanitarian education he received as the offspring of a Saxon choirmaster, organist and clergyman; and as a pupil of the famous Rudolf Mauersberger, one of the most important composers of Evangelical church music at the "Kreuzalumnat", a famous boarding school in Dresden in, as well as being a pupil of both Karl Straube and Günther Ramin in Leipzig. Last but not least he was a student at the Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy School. A school founded by the Master himself.

Karl Richter was born on 15th October 1926 as the fourth of five children to Dr. Christian Johannes Richter and Clara Hedwig Richter in Plauen in Vogtland. Two years later the family moved to Marienberg in the "Erzgebirge", where the father took over the position of Superintendent. In Marienberg and later on in Freiberg in Saxony, where Karl's mother had moved to after the early death of his father due to heart failure. Karl was greatly influenced by church and organ music. In Freiberg's Cathedral, one of the most beautiful gothic cathedrals in the whole of Germany, he had the opportunity to practice on Gottfried Silbermanns monumental organ and of being able to sing in the Kurrende. In 1937 at his own wish, he started school at the "Kreuzgymnasium" (School of the Holy Cross) in Dresden and became a member of the famous "Kreuzchor" under the direction of Rudolf Mauersberger. In 1940 Karl Straube, former retired "Thomaskantor" took the highly talented Karl Richter as his last pupil. The years of learning and the first musical assignments as organist and conductor were abruptly interrupted by Richter's military conscription. One year later his mother died of heart failure. In 1946 after finishing his military service and a period of imprisonment as a prisoner-of-war, Karl Richter was able to take up his studies again at the State Academy for Music in Leipzig, where Karl Straube and Günther Ramin, at that time Thomas cantor, introduced him to the great German tradition of Bach interpretation.

After passing his final state examination with the highest awards ever, his career started a steep climb when in 1949 he was appointed organist in the Thomaskirche in Leipzig and teacher for organ music in the school where he himself had once been a pupil. When, in the course of his organ practice he became witness to the transfer of Johann Sebastian Bach's bones to their last place of rest in the "Thomaskirche", Richter prepared the great Prelude and Fugue in E-flat as a worthy reception for the great Thomas cantor. Karl Richter's success at home and abroad was achieved in the Bach year of 1950. Apart from numerous musical assignments as cembalist and organist, for which he was awarded the GDR National Prize, he also won prizes at the Bach Competition in Leipzig and at the Concourse International in Geneva. It was in this year that the earliest organ and cembalo recordings were made at the MDR Radio Studios in Leipzig.

Karl Richter had as a child experienced the ever-present, oppressive influence of the National Socialist Regime and later the even more oppressive political indoctrination that followed in the newly-founded DDR that must have seemed for the young ambitious musician like a personally aimed restriction of his artistic development. In 1950, during a concert tour in southern Germany and Switzerland with the Thomas choir of Leipzig, under the direction of Günther Ramin, with Karl Richter as organist, he met Gladys Müller, who was later to become his wife; and so it was probably not difficult for him to turn his back on the DDR, and with just a small suitcase holding the barest of necessities, always afraid that the boundary officials could become suspicious, he travelled in April 1951 with the train to Berlin, from there to Zurich and finally to Western Germany to look for a new field of activity. In the autumn of the same year, thanks to the intervention of Günther Ramin he was able to take part in an audition, which secured him the appointment to Cantor at the Markuskirche in Munich. At the same time he was engaged as a teacher of organ music and Evangelical church music as well as being appointed Director of the choir belonging to the High school for Music in Munich. In June 1952 Karl Richter and Gladys Mueller were married in Zurich. The young couple moved to Munich. In April 1953 their son Tobias was born and in November 1961 their daughter Simone. In 1967 the family moved to Switzerland, in 1970 they moved into a house of their own high above Lake Zurich.

Munich however, was to remain for more than thirty years, the centre of Karl Richter's artistic creativity. It was thanks to him that out of the Wagner and Strauss metropolis, an equally important Bach metropolis was created, achieving a worldwide reputation in the shortest of time. At the Markuskirche Richter had taken over the "Heinrich-Schütz-Kreis". In 1951 the first gramophone records with Richter as cembalist in the Fritz Lehman interpretations of the "Concerti grossi" opus 6 from G. F. Handel were made for the Archive Production of the German Gramophone Society. In 1952 only one year later, Karl Richter's first independent recordings: the Heinrich Schütz Musical Obsequies, with the Heinrich-Schütz-Circle, a small ensemble which was formed by Richter into one of the best oratory choirs of its time, a choir, full of youthful zest, radiating both a resonant power and sensitive awareness of Bach's music. It was this ensemble that was then awarded the right to make the great works of J. S. Bach its central theme; and so it was only fitting that in 1954, the choir was given the title "Munich Bach Choir".

On the 27 February 1956 Guenther Ramin passed away. His death gave rise to a difficult decision that Karl Richter had to make concerning Leipzig and the role it was to play in his future career. It was thought in Leipzig that only Karl Richter was acceptable as the legitimate successor to Ramin. On Good Friday of the same year a double delegation from Leipzig and Berlin brought him the official offer of taking over the position of Cantor at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig, the highest musical office that can be attained in the Protestant Church. Richter asked for time to think the decision over. Then at the beginning of May he turned the offer down. He felt he was thirty years too young to take on the burden of this responsible position; especially when taking into consideration the organization and educational duties attached to the artistic and ecclesiastical responsibilities. In a newspaper interview Richter named the reasons for his refusal. "For the last four years in Munich I have found a sphere of activity that I am not willing to relinquish so soon again. I have set myself a task, which I fully believe, is of tremendous importance for sacral music in Germany and that is to play the complete works of Johann Sebastian Bach, his Cantatas, Motets and Oratorios on a cyclical basis. The appointment in Leipzig is like being offered a king's throne, but my choir in Munich would break up. The decision is a very difficult one for me to make."

Karl Richter had formed the Bach Orchestra with members of the bigger Munich Orchestra. Thus creating two ideal bodies of sound for his interpretations. The ensembles were more than used to his way of working, especially to his musical spontaneity and tonal conception. Because of this, Richter could expect his musicians, during a concert to anticipate what was expected of them without any verbal communication. The complete works of J. S. Bach stood, from start to finish, as the very centre of Richter's work. The Passions, the high Mass, the Christmas Oratorio, the Overtures, Concerts and Organ pieces were all included in the Munich Concert Programme, and as of 1965 in the yearly Bach Festival in Munich. This Festival was a testing ground for new artistic orientation. That Karl Richter is known up until this day as a specialist for high Baroque repertoires in which, apart from Bach at the most only George Friedrich Handel was featured was due to an unhappy marketing policy of the big Gramophone companies, who in the sixties and seventies of the last century presented their artists under contract, such as Karl Richter, as specialists of a particular Repertoire rather than rightly presenting the wide scope of their musical interests. The great vocal works of Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven, Johannes Brahms, Anton Bruckner, Anton Dvorak and Max Reger belonged to the kern repertoire regularly performed by the Munich Bach Choir. Apart from that Richter used to feature old and modern masters of a capella literature in the Evensong services in the St. Markuskirche in Munich. Besides the Motets from Johann Sebastian Bach Richter also featured Motets from Heinrich Schütz and his contemporaries; something he was familiar with from his time spent in Dresden together with Motets and Organ music from Max Reger which he had become acquainted with through Karl Straube who was both a friend and important interpreter of Reger's music.

"A long jump from the organ bench", that was how a music critic in Munich described Richter's performance of Bruckner's 8 Symphony with the Bavarian State Orchestra. In the figurative sense this remark held a core of truth, because hardly any other church musician had up until then moved so far away from his traditional place at the organ. Within only a few years, Karl Richter had become one of the most sought after guest conductors by many choirs and orchestras, even Opera houses at home and abroad. He continually expanded his Repertoire to include vocal music, symphonies and opera. From the very beginning Karl Richter had gone on concert tours as a soloist with his ensembles in many European countries; later on he travelled to North and South America, to the former Soviet Union and to Japan. The unabridged performances of Bach's Passion in the last-named countries were milestones in the realm of international cultural exchange. A whole row of distinguished Concert events were honoured to have Karl Richter as a guest, He appeared regularly in summer at the "Bach Woche" in Ansbach, at the concerts held at Stift Ottobeuren and for the Christmas time vespers in the grand Festival hall or in the "Mozarteum" in Salzburg. From 1963 onwards he was a regular guest-Conductor of the Vienna Symphony Orchestra and the Vienna Choir Association, with whom he performed not only the Bach Passion but also other works of oratorical and symphonic literature. Later on he regularly took part in concerts with the Vienna Symphony Orchestra. As early as 1962 Karl Richter began his annual appearances at the "Teatro Colon" in Buenos Aires, where he gave concerts with local choirs and the orchestra of the "Teatro Colon", concerts that were dedicated to his traditional oratorical Repertoire and it was here that he could realise, as a Conductor, scenic productions of the operas, "Guilio Cesare" and "Xerxes" von George Friedrich Handel. In the orchestra pit in front of the opera stage in Geneva; Karl Richter conducted Handels "Belshazzar" and Mozart's original arrangement of "Idomeneo" and last but not least Willibald Gluck's "Iphigenie in Tauris" was put on stage at the Munich National Theatre.

As already mentioned Richter's Gramophone career began almost at the same time as his Munich career did. In the beginning he held parallel contracts with the "Deutsche Gramophone Gesellschaft" and Teldec, who brought out Richter's recordings under their Telefunken Label in Germany and under the Decca Label in English-speaking countries. With the archive production of the prize-winning recording of the complete works of Johann Sebastian Bach for the "Deutsche Gramophone", a recording that remained a bestseller for over a decade, Karl Richter succeeded in setting unequalled standards. In the seventies Richter played a representative cycle of 75 Bach-Cantatas for each Sunday and Holyday in the church year. Richter's recordings have been included in the Catalogue for the last decade and even today are cause for manifold discussions. A second production of Bach's "Matthäus Passion", awe-inspiring in its vision of spacious musical framework and timelessness, moving, in the painstaking attention to every detail of composition and statement, that only a lifetime of experience can make possible. This production set an unexpected and abrupt end to Karl Richter's "Endeavour to translate the other great Aeneis, that of Johann Sebastian Bach in his language" (Aurèle Nicolet).

When asked about the energy-draining self-imposed burden of work he set himself, he would reply "My time is now", or even "We Richters don't grow old". He lived and worked in the full awareness of how finite time is. Almost exactly to the day ten years before his death, he had suffered a heart attack, from which he had never really recovered. In the following years he also had trouble with his eyesight. In an almost panic-stricken fear of "days without light", he started to memorize music scores, but he did not just want to play "off by heart", he wanted to reach a higher sphere "par coeur- with his heart". In the middle of the preparations for a new Japan Tour which in May 1981 was to be made up of thirteen appearances with four different Concert programmes in Tokyo and eight other towns, Karl Richter died of a heart attack on 15 February 1981 in an Hotel room in Munich. With the Bach-Motet "Fürchte dich nicht" (Have no Fear), the Bach Choir of Munich took leave of their conductor in the Markuskirche, a conductor they had known and worked together with for over thirty years. On 23 February 1981 Karl Richter was laid to rest in Enzenbühl in Zurich. On 3 May 1981, the Bach Choir and Orchestra under the direction of Leonard Bernstein, with whom Karl Richter had shared a deep friendship, gave a concert "in memory of Karl Richter", featuring works of J. S. Bach in the Hercules Hall of the Munich Residence.

Text from DVD Booklet:

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