

## Franz Kelch – Memories of Karl Richter

When Karl Richter left Leipzig to come to Munich at the end of 1951, his predecessor, the prominent organist and choirmaster of the Heinrich-Schütz-Kreis, Professor Michael Schneider, had already arranged several great Bach concerts. The choir – which was called „Münchener Bach-Chor“ as of 1954 – had been excellently led by Schneider, and all members stayed in the choir after Richter took over.

Among the early supporters of Richter's church music, above all Dean Dr Theodor Heckel should be mentioned, an amiable and kind-hearted man with a great feeling for art, who contributed a lot to the success of the evening concerts.

As Richter was unknown to the Munich audience, his beginnings in Munich were modest, and the churches were not overcrowded. All Richter had at his disposal was the choir, and he had to collect the orchestra musicians from the Philharmonic Orchestra, the Radio Orchestra and the State Opera Orchestra on each occasion.

Richter's creative work was marked by the extensive tradition of cantorial practice in Leipzig. Through him Munich became the leading place for the cultivation of Bach's music in Germany. This was the beginning of Richter's international career.

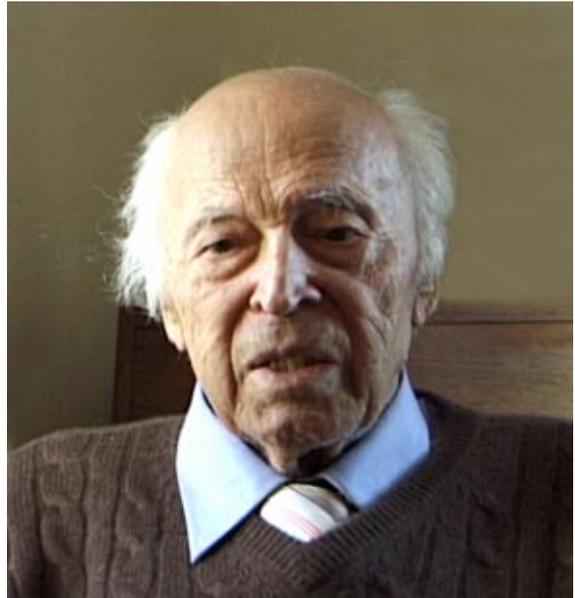
One day I was surprised to see a young man at my garden gate, accompanied by a former member of the Thomanerchor (St Thomas Choir of Leipzig) who now lived in Munich. He asked me whether I was willing to sing the bass parts of the cantatas in his evening concerts that were planned at the Markuskirche (St Mark's Church) – however, he said, he had no money and could only offer me 50 Deutschmarks if the attendance was good. I didn't hesitate and accepted the offer.

Richter was a brilliant organist and when he was conducting, he gave strong impulses. His beat was very precise, and – a fact particularly appreciated by each singer – he gave you a free hand in the interpretation of the recitatives, fully adapting to the singer's intentions of interpretation by giving only few signals.

A highly fruitful cooperation ensued, and in the first six years of his meteoric rise to fame I sang in quite a number of his performances: about 27 cantatas in evening concerts, the Christmas Oratorio five times, the Mass in B Minor three times and the part of Christ twice in the St John Passion and twice in the St Matthew Passion.

As far as the musical aspects were concerned, there never were any problems. We were so well-attuned to each other that I even acted as a short-term stand-in on one occasion and sang the bass part of the solo cantata BWV 82 „Ich habe genug“, which is known to be difficult, without any orchestra rehearsal. The Dutch bass Hermann Schey, a highly esteemed concert singer, who was about 65 years old at that time, had cancelled his appearance on the afternoon of the day the performance was to take place. Richter called me up, we arranged an explanatory rehearsal at the piano in the parish hall of the Markuskirche, half an hour before the beginning of the performance, briefly discussed the tempi and the particularities in the recitatives – and the performance was a great success.

Between Richter and me oral agreements were still valid for the Munich concerts. This brought about



a little debacle in 1955: Richter had engaged me for the St John Passion on Palm Sunday for quite some time. When I came to the rehearsal, I found my voice colleague Horst Günther there, who too had been employed for the part of Christ and had arrived from Freiburg. Palm Sunday is an important day for each concert singer, and I had turned down several good offers from other places for this Passion. It could not be clarified immediately how the double engagement had come about. Richter apologized. I stepped down and accepted the financial loss. In return, the part of Christ in the St Matthew Passion was fixed for 1956.

With regard to this performance of the St Matthew Passion by Richter, I would like to give the following retrospect of the year 1954:



*An encounter which was just as valuable for my experience and my classification as a Bach singer in the years of my cooperation with Karl Richter was that with the St Thomas Cantor Professor Dr Günther Ramin. For his first journey through Western Europe after the war, he was looking for a singer for the part of Christ in the St John Passion, and I was recommended by Richter. All singers met in Kassel and we had an explanatory rehearsal in the Stadttheater (city theatre) with Ramin. As always before a performance, he rehearsed the „Eilt“ aria with the eminently difficult chorus interjections „Wohin, wohin“ with the singer of the bass arias, the chorus of the soldiers „Lasset uns den nicht zerteilen“, mastered with virtuosity by the singers of the Thomanerchor, and the final choral „Ach Herr, lass dein lieb Engelein“, built up from a restrained piano to a great climax in a heart-touching way each time.*

*Ramin could rely on the excellently trained Thomanerchor and the brilliant Gewandhaus Orchestra, and the performances were overwhelmingly fascinating and dramatic.*

*Ramin's approach to Bach was vibrant, dynamic and well-conceived in structure, and despite all the rhythmic exactness and discipline which is necessary for Bach's works it was by no means an unemotional, puritanical performance of music. It was the same authentic style of Bach interpretation which I had already seen with his disciple Karl Richter and which was mainly inspired by the impulses coming from a strong musical personality.*

*Besides the St John Passion recorded on disc in 1954, which is still available as a CD document of Ramin's lively performance and concept of style, his recording of the St Matthew Passion had already begun in the year 1956 – also the date for the recording with the singers from Munich, Hertha Töpfer and me, had already been fixed – when the message of Ramin's sudden death arrived.*

*Certainly a comparison of this St Matthew Passion under Ramin with the one under Karl Richter in the same year would have been very interesting.*

### **The St Matthew Passion in 1956**

This was Richter's second St Matthew Passion in Munich. His reputation as a Bach interpreter had meanwhile become so firmly established that there was a run on the tickets in the musical world of Munich, a second performance had to be scheduled and the big Lukaskirche (St Luke's Church) had to be chosen as a performance hall. The audience, who had accompanied Richter's path in the first years

of his breakthrough, were filled with anticipation. How would he approach Bach's major work – which was now performed in memoriam of his teacher, the Thomas Cantor Günther Ramin, who had unfortunately passed away?

Richter knew the whole score by heart. With sparkling eyes and clear conducting gestures, he spurred the choir and the orchestra and transferred his fervour to all performers.

Then he went over to the harpsichord to cue the performers from there and to play the continuo part of the arias himself with remarkable concentration or to bring out the details of the Evangelist's recitatives with utmost virtuosity in an inimitable way. He coaxed a large variety of timbres and styles from the harpsichord, such as I had never heard in other performances. Another particularity – which could only be noticed by those participants sitting directly next to him – was that in the performance on the following day, he wove parts into his improvised basso continuo play that were completely different from those one had perceived on the day before, but with the same ingeniously ornamental expression. Who else in the whole world would have been able to do this!

The listeners and performers went home deeply moved after those performances. A milestone for a lively, unorthodox cultivation of Bach's music and performance practice of the Passions in Munich had been set.

Whereas in the past few years Richter's performances often had only been given a few lines in the press, this St Matthew Passion was the actual breakthrough for Richter. So the renowned lead reviewer of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Karl Heinz Ruppel, now wrote a detailed report. It said about the soloists:

*„With Claire Owen, Hertha Töpfer and Kieth Engen, however, an ensemble of excellent Passion singers came together, and the interpretation of the part of Christ by Franz Kelch with its spiritual permeation, its warmth of expression and the cultivated style of the noble bass voice is one of the most beautiful Bach interpretations by a singer one can imagine.“*

Now also the best-known opera and oratorio singers in Germany and abroad offered to sing with Richter. This suited Richter's intentions very well, for his ambition was to conduct not only at Bach concerts, but also at opera houses. From then on, also the Bayerischer Rundfunk did regular broadcasts of Bach cantatas under Richter's direction.