

# Claes H. Ahnsjö

1. August 1942 in Stockholm

## Beginnings 1973

In September 1973 I came to Munich to take up a permanent engagement at the Opera, although I had been there often enough for rehearsals, etc. A meeting had been arranged for me with Professor Richter. I made my way to the Academy, I was very nervous and excited, because I knew what an incredible personality he was. He showed me into a room with piano and asked: "Which music have you brought with you?" I answered: "Mass in B-minor, the Schöpfung and Johannes-Passion" - "Yes, Johannes-Passion is good." I had been told previously, that the Professor had very little time and that I should concentrate on a few recitatives and one aria. I began with the first recitative and went on and on. After about a quarter of an hour he cut me short and said: "You know if you breathe here a bit earlier, we can see what happens, and then we can do it all over again. I did just as he had said and then he stopped playing, looked at me and said: "Yes, my dear friend, that's how it works."

## Text arrangement

The situation was unbelievably important because of the personal importance the text held for me. If at a certain spot, the text had no comma but the music had a *fermate*, it could easily happen that this *fermate* would be used for breathing, causing the composition to break down. Because of this I have always tried to work very hard on the way the text is arranged. It is very important for me that not only the notes have to be right, but the text as well. And Richter had made all this clear to me in the way he voiced the phrase "Yes my dear friend, that's how it works". And it was quite fantastic the way we continued from there. The complete Johannes Passion was arranged in just over an hour. That made me very happy because it made me think, he's not in such a hurry after all, but is instead, willing, to work with me.

## Concerts and Opera

A good six months later I was given Haydn's "Schöpfung", at that time in the Deutsche Museum. That's how everything began. Then we had several concerts every year as well as a few tours, Barcelona amongst others. Richter conducted Gluck's "Iphigenia in Tauris" in the State Opera House and I was permitted to be present. It was the first time I had ever stood so far away from him, usually he stood next to me as conductor. It was a completely new experience, he was so present, it was indescribable, the close contact with him. There was always this spark that leapt and ignited despite the distance caused by the orchestra pit, Unbelievable! In the Iphigenie there are two tenors, one is dramatic the other lyrical. Siegfried Jerusalem sang the dramatic and I sang the lyrical. It really was a pleasure the way Richter led the music, the way he was aware of everything. Half the orchestra was of course the Bach orchestra, all musicians that he knew well and who had always played well with him. One noticed that although he found it very challenging, he enjoyed it too. It was a very fine production.

## Concert Performances

There was something that made every singer that worked together with him especially happy. Every thing would be more or less rehearsed and agreed upon how it was to be done. But then during the concert, when Richter noticed, that the singer's voice was better than it was at the rehearsals, he would demand more and would start to improvise if possible on the cembalo giving the Singer a sideways glance.

And this feeling, that he thought you could manage it made you feel as though you were floating on air. You maybe achieved something, that you yourself had no idea that you were capable of, and then that look from him saying "you did it!". These were moments with him that were simply superb. Rehearsals could sometimes be extremely trying, but during a concert the situation arose where everything was just music. You no longer saw the audience, you floated on clouds. He was capable of creating such an atmosphere with both choir and orchestra as well, he could call forth these colours, create these intensive contacts and everything was lit up and glowing.

## **Final Performances**

1979 and 1980 I had quite a lot to do In April 1980 the last performance of the Matthäus Passion took place. I sang both parts, the evangelist and the tenor arias. A few weeks earlier the Johannes Passion had taken place with Francisco Araiza as evangelist and myself singing the arias. But in the Matthäus Passion I took over everything. In December 1980 the Weihnachtsoratorium was performed here in Munich and in Salzburg in the big festival halls Then the second part of the Weihnachtsoratorium was due to follow on the 9<sup>th</sup> January 1981. I had a bad cold and had to cancel, and on 15<sup>th</sup> February everything was over and finished with.

## **Final B minor Mass**

I don't know, how many times I had sung the B-Minor Mass. It was the last performance in the summer of 1980. Many happy moments transpired there, the Benedictus or the Duet as well as all the other wonderful Arias, that in his hands alone became formed and styled to an incredibly high standard. That's what makes a good conductor, whether conducting an orchestra or as here conducting a choir. It's the way he forms his instrument and produces what is possible. Partly too what he wants and envisages for himself. The material is there, and what can be done with this material, that is the unbelievable giftedness, when something really out of the ordinary comes into being. He overlooked nothing, he knew what he wanted and whoever did not or could not cooperate with him did not last for long But his relationship to the choir, or to the orchestra and to the singers, was sometimes very strained, but affection was always there somehow. And he had respect, unbelievable respect.

## **Timbre**

You didn't want to disgrace yourself, you wanted to deliver the best possible result. And because of the way he was, you became just a tiny bit like a chameleon. You understood: yes that is the way he wants it to be, and you went that way. And after a while, in the choir as well for example, everyone sang or interpreted in a certain direction. When then the Maestro stood up there and heard everything and knew everything and is unbelievably precise then he can, naturally after a few years-it takes some time- achieve a special timbre". Karajan had, in Vienna made the tuning a little bit higher, that was also because of a certain timbre, but you can't do that with singers. Richter had, through his personality, his way of playing the cembalo, and the way he himself made music, created a specific timbre which he then gave to his choir and the choir gave it back to him. That is how this absolutely unique timbre belonging to the Bach choir came to be. The Orchestra as well had a special sound with him There were many from the opera who under the direction of Sawallisch or whoever else was there were used to a different sound. But once you had seen Richter's face you were carried off into his world. That was very clearly felt.

## **Ensemble**

In an Ensemble there is no indifference to be found amongst one another. That is what music is, what music brings about. You can't make music with just one individual, every one has to fit together. There

was a togetherness which Richter, through his way of doing things had achieved. Every person is equally important. It takes a bit of time naturally until one understands that it is not the individual who is important but everyone together. It is always easier to sing in a choir, that is not professional and does not get paid for it. When a choir sings for the love of it and the wish to make music, it's easier to achieve a pleasant atmosphere, than when it just a case of how much salary is received or how long the contract is for.

## **Rehearsals**

From my own experience I can say that we rehearsed in such a way that I knew exactly what Richter wanted. He gave us the frame and inside this frame we had to stay. But then sometimes at certain concerts one was suddenly outside the frame. But because we knew his behaviour so well and because everything was going so well, it was often better that the rehearsal one day before or on the same day would not be so strict allowing the crucial factor to come into being at the concert itself. When he noticed that it made no sense to carry on because everything already functioned, he would quickly move on to the next part of the rehearsal.

I believe, that everything I sang with him in Concerts, I had also studied with him. I was personally too nervous to stand in front of an audience if I did not feel sure of myself. And it was exactly this assurance that was rehearsed with him, one knew exactly what he wanted. It sometimes happened that when we rehearsed the same piece just a few months later it would not be so thorough, because we knew already what he wanted. But I am one of those people who must have everything fresh. Then I feel free. If I have to be careful all the time that everything is just the same as the last time I can't feel relaxed. I always wanted my rehearsal. I can't remember anything that I had not rehearsed with him.

I know that I especially enjoyed the individual rehearsals, because he gave me so much I wanted to soak up everything, I was downright addicted. And he didn't mind. That's why it was so fortunate for me, he gave me what I wanted. To throw myself onto the stage without having everything prepared that is not my thing.

## **Richters Eyecomplaint**

There was a time when he could hardly see anything and we used to think he was peeved or sulking. You walked past him and he didn't react at all. We didn't find out until later that it was because he just couldn't see us. During that time he learnt everything off by heart, *Schöpfung, Jahreszeiten* for example. Then he had an operation and he was like a new person, no wonder after having overcome such an affliction. After that he enjoyed working again because he was able to see properly.

## **Evangelist, Textorientation**

I had sung the *Passions* earlier before I came to Germany. My way of doing things was of course influenced by my theatre experience, I had developed my own method of interpretation and presentation. Then the situation arose in the first rehearsal where Richter at one point asked: "Could you maybe try it like..... Since then I have become extremely text - oriented, with the result that as an evangelist I am very subjective. I know that now. Of course there are some people who think that the Evangelist must be completely objective, only a narrator. But for me every atrocity that happens is frightening, I am so moved and caught up by the text that I use it, theatrically if you so will, to its full capacity. Bach did not only write the notes, they are of course extremely important, but he also had the text, and then he created this music for his world. The text was tremendously important, being taken from the Bible.

The story told in this Passion of Christ is one of the most dramatic stories ever experienced. That is why I get so nervous and ill at ease when it is, as is unfortunately often the case, monotonously read out by the priests in church. Then I have to get up and leave because I can't bear it. Not taking things seriously or being only half concentrated is not my thing. That is may be the reason why as an evangelist I did too much But I was always somehow or other giving testimony to what took place, especially in the recitative.

One had to know of course exactly, and at which point in the Text, what was to be done. The Passions are in actual fact documentaries, a running commentary of what is happening directly. When however the text is more a description of what is happening, then a different inflection would be used. But there as well the text is important. This is always argued about, there is even an opera based on this theme: what came first, the music or the text. I believe in spite of everything that the text comes first. The music for such a piece would never be composed first and then the text fitted in afterwards, it was always the other way round. The composer had personally experienced the text, and then built his world around it. This can be heard in Bach's music to perfection.

Of course one should not neglect anything, but sometimes at the concerts I had the feeling that Richter liked my way of singing. On the cembalo he had, sometimesl played things that were not in the score, just to help me. And he never said afterwards that it was too much. He knew it was part of my nature. What I learnt and experienced then I would like to carry into effect to this day, and this is what I try to impart. I am not interested in being a neutral singer with a good voice singing notes. And when Richter had the chance of getting more than was expected then he gladly took it. I thought that was great, in such a distinguished Man. One could not only deliver what was being rehearsed, when he noticed that a door could maybe open a little b more, he was there at once to see it would stay open.

I experienced this more significantly with Haydn's Schöpfung or in the opera, where one could, theatrically do more There the setting was more special than in the Passions, which had their boundaries. Richter was especially sensitive when it came to opera, and he was always glad when he could exact just that little bit more. My best point had always been that I was more pianissimo than forte, and that really pleased him and he always tried to get as much pianissimo from me as possible.

### **Once more: Opera**

At the same time, apart from this Gluck-Iphigenie, my main focus was on Mozart. I started with the Zauberflöte and then sang almost all of the lyrical Mozart-pieces, Parallel to the Zauberflöte, Idomeneo in which I sang the part of Idamantes, was running as well as "The Gärtnerin aus Liebe", therein lies maybe my good fortune in still being able to sing, because I never had to go beyond my abilities and hardly did anything that was outside my professional line of work. I was once asked to sing Wagner, but I declined, saying I would not be able to accomplish it. I did however learn the part and went for an audition, but in the second act it was all over. and from then onwards I was on the right path. I deliberately did not want to lose the Bach-passages. I knew that if a Passage overtaxed my voice it would be the same as when a lightweight boxer always fought against a heavyweight opponent. He could maybe get through three rounds but would then be done for, and could never come back again. One must always work at the same level. My voice and lyrical passages such as Bach and Haydn fitted well together.

That really is a problem these days: Because there is not so much money at hand, a lyrical singer will be engaged, for example, but will be expected to sing everything. After a couple of years he will be "sung out". After all we are not chips. We only have one voice, and if that voice is worn out, then it's all over. We were fortunate in those days, everyone could sing in his own special field.

## **At the end**

It was always positive when Richter never said very much, but instead played with his eyes. Then you could notice how absorbed he was. Richter never really spoke very much. It all came across through the way he conducted and through his eyes.

For me Richter was the person who made me happy. Maybe I often looked the other way when I did not approve of some things, because I had enough to do myself. The things I was allowed to do were extremely difficult, and I had no time for playing around I was unbelievably concentrated on what I had to do. Maybe that was why I was never one to sit around in Cafes or bars. It could also have had something to do with the language, that as a foreigner I didn't always feel quite comfortable when all around were babbling away in a language I did not always understand. But I think I lived very well just the same, I made my music and then I stepped aside.