

Dietrich Fischer –Dieskau

28. Mai 1925 Berlin

18. Mai 2012 Berg

When Karl Richter died of a heart attack at the age of 54, it caused dismay and consternation for everyone everywhere. The fame and the impact he had brought into being for the new Bach tradition and his founding of the once world famous Bach Choir, a choir of amateurs with professional format, had produced an almost cult-like reverence in all parts of the world, something which no other Cantor of the 20th century—except maybe his teachers Karl Straube and Günther Ramin—could ever give claim to. These two great taskmasters in whose charge Richter grew up, together with the choral education of Mauersberger, provided him with the performance practice of at least three generations. Not everything which their interpretations accounted for can have met with his approval, because everything he did to the contrary was just as important as it is difficult to put into words.

When I got to know him he gave me the impression of being a lonely person. And he was surely still "on the way" as far as his brilliant "Bach-Style" was concerned. At that time there was not much to be felt of the spontaneity and verve with which he could fill Bach's work. His memory however was always unbelievable. He was familiar with the complete works for all keyed instruments as well as everything Bach had ever composed for the human voice. He had everything in his head and at his command. Very often at the beginning of a concert he was still not fully sure what was on the programme list. Basically it was only through his interpretations on the organ and cembalo that one could truly measure how his Bach conception was rounded off year for year: started as an absolute austerity and objectiveness it grew and developed into the glowing fervent piety that animated his being.

Richter never bothered himself much with the academical music revolutions taking place as regards the latest Bach-research. He allowed his orchestra to play modern instruments and gave his whole attention to conveying intensity, which was one of his specific qualities. During performances, he could enthuse and arouse both performers and audience, and those musicians who had minutely studied their parts could never be sure that they would not be guided into other mysterious spheres of tempi, of expression, of sound-intensity, never really knowing what was happening to them. He was not easy to handle neither as performing artist nor as a person. He could not only enthuse, he could provoke and scandalize. When someone like Richter invests his whole life, without consideration for his heart or for his ever endangered eyesight, he can become impatient even hard when it concerns his work, his accomplishments and last but not least his image.

Every Sunday he sat at the organ of this very Markuskirche that later was to be chosen as the starting point for his Munich activities. Richter the son of a Pastor, had been brought up on the organ, as an adolescent he had sometimes spent the night on the organ bench so that he could start to practice first thing in the morning. It must have been taken for granted that the Thomas organist should be offered the position of Thomas Cantor in Leipzig when he was still very young. His sure-footed intuition concerning his future possibilities and the approaching political developments however caused him to prefer West Germany and he pitched his tent in a catholic town in which an acceptable Bach Tradition had still to be built up. What better way to back this up than through Richter's activities at the Munich Music Academy, which in 1956 appointed him as their youngest professor.

Within a very short time Richter transformed the name Munich into a synonym for a Bach Culture with no ifs and buts. Sometimes he met with resistance, which caused him to keep his distance from those who were not working with him, unless it was on the basis of an effusive music-brotherhood which never has much to do with humaneness anyway. His work was everything for him, and it was

only later, bit by bit that I realised how much drive and winning constructiveness he had put into it. Apart from the usual dryness of all music exercises amongst the young in the early fifties, what annoyed me most of all was a certain grumpiness he had when discussing everyday situations, it was by no means any form of dispute as was sometimes reported in the newspapers. At the mere mention of any musical detail however his eyes would light up and his attention was captured. Nobody will ever forget the expression of fulfilled dedication which cast a spell on his face at the sound of one of his musical interpretations and lingered there long after the performance was over.

He enriched the lives of all music lovers everywhere and he would have travelled to what in those days were undreamt of symphonic shores. The last time I met him was at a *Deutschen Requiem* from Brahms in Munich 1977, where the suspense and depth of expression that he could achieve as conductor could be clearly felt and followed. On the opera scene — I had the pleasure of taking part in Händel's *Cesare* and Gluck's *Orfeo* with him, he established and proved himself not only through improvisatory vigour but through his very particular ability of handling voices, which can be heard in the recording of the tremendous Cantata Project.