

Kieth Engen

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Beginnings 1955

My first meeting with Karl Richter took place in 1955 in the Markuskirche in Munich. Agatha Thiedemann had arranged the meeting, because Karl Richter was completely unknown to me at that time. I came from Austria, from America, and she said I could audition in the Markuskirche, but that beforehand I should have a few words with him in the vicarage. So in summer 1955 I went to the vicarage, sat down on a bench and waited and couldn't see anybody. I waited about five minutes and thought to myself, now this is great what am I supposed to do now? Then suddenly I noticed somebody next to me, it was Karl Richter.

We sat there next to one another, like Max and Moritz, not looking one another in the eye. Then he asked me: "Where do you come from and what are you doing at the moment, I've heard that you are at the Staatsoper?" I said "Yes." Whereupon he asked me: „How much do you earn?" I found that rather weird that someone should ask me that but why not, we were in a vicarage, so I told him. Then he said: "What do you want to sing?" And I answered: "I would very much like to sing Arioso *Am Abend, da es kühle war* from the Matthäus-Passion." We made our way to the organ, the church was empty, and we did Arioso, Richter on the organ, and I sang. Afterwards he said: "Very good, very good, could you do two Cantatas with me in November here in this church?" "Yes of course", I replied, "with pleasure".

And then I noticed, that two other people were in the church. It was Dr. Weymar and his wife. On the way out they waved to me and called out: "It was very nice, very nice!" And that is how my career with Karl Richter began and my connection with the "Ansbacher Bachwoche" started. That was in 1955. In November 1955 my first Cantata evening with Karl Richter took place in the Markuskirche: *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott und Gott der Herr ist Sonn und Schild*. From then on for the next 25 years we worked together and I learnt and profited so very much from Bach and Karl Richter.

Bachwoche Ansbach

The Ansbacher Bachwoche was as follows: As is often the case in real life the first time was not a success. I was at that time engaged at the Bayerische Staatsoper and could only take on other engagements outside Munich, if the Staatsoper so permitted. The Weymars had invited me to Ansbach and I tried to get time off. The Staatsoper kept me hanging on for an answer, and after about a month the decision was no because at just that time I had too many performances. I had to cancel with Dr Weymar at the very last minute and I thought to myself: Oh Dear, that's my connection with the Ansbacher Bachwoche gone forever because instead of saying "No", I had said "I'll try".

But by the grace of God, two years later I was asked again. In the meantime there had been a few angry letters, but a connection had sprung up between myself, Dr Weymar and his wife Liselotte for the *Matthäus Passion, Johannes Passion* and the *Mass in B-minor*. That was in 1957. I took part in the Ansbacher Bachwoche three years running. It was a wonderful time, the life we lead in Neuendettelsau. There in that little village our time was spent just for Johann Sebastian Bach. All we did was to practice and rehearse: then we were driven by bus to Ansbach in the Gumbertus Church to perform our Concerts. There were many well-loved colleagues present, Peter Pears, Fritz Wunderlich, Ursula Buckel and Marga Höffgen were there as well and of course, Hertha Töpfer. I sang all my life with Hertha Töpfer at the Opera and

in Karl Richter's Concerts. She was an exceptionally gifted Bach singer. The time spent in Ansbach maybe laid the Bach foundations for me.

We spent three weeks fully absorbed with Johann Sebastian Bach. In those days Bishop Lilje always preached on the first evening of the Bach Woche. He always came to listen to the rehearsals in Neuendettelsau too. It was a humane gathering with art, with people and with Johann Sebastian Bach, and it was a beautiful time. I'm not sad that it's over, I'm grateful, that I had the experience.

The Munich Bach Choir

I am sad to say, that I was so preoccupied with my Arias, my Ariosi and recitatives, that I never gave much thought to the Munich Bach Choir. I just noticed at the concerts what a magnificent choir it was and how beautifully they sang but at that time, I did not have much association with them or what they did. The choir did not stay in Neuendettelsau, they stayed in another little village (Stein near Nuremberg), We came together for rehearsals in the Gumbertuskirche and above all in the Augustana in Neuendettelsau.

In those days the only thing I noticed was the distinctive sound that Karl Richter had developed with his choir for the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. It was the first time I had heard anything like it, and it earned my admiration. But, as I said when a singer has a difficult Bach-Aria, he doesn't give much thought. To what is going on behind him. But it was a very good fellowship for example after the concerts. But after the concert the choir left in their bus, and we soloists were left behind with the Orchestra. We were much closer to the Orchestra than to the choir. That was my first impression, and therefore I have to say quite honestly I gave much too little thought to the Bach Choir. That came later during the Cantata evenings and during my first recordings of the Weihnachtsoratorium for Teldec. There we were together and I heard everything, experienced how Richter worked with the Choir. A kind of magic existed between the choir and Richter. He never needed to say much, he could express what he wanted from them with his body language – with his whole being. And the choir followed him at once.

We were all together during our trip to Russia. That's when I came a bit closer to the choir and got to know them as individuals. There were some Americans amongst them, but I can't really say that I got to know them personally as friends, but as good acquaintances. And they are above all participants in something in which we all were taking part in, a great creation, and this creation was the work of Johannes Sebastian Bach.

Tempo

If one is a soloist and one sings Bach, there are problems with breathing, with technique, with Pitch, with everything. It's all so much around the soloist that he can't even hear the choir. For example *Mein teurer Heiland* lass dir sagen in the Johannes Passion. One simply had enough to do with Richter, his tempo and his interpretation of the arias. I once had a small argument with him in the Deutschen Museum during the Matthäus-Passion. I was clever enough at that time to know, that one never argued with or about the conductor in front of the orchestra, one waited until afterwards. Anyway, there was this particular spot in the Matthäus-Passion, where Jesus starting words are *Nehmet, esset, das ist mein Leib*. All quarter notes, Karl Richter had made it that way - wonderful to sing. And then followed: *Und er nahm den Kelch, dankete, gab ihnen den und sprach: Trinket alle daraus*. All quarter notes too or so I thought, but no, Richter had changed to another tempo. I stopped singing, because I was so infuriated. I could not sing what these words were supposed to mean at this pace, it was so different to all that had gone before, and so I stopped singing. During the interval I went to him and asked: "Herr Professor, how was that possible? In the Introduction you kept the quarter notes slow and then at the difficult spot, where the bassist has the second introductory words of Jesus the pace became so fast?" He

answered: "Oh lets drop the subject, I just wanted see, if the violinists were performing properly. Tonight it will be completely different." That's the way he was!

Karl Richter and the singers

I can't say that Richter was not a singers friend, but there are some conductors who love and understand singers. Ive now worked together with him for 25 years I believe he only heard the voice as a part of the whole sound, as part of the orchestra. Which was absolutely right for him. But for a soloist it is always "prima la voce", first the voice and then the music. But he had this collective sound, and that's why it was just as impossible for him to look inside the singer's soul as it was for a soloist like me to look inside Richter's soul. But despite this we had wonderful concerts.

Karl Richter and the Opera

Richter love of the opera was, if I may say so, an unhappy one. Basically he wanted to conduct opera. In those days he sometimes had a concert in the north of Germany. Herr Geisel drove him there so that he could here a rehearsal with Keilberth or with Knappertsbusch. He would sit in the theatre loge with the orchestra score from the opera in front of him. Watching how Knappertsbusch or Keilberth performed. I never sang in an opera with him, but he would have been an outstanding opera conductor. Ther is a nice story told about him. We were in America for the second time, and hebhad received an offer from Vienna to conduct Figaro. Once, after a concert he asked me: "You have sung Figaro so often, what do you think of it and the Recitatives?" I answered, "Herr Professor, when you play the cembalo the evening is a success, because you do it so well. But you have to play the cembalo and conduct at the same time, and it is wonderful". And he looked at me and said: "Yes, but you only know Mozart, I would like to conduct Verdi, I would like to conduct Wagner." And I thought to myself, start with Mozart. But I didn't say it out loud.

But then back in Munich I went to see Keilberth, he was GMD at the Bayerischen Staatsoper. I was young and bold and said: "Herr Professor, I have just been in America with Karl Richter and he is maybe going to conduct Figaro in Vienna. It really is a disgrace, that he is here in Munich and does not conductin the Cuvilli'es-Theatre, he could conduct Mozart so wonderfully, ther in the Cuvillie's-Theatre". And Keilberth answered, "Ach I'll tell you something, If I give Richter Mozart then he would say, I would like to conduct Verdi, I would like to conduct Wagner. And I had to laugh inwardly because both had said the same thing. But he did once conduct Iphigenie (Gluck) here with a crazy director (Achim Freyer) and it was definitely first-rate, and he could have really made a career for himself as an opera conductor. But it would have been a shame as far as his Bach was concerned.

We had already done this Iphigenie with Keilberth back in 1956/57 im Prinz Regenten Theatre. It was a wonderful old-style performance with Hermann Prey and others. We were warriors, old Greeks etc. Achim Freyer, who is a brilliant artist, did this opera now as well. I had seen him in one rehearsal, he'd only danced, and as I couldn't dance very much. I didn't think the production was the last resort. But I met Richter in the Maximilianstraße, and he asked me: "You went to the rehearsal, what did you think of this production?" And I answered: "I don't think it's good, it's not good for the music." Whereupon Richter then said: "My son said it was very good." What shall one say to that. Truth has a wide margin.

Karl Richter and Tempo again

In 1956 Karl Richter went on his first Concert tour as Organist in U.S.A. In those days I lived in the Giebelstraße and he lived in the Schumannstraße, so we saw one another very often. We met once and he asked me if I could come by and translate two or three letters into English for him, which I did and

then soon after that he left for America. He gave a concert in San Francisco in the Grace Cathedral, and the next day there was a seminary with all the organists from the surrounding district. They spoke about the works he had played. He had performed, among others the choral *Wachet auf ruft uns die Stimme*. The next day when he was together with the young Americans, they asked him why he had played so slowly. And he asked: "Do I play slowly?", and they answered: "Yes really slowly, we're used to hearing it played faster, sort of jazzed up."

And then something very important about Karl Richter could be noticed. He had in his innermost being an intuitive set of rules; but he had never regarded them as rules, but as a part of his life. He said to the young musicians: "Give me a Bible! Take a look! The foolish and the wise maidens fall a sleep and then the Bridegroom comes, and only then do they wake up. Awake! When we are awakened from a deep sleep, we are at first slow to get going, we have to take our time." For the young Americans this proved to be a good explanation, why he used a slower tempo.

Karl Richter never justified a rhythm, he just went through with it. And then there was the "Dolce", "Legato", "You have to feel it" he would say. That's the way it was with him. As far as I know, only once, in the Cantatas, is a tempo indication given in Johann Sebastian Bach's score, and that's in the "Kreuzstabkantata". Suddenly in the last Recitative there is an "Adagio". And he always said, Rhythm is always something physical, to be felt and sent out in ones music, and in one's being and then it is right.

You never heard him say things like, he's too fast, he's too slow - no, he's not ready or he is good, he goes his own way. And that's something I learned from him. His tempo was always different, but it was always right.

Tuning and Intonation

He had these young singers, and the sound was young and clear. He had developed the way he worked with these young people to perfection. But because they were younger the pitch was always a bit higher and because I was Bassist, I was always a bit lower. That sometimes irritated him. I said "Herr professor, I am not seventeen, I am already forty and my "a" is a bit different. I was more than happy when, we were in Russia with the Johannes Passion and all the instruments had to be tuned to a lower pitch because of the organ. That pleased me greatly. But he was used to the wonderfully alive and crystal clear sound of the Bach Choir. I know many choirs, but non could compare with the Bach Choir. It was as he said his "Gabelsberger Footwarmers" something quite unique.

Vocal Vibrato

In 1956 Fritz Lehmann died during a production of the Matthäus Passion, and a year later the orchestra of the Bayerischen Staatsoper asked Karl Richter, if he would be willing to perform the Matthäus Passion, not with his choir, but with the teachers choral society choir. These were completely different people, older people, and he was peeved. He was completely peeved because they did not do what he wanted them to do, in the way he was used to, with his own choir. During one rehearsal he abruptly tapped for silence, "Ladies and gentlemen of the choir, all vibratos above a third are forbidden". Whereupon the love between choir and conductor did not become profounder, but that was how he was.

Karl Richters Aura

He was unique. He was a bit like St. Stephan, there was no danger of him being snapped up by Hollywood. He did not like publicity. When he conducted, and the audience could not see him, but we could,

a special light radiated from him, this small person became taller and handsome. An aura of beauty surrounded him, given to him by the music, by his intrinsic association with music, by his life with music it made you bear in mind, where he had come from, from the organ and of how very much knowledge he had. I often experienced this inner glow, that Richter had, not every time but very often, and they were moments of immortality.

Trip to Moskow and Leningrad 1968

On the last day in Moskow we went sightseeing, and in the evening we took the night train to Leningrad, where we were to give a concert. Before that we had been in the Bolschoi Theatre to see Rimsky-Korsokov's wonderful opera (*Die Saga von der unsichtbaren Stadt Kitesch*). We boarded this train, a long train, super modern, luxurious etc. Early next morning we arrived in Leningrad. The soloists and Richter were in one carriage. I am always the slowest in the world. Everyone had left, and I finally got myself together and got out of the train and took a look ahead at the platform, about half a kilometre long and empty. The exit to this railway station was below stairs. I noticed somebody behind me. When I turned around, I saw it was Karl Richter. Both of us made our way slowly along this half a kilometer, carrying our heavy luggage. Suddenly he stopped, there was nobody around, he turned to me and said: "Tell me, is this the last time in Russia for you too?" He didn't want to go there again, but he did return again. It was a triumph beyond compare, for Richter, and for his choir.

Richter and his Bach Choir once again

I think the most difficult work for a choir is the Mass in B-minor. It is a "Hans Sachs", a tremendous challenge. I have heard two beautiful extraterrestrial B-minor Masses. It was always good, but those of extraterrestrial beauty were in Ansbach and in New York, where everybody was dead tired from the journey, from the concerts, from sight seeing, from just everything. But in spite of this fatigue an impetus arose from Richter, that made them sing like angels. They sang as fresh and beautiful as if they had just returned from a four week holiday. How it happened I can't say, to all intents and purposes it shouldn't have been possible but it was. This was due to the remarkable liaison between Richter and his choir. And that will never happen again. It was unparalleled. It was of his making and the making of his choir. Then in effect they sacrificed an awful lot; but with pleasure and that is the beauty of it.

In Moskow, the young people who didn't have a ticket came into the hall of the Tschaikovsky-Konservatorium by way of the roof we saw how they came through the windows as well. There was quite a jubilation, because it was the first time they had heard the Johannes-Passion in such perfection. And above all it was young people. Maybe that was the connection between the young choir and these young listeners here in Moskow. In Leningrad it had been in a magnificent classical Concert Hall (Leningrader Philharmonie), with a completely different audience, a more mature audience, an audience, that had also been enraptured but in a different way.

Richter had given so many concerts, Organ, Cembalo, Orchestra, Choir. He stood on stage and on the podium so many times, it was second nature to him and it wasn't anything remarkable, when the public's reaction was sometimes different. For him it was part of his life, and that never went along like a tone that never varied, but rather in waves. There were evenings when he felt fine, and evenings when he felt in a bad way. He was an exceptionally gifted organist, but if he hadn't rehearsed you could tell and he could hear it as well and would be angry about it. But where was the time to be found, when there were so many appointments to be kept.

I once took him by car to a choir festival somewhere in the "Englischer Garten". He told me, that once a year he liked to have a fun night out eating and drinking with the choir members. Watching him there

I could see, how very important these personal contacts between himself and the choir were and how important it was for him personally to work with these young people. If somebody was incapable of doing something, he was very rigorous, then you had lost. But if he saw, that you were trying, then he helped.

I'm sad to say I took far too little notice of his work with the Choir, only during the rehearsals in the Gumbertuskirche, in the Augustana in Neuendettelsau, in the Deutsche Museum and during the trips to Russia and America, where he really worked with the choir. Sometimes he would jump over an aria because he wanted to try something with the choir. The work with this choir was, for Richter a heartfelt need.

Rehearsals

After having sung for Richter in the church in 1955, one of my first meetings with him was remarkable. I met him in the Giebelstrasse and he said: "Tell me do you know the Kreuzstabkantate von Bach? And I answered "No", at that time in 1955 I didn't know it. He then said: "Come with me". In those days the the Musikakademie was in the Stuckvilla, so I went with him to the Stuckvilla and for over two hours we went through this Kreuzstabkantate. In those days he had time for that kind of thing. Later in life when he had his great career there was never enough time for such rehearsals. This Moloch named Career was harmful for him. Maybe I shouldn't say that because I have no right to judge over Richter. It was the path he had to take and he took it.

Karl Richter's death

There is one thing though that I always thought was remarkable and I have to say it. Karl Richter died, aged 54, on Septuagesima Sunday. A sunny day but bitterly cold. It happened in Hotel Vierjahreszeiten in Munich. Next door in the "Englischer Garten" Dr. Weymar and his wife were taking a walk, they didn't know he was dying up there in his room. I was here, and when I heard, what had happened, I opened my mottobook. These mottos and songs were always drawn up 3 years in advance. For 15th of February there was a song from Philipp Spitta: "On the day when he wants to speak, open your heart and be still. So that he with you his work can do, let the work of your hands rest so". For me that was somehow for Karl Richter. There was something eternal about his work and in his mastery and in what he had created with his Bach-Choir and the Bach Renaissance here in Munich; something unique, a magnificent period of time. We must, in spite of everything, get down on our knees and say thanks to the Lord, and to Karl Richter and to Johann Sebastian Bach.

Tempo once again

Normally in the prime of life one begins with excess, with boundless vitality and everything that belongs to it. I can do this and I can do that and faster. And when one gets a bit older then everything starts to slow down first a little, and then very much so. There are exceptions, but the slowing down is normal. But I never noticed this with Karl Richter. Never noticed that he used to be faster and later became slower. He was always different, but within the music, within this entity of word and sound.

I think with him, one should never forget that he was basically an organist. At rehearsals he would always say to the orchestra, "Gentlemen, we have to bring it up from below, not from above, from below, from the basses upward". He was very very strict about this. But he was prepared to do it in every justifiable tempo. There was never a continuous slowing down there was never a continuous speeding up. I never noticed it. I always used to think, my goodness what's that going to be like this evening That's why we always had pins and needles. We never knew exactly what was going to happen.

That is why working as a singer with Karl Richter meant having a mental connection to him and from him. And I think this applied to the choir as well. If this was not the case it would have been impossible to work with him. I never heard him say: "Faster please!", and never: "Slower please!" Either I heard a lot said but never that. His tempo came from within and never from outside.

If you drive to Bayreuth and go to Haus Wahnfried, you enter a room where from the first Ring, right up until the present day all the Wagner operas with the names of all the conductors and the time data are written down: Walküre, first act, Parsifal second act, and sometimes there is a difference of almost one hour. That is why it is so difficult to argue about tempo.

I once had a very good colleague who always rehearsed her arias one pitch higher so that it would be easier at the concert. And there are times, when an aria is rehearsed at a faster tempo or at a slower tempo just to see how it sounds. But "in the heat of the battle" on the concert podium, it's all in vain, it has to be experienced. Every person is different every hall is different, but there was only one person named Karl Richter and he was always different -, but who always right.

The Last Weihnachtsoratorium 1980

Karl Richter's dressing room was usually downstairs, because he always wanted to be the first to leave after the concert. And as fate would have it, at this last concert in the German Museum for the first time I had to share this room with him. The very last Concert was the Christmas Oratorio. We hardly spoke a word to one another, after 25 years, and he left so quickly that time. I didn't even have the chance to say goodbye.

The Bayerisches Staatsoper had once again come between us. He had planned a Japantournee and wanted to have me along, but I could not accompany him, because the Staatsoper would not let me go. He had misconceived the situation, and with the remark: "Am I not worth as much as the Staatsoper?" Had taken the last three Cantatas from the Weihnachtsoratorium and two other concerts away from me. But it was his privilege. All that is not important. The most important factor was these 25 years with Bach and the young Karl Richter and with his choir, his unique choir.