

# Johannes Fink

12 August 1942 in Nuremberg

## Beginnings 1964

My engagement to play in the Munich Bach Orchestra fell right into my lap. In May 1964 I was on my way to lessons at the Music Academy. I was walking past the main door with my Cello case, when suddenly a big stout perspiring man rushed out of the door in my direction and asked: "Do you have a dress coat? And do you have a valid passport? You are engaged!" I was a bit confused and asked: „What it was all about?“ and this person told me, that in two days time a concert tour of the Munich Bach Choir and Orchestra was due to leave on it's way to Italy and the opera cellist had had to say no, because his boss would not give him time off. And he now desperately needed a cellist.

I went to my Professor to ask his advice and he said, I should accept at all costs. I then went to the caretaker of the Academy who was as it later transpired figuratively speaking, Karl Richter's "right hand", and said: "Yes". The next day I was in the Markusirche for two rehearsals, and two days later with my dress coat and my valid Passport, which were so to say my Qualifications, I was sitting in the train as part of the Bach Choir and Orchestra. It was an unbelievably beautiful trip. Ten days long, we started in Palermo and then went up to Turin. Yes, I was just a young lad, a student and I was incredibly happy.

## Early Contact with Richter

I'd had contact with him once before, if you could call it that. I had as a scholarship student of Ansbach gone to a concert in the Heilsbronn Cathedral. The Bach Motet "Fürchte dich nicht" was on the programme and for me, a completely unknown Karl Richter had played the "Prelude and Fugue in E-flat major" and then the Motet "Jesu, meine Freude". They were all pieces that I knew, but in "Jesu meine Freude" right at the very end it almost tore me apart. I knew the piece very well, and in principle I could have sung along, and then in the last two lines of the verse: "Dennoch bleibst du stets in Leide, Jesu, meine Freude" (And yet despite your agony you remain, Jesus, my elation). At least that is how I expected to hear it, and then suddenly, from the gallery in Heilsbronn: "Dennoch bleibst du" was followed very softly and like a parenthesis by: "auch im Leide", and then finally with strength and conviction: "Jesu meine Freude". That impressed me unbelievably, the way he adapted the text in this way. That was before I started my studies in Munich. It was a happy coincidence that after this other colleague was forced to cancel, I was the first one to walk past the door of the Academy with a Cello case in my hand.

## Conducting and Arranging

In principle they are both the same. What he, Karl Richter, delivered was simply through the way he worked. He did not need to work specially with the Continuo Group. When it came to Cantatas, Oratorios or the Passions he of course followed the text closely and when one knew what was written in the text then you couldn't do anything else but to follow what he had read or interpreted into them. As for the recitatives it makes me think of the time in the Johannes Passion where he had lagged behind when Pontius Pilatus asks "What is Truth?" He did it with a wave of his hand with and a move of the body he made it so clear that he did not want "What is - BUMM - Truth?"

Due to the fact that he played the cembalo himself, he didn't have all that much opportunity to conduct and had to find other means of expressing himself besides a GMD with his baton, but everything was so clear and so explicit. I have to think of Kurt-Christian Stier, who always played

the second violin solo in the Matthäus Passion so brilliantly (Gebt mir meinen Jesum wieder). When new young people joined the orchestra it sometimes happened that someone would burst in during the prelude. But if you had heard that once, it was clear for all time: It couldn't be any different. And he didn't need to make any huge gestures. Richter had so many possibilities of expressing himself. With his eyes, with his body language - and of course with his conducting, although there were many times when he did not even use his baton. It was always more than clear to everyone, great or small, what he wanted.

## **Viola de Gamba**

I started playing the Viola da Gamba during my student days in Nuremberg. My cello teacher said at that time: "We have a new man here in the House (Academy), he teaches Cello he should have a few pupils. "You belong to the more or less older music" (I am the son of a Franconian - Lutheran Cantor, I grew up imbibing more Bach than my mother's milk). "Wouldn't you like to try the Viola da Gamba for one year?" I hired an instrument and soon noticed that I somehow or other had an affinity to this instrument. I kept it up and when I came to Munich I use to go back every now and again to my teacher in Nuremberg; that's how it came to be known in Munich that I played the Viola da Gamba.

One day Karl Richter's Casting Director, Herr Kirchner, called me and asked: "do you trust yourself to play the viola da gamba in a Bach Passion?" Now at that time I was 22, 23 years old, an age where one trusted oneself to do a great number of things, and I of course answered with yes. I then went to the first rehearsal. Karl Richter looked at me very tentatively, but did not say a word. Then came the general rehearsal for the Johannes-Passion. Hertha Töppler sang the "Es ist vollbracht"-Aria. He did not say anything after the General Rehearsal either, but when we were leaving the podium, he came to me and said: "but tomorrow evening you are not to play off by heart", but of course "I'll play by heart, Herr Professor, when I play something from memory, it means I know the piece very well." He thereupon: "And what will you do if somebody else makes a mistake?" "That won't happen." "No, I don't want you to play off by heart, it makes me nervous."

At that I had to smile a bit, because he had conducted and practiced and played everything from memory. He knew all the measures by heart. So despite everything I played by memory and he never said another word about it. When something was played for the first time, you always waited for him to say: "It was good" or maybe even more so to hear "it was not good". Not a word was said.

A couple of weeks later he saw me in the canteen in the Academy. It was more or less his regular haunt, he always drank his coffee there and at that time he still smoked. He called me over and asked: "Tell me, how do you know all the pieces so well? I told him I was that as the son of a cantor I simply knew them. "Is that so! a Cantor". That's how we got talking and then many such odd occurrences took place, and from that day on I always had the feeling that it was more than just a contact between two musicians. Indeed I never at that time felt like a musician, I was still a little boy and Karl Richter was the Herr Professor

With time the contact increased to the point where he suggested we should play the Viola da Gamba sonaten together. Which we did, and for me, musically, a very wonderful and unbelievably valuable and productive working relationship came to be.

## **Musical Understanding**

There is actually not much to explain. The moment you would have spoken about it would have been proof that you had not understood. The understanding, maybe even the mutual agreement

went so far, that we in principle didn't have to look at one another. Of course I always had his movements in the corner of my eye. When he sat at the cembalo and held his arm at a certain angle, then I knew it was an organic movement for the pickup note. And when he did it like that on the cembalo and one saw it, then you knew it couldn't happen any other way.

With the "Komm, süßes Kreuz"-aria I had the pickup note. At some point or other I would have the feeling that the time was right, and I would start to play. Big gestures or so on were not needed. It was the same thing when he accompanied the singer, one felt at home in the instrumental accompaniment. And if he wanted something else it could be clearly heard on the cembalo. A Ritardando for example so that it could not possibly be anything else. But we never had to talk much about it.

### **Filling-in in the Bach- Orchestra**

Once, in the Markuskirche the Continuo-Cellist of that time, Fritz Kiskalt had a heart attack shortly before the Concert and another cellist had to fill in for him. He came into the sacristy and said, I'm here to play in Herr Kiskalt's place, is there anything I have to look out for? Anything special? Karl Richter asked the Cellist: "Have you heard my recording?" "Yes of course" he replied, "That's not the way I do it".

### **Spontaneity**

He had a very spontaneous way of making music. I can remember we were on tour with the Bach orchestra but without the choir. The programme included the "6 Brandenburgische", "the d-Moll concert" and some other pieces I can't remember. We performed twelve times in a row, right across Germany, from Kiel to Salzburg. Not once were you at a concert and thought, "oh dear, here we go again!" It was different every time it was new every time, sometimes exciting, sometimes you had to be really careful, it never became routine, but it was always very articulate. At that time, there and then, it could not have been otherwise

### **Munich Bach Choir**

The relationship between choir and orchestra was very cordial, it was a very presentable choir in those days - middle of the sixties, beginning of the seventies, there are quite a few who could tell quite a lot about how it was. Many deep and lasting friendships were formed between the choir and members of the orchestra friendships, which in part still exist to this day. Once to be honest, I was a bit annoyed, we were on tour and I always had my Cello, my bass viol, then my suitcase etc. and not once did any of the men from the choir come and say: "Oh you have a lot to carry". Not once did any of them offer to help carry something. The girls in the choir came and said, "Good heavens, you can't carry all that at one go, give me something". I was really annoyed about the stupid commentaries made by the male members of the choir. But it was **the** choir. Karl Richter invited me often to Vienna to play the bass viol at the Passions. The Vienna music society choir always sang there and there was always a more than noticeable difference in performance to that of the Bach Choir a week earlier. The choir in Vienna especially the female section as though the majority of the members had already been present at the debut performance. That was never the case with the Bach Choir

### **First Tour of Brazil**

It was the very first trip that Richter made to Brazil as a conductor. He was very talented when it came to languages, and had in only a few weeks learnt Portuguese for this trip. So he could more or less talk to the Orchestra in Portuguese. Just his the commentaries he made for his German

participants, he made in German. The following was told to me by a Brazilian musician: The musicians in the orchestra in Rio de Janeiro could not support themselves solely on what they earned making music. That meant that most of them had a second occupation.

The cellist was anything else but reliable, and at one point or other during a break Richter said either to himself or to John van Kesteren: "You can only hear him, when he plays in the interval." Unfortunately the Cellist was one of the few who could understand German, and he of course felt his honour had been offended. There was a lot of excitement and a huge row, ending with the removal of the Cellist from the Orchestra and that is why Johannes Fink was flown in.

### **Karl Richter's Relationship to Time**

During his short lifetime, he burnt the candle at both ends. He was a very restless person. Sometimes it went so far that later, when we had got to know one another well, it could happen, that at 11.00 clock at night the telephone would ring, and he would say: "I can't sleep" and then we would have a chat and then it could happen that right in the middle of a sentence he would say: "I think I can sleep now" and would put the phone down.

Or during the time where he could not see very well, he would ask me to drive him around. It often happened that when we had left the Hotel early in the morning after a sleepless night, he would go to sleep during the drive. He was very irrational when it came to managing his everyday life.

He keenly observed the times he lived in both critically and with a certain resignation. It became very evident, that he found it difficult to come to terms with the musical development that started to take place during his lifetime and which was to carry on after his death.

### **Nikolaus Harnoncourt at the Bachfestival 1965**

We once went to a concert together, and it was evident, that he didn't know how to cope with this new type of music that had developed. Of course those responsible at that time were more than the Pope, and the so-called History of musical practice and time itself had also played their part in this evolution, but it was not his thing. He was very much attached to tradition. A long, long time afterwards a saying came into my head, which would have suited him: "Tradition means to pass on the fire, and not to worship the ashes." That was his attitude towards the musical times in which he had lived in. And in which he had sadly not survived.

### **Johannes Fink as Pilot**

I already mentioned the many odd occurrences between Richter and myself that took place over the years. He was a tremendously uncommunicative person the minute one or two others were present. During the many concert trips and here in the Academy we got to know one another better. At some time or other somebody must have told him that I had a very advanced pilot's licence and he called me one day to tell me that he had a problem getting a flight on Christmas Day. He was a proper Cantor, he took his church services seriously and played at the first morning service on Christmas Day; and there he was, stuck in Munich because no flights were available. „Could I maybe fly him home?“ I replied "Yes of course, gladly"!

And I can remember the first flight very clearly. I picked him up at the hotel, and drove out to the airport, it was Riem in those days and of course I took the flight very seriously. I had a first officer as co-pilot and the machine was a cut above the ordinary. Richter sat in the rear and we flew him to Munich. Two or three weeks later he called me to say thank you again, for getting him to Zürich on

time for his Christmas dinner, He asked if he call on me again if he was ever in a fix - "Yes of course, gladly!" Then the next flight followed, and many more after that, I don't know which one it was where he asked me if it was absolutely necessary that someone had to sit up front with me. I replied: "Not absolutely, in this type of plane I'm allowed to fly alone. That was what he then preferred. From that moment on he always sat next to me in the cockpit. Very often he would watch everything with interest, but mostly, after a short time, he would take out some music score or other and flip through it. In retrospect I noticed that he was always fully with it, because he was very interested in the technical aspect of flying. In this way we spent quite some time together

### **The Last Flight Christmas 1980**

I especially remember the last flight I made with him. It was Christmas 1980. Very shortly before, there had been this ominous interview in the *Abendzeitung* with the director at that time of the Philharmonic, Celibidache. "Celi" had made back-biting comments about conductors. We sat together in the plane and he questioned me during the whole flight, "Tell me is it true what he said about Karajan?" I could only say: "You know the way the red top press works. I don't believe he said what they wrote but I wouldn't be surprised if it were true." Richter replied: "And is it true what he says about Knappertsbusch?" that's the way he questioned me about all the conductors, that Celebidache had slandered. Then it was time to land in Zürich. I took his suitcase, his son was already there waiting for him in the car. I accompanied him as far as the Passcontrol and was already on my way to the plane again when he called me back and asked: "Tell me, didn't he say anything about me?" That was the whole reason why, during the flight, he had asked me so much about the other conductors!