

Julia Hamari

21 November 1942 in Budapest.

Beginnings 1965

It was a fantastic experience for me. In 1965 I won the Franz-Liszt Competition in Budapest as youngest competitor. Following the competition, a Gramophone record was made and distributed, and that is probably how the record arrived in Vienna. It was the Festival time there, and if I remember rightly, Christa Ludwig had cancelled and I was asked to sing. I was a small 22 year- old, who was still at school, who had left the academy just for this competition. I had arrived from Hungary unbelievably showily dressed. We were poor, it was in fact at that time a very gloomy period in general, but not for me. For me the sun shone through the music and through the fact that I thought everybody loved me and wanted to help me.

I was introduced to Richter at the Music Association in Vienna. He came into the room and I stood there, absolutely unknown, truly a little girl, and nothing more. He stood before me with his crazy, I always say and mean it in the nicest way- “Fisheyes” I tried to stare back at these” Fisheyes “and felt as though I was paralysed. I looked into these “Fisheyes” and thought I wouldn’t be to sing a note. And then he said, in his cute saxon dialect, “well come on, let’s sing a little bit”. Then he led me into a huge room and began at once with the Erarme-dich-Arie from the Matthäus Passion. Only when he had almost finished playing did I realise that he was not of this world, but that he lived in a world of his own. He was not realistic, the public bothered him, the listening to and hearing bothered him, later of course I got to know him as a very self-contained person , but this was my first impression, he lived just for the music.

I said to myself this is where I can feel at home. Music was my life as well. Why are you nervous, let yourself go, let yourself be carried along: and I started to sing the Erbarme –dich-Arie. And suddenly,he stared at me-it happened once as well at a concert- he looked right through me, and by doing so encouraged me to sing even better than ever before. I still get goosepimples when I think about it. Then he said “Young, but already an artist. Enough.” and then added “It’s going to be wonderful”

When I think back, (to the sensational debut in April 1966) Hermann Prey was there, Peter Schreier was there, (also one of his first concerts in Vienna), Ernst Gerold Schramm - he was a wonderful friend of mine, and it was the last concert with Theresa Stich-Randall, another high-ranking Concertpianist, and I was really in comparison just a baby.

I stood up for the “Erbarme dich” aria, and I think I sang well That was the very first Mathäus Passion of my life. Of course nobody wanted to believe me. Such a beginning was normally not possible. The aria came to an end, and I looked at him and he looked at me there was this crazy pause, this awful pause: everything stood still nobody stirred; and then the choir started very slowly to sing the choral. Then he very quickly did the subsequent Recitative, looking angrily at me all the time as if it was my fault that he was so surprised.

Audio-recording of Händel’s Julius Ceasar

When I came back to Germany again, the first thing that Richter actually wanted of me was to sing the Cornelia in Händel’s Julius Ceasar. I, as the little girlie, it was 1968 or thereabouts, was to sing the oldest part, I think it was Peter Schreier’s mother.

Richter was not in a good mood because he had broken his foot and with this broken foot he had to

conduct. I came to the part where I had to sing “Io moro”, and suddenly in a very unfriendly way he said “Don’t die on me like that! I don’t like it, I don’t like it. Die FORTE!. I was appalled. Then Dieskau came to me and said softly “Wait a second, Julia” - wait a second Karli ”- he was allowed to say that, for me it was the professor, “Karli, take a look at this, now I’m going to die FORTE on you” and he then performed my part. There was uproarious laughter, Richter looked at me and said, “Alright then, die PIANO” And so it came to be that on the gramophone record I died PIANO.

Discipline

Such were the experiences I had with him. Of course there was not very much time for the arias. Tatjana Troyanos sang Cleopatra. For a concert the concentration was alright, but for a gramophone record it was rather exhausting for the Mezzo. I sat outside the door and waited until Richter would call “Hamari, up to the microphone!” And on the spot I and my voice had to be completely and totally disciplined and concentrated. I try to tell this to my pupils today. Discipline is absolutely necessary for singers. What you do beforehand and what you do afterwards does not count, but this discipline is very very important.

Filming the Passions

Then we had the filming of the Matthäus Passion and the Johannes Passion. First came the Johannes Passion, in 1970, then in 1971 the Matthäus Passion followed. When the shooting was finished and we could take a look, me in my blonde wig, I thought at first, my God they haven’t shown much of me because I wasn’t very good I was however relieved when I noticed that nobody was shown for more than two minutes or even less. In fact it was a big disappointment that we were to be seen only for such a short time. I thought people were interested in seeing the singers when they sang.

Before the film was made I had sung the Johannes-Passion in Frankfurt with Theodor Eger. He had a relatively slow tempi, but I gradually became even slower and slower and he did not help me at all. So where I had to hold the low C I ran out of breath, something that had not happened before in my whole life. It gave me a shock but the concert carried on. Admittedly this part of the concert went to pieces and I was of course worn out. Then the film was made with Richter and I asked him: ”Maestro, Professor Richter, can you help me? I had a shock because I couldn’t hold the low C please be so good, somehow.....”. ”never mind we’ll take care of that”. And the result was that I was able to sing the Johannes Passion again.

The Matthäus-Passion was in the Bavarian Film Studios, I can remember this huge Studio. And we had to sing properly. There was no Playback , we had to sing. And he stood there and as I opened my mouth for the first time, I thought I didn’t have much of a voice. But then I got used to it: I hear so much - and I sing so much - nothing more.

And when, for the first time, I sang the second part of this Aria (“Ach nun ist mein Jesus hin”), and it was finished, there was a short silence and then the choir bellowed in with such a force that I received another shock but this time of the positive sort.

He was right, I sang the Aria one one breath without severing, the way it can be heard on the record. At all events this Cantate has become my signpost and my best-loved recording. When everything was completed he suddenly put his baton down and said “And you and only you will sing that with me and nobody else”. And that’s the way it was.

Cantatas Recording (Trinitatis I)

I love one of these Cantatas dearly, with the Aria “Wie furchtsam wankten meine Schritte” And the way

I had sung it, I suddenly thought oh my goodness I won't be able to sing like that now. Richter had adopted an unbelievably slow tempo I had to take breath in until I thought my lungs must burst. But I did it staring at him the whole time, I had to sing off by heart otherwise It would have been absolutely impossible. Then everyone looked at me, and the Orchestra started to applaud. I went up into the studio rooms, my arms stretched out away from me I'd really expanded my lungs with this slow tempo. Suddenly Richter appeared behind me and said "It was pretty slow, wasn't it?". I turned around and asked "Isn't that what you wanted?" "Of course not! Now you'll get the right Tempo and everything will be fine"

Mass in B-minor Ottobeuren 1980

My greatest experience was his last Mass in B-minor in Ottobeuren. I think I'm not the only one to think so. Whoever has experienced this B-minor, and I'm thinking now of my colleagues, I believe they all had tears in their eyes when they spoke about it. I did not know at the time that it was to be my farewell, but it is wonderful that I could say goodbye to him in this way. I believe that not many singers are given such an opportunity, this Farewell suddenly became for me something very private. And Richter is to this day my God.

I learnt a tremendous amount from him and I think it was because of him that I became a Bach specialist. And because of this there were not many Bach conductors that I could accept. He was my Maestro. For me he was what I called Bach. And now I want to say something which will probably surprise many people. God took him at precisely the right moment. I believe that today so called fantastic Bach interpreters would not have accepted him. And Richter would never make compromises.

Karl Richter and Hotels

He loved music, it was his life. When he stayed in hotels it was always in the the most removed corners with his cembalo. He had to practice the whole night through, I think he only ever slept for about one hour because he wanted to play the whole time. And I know that during the night he would call his favourites, the ones he liked most of all, at three or four o'clock in the morning to say, "I've played enough, now I need someone to talk to."

It didn't interest him at all if somebody had just gone to sleep. It didn't interest us either. We took it for granted, sometimes we even were waiting for it to happen, curious to know which night was to be the one when he was going to call because he had played enough and was not yet able to sleep.

He has stayed in our hearts, and I believe, whoever worked with him and was a true musician, as he was, was devoted to him and his spirit and we hope, all of us, to meet with at some point once again.

Richter and the Bach Choir

I can remember, I think it was at a rehearsal for a Matthäus Passion in Ottobeuren. I sat in a room opposite to the choir. The Orchestra was in between and Richter sat next to me. It was the first time that I saw what a charisma Richter had and how much the choir loved him. It was because they were so devoted to him that they were able to feel this. That is why the rehearsals with the choir were such a tremendous experience for me. The singers were devoted to Richter. He was for the choir the absolute perfectionist, everything had to sound as perfect as a grammophone record. It was important for him that his inner conception should be transmitted to the choir.

I always said I was envious, because the choir could be together with him so often, and I could not. It was unbelievable to be able to experience what took place between him and his choir. Afterwards at a

concert or a recording I was never able to experience this, they would be standing behind me. It was only when I was singing an Aria together with them, and in the Matthäus Passion there were many such Arias where I could really sing with them like Question - Answer, Question-Answer.

That was why it was such a tremendous experience for me when the choir applauded me in the Bavaria Studios showing me their praise for my performance. I believe that only Richter and no other conductor, was capable of producing such moments between his performers and choir. Richter was not an egoist (even though many thought just the opposite.....). He was the music itself, and he was the only person in my whole life that I accepted because I knew this, I knew that he was the music.

I congratulated him too on what he what he was able to do with the choir of those days. I knew a lot of the members and they would come to me in between times. A very special sort of communication sprang up between us. A conversation in which they wanted to ask me just as many questions as I wanted to ask them. A very wonderful kind of contact sprang up between us. When recently, at the 50 years Jubilee in Munich I sat amongst some of the members of the old Bach Choir - his children - I experienced all over again the ability to talk to them again in exactly the same key as in the past. Many of them recognised me too, a lot of time has passed by and I don't look the same as I did then -, but they recognised me nevertheless.

Tempo

Richter's Tempi were incredibly full and complete and he expected us to feel this. These days lots of things aren't ventured anymore maybe because people are emptier somehow and fast tempi are modern OK times are much faster than they used to be. But Richter's Tempi taught me how to sing because I could breathe well. I didn't need to learn any extra backing. My backing came from the demands his music made on me, and then I think a good technic develops of it's own volition. With Richter, without him having to say a word, discipline reigned. He could control you with just a glance. Our music making took place in a closed and harmonious atmosphere.

Karl Richter and Publicity

Richter was in no way at all a public person. The public disturbed him... Cameras disturbed him. That's why I think the television recordings were never 100 % Richter because other tempi arose that we were not expecting. If he was disturbed for some reason he would immediately change the tempo. Usually a bit cramped, so he could not perform the way he wanted to. It was a kind of intimacy that I have never experienced with any other conductor.

The Young Bach Choir

I feel sorry that the young Bach Choir of today never got to know Richter. They will never know what they missed out on. It was wonderful in those days. Regardless of the fact that other choirs are schooled in perfection and can work 25,000 hours without a conductor. I believe that with Richter they could have learnt the notes on their own because the music only comes to be because of the notes. Everywhere else everything is very thoroughly rehearsed, and I know conductors who are only shadows of what Richter was, that has got to be said, I am a very truthful person. Nobody can harm me anymore, and when I speak of my God of Music I want him left on his throne because that is what he deserves, to be left on his throne.

Bach-Conductor

If another conductor said anything about Richter I always answered "You couldn't hold a candle to

him. "I honoured him, my inner self knelt before him in a way I was never able to do with any other conductor. He was my Bach conductor because he was in the music. I said to all other so-called Bach conductors that I was a child of Richter and of no other. I am his child and therefore I would neither accept nor respect any other, especially when they were only adolescents. I must admit that I sometimes went overboard.

In all events I never needed any diplomatic talents when it concerned Karl Richter. He looked at me, lifted his baton or sat at the cembalo and I was immediately on his wavelength! The door to Bach's world opened and I could stroll in. Otherwise, if I'd had to open the door myself, I would never have been able to enter. The other Conductors could not guide me in, they were never in the world of Bach, they were always in their own world. And if I did not open the door then I was never in Bach's world. I never had such problems with Richter. The door opened automatically and I went in and was at one with Bach and Richter.

I think the way it is with the conductors and their Tempi is that they imagine something but they don't experience it. They imagine something in the text, but the text has its own melody. Bach wrote the music to suit the text. We are singers, the most important element has to be the music, which then together with the text creates something phenomenal. Richter's approach was always a musical one, the modern conductors approach is a textual one.

That is the huge difference to translate a text is something very realistic, to translate music is something you cannot get a grip on, it remains ethereal. So the text has to be made to seem larger than life because the music is always so. Singing is always a step higher than the spoken word, it is an unbelievable gift to be able to put the spoken word to music. I believe that was how it was for Richter.

Recitative

When Richter sat at the cembalo, it didn't matter if it was a recitative or an Aria, he always got up in between to conduct. He was at one with the Cembalo, and we three, Richter, the Cembalo and myself were suddenly one. We were Bach. I am a very instinctive, and spontaneous singer and music is my medium. A recitative with Richter was never dry except for the Evangelist. The Evangelist, for him was something very different. God, Jesus, was sometimes too much, too big, for me. It exceeded everything, almost too dramatic, but Richter wanted it so. He led the singer to present Jesus in just this way, and then the Aria came for me too. The Recitatives were not one bit smaller or less, for me they were however more important than the Aria.

He accompanied the Recitatives on the Cembalo, full of rhythm and intensity. I always held the cembalo in high regard. It is unbelievable what he could conjure out of an instrument, even for the dry Recitatives and for the Cantatas. I can't say why I sang it this way or that way, I had to sing it the way he wanted it from me at that very moment. It just had to be so. I can't see any lines either, I can't see that from this side if it is an accord from the Orchestra or from him. I just dived in and I didn't know how a person could play an accord in such a way. When I then heard how somebody else tried to copy Richter, it always sounded very different.

Ottobeuren

To listen to Richter playing the three Organs in Ottobeuren was an unforgettable experience. I had the chance of sitting there for five days, listening to him conjuring the unbelievable out of the register in the same way he had done with the Cembalo, from gentle chimes to the dramatic. I ask myself over and over again if anyone can produce such dramatic sounds from a cembalo. When he played my recitatives

I sang it like that because I knew that was the way it was meant to be. I did not have to give Richter any explanations, never once in my life. It was just so.

Klang des Bach Choirs

When I talk about the sound of the Bach Choir, I mean you could hear the sound of the love that Richter had for music. And because the choir was so dedicated to Richter, when they heard this music they carried this feeling with them. And because they spent an enormous amount of time singing with Richter this became a boundless flood that they were caught up in. It is a complete unity with music, and Richter did not order it, he was this unity. Other conductors like to implore and explain, Richter hardly ever said anything. He just stood there, his eyes following his singers, some-times severe sometimes benign his only wish being that Bach should ring out. And the Bach Choir were devoted to him. How could you not be devoted to him That for me was the all in all.

If it was the Choir or the soloists it never made any difference to him as far as I could see. He of course knew the Choir inside out. Sometimes he had a soloist as guest. Whoever was good, he respected, whoever was not good he would turn his nose up at and could then be absolutely unbearable, that really is true. I myself have experienced how awful he could be.

The choir was his instrument, but they wanted to be his instrument. It was the will of the Choir, deliberately or undeliberately, to surrender themselves, to become as one single person, a unity that Richter embraced and said: "They'll do it anyway, because it's the right way, You can't do it in any other way, only the absolutely right way."

Phenomenon Richter

What was phenomenal about Richter was, that he was never twice the same. He could not be fitted into a mould or pattern. One day he was a bit faster, the next day a bit slower. Sometimes in a good mood, but when we didn't know whether to sing or cry that would put him in a bad mood and the we would pull our socks up, and want to help him so that the good mood would return because if someone had displeased him or something had annoyed him, it was always his music that helped him to recover. When that did not work then he was as cramped as we were as singers. That too was an indescribable experience with Richter. One had to be in unity with him when it concerned his music otherwise nothing went right, but when it did, you took a step back and said, Jesus has a brother on this earth.

Richter always sensed that he would not live long. He knew it. As a human being he was exceptional, in fact he something a lot greater, always a bit closer to music than to people.

The phenomenon Richter cannot be explained, I have no explanations. He was somebody I had to serve quasi with music, and I do not serve anybody. Nobody should serve me either. Isay to my pupils do not serve anybody just serve the music, and what you can express with your voice and with your life. When Richter appeared on the scene and I looked at him iwas another person. Maybe it was meant to be, because then It was the biggest gift in my life, that I got to know him and that I had the chance to work with him.

Concentration

When I worked with him, there was this indescribable concentration that I cannot put into words. I don't know if something took place between us because of the music, which is what the choir felt as well. Maybe he had gone through a period where it had been very exhausting having to concentrate so

hard with certain singers and maybe he had then taken others who did not need so much effort. I only know that in the very beginning when we recorded Julius Caesar, I must say that he was really a bit unbearable. I had to pluck up all my courage and really had to concentrate to sing well and to recognize his wishes when I looked at him. OK that was not Bach, that was Händel.

There again I couldn't have cared less what I had to sing for him, Dvorak "Sabat Mater" or anything else at all, I can remember he came to me once after I had sung Sabat Mater and said "You were wonderful" I maybe needed a bit more concentration from him: and he had some periods, where he maybe let the singer perform more on her own. Presumably I needed a bit more of his soul. I gave as well though, I know that from others, with whom I sang. Sometimes they complained that I demanded an awful lot from them. I could never be light as a singer. I was indescribably concentrated, I gave myself up to the music totally. I would sometimes weep, which not everybody understood. They maybe thought I was lamenting myself, which of course I was not, the atmosphere was so unique that I just had to weep. Like now when I just talk about it. It's not showing off or like being in a circus it just has to be so. It shows that feelings can be unbelievably honest. Making music causes such feelings to rise to the surface. I thank God that I had the opportunity of experiencing Richter in such concerts.

Peter Schreier

I also experienced Richter on the Cembalo at Peter Schreier's first concert in the Herculessaal. Richter sat at the Cembalo and I sat relatively close by. My impression was that Peter Schreier had presented himself on a platinum tray and Richter conducted the concert from his seat at the Cembalo. I have never seen the like since, that a concert could be conducted from start to finish from the Cembalo. And Peter was happy to have this chance, because Richter loved and respected him dearly.

Bass-Register

The sound of the Cello in the Agnus Dei of the B-minor-Mass, the sound of the Oboe in the "Qui sedes"-Aria, or the sound of the Violin in "Laudamus te", when it was well played and the Soloist was fantastic, meant for me that the accompanying sound achieved a depth that was closer to Alto than to Soprano. And Bach with his Organ point also took unbelievable advantage with his Bass Pedal. Richter was after all an Organist and was in Leipzig closer to Bach than almost anyone could be. Richter had felt this and drunk this and eaten this, he had not made this sound the deep notes were consistent. Music is a language. Maybe Richter loved the deep warm tones of the Alto, the warmth of the Celli. Maybe he felt closer to these sounds just as Bach did especially on the organ.

In the B-minor-Mass in the last chorus it can be heard how, as in the "Dona nobis", the pitch-depth builds up. JA the deep notes build up, not the high ones, Richter could bring the deep notes so close to the higher ones that they were almost drowned out. Doing this presents an enormous width of sound and gives the music more space. The deeper instruments accompany the Alto, providing unbelievable support. And that is why I think that Bach and Richter were of one soul.

In Conclusion

When I talk about Karl Richter today it makes me feel good, like it used to be when I sang with him. This was not always the case with every conductor. I did not always feel good. I was aggressive. I was too smart. I thought I made the music. And now when I speak of Richter I can feel the same atmosphere as it was then, as if he was here. Making music with him got rid of all my malice, that is true sincerely true. And indeed it was the sincerity that was always his climax in the Mathäus Passion, nobody can do it in the same way. Nobody! Nobody ever again!