

Reverend Karl Heckel

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Situation 1950/51 in St Markus

My father, the Reverend Theodor Heckel, Dean of St. Marcus and town Dean of Munich, came to Munich in 1950. He was established in October 1950, his organist was at that time the very well known Michael Schneider, who sadly had to leave Munich to follow a call to Detmold, much to my father's regret as they had got along together very well. And so it became necessary to fill the vacant position of organist in the St. Marcus Church. Many well known and for that period distinguished organists had been invited to Munich to play before the Commission for that purpose.

The first one was a Bavarian named Otto Mayer from Ansbach, a very good Cantor, who was still alive when Richter performed for the first time at the Bachwoche in Ansbach. After Mayer the Cathedral organist from Bremen, Herr Bremsteller was invited, although I can't remember what he played, and it's possible that I never even heard him play because I was at that time studying Theology in Erlangen.

Then another player came, his name was Hans Heintze from Lüneburg whom the Commission had more or less sworn in. Coincidence however is a wonderful thing because just at the same time the Thomanerchor was there on tour and were allowed to sing in the Markuskirche under the direction of Günther Ramin.

Günther Ramin was generally known as teacher and paragon to both Karl Richter and his predecessor Karl Raube. Günther Ramin cordially asked my father if he would be willing to meet him after the performance that night at 23.30. My father agreed and it was there that the conversation described in my father's memoirs took place. I myself was not present because I was at college.

My father sat there in the first row with the National Director for Church music, Högner, who was also a Straube Student and had worked for many years in Leipzig, plus another Professor, Robert Heger from the Music Academy, and a further Professor, Erich Valentin together with a man from the Ministry of Culture, Karl Held. For three quarters of an hour or maybe an hour they sat listening and then withdrew. Richter left as well because my mother had invited him home for a meal. My sister-in-law Louise Heckel who lived in Pöcking, later told us how she was almost shocked that such a young man had been called together with such figures of high caliber as Bremsteller and Hans Heintze. But she did not know what had already taken place behind the scenes.

First Contact with Karl Richter

One day at breakfast my father asked me to be on hand at 11 o'clock because the Thomas-organist, Karl Richter would be coming to play the organ. I was to show him the organ and the essential tones as he did not have much time and had to find his way around as quickly as possible, something I could do very well as I used to play the organ all the time.

At 11 o'clock a medium sized person in a white smock arrived and was introduced to me as Karl Richter. We met one another for the first time at the organ. I showed him the various works and tone combinations that he could use and he said, "You know this organ very well, I would have done it

just as you say.” Then he played his Programme pieces and called me when he needed to know which register I would have used at such and such a point and everything worked out splendidly.

I can't remember all the pieces he played, but I do know that he played the Toccata in d-minor, a piece that even today leaves a tremendous impression on it's listeners. There was the Schübler-Choral “Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme”, played very solemnly, and then Reger's great B A C H works.

Ramin about Richter

What had in fact happened earlier was, that Ramin had come to my father at one o'clock in the morning, after a Thomaskonzert, it is written in detail in his memoirs. I just want to say that my father spoke about the situation in Munich as far as Church music was concerned, and mentioned that the Markuskirche was in need of an organist, whereupon Ramin spontaneously answered: “I can recommend Karl Richter, my Thomas organist up to now”. My father wrote down Ramin's explicit remark: “He is much better than I am”. I had as a student heard Ramin earlier in Nuremberg, and already thought at that time that he could do a great deal; so what Ramin said showed that the young Richter had already attracted a lot of significant attention with the right people.

Richters Appointment in Munich

At all events my father began to set about Richter's appointment. He wrote that it was a difficult task because of Richter's age. In those days authority was based on age and experience, so it was no easy matter for my father to achieve acceptance. He took shelter behind Dr. Meinzold, ministerial leader of the regional church council and it was thanks to his help that Richter's appointment was successfully accomplished. Richter's activity was basically in the State Music Academy, but he also had the position as organist in St. Markus. He received payment from both sources and it was from hereon that his great creativity began.

Dekan Karl Heckel comments on Richter (from his Memoirs)

My father wrote at the conclusion of his memoirs: “The wonderful Bach Choir was built up by him (Karl Richter) and was a pliant instrument in an artist's hand. The fixed monthly Friday music evenings with their simple liturgical core, biblical readings, evening prayers and the Lord's Prayer and blessing, belonged to the most visited church services precisely because Richter's fame very quickly made itself known. Richter's fame spread to North and South America, to Italy and France, to Moscow and Leningrad and to Japan as is known. Richter's greatness was however, that despite everything, he remained simple and humble as only the exceptionally gifted can.” Here my father's memories of church music ended.

Reverend Karl Heckel and the Organ

To give an idea of myself and why I learned to play the organ was because when I was a sixth-former in Erlangen I got to know the famous Professor George Kempff, brother of the better known pianist Wilhelm Kempff, and liked to listen to him play at church services. A great deal has been written about Kempff. He was so to say, a musical original and had learnt a tremendous amount from his father's Cantor house in the Nikolai Church in Potsdam. He was a pupil of the Berlin pianist Nagel who always used to say that he was a sort of grandchild of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. This impressed me so much so that everything Kempff could do I wanted to be able to do as well - typical behaviour for a belated adolescent. I started to go secretly to the Gottesacker Chapel in the

old town to cram Bach's minor Preludes even though it is not really clear if they are authentic or not, but in any case lovely. Then later when, due to my father's transfer in 1950, we had moved to Munich I could play for myself with great pleasure on the organ in the Markuskirche.

Then one day Michael Schneider said to me: "I will teach you how to play the Friday music, so that I can go to the performances in Detmold as appointed. I was not allowed to say anything to my father because Michael Schneider was as yet, only in the preliminary negotiations. And so I could play with ever increasing pleasure. Later I played at secondary church services because the new organist Karl Richter was not yet there, it was a long interim to bridge. Together with Dean Nicol who later died in Weißenburg, I filled this position until Karl Richter finally came. It was then that the memorable transfer that I have already spoken about took place.

Further Contact with Richter

In the meantime I had continued studying Theology. During the holidays I could play the organ again in the Markuskirche. Apparently Karl Richter had wanted to play the organ himself and had been listening to me for a fairly long time without me being aware of him. Then he went over to my father in the Deanery and begged of him: "Your Karl plays the organ so beautifully that I think he should study music. I would like to have him as my assistant. Whereupon my father gave him a piece of his mind and said: "Richter don't make my son so unsure of himself, I'm glad to have got him this far with his studies, he plays too much music and not enough Theology for my liking!" At lunchtime the story was dished up for me. Richter had already left, and an almost tearful discussion took place." Richter was here and he wants you as cantor To cut a long story short I said: "But Father, that's not what I want at all, I only want it to continue as a hobby, I don't want to break off my studies. And so the lunch came to a woeful end, but my father said later: "we'll see, people like Richter, who were already famous at an early age, usually know how to assert themselves, but it's not your way of life, and apart from that clergy are better paid than cantors." A truth which still applies to this day.

In the afternoon as coincidence would have it, my old school friend from Ansbach days, Peter Hollfelder, who later became Professor at the Music Academy in Würzburg, wanted to visit me. So it was that he came for coffee, and my father opened the door for downstairs. He introduced himself, and immediately received a more or less good telling off with the comment "Don't tell me your coming to lure Karl off to music as well!" Peter answered "Why I've no idea what you are talking about". This scene took place in the afternoon, the other in the morning of the same day. We drank a cheerful cup of coffee and Peter Hollfelder gave me his opinion on my problem. I told him that I couldn't expect my father, at his age, to agree to my starting a new field of studies. That I could not follow my musical career further when I became a clergyman, as I would be sent to many different locations. I would only have the opportunity of meeting Richter during the holidays, when I came to visit my parents; and only then when he performed something I particularly wanted to hear.

I met Richter just a few months before he died. It was in September 1980. He bemoaned the fact that he never again found the cooperation between Lutheran preaching and Bach's music as he had experienced with my father. And that was very true.

As is well known Richter died in February 1981, I was at that time Lutheran Pastor in the Lutheran Church in Zürich. I had resumed contact with Richter while he was still alive. I can remember, it was in November 1980, at his house in Erlenbach. We got along well together, but he was going through various crises concerning his health. I could see as well that his eyesight was a lot worse and that he had to wear much thicker glasses than the ones he had worn earlier; and that gave me cause for concern. We promised however to keep in contact, but we never got to see one another again.

Funeral in the Markuskirche

At the funeral service held for Karl Richter in the Markuskirche in Munich, I looked down from above onto his coffin, and felt that a part of my young life had, together with him, been taken away from me. On my way out of the church I heard one elderly lady say to another: "Richter impressed me so much so, that I started going to church again. Thanks to him and to Bach's Music I have found my way back to God."

Karl Richter's Burial

Karl Richter's widow, Gladys Richter, a painter, in Erlenbach on Lake Zurich, where she and Richter had later bought a house requested me, because I was nearby, if I would, as a Lutheran clergyman, conduct the burial service in lieu of the Pastor belonging to the established national church I was more than happy to be able to render this last service to my master and I must say audio tutor, because I had never attended any of his courses at the Academy.

I was understandably very nervous, at the idea of carrying out the funeral of this great man, which clergyman wouldn't be. I spent a lot of time thinking about what kind of special gesture I could make to mark the funeral of someone so special. It crossed my mind that I owned a copy of the Peters edition of the Bachmoteten, which I had sometimes used in the past when I had sung Moteten with Richter. Some of these Motetten were distinctly Motetten for the dead. I thought to myself, I will sacrifice this book by throwing it into the grave for all to see as a sign that one of the last great musicians to have understood and interpreted Bach has gone forever.

From this time on I missed him very much, I still keep in contact with his widow, and when possible we visit one another every now and again.

First Positive Organ in the Markuskirche (1951-1960)

Karl Richter had bought a small positive organ from Steinmeyer in Öttingen, meaning Karl Richter and my father and the whole Parish, because he had discovered very quickly that the gallery was much too small for larger performances, and he preferred to play in the choir. To be able to do so he needed a Bass organ. In 1950 a small Barock-positive, with carved decorations was installed. This organ was later sold by my father to my newly built church, the Paul-Gerhard-Kirche in Augsburg, then for a while the organ stood in the choir in the St Ulrichs-Kirche in Augsburg, until the new church was ready in 1964. After that it stood in the Gallery. From there, after the proper organ arrived it was sold with the help of a friend who was Lord Mayor of culture for Neuburg on the Donau and gave a huge state grant to the palace Chapel.

Richter's musical-theological questions

Many a time, when I was at home, Richter had taken me aside to ask me how I felt or reacted to the theological themes of one or the other Cantata. If as a young man you had read the works of Albert Schweitzer you realised that this music is not indiscriminate however but very complex. What was the character of the Sunday, how must the character of the church music comply, should there be an introduction, should the soloist or the choir begin, is it a festive day like Easter, so that a festival orchestra would be required, with three Trumpets, three oboes and strings, or is it to be a tranquil Cantata.

I must say, what impressed me most of all at that time was Leonard Bernstein's Cantata performance,

which surely was held on purpose in the Herculessaal, “Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme”. It is a Cantata in which the theological marriage between the parishioner and God or the relationship between the faithful and eternity is shown. Admittedly there are many such Cantatas in which Richter in his inimitable way of conducting, brought out voices which normally were never heard, interpreting exactly the text sung at precisely that moment that was something fantastic. That made people sit up and listen, and, as an elderly lady said, made them feel devout. That was something he could do very well indeed.

Karl Richter had right up until a few days before he died taken part in a concert tour featuring Bach’s “Flötensonaten” with Aurèle Nicolet the great flautist who drew many students in his wake. I can’t say where exactly, but the last stop was in Nürnberg, I only know that on the day Richter died I received a telephone call from a friend of mine in Karlsruhe, Gerhard Wunderer, who was the director of the Inner Mission there, asking me: “Have you heard that Karl Richter is dead?” I could only weakly answer: “No”.

Luther’s Last Words

Sometimes Richter did not feel very well during our small concert trip, and he was troubled by suicidal thoughts. He died later of a heart attack. He spoke with Nicolet about the last words Luther uttered on his deathbed in Eisleben according to what the medical clerk had said. I want read this last word now aloud because it reaches the depths that Richter had experienced and which had moved both himself and Aurèle Nicolet. That is why Nicolet was moved to recite these words again at Richters coffin during the funeral in the Markuskirche. Luther spoke these words on 15th February 1546 on his deathbed and on 18 February 1546 he died in Eisleben. It is the legacy of a great man, from whom it can be said that he carried the same weight and importance as Johann Sebastian Bach.

Luther said thus: Nobody can understand Vergil in his Shepherds verse unless he too has been a shepherd for five years. Nobody can understand Vergil in his Peasants songs unless he too has been a peasant for five years. Nobody can understand Cicero’s letters unless he too has experienced twenty years in a huge political system. The Holy Scriptures cannot be sufficiently appreciated by anybody unless he too has spent hundreds of years with Prophets like Elijah and Elisa, with St. John the Baptist and Christ and his apostles. You should not attempt to tackle this mythical divinity, but instead, reverently follow after. We are beggars, this is the truth.

Karl Richter had for sure in his interpretations of Bachs Texts and Oratorios been influenced by his physical disabilities, he died later of a heart attack, all alone in the Hotel “Vierjahreszeiten” in Munich. His bad health had preoccupied him and I think, that his interpretations expressed the fact, that after all he had performed and achieved he must now humbly retire. My father had once said a genius must at the same time be humble. And that was how he was.

Richter’s Art of Registration

I have to say as far as the art of registration goes Michael Schneider was far more finicky and fastidious. Richter was genial. Towards the end of his life he said to Nicolet and others, that he liked to play “off by heart”. That describes exactly the way he played the organ.

If he was not feeling cheerful he played softly, and improvised in the same style quietly and subdued, but if he was in a rage or feeling emphatic he hardly looked at the single registers the important thing was that the all round tone was right,, one register more or less was not going to make any difference, you would take note of the way it was played, this “par Coeur”, the person inside the artist. Richter sought out where he could reduce the sharpness, where he could increase the softness and maybe even where he could use a tremelo, making the music more sensual.

I play like that a lot too, I learnt it from Richter. I've often heard said that was how you could recognise my playing. And that is the "off by heart" playing, sometimes with emphasis or euphoria, sometimes very restrained. That is what I learnt from him and it is for me, unforgettable. That is what I pass on.

I am so to say, a rather small imitator of Karl Richter, but I have learnt something. And since at my age I only perform as a layman organist, I cannot always make full use of unknown organs because the organs themselves are not capable of it. I am very happy that I have heard how it resounds by Kempff, what exactly one has to do from Schneider and from Richter what "off by heart" means.

Richters Continuo on the Cembalo

I would like to say something about the spontaneous accompaniment of the Arias and Recitatives of the Oratorios. Richter was completely free from these slavishly prescribed Continuo notes, provided by the publishers. He could create at the blink of an eye, be it tempo or temperament, whatever was needed at that very moment. Ideas that sometimes lead to a hushed tranquillity or a temperamental outburst; making one aware that someone was creating a work of art out of a rather staid and naked Recitative.

Unity between Sermon and Music

My father's influence: His function as a former overseas Bishop of the German Protestant Church in World, Capital and Commercial cities had provided him with experience with people, with portrayal and self-portrayal. Marcus' sermons had always affected Richter in the same way as the sermons of Bach's time which always fitted into the Cantata text and the character of the Sunday in question. It was an entity, and I think that's the reason why the people came.

When I come to the Markuskirche these days, there is still a very good Cantor there, someone that I really admire, Holger Boenstedt. I cannot judge whether the preacher still succeeds in creating this union between the Lutheran doctrine and the music, but I think it is still the quintessence.

The Barock Organ in the Markuskirche

My father was never really happy about Richter wanting a second mechanical organ. Richter had been in Denmark and had seen the huge organs in the Cathedrals there. I think Markussen was the name of the Organ builder. These organs had made such an impression on Richter that he believed that the Steinmeyer organ, which was more of a late romantic and Orgelreform accentuated organ, could not deliver what an Barock organ could, especially when it concerned precision and velocity, because of the mechanical works. And that was what he wanted. My father was in a cold sweat wondering how he was to find enough money to build such an organ, squeezing blood out of a stone seemed to him to be an easier feat at that time. The organ was however then built by Hans Ott in Göttingen.

Ansbach and the Organiser

Oh yes, Ansbach and the "Bachwoche"! That's where I always met Dr. Karl Weymar. Weymar was actually violist in the Berliner Philharmoniker and had built up the Ansbacher Bachwoche after the war. He always had problems finding accommodation for the musicians. Then he was offered the opportunity of accommodation in the Hospice belonging to the Diakonissen, (Protestant sisters) in Neuendettelsau, which solved his problem. There was also a shuttle bus available to and from Ansbach for the musicians and everyone else concerned.

First meeting with Dr. Carl Weymar.

During my student days I received an early morning telephone call from Karl Richter, he was not feeling very well, had what seemed to be influenza and wanted me to play the organ in St. Markus. He couldn't find anyone else at such short notice. I gladly agreed and went across to the morning service and the main service. Dr. Carl Weymar and his wife lived in the Markus community, and were in the habit of attending the main service. Richter had explicitly said, that I should turn the organ, which was on wheels, to a position where my father could not see me because he was never pleased when his Cantor, Richter was HIS cantor, could not play. That was why I had to turn the organ so that I could not be seen.

I did as I was told, I did not want Richter to be disgraced. I started to play in a lively way and this obviously pleased Dr. Weymar so much that he came up to the gallery expecting to find Richter. Richter of course was nowhere to be seen and Dr. Weymar asked me where he was. For the first time in my life I told a big lie and said: "He left by the other staircase". I didn't want to say that he was not there and that I had played, that would have been like boasting. But he obviously must have seen me playing the last piece because he said: "You play wonderfully. I would like to invite you, on the spot, to assist at the Bachwoche". And that was the beginning of my acquaintanceship with many "Ansbacher Bachwochen."