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My First Engagement 1970

My first engagement with Richter fell so to say right into my lap. Mr Vetter, the organizer at that time in Munich rang me to say " We are standing here at the airport and want to get to Moscow and Leningrad with th B-minor mass with Richter as conductor, can you come along? I said " Wonderful!" and he went on to say "You will be given a prepaid ticket which will get you to Copenhagen today and where you will stay the night and then fly on to Moscow without a visa which will be given to you when you are picked up there ,and in the evening the Mass in B-minor will be performed in th Tschaikovsky-Conservatorium—without rehearsal, without anything.

Ok. I flew to Copenhagen and had the feeling all the time as if someone was trying to pull my leg because I did not have anything with me apart from my Tails and my score in my suitcase. I spent the night there as planned, and flew the next morning with the Russian Aeroflott to Moscow. When I arrived there was nobody to pick me up, and after an hour's isolated wait, to my heartfelt relief, somebody's voice called out , "Are you Mr. Nimsgern?? " It was a lady from the Goss Concert Agency the most powerful agency in Russia. She drove me to the Consulate, where after a lot of fuss and bother I was given my permit to stay.

We arrived at the Hotel Rossia about 2 hours later. I went up to my room, awful!! But I was not interested only wanted to get into voice. I, put on my tails and then I went downstairs to meet Karl Richter for the first time in my life! "Good evening, well yes you know the piece, yes yes good okay. We were then transported by car to the Conservatorium.

We arrived separately at the Tschaikowsky Konservatorium and the Concert started immediately with the B-Minor Mass. Richter was obviously very moved, stroked my cheek just before the start and "You know everything" and to reassure myself I answered I „Yes everything is OK“ and then I sang everything he played for me. The whole tempi etc, that was always right, we understood one another without a word said, and I believe that he felt the same. I was naturally very proud and happy with Bach, for me a half god, and the chance of performing with Karl Richter in this way.

This sudden engagement with Richter in Saarbrücken where I often performed as a guest singer, enabled me to reject a big production without a guilty conscience. It was the opera "Margarethe" by Gounod. I was to sing the part of Valentin which I was not keen on anyway. But what was even worse was that I missed my sister's wedding. Just for this one week with Karl Richter I got into quite a lot of trouble privately.

The Munich Bach Choir

The Bach Choir was definitely an institution in Munich, because of the Deutsche Gramophon and the archive-recordings. What impressed me most of all though was to experience the Choir live. What impressed me even more was that the singers in the choir were all more or less the same age as I was, This led to a direct friendly and "hail fellow well met" atmosphere from the very beginning, especially with the ladies, young ladies that have never forgotten. It was so nice and endearing, a lot of flirting went on, and we drank quite a lot of vodka which was about the only thing you could get, the Concerts have always remained a wonderful memory for me.

Five years with Karl Richter.

It worked exactly five years with Karl Richter. 1970, 1971, 1972, and 1974, and then everything suddenly came to an end. It started with Mass in B-minor. This took place very often, probably because I could sing the two separate arias rather well. Then came the Bach Cantatas and the Matthias and Johannis Passions, The Four Seasons in Paris with the broadcasting company and *Schöpfung* several times in Buenos Aires. The conclusion, coincidental or planned, I don't know, was in 1974 in the wonderful Basilika in Ottobeuren with *Elias* from Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. As far as I can remember Karl Richter was never a wild *Elias* fan, but I don't know to be sure. He had performed *Elias* earlier and later too, but I believe he had just been waiting for this opportunity, a young singer who could sing everything like a young temperamental prophet. Today I do it differently, mostly because of my age.

It was exactly these five years, and following this Richter era, as if someone was directing my moves, I joined the Munich Opera and there during the following years sang a tremendous amount. But Karl Richter never crossed my path again and never engaged me again. Every now and again I was engaged by Richter's successor Schneidt and then that was that, the Munich Bach Choir vanished from my life.

Film-shots of the Matthäus Passion (1971)

In my opinion, I believe that another colleague was intended for the part. The engagement was pretty short-notice and I was chosen for the „evil“ men although they were not really evil. Kieth Engen and Walter Berry had the Bass arias, they were significantly established people, and I had these so-called „Wurzen“, to sing. I still can remember that very well

Now and again the film can be seen on the television. Some people call me up and say "My goodness how young you were" Well! we were all young once! But I found the cultural aspect marginal. I would have preferred to have sung the really important things, although, -one has to say-, Pilate, in the Johannes Passion, if you counted the notes and not the importance of the role, had almost more to sing than Jesus. Pilate is a great figure. He says the only phrase, that most people remember at all from the Passions "What is Truth?"

This man is very unsure of himself and feels trapped. On the one hand he had this self-named son of God and did not know what to do with him, but at the same time felt very impressed by him. On the other hand he had the people who were enemy-occupied by Rome and who had asked „Are you not a friend of the Emperor? So he was naturally scared stiff. So to make the best of a bad job he did the worst thing that could have been done in the situation and in so doing fulfilled all the biblical prophecies by leaving the choice to the people who condemned Jesus and let Barrabas go free. In other words a very modern figure. Types like that can always be found, these politicians who dither and sway in all directions doing what they would never do at home or in their hearts.

Richter was my Pontius Pilate he was in many things too temperamental: „Now then, it doesn't have to be so aggressive. Immediately one thinks off the cliché that if someone is always full of life and feeling that he is“ opera-like“and too theatrical. I regard that as absolute nonsense. Either lively or not lively. That's got nothing at all to do with Opera or Concerts absolutely nothing at all.

But this Jesus in the *Matthias-Passion*, he had very many different facets he really gets going, and not just with a halo. Some idiot once said that the violins that took part were his Halo. He is a human being like all of us, a revolutionist, who naturally was in conflict with his father in the end, that is quite something- he did not actually want any conflict at all if only because of bodily fear he felt. Suddenly he is a tortured and anguished human being: “ *Oh my Father, if it is possible let this cup pass from me,*” that is absolutely not Godly.

Recitative

If you can sing Bach, I have at least tried, then you can sing everything. One learns *legato*- one learns how to breath. One learns expression. And that brings us to recitatives. With Bach every Recitative is different, and the harmony is sometimes so askew, so off-key that Beethoven or Mozart and the classics just cannot be compared to it. They are in actual fact very antiquated. With Bach everything moves in a chromatic directness that Wagner later used. It was not for nothing that the whole world was evidently moved by the *Tristan-Accord*. With Bach these interrelationships can be found very often and are completely taken for granted, they were not presented on a plate just as they are in the Tristan prelude. All of a sudden everybody was wide awake and said „ Goodness that is completely harmonious where is that leading to? a-minor? Some amazing books have been written on the subject. With Bach it is *en passant*- all included.

I always tried to keep the Recitatives alive and full of spirit. I didn't want the intervals cramped either by breathing techniques or dramatic grounds but as one whole and complete phrase more like an aria than a short *secco* affair. From the very beginning I was always assured that I was „super“ at the recitatives._What is super?.....

I always say that whoever mumbles or speaks poorly probably thinks like that too. Textarticulation was something I already understood as a boy, it was something I didn't have to do anything about, for me it was a question of intellect. If I don't understand or want to understand something myself then who is going to understand me when i relate something for the first time. That is why I find the kind of „vocalinebriation“ that a lot of singers, especially the italians preach, absolutely stupid. We do not transport sounds, the sounds must resound, and that depends on the beauty of the voice,,but what we do transport is semantic- the science of meaning. Do you know what Richard Strauss once said about that? I like to repeat his words often“Speech is like a human body, the vowels are the flesh and theconsonants are the skeleton, and without the skeleton the flesh has no form and

falls apart. "That explains everything, without the right text nothing works. The long and the short vowels are always sung wrongly by almost all singers, in German as well. This has become a hobby of mine. I would say that Fischer-Dieskau does everything right and I learnt it from him. He is my God anyway. When someone has asked me "Where did you learn to sing I have always said not by Lohmann, but by Fischer-Dieskau and maybe before that by God himself. A lot of Talent is important and being able to listen paradigmatically.

Once again: Mendelssohn, Elias

The Mendelssohn competition in Berlin was, I believe in 1967. I was still a student at the Music Academy, it was before my time at the opera. From every Music Academy) only one student was allowed to take part in the competition which was for song and I don't know what else in that year. I of course sang Mendelssohn among other things; and I believe it was the same Aria that I always sang at competitions „*Ist nicht das Herren Wort wie ein Feuer*“ and the audience was enthralled. Other singers were always afraid of this piece because it was the absolute entrance theme. I sang Ravel, I sang all kinds of things, But I always had an uncanny relationship to *Elias* even before the conductor caught on to it.

Although the war was long over there was still this Nazi verdict in the air that such gentle Jewish music was neoclassical, weak imitation, with no power or force to it. I always felt that was idiotic. Apart from the antisemitical approach, I think that Wotan in the *Walküre* is Mendelssohn's *Elias*. I have always compared the two, although both figures have really nothing to do with each other, have nothing in common, both roles demand the same kind of power of assertion and the same mental vigour. It's not a soft or weak thing nor a swaggering braggard.

Elias has accompanied me from the very beginning of my career. I sang it for the first time in 1964 , when I was still a student. I believe that in my humble interpretation of Elias, that now and again I was able to convince many a choir and many a conductor what a great role it is and how fantastic the whole piece is.

Breath control

As far as breathing was concerned i always had this enormous amount of breath,more than i needed. Marga Hoffmann, a much loved and esteemed colleague once said to me in the very beginning“You have too much ambition in delivering the longest phrases ,you should breathe instead in between, the last note is always the most decisive, there should be enough breath left over for it,“ I always tried to follow her advice, but the gigantic phrases and coloratoren and I don't know what else, with Bach and then later with Wagner I had to have endless power and my diaphragm had to hold out more than eighteen or more beats. Today when I hear celebrated singers belonging to my profession, i have to laugh. They gasp for breath like a Two-stroke engine, they hack one phrase into several parts and then are praised ;and sometimes in the reviews it is said that they sing better than Mr. Nimsgerm used to do in times gone by !.

Rehearsals with Richter

I can't remember if Richter ever criticized significantly during rehearsals. He didn't praise either. He didnt really say very much at all. I always understood it to be that we, blind or seeing, without any big discussions understood one another. I have to say that I was a very revolutionary rebellious young man who would argue with every conductor if there was something I did not agree with.But not with Richter, maybe out of deep respect, maybe fear, I remained quite tame.Everything was so right.I delivered the recitatives relatively wide and slow. I felt it was the right way to do it, and I had the feeling that he felt the same way too.

I can't remember him ever once saying: "Couldn't you do such and such differently?", except for what I said earlier, about Pilate from the film recording of the Matthäus –Passion, which he didn't know from me and wanted to have it differently. We were already made up and took our places for the film. In one or two days it was done. I can remember he did not want this reproach against Petrus. And then with Pilate " *What do you have for a complaint against this man*" this was almost screamed at the people out of fear by Pilate, he didn't want it like that either.

Anecdotes

I have already told you the first anecdote in front of the Tschaikovsky Conservatory where he said only " Good day" and " Good evening" "You know the piece, yes? I did not say, "You know the piece too?", maybe I said it later, but with Richter you could refrain from that kind of remark, it would not have been amusing. And then he stroked my cheek and said "Good Luck" and off he went , and that was that.

When we performed Bach's *Magnificat* And Schubert's *As-Dur Messe* at the Salzburg Festival, I can still see us in the Festival House in a hall somewhere high up under the roof rehearsing with the orchestra, and the soloists who were up there too. Edda Moser and Hertha Töpper and an englishman, named Eric Tappy as tenor. We sat there and waited but I never got to get a turn with my aria and then the two-hour session was over. He stroked my cheek again and said, "You sang beautifully today." And I thought to myself is he just pulling my leg or is he trying to say that when I kept quiet it was better than when i sang. I believe he had just forgotten that I was sitting there. Anyway, I took part in this Concert without having rehearsed the *Quia fecit* with him at all. I thought that was rather amusing.

Then there was this business in Paris with the *Jahreszeiten* which was rather impertinent of me. Before we began to rehearse he said to me "Don't take any notice of the Continuo- Cello player, he's not quite right in the head, he is a psychopath." Something must have taken place between them some earlier date. Richter was on the Radio very often, and on that day i don't know what the Devil got into me but when at the start of the *Jahreszeiten*, the Bass stands up to sing "*See how the severe winter flees, attracted by distant poles.....*" "I stood up and sang" "*See how the severe Richter flees, attracted by distant poles.....*" Naturally the cellist understood and laughed, and Richter gave me a sour look, as much as to say "Was that necessary, going behind my back like that?" "Because of the advice he had given me earlier he did not find it very amusing at all and looking back, I must say , I would not do the same again today.

After the *Neujahreszeiten* in Moskow, which was the second Concert, after we had driven the whole night in a train to Leningrad to the next two Concerts, we were still in the Hotel Rossia in the reataurant on the 20th floor. Everything was empty, but the waiters said evrything was full, everything was reserved, was booked out. We gave them 20 DM and then we could sit down wherever we wanted to. We drank lovely Georgian red wine and had something to eat and we were all quite happy and a little bit tipsy. We got into the lift and went up three floors.

The lift door opened and a group of ominous looking Mongolians or mongolian-looking Sibiraken entered. Kesteren said " They stink of garlic" From the corner a guttural voice growled "Who stinks of garrlic?" And we, Kesteren could feel the knife in his back, we quickly pressed the next button, and hastily left the lift, the lift door closed behind as we all breathed a sigh of relief. Nothing had happened. In

connection with Richter and under the Title " German in foreign countries". In distant Moscow and in that lift none of us had expected that our remark would be understood.

I believe it was in 1971 at the Bach Festival. I had quite a few pieces to sing: Cantata-evenings, Passion-B-minor Mass- always with a free day in between. I think I went home after the first Concert. At the second Concert ,during the intermission,- I had already rehearsed the Cantatas,he very unexpectedly asked me, "Where have you been singing in the meantime?" I thought "Oh God, do I sound so lousy? Does he think I sound tired, flat or out of breath or shaky? I answered "The day before yesterday, with you." He seemed contented with that, and I don't know to this day what he wanted to say to me, or if he had forgotten that I was there with him two days earlier, or that he thought I had lustily sung a Tellramund or something similar. Which was not the case.

It was this special kind of absentmindedness that he had, you could even call it a kind of subversive humour. One never ever knew exactly what he wanted to say, or if what he said was intentional or just because he wanted to say something. To this day I don't have the answer , and I believe, that many of my colleagues who have had the same experience with Richter, to this day , will never know exactly if what he said was deliberate or just this special absentmindedness.