

MICHAEL GIELEN

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I often hear talk about famous conductors some of whom do not deserve the fame afforded to them. Barbirolli was not a good conductor as evidenced in my article about him with the testimony of some of his orchestral players ; Karajan and Rattle often alter what the composer wrote and Barenboim is very disappointing. Explanations to support these comments are given in my articles with supporting evidence, and I regularly receive emails agreeing with me and these communications come from professional and well-established musicians.

Then I mentioned Michael Gielen and people responded with “Who?” which I find unbelievable and this ignorance is sad. Gielen is an exceptional conductor.

He was born in Dresden on 29 July 1927 to Josef and Rose. His father, who was Jewish, was an opera director. On his mother’s side, he was the nephew of Eduard Steuermann.

Michael began his illustrious career as a pianist in Buenos Aires and gave an early performance of the complete piano works of Schoenberg. This was in 1949. Michael’s teacher in South America was Erwin Leuchter.

Gielen became conductor of the Vienna Opera from 1950 to 1960. In addition to these duties, he conducted much contemporary music, works that were challenging and difficult which the aforementioned conductors would not be able to cope with. He became the Director of the Royal Swedish Opera from 1960 to 1965 followed by appointments at Netherlands Opera and Frankfurt Opera from 1977. He was universally admired.

He was principal conductor of the Belgian National Orchestra from 1969 to 1973, the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra from 1980 to 1986 and the Southwest German Radio Symphony Orchestra from 1986 to 1999.

Not only is he a brilliant conductor but a supreme master of very complex and, indeed the most complex modern scores. He has premiered Lachenmann’s *Fassade* and *Klangschatten*, Ligeti’s *Requiem*, Stockhausen’s *Carre* and Zimmermann’s *Die Soldaten*. He recorded *Moses and Aaron* by Schoenberg in 1973 and, six years later, revived *Die Gezeichneten* by Schreker in Frankfurt.

As a composer, he has written a few works in the style of the Second Viennese School which include settings of poems by Hans Alp, Paul Claudel, Stefan George and Pablo Neruda. His *String Quartet Un vieux souvenir* of 1985 is based on Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs de Mal*.

Lest he be falsely accused of only ‘doing the modern stuff’ he is excellent as a conductor of Beethoven, Bruckner and Mahler. His performance of Brahms’ *Piano Concerto no 1* with Helene Grimaud will never be bettered. Many soloists have told me that he was a dream conductor to work with.

He won the Theodor W Adorno Prize in 1986, and later, the Ernst von Siemens prize of 2010 and, in the same year, the *Grosses Verdienstkreuz mit Stern der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*.

It is probably the inane prejudice against contemporary music that unfairly makes him little known but often this is the fate of geniuses.

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