

HANS KNAPPERTSBUSCH

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Great musicians in the past are often soon forgotten. Such a case is Hans Knappertsbusch.

He was born in Elberfeld, now known as Wuppertal, Germany on 12 March 1888. He studied philosophy at Bonn University and music, especially conducting, with Fritz Steinbach at the Cologne Conservatory. He assisted Siegfried Wagner and Hans Richter at the Bayreuth Festival and, all his life, he loved Wagner. He became the undisputed best interpreter of Wagner's music. One has only to take as examples the Liebestod from Tristan and Isolde with the magnificent Birgit Nilsson, or the first act of Die Walkure. No one has ever performed Wagner better.

Hans Knappertsbusch began his conducting career in Elberfeld in the years 1913 to 1918, Leipzig 1918 -1919 and Dessau 1919-1922 and he was admired from the world over. When Bruno Walter left for New York from Munich, Knappertsbusch succeeded him as Music Director of the Bavarian State Orchestra and the Bavarian State Opera.

He was not only a great conductor but a decent man of high principles. He hated the Nazis and their brand of socialism and, despite pressure put on him, he refused to join the Nazi party. In 1933, along with Richard Strauss and other composers, he signed a statement protesting at the city of Munich as a reaction to Thomas Mann's Woes and Greatness of Richard Wagner which denigrated Wagner as indecent in this psychoanalytical treatise and it also spoke about Hitler and the Nazis appreciation of Wagner explaining that Wagner would be on their side.

It is known that, like Hitler, Wagner hated the Jews but it is readily forgotten that Chopin was even more hateful to the Jews.

Knappertsbusch believed that the Nazis were uncivilised, coarse and common. His views often led him into conflict with the authorities at great risk to his own life or freedom. He was banned from working in Germany for a time and Hitler himself endorsed this. This was retracted after a while since there were few conductors in Germany. This fine conductor made regular veiled insults about Nazis officials. That he was popular with the ordinary people probably saved him from further persecution.

Herbert von Karajan was a Nazi sympathiser and a narcissist. He was also renowned for being a very unpleasant man. Elizabeth Schwarzkopf was also a Nazi. The conductor Clemmens Krause was a favourite of Hitler and Hans Pfitzner said that all art should belong to the Fatherland. That Furtwangler conducted concerts in the presence of many Nazis does not make him a Nazi. The Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra approved of the Third Reich and they were denounced as a result.

Richard Strauss was also said to be a Nazi.

Sir Thomas Beecham invited Knappertsbusch to Covent Garden in 1936 but his permit to leave Germany was withdrawn. In the late 1930s, he went to Vienna to conduct the Vienna Opera ignoring the Nazi policy of not allowing Germans to work in Austria. He also became a guest conductor of the Salzburg Festival and even during the time that Austria was annexed by Germany in 1938

He was added to the Gottbegnadeten (God gifted list) which meant he was not called up for military service and he continued to promote German music. As well as Wagner, he often performed Bruckner and recordings of the symphonies 3, 4, 5 and 7 are still available. He conducted Richard Strauss, Schubert, Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Nicolai and Wagner opera and someone called Komzar.

At the end of World War II, he returned to Munich where he stayed for the rest of his life. He conducted the first performances of The Ring at the reopened Bayreuth Festival in 1951. He also conducted Parsifal that year in a performance that has become legendary. He was rightly lionised.

We have already mentioned the greatness of his character. He was a modest man, highly personable but he did not like rehearsals or recordings. He was affectingly known as Kna. He did occasionally have a temper and, like Fritz Reiner, aimed for perfection. There was an outburst with Birgit Nilsson but the most objectionable outburst towards her was from Karajan who was objectionable to all his singers. His cruelty to Grace Bumbry is unforgiveable.

Knappertsbusch belongs to the High Art in music which no longer exists. There is no longer the dedication to the music and the pressing for perfection that once existed.

Hans Knappertsbusch died in Munich on 25 October 1965. He was 77.

As a final tribute, the British pianist Clifford Curzon said that Knappertsbusch was the best conductor he ever worked with.

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