

ISTVAN KERTESZ

David C F Wright DMus

It is sad when a truly great musician dies young. And such is the case of Istvan Kertesz an exceptional conductor and superlative musician. Why did he drown off the Israeli coast at the early age of forty two? Did he have a heart attack? Did he swim for too long and did not have the strength to regain the shore?



He was the conductors noted for, among many other things, of building up morale among the players. He was not a martinet like Reiner or Szell although these two conductors were among the best ever. He was not rude and ignorant like Barbirolli who was always offensive to his

orchestras in an attempt to conceal his own deficiencies which were many. He did not take liberties with the scores as does Karajan. Kertesz was not a show off like many conductors.

His parents were Miklos Kertesz and Margit Muresan. Miklos was born in Szecsemy of a large Jewish family and eventually became the managing director of a leather works before dying of appendicitis in 1938. As a result his widow went to work to support Istvan and his sister Vera who was four years his junior. In the office where Istvan's mother worked she rose to become the office manager.

Istvan Kertesz was born in Budapest on 28 August 1929 and began violin lessons at the age of six in 1935 when, as he said, "Terrible things were happening in Europe". He was also studying the piano by the age of twelve.

Hungary was an ally to Nazi Germany in World War II but Hungarian Jews were still being persecuted by the Nazis and most of Istvan's extended family were forced into Auschwitz in 1943 and murdered there.

After the war, Istvan returned to his studies at the Kolcsey Gymnasium graduating in 1947 from when he enrolled at the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest now known as the Franz Liszt Academy of Music.. His studies in violin and piano continued and he undertook composition with Kodaly (1882-1967), Leo Weiner (1885- 1969) and Rezso Kokai. But conducting became his great interest and he studied with Laszlo Somogyi and the great Janos Ferencsik (born 1907). He was impressed with Bruno Walter (1876-1962) and with Otto Klemperer (1865-1973) then the director of Budapest Opera.

It was at this music college that he met his future wife Edith Gabry an accomplished soprano. They were married on 10 September 1951 and had three children Gabor, Peter and Katarin.

The years 1953 to 1955 saw him conducting at Gyor and, from 1955 to 1957, he conducted the Budapest Opera.

But then came the Hungarian Uprising and so he left Hungary with his wife and children and continued his studies at the St Cecilia National Academy in Rome with Fernando Previtali (born 1907). His wife was regularly singing opera in Bremen. One of her most important events was singing Marie at the

premiere of Zimmerman's *Die Soldaten* on 15 February 1965 with the conductor Michael Gielen at the Cologne Opera.

Kertesz's next engagement was as guest conductor both with the Hamburg Symphony Orchestra and at the Hamburg State Opera as well as in Wiesbaden and Hanover.

The Germans loved him at first and the reviews of his performances were outstanding. His performances of *Fidelio* and *La Boheme* were so good that they are still talked about today.



In March 1960 he was pleaded with to become the Music Director of the Augsburg Opera. His performances of Mozart operas became legendary. Singers and the orchestra adored him. He also gave stirring performances of operas by Verdi and Richard Strauss.

Such was his deserved fame that he was in demand everywhere and was guest conductor with the Berlin Philharmonic, the London SO, Israel PO, San Francisco Opera and the Spoleto Festival in Spain. Arthur Rubinstein wanted him in Paris. Two other great pianists wanted him namely Julius Katchen (1926-1969) and Clifford Curzon. Barry Tuckwell recorded the horn concertos of Franz Strauss and his son, Richard.

He made his debut with the Royal Liverpool PO in 1960. From March 1962 and for eleven years he worked extensively with the Israel PO and performed 378 works with them.

With his appointment with Cologne Opera, he gave the German premiere of Britten's *Billy Budd*, which he disliked, and Verdi's *Stiffelo* as well as Mozart opera.

The inclusion of *Billy Budd* had some unfortunate consequences. The Germans also disliked the work and Kertesz fell from favour for performing this work. But the Germans wanted a general criticism and complained that Kertesz's tempi were often too fast.



From 1965 to 1968 he was the conductor of the LSO and made guest appearances at the Royal Opera, Covent Garden. He introduced the first complete performance of Dvorak's *Symphony no. 1*. He recorded all the Dvorak symphonies with the LSO between 1963 and 1966 and his stunning recording of Dvorak's *Carnival Overture Op 92* is second only to Reiners.

He was appointed conductor of the Bamberg Symphony Orchestra in 1973.

The Cleveland Orchestra wanted him by 96 votes to 2 as a successor to Szell but the Board rejected this... a great mistake!

With the Vienna PO he recorded all the Schubert symphonies as well as the Brahms symphonies. With

Katchen there were recordings of Prokofiev 3, Bartok 3, Grieg, Schumann, the Ravel concertos and Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue. His recording of Shostakovich's Symphony no 5 suffers from a misunderstanding of the coda of the finale.

He was the Music Director at the Ravina Festival in Chicago from 1970 to 1972.

Katchen was 42 when he died. So was Kertesz. He had gone swimming at Herzliya off the coast of Israel on 16 April 1973 and drowned.

Klemperer died that same year.

Istvan Kertesz was a very great conductor and a kind and warm personality. Orchestras loved him and with good cause. He knew his art and his players and loved them too. He is vastly better than many 'great names' in the world of conductors. He hated pomp and music of that kind. He rarely performed contemporary music and said that it was best left to those who specialised in this music. What he did do he did supremely well.

© COPYRIGHT David C F Wright 1974. This article or any part of it, however small, must not be copied, quoted, reproduced, downloaded or altered in any way whatsoever nor stored in any retrieval system. Failure to comply is in breach of International Copyright Law and will render any offender liable to action at law.