

KARL MUNCHINGER

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There is no doubt that Karl Munchinger was the pioneer in the revival of J S Bach's orchestral music and, to a lesser extent, the music of Pergolesi and Pachelbel.

This German conductor was born in Stuttgart on 29 May 1915 and has the distinction of being faithful to his own city for the whole of his life even in the 53 severe bombing air raids from November 1942.

He studied at Stuttgart's Hochschule for Music and became an organist and director of a church choir. He accepted the post of conductor of the Hanover SO in 1941 which post he held for two years.

In the summer of 1945 he formed the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra which rapidly became the finest ensemble of its kind. Its Paris debut was in 1949 and its American debut was in San Francisco in 1959. Munchinger returned to the USA with his orchestra in 1977. For Decca he recorded Bach's orchestral works as well as the Passions, some oratorios and the Musical Offering. He also made an excellent recording of Haydn's Creation.

Munchinger's performances are exemplary. He always chose the right tempi making for crystal clear clarity. He did not use period instruments. He instilled in his performances a rhythmic vitality. His ornamentation was not over the top as it is with some performers.

I remember, as a boy, taking part in a piano competition in which the adjudicator was the unpleasant Maurice Jacobson. I played one of the Handel suites and when I had finished he complained that Handel would not have played the ornaments as I had. My father replied from the audience, "How do you know? Did you met Handel and hear him play?"

Too much fuss is made about ornaments today.

In order to achieve the highest standards, which he did, rehearsals were fastidious. He was a tough and disciplined musician.

He toured with his orchestra through Europe and Russia. In 1977, he took his orchestra to the Peoples Republican of China.

People are fickle. In his last years Munchinger fell from favour. We had entered the age of the speed merchants (play Bach as fast as you can), and there were inane debates about how to play ornaments and the evolution of new styles ... and, if you did not play on period instruments, the performance would be all wrong.



Munchinger's other claim to fame was the promotion of an unknown Canon in D by Pachebel. He was excellent in the Beethoven and Mozart symphonies and conducted music by the Swiss composer, Frank Martin.

When I was a boy and learning Bach organ works, Munchinger was my hero. His Bach was, and is superlative and never in that dull Teutonic style favoured by Klemperer.

Retirement came to this Stuttgart conductor in 1968 and he died on 13 March 1990.

Discerning musicians will always remember him.

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