

D. Kern Holoman. *Charles Munch*

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Reviewed by R. J. Stove

It is curious to realise that serious musicological investigation of conductors is little more than two generations old. By the power which conductors must exert, they confront us with hard questions about the nature of artistic authority. Censures of their role tend to take similar forms across the decades: from the grim warning by record producer John Culshaw about Herbert von Karajan having ‘unwittingly ... filled the void left by the death of Hitler in that part of the German psyche which craves for a leader,’¹ via the less personalised and more detailed laments of violinist Carl Flesch (who wrote ‘The mentality of conductors is a dark, abysmal chapter that still awaits a historian ... it is the only musical activity in which a dash of charlatanism is not only harmless but positively necessary’),² to the comparatively good-natured bewilderment voiced by a greater violinist than Flesch, namely Pablo de Sarasate. ‘Enrique,’ Sarasate complained to his much younger friend Granados,

do you know what is happening today? I mean, these conductors, with their little sticks. They don’t play, you know. They stand in front of the orchestra waving their little sticks. And they get paid for this, get paid well, too. Now suppose, Enrique, suppose there were no orchestra and they stood there alone. Would they pay them just the same—they and their little sticks?³

Few musicians have been altogether free from the occasional urge to wish that conductors could be junked, and that something like the early Soviet Union’s wholly conductor-less Persimfans ensemble (founded 1922, abolished 1932) could have remained the concert-giving

¹ John Culshaw, *Putting the Record Straight* (New York: Viking Press, 1982), 195.

² Carl Flesch, *The Memoirs of Carl Flesch* (New York City: Da Capo Press, 1979), 230.

³ Janet Baker-Carr, *Evening at Symphony: A Portrait of the Boston Symphony Orchestra* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 102.

norm. But even a brief study of this group's doings reveals that Persimfans, no less than many a conventional Western orchestra, was the brainchild of a single individual: Lev Tseitlin, a former violinist under the direction of Sergei Koussevitzky.⁴ It is a telling insight into the mentality of instrumentalists that Persimfans's final years engendered stubborn rumours of a conductor having been surreptitiously employed during rehearsals.⁵ Moreover, the need for leadership can hardly be said to disappear with mere shrinkage of personnel numbers, since anyone who has witnessed a string quartet's practice sessions knows how often and how instinctively the second violinist, violist and cellist look to the first violinist for gestural cues. Even the rightly celebrated, Grammy-award-winning Orpheus Chamber Orchestra comprises—understandably enough in view of its name—a mere thirty members.⁶ In short, for as long as we have symphony orchestras, we appear bound to have conductors; and rather than dismissing them outright, it makes sense to subject them to the same scholarly procedures as have long been second nature to chroniclers of other musicians.

Accordingly a certain aesthetic pleasure accrues from the mere contemplation of painstakingly researched conductor biographies released from the early 1980s onward. Toscanini has been served with great diligence by the studies of two American musicologists, Harvey Sachs and Mortimer Frank; Otto Klemperer, by the late English journalist Peter Heyworth; Sir Thomas Beecham, by another English journalist, John Lucas; Karajan, by yet a third English journalist, Richard Osborne; Leopold Stokowski, by Rollin Smith (best known for his accounts of French organ music) and the unrelated California-based William Ander Smith; George Szell, by New Yorker Michael Charry; and Fritz Reiner, by English academic Kenneth Morgan. Gaps in the scholarly literature persist (we lack analogous books devoted to Willem Mengelberg and Eugene Ormandy, for instance), but the situation is so greatly improved on what it was even forty years ago that hosannas are irrepressible. Even at a more popular level of commentary, improvements are evident. We can discern this simply by comparing what passed in 1991 for a thorough enquiry into the conductor's art, Norman Lebrecht's *The Maestro Myth*,⁷ with a much newer tome aimed at a similarly generalist readership: Tom Service's *Music as Alchemy*,⁸ characterised by straightforward, self-effacing reportage devoid of Lebrecht's general slovenliness.

The case of Charles Munch—born in Strasbourg in 1891, but, from 1949 to 1962, famously Boston-domiciled—is a more problematic one than that of Toscanini or almost anybody else in the modern conducting pantheon. It is more problematic for several reasons. As D. Kern Holoman (Distinguished Professor of Music at the University of California, Davis) stresses in his 2012 biography, Munch managed to combine a certain outward glamour with a temperament almost Trappist in its aversion to wasting words. 'Notoriously private,' Holoman emphasises (p. xxii), Munch:

⁴ Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: OUP, 1989), 135–50.

⁵ Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 139.

⁶ Mark Daniell, *Strategy: A Step-By-Step Approach to the Development of World-Class Business Strategy* (Basingstoke, Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 112.

⁷ Norman Lebrecht, *The Maestro Myth: Great Conductors in Pursuit of Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991).

⁸ Tom Service, *Music as Alchemy: Journeys with Great Conductors and Their Orchestras* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012).

would flee worshipful crowds and even admiring, powerful trustees by various prearrangements with his chauffeur ... Though he must have had to attend to an enormous correspondence merely to keep up with daily life, his personal letters are sparsely preserved, and one of his greatest admirers [Henry Cabot, Boston Symphony Orchestra administrator] said in the *Boston Globe* that he was the worst correspondent he had ever met.

Of Beecham's jokiness, of Mengelberg's and Furtwängler's chronic didacticism on aesthetics, of Toscanini's compulsive and hair-raisingly indiscreet epistolary confessions, Munch remained alike incapable. He made rehearsals strictly business, confining most of his verbal utterances to such commands as '*Plus vite!*'. Or, if he feared that over-concentration upon the mechanics of a particular movement would do more harm than good, he would tell players '*Pas nécessaire!*', and skip to a later passage.

Munch's death occurred, with shocking suddenness, in a hotel room in Richmond, Virginia, during the early hours of 6 November 1968. His fate is an object lesson in the dangers of political enthusiasm, since he had imprudently stayed up late to watch the televised coverage of Richard Nixon narrowly vanquishing Hubert Humphrey. He left, as Holoman notes (p. xxiii), 'neither a widow nor children, and, lacking them, little of the myth-making apparatus left behind by Toscanini (through his son, Walter, and daughter, Wanda Toscanini Horowitz).' The nature of his relations with his niece and heiress, the pianist Nicole Henriot-Schweitzer—who married the nephew of Alsace's most famous modern son, Albert Schweitzer—continues to be uncertain, though *mauvaises langues* periodically drew the worst conclusions (Madame Henriot-Schweitzer died in 2001, discreet to the end).

Besides, the Teutonic elements in Munch's background and career—he grew up under German rule, and after World War I he served as the Leipzig Gewandhaus orchestra's concertmaster—deprived him of that appeal to Gallic particularism which his rival Pierre Monteux retained in abundance. It ensured that geographically, no less than culturally, he emerged from a crossroads. Even the spelling of his name served as the continuation of ethnic conflict by other means. Born Münch, he habitually used the umlaut until at least 1940, dropping it either in response to the Occupation or, more likely, on taking up Boston residence in 1949 and being confronted with American newspapers' inability to render diacriticals. (*The New Grove's* Munch entry, long out of date, keeps the umlaut, but the Second Edition gives the name without an umlaut as an alternative.) By such considerations as these are unwarranted influences placed upon posterity. Dichotomies of this sort are inseparable from consideration of Munch's outlook.

It should surprise no-one, then, that Holoman's volume—which fully deserves the overused appellation 'definitive'—is the first scholarly account of Munch in any language. Holoman is himself a conductor of stature; and, as with Harvey Sachs's books on Toscanini, readers benefit from the author's practical expertise in wielding a baton. Before Holoman's study appeared, anyone wanting to know more about Munch had been dependent upon Munch's own 1955 monograph, *I am a Conductor* (originally *Je suis chef d'orchestre*, which had appeared in France a year beforehand): a remarkably unrevealing document, save as it concerns the nitty-gritty of directorial musicianship.⁹ Whilst it did well in sales terms on both sides of the Atlantic—

⁹ Charles Munch, *I am a Conductor*, trans. Leonard Burkat (New York: OUP, 1955).

American music-lovers old enough to have heard Munch live 'still tend to have a copy on their shelves, into which they've tucked clippings, obituaries, and other souvenirs of Munch at work' (p. 233)—it omits so much of relevance to Munch's thinking that it can hardly begin to substitute for what Holoman has now provided.

Munch may be said to have enjoyed, or suffered from, a career pattern unique among the podium's twentieth-century greats. Toscanini, Beecham, Monteux and Mengelberg all began to conduct on a professional basis when still in their twenties. By contrast, Munch did not concentrate on conducting until he was past forty. This deferral occurred despite his early musical promise in an exceptionally close-knit clan: his father, Bach-loving choirmaster Ernest Münch, became 'a central figure in Alsatian Protestantism' (p. 4); his conductor-musicologist brother Fritz Münch was 'by all measures but international celebrity as important a musician as Charles' (p. 3). (Among Bach discographers, Fritz continues to be recognized for his mono recordings of the *Christmas Oratorio*, *Mass in B minor* and *St Matthew Passion*, admittedly on long-defunct labels obscure even at the time.)¹⁰ As for Charles himself, his reminiscences of his belated start on the rostrum—earlier he had been organist as well as violinist—are singularly disarming:

Now that you know how I became a conductor, take this advice: Don't do it my way. Chance, happy chance has had a big part in my career but it is better to start out with a detailed battle plan rather than trust too much to luck—except of course that you must be ready to take advantage of it when you can ... Having 'conductor' printed on your card will not make you one. You must earn the right to call yourself a conductor and you can do so only by proving yourself an artist.¹¹

After returning to France in 1932, Munch maintained simultaneously the directorships of two Parisian orchestras: the *Orchestre Philharmonique de Paris*, and the *Société des Concerts du Conservatoire*. (At times he would combine both bands for the *Requiem* by his beloved Berlioz.) He continued to run the *Société des Concerts* during World War II, partly for fear that if he did not, a German conductor would be given the post.

Charges of wartime collaboration have continued to dog his name now and again, but Holoman bluntly shows them to be without substance: 'By not one of the standard measures is [Munch's] loyalty as a French citizen even remotely suspect' (p. 59). Assessed against the very loftiest criteria, Munch fell short of total purity in the heroism department. Emotions of personal gratitude prompted him to continue his existing good relations with two figures compromised by the Third Reich: Furtwängler and Alfred Cortot. (The latter held high office under Marshal Pétain's rule, and indeed was the most lavishly promoted practitioner of any art during that rule. Historians still dispute the extent to which Cortot found himself coerced into Vichy acquiescence by a combination of naïveté and fear for the welfare of his wife, who was not only Jewish but gave a further hostage to Pétainist fortune in being related by marriage to the Jewish socialist ex-Prime Minister Léon Blum).¹² Still, Munch emerges from Holoman's description with a cleaner resistance record than many of his musical compatriots, who—in Clive James's witticism—joined the resistance only after

¹⁰ 'Charles Munch, Fritz Münch and Hans Münch: Bach Cantatas and Other Vocal Works,' *Bach Cantatas*, <http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Performers/Munch.htm> (accessed on 29 Jan. 2013).

¹¹ Munch, *I am a Conductor*, 26–28.

¹² Myriam Chimènes and Josette Alviset, eds, *La Vie musicale sous Vichy* (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 2001), 36–52.

the war was over. In one respect, at any rate, Munch and his *bête noire* De Gaulle thought alike: neither wanted to lose caste by undue willingness to demonstrate Anglophone skill. As Holoman remarks (p. 108), Munch's

limited English was a convenient excuse, and he did not try to correct the general impression that it was halting. By the mid-1950s he could move in and out of his third language without thinking much about it, understanding virtually everything in due course and able to get what he wanted however it came out.

One mark of the outstanding musician in any sphere is his preparedness to learn from competitors. Here, too, Munch had an impressive curriculum vitae, above all in his respect for Toscanini's accomplishments. Toscanini's death in 1957 'effectively elevated Munch,' as Holoman writes, 'to the deanship of American symphony orchestra conductors, though few understood either how deeply his personal admiration ran or the extent of his artistic bereavement' (p. 156). Along with not only Toscanini but also most other executants who had attained international renown before the long-playing record's advent, Munch possessed a healthy reluctance—sadly, rare among conductors younger than he—to perform works he found boring or otherwise unsympathetic. The current idea that a conductor *must* record, say, all the Beethoven symphonies, if he records any of them, meant nothing to Munch. He avoided Mahler's symphonies, though not Mahler's songs, although Wagner and Richard Strauss made their way into his repertoire. So did the standard orchestral works of Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Brahms, many of which he committed to LP with commercial success, as well as including them in concerts alongside the Berlioz, Debussy, Ravel and Saint-Saëns interpretations for which he is more often remembered.

Altogether the combination of Munch and the Boston Symphony turned out to be a fiscal winner for the relevant record company, RCA. This gave him a freer hand than he would otherwise have enjoyed to promote living composers (by no means always French or German) whom he found congenial. These composers he championed with the fervour of a convert. Arthur Honegger, Bohuslav Martinů, Walter Piston, Sir William Walton and the late Henri Dutilleux were particular favourites of his. When, on a guest appearance with the London Philharmonic, Munch took up *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* by Benjamin Britten—who tended to be highly insulting about other conductors of his own music—he achieved the rare feat of pleasing Britten himself, who referred to Munch as a 'damn good conductor ... The LPO isn't so hot an orch [*sic*], but he made them play wonderfully, and had a good idea of the piece.'¹³ And Munch had none of his successors' qualms about approaching pre-Haydn masterworks. His large discography—much of it, unlike Toscanini's, captured in sound which is entirely acceptable and often excellent—includes a 1957 account of the complete Brandenburg Concertos, sounding undeniably 'inauthentic' (a piano, if you please, in the Fifth Concerto, played by none other than Lukas Foss) but mostly bracing. It blows sky-high the widespread fallacy that all pre-1970s baroque performances were slow and laboured to the point of elephantinism.

Munch's 1962 departure from his Boston job brought no lull in his work ethic; if anything, the reverse, although the promise implicit in his 1967 acceptance of the Orchestre de Paris's

¹³ Paul F. Kildea, *Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), 238.

conductorship was not to be long fulfilled. To the young Seiji Ozawa, who had ill-advisedly told the post-Boston Munch 'And now your life is easy,' Munch administered a courteous but determined rebuke: 'Ah, but there you are wrong. Every day I must study these scores for many hours. Even now I learn something new' (p. 213). Holoman notes (p. 229) that 'the personal affinities linking Munch and Ozawa were several, and in terms of longevity and public appeal, wanderlust, and deepening criticism that characterised the last Boston sessions, their stories are quite similar.'

Possibly the finest single tribute to Munch's impact on jaded players comes from the Boston Symphony's principal trumpeter, Roger Voisin, recollecting a month-long tour that included highlights from Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette*. Voisin had become accustomed to bringing a book or a magazine to deflect boredom through the music's twenty-five-minute love scene, where the first trumpet has nothing to do. 'But for twenty-eight days,' Voisin reported, 'I never opened the book. I was completely riveted by that man' (p. 188).