

### A True Artist and a True Friend

Roger Allen welcomes the reissue of a meticulously researched biography of Hans Richter

Christopher Fifield, *Hans Richter* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2016). 776 pp. £50.00. ISBN: 978-1-78327-021-7

There can be no doubt that Christopher Fifield's masterly biography of Hans Richter (1843–1916), first published in 1993, is a classic of its genre. Its reissue by the Boydell Press in an expanded and handsomely produced new edition is very welcome indeed and a substantial addition to the bibliography.

Hans Richter's historical importance as an executive musician cannot be overstated. His musical practices were shaped and nurtured by daily contact with Wagner in the Tribschen years (1866–72) when he lived as a member of the household. Among his many duties, both secretarial and domestic, he acted as Wagner's amanuensis by making fair copies of the full scores of *Meistersinger* and *Siegfried* from the composer's autographs; he played a prominent part in the premiere performances of *Meistersinger* in Munich, even on one occasion stepping up to sing the part of Kothner (16 July 1868); and he arranged the musicians and played the trumpet in the famed first performance of the *Siegfried Idyll* (25 December 1870). Throughout his periods of residence he was fully involved in Wagner's creative processes as the composer approached the summit



Hans Richter with Wagner's children and step-children (left to right) Eva, Isolde, Siegfried, Daniela and Blandine

of his powers in the early 1870s. There was thus no one better equipped to take the conductor's stand in Bayreuth's covered orchestra pit for the first performances of the complete *Ring* cycle in 1876.

The relationship was not always easy, not least because of the often impossible demands Wagner habitually made on his young musical assistant. It was, for example, Richter who at the tender age of 26 became inextricably caught in the web of intrigue and hostility that surrounded the first performances of *Das Rheingold* ordered against Wagner's wishes by King Ludwig in 1869. As Fifield makes clear in chapter 7, Wagner's behaviour towards Richter in the summer of initial preparations for the *Ring* in 1875 can only be described as shabby. There is no doubt, however, that Wagner grew increasingly fond of his young protégé. Richter in turn remained unwaveringly loyal to Wagner and the Bayreuth ideal throughout the years of his own fame, returning to the Festival Theatre to conduct *Die Meistersinger* in 1888, the revival of the *Ring* in 1896, and appearing regularly until his own final performance of *Die Meistersinger* on 19 August 1912. When in Bayreuth he was very much his own man and carefully kept his distance from Cosima's autocratic demands during the years of her festival directorship. Cosima in turn was always circumspect in dealing with Richter. His unique association with Wagner himself carried its own authority.

'Hans Richter described himself as a Hungarian by birth, an Austrian citizen and a musician of the German race' (p. 452). In a broader historical sense, what emerges very clearly from Fifield's meticulous primary research is that Richter was a transitional figure between that of the old-school Kapellmeister and the emerging figure of the star conductor as represented by his younger contemporaries such as Arthur Nikisch (1855–1922) and Felix Weingartner (1863–1942). Richter's first musical experiences were as a chorister in the Court Chapel of Vienna before entering the Vienna Conservatoire to study the horn and music theory, the latter with the famed Simon Sechter. As a conductor Richter emerged from among the ranks of the orchestra; but his craft was rooted and grafted in the routine of the Kapellmeister. This is clearly evident from the fact that, following his initial appointment to the Vienna Court Opera in 1875, he returned to his musical roots by taking on additional duties as deputy conductor to the Court Chapel before eventually succeeding to the post of Court Kapellmeister as late in his career as 1893. Vienna was the centre of Hans Richter's musical activities for twenty-five years (1875–1900). In spite of his close association with Wagner, he managed to remain aloof from the Hanslick-inspired controversies surrounding Brahms and Bruckner. He championed both composers by giving the premieres of Brahms's Second and Third Symphonies as well as Bruckner's Fourth in 1881 and the second version of the mighty Eighth in 1892. It was not until he became unsettled by the mercurial temperament of Gustav Mahler, appointed as director of the Vienna Opera in 1897, that he finally severed his connections with Vienna and transferred the centre of his musical activities to England.

Richter first came to the notice of the English musical public in 1877 when he assisted Wagner at a series of concerts given in London's newly completed Royal Albert Hall, the purpose of which was primarily to raise funds to help pay off the deficit generated by the previous year's Bayreuth Festival. The venture was a financial failure, but it had the effect of establishing Richter firmly in the minds of the English musical public. From that point on he became a regular visitor, establishing the London Richter concerts in 1879 and giv-

ing the English premieres of *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger* in 1882 at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. In 1885 he was appointed conductor of the Birmingham Triennial Music Festival and in 1900 accepted an offer from the Hallé orchestra in Manchester to become its conductor. It was the Birmingham appointment in particular that prepared the way for his close association with another composer of the first rank: Edward Elgar. In 1899 Richter gave the first performance of the *Enigma Variations* and later described Elgar's First Symphony of 1908 as 'the greatest symphony of modern times, and not only in this country' (p. 405). Elgar dedicated the work to Richter and inscribed on his copy of the score: 'To Hans Richter, Mus.Doc. True artist and true friend.' Richter's influence on standards of orchestral playing and musical taste in England was considerable. It was Richter who advanced the cause of Wagner by promoting and presiding over the first ever complete *Ring* cycle given in English at Covent Garden in 1908. The outbreak of war between Great Britain and Germany in 1914 caused him considerable personal difficulties and distress in his last years, although he remained in contact with Elgar.

The sheer weight of archival research and supporting documentary evidence in this study is extraordinary; in this regard the replacement of the endnotes in the original publication with footnotes is a very welcome improvement. It makes referencing the original sources so much easier. The historical evidence is clearly evaluated and where oft-repeated received opinion has over time been elevated to the status of myth, Fifield is not afraid to challenge. For example, he largely debunks the legend that the relative failure of Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* at its Birmingham premiere in 1900 was principally due to Richter's lack of preparation (pp. 336–40). Fifield's engagement with and enthusiasm for his subject is infectious, yet he always maintains a high level of scholarly disinterest and carefully avoids the pitfalls of hagiography. The thirty-five individual chapters, while packed with detail, are concise and each deals with a discrete topic or period in Richter's life. Richter is not usually a figure associated with humour, but there are nevertheless some entertaining anecdotes. For example, on 14 February 1887 Richter reported to director Wilhelm Jahn that at a performance of *Die Walküre* the artist singing Wotan 'got so carried away that he aimed Wotan's spear at the prompt box time and again and poked around inside it' (p. 232). Later on in his Manchester days the famed bassoonist Archie Camden told many a tale of Richter in rehearsal and performance, such as when he asked the principal flautist to 'dance like a fairy' in his solo in Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* Overture. The flautist duly did so excessively at the concert. It turned out he was trying to avoid a wasp! (p. 389)

It must be said, however, that even in a book of this literary quality there are instances where the wealth of detail, especially when it takes the form of long lists of dates and works performed, can impede the narrative momentum. (See for example pp. 220 and 363.) This is further compounded by the regular occurrence of very long quotations, often extending to multiple pages. It is undoubtedly useful to have the sources to hand: in the case of Richter's own letters and diaries, cited in idiomatic translations, the subject then speaks with a strong voice of his own. But long passages of slab-like and rather turgid late-Victorian newspaper reportage (such as the multiple citations of Herbert Thompson's diatribes in the *Yorkshire Post*) can become wearisome. These undoubtedly contain some excellent material, but some judicious editing in this reissue would certainly have enhanced their critical impact.

This reservation does not apply to the very welcome inclusion as a substantial appendix of Hans Richter's Conducting Books. These priceless documents are here published for the first time. The six volumes detail every opera, concert and Court Chapel service Richter ever conducted, from his first public engagement on 19 September 1865 in his home town of Raab to his very last appearance conducting *Meistersinger* in Bayreuth on 19 August 1912. They are wisely left unedited and faithfully reproduce Richter's often idiomatic spelling and occasional pithy comments. As Fifield rightly says in his brief preface, 'Richter's six conducting books not only provide a unique insight into a famous conductor's heavy workload and exhausting schedule, but also allow us a fascinating glimpse into performance practice on the concert platform, in the opera house and in the chapel in Austria, Germany and England during the fifty years leading to the First World War' (p. 473). As noted earlier, Richter was a transitional figure who stood at the beginning and the end of an era. As such he is inseparable from the history of his age. This is best summed up by Siegfried Wagner in his *Erinnerungen*, cited on p. 310: 'With Hans Richter a type of German musician has disappeared and appears to be almost extinct, the orchestral master who originates from the orchestra itself. He was no conductor in the way of Bülow. He always remained a musician.'<sup>1</sup> It is not entirely clear what Siegfried Wagner meant by his cryptic assessment of the relative merits of Richter and Bülow, but when it came to dealing with the worthy citizens of Manchester and the Hallé, it was probably just as well that Richter did not share von Bülow's notoriously fiery temperament.

This expanded new edition is beautifully presented and produced. The fine photograph chosen for the redesigned dust jacket shows a fully bearded, patrician-like Richter as he must have appeared to his orchestras when in his prime in the 1880s. The standard of copy editing is generally very high. It is not, however, entirely free from errors. For example, there is an anomaly in the penultimate sentence on p. 230 which states: 'The year [1886] ended with tributes to [Carl Maria von] Weber whose death had occurred exactly a century before.' Weber was actually born, rather than died, in 1786. This discrepancy is all the more curious as the mistake does not occur in the original 1993 edition.

Christopher Fifield's biography of Hans Richter received considerable critical acclaim when it first appeared in 1993; the passage of twenty-five years has not diminished its stature in any way. It remains a formidable achievement and happily takes its place alongside such notable examples of conductor biographies as Michael Kennedy's *Barbirolli* (1971), Richard Osborne's *Herbert von Karajan* (1998) and John Lucas's *Thomas Beecham* (2008). Even those who possess the original publication of 1993 should invest in this new edition, if only for the inclusion of the invaluable resource of Richter's Conducting Books. Richter's lasting historical significance is movingly captured by the photograph, taken by his son-in-law Sidney Loeb, which appears on the back of the dust jacket of both the original edition and the reissue. It shows the rear view of his stately figure descending the hill from the Bayreuth Festival Theatre in the fateful summer of 1914. As Fifield puts it in his closing sentence, 'an evocative final glimpse of the man who had so much musical history about him, and passed it on to his fellow man with nothing more than a piece of cane mounted on a stout cork handle' (p. 468).

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<sup>1</sup> Siegfried Wagner, *Erinnerungen* (Stuttgart, 1922), 165–8.