

A Will and a Way

There were no guarantees that the Basle Chamber Orchestra's life would be a long one. Although there were musicians interested in performing early and modern music, plenty of works for them to perform, and a conductor to lead them, there was no money. For nearly ten years, the musicians who played in the orchestra's half-dozen or so concerts a year did so unpaid. Sacher, too, received no fee, but there were unavoidable expenses involved in the BKO's development and concerts. There was the rent of performance venues. There were printing costs for tickets and programmes. There were publicity and administrative costs, and fees for hiring outside soloists and additional musicians when a work required brass or woodwind. All these costs had to be met, and initially the returns were small.

The new orchestra and its performances of 'new music' did not have the support enjoyed by the city's symphony orchestra. Not only were the latter's concerts well attended, but they were subsidized by the machinery of the state-supported Basler Orchester Gesellschaft (Basle Orchestra Society). 'At that time,' explained Curt Paul Janz in 1995, 'the work of contemporary composers was regarded by the directors of the Basle music societies, their orchestras and many of the concert-going public with total hostility.'

Potential conflict, however, was no deterrent to Sacher. 'I see that I've begun a fight,' he had written to Lili Streiff – he was only nineteen, but already fully aware of his mission – 'a task which is threatened by countless obstacles. And I see that much of me is not equipped for this fight. But there is a will in me which is bigger than all energy, a great will to conquer.'¹¹

It was with that will to conquer that Sacher set about modernizing Basle's musical life. 'He simply devoted himself to contemporary music,' said Janz. 'With Moser. With Hindemith. He moved Basle's musical life into a sector left untouched in many other larger cities. Right from the beginning, he saw that as his life's work, and he lived according to that. He regarded himself as a man in the service of his vision.'

Vision alone, however, could not ensure the orchestra's survival. Contemporary music was simply not good business, even though, according to Dr Albert Müry, a journalist and a member of the Basle Chamber Choir for fifty years, Sacher's early concerts in the 1500-seat hall of the Basle Casino were well attended. There were those who were eager for a change from the predictable diet dished up in the city's symphony concerts. Many people bought tickets to Sacher's concerts because they were curious and because he offered them something they couldn't find elsewhere.

Since the orchestra could not support itself fully, Sacher needed wealthy patrons. He found one in Otto Senn-Gruner, a retired Swiss army colonel whose family had made its fortune from the manufacture of silk ribbons (the factory still exists in the Basle countryside). The family was known for its love and patronage of classical music and musicians. In addition, the colonel had a collection of valuable musical instruments, and was greatly interested in the new direction being forged by the young Paul Sacher and his chamber orchestra.

Sacher had founded the BKO as a society, and he saw to it that Senn became the society's first president. It was public knowledge that during the two years between the orchestra's beginnings in 1926 and Senn's death in the autumn of 1928, it was he who covered the orchestra's deficits. 'Senn would say, "How much is needed? I'll send my cashier over in the morning,"' Sacher recalled. Additional funds were raised by selling society memberships; these ranged up to a life membership, which cost SFr 500, a very large sum at the time.

After Senn's death, the position of president was offered to Alfred Von der Mühl, the wealthy owner of a ceramics factory in Lausen in the canton of Basle, and a great music-lover. Marianne Majer, who played with the BKO for more than thirty-five years,

remembered how the offer came about. 'He [Sacher] told me that he had met Von der Mühl at a social event. There was a buffet supper and Von der Mühl himself had served Paul very generously. Paul told me later, "I decided that, if he could serve me there in such a fatherly way, he could be president of the BKO!"' Von der Mühl accepted, and showed great initiative in fund-raising on the orchestra's behalf.

Sacher's choice of Von der Mühl as his orchestra's second president was not as arbitrary as the anecdote suggests. He had already shown acute perception in sizing up individuals, their talents and the role they might play in helping him reach his goals. With Von der Mühl and Senn, he had wooed individuals who could not only help him, but interested him as well. This ability to 'see' people, to assess their potential and to harness their talents to his own projects was criticized by some as a skill he abused for his own ends.

His friends saw the deliberate design behind his actions, but their assessments of it vary. Alfred Müry called it 'calculating', but Frau Majer saw it differently. 'He knew exactly what he could use people for. That's an art! In his masterplan, everyone had his place. And many people resented that,' she said. 'They said he used his ability to attract people in order to use them. But I don't agree. He did see people's talents, and what they were capable of, but I don't think he used them in a self-serving way.'

Whether it was mere coincidence or a case in point, shortly after Marianne Majer joined the BKO, Sacher suggested that she become the orchestra's librarian, which meant looking after the orchestra's music. The job also involved interacting with the staff of the Basle Casino concert venue, which for a shy young woman in her late teens was a horror. 'Sometimes, when I had to go to the Casino, I used to stand outside in the street for quarter of an hour before I found the courage to go in. But the job soon forced me to stop doing that.'

The lack of money that made the BKO's early existence so precarious was not, however, an obstacle to Sacher's early commissions. 'When I started, I was not as poor as a church mouse, but I was not rich; I didn't have money. However, when I asked a composer to write a piece for me for the chamber orchestra, I didn't have to offer him money. I offered him a performance of

the work by the Basle Chamber Orchestra. No money, but a good performance. There were composers who thought it was wonderful to know that “I’m composing a work for him, and he will perform it with his orchestra.”

Even if more money had been available, Sacher pointed out that in the 1920s it was not usual to pay for commissions. ‘In 1926, giving commissions was no longer as commonplace as it had been in the eighteenth century, when a composer wrote in the service of a great gentleman or a ruler – like Monteverdi at the court in Mantua. It was no longer usual for someone to say, “Write a work for me. And here are five hundred francs. That’s your fee for the work.” It wasn’t usual last [the nineteenth] century, and as far as I know it wasn’t usual at the beginning of this century. I know of no examples.’

Sacher’s early unpaid commissions were from Swiss composers like Rudolf Moser, who, although originally from St Gallen in eastern Switzerland, had lived and taught in Basle for many years. His first commissioned work had been performed in the BKO’s first concert in 1927. At the end of 1928, a second composition of Moser’s was introduced to the Basle public: the Concerto in D minor for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 39, followed by the première of a work by Ernst Kunz, a Swiss composer who did not live in Basle.

Looking back at these early commissions, one is struck by an apparently systematic progression. With each new one, Sacher seemed to move further away from his base in Basle. The next commission, for instance, was for a work by Conrad Beck, a young Swiss composer who lived in France, where he had made an international reputation. Beck’s Symphony No. 5, dedicated to Sacher and the BKO, was performed in 1930. Three years later, Sacher had moved beyond Switzerland’s borders: his first commission for a non-Swiss composer was to the German Wolfgang Fortner, whose Concerto for String Orchestra was given its première by the BKO in December 1933. However, Sacher later contended that what looked like a carefully planned strategy was simply a case of one thing leading to another.

‘I never gave my commissions in a systematic way. I never considered, “Who lives in this century? Who is important or

interesting? With which works could one perhaps become famous oneself?” I never thought like that. I limited myself to those composers whose music I knew well, whose music touched me. That was really my criterion: my personal taste.’

In addition to his commissions, Sacher introduced the Basle public to many existing works which had not previously been performed in the city. These included, in the BKO’s second concert on 3 June 1927, Paul Hindemith’s *Das Marienleben* (The Life of Mary) Op. 27, for soprano and piano, and on 10 March 1928 three further works by Hindemith. On the latter occasion, Hindemith himself was the soloist in his Sonata for Unaccompanied Viola, Op. 31 No. 4.

‘At that time,’ Sacher recalled, ‘Hindemith was just starting out. He was the bad boy of contemporary music. His early music was really impudent, without consideration for his listeners, outside the tradition. ... He was fairly small, and had a big skull, and then this huge viola. ... I liked him very much, and naturally his music as well. In contrast to that of the Second Viennese School, his music – like Stravinsky’s – had a strong rhythmic element, and that appealed to me greatly. And he could be merry and humorous. I got to know him when he first came to the BKO as a soloist, and that was the beginning of our friendship.’

The words ‘rhythmic element’ appeared repeatedly in conversations with Sacher about his favourite composers. It was one of the main criteria that attracted him to, or turned him away from, a composer’s work. It was also a yardstick for judging the ability of the musicians who performed in his orchestras, as the story of Marianne Majer’s audition for the BKO illustrates.

Majer had left school early to study music. She auditioned for the BKO shortly after its first concert in 1927, even though she had not yet begun her studies at the Basle Conservatory. ‘I played Vivaldi’s G minor concerto. Then Paul said, “You’re at the lower limit of what I can accept. But you played the syncopations so well!” It was rhythmical, and he liked that.’

Michaela von Herwarth, who played with the BKO from 1936 to 1938, recalled that the ‘rhythmic element’ was not only a leading aspect of Sacher’s aesthetic taste in music, but also one of his hallmarks as a conductor. ‘His two great musical strengths were his

rhythmic ability and his ability to elicit a good sound. He had to work very hard on the orchestra's intonation, but then he's someone who always worked hard.' She also remembered his severity in early rehearsals. 'He was extremely firm and not very cheerful. We weren't actually allowed to laugh.'

Musically, Sacher's severity and cultivated control prompted frequent criticism of his manner of conducting early classical works. For instance, when he performed Mozart, many of his peers felt that he was too reserved to show how beautiful he found the music, and that reserve led to the comments that he was 'ice-cold', and 'just an organizer'. Some of Sacher's professional colleagues also found that he lacked the elegance and intimacy necessary for conducting the smaller, early works of Mozart or Haydn that he loved to perform. Judging by archive films of Sacher's early rehearsals and performances, such complaints were justified, but at the time Sacher did not care about elegance when he was conducting. For him the commitment of energy was important, and in his early years he conducted with excessively robust physical gestures. Nor was he physically disposed to elegance. His short, strong, stocky form was better suited to the farmlands of his ancestors than to the drawing rooms of the nobility. In his later years, elegance of person and form in his conducting took on greater meaning, and the contours of his physical performance became smoother, but there were still complaints that the way Paul Sacher conducted classical music did not do justice to the influence of his teacher, Weingartner.

On the other hand, confirmed his associates, when he conducted contemporary music he was supreme. The inhibitions that stilted his performances of the classical repertoire vanished when he conducted new works, some of which were made up of many different elements requiring sure coordination and control. 'That was, in my opinion,' Majer said, 'Paul's greatest strength. To control a huge apparatus like that, to keep it together. It was unbelievable how he did it. Then, he really made music from his soul.' The critics agreed.

On 4 June 1929, Sacher performed Arthur Honegger's 'symphonic psalm', *Le Roi David* (King David), for the first time in Basle. The forces required were considerable: his own orchestra

strengthened by wind, brass and percussion players; a large choir and solo actors and singers. But Sacher was equal to the work's formidable demands, and seemed completely at ease.

The *Basler Anzeiger's* critic wrote that 'His conducting ability... allows him to hold the many branching threads in sure hands like an experienced commander. His calm and decisive signals are particularly striking. Such conductors are internally and externally controlled, and are able to transfer this state to all their performers.'¹²

Conducting the BKO was not the only activity in which Sacher was preoccupied with the problems of performing modern music. On 24 June 1927, he and four colleagues founded a group called *Gruppe der Fünf* (Group of Five), whose name was probably inspired by *Les Six*, a group of six French composers who were disciples of Erik Satie in the 1920s.

Of his four associates, Hans Ehinger was a music journalist and critic; Max Adam was an oboist and a teacher at the Basle Conservatory, as was Ernst Mohr. The fourth, August Wenzinger, was the solo cellist with the BKO for its first season, and later a founding member of the *Schola Cantorum Basiliensis*.

As Sacher explained, the point of the group was 'to examine and tackle the problems of unknown music'. The group organized and performed a series of 'study performances', either in the Conservatory hall or in the homes of wealthy patrons like Otto Senn's son, Willy. These performances did not aim to be concerts. 'The material was indigestible – new. Unknown things which most people thought were terrible. We wanted to really tackle these new works, and usually in the course of the "performance" we spoke about them because the public, too, had to tackle them.'

Innovative as these informal performances were in terms of the musicians' direct interaction with their audiences, the concept was by no means new. It had been introduced four years earlier in the Swiss city of Winterthur by Dr Hermann Scherchen – then conductor of the Winterthur City Orchestra – as part of his own life-long mission to promote contemporary music. Sacher had simply borrowed the idea, and over the next two years fifteen 'study performances' were given in Basle. Then, in 1929, the *Gruppe der Fünf* was offered an opportunity to put its work with contemporary music on a formal footing. The International Society for

Contemporary Music (ISCM) had one Swiss branch, in Zurich. The branch's work had, however, stagnated, and on the initiative of one of its founding members, the Winterthur businessman and arts patron Werner Reinhart, the Gruppe der Fünf in Basle agreed to take over as the Swiss branch of the ISCM.

Like the BKO before it, the new organization survived initially thanks to the generosity of wealthy patrons, but the problem of Sacher's own finances was slowly becoming acute. Although he still lived at home with his parents, his private financial needs were growing, and many of his conducting jobs were still unpaid. Then, in 1929, he found a solution.

There were a number of choirs of differing types and standards in Basle in the 1920s. One of them was the Basle Bach Choir, founded and conducted by Adolf Hamm. There was also a madrigal choir, and the Basle Men's Choir, whose members had a predilection for singing folk songs. In November 1929, when the Men's Choir sought a new conductor and artistic director, Sacher was offered a trial rehearsal by the choir's board. Apparently he satisfied their requirements because he was offered the job, which he accepted even though it lay far from his musical interests. The real reason for his acceptance was financial: the position carried with it a generous wage, and his decision was a pragmatic one, based on his needs at the time.

'Imagine. That was sixty years ago. They paid me five hundred francs a month, for a rehearsal every Monday evening from eight to ten. Oh la la! That was a lot of money then! I found that princely.'

The payment may have been princely, but Sacher later described the job as agony. 'I like conducting concerts with choir and orchestra,' he explained, 'but I find it boring to study a work with an amateur choir. I'm not a patient teacher. ... It takes so long, and they still sing out of tune. And a men's choir is much worse than a mixed choir, where there are at least a few pretty women to look at. But I was twenty-three years old, and they were offering five hundred francs a month!'

During the first three years of Sacher's work with the BKO, he performed two works which required a choir, Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* and Carissimi's *Jephte*, and for these performances Adolf Hamm's Bach Choir was an obvious choice. In return, the orchestra

accompanied the choir in a number of Hamm's own choral concerts. The Basle Bach Choir, however, was not Sacher's ensemble. Relying on someone else's choir meant relinquishing control to outside circumstances, something Sacher was reluctant to do. He also wanted the choir with which he worked to be trained to sing both contemporary and early music, a requirement which posed problems for an outside group.

As he had done with his chamber orchestra when a need arose which others could not meet, Sacher set about meeting it himself. 'I had incredible luck,' he remembered. 'The madrigal choir directed by Dr Alfred Wasserman had just been disbanded because he had been called away from Basle for professional reasons. I was able to take over practically the whole ensemble. They were not professionals but selected amateur singers. They formed the basis of the Basle Chamber Choir, and they were very good.'

It was important to Sacher that the ensemble's high standards be maintained. Many of those who auditioned later were told that their acceptance would depend on their willingness to take singing lessons. Alfred Müry remembered that Sacher, despite his severity in rehearsals, could 'really excite people, sweep them along with him. It was exciting to be working towards the première of a famous composer, and later the possibility of travelling abroad with the choir was an additional attraction for new members.'

During the 1920s, if he could not have financial control of the institutions blossoming from his dreams, Sacher ensured that he at least had total artistic control. At home, too, his authority was unquestioned. After 1927, home was a three-storey house at Burgfelderstrasse 23, which Anny had bought after selling the property in Thannerstrasse. As for many years previously, Paul shared an apartment on the second floor with his parents, while Nelly remained with her grandfather on the ground floor. And, again as always, the best room was given to Paul. 'It was on the left, as one entered,' Nelly remembered. 'On the right was a dining room which was never used, with *Jugendstil* furniture: a sideboard, a lovely table and chairs – all for occasions which never took place.'

Els Havrlik remembered Paul's room at Burgfelderstrasse 23 as being somewhat dark, with a chaise longue on which they sometimes lay to talk. 'And there was his desk at the window. I couldn't ever imagine him at the table with his family because he seemed to be something extraordinary. He had breakfast in his room. He told me that his mother brought him rolls and coffee at seven thirty.'

By this time, Anny was no longer listed in the business pages of the Basle address book as a seamstress. Now she made her extra money by helping her friends and former neighbours, the Pellmonts, in the pastry and coffee shop that they had taken over in Basle's inner-city shopping area. Sometimes there were large parties, or holiday crowds, and then she was called in to work the till, or to help serve. But her sewing machine still stood on the lounge room table and it was never idle for long.

'She was very hard-working and practical,' Marianne Majer said. 'I had kept my mother's wedding dress, a lovely black gown, and out of that Frau Sacher made me my first concert dress for the BKO concerts. And she was always giving me helpful hints about how I could make small improvements to my clothes: a row of braid here, or new buttons there.'

For a time, Marianne went each Sunday morning to help Nelly knot a huge carpet she was making. She was then often invited upstairs to join the Sachers for lunch. 'There was a sofa and a few chairs. When Paul was there, he sat on the sofa and all the others sat around on ordinary chairs. I was allowed to sit next to him on the sofa because there was always a chair too few.'

As their reputations grew, Paul Sacher and his orchestra performed not only in the BKO's official concerts but at other functions as well. His growing network of contacts, supplemented by those of Annie Tschopp, led to invitations to perform at weddings, funerals, and social events of all kinds. Sometimes the entire ensemble performed; sometimes just selected individuals.

One such event remained clear in Sacher's memory throughout his life. It was the occasion of Felix Weingartner's birthday on

2 June 1930. Weingartner's wife asked Sacher and his orchestra to perform one of Weingartner's works, his Serenade in F major for String Orchestra, Op. 6, at the party she had arranged in the Summer Casino. After the performance, Frau Weingartner led Sacher to the table where he was to sit for supper. On his left was Mrs Dora Von der Mühl, the wife of Hans Von der Mühl. On his right was the wife of Dr Emanuel Hoffmann, Maja Hoffmann-Stehlin.