

# Karl Anton Rickenbacher

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Swiss conductor Karl Anton Rickenbacher

20 May 1940 (Basel) - 28 Feb 2014 (Montreux)

While sitting at his piano at home this morning studying the score of Mahler *Totenfeier*, the celebrated Swiss conductor, Karl Anton Rickenbacher, suffered a heart attack and died suddenly. Beloved husband of the former ballerina, Gaye Fulton, and devoted step father to her two sons and three grand children, this energetic, life and soul of the party personality, is suddenly gone. As a conductor, Karl Anton was part of the continuum of the grand German tradition; a former student of Karajan and Boulez and assistant to Klemperer, he spent his life delving and researching in depth into every piece he conducted. It seems fitting that he passed away surrounded by his scores and books in his study at home, while thinking deeply about the Mahler score at his piano.

Karl Anton Rickenbacher was born in Basel in 1940 and studied with Herbert Ahlendorf at the Berlin conservatory and privately with Herbert von Karajan and Pierre Boulez. He began his career as a répétiteur and staff conductor at the Opernhaus Zürich (1967–69) and the Städtische Bühnen Freiburg (1969–75), during which time his development was decisively influenced by another great conductor, Otto Klemperer, who described him as 'one of the most talented conductors of the younger generation'. Subsequently he shifted his activities to the concert hall and was appointed general music director of the Westphalian Symphony Orchestra in Recklinghausen (1976–85) and principal conductor of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra in Glasgow (1978–80). He famously campaigned to save the BBCSSO during the time of attempted cut backs to BBC orchestras in 1980. At the same time, he began appearing regularly in Europe, North America, and Japan as a guest conductor. In 1987 he was appointed principal guest conductor of the Belgian BRT Philharmonic Orchestra.

His large discography—chiefly in collaboration with the Bamberg, Bavarian Radio, Berlin Radio, London Philharmonic and Budapest Symphony orchestras—includes a number of first recordings of works by Beethoven, Wagner, Bruckner, Liszt, and Mahler, as well as

Humperdinck, Hindemith, Milhaud (awarded the Grand Prix du Disque), Zemlinsky, and Hartmann (Cannes Classical Award). In 1999 his recording of *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* (with a text by Sir Peter Ustinov) won the German Echo Preis as Best Classical Recording of the Year. He won an Echo Prize again the following year for his recording of Messiaen's oratorio *La Transfiguration*, and another in 2001 for a CD in the Unknown Richard Strauss series.

After Karl Anton Rickenbacher's American debut in 1989, *Musical America* wrote:

'... Rickenbacher has Klemperer's musical depth and probing insight, Boulez's eye for detail, and the zest and energy that have characterised Karajan at his best.'

Olivier Messiaen spoke of Rickenbacher as 'a great conductor of our time, who discerns precisely the relevant aesthetics of each work'.



The programme of Richard Strauss, *Metamorphosen*, Olivier Messiaen, *Offrandes oubliées* and Gustav Mahler *Mouvement symphonique (Totenfeier)* which Karl Anton was to conduct with the *Orchestre de la Haute Ecole de Musique de Genève* on the 16th of March is a quintessential Rickenbacher programme. This concert at the *Espace Ville de Genève* will now be dedicated to the memory of Karl Anton Rickenbacher.

Paul McGrath

(Conductor and step son of Karl Anton Rickenbacher)