

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1345

KARL MUCK (to rhyme with 'look') was born at Darmstadt on October 22nd 1859. His first and excellent training was from his Bavarian father, a lawyer and conductor. His musical education continued under Kissner at Würzburg. After gaining a doctorate in classical philology at Heidelberg, he continued his musical studies at Leipzig Conservatorium, making a *début* as a pianist at the Gewandhaus in 1880. He studied further at Zürich and made his conducting *début* as Chordirektor at the Theater there; rapid promotion to Kapellmeister following when the incumbent became ill. He found conducting so enjoyable, and he was seen to have so much talent for it, that his career was decided. In the central European system of the time conductors moved around in relatively short appointments. Those who benefited from experience and gained a reputation migrated upwards to the senior posts. Thus Muck progressed through Salzburg, Brno and Graz until, in 1886, he became Principal Kapellmeister of the Deutsches Theater, Prague under Angelo Neumann's management, and he was Direktor when Neumann took his Travelling Opera Company to Berlin. This led to appointments at the Hofoper as Kapellmeister in 1892 and Generalmusikdirektor in 1908. With this leading position he also took on the Königliche Kapelle with equal success. Muck first conducted the "Ring" cycle in 1889, at Prague, Moscow and St. Petersburg, and in 1901 in Berlin at the Lessing Theater. From 1894 to 1911 he conducted at the Schleswig Music Festival. In 1899 he conducted *Fidelio*, *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser*, *Die Meistersinger*, *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Walküre* at Covent Garden. His casts included: Joanna Gadski, Lilli Lehmann, Félia Litvinne, Lillian Nordica, Rose Olitzka, Ernestine Schumann-Heink, David Bispham, the de Reszke brothers, Andreas Dippel and Anton van Rooy. Henry Wood was disappointed with the *Dutchman*, but hearing him many years later in Boston, "it would be fair to add that he gave some very inspired and perfect performances."

Muck came to Bayreuth as an assistant in 1892. To his credit, and to the benefit of that ever penurious institution, he was amongst those artists for whom service to the cause sufficed, he never took a fee; Toscanini was another. From 1901 to 1930 Muck conducted *Parsifal* at Bayreuth every year, which may well be in *The Guinness Book of Records*. More to the point, for many he was and remains the greatest exponent of the work, a view which the records support. His tempi were slow, though, amazingly, not as slow as Toscanini's, which did not make things easy for singers. (For the first act: Muck: 114minutes, Toscanini: 122) Siegfried Wagner's death was the cue for his departure. Bayreuth was now governed by a woman under half his age, a foreigner, a usurper with new ideas; also he was beside himself with jealousy at the arrival of Toscanini.

In Vienna from 1903 to 1906 he and Felix Mottl were joint conductors of the Philharmonic concerts. Under Muck Vienna first heard Bruckner's ninth symphony. From 1906 to 1908 and from 1912 to 1918 he was with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Boston audiences venerated him as the bringer of German

culture, but his tenure ended abruptly. Some held that after America entered the Great War he refused to conduct “The Star Spangled Banner”, others that he was signalling to enemy ships and yet others that there was a scandal of a sexual nature. A witch hunt led by people who had suffered from his sharp tongue, and it was sharp even by the standards of great conductors, led to his internment under the Enemy Aliens Act in 1918.

After the war he conducted in Amsterdam, Hamburg and Munich and he was a respected conductor of the Hamburg Philharmonic Concerts from 1922 until 1933. Muck died at Stuttgart on March 3rd 1940.

Karl Muck was born four years after Arthur Nikisch and eight before Toscanini. Chronologically it was Muck who ushered in the modern notion that ultimate authority rests in the score. He is regarded as one of the great masters of the baton. There were no balletics, he remained still, the tip of the baton describing small arcs. He conducted with phenomenal surety and rhythmic certainty. His readings were objective, based on logic and appreciation of structure. He was a very hard worker; in his Berlin years he conducted over a thousand performances of over a hundred operas. He conducted always with a score, asserting that assurance for the musicians was more important than memory tricks. Frida Leider wrote of his almost ascetic appearance, his piercing glance, and elegant and old fashioned dress, he seemed unapproachable, but behind all this was a fine mind and an outstanding artist. “Muck’s calmness and clarity enabled me to draw everything out of the role (Kundry), as I had always previously tried to”. Artur Schnabel, ever sparing of praise, saw him as “a truly great master, his reliability, maturity and selfless dedication unparalleled in any living artist.” and Paderewski, even though Muck had insulted him, spoke of his indescribably perfect accompaniment. For Bruno Walter “His clear interpretive style revealed simplicity, greatness and strength.” He felt that the sharp words and cutting remarks were a mask, a barricade for vulnerability. Walter appreciated Muck’s friendship and support at the end of 1932, “He greeted me (warmly and) sat in his box, where he could be seen by everybody, and took part in the applause ostentatiously.”

There was none of the flamboyance and romanticism of Nikisch; Muck conducted with directness, firm tempi and few liberties; he was near to Strauss and Weingartner, the very antithesis of Mengelberg. He was strong in the causes of Bruckner and Mahler, his programmes included works by Debussy, Schoenberg, Sibelius and Tchaikovsky; there were many new works, some for which he had no liking, but which he felt should be heard. Unlike Nikisch, who would rehearse a new work *prima vista*, Muck rehearsed only after the very fullest preparation. Indeed, under him preparation was such that on occasion he would stand with his arms at his side, while the orchestra played a movement without him.

Carl Muck’s records fall into three groups: Records made in Boston by the acoustic process in 1917, records made in Bayreuth at the time of the Festival of 1927 and records made in Berlin in 1927 and 1928.

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