



Alan Charles Maclaurin Mackerras
(1925–2010)

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When Sir Charles Mackerras died, on 14 July 2010, there was a flood of obituaries around the world: in the land of his birth, the United States; his homeland, Australia; the land of his home, the United Kingdom; and the country whose music he had done so much to foster, the Czech Republic. Aged eighty-four and suffering from cancer for several years, Charles Mackerras was still in full musical flight. He was expected to conduct at two Prom concerts in London later in July. His interpretation of Mozart's *Idomeneo* was awaited in August at the Edinburgh Festival, of which he was honorary president, and he was scheduled to return to Prague in the autumn for a concert to mark fifty years of collaboration with the Czech Philharmonic. Many other bookings flowed into 2011.

Born into a family that has contributed mightily to Australian humanities and social sciences, Mackerras studied oboe, piano and composition at the (then) New South Wales Conservatorium of Music. By the age of 19 he was principal oboist of the ABC Sydney Orchestra, and at twenty-one left for England to pursue a career as a conductor. Fate intervened soon after his arrival when he struck up a conversation with an amateur Czech cellist, who recommended he seek a British Council scholarship to study in Prague. This chance event changed the course of his career, and of musical history. Mackerras studied in Prague during 1947–48, spending much time with the legendary Czech conductor Václav Talich, who was then under house arrest. To Talich he owed a philosophy of life as a musical leader. He once explained it over Czech Radio: 'You mustn't be conceited, but you mustn't be too modest either. Because if you're too conceited, you are not sharing respect for the greatness of the music you are working for. But if you're too modest, the orchestra will not respect you.'

Over the following decades Mackerras became the leading international proponent of the music of Leoš Janáček, an enthusiasm he imbibed in part through his friendship with the Czech oboist, Jiří Tancibudek, who later migrated to Australia. In 1978 Mackerras received the Janáček Medal; in 1996 the Czech Republic's Medal

of Merit; and early in 2010 he received an Artis Bohemiae Amicis award for his promotion of Czech art abroad. In his own estimate, his many performances, recordings and studies of Janáček's music were his greatest legacy to music.

Mackerras's career as a conductor spanned over sixty years. Returning to London from Prague in 1948, he became a staff conductor at Sadler's Wells, where he conducted the first British staged performance of Janáček's opera *Káťa Kabanová* in 1951. He rapidly expanded his conducting orbit, working with most British orchestras, and then increasingly abroad. During 1966–69 he was chief conductor of the Hamburg State Opera, then during 1970–77 was music director of the Sadler's Wells Opera (renamed English National Opera during his tenure). He then held many other leading conducting positions, including with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the Metropolitan in New York, San Francisco Opera, Welsh National Opera and Glyndebourne. In 1973 he conducted the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in the opening concert of the Concert Hall at the Sydney Opera House, and during 1982–85 became that orchestra's first Australian chief conductor. During 1997–2003 he was principal guest conductor of the Czech Philharmonic, and from 2004, of the Philharmonia Orchestra in London.

Mackerras's legacy of recordings spanned the technology of 78-rpm records to DVDs. His earliest recording, from 1952, was of his own arrangement of Arthur Sullivan's music for the comic ballet *Pineapple Poll*. Among the hundreds of recordings that followed were some of the earliest 'period performance' recordings, all the symphonies of Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms, most of the repertory of Gilbert and Sullivan, the 'lost' cello concerto of Sullivan, and a great swath of Czech music. His obituarist in *The Guardian*, Alan Blyth, commented:

In many ways Mackerras was a man of his age, a man for all seasons of music who lived for his art and for the bettering of its execution. Although he had his specialities, he was game for anything that he could enthuse over, and that enthusiasm was conveyed almost every time he was on the podium or in the pit. Public and private friends warmed to his down-to-earth, no-nonsense personality and his ready sense of humour.

During his long and busy life Mackerras's musical stature and generosity were well acknowledged. As well as his many Czech awards, he was knighted in 1979, following a CBE in 1974, and became a Companion of Honour in 2003. In 2005 he became the first recipient of the Queen's Medal for Music. In 1997 he became a Companion of the Order of Australia (AC) for his services 'to music and Australian music', the same year in which he became an Honorary Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities.

One of Mackerras's last performances was of Janáček's opera *Přihody Lišky Bystroušky*, better known as *The Cunning Little Vixen*, at the Royal Opera, Covent Garden,

during March 2010. He invited the Berlin-based young Australian conductor Simon Hewett to join him for the rehearsals. Hewett recalls:

I had the enormous privilege of working with Sir Charles on a revival of *The Cunning Little Vixen* at Covent Garden, just a few months before he died. It was extraordinary to see what vitality and determination he brought to Janáček's great opera. Despite having to deal with considerable physical pain while conducting (he was operated on for a blocked nerve in his chest in between orchestral rehearsals) his enthusiasm for the work was infectious, and elicited tremendous warmth and commitment from the Covent Garden orchestra. I remember feeling particularly moved during the final dress rehearsal, listening to the Forester's Monologue at the end of the opera, during which reflections on springtime renewal are bathed in gentle, dappled orchestral colours. I felt especially grateful that this gutsy and tenacious Australian had done more than anybody else to introduce Janáček's operatic masterpieces to western audiences. Little did I know I was hearing Sir Charles rehearse this music for the last time.

Indeed, this was the same passage that Mackerras chose for the close of his own funeral service on 23 July 2010. As, indeed, had Janáček, in 1928.

Malcolm Gillies