Fritz Münch : advocate of the Bruckner cause in Alsace-Lorraine (France) in the 1920s and 1930s

The Münch family was closely identified with all 3 official institutions of musical life in Strasbourg : the Conservatory, the subscription-concerts of the Municipal Orchestra (founded in 1855) and the regional musical festivals, which traced their roots to the mid-1880's and coalesced into the modern Strasbourg Festival.

In 1924, Frédéric (« Fritz ») Münch - a leading specialist in religious music - succeeded his father Ernest Münch as music-director of the « Chœur de Saint-Guillaume » (founded in 1885) at the Protestant Lutheran « Wilhelmer-Kirche » . Since the end of the 19th Century, the Choir, a long-time partner of the Municipal Orchestra, took part in the city's musical life - in particular, in historical creations as well as concerts of the Strasbourg Music Festivals. Fritz Münch was the brother of Charles Münch and the brother-in-law of Doctor Albert Schweitzer (an active member of the Choir in the 1900s who was called to play the organ during the " spiritual concerts ") . Fritz became a key figure of the Bach revival in the Alsace-Lorainne region by programming one of the " Passions " on Good Friday. His repertoire consisting of large scale sacred vocal works spanned the baroque, classical, post-romantic and contemporary periods. He gave the French premiere of Anton Bruckner's Fifth Symphony and the Paris premiere of the Mass No. 3 in F minor. One of his most notable students at the Conservatory was Ernest Bour who will succeed him as music-director of the Municipal Orchestra.

6 January 1924, Epiphany Sunday : Te Deum, Charles Münch, concert-master
Saint-Guillaume's Church Choir, Strasbourg

25 November 1927 : Mass No. 3, Te Deum, Palais des Fêtes, Strasbourg
Saint-Guillaume's Church Choir

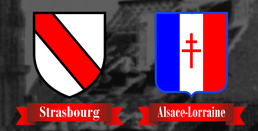
Fritz Münch conducts the premiere in Paris of Bruckner's Mass No. 3

10 March 1928 : First performance of Mass No. 3 in Paris, at Salle Pleyel
Fritz Münch conducts the Saint-Guillaume's Church Choir of Strasbourg and the " Orchestre des Concerts Colonne "

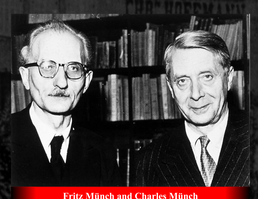
Fritz Münch conducted the premiere in France of Bruckner's Symphony No. 5

(Obituary of Fritz Münch in Le Monde, 13 March 1970)

The Paris premiere was not given until much later, on 22 October 1969, by Eugen Jochum and the Orchestre national de l'ORTF at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées.



Charles and Fritz Münch | Charles, concert-master

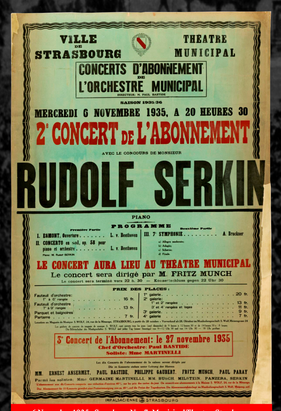


Fritz Münch and Charles Münch

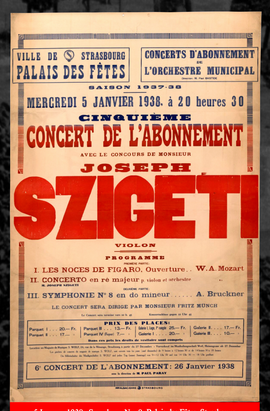
Chœur de Saint-Guillaume - 1911 -

As part of the 1936 Strasbourg Festival

12 May 1936 : Symphony No. 5, Te Deum, Palais des Fêtes, Strasbourg
Saint-Guillaume's Church Choir



6 November 1935 : Symphony No. 7, Municipal Theatre, Strasbourg
Municipal Orchestra's subscription-concert



5 January 1938 : Symphony No. 8, Palais des Fêtes, Strasbourg
Municipal Orchestra's subscription-concert

The Religious Music of Anton Bruckner - by Fritz Münch

24 February 1928 : Text published in the French music magazine « Le Ménestrel » (The Minstrel) , pages 81-82.
Fritz Münch considers Bruckner's religious compositions, and comes to the following conclusions : The Bruckner revival in the composer's own country is not due to a sudden turn of fashion.
Münch (who was a cellist, a conductor, a pastor, a professor at the Faculty of Theology and the director of the Protestant Seminary of Strasbourg) gave a lecture on « the Religious Music » of Anton Bruckner at the City Hall of Paris on Monday, 21 November 1927.

In Paris

27 February 1925 : Fritz Münch and his Choir in front of the Imperial Tomb of Napoleon inside the Dome Church of « Les Invalides » in Paris

27 February 1925 : Fritz Münch and his Choir in front of « Les Invalides » in Paris

Fritz Münch at the podium in front of the Strasbourg Municipal Orchestra and the Saint-Guillaume's Choir preparing for a church concert

1932 : First Strasbourg Festival

Roger and Gustave Wolf (co-founders of the Strasbourg Festival), Fritz Münch and the Municipal Orchestra at the « Palais des Fêtes »

1927 : Fritz Münch and the Choir in front of the « Élysée » Palace in Paris

1936 Strasbourg Festival

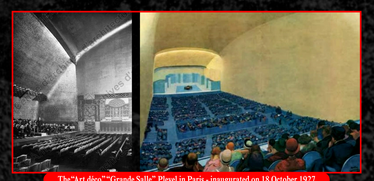
Roger Wolf, Artur Schnabel, Elisabeth Münch, Otto Klemperer and Fritz Münch (Klemperer conducted all the Beethoven symphonies during this edition of the Festival)

2012

The "Art nouveau" "Palais des Fêtes" (Festival Palace) originaly named "Sängerhaus" (Singer's House) in Strasbourg

The Municipal Theatre (Opera House) in Strasbourg

The Protestant Lutheran Church of Saint-Guillaume (« Wilhelmer-Kirche ») in Strasbourg



The "Art déco" "Grande Salle" Pleyel in Paris - inaugurated on 18 October 1927

Strasbourg's music scene - Dates and Events

1895 : The First « Kapellmeister » of the Municipal Theatre Wilhelm Bruch (a distant cousin of composer Max Bruch) conducts the Strasbourg premiere of Anton Bruckner's Symphony No. 7 during a summer-concert.
1897 : Wilhelm Bruch performs the Seventh Symphony at the large public park of the « Orangerie » which happens to be the summer resort of the Strasbourg Municipal Orchestra in the Neustadt District.
(In 1910, Bruch will conduct the Nuremberg premiere of the Ninth Symphony with the local Philharmonic Orchestra.)

3 June 1907 : Final day of the Second edition of the « Fête musicale d'Alsace-Lorraine » in Strasbourg.
Anton Bruckner's Symphony No. 4 in E-flat major, « Romantic » , is performed by Felix Mottl and the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. - Music-critics say Bruckner's work remains misunderstood ...

1919-1926 : Charles Münch is concert-master and assistant chief conductor of the Strasbourg Municipal Orchestra.

From 1897 to 1919 : Under the successive directorships of the Alsatian Franz Stockhausen (1897-1905) - who was not a great supporter of the composer - and the anti-modernist German Hans Pfitzner (1907-1919) , the Strasbourg Municipal Orchestra played works by Anton Bruckner 19 times (8+11) - the Third (created by Pfitzner in 1910) , Fifth, Seventh and Ninth Symphonies (which are met with mixed success ...) and the " Te Deum ". For Pfitzner who loved to engage in musical polemics, Bruckner was still a " monstrous dilettante ". He and other musicians of his generation unjustly accused him of having composed the same symphony " 9 times ".

The appointment of Pfitzner (posing as a fierce adversary of French music) as director of the Strasbourg Conservatory in 1908 and as music-director of the subscription-concerts of the Municipal Orchestra revamped the two institutions. After his nomination as music-director of the Opera House in 1910, Pfitzner was now the benevolent monarch in town, assembling around him German assistants and associates with whom the young Charles Münch certainly interacted. Among these was Wilhelm Furtwängler, who spent one year in Strasbourg as apprentice-conductor (1910-1911) and Otto Klemperer (1914-1917) who was named professor and director of the Conservatory, first « Kapellmeister » and then Deputy music-director of the Theatre (1916) . Klemperer included some of his own compositions in his farewell concert. Pfitzner left Strasbourg in 1919 after the annexation of Imperial Alsace by France in the aftermath of World War I.

Saturday, 10 March 1928 :" Grande Salle " Pleyel in Paris. Fritz Münch conducts the Saint-Guillaume's Church Choir of Strasbourg and the " Orchestre des Concerts Colonne ".
The Hungarian Felicie Hüni-Mihacsek (from the Vienna and Munich Operas) is the soprano soloist for the Paris premiere of Anton Bruckner's Mass No. 3 in F minor.
She studied at the Music Academy in Vienna with the famous teacher, the mezzo-soprano Rosa Papier-Paumgarter. Hüni-Mihacsek created Pfitzner's Opera, " Das Herz ", in Munich in 1931.
Papier, a friend and supporter of Bruckner, once asked the Master why he did not write songs like those of « Doktor Brahms » .
He answered :
« I könnt's schon, wenn i wollt', aber i will nit'. » (I could do it if I wanted to, but I won't.)
Papier later became a well-known member of the Vienna Court Opera and, following her early retirement due to health reasons, a distinguished singing teacher whose pupils numbered Anna von Mildenburg. She also exerted considerable influence on the Viennese musical scene, helping in no small way to bring about Gustav Mahler's appointment as director of the Court Opera.

Idea, Layout, Text & Image compilation Gilles Houle