

This article originally appeared in Issue 35:3 (Jan/Feb 2012) of *Fanfare* Magazine.

CHARLES MUNCH. By D. Kern Holoman. Oxford and New York: Oxford U Press, 2011. 277 pp. 39 illustrations. \$35

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There is a generation of music lovers, now in their 60s, who will receive D. Kern Holoman's comprehensive biography of Charles Munch with a passion of gratitude. These listeners recall when the music directors of major orchestras represented cultural icons and their work seemed everywhere: on radio, in record bins, on TV. Ormandy, Szell, Reiner, Bernstein, and Munch stood as giants of the baton. Their performances were hotly debated. Everyone had an opinion, a point of pride, and a hero.

In the intervening years much has been said about Bernstein, and numerous insightful books appeared about the orchestral Philadelphians, Clevelanders, and Chicagoans. Erich Leinsdorf wrote two acerbic autobiographies—partly about the Boston Symphony. But the musically exciting, uncontroversial Munch years in Boston (1949–61), remained benignly opaque.

Charles Munch's childless marriage was essentially an alliance of Alsatian musical families arranged by his mother. Mrs. Munch remained in Europe during his tenure and did not undertake the kind of hagiography represented by Natalie Koussevitsky. When Munch left Boston, to build the Paris Orchestra, there were fewer keepers of his American flame.

The Charles Munch who comes to life in these pages was a musician's musician and remarkably lacking in cynicism or self-promotion. There appears to have been only one colleague who really disliked him, Paul Paray, and this apparently out of envy. And Francis Poulenc felt he and Charles Munch had little in common. Fair enough.

Munch's life story is that of a handsome, idealistic man with a passion for art, music, food, and friendship, and a belief in the intuitive spark. He was a serial monogamist with a genuine liking for the company of women. His female companions knew and liked each other. In later years, in an old-fashioned arrangement, Nicole Henriot Schweitzer stood out among these as his special companion and hostess. Professionally, Jean Martinon and Charles Dutoit were protégés, and Pierre Monteux a friend.

In music, Munch was an unusual combination of fire and intuition. He disliked Mahler. He admired Furtwängler more than Bruno Walter (and had played under both as concertmaster of the Leipzig Gewandhaus), but rejected Furtwängler's incoherent downbeat. Munch requested entrances on the beat. But he disliked exhausting an orchestra with rehearsals, the way George Szell did, and was known for sending the players home early. No two Munch performances were strictly alike, though too much can be made of that. They were generally fast and febrile, but with special moments of glowing beauty all their own. Illustrations reveal an elegant, formal man, frequently rumpled and disheveled from his exertions.

D. Kern Holoman has made it easy for the reader to make up his mind. There is a full discography, beautifully reviewed, as well as a website for video clips and edited recordings. It would be hard to imagine a better-written, more insightful, or more useful biography. Gratitude is a delightful emotion to experience. This is the book we have been waiting for.