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# Arts

THE THIRD EAR

## Munch bio recalls vivid life



By **Jeremy Eichler** | GLOBE COLUMNIST FEBRUARY 26, 2012





THE DOMINION, COURTESY OF BSO ARCHIVES

**Charles Munch conducting the Boston Symphony Orchestra with soloist Richard Burgin. When he arrived, the players were won over by Munch's relaxed charisma and spontaneous approach.**

It's often lamented that classical music suffers from a Golden Age syndrome, placing all of its greatest moments in the distant past. But posterity can also be unkind to the re-creative artist. Serge Koussevitzky was the most significant music director in the Boston Symphony Orchestra's history, yet there is not a single modern English-language biography of him or an authoritative book written after his death that places his Russian and American careers in full perspective.

Until recently, Charles Munch, who presided over the BSO as its music director from 1949 to 1962, faced the same blank space on the musical bookshelf, one that has only now, fortunately, been filled by D. Kern Holoman's elegant new biography, "Charles Munch" (Oxford University Press). Holoman, a professor of music and conductor at the University of California Davis, provides not just a colorful and warmly affectionate account of the life and career of "le beau Charles," but also brings context to the major institutional changes that took place during his tenure, a pivotal period in American orchestral life.

Born in 1891 in Strasbourg, Munch came to conducting relatively late, beginning his career as a violinist and honing his instincts for orchestral color from deep within the string section. He climbed the ranks to eventually serve as

concertmaster under Wilhelm Furtwängler at the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, before moving to Paris, marrying a Nestle company heiress, and launching his conducting career. (Holoman mentions the questions occasionally voiced about Munch's career in Nazi-occupied France, but vigorously defends his subject, writing "there is not a shadow of anti-Semitism to be found in his life or work.")

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By the late 1940s in Boston, Koussevitzky wanted an American - Leonard Bernstein - as his successor, but the orchestra's trustees ignored his wishes and went with Munch, at that point already an international celebrity who radiated French charm, and, as an Alsatian, was conveniently heir to both French and German traditions. Holoman describes the press conference announcing the conductor's first season in 1949, at which Munch, with his still-limited English, managed a simple yet powerful declaration: "There will be joy."

That was apparently a cherished commodity for the players after years under the baton of the revered yet feared Koussevitzky. Munch was true to his word. The men of the orchestra - and back then they were almost entirely men - were won over by his relaxed charisma and refreshingly spontaneous approach to music-making. He was an instinctual musician, with an inborn feeling for line and phrasing. He also became legendary for his casual attitudes toward rehearsal, and one BSO retiree I spoke with recently, violinist Sheldon Rotenberg, 94, still recalled over a half-century later the day that Munch showed up to rehearsal, asked the men if they knew the music, received an answer in the affirmative, and told them all to go Christmas shopping.

As Munch saw it, music could not be prepared within an inch of its life and then reenacted at concert time, but had

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to be created fresh in the moment of contact with the audience. The tempos he chose could vary wildly across different performances of the same repertoire. Oboist Ralph Gomberg is quoted describing the collective exhilaration that Munch's conducting could sometimes unleash in the orchestra, likening the playing of the final movement of Berlioz's "Symphonie Fantastique" to riding "an avalanche going down a steep mountain."

The BSO-Munch relationship has of course been documented in an extensive catalog of recordings for RCA Victor, but you can hear this element of spontaneity best in recordings from live radio broadcasts. Included in the BSO's Symphony Hall centennial box set, for instance, are singularly electric performances of Franck's symphonic poem "Le Chasseur maudit," Debussy's "La Mer," and Ravel's "La Valse."

The biography also makes clear just how much the basic job description of music director has evolved over time. When Munch first arrived, he was expected to conduct the vast majority of the concerts. Guest conducting was extremely rare. So too was a month of concerts without contemporary music. The amount of premieres on a typical Munch season in fact makes James Levine's advocacy for new music look tame by comparison. In his first season alone, Munch led first performances by Poulenc, Honegger, Pfitzner, Walton, William Schuman, and Lukas Foss.

When a listener once complained about this diet of new music, Munch addressed the matter head on in a remarkably forthright letter published in the Boston Herald that merits quoting. "I understand your point of view," he wrote, "since you come to concerts for amusement or distraction or perhaps for consolation - surely for pleasure. But we are asking you . . . to listen to something new, something difficult to understand, even difficult to listen to, especially at first encounter."

Munch continues: "I consider it our duty to devote, let us say, one-quarter of a concert - which is truly the minimum - to the music written in our time. . . . Music to exist must be played - and who is to play it if we do not? I tell you frankly that it would be easier for us to play only older music just as it would be easier for you as a listener, but if we imposed this restriction on ourselves, we should be abandoning our obligation to history." (The BSO at the time proudly circulated this letter in a press release and reprinted it in its programs. Needless to say, any BSO music director candidate today who proposed Munch's one-quarter principle would simply not receive the job.)

Munch's signature repertoire, especially in his later career, tended toward the French composers such as Ravel and Berlioz with whom he is still most closely associated. But Holoman shows just how often he played Brahms, essentially persuading the French to embrace him, and Bach as well. Munch also led the BSO on its first international tour, in 1952, an event one Boston critic breathlessly called "the most historic milestone in the cultural life of the city in our times." The CIA, Holoman recaps, was a major funder of the tour.

Just four years later, in 1956, came the BSO's landmark tour to the Soviet Union, led by Munch and former BSO music director Pierre Monteux, and colorfully reconstructed by Holoman: the banks of welcome flowers in Leningrad station, the ecstatically received concerts, the sleeper train to Moscow greeted in the morning by the soloists David Oistrakh and Sviatoslav Richter. The orchestra's fees were paid, as BSO manager Tod Perry recalled, in "bushels and bushels of ruble notes wrapped in newspaper," rubles which, of course, couldn't be taken out of the country.

The stories from this tour make irresistibly dramatic narratives, but their ultimate impact on the international political situation remains an interesting question. Holoman describes the tour as "a true turning point in the Cold War," and yet it's hard to point to tangible political consequences. At the very least, the extensive press coverage must have humanized the Soviets in the eyes of US readers, if only momentarily.

Late in Munch's Boston tenure and afterward, the joy element was turned on its head and he was accused of letting discipline falter in the ranks. Even BSO executive Henry B. Cabot, in a glowing letter to the Globe after Munch's death in 1968, at 77, speculated that Munch retired in part because he did not have the heart to tell players they were no longer up to the BSO's standards. Memories of the Koussevitzky era also began to reassert themselves and Munch was cast as a shallow sensualist by comparison. "National leadership has been given up for local titillation," one respected music professor damningly wrote in *The New York Times*, calling for new leadership at the BSO. The Austrian-born Erich Leinsdorf succeeded Munch and painted his era uncharitably.

But it is the long shadow cast by Koussevitzky that has in some ways continued to dim the memory of Munch's time in Boston. Holoman describes how, in the many oral histories taken of the players, Koussevitzky seamlessly

dominates their recollections, and I have encountered the same phenomenon in speaking with retirees. It's also clear that Koussevitzky, beyond his larger-than-life persona, left his stamp institutionally, through the creation of Tanglewood, and nationally, through his broader vision for the role of the orchestra in American public life.

Both men, of course, deserve the kind of meticulous and wide-ranging appraisal that at least Munch has now received. And on a not unrelated note, the BSO could be doing a lot more to showcase its own history by digitizing its archives and placing them online, as the New York Philharmonic has done so marvelously. In an organization as proudly tradition-minded, shouldn't a higher priority be placed on tending its own traditions?

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