

Hermann Scherchen

German conductor Hermann Scherchen (June 21, 1891-June 12, 1966) was originally a violist who played in the Bluthner Orchestra of Berlin while still in his teens. He also played in the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, taught himself score-reading and conducting, and assisted Schoenberg with the premiere of *Pierrot lunaire* in 1912. Shortly afterwards he made his conducting debut with that work. He was a champion of 20th-century composers such as Richard Strauss, Webern, Berg and Varèse, and actively promoted the work of younger contemporary composers including Iannis Xenakis and Luigi Nono.

In 1914 he became conductor of the Riga Orchestra. Five years later he founded the Neue Musikgesellschaft and the left-wing journal *Melos*. In 1922 he took over the Frankfurt Museum Concerts from Furtwängler and became director of the Winterthur Musikkollegium. Along with the philanthropist Werner Reinhart, Scherchen played a leading role in shaping the musical life of Winterthur for many years, with numerous premiere performances, the emphasis being placed on contemporary music. With that group, he gave the premiere of Webern's *Variations for orchestra* op. 30 in 1943. Opposing the Nazis, he had moved to Switzerland in 1933 and became conductor of the Zürich Radio Orchestra. After the war he gave premier performances of major works by Dallapiccola, Dessau, and Henze and in 1954 created the Studio for Electro-Acoustic Research in Gravesano.

Like Vasily Safonov and (in later life) Leopold Stokowski, Scherchen commonly avoided the use of a baton. His technique when in this mode sometimes caused problems for players; an unidentified BBC Symphony Orchestra bassoonist told the singer Ian Wallace that interpreting Scherchen's minuscule hand movements was like trying to milk a flying gnat. According to Fritz Spiegl, Scherchen worked largely through verbal instructions to his players and his scores were peppered with reminders of what he needed to say at each critical point in the music. However, Scherchen did not always dispense with the baton. The film of his rehearsal of his edition of Bach's 'Art of Fugue' with the CBC Toronto Chamber Orchestra shows him using a baton throughout, and very effectively.

He was the teacher of Karl Amadeus Hartmann, and contributed to the libretto of Hartmann's opera *Simplicius Simplicissimus*. He also premiered Hartmann's early work *Miserae*. The conductor Francis Travis was a pupil, then conducting assistant, for five years.

He is probably best known for his orchestral arrangement (and recording) of Johann Sebastian Bach's *The Art of Fugue*. Another notable achievement is his 1958 recording of Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony for the Westminster label (subsequently reissued on compact disc), containing what is still (as of 2006) the fastest first movement ever recorded and the closest to Beethoven's own, problematic, metronome mark. His 1933 "Lehrbuch des Dirigierens" ("Treatise on Conducting" ISBN 3-7957-2780-4) is a standard textbook. His recorded repertoire was extremely wide, ranging from Vivaldi to Reinhold Glière.