

Dietfried Bernet obituary

Austrian conductor admired at opera houses across Europe

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Dietfried Bernet, seen here in 2005 at Glyndebourne, where he was conducting *The Bartered Bride*. Photograph: Mike Hoban/ArenaPAL

The distinguished Austrian conductor Dietfried Bernet, who has died aged 71, was a regular visitor to Britain, where he was much admired by the public and critics alike. Indeed, some of his best work was done in England, at the London houses, Glyndebourne and *Opera North*, though his permanent appointments were elsewhere: Vienna, Mainz and Copenhagen.

Born in Vienna, he studied at the Academy of Music and Performing Arts there with Hans Swarowsky and Dimitri Mitropoulos. After making his debut in orchestral concerts in *Austria*, he went on to act as guest conductor with leading orchestras and at major opera houses. In 1962 he won first prize in the International Conductor's Competition at Liverpool, one of few such events at that time. The financial reward was less significant than the consequent representation by the leading artist management firm *Ibbs & Tillet* and the invitations to conduct the Royal Philharmonic and Liverpool Philharmonic orchestras in tours all over England.

Appointments followed at the Vienna Volksoper (1964) and Vienna State Opera (1966), and numerous engagements with such orchestras as the Berlin Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony, London Philharmonic, Munich Philharmonic and Hungarian National orchestras. In 1974 he became Generalmusikdirektor of the city of Mainz, but continued to guest conduct all over *Europe*, as well as in North and South America.

From 1995 to 2000 he was chief guest conductor of the Royal Danish Opera, where he was warmly regarded by the players and frequently called upon to tackle the big Romantic scores of Wagner, Strauss and others. When the Danish company showcased its talents at Covent Garden in a single performance of Prokofiev's *Love for Three Oranges* in 1995, it was under the baton of Bernet, who was highly praised for his invigorating, sharply pointed reading.

The following year saw the first of his three visits to Glyndebourne for Strauss's *Arabella*, when his subtle handling of the score's longeurs and the warm, sensual, Viennese-style sound he drew from the London Philharmonic Orchestra elicited favourable comparisons with Strauss conductors of the calibre of Rudolf Kempe and Karl Böhm. He returned to the Sussex house in 1999 and 2005 for equally well-received performances of *Manon Lescaut* and *The Bartered Bride*.

Bernet was also a passionate advocate of neglected neo-Romantic repertoire such as Erich Korngold's *Die Tote Stadt*, and he was instrumental in the revival of interest in the work of Alexander Zemlinsky and Franz Schreker. His success with such large, heavily scored works lay in his ability to clarify textures in such a way that the singers were never overwhelmed. This particular skill was demonstrated most clearly in memorable performances of *Tristan und Isolde* at English National Opera in 2003. Here Bernet's handling was spacious but capable of blazing climaxes, sumptuous in its gathering of textural detail yet always elegantly shaped and singer-friendly.

He appeared on a number of occasions with similar success at Covent Garden in repertoire that included Mozart (*Don Giovanni*, *Così Fan Tutte*) and Lehár (*The Merry Widow*) and at Opera North. He was a regular visitor also at the opera houses of Munich, Hamburg, Cologne, Naples, Venice, Barcelona and Bregenz. Alongside these operatic engagements he maintained a notable career on mainly European concert podiums, with a repertoire that embraced Mahler, Bruckner, Dvořák, Strauss and Hindemith. He made recordings with the Vienna State Opera for a number of companies, and was the conductor for a recital by the American tenor James McCracken on Decca.

A lifetime's insights into the business of conducting are distilled with wit and style in his book *Argumente für den Herrn im Frack* (arguments in favour of the gentlemen in tails), an English edition of which is planned under the title *What You Always Wanted to Know about Conducting*.

His honours included a professorship awarded by the Austrian president and the Austrian Cross of Honour for Science and Art (first class). He is survived by his wife, the actor Johanna Lonsky.

• Dietfried Bernet, conductor, born 14 May 1940; died 23 May 2011

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