

Music: Paul Sacher and the Basel commissions

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Basel's cultural reputation rests on music as much as on the visual arts. Here too one patron stands out. Paul Sacher, born in Basel in 1906, founded the Basler Kammerorchester in 1926 at the age of twenty. With it he pursued a programme that combined early music, then little performed, with new works that he commissioned from the leading composers of his time.¹ His marriage to Maja Hoffmann-Stehlin in 1934 gave him the means to expand this programme. He later became a member of the board of Roche and one of its largest shareholders.² He thus united in one person the conductor, the patron and the industrial owner, a combination that has few parallels in the twentieth century.

The list of works written for Sacher and his orchestras is long. Béla Bartók composed the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* for the tenth anniversary of the Basler Kammerorchester, which gave its first performance in Basel in January 1937 under Sacher's direction. Bartók's *Divertimento for String Orchestra* followed in 1939, written during a stay at the Sachers' chalet in Saanen.³ Igor Stravinsky wrote the *Concerto in D* for strings, often called the *Basle Concerto*, for the orchestra's twentieth anniversary. Richard Strauss's *Metamorphosen*, the elegy for twenty-three solo strings written in the last months of the Second World War, was commissioned by Sacher for the Collegium Musicum Zürich, which he also directed, and was first performed in Zurich in January 1946.⁴

Further commissions went to Arthur Honegger, Bohuslav Martinů, Paul Hindemith, Frank Martin, Henri Dutilleux, Hans Werner Henze, Witold Lutosławski, Luciano Berio and Pierre Boulez, among many others. Accounts of Sacher's patronage usually estimate the number of works written at his request at well over two hundred.⁵ The economic logic of this patronage was unusual. Sacher did not buy existing works on a market. Instead, he financed the creation of new ones, accepted the risk that some would fail and placed his orchestras at the composers' disposal for the first

performance. In the vocabulary of finance, he acted as an early-stage investor in musical capital, whose returns accrued to the repertoire of the world.

The Basler Kammerorchester gave its last concerts in 1987, after more than six decades. The present Kammerorchester Basel, founded in 1984 by young musicians, is a separate ensemble that has built an international reputation of its own through recordings and tours.⁶ The Sinfonieorchester Basel, which also serves as the orchestra of the Theater Basel, and the Musik-Akademie with its Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, founded by Sacher in 1933 as an institute for early music, carry the musical tradition forward.⁷ The Schola has trained generations of performers of early music and gives the city an international standing in a field that attracts students from every continent.

1 Notes

1. On Paul Sacher (1906–1999) and the foundation of the Basler Kammerorchester in 1926, see the Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz, article "Sacher, Paul"; the publications of the Paul Sacher Stiftung. To be verified. ↩
2. On Paul Sacher's role on the board of directors of F. Hoffmann-La Roche AG and his shareholding through the family, see the Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz and the literature on Roche. To be verified. ↩
3. On Bartók's Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta, commissioned by Paul Sacher for the tenth anniversary of the Basler Kammerorchester and first performed in Basel on 21 January 1937, and the Divertimento of 1939, see the publications of the Paul Sacher Stiftung and the Bartók literature. Dates to be verified. ↩
4. On Stravinsky's Concerto in D (Basle Concerto, 1946) and Strauss's Metamorphosen, commissioned by Paul Sacher and first performed by the Collegium Musicum Zürich under his direction on 25 January 1946, see the publications of the Paul Sacher Stiftung. Dates to be verified. ↩
5. On the number of works commissioned by Paul Sacher, usually given as more than 200, and on composers such as Honegger, Martinů, Hindemith, Martin, Dutilleux, Henze, Lutosławski, Berio and Boulez, see the publications of the Paul Sacher Stiftung. Figures to be verified. ↩

6. On the dissolution of the Basler Kammerorchester (1926–1987) and the separate Kammerorchester Basel founded in 1984, see the publications of the Kammerorchester Basel. Dates to be verified. ↩
7. On the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, founded by Paul Sacher in 1933, and its integration into the Musik-Akademie Basel and the Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz, see the publications of the Musik-Akademie Basel. To be verified. ↩

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