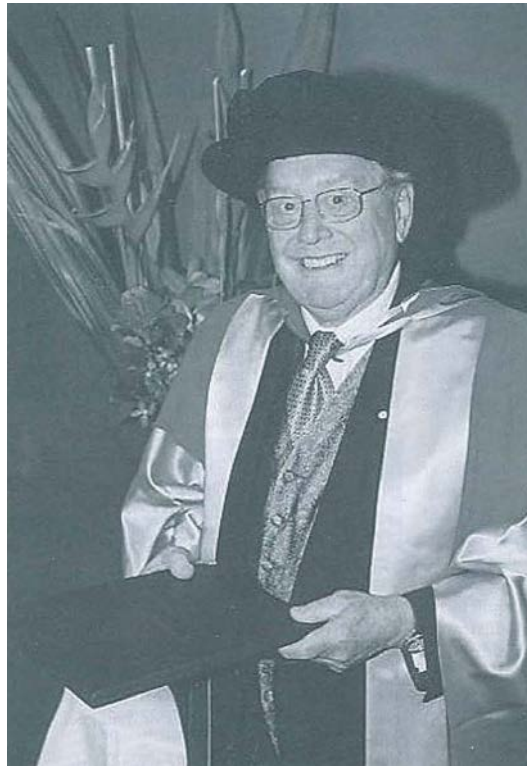


Mr Sir Charles Mackerras

The degree of Doctor of Music (*honoris causa*) was conferred upon Sir Charles Mackerras at a ceremony held at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music in 2003.



Sir Charles Mackerras, *photo, ZOOM Productions, 'The University of Sydney News', 3 October 2003, University of Sydney Archives.*

Citation

Chancellor, I have the honour to present Sir Charles Mackerras for the conferring of the degree of Doctor of Music (*honoris causa*).

“So long as any study is carried on in such a way as to develop a man’s thinking powers that study will infallibly be a means to culture”.

These were the sentiments of my distinguished predecessor, Sir Henry Normand MacLaurin, an Edinburgh surgeon who was successively Vice-Chancellor and Chancellor of The University of Sydney and the great-grandfather of Sir Charles Mackerras, the magnificent international conductor whom we honour tonight.

The education of Charles Mackerras followed no traditional path: A school education at St Aloysius, then Grammar and – finally – Kings, a school chosen in desperation so that he could be as far away as possible from the Conservatorium, where harmful influences were thought to lurk. There was a series of quite dreadful school reports and an indifferent Intermediate Certificate. Hardly the makings of an international academic musicologist.

Yet none of this bare and scarcely impressive scholastic outline gives an inkling of his true youthful scholarship. Or of the depth of his teenage eighteenth-century musicological research. Of his passion for opera, which developed at age eight and never left him. Of the domestic Gilbert and Sullivan which was so formative an influence in his - by all accounts - chaotic home. Or of the juvenile enterprise with which he assembled and conducted his first amateur orchestra in a Roseville church hall. Whatever desperation he caused his teachers, his peers knew he was a brilliant and determined musician.

Charles Mackerras has conducted virtually every major international orchestra. He is former Musical Director of Sadler's Wells (now the English National Opera) and of the Welsh National Opera, and has been a leading or Principal conductor of many others, including The Scottish Chamber Orchestra Opera and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. In 2002, he was appointed as Principal Guest Conductor at the Philharmonia Orchestra in London. He was the obvious choice in 1973 to conduct the opening concert at the Sydney Opera House.

Unfortunately for Sydney University, though not for the wider world, Sir Charles eschewed the university studies encouraged by his parents, and almost literally ran away from school to his beloved Conservatorium. What a delight then to welcome him back to the modern Con, transformed and transfigured, with acoustics designed by the finest international acoustic engineers, but still unmistakably the Con - and now an integral part of the University which meant so much to his family through many generations.

Charlie Mackerras was the eldest in a family of seven children of Alan and Catherine, two Sydney University graduates, and academia was in their blood. They reportedly all talked and argued at once. Catherine Mackerras' paternal grandfather was the aforementioned Sir Henry Normand MacLaurin, after whom the MacLaurin Hall, which formerly housed the Fisher Library, is named. There is another family influence which we must not forget. In 1963 Sir Charles's mother, Catherine, wrote a biography of her great-great grandfather, Isaac Nathan, 'The Hebrew Melodist', who is sometimes said to be the Father of Australian music'. He arrived in Sydney in 1841 after a successful musical career in London, was a one-time music tutor to Princess Charlotte and a friend of Byron's. She dedicated the book to her son, Charles.

In Sir Charles's day, the Con was an oasis of culture and coffee in an often humdrum and conformist city. It was, after all, a time of war and then of post-war austerity. Others of Sir Charles's contemporaries who gathered within its protective portals included such as Paddy Tuckwell, Richard Bonyngé, Donald Hazelwood, Malcolm Williamson, Rosina Raisbeck, Ailsa Aplett. Some of them are here tonight. They talk about how 'Charlie' 'floated in and floated out' of harmony classes, as the only harmony student not in need of extra coaching. Perhaps he really did know more about mathematics than his earlier teachers liked to think.

In those days at the Con and then the Sydney Symphony Orchestra Sir Charles' instrument was the oboe – not your traditional entrée to conducting. Yet Sir Charles has commented on the invaluable training in the understanding of breathing which oboe-playing gave him – an understanding which later enabled him to 'know how to breathe with the singers'.

Then came London – another kind of Mecca for young post-war Australians. There he met his beloved wife, Judy, herself a distinguished clarinetist. And there too a truly amazing serendipitous happening which was to influence so fundamentally not only his own future career but also the whole way in which Eastern European music is now appreciated in the west.

It was 1947 and the young Charles was sitting in a coffee-shop in Kensington, poring over a Dvořák score he had just acquired. A Czech Jew came and sat opposite. Seeing the score of music from his homeland, the old man advised Mackerras to apply for a British Council Scholarship to Prague. Talk about chance favouring the prepared mind!

In Prague he saw the devastation war had brought to the east. And then in 1948 he saw the human destruction brought by communism as it engulfed the university in Prague. His revered teacher Václav Talich, had to leave the Academy, but he did not stop teaching Charles Mackerras, who regularly travelled by train to Talich's villa to learn more of Czech music. Thus did Mackerras acquire familiarity with the great Czech works, particularly those of Janáček which he has championed so eloquently in the West. And now he has lived to see the flowering of Czech freedom. His Medal of Merit was received from that great liberal thinker, President Václav Havel, in 1996.

So, to return to our beginning. There are a number of identifiable – one might almost say essential – formative creative features to be teased from the extraordinary story of Charles Mackerras. There is of course intrinsic determination and musical creativity developed from an early age. But a developing mind must be exposed to a vast diversity of influences and arguments in order to explore all possibilities and choose an individual path. There is the constant spirit of critical enquiry which questions orthodoxy at every

turn, and which paradoxically produces 'authenticity' in music. Then there is the paradox, still not often mentioned in polite or ambitious society, that it is often necessary to wander out of the mainstream in order later to contribute to that mainstream. There is the obvious nurturing care and support of friends and family.

But above all, in the scholastic enterprise, there is the twin partnership between a talented and determined student and the wisdom of teachers whose own individuality and depth of knowledge are the source of inspiration. All these are relevant to Sir Charles's wonderful life and contribution as one of the world's leading maestros.

The path he trod and the musicological studies which he undertook were a "means to culture", achievement and contribution on the most extraordinary international scale.

Chancellor, I have great pleasure in presenting to you for admission to the degree of Doctor of Music (honoris causa), Sir Charles Mackerras.