

**Questions of art and contemporary history concerning Wilhelm Furtwängler –
Reflections on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of his death on 30 November 2004**

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Musical interpretation and judgement on history have one thing in common: They make people who are otherwise most peaceful engage in veritable battles of faith. It is a mental struggle, accompanied by strong emotions. It was Furtwängler's lot to acquire the role of a defender in both fields. His artistic conviction was something he vehemently stood for, with total commitment. He could not really fight for his role in the Third Reich, but only ask for understanding and add some points in his own favour; he also remarked not having done any wrong, for which he could be held responsible. However adversaries and those born afterwards tend to moralize with a lot of ignorance and hypocrisy. On the other hand Furtwängler's supporters and admirers tend to have a transfigured view on him and to consider any kind of critical question as desecration of a monument.

Furtwängler should not be dealt with on such a level. One should in that case rather refrain from commenting at all. No one is obliged to love classical music, no one is obliged to love Furtwängler's art. And no one must be led to think that he was a hero of the resistance. It is something one should not expect from him; one should not think that he who had been concerned about getting through the Third Reich somewhat unharmed and must necessarily have been a coward and an opportunist.

I.

Fifty years ago the unexpected news of Furtwängler's death at the age of 68 years shocked the world of artists and music lovers. One had thought to be able to hear him once more in concert. Only three months ago the radio had broadcast his last Salzburg Beethoven-evening (*Eighth Symphony, Great Fugue, Seventh Symphony*, 08/30/1954), at the height of his power in shaping the music. As a 21-year-old student I had just arrived in Heidelberg and witnessed the mourning ceremony in the Heilig-Geist-Kirche with the sermon by prelate Hermann Maas, who had been close to Furtwängler. A chamber orchestra with musicians from the Berlin Philharmonic, conducted by Eugen Jochum, played Mozart's *Masonic Funeral Music*. The high street was packed with people. Words of commemoration by renowned artists from the whole world – also by Albert Schweitzer and Pablo Casals – were

printed right away. Nobody doubted Furtwängler's extraordinary artistry, his honesty and his amiable humanity. All this was only quite natural, as European-American culture was in the midst of reconstruction, Germany became a docile member of the Western community of values and was under American protection at the front of the Cold War. Seven years of renewed international concert activity seemed to have considerably strengthened Furtwängler's fame. Six years had past since the campaign to keep him from performing again in the United States; in 1955 Furtwängler was supposed to lead the Berlin Philharmonic's first North American tour, as well as the same venture with the Vienna Philharmonic in 1956. Only later was it made public that Furtwängler, who had had a first breakdown in 1952 – but recovering from it with an incredible amount of performances in two years – was ready to part from this world upon a new illness in November 1954. Let us in the first place speak about what made Furtwängler so important to us in musical terms.

Between 1911 and 1954 this artist conducted more than 4,000 concerts and opera performances; apart from that there were also occasional public appearances as a pianist or as an accompanist on the piano. More regular activities as a chamber musician was in general restricted to private life. Still Furtwängler played the piano part in two Brahms Sonatas with the violinist Gioconda de Vito in two private performances for Pope Pius XII in Castel Gandolfo. This occurred during a whole month dedicated to rehearsing and performing publicly (act by act) Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung* for the Roman Broadcasting Company. Three months prior he had accompanied Elisabeth Schwarzkopf on the piano in 21 songs by Hugo Wolf.

Furtwängler had turned to conducting to be able to live from his art, too, as he was about to "go to rack and ruin as a composer" between 1906 and 1911 – that's how he described his situation in retrospect to his friend Ludwig Curtius. In Lübeck it soon became clear that he had an extraordinary talent for musical interpretation with the means of leading an orchestra. In the four years before the outbreak of World War I he gave numerous popular and symphonic concerts in the Hanseatic city (with a few detours to Hamburg and Munich) with such enormous success that he was hired in Mannheim in 1915 for the next five years. In his time there he mostly performed operas and more and more concerts. From 1917 onwards he was often invited as a guest conductor to the major musical centres, Munich, Frankfurt, Darmstadt, Berlin and Vienna. In the 1920ies he mostly gave concerts and broadened the repertoire he had become familiar with so far (e.g. with performances of Gustav Mahler's first four symphonies), touring abroad as well, in Stockholm, Rome, London, the United States, Paris: he was now undoubtedly one of the foremost conductors. It is quite interesting to take a

look at the order of his performances abroad: he started off in Stockholm, which was neutral and on friendly terms with Germany during the War, Italy, a country that was most important to him since his youth, followed, and then came the three states of the major enemies at War, with France in the last place; however this relationship soon became the most intense, lasting until his death. Nowhere was Furtwängler's art with its autonomy, and irrespective of all political problems, better understood than in France. Admittedly Furtwängler was never the only one among the leading conductors, and never was he spared criticism: his most fervent critic, Ernest Newman from England, still wrote after 25 years in 1951 about the old characteristics of Furtwängler's conducting: "In the beginning you hear next to nothing, and then he hits you on the base of the nose so that you see the stars." There is some truth in this statement, his dramatic scope was indeed quite extraordinary. Furtwängler's magnitude and uniqueness are a phenomenon which only took shape gradually in the quarter of a century since 1933, and then again with his artistic heritage on records after 1970. Initially he was very much promoted by the German cultural propaganda of Minister Goebbels: In the first place the internationally renowned conductor was spoken of as the greatest representative of the one and only, the supreme art (which meant German art), but continuing to consider Furtwängler as a phenomenon after the War came from the outside and rehabilitated the artist from all kinds of political propaganda and distortion: In fact he had almost no peer in his domain. Some had already foreseen this in Lübeck, France's music lovers knew this before 1933, and this is what determined his fame and post-fame after 1947 – amid hostility.

Going on tour with orchestras was a novelty in the 1920ies after the 1923 monetary inflation and Germany's impoverishment. Furtwängler first toured Switzerland with the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, then once or twice a year Germany and Middle Europe with the Berlin Philharmonic, and also Western Europe, France and England. Some journeys with the Vienna Philharmonic followed, too. There is no doubt that these tours were undertaken to raise the musicians' income, but it also served the internationalization and mutual understanding after the War, and in any case it broadened Furtwängler's fame throughout the world. The dimension of activity on an international scale was cut off only in 1939, and it was only – or already – in 1948 that he was able to carry on. The years between 1939 and 1943/44 only saw remnants of all this, a kind of surrogate. When the orchestra was travelling with Furtwängler they only went to Switzerland, to allied Italy, to neutral Sweden. Furtwängler did no longer travel to the countries that had been conquered in the War. There are some particular cases, though, that he has been incriminated with. Until 1943/44 he gave a few concerts in occupied Denmark, some in neutral respectively allied Hungary, and for two

concerts he was also in Prague, the capital of the "Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia". Were these not performances in conquered countries? One has to call to mind that back then in Germany these countries were not considered as defeated enemy states and that at least for the time being they were no countries of open resistance against the German occupation forces.

Between 1923 and 1954, the year of his death, Furtwängler headed 41 vast concert tours throughout Germany and Europe with at each time up to 35 performances, day by day in a different town, Hamburg, London and Paris were often given two concerts. In addition to that there were the concerts as a guest conductor with the local orchestras. One can estimate that in these 28 years – the period from 1945 to 1946/47 was almost without any performances – Furtwängler conducted about 1,000 concerts abroad, which makes one fourth of all his performances. This statistics might place him in the foremost position of all great travelling musicians, and this might also help to understand that from 1947/48 onwards Furtwängler was again welcomed and cheered at in the states of the wartime enemies; one was familiar with him and wanted to hear him again. There are two exceptions: in 1948 a boycott by artists put paid to an invitation to Chicago for the year 1949, and in Switzerland – above all in Zurich – early in 1945 and in the summer of 1948 there was a campaign against Furtwängler as a Nazi-conductor. Both campaigns against Furtwängler were no credit to those who urged them on, for until August 1944 Furtwängler was regularly invited to Switzerland, and in February 1945 he was still able to conduct his concerts in French Switzerland. Some Swiss – not all of them – have opportunistically waited for the clearly visible end of the Third Reich before speaking up in protest. Artists from the United States threatening to boycott the Chicago Symphony Orchestra – prompted by the Toscanini-party – did not have, to put it mildly, only sincere motivations; a lot was also about competition and defamation. The great violinists Yehudi Menuhin and Nathan Milstein have said and written all the necessary things about this case. On the other hand one also has to understand that the wounds could not heal shortly after World War II, and the Minister for the Reich's propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, this ruthless genius of the media, had been able to make reckless propaganda via the broadcasting company of the Reich with the sublime German art and its "greatest" and most famous representative.

II.

I would now like to speak a little about Furtwängler's art. During and after the War I struggled to learn how to play the piano in difficult circumstances, but I only became musically interested in 1947. With fourteen years I was somehow all for it, in the midst of an

age when a post-war teenager has to cope with the problems of growing up. I was drawn to the radio, absorbing a few notes, Mendelssohn's Overture from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Schubert's *Rosamunde*-Music and his *Unfinished Symphony*, and then I saw the advertisement for Furtwängler's performance in Hamburg with his new Symphony – I listened to this performance of the Hamburg Philharmonic on the radio, and I began to attend the so-called public rehearsals of both Hamburg orchestras on otherwise boring Sunday afternoons at 3 p.m. Thus I got to know from 1948 until 1953 the whole classical, romantic and modern orchestra repertoire through Eugen Jochum, Hans Schmidt-Isserstedt, Joseph Keilberth and also guests such as Hans Rosbaud – and Furtwängler. In addition to that there was the classical radio broadcast (45 minutes) on Sundays at 6 p.m. Allow me to say that the encounter with this music has helped growing up in rather difficult times, and since then it has enriched my life emotionally and intellectually – most recently with some twenty concerts in Berlin and Hamburg by the conductor Günter Wand in his *Indian Summer*. Initially there were some breakthrough-experiences. The first orchestra concert I ever attended was by the Hamburg Philharmonic, conducted by Occupation Officer John Bitter with a dazzling programme: Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony*, Bartók's *Third Concerto for Piano* and *La Valse* by Ravel. Then Bruckner's *Eighth* with Eugen Jochum, along with Dvořák's *Violin Concerto*, played by Gerhard Taschner. And when the first post-war tour of the Berlin Philharmonic with Furtwängler in West Germany was announced I urged my father to get the cheapest tickets, each 5 DM, for an evening with Beethoven: the *Coriolan Overture*, the *Pastoral Symphony* and the *Fifth*, for I knew that in 1927 my father had sought encouragement in a Furtwängler-concert for the following day when he was to court his fiancée; mentioning this once, he spoke about the eternal "flow" in the music shaped by Furtwängler's hands. Hence on 2 June 1949 the two of us sat in the Musikhalle, high up in the gallery of the upper circle, seeing only the conductor's head, far away, moving about vehemently, but what we heard was the miracle of tension and détente, the "flow" and the discharge of temperament above all in the long *Pastoral Symphony*, but equally the horns' sforzati, the basses' dark timbre and the *Fifth Symphony*'s drive. Three classical works I heard for the first time, but I heard them in a way that as a whole they are still present to me, long before I got to know them "by heart". Then I heard Furtwängler's interpretation of Bruckner's *Eighth* and the premiere of *The Magic Flute* on the radio from Salzburg. And then once again in October 1951 the Vienna Philharmonic with a romantic programme including the Overture from *Der Freischütz*, Schumann's *Spring Symphony* – overwhelming in its noble exemption – and Bruckner's *Fourth* with the infinitely tender singing in its andante: 17 minutes of absolute rapture. And

already a fortnight later Furtwängler as guest conductor of the Orchestra of the North-German Broadcasting Company, whose concert masters Erich Röhn and Artur Troester had held the same position in Berlin with the Philharmonic Orchestra: an evening devoted to Brahms with the *Haydn Variations*, the *Double Concerto* (with both concert masters) and the *First Symphony*. Since fifteen years everybody is able to get an impression of this enormous musical event, as two of this evening's works had been recorded on this October evening with very good broadcasting quality to be now published. All I remember after that is the last Beethoven-evening in Salzburg on 30 August 1954, and then came the sad news. Gradually one bought the great studio-recordings by DGG and Electrola, waited for twenty years until the big amount of concert and opera recordings was finally issued, above all in Italy and in the United States, and nowadays music lovers are able to follow Furtwängler's activity almost in its entirety in often fairly good reproductions, more than anybody could ever have heard during the conductor's lifetime. An old prejudice claiming that Furtwängler's fascination could only have been experienced live in concert has long been rectified. It is for sure that LP- and CD-recordings generally do not send shivers down one's spine as live concerts do. However one can be astonished about Furtwängler's understanding of form, about the compelling beauty of sound, the balance and the highly dramatic intensification (the already mentioned "punch on the base of the nose"), effects that Furtwängler was able to achieve with an ordinarily good orchestra by giving only matter-of-fact technical indications during rehearsal: "There must be the triple fortissimo, I don't hear anything, the drum, too; play this with one breath, never mind if there's a gap [in the sound]. A *small gap*" (Stockholm 1948, in a recording of the rehearsal with the *Leonore Overture No. 3*). No trace of romantic zeal during the creation of extraordinary interpretations, but rather stern analysis and technically competent assertion of the result in rousing performances. And according to the reviews this capacity was already remarked in Lübeck in 1911 in Furtwängler's first leading position. "The movement of the arms is still grotesque, but oh the things you get to hear..."

III.

So far for the acoustic experiences. I would now like to speak about some musical examples.

(I only have the space to give key notes that will be explained with the musical examples mentioned).

The basis for it all is the mental presence of the work of art as a whole, through a musically-technically exact realization in the imagination of the performer, allowing no routine. Deliberation and "naturalness" of the interpretation.

1. Undeniable: relaxed precision in tempo and dynamics. Examples: Haydn, one slow movement (*No. 88* or *No. 94*); Mozart, Overture *The Magic Flute*, 1949; Beethoven's *Eighth Symphony*, Allegretto, 1930. Rossini, Overture *The Thieving Magpie*; with this recording Furtwängler demonstrated: Never mind about Toscanini, we can do equally well.
2. Natural flow (legato playing in the tempo without paragraphs): Schubert *Rosamunde*, Music from the Entr'acte (Recording Vienna 1944, but also 1950).
3. Animation through phrasing and structure: natural transitions, even if not indicated in the score: Beethoven *Eighth*, Allegro (First Movement); *Pastoral*, Scene by the Brook; Schubert *Great C Major Symphony*, First Movement (Andante-Allegro), Second Movement (Andante) 1st part until the almost complete standstill of the tempo and the reintroduction of the main tempo. Brahms *Hungarian Dances No. 1* and *3* from 1929 and 1930, *No. 3* compared with the new recording by Sir Simon Rattle and the Berlin Philharmonic: artificially-elegant in opposition to Furtwängler's pure and stirring naturalness.
4. Consistent and internally structured big form: problematic, but not random concentration of the tempo in Bruckner (*Fifth* and *Eighth Symphony*). Beethoven *Ninth Symphony*, First and Third Movement. Studied acceleration and widening in the Finale of the *Haydn Variations* by Brahms.
5. Piano and fortissimo: César Franck, *Symphony in D minor*, Slow Movement. Brahms' *Fourth Symphony*, Passacaglia.

IV.

Before concluding allow me to say a few words about the moral and political judgement on Furtwängler and his whole generation, as far as it had not completely broken up

public and external relations with the German State before 1945. This led to re-education, denazification and political control by the victorious party, causing in the thirty years that were about to follow an entirely negative judgement by the generations which themselves no longer had any personal memories of the Third Reich.

Furtwängler was chosen by the American Occupation Forces as an example of how German artists and intellectuals surrendered themselves to the Nazi-dictatorship; he was accused with failure in moral and political matters. The facts are known; the film based on the play *Taking Sides* sums up the opposing lines: on the one hand there is art in its ivory-tower, exploited for the Nazi-reign, on the other hand there are the masses of corpses that can only be cleared away with excavators, e.g. in Belsen in 1945 by the English troops. Did the Germans not notice? This seems hard to believe.

In the last twenty years there have been a lot of heated discussions (and more and more accusations) on the question if and what the Germans did know about the atrocities and violence, to what extent they tolerated it without speaking up publicly, and in how far they even gained financially. One of the Presidents, Richard von Weizsäcker, said in 1985: "Those who wanted to know could have known." Analogously one goes on asking – and responding to Furtwängler's disadvantage – what had already been asked since 1934/35 outside Germany (also by Arturo Toscanini, who himself had left Mussolini's Italy only after a few years): How could the most famous among German conductors (like the equally famous Richard Stauss) believe in going on conducting unharmed in Germany – and also in the occupied capitals of Copenhagen and Prague between 1940 and 1944? How could he perform at the Nazi Party rally in Nuremberg in 1938 and likewise at the Führer's birthday in 1942 at the Party's official celebrations with Goebbels? One must admit that these performances Furtwängler was accused with afterwards could hardly have been avoided for actual and comprehensible reasons; however this is not an answer to the general question about why Furtwängler – surely without claiming for it – did not say no to the German Reich and the way it made use of his artistic reputation. I have three remarks on this subject. In the first place Furtwängler was convinced that true and great art could not be harmed by contemporary political events, similar to the Churches – namely those marked by Luther – with their conviction that in the Third Reich one could credibly go on being a Christian without risking to enter in resistance movements – with all its consequences.

Secondly one has to say that at least in the beginning it was not all that clear if one could stay in the country, and once having stayed it did not become any easier to leave later

on. But saying that someone else should have left his country out of protest is asking a bit much and comes close to an act of conceitedness.

And finally one may also say that one cannot forbid artists to be active artistically in politically unacceptable circumstances, despite the negative image they might get at least from the outside. One should ask, though, if and how this wrong situation mirrors in the work of artists, a question e.g. the Christians in Germany and their leading members should and must equally be confronted with. This will only suffice for a moral incrimination when truly unjust actions and positions can be established as facts. If this is not the case it is more likely that sympathy will prevail or those who had been put in such dreadful circumstances, and who then had to settle their failure – if ever there was one – with their own conscience.

Furtwängler's newest biographer, Herbert Haffner, has put it the following way: At the time of his death Furtwängler was a man who had mentally and politically failed because of his own anachronism.

One can reply that no one conducted like Furtwängler did – during his lifetime just as nowadays – but Furtwängler's interpretation, accessible for a large part as recordings, meet a worldwide interest by musicians and music lovers. They do not seem to be obsolete in any way, but often unique and riveting. Furtwängler's performances are thus being used as an impulse or even a standard for a possible way to give an adequate shape to the work, although no one could have these works with all their details played in the same way as Furtwängler did. His concerts see to it that performances of these works are still of interest in a time whose musical style of expression has completely changed. The "great work" has become dubious for the younger ones. Let me remind you that Elvis Presley's career has begun during Furtwängler's final years. From then on music was experienced differently, and the classical and "bourgeois" musical world of the "great concert" was put into perspective to an extent that was quite unheard of before. Admittedly there had already been a musical culture on two storeys since World War I – or perhaps even before. However since the 1950ies rock and pop as a democratization of the old jazz had started to constrict and to edge out the "bourgeois-aristocratic" musical culture. This is not the right place to speculate about the future of the two or three musical cultures ("Western", to start with), that coexist at the moment. Be that as it may, "classical music" is simply not dead. And some vital elements surely stick out from the rubbish heap of recorded music. Furtwängler's musical achievements are definitely a part of it.