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Festive Concert "25 years of Wilhelm-Furtwängler-Society, e.V."

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Concert: Piano Quintet by Wilhelm Furtwängler

Otto-Braun-Saal, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin

The following will be an attempt to establish the **proportion** between the three sides to this eminent man, which should still be of interest nowadays. He was, in the true sense of the word, an incomparable **leader of orchestras**, who attracted the audience for more than 40 years. Via his concert and opera recordings he gained a continuously growing **second audience** unlike any other *kapellmeister*; so far for the first point. Secondly, he was little esteemed as the **composer** of his own great works, which he wrote in his last 10-15 years. He tried to familiarize the listeners with them, admittedly only in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. His own works were very important to him, far more important than the world-wide success with works by others, which he loved – as the success they brought him. As an artist he projected himself into these works to fully understand them and to express himself through them at the same time. Inspired by this creative will that gave form to music his performances of other composers' works acquired their much-praised uniqueness, though not without critics' reservations about his approaches. And yet he always caused enthusiasm, among the audience during his lifetime, and among that which has emerged since his death, and all in all the critics have become less reserved. It is the least to respect him as an outstanding interpreter of a so-called bygone era.

Thirdly, as a German **contemporary** to two World Wars he tolerated some compromises during Hitler's reign like all people living in Germany at that time. He has been accused of these compromises for much longer than others, for he was famous, and it is this fame that Goebbels made use of in order to go on presenting Germany as a land of unbroken culture. Here again the proportions have been given a more righteous order. Whoever lived in Germany during those 12 years has his share in the lot as a whole, even if he be, like Furtwängler and numerous others, guiltless and exonerated in a – though not exclusively – juridical manner. In the case of this conductor the acclaim by the international concert public and listeners of records has now proven that his art lives on, independent from political issues. It was not damaged by the political circumstances, and it still appeals to today's audience.

This is a merit of technical reproduction, against which he had his well-known reservations, but nevertheless it enables us to put his purely artistic achievements to the test. I am inclined to say that this way Furtwängler took revenge – in Japan, the United States, England, France, Italy and everywhere else throughout the world where these records are sought after. This global interest goes far beyond the extent Germany cares for these acoustic documents. Furtwängler's very controversial quote from the 1930ies, according to which art has nothing to do with politics, is highly confirmed through his ongoing success, decades after his death. The same applies to our esteem for great works that have been created in other totalitarian systems. We might think of the circumstances in which Prokofiev and Shostakovich wrote their compositions; some of them indeed happen to reflect politics thematically. Their artistic quality is not based on their political reference, cause or content, but rather on the way in which they give musical expression – as an artistic-humane document – to these elements. Beethoven, Brahms or Wagner are not much of an exception. I am not saying that politics is not implicated in musical works of art, but it is much more indirect and less obvious. Only with great care and a particular and artistically-contemporary sense of the humane in sounds can it be grasped. After all it is never the news of the day – a leader, so to say –, but the refusal of such. Let me give you an example: I admit being unable to listen to Liszt's *Les Préludes* without being reminded of an aspect of victorious propaganda, as this is the way in which they were broadcast during my childhood. However it is for sure that when Liszt wrote them eighty years earlier he could impossibly have guessed at what would happen to them. It is a hindered reception, as I grew up during the war, and this has nothing to do with the work itself. Incidentally Furtwängler issued a recording of this composition in 1954, the last year he was to live, and he had not done so before. It did not figure in his concert programmes from 1934 until his death. Occasionally he was able to honour it without inhibitions as a work of art from 1911 to 1933. The last time he conducted it in concert as the final piece with sure impact was in February 1933, and he did so on a tour with the Berlin Philharmonic in the towns of Dortmund, Brussels, Antwerp, Bristol and London, playing it alongside works by Debussy and Hindemith. Furtwängler must have been aware of what Goebbels did with it afterwards – you were unable not to hear the special reports on the War. I think it might be possible that with his 1954-recording Furtwängler wanted to liberate it from this misfortune; to him it was the work as he had conducted it in Lübeck in 1911 for the first time, Liszt's work, not Goebbels' instrument of propaganda. Or perhaps he only wanted to do Walter Legge a favour, the EMI-producer, who supposedly proposed it to him. In any case the accompanying music to special features on the War was not by Furtwängler who avoided the work for more than

twenty years. One has to expect such sensitivities among genuine artists. How else is it to explain that – to mention yet another example – never again Hindemith's *Mathis-Symphony*, which he had premiered in 1934, figured in his programmes, although he conducted several other, more radically modern and less popular works by the same composer after the War both in Germany and abroad? Perhaps he felt uneasy to remind of his courage against Goebbels, for sure; or maybe the old craftsmanship, the Isenheim altar-programme, the reactionary elements in the work did not convince him any longer. The artist Furtwängler had never been an **Anti-Historian** out of conviction, and he surely knew his Nietzsche very well. He was not interested in the way the works might have sounded during the lifetime of the composer, but how the score – and nothing else but this – could be brought to life in present times. (I was asked by Dr. Joachim Matzner to add a reference at this point to the recordings, released ten years ago, of some of the Berlin concerts during the War. Their particularly dramatic nature has led many to see in them a reflex on the inner and outer situation of the artist in this War and in Germany, bearing witness of art that stands up against the surrounding public reality. There can be no doubt about that, but finding words of interpretation for the artistic process is not that easy. What kind of "resistance" or "refusal" is it that some sense here? The works and their nature are no other; and yet a possibly desperate struggle for the autonomy of spirit and art may be a background to it all. It is exactly this autonomy that has been denied by many critics in the discussion about Furtwängler's music-making under the circumstances of Hitler's Germany.)

Something more remains to be said about the relationship between the anti-historic **interpreter** and the **composer**. I will now have to speak about my few concert experiences with Furtwängler in Hamburg after the War, with three orchestras, the Berlin Philharmonic, the Vienna Philharmonic and the NWDR-Orchestra (North-German Broadcasting Company), playing Beethoven, Brahms, Schumann and Bruckner. These concerts in the very same concert hall, the Musikhalle, were all completely different, not only due to the mostly very cheap seats and the diversely sounding orchestras, but because of the works and their presentation. Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* and the *Fifth* happen to be opposites, created side by side by one and the same composer as musically-humane characters, and the oppositions were not blurred by Furtwängler, but acutely drawn as complementary. The most striking though was the opposition in 1951 in two concerts, which took place within an interval of twelve days. One evening combined the noble and free swiftness in Schumann's *Spring Symphony* with the never-ending, seemingly timeless immensity and the pianissimo in Bruckner's *Romantic Symphony*; during the 17 minutes of the Andante one could have heard

a needle fall to the ground. The preserved recordings from the following concerts in Stuttgart and above all Munich cannot convey this, they only give a slight idea; there is too much coughing, and hence they fall apart. During the Andante in Hamburg time stood still, but this is something which one can only experience in a live concert; all that the recordings show are the means of interpreting, with which the conductor achieved this in the moment of the concert. It had been likewise with the *Pastoral Symphony*. Twelve days after Schumann and Bruckner the same conductor almost made the hall explode with Brahms' *First*, and only in unforgettable instances at particular parts, during a call of the horn or pianissimo-parts by the violins did the artist of quiet sounds become visible. In Hamburg, and with the very same orchestra, we knew Brahms by heart; the enthusiasm was as great as ever; but what we really heard here pushed us up against the wall, and only with the publishing of the record 40 years later is it possible to acknowledge in its full extent what kind of an artistic event we were able to witness – the most tremendous Brahms First that remains as a Furtwängler-recording, although there are some outstanding documents with the Philharmonic Orchestras from Vienna and Berlin. The performance of this work, in which Furtwängler gave particular and subjective expression to all things titanic and michelangelesque in his intention of arrangements, was at the same time juxtaposed with the completely silent and vast immersion into Bruckner's romantic universe or the vivid and calm breath of the *Pastoral Symphony*. In Berlin a few weeks later two of the most famous studio-recordings were made for the Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft, Haydn's *Parisian Symphony No. 88* and Schubert's *Great C Major Symphony*, along with Schumann's *Fourth* the classic among Furtwängler's recording production, which is familiar to everyone. But in those days he also recorded his own (Second) *Symphony in E minor* – a rather strange case. This recording has the same timeless calm like Bruckner's already mentioned *Fourth Symphony*, but – unlike it – it feels unbearably long. Live recordings of this work from 1953 and 1954, also from 1948, are much better, as it is there that he takes on his own work more as a creator, not, as it were, wanting to leave a "document" for posterity as is the case with the studio recording.

What to make of these experiences? Well, in conducting the great works in the studio Furtwängler was at times apt to a certain inhibition, that might result from the psychologically dominating pressure to produce "finality" and perfection in such a place. Some of the vivid uniqueness was easily lost; only the smaller pieces with big impact that he recorded in the studio do not show this too overtly. Furthermore Furtwängler did not have a homogeneous, orchestral sound for various works, but rather treated every composition in every performance – with the same basic idea – as unique. Naturally this was achieved on the basis of textual

interpretation that was long established, although he studied the scores over and over again. In some concerts he altered himself; this still applies for Brahms' *Third* in 1954 – he wrote that he had only then understood the work – and even for Beethoven's *Fifth*. The performance is never random, but it has to bring the written work to life. As an individual phenomenon it has to become an organic, acoustic event, in order to exist as a work of art in its entirety. Being always something unique this event is in principle irretrievable; it cannot be reproduced, but only heard in its uniqueness – and eventually be reproduced technically, with the overall loss of the atmosphere, which cannot be captured by a recording. In Furtwängler's performances there are – and this can be verified among the acoustic documents, as it is part of the textual interpretation, and not of the "atmospheric" – the poles of the overwhelmingly great, titanic (where he sees the work as such) and of the vast, resounding space even at the most quiet moments, and both comes together in many works, sometimes in one and the same movement, sometimes from one movement to the other. Among his performances Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony* had its reputation because of its polarity. The coherence between the extreme poles must never come off, though. In the listening process, eruptions should not force the measure of organic formation of the work of art, even when limits were reached or nearly exceeded. Furtwängler deliberately called this the biological, the organic or the inner line of a work, the basic flow under the surface of what was going on in these thousands of notes, like the ruffled waves in the sea. "Fixed types that have as living forms evolved." (Goethe) One of his most profound remarks states that all music is equal in this very last layer of a musical work of art. It is the region where the interpretation reaches the music as art itself.

In a conversation in 1954 Furtwängler talked modestly about his being a conductor – "I know a few works", he said, that could be performed with empathy and sound technique by any orchestra without too much of an effort. This kind of understatement was unheard of, although he had absolutely no difficulty while working together with many orchestras, some of them not always of the highest level. What he really wanted to say was that when he himself **composed** it was a completely different activity, requiring a lot of time and calmness. In the case of Mozart, Richard Strauss or Paul Hindemith, and perhaps also Stravinsky, too, things are known to have worked differently; composing was craftsmanship for them, and Mozart went on to produce a series of ever-lasting works; and yet he had never disposed of time and calmness. In comparison Brahms, Schumann and Bruckner are a different case, and Furtwängler even more so. Composing needs craftsmanship, without being craftsmanship; it has to occur from out of the presence of the person who writes music. All the extremely

extended means from music history are available; but the expression, the whole is what the composer has to find in himself.

As a composer Furtwängler is attached to a solid, canonical tradition of forms, the lied, the sonata, the symphony as organic form of evolution on the basis of naturalness and simplicity. The result can be highly complex, and thus it is in Furtwängler's works. Whether he has always succeeded is controversial, but unlike it has often been said his work was not imitative – apart from the confirmation of sonata and symphony as organic forms of evolution. Here and there Furtwängler as a composer also makes use of means that can be found in Brahms, Bruckner, Tchaikovsky or César Franck, even Mahler, but I do not understand how anyone can possibly say that his music sounds similar to theirs. Even Schubert's early symphonies do not sound like Haydn, whose means he employs, and the late sonatas and symphonic movements are influenced by Beethoven's model, but they sound so differently!

In terms of accessibility Furtwängler's few gigantic works are problematic to the listener insofar as they put high demands to the executors. I am only aware of one performance of his *Third Symphony*, a very modern and profoundly contemplative work, that shows this work in all its might; it is the commemorative concert, with Joseph Keilberth conducting the Berlin Philharmonic in 1956. The Furtwängler-Society is about to release this record for its members and for the members of other national Furtwängler-Societies. I am convinced that in any case **this** work will still have its break-through, if people are able to listen attentively to it. It certainly might be one of the final statements to the history of the symphony as an organic entity with four movements and expression of an artistic mankind, which sees the essential European musical achievement in this form in the 18th and 19th century. These centuries believed in "evolution", whose measure did not exceed in principle the possibilities of evolving, individual humanity. In the 20th century this seems to have gone more and more astray; but the liveliness of this tradition shows as well that this is being felt as a loss, too, a loss that cannot be borne, should it be definitive.