

Wolfgang Schreiber

## What can we learn from Wilhelm Furtwängler 70 years after his death?

In the mature period of his life, Wilhelm Furtwängler tried to balance two different positions in his life - under dramatic circumstances: Here, in the realm of music, conducting, composing, thinking about music, explaining it, working on it in letters and essays. There, in another, the so-called Third Reich, he had to fear and fight for music and its freedom - he himself had become a stranger in Nazi Germany, torn back and forth helplessly in the jungle of politics. Later films about Furtwängler, even their titles, show how diffuse and complicated his artistic and political situation was under National Socialism. How threatened his life as music director of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra had to be during twelve years of dictatorship. And how contradictory and controversial his existence is to this day. Wilhelm Furtwängler's idealistic, thoroughly contestable artistry remains one of the main topics of debates about music and art politics in the 20th century. The gaudy film titles are a sign of his popularity.

**‘Hakenkreuz und Götterfunken’** [Swastika and spark of the gods] is the jaunty title of the 2001 film, **“Sehnsucht nach Deutschland”** [Longing for Germany] is the quasi-patriotic title of the 2003 film, and in 2022 the depressing statement: **“Klassik unterm Hakenkreuz”** [Classical music under the swastika]. Like a summary of the 2001 film title **‘Taking Sides. The Furtwängler case’**. The historical and political situation as well as the psychological circumstances of the man who was only world-famous as an opera and orchestral conductor, not as a composer, are indeed difficult. It almost seems as if there were two examples of his nature: the artist devoted to music and the contemporary shaken by politics and his own crisis of consciousness. Wilhelm Furtwängler, **‘a case’**, one of the most difficult cases in 20th century music - even today, seventy years after his death on 30 November 1954.

Furtwängler, the most prominent representative of musical life in Germany in the first half of the century, still appears to be one of the most enigmatic characters in the discrepant universe of so-called Germanness. This also has to do with the origins of the man born in Berlin on 25 January 1886, with his classical-humanist education oriented towards the 19th century and his youth in Munich, which was intellectually enthusiastic about all the arts. There, his father Adolf Furtwängler, the famous professor of classical archaeology, had deregistered the highly gifted boy from grammar school and entrusted him to private lessons with academic teachers. Literature, art, history, piano, composition, above all composition. His early goal in life: to be a composer. This outlined the inner conflict that plagued him throughout his life - the call to be a composer, pushed aside by a triumphant career as a conductor.

Other questions have remained unanswered: What caused him - in a deeper sense - to give up his destiny to be a composer? Only the successes in opera and concert - or the doubts about the not-so-clear, not-so-powerful vocation as a composer?

Or the question: Why did the conductor Furtwängler, who in the 1920s and 1930s had committed himself to musical modernism on the conductor's podium, to Mahler, Hindemith, Prokofiev and Schoenberg - well, the spectacular Berlin premiere of Schoenberg's Twelve Tone Orchestral Variations in 1928 was probably a misunderstanding - why did Furtwängler, who conducted Debussy, Strauss, Bartók and Stravinsky and was even president of the International Society for New Music in 1925, want to be measured himself almost exclusively against German-Austrian Classicism and Romanticism in his late phase, against Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Bruckner and Wagner? Against the canon of the highest values.

And about politics: What prompted him to persevere in Hitler's Germany despite the conflicts with the Nazi regime, not to follow the greats of music into exile - Arnold Schönberg or Franz Schreker, Otto Klemperer, Fritz Busch or Erich Kleiber, Artur Schnabel, Emanuel Feuermann, Fritz Kreisler? Why did Furtwängler have to or want to come to terms with the Nazi leadership? To protect

his Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, to defend the state of German culture and music against its attackers? And how unclouded was Furtwängler's cultural and socio-political perspective? There is no doubt about his personal integrity - his need for action seems desperate to us today. Then there is the explosive, very complex question: How much historical and personal guilt did Furtwängler have to bear as a result of his indecisiveness, his tactics with the Nazi state? What merits belong to him?

The penultimate of these questions can be as good as answered by one of Furtwängler's firm convictions, localised in his understanding of music and the world. He was of the opinion that the ideal sphere of art was not connected with the pragmatism of politics. Furtwängler lived in two separate worlds, so to speak - and did not want to resolve the contradiction. Daniel Barenboim, who met Furtwängler in rehearsals in Salzburg as an eleven-year-old boy wonder, played to him on the piano and was immediately described by Furtwängler (literally) as a **'phenomenon'**, Barenboim formulated his certainty in an interview 50 years after Furtwängler's death, on the occasion of the Lucerne memorial exhibition. **'Through everything that is created in music,'** said Barenboim at the time in reference to Furtwängler, **'you** can also learn a great deal about humanity, about relationships and about fears. That's why I don't believe that you can separate music from anything.' Barenboim had to disagree with Furtwängler: **'Music** is a world that has similar laws to **reality.**' With the founding of the West Eastern Divan Orchestra, Barenboim wrote music policy.

Furtwängler's concept of music as an autonomous world of sound and ideas, separated from social reality, corresponded to the conservative artistic ideal of a bygone era. Furtwängler was not strictly opposed to the impositions of the Nazi state, which had hijacked public cultural and musical life. Of course, he had defended the composer Paul Hindemith, who had been vilified by the Nazis, and returned his title of **'State Councillor'** [Staatsrat]. Furtwängler's crisis-ridden situation was linked to a full-blown, tragic German-national traditionalism. But in no way had he even remotely taken a seat in Hitler's and the NSDAP's haze,

despite all his cultural-political concessions. This included the fact that Furtwängler sometimes had to show himself at the conductor's podium at popular party and concert appearances in front of the powerful, who showered him with applause as the figurehead of their aggressive, only seemingly normal bourgeois art policy. '**Furtwängler** is celebrated like a **god**,' Goebbels wrote in his diary. '**The** Führer and all of us are **enraptured**'. He continued: '**He** has once again done us great service **abroad**.' The propaganda minister in 1937: '**There** are still a few half-Jews in the Philharmonie. I will try to get rid of them. It won't be easy, Furtwängler is trying to keep them by all **means**.'

The attention now turns to the Italian Claudio Abbado, from 1989 Karajan's successor and Furtwängler's successor at the Berliner Philharmoniker. Abbado - the heir to Wilhelm Furtwängler? Of course, Abbado differed explicitly from the stylistic consonance of his two predecessors in his culturally and contextually broad-minded approach to music, but he never made a secret of his appreciation for Furtwängler's music-making. And he had an astonishing preference: Abbado, who was born in Milan, did not, as might have been expected, recognise his compatriot Arturo Toscanini as a '**leading figure**' on the conductor's podium, but he did recognise the art of the German Wilhelm Furtwängler. He had observed both conductors at close quarters during their performances in Milan in the early 1950s. However, his affection for Furtwängler did not exclude his passion for 20th century music. This was one of the reasons why the Berliner Philharmoniker chose him as their Artistic Director. Abbado not only conducted Bartók and Stravinsky, Schönberg, Berg and Webern with dedication, but also Stockhausen, Ligeti, Kurtág and Wolfgang Rihm.

And for all his closeness to Furtwängler, Abbado kept his distance from the Romantic cult of genius surrounding the great conductors of the past. His antennae were not those of Furtwängler. Thanks to his collaboration with the communist avant-gardist Luigi Nono and the pianist Maurizio Pollini, Abbado focussed his attention on the social aspect of musical creation, and therefore also on the socio-political practice of music-making, for example in concert halls as well as with concerts in factories and schools.

Why did Wilhelm Furtwängler of all people come to the attention of the half-century younger Italian, who had studied in Vienna with Hans Swarowsky, a pupil of Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern? In an interview with Abbado for the booklet to his recording of the Beethoven symphonies, Abbado explained his closeness to the German conductor. **‘For** me, Furtwängler was always the greatest interpreter... Because with him, every note, every phrasing had a logical **meaning.**’ Abbado continued: **‘Toscanini** was different - his music-making was more a very well conducted, schematic, technical affair. With Furtwängler, there was much more music to be **heard.**’ Abbado specified: **‘As** far as the connection between all the notes in the music is concerned, Furtwängler was able to conduct that and let us hear **it.**’ So much more music! Thanks to Furtwängler, Abbado delved into the deeper layers of the music, into the relationships and proportions of the orchestral sound.

Theodor W. Adorno sought to grasp Toscanini and Furtwängler's music-making in a very sharp and polemical way. **‘What** Furtwängler possessed to the highest **degree**’, according to Adorno, was **“the** organ for musical meaning, in contrast to mere functioning, as it came into the musical world as an ideal following **Toscanini**”. Too polemical a diagnosis?

Furtwängler himself was downright implacable towards Toscanini, the great antipodean, when he defended his basic ideas on his own understanding of music and conducting - written down spontaneously in his pocket diaries between 1924 and 1954. When he attended Toscanini's concerts during his guest appearance in Berlin in 1930, he was very disappointed. Furtwängler's critical notes analysing Toscanini's interpretations of Haydn's symphony **‘The Clock’** and Beethoven's third Leonore overture are worth quoting at length: **‘The** functional significance of modulations in the long **term**’, according to Furtwängler's criticism of Toscanini, **‘which** play such a different role in absolute music, especially Beethoven's, seem completely unknown to his naïve sense of operatic music. But in other respects, too, there is not the slightest hint of a soul-psychological penetration as a purely musical **one.**’ Toscanini also conducted Beethoven's **‘Eroica’**, Furtwängler lamented the **‘strangeness** and naïve ignorance of one of

the main demands of symphonic music proper, the demand for organic development, the living-organic growth of every melodic, rhythmic and harmonic formation from the **preceding.**' Furtwängler was thus referring to his greatest ability, his almost magical art of creating symphonic transitions. Furtwängler's criticism of Toscanini becomes an implicit self-portrayal of his own ability, spontaneously notated under the impression of Toscanini's Berlin concerts - like an annihilation!

January 1944: The Berlin Philharmonie is destroyed in a hail of bombs. Furtwängler conducts the **'Meistersinger'** at the Bayreuth Festival that summer. In the final phase of the world war, he leaves Germany and travels to Switzerland, where he works on his compositions. Furtwängler, caught up in the mills of the Nazi state and compromised, was banned from performing by the victorious powers. One of the people in Berlin who stood by Furtwängler during the subsequent so-called **'denazification process'** of the Allies was the musician Sergiu Celibidache. Soon after the end of the war, the Berlin Philharmonic made the young, highly talented Romanian its interim chief conductor. He himself saw himself more as a kind of stand-in for Wilhelm Furtwängler, whom he admired. During his student years in Berlin from 1936 onwards, Celibidache had heard countless Furtwängler concerts and had acquired an in-depth knowledge of Furtwängler's conducting. A revelation for him. He had found his guiding figure, a mentor whose art he would never tire of deciphering, interpreting and comprehensively explaining.

In his 17 years as chief conductor of the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra, until his death in 1996, Celibidache gave his orchestral musicians, his students, critics and the public insights into Furtwängler's art. And this, according to Celibidache, conveys the **'creative hearing'** of the becoming and passing of music. **'There are people among us,'** said Celibidache, **'who** can perceive music as it is being **created.**' This refers to the continuum of music in the present - with everything that the **'aura'** of art has meant since Walter Benjamin.

Precisely for this reason, and also because microphones cannot represent the orchestral sound in its vibrating overtone spectrum as comprehensively as the

reflective space of the concert hall, Furtwängler remained sceptical about the media storage of music on record; he actually rejected it. Celibidache followed him in this, provocatively out of date, unfashionable. Nevertheless, both Furtwängler and Celibidache's many radio recordings, mostly concert recordings, have been preserved. Monuments to memory. **'On records,'** says Celibidache, **'not** even a shadow of Furtwängler remains - no disc can reproduce what was in the room. But today we want to listen to Furtwängler's recordings - from the very first, the **'Freischütz'** overture from 1926 with the Berlin Philharmonic, to the last, the **'Walküre'** from October 1954 with the Philharmonic in Vienna - all collected in a box with 107 CDs, called **'The Legacy'**.

**'Once** I asked him about a **passage,**' says Celibidache's fundamental Furtwängler experience, 'Doctor, how fast does it **go?**' A very open, physical question, I would say. And what did he answer me? 'Oh, it depends on how it sounds'. - Celibidache concludes: **'So** how it sounds can determine the tempo. Tempo is not a reality in itself, but a condition. If there is an enormous variety that **interacts'** (explains Celibidache), **'I** need more time to be able to do something with it musically; if there is less going on, I can get over it more **quickly.'** Well, neither the conductor nor the composer Furtwängler wanted to go over something musically. The only thing that was certain, for him as well as for his favourite Celibidache, was that the tempi on recordings, from the loudspeakers, were too slow due to the lack of complex room acoustics.

Conductor or composer, or conductor and composer? This Furtwängler question remains unanswered to this day. What can we really learn from Furtwängler the conductor who composed - or was he the composer who conducted? Hard to say. We are not talking about the composer of three symphonies who continued the late Romantic period.

One observation by Celibidache may surprise more than just conductors: For him, Furtwängler **'was** not a good conductor, but he was a brilliant **musician.'** Some have tried to describe how Furtwängler conducted, with what body language and gestures. Unfortunately, there are only a few film recordings, but there

are, for example, the memoirs of Karla Höcker from 1955, his travelling companion who was a writer. According to her, ‘**with** his sweeping movements, he brought out sound effects of unusual intensity from the orchestra; indeed, in the way he leaned and bent, he was sometimes more reminiscent of a storm-whipped tree than a carefully tactful **conductor**’. Or else film images of Furtwängler at the podium make one think of a marionette into which the music strikes like lightning. Furtwängler's secret was the conducting function of his left hand, the unconscious signalling of the intuition of listening and of expression in the composition. A music lover in Lübeck raved about the 26-year-old conductor: ‘**Furtwängler** grows from time to time and holds us all under his spell... In addition, there is often an almost unearthly expression on his face, which seems to be transfigured by an inner **glow**.’

Learning from Wilhelm Furtwängler in 2024 - exclamation marks, question marks. Musicians and listeners everywhere learn how musical logic and the architecture of forms work; with Furtwängler, it is not about a sound, however intensely beautiful, but rather about the musical fabric of constantly moving, interwoven sound relationships between the notes. What is there to learn from Furtwängler for all those - and these are most people alive today - who can only hear him through recordings? Beethoven, Brahms, Bruckner, Wagner.

Could it be that the idea of an essay that the composer Paul Hindemith prefixed to his memoirs in 1955, the year after Furtwängler's death, still holds true? ‘**A** measure that is missing **today**’. What would such a measure be? Hindemith believed he knew: ‘**He possessed,**’ he wrote, ‘**the** great secret of **proportion**.’ A knowledge of the relationship of parts to the whole, of the large to the small, of length to width, in the unity of the multiplicity of melody and rhythm, tone strength and tone colour. The conductor and composer Wilhelm Furtwängler once had to learn all this.

But what can those who listen to old recordings of his Beethoven and Brahms today learn from him? For example, not to forget that the real presence of the music in the here and now of the room cannot be replaced, even if it achieves acoustic perfection ‘**in** the age of its technical **reproducibility**’. And pay attention



to the completely different variety, like this: **‘Freude schöner Götterfunke’** [joy beautiful spark of the gods] not without the fatal finding of a music culture in times of crisis and war. Or, to put it somewhat old-fashioned: to recognise the uplifting, perhaps sublime greatness of classical music in the tense scenario of aesthetic and political manifestations.

**Text of the lecture given by music journalist Wolfgang Schreiber at a matinee of the Wilhelm Furtwängler Society on 15 September 2024 in Berlin.**

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