



'Studies'

FURTWÄNGLER'S FIRST CONCERT



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ON Monday 19 February 1906, Wilhelm Furtwängler conducted his very first concert. The ensemble under his baton was Munich's Kaim-Orchester, soon to be renamed the Konzertvereins-Orchester, ancestor of today's Munich Philharmonic.

The young conductor's engagement for this event had nothing to do with his own reputation — he had only just turned twenty and was a complete unknown — and everything to do with his father's benevolence. One of Europe's foremost archaeologists, Adolf Furtwängler (1853-1907) was chair of archaeology at the University of Munich, and director of the city's Glyptothek. Judging by the notes he made at the time, he was absolutely convinced of his son's brilliance. A certain paternal bias may, however, have led him to over-estimate the latter's talent, which although unquestionably genuine, was still developing at this point in time. Wilhelm had spent a few months working, as répétiteur, under Georg Dohrn, who was music director at Breslau (modern-day Wrocław) in Silesia and also happened to be his mother's cousin. Nothing much came of this junior role, and the attitude of established colleagues towards him was not altogether encouraging. The great Joseph Joachim, one of Berlin's most respected musical luminaries, for example, was not particularly flattering about the young composer's early efforts in chamber and orchestral music.

Furtwängler père, however, was quite sure that public recognition would open doors and a world of opportunity to his son. He therefore made what proved to be a costly decision and paid the princely sum of 1400 marks to hire the Kaim-Orchester. Founded a dozen years earlier by Franz Kaim, heir to a piano manufacturer, the ensemble was revitalising orchestral music in the Bavarian capital, especially as the enterprising patron had ordered the construction of a new concert hall, initially named after him, but in 1905 rechristened the Tonhalle,

a name it kept until its destruction in 1944. During this period, the orchestra's conductor was the renowned Finnish musician, and friend of Sibelius, Georg Schnéevoigt (1872-1947).



The Munich Tonhalle

The concert was advertised in the daily papers, some of which took an interest in covering the event. Adolf Furtwängler's reputation would certainly have had something to do with raising the profile of a concert conducted by an unknown debutant. As far as both father and son were concerned, the aim of the event was to showcase the gifts not so much of a young conductor as of a young composer, and perhaps to make up for the failure of Wilhelm's *First Symphony*, premiered by Dohrn in Breslau in 1903. Who better, then, than the composer himself to conduct his own work? And if he could wield a baton well and communicate effectively with his players, so much the better — particularly as Kaim had apparently dangled

the prospect of a post as principal conductor if the concert were a success. Or so Adolf alleged in his diary. It seems highly unlikely, however: who on earth would entrust an orchestra of this level to someone so inexperienced? This claim should be treated in the same way as another made by the proud father, namely that his son Wilhelm's quartets were the only works of their kind worth anything since those of Beethoven...

There were three works on the programme that evening. The choice of Beethoven's *The Consecration of the House* overture reflects what was to be a lasting and unwavering connection between conductor and composer, while Furtwängler's own *Symphonic Poem in B minor* was the concert's *raison d'être*. More than a century later, however, what is most striking is the inclusion of Bruckner's *Ninth Symphony* in the second half of the concert. The composer's final work, it was by no means a classic of the repertoire, having only been premiered by the Vienna Konzertvereinsorchester and Ferdinand Löwe in the Austrian capital on 11 February 1903. Its Berlin premiere was given by the Berlin Philharmonic under Nikisch in October of the same year. Taking on such a difficult and innovative work as an untested conductor less than three years later was a risky venture, requiring a good dose of either pure guts or blissful ignorance.

Again, we know from notes left by Adolf Furtwängler that he was unhappy with the poor standard of the musicians and the limited number of rehearsals allotted to his son — just three. Given the usual practice of the day, one might be tempted to say that three was quite generous! Adolf also recorded the fact that the hall was full and there had been enthusiastic applause at the end of the concert. Let's put this in context by taking a look at the reviews.

***Allgemeine Zeitung*, 21 February 1906**

Yesterday at the Tonhalle, a young composer from Munich, Wilhelm Furtwängler, son of the famous archaeologist, conducted Beethoven's Overture, op.121, a symphonic movement of his own composition, and Bruckner's Ninth Symphony. His style reveals a lively perception and a musical vision that takes in every detail and nuance; these qualities will stand him in good stead for presenting large-scale works, and will be especially helpful when it comes to the modern symphony. In the Overture — whose microcosmic diversity calls on the most rigorous forms of musical dialectic — he set out these details with great clarity, but not at the expense of the voice leading; by means of succinct summarisation, the conductor skilfully worked towards building a coherent whole. He also gave a very

accomplished performance of the Bruckner symphony, in which everything depends first and foremost on a broad, sweeping conception. He injected exceptional freshness into the Scherzo, handling the rhythmic contrasts with astonishing assurance, and the unique and vibrant atmosphere that emanates from this unusual piece of music is established from the opening bars onwards. In the closing Adagio, however, this reassuring determination is somewhat diminished. We should like to make one recommendation to the young artist: he should keep his head and body movements to a minimum; his constant nodding and rocking movements do not look good and at times even prove detrimental to his beat; on top of that, nothing is more tiring or unnecessary than conducting with one's whole arm. Of course the key entries and dynamic transitions need to be indicated, but in most cases a glance, a small movement or a subtle gesture will more than suffice. As illustrated by our finest conductors, there has been a shift away from the *vivacité* of Bülow and back towards a far more sparing use of gesture. No conclusions can be drawn about the young conductor's gift for composing on the basis of a single symphonic movement. Certain features of his symphonic poem reveal that he has the potential for more significant assignments: it is original in its invention, the structure is not without interest, and the seriousness of intent extends to the orchestration, with just a few minor awkward moments in the trombone and trumpet parts. But, as is true of so many other symphonic works, the work as a whole is lacking in organic coherence, in a development based on spontaneous motifs and purely musical factors. It is too sprawling, disintegrates into details and falls short of achieving the admittedly sincerely intended overall effect. We therefore hope that this very talented young musician will succeed in finding a compositional style that suits his individuality. Then we can look forward to greater things from him!

***Münchner neueste Nachrichten*, 24 February 1906**

Wilhelm Furtwängler, who made his debut in Munich as both composer and conductor with the Kaim-Orchester on Monday, is still so young that we can forgive the excess of audacity and self-confidence for which an older artist might be reproached — indeed, we might even find it charming. The fact that he selected Bruckner's Ninth Symphony for his first major conducting challenge unquestionably proves that he has good taste and plenty of ambition, but runs too far counter to the old adage *Experimentum fiat in corpore vili* for us to offer our unalloyed approval. Attempting a successful performance of such a work after just three or four rehearsals, at

which time also had to be spent on other pieces, would have been a risk for a seasoned conductor and was bound to end in failure for a novice. Bearing this in mind, it is worth noting with a degree of admiration that certain sections, such as the Scherzo, for example, were performed surprisingly well in the end — even if the Trio was taken too quickly. As to whether or not Mr Furtwängler possesses an exceptional and innate talent for conducting, the jury is still out. Little more light was shed on the matter by the performance of Beethoven's Consecration of the House overture, the first work on the programme. The young man undoubtedly has considerable musical gifts and we cannot therefore rule out the possibility that he may, with time, become a decent conductor. For this to happen, however, he would first need to learn what it really means to conduct an orchestra: for example the basic principle that one's gestures need to be functional, including when they go beyond simply beating the time. In other words, they have to convey the conductor's intentions to his players in the clearest, most convincing manner possible. Furtwängler the composer made a far stronger impression on me than did Furtwängler the conductor. His Symphonic Poem in B minor — a title which we have understood here to mean no more and no less than a relatively independent and self-contained symphonic movement — is certainly still very wild, very chaotic and very immature. Nevertheless, it reveals a deep and powerful sensitivity, a sincere and serious intent, and, most significantly, a truly original — if still embryonic — vein of invention. As long as this young artist does not misinterpret the generous applause he received throughout the evening, in the belief that he has already secured a great achievement, then the experience gained from this concert could do a great deal to help him reach his goal more quickly and without too many diversions along the way.

The most striking thing about both reviews — apart from the variety of opinions they express, most of them favourable and none of them indifferent — is the description of Furtwängler's conducting style. The whole-arm movements, the swaying hips, the *agitato* of the head: they all convey an image of the conductor just as he is portrayed in descriptions of the 1930s and as we can see him in film footage. So he clearly (and consciously?) developed this very distinctive style at a very early stage of his career.

While it garnered mixed reviews, his *Symphonic Poem* was not slated in the way often reported today. One other critique has survived, its tone now mitigated by that of the two reproduced for the first time here. The Furtwängler website created by the late René Trémine offers a single press quote, taken from the

Bayerische Kurier of 23 February. We have not been able to consult the original German, and the English text below is translated from the French version on the website which may itself be a somewhat free translation.

Having heard the concert of this very young conductor, Wilhelm Furtwängler, who selected Bruckner's Ninth Symphony as his first victim, one might think that the programme had been chosen with today's audience in mind. Is he talented? Absolutely, but no one should make their debut at this level if they are still struggling to master the skill of conducting. While the Beethoven overture was acceptable, despite the huge amount of energy expended, the Bruckner left a cold, grey impression. The Scherzo suffered most, and sounded like a journey through treacherous reefs after days of relentless rain. Happily, his own Symphonic Poem seemed promising, but soon turned into something empty and formless in which one could note how small themes were subjected to harmonic torture. The audience's repeated applause came as a surprise.

So what came of this performance? His father noted, "Concert in February — a full hall and a great success, although his own work was not at all well understood and the critics were rather restrained. No one dared say what most had noticed: that he cut a distinguished and imposing figure." Such comments merely underline once again his view that his son was a misunderstood genius.

What was Wilhelm's own reaction? We have no personal testimony from him. Presumably, as well as being disappointed by the reviews of his own work — which for him had been the heart of the concert — the experience led to a decision as to his future path. Accompanied by his mother, he travelled to Berlin, where an agency obtained a modest new post for him: répétiteur and third conductor at the Zurich opera house. Let's be frank, it was quite a comedown to go from the glory of conducting a grand symphonic performance in a regional capital to the obscurity of rehearsing an opera chorus. The truth is, however, that this lowly role was a normal step on the career ladder — what was exceptional was the whole improbable adventure of that first concert in Munich. Furtwängler himself recalled the event years later when, in 1939, he began a famous lecture on Bruckner by saying, "Bruckner's Ninth was the first work I conducted — for better or for worse — as a twenty-year old. Since then, I've had many opportunities to conduct his music."

And what about Munich — did the concert become one of the city's cherished musical memories? When Furtwängler returned on 3 July 1914 to conduct the

same orchestra (which in the meantime had become the Konzertvereins-Orchester), now benefiting from the relative fame he had achieved during three years as music director in Lübeck, an extensive review in one of the papers made no mention of his not-so-distant past.

Everyone seems to have forgotten the performance of 19 February 1906, now reduced to a single line—the first in a very long list of concerts.

Transalation: Susannah Howe



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Tonhalle (Türkenstrasse 5).

Montag den 19. Februar 1906, abends 7^{1/2} Uhr

KONZERT

Wilhelm Furtwängler

mit dem

Kaim-Orchester.

PROGRAMM:

1. Overture, C dur op. 124 Die Weihe des Hauses *Beethoven*
2. Symphonische Tondichtung, h-moll *Wilh. Furtwängler*
3. IX. Symphonie, d-moll *Anton Bruckner*
Molto mosso — Scherzo — Adagio.

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