

Furtwängler

by Alfred Brendel

Wilhelm Furtwängler was the performing musician who, more than any other, provided me with the criteria for judging a performance. Not that I knew him personally; my career had just begun when Furtwängler's ended, and partnership with a great conductor of his age would have been no easy matter for a youngster anyway. But I had heard several of his concerts in Vienna, Salzburg, and Lucerne, as well as a number of opera performances. These, and the records and tapes which since that time have kept me in touch with his conducting, have remained for me a most important source of reference as to what music-making is about.

The greatness of Furtwängler the conductor is, I think, best appreciated if one disregards Furtwängler the composer, the writer of essays, letters or diaries, the thinker (outside of the purely musical sphere), the German patriot, as well as the person 'political' and 'non-political', childish and sophisticated, magnetic and absurdly irritable. Those who believe that the character of a musician has to be as elevating as the best of his music-making need read no further -- a lot of great music will elude them. A young intellectual who, in conversation with Alban Berg, complained about Wagner's character was told by Berg: 'For you, as a non-musician, nothing could be easier than to condemn him.' Unlike Wagner, Furtwängler hardly qualifies as a villain. Yet I shall have to dissociate myself from some of his views, above all from his obsession with the overwhelming importance of German soul and spirit -- that conviction about being chosen which, according to the eminent Zionist leader Nahum Goldmann, was, ironically, for some time a belief common to both Germans and Jews. ['Both peoples have been of importance in world history; but they have also felt, and feel, their own importance to an unusual degree. Being excessively aware of their importance, they take pride in it as well.' (Nahum Goldmann, 'Warum der Nazi-Schock nicht enden darf', Die Zeit, 2 February 1979.)]

Then there is Furtwängler's belief, derived from Goethe, that 'the very great is never new', and his clinging to tonal harmony, to the heritage of the classical and romantic symphony, to popular intelligibility -- even in the case of new compositions -- which in the end blinded him to the achievements of twentieth-century music, and made him overestimate his own. His definition of a composer as 'one who can write his own folksong' suggests a dangerous affinity with those who regard music as a controllable political tool.

Furtwängler considered himself primarily a composer, and repeatedly spoke of the day when he would finally stop conducting in order to do something truly worthwhile. But it was not merely a matter of chance that this wish remained unfulfilled. There was, of course, the fact that Furtwängler had been successful as a conductor, whereas he remained relatively unnoticed as a composer; but there must also have been a critical instinct within him which told him that, notwithstanding his belief in himself as a composer, conducting was where his powers of persuasion lay. All we need to know about his compositions is that they helped him to look at the works he conducted from a composer's point of view.

To those of us who do not seek access to music via the detour of literature, philosophy or ideology, Furtwängler remains indispensable. If Furtwängler had not existed, we would have had to invent him. He was the conductor under whose guidance a piece of music emerged as something complete, alive in all its layers, every detail justified by its breathing relevance to the whole. The prejudice among some English-speaking critics that Furtwängler, carried away by the musical moment, sacrificed unity and cohesion, is more untrue of him than of anybody else. No conductor was, in his greatest performances, freer yet less eccentric. No other musician in my experience conveyed so strongly the feeling that the fate of the piece (and of its performance) was sealed with its first bar, and that its destiny would be fulfilled by the last. Spontaneously varied as Furtwängler's performances sometimes were, they always seemed to grow from the seed of their beginning: they sounded 'natural', if one grants that the artist proceeds in a manner analogous to nature.

In an age such as ours which is fascinated by language and linguistics it is easy to forget that organized thinking is possible without the help of words. On his own purely musical grounds, Furtwängler the conductor strikes me as a 'thinker' second to none; as a writer on music, on the other hand, I rarely find him satisfying. 'I cannot,' as he says himself, 'get involved with a work in order to demonstrate it reasonably and with love -- and at the same time talk about it.' Yet there are a few instances where his words do reflect his musical task.

It is necessary that both the detail and the whole have gone through the performer's emotions. There are some who can feel a single phrase; only a few who can grasp the complete line of an extended melody; and nearly none who can do justice to the total context of that veritable whole which every masterpiece represents. There is, however, a way of dealing with compositions -- overly practical and therefore universally adopted these days -- which does not even attempt emotional involvement. It presents the bare facts without their meaning.

Another clue to the character of his conducting is contained in a letter to his childhood mentor and lifelong friend Ludwig Curtius. He writes: 'The work of art should be a mirror not only of one's nerves, of the acuteness of one's observation, the consequence, coldness and sincerity of one's conclusions, or of the refinement of one's senses, but of the whole man.'

Lean, bent slightly backwards, and with an elongated neck, Furtwängler in front of an orchestra gave the impression of overlooking vast spaces. His beat had very little in common with that of present-day conductors. In stretches of pianissimo it could be minute and extremely precise; elsewhere, outstretched arms undulated downwards in total physical relaxation, so that the orchestra had to guess where the beat should be. The sounds thus produced could be of an elemental intensity that I have not experienced since. The image of 'Jupiter tonans' was what came to me then: Furtwängler's thunder was always preceded by lightning-shaped movements, which made the orchestra play considerably after the beat (if there was a beat), and induced double-basses and cellos to prepare the ground for the sonorities by discreetly anticipating their entry. Arthur

Nikisch, according to Furtwängler, was the only conductor who presented a thoroughly unforced appearance; Furtwängler regarded himself, in this respect, as Nikisch's pupil, and believed that any contraction of muscle on the part of the conductor would show up in the sound of the orchestra as if reproduced on a photographic plate.

Furtwängler's technique, though seemingly unfocused and impractical, was in fact well considered. Not only did it help to anticipate the quality of sonorities and the delay of an important beat: it also foreshadowed changes of atmosphere or the gradual modification of tempo. And this leads us to Furtwängler's particular strength: he was the great connector, the grand master of transition. What makes Furtwängler's transitions so memorable? They are moulded with the greatest care, yet one cannot isolate them. They are not patchwork, inserted to link two ideas of a different nature. They grow out of something and lead into something. They are areas of transformation. If we observe them minutely, we notice that, at first almost imperceptibly, they start to affect the tempo, usually a great deal earlier than is the case with other conductors, until their impact finally makes itself felt. Even where I disagree with the amplitude of Furtwängler's tempo modifications -- as in the first movement of Beethoven's Fourth Symphony -- I do not know what to admire more: the urgency of his feeling or the acuteness of his control.

Tempo modifications are merciless indicators of musical weakness. With Furtwängler, as often with Casals, Cortot or Callas, they give evidence of supreme rhythmical strength. It would, however, be misleading to look at rhythm, or any other musical element, by itself. If rhythm is to be more than an abstract scheme or a crude obsession it must be influenced by articulation, character and colour. It must be affected by the performer's reactions to harmonic events and -- a particular rarity these days -- by that feeling for *cantabile* which permeates music in the widest possible sense.

Furtwängler made one aware of the interdependence of these and other musical factors. What is called 'structure' emerged as a sum of all the parts. Consequently Furtwängler's performances were often less idiosyncratic than those of his fellow conductors, and more varied. Listen to his

recording of Beethoven's Leonore Overture No. 3 with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, with its astonishing variety of colour and atmosphere, tempo and dynamics, character and meaning. Yet the music is never burdened by 'expression' from outside. Energies within the piece are released, the essence of the entire opera comes to life without the need for words. Ecstasy and strategy are perfectly matched, combining to produce the big line.

Furtwängler's big line is not a kind of long-sightedness, presenting the larger contours while the details of characterization are lost. It is one of Furtwängler's distinguishing features that, at least within the repertory he excelled in, each musical character is conveyed with a superior clarity of vision, and with the mastery of the superior professional. Even where the music seems to be left alone, where apparently 'nothing happens' during several bars of the softest playing, as in the cello tune of Schubert's Unfinished Symphony, conviction alone would not deliver such stillness. It had to be conducted and rehearsed.

It had, incidentally, to be recorded as well. There is a widespread belief that Furtwängler's genius was only present in live performances -- a belief kindled by the maestro himself, who disliked recording sessions. The glorious Unfinished Symphony with the Vienna Philharmonic, a performance as perfect as any I know, is only one of a number of studio recordings that refutes this opinion. On nearly all counts it seems to me more satisfying than the live recordings I have heard. Equally outstanding are Schubert's Great C major Symphony (Berlin) and Beethoven's Leonore No. 3 (Vienna) which, judged as a whole, stand up to any recorded live performance. And the studio recording of Tristan seemed to have pleased even Furtwängler himself who, for once, admitted that a record can have musical merits. I wish Furtwängler could have known how much his performances still mean to many of us today.

At the beginning of these notes I wrote of my debt to Furtwängler for providing me with criteria by which to judge a performance. Looking back over my remarks, I find I must add some afterthoughts.

I have mentioned the variety of musical factors and their interdependence. Let me add an example. Furtwängler's pianissimo, extremely remote, yet without a meaningless moment, was more than a degree of dynamic quietness; it was a matter of colour, and Furtwängler's colour -- even at its most sensuous or nervously refined -- was always a matter of emotion. Thus pianissimo and misterioso were often identical.

I have hinted at the decisive importance of the very opening of a piece, its dominating impact over what is to follow -- the way in which it reveals a particular musical vista, causing one to enter a stage set for an inevitable dramatic action. I have yet to declare my admiration for some of Furtwängler's codas. In the concluding sections of the first movement of Mozart's G minor Symphony or of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, he managed to make us feel that the life of a piece had been lived through, and that the coda expressed the tragic summation.

I have also referred to his ability to characterize, and to change the chemistry of character and atmosphere during transitions. One of my early piano teachers told me, with a smile, that performers can either play beautiful themes or beautiful transitions, but rarely both. Furtwängler made nonsense of that theory. He seems to me the exact opposite of Charlie Chaplin in one of his early films. Chaplin the pawnbroker carefully takes an alarm clock apart under the eyes of its owner; finally, when every single component lies spread out on the counter, he sweeps the lot into the owner's hat.

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