

**CONDUCTING AND THE GREAT CONDUCTORS: THE COLLECTION OF AN
OPINIONATED, ARDENT FAN AND TOO-INFREQUENT PRACTITIONER (1990-
present)**

By James D. Siranovich, Class of '22 (born '74)

*To do this, you know, you really have to be a bit of maniac. –Sir Georg Solti
(Chicago Symphony; Royal Opera House, Covent Garden)*

*You have to conduct an opera four or five times, really, just to know what the
hell's going on. ---Herbert von Karajan (Berlin Philharmonic; Salzburg Festival)*

*A conductor is forever a student.---Leonard Bernstein (New York Philharmonic,
Vienna Philharmonic)*

*It's the strangest thing—you make a gesture, and suddenly, sound comes out.
Everyone should try it. ---Riccardo Muti (La Scala, Milan; Philadelphia Orchestra;
Chicago Symphony)*

*Conducting is the strongest evidence I've yet seen that telepathy, in one form or
another, exists. ---Hugh Bean, violinist (London Symphony)*

*There is this mistaken notion that the right hand beats the time, and the left hand
is there for expression. NO. The expression must be IN the time-beating ITSELF. –
Leonard Bernstein*

*You know, the bars are nothing but the boxes the REAL music comes in! –Sir
Thomas Beecham (London Symphony, Royal Philharmonic)*

Welcome to my collection of books on the Great Conductors and the art of conducting. This collection has grown out of my fervent belief that the full-sized symphony orchestra of the mid-19th to mid-20th centuries is the greatest instrument ever created, that the greatest privilege in music is conducting a fine orchestra, and that the greatest pleasure in music is playing in or listening to one. While I have happily worked in many different areas of the classical music field for years, nothing compares to being surrounded by the sounds emanating from 100 instruments, and once felt, it is addictive and awe-inspiring. Add the human voice to it, and you've got opera, and really, what more could you possibly want (he said with objectivity)?

The history of the profession and its great practitioners is endlessly fascinating, and I have been enamored since age 16, when I saw a PBS documentary about Solti and the Chicago Symphony rehearsing Beethoven's Fifth, then the PBS broadcast of Wagner's "Ring", live from the Met. In 1990, I bought "Herbert von Karajan", by Roger Vaughan—my first conductor book--and have just bought two long-awaited biographies of the greatest conductor I ever saw in person (19 times!), Claudio Abbado, yesterday. It was the documentary "Abbado in Berlin" that set me on the path to studying the craft myself. Thus, the collection is thirty years old, and still growing. If one includes all the

books about the actual practice of the craft and the histories of the major orchestras the great conductors conducted, it stands at about 100 books. About 20 more were sadly ruined in a basement flood about ten years ago, but beyond a passing reference, I do not include them here. A cursory perusal of Amazon unearths 30 more books I *should* have, but will have to put off until the summer. A biography of the fiery Dutch conductor Willem Mengelberg (d. 1951). An account of *El Sistema*, the program bringing orchestral music to poor Venezuelan youth. A new collection of anecdotes about Sir Thomas Beecham (1879-1961), the funniest great conductor who ever lived...and so on. Ah well. While I have been a choral conductor as well, and studied with a great one, the collection is 99% orchestral and operatic. When all is said and done, the choral world is a different world, and in this country, the worlds rarely overlap. (Unfortunately, even the operatic and symphonic worlds rarely overlap in this country, and most conductors of one broad subgenre never touch the other.) Also, I use masculine language throughout because opportunities have only begun to open up for women. While I require no convincing that a woman can be as good a man in this profession (indeed, two of my best teachers were women, and I consider the English conductor **Sian Edwards (b. 1959)** one of the best in the history of the profession), the fact remains that they have not had the opportunities for too long, and thus all the great, widely-recorded and famous conductors of the past are men. At any rate, this collection is but a snapshot, and an ever-growing one!

Most people have some idea of what goes into playing the violin or the clarinet, and can even distinguish a good player from a bad player. They know that instrumentalists and singers study with teachers, practice, perform, and spend years perfecting their craft. They know that it takes a long time to be good, and that excellence is rare. However, most are not clear on what conductors are doing beyond ‘keeping time’, and wonder if the orchestra really needs a conductor at all. They are also very curious about the course of study that conductors follow, and what effect, if any, their gestures have on an orchestra. The renowned conducting teacher Otto-Werner Mueller used to make time-beating gestures in the air and intone, “You know, all THIS is five, MAYBE ten percent of what we do.” So what’s the rest of it?

A brief history. While there are many ways in which to view the emergence of the conducting profession and the matrix in which its greatest exponents were able to practice the craft, I prefer to think of it in terms of three significant and somewhat overlapping changes:

First, orchestral ensembles began to grow larger. During the time of Program Author J.S. Bach (1685-1750), choral conductors conducted from the organ console, as most do to this day; small orchestras were led by the concertmaster (principal violinist), the harpsichord player (from the keyboard), or both. Program Author W.A. Mozart (1756-1791) and Haydn (1732-1809) supervised the performances of their own symphonies and operas, conducting from the keyboard. By the time of Beethoven (1770-1827), orchestras were simply too large for this to be effective, and people began using small sticks of wood called ‘batons’, which most conductors still use, for greater

visibility. Beethoven conducted the premieres of his Fifth and Sixth Symphonies not from the keyboard, but standing on a podium, keeping time (expressively!) with a baton, his hands, and his entire body. This was new and radical. With vast improvements in the construction and capabilities of wind and brass instruments came composers' interest in writing differently for these instruments. The story of the evolution of symphonic music is really the story of winds and brass taking on a greater and more equal role in the ensemble—previously, strings had always played the bulk of the melodic material. I believe that the improvements in instrumental construction, which allowed one to play equally in tune in all keys, were a major factor in the expansion of Romantic tonal and chordal vocabulary, ca. 1800-1910. Composers wrote previously 'exotic' modulations because the instruments now made those modulations possible. Music began to modulate further and further away from the home key, and thus took longer to return to it with any coherence. (Many movements of Mahler Symphonies, for instance, are longer than entire Mozart Symphonies.)

What of 'beating time', the most obvious aspect of conducting? Much music of Baroque and Classical times had a regular 'beat', with few tempo modifications—as orchestras got larger, symphonies got longer, chordal and tonal vocabularies got 'wilder', and tempo changes became more frequent, one man standing in front of the group keeping things together, and making all final decisions in rehearsal about tempos, balance, etc., became more necessary than ever. It became clearer and clearer that, as in poetry, the beat and the rhythm are not the same thing at all.

Second, there was a shift from composer/conductors always presenting their own music to presenting other people's music as well. In time, a canon, a sort of musical Program List, was formed, and is still dominant today. The real fathers of the profession, **Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)** and Program Author **Richard Wagner (1813-1883)**, embodied two distinct approaches to the craft, and to the interpretation of symbols. For Mendelssohn, who spearheaded a revival of J.S. Bach's music with an epic performance of Program Work the *St. Matthew Passion*, not only the notes on the page, but the dynamic and tempo markings as well, were to be as scrupulously observed as possible. The conductor was, as Boston Symphony conductor Erich Leinsdorf famously put it years later, primarily "the composer's advocate", a kind of humble servant. Richard Wagner believed that the *melos*, the through-line connecting the entire piece, was the key to everything, and that all kinds of tempo modifications could be used in the service of bringing the *melos* to the fore. In other words, what was *behind* the notes was as important *as* the notes. All this rested upon the conductor, whose job it was to re-compose the piece from the inside out, to pick it apart like a Swiss watch, find the *melos*, and filter it all through the prism of his own personality and convictions. Notation was imperfect and often ambiguous. There were a thousand decisions to be made, behind the notes. The composer *needed* the performer, and the conductor was as much a performer as any of the musicians in the orchestra.

These styles of conducting, Mendelssohnian and Wagnerian, Apollonian and Dionysian, are still with us. The locus of every conductor's musical identity is inevitably found in one of these two matrices of text, symbol, sound, interpretation, and

responsibility. Of course, Mendelssohn was a great musician who realized there was music behind the notes, and of course Wagner wanted a composer's wishes respected—but it is a question of emphasis, priority, and quite differing philosophies of what notation really is, and means. Although most conductors aim for a fusion now, we are (sadly, in my mind) living in a time with far more literalists than Wagnerians. There are great conductors of both kinds, but I must confess that my sympathies, as well as my own all-too-infrequent and modest contributions to the profession, lean toward the Romantic and non-literalist. I am skeptical of all Fundamentalisms, for better or worse, whether biblical, constitutional, or musical, and I firmly believe that a great symphony or opera admits of multiple, equally valid interpretations. That does not change the fact that a conductor must be absolutely convinced, in the moment, that his interpretation is valid, and that he has every right to ask 100 people to go along with it and put their vastly differing opinions aside. Egos are understandably, notoriously large, even amongst the quiet ones!

As I said before, Bach, Handel, Haydn, and Mozart conducted and supervised the premieres of their own works. Mendelssohn and Wagner were great composers who also conducted the music of others. Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) and Richard Strauss (1864-1949), both great composers and conductors, conducted *more of other people's music than their own*. (In fact, Mahler composed his massive Symphonies during the summers, on 'hiatus' from his job as head of the Vienna State Opera.) While composer-conductors continued to flourish, from Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) to Bernstein (1918-1990) to the Hollywood expatriate Erich Korngold (1897-1957) and "Psycho" composer Bernard Herrmann (1915-75), there arose a new breed of musician—the full-time conductor who was either not primarily a composer (Szell, Tilson Thomas), or not a composer at all (Karajan, Carlos Kleiber). This also coincided with the formation of a canon, mostly Germanic, but inclusive of French, Russian, Italian, and a few Eastern European and American composers, so that Bernstein could speak of "the standard 120 pieces" by the early 1960s. Bernstein spoke of instrumental music—there are about 50 standard operas as well. (While I have been writing mainly of instrumental music, everything I have said about the expansion of chordal vocabulary, tempo variation, larger-scale forms, and the necessity for one figure to exert interpretive control and make the final decisions, is applicable to the history of opera as well. Mozart's *Don Giovanni* can be done with an orchestra of about 45. Richard Strauss' mighty *Salome*, *Elektra*, and *Der Rosenkavalier* require an orchestra of 110-120!)

Third, great conductors need not only great orchestras to conduct, but audiences to listen, and in the United States, the 1950s and 1960s were the high point of the great dissemination of 'high culture' to the masses known as 'middlebrow' education. This music obviously grew out of a European matrix, just as blues and jazz grew out of the fusion of West African chant and Scots-Irish Appalachian melody. Opera, created in the Florentine Renaissance, came before symphony. While there are great symphonic composers of many nationalities, when all is said and done, the Great Romantic Symphony is an Austro-German creation, as is the Great Conductor. The great orchestras were all founded in the 19th century, and although Mahler died in 1911, and Strauss in 1949, they were 19th century men in the 20th century. Most of the conductors

represented in my collection came of age during and after the culmination of the Austro-German symphonic line, and lived long enough to participate in the golden age of the symphony orchestra and the widespread attempt to share 'high culture' with the masses of people through radio, television, and books. (The New Program was founded in 1937, near the beginning of that glorious musical time.)

Orchestral music was not only of this 'high' variety. Think movie soundtracks. Big bands. Vintage cartoons. The orchestra pits of Broadway musicals. Large jazz ensembles. There was a time when orchestral music, in one form or another, was omnipresent, and listened to by millions. Mahler and Strauss and Furtwängler were celebrities in their day, but within select circles. Toscanini, Solti, Ormandy, Carlos Kleiber, Bernstein, and Herbert von Karajan were great conductors, but their public images were also creations of new mass media—long-playing records, radio, and television. The recorded legacies of Bernstein (1918-1990) and Karajan (1908-1989) are so vast that their estates continue to generate more royalties than all other classical music sales combined. For obvious technological reasons (streaming, anyone?), this will never happen again.

Because great conductors are first and foremost interpreters of symbols, and those symbols represent sounds which existed in the minds of composers, the great conductors are really sculptors of the flow of sound, in time. Like all classical musicians, they interpret notes on a page, but they have many more notes to interpret! The study is vast, rigorous, and endless.

Most of the people in this collection came up through the German Opera House route, analogous to the major and minor leagues in baseball. Most graduated from a handful of conservatories at age 18-20, went right to opera houses as vocal coaches and rehearsal pianists, moved on to assistant conductor and chorus-master positions, and, if they excelled, from Third to Second to First Kapellmeister and GMD (Generalmusikdirektor). Typically, they would move from one town to another upon promotion, and typically the whole process took a decade or more. (Herbert von Karajan worked first in Ulm, then in Aachen, then in Berlin, for example.) By the time they reached their artistic maturity, they had conducted most of the by then 'standard repertoire', both orchestral and operatic, easily 20-30 times. They had strong interpretations born of trial and error and relentless study. (One of my own teachers, Ruben Vartanyan, who came of age in Soviet Russia, conducted over 650 performances at the Bolshoi Theatre, Moscow between 1965-1985.) They had absolute power over hiring and firing, repertoire, and soloists. Their craft was respected, and their social position high. Many came here during, between, and after both World Wars, and until very recently (and, one might argue, even today) the profession has been dominated in the United States by European imports. Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990) was the first native-born American conductor of a major symphony (New York Philharmonic, 1959-69). There are about ten first-class orchestras in the U.S. now, but for years, the Big Five were, in no particular order, the New York Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Chicago Symphony, and the Cleveland Orchestra. The best

three non-American orchestras are generally considered to be the Berlin Philharmonic, the Vienna Philharmonic, and the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam, although of course there are many other astounding groups. London deserves particular mention—the only city with five major orchestras, and as a result, the toughest critics and an extraordinarily seasoned lay audience.

While there are many commonalities among great conductors, there is also great diversity. Many are pianists, and many others violinists. Most master at least one instrument, but most also focus exclusively on conducting after a certain point. There are great Italian conductors who conduct only opera, great English and American conductors (particularly the latter) who conduct only symphonic music, and many Germans and Italians equally comfortable in both. (In my strong opinion, the very *very* greatest excel in both equally, and these are a rare breed.) Some use a baton, some don't. Some flap around, some barely move. Some give every beat, others barely beat at all. Some use a score for reference, others have even the rehearsal letters and bar numbers memorized. All can hear a score 'inside their head' while looking at it on the page. (No, really.) All know the scores inside and out, and are simultaneously listening to what's happening, giving some indication of what's about to happen, making sure things are together and in balance, and, in transcendent moments, managing to get out of the way and let the flow of the music emerge. They are at once deeply inside and outside the music, both controlling it and letting it flow, both giving and receiving. Unlike other musicians, they are dependent on, at minimum, 35 other people to make their music, and generally more like 75-100. They must be able to convince that many people that their interpretation is valid. Many of the musicians in any given orchestra either 1) don't like the conductor at all, 2) think they themselves could do a better job, or 3) both. There is a lion-taming aspect, even under the best of circumstances. Because, again, we are dealing with an interpretation of *symbols representing sounds*, my collection is also, of necessity, the analog to a vast audio and video archive. Spotify is grossly unreliable in terms of multi-movement symphonies and operas, but YouTube makes possible a degree of comparative listening previously unimaginable. When all is said and done, the great conductors are as individual as fingerprints, have tremendous charisma to match their generally immense educations, and go so far beyond the beating of time (although they may be doing that quite regularly) that they approach transcendence.

Leonard Bernstein famously said that almost any musician could learn to become a competent conductor, and that some could even be good, but that the great ones were few and far between. Why are some good and a select few others great? Why do multiple people from similar backgrounds go through the same training, and yet so few produce anything transcendent? While I am a strong believer in genius, and in its ultimate mysteriousness, I can only say, with reference to the great conductors, that they do exist, and must be seen and heard to be believed. So where do you start?

Rather than giving a conventional bibliography, I have elected to organize it by question/theme and to annotate at length. Again, this barely scratches the surface of the history, the sociology of audience reception, stories of symphony orchestras, etc. A more detailed bibliography/discography is available upon request. Again, the books are the

springboard to the audio-visual. Two quick caveats: 1) This music is meant to be listened to undistractedly. If at all possible, make it your focus when you listen to or watch. Operas may be listened to after initial viewing, but they are meant to be *watched first*. 2) In this age of iPhones and wireless earbuds and tiny computer speakers, I may be shouting into the void, but speakers, speakers, speakers! A good set of computer speakers (say, Bose) and/or a good freestanding Bluetooth speaker roughly the size of a small log will bring you closer to the full tonal range of this music. As well, please remember that as St. John's students, we get \$10 tickets upon request to both the Annapolis Symphony and the Annapolis Opera; the Baltimore Symphony is but a short trip, and the National Symphony Orchestra and Washington National Opera, both in DC, are first-class. The National Philharmonic, probably the finest regional orchestra in the tri-state area, plays regularly at the Strathmore Center in Bethesda, MD.

HAPPY READING AND LISTENING!

**CONDUCTORS AND CONDUCTING: A THEMATIC, ANNOTATED,
FIERCELY SUBJECTIVE, OPINIONATED, AND PAINFULLY PARTIAL
BIBLIOGRAPHY AND HYPERLINK HIVE**

[CAVEAT: Many of these clips are long. Do not be dissuaded. Watch just a few minutes to get a feel for the different conductors' approaches and personalities.]

GENERAL HISTORY

Schonberg, Harold *The Great Conductors*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967

The former chief music critic of the *New York Times* gives informative, witty, erudite snapshots of all the important historical figures. He does the same in *The Great Pianists*, if anyone cares to pursue that area.

Lebrecht, Norman *The Maestro Myth*. Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing Group, 1991

Mr. Lebrecht writes like a British tabloid journalist, and is entirely too fixated on prurient interests; nevertheless, this remains the best and easily most entertaining introduction to the great conductors, the German Opera House circuit, and the evolution of audiences. The appendix with all the career trajectories, by year, is unparalleled.

Mauceri, John *Maestros and Their Music: The Art and Alchemy of Conducting*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017

One of the three main assistants to Leonard Bernstein, and a fine conductor in his own right, Mauceri has seen it all. He combines backstage gossip and firsthand accounts of the wild 1970s with thoughtful and insightful perspectives on the profession.

Rubin, Joan Shelley *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992 Prof. Rubin gives the most concise, entertaining, informative, and wistful look at the days when erudite and cultured book, radio, and TV executives decided high culture wasn't just for those born to wealth. (sigh)

DOCUMENTARY: THE ART OF CONDUCTING (BBC, 1994)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LYnqU4AJvtA>

Two hours long, and well worth it. There is a sequel of equal length. Incomparable footage and interviews.

THE LITERALIST/TEXTUALIST VS. THE ROMANTIC INTERPRETERS

Wagner, Richard (1887) 1989 *On Conducting*. New York: Dover

Der Meister spricht. Small book that packs a huge punch. It's all here. Melos. Tempo modification. Sound and symbol. Rules of interpretation, all of which are meant to be broken. A radical treatise.

Weingarter, Felix (1895) 1969 *On the Performance of Beethoven's Symphonies, and other Essays*. New York: Dover

Wagner did not live long enough to record. Weingartner, a personal friend of Brahms, did, and the recordings are electrifying. More Wagnerian Romantic musings on Beethoven and on music itself.

Hamilton, Kenneth *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008

Peres da Costa, Neal *Off the Record: Performing Practices in Romantic Piano Playing*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012

The Hamilton and da Costa books, on the surface, have nothing whatever to do with conducting, and you may ask why they're here. They are the most compelling and cohesive modern statements of the Wagnerian view of score interpretation. Everything they say about Romantic performance practice with regards to the piano can be applied to the full orchestra, the violin, the voice, or anything else. Purism came in the 1940s and 1950s. Classical music was MUCH more freely interpreted, the Wagnerian view QUITE dominant, for decades. I cannot recommend these highly enough, particularly since one gains access to online recordings of every single excerpt cited after registering the book online. It is possible to hear people play, albeit 'through a glass darkly', who were born in the 1830s!

Leinsdorf, Erich (1912-1993) *The Composer's Advocate: A Radical Orthodoxy for Musicians*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981

Leinsdorf was a brilliant man, and the longtime conductor of the Boston Symphony. This is the most comprehensive treatise available on what a conductor does, what s/he must know, what s/he must study, and what his/her responsibilities are. Maestro Leinsdorf leans toward the Mendelssohnian, purist side. But what an elegant work, and one every student interpreter should read.

Brown, Clive *Classical & Romantic Performing Practice 1750-1900*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999

I did not have time to talk about the British revival of period instruments and performing practice which took place in the 1960s and 1970s. Mr Brown knows it all, and this is the Bible of that movement. I have the deepest respect for his scholarship, but I cannot accept that one must play on the instruments they played on in 1800-something, or replicas thereof, to have an ‘authentic’ interpretation. Still, many of these techniques can be used on modern instruments, and this is an invaluable historical resource. I do not recommend it for the layperson, however. The greatest conductor in this subculture is Sir John Eliot Gardiner, grandson of the famous Egyptologist, whose Bach cantata cycle is one of the greatest things ever recorded by anyone. He, Roger Norrington, and Christopher Hogwood began exploring more ‘authentic’ performance practices in the 1960s and 70s, and made their careers brushing aside Romantic traditions and making everything ‘leaner and meaner’---no string vibrato, original wind instruments, valveless French horns, etc. Gardiner is an astounding musician and intellect, and everyone should hear him. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KcosBkNGjPI> (*Bach Cantata 113*)

Muti, Riccardo *Riccardo Muti: An Autobiography: First the Music, Then the Words.* New York: Rizzoli, 2011

Maestro Muti has had a long, distinguished career. The son of a Neapolitan physician, he has been, at various times, head of La Scala, Milan (Italy’s foremost opera house), the Philadelphia Orchestra, and, currently, the Chicago Symphony. He is classically educated, witty, and confident. He is listed in this section because he is a Mendelssohnian purist with regard to the score, and it suffuses his writing. His perspective on the notes on the page is analogous to a Fundamentalist reading of Scripture. Not my ‘camp’, but he is wonderful and brilliant.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sW0-75f8ov4> *Schubert, Symphony no. 8, “Unfinished”*

THE CRAFT, BOTH PHYSICAL AND PREPARATORY

Rudolf, Max *The Grammar of Conducting.* New York: G. Schirmer, 1950

The standard Bible, at least in America, for time-beating, rehearsal technique, opera vs. symphony, and every possible rhythmic pattern that may arise. The patterns are often made fun of, including by me, but again this is a work that deserves respect.

Scherchen, Hermann *The Handbook of Conducting.* London: Oxford University Press, 1933

Similar to Rudolf, but a bit more mystical, and certainly harder in terms of the description of a conductor’s preliminary requirements. Daunting. Invaluable for the student, who should read it asking, “Do I REALLY want to do this?”, and for the professional who needs to touch base with the very highest standard. A bit pattern-heavy, but so what?

Timeless. Furtwängler would say to the Berlin Philharmonic, “I can do a pattern right out of Dr. Scherchen’s book. See that? But that’s so BORING, isn’t it?”

Thakar, Markand *On the Principles and Practice of Conducting*. NY: University of Rochester Press, 2016

Longtime Peabody and Baltimore Chamber Orchestra conductor Markand Thakar, a protégé of the eccentric Romanian genius Sergiu Celibadache (profiled by Lebrecht in “The Maestro Myth) gives his take on the Rudolf/Scherchen-type book, combined with descriptions of Celibadache’s techniques and EXCELLENT musical insights. His book “Looking for the ‘Harp’ Quartet: An Investigation into Musical Beauty”, is a must-read for all musicians. Anyone interested in conducting should audit or take a Thakar masterclass at some point. He is quite married to a particular style of beating time which insists on the absence of circular motions, but his interpretive powers and philosophy of music are undogmatic and super-Romantic.

Walter, Bruno (1876-1962) *On Music and Music-Making*. New York: Faber & Faber, 1961

Like Zuckerkandl? You will LOVE this. Hate Zuckerkandl’s diagram-drawing side, but love his mystical populism? You will LOVE this. Probably the greatest explanation of intrinsic vs. extrinsic musicality—what can and cannot be taught and learned—ever written. Dr Walter, one of the two major protégés of Gustav Mahler, is a beautiful writer on music. Would that everyone connected with it on as spiritual a level as he did. Of special interest to Johnnies—Dr Walter had the kind of broad, deep German *gymnasium* education that we aspire to here. It is a pleasure to read the writings of a man so conversant with all the high points of Western thought who is able to synthesize it all and focus it all back on the music.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KtQ-A0SUwyc> *Brahms Symphony no. 2 (rehearsal)*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yaCoJbcRP2s> *Documentary about his life.*

BIOGRAPHIES, AUTOBIOGRAPHIES, AND PORTRAITS

Berlioz, Hector (1848-1865) 1966 *Memoirs*. New York: Dover

Great, eccentric French genius composer-conductor. Gallic swagger. Says in the opening that it is unbelievable to him that his birth came about ‘unheralded by any of the portents generally attendant upon the births of august personages.’ I don’t know if he’s joking or not. Don’t you want to find out? Read it and listen to *Symphonie Fantastique*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJ3TGj8CAyA>

de la Grange, Henri-Louis *Mahler (4 vols.)*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995

The gold standard Mahler biography. Volume 2 contains detailed scene-by-scene descriptions of the Mahler production of Program Work *Don Giovanni*, as conceived by the stage director Alfred Rölller.

Shirakawa, Sam *The Devil’s Music Master: The Controversial Life and Career of Wilhelm Furtwängler*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992

Ardoin, John *The Furtwängler Record*. Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1994

My vote for greatest conductor of all time, and a man whose personal life was as interesting as his art. The son of a famous archaeologist, he rose to the top of his profession smoothly. He was Adolf Hitler’s favorite conductor. He hated Nazis, but refused to let them force him out of his country. He would go to Hitler’s office and scream at him that he was a madman, but Hitler let him alone because he worshipped the art. Furtwängler had an eccentric way of beating, hardly keeping time at all, but he had a mystical bond with orchestras and audiences almost unparalleled in the profession. He was at his best in Beethoven, Wagner, and Bruckner. Longtime Berlin Philharmonic timpanist Werner Thärichen, himself a composer and conductor, says, “One day, we were rehearsing, and the conductor was just decent. Suddenly, the sound changed, and we were on the edge of our seats. I looked at the podium—nothing special there. It was then that I noticed Furtwängler had walked in and was standing in the doorway. It was his presence alone that created this sound. He carried the sound so strongly within himself that he was able to invoke and transmit it even without conducting us. His presence was enough. Every rehearsal was a concert. We were on the edge of our seats.” His slows were quite slow, his fasts faster than anyone’s. Listen to his Beethoven Ninth from March, 1942 (Hitler’s birthday). Listen to a man who hated Nazis, forced to conduct for Nazis, using Beethoven’s Ninth as a megaphone to vent his anger, to throw Schiller’s message of brotherhood in their faces. Shirakawa takes a dim view of Furtwängler’s choosing to stay in Germany, which I do not share. (Furtwängler personally helped at least 200 Jews escape to Switzerland, and was practically compelled to stay in Germany

because the Nazis would not allow his mother to leave with him. He feared that she would be killed.) However, it is an excellent biography, and John Ardoin's discography is a labor of love I WISH I had written. An arch-Romantic, and in my opinion, a sonic record of how Wagner might have conducted, had he lived in the era of recordings. The great conductors Claudio Abbado (my man, about whom more later), Zubin Mehta, and Daniel Barenboim used to play Furtwängler recording to each other on transatlantic phone calls in the 1960s and 70s. Barenboim, an extremely confident and imperious man indeed, told an interviewer, "You know, not a day goes by that I don't think, 'I wonder what Furtwängler would have thought of this.'" Of the three, Abbado was the only one who carried on a part of that unique sound, about which more later...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4s1OFwAlMMw> *Overture to "Don Giovanni"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FoU-iCT21fc> *Overture to "Die Meistersinger"—conducted for the Nazis he hated. Chilling.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IgwRtknwI8k> *The slowest/fastest, most shattering Beethoven 9 on record. The climax of movement I. The savagery of movement II. The expansiveness and unbearable intensity of movement III. The CHORUS!!!!*

Sachs, Harvey *Toscanini*. New York: Harper & Row, 1978

Frank, Mortimer H. *Arturo Toscanini: The NBC Years*. Portland, OR: Amadeus, 2002

Horowitz, Joseph *Understanding Toscanini: How He Became an American Culture-God and Helped Create a New Audience for Old Music*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987

When **Toscanini (1867-1957)** and **Furtwängler (1886-1954)** were each asked, "Who's the greatest conductor in the world?", they always gave each other's names. Toscanini's face was everywhere. All Americans knew who he was. NBC, under the leadership of David "General" Sarnoff, created a special radio symphony orchestra for him which was one of the great orchestras in the world at the time, pilfering many players from top orchestras in the process. It is hard to imagine the mainstream cultural fame Toscanini had in America for about 20 years. He was like a rock star. Sachs has written an even more detailed biography which I have not yet read (it came out last year), but this 1978 biography is plenty detailed and comprehensive. Mr. Frank shares many anecdotes from the great radio symphony years, and Horowitz has done as good a job as anyone depicting the great classical music boom in this country, an historical phenomenon I was born too late to enjoy, and upon which I look with great nostalgia. Toscanini was a man of the Left in politics, couldn't forgive Furtwängler for staying in Germany, and was ardently anti-Fascist to his core. Ironically, he was one of the three great tyrants that ever held a baton, and you can hear him SCREAMING at the orchestra in various YouTube

clips. It would not ‘fly’ now, but the performances are electrifying, taut, fast, and almost unbearably intense. How did he live to 90 without having a massive heart attack? For YEARS, the gold standard in this country. Although not a strict Mendelssohnian, he eschewed all Romantic talk about music, and did more to promote the “score and nothing but the score” view than anyone in history. He famously said of Santa Fe Program Work *Eroica* (*Beethoven’s Third Symphony*), “Some say it is Napoleon, others Mussolini. Bah! For me, is only ‘Allegro con brio’.” His memory was legendary and photographic. When a bassoonist complained at intermission that he could not play that evening’s hour-long symphony because his B-key was broken, the old Maestro thought for three minutes, then said, “You don’t have to play any more B’s tonight.” He had mentally run through all the bassoon parts. Despite the verbal abuse, he was loved and respected by musicians, who understood that, as hard as he was on them, he was harder on himself. After a 65-year career, Toscanini admitted that he had been fully satisfied with perhaps 10 concerts.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JQvyg3kJ54> *Overture to “La Forza del Destino” (Verdi)*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DuK133dK6eQ> *Beethoven’s Ninth—compare opening to Furtwängler’s!*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-1KtSOWLXE> *Toscanini SCREAMING in rehearsal. They loved him anyway. Hard to imagine, but it’s the truth.*

Hart, Philip *Fritz Reiner: A Biography*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994

Morgan, Kenneth *Fritz Reiner: Maestro and Martinet*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 2005

Charry, Michael *George Szell: A Life of Music*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 2011

Angell, Lawrence, and Jaffe, Bernette *Tales from the Locker Room: An Anecdotal Portrait of George Szell and his Cleveland Orchestra*. Cleveland, OH: ATBOSH Media, 2015

Rosenberg, Donald *The Cleveland Orchestra Story: “Second to None”*. Cleveland, OH: Gray & Co., 2000

Who were the other two tyrants? **Fritz Reiner (1888-1963, Chicago Symphony)** and **George Szell (1897-1970, Cleveland Orchestra)**. Both Mendelssohnians, albeit fiery ones. Vast recorded legacies. Anti-union. “Is it the primary job of a symphony orchestra to play music at the highest level, or to guarantee its members the best and most secure

job?” sneered Szell. Fired people on the spot. Made people play alone, then made scathing comments. George Szell, a protégé of Richard Strauss, literally remembered every scrap of music he ever heard and could play it on the piano or write it out. Reiner was almost of that caliber, once dictating an orchestral score, from memory, to ten copyists, who then copied out parts for the night’s concert when they were lost on a plane. The two worshipped Toscanini. What they wanted, above all else, was clarity and precision. Szell’s famous saying was, “Gentlemen, we must make this sound as if it were improvised—but, of course, as the result of meticulous planning!” An extraordinary fund-raiser, Szell grew the Cleveland Orchestra into one of the Big Five. Remarkably, fifty years after his death, his spirit somehow still inhabits the Orchestra in a very real sense. It is still his standard to which they aspire at every concert. He was also a terrifying but supportive mentor to young conductors, including the great Metropolitan Opera conductor **James Levine (b.1943)** If a conductor made it through Szell’s course—playing Bach’s Two-Part Inventions with the parts reversed, but the hands in standard position; learning to read full scores at the keyboard at sight; etc., he was well-trained indeed. Szell was also extremely generous, giving assistants regular opportunities to conduct full programs in rehearsal and at run-out concerts, then attending and critiquing. (Bernstein was the same, narrating one assistant’s progress in real time as his other two assistants sat with him, then switching them up. This kind of mentorship is UNHEARD OF today.)

Reiner was treated very badly toward the end by the Chicago Symphony board, but managed, during his tenure, to create some of the finest recordings ever made. He used a tremendously long baton, with which he made unbelievably small little motions. (He once fired, on the spot, a bass player who brought a telescope to rehearsal as a joke.) For some years, he was the conducting teacher at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, America’s most exclusive conservatory, where Leonard Bernstein was his student. According to Bernstein, Reiner would clap once, loudly, say, “STOP! Right where we stopped—what’s the second clarinet playing? Don’t look at the score. Tell me or SING it.” If you couldn’t come up with it, he’d say, “You don’t know your score. Sit down. Study the damn thing.” Brutal. But what training!! Bernstein revered him to the end of his life, although the crotchety Reiner’s response to Bernstein’s histrionic podium manner was, “Well, he didn’t get it from ME.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0FwIG5j188s> *Beethoven 7, Reiner*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YlyUti7BbCY> *Szell rehearses Beethoven 5.*

Walter, Bruno *Theme and Variations: An Autobiography.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946

Ryding, Erik, and Pechefsky, Rebecca *Bruno Walter: A World Elsewhere.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001

Heyworth, Peter *Otto Klemperer: His Life and Times (2 vols.)*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983

The two big protégés of Gustav Mahler were **Otto Klemperer (1885-1973)** and **Bruno Walter (1876-1962)**. Both were Wagnerians, but both took radically different approaches. Walter was gentle, courtly, firm, insistent, and Romantic. Although I love jazz, and am the son of a blues, jazz, and rock guitarist, I never fail to laugh at Walter's aversion to jazz. "They are wonderful musicians," he intoned in his lyrical Austrian baritone, "but I must say that the constant beating of the drum, und die incessant shrieking of the muted brass, are abhorrent to me." A man of his time.

Otto Klemperer, who started his career a hotheaded musical partner of radical stage directors at Berlin's Kroll Theatre, ended his 88 years a god in London. Klemperer was the Terminator of conductors. He was bipolar and went into fugue states for months. He attempted suicide. He was institutionalized. He had several massive strokes. He fractured his skull falling off a podium and almost died. He set himself on fire smoking in bed and underwent horrible therapy. Through it all, he kept conducting. His sarcasm was legendary, as were his mood swings. When he caught a musician looking at his watch in rehearsal, Klemperer asked, "Is it GOING?" In a manic phase, he went missing during a rehearsal of Puccini's opera "Girl of the Golden West". When the stage manager went to look for him, Klemperer jumped out, dressed in full cowboy gear, pointed a gun at the man, and yelled, "STICK 'EM UP!" Women threw themselves at him, even in his 80s. (Many of these men exuded a tremendous erotic fascination which was irresistible to a great number of people.) Yet he was generally deadly serious in rehearsal. Of Klemperer's later years, Yehudi Menuhin recalled, "All he could do was STAND there. But he STOOD there....with authority, and somehow we played what he wanted." Both Walter and Klemperer are profiled in the great BBC series, "The Art of Conducting". Klemperer slurs, post-stroke, "Dr Walter is a very great conductor, but he is also a very great moralist. I AM IMMORALIST! ABSOLUTELY!" He was 6'7", massive, and intimidating, yet deeply spiritual. Walter and Klemperer have spawned great biographies and recorded legacies. It is worthy of note that although both men revered and studied under Mahler, a notorious perfectionist, they interpret his music COMPLETELY differently, and each claimed that Mahler approved of the differences. So much for composers being literalists.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oEJqA1D-vZI> IMMORALIST!!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jz5AJwbn6uU> Beethoven 9. Standing there with authority.

Solti, Sir Georg (1912-1997) *Memoirs*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997

A charming tyrant and long-time conductor at Covent Garden, London, and the Chicago Symphony. Not a modest man. One of the great interpreters of Wagner ever, although his approach to conducting is a fusion. Inimitable Hungarian accent. Horrible singing voice, but perfect pitch. Watch the BBC interview where he rasps, “I came from German Opera House where my word was law. No one ever said to me, ‘No.’ Then I come here, everything’s a negotiation, so I got angry. They called me ‘The Screaming Skull’. That was ok. But then they called me a Nazi. ME—a Hungarian Jew! Do you believe it?” It was his rehearsals that hooked me on conducting to begin with. Great generosity and warmth along with the high-handedness.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2L85eTSWrng> *Tannhäuser Rehearsal*

Barber, Charles *Corresponding with Carlos: A Biography of Carlos Kleiber*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011

One of my top five, **Carlos Kleiber’s (1930-2004)** relationship to the beat is one of my favorites. Along with Claudio Abbado, he is the living embodiment of conducting the PHRASE rather than the beat, and there is a greater correspondence between his beat and the actual MUSIC (not the ‘beat’!) than in almost any other conductor I’ve seen. Charles Barber was a long-time friend and correspondent of the reclusive Maestro by mail and email. This is a loving and comprehensive portrait. His 1989 New Year’s concert from Vienna must be seen to be believed. He was poetry in motion. Himself the son of a great conductor (Erich Kleiber), and filled with Freudian angst, Carlos Kleiber was the most reticent of the great conductors, and performed only a select few favorite pieces for most of the last 10 years of his life. His demands were high, he was mercurial, and producers and promoters would lose much sleep every time he was hired. Whereas most conductors have to make do with four orchestral rehearsals, MAYBE five, he demanded no fewer than 14 orchestral rehearsals for a standard opera like *La Bohème*. And yet, when he was there, there was always transcendent music-making, with hardened orchestral players reduced to cathartic tears.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWIQ7xhU1u4> *Overture to “Die Fledermaus” (J. Strauss)*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7Hn0do-xKE> *New Year’s Concert, Vienna 1992*

Barbirolli, Evelyn *Life with Glorious John: A Portrait of Sir John Barbirolli*. London: Robson Books, 2002

Kennedy, Michael *Barbirolli: Conductor Laureate*. London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1971

Beecham, Sir Thomas *A Mingled Chime: An Autobiography*. New York: Putnam, 1943

Atkins, Harold, and Newman, Archie *Beecham Stories*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979

Lucas, John *Sir Thomas Beecham: An Obsession with Music*. London: Boydell Press, 2009

Now we come to the Brits. **Sir John Barbirolli (1899-1970)** took on the New York Philharmonic after Toscanini's death and was thrown to the wolves by that imperious orchestra. A native Londoner and a great cellist, he decamped to Manchester, where he presided over the Hallé Orchestra for decades. The rehearsal excerpt on the BBC "Art of Conducting" series is hair-raising. One of the best conductor-orchestra marriages ever. Barbirolli died in 1970, and apparently old musicians still tear up at the mention of his name. He was not sympathetic to Beecham. "If you let that man near my orchestra," he said, "you won't see my arse for dust."

Sir Thomas Beecham (1879-1961), grandson of the British equivalent of the CEO of Bayer Aspirin, had a prodigious memory and an eccentric technique. An aristocrat to his fifth finger, and the equivalent of a multi-billionaire in today's money, Beecham, known to all as "Tommy", was as beloved by his orchestras as Barbirolli. Sir Thomas is also, without question, THE FUNNIEST great conductor who ever lived. He told an audience in Liverpool who didn't clap that they looked as if they'd been eating grass for three years. He asked a trombonist, "What is that unique and antiquated drainage system which you are applying to your face?" When he asked the name of a substitute he didn't know, and was told "Ball, Sir Thomas", Beecham replied, "Ah. How very SINGULAR." Of his least favorite instrument, the harpsichord, he said, "I don't know how Bach stood it. It sounds like two skeletons copulating on a corrugated tin roof!" Imagine that Oscar Wilde was a great conductor, and you have it. I cannot resist quoting his autobiography—a fight amongst Russian cast members of a production of *Boris Godunov* ended in reconciliation, and both parties thanked Sir Thomas for his help in resolving the issue. He writes:

Just then, the terrifying suspicion crossed my mind that they were contemplating an affectionate handling of myself. Quite unable to endure the prospect of being enthusiastically embraced by a hundred Russians of both sexes, I loudly called to my native bodyguard, 'Come on boys, that's it, it's all over!', and making a precipitate dash for the doorway, left the chaos to the tranquilised foreigners.

A great conductor of opera and symphony both. I would give anything to have met him.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0yFFBL2alsM&t=9s> *Barbirolli in Rehearsal*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6iUcigwhaE> *Beecham—HILARIOUS.*

Osborne, Richard *Herbert von Karajan: A Life in Music*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1998

Vaughan, Roger *Herbert von Karajan: A Portrait*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1986

Karajan: The Master's Style (photo book). Milan: Umberto Allemandi, 2009

Herbert von Karajan (1908-1989) is the most filmed conductor in history, and died a half-billionaire from recording royalties alone. He was a champion skier, soccer player, jet pilot, yacht captain, racecar and motorcycle driver, and qualified electrical engineer. He never used a score, even for five-hour operas—which he stage-directed as well as conducted. Basically like James Bond, except he conducted. Astounding “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous” portrait by Roger Vaughan—my first conducting book, from back when such profiles were written unironically. The Osborne biography is still the best in-depth profile of this quixotic man, “Part-child, part-wise old Chinese man”, as his best friend and second wife put it. The documentaries by Peter Gelb are stunning. His rehearsal of Schumann’s Symphony no. 4 is the greatest orchestral rehearsal ever filmed, in 1966. “What does a conductor do”, you ask? A sample: “There is something I must explain. Here, the first violins are doubled by the flute. But you can’t hear the flute. Why? You’re too close to the bridge. All of you play on the fingerboard, so the harmonics don’t compete with the flute.” (They play, and you hear the flute. This level of detail is unfortunately rare!) He was an extremely magnetic and attractive man who had veto power over every image of himself ever shown publicly. He had more power than any conductor in history, and no one will be allowed to have that much ever again—but what glorious music-making. Karajan deliberately set out to fuse Toscanini’s intensity and clarity with Furtwängler’s fervent Romanticism and bass-driven sound, and he succeeded!! He considered Furtwängler’s Berlin Philharmonic the greatest orchestra in the world, coveted it, and was named chief conductor in 1955—for life. For the next 34 years, Karajan and Berlin were synonymous, and the very definition of ‘great’. Karajan was taciturn, mercurial, Machiavellian, yet very warm to those close to him. In opera and choral works, his eyes were open—most conductors consider eye contact essential. However, he conducted all symphonic repertoire with his eyes closed. “Furtwängler used to look at us fervently,” recalled one player, “and now we weren’t so much as looked at. It was difficult.” But they got used to it, and a (mostly) first-rate musical marriage was born. Married three times, Karajan found ultimate happiness with the French model Eliette Mouret, whom he married when he was 57 and she was 19. Friends with both his ex-wives, who attended his Berlin concerts religiously, he would bow at intermission to the two exes, and at the end to the current. He was the favorite conductor of Carlos Kleiber, whom Mrs. von Karajan found weeping on her husband’s grave in the middle of the night on the five-year anniversary of his death.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Shc-4AZVaNk> *Karajan in Rehearsal, 1966. THE standard.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asJf3KmA08&t=4s> *Bruckner Symphony no. 8, in St. Florian (Bruckner's church). Closed eyes!*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVprS--bLks> *Isolde's Liebestod with Jessye Norman. Last year of his life.*

Trotter, William *Priest of Music: The Life of Dmitri Mitropoulos*. Portland, OR: Amadeus, 1995

Mitropoulos, Dmitri *A Correspondence with Katy Katsoyanis (1930-1960)*. New York: Martindale, 1973

The great Greek conductor and mentor of Leonard Bernstein, **Dmitri Mitropoulos (1896-1960)** had a photographic memory, down to the rehearsal letters, and never used a score even in rehearsal. His music-making was Wagnerian and unpredictable in the extreme, but in late Romantic works he was extraordinary. From a family of Greek Orthodox priests, he was almost an ascetic, and even a borderline saint—living simply, donating much of his New York Philharmonic salary to the poor, quietly helping all in need...Fascinating biography and very erudite correspondence.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kl-dSoNHx8Y> *Rare video of Mitropoulos. Photographic memory.*

Burton, Humphrey *Bernstein*. New York: Doubleday, 1994

Bernstein, Jamie *Famous Father Girl: A Memoir of Growing up Bernstein*. Harper, 2018

Harmon, Charlie *On the Road & Off the Record with Leonard Bernstein: My Years with the Exasperating Genius*. Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge Publishing, 2018

What is there to say about **Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990)**? I had considered submitting only my Bernstein collection to this contest! Quite simply the finest composer/conductor/teacher this country has ever produced, and a virtuoso pianist besides. Excessive in all areas of his life, yet super-disciplined. Polyamorous and bisexual, yet a devoted husband and father. Taught by Mendelssohnians and Wagnerians alike, he attempted to fuse them. A control-freak, he beat many, many beats, even oversubdividing beats at times. But what passion. His great friend, the violinist Isaac Stern, said that Bernstein had created “A wonderful palace of emotion.” Norman LeBrecht quotes a musician as saying, “He had the courage to translate his every feeling into movement.” The older he got, the freer his music-making got. His Mahler cycle is legendary, as is his conducting a movement of a Haydn symphony with facial expressions only. For better or worse, since Bernstein, every American conductor is expected to be a kind of fiery evangelist/Old Testament prophet for classical music. Most of the men I have listed never had to search for an audience, nor particularly worry about money, nor, God forbid, have to explain to people WHY this music was great and should be

performed and was essential to a culture. Bernstein was, for decades, THE face of classical music in the U.S.—the first native-born American to lead a major symphony, and a tireless advocate for American classical music. The Burton biography is the gold standard. Charlie Harmon’s book is the classical equivalent of a roadie’s tribute to the Rolling Stones. Jamie Bernstein has written a wonderful portrait of her father, which gives her astounding mother, the Chilean actress Felicia Montealegre Cohn, the credit she deserves for signing on to marry this wild, fiery, restless genius.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GgsDp2d-epA> *Art of Conducting (Omnibus) THE BEST lecture on the subject “What is a conductor and what does he do?” EVER. Uses Brahms’ First Symphony as a test case.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rECVyN5D60I> *End of Mahler 2. Bernstein gives himself TOTALLY. Often imitated. Rarely matched.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Kyso5VmZ6g> *“Rite of Spring” rehearsal. Calls trombonists “hunky brutes”.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q38ZLodjvwg> *A great teacher of conductors.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zn5bhJ5YX6U> *His own “Candide” Overture.*

CLAUDIO ABBADO (1933-2014): IN A CLASS BY HIMSELF

Abbado in Berlin: The First Year (documentary, 1989)

Claudio Abbado was the greatest conductor I ever saw live, and I saw him about 20 times. A Furtwängler worshipper and Wagnerian, he took over the Berlin Philharmonic after Karajan’s death, founded the Gustav Mahler Youth Orchestra and the Lucerne Festival, and proceeded to record prolifically even after a near-death experience with stomach cancer that left him barely able to eat. No biography has been available until now; one came out in 2018, and another last year, in Italian and German, respectively. I have ordered them, but have not read them yet. I regret that there is not more written about Maestro Abbado. At one Carnegie Hall concert, an old German man grabbed my hand in the middle of Bruckner’s Ninth Symphony and whispered, “Er hat des klanges Furtwänglers!” (He has Furtwängler’s sound!) Yes, he did, and it’s inexplicable. Somehow, he was able to conjure up that great, bass-heavy sound, combine it with lightness and transparency, and achieve fusion. His concerts were unforgettable. In terms of the physical beat, I have never seen anyone whose gestures I thought were more in keeping with the macro-rhythm and architecture of the music.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-JIazPa8Rk> *Abbado in Berlin: The First Year*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iwZF0JIRFqA> *Polonaise from “Eugene Onegin” (Tchaikovsky)*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zJJiPlbJjs8> *Symphony no. 6, "Pathétique"* (Tchaikovsky) *The old man with his beloved Lucerne Festival Orchestra. A complete transcendence of 'beat'.*

POSTSCRIPT

The essay was condensed from 45 pages, and while I am happy to pay tribute to these men, I can only think regretfully about what I have had to cut. Stokowski (the conductor of Disney's 1940 masterpiece, "Fantasia". Eugene Ormandy, who was with the Philadelphia Orchestra 44 years. The taciturn, deep Evgeny Mravinsky, conductor of the Leningrad Philharmonic for FIFTY years (the record), from 1938-88. The Bernstein protégés Michael Tilson Thomas (b. 1944) and Marin Alsop (b. 1956), the first woman to lead a major orchestra (Baltimore Symphony). The great classmates of Abbado and fellow Furtwängler worshippers, Zubin Mehta (b. 1936) and Daniel Barenboim (b. 1942). The ecstatic and wine-fuelled conducting of Charles Munch (1891-1968). The mystical Jascha Horenstein (1898-1973) The too soon departed operatic master, Thomas Schippers (1930-1977). And the list goes on.

I am sometimes asked if there are any great conductors today. Mehta just 'retired'. Barenboim is still active. I generally think people mean YOUNG great conductors. Well...there are two I think may just be the real deal. Yannick Nézet-Séguin (b. 1973 in Montreal), current head of both the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Metropolitan Opera House, and Teodor Currentzis (b. Athens, 1972), who built his own career by producing his own recordings, and is now guest-conducting the Berlin Philharmonic. Finally, the great German conductor Christian Thielemann (b. 1959), a Furtwängler-worshipper with a Toscaninian temperament!

And finally, I would be remiss if I did not thank all the teachers that cultivated the love of this music and this art. William Hudson. Robert McCoy (1951-2000). Kate Tamarkin. Ruben Vartanyan (1936-2008). Sian Edwards. Leonid Korchmar. Oleg Proskurnya. Piotr Griбанov. Jorma Panula. Christopher Zimmerman. Markand Thakar. Otto-Werner Mueller (1926-2016). Leo Nestor (1948-2019).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_tLuudGGk *Romeo and Juliet Fantasy-Overture* (Tchaikovsky, cond. Nézet-Séguin)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZcA-KuvHeVE> *Dies Irae from the Verdi "Requiem"* (Currentzis)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KTM7E4-DN0o> *Tannhäuser Overture* (Thielemann)