

The Poisoned Well by arwulf arwulf

It's been said that when Gustav Mahler's songs are sung by a tenor, we are closest to hearing the voice of the composer himself. On the other hand it's certain that the female voice, developed to its full harmonic potential, constitutes a direct emanation from the cosmo-feminine plexus of the universe. Therefore, no gender assignment. All sound is creative; it's the first state of coming to be. Today I am in the mood for German *lieder*. Turn a singer loose among us. Tenor or mezzo-soprano, solo or duet, that's fine. And may the conductor of the orchestra not rush the tempos. Waleed Howrani is my choice for pianist, if pianist there be. Open up the windows, breathe the music coming in.

Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, elements of which appear in his First Symphony, is a song cycle of remarkable depth and beauty. Some of us got no time for this sort of thing; hard-pressed to listen closely and cop a vision in that other dimension, but sure to spend two hours a day chatting over e-mail, many would grow impatient with this product of the 1880s.

Personally, I cherish its every turn. Mahler set his own poems to transformational music, and it's unhealthy that more of us do not have time for such austere rituals. It is springtime. The orchestra says so. Here's a bird singing from the branches of a tree: "Hi, you! Is that right? Good morning! Isn't it? You there! Isn't it a lovely world?" Beatific vision of the blessings of the earth.

Imagine declaring such music illegal. To stamp it with the Star of David in the same ban as rendered Mendelssohn *verboten* and the poetry of Heine *anonymous*. A staggering abomination. Little Joe Goebbels as arbiter for a nation, for a continent, and, if you're not careful, for the world. To ban Mahler's music is to ban the heart. This I do believe.



Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau

Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, aged 27 years, recorded *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* in 1952, his voice beautifully accompanied by an orchestra under the direction of Wilhelm Furtwängler. It was the dawn of Dietrich's recording career, and quite near the close of Furtwängler's. Within two years Wilhelm would leave his body at the age of 68 whereupon Herbert von Karajan would clamber to the top of the heap as a superstar conductor, eventually amassing enormous quantities of wealth. I wish to consider these men, together with a few of their contemporaries and predecessors, in the light—and shadow—of their ethics; to compare the actions of one against the other, and to reflect upon a culture nearly destroyed by Nazi punks.

Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, whom I have nicknamed "Deeter", wrote an autobiography entitled *"Reverberations" (1989 Fromm International)*. It is refreshingly honest about collective denial and social malaise. Walking to school one day in 1938, Deeter and a friend came face to face with the ugly spectre of racist violence: "Glaring white letters, ugly drawings, arrows pointing to [Jewish] stores, words of abuse, obscenities, all scrawled on the pavement, brought to a stop first our feet and then our hearts...the plate glass windows all around were smeared over. People passed by with frozen expressions."

It was the morning after *Kristallnacht*. "Sometimes I was amazed that human beings were so easily capable of such things..." Here is a sensitive and conscientious eyewitness. "The movie newsreels brought us the first terrifying hints of concentration camps. It became impossible to claim that we knew nothing about them. But people buried their heads in the sand, preferring what they believed to be the security of the moment.

Did that make those who remained passive equally guilty? Were we boys guilty when, walking to school, we silently passed by the filth scrawled in the road?

"Everyone knew what was going on, but we were not brave enough to bring up this particular topic in school. Of course anyone could see and understand if only he took the trouble to think. But people were not informed enough. The broad stratum of the middle class was perhaps even more ignorant than were the workers, who had been schooled by the German Socialist Party and by their trade unions. Nevertheless, the daily object lessons played out in the streets really should have made many people more suspicious...The newspapers contained hints that the Jews were being 'dealt with'. Could it have been that we did not believe such indications? Of course we did...Gradually people escaped into cynicism." Having read these words, whenever I hear Deeter interpreting Mahler, Schubert or Wolf, there is an extra dimension added to the listening experience: the conscience of the artist. Now whenever an artist behaves instead as if the conscience has atrophied and fallen off, operating with a seriously impaired sense of what's right or wrong, then I for one will stand up and ask questions about the nature of the energy which is being generated, circulated, given tangible form.

Richard Wagner's essay "Judaism in Music", which appeared in 1850, is apparently the work of a sociopath: "If emancipation from Judaism seems to us a prime necessity, we must test our strength for this war of liberation. We shall not gain this strength merely by an abstract definition of the situation, but by an intimate knowledge of the nature of our deep-seated, involuntary feeling of repugnance for Jewish nature. By this unconquerable feeling, what we hate in the Jewish character must be revealed to us, and when we know it we can take measures against it. By revealing him clearly, we may hope to wipe the demon from the field, where he has been able to thrive only under the protective cover of darkness, a darkness that we good-natured Humanists ourselves have offered him to make his appearance less disgusting."

This reads exactly like a passage from *Mein Kampf*, but it was written by Richard Wagner. Some have tried to explain it away saying that Wagner was simply pissed off at Meyerbeer, but that will never do. There is no excuse for this sort of garbage, and it is not surprising that many people still avoid Wagner on principle. Separating the music from the politics is difficult; some say impossible.

Still, Wagner is part of the story. His tonal innovations shaped much of the music of the second half of the 19th Century, impacting the experimentation of the 20th. Anton Bruckner is cosmic. Hugo Wolf, strong tea. Debussy is deeply involved in this equation. Look through the magic window of Mahler to Schoenberg, Webern, Berg, (keep looking!) Messiaen, Stockhausen, Boulez, even Zappa. There's all this historical connective tissue. One cannot go back and rearrange. Wagner is part of the picture. Yet even as the whole-tone scale expands the potential of harmonic vision, one must confront Wagner as a haunted thrombosis of the collective European shadow. We all must be responsible for our actions. Wagner's anti-Semitic publications contributed to the poisoning of the wellspring of Germanic culture. As much as I might enjoy a Wagner overture, one cannot ignore the fact that music and hate spew came from the same man. It makes for difficult listening.

We turn now to the unpleasant case of Herbert von Karajan, who joined the Nazi party twice; he applied for membership on April 8, 1933 in Austria, where the Party was still illegal. Less than a month later, on May 1st, he joined the brownshirts in Germany. The number they assigned him on this second occasion was 340914. I get this information from "*Karajan—Notes On A Career*" by Robert C. Bachmann, translated by Shaun Whiteside (1990 Quartet Books, London). This is a damning study, which pins Karajan on all of his sociopathic qualities. When Bachmann interviewed Karajan, the results were illuminating: B: "Does it hurt you that your Party membership is still held against you?" K: "I'm quite indifferent to it." B: "Do you think you did something wrong back then?" K: "No, quite certainly not. I would do exactly the same again." He then compares joining the Nazi Party with becoming a member of a Swiss mountaineering club!



Herbert von Karajan

Bachmann states that Karajan "...has grasped nothing of what it means to be a human being. Probably quite unconsciously he is, in his boundless inability to connect with the people around him, making a mockery of the ideal of humanity, and the victims of a regime which he himself loyally served. Either he didn't know what he was saying and doing, and had known it at no point in his life, or he has never understood the catastrophe that occurred during those years, either internally or externally."

Karajan on the subject of the Third Reich: "It did me no harm...it really advanced my career." Bachmann observes: "The truly shocking aspect of his biography is not that he allowed himself to be...useful to the regime, but that he refused to face up to it. And that he learned nothing from history." No shit. Even Albert Speer eventually had it together to admit in writing that he and his buddies made a lotta really big mistakes.

Vocalist Elisabeth Schwarzkopf says it all: "Karajan was an utterly bad character...although he was a great conductor, the behavior of Karajan was such that we have no reason, even after his death, to say he was a great man. He was not."

Contrast this tarnished tale of a Nazi punk with the story of Wilhelm Furtwängler, who, when he first saw a swastika banner hanging in a Viennese orchestra hall, informed the administration that "as long as that rag is up there, I will not begin rehearsal." Learning that Goebbels intended to appropriate the Vienna Philharmonic so as to turn it into a state orchestra, Furtwängler openly stated he would have nothing to do with the ensemble if it fell into state hands. He confronted Goebbels one-on-one about this. The exchange was turbulent but Furtwängler prevailed. It is said that the traditions of this venerable organization would have been lost forever if this man had not stood his ground; "we would certainly not have the Vienna Philharmonic we have today."

Furtwängler actively resisted the purging of Jews, half-Jews and spouses of the "racially impure" from the orchestras under his command. He actually got into a shouting match with Hitler over this issue. He also boldly opposed the ban on Jewish composers for as long as this was possible. My impression is that his bravery knew no bounds. For he risked his life by working to save Jews and other imperiled persons to the fullest extent of his capabilities. "Those for whom he could not get help officially, he assisted covertly in escaping." At least on one occasion he arranged the transfer of an individual from a concentration camp to a munitions factory, where that person worked until the fall of the regime.

"Helping Jews and other undesirables [became] all but a full-time occupation for Furtwängler...he never hesitated in helping anyone—Jew or otherwise—right up to the end of the war...Even when helping Jews became a capital crime, and people were being publicly hanged on mere suspicion of it, Furtwängler helped or tried to help anyone who asked him. Hundreds whose lives were endangered lined up outside his dressing room after concerts to ask for aid. Furtwängler never turned anybody away and did what he could for each of them directly or indirectly. Furtwängler's record for flagrantly assisting persecuted individuals inside the Third Reich is probably as unequalled as it is astonishing."

This information comes from a book with a very facetious title: "*The Devil's Music Master—the controversial life & career of Wilhelm Furtwängler*" by Sam H. Shirakawa (1992 Oxford Univ. Press) —Highly recommended.

Why was Furtwängler able to resist tyranny so openly? Because he was Hitler's very favorite

conductor. Now this is truly ironic! Can you picture the dynamic in the upper echelons of the Third Reich? Goebbels and his staff testily commenting upon Furtwängler's subversive humanitarian actions; Himmler rubbing his hands together saying "let me have him for a fortnight"—and all the while they couldn't mess with him because the Führer would object, saying "Jah, his politics are hopeless, but listen, this son of a bitch can *conduct!*"

Furtwängler never joined the Nazi Party and refused to give the fascist salute; he constantly ducked and sidestepped to avoid conducting at state functions. How different from young Karajan, who would often begin his concerts with the *Horst Wessel Lied*. Furthermore, how ironic that the obedient Karajan ended up on Hitler's shit list because of a botched performance of Adolf's favorite opera, Wagner's *Meistersinger*. It happened in 1940; legend has it a vocalist showed up drunk and caused the show to flounder. Hitler observed that Karajan was conducting without a score, and put the blame on him without finding out what had really happened. "I will not attend the Opera again if that young man is conducting." This pretty well kept Karajan out of the concert halls until the collapse of the Reich. He concentrated instead upon gramophone recordings, and this is exactly how Karajan groomed himself to become the postwar king of studio production.

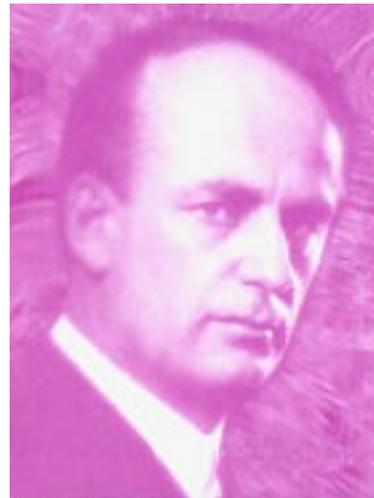
Meanwhile, the Ministry of Enlightenment and Propaganda used Furtwängler's name to further its own agenda. The rest of the world kept hearing about Hitler's precious conductor, the pride of the Third Reich, as if Furtwängler was in cahoots and proud of it, even as he fought their racist and totalitarian laws on a daily basis.

It is infuriating to learn how relatively painless was Karajan's "denazification" after the war; he never had to apologize or explain himself. It was time for EMI records to launch a superconductor! "*Never mind that membership card, you handsome devil, put on this turtleneck sweater and pose for the cameras! Let's sell some adagios!*" When he died, Karajan left an estate worth more than 270 million dollars.

Furtwängler's reputation was smeared, particularly in the USA, and to this day he is often mistakenly pegged as a Nazi. This means that people continue to believe the advertising slogans of the most vicious liar of the 20th Century, Joe "the putz" Goebbels. Even Bachmann, while he nails Karajan for refusing to answer to his past behavior, perpetuates the lie about Furtwängler.

I do appreciate what Bachmann wrote about Karajan's superstardom: "His work largely remained nothing but a contribution to the greed of an excessive society which, in the age of mass-communication, is losing its ability to communicate. How is the musically unskilled listener from our primarily visually-oriented culture to respond to music—a listener, in addition, from a generation which has grown up with the controlled diversity of an abstract reality delivered by television, and which constructs its vision of the world according to that false reality because it seems more authentic than the real world? A listener who, by listening too much but not really listening at all, has forgotten how to listen?"

Listen: Furtwängler left many wonderful performances on record. He also wrote three symphonies. There is a divinity which lives inside of the music itself. When I'm alone I often sing *Om Namah Shivaya Om: I bow to the divinity within*. Somebody tried to poison the well, but it still runs clear and cool. I stand by Wilhelm Furtwängler—with all of my heart I declare his memory to be sacred, his spirit divine. ☑



Wilhelm Furtwängler