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A Conductor for the Ages

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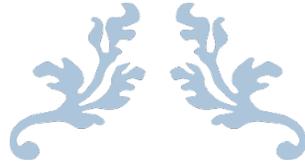
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A CONDUCTOR FOR THE AGES



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Music is an interesting idea. It is the epitome of ephemerality. Despite being audible one moment and then gone forever in another, its affects are long lasting. It must have a beginning and an end, but the aftermath can linger within the listener. Not only did Herbert von Karajan direct music in a way that encompassed that description, but he himself encompassed that description. Herbert von Karajan was an Austrian who conducted in Germany in the twentieth century. It can be said that he greatly impacted Germany in the area of musical performance as well as film and recording while he presided as conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, or Berliner Philharmoniker as it would be called in the native German tongue.

Born Heribert Ritter von Karajan on April 5, 1908, Karajan was the posterity of Ernst and Martha von Karajan. Dr. Ernst von Karajan was a dentist and instead of living a musically lacking life, he rather had an extreme appreciation for music. He himself played piano and clarinet. The Karajans would often put on programs within their homes. It was even said that sometimes if Ernst von Karajan was called to work they would pause the program until he returned even if it was in the wee hours of the morning. It was at these programs that Herbert began publically performing piano at a young age. It was clear that he had exceptional skill and musicality as a pianist.

Karajan studied piano with Bernhard Paumgartner in Salzburg. It was here that he not only grew as an exceptional musician, but also where Paumgartner recognized that piano was not enough for Karajan. As Karajan said himself, "Then came the decisive day when I discovered that my two hands weren't enough to express what I wanted to express. In this predicament my lifelong friend and mentor, Councilor Paumgartner, said: 'There's only one thing you can do: you must become a conductor.'"¹ From this point Karajan moved into conducting receiving a position in Ulm. From Ulm he then received a position as the music director in Aachen. It was at

these two places that his rough edges were rounded so to speak. As a young conductor he was very energetic, and he needed time to mature. Both Ulm and Aachen gave him the time to mature and grow into a better conductor.

In addition to a musical upbringing that only somewhat qualified him to be a world class conductor Karajan was a studious individual. He would wake up every morning and study his scores until he had them memorized. He knew his scores inside and out and he had a precise idea of exactly what he desired the piece to sound like. Karajan was constantly doing something whether it was studying scores or flying planes, he would never let his mind rest. In fact it is safe to say that only in conducting a performance would his mind be the most relaxed. This personality of continual motion definitely gave Karajan the ability to be knowledgeable about the music that he required himself to conduct.

As a conductor one must be highly knowledgeable not only about the score itself but also about each individual instrument within the ensemble. This in depth knowledge is a necessity, otherwise the orchestra will recognize that the conductor does not know enough to be conducting them, and the relationship will be extremely poor. Karajan obviously was studious enough not only to fill that portion of the conductor's role, but to exceed expectations. He would say that it was his duty to share the music he conducted with the world. Matheopoulos refers to Karajan as having "Almost the attitude of a priest. Or a *true* doctor."²

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1. Dornhelm and others, *Karajan; Or Beauty as I See it*.
 2. Matheopoulos, *Maestro*, 243.

Karajan was a master of perfection. When Matheopoulos referred to Karajan as a doctor it was quite appropriate, not only in the sense that his father was a doctor, but also in the way he treated the orchestras he worked with, namely the Berlin Philharmonic. He would work every imperfection until the music conformed to the sounds he heard within his head. He would often get frustrated with how the orchestra would not play the way he desired them to play. It would often be only a small detail such as hearing an up-bow or a down-bow instead of just “a” bow. This type of precision was not mainly a drive to perfection, but embodied a desire for beauty and musicality.

By the time that Karajan reached the Berlin Philharmonic he had received enough experience to take him exactly where he needed to be. He had proven to the world that he could take an orchestra and transform it into a better orchestra. By observing Karajan’s rehearsal of Schumann’s 4th symphony the precision of each note and movement can be observed in his technique. He would tell the first violinists to listen to the flutes, because within the passage the flutes brighten the sound of the violins as they play in unison to create a sharper contrast. In a second passage he pointed out that the phrase was proceeding through a decrescendo. Right at the end however there is a bow change within the first violins which caused the last note to be louder even though it was right at the end of the decrescendo. He quickly pointed this mistake out and had the orchestra fix the problem. These subtle nuances proved Karajan’s perception of the journey music must take within a piece. He understood how the flow of a passage needed to be effected in order to carry out its specific purpose.

It could be said that Karajan impacted the performing forces in Germany through his work with the Berlin Philharmonic. In the most direct sense Karajan’s qualities as a musician all impacted his influence. As a child the many performances he gave on piano prepared him to

understand the musicality required to perform music well. His personality as a studious musician helped to connect his preparedness with the music to the well rehearsing of the orchestra. His ability to hone in on mistakes and transform a passage that is played well into a passage that is played with expression and musicality proved his ability to work with an orchestra in order to produce highly valued repertoire. These are the main ways Karajan's personal life and musicality helped to impact the German performances of orchestral music.

Karajan had a very interesting take on film and how it was used within music. He was one of the pioneers who affected the use of film in music. Before becoming his own director for the films he created, he worked with directors such as Georges Clouzot and Hugo Niebeling. Both of these directors had an impact on Karajan's view of what he wanted in the film and what he did not want in the film. His personality of precision impacted not only the musical aspects of his work, but also the visual aspects of the films he worked on to create.

With Clouzot, Karajan's films were clean, pristine and were filmed as we would picture most films of orchestral concerts in this day and age. Excellent crossfades as well as good motion of the camera across the performers. The one main difference that pervades all of Karajan's films would have been more camera time upon Karajan himself. Whether the reason behind his desire to have the camera on him more often was a result of narcissism or of the desire to show the music visually via conducting, it is hard to say. Both have logical reasoning behind them, but neither are exclusively important to the lasting effect of his films.

Niebeling in comparison to Clouzot had radical ideas of what the marriage of film and music should have looked like. Niebeling was so good visualizing the music to a point where it detracted from the music itself. The production of Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony No. 6 captured the movement and intensity of the music within the film production. When the music is

topsy-turvy the camera movement itself was spinning and almost seemed as if the camera man were on a boat riding the waves. In addition to this when a particular line descends in pitch the picture of the performer descends in a linear motion across the screen as if to represent the notes themselves descending on a staff. This type of videography infuriated Karajan to such a great extent that Niebeling was cast out after his work on the two films he created with him.

Karajan desired a more commanding role in the production and editing of these films. He wanted to impact film and the visual effect of film in the same way that he wanted to command the music. This aspect of Karajan is not only found in the filming techniques and musical rehearsals and performances he left, but also within his recording techniques. He had a similar approach to recording as he did to filming. He desired to create what he had inside his mind and to capture it to share it with more people than just the few that could attend a concert.

Karajan worked his orchestra to perfection however in recording he desired to capture the sound of a concert in a concert hall. He constantly experimented with his sound technician and discussed on how to get the correct sound and level of each instrument. The goal was not to cheat by using recording technology as we would see many pop artist doing today, but rather to use the technology in order to transform the individuals' sound system into a concert hall. The vast number of his recordings are still popular today and capture not only good music, but the sound that Karajan produced. A sound consumed with love and passion for music itself. A conversation of expression. Ultimately a communication of souls.

Karajan's impact as a musician upon the musical performance itself, filming, and recording is still impacting the world today. His accomplishments have been unparalleled and unmatched. The ability for a musician to be so well versed in technology in order to work with other professionals in such a way to create something that was before his time, was and is an

astounding feat. His interpretation of music is timeless, and his impact will carry throughout generations. In the same way that this discussion began regarding the ephemerality of music, so it must end. Karajan passed away on July 16, 1989, and yet as music lasts for a short time and is gone, Karajan himself will continue to live on within the high quality performances, films, and recordings, as well as the hearts and minds of conductors and musicians. An impact and challenge to see music as beauty and release, or catharsis for the soul.

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