

HERBERT VON KARAJAN

David C F Wright

Vanity cannot make a great conductor, wrote a famous conductor.

A great conductor performs what is written and does not make alterations, wrote another.

The conductor is the servant of the music not its editor or arranger, wrote another.

If these things are true then Karajan was not great conductor.

Herbert von Karajan was born in Salzburg on 5 April 1918 to a family that may have been Aromanian, a Latin people of the Southern Balkans or Greek. His great-great-grandfather was Georgios Johannes Karajannus who was born in Kozani a town now in West Macedonia in Greece. Herbert's grandfather on his mother's side was born in what we know now as Slovenia.



His parents were Ernest and Marta nee Kosmac. The boy studied piano with Franz Ledwinka and was a competent pianist as a child. He studied at the Mozarteum from 1916 to 1926 and his other teachers were Franz Sauer and Benhard Paumgartner.

Music was apparently in doubt as a career and so he studied at the Vienna Technical College from 1926 to 1928. Nevertheless music triumphed and he was particularly interested in conducting. In 1929, he conducted Richard Strauss's Salome. From 1929 to 1934 he was Kappelmeister at Stadtheater in Ulm. In 1933 he conducted the Walpurisnacht scene from Gounod's Faust and the following year conducted orchestral concerts and opera at the theatre in Aachen.

He was always self-promoting and aligning himself with those who he felt could advance his career. All his life he would tread underfoot anyone to elevate himself. On 8 April 1933 he joined the Nazi party and was a disciple of Hitler. But, within weeks, the Nazi party was outlawed in Austria. Karajan remained a member and supported Hitler's desire to eliminate the Jews. Karajan was ruthlessly anti-Semitic as was Chopin, Wagner and Britten.

Some conductors such as Klemperer, Kleiber and Toscaninni fled from Nazism and Fascism. Other conductors remained working in Germany despite the political upheavals such as Furtwangler, Ansermet, Schuricht, Bohm, Knappertsbusch, Krauss and Elmendorff. Karajan stayed in Germany although he was the least experienced conductor.

Karajan was also narcissistic, difficult and troublesome. His petulance and Elgarian character made him highly disliked.. His first marriage to operetta singer Elmy Holgerlof on 25 July 1938 was unsuccessful and ended in 1942 when he remarried almost immediately to Anna Maria Sauet on 22 October 1942 despite the fact that her grandfather was a Jew. This caused him to fall from favour somewhat in Germany but he still continued to pay obeisance to the Nazis.

But to backtrack. In 1935 he conducted Fidelio at the Berlin State Opera which was followed by Wagner's masterpiece Tristan and Isolde. It must be remembered that Germany had great opera

conductors at this time including Furtwangler and Victor de Sabata.

Towards the end of the war, Karajan and his family moved to Italy with the help of de Sabata.

Karajan's first post-war concert in Vienna was in 1946 with the Vienna PO but then he was banned from conducting by the Soviets who had occupied Austria and this was because of Karajan's allegiance with the Nazis. When the ban was lifted in 1947, he recorded Brahms's German Requiem. Two years later, he became the director of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna. He conducted at La Scala, Milan and was recording with the infant Philharmonia in London. He became associated with the Lucerne Festival. During 1951 and 1952 he conducted at Bayreuth and, in 1955, became musical director for life of the Berlin PO and from 1957 to 1964 was artistic director of the Vienna State Opera.



In 1955, he made his first of four major tours to the USA with the Berlin PO and in 1957 and 1984 he took the orchestra to Japan.

His second marriage ended in 1958 and he remarried the same year to a French model, Eliette Mouret and they had two daughters the first being Isabel who was born in 1960 and the second was named Arabel.

He received many awards including a honorary Doctor of Music from Oxford University, the Gold Medal from the Royal Philharmonic Society, the Olympia Award of the Onassis Foundation and the UNESCO International Prize.

It is true that his fame was due to his very many recordings and he was said to be the top-selling classical artist of all time selling, at least over 200 million records. He was fortunate in having excellent recording engineers which made his orchestra sound so good.

But he was an absolute pig to many of his soloists and choirs. He often altered the composers instructions because he knew better. For example, six horns in a Beethoven symphony, not what Beethoven wanted! Of course, there will be others who will praise him particularly if they are female and glamorous for he had an exaggerated interest in such.

Let me quote an example which is one of hundreds made by professional musicians in their justifiable complaints about Karajan. This one is from one of the greatest singers of our time.

Karajan's beat was often confusing. Although his upbeat and initial downbeat were clear, he would then often form circles in the air with his baton and his eyes closed. That difficult beat and the effects on performers got many of us, including me, into conflict which had unfortunate results for quite a long time.

He was entrusted with the rehearsals of The Ring in 1951. Knappertsbusch was to conduct the actual performances and his outlook on the music was broader than that of Karajan who accelerated the music in rehearsals which made it horrific for the singers. He broke the speed record in conducting Wagner although Clemens Krauss could be even faster.

When Karajan conducted Tristan with his confusing beat, he became even more irritating. In Act Two, we all tried to decipher his tempo but he was in the pit with his eyes closed sketching clouds in the sky with his baton with no clear rhythmic structure which could be followed. At one rehearsal, the tenor Ramon Vinay left the stage in desperation. I tried to talk to Karajan about the problems he was causing. He took my reasonable comments as an affront to him and refused to have anything to do with me for 12 years.

He was the consummate capitalist only interested in making money and promoting himself. He dominated music in Austria and at the Vienna State Opera for many years. This pampered to his Elgarian pomposity and the narcissism of Britten.

Brigit Nilsson had a heavyweight bout with him in his office. He came very close to striking her. Her pearl necklace was broken and the pearls spilled upon the floor. Karajan became even more sarcastic and hateful.

After his 12 years of blacklisting me, I returned to work with him. Again his meditative posturing was evident. At a performance at La Scala and, after the initial applause, he sunk into potentially endless contemplation, his eyes shut and his head buried in his hands. He had to be roused by someone in the audience to conduct the performance.

Rehearsals with him did not allow any discussion about the roles which Metropoulous would welcome. Karajan had an autocratic attitude and was unreasonably critical. As to my performances of Elektra, he said that I was too sarcastic in the role. If anyone disagreed with him on anything, he was oversensitive and objectionable. All the other conductors I worked with admired my interpretations. Reiner and Szell, both far better conductors, could be fussy and occasionally severe but, unlike Karajan, they put the music first. Karajan put himself first.

Yes, Karajan was an absolute pig,



He produced and directed films of his conducting and the camera was fixed on him ninety nine per cent of the time. The orchestra was glimpsed not seen, never were the soloists or the choir seen. In fact, in Beethoven's Choral Symphony he could have been conducting to a gramophone recording! The close ups of him were such that you could count the hairs up his left nostril.

Vanity does not make a great conductor.

Some of his recordings are good. That cannot be denied. His Four Last Songs of Richard Strauss with Gundula Janowitz are second only to the performance by Lisa della Casa. I remember his performance of Sibelius's Symphony no. 4 which is a tough piece. It was simply awful and deviated from the score. I did not hear it again until I heard it played properly in a performance by Alexander Gibson.

If you hear a work for the first time and it is played badly it can hinder your appreciation of it for life and lead to false appraisal and statements.

In his last years, Karajan was beset with illness and had a few strokes. He died from a heart attack on 16 July 1989 in Anif south of Salzburg.

(It is regretted that this article has been purloined by some dishonest person and appears elsewhere without my authorship being acknowledged)

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