

Furtwänglers Sendung: Essays zum Ethos des deutschen Kapellmeisters

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ALBRECHT RIETHMÜLLER / GREGOR HERZFELD (HG.)

Furtwänglers Sendung

Essays zum Ethos des deutschen Kapellmeisters

Musikwissenschaft

Komponisten - Dirigenten

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Furtwänglers Sendung: Essays zum Ethos des deutschen Kapellmeisters

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[1] Stellan Skarsgård is a Swedish actor who plays the role of the German conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler in István Szabó's film *Taking Sides* (2001, based on the theater play by Ronald Harwood from 1995). Skarsgård is regularly cast in the films of the Danish director Lars von Trier (e.g. *Dancer in the Dark* 2000, *Dogville* 2003, *Melancholia* 2011, *Nymph()maniac* 2013), which—generally speaking—deal with confusing the roles of perpetrator and victim, using at times explicit images of violence and sexual obsession as well as disturbing soundtracks fraught with multiple possible meanings. Von Trier's integrity has been questioned after accusations of sexual harassment,^[1] as well as his public statements professing fondness for Albert Speer and empathy for Adolf Hitler.^[2] Skarsgård, who made excuses on von Trier's behalf by arguing that he was only joking, is widely known for his roles in the Disney blockbuster franchise *Pirates of the Caribbean* (part 2, 2006, and part 3, 2007, directed by Gore Verbinski with music by Hans Zimmer) and in the film musicals *Mamma Mia!* (2008 and 2018, directed by Phyllida Lloyd and Ol Parker respectively) featuring hits by ABBA. Recently, he won a Golden Globe for his role in the TV mini-series *Chernobyl* (2019, created by Craig Mazin), which has also been highly acclaimed for its haunting soundtrack by Icelandic composer Hildur Guðnadóttir.^[3] Playing the roles of a cursed pirate or a hopeless romantic, a pervert or a rapist, the Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers in the Soviet Union or the head conductor of the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonic Orchestras during the Third Reich, Skarsgård has proved his versatility and changeability as an actor. Whereas these abilities are indispensable for a successful acting career, play-acting in the music business (apart from musical theater and some areas of popular music) is generally perceived as inauthentic and a change of character is rarely an option. Apparently, musicians may be allowed to evolve and refine their art, but they should be consistent in their ideals.

The impression that Wilhelm Furtwängler heeded this (mis-)conception emerges clearly from the readable collection of twelve short essays edited by Albrecht Riethmüller and Gregor Herzfeld, *Furtwänglers Sendung* (Furtwängler's mission / calling). One learns that Furtwängler consistently believed in the freedom of musical life from political restrictions, as well as in his vocation to serve the German people and the tradition of German music, beliefs he held during the Third Reich and beyond. He held on to his convictions even though doing so lent support to both a murderous fascist system and a dangerous post-war business-as-usual mentality. He was consistent. Considered alongside other influential studies of Furtwängler,^[4] however, the question emerges of whether he may have played different roles after all, whether he had merely acted the role of collaborating cultural partner with the Nazis, or whether he had invented this role for his denazification trials. Depending on how these questions are answered, one finds oneself in company with either apologists or critics in the divided reception history of Furtwängler's career. The film *Taking Sides* does indeed take sides by creating a story that rests upon the actual denazification trial and dramatizes it into fiction. Historical research is a different matter. It is necessarily based on source material but, although historians arguably cannot avoid imposing a narrative on their subject, this should by no means produce fiction. Rather, it is supposed to aim at an objective, unbiased, and critical examination of these sources before—if at all—taking sides. This approach is chosen by the authors of the essay collection. By relying on archival as well as

published source material and by reflecting on secondary literature, the authors attempt to interpret Furtwängler's actions and words during the Third Reich as well as the consequences of those actions for his reception history until now. They discuss critically the idea of music existing in a political vacuum and the entanglement of music aesthetics with ethical questions—two ideas commonly encountered even today in thinking and writing about music in general, but nonetheless deceptive strategies, I would argue, that often turn out to be merely disguised loopholes and pitfalls when it comes to the responsibility and integrity of artists, researchers, and publicists.

[2] In the twelve short essays the authors highlight diverse aspects of Furtwängler's career from various angles—individual, complementary, and sometimes overlapping ones. The topics include the inevitability of music's political implications in a dictatorship and the error of presuming an unpolitical safety of musical life. They deal with the notion of music as an unquestioned carrier of moral values and the Nazis' chauvinist claims of the superiority of German music. Furtwängler's relation to Joseph Goebbels, Ludwig Curtius, Thomas Mann, and others is discussed together with his reception by his first biographer (Friedrich Herzfeld), a more recent biographer (Sam Shirakawa), and in the film *Taking Sides*. Besides his career as a conductor, his ambitions as a composer are also taken into account. As mentioned, the approaches mainly rely on primary sources, citations from correspondences, private notes, newspapers, administrative documents, etc. Some of them are cited for the first time, others are well-known and repeated more than once within the book itself, as admitted by the editors. Although more cross-referencing between the essays would have served to acknowledge their individual but interconnected angles, the generous quotations allow readers to make up their own minds before following or disagreeing with the authors' interpretations. What unites these essays as snapshots ("Momentaufnahmen," 7) is that they deal thoroughly with the ambivalence of their subject. Instead of trying to resolve the fuzziness of these shots ("das Diffuse mancher Bilder," 7) into a clear or clean picture by eliminating disturbances, the authors deliberately focus on the blurred details and present them one after another in revealing close-ups.

Gerhard Splitt opens his essay "Kapellmeister nur 'für das Volk'? Der Dirigent im NS-Staat" (Kapellmeister only "for the people"? The conductor in the Nazi regime, 9-25) with two widely known quotes that render a blurred image of, on the one hand, Furtwängler's commitment to serve only his audience—the people alone—and on the other hand, Goebbels's satisfaction over the conductor's growing affiliation with the regime. By drawing on further primary sources, mainly Furtwängler's and Goebbels's own words, and focusing on the first few years after the *Machtergreifung* (seizure of power), Splitt comprehensibly explains that the conviction to serve the people and to remain unpolitical ultimately served the totalitarian regime and that the conductor must have been aware of this (11). Revisiting the dispute over the ban on performing Hindemith, Splitt underlines that both sides agreed on one level: that their disagreement concerned principles of art and culture in a dictatorship (15). With a detailed analysis of the chronology of events, Splitt also draws an interesting connection between Furtwängler's temporary resignation and the possible scheming involvement of Richard Strauss and reveals an error in the edition of the correspondence between Strauss and Clemens Krauss related to these events (19-20). Splitt bases his argument conclusively on Furtwängler's own words taken from sources between 1927 and 1954 that show astonishing consistency and demonstrate that he had "das Sendungsbewusstsein eines Kunst-Hohepriesters" (23), meaning that he behaved like a high priest who preaches his art with missionary awareness and intention.



Figure 1: festive staging of *Friedenstag* at Vienna State Opera as part of the *Reichstheaterfestwochen* (Reich Theater Festival) in Vienna, June 10, 1939; presentation of a laurel wreath to Richard Strauss, with director Clemens Krauss on the right-hand side; by courtesy of Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, [Bildarchiv Austria](#)

The notion of consistency is taken up by Michael Custodis in his essay “Kunst als politisches Vakuum?” (Art as a political vacuum?, 27–38), which aims at explaining why Furtwängler believed in the unpolitical nature of musical life in the first place. Custodis argues that Furtwängler’s upbringing and humanistic education led to an aesthetic mentality that was firmly grounded in the *l’art-pour-l’art*-principle of the Romantic era. Hence, he held fast to a belief in the autonomy of music and saw himself as a composer in the tradition of Beethoven and Brahms. Drawing on sources from retrospective literature by and correspondences with his teacher Curtius and his early love Bertele von Hildebrandt (later Braunfels), Custodis gathers illuminating details on Furtwängler’s developing personality in his adolescence and early career. Readers may decide, however, how much meaning they want to acknowledge Braunfels’s characterization of her former fiancé half a century after their break-up and three years after his death (32). Furtwängler’s character as well as his beliefs in the supposed superiority of German music were easily accommodated within the Nazi ideology directly after the *Machtergreifung*, as Custodis lucidly points out (34), and even his ambitions as a composer of German anti-modern music were compatible with the political agenda despite his insistence on separating music from politics. Further references to two incidents that are also mentioned in other essays of the book would have been desirable: his refusal to participate in the propaganda film about the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra (1944) and his imminent arrest in the winter of 1945 in the wake of the attempted assassination of Hitler.

In a complementary way, the following essay “Musik als Immunitätsgarant: Zur Verquickung von

Kunst und Moral" (Music as a guarantee of immunity: On the conflation of art and morality, 39-46) by Andreas Domann deals with the amalgamation of musical competence and moral values in Furtwängler's career and its reception history. According to Domann's thesis, which is supported by quotes from the conductor, apologetic writings about him, and Detlef Oesterreich's concept of authoritarian reaction, Furtwängler was and still is conceived to have been an ethical authority despite his anti-democratic thinking and because of a rather unconscious but widely practiced habit of explaining music in terms of moral categories (42). With his concise analysis, Domann reveals the pitfalls of this unquestioned mixture in musical thought now and then.

[3] The misconception of music existing in a political vacuum is resumed by Lore Knapp, in her essay "'und übrigens, was hat Kunst mit Politik zu tun?' Die Familie Mann und Furtwängler" ("And what, by the way, does art have to do with politics?" The Mann family and Furtwängler, 47-57), from the perspectives of Thomas Mann and his children (Erika and Klaus) and their reactions towards the conductor's involvement with the Nazi regime and his unbroken post-war career. Knapp cautiously elaborates on the hiatus of broadcasting his performances abroad despite their propagandistic context and origin from the fascist enemy at war. She cites Erika's disapproval of these broadcasts as well as Thomas's ambivalent words that simultaneously communicate detestation of the conductor and love for the music he performed. Acknowledging that Thomas not only shared the conductor's belief in the superiority of German culture but also his notion of music's moral values, Knapp refers to *Doktor Faustus* (1947)—at times with slightly meandering confusion which may be due to its diffuse subject and the limited extent of the essay—in order to point out that Mann chose the option of literary codification ("den Weg literarischer Chiffrierung," 52) for his reckoning with the cultural politics of the Nazis and their humanistic roots ("um mit der nationalsozialistischen Musikpolitik und ihren geisteswissenschaftlichen Wurzeln abzurechnen," 52) and that he created the protagonist Leverkühn as an inverse mirror image of Furtwängler.



Figure 2: Thomas, Erika, Katia, and Klaus Mann in 1929 (Photo by Eduard Wasow); by courtesy of [Wikimedia Commons](#)

In “Paktieren mit Goebbels” (Colluding with Goebbels, 59–72), Johannes Hellmann is committed to prove that Furtwängler made a pact with the regime, with Goebbels in particular, which was based on an ongoing give-and-take negotiation with benefits for both sides. “Paktieren” is a word used by Furtwängler himself in a letter to Curtius in 1934 as one of two options he came to terms with—the second was to leave the country (59). From here, Hellmann cites mainly from Goebbels’s diary and connects the excerpts to a chronology of decisions and events. Revealing as this may be, one must be aware of the fact that Hellmann’s argument relies on the subjective observations of a cruel scheming felon. Nevertheless, Hellmann drives the point home how Furtwängler was viewed in the eyes of the Nazis. By citing from letters of the conductor, he is also able to demonstrate how Furtwängler’s involvement with the regime’s decision on the 80th birthday celebrations for Richard Strauss, who had then fallen from grace, had nothing to do with taking a stance on behalf of his rival but was intended to secure his own standing and to expand his power in the music business of the Third Reich and beyond (69). Hellmann furthermore points out the similarities between Furtwängler’s rhetoric and the language of the Nazis.

Misha Aster’s essay “Der Kämpfer” (The fighter, 73–84) is an engaging close-up on the careers of the four Jewish musicians in the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, Gilbert Back, Nikolai Graudan, Joseph Schuster, and concertmaster Szymon Goldberg. Even though they were allowed to keep their positions initially after the *Machtergreifung*, Aster argues, this was part of what he calls the “Goebbels-Furtwängler-Pakt” (77): Furtwängler was temporarily permitted his artistic freedom and the regime benefited from fueling antisemitism within the orchestra, before all four were forced—not officially but nevertheless forced, as Aster proves—to leave and save their lives in

exile. Fortunately, they were able to continue their careers—despite Goldberg’s internment in a Japanese concentration camp on the Dutch East Indies—and reunite in the United States. Aster recounts emphatically but without citing a source how Goldberg, after one of his concerts in London in 1947, unexpectedly encountered Furtwängler who unashamedly stated that they both had suffered greatly (73). Apparently, as Aster claims, relying on the memory of Furtwängler’s wife Elisabeth, the conductor continued to correspond with Back after the war and wrote that he was homesick for the four musicians (83). At this point, the picture remains distorted and a more critical analysis of the sources would have been desirable.



Figure 3: Szymon Goldberg in 1957 (Photo by Eugene Cook); by courtesy of the [Szymon Goldberg Official Website](#)

That Furtwängler perceived himself first and foremost as a composer but is almost exclusively known for his conducting career, is the subject of Frédéric Döhl's essay "Selbstbild und Rezeption des Komponisten" (Self-image and reception of the composer, 85-105). Döhl eloquently argues that Furtwängler as a composer was no less embedded in the political context: he acted deliberately, negligently, and knowingly supported the Nazi regime ("er [Furtwängler] hat

vorsätzlich, jedenfalls grob fahrlässig wider besseren Wissens deren Herrschaft [die der Nazis ...] unterstützt," 92)—despite his claims to the contrary and for at least two reasons. His main compositional phase commenced with the circumstances of his politically forced resignation in 1934 and his musical-aesthetic thinking parallels the cultural politics of the Nazi-regime in its discrediting of atonal music. With quotations of the composer on music aesthetics from the time during and after the Third Reich—e.g. his description of atonality as “biologisch minderwertig” (91), that is, biologically inferior—Döhl demonstrates that Furtwängler’s thinking remained consistent and further that his compositions are not only political (“eminent politische Musik,” 94) but also a credo (“Glaubensbekenntnis,” 95) for tonal music. In his writings, the composer intended to justify the anti-modern style of his compositions, which he nevertheless was reluctant to perform himself. After an analysis of Furtwängler’s string quintet in C major (finished in 1935), Döhl—somewhat ironically—concludes that the composer and his work are far less interesting than his legacy as a conductor and his role in the Third Reich.

[4] Possibly understood as a continuation of his first essay in this book, Michael Custodis in his second essay, “Glauben an den deutschen Geist: Im Briefwechsel mit Bertele Braunfels, Ludwig Curtius und Hans Schnoor” (Belief in the German spirit: In correspondence with Bertele Braunfels, Ludwig Curtius, and Hans Schnoor, 107–24), revisits Furtwängler’s companions, in this case with an emphasis on the immediate post-war period and his denazification trials. With a thorough critical analysis of primary source material mainly from the conductor’s estate, Custodis comprehensibly traces the consistency of Furtwängler’s belief in the rightness of his behavior and his intention to continue to serve the German musical tradition. Through quotations from the letters, some of which are given in full, readers are able to relate to and distance themselves from Furtwängler’s thoughts on feeling betrayed and unrightfully accused. The correspondence with Curtius reveals not only that he still claimed the interpretational sovereignty over German music (110) but also his antisemitic attitudes (112) as well as his ignorantly consistent adherence to music as being unpolitical (116). Custodis explains that by collaborating with Hans Schnoor, who planned to publish a music magazine intended to praise German anti-modern culture, Furtwängler blatantly agreed with antisemitic opinions on political and aesthetic matters.

The essay by Gregor Herzfeld, “Friedrich Herzfelds Monografie” (Friedrich Herzfeld’s monograph, 125–37), focuses closely on the first biography of Furtwängler, published in 1941, and its author Friedrich Herzfeld who was not only the head of the press department of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra but also a Nazi with Jewish ancestors. Gregor Herzfeld consequently argues that the biography with its propagandistic tenor simultaneously served the Nazi-regime; the author, who was eager to conceal his family tree; and the subject, who must have agreed to his portrayal as “arischen, deutschesten, tiefsinnigsten und klangmagischsten Dirigenten” (“Aryan, most German, and most profound conductor with the most magical sound,” 133). With this background in mind, it is even harder to digest the citations from the book that describe the conductor’s career through the lens of an antisemitic and chauvinistic ideology. Comparing the original with the post-war edition, published in 1950, Gregor Herzfeld points out that besides obvious eliminations, the tenor of German nationalism was conserved and the recent history was merely labelled as a catastrophe. “Die Streichungen und Änderungen sind darin ebenso aufschlussreich, wie das, was an Chauvinismen stehen bleiben konnte” (135)—that is, the eliminations and changes are as telling as the retained chauvinism, as Gregor Herzfeld accurately concludes and reminds us that this was not a singular case neither in journalistic nor—one might add—in musicological literature.

With his second essay, “Toscanini und Furtwängler aus der Sicht Adornos” (Toscanini and

Furtwängler from Adorno's perspective, 139–45), Andreas Domann presents an insightful reading of Adorno's *Die Meisterschaft des Maestro* (The mastery of the maestro, 1958), arguing that even though Furtwängler is only briefly mentioned, Adorno's condescending view of Toscanini can be interpreted as an inverse mirror image of the German conductor (139). Domann diligently elaborates on how Adorno's critique of Toscanini is based on his belief in the superiority of German music and musicians and how his invective is similar to the words Furtwängler used in 1930 about his Italian rival. After investigating Adorno's notion of moral integrity and political attitude, Domann resumes: "Nicht der Dirigent, der mit seinen Auftritten nationalsozialistische Propaganda unterstützt hat, wird zum Sinnbild gesellschaftlicher Zwangsverhältnisse, sondern der, dessen Nationalität und Geschmack nicht Adornos Billigung erfahren" (145)—in Adorno's view, then, the symbol for social constraint was impersonated by Toscanini because of his nationality and taste, ironically not by Furtwängler who supported the propaganda of the Nazis.

As an example for apologetic writing on Furtwängler, Till Wallrabenstein in "Strategien einer erzwungenen Apologie in Sam Shirakawas *The Devil's Music Master*" (Strategies of a forced apologia in Sam Shirakawa's *The Devil's Music Master*, 147–59) discusses this monograph from 1992. He demonstrates that Shirakawa characterizes Furtwängler similarly to a Greek epic hero by writing from an imagined first-person perspective and that he sacrifices referencing reliable sources for an empathetic fictional writing style. By quoting from the book, Wallrabenstein demasks the contradiction of describing Furtwängler as politically naïve and as a hero of political resistance at the same time (151). One wonders if Shirakawa, who argues that Furtwängler's performances were disguised acts of political protest (152) and labels Holocaust survivors demonstrating at the conductor's denazification trial a "pack" (156), deserves more attention at all.

The collection concludes with an essay by one of its editors, Albrecht Riethmüller's "Vom jüngeren Umgang mit einer Musikerikone" (On the recent handling of an iconic musician, 161–77), in which the misconception of music as unpolitical and musicians as morally good is once more emphasized as one of the reasons for Furtwängler's unbroken post-war career and his apologetic reception that has turned into hagiographic cult (161). Riethmüller eloquently demonstrates this with several illuminating references but focusing mainly on two examples: first, two recent box editions of Furtwängler's recordings (Berlin Phil Media 2018 and Deutsche Grammophon 2019) with their booklets and the journalistic reactions to it, and second, the film *Taking Sides*, which dramatizes Furtwängler's denazification trials and demasks the above-mentioned misconception. Questioning the strategy of projecting the circumstances of war and terror on Furtwängler's interpretation of the recorded works, Riethmüller draws attention to the facts—that is, the politics of programming works only by German and Austrian composers (except for Sibelius who counted as German enough for the Nazis and, it must be added, Ravel) and the lack of Jewish composers even in the recordings after 1945 (166–67). Pondering Riethmüller's critical analysis of some spotlights on Furtwängler's reception, one wonders whose judgment is more reliable, that of the fictive character in Szabó's film, the interrogating major who recognizes him as a friend of criminals, or the booklet writers who praise him as a legendary conductor of German music.

[5] While this collection of essays contains many insightful answers, it provokes even more questions. For example, why did Furtwängler, despite his many statements after the war, never officially or publicly utter a single word of sorrow, empathy, consternation, or any comment at all with respect to the Holocaust? Thinking about this question, one might promptly ask, would it have changed anything? From the twelve essays that focus on Furtwängler's actions, writings,

and beliefs, it emerges that he was consistent throughout his career. He did not play a role. But he played an important part in the propaganda machinery. He showed consistency—but how can it be that an artist stays true to himself, remains unchanged, and maintains his authenticity even after having been part of a murderous regime that committed the cruelest crimes against humanity? Answering these questions was not the aim of the book. But it explains and interrogates with critical reflection of reliable source material the consistency of Furtwängler's reception history. Apart from a few typographical lapses, the book presents a substantial as well as accessible scholarly contribution to the state of research on Furtwängler and to the thematical series *Komponisten—Dirigenten* of the Franz Steiner Verlag in which it was published. One hopes that the (male-gendered) series title is not taken too literally and that, following the monographs on Gustavo Dudamel^[5] and André Previn,^[6] it will also include high-quality research on female composers and conductors in the future.

References

1. On her Facebook page in 2017, Björk, who played the lead role in von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark*, described having been sexually harassed by a Danish director. Although she does not mention his name, von Trier is the only Danish director she worked with. Cf. Björk's Facebook posts, [October 15, 2017 \(3:14 p.m.\)](#), and [October 17, 2017 \(1:12 p.m.\)](#). Von Trier promptly denied the accusations. Cf. "'Not the case': Lars Von Trier denies sexually harassing Björk," *The Guardian*, [October 19, 2017](#). All websites have been accessed on March 19, 2021. ↑
2. For von Trier's comments on Hitler and Speer, see the video of the press conference at the Cannes Film Festival in 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QpUqpLh0iRw>; and for Skarsgård excusing von Trier, see his interview with Matthias Greuling for *Die Furche*, [April 3, 2014](#) or in English with Sam Adams for *The Dissolve*, [March 21, 2014](#). All websites have been accessed on March 19, 2021. ↑
3. For *Chernobyl*, Guðnadóttir received, among others, a Grammy (Best Score Soundtrack for Visual Media) and an Emmy (Music Composition for a Limited Series, Movie, or Special) in 2020. Interestingly, the Golden Globes lack the category of Best Score for TV. However, in the category of Best Score for Motion Picture she won—as she would a few weeks later at the Academy Awards and in the following year at the Grammy Awards—with her score for Todd Phillip's *Joker* (2019). Her success is unprecedented in the film music business, in which prizes have been awarded almost exclusively to male composers. ↑
4. Besides the academic literature referenced throughout the book, one may also turn to sources of oral history available on the Internet, such as the narratives of Furtwängler's second, twenty-five-year-younger wife Elisabeth (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYtzewocufs>) or by one of his five children born out of wedlock to five different women, Friederike Kunz (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8yxzMJSmGQ>), to listen to the personal memories of their husband and father. Both websites have been accessed on March 19, 2021. ↑
5. Peter Moormann, *Gustavo Dudamel: Repertoire—Interpretation—Rezeption* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2019). ↑
6. Frédéric Döhl, *André Previn: Musikalische Vielseitigkeit und ästhetische Erfahrung* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2012). ↑