



Hammer of the gods

Hypnotic? Perfectionism? No conductor's legacy is as widely – and passionately – debated as Karajan's. There's a very good reason for this, argues **Peter Quantrill**

We still talk of something called a classical record industry, some amorphous collective that produces and disseminates good music for the enrichment of our minds and other men's pockets. But for all the achievements of Edison, and Fred Gaisberg, and Compton Mackenzie, to name a few, in creating records and a market for them, classical music's industrial revolution was born on 19 January 1946 when Walter Legge met Herbert von Karajan in Vienna. The wheel stopped turning, to the chagrin of record executives the world over, on 16 July 1989, when Karajan died at his home in Anif, outside Salzburg.

Listeners have moved on, even if not all record-company executives have, to a more

pluralistic age and perhaps one, in Karajan's prophecy, where "we shall be overwhelmed with things that are tenth-rate". His story is the story of that "classical record industry", its self-aggrandising triumphs and moments of sublimity as well as grotesquerie. His reputation took a nose-dive even as his principal record company, Deutsche Grammophon, started up the Karajan Heritage industry in 1990 with the egregious and multi-million-selling "Karajan Adagio". Among his upwards of 500 recordings, few are now mentioned, fewer still recommended, in comparative assessments on radio or in print, except in dutiful observation that the past is another country. Successive editions of the *Penguin Guide to Classical Records/CDs* graphically reveal the rise and fall, not of the intrinsic merit



of his recordings, but of critical sympathy to them. Even so, the greater portion is still available. Someone must like them.

Legge's journey to post-war Vienna was in search of new EMI artists, but one in particular: a conductor to record with his new Philharmonia Orchestra. With Karajan in thrall, Legge seized the moment to arrange a series of recordings that vividly capture their troubled times and transcend them – Brahms's *German Requiem* and Second Symphony, the last two symphonies of Beethoven and, most affectingly, Strauss's *Metamorphosen* – where the old gold of Musikverein Vienna still glows but with a new burnish. Legge realised that he had found the modern kind of conductor he was looking for, and Karajan was hungry – to learn, to make

records (and money) and to recover a reputation compromised by the lengthy de-Nazification process. He seized the Columbia/EMI contract with alacrity. As the producer Andrew Keener remarks, "In the Philharmonia, Legge created an orchestra the refinement of which Karajan had never previously encountered. Between them, they made recording a recognisable art form in itself for the first time. They shaped the aesthetics of classical recording."

What crucially helped them to do so was the switch from wax masters to the new tape technology. You could now drop in a quaver instead of making another four-minute side. Where Furtwängler and others affected baffled contempt for the concept of editing, Karajan saw technology as his servant in reproducing his

work on record, and the technology itself shaped his interpretations more explicitly than any other classical artist. Much later, he would have live musicians imitate editing software in using two oboes for the obbligato solos in Bach's B minor Mass "to help create a long line and obviate intrusive snatched breaths" – breaths, you might think, which are written into the very fabric of the music.

In fact the mastery of *legato* that Furtwängler had grudgingly acknowledged in Karajan is evident from some of his earliest recordings. So, in retrospect, is the continual evolution and sanguine reassessment of a work and his approach to it (that, like so much about Karajan, has been underestimated, perhaps due to critical spasms of revulsion against the hype). A Berlin



Philharmonic Dvořák Ninth becomes hopelessly becalmed in the slow movement. Mozart symphonies with the radio orchestra in Turin bear out Karajan's admission of defeat: "I heard in my inner ear what I wanted to hear and the rest...well, it went down." Back then he had not learnt how to take the thrill of "Das Wunder Karajan" from the concert hall to the studio. The critic Klaus Geitel remembered the "glittering, exciting" thrill of pre-war Berlin concerts with their new repertoire: concerts with Furtwängler "were like going into a cathedral"; with Karajan, it was "like going to the Venusberg, like entering a bacchanal."

Jackboots...and pianissimi

His fifth concert with the Philharmonia in London set the tone for the reception of Karajan in English-speaking countries. Where the *Daily Mail* resorted to "jackboots marching" in Beethoven's Seventh, Eric Blom in the *Daily Telegraph*, more reasonably, heard "hectoring severity", but went on: "About the symphony everything was notable, most particularly perhaps the fact that no incident was less than meaningful; yet none failed to subordinate itself to the conductor's total conception."

From the same concert *The Times* already noted the extreme *pianissimi* that would become one of Karajan's defining characteristics. London audiences had last heard such orchestral virtuosity a decade and more previously in the concerts that the BBC Symphony had given with Arturo Toscanini, who is so vital an influence on Karajan's early interpretations and recordings:

"Toscanini impressed Karajan for ever", remarks Michel Glotz, Karajan's executive producer from 1968 onwards, "by saying that if you want a real *crescendo*, you must go from the most *pianississimi* to the loudest *fortississimo*."

There are Philharmonia recordings that show Karajan learning on the job, creating blueprints for much more finished later recordings. One of the most telling indicators of his achievements with the Philharmonia was the Brahms cycle that he prepared, but Toscanini conducted, in 1952. When Toscanini arrived, he found (to his delight) he had little to do but direct: the incandescent results are now on Testament. But in the field of opera, his experience as general music director of the theatres in Ulm and Aachen had furnished him with The Knowledge – of the repertoire and the art of the possible. *Hänsel und Gretel*, *Falstaff*, *Der Rosenkavalier* – dazzling jewels of the gramophone catalogue, all of them, alongside his contemporaneous Milanese collaborations with Maria Callas in *Madama Butterfly* and *Lucia di Lammermoor*. He never pretended to the technical knowledge of his singers and instrumentalists that many conductors consider obligatory, but his sense of timing, and of a singer's capabilities, enabled him to produce "not one but three or four generations of singers," said Christa Ludwig. "His primary focus was to instruct the orchestral players to listen to the sound of the singers."

Nor, for all his enduring fascination with technological advances, did he delve into the particulars: he left that to the experts. Robert Gooch, one of EMI's first stereo engineers,



KARAJAN TIMELINE

Karajan side bar
Sit alisi blandre
tem et lore velit ut wis et,
consectem doloree tumsandre
coreet, volobor in essequam
iucsi tem do core exer ad
tionsenibh el ing eniatissi.

Luptat ilit velesto endre vent
utpat prat aliquat. Duis te dipis
accum iriuscin ut ut nosto dui
tie facip ercipsustrud erostie
deliquisl ea facil dolor sectet ad
dunt prat adignim dolore

dolessissisl ing et wisse delenis
nostincipit enit ut il et ad tem
vel iurem irit nis nos nulputat.
Tat. Ci blandipsummy
nullaoreet, sequisi tie te eugueri
liquat dolutatem veliquam,

quam, quamet wisis et outpat.
Modit, sum eugiam vulputpat,
quis euismol oborting ex enisi
blam alit nonsent la faccum
essequisse diam outpat, quis
num inim dionsenibh ex el

Harnoncourt the conductor (below), Musicus-Wien (left)

Harnoncourt the Musicus-Wien (left)

Harnoncourt the conductor (below), and with Concentus Musicus-Wien (left)

Harnoncourt the conductor (below), and with Concentus Musicus-Wien (left)



delesequis nonsecte magna cor ad eu feuijsumsan utem dolut atum in estinci eum vulla faccum dunt nummy non utpatue molestrud tin et vulluptat lutpatelis atue magnibh euis

accum aliquisl dolore dolut wis nos amconul putpatu mmodit nissi. Tum zrrilisi. Cum inibh et, vulputatue dunt at. Duisl et autpat, consecte magniam

etuerat, con velendrem do con er se magnim iliquiscin el ea faccum andigna feum vullaore consed tet, quat vero elis nibh etue magnibh ex eraesecte dolobor sumsand ionsectet del

dolenim zrriliq uisciduis dolutpat. Ut dolor si blan ulput wisi. Andrem at. Ure faccumandre vent ing endionsectet vel ullaore dolutpat.

remembers Karajan staying in the studio while Legge lorded it in the control room, commanding minute adjustments of microphones and levels that Gooch and his colleagues knew would go unheard. Even 30 years later, his sound engineer at DG, Günter Hermanns, says it was rare for Karajan to comment on the takes that he, Hermanns, had selected.

Image and preception

On the other side of the Atlantic at the end of the 1950s, Leonard Bernstein was starting to stage the Young People's Concerts of the New York Philharmonic, and composing music that united popular and classical idioms. Between them, the two men would be the recognisable faces of the conductor for decades to come. Both commanded matchless powers of musical understanding and psychological acuity. They would sell classical music to millions. One would enlist the word, the other, the image. Bernstein's special quality was his approachability, Karajan's was his aloofness. That both images were just that, images, is less important than their perception. What matters is not that there were other conductors who could do certain works better, or were pushed into shadow – of course there were – but that these two, Bernstein and Karajan (obliquely united by their mentor, Dmitri Mitropoulos), knew how to harness their talents to their destinies.

After his election to the head of the orchestra he had been "born to conduct", the Berlin

Philharmonic, Karajan was not slow in taking the bait of expensive new stereo equipment and an exclusive contract from DG's president, Elsa Schiller. The first of their Beethoven cycles, in 1962-63, illustrates Karajan's greatest gift, pinpointed by Sir Simon Rattle in an anniversary tribute recorded by the Karajan-Centrum.

"Karajan gave the orchestra even more than the sound which is always part of their birthright. He had a very, very profound sense of pulse which is what people tend to forget about his work – he had a devastatingly strong rhythmic impulse that was underneath it. And that's why he was often able to conduct in such a very, very smooth way but yet keep the pulse underneath it." The racing, the flying, the yachting and everything else all stem from a contemplation of forward movement more commonly observed in great sportsmen.

Foreign audiences from the 1960s onwards heard little from Karajan but Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Bruckner and later on Mahler, but in Berlin and on holiday in St Moritz a library of Western orchestral music on record, from Albinoni to Henze, was steadily accumulated. The ambition is gargantuan, and not all the

Karajan would take in the new wave of '60s auteurs at the cinema – Visconti and Kubrick

be renamed Pizarro, so dark and lowering is the overall feel, brutal, massive, preeminent, not in the least illustrative of the tender or vulnerable sides of the drama – and most inspired in *Tristan*,

where the lovers of Vickers and Dernesch swirl round in an ecstatic double helix, oblivious to the rules of time and space.

Karajan and Glotz would take in the new wave of '60s auteurs at the cinema. Karajan was impressed by Visconti and Kubrick's *2001*, of course, but even more by *Barry Lyndon*, which according to Glotz "corresponded to his idea of beauty". Kubrick's retelling of Thackeray's anti-heroic anti-romance used the widest-aperture camera then built in order to film by the light of three candles, technology at the service of hyper-naturalism. No wonder Karajan loved it.

His attention wandered from audio to video, spurred by collaborations with Henri-Georges Clouzot and his Salzburg Festival productions. A contemporary – and consequent? – lack of care over balance and editing, even orchestral discipline, is painfully obvious in recordings such as the 1975 Sibelius Fifth on EMI and the best-selling DG *Planets*. "Sometimes there are horrors and glories on the same disc," notes Keener. "I learnt Stravinsky's *Apollo* from Karajan's recording, and though some said it was beautified, I found it utterly seductive, the huge refinement of the playing. But turn over and you get incredibly slipshod playing in the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* – rhythmically slack, missed entries and so on."

"Perhaps it's human nature to always want what one doesn't have," was Christa Ludwig's reasoning in her autobiography. "Although



Harnoncourt the conductor (below), and with Concentus Musicus Wien (left)



ABOVE Harnoncourt receiving the 2005 Kyoto Award (top) and (above) in rehearsal
BELOW Harnoncourt receiving the 2005 Kyoto Award (top) and (above) in-

Karajan's greatest toy was stage direction, he hadn't learnt the craft, so he needed an insane number of rehearsals just for the lighting." The vast, dark, static productions, and the films from which bassoons are banished as too ugly for a Télémondial Eden, both show how Karajan's eyes were out of kilter with the sophistication of his ears. Far more telling, more fiery, more honest, are the live telecasts of the Berlin (1959) and Vienna (1957) Philharmonic tours to Japan, recently released by NHK's DVD label, which bear out Rattle's observation: "He had a very particular concept of sound and what it is. Sometimes when I see films of Karajan as a young man it's astonishing how aggressive his conducting is. He's like no one I've ever seen, and he might have been battling with demons." The encore from the Berliners is the *Air on a G String*, chaste, quite reserved, yet pliable in every bar. The final *rallentando* is uncondacted, except perhaps by telepathy. How did he do it?

It's in the last few years of his life, when incapacity and power struggles caused him to reassess his priorities and relinquish administrative power and opera production, that a rough passion re-emerged in his conducting. In a recent interview, Ben Kingsley referred with admiration to a Japanese artist who hoped that, when he was 90, he would be able to paint a

masterpiece with three strokes. The Vienna recordings of the last two Dvořák symphonies, the last Berlin Beethoven Eighth and *Missa solemnis*, achieve more by attending to less, allowing the brass their head, and chorus and strings to sing in full, untrammelled sweep. For all the standard wisdom of early=good, late=bad in Karajanology, the set of *Paris* Symphonies from 1980 is only one of many examples where the later recordings convey more urgently than their predecessors all that might be at stake in, say, the unrelenting G minor drama of No 83.

The great legacy

What I have found odd in listening (or listening again) to many Karajan recordings during the last two months is how difficult it is not to strike a defensive stance. The same words recur in critical appraisals from both dismissive and appreciative standpoints. Hypnotic, for example, which is frequently applied to the films, and to his recordings of repertoire from Bach to Ravel. Some listeners find the idea of being hypnotised by a performance a repellent manipulation; for others, it is simply a consequence of submitting to Karajan's control of timbre and tempo. His EMI recording of *Pelléas* is sumptuously Wagnerian, no question: well, either you believe that Debussy was reacting against *Parsifal* and *Tristan*, or surreptitiously absorbing them. Most loaded of all, the accusation of "perfectionism". Which artist does not want every performance to be perfect – that is, true to its own lights, and those of the work? One who returns to *Der Rosenkavalier* time and again understands the Marschallin's injunction to "hold and let go: those who are not like that will be punished by life and God."

The drive to eliminate contingency is there – most comically in Karajan's commission of a cowbell-machine, built like a spit-roisserie, for his 1977 performances of Mahler's Sixth, so that the cows would graze *a tempo* (does the machine still gather dust in the Philharmonie?). A curiously contradictory charge is one of interpretative absence (ironically, once an ideal of the period-instrument movement): that Karajan wound up the Berlin Philharmonic clock and set it going. I know what *The Times* reviewer of Karajan's 1965 London performance means about his Bruckner Eighth when finding it "bland and empty of personality...the shell of a great cathedral without an altar or cross". The celebrated DG Bruckner cycle all too truthfully reflects its original cover artwork of a frozen avian corpse, noble and lifeless. Rattle remembers Karajan saying to him: "It's easy to sing like a bird when you're young like a bird. When you have had life's tragedies – it's much harder to sing then." It reminds me of that wonderful Auden quote. Somebody wrote to Auden, wanting a libretto for an opera, and he wrote back only one sentence: "Sorry, too sad to sing. Yours, Auden."

Knowing that Karajan joined the Nazi party, under whatever circumstances and for whatever

reason, will be enough for many with long memories – and some with shorter ones – to declare that they can take no pleasure from his subsequent career. I am not one of these people. I am not hypnotised by the "home video legacy" of the Unitel films; they are a well intentioned vanity project that, in Andrew Keener's phrase, already look "desperately dated and tawdry". Elsewhere, however, I am struck time and again by an innate stylishness that pertains to the music itself. Wherever I turn, composers sound completely themselves. *Il trovatore* (all three recordings!), Sibelius's Fourth (DG), *Die Meistersinger* in Dresden (EMI), Prokofiev's Fifth, all those Strauss waltzes and polkas in London and Vienna.

Twenty years from now, Karajan's most durable legacy may still be of music from his own war-torn age: Puccini, Strauss, Ravel and Shostakovich. Were I charged with preserving one record for posterity, I would pass reluctantly over his Schumann Second, his New Year's Day Concert and his Schoenberg Op 31 and alight upon Shostakovich's Tenth – not in either of the blistering DG recordings but Melodiya's LP of the Berlin Philharmonic concert given in the Moscow Conservatoire on May 29, 1969. No edits, no sonic swirl, just decent Russian stereo and collective musical intuition and nerve on the verge of what must be humanly possible. Never

His most durable legacy may still be music from his own war-torn age

(in my experience) has the symphony's sense of musical autobiography (at once compelling and creepy), of living through difficult and dangerous times and emerging at the end unbowed, been more wholly conveyed.

The second half (!) was, inevitably, *Ein Heldenleben*. This doesn't survive, but Werner Thärichen, long-time timpanist in Berlin and not known as an ally of Karajan, heard an ever greater depth of identity with Strauss's tone-poem in his interpretation, honed over 55 years, four recordings and 70 concerts. By the time of the last such in May 1988, said Thärichen, "I'm absolutely certain that this man was conducting the story of his life." *Geil* – horny – was the word used by a German colleague of Jeffrey Tate to describe Karajan in the pit (the man himself said he always felt cold in the studio). "It was a physical necessity for him to be in contact with music," thinks Tate. "His fundamental sensuality was pushed into the world of music, which is why Strauss's music meant so much to him." ●