
Interview: Kurt Masur

‘There came a time when I had no fear’

Following a full press conference on Dec. 29, Kurt Masur, director of Leipzig's Gewandhaus Orchestra, gave the following interview to Ortrun and Hartmut Cramer of Ibykus magazine. EIR thanks the editors of Ibykus for kindly making it available to an English-speaking audience.

Ibykus: Professor Masur, why did the revolution begin here in Leipzig, and why does it continually get the strongest impulses from this city? The economic and political problems are the same all over the German Democratic Republic. What is the special significance of Leipzig in this respect?

Masur: I think Leipzig is the only large city in our country whose international contacts were never entirely broken off—i.e., through the Leipzig Trade Fair. This twice-yearly contact with influences abroad has had great significance for the citizens of Leipzig—especially because, as you know, many visitors to the fair stay in people's private quarters. There are many conversations and friendly debates, and always new ideas. This has kept Leipzigers open to everything coming from abroad.

But the Leipzigers have always been open to new impressions. I can make this clear by way of an example which I recently used with President Mitterrand: There are many expressions in Leipzig slang which are originally French. The word *fischlant*, for instance, means the same thing as the French *vigilant*. It happens to be the nicest thing you can say about a Leipziger: “He's *fischlant*” means he's clever and can find his way in any situation. Or take the expression: “A child *plärrt*”; this comes from *pleurer*, to cry. This and similar influences come especially from the craftsmen who arrived from Flemish and French regions to settle here in Leipzig.

I believe this openness for new impressions from abroad, which especially comes from the fact that Leipzig is an international nodal point and has also been a nodal traffic point between north and south and east and west, has been kept alive by the Leipzig Trade Fair, even through the era of divided Germany. Because of this, all Leipzig citizens have retained the same or a similar character and sense of themselves. As you know, *Iskra*, the revolutionary newspaper for

the Soviet Union, was published here in Leipzig. I guess you could say that “the Leipzigers have always been in on everything.”

Ibykus: You are not the first German conductor who was forced to pursue your artistic activity under a dictatorial system. Wilhelm Furtwängler, one of your predecessors here in Leipzig, suffered the same fate. The question of whether to stay or leave played a big role in his situation. Do you think yours is similar?

Masur: Certainly—at any rate, from the standpoint of him as a leading personality. But his situation was more difficult. In his day there were concentration camps, which we didn't have here.

In my opinion, people should not paint what happened in our country so black, that you can't understand why anyone would have stayed here and lived here. That would be false. On the other hand, it was never hard for me to understand that someone who did not have the strength to live and work under these conditions, would have to leave—as, for example, my friend Klaus Tennstedt did. Klaus simply had to leave. There are others besides him who said, “I can't stand it any longer,” and when that's the case, you simply have to tell them, “Okay, then go.”

All this has to be examined more carefully; but it is a fact that we had a whole slew of young people who showed the same symptoms: They were extraordinarily talented and had the bolder ideas; and they either left, or they often suffered such damage that their nerves would not permit them to continue, or they just gave up. There are absolutely tragic individual cases, which cannot necessarily be ascribed to the oppressive situation, but which I would like nevertheless to connect to it.

You feel hemmed in. You hit up against limits—like a man who feels a barrier which he cannot break through. You can't allow free rein to your imagination. You can imagine things, but you can no longer hold them inside the small container which is permitted you. This was symptomatic of the situation in the G.D.R.; it was a great impediment for us artists.

Ibykus: How did you deal with it yourself?

Masur: I must say that I have always felt quite strong. The blows which I received already in my younger years, have made me strong. As a young person I was driven out of my homeland, Silesia, and came here when I was 17. I earned my keep as a student by playing dance music at night; then, the next morning, my fingers still worn out, I had to play Beethoven sonatas again.

Those were times which have not passed without leaving its marks. But they made us strong. Believe me, they gave me the armamentarium to conquer, and often even ignore, the oppressiveness of my own situation.

There came a time when I no longer had any fear—simply



Andrew Spinnatus

The square in front of the Leipzig Gewandhaus was the scene of the pro-democracy demonstrations which built up over the months, leading to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

no fear at all, not of anybody: not of the American CIA, or of the Soviet KGB. And that's a beautiful feeling.

Ibykus: Together with five other citizens you wrote a call for non-violence; you turned to the citizens of Leipzig and invited them to public discussions in the Gewandhaus. Was that following the famous ninth of October?

Masur: Yes. The invitation to the "Gewandhaus dialogues" was our way of keeping the promise we made to the population in our Oct. 9 declaration. We initiated these discussions immediately after that. We had already thought them up in our "council of six," and had divided up the corresponding tasks among us. And then we held them, a total of five times through Christmas, and with large participation.

Ibykus: Did your call, these discussions, and your almost 20 years of work with the orchestra, along with the reputation enjoyed by the Gewandhaus Orchestra as a centuries-old institution, contribute to the fact that the revolution has been non-violent up to now?

Masur: If people hadn't trusted us, things would have gone differently. I have to honestly say, that I had objected at first, when the other five members of the "council of six" insisted that I should read the call we had jointly written. I told them that I am a musician, and only for an elite layer, only for music-lovers in Leipzig. They overruled me. I did not believe that my actions would have such an effect in the further course of events.

Of course, I'm happy about the result. It has proven that our basic attitude—and it wasn't only mine, but that of the entire orchestra, and had been so for years—was correct. We taught in kindergartens; we went to factories and played there; we organized school concerts, and concerts for appren-

tices. We also gave a concert for the construction workers who built this concert hall. Our musicians have given introductory lectures, and in their external actions have always been loyal to the city of Leipzig and its musical life. All these activities brought us into contact with many people in Leipzig; we've reached practically every layer.

But at that moment, at first, I wasn't all that conscious of this. Then it bore fruit. It was simply the result of the fact that none of us felt like an elitist artist who wanted nothing to do with the "man of the masses." It is this close connection with the citizens of Leipzig, which has led to the fact that now, at this moment, we have reached a happy culmination point where one can say that there just can't exist a happier rapport between public and orchestra.

Ibykus: So you are now experiencing a confirmation of the social role of great art, as Beethoven and Schiller demanded?

Masur: Precisely. This, I believe, is associated with the historic tradition of our 200-year-old orchestra, since the original Gewandhaus Orchestra was the only one both founded and paid for by citizens of the city of Leipzig. It therefore wasn't a court orchestra, as were all the aristocrats' orchestras. No, the Gewandhaus Orchestra is an orchestra born of Leipzig's proud citizenry. The people of this city heard the orchestra each day in the opera house; and when they went to church, they heard it in the St. Thomas Church, and they knew that this was where Johann Sebastian Bach had made music earlier, with the predecessors of this orchestra. All this taken together, is what I think made people conscious that this orchestra is *their* orchestra. Later on they became increasingly proud of the orchestra because of its successes abroad, so that I would like to say that we have now arrived at the high-point of what I had in mind when I took this post in 1970.