

# The Immortality of Wilhelm Furtwängler

by Matthew Ogden

May 18—Wilhelm Furtwängler died on November 30, 1954. The epitaph which Furtwängler chose for his own tombstone were the words of Saint Paul:

*And now abideth Faith, Hope, Love, these three;  
but the greatest of these is Love.*

Not coincidentally, these are also the last words of Johannes Brahms' final vocal composition, *Vier Ernste Gesänge (Four Serious Songs)*. Brahms' lifelong friend Clara Schumann had suffered a massive stroke in March of 1896, shortly after playing her last public concert, at which she performed Brahms' *Variations on a Theme by Haydn*. Brahms, anticipating that Clara Schumann would soon die, composed this series of four songs based on biblical text. Brahms himself would die the following year.

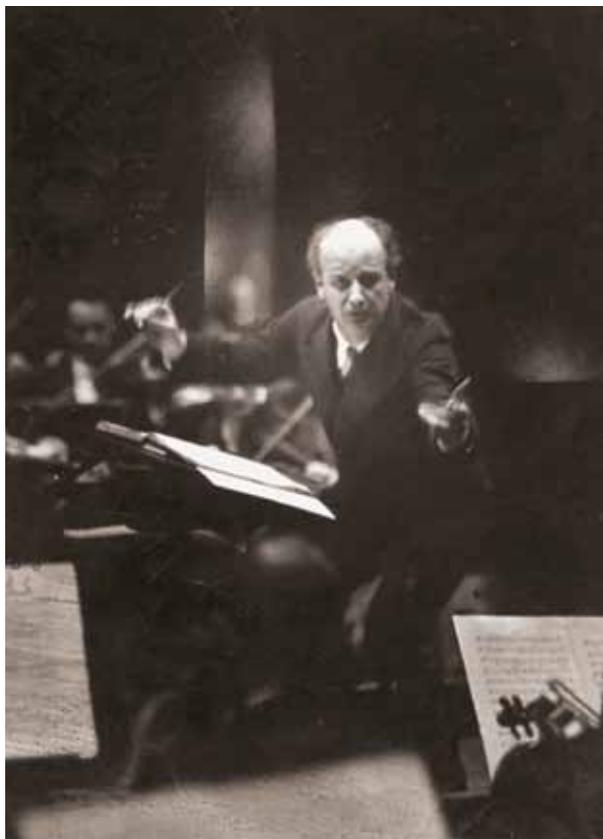
Brahms asks us: What is the meaning of our lives? Is man nothing more than a beast? Do our lives amount to anything more than the dust which we become? As animals die, so our bodies do as well. Are all of our pleasures, sufferings, trials, aspirations, our experiences between birth and death, nothing greater than mere idle vanities, ephemeral, and lost in time? A breath in the wind? A droplet in the rushing flood?

Or can we see beyond our deaths, as "through a glass, darkly," to something

which abides after our flesh is gone? To the future, into which the meaning of our lives will persist? As the poet Percy Shelley wrote in verses composed shortly before his own death:

Music, when soft voices die,  
Vibrates in the memory...  
And so thy thoughts, when thou art gone,  
Love itself shall slumber on.

As Wilhelm Furtwängler said of Johannes Brahms in a speech commemorating the centenary of his birth: "Particularly in the last years of his life, he lived with the future, with *eternity*, in mind."



*Wilhelm Furtwängler*

## Unheard Melodies

Immortality is not merely the unceasing extension of mortality. It is not a never-ending longevity of the flesh. Rather, just as infinity is not the sum of an unlimited number of finites, *eternity* exists above time, outside of time. The eternal is not contained within, and cannot be attained through the additive aggregate sum of temporals. The sequential chronology of what we call elapsed time is merely the unfolding shadows of something higher—the meaning of each moment cannot be located within the moment itself, but only from the standpoint of the greater flow of which it is a passing

part. And without the prior existence of the whole, there could be no possibility for the existence of the parts.

How can we transcend the experience of the moment to participate in the eternal, the universal which created it? How can we be living participants within that whole which supersedes the existence of its subordinate parts?

Just as he said of Brahms, Furtwängler himself lived always “with the future, with eternity, in mind.” In fact, the capacity to live in the future—to participate in the eternal—is, in a very real way, the secret that lies behind the almost timeless quality of the experience of a performance by Furtwängler.

The absolutely distinct quality of Furtwängler’s performance will immediately grip any sentient listener, and is instantly recognizable. The relentless quality of suspension, a tension always pulling the listener forward from the very beginning through to the very end, an absolute coherence, an unbroken unity—all of these words describe the effect of the almost magical power that Furtwängler commanded over his music and his audiences. The conductor Claudio Abbado describes the effect that even the presence of Furtwängler exerted over his orchestra:

“Even when Furtwängler walked into the pit, there was tension around him—like electricity. . . . And slowly, this wonderful warm sound came out of the orchestra, and the tension, always this wonderful tension, from beginning to end. He was one of the few musicians who could create tension even in the pauses, when there was nothing but silence.”

A seemingly paradoxical idea: a musical tension which exists even in the moments when there is no audible sound. How can there be something in what seems like nothing? For Furtwängler, the notes were not the music, but were merely shadows dancing to a higher music, one that lurks silently but powerfully behind the sensual sounds. As the poet John Keats famously wrote in his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;  
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear’d,  
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.

This “silent form,” which lives outside of time, “dost tease us out of thought as doth eternity.” The eerie presence of a ghostly something visiting our present time from beyond time itself is the effect we experience through the music of Furtwängler. We are transported

beyond the momentary experience of the part, to an apprehension of the existence of a greater, superior whole, which is constantly exerting its power and control over each passing present moment in time.

Perhaps the most readily available example of this are Furtwängler’s recorded performances of Franz Schubert’s *Symphony No. 9 in C Major*, the so-called “Great” Symphony. Furtwängler’s rendering of this masterpiece remains the standard which no other performance of the work has since achieved. Furtwängler’s performance was described by the great Russian conductor Valeri Gergiev in a recent interview, in which he described Furtwängler as a giant, unequaled among all others, the conductor whom he admired most:

“The most difficult thing in conducting is not to slip into mechanical beating. So this restless search for a real tempo, a real pulse, of practically each bar of music, rather than just one tempo for one movement, is something that very few conductors could ever master. Not many conductors will confess, maybe, that it will be something difficult for them to do, but then they will go and compete with Furtwängler, and most probably lose. Because it’s a kind of God-given gift, a genius quality, which one conductor contributes to the playing of the orchestra—I describe it in the following: You can’t possibly imagine this same orchestra play the way they play with Furtwängler, if you just remove him from the podium. It is just not possible to imagine they will do the same thing. They will be even maybe more organized; they’ll be very focused in a certain ensemble; but they will never deliver this kind of incredible expression which he is able to bring to life once being in front of an orchestra. . . .

“Take the example of his performance of the ‘Great’ Symphony of Franz Schubert. . . . The quality of symphony and the quality of interpretation. Amazing. I believe in every movement there are so many changes of tempo. First, fantastic theme with horns are playing, and then, in the Second Movement—it seems to be very settled but then it becomes so desperately dramatic. And again, the Third Movement, it’s not just going like a clock, you know, da-da-da-da-DA-da-da-da-DA—it has a bite, it has a freedom, it has a fire.”

The constant change in tempo so characteristic of Furtwängler’s music indicates the presence of a higher law, a higher time, dictating the unfolding of each moment in time. These are not arbitrary changes, not precalculated mathematical values, but the pulse of a living, breathing organism united by a single all-em-

bracing coherent process of development, proceeding always into the future, residing in what is yet to come. The performer subordinates himself to that power, that higher law, striving always toward the apprehension of the unity which brings coherence to the multiplicity of the parts—an almost religious quality of devotion.

### Listening to the Future

“Let us consider the activity of artistic creation. . . . When we look closely at this process, we find we can distinguish two levels. On the first, each individual element combines with those adjacent to it to form larger elements, these larger elements then combining with others and so on, a logical outwards growth from the part to the whole. On the other level, the situation is the reverse: *the given unity of the whole controls the behavior of the individual elements within it, down to the smallest detail.* The essential thing to observe is that in any genuine work of art these two levels complement each other, so that the one only becomes effective when put together with the other. . . .

“The artistic process that has as its starting point the unity of the whole, rests on the concept of a more-or-less complete vision of that whole. For the artist at work, this vision is the goal he seeks to attain; the star that, unbeknownst to him, guides his steps through the maze of obstacles and temptations that beset his path and shows him how to unite the forces at his command. Only at the end of the journey, therefore, will the vision emerge in its totality, not only for the listener, the receiver of the work of art, but also—and this is a vital point—for the composer, the creative artist himself. The total vision only achieves its full radiance when it merges with all the individual sources of light from within the work, the over-all and the particular

interacting and stimulating each other. It is not that the vision is present, ready-made, from the beginning and is only waiting to be filled with artistic substance. On the contrary: the joy that the artist feels comes not from possessing the vision but from the activity of turning it into reality.”

—*W. Furtwängler, “Thoughts for All Seasons”*

The foregoing typifies Furtwängler’s insight into an actually ontological principle, one which extends far beyond music *per se*, which is as true in science as it is in art. It shouldn’t come as a surprise that Furtwängler’s contemporaries Max Planck and Albert Einstein were themselves devoted musicians as much as they were scientists. In fact, Furtwängler’s composition teacher when he was a young man, Joseph Rheinberger (who was himself a friend and collaborator of Johannes Brahms), had also taught composition to the young Max Planck.

Einstein asserted that the paradoxes pertaining to time and causality presented by Planck’s discovery of the quantum would actually be resolved from the standpoint of a higher understanding of music. In an interview published as

an appendix to the book *Where Is Science Going?*, Einstein asserted:

“Our present rough way of applying the causal principle is quite superficial. . . . We are like a juvenile learner at the piano, just relating one note to that which immediately proceed or follows. To an extent this may be very well when one is dealing with very simple and primitive compositions; but it will not do for an interpretation of a Bach Fugue. Quantum physics has presented us with very complex processes, and to meet them, we must further enlarge and refine our concept of causality.”



*Johann Sebastian Bach, in a 1748 portrait by Elias Gottlob Haussmann*

The implications of Einstein's allusion to Bach's fugues are very revealing when considered in light of his contemporary Furtwängler's insights, as quoted above. When we consider the necessary existence of a unified whole in music, which, as Furtwängler says, "controls the behavior of the individual elements within it, down to the smallest detail," we must ask: Where does that whole exist? If the whole cannot exist in any part, nor in the aggregate of all the parts, where and when can we locate the existence of this unifying whole?

Only by *listening to the future*, to that totality which can never exist in the sequential temporal experiences of the ear, but only in the imagination which can consider the entire composition as a one, existing as a unity outside of time. By hearing that single unified Being, and following it as it guides us through the inexorable evolution of its own Becoming. By allowing the inaudible echo of that yet-to-be-experienced future to resonate within the audible sounds of the present, each meeting and mutually interacting with one another at each unfolding moment in time. At no one moment of the sensed experience in time can this whole be perceived; however, it is present at all times, above time, guiding the behavior of each moment of the unfolding experience of time.

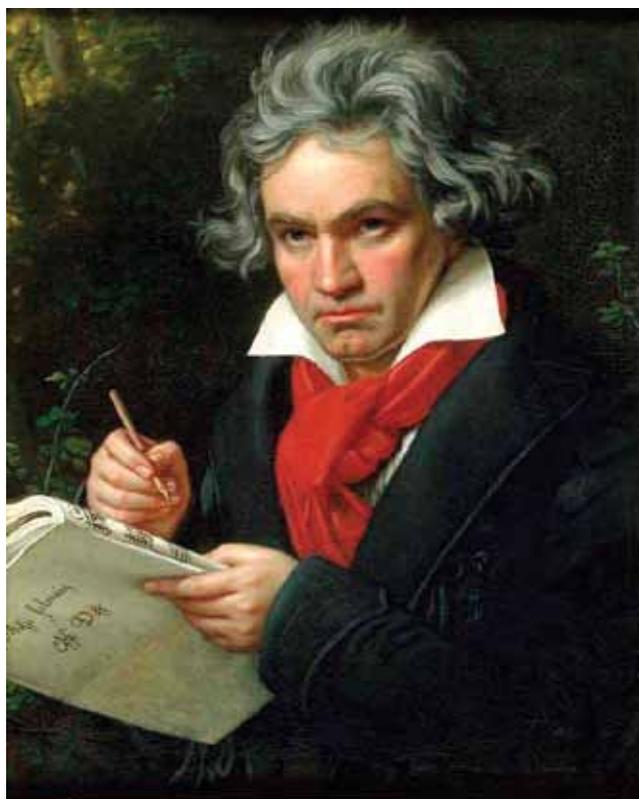
Furtwängler expresses this as the intersection between the *Nah-Erleben* and the *Fernhören*, the interaction between "near-experience" with the "distance-hearing," also citing the fugues of Bach as exemplary of the most perfect expression of this principle:

"Bach remains today what he has always been—the divine creator on his throne above the clouds, beyond the reach of others.... Here we find concentration on

the moment in time united with the unheard expanse; the immediate realization of the part paired with the truly sovereign overall vision of the whole. With its ever-conscious feeling for the near and the far at the same time; with its unconstrained fulfillment of the here-and-now joined with an ever-present subconscious feeling for the structure, the current of the whole; its 'near-experience' [*Nah-Erleben*] with its 'distance-

hearing' [*Fernhören*], Bach's music is a greater example of biological certainty of purpose and natural power than we will find anywhere else in Music. Precisely this is what makes Bach's music so truly unique.... Bach, the creator of these choruses and these fugues, seems to be not a human being, but the spirit that rules the world, the very architect of the universe.... It is this that makes him for us the greatest of all composers, the Homer of music, whose light still shines out across our musical firmament, and whom, in a very special sense, we have never surpassed."

—*W. Furtwängler*,  
"Bach"



*Ludwig van Beethoven, by Joseph Karl Stieler, 1820*

In Bach, we experience at every moment this intersection of the near with the far, the part with the whole, the microcosm with the macrocosm, the temporal with the eternal. As Furtwängler describes elsewhere, the mission of the artist is always to seek: "the fulfillment of the moment within a larger process. Each individual thing has its own function and this within the development of the whole. The two meet and intersect at each moment. It is not always easy at first to grasp the fact that every detail has its function within the whole, and is not only 'arranged' within this whole, but often has an effect on the whole that goes far beyond its individual importance.... This single-mindedness of purpose, this clear and unmis-

takable cohesion of the whole can only be created through real laws, based in nature.”

—W. Furtwängler, “Notebooks,” 1946

### ‘If I Have Not Love, I Am Nothing’

“Love—love that is forever being seized and shaken by the work—can never be replaced. Love alone creates the preconditions for the visionary and correct understanding of ‘the whole’ in the work of art, for *this whole is nothing but love*. Each individual part can be more or less understood intellectually, but the whole can only ever be grasped by *the living feeling of love*. It is the only thing which is appropriate and fitting to the whole work of art as an image of the active and living world. Everything else, however skillful it may be, is limited, and therefore profoundly boring to me.”

—W. Furtwängler, “Notebooks,” 1936

As the 19th Century drew to a close, Johannes Brahms’ setting in his *Four Serious Songs* of the words of St. Paul speaks almost as a prophesy, a warning to musicians, a eulogy for art in the century to come:

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.”

As Furtwängler insisted, without the dedication to the “the living feeling of love” which is required to grasp the understanding of a work of art in its wholeness, music dies, and becomes nothing more than the intellectualized assembly of individual separate parts rather than a single, living, organic whole. In the essay cited previously, Furtwängler asks the question: what is the emotion which is required by the artist to grasp this fundamental unity of the whole?

“Corresponding to the power that works inwards, from the whole to the parts, a power which proceeds from a more or less complete vision of the whole, is an emotion that springs from the artist’s relationship to the world at its most profound and most meaningful—an emotion one may call love, humility, reverence, worship, awe, and many other things . . . a love of the world, which comes to us as the eternal gift of God. If only modern man would grasp that it is impossible to understand and shape the world as it confronts us without loving it! And that it is equally impossible to love it



St. Paul at his writing desk, by Rembrandt van Rijn, 1629

without seeking, in the context of this love, to understand it!”

For Furtwängler, the late compositions of Beethoven represented the high-point in this ideal of cohesive artistic unity in which the parts became absolutely subordinated and inseparable from the whole—an ideal which, however, was increasingly abandoned following Beethoven’s death.

“With Beethoven, the parts increasingly lost their independence, to the point where they were incomprehensible without reference to the whole; no part made sense without reference to that which preceded it and that which followed. Up to the time of Beethoven, musical development had taken place with the tacit assumption that the work of art emerged like an organism. . . . Whereas Beethoven sought to bring out the whole with ever greater clarity and power, his contemporaries, but even more his successors, turned away from this approach, and the concept of the work of art as an organic whole crumbled in their hands. . . .”

The irony, however, of the rejection of the concept of the organic whole, is that, since the very existence of the parts depends upon the existence of the whole, in the absence of this whole, there also ceases to be the possibility of the parts!

“Today the concept of overall form has lost its central, dominant position. No longer does it appear to be able to assert itself over the material. *No longer is it the whole that controls the behavior of the parts. . . .* The whole has been consumed by the parts, with the result that, not only is there no longer a whole, but there are also no longer any parts, because these can only exist so long as there is a whole to which they can refer! Everything exhausts itself in the individual moment, no heed being paid either to what has gone before or to what follows. The consequence is a concentration on the effect of the moment, effect for its own sake, in harmony, in rhythm, in orchestration, and through numerous little titillating details.”

Thus, quite literally: “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.” Furtwängler clearly identified what he saw as the tragedy of music’s decline as being fundamentally rooted in the loss among his contemporaries of the capacity for love.

“Our only hope of salvation, a return to the inspiration that comes from the living masterpieces of music, is all-too-often stultified by bad performances. The inability to feel the fundamental emotional content of a work through its entire course, from beginning to end, is at its most glaringly obvious in those works of whose living example we stand in greatest need today. It is those works that receive the worst performances because they are the very ones that make the greatest spiritual demands on the performer.”

## The Music of Our Soul

Pope Francis recently stated in an interview, that for him, the most “Promethean” of all conductors is Wilhelm Furtwängler, citing Furtwängler’s performances of Beethoven, and especially Bach, specifically his *St. Matthew’s Passion*, saying: “The piece by Bach that I love so much is the ‘*Erbarme Dich*,’ the tears of Peter in the *St. Matthew’s Passion*. Sublime.”

And indeed, Furtwängler’s music has a reverential, devout, almost religious quality to it. The orchestra under Furtwängler, becomes fused into a single instrument, a single organism, and becomes in his words “a point of entry of the divine.”

“The sense of the orchestra as an artistic medium is that this body, constituting of 90-100 different people, different heads and hands, becomes one instrument through which a soul, a feeling, an intuition is communicated to the listener in its tiniest details. The more it achieves this, the more it loses its vanity of wanting to be something itself, the more it becomes the mediator, the communicator, the vessel and point of entry of the divine, speaking through the great masters.”

—*W. Furtwängler, “Notebooks,” 1929*

Furtwängler sought to transport his audiences from the mere temporal experience of the passing moment and into the universal, the eternal, the whole. This becomes the almost sacred devotion of the true artist and the true scientist alike. As Albert Einstein wrote in 1930, in an article published in the *New York Times Magazine*, describing what he called the “cosmic religious feeling” which motivates the great scientist:

“The individual feels the futility of human desires and aims, and the sublimity and marvelous order which reveal themselves both in nature and in the world of thought. Individual existence impresses him as a sort of prison and he wants to *experience the universe as a single significant whole*. How can this cosmic religious feeling be communicated from one person to another . . . ? In my view, it is the most important function of art and science to awaken this feeling and keep it alive in those who are receptive to it.”

Furtwängler’s music allows us to do just that. Furtwängler enables his audiences to escape that prison of shadows and sense-experience, and to experience instead the *unheard* music which lies beyond the notes. Each sound may quickly die, but the music which created it is eternal.

As Furtwängler’s great friend and collaborator, the violinist Yehudi Menuhin said:

“There are many conductors, but very few of them seem to reveal that secret chapel that lies at the very heart of all masterpieces. Beyond the notes, there are visions, and beyond those visions, there is this invisible and silent chapel, where an inner music plays, the music of our soul, whose echoes are but pale shadows. That was the genius of Furtwängler because he approached every work like a pilgrim who strives to experience this state of being that reminds us of Creation, the mystery which is at the heart of every cell. With his fluid hand movements, so full of meaning, he took his orchestras and his soloists to this sacred place.”