

FURTWÄNGLER ON BEETHOVEN

(from an interview with H. Braisford, London, November 2, 1948)

FURTWÄNGLER: Nowadays people are apt to prize a clean and accurate reproduction of what's written in the score above everything else. Many conductors work, so to speak, with a technique of anger. Will that do if our task is to render a work that depends on color, like a picture by Rembrandt? Can one justice in a line drawing to a work whose significance lies in its vision of color?

The duty of the performer is to go back continually to the style of the work itself and base himself on that. Each period, indeed each single work of a master has a fresh, individual style of its own. That's especially true of Beethoven, who faced in many directions. Not only was he the last of the Classics, he was first of the Romantics. He is not only an architect, he is at least as much a painter. To confine a universal genius like his within the limits of his own time is altogether out of place.

INTERVIEWER: A friend then asked about Furtwängler's choice of tempi. At the concert he'd found them unconventional, some of them convincing, but not all of them.

FURTWÄNGLER: I should not take these tempi if I were not convince they were the tempi of Beethoven. The long and the short of it is that an interpreter can render only what he has first lived through. The formula for the correct rendering of everything, which can become a universal law, applicable to every case? No, there isn't such a thing, though many people assume there is. There is no such thing as standardized tempi. Each tempo stands in a necessary relation to the possibilities of the volume of sound. In a small hall with good acoustics the tempi can be broader than in an excessively big hall with bad acoustics in which the instruments can develop all their warmth and power.

INTERVIEWER: The interviewer recalled having heard the famous Moscow experiment of the 1920s, a conductor-less orchestra. They too had played the Ninth Symphony after eleven rehearsals of debating. The ensemble was perfect, details stood out sharply, but they couldn't grasp the music as an organic whole. Was this, perhaps, the essence of the task of the conductor?

FURTWÄNGLER: Very true-that is exactly the proper function of the conductor. It's only when he has studied and mastered the details that his real task begins-the weaving of all the particular into an organic whole. The composer, the creative artist, works the other way around. He starts with a vision of the whole work and then his vision leads him down to the details. Or, one can say that however high the technical capacity of an orchestra may be, the conductor has one archenemy to fight: routine.

Routine is something very human, very understandable. It's the line of least resistance, and there is no denying that in daily life it has its advantages. But all the more must we insist that it plays the most deadly role in music. Especially in performance of old and familiar works. In fact routine, with its loveless mediocrity and its treacherous perfection, lies like rust on the performance of the most beautiful and best-known works.