

THE ARTS.

Frau Furtwängler remembers

Frau Furtwängler has recently been in this country lecturing at the British Institute of Recorded Sound. When I met her she told me how surprised she had been at the eager response to her talks. Indeed, such is the interest in the work of her husband (who died 19 years ago), particularly among those who could not possibly have heard him in person, that she sometimes has to keep adulators at bay. Furtwängler's conducting has for many youthful musicians become the all-pervading gospel. Witness to how high his reputation now stands lies in the enormous sales figures here and in America of the recent issue of his



Ring, which has prompted record companies, astonished at this success, to consider reissuing on disc other known tapes of his operatic performances: we can shortly expect a *Don Giovanni*, a *Fidelio* and a *Magic Flute* from one or another source.

While, of course, appreciating all the praise heaped on her husband, Frau Furtwängler keeps a steady head about the man and his reputation. "Contrary to what most people think, his recording of the *Ring* is faster than either of the other two available versions. That is because he used to hurry through passages that he didn't care for so much, such as the Mime-Siegfried scenes. When he was a bit bored himself, he went faster. Then for the beautiful passages he slowed down. Those are what people remember, so they think his whole performance of the cycle is slow. His was the fastest *Parsifal* I have ever heard. Again the great passages were very slow, but the whole of Gurnemanz's narration went quickly."

The *Ring* performances, originally done for Italian radio, were made one act at a time, so I asked Frau Furtwängler how her husband managed to maintain such a sense of continuity. "He could keep his concentration over weeks and weeks. In between each performance he was working all day and much of the night on the scores. During the whole four weeks, he remained in our hotel room and I said to him that he must now know the scores by heart: in fact he never conducted without a score because of the singers. He looked at me, and I shall never forget his expression: 'You know when I know the work, then the others will know it too.' I think his extraordinarily deep knowledge of the works he conducted was part of the secret of his success.

He communicated this to the artists and the public. He took you into his confidence in a performance and kept you there. Even those like me, who were not musicians, felt like that.”

If you ask her about how Furtwängler’s interpretations before and after the war differed, she refers you to his young admirers whom she says know far more about these things than she does. “But there certainly *was* a difference. I think the development was entirely human: he became wiser. He had a tragic life, don’t forget that, and I think this came out in his music-making. He emphasized the tragic side of the music more than he had formerly. And his readings certainly became slower—except, as I’ve said, in Wagner.

“After those *Ring* performances he said that he thought Wagner would be content with him. He would never have dared to say that in referring to Beethoven. He treated Wagner as a man; Beethoven was his god. That’s why I was once very amused when I asked him why he never conducted Beethoven’s *Ruins of Athens* music. He frowned, and turned away the question, because he liked to pretend that Beethoven really could not have composed that kind of inferior music. He wished that Beethoven hadn’t written it.”

I asked her to expand on the tragedy of his life that she had referred to. “He had a wonderful youth, and a free upbringing. His parents were very good to him—but there seems to have been one thing missing: he was not taught really to communicate with other people. He did not learn the conventions or tact needed in human relationships. That led to many misunderstandings in later life. He always made direct, frank statements and they weren’t always appreciated. In consequence he became very shy.

“Then he always wanted to be a composer, not a conductor. He once said to me that conducting was the roof under which he sought protection when he found out people did not understand his compositions. Later, both in 1934 when he gave up all his positions and when he was in disgrace after the war, he was able to fall back for consolation on his composing. In 1934 he wrote his piano concerto which has recently been revived by Barenboim and Mehta in Berlin and Los Angeles. From 1945 to 1947, he finished his second symphony and started his third.”

She is very willing to discuss her husband’s controversial position during the 1930s. “What shocked him most at the start of the Nazi regime was the arbitrary decisions as to who was and who was not a German. That’s why it makes me furious when people say that he tried only to help men like Walter and Schnabel. Those Furtwängler was most concerned about were the ordinary men and women, the Jewish wives, for instance, of players in his orchestra. These were the people, whom he knew intimately, whom he succeeded in protecting. And what a struggle it was for him, who was such a lover of his country, to feel that Germany *must* lose the war to be rid of these gangsters. Why didn’t he leave his country? Well, it’s like some Russian artists today: they know that if they leave they can never go back. His passport was taken from him. Then when he got it back Goebbels told him: ‘Very well, leave the country, but you know we will be here a thousand years, and you will never be allowed to return.’

“That word ‘never’ was simply too much for him. Not only that: his orchestra, all the

players implored him to stay, and the wartime concerts were very beautiful, giving his audiences a reason to stay alive. That made him realize that he couldn't bear to be separated from what was his whole life. At the same time he did everything he could to help musicians in trouble: so much so that by the end of the war his own life was in danger and he was warned in 1945 when he had a concert in Vienna not to come back to Berlin but to go to Switzerland because his name was on the liquidation list. Full of trepidation, he reached the border and the passport official looked at his papers. He was an elderly man; after a few seconds' hesitation he let Furtwängler through, and I believe saved his life. After that, he received messages: 'Don't come back'."

So back to Furtwängler, the musician. How was he before a performance? "He was never nervous, except once when he produced as well as conducted *Tristan*. That was in Vienna, and something didn't go quite right in the first act on stage. After that, he decided never again to be his own producer, but he would complain if another producer did something that went against the music, such as making Donna Elvira an absurdity. Maybe Giovanni is not pleased to see her again, may he Leporello enjoys recounting maliciously the catalogue of conquests but the audience must feel for her—because it's there in the music."

What of his technique with the baton? "He always said that he could, of course, give an ordinary beat, but then the sound he wanted did not emerge. If the beat is too clear, the beauty of the music vanishes. He wanted a round, full sound, and for that he had his own, very individual methods. How the players managed to start together I don't know: that was his secret. As far as the sound itself is concerned, there's the emphasis he laid on the bass instruments, particularly the bassoon. In his own works, too, he gave the most beautiful things to the bassoon. I think again it's something to do with darkness and tragedy."

Alan Blyth