

## FURTWÄNGLER RECALLED

By Martin Bernheimer

The telephone operators at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel could not cope with the name Elisabeth Furtwängler, and did not seem to appreciate being bothered. The man at the desk wasn't much help either. But I finally tracked down the widow of the great German conductor sunning herself on the patio.

"She does not like dark places," her companion explained.

Frau Furtwängler, an attractive, cheerful, eminently ladylike lady who favors no makeup and simple tailored suits, looked a bit incongruous amid the would-be Beautiful People. Her severe gray hair and no-nonsense demeanor clashed with the conspicuous consumption of the Tom-Collins-by-the-swimming-pool set. She seemed oblivious to the flamboyance around her, however. She had come to talk about Wilhelm Furtwängler.

She usually referred to him simply by his last name. But when an anecdote required that she quote her own remarks to her husband, the name became Willem. Suddenly one noticed the distinction between the awesome public image — the incipient legend, if you will — and the private man, for whom a common Berliner contraction seemed perfectly appropriate. And endearing.

Frau Furtwängler had come to America from her home near Montreux, Switzerland, to help promote interest in the public Furtwängler. She had come on her own, with no backing from record companies, no hype crutches from public relations firms.

She knew that a revival of interest in her husband's work was reaching a crest. Several influential, younger musicians — e.g., Mehta and Barenboim — were championing the cause, and the Angel-Seraphim "Ring" recording was selling better than anyone, other than Frau Furtwängler, had expected.

She thought the time was right to remind the public of Wilhelm Furtwängler's unique contribution to music, to clarify some misconceptions about him as man and artist, and most important, perhaps, to lobby for the release of some more historic recordings. Her trip was, in short, a model labor of love.

Money, it turned out, had nothing to do with it. "I have enough to live on," she said. "I am grateful for that. If I didn't, I would not be able to waive royalty payments to the Furtwängler estate. And, if I did not waive those payments, there would be no recordings at all."

"They did give me a modest token gift after the 'Ring' was released," she added. "That was nice. But, ultimately, it was not important."

The release of the Furtwängler “Ring,” nearly two decades after its creation for Italian radio, represented the climax of a long and complicated history of legal hassles and ego rivalries. “It would read like a dime novel,” says the stoic widow. “A really bizarre tale of crime and intrigue.”

Frau Furtwängler was a bit reluctant to go into accusatory details, however, “I want to encourage the release of the performances we have preserved on tape. I don’t want any one’s hurt feelings to hinder achieving that goal. Nothing else matters. The ‘Ring’ proved it was possible. Now we must work to liberate the rest of the Furtwängler legacy”

Furtwängler was never very much interested in the recording studio. “He wanted to communicate directly,” says his widow. “He was not interested in the technical problems. He was impatient. And he hated the endless redoing and splicing. He thought that was dishonest.

“He did not realize the basic potential of the recording as a medium until the Flagstad ‘Tristan’ was released. Only then did he begin to change his mind. But, by then he had so little time left.” Making music was an all-consuming passion for Wilhelm Furtwängler. “He was special,” says his wife. “He was different even for his time. He was shy in private life, totally devoid of arrogance and pomposity. He was simple, even childlike. But when it came to basic human principles. and to his art. he was a fighter. He also was very German, and proud of a culture that could give the world a Beethoven and Goethe.

“Many people resented the fact that Furtwängler stayed in Germany throughout the war. They confused being German with being a Nazi. They conveniently overlooked the fact that Furtwängler opposed the regime, and that his name was immediately cleared by occupation authorities after the war.

“Why did Furtwängler stay in Germany? Because he could not have been happy anywhere else. Because he felt he could do more good by fighting from within the country than by fleeing. His anti-Nazi activities had begun as early as 1933. He was bitter that he had to defend his record and his motives after the war. He helped many Jews in his orchestra avoid concentration camps. He regarded them as Germans, just as he regarded himself as a German. Ironically. he always referred to Hitler as ‘that miserable Austrian.’ There were no subtle national distinctions for him . . .

“Goebbels went to Furtwängler and offered him a passport ‘Take it and go,’ he said. ‘But if you go, you must realize that you may never return.’ That was too much for Furtwängler. Things were easier for Toscanini. He was welcome to return to Italy if he wanted to . . .”

Frau Furtwängler discusses her husband's war record with defensive sympathy. She brings the same animated intensity to the clarification of his musical image.

"It is a cliché to speak of Furtwängler in terms of his slow tempi. Just listen to how fast and how lightly he takes the 'Figaro' overture, or the way he kept things moving forward in the Bruckner Ninth. His 'Ring,' as an entity, is faster than Solti's. In Bayreuth, his 'Parsifal' took a minute less than Strauss' — and the Wagnerites regarded Strauss as a speed demon.

"Of course he favored broad, spacious tempi when the music justified that. But it never was a built-in principle. In 'Parsifal' he said he used to speed up for Gurnemanz, whom he regarded as something of a bore, but he slowed down for the moments of genuine poignance."

I wondered how Furtwängler related to his rival. Hans Knappertsbusch, who is remembered for even slower tempi.

"They were good colleagues who respected each other as professionals. Once, Willem took me to hear Kna's 'Ring.' When the curtain went up and the Rhinemaidens started singing, the pace really was very leisurely. 'Rhein ...' droned the first syllable, for what seemed an eternity. Willem leaned over and whispered in my ear: 'By this time I'm already through with . . . gold.' "

Contrary to popular conception. Wilhelm Furtwängler had a sense of humor. "How he could laugh, at the most innocent, childlike things! Anyone who doubts that should listen to the way he plays the Musikus' of Hugo Wolf on the recording with Frau Schwarzkopf. It is true, he had a limited sense of the ironic. '*Ich bin hait ein Tragiker,*' he used to say. '*I'm just so tragedian.*' And yet he loved to think up little tricks, and to invent puns on people's names. For in stance, he always called Walter Legge, the recording impresario, '*His Master's Legge.*' "

Perhaps Furtwängler's reputation for solemnity is related to his unswerving commitment to the composers he served. "*When I conduct,*" he once told his wife, "*It is a matter of love.*"

Furtwängler did not mind criticism so long as it was directed at him and not the composer. "If someone disliked his conducting," recall Elisabeth Furtwängler, "he weighed the merits of the complaint and acted accordingly. He bore no grudges — I did, but he didn't. If someone disliked Beethoven or Brahms, however, he never forgave or forgot.

"I only saw him lose his temper twice during rehearsals, and both times it was in defense of the composer. Once during a run-through of 'Figaro' the stage director instructed the baritone, aging Count Almaviva to treat his threats to

Cherubino lightly, ironically. Furtwängler stopped the orchestra in rage. ‘The Count means every word of those threats,’ he insisted. ‘Right now the Count really intends to kill the boy! Listen to the music. I cannot conduct it any other way. There is no room for irony here.’

“Another time, the regisseur wanted Donna Elvira in ‘Don Giovanni’ to make light of the lady’s suffering. ‘Impossible,’ interrupted Furtwängler. ‘Her suffering is real. It is honest. You cannot mock it unless Mozart mocks it too. He does no such thing. Listen to the music.’ ”

Listen to the music.

Elisabeth Furtwängler is not surprised by the upsurge of interest in her husband. “His humanity,” she explains, “shines through everything he did. He was good, so good that people always took advantage of him.”

Furtwängler died on Nov. 30, 1954. He was 68. “The doctors told me he had bronchial pneumonia. But people don’t die of that. Furtwängler simply did not want to live anymore.

“On Nov. 6 he said to me, ‘I am going to die now. It will be easy. It is good this way.’

“He was a tortured man. He was filled with shame for Germany and what it had done. He had a tremendous capacity for suffering, but he was tired. He was depressed, too, because of a recently acquired hearing impairment. It threatened to get worse. He feared nothing so much as being a fraud. and he was convinced that a conductor with a genuine hearing loss could be nothing else. At the end there was no agony, no suffering. The mighty Wilhelm Furtwängler simply, quietly died.

“His death,” says Elisabeth Furtwängler, “was the most shattering experience of my life.”

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