



Karajan

A Study

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THE MOST arresting and influential of the new personalities in Salzburg this year was without doubt the conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, Herbert von Karajan. Greatly praised and hotly attacked, he has been hailed as a new Toscanini, as the greatest hope of Austrian art, and assailed as an irresistibly clever manipulator without heart or scruple, a cold, self-infatuated monomaniac guilty of arresting the vital flow of music with unexpectedly inserted dams calculated to force a vulgar but spectacular artificial tension.

At any rate, no critic has failed to react violently one way or the other, which in itself is a sign of a powerful and disturbing new personality at work. And, indeed, there is something here to discuss: for Herr Karajan is clearly a man of prodigious gifts and

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may well cause a great stir in the musical world. An Austrian, he does not belong to the Viennese tradition, and is equally remote from the classical purity, the luminous refinement of Schalk, and from the tender lyrical melancholy, the poetry and the elegiac sweetness of Walter.

Herbert von Karajan is a child of our own time, a deliberate and ruthless planner with a very uncommon power of concentration, organisation and execution. He is in iron control of himself and his orchestra; imposes his personality on the players and the audience and in some degree hypnotises both. Since the Vienna Philharmonic is today the equal of any body of players in the world, it responds to Karajan's smooth, sharp, microscopically minute demands with astonishing precision and beauty.

Karajan seems to conceive music as a series of self-contained episodes, and these he articulates one by one with a clarity of detail and a strictly calculated imperious organisation of tempi and dynamics which move with the remorseless accuracy of a dive-bomber intent upon its prey. His interpretations must inevitably shock and repel those who take for granted more traditional methods, but even those who feel lack of sympathy or even indignation – as, for example, with his treatment of the slow movement of Beethoven's C minor symphony as if it had been written by Mahler, or of its opening movement as if the composer were Berlioz – cannot deny that a very formidable new figure has appeared in the world of musical performance.

If Herr Karajan's style is at times over-rhetorical, it also rises to a vast and magnificent eloquence unattainable to the orthodox interpreters. His truest triumph was his performance of the Brahms Requiem: this is a work of considerable *longueurs*, which needs a powerful hand if it is to be kept from sagging; Toscanini, for example, tends to desiccate it altogether. Under Karajan the Viennese played and sang with such noble dignity and Mme Schwarzkopf sang with such purity and sweetness as to transfigure the work and give it, for the moment, new dimensions. After this

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triumph the great ovations accorded to this conductor in Vienna and Salzburg seem justified. And yet he does not always remain upon his pedestal: his penchant for deliquescence, for the *pourriture ignoble* of bad Strauss, is very strong; sometimes he seems to address the music, as someone once said of Kerensky's speeches, not to the head nor to the heart but to the nerves. But be it addressed to what it may, the skill, audacity, willpower and originality of Herr Karajan are most exceptional and make him the most interesting among the younger conductors of our time.

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