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## Kurt Masur and the Leipzig revolution

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*Ortrun and Hartmut Cramer report on one of the most remarkable leaders of East Germany's revolution, who made Beethoven's ideas more powerful than Stasi bayonets.*

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"I am a conductor and a musician first and foremost; I'm a politician only against my will." This self-characterization ran like a red thread throughout a press conference held late last December by Kurt Masur, director of the world-renowned Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig, East Germany, and recently named as the new director of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra.

The Dec. 29 press conference was held the day after a breathtaking performance of the Ninth Symphony by Ludwig van Beethoven, which had been designed as the kickoff of a long series of "concerts for Leipzig," the historic city which has played such a crucial role in the still-continuing German Revolution of 1989. The citizens of Leipzig, who have gotten used to doing things spontaneously recently, had quickly transformed a dress rehearsal for the traditional New Year's Eve concert of Beethoven's Ninth, into a concert in its own right, which was open—almost exclusively—to residents of Leipzig.

Even before the music began, the ovations for Masur and the Leipzig orchestra more resembled those given at demonstrations than at a concert. And at the conclusion of the last piece, which caught everyone up in the enthusiasm, almost 2,000 listeners showered the director and musicians, including the numerous members of the Gewandhaus Children's Chorus, with storms of applause which seemed to never end. Seldom has there been a more intense performance of this great symphony, and seldom was there a more attentive public than the Leipzigers at that moment.

Masur, for all his modesty, had a great deal to do with this. Little wonder that his constant "search for the truth-content in music," as shown by his unceasing efforts to pres-

ent great music such as the Ninth Symphony in such a way that each time it sounds "fresh as the morning dew," and "as if it has been composed yesterday," has now flowed into other fields of work. And doing that means putting one's own person in second place to the music itself, in order to let the composer's own thoughts act directly.

### **Musical truth vs. 'American show'**

Masur has a horror of music as "show business." He feels closer to a composer "such as Simon Rattle, who decides to remain in his native Birmingham [England] in the service of music, and therefore forgoing a brilliant career as a star at the podium," than he does to a superstar such as Leonard Bernstein, whose most recent media spectacle in Berlin only received a curt "no comment" from Masur. When pressed by the *Washington Post* for a comment, Masur finally let out a sigh: "American show." The American journalist was visibly relieved that he had let it go at that.

But it also means decisively intervening and acting when that is necessary. This was expressed musically over the last few months, in his suddenly breaking off his production of a recording of Beethoven's symphonies, at the point when it became clear that he and his musicians "simply couldn't put our whole hearts into it. For we all had family members, close friends and acquaintances who were participating in the Monday demonstrations, whose peaceful outcome was anything but assured." His recording of Beethoven's "Eroica" symphony, made during those tumultuous days, will be "heard again in perhaps six months or even later. It certainly has its advantages; but in that situation, we simply could not act as if nothing was happening."

And thus the musician Masur became a politician, albeit an unwilling one. To him, who up to then had held a high representative post in the SED's communist state but had never bowed to it, fell the task of leading the political demonstrations and prevent chaos and the spilling of blood.

(In the meantime, it has turned out that the SED leadership in Berlin had already given orders to shoot at participants in the Oct. 9 demonstration. Live ammunition was given out, all the hospitals, especially the blood banks in Leipzig and the surrounding area, had been put on an emergency alert. According to eyewitness reports, the numerically very strong and heavily armed forces which had assembled behind the Gewandhaus possessed "weapons which we had never seen before," including armored cars with movable gratings upon which sharp pieces of metal had been mounted, apparently intended to halt, or rather to skewer the demonstrators.)

### **Organizing a peaceful revolution**

Masur, together with a representative of the Protestant Church, a night-club star, and three local SED functionaries, drew up the now-famous Leipzig "Call of the Six" for non-violence, and went into the streets with the Monday demonstrators—right in the front ranks. He furthermore kept his promise and invited all citizens to Sunday "Gewandhaus discussions," where all Leipzig citizens could come to present and debate political problems. With this, Masur introduced a style into the political conflict which made substantive dialogue possible, and ensured the *peaceful* future course of the revolution. It is a testament to Masur's fine sense of truthfulness, that he was just as energetic (and credible) in rejecting the pitiful claim of Prime Minister Egon Krenz that it was he, Krenz, who prevented a bloodbath, as he was in rejecting the remark of West German Social Democrat Willy Brandt, played up in the Western press, that "Soviet officers" had prevented it. "That's a nice story; but it's not true," said Masur.

Asked about the future course of political developments, Masur said that the communist SED had been completely discredited, and that the people no longer believed a word they said. People just don't want any sort of socialism anymore; words such as "confidence," "readiness to sacrifice," "labor and reconstruction," coming out of the mouths of SED officials, only elicit revulsion. It doesn't matter what the SED says or does; its political credibility is finished, once and for all. This party can no longer motivate anything for anyone.

Masur saw the greatest threat coming from the press and the alleged "rise of neo-fascism" which the SED was so loudly crowing about, whose appearance he considered to be mainly "provoked." But he also saw danger in the fragmentation of the political opposition. Meanwhile, the most important current theme is not the "in part hair-splitting discussion" about reunification, but rather the country's future economic development. The initiatives of the Modrow transitional caretaker government, as good as they might be, did not have nearly enough "boldness," and were continually tailing

development rather than leading them.

In his discussions with West German politicians, including Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, Christian Democratic leader Kurt Biedenkopf, and Social Democratic leader Hans-Jochen Vogel, he said that economic aid was in the foreground. During his visit with French President François Mitterrand, the latter pointed to the fears which European neighbors had of a reunified Germany. Questioned on this, Masur conceded that of course, any dominant German role in Europe will be problematic, but that a politically enhanced France would make an ideal combination with Germany's enormous economic power.

Masur displayed a great measure of political shrewdness. For instance: "Of course we can't approach these developments naively; no one abroad is going to give us something for nothing. Besides, we don't want alms, but only the opportunity to work effectively and to enjoy the fruits of our labor." But what left the most enduring impression was Masur's honesty and moral uprightness—qualities which can stand a politician in good stead.

### **Boldness, and beauty**

"Boldness is a concept which I value highly," said Masur, and he used it not only in complaining about the lack of that character trait, so necessary today, in the transitional government, but also in order to inveigh against the old regime's suppression of just this quality. "Precisely the most gifted musicians and artists, who had the boldest ideas, were prevented by the government from developing their talents and putting these in the service of society."

On the other hand, Masur used the strongest terms to express his disgust with everything ugly. To him, it is bad enough when Beethoven's Ninth is misused for purposes of political representation; but it is downright "barbaric" when on such occasions, ostensibly on the grounds of insufficient time and concentration-span, only the final movement is performed. To him, and to all Leipzig citizens, it was "barbaric" when the beautiful old university church, Leipzig's only cruciform church, was dynamited in the early 1970s at the behest of the party functionaries of the Karl Marx University. "That barbarism almost led to a revolution then and there," reported one member of the Gewandhaus Orchestra.

It would be a joy for us all, if a man of such integrity could also directly assume a high political responsibility. But the conductor and "politician against his will," when asked what he thought of suggestions that he might become President of the German Democratic Republic, turned this aside with a smile, and referred to his "fortune to be in the most beautiful profession which one can have during these times, that of a musical director." But he was crafty enough to add: "But I will not shirk responsibility."

That's precisely what the author Vaclav Havel, now the President of Czechoslovakia, had said only a few weeks earlier.