

# FEATURES

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## MY RELATIONSHIP TO BEETHOVEN

*Seventh Gerd Bucerius Lecture, Washington DC, May 31, 2006*

### **Kurt Masur**

*Music Director, Orchestre National de France*

*Principal Conductor, London Philharmonic*

*The Bucerius Lecture Series, endowed in memory of the publisher Gerd Bucerius, honors individuals who have made important contributions to the development of civil society. This year's lecture honored the conductor Kurt Masur, Gewandhauskapellmeister of the renowned Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig from 1970 to 1996, who played an important role in the peaceful revolution of 1989 in East Germany. Kurt Masur spoke about his long engagement with the composer Ludwig van Beethoven, offering many spontaneous asides and anecdotes, and even occasionally breaking into song. He then answered audience questions at length. Since no printed text can capture this remarkable performance, we only print selected excerpts here. A video recording of the lecture will be available on DVD. If you would like a free copy of this DVD, please send an email to [events@ghi-dc.org](mailto:events@ghi-dc.org) by January 31, 2007.*

### **Discovering Beethoven**

We wanted to talk about Beethoven. My story is very personal and I will try to show you a little bit how things changed. Of course, my picture of Beethoven is not completed yet. I am still growing into it, I am still studying it, but it is much more than it was at the beginning. When I was five years old, I was often alone. Therefore I discovered a piece of furniture, which was called the piano. I was five years old and my mother was not there, my sisters weren't there. So I went up to the piano and I started to try to play all the tunes I had learned, children's songs and so on. This was my beginning with music. After a while, I discovered that I never felt alone again because I could communicate with the music. I later discovered that this was the source of my feelings about music. How much I still need it today. I still need to make music to stay healthy. When I was ten years old, I finally got a piano teacher. Then I started playing some Beethoven piano pieces and discovered others. And I wanted to know more about him.

Then, when I was six years old, Mr. Hitler came to power. And then Beethoven played a very important role because of his heroism. And

Beethoven became a hero! A “German hero,” of course. He had lived and worked in Vienna, but this was his mistake. As far as the Nazis were concerned, he was born in Bonn, and that was that. While making Beethoven an example for every German could be seen as a positive sign, the Nazi image of Beethoven meant forgetting about the Beethoven who was full of humor, love, romanticism, imagination, and philosophy. And, of course, Hitler never mentioned that Beethoven subscribed to the ideals of the French revolution: liberty, equality, fraternity. These ideals were a kind of guiding light in Beethoven’s life from beginning to end. It has been fascinating for me to discover this again and again, as I read the scores.

My path was, of course, typically German. I was in high school and then I became a soldier to try to save Germany. As you know, fortunately without success. Then I came to the conclusion: What was your life until now? I became a soldier at the age of seventeen. I left for war together with 135 youngsters, all 17 years old, and we fought in Holland, and of 135 only 27 returned. When we arrived back in Emden, in northern Germany, the first thing I discovered was a piano and I started to play for my fellows. And some of them shouted: “Stop it! I cannot bear that anymore.” So music can hurt, also. As beauty can hurt, if you lost someone. For me, however, in these postwar circumstances, Beethoven played a very important role. One simply feels the enormous strength of this man. Think about the beginning of the Ninth Symphony. It is like darkness, like chaos, beginning and ending with the *Ode to Joy*. What Beethoven achieved he achieved because he believed that God gave him a talent, which gave him the duty to be as good as he could be, to use his talent and to take a message to the people. This was for me the most fascinating thing because I thought, if you want to be a musician, this is the only way your life makes sense. Not to show people how good you are, but to make them believe and to learn, to understand what music can mean.

## Conducting

We cannot measure nineteenth-century conducting by the standards of our time. In the nineteenth century, orchestras were led in a way where everybody tried to do what they wanted. Regarding Beethoven, we know that he tried to lead the orchestra still in the Ninth Symphony performance, but he had lost his hearing. There was an assistant behind him who tried to help. The Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra played all nine Beethoven symphonies in his lifetime in a cycle without a conductor. The *Gewandhauskapellmeister*, the musical director of the orchestra, only conducted concerts if there was a choir or a soloist. The first conductor you can call a conductor in the modern sense was Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn was the first conductor who insisted at the Gewandhaus Orchestra that

he would be conducting everything. He did not want to let the orchestra play only alone because, he said, the conductor's leadership was not technical but to inspire the orchestra, to have a musical unity, to try to make people understand what the music means.

## **Beethoven and Shostakovich**

I went to meet Shostakovich in Moscow in 1974 for the first time, and then again in 1975. And then I told him that I would like, on his birthday, to start a concert cycle with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra with all his symphonies in one half and all Beethoven's symphonies in the other half. And he asked me: Why? And I said: Shostakovich, both you and Beethoven reflect the happenings of your times. It was not only the *Leninград Symphony*; there was a lot of other music where Shostakovich was with his people. When I started this cycle in Leipzig, people said: Masur is crazy, he will not have an audience. There's a very nice story about that. At the first concert we played Beethoven's First Symphony in the first half, and Shostakovich's First Symphony in the second. So I started with the Beethoven symphony, and after the break, 30 percent of the audience had left because they did not want to hear Shostakovich. This was not only because of the composer, but because of the animosity toward the Russian people after the Second World War. The next evening, I turned around to face the audience and announced that because of technical reasons, we would start with Shostakovich. And the cycle of concerts became a success. People understood, and suddenly they understood Shostakovich. Shostakovich was one of the greatest composers of symphonic pieces in the twentieth century.

## **Masur's Role in East Germany's "Peaceful Revolution" of 1989**

The peaceful revolution was not my work; the media gave me the role because I was one of the best-known people in Leipzig at that time. To be *Gewandhauskapellmeister* in Leipzig does not just mean being the conductor of the orchestra. The Gewandhaus was the pride of the city for centuries. This meant that the Gewandhaus was an institution in which people believed. I was happy to be there and to be one of those who were brave enough to try to make people see: we have to change, something must be changed, but peacefully. It was a miracle. On the crucial evening seventy thousand people demonstrated in the streets of Leipzig, and not one window was broken—because of the intelligence of the people. They avoided violence because they wanted to achieve what they desired: freedom of thinking. It was not about German unification at that moment. They did not want to be West German people; they did want to be free. So my role was that of one citizen among the whole city.