



Nikolaus Harnoncourt
(Foto: Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Wien)

**Deep grief about Nikolaus Harnoncourt (6.12.1929-5.3.2016)
who was also one of the founding members of our Schumann
Forum, launched in 2011.**

Obituary by Professor Otto Biba (Dr Dr), Director of the Archive, the Library and the Collections of the Society of the Friends of Music in Vienna (member of the Schumann-network)

On 11th and 12th July 2015, Nikolaus Harnoncourt conducted the last two concerts of his life within the framework of festival *styriarte*, founded for his sake in 1985, at Stainz parish church, located at a short distance from Graz. Themed “In tempore belli”, the programme included Haydn’s “Missa in tempore belli”, the so-called Kettledrum Mass, and his Symphony Hob. I:97.

Almost symbolically of his farewell to the concert stage and his Vienna-based “Concentus Musicus Wien” ensemble, given that Harnoncourt often found himself *in tempore belli*, in time of war, although not in an external sense, as he did not see any enemies, never felt attacked (but indeed not understood for a long time) and therefore did not attack either. He fought for the truth of art, not as a warrior, not against people and opinions, but as a missionary for art, for its “holy language”, that is, music: “[We musicians – all artists – have to manage a powerful and outright holy language. We must do all we can to ensure it does not get lost in the wake of materialist development. There is not much time left and might even be too late, as the restrictions on thinking and the language of reason and of logic and the fascination with the advances in science and civilisation achieved through this alienate us further and further from the true realisation of mankind. It is probably no coincidence that such alienation goes hand in hand with religious thought drying up: Technocracy, materialism and thinking in terms of prosperity do not need religion, do not know any religion, not even morals].” Harnoncourt yet fought for something more, namely for the truth of art and, within art, again not against visible enemies but against invisible enemies, such as oblivion, habitualness, sloppiness, convenience or thoughtlessness, which can all lead to forgetting the truth. He fought against this with his spirit, his knowledge, and the means of science. If the latter did not want to take notice of him for a long time for being a “practitioner”, this did not worry him, as he knew that time was working for him, for a connection between science and practice.

The last work which Harnoncourt conducted at his last concert at the Großer Musikvereinssaal [Large Hall or Golden Hall of the Viennese Music Association Concert Hall] in Vienna was Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. This was a bold new presentation towards which he had been working through extensive research, and eventually he had found a musician who was able to play the part of the piccolo in the last movement on a type of instrument of which he was convinced or positively knew that it had also been used in Beethoven’s time for this very purpose. All of a sudden, everything was balanced, the piccolo part was no longer somehow superimposed but perfectly integrated and it was only now that the wind instrument passages could be clearly identified as such. In short, this had happened with Harnoncourt so often before:

Apparent problems of instrumentation became obsolete once the right instruments were deployed in the right way. This was not different in his Schumann interpretations: No more talking about Schumann's strange instrumentations that had to be corrected by all means.

The live recording of Beethoven's Fifth was intended for a new edition of all Beethoven symphonies with his "Concentus Musicus Wien". Unfortunately, this project had to remain unfinished, after Harnoncourt had to finally recognise at the beginning of December 2015 that, due to illness, the strains of a concert (the performance and all preceding rehearsals) would no longer be a match for him. On 5th March 2016, he passed away, surrounded by his family, and also left unfinished a book on which he had been working until the very end.

A virtually boundless sense of responsibility in handling what had been entrusted to him, and a fundamental creative drive: It might perhaps be easier to understand these maxims of the interpreter Nikolaus Harnoncourt if one thinks of the small workshop at his house in St Georgen in Upper Austria where he used to work on wood, a precious material for him, dealing with it in an economical and well-considered manner, but also vigorously interfering to make it become what it was intended for. It should also be noted that at the age of fifteen he discovered his love of marionettes, delighted others with this and gathered them around him, built marionettes and stages for them - and gave performances with his friends. This was, by the way, inspired by Heinrich von Kleist.

"We will take him" is what Herbert von Karajan, chairman of the jury, whispered before Nikolaus Harnoncourt had even played the first note when auditioning for the Wiener Symphoniker [Vienna Symphony Orchestra] in 1952. Karajan was impressed by his artistic personality, but less so by his interpretational style later on. "[If you carry on like this, you will just fall]", Enrico Mainardi predicted after listening to one of Bach's solo suites with historical bowing and phrasing interpreted by Harnoncourt at a private house in Vienna. To illustrate this, Mainardi overturned some wine glasses on the table.

Harnoncourt always polarised. In 1949, he founded the "Wiener Gambenquartett [Viennese Viola da Gamba Quartet]" together with

Alice Hoffelner, Alfred Altenburger and Eduard Melkus. Melkus and Altenburger left him due to his intransigence, Alice Hoffelner became his wife in 1953. That same year, 1953, he also founded the “Concentus Musicus Wien” ensemble with some friends and colleagues, with which he made his first public appearance as late as May 1957 only, following four years of rehearsing, trying, searching and checking prior to the first performance. Except for the harpsichord, playing was done not on replicas but consistently on historical instruments which Harnoncourt had purchased for this purpose (often really at the cost of great privations for himself and his family). In 1958, he started performing with the “Concentus” on a regular basis, for which everything from hall rentals through to ticket sales had to be financed and organised by himself until he obtained his own concert series at the Wiener Konzerthaus [Viennese Concert Hall] in 1962. He undertook his first American tour with the “Concentus” in 1966 and the first one through Germany in 1968. In 1973, Harnoncourt was engaged for the first time for a concert of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde [Society of the Friends of Music] at the Großer Musikvereinsaal. With this, he received the highest recognition in the Viennese music scene, and soon thereafter his own cycle in this very same Hall. There, he conducted the “Concentus” for the last time from the cello in 1987, as he had been doing since 1953. After that, he conducted his orchestra from the conductor’s desk also, as he had been doing with other orchestras since 1972.

Harnoncourt made the leap from orchestral musician to conductor in 1969 when he left his service with the Wiener Symphoniker, which was first as a leap in the dark and not because he was aiming high. He simply could no longer stand the tension between what he wanted to do by conviction and what he had to do within the orchestra.

As a conductor, Harnoncourt continued polarising and also shocking, and it was certainly an exciting time for him and his family until he was gradually recognised and engaged by the major orchestras, first by the Koninklijk Concertgebouworkest [Royal Orchestra of the Concertgebouw Concert Hall] in Amsterdam, then by the Berliner Philharmoniker [Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra] and the Wiener Philharmoniker [Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra], which he bridged with disc recordings with his “Concentus”, as Teldec was backing him and produced many

recordings in series “Das Alte Werk [The Old Work]”. In 1971, he started the first complete recording of all Bach cantatas together with Gustav Leonhart (each of them being in charge of part of it), having done already solid pioneering work with Bach’s “Matthäuspassion [St Matthew’s Passion]” and “h-Moll-Messe [Mass in B minor]”. At the Opernhaus Zürich [Zurich Opera House], he realised a Monteverdi cycle between 1975 and 1979 and a Mozart cycle between 1980 and 1989, and was a permanent candidate at the Salzburger Festspiele [Salzburg Festival] since 1992, provided he was offered the right artistic working conditions he considered necessary. These were also for him the maxim according to which he selected engagements by orchestras and opera houses. He had his own cycle only at the Großer Musikvereinsaal in Vienna and only wanted it there, with always two concerts for each programme. During the Salzburg Mozart Week 2015, Harnoncourt still accepted a concert with the Wiener Philharmoniker at the Salzburger Festspielhaus [Salzburg Festival House], which Lorin Maazel, deceased before that, should have conducted. In January 2016, no such prominent replacement was found for his own concert there. The great conductors of his generation are becoming less and less.

But Harnoncourt was not only an interpreter but also an academic as a prerequisite for his interpretational work, as he repeatedly stated. From 1973 until his retirement in 1993, he taught as a Professor of Performance Practice and Historical Organology at the Hochschule Mozarteum [Mozarteum Conservatoire] in Salzburg. His seminar was called “Theorie und Praxis der Alten Musik [Theory and Practice of Old Music]” where “Old Music” in his view went up until 1900. His repertoire as a conductor even included Alban Berg: “[Alban Berg has hardly ever been closer]”, can be read in a review after one of his performances of Berg’s violin concerto with Gidon Kremer. A propos repertoire, this constantly increased. Operettas, Smetana’s “The Bartered Bride”, Verdi’s Requiem, these are also works which Harnoncourt gave his distinctive profile.

His artistic creation is documented in numerous audio recordings. He also expressed his world of thought, his academic findings and maxims in a number of books and essays. And it is fascinating to follow how all this conforms to his interpretations.

In 1997, Nikolaus Harnoncourt was the winner of the Robert Schumann Prize of the town of Zwickau. Before that, he had been awarded the Erasmus Prize in 1980, the Golden Badge of Honour of the German Record Critics in 1985, the Polar Music Prize of the Royal Swedish Academy of Music in 1994, the Grammy for the best choral recording in 2001, the following year the Ernst von Siemens Music Prize, and the Echo Klassik Prize in 2010. He was made an honorary member of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna in 1998 and of the Wiener Philharmoniker in 2004, and in 2012 he was awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal Philharmonic Society. This was supplemented by a number of state awards which, however, were less important to him than any musical acknowledgements. What made him happiest was the approval of the audience, when he saw that his persuasive efforts as an artist were accepted and had led to a new hearing, when he succeeded in taking the performing musicians as well as the audience along with him to new experiences of reception and making them think about music together with him, and when there was an understanding of “Musik als Klangrede [Music as a Tonal Language]”: This was Nikolaus Harnoncourt’s strongest and deepest concern and also the title of his book, with the subtitle “Wege zu einem neuen Musikverständnis [Paths towards a New Understanding of Music], published in 1983 and since then repeatedly reprinted and translated into many languages.

Vienna, Palm Sunday 2016