

SOME OBSERVATIONS
ON THE
CONDUCTING OF RICHARD STRAUSS

by

Alois Melichar¹

In the fall of 1927 - it was shortly after my return from the trans-Caucasian and middle Asiatic countries - I was engaged as conductor and musical advisor to the "Deutsche Grammophon A.G.," "His Master's Voice." It was not one of my contractual duties to be present for musical assistance to the recording technicians during the recordings of other conductors. At that time this was the province of Hans-Butze Hasse, a musical recording director known in Berlin musical circles, who had already held the post for many years. I was quite busy from the beginning and, along with Julius Pruwer, had to conduct a great share of opera recordings - with Domgraf-Fassbender, Schlusnus, Patzak, Roswaenge, Emmy Leisner, Erna Berger, Adele Kern and many others. In addition I had to direct many works of the standard concert and opera repertory, ballet music, overtures and selections from opera and operetta. Consequently, in many weeks I had to work mornings with the Berlin Philharmonic and afternoons with the State Opera. Despite this busy schedule, I still frequently attended, from the prudent interest of a young musician, the recording sessions conducted by Max Fiedler (the splendid Brahms conductor), Furtwangler, Knappertsbusch, Kleiber, Krauss, Klemperer and Pfitzner.

There was one conductor, however, for whom I never missed a single recording session between 1927 and 1936: Richard

Strauss. In the course of those years I became convinced that Strauss was perhaps the greatest of all the great conductors whom I know from my own observation and hearing, namely, Muck, Nikisch, Toscanini, Furtwangler, Ansermet, Knappertsbusch and Schuricht.

Here it is not a matter of the musical superiority which may be granted to Strauss as the great composer truly without peer among his conductor colleagues, but rather of the purely manual-technical side of his conducting.

Strauss' conducting technique was the finest and most economical and precisely because of this was - without making a show of egotistical, beating virtuosity - of an indescribable expressivity. The suppleness of his right wrist was unique, so that by means of the smallest movements he was capable of conveying to the musicians even minute changes in tempo with unmistakably clarity. This capacity, which, similarly, only Knappertsbusch also possessed, was famous with the members of the *Staatskapelle*² and the Philharmonic, and I remember that during the breaks in their recording sessions they always mentioned it to me with admiration. With these minimal movements Strauss trained the orchestra to greater and more constant attentiveness, so that he could achieve the finest agogic nuances. And also the slightest rubati always were executed with accurate ensemble playing. Nothing has a more ruinous effect on the reaction capacity of an orchestra than the continual production of large conducting gestures. The tormented musicians finally remedy it for themselves by scarcely looking any longer at the beater-to-death of the tempo, the rower and

churner to whose conductorship they have been condemned.

Once during the recording of Mozart's great *G Minor Symphony*, Strauss rapped for silence and said, "Now, gentlemen, watch: I am not conducting a *ritenuto* here, but only a trace of holding back - no, not even holding back - only something for us, not for the public, nor for the critics, who never notice anything anyway." This fine hand and, naturally, as a musical prerequisite, his great perception of style enabled Strauss to make certain things clear and obvious to the musically sensitive listener. By means of slight, scarcely noticeable tempo modifications he was able to clarify not only the thematic and archetectonic relations of the classical symphony, but also its uninterrupted harmonic-modulational tension, yet without abandoning the sphere of classical performance style through excessively romantic expansions, accelerations, tempo spasms and dynamic extremes.

From the observation of the Straussian conducting technique, which always fascinated me³, the function of the baton became clear to me for the first time. I discovered the importance of this remarkable little magic wand, which has been rejected by many "conductors" as obsolete and superfluous. The point of the baton - as a lengthened index finger, so to speak - must (or, at least, should) indicate to the orchestral musicians, in an intelligible, reliable way, the metrical beat for the entire duration of a piece, while the free, stickless left hand has a more expressive task⁴. Only this conducting technique by which, in principle, the left hand does something different than the right, but both still know exactly what each other does,

guarantees - presuming the musicality of the conductor - the optimal interpretation of a great piece of music. Thus: the right *beats*, the left *delineates* in free movement the thematic-dynamic development of a piece. A baton wielded precisely in this way also accomplishes a very pleasing and, consequently, important secondary effect: the musicians feel secure; they are not nervous and can calmly and comfortably devote themselves to their often very difficult instrumental and expressive problems. Many conductors who have never sat in an orchestra do not suspect that, because of their own inferior gestures, the musicians become exhausted from forced, desperate counting-along of the beats. How often have I heard from the members of the Berlin *Staatskapelle* who the previous evening had played *Salome* in the opera under Strauss: "With our Richard we feel as safe as in Abraham's bosom; with him nothing can happen to us." It does not surprise the knowledgeable that under the batonless, grotesque-looking, two-armed churning of many of our famous conductors not only *Elektra* but also the *Third Leonore Overture* completely collapse - and this with first-class orchestras! ("and the critics never notice anything anyway").

Naturally, these chances of collapse are dangerously increased through the snobbish and highly irresponsible conducting by memory of some opera *Kapellmeisters*. As long as everything "goes," it goes well, but if only the most trifling unforeseen incident occurs - a singer, for example, does not get the cue which he must have in a complicated passage and which the conductor is duty-bound to give - already there is a scandalous breakdown. Many years ago a conductor of the Berlin State

Opera celebrated a triumph because he conducted *Elektra* from memory. What the public and the critics did not know, however, was told to me by a member of the orchestra: each singer had stationed behind the scenes a coach or a stage director with a piano score, who gave him the cue while the conductor presented his inspired show before a nervous orchestra to the public and a part of the press. Now, Richard Strauss never conducted from memory, not even in his own works. How he mastered a difficult score, however, is illustrated by a little experience that still produces a chill up my spine: Strauss conducted - it may be a good thirty years ago - *Tristan* at the Berlin State Opera. I sat in the first row, about a half meter to the side of him and thus could observe him well, yes, even, to a certain extent, take in the score at the same time. The calm which he emanated had an almost magical effect. The friendly earnestness with which he took the orchestra and stage in his keeping, the delicate, careful and still manly determined way in which he led the musicians and singers in splendid musical climaxes - all this touched me deeply, and it is no doubt understandable that I took little notice of the proceedings on stage, because I scarcely took my eyes off him. In the third act, however, it happened. After a harmonically interesting passage he casually turned back about five pages of the score with his left hand while he continued to conduct and give the singers their cues with his right. He quickly sought one spot, drew his index finger slowly from the highest line of the flutes down to the double-basses, hesitated a few seconds pensively - still conducting along with his right hand - and again turned the pages to the place which had been reached in the meantime. I presume that the instrumentation or the construction of a chord interested him after it had long since been played, and I

must confess that, to me, at that time, the simultaneity of two distinct intellectual processes, one contemplative-analytical and the other progressive-reproducing, or - otherwise expressed - the phenomenon of musical simultaneous thought, was somewhat uncanny.⁵

Strauss had another characteristic which struck me as curious, and which I rarely observed with other composers. This was his frequently-observed composure, actually a reserve, in relation to his own works, both in recordings and in concerts, which was almost the antithesis to the zeal, to the internal tension when he conducted or recorded a classic. This struck not only myself but also many of my friends who were members of the Berlin *Staatskapelle*. We often pondered and talked about this psychological problem until we believed that we had found an explanation for this somewhat step-father-like treatment of the children of his own spirit. This was his astonishing modesty and self-criticism - yes, in a sense - a shyness to "exhibitionize" himself in the display of his own works. It seems to me that an anecdote told by a member of the Vienna Philharmonic substantiates the correctness of the Berlin "psychoanalytical" exegesis. In 1949 or 1950 Wilhelm Fürtwängler conducted in Geneva the tone poem *Death and Transfiguration*. After the rehearsal Strauss said to the conductor, "You have done it beautifully." Thereupon, Frau Pauline, the composer's wife, said (to Strauss): "Yes, you never conducted it so beautifully," to which Strauss, completely seriously, replied, "But I composed it, you know." I interpreted, somewhat drastically, the answer in the following way: One cannot put oneself so intensely into something that one has composed oneself, if one has a sense of modesty.

I want to relate just one, perhaps, even more significant event of many such experiences related to this complex. Strauss had to record his suite *Burger als Edelmann* and the great *G Minor Symphony*⁶ of Mozart for Deutsche Grammophon - it may have been in 1930. After extremely cordial greetings all around he played through the first movement of the suite once, a difficult chamber-music-like piece, and Strauss said immediately to me, "Can we now make a recording?" I answered, "Yes, a test recording." It was made. I called down - the recording studio was a story above - "Herr Doktor, please come up and listen to it." He answered, "Oh, no, you listen to it alone and tell us what is still bad; if we then play it once more, it will be all right." I did this, then gave the orchestra some more instructions and Strauss made the final recording. We went through the entire suite this way. Naturally, the recordings were outstanding, certainly because the chamber musicians were thoroughly paralyzed into an unheard-of concentration by the rather too-short rehearsal work. But with somewhat more intensive working out they could have done better. In the break the double-bass player, Johannes Kruger, the board director of the *Staatskapelle*, came to me and said, somewhat troubled, "Yes, yes, he does not put too much effort in his own works! Although his entire personality and conception were in the recording, with a little more rehearsal we could have played still better, with more virtuosity. Do you know what? When Richard comes from Munich for the next recording, we will place ourselves at your disposal gratis for one or two rehearsals so that you can go over with us quietly the most technically difficult parts of his works. Maybe director Wunsch would agree."⁷

After the break, when the time came for Mozart's symphony, Strauss was almost transformed. He rehearsed thoroughly and patiently,

went up the stairs and listened to the test recordings, corrected tirelessly and achieved a splendid recording of the entire symphony. I want to relate just one interesting detail from this intensive rehearsal work - and with this I am returning back to Strauss' conducting technique. In playing through the andante movement of the *G Minor Symphony*, which customarily is conducted by all conductors "in six" - that is, with six beats to the measure - he suddenly tapped and said, "Now, gentlemen, this beating in six just chops up the theme. I will try it in two. Perhaps it will work." And, in fact, it worked magnificently! By means of the precise wielding of the point of the baton he established - completely unmistakably for the musicians - the two now enormously slow baton beats at the two corresponding points in time in the "conducting space."⁸ Thanks to his expressive wrists, he was also able to maintain the elastically-variable agogics within the 6/8 meter. And now the splendid movement went by in a steady but agogically slightly modified flow. In the following years I made in increasing measure the observation that Strauss - in the interest of thematic integrity - often conducted in two (alla breve) in places where other conductors still beat four.⁹

To conclude, I can digress with some observations which do not bear directly on Richard Strauss' conducting technique, but which furnish one more important explanation for the exceptional worship and love which he enjoyed from the musicians.

Strauss was - perhaps because his father was also a musician - a model and master at rehearsal. Because of his calmness, objectivity and concentration he never had to prolong the rehearsals, but rather - what is a good psychological device - he always stopped five

or ten minutes early. In rehearsals he always treated the musicians with as much consideration as possible. He did not have the woodwind players repeat difficult passages until their throats dried out, because he was certain that they would put them in order in the warmup room or at home. He let the brass rest when he had to play the fortissimo-tutti places repeatedly. During the rehearsals for his concerts he often confidently left the most difficult works somewhat understudied because he knew that his fine musicians would play with doubled concentration that evening so that nothing would "happen." In his dealings with them he was never condescending but always "primus inter pares." He had a wit and humor which was never wounding to them; indeed, many times he manifested a certain mild self-irony, as if he wanted to excuse himself for his No. 1 position. His entire conduct toward the musicians, technicians and staff gave evidence of an unaffected, unacted naturalness, and it was evident to all that he belonged to that rare artist type which does not take himself too seriously. With other conductors I have scarcely found such a constantly good "working climate" as I found with him. How often I begged the previously-mentioned Johannes Kruger and some of his colleagues who are clever at writing to collect and write down the many witticisms, ingenious plays on words, quick-witted replies, etc. which Strauss produced in abundance over the decades. They promised they would, but I don't know whether they have kept their promise. After a recording of *Don Quixote* with the *Staatskapelle*¹⁰, we - Strauss, the solo cellist (if I am not wrong, one of the Dechant¹¹ brothers, who sat at a desk) and I - listened to the test recordings. At one variation, which ends with

a broadly bowed deep D on the C string of the violoncello, Strauss said very softly to me, "The purest s--t." I replied, shocked, "But that is really splendid." Strauss answered with a roguish laugh, "But I mean the Rosinante." I leave it to my musical readers to look into the score and find the place where Strauss musically so humorously and onomatopoeically has the Rosinante let her peristaltic end product fall to the ground.

These briefly sketched reminiscences have no other purpose than to contribute a few small but characteristic features to the picture of a great musician who already has long since taken his permanent place in the pantheon of music history. My observations about the conductor Strauss may be more significant since they are somewhat more detailed and concisely treated and they may serve an enlightening and educational purpose at a time when mongrel exhibitionist conductors, catapult virtuosos and managers escaped from the region of film are considered music interpreters by badly educated older and uneducated younger audiences.

1. Alois Melichar: Composer, conductor and writer on music. Born in Vienna, 1896. Educated at the Vienna Musical Academy and then studied with Franz Schrecker in Berlin. Subsequent to his service as conductor for the Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft he has had a career as film composer, broadcast music director and writer. He now resides in Munich.

2. *Staatskapelle*: We have retained the author's German term rather than to replace it by the cumbersome: State Opera Orchestra.

3. They must also have fascinated Stravinsky, as can be inferred from his recollections of the first performance of *Josephslegende* held at the Paris Opera May 14, 1914: "At Dia - hilev's production of *Josephslegende* I had the opportunity to observe Strauss close up, closer, perhaps, than at any other time. He conducted the premier of his work and remained in Paris for some time during the rehearsals ... I observed him in rehearsals and admired the manner in which he conducted ... All his corrections were exact. His ears and his musicality were totally honest." (Author's footnote)

4. The effective interpretation of the contrapuntal ebb and flow of the metrically free music of the middle ages does not require the baton, but, rather, it should actually be dispensed with. The interpretation demands, however, a special talent and experience which, for example, Pere Martin, the choir director of the famous chorus of the Church of St. Eustache, Paris, possesses to a high degree. (Author's footnote)

5. "When I have seen *Wallenstein* or *Iphigenie* three times I know the poem, and after three performances I also know *Tristan*; and from then on the only things which interest me on the stage are a conscientious new production or new singers."

"The orchestra in *Tristan* and *Die Meistersinger*, on the other hand, no matter how carefully and frequently I study the score at home, reveals something new every time." *Richard Strauss: Recollections and Reflections*, edited by Willi Schuh, Trans. by L.J. Lawrence, Boosey & Hawkes, London, 1953.

6. The issued recordings of *Burger als Edelmann* bear the matrix numbers 408BSII and the date 1930.

Two recordings of Mozart's *Symphony in G Minor* (K.550) conducted by Strauss were published. The later of the two bears the matrix numbers 296be to 302be and the date 1928. This recording has been reissued on LP: Heliodor 88022.

7. Only one who knows the very demanding life of the much overworked musician, with its rehearsals, concerts, opera duties, record and film recording, conservatory and private instruction will be able to appreciate the significance of this offer, which was the result of loving veneration. I conveyed this offer to the management and obtained, however, only the answer: "And who will pay for the hall rent, the electricity and the heat?" (Author's footnote)

8. What I mean by "conducting space" is the space in front of and next to the conductor which his hands and arms can encompass easily. If, now, conductors stand on tiptoes, their arms high over their heads or flung behind, or if they, by recourse to knee bends, occasionally conceal themselves behind the music stand, these motions fall beyond the field of vision of the musicians and are, therefore, in a technical conducting sense, completely inappropriate, useless and often confusing. The well-known threat of a member of the Vienna Philharmonic can be understood in this context, not only regarding interpretation, but also conducting technique, and only in this way can the anecdote be correctly appreciated: "Herr Kapellmeister, if you keep talking, we shall play exactly as you conduct." The

public little suspects how many dangers of disaster brought about by conductors are averted only by the presence of mind of the musicians and the soloists. (Author's footnote)

9. "The slow movements of the last three great symphonies (G Minor, E Flat Major, C Major) should be interpreted and if possible conducted in crochets." *Richard Strauss: Reflections and Recollections.*

10. Recorded in 1933, released on the Polydor label, Pol.27320/4. The record labels list the soloists as: "Cello, Enrico Mainardi; viola, Karl Reitz; violin, Georg Kniestadt.

11. Probably Karl or Fritz Dechert?

Translation by Richard C. Burns and Lois Feuerle. Additional footnotes by R.C. Burns with the assistance of Richard Warren, Jr. of the Yale University Collection of Historical Sound Recordings in supplying matrix numbers of those recordings that Mr. Burns did not have in his record collection.

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