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An Appreciation of Otto Nicolai In Commemoration of the 200th Birthday of the Founder of the Vienna Philharmonic

This year the international music world commemorates the 200th birthday of several composers. In 1810, Frédéric Chopin was born on March 1st in Żelazowa Wola and Robert Schumann was born on June 8th in Zwickau. The Vienna Philharmonic celebrates an even more significant anniversary with the birthday of Otto Nicolai, only one day after Robert Schumann, on June 9, 1810, in Königsberg (Kaliningrad).



Shortly after the birth of Carl Otto Ehrenfried Nicolai, his mother was declared insane as the result of a serious illness, whereupon her husband, the composer Carl Ernst Nicolai, left his family, forcing the child to be given into the care of foster parents. Only in 1820 did the father assume responsibility for the upbringing of his son, but in the hope of making a wunderkind out of the boy, he mistreated him to such an extent that the young man fled from home at the age of 16 to make his way in the world alone. In a circuitous manner he arrived, by way of Stargard Szczeciński, in Berlin, where he was taken in by Carl Friedrich Zelter, a friend of Goethe and a teacher of Mendelssohn, who provided Nicolai with an education at the Royal Institute for Church Music, which he completed in 1830.

In that same year, in the form of four part songs, compositions by Otto Nicolai appeared in print for the first time. In 1833 he became the organist of the Prussian Legation in Rome. This gave him the opportunity to further his education - primarily through the intensive study of the works of Giovanni Pierluigi Palestrina and lessons with Abbate Giuseppe Baini, and to make the acquaintance of several important personalities, most notably Gioacchino Rossini and Gaetano Donizetti. Nicolai presented some of his compositions to these maestri, both of whom provided him with letters of recommendation with the aim of securing a commission for the composition of an opera. These contacts led to a promising engagement when Bartolomeo Merelli, the impresario of La Scala in Milan, offered Nicolai not a commission for an opera, but rather a conducting position at the Court Opera Theater at the Kärntnertor (Carinthian Gate) in Vienna, which Merelli leased together with the fashion designer Carlo Balochino. On June 1, 1837, Nicolai took up his new position immediately demonstrating his brilliant ability. However, he was soon confronted with intrigue and hostility, attributable to envy and jealousy as well as to his own exaggerated self-confidence, which ultimately led to his contract not being renewed after one year.

Nicolai returned to Italy, where after previously having been successful as a pianist and an established teacher, he now developed a reputation as a composer. Between 1839



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and 1841, four of his operas ("Rosmonda d'Inghilterra" otherwise known as "Enrico second", "Il Templario", "Gildippe ed Odoardo" and "Il Proscritto"), were performed in Trieste, Torino, Genoa and Milan, four of the most important opera houses in the country. Especially "Il Templario" was a major success and in the course of the ensuing decades was also performed in Vienna, Budapest, Barcelona, and even in St. Petersburg and New York. A deeply personal disillusionment, the separation from his fiancé, the singer Erminia Frezzolini, amid scandalous circumstances, caused Nicolai to accept a new offer from Merelli and return to the Court Opera House in Vienna for the production of his "Il Templario". The premiere, which took place on May 31, 1841, was so successful that Nicolai received a three-year contract as first conductor, which he extended until 1847 despite an offer from Berlin. In these six years, Otto Nicolai became the leading musical personality in Vienna. Although his reknown had less to do with his compositions, with the exception of "Il Templario", as a conductor he was unrivalled and attained cult status among devotees of classical music through the introduction of the Philharmonic concerts.

The founding of these concerts was preceded by an innovation which directly affected the acceptance of one of the most important operas of history. At a performance of "Fidelio" in the Court Opera House on September 28, 1841, Nicolai introduced something new: "Between the two acts, I performed the grand overture to 'Leonore' and in so doing gained much additional respect with the audience. The insert was received with great enthusiasm, and now "Fidelio" can no longer be performed without the same."¹ This third "Leonore" Overture made Nicolai famous in Vienna, and its performance by the future Philharmonic members opened up a new dimension in orchestral playing. "There were more than a few experts in that day who considered this composition to be unplayable and suggested to the master that he compose something easier! [...] That which our opera orchestra has accomplished will hardly be found anywhere else, and the thunderous applause, which did not stop until the overture was repeated, was the reward for this achievement. It was evident that only true artists could produce such sounds!"² Beethoven's Third Leonore Overture proved to be a catalyst for the Philharmonic concerts. The opera orchestra's interpretation not only opened the eyes of the audiences to the hitherto unforeseen possibilities for orchestral concerts of high quality, but its success also strengthened the self-confidence of the musicians and provided them with perhaps the decisive incentive to undertake this undoubtedly risky step of introducing the Philharmonic concerts.

On March 28, 1842, under pressure from prominent personalities of Vienna's musical life, Nicolai thus took up the much-discussed idea and conducted a "Grand Concert" presented by "the complete orchestral personnel of the Court Opera Theater" in the Large Redoutensaal. Beethoven's Seventh Symphony opened the first concert of the Court Opera Orchestra under its own auspices. The birth of the Vienna Philharmonic was the result of a democratic resolution and the willingness of the musicians to accept this great challenge. However, the decisive impetus came from Nicolai, who set artistic standards of timeless validity ("to give Philharmonic concerts in Vienna, with the goal of performing the very best, with the best personnel, in the best possible manner."³), and created the administrative guidelines which remain to this day unchanged.

¹ Otto Nicolai: Briefe an seinen Vater (hg. Wilhelm Altmann, Regensburg 1924), S. 282.

² Allgemeine Wiener Musik-Zeitung (AWMZ), Nr. 7, 15. 1. 1842, S. 27.

³ AWMZ, Nr. 76/77, 26./29. 6. 1847, S. 305 ff.



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Nicolai repeatedly encountered conflict with those around him due to his high artistic expectations, and it was a vehement dispute which eventually ended Nicolai's career in Vienna. When Balochino refused to stage the premiere of the opera "The Merry Wives of Windsor", in angry protest Nicolai in consequence left Vienna forever to accept a position as conductor at the Royal Opera House and director of the cathedral choir in Berlin. His departure from Vienna, in spite of all this adversity, was grievous for him. "It must be said that the Berliner have no idea about the performance of symphonic music in the degree of perfection which I have achieved with the Philharmonic concerts in Vienna, even though the Berliner assume they do it better than the rest of the world. The pathological arrogance, which always seemed to me to be the prevalent attribute of the Berliner, remains today! As a person I will continue to miss Italy and Vienna for a long time, and as a musician I will not find an equivalent for Vienna, unless there comes about a better arrangement for the organization of the orchestra. There is more order in Berlin, which I missed greatly in Vienna at first – but the Viennese have music in their blood, whereas here music has to be learned. There is just more talent in the south!" noted the Prussian-born Nicolai in his diary⁴, even though he had departed Vienna in strife and bitterness. Fourteen years earlier he had left Berlin as an unknown talent. Upon his return, "he stood at the pinnacle of musical life"⁵, and completed his most well-known composition, with the premiere of "The Merry Wives of Windsor" taking place on March 9, 1849. The selection of Otto Nicolai as a member of the Academy of Arts came too late. The accreditation took place on May 11, 1849, on the same day he died of complications from syphilis.⁶

An element of tragedy pervades this musician's destiny. He did not live to experience the worldwide success of his finest opera; even though his talent as a conductor was undisputed, he remains today in the shadows of the greater composers Weber and Wagner; and finally, he was unable to establish himself permanently in Vienna, the city in which he found artistic fulfillment – too great was the difference in mentality, too undiplomatic was the manner in which he asserted his artistic expectations, and too blatant were his demonstrations of intellectual dominance. "Nicolai has enemies in Vienna, which reflects poorly on the Viennese, because I consider him one of the finest conductors I have ever met, and as one of those persons whose influence suffices to provide a musical pre-eminence to the city in which they reside, if they are provided the means necessary for the unleashing of their energy and intelligence"⁷, according to no one less than Hector Berlioz, who gave several concerts with the orchestra of the Theater an der Wien during the 1845/46 season, heard various opera performances and Philharmonic concerts, and even conducted the Philharmonic himself on one occasion.

Berlioz confirmed that Nicolai and his musicians had advanced to a new dimension. "In addition to confidence, brilliance and an exceptional technique, the orchestra possesses an excellent sound, which is undoubtedly due to the strict and exact tuning of the instruments to one another as well as the perfectly clean playing of every individual member. [...] The orchestra at the Court Opera House at Kärntnertor knows how to accompany vocal music of all styles; it knows to play out as soon as it is accorded the leading role; its loud passages are never noisy, except when it has to perform one of

⁴ Otto Nicolai: Otto Nicolais Tagebücher (hg. Wilhelm Altmann, Regensburg 1937), S. 270 f.

⁵ Ulrich Konrad: Otto Nicolai (1810-1849). Studien zu Leben und Werk (Diss. Baden-Baden 1986), S. 78.

⁶ F. Michelsen: Die Krankheit und der Tod Otto Nicolais. In: Münchner medizinische Wochenschrift, Jg. 1913, Nr. 32, S. 1777 f.

⁷ Hector Berlioz, Memoiren (hg. Wolf Rosenberg, München 1979), S. 363.



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those wretched cacophonies, which require that it be as bad as the composer. This orchestra is perfect in the opera and triumphant on the concert stage; furthermore, among its members are none of the type of musicians who, bloated with vanity, reject objective criticism, consider any comparison with themselves and foreign virtuosos to be an insult and who think they do Beethoven a great honor when they condescend to perform his music."⁸

The one responsible for these qualities, Otto Nicolai, was as a conductor, who, in his faithfulness to the original, in his conducting technique and capacity for analytical and intellectual comprehension of a musical score, was commensurate with the qualifications for a leader of an orchestra today. The most vivid description of Nicolai's rehearsal technique is provided by the director of the Music Institute in Prague, Kinderfreund, who observed a rehearsal of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in March 1843. "In his manner of conducting, I find Maestro Nicolai very similar to the brilliant Karl Maria v. Weber [...] In front of his orchestra, Nicolai resembles a Perpetuum mobile, with the greatest agility he seems to be everywhere and hears everything with an enviable ear; his leadership displays an admirable confidence and discretion, and is made more interesting because while conducting he refers to Mälzel's metronome to check if his chosen tempo is in agreement, while at the same time imparting a request to the orchestra assistant and cordially greeting the singers who finally arrive, without breaking concentration in the least. He does not miss the tiniest passage or the finest nuance, and the omission of an inconspicuous but significant detail will serve as catalyst for several repetitions."⁹

Certainly the expectations which Nicolai set in order to implement his artistic ideals also led to vehement disputes with the orchestra. The practice of holding only one - or in the best case two - rehearsals which had to be sufficient, even for premieres, was replaced by a style of working, which, in addition to a perfect handling of technical requisites, had as its goal a unified concept. Of course, this required a corresponding willingness on the part of the orchestra. The eight rehearsals which Nicolai held before the first Philharmonic concert certainly presented new artistic possibilities, but this also meant foregoing the teaching of private lessons. In fact, not all musicians possessed the necessary discernment, and when a public scandal developed at the time of the eighth Philharmonic concert on March 30, 1845, with concertmaster Georg Hellmesberger conducting instead of Nicolai, the truth could no longer be kept secret. "What effort, perseverance and endurance it must have cost this man to incite this musical ensemble which, although certainly composed of the best players, is not always united in energetic artistic endeavor, to repeatedly rise willingly and without grumbling to the mental heights necessary in order to perform at the level it is capable, even though unaware of its own potential! What type of opposition, regarding the large number, the length, or the detailed nature of the rehearsals, did he not experience?"¹⁰

The analysis of this scandal exposes the dark side of the Nicolai era, the artistic successes of which were purchased at the price of serious conflicts. In Nicolai's view, the orchestra took advantage of his weakened physical condition to demonstrate its own strength. "A serious ailment befell me in the month of February 1845. It consisted primarily of rheumatic meningitis and cost me endless time, money and pain. [...] Not until the end

⁸ Berlioz, Memoiren, a. a. O., S. 362 f.

⁹ Der Humorist, Nr. 51, 13. 3. 1843, S. 211.

¹⁰ AWMZ, Nr. 40, 3. 4. 1845, S. 158 f.



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of March did I gradually recover and had to endure the anguish of seeing my ungrateful orchestra personnel, without my consent, hand over the direction of the 8th Philharmonic Concert [...] to their concertmaster, Josef [actually Georg] Hellmesberger. I wanted to protest this, but it was too difficult being ill and bedridden; the orchestra was angry that the press always praised only me, the director, for the excellence of the Philharmonic concerts and wanted to prove that the members of the orchestra could perform the concerts just as well without me."¹¹ Written down more than two years after these noteworthy events, this report conveys, in addition to an understandable one-sidedness, the blemish of being too superficial. Thorough knowledge of these events exposes a regrettable truth: the continuous tensions between Nicolai and the musicians discharged themselves in a hateful conflict which became a public spectacle.

An article from a correspondent for the Budapest newspaper, "Der Spiegel", incited an amazing escalation of this affair: "The Philharmonic concerts [...] in Vienna may be coming to an end at the close of the current season. Petty quarrelling between Otto Nicolai and the orchestral musicians are undermining an enterprise, which in its noble aspiration enhances Vienna's reputation. It is truly misfortunate that music's venerable banner is still in the possession of many undutiful sons, who repeatedly create hindrances to the strengthening of unity."¹²

A publicized argument among artists recognizes only one loser: the fine arts. Nicolai realized this as well. Despite his illness, he attempted damage control by distancing himself from this report in several newspapers. This was unsuccessful however, because two days previously the musicians had formulated their rebuttal to the "Spiegel" article. This first press release from the Vienna Philharmonic spokesman displayed uninhibited emotion: "[...] I have [...] no other option [...], but to state that only for very sound reasons would the orchestra replace Otto Nicolai in his capacity as our director/conductor. In this manner the orchestra personnel [...] takes exception to the remark that [...] 'It is truly misfortunate that music's venerable banner is still in the possession of many undutiful sons, who repeatedly create hindrances to the strengthening of unity.' - I, on the other hand, who am well enlightened in this matter, would remind the reporter that if he had taken the trouble to properly inform himself, he would have included the conductor, Mr. Otto Nicolai, amongst the most undutiful sons, since it was he alone who assumed the role of causing hindrance to the strengthening of unity. [...] I would add in conclusion that the Philharmonic concerts will continue and that the orchestra personnel [...] against whom conductor Nicolai and his cohorts so cleverly schemed and shrewdly spread opinions of protest which intimated that this institution, apart from conductor Nicolai, has no possibility of continued excellence in performance. [...] Vienna, March 9. Yours Sincerely, Aegid Borzaga, member of the Imperial Hofkapelle and soloist of the Court Opera House."¹³

Nicolai anticipated such a response. Only one day after the appearance of this attack, he announced that "because of the great strain involved,"¹⁴ he would be unable to conduct the concert. However it appears he was reluctant to acknowledge what was for

¹¹ Nicolais Tagebücher, a. a. O., S. 236 f.

¹² Der Spiegel für Kunst, Eleganz und Mode (Spiegel), Nr. 19, 5. 3. 1845, S. 296.

¹³ Spiegel, Nr. 23, 19. 3. 1845, S. 366 f. Der hervorragende Cellist Borzaga schied nach 1848 aus dem Orchester und nahm als „Oekonom“ des Kärntnertortheaters eine wichtige administrative Funktion ein.

¹⁴ AWMZ, Nr. 34, 20. 3. 1845, S. 136; Der Wanderer, Nr. 69, 21. 3. 1845, S. 275.



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him a bitter truth, that the "free will"¹⁵ of the musicians had turned against him. The assumption that he had indeed been removed from his position of leadership is confirmed by his definite intention now to leave Vienna and on July 1st to enter the employment of the King of Prussia.¹⁶ Fortunately, it turned out differently. Although Hellmesberger conducted the 8th Philharmonic Concert, which the convalescent Nicolai attended "only as a member of the audience"¹⁷ as a demonstration of the insult he been subjected to, both sides finally came to a sensible solution. This was perhaps due to a decision made in higher circles. In order to secure Nicolai's continued presence, Carlo Balochino was pressured by Graf Sedlnitzky, the president of the police who was active in the affairs of the Court Opera Theater, to implement a new contract with the composer providing him with a yearly salary of 2,400 instead of the 2,000 gulden previously remunerated. With this the crisis was resolved and as early as June 1, 1845, the composer informed his father that, "following much deliberation"¹⁸, he had decided to remain in Vienna.

"Nicolai had a genuine artistic nature: ingenious, enthusiastic and ambitious but also vain and moody," whose disposition could "suddenly shift from cultivated amiability to unbearable irritability."¹⁹ The musicians were provoked by his superlative reviews, as Nicolai correctly noted, which only served to elevate his already well-known vanity, which also required the highest standards from himself. "[...] if I had more creativity and more genius, then I would brazenly place myself at the forefront, because I have exceptional command of composition, instrumentation, and utilization of all vocal and instrument means."²⁰

Nicolai's untiring efforts were not appreciated by the musicians. It lies within the nature of democracy that it can turn unmercifully upon its own founders, eventually making their posthumous honour all the greater. In the case of the Vienna Philharmonic, it is the annual Nicolai concert, which takes place as part of the subscription concert series, and the Nicolai Medal in honour of distinguished service to the orchestra, which uphold the memory of the composer and conductor Nicolai. Additional activities in this anniversary year consist of the inclusion of the overture to "The Merry Wives of Windsor" to open the second half of the 2010 New Year's Concert; the performance of the "Moonshine Chorus" from the same masterpiece (which Nicolai himself conducted at his final concert in Vienna on June 21, 1847) at the Summer Night Concert 2010 on June 8th, the evening before Nicolai's 200th birthday; a ceremony which will take place on the anniversary itself at the "Haus der Musik" in the former city palace of the Archduke Karl, where Otto Nicolai resided at the time he founded the Vienna Philharmonic; and on July 15, 2010, in honour of its founder, the orchestra performs for the first time in Königsberg (Kaliningrad), Nicolai's city of birth, at which time a commemorative plaque will also be unveiled in the city's cathedral.

The one and only adequate homage on Otto Nicolai resides on another level. "To present to the audience Beethoven's magnificent creations as excellently as the means at hand allow, and at very least with the deepest love and enthusiasm - that is my duty,

¹⁵ Nicolais Tagebücher, a. a. O., S. 223.

¹⁶ Nicolai, Briefe, a. a. O., S. 333.

¹⁷ AWMZ, Nr. 40, 3. 4. 1845, S. 158.

¹⁸ Nicolai, a. a. O., Briefe, S. 337.

¹⁹ Eduard Hanslick: Geschichte des Concertwesens in Wien (Wien 1869/70), S. 316.

²⁰ Nicolai, Briefe, a. a. O., S. 355.



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and that of everyone who finds himself in a position similar to mine. For this, no gratitude is due me, for the cause carries within itself its own reward", wrote Otto Nicolai a few months before the first Philharmonic concert.²¹ The preservation of this fire which burned within his soul is the surest guarantee of the continued existence of the association which he founded. With superior ability and glowing enthusiasm for music he unlocked hitherto unknown dimensions of orchestral performance, so that as early as 1844 he could correctly say of himself: "The most important thing that I have done in Vienna in these past 3 years has been the founding of the Philharmonic concerts".²² Through the continuation of this endeavour up to the present day, the Vienna Philharmonic expresses the appreciation which was denied him during his lifetime.

The human frailty manifested in the relationship between Nicolai and "his" Philharmonic has long since been forgotten; the embittered conflict and the petty squabbles are only insignificant reminiscences. Yet at the same time, these also serve as an admonition to make unrelenting efforts toward preserving unity in spirit regarding mutual artistic goals. With the "founding of the 'Philharmonic concerts' Nicolai constructed [...] a monument, that will not soon crumble. His name is so interwoven with the musical history of Austria that it is impossible not to mention him when naming those who exerted great influence in their time, wielding the same in the service of the arts."²³ Nicolai's posthumous fame as the composer of the opera "The Merry Wives of Windsor" soon outshined his much admired accomplishments as a conductor. However the homage from the year 1847 quoted above was almost prophetic: Whereas Nicolai's masterpiece, "The Merry Wives of Windsor", was greatly to be overshadowed by "Falstaff," Verdi's setting of the same Shakespeare comedy, the establishment of the Philharmonic concerts has proven to be Otto Nicolai's everlasting monument.

²¹ Nicolai, Briefe, a. a. O., S. 355.

²² Nicolais Tagebücher, a. a. O., S. 222.

²³ AWMZ, Nr. 35/36, 23./25.3. 1847, S. 146.