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A Sound Tradition

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE
VIENNA PHILHARMONIC
ORCHESTRA

Translation from the German
by John Hargraves

With 99 illustrations



WIENER
PHILHARMONIKER
— 1842 —



Amalthea
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To the memory of Ernst Ottensamer (1955-2017)

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A Tour

A Stroll through Vienna and through the History of an Orchestra

May I interest you in a little tour of the city? In less than twenty minutes, we will stroll by the most important centers of Philharmonic life of Vienna.

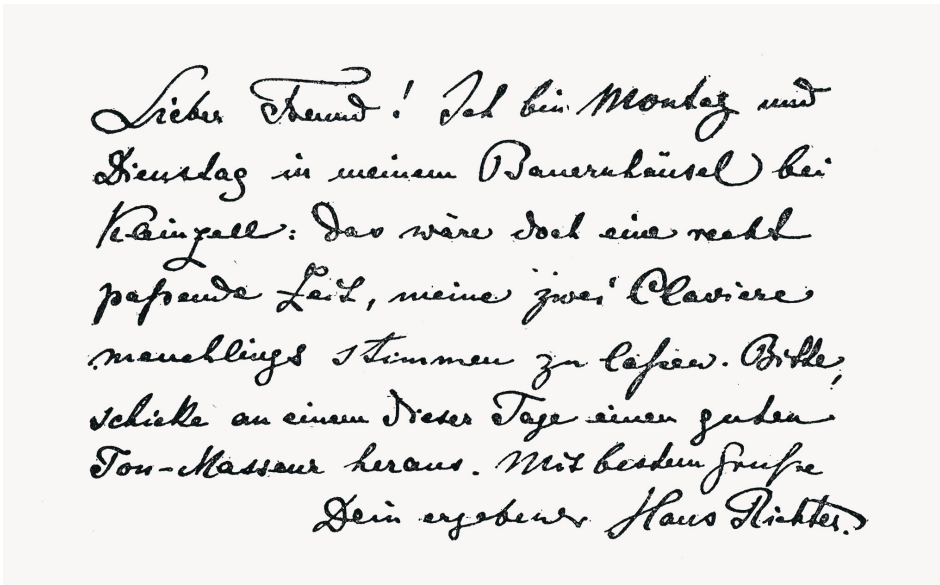
Home Base: the Musikverein

Let us begin with the Karlsplatz. Behind us, the baroque splendor of the Karlskirche, Ressel Park with its Brahms memorial, and the Technical University (formerly the Imperial and Royal Polytechnic Institute, where the Strauss brothers Johann and Josef studied). In front of us is the Musikverein building by Ringstrasse architect Theophil Hansen, who also designed the Vienna Parliament building, the Academy of Fine Arts at the Schillerplatz, the Stock Exchange on the Schottenring, and numerous palatial residences of the capital city. The home of the “Society of Friends of Music in Vienna” (*Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Wien*), founded in 1812, also houses the administrative offices of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra (or as it is called in good old Austrian bureaucratese, the “Chancellery.”) Here, in the Great, or “Golden,” Hall of the Musikverein, since it opened in 1870, the subscription concerts of the Philharmonic as well as the New Year’s Day Concerts take place, which have contributed to its international standing.

Stars are set into the paving stones in front of the façade with the names of important musicians: the Austrian symphonic composer Anton Bruckner, the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler, the contemporary German-Austrian composer Gottfried von Einem, and the Romantic Franz Schubert. These commemorative plaques are part of the “Vienna Music Mile.” This memorial is quite neglected nowadays and certainly not a worthy “walk of fame” for the music metropolis, but can nonetheless serve as a reminder and orientation guide.

Going By the Ticket and Ball Office...

We cross Bösendorferstraße, bearing the name of the famed Viennese piano manufacturer, and walk down Dumbastraße (named for the Austrian industrialist Nikolaus von Dumba, who was vice president of the Musikverein and board member of the Vienna Men's Choral Association in the late 19th century), to the Kärntner Ring, where we will turn left.



Philharmonic conductor Hans Richter asks his "dear friend" Ludwig Bösendorfer to tune his pianos.

A few meters on from there we reach the Ticket and Ball Office of the Vienna Philharmonic, in front of which we see more music-stars: for Pierre Boulez, Johann Sebastian Bach and Johann Strauss. The Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, the only musical organization so represented here, has a star commemorating its first concert on March 28, 1842. As we walk backward through history, we are now approaching this magical date.

Passing stars for Dmitri Shostakovich, Anton von Webern, and Herbert von Karajan (the plaque is graced by the maestro's signature as well, which Hildegard Knef thought looked like "a cardiogram"), we continue along the Ring to the State Opera building, rising to our right, and which, like the Musikverein, can be considered home base for our orchestra. For since its birth, the Philharmonic has recruited its players from members of the opera orchestra; aside from versatility, this provides economic viability for its musicians. A prerequisite for being accepted into the concert orchestra (organized as an association) is membership in the opera, which has a probationary period of several years. We will come back later to this "double identity" feature of our orchestra. For the moment, let us note that Philharmonic musicians, while playing in the opera, may not be called that, but should sound like it!

...and the other homebase: the State Opera

Only one year older than the Musikverein, the Court Opera Theater on the Ring was completed according to plans of the architects August Sicard von Sicardsburg and Eduard van der Nüll in 1869 and opened on May 25 with Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (back then presented in German as *Don Juan*).

The space to the right of the Vienna State Opera (as seen from the Ring) originally had no name, as it was part of Kärntner Straße. At the instigation of the then director of the State Opera, Ioan Holender, the tract was named Herbert-von-Karajan-Platz in 1996. On the one hand, honoring the outstanding conductor and eminent house director (from 1956 to 1964) is quite appropriate; on the other hand, it makes one wonder how a half century after the end of the war, a square in the capital of Austria can be dedicated to a prominent former Nazi party member...A research group commissioned in the early 2010's by the University of Vienna and the city to deal with street names identified the Karajan-Platz as a "case needing further discussion."

Several more musical celebrities are remembered here with stars: the composers Alban Berg and Richard Strauss and their superb conductors Clemens Krauss and Karl Böhm. Then, lined up together, Giuseppe Verdi, Leonie Rysanek, Hans Knappertsbusch and, last but not least, Gustav

Mahler. Directly across from the side entrance of the opera house is the beginning of Mahlerstraße, a name it bore at first only between 1919 and 1938. It mutated under the Nazis to “Meistersingerstraße” until 1945 when the name and remembrance of the Court Opera director were restored.

The Kärntnertor-Theater— today Vienna’s most famous Hotel

Behind the opera runs the Philharmonikerstraße, which was given that name in 1942 to mark the orchestra’s Centennial Jubilee year. Crossing this street we find ourselves in front of the world-famous Hotel Sacher. It got its nickname—“Vienna’s most musical hotel”—not just from the huge number of guests from “next door,” but also due to its precise geographic location: from 1709 to 1870 the “Imperial and Royal Court Opera Theater by the Kärntnertor,” the forerunner of the Opera on the Ring stood in this spot. If we just scan the decades before the founding of the Vienna Philharmonic, the Kärntnertor-Theater premiered performances of, among other things, a *Schauspielmusik* and a piano concerto of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, operas by Joseph Haydn, Antonio Salieri, Conradin Kreutzer, Carl Maria von Weber and Franz Schubert. Schubert’s song *Der Erlkönig* was first heard here in 1821, and eight years later, Frédéric Chopin had his Viennese debut as a pianist in this theater.

The most significant moments in the house’s history are associated with the name of Ludwig van Beethoven: the premiere of the final version of *Fidelio* occurred on May 23, 1814, and that of the Ninth Symphony on May 7, 1824. And both were performed by members of the orchestra that was to become the Vienna Philharmonic. The Viennese public felt such a close connection to this musically important site that when the Hotel Sacher was built on the same place, it was forbidden in writing to have any opera performance there.

We could turn right and go on along the continuation of Philharmonikerstraße (Walfischgasse no. 13 was once “Café Parsifal”, frequented equally by opera cast, staff and audience members) but we shall instead stroll up Kärntner Straße. At the end of the block is Maysedergasse, named for the violin virtuoso Joseph Mayseder, who was both a “Concert

and Solo performer” at the Court Opera Theater. He never became a member of the Philharmonic, but nonetheless appeared as a soloist in the orchestra’s first concert. We turn right onto Annagasse, at the start of which we are greeted by a memorial star for Arturo Toscanini. The Italian “maestrissimo” shaped the history of our orchestra for only a few years: his debut in October 1933 marked the start of the guest conductor system at the Philharmonic. In early 1938, the fiercely democratic Italian decided to shun Austria, now joined to the German Reich by the *Anschluss*, and its top class orchestra.

The Haus der Musik

We saunter down Annagasse (passing by the Ristorante Sole, where artists and the public like to go after opera performances), at the end of which is the Haus der Musik. Here we come excitingly close to the founding moment of the Vienna Philharmonic: the composer and conductor Otto Nicolai lived in this building during his service as Viennese Hofoperkapellmeister (Court Opera conductor). A memorial tablet placed in 1942 (at the hundred year jubilee of his once-in-a-century idea to form a concert ensemble from the opera orchestra) shows Nicolai’s portrait, the dates of his all-too-short life (1810-1849), and the date of the first concert he conducted (March 28, 1842—a date we shall not forget so quickly!) remind us of this music-historical milestone.

The text on the house on Seilerstätte opposite turns out to be much more flowery: the marble tablet commemorates the legendary dancer Fanny Elßler, who was born the same year as Nicolai, but lived until 1884, and whose fame became downright mythical. The inscription: “She was the smiling face of her century, one of those rare masterworks whom the creator weighs in his hands for many ages, before releasing them to life.” The most frequently performed work of the 1823/24 season in the Kärntnertor-Theater was the magical ballet *The Fairy and the Knight/Die Fee und der Ritter*—and the record-breaking number of performances was due to none other than its star: Fanny Elßler.

Let us enter the Haus der Musik, the former “Palais Erzherzog Carl” in the Seilerstätte. It houses, among other things, the Historical Archive

of the Orchestra as well as certain publicly accessible memorabilia from the rich history of the orchestra in the Museum of the Vienna Philharmonic.

On the first floor, we pass by displays devoted to the history of the Vienna State Opera before entering a room containing information on the history of the world-famous New Year's Day Concerts of the Vienna Philharmonic. To the right we are led into an imaginary concert hall, where visitors can experience the high points of the last New Year's Concert or the Summer Night Concert of the Philharmonic, on large-screen displays. To the left is the historic Hall of Mirrors. Here there is documentation on concert tours, honors and distinctions, the Vienna Philharmonic Ball and the orchestra's artistic collaborations with composers such as Johannes Brahms, Anton Bruckner, Gustav Mahler, Richard Strauss, Hans Pfitzner, Franz Schmidt and Alban Berg, using original objects.

One's eye falls on the batons of numerous prominent orchestra leaders—at first glance, that of Toscanini looks to be as long as the others. But if we recall that the Italian maestro used to use an especially long stick to conduct with, we look a bit closer—and in fact, the stick is broken off. This probably occurred as the result of one of its owner's legendary fits of rage...

The adjoining Nicolai Room has a special document of Austrian cultural history on display: the decree founding the Vienna Philharmonic (see page 27). It also contains the first photograph of the orchestra (1864) and pictures of Otto Nicolai, the violinists Georg and Joseph Hellmesberger and others. And last but not least, the program of the first Philharmonic concert...you surely remember the date!

1842—What a Year!

We could continue our wanderings onto Singerstraße; the inn “Zum Amor” once stood there, where, according to a romantic account, the founding of the orchestra is said to have occurred; then, around the corner in Grünangergasse, in the editorial room of the *Allgemeine Musik-Zeitung* the plan was in fact conceived to form the first professional “sound body” of Vienna to give independent concerts...But now it's time

for a pause. If we put that mythic year of 1842 under a magnifying glass, it shows itself to be a most significant year. Let's pull out the most important dates:

On March 3rd, the “Scottish” Symphony of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy had its world premiere in Leipzig's Gewandhaus and was conducted by the composer. A short week later, on March 9th, Giuseppe Verdi's first international success, *Nabucco*, first appeared on stage at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan. Verdi was a fateful figure for Otto Nicolai in two senses: for one, the latter had rejected the (in his opinion) inferior *Nabucco* libretto (“endless raging, blood-letting, screaming, beating and murdering is no subject for me”) and in so doing opened up a pathway for the younger Italian to world fame. And for another, Nicolai's greatest opera success, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, was outmatched more than 40 years later by Verdi's masterpiece on the same subject, *Falstaff*, and—unjustly—eclipsed by it. It is no surprise to us that Nicolai could simply not abide the Italian's music: “He orchestrates like a fool [...he] must have a heart like a donkey's, and is truly in my eyes a pitiful, contemptible composer.”

The scarcely thirty-year-old Verdi visited Vienna in April of 1843 and conducted his *Nabucco* at the Kärntnertor-Theater—and thus with the musicians of the Philharmonic Orchestra. They had already performed the world premiere of Gaetano Donizetti's *Linda di Chamounix* on May 19, 1842. It is noteworthy that the “Rossini-Craze” of the early 20's, that is, the rage for the composer of the *Barber of Seville*, was “reignited” two decades later with Donizetti. Back then, German opera played second fiddle in Vienna, even though its greatest master was already standing at the door: Richard Wagner's *Rienzi* was produced on October 20, 1842, at the Royal Court Theater of Dresden. It was not to have its first Austrian performance until May 30, 1871, in the “new” house on the Ring. Other new works of note in the year 1842: Michail Glinka's *Ruslan and Ludmilla* (December 9 in Saint Petersburg) and finally, on the last day of the year, Albert Lortzing's *Der Wildschütz* at the Stadttheater in Leipzig.

Arrigo Boito, the Italian composer and librettist (of Verdi's last operas, *Otello* and *Falstaff*, among others) was born on February 24 of 1842, the operetta composers Carl Millöcker, Arthur Sullivan and Carl Zeller on April 29th, May 13th and June 19th. Our orchestra had hardly any contact at all with the latter-mentioned composers; more, though, with the works

of the Frenchman Jules Massenet, who was born on May 12th: his opera *Werther* had its world premiere in the Vienna Court Opera in 1892.

The birthday of a sister institution should be mentioned, which falls on the 2nd of April 1842: the “Philharmonic Symphony Society of New York” was founded on that day, thus making the New York Philharmonic just a few days younger than the one in Vienna and the oldest symphony orchestra of the USA. Two death dates will round out this musical review of 1842: Mozart’s widow Constanze passed away on March 6 in Salzburg (a mere 51 years after her husband!) and the then celebrated composer Luigi Cherubini died on March 15th in Paris. When the Vienna Philharmonic, then still known as “Orchestral Personnel of the Imperial and Royal Court Opera Theater”, gave its first concert, it included two pieces by the late composer in its program.

In the Nicolai Room of the Haus der Musik, we are in fact physically close to the founding of the Philharmonic, and we can hardly believe that at one time other “founding” dates were being talked about besides this year of 1842...but more of that in the next chapter.

Our ramble through
Vienna from the
Musikverein to the
Haus der Musik

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