THE DEVIL'S MUSIC MASTER
THE CONTROVERSIAL LIFE AND CAREER OF WILHELM FURTWÄNGLER
The Devil's Music Master: The Controversial Life and Career of Wilhelm Furtwangler, Sam H. Shirakawa, Oxford University Press, 1992, 0199923418, 9780199923410, 544 pages. From 1922 until his death in 1954, Wilhelm Furtwangler was the foremost cultural music figure of the German-speaking world, conductor of both the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonic orchestras. But a cloud still hangs over his reputation, despite his undeniable brilliance as a musician, because of a fatal and tragic decision. Wilhelm Furtwangler remained in Germany when thousands of intellectuals and artists fled after the Nazis seized power in 1933. His decision to stay behind earned him lasting condemnation as a Nazi collaborator--"The Devil's Music Master." Decades after his death, Furtwangler remains for many not only the greatest but also the most controversial musical personality of our time. In The Devil's Music Master, Sam H. Shirakawa forges the first full-length and comprehensive biography of Furtwangler. He surveys Furtwangler's formative years as a difficult but brilliant prodigy, his rise to pre-eminence as Germany's leading conductor, and his development as a musician, composer, and thinker. Shirakawa also reviews the rich recorded legacy Furtwangler documented throughout his forty-year career--such as the legendary Tristan with Kirsten Flagstad and the famous performances of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in 1942 and 1951. Equally important, Shirakawa goes backstage and behind the lines to explore how the Nazis seized control of the arts and how Furtwangler single-handedly tried to prevent evil characters as Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels and Luftwaffe Chief Hermann Goring from annihilating Germany's musical life. He shows how Furtwangler, far from being a toady to the Nazis, stood up openly against Hitler and Himmler--at enormous personal risk--to salvage the musical traditions of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven. Shirakawa also presents moving and overwhelming evidence of Furtwangler's astonishing efforts to save the lives of Jews and other persecuted individuals trapped in Nazi Germany--only to be proscribed at the end of the war and nearly framed as a war criminal. But there was more to Furtwangler than his politics, or even his music, and we come to know this extraordinary man as a reluctant composer, a prolific essayist and diary keeper, a loyal friend, a formidable enemy when crossed, and an incorrigible philanderer. Numerous musical luminaries share their memories of Furtwangler to round out this vivid portrait. Based on dozens of interviews and research in numerous documents, letters, and diaries, many of them previously unpublished, The Devil's Music Master is an in-depth look at the life and times of a unique personality whose fatal flaw lay in his uncompromising belief that music and art must be kept apart from politics, a conviction that transformed him into a tragic figure...

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Dig: Sound and Music in Hip Culture, Phil Ford, Jun 29, 2013, Music, 336 pages. Hipness has been an indelible part of America's intellectual and cultural landscape since the 1940s. But the question What is hip? remains a kind of cultural koan, equally ....

Herbert Von Karajan A Life in Music, Richard Osborne, 1999, Conductors (Music), 851 pages. 'A monumental work of scholarship, of integrity, of sympathy born of respect and humanity. A woven tapestry, rather than a mere listing of events and accomplishments, it ....

The Wit and Wisdom of Ozzy Osbourne, Dave Thompson, Sep 17, 2010, Music, 176 pages. All Aboard the Crazy Train This is Ozzy Osbourne in all his raw and unfiltered glory; four decades worth of his best quotes, oddest observations, risquè retorts, and yes, even ....

The Faber Pocket Guide to Bach, Sir Nicholas Kenyon, Mar 17, 2011, Music, . The music of J.S.Bach has a unique power and attraction some 300 years after it was written. From annual performances of the great Passions and BBC Radio 3's hugely successful ....

The baton and the jackboot recollections of musical life, Berta Geissmar, 1946, Biography & Autobiography, 403 pages. .

This Life of Sounds: Evenings for New Music in Buffalo, Renee Levine Packer, Jun 24, 2010, Music, 256 pages. This Life of Sounds portrays an important and previously unexplored corner of the history of new music in America: the Center of the Creative and Performing Arts in the State....


Two worlds of music, Berta Geissmar, 1975, Biography & Autobiography, 327 pages. .


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Despite the catchpenny title, based on the fact that the German conductor (1886-1954) remained in his country throughout WW II and thereafter was accused of being a collaborator, this is a solid, judicious and thoroughly researched work. Shirakawa, identified only as "a writer and filmmaker," displays a profound understanding of music, and his book has clearly been a labor of love. He comes out foursquare for Furtwangler--"perhaps the greatest conductor this century has produced"--and musters much evidence to show that while his decision to stay in Nazi Germany, adding cultural luster to the Reich, was probably misguided, it was inevitable given Furtwängler's pride, stubbornness and conviction that he could salvage something from the ruins. It seems indisputable that he saved many Jewish musicians and other professionals, including some he had
no reason to admire, and that he was instrumental in preserving the Berlin Philharmonic, only to have it taken away from him later by a real opportunist (and party member), Herbert von Karajan. Shirakawa's discussion of all this is admirably clear-headed, and the chapters devoted to the conductor's experiences in the U.S., and to his legacy on disc, are invaluable. Photos.

Furtwangler's stature as one of our century's great conductors is well documented on many recordings, particularly those recorded in concert. The controversy alluded to in the title of this superb study arose from Furtwangler's refusal to leave his native Germany when the Nazis seized power. We are shown that Furtwangler, rather than being the Devil's (Hitler's) music master, as he was regarded in America, resisted the regime at every opportunity. His efforts on behalf of many Jewish musicians, for example, could easily have cost him his life. Furtwangler's tragic mistake was to believe that music exists in a Platonic realm, untainted by politics. Shirakawa's riveting and well-researched account would seem to set the record straight once and for all. Deserving a place beside Joseph Horowitz's fine Understanding Toscanini (Univ. of Minnesota Pr., 1987), this book is highly recommended.

Although I am totally unable to speculate on the quality of the research behind this book, it is to me a very pleasant reading experience, to say the least. The book is very well-written (which cannot be said of the biographies of many "serious" musicians) and whilst the author is overtly sympathetic to his subject, he is also sensitive to the weaknesses in the personality of this great but flawed man.

Furtwangler lived through both world wars and occupied a highly unique place in modern musical history. I thought it would have been quite a feat to bring to life not just the man, but the times that made and shaped and (perhaps ultimately) broke him - perhaps one of the most complicated periods in human history (from Imperial Prussia to the Weimar Republic to the Third Reich to post-war Germany). I thought the author did a brilliant job. He writes with a flair and the book never loses its flow or its grip on you, even when it's going through a few large chunks of what can only be called data (e.g. dates of professional engagements, works premiered or performed, etc. - even a long list of people whom Furtwangler saved or helped under the Nazis and basic facts of each case).

Nor does the author skip over the "juicy" parts of Furtwangler's life (there is the odd love letter to read, which is no bad thing), but he does not descend to prurience - perhaps not an easy task if you are writing about a veritable Don Juan. I suppose the man's famous sex appeal simply cannot be omitted if one is to figure out what makes Furtwangler, well, Furtwangler.

Nevertheless, the book is primarily about Furtwangler's decision to stay in Germany and the consequences of this decision. In this aspect, the author absolutely delivers. Look out for the intensely engaging chapters on Furtwangers' protracted and deadly game of chess with all of Goebbels, Goering, Himmler and Hitler himself. Also watch out for the bit on the furore over the prospective Chicago Symphony appointment and the post-war correspondence between Furtwangler and his old friend Bruno Walter. Just these bits, I thought, are worth the price of the book. I bought the electronic and then the hard copy versions - that's how big a fan I am.

Is this the "final word" on Furtwangler? Is this the closest we can get (in English) on his character? (The author was at least in time to speak in person to Frau Elizabeth Furtwangler and a few of the musical luminaries who were the great man's colleagues.) Is this a truthful picture of the man and what he did and what happened to him? Who can tell? Read this book as one possible way to interpret the man and his part in history. Perhaps as a story. Even as a cautionary tale from the bloodiest century man has ever known. In any event, it is a highly rewarding reading experience.

Not being a reader of German I have alwasy lamented the dearth of general reading on this strangely mesmerising and hugely influential man. I am very happy with the present offering and hope that it may be the precursor of more scholarship to follow. I hope you will enjoy as much as I did. Read more &rsaquo;

This isn't quite a 4-star book for me, but it comes quite close. Shirakawa has spent a lot of time
listening to Furtwangler recordings and speaking with those who knew him (while, of course, also relying on good primary and secondary sources). He clearly sympathizes with the conductor and greatly admires his work. As someone just beginning to really appreciate Furtwangler, I'm glad that Shirakawa spends several chapters exploring Furtwangler's recording career (much of it post-WWII).

Aside from his outstanding musical gifts, the most notable thing about Furtwangler is the decision he made to stay in Germany during the Third Reich. Shirakawa sets forth Furtwangler's reasoning effectively, and he highlights the dangers that Furtwangler increasingly faced. The author also spends significant time on the cost of Furtwangler's decision--including on his reputation (then and now) in America and the scorn to which he was subjected by artists/authors/musicians who left Germany after the Nazis came to power. Did Furtwangler do the right thing by remaining to preserve what he considered to be true German art from the depredations and degradations of the Nazis? It's hard to argue with Shirakawa's conclusion that Furtwangler did a great deal of good--both for individuals and the general public--by remaining. And also that Furtwangler did what he could to not be officially associated with the regime. But Shirakawa never really explores whether Furtwangler was aware of the use to which he was put by the Nazis, and, if so, how he could justify being perceived as ratifying the Nazi's attempt to redefine music.

I also felt that Shirakawa never really explained how Furtwangler survived until almost the end of the war before having to flee Germany. Himmler (head of the SS) hated him; Goebbels and Goering both disliked him; and Hitler seems to have been frustrated by him. Was Goebbels' and Hitler's admiration of his musicianship enough to overcome his noncompliance with Nazi requests, and his open disagreements with policy? Possibly, but it's never quite clear. The ambiguity of Furtwangler's power in Nazi Germany is made manifest by the fall of (Cornelius?) Vedder, a Himmler associate and agent who shepherded Herbert von Karajan's rise. According to Shirakawa, at least Goering and Himmler were behind Vedder and Karajan's swift climb to prominence and rivalry with Furtwangler. But somehow Furtwangler was able to engineer Vedder's fall, which conveniently had the effect of hindering Karajan's ambitions. It's not at all clear how Furtwangler could have pulled this off, and Shirakawa's account isn't revealing.

Finally, although time was spent at the beginning of the biography on Furtwangler's non-musical life (his relationship with his long-time secretary, his many love affairs), that falls by the wayside as Shirakawa recounts the Nazi years. It was never clear to me how Furtwangler came to know and love his second wife, who brought 4 children from a previous marriage into their home. Or what relationship he had with any of his children, including his multiple illegitimate and step-children (other than a couple of short anecdotes from his one legitimate child at the end). I would have liked to know more about the private man.

Wilhelm Furtwangler is mostly served well in this biography by Sam Shirakawa, but the author has real problems with his prose. It's good that he wants to make his book as accessible to the general public as possible, but too often it leads him to sentences which are unintentionally deprecating and, well, trite. An example: "The unimpugned lootings of Jewish-owned property and businesses had already begun, and the move to examine everybody's family tree for signs of Jewish blood became the deadly Trivial Pursuit of the time." I don't think it's being oversensitive to be offended by having Hitler's despicable racial policies compared to a popular board game from the 1980s, but quite apart from that, sentences like this one put things in simplistic ways more appropriate for a high school term paper than for a scholarly work.

Nonetheless, Shirakawa has done a scrupulous job of examining Furtwangler's life and career. The evidence he puts forward that Furtwangler was not a Nazi is well-documented and compelling, even if there are remaining doubts (which there probably always will be). He also does a very credible job at detailing the conductor's work habits, his thoughts on his craft, his dalliances (which were considerable), his relations with other composers, conductors and musicians, and his frequent battles of wills with the leaders of the Third Reich. You may still feel no pity for Furtwangler's dilemmas at the end of the book, but it's not because the author hasn't been thorough in examining his subject's life. I hope Shirakawa might consider a revision this book at some later date; there's too
much that's good about this book to let it be undermined by what's bad.

In the first half of the 20th century, Furtwangler was arguably the world's greatest conductor of classical orchestral music, a master interpreter of the German composers that Hitler cherished, particularly Richard Wagner and Ludwig Van Beethoven. He elicited from orchestras a unique sound, alternately terri...more "Furtwangler gave me a reason for living during the Third Reich."

While many of Germany's top musical artists fled the Nazifying Germany of the '30s, Furtwangler stayed, naively believing that music was above politics, that the classical ideals of art would survive the madness and lend a civilizing influence. He believed it was better to stay and bail water from the sinking ship than jump overboard.

Thus, Furtwangler, unwittingly had struck a Faustian bargain, becoming what author Sam Shirikawa in this biography dubs, "The Devil's Music Master." Interestingly, that is also a title that might apply to any biography of Furtwangler's contemporary, the Soviet composer, Dmitri Shostakovich, the premier musical artist of his country under the tyranny of Stalin. They were both the favorites of their respective dictators, and utterly powerless to change their fates.

After the war, Furtwangler was vilified by the Allied occupiers and vetted through a humiliating and savage de-Nazification process, and eventually cleared of wrongdoing. Justly, as Shirikawa points out, because Furtwangler's constant defiance of the Nazis was nothing short of heroic, and the author cites case after case to prove it. Himmler's file on Furtwangler became enormous as the conductor resisted, defied, challenged and refused to tolerate Party policies, even criticizing Hitler outright. Some of Furtwangler's acts of resistance were bold and some subtle. He called the Nazi flag "a rag" and refused to conduct under it when the Vienna Philharmonic hung it to mollify the Nazis. He refused on several occasions to raise his arm in the Nazi salute, even at concerts attended by Hitler himself. He fought to keep Jewish musicians in his orchestra. Furtwangler managed a feat achieved by few people, save Oskar Schindler, and that was to keep Jewish musicians and their Jewish spouses alive for the entirety of the war.