

## **Why my grandfather?**

'Why my grandfather?' was the question Nikolaus Harnoncourt's grandson Maximilian asked me one April evening in a Viennese café. He was referring to the long and powerful fascination his grandfather had for me.

Already disturbed to find myself face to face with someone who had known him very closely, I could only stammer out the first thing that came to my mind and which I formulated after a concert in Amsterdam... "FINALLY! It's a bit short, I agree, but it had the advantage of being spontaneous. Well, having said that, I propose to justify and illustrate why FINALLY was the right choice.

I'll try to answer a question asked by Claudia Stobrawa, the director of the Harnoncourt Zentrum, who rephrased a question asked by Maximilian.

Why don't I listen to the studio recordings! I can't, I'm starving... I'll explain a little further on.

## **The appearance of FINALLY!**

To exclaim 'at last' implies frustration, that we are waiting for something or someone. Why are we waiting? What could be the source of this expectation, a hope ... a consolation ... a confirmation ... surely a bit of all of that. But also 'At last!', no more mawkishness, no more angelism, an era is coming to an end, a new era is arriving...

But before I develop this point, perhaps I should introduce myself, who I am!

I was born into a family that was not at all musical, and being the eldest of the new generation I was part of a vague tradition whereby my great-grandfather, who had been what in France were called 'the black hussars of the Republic', in other words a teacher, was concerned with awakening his descendants to knowledge. He applied the principle of Montaigne (or Rabelais), the child is a fire to be lit...

This had the effect of triggering in me a thirst for knowledge, the book was a faithful companion and so was listening to music, as a self-taught person... I read and listened to everything and anything...

After my studies, for forty years I worked as an educator with children in difficulty in a therapeutic institution.

Of all the composers I listened to, Mozart was the one that suited me best, although I had very eclectic tastes, I liked or didn't like... so my first records were: Alexander Nevsky by Prokofiev, Schumann's symphonies one and four, Janacek etc.... I also listened to a lot of radio, which we'll see later was not without consequences.

For quite a long time I was impatient and excited before putting on the record player a record I'd been looking for for a long time, but the more I frequented concert halls, the more this excitement waned.

But the more I frequented concert halls, the more that exhilaration waned. The atmosphere in the auditorium progresses from a murmur to a hubbub, with the audience talking to each other and the instruments tuning. Then the tone drops during the tuning, applause for the first violin and then for the conductor. The miracle happens... or doesn't happen, we listen to each other, we breathe in and out, imagination and reverie take hold, a collective intelligence is being born, it's a collective self, we're becoming a community.

So Mozart: in the sixties it's Walter who dominates, and then Boehm afterwards, the big box set of 46 symphonies... very boring because very monotonous and systematic, with no inventions or intentions: nothing can happen, but nothing will happen... But above all with the latter, something is missing, I feel that Mozart cannot be just "beautiful". For as the poet said, 'Beauty is a lie'. Brüggem confirmed this when he said that when he played Mozart, the Concertgebouworkest was lying... before Nikolaus Harnoncourt of course.

Jean Victor Hocquard's 'Mozart's Thought' was a very erudite work, but difficult to access, especially for the teenager that I was. He talks about the last three symphonies as 'three black suns of melancholy'... he refers to Gérard de Nerval

Je suis le ténébreux, le veuf, l'inconsolé  
Le prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie  
My only star is dead. And my lute studded  
Carries the black sun of melancholy.

El Dedischado

This reinforces my opinion that Mozart is not so simple...  
More frustration... so I'm hearing nothing but lies...

### **The first time I heard a work conducted by Harnoncourt and the consequences.**

In November 1979, on my birthday, the radio was going to broadcast a concert live from the Musikverein in Vienna: Monteverdi's Vespers.

I found it very hard to get into this world, I tended to have a wandering mind and poor attention span, in short, I was bored!

But that evening, and regular concert-goers will know what I mean, something happened, it became ecstatic, a fascination and amazement. A constellation of worlds calling out to each other, responding to each other, uniting, a genesis!

This evening will be the start of a long and exciting adventure with Nikolaus Harnoncourt. So many discoveries, so many glimpses, so many new auditions and so much complicity.

My musical tastes and my listening choices have changed a great deal over time, I've hated what I loved (Mahler, for example), discovered other music, broadened my horizons considerably, visited venues other than Paris, particularly the Concertgebouw, discovered the London Proms and their incredible atmospheres... and so on.

Musical media have also evolved and so has the equipment used to listen to music.

First of all, the vinyl period, which was mainly Bohemian, not just Dvorak and Janacek and so on. This interest necessitated trips to Brussels to visit a record shop that had almost the entire Supraphon catalogue on its shelves.

I was already feeling frustrated, something was missing. Pianist Clara Haskil liked to say after a concert, 'You've heard the silence, the walls are listening...'. Quite simply, life was missing. To my ears, the studio was closer to thanatos than eros.

And can you imagine "Di quella pira" from Le Trouvère without a fiery reaction, or not, from the audience, a roar ... it's almost implicit in the score. The audience too can, and must, have talent. And the encore, which some people are so fond of, me for example. Abbado at the Proms could give up to three encore performances, and Harnoncourt also gave a number of them at the Albert Hall!

So where do the walls listen? At the concert, in the opera house, so that's where you have to look. I'd already had a premonition of this with Gérald Moore's farewell concert, which was recorded in public, and I found a warmth and complicity that didn't exist in studio recordings. Live recordings were very rare at the time.

So I had to record the radio, either on cassette or on tape. But limiting myself to France Musique was going to be a bit short on resources...

I was an occasional reader of the English magazine "The Gramophone", in which it was possible to publish advertisements, which I did.

## **The network**

I can't remember the exact wording of this first advert, and others that followed, but the responses were promising, I had already recorded a few concerts by Karajan, Abbado and Boulez, as well as operas by Strauss conducted by Boehm... Little by little a group was formed over time. Three Frenchmen: one a fan of Celibidache, one

of Karajan and the third of French music and performers - well, almost, he was also a great specialist in Cluytens, who was Belgian... two Englishmen, Karajan again and Boehm, an Austrian who was very passionate about Harnoncourt, and a Dutchman who was a frenetic collector of all documents relating to the Concertgebouworkest.

They became very close friends, and I sometimes spent holidays with the Romanian conductor's fan, which led to heated discussions on the sand of the beach...

I gave up vinyl, and bought equipment that allowed me to make audio recordings for the radio, and cassettes so that I could send my correspondents what they were looking for and what I had found.

It was through a member of this group that I received a Mozart concert by Harnoncourt in Amsterdam in April 1982. Three works on the programme for this month of April: a C.P.E. Bach symphony, which proves to be quite contrasting and in which the attention never wavers, my first approach to the Bach sons, Mozart's flute concerto No. 1 with Paul Verey, a concerto that is rather easy to listen to 'easy music by the divine Mozart', but this term, which is perhaps meant to be laudatory, is a mask... The work here can prove to be very dramatic, small sharp waves, dialogue between the soloist and the orchestra, we are close to theatre, we talk to each other, we listen to each other, a tension is perceptible. .. FINALLY!... it's not just beautiful, the wind is blowing, we're breathing, we're panting, if we're attentive we can hear the conductor's breathing, and this concert concludes with a three-dimensional Jupiter symphony, triumphant, very dynamic, we sense that this is a culmination, this will be the last symphony, which perhaps opens doors rather than concluding, it's moving forward and it's not angelic.

I decided to follow this artist a little more closely, and as usual to ignore opinions good or bad... I'll make up my own mind, I'll like it, I'll be thrilled or... nothing. I had heard Harnoncourt before, but not in Mozart, as I said earlier, but in Monteverdi.

I've made up my mind to go to Amsterdam... It will be some time before this wish comes true. In the meantime, activate the network and ask for recordings of Harnoncourt's concerts broadcast on the radio and wait for him to come to Paris in June 1984...

### **I won't be exhaustive.**

I won't be exhaustive, I won't draw up a catalogue of the concerts and operas conducted by Harnoncourt that I've been able to attend. Why, you may ask, for a number of reasons, which I think are entirely credible... because I don't want to draw up an iterative catalogue, which is bound to be boring... Mille e tre, Mille e tre...

I'm not a musician, I don't play an instrument, I don't read music...

Amateur I am, and amateur I claim to be...

So I'm going to talk about atmospheres, emotions, exaltations, passions, life as it is in the concert hall in the middle of an audience, nothing more but nothing less.

I don't know if I'll be able to put into words what I experienced, but it's worth a try.

## **Paris, June 1984**

In June 1984 in Paris, it was raining in the late afternoon, and even in the storm I had no hesitation in going out, to the Châtelet. Yesterday Karajan conducted the Alpine Symphony. Today the programme includes Mozart, the Concertgebouw and Nikolaus Harnoncourt.

Le Châtelet is a very large, historic, Italian-style venue... with shaky acoustics, for decades it was a theatre for operettas...

Today it's a fairly mixed audience, young people chatting about last week's concerts, and who as soon as the doors open swallow the steps to sit in the best seats up there, in heaven, as well as old ladies all in jewellery, elegant old gentlemen etc....  
...we've put on perfume ranging from Chanel No. 5 to cheap cologne... and then there are people like my wife and me, neither too much nor too little... ordinary people. We come for the music.

Later on I'd realise that audiences vary from country to country, from venue to venue, even within the same town.

The programme begins with Lucio Silla's overture, which bursts forth, the orchestra sounding clear and vibrant, the dynamics broad, far from angelic and mawkish. A three-movement construction, it's the second that seems to me the most significant, a mixture of melancholy and pathos, the two extremes are more compelling; the first chords tell us that what you are about to hear is not an Italianate entertainment but a drama... It's not just an opera overture, it's a work in its own right, and perhaps the harbinger of what's to come in this concert. The third violin concerto follows, with Thomas Zehetmair as soloist. I hear something pastoral, rural, a village fete, the strings imitate hurdy-gurdies, the second movement seems nocturnal, an idyll in the night in the middle of the fields. I am assailed by images and colours... a great success, no contest.

Then came the climax of the concert: the symphony in E flat major, the thirty-ninth. The most dramatic and anguishing of Mozart's symphonies, its personal drama constantly shines through. A fiery, implacable work, shot through with breaths of anguish in fleeting moments of silence, the minuet is no longer a pastoral dance but a dance of the dead, a Mahlerian touch... this symphony does not calm down, it takes stock. It opens the question, what have I done with my life?

And as if to give a temporary answer and resolve the tension that had run through the work, an encore was offered, a balm on a wound, the overture to the Schauspieldirektore... a conquered audience, a long ovation. We left and there was a lot of discussion in the corridors, some enthusiastic, some sceptical, could Mozart be violent?

I admire people who, after such a moment, can become forensic doctors who weigh up, analyse and dissect what they've heard... I'm incapable of doing that.... I'll do it at

home, much later, the only certainty in Mozart, the Concertgebouw and Harnoncourt, is that you still have to live it... But what I didn't know yet was that it was going to take time, a lot of time....

### **A brief aside:**

For many years now, I've been wondering about the way programmes are put together, why associate one work with another? I've become convinced, perhaps wrongly, that they interact with each other either through contrasts, responses or complementarities, and that their meanings are, by osmosis, tinged with the spirit of the piece that precedes and heralds what follows.

Kurt Masur claimed that the Brahms symphonies should be played in order because, according to him, the second was the answer to the first and the fourth to the third.

... Almost all the concerts conducted by Harnoncourt seem to me to illustrate this, the best example being the evolution of his vision and reading of Mozart's last three symphonies.

The debate is open.

### **Amsterdam January 1991**

#### **The Last Three Symphonies**

Between 1984 and 1991 the network worked very well, and I received many concerts and opera performances. More particularly from the Netherlands and Austria.

Paris, Gare du Nord 11.15 p.m. Saturday 26 January 1991, I'm on the night train to Amsterdam, where tomorrow Nikolaus Harnoncourt conducts a unique concert featuring Mozart's last three symphonies: 39, 40 and 41. Very uncomfortable sleeper car, thin blanket, arriving tomorrow morning at 8 o'clock.

First things first: my wife has been on the phone trying to get two tickets, but she'll only get one...

The ticket is there, in my hand, and in the long queue at the ticket office others will get the laconic reply 'Sold out'.



First of many visits to the Concertgebouw, ushers in uniforms and caps in front of the entrance doors. The audience took their seats alone, and I was in the front balcony in a superb position. Composers' names are inscribed in cartouches all around the

auditorium - I'm sitting above Franck's... Additional seats have been installed on the stage.

The acoustics here are sufficiently reverberant; in Paris all the halls sound more subdued, the sound is softer, but also less precise. This acoustic suits me just fine, and in a few (many) years I'll find an atmosphere in Paris that's almost similar to the Philharmonie.

The doors to the staircase opened, Harnoncourt descended the dreaded thirty steps leading to the stage, there was a long round of applause, and some of the audience stood up - I would find out why later, as my Dutch correspondent who was present in the hall would tell me. A violent bereavement had struck the family.

The last three symphonies were separated by two intermissions.

I found a text written by Jean and Brigitte Massin in 1958, in their biography of Mozart.

"First the hope and the ideal, then the tragedy in which an existence struggles furiously, and finally the battle fought, pursued to triumph. Nothing could be clearer, nothing simpler; to separate the three works is to cease to understand them (...) it is indeed a trilogy intended as such.

For me, this text expresses what I heard in Amsterdam in 1991; later Harnoncourt would unite his three symphonies even more closely.

Back to the harsh reality of life, the two intermissions and all the repeats would soon be incompatible with the Paris train timetable, but fortunately a taxi on Baerlstraat would solve the problem and I would catch the train just in time.

I'm convinced I absolutely must go back to the Concertgebouw, and after a difficult journey I'll get a season ticket for the Sunday afternoon concert...

## **Amsterdam Stopera November 1992**

### **Così fan tutte**

In the early 1990s, Harnoncourt conducted the three operas Mozart composed with Da Ponte. It was at the Amsterdam opera house with the Concertgebouworkest in the pit. I saw two of the three operas, Don Giovanni and Così fan tutte.

It was the first opera I ever bought on record, the first recording Boehm made in Vienna in 1956.

Così fan tutte is a divisive opera, which superimposes buffoonish and dramatic scenes, lies and sincerity, comedy and drama.

The story is cruel, the farce organised with great perversion by Don Alfonso is cynical (seducing the other man's fiancée), the young men are going to lose this dangerous

bet but they don't believe it. Alfonso knows it. Can we laugh at Fiordiligi, 'Come un scoglio'. In Amsterdam, Charlotte Magiorno was sitting in a stranded boat, letting time slip by in her hands... sand... the passing of time...; things will not get any better for the two men, for in the course of the work Dorabella will fall in love with Guglielmo, even though she is promised to Ferrando, and Fiordiligi will get closer to Ferrando. The opening scenes suggested that the couples were not well matched, as Don Alfonso must have noticed.

In Flimm's staging, in the final scene, when the two boys are recognised and the couples are able to reform, they rush into each other's arms but not into those of the bridesmaids - this is emphasised in the staging by a darkening - and Don Alfonso restores order, much to the visible despair of the four protagonists. The finale is gritty; can we imagine their future happiness... impossible. Their love lives are shattered. And Don Alfonso takes the prize....

Harnoncourt accompanies the director's option, the orchestra alternates between Italianate passages and more dramatic moments, and the final ritornello becomes ironic. I find that an obscure colour has increasingly overshadowed this opera.

This reading of *Così fan tutte* suits me to a T. The more I listened to it, the more the sadness tended to cover the whole work. We're talking about a comedy that seems frivolous, banter that has lovely arias and ensembles... the divine Mozart once again, whereas it is a serious, grave piece of infinite melancholy. Harnoncourt knew how to alternate and organise this plurality and end the work in an act of despair: what future for the four young people?

Harnoncourt has conducted this opera several times, most recently at the Theater an der Wien with the Concentus Musicus. I'm not comfortable with this version, probably wrongly, but I find it too Italianate. But Harnoncourt was like that, never the same performance twice, I have a rather desperate reading of the work, but there is always something to learn from this side step. Perhaps I should take one myself.

## **London November 1994**

### **Beethoven cycle with the Philharmonia Orchestra in London**

How and where did I learn this news: Harnoncourt will conduct a Beethoven cycle with the Philharmonia Orchestra, in London at the Festival Hall and in Birmingham in November. I made this discovery in August 1994 in the corridors of the Albert Hall on the evening of a Proms concert. I jostled my wife a bit and said to her, 'You've seen it, you've seen it'... I was excited... The dates were possible, so we could schedule at least two concerts at the end of October and the beginning of November.

### **Symphonies one and three**

The first of the two concerts will feature the first two odd-numbered symphonies, i.e. the first and third. And then the Second and Seventh for the second. According to my information, this is the usual pairing, as in Graz, for example.

As sometimes happens to me, the tension is such that I'm ecstatic, I'm experiencing a certain bliss... It'll settle down.

In spite of everything, the Philharmonia sounds quite massive, and the acoustics of the Festival Hall are cottony. It's customary to say that London doesn't have any good concert halls!

And yet something should be calling out to me, but for the moment I'm not observing anything unusual. The first symphony unfolds, the winds sounding perfect. Intermission, L'Eroica begins with two cannon shots, the battle begins, the dead on the battlefield, peace restored and celebrated...

A colleague of my wife has joined us, it's his first concert, he asks me 'So?'... It's war, it's Serbia, we're in the middle of a battle in ex-Yugoslavia.

The next day, the music critic of The Times ran the headline 'Gun and powder at the Festival Hall'. I remember an anecdote told to me by a Russophile friend. During the last war, in Moscow, Maria Youdina was playing a Bach piece in front of Neuhaus, who asked the pianist, "Why are you playing it so violently?"

This is not insignificant and raises the issue of the artist in his ivory tower, or in direct contact with the times, however dramatic they may be... Two opposing conceptions. Personally, I think that the artist, whatever the artistic form in which he expresses himself, must help me, enlighten me, support my revolts or generate them, show me a way to decipher the times and the events that run through them. It's a ferryman. Che vuoi? Who are you? What have you done with your life? Like Klimt's *Nuda Veritas*, which holds up a mirror to us.

'If you cannot please everyone with your actions and your art, please only a few; pleasing the many is dangerous'

Schiller's lines are inscribed on the painting.

## **Symphonies two and seven**

Back at the Festival Hall after a short trip to Southampton by the sea. Less exaltation, certainly more availability... Seeing the orchestra settling in, I understood why I had perceived an oddity: the double basses are on the left, viola and cello in the centre and the violins, first and second, face each other. I had not observed, or paid any attention to, such an arrangement before in Amsterdam.

It was Klemperer's and Kubelik's arrangement, the revelation of the evening. The dialectic within the two works is highlighted, the question from the first violins, the response from the second, echoes, contrasts, we physically see the themes circulate from one section of desks to another, this is flagrant in the third movement of the Seventh Symphony.

Research could be done to determine when Nikolaus Harnoncourt started using this so-called antiphonal arrangement for a symphony orchestra; the video of the symphony rehearsals in Graz shows that this was not yet the case in 1991.

It became the rule for virtually every concert I attended after London.

In 1997 a Schumann cycle with the Philharmonia was planned, but unfortunately it did not take place. Harnoncourt was replaced by Thielemann.

At the end of a concert of the Schubert cycle in Paris, I dared to ask Alice Harnoncourt for confirmation of this information, which upset me greatly, and she replied that it was a problem of fatigue. Since then, rumours have appeared that the Philharmonia musicians had been very reticent about the conductor's artistic demands. All that doesn't matter, only my frustration. I'll hear Schumann with him somewhere else.

I have deliberately limited my memories. I attended many of Nikolaus Harnoncourt's concerts, in Paris, of course, his frequent visits to the Châtelet when Stéphane Lissner was its musical director, at the Cité de la Musique with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe, in Brussels with the Concentus Musicus and so on. I hope others will add their memories.

### **'Foolishness consists in wanting to conclude...'. Flaubert.**

Anyone who has attended several of Harnoncourt's interpretations of the same work knows that it is never the same performance. That the score was examined, retransmitted with new eyes, new side steps. One step to the side and the landscape changes," a colleague used to say to me when we were faced with a difficult situation...

I'm thinking personally of Schubert's Ninth Symphony, whose reading has changed over time, and this with the same ensemble. Amsterdam 1992 is less dramatic than Paris 1997, where I think we had a Faustian reading, the last movement was a real race to the abyss, and without Marguerite's redemption.

Every creation is a reflection of the events of the period in which it was created. The musician cannot just be the guardian of a museum, he must also be a messenger. A messenger of his inspirations and convictions, but also of his doubts and questions.

What I have perceived with Harnoncourt, over the many years that I have seen and heard him, is the interaction between the works in the course of a single evening.

Why was Harnoncourt important? Firstly, in terms of interpretation, there was a before and an after to Harnoncourt, and not just in Baroque music, but also in Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert and so on. His Schumanns remain for me great moments of intense emotion.

And as Rattle said, 'Harnoncourt is like Haley's comet, you only see it once every hundred years, you can't miss it'.

Especially with Harnoncourt, the key word that can define him, in my opinion, is 'DIALOGUE'. Dialogue between all the parties involved, dialogue between the instrumentalists, dialogue between the conductor, the storyteller, the initiator and his audience, dialogue between the musicians and the listeners, as he emphasised in his farewell letter to the subscribers of the Musikverein shortly before his death, but

which he could just as easily have addressed to the audience in Amsterdam, Paris or Berlin.

What would I have liked to listen to, conducted by Harnoncourt, that he didn't want to do or didn't have time to finish?

I have a particular fondness for Dvorak's Sixth Symphony, which would have complemented the other three, Seven, Eight and Nine, magnificently...

Completing the Beethoven cycle with the Concentus Musicus would have done it for sure. I don't think I'm the only one to express my frustration. I would also have liked him to help me explore and guide me through the Second Viennese School, after Berg, the Violin Concerto, Der Wein, Harnoncourt could have taken us into the world of Webern, the Passacaglia was scheduled, I dreamt of the six pieces in Opus 6. ... And then there's Berg's opera Wozzeck, which moves me to tears...

Can we continue to go to concerts after Harnoncourt's death? The answer is yes, a thousand times yes. We can afford to be nostalgic.

To copy is to lose your uniqueness.

That's sometimes what I've thought when faced with certain recent interpretations by young conductors... with their frenetic conducting. Fortunately, others have understood and integrated the spirit. It has been passed on to them and they in turn will pass it on.

This flame still glows because some of them have wished to pass it on, and I am thinking of Maximilian Harnoncourt, Stefan Gottfried, and the team at the Harnoncourt Zentrum, especially Claudia Stobrawa, to whom these few lines owe a great deal. Thanks also to Takaomi Negoro.

Thank you for your kind words.

"Dear audience,

My physical strength is forcing me to give up my future projects. Great thoughts come to me: an incredibly deep relationship has developed between us on stage and you in the audience - we have become a happy community of pioneers! A lot will remain of that. This year's cycle is still in my mind, so stay true to it!

Your Nikolaus Harnoncourt".

Lionel Meistermann

Montreuil

May / June 2025