

Melvin Landsberg
Department of English
University of Kansas
Lawrence, Kansas 66044
Telephone (785) 749-1766

A Garden in Hell

Suppose you have a small library, with pictures to adorn the walls—a garden laid out around—and contemplate scientific and literary pursuits, etc., and discover all at once that your villa, with all its contents, is located in hell, and that the justice of the peace has a cloven foot and a forked tail—do not these things suddenly lose their value in your eyes?

Henry David Thoreau, in his essay “Slavery
in Massachusetts” (1854)

I became enthusiastic about classical music much later than I like to acknowledge to myself, and my joy in it was heightened by a CD of three Beethoven piano sonatas—the “Moonlight,” “Pathétique,” and “Waldstein,” played by a notably sensitive pianist, Radu Lupu. Suddenly I was in a passion to hear more Beethoven. A modicum of experience quickly convinced me that the ability of a performing artist or a conductor could make a huge difference in my response to any work by Beethoven, and indeed by any other composer.

Several listeners’ guide to classical music offered information about composers’ and sometimes performers’ lives, careers, and works. I already had the *Rough Guide to Classical Music* (ed. by Joe Staines and Duncan Clark), and I bought *The NPR Listener’s Encyclopedia of Classical Music* (by Ted Libbey). Both of these gave further help by recommending CD versions of the musical works they discussed.

As I oriented myself among conductors and performers whose CDs were sometimes recommended, I found in Libbey noisome chunks of information about several of their careers. Herbert von Karajan, who later conducted all of Beethoven's symphonies, joined the Nazi Party in 1933, a day after a new law removed Jewish conductors from national opera houses in the Third Reich. He knew that early membership would boost his career—as it did rapidly.

Elisabeth Schwartzkopf, the German opera singer, became a member of the Nazi Student League at age nineteen in 1935, and later joined the Nazi Party. Schwartzkopf fared very well during World War II, having a Gauleiter and SS general as her protector. After the war, she performed for a CD of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, conducted by Karajan.

Von Karajan and Schwartzkopf were Nazis by choice, whose shoes could conceivably have accommodated cloven feet. The renowned conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler had qualms about his villa in the garden. According to Libbey—and I will quote him at some length:

By the time Hitler became Chancellor in 1933, Furtwängler was far and away the most respected (and financially successful) musician in Germany, and his status only increased during the years of the Third Reich—despite being intellectually and philosophically at cross-purposes with them, he had the ear of propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels and of the Führer himself. During the entire Nazi period, as his artistry reached its zenith, Furtwängler clung to the naive belief that a true German artist could remain above politics, even in the face of vicious tyranny. Feeling the need to keep music alive, and protective of his powerful musical positions, he engaged in a delicate tap dance with the Nazis, mixing compliance with defiance, becoming essentially the Führer's conductor on the one hand, but using his influence to protect many Jewish musicians on the other.

At a celebration of Hitler's birthday, Furtwängler conducted a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in 1942, a year in which the Nazis' gas chambers were doing their ghastly work.

I began this essay with a quotation from Thoreau, who was excoriating Massachusetts' acquiescence in the U.S. government's restoring a fugitive slave to his master. To make a man a slave, he wrote, was no better than to make him a sausage. (It was left to Nazis to make lampshades of men's skins.) Clearly Thoreau's question about dwelling in a pleasant villa in hell was as pertinent in the 1930's and 1940's as it was in 1854. It gives promise of remaining pertinent in centuries to come. A fact which should make Thoreau's essay "Slavery in Massachusetts" an enduring work, along with his much better known *Walden* and "Civil Disobedience."

Should we allow our response to an artist's character and deeds to cloud our responses to his work. On this question there is a smoldering silence. I confess that I would find immensely more pleasure in listening to CDs of Beethoven's symphonies by Arturo Toscanini, a superb conductor and a cynosure for anti-Fascists and anti-Nazis during his life, than to CDs of the same works by von Karajan. Following my purchase of a set of Tuscanini CDs of the symphonies, I recently bought Carlos Kleiber's acclaimed CDs of Beethoven's Symphonies no. 5 and 7. I knew almost nothing about Kleiber, but was gratified by reading something of his family history; his father, Eric, left Germany for Argentina in 1935 because he couldn't stomach the Nazis' cultural doings. I am certain that I will irritate some of my aesthete acquaintances by saying that I don't want von Karajan and Schwartzkopf's Beethoven's Ninth, not even as a gift.

As for Furtwängler, Thoreau had acerbic comments on temporizers. Of the Governor of Massachusetts who in 1854 didn't try to prevent the black fugitive's being forced back to slavery, Thoreau said: "Has he had as much as he could do to keep on the fence during this moral earthquake? . . . He could at least have *resigned* himself into fame."

The final movement of Beethoven's Ninth symphony, the choral movement, has two lines from Friedrich von Schiller's "Ode to Joy." Schiller wrote of all men becoming brothers through joy.

alle Menschen werden Brüder,
wo dein sanfter Flügel weilt.

Sadly, I can't see Furtwängler as a Don Quixote fantasizing that he could reform Hitler through music.