



Carl Schuricht

Mozart Piano Concerto, K. 595
Robert Casadesus | Swiss Festival Orchestra

Brahms Symphony No. 2
Vienna Philharmonic

Wolfgang Amadé Mozart (1756–1791)
Piano Concerto in B-flat major, K. 595

- I. Allegro 13:14
- II. Larghetto 8:07
- III. Allegro 8:07

Robert Casadesus piano
Swiss Festival Orchestra
Carl Schuricht

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)
Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 73

- I. Allegro non troppo 15:14
- II. Adagio non troppo – L'istesso tempo, ma grazioso 9:06
- III. Allegretto grazioso (Quasi Andantino) – Presto ma non assai 5:07
- IV. Allegro con spirito 9:26

Vienna Philharmonic
Carl Schuricht

recorded live at LUCERNE FESTIVAL
(Internationale Musikfestwochen Luzern)





**Carl Schuricht –
Inspirations of a sceptic**

Posthumous fame of great conductors is a delicate matter. Multiple posts, demonstrations of power and an excessive discographic presence during their lifetimes provide no guarantee of immortality. No small number of once highly revered maestri disappear alarmingly quickly from public awareness, and finally even from the latent public within encyclopaedias and catalogues. However, there are also counter-examples of late historical justice and unexpected discoveries – such as Carl Schuricht: the epitome of an old-school German *Kapellmeister*. He died in 1967 and was the subject of occasional anecdotes recounted by older orchestral musicians or longstanding concert-goers, in which he featured as an example of infirmity, of one of those frail masters who just cannot stop, even though their joints have long since given up service. Carl Schuricht was, rather heartlessly and thoughtlessly, judged by these unfortunate last impressions, the unfavourable circumstances of his final performances. Seiji Ozawa, fifty-five years his junior, recalled: “Carl Schuricht, not particularly famous in Japan, was a very old conductor. He conducted orchestras with his sharp eyes and was able to direct musicians through looks. When he appeared on stage, it took him nearly five minutes to reach his podium. During that time, the audience applauded, their hands becoming quite hot by the end. He looked too old to be appreciated by younger ladies; however, I discovered many of them in the audience. To my surprise, his music did not reveal his great age: everything sounded much livelier than with any of the younger conductors.”

Since Schuricht held no more than a handful of posts which, at that, were not the most prestigious and ran out completely towards the end of his life, resulting in only a small number of opportunities for studio recordings, it seemed only a question of time until “his music” and, by implication, his name would fade away. But then, increasingly frequently, more and more live and radio recordings of the almost forgotten conductor surfaced. And these documents, this body of evidence, of a powerful and individual art of interpretation could no longer be defied by ignorance. Carl Schuricht no longer was a merely anecdotal figure of the past but became (again) a household name. Soon, however, he was also



adopted as an idol of the “everything was better in the olden days”-faction and the “such personalities no longer exist nowadays”-brigade; he was numbered among the ancestral portraits of the “last titans” and juxtaposed with the supposed gnome-like posse of living conductors. To Carl Schuricht himself, such discomfort with the present and the denial of contemporaneity were entirely alien. “To look after classical and romantic music like a Westphalian farm and to despise modern music because it yields less seems to me to represent first-class cowardice!”, he observed. He gave pioneering advice to a rising conductor: “Do in your time what I did in mine, my dear young friend. If you don’t put yourself at the service of the art of your contemporaries, your work is worth only half.” And then there followed a sentence, a precept, which has since been cited as the creed of this musician: “To serve a cause is better than to be served by it.”

Indeed, Carl Schuricht, born in Danzig into a dynasty of organ builders in 1880, represents a forgotten era of German music life. He was raised in a unique sphere of art and craft, study and conviviality, elite and everyday musicality: “I spent my childhood with my grandfather, amongst zinc and pewter pipes. Our entire extended family was obsessed by music. We made up an imposing group of around fifty when we were all together. Each Sunday in the summer, three big, open coaches, decorated with leaves, would take us into the countryside. After our meal, we would sing choruses by Mendelssohn, Handel and Bach.”

Slowly but surely, solidly and in a dignified manner, in one word: masterly, Schuricht embarked on his path, a career that lasted over four decades. He began as a répétiteur at the Mainz Stadttheater, moving on as Kapellmeister in Dortmund and Zwickau, before becoming choir director at Goslar, the Rühl’sche Gesang-Verein in Frankfurt and the Philharmonischer Chor Berlin, and finally taking up the post of Generalmusikdirektor at Wiesbaden, the Leipzig Radio Orchestra and the Dresden Philharmonie. For the last twenty years of his life, however, he relinquished any posts or appointments. In Wiesbaden, Schuricht performed the symphonies of Gustav Mahler – unusual programming at that time. In the same city, Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt, who would go on to become a famous music critic, became acquainted with Schuricht: “Friends of my mother’s effected an introduction to this cultured, radiant looking man. He prompted me to attend the harmony courses which he held each Monday morning at



a small hall. These were classes that went far beyond the domain of harmony, leading to questions of form, orchestration and general cultural interrelationships, to which I owe a great deal of my artistic understanding."

Schuricht himself spoke, a little less prosaically, about "enlightenment" and the "gift" of identifying the "essence" of a composition. He went on to clarify: "Such inspiration does not lose its absolute status, nor its buoyancy, during the time that the interpreter enters into the construction and details of the work." Schuricht despised all those colleagues who "use the work to stage their own person". He demanded an objective approach, a "precise realisation of the musical text and its instructions" without equating this fidelity with "post-creative engagement": "The challenge lies in entering into the transpersonal essence of the work and unveiling it to the listener with vivid sentiment, and that is possibly the actual – and far more difficult – objectivity: neither recreating facades nor exposing emotions alone can grasp that essence." And since he was not concerned about his "own person", he was able to focus on the "essential" whilst conducting, using concise movements and a regulatory hand with only a few careful, organising, accentuating gestures, with a highly alert, slightly piercing look and with a strict, sometimes disapproving expression. Indeed, Schuricht had no time for "fidgiting" conductors, even if they were more popular with audiences (a fact which he deplored).

As is true of any rehearsal fanatic, Schuricht did not enjoy boundless popularity amongst orchestral musicians, but they were very aware that his pedantic and systematic work on detail would, come the performance, turn into a paradoxical sense of freedom: into a higher and more sophisticated form of improvisation. Otto Strasser, a violinist as well as the chairman of the Vienna Philharmonic (Schuricht had conducted this orchestra for the first time in 1934 and was made an Honorary Member in 1960), recalls in his memoirs: "Schuricht was an extraordinarily thorough studier. He was a man of precision, and whilst he did not speak as much as [Willem] Mengelberg, he nonetheless spoke extensively. We usually played for a few minutes whilst he folded the corner of each page in the score where he needed to make corrections later; then his explanations began. They were sensible, if tiring, since his scores tended to consist almost exclusively of dog-ears."



In September 1943, Schuricht made his debut at the Internationale Musikfestwochen in Lucerne, today's LUCERNE FESTIVAL, conducting Beethoven's *Missa solemnis*, with a plea for "internal and external peace" which the composer had added to his score. This plea went unheard in Germany during the time of "total war", prompting Schuricht to relocate to Switzerland at the end of 1944 – even though he had just been promoted from guest conductor to chief conductor of the Dresden Philharmonie, and been placed onto the "list of the divinely gifted" as one of a few chosen artists. This was a privilege granted by the Nazis which was intended to spare named artists from military service for which ordinary mortals were conscripted. Carl Schuricht remained in Switzerland and, at his four Lucerne performances after the war, was welcomed as "the only representative, apart from Otto Klemperer, of the generation of old German conductors still remaining active" (an honorary title which Günter Wand was to receive three decades later). "During the course of the eighteen years which have passed since his first Lucerne concert (1943), he has become an old gentleman", the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* reported in 1961. "Even if the 81-year-old has difficulty walking to his podium, his music-making has remained astonishingly young. His economical, precise beat and the security and suppleness with which he effects modifications of the basic tempo give no hint of fatigue or decline of mental or emotional faculties."

On 19 August 1961, Schuricht directed the Swiss Festival Orchestra in a programme of Mozart and Schumann. "He conducted Mozart's 'Prague' Symphony in a ludicrously fast tempo which I found shocking at the time", the oboist Heinz Holliger admits, who had joined the festival orchestra for the first time during that summer: "Today, I have adopted it wholeheartedly as a conductor. His interpretation of the 'Rhenish' Symphony by Schumann was also a unique experience." Interestingly, Otto Strasser also comments on Schuricht's swift tempi: "Possibly to compensate for an age complex, he sometimes opted for remarkably rapid speeds." Perhaps listening habits have changed in the meantime, for in Mozart's final Piano Concerto, K. 595 in B-flat major of 1791, which Schuricht had placed between the 'Prague' and 'Rhenish' Symphonies, he never went for extreme tempi. Additionally, his soloist, the 62-year-old French pianist Robert Casadesu (with whom Schuricht performed the work a few days later at the Salzburger Festspiele in a concert that was also recorded), took great care to



animate the notes between the notes, the filigree runs, passages, ornaments and embellishments, without rushing them excessively. First and foremost, however, Casadesu struck the distinctive tone of this concerto – the mature work of a young man – between simplicity and noblesse, innocence and wisdom, *buffa* and elegy: “A heavy heart with a light spirit”, as Clemens Brentano put it in one of his poems.

Johannes Brahms referred to himself and his Second Symphony, Op. 73 in D major, as the “sunny symphony” of a “heavily melancholy person”. The Vienna Philharmonic had given its premiere in 1877, and the same orchestra also performed this symphony on 8 September 1962 in Lucerne, as part of a Haydn, Mozart and Brahms programme – the penultimate concert that Carl Schuricht was to conduct at the festival. Whilst he is respectful of, and faithful to, the musical text – no note is missing, no part becomes indistinct or evaporates – Carl Schuricht demonstrates a strikingly free approach to the music, “his music”: freedom in dynamics, freedom in the often abruptly, almost impatiently, increased tempi, freedom in the occasionally uninhibited opulence, the refinement in the blend of the instruments. Much subjectivity can be detected in Schuricht’s objectivity, a strongly personal trait blending into the “transpersonal essence” of this symphony (of which Schuricht had made a studio recording, also with the Vienna Philharmonic, nearly ten years previously). There is no hint of the conductor’s old age.

And yet, the number of his performances dwindled, cancellations became more frequent – time ran out, increasingly quickly. Schuricht confessed that he continued to doubt himself until the very end. “One inches forwards, never arrives ... And one must, in the end, desert one’s own development – exactly at that moment when one had hoped to become its master. ‘Vita brevis’ – that’s what it is.” But in his art, or the art with which he had been entrusted, Carl Schuricht outlived his own time, winning the curiosity and affection of a generation who no longer had the privilege of experiencing him in the concert hall.

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LUCERNE FESTIVAL

recording: live recording at LUCERNE FESTIVAL (Internationale Musikfestwochen Luzern)



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