



Christoph Eschenbach in conversation

with Thomas Meyer, February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015 in Bamberg

*Thomas Meyer: Christoph Eschenbach, if I try to summarize your musical career, then first there was a brilliant young pianist, who met with early success, who then – to the surprise of many – left this path to become a conductor, which once again brought him around the world. Does this mini-biography sound right to you?*

Christoph Eschenbach: Yes, certainly. The background has many more layers, though: my first instrument was of course the piano. When I heard a great symphony orchestra for the first time, I was eleven years old. It was the Berlin Philharmonic with Wilhelm Furtwängler, and I was left completely enchanted and astonished and I said „I want to become a conductor.“ So my adoptive mother said, „If you want to become a conductor, you must first learn at least one orchestral instrument.“ So I chose the violin, since my adoptive father was an amateur violinist and violist, and chamber music was constantly being played in our home. After just a week I was having violin lessons, which was critical for my later orchestral work. During my studies I continued to pursue violin, until it simply became too much alongside the conducting studies, which I commenced at 18 just after my graduation from secondary school. Then came the ARD- and the Clara Haskil-Preis in Lucerne, prizes that catapulted me into an international career as a pianist. So after the conducting exams I first devoted myself to the piano, a full seven years. During this time I very closely observed the conductors with whom I worked. To this end I usually arrived very early, often two or three days before, to observe the rehearsals that the conductor had set aside for the symphonic part of the program. I learned a tremendous amount this way; George Szell and Herbert von Karajan became my greatest mentors at that time. One day I concluded that it was time to take the baton up again: a wish that I had always retained in my mind.

*It was surely also a fundamental transformation in your music-making. You had to find a very different mode of musical expression...*

C. Eschenbach: My conducting debut was in 1972. I just wanted to see what it was like with a professional orchestra. I felt musically secure, but conducting requires more: body language, verbal communication, etc. And it was OK. I still had much to learn then, to say nothing of the great repertoire, but I had confidence and continued on this path.

*Conducting requires a particular communicative skill which has to be learnt.*

C. Eschenbach: Precisely that interested me very much, especially after these seven lonesome piano years. This style of life and traveling – where every night is spent in a new hotel, and the change of scenery was not always palatable – had to be learned. In the early years one isn't always staying in the best hotels either, it wasn't the best ambience; but I got used to it, and after a few years it wasn't quite so bad. Moreover, I turned the premise around and said to myself: don't trouble yourself over the shortcomings of the vagabond lifestyle, but rather accept it as a given that you will be exposed to new people, new mentalities, new countries, cities, museums, etc. I transformed my attitude into one of hungry curiosity. And then it went very well.

*It became a journey of education...*

C. Eschenbach: ... of education, indeed of life lessons.

*Do you still give solo recitals nowadays?*

C. Eschenbach: Not at all anymore, ever since I took on the first music director position as chief conductor of the Staatsphilharmonie Rheinland-Pfalz in Ludwigshafen in 1978. That's when I stopped giving recitals. I simply didn't have the time to work up new programs every year, because I had to study so much new conducting repertoire. But I didn't want to give up the piano completely, since it continued to interest me. First, I wanted another way of music-making besides standing before an orchestra, but also I wanted the physical and practical experience of making chamber music with the orchestral musicians. What followed was a wonderful time in which I recorded all the Lieder of Schumann with Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and later with Peter Schreier. This was immensely rewarding. I wanted to hang on to this world, and so I stayed by the piano, then as now. For example, I still do Lieder recitals with the outstanding Matthias Goerne and once in a while a Mozart concerto that I conduct from the piano. It's very satisfying, this somewhat expanded conception of chamber music.

*When a conductor plays chamber music with his orchestra musicians, he gets to know them on a completely different level.*

C. Eschenbach: Exactly. One isn't just calling the shots from above and the musicians must follow, but rather one becomes a first among equals at the piano. At the same time the conductor gets a better understanding of the psyche of the players. He has intense discussions with them, sometimes might go out with them after the rehearsal, and a tighter bond can form. My wonderful colleague Barenboim does this too, but it's only a very few that do.

*Did any of your mentors provide a role model in this respect?*

C. Eschenbach: George Szell even made recordings of Mozart quartets with his musicians from the Cleveland Orchestra. He also performed piano concertos with them. Karajan less so; he did play the piano, and together with myself and Justus Frantz he often played the Mozart concerto for three pianos, even on tour. He had a lot of pleasure in it. Furtwängler also played. His wife Elisabeth, who incidentally only passed away quite recently, told me that he always had Chopin on his music stand. Furtwängler – Chopin... you wouldn't expect this combination, perhaps. For me it makes perfect sense, though, because next to Bach, Chopin is one of the most wonderful composers.

*Do the three conductors you mention constitute a musical tradition that you seek to emulate?*

C. Eschenbach: Furtwängler I saw a few times when I was a child, eleven or twelve years old. I was thirteen when he died. I didn't really get acquainted with him. Karajan and Szell invited me to their rehearsals, though at the time it was highly unusual for young people to sit in on rehearsals. Afterwards I could talk to them about the rehearsals and ask questions, and they always made time for me. Szell, for example, worked through my entire piano repertoire with me at two pianos. This went on for two years, in various locations. He always played the orchestra parts – from memory, by the way, and brilliantly! At least twelve Mozart concertos I performed for him, all five Beethoven, Schumann, the two Brahms, and the second of Bartók...

Thus Karajan and Szell were the two from which I learned the most, by observing their rehearsals and having many conversations with them. This was incredibly important for me, for they represented two extremes. Szell was a completely different sort of musician than Karajan. Both took the same kernel of musical expertise as their point of departure, but their approaches were different. Szell was a sculptor, a renderer, a formulator of phrases, and with the word formulator I already imply: a master of musical diction. What Harnoncourt formulated very aptly in his book, *Music as Speech*, I'd already heard ten years earlier from Szell. Karajan on the other hand evinced colors from the music, transitions, subtleties that lay in hues. Now it was up to me

to reconcile these approaches into a model for myself, without copying either master – the latter is always a bad idea for young conductors.

*In your early years you regarded yourself as an observer and a learner. When I view your homepage, it seems to be extended further. At various stages your activity gave you new experiences: there was the buildup of an orchestra, the advocacy for new music, the organization of an entire musical life. Those are qualities that go beyond mere music-making.*

C. Eschenbach: My motto is that one never stops learning. That makes life interesting. I am filled with curiosity about everything I have not yet seen and not yet learned or experienced.

*A crucial experience seems to have been the one with the Houston Symphony Orchestra. What was special about that situation?*

C. Eschenbach: Houston was the first American orchestra that I directed. It was in a miserable state, nearly bankrupt. The financial foundation, the so-called endowment, had practically shrunk to nothing due to the effect of the oil crisis on the oil-based economy in Texas. Thus I was immediately confronted with the main job of an American music director, namely fundraising. At the time I did not yet know how it was done, but I learned by doing. So I had to participate in countless fundraising dinners, but soon this 'had to' became a 'wanted to'. I needed to bring the orchestra back on solid footing and bring in money, so that it could not just survive but also thrive. My efforts were successful and people showed great appreciation. The second point was that I could really shape an orchestra. I had to be firm and switch out a few musicians whose quality was not up to the standard I imagined. Those were my primary objectives during that time. It was very strenuous, but also so effective that after four or five years, when we started our first European tour, the Newspaper DIE WELT was writing of the „Houston Miracle.“ That may have been somewhat exaggerated, but indeed Houston had risen to the top league of American orchestras. And that is how it continued. For me this was a wonderful time period, where I had to learn a lot and learn it quickly, but was also able to witness these efforts bearing fruit.

*You said that you needed to be firm about personnel decisions... did this come easily to you?*

C. Eschenbach: It's part of the conducting profession, which consists of so many different duties. You must be like a father, sometimes even more strict; you must be a diplomat, a physician. It often happened that people came to me with a gripe and to seek advice. Medicine is a hobby of mine, as is psychology. I studied volumes of Carl Jung. As a conductor you must also be a politician and a business expert in order to help the orchestra. One must be a communicator: to the orchestra, to the audience, to the different kinds of audiences, to the sponsors.

*You also formed a chamber ensemble there, with whom you went on tour.*

C. Eschenbach: Yes, the Houston Symphony Chamber Players, with whom I traveled the world: Japan, the U.S., Europe. We recorded a number of lovely records, including two with the second Viennese School, which at the time was very unusual and today is even more unusual. I was also quite industrious at the piano again, recording solo pieces such as the Berg *Sonata* or the Webern *Variations*. Primarily chamber music, though, like the cello pieces, the violin pieces, Webern's *Concerto* or Berg's peices with clarinet.

*You have worked with many orchestras around the world. Is it always possible to just be yourself?*

C. Eschenbach: Yes, absolutely. The conductor is always the constant. Yet in each orchestra you'll find differences in details. After Houston I was appointed at the North German Radio (NDR) Orchestra in Hamburg, which being a radio orchestra had completely different structures. That has advantages: it receives public funding, which means one can be far more extravagant with the repertoire. Something like our millennium concert „Seven Horizons“, in which we presented seven world premieres in a single day, is not possible in America. I feel very fortunate

to have had these two possibilities, in between Houston and Philadelphia, to lead the Orchestre de Paris and the NDR Orchestra as two European orchestras. Thus the breadth of possibilities was quite wide in my conducting career.

*What role does new music play in your repertoire? Early on you performed the piano concerto of Günter Bialas....*

C. Eschenbach: ... and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Concerto of Hans Werner Henze. Both were written for me, and I premiered both— the latter is a very difficult, complicated, long piece, which I played time and again over four or five years. Along with it I very often played the Henze piano sonata, and I integrated Takemitsu into recital programs. I began with new music very early. As a conductor too: in Houston we always had a composer-in-residence and premiered one or two of their pieces as well as others that they suggested. In Paris I conducted a lot of contemporary French music: Olivier Messiaen, Henri Dutilleux, Pascal Dusapin, Marc-André Dalbavie ...

*You also regard the mentorship of young musicians as one of your central duties...*

C. Eschenbach: There, too, my great role models are Karajan and Szell. For example: in 1986 I gave up the principal conductor position with Zurich's Tonhalle Orchestra after five years. I wanted it this way, because I found the institutions too rigid and too complex. The orchestra really consisted of two bodies, an opera and a concert formation who then proceeded to separate. Both orchestras were too small and always had to work with ringers. That got on my nerves, so I left Zurich. At the time I came to Karajan to seek his advice. He said „ You have made a mistake by leaving Zurich. That is not good. You must have an orchestra!“ I replied „ Oh no, I am actually pretty glad to be free for a few years and to choose which orchestras I want to work with.“ „ No,“ he replied. „ You need a steady orchestra, in you I see someone who shapes and trains others. You need an orchestra that you can build and improve.“ On some level I took that very seriously, and after two years I went to Houston. And he sent me a hand-written letter of congratulations. Szell had a gift for mentoring and advising that I very much took to heart. I said to myself „ This is such a rare thing, it should exist far more often.“ Soon the first young artists came along whom I advised and promoted, by either securing agency representation for them or recommending them to others: take the example of Renée Fleming, who was completely unknown when she understudied as the countess in Houston Grand Opera's *Marriage of Figaro*. I recommended her for an audition at the Met, where she was naturally successful. That's how her career began. There were a number of pieces I chose to perform for the first time just to showcase her talent: the *German Requiem*, *Missa Solemnis*, *Exultate jubilate*, the *Four Last Songs* – all premieres for her. It was very important that she had good advice then. At that same time Tzimon Barto was getting on the podium, whom I found and still find fascinating. With him I did the same thing: recommending him to agencies, playing concerts with him, etc. After that came Lang Lang, who to this day approaches me for lessons, and several other young people: violinists, cellists, pianists, not too many, but rather specifically those who I believe have something special to say in music. None of the fast and loud players—technically all of them are fantastic—but rather the ones that dig deep and discover the music that lies deep within. To encourage this process of reaching into their own depths, that interests me very much.

*You collaborated with Antje Landshoff-Ellermann to translate poems by Tzimon Barto into German. Is literature a little-known, or even secret hobby of yours?*

C. Eschenbach: I never undertake a journey without packing a book or two. I'm an avid reader. One area that interested me from the very beginning is Austrian literature, starting with Mozart's letters, which I consider real literature, and not just the Bäsle letters. The letters to his father, his mother, Michael Puchberg—these are literary testimonials. In his short life he wrote six volumes of letters! The music of Schubert and Bruckner is, for me, closely connected with Adalbert Stifter. Stifter's *Nachsommer* is one of the loveliest books that I know. Then around the turn of the century there's Musil, Joseph Roth, Schnitzler; I'd also count Kafka. Especially wonderful is Thomas Bernhard. And among the more recent ones, Jelinek, Gerhard Roth – those are all people I carry around with me.

*Why Austrian literature in particular?*

C. Eschenbach: For me it ties into Austrian music: this singsong quality in Schubert, for example, the minimalism, if you will, of Bruckner – these are echoed in Thomas Bernhard. Particularly the poems of Ingeborg Bachmann are incredibly musical. But the great Germans of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also, Thomas Mann or the sadly somewhat neglected Hans Henny Jahnn, who in their most significant works had composers as the chief protagonists: Adrian Leverkühn and Gustav Horn.

*Back to music: You spoke of having inherited something from both Karajan and Szell. Did this evolve into a particular sonic or interpretive ideal?*

C. Eschenbach: I believe you can only speak of a 'sonic ideal' if you seek the sonic ideal for Debussy when you play Debussy, a Mozartian ideal for Mozart, a Baroque ideal for Baroque music, and a Brahmsian ideal for Brahms. Each sound needs to be appropriate for the composer and the work. There is no default sound ideal that must be imposed on every composer. There are certain conductors who approach everything from the Baroque standpoint, and then apply it to Brahms and Wagner, or vice versa. I think that's a mistake.

*You have a very broad repertoire. Is there a core set of works in which you feel most at home?*

C. Eschenbach: I can't really say that, no. I am just coming out of a Bartók rehearsal, and so right now his *Concerto for Orchestra* is the most fascinating thing I know. Next week I'll be doing a Tchaikovsky symphony, and then it will be that. I need to identify with a work 100%, otherwise I cannot be its interpreter, and that's why I don't have any favorite or 'core' pieces from which I derive all the others.

*Let me rephrase, then: Is there any music that you do not perform, because it has remained foreign to you?*

C. Eschenbach: (*reflecting*) For example, Pfitzner, though even there you'll find some interesting music. I don't mean to condemn that composer, but it is not a world that I yearn for.

*In the book that publisher Wolfgang Erk released in 1990 on the occasion of your 50<sup>th</sup> birthday in the Radius-Verlag...*

C. Eschenbach: ... that is so long ago ...

*...Richard Bächli, the operations director of Zurich's Tonhalle Orchestra, tells a moving story: during a tour of Japan you were, one morning, nowhere to be found, only showing up again in time for the concert that evening. You refused to say where you had been, but Bächli learned from your Japanese friends that you had undertaken a long automobile journey in order to visit a school for mentally and physically disabled children to play Mozart for them...*

C. Eschenbach: Back then, when I frequented Japan, I drove to this school on every tour. It had been established and built by a wonderful woman using her own money: Mariko Miyagi, a successful film actress who gave up her career to devote herself to these children. She taught them, for example, to draw, exhibited their art and published wonderful books of their pictures, once in a while poems, even though the children could barely write. I gave a recital there; the children wept, they were so moved by the music; a number of them were in awe of the fingerwork, and then went to typewriters and tried to type, which was very difficult for them because their fingers were so spastic, but with the help of this woman and her staff it worked, and some wonderful poems came out of it, inspired by the music. This moved me very deeply. I have lost that connection a bit, having not been in Japan for a while, but I will certainly take it up again when I return in the autumn ...

*Music can unleash something very profound in people.*

C. Eschenbach: Well, of course. It is so sad that we have so many wars in this world. Everywhere there is crisis, there is conflict, and it keeps getting worse. Look at the events in Paris at the start of this year. There is no peace in sight, and music has a lot to offer here. Daniel

Barenboim is trying to bring the Palestinians and the Israelis together, but it scarcely seems to work, as we can see by looking at the political situation. It's disappointing that politics disavows any influence from music. Music could be an instrument of peace in the world. Every politician and every terrorist should listen to Bach for an hour – then at least the world would look a bit different. Music offers so many aspects that could bring about change.

*I'm also thinking about your own biography. You were born during World War II, had to flee, and then found something in music which set you free...*

C. Eschenbach: I pretty much owe my life to music. I was in a greatly diminished state. Music allowed me to express myself. It opened the floodgates, which I'd used to conceal myself after the awful experiences I'd had. But there are millions upon millions who are suffering, and whose suffering ought to be alleviated. It's tremendously difficult...

*Could it have been something other than music?*

C. Eschenbach: Music is the most direct form of expression. I wasn't able to write yet, and I had no implements to draw or paint. Music physically moved me. When my mother played, sang, or taught, I kept hearing this music, which filled me like a cooling balm.

*It is said that during the later stages of growth, such as learning to write, many early memories vanish. How far back can you remember?*

C. Eschenbach: It's all still very, very vivid. I remember back to when I was three, or even two years old—and, of course, back to my first moments with music. I grew up with my grandmother. My mother died when I was born, and her younger brother, who played violin, drowned at the age of fourteen. My grandmother reacted in exactly the wrong way: she closed herself off to music. When the radio played music, it would be switched off. I sat at my mother's piano, which was in the home, when I was about three, and would tinker a little, but my grandmother did not want me to cultivate that. It wasn't until my adoptive mother took me in that I really heard music for the first time. I was about six, and it completely bowled me over. It was a key experience in my life.

*You apparently were unable to speak at the time.*

C. Eschenbach: I had completely shut down in the aftermath of war. My grandmother had died while fleeing, and my adoptive mother, a cousin of my mother, found me under the direst circumstances in a refugee camp. Sixty people around me perished in the course of a month. I was the last one to survive. This closes you off, you don't want to speak anymore. My adoptive mother was frightened by this. She would ask me questions, and I didn't respond. But with music my voice returned. It took a long time, but it returned.

*From this perspective music does come to mean something else entirely.*

C. Eschenbach: Yes. And through it my relationship with music is far more personal. When I make music today, it is a very personal expression. It is often said that I don't conduct Brahms or Beethoven symphonies like the others do, but rather discover and bring forth new things. Some critics don't appreciate this, but the audience usually has. The audience has always understood me. That is why it is such an honor that the jury of the Ernst von Siemens Music Prize has chosen me to receive this honor.

*We only spoke of voice and opera in passing just now, even though you have conducted it many times. That's another area where you have roots. Your adoptive mother, Wallydore Eschenbach, was a pianist and a singer...*

C. Eschenbach: The voice is the most direct form of human musical expression. It's something I first heard from my adoptive mother. I often listened to what she would say during lessons. She was an outstanding teacher for the way she brought out the character of a student's voice. Opera was an important part of my education, for Wilhelm Brückner-Rüggeberg in Hamburg was a brilliant teacher, a very typical opera conductor. With him we studied opera to the near

exclusion of all else: from Mozart via Lortzing, Wagner, Verdi, Puccini, everything there was in the literature, up to *Wozzeck*. Yes, singing is a world unto itself. I also tell every young pianist that they should sing through the piano.

*Along with this came the pivotal experience with Fischer-Dieskau ...*

C. Eschenbach: ...which was the perfect complement. The Lied repertoire was a specialty of my adoptive mother. To know the song literature of Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, and Wolf opens a different avenue into the symphonic literature. Those who don't know the nearly 600 songs of Schubert (and I know almost all of them) or the 300-odd songs of Schumann, cannot really conduct a Schumann symphony. I have also benefited from knowing the piano music of Schumann or the four-hand repertoire of Schubert. Often those are symphonies in disguise. It was indeed very important in my life to study all of that.

*Where will the journey lead next? What remains to be discovered?*

C. Eschenbach: A great deal, when one considers: life has already been very long, but there is still much literature awaiting discovery. For example, I only came to Shostakovich very late and am now fascinated by it. I know all his symphonies, but have only conducted five of them. I'm still missing the other ten. With Sibelius it's similar. There's a lot of Britten I haven't conducted; now an opera is on the calendar. Then I always want to perform new music as well. There are wonderful composers on the global scene. In Germany alone are composers such as Reimann, Rihm, and Pintscher, just to cite the most familiar names—who in turn have excellent students like Jörg Widmann. Then the French composers like Dalbavie and Dusapin and the late, lamented Messiaen and Dutilleux. Or Thomas Adès and James Macmillan in the UK. In the USA there's Augusta Read Thomas, who deserves more recognition, or Sean Shepherd – really outstanding people, who ought to be performed more—just to name a few. Besides that there's also an industrious crop of very young talent.

*When you look upon the music scene today, are you optimistic or pessimistic?*

C. Eschenbach: Optimistic. The young musicians and young composers are a sure sign to me that the death of so-called classical music has been completely misdiagnosed. So many more young talents than ever before, they will keep music alive, salvage it!

*In this you have no doubts?*

C. Eschenbach: No. Music is too strong. It doesn't simply let itself be vanquished or declared dead.