

New Study Corrects Key Misinterpretations of Herbert von Karajan's Ties to National Socialism

A Historical Assessment by Prof. Dr. Michael Wolffsohn

Freiburg im Breisgau, February 13, 2026 – The role of Herbert von Karajan (1908–1989) under National Socialism has for decades been one of the most controversial chapters in music history and contemporary history. Political attributions, abbreviated interpretations, and contradictory narratives have long also shaped the public image of one of the most important conductors of the 20th century. A new historical study by the renowned historian Prof. Dr. Michael Wolffsohn now presents a comprehensive, source-based reassessment. The study will be published in book form on February 16, 2026, by Verlag Herder under the title ***Genie und Gewissen – Herbert von Karajan zwischen Musik und Nationalsozialismus*** (Genius and Conscience – Herbert von Karajan Between Music and National Socialism).

The study was commissioned by the Eliette und Herbert von Karajan Institute with the aim of providing a comprehensive, rigorously scholarly assessment. Drawing on extensive international archival research, Wolffsohn evaluates a wide range of sources, including materials that had previously been overlooked or misinterpreted. These include records from archives in Germany, Austria, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Israel; NSDAP and administrative files; denazification records; private correspondence; and, for the first time, materials from Karajan's private library that have recently become accessible. In addition, Wolffsohn conducted numerous interviews with contemporary witnesses and their descendants.

The central finding of the study is a clear distinction between formal conformity and ideological conviction. Wolffsohn concludes that Herbert von Karajan was neither an ideological National Socialist nor a perpetrator. He classifies him as a "formal National Socialist": a politically disinterested, career-oriented conformist who navigated an authoritarian system opportunistically without sharing its ideology. Karajan's actions, Wolffsohn argues, were driven primarily by his fixation on music and artistic success, not by political commitment.

The study thus contradicts widespread assumptions of a particularly close relationship between Karajan and the Nazi regime. Contrary to long-standing interpretations, there was no strategic patronage relationship between leading representatives of the regime and Karajan. Instead, Wolffsohn shows that the National Socialist cultural apparatus was not a monolithic power structure but was characterized by rivalries, overlapping competencies, and shifting loyalties. Artists operated within a structurally competitive system that rewarded success while at the same time exposing them to political arbitrariness and denunciation at any moment.

The study also reassesses Karajan's membership in the NSDAP. Through a precise analysis of party membership records and their administrative peculiarities, Wolffsohn corrects earlier misinterpretations. According to his findings, Karajan joined the NSDAP only in 1935—as a de facto prerequisite for professional advancement—and not already in 1933. Backdated entries and multiple registrations were administrative in nature and not evidence of active political initiative. Wolffsohn evaluates Karajan's party membership as an act of pragmatic conformity rather than ideological identification.

Another key finding concerns Karajan's private circumstances. For the first time, the study demonstrates in detail that his marriage to Anita Gütermann, who under Nazi racial laws was classified as a "quarter-Jew," weakened his professional position and made him politically vulnerable. This refutes the thesis that the marriage benefited Karajan's career under the Nazi regime. On the contrary, his contractual conditions and performance opportunities demonstrably deteriorated after the marriage.

The analysis of the denazification proceedings after 1945 also occupies a central place in the study. Wolffsohn shows that Karajan's classification as "less incriminated" in 1946 was consistent with the legal

criteria in force at the time and was not an exceptional case. Decisive factors included the absence of political activity, the timing of his party membership, and credible exculpatory testimony—including statements from returning Jewish and non-Jewish exiles. The differing assessments by the Allied authorities are explained but by divergent administrative and political standards on the part of the occupying powers.

Wolffsohn places particular emphasis on what he terms the “external Nazification” (Fremdnazifizierung) of Karajan after 1945. In various political contexts, especially during the Cold War, Karajan’s biography was repeatedly reinterpreted and politically reframed—often detached from the actual source material. Protests against his performances, for example in the United States, did receive media attention but originated from small groups and were not representative of broader public or Jewish opinion. At the same time, numerous Jewish musicians and Holocaust survivors worked with Karajan, which does not empirically support the thesis of an antisemitic disposition.

The evaluation of Karajan’s private library complements this overall picture. The works documented there—including writings by Gershom Scholem, Martin Buber, and Leszek Kołakowski—stand in clear contrast to National Socialist ideology. No evidence of völkisch or ideological Nazi literature can be found.

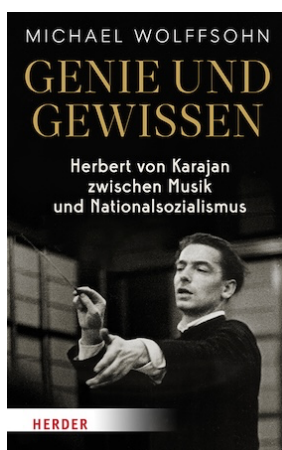
Prof. Dr. Michael Wolffsohn summarizes the findings of his study as follows: *“The sources depict Herbert von Karajan as an artist who formally conformed within a dictatorial system without internalizing its ideology. He was neither a perpetrator nor an ideological National Socialist, but a politically disinterested opportunist fixated on his music. Many of the political roles later ascribed to him say more about the respective politics of memory than about his actual conduct in the ‘Third Reich.’”*

With “Genie und Gewissen”, Wolffsohn presents a differentiated overall assessment that corrects key errors in previous research and enables a well-founded historical assessment. The study is intended as a contribution to a historically precise, non-ideologically distorted engagement with Herbert von Karajan—and at the same time as a case study of the scope of action available to artists under authoritarian systems.

Michael Wolffsohn: *Genie und Gewissen – Herbert von Karajan zwischen Musik und Nationalsozialismus*. Verlag Herder publishing house, Freiburg im Breisgau. First edition 2026. Hardcover, 304 pages. €26,00. Publication date: February 16, 2026.

An author-approved summary of the study is attached as a PDF. Michael Wolffsohn is available for interviews regarding the book upon request.

Press images are available for complimentary download at www.karajan.org (Path: Karajan Institute > Press Materials > Press Photos > Herbert von Karajan Official).



Media contact:

Jahrreiss Communications

Ralf Geissler / Susanne Jahrreiss

welcome@jahrreiss.com

+49 170 904 30 50