

Genius and Conscience – Herbert von Karajan Between Music and National Socialism

A Study by Prof. Dr. Michael Wolffsohn (Summary)

Introduction

The historical assessment of Herbert von Karajan (1908–1989), one of the most important conductors of the twentieth century, has been controversial for decades. His role within the National Socialist state, the political and institutional framework of his activities, and the moral evaluation of how he dealt with his own past after 1945 have often been treated in scholarship only in fragments and amid substantial interpretive disputes. This research field is additionally politicized—both in the immediate post-war period (United States, France, Austria, Germany, Israel) and today (for example in Salzburg and Vienna).

Prof. Michael Wolffsohn's study substantially expands the existing state of research. It evaluates a wide range of previously neglected, unknown, or misinterpreted sources: international archival files (Austria, Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Israel), NSDAP and administrative records, denazification files, private correspondence of the Karajan and Gütermann families, statements by contemporaries, as well as Karajan's private library in St. Moritz, made accessible for the first time. Added to this is a systematic historiographical analysis of claims in earlier research that have been widely repeated but not securely substantiated.

The result: Karajan was a formal National Socialist, not an ideological National Socialist and not a perpetrator. His actions during the Nazi regime correspond to the pattern of a politically indifferent, career-oriented conformist who lived almost exclusively in his musical world—embedded in a system in which culture was highly instrumentalized by politics. The study also newly demonstrates that Karajan's marriage to the “quarter-Jewish” Anita Gütermann weakened his position under Nazi racial legislation and, contrary to frequent claims, did not strengthen it. The study likewise shows that after 1945 Karajan repeatedly became the victim of political attributions imposed from outside, which distorted his actual role in the “Third Reich.”

The following summary presents the central findings of the study in the context of historical research, supplemented by background information on structures, mechanisms, and political logic of the Nazi state and the post-war period.

1. Karajan in the Nazi State: Leeway for Action, Opportunism, and Structural Constraints

Karajan's conduct between 1933 and 1945 can only be understood in the interplay of personal motives, institutional structures, and the specific functional logics of the National Socialist cultural state. The study is the first to integrate these factors into a coherent overall model.

1.1 The National Socialist Cultural State as a Competitive System

The National Socialist cultural apparatus was not a monolithic bloc, but a system marked by rivalries, overlapping competencies, and shifting power constellations. Leading representatives of the Nazi regime such as Adolf Hitler, Joseph Goebbels, and Hermann Göring; cultural officials such as Heinz Tietjen, the general intendant of the Berlin State Opera; the Party Chancellery; regional Gau administrations; and local party functionaries often pursued conflicting interests. Artists like Karajan operated within this field of tension.

Research has often overlooked that Karajan's career decisions were not an expression of political proximity, but part of a structurally generated system of competition. The regime rewarded the success of “Aryans”—regardless of ideological conviction, as long as they functioned in the regime's interest. At the same time, any artist could be endangered by denunciation or political arbitrariness.

1.2 Karajan as an Apolitical Aesthete and Opportunist

The new evaluation of sources confirms consistently: Karajan was fixated on the Olympus of high culture, on the musical world, only weakly politicized intellectually, and limited in political judgment. His letters show no ideological zeal, but a clear orientation toward career advancement. This stance matches the pattern of opportunism among many Germans and Austrians of the era—not the motivation of a perpetrator or ideological National Socialist.

1.3 Mythmaking About Alleged Preferential Treatment

A persistent cliché in the research claims that Karajan was systematically promoted by the Nazi state. The study refutes this.

No strategic relationship of protection with Goebbels: the few documented contacts were instrumental and short-lived.

No continuous career patronage: from 1942 onward, Karajan loses key positions and performance opportunities. Risk factors arising from his marriage: at the latest after marrying Anita Gütermann, Karajan was regarded as “politically unreliable.”

The Nazi regime used Karajan’s talent—it did not create it.

2. NSDAP Membership: Administrative Logics, Errors in the Research, and a New Assessment

The question of Karajan’s party membership is a central topic in Karajan historiography. Through precise analysis of files, Wolffsohn is able to correct major misinterpretations.

2.1 Why Many Researchers Misread the Membership Card

The NSDAP membership index is not a reliable document in the modern sense. Backdating, batch processing, and subsequent harmonization were common practice within the apparatus—especially after the party admissions freeze of 1933. The widespread assumption of two memberships (Salzburg and Ulm) rested on an uncritical reading of such administrative traces.

2.2 The Actual Sequence of Events

- 1933: No party membership came about, either formally or in substance.
- 1935: Entry in Aachen as a prerequisite for the position of General Music Director.
- Backdating and later entries: these concern administrative allocations, not Karajan’s actions.

2.3 Historical Classification

The membership was a pragmatic act of adaptation, not an expression of ideological identification. For many artists in authoritarian regimes of the twentieth century, joining the party was in practice a prerequisite for professional prospects.

This correctly places Karajan as an opportunist—not as a perpetrator.

3. Denazification: Austrian Proceedings, Allied Interests, and Political Logics

The study offers, for the first time, an integrated view of the parallel denazification processes and the political interests underlying them.

3.1 Austria’s Interest in Cultural Stabilization

The study shows clearly: Karajan's classification as "less incriminated" by the Austrian denazification commission in 1946 was based on the legal categories and political assessment standards of the immediate post-war period. Austria systematically examined the type of membership, timing, actual political activity, and credible exculpatory testimony. Karajan's case matched the profile of numerous cultural figures who had been formal members but had exercised no political function. His return to Austrian musical life therefore did not rest on special treatment, but on a demonstrably proper, formally correct procedure under the legal provisions in force at the time. Decisive for Karajan's exoneration were returning Jewish and non-Jewish émigrés and other victims of Nazi persecution.

3.2 Divergent Positions Among the Allies

The study shows that the Allied powers assessed Karajan in different ways—not because of varying facts, but because of different administrative and political approaches.

France temporarily imposed performance bans. This practice corresponded to the generally stricter line taken by the French occupation authorities toward former NSDAP members.

The United States assessed Karajan more differentiatingly. The positive Austrian classification, primarily by remigrants, the absence of political activity, and Karajan's international importance led American authorities to see no reason to exclude him for longer.

The United Kingdom largely followed formal criteria and aligned itself with the Austrian decision. No further political evaluation took place.

The variety of assessments shows that Karajan was not "obviously incriminated"—otherwise the Allies would likely have reacted accordingly.

3.3 The Comeback

By the mid-1950s, international institutions (including the New York Philharmonic and the Metropolitan Opera) were seeking to work with Karajan. This would not have been possible without robust exonerating judgments.

4. "External Nazification": How Political Attributions Shaped Karajan's Image

The study makes a major contribution by showing how, after 1945, Karajan was newly "categorized" in different political contexts—often detached from the source record.

4.1 The Mechanics of the Protests in the United States

Ahead of Karajan's planned appearances in the United States in 1955, there were protests organized by small local groups, including individual representatives of Jewish organizations and Zionist activists. The trigger was erroneous reports about his alleged political role in the Nazi state and misunderstandings about the Austrian denazification decision. While audiences celebrated Karajan's performances, scholarship often stylized them as a major scandal. In fact, the protests came only from small groups. They were strongly amplified by the media and were not representative of American Jewry, let alone the general public.

At the same time, numerous musicians and intellectuals supported Karajan or worked with him—especially Jewish ones.

4.2 Causes of the "External Nazification"

Three structural factors:

1. Early misinterpretation of European information by U.S. authorities.
2. Not grounded statements that falsely classified Karajan as a "committed Nazi."
3. Cold War: European artists were increasingly categorized politically.

4.3 Impact to the Present Day

Karajan's identity was overlaid for decades by repeated attributions.

5. The Private as Political: Marriage, Family, and Personal Contexts of Action

This section is central to the reassessment of Karajan, because fully reconstructed family sources are used here for the first time.

5.1 The Significance of the Letters to Elmy

The letters to his first wife, Elmy, confirm a clear picture: Karajan was politically indifferent and entirely focused on his musical work. They contain neither antisemitic nor ideologically motivated statements. Their historiographical significance lies above all in showing Karajan as an apolitical person fixated on aesthetics.

5.2 Karajan's Marriage to Anita Gütermann as a Structural Liability

The study establishes:

- Under Nazi criteria, Anita was “quarter-Jewish.”
- Her father was repeatedly subjected to repression.
- The Reich Chancellery obstructed the marriage.
- Karajan's contractual situation deteriorated noticeably afterward.

This clearly refutes the thesis that the marriage advanced his career.

5.3 Moral Reckoning After 1945

During interrogations in the course of denazification in 1946, Karajan explicitly described his party entry as a “mistake.” The conversations with Cardinal König reveal Karajan's ambivalent attitude:

- awareness of his own opportunism,
- emotional overload,
- inability to engage in comprehensive historical self-reflection.

6. Karajan's Books: An Evidentiary Field, Not the Main Argument

The analysis of his library is not a core element of the historical assessment, but an important additional indication. The dominant works—Scholem, Buber, Friedell, Kołakowski, metaphysical texts—stand in fundamental contradiction to National Socialist ideology. The fact that no völkisch-ideological literature can be documented underscores the overall picture of an apolitical, spiritually oriented artist.

7. Post-war Reception: Cold War, Memory Politics, and Cultural Diplomacy

Karajan's career after 1945 unfolded amid new political expectations and shifts in cultural power.

7.1 Jewish Musicians and Holocaust Survivors as Key Indicators

Many Jewish musicians and Holocaust survivors worked closely with Karajan after 1945—an empirically strong indication against the thesis of an antisemitic basic disposition.

7.2 Political Projection Screens of the 1970s/80s

The Waldheim affair, East–West debates, and conflicts over memory politics led to the question of Karajan's Nazi past being politicized again. His actual role was often overestimated or distorted in the process.

Conclusion: A Historically Differentiated Overall Picture

The study enables a consistent classification of Karajan:

1. Not an ideological National Socialist
2. Not a perpetrator
3. A music-obsessed, politically indifferent, career-oriented, and opportunistic conformist—a “formal National Socialist” within an authoritarian system
4. Structurally endangered by his marriage—not privileged
5. After 1945 repeatedly the object of political attributions imposed from outside
6. New source findings correct central errors in earlier research.

Karajan was average in his political conduct—extraordinary in his artistic work. The study provides the basis for a factual discussion of his role under National Socialism and in the post-war period that is not ideologically distorted.

Author's Note

This summary is based on the historical study by Prof. Dr. Michael Wolffsohn, written using numerous new archival sources and previously unpublished documents. The study aims to situate Herbert von Karajan within the tension between art, politics, and history, and is addressed to a broad, interested public as well as specialist scholars.

The Book Based on the Study

Michael Wolffsohn: [Genie und Gewissen – Herbert von Karajan zwischen Musik und Nationalsozialismus](#). Verlag Herder, 1st edition 2026.