



## Dr. Herbert Blomstedt



Dr. Herbert Blomstedt was born in Springfield, MA, and raised in Sweden and Finland. He studied at the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm and at the University of Uppsala. Later he took conducting classes with Leonard Bernstein, Igor Markevitch, and Jean Morel. In 1954 he was appointed as Chief Conductor of the Norrköping Symphony Orchestra, Sweden (1954-61). Blomstedt then held the position of Chief Conductor of well-known Scandinavian orchestras—like the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, Norway (1962-67), the Symphony Orchestra of the Danish Radio, Copenhagen (1967-77), and the Symphony Orchestra of the Swedish Radio, Stockholm (1977-83)—while also teaching as a Professor

of Conducting at the Swedish Royal Academy of Music (1961-1971). From 1975 to 1985 he was Chief Conductor and General Music Director of the Dresden State Orchestra (“Staatskapelle”) with which he toured twenty European countries as well as the USA and Japan. He then became Music Director of the renowned San Francisco Symphony Orchestra (1985-1995), which he led on well-received tours to acclaimed international music centers. Since 1986 he is Honorary Conductor of the NHK Symphony Orchestra, Tokyo, and since 1995 Conductor Laureate of the San Francisco Symphony. After three years as Chief Conductor of the NDR Symphony Orchestra, Hamburg (1996-98), he was appointed Chief Conductor (“Gewandhauskapellmeister”) of the famous Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra (1998-present).

His many decorations include four honorary doctorates, Knight of the North Star (given 1971 by the King of Sweden), and Knight of the “Dannebrog” (given 1978 by the Queen of Denmark). He received Grammy Awards for Orff’s *Carmina Burana* and Brahms’ *German Requiem*.

After living in Sweden he has now resided for many years in Lucerne, Switzerland.

**S**habbat Shalom\*:  
**Dr. Blomstedt,**  
**what is music**  
**for you?**

**Herbert Blomstedt:** First of all, music is a great part of my life. It’s not all of my life, but it occupies the main part of my life—that is, for many hours a day. The reason I like music so much is that I regard it as such a wonderful means of communication. Not only do I communicate with other people through music, I also get ideas from others—in this instance from the composers. When I read a musical score, I am like a medium. The message from the composer is passed on through me: through my world, through my possibilities including my limitations. I try to grasp what the composer wanted to express and give that on to others. Since I am a conductor, my task is to communicate my idea of the music first to my fellow musicians who play around me—that could be 20 people, 100 people, or 200 people—and

then together with them to a public of many more.

As a means of communication music is extremely fascinating, especially since music is a symbol of life. Art music in the Western tradition has a start or is born—from nothing—then has a development towards some goal, some high point, some climax, and ends or dies down. The piece could be two minutes or two hours long. You can see how, being a piece of art, music is a symbol of life. It is born, it has its complications and its possibilities that are worked out more or less fully or just indicated, and then falls down with a final clash, or in a tragic end, in nothing, in nirvana, or in a triumph, in a triumphal Hallelujah. Art music mirrors the millions of possibilities in human life.

Isn't it the most interesting part in our lives to meet other people, communicate with them, have them influence our ideas and thinking about life, and, perhaps, give them something back? Music is the perfect method in doing that. As it crosses the borders of language and different cultures, music is an ideal way of communicating. There are, of course, some limitations. Unless it has a text, music cannot communicate facts, e.g., how fast the light travels. It cannot communicate abstract ideas, e.g., the idea of a heavenly sanctuary, some other sophisticated theological concepts, or formulas and statistics in the natural sciences. So, with music you cannot communicate facts. But, however necessary facts may

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be, they do not constitute the most important things in our lives. Important in our lives is how we relate to each other, to our ancestry, and to God. And here we enter the real field of music, with communication better than through any other language. This makes music central not only to the professional musician, but also to anybody who has a minimum of musical talent. And it is my firm belief that practically everybody has such a minimum of musical talent. Bach, Beethoven, and Bruckner are not just for a handful of specialists. You do not have to go to the university and get a doctorate to enjoy the music

*Music is a symbol of life.*

of Bach. You just have to allow yourself some time and put in some effort on your own—the effort being to sit down and listen, to open your ears and reflect in tranquility without being pushed around by other duties. Bach's music has a message that goes directly to the heart. Of course, Bach is just an example. It could also be music that is a thousand years older, or music that is written today. Thus, music is very central, not only to the musician but to everybody. Just look around and you will see that it really is. People deal with music everywhere. How they deal with music is another question, but music is part of everybody's life.

***Shabbat Shalom:*** We can find music in different settings, but how would you describe the role of music in religious life?

**Blomstedt:** Since music is a spiritual affair, it is one of the main witness forms. You cannot prove the existence of God in the same way that you verify something in the laboratory. That's just not possible, neither for theologians nor for anybody else. But there are witnesses to the existence of God. The Bible certainly is the prime witness. Next to the Bible, music is for me the best witness. There are other witnesses, too. The whole creation is a witness to God, and especially His prime creation—humans. For how could we get an idea about God without other people? As an example, for many people their idea about God is very much influenced by the way they perceive their biological father and mother. That is a first point of reference. Indeed, what we see in other people very much shapes our future understanding of God.

For me, the witness of music can go far beyond that, because music can give you at least an idea of the endless greatness of God, a God who has no limitations of time and space—a concept that goes beyond our possibilities to grasp. Music can depict God's greatness and can give us the sense of awe that perhaps individuals cannot so easily create in us. The reason for this lies in the fact that music can appeal to all strata of the intellect

and at the same time be very emotional. And since humans are a mixture of brains and feelings, music can ideally grasp the whole person as he or she was created by God. Certainly God did not create humans like a machine or like clever animals. The human combination of intellect and emotions is without comparison in the animal world. In addressing these two capacities, music can give an idea or a glimpse of what the Creator must be.

Of course, when we listen to ditties or sing sentimental religious songs, it is difficult to get a proper idea of how great God is. The text of that music may be quite nice and true, but the music itself does not include anything of God's greatness. This effect is much better conveyed by a hymn from the Reformation era, or a fugue by Bach, or a symphony by Beethoven. And there is music in which the greatest composers have combined their musical skills with their intensely religious feelings to create religious music with text that ranks among the greatest testimonies to what God can do through a human individual.

***Shabbat Shalom:* That leads to the next question: Is there religious music per se? How would you define it?**

**Blomstedt:** I do not think that there is religious music per se. A slow tempo, absence of dance rhythms, use of the organ etc. does not automatically make the music religious. Not even the presence of a religious text automatically makes a song religious,

if the music itself is not of a higher spiritual character. The effect is that, for at least the more sensitive musical mind—and I am not speaking of specialists like myself, but of people in general who like and are used to listening to good music—it will even be distracting to hear a religious text set to music that is not on a spiritual level with its text. But in another sense almost all Western art music (including medieval Gregorian Chant, a Haydn String Quartet, a Bartók Concerto) is in effect “religious” when it attains that lasting quality mark as a product of profound vision and highest effort.

What gives the music a religious character is its capacity of bringing us into contact with something that is infinitely greater than ourselves. We cannot be elevated to a higher level if we deal only with trivialities, with cheap commercial mass products.

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Such can never elevate. To elevate has always to include an element of effort, an effort on the part of the one who wants to be elevated. In that sense I firmly believe that a symphony by Bruckner or a fugue by Bach is far more religious than a trivial song sung in a church. The religious text of such a song may be acceptable, but the music is betraying what the text says. Often the conflict between text and music could tear apart the musically sensitive person if

he or she is not gifted with an almost superhuman amount of tolerance and patience. But fortunately, you don't have to go to the concert hall to experience religious music of the highest caliber. There is a treasure of religious music in the best Christian hymns spanning five centuries or more. It is there for us to use, and thereby be blessed.

***Shabbat Shalom:* So, in your opinion, there is a music that elevates and a music that does not elevate?**

**Blomstedt:** Certainly.

***Shabbat Shalom:* How does it work?**

**Blomstedt:** I think the purpose of music is to elevate—and I am again speaking of art music in the Western society. If music does not fulfill that purpose, it's really not good. Bach, who was a very emotional person, once expressed this in a typical saying of his. But let me provide some background first, since

few today have any idea who Bach really was. People often think of Bach as somebody extremely boring and old-fashioned who wore a wig and had no contact with life. I want to remind them that Bach had twenty-two children. How can you be without emotion when you have twenty-two children? And he raised them to be fine Christians. He was a deeply religious and a very emotional man, full of temperament. He could become very angry, and I am sure he was espe-



cially angry when his sons and daughters did not live up to the standards of music he wanted to set. When those schoolboys at the St. Thomas in Leipzig did not respect the musical standards that he was trying to teach them, or when he heard music in the streets or in the fine societies that was not of the best quality, he could get very upset. Bach said that the ultimate reason for music is to give glory to God and to refresh the mind and soul. For him, music that does not do either of these is not worthy to be called music at all. It's nothing better than a "devilish bawling and bragging." There was such devilish music in Bach's own time. Certainly there is baroque music that fits this description well. Music that is full of repetitions with no variation or development. Indeed, there is lots of baroque music that is not particularly good. And there is also lots of contemporary music that is bad music—shallow, trivial, banal. It's just routine, trashing, treading a treadmill, not worthy of human emotion or human intellect. That kind of music was devilish to Bach. Of course, Bach was demanding. But if you want to have a discussion on terms like this, you have to be quite either-or. There is no middle ground here. In music, there is no way to be neutral. "All music is good" is a standard philosophy today. Many believe that a piece of music written for Broadway in New York could be just as elevating as a Bruckner symphony, or that a sentimental religious song

could be just as good as Martin Luther's "A Mighty Fortress." In general, people want to avoid evaluating music. They only go for what they like, for anything that tickles the ear. Today, everything seems to be okay. I regard it as a most dangerous concept to believe that anything is as good as everything else. There are distinct criteria why something is a little better, less good, very bad, distasteful, or should be avoided at all costs. However, such a distinction is not a very favorite idea for most people today, neither in our churches nor in the art world.

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**Shabbat Shalom:** What would be some of the criteria according to which the value of music can be determined?

**Blomstedt:** When choosing music we should be at least as critical as when we buy a new car or our daily food. Is it well made? Functional and durable? Is it nourishing, tasteful, nontoxic? Does it serve my real needs?

Music that comes from Pop sources is rarely of lasting quality. It is hastily put together, tickles the ear, and stirs the bowels, but loses value quickly and leaves us spiritually empty. It is like candy—not fit for food. And if you eat too much of it, it destroys you.

Music that comes from "classical" sources is always the safer choice. Time has proven its value, and its message is as fresh today as ten, a hundred or three hundred years ago. It may be simple on the surface, but beneath—after repeated listening—there is a rich web of associations that ultimately touch on all layers of our personality: body, mind, and soul.

This is the music that also has an ethical impact, able of elevating every listener. Listen to classical music stations only! Avoid the bad stuff. It may be harmful to your health. The choice is yours!

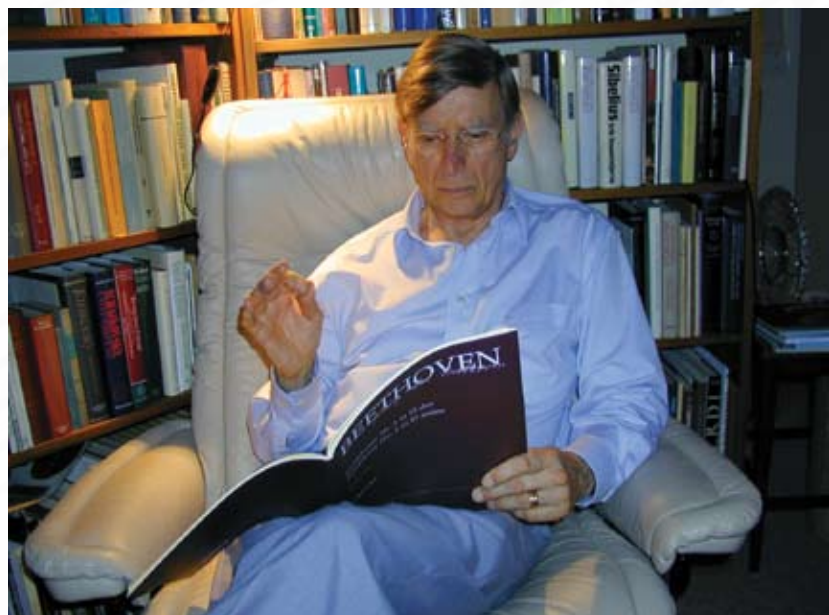
**Shabbat Shalom:** If I understood you correctly, the main role of religious music is to elevate. Do you see any other functions of religious music, for example, inspiring fellowship, emotions, creating associations?

**Blomstedt:** Let me shape the question a little bit. If you ask the question "Is the only reason for religious music in a religious service to elevate?" then I would say Yes. But of course, believers, like other people, come together in many ways for different reasons. Sometimes we come together to play a String Quartet by Haydn, or we come together to sing folk songs with a guitar, or, as it was practiced earlier, we do some work together and we sing rhythmical songs to get the work done more easily. So there are many purposes for music. But regarding the music in a religious service, where God is the One worshiped, I feel that only the very highest definition



of music can be used. There are many different styles of worship, and of course there are many different ethnical styles because we have different backgrounds. But whatever background we have, the main idea is that when we make music before God, in His presence, it must match our image of God.

A reciprocal effect is that the music we use in the service is in turn helping us to shape our image of God. If the music that we make for religious services is just the same music that we hear in the street, the radio, or the dance hall, then God becomes just another fellow, our best buddy. In a way, He certainly is just that, but this picture of God gives us only a quite limited view of what God really is. He is much more than our brother and buddy. The image we have of God should be a very rich one. He is not just the One we lean our heads on when we are tired and He comforts us by saying, "Be of good comfort, I am always with you. Be of good courage, I will always forgive you. Just be sincere and just love Me and you will be all right." That's only one part of God. God is infinitely more. He is the Creator. He is your Creator. He is your employer. He is the One who told you "Go out and be a witness for Me, and be careful what you say, how you express yourself. Remember you are created in My image. Do nothing that would distract from the highest idea you have of Me when you speak about Me to other people." He is our Judge. We



have to have ultimate respect for Him. And in order to have some idea of how great He is we must spend as much time as possible looking for places where we catch a glimpse of who He really is: in nature, in the best kind of books, and in the best kind of music. Don't just look around on the street, but lift up your eyes to the mountains where God is. This is what will help you to create a mature image of God.

***Shabbat Shalom: Where do you see the connection between music and spirituality? What is this connection, if there is any?***

**Blomstedt:** There is a clear connection. I remember, once in an interview many years ago I received a similar question. I replied that I know many fellow artists—painters, writers, and especially musicians—of the highest caliber, and I think they are all in one way or another religious at heart. What I meant is that all these people are deeply spiritual. They do not need to be Christians, they might

as well be Jews or Muslims or whatever, but they are spiritual people. Because art is a spiritual affair. Music deals in a sort of semiabstract way with realities of life. As I said before, music is a symbol of life. And God is the Life-giver. If you deal with a symbol of life, music in this instance, you cannot concern yourself with it without dealing with the Life-giver in one way or another. You are looking for Him. Sooner or later we all seek answers to the questions "What is the origin and the reason of all this? Who am I, and where do I stand? How do I relate to this? What is behind all this?" Music cannot give the full answer, just as theology cannot give the full answer, because both are not exact sciences. Both deal with deeply spiritual matters and are searching for ultimate truth in an area where we know that our knowledge will remain "in part only." Music, however, better than science can give an idea of the infinite greatness of God.

When you hear certain music, it is as if the horizon is lifted, like “Ahhhhhhhh.” Your whole person is being filled with something that is infinitely greater than yourself. This cannot be done by music that just catches your legs, or catches your ears by a nice tune, like “Di-di-doo-di-doo-di-doo . . .” That’s nice. I feel rhythm in my body. But then, Stop. There is nothing more. Stop. Nothing that refreshes the mind. Nothing that elevates the soul. This music may have a function in the cafés or in the dance hall.

*Perhaps one percent of the commercial religious music can stand a serious test.*

But it has absolutely no place in worship.

***Shabbat Shalom:* What do you think of the present movement that integrates more and more “contemporary” popular and ethnic music in worship services?**

**Blomstedt:** First of all, I could hear that you put the word “contemporary” in quotes. Correctly so, because the word “contemporary” is completely misused, particularly when one equates “contemporary” with “appropriate” for the present time. Let me give you an example. I have gone to religious services where the program says that “contemporary music” is played. However, what they really mean is: “Come and hear music of the same kind as you hear all through the week

in the coffee shops, from the radio stations for pop music, music that avoids the lofty sounds of the organ and the resonance of old cathedrals. Come and be ‘in,’ be like all other people, be yourself, be ‘contemporary.’” Really, “contemporary” is a much too positive word for such a philosophy.

All the others who like really good music are viewed as totally old-fashioned, as having no contact with real life. Those are people who like Bach or Gregorian chant, or even recite the Psalms. Regarding the latter, some say “It’s enough that we have the Gospels. Why read the Psalms if we have the Gospels? Jesus is all we need.” This is of course also completely wrong. The Psalms are just as contemporary as any ditty written yesterday. So contemporary is not a quality that we should discuss without qualifying very carefully what we mean by it.

When you ask about the

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value of contemporary music, there is both contemporary music that is very good and contemporary music that is bad. I want to emphasize that there is very valuable contemporary music written today. Such music is, however, rarely performed in these “contemporary” worship services. On the other hand, there is old music that is trivia—especial-

ly music from the nineteenth century—but nevertheless performed in many religious services. That music is completely banal and has very little to do with the quality of the biblical message. Of course there is also old music that is of a high caliber, valuable music that is approaching the value of its religious text.

I am thinking of a saying by Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great religious thinker and Jewish rabbi from Poland, educated in Berlin, and then teaching at Jewish Theological Seminary until he died in 1972. He was not a trained musician, but he liked music. Heschel could express himself wonderfully in words. He is one of the religious writers and philosophers that I read with great benefit. He said once that he himself spends hours and hours, day after day, trying with enormous effort to find the right words to express some valid ideas about God. “And then,” Heschel says, “in the evening I may

go to a concert with music by Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Bruckner, Mahler, etc. And I think: These people have said it much, much better.”

***Shabbat Shalom:* What do you think of the so-called “third stream” that combines classic, popular, and world music, and can be seen among many of today performers and composers of**



## classical music?

**Blomstedt:** I am not really sure what the question aims at. Of course, I know very well that such tendencies exist in the realm of art music. This sort of crossover is typical of our times. It stems very much from the present philosophy that all music is of equal value, which I think is a complete misunderstanding, even if a good composer can integrate in his or her music elements from many different sources. But I think the basic truth that all persons are of equal value is simply misapplied here. Your human value is the same if you are a Ph.D. or a street sweeper. Whatever color the skin has makes no difference in the person's value. We

highest ambitions in music (e.g., a symphony, an opera, a fugue, or an oratorio)—is bound to be only moderately successful, depending on the degree of integration the composer can achieve. These crossovers can certainly be a positive influence and create some interesting ideas. Take for instance Bach. He was a melting-pot of influences, though he never left his native Thuringian homeland in central Germany. Still, because of his talents and the seriousness of his work, but also because he soaked up different influences, Bach became the greatest church musician that ever lived. His music would not be what it is without the Italian or the French influence. It's

grown too complex. Serious composers, many of them the best in their generation, lost their audience, and when you lose your audience then you lose one of the main reasons for being a musician. You want to communicate something, but if there is nobody who receives it, what is the point? That was when composers discovered their new goal: "Let's write music that people can understand." We are in the middle of this trend right now. It started in the late eighties. "Oh," people said, "This is called modern music. And we like it. I think I am quite musical!" They were happy to discover that there was contemporary music that was not so completely cerebral that it had lost its contact with human emotion. This is one of the backgrounds of contemporary crossovers. Serious composers want to be public. They want to use their skills as very well studied composers to reach the public. I cannot see that there is anything wrong with that. After all, it stems from a very legitimate need to communicate themselves. How much of this modern trend is denying the true goals of the serious composer by just setting out to be cheap, to prostitute oneself more or less, to please and be public, that is only for the experts to judge. Of course, all the commercial religious music you have today is of such a kind. There is perhaps one percent that could stand a serious test. Most of the commercial religious music is just manufactured. It is very easy to write music like this. I tried

*Gregorian chanting, the earliest expression  
of Christian art music, has its roots  
in the synagogue chant.*

are all equally valuable. And yet, the products of our industry are not equally valuable. Such is also true for music. The music that is written for everyday consumption that you hear in the restaurants, in the elevators, in the radio, or when the car passes by with its heavy "dum-dum-dum-dum-dum" [bass tones] is not of the same value as a folk song or a symphony by Brahms. We need to attach value to the things we are dealing with.

So, the effort to combine different kinds of music—music that has very modest requirements on the intellect (e.g., dance music, work music) with music that has the

nothing to say against getting ideas from all around.

I think a great deal of the crossover that we see today in art music is a result of frustration. In the fifties, sixties, and seventies the art music was getting more and more intel-

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Music is like a  
catalyst.*

lectual, so superintellectual and so devoid, correspondingly, of emotion that people stopped going to these kinds of concerts. The music had



## *Music does not transform you if you do not let it transform you. Just like the gospel.*

it myself. I can write such a song in ten minutes. No problem. Of course, then it's also forgotten in perhaps ten minutes, a week, a year or two. In contrast, it is rare that a composer of the highest ambitions and of the highest schooling writes a piece to communicate something in a way that a very big public immediately can grasp and understand. To find a product that can satisfy both the intellectual and the emotional demands takes a really great composer and a sincere effort over a long time, and long experience. There are very few who can do that.

***Shabbat Shalom:*** How do you see Christian music as different from Jewish music?

**Blomstedt:** I don't know Jewish music too well, I must confess. Most people, also most musicians and musicologists, do not know Jewish music. But what is "Jewish"? We are certainly acquainted with music written by Jews—for example, Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Gustav Mahler, Giacomo Meyerbeer, Leonard Bernstein, Aaron Copland, George Gershwin. Their music is of course various and diverse. Just as there is an enormous difference between the music of Gershwin and that of Mendelssohn, there is also an enormous difference between Mendelssohn and Mahler. They are all Jews. What is the common ground they have? You have to define more clearly what you mean by "Jewish music." If you mean Jewish religious

music, then the Jews themselves barely have an idea of how old Jewish music really sounded and how it was. We know very little about how the Psalms were sung by David. The closest we can come to compare in the Western tradition is the Gregorian chant. We know that Gregorian chanting, which is the earliest expression of Christian art music—developing in the third to sixth centuries and

*Millions of people hear  
candy music . . .  
and think that brings  
them closer to God.  
This is tragic.*

then codified around 600—has its roots in the synagogue chant. There have been old Jewish communities isolated in the Diaspora, especially in the Arabian Peninsula, that have kept their tradition and their rites pretty intact during the centuries. In the nineteenth century modern scholars, including Jewish scholars, became aware of that and started to understand better the link from the Gregorian chant to the biblical chant. To be sure, the Gregorian chant is today practically a forgotten art form. Musicologists know about it; very few Catholic priests perform it today, even in great Catholic cathedrals. There are some who cultivate it—in some cathedrals in Germany, but especially in France—and they do it in a wonderful way. It is a rev-

elation to listen to this music that grows out of the text and follows it. Even the atmosphere of this music gives you an idea of the infinite greatness of God. The Gregorian chant consists of one line; it is unaccompanied, just one voice sung by several monks together. It is in perfect harmony with the church room that it fills, with the high ceiling in the church and its infinite acoustics. Here God is. The medieval Christian knew also that God is not there physically, but in spirit. This was His world. The church conveyed to the believer the idea of God's greatness. It appears that the music that was written for these Psalms—most texts come from the Psalms, only some from the prophets and the New Testament—comes very close to the idea the Jews in biblical times must have had about music. When Jesus stood up in the synagogue at Capernaum and "read" a passage from Isaiah, he surely was not reading as we do today. He was singing in an elaborate voice because God's word should not be spoken in everyday style. Still, we can only speculate how it was really done. In contrast, the music practiced nowadays in synagogues is well known, but as far as I know most of it was shaped by the practice of the nineteenth century.

***Shabbat Shalom:*** How do you explain the importance of music for Christians?

**Blomstedt:** Music is important for everyone. But why is it especially important for Christians? The only answer is

that music can help in forming a more complete, deeper, and truer image of God. Music itself helps in many ways. In the most primitive way, it helps doing the work—these are rhythmical work songs. It helps expressing enjoyment and community, e.g., when one performs a dance—and I am speaking of folk dance and not of the Western or American couple dance. That is a wonderful function of music. Music in its highest form, as we Westerners understand it, can help in even greater ways: in forming personality, in deepening one's view of life, and above all in coming into contact with the Eternal. Søren Kierkegaard, the great Danish philosopher and the father of the modern existentialist faction of philosophers, describes in one of his main works, *Stages on Life's Way*, three levels of life: the aesthetical, the ethical, and the religious stages. The purely aesthetical stage sounds wonderful, but what Kierkegaard means is aesthetical in an almost idolatrous sense. It's about things that only please your senses: how you experience smell, taste, sound, and vision. The aesthetic evaluation is: what is pleasing to see is good, what tastes good is good, what is beautiful is good, what sounds nice to your ear is good. The ethical question comes only at a higher stage, when man matures a little bit more. At that level human beings ask themselves: "Is everything that tastes good really good? Does it have a good purpose? Is it good for you, also in the

longer perspective? Does it help you to be good to others?" That's the ethical question. Finally comes the highest question: If you think it is good for you and for other human beings, what does God think Who knows better? Very few people ask themselves this kind of question. It is sad to say that most people today remain on the aesthetical level, also in regard to music. What sounds good and pleases the ear is considered to be good. The motto is "If I like it, it's good." But people should ask the other question: "What is really good for you? What helps you to develop your personality, to develop the best in you?" It is our duty

*My deepest wish is to  
reveal God in music.*

to develop the musical talents given to us, and as I said before, everybody has talents. Finally, most people don't ask the ultimate question at all, not even religious people: "What does God think?" Only a very few people come to that stage where they struggle with God to come to a sort of clear view of what God wants just from you. Most people spend all their life on the aesthetic level only. To use a parable of Kierkegaard, it's like human beings who spend all their life living in the basement of their two-story house, because there they have stored all their provisions, meat and drink, etc. However, those human beings rarely go up even to the first floor where there is light, where they can look around a

bit and widen their horizons. And they never go up to the second floor where they could have this wonderful view—it might be even a view of heaven. They spend all their life in the basement. How sad!

***Shabbat Shalom: It's very clear that you uphold a very high standard of music. Let me ask you a completely different but still somewhat related question. Considering the effect of music, how would you comment on the fact that in concentration camps SS officials would be listeners to great music and still be able to perform atrocities?***

**Blomstedt:** Well, music is not a sorcerer's formula. Music is like a catalyst. It does its work within you. Some of the most terrible people in the history of humankind were some popes. Apparently the Christian faith did not help them to be decent people. They did not take the Christian message to their heart; they just used it as a means of getting power. Likewise music does not transform you if you do not let it transform you. Just like the gospel. It's not a formula. A few Bible texts do not guarantee salvation. That is much too primitive a way to look at the Christian message. That is superstition. Just like the belief that the worst criminal would be saved when the priest comes and performs the cross sign over him or her. Or the belief that a child will go to hell if it is not baptized when it is one day old. The Christian message is for the whole person—for the mind, for the soul, for the emotions.



It must occupy the whole person. Good music can be used by professionals in a power play. But then it has not been allowed to change their personality. I am convinced that good music has an elevating influence on anybody who really opens his or her soul to it, but again it's not a formula. In fact, some of the worst characters I know have been musicians.

***Shabbat Shalom:* What is your deepest wish about your personal involvement in musical life? What is your greatest frustration as a musician?**

**Blomstedt:** Perhaps it is easier to start with the latter question. Our discussion has already revealed some of my frustrations. My greatest frustration in music is to see how musical talent is not used and thus wasted. We all have musical talents to some degree; even those who never dream of playing an instrument have musical talents. You can discern levels of pitch, hear the difference between loud and soft, or the difference between a man or a lady singing. Very few, less than one thousandth of a percent, do not have these abilities. So, we are all musical. Even if not all of us have wished to develop and to perform as a musician, all of us have the possibility to at least develop an understanding for music. I see so many people that are never going out of their basements, who are staying down there with the most trivial and banal music conceivable, because they think it sounds good and tastes good, but they do not perceive that

in reality such music is not good for them. There have been enough people who have been preaching that it is not good for you to live only on candy just because it tastes good. Most people in our culture have a fairly good idea what their diet should be. There is certainly no grown-up who would eat candy for breakfast, lunch, and supper. However, there are millions and millions of people who hear candy music at morning, noon, and evening, in the street, in the dance hall, in church, everywhere. Candy music, candy music. And they think that brings them closer to the good or even to God, because they have never tasted anything else. This is tragic. This is my greatest frustration, musically speaking.

Religiously speaking, I think the image we have of God is very much created by the atmosphere we live in. For example, if we have a wonderful mother and father, we could certainly get a good basic idea of what God could be, namely loving, knowing everything, trustworthy, helpful—and our righteous judge. Somehow other people who do not have good parents, or who lose their parents, or never had parents, can grow up to become good people anyhow, because they had other role models who gave them an idea of what they could be. Musically speaking, the way we sing about God in church helps to create an image of God. I believe the better the music is, the higher and richer the ideas of God can be conveyed. I am not saying hereby

that only a musicologist can get the proper idea of who God is. Just as the study of theology does not necessarily make you a better Christian. But music is a wonderful tool to help to widen our horizon, to make space for something that is infinite to us—God. Much of the preferred music in our churches has limited the idea that you can get about God. That is tragic, too.

My deepest wish is to reveal God in music. This is why I concentrate on the greatest masters in my concert programs. God speaks most clearly through them. There are also many minor prophets in the musical Canon, but they must speak the same message. The ultimate purpose must be, as Bach said, “to the glory of God and to the refreshment of mind and soul.” At least, the music of the Christian should have no other purpose.

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\*This interview was prepared and conducted by Wolfgang Lepke and Martin Pröbstle.