

GEORGE SZELL

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George Szell was a great conductor.

He was born in Budapest on July 7, 1897. His father was Hungarian and his mother was Slovenian.

From the early age of three, George was brought up in Vienna and his musical training was as a pianist studying with Richard Robert who counted Rudolph Serkin (1903-1991) among his pupils. In fact, Szell and Serkin became lifelong friends.

Szell studied composition with Eusebius Mandyczewski (1857-1929), who was a friend of Brahms, and Szell also studied briefly with Max Reger.

George began his career as a composer and pianist touring Europe at the age of eleven playing his own Rondo for piano and orchestra. His skill at the piano was outstanding and he was dubbed the next Mozart. But he realised that he would not make a composer and that the world was full of great pianists although it must be emphasised that he was a very fine pianist recording Mozart Violin Sonatas with Raphael Druian and Piano Quartets by Mozart as well as the splendid Piano Quintet Op 34 by Brahms.

His conducting debut came about by accident. He was on holiday when a conductor who was scheduled to take a concert could not appear as he was injured. This set the seal for Szell to be a conductor.

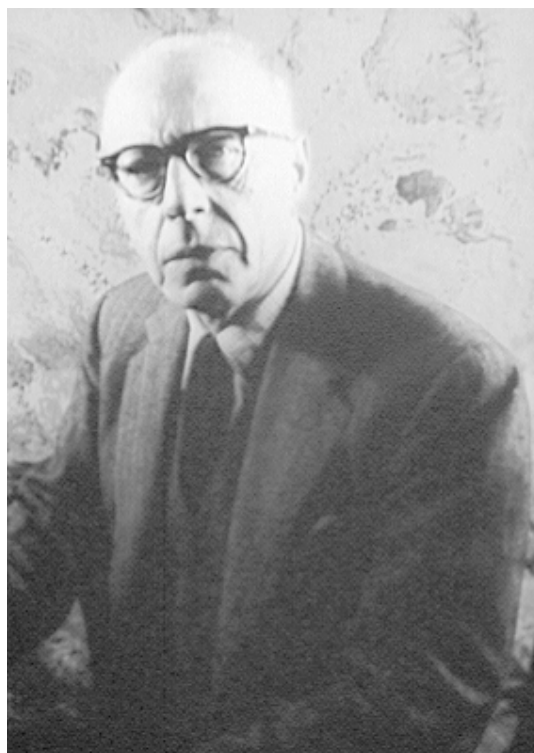
At the age of eighteen, he had a position with Berlin's Royal Court Opera where the music director was Richard Strauss who befriended him. Later, Strauss would often say that Szell performed his music perfectly. Szell made the first part of the premiere recording of Don Juan and Strauss was a major influence in the young man's life.

Leaving the Royal Court Opera in 1919, Szell worked at various opera houses and conducting orchestras throughout Europe. He succeeded Klemperer at the Municipal Theatre in Strasbourg before becoming assistant conductor to Erich Kleiber of the Berlin Staatsoper in 1924.

His fame spread rapidly and he made his American debut in 1930 with the St Louis SO. When the Germans invaded Czechoslovakia, Szell became the conductor of the Scottish National Orchestra.

At the outbreak of World War II, Szell was returning home from Australia via the USA and so settled with a family in New York City. He spent a year teaching and then received frequent invitations to conduct including to perform with Toscanini's NBC SO in 1941. The story is told that Toscanini was incensed at rehearsal when Szell snarled at the orchestra especially the horn section. This gave rise to the comment that Szell was a tyrant on the podium.

A year later, Szell made his debut at the Metropolitan Opera which association lasted for four years. He had a difficult relationship with the Opera's general manager, Rudolph Bing. Such managers should be musicians not just business men.



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Szell's debut with the New York PO was in 1943 and he became a naturalised citizen of the USA in 1946, the year he was invited to be the conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra a post he held until his death in July 1970.



He was married twice. His first wife was Olga Band to whom he was married from 1920 to 1926. He then had a romance with Evelyn Rothwell and they were very happy and about to become engaged when Barbirolli came on the scene and created so much trouble that the proposed engagement did not materialise. For the rest of his life, Barbirolli sabotaged Szell, or tried to. Barbirolli was a very nasty character and a poor conductor. Looking into Rachmaninov's coffin he said that this was the best performance Rachmaninov ever gave. The Americans hated Barbirolli as did many members of the Halle Orchestra and I have their letters to evidence this.

Szell's second wife was Helene Schultz Teltsch who originally came from Prague. They married in 1938 and had a happy marriage which ended with Szell's death in 1970.

It is sometimes forgotten that musicians have lives outside of music. Szell was a gourmet cook and an enthusiast of motor cars. He rejected the Cleveland Orchestra's chauffeur driven car and would drive his own Cadillac.

His last recording was of Sibelius's Symphony no. 2 given in Tokyo in 1970. His recording of the Schumann symphonies were highly acclaimed and put to death, for a while at least, that Schumann's orchestration was below par and also highlighted the pointlessness of Mahler re orchestrating them. Szell's Brahms was exemplary and in the concertos he employed Serkin, Leon Fleisher, David Oistrakh and Rostropovich. Casals recorded the sumptuous Dvorak Cello Concerto with Szell in 1937 and said he had never worked with a better conductor.

Gary Graffman is a truly remarkable pianist and recorded Prokofiev concertos 1 and 3 with Szell in 1966.

As to the claim that Szell was a tyrant on the podium, I have no first hand evidence of this. Reiner was said to be a martinet but both these conductors were the best conductors in American of their time. They were perfectionists.

Szell, Reiner, Boult and Bryden Thomson were great conductors being faithful to the scores although, on very rare occasions, Szell did some minor editing particularly on works he did not like. Like Boult, he did not like Schubert's Symphony no. 9.

He had so many qualities. He had a marvellous ear and a wonderful understanding of the music which he performed. He respected the music and their composers.

He died of bone cancer in a Cleveland hospital on 30 July 1970.

A later music director of the Cleveland Orchestra, Christoph von Dohnanyi said, "We gave a great performance and George Szell gets a great review".

The orchestra's publicist, Louis Hood, often said that when George Szell walked into Severance Hall the columns stood up straighter.

(It is regretted that some dishonest person has purloined this essay and put their name to it)

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