

The Washington Post  
December 20, 2015

## Kurt Masur, 88 Conductor who was a unifying force in a divided Germany



*Kurt Masur conducting the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 2009. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)*

by [Matt Schudel](#)

Kurt Masur, a renowned conductor who led the New York Philharmonic for 11 years and who manifested the healing power of music during tense political moments in his native East Germany, when he played a crucial peacemaking role in the weeks before the collapse of communism and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, died Dec. 19 at a hospital in Greenwich, Conn. He was 88.

He had complications from Parkinson's disease, the New York Philharmonic said in a statement.

Mr. Masur (pronounced mah-ZOOR) spent much of his career in communist-controlled East Germany, gaining international renown as music director of Leipzig's Gewandhaus Orchestra.

He took over the orchestra in 1970 and built it into an ensemble of impeccable precision, known especially for its refined string sections. The orchestra recorded on major international labels, and Mr. Masur also led a music school in Leipzig and taught courses in conducting.

A 1974 concert tour that brought Mr. Masur and the Gewandhaus to Carnegie Hall, prompting New York Times critic Harold C. Schonberg to declare, "The ensemble was perfection."

Propelled into the top ranks of the world's conductors, Mr. Masur began to make guest appearances with orchestras in Chicago, Cleveland and Boston. He became principal guest conductor of the Dallas Symphony in the late 1970s, but maintained his allegiance to the Gewandhaus. Over time, he became one of the most recognizable and respected figures in Leipzig.

Although he never joined the Communist Party, Mr. Masur prevailed on East German leader Erich Honecker to support the building of a new concert hall in Leipzig and to rescind a government ban on travel outside the country by East German artists.

As a pro-democracy movement gathered strength in 1989, Leipzig became a center of resistance to the communist regime. After witnessing the violent arrests of demonstrators, Mr. Masur went on West German television and declared, "I am ashamed."

On Oct. 9, 1989, Leipzig's streets filled with thousands of protesters. Armed with the moral authority of his leadership of the Gewandhaus, Mr. Masur convened a meeting of dissidents, musicians and Communist officials to draft a statement calling for nonviolence.

Against the orders of national authorities, the local police commander ordered his officers to withdraw. Mr. Masur went on Leipzig radio stations, pleading for restraint. He was immediately seen as a calming force at a crucial moment.

One month later, the Berlin Wall came down, as East Germany's communist government crumbled in a bloodless revolution after four decades.

"Something happened here, before our eyes in Leipzig," Mr. Masur said at the time. "This was not a revolution for better groceries, but for the spirit of freedom. "

Some people urged Mr. Masur to run for mayor of Leipzig or even prime minister, but he returned to the podium. On Dec. 31, 1989, he led the Gewandhaus Orchestra in a triumphant performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, broadcast on television across throughout East and West Germany as a symbol of national unity.

"I am a politician against my will," Mr. Masur told The Washington Post days later. "I have the most wonderful profession a person can have. I'm not cut out to be a politician. I only tried to stop something bad."

Kurt Masur was born July 18, 1927, in what was then the German town of Brieg, now Brzeg, Poland. His father was an engineer who advised his son to study electronics.

But from an early age, Mr. Masur was drawn to music and began to teach himself to play piano at 7. He later studied the organ, cello and other instruments.

"I was not brilliant," he told The Post in 1990. "I loved only music. Really, for me, there was nothing else I could do."

At 15, he entered a music school in Breslau (now Wroclaw, Poland), and he often listened to classical performances on the U.S. Armed Forces Radio Network during World War II.

After being drafted into the German army, Mr. Masur was captured and spent time in a British prisoner-of-war camp.

After the war, he turned to conducting because of an injury to his hand. He graduated in 1948 from a Leipzig conservatory founded by 19th-century composer Felix Mendelssohn.

He worked as a conductor at various opera houses and East German orchestras before going to Berlin in 1960 as music director of the Komische Oper (Comic Opera), where he developed a deep sense of the dramatic possibilities of music.

Yearning to work more in the orchestral tradition, Mr. Masur began to take guest-conducting jobs and in 1967 became music director of Dresden Philharmonic. Three years later, he moved to Leipzig, a city with a rich musical tradition reaching back to Johann Sebastian Bach.

In 1991, Mr. Masur took over as music director of the New York Philharmonic. He brought a Germanic sense of discipline to the orchestra, which had given years of lackluster performances under his predecessor, Zubin Mehta.

Mr. Masur conducted without a baton, but he left no one in doubt of his authority. He specialized in the repertoire of the 19th century, but he also commissioned dozens of new works by American composers.

He brought a new clarity to the orchestra's sound, embarked on ambitious recording projects and a series of worldwide tours.

"Once again," critic Tim Page wrote in *Newsday*, "our cultural capital has an orchestra worthy of comparison with the finest in the world."

Much of Mr. Masur's 11-year tenure at the Philharmonic was marred by a power struggle with the orchestra's board and its executive director, Deborah Borda.

In 1998, the board announced that Mr. Masur would leave the podium after four more years. He was furious about the decision, saying his prickly dealings with the Philharmonic reminded him of his earlier experiences with the East German secret police.

When Mr. Masur left the Philharmonic in 2002, he had conducted about 860 concerts for the orchestra. He later served as principal conductor of the London Philharmonic and the *Orchestre de National de France*.

In 2011, he led Washington's National Symphony Orchestra in a concert of German music, including Brahms's First Symphony.

"Masur is not a conductor of big or graphic gestures," *Post* music critic Anne Midgette wrote. "He keeps his hands close to and in front of his body, and lets the music talk."

Certain details about Mr. Masur's early life are difficult to gather. His first marriage ended in divorce. His second wife was killed in a 1972 car accident in East Germany, in which Mr. Masur was the driver. He was seriously injured, and two passengers in the other car were killed.

Survivors include his third wife, Japanese-born musician Tomoko Sakurai; four children from his earlier marriages; and a son from his third marriage, Ken-David Masur, associate conductor of the San Diego Symphony.

For Mr. Masur, music was a form of idealism, a way to inspire people to reach for transcendence and truth.

"The message of Beethoven brings us back to what we should do," he said in 2004. "Fear can never unite people. Pain cannot unite people. Joy unites people. Beethoven is always fresh."

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