Carlos Kleiber — the name evokes both Hispanic and German spheres — cancelled performances, never gave interviews, claimed he only conducted when the fridge was empty, and told Plácido Domingo he'd prefer to devote his time to drinking wine and making love. He only conducted 96 concerts in his life (does Valérie Gergiev notch up more in a year?). Yet, according to Claudio Abbado, Kleiber was the most important conductor of the 20th century. He scarcely ever wanted to be 'a contender', yet staggeringly, he was recently voted the most inspiring conductor of all time by a BBC survey of 100 conductors. Who was this remarkable man? Why was he so revered by professionals and audiences alike?

Domingo thinks that Carlos was the most musical person he has ever met, feeling 'a tremendous emptiness at losing a friend and a genius' on his death (seven years ago this month). Kleiber kept by his bed a book by Zhuangzi, a Chinese philosopher, which he heavily underlined. He added four exclamation marks to this sentence: 'The behaviour of the ego is appallingly monotonous.' Brigitte Fassbaender, a mezzo-soprano who often performed under his baton, reflects that 'he was lucky enough to be tall and slim; most conductors are small, so they act like sergeant-majors to compensate.'

He called me once from Munich knowing that I was due to conduct Beethoven's Coriolan Overture and enquired whether I had heard Stokowski's recording of it. He was warm, kind, and devoid of all self-importance. What he found compelling about this interpretation was its 'wildness', even though it jeopardised the ensemble. It is this pure explosive feeling that is the hallmark of his own conducting.

Merely watch Kleiber as Carmen arrives on stage in a 1978 DVD from Vienna directed by Zeffirelli, and you will be knocked sideways by his manic intensity and passion. Fassbaender said he had to identify with a work '1,000 per cent' to conduct. 'You felt you were recreating the music when he was conducting,' remembers a flautist from Kleiber's Stuttgart days. He 'lived' the music. In 1984 Carlos told me that he was toying with the idea of conducting Il Trovatore or Un Ballo in Maschera. Sadly, he conducted neither, presumably never achieving the requisite level of identification.

The opera director Otto Schenk adored him, but laments, 'I don't know why he was so lackadaisical about his job.' Devoting to Slovenia, he often thought about giving up very much under the thumb of his father. He has a genius for a conducting but he doesn't enjoy it.

Carlos was genuinely humble and also a rabid perfectionist. The childlike innocence which you can see in some of the best performances ever, including Beethoven's 9th and Brahms's 2nd symphonies on DVD, often involved a tortuous journey, one that was sometimes curtailed. He abandoned a rehearsal in Vienna when the second violins could not understand what he wanted at the beginning of the Adagio of Beethoven's 4th. He needed the inflection to sound like 'Thérèse', and it sounded more like 'Marie'. A minor altercation ensued, a switch flicked in his brain, and he was off to the airport. In Berlin, he was booked on flights to Munich every evening during rehearsals, in case of further blown fuses.

To be a great conductor is not primarily about keeping your forces together. The notes are symbols of a vast hinterland of discovery. He is delving not only deeply behind the notes but deeply into his soul. Naturally, it helps if you have the technique to keep the ensemble tight too. Kleiber's technique was inimitable: in a zoomorphic state he hovered like an eagle, fluttering, swooping, and then plunging to devour his prey. He could dance, appear gauchy, fey, often mad and hysterical, and reflect every minuscule nuance and emotion. Composers' specific requests rarely solve the problem.

Karajan says that where the Hungarian composer Béla Bartók asks for a particular passage to be played in 12 seconds, he could conduct it in six different ways in 12 seconds. Can you imagine 80 actors — the equivalent of an orchestra — reciting Shakespeare's Macbeth: 'Life is a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more...', and making any sense of it? It really would be a 'tale told by an idiot', signifying nothing.

In a 65-minute phone chat in 2002 we discussed music and musicians — of whom he was warm about many, rude about some (Barenboim), and hilariously mischievous about others. He said, for example, that the Dutch maestro Nikolaus Harnoncourt should be brought on 'to frighten the children'.

Carl Jung said that 'People will do anything, no matter how absurd, in order to avoid facing their own souls... To have soul is the sole venture of life, for soul is a life-giving daemon who plays its elfin game above and below human existence... Heaven and hell are the fates meted out to the soul and not civilised man'. Carlos Kleiber was described by Joan Holender, artistic director of Vienna's State Opera, as 'musically the perfect mediator between God and mankind'.

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