Press Release of the Salzburg Festival

Obituary: Herbert Blomstedt



Herbert Blomstedt conducting the Vienna Philharmonic at the 2021 Salzburg Festival
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In Herbert Blomstedt, the world has lost one of the great conductor personalities of our time at the age of 99. The Salzburg Festival looks back in immense gratitude to many artistic encounters with him. For over four decades, he gave the Festival audiences musical highlights, illuminating the works he conducted in their full depth and vibrancy.

“Herbert Blomstedt was one of those artists whose authority required no grand gesture. His humility, his human affection and his uncompromising passion for music were as impressive as his artistic stature. He comprehended works of music with analytical precision while also endowing them with incomparable vibrancy. The fact that he was able to conduct with such spiritual and physical freshness well into a very advanced age was admirable. We will remember him as a great musician and an extraordinarily amiable human being,” says the Salzburg Festival’s Directorate.

It was a rare combination of artistic mastery and personal modesty that characterized Herbert Blomstedt. He required neither great gestures nor external emphasis to mesmerize an orchestra. His interpretations were marked by extraordinary precision in his treatment of

the score, by analytical rigour, but also a directness which made the music feel new and fresh every time. Any form of vanity was anathema to him. Anyone who witnessed his work on the podium encountered a conductor who communicated with his musicians with friendly earnestness, alertness and an almost boyish smile. After an enthusiastically celebrated concert, one might see him skip down the stairs of the podium, visibly inspired by the music. This infectious joy he took in music-making was perhaps one of his most endearing trademarks.

Herbert Blomstedt made his Salzburg Festival debut in 1976, leading the Staatskapelle Dresden, whose chief conductor he was at the time. The programme included works by Paul Hindemith, Frank Martin and Ludwig van Beethoven. This first performance already met with high acclaim from the audience and the critics alike. In 1990, the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra made its Salzburg debut under his baton. Blomstedt offered a remarkable interpretation of Anton Bruckner's Third Symphony, focusing on the modernity and inner drama of the work.

After a longer hiatus, he returned to Salzburg in 2010 with the Gustav Mahler Youth Orchestra. In 2014, he first conducted the Vienna Philharmonic at the Festival, stepping in for Riccardo Chailly at short notice. The review in *Der Standard* summarized the qualities of this substitution in pithy and humorous words: "Since Bruckner's monumental Symphony No. 8 had been programmed, it seems a grave impoliteness to call Herbert Blomstedt a substitute."

A special highlight was the closing concert of the 2016 Festival, in which he appeared with the Gewandhaus Orchestra Leipzig and the pianist András Schiff. Blomstedt's Beethoven interpretation was enthusiastically applauded by the audience. His last performance at the Salzburg Festival came in the summer of 2024: with the Vienna Philharmonic, the 97-year-old conducted Felix Mendelssohn's *Lobgesang*, among other works, at the Großes Festspielhaus. Altogether, he appeared on the Festival's stages 18 times, with five different orchestras. He conducted the Vienna Philharmonic twelve times.

Herbert Blomstedt had a special affinity for the music of Anton Bruckner. His recordings of the Bruckner Symphonies are considered benchmark recordings, as are those of Beethoven's works. From his profound personal faith, he derived an attitude which fundamentally influenced his music-making. To him, music was far more than the perfect rendition of a score: it was a form of exploring the human condition and transcendence, an experience he wished to share with musicians and listeners alike.

Herbert Blomstedt led a long, extraordinarily fulfilled artistic life. Until the very end, he had a passion for music which knew no routine and appeared to accept no limitations of age.

The black flag flies from the Großes Festspielhaus – a symbol of grief, and of grateful remembrance of an artist whose music will continue to resound in Salzburg.