

# The Political Downbeat of Kurt Masur

By Henry Kamm

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HANNOVER, West Germany — To New Yorkers, he is the future music director of the New York Philharmonic, but to the people of East Germany, especially those of Leipzig, Kurt Masur is a hero of the overthrow of communist rule and the man who might have been president.

Masur entered politics less than a year ago as an advocate of embattled street musicians in Leipzig, the city that became a focal point of pro-democracy protests last fall. This modest involvement helped catapult the 62-year-old conductor into such preeminence in East Germany's peaceful revolution that he was virtually the only one widely viewed as a likely choice for president.

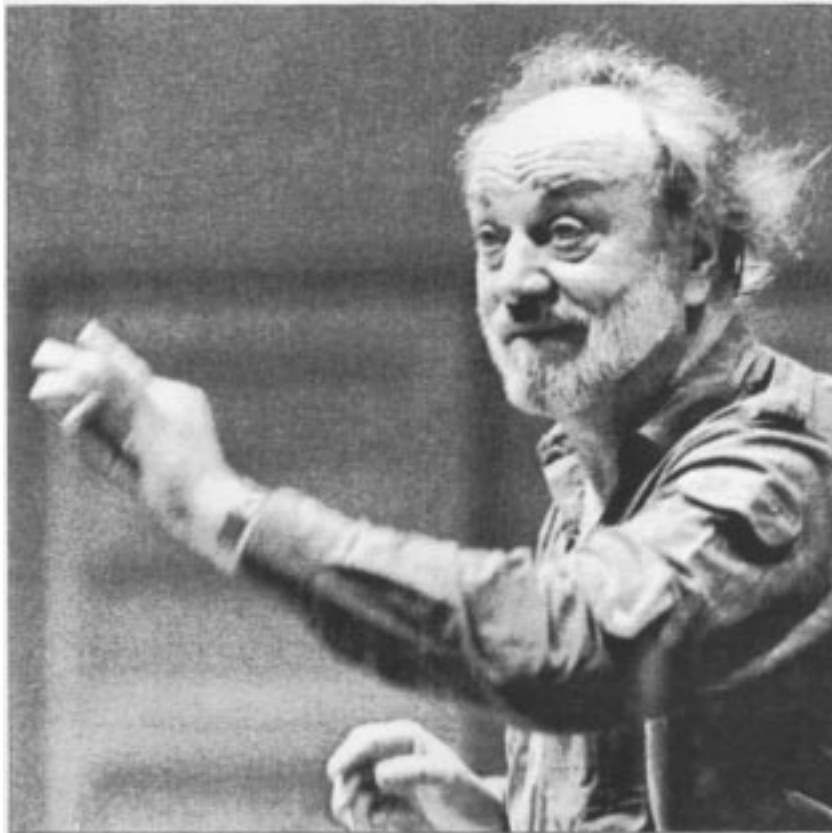
The post, which was to have replaced the collegial presidency headed by the deposed Erich Honecker, has not been created. But most East Germans in political life believe it would have materialized had the conductor wanted it. Masur was appointed April 13 to the New York post, starting with the 1992-93 season.

In an interview here on Saturday, where he conducted his Gewandhaus Orchestra of Leipzig in a benefit concert for the city's depleted medical services, Masur said he was tired of talking about his political career, which he said was not a career at all.

"If I have become musical director in New York, it is because I am Masur the musician again," he said as his orchestra tuned up for a rehearsal. But so full is Masur with what has evidently been a high point of his life that he brought up the events of last autumn himself, letting them dominate the interview.

Asked whether he was certain when he first decided to make music his profession, he said: "Even today I'm not sure. This is a profession where you know only all the way at the end — or perhaps when one has lived through what we have lived through in the last months, when you learn that life can be more than just entertaining people for two hours in the evening."

Masur described his transformation from a musician who had never belonged to a political party to a public figure whom many



Steve J. Sherman

Kurt Masur: "Life can be more than just entertaining people for two hours in the evening."

credit with having defused a volatile situation last October.

Masur said his political role began with a letter he received in June, when nothing seemed yet to be stirring. The letter writer, a man Masur did not know, told of witnessing the arrests of street musicians who were performing without the professional licenses required by the government.

"Couldn't I do something?" the conductor said, recalling the letter. "Couldn't I become the patron saint of the street musicians? And I took this very seriously, because I found it so curious. Of course, it had political aspects. The young people had been protesting against how difficult it was to be allowed to be a street musician."

"So, on the spur of the moment, I invited all the street musicians

of Leipzig — I think we got all of them — and the police, the security police, the party. Altogether there were finally 650 persons. We began the meeting with hurdy-gurdy music — we started with a little fun — and then we got down to a serious conversation," Masur said.

The most successful point he made that day was: "As if people didn't have enough other problems not also to have a ban on street music."

People in Leipzig say that the Gewandhaus conductor's position is so prestigious, and Masur had such international standing, that no one else could have brought off such a meeting, particularly the attendance of the secret police and Communist Party leaders.

Ulla Schafer, the administra-

tive director of the Gewandhaus, said that when demonstrations against the regime began in October on Karl-Marx-Platz, which the Gewandhaus faces, Masur and other orchestra personnel feared that violence would take place "before our very eyes."

"On Oct. 7, we saw the police line up water cannon," she recalled in an interview. "We could already in our minds see the wounded being treated in the foyer of the Gewandhaus."

At that point, with his earlier success as a mediator in mind, Masur invited a disparate group to his apartment, including Communist Party leaders, clergymen, theologians and a political cabaret artist, Schafer said. The group issued a joint appeal against violence, and for the first time the

Communist Party offered to hold talks with leaders of the still barely organized opposition.

The result was a series of discussions in East Germany's tensest and angriest city. Held in the Gewandhaus under the conductor's informal chairmanship, the talks removed the danger of civil strife and bloodshed, many here say, and contributed significantly to the Communists' peaceful surrender of absolute power and the rapid introduction of pluralism.

Masur, a guiding spirit behind the New Forum opposition movement, became a familiar personality throughout East Germany, even to people who did not know him as a musician. When the playwright Vaclav Havel became president of Czechoslovakia in December, the idea of creating a similar post and conferring it upon an artist took hold in East Germany, and Masur was in serious demand.

He was approached by most of the new parties, Schafer said, and as late as three days before parliamentary elections last month, the conductor thought he might not be able to resist the pressure.

"It's his sense of duty," she said.

The issue became moot when voting confirmed the urgency of the demand for reunification with West Germany. This appears to have led to the shelving of the idea of creating a presidency.

Masur also plans to retain his post as director of the Gewandhaus Orchestra at least through the 1993-94 season, when the orchestra will celebrate its 250th anniversary. He said his remaining nonmusical mission is to assist in planning the rehabilitation of Leipzig, where housing and services deteriorated under the neglect of the old regime. In addition to the concert in Hannover, Masur had a similar benefit in Frankfurt.

"We are proud and a little sad," Schafer said, summing up Leipzig's reaction to the conductor's appointment by the New York Philharmonic. "But pride outweighs sadness."

Masur has sought through the East German press to reassure Leipzigers. "I remain a Leipziger," he said. "I have learned to love this city."