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A Profile of Conductor Kurt Masur and Soprano/Violinist Tomoko Masur of Harrison

BY SUSAN HODARA PUBLISHED MAY 25, 2012 AT 12:14 PM

Maybe you've spotted them walking along Long Island Sound near Playland, or by the harbor in Mamaroneck: a tall, distinguished elderly man wearing, perhaps, a Bavarian hunting jacket, and, holding his arm, a petite Japanese woman with a streak of gray in her glossy black hair. You may have seen them at a certain Austrian bakery in Rye buying a loaf of fresh German bread, or in a favorite hardware store on Boston Post Road where he, in particular, amuses himself among the wares.

They are the Masurs: Kurt, the Maestro, one of the most highly regarded conductors of his generation, and Tomoko, a soprano and violist and his wife of 38 years. On a recent afternoon, I joined the Masurs at their Harrison home, where they have lived since 1992 and where they raised their son, Ken-David. They sat side by side in the living room—she, perched forward in her chair with her palm on his forearm; he, upright on the sofa, calm and content despite periodic tremors in his hands. Befittingly, the memories they shared with me from Kurt's 60-plus-year career were punctuated with musical associations—like the concert at which they met, 39 years ago in Rio de Janeiro, where he was conducting and she was playing viola. "It was Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony and one of Mozart's piano concertos," Kurt says. "She was sitting there in front of me in the orchestra, and she was disturbing me because..." and here, he turns toward Tomoko, "I don't know—her face was giving me answers to questions."

Since then, the Masurs have traveled together across the globe, where the Maestro, who will turn 85 next month, has

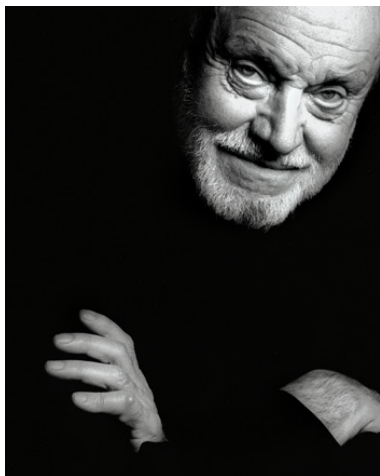


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conducted the world's greatest orchestras. He holds titles including Honorary Guest Conductor of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, Honorary Music Director for Life of the Orchestre National de France, and first-ever Conductor Laureate of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, in Germany, where he was Gewandhaus Kapellmeister from 1970 to 1996. Here in New York, where he was the New York Philharmonic's Music Director from 1991 to 2002, he became the orchestra's first director to be named Music Director Emeritus, and the second person ever to receive an honorary position—the first was Leonard Bernstein, who was Laureate Conductor. In 2011 alone, the Masurs traversed three continents, beginning with a New Year's Eve concert with the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra in China, proceeding with concerts throughout Europe, across the United States, then back in Europe. Just days after our conversation, they were set to depart for another series of appearances in Israel, Germany, China, and France.

Yet there are only two places the couple call home. One is Leipzig, where they own a house. Ken-David, now 34 and a conductor himself, was born there, as were Kurt's older children from two previous marriages. The city is not far from Kurt's birthplace, Brieg (then in Germany, today in Poland), and site of the Leipzig College of Music—now the University of Music and Theatre—where he was educated. When they're alone, the Masurs converse in German, which Tomoko, 62, learned as a student of German literature during her university days in Japan.

The other place that's truly home for the Masurs is Westchester. Their appreciation for the area took root when, seeking a school for Ken-David, they visited the German Language School in White Plains—which he ended up attending. “We couldn't believe how quiet and beautiful it was up here,” Tomoko says. “We just drove around for a while and decided to look at some houses.”

It took seeing more than 30 before they found theirs. It's a sprawling, two-story clapboard with a well-kept garden and a swimming pool in the backyard. There's a den and a sparsely furnished “Japanese” room, as Tomoko calls it, where Kurt gets regular massages.

In the newly renovated kitchen, an alcove has become a tea kitchen, one wall lined with a collection of Meissen china. In another corner, a pile of toys awaits visits from the couple's young grandchildren; Ken-David and his wife are expecting their third child this month.

On the glistening stovetop sits a lone silver pot with an overturned frying pan for a lid. “She's a wonderful cook,” Kurt says about his wife, to which she replies, “He's a very good husband—he never complains. The only thing he might say is, ‘You haven't cooked me potatoes for a while.’” Potatoes, it turns out, are among the Maestro's favorites. Potatoes and that German bread.

Naturally, the house is filled with all sorts of musical connections. A home theater in the basement contains an extensive collection of concert videos; the sunlit piano room is the site of impromptu performances by family and friends. The living room serves not only as a gathering space but also as a listening room, with nearly five-foot-tall Bose speakers on either side of the fireplace.

When the Masurs are in Harrison, Kurt makes his office in the dining room, where I noticed some sheet music and a book about Beethoven resting tidily at one end of the long wooden table. “This is where my husband works every morning,” Tomoko says. Adorning the room's walls are framed chronicles of the Maestro's accomplishments and passions. Among them are photographs and programs from his tenure with the New York Philharmonic, original scores, and a document signed by the German composer and conductor Felix Mendelssohn.

Mendelssohn represents for Kurt a bridge to his roots. Not only was the Leipzig's College of Music founded by Mendelssohn in 1843, but Mendelssohn was among the notable Kapellmeisters who preceded Kurt at the Gewandhaus there.

The masterworks of traditional European, and principally Germanic, classical music are embedded in Kurt's soul, and he has worked throughout his career to deliver the essences of those compositions to his audiences. “My primary goal as a conductor,” he says, “is not technical perfection. That is necessary, of course, but it is the message of the music that is most important to me. I want listeners to identify with the ideas of the composer and the spirit of the music.”

And not just classical music. “I am interested in every kind of music,” he says. He has an extensive

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collection of international folkloric recordings, and is particularly fond of jazz. During his stint with the New York Philharmonic, he collaborated with Wynton Marsalis, the Pulitzer Prize-winning trumpeter, composer, and music and artistic director of Jazz at Lincoln Center and its orchestra, on performances in New York and Paris. At one point, Marsalis came to Harrison to work with Kurt. “When he saw the basketball pole in our driveway,” Tomoko recalls, “he said, ‘Okay, let’s play first,’” and, before settling down to music, he and the Maestro shot some hoops.

Besides his musical achievements, Kurt has been recognized for his humanitarianism. In 1989, he took on a leadership role politically, proclaiming his support for demonstrators against the Communist regime in East Germany. In the decade following the fall of the Berlin Wall, he was awarded civilian honors in Germany, Poland, and the United States.

As Kurt approaches another milestone birthday on July 18, there are speculations about the state of his health—his shaking, his apparent frailty. He has relinquished all music directorships and limited his touring; earlier this year, he canceled several performances in Boston and New York, citing the physical demands of the particular work, Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis*.

Stefana Atlas, operations director of Masur Music International for the past two decades, acknowledges that Kurt is slowing down but also noted the power he still holds. “Even when he’s not conducting,” she says, “he has a way of pointing a finger, or moving his nose or his eyes, or just nodding, that inspires the orchestra. These are very special moments.”

And the Maestro himself? Any intentions of stopping?

“Why would I?” he said. “As long as I’m able to do it, stopping would be stupid. Music is what keeps me alive.”

[Editor’s Note: We were sorry to learn, as this issue was going to press, that Kurt Masur suffered a fracture to his left shoulder after falling from a podium during a concert in Paris. Masur, who hopes to resume conducting in September, had to withdraw from concerts scheduled through the end of this month. We wish the Maestro a full and speedy recovery.]

Freelance journalist Susan Hodara is a past contributor to both Westchester Magazine and Westchester Home. A resident of Mount Kisco, she frequently covers the arts in Westchester and is always inspired by the artists she profiles.



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