

**Herbert von Karajan was not one to miss a beat: he was one of the greatest conductors of all time, and a passionate Porsche fan besides. Karajan would have turned 100 this year. Allegro!**

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Fascination

# A Conductor at the Wheel



**Athletes, artists, aristocrats...** simply business as usual at the Porsche service garage in Salzburg. The mechanics here are used to celebrity clients, but one day in the mid-1970s even they couldn't quite hide their excitement when they saw who had just driven up to the gate. The man in the red Porsche 911 S was none other than Herbert von Karajan, one of Salzburg's most famous sons and one of the most famous conductors in the world.

Wearing a heavy winter coat and stern expression, Karajan told the group of men in overalls that something about the driver's seat didn't feel right. The mechanics exchanged glances. Who would be brave enough to step forward? Gerhard Michalek was the first to muster the courage to address the maestro. Perhaps he might try driving without his bulky coat? "You think that's what the problem is?" "Yes." Karajan acted on Michalek's suggestion and went for a spin, this time *sans* coat. When he returned five minutes later, the furrow in his brow had disappeared and he was positively beaming. "Michalek, you were right!"

That little episode broke the ice between the famous man of music and the "orchestra" of Porsche mechanics. For Karajan was a man who appreciated the value of good craftsmanship and was aware of what a difference seemingly little things could make. From then on, he was a frequent guest. Michalek, who is 61 and head of the Porsche dealership today, and his coworker Heinrich Egermann, now 53, were assigned to take care of the maestro's car service needs.

Michalek and Egermann remember Karajan fondly. "He was a very learned man, but he was always thirsting to know more. He wanted to know about every little detail, and he wasn't content with vague explanations. But he always accepted an honest answer," recalls Michalek. The mechanics soon knew to expect questions whenever Karajan stopped by. "What happens if I change gears in a curve?" "What happens if I increase the tire pressure?" Other times, he would have specific requests for ▶

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**Totally in tune:**  
Herbert von Karajan in 1959 with his 550 A Spyder outside Plant One in Zuffenhausen (top left); Karajan (from left) with Richard von Frankenberg and Hans Klauser (top right)

**No sweeter sound:**  
The maestro talks shop about the 911 S 2.4 in 1972 (bottom left); Herbert von Karajan picks up his first Porsche, a 356 Speedster, in 1955 (bottom right)





custom features, such as a special leg rest for his left leg to make reaching the clutch easier. (Karajan stood five feet three inches tall, a fact that in no way diminished his commanding presence.)

Karajan's first encounter with a Porsche was in 1955, just a year before the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra had appointed him chief conductor for life. It was a 356 Speedster: a compact powerhouse made up of equal parts technical finesse and joie de vivre, with a dash of genius thrown in—a description that would fit the great conductor just as well. And indeed, the 356 marked the beginning of what was to be a life-long love affair with Porsche for Karajan. The next was a 550 A Spyder that Karajan bought from Porsche race driver Richard von Frankenberg in 1959. In 1972 he “graduated” to the red 911 S, with which he made his first appearance at the Salzburg service garage.

The 911 S provided him ample opportunity to hone his driving skills. “Karajan liked to drive fast, even though his busy schedule rarely allowed him to drive very much,” recalls Egermann. In 1968, Karajan had bought a tastefully appointed house for his family in the small town of Anif near Salzburg, and “he often enthused about how he would zip along the mountain roads behind his house in the early morning hours on weekends, when

**A visit to Weissach:**  
Herbert von Karajan (third from left) in May 1975 with (from left) Ernst Fuhrmann, Hans Klauser, Helmuth Bott, and Manfred Jantke (above); Karajan (center) listens as Jantke, Bott, Fuhrmann, and Klauser (from left) explain the features of the 911 Turbo 3.0 (below)



there was no traffic,” says Egermann. “For him, that was the ultimate way to unwind.” As a man whose profession required a very keen sense of hearing, Karajan was normally very sensitive to noise, but not when it came to his beloved Porsche. “This is a sports car,” he once said dryly. “It’s supposed to be loud.” The sound of the engine roaring was almost as sweet to him as the sweetest sound of all—the sound of thundering applause.

Karajan’s procession of Porsches didn’t end there. He followed up the 911 S with a dark blue 911 Turbo 3.0 in 1975 and a 300-hp 911 Turbo 3.3 in 1984. Its red and blue stripes earned it the nickname “Martini Porsche.” When the maestro ordered what would be his last Porsche in 1988, a 959 with 450 hp (of which only 292 were produced), the Salzburg Porsche team came up with a special way to honor their illustrious customer: they delivered the Indian Red car with light brown leather seats to his door in person. The idea was a success: when they handed him the special delivery note bearing the number 0959, Karajan beamed in delight.

Karajan’s Porsches were more than just a rich man’s accessory. Michalek and Egermann can testify that his interest went deeper. They would often pick up his car for a checkup or return it afterward, and on these occasions the maestro would sometimes invite them in to his library in the attic. Besides countless works on music, it contained “at least 150 books on cars, including every Porsche book on the market,” Michalek remembers. Though theory and practice are two different things, as any musician knows, perhaps this thorough grounding in theory stood Karajan in good stead: in all his many years behind the wheel, he never once had an accident. ◀

## A True Classic

Born in Salzburg on April 5, 1908, Herbert von Karajan was the son of Greek immigrants to Austria. Their original last name was Karajannis. Karajan attended the Mozarteum Conservatory in Salzburg, graduating in 1926. He became chief conductor of the Vienna Symphony Orchestra in 1948; in 1955, he succeeded Wilhelm Furtwängler as conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. Over the course of his career, he produced more than 1,000 recordings for such distinguished labels as Deutsche Grammophon, Sony BMG, Decca, and EMI—a number few conductors can match even to this day. So far, more than 200 million recordings featuring Karajan as conductor have been sold worldwide. Herbert von Karajan died on July 16, 1989.

See the Karajan homepage at [www.karajan.org](http://www.karajan.org), which includes a biography, a list of recordings, photographs and videos, and a calendar of events for the Karajan centennial year 2008.

Deutsche Grammophon is releasing a number of CDs and DVDs to commemorate Karajan’s 100th birthday: *Karajan Gold: Greatest Classical Hits*; *Herbert von Karajan: The Music—the Legend*; *Karajan*, a documentary by Robert Dornhelm (DVD); [www.deutschegrammophon.com](http://www.deutschegrammophon.com)

