

Das Reichsorchester—The Berlin Philharmonic and the Nazis

By Verena Nees
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For 60 years the role of the renowned Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra during the period of Nazi power has remained in obscurity. In Hitler's Third Reich the orchestra was known as the "Reichsorchester" and functioned under the control of Joseph Goebbels as part of his notorious Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda.

The occasion of the Berlin Philharmonic's 125th anniversary November 4 saw the premiere of the documentary film *Das Reichsorchester (The Reich's Orchestra)*, directed by Enrique Sánchez Lansch (*Rhythm is it!*, 2004). The film is based on a book by the young Canadian author Misha Aster (in English, *The Berlin Philharmonic and the Third Reich*), which was published at the end of August this year by Siedler Verlag.

On the day before the anniversary celebrations, an exhibition also opened in the entrance hall to the Berlin Philharmonic Concert Hall: "The suspect saxophone—'degenerate music' in the Nazi state." This is a revised and expanded version of an earlier exhibition held in the Düsseldorf Tonhalle in 1988 to mark the 50th anniversary of the Nazi exhibition of "Degenerate music."

The Berlin Philharmonic and the Düsseldorf Symphony Orchestra have collaborated in this revised version of the exhibition, which can be viewed until December 31 in Berlin, and from January 25 to March 10, 2008, in the Düsseldorf Tonhalle. In 1938, both orchestras provided the musical programme for the Nazis' exhibition.

The present principal conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, Sir Simon Rattle, said that it was young musicians who had demanded an account be given of the history of the orchestra during the Nazi period. It has taken longer for the full record of the orchestra to emerge than has been the case with some of the other prominent enterprises that supported Hitler's regime.

There was great public interest in the showing of *Das Reichsorchester* at the anniversary celebration, with the Chamber Music Hall filled to overflowing. The question hung in the air—how could such an outstanding orchestra, which embodied the heights of a developed culture, allow itself to be used by barbarous dictatorship?

Unfortunately this question remained largely unanswered after the film.

The origins of the Berlin Philharmonic go back to a young ensemble composed of members of the Benjamin Bilse band in 1882. However, they only appeared as a "Philharmonic Orchestra" from 1887 onwards, when Berlin concert agent Hermann Wolff took over the organization of the musicians and hired well-known conductors—first, Hans von Bülow, then for 27 years, Arthur Nikisch.

Under the latter the orchestra received international renown. After the death of Nikisch in 1922, Wilhelm Furtwängler was chosen to lead the orchestra. Despite an outstanding international reputation and numerous foreign tours, the Philharmonic was beset by a financial crisis during the economic crisis of the early 1930s. Attempts to gain more support from the Berlin city council were unsuccessful, and the self-administered orchestra was threatened with bankruptcy.

It was Furtwängler who, immediately after Hitler's seizure of power,

turned personally to Goebbels and negotiated a deal which involved the orchestra working under the Propaganda Ministry. The survival of the Berlin Philharmonic was secured in this Faustian bargain, but at the cost of its artistic and moral independence. The orchestra now served the representatives of the Nazi regime, providing the musical programme for the Nazis' party congresses in Nuremberg and the Olympic Games, and giving regular concerts for other Nazi organisations.

Orchestra members were excused from military service and not drawn into the war, in contrast to members of other orchestras, such as the Staatsoper and the Deutsche Oper. They received privileges in their pay and in the assignment of living accommodation; even in the midst of the war they were able to make journeys abroad to Spain and Portugal, playing concerts until nearly the end of the war in 1945.

The process of "Aryanisation" was carried out within the ranks of the orchestra and four outstanding musicians were forced to leave the orchestra in 1934 and go into exile: the first concert master Szymon Goldberg, solo cellists Nikolai Graudan and Joseph Schuster, as well as the violinist Gilbert Back.

At the same time, about 20 orchestra members joined the Nazi Party (NSDAP); others simply remained fellow travellers. Some, however, made no secret of their political convictions, like the violinist Hans Woywoth, who turned up for practice in his SA uniform, or cellist Wolfgang Kleber and viola player Werner Buchholz (the latter wrote propaganda articles for the Philharmonic's newsletters). Musicians with just one Jewish parent were allowed to stay. Unlike the Vienna Philharmonic, where 42 percent of the orchestra were NSDAP members, Goebbels did not insist too strongly on the Nazification of the Berlin Philharmonic. For him, the orchestra was more important as a propaganda tool.

There were hardly any protests from orchestra members against the dismissal of their Jewish colleagues. Interviewed by Enrique Sánchez Lansch, the violinist Johannes Bastiaan answers, yes, the dismissal of the Jewish musicians had frightened him. Goldberg had been his teacher and was a great role model. But being a member of the Philharmonic was such a high point of his career that to resign in protest had been inconceivable. He raised no questions when he received from the Interior Ministry the permanent loan of a valuable Italian violin that had belonged to a Jew.

"As artists, as musicians, one was far removed from these things. When one is so involved in music, these political or state things are of no interest," Bastiaan says in the film. During this time, the members of the Philharmonic orchestra lived in a "glass jar." A second Philharmonic member of the time, Erich Hartmann, describes things in a similar vein: "We actually only did our work. We made music with joy; we had a marvellous conductor and did not think about politics."

Only when the Allies started bombing Berlin and Johannes Bastiaan, well dressed and holding his violin case, took the S-Bahn (urban train) or a bus alongside desperate people whose sons and husbands were somewhere at the Front was he overcome with a "feeling of

embarrassment.” Bastiaan describes the unpleasant realisation he made at the concert in the Olympic Village for the wounded in the last days of the war, seeing the contrast between the faces of the young wounded soldiers, which reflected their terrible experiences, and the just as young, but healthy, orchestra members.

The last concert took place on 16 April 1945. But on 26 May, within a few days of the end of the Nazi regime, the orchestra played again at the Titania Palace (the Philharmonic Concert Hall had been destroyed by bombs in 1944), under the direction of Leo Borchard and presented works by composers previously banned by the Nazis such as Mendelssohn and Tchaikovsky.

Furtwängler went through the de-Nazification process, in which he was classified a “fellow traveller,” and just a handful of orchestra members were forced to leave, including Kleber and Buchholz—who both quickly found places in other orchestras. Buchholz later became a professor at the Hanns Eisler Academy of Music in East Berlin and Kleber was frequently hired as a session musician for radio broadcasts by the Philharmonic. After the war, orchestra manager Gerhart von Westernman retained the same position he held under the Nazis. In 1954, when Furtwängler died, Herbert von Karajan was appointed as new conductor. Karajan was a favourite of Hermann Goering, and had twice applied to join the NSDAP. During the war he had directed the orchestra of the state opera.

The strength of the film lies in its use of previously unknown documentary footage, including marvellous scenes from concerts with Furtwängler, Herbert Knappertsbusch, Richard Strauss, Sergiu Celibidache and others. These are combined with numerous historical documents from party and state archives, for example, the commemorative speech by Goebbels from the concert podium on the occasion of Hitler’s birthday, photographs of foreign concert tours in the midst of the war and the disconcerting comments in the *Wochenschau* newsreels, which depict the orchestra as the embodiment of German cultural life.

The core of the film is made up of interviews with the only two surviving members of the Philharmonic of that time, as well as the descendants of orchestra members, including the son of a Jewish musician who had to go into the exile in 1934. The personal memoirs of the 96-year old violinist Johannes Bastiaan and the 87-year old double bass player Erich Hartmann, who only joined the orchestra in 1943, are both touching and appalling at the same time, above all because their naïveté and political thoughtlessness are also so frequently found amongst musicians, other artists and intellectuals today.

The director consciously refrains from any comment and the film exclusively relies on these personal statements and documentary footage. In this way, he succeeds in encouraging the audience to reflect on what they are seeing. Using montage sequences with some of his interviews, the director tries to form a counterpoint to the statements of the all-too naive musicians; for example in the case of the viola player Dietrich Gerhard, who only joined the orchestra in 1955.

Gerhard declares that, as far as he knew, the Jewish solo cellist Joseph Schuster went into exile voluntarily, even though he had been offered a new contract with the Philharmonic and that he preferred to take an engagement in New York. Immediately following this statement, Schuster’s son, John, appears, who possesses a large collection of photos, letters and musical programmes from his father. He reads a statement by his father, which makes it clear that he left Berlin unwillingly and only out of fear that he and his family might be arrested.

The rousing concert footage stands in contradiction to the desire of the orchestra to please the Nazi regime; the unconcerned comments of the contemporary witnesses or their descendants to the effect that they were only musicians doing their job leaves a bitter taste behind, even without any additional commentary.

But the film does not go any farther: The fate of those musicians who

did demonstrate resistance to the Nazis, in contrast to the Philharmonic members, is barely dealt with. Likewise, the extent of the loss to musical life as a result of the ‘Aryanisation’ policy is not touched on at all. Instead, the film contents itself by showing Goebbels at Berlin’s Deutsche Oper on November 26, 1937, in which he proclaims the strength of German cultural life, despite the removal of some 3,000 Jews.

Important material that can be found in Misha Aster’s book is not used, although it could deepen the discussion about the relationship of the musicians to the Nazi regime. For example, the correspondence between Furtwängler and the Jewish violinists Bronislaw Huberman and Fritz Kreisler, who in 1934 rejected an invitation to appear with the Philharmonic, as did the pianist Artur Schnabel. Huberman wrote, “In truth, it is not about violin concerts, and also not about Jews, it concerns the most elementary conditions of our European culture: The freedom of the individual and his unconditional self responsibility, regardless of caste or race.” (Misha Aster, “Das Reichsorchester,” pp. 271 f)

Fritz Kreisler expressed himself similarly. Wolf Lepenies, who wrote the preface to Aster’s book, quotes Huberman from a later article that appeared in the *Manchester Guardian* in 1936: “Before the whole world I accuse you, German intellectuals, you non-Nazis, of being the truly guilty ones of all the Nazi crimes ... Because it is not the first time in history that those from the gutter reached for power, but it was reserved for German intellectuals to help them to victory. It is a truly dreadful spectacle ... Germany’s spiritual leaders ... whose calling was to lead the people through their example and deeds, from the very beginning displayed no reaction to this attack against the holiest qualities of mankind other than coquetry, being in cahoots, cooperating... [they] cower and are silent.” Huberman’s accusations are addressed not least to Wilhelm Furtwängler.

The most serious criticism that can be made about the film, however, is the fact that the name of Herbert von Karajan does not appear at all.

Can one seriously deal with the history of the Berlin Philharmonic without showing the role of Reich Minister Goering’s personal favourite? After all, von Karajan led the orchestra after Furtwängler’s death for 34 years, until his own death in 1989, the longest period as principal conductor of any.

The young Austrian had served the Nazis since 1933, and was a member of the Nazi Party at least from 1935 onwards. In 1938, he directed Wagner’s “Tristan and Isolde” at the Berlin Staatsoper, and was hailed in the Nazi press as the “wonder Karajan,” being appointed director of the Staatskapelle. Behind him stood not only Goering, but also the powerful concert agent Rudolf Vedder, who later became an SS Sturmbannführer with good connections to Himmler.

In post-war Germany, von Karajan continued his career unhindered and from 1955 on ensured that the Philharmonic once again led a glittering and privileged existence under a “musical glass jar” (Johannes Bastiaan talking about conditions under the Nazis). Only since 1989, under Claudio Abbado, and above all under the current principal conductor Simon Rattle, has the orchestra opened up to a broad public.

The 60 years of silence about the orchestra’s involvement with the Nazi regime cannot be explained without reference to von Karajan. Enrique Sánchez Lansch is very conscious of this: talking on *Deutschland Funk* radio, he admitted that in the von Karajan era, as a result of his membership of the Nazi party, the topic could not be raised. But Lansch, who has enjoyed close relations with the orchestra since his film *Rhythm is it!*, clearly did not want to step on their toes. In his defence, Lansch says the film deals with the issue of how “collectives protect the individual from taking their responsibility.” However, this limited approach means that the film deals inadequately with the role of figures such as von Karajan and also Furtwängler.

There are also missing chapters in the historical outline provided in the press briefing. Herbert von Karajan’s leadership of the Philharmonic in the post-war period is praised in the highest tones, but there is silence

regarding his history under the Nazi regime.

The remarks by the book's author Misha Aster also seek to sanitise the role of the orchestra; he has assembled much interesting material, but barely analyses the significance of the Philharmonic for the Nazis. On the selection of Herbert von Karajan in 1954 as principal conductor he writes gushingly: "Established on the rubble of Goebbels' 'ambassadors of German culture,' and considering its past, the post-war orchestra was able to carry through reforms with finesse and at breath-taking speed, and so preserve its singular reputation. At the same time, as an institution, it had achieved a maturity that permitted it to select even a [former] Nazi Party member as principal conductor without being damaged." (Aster, p 344)

One broadcast journalist's assessment of this book as a "work of complacency" is appropriate. The same journalist also quotes Aster's self-justifying words: "Of course there were compromises, and moral compromises certainly. Was that opportunist? There were perhaps better reasons to take part than to resist."

No, Mr. Aster, there were grounds on which to resist and resistance was carried through, also by artists; such as the pianist Helmut Roloff, whose work for the Rote Kapelle resistance group was shown in the accompanying exhibition "The suspicious saxophone." Or the conductor Leo Borchard, who following Kristallnacht in 1938 hid many Jews or helped them to escape, and faced professional disqualification. There were the composers Karl Amadeus Hartmann, who went into "internal exile" by forbidding the playing of his own works throughout the territory of the Third Reich. Many musicians paid for their resistance with their life, for example the young pianist, Karl Robert Kreiten, a pupil of Claudio Arrau, who also played with the Philharmonic. He was executed in 1943 in Plötzensee after being denounced.

The devastating impact of fascism on music culture and culture as a whole cannot be divorced from the history of the Philharmonic under the Nazis. But Misha Aster seems to have little interest in such questions, otherwise he could not claim so naively that the Philharmonic demonstrated a "militant community spirit and political skill" in the way it dealt with tradition and heritage after 1945 (Aster, p 328), while repeatedly stressing it was not a Nazi orchestra.

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