

# The Image of Purity

## The Racial Ideology of the Vienna Philharmonic In Historical Perspective

by William Osborne  
music

Due to the protest evolving because of the Vienna Philharmonic's gender bias, an interest in the orchestra's ethnic and racial ideologies has also emerged. I provide here a very brief sketch of some aspects of the orchestra's ethnic and racial beliefs. The theme requires much more space than I can use here, so I limit myself to some simple documentation. I should also note that the Vienna Philharmonic's racial ideology is much more difficult to write about than their gender bias, since it is difficult to document, and since the topic is extremely volatile and has to be addressed with sensitivity and care.

In addition to the exclusion of women, the Vienna Philharmonic believes that ethnic uniformity gives it aesthetic superiority. In some cases these views expand beyond questions of ethnicity and assume the tones of a racial ideology. The Vienna Philharmonic feels, for example, that it is essential to exclude people whose physical appearance would identify them as non- Austrians, since this would damage the visual image of the orchestra and put in question certain characteristics of Austrian culture.

Examples of this ideology have been documented by Elena Ostleitner, a professor at the *Institute für Musiksoziologie* of the Vienna Music Hochschule. She was commissioned by the Austrian government to examine why there is an apparent shortage of qualified young candidates for orchestra positions in Austria. Among the many factors contributing to the problem, she noted that foreign musicians trained in Austria are often denied jobs due to their race.

She found that, "Even in a renowned orchestra like the Vienna Philharmonic, it is difficult, if not impossible, to fill vacancies, because the Philharmonic members say the musicians applying do not fulfill their artistic requirements, or are visibly of foreign origin."(1)

If foreigners are accepted, an emphasis is placed upon their "visibly" belonging to a central European racial group. In fact, the Vienna Philharmonic has 6 foreigners among its 149 members, and they all have the appearance of central Europeans.(2) Ostleitner conducted numerous interviews for her study, and the discussions sometimes cover attitudes toward Asian musicians in Austria . These views toward Asian musicians provide useful insights, because many Asians have reached the highest standards of western art music, many have studied in Vienna, and many still live there. Ostleitner, for example, recorded this statement by a woman who lives in Austria:

"I auditioned for an orchestra, and I led in the point tabulations as long as I played behind a screen. Due to my name it was not apparent that I am an Asian. But when the screen was removed, I was rejected without comment. Friends in the orchestra confirmed my assumption. They do not take foreigners, and if they do, then only those in which [foreign appearance] is not visible."(3)

In another interview Ostleitner recorded a corroborating attitude, expressed by a 40 year old male conductor:

"The Japanese lack the "inner glow" ("*innere Glut*"). But since they have youth orchestras for almost all age groups, they are often technically solidly in the saddle even in the younger years."(4)

The view is that Asians have some sort of innate difference in regard to western art music in spite of their technical accomplishment, and that their physical appearance would somehow lower the aesthetic image of Austrian music-making. In an interview with the West German State Radio, another Viennese sociologist, Roland Girtler, who is a professor of sociology at the University of Vienna, noted similar attitudes. He specializes in the study of isocratic social groups, and has observed the Vienna Philharmonic as an exclusive men's group. He describes the orchestra as being similar to a cultic fraternity, and notes that they exclude foreigners on a racial basis:

"What I have noticed that is interesting, is that the Vienna Philharmonic would also never take a Japanese or such. If they took one, this also would somehow by appearances put in question the noble character of Viennese culture. But this is not racist!"(5)

Again it is not merely musical performance, but the racial physiognomy of Asians that is the critical issue--though Girtler does not view this as racist. By visually putting in question the "noble character" of the orchestra, the ensemble's status and the inherent qualities of Austrian culture would presumably be damaged.

In the same interview with the West German State Radio, members of the Vienna Philharmonic openly expressed these racial ideologies. Dieter Flury, a solo-flutist in the Vienna Philharmonic, believes that only central Europeans should be members because they have qualities that are intrinsically different from other races:

"From the beginning we have spoken of the special Viennese qualities, of the way music is made here. The way we make music here is not only a technical ability, but also something that has a lot to do with the soul. The soul does not let itself be separated from the cultural roots that we have here in central Europe. And it also doesn't allow itself to be separated from gender. So if one thinks that the world should function by quota regulations, then it is naturally irritating that we are a group of white skinned male musicians, that perform exclusively the music of white skinned male composers. It is a racist and sexist irritation. I believe one must put it that way. If one establishes superficial egalitarianism, one will lose something very significant. Therefore, I am convinced that it is worthwhile to accept this racist and sexist irritation, because something produced by a superficial understanding of human rights would not have the same standards."(6)

This candid statement illustrates the role race plays in the orchestra's beliefs about music-making. An almost identical statement was reported in a radio broadcast of the Austria National

Broadcasting Corporation. A public school teacher who had taken his class to a rehearsal of the Vienna Philharmonic reported that a girl in the class asked why only men were in the orchestra. Werner Resel, the orchestra's chairman, answered that the "Vienna Philharmonic is an orchestra of white men playing music by white men for white people".(7)

These are some blatant examples of how racial ideologies are expressed in the Vienna Philharmonic. But it should be noted that very often subtleties of language make racism difficult to identify. Since racial ideology is strongly stigmatized in much of the international community, it is often expressed through a sort of coded language (and not just in German). Statements can thus be made whose implications are difficult to determine. Anti-Semites in central Europe, for example, will refer to Jewish people as "no-nationals" based on a racist belief that they are wanderers who never really "belong" to a particular country. Or discussions will turn to unnamed groups who destroy the "ethical uniformity" of society with the clear and unspoken implication that this would result from the "non-Christian influences" of Jewish religious groups. This kind of code language is a central part of the neo-nazi and anti-Semitic literature that is widely available in newsstands throughout Germany and Austria.(8) These methods are often used by orchestra musicians as well, and can be problematic for scholars studying racial and ethnic ideologies in orchestras. When put under a critical eye, the Vienna Philharmonic will sometimes change the tone of its statements and give less than convincing explanations about why there is not a single woman, or a single member of a "visible" racial minority in the orchestra.

Due to the Vienna Philharmonic's long history of racial and ethnic ideology, it was easily appropriated and transformed into one of the most active orchestras for the support of National Socialism. In 1938 Austria was made part of Germany through the "*Anschluss*," which was euphorically greeted by a wide spectrum of Austrian society. A program was set in motion to "Aryanize" Austrian culture. As a result, Wilhelm Jerger, who was a contrabassist in the orchestra and a Lieutenant in the SS, became the chairman of the Vienna Philharmonic.

Forty-seven percent of the Vienna Philharmonic's members belonged to the Nazi party, and many were members well before 1938 when it was still illegal in Austria to be a party member.(9) Six members of the orchestra were Jewish and died in the concentration camps, and another eleven were able to save their lives by timely immigration. Nine additional members were found to be of "mixed race" or "contaminated by kinship" ("*Versippte*") and reduced to secondary status within the orchestra.(10) Since 47% of the members belonged to the National Socialist Party, and since 26 "non-Aryans" were either murdered, exiled or reduced in status, the strongly fascist tendencies of what remained of the orchestra are clear.

The orchestra's many activities in the service of National Socialism began only days after the *Anschluss*. They began with a trip to Berlin to perform a concert under the direction of Furtwaengler especially for Hitler. The *Anschluss* euphoria continued when they performed the *Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, again with Furtwaengler, at the Nürnberg Party Days in 1938. Hitler was so taken with their performance and their show of devotion that he promised the orchestra his personal protection and concern.(11) The Vienna Philharmonic was asked to be a yearly fixture at the Nürnberg party rallies(12). They thus became part of the central paradigm of National Socialist cultural ritual.

In this capacity and many others, the orchestra became one of the most important propaganda instruments for the Party. For example, they made many tours of the occupied areas where it was considered most essential to "Germanize" the conquered peoples. These tours included cities such as Krakow, Copenhagen, Den Haag, Amsterdam, Paris, and Dijon.

The Vienna Philharmonic's centennial fell in 1942 and was commemorated with a book entitled *Erbe und Sendung (Inheritance and Mission)* by Wilhelm Jerger. The book very clearly documents the ideologies of the orchestra and how ideally suited they were to appropriation by National Socialism. For example, the book includes the genealogies of several prominent father and son generations that filled the ranks of the Philharmonic, and every "non-Aryan" in the tables has a special asterisk by his name. Jerger explains that the Aryan stock of these Philharmonic families was so "tough" that the purity of their "blood" wasn't notably damaged by what racists refer to as dysgenic influences:

"And here it is demonstrated, that in spite of manifold influences of blood from elsewhere, this Mind [*Geist*] continues to implant itself with great toughness through the ancestral lineage, and that it is often very sharply imprinted. It is understandable, that such an inheritance must beget outstanding musicians, who in their stylistic education and in their experience of orchestral playing are already extraordinarily schooled. This is Mind from Old Mind, which helps tradition and inheritance, an overcoming investment [*überkommene Anlage*] to a special development and fulfillment."(13)

Schooling is acknowledged as important, but only in the context of a special "blood" inheritance which transmits "Mind". This follows the "Blood and Soil" ideologies of National Socialism with its belief that cultural traits are genetically inherited. And it seems uncomfortably close to the orchestra's recent comments about the special qualities of the "central European soul", their attitude toward Asians, and music-making revolving around white people.

In 1898 Gustav Mahler became the General Music Director of the Vienna Philharmonic, replacing Hans Richter who had led the orchestra for the previous 23 years. (The Vienna Philharmonic refers to the Richter years as its golden age.) Mahler's tenure was troubled in part by a continual pattern of anti-Semitic harassment and he left the orchestra after three years. Jerger, using his own words and quoting those of Max Kalbeck, draws a comparison of Richter and Mahler that reveals the anti-Semitic attitudes Mahler confronted:

"A completely different type of personality entered with Mahler, 'as there' -- to speak with Max Kalbeck's vivid words -- 'instead of the tall blond bearded Hun, who placed himself wide and calm before the orchestra like an unshakeable, solidly walled tower, there was a gifted shape [*begabte Gestalt*] balancing over the podium, thin, nervous, and with extraordinarily gangly limbs.' In fact, a greater contrast was really not possible. There the patriarchal Hans Richter in his stolidity and goodness, and his extremely hearty and collegial solidarity with the orchestra, and here Gustav Mahler, oriented to the new objectivity [*neue Sachlichkeit*] -- nervous, hasty, scatty, intellectualish [*sic*] -- the music a pure matter of his over bred intellect."(14)

Unfortunately there is not space here to analyze the language (intellectualish, over bred, new objectivity, gangly limbs, scatty vs. blond, tall, stolid, wide, calm, solidarity) and how it expresses the hallucinogenic ideologies of anti-Semitism and National Socialist aesthetics. The transparent sub text is one of chauvinistic masculinity and genetic superiority.

Jerger's book vividly illustrates how national cultural identity in western art music can be intertwined with sexism, racism and chauvinistic ethnocentricity. Though the Vienna Philharmonic is clearly no longer fascist, much of the characteristic language used in Jerger's book about the "central European soul", the "physiognomy of the orchestra", "emotional unity", "masculinity", "ethnicity", etc. was evidenced long before the *Anschluss*, and is still used to this day when the orchestra speaks about itself.

The special regard the National Socialists had for the Vienna Philharmonic stands in stark contrast to the plans the Nazis had for the rest of Vienna. It was Hitler's goal to destroy Austria's independent national identity by reducing its capital Vienna to provincial status and making his home town of Linz the new cultural center of Austria. For example, the "Reichs Bruckner Orchestra" of Linz was founded by the National Socialists in 1942 and immediately became the only other orchestra in the Reich with a status equal to the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonic's.

After the war the de-Nazification of the Vienna Philharmonic was conducted in a disinterested, half-hearted and careless manner. The reasoning was that due to the war there were not adequate replacements for the many National Socialists in the orchestra, and that due to its special qualities the Vienna Philharmonic deserved special treatment.(15) The orchestra argued with singular logic that it had lost so much through "Aryanization" that it could not afford to lose anymore quality through "de-Nazification".

The government offered its "complete agreement for the position" and said "the current condition would be bearable, since it was the view that in the interest of the cultural mission of Austria, artists in general, and especially the Vienna Philharmonic, would be subject to a different evaluation than other professional groups."(16) Only five of the many Nazis in the orchestra were fired. Later ten others were given an early retirement whose ages were between 54 and 66. And of the 5 who were actually fired 3 soon returned to the orchestra due to the Philharmonic's common administration with the *Volksoper* where they had obtained work. Thus only 2 National Socialists of some 60 in the orchestra were really fired. These were Wilhelm Jerger, and a violist who the orchestra resented, not because he was a National Socialist, but because he obtained his position during the war without auditioning.(16)

The lax de-Nazification of the Vienna Philharmonic had an affect on orchestral policy. Toscanini refused to work with them because of the Nazis who remained in the orchestra. In 1947 he was asked to conduct, but said he would only do so if certain fascists were removed from the orchestra. The Vienna Philharmonic refused.(17)

In 1949 the Vienna Philharmonic voted to take a pay cut in order finance an apartment, pension, and chauffeur for Hans Pfitzner, a composer who is considered to have been one of the most active anti-Semitic spokesmen in the music-world of the Third Reich. Among his many National Socialist activities, he advised the regime on racial cleansing. In the horrific language of National

Socialism this was referred to as the "Entjudung" ("de-Jewing) of culture. Fulfilling a function similar to the Vienna Philharmonic's, he was widely performed in the conquered countries in order to "Germanize" them. He was held forth to the subdued peoples an example of the "most German" [*deutschesten*] composer. Nazi officials "celebrated Pfitzner as one of National Socialism's most related-in-character [*wesenverwandten*] German fighters and exhorters of music."(18) It is thus informative that in 1949 the Vienna Philharmonic elected Pfitzner to be an honorary member of the orchestra.(19)

In 1953 the orchestra caused international concern when it elected a former SS Sargent and member of the *Sicherheitsdienst* (which included the Gestapo) as its Executive Manager (*Geschäftsführer*).<sup>(20)</sup> Actions such as these made it difficult for the Vienna Philharmonic to leave behind its reputation as a "Nazi Orchestra" in spite of its fine music-making. That they continue to express the belief that gender and ethnic uniformity give them aesthetic superiority has not helped their image.

Though the Vienna Philharmonic maintains gender and ethnic uniformity among its members, they allow for outside influence through guest conductors and soloists. They have found it beneficial to consciously use these guests to rehabilitate the orchestra's public image, while at the same time quietly denying rank and file membership to women and racial minorities<sup>(21)</sup>. This has been an effective public relations tool for resisting change, and fits with sociological models which suggest that isocratic groups form controlled relationships with outsiders to mutually enhance their image and status.

In summary, the orchestra's ethnic and racial ideologies allowed it to concentrate and institutionalize beliefs that were common in Germany and Austria decades before the *Anschluss*, and this made the Philharmonic an easy and willing target for National Socialist appropriation. Due to the lax effort in de-Nazification, combined with the general post-war atmosphere in Austria as a whole, the orchestra still maintains views that cause discomfort in the international community. What are these "racist and sexist irritations" that are an essential part of "the noble character of Viennese culture" and why do they ask us to tolerate them? Why is it important that "white men perform music by white composers for white people?" Why would the Vienna Philharmonic be damaged if some members were visibly of other races such as Asians? What do they mean by the "Soul" and why is it affected by race and not just education?

A great deal of dialog and documentation is still necessary. These concerns are not just finger pointing at an orchestra in Austria. The Vienna Philharmonic is central to the identity of western culture, and to look at that orchestra is to look at ourselves. One need only listen to Walter Cronkite moderating with his epic tones the yearly broadcast of the Vienna Philharmonic's New Year's concert, which is broadcast to an estimated audience of one billion people, or to see the diplomats, Cardinals, and heads of state sitting in the honored seats in the front rows of its concerts, to know how close the Vienna Philharmonic is to all of us. And the Vienna Philharmonic claims to be the best selling recording orchestra in the world. So now, fifty years after the war, the people in and surrounding this orchestra must begin an honest dialog. We must look at how we deal with "the other", and at the deep-seated brutality and denial that seems to lie at the heart of much of western culture.

## NOTES

- (1) Ostleitner, Elena, *Liebe, Lust, Last und Lied* (Wien, Bundesministerium fuer Unterricht und Kunst, 1995): 6.
- (2) For the number of foreigners see: Ostleitner, 1995, 45. For their racial appearance see their photos in: Hellsberg, Clemens, *\_Demokratie der Koenige: Die Geschichte der Wiener Philharmoniker\_* (Zurich: Schweiher Verlagshaus: Wien: Kremayr & Scheriau; Mainz: Musikverlag Schott, 1992) 624-650. Hellsberg is a first violinist in the Vienna Philharmonic, vice- chairman of the orchestra, and the orchestra's archivist. His book, written for the 150 year anniversary of the orchestra, is relatively open about discussing the orchestra's Nazi past, but still contains a somewhat rationalizing tone.
- (3) Ostleitner, 1995, 44.
- (4) Ibid. 46.
- (5) Osborne, William, "Art Is Just An Excuse: Gender Bias in International Orchestras", *Journal of the International Alliance for Women in Music* (Vol. 2, No. 3, October 1996) 6. The interview material was transcribed and translated from: "Musikalische Misogynie" broadcast by the West German State Radio, February 13, 1996. See also: Girtler, Roland, "Mitgliedsaufnahme in den Noblen Bund der Wiener Philharmoniker Als Mannbarkeitsritual", *Sociologia Internationalis* (Beiheft 1, Berlin 1992).
- (6) Osborne, 1996, 6.
- (7) "Von Tag zu Tag", broadcast by Austrian National Radio and Television, December 11, 1996, 4:05-4:45pm. Thanks to Regina Himmelbauer for bringing this to my attention.
- (8) One of the most common of these publications is *Die National Zeitung*.
- (9) Hellsberg, 1992, 464. See also his endnote number 17, page 672.
- (10) Ibid. 505.
- (11) Ibid. 464.
- (12) Ibid. 464.
- (13) Jerger, Wilhelm, *Erbe und Sendung* (Wien: Wiener Verlag Ernst Sopper & Karl Bauer, 1942) 87. Copies of this book are rare. Thanks to Manuela Schreibermaier for finding and making a copy available to me.
- (14) Ibid. 57.
- (15) Hellsberg, 510.
- (16) Ibid. 510.
- (17) Ibid. 518.
- (18) Ibid. 549-551.
- (19) Kroll, Erwin, "Der Warthegau huldigt Pfitzner. *Allgemeine Musikzeitung, Leipzig* (LXIX/10, September 18, 1942; as quoted in: Prieberg, Fred K., *Musik im NS-Staat* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1982) 224.
- (20) Ibid. 514.
- (21) During the Waldheim affair in the late 1980's the Austrian government made plans to send the Vienna Philharmonic to Israel with Bernstein. The orchestra unsuccessfully used this occasion to try to force the government to give them a permanent tax break. See Hellsberg, page 560.