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The Special Characteristics of the Vienna Philharmonic's Racial Ideology

by William Osborne
[sent to various lists Dec. 31, 1999]

In this post I would like to briefly discuss specific aspects of the Vienna Philharmonic's racial ideologies particularly in regard to the [public relations campaign](#) the orchestra has mounted since their views became widely known via the Internet.

In early February of 1997 I released an article entitled "The Image of Purity: The Racial Ideologies of the Vienna Philharmonic In Historical Perspective." It is available at: <http://www.acu.edu/academics/music/archive/iawm.9701/0074.html>

The article documents the Vienna Philharmonic's policy of excluding people who are visibly members of racial minorities, and correlates those views with the orchestra's extensive and willing collaboration with National Socialism during the Third Reich.

One week after I placed the article on the net, the President of Columbia Artists International (the Philharmonic's principle agent) flew to Vienna and told them that if they did not change their current policies of gender and racial exclusion he could not continue representing them. In response to his threats and mounting international protest organized by the International Alliance for Women In Music, the Philharmonic made its second harpist, Anna Lelkes, the first woman member of the orchestra.

They also hired a public relations consultant to help them cleanse their reputation as a sexist and racist institution. These public relations activities have included some chamber music concerts for Jewish organizations in New York that were given in conjunction with the orchestra's opening of Carnegie Hall's 109th season. They will also include a

concert at the Mauthausen Concentration Camp on May 11, 2000.

These public relations gestures are positive actions, but unfortunately part of their intention has been to mislead the public. In the three years since the orchestra said it would open its doors to women, none have been admitted except for harpists. This does not represent change. The orchestra has always used women harpists. And the gestures toward [the Jewish](#) community have a confusing and specious character, since the racial ideologies at issue are not - specifically- anti-semitic. Before World War II, 18 members of the Vienna Philharmonic were Jewish, but now there are only two. For that reason--if no other--anti-semitism is not a significant problem in the orchestra.

The real issue at hand is the Vienna Philharmonic's post-war policy of remaining -entirely- white, because they feel that people who are -visibly- members of racial minorities would destroy the orchestra's image of Austrian authenticity. (For a brief documentation see the information at the end of this post.)

The Philharmonic's racial ideology is directed particularly toward Asian musicians, since many have reached the highest professional standards and pose a real "threat" at auditions. Approximately half of the students at the Wiener Musik Hochschule are foreigners, and many of them are Asians who marry and settle in Austria, where they also have children.

The Vienna Philharmonic is the only major orchestra in the world without a single non-white member. It is not a coincidence that the orchestra is comprised of 149 white men and one white woman. It is the result of overtly practiced racism.

A Brief Documentation of the Orchestra's Racial Discrimination

After the Second World War the Vienna Philharmonic instituted blind auditions, but they were soon eliminated. In his memoirs, Otto Strasser, a former Chairman of the Philharmonic, described the problems blind auditions caused:

"I hold it for incorrect that today the applicants play behind a screen; an arrangement that was brought in after the Second World War in order to assure objective judgments. I continuously fought against it, especially after I became Chairman of the Philharmonic, because I am convinced that to the artist also belongs the person, that one must not only hear, but also see, in order to judge him in his entire personality. [...] Even a grotesque situation that played itself out after [my retirement](#), was not able to change the situation. An applicant qualified himself as the best, and as the screen was raised, there stood a Japanese before the stunned jury. He was, however, not engaged, because his face did not fit with the 'Pizzicato-Polka' of the New Year's Concert." [1]

The Vienna Philharmonic believes that Asian features do not fit with cultural authenticity in the rank-and-file of a symphony orchestra. They thus changed their audition procedures so that applicants could be seen for the final round. They also require a photo with job applications.

Dr. Elena Ostleitner, a Professor at the Wiener Musik Hochschule's Institute for Music Sociology, has studied the Philharmonic's views. She notes 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." [2] The Philharmonic's views are shared by some other Austrian orchestras. Ostleitner recorded the following statement by an Asian woman:

"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]

Another Viennese sociologist, Prof. Roland Girtler, of the University of Vienna, has made the same observations:

"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!"[4]

It is not merely musical performance, but also the racial physiognomy of Asians that is the critical issue--though Girtler does not view this as racist. His observations are confirmed by members of the Philharmonic. Dieter Flury, the orchestra's solo-flutist, notes that both gender and ethnic uniformity are essential to the orchestra:

"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."[5]

Similar views were 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 at the time, answered that the "Vienna Philharmonic is an orchestra of white men playing music by white men for white people".[6]

Statements such as these contradict the claim that the Vienna Philharmonic is just "coincidentally" the only all-white major orchestra in the world.

ENDNOTES

[1] Otto Strasser, *Und dafuer wird man noch bezahlt: Mein Leben mit den*

*Wiener Phiharmonikern*_ (Wien: Paul Neff Verlag, 1974)

[2] Elena Ostleitner, *Liebe, Lust, Last und Lied*_ (Wien, Bundesministerium

fuer Unterricht und Kunst, 1995) p. 6.

[3] Ibid.

[4] "Musikalische Misogynie," broadcast by the West German State Radio,

February 13, 1996. See also: Roland Girtler,

"Mitgliedsaufnahme in den

Noblen Bund der Wiener Philharmoniker Als

Mannbarkeitsritual", Sociologia

Internationalis (Beiheft 1, Berlin 1992).

[5] "Musikalische Misogynie" broadcast by the West German state Radio,

February 13, 1996. See also: William Osborne, "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.

[6] "Von Tag zu Tag", broadcast by Austrian National Radio and Television,

December 11, 1996, 4:05-4:45pm.

For additional information about the Vienna Philharmonic and women in orchestras see these websites:

["Art Is Just An Excuse: Gender Bias in International Orchestras"](#)

["The Image of Purity: The Racial Ideology of the Vienna Philharmonic in Historical Perspective"](#)

["A Difficult Birth: Maternity Leave in the Vienna Philharmonic"](#)

["You sound Like a Ladies' Orchestra: A Case History of Sexism Against Abbie Conant in the Munich Philharmonic"](#)

["Symphony Orchestras and Artist Prophets: Cultural Isomorphism and the Allocation of Power In Music"](#)