

How the Nazis ruined musical tuning

by Laurent Rosenfeld

To say that the decision to tune the "Concert A" to 440 vibrations per second (Hertz) was a Nazi conspiracy, might seem to be an exaggeration; yet it was Dr. Josef Goebbels's Radio Berlin that organized the conference at which this decision was made.

Musical tuning was essentially a matter of habit, rather than law or standardization, until the second half of the 19th century. As *EIR* has previously reported, the Russian czar's military band had set a bad example of higher tuning in 1815, at the Congress of Vienna, but this was only an example, and no law was passed.

Faithful to its tradition of (sometimes excessive) centralization, France was the first country to decide to do something centrally on the question. By July 17, 1858, an official commission was formed with seven musicians (Berlioz, Rossini, Halevy, Meyerbeer, Auber, Monnais, Thomas), two physicists (Lissajous and Despretz), and Major General Mellinet (in charge of the military bands), to study the question. They studied the tuning level everywhere in Europe, and found that the A varied from 434 to 456 Hertz. The commission ended up proposing a "standard pitch" ("normal diapason") to be fixed at 435. A decree was issued on Feb. 18, 1859, forcing every conservatory, music hall, and music school in France to use this standard tuning.

While this A = 435 is not the perfect scientific value we should hope for (it is slightly less than one-eighth of a semitone higher than the scientifically determined value of 432), this effort was commendable. Twenty years later, Giuseppe Verdi wanted to adopt the same value for standard pitch, and was only later convinced to go down to the better 432 "scientific pitch."

The first international standardization of tuning came in 1885, at a Vienna conference, where the French A = 435 "standard pitch" was adopted. This value remained prevalent until at least 1939, and is still today the only officially recognized value in France.

The role of Goebbels

It was Radio Berlin, in 1938-39, which organized a conspiracy to raise the pitch. Radio Berlin was Dr. Goebbels's main propaganda instrument, and was under top-down control of the Nazis. No one was appointed to a leading position at Radio Berlin without the approval of the Nazi propaganda minister.

Robert Dussaut, a French musician and a fervent advocate of A = 432, wrote in 1950, "By September 1938 [at the time of Munich!], Dr. Grutmacher and the Acoustic Committee of Radio Berlin requested the British Standard Association to organize a congress in London in order to adopt internationally the German tuning of 440 vibrations per second. This congress did, in fact occur in London, a very short time before the war, in May-June 1939. No French composer was invited. The decision to raise the pitch was thus taken without consulting French musicians and against their will."

Other sources, such as René Dumesnil, another advocate of lower tuning, say that this London congress was a set-up: The organizers first asked musicians, engineers, instrument makers, physicists, etc., whether they would agree to A = 440, and *whoever would not agree was simply not invited!*

Since the war broke out very soon afterwards, this first attempt to raise the tuning standard was not enforced, at least not officially. So another congress was organized, again in London, under the auspices of the International Standardizing Organization (ISO), in October 1953. Again, people were carefully selected in such a way that no opposition would be voiced against the project, and, of course, the project did not meet any significant opposition from the floor of this conference. At least in France, musicians were mobilized against this. Dussaut and his friend Claude Delvincourt (then head of the National Conservatory of Paris) had organized a referendum among musicians, reaching directly or indirectly 23,000 of them, and a vast majority supported Dussaut's project of coming back to A = 432. Delvincourt, Henri Busser, and Jaujard, three of the most important French musicians of the time, had written to the congress in London to ask for a lower tuning, but to no avail.

The question of jazz

But the main issue at this second London congress was that A = 440 was decided especially by instrument makers, especially wind instrument makers, who wanted to be able to export their instruments to the United States, where the influence of jazz had raised the pitch to 440 and well beyond (it later went up to 445 and even 447 in "classical" orchestras, and up to 470 in jazz orchestras).

Robert Dussaut writes, "My opponents have answered me that the Americans want the tuning to be at 440 vibrations per second, because of jazz, and that we should be in conformity with them. It has been shocking to me that our orchestral musicians and our singers should thus be dependent upon jazz players from the other side of the Atlantic. . . . Commercial considerations come first. Artists have but to abdicate."

And Dumesnil adds, "When instrument makers raised the pitch to satisfy jazz musicians, they should have consulted composers and singers, but they carefully avoided doing so. . . . It is not one of the smallest drawbacks due to the invasion of jazz."