

Furtwängler's name cleared—at last

by Kathy Wolfe

The Devil's Music Master: The Controversial Life and Career of Wilhelm Furtwängler

by Sam H. Shirakawa

Oxford University Press, New York, 1992

506 pages, hardbound, \$35

ABC News reporter Sam H. Shirakawa has done history, Germany, and Wilhelm Furtwängler (1886-1954), in that order, fine service, with his new biography of the great conductor. Anyone who wishes to save classical music from its present state near-death should read this book.

Furtwängler, who began composing music and conducting in 1905, before he was 20, was by the 1920s rightfully among the premier conductors of Europe, for the extent of singing expression and contrapuntal construction he could draw from Beethoven and other classical compositions. Anyone unfamiliar with him should purchase his Beethoven symphonies, especially, as Mr. Shirakawa notes, his first postwar performance of the Ninth (Choral) Symphony on July 29, 1951.

The book's title refers to the vile campaign of lies against Furtwängler, run in the U.S. by the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith (ADL) and directed by the real pro-Nazis in Britain, because he did not abandon his country during World War II. For this, they called him Hitler's conductor, "The Devil's Music Maker."

In fact, as Shirakawa's preface notes: "When thousands of intellectuals and artists joined the exodus of Jews from Germany after the Nazis seized power, Furtwängler remained behind with the conviction that he could save the culture which produced Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, and others from annihilation by the Third Reich. Despite his well-documented and astonishingly successful efforts to keep Jews part of German cultural life and his manifold endeavors to assist anyone who asked him for help through the Third Reich, saving hundreds from certain death, he was all but branded a war criminal and nearly framed at a de-Nazification trial at the end of the war. This even though Furtwängler



Recording session of the Vienna Philharmonic at EMI, ca. 1948-50, with Furtwängler (seated right) and Walter Legge (seated center). Legge made it difficult for Furtwängler to make recordings, while promoting Nazi superstar Herbert von Karajan.

never joined the Nazi Party and openly acted against the regime until its fall. . . .

"Wilhelm Furtwängler was a creature whose overweening confidence in his own capacity to make a difference against one of the most malevolent forces the world has known catapulted him far beyond the confines of his profession. That peculiar spark of hubris drove him into resistance, rebellion, and sedition, in defense of a culture being annihilated . . . and he became a leading figure in the Resistance inside Germany, despite later efforts to prove otherwise."

Shirakawa documents how Furtwängler used every moment of the war to save lives and to try to give some small spark of hope to the German people, to present an actual alternative to Hitler. Many leading musicians fled Germany, and even some of Furtwängler's friends, such as conductor Bruno Walter, criticized him for staying and "lending legitimacy to the regime." But most Germans could not simply hop on a plane and land a fat contract abroad.

Shirakawa quotes German pianist Walter Giesecking's succinct comment: After the war, Furtwängler's critics "evidently believed that 70 million Germans should have evacuated Germany and left Hitler there alone."

The New York Times, the ADL, and the real Nazis

While Shirakawa seems not to know of the ADL and how the lies against Furtwängler were *orchestrated* by London, he exhaustively documents the campaign and how false it was. It started, he shows, as early as 1937, when Macy's executive Ira Hirschmann, a former board member of the New York Philharmonic, and the *New York Times* began attacking Furtwängler as "anti-Semitic." Both Hirschmann and the *Times's* Sulzberger family owners were leading

members of the ADL, closely connected to the London Royal Institute of International Affairs, which actually backed Hitler by promoting Nazi Economics Minister Hjalmar Schacht.

Shirakawa also documents the horror of the Allied postwar occupation, during which Walter Legge promoted committed Nazi Party member Herbert von Karajan as a star. Walter Legge was the British Intelligence agent who ran London's EMI Records, and who made it almost impossible for Furtwängler to record. Meanwhile, the anti-Nazi Furtwängler was forced through a brutal "de-Nazification" trial. Again in 1949 and 1950, Shirakawa shows, the Hirschmann-*New York Times* cabal orchestrated the Chicago demonstrations against Furtwängler and kept him out of the U.S., threatening any musician who would not boycott him, as Yehudi Menuhin reveals in Chapter 19.

Shirakawa is at his best in his devastating exposé of the evil genius of EMI, Walter Legge, and his golem von Karajan, who destroyed postwar music with the recording industry. In the final chapter, he notes that while Furtwängler faded into obscurity, the recording industry "became a mighty money machine . . . a vast parade of younger conductors" who offered only "an ever-increasing trend toward silken homogeneity of orchestral and vocal sound. . . . No conductor of the 20th century made more of a fetish of it than Herbert von Karajan. Whether it was an achievement in musical expression did not seem to matter much. . . .

"But Karajan always felt cowed by his fear that Furtwängler was irrefutably superior, and he turned from striving to be the world's greatest conductor, to becoming the world's most powerful, and in that objective he attained the highest glory . . . for few musicians leave an estate worth more than \$270 million. But the *Alberich* [gnome] within Karajan made him miserable. After a sensational performance, his men came to congratulate him. 'Quatsch!' he grunted. 'Furtwängler would not have liked it.' " Amen.

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