

Anton Bruckner, Reinhard Heydrich and the « Rudolfinum » Organ **By Gilles Houle**

The grand opening of the « Rudolfinum » Concert Hall on the right bank of the Vltava, just opposite the Prague Castle, was supposed to have taken-place on Saturday, 24 January 1885, but it was postponed due to the illness of the Archduke of Austria and Crown Prince of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Rudolf Franz Karl Joseph von Habsburg-Lothringen.



The bank « Böhmisches Sparkasse » (founded in 1825, this savings bank was the oldest financial institution in the Kingdom of Bohemia) decided to hold the opening ceremony on February 7. The institute's representatives asked Prince Rudolf for permission to name the building after him, « Rudolfinum » .

Important Czech-speaking painters were offended that they had not been the only persons approached by the bank « Böhmisches Sparkasse » and also that too many professors from the Vienna Academy were sitting on the jury. For this reason, they refused to enter the competition. In the end, 3 of the 14 submitted designs were selected as winners, but they were never realized. For this reason, these areas of the walls still contain no artistic « décor » .

Total cost of the project : 2 million gold pieces.

Early February 1885 : Anton Bruckner went to Prague, Bayreuth and Munich in succession. He visited the city of Prague as part of his latest international organ-tour.

Saturday, 7 February 1885 : Bruckner inaugurated the new Symphonic organ of the « Rudolfinum » (a 50 register instrument built in 1883-1884 by the German firm Wilhelm Sauer from Frankfurt on the Oder) ,

although Crown Prince Rudolf was (again) unable to attend (he did not see the building for the first time until in April) .

(In 1883, Sauer was awarded the Distinction of « Akademischer Künstler » and, the following year, on 18 April 1884, he was named by the cabinet as « Royal Organ Builder » .)

Nonetheless, the grand opening was a major event. In the presence of the bank's director, both architects (Josef Zítka who built the National Theatre, and Josef Schulz who built the National Museum) , and Prague's notables, the guests viewed the newly-opened Old Masters Picture Gallery and the halls of the Museum of Industrial Arts, and the climax of the celebration was a gala-concert.

First work played :

Ludwig van Beethoven : Overture in C major from « Die Weihe des Hauses » (The Consecration of the House) , Opus 124.

(The attic of the « Rudolfinum » houses several statues, one of which is by Beethoven.)

Then, the Head-Master of Prague Art School conducted the Orchestra from his institute, which played, among others, the Slavonic Rhapsody No. 2 by Antonín Dvořák.

The Czech press welcomed the opening of this magnificent temple of culture, completed only shortly after the National Theatre.

But this great event was nearly spoiled by nationalist quarrels (most of the guests present at the inauguration spoke German, there was only a handful of Czechs) and the missing decoration of the Ceremony Hall (the construction of the building extended over a decade) . The Czech press blamed it on the fact that too few Czech artists had been asked to contribute.

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Reinhard Heydrich lived as a boy in an elegant home with his family enjoying elevated social status. But young Heydrich also suffered as the target of school-yard bullies, teased about his very high-pitched voice and his devout Catholicism in the mostly Protestant town. He was also beaten-up by bigger boys and tormented with anti-Jewish slurs amid rumors of Jewish ancestry in his family. He was a withdrawn, sullen boy, unhappy, but also intensely self-driven to excel at everything. As he grew, he excelled at academics and also displayed natural athletic talent, later becoming an award winning fencer, horseman, and sailing champion.



Reinhard Heydrich

The « Rudolfinum » served from 1918 to 1938 (after World War I) as the First Czechoslovak Parliament building (Czech Chamber of Deputies) . Tomáš Masaryk was the founder and the first President of Czechoslovakia, and so is called the « President Liberator » .

On Saturday, 27 September 1941, Adolf Hitler had appointed Reinhard Heydrich Deputy « Reichsprotector » of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (the part of Czechoslovakia incorporated into the « Reich » on 15 March 1939) who assumed control of the territory - he is now the sole Master of Prague ! (He was replacing Konstantin von Neurath, aged 68, considered ineffective and officially on sick leave.) This nomination allowed Heydrich to have direct contacts with the highest-ranking leaders of the Third « Reich » , passing over the « Reichsführer » of the « Schutzstaffel » , Heinrich Himmler. Heydrich was convinced of his political power as a statesman.

On Friday, 10 October 1941, Heydrich, Karl Hermann Frank and Adolf Eichmann met to plan deportations from the Protectorate to Łódź, Minsk and Riga, and the establishment of the ghetto in Theresienstadt.

On the recommendation of Wilhelm Furtwängler, Joseph Keilberth was named in 1940 « Generalmusikdirektor » of the German Philharmonic Orchestra of Prague (« Deutsches Philharmonisches Orchester, Prag ») - an ensemble which had already existed under the Monarchy. Keilberth conducted around 400 concerts, of which 20 programs included music from composers who were « approved » by the Nazi regime. Since he and the musicians were considered « indispensable » (U.K.), they continued to perform into the last days of the Second World War - a « Beethoven evening » was given in Prague on May 1, 1945 ! According to Fred K. Prieberg, Keilberth was, from 1942 to 1945, the regional Director of the « Reichsmusikkammer » in the « Reichsprotektorat » of Bohemia and Moravia. In August 1944, during the final phase of the War, Keilberth was included in Adolf Hitler's approved « List of the Most Important Conductors », which saved him from going to the front (locally or abroad) .

In October 1941, Reinhard Heydrich became a patron of the German Philharmonic Orchestra of Prague.

The Orchestra, drawing most of its members from players at the former German Theatre and « Sudetendeutsche Orchester Reichenberg », was renamed the « Sudetendeutsche Philharmonische Orchester » for the purpose of the German Cultural Week organized by the « Reichsprotektorat ». Charged by the Ministry of Propaganda (under Doctor Josef Goebbels) with the task of « guaranteeing the future of German music in Prague » somewhat later in the summer of 1939, its title was subsequently altered to « Deutsche Philharmonische Orchester, Prag » .

The « Rudolfinum » now served as the administrative offices of the Nazis.

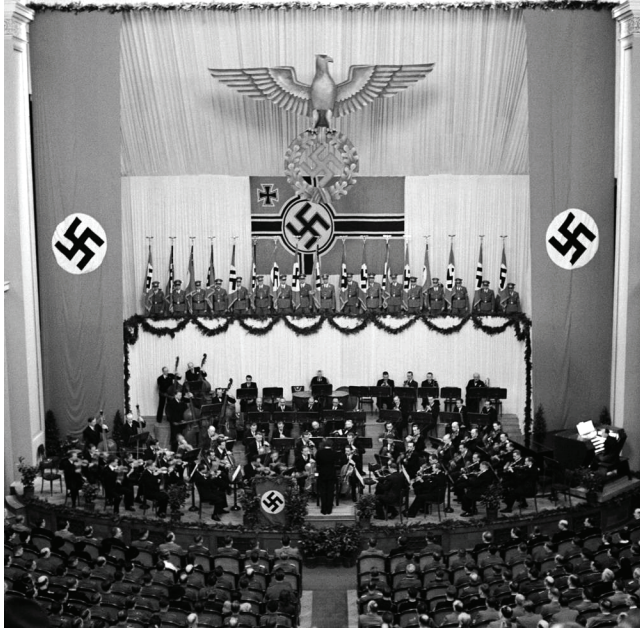
Heydrich was raised in a cultured, musical environment. His father, Bruno Heydrich, founded (1901) and directed the Halle Conservatory of Music. He was also a Wagnerian Opera singer and a composer - with Wagnerian pretensions. His mother (who believed in the value of harsh discipline and frequent lashings) was an accomplished pianist. Young Heydrich had a sincere love and talent for Classical music trained seriously as a violinist, developing expert skill and a lifelong passion for the violin. Owing to his charm, he was welcome in high-society.

Heydrich ordered the resurrection of the « Rudolfinum » as an arts centre. This important mandate was given to architects Antonín Engel (then the only living student of Josef Zíték) and Bohumír Kozák who restored the original function and decoration of the concert-stage and auditorium, but also tried to improve the hall's acoustics, which had been criticized ever since the beginning of concert activities in the building.

Although not all of the original plans were implemented, the alterations made between 1940 and 1942 brought the building back to its original use, if only for the German Philharmonic Orchestra, active in Bohemia until 1945.

It was namely Engel's merit that the « Rudolfinum » was preserved and its acoustic properties were perfected.

At the festive opening night, on Thursday, October 16, to which Heydrich had invited the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra to perform Beethoven's 9th Symphony, he reiterated his firm conviction that culture and politics were inseparably intertwined, a point he sought to underline by referring to the history of the « Rudolfinum » itself.



A concert in the Rudolfinerhaus—1941

Heydrich recalled that Anton Bruckner had played the organ here, but noted sadly that, after 1918, musical life had become « Czechified » and had, therefore, « degenerated » .

Cutting the ribbon at the re-opening ceremony, Heydrich said :

« The organ console at which Anton Bruckner once sat was smashed with an axe to make way for a bust of Masaryk. »

After 20 years of darkness, the « Rudolfinerhaus » was now, once more, a « site of German art » .

That same day, the first deportation (a train containing 1,000 Jews) left the Czech capital for the Litzmannstadt (Lodz) ghetto in the Warthe district (Poland) .

Between October 16 and 3 November 3, five transports containing nearly 5,000 men, women and children were despatched to the Lodz ghetto.

Heydrich's brutal policies during that time quickly earned him the nickname « the Butcher of Prague » . He was assassinated by Czech partisans on June 4, 1942. In retaliation, the SS destroyed the Village of Lidice. All 173 men over 15 years of age from the village were executed on 10 June 1942. The surviving 184 women and 88 children were deported to concentration camps.