

The Nazi Propaganda Film, "Philharmoniker" Compiled from the Internet by Gilles Houle

The plot of this film takes place during the penultimate year of the Weimar Republic intertwined with the difficulties of the orchestra and the solidarity of the musicians. (In 1933, the orchestra was in a particularly difficult existential crisis and saw only one way out : transforming into a national orchestra.)

In 1940, Walt Disney produced « Fantasia » with Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra. Propaganda Minister Josef Gœbbels did not want to be outdone, and commissioned director Paul Verhoeven to make a film about the Berlin Philharmonic.

« It's going to be a masterpiece. Furtwängler must participate. I have the whole scenario in mind. »

Verhoeven spent the war-years as a film and stage director of « apolitical light comedies ». Gœbbels had no idea how difficult « Philharmoniker » would be to make, and when it looked as though its completion was far into the future, he ordered a treatment for a film about Ludwig van Beethoven.

The shooting of « Philharmoniker » lasted from 26 November 1942 to 1 March 1943. The film was finally completed in December 1943.

The prominent Berlin film-critic Werner Fiedler who was already on Gœbbels' black-list gave such a scathing review of the film that Verhoeven demanded that Fiedler be arrested. (Fiedler said he narrowly missed being liquidated.)

Gœbbels had his hands so full with the Allies closing in on Germany that he never got around to ordering Fiedler's arrest. Wilhelm Furtwängler was so delighted with Fiedler's review of this distasteful film that he asked to see him. That discussion took place in the latter days of December 1944, when both men were in personal danger.

« Philharmoniker » was a masterful example of Nazi public relations in its clever distortion of facts and wholesale untruths. According to the script, the Nazis alone had made the Berlin Philharmonic the great orchestra it had become over the years. The concert agency of Wolff and Sachs (Louise Wolff and Erich Sachs), which was largely responsible for marketing the orchestra everywhere, was left unmentioned. Louise Wolff and Bruno Walter never existed.

The film was made to help the German people, especially the Berliners, forget for a moment the nightly bombings and inevitable defeat.

An Anglo-American squadron dropped phosphorus bombs on the old « Philharmonie » during the night of 30-31 January 1944 - coinciding with the 11th anniversary of the accession of Hitler as Chancellor of the « Reich ».



The city of Berlin was the main target of the air-raid. 440 Lancasters, 82 Halifaxes, 12 Mosquitos (534 aircraft) , were dispatched to Berlin. The RAF losses were 33 aircraft, 6.2 % of the total. The western and southern districts were hit in the most concentrated attack.

This time, the « Philharmonie » was destroyed forever. The orchestra lost its hall, its archive, most of its instruments and much of its music library.

Three weeks before, Furtwängler conducted a series of concerts from January 9 to 12. Owing to bombing raids, the concerts at this time were mainly scheduled in the afternoons and on Sunday mornings. The other concerts in the subscription-series, given by Karl Böhm, Oswald Kabasta or Volkmar Andreae (some of which were in any case cancelled) , were scheduled to be given only twice.



Digital recreation of the interior of the Old Philharmonie

The old hall was located in a huge edifice at Numbers 21-22 « Bernburger-Straße » in the Steglitz (Kreuzberg) District - which originally housed a roller-skating rink !! The entrance to the « Philharmonie » building was in a court-yard. In the hall, which was rectangular in shape and held about 2,500 concert-goers (including 900 in standing room) balls, meetings and receptions were also held. Wolfgang Stresemann, the long-time General Director of the orchestra (1959-1978 ; 1984-1986) recalled that the interior was richly-decorated and while it radiated dignity, for him, it lacked charm. It brought forth associations of « bourgeois prosperity » and created the impression of a « lavish multi-function space » to which the music sounding within « provided nobility » .

A more blunt appraisal was given by the music-critic Friedrich Herzfeld, who was the head of the Philharmonic press-office in the years 1940-1943 :

« It was exceptionally awful. The hall could never over-come its original function as a roller skating rink. Of course, it was refurbished many times. The transverse hall was elongated. But it always maintained the cheap excess of its founding time. It was decorated with plaster stucco - as tasteless as anything. (...) It would be difficult to find something more uncomfortable than those hard wooden chairs. The slightest movement would bring forth a creaking racket. »

In the last years of the war, going to the « Philharmonie » was not an easy choice and, according to the musicians themselves, people wondered if they would not attend their last concert. The concerts were held

PHILHARMONIKERE



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**I DENNE STORE KONCERTFILM SPILLER
Berlins philharmoniske Orkester**
UNDER FØLGENDE DIRIGENTER:

Generalmusikdirektør EUGEN JOCHUM
1 SATS af 5 SYMFONI af BEETHOVEN
1 SATS af 7 SYMFONI af BRUCKNER

Generalmusikdirektør Dr. KARL BÖHM
"LES PRÉLUDES" af LISZT
"AN DER SCHÖNEN BLAUEN DONAU" af JOHANN STRAUSS

Generalmusikdirektør Professor HANS KNAPPERTSBUSCH
2 SATS af 5 SYMFONI af BEETHOVEN
Dr. RICHARD STRAUSS
FESTPRÆLUDIUM af RICHARD STRAUSS

Note the inclusion of part of the first movement of Bruckner's Symphony No. 7.

with frequent interruptions due to night time alerts and forced the audience and musicians to wait to see if the evening could continue. One can certainly imagine with difficulty how much going to the concert, in these tragic moments, was an act of faith, excluding any other motivation outside of art. This very strong tension permeated the artistic performances of Fürtwängler, to the point where it is difficult today to understand with the usual interpretative grid.

Shortly afterward, Fürtwängler viewed the ruins. The hall had been more of a home to him than any house he had ever lived in. For the first time in his life, he felt old, for here was irrefutable proof that the only part of his life which meant anything to him was gone.

Nonetheless, the loss of the building itself was no great loss to him. He never had cared much for its parody of classical Greek architecture.

Elisabeth, his new wife, recalled his reaction :

« Wilhelm was capable of wit and humor at the most unusual moments, and this was one of them. When he phoned me, I was in Austria, and he said to me :

“ It looks better as a ruin than it did as a complete building. ” »

Day by day, Berlin was pounded by Allied bombs and pummeled into rubble, ash and smoke. Fürtwängler knew, as most Germans knew by now, that the War was lost. He was happy that it was all coming to an end, but the sight of Berlin, its history, its culture disappearing before his eyes enraged him, and he became increasingly outspoken and open in his criticism of the Nazis, despite the warnings of his new wife and close friends.

It is important to recall that when Fürtwängler returned to Berlin in November 1943, he learned that the Allies had bombed the « Philharmonie » (for the first time) . The interior was still intact but the façade had been badly damaged and fire had destroyed almost the entire library containing precious scores, priceless manuscripts, and most of Fürtwängler's personal and professional files. Enough of the rubble was cleared out to present a few concerts.

Several video clips of performances are featured in the film by the « Reichs-Orchester » :

Eugen Jochem directs excerpts of the first movements from Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 and Bruckner's Symphony No. 7.

General-Music-Director Professor Doctor Karl Böhm vigorously conducts « Les Préludes » by Franz Liszt and « The Blue Danube » by Johann Strauß junior.

General-Music-Director Hans Knappertsbusch conducts the second movement of Ludwig van Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 for the workers of a Berlin factory (a good example of theatrical re-enactment of a « Werk-Pausen-Konzert » promoted by the Nazi regime) .

In 1939, Gœbbels decided to give radio a new lease on life, for obvious propaganda reasons, by programming Furtwängler's concerts in the early part of the evening :

« Furtwängler makes me laugh with his 2,000 spectators at the “ Philharmonie ”. What we need are the masses and we have the radio. »

Gœbbels made numerous offers to Furtwängler to appear in « Philharmoniker » and have a say in its production (only Furtwängler could give the film the stamp of legitimacy it needed) . Furtwängler hated the blatant Nazified bias in the script. It made no mention of any of the Jews who had been connected with the Philharmonic (Bruno Walter, Otto Klemperer, etc.) , barely acknowledged Arthur Nikisch's contribution to it. Furtwängler firmly refused to have anything to do with it. Gœbbels fingered his only remaining trump card. Richard Strauß was all too happy to make a brief appearance ...

« Philharmoniker » gloriously ends (??) with Strauß conducting his own bombastic « Festliches Präludium » (Festive Prelude) for organ and orchestra. In fact, it was really conducted by Alois Melichar (1896-1976) , a student of Joseph Marx and Franz Schreker, who partly composed the original score for « Philharmoniker » . Strauß was filmed « conducting » for a few seconds in a studio with an audience back-drop. Melichar who was under contract with the « Ufa » Studios (Universum Film AG) composed music for many films during the Third « Reich » . He was the musical director of « Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft » from 1927 to 1933.

Werner Fiedler testified during the denazification trial of Furtwängler who refused to act in the film. He was called in by the conductor for a discussion of the necessity of criticism in general. Furtwängler finally agreed that criticism is necessary if Art is to survive.

Gœbbels asked Furtwängler to direct the music in a film about Beethoven, again for propaganda purposes. They quarreled violently about this project.

Furtwängler told him :

« You are wrong, “ Herr ” Minister, if you think you can exploit Beethoven in a film. »

Gœbbels gave up his plans for the film.

In April 1944, Gœbbels wrote :

« Furtwängler has never been a National-Socialist. Nor



Irene von Meyendorff was the lead female actress in the film. She despised Goebbels and emigrated to England after the war.

has he ever made any bones about it, which Jews and emigrants thought was sufficient to consider him as one of them, a key representative of so-called “ inner emigration ”. Furtwängler's stance towards us has not changed in the least. »

He wanted Furtwängler to supervise the sound-track. Furtwängler was anxious to humor the Propaganda Minister at this point in 1941 because he needed his help to get more money for the Philharmonic and enlist him in his battle against some virulent enemies who were threatening him at the Berlin Philharmonic, so he did not decline immediately. Eventually, they talked seriously about the film, but Goebbels’ arrogant manner collided with Furtwängler’s propensity for long-windedness.

« Philharmoniker » was officially released in Germany on December 4, 1944. The Berlin premiere was held at the « Tauentzien Palast » - on « Tauentzien-Straße » Number 19 at the corner of « Nurnberger-Straße » (Nos. 50-52) , close to the famous « Kaufhaus des Westens » department-store.



Taumentzien Palast - where the film was premiered



The bust of Bruckner in the Old Philharmonie as depicted in the film.