

MODERN MUSIC

MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

FRANI MUSER
Associate Editor

JOEL LIFFLANDER
Technical Director

DURING THE OCCUPATION AND AFTER

The story of musical life abroad during the German occupation and in those regions which have been liberated is difficult to gather. Many reliable observers known to us before the war have left the great capitals. Censorship and communication delays make additional problems. Below we publish the first instalment of what we hope will become a continuing and expanding survey. We are grateful to the many agencies and individuals who have furthered our effort, and especially to Mr. Léon Kochnitzky, formerly of Belgium, now of the United States, and one-time associate editor of *La Revue Musicale*, for his invaluable advice.

RESISTANCE IN BELGIUM... Jules Brogniez

Brussels, January 3 - By cable

BELGIUM has been for centuries a fecund source of music, a center for the dispersion of musicians to the theatres and orchestras of the world. America, for instance, has long since adopted our Pro-Arte Quartet and only recently appointed Désiré Defauw of Brussels conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

The German Occupation brought the expansive activities of Belgian musicians to a full stop. For a brief time it seemed fatal even to our own indigenous musical life.

But after the first profound discouragement, the result of the "Phoney War" and the brutal German aggression, a salutary reaction took place. Musical activity was resumed in many forms, and nearly all of it was characterized by an intense emphasis on our own nationalism.

In the field of education – most important of all to the preservation of our musical culture – there was at no time any relaxation of effort, any decline in the scale of study or of standards. The Royal Conservatory of Brussels in the three seasons from 1940 to 1943 graduated between 140 and 240 students each year – and this is only one of four great state institutions. In addition account should be taken of the many private, and small semi-official community schools, all of which have operated at full capacity throughout the war. Despite the death of several distinguished performer-teachers, it is clear that the great traditions of Belgian musical education have been passed on intact to the present generation and are adequately guaranteed for the future.

Still more remarkable, considering the circumstances created by the Occupation, have been the quality and magnitude of musical performance. Public musical activity has been really overwhelming. Never before in their history have Belgians attended so many concerts, never have they given such a warm reception to their own musical artists. To mention only the activities of our capital, Brussels' three largest organizations, L'Association des Concerts du Conservatoire, La Société Philharmonique and La Chapelle Musicale de la Reine Elisabeth, each presented more than ten large concerts every season. Chamber music groups multiplied in number and in performances; the Quatuors Artis, Pro Nova, Desclins, Van Neste, Van Herck, De Groote, Gertler – indeed it is impossible to name them all or to add up their many recitals.

During the war years there has been hardly a day in Belgium without some musical offering of value. The public poured into the halls in veritable torrents. In these hours of beauty, the Belgians sought and found a palliative for the long days and nights of ugliness of suffering and humiliation which were the consequences of the Occupation.

III

Interesting new ventures were also undertaken, new ground was broken in our musical life, with remarkable results. From 1940 on, popular concerts were organized with the assistance of the Department of Public Education, at the Brussels Conservatory, for which the admission price was set very low. Let me quote on this subject, Herman Closson, the well-known music critic who is at present secretary of the Association des Concerts. Writing in the 1942 annual report of the Conservatoire, he says:

"Three popular concerts were given at the Conservatoire annually, before a capacity audience. They were under the direction of the conductors De Vreese, Marsick and Franz-André respectively, whose highly eclectic programs (designed to meet the comprehension of this special audience) always included at least one Belgian work. Solos were performed by the most important instrumentalists, all of them teachers or prize-winners of the Conservatoire. These 'School Concerts,' originally arranged chiefly for school children have now been merged with those of the new organization, Les Jeunesses Musicales, whose aim is to acquaint the whole younger generation with the greatest music . . . Each program is now given in the Conservatoire and repeated in the Salle des Beaux Arts."

The programs list these names of composers: Berlioz, Dvorak, Gabriel Fauré, Joseph Jongen, Rimsky-Korsakov, Wagner, A. Degreef, A. Deboeck, L. Stekke, E. Gilson, Théo Ysaye, F. de Bourguignon, L. DuBois, Marcel Poot, Peter Benoit, E. Tinel, G. Lekeu, J. Absil, V. Buffin, M. Shoemaker, Huybrechts, G. Devrèese, V. Vreuls, D. Van de Woestyne, Léon Jongen. As can be readily seen the majority are Belgians, clearly chosen in an effort to acquaint our youth with the music of their own country, and at the same time to provide an opportunity, rare before this organization came into being, for young, native composers to win a hearing.

Another new idea which has already borne excellent fruit was the establishment in 1943 of the Great National Competition for Music by La Société Philharmonique. The field is restricted to pianists, singers, violinists, and 'cellists, who must be prize-winners of the conservatories, and the age limit is seventeen to thirty. A novel feature is that the finalists compete by appearing with the Grand Orchestre National Belge. One can readily see what a stimulus this far reaching scheme will be to the development of highly trained, highly selected artists for our future musical life.

La Chapelle Musicale de la Reine Elisabeth has undergone a considerable metamorphosis during the months of aggression and the years that followed. This admirable musical seminary was founded at the initiative of the Queen of the Belgians, herself noted as a musician. During the Blitz its edifice was seriously shattered, but now it seems structural equilibrium has been restored, and it is once more firm and safe. Far more serious were the interior changes of policy which the institution experienced. These can only be charged to what at best should be called the "inconsistent behavior" of its director. Since the Liberation however,

La Chapelle has again resumed its special activities in the sole interest of the future of Belgian music.

III

Organizers of all Belgian concerts were exposed to the pressure of German propaganda, which was at times insidious, at others menacing. "Collaboration" was generally proposed in the form of suggestions to place German orchestra leaders and soloists on all possible programs. These efforts were on the whole successfully resisted.

The German Propaganda Abteilung, as a desperate resort, founded the "Philharmonie Brüssel" – a euphemism which deceived few sound Belgians. Here the General-Musik-Direktoren played to their hearts' content, but strictly before an audience of soldiers and traitors.

After the Liberation, in the fall of 1944, La Société Philharmonique could publish, without risk of contradiction, the following bulletin: "During the entire occupation, not a single German subject has been permitted to mount the podium of our society. The same prohibition was made effective against those few Belgian musicians who had put themselves at the services of the Propaganda Abteilung. As far back as September 1939, the Philharmonique cancelled all engagements previously made with German artists for the 1939-40 season. Our audiences understood the sentiment which dictated this attitude. To all demands of the occupying forces, to all orders even when accompanied by threats, the Philharmonique opposed an unshatterable resistance. In time the army came to understand the futility of further efforts."

From Switzerland, comes a tribute to the integrity of the society. In the Geneva periodical, *Dissonances*, of December 1943, Aloys Mooser pays the following homage:

"Influential musical circles in certain occupied countries seem to have welcomed the idea of collaboration which they can hardly fail to see leads in one direction only, to their own greatest detriment. In Belgium, however, we find a comforting example of resistance and of dignity which does her honor. Into that country, too, the virtuosi and ensembles of the Third Reich flowed in overwhelming streams. But the invasion was contained and stemmed. As a matter of fact the general programs of the Philharmonique, always notable for extraordinary variety, have, since the Occupation made a heroic appeal to their own national musical resources, and drawn for the rest on the best qualified representatives of French art. The great classical and romantic masters

continued to be performed, but otherwise no German name appeared on the society's programs."

The lyric theatres, too, showed an abundant activity, despite the difficulties that followed the tight restrictions imposed by the Occupation. It is always a greater task to gather together a vocal ensemble than the elements of an orchestra. The Théâtre de la Monnaie of Brussels has a homogeneous troupe which was able to carry on its regular repertory. During the off-season a smaller group of this Company organized operetta performances that were very popular. In addition the orchestra members gave a post-season of concerts under the direction of René Defosse, a talented young leader of great promise, and these were enormously successful.

III

Censorship by the Germans was extended over all concerts and performances without exception. An implacable decree was in effect against both Russian and Jewish musicians. In this connection let me recount one of many already famous anecdotes, this one being out of my own experience. My good friend Lempers, director of the Academy of Music in the city of Ath, had submitted the program for a student competition to the local censor. This showed that a young girl violinist was scheduled to play the Allegro of a concerto by Mendelssohn-Bartholdi. "Though a musician myself," said the embarrassed censor, "I must bar this work . . . But, ahem, let's see . . . If you list it as *Concerto* by Bartholdi, then I, too, can attend the performance and hear music that I adore."

There is no point now in discussing the musical activity of the Belgian radio during the Occupation. Like the press, all broadcasting was completely in the hands of the enemy. The record is being examined objectively by authorities who should be competent to find out just what degree of necessity drove certain Belgian artists to take part in these efforts. There can be no doubt that many beautiful programs were broadcast to which the population listened with pleasure. At least while music was heard, the spoken propaganda was silenced . . . and of course one could also switch to New York and London.

Looking back now on the years since 1939 I can only say that during the Occupation musical activity in Belgium actually helped to sustain the spirit of the people, it was an instrument of survival and kept our intellectual and moral forces at a high level.