

The Doom of German Culture

A Great Musical Society Broken Up By Nazis

By

Joseph Sack

THE persecution of the Jews in Germany has taught me many things I did not know before. I did not know, for instance, that the Jews before the Nazis came into power, were the bulwark of Germany's musical life! As conductors, performers and concert-goers, they made Germany famous as the most musical country in the world. And now that conductors like Bruno Walter, Klemperer and Dr. Heinz Unger; violinists like Huberman, pianists like Schnabel, have been driven out, I can see how much Germany has owed to the Jews and how much poorer it is without them.

I have mentioned the name of Dr. Heinz Unger. Although he may not be so well known to South Africans as Bruno Walter, he has played an equally important part in the musical life of Germany.

And it is of him that I wish to write.

Recently in the Queen's Hall, London, he conducted the London Philharmonic Orchestra for the first time, and so brilliantly that an audience of 2,500 applauded him wildly for ten minutes after the last piece, and made him return again and again to the platform.

I FOUND the conducting magnificent. But what interested me most was the programme. This was exactly the same as that which Dr. Unger conducted with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra in 1923. This concert was the first Unger gave after his appointment as permanent conductor of the Friends of Music Society, probably the biggest in the world outside North America.

The Society had several thousand members, and Dr. Unger regularly conducted the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra in their concerts. The leading soloists were engaged for these; new symphonies were performed for the first time; and the audiences, asked for, and accepted only the best. The Society under Unger's leadership quickly became famous. It was one of the happiest features of Germany's musical life.

Dr. Unger introduced new works by Ernest Bloch, the great Jewish composer. His Symphony, "America," was received with the utmost warmth both by audience and critics. Piatigorsky, now regarded as the world's greatest 'cellist, made his first solo appearance with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra under Unger, at one of the Society's concerts. He played Bloch's "Schelomo." The works of Gustav Mahler were also performed here for the first time.

In short, the Society continued to flourish until its last concert given in Berlin on March 2, 1933. And when Dr. Unger told me about this there was a note of sadness in his voice.



Dr. Heinz Unger

"ON March 2, 1933," he said, "I conducted for the last time in Berlin. A big audience. Orchestra play well. Everyone pleased. On March 5 came the elections. I must leave Germany at once because I am a Jew. I don't know where to go! Then I decide to go to Spain! The conductor of the Madrid Symphony Orchestra hears that I have arrived in Madrid, and he asks me to conduct one of his Symphony concerts."

Dr. Unger eagerly agreed, and so pleased was the public and so generous the Spanish conductor who stood down in favour of Unger, that he not only conducted one concert but he stayed to conduct a special series of ten!

Thus, Spain, which a few centuries before, had driven out its Jews, now extended a welcome of the warmest and most hospitable kind, to one of the same race fleeing from persecution to another great country.

"And what of the 'Friends of Music Society'?" I asked.

"The Society is still existing—in theory," he replied, "but there are no more concerts. No conductors, no musicians, no audience. Lots of Jews supported it. Now they are either refugees or, if still in Berlin, they have no money for concerts."

Until March 5, 1933, the City of Berlin looked with a patronising eye on the work of the Music Society. Then its interest suddenly ceased. It took away its financial support.

And so behind the appearance of Dr. Unger at the Queen's Hall, London, there was a sad story. A great musical movement, where Jew and Gentile joined in equal appreciation of music's beauties, wrecked by the

Nazis; its members scattered by a tempest of persecution.

And this is Nazi culture!

MUSIC and art flourished in Germany a few years ago, as they did, perhaps, in no other country. But when one looks at Berlin's empty concert halls, at the list of banned artists and others who refuse to go there while the present regime lasts, there might be some excuse for asking: "Where is Germany's Culture To-day?"

My reply is that the culture which made Germany famous for centuries before the arrival of the Nazis, has been taken out of Germany by refugees such as Dr. Unger, and members of the Friends of Music Society.

Certainly that culture is difficult to trace in the country!

Dr. Unger, by the way, is booked to return to Spain for further concerts, and is at present conducting in Stockholm. Thereafter he goes to Russia to conduct the leading symphony orchestras, and in opera.

His family have been reputed as lawyers and barristers for generations in Germany. He himself was intended for a legal career, but as he himself confessed: "As a student, I spent more time at the opera than in the university," and he gave up his legal studies to devote all his time to the art of conducting.

He quickly established himself as one of the "star" conductors of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, but unlike Bruno Walter he did not travel much outside Germany.

Now, however, he has been obliged to do so, and is adding to his reputation wherever he appears. Everywhere he has been enthusiastically welcomed.

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