

“One must not forget”: A musical tribute in Berlin to Jewish members of the Deutsche Oper orchestra persecuted by the Nazis

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This was a musical performance that truly got to one. In mid-January, members of the renowned Deutsche Oper [German Opera] orchestra in Berlin, predominantly youthful, put on a concert entitled “One must not forget.” It was dedicated to four Jewish members of the orchestra who were murdered or forced into exile by the Nazis in the 1930s.

In text, images and music, the current orchestra musicians paid tribute to Wladislaw Waghalter, violinist and concertmaster from the establishment of the Deutsche Oper in 1912 and co-founder of the Waghalter Quartet; Max Rosenthal, second violinist from 1913; Hans Kraus, cellist from 1913 and member of the Waghalter Quartet; and Werner Lywen, violist beginning in 1929.

The selection and presentation of the various pieces, the texts taken from documents, the concert reviews and letters that actress Margarita Broich read aloud between pieces, the accompanying personal and concert photographs displayed on the screen behind the musicians—all that combined to restore the features of the long-forgotten musical personalities. At the same time, it brought to life the vibrant music scene that existed between the wars, bound up with the rebellious spirit of the time and which the Nazis sought to destroy.

Concertgoers filled the Deutsche Oper Tischlerei performance space, among them grandsons of Wladislaw and Ignatz Waghalter and a daughter of Werner Lywen, who traveled from abroad to attend the event. At concert’s end, the audience gave the musicians a standing ovation.

“I feel very close to these musicians,” said 43-year-old solo timpanist Benedikt Leithner, who initiated the concert and plans another next year.

In the opera company’s archives, Leithner came across the names of eight Jewish musicians dismissed in 1933, as well as those of other Jewish artists such as conductor and orchestra leader Ignatz Waghalter, Wladislaw’s elder brother, who helped inaugurate the opera house in 1912. The group of persecuted artists also included singers and three dancers.

“I was looking for stories, but, unfortunately, I found very little information at first,” commented Leithner, who is not Jewish. “But certain questions preoccupied me: Who were these people? Did they have families? What became of them?” Following the concert, Leithner explained that an encounter with an elderly woman in France provided the initial impetus for his effort. The woman told him about her experience as a Jewish child who survived in hiding while her relatives in Austria were murdered.

For more than a year Leithner combed through databases and archives for information about his victimized “fellow musicians,” and that research continues. Leithner told the WSWWS he wanted to portray the orchestra members not only as victims, but as outstanding musicians. Wladislaw Waghalter, for example, studied with Joseph Joachim—the famed Hungarian violinist, conductor, composer and teacher—and twice won the prestigious Mendelssohn-Bartholdy University Competition, in 1903 and 1905.

The programme of the “Against Forgetfulness” concert sensitively followed the historical and musical traces of these long-obscured artists driven out of the orchestra by Nazi officials. The evening began with a beautifully performed rendition of Ignatz Waghalter’s Violin Sonata in F Minor, Op. 5, (1902), which the composer dedicated to Wladislaw. Unlike his brother,

Ignatz Waghalter was able to escape the Nazis in time. Wladislaw Waghalter died in 1940 upon receiving his deportation order. He is believed to have suffered a heart attack. His wife and daughter were later murdered at Auschwitz.

After the opening piece, Margarita Broich cited an article published in the *Allgemeine Musikzeitung Charlottenburg* in January 1913, which commented, “Wladislaw Waghalter is one of the most excellent younger musicians. Having attended a large school, and still maturing under Joachim’s artistic influence, his playing reveals something particularly solid and tasteful. The lightness of his fingering allows him to undertake the most challenging works.”

Concert organizers dedicated the second piece in the programme, Joseph Haydn’s String Quartet in C Major, Op. 54 No. 2, to Hans Kraus, who once performed it with the Waghalter Quartet. Kraus was initially able to resist dismissal due to his record of front-line service in World War I. He managed to escape to Shanghai in 1940. In 1947, he emigrated to the US.

As a tribute to Max Rosenthal, the musicians performed the String Sextet (1924) by Erwin Schulhoff, a German-Jewish-Czech composer and pianist who joined the Communist Party and was influenced by George Grosz’s Dadaism. The sextet resounds with wild rhythms and dissonances. Schulhoff was murdered in a concentration camp, as was Max Rosenthal, his wife and daughter.

The last reference to Rosenthal that Leithner found was a diary entry of a fellow deportee on the fateful train to Minsk. In his notes from the Minsk ghetto, Berthold Ruder recorded: “An endless journey. No hot food or drinks. Toilet frozen. Everything overflowed. Liquid excrement flowed into the car. In the evening, a wonderful concert by Max Rosenthal.”

At the end of the grippingly-played Schulhoff piece, the ensemble, bathed in blue light, remained motionless for a full minute. No one present escaped the intense emotion of this moment of mourning for the Jewish musicians.

The evening’s tension and drama grew out of the stark contrast between the musical interpretations, vibrating with empathy and humanity, and the brutal, anti-Semitic terror of the Nazis. Audience members, including many youthful concertgoers, held their

collective breath as Margaret Broich read a September 1934 letter from the Nazis’ Ministry of Propaganda to the director of the Deutsche Oper:

“I request that the employment of the Jewish orchestra member Lywen be terminated immediately for reasons of official interest in accordance with No. 6 of the Second Regulation for the Implementation of the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service of May 4, 1933, and that I be informed of its implementation. For the duration of the period of notice, please observe No. 6, paragraph 2 in conjunction with No. 5, paragraph 6 of the Second Regulation for the Implementation of the Law.” Three weeks later, the director reported he had complied. Werner Lywen—the youngest of the musicians honored by the concert—was dismissed in April 1935.

Lywen was able to make his way to the US and build a new career in exile alongside Leonard Bernstein. In tribute to him, the recent Berlin concert performed a duo for viola and cello by Paul Hindemith, with whom Lywen associated, as well as pieces by Igor Stravinsky from *The Soldier’s Tale* (1918).

This finale, with its jazzy, almost cheerful note, in which Benedikt Leithner himself took part as drummer, conveyed a defiant, combative message: “Never again.”



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