

Review
Frits Zwart:
Conductor Willem Mengelberg, 1871-1951:
Acclaimed and accused

[volume 1 and 2]

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The monumental work *Conductor Willem Mengelberg, 1871-1951: Acclaimed and accused* by scholar and former director of the *Nederlands Muziek Instituut* ('Netherlands Music Institute') in The Hague for forty years, Dr. Frits Zwart, documents the life and work of influential 20th-century Dutch conductor Willem Mengelberg. A tour de force in its scope, the two-volume work of more than 1300 pages is an in-depth account of Mengelberg's rise to prominence as one of the premier conductors in the world to the conductor's veritable ruin as an outcast in Switzerland for having been linked with the Nazis as a collaborator in World War II. Although it is clear that the author feels admiration for the conductor and his manifold accomplishments, there is still a sincere and careful attempt to examine the accusations against Mengelberg throughout.

Mengelberg, whose tenure as conductor of the Concertgebouw Orchestra spans fifty years, from 1895-1945, energized the ensemble, bringing it from a small, provincial organization to its celebrated international fame under his leadership. Frits Zwart, a focused and ardent researcher, has contributed a mammoth narrative on the man, his life, and music. The writing is detailed and sometimes obtuse, straining to account for the entire life of Mengelberg from his beginnings as a music student, through his prominence at the helm of the Orchestra, to his sanctioned ban from the musical stage and final years.

Willem Mengelberg, from an artistic family – his uncle was the prominent composer and musicologist Rudolf Mengelberg and his father the Dutch-German sculptor Friedrich Wilhelm Mengelberg – was a kind of musical prodigy, excelling at composing, performance, and conducting. Willem Mengelberg, who began his musical career as pianist and composer, then becoming an aficionado of choral music and conducting, made a swift ascent to the podium of the Concertgebouw at the precocious age of 24 in 1885. It was a post he held until his removal in 1945 by the Dutch government for his Nazi sympathies and cooperation with Nazi occupying forces in the Netherlands during the war. While the modern-day Concertgebouw Orchestra owes much to Mengelberg, his name is still awaiting its "cultural rehabilitation."

Zwart divides the career and life of Mengelberg into six periods which is a bit unwieldy given that this is three periods greater than is usually assigned to the life of Beethoven. This approach may be symptomatic of the often-heroic light in which the conductor is painted. Often in demand as a guest conductor throughout Europe and The United States, Mengelberg was a long-time conductor of the London Symphony (1911-1914) and served as guest conductor of the New York Philharmonic (1905-6). He championed the music of Richard Strauss – the latter dedicated his *Ein Heldenleben* to Mengelberg and the Concertgebouw in 1898 – and Mengelberg was dedicated to promoting the symphonies of Gustav Mahler when the world viewed his music as too modern or "too Jewish." The Concert-

gebouw Orchestra Mengelberg was presented with early in the 20th century was, according to Mengelberg's accounts, undisciplined and lacking sophistication. Mengelberg's strong musical personality hewed from it an ensemble that played in tune and worked together. He saw purpose in bringing conductors from abroad to work with the Concertgebouw Orchestra and he was essentially an enthusiastic cheerleader both for the ensemble and for his own career prospects. Recordings of the ensemble during the Mengelberg tenure are a testament to the musician's profound stamp on the orchestra.

Scholars have previously addressed the so-called "problem of Wagner" – that of whether one may essentially address the merit of the art and leave the personal failings of the artist behind. The significance of the words in Zwart's biography's subtitle – "Acclaimed and accused" – hints at a narrative that attempts to straddle both sides of the debate, celebrating the career of the noted conductor, while describing the many instances in which Mengelberg openly supported the Nazis. Many examples in music history, chief among them the problem of Wagner's blatant antisemitism, require us to weigh the importance of the musician in relationship to the musician's political and/or personal views. Zwart writes that Mengelberg was heartened by early reports of Hitler and believed, like so many others, that he would bring a broken post-World War I Germany to a better future. Mengelberg was one of the first to champion the works of Jewish composer Gustav Mahler, referring to him as the Beethoven of the 20th century.

Zwart suggests that perhaps Mengelberg's authoritarian tendencies – he was, after all, a conductor with a strong temper who wielded the baton through unquestioned strength – meant that the conductor was drawn to Hitler's vision. Still, Mengelberg must have begun to realize that the vision he so admired in the Nazis included dangerous tendencies. The conductor received several letters from Jewish musicians asking for help in the late 1930s and he watched as countries like Poland and Austria were summarily invaded. He refused to bring together politics and music and claimed that his conducting appearances in Germany and Austria were simply reflective of a man dedicated to his art. According to Zwart, even in the face of mounting evidence of escalating antisemitism and ruthless aggression, Mengelberg never made a public statement against Hitler or the Nazis, a factor that ultimately led to his own downfall. His pro-Nazi rhetoric culminated in the conductor reportedly toasting the invasion of the Nazis in the Netherlands in May 1940, although Mengelberg later believed he had been misquoted.

Zwart points out that not a single statement survives that describes the conductor's regret for his support of Hitler and the Nazis. His public statements and appearances with Nazi leadership, including the notorious *Reichskommissar* ('commissioner') Seyss-Inquart of the occupied Netherlands, resulted in public

opinion turning against him. Mengelberg was largely thought to be a traitor. In 1945, following the war, the Netherlands' Honour Council for Music banned the conductor in absentia for life though the ban was later reduced to six years. In addition, in 1947 Queen Wilhelmina revoked his previously awarded Medal of Honor. Mengelberg, forfeiting both his passport and reputation, lived the remainder of his life in Switzerland never to conduct the Concertgebouw Orchestra again.

History may have dealt a harsh blow to Mengelberg because, though he did try to intervene on behalf of the Jewish musicians in his orchestra, the efforts were simply not enough to dispel the stink of complicity that surrounded him. Mengelberg did advocate for Jewish musicians, and the list includes distinguished names like the harpist Rosa Spier, concertmaster Ferdinand Hellmann, and singer Hermann Schey. His cordial relationship with Seyss-Inquart meant that he was able to act on behalf of a few select Jews. One wonders, given his powerful place as conductor of the Concertgebouw Orchestra, favorable relationship with Nazi leadership, and the fact that he was a member of the influential *Nederlandsche Kultuurraad*, if he could have been a greater force for good. The author includes a discussion of missed opportunities – the ways in which Mengelberg could have redeemed himself in both the eyes of his Dutch compatriots and, for that matter, in the historical record. The text is a meticulous description of the life and work of Willem Mengelberg and truly the life work of Zwart. In creating a narrative of such detail and care, the reader senses the struggle the author had with the subject of his admiration. One can feel throughout the narrative that the author himself wanted to give Mengelberg the opportunity to “set the record straight,” only to realize again and again that there is not enough evidence to redeem the conductor from his ill-gotten fate. Nevertheless, the extensive document of a flawed but still musically admired conductor is worth the read and will remain, perhaps indefinitely, the premier scholarly work on conductor Willem Mengelberg.

About the reviewer

Deborah Nemko is professor of music at Bridgewater State University in Bridgewater, Massachusetts and faculty member of New England Conservatory's Piano Preparatory School in Boston, Massachusetts (U.S.). A pianist, she completed her D.M.A. at the University of Arizona in 1997 and regularly appears in concert throughout the United States and abroad as soloist and collaborative artist. She has performed in prestigious venues including Carnegie Hall, the Shanghai Oriental Arts Center, and Amsterdam's Bethaniënklooster. After completing her 2015 Fulbright Fellowship to the Netherlands for her project, “Suppressed and forgotten Dutch composers of World War II,” for which she also received a Bridgewater State University Presidential Fellowship, she developed innovative recitals and workshops on Dutch composers of the Holocaust. In 2019

she performed music by victims of the Holocaust for the Anne Frank Awards celebration in the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., sponsored by the Dutch Embassy. She has served as visiting faculty at the Utrecht Conservatory in the Netherlands, the International Master Classes in Belgium, and the Grumo International Music Festival in Italy. Currently, she is a board member of the International Alliance for Women in Music.

