

Verbundkatalog Kalliope

**In: New York Herald Tribune, European Edition (Paris),
Friday, June 6, 1947**

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1947-05-31

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The Furtwaengler Ovation

Erika Mann Finds It Political, Not Musical

To the Editor, European Edition:—

In a Berlin dispatch datelined May 25, Mr. John Elliott describes the "tumultuous acclaim" given to Dr. Wilhelm Furtwaengler, recently "de-Nazified" German conductor, when he led the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra for the first time since the war. "A cosmopolitan crowd," says Mr. Elliott, "forgot nationality and the after memories of the... war." And then he quotes Mr. Eric Clarke, chief of the Theater, Film and Music Branch of the Information Control Division of AMG, as follows: "I was glad to see people forget all about politics for once and lose themselves in music."

The crowd applauded for 15 minutes forcing the conductor to return 16 times to the platform to acknowledge the cheers of his admirers.

Who were these "admirers" and what caused them to applaud for 15 minutes? According to Mr. Elliott, an international audience paid tribute to a conductor for the good and simple reason that they liked his music. And no doubt, Dr. Furtwaengler knows his stuff even when—as was the case on the evening in question—he has had only one or two rehearsals and the orchestra, a makeshift ensemble two thirds of whose members were not with him when the maestro last conducted the Philharmonic early in 1945, is not up to standards. Let us assume, then, that the concert was good. Owing to some minor miracle, it may even have been excellent.

But excellent concerts are being given continually in New York, Boston and Philadelphia without prompting American music lovers to applaud for 15 minutes. Nor do I remember any concert in Paris or London the acclaimed excellence of which forced the audience to force the conductor to return 16 times to the platform. As for Moscow, I do not know, but it appears unlikely that the Soviets should have "forgotten nationality and the after memories of the war" in honor of a personage whom, along with their Allies, they prevented from appearing for almost two years.

It would seem, then, that Dr. Furtwaengler owes his triumph chiefly to his compatriots. Had these, however, really "forgotten all about politics and lost themselves in music?" Or were they not rather using and abusing music for the purpose of staging a political demonstration?

Much speaks in favor of the latter assumption. "De-Nazification," as is generally known, is most unpopular with the Germans who will miss no opportunity noisily, pointedly and aggressively to celebrate its "victims" and "survivors." They have done so—to cite one example where many could be given—in the case of Gustaf Gruendgens, actor, director, Nazi "Staatsrat," Senator and intimate friend of Goering, when the Russians finally permitted his reappearance on a Berlin stage. They have done so in the case of Dr. Furtwaengler, Hitler's pet maestro and musical propagandist abroad. And they will continue to do so as long as Allied reporters keep mistaking their strictly political demonstrations for art-loving ovations.

That a number (just how large a number one would like to know) of non-Germans contributed to

Furtwaengler's conquest of Berlin hardly alters the character of the German performance. This character is further illustrated by the fact that no great anti-Fascist conductor or virtuoso has thus far been urged to stage a comeback in Berlin. Neither Toscanini nor Bruno Walter, neither Hubermann nor Adolf Busch, men of whose world renowned art "Führer" Hitler deprived his musical nation, seems to be wanted.

ERIKA MANN,

Zurich, May 31, 1947.