

RSO Wien Threatened with Sudden Death

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VIENNA -- A crisis is brewing in the politically-charged Viennese music world. Variouslly described as a "scandal," "an embarrassment" and "absurd" by its own members, the Radio-Symphonie Orchester Wien (RSO Wien) is facing the possibility of extinction.

The RSO is Austria's only radio orchestra and the only one of Vienna's three orchestras to concentrate on 20th- and 21st-century music (there are 14 world or Austrian premieres planned for 2009-2010), as well as rarities from the past. It plays about 70 concerts per year at Vienna's Musikverein, Konzerthaus and RadioKulturhaus, at the Salzburg Festival, in the pit as an opera orchestra at Theater an der Wien, and in other venues throughout the country. All performances are broadcast on the classical radio station of ORF, Austria's national broadcasting corporation. Programs are almost never repeated, due to the nature of the repertoire.

In April 2009 and without warning, ORF, which depends on viewer subscriptions and advertising for income, informed the RSO that it may have to disband. ORF has been trying to force the orchestra to reorganize as an independent entity, such that it would secure its own financing from sponsors, the federal government or the City of Vienna. As outgoing Music Director Bertrand de Billy puts it, "It's like a three-way ping-pong game, and we are the ball."

He's right. In today's economy, finding a corporate sponsor would be next to impossible. Even those arts organizations that have such patronage are watching it dry up. The City of Vienna's response is that it already supports the Wiener Symphoniker and doesn't need to fund another orchestra, especially when it also contributes to the Bundestheater Holding Corporation, which oversees Wiener Staatsoper, Volksoper Wien and the Burgtheater, as well as Vereinigten Bühnen Wien, an umbrella organization that produces Broadway-scale musicals as well as operas and concerts.

Austrians who own televisions or radios are obligated to pay a monthly subscription fee to ORF, whether or not they take advantage of its two TV stations or three main and/or nine regional radio outlets. For retired or disabled persons, the federal government used to pick up the tab, but stopped several years ago when ORF did not comply with a federal order to present a viable long-term budget and business plan. Until ORF complies, the government continues to withhold these funds. ORF, in turn, is threatening to disband the orchestra and eliminate children's programming, coverage of soccer and Formula One racing and its support of independent films.

The small sum being withheld by the government could make or break the RSO, whose operating budget is less than one percent (approximately 0.8%) of ORF's annual €900 million budget.

Traditionally, ORF gets 50% of its income from advertising and subscriptions. But revenue is down: not only is it cheaper to advertise on independent television stations, the quality of ORF's programming has been called into question, with increasing numbers of viewers favoring the independent channels.

The ORF is governed by a 35-member board of advisors, some of them selected by Austria's five main political parties; they must approve any resolution to outsource the orchestra.

Ironically, a study was made in 2003 about the viability of such a move. After exploring several scenarios, including private sponsorship and building a strong marketing program (although there is virtually no budget for marketing), researchers determined it would actually be more expensive than leaving RSO within the ORF. (Technically it is not a division of ORF, but a cost center.)

The orchestra, which was already thinned-out in a previous, 1996 economic crunch, currently maintains 87 permanent professionals plus ten student musicians, an administrative staff of four or five and its music director.

But with April's sudden news, it's not clear how or whether it will survive. ORF took a somewhat similar approach with the RSO Choir in 1995, which ceased to exist in a mere two weeks.

"The threshold of pain for obliterating cultural institutions in Austria is quickly lowering," commented a member of the orchestra. Players are also tired of being told that the current fiscal crisis is not due to any one reason, but to the global financial mess: "The world is responsible!"

RSO is determined to maintain its identity as a radio orchestra, and to continue to create interesting programs that will not necessarily please the masses content with Beethoven, Brahms, and Bruckner.

"The only thing we can do is convince [ORF and the government] that the RSO plays a major role in Austrian culture, a country with a huge tradition of music and art. If this happens in Wien, what about the rest of the world?," commented another player. Should the RSO disband, Austria would be one of two countries in the European Union without a radio orchestra (the other being Portugal). "And Vienna is the center of the world for music!" says De Billy.

"I'm very proud of my musicians," he continues. "We've reached a very high level, and have good relations with the public and critics. No one else [in Vienna] plays this repertoire. It's not a question of there being one orchestra too many, as there are in Berlin.

"If we are forced to separate from ORF, that means the beginning of the end. It's like having this sword of Damocles hanging over our heads. Right now we are rehearsing Schoenberg's 'Pelléas et Mélisande' and Messiaen's 'Poèmes pour Mi.' Who else plays that in Wien?"

"It's very dangerous: young musicians ask for days off to travel to Germany to audition for other orchestras, and I have to say 'Yes.' I understand: they must protect their future.

"It's unbelievable, the number of people against the RSO. That is sad, on a financial, political and human level."

A grassroots petition has sprung up on Facebook, inaugurated by a young supporter of the orchestra. The outcry has grown worldwide, with almost 29,000 signatories including Plácido Domingo, Anna Netrebko, Thomas Quasthoff, Daniel Harding, Kurt Masur, David Pountney, Patrice Chéreau, Pierre Boulez and Peter Konwitschny.

As the RSO dilemma was not discussed at ORF's most recent meeting on June 18, we will not know the next chapter in this saga until the board reconvenes in the fall.

"I can't *believe* the orchestra would be disbanded," says one player. But his eyes contradict his alleged conviction.

Author's note: the facts and opinions expressed in this article result from several meetings with Bertrand de Billy; the two members of the RSO's workers' council, Geert Langelaar and Bernhard Ziegler; and members of the orchestra who wish to remain anonymous.

To sign the petition, go to: www.onlinepetition.at.

<http://rso.orf.at/>

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