

Austrian Cultural Forum Hosts WSNY — Vienna Phil. and NY Phil. Exhibit 175th Anniversary Archives



L. to r. Vienna Philharmonic archivist Silvia Kargl, historian Friedemann Pestel (Univ. of Freiburg), and Barbara Haws, New York Philharmonic archivist/historian since 1984, all superbly knowledgeable in their subjects

On Feb. 24, thirty fortunate members of WSNY were invited to attend a special viewing of an engrossing exhibit at the Austrian Cultural Forum in New York. The joint archival exhibit, titled “Vienna and New York: 175 Years of Two Philharmonics,” was on display Feb. 23-Mar. 10. It then opened in Vienna’s *Haus der Musik* Mar. 28, continuing until Jan. 2018. Expansion of the VPO’s historic archives was funded by the Birgit Nilsson Prize awarded in 2014.

The event was curated and narrated by Barbara Haws, New York Philharmonic archivist/historian since 1984 (giving her first presentation to WSNY), with additional preparation by assistant archivist Gabryel

Smith. Representing the Vienna Philharmonic was her counterpart, archivist Silvia Kargl, with historian Friedemann Pestel (Univ. of Freiburg).

Although none of the exhibits were specifically related to Wagner, there was much of unusual interest. Eight exhibit cases lined the walls, evenly divided between the two orchestras.

The NY Philharmonic material included Leonard Bernstein’s score of Mahler’s Sixth Symphony with a large red-and-black bumper sticker affixed to the first page, reading “MAHLER GROOVES.” Also on exhibit were Bernstein’s carefully considered programming plans for his first season as music director (1958-59); and, in a tantalizing glimpse of what might have been, a letter from Wilhelm Furtwängler dated Mar. 26, 1936, regrettably declining an invitation to lead the NY Philharmonic as successor to Arturo Toscanini, due to “the world-political situation.”

Vienna’s exhibits included autograph letters by Brahms, Bruckner, Mahler, Schoenberg, and Richard Strauss. New York and Vienna also shared a special relationship in that Mahler and Bernstein conducted both orchestras.

Vienna has also attempted to confront its National Socialist past. A 1941 letter was displayed requesting lenient treatment for five distinguished elderly Jewish orchestra members subject to deportation; unfortunately the letter was disregarded, with ruinous consequences for those musicians who could not emigrate.

The meeting ended with an illuminating question-and-answer period. Among topics addressed were: 1) Did Mahler really take the lost autograph score of Charles Ives’s Third Symphony with him to Europe, planning to perform it in New York? “Wishful thinking by Ives supporters.” 2) How many women are tenured members of the VPO? “Thirteen, with three more in the pipeline; New York has a 50-50 ratio of men to women.” 3) How are VPO auditions conducted? “Auditions are blind; preference is no longer given to students of orchestra members, but they can be taught to play in the style of the VPO to increase their chances.” 4) Can the VPO and the Staatsoper perform at the same time? “Yes; the Vienna State Opera Orchestra and Vienna Philharmonic currently have 140 positions.”

A 40-page souvenir booklet of the joint archival exhibit, with color facsimiles and translations, was distributed gratis to all WSNY attendees. Also, you can now search the NY Philharmonic Digital Archives to take an online “Virtual Tour” of the Austrian Cultural Forum exhibit of both orchestras at *archives.nyphil.org*. The NY Philharmonic is continuing to digitize its archives. The VPO intends to embark on a similar project.

An interesting sidelight surfaced when the archival exhibit traveled to Vienna. Among the NY Philharmonic’s memorabilia was the score that Leonard Bernstein used when he conducted Mahler’s “Das Lied von der Erde” for his VPO debut in 1966. Bernstein kept it as a memento until his death in 1990. It was then donated to the NY Philharmonic Archives. However, the score actually belonged to the VPO. Bruno Walter had originally utilized it for the first VPO performance of “Das Lied” in 1936. In a ceremony in Vienna on Mar. 28, the NY Philharmonic and the Bernstein family returned the score to the Vienna Philharmonic, after half a century.

Lastly, both orchestras are issuing 175th Anniversary limited-edition newly remastered historic CD box sets. New York’s contains 65 CDs from 1917-1995 (Sony); Vienna’s comprises 44 CDs and one DVD from 1951-2004 (Deutsche Grammophon). Each set will include representative works by Wagner.

MICHAEL SHERWIN

Michael Sherwin, a Society member, recently served as producer of a 2-CD album of “20th Century American Choral Treasures” for the National Endowment for the Arts.