

Salzburg: A festival faces up to its past

The great names of the Salzburg music festival - Strauss, Furtwängler, Karajan - sit uneasily alongside a great horror: Hitler, the Nazis, anti-Semitism. Now, a film by the director Tony Palmer tells the full story. Jessica Duchen reports

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The Salzburg Festival: the name alone is pure magic. This annual cornucopia of artistic thrills, with its cocktail of world-class music, theatre and glorious Alpine landscapes, has inspired countless festivals the world over, but its legendary status remains unique. Its history, though, is anything but unchequered. Now a powerful portrait by the film director Tony Palmer is revealing its full story, warts and all, for the first time.

The Salzburg Festival: A Brief History is a 195-minute celebration of phenomenal music-making by luminaries such as Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Alfred Brendel, Daniel Barenboim, Placido Domingo, Mitsuko Uchida, Simon Rattle and more. It is also a riveting tale of power, glory, Mozartkugeln and the Nazis. The film has been financed not by the festival but by a member of the American Friends of the Salzburg Festival, an organisation the festival is now closing down. "It seems it wasn't raising enough money; what it was doing was raising awareness of the festival," Palmer says. "So the festival wants it shut. This is its farewell present; hopefully, the truth."

Controversy has never been far from Palmer's films, but the ructions in Salzburg over this one may yet take the biscuit. Palmer, ever determined to confront difficult issues, has revealed sides of its history that many would rather forget, epitomised by rare archive footage of Hitler sweeping into Salzburg against the background of the city's famous castle, his henchmen arriving in state at swastika-bedecked festival performances, and cheering crowds welcoming the German invaders in 1938.

One could argue that festivals are about art, not politics; that the past has to be laid to rest. But for the Salzburg Festival, this is a fraught issue, first because of the titanic stature of so many musicians embroiled in those and subsequent years; and also because of the resonances that have rebounded through the decades up to the present day.

"The festival authorities are divided about the film," Palmer says. "Nobody has spoken publicly against it, but some who were supportive at first have changed their tune, because one pressure lobby has been getting at them about the Nazi material, saying, 'We can't say all this again, cut it out, it's not relevant.' Again?"

It's never been said before! And it's absolutely crucial to understanding what this festival has achieved. And I do say virtually at the beginning and end of every sentence that what they have achieved is absolutely wonderful; there's nothing like it on the planet. Even so..."

Salzburg's reputation for anti-Semitism was probably set by the city's original status as an independent, ecclesiastical state run by its archbishop. Until the 17th century, Jews were burnt at the stake at a site that is now one of Salzburg's biggest breweries. Protestants, too, were thrown out in the mid-18th century. The law was changed by Emperor Franz Josef in 1868 to allow a quota of Jews into Land Salzburg.

"Until the First World War, there were never more than 600 Jews living in Salzburg at any time," Palmer says, "and the reason is now clear: it was one of the most anti-Semitic towns in Europe. Was, and maybe still is; we can't prove it, but Helga Rabl-Stadler, the president of the Salzburg Festival, says in an extensive interview in the film that 'there are people around today who wish that Hitler and the Nazis were still here now'."

Yet ironically, the festival was spearheaded by two Jews: Max Reinhardt, the visionary, idealistic theatre director; and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, poet and librettist to Richard Strauss. Festivals had been held occasionally in Salzburg since 1856; but after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Reinhardt and Hofmannsthal, together with a local businessman, Friedrich Gehmacher, and Strauss himself as father figure, saw the opportunity that an annual festival there offered to revitalise the soul of a state ravaged by war, hardship and identity crisis.

In the first festival, in 1920, Reinhardt initiated the annual performance of the English Protestant morality play *Everyman* (in German, *Jedermann*), a tradition that persists today. "The Archbishop, Ignaz Reider, had seen Reinhardt's production of *Jedermann* in Berlin," Palmer recounts, "and he suggested that they perform it on the steps of the Cathedral. Huge protests. But the Archbishop declared that he owned the cathedral square and nobody could stop it! So there's the irony of the Catholic archbishop protecting these two Jewish artists and this Protestant, traditional version of the *Everyman* story, and, what's more, translating it so that it clearly referred to the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It's a work of genius, and it's no accident that it's still there."

The festival quickly became a magnet to the intellectual elite of Europe, besides the high society that still frequents it. Musically, it attracted the finest performers of the day, notably the Vienna Philharmonic and conductors such as Arturo Toscanini, Wilhelm Furtwängler and Strauss himself conducting his own operas. But calamity was not far away.

"Even English history books talk of the Nazis 'invading' Austria," Palmer says. "Actually, they were welcomed. Within a week of the Anschluss, there was a plebiscite and 97 per cent of the population voted in favour. I interviewed many eye-witnesses of the time, including Maria von Trapp of *Sound of Music* fame."

The invaders had big plans for Salzburg. They intended to build a monstrous new festival theatre on the hillside across the river - "the brief was that it must

be higher than the castle," says Palmer - and a parallel building on the opposite hill as the Wehrmacht headquarters for "Ostmark", as the Nazis * * euphemistically called Austria. Fortunately those plans came to nothing, although Palmer has unearthed for the first time the actual architectural drawings. Still, the effects of the power vice in which the Nazis soon held the festival were far-reaching, for the musicians responded to them in ways that affected their reputations for the rest of their lives and have continued to dog them after death.

Toscanini, among others, refused to perform under the regime. But for some, that was not the case. Controversy was especially rife over why Furtwängler did not leave. Palmer interviewed Furtwängler's nonagenarian widow Elisabeth, who reveals how her husband was coerced into staying in Germany.

"By 1938, Furtwängler had had enough and he let the Berlin Philharmonic know that he intended to leave," Palmer explains. "This got back to the authorities. He was then told that, the Nazis having arrived in Austria, Goebbels was threatening to disband the Vienna Philharmonic and send all its members into the army. Goebbels wanted to establish the supremacy of the Berlin orchestra over Vienna; but Berlin was in Prussia, the fiefdom of Goering, whom he hated. Furthermore, in Goebbels' view, Vienna was infested with Jews; Mahler, the great inspiration to the Vienna Philharmonic, was Jewish, as was that other great conductor, Bruno Walter, who had fled. When Furtwängler heard that the Vienna Philharmonic was in effect to be abolished, according to Elisabeth he went to the Führer and said, 'If you do that, I am definitely leaving.' He'd been thinking about it, but hadn't said it until then. And the Führer said, 'No, you can't possibly do that.' So he stayed and thus he saved the Vienna Philharmonic. Mrs Furtwängler says that after the war he finally recognised everything that had happened, and said to her, 'Germans did this! Happiness is no longer possible in our life.' That's incredibly moving."

Furtwängler was not the only conductor caught in the Nazi stranglehold. The young Karl Böhm was likewise manipulated: Böhm's son, the actor Karlheinz Böhm, recounts in another interview that his father was warned that if he left, every member of his family would be sent to a concentration camp.

Richard Strauss himself accepted the post of president of the Reich Music Institute. Palmer interviews Strauss's great-granddaughter Madeleine Rohla-Strauss, who offers a near-apology for her forebear's action. It was a move made not out of conviction, she confesses, but extraordinary political naivety and egoism.

"First, he thought he could be a force for good, which was too stupid for words," Palmer says. "Next, he'd made a fortune before the First World War, especially from Salome and Der Rosenkavalier, but, thinking that the Austro-Hungarian Empire looked dodgy in the run-up to 1914, he'd put all his money into the Bank of England. The whole lot was seized as part of the reparations following the Treaty of Versailles, so in 1919 he was virtually bankrupt. This memory weighed heavily when the Nazis came along - he was determined that it wouldn't happen again.

"So to some extent his accepting that post was understandable. Besides, it flattered his ego to be told he was Mr Big. Last but not least, he'd had a personal mission to try to establish a system of musical education in the Weimar Republic; it had failed, and now he thought he could achieve it under the Nazis. You can understand that kind of naivety, even if you can't approve of it."

There was a further twist in Salzburg's political tale. In 1945, when the city had been heavily bombed and people were reduced to begging in the streets, the festival nevertheless went ahead. Palmer discovered that it was financed by the Americans, who were using it as Cold War propaganda. "The Russians had got to Vienna in February," Palmer recounts. "Mrs Furtwängler told us this: the Russians had already imported as many great Russian conductors and orchestras as they could to play in Vienna. So the Americans thought, 'Anything they can do, we can do better.' Therefore they needed the Salzburg Festival. It was re-established after the Second World War as a direct result of American military policy, and the Americans paid for it for several years."

Meanwhile, a young conductor had been rising through the ranks: Herbert von Karajan, a native of Salzburg. Later, as director, he built the festival to such a peak that on his death in 1989 fears abounded not only for what would happen to it, but even what would happen to the city itself, where the festival had become the largest source of income.

Karajan had joined the Nazi party not once but twice, the first time while it was still illegal in Austria. "Without the Salzburg Festival," Palmer says, "the careers of many musicians who had suffered by their association with the Nazi party would not have revived as quickly as they did, Karajan being the obvious example, but Elisabeth Schwarzkopf too. Many managed to find a niche in a city which certainly had had a love affair, and some would say continues to have a love affair, with that time." Palmer points out that two eminent sopranos, Schwarzkopf and Kirsten Flagstad, had both been card-carrying party members; Flagstad's stellar Wagnerian career never fully recovered. "But Schwarzkopf, who stayed in Austria and performed often in Salzburg, somehow managed to survive."

Nevertheless, the film presents a balanced portrait of Karajan, emphasising his vital role as not only legendary conductor and festival director but also as patron to other musicians. "He was always willing to invite and recommend younger conductors," Palmer says. "Very few conductors do that!" Among those Karajan helped to launch in Salzburg were Riccardo Muti, Seiji Ozawa and Mariss Jansons, plus the violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter, all of whom pay tribute to his influence in the film. Extracts from home movies show him as a devoted family man leading an unpretentious existence, while anecdotes abound about his quiet financial generosity. For Karajan, then, redemption did lie to a considerable extent in art.

But the legacy of the war years proved long-lasting - manifesting, according to Palmer, as an ingrained conservatism that he regards as closely linked to anti-Semitism. "Gérard Mortier, under whose directorship the festival achieved unprecedented audience levels, fell foul of this many times," Palmer says. The

Belgian-born arts manager raised hackles by up-ending tired traditions that were ossifying the festival's artistic outlook.

"He felt he was simply trying to re-establish the ideals on which Reinhardt had founded the festival, to put it back on the intellectual map," Palmer says; though some critics felt that certain productions went too far, including a drug-crazed Don Giovanni and a brothel-set production of Die Fledermaus that even today reduces Salzburg's citizens to a state of spluttering frenzy. One of Mortier's collaborators, the provocative opera director Peter Sellars, tellingly comments: "We all have our moment where the door opens and you step in and you do anything you can do before they figure out what you're doing and throw you out again."

"An earlier crunch point, ironically during Karajan's regime, had been the first production in Salzburg of Moses und Aron," says Palmer. "One of many things I didn't include was some footage of the director Jean-Pierre Ponnelle and the conductor James Levine being booed off the stage." Levine, he adds, talked to him at length about the problems surrounding the work: "It's Schoenberg; it's the most in-your-face Jewish opera there is; and at the time, Kurt Waldheim was president of Austria. Nothing was ever proved against Waldheim except that he had lied about his Nazi past, but when he came to the Salzburg Festival, there were riots. And everybody denied it. Riots? Never! They said it had never happened! Quite extraordinary. There's film of it and I've included that."

This year, 27 January marked the 250th anniversary of the birth of Mozart. The date is also the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. Mozart year in Salzburg opened that day with a gala at the Mozarteum. Palmer was there. "The President of Austria, Heinz Fischer, was the last to speak. Everyone else had been saying, 'Wonderful place, wonderful Mozart...' Fischer spoke very quietly. His first line was, 'Today is Mozart's birthday. Never forget that this day is also the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.' The audience gave a sharp intake of breath. And in front of me three ladies in furs and jewellery got up and walked out."

The film closes with President Fischer's words: "How incredible it is, and how difficult to understand... that the human being is able to write such wonderful, heavenly music, and that the very same human being is able to behave like those who are responsible for the murders and crimes in a concentration camp like Auschwitz. And I personally am touched because my father-in-law was in the concentration camp, and so this 27 January is really indicating the wide, wide space between heaven and hell."

Palmer's film traces a compelling path across that space. And as this year's Salzburg Festival begins its celebration of Mozart, presenting all of his 22 operas, this film may well prove a crucial part of a truth and reconciliation process that has never quite been completed.

'The Salzburg Festival: A Brief History' is out next week on DVD. It will be screened several times during this summer's Salzburg Festival