

OPERA PERFORMANCES IN ANTWERP DURING THE FIRST AND SECOND WORLD WAR

- Erik Baeck -

In an ideal world, the definition of art would have nothing to do with race or politics. However, world history has proved that art can be promoted, rejected, or destroyed because of racial, political, and religious prejudices. Research on opera performances during the German occupation of Antwerp in the First and Second World War reveals that the programming of operas; the recruitment of soloists, stage managers, and conductors, as well as publication and reception in the press were censored and manipulated by both German occupying forces and Flemish activists. By focusing on two similar periods and their differences, this article lays a foundation for further comparative research on cultural policy (and its results) in both occupation periods.

Until recently, little or no research had been done on opera performances in Antwerp during World War I and World War II. On one hand, it was believed that no performances took place between 1914-1918 because the municipal opera houses had been closed. On the other hand, the years 1940-1944 remained a delicate matter as long as several Antwerp personalities who had played an important political and cultural role during the Nazi-occupation were still alive. Nevertheless, Antwerp turned out to be the perfect subject for a comparative case study of opera performances during both world wars. Scrutinising archival documents, newspapers, and periodicals has not only provided substantial information on the organization, programming, and performances of opera spectacles in the metropole on the river Scheldt during both wars but also an intriguing insight into the collaboration of Antwerp opera directors and conductors with National-Socialists during the Second World War.

I. The First World War¹

In 1914, Antwerp boasted two opera houses. The *Théâtre Royal* (Royal Theatre, director Adolphe Coryn) was inaugurated in 1834 at the Komedieplaats and presented primarily a French and Italian repertoire in French. The *Vlaamsche Opera* (Flemish Opera, director Henry Fontaine) was inaugurated in 1907 at the Kunstlei (now Frankrijklei) and justified its existence by performing Flemish and German operas in Dutch². Both opera houses functioned according to a concession system³.

Zivilverwaltung and German Censorship

During the first few months after the occupation of Antwerp by the Germans on 9 October 1914, the Military Governor of the province, also president of the *Zivilverwaltung* – the German civil administration – issued not only a curfew but also a ban on opera and theatre performances, concerts, entertainment, and games. Directly impacted by these restrictions, both opera houses remained closed and A. Coryn, H. Fontaine and many members of their opera companies fled abroad.

However, in response to complaints from radical Flemish nationalists (named activists in 1915), the German General-Governor of Belgium, Moritz Freiherr von Bissing, tried to promote German war policy in occupied Belgium with the so-called *Flamenpolitik*, a Flemish-friendly policy. His cultural policy, founded on German supremacy,

was implemented by the *Bildungszentrale* (Education center)⁴. In the interest of gaining the confidence of the population, the German occupier allowed mayor Jan de Vos as well as most of the aldermen and the Antwerp city council to retain their function under the supervision of the Military Governor of the province. And after the precarious restoration of social life, the *Belgische Artisten Vereeniging* (Belgian Artist Association) finally obtained permission to organize Flemish spectacles in April 1915⁵.

Louis Bertrijn, pre-war director of the municipal *Koninklijke Nederlandsche Schouwburg* (Royal Dutch Theatre) located on the Kipdorpbrug, had already formed a new Royal Dutch Theatre company in October 1915, programming theatre plays and so-called “Flemish lyric dramas” with actors, actresses, and an orchestra conducted by Karel Candaël who had fled to the Netherlands at the outbreak of the war and returned in 1915⁶. Moreover, Antwerp was not deprived of opera performances during the war. New opera companies were formed in several private theatres, playing a franco-italian repertoire of operas and operettas in the Dutch language. Performances in French were forbidden by the *Zivilverwaltung*, but there was still a free choice of repertoire. According to Otto Flake, responsible for censorship, the inspection was often trivial, superficial, and limited to the external presentation. For instance, the colours blue-white-red of the French national flag or the bust of the Belgian king Albert were forbidden⁷.

1. This section summarises and partially republishes information that was published by ERIK BAECK, “L’Opéra à Anvers pendant la Grande Guerre”, in *Revue belge de Musicologie*, vol. 74, 2020, p. 85-104.

2. HEDWIGE BAECK-SCHILDERS and ERIK BAECK, “Muziekleven”, in GUSTAVE ASAERT and LUC DUERLOO, ed., *Antwerpen in de 20^{ste} eeuw. Van Belle Époque tot Golden Sixties*, Brasschaat, 2008, p. 317-335.

3. Under a concession system, the city council appointed a director for the city-owned opera house but the director himself had to recruit and remunerate his opera singers, choir and orchestra. However, the city council allowed him a subsidy.

4. LODÉ WILS, *Flamenpolitik en Activisme*, Leuven, 1974, p. 88-107.

5. *Antwerpsche Tijdingen*, 24 April 1915, p. 3.

6. Flemish lyric dramas, a genre promoted by Peter Benoit, were not operas. The actors, not singers, had to recite the spoken text on the metrum and rhythm of the music. See HEDWIGE BAECK-SCHILDERS and ERIK BAECK, “Wat gebeurde er met het ‘Meilief van Peter Benoit?’”, in *Post Factum. Jaarboek voor Geschiedenis en Volkskunde* (Provincie Antwerpen), no. 2, 2010, p. 87-127.

7. OTTO FLAKE, *Es wird Abend. Bericht aus einem langen Leben*, Gütersloh, 1960, p. 239 and 240, cited by ULRICH TIEDAU, “De Duitse cultuurpolitiek in België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog”, in *Cahiers d’Histoire du Temps Présent*, no. 11, Bruxelles, 2003, p. 33.

Four New Opera Companies

The Two Companies of Jespers

In October 1915, Emile Jespers, an Antwerp sculptor and amateur-pianist, founded *Vlaamsch Operagezelschap* (Flemish Opera Company) in the Palatinat theatre with former members of the Flemish Opera, conducted by Alphonse Cluytens, who had been second conductor from 1910 to 1912⁸. Jespers obviously wanted to provide work for opera singers who had been unemployed since the closing of the Flemish Opera. Performances initially took place on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday. But Jespers disbanded this troupe after a few performances of Act 2 of Jan Blockx' opera *Bruid der Zee* and Arthur van Oost's opera *Minnebrugje* and founded another company, the *Vereenigde Operazangers* (United Opera Singers) playing in theatre El Bardo on Saturday and Sunday with conductor J. Hollebeke, a former violoncellist of the Flemish Opera⁹.

The first performance by the United Opera Singers, 25 December 1915, featured Gounod's opera *Faust*¹⁰, followed by Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* and Van Oost's *Minnebrugje* in January 1916¹¹. However, with the operetta *Les Saltimbanques* of Louis Ganne in the programme in February 1916, Jespers' troupe changed the bar. Because the public wanted to see and hear operettas and was pleased by Ganne's operetta, *Les Saltimbanques* was performed until 26 March 1916¹². And after the premiere of *Le Grand Mogol*, an opera-bouffe by Edmond

Audran on 30 March 1916, their popularity with the public lasted until the end of the winter season on 13 April 1916¹³.

Nevertheless, the program was criticized in the press. Daily newspaper *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, an organ of the Flemish activists, published a reader's letter indicting *Faust's* premiere due to its "giving in to the unhealthy lust of the masses and in this way helping to abolish the purification that our Flemish Opera has brought about", and the editors agreed with this statement because "We understand very well that their [the United Opera Singers] sole purpose is to provide for the living needs of artists [...] However, we absolutely cannot approve and we will not at all allow that our Flemish principles should thus be harmed"¹⁴. Indeed, as a reaction to the exclusively French repertoire of the Royal Theatre, the Flemish Opera troupe was formed in 1893 to play Flemish and German works and not French operas such as *Faust*.

There is no doubt that the performances of the opera *Faust* were mediocre. For instance, the orchestra consisted merely of a piano and a quartet of strings without woodwind and brass instruments, sometimes the choir sang out of tune, the vocal technique and the physiognomy of the soloists left much to be desired; at one point, they started ten bars too late, and the conductor had removed a large portion of the score (probably for the most part the ballet music because he had no ballet troupe at his disposal) But all

8. *Geïllustreerde Zondagsgazet*, 3 October 1915, p. 4. The Palatinat theatre in the Carnotstraat 22, was the former *Rubenspaleis*, built in 1877, and transformed in an operette theatre in 1910. During the war, theatre performances were given on Saturday, Sunday, Monday and Thursday (see *Idem*, 24 October 1915, p. 4). About Cluytens, see ERIK BAECK, "Cluytens, Alphonse, Malwina, pianist, dirigent, componist en muziekpedagoog", in *Nationaal Biografisch Woordenboek*, 18, Brussel, 2007, p. 190-193.

9. *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 3 December 1915, p. 3. El Bardo, situated on the Sint-Jacobsmarkt, could be rented since its inauguration in 1882 by theatre companies and societies.

10. *Idem*; *Het Tooneel*, 1 January 1916, p. 1, 2; *Geïllustreerde Zondagsgazet*, 2 January 1916, p. 4.

11. *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 30 December 1915, p. 3; *Het Tooneel*, 8 January 1916, p. 3. We mention the titles of the operas in the original language but the performances were sung in Dutch.

12. *Het Tooneel*, 12 February 1916, p. 5; 25 March 1916, p. 4; *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 7 February 1916, p. 3; 11 February 1916, p. 3.

13. *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 12 April 1916, p. 3.

14. *Idem*, 29 December 1915, p. 3: "door toe te geven aan den ongezonnen lust van de massa, en zoodoende er aan mee te helpen de loutering bewerkt door onzen Vlaamschen Opera terug te niet te doen [...] Dat echter hierdoor afbreuk wordt gedaan aan onze Vlaamsche beginselen, is eene daad die wij niet kunnen goedkeuren en die wij niet goedschiks mogen laten gebeuren".

of this apparently did not disturb the audience, who listened silently and applauded cordially¹⁵. However, press reviews of *Cavalleria rusticana* and of operetta performances such as *Les Saltimbanques*, for which hundreds of interested people were unable to get tickets, and *Le Grand Mogol* were less severe¹⁶.

According to press announcements the United Opera Singers would continue their operetta repertoire in El Bardo during the summer season, but there are no further mentions of the company, probably because other theatres such as Anvers-Palace, Eden, Hippodrome, Palatinat, and Scala had adopted the same operetta repertoire.

The Two Companies of Villier

In September 1917, two well-known singers, Georges Villier, a baritone at the Flemish Opera troupe from 1911 to 1914, and tenor Paul Scapus, founded the *Nieuwe Operavereeniging* (New Opera Association) in Anvers-Palace, built in 1915 by Antwerp architect Louis Hamaïde as a music-hall with 1,400 seats and a large stage.

In this case, the intentions and the means of the founders were more professional than those of Jespers. Cluytens conducted a thirty musician orchestra and L. Van den Broeck led a choir of thirty singers. The New Opera Association played once a week, first on Tuesdays, later, starting in March 1918, on Fridays¹⁷. Anvers-Palace also presented cinema screenings and symphonic concerts¹⁸.

The franco-italian repertoire did not differ from the pre-war repertoire in the Royal Theatre, with the exception of the fact that it was now sung in Dutch¹⁹. The first performance, Puccini's opera *Tosca* on 2 October 1917, obtained great success: a full hall, new sets, excellent protagonists, although the orchestra was a bit weak and the substitution of the harp by a piano rather unfortunate²⁰. In November, Frank Berthen reviewed in *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws* Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* and Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* as fine performances, requesting however that, after these two Italian operas, Flemish works would appear on the playbill²¹. Villier's troupe continued nevertheless with Massenet's *Werther*, Donizetti's *La Favorite*, Puccini's *La Bohème*, Bizet's *Carmen*, Massenet's *Manon*, and Verdi's *Rigoletto* and concluded the season on 10 May 1918²².

Het Tooneel frequently mentioned that Anvers-Palace was fully booked and that the performances had a decent, even an excellent vocal level²³. The reviewer could also not fail to confirm the relentless appreciation by the public of the emphatic and sentimental themes in the French drame lyrique *Werther*²⁴. In contrast, Frank Berthen wrote in *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws* that the staging was sometimes ridiculous. For instance, when night falls in the first act, it falls in jerks and the transition from a clear day to a gloomy night lasted only 30 seconds²⁵. Berthen criticized also the disgusting bad taste in *Werther*, "a masterpiece of false, sweetish sentimentality"²⁶. And a certain L.V., Berthen's successor as music critic of

15. *Het Tooneel*, 1 January 1916, p. 2.

16. *Idem*, 15 January 1916, p. 3; 12 February 1916, p. 5; *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 7 February 1916, p. 3; 29 February 1916, p. 3; 3 April 1916, p. 3.

17. *Het Tooneel*, 15 September 1917, p. 3; 2 March 1918, p. 1.

18. See in this issue HEDWIGE BAECK-SCHILDERS, "Symphonic concerts in Antwerp during the First and the Second World War".

19. Dutch is the common language of Flanders and the Netherlands.

20. *Het Tooneel*, 6 October 1917, p. 5.

21. *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 12 November 1917, p. 3. It is not surprising that Berthen wanted Flemish works because *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws* was an activist newspaper. Moreover, newspapers were censored by the *Zivilverwaltung*. Reviews were thus biased.

22. *Het Tooneel*, 17 November 1917, p. 2; 15 December 1917, p. 2; 12 January 1918, p. 2; 9 February 1918, p. 1; 16 March 1918, p. 1; 20 April 1918, p. 1; 4 May 1918, p. 2.

23. *Idem*, 13 October 1917, p. 3; 10 November 1917, p. 3; 17 November 1917, p. 2; 15 December 1917, p. 2.

24. *Idem*, 17 November 1917, p. 3.

25. *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 15 November 1917, p. 4.

26. *Idem*, 15 November 1917, p. 4: "meesterwerk van zoetelijk namaaksentiment".

Nieuwe Opera-Vereeniging

WINTERSEIZOEN 1917.1918

SCHOUWBURG „ANVERS-PALACE“

APPELMANSSTRAAT, 35

Bureel: 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ u. T.U.

Doek: 8 u. T.U.

GALA-VERTOONING

WERTHER

Opera in 4 bedrijven.

Muziek van
J. MASSENET.

Nederlandsche bewerking van
H. VAN ROOY.

De Schout	...	...	...	H. G. Dils
Charlotte	...	...	...	Mej. Val. Bellys
Sophie	..	...	...	" Hel. Krinkels
Werther	..	...	...	H. Paul Scapus
Albert	...	...	...	" G. Villier
Johann	...	...	...	" J. Wera
Schmidt	..	...	...	" A. Fabry

Orkest onder de leiding van den Heer Alph. CLUYTENS.

STRENG VERBODEN TE ROOKEN IN DE ZAAL.

Program Werther, J. Massenet, performed in Anvers-Palace by the New Opera Association (Nieuwe Opera-Vereeniging) in November 1917. Source : Collection City of Antwerp, Letterenhuis.

Het Vlaamsche Nieuws, did not hesitate to affirm after a performance of the Italian opera *La Favorite* that it would be better to present national lyrical works instead of “those foreign pieces, which are, moreover, exclusively French and Italian [because] our national character does not at all correspond with this music”²⁷.

In May 1918 negotiations with the direction of Anvers-Palace for the formation of a new troupe did not succeed, but several members of the New Opera Association with the exception of Scapus, who had signed in January 1918 an engagement with the *Beurstheater* (Stock Exchange Theatre) in Brussels, followed Villier to found a new company in the *Théâtre des Variétés* (Variétés Theatre)²⁸. Villier, however, had to change the repertoire to operettas because the *Zivilverwaltung* had forbidden opera performances in variétés-theatres, music-halls and cinemas since June 1918 at the instigation of the *Vereeniging voor Schrijversrechten* (Writers’ Right Association)²⁹. This prohibition favoured the reopening of the Flemish Opera, wanted by the activists (see later).

Villiers formed a new troupe with conductor Cluytens, stage-manager Olivier, pianist-accompanist Jozef Vaes, 20 soloists, an orchestra of 40 musicians and a choir of 40 singers³⁰. The first performance, Offenbach’s *Grande-Duchesse de Gerolstein*, was played on 3 October, Oscar Straus’ *Ein Walzer-*

traum followed on 17 October, both of course sung in Dutch³¹. Instead of one performance a week in Anvers-Palace, Villier’s new company played in the Variétés Theatre on Thursday, Saturday, Sunday (afternoon and evening), and Monday³². One of the reasons to give more performances seems to have been that the Variétés Theatre did not have as many seats as Anvers-Palace. However, many music lovers who had liked the opera performances in Anvers-Palace, did not attend as frequently the operettas in the Variétés Theatre³³.

The Reopening of the Flemish Opera

Although the municipality had closed the Flemish Opera, the *Zivilverwaltung* nevertheless requisitioned the hall for *Gastspiele* (Guest performances) organized by von Bissing’s *Bildungszentrale*. The *Oper der Etappen-Inspektion IV* (Opera of the Etappen-Inspection IV), an opera company formed by the Germans in Ghent, chief town of the military 4th Etappe [an area outside the combat zone] and conducted by Eugen Gottlieb, played Wagner’s *Die Walküre* (18 July 1917) and Verdi’s *Rigoletto* (17 August 1917)³⁴; the *Königliche Hofoper Stuttgart* (Royal Stuttgart Court Opera) performed Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*, conducted by Max von Schillings (29 Januar 1918)³⁵; the *Deutsches Theater in Brüssel* (German Theatre in Brussels) gave four opera performances, Nicolai’s *Die lustige Weiber von Windsor*, Flotow’s *Martha*, Lortzing’s *Der Waffenschmied*, and *Zar und Zimmerman* with the *Deutsches*

27. *Idem*, 14 December 1917, p. 2: “Zouden zij [de leiders van de Nieuwe Operavereeniging] het ook niet beter achten nationale zangspelen op te voeren dan dat vreemd – en dan nog uitsluitend Fransch en Italiaansch – gedoe? Het staat nu eenmaal vast dat onze volksgeest niet strookt met deze muziek.”

28. *Het Tooneel*, 18 May 1918, p. 1; 25 May 1918, p. 1. The Variétés Theatre, situated Meir 68, was built by an “société anonyme” in 1904 in order to perform French classical and modern plays in the original language. François Reinemund, representative of the administration of the theatre, had concluded with Villier an annual bail of 45.000 fr. on the condition that the contract would be suspended when the war ended.

29. *Het Tooneel*, 1 June 1918, p. 1: “Vereeniging van Schrijversrechten besloten heeft geen voorstellingen van opera’s meer toe te laten in kinema- en music-hallzalen”; *Id.*, 30 November 1918: “Door een van die aartsdomme besluiten waaraan wij voor onze bevrijding stilaan gewend waren geraakt, had de ‘bezettende overheid’ aan den sympathieken bestuurder der Variétés, heer George Villier, het verbod opgelegd opera’s op te voeren”.

30. Letterenhuis Antwerpen, Théâtre des Variétés, T 26519 D, Programs Toneeljaar 1918-1919; *Het Tooneel*, 7 September 1918, p. 1; 14 September 1918, p. 1.

31. *Het Tooneel*, 7 September 1918, p. 1; 26 September 1918, p. 1; 19 October 1918, p. 1; 16 November 1918, p. 1.

32. *Idem*, 14 September 1918, p. 1.

33. *Idem*, 30 November 1918, p. 1.

34. Letterenhuis Antwerpen, dossier KVO, O33745, program *Die Walküre*, 18 July 1917; *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 20 July 1917, p. 3; 19 August 1917, p. 3.

35. *Idem*, program *Tristan und Isolde*, 29 Januar 1918. Soloists and conductor came from Stuttgart Opera, but the orchestra was the German Symphony Orchestra in Brussels.

Symphonie-Orchester in Brüssel (German Symphony Orchestra in Brussels) conducted by Klaus Nettsträter (July 1918)³⁶; and the Opera of the Etappen-Inspection IV also presented Puccini's opera *Tosca*, and Millöcker's operetta *Der Bettelstudent* (September 1918)³⁷. All of these performances were only performed once. Moreover, the *Deutsches Theater an der Westfront* (German Theatre at the West Front, a company formed by the Germans in Lille, France) and the *Opera of the Etappen-Inspection IV* organized 24 performances of operettas from 14 September 1917 until 8 November 1918³⁸.

In *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 29 July 1917, Fr. Berthen regretted the cuts in the second act of *Die Walküre*, but he praised the interpretation of all the soloists and he had "never seen or heard such a perfect *Brünnhilde*". Two weeks later, on 19 August 1917, Berthen wrote that he didn't like the performance of *Rigoletto* because the German soloists were not familiar with the "agil, extrovert and superficial Italian singing style". For the performance of *Tristan und Isolde*, 29 January 1918, the Flemish Opera was packed, with German officers and soldiers, members of Antwerp's so-called "German colony" and numerous pre-war Flemish Wagnerians, who were deeply impressed by the ideal Wagnerian singing style of the soloists and Wagner's genius³⁹. Staging, soloists, orchestral performances, and public interest for the operetta's performed by German companies were, however, rather moderate according to the press⁴⁰.

Meanwhile, notwithstanding the opposition of Louis Franck, alderman but as president of the intercommunal commission Groot-Antwerpen also virtual mayor of Antwerp, activists had installed an *Hoofdbestuur voor Vlaamse Actie* (Central Administration for Flemish Action) in order to dominate the Antwerp college of aldermen⁴¹.

Already in November 1917, Henry Fontaine cherished the hope to form a troupe for the lyric season 1918-1919 "in any circumstances"⁴². In May 1918, he finally requested permission from the mayor and aldermen of Antwerp to dispose of the Flemish Opera, but after the college of aldermen informed him that he had to run his business without municipal grants, without assurance contribution, and without payment of machinists, he withdrew his request in June until more favorable circumstances or conditions would occur⁴³. However, on 7 June 1918, during a reunion organized by the Flemish authors and activists sympathisers Pol de Mont, Emmanuel de Bom, and Lucas Hendrik Smeding, Fontaine was informed that a consortium of wealthy citizens had the intention to support the Flemish Opera and to ask the municipality to nominate him as director if he would send a new request⁴⁴. Relying on this support, Fontaine wrote thus a second sollicitation, which was accepted by the college of aldermen, dominated then by activists, in the session of 18 June 1918⁴⁵. The decision of the *Zivilverwaltung* to forbid opera performances in

36. *Idem*, programs. For the *Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester in Brüssel*, see HEDWIGE BAECK-SCHILDERS, "Symphonic concerts in Antwerp..." in this issue.

37. *Idem*, programs; *Belgischer Kurier*, 17 September 1918 (no page number).

38. Letterenhuis Antwerpen, dossier KVO, O33745; *Belgischer Kurier*, 18 May 1918 (no page number).

39. *Belgischer Kurier*, 2 February 1918, p. 3.

40. *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 16 September 1917, p. 3; 18 September 1917, p. 3; 14 November 1917, p. 3; 15 November 1917, p. 2; 19 November 1917, p. 2. The "German colony" was a community of German merchants, present in Antwerp since 1796 with important port activities, trading practices and its own cultural life.

41. SOPHIE DE SCHAEPDRIJVER, *De Grootte Oorlog. Het Koninkrijk België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Antwerpen, 2013, p. 161, 357 (note 424); FRANK SEBERECHTS, "Antwerpen tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog", in *Antwerpen in de 20^{de} eeuw...*, p. 117-124 [120].

42. *Het Tooneel*, 24 November 1917, p. 1: "De heer Fontaine zal [...] een operagezelschap samenstellen, waarmede hij het seizoen 1918-1919 zal openen, onaangezien het verloop der omstandigheden".

43. *Idem*, 18 May 1918, p. 1; 8 June 1918, p. 1.

44. *Idem*, 8 June 1918, p. 1. Members of this consortium were for instance Eduard de Beukelaer, founder and owner of a biscuit concern, and Sallie Kok, a Jewish-Dutch Antwerp diamond dealer, who financed also *De Vlaamsche Post*, organ of the activists.

45. *Idem*, 22 June 1918, p. 1; 29 June 1918, p. 1.

General-Gouvernement in Belgien.

Deutsches Theater in Brüssel

errichtet vom
Rhein-Mainischen Verband für Volkbildung
Vollzug **Dr. S. Schmitt.**

Abends 7 Uhr. Am Dienstag, den 29. Januar 1918 Ende nach 11 Uhr.

Gastspiel der Königliden Hofoper Stuttgart
in der Flämischen Oper, Kunstlei, Antwerpen.

Tristan und Isolde

Handlung in drei Aufzügen von Richard Wagner.

Musikalische Leitung: Max von Schillings. Leiter der Aufführung: Franz Ludwig Gorth.

Personen:

Tristan	Rudolf Ritter
König Marke	Reinhold Jrig
Isolde	Helene Wildbrunn
Kuzmenal	Theodor Schedl
Melot	Rudolf van Schaif
Brangäne	E. Hoffmann-Crogin
Ein Ritter	Felix Döfen
Ein Steuermann	Franz Börd
Stimme eines jungen Seemannes	Rudolf van Schaif

Schiffsvoll, Ritter und Knappen.

Bühnendienst: Hans Wiese.

Nach dem ersten Aufzuge findet eine Pause von 20 Minuten, nach dem zweiten eine solche von 25 Minuten statt.

Preise der Plätze:

Orchesterbänke	8. — M.	2. Rang und 2. Rang Loge	4. — M.
1. Rang und 1. Rang Loge	8. — M.	3. Rang 1. und 2. Amphitheater	2. — M.
Parquet	7. — M.	3. Rang Galben	2. — M.
Parterre	5. — M.	3. Rang 3. Amphitheater	1. — M.

Verkauf der Karten am 27., 28. und 29. Januar auf der Kommandantur, Zimmer 9.

Druck von Kasper & Pöhl, Hannover. — 3. Nr. 1474, 241-18.

Program *Tristan und Isolde*, R. Wagner, performed in the Flemish Opera by the *Königliche Hofoper Stuttgart* 29 Januar 1917. Source : Collection City of Antwerp, Letterenhuis.

cinema and variété-theatres had obviously paved the way to success for the Flemish Opera.

The repertoire for the 1918-1919 season was already published on 29 June and the list of members of the troupe followed on 31 August 1918: Julius J.B. Schrey, conductor, Fé Derickx, principal stage – manager, 21 soloists, an orchestra of 50 musicians, a mixed choir of 90 singers, and a choir of 50 children⁴⁶.

Deploring the poor situation of the theatres in Flanders and most especially the unsolved problems with the theatre in Ghent, the *Belgischer Kurier*, 23 July 1918, looked forward on the re-opening of the Flemish Opera “from which the whole country would benefit”⁴⁷. *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 10 September 1918, published a triumphal article by chief editor and activist Raf Verhulst, stressing that “the Flemish city of Antwerp informs the world of the re-opening of the Flemish opera to fortify on his turn the Flemish soul”. Announcing *Prinses Zonneschijn*, a fairy legend composed in 1893 by Paul Gilson on a libretto by Pol de Mont, for the premiere, Verhulst precised that it would be a tribute to Gilson, the new director of the *Koninklijk Vlaamsch Conservatorium* (Royal Flemish Conservatoire) that would reinforce the link between the opera and the conservatoire. Finally, he revealed that no less than five Flemish operas would be performed, one of them the premiere of *Meivuur* (an opera composed by a young Antwerp composer, Jef Van Hoof, convinced activist and pupil of Gilson). Regarding Fontaine’s choice to include in the repertoire also Gounod’s *Faust*

and Bizet’s *Carmen* – two French operas never played in the Flemish Opera – Verhulst admitted that he had received several letters of protest, pretending that only Flemish and German works could be played, and that this rule had been logical in times when there was also a Royal French Theatre in Antwerp, but argued boldly that this theatre “has no more sense in a Flemish city and moreover, it is now closed”⁴⁸.

With financial support of a consortium of activists and with approval of the activist press, Fontaine did not wait until the end of the war to open the Flemish Opera. The premiere of *Prinses Zonneschijn* on 10 October 1918 was attended by Karel Weyler, alderman of Public Instruction and Fine Arts, but neither mayor Jan De Vos nor alderman Louis Franck were present, as was the custom before the war by the opening of the opera season⁴⁹. The premiere of Flotow’s *Martha* followed on 19 October, Wagner’s *Fliegende Holländer* on 31 October and Gluck’s *Orpheus und Eurydike* on 7 November 1918.

Rave reviews appeared in the censored press⁵⁰. Van Hoof was however disillusioned after the performance of *Prinses Zonneschijn*, because the almost impossible difficulties of this “summit of the musical literature” exceeded the possibilities of the new troupe of the Flemish Opera. “They have still to work a lot”, he concluded⁵¹. But in his commentary on the *Fliegende Holländer* Van Hoof stated proudly that “the Flemish Opera is a result of the *Vlaamsche Beweging* (Flemish Movement)” and argued that “Those who have participated in its

46. *Vlaamsch Leven, zelfstandig Vlaamsch geïllustreerd weekblad*, 8 September 1918, p. 10, 11.

47. *Belgischer Kurier*, 23 July 1918 (no page number): “Wo die Theaterverhältnisse so elend sind wie in Flandern, kommt das Wirken einer einzigen Bühne den ganzen Lande zu guten.”

48. *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 10 September 1918, p. 1: “Het Vlaamsche Antwerpen laat aan de wereld weten dat de Vlaamsche Opera terug heropbloeit, om mede de Vlaamsche ziel te sterken. [...] *Prinses Zonneschijn* van Pol de Mont en van den grooten Vlaamschen meester Paul Gilson. [...] Het wordt aldus te gepaster uur en stond, een hulde aan den nieuwen bestuurder van het Koninklijk Vlaamsch Conservatorium [...] Gilson, die zich te Antwerpen metterwoon komt vestigen, en onder wiens leiding het Conservatorium eindelijk weer in opzicht van kunst zal kunnen ontluiken, is de band die Opera en Conservatorium nog meer tot een geheel samenbrengt [...] Doch nu de Royal, die toch geen reden van bestaan had in onze Vlaamsche stad, gesloten is [...]”.

49. *Antwerpsche Courant*, 11 October 1918; *Het Tooneel*, 12 October 1918, p. 1.

50. *Het Tooneel*, 12 October 1918, p. 1; *Antwerpsche Courant*, 11 October 1918, p. 1; *Nieuwsblad van Antwerpen*, 12 October 1918 (no page number).

51. *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 12 October 1918, p. 2: “hoogtepunt in de muzieklitteratuur” [...] “maar er dient ontzaglijk gewerkt”.

VLAAMSCH E OPERA
VAN ANTWERPEN
 BESTUUR : HENRY FONTAINE



TOONEELJAAR 1918-1919

VLAAMSCH E OPERA VAN ANTWERPEN
 Directeur: HENRY FONTAINE

Donderdag 10, Zaterdag 12, Zondag 13 October 1918
 om 8 ure 's avonds (t.u.)

Prinses Zonneschijn
 Sprookjespel in 4 bedrijven

Gedicht van Pol DE MONT Muziek van Paul GILSON
 Dirigent: Hr. J. J. B. Schryg — Regie: Hr. F. Dericks

VERDEELING

Prinses Zonneschijn	Mej. J. Lauwers
Koning Ajuboud , haar vader	Heer H. Caspele
Walpra , godelve van Koning Hegem.	
Ajubouds broeder	Mej. J. Montfort
Tjald , haar zoon	Heer Paul De Blaer
De eerste Skald	Heer Marcely
De tweede Skald	Heer Eug. Van Haeswyck
De derde Skald	Heer J. Helestrate
Spel- en naammeesters, jagers, dienaars, hoorsblazers, schilknopen, houtzaagsters, kinderen.	

Land van bergen en wouden — Germaansche zeezijde.

Kostuimen van het huis Verhoeven-Rasquin.
 Pruisken van het huis E. Dingemans.

Program Flemish Opera (Vlaamsche Opera), Prinses Zonneschijn, P. Gilson, performed in October 1918.
 Source : Collection City of Antwerp, Letterenhuis.

reopening will have contributed to the resurgence of Flemish music and Flemish people, which is activism of the purest kind”, concluding that after Gilson, Flotow and Wagner, also Gluck and Mozart would follow “because it is almost impossible to organize a lyric season without German music”⁵².

Before the armistice of 11 November 1918, the Flemish Opera had performed *Prinses Zonneschijn* (5 times), *Martha* (3), *Der fliegende Holländer* (3), *Orpheus und Eurydike* (3), in total 14 performances of 4 operas, respectively 1 Flemish (5 performances) and 3 German (9 performances). All these performances were conducted by Julius J.B. Schrey and staged by Felix Derickx.

Conclusion

Although the city council had closed the Royal Theatre and the Flemish Opera, opera performances still took place in Antwerp during World War I. The Royal Theatre remained closed; the Flemish Opera was claimed by the German occupier for performances by German opera troupes. Several new Antwerp opera troupes were also formed, playing in private cinemas and variétés-theatres. However, the artistic level of the performances did not reach the level it was at before the war. Finally, in the last months of the war, the Flemish Opera reopened with a new troupe, formed by its pre-war director, supported financially by a consortium of rich activists and with the consent of the Antwerp municipal administration.

II. Interbellum

After the Armistice, Villier’s opera troupe obtained permission of the city council to play in the Royal Theatre until the return of its pre-war director A. Coryn who formed a new opera troupe and opened the season on 11 February 1919. In 1920 the Flemish Opera became *Koninklijke Vlaamse Opera* (Royal Flemish Opera, acronym KVO). Finally, in 1933, in the midst of a global economic crisis and mounting political tensions, instigated by the *Frontpartij* (Front Party) – a political party fighting for more Flemish rights – the municipality decided to support only the KVO⁵³. Henceforth deprived of subsidies, the opera company of the Royal Theatre was disbanded⁵⁴. In 1935 a new KVO director was appointed, Jef Sterkens, who wanted to improve the artistic and technical standards of his troupe in order to keep up with German theatres⁵⁵. Sterkens appointed a German stage manager who modernised the lighting equipment and the sets. And he promoted Hendrik Diels, who had been engaged as conductor in 1931, to the position of principal conductor. In the following years the links between the KVO and Hitler’s Germany were strengthened by the *Deutsch-Vlämische Arbeitsgemeinschaft* (German-Flemish Labour Community, acronym DeVlag), a Flemish organization founded in 1935⁵⁶. Diels guest-conducted in Germany and German conductors guest-conducted in the KVO; the KVO troupe played guest-performances in Cologne and the Cologne troupe in Antwerp⁵⁷.

52. *Idem*, 4 November 1918, p. 2: “De Vlaamse Opera is een uitvloeisel van de Vlaamse Beweging [...] Hieraan hebben meegewerkt of willens en nillens hieraan meewerken, zal bijgedragen hebben tot het heropleven der Vlaamse Toonkunst, van het Vlaamse volk en is aktivisme en hét aktivisme in zijnen zuiversten vorm [...] Zonder Duitsche Kunst is het bijna onmogelijk een heel speelplan op te zetten.”

53. *Gemeentebld Stad Antwerpen*, 1933, 4, p. 190.

54. *Aanhanssel van het Gemeentebld, 2^{de} halfjaar 1934. Verslag over het bestuur en den zakentoeestand der Stad Antwerpen, dienstjaar 1933*, p. 182-183. In the aftermath of this decision the theatre company of the Koninklijke Nederlandsche Schouwburg (Royal Dutch Theatre) – situated Kipdorpevest – abandoned this theatre and took possession of the Théâtre Royal (Royal French Theatre) – situated Komedieplaats – which henceforth was renamed Koninklijke Nederlandsche Schouwburg.

55. ANDRÉ M. POLS, *Vijftig Jaar Vlaamse Opera*, Antwerpen, 1943, p. 37.

56. *Jahresbericht der Propaganda-Abteilung Belgien beim Militärbefehlshaber in Belgien und in Nord Frankreich, August 1941* (CEGESOMA, PAB Jahresbericht 1941, p. 38).

57. Letterenhuis Antwerpen, D 425/D, file on H. Diels; see also CHRISTOPH SCHWANDT, *Oper in Köln. Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, Berlin, 2007, p. 294; ERIK BÆCK, “Richard Strauss in Antwerpen” in *Richard Strauss-Blätter*, no. 37, 1997, p. 86-97; *Id.*, “Richard Strauss in België”, in *Richard Strauss-Blätter*, no. 44, 2000, p. 83-110; AUGUST MONET, *Een halve eeuw Nederlandsch Lyrisch Tooneel en Vlaamse Opera te Antwerpen*, Antwerpen, 1930, p. 335, 333, 338.

III. The Second World War⁵⁸

Militärverwaltung and Nazi-Censorship

On 10 May 1940, twelve days after the final performance of the KVO's 1939-1940 season – a concert of music by Flemish composers – Hitler's armies invaded Belgium. On 28 May, King Leopold III surrendered. Undecided about the long-term future of Belgium, Hitler chose to have it governed by a *Militärverwaltung* (Military Administration). By order of 23 September 1940 the Military Administration reopened the theatres, but the performances were strictly controlled by the *Feldkommandantur* (Field Command Authority) and the *Propaganda-Abteilung Belgien* (Propaganda Division Belgium, acronym PAB). And just like in the previous war, the German authorities pursued their *Flamenpolitik*, but this time people or organizations striving for an independent Flanders were no longer supported. The PAB even forbade newspapers and other media to discuss the political future of Flanders and/or Belgium⁵⁹.

The PAB first registered all existing cultural institutions and organizations in Belgium, and then checked their activities and exercised influence on their programs. French operas were banned as much as possible in favour of a gradual conversion to German operas⁶⁰. From 1 April 1941 onwards works of Jewish composers, conductors, and soloists were also forbidden⁶¹. As a matter of fact, a *Lexikon der Juden in der Musik* was published in 1940 in the *Veröffentlichungen des Instituts des NSDAP* as a manual for banning works

of Jewish composers from the repertoire⁶². Operas of Jewish composers which had been played in the Royal Flemish Opera before the occupation, such as Karl Goldmark's *Die Königin von Saba* and *Das Heimchen am Herd*, Jacques Offenbach's *Contes d'Hoffmann*, Léopold Samuel's *Ilka*, Darius Milhaud's *Medée* and Daniel Sternefeld's *Mater Dolorosa*, fell under this censorship. Sternefeld, second conductor of the KVO since 1938, had already been dismissed in 1940 as an Antwerp Jew and went into hiding in Antwerp. Arrested in September 1942 and transferred to the Dossin barracks in Mechelen, he was released in September 1943 after an intervention by Queen Elisabeth⁶³.

A New Statute for the Municipal Theatres

Prior to season 1941 – 1942, director Sterkens and his predecessors had worked with a concession system⁶⁴. But on 21 April 1942, mayor Leo Delwaide and the city council decided to directly fund municipal theatres as part of the general cultural policy⁶⁵. The opera director no longer had any personal financial concerns providing that they did not exceed an agreed-upon budget. Joris Diels, principal conductor H. Diels' younger brother, who had been director of the Royal Dutch Theatre from 1935 to 1938 and again from 1939 to 1942, was appointed Director-General of the *Koninklijke Theaters van Antwerpen* (Royal Theatres of Antwerp), a consortium that included both the KVO, directed by Sterkens, and the Royal Dutch Theatre, newly directed by Lode Monteyne⁶⁶. J. Diels was responsible for the artistic policy and

58. This section summarises and partially republishes information that was published by ERIK BÆCK, "The Wagner Cult at the Koninklijke Vlaamse Opera during the Second World War", in *Revue belge de Musicologie*, 69, 2015, p. 159-175.

59. LOUIS FORTEMPS & ROEL VANDE WINKEL, "The German Military Propaganda Department Belgium (Propaganda-Abteilung Belgien) vis-à-vis 'Cultures of Spectacle' in Occupied Belgium (1940-1944)", published elsewhere in this issue.

60. *Jahresbericht ...* (CEGESOMA, PAB, August 1941, p. 39); *Propaganda anlage-und Tätigkeitsbericht* (CEGESOMA, PAB, 01/41g, von 16 bis 31.12 1940, p. 0007).

61. *Jahresbericht ...* (CEGESOMA, PAB, August 1941, p. 43).

62. THEO STENDEL & HERBERT GERICK, *Lexikon der Juden in der Musik. Mit einem Titelverzeichnis jüdischer Werke*, Berlin, 1940.

63. Letterenhuis, O33745, programs of the KVO's 1938-1939 and 1939-1940 seasons. On Sternefeld's war years see MARK DELAERE, "La Symphonie en Ut (1943) de Daan Sternefeld: Lecture d'une composition clandestine", in *Revue belge de Musicologie*, 69, 2015, p. 145-157.

64. For "concession system", see footnote 3.

65. Leo Delwaide was mayor of Antwerp from December 1940 until January 1944.

66. *De Dag*, 24 April 1942, p. 5: "Hervorming van het Antwerpsch Theaterwezen. Maatregelen met historische draagwijdte".

management of both companies, and in his opinion, the new statutes would contribute to better results and future renown⁶⁷. In 1943 Sterkens left the KVO to become director of the *Volksschouwburg* (Alhambra Theatre) in Brussels, but H. Diels remained principal conductor of the KVO, assuming near complete control of artistic matters while continuing his regular guest conductorship at the Cologne Opera⁶⁸. The engagements of both Diels in Germany and of German conductors and soloists in Antwerp were prepared by the PAB and organized in close cooperation by DeVlag⁶⁹.

Four KVO War Seasons

The 1940-1941 Season

The first season under German occupation opened with Verdi's *Aida* on 1 October 1940. Wagner's *Lohengrin* was played four times under Diels, *Tannhäuser* four times under second conductor Renaat Veremans and *Die Walküre* three times under Diels, who also conducted *Parsifal* with soloists of the Opera of Cologne in the leading roles on Good Friday, 11 April 1941. All operas were sung in Dutch but German soloists sang their roles in German. In Antwerp, the Opera of Cologne gave German language performances of *Die Walküre* on 12 December 1940 and Mozart's *Nozze di Figaro* on 17 January 1941 and the Opera of Düsseldorf played Beethoven's *Fidelio* on 19 December 1940. In PAB reports, an attempt at bilingualism in the opera was described as successful after the guest performance of Berlin coloratura singer Erna Berger in the role of Gilda

in Verdi's *Rigoletto*. The *Parsifal* performance also proved that Flemish and German language merged in "the happiest way"⁷⁰.

When the season came to an end on 31 May 1941 with Puccini's *La Bohème*, it had featured some 23 operas, including 12 performances of four works by Wagner mentioned above; four other "German" operas, namely Mozart's *Zauberflöte*, Gluck's *Orpheus und Euridike*, Flotow's *Martha*, Beethoven's *Fidelio*, and three operettas (37 performances in total, 13 of which were operettas); eight Italian operas, Verdi's *Aida*, *Traviata*, *Rigoletto*, Puccini's *Bohème*, *Butterfly*, *Tosca*, Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* (53 performances); four Flemish operas, Gilson's *Prinses Zonneschijn*, Hullebroeck's *Het Meisje van Saventhem*, Van Overeems *Elsje Zevenschoon*, Wambach's *Quinten Massijs* (14 performances); three French operas, Gounod's *Faust*, Bizet's *Carmen* and *Pêcheurs de Perles* (21 performances) and one Swiss opera, Sutermeister's *Romeo und Julia* (4 performances)⁷¹.

On 26 May 1941, Diels gave a special performance of *Parsifal* in the *Théâtre royal de la Monnaie* in Brussels with the KVO orchestra and the same Cologne soloists that were featured in Antwerp the previous month⁷². According to a proud PAB report it was the first opera performance to be given in Dutch at *La Monnaie*⁷³. On 27 June 1941, Diels conducted Wagner's *Meistersinger* as a closing-ceremony for the *Deutsch-Flämische Kulturtag* in Cologne with the company of the Cologne opera. Flemish nationalists newspapers

67. *Idem*, 26-27 April 1942, p. 8: "Joris Diels ontvangt de pers. Het toneel te Antwerpen op nieuwe banen?".

68. CHRISTOPH SCHWANDT, *Oper in Köln...*, p. 294. On 14 July 1940, Diels conducted a performance of Wagner's *Die Walküre* in Cologne.

69. *Jahresbericht ...* (CEGESOMA, PAB, August 1941, p. 42)

70. *Propagandaanlage- und Tätigkeitsbericht von 15 bis 31 März 1941*, (CEGESOMA, PAB, 126/41, p. 0126); *Idem...* von 1 bis 15 April 1941, (CEGESOMA, PAB, 155/41, p. 0145).

71. Letterenhuis Antwerpen, dossier KVO, O33745, programs of the KVO's 1940-1941 season. "German" in terms of the occupier's nationalist classifications of music (for instance, Mozart, an Austrian, was classified by the occupier as a German composer). We quote the operas in the original language but they were sung in Dutch. However, when German guest-soloists were engaged, they sang their roles in German.

72. Letterenhuis Antwerpen, file Hendrik Diels, D 425/D, photocopy of a published review entitled: "Parsifal in den Muntschouwburg te Brussel. Schitterende uitvoering door het gezelschap van Anwerpen onder leiding van H. Diels" with handwritten reference "Het Nieuws v.d. Dag, 27 Mei 1941".

73. *Jahresbericht ...* (CEGESOMA, PAB, August 1941, p. 43).

reported extensively and enthusiastically about these Culture Days which provided concrete proof of cultural and political collaboration⁷⁴.

The 1941-1942 Season

On 2 October 1941, Diels opened the season with a new production of Wagner's *Meistersinger*, directed by guest stage manager Werner Jacob, a German who was at the time principal stage manager of the *Deutsches Theater in Rijsel* (German Theatre in Lille, France)⁷⁵. The KVO took this production to Ghent on 14 October and to Brussels on 4 November. *Lohengrin* was performed seven times (one performance with guest-conductor Walter Beck, Generalmusikdirektor in Berlin and six with second KVO conductor Veremans). On Good Friday, Diels directed *Parsifal* with the same soloists from Cologne as the previous year. Both *Lohengrin* and *Parsifal* were presented in stagings by Antwerp-born Karel Schmitz, principal stage manager of the KVO.

On 28 June 1942, on the occasion of Diels' tenth season with the KVO, friends and admirers paid him homage with a special performance of *Die Meistersinger* – the sixth of the Antwerp season – conducted by Diels himself. Tributes by artistic administrators, directors of German theatres, leaders of the occupation government, composer Richard Strauss, and many Flemish composers, critics and politicians were published in a luxurious program booklet. Diels was lauded as a champion of Flemish composers and an engine for the improvement of musical life in Antwerp⁷⁶. And the mayor of Cologne, Dr. Peter Winkelkemper, awarded Diels the title of *Ehrendirigent der Kölner Oper* (Honorary Conductor of the Cologne Opera) for his role in the close partnership that had developed between the KVO and the Cologne Opera.

Two days later, the season closed with Johann Strauss' operetta *Fanny Elssler*. This season had featured some 23 operas: three Wagner operas,

cited above (14 performances); three other German operas, namely R. Strauss' *Rosenkavalier*, Mozart's *Zauberflöte*, Gluck's *Orpheus und Eurydike* (18 performances) and five German operettas (37 performances); nine Italian operas, Puccini's *Butterfly*, *Bohème*, *Tosca*, Rossini's *Barbiere di Siviglia*, Verdi's *Traviata*, *Aida*, *Rigoletto*, Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*, Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* (58 performances); four French operas, Bizet's *Carmen* and *Pêcheurs de Perles*, Gounod's *Faust*, Laparra's *Frégona* (24 performances) and three Flemish operas, Baeyens' *Coriolanus*, De Boeck's *Reinard de Vos*, Veremans' *Anne-Marie* (14 performances)⁷⁷.

The 1942-1943 Season

New statutes of the KVO (supra) made it possible to engage more prominent guests and to prolong the season which opened with Weber's *Der Freischütz* on 24 September 1942 and closed with Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* on 31 July 1943. Wagner's love drama was performed four times that season staged by Werner Jacob with sets by guest designer Adolf Stripling and German singers in the title roles. This was another bilingual German-Dutch production, wherein the guests sang their parts in German.

Jacob and Stripling were also recruited for new productions of Wagner's *Siegfried*, *Die Walküre* and *Götterdämmerung* which were performed in March and May 1943 with German guests Hans Grahl and Albert Seibert (both in the role of Siegfried), Marie Theres Henderichs (as Brünnhilde), and soloists from the KVO including Albert le Roy (Wotan), Theo Beets (Siegmund) and Irma de Keukeleire (Sieglinde). Finally, Wagner's complete *Ring des Nibelungen*, consisting of four operas, *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*, was performed to general acclaim between 12 and 17 June 1943 on the occasion of the *Hansakulturdagen der steden Antwerpen en Keulen* (Hansa Culture Days of the cities Antwerp and Cologne). According to Odier Daem, alderman

74. *De Dag*, 1 July 1941, p. 2: "Duitsch-Vlaamsche Kultuurdagen."

75. *Idem*, 1 October 1941, p. 5: "Kon. VI. Opera. Kreaties en hernemingen."

76. Letterenhuis Antwerpen, D 425/D, program *Huldebetoon Hendrik Diels*, 28 June 1942.

77. *Idem*, dossier KVO, O33745, programs from the KVO's 1941-1942 season.

of Fine Arts of Antwerp, the Hansa Culture Days had furnished ample proof that the artistic and technical standards of the KVO were a match for those of prominent German theatres⁷⁸. The KVO presented also a complete *Ring* cycle in Ghent between 19 and 24 June 1943. On 23 April 1943, the title role in the Good Friday performance of *Parsifal* was sung by a new guest soloist, Gotthelf Pistor, who had been the interpreter of the major Wagnerian tenor roles in Bayreuth from 1925 to 1931 and had joined the Nazi Party in 1933.

The season featured 26 operas: six Wagner operas (18 performances), all conducted by Diels; five other “German” operas, namely Weber’s *Freischütz*, P. Gräner’s *Schwanhild*, Mozart’s *Nozze di Figaro* and *Zauberflöte*, R. Strauss’ *Rosenkavalier* (36 performances); eight Italian operas, Verdi’s *Don Carlos* and *Traviata*, Puccini’s *Bohème*, *Butterfly* and *Tosca*, Rossini’s *Barbiere di Seviglia*, Mascagni’s *Cavalleria Rusticana*, Leoncavallo’s *Pagliacci* (71 performances); four Flemish operas, Blockx’s *Herbergprinses*, Gilson’s *Prinses Zonneschijn*, Van Oost’s *Minnebrugje*, Verheyden’s *Heibieke* (14 performances); three French operas, Gounod’s *Faust*, Bizet’s *Carmen* and *L’Arlésienne* (31 performances) and six “German” operettas (59 performances)⁷⁹.

The 1943-1944 Season

A week of celebrations on the occasion of the KVO’s 50th anniversary opened the 1943-1944 season with a concert of works by Flemish composers, Blockx’ opera *Herbergprinses*, Wagner’s *Rienzi* and Weber’s *Der Freischütz*, all conducted by Diels⁸⁰. Moreover, Diels cherished the ambition to close the season with Wagner’s “entire” operatic oeuvre in chronological order from *Rienzi* to

Parsifal, eleven operas in total, between 13 May to 15 July 1944, with a collaboration of German guest soloists⁸¹. As mentioned before, the KVO had mounted new productions of *Tristan und Isolde* and the *Ring* cycle during the previous season in preparation for this extraordinary venture. The remaining Wagner works were rehearsed and performed in new stagings over the course of the 1943-1944 season⁸². Diels indeed had a whole group of Wagnerian singers at his disposal with native Antwerpians, such as his wife Maria van der Meirsch, Irma De Keukeleire, Mina Bolotine, Theo Beets, Robert van Aert, and other Belgian soloists as Maria Serverius, Simon Bricoult, Karel Locufier, Fernand Faniard and Albert le Roy.

After *Rienzi* on 30 September 1943 in a production by Alexander Spring, General-Intendant of the Opera of Cologne and a notorious member of the Nazi Party, and sets by Alf Björn, followed *Der fliegende Holländer* on 23 October with staging and lighting by Herbert Furreg, who had settled at the Volksschouwburg in Brussels in 1942, and sets by Björn; *Tannhäuser* on 2 December, directed by Jacob with sets and costumes by Ernst Lempeler; *Lohengrin* on 25 December, staged by Schmitz with sets by Lode Ivo; *Tristan und Isolde* on 22 January 1944, staged by Jacob with sets by Stripling; *Die Meistersinger* on 19 February, staged by Jacob with sets by Björn; *Die Walküre*, on 16 March, staged by Jacob with sets by Stripling; and finally *Parsifal* on 7 April in a new Flemish translation by André A. Pols and with Schmitz as stage-manager⁸³. All of these performances were conducted by Diels, apart from two performances of *Lohengrin* under Ludwig Josef Kaufmann, who had been appointed the title first conductor at the start of the season⁸⁴.

78. *De Gazet*, 28 September 1943, p. 1: “Een halve eeuw Vlaamsche Opera te Antwerpen”.

79. Letterenhuis Antwerpen, O 33745, programs from the KVO’s 1942-43 season. For “German”, see footnote 70.

80. *De Gazet*, 1 October 1943, p. 2: “Het Operaseizoen te Antwerpen geopend. Een glansrijke “Rienzi”-opvoering”.

81. *Idem*, 7 September 1943, p. 3: “Het nieuwe Tooneelseizoen vangt aan”. “Entire operatic oeuvre” of Wagner is not correct because two early operas, *Die Feen* and *Das Liebesverbot*, were not envisaged.

82. *Idem*.

83. On A. Spring, see CHRISTOPH SCHWANDT, *Oper in Köln...*, p. 261, 271, 296.

84. The conductors for the 1943-1944 season were Diels, principal conductor and representative of the Director-general, Ludwig Jozef Kaufmann, first conductor, Ernst Van der Eyken and Maurits Veremans, second conductors, Rudolf Perak and Renaat Veremans, guest conductors. Cf. *De Gazet*, 7 September 1943, p. 3: “Het nieuwe Tooneelseizoen vangt aan”; *De Dag*, 17 September 1943, p. 2: “Het seizoen 1943-1944 in the Kon. Vl. Opera. Talrijke opvoeringen voorzien”.



KVO, Die Walküre, R. Wagner, set of Act III, performed in 1944. Source : Collection City of Antwerp, Letterenhuis.

The ambitious Wagner cycle of eleven operas opened on schedule with *Rienzi* (13 May) and *Der fliegende Holländer* (14 May). However, problems with travel permits for the German soloists complicated the following performances and effectively truncated the cycle. German soloists who had been engaged were replaced by members of the KVO troupe; *Rheingold* (10 June), *Siegfried* (24 June), *Götterdämmerung* (1 July) and *Parsifal* (15 July) were canceled⁸⁵. Nevertheless, Diels had directed some 55 performances of eight Wagner operas (*Rienzi*, *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger*, *Die Walküre*, *Parsifal*) during the 1943-1944 season. Several of these performances were reserved for the *Wehrmacht* (German Armed Forces), as was Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*, with which the season concluded on 31 July 1944⁸⁶.

The KVO's final season of the war included also four other "German" operas, namely Mozart's *Nozze di Figaro* and *Zauberflöte*, R. Strauss' *Rosenkavalier*, Weber's *Freischütz* (17 performances), eight "German" operettas, among them J. Strauss' *Fledermaus* and *Zigeunerbaron*, Lehar's *Graf von Luxemburg*, *Lustige Witwe* and *Friederike*, Zeller's *Vogelhändler* (79 performances), six Italian operas, Verdi's *Don Carlos* and *Rigoletto*, Puccini's *Butterfly*, *Bohème*, *Tosca* and *Manon Lescaut* (53 performances), two French operas, Gounod's *Faust* and Bizet's *Carmen* (15 performances) and two Flemish operas, Blockx's *Herbergprinses* and De Boeck's *Francesca* (10 performances).

During the Nazi-occupation the number of Wagner operas, the number of performances and the

percentage in the overall performances of the KVO respectively increased from 12-18 performances of 3-6 operas, making up a constant 8% of the total repertoire in the first three seasons of the war to a spectacular 55 performances of 8 operas making up 24% of the repertoire in 1943-1944.

Press Comments

On 3 July 1940 the Antwerp daily *De Dag* already hinted at the reopening of the KVO and two days later published an article on Wagner, Hitler's favorite composer⁸⁷. Comments on Wagner performances at the KVO during the 1940-1941 season were written in contestable and politicised terms by collaborating music critics. Walter Weyler, librarian of the Royal Flemish Conservatoire and Antwerp region leader of DeVlag – he changed his name in Hans Dirken after the war – claimed for instance in *Volk en Staat* that *Lohengrin* held special political resonance in the context of the war in Europe for its portrayal of "an unified German race seeking to shape the destiny of the West under joint leadership"⁸⁸. And he read *Parsifal* in terms of the anticipated "redemption of the German race" and "liberation of Europe", framing the hero Parsifal as a premonition of the *Third Reich* and its rise under the "genial leadership of a human-become-hero"[Hitler]⁸⁹. Moreover a review on the *Parsifal* performance by the KVO at La Monnaie in Brussels in 1941 used the figure of Wagner as a rhetorical tool for absorbing Flemish art into a larger pangermanic vision of culture, "our culture in the making", placing the work of Gezelle, Benoit and Tinel, who are referred to as "Flemish-Germanic" artists, on equal footing with Wagner's "German-Germanic" art⁹⁰.

85. *De Dag*, 15 June 1944, p. 2: "Wagner-Cyclus. Belangrijke mededeling".

86. Letterenhuis Antwerpen, O33745, programs of the KVO's 1943-1944 season. Programs for the *Wehrmacht* were printed in German.

87. *De Dag*, 1 July 1940, p. 9: "Nog nieuws uit de Antwerpsche Tooneelwereld; *Ibid.*, 4 July 1940, p. 2: "Groote figuren uit de wereldgeschiedenis. Richard Wagner, Duitsch operacomponist (1813-1883)".

88. *Volk en Staat*, 15 October 1940, p. 8: "Vlaamsche Opera. Lohengrin", signed W.W.[eyler]: "het was een tijd waarin alle Germanen, als vrije mannen onder een gezamenlijke leiding, het aangezicht van Europa en het lot van het Avondland hielpen bemeesteren."

89. *Idem*, 12 April 1941, p. 2: "Glansrijke Vertooning van Parsifal": "nu wij wel degelijk de verlossing van het Germaansche ras en de bevrijding van Europa mogen beleven! [...] de wederopstanding van het Duitse Rijk, onder de geniale leiding van een mensch-geworden held."

90. See footnote 71. "De Duitsch-Germaansche kunst van Wagner, die naast de Vlaamsch-Germaansche kunst van Guido Gezelle, Peter Benoit en Edgar Tinel, een onontbeerlijk bestanddeel van onze wordende kultuur is." Gezelle (1830-1899) was a Flemish poet, Benoit (1834-1901) and Tinel (1854-1912) were Flemish composers.

KON. THEATERS VAN ANTWERPEN • DIRECTEUR-GENERAAL JORIS SIELS

VLAAMSCHE OPERA
SPEELJAAR 1943 - 1944

WAGNER CYCLUS

- | | |
|----------------|-----------------------------|
| 13 MEI | RIENZI |
| 14 MEI | DE VLIENDE HOLLANDER |
| 20 MEI | TANNHAUSER |
| 25 MEI | LOHENGRIN |
| 27 MEI | TRISTAN EN ISOLDE |
| 3 JUNI | DE MEESTERZANGERS |
| 10 JUNI | RIJNGOUD |
| 17 JUNI | DE WALKURE |
| 24 JUNI | SIEGFRIED |
| 1 JULI | GODENDEEMSTERING |
| 15 JULI | PARSIFAL |

Algemeene muzikale leiding

HENDRIK DIELS

Regie: **Dr. HERBERT FURREG - WERNER JACOB**
KAREL SCHMITZ - Prof. ALEXANDER SPRING



BOEKHOUTDRAAIERIJ VAN DE WAGNER CYCLUS VAN DE VLAAMSCHE OPERA
VAN ANTWERPEN, 1944. NEDERLANDSE DRUK: DE DRUKKERIJ VAN DE WAGNER CYCLUS VAN DE VLAAMSCHE OPERA

DRUK: DE DRUKKERIJ VAN DE WAGNER CYCLUS VAN DE VLAAMSCHE OPERA

KVO, Wagner Cyclus, 1944. Das Rheingold, Siegfried and Götterdämmerung had to be canceled.
Source : Collection City of Antwerp, Letterenhuis.

The End of the Occupation

On D-Day, 6 June 1944, the Allied Expeditionary Forces landed in Normandy. On 4 September 1944, Antwerp was liberated. Two months later, on 9 November, the KVO opened its 1944-1945 season with Verdi's *Falstaff*, conducted by D. Sternefeld, who remained first conductor until 1948 when he was appointed second conductor of the Great Symphonic Orchestra of the NIR-INTR and finally succeeded Franz André as its first conductor in 1958⁹¹. Hendrik Diels had fled to Berlin where he conducted some concerts but returned finally in May 1945 to Antwerp where he was arrested and jailed, whereas Joris Diels fled to the Netherlands, never returning from his self-chosen exile⁹².

Conclusion

In World War II, the municipal theatres of Antwerp (KVO and Royal Dutch Theatre) became a consortium, the Royal Theatres of Antwerp, which was directly funded by the municipality. The programming promoted a Wagner cult and relations with Hitler's Germany were strengthened and facilitated by the PAB and DeVlag, resulting thus in cultural and political collaboration.

IV. General Conclusions

During World War I, the Royal Theatre remained closed and the Flemish Opera was requisitioned by the Germans for performances by German companies. However, director H. Fontaine, backed by Flemish activists, obtained the permission from the city council to open the 1918-1919 season in the Flemish Opera with his new troupe in October 1918. In the interbellum the troupe of the Royal Theatre was disbanded and in World War II the municipality, abandoning the concession system, funded directly the Royal Flemish Opera and the

Royal Dutch Theatre which were united in a consortium in 1942.

During World War I, two opera troupes of E. Jaspers and two of G. Villiers successively afforded work in Antwerp to musicians and singers and entertained their public with local performances in private cinemas and variétés theatres. During World War II, some productions were also performed in Brussels, Ghent, and Cologne and German opera companies, soloists and stage-managers were invited with the support of the PAB and DeVlag. Through these means, the KVO fostered an ambition to reach the same artistic level as German opera companies.

During World War I, the opera companies of Jaspers and Villiers were unable to achieve the same financial possibilities and artistic levels as the Royal Theatre and the Flemish Opera had maintained prior to the war. During World War II, the KVO continued its renewal of staging and lighting that had started during the interbellum, following the example of German opera houses. There was one exception however, namely the traditional performances of *Parsifal* which were staged in the same fashion as they were at the premiere in the Flemish Opera on 17 March 1914.

During World War I and II, the German occupier exercised censorship. In both wars, opera performances in French were forbidden to cripple pre-war French hegemony. In World War II, a ban was moreover imposed on performances of operas by Jewish composers and the engagement of Jewish conductors and soloists.

During World War I, Flemish activists had already been drawn into collaboration by German *Flamenpolitik* and sponsored the reopening of the Flemish Opera with one Flemish and three German operas, one of which was by Wagner. But in World War II, the ambitions and means of the KVO were substantially greater, opera performances were more

91. Letterenhuis Antwerpen, O33745, programs 1944-45 season.

92. On H. Diels' conviction by court-martial, see ERIK BAECK, "The Wagner Cult..." p. 170-171.

numerous, presenting an higher artistic level with the co-operation of famous German soloists and stage-managers and resulted in a real Wagner cult.

Parallels and differences exist thus between World War I and World War II, but political and cultural collaboration with the German occupier was

much more pronounced in World War II, both Flemish nationalists and Nazis instrumentalizing Wagner's operas within the framework of a racial vision allying Flemish and German art in the New Order planned by the Nazis. The findings of our research thus demonstrate once again that music can be manipulated for political purposes.

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Abbreviations

KVO = Royal Flemish Opera

DeVlag = Deutsch-Vlämische Arbeitsgemeinschaft

PAB = Propaganda-Abteilung Belgien