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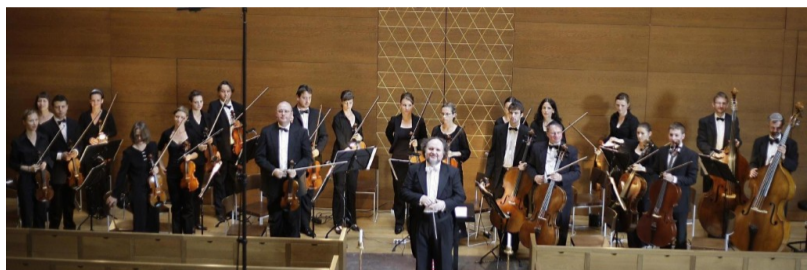
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## Too Good to be Forgotten

Galen Johnson | January 2, 2014



### Dresden orchestra performs works by once banned Jewish composers

Since its founding in 2007, Dresden's Neue Jüdische Kammerphilharmonie (NJK), and its conductor and artistic director Michael Hurshell, have grown into an

important and innovative ensemble with a mission unique not only in Germany, but in the world.

#### Neglected treasures

The NJK mainly devotes itself to Jewish composers banned or persecuted by the Nazis, and has rapidly become an essential part of Germany's legendary musical culture. This elite ensemble of 24 strings is praised for its astoundingly high level of accomplishment in both sound and interpretation and its mastery of finely nuanced, beautiful sonority, playing with spirit and richness of contrast.

"I always begin rehearsals by asking, 'Has anyone played this work before? Has anyone ever heard this piece?' The answer, so far, has always been 'no'," explains Michael Hurshell, who was born in Vienna as son of American parents. "Dresden audiences must have been somewhat nonplussed when they saw posters of our early concerts. Names like Lavry, Zeisl, Fitelberg, Zador, Tansman and others were completely unknown to them," he continues. This music, suppressed as "degenerate" by the Nazis, vanished from the concert stages in Germany and German occupied Europe between 1933 and 1945. "When the NJK was formed in 2007, my aim was to 'bring this music home'," Hurshell says.

#### Raising awareness

"Some composers like Korngold achieved great fame in Hollywood, but their compositions for the concert hall are much less known. Audience response here in Germany has been wonderful. The music is so expressive, listeners connect to it immediately."

The NJK was fortunate to receive startup funding from Dr. Phillip Frost, the well-known American philanthropist. Since then, they largely have been funded by public resources, in particular the Saxon government. The most recent development is a series of Concerts for Young People, which include parallel educational elements. The NJK has performed music by about 25 rediscovered composers. The orchestra regularly visits Berlin, where two concerts were recorded and broadcast by MDR, Central German Radio. These works are simply too good to be forgotten.

#### Emotional encounters

"At present we are making plans for a major undertaking, a short tour of the United States, in 2015," Hurshell adds. He's convinced that audiences in the States, where of course the number of Jewish music lovers is far greater, will want to hear these neglected masterpieces. "While German audiences have been enthusiastic, my most emotional post-concert encounters with listeners have been Jewish concert goers old enough to remember some of these names. At the recently refurbished White Stork Synagogue in Wroclaw, a nearly 90 year-old member of the shul said to me, with tears in her eyes, 'That I should live to see this music revived...'" The performing is, of course, only the last stage in a long process. Finding the music is often complicated, since some of the repertoire is music that has never been published in Europe. This research is part of the adventure.

*Galen Johnson is an American author and dramatist in Seattle, WA*

*Photo Credit: Ralph Heinrich*

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