



Karl Muck



The fall of the BSO's once renowned conductor

By: R. Marc Kantrowitz
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When Henry Lee Higginson, the aristocratic founder of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, hired Karl Muck, he thought he had struck gold.

Born in 1859 in Germany, Muck had risen to the very top of the European maestros. Assuming his post in 1906, he quickly fulfilled Higginson's vision. Known as a strict taskmaster who extracted nothing short of brilliance from his musicians, Muck's orchestra became immediately and immensely popular. After a few years, though, despite his success and the initial fondness he held for American audiences, Muck and his wife, Anita, were summonsed back to Germany by its leader and Muck's close friend and supporter, Kaiser Wilhelm II.

But he soon grew to miss the opportunities and freedoms the BSO provided. When Higginson in 1912 again beckoned with a generous salary, Muck eagerly jumped. Once back in Boston, Muck again prospered, although he kept a wary eye on the events in Europe. While he had left Germany at an early age, moving with his family to Switzerland where he became a citizen, his ties to his homeland remained strong.

When war broke out during the summer of 1914, Muck and two dozen BSO musicians were performing across the continent. Given his loyalty to his birthplace

and the kaiser, Muck attempted to enlist, but given his age, 55, he was rejected. Recognizing the strong image Muck carried in America, however, the powers that be told him to return there, much to the relief of Higginson, who feared losing his talented conductor.

The ooze of sentiment against Germany solidified with the sinking of the New York-to- Liverpool-bound Lusitania in May 1915. More than half of the 2,000 innocent civilian passengers, including children and six score Americans, perished. Higginson, who served as an officer in the Civil War, shared the outrage of his fellow Americans. Muck, meanwhile, wisely kept his personal pro-German feelings under wraps and continued brilliantly to lead the BSO.

In response to world condemnation, Germany temporarily scaled back its seafaring attacks. In February 1917, however, it resumed them, to the consternation of a neutral United States, which faced curtailing all trading with the allies as well as the prospect of its ships bound for Europe being torpedoed.

Demonstrating his displeasure, President Woodrow Wilson severed diplomatic relations and ordered the charismatic and charming German ambassador, Count Johann von Bernstorff, expelled. Muck unwisely traveled to Washington to bid his friend goodbye.

America's slow slide to war came to fruition a month later with the discovery of the Zimmermann telegram, a missive from German foreign secretary Arthur Zimmermann to Bernstorff while he was still here, seeking to enlist the aid of Mexico and Japan in a joint war against the United States. Bernstorff passed along the offer, promising money and the states of New Mexico, Texas and Arizona to Mexico for its cooperation.

With war declared, Muck, recognizing the public sentiment, offered to resign, a move not only rejected by Higginson but met with a new five-year contract.

The demand for support and loyalty on the home front against the German enemy was led, in part, by the editor of The Providence Journal, John Revelstoke Rathom, who lived by the motto "Raise hell and sell newspapers." The louder the voices, the greater the volume of papers sold, and Rathom was a screamer.

Finding a convenient target, Rathom zeroed in on the "Kaiser-loving [Muck], a man of notoriously pro-German affiliations [who conducted a program]

almost entirely German in character.” With a performance scheduled in Providence on Oct. 30, 1917, Rathom wished “to put Professor Muck to the test” by performing “The Star-Spangled Banner,” thus joining the practices of various other orchestras.

When Higginson and Charles Ellis, the manager of the BSO, learned of the demand, they ignored it, not wishing to inform and embarrass Muck by telling him what to do. By making that tone-deaf decision, Higginson and Ellis catastrophically sealed Muck’s fate. Rathom’s crucifixion of Muck as a traitor, spy and one who hated America quickly gained steam and acceptance around the nation, with performances canceled and calls for Muck’s head.

When the government stepped in to investigate, private embarrassing details emerged, including affairs, real and imagined. His most serious dalliance involved Rosamond Young, a 22-year-old gifted soprano, to whom he wrote letters in which he professed his love — “You are mine and I am your slave and so I must remain” — and criticisms of America and its citizens: “[my audiences are a vulgar] crowd of dogs and swine ... rabble.”

Though an investigator concluded that Muck was neither a spy nor a security threat, highly restrictive legislation soon passed, encompassing Muck’s pro-German leanings and his anti-American musings. On March 25, 1918, as Muck finished his rehearsal at midnight in Symphony Hall, he was arrested. Soon thereafter, the BSO dismissed a large portion of its German musicians.

Faced with his letters going public and wishing to put it all behind him, Muck acquiesced to being hauled off to a barbed wired and armed guard internment camp in Georgia, where he would spend 17 months. While he was there, he led a concert for his fellow 4,000 inmates.

The war ended in November, but Muck wasn’t released until August, upon which he and his wife returned to Germany. There he found employment opportunities diminished given his past relationship with the now deposed kaiser.

After his “most devoted wife, the noblest friend, the bravest companion” died in 1921, Muck suffered greatly, mourning the death of his wife and their sole young child, who died years before. He never remarried and never returned to America. When the news of his death in 1940 reached the BSO, its rehearsal stopped and its members stood silently in memory of their once renowned conductor.

The above column is based on *War Fever: Boston, Baseball, and the America in the Shadow of The Great War* by Randy Roberts and Johnny Smith, along with internet sources. R. Marc Kantrowitz, a former Massachusetts judge, can be contacted at Rmarckantrowitz@comcast.net.