

Correspondence between Wilhelm Furtwängler and Joseph Goebbels about Art and the State (April 1933)

Abstract

The Reich Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, heeded the call for “coordination” [*Gleichschaltung*] in the area of culture by creating the Reich Chamber of Culture in September 1933. Membership was mandatory for anyone who planned to continue working in the cultural arena—artists, writers, performers, etc. Individuals who were excluded from membership on the basis of race or politics were thus effectively barred from working or publishing. National Socialist cultural policy was based on the simple notion that art had to serve the people, the state, and the “race”. Its goal was the complete “Aryanization” of art, a process that involved the labeling of Jewish and non-conformist artists as “degenerate.”

In 1933, the renowned conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler (1886–1954) was head of the Berlin State Opera; he was later named Vice President of the Reich Chamber of Music. In the following letter to Goebbels, Furtwängler tries to defend the autonomy of art against the encroachment of politics. The “Aryanization” of art never appealed to him, and in subsequent years he became increasingly active on behalf of Jewish musicians. Goebbels asked Furtwängler for permission to publish the letter, and the request was granted. On April 11, 1933, Furtwängler’s letter appeared in the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, along with a response from Goebbels. Asserting his authority over the celebrated conductor, Goebbels explained that everything, including art, was political already.

Furtwängler was later reprimanded for having allowed himself to become the poster child for Nazi cultural policy. Therefore, he was initially banned from the musical profession after the war. This ban, however, was lifted after he was acquitted at his denazification trial.

Source

I. Furtwängler to Goebbels

Dear Reich Minister,

In view of my work over many years with the German public and my inner bond with German music, I take liberty of drawing your attention to events within the world of music which in my opinion need not necessarily follow from the restoration of our national dignity which we all welcome with joy and gratitude. My feelings in this are purely those of an artist. The function of art and artists is to bring together, not to separate. In the final analysis, I recognize only one line of division—that between good and bad art. But while the line of division between Jews and non-Jews is being drawn with a relentless, even a doctrinaire, sharpness, even where the political attitude of the person concerned gives no grounds for complaint, the other line of division, extremely important, if not decisive, in the long run—that between good and bad—is being far too much neglected.

Musical life today, weakened anyway by the world crisis, radio, etc., cannot take any more experiments. One cannot fix the quota for music as with other things necessary for life like potatoes and bread. If nothing is offered in concerts, nobody goes to them. So that for music the question of quality is not simply an idealistic one, but a question of life and death. If the fight against Jews is mainly directed against those artists who, lacking roots themselves and being destructive, try to achieve an effect through kitsch, dry virtuosity and similar things, then this is quite all right. The fight against them and the

spirit they embody cannot be pursued emphatically and consistently enough. But if this fight is directed against *real* artists as well, this will not be in the interests of cultural life, particularly because artists anywhere are much too rare for any country to be able to dispense with their work without loss to culture.

It should therefore be stated clearly that men like Walter, Klemperer, Reinhardt, etc. must be allowed in future to express their art in Germany.

Once again, then, let our fight be directed against the rootless, subversive, leveling, *destructive* spirit, but not against the real artist who is always creative and therefore constructive, however one may judge his art.

In this sense I appeal to you in the name of German art to prevent things from happening which it may not be possible to put right again.

Very respectfully yours:

[signed] Wilhelm Furtwängler

II. Goebbels to Furtwängler

Dear General Music Director!

I am grateful for the opportunity given me by your letter to enlighten you about the attitude of the nationally-inclined forces in German life to art in general and to music in particular. In this connection, I am particularly pleased that, right at the beginning of your letter, you emphasize in the name of German artists that you gladly and gratefully welcome the restoration of our national dignity.

I never assumed that this could be anything other than the case, for I believe that the struggle we wage for Germany's reconstruction concerns the German artist not only in a passive but in an active way. I refer to something the Reich Chancellor said publicly three years ago, before our seizure of power: "If German artists knew what we shall do for them one day, they would not fight against us but with us."

It is your right to feel as an artist and to see things from an artist's point of view. But that need not mean that you regard the whole development in Germany in an unpolitical way. Politics too is an art, perhaps the highest and most comprehensive there is, and we who shape modern German policy feel ourselves in this to be artists who have been given the responsible task of forming, out of the raw material of the mass, the firm concrete structure of a people. It is not only the task of art and the artist to bring together, but beyond this it is their task to form, to give shape, to remove the diseased and create freedom for the healthy. Thus, as a German politician, I am unable to recognize only the single line of division which you see—that between good and bad art. Art must not only be good, it must also appear to be connected with the people, or rather, only an art which draws on the people itself can in the final analysis be good and mean something to the people for whom it is created.

There must be no art in the absolute sense as known by liberal democracy. The attempt to serve it would result in the people no longer having any inner relationship to art and in the artist himself isolating and cutting himself off from the driving forces of the time in the vacuum of the *l'art pour l'art* point of view. Art must be good; but beyond this it must be responsible, professional, popular [*volksnah*] and militant. I readily admit that it cannot take any more experiments. But it would have been more suitable to protest against artistic experiments at a time when the whole world of German art was almost exclusively dominated by the love of experiments on the part of elements alien to the people, and of the race who tainted and compromised the reputation of German art.

I am sure you are quite right to say that for music, quality is not only an idealistic question but a matter of

life and death. You are even more right to join our struggle against the rootlessly destructive artistic style, corrupted by kitsch and dry virtuosity. I readily admit that even Germanic representatives took part in these evil goings-on, but that only proves how deeply the roots of these dangers had penetrated into the German people and how necessary it seemed, therefore, to oppose them. Real artists are rare. Accordingly they must be promoted and supported. But in that case they must be real artists.

You will always be able to express your art in Germany—in the future too. To complain about the fact that now and then men like Walter, Klemperer, Reinhardt, etc. have had to cancel concerts seems to me to be particularly inappropriate at the moment, since on many occasions during the past fourteen years real German artists were condemned to silence; and the events of the past weeks, not approved of by us either, represent only a natural reaction to those facts. At any rate, I am of the opinion that *every real artist* should be given room for free creativity. But in that case, he must, as you say yourself, be a *constructive, creative person* and must not be on the side of the rootlessly subversive, leveling, in most cases purely technical professionals whom you rightly criticize.

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