

“The future was always our top priority”

Alfred Schlee



Alfred Schlee (left) took on personal responsibility for Pierre Boulez (right) right from the start. He invited him to stay with him in an Alpine lodge but, rather unfortunately, the mountains were shrouded in fog and it was impossible to see anything. This prompted Schlee to buy a postcard and give it to Boulez with the words: “This is what it normally looks like.” Boulez later recalled this scene, saying: “Schlee always purchased the picture postcard of a utopian landscape.”

In 1927, when I asked Hans Heinsheimer, whom I already knew quite well, if he could find a position for me at Universal-Edition, I certainly did not intend to stay there for the rest of my life. My admiration for the high-risk, international, modern production department at the publishing house and for its director, Emil Hertzka, had aroused my curiosity and I wanted to know how an institution like this functioned. I originally planned to spend two or three years finding this out, but it was not long before I was offered the post as representative of Universal-Edition in Berlin, a position I was more than happy to accept. In those days Berlin was the centre of the world, particularly the musical world.

Nobody was bothered about whether or not Universal-Edition was a Jewish

publisher. Unfortunately, the situation changed rapidly when Hitler unexpectedly assumed power in Germany with the Nazi party, which had been considered in decline. My opinion of National Socialism was unequivocal. As a student I had once heard one of Hitler's speeches and thought it impossible that this person could ever pose any kind of threat. However, not even this terrible delusion prevented me from remaining unfailingly convinced, even in the worst hours and through the most tragic affairs, that this regime could only last for a short period of time.

My work now took on a new focus. The majority of my newly found friends were gradually leaving Berlin. Most of the important works in the publishing house catalogue had been affected by the boycott imposed by Nazi racial or cultural laws. Even UE itself came under fire, and its Jewish directors, employees and authors in Vienna were also subjected to targeted persecution. I went to the Austrian embassy in Berlin to obtain advice and gained the impression that they wanted to warn me against becoming too committed to the publishing house; this filled me with terror. Alarm signals of this kind meant that I began to concentrate my thoughts on the survival of the publishing house. My suggestion that we should set up an alternative company in Switzerland, was not, however, approved by my Viennese superiors. They felt safe in Austria and believed me to be a pessimist who had been frightened by the Nazis.

"Please give me exclusive rights to your works. I promise you that I will print them when this terrible situation has passed. Please send your scores to our friend Kurt Hirschfeld from Zurich Theatre; they will reach me from there. I am naturally unable to print them now, but a little trust goes a long way."

Alfred Schlee to Rolf Liebermann in 1943 or 1944. The latter recorded these recollections in 1998

However, in 1938/39 things got nasty for UE. The Viennese publishers were bought out by the German publishing house Schott. However, an employee at Schott who had “Aryanised” the publishing house Peters convinced the relevant ministry that Schott was not “reliable” enough. Ownership of UE was therefore passed on to Peters, who acquired it using capital released by Göring. Provisional administrators took over the management in Vienna. We enjoyed a certain degree of protection; they were civilised people who acted decently even towards Heinsheimer and Director Winter, whose emigration was facilitated by them.

It was now important for us to make sure that nothing happened that would make Universal-Edition unable to resume its international activities “once everything was over”. In other words, we needed to ensure that our core stock survived, that our manuscripts did not disappear, that banned and unperformed works were not lost, that any reproducible documents for these works were preserved and that these things would remain in our possession, even if they had to be moved owing to the risk of being bombed if the war was lost. It goes without saying that we had arguments with Peters over this.

With extensive help from Gottfried von Einem, and above all his mother, valuable material was taken to Ramsau. Even among the Nazis, there was a kind of Austrian patriotism that resisted the looting that was going on. The mayor of Vienna at the time, who was a National Socialist, helped me a great deal, as did an official at the Department of Culture. The Gestapo only came to the UE offices once and, strangely, only confiscated Weill and Schenker. After that, the UE manuscripts were taken away in a sort of semi-official manoeuvre described as “bomb protection”. Most of them were hidden in churches; works by Weill and Schönberg were stowed away in Zwettl, behind the organ, for example. I had rented a private house in Semmering and we used one of its rooms to store scores, manuscripts and instrumental parts. This enabled us to reproduce new material without too much trouble. Before war broke out, we were also able to send material abroad. The Nazis’ interest in foreign currency was greater than their concern that exports were helping the survival of the cultural assets which they were attempting to destroy.

I didn’t think overly much about what was going on around me, but focused more on the future. It was always our top priority. Even when the Russians came, a great deal could be achieved if you weren’t afraid. And so, with the help of a good many friends, we managed to preserve the existence of the publishing house in Vienna and could prepare to operate freely again following liberation. Once the shooting had stopped in Vienna, the best period in my life began. When UE was in danger of being sold off as “German property” while the company was being re-established immediately after the

end of the war, Egon Seefehlner saved the day. Alfred Kalmus was able to restore the company's status as a joint-stock company, and he then concentrated on its publishing activities together with Ernst Hartmann, me and a host of enthusiastic young workers.

(recorded by Lothar Knessl)



ALFRED SCHLEE (1901 DRESDEN–1999 VIENNA)

was initially Universal-Edition's representative in Berlin before moving to Vienna in 1938. During the Nazi dictatorship Schlee hid scores in hideaways such as churches and at his house in Semmering, or he sent them to safe places abroad. This enabled pieces by those composers who are today regarded as having written the classic works of modernism to be played after 1945. From 1951 onward he was a member of the Executive Board together with Alfred Kalmus and Ernst Hartmann. He attracted composers such as Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, Luciano Berio, Arvo Pärt and Wolfgang Rihm to the publishing house.