

Lucerne's history guides Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra

September 11, 2013 12:04 am

By Elizabeth Bloom / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

LUCERNE, Switzerland -- It was the summer of 1938, and Arturo Toscanini, likely the world's most famous conductor, was directing an orchestra at a new summer festival here. Germany had just annexed Austria. And the world was about to erupt in war.

The founding of what would later be known as the Lucerne Festival -- which is celebrating its 75th anniversary this summer -- was intimately tied to the politics of Europe at the time. That history plays no role in today's version, considered one of the top orchestra festivals in the world.

The Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra has two concerts at Lucerne this week, performing Tuesday and tonight as part of its 2013 European festivals tour.

The motivation for the original festival was likely financial, as the leaders of Lucerne saw the success of other European festivals and wanted to bring tourist dollars to their city, according to Harvey Sachs, Toscanini's biographer. Recruiting Toscanini, who had led La Scala in Milan and the New York Philharmonic among other prominent groups, would be a boon to those efforts.

Toscanini was 71 at the time and a bit of a homebody. But he took on the new project anyway. As an outspoken opponent of fascism, he had stopped performing in Austria, Germany and his native Italy in the 1930s, and severed ties with musicians who hadn't done the same. During that period he made the rounds elsewhere throughout Europe. In 1936, he conducted the inaugural concert of what is now the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra in what was then Palestine. Lucerne was a particularly symbolic setting, since it was in a largely German-speaking country not under Nazi rule.

"It was as if to say, 'If you want to hear me, you have to leave your horrible countries,'" said Mr. Sachs.

Toscanini had actually run as a symbolic candidate in Mussolini's party in 1919. That party was to the left of the socialists -- politically unrelated to Mussolini's eventual fascist party -- and was soundly defeated in the election.

When Mussolini shifted to the extreme right, his government made it increasingly difficult for the vocally anti-fascist Toscanini to conduct in Italy. It would not subsidize La Scala if Toscanini was there, so in 1929 he left. In 1931, he was roughed up outside a concert hall in Bologna, Italy, when he refused to conduct the

fascist anthem.

"I have said to our fascists time and again: 'You can kill me if you wish, but as long as I am living I shall say what I think,'" Toscanini wrote.

And when he conducted at the festival in central Switzerland, others took note. Even the crown princess of Italy, Maria Jose, visited Lucerne. While she wasn't a member of Mussolini's party, "she was a representative of the Italian monarchy that was keeping [him] in power," said Mr. Sachs.

Though Italian fans came to see Toscanini live, the angry Italian government confiscated his passport.

That fall, Toscanini arrived in New York to conduct the NBC Symphony Orchestra, and the musicians gave him a standing ovation. "They knew he had just stood up to the fascists," said Mr. Sachs.

As the festival celebrates its 75th anniversary, its history remains largely unknown. It turns out that the PSO was the first American orchestra to play at the Lucerne Festival in 1964, under conductor William Steinberg.

Festival activities on Aug. 25, the actual anniversary date of Toscanini's debut here, included children's concerts, films and chamber music, said Michael Haefliger, the artistic and executive director. The free events were attended by more than 8,000 people.

The theme of this year's festival is revolution, although the festival is completely nonpolitical in nature, said Mr. Haefliger.

PSO music director Manfred Honeck said some of the PSO's repertoire speaks to that theme. Works such as Ravel's "Bolero" and Strauss' "Ein Heldenleben" were groundbreaking pieces in classical music.

Still, Mr. Honeck is aware of the festival's unique history.

"It's a special atmosphere, special meaning to be there," he said.

Elizabeth Bloom: ebloom@post-gazette.com, 412-263-1750 or on Twitter @BloomPG.

First Published September 11, 2013 12:00 am