

## Recounting the Arrest of a BSO Conductor

On Tuesday, October 30<sup>th</sup>, 1917, Boston Symphony Orchestra manager Charles Ellis received a telegram from several Providence organizations demanding the BSO play the *Star-Spangled Banner* in its forthcoming concert at Infantry Hall, echoing what the Providence Journal had published that morning. Ellis conferred with founder Major Higginson, hardly a man to bow to outside pressure. They did nothing, and they did not confer with conductor Karl Muck on the issue.

The next day the Journal reported that Muck and the orchestra had “refused” to play the *Star-Spangled Banner*; the national press picked up on the uproar that followed.

Major Higginson immediately made a statement that, “Dr. Muck never knew that a request for the Star-Spangled Banner had been made, until after the concert ended, and he had returned to Boston.”

The following Friday afternoon (November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1917), the Symphony Hall concert began with another statement from Major Higginson:

*Last spring, at my earnest request, Dr. Muck consented to remain in charge of the orchestra, because I considered him essential to the continuance of these concerts. He has placed his resignation in my hands because he does not wish that any personal feeling toward him should prejudice the welfare of the orchestra. To lose him would be a disaster.*

Muck then entered to an ovation and conducted the concert. An insert in the program book informed the audience that the concert would conclude with the *Star-Spangled Banner*. Afterward, he bowed to deafening applause.

With that and every concert that followed, Muck and the Boston Symphony performed the *Star-Spangled Banner*. But the damage had been done.

The following Wednesday, Edwin Warfield, the former governor of Maryland, promised in cancelling a BSO performance in Baltimore that:

*... this man [Muck] would not be allowed to insult the people.....I told them that mob violence would prevent it, if necessary, and that I would gladly lead the mob to prevent the insult to my country and my flag.*

The Baltimore concert was cancelled. But performances continued later that week in New York and Brooklyn.

There was also Muck’s citizenship to consider. When Karl was eight, his father became a Swiss citizen in order to avoid political entanglements between Prussia and Bavaria, and the conductor maintained Swiss citizenship throughout the years. To claim him as an enemy alien would stretch most courts to kangaroo proportions.

That didn’t stop Mrs. William Jay, a New York socialite, from starting a vituperative public campaign to have Muck removed from the American musical scene. By March of 1918, concerts in New York sold out houses, with the requisite *Star-Spangled Banner*, and with massive police

protection. Higginson, realizing that this situation was not helping the Boston Symphony's survival in the long term, asked the federal government if he could make arrangements for Karl and Anita Muck's safe departure to Germany. Washington provided no objection, but placed this under the jurisdiction of the Boston U.S. District Attorney, Thomas J. Boynton.

Before the couple's quiet departure could take place, and in spite of the Swiss passport, Boynton had Karl Muck arrested as an enemy alien. Within 24 hours, the authorities transferred him from a Back Bay holding cell to the East Cambridge jail, where he was said to have smoked three packs of cigarettes during questioning, and was soon after restricted to smoking a pipe.

Boynton and his assistant on alien matters, Judd Dewey, did not reveal to the press the details of Muck's internment, but they eventually justified the arrest upon letters Muck wrote to a teenage mistress several years earlier. Boynton admitted that the letters did not incriminate Muck, but rather proved him to be "potentially dangerous." On April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1918, the authorities incarcerated Muck in a federal prison at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia. He was released nearly a year after the war's conclusion in September 1919, departing immediately for Europe, never to return.



Karl Much appears second from left in "perp walk."