

## **JAN VAN GILSE**

Dr David C F Wright (1999)

Jan Peter Hendrik van Gilse was a controversial figure and, like Wilhelm Mengleberg, was often out of favour because he promoted German music. In fact, a lot of his own music is Germanic and consequently was not admired in Holland. In World War I, Holland was neutral but suffered attacks on their shipping by both the Allies and the Germans but the Dutch had no sympathy for the Germans. In May 1940 Holland was invaded by the Germans although they had again decided to be neutral.

Rotterdam was the birthplace of Jan van Gilse on 11 May 1881, the youngest of four children. His father, Jan Albert (1843-1915) was a journalist with strong political ambitions. He was a representative of the Dutch parliament from 1897-1901. He married Maria Auguste Hocklemann

(1843-1925) in 1871, the daughter of a German merchant.

The boy studied in Cologne under Franz Wullner (1832 - 1902). Jan's first works were conducted by Mengleberg at examination competitions in 1900-1901 including his Symphony no. 1 in F. Its success allowed him a two year fellowship to study elsewhere. Jan had a row with the new director of the Conservatory and went to study with Humperdinck in Berlin where he worked on his Symphony no. 2 in E flat. Then became the répétiteur at the Bremen Opera. Thereafter he spent many years in Rome, Munich and elsewhere and returned to the comparative safety of Holland during World War I. In 1909 he had married a Dutch girl, Ada Hooijer. They had two sons Jan Hendrik born 5 June 1912 and Maarten, born 12 June 1916.

Van Gilse was severely critical of music, and many other things, and did not endear himself to the Dutch. He would argue about almost everything.

However, he took the initiative in setting up the Society for Dutch composers in 1911 and two years later set up an organisation to protect the copyright of the works of Dutch composers.

Mengleberg had invited van Gilse to conduct the Concertgebouw in 1915 and certain members of the orchestra asked van Gilse to compose a chamber work for them. The result was the Nonet of 1916. The members complained that it was too extensive and far too Germanic and that the scherzo was too close to Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*. There were resultant bitter squabbles. The work is heavy and Teutonic.

In 1917 he accepted the position of conductor of the Utrecht Stedelijk Orkest. He was unwise in performing a lot of German music and the composer Willem Pijper expressed this concern. And he was not alone in condemning the choice of repertoire. In addition, van Gilse was apparently not a good conductor and came in for more criticism as a result. There was a great deal of acrimony and in 1921 van Gilse was forced to resign.

In 1922 he began a String Quartet which he did not finish. The first movement he designated as *Adagio molto* but given the allabreve notation and how the music is set out, scholars believe the designation was wrong and the movement is usually played *moderato*.

He spent some aimless years in Switzerland and returned to Germany in 1926 which did his cause no good at all. But he still fought his cause wanting to be accepted in his native Holland as a composer and musician.

In 1933 Richard Strauss asked him if he would like to assist in working on worldwide rights for composers but things were uncertain in Germany as Hitler and his socialism was coming to power.

Van Gilse left Germany in 1933 and obtained the post of director of the Utrecht Conservatory where he stayed for four years. How he was so appointed is a mystery. Perhaps the Dutch took the attitude of letting bygones be bygones.

Nonetheless van Gilse was a wayward and uncompromising figure. He dabbled in all sorts of activities including consulting mediums and mesmerics.

By 1937 van Gilse decided to devote his time to composition. He was also a keen supporter of fellow musicians and had been for some time.

He spent the years of World War II having to constantly state that he was not a German sympathizer and he worked for the Dutch resistance. When the Nazis invaded Holland on 10 May 1940 it was less than a year later before the Germans insisted that all Jews in the orchestra leave. Van Gilse resisted this measure. Then the Nazis insisted that all Jews who attended concerts had to wear and display The Star of David. His own home was invaded by the Gestapo in March 1942. His two sons were killing fighting with the Dutch resistance and within six months. Maarten was executed on 1 October 1943. This broke van Gilse's heart and his health rapidly declined. He went into hiding at the home of the parents of fellow composer Rudolf Escher. He died of cancer on 8 September 1944.

Wartime restrictions meant that he could not be buried under his own name. But he was buried on 12 September 1944 at the Groene Kerkje in Oegstgeest.

After the war, a monument by the sculptor Mari Andriessen was placed over his grave. It depicts a dying soldier letting a sword fall from his hand but still holding up a lyre, the symbol of music.

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