

Fire damages Berlin Philharmonic's iconic concert hall

Fire broke out Tuesday at the building housing the Berlin Philharmonic orchestra in the German capital, sending plumes of pale smoke billowing skyward from one of the city's leading cultural icons and one of the world's great concert halls.

More than 150 firefighters battled the blaze, using axes to break through part of the roof and appearing to bring it under control within a few hours.

A fire department spokesman, Jens-Peter Wilke, told the television station NTV that a "total write-off" of the building was unlikely, though it was "obviously in danger."



Smoke rising from the roof of the building housing the Berlin Philharmonic near Potsdamer Platz on Tuesday. (Fabrizio Bensch/Reuters)

The police said there had been no injuries in the fire, which took hold just before a public rehearsal.

The authorities said many of the orchestra's instruments had been saved, but there was doubt about some heavy pieces, including concert grand pianos. The fire brigade said efforts to extinguish the blaze could themselves have caused extensive water damage.

Musicians described a frantic evacuation. Sarah Willis, the second horn player, said she had been in the warm-up room when she "smelled something like lunch was burning."

"A few minutes later, someone burst in and said we have to get out now," she said, speaking on her cellphone as she watched smoke coming from the building. "Double basses were on stage and many valuable violins and cellos were in lockers. The stagehands were allowed to take them out."

"The orchestra hands were absolute heroes," she said. "People were panicking about their instruments, as you can imagine. Once everybody was out and safe, they were worried about their instruments."

They were moved to a chamber music hall next to the main building. As she watched the firefighters drill through the roof to get at the fire, she said, "It's really painful to see. They're breaking up the roof!"

"It's really sad," she said. "It's the best acoustic in the world. We just don't know what it's going to look like."

The news of the fire reverberated through the classical music world. The distinctive, ocher-colored building, completed in 1963 and designed with some controversy by Hans Scharoun, lies near the old dividing line of Berlin - the wall - in what was once the western sector. It is known especially for the high quality of its acoustics. Many of the world's leading musicians have performed there.

"If the building were to go, that would be an incredible catastrophe," said Michael Cullen, an American building historian based in Berlin, who has written extensively about the Reichstag, the Brandenburg Gate

and other Berlin landmarks. "Its design is unique, it's singular. There is only one of its kind. It is a testament to an architect's fancy."

The cause of the blaze - and the extent of the damage - remained uncertain. The German news agency DPA said the fire had probably been caused by welding in the roof area.

The building was opened with much fanfare in 1963 with a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony conducted by Herbert von Karajan, whose name was closely associated with the Philharmonic. The orchestra, which has about 720 musicians, including its children's choir, was founded around 120 years ago. Its principal conductor is Simon Rattle of Britain.

A spokesman for the orchestra, Peter Riegelbauer, told the DPA news agency that the former musical director of the orchestra, Claudio Abbado, was in the building when the fire started. Abbado, whose appearances have grown fewer because of health problems, was to conduct the piece the orchestra intended to rehearse: Berlioz's "Te Deum." Performances had been scheduled for Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings.

Daniel J. Wakin reported from New York. Alan Cowell contributed reporting from Paris and Victor Homola from Berlin.

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