

Conductor falls victim to 'cultural anti-Semitism'

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By Regine Wosnitza

DANIEL BARENBOIM'S long fight to prevent the merging of Berlin's two main opera houses was overshadowed this week by allegations of anti-Semitism in Germany's cultural and political establishment.

Fuelling the controversy were remarks by a Berlin politician, referring to "the Jew Barenboim," and a letter to a German daily by a Barenboim supporter and former government figure maintaining that anti-Semitism was on the rise.

"After all the years that I have worked in Germany with so much joy, and after the decade that I have been living in Berlin," Mr Barenboim himself said this week, "I am astonished to learn that my being Jewish is supposed to have anything to do with my making music or with my work at the State Opera."

Former cultural senator Ulrich Roloff-Momin, who brought the pianist-conductor to Berlin in 1991, wrote in Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung that Mr Barenboim was a victim of latent anti-Jewish feeling.

He referred to a long-standing rumour that a "leading personality in Berlin" had remarked that "Jewish mingling would come to an end" if Mr Barenboim left the city after his contract expires in 2002.

Whether the remark was ever made has never been confirmed. But the 57-year-old Mr Barenboim has said that he and a former assistant, Christian Thielemann - whom the Berliner Morgenpost named as the "leading personality" involved - had long ago settled any differences.

Mr Thielemann, 16 years his junior, is now the chief conductor at the German Opera House and the favourite of the two men for the post of chief music director at a planned merged opera house.

Mr Barenboim said this week that, in any case, what disturbed him most was a comment - front-page news in German papers - by Christian Democrat city council leader Klaus Landowsky.

Mr Landowsky was quoted as telling a parliamentary meeting that the future of opera in Berlin now hinged on a choice between two people: Thielemann, whom he described as a "young Karajan," and "the Jew, Barenboim."

"This remark really angered me," Mr Barenboim said, adding that Mr Landowsky had still not called him to talk about it as promised.

Eberhard Dieppen, the Christian Democratic mayor of Berlin, did call Mr Barenboim afterwards - arguing that Mr Landowsky's statement had been a reflection of the rich cultural diversity of the "new Berlin."

Mr Roloff-Momin, however, was "latent anti-Semitism" at work "when religion is made to count in cultural political affairs."

On Sunday, both Mr Barenboim and Mr Thielemann received music awards in Berlin. Asked if he was still ready to remain in Berlin, Mr Barenboim replied, unequivocally: "Yes."