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Occupied Kultur: Cold War Competition and Musical Renaissance in Post-World War II Germany

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When Soviet occupiers marched into Berlin in May 1945, they found the once vibrant city decimated by the reality of defeat. Streets, neighborhoods, and businesses were replaced by heaps of rubble. The scene was the same all across the country. But more damaging to Germans than their ruined cities was their tattered identity. Germans had understood themselves as the bearers of high culture, a notion that existed long before Hitler reinforced it with his assertions of German superiority.¹ But after years of war and a crushing loss, cultural life in Germany had all but disappeared. Music halls, sets, costumes, and instruments had all been destroyed in bombings. Additionally, after Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels announced “total war” in August of 1944, most opera and orchestral productions ceased and musicians were no longer playing music.² After the war, the Allied occupiers, understanding that art and specifically music was a critical component of Germans’ self-awareness, went to great lengths to revitalize German music culture. In doing this, the Allies hoped to not only eliminate any lingering effects of Nazism in music, but to promote their own cultural traditions as well. Ideological differences, especially between the United States and the Soviet Union, put the Allies at odds over denazification and reeducation procedures. However, it was specifically this Cold War animosity and competitiveness that inspired each side to push its cultural agenda in its respective sector, opening the door for innovative art and sparking a musical rebirth in Germany.

¹ Michael H. Kater, “Introduction” in *Music and Nazism: Art Under Tyranny, 1933-1945* (Laaber, Germany: Laaber-Verlag, 2003), 9.

² David Monod, *Settling Scores: German Music, Denazification, and the Americans, 1945-1953*. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 24.

Music had been used as a political tool in Germany long before the Cold War. Nazi influence on music was considerable, perhaps most obviously in the persecution of Jewish composers and musicians. The Nazis banned their music and forced them out of Germany, either into concentration camps or into exile, often in America. Those non-Jewish musicians who remained enjoyed great public acclaim, state support, and career success.³ The Nazis also used music as a manipulative military technique, conditioning Germans from the time they were children to think of themselves as a part of a strong nationalist movement. Constantly hearing Hitler Youth songs had the subconscious effect of making adolescents act, as historian Michael H. Kater explained, “uniformly for the regime: sing in unison, march in unison, and ultimately man the trenches, shoot, and kill as a united army.”⁴ But the most important role music played in the Third Reich was fortifying the national identity. The Nazis claimed that the classical titans that Germany produced and their prominence in Western culture was proof of the country’s superiority. Of course, Germans had long thought of their country as more culturally advanced than others, but by appealing to the people’s special relationship with German music and by venerating renowned German composers, the Nazis managed to place their Reich neatly in sync with the nation’s cultural glories.

This was a considerable problem for the occupiers, who were left with the thorny task of eradicating National Socialism, not merely in government but in the hearts and minds of Germans also. This was a difficult chore: the Allies had to purge Nazism but not appear as authoritarian as the Nazis, all while pushing their own political agendas and still preserving the spirit of the German people. There were drastic reforms to all aspects of German life that had been tainted by the Nazis, from the administrative bureaucracy to the military. But the occupiers, realizing that *Kultur* was such a vital aspect of national identification, also targeted classical music as part of their reeducation programs.⁵

³ Christopher Fox, “Music After Zero Hour,” *Contemporary Music Review* 26.1 (2007): 7.

⁴ Kater 10.

⁵ Monod, *Settling Scores* 4.

The Soviets wasted no time in resurrecting Berlin’s music scene, allowing the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra (BPO) to organize only five days after the Germans surrendered and rehearse eight days after that.⁶ In authorizing the recuperation of the BPO, the Soviets sought to earn the support of the musicians and intellectuals of Berlin by “cast[ing] themselves as the champions of German cultural tradition.”⁷ As despicable as their actions were towards the general German public, the Soviets were well liked by the musicians and intellectuals because they fraternized with the Germans and revered German music. Indeed, the Soviets and Germans had similar musical traditions. Both believed it was the state’s responsibility to “sponsor, guide, and protect the arts” and both “viewed the arts as an integral aspect of society and were well versed in the European canon of high culture.”⁸ Because the Soviets had the same attitude towards the importance of music in society and the centralized coordination of music as the Nazis, they failed to truly transform music culture in Germany. This laxity extended to Soviet policies of denazification as well. Theirs was a “the show must go on” policy, and instead of trying to rid musical culture of the effects of Nazism, they overlooked musicians’ ties to the Nazis if they were especially talented or cooperated with the Communist military government. To be sure, the Soviets tried to influence musical culture by situating exiled German Communists at top positions in arts departments⁹, but overall their jockeying for the loyalty of the German people, their admiration of German classical music, and their belief that the state ought to subsidize and promote the arts hindered any real attempt at Soviet denazification and reform in music culture.

By the time the Americans arrived in Berlin, the Soviets had already established cultural institutions and American officers were not happy with those arrangements. Whereas the Soviets were willing to excuse musicians’ affiliations with the Nazis, the Americans were

⁶ Amy C. Beal, “Reorchestrating Germany’s Culture: Music after World War II,” *Humanities* 27.6 (2006): 46.

⁷ Elizabeth Janik, “The Golden Hunger Years: Music and Superpower Rivalry in Occupied Berlin,” *German History* 22.1 (2004): 81.

⁸ Janik 82-83.

⁹ Janik 84.

determined to eliminate all traces of National Socialism in German music and life. Their harsh policies of denazification stemmed from their general opinions of Germans as inherently nationalistic, chauvinistic, and militaristic, with Nazism being simply the “latest and most vile manifestation of the German cultural and social character.”¹⁰ In order to ensure that the Third Reich would be the last of such manifestations, Americans barred anyone they associated with National Socialism from holding positions of authority. In the case of performers and composers, this meant that anyone who was a member of the Nazi Party, corroborated with Nazi policies, profited from Hitler’s cultural policies, was a nationalist, or believed in the superiority of German music could no longer work as a musician. In other words, most performers and composers were out of a job.¹¹ In order to comprehend this strict policy, it is important to suspend our contemporary understanding of culpability in regards to the crimes of the Third Reich. In the minds of the American occupiers, all Germans had an inclination towards aggression and hate; the only way to change that was to prevent the worst offenders from further influencing the rest of society.

What emerged from this was the systematic vetting and blacklisting of German musicians. In order to secure work as a musician, Germans had to fill out a series of forms and sit through a number of interviews concerning their role in the Reich. Americans used the lists to determine who was employable and in what field: “persons on the ‘black’ and ‘grey unacceptable’ lists were denied any work above manual labor (these were the ‘mandatory removals’); those on the ‘grey acceptable’ list were to be allowed to work at their profession but not hold ‘policy-making or executive positions’; and those on the ‘white’ list were free to take any job that was offered.” By mid-1946, those lists bore the names of approximately 10,000 Germans in the media and arts.¹²

The American program of denazification was baffling to Germans, who believed only the “xenophobic anti-Semites” could be justly

¹⁰ David Monod, “*Verklarte Nacht*: Denazifying musicians under American control” in *Music and Nazism: Art Under Tyranny, 1933-1945* (Laaber, Germany: Laaber-Verlag, 2003), 297.

¹¹ Monod, *Verklarte Nacht* 299.

¹² Monod, *Settling Scores* 47.

considered Nazis.¹³ Despite their distress over being universally dubbed National Socialists and criminals, musicians devised ways to skirt punishment. Many professed to have had good relationships with Jews and that they did everything they could safely have done to protect their Jewish friends. Some claimed to be unaware of the severity of the Nazis’ racial and social policies, that they had been too immersed in their work and compositions to notice the changes in the country. A common excuse was that they were forced to join but they were not ideologically committed to the Nazi cause. Others asserted that the fascists really did not like them, highlighting every bad review received or negative comment made about them during the Third Reich. Interestingly, the composer Wilhelm Furtwängler, whose close ties to the Nazi regime were well known, insisted that his performances were “gestures of defiance that the Nazis could not comprehend.”¹⁴ Still, it was obvious that the performers and composers who worked during Hitler’s reign prospered from his banishment of Jewish and non-German musicians and most continued to believe in German musical superiority. Thus, the Americans considered most of them guilty Nazis and eliminated them from German cultural life. Their purpose was not to rehabilitate individuals—to turn fascists into republicans—but to rehabilitate German society as a whole.

Beyond just removing musicians with National Socialist affiliations from prominent positions in musical life, American occupiers were also concerned with undoing the Nazis’ discriminatory cultural policies and establishing in their place new democratic values. But this was a delicate situation. Hitler had banned the performance of works by Jews or other so-called degenerate musicians. In order to reverse that policy, the Americans had to promote those forbidden works. But it was difficult to do so without legitimizing the Nazis’ racial myth. Further, they were concerned that authorizing the performances of Hitler-approved German classics would affirm Nazi values. Ultimately, they took the risk. The classics were approved, but not necessarily vigorously promoted by the Americans; they did, however, push the performances of formerly

¹³ Monod, *Settling Scores* 56.

¹⁴ Monod, *Settling Scores* 54.

banned music while hiding the fact that they were promoted primarily because they had been suppressed during Hitler's reign.¹⁵

Americans also had to assess the role of government in music. In the United States the arts were funded by private patrons; in Germany, it had been traditionally supported by public subsidies. But because Germany now lacked wealthy patrons, the Americans knew some kind of government subsidy was necessary to revitalize the music world. But a large, centralized government was "perceived by the Americans in 1945 as one of their former enemy's hereditary ailments." Therefore, the occupiers had to somehow meld the traditions of both America and Germany where "the power of the state in the arts would have to be held in check by the rights of the public and the freedom of the artists."¹⁶ In addressing the key to Germans' national identity—music—the Americans hoped that they would be able to reeducate, denazify, and democratize the rest of the population.

Unfortunately, the Allies' conflicting philosophies on denazification made it more difficult for the Americans to enforce their policies. Not all of the Allies shared the same beliefs about eradicating Nazism and the guilt of ordinary Germans and thus did not enforce the same restrictions as the Americans. Musicians that were barred from performing in the American sector were allowed to work in other sectors. For example, Wilhelm Furtwängler was blacklisted by the Americans and forbidden from occupying a prominent position in the American sector. The Soviets, however, ardently supported his return to conducting and let him perform in the Eastern sector. Americans had to consent to his return, which "pav[ed] the way for other musical celebrities of the Third Reich."¹⁷ The inconsistency regarding denazification among the Allies ultimately weakened American standards. Since they could not enforce their policies everywhere, they were forced to adapt them and accept what they considered to be unsubstantial programs for denazification.

The disharmony between the American and Soviet sectors was certainly not unusual in the years following World War II and its

¹⁵ Monod, *Settling Scores* 31-32, 99, 124.

¹⁶ Monod, *Settling Scores* 27.

¹⁷ Janik 92.

results were often disastrous. But in the case of German musical culture, the competition for loyalty and prestige turned the country, and particularly Berlin, into a vivacious center for the arts. Contending for local cultural prestige, the occupying powers organized art exhibitions, reopened theatres, and issued newspaper licenses.¹⁸ Of course, both sides also encouraged the growth of the music society. But while the Soviets promoted German works considerably more than Russian pieces, Americans promoted their own music as well as more innovative works that had been frowned upon by the Nazis.¹⁹ They saw American culture as the "vanguard of democratization" and promoted it whenever possible.²⁰ For instance, American musical celebrities were brought to Germany to perform not only for the military's occupying force but for local musicians as well. Jewish-American composer Leonard Bernstein was scheduled to conduct the Bavarian State Orchestra in Munich and, as one officer noted, he made quite an impression on Germany's musical elite: "As news of Bernstein's talent spread in the music community critics and conductors in the vicinity began to gather for the last two rehearsals. The surprise expressed all too frequently was that an American could come and teach Germans how to play." The success of this visit "paved the way for other American musicians, conductors, ensembles, and orchestras who toured Germany during the years of military occupation and after."²¹ More important than giving them a new stage on which to perform, the tours of American musicians opened Germans' eyes to the high standards of American music and helped them realize that fantastic talent existed outside of their country. They understood that their musical culture was not altogether superior to that of any other nation.

In promoting modern music, Americans hoped to show the Germans what they were missing during the Reich. In 1946, the heavily subsidized *Internationale Feirienkurse für Neue Musik* (IFNM) in Darmstadt

which "worked in tandem with radio stations to commission, record, and

¹⁸ Amy Beal, *New Music, New Allies* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 20.

¹⁹ Janik 77.

²⁰ Monod, *Settling Scores* 118.

²¹ Beal, *New Music, New Allies* 22-23.

promote new repertoire” was established, opening doors for musicians wanting to experiment with music.²² It should be noted that the Americans perhaps naïvely thought that modern music was unavailable in Germany under Hitler. In truth, while the Nazis certainly did not like modern music, it was still available for German consumption and those who were already interested in contemporary music were far more knowledgeable than the Americans. Still, the promotion of modernism—albeit more accessible modernism that featured polytonal, polymodal, and polyrhythmic effects without “casting away from the traditional tonal moorings”²³ challenged audiences and pushed Germans’ musical boundaries, all while providing a sharp contrast to Soviet policies of music reform.

By 1948, the currency reform in the western sector sent Germany’s economy into a tailspin and led to the official division of Germany. The political crises that immediately followed in Cold War Germany—the Berlin blockade and airlift—both hold a pivotal place in history. But the musical culture of Germany was damaged by the introduction of the Deutsche Mark as well. Germans’ savings were wiped out and the prices of goods soared even higher than the black market prices immediately after the war. One consequence of all of this was that there was a return to a conservative trend in music. Because seeing a performance was now considered a luxury, Germans typically only went to productions of well-named stars.²⁴ Yet for those few years between the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War, Germany was once again a cultural jewel of the world. Attempting to win the support of Germans and revolutionize the country, the Americans and Soviets initiated cultural policies that enabled Germans to not only embrace their own classics, but also experiment and broaden the definition of what is high German culture.

22 Joy H. Calico, “Schoenberg’s Symbolic Remigration: A *Survivor from Warsaw* in Postwar Germany,” *Journal of Musicology* 26.1 (2009): 18.

23 Monod, *Settling Scores* 125.

24 Monod, *Settling Scores* 182, 193.