Thinking about the Twentieth Century

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The presence of essays on Hans Pfitzner and on Béla Bartók’s collaboration with Benny Goodman in this issue of MQ once again raises the question of how we choose to construct the history of classical and concert music in the twentieth century.

Few eras in the history of music have bequeathed to historians such intense controversy over competing contemporaneous trends as the first four decades of the last century. Writing and reading about music were thriving enterprises between the mid-1890s and 1939, the decades during which the nineteenth century came to a close. Disparate trends in art emerged, each overtly committed to charting a new direction adequate to a self-consciously modern age, one seemingly discontinuous with the past in an unprecedented way. Spurred on in part by highly visible contemporaneous departures from nineteenth-century practices in painting, sculpture, and architecture, composers wrote music surrounded by intense debates over ideas of continuity, evolutionary change, revolution, and their counterparts: ideologies of restoration and reaction to perceived radical threats to hallowed traditions, including the discovery of ethnic and national authenticities in rural premodern folk music. The role of jazz in concert and classical music in the twentieth century was shaped by debates about whether art could or should be progressive and aligned with history, or whether it was properly governed by normative philosophical claims about beauty. The new century, with its spread of literacy, brought concerns about for whom one might be writing music for in an age of mass communication. The scale of the potential audience eclipsed the significance of the patronage of a landed aristocracy and captains of industry.

Hans Pfitzner made a name for himself in this cauldron of verbal exchanges. His fame rested only partially on his work as a composer and conductor. His reputation benefited from his notoriety as a polemicist. Indeed, the sheer volume of composers’ criticism and pamphleteering—including contributions by Busoni, Schoenberg, Berg, and through his
ethnographic work, Bartók—outstrips the output of music itself between the late 1890s and the mid-1930s. This makes the task of making sense of the musical culture of the early twentieth century only more difficult. Words and sounds do not always seem to line up neatly and coherently with one another. MQ’s worthy rival, JAMS, has, in its latest issue (volume 71, no. 2), a very fine article by Clare Carrasco on Alexander Zemlinsky’s String Quartet No. 2, Op. 15, and its reception between 1918 and 1924. Carrasco looks at the use of the term “Expressionism” (a term taken from art criticism) in music in the years after the Great War and in subsequent decades.

As Carrasco observes, Zemlinsky was cast, in the half century following his death in 1942, as a rather conservative figure, one who did not follow Schoenberg, once his brother-in-law, on a journey toward a more radical modernism. That placed him, wrongly, on the margins of history. His works vanished from the stage, alongside those of his younger contemporary Franz Schreker. But that was not always the case. The sort of scholarship Carrasco and the authors in this issue of MQ pursue forces us to reconsider the prevailing understanding of twentieth-century musical modernism after 1945.

Indeed, the shape of the twentieth century in terms of the evolution of its musical culture may not justify placing one construct of modernism at the center. The privileging of one strand of radical change in the approach to composition may have blinded us to realizing its place on the margins, both empirically and in normative terms. A propos of this year’s Leonard Bernstein centenary, this approach would justify placing Bernstein, who was considered a marginal conservative in the 1960s, closer to the center. And from the standpoint of the repertoire from the last century that is still being played, modernist composers such as Roger Sessions, who once were considered exemplary, are now on the periphery. That shift may mirror the actual shape of history. The promising beginnings of Schreker and Zemlinsky revivals today support the notion that the revision of how we characterize the twentieth century now under way is justified.

One striking feature of the past century was the extent to which the language of music criticism appropriated the way politics was talked and written about. For example, in 1920s Germany modernist approaches in music were viewed, and feared, as musical “bolshevism.” A systematic departure from tonality, rhythmic continuity, and conventions of lyricism and sonic beauty quickly acquired politicized descriptions that in turn inspired Pfitzner-style appeals on behalf of the continued validity of recognizable traditions of musical practice. Music took on political roles. Its more radical modernist departures were seen as heralding and encouraging political change by helping shed the hypocrisies and conceits of the
nineteenth century. And the contrary allegiance to stylistic continuity was therefore regarded as representing how music affirmed a politically reactionary posture. Neoclassicism and adherence to late Romanticism came to be seen as bulwarks against cultural decline and as weapons in the struggle to preserve the cultural inheritance from the ages of Bach and Beethoven against the destructive, demonic, and “degenerate” forces of modernity.

Owing to the formation of the Third Reich in 1933, we now, quite understandably, focus on the use of the term “degenerate” in Fascist rhetoric to condemn certain types of music in the 1930s—including jazz, music by Jews, and radically modernist compositional strategies. But we should also remember that the Nazis appropriated and trivialized a pseudo-scientific term that enjoyed wide popularity at the fin de siècle. That very same epithet was used in Russia by Rimsky-Korsakov beginning in the 1890s as a quick way to dismiss a great deal of new music from the West, including works by Vincent d’Indy and Richard Strauss, both composers who were certainly not considered “degenerate” by the Nazis. There was something fake, artificial, overly facile, insincere, needlessly elaborate, and even cheap about this “sick” and “decadent” and “degenerate” music according to Rimsky-Korsakov. Rimsky also had Skryabin, among others, in mind.

The historical weight of the imposition of aesthetic norms by Fascism in Germany and Italy (as well as in the Soviet Union) has prevented posterity from looking at twentieth-century musical culture clearly. What is bedeviling about the twentieth century is precisely the curious crossed wires between politics and music. Take, for example, the fate of composers under the Nazis. A compelling Canadian documentary appeared in 2016 entitled Exit: Music. Written by Simon Wynberg, it traverses the careers of six composers—Walter Braunfels, Kurt Weill, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Adolph Busch, Mieczyslaw Weinberg, and Paul Ben-Haim—and sets a seventh up for future exploration: Jerzy Fitelberg.

The purpose of this persuasive and powerful film was to highlight how much politics has interfered with our understanding and appreciation of the dominant musical achievements of the twentieth century. There exists forgotten music that can be said to represent the century and deserves to be heard in concert. But it has disappeared not only on account of murder, persecution, and exile but because too many composers persecuted by the Nazis did not fit the paradigm of musical modernism that overwhelmed the discussion after 1945 of what proper twentieth-century music ought to be. In that paradigm, the more traditional aesthetic norms favored by the Nazis were tarnished: they became allies of radical evil and Auschwitz. The anti-modernist character of musical
beauty celebrated by the Nazis was regarded as evidence of collaboration. It rendered the unbearable and unthinkable palatable. Radical modernism—from Schoenberg on—offered post-1945 composers an aesthetics of resistance against totalitarianism and inhumanity. Yet post-1945 experimental new music was itself drawn into the Cold War: revolutionary musical aesthetics and conservative anti-Communism capitalism in the West became, improbably, allies.

Exit: Music offers generous segments of music, beautifully played by musicians from the Royal Conservatory in Toronto. All the music in the film is by victims of Nazism. Yet the music shares an approach to form, expression, and sonority far closer to Pfitzner, Strauss, and Orff—the Nazi era’s most celebrated composers—than to Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg. It is a shame that the “Aryan” anti-Nazi Karl Amadeus Hartmann, whose life under the Third Reich most closely paralleled Braunfels’s, was not referenced in the film, for his modernist music (inspired by Berg and Webern) rightly would have complicated the issue.

Indeed, as the film makes evident, none of the six composers chosen as subjects could be regarded radical modernists. But the plain fact is that Korngold, from his 1927 opera, Das Wunder der Heliane, to his Hollywood films—particularly Robin Hood, Kings Row, Sea Hawk, and Juarez—featured “old-fashioned” decorative and lush soundtracks reminiscent of fin-de-siècle practices. There is however a resilient originality to them. It is ironic that Korngold’s film music was deployed to affirm values directly opposed to Nazism: kindness to strangers, respect for the rights of the individual, resistance to tyranny, and tolerance and peace between differing peoples and nations. At the same time, the Nazi film industry trafficked in the very same late-Romantic musical vocabulary in its attempt to pacify and seduce viewers to accept and embrace the Nazi state and its radically opposite values: xenophobia, racial superiority, the glory of violence and death. So how do we understand the role of music in twentieth-century politics and differentiate between Korngold’s music and that of the composers of Nazi movie soundtracks? As we examine that question, it is interesting to note that Nazi-era painters are now making something of a comeback as more than political hacks. The 2018 New York exhibit at the Neue Galerie, Before the Fall: German and Austrian Art of the 1930s, made this point by showing striking canvases not easily dismissed as mere propaganda once off limits as morally compromised. What justifies the return to respectability by painters of considerable talent who worked in and for the Nazi regime?

Aesthetics and politics diverged more than was once thought. Webern was a Nazi enthusiast. Most of the composers in the Exit Music film ran afoul of the Nazis by merely being Jewish or of Jewish origin.
One—Busch—was a committed non-Jewish anti-fascist. Ben-Haim ended up in Israel, Weinberg in the Soviet Union, Braunfels retreated into inner emigration in Germany, and the rest ended up in the United States. The early music of Ben-Haim, the music of Busch, Korngold, and Braunfels all attest to a potential of continuity, tradition, and tonality that exceeds the boundaries of mere reaction and conservatism. The music in *Exit: Music* in no way can be regarded as worthy of derision as hopelessly “old-fashioned,” or as “modern,” using the negative critical vocabulary of Pfitzner or Korngold’s father, the Viennese critic Julius Korngold.

And although most of the composers (Weill excluded) probably held centrist political views, there is no facile correlation between politics and compositional style before 1945. Can the music of these non-radical modernist composers and victims still represent the reality of their historical era without being implicitly affirmative of dictatorship and oppression on account of its style? Likewise, after 1945, politics cannot be a dominant guide to judging the aesthetics or implied ethical and moral significance of music.

However, the main point is that the twentieth century needs to be rethought. In that process, many composers with minor reputations owing to the vicissitudes of politics demand a new look. And composers who resisted the experimental and systematic departures of modernism should not be dismissed as out of step with history. They may indeed represent a center of gravity and thus force us to reconsider the link between music and political history in the twentieth century. These composers include, in the United States, everyone from Randall Thompson and William Grant Still to Bernstein, and in Europe, composers such as Othmar Schoeck, Joseph Marx, William Walton, Nikolai Myaskovsky, Gottfried von Einem, and Braunfels. And we need to consider the music of the leading composers of the Cold War from behind the Iron Curtain—in Poland, Hungary, and the Soviet Union—including Grazyna Bacewicz, László Lajtha, Boris Tchaikovsky, Boris Tishchenko, Edison Denisov, Siegfried Matthus, Boris Blacher, and Paul Dessau. These are just a few candidates for exploration through scholarship and, above all, in the concert hall.