
Joan Evans

Musical life in Nazi Germany has attracted growing attention ever since Fred K. Prieberg’s pioneering study of 1982 surveyed the dubious record of German musicians during the Nazi period.¹ Within the last few years a number of full-length studies have contributed to our growing understanding of this previously dark corner of music history.²

Michael H. Kater is a distinguished social historian with a broad knowledge of the workings of Nazi society. He has written authoritative books on the SS, the social make-up of the Nazi party, and the medical profession under Hitler. After first training his sights on Nazi Germany’s musical life in *Different Drummers: Jazz in the Culture of Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), Kater has turned his attention to concert music. In *The Twisted Muse* he has drawn extensively on archival sources, contemporary publications, and personal interviews to create a richly documented account of musical life in the Third Reich. (Kater’s forthcoming *Composers of the Nazi Era: Eight Portraits* will complete his trilogy on musicians in Nazi Germany.)

*The Twisted Muse*, a vivid account of the activities of Germany’s musicians, reveals much that is new and thought-provoking. Choosing his case studies to illustrate a broad spectrum of the country’s musical life, Kater not only examines the careers of celebrated composers, conductors, instrumentalists, and singers, but also those of orchestral musicians, church organists, and music teachers. Kater avoids the easy categories of heroes and villains; his portraits are painted in shades of grey. He argues that to pursue an artistic career in Nazi Germany meant accommodating oneself, to a greater or lesser extent, to the demands of the regime. Karl Bôhm, for example, occasionally performed “politically daring” repertoire (p. 64), worked with progressives such as the stage designer Caspar Neher (a former associate of Bertolt Brecht), and supported the composer Boris Blacher, who was racially suspect. Yet Bôhm is on record as having praised the cultural aims of the regime. Some musicians attempted to circumvent onerous obligations, while others applied themselves assiduously to playing according to the new rules. But all, Kater maintains, compromised their artistic integrity, emerging in 1945 as “gray people against a landscape of gray” (p. 6).

¹Fred K. Prieberg, *Musik im NS-Staat* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1982). Prieberg’s study is dedicated to the memory of Joseph Wulf, whose *Musik im Dritten Reich: Eine Dokumentation* (Gütersloh: Sigbert Mohr, 1963) can still be profitably consulted.

One of the insights to emerge most clearly from Kater's study is the speed with which most musicians adjusted themselves to the new realities after January 1933. The authorities, fully cognisant of the importance of music, were nonetheless aware of the impracticality of attempting to exercise rigid centralized controls over the vast panorama of Germany’s musical activities. Instead, the day-to-day workings of the country’s musical life were left largely in the hands of its leading practitioners. Music was thus allowed much more autonomy than were the other arts, especially those such as film, for example, which could be more easily harnessed for propaganda purposes. That this self-regulatory approach proved to be successful was largely due to the cooperation of Germany’s musicians. Great and small, they proved more than willing to enlist their art in the service of the new Germany.

Very few Gentile musicians were sufficiently motivated to leave Nazi Germany (a situation that obtained in the general population as well). Thus most of the German or Austrian musicians who emigrated to the United States, for example, were Jewish. Kater follows a number of leading Jewish musicians such as Arnold Schoenberg, Kurt Weill, Otto Klemperer, and Bruno Walter into exile, examining the various factors that affected their adjustment to life in a foreign land. As for the non-Jewish emigrés, Kater calls for a closer look at the circumstances surrounding their departure. The conductor Erich Kleiber refused to stay in Germany “for love or money” (p. 124) after the uproar occasioned by his performance of music from Alban Berg’s Lulu at a Berlin Staatsoper concert in November 1934. Others who left did so only reluctantly, after having failed in their attempts to secure their professional survival in Germany. Paul Hindemith and Fritz Busch, both of whom have long been admired for their anti-fascist stance, belong in this category. The case of the conductor Hermann Scherchen, one of the leading champions of modernist music in the Weimar period, is also more complex than has been assumed. An outspoken socialist, Scherchen was a “natural foe” of National Socialism (p. 127), who avoided Germany after 1933. Yet there is evidence to suggest that as the war progressed, the staunchly anti-Nazi Scherchen wavered in his opposition long enough to consider seriously Joseph Goebbels’s offer of a conducting position in his homeland.

Kater tackles the vexing question of why German musicians supported the regime in such overwhelming numbers. Many were ideologically committed, of course; others were driven by opportunism or by a blind respect for authority. But many musicians were fuelled by the hope that the new masters would be able to alleviate the desperate economic straits in which they, even more than other professional groups, found themselves mired at the end of the Weimar Republic. These hopes did not remain unfulfilled. Although unemployment remained a serious problem throughout the early years of the regime (as late as 1936, for example, the jobless rate for musicians was still twice the national average, and four-fifths of those lucky enough to have a job were paid less than blue-collar workers), conditions did improve for musicians, especially between 1936 and 1939, as the general economic situation stabilized.
Support for the regime did not guarantee success. Nor was the lack of a Party card necessarily a stumbling block; this is evident from the successful careers of Clemens Krauss or Karl Böhm, not to mention that of Wilhelm Furtwängler. Success depended upon a combination of factors, including talent, political acumen, and (as ever) good luck. The conductor Hans Knappertsbusch, for example, was unlucky. Hitler simply disliked him. This fact, combined with his problematic handling of affairs at the Munich Staatsoper, was enough to block Knappertsbusch’s success, even though his Nazi sympathies were evident long before 1933. (Kater firmly rejects the conductor's post-1945 claim that he had opposed the Nazis.) Hitler harboured a similar dislike for Hans Pfitzner, Germany’s most nationally minded senior composer, second in reputation only to Richard Strauss. Thus despite his unswerving ideological commitment to the Nazi cause, Pfitzner was never accorded the status he loudly claimed to be his due. But even Hitler’s support did not guarantee success, as is clear in the case of Fritz Busch. Although he had strong support from Berlin, opposition on the part of local Party functionaries cost the conductor his position at the Dresden Staatsoper.

Kater’s investigation sheds new light on the activities and attitudes of most of the major (and many of the minor) players in Nazi Germany’s musical life. In the ever-vexing case of Richard Strauss, Kater’s account is enriched by his good fortune in obtaining access to the usually restricted Strauss family archive in Garmisch. Although he fully acknowledges the composer’s less-than-admirable attributes, Kater’s portrait reveals a man less fuelled by personal ambition, and one whose engagement with the Nazi regime was less committed, than has been claimed. The charge of materialism frequently laid against Strauss, Kater claims, is exaggerated, and in any case, Furtwängler earned more during the Third Reich than did the composer.

Kater firmly rejects the widely held view that Strauss was apolitical, claiming that the composer was “more consciously and more skillfully political” than most German musicians, including Furtwängler (p. 203). Though his politics were to fail him early in the game, Strauss attempted to use the new political system to further certain reforms related to Germany’s musical life towards which he had been working for decades. These included raising the standards of musical training and performance throughout the country, increasing the share of royalties accorded to composers of “serious” music (E-Musik), and obtaining an extension of copyright protection for concert music. Strauss accepted the presidency of the Reichsmusikkammer (Reich Music Chamber) with the aim of using the position to accomplish these reforms.

Strauss’s forced resignation in July 1935, Kater suggests, had less to do with immediate circumstances (i.e., the well-known controversy concerning the premiere of Die schweigsame Frau) than with organizational concerns related to the RMK. The egotistical and independent-minded composer was manifestly

---

3 See, for example, Gerhard Splitt, Richard Strauss, 1933–1935: Ästhetik und Musikpolitik zu Beginn der nationalsozialistischen Herrschaft, Reihe Musikwissenschaft, vol. 1 (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus Verlagsgesellschaft, 1987). Splitt not only claims that Strauss was a convinced National Socialist, but characterizes his music as fascistic.
unsuited for an administrative position. He had little interest in the day-to-day workings of the Chamber (he was rarely present in Berlin), and was inclined to soft-pedal issues related to the “Jewish question.” (On the other hand, Strauss’s replacement, Peter Raabe, a retired Generalmusikdirektor and an avid Nazi supporter, proved to be Goebbels’s “ideal puppet” [p. 20].) Strauss himself had soon realized that his seemingly exalted post actually gave him little leverage in carrying out his reforms, and his initial high expectations soon gave way to disenchantment. Already in the autumn of 1934, less than a year after the official opening of the RMK, Strauss was considering resigning. Kater suggests that he would have likely have done so even if the Schweigsame Frau affair had not precipitated his departure.

After his resignation, Strauss was subjected to a “roller-coaster” existence (p. 208), alternately tolerated (he was, after all, the country’s best-known and best-loved composer) and humiliated. Much of this humiliation was visited upon his family. Kater vividly describes the viciousness with which the regime treated Strauss’s family members, especially his daughter-in-law Alice (née von Grab), who was Jewish, and her two young sons. At the time of the Kristallnacht attacks, for example, the composer’s grandchildren were taken to the centre of Garmisch and forced to spit on Jews who had been rounded up. Especially chilling is the account of the brutal treatment given Alice Strauss’s Prague relatives. Strauss himself attempted to intervene on their behalf, even driving up to the very gates of Theresienstadt, where several family members were imprisoned. But a connection with the country’s most famous composer provided little protection; no fewer than twenty-six of Alice Strauss’s relatives perished at the hands of the Nazis.

Whereas Strauss has previously been treated less charitably than the facts warrant, the various portraits of Furtwängler to date have been “far too flatteringly drawn” (p. 211). Compelling evidence for a redress of this imbalance includes Goebbels’s diaries, which support Kater’s claim that as the war progressed, Furtwängler’s “inner commitment” to National Socialism grew stronger (p. 202). Kater also raises questions about Furtwängler’s motivation in helping the dozens of people who requested his assistance. Here Kater’s conclusions are less convincing. He gives the conductor full credit for helping many Jews (most famously members of the Berlin Philharmonic), but notes that Furtwängler’s helping hand was also extended to anti-Semites, Nazis, and Nazi sympathizers. To Kater, this widespread “meddling” suggests an obsession with “personal connections,” resulting from a megalomaniac’s need to be at the centre of events (p. 196).

Kater’s skill and experience as a social historian is put to good use in his account of the role of music and musicians in institutions as varied as the family, the schools, the Hitler Youth, the academies, and the Protestant Church. The Nazi rulers, thoroughly aware of the propaganda potential of music to forge a bond between the regime and its people, early set about the Gleichschaltung

---

(coordination) of musical life in the institutions. The practice of *Hausmusik*, which had fallen into decline in recent decades, was rigorously promoted, for example, with high-profile annual events devoted to amateur music-making. More significant and far-reaching were the activities of the Hitler Youth (*Hitler-Jugend*). From the very beginning this organization stressed the importance of systematic musical training. Through its own regional music schools, and in music camps and rallies, the HJ pursued its ideological commitment to music as a crucial tool in forming young National Socialists. In short order the HJ took over the task of music education from Germany’s schools, assumed control of such venerable institutions as the Vienna Boys’ Choir and the St. Thomas Choir of Leipzig, and, through its musical involvement in the various festivals designed to replace Christian ceremonies, assisted the regime in its attempts to eradicate the churches and the traditional values they represented. One of the most popular of HJ composers was Heinrich Spitta. A nephew of Philipp Spitta, the Bach biographer, Heinrich Spitta was the author of such extremely popular works as his early Hitler hymn, *The Führer Has Called Us*. Among the HJ’s music instructors was the young Cesar Bresgen, a committed National Socialist who (despite his post-war claim that he had written no music for political purposes) produced music for the Hitler Youth “like clockwork” (p. 144). Kater bluntly describes as “lies” Bresgen’s claims that he had little to do with politics (p. 145), pointing out, for example, that Bresgen held the rank of *Obergefolgschaftsführer* in the HJ.

Kater is not one to mince words, but on occasion he comes uncomfortably close to suggesting guilt by association. For example, while noting that Bresgen was a “star” at the 1939 Dusseldorf festival (p. 144), Kater reminds us of the Degenerate Music exhibition that had been attached to the festival the previous year. Similarly, Bresgen’s new trombone concerto was conducted by “the anti-Semitic” Paul Sixt (p. 145); one of Hugo Distler’s young students joined the HJ before it was obligatory to do so; Wolfgang Fortner “collaborated” (!) with the “anti-Semitic” harpsichordist Li Stadelmann (p. 171); and so on. This is unfortunate, for Kater’s sobering portraits need no such dubious support.

The reformist music program pursued by the Confessional Church, Kater claims, was “essentially fascistic” (p. 162). Motivated by a desire to restore to liturgical music its post-Reformation “purity,” leading Protestant church musicians demanded that Romantic music, with its emphasis on virtuosity and individualism, be replaced by the more sober sacred works of earlier German masters such as Schütz or Bach, or by contemporary music written in a polyphonic, neo-Baroque style. The reformers themselves were quick to note the parallels between National Socialist principles and the “völkisch” aims of church-music reform (e.g., the emphasis on congregational singing), and leading church composers such as Hugo Distler, Ernst Pepping, Johann Nepomuk David, and Wolfgang Fortner all had close ties to the regime. Far from finding in the church a “refuge” from Nazism (p. 170), as one Fortner biographer claims, the composer and his colleagues helped forge a “silent alliance” between fascism and the Protestant church (p. 167). As for the organ, it
assumed a political role well beyond the walls of the church. Given a prominent position in Nazi ceremonial occasions, as well as in the music program of the Hitler Youth, the king of instruments became the highly symbolic “total instrument of a total state” (p. 173).

Political historians have realized for some time that continuities exist between the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich. That these can also be traced in the country’s musical life is clear from Kater’s research. Parallels are drawn between the youth culture of the Weimar period and the Hitler Youth, for example; Kater points out that music played a significant part in both. Continuity is also present in the case of the organ reform movement, whose beginnings stretch back into the 1920s. Already in 1927 the reformers, by stressing the true “German” quality of the Baroque-style organ, had fostered a nationalistic quality that served it well when it later joined forces with the ideologically suspect music reforms of the Confessional Church. One might also add that continuities exist in another direction: between the Third Reich and the post-1945 musical world. The Organ Movement’s interests in early music, for example, were paralleled by the many musicological publications devoted to early German masters, such as the volumes of *Musikalische Denkmäler* that still grace our music-library shelves. And to what extent did the Hausmusik initiative, along with other amateur music-making activities prompted by “archaic impulses” (p. 132) implicit in the “blood-and-soil” ideology, foster the growth of the Early Music movement?

Kater devotes his final chapter to the issues and personalities involved in the regime’s “struggle for modernity in music” (p. 177). He reminds us that, contrary to still popular belief, new music was not restricted to works slavishly modelled on the masterpieces of the past. Nazi Germany prided itself on being a modern state, and its composers were encouraged to develop a suitably modern style, “modern but not un-German,” in the words of Goebbels, Germany’s cultural overlord.⁵ The task for composers was to develop a musical language that was modern-oriented, yet tonally based, and firmly anchored in the German musical tradition. Such a “national” language would automatically distinguish itself from the “decadent,” “bolshevist,” and “international” (read “Jewish”) music of the hated Systemzeit. The problem was that Nazi leaders could not devise a definition of what might constitute a “German” musical language. Atonality was condemned out of hand as “Jewish,” but apart from reiterating that proscription, the leaders were unable to articulate directives, much less enforce them. The uncertain situation that developed fostered contention among regime leaders and fed the struggle for cultural control that existed between the pragmatic Goebbels and Alfred Rosenberg, the Party’s chief ideologue and cultural watchdog. It also led to uncertainty for both composers and performers. In the absence of guidelines, grey areas existed in which one might be open to attack. On the other hand, depending on individual

---

circumstances and the vagaries of patronage, one might enjoy a surprising degree of leeway. This situation helps explain the success of modern-oriented composers such as Carl Orff, Werner Egk, and Rudolf Wagner-Régeny, as well as (in a more limited way) Schoenberg’s former students Winfried Zillig and Paul von Klenau.

It seemed to many, especially after the successful premiere of the *Mathis der Maler* Symphony in March 1934, that the recent works of the “Aryan” Hindemith, written in an expanded tonal language richly evocative of Germany’s musical past, could provide suitable models. But this was not to be. Well before 1933 Hindemith had made “deadly enemies” in the Nazi camp, including Hitler himself (p. 180). Kater relates the familiar anecdote that places Hitler at a 1929 Berlin performance of *Neues vom Tage*, where he was disgusted by the sight of the (seemingly nude) soprano in her bath. There appears to be little evidence for this story, however. And indeed, quite apart from the fact that the Führer’s tastes ran famously to Wagner, it is difficult to imagine what could possibly have induced him to attend a performance by Germany’s leading home-grown modernist. Hitler’s hatred can be attributed to less colourful factors: Hindemith’s 1920s reputation as the *enfant terrible* of German composers (a reputation fed by the provocative *Sancta Susanna* and *Das Nusch-Nuschi*), not to mention his Jewish and left-wing connections. At any rate, as far as most Nazis were concerned, Hindemith’s “list of sins” precluded his acceptance (p. 181), regardless of recent changes in his musical language. His music gradually fell into eclipse and Hindemith himself finally—and reluctantly—bowed to the inevitable and emigrated. That he continued to be a subject of interest well into the war years, however, illustrates the general esteem in which he was still held in many circles; it also indicates that his influence, as much his music, was sorely missed.

Kater suggests that as a result of the gradual eclipse of Hindemith’s music after 1935, some authorities were now “looking to Stravinsky” as a source of inspiration for young German composers (p. 183). Certainly there was substantial support for Stravinsky’s music from 1936, when, after an unofficial boycott of more than three years, his music was once again performed in Germany. But a causal connection between Hindemith’s eclipse and Stravinsky’s success is unlikely. It is true that Stravinsky’s influence, which before 1933 had been as ubiquitous in Germany as elsewhere, can easily be detected in modern-oriented German music written during the Nazi period (most obviously in Carl Orff’s *Carmina Burana*, premiered in 1937, and in the works of Orff’s friend Werner Egk). This influence was widely acknowledged, if often deplored, in the German press. But Stravinsky’s “rehabilitation,” diligently prepared and supported by his German supporters (especially his publisher, Willy Strecker, of Schott) was largely fuelled by Germany’s desire, after the xenophobic early

---

6 See Joan Evans, “Die Rezeption der Musik Igor Strawinskys in Hitlerdeutschland,” *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 55 (1998): 91–109. The outbreak of war brought an end to these performances, despite the Hitler-Stalin Friendship Pact. A French citizen since 1934, the Russian-born composer was now considered an enemy.
years of the regime, to rejoin the European musical community. This desire was also reflected in the rise of festivals of new music, many with an international emphasis. How better to signal the change in attitude than by opening the country’s theatres and concert halls to the music of Europe’s most famous modern composer?

Like Hindemith, Carl Orff had little sympathy for the Nazis. His accommodation with the regime had as its motivation, at least in part, the necessity of hiding the fact that one of his grandmothers was Jewish. But if Kater’s account of Orff’s journey through the Third Reich is a compassionate one, Orff’s opportunistic behaviour in 1946 elicits little sympathy. For Kater shows that Orff, faced with denazification procedures, engineered an “instant whitewash” (p. 190–91). He claimed to have been involved in founding the “White Rose,” the well-known resistance group whose members were executed for treason in 1943. Though Orff never appears to have been involved in anti-Nazi activity of any kind, the American occupation forces accepted his “clever fabrication” (p. 191), freeing the composer to begin a successful post-war career.

Despite many “demonstrations of discontent” among German musicians (p. 223), very few openly criticized the regime. One such “discontented” composer was Karl Amadeus Hartmann, a modernist composer who had studied with Scherchen and shared his mentor’s leftist political stance. Recognizing the futility of open dissent, Hartmann “internalized” his opposition (p. 234). He did not obtain the membership in the RMK that was required to pursue a musical profession, and thus remained effectively unemployed. Though his works could not be performed in Germany, Hartmann continued to compose. (He was fortunate in that his material needs and those of his young family were provided for by his father-in-law, a well-to-do Munich merchant.) His protest found a voice in music written “for the drawer,” music through which the composer created a “private monument of protest” (p. 234). These works include Miserae, a symphonic poem written in 1933–34 and dedicated to “friends, who had to die in the hundreds” in Dachau, and the elegiac Concerto funèbre, a violin concerto written on the outbreak of war and dedicated to his four-year-old son. For political as well as artistic reasons, Hartmann strove, and with a fair degree of success, to secure performances of his music abroad. In this way he tried to remind the outside world that the vestiges of another Germany still existed. Oddly, Hartmann seems to have escaped serious harassment by the regime. Did he have friends in high places?

Thanks to the work of Kater and others, we now know much more than we did even a few short years ago about the conditions of musical life in Nazi Germany, both in terms of the organizational structures that governed musical life and the extent to which individual musicians came to terms with the new situation. Much remains to be done, however. Not the least of these tasks is the inclusion of these new insights into standard texts and reference books. One awaits with interest, for example, the revised edition of the New Grove Dictionary, whose current entries on most figures associated with the Third Reich are, to put it mildly, woefully misleading.
There is also the important task of examining more closely the actual music written in the Third Reich. *The Twisted Muse* is primarily a social history of musicians in Nazi Germany; thus the music itself (despite the implied promise of the subtitle) is given relatively little attention. Nor does the reader learn how music written in Nazi Germany reflected the musical developments taking place elsewhere. One suspects that much German music of the 1930s, with its tonal orientation and light dusting of dissonances, is not dissimilar in general style to a great deal of music written elsewhere during this period—some of it, indeed, by modernist composers who after the heady atmosphere of the 1920s now trod more conservative paths.

Though it remains for musicologists to probe more deeply into the actual music composed under Hitler, *The Twisted Muse* provides us with the most important study to date on musical life in Nazi Germany. The book is attractively produced, with an extensive index, and nearly seventy pages of documentation. Unfortunately, the practice of bundling together a dozen or more citations into a single endnote makes it often difficult to locate a specific source. There is no bibliography.

Joan Evans


The cover of Karl Grunsky’s racist and anti-Semitic *Kampf um deutsche Musik!* (Stuttgart: Erhard Walther, 1933) provides an apt illustration of the title of Pamela Potter’s study of German musicology, *Most German of the Arts*: a lyre, symbolising Music, is being pulled from a pool of muck and slime by the German Imperial flag. The idea of music being inherently German is an important theme of Potter’s work, one she traces from Athanasius Kircher in the seventeenth century through to the works and teachings of exiled German scholars in post-war America. The very act of making such long-term connections is indicative of her overall project: an attempt to reintegrate the role and development of German music(ology) between 1933 and 1945 into the larger historical narrative by uncovering and examining the unmistakable continuities between the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich. *Most German of the Arts* is in every way a pathbreaking book: an important corrective to silence and obfuscation, and a welcome reconsideration and refocusing of earlier historiographical theses.

The book is not arranged chronologically, but by topic, moving from the general to the specific, and allowing the reader to see the historical continuities most clearly. It begins with an examination of music and society during Weimar and the Third Reich that provides the context for the rest of the work. The next four chapters discuss, respectively: musicology and society during

---

7 In this regard, the title of the German translation is more accurate: *Die mißbrauchte Muse: Musiker im Dritten Reich* (Munich and Vienna: Europa Verlag, 1998).