

War, fascism and the fate of music in the 20th century

By Fred Mazelis
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Forbidden Music: The Jewish Composers Banned by the Nazis, Yale University Press, 2013.

In recent years growing attention has been paid to the so-called “lost music” of the first half of the 20th century, and specifically to the devastating impact of the two world wars and the Nazi period on the lives and careers of so many composers and other musicians in Germany and Central Europe. *Forbidden Music: The Jewish Composers Banned by the Nazis*, by Michael Haas, takes this subject further, exploring not only the fate of individual composers who suffered at the hands of the Hitler regime, but also an entire 150-year period of musical history that was disrupted and in some ways brought to an end by fascist barbarism.

Haas, a well-known music producer and musicologist who organized the “Entartete Musik” [“Degenerate Music”] series of recordings for Decca in the 1990s and more recently served as the music curator for the Jewish Museum of Vienna, has written a thought-provoking book, a massive work of musicological excavation and scholarship that will be indispensable to anyone seeking to understand this entire period of Western classical music.

Haas’s major theme is spelled out in his introductory chapter. He stresses the central role played by composers of Jewish ancestry in the Austro-German musical tradition. While not minimizing the age-old anti-Semitism in the German-speaking lands that became the German Empire and the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, Haas shows that “Jews were able to counter threats of exclusion from German culture by ... reshaping it through their own creativity.” He adds that, “by banning Jewish composers, Hitler’s Reich amputated an essential limb from the body of Germany cultural continuity.”

The correctness of this thesis is proven over the course of the book. Haas delves into German and Austrian history, including the 1848 revolutions throughout Europe and the emancipation of the Jews, both in Austria (in 1867) and Germany (in 1871).

Nineteenth-century German music was dominated by the two titans Richard Wagner and Johannes Brahms, both non-Jews of course, whose earthshaking musical contributions shaped Western classical music. Haas devotes a chapter to each of these figures.

In aesthetic terms, Wagner attacked a “reverence for the past” and revolutionized music through his use of leitmotifs, harmonic experimentation and the development of what he called the “gesamtkunstwerk” (total work of art).

Brahms, on the other hand, developed existing forms and musical language in the tradition of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert, the giants who first made Vienna the musical center that it remained for more than a century. Haas points out the irony of the fact that Wagner, nearly a generation Brahms’s senior, was the leader of the musical avant-garde of his day, while the younger composer was regarded as the more conservative figure.

The clash between Wagner and Brahms—more precisely that between opposing critical camps rather than the composers themselves—has often

been exaggerated. As Julius Korngold, the famous critic at the *Neue Presse*, Vienna’s leading newspaper for more than 70 years, put it: “Not Wagner or Brahms, but Wagner and Brahms.”

What must also be considered, however, is Wagner’s deplorable musical-intellectual legacy, a legacy made all the more dangerous by his undeniable genius. As early as 1850 he published his notorious anti-Semitic tract *Judaism in Music*. Wagner reflected an anti-Enlightenment wing of romanticism. He counterposed instinct to reason, passion to law and mythology to science, as Haas puts it. These views anticipated the extreme chauvinism which was later to be used against the working class and the socialist movement, with such devastating consequences for European Jewry.

Wagner was not just a great composer who also happened to be an anti-Semite. He made anti-Semitism central to his music and poisoned German musical historiography in the process. While this does not negate Wagner’s greatness, neither can it be ignored.

Wagner set up a dichotomy between German and Jewish music that did not exist in reality. There was no such thing as “Jewish classical music” any more than there was “Jewish economics” or “Jewish physics.” Of course there was Jewish liturgical music, but in fact this played little or no role in the work of Jewish composers in Germany and Austria, most of whom were secular and many of whom had not even been raised as Jews.

In the course of the 19th century German-speaking Jews active in the professions and cultural life often faced pressure to convert to Christianity if they hoped to achieve their professional goals. As is well known, the father of Karl Marx converted to Lutheranism, and Felix Mendelssohn, grandson of the illustrious philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, was baptized as a young boy. Later, even after full civil rights for Jews were introduced, figures such as Gustav Mahler converted in order to advance their careers.

Bound up perhaps with their vulnerable social position, Jewish composers who were Wagner’s contemporaries often tended, in their attempt at assimilation, to embrace existing forms and avoid the experimental. Composers such as Giacomo Meyerbeer, who achieved fame in Paris, were denigrated by Wagner. Meyerbeer and others, including Ignaz Moscheles and Jacques Halevy, were eclipsed by the growing enthusiasm for Wagner and the impact he had on several generations.

The second half of the 19th century saw the growing urbanization of the Jewish population and the rise of a secular artistic intelligentsia. Jewish composers came to play a more and more prominent role, with Mahler achieving fame in the 1890s and becoming, especially during his tenure at the Vienna State Opera from 1897 to 1907, the most famous composer and conductor of the day.

Mahler was in some respects a bridge between Brahms and Wagner, and between the 19th and 20th centuries as well, uniting “old” and “new” and also breaking down many of the remaining barriers for Jewish composers in the process. In his musical language, Mahler was indebted to Brahms,

and like the latter he composed in the symphonic and not operatic tradition. However, his symphonies also took something from Bruckner's massive compositions, and Bruckner was a noted acolyte of Wagner. Furthermore, Mahler had been influenced by Wagner as a student, and while he developed his own style and language, the expansiveness of his work, its large scale and length, also owe something to Wagner.

The 20th century saw Jewish composers playing a more diverse role in the development of music and debates over musical aesthetics. Arnold Schoenberg became the leading theorist of a break with tonality, while many others continued to work in the tradition of their predecessors.

Vienna's place in the musical world in the last decades of the 19th century paralleled that of Paris in the sphere of painting. This flowering coincided, however, with growing signs of the decline and decay of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The social tensions and great power rivalries were to erupt in war and revolution less than two decades later, with the collapse of the three great empires in Germany, Austria and Tsarist Russia.

The gathering storm clouds found their reflection in cultural upheaval, including in the music world. No one articulated it more clearly and intensely than Schoenberg, the composer and musical theorist who, in his noted *Harmonielehre* of 1910, insisted that the task of music as well as art was to show the "sometimes awful and repugnant visions of real life," as Haas explains it. Schoenberg criticized what he termed the "insane delusion that artists are only in the service of beauty."

Shifts in the world of music, paralleling that of the birth of abstraction in painting (Schoenberg conducted a decade-long correspondence and collaborated with the Russian painter and pioneer of abstraction Wassily Kandinsky), can only be briefly noted in this context. It must be said that Schoenberg's intellectual seriousness and insight into the growing crisis and aesthetic dilemmas facing classical composition did not automatically translate into a musical path—in his case the total rejection of tonality—that would inaugurate a genuinely new and progressive musical future.

In the wake of the unprecedented devastation of the First World War and the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a "musical migration" took place from Vienna to Berlin. The capital of Weimar Germany now attracted many of the leading musical figures. For the next decade and more Berlin was a center of musical debate and experimentation. Contending schools of expressionism, *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) and the twelve-tone system devised by Schoenberg vied for support. Kurt Weill and Hanns Eisler created music that was aimed at the masses and more directly political in its outlook and purpose.

The lively debate between rival musical trends was aborted by the Nazi takeover, first in Germany in early 1933 and five years later with Hitler's annexation of Austria. Alongside the bloody repression of the German Communist and Social Democratic Parties, a systematic purge of Jewish conductors and other musicians began soon after Hitler's appointment as Chancellor. Franz Schreker, the most prominent composer of the period, a half-Jew who had been raised as a Christian, was forced into retirement and died of a stroke in early 1934, at the age of 55.

The author points out some of the absurdities of Nazi policies, in addition to their tragic consequences. The role of Jewish poet Heinrich Heine in the development of German music was perhaps the most obvious problem, since his words had been set—by Schubert, Schumann, Brahms and others—to some of the most famous art songs and song cycles in history. There was also the difficulty of dealing with Franz Lehár's *The Merry Widow*, perhaps the most popular operetta of the day, whose librettists, Viktor Léon and Leo Stein, were both Jews.

As part of the attempt to systematize the exclusion of Jewish musicians, in 1940 the Nazis produced a "Lexicon of Jews in Music," consisting of some 10,000 names. By this time, of course, the regime made no effort to justify its actions in aesthetic terms. Jewish composers whose work fell into the avant-garde framework, including many who were great admirers

of Wagner, were denounced for "Jewish Cultural Bolshevism." Some of the best known figures, on the other hand, worked in a more accessible idiom that could not be caricatured as "degenerate"—which of course did not save them from the Nazi ban.

Fascist brutality represented an assault on human culture that was inseparably bound up with social counterrevolution and the destruction of independent working class organization. Nazism was a form of German cultural suicide. The great merit of this book is that it documents this assault in great detail in the field of music, an assault whose impact can be felt to this day.

Most of the leading Austrian and German composers, conductors and other musicians were able to escape the Third Reich. Some, like Weill and Schoenberg, left almost immediately after Hitler took power. Musicians like conductors Bruno Walter, Otto Klemperer and George Szell, pianists Rudolf Serkin and Artur Schnabel and cellist Emanuel Feuerman made their way to the United States. Other composers, however, including Erwin Schulhoff, Hans Krasa and Viktor Ullmann, all of whom were Czech-born but German-speaking, perished tragically in the Holocaust.

The musicians shared in the difficulties of other refugees. Some were interned as "enemy aliens" in Britain. Many had to contend with restrictive immigration policies, especially in the US. Cultural differences and difficulties finding work also beset all but the most well-known of the composers.

The refugees saw their composing careers disrupted and in many cases destroyed. Weill reinvented himself as a successful composer on Broadway, but his later work, while it has many charms, lacked the passion and impact of the work he did with Bertolt Brecht (*The Threepenny Opera, Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*). Erich Korngold (the son of critic Julius Korngold), who achieved fame at the age of 23 with his opera *Die Tote Stadt*, turned to composing for Hollywood films after he arrived in the US, along with numerous others.

Most of the refugees had far less success than Weill and Korngold. Hans Gal and Egon Wellesz, for instance, who were well known in Germany and Vienna, respectively, found refuge in Britain. Wellesz lived to 89 and Gal to 97, but their compositions were rarely performed and they drifted into teaching careers.

Ignatz Waghalter, who had been the inaugural music director of one of Germany's most important opera houses, the Deutsches Opernhaus in Berlin, where some of the works of Schreker and Weill were premiered, was also forced to flee, along with Rudolf Bing, later the director of the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

The left-wing Eisler, another of the many composers who was half-Jewish, falls into a slightly different category. He achieved some success in the US, but was then deported in 1948, with the onset of the anti-communist witch-hunt.

For those who returned or considered returning to Europe after the war, a different set of problems awaited. A musical elite that had prospered under the Nazis suddenly discovered that an embrace of musical modernism could help to provide them with spurious anti-Nazi credentials. Former Nazis now embraced twelve-tone music.

The onset of the Cold War barely a year after the end of World War II brought with it a shift in "musical policy." While the Vatican and the US OSS, the forerunner of the CIA, helped Nazi war criminals to escape, the CIA later helped to fund and publicize what the author refers to as "anti-communist activity in the arts."

The aim was to associate the supposed avant-garde with the alleged freedom of the capitalist West, a campaign that was made easier by the Stalinist policy of strangling artistic creativity in the name of "socialist realism." American critic Susan Sontag later explained, of her experience as a young intellectual in Europe during this period, that "we knew we were supposed to appreciate ugly music ... it was certainly not what was

being performed in the USSR ... where artists could not perform or write ugly music.”

The political imperatives of the Cold War left certain composers who had suffered at the hands of the Nazis out in the cold. Composers who saw themselves as progressive, like Austrian Berthold Goldschmidt, discovered, as he later put it, that “suddenly we were out of date.” *Forbidden Music*, to sum up, is successful both in demonstrating the contributions of Jewish composers to the Austro-German musical tradition, and at the same time illuminating a large part of the history of Western classical music for the last two centuries.

There is one major conceptual weakness in Haas’s account of this period that should be noted. He describes the ideological struggle that played out in the cultural arena in Central Europe over a period spanning nearly three-quarters of a century, but its social roots and dynamics are never seriously discussed. Because he separates the issue of anti-Semitism from its social, economic and political basis, he cannot fully explain how and why the Holocaust took place.

It is not necessarily the task of musicology to explain how the Nazis could have been stopped, but since Haas chooses to deal in great detail with the history of this period, a brief examination of the historical significance of anti-Semitism is in order.

The author writes a good deal about anti-Semitism in Vienna, for example, but there is barely any mention of its socialist opponents, or of the way in which anti-Semitism was used to appeal to backward elements and weaken the working class.

Nor can the growth of anti-Semitism in Germany be grasped without noting that the last two decades of the 19th century saw the unprecedented growth of a mass socialist movement enrolling millions of workers in that country, the homeland of Wagner and Brahms. (Interestingly, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) organized musical evenings where thousands of workers listened to the works of *both* Brahms and Wagner, along with Beethoven, Bach, Liszt, Handel and others.)

Modern anti-Semitism as it emerged and developed in the early decades of the 20th century, the “socialism of fools,” was above all a weapon wielded against the working class. National Socialism was the last resort of a decaying system against the movement for international socialism.

It was the isolation of the Russian Revolution after its victory in 1917, and the betrayals of the revolutionary struggles of the German working class in particular, which strengthened the Nazi forces and led eventually to Hitler’s triumph. The fate of the Jewish composers and musicians, as part of the fate of European Jewry, cannot be understood apart from this history.

As to the future of classical music, the author is not obliged to offer a road map or blueprint, of course. Haas correctly calls for renewed efforts to be made to rescue the libraries and papers of a generation of musical figures that for the most part has already passed from the scene. His own work on “Degenerate Music” has now been followed by an ambitious series of recordings by the Naxos label, including some of the work of Waghalter, Schulhoff, Wellesz and others.

This is not an exercise in nostalgia. The “debate” that was ended by the Nazis must be revived. That which was forbidden should not be forgotten. The musical compositions that fell by the wayside in recent decades will be heard again in a new and contemporary context. This is a crucial aspect of the question. Musical history will be illuminated by conditions and events that awaken new audiences and new composers. Music education and artistic renewal will be part of a social and cultural renaissance that accompanies new struggles. The fate of culture itself is inseparably bound up with the fate of the working class and the struggle for social equality.

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