

## MUSIC IN THE THIRD REICH

# Music in the Third Reich

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ERIK LEVI

# Introduction

The function of the arts in a repressive political system such as the Third Reich has always exercised considerable fascination amongst cultural historians. Yet since 1945, there has been something of an imbalance in the levels of scrutiny afforded to the different art forms during the Nazi era. In purely statistical terms, there can be no doubt that most attention has been drawn to the visual arts and architecture. For example, the bibliography *The Nazi Era. 1919–1945*, edited by Helen Kehr and Janet Langmaid (London, 1982), lists nearly twenty post-war books dealing with art history, and eight concerned with architecture. Next to these areas, the role of the media, especially film, has also elicited comprehensive and detailed examination. In comparison, music seems to have attracted far less exposure and, to date, only a handful of books in the German language have been exclusively concerned with the subject. These are *Musik im dritten Reich* (1962) by Joseph Wulf, *Musik im NS-Staat* (1982) by Fred Prieberg, *Musik und Musikpolitik im faschistischen Deutschland* (1984) edited by Hanns-Werner Heister and Hans-Günter Klein, and *Entartete Musik* (1988) edited by Albrecht Dümmling and Peter Girth.

Given Germany's undisputed historical pre-eminence in both the performing and creative aspects of music, the paucity of scholarly material on musical life in Nazi Germany appears to be somewhat surprising. But there are perhaps special reasons why, amongst all the arts, it is music that has remained relatively neglected. One explanation must surely rest with the very abstract nature of music as an art form. This poses special difficulties for any historian who seeks to draw unambiguous parallels between music and political ideology, difficulties which appear, at least on the surface, to be far less problematical in the visual arts or film. At the same time, it would be misleading to suggest that connections cannot be drawn. No one would dispute that socio-political factors have some bearing on the composition, performance and reception of music in any period. But attempts at arriving at a *precise* definition of the political complexion of a particular piece of music, especially one which is divorced from a specified text or programme, still prove elusive.

Apart from the fundamental difficulty of articulating the relationship between music and politics, there are some purely historical factors which go some way towards explaining why musical activity in the Third Reich has not been exposed to such extensive exploration. Perhaps most important in this respect is the constancy of the German Musical Establishment from the Weimar Republic to the post-war era, and its vested interest in suppressing information about its role during the Nazi era. In most historical surveys of twentieth-century music, this issue is barely discussed. Rather, musicologists have tended to focus their attention on the dramatic impact of Hitler's anti-semitic policies which forced the emigration from Germany of a number of very significant and influential musical figures. In contrast, the equally valid point that the majority of musicians, some of incontestable importance, chose to remain and actually prospered under the Nazis, seems to have been overlooked. Since many of these musicians preserved their positions of influence in post-war Germany, strenuous efforts were made to obstruct detailed investigation of their individual relationships with the regime.

Of course, there is nothing remarkable about the attempt to cover up past complicities, and it is certainly not unique to the field of music. On the other hand, as Fred Prieberg has so rightly pointed out in his book *Musik im NS-Staat* (Frankfurt, 1982), the conspiracy of silence and misinformation about the Nazi era has extended to some of the most highly respected academic publications. Prieberg cites as an example the pioneering music dictionary *Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, published between 1949 and 1968. This mammoth 14-volume study, edited by Friedrich Blume, university professor of music in Kiel during the 1930s, can be found in almost every major music library. Yet comprehensive information regarding the activities and outputs of certain composers, performers and musicologists, who enjoyed prominence during the Third Reich, is found wanting.

Such deception only compounds the difficulty of painting a balanced picture of musical life in the Third Reich. Here again there are historical problems, for in the aftermath of the war and the horrifying revelations of the Holocaust, it was tempting for propagandists to taint all cultural activities associated with the Nazis. Yet of all the arts, music does not provide much

useful ammunition for expounding this argument. Even without underestimating the cruelty and intolerance of the Nazi regime, the notion that music entered a twentieth-century equivalent of the 'Dark Ages' during the Third Reich simply does not stand up to detailed scrutiny. On the contrary, examination of certain aspects of musical life in Germany during this period demonstrates a much greater degree of flexibility and creative enterprise than is commonly assumed.

This brings me to one of the central preoccupations of my book, namely the necessity to establish a sense of continuity in 20th-century German music. All too often, it has seemed convenient simply to view the artistic achievement in the Third Reich in complete isolation. In such an interpretation, Hitler's seizure of power in 1933 is seen to have ushered in a period of intense reaction against artistic modernism, and a return to the neo-Wagnerian values of the 19th century. But while there are undoubtedly reactionary elements in German music from 1933–45, it is also worth pointing out that the Nazis accommodated and adopted various existing stylistic elements – *Gebrauchsmusik* (utilitarian music), *Gemeinschaftsmusik* (community music), neo-classicism, the revival of interest in early music – which had been established during the Weimar Republic. In addition, it would be misleading to isolate completely musical developments in Germany during the 1930s from elsewhere in Europe. The parallel between music in Stalin's Russia and in Hitler's Germany provides an obvious point of reference. But even in countries with non-totalitarian political systems, there is sufficient evidence to point to a less 'modernistic' aspect to contemporary musical composition than in the 1920s.

Apart from delineating the degree of continuity and change from the Weimar Republic to the Nazi era, my other major concern in this book is to trace the complex relationship between Nazi musical ideology, such as it existed, and its practical application in the Nazi state. Herein lies one of the major contradictions of the age. While certain musicologists and critics proved eager to furnish the regime with biological theories about the racial superiority of Aryan music and proposed wholesale changes to the organisation of musical culture in the country, the actual administrators of music policy carried out their programmes only intermittently. One of the major problems of equating theory with practice lay in the diverse cultural aims of the Nazi hierarchy. Throughout the period, there were clear

divisions of opinion over music policy between Alfred Rosenberg, the party's appointed ideologue, and Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's Minister of Propaganda. In this long running dispute, Rosenberg adopted an entrenched and orthodox ideological attitude, but in almost every case he was skilfully outwitted by his rival, who had seized the machinery of government and was perfectly prepared to subordinate Nazi principles to the political requirements of propaganda. The conflict was hardly resolved by Hitler who, at his cultural address to the Nuremberg Party Rally in 1938, even went so far as to question the validity of National Socialist theory as applied to music. Because of these seemingly irreconcilable views, it becomes clear that music policy between 1933 and 1945 was riddled with ambiguities, compromises and inconsistencies of outlook.

Since my book is concerned first and foremost with policy and its application, its structure does not follow the line of many music histories. Readers may well be disappointed to find that discussion and musical analyses of compositions written during this period are only touched upon in passing. Neither have I concentrated much attention on biographical examination of the equivocal positions of such important musicians as Richard Strauss, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Herbert von Karajan and Paul Hindemith, fascinating as they are. Rather, I have preferred to adopt a more generalised approach in this introductory study, starting with the examination of conservative attitudes manifested during the Weimar Republic, and then proceeding to a survey of the regulatory controls of music during the Third Reich and the policies of anti-semitism and anti-modernism as applied to music. After these substantial chapters, I have concerned myself with various facets of musical life in Germany, in particular orchestral and operatic administration and repertoire, music on the radio, commercial recordings, music publishing, music journalism and approaches to musical history. The list of subjects covered has, of necessity, been selective, and there are numerous other areas – for example, music and the youth movements, the relationship between church musician and the Nazi state, and the effects of German imperialism on the musical life in the occupied territories – which, for reasons of space, have had to be omitted from the present survey.