

Sadistic Impulses In Music

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Empf: Re: More about Maedchen Orchester in Auschwitz

Wende Bartley asks:

>If music is used in a context of such horror and destruction, then are you suggesting that the SS may have been conscious of this power of music and were using it deliberately as another method of torture and repression?<

I think the answer might be yes, though I am not sure how conscious they were of what they were doing. Knapp states plainly that the SS consciously used music as a method of torture and repression.

I hypothesize that the abuse of music in the concentration camps was, in part, a result of long standing western cultural trends of which the SS was one manifestation. I have attempted to outline this admittedly radical thesis in a 6500 word article entitled "Symphony Orchestras and Artist-Prophets: Cultural Isomorphism and the Allocation of Power in Music" published in the current issue of *Leonardo Music Journal* (Vol. 9, 2000.) I will try to summarize some of the basic aspects of my view in five meager paragraphs. (Please understand this is a very sketchy outline, so I hope no one will take me to task about it.)

The rise of 19th century cultural nationalism strongly affected music. Through the cult of the hero-artist, the composer began to speak as the voice of "his" nation. Artists such as Wagner, Dvorak, and Verdi, helped emerging European countries assert their ethnic identity and claims to national sovereignty. At the same time, the growing autocracy of the conductor (which already had a feudalistic heritage) increasingly objectified musicians who became functionaries, highly responsive instruments, embodiments of his musical fantasies.

At least on a subliminal level, a new aesthetic seemed to evolve, a megalomaniacal objectification of humans motivated by the combined unconscious sensualities of sadism and music. Perhaps this helps us understand the work of conductors such as Toscanini, Rainer, and Stowkowski who joined musical transcendence with a tyrannical terrorization of their performers. Power and public subjugation, the whipping and slashing of the phallic baton, and the orgiastic build to climax under the watchful and authoritarian eye of the conductor are part of what patrons expect from symphony orchestras, and these expectations seem to contain vicarious satisfactions of sadism.

This form of sadistic objectification was especially appealing to the SS as embodied in the camp orchestras. It reduced both the victims and perpetrators to de-humanized functionaries, thus weakening the capacity for empathy and moral judgment.

Seen from a larger perspective, the symphony orchestra's autocracy, human objectification, and cultural nationalism ultimately allowed it to be appropriated as a general simulacrum of National Socialist ideology. People saw that through a symbolic claim to transcendental authority, both conductors and their Führer rose above the mundane world to share their revelations and abuse with the less profound. They saw that transcendental élan and passion

could justify and enforce the subjugation of others, while at the same time symbolizing cultural superiority. Thomas Mann was one of the first to recognize that Hitler, an itinerate painter from Vienna, presented himself to the people as a myth-making, transcendently inspired artist-prophet.

The larger design of Hitler's ideology as an artist-prophet included the recreation of humanity according to a new aesthetic. From this perspective, the Holocaust was a work of art, a "purification" of culture, a "sculpting" of the human race. Aesthetic and political ideology synthesized into a single terrifying force. Human life became clay in the artist-prophet's hands.

As I said, even a brief outline of these radical ideas takes 6500 words.

I think that Knapp sensed the importance of these historical trends very strongly, but all seven musicians she interviewed were very reluctant to talk about the purpose music served in the camp! Knapp notes that the theme seemed to make all too vivid the musician's degradation and objectification. As a result, there is little interview material related to Chapter 6, "Functions of the Dictated Music."

Knapp thus bases the chapter on general information about the use of music in Nazi Germany. She notes that music "was a part of the extermination apparatus" (particularly the marches,) that it was "coupled with excesses of violence and the killing of people," that it was specifically used as an instrument of torture, and that it was used to reaffirm and assert status and power. She also notes that it added a "ceremonial framework to slavery" and deadened the perpetrators consciences--all themes in music (especially military music) uncomfortably familiar to those with the eyes to see.

When discussing why music was used to accompany the selection of prisoners who would go to the gas chambers, she makes one of her most interesting statements:

"My imagination meets its borders here, limits I neither can or want to cross. One can speculate why the SS needed music for the 'Selektion.' Such speculation quickly leads to regions of brutality and sadism, and its instructive worth is doubtful."

I don't know what to think. There seems to be at least some evidence to suggest that the musical sadism expressed in the camps was not a passing anomaly, but an inherent part of western art music, even if normally expressed on a much more sublimated level. If that is the case, the instructive value of examining those motivations is not only very great, it is necessary for our survival.

William Osborne
