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Atonality, 12-Tone Music and the Third Reich

Atonality in music signifies degeneracy and artistic bolshevism.

– Hans Severus Ziegler at the Degenerate Music Exhibition in Düsseldorf, May 1938[1]

The whole atonal movement in music is contradictory to the rhythm of blood and soul of the German nation.

– Alfred Rosenberg at the annual Reichstagung of the National Socialist Cultural Organization in Düsseldorf, June 1935[2]

These extensively quoted statements, emanating from two of the most vociferous cultural ideologists of the Third Reich, give the impression that the Nazi regime formulated a highly consistent attitude towards 'modernist' trends in contemporary music. In reality, however, perceptions of the exact nature of 'atonality' and the 'atonal' movement in music remained notoriously imprecise. Six months before Rosenberg's address, for example, Hitler's Propaganda Minister Goebbels had erroneously denounced Hindemith as an 'atonal musician' who had succumbed to the 'biting dissonances of musical bankruptcy'.[3] Similarly, in 1938 Hans Severus Ziegler, organiser of the Degenerate Music Exhibition, had singled out the unequivocally tonal music of Hermann Reutter for particular criticism, claiming that it manifested severe symptoms of constructivism.[4]

If political leaders and propagandists could perhaps have been excused a certain amount of licence in their technical appreciation of the musical idioms of specific composers, professional musicologists and critics were hardly less selective than their mentors in perpetuating such sweeping generalizations. In discussing the music of Stravinsky, for instance, Friedrich Welter suggested that the composer had succumbed to 'atonality à la Schoenberg'.[5] Siegfried Kallenberg saw Stravinsky and Schoenberg as joint leaders of a modern music movement that 'forged an anti-German abstract line'.[6] At various times composers as stylistically disparate as Ernst Toch, Wolfgang Fortner, Boris Blacher and Alban Berg were tarred with the same 'modernist' brush.

Such inconsistencies in matters of musical assessment extended to the area of performance history during the period. Although as early as November 1933 Goebbels had entrusted the Reichsmusikkammer with the task of vetting and approving concert programmes throughout Germany, it took four years before the Ministry of Propaganda established an official reading panel (*Reichsmusikprüfsstelle*) which exercised a much tighter control over musical censorship. But even then, bureaucratic interference did not always prove infallible and there were some instances when stylistically advanced music somehow managed to slip through the net.[7] Performances of Stravinsky's work in Germany, for example, were only officially banned by the regime as late as February 1940. Before then, the composer had enjoyed some patronage from the Nazis. Although branded a 'cultural bolshevist' by certain sections of the Nazi hierarchy (his music was featured along with many other 'modernist' composers at the Degenerate Music Exhibition in 1938), Stravinsky maintained his contract with his German publishers, was invited in 1937 to record his ballet *Jeu de Cartes* with the

[1] Hans Severus Ziegler, *Entartete Musik. Eine Abrechnung* (Düsseldorf), p.24.

[2] Alfred Rosenberg, *Gestaltung der Idee* (Munich, 1939), p.337.

[3] Paul Joseph Goebbels, 'Dr Goebbels auf der Jahreskundbegebung der Reichsmusikkammer', *Berliner Lokal Anzeiger*, 12 December 1934.

[4] Ziegler remained implacably opposed to the music of Hermann Reutter (1900–1985), and managed in the process to encounter the wrath of Peter Raabe, Strauss's successor as President of the Reich's Music Chamber. Despite such controversy, the young composer enjoyed official status during the Third Reich as director of the Frankfurt Musikhochschule.

[5] Friedrich Welter, *Musikgeschichte im Umriss* (Leipzig 1939), p.237.

[6] 'Die un-deutsche abstrakte Linie' in Joseph Wulff, *Musik im dritten Reich* (Gütersloh, 1963/1966), p.45.

[7] The most surprising example of bureaucratic oversight occurred at the First Reichsmusiktage held in Düsseldorf in May 1938, organized under the auspices of the Ministry of Propaganda, in which Boris Blacher's dissonant *Geigenmusik* received its first performance.

Berlin Philharmonic for Telefunken, and secured at least a few performances of his most recent works in the country.

It was perhaps one of the supreme ironies of the 20th-century musical history that while the Nazi authorities seemed able to tolerate the 'un-German' abstractions of Stravinsky, they condemned Schoenberg's music out of hand; this despite the fact that the composer had inextricably linked his own musical development to the German tradition the Nazis so admired. But Nazi critics in particular attempted to portray Schoenberg's evolution of 12-tone composition, described by the composer in 1922 as guaranteeing 'the supremacy of German music for the next hundred years',[8] in a purely racial light.

> The twelve-tone system in music is equivalent to Jewish levelling down in all other matters of life... This represents a complete destruction of the natural order of notes in the tonal principle of our classical music.[9]

The parallel drawn between Schoenberg's 'complete destruction of the natural order of notes' and a perceived World Jewish conspiracy which aimed to subvert German culture proved irresistible to Nazi propagandists, especially when such views were supported with the help of the Riemann *Musiklexikon*, one of the most prestigious of all German music dictionaries. Quoting Riemann's condemnation of Schoenberg's *Harmonielehre* as 'outrageously dilettantish, showing little understanding of musical history and representing a peculiar mix-up of theoretic backwardness and hyper-modern negation of all theory',[10] the editors of the *Lexikon der Juden in der Musik* chose to interpret such criticism in a wider socio-political context:

> Riemann especially attacks Schoenberg's tendency to negate anything that was achieved before – an old and proven Jewish tactic which has often been used in order to usurp the cultural values of the nations that gave them sanctuary....[11]

The anti-semitic gloss that was conveniently attached to Schoenberg's work, and in particular his utilization of 12-note technique, should by rights have obviated the possibility of official acceptance during the Third Reich of any music that manifested similar compositional procedures. Certainly, both Berg and Webern were subjected to equally antagonistic propaganda against their work,[12] although attempts to taint both men on racial grounds proved entirely fruitless. But the situation as far as Schoenberg's other pupils were concerned, especially those from his period in Berlin, was by no means so clearcut.

Between 1926 and 1933, Schoenberg taught at least 18 musicians at his master classes in composition at the Prussian Academy of Arts. A number of these composers were of foreign origin and had already returned to their native countries well before the Nazis came to power. Others soon emigrated on either racial or political grounds in 1933.[13] Of those that remained, two of the most talented, Peter Schacht (1901–1942) and Norbert von Hannenheim (1898–1943), suffered particular hardship under the Nazis. Schacht had already shown considerable promise as a composer in the final years of the Weimar Republic. He was awarded the Emil Hertzka Prize from Universal Edition in 1933 for his Violin Sonata, but his fate was sealed very early on in the Nazi regime after his Schoenbergian String Quartet was performed in June 1933 at the annual meeting of the Allgemeine Deutsche Musikverein in Dortmund. In response to the new cultural climate, the authorities had already censored the original programme – cancelling a scheduled performance of Webern's *Sechs Stücke für Orchester*. But Schacht's composition had escaped their notice and the work was greeted with unbridled hostility from the Nazi critics. As a result of this blunder, Schacht's name

[8] H.H. Stuckenschmidt, *Arnold Schoenberg* (London, 1959), p.82.

[9] Theo Stengel/Herbert Gerigk, *Lexikon der Juden in der Musik* (Berlin, 1943), p.246.

[10] Stengle/Gerigk, *Op. Cit.*, p.247.

[11] Stengle/Gerigk, *Op. Cit.*, p.248.

[12] One of the major musical scandals of the Nazi era was the first performance of Berg's *Lulu Suite* given by Erich Kleiber and the Berlin Staatskapelle in November 1934. Its reception was unusually controversial, bringing out into the open the defiance of critics such as Stuckenschmidt and Oboussier who refused to tow the party line. As a result of this, Stuckenschmidt was forbidden to continue working in Germany and Kleiber resigned his post at the Berlin Staatsoper.

[13] Amongst those who left Berlin in 1933 for both racial and political reasons, undoubtedly the most important was Hanns Eisler (1898–1962) who had originally studied with Schoenberg in Vienna, following his master to Berlin in 1925. It is interesting to note that although Eisler had rejected 12-tone writing in his works written during the final years of the Weimar Republic (e.g. *Die Massnahme*), he returned to the technique in his most trenchantly anti-fascist composition, the *Deutsche Symphonie*, upon which he began work very soon after his exile.

Mention should also be made of Karl Amadeus Hartmann (1905–1963), one of the few German composers who went into so-called 'inner exile', remaining in his country during the Third Reich. A staunch anti-fascist, Hartmann wrote works such as *Miserae* for orchestra (1935) which openly attacked the régime. Later during the war, Hartmann studied composition and analysis with Webern, but although his music was influenced by expressionism and was strongly dissonant, he never embraced 12-tone music.

achieved such notoriety that he was unable to further his career.

The case of Norbert von Hannenheim was slightly different. A recipient of the Mendelssohn Scholarship in 1932, he too was awarded the Emil Hertzka Prize in the following year for his Fifth Symphony. Hannenheim's relationship with the Nazis began promisingly when he received a commission from Berlin Radio to compose and arrange some songs from his native Transylvania. But his financial fortunes soon began to decline. Apart from a *Volksmusik Divertimento* for brass which was issued by Littolf in 1937, none of his other works were published during the Third Reich and he had to eke out a meagre living as a copyist. A planned performance by Erich Kleiber and the Berlin Philharmonic of two movements from Hannemheim's Seventh Symphony on 27 February 1935 failed to materialise in the wake of the turbulent political situation which accompanied the Hindemith Case two months earlier. Eight years later von Hannenheim ended his life, falling victim to a bombing raid[14] during World War II which destroyed his Berlin apartment and most of his manuscripts.[15]

Of all Schoenberg's pupils only Winfried Zillig (1905–1963) and Fried Walter (born 1907) managed to ingratiate themselves with the Nazi authorities. While Walter's music is of little relevance to the present discussion because it does not evince any perceptible Schoenbergian influence, the work and career of Zillig, best remembered nowadays for his editions of *Moses und Aron* and the reconstruction of the oratorio *Die Jakobsleiter*, deserves more detailed consideration. Born in Würzburg, Zillig first studied with Schoenberg in Vienna in 1925 and accompanied his teacher to Berlin in the following year. According to Hans-Heinz Stuckenschmidt, Zillig became one of the master's favourite pupils, and in 1927 Schoenberg recommended the young composer's work to his publishers Universal Edition.[16] Already in his earliest works – which included a String Quartet, a Serenade and an Overture in classical form for Orchestra – Zillig demonstrated complete mastery of 12-tone composition, a technique to which he remained loyal throughout his life. In 1927 he began his professional career as musical assistant to Erich Kleiber at the Berlin Staatsoper, moving to Oldenburg the following year where he worked as a repetiteur for the first performance in the German provinces of Berg's *Wozzeck*. The strong influence of this work can be perceived in his own first opera, *Rosse*, commissioned by the Düsseldorf Opera where Zillig was appointed conductor in 1932. Based on a play by Richard Billinger – a dramatist who enjoyed considerable prestige during the Third Reich – *Rosse* received its first performance under the baton of Jascha Horenstein on the 11 February 1933 in a double bill with Hermann Reutter's *Der verlorene Sohn*, only a week or so after Hitler seized power.

Although the opera secured a positive reception from audience and critics, it quickly disappeared from the repertoire and was never revived in the following years. Nonetheless, its dramatic scenario, the tragic demise of an animal-loving steedsman who attempts to resist the impending mechanization of the land, fully accorded with the Nazi ideology of 'Blood and Soil' which glorified such issues as the 'eternal unending progression of country life'.[17] It was also on ideological grounds that Zillig's two subsequent operas — the one-act *Das Opfer* (Hamburg, 1937), a portrayal of heroic self-sacrifice for a higher ideal, and *Die Windsbraut* (Leipzig, 1941), another mythical peasant drama by Billinger — also found favour with the authorities.

Zillig's situation during the Third Reich was decidedly equivocal. In professional terms, he maintained a successful conducting career, moving from Düsseldorf to Essen in 1937 and to Posen in 1940. He was also extremely prolific as a theatre composer receiving prestigious commissions to compose, amongst other things, incidental music for the Reichstheaterfestspiel in Heidelberg, the most important event of the theatre calendar in Nazi Germany. But Zillig still remained devoted to Schoenberg, modifying or indeed disguising his use of 12-tone technique, yet managing at the same time to avoid public censure. In *Das Opfer*, based on Reinhard Goering's play *Captain Scott's South Pole Expedition*, the musical material is less overtly astringent in character than in *Rosse* with the vocal lines emphasising closely knit intervals of

[14] Another victim of the war, but under very different circumstances, was the Schoenberg pupil Viktor Ullmann (1898–1944) who wrote 12-tone music in Czechoslovakia during the 1930s, including the *Variationen und Doppelfuge über ein Klavierstück von Schönberg* for Orchestra. After the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, Ullmann was sent to concentration camp in Theresienstadt and was murdered at Auschwitz.

[15] For more details on Hannenheim's career see Dieter Acker: 'Norbert von Hannenheim', *Melos*, xxxvi, 1969, p.6–8.

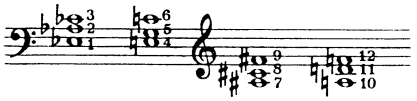
[16] H.H. Stuckenschmidt, *Schoenberg. His Life and Work*. (London, 1977), p.319.

[17] J.M. Ritchie, *German Literature under National Socialism* (London and Canberra, 1983), p.109.

Winfried Zillig, from Carl Niessen's book 'Der Deutsche Oper in der Gegenwart' (Regensburg, 1944)

thirds and fourths, and a central row consisting of a juxtaposition of four tonally orientated three part chords (Ex.1)

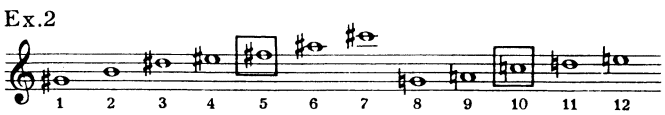
Ex.1



Although Zillig's frequent recourse to bitonality in *Das Opfer* and his unconcealed use of the tone-row as a melodic sequence in Oates' aria (No.3) could have aroused controversy, critics of the period saw the music's austerity as being entirely appropriate to the moralistic ethos of the drama.[18]

In *Die Windsbraut* Zillig effected a more overt rapprochment between conventional tonality and 12-tone technique. For example, each of the three acts concludes with an unadorned tonic chord of F sharp major, the goal of which is implied in the central row which juxtaposes two conflicting tonally orientated fields (Ex.2):

Ex.2



While the Nazi critics signally failed to comment upon or acknowledge the dodecaphonic aspects of Zillig's music, the utilization of 12-tone technique in the operas of the Danish-born composer Paul von Klenau (1883–1946) proved to be more controversial. A pupil of Max Bruch and Max von Schillings before World War I, Klenau subsequently studied with Schoenberg during the early 1920s and helped to promote his music in Denmark, conducting performances of *Pierrot Lunaire* and the First Chamber Symphony in Copenhagen. The impact of Schoenberg's tutelage was barely perceived in his opera *Das Lästerschule* (Frankfurt, 1926) which retains a conventional approach to tonality. However, Klenau's next major work – the opera *Michael Kohlhaas* (Stuttgart, 1933), which followed a creative pause of some seven years – made some direct use of 12-tone technique.

The much-heralded première of *Michael Kohlhaas*, one of the first new operas to have been given in the Third Reich, aroused considerable interest. Attention was drawn to the musical idiom which juxtaposed passages of total chromaticism with more diatonic material that included quotations from pre-existing works such as the Kyrie from Palestrina's *Missa Emendemus* as well as arrangements of 16th-century chorales and songs harmonised in a consciously archaic manner.

This fusion of two seemingly conflicting musical styles disturbed party critics. But it was Klenau's use of 12-tone technique – and, by implication, the influence of the Second Viennese School – which provoked the greatest contention. Reviews which appeared in *Die Musik* and the *Zeitschrift für Musik*, after the first Berlin performance of *Michael Kohlhaas* in January 1934, berated Klenau for his espousal of atonality.[19] The composer subsequently responded to these charges by writing a series of articles offering historical precedence, in the form of an

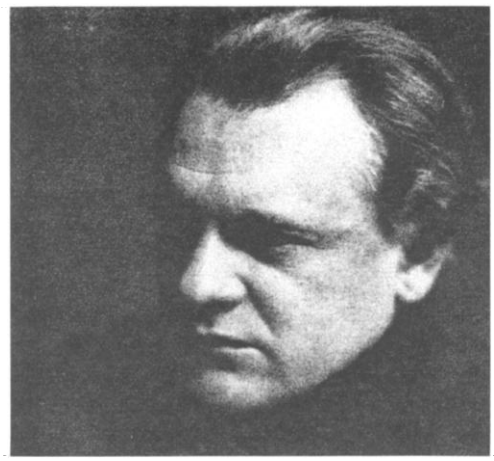
[18] See extracts from contemporary critiques of Zillig's opera quoted in: Werner Schmidt-Faber, 'Atonalität im Dritten Reich' *Herausforderung Schönberg* (ed. U. Dibelius) (Munich, 1974), p.131.

[19] Friedrich W. Herzog, *Die Musik*, April 1934, p.541 and Fritz Stege, 'Musik in Berlin', *Zeitschrift für Musik*, April 1934, p.402.

analysis of the Prelude to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, for the evolution of the twelve-tone theory.[20] Being careful to avoid any mention of Schoenberg, Klenau, however, acknowledged the existence of several different 'twelve-tone' theories. Yet he rejected criticism that his music was in any way 'atonal'. Indeed, he claimed to have evolved his own 'tonally-determined' 12-tone techniqe. He believed that such strict organization of tonal material was entirely appropriate to the future direction of the 'National Socialist World'.[21]

An examination of the first two of the seven tone-rows (Ex.3, I) which Klenau employs in *Michael Kohlhaas* confirms the primarily tonal orientation of his music, although it is more difficult to perceive this characteristic in some later sections of the opera, for example the opening of the Second Act (Ex.3, II).

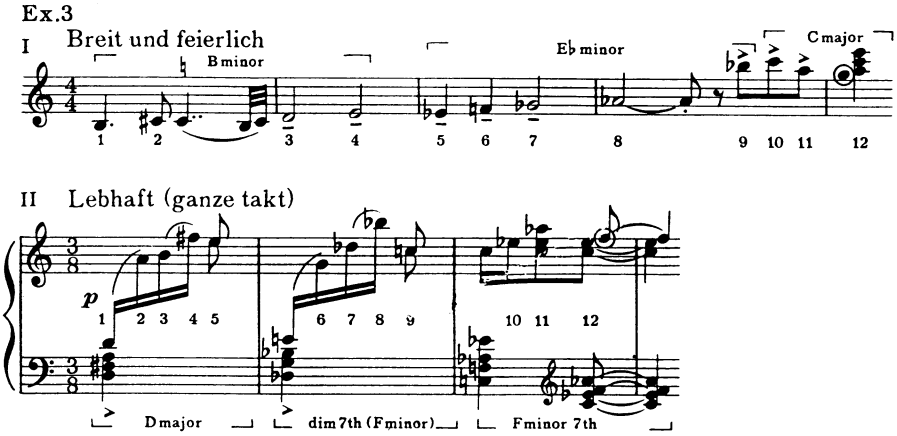
Klenau's robust defence of his compositional technique eventually silenced Nazi doubts about his music. The composer received commissions for two further operas – *Rembrandt van Rijn* (Berlin, 1937) and *Elisabeth von England* (Kassel, 1939) – the musical idioms of which pursue a similar mixture of 12-tone and stylized material. In contrast, some of Klenau's instrumental music



Paul von Klenau, also from Niessen's book

answer can be found not so much in questions of musical aesthetics, matters which hardly concerned the Nazi hierarchy, as in the ideological acceptability of Klenau's chosen operatic subjects[22] and his loudly proclaimed loyalty to the system.[23] It is worthwhile speculating that had Anton Webern possessed the same degree of political acumen, he too might have been able to accomplish his strongly declared desire to

Ex.3



of the period, which included a set of Preludes and Fugues for Piano (1941) and the String Quartet No.2 (1944), assumed a more consistently chromatic musical language.

One may well ask why a totalitarian state such as the Third Reich could tolerate any manifestation of a technique which, despite Klenau's protestations, remained condemned by some of its leading propagandists as 'degenerate'. The 'convince the Hitler regime of the rightness of the twelve-tone system'.[24]

Music examples by kind permission of Bärenreiter Verlag (Ex.1), Schott & Co. Ltd. (Ex.2) and Universal Edition (Ex.3)

[20] See in particular Paul von Klenau, 'Über die Musik von meiner Oper "Michael Kohlhaas" ', *Die Musik*, January 1935, pp.260-262 and 'Wagners "Tristan" und die "Zwölftönemusik".' *Die Musik*, July 1935, pp.727-733.

[21] 'Zu Paul von Klenaus "Michael Kohlhaas" ', *Zeitschrift für Musik*, May 1934, p.531.

[22] For a more detailed appraisal of the ideological ramifications of 12-tone music in the Third Reich see Werner Schmidt-Faber, Op. Cit. and Hans-Günter Klein, 'Atonalität in den Opern von Paul von Klenau and Winfried Zillig – zur Duldung einer im Nationalsozialismus verfemten Kompositionstechnik', *Internationaler Musikwissenschaftlicher Kongress Bayreuth 1981* (Kassel, 1983), pp.490-494.

[23] Klenau later referred to his compositional technique as 'totalitarian': see the preface to his two volumes of *Preludes and Fugues* for Piano, (Vienna, 1939 and 1941).

[24] Hans Moldenhauer, *Anton Webern* (London, 1978), p.474.