

Persecuted Composers – Persecuted Music
On Thomas Hampson’s 2005 Salzburg Recital

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How It Began

On May 10, 1933 (the new regime wasted no time), the books of unfavored authors were burned on the Opernplatz on Unter den Linden in Berlin, and in other German cities as well. Among those authors were many writers who had played a major role in the Weimar Republic: Alfred Kerr, Kurt Tucholsky, Carl von Ossietzky, Erich Maria Remarque, Heinrich Mann, and Erich Kästner. “Classics,” too, were banned and symbolically destroyed: Sigmund Freud, still living, was discredited in the form of the “Freudian School,” and a much older author of world-historical significance was consigned to the flames with the slogan, “Against class struggle and materialism, for national community and idealist living:” Karl Marx, which made clear that the National Socialist furor for extermination very much thought historically. The book burnings of these May days came just after the boycott, which went off according to plan, of Jewish shops and businesses on April 1, 1933, and they showed with brutal clarity what the new rulers, and the millions of enthusiastic Germans who followed and celebrated them, were capable of, and would be capable of. Anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear could clearly discern the true character of the regime. With these two actions, the April boycott and the May book burnings, the spring of 1933 had already seen the start of the inexorable process which led from discrimination to ostracism, then to deportation, and ultimately to the physical extermination of all those who had not placed themselves out of reach of violence, and could no longer escape it. Heinrich Heine’s much quoted, truly prophetic phrase proved true to a terrible extent: “Wherever they burn books, they will, in the end, burn people!”

The Anti-Semitic Components

The exclusion and persecution of “undesirable elements” soon came to encompass not only regime opponents from the left of the political spectrum, but also, with radical consistency, Jewish Germans and all European Jews. Anti-Semitism was the

glowing core, hardly a secret, of the National Socialist worldview, not for Adolf Hitler alone, though in him to an extreme degree. A swift succession of legal measures forced German Jews out of every field and profession; they were bullied and, little by little, robbed of their civil rights. This applied to doctors and shopkeepers, lawyers and university instructors, and of course to writers and musicians as well. There was nonetheless no “notes burning” comparable to the book burnings. In musical matters, the National Socialists deprived individuals of their rights in a less spectacular fashion than was the case in the field of literature. It is easy to explain why this was so: Liberal or outright leftist writers, writers who had defended the Weimar Republic or had dared, before 1933, to speak out against the gathering storm of poisonous National Socialist ideology, were easy to identify, whether Jewish or not. On the other hand, nothing, with the exception of hard left struggle anthems, is known of compositions directed against this poisonous ideology before 1933. The art of music, traditionally many-faceted and purportedly unpolitical, always had an easier time staying out of the battles of the day. There was no way to find a “Jewish” or “Aryan” dominant seventh chord, even if the triad had been successfully identified as ‘Germanic,’ whereas atonal or twelve-tone music was ascribed to the “Jewish Ungeist.” Nor were there composers before 1933 who could clearly be identified as leftist, Hanns Eisler, and to a lesser extent Kurt Weill, notwithstanding. Here the criterion of “Jewishness” had to serve as the defining characteristic of choice. For the National Socialist subordination (*Gleichschaltung*) of all cultural life, Goebbels created the Reichskulturkammer, which in its subgroupings encompassed all “cultural artists” of the German Reich. Those who were not members of this organization soon had no chance to work in a profession related to writing, painting, composing or performing. As early as April 1934, the Reichsmusikkammer issued guidelines for the acceptance of “non-Aryans” into the trade associations, and made unmistakably clear what was meant: “Non-Aryans are to be regarded as fundamentally unsuitable as bearers and tenders of the German cultural heritage, and must therefore show particular proof of the reliability and suitability required.” It is almost needless to say that proof of particular suitability for non-Aryans, that is, for Jews, could be furnished only in exceptional cases, and these exceptions, too, quite soon grew obsolete.

That German culture needed purification from “un-German elements,” termed jointly or separately “cultural Bolshevism” and “Jewish intellectualism,” was hardly an idea that had to be invented after January 1933. Here, as in all fields, the National

Socialists were only talented revivers and radicalizers of second-hand ideas that had largely arisen at the end of the 19th century and then found new life amidst the confused and uncertain feelings of the Germans and Austrians who, after 1918, had suffered a devastating defeat and had dim prospects for betterment in a republic that was thoroughly disapproved of, and at best unloved. In the realm of culture, these ideas, taken together, were captured in the term 'degeneracy,' and the history of this term culminated in two hate exhibitions, the Entartete Kunst exhibit in Munich in 1937, proverbial even today, and Entartete Musik in Düsseldorf in 1938, which elicited much less attention, but was symptomatic and fateful nonetheless.

Exclusion and Persecution

Both were visible expressions of a swiftly implemented "purification" of German musical life from 'elements foreign to the German people and race.' There were, characteristically, no bans on individual works or composers. Rather, it was simply very soon clear to directors of opera houses, radio editorial staff, concert agents and symphony orchestras which composers and works could no longer be performed, which "non-Aryan" musicians and directors had to be removed from orchestras and boardrooms. The situation was clear: Anyone with too many Jewish grandparents (and the questionnaires expressly inquired after them) first had to prove exceptional dependability, as mentioned above, and soon there were no transitional rules any longer. Two handbooks existed to assist with any possible unclarities: the quite vulgarly anti-Semitic *Musikalisches Juden ABC* (1935), and following on it the significantly more serious *Lexikon der Juden in der Musik* (1940), officially sanctioned by the Reichsmusikkammer. In the latter book, one could read, for example, of Franz Schreker: "It was altogether fitting for the age of decay [meaning the Weimar Republic] to place a 'poet-composer,' who made the most varied sexual aberrations the subject of his musical works for the stage, at the head of the foremost music academy of the Reich." With every indication of contentment, the Schreker article of this lexicon concludes as follows: "In July 1932, already under the sign of the coming political change in Germany, Schreker had to resign his post as director of the Berlin Hochschule für Musik."

This lexicon, along with the Düsseldorf exhibition Entartete Musik of 1938, was the ideological lining for countless intrusions into the biographies of individual musicians. The exhibition's initiator, the Weimar theater director Hans Severus

Ziegler, set a tone in the accompanying text in which the will to exterminate cannot be ignored: "What has been collected for the exhibition Entartete Musik reflects the witches' sabbath and the most frivolous sort of spiritual-artistic cultural Bolshevism, and reflects the triumph of subhumanity, of arrogant Jewish impudence and utter spiritual feebleness.' The exhibition itself put in the stocks, in sound and pictures, such individuals as Arnold Schoenberg, Franz Schreker, Kurt Weill, Ernst Krenek, Leo Fall, Otto Klemperer, and Paul Hindemith. Incidentally, neither Hans Severus Ziegler nor the other exhibition organizers were ever held responsible for this act of spiritual terrorism. Ziegler's career in the theater was over in 1945, to be sure, but he found a job all the same as a teacher at a north German boarding school.

There existed, in addition to the Jewish composers and musicians, a smaller group of non-Jewish artists who had already been pursued by the National Socialist press before the seizure of power, and they too fell victim to the exclusionary measures. For a brief transitional period, well-wishers still entertained illusions that this process could be deflected (prey to this illusion was, among others, Wilhelm Furtwängler), but soon the seriousness of the situation could be ignored no longer.

One must recall how this process of banning and banishments drained musical life in Germany (and soon in Austria too), a process carried out with all the perfection of a properly functioning civil service and which had the character of torture, of turning the screws tighter and tighter. Only a few representative names can be mentioned here. Among those driven out, expelled and persecuted were the composers Paul Abraham, Ralph Benatzky, Alban Berg, Paul Dessau, Hanns Eisler, Berthold Goldschmidt, Friedrich Hollaender, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Ernst Krenek, Karol Rathaus, Arnold Schoenberg, Franz Schreker, Erwin Schulhoff, Robert Stolz, Wladimir Vogel, Franz Waxman(n), Kurt Weill, Egon Wellesz, Stefan Wolpe, and Alexander Zemlinsky. Among the conductors driven out and persecuted were Maurice Abravanel, Leo Blech, Gustav Brecher, Fritz Busch, Oskar Fried, Erich Kleiber, Otto Klemperer, Erich Leinsdorf, Hermann Scherchen, Hans Wilhelm (William) Steinberg, Bruno Walter, and Fritz Zweig. Among the singers driven out and persecuted were Alexander Kipnis, Lotte Lehmann, Emanuel List, Richard Tauber, and Joseph Schmidt; among those engaged in music criticism, Theodor W. Adorno, Paul Bekker, and Alfred Einstein; among instrumentalists, Emanuel Feuermann and Arthur Schnabel. Lastly, those who were driven out, persecuted and murdered in Auschwitz and other camps were those who sought to save themselves

by going, so to speak, in the wrong direction: Among the composers might be mentioned Pavel Haas, Gideon Klein, Hans Krása, Erwin Schulhoff, and Viktor Ullmann. These are only a few names, only the best-known. Of the countless violinists and clarinetists of Jewish extraction to be driven out of German and, after 1938, Austrian orchestras, often only names, not even individual fates, are known. In a short period in 1938 following the Anschluss, the Vienna Philharmonic lost 21 members. The case of the violinist Alma Rosé has attained a melancholy fame, in particular because she was the niece of Gustav Mahler: She was a highly gifted violinist who founded a successful women's orchestra for entertainment music. Though her family emigrated to London, she herself continued to travel on tour. She was arrested in France in 1942 and deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1943, where she conducted the camp orchestra until she died of an illness in the camp in 1944.

A second example is one of the composers from our program. Only these individual biographies allow something approaching an understanding of the terrorist quality of the intrusions into the lives of the individuals who, taken together, made up the immense mass of millions of the persecuted and ultimately the murdered.

The Case of Viktor Ullmann

Viktor Ullmann was born in Teschen in 1898, the son of Jewish parents who had converted to Catholicism. (In the age of racial anti-Semitism, conversions to Christianity no longer offered protection from discrimination and persecution). Ullmann studied composition in Vienna, under Arnold Schoenberg, among others. In 1919 he went to Prague, where he worked as choir director and répétiteur at the Deutsches Theater, the musical director of which was Alexander Zemlinsky. From Prague, Ullmann went, in the late 1920s, to Aussig as opera director, then to Zurich, where he conducted music at the Schauspielhaus and achieved success with his first compositions. His acquaintanceship with the anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner changed his life: He became head of a specialist bookshop in Stuttgart, then left National Socialist Germany quite early, in 1933, and returned to Prague, where with difficulty he started over and began composing again. Slowly the new successes came, and Ullmann was on his way to becoming known as a composer of the avant-garde when the Germans marched into Prague in March of 1939. Ullmann, declared a Jew, was forbidden any public activity as a musician—though this did not hinder him from continuing to compose. In September 1942 he was brought to the

Theresienstadt concentration camp, which the National Socialists, with unparalleled cynicism, used as a “model camp.” There a rich cultural life among the prisoners was all but subsidized to create the illusion of normality, and it is no coincidence that four of the most important persecuted composers, all of Bohemian-Moravian extraction, lived in Theresienstadt at the same time and were able to work under the circumstances, as indeed the camp directors encouraged them to: Pavel Haas, Gideon Klein, Hans Krása and Viktor Ullmann. Also worthy of note is the Czech conductor Karel Ančerl, later world-famous, who would be among Theresienstadt’s few survivors.

Theresienstadt was not an extermination camp, and the living conditions were significantly better than those in other camps, though deceptively so nonetheless. Altogether unjustified was the illusion of many prisoners that they could survive there, or that here they were somehow protected, for example owing to their intensive artistic involvement in the realm of music. How people could do creative work under the conditions is simply inexplicable. Viktor Ullmann, for example, wrote an entire opera, *Der Kaiser von Atlantis*, which he finished at the end of 1943, and which has shown its expressive power in numerous performances since its rediscovery some years ago. Shortly after the opera’s completion, the inconceivable radicalization of the extermination measures carried out in the second-to-last year of the war destroyed all illusions: The so-called Artist Transport of October 16, 1944, brought Haas, Klein, Krása and Ullmann to Auschwitz. Haas, Krása and Ullmann were sent to the gas chambers in a matter of days. Gideon Klein, the youngest and strongest, had to do forced labor for a time, then was murdered during the evacuation of the camp in January of 1945. Four of the most important German composers of their generation thus fell victim to the genocide.

Richard Wagner’s Fateful Role

Once more, our view must travel back, and our historical perspective must expand, to explain the basis on which musicians, not only (but in particular) Jewish, could be persecuted and deprived of their rights. In this, the insane National Socialist terror was able, unfortunately, to base its claims on a star witness with a mighty reputation: Richard Wagner. Under a pseudonym, Wagner published the pamphlet *Das Judentum in der Musik (Jewry in Music)* in a well-known music journal in 1850. He published the same text again 19 years later, this time as a brochure and under

his own name, which by then had become known throughout Europe. *Das Judentum in der Musik* is, and one cannot put it more mildly, a central document of 19th-century anti-Semitism, with significance far beyond the musical context. The work's central thesis is that Jews might be exceptionally clever interpreters in the field of music, but are incapable of original creative work, and thus worthless as composers. The Jewish influence on musical life in Europe is portrayed as ominous, and as something to be fought against. Felix Mendelssohn and Giacomo Meyerbeer are made particular examples of these theses. Wagner attacked the former, with whom he had been well acquainted, in relatively moderate fashion. But Meyerbeer, Wagner's competitor in the field of opera, and from whom he had received personal support (of which he made no mention), Wagner attacked with the worst sort of rancor. The pamphlet, and in particular the second edition of 1869, created a tremendous sensation—the discussion went as far as England and the USA, and numerous translations were published.

From that moment on, nothing could get rid of the prejudice that Jewish composers were only clever eclecticists, assembling material stolen from various sources, spreading their works with the help of other Jews, and earning a great deal of money in the process. This suspicion was entertained not only by radical anti-Semites, but rather throughout broad circles of the educated European bourgeoisie, a group which grew increasingly receptive to anti-Jewish prejudices—often hardly recognized as such by those affected—in the closing years of the nineteenth century. Giacomo Meyerbeer's operas, once worldwide triumphs, had already begun to lose favor with the public in that period. By the beginning of the 1930s, the operas were so seldom to be heard that no further defensive measures were necessary from the National Socialist administrations.

Mendelssohn – Meyerbeer – Mahler

Mendelssohn, whose symphonies, concertos and lieder had remained a basic part of bourgeois music culture, was another matter. The composer, who had converted to Christianity as a child, was eliminated step by step from German musical life: In 1936, the Mendelssohn monument in Leipzig, where he had lived and worked for many years, was destroyed under cover of darkness, and the family descendants were bullied and forced into exile. A famously absurd attempt was made to replace Mendelssohn's music for Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The music,

today the composer's most popular work, had been banned, but it had traditionally been used for performances of the play. Hans Pfitzner refused to provide a replacement—in contrast to the ambitious young Carl Orff.

In the years around the fin de siècle, a third 'Music Jew' came to the prominence alongside Meyerbeer and Mendelssohn: Gustav Mahler. He, too, was helped little by his conversion to Catholicism. This permitted him the office of artistic director of the Vienna Court Opera, but did not protect him from the anti-Semitic campaigns which began as soon as he took on a leading position in Viennese cultural life and which followed him, with varying intensity, for the rest of his life. These campaigns, to be sure, were nonetheless directed less against Mahler the conductor than against Mahler the composer. Mahler sought to escape this problem through suppression and concealment, and to a certain extent he succeeded. After his death, however, the discussions of the futility of his artistic efforts and of the absence of 'true German depth' in his works continued with unabated intensity. One must consider, as drastic as it is, the truth: Had Gustav Mahler not died in 1911, he would have had to experience, at the age of 78, Hitler marching into Vienna and his enthusiastic reception there. He would have been bullied and deprived of his rights, as happened to Sigmund Freud, and had he not—as Freud did—chosen emigration in his old age, he would have been, and this may be said with certainty, deported to an extermination camp, as happened to his niece Alma Rosé.

To recall how the approach taken with these three composers of international reputation—in the spirit of Richard Wagner, to whom go back all demonizations of Jewish composers—set the tone for what happened to living composers and musicians, whether Jewish or, though non-Jewish, undesirable, whether politically or because proponents of avant-garde music (Neutöner), one might have a look at the 1939 work of the National Socialist musicologist Karl Blessinger, *Mendelssohn—Meyerbeer—Mahler. Drei Kapitel Judentum in der Musik als Schlüssel zur Musikgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts (Mendelssohn—Meyerbeer—Mahler: Three Chapters of Jewry in Music as Key to the Music History of the Nineteenth Century)*. The formulation alone explains why works of these three composers form the basis of the program for Thomas Hampson's concerts, even though they were not directly affected by exile and persecution.

The "cardiac asthma of exile" (Thomas Mann) found its most compelling poetic

formulation in the words of the emigrant Bertolt Brecht. A verse from his poem "An die Nachgeborenen" ("To Those Born After") reads thus:

I would also like to be wise.

In the old books it says what wisdom is:

*To shun the strife of the world and to live out your brief time without fear
to get by, too, without violence*

to repay evil with good

not to fulfill your desires but to forget them is thought wise.

All this I cannot do:

Truly, I live in dark times!

The composers of our lied project lived, like Brecht and millions of others, in truly dark times. Whatever their personal fates, they survived in their music. To remember this is our obligation. In the words of Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer: "What is of value is not the conservation of the past, but instead the redemption of past hope."

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