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The Nazi War on Modern Music

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WAR ON MODERN MUSIC AND MUSIC IN MODERN WAR:

VÖLKISCHER BEOBACHTER RECEPTION OF CENTURY COMPOSERS

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Recent scholarship on Nazi music policy pays little attention to the main party newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, or comparable publications for the general public. Most work concentrates on publications Nazis targeted at expert audiences, in this case music journals. But to think our histories of Nazi music politics are complete without comprehensive analysis of the party daily is premature. One learns from this resource precisely what Nazi propagandists wanted average party members and Germans in general, not just top-level officials and scholars, to think—even about music. Therein, we see how contributors placed a Nazi “spin” on music history and composer’s biographies.

Using heretofore untapped materials, this article will fill part of this gap in our historiography of Nazi music policy. It will first detail *Völkischer Beobachter* attacks on prominent representatives of musical modernism in the Weimar era; it will then cover “acceptable” alternatives to Weimar decadence that the *Völkischer Beobachter* posited through the Third Reich. With the war, however, the theme most emphasized in *Völkischer Beobachter* cultural coverage was militarism. This paper will conclude with a survey of how revered figures such as Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, and Wagner were scrutinized for indications that they could serve as inspiration for the German Volk at war.

“WEIMAR MUSIC” IN THE VÖLKISCHER BEOBACHTER

With its outlook so strongly rooted in the romantic German music tradition, what the *Völkischer Beobachter* found most disgraceful in Weimar culture was cultivation of musical modernism, the whole of which it referred to as, at best, the “farcical imitation of a carnival barker selling a tent full of musical freaks,”¹ and, at worst, “Jewish terror in music.”² The newspaper stood firm in its rejection of works by “Jews and assorted foreigners” or Germans who supposedly associated with “international, Jewish circles”³—applauding “brave acts of resistance” such

¹Sela, “Schichtls musikalisches Raritätenkabinet oder Der tolle Nach-Fastnachtsspur,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 21 February 1923.

²“Jüdischer Terror in der Musik: Neue Musik--Paul Aron,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 6 January 1929.

³Sela, “Schichtls musikalisches Raritätenkabinet oder Der tolle Nach-Fastnachtsspur.”

as when a lone Nazi stood up and shouted “pfui” at a concert of Schoenberg, Bartok, Hindemith, Stravinsky, and Bartok.⁴

The “musical foreigner” whom the *Völkischer Beobachter* derided most was Igor Stravinsky. While an early attack identified him as a “spiritual Polack,”⁵ Fritz Stege described Stravinsky as a “Russian composer with half-Asiatic instincts hidden under the cover of French civilization” who simply knew how to manipulate concert-goers as “objects of speculation.” His was, according to Stege, “barren music of noise without any real ideas, full of hysterical orchestral outbreaks and strongly carnevalesque or Jazz sections.”⁶ Herbert Gerigk—editor of the *Lexicon of Jews in Music* and the Nazified journal, *Die Musik*—wondered at the fact that Stravinsky’s music to the *Rite of Spring* was able to move people at all: its popularity was clearly a “massive overestimation of Stravinsky’s art—the substance of which was really weak.”⁷

Of all the manifestations of musical modernism in the Weimar era, however, the event which received the most attention in the *Völkischer Beobachter* was the 1927 opening of *Jonny Strikes Up* [*Jonny spielt auf*], an operetta by Ernst Krenek which included jazz music and a leading man in blackface.⁸ The *Völkischer Beobachter* commotion over Krenek’s opera matched the controversy surrounding *All Quiet on the Western Front* in literature and film. In it, the paper vented every major element of its vendetta against post-war German society and politics as a whole.

F. A. Hauptmann, a leader of National Socialist cultural initiatives in Leipzig,⁹ felt “shame” that the premiere took place in his hometown, “at the heart of Germany,” and immediately asserted a racist take on the event: Even if he didn’t look it, Krenek could be counted as Jewish “since he married the daughter of the Jew Gustav Mahler.” Moreover, “all his music was typically Jewish”—“soft and effeminate.” But *Jonny Spielt Auf*, in which “a black hero seduced white women and stole valuable violins,” was most troubling. Really a “jazz opera,” its “deep meaning” was simply, “Life is just a game: we’ll dance and stumble through it, then let ourselves be finished off by Jonny the Nigger.”¹⁰ For Hauptmann this work symbolized the “mastery of foreign races over German culture” and the

⁴“Jüdischer Terror in der Musik: Neue Musik--Paul Aron.”

⁵Sela, “Schichtls musikalisches Raritätenkabinet oder Der tolle Nach-Fastnachtsspur.”

⁶Dr. F. St. = Fritz Stege, “Eine neues Musikschandwerk: Eine Strawinsky ‘Welt’-Uraussführung in Berlin,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 30 October 1931.

⁷Herbert Gerigk, “Die Wandlung der neuen Musik,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 27 September 1938.

⁸See Susan Cook, *Opera for a New Republic: The Zeitopern of Krenek, Weill and Hindemith* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988) 85-105 and 206-210 for a synopsis and discussion of this operetta.

⁹Hauptmann became a Nazi party member in 1925 and founded the *Kulturpolitische Abteilung der NSDAP Kreis Leipzig*; he was also a leader of the *Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur* and the *NS-Kulturngemeinde Kreis Leipzig* (Adelheid von Saldern and Lu Seegers, *Inszenierte Stolz* [Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2005] p. 120, n. 26).

¹⁰F. A. Hauptmann, “Die erste Jazz-Oper. Von einem tschechischen Juden. Uraufführung in Leipzig,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 19 February 1927.

“annihilation of Aryans by niggers.”¹¹

When the opera was produced in Dresden, the *Völkischer Beobachter* decried it as a “monstrous invention of insanity” which proved that the “Jewish theater and press industry” had “stolen healthy sentiment” from the German soul.¹² By December, the “battle against Jonny” spread to the newspaper’s home in Bavaria, and it wondered what the state government was going to do about this “so-called opera that was really an apotheosis of nigger-ness.”¹³ According to Hans Buchner, a musicologist who dedicated himself to publishing the marches and songs of the Nazi movement, supporters of *Jonny* were the enemies of classical and romantic music. Bourgeois taste had collapsed after the catastrophe of the World War: this was all leading to “systematic anarchy,” the “bolshevization of life forms and content,” and the “rise of negro culture.”¹⁴

In January of 1928, the show’s opening at the Vienna Staatsoper led to street demonstrations. The *Völkischer Beobachter* was pleased that protesters ignited stink bombs around the entrance.¹⁵ But it was disappointed that police officers had been stationed around the theater, to arrest hecklers against this “Jewish disgrace.”¹⁶ Blacks were “raping German girls and women along the Rhine” while people were roaring approval of this “negro culture.” While poor proletarians looked on, the “chosen people” would drive up to the event in their Citroens, Chryslers, and Chevrolets: “fat, overfed [Jews] with slim, blond German girls by their sides because they bought them with money.” If anyone resisted the production by throwing out their right arm and shouting, *Heil Hitler!*—“the lonely cry of tormented hearts, the cry of German fighters”—police harassed them. If Germany was ever to arise again, according to the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the whole Weimar “system” symbolized in these events would have to be “completely rooted out, along with all its leaders.”¹⁷ In the end, the newspaper could only explain successes of *Jonny Strikes Up*, *The Threepenny Opera*, and similar productions that “glorified subhumanity” in terms of a conspiracy: “Marxists had gassed the brains of the public.”¹⁸

But for all the attention they devoted to Krenek’s *Zeitoper*, even more infuriating to Nazi critics was what Arnold Schoenberg conceived as “polytonality.” Already in 1920, Hans Buchner referred to Schoenberg as the “[supposed] pathbreaker of [a] modern compositional technique that had been inaugurated by another Jewish composer: Gustav Mahler.” The “philo-Semitic movement” that supported musical modernism that constituted a “significant threat to volkish consciousness

¹¹Hauptmann, “Die erste Jazz-Oper. Von einem tschechischen Juden. Uraufführung in Leipzig.”

¹²Rud. Burock, “‘Jonny spielt auf’ auch in Dresden,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 19 November 1927.

¹³“Der Kampf um ‘Jonny’,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 11 December 1927.

¹⁴Hans Buchner, “Krenek’s Jazzoper ‘Jonny’,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 20 December 1927.

¹⁵“Die Wiener Nationalsozialisten gegen ‘Jonny.’ Stinkbomben in der Wiener Staatsoper,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 29 January 1928.

¹⁶“‘Jonny spielt auf’ unter polizeilichem Schutz,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 30 January 1928.

¹⁷J. B., “Jonny spielt auf und die Polizei tanzt,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 19 June 1928.

¹⁸“Arteigene und artfremde Musik,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 10 November 1931.

and weakened hope for the future.”¹⁹ Another contributor described Schoenberg as a “prophet who had wandered in from Jerusalem; the herald of the modern era; an apostle for whom nothing sacred could be trivialized enough; a philosopher and thinker without a head.” Could anyone take such a man seriously? the *Völkischer Beobachter* wondered.²⁰ Actually, Buchner seemed to think so, since he argued that Schoenberg’s “Jewish-Viennese clique” was committing “musical exorcisms and rapes that were beyond the pale.”²¹

It was clear, in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, that these forces could only lead to “error, degeneration, and corruption.” Perhaps other peoples and races thought in terms of twelve-tone composition, but to Germans they were “alien.” This style was “undoubtedly degenerate, because it broke from the foundations appropriate to German musical taste.” That said, the *Völkischer Beobachter* took solace in the view that Schoenberg’s own compositions “provided the best evidence of the futility his theory”: while they may have “seemed fascinating in postwar years dominated by a mood of doom, they ended in nothing but chaotic nihilism.”²²

MUSIC OF THE THIRD REICH IN THE *VÖLKISCHER BEOBACHTER*

Regarding music in particular, defending the grand tradition was the paper’s priority, but where German music should go in the new age of the Third Reich always remained an open question. Confusion about this was palpable in *Völkischer Beobachter* coverage of the preeminent German composer of the era, Richard Strauss. In its earliest days, the newspaper reviewed the Munich premiere of Strauss’ *Die Frau ohne Schatten* negatively, referring to the composer as “suffering from profound intellectual and moral paralysis.”²³ To the *Völkischer Beobachter*, *Elektra* had “marked the end point of neo-romantic music drama,”²⁴ and *Ariadne auf Naxos* had been “incomprehensible.”²⁵

Much *Völkischer Beobachter* enmity against Richard Strauss stemmed from Alfred Rosenberg himself. In February of 1926, he let out the stops in a vicious attack insinuating that the composer was of Jewish origins. “Regarding whether Richard Strauss has Jewish blood in his veins or not, there are indications that make it very doubtful that his is of pure German origin,” Rosenberg opened. His mother was born into the Pschorr beer family; but his father “really must have been a Jew.” As proof, Rosenberg had no evidence except the “striking” fact that as a member of the orchestra of the National Theater, the elder Strauss had “agitated” against a performance of Richard Wagner’s *Meistersinger*. On that slim basis, though, Rosenberg went on to state that “everything that Richard Strauss has created betrays the fact that he is a half-blood.” With few exceptions,

¹⁹Buchner, “Von zwei Welten in der Musik.”

²⁰Sela, “Schichtls musikalisches Raritätenkabinet oder Der tolle Nach-Fastnachtsspur.”

²¹Hans Buchner, “Elektra,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 24 August 1923.

²²Ludwig K. Mayer, “Musik in unserer Zeit,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 18 December 1938.

²³“Münchner Festspiele: Die Frau ohne Schatten,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 19 September 1920.

²⁴Hans Buchner, “‘Elektra’ neu einstudiert,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 12 October 1927.

²⁵“Theater: Ariadne auf Naxos,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 4 September 1923.

his compositions were just “head games—ingenious mathematical arrangements of notes.” “Race,” Rosenberg concluded, was the “key to world history,” and also provided a way to “judge the creations of artistically gifted people.” Strauss was gifted, but he “lacked the racially sound national character necessary for greatness.”²⁶

However, after 1933, the tone changed when, despite Rosenberg’s complaints, Goebbels appointed Strauss president of the Reich Music Chamber. In August the *Völkischer Beobachter* referred to him as one of the “truest servants to great works of art.”²⁷ Thereafter, the paper’s interpretation of Strauss shifted significantly. Known as a rebel in his earlier days, he “carried new thoughts and forms” beyond those of Richard Wagner, with “positive, not destructive effect.” Despite some modernist tendencies, his “essence was true and German.” The innovations of the young Strauss were manifestations of an “organic process of development that operated according to inherent laws of life,” running directly back through Liszt and Berlioz to Beethoven. Above all, his support of Hitler’s leadership over German art was “clear and unambiguous.”²⁸

The Third Reich gave Strauss full honors on his 75th birthday in 1939, with ceremonies and concerts in Berlin and Vienna.²⁹ Heinrich Stahl elaborated the official pronouncements in an article on the composer’s “cheerful life” which disassociated Strauss from modern tendencies he had certainly followed. A “miracle” had taken place in the case of Strauss, Stahl asserted: over time the “revolutionary” had become the “classicist.” The corrupt Weimar era was a period of “technological music making”—of “empty note jumbling”—which were “signs of its political orientation and worldview.” But through it all, Strauss held unwaveringly to “thoroughly trained form, to tonal structure, to folkish melody full of feeling.” Strauss did not become a “pacesetter of the destructive elements,” but on the contrary, their “victorious adversary” who heralded a “refined joy of life made possible by ingenious talent grounded in the southern German world of sounds, melodies, and dance rhythms.”³⁰

Friedrich Bayer wrote in 1942 that during the “hopeless postwar years of spiritual, cultural, and artistic aberration and confusion”—when the “scourge of International- Jewish atonality punished November Germany for its lack of instinct”—Strauss’s “healthy, natural, straightforward music” was considered conventional and clichéd, while “artificial composition methods and contrived tonal systems were proclaimed superior.”³¹ This, the *Völkischer Beobachter*

²⁶ Alfred Rosenberg, “Richard Strauss Judenstämmling?,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 7 February 1926.

²⁷ Hugo Rasch, “Festliche Tage in Bayreuth,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 6 August 1933.

²⁸ Max Neuhaus, “Richard Strauss zum 70. Geburtstag,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 11 June 1934.

²⁹ “Richard Strauss zu Ehren,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 13 June 1939.

³⁰ Heinrich Stahl, “Symphonie des heiteren Lebens: Richard Strauss zum 75. Geburtstag,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 11 June 1939.

³¹ Friedrich Bayer, “Richard Strauss: Ein Musikerbildnis,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 28 December 1942.

made clear, had ended with the rise of Nazi political culture: on his eightieth birthday in 1944, Strauss continued to be promoted in the paper as “a musician of world significance,” even as his son and Jewish daughter-in-law were threatened with arrest by the Gestapo.³²

About another contemporary composer the *Völkischer Beobachter* was less conflicted, though it had to defend the quality and significance of his output. More so than any other artist, the newspaper tried to will Siegfried Wagner into the constellation of German masters, even if it was apparent he was far from his father’s equal. Insisting, for instance, that a single work by Siegfried was more significant than “any three operas of Puccini,” the paper held that criticism of the son’s music was part of the general conspiracy against Richard Wagner and the Bayreuth world as a whole.³³ Herbert Mueller argued that by exploring the world of German fairy tales and “evading current fashions,” the folkish operas of Siegfried Wagner “provided something for the whole German Volk.”³⁴ Thank heavens, the paper declared, “good forces” like Siegfried Wagner were still at work: remaining “inaccessible to all foreign influences,” he was “striving simply and faithfully for the rebirth of the German soul.”³⁵

However, implicit in all of these efforts to extol Siegfried Wagner as a German master—to prove that he was more than a composer of “fairy tale operas”³⁶—was a sense that the cause was lost: his works were not going to make it into the standard repertoire. Assessing the list of new operas produced in 1932, the *Völkischer Beobachter* was furious that there were so many “skirt shows, negro operas, and Jewish musicals” but nothing by the likes of Siegfried Wagner. His “worthy works” were being forgotten and could only hope for a “more German opera schedule” in the future.³⁷ After his death in 1930, Josef Stolzing, the main *Völkischer Beobachter* cultural critic, eulogized Siegfried’s life as “difficult” because of anti-Bayreuth forces supposedly working against him. He was condemned to live in a period when foreign influences “penetrated deeply into the Volk and alienated it from itself.” Siegfried Wagner’s mission as the composer of truly German works could “only be completed in posterity—if the treasures of his creative forces were finally recognized by the race that the Third Reich of Greater National Socialist Germany would engender.”³⁸

Surprisingly, the *Völkischer Beobachter* was not as convinced about another Bavarian composer: Carl Orff. Herbert Gerigk was not even sanguine about

³²Erwin Voelsing, “Ein Musiker von Weltrang: Zum achtzigsten Geburtstag von Richard Strauss,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 13 June 1944.

³³Hans Severus Ziegler, “Deutsche Festspiele in Weimar,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 30 July 1926.

³⁴Herbert H. Mueller, “Siegfried Wagner. Zu seinem Geburtstag am 6. Juni,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 5 June 1927.

³⁵“Siegfried Wagners ‘Heilige Linde’,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 11 July 1929.

³⁶Herbert H. Mueller, “Siegfried Wagner: ‘Das Flüchlein, das jeder mitbekam’,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 20 November 1929.

³⁷“Neue Opern und vergessene Komponisten,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 11 January 1933.

³⁸Josef Stolzing, “Siegfried Wagners künstlerische Sendung,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 2 August 1930.

the premiere of *Carmina Burana* (1937). The piece was “marred by a series of problems,” Gerigk complained. The first was the language of the song texts, which were in “monkish Latin and 13th-century German.” Consequently, “no one could understand a word.” In addition, Gerigk felt, Orff’s music style was “lapidary”: he “just placed melodies next to each other; his only means of formal development were repetition and rhythmic association; and the melodies frequently reminded one of children’s songs.” Moreover, “sometimes one heard a wholly elementary sound language, at other places a jazz mood.” In the end, whether *Carmina Burana* marked the starting point toward a new musical direction was “a matter of cultural politics and world-view.”³⁹ The *Völkischer Beobachter* clearly had its doubts.

Other composers whom the *Völkischer Beobachter* did identify as heralds of music for the Third Reich included Max Reger, Paul Graener, and Max von Schillings, but I have to omit discussion of their reception in the interest of saving time.

“MUSIC OF WAR” IN THE *VÖLKISCHER BEOBACHTER*

Ultimately, the culmination of “Nazi Culture” was the Second World War itself—indeed, this was its sole “masterpiece”—and a major component of the newspaper’s cultural coverage was dedicated to indicating that the greatest Western cultural figures and their works could be associated with the main themes of the conflict—as it approached, as it raged, and as it ended.

A 1941 article demonstrated how the newspaper also tapped into the German music tradition for these wartime purposes. Entitled *Händel’s Martyrdom in England*, this broadside was designed to associate the composer with contemporary Germans who had been living in foreign lands but were now making their way “back to the Fatherland” during the present conflict. Music historian Friedrich Baser exclaimed that “along with the millions now returning to the Reich, there is one that we do not want to forget—one who, after a heroic half-century long battle at his lost outpost of German culture, fell.” It was finally time to counter myths about Händel’s second home of choice. In brief, Baser insisted that it would be more accurate to call it his “state” of choice, because “never has an artist of such brilliant, indisputable greatness had to fight his whole life against so much premeditated evil as Händel did in London, to the point of despair.”⁴⁰

Given its proclivity toward the German music tradition, it is no surprise that the *Völkischer Beobachter* also referred often to Mozart, Beethoven, and Wagner in the war years. Indeed, the best opportunities for cultural politicians of the Third Reich to exploit Mozart came with the one-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the composer’s death in 1941. Concerts, ceremonies, and especially radio broadcasts were organized throughout Germany and the *Völkischer Beobachter*

³⁹Herbert Gerigk, “Carl Orffs Carmina Burana,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 16 June 1937.

⁴⁰Baser, “Händels Martyrium in London.”

announced that “everything had been arranged according to the will of the *Reichsminister for Propaganda*, Dr. Goebbels.”

On 5 December 1941, Mozart’s death day, Goebbels attended the main commemorative ceremony at the Vienna Staatsoper. To open, the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra performed the overture to *La Clemenza di Tito*, and then Goebbels gave a speech which the *Völkischer Beobachter* published in full under the title, “The German Soldier Is Also Protecting Mozart’s Music.” Mozart, he commenced, whose music still “ruled” in theaters and concert halls, served as a symbol for the spiritual and cultural creativity of the German Volk. Goebbels recognized that one might wonder whether an official function marking Mozart’s *Todestag* was appropriate, in light of the “brutal events of the day.” But he responded in the affirmative, because Mozart’s music “belonged among all those things which German soldiers were defending against assault.” Therefore, there was no contradiction between “the world of sound in which he lived and worked, and the hard and threatening world Germans were experiencing—the chaos of which they wanted to transform into discipline and order.”⁴¹

In Salzburg the next day, the local *Gauleiter*, Gustav Scheel, reminded listeners that the Führer had explained how important it was to preserve the memory of Mozart, as both a model and a source of inspiration. They were not just celebrating Mozart as a musician, but as a reminder that Germany, “then fighting a battle for Europe, had to take up a leading and organizing role in the cultural world.” In the “great struggle for the preservation of Europe and for the preservation of European culture,” they were marking the day in a quiet and profound way that “nevertheless strengthened this resolve for battle, since Mozart reminded them of the values of life and culture for which they were fighting.”⁴²

Beyond these statements made at the height of German military success—which remind that the Nazi leadership propagandized its aggressive policies partly in terms of a united, more efficient Europe—Mozart references continued to appear in the *Völkischer Beobachter* as the military tide turned. Perhaps the most dramatic of these ran under the title, “The Musician of God,” on 31 January 1943, during the last stage of the battle for Stalingrad. Simultaneous with the capitulation of von Paulus’s Sixth Army, the paper asserted that Mozart’s music found its greatest resonance in the German populace, conveying an “artistic experience which lifted it out of the horrors of daily life into light and blessed heights.”⁴³ One wonders if statements like these, ostensibly intended to provide solace to those losing loved-ones on the Eastern front, had any redeeming effect at all, since the only subsequent mention of the surrender at Stalingrad to appear in the *Völkischer Beobachter* was a brief announcement from Goebbels that, as

⁴¹Joseph Goebbels, “Auch Mozarts Musik verteidigt der deutsche Soldat,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 6 December 1941.

⁴²“Gauleiter Dr. Scheel bei den Salzburger Mozart-Feiern,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 7 December 1941.

⁴³Günther M. Greif-Bayer, “Der ‘Musikant-Gottes,’” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 31 January 1943.

a memorial gesture, theaters and concert halls would be closed for two days.⁴⁴

In the latter stages of the war, the paper ran an extended article which also represented Mozart and his work as sources of redemption for a war-weary nation. Emphasizing the theme of “Love in Mozart’s World,” this lecture contrasted “Mozart’s work of beauty and spirituality against the present world of destruction and ruin.” Mozart’s world offered sources of strength that were of “special importance to Germans during wartime in particular,” because he perceived the world and mankind “in the truest possible terms and depicted the all-embracing love that may ennoble us after all.”⁴⁵ Thus did the *Völkischer Beobachter* try to appropriate the music of Mozart as a source of both inspiration in victory, and salvation in defeat.

A confirmed enemy of France, according to Nazi interpretations, Beethoven appeared in wartime *Völkischer Beobachter* propaganda above all as a fighter. For instance, the head of the Beethovenhaus in Bonn, Ludwig Schiedermaier put together for the newspaper a collection of anecdotes and quotations establishing Beethoven as a “fighter of great willpower.”⁴⁶ Nazis also reiterated a legend of Bismarck’s feelings about the *Appassionata Sonata*—“If I heard this music often, I would always be very brave”—to imply that Beethoven’s music should serve as inspiration to be brave in political and military situations.⁴⁷ The *Völkischer Beobachter* repeated the anecdote with the following commentary: “To the Iron Chancellor, Beethoven’s music was the sonic symbol of human heroism; after listening to this heroic, passionate music he felt that the highest virtues of the warrior had been manifested.”⁴⁸

Throughout the war, the party continued to mark Hitler’s birthday with broadcasts of Beethoven’s music. On 19 April 1942, just after Hitler personally assumed *Wehrmacht* command in Russia, Goebbels arranged a special birthday celebration to announce the Führer’s new role. The culmination of the ceremony was a performance of the Ninth Symphony. In a speech given just before the music, Goebbels orchestrated the emotions he expected this selection to stimulate and the *Völkischer Beobachter* reprinted his statement in full.

If ever the German nation felt itself united in one thought and one will, then it is in the thought of serving and obeying [Hitler]. The sounds of the most heroic music of titans that ever flowed from a Faustian German heart should raise this realization to a serious and devotional height. When, at the end of our celebration, the voices and instruments strike the tremendous closing chord of the Ninth Symphony, when the exhilarating chorale sounds joy and carries a feeling

⁴⁴“Theater und Unterhaltungsstätten bis 6. Februar geschlossen,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 4 February 1943.

⁴⁵Greta Daeglau, “Die Liebe in Mozarts Welt: Ein Vortrag von Dr. Karl Pempelfort,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 24 August 1944.

⁴⁶Ludwig Schiedermaier, “Beethoven und das ‘Schicksal’,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 21 October 1925.

⁴⁷“Goethe und Bismarck über Beethoven,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 26 March 1927.

⁴⁸Friedrich Riessner, “Bismarck und die Musik,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 15 August 1935.

for the greatness of these times into each and every German cabin, when [Beethoven's] hymn resounds over all distant countries where German regiments stand guard, then we want everyone, whether man, woman, child, soldier, farmer, worker, or civil servant, to be equally aware of the seriousness of the hour and to experience the tremendous happiness of being able to witness and take part in this, the greatest historical epoch of our Volk.⁴⁹

As for so many themes of the paper's cultural coverage, however, the strongest emphasis was placed on how Hitler's favorite, Richard Wagner, could be aligned with the war effort. For instance, in November 1940, the expansionist subtext that some perceived in the last act of *Die Meistersinger* came forth in *Völkischer Beobachter* coverage of a performance in Strassburg—the heart of newly reclaimed Alsace-Lorraine. According to music critic Erwin Bauer, the first *Meistersinger* production in “liberated Alsace moved the heart as powerfully as the experience of a storm.” In the immediate political atmosphere, the stage seemed to Bauer “as if transformed into a scene representing recent events,” especially when the singer playing Hans Sachs “delivered the powerful warning of his closing address with stirring emotional effect, while turning directly toward the Alsatian audience.” In the eyes of the Nazi observer, the Alsatian listeners “took part in this finale as if they were themselves the Volk of the *opera*, giving thanks for all these feelings of happiness to a German master who had become a symbol of the richest and most worthy aspects of German existence.”⁵⁰

Besides associating him with anti-French revanchism, the wartime paper emphasized Wagner's general distaste for the English. The most useful Wagnerian resource the *Völkischer Beobachter* could use in its anti-British propaganda was his short story, *A Pilgrimage to Beethoven*. Written in 1840 in Paris, Wagner portrayed a young man—much like himself at the time—who journeys to visit the master in Vienna. Along the way, the hero is regularly thwarted by a rich Englishman who has the same plan. Whoever looks through it, wrote Willibert Dringenberg, would therefore “grasp why the Brits had established a blockade against Wagner's work” at the beginning of the war. The “Brit” in the story was an “English snob,” in every sense “the opposite of cultured and civilized.” Like this character, Dringenberg extrapolated, contemporary English were driven by an “excessive need for gathering, for grasping—an instinctive lust for possession, be it gold, Greek reliefs, or Egyptian mummies; fruitful land, desert, or ocean; colored servants, French *poilus*, or neutral ships.” Wagner “intuitively observed these foundations of the English soul,” according to Dringenberg, and “deliberately represented the English plutocrat as the opponent of the cultured German individual.” Let the English hate Wagner, Dringenberg closed: for “their hatred

⁴⁹“In Dankbarkeit und Treue: Ansprache von Reichsminister Dr. Goebbels in der Feierstunde der NSDAP am Vorabend des Geburtstages Adolf Hitlers,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 20 April 1942.

⁵⁰Erwin Bauer, “Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 18 November 1940.

added to his renown, and to German pride.”⁵¹

Later, in the summer of 1941, just eight days after German forces invaded the Soviet Union, the *Völkischer Beobachter* shifted its association of Wagner to the conflict its own leadership had unleashed upon the world. According to Heinrich Stahl, the “twilight of the gods” could be read as presaging the positive outcome of the Barbarossa campaign: “the stormy tempo and powerful events of the conflict were bringing the German Volk closer than ever to recognition of the deepest meanings of the Ring—of the connections between great art and the Volkish war of liberation.” In the Ring Cycle, Wagner “shaped the inevitable historical progression of an old, rotten world toward self-immolation into a gigantic cultural symbol: the fall of the Walhalla gods wasn’t a catastrophe, but a great process of purification—relieving the world of enormous guilt.”⁵² Stahl could not have known that he was inadvertently portending the *Nazidämmerung*—an act of self-immolation that would ultimately lead to the fall of the national gods, including Hitler and Wagner, and payment for enormous crimes against humanity.

CONCLUSION

Of the 1700 articles I gathered and studied for this project as a whole, 1009 were dedicated to the subject of music and its composers. Overall, an average of 40 articles per year were devoted to “serious” music issues, while only about 14 per year dealt with the “masters” of the other arts altogether. Noteworthy too is the discrepancy between the highest number of articles devoted to leading figures in letters and arts—Goethe (59), Nietzsche (20), Schiller (20),—and those about musicians—Wagner (243), Beethoven (116), Mozart (107). It is clear that the German music tradition was the cultural legacy that the Nazi cultural operatives most wanted to claim as “theirs.” Throughout the pages of the *Völkischer Beobachter*, music was unquestionably deemed “the most German of arts.” It is also striking that while Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven were important components in National Socialist propaganda, Richard Wagner received by far the most attention from the paper. That Wagner was not only the central historical figure in the musical and cultural views of the Nazis, but in their *Weltanschauung* as a whole, is apparent.

This said, the most important—though ultimately unanswerable—question regarding this material is what effect did the music-historical coverage of the *Völkischer Beobachter* have on contemporary readers? In studying the reception of art, literature, and music, we press beyond analyzing the intentions of their creators in order to determine how the works were perceived and attributed with meaning by audience members. Investigating records of interpretations that made it to print, in academic publications and—here—in the popular press, is one step of this endeavor. From newspaper critiques and tributes, we can learn what academics, journalists, and party activists believed to be the lessons of

⁵¹Willibert Dringenberg, “Richard Wagner durchschaut die Engländer,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 21 May 1940.

⁵²Heinrich Stahl, “Die neue Götterdämmerung,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 1 July 1941.

great works, usually in accord with their ideological principles and propagandistic goals.

However, these sources do not let us ascertain exactly how readers responded to such assertions. The readership of the newspaper, which had the largest subscription base in German history by 1945, was wide and varied. We can assume that it included committed party members and officials, but also general readers who looked at it out of curiosity or just to obtain political, cultural, economic, and sports news. How the detailed interpretations of the cultural section would have impacted this range of readers remains an open question about which we can only posit some hypotheses.

As Hitler ordered in *Mein Kampf*, Nazi propaganda was to “confine itself to a few points and repeat them over and over” until it “created a general conviction regarding the reality of a certain fact.” Exploring these arguments, or at least experiencing the strength of language used in these repeated concepts, helps us to understand—or, rather, feel—how those ideas could become ingrained in every aspect of National Socialist life. After being exposed to just a few of them, even a modern reader can become numb to their insinuations on the basis of increasing familiarity alone: “Of course, so-and-so was an Aryan, a nationalist, an anti-Semite, and a militarist—they all were, weren’t they?” Whether they really understood the high-cultural justifications that the *Völkischer Beobachter* provided, or not, regular readers could receive from their constant presence in the daily newspaper the sense that these notions were historically valid.

The point of investigating these arguments now is not to debate with them—do we need further proof that Hitler’s ideology was “wrong”?—but to recognize that, however they were received, these terms provided the semblance of cultural, historical, and academic legitimacy for Nazi policies at home, at the front, and behind it. Having relentlessly worked to establish that the Western tradition consisted of oppositions between acceptable elements and enemy forces, it would have been no surprise for readers to learn that if Germany was ever to rise again, the whole Weimar “system” would have to be “completely rooted out, along with all its leaders.” Or, that the Nazi party was pressing for a battle against “Jewish poisoners of German culture” and would not rest until they had “disappeared.”

Nothing about what followed these warnings in the cultural section of the *Völkischer Beobachter* could really have been much of a surprise. Sheerly through the mind-numbing repetition of these concepts in flaming rhetoric over a quarter of a century, many Germans could have become convinced about the righteousness of the extraordinary missions carried out later. The Nazi formulation of a Western tradition of inhumanity toward social, political, national, and racial enemies surely contributed to the transformation of ordinary Germans into heartless killers. This too we must not forget.