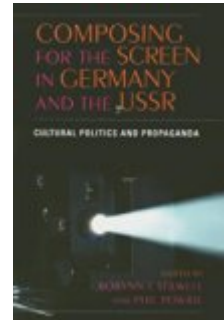




Robynn Jeananne Stilwell, Phil Powrie, eds.. *Composing for the Screen in Germany and the USSR: Cultural Politics and Propaganda*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. 187 pp. \$21.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-21954-1.



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In their introduction, Robynn Stilwell and Phil Powrie, the editors of this interesting collection of essays, rightly note that research into film music is still relatively thin on the ground, despite increasing interest in the field during the last two decades. Although not immediately apparent from the title of this study, the contributors largely concentrate on prewar cinema, an era characterized by decisive changes (particularly the advent of sound) that were set against times of political upheaval after the end of the First World War. The editors choose to concentrate on Germany and the Soviet Union, two countries that were not only at the forefront of the application of the new medium of film (with Germany's film industry second only to Hollywood during the 1930s) but that also offered the "highest concentration of serious writing on the subject of film music" during the 1920s, when key figures such as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Sergei Eisenstein, and Hanns Eisler published critical studies (pp. 2-3). In both countries the role of the arts in society was hotly debated, with propaganda playing a major

role. Music "became a key ingredient in the propaganda machines developed by the National Socialists and [Josef] Stalin" (p. 3). At the same time, the editors rightly stress that the German regime was prepared to allow a wide variety of musical vehicles "so long as the musicians were not Jewish" (p. 4), while the challenge of new musical styles to the Communist Party under Stalin appeared much greater because of the country's fragmentation. In the introduction, Stilwell and Powrie draw the volume's contributions under one "umbrella" by stating that its overall aim was to "examine more closely film music from this vibrant, productive, politically charged yet largely still unresearched period where the relationship between film and music is concerned" (p. 6). That the volume is not entirely successful in achieving this goal does not mitigate the quality of many of its contributions.

In the first essay, Robert Peck lays the ground for some of the following contributors and presents a concise and convincing basic introduction to film music in the Third Reich. Peck focuses

on institutional context and presents a number of case studies of key composers from different genres. He argues persuasively that the careers of many of these composers spanned silent to post-war cinema with little interruption during the Nazi era. Corresponding to other areas of public life, apparently, continuities were more prominent than real breaks. The National Socialists' influence on cultural life was not as dramatic as perceived in the secondary literature but equally--and Peck rightly stresses this point--their radical antisemitism had massive consequences, as it resulted in the expulsion of Jewish composers. Peck correctly points out that Nazi cultural policy accommodated competing approaches, with radical positions regarding a "purification" of German repertoires (such as those supported by Alfred Rosenberg) further losing ground during the war when official policy regarding jazz, for example, was relaxed and the need for culture as entertainment was stressed. Overall, Peck succeeds with his overview, although the case study of Peter Kreuder, which he uses to demonstrate his conclusions, remains too brief.

Next, Reimar Volker takes up a particular example of Nazi music policy by examining Herbert Windt's film music for Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935). In the scholarly literature, Windt's music has often been characterized as almost entirely following in the footsteps of Richard Wagner and Anton Bruckner, but Volker argues convincingly that the connection between Windt and Wagner is not as clear-cut as is sometimes suggested. First of all, the Reich Music Chamber deemed direct references to classical composers in film music unacceptable. Apart from that, Windt moved away from this tradition to some extent, as his engagement with the *Thing* open-air theater movement illustrates. Overall, Volker convincingly argues that rather than relying too much on Wagner, Windt's compositions related to a Nazi "aesthetics of awe" (p. 47).

In the next essay, Marc Weiner takes a look at a composer branded "degenerate" by the Nazis. Alban Berg has rarely been linked to film music, although the silent film sequence he produced for his opera *Lulu* (1937), which was based on two of Frank Wedekind's plays, is fascinating, a claim that Weiner substantiates impressively in his essay. He points to the interesting relationship between opera and film in *Lulu* as "the film narrates, and the opera emotes" (p. 62). Weiner further argues that Berg's film cleverly evokes both the silent film and the talkies, indeed, that it "evokes the institution of the cinema per se" (p. 65). Berg had a great interest in the emerging *Zeitoper* of the 1920s; he wanted to depart from traditional opera and intended to integrate film "into the legacy of the German operatic tradition" (p. 67). Intriguingly, Weiner also discusses the aggressive reaction against cinema in general and avant-garde composers such as Berg, Ernst Krenek, and Kurt Weill in particular from conservative and nationalist circles. He rightly focuses on criticisms made by Hans Pfitzner who, perhaps not surprisingly, eventually became one of the leading contemporary composers in Nazi Germany. His success, however, could not take away from the fact the Berg's silent film is a "crowning example of the modernist avant-garde" (p. 70).

Conservative film circles liked *Bergfilm* (mountain film). In his essay, Christopher Morris concentrates on Edmund Meisel, who composed the music for one of the quintessential films of that genre, *Der heilige Berg* (1926). Meisel is an interesting case through which to examine the influence of Nazis on cultural policy because of his association with left-leaning productions and his commitment to socialism. Morris concentrates on two issues in particular in his essay: the "politics of urban experience" and the "politics of autonomy" (p. 77). He argues that although Meisel's "embrace of the urban soundscape" was difficult to satisfy in the irrational and romantic *Bergfilme*, it could be seen in some sequences. Morris's second issue of autonomy refers to values of "aesthetic

creativity, uniqueness, and authorship" (p. 77), which seemed difficult to fulfill in a film produced for mass audiences that borrows from a variety of musical sources. However, Morris rightly points out that the genre was not as distinctive as it may appear, but rather reflected a dialectic between nature and technology and was thus both romantic and modern.

The subsequent essay, by composer Ed Hughes, deals with a 1941 film music composition by Eisler for the short film *Regen* (1929) by Dutch director Joris Ivens. In 2001, Hughes was commissioned to compose a new score for this piece, and in his contribution he investigates the issue of rhythm in relation to Eisler's original score. Hughes questions whether "advanced musical resources necessarily correspond with advanced visual resources" (p. 103) and concludes that Eisler's score led to a "dissonance between musical and visual images" (p. 104). While interesting in many respects, particularly regarding Eisler's criticism of Eisenstein's montage ideas, it is not entirely clear why Hughes only briefly links his investigation to his own 2001 composition—in contrast to what the volume's introduction suggests the essay will do. Perhaps such a linkage would have departed too far from the time frame of pre-war film history.

Unfortunately, the following essay takes just such a departure—although Björn Heile's investigation into Mauricio Kagel's engagement with film and music is fascinating. Kagel's approach in his films, of taking "cinema's claim to represent a multimedia art form literally," has led to the production of some works where "the film is the composition" (p. 107), and Heile is particularly interested in these films. Excellent as this contribution may be, in a volume that focuses on the prewar period, it fails to establish any useful links to that time period. For this, however, Heile can hardly be blamed; even so, his contribution would have been served better in a volume with a different focus.

In the first essay of the second part of the volume, on film music in the Soviet Union, Julie Hubbert revisits Eisenstein's theory of film and music. She claims that although his essays on montage have been widely received, the parts that deal with music have been largely ignored. Hubbert asserts that although Eisenstein's description of music may be "difficult, even cryptic," it had strong echoes of contemporary film music theory and practice (p. 126). Hubbert's contribution convincingly (and usefully) sums up some of the key theoretical tenets referred to throughout this book.

Next, Rebecca Schwartz-Bishir turns her attention to Sergei Prokofiev's music for Eisenstein's film *Alexander Nevskiy* (1938), which clearly communicated the Soviet Communist Party's policy of socialist realism. Research on the production has so far focused on Eisenstein but Schwartz-Bishir is explicitly interested in Prokofiev's role and the extent of negotiation involved in his compositional choices in the politically volatile climate of the 1930s. Schwartz-Bishir claims that although much of Prokofiev's music for the film can be labeled as reflecting the ideals of socialist realism, some of it cannot, and she concludes that Prokofiev arrived at a successful compromise.

Unfortunately, the last contribution to the Soviet section of the volume is another poor fit for the volume. In it, Mitchell Morris offers an intriguing investigation of the cult film *Liquid Sky* (1982), directed by the Soviet émigré Slava Tsukerman and set in downtown New York. Particularly fascinating is his claim that the difficult (often weird) features of the film arise "out of the fertile interaction of two belated aesthetic worlds: the Soviet Union in the Brezhnev years, the 'era of stagnation'; and America in its post-Watergate/Vietnam hangover" (p. 163). Although Morris is able to substantiate this claim, it appears misplaced in a volume that emphasizes the prewar situation. Also, the author makes no attempt to engage significantly with any of the other theo-

ries, composers, or directors discussed elsewhere in this volume.

Overall, the collection does not entirely do what it promises. Only a few articles relate to its subtitle, and two articles go beyond its scope. Finally, the editors fail to explain the imbalance they created in the number of essays devoted to each area by including six essays on the German scene and three on the Soviet Union. Despite these infelicities, however, the quality of most of the contributions is solid and some add significantly to our knowledge of an intriguing area of research.

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