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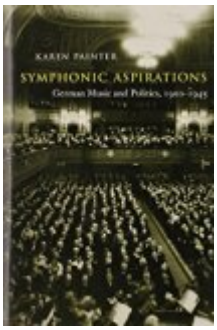

Karen Painter. *Symphonic Aspirations: German Music and Politics, 1900-1945.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007. vi + 354 pp. $49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-02661-2.

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Published on HABSBURG (January, 2010)

Commissioned by Jonathan Kwan (University of Nottingham)

Ever since the early nineteenth century and the symphonies of Ludwig van Beethoven's heroic period, particularly the Eroica and Fifth Symphonies, many listeners and critics have considered the genre to be a particularly German one. The rhythmic drive and motivic force of those works led many to compare all subsequent symphonies to Beethoven's model in terms of assessing quality. Early reviews of Beethoven's Fifth by Adolf Bernhard Marx and E. T. A. Hoffmann set the standard for heroic and impassioned responses to this music. Composers outside of Germany usually modeled their symphonies on Beethoven's, and even German composers, such as Johannes Brahms, felt intimidated when following in the master's footsteps. In *Symphonic Aspirations*, musicologist Karen Painter explores the meaning of the symphony as expressed by music critics in Germany and Austria at the fin de siècle, during the period around World War I, and during the Third Reich. Research on musical culture during the Nazi era has been prolific over the past twenty years. Significant publications include Michael Kater's *The Twisted Muse: Musicians and Their Music in the Third Reich* (1997), Erik Levi's *Music in the Third Reich* (1994), and Richard Etlin's *Art, Culture, and Media under the Third Reich* (2002). These authors examine music and other arts from multiple angles, whereas Painter's is the first book to treat musical criticism of the symphony specifically during that era. Broader research on music criticism during the Third Reich includes studies by Dorothee Rackowitz and Marc-André Roberge.[1] Pamela Potter, in *Most German of the Arts: Musicology and Society from the Weimar Republic to the End of Hitler's Reich* (1998), investigates the role of musicologists specifically in shaping cultural thinking during that period, where Painter looks at critics, and both books complement each other well.

When we think of music and the Third Reich, some of the first topics that come to mind might include the persecution of Jewish musicians and composers, Hitler's adoration of Richard Wagner and his music, and Richard Strauss's complicated relationship with the Nazi regime as head of the

Reich Music Chamber. All of these topics are well covered in many of the books mentioned above. Painter's primary focus is on the meaning of the symphony as a musical genre expressed through print journalism, and the ways in which critics used the cultural values associated with the symphony to impress their values on their readership. Her examination of the symphonic literature focuses on the works of Austrian composers Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) and Anton Bruckner (1824-96), one of Mahler's teachers at the University of Vienna. Her published work related to this material includes an essay in ***Nineteenth-Century Music*** on Mahler's music and new attitudes toward orchestration in fin-de-siècle Vienna (1995), and an article on Paul Hindemith and Hans Pfitzner's music in the Third Reich in ***The Musical Quarterly*** (2001), as well as her editing work, translation of reviews, and an essay on Mahler's Eighth Symphony and mass culture in ***Mahler and His World*** (2002).[2]

Painter defines the scope of her book and introduces major themes in the introduction. She seeks to "recover the listening habits and aesthetic values" that music critics hoped to instill in the public, as well as the "political and cultural values they passionately believed were at stake and at risk" (p. 2). Important topics include the increasing weight placed on polarizing language and narratives of violence in symphonic criticism, changes in critical approach from analysis of symphonies as art objects to a focus on the sensory experience of listening, and the duality of Mahler and Bruckner--how Bruckner's music appealed to conservatives and nationalists while Mahler's attracted a more liberal following. While this dichotomy suits Painter's goals well, it would have been useful to include material on the reception of canonic German-speaking composers, like Brahms or Franz Schubert, during this period for comparison.

The book is divided into three sections, covering the periods 1900-14, 1914-33, and 1933-45, respectively. Part 1 is entitled "Tradition in a Modern Age: Bruckner and Mahler at the ***Fin de siècle***." In chapter 1, Painter explores the meaning of the symphony around 1900 as a "refuge from modernism" for many critics, perceived threats from program music to its dominance in the concert hall, and growing anti-Semitism in German arts criticism after unification in 1871 (p. 25). For Painter the "contested rise of the working class, the assimilation of Jews, [and] the battle between tradition and modernism" were all embodied in the symphony as "composed, heard, and evaluated." An artwork could "not be just an artwork" (p. 43). In chapter 2, Painter examines the traditional association of the symphony and cultivation (***Bildung***) within nineteenth-century German culture. Counterpoint, long viewed as a signifier of tradition and authority in the symphony, was created by Mahler and Strauss more through orchestration, rhythm, and wide registral gaps than through pitch alone. This new approach led audiences to "listen between the lines," so that hearing polyphony entailed "being in the music" as if "surrounded by the voices" (p. 60). The shift from analyzing a symphony at a distance to being absorbed as a listener in the sound world of modern music is a recurring theme in the book. The third chapter concerns the primacy of tone color (timbre) in Mahler's music and the perceived threat to musical culture and analysis posed by the sensuous of timbre. Painter argues that critics felt threatened by the prominence of that which could not be dissected and analyzed like rhythm, melody, harmony, or form. "The primacy of timbre in modern music," she argues, "imperiled not just aesthetics but musical culture--the values that accrued from studying and listening to music" (p. 87). Sensuality was not completely forbidden to the symphony, but it had to be "sublimated" (p. 113). A hesitance to indulge in the physicality of musical listening before the war yielded to a greater acceptance of it after wartime brutality was experienced firsthand. This chapter is one of the strongest and most focused in the book.

Part 2 is "The Politics of Tradition: Mahler and Bruckner, 1914-1933." The fourth chapter deals with the influence of World War I on attitudes toward force and violence in music, particularly Mahler's Sixth Symphony. The war led many to find "aesthetic beauty and pleasure in violence and tragedy" (p. 138). If music was to "convince" in the mid-nineteenth century, and to "compel" around 1900, it was to "force" or "overwhelm" around 1910 (p. 151). Paul Bekker was particularly influential in shaping an aesthetics of musical strength through his writing. Critics praised the power and sonic strength of Mahler's Sixth to a greater degree after the war, suggesting to Painter that the symphony as a genre during this period "conspired in the aestheticization of violence" as the "physical experience of music" replaced the "lofty ideals of a generation past" (pp. 156, 159). Chapter 5 is devoted to Bruckner's music and German nationalist ambitions. After the territorial losses suffered by Germany and Austria through the Treaty of Versailles, metaphors of space and structure became more prevalent in musical criticism. Bruckner's music appealed to conservatives and nationalists who criticized the decadence and materialism of the Weimar Republic and yearned for an expansion of German territory under a more authoritarian government. His symphonies followed the traditional four-movement structure and instilled "confidence in the genre as a set of constraints on the composer and expectations for the listener" (p. 170). The expansiveness and solemnity of Bruckner's music proved an ideal match for the "grandeur and awe" later cultivated in Nazi public culture (p. 204).

Part 3 is entitled "Symphonic Traditions under National Socialism." The idea of the symphony remained potent to the Nazis, even though actual symphonies were of less use as propaganda than other types of music. In chapter 6, Painter explores the case of Paul Hindemith and his *Mathis der Maler* Symphony. The stress on populism diminished the usefulness of complex and lengthy symphonies. Works entitled "symphony" after 1933 often bore little resemblance to nineteenth-century ones. If the *Mathis* Symphony was essentially a suite of pieces drawn from Hindemith's opera of the same name, as Painter asserts, the mislabeling led to the breakdown of the "cultural value" of the genre (p. 241). Painter traces Hindemith's complicated relationship to the Nazi government as he fell in and out of favor. The accessibility of his music, bolstered by the quotation of German folk songs, "translucent counterpoint," and tonal idiom, made the work suitable to the *völkisch* aims of the government (p. 232). Painter labels the Nazis the "regime of the symphony," even though the genre became degraded in meaning during the period. The turn of German composers away from the symphony after 1945 confirmed that the symphony "could never have been just music" (p. 243). In the final chapter, Painter discusses the political usage of Bruckner and his music by the Nazis and traces the further decline of symphonic ideals through the popularity of Carl Orff's *Carmina burana*. The need for symphonies as propaganda declined after the 1936 Berlin Olympics, and wartime losses affected morale, as popular songs became more useful in inspiring cheerfulness and "escapism and simple gratification prevailed" (p. 245). Contemporary composers often wrote "symphonic works" for large orchestras or made orchestral arrangements in order to "draw on the color and monumentality of the symphony without adhering to its formal strictures" (p. 256). One such work was *Carmina burana* (the premiere was on June 8, 1937), which became widely popular in Nazi Germany and "lent itself to a synthesis of enthusiasm, obedience, and naïve celebration of secular collectivism" (pp. 262-263). In spite of Orff's claims that his music suffered during the Third Reich, Painter concludes that, with "thirty-six productions over seven years," *Carmina burana* "hardly suffered at the hands of the Nazis" (p. 265). This work "brought to an end a long era of symphonic aspirations" through its repetitive material, "preharmonic structures," and the removal

of any need for "symphonic engagement" and active listening on the part of the public (pp. 264-265).

Painter concludes with several provocative assertions and questions. For one, critical emphasis on the absorption of listening and the joy of being overwhelmed by sonic strength and monumentality may have conditioned the public to accept the authority of the Nazi regime, which prized monumentality and displays of power. She asks whether Hitler's "claims about power and racial community" would have been so "imperative and totalizing" without "two generations of symphonic discourse." Would his words have been accepted so easily by the educated without the "guidance and assurance of respected critics?" Her final acknowledgment is that music and the interpretation of it during this period "mattered," though the interpretation did not always "emancipate or enlighten" (p. 270). Although many factors combined to condition much of the German public to go along with Nazi plans, Painter's arguments seem at least reasonably plausible after the material she has presented in the book. She places her work within the wake of a generation that sought complete denazification, but which failed, in her opinion, to "produce an adequate explanation" of how musical thought in journalism and criticism proved to be "so powerful a force in the ideologies of the first half of the twentieth century" (p. 269). Her book is not a reception history, since reception is "too passive a process." Instead she classifies it as a history of what the Germans call "*Sinnstiftung*: endowment with meaning--of musical discourse" (p. 270).

Symphonic Ambitions is a thoroughly researched and well-written book. Its major contribution is to deepen our understanding of trends in the critical reception of the symphony in the German-speaking lands during a vitally important historical period. Painter remarks that critics, natural advocates with the power of the press "at their fingertips," were often more zealous than composers and musicologists in helping to support the Nazi empire (p. 209). She pulls no punches in criticizing well-known musical figures who sought to conceal their full relationship with the Nazi authorities, though without unfairly attacking individuals. Painter takes a strong stance in refuting claims made by Hindemith and Orff that they were shunned by the Nazi government and sought no favor from it.

In spite of difficulties in identifying and locating information on critics who remain "little more than a name," Painter has exhausted her primary source material, combing through hundreds of reviews in German and Austrian archives and in old newspapers, as well as books from the same period (p. 8). She avoids heavy usage of musical analysis or technical jargon, so the book will be of interest and use to scholars in many fields. Those interested in musical journalism of the period will find it especially useful, as will scholars of the reception history of art. Historians of Germany and Austria during the first half of the twentieth century will get much use out of the book as well. Musicologists who specialize in Mahler or Bruckner will definitely want to add this book to their collections, as will those interested in the cultural history of the symphony. Her discussion of obscure composers of the period adds to the interest value.

There are few major shortcomings to highlight. Her endnotes are numerous and thorough, providing further information that I found to be of great interest and significance for my own research. Unfortunately, she rarely includes the original German-language text of numerous translated passages, such as reviews, either within the text proper or in the endnotes. While her translations are fluid and natural sounding, I always enjoy seeing the original-language material. I would have also welcomed more musical discussion and analysis. She thoroughly analyzes the final movement of Mahler's Sixth, and similar examples would have been beneficial for comparing

critical responses to concrete musical detail. Including this might have narrowed the potential audience for the book, however. Finally, there are a fair number of typographic errors (e.g.,. “hear” instead of “here” on page 51 or “urn” instead of “turn” on page 152) and omitted words that should have been caught by editors and that leave the reader puzzling as to the intended meaning. In spite of these minor complaints, the book is highly recommended for library purchase because of its wide appeal to students and scholars in many disciplines.

Notes

[1]. See Dorothee Rackowitz, “‘Was man nur flüsternd mitteilen konnte’: Musikkritik in Hamburg im ‘Dritten *Reich*,’” in *Zündende Lieder--Verbrannte Musik: Folgen des Nazifaschismus für Hamburger Musiker und Musikerinnen*, ed. Peter Petersen (Hamburg: VSA-Verlag, 1995), 199-214; Marc-André Roberge, “Deux facettes de la critique musicale pendant le Troisième Reich: Musikkritik et Musikbetrachtung,” *Criticus Musicus: A Journal of Music Criticism* 1, no. 2-3 (Summer-Fall 1993): 25-36; and Fabian Lovisa, “Musikkritik im Nationalsozialismus: Die Rolle deutschsprachiger Musikzeitschriften, 1920-1945” (PhD diss., Ruprecht-Karls-Universität, 1991).

[2]. Karen Painter, “The Sensuality of Timbre: Responses to Mahler and Modernity at the ‘Fin de siecle,’” *Nineteenth-Century Music* 18, no. 3 (Spring 1995): 236-256; “Symphonic Ambitions, Operatic Redemption: Mathis der Maler and Palestrina in the *Third Reich*,” *The Musical Quarterly* 85, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 117-166; and “The Aesthetics of Mass Culture: Mahler’s Eighth Symphony and Its Legacy,” in *Mahler and His World*, ed. Karen Painter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 127-156.

Citation: Stephen Thursby. Review of Painter, Karen. *Symphonic Aspirations: German Music and Politics, 1900-1945.* HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. January, 2010.

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