Mozart and the Nazis is a well-researched, detailed account of perceptions about Mozart, his music, and his legacy in the Third Reich and beyond. Indeed, the title does not do full justice to the chronological scope of the work, which opens with the celebrations of Mozart’s 175th birthday in 1931 and concludes with the post-war continuation of various projects and interpretations passed down from the Nazi era. The geographic scope also pushes beyond the borders of the Third Reich, following the fate of German exiles and assessing Mozart’s reception among Germany’s allies and in territories invaded and occupied by German troops. The author, Erik Levi, wrote one of the first English-language studies on music in Nazi Germany and applies his expertise to mine archival sources, contemporary publications, and secondary literature to offer a richly informed survey.[1]

Levi’s introduction briefly summarizes the book’s goal of examining the Nazi campaign to co-opt Mozart despite the challenge of conforming the composer’s character and outlook to their weltanschauung. Thereafter, the first chapter (“Prologue: 1931, a Mozart Year”) looks at the celebrations as well as the status of various editions of Mozart’s music underway in Depression-era Germany. The following two chapters (“Der deutsche Mozart” and “Mozart and the Freemasons: A Nazi Problem”) examine the numerous attempts both before and during the Third Reich to emphasize Mozart’s Germanness and to distance the composer from his known associations with Freemasonry, especially once the movement had become a target of Nazi suppression. The chapter titled “Aryanising Mozart” analyzes Mozart’s direct and indirect associations with Jews, most notably his collaboration with librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte and the popular nineteenth-century German translations of Da Ponte’s texts by another Jew, Hermann Levi.[2]

In the next two chapters (“The Mozart Diaspora” and “True Humanitarian Music: Exiled Writers on Mozart”) we learn about Mozart’s significance for oppressed Jews living within the Reich and those driven out of Hitler’s Germany. "Mozart Performance and Propaganda: From the Anschluss to the End of World War II” details the high-profile political exploitation of the Salzburg Mozart festival on the eve of the Anschluss, and chapter 8 (“Mozart Serves German Imperialism”) looks at Mozart reception under German occupation. The final chapter (“Epilogue: Nazi Legacies”) traces vestiges of the “nazified” Mozart beyond the Third Reich, including the completion of an edition of Mozart’s works initiated under Hitler, the English dubbing and distribution of a Mozart bio-pic of 1942, and the resurrection of theories about Mozart’s opposition to Freemasonry and his deep-seated nationalism, the rhetoric of which could be effortlessly superimposed on the more recent image of an “Austrian Mozart.”

Levi’s comprehensive treatment is a valuable addition not only to the study of Mozart reception history but also to investigations of the ways artists and their works can be subjected to a wide variety of interpretations under differing historical conditions. At the same time, Levi’s ample evidence of the continuity and ubiqu-
The rich detail provided in *Mozart and the Nazis* gives uty of Mozart’s meaning for audiences in and beyond the Third Reich tends to undermine the work’s main contention that “[a]lthough many regimes have appropriated great historical and artistic figures of the past for their own political purposes, none has done so with such thoroughness as the Nazis” (p. 1). Levi, like so many others seeking to highlight the singularity of Nazi atrocities against not only European Jewry but also Western civilization, strives to reconstruct a campaign of cultural mayhem as ruthless and thorough as the Holocaust itself, only to struggle with evidence that complicates this agenda.

This becomes clear almost from the start, as Levi demonstrates an adherence to portraying Mozart as a German icon in the years leading up to the Third Reich, in which severe economic hardships offered Mozart’s 175th birthday as “one small opportunity for Germans to be reminded of their great musical heritage” (p. 5), and showing how a leading scholar was already “echo[ing] the Nazi line of attack” in a 1931 essay on “the German Mozart” (p. 29). Indeed, Levi traces this tendency from the time of Richard Wagner (p. 16) to its climax reached in the years leading up to the First World War in “a flurry of publications which sowed the seeds for the omnipresent and unchallenged interpretation of the composer that followed the advent of the Third Reich” (p. 20). Clearly such “abuse” of Mozart was not a Nazi innovation, nor could the Nazis be cited for being the most abusive. Levi even observes a weakening of the insistence on a purely “German Mozart” at the height of World War II, in the interest of currying favor with the Axis and drawing attention to Mozart’s debt to Italy (pp. 31–32).

This is not the only instance in which earlier extremism is softened, even silenced, during the Third Reich. In the fascinating discussion of the troubling relationship between Mozart and Freemasonry, Levi diligently traces efforts to distance Mozart from the Masons all the way back to the 1790s, culminating in conspiracy theories in the late nineteenth century suggesting that Jews and Masons poisoned Mozart. Yet a 1928 polemical expose that was reprinted in the Third Reich prompted a denunciation by propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels and a formal ban on further publication (pp. 39–40). Even more fascinating are the controversies over how to represent Masonic themes in contemporary productions of The Magic Flute, resulting in a formal pronouncement by Hitler against any attempts to pervert Mozart’s original intentions and a position statement by the head of theater operations recommending that producers back away from overly zealous attempts to “cleanse” the work of its Masonic and Egyptian elements (pp. 42–51). With regard to Mozart’s Jewish associations, we see a similar degree of ambivalence, with positive endorsements of Da Ponte’s contributions appearing as late as 1938 (p. 55) and, in the ensuing competition to furnish new German translations to replace those of Hermann Levi, instances of preference for Levi’s version over more recent “Aryan” substitutes (p. 72). In fact, the criticisms of Hermann Levi’s translation hardly ever cite his Jewishness, but rather contend that the newer, more modern versions should supersede the stilted and overly romantic texts in use since the late nineteenth century. In the end, we learn that the Third Reich was not the first official German entity to abuse Mozart as a cultural icon, and perhaps out of a keen interest in gauging public opinion even urged more moderation, not out of any sense of taste or decency but out of a pragmatic need to win over support rather than risk alienating countless Mozart devotees.

Mozart’s significance particularly for Jewish performers and scholars provides perhaps the most compelling material for readers of this list, as the discussions yield some very poignant insights into this group’s stubborn adherence to German cultural identity. As is well known, the systematic exclusion of Jews from participation in German cultural life led first to a stop-gap measure concocted by the government and the Jewish community, known as the Jewish Culture League (Kulturbund deutscher Juden), to provide cultural and educational programs exclusively for Jews by Jews. When it came to excluding German content from the league’s programs, the deep connection German Jews held to German culture became all too evident. The ban on Mozart imposed upon the league in 1937 was a bitter pill to swallow, and Herbert Peyser, reporting for the New York Times, perceptively noted the German Jews’ undying claim to “that same artistic, scientific, and philosophic fare to which, through the centuries, they have felt a proprietary right to equal that of other Germans” (quoted on p. 92). Once beyond the reach of Nazi authority, German Jews and other exiles could continue to cultivate their connection to Mozart, and Levi provides details of their involvement in the Glyndebourne Festival, Salzburg, and other venues in the United States and Britain. Indeed, Jewish musicologists chose high-profile platforms such as the New York Times and Thomas Mann’s journal Mass und Wert to emphasize Mozart’s humanity and, in essence, to draw sharp lines of distinction between the long and venerable legacy of German culture and the Nazis’ recent perversion of it.

The rich detail provided in *Mozart and the Nazis* gives
readers a wealth of material for gaining a deeper understanding of how such an important musical figure can be mythologized and exploited to serve both universalist and exclusionary political philosophies. Yet rather than read this exposé as a demonstration of the Nazis’ singularity in “abusing” this particular cultural icon, one should be open to observing how, under National Socialism, the Austro-German Mozart “industry” was allowed to prosper and mature, both within the Third Reich and beyond. Levi’s extensive and very useful bibliography includes a recent article by Ulrich Konrad (under the subcategory “Further Reading”) that forcefully argues for no noticeable changes in Mozart reception before, during, or after the years of Nazi terror. Looking past the indisputable political exploitation of the Salzburg festival, one cannot help pondering that scholars, performers, and policymakers of all stripes shared in a common mission to perpetuate the myths surrounding Mozart and his music and to exploit them toward fulfilling their own political and ideological agendas, and that this process continued long past 1945 in and beyond Germany’s borders.

Notes


[2]. The author is not referring to the more widely accepted definition of “aryanization” as the seizure of Jewish-owned property.


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