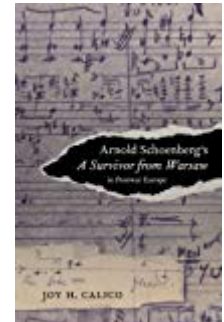


Joy Haslam Calico. *Arnold Schoenberg's "A Survivor from Warsaw" in Postwar Europe.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014. 272 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-28186-8.



Reviewed by Mark Berry

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Joy H. Calico's new book is an impressive work of cultural history, looking at the path taken through postwar Europe by Arnold Schoenberg's shattering 1947 cantata, *A Survivor from Warsaw*, in its various national premieres and the reactions thereto. Europe emerges unified and divided in almost equal measure, both in familiar and unfamiliar ways.

Schoenberg's "survivor" comes to us neither from Auschwitz nor Treblinka, but Warsaw. Schoenberg told the critic and composer Kurt List: "The title will be 'A SURVIVOR FROM WARSAW' because it was my inspiration and the geographical meaning includes the ghetto and all what happened there" (p. 8). That included the 1942 deportation of 280,000 Jews from the Warsaw ghetto to Treblinka and subsequent resistance to that deportation. Ever jealous of artistic autonomy, Schoenberg in no sense intended this as "mere" documentary. What, after all, would be the point? Transformation into an artwork is surely justified, if at all, by the addition of something a documentary report could not offer. It is, then, a work of

the composer's imagination, inspired by what he had heard, not necessarily limited by it. But that is not really the material of Calico's book; she is not really concerned with the work itself. We learn much about national, transnational, and international cultural networks, and their often complex relationships with European political structures.

The 1948 premiere was given by Kurt Frederick and the amateur Albuquerque Civic Orchestra; Frederick, born Fuchsgelb, had not only been violist in the Kolisch Quartet, led by Schoenberg's brother-in-law, but also choral director at Vienna's Stadttempel until the Anschluss. Immediate reception was enthusiastic, even occasioning a mention in *Time*, although discussion already included some questioning of the ethics of transforming Holocaust experience into art. Europe heard the work for the first time the following month, in December, conducted by René Leibowitz in Paris. Perhaps surprisingly, that seems, according to Calico (and I have no reason to dispute this), to have occasioned less immediate discussion. (Or, to put it in another, not necessarily

contradictory way, our sources are severely limited.) Nevertheless, Calico's story is one of posthumous remigration: Schoenberg may soon, as Pierre Boulez famously announced, have been dead, but his music returned to Europe—transformed, of course.

Calico's book looks at the "cultural mobility" (p.15) of this particular work, with different chapters addressing its travels through West Germany, Austria, Norway, East Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, up until the year 1968, which was as significant for the invasion of Czechoslovakia as it was for student and other revolts in the West (leaving aside here the question of how much they can and should be considered part of the same movement). In much American scholarship on music of this time, most celebratedly and perhaps notoriously, the work of Richard Taruskin, the Cold War looms large, and, indeed is the main point of focus.[1] Calico, however, makes no claim that this is the only way to consider it; there is none of Taruskin's aggressive neoconservatism, determined to downplay Schoenberg in order to elevate the Soviet "dissident," Shostakovich. Calico's framing is perfectly justified, indeed illuminating. Concentrating on European countries in the middle, rather than the US and USSR, Calico avoids the stridency of Taruskin's extraordinarily crude oppositions, so ably delineated by Paul Harper-Scott.[2] There is a degree of historical disjuncture, since Schoenberg's work only appeared in the "people's democracies" during the "Thaw," following Kruschchev's 1956 denunciation of Stalin; that is part—yet wisely, only part—of the history Calico traces.

Throughout Europe, there is a pattern—not always uncontested, it not always so contested as it might have been—of audiences distancing themselves from responsibility. It sometimes shades into something darker than that, too. Remnants or more of Nazism crop up, for instance the grotesque critic for the Bielefeld-based *Westfalen-Blatt*, Hans Schnoor: as antimodernist as he was

anti-Semitic. (Too) quickly denazified, he happily used the Hitleresque "anständigen Deutschen" to describe the apparently long-suffering victims of this "provocative obscenity ... [in which] Hermann Scherchen (who else?) has placed Schoenberg's hate-song [*Haßgesang*] next to Beethoven's *Egmont* overture" (p. 32). Here, Calico's understanding of specific rhetorical choices is enlightening; the term *Haßgesang* is clearly, convincingly related to anti-British sentiment. The Americans were not the only occupiers, nor were the Jews the sole objects of old Nazis' *Haßgesänge*. Gertrud Schoenberg, the composer's widow, perhaps wisely declined to involve herself in German politics, but there were others who could sue—and did. Moreover, fusion of hostility towards new music performance and "collaboration with the 'occupying army,'" even, in Schnoor's words, a certain "remigration" (p. 40), are both of intrinsic interest and suggestive of historical justification for Calico's theoretical framework.

Calico recognizes the occupation on both sides of the Iron Curtain; the Allied, and not just the aforementioned British, presence in the Federal Republic of Germany is given its due, as is the very particular situation of Austria, too often forgotten. (Perhaps that is as relevant now as ever. NATO, after all, endures, long after the demise of the Warsaw Pact.) In any case, one cannot help but notice that Austrian reactions, whether program notes or reviews, to what perhaps should most clearly have been a "homecoming" premiere, were conspicuous, even when they somewhat timidly mentioned the Jewish victims, in their failure to mention Nazi perpetrators. The closest instance Calico has been able to discover is one to the "Hitler-Zeit." "In the Eastern-Bloc case studies ... it is the Jews who go unnamed; in Norway and West Germany both parties are identified.... What remained unsaid is at least as important as what was made explicit" (pp. 64-65).

A particularly welcome feature of Calico's treatment of the German Democratic Republic,

Polish, and Czechoslovak performance and reception is her refusal to adopt an excessively “totalitarian” approach to politics and society. There is, I think, a remnant of the West’s triumph, the “end of history,” and so on, but far less than one often reads, especially from American musicologists, but if so, it is only a remnant. In the case of many historical musicologists, there is less evidence than one might wish for of engagement with the more strictly “historical” literature, but Calico makes not inconsiderable attempts here, in a bravely transnational study. In some musicological writing on, say, the French Revolution or 1848, one almost has the impression that Wikipedia-style knowledge of a few facts provides enough “context” for a “line” being taken: an approach more akin to “cultural studies” than history as historians would know it. (Thus speaks a weary Wagner scholar.) Such is certainly not the case here. There are many helpful historical reminders—for instance, that the word “survivor” did not necessarily hold the particular connotations it does now, Central Europe being full of survivors (p. 110). Moreover, the charge works both ways: relatively few historians treat musical history with the seriousness it deserves. Amongst their number, I am especially pleased to see Elizabeth Janik (*Recomposing Music: Politics and Tradition in Cold War Berlin*, 2005) mentioned here.

Connections between the countries concerned are considered, for instance, East German musicians’ performance of *A Survivor* at the Warsaw Festival, its Polish premiere taking place against a background of “persistently contentious” disputes over the Oder-Neisse line and repatriation of Germans living in Poland. It is a welcome surprise to see a Scandinavian country discussed at all in such a study, let alone to discover the remarkable route through which a concert organizer, Pauline Hall, came to know of the work in Vienna (the 1951 International Musikfest) and resolved to have it performed at home. Norway’s contact with Schoenberg’s music had previously been minimal. Radio broadcasts are also given their due. (More,

perhaps, on their funding and structures would have been welcome, but perhaps that would have distracted from Calico’s particular purpose.)

Individuals such as the remarkable Hall, who provided her own Norwegian translation, are both permitted to speak for themselves and set in context. Hall’s courage was not necessarily repaid with comprehending critical response. Opposition to Schoenbergian modernism (“problematic, let’s face it—to put it mildly,” according to a writer for the conservative *Morgenbladet*) combined somewhat uncomfortably in some cases with “Nordic isolationism and ... Christian-centric orientation” (p. 85). Herbert Kegel’s advocacy, both in East Germany and beyond, is discussed, with generous acknowledgement to the variety of musical worlds thriving as well as questioned in Leipzig: not just Schoenbergian modernism but jazz, too. Generous assistance from the state through its own recording company, VEB Schallplatten Berlin, was to a certain extent indicative of the GDR’s Ministry of Culture wishing “to combat the onslaught of American popular culture,” offering “more art music” instead (p. 103). But the waters are productively muddied by issues of East German anti-Semitism, too. Calico rarely resorts to one mode of contextualization and/or interpretation; the book emerges the more strongly for it.

This is a relatively short book, which gleans a great deal from many aspects of the reception of a seven-minute piece. There would, I think, have been nothing gained from making it longer. Many aspects of the history I have not mentioned at all, not because I think them unimportant, but because this is not intended as a full summary; the reader would be better advised to read the book itself than a hasty précis. Any major cavils? Book reviews are notoriously concerned with urging authors to have conducted a different study entirely, or even partially. I hope I shall not fall too deeply into that trap when I voice a reservation I feel towards much *Rezeptionsgeschichte*. Might we perhaps have had a little more discussion of

the work whose reception is being studied, both “before” and “after” the migrations Calico traces? It is true that Calico makes no claim for that to be the object of her study, but I think that in some respects a pity.

That aside, on its own, fascinating terms, Calico has written a book that will repay attention from a variety of readers. Historians should be prompted to pay more attention to musical composition and performance, whether in postwar European history—or, if you must, “Cold War history”—or elsewhere. Musicologists will find a more sophisticated engagement with historical scholarship than is always the case with such work. We shall all find intriguing elements of a history of which few of us will have known much, if anything. That it suggests there will be far more to say, making no claim to exhaustiveness, is indicative of the book’s numerous estimable qualities.

Notes

[1]. “When Serious Music Mattered: On Shostakovich and Three Recent Books,” in *A Shostakovich Casebook*, ed. Malcolm Hamrick Brown (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 364; more generally, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[2]. *The Quilting Points of Musical Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 27-33.

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