H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tillmann Bendikowski, Sabine Gillmann, Christian Jansen, Markus Leniger, Dirk Pöppmann. *Die Macht der Töne: Musik als Mittel politischer Identitätsstiftung im 20. Jahrhundert.* Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2003. 219 S. EUR 24.80, broschiert, ISBN 978-3-89691-547-4.

Reviewed by Julia E. Sneeringer

Published on H-German (October, 2004)

The political movements of the last century were accompanied by music that was intended to inspire, unite, and lend emotional charge to ideology. But music has tended to be treated more as the "decorative trimmings" of events such as 1848 or the Nazi revolution, rather than a focus of analytical inquiry in its own right (p. 7). The volume under review sets out to remedy that oversight, posing questions such as, what does power sound like? What is music's role in forming political group identity? Is there such a thing as inherently right- or left-wing, conservative, democratic, or authoritarian music? Can music itself have a political character, or does this come only from the lyrics that accompany it? While this volume is only partially able to answer these questions, it nonetheless constitutes a worthy addition to the growing literature on the social and political uses of music.[1]

Stemming from a 2002 conference in Schwerte, this volume includes twelve essays by historians, musicians, musicologists, journalists, literary scholars, and even a psychologist. It covers a range of styles and genres across national borders, including classical music, American union songs, folk, experimental composition, and neo-Nazi music. The authors do not take up the question of how "unpolitical" music has been used in a political way, such as the competing uses of hot jazz in Nazi Germany, for example. Instead, their focus is on explicitly political music, on musicians and composers with a stated desire to use music to effect political change.

The volume begins by addressing the nature of music itself as a communication form both similar to, and distinct from, written or spoken language. It stresses the performative and public uses of music; private uses of music in political identity formation are not addressed. Michael Grossbach and Eckart Altenmueller offer a useful, readable summary of the scientific literature on how music works in the human brain to produce quantifiable, beneficial sensations such as pleasure or courage in battle. This explanation of music's physiological effects sets the stage for essays on music's role in building community, from the party rally to the labor hall to the underground neo-Nazi concert. One of the best pieces is Tillmann Bendikowski's look at public singing in modern history, which argues that such singing can change the political atmosphere in the present while structuring past experience and articulating visions of the future (pp. 24-25). Among other things, Bendikowski explores "what German unification sounded like" by investigating the history of how, when, where, and who sang--or did not sing--the ***Deutschlandlied*** in late 1989, arguing that the song itself became an event, both reflecting and structuring Germans' changing political identities and goals.

Music allows groups to articulate visions of utopia, as in Thomas Pfeiffer's article on the function and meaning of music for Germany's New Right. Pfeiffer, a journalist and sociologist, surveys the central place of music in the scene's development. New Right leaders see music's emotional resonance as key to building "national liberated zones" to counter what they call "the cultural hegemony" and "thought bans" of the '68ers (pp. 196-199). New technologies (the internet, MP3s) enable the movement to circumvent bans on concerts and recordings while providing both recruits and cash. Like Bendikowski, Pfeiffer discusses the power of group singing at New Right concerts, in which audiences become one with the performers and chant lyrics that the singer cannot for fear of legal prosecution. Pfeiffer cannot quite back up his claim that the movement's music does not just rehash *voelkisch*-Nazi themes in its content, but he makes an important contribution with his portrait of the movement's stylistic diversity. From punk to German New Wave to folk, seemingly any genre can be reworked with racist, hypernationalist content, making the case that there is no musical style that is inherently neo-fascist.

The most successful and interesting pieces, from an historian's point of view, are those that analyze music and composers in social and historical context. Dirk Poeppmann's thoughtful essay, "Composing after Auschwitz," combines textual and tonal analysis, critical theory, historical background, and audience reception to explore how Schoenberg, Shostakovitch, and Penderecki confronted and shaped collective memory of the Holocaust into the 1960s. Kirsten Reese, herself a musician, offers a splendid piece on Ruth Crawford Seeger's evolution from avant-garde composer to folk song archivist and mother. Crawford's work was openly political, whether she was composing experimental songs about common laborers or transcribing field recordings made by John and Alan Lomax. Crawford was part of a movement against "sentimentality" in composition that in the United States included figures such as Henry Cowell and Charles Seeger (Crawford's future husband and father of folksinger Pete). In the early 1930s they argued that the workers movement needed music as radical as its lyrics (a position Stalin was busy suppressing in the Soviet Union), though in coming years Crawford and Seeger became strong promoters of American folk music as the true voice of the oppressed. Crawford's gender informed her position as well: economic necessity forced her to set aside a promising career as composer and offer piano lessons while raising four children. Teaching led her to argue that folk music is America's true cultural heritage, a transmitter of democratic values and customs. As she wrote in her anthology, ***American Folk Songs for Children***, "everyone can sing."

At the opposite end of the spectrum from folk is avant-garde music, the subject of four essays in this volume. Non-musicians may get bogged down in their sometimes lengthy dissections of compositional technique, such as Frank Sielecki's piece on political avant-garde music of the 1960s and 1970s, which proffers the outmoded assertion that nothing political appeared in West German music before 1968. Others, however, are more accessible. Reinhard Voigt profiles Stefan Wolpe, a German Jew who fled to Palestine in 1934 and then to New York in 1938. Voigt makes a convincing case that Wolpe's music captured in sound the condition of exile, though one wishes that this book came with an accompanying CD for those of us unfamiliar with these compositions. Musicologist Beate Kutschke explores a 1970 controversy over the future of New Music. Kutschke sets this fight between Clytus Gottwald (director at the Sueddeutsche Rundfunk) and composer Nicolaus Huber against the backdrop of the conflict between New Music's official promotion during the occupation as an untainted vehicle (because hated by the Nazis) to express universal humane values, and a new generation that rejected the tame, elitist nature of what was now the West German culture establishment. Like avant-gardists since the

early-twentieth century, this new generation hoped to create new art forms that were both politically revolutionary and capable of winning mass audiences. Huber understood himself not as a composer but as an "author" who used music to question the very nature of musical tradition; Gottwald rejected his compositions as unmusical. Kutschke points out the "absurdity" (p. 157) of their conflict, which, for all its breast-beating about politics and elites, carried on as if music could exist without audiences and offered no political solutions at all. Ultimately, avant-garde composers have not yet successfully redefined how music is written or received.

Several essays in this volume fail to come to grips with the questions posed in its introduction. Sabine Gillmann's piece on American labor songs and New Deal policy summarizes too much that is already known about figures such as Woody Guthrie, and analyzes too little how songs critical of capitalism or the government actually impacted the union movement. Gillmann's piece lacks the rich contextualization of Reese's profile of Crawford Seeger, and the conclusion that the question of whether musical codes are neutral or can be re-signified "must be posed anew" seems flat (p. 53). Christoph Schwandt's characterization of composer Rudolf Wagner-Regeny as the "servant of two dictatorships" (Nazi and East German) oversimplifies a career whose ambiguities and complexities are obscured by the essay's confrontational title, without providing much at all in the way of sources. David Tompkin's piece on official GDR music policy in the 1950s also lacks context, restricting its scope to internal party debates. While Tompkins argues that composers in the official Verband were able to modify top-down directives, he provides no sense of reception or evidence of the "certain success" (p. 113) the SED had in pushing through its music policy. He also notes the "astoundingly broad" propagation of a "socialist" *Unterhaltungsmusik* without offering evidence or addressing the literature on that music's notorious failures.[2]

The volume's essays collectively suggest that music ultimately only works politically within social contexts, that any political meanings are bestowed by composers and listeners--sounds themselves do not have political content (p. 11). Fair enough, but we cannot assume that audiences have uniformly supported or even picked up on the political messages put forth by composers. As Simon Frith and others have long argued, the uses of music are far more complex and extend beyond the text to include rhythm (a subject these essays generally do not address) and the contexts in which music is played and heard.[3] When analyzing music's social and political power, we must keep in mind the ways music produces affective alliances and works to produce pleasure and empowerment, all of which adds additional layers of meaning to musical texts.

Notes

[1]. For Germany see Celia Applegate and Pamela Potter, eds., *Music and German National Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), H-German review by Sacha Davis at http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=143771076519833; Uta Poiger, *Jazz Rock and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in Divided Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); and Michael Kater, *Different Drummers: Jazz in the Culture of Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992 and 2003), H-German review by Sabine Gillmann at http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=95541086039397.

[2]. See Michael Rauhut, *Beat in der Grauzone: DDR-Rock 1964 bis 1972 Politik und Alltag* (Berlin: Basisdruck, 1993); and Timothy Ryback, *Rock around the Bloc: A History of Rock Music in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[3]. Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock'n'Roll* (New York:

Pantheon, 1981); and Lawrence Grossberg, "Another Boring Day in Paradise: Rock and Roll and the Empowerment of Everyday Life," ***Popular Music*** 4 (1984): pp. 225-260.