Vulcan Historical Review

Volume 27

2023

Music as Propaganda in the Third Reich

Samantha Howerton

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/vulcan

Part of the History Commons

Recommended Citation
Howerton, Samantha (2023) "Music as Propaganda in the Third Reich," Vulcan Historical Review: Vol. 27, Article 10.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/vulcan/vol27/iss2023/10

This content has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the UAB Digital Commons, and is provided as a free open access item. All inquiries regarding this item or the UAB Digital Commons should be directed to the UAB Libraries Office of Scholarly Communication.
Music can elicit emotional and even physical responses that images and literature cannot. With this in mind, music is one of the most powerful tools for mass control. Mass control, or the state in which people are fully obedient to an individual or group, continues to prove itself vital to numerous fascist governments and organizations. While these entities utilize a variety of resources and tactics, Nazi Germany, in particular, weaponized music in a way never seen before. When considering propaganda in Nazi Germany, music is often overlooked. Nevertheless, music was an extremely important aspect of the propaganda used, mainly because of how it conveys information and expresses ideas. The Nazis recognized the power and influence of music and utilized it to further solidify their control over the people of Germany. Not only did they successfully control the airways and radio, but they also utilized music to alienate certain racial, ethnic, or religious groups deemed as a threat to the Third Reich. This targeted use of discrimination is evident through the banning of art and music the Nazis deemed “degenerate.” Additionally, their tactics for mass control were present within the music created for and endorsed by the Nazi Party. The ways in which the Nazi party utilized anthems, marches for the Hitler Youth, or already famous compositions, demonstrates that music was an effective method for controlling the people of Nazi Germany.

Coming out of World War I, Europeans welcomed new forms of expression and leisure. This included a Modernist movement in Germany and a rise in jazz clubs.\(^1\) The Germans fully embraced the Roaring Twenties; that in of itself was a shining symbol of personal freedom and self-expression. However, as the Nazis rose to power, the party created the Reichsmusikkammer (RMK) in 1933 to ban these new forms of musical and artistic expression, referring to them as “entartete,” or “degenerate.”\(^3\) The RMK also required German musicians to be added to a registry, which facilitated the suppression of music created by people the Third Reich deemed “subhuman.” The ban on “degenerate” music targeted many notable Jewish musicians, including Arnold Schoenberg and Giacomo Meyerbeer.\(^4\) Unsurprisingly, the Nazis blamed the “Jewish influence” for the existence and
creation of so-called degenerate art and music. They claimed that “degeneracy” was a racial characteristic and utilized this argument to continually deepen their antisemitic views.\textsuperscript{5} In other words, “The real issue was not with the work of art itself but with the race or ethnicity of its creator.”\textsuperscript{6} This attack on music reveals that the Nazis firmly believed that the origins of genres like Jazz “tainted German musical culture”\textsuperscript{7} and further solidified their desire to keep the Germans “pure” from foreign or Jewish influence. These regulations only increased the control that the Nazis had over the people of Germany.

In 1938, a music exhibit titled “Entartete Musik,” or “Degenerate Music” was organized by the RMK to showcase a curated selection of banned music.\textsuperscript{8} This exhibit displayed portraits of banned musicians and composers. The exhibit also included listening booths where the “degenerate” music was played for interested patrons.\textsuperscript{9,10} Visitors of the exhibit were given brochures written by Nazi official Hans Severus Ziegler. The brochure cover featured a caricature of a fictional black jazz musician named “Jonny,” who is depicted as a monkey in a suit wearing a Star of David on his lapel. As noted by Marita Berg, a writer for Deutsche Welle (DW), a modern German media outlet, “It [Jonny] would become a prominent figure within Nazi propaganda and the symbol of ‘degenerate’ music.”\textsuperscript{11} Ziegler gave a speech to introduce the exhibit, saying “What has been collected in this exhibition represents an effigy of wickedness – an effigy of arrogant Jewish impudence and complete spiritual insipidness.”\textsuperscript{12} The Germans truly believed that the works shown in the Degenerate Music exhibit were despicable, as described by Ziegler.

Even as they banned “degenerate” music, the Third Reich also approved and even endorsed music by certain composers and musicians. Hitler claimed that there were
three “master composers” who were the representation of “good’ German music.” These composers were Ludwig Von Beethoven, Richard Wagner, and Anton Bruckner. At the peak of his career, Beethoven was said to possess a great amount of self-confidence; he once said, “Strength is the morality of the man who stands out from the rest, and it is mine.”

Perhaps Hitler saw himself in Beethoven’s great confidence and believed that his own spirit was representative of what Germany should be. Richard Wagner was a personal favorite composer of Hitler’s. Wagner was known to be antisemitic, as he believed that Jewish musicians were “the ultimate source of what he perceived as substanceless music.” Wagner expressed this belief and other antisemitic principles under a pseudonym in a work titled “Judenthum in der Musik” (Judaism in Music) that was published in 1850. His most famous composition, “Die Walküre” (“Ride of the Valkyries”), is an epic musical piece that incites intense feelings of wonder among listeners. This composition “was broadcast to accompany reports on German air attacks.” Wagner’s music was utilized in a way that made the Germans feel pride in their country’s aggression - and this aggressive national pride was also present in Bruckner, yet another composer endorsed by the Nazis. Bruckner was heavily influenced by Wagner and his compositions. Additionally, he was yet another example of a “good” German creator who was utilized to evoke national pride among the Germans. All three of these composers are characterized by the triumphant themes in their music, so it is understandable that the Nazis were drawn to their compositions, as these compositions were used to instill national pride.

The Nazis utilized anthems to further solidify their control. The Nazi Party anthem, arguably the most famous Nazi song, is titled the “Horst Wessel Lied” or the “Horst Wessel Song.” This composition was titled after the writer, an early Nazi recruit who was killed by political enemies. The Nazis hailed him as a martyr and, in turn, they adopted his song as the official Nazi anthem. The song itself is in a major key, and the tempo is a march. These elements are both musical characteristics that incite feelings of patriotism or national pride among listeners. The melody is repetitive and easy for one to sing along to. The lyrics themselves are full of patriotic propaganda. The first and last stanzas include the lines “Comrades shot by the red front and reaction/ March in spirit with us in our ranks.” These stanzas highlight how the Nazis sought to promote unity within the Party. The lyrics claim that Party soldiers are so incredibly devoted to the Nazi cause, that they would continue to march with the Party even in death. In the third stanza, the lyrics are as follows: “For the last time the call will now be blown/ For the struggle now we all stand ready/ Soon will fly Hitler-flags over every street/ Slavery will last only a short time longer.” These lyrics are a testament to the Nazis’ desire for the “Nazification” of Germany and eventually Europe. The word “slavery” in this context holds a variety of meanings. First, it refers to the Nazi belief that Germany was “enslaved” by other countries through having to pay reparations for World War I. “Slavery” also refers to the immense economic struggle that all Germans experienced after the Great War. The Horst Wessel Song is surviving proof of the success of Nazi Germany. Not only was it immensely popular, but the lyrics themselves also promoted patriotism and national pride among the Germans.
Another important aspect of propaganda in Nazi Germany began with the indoctrination of the youth. The Nazis accomplished this indoctrination through the creation of the Hitlerjugend (Hitler Youth). This organization was comprised of young German boys who engaged in several activities that promoted full submission to the Swastika. The Hitler Youth participated in education, military exercises, and community service. Most notably, young boys participating in the Hitler Youth engaged in group singing and marches. These boys were also instructed in both singing and musical instruments. Music was used as a tool to unify these boys and indoctrinate them in Nazi ideals. An unknown former member of the Hitler Youth spoke about his experience as a young boy in the program. He stated, “In the songs that we sang, in the poems that we recited, everything was bright, shiny and clear, the sun and earth were ours, and tomorrow so, too, would be the whole word.” These words reveal how truly powerful music was to the Nazis, as it was a vital tool of mass control, especially for the youth.

The quote from the unknown Hitler Youth member echoes the lyrics of a popular song in Nazi Germany, titled “Es zittern die morschen Knochen” (“The Rotten Bones are Trembling”). The lyrics of this song are triumphant and confident: “We will continue to march/ When everything falls into shards/ And today Germany belongs to us/ And tomorrow the whole world.” In a video provided by The European Grandma Project, Grandma Rosa, a German-speaking Austrian who lived during the time of Nazi Germany, recalled the lyrics to the song and explained her interpretation of it. “That’s all they think of,” Grandma Rosa stated when recalling the lyrics. She continues, “The elderly - it’s the elderly with the rotten bones which are trembling. But the young ones are all on their [the Nazis’] side.” Her words highlight why the Nazis believed that it was so incredibly important to indoctrinate the youth. When someone is young, they are impressionable and easy to influence. However, the elderly had an established set of morals and were the most likely to resist. Additionally, the song acted as a thinly veiled threat to the elderly who did not support the Nazis – the young were going to take over Germany regardless. The elderly could either cast aside their personal beliefs and follow the Nazis or keep their ideals and perish. Grandma Rosa closes the video with these words: “Because we are the masters – Germany belongs to us!” Those who sang this song proclaimed that their country belonged to them, the young, impressionable Germans - not the “rotten bones.”

Music was experienced and utilized in a variety of ways during the rule of the Third Reich. Whether it was claiming “degeneracy” in music was a racial characteristic, or encouraging Germans to sing along to anthems that were laden with propaganda, music was ultimately an extremely effective tactic to keep the German people obedient to the Nazis. “Degenerate” music became an important aspect of Nazi propaganda, as it allowed the Third Reich to deepen the narrative that they enforced. No matter how musically “good” a composition was, the race or religious background of the composer negated any value that the piece held. As mentioned earlier, music is able to communicate messages and ideas in a manner that other forms of propaganda normally cannot. With this in mind, music proved itself an effective medium to promote and celebrate Nazi values. From endorsing known antisemitic composers to finding inspiration in popular Germany symphonies, the Nazis became experts at cherry-picking music that best suited their ideologies and purpose. The songs of the Third Reich contained similar musical elements that incited feelings of inspiration or patriotism in the listener. The lyrics encouraged a nationalistic response as well, as popular Nazi songs communicate themes of national pride and hope among the people of Nazi Germany. The Hitler Youth succeeded in communicating
these ideas as well, in the marches and group singing that young boys were required to partake in. One usually does not think about music when considering Nazi Propaganda and how it was so incredibly effective. With all of this in mind, music was overall an extremely effective and masterful way to expose the German people to propaganda.

ENDNOTES


