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Pamela M. Potter, *Art of Suppression: Confronting the Nazi Past in Histories of the Visual and Performing Arts*

Oakland, University of California Press, 2016.

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- 1 Few scholars seem better equipped to tackle the thorny issues that surround our perceptions of cultural activity during the Third Reich than Pamela M. Potter. Her 1998 book, *Most German of the Arts*, was a hugely significant publication highlighting the lengths to which musicologists living and working through the Nazi era sought to harness convoluted intellectual arguments in order to gain the favour and patronage of their political masters. No less problematic was the realisation that many of these ideas, particularly those that contrasted the wholesomeness of German art with the dangers associated with exposure to and influence from other cultures, whether non-German or Jewish, were deeply ingrained and formed part of a long-standing intellectual tradition that had already been formulated well before the Nazis had come to power. The only difference was that they were now recalibrated in such ways that they suited the specific climate of opinion that flourished in 1930s Germany. Most disturbing of all, perhaps, was her discovery of a long-standing conservative and reactionary underbelly in German musicology which prospered during the so-called enlightened cultural and intellectual environment of the Weimar Republic.
- 2 Yet despite the thought-provoking issues that were brought into the open in publications such as *Most German of the Arts*, the wider world still clings to a rather different notion of the way culture developed during this period. In this interpretation,

the Third Reich in cultural terms marks a decisive break with the immediate past. Citing irrefutable evidence that so many artists despised by the Nazis were proscribed and forced out of the country, the overwhelming impression of Nazi culture was that it was monolithic, reactionary and impoverished, that it represented nothing less than the equivalent of a twentieth-century dark ages completely isolated from currents of thought existing in other countries, and that all cultural practitioners, whether working at national or local level, fully subscribed to the Nazi worldview. Undoubtedly one of the most seductive myths to have gained widespread currency, to the extent that its assumptions are still perpetuated on several reputable websites, is that between 1933 and 1945, Hitler, alongside Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, controlled all manifestations of cultural creation and erected rigid guidelines, based almost exclusively on their own personal tastes as to what was deemed acceptable or unacceptable to the regime.

- 3 Inevitably, the overall picture remains far more complex, ambiguous and open-ended. It is this desire to explore and expound upon the multi-faceted nature of Nazi cultural activity that lies behind Potter's latest book, *Art of Suppression*. As Potter argues, the book's purpose is to try and understand why certain notions about the Nazis' manipulation of culture have remained compelling enough to be widely accepted, even though mounting evidence, manifested in much recent scholarship, continues to erode the credibility of this stance. In order to explore this notion in more depth, Potter mines the extensive bibliography of material written mainly by Anglo-American and German authors about this topic that has been published since the end of World War II. But whereas most of Potter's earlier writings focused almost exclusively on issues related to music, her orbit here is much wider and more ambitious, incorporating critical historiographies of the visual arts, architecture, theatre and film, as well as music. The intention, however, is not to add to this material by presenting new discoveries related to further archival research, but rather analyse writings in the public domain from the perspective of the agendas which underpin them. Thus, it considers such issues as the ways in which the circumstances of exile, the Allied occupation of Germany, the Cold War, and the complex debates surrounding the meanings of modernism have inflected interpretations of Nazi cultural development. It also brings to the fore the post-war suppression of inconvenient truths about artistic productivity during this period, suggesting that more favourable conditions existed for artists than what we have previously been led to believe, and that representing the era as a dystopia of artistic limitation, authoritarian micromanagement and kitsch is at best misleading.
- 4 Potter's book is divided into six chapters, each of roughly equal length. In the first, entitled 'What is known and what is believed', she grapples with the many misconceptions that continue to permeate arguments surrounding Nazi culture. The second chapter 'The Exile Experience', considers the difficult and often hostile reception accorded to artists who fled Nazi Germany and that they had to contend with very different working conditions in the countries where they settled. It also explains why cultural histories that were written by German émigrés posited a somewhat black and white interpretation, setting off everything that happened in the Weimar Republic as positive and everything associated with Nazism as negative. In her third chapter 'Occupation, Cold War and the Zero Hour', Potter outlines how the discovery of the Holocaust intensified this interpretation but that ideological tensions arising from the

contrasting positions promoted by the Soviet and the Western powers that were occupying Germany muddied the waters.

- 5 Potter's fourth chapter, 'Totalitarianism, Intentionalism, Fascism', is particularly absorbing. It analyses a number of pioneering texts that appeared in the 1960s, a salient example being the set of books by Joseph Wulf which for the first time in the post-war era collate material on the performing arts that was published in books, newspaper articles and specialist journals of the 1930s and early 1940s. The way this information is organised is in itself revealing, since major emphasis is placed upon illustrating how the medium in question was controlled, what was deemed acceptable and unacceptable as well as highlighting what he regarded as specifically National Socialist terminology and the consistent strain of anti-Semitism that underpinned the selected documents. What interests Potter is not so much the exact content of such books but the ideology that drives the ways in which the material is presented to the reader.
- 6 Any discussion of culture during the Third Reich has to come to terms with the regime's ambiguous relationship to modernism, the central topic of Potter's fifth chapter. In a subsection entitled 'Nazi Music: What it was not', Potter emphasises a peculiar distinction existing in musicological writings on the subject which at least up to the 1990s preferred to focus on stylistic features it generally eschewed rather than trying to determine what if anything was unique and 'Nazified' about the new music that was composed at that time. Basic assumptions that the Nazis suppressed all vestiges of musical modernism were upheld, and that all the victims of National Socialism living in exile promoted a progressive cultural outlook. Furthermore, since for various reasons, much of the music was inaccessible to the general public, it was assumed that it must have been artistically inferior and not worthy of serious scholarly attention. With more detailed excavation, emanating from detailed studies appearing in the 21st century, these conclusions have proved to be far too simplistic and disingenuous, as has been the notion that the features of this music were created in an artistic vacuum isolated from developments that were prevalent in other European countries and the United States.
- 7 This link to artistic currents outside Nazi Germany is expanded in Potter's final chapter which discusses Cultural Histories produced after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Apart from drawing out uncanny parallels between the rhetoric produced by the Nazis and the Roosevelt administration in terms of building communities through eliminating class division, restoring order out of chaos and encouraging a leadership cult, Potter also addresses more recent connections especially in the popular arts. In her conclusion, she applauds the trend towards exploring mass culture in arts scholarship rather than the conventional separations between so-called 'high' and 'low' art as offering a particularly fruitful area for future investigation. But she also counsels the necessity for such scholarship to be fully aware of the peculiarities of German history and that 'by acknowledging the similarities between German and other societies, as well as the crucial differences in scale, degree and effectiveness, cultural historians will be in a better position to resolve the nagging paradox of German culture coexisting with Nazi barbarity.'
- 8 Given that her text extends to just over 250 pages, it seems implausible that Potter is able to encompass as well as deconstruct so many different issues and still deal with them in considerable depth and detail. Yet in no sense did I feel short-changed by the material as it was presented here. Even though discussion of music per se accounts for

only a limited proportion of each chapter, what impressed me most was the sheer skill by which Potter was able to draw threads and connections between so many different artistic media, thereby highlighting that her scholarly expertise extends way beyond musical matters. Furthermore, Potter's narrative is compelling, closely argued and effectively illustrated with apposite visual imagery as well as extensive quotations from seminal works. Equally essential and particularly useful for scholars researching this period is the impressively comprehensive bibliography. In short, this book should be read by all those who have an abiding interest in German culture during the middle of the twentieth century.

AUTHORS

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Erik Levi is Visiting Professor in Music at Royal Holloway, University of London. Author of the books *Music in the Third Reich* (1994) and *Mozart and the Nazis* (2010), he has edited several publications relating to Austro-German music of the twentieth century including *Music and Displacement* (with Florian Scheduling), *Hanns Eisler in England* and *The Impact of Nazism upon Twentieth-Century Music*. He is currently co-editor with David Fanning of the forthcoming book *The Routledge Companion to Music under German Occupation, 1938-1945*. An experienced piano accompanist who has appeared on thirty BBC recordings and the double CD set *Continental Britons* on the Nimbus label, he is also a broadcaster and regular reviewer of CDs for the *BBC Music Magazine*.