

Dangerous Melodies: Classical music and US foreign policy in the 20th century

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Dangerous Melodies: Classical Music in America from the Great War Through the Cold War, W.W. Norton, 2019

Dangerous Melodies explores the relationship between US foreign policy and classical music over the course of the 20th century. Its author, Jonathan Rosenberg of the City University of New York, covers much territory that is both informative and relevant.

Of particular significance, in light of the US/NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and its impact on musical performance today, are the sections of the volume dealing with the campaign against German composers and musicians in the wake of the 1917 US entry into the First World War, and also the manner in which composers ran afoul of witch-hunters in the early years of the Cold War prosecuted by Washington against the Soviet Union following World War II.

Both the First World War and the Cold War were accompanied by campaigns against “dangerous melodies.” In the case of WWI the “enemy” was a national one, and Germans were suspect because of their nationality and language. At the time of the Cold War, a similar superpatriotism was sponsored, this time on the ideological basis of anti-communism.

There were 700,000 German-Americans, both foreign-born and of German parentage, in New York City in 1917, the year the US entered the war against Germany and its allies. It was almost three years after the conflict had begun, one motive for the delay being undoubtedly that rising American capitalism was waiting for its older rivals to exhaust themselves.

Amidst anti-German hysteria promoted by the ruling class and its political representatives, German classical music came under ignorant attack after the declaration of war in April 1917. Walter Damrosch, the famous German-born conductor who was himself of “mixed” ancestry (one of his grandfathers was Jewish), and for whom New York City’s Damrosch Park at Lincoln Center is named, felt it necessary to remind the public that Bach, Beethoven and Brahms (the famous “three Bs” of classical music) “belong to the entire civilized world.” Without these and other German composers, much of today’s standard symphonic repertory, and even more so that of a century ago, would disappear.

Contrary to Damrosch’s enlightened views, music of German composers was quickly removed from many concert programs after 1917. A distinction was eventually made between performances of work by dead German composers (including the abovementioned Bach, Beethoven and Brahms), and those like Richard Strauss, who were very much alive. As late as October 1917 Strauss was still being played by the New York Philharmonic, but in January 1918 this changed. The work of the composer of tone poems like *Don*

Juan and Till Eulenspiegel, as well as operas such as *Salome*, *Elektra* and *Der Rosenkavalier*, was removed from concert halls throughout the country, and did not return until several years after the war.

Members of the board of the New York Philharmonic demanded the removal of its conductor, the Austrian-born Josef Stransky. Stransky survived, but others did not. Karl Muck, who had been the much-praised conductor of the Boston Symphony, was falsely accused of refusing to play “The Star-Spangled Banner” after a Boston concert. He was not only removed from his position, but also imprisoned as an enemy alien for nearly a year and a half. Muck was eventually deported, in August 1919, and never returned to the US.

As in the case of the First World War, the second, even greater, global slaughter, was followed by preparation for another. In the post-World War II years, however, while the crusade against communism did lead to shooting war in Korea between 1950 and 1953, it eventually took the form of the Cold War between the US and USSR, lasting more than four decades.

The conventional account of the Cold War, which the author of this book apparently accepts as a matter of course, is that it was a battle between “democracy” and “communism.” In fact, it reflected the continuing fear on the part of the capitalist ruling classes of the example set by the October 1917 Revolution, which had taken place only three decades earlier.

Despite the degeneration of the revolution under the nationalist bureaucracy headed by Stalin, the nationalized property relations and other conquests of 1917 had not yet been completely destroyed. The Cold War aims of imperialism were directed against these conquests. The war danger did not come from the Stalinist regime, which sought “peaceful coexistence” with imperialism and wanted nothing more than a revival of the wartime alliance between Moscow and Washington.

The anti-communist campaign, of which Senator Joseph McCarthy was the most demagogic spokesman, was also directed at the American working class. A dozen unions in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) were expelled from its ranks, with the eager cooperation of the trade union bureaucracy. At the same time, the anti-communist frenzy was not at all incompatible with utilizing the services of the Soviet bureaucracy, maintaining capitalist rule in France, Italy and elsewhere, ensuring that socialist revolution would not spread to the advanced capitalist world.

The Cold War was in high gear by the time the Stalinist-dominated World Peace Conference, as Rosenberg reports, convened at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York City in 1949. Dmitri Shostakovich was brought to lend his prestige to the event, as the regime in Moscow

sought to appeal for “peaceful coexistence” with imperialism.

Only a year before the New York meeting, Shostakovich, Serge Prokofiev, Aram Khachaturian and others had come under renewed attack from the Stalinist musical authorities in Moscow, charged with “formalism” for writing compositions that did not adhere to the tenets of “socialist realism.” These leading composers had been forced to humiliate themselves via apologies for their alleged aesthetic and political sins.

Shostakovich attempted to play the role assigned to him at the conference a year later. His acute discomfort was obvious as he read his speech. The anti-communist campaigners had a field day, capitalizing on the reactionary role of Stalinism to advance the Cold War aims of American imperialism. They held the Russian Revolution responsible for the crimes of those who had betrayed it. Philosopher Sidney Hook, a left-wing figure in the 1930s, was in the forefront of this attack, which featured a “counter-rally” on the last day of the conference.

US cultural and literary figures were also involved in the peace conference. From the classical music field, as *Dangerous Melodies* recounts in some detail, Aaron Copland was a prominent participant. He addressed the conference, calling for an end to the Cold War. As Rosenberg sums up Copland’s message, “The United States had behaved in an unfriendly way toward the Soviet Union, especially when Soviet musicians faced roadblocks when attempting to perform in America.”

Copland’s naïve call for coexistence fell on deaf ears in Washington. As the Waldorf Peace Conference ended, the US State Department canceled visas and instructed various delegations to leave the country. A Yale professor who had arranged the appearance of Soviet delegates in New Haven, Connecticut was fired from his job.

A few years later, in 1953, Copland was called before McCarthy’s Senate subcommittee to be grilled on his political views and associations. Rosenberg describes the circumstances quite accurately:

“Aaron Copland found himself playing a role in the Cold War, when the second Red Scare, inflamed by Senator Joseph McCarthy’s toxic machinations, polluted American political culture, to say nothing of the world of classical music. Among the many adversely affected by McCarthyism, the composer was hauled before the Wisconsin senator’s committee (the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Government Operations Committee) in 1953, a body that compelled scores of Americans to testify about their past activities and associations. Allegedly intended to enhance America’s security in the face of a purported domestic Communist threat, the committee, the senator, and his zealous aides could not document a single concrete example of an individual who threatened the United States.”

Of course Copland was not the only victim of the Cold War witch-hunt, in the field of classical music and elsewhere. Multi-talented singer and actor Paul Robeson was the most prominent casualty. Copland escaped with his career intact, unlike so many victims in the more vulnerable field of the Hollywood blacklist. He did, however, feel obliged to present a clumsy apology for his participation in the peace conference of 1949, and, as Rosenberg reports, “When McCarthy asked if, at some point, Copland would be willing to supply ‘a list of those Americans’ who attended the conference, the musician said that he would, ‘[a]s far as I can.’”

Copland’s passport application was denied at this time, and it was not restored until several years later. Although Rosenberg does not mention it, conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein, who was then

a rising figure in the musical world, also had his passport application rejected, until he submitted a humiliating legal affidavit affirming his loyalty.

The relevance of this history should be apparent to anyone who has followed the current campaign against Russian classical performers like conductor Valery Gergiev, soprano Anna Netrebko and bass Ildar Abdrazakov. Shostakovich’s 7th Symphony, the “Leningrad,” was recently removed from a program of the New York Philharmonic, in an echo of the removal of the work of Richard Strauss more than a century earlier.

In the third decade of the 21st century, world war is threatened once again, and once again nationalism is being utilized against culture.

The author’s presentation of this history, while valuable, is hampered by an outlook that does not go beyond liberal political platitudes. Duly critical of extreme nationalism, Rosenberg counterposes a more enlightened defense of the “national interest” to the “excesses” that characterized the World War One and Cold War years. Along these lines, he approvingly quotes those musical figures, like Walter Damrosch and others, who espoused a “universalist” approach, opposing those who demanded blanket bans on German music or, during the early years of the Cold War, similar attacks on Soviet culture.

Edward Johnson, for instance, the longtime general manager of the Metropolitan Opera, declared during the Second World War that it was not being waged “against the German people, German art or German culture,” but rather against “an ideology, not a race.” Opera audiences continued to hear Wagner during the war—with the notable exception of one of his most popular works, *Die Meistersinger*, which was adjudged too nationalistic.

Johnson’s defense of the culture of the “enemy” is a far cry from the reactionary demands from Peter Gelb of the Metropolitan Opera that Russian performers be forced to accept loyalty oaths before they are allowed to perform today. The rights of Netrebko should not be based on agreement with her political views—although the vindictive treatment of Netrebko is particularly flagrant given that she has made statements opposing the invasion of Ukraine.

The even more extreme anti-Russian campaign of the right-wing Ukrainian regime, endorsed by the US State Department, is another demonstration of the reactionary role of nationalism and how it is used to attack the democratic rights of the working class as a whole. The deepening crisis is forcing the ruling class to dispense with the democratic disguise it has used in the past. While the defense of musical and cultural exchange must be welcomed, the “universalism” which Rosenberg describes is insufficient to answer the threat of war. The fight for democratic rights, as well as the threat of a third world war that would menace all of human civilization, must be based on the struggle on the working class.



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