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HIST 133B
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03/15/2024

The Nature of Race and Music in Nazi Germany: Understanding *Entartete Musik*

- “Entartete Musik: Eine Abrechnung von Staatsrat Dr. H.S. Ziegler”

Translation: “Degenerate Music: A Statement from State Councilor Dr. H.S. Ziegler”

The author of this brochure, Dr. Hans Severus Ziegler, was a head Nazi official, serving in many bureaucratic positions spearheading the new standards for Nazi culture. Under the Nazi regime, he served as Council of State, a member of the state government of Thuringia, President of the German Schiller Foundation, and Reich Culture Senator.¹ The basis of his work focused on cultural propaganda and censorship, which is reflected by his creation of the “Entartete Kunst” (Degenerate Art) exhibitions. One of the exhibitions focused on “Entartete Musik” which was the reason behind the creation of the brochure. The brochure is an extension of this bigger exhibition that was created by Ziegler back in 1938 in Dusseldorf. “Entartete Musik” ran until June 14, 1938 in Dusseldorf and moved throughout Weimar, Munich, and Vienna up until 1939 due to the outbreak of the war.² Considering that there were various reproductions of this brochure, it would be difficult to come up with a singular original document. So far I have been able to find three separate locations for it, one housed in the German History Museum Picture Archive and used in Robert Moeller’s book. A second is in the Bibliotheque nationale de France, and the third as part of a physical collection belonging to UCLA.³

Dr. Hans Severus Ziegler, creator of both brochure and exhibition, operated within the Nazi regime as a high official dealing in matters of defining social order through propaganda and censorship tactics. His brochure served as a direct attack against Black and Jewish music, arguing that as racially inferior beings, their music was not fit for German consumption. His

¹ “Hans Severus Ziegler,” Wikimedia Foundation, last modified June 16, 2023, 11:05, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans_Severus_Ziegler.

² Berg, Marita. “‘Degenerate’ Music.” DW. 05/24/2013. <https://www.dw.com/en/the-nazis-take-on-degenerate-music/a-16834697>.

³ <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k9124205m#>.

reputation came under criticism during a 1935 investigation that preceded his creation of the exhibit, which put him on trial over allegations of homosexuality.⁴ Although his sexuality was never confirmed to have violated Nazi rules, the allegations created a significant impact on his reputation. The remnants of this investigation likely influenced the creation of the exhibit as a means of reusing Hitler's tactics of putting the spotlight on other groups to minimize criticism of himself. Another effect of these investigations can be seen in the little knowledge there is surrounding Ziegler, considering how despite being such a high ranking figure, a lot of the knowledge available on him is only observed through texts that deal in other figures of Nazi Germany and their interactions with Ziegler. Even his texts haven't been explored as much and those that are available have been kept in their original German translation. It is quite unfortunate because one of his books, *Das Theater des deutschen Volkes; Ein Beitrag zur Volkserziehung und Propaganda*, deals directly with Nazi propaganda in theater.

The Degenerate Music brochure displays a caricature of an African-American jazz saxophone player with a Star of David visibly on the lapel of his suit.⁵ This image is not only a racist depiction of African-Americans, it serves to associate Black people with Jewish people, symbolizing that the nature of jazz music is inferior on two fronts and thus should be erased from German culture. The brochure was an extension of a much bigger exhibit that displayed examples of "degenerate music" via reproductions of music that was created or played by mainly Jewish and Black artists. The exhibition in itself was highly criticized and considered controversial especially by other musicians that belonged to the Nazi party.⁶ It was because of its controversial nature that it did not become as successful as its "degenerate art" counterpart, ultimately closing in June of 1939.

Bibliography

1. Croissant, Charles. "Entartete Musik: Zur Düsseldorfer Ausstellung von 1938," *Notes* 47, No. 3 (1991): 763–64. <https://doi.org/10.2307/941886>.

⁴ Klee, Ernst. *Das Kulturlexikon zum Dritten Reich: wer war was vor und nach 1945*. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2007.

⁵ Hans S. *Entartete Musik: Eine Abrechnung von Staatsrat Dr. H.S. Zeigler* (Düsseldorf: 1938).

⁶ Abaigh McKee, "Art and Music Under the Third Reich," *Music and the Holocaust*, ORT, accessed February 27, 2024, <http://holocaustmusic.ort.org/politics-and-propaganda/third-reich/entartete-musik/>.

This article talks about the Entartete Musik exhibition and how it impacted the cultural standard of German music. Croissant expresses the recurring idea that this exhibition was a demonstration of social and cultural control taken by the Nazi party, making a statement of the musicians and justifying their consequences. He goes further into analysis of the exhibition, arguing that the deeper point it was intended for was to set a precedent for how a fascist government should treat musicians, and extendedly citizens, who were resisting conforming to the status quo that the Nazi party wanted to institute. The exhibition, based on Croissant's points, converted artistry and music into a political tool, a reflection of its community's ideals, and thus a weapon that had to be converted in favor of the Nazi party.

2. Dümmling, Albrecht and Peter Girth, eds. *Entartete Musik: Banned by the Nazis*. Los Angeles: Los Angeles Philharmonic Association, 1991.

This collection of essays from the Los Angeles Philharmonic Association offers critical analyses of the “Entartete Musik” exhibition from a more recent perspective. This collection is split into two parts. The first is composed of modern essays from scholars constructing arguments for the importance and impact that the exhibition had on the populace. The bulk of the writing argues that the Nazi exhibition at its core wasn't intended to start and finish the battle between races. It was instead a cultural battle against the modernist movement that was reaching Germany. Modernist culture by definition is the antithesis of the values that the Nazi regime was attempting to inculcate on its citizens, and because the arts were the strongest drivers for the modernist movement, the Nazis had to move against it by defacing it with existing propaganda that the youth could relate to. The second portion of the text is a study of a few of the exhibits that were shown in the original exhibition. It examines how the exhibits were framed, providing further support for the idea that was being promoted within the first part of the text.

3. Blumenthal, Barbara. "Exploring the Genius of 'Degenerate' Music." *Jewish Advocate*, Oct 13, 1994. <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/exploring-genius-degenerate-music/docview/205165713/se-2>.

This article discusses the importance of musicians and their art during their persecution in the concentration camps. Her article focuses on four Czech-Jewish composers sent to a concentration camp because their music had been labeled “degenerate.” Their music became

individual pieces in the Entartete Musik exhibition, which Blumenthal argues is the social means by which the Nazi regime was able to get away and justify their use of concentration camps and “the final solution” plan enacted within the camps. Blumenthal argues that exhibiting and categorizing Jewish art and music as a degenerative disease that was impacting German society created a strong argument for the “purification” of Nazi society. The exhibit became the party’s social argument for Jewish genocide.

4. Anderson, Martin, “Degeneration, Regeneration (‘Entartete Musik’),” *Tempo*, no. 210 (1999): 52–56. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/946828>.

Martin Anderson’s article focuses on various composers and musicians who were present within the Entartete Musik campaign of 1938. The Nazi campaign had initiated the persecution of culturally non-conforming artists, particularly Jewish musicians. The article highlights two main points and consequences of the Entartete Musik campaign. On one hand, the musicians that remained and were consequently caught within Nazi occupation, became victims of erasure. Not only were they sentenced to concentration camps where their identities became another number in the system, but their art and musical contributions were effectively erased from history. The only remaining encounters of their musical contributions exist because the Entartete Musik exhibition contained a few of their works. On a second point, musicians who were able to escape the fate of those who stayed had to emigrate to new countries, where they had to begin their art anew. Their work only survived because they did and even then it was still a slightly erased existence because of the forced emigration they had to endure.

5. Ashley, Tim. "Entartete Musik." In *The Oxford Companion to Music*. Oxford University Press, n.d. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199579037.001.0001/acref-9780199579037-e-2279>.

This article is fairly short compared to the others, but it adds a deeper understanding of what the actual term for Entartete Musik actually means within the Nazi context. Although the rough translation for the phrase simply means, “degenerate music,” Ashley argues that the root of the term stems from genetics and is meant to instead connote “mutant.” Although the change in word doesn’t paint the Nazis any more sympathetic to the artists they exhibited

as “dangerous to society,” the use of the word mutant further removes the musicians from society and deeply antagonizes their work as an aberration of social values.

6. McKee, Abaigh, “Art and Music Under the Third Reich,” Music and the Holocaust, ORT, accessed February 27, 2024, <http://holocaustmusic.ort.org/politics-and-propaganda/third-reich/entartete-musik/>.

This website talks about both the Entartete Kunst and Musik exhibitions in Dusseldorf from 1938. Focusing on what it has to say about the Musik exhibition, it acknowledges that music became an essential component for the sake of Nazi propaganda. It had to dismantle musical resistance and limit the presence of foreign music from “contaminating” the ideas and values of its citizens. The exhibit was a way for the Third Reich to tarnish non-assimilating musical genres and musicians, shifting the narrative to recognize such work as detrimental to society at large and thus becoming an enemy of the state that needed to be eliminated. It was a controversial exhibit even in Nazi Germany, as many Nazi supporters boycotted and protested the exhibit.⁷ Music was too delicate of a subject for the Nazi party to weaponize, making it a losing battle for them.

⁷ Meyer Michael. *The Politics of Music in the Third Reich*. New York: P. Lang, 1991.