

What Happens When Art Collides with Its Society

A research guide designed to accompany James Conlon's October 13 lecture for the Visions and Voices series of events. The guide provides historical background and resources for learning more about the music banned by the Nazis during World War II.

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[What Happens When Art Collides with Its Society: A Lecture by James Conlon](#)

Monday, October 13, 2008

7:30 p.m.

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Introduction

What Happens When Art Collides with Its Society: A Lecture by James Conlon was organized by the USC Thornton School of Music. Conlon is one of the world's preeminent conductors—currently working with the Los Angeles Opera, the Ravinia Festival, and the Cincinnati May Festival—and an authority on music banned by Hitler's Nazi Party during World War II.

At his lecture, Conlon explored how the rise of Nazism affected compositions and musical performances from the period. The Thornton School and Ross Scimeca of the USC Libraries have selected the following resources to help you learn more about the conflicts between art and society—both during WWII and today.

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Ross Scimeca

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Nazi Censorship of Music

During World War II, the Nazi Party banned a wide variety of art, literature, and music ranging from instrumental and chamber pieces to symphonies, operas, and jazz. Musical works by Jewish and leftist composers were censored, along with pieces that conflicted with Nazi ideology or the German romantic myths central to the aesthetic of National Socialism. As a result, the Nazis promoted the music of Richard Wagner and Anton Bruckner while suppressing works by modernist composers such as Paul Hindemith.

A writer from the *Deutsche Zeitung* wrote disparagingly of Hindemith after seeing a performance of his *Mathas der Maler* symphony, stating that his "musical products were thoroughly at home in an atmosphere characterized by the names Alban Berg, Arthur Honegger, Bela Bartok, and the quarter-tone mixer Alois Haba."

Before taking power, the Nazis rioted after a 1928 performance of Ernst Krenek's opera *Jonny spielt auf* in Vienna. Not only did Krenek's work contain jazz compositions, but its artistic thesis was that the jazz traditions developed by African American musicians were the rightful heir to dying European musical traditions.

The National Socialists used the term "degenerate art" to describe nearly every innovative feature in 20th-century music.

Ironically, many of the 20th-century composers working in the German romantic tradition—the official aesthetic of the Nazi Party—were Jewish; others had ties to socialist political parties. As a result, the Nazis suppressed a great deal of music that sounded exactly the way they believed music should sound.

Thus they upheld Wagner and Bruckner as musical ideals while censoring the Wagnerian operas of Erich Wolfgang Korngold and his mentor Alexander von Zemlinsky and Mahler's symphonic works, which were the direct musical descendants of Bruckner's compositions.

In addition to banning the works of these Jewish composers, the Nazis banned the Wagnerian operas of Franz Schreker because of his leftist politics. The National Socialists also outlawed public performances of musical works by 19th-century Jewish composers from the German romantic tradition, including Felix Mendelssohn, Giacomo Meyerbeer, and Jacques Offenbach.

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Further Reading

The Twisted Muse: Musicians and Their Music in the Third Reich

By Michael H. Kater
Oxford University Press, 1997
Grand Library ML275.5.K38 1997

Music in the Third Reich

By Erik Levi
St. Martin's Press, 1994
Music Library ML275.5.L49 1994

The Politics of Music in the Third Reich

By Michael Meyer
P. Lang, 1991
Music Library ML275.5 M49 1991

Symphonic Aspirations: German Music and Politics, 1900-1945

By Karen Painter
Music Library ML275.5.P35 2007

Most German of the Arts: Musicology and Society from the Weimer Republic to the End of Hitler's Reich

By Pamela Maxine Potter
Yale University Press, 1998
Music Library ML397.P67 1998

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Recordings of "Degenerate" Music Banned by the Nazis

Die Voegel (Decca, 1996)

By Walter Braunfels

Braunfels' opera is based on *The Birds* by Aristophanes. It will be performed April 2009 by the Los Angeles Opera with James Conlon conducting.

Music Library 8018mus

Die tote Stadt (Orfeo, 2004)

By Erich Wolfgang Korngold

Music Library 12601mus

Jonny spielt auf (Decca, 1993)

By Ernst Krenek

Music Library 6189mus

Die ferne Klang (Naxos, 1989)

By Franz Schreker

Music Library 9256mus

Der Zwerg (EMI, 1996)

By Alexander von Zemlinsky

The Los Angeles Opera—with James Conlon conducting—performed Zemlinsky's powerful work last season.

Music Library 7650mus

The Braunfels and Krenek recordings are part of the Decca series Entartete Musik, which preserves compositions labeled "degenerate music" by the Nazis.

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