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How Noise Becomes Music
Translated by Gratia Stryker-Härtel

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Degenerate, my foot – Music in Nazi Germany

At the time when Adolf Hitler was voted in as chancellor of Germany's Third Reich in 1933, a large number of people were jobless. Hitler had promised the people that things would be better for them if he were in power. Over and over again in his speeches, he had asserted that the Jews were at fault for the condition in which Germany found itself. And many Germans believed him. After Hitler was named "Führer" – dictator – and the Weimar Republic's democratic form of government was dissolved, he began persecuting the Jews.

He initially limited the scale of their humiliation, requiring them to wear a yellow star atop their clothing. This warranted all to note who was Jewish and who wasn't. Jews were treated as second-class citizens, and their human rights were denied them. In the Kristallnacht of 1938, a large number of Germans destroyed Jewish businesses and houses. Books written by Jews were publicly burned. In the end, the Nazis resolved to kill all Jews in Europe, calling this genocide the "final solution."

After seizing power, Hitler began to expand the territory of the German Reich. He asserted that Austria belonged to Germany. He followed by occupying Czechoslovakia. In Italy, he entered into an alliance with Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. Soon thereafter, German troops had conquered Poland and France. In just the blink of an eye, a large portion of Europe had slipped under Hitler's domination.

All occupied territories were combed through to find Jews. A ghetto was built in Theresienstadt to confine the Jews in Bohemia, one of those territories; and more and more German Jews were deported there too. At first glance, the ghetto looked like a village surrounded by a barbed wire fence. For the Nazis, the ghetto was known as a "transit camp," a place where Jews were deported so that, sooner or later, they could be sent to concentration camps to be murdered. But many people died in Theresienstadt as well.

One of the many imprisoned in Theresienstadt was Viktor Ullmann, a composer born in Czechoslovakia who went to Vienna to study with Arnold Schönberg. He later moved to Prague and studied under the mentorship of Alexander von Zemlinsky. A highly promising musician, Ullmann particularly liked employing quarter-tone steps in his music, and he created his own tonal language.

It was in 1942 that Viktor Ullmann was deported to Theresienstadt. There he wrote short articles for the ghetto newspaper and organized concerts with other Jews. Ullmann did not want to believe that people were murdering each other. He did not believe that the Nazis had already gassed millions of Jews. But

over time, the rumors and the proofs of mass murders could not be avoided any longer. Ullmann even wrote an opera in the Theresienstadt ghetto. It bore the title “The Emperor of Atlantis,” and it centered on a mad emperor – an allusion, of course, to Adolf Hitler. The opera was not performed at the time.

On October 16, 1944, the composer, alongside many other Jews in Theresienstadt, was herded into a cattle car. The train traveled directly to Auschwitz, into one of the largest German concentration camps. Ullmann was undressed, his hair was shorn, and he was forced into the gas chamber – and murdered there. The war came to an end seven months later; Germany surrendered after France, England, the USA and Russia conquered Adolf Hitler. But that was no longer of any use to Viktor Ullmann, victim of the “Shoah” – the genocide undertaken by the Nazis against the Jews.

Hitler’s Nazis extinguished a large portion of German musical culture; and many artists killed by the Nazis were irreparably lost to memory after the war as well. It was more than thirty years after his death, in 1975, that Viktor Ullmann’s opera “The Emperor of Atlantis” was first premiered.

Erwin Schulhoff was also among those who fell victim to the Holocaust. Before the war, Schulhoff was a musician with a penchant for experimentation. He became caught up in the winds of new musical movements, focusing especially on quarter-tone music, and he experimented with the jazz coming from the USA to Germany at the time. After Hitler came to power, Schulhoff foresaw the tragedy to come. He joined the ranks of the Socialists in opposition to National Socialism (Nazism). Schulhoff was confined in the Fortress of Wülzburg in Bavaria, in an internment camp for the citizens of foreign countries – and died a miserable death there due to malnutrition, exhaustion and illness.

More than six million people were murdered by the Nazis, including not only Jews but also gypsies, homosexuals and many handicapped people and political opponents. Hitler also singled out artists who broke with the Nazi aesthetic.

As dictator, Hitler not only wanted domination over all of Europe but also complete power over the arts. He held that poems, paintings and music should first and foremost be “German,” in the view that Germans were “Übermenschen,” a people better than all others. He raved about the operas of Richard Wagner since they portrayed German heroes. And he used art for his propaganda; Nazi films featured the well-formed, supposedly “Aryan” bodies of blonde, well-trained men and women. Filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl used them in the scenes of her films and sculptor Arno Breker cast them in stone.

In their propaganda, the Nazis primarily used operettas, military marches and popular hits. In using them, they hoped to awaken strong feelings in their viewers and listeners. When German troops faced defeat in

Russia and it first began to look like Germany could lose the Second World War, Hitler's propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels used films and music to encourage the people to keep going.

Singer Zarah Leander and popular hit star Hans Albers were the most well-known artists to perform under Hitler's swastika-bedecked flag and fire up the German population with their songs. Since the texts they performed were not really political, it is difficult to say if these artists were singing for Hitler or their public. Probably the most well-known song of the time was Lale Andersen's "Lili Marleen," which was about a woman waiting in lantern-light in front of some barracks for her husband. This song, of course, was a hit with the soldiers, hoping in the trenches that their wives back home were waiting faithfully for them. And, in a show that sometimes, music can even bind together people who are fighting against each other, "Lili Marleen" was loved not just by German soldiers but also by English and American soldiers as well.

Nazi art, at its core, was pretty simple. It was designed to encourage people, to be pretty – and to fire people up for Germany and for Hitler's politics.

The Nazis despised everything that did not sound "normal" – and outlawed it. Particularly the art that had developed just before they seized power: Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Cubism and New Objectivity. They ridiculed the jazz coming from the USA under the name "Negermusik." The Nazis drove out, imprisoned and murdered most of the musicians who had risen to success before their takeover. The Nazis had their own musical favorites, and they endured composers like Carl Orff, who especially experimented with rhythm in his works. Orff was also criticized by the Nazis, however, for his great choral work, "Carmina Burana," a piece that was too "jazzy" for them. Orff, for his part, had used recomposed songs from the Middle Ages in the piece.

Anything and everything that did not conform to Nazi ideals of beauty was slotted as "degenerate art" – art that posed an endangerment to society.

In 1937, an exhibition of "degenerate artworks" of this sort was staged in Munich. The Nazis, in an effort to warn Germans against this "scandalous" culture, acted out in an especially malevolent way. They hung imaginative paintings of people next to photographs of handicapped individuals in mockery of both the handicapped and the artists participating in the exhibition. The absurd thing about this exhibition of "degenerate artwork"? Rarely in history have so many excellent modern artworks been on display in one place – and, sad to say, under the worst of circumstances.