

Composing the Canon in the German Democratic Republic

NARRATIVES OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY MUSIC



ELAINE KELLY

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AdK	Akademie der Künste
BA	Bundesarchiv
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany (Bundesrepublik Deutschland)
GDR	German Democratic Republic (Deutsche Demokratische Republik)
LA-Berlin	Landesarchiv Berlin
RBA	Ruth Berghaus Archiv
SAPMO	Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR
SA-AdK	Stiftung Archiv Akademie der Künste
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands
Stakuko	Staatliche Kommission für Kunstangelegenheiten
VDK	Verband Deutscher Komponisten und Musikwissenschaftler (retitled Verband der Komponisten und Musikwissenschaftler der DDR in 1973)

NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

All translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

Composing the Canon in the German Democratic Republic

Introduction

Bourgeois Pasts and Socialist Futures

Narratives of the past are invariably constructed in the image of the present. They reflect the ruling discourse in which they are conceived and serve to reinforce contemporary value systems. This is particularly the case where cultural canons are concerned. Canons, as Marcia Citron observes, “encode ideologies that are further legitimated through being canonized.”¹ They privilege aesthetic criteria that are born of contemporary norms and, in doing so, perpetuate the status quo. Canons do not, however, just endorse structures of power; they also expose the tensions that underlie these structures. They emphasize the disjunctions that inevitably exist between the reality of a society and its projected self-image, and contain within their idealized forms the shadow of the undesirable other. As Griselda Pollock has argued, canons tend to be created in opposition to that which is perceived to threaten the equilibrium.²

Questions of what a society reveals of itself through its relationship with its cultural heritage lie at the heart of this book. History loomed large in the German Democratic Republic. The ruling party, the SED, positioned the state not as a brand new entity but as the successor to all that was positive in the German past. Marxist-Leninism was portrayed as the culmination of a line of rational thought dating back to the late eighteenth century and the GDR as the second German Enlightenment, a place in which this intellectual tradition would finally achieve its apotheosis. Central to this foundation myth was the nineteenth-century musical heritage. A Lukácsian model of music history emerged in the 1950s, which located the precedents

for the socialist self and the capitalist other in classicism and romanticism respectively. The construct of the heroic Beethoven was heralded as a prototype for the socialist citizen, and a tradition of realistic dialectical composition, with its origins in classical sonata form, as a musical expression of the socialist public sphere. The irrational and mystical tendencies of romanticism, in contrast, were identified as early signposts of the false path that Germany had taken en route to fascism, war, and foreign occupation.

My aim in writing this book has not been to provide a comprehensive account of the reception of nineteenth-century music in the GDR. Instead, I present five case studies that explore how the canon served as a conduit for wider issues of nation-building, identity, and opposition over the course of the state's forty-year existence. In the decades since its demise, the question of how the GDR should best be analyzed has been a fraught one.³ The totalitarian model that dominated scholarship in the 1990s of a rigidly controlled *Unrechtsstaat* or unconstitutional state, in which every aspect of life was penetrated by SED control, has come under fire for its overprivileging of government archives, and thus the SED's static and monolithic vision of the state.⁴ Conversely, studies that focus on everyday life or on the private "niches" of the GDR have been criticized for downplaying the fact that the state *was* ultimately a dictatorship; while the lived experience of East Germans might not chime with the picture that emerges from official documents, the mechanisms of dictatorship, which included oppression, surveillance, and excessive bureaucracy, were a fundamental part of life.

Key to understanding the complexities of the GDR is the recognition of the fact that there was no clear line dividing the state from its people. As Mary Fulbrook explains: "The 'state' or 'regime' was not a unitary actor, which simply did (mostly nasty) things to the ill-defined, undifferentiated mass of 'the people'."⁵ While the balance of power lay with an elite ruling cabal, the realization of state socialism was dependent on the participation of East German inhabitants. On an idealistic level, their active involvement was encouraged as an essential component of the Enlightenment society to which the GDR aspired. More prosaically, as Charles Maier notes, the SED relied on the cooperation of its citizens for legitimation.⁶ As a consequence, individuals could, and did, function with a certain degree of autonomy. The intersections between state and society emerge vividly in the context of the canon. The canon served as a method of control for the SED, encoding the GDR's foundation myths and translating them into a discourse that promoted social cohesion and collective identity. Yet, it was not simply a top-down construct. Its formation was the work of a diverse group of people, including party functionaries, musicologists, composers, performers, journalists, writers, and film makers, whose interests sometimes

overlapped but were far from identical. Consequently, as with the society in which it was conceived, it was not monolithic; it inscribed both the multiple perspectives that were vying for position in the state and the spaces that existed for independent thought. It also, crucially, was not intransigent. It was subject to repeated negotiations, and its parameters were continually in flux. In this, it mapped both the ascent and decline of the state.

The reception of the canon in the GDR involved two distinct phases, which are reflected in the bipartite structure of the book. Part I focuses on the construction of the state and posits the formation of the socialist canon as an act of nation-building. Part II charts how in later years, as the spirit of hope that had pervaded in the postwar period dissipated, the canon emerged as a site of dissent. The incorporation of the canon into a framework of socialism has tended to be interpreted as a calculated response to the politics of the Cold War. This was certainly true where composers' anniversaries were concerned. The state-sponsored celebrations to mark the Bach and Handel bicentenaries in 1950 and 1959 and the 125th anniversary of Beethoven's death in 1952 all served as major propaganda exercises.⁷ Yet the appropriation of the musical heritage was not a simple case of cultural exploitation. The drive to transform bourgeois traditions to reflect socialist ideology was indicative of both the wider preoccupation with the past in Marxist thought and the need for collective memory in postwar Germany. While the GDR owed its origins to Soviet occupation, it was in many ways a fundamentally German state. Day-to-day politics, for example, were influenced as much by the legacy of the Prussian past as they were by imported Soviet structures.⁸ Equally, the importance placed on music, and on high culture more generally, was symptomatic of the historical tendency of Germany to identify itself as a *Kulturnation*.

The extent to which the Western musical canon is grounded in nineteenth-century German culture is a topic to which scholars have returned repeatedly in recent years. The emphasis that was placed on canon formation in German nationalist thought, and the birth of musicology as a discipline in German universities, resulted in a conception of music history in which universality and Germanness were deemed to be one and the same. As Celia Applegate remarks, "it was given to *Germans* like Beethoven, in other words, to express the most profound truths of humanity; it was a quality of the *German* people to produce greatness and genius."⁹ The canon that emerged from this cultural nationalism was subject to numerous transformations in subsequent decades. Its political intent was reconfigured repeatedly in response to Germany's turbulent cycles of destruction and new beginnings. So too was its makeup. Yet the fundamental ideology of the canon, which was grounded in Hegelian ideals of *Bildung* and

progress, remained constant, surviving both the catastrophe of the Third Reich and the globalization of Western art music.

The two case studies in part I explore how processes of canon formation in the early GDR translated German ideals of culture into the context of state socialism. Chapter 1 focuses on the role that musicologists played in this phenomenon. Reconciling established canonic ideals with the totalizing principles of socialist modernism, they evolved a brand of music historiography that was distinct to that which developed in the West. Personality driven, this resulted in a narrative of nineteenth-century music history that could be held up as a blueprint for the East German nation. In the abstract, this narrative, with its polarization of classical and romantic aesthetics, offered a neat explanation for the conditions of the GDR's establishment. In practice, the makeup of the socialist canon was much less clear-cut. While the origins of socialist realist composition were located in the late classical period, as befitting its proximity to the French Revolution, the socialist canon also incorporated within its remit earlier composers such as Bach and Handel, and a large swathe of later nineteenth-century music that was deemed to uphold classical principles and thus have nothing in common with romanticism. This inclusive approach reflected the conviction that classicism and romanticism had evolved side-by-side rather than in sequence. It was also indicative, however, of the deep-seated reluctance to relinquish a body of art that was intrinsically bound up with the German sense of self.

The complexities that were associated with the harnessing of a legacy that was inherently bourgeois, that had been appropriated by the Nazi regime, and that was shared with the Federal Republic of Germany, are illuminated with particular clarity in the case of Richard Wagner. Wagner fitted uncomfortably into the socialist canon. His omission was precluded, however, by his popularity and cultural cachet, attributes that lent him considerable weight in the precarious climate of the early Cold War. His reception, which is the subject of chapter 2, exposed the seams in the official narrative of music history and challenged the unity of the ruling discourse. As the discrepancies between the idealized construct of Wagner and interpretations of his operas on stage reveal, the relationship between discourse and practice in the GDR was often less than harmonious.

The extent to which the canon became synonymous with the ruling discourse of the state in the 1950s rendered it a powerful vehicle of criticism in later decades. Foucault argues that discourse is not always the servant of power. He explains that: "Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it."¹⁰ As the political situation deteriorated in the GDR, the foundation myth of the canon was increasingly at odds with the realities of life in the state. Its heroic tropes, and

narratives of progress, democracy, and revolution rang hollow as the promised socialist utopia failed to materialize, and it was the subject of intense scrutiny by a younger generation of individuals who were increasingly disillusioned with the status quo. They deconstructed the canon's tropes in order to expose the chasm between official rhetoric and the realities of the GDR. They cast doubt on the validity of the Enlightenment principles to which the SED claimed allegiance by calling into question the canon's overarching values, and they turned to alternative pasts in search both of parallels for their alienated condition and models from which a more humane socialism might emerge.

The case studies in part II of the book examine three different facets of this development, placing the reception of the canon within the wider culture of the late GDR. Chapter 3 analyzes the reception of Beethoven in the years surrounding his bicentenary in 1970, and explores how an Adornian model of the late composer was set against the heroic construct that dominated in the state. This served to expose the totalitarian nature of Enlightenment and, by implication, early socialist thought. It was also symptomatic of a preoccupation with lateness that was characteristic of late socialism more generally. Chapter 4 focuses on the revival of romanticism in the late 1970s, and analyzes how the irrational, subjective qualities of romantic thought, which had once been taboo, were now embraced by utopian communists as a potential route to a positive socialist future. Chapter 5, finally, deals with the more nihilistic aspects of late socialism, centering on Ruth Berghaus's post-Brechtian productions of canonic opera. Her abstract and irreverent stagings of Weber and Wagner turned on its head the function assigned to history in the GDR. She dismantled the canon's iconic figures, its heroic norms, and its rational, teleological narratives. Her productions illuminated the problems of contemporary society; she offered no solutions, however, for a way forward.

In what follows, I offer some context that should prove useful for negotiating the main body of the book. First, I address the question of why the bourgeois heritage was so feted in the state, examining the preoccupation with high art from the various perspectives of Marxist-Leninist thought, German nationalism, and antifascist traditions. Subsequently, I provide some reflections on the parameters of socialist modernism and late socialism as they apply to the GDR.

MARXISM AND THE BOURGEOIS HERITAGE

German communists who had spent the Second World War in exile in Moscow returned to their homeland in 1945 with a clear political mandate. The first socialist state on German soil would be achieved not

through the construction of a brand new proletarian culture but through the promotion of the existing national heritage. Walter Ulbricht set the precedence in June 1945, declaring at a Brandenburg meeting of the German Communist Party that: "It is essential that one tells the youth something first about the role of the Prussian military and the lies of the Nazis. Then one must begin to familiarize them with German literature, with Heine, Goethe, Schiller etc. Not starting with Marx and Engels! They wouldn't understand that."¹¹ This commitment to the Germanic heritage represented an astute response to postwar political conditions. It was also, however, borne of a socialist conception of art as a fundamentally humanizing experience. As an American official observed of Soviet cultural policy in Germany in July 1945: "it has as its basis an almost fanatical reverence for art and artists, coupled with the belief that artistic creation is intrinsically good, and an urgent need of human beings in times of uncertainty and suffering."¹² Politicians in the Soviet-occupied zone heralded the embrace of German culture as a vital step on the path to the socialist society that they envisaged emerging in Germany, and to this end aimed at a full-scale democratization of high art. Anton Ackermann spelled out this agenda in 1946, explaining that:

We desire that the workers be given the opportunity to attend the state opera and the best theaters [...], that the best art exhibitions and concerts also be hosted in workers' districts, and thus the workers be offered not a separate art, an artistic substitute, but instead the best that creative power can bring forth.¹³

The hierarchical distinction between bourgeois and proletarian art that is implicit in Ackermann's statement is significant. It reflects the wider disjunction that existed between the rhetoric of revolution central to socialist ideology and the stabilizing tendencies that characterized the politics of the twentieth-century's communist regimes. Michel Foucault describes communism as suffering from a "birth trauma." It wants, he explains, "to recapture for itself the world at the time it was born, the world of a triumphant bourgeoisie."¹⁴ While the official discourse of Europe's communist states was future-oriented, centering on the ideal of a socialist utopia, their value systems were deeply rooted in the past. As Foucault remarks: "most of the bourgeois values are accepted and maintained by the Communist Party (in art, the family, sexuality, and daily life in general)."¹⁵

The relationship between bourgeois art and socialist thought has a particularly fraught history, a fact that reflects Marx's own silence on the topic.¹⁶ The question of whether the emancipation of the working classes should

involve the creation of a new culture or a democratization of the existing one divided left-wing ideologues in the German workers' movements of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ It shaped cultural discourse in the fledgling society of the Soviet Union,¹⁸ and was central to the "expressionism debate" that played out in the German exile press in the 1930s. In each case, the established bourgeois heritage trumped the prospect of a new proletarian culture. For the middle-class intellectuals who invariably charged themselves with the empowerment of the working classes, the utopian socialist society was one in which middle-class values dominated. Education or *Bildung* was advocated as a prerequisite to freedom, and the accessibility of high art as the pathway to self-enlightenment. Typical is Wilhelm Liebknecht's 1875 idealization of art in the context of nineteenth-century workers' festivals: "Workers' festivals are not festivals to intoxicate the senses. Since the worker alone is a man of culture, they are not only workers' festivals but true festivals of culture, true festivals of humanity. At workers' festivals [...] we instruct and enlighten ourselves, becoming strengthened for the struggle to come."¹⁹

Key to the privileging of high art under state socialism was the question of whether the transition to communism would be achieved by revolution or evolution. In the Soviet Union, the Communist Party opted in favor of the latter. As Lenin argued, "in every national culture there exist undeveloped elements of a democratic and socialist culture, for there is in every nation a working and exploited mass whose life conditions unavoidably give birth to a democratic and socialist culture."²⁰ The conservative tendencies of this perspective became pronounced under Stalin. "Stalinist culture," Laura Urbaszewski explains, "was portrayed as the end development of all culture, the goal towards which all history had been evolving."²¹ Over the course of the 1930s, iconic figures from Russia's pre-revolutionary past, ranging from Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great to Pushkin, were recast as the forefathers of Soviet Union. Pushkin, for example, in the epic celebrations that were organized to mark the hundredth anniversary of his death in 1937, was presented as a model "for the new Soviet man."²² The eulogy published in *Pravda* that year announced that "Pushkin is entirely ours, entirely Soviet, insofar as it is Soviet power that has inherited all of the best in our people and that is, itself, the realization of the people's best hopes."²³ This heritage was posited not simply as the prehistory of the state, but also as a template for socialist realism. Socialist realist music, for example, was notably predicated on those genres and forms that had dominated nineteenth-century cultural life. Writing on the future of music in 1948, Stalin's director of cultural policy Andrei Zhdanov declared that: "the classical modes do remain unexcelled to this day," and prescribed that "we

must take from the classical musical heritage all that is best in it, all that is essential to the further development of Soviet music.”²⁴

The legitimacy of the bourgeois heritage was given a theoretical grounding by Georg Lukács, whose contributions to the expressionism debate were to prove pivotal for the introduction of socialist realism in the GDR. The revolution-evolution opposition was a decisive point of contention in the aesthetic disputes that played out between Lukács and German Marxists such as Bertolt Brecht, Hanns Eisler, and Ernst Bloch. Framed in terms of the question of whether art should anticipate or reflect social change, the debate highlighted a fundamental split in Marxist aesthetics. Brecht, in the spirit of revolutionary idealism, argued that art was an agent of change. As Lunn explains, he held that art could “aid in the transformation of the given reality through its ability to anticipate an alternative and realizable socio-economic system.”²⁵ This would only be the case, however, if the culture of the bourgeoisie ceded as the dominant to that of the proletariat. Realist art, Brecht claimed, comes “from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up.”²⁶

Lukács, in contrast, saw no need to dispense with the bourgeois heritage. He proposed a theory of reflection, which evinced a fundamentally passive conception of art and contained three important maxims. First, he claimed that the power of art lies in its capacity to reflect the best of society; second, that good art is not necessarily political art; and third, that culture evolves in a progressive continuum. Central to this theory of reflection was Marx’s conception of art as ideology. Marx, in the preface to his *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, classifies art as superstructure; as with other “ideological forms,” it is a manifestation of human consciousness and a reflection of the conditions of the economic base.²⁷ For Marx, the relationship between art (superstructure) and society (base) is not a purely causal one. Ideologies, Marx argues, do not simply offer a mechanical reflection of economic conditions but are capable of illuminating the conflict between “the material productive forces in society” and the “existing relations of production.”²⁸ Through this process of illumination, art has the potential to inspire new needs that feed back into the economic base.²⁹ Expanding on these basic tenets, Lukács ascribed two related functions to art. First, it should provide a depiction “of the subtlety of life, of a richness beyond ordinary experience.” Second, in the context of this richness, it can “introduce a new order of things which displaces or modifies the old.”³⁰ Importantly, this new order emerges through reflection rather than revolution, “for such a new order is never simply imposed on life but is derived from the new phenomena of life through reflection, comparison etc.”³¹

This ideological interpretation resulted in a model of realism that was divorced from the discourse of class struggle. In contrast to Brecht, who called for a concept of realism that was “wide and political,”³² Lukács, building on the recent discovery of Engel’s “realism letter,” separated art from political intent. Writing in 1888, Engels had claimed the royalist Balzac as an exemplary realist and noted that realism “may creep out even in spite of the author’s views.”³³ Lukács similarly argued that the impact of the forces of production on a work is unconscious; the forces react “for the most part independently of an author’s control.”³⁴ As such, realistic art need neither be tendentious nor offer political solutions; on the contrary, from Lukács’s perspective good art is concerned not with the here and now but with the unchanging “totality” or essence of life. The great artist is not content to remain within the confines of his own immediate experience. Instead “his goal is to penetrate the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society.”³⁵

Lukács’s emphasis on a Hegelian construct of totality encouraged an essentialist view of the cultural heritage that was amenable to Stalinist ideology but anathema to Brecht, who emphasized the “historicity” of the past. Brecht advised that theater productions of the classics should refrain from drawing parallels between the past and present and should instead highlight difference and distance:

In other words we must drop our habit of taking the different social structures of past periods, then stripping them of everything that makes them different; so that they all look more or less like our own, which then acquires from this process a certain air of having been there all along, in other words of permanence pure and simple.³⁶

Where Brecht demanded rupture, Lukács called for continuity. He depicted the socialist literary heritage as a continuum of universal humanist works, stretching from Weimar classicism through Balzac and Tolstoy to contemporary realists who used this lineage as a model. His static view of the past drew harsh criticism from Bloch and Eisler. In their joint essay “Die Kunst zu Erben,” they argued the need for a “productive appropriation of the cultural heritage.”³⁷ They explained: “Even the ‘beautiful sound’ of nineteenth-century harmony which exercises such attractions is not a static phenomenon but rather a historical one, and one that it is not remotely possible to preserve in a classicistic way.”³⁸ Lukács dismissed such appeals for a more critical reception of the past. Marxism, he argued did not demand a renegotiation of the past; instead it “raises to conceptual

clarity those fundamental principles of creative activity which have been present in the philosophic outlook of the best thinkers and the works of the outstanding writers and artists over the centuries.”³⁹

Lukács’s aesthetics rapidly took precedence in postwar East Germany. His exile writings were translated into German and published in series by the newly founded Aufbau Verlag between 1947 and 1949, and his theories were canonized in the wider cultural sphere by his close friend, the writer and member of the SED elite Johannes R. Becher.⁴⁰ Such was the extent of his impact that the critic Hans-Heinrich Reuter acclaimed him in 1956 in the weekly national newspaper *Sonntag* as the “accepted Marxist literary historian of our time.” Reuter added that while one might not agree with him, one was certainly not allowed to ignore him.⁴¹ The dominance of Lukács’s theories, which continued to shape the state’s cultural discourse long after his political fall from grace following his involvement with the Hungarian Uprising in 1956, reflects the hegemonic position of Zhdanovist policies in the GDR. It was, however, also symptomatic of the fact that Lukács offered an interpretation of the cultural heritage that provided officials and purveyors of culture alike with a Marxist method for dealing with Germany’s difficult past.

GERMAN CULTURE AFTER FASCISM

The moral status of German culture was subjected to harsh scrutiny by intellectuals exiled in the West during the 1930s and 1940s. Attempts to explain the descent of the nation into totalitarian oppression returned repeatedly to the Germanic cultural spirit. While Horkheimer and Adorno located the roots of fascism in the rationalism of the Enlightenment,⁴² others were drawn to the all-encompassing narrative of a *Sonderweg* or fatal path that was inextricably linked with Germany’s perception of itself as a *Kulturnation*; that is, a nation based on a shared cultural rather than political history.⁴³ Writing in 1939, Thomas Mann notably declared the lofty heights of German music to be an explicit expression of its deep-rooted problems. It was no coincidence, he argued, that Germany’s greatest contributions to the monumental art of the nineteenth century were in music rather than the novel. The German psyche was devoid of the “social and political interest” that had produced writers such as Balzac, Tolstoy, and Dickens.⁴⁴ Instead it was marked by an introspectiveness that found its truest expression in the abstract and mystical realms of music, for music is not social. It is concerned instead with nature.⁴⁵