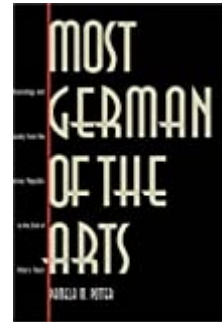


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Pamela M. Potter.** *Most German of the Arts: Musicology and Society from The Weimar Republic to The Ende of Hitler's Reich.* New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1998. 364 S. \$40.00 (taschenbuch), ISBN 978-0-300-07228-0.



**Reviewed by** Celia Applegate (Department of History, University of Rochester)

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Pamela Potter has written a meticulous, comprehensive, and extraordinarily nuanced study of the German musicological profession before, during, and after the Nazi years. Despite what the Goebbelsian title suggests, this is not a book about music or musicians as such. *Most German of the Arts* instead tells the story of how an ill-defined and academically lowly community of scholars struggled to define themselves and to win recognition amidst the political crises and economic upheavals of the first half of the twentieth century. There is a kind of perverse heroism described in these pages, as musicological scholars take the most unpromising of circumstances and somehow turn them to their advantage, finding opportunity for scholarly achievement (of sorts) even in the midst of total war and managing something like triumph through sheer persistence in the post-war decades (more on that later). The coincidence of musicology's struggle to achieve professional standing with the great crises of modern German history gives this story its broader relevance, for musicology's Johnny-come-lately status in the academic world made it, Potter argues, especially attuned to people and trends outside the ivory tower, especially vulnerable to struggles for survival within the ivory tower, and especially sensitive to intellectual fashions and political influences. As a result, its story, told with the deftness and thoroughness of a consummate researcher, gives us genuinely fresh insight into the illu-

sory independence of intellectual life.

Central to Potter's project is her assertion that musicological developments—and by implication, much else in cultural life as well—flowed much more smoothly across the divides of political regimes than we have recognized. Potter rejects the view that Nazi musical life represented a “total departure from that of the Weimar Republic” and emphasizes instead, throughout the book, the “seamless transitions” that characterized the progress of the majority of musicologists, world-views intact, from the German defeat in the First World War straight through democratization, nazification, and denazification (p. 29). The essential feature of their work that allowed such a series of seeming re-inventions was their unchanging commitment to defining and defending a Germanocentric view of music history, one in which German musical superiority, variously understood, somehow compensated for the German nation's political frustrations, social divisions, and even military defeats. The assertion of German musical greatness took musicologists from such conventional scholarly projects as establishing research institutes and publishing journals to such unconventional and exceedingly dubious ones as plundering the musical manuscripts of defeated countries and “de-anglicizing” that “especially perplexing specimen of a German composer,” George Frideric Handel (p. 222).

The arcane attractions of academic in-fighting and backstabbing aside, Potter finds her richest material in the scholarly treatises which attempted, through a fascinating variety of strategies, to define “Germanness” in music. Equally rich in its implications for non-musical history is Potter’s account of the efforts of musicologists, before and after 1933, to establish meaningful connections to the general public through the encouragement of popular education and amateur music-making. Here we find one of the most ironic of continuities, as musicologists under both the Weimar and Nazi regimes attempted to consolidate German musical superiority by involving an ever broader public in its making.

Yet despite the powerfully-argued case for continuity at the center of this book, Potter is too good a historian not to recognize the peculiarities of life in the Third Reich. For starters, the Nazi regime showed itself far more able and willing than previous administrations to spend money rescuing research institutes, funding orchestras, and strengthening professional organizations—all, of course, within the overall project of *Gleichschaltung*. Potter argues that “in the final analysis, the Nazi regime was more in the business of salvaging old musicological enterprises than creating new ones” (p. 87), but likewise demonstrates the pervasiveness of the racialist underpinnings to all its cultural philanthropy. Conforming to new demands for racially-informed research required a good bit of trimming and even contortionism, however willingly undertaken, on the part of such musicologists as Friedrich Blume. Potter characterizes Blume’s keynote address at the notorious Duesseldorf Musiktage in 1938, when he spoke on “the problem of race in music,” as a piece of “masterful fence-sitting” (p. 184), yet we should not lose sight of why it was necessary to sit on the fence in the first place. Potter works with the tensions between long-term continuities and short-term exigencies, attempting to resolve them through emphasis sometimes on the role of ambition and opportunism, sometimes on shifting ideological commitments, sometimes on fear, sometimes on unintended consequences of sincerely-held beliefs (the latter explanatory strategy characterizes her convincing portrayal of Kurt Huber, whose progress from enthusiastic participant to martyred resister is one of the most gripping personal stories of the era). But the “problem of race” in music remains, insofar as her account of musicology in the Weimar era clearly shows its marginality to serious scholarship and her account of musicology in the Nazi era clearly shows its dominance. In the end, the argument for continuity prevails only because racialism of

the literalist variety failed and a more diffuse, more inherently flexible conception of culture—and by extension of German musical/cultural superiority—survived. Potter would seem, then, to imply that a distinction should be maintained between murderous racialism and German nationalism as such—similar, perhaps, to the distinction she builds into her analysis between the two categories of “Nazi ideologues” and “musicologists” (for an example of this potentially problematic categorical distinction, p. 239). The musicologists as a whole seem in Potter’s account to have taken more orders than they gave, to have adhered to more policies than they made.

The survival of musicological Germanocentrism brings us to the final, in some ways most intriguing, part of the book—Potter’s treatment of the whole failed process of denazification. This chapter is characterized by the same precise and balanced judgment with which she analyzed the professional fortunes of various musicologists in the Nazi years, yet it is laden with far more historical irony. The problem with denazification, in Potter’s account, certainly includes its failure to make accurate or consistent judgments about individual participation in the Nazi regime—“many who fared well during the Nazi regime,” she observes, “experienced relatively few career difficulties after 1945” (p. 252). But she goes beyond that to argue that the whole concept of “denazification” only obscured the “deep roots” of the musical-intellectual “trends that found correspondence with aspects of Nazi ideology” (p. 262). Thus, certain scholarly enterprises, such as the *Erbe deutscher Musik*, continued on as before after 1945, with no critical reappraisal of their nationalistic, even race-centered, conceptual underpinnings; indeed, their very ability to survive denazification, at least in part because they were not, in fact, narrowly Nazi undertakings, became the best form of legitimation in the post-war era.

Even more ironically, many of the German musicologists who had emigrated to the United States to escape Nazi persecution themselves brought “their German identity, their belief in the German intellectual tradition,” and “their internalization of a long-standing precept of German musical superiority,” which in turn became a central and unexamined assumption of American musicology in its post-war growth years (p. 260). “American musicology,” she concludes, “has inherited a Germanocentric concept of music history without understanding its immediate political relevance for the times in which it was originally formed” (p. 261). *Most German of the Arts* ends with a call for musicological self-awareness. And although such an awareness of the

ideological underpinnings of the discipline has become increasingly widespread among musicologists in recent years, no scholar has made so major, so subtle, and so important a contribution to understanding the actual social and political history of musicological knowledge as

does Potter in this excellent book.

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