



**Maren Köster.** *Musik - Zeit - Geschehen: Zu den Musikverhältnissen in der SBZ/DDR 1945 - 1952.* Saarbrücken: Pfau-Verlag, 2002. 179 S. EUR 20.00 (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-89727-191-3.



**Reviewed by** Elizabeth K. Janik (Department of History, James Madison University)

**Published on** H-German (December, 2003)

## Music as a Path to Understanding History

### Music as a Path to Understanding History

What kind of music was composed, performed, and promoted by cultural authorities in Soviet-occupied Germany and the early German Democratic Republic? This question, at the heart of Maren Köster's *Musik-Zeit-Geschehen: Zu den Musikverhältnissen in der SBZ/DDR 1945 bis 1952*, has been addressed by few scholars of German culture in the nearly fifteen years that have passed since the collapse of the Berlin Wall.[1] Insofar as a common popular image of musical life in the early GDR exists today, it is not a very refined one. Filmmakers have most often turned to a narrow repertoire of politically inspired "mass songs" as a means of underscoring the repressive atmosphere of the young SED state—in stark contrast to the free-wheeling sounds of western jazz, or the challenging musical experiments of the Darmstadt school and the international postwar avant-garde. As Köster points out in her introduction, the most frequently played song in the history of German film is (according to the 1997 *Guinness-Buch der Rekorde*) "Bau auf, bau auf (Jugend erwach)," the optimistic hymn to postwar reconstruction that became the anthem of the Freie Deutsche Jugend

(FDJ), the mass organization of East German youth. Indeed, the song's appearance at a critical moment in last year's successful comedy *Goodbye, Lenin!* seems to confirm its dominant position as a cornerstone of GDR musical memory.

In her revised dissertation from the University of Rostock, Köster tempers such ready stereotypes by arguing that "musical conditions" in the Soviet occupation zone and early GDR were not bound by cookie-cutter dictates of socialist realism, but instead demonstrated a remarkable heterogeneity. As depicted by Köster, the founders of GDR musical culture were a diverse group—including composers and critics who sought to downplay their connections to Nazi cultural authorities (while angling to maintain the privileges they had enjoyed during the Third Reich), returning communist emigres who wanted to lay the groundwork for a new anti-fascist musical tradition, as well as the Soviet cultural officer Sergei Barski, who impressed his German charges with his liberal cultural attitudes and (as one journalist recalled) his "wirklich profunde musikalische Bildung" (p. 61). With the support of first Soviet and then SED institutions,

these individuals encouraged the performance of modernist chamber pieces and engaged in lively public debates over the future of German music. Only as a consequence of the mounting Cold War conflict between east and west did the “relatively open” musical atmosphere of the immediate postwar era give way to “oftmals irrationalen, umfassenden Verhaertungen [...], die mit den Debatten ueber 'Formalismus' und 'Realismus' in den fruehen fuenfziger Jahren ihren Hoehepunkt erreichten” (p. 8).

Koester belongs to a cohort of young musicologists on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean who have recently turned a critical eye (and ear) to the role of music and musical institutions within the early GDR.[2] Of these new studies, Koester’s work is likely to spark the greatest interest for historians of German culture and society who are not necessarily musical specialists. In contrast to Lars Klingberg’s and Daniel zur Weihen’s detailed institutional portraits of the musical arms of the SED cultural bureaucracy, Koester casts her net more broadly. She seeks to illuminate East German “musical conditions” (*Musikverhaeltnissen*), a term that she defines as the “Gesamtheit der Verhaeltnisse und Bedingungen [...] unter denen in einer konkreten historischen und gesellschaftlichen Situation musikalische Werke produziert, vermittelt und rezipiert wurden” (pp. 8-9). Affirming the eminent Marxist musicologist Georg Knepler’s dictum that an awareness of broader historical trends is essential to understanding music,[3] Koester argues that the inverse perspective, “Musik als Weg zum Geschichtsverstaendnis,” is equally valid; “da gerade Musikerfahrungen und musikalisches Denken einen nicht unbedeutenden Teil der kulturellen Identitaet ausmachen, spielen sie bei gesellschaftlichen Umbruechen wie dem nach dem Ende der NS-Herrschaft—eine besondere Rolle” (pp. 12-14).

Koester suggests that a more sophisticated awareness of musical conditions in Soviet-occupied Germany will enrich our understanding of the country’s postwar reconstruction and its eventual division between east and west. Unfortunately, the promise of this intriguing proposal remains largely unfulfilled. The main body of her narrative rarely delves into the broader cultural and political implications of musical events and debates. Rather than considering the historical conditions that shaped East German music (and vice versa), she presents a montage of “representative case studies” that are intended to capture the diversity and complexity of the postwar musical scene. The first half of her study examines three different stages of postwar musical development: “Neube-

ginn? (1945/46)” portrays the idealistic initiatives of Soviet occupation authorities to rejuvenate German musical life; “Umbrueche (1948/49)” examines the career of the Soviet music officer Sergei Barski and the postwar musical thought of the composer Hanns Eisler; and “Verhaertungen (1951/52)” outlines the debates on musical formalism unleashed by the Fifth Congress of the SED Central Committee in March 1951. The book’s second half, “Biographien—Institutionen—Werk,” discusses the careers of selected GDR musicians, the musical initiatives of the Schutzverband Deutscher Autoren and the Kulturbund zur demokratischen Erneuerung Deutschlands, and Eisler’s controversial, unfinished opera, *Johann Faustus*.

In the end, the reader is left with little orientation as to how or why these case studies in particular are, in fact, representative of the broader picture of East German musical life. Koester dismisses the conclusions of authors like Pike and Klingberg, who have emphasized the fundamental intolerance of Soviet and SED cultural policy in the immediate postwar era, without seriously engaging their arguments or providing a consistent base of evidence to the contrary. Her eclectic portrait of East German musical conditions might have been shaded quite differently had she focused more on personalities and events throughout the entire Soviet occupation zone, and less on the exceptional city of Berlin.

To her credit, Koester has illuminated important facets of GDR musical culture that had not yet been brought to light. Her portrait of Sergei Barski is admirably thorough, and her investigation into the Nazi party affiliations of influential GDR musical personalities such as the composer Hans-Georg Goerner and the critic Karl Schoenewolf provides a much-needed corrective to the silence on such potentially embarrassing matters that was maintained by GDR scholars. She has utilized a rich collection of archival sources, particularly the holdings of the *Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv* and the *Stiftung Archiv der Akademie der Kuenste* in Berlin. Yet readers seeking a more comprehensive analysis of musical life in Soviet-occupied Germany will be frustrated with Koester’s selective coverage. They will put down her book knowing far more about the libretto of Eisler’s *Johann Faustus* (for which only fragments of music were ever composed) than about any composition that was actually heard and performed in the early GDR. Likewise, they will read little about the political songs (such as “Bau auf, bau auf”) that were aggressively promoted by SED officials, and nothing about the jazz and popular dance hits that these officials just as aggressively attempted to stifle. The

compelling—if not always consistent—insights of *Musik-Zeit-Geschehen* will be best appreciated by those readers who are already familiar with the major figures and debates of East German music in the immediate postwar era.

Notes:

[1]. Recent studies of Soviet and SED cultural policy in the immediate postwar era have emphasized literature, drama, and the visual arts. See David Pike, *The Politics of Culture in Soviet-Occupied Germany 1945-1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992); David Bathrick, *The Powers of Speech: The Politics of Culture in the GDR* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995); Manfred Jaeger, *Kultur und Politik in der DDR* (Cologne: Deutschland Archiv, 1995); and Anne Hartmann and Wolfram Eggeling, *Sowjetische Praesenz im kulturellen Leben der SBZ und fruehen DDR 1945-1953* (Berlin: Akademie, 1998). A significant exception is Uta G. Poiger's *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[2]. See Lars Klingberg, *Politisch fest in unseren Haenden: Musikalische und musikwissenschaftliche Gesellschaften in der DDR* (Kassel: Baerenreiter, 1997); Daniel zur Weihen, *Komponieren in der DDR: Institutionen, Organisationen und die erste Komponistengeneration bis 1961* (Cologne: Boehlau, 1999); and Joy Haslam Calico, "Fuer eine neue deutsche Nationaloper": Opera in the Discourses of Unification and Legitimation in the German Democratic Republic," in *Music and German National Identity*, eds. Celia Applegate and Pamela Potter (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[3]. Georg Knepler, *Geschichte als Weg zum Musikverstaendnis* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1977).

Copyright (c) 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Elizabeth K. Janik. Review of Köster, Maren, *Musik - Zeit - Geschehen: Zu den Musikverhältnissen in der SBZ/ DDR 1945 - 1952*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. December, 2003.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8488>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).