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Friedenstag by Richard Strauss: An Exploration of the Effect of Nazi Propaganda on German Composers

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An Exploration of the Effect of Nazi Propaganda on German Composers

An Annotated Bibliography

Richard Strauss was one of the most influential German composers in the first half of the 20th century. His relationship with the Nazi Party has been a topic of debate among musicologists and historians for some time and the question of whether Strauss attempted to resist the regime through his work remains. Strauss's opera *Friedenstag* has garnered much of this debate as it can be seen as either a piece of propaganda or a piece of pacifist resistance. Given the reach of the Nazi propaganda machine, there is little question that Strauss would have been influenced by it. This paper will examine the effect of Nazi propaganda on Strauss and the influence it had on the composition of his opera *Friedenstag*.

Correspondence:

1. Strauss, Richard, and Stefan Zweig. *A Confidential Matter: The Letters of Richard Strauss and Stefan Zweig, 1931-1935*. Translated by Max Knight. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.

This collection of letters shows the correspondence between the composer and his librettist. Stefan Zweig originated the idea of *Friedenstag* but due to the political climate in Germany, he was forced to flee and was unable to write the libretto. That job fell to Joseph Gregor. Much of the correspondence in this collection shows the exchange of ideas between Strauss and Zweig regarding *Friedenstag*. These letters provide crucial insight into the composition of the opera and are firsthand accounts from Strauss and Zweig. Letters in this collection are cited by Bryan Gilliam, Pamela Potter, and Gerhard Splitt in several scholarly articles and books, so in a sense, they begin the wider conversation of propaganda surrounding *Friedenstag*. The translator of this collection, Max Knight, was the principal editor of the University of California Press for 26 years and was awarded by the Austrian government for his work in translation.

Dissertations and Theses:

2. Howell, Anna. "The Influence of Politics on German Cultural Life During the Third Reich, with Particular Reference to Opera." MM thesis, University of Durham, Durham, UK, 1984.

This thesis examines the methods by which Hitler attempted to mold "a new cultural policy" befitting the new government and argues these attempts to dictate to composers and artists failed. The analysis is set against the cultural background of Germany in the Twenties and Thirties and specifically sets opera against the socio-political landscape of the 1930s. Much of the evidence Howell cites is correspondence from composers as well as published Nazi propaganda regarding the themes the party desired to see put on stage. This thesis is similar to the book by Bryan Gilliam in that the main relevance is in providing a wider context to Strauss's *Friedenstag*. Without the appropriate cultural and historical context, examining the effect of Nazi propaganda on a particular composer would be incredibly difficult. Anna Howell completed this thesis as a part of earning a Master of Music at the University of Durham and was published by the university.

3. Moss, Patricia Josette. "Richard Strauss's *Friedenstag*: A Political Statement of Peace in Nazi Germany." MA thesis, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, 2010.

In this thesis, Moss argues that *Friedenstag* was composed as a work of political resistance, that Strauss was well aware of the politics of the opera he was composing, and that he was not "politically naïve" as some have suggested. This thesis examines the correspondence between Strauss and librettist Stefan Zweig as its primary evidence for the argument. Moss's argument falls in line with that of Pamela Potter. Moss gives a bit more context into Strauss himself and whether he was apolitical as some have claimed. That provides a much-needed framework for examining how Nazi propaganda would have affected Strauss. Patricia Moss completed this thesis as a part of earning a Master of Arts from the University of Victoria and it was published by the university.

Essays in Collections:

4. Levi, Erik. "Nazi Germany." In *Richard Strauss in Context*, edited by Morten Kristiansen and Joseph E. Jones, 256-65. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

This essay is biographical in nature, as are all the essays in this collection. It shows how Strauss was used by the *Propagandaministerium* [Propaganda Ministry] even without his knowledge. This is evidenced by historical data and correspondence. Strauss simply being president of the *Reichsmusikkammer* [Reich Chamber of Music] was a victory for the Nazi propaganda machine. There is little argued here since it is primarily biographical but showing how Goebbels felt about Strauss adds another layer to the topic of how Nazi propaganda affected Strauss's composition of *Friedenstag*. It shows that propaganda was able to affect the composition of the opera without Strauss necessarily being aware of it. Erik Levi is a professor of music at the University of London, is a regular contributor to *BBC Music Magazine*, and has published widely on the effect of Nazism and fascism on music in the 20th century.

5. Potter, Pamela M. "Strauss and the National Socialists: The Debate and its Relevance." In *Richard Strauss: New Perspectives on the Composer and his Work*, edited by Bryan Gilliam, 93-113. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992.

Potter argues in this essay that the question of Strauss's relationship with the Third Reich cannot be simplified to whether he was a Nazi collaborator. Potter lays out the sequence of historical events during the Nazi period and highlights the important moments regarding Strauss's involvement with the Third Reich. Potter uses these moments set alongside research by scholars such as Gerhard Splitt, Walter Panofsky, Joseph Wulf, and George Marek to support her argument. She also cites much of the same correspondence in this essay as her article entitled "Strauss's *Friedenstag*: A Pacifist Attempt Political Resistance." Potter also takes a starkly different position from that of Splitt and Marek on Strauss's affiliation with the Third Reich. This essay shows that Strauss's relationship with the Nazi regime varied and changed over time. It forces the researcher to take a more nuanced view of Strauss's politics, thus altering the context in which Nazi propaganda would have influenced Strauss's compositions. Pamela M. Potter is a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where she specializes in how music and the arts relate to the socio-political landscape of 20th-century Germany and Europe.

6. Steinberg, Michael P. "Richard Strauss and the Question." In *Richard Strauss and his World*, edited by Bryan Gilliam, 164-89. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

In this essay, Michael Steinberg examines Strauss's politics by drawing parallels between Strauss and German philosopher Martin Heidegger who held the position of Rector of the University of Freiburg at the beginning of the Nazi regime. Steinberg seeks to examine Strauss's politics as a part of "the man's musical imagination." There is no specific argument made regarding Strauss's political affiliation, however, Steinberg does reference Splitt and how Strauss could not be seen as apolitical since the Nazi government sought to dictate all cultural aspects of Germany. Steinberg cites several of Strauss's compositions along with correspondence between the composer and Stefan Zweig in this essay. Richard Strauss had a controversial relationship with the Nazi regime. Examining this within the context of his compositions provides context for identifying the influences of Nazi propaganda. Michael Steinberg is a professor of history and music and German studies at Brown University and has served as dramaturg on opera productions at the Berlin State Opera and Teatro alla Scala.

7. Walter, Michael. "Strauss in the Third Reich." Translated by Jürgen Thym in *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss*, edited by Charles Youmans, 226-41. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2010.

This essay explores Strauss's relationship with the Nazi party, particularly Strauss's motivations. Walter argues that Strauss had no political motivation, but rather an egoistic one. Strauss was more concerned with the advancement of his music and that of German music (he did not see a distinction between the two) than he was with whatever political regime was in power. Walter cites letters by Strauss as evidence for this argument. The essay shows that Strauss may have been aware that he was being propagandized by the Third Reich and yet was more concerned with his music being advanced. If Strauss was aware of the propaganda he was being used for, then the question of whether propaganda truly affected the composition of *Friedenstag* at all arises. This perspective further widens the context of *Friedenstag* and shows that Strauss's motivations may have been neither to compose a piece of propaganda (as Splitt argues) nor a piece of resistance (as Potter argues). Michael Walter is a professor at the University of Graz Institute of Musicology where he specializes in the relationship between music and politics.

Secondary and Tertiary Monographs:

8. Dennis, David B. *Inhumanities: Nazi Interpretations of Western Culture*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

This book is an account of the ways in which Nazi Germany propagandized European literature, philosophy, and the arts to fit its ideological purposes. Dennis examines articles found in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the main Nazi newspaper, to show how history, biographies, and aesthetics were twisted to fit the Nazi party ideals. This book shows the ways in which the Nazi propaganda machine attempted, and was oft successful, to influence German citizens. This accounting provides the necessary context when looking for the effect of propaganda on *Friedenstag* from the perspective of the Nazi Party, unlike several other sources cited here. David B. Dennis is a history professor at Loyola University Chicago and has published several books on the influence of politics on German culture.

9. Gilliam, Bryan. *Rounding Wagner's Mountain: Richard Strauss and Modern German Opera*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Biographical in nature, this book focuses solely on Strauss's operas and the events surrounding their compositions. There are no specific arguments made regarding the operas, however, Gilliam does present the question of Strauss composing *Friedenstag* and whether it was resistance against or propaganda for the Nazi party. He does not offer an opinion one way or the other though. Gilliam uses primary correspondence and opera scores as his main source material along with articles written by various scholars on differing viewpoints. Two of the scholars he cites in the chapter on *Friedenstag* are Pamela Potter and Gerhard Splitt, thus adding to the existing conversation on Strauss's relationship with the Nazi party. This book provides key historical and biographical context to the events surrounding the composition of Strauss's operas. Bryan Gilliam is a professor at Duke University and is a preeminent scholar on Richard Strauss.

Scholarly Journal Articles:

10. Potter, Pamela M. "Strauss's *Friedenstag*: A Pacifist Attempt at Political Resistance." *The Musical Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (Summer 1983): 408-24.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/742179>.

In this article, Potter lays out a case for *Friedenstag* to be considered a piece of political pacifist resistance. She cites several letters between Strauss and his librettists Joseph Gregor and Stefan Zweig along with examining the opera itself to make her case. While many of her arguments based on the analysis of the opera are circumstantial, they do hold weight given the way the Nazi regime would intercept printed materials and letters. Potter's argument stands in opposition to that of Gerhard Splitt in his article, "Oper als Politikum. 'Friedenstag' (1938) von Richard Strauss." This is important as Potter's article provides a necessary voice on one side of the argument regarding Strauss's intentions in composing *Friedenstag*.

11. ———. "What is 'Nazi Music'?" *The Musical Quarterly* 88, no. 3 (Autumn 2005): 428-55.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4123231>.

This article of Potter's seeks to change the way we view music composed under the Nazi regime. Potter argues that one should look objectively at the music produced during this period without regard to the composer's affiliation with the Nazi party. She argues that there is not enough evidence to support the idea that there is inherently "Nazi music." Potter cites research by Hans-Günter Klein and Erik Levi that failed to produce evidence of a "Nazi musical aesthetic." This article seems to be in opposition to Gerhard Splitt cited below given that he draws comparisons between certain symbolism in *Friedenstag* and the ideals of the Third Reich. Potter also provides more context for the argument she makes in the above-cited article and further strengthens her case that *Friedenstag* was a work of resistance, which is the crucial part of this article. With the added context to Potter's argument of pacifist resistance, one can see that, while ultimately effective, the *Propagandaministerium* may not have accomplished its goal of infusing Nazi ideology into all aspects of German life.

12. Splitt, Gerhard. "Oper als Politikum. 'Friedenstag' (1938) von Richard Strauss." *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 55, H. 3 (1998): 220-251. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/931019>.

This article explores the socio-political events surrounding the composition and production of Richard Strauss's opera *Friedenstag*. In it, Splitt argues that Strauss composed this opera as a piece of propaganda in favor of the Nazi party and ideology, as opposed to Pamela Potter's interpretation of pacifism. Splitt identifies several themes in the opera that correspond to Nazi ideals. He even draws a link between the heroine's lines about the "eternal sun" and the origin of the swastika as an ancient Indian symbol for the sun. This article makes a compelling argument for Strauss composing this opera as a piece of propaganda to appease the Third Reich, which provides an invaluable perspective. Without this side of the argument, it would be much harder to see a true picture of the influence of Nazi propaganda on Strauss. Gerhard Splitt is a German musicologist who was among the first to outright call Strauss anti-Semitic and a supporter of the Nazi regime. This article was published in a German peer-reviewed journal.