

Musical displacement and musicology's construction of the post-war avant-garde

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Abstract

Most major textbooks on 20th century music give ample room to the works of avant-garde composers such as Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Bartók, Weill, amongst others. This attention, however, usually ends with the migrations of these figures in the 1930s. Indeed, musicology does not treat the émigré composers as canonical, and commonly omits them. The work of the most prominent figures is often largely ignored after their migration (e.g. Schoenberg), seen through the lens of a biographical swansong (Bartók), or narrated as a tale of aesthetic decline (Weill).

This situation is particularly paradoxical given that, after 1945, many of those who had been pivotal forces in avant-garde music before 1933 were still alive and productive (Ernst Krenek, for example). Even so, the émigré composers were overlooked in the politically motivated and sponsored revivals of avant-garde music in Paris, Darmstadt, Donaueschingen and elsewhere that accompanied the early Cold War years. This is especially surprising given that such efforts sought to construct a tradition *continuing* that of the interwar avant-garde. If included at all, the émigrés were treated as “the last survivors,” administering the heritage of the inter-war period rather than participating in the creative processes and contemporaneous discourses of the post-war avant-garde.

This exclusion of émigré composers from the narrative of post-war avant-garde music is a complex phenomenon that warrants analysis from a range of perspectives. As well as investigating contemporaneous musical avant-garde activities, my paper will offer a critique of music historiography, with its tendency to either downplay or ignore political realities of displacement and exile in 20th century avant-garde music. Aiming to construct a history of linear and teleological developments, musicology, as I will argue, has long advocated a marginalised focus, instead of adopting a more multi-stranded and pluralistic approach. My paper will discuss this phenomenon and offer suggestions for how we might re-think the history of the post-war avant-garde within the particular context of the Cold War. Constructing the émigré composers as components of musical life before *and* after their migrations, I seek to illuminate the often-contradictory history of the avant-garde.

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