

Germans and Their Music in the Time of War, 1914-1918

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This lecture and its published version in the form of this article are adapted from a small part of a book I am writing, called *Music and the Germans: A History*. The book fits together the pieces of German life that over four centuries produced not only musicians of genius, Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, et cetera, but also countless numbers of professional and amateur musicians, musical organizations, ensembles, conservatories, buildings, statues, and not least, from the seventeenth century on, more music journals and other forms of writing about music than any other place in the world. This article will examine what happened to this vibrant musical life, an integral part of European musical culture, in the war that broke out in August of 1914.

Two months after its outbreak, on October 4, 1914, ninety-three German scholars, writers, and artists signed a manifesto “To the Cultural World!” Their purpose was to refute “lies and

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1 “Manifesto of the Ninety-Three German Intellectuals,” https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Manifesto_of_the_Ninety-Three_German_Intellectuals (accessed December 11, 2021). The full text in German and English is available at https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=938. The manifesto was published in France in *Le Temps* and in London in *The Times*: Glenn Watkins, *Proof Through the Night: Music and the Great War* (Berkeley, 2003), 25.

2 They seemed to have believed the censored press accounts about Belgian franc-tireurs firing on German soldiers. Kaiser Wilhelm II went so far as to send a telegraph to President Woodrow Wilson, claiming that his soldiers were only defending themselves in the face of Belgian resistance. See John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven and London, 2001).

calumnies.” They described themselves as “heralds of truth.” The manifesto consisted of a series of refutations and accusations: Germany had not caused the war or wanted it; not trespassed in neutral Belgium; not taken “the life and property of a single Belgian citizen” without “the bitterest defense having made it necessary,” not “treated Louvain brutally”; and so on. It asked the world to “Have faith in us! Believe, that we shall carry on this war to the end as a civilized nation, to whom the legacy of a Goethe, a Beethoven, and a Kant, is just as sacred as its own hearths and homes.”¹

Mobilization had begun in early August of 1914. In the first weeks of conflict, the ruthlessness of the German troops in Belgium had become notorious in Great Britain, France, and to some extent around the world—there were reports of summary executions of civilians, deportation, forced labor, and the destruction of villages and towns. Far from protecting culture and science, the German army burned down the University of Louvain with its library dating from 1636, destroying the work of centuries. Most of this was hidden from the German public and, even when encountered in foreign news, was interpreted as anti-German propaganda. Otherwise, it is difficult to understand how the ninety-three German intellectuals who signed the manifesto could have thought the behavior of their army acceptable.² Its signatories included Nobel Prize winners and distinguished scholars and artists in all the scholarly disciplines and arts, including three musicians — Engelbert Humperdinck, the composer of operas, Siegfried Wagner, the artistic director of the Bayreuth Festival (and Richard Wagner’s son), and Felix Weingartner, an Austrian conductor, composer, and writer, who had become Mahler’s successor at the Vienna Opera and Philharmonic. The manifesto demonstrated that musicians, like other Germans, did not stay aloof from the events. It set a precedent for much that would happen in musical life for the next thirty or so years.

Throughout the war, musicians in prominent positions — conductors, composers, performers — made themselves available

for propaganda purposes, producing statements that could be published and sold in small form. They would allow a quotation, a scrap of music, or a signature to be reproduced on postcards, all part of the trade in musician ephemera (busts, photographs, quotation books) that had proliferated in the nineteenth century. Arthur Nikisch, the most admired conductor in his time, copied out the first four notes of Beethoven's 5th symphony, along with his signature and Beethoven's description, apocryphal or not—"This is fate knocking at the door."³ Wilhelm Kienzl, an Austrian conductor and composer, published a martial song called "Das Lied vom Weltkrieg" with the rousing words "Hark from afar the horn of Roland, rousing Germans to fight," and so it went. People bought such ephemera to support the war effort. Even Arnold Schoenberg, not by any means a Hooray patriot, compared Germany's assault on France in August 1914 to *his own* assault on decadent bourgeois artistic values, especially those of Debussy, Ravel, and Stravinsky: "Now comes the reckoning . . . Now we will throw these mediocre kitschmongers into slavery and teach them to venerate the German spirit and to worship the German God." Later he called it an "act of war psychosis."⁴

As we know, the First World War took a ferocious toll on all the combatant nations; including civilians, the total number of casualties was more than 40 million.⁵ Considering this toll, to focus on musical life in the combatant nations, in particular Germany and Austria, seems almost indecent. Yet music and musicians too were part of the experience of war. At the most basic level, the European musical world that had flourished for centuries collapsed. Musicians ceased to tour across national borders or left their employment in places now enemy territory; joint musical enterprises ceased to operate. The German music publisher Breitkopf & Härtel suspended its publication of the *Journal of the International Music Society*, explaining that "'world culture' had to give way to 'world war,'" then adding misleadingly that this development had been "against the long-held desire for peace among the German people."⁶ The

³ "So pocht das Schicksal an unsere Pforte!"

⁴ Quoted in Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2007), 60.

⁵ "World War I Casualties," *Reperes: Partenariat Éducatif Grundtvig 2009-2011*: <https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/reperes112018.pdf> (accessed December 16, 2021).

6 "An die Deutschen Mitglieder der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft," *Zeitschrift der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft*, 15 (1914), Addendum.

7 Annette Becker, "Arts," *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, ed. Jay Winter (Cambridge, 2014), 504.

International Music Society itself collapsed: a symbol of the failure of nineteenth-century internationalism.

In contrast, the musical life of the warring nations did *not* cease: it carried on, expressing every emotion the war produced: "Hatred, hardship, patriotism, pain, mourning — all were present in a certain aesthetic disorder," writes Annette Becker.⁷ There was music in the towns and cities, music on the front lines and rear lines of war. Many of the soldiers who fought in the war on both sides had learned music in school or participated in singing clubs. Some were professional musicians, usually just beginning their careers when they were called up for military service. Professional musicians were killed and wounded in the war, including several with growing reputations. Rudi Stephan, born in 1887, was regarded as one of the most promising composers of his generation at the time the war broke out. He was killed by a Russian sniper on the eastern front in September of 1915. The more famous case is of Paul Wittgenstein, training for a career as a pianist when he was called up. He took a bullet to his right elbow on the eastern front, was captured, and sent to a Siberian prisoner-of-war camp, where his arm was amputated. After the war he commissioned left-hand compositions from the composers of the time, many of whom were German and Austrian, but also Prokofiev, Ravel, and Benjamin Britten. The Austrian violinist Fritz Kreisler, then thirty-nine, was called up to the Austrian army at the beginning of the war, served about a month in the trenches on the eastern front, suffered serious leg and head wounds from a mounted Cossack attack on his line regiment, and was invalided out of the army. Arnold Schoenberg (also Austrian) was called up twice: in 1915 at age 42, then discharged on grounds of poor health. In September 1917, he was called up again for a month, with only light duties, and soon released from service for a second time. Back in civilian life, he liked to tell friends about the officer in charge of his unit who asked him if he was "this notorious Schoenberg." To

which he replied: “Beg to report, sir, yes. Nobody wanted to be, someone had to be, so I let it be me.”⁸

These were exceptional cases because they were all known in the musical world; most musician-soldiers were not. Still, books devoted to the First World War mostly seem to agree about the irrelevance of music in wartime and rarely even mention the presence of military bands or music of any kind on the front. Musicologists end their books in July 1914 or begin them in 1918.⁹ The war can sometimes seem a zone without music, with musicians behind the lines composing works to be premiered and published later. But much that had been part of the fabric of private and public, amateur and professional musical life all over Europe—choral societies, brass bands, music halls, orchestras, music lessons, and so on—did not disappear from Europe when the war began. The only “musical instruments” that suffered were the church bells which, as the war dragged on, were hauled off for their metals, melted down, and became cannons. A minister in the small town of Kusel in the Palatinate told his congregation in July 1917, after the bells had been taken away, that “They will speak a different language in the future. It goes against all our feelings that *they*, who like no other preach peace and should heal wounded hearts, should tear apart bodies in gruesome murders and open wounds that will never heal.”¹⁰

War presented new sounds, new ways of listening to silence and to noises, and new appreciation for music beyond strictly military needs. Europe prepared for war and went to war singing national anthems and martial songs, lodged in the collective memory of wars that had come before. “War time has become song time,” wrote Ernst Moraht, the editor of a wartime collection of patriotic songs, one of many produced in the war.¹¹ Roger Chickering, in his magnum opus on the First World War in Freiburg, a city close to the French border, writes that the month of July was filled with expectation of something momentous. There were crowds and vigorous singing

8 Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea: Selected Writings*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (London, 1975), 104.

9 There are, of course, exceptions. See Rachel Moore, *Performing Propaganda: Musical Life and Culture in Paris During the First World War* (Woodbridge, 2018), 1. Glenn Watkins’s *Proof through the Night* covers the Allied nations well but focuses mostly on concert repertoire, classical music, and its composers. A better model for cultural historians is Regina Sweeney’s *Singing Our Way to Victory: French Cultural Politics and Music during the Great War* (Middletown, CT, 2001).

10 “Vaterländischer Abend,” *Kuseler Zeitung*, https://www.rheinpfalz.de/startseite_artikel,-vaterl%C3%A4ndische-abende-und-appelle-weniger-zu-essen-_arid,284821.html, (accessed January 6, 2021).

11 Moraht quoted by Zoë Lang, “Creating a War Repertoire: *Musik für Alle* and Domestic Music during the First World War,” *Journal of Musicological Research* 33 (2014): 208.

12 Roger Chickering, *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany: Freiburg, 1914-1918* (Cambridge, 2007), 62.

13 Ethel Cooper, *Behind the Lines: One Woman's War, 1914-18*, ed. Decie Denholm (London, 1982), 22.

14 Michael Fischer, *Religion, Nation, Krieg: Der Lutherchoral 'Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott' zwischen Befreiungskriegen und Erstem Weltkrieg* (Münster, 2014), 85-178.

15 Karen Painter, "Singing at Langemarck in the German Political Imaginary, 1914-1932," *Central European History* 53 (2020): 763-784. See also Lukas Grawe, "Langemarck Myth," 1914-1918-online. *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson (Berlin, 2019). DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.11333 (accessed January 2, 2022).

in the city square; "singing students roamed the streets" in anticipation of what was to come.¹² In Leipzig, Ethel Cooper, an Australian piano student at the Conservatory, described sitting at a café on July 31, "thinking we would hear some music," but "all we did was to have to stand up five times for the *Wacht am Rhein*."¹³ The Germans gathering in front of the Royal Palace in Berlin to hear Kaiser Wilhelm declare war sang Luther's Reformation anthem *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*. Soldiers sang the same hymn while boarding trains to the front, or (sometimes) preparing to go over the top of the trenches, or engaging in singing wars across no-man's-land.¹⁴ At the news of the German victory at Tannenberg in August 1914, Berliners gathered on Potsdamer Platz to sing hymns. After the fighting began, the newspapers began to write stories, maybe confected, of soldiers singing when they attacked the enemy, drawing parallels to the wars of the Reformation. The most spurious account of soldierly courage expressed by singing was peddled by the Supreme Army Command itself, in an infamous official communiqué on November 11, 1914. To disguise the disastrous results of a German attack on British forces in Belgium, the high command announced that "Westwards Langemarck young regiments rushed forward under the song 'Deutschland, Deutschland über alles,' advancing against the first line of the enemy and taking it." The report was reprinted verbatim by the German press and became an uncontested piece of evidence for German claims of "cultural superiority" throughout the war.¹⁵

Music, as it always had done, accompanied and heightened the experiences of life, in peacetime and in war. It expressed patriotism, righteousness, exultation, mourning, and hatred, and reminded people of a time before the war and the hope for it all to be over. In all theaters of war — Germany, Austria-Hungary, France, Russia, the Balkans, Africa, the Far East — the most conspicuous musicians were the ones playing in military bands. Every country in Europe had an abundance of these soldier-musicians and had done so for centuries.

Prussia modernized its bands in the nineteenth century and added to the repertoire transcriptions of classical music. By 1900, it had a military musical establishment of about 560 bands, which employed 17,000 or so musicians. Accompanied by these bands, middle-class crowds assembled in city centers throughout July to cheer and bellow nationalist songs in anticipation of the war to come. Soldiers boarded trains at railroad stations, with people cheering and the bands playing.

The extent of the enthusiasm for war, the so-called “spirit of 1914,” can easily be overstated.¹⁶ Most did not participate in the aggressive festivities of going to war or thrill to the parades of students and soldiers. Nevertheless, the “sentimental militarism” of military bands had been widespread before the war (and I might add in many countries, from the U.S. to Japan). Military bands sweetened the departure of troops, ginned up the crowds, and made for good press. Many musicians who were civilians before the war, when drafted, were able to keep their profession simply by putting on the uniform of an army musician.¹⁷ The most obvious difference was that a military band in peacetime, whether marching in a parade or playing in a bandstand, was surrounded by peaceful activities and almost certainly the loudest sound in the vicinity. In wartime, it was not, especially in headquarters near the front. Musicians in soldier uniforms were more like war profiteers than regular soldiers, as Rempe has pointed out.¹⁸

Military bands and orchestras typically stayed in towns and camps behind the lines. They provided entertainment for the troops in their regular rotation back and forth from the front. There was, for instance, a 35-man music corps stationed in Bruges in September 1914. Their duties included ceremonies, concerts for soldiers, music between acts in plays at the theaters, and visits to the wounded in hospitals. It could seem almost as if ordinary musical life still existed. There were also up-and-coming conductors (Wilhelm Furtwängler, among them) and well-known soloists who were recruited to perform

16 See Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth, and Mobilization in Germany* (Cambridge, 2000).

17 Martin Rempe, *Kunst, Spiel, Arbeit: Musikleben in Deutschland, 1850-1960* (Göttingen, 2020), 151.

18 Rempe, 151.



Figure 1. Regimental Band and soldiers in France behind the lines, 1916. Photo: Oscar Tellgman. © Bundesarchiv Bild 136-0744.

19 *Ibid.*, 151-3.

at concerts a considerable distance behind the lines. The concerts were for soldiers rotating from the front for a few days of repose, and they could be quite ambitious, and always ended with a Beethoven symphony, usually the 5th.

The military bands stationed closer to the front had a less comfortable job, experiencing some of the same deprivations (food, sleep) as the regular soldiers, and often served as stretcher carriers.¹⁹ Still subject to military discipline, some men had a hard time adjusting, but the reality they experienced was far easier than that of soldiers in the front-line trenches: when the shelling was most intense and no performances were possible, the musicians simply resumed practicing—or composing. This was roughly the case of Paul Hindemith, twenty-two years old and already the concertmaster of the Frankfurt Opera Orchestra. He was conscripted into the army in 1918 and sent to the front lines in Alsace, where he joined a military band that was stationed less than a mile behind the lines. They played dance and march tunes for soldiers rotated back from the trenches for a few days of relief from fighting. After he arrived, the commanding officer, a music-loving count named von Kielmannsegg, whose favorite composer was the Frenchman Claude Debussy, founded



a string quartet of soldier-musicians with Hindemith their leader.

Transferred to Flanders, Hindemith saw fighting for the first time and wrote in his journal, “A horrible sight. Blood, bodies full of holes, brain, a torn-off horse’s head, splintered bones. Dreadful! How mean and indifferent one becomes. . . . One sits in quarters, writing, chatting, . . . not thinking about how soon the bell could also toll for us.”²⁰

For the soldiers on the front lines who were not professional musicians, music took on a different aspect, not work but a small measure of pleasure, a relief from boredom. Much has been written about shell shock in the First World War battlefields. The most recent estimation of how many soldiers suffered from it on the western front is about 5 percent, leaving 95 percent of soldiers coping with the strain of static warfare and finding ways to gain control over their emotions.²¹ Singing was one such relief from unbearable tension. Two years into the conflict, the Austrian War Ministry ordered the Imperial Academy of Sciences to record soldiers’ songs of all

Figure 2. Music in the square in Menneville, France, n.d. Photo: Oscar Tellgmann. © Bundesarchiv Bild 136-1057.

²⁰ Fondation Hindemith, “Life and Work”: <https://www.hindemith.info/en/life-work/biography/1914-1918/>. (accessed February 26, 2022).

²¹ See most recently, Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge, 2008).

Figure 3. Paul Hindemith's soldiers' quartet, encouraged by the music-loving regiment commander Count von Kielmannsegg. Hindemith composed his 2nd String Quartet Op. 10 while on the Alsace Front. They played some of Hindemith's early compositions, including his 1st string quartet, composed in 1915. © Fondation Hindemith.



22 Leon Hajek, *Das Phonogrammarchiv der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien von seiner Gründung bis zur Neueinrichtung im Jahre 1927* (Vienna, 1927), 14. See also Christian Glanz, "Die 'Musikhistorische Zentral' im k. u. k. Kriegsministerium im Ersten Weltkrieg," 84-97; Andrea Stangl and Derek Weber, "The Sounds of War – Music and the Music Business during the War Years," in *The World of the Habsburgs: The First World War*, <https://ww1.habsburger.net/en/stories/sounds-war-music-and-music-business-during-war-years> (accessed January 15, 2021). The German Phonographic Commission, established in 1915, also made recordings of the languages of the many prisoners-of-war and people from enemy countries who could not leave before the war broke out.

the languages in the Dual Monarchy, as well as the songs of Russian, Serbian, and other enemy combatants in prisoner-of-war camps. These recordings were added to the Austrian Phonogram Archive, established in 1899.²² Germany established a Phonographic Commission in 1915 to record spoken word and music of prisoners in internment camps, producing thousands of gramophonic studies in about 250 languages and dialects. One example is a recording of Korean prisoners singing protest songs against the Japanese Protectorate in their country.

Back in the active theaters of war, obtaining, finding, making, and playing musical instruments was one way to stay sane. Soldiers on both sides of the conflict would sometimes find a piano in a house deserted by its previous occupants and use it while the company was in the vicinity. In the long stretches of boredom and anxiety between attacks, soldiers made things, including improvised musical instruments. These were often crude string instruments, made from wooden or metal boxes that had once held munitions, gas masks or medicine in them. Their cheapness and inferior sound made them even more valuable to the soldiers; they were sometimes covered with inscriptions, signatures, or carved designs that had nothing to do with the sound they made.²³

23 Johanna de Schmidt, "All Quiet on the Western Front? The Creation and

Perception of Self-Made Instruments in the Trenches of the First World

War," *Journal of Musicological Research*, 33 (2014): 157-60.



The most important friend to the soldier on the front was the harmonica, and in the modern era, it was primarily an instrument manufactured in central Europe, especially Germany and Austria.²⁴ Small manufacturers had begun producing them in the early nineteenth century. By the 1860s, a German entrepreneur named Matthias Hohner had developed a way to produce thousands of them. By 1887, the Hohner factories were producing more than a million of them and exporting them all over the world. The Hohner concern was not the only one producing one of the most portable, inexpensive, and easy-to-learn musical instrument in the world—thousands of manufactories popped up in Germany in the last decades of the nineteenth century. No surprise, then, that soldiers took their harmonicas to war in their kits, and no surprise that the harmonica manufacturers of Germany and Austria began to market them aggressively—and patriotically—after the war broke out. Along with standard harmonicas, the Hohner manufactory made ones shaped like ammunition cartridges, warships, and submarines. They (and other manufacturers) churned out models with patriotic sayings engraved on them: Hurra, “Deutsche vor die Front!”, “Gott mit uns!”, and Bismarck’s much-quoted rallying cry, “Wir Deutsche fürchten

Figure 4. German soldiers in France, relaxing in a break from fighting, 1917. Unknown photographer. © Bundesarchiv Bild 183-R22784.

²⁴ Even the British had German harmonicas, and the Hohner company kept selling them abroad even as the war raged on.



Figure 5. Hohner harmonica for German soldiers, 1914.

25 See Hartmut Berghoff, "Patriotismus und Geschäftssinn im Krieg: Eine Fallstudie aus der Musikinstrumentenindustrie," in *Kriegserfahrungen: Studien zur Sozial- und Mentalitätsgeschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs*, ed. Gerhard Hirschfeld, Gerd Krumeich, Dieter Langewiesche, and Hans-Peter Ullmann (Essen, 1997), 262-82.

Gott und sonst nichts auf der Welt!" German companies marketed them successfully to *all* the combatant nations as presents that families could send to their loved ones at the front, with more mottos proliferating throughout the war: *not just* "Deutschland, Deutschland über alles," but also (for the English-speaking markets) "The Good Comrade," "Through Battle to Victory," geographical names of war zones where soldiers were stationed, and so on.

Patriotic sayings would have had some attraction to the soldiers, but only the music-making made time go by in wartime. The soldiers needed the harmonicas to alleviate boredom and carry with them a memory of home. Hartmut Berghoff found many letters from soldiers in the Hohner archives thanking the manufacturer for their small treasures. One wrote that "Many a warrior's heart has already forgotten all the misery that reigns here thanks to this instrument," and another, "We make an unholy racket every evening and forget our otherwise unenviable situation."²⁵ When the opposing trenches were near each other, as they were in parts of the western front as well as the eastern front, the soldiers could hear each other's conversations, as well their music-making. Especially in the first years of the war, this led to more-or-less spontaneous fraternization—singing together or singing in competition with each other across the divide, meeting in the middle to collect the wounded and dead and exchanging greetings. Soldiers played harmonicas on both sides of the war, in competition or in something like harmony.

The most famous of these unauthorized encounters was the Christmas Truce of 1914, in which some 100,000 British and German troops ceased hostilities in their sectors. It started in

the late hours of December 24, with flickering lights and singing from the German trenches—“Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht,” one of the many Christmas songs shared by the opposing forces. The English troops saw the lights, heard the singing, and joined in, and went on from there; in daylight the opposing forces came out from the trenches and fraternized and played soccer. Episodes like this went on sporadically in the first years of the war, never official, often prompted by hearing music, and always condemned by the upper ranks. By 1916, they had died out altogether.²⁶

26 Joe Perry, *Christmas in Germany: A Cultural History* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2010), 93.

27 Lang, “Creating a War Repertoire,” 210-13.

I leave the war front now to consider the home front, where orchestras and bands played on in German and Austrian cities and where households bought patriotic songbooks and marches for piano, two-handed and four-handed (the latter the better, because louder). A veritable army of music businesses supplied them, churning out sheet music and anthologies for commercial venues as well as homes. One prolific compiler was Ernst Moraht, the man who said, “War time has become song time” and whose *Unser Liederbuch* was a best seller. *Musik für Alle* (next to it) was a popular monthly subscription series of sheet music for domestic music-making; it had been founded in 1906 by a minor composer, Bogumil Zepler. He produced four thick volumes during the war, filled with songs about past wars, military marches, national anthems, and new songs (many by Zepler himself), all trying to capture the spirit of the war of 1914.²⁷ Austrian music publishers did the same.

Postcards too were created in the hundreds of thousands, with lyrics or evocations of songs, both heroic and sentimental (“Wacht am Rhein,” “Vor Paris mit Sang und Klang,” “Lieb Vaterland magst ruhig sein”). Phonograph companies recorded this outpouring of patriotic music and developed a compact phonograph that could be operated (with a crank) even in the trenches. The manufacturers of mechanical pianos and organs produced an abundance of rolls, from the “Archduke Albrecht March” to “Wien, du Stadt meiner Träume.”

28 "Vaterländischer Abend," *Kuseler Zeitung*, https://www.rheinpfalz.de/startseite_artikel,-vaterl%C3%A4ndische-abende-und-appelle-weniger-zu-essen-_arid,284821.html, (accessed January 6, 2021).

29 Chickering, *The Great War*, 382.

The Hupfeld and Welte manufacturers of mechanical theater organs successfully lobbied the naval offices of Germany and Austria to buy their large and expensive mechanical instruments for entertainment on warships, equipped with the latest rolls of patriotic songs and vaudeville favorites. After the United States entered the war in 1917, the German mechanical piano industry began to produce rolls for its instruments with American dance hits, marketed for Germans. The most popular of which—*for Germans*—was George Cohan's "Over There" with its cheerful refrain, "Johnny get your gun."

Performed music on the home fronts of the war sounded much like the prewar years, but a bit more overtly nationalistic. After a short period of soul-searching about whether they should play music at all while soldiers were risking their lives for the homeland, cities resumed their fall concert schedules. There were fewer of them, initially only half as many as before the war. Impresarios and conductors salved their consciences by calling the concerts in wartime "patriotic concerts," in other words, a contribution to the war effort, bringing people together, and forging emotional bonds which would strengthen the nation. A typical small-town "patriotic concert" took place in March 1915 in the town of Kusel in the province of Rheinland Pfalz. It featured music provided by soloists and a chorus, poetry reading, and a lecture about the war. The local newspaper claimed the event had "summoned up the most intense patriotic feelings" and was a "powerful expression of national sentiments."²⁸ There were a few premieres of works by German and Austrian composers during the war, but most ensembles continued with their tried-and-true Austro-German repertoire, filled with Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, Brahms, Wagner, and of course Beethoven, as often as possible: "serious" programs for a "serious audience," as one music reporter characterized it. The pianist Wilhelm Backhaus, the once-child prodigy, now thirty-two years old and in military uniform, performed in Freiburg to a full house, playing classical favorites from Schubert to Brahms.²⁹ Audiences wanted

familiar programs, reminders of happier times. Scandinavian composers were heard also, as well as Tchaikovsky, according to one critic because of his “light blond hair and his wonderful blue eyes.”³⁰ Among professional musicians there was some resistance to excluding all composers other than those of the Central Powers, as demanded from some of the public. In practice, the Austrian government was satisfied if the number of Italian and French operas were kept to a minimum. Already by 1915, the works of Russian, French, and Italian composers had returned to the Musikverein as well as the Vienna State Opera.³¹

August Spanuth, the editor of a leading music journal (*Signale für die Musikalische Welt*) and a well-traveled pianist who had lived in the United States for decades, also pushed back against the politicization of music, though in a back-handed way. He blamed it on the Italians. We Germans need “no protective ordinances to flourish.” We will not politicize it, “our most cherished and greatest art”: “Our main duty remains in war and peace, to distinguish between good and bad music, whether it was produced in Rome or in Berlin.”³² These were fine lines to walk, and as the war dragged on, food became scarcer, casualty lists longer, good news from the warfronts less convincing, and morale lower, they seemed hardly to matter. There were more wounded soldiers in their grey uniforms in the concert hall, civilians wearing sober clothes, women with less jewelry, and the concert hall became another mirror of a society exhausted and in mourning.

But how did the composers respond to the war, the people who were most responsible for the stature of Austro-German music in the world, then and now? Some continued to produce works during the war years even though it really was not a good time for premieres of new compositions. I will briefly discuss five of them. The oldest of these was Max Bruch, and like most musicians, he did not sign the manifesto “to the cultural world,” although he was not a pacifist and rejoiced in German victories. Seventy-six years old in 1914 and a prolific composer of oratorios, chamber music, and concertos, Bruch

30 These quotations can be found in Ziemer, “Listening on the Home Front,” 209-211.

31 Watkins, *Proof through the Night*, 214.

32 “Kunst und Politik,” *Signale für die Musikalische Welt*, Nr. 9 (March 3, 1915): 129-30. He also added that any person who agitates against music of other countries was a “weakling” and “does not belong in the mighty, free, and Olympian Germany.” See also Eckart John, “Die Politisierung der Musik als Phänomen des 20. Jahrhunderts,” in *Von Grenzen und Ländern, Zentren und Rändern: Die Erste Weltkrieg und die Verschiebungen in der musikalischen Geographie Europas*, ed. Christa Brüstle, Guido Heldt, and Eckhard Weber (Schliengen im Markgräflerland, 2006), 56-8.

33 Steven Beller, "The tragic carnival: Austrian culture in the First World War," in *European Culture in the Great War: the arts, entertainment, and propaganda*, eds. Aviel Roshwald and Richard Stites (Cambridge, 1999), 136-7.

34 Michael Kennedy, *Richard Strauss: Man, Musician, Enigma* (Cambridge, 1999), 189. It premiered only in 1919, at the Vienna State Opera.

35 As James Garratt has written, the English and the French were composing organ music during the war for similar reasons. James Garratt, "Ein Gute Wehr und Waffen': Apocalyptic and Redemptive Narratives in Organ Music from the Great War," in *Music and War in Europe: from French Revolution to WWI*, ed. Étienne Jardin (Turnhout, 2016), 379-411.

36 Kathryn Bailey Puffett, "Anton Webern," *Grove Music Online*: <https://doi-org.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.29993>, (accessed January 5, 2022).

had had a career like Felix Mendelssohn before him. It had taken him to Great Britain many times, where he was lionized. When hostilities commenced in 1914, he renounced his Cambridge honorary degree. Without his international royalties to support himself and his family, he began to compose again, almost against his will and all with war themes.³³ He composed more oratorios, one called a "celebration of heroes" [*Heldenfeier*], another, a paean to the motherland [*Die Stimme der Mutter Erde*], and in 1919, a requiem in the form of an oratorio [*Trauerfeier für Mignon*], a Goethean lament for all the loss and suffering of the war years. There were also anthologies of songs for home music-making, many on the theme of mourning — "In Heaven," "On the Grave of a German Rifleman."

Richard Strauss also refused to sign the manifesto and was not a pacifist either. After hostilities had begun, sarcastic as ever, he offered to give back his Oxford University honorary doctorate in exchange for the British sinking one of their own Dreadnoughts, but he opposed artists becoming involved in war and politics. They should be getting on with their work, he thought, which was what he did, finishing his opera *Die Frau ohne Schatten* during the war.³⁴ And there was nothing like organ music to drive home the point that God was on the side of your nation. Max Reger composed a resounding organ piece called *Eine Vaterländische Ouvertüre* in 1914.³⁵

To consider the younger generation, Anton Webern, devoted to Schoenberg and distressed by his experiences in the Austrian army, spent the war in and out of active service, sometimes wishing to be in the army to share his idol's experience, then getting out of it by pleading his essential role in cultural life.³⁶ Alban Berg, another Schoenberg student, had already decided before the war broke out to compose an opera based on the nineteenth-century playwright Georg Büchner's unfinished *Woyzeck*, about a soldier who kills his common-law wife. Berg had seen a performance of it in May 1914 just before the war broke out, and a year later he was called up to

the Austrian army. He ultimately ended up with a desk job in the War Ministry because of his asthma and finished the opera after the war. His experiences in the army contributed to *Wozzeck's* brutal realism. He confessed to his wife that "there is a bit of me in this character, since I have been spending these war years just as dependent on people I hate, have been in chains, sick, captive, resigned, in fact humiliated."³⁷

Meanwhile, the cabarets, musical halls, theaters, and cinemas provided cheap entertainment and welcome distraction from anxiety, grief, and increasingly, hunger. Musicians and other performers (actors, dancers, comedians) were also busy performing for the war effort behind the front, usually in military hospitals and often without pay. In Berlin, a city of four million people in 1914, commercial entertainment venues came up with a multitude of semi-comical, semi-patriotic songs and operettas. In the first months of the war, all assumed that the Germans were innocent in the outbreak of war, the war would be quick, and Germany would win. Theaters initially tried to stage works glorifying the military, such as *Deutschland über alles!*, which had only sixteen performances, and *Die Waffen her!* [Get the Guns!], more successful than the other, with about 50 performances before closing.³⁸ But when the war did not end quickly, it became clear that the public wanted entertainment that did not remind them of it, even so early in its four-year run.³⁹

Possenbühnen, roughly translated as "antic theater," began producing rafts of comic musical plays and operettas, some with military themes, such as *The Kaiser has Called* and *Bring the Weapons Here!*, and *Always Hit Hard!*, a "patriotic people's play." The latter had a score by Walter Kollo, a prolific composer of operettas, musical comedies, farces, and hit songs which he continued to produce throughout the war.⁴⁰ The popular entertainment business in other cities was just as busy. In Vienna's Johann-Strauss Theater, *The Gypsy Princess* [*Csárdásfürstin*], an operetta by Emmerich Kálmán, was performed 500 times in wartime, a musical bacchanalia of

³⁷ Quoted in Watkins, 235.

³⁸ Martin Baumeister, *Kriegstheater: Grossstadt, Front und Massenkultur, 1914-1918* (Essen, 2005), 129.

³⁹ Peter Jelavich, "German Culture in the Great War," in *European Culture in the Great War*, 33-6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 67-76.

41 R. E. Sackett, "Satires of War: Two Plays by Munich's Karl Valentin, 1916-1917," *The Germanic Review*, Vol. 69, no. 4 (Fall 1994): 6.

42 Sackett, "Satires of War," 10. For the wartime Munich stage, see also Sackett, *Popular Entertainment, Class, and Politics in Munich, 1900-1923* (Cambridge, MA, 1982), 70-96.

waltzes and fiery gypsy dances. Munich's *volkstümlich* offerings appealed to middle- and lower-middle class audiences and were performed in music halls and taverns catering to people nostalgic for imagined or abandoned rural communities. There were comic sketches and practical jokes, with Jews often the butt of them. There was an endless provision of con-fected nostalgia for "old Munich" and "old Bavaria," invented traditions at their most obvious. They were presented in large venues, mostly in modern German with Bavarian dialect thrown in for a calculated authenticity and performed during the war along with more obviously patriotic offerings such as *Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles* (the Munich version) and *Hoch Zeppelin* (Long live the Zeppelin).

As the war dragged on and food shortages became dire, over-the-top nostalgia became a way to express a disguised disenchantment. Placed in a distant past populated by foolish aristocratic officers and ill-trained soldiers, the incompetence of all was intensified by parodic military songs and marches. The comic duo of Karl Valentin and Liesl Karlstadt were the stars of the Munich entertainment firmament, also performing more than a hundred times at military hospitals, as did many other entertainers.⁴¹ Karl Valentin was throughout the war a master of evading censorship through misdirection and comedy. In 1917, three years into the war, he staged a short play called *Der Herzog kommt* (The Duke is Coming), a savagely comic, barely disguised depiction of the war itself. The everyman soldier named Stuckmeister, a master of nothing, played by Valentin, and his sidekick Karlstadt as a drummer boy suffer under an incompetent officer who plays skittles all day. Stuckmeister comments that "Yes, in a little while I'll have been with the militia for three years, but time passes quickly. . . . It seems to me that I've been in it for twenty." Any audience who had experienced the three years of war, with no end in sight, would have known what he meant.⁴²

What are we to make of all this musical activity? At the most basic level, the muses did not fall silent. War seemed to stim-

ulate creativity in some people, and music, *especially* music, provided comfort, distraction, and something I'll call "cultural reassurance." This had a dark and a light side. On the dark side, music occasioned plenty of expressions of prideful superiority, bombastic brass bands, loud singing — German musical traits that had developed over the course of the long nineteenth century. Following historian Martin Rempe, we could also call working musicians in military band uniforms and the publishers who churned out endless volumes of patriotic songs war profiteers: *Kriegsgewinnler*, a dubious position to be in.⁴³ Yet music also provided pleasure, creation rather than destruction, solidarity rather than bombast, music to assuage anxiety and dread. Still, for soldiers, it was a little more complicated. In Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, perhaps the greatest novel of the First World War, the piano is something of a leitmotif, a reminder of alienation from home and hearth, an ambivalent symbol of something hard to express. When the narrator Paul Bäumer goes on leave from the front, we find out that he had played the piano in civilian life. Yet he writes that "a sense of strangeness will not leave me" and he sees through "a veil" the people and things in the house: "there my case of butterflies [an intimation of his death], and there the mahogany piano." A piano is "there" when he visits his dying friend in a field hospital, it is "there" when he is stationed near a soldiers' home, it is "there" when he talks to Russian prisoners-of-war, one of whom is a violinist. As the novel goes on, the piano becomes a touchstone for the world beyond the war, a place Paul could no longer inhabit.

⁴³ Rempe, *Kunst, Spiel, Arbeit*.

We can also think of the war as a stress test of the musical environment that had grown over several centuries into a densely populated assemblage of institutions, practices, and repertoire. This environment *survived*. Governments collapsed and revolutions broke out in the defeated nations, but the orchestras played on—and continued to play on in the decades after, with a mixture of old and new repertoire. New paths opened,

44 Quoted in: Elizabeth Otto and Patrick Rössler, "Introduction: Embodying the Bauhaus," in *Bauhaus Bodies: Gender, Sexuality, and Body Culture in Modernism's Legendary Art School*, ed. Elizabeth Otto and Patrick Rössler (New York, 2019), xxviii.

not just atonality (which had its roots in the prewar era), but a raft of new genres and styles: the music of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, *Gebrauchsmusik*, *Grammophonmusik*, *Zeitoper*, jazz, what we associate with Weimar culture. Walter Gropius's speech at the opening of the Bauhaus in 1918 articulated a *Zeitgeist* that many musicians also shared: "Many of you have just returned from the field of battle. Those who experienced death out there have come back totally changed; they sense that no further progress can be made along the old paths."⁴⁴

Nevertheless, the old paths were still there and frequently trod. Traditions survived and were renovated. There was a path forward, and it included the rich treasures of the past *and* the experiences of the war. It is important to note that the Weimar Republic actively sought to shore up the institutions and practices and repertoire that had accumulated over the previous centuries. It was an effort to attach the new democracy to the Austro-German musical tradition—evident during national holidays, state funerals, and other public rituals. The musical world that so many people had participated in before the war was not broken, not abandoned and possibly mattered more than ever to a population battered by a catastrophic war, economic collapse, and uncertainty about the future.

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