

IREX Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Grant
David Tompkins
October 31, 2001

Research Report

Topic of Research

The Politics of Music in the GDR and Poland: The Party, Composers and Society, 1948-1957

My dissertation engages in a comparative study of musical life in Poland and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) during the decade of high Stalinism from roughly 1948 to 1956. During this period, the aesthetic doctrine of socialist realism was the only officially tolerated form of artistic expression, and was used both to control the producers of music and to influence society. The first half of the dissertation focuses on the complex relationship between the Party authorities and composers. Here I examine in particular the cultural sections of the Party Central Committees, the Departments of Music in the Ministries of Culture, and especially the all-embracing and highly centralized Composers' Unions which exercised considerable control over the musical realms of the two countries. The second part investigates the politicization of music among wider segments of society, as I concentrate on commemorations, festivals, and amateur musical activity.

This dissertation explores two interrelated hypotheses about the Party, composers, and the musical activity of the masses. I claim that music, as a major part of cultural production in these countries, was an important element in imposing and maintaining the communist regimes of East Central Europe. The Party sought to influence artistic production as part of a project of saturating the public space with ideas and symbols in an attempt to create and control the new socialist man. Music helped the Party to establish legitimacy with respect to society; both extensive support for musical life, as well as the messages inscribed into the musical works themselves, encouraged musical elites and the masses to accept the Party's hegemonic position. I also argue that the oft-asserted image of an all-powerful Party imposing its will totally on composers and society is simply not tenable. Rather, there was much more negotiation taking place, and musical producers and society at large were both able to realize some of their own goals, as well as modify some they found anathema.

More broadly, my study sheds light on a host of issues linked to the way music was utilized and manipulated to assist in establishing dominance over society as well as the various responses of composers to political control over their artistic activity. I also examine the privileged but poorly understood place of culture in the socialist project and the relationship between communist policies and artistic production. I come to important conclusions about cultural life during the formative years of state socialism in Central Europe, and gain insights into the early histories of both the People's Republic of Poland and the GDR. Through my focus on music, I am examining wider questions about the relationship between communism and both intellectuals and society, as well as the intersection of nationalism and communism.

The comparison of Poland with the GDR is a compelling one, as it permits an examination of a similar interaction between politics and the artistic world in two neighboring, but historically quite different countries, which nonetheless underwent a similar transformation. Prior to 1945, music occupied a very different place in their respective cultures, but thereafter, the Soviet-inspired aesthetic ideology of socialist realism with its linked modes of political control was enforced in the societies of the GDR and Poland. On the surface, the musical cultures of the two countries appear quite similar, but the analogous processes and institutions at times produced dissimilar results. In my dissertation, I will increase our understanding of both the unity and diversity of a Soviet bloc once thought quite homogenous during its first decade. Examining and comparing these interactions in both the GDR and Poland will provide insights into both the processes themselves as well as the societies in which they took place, and also increase our understanding of the nature of musical culture, and culture generally, in countries where the government strove to dominate completely.

Relevance to Field

For many years, the totalitarian model of socialist societies was a major tool for understanding countries such as the GDR and Poland. The relationship between the state and society was seen as the dominance of the former—an omnipotent Party aspiring to control all aspects of society. The so-called revisionists, especially in Soviet history, began to question this model in the 1970's, focusing on social groups and uncovering a greater field of play for those living under state socialism. Scholars such as Sheila Fitzpatrick have focused on the cultural realm and posited an extensive dialogue between Party/state and artists.¹ Katherine Verdery's *National Ideology under Socialism*² does the same for East Central Europe and raises many of the theoretical questions I intend to explore. She examines the complicated dynamic between intellectuals, the Party, and national tradition in Romania and stresses the importance of the "symbolic-ideological" mode of domination in socialist societies, in which symbols and ideological premises play an important role in asserting control over society. Verdery theorizes about the way intellectuals strove for influence among themselves and with respect to the Party, and also about the way the Party sought to shape artists and their production as part of controlling and changing society. She asserts that communist regimes attempted to create an "authorized" language in order to produce and assert control over the social world,³ and this seems quite evident in the attempt to create an official, socialist-realist musical language during my period. My research will test some of her hypotheses in the musical realm in two other socialist countries.

Since 1989, the archives in both Poland and the former GDR have become almost fully accessible to scholars. The decade in which I am interested has received particular attention, as it is the formative period of state socialism in these countries. Recent books like that by Padraic Kenney⁴ make use of newly-opened archives to complicate the picture of a society once thought prostrate under the heavy hand of the Party. After a wave of largely political histories and attempts to fill in well-known "blank spots", a number of studies examining the cultural life of Poland and the GDR have also recently appeared, concentrating on literature, followed by the graphic arts, sculpture and architecture. Music, in comparison, has been somewhat neglected, except for a few musicological studies that tend to be rather brief and furthermore dismissive of the works created during this time. Composers and musicians have themselves aided this process of marginalization, sometimes feeling ashamed for their production of this period.

There are a number of studies that deal with the topic under consideration, and many more are currently being undertaken as part of a renewed interest in socialist realism and Stalinism. For Poland, three works in English touch on my period, but none have the same intensity of focus and scope of research.⁵ Several scholars are now conducting research on music in this period, such as the Cardiff musicologist, Adrian Thomas. The situation for the GDR is considerably better, as a number of younger scholars have recently completed or are undertaking research focusing on music and

¹ See especially Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992.

² Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

⁴ Padraic Kenney, *Rebuilding Poland: Workers and Communists, 1945-1950*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.

⁵ Cynthia E. Bylander, *The Warsaw Autumn International Festival of Contemporary Music, 1956-61: its goals, structures, programs, people*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, 1989. This has an introductory chapter dealing with the Stalinist period in Poland, but it is relatively short, and weak on archival sources. Also Jan Patrick Lee, *Musical Life and Sociopolitical Change in Warsaw, Poland, 1944-60*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1979, suffers from similar limitations and focuses on a narrow geographic area. Finally, Lidia Rappoport-Gelfand, *Musical Life in Poland: The Postwar Years, 1945-1977*. New York: Gordon and Breach, 1991, devotes considerable attention to the postwar decade, but focuses almost exclusively on the music itself, and furthermore on a small number of works.

politics in this period,⁶ though these studies differ in focus from my own, and are often musicological rather than historical. One recent musicological study covers some of the ground in my dissertation, but focuses almost exclusively on composers and compositional praxis.⁷ For neither Poland nor the GDR does there exist an overview of the relationship between music and politics that examines the Party, composers and the rest of society. Furthermore, my comparative approach will allow me to draw larger conclusions about the nature of the relationship between art and politics within the entire Soviet bloc rather than exclusively one country. My position as an American historian allows me to transcend the often bitter personalized debates that mark much of the scholarship on this period.

Research Sites

In total, I conducted research from September 1999, through September 2001, in Warsaw and Berlin. I spent the autumn of 1999 in Warsaw on to a Kosciuszko Foundation grant, and returned in late summer of 2001 on my IREX fellowship. From January 2000, through summer, 2001, I worked in Berlin thanks to a Fulbright/Germanistic Society of America grant and a Social Science Research Council-Berlin Program for Advanced Studies grant.

The archives in both countries yielded very rich documentation. In Warsaw, my main archive was the Archive of Modern Records (Archiwum Akt Nowych), which holds documents for the Cultural Department of the Central Committee of the Polish Communist Party, as well as all the files from the Ministry of Culture and Art. Also here are the documents relating to the organization ARTOS, which organized nearly all artistic events in Poland from 1948 to 1954. I also spent a large amount of time at Archive of the Polish Composer's Union (Związek Kompozytorów Polskich), where I consulted a large number of hitherto untouched documents, including numerous protocols from the Congresses of the Union, meetings of the main board, the commission devoted to commissioning and purchasing works, the qualification committee (for composers who wanted to join), the prize-granting committee, the committees which evaluated the compositions of members, and others. I also used the archive of the main musical publishing house (Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne) in Kraków, and looked briefly at regional archives in Kraków and Poznań.

In Berlin, I mostly researched the main Bundesarchiv, which houses SED Party documents connected to music and culture, as well as material relating to the Ministry of Culture and its predecessors. I also made use of the archive of the Academy of the Arts (Akademie der Künste), which had extensive holdings on the Academy itself, as well as on the Composers' Union and individual composers.

Recommendations

Much work is still needed on the issue of the relationship between art and politics in postwar East Central Europe in general, and Poland in particular. The public at large, as well as many scholars, still treat the period 1945-1989, and certainly 1945-56, as a sort of "dark age" with little of value, artistic or otherwise. Such a belief is manifestly untrue, and a critical and objective appraisal of culture during this period should be continued.

⁶ Joy Calico, *The Politics of Opera in the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1961*, Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Duke University, 1999; Toby Thacker's forthcoming dissertation on music in East and West Berlin, 1945-1950, University of Bristol.

⁷ Daniel zur Weihen, *Komponieren in der DDR: Institutionen, Organisationen und die erste Komponistengeneration bis 1961*, Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1999.