

Twentieth-Century Music and Politics

Essays in Memory of Neil Edmunds

Edited by
Pauline Fairclough

An Ashgate Book

TWENTIETH-CENTURY MUSIC AND POLITICS



Neil Edmonds, Bath, January 2008.
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PAULINE FAIRCLOUGH
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For Nancy and Keith

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Extracts from Shostakovich, *The Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* © With kind permission of Musikverlag Hans Sikorski, Hamburg.

Extracts from Shostakovich, *Orango* © DSCH Moscow. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

Image of Boris Iofan, 'Palace of the Soviets' © Illustrated London News/Mary Evans Picture Library.

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Foreword

Imagine the following scene: in 1994 a doctoral student has finally, after several years of effort and setbacks, reached the stage of undergoing his viva exam. His teachers wait uneasily in another room. The external examiner is an Oxford professor; the internal, a distinguished historian of popular culture. The dissertation (after much knocking into shape) has emerged as a 550-page monster on an unusual, even questionable topic, the Soviet proletarian music movement.

The teachers are getting uneasy: the viva has been going on for more than two hours – hardly a good sign. One of them can take it no longer, and tiptoes down the corridor to where the exam is happening. Outside the door a strange sound can be heard: three unaccompanied voices joining in lusty proletarian songs. This is what the most formal and strained of exams has degenerated, or risen, to – a sing-song!

Neil Edmunds, of course, got his doctorate with acclaim. I know this story is true, because I was his supervisor (and did a lot of the knocking-into-shape). He immediately became a valued friend. This foreword is about Neil, not only because the volume is dedicated to his memory, and because his legacy thoroughly deserves it, but because every title in it is on a topic that would immediately have summoned up his sympathy and interest.

Neil came to Sussex from Newport, an only child from the Welsh valleys – he retained abiding loyalty to place and family all his life. He joined the Sussex University School of Education, training to be a schoolteacher. After one term, he was told he would never make it. Then he took a surprising and bold step: to opt first for our Russian Studies MA, then for a doctorate in Soviet music. He was a historian and hadn't taken a degree in either music or Russian. Sussex was flexible like that (hardly anybody I supervised for a higher degree had come through standard academic processes: all were self-driven enthusiasts, and the better for it). His enthusiasm was tested to the limit when Neil got a year's scholarship to the Moscow Conservatory through the British Council. It was at the moment of the Soviet Union's breakdown. Food was scarce, inflation taking off and Neil had hardly a word of conversational Russian at that stage – to avoid starvation he could only point to the few items of food available on the shelves or at a canteen. But the contacts he made and materials he obtained that year made up for any hardships on the way.

After graduating, Neil had a series of temporary (one-year) appointments at the University of the West of England (UWE) in Bristol. Getting a permanent post at a British university was already difficult. His tenaciousness once again paid off; he turned out to be such a good teacher that he became indispensable. UWE eventually made him a permanent lecturer, then senior lecturer, in history. At his funeral his students paid touching tribute to him: he was very generous and had time for everyone, never needing to be reminded of a name. Though in some ways

a solitary person, he was very sociable and a keen games player – his old UWE football team has been renamed after him. All the more shocking was his sudden death from multiple organ failure soon after his 42nd birthday. A bursary has been founded at UWE in his memory by his parents.

Neil's particular talents were interwoven with his personal qualities. He had a natural sympathy with those disregarded by the elite and with their culture – no doubt what led him to the 'mass song' of the early Soviet Union in the first place. He was alive to the folly and sheer oddity of, say, musical propaganda; but in an article titled "Lenin is always with us", he can end with praise for 'the idealism and sheer enthusiasm instilled by Bolshevism ... that can easily be overlooked in our largely anti-Communist world'.¹ Friends attest that (even if prompted!) he never had a harsh word to say about anyone. Yet he also had an acute sense of humour: Gerard McBurney remembers his delight in the 'Gogolian absurdity' of the Soviet 1920s, the preposterous things people said in committees. I recollect that we often, predictably, talked about Shostakovich and the 'Shostakovich industry'; Neil gently pointed out that 'he knew how to play the system as well as anybody', what a public figure he was for much of his life: Member of Parliament, recipient of countless petitions and begging letters. I wish he had written at length on the topic.

Neil, so thoroughly a Welshman (even a Plaid Cymru voter²), was internationally minded, with a great range of contacts, from Finland to Shanghai, which this volume reflects. Of course, he loved music and was musically literate, with a great store of tapes often of rare and weird performances, which as ever he was generous in sharing. But he was firm in his belief that in music history, the music should not be allowed to crowd out the history, to which he paid scrupulously professional attention. This emerges (explicitly) from his long and very well documented study of William Glock's 'reign' at the BBC – impartially written, yet allowing the simmering political tensions of the time to show through. Its publication in 2006 shows how his talent could have developed if not cut brutally short at the beginning of 2008.³ Nonetheless, he accomplished a lot – effectively opening up a whole new field of scholarship – and I believe that for him the academic path he had chosen always remained a big and surprising adventure. How he spread inspiration around is wonderfully shown by this volume.

Robin Milner-Gulland
Professor Emeritus, University of Sussex, 2012

¹ Neil reworked this concluding phrase slightly for the final sentence in the published version of this spoken paper to remove the phrase 'largely anti-Communist world': see Neil Edmunds, "Lenin is always with us": Soviet Musical Propaganda and Its Composers during the 1920s', in Neil Edmunds, ed., *Soviet Music and Society under Lenin and Stalin: The Baton and Sickle*, London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004, p. 119.

² Plaid Cymru is the nationalist party of Wales.

³ See Neil Edmunds, 'William Glock and the British Broadcasting Corporation's Music Policy, 1959–73.' *Contemporary British History* 20/2 (June 2006), pp. 233–61.

Preface and Acknowledgements

The original impetus for this volume came from an invitation in 2008 from two of Neil Edmunds's colleagues in the Department of History, Philosophy and Politics at the University of the West of England: Dr Martin Simpson and Professor Philip Ollerenshaw. I wish to thank them for their invitation and the opportunity to put this book together as a memorial for Neil. I am grateful to my contributors for their hard work, commitment and patience.

I would like to extend special thanks to Dmitri Smirnov for his generous help with the musical examples for Gerard McBurney's chapter and to Jessica Talmage of Mary Evans Picture Library for help with sourcing our image of the Palace of Soviets.

*Pauline Fairclough
Bristol, 2012*

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Introduction

Pauline Fairclough

When considering the role music played in the major European totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century – principally those of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia – it is music's usefulness as propaganda that leaps first to mind. Certainly, it may be true that no major political movement has ever done entirely without music, whether we think of the marching bands in the Orangemen's parades in Northern Ireland and Liverpool, the Soviet mass song or Nazi celebrations of Wagner and Bruckner. Yet the very term 'propaganda' is difficult to define and fully quantify. While it is easy to seize on a Soviet song of the 1930s that glorifies Stalin and collectivization and label it 'propaganda', can we be so confident about applying the same term to the music of a major mainstream composer who received political approval in totalitarian regimes, such as Shostakovich or Richard Strauss? As a number of the chapters in this volume demonstrate, there is a complex relationship both between art music and politicized mass culture, and between entertainment and propaganda. Even when dealing with texts with explicit political content, as with Derek Scott's examination of Irish Unionist and Republican songs, the relationship between folk song, urban popular song and commercial pop/rock culture throws up questions of how certain musical idioms are perceived. Scott shows that Unionist songs, for example, can be shown to utilize English or even Scottish tunes that invite mass participation, while Nationalist songs are more evocatively folk-oriented. Thus what appears to be manifested as a split between religious communities is manifested musically far more in terms of ethnic identity ('ethnic' in the sense of relating to either English/British or Scots/Celtic), a phenomenon that clearly relies strongly on a contemporary ability to recognize those identities and to respond in appropriately different ways. What constitutes 'propaganda' in a war between sectarian or ethnic alliances that may also be bound up with issues of colonialism and religion is difficult to pin down to any single meaning. In the case of music written for either high art or popular entertainment under totalitarian rule, identifying propaganda content is an equally, if not more, fraught process and is often not the most productive approach to adopt.

Several chapters in the volume vividly illustrate the complexities of musical life under totalitarian regimes. In his study of four Nazi musical films, Guido Heldt demonstrates that mass culture produced during wartime unavoidably engages with the harsh realities of those years, whether through blatant escapism or actual ideological collaboration. Understandably, scholarly focus relating to Nazi Germany and occupied territories during the war has turned its gaze chiefly towards the suppression of European cultures (as is the case with Katarzyna

Naliwajek's chapter dealing with Polish musical culture under Hans Frank), or the Nazification of German musical life. But the result is that we know little of Nazi popular culture in its own right, even though this was the common diet of German citizens for over a decade, and played a direct role in garnering support for the regime. Only by shining a light on the everyday experiences of German citizens during the Nazi regime can we hope to understand something of the 'banal reality' of war as experienced by Germany as it, like the Allied forces, relied on propaganda for popular support.

Bogumila Mika's chapter on the founding of the Warsaw Autumn Festival shows how artistic and political aims were negotiated in the network of official debate and international reception surrounding the festival's establishment and early years. Though its initial impetus came from a desire to showcase modern Polish and Soviet music to the international musical community, the Warsaw Autumn Festival effectively smuggled in Western avant-garde under the noses of Polish and Soviet Communist leaders and opened the floodgates for what truly did become a 'bridge' event between the Eastern bloc and the rest of the world. In analogous examples, the two chapters by Simo Mikkonen and Pauline Fairclough addressing the politics of musical exchange between the Soviet Union and the West deal with the role of music as a form of 'soft power' covering the period between the Second World War and the early 1960s. Mikkonen argues that the Soviets' willingness to send artists abroad was a calculation based on the Soviet leadership's evaluation of the risks of high-profile defections balanced with the advantages of displaying Soviet talent and apparent goodwill. However double-edged this 'goodwill' really was, Mikkonen concludes that it was nonetheless effective in promoting the idea of a peaceful Soviet Union abroad, as well as initiating elements of cultural competition between East and West. Fairclough's chapter shows how such a cultural 'bridge' between the Soviet Union and Britain was cut off in the late years of the war owing to Stalin's withdrawal from international cooperation and deep-rooted habits of Soviet mistrust. But she also shows that British attempts to initiate cultural exchanges were far from innocent: both sides were playing a very deliberate propaganda game.

Gerard McBurney's close engagement with Shostakovich's incomplete opera *Orango* raises intriguing questions about political and personal satire at this delicate cusp-point of Stalinist society: just before the Stalinist repressions, and just after the First Five-Year Plan. Set in the planned, but not yet built, Palace of the Soviets (based on the widely circulated wining design by Boris Iofan), the staging would have been as bloated and grotesque as the building itself – which was in fact never built because of the impracticality of its design. This alone renders *Orango* a dangerously over-the-top spectacle, mocking, rather than genuflecting before, Stalinist monumentalism. But *Orango* was also dangerously close to the bone in terms of its personal satire. McBurney speculates convincingly that the character of Orango may have been an unobvious – and cruelly degrading – caricature of the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, who had shot himself in 1930, just a few years before Shostakovich and his librettists embarked on their ill-fated collaboration. If so,

completion of the opera could have been politically disastrous for its creators, since Stalin was shortly to announce that indifference to Mayakovsky's poetry was a crime and his canonization in Soviet culture began from that point – aptly described by Boris Pasternak as Mayakovsky's 'second death'.¹

Joan Titus's chapter on Shostakovich's approach to film scoring critiques the easy assumption that the composer ranked such work lower than composing in other 'high art' genres. Apart from Shostakovich's distinguished collaborations with Grigory Kozintsev (*Hamlet*, 1964; *King Lear*, 1970), Titus is correct in judging that this aspect of his career has been rather overlooked in the West's assessment of Shostakovich. Even more neglected are the composer's writings, partly for the same reason: it is too easy to assume that his film scores and writings are not wholly sincere, especially those dating from later in his life, when he is known to have developed the habit of signing documents without reading them. Film was one of the most intensely scrutinized art genres in the Soviet Union in Shostakovich's lifetime, monitored to a suffocating degree by Stalin, who took a very personal interest in it, as he himself was a film enthusiast as well as keenly aware of its propaganda function. Though Shostakovich did sometimes tire of film work, he composed 34 original film scores throughout his career, including some with explicitly Soviet or 'revolutionary' content. It would be folly to assume such films were scored insincerely or without artistic commitment; and Titus makes a strong case for demonstrating Shostakovich's deep engagement with film music's potential to play an integral part in film.

One clear manifestation of totalitarianism in musical culture is the active suppression or manipulation of certain ethnic or political groups, and nowhere was this more blatant than in Nazi-occupied nations in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Katarzyna Naliwajek gives a detailed account of Nazi-dominated musical life in Poland under the General Government between 1939 and 1941. Under the regime of Hans Frank, Poland saw its national culture completely crushed, with outright bans on the performance of music by Polish and Polish-Jewish composers, or any participation in concert life by Jewish musicians. This was part of a concerted campaign to eradicate Polish culture completely and to effectively transform a part of the former Poland into a German colony. Yet within the limits of these bans, Polish musicians nevertheless continued their own culture, even if performances were limited to private meetings and gatherings in cafés. By examining this 'underground' musical life, Naliwajek highlights those aspects of Polish musical culture that were particularly treasured as well as charting the network of clandestine organizations who worked to maintain it.

The Nazis practised a rather different manipulation of public opinion in occupied Serbia. During the war, the occupiers relied on a puppet Serbian administration and offered a phoney Serbian national revival in an attempt to gain popular support

¹ Cited in Patricia Blake, 'The Two Deaths of Vladimir Mayakovsky', in Blake, ed., *Vladimir Mayakovsky. The Bedbug and Other Stories*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1960, p. 50.

against the groups who most threatened the regime: Communists and royalists. In rhetoric redolent of traditional imperialism, Nazi support for Serbian culture constantly undermined it by implying its inherent inferiority to German art at the same time as encouraging it at the expense of the art of other ethnic groups of the former Yugoslavia in a classic ‘divide and rule’ strategy. In this trumped-up ‘nationalism’, targeted races such as gypsies and Jews were held up as threatening Serbian cultural identity, in a blatant attempt to foster mass feeling against those most targeted in Nazi arrests and genocide. As the post-war inquest showed, the Nazi occupiers and collaborationists mounted a concerted effort to give the impression of normality in cultural life during the war, ‘as if nothing had happened’. Music – especially popular ‘classics’ like Beethoven, Weber and Tchaikovsky – made a convenient shopfront for normality under these complex circumstances.

Many readers will find the presence of Joaquín Rodrigo surprising in a volume such as this. Yet what Eva Moreda Rodríguez demonstrates in her discussion of his celebrated work *Concierto Heroica* is not a composer actively seeking to offer propaganda to Franco’s regime, but rather the far more subtle and widespread phenomenon of what could be termed passive collaboration. What Moreda Rodríguez offers here is an alternative way of contextualizing music: not attempting to codify its resistance or even its submission, but instead to present data relating to the *Concierto*’s composition, premiere and subsequent reception. Indeed, the key question that she raises in doing so is whether the music itself is ever the right place to locate political meaning of any kind. Reception histories tend to offer a diverse picture of interpretation even when examining contemporary documents; and with the passing of time, readings evolve and may change quite dramatically. If Rodrigo showed a ‘willingness to offer critics and the regime a work which could be construed as a symbol’ then it is that very construal which must be of primary interest to us, and not the composer’s intention.

Beyond the comparatively well-defined boundaries of music’s role within totalitarian regimes lies a vast field of far more nebulous connections between music and ‘politics’, in its very broadest sense. Since the early 1990s the term ‘identity politics’ has been in widespread use as a way of grouping together an otherwise bewilderingly diverse body of cultural practices. It is within this framework that we can see composers’ relationships with their own national cultures, as well as with the wider practices of Western art music traditions. While such reflections on cultural ‘identity’ seem especially acute in the music of émigré composers such as Stravinsky, they also impinge on the reception histories of specific bodies of music within other nations as well as on assertions of national self-identity. Erik Levi’s research into the International Society of Musicians (ISM) has uncovered some uncomfortable facts about its political alliances. Levi reveals a split between those figures in the British musical world who were supportive of the European avant-garde in the 1920s and 30s and those who advocated ‘protectionist’ cultural policies that sought to champion home-grown culture. It was those on the protectionist wing who attacked the ‘infiltration’ of national culture by émigrés; and in this respect their views chimed all too well with Hitler’s own policy of

ethnically ‘cleansing’ German music. Similar tensions can be discerned in British musical writing about Soviet and other ‘leftist’ music from the 1930s right up to the 1970s; as Joanna Bullivant shows, the BBC’s Hugh Ottaway was a staunch supporter of Alan Bush, as indeed he was of Shostakovich, where such support came at the expense of contemporary British composers in the 1960s and 70s.²

Three chapters in this volume address emigration specifically. Hon-Lun Yang’s collaboration with Neil Edmunds on the Russian musical communities in 1930s Shanghai reveals how Shanghai – a city that was notoriously cosmopolitan, even ‘European’ in its rich blend of cultures and active artistic climate – was a natural choice for Russian musicians and composers who left their country in the wake of the 1917 Revolution and the ensuing civil war. Although they were classed as refugees, and thereby had a weaker legal status than the other expatriate communities there, the Russian community was large enough for talented artists nevertheless to occupy a privileged position within the host city. In a very different study focusing specifically on a single composer, Jonathan Cross examines the nature of Stravinsky’s personal and changing relationship with his native culture in parallel with the basic materials of Western musical culture itself. As a composer whose creative life began with private study with Rimsky-Korsakov in the cosseted, privileged world of Silver Age Russian culture, yet who lived through two world wars and absorbed an unparalleled breath of musical tradition and innovation, Stravinsky’s creative career holds up a mirror to changes in relation to his own national culture, exploited and perceived as the exotic ‘other’ in relation to the dominant émigré cultures in which he successfully forged most of his career. Using the Formalist-Brechtian concepts of estrangement and defamiliarization that were in widespread circulation in the 1910s and 20s, and revived in Prague and Paris in the 1960s, Cross takes an innovative approach to assessing Stravinsky’s own changing relationship to Russian and Western musical traditions as he responded to the fractured cultural landscapes of twentieth-century Europe, Russia and America. Finally, Florian Scheduling’s description of Hungarian cabaret (and other music-related émigré activities) in London – both during and after the war – unpacks crucial aspects of the émigré experience: political readjustment within a new cultural framework; definitions of ‘Self and Other’, and the tangible impact of a newly transplanted cultural community on the British art scene.

All of the chapters collected in this volume address musical life within Europe (including Soviet Russia), or within a European émigré community. The emphasis on musical life in Soviet Russia reflects the interests of the dedicatee of this volume, the Soviet music historian Neil Edmunds, who died at the tragically young age of 42 in January 2008. At the time of his death he was at work on two projects: research into Alan Bush and a collaborative project with Hon-Lun Yang on the Russian musical diaspora in Shanghai. Many of the contributors to this book were his personal friends; others, whether they knew Neil or not, have

² See also Pauline Fairclough, ‘The Old Shostakovich: Reception in the British Press’, *Music and Letters* 88/2 (2007), pp. 266–96.

generously contributed to this memorial volume and helped to make it a book that Neil himself would have loved to have been a part of. We hope that this tribute will do some justice to the memory of an original, talented scholar and much missed colleague and friend.

Chapter 1

‘A World of Marxist Orthodoxy’?

Alan Bush’s *Wat Tyler* in Great Britain and the German Democratic Republic¹

Joanna Bullivant

In 1981 Michael Tippett wrote of his fellow composer Alan Bush: ‘Alan lives in a world of Marxist orthodoxy and certainty, while I live in a world of humanist ambivalence and uncertainty’.² The two had not always seen themselves as embracing such opposite poles. They were contemporaries and friends, both with lives spanning almost the entire century (Bush lived from 1900 to 1995, Tippett from 1905 to 1998). Bush was an important influence on Tippett in the 1930s, when the young Tippett was excited by Bush’s ‘adventurous’ music and both were interested in exploring ways of linking musical and political interests.³ By the time both were composing their first operas – Tippett’s *The Midsummer Marriage* (1946–52) and Bush’s *Wat Tyler* (1948–51) – their differences were certainly apparent. Tippett had quickly abandoned party politics. *The Midsummer Marriage* continued the project he began with *A Child of Our Time*, finding a means of musical expression adequate to expressing the fractured nature of modern man and restoring ‘wholeness’. Bush, on the other hand, maintained his political radicalism as an ardent and lifelong Stalinist, denounced his earlier interests in modernism, and embraced a simplified, national style prompted by the 1948 Soviet controversy and Prague Congress.⁴ Begun that very year, *Wat Tyler* exhibits much evidence of

¹ Early versions of this paper were presented at the Oxford University Graduate Colloquia Series, the 2009 Meeting of the American Musicological Society and the 2010 ‘Twentieth-century Music and Politics’ conference in Bristol. I am grateful for the many helpful comments received. I am also grateful to Burkhard Schwalbach for his advice on translations, to Nathaniel Lew and Samantha Bassler for reading and commenting on versions of this paper, and to the Alan Bush Music Trust for allowing me access to archival material.

² Michael Tippett, ‘A Magnetic Friendship: An Attraction of Opposites’, in Ronald Stevenson, ed., *Time Remembered. Alan Bush: An 80th Birthday Symposium*, Kidderminster: Bravura, 1981, p. 9.

³ Michael Tippett, *Those Twentieth Century Blues*, London: Pimlico, 1994, p. 43.

⁴ See Julie Waters, ‘Proselytizing the Prague Manifesto in Britain: The Commissioning, Conception, and Musical Language of Alan Bush’s “Nottingham”

Bush's chosen path: it depicts a popular English uprising – the 1381 Peasants' Revolt – and working-class hero through a score making use of folk song and giving a prominent role to the chorus. We might speculate that the differences apparent in the two operas, and the larger contrasting artistic visions from which they sprung, were what Tippett had in mind when comparing himself with Bush. Not only did they choose different musical idioms, but in Tippett's view these reflected different appreciations of the nature of the modern world and how this might be addressed by an artist. This comparison is not neutral. It implies that Bush failed to recognize – or for political reasons chose to ignore – the true complexity of the contemporary world, and to produce music to match.

Such a view of Bush and his music as anti-modern was particularly prominent in the reception of the first British production of *Wat Tyler*. Despite winning a prize in the Arts Council opera competition held for the 1951 Festival of Britain, the opera was not broadcast in Britain until 1956. By the time of the production in 1974, complaints about the old-fashioned music and political message of the work were pervasive, as was the conclusion that these qualities explained both the neglect of the work in Britain and its apparent success in East Germany, where it received three professional productions.

In the context of increasing scholarly engagement with definitions of modernism and their relationship to cold war political and cultural contexts, such judgements regarding the post-war Bush and his opera have already come under scrutiny.⁵ In a study of the Glock-era BBC, the late Neil Edmunds opened up a space for critique of Bush's condemnation as anti-modern: he asserted that Bush was criticized for writing 'in a regressive idiom associated with Stalinism' during a period in which the BBC, influentially, rejected 'provincialism' and championed the avant-garde.⁶ Nathaniel Lew has likewise challenged views of *Wat Tyler* as propagandistic, reading the work as an apt emblem of Britain immediately after the Second World War in its aesthetic unsuitability for the Soviet Union, its broad appeal and its espoused intentions to reach an English audience.⁷

Symphony', *Music and Politics* 3/1 (Winter 2009), <http://www.music.ucsb.edu/projects/musicandpolitics/archive/2009-1/waters.html> (accessed 12 June 2010); R. Murray Schafer, *British Composers in Interview*, London: Faber, 1963, p. 58; Percy M. Young, *A History of British Music*, London: Benn, 1967, p. 597.

⁵ For a discussion of related issues in the pre-war context, see my 'Modernism, Politics and Individuality in 1930s Britain: The Case of Alan Bush', *Music & Letters* 90/3 (Aug. 2009), pp. 432–52.

⁶ Neil Edmunds, 'William Glock and the British Broadcasting Corporation's Music Policy, 1959–73', *Contemporary British History* 20/2 (June 2006), pp. 237, 249.

⁷ Nathaniel Lew, 'A New and Glorious Age: Constructions of National Opera in Britain, 1945–1951', Ph.D. diss, University of California, Berkeley, 2001, pp. 564–5. Lew considers the tragic ending of the work, an aspect condemned in contemporary Soviet operas, as rendering the work unsuitable for that nation, but ideal for a nation still under capitalism.

In spite of such challenges to existing views of *Wat Tyler* and Bush's experiences more widely, one almost entirely overlooked area is the opera's radio broadcast and three professional productions in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Reflecting the repressive political regime of the GDR, its apparent success there (in opposition to the British reception) has been overlooked or dismissed as politically suspect and musically regressive. Yet, as this chapter shall argue, the surprisingly nuanced GDR history may provide crucial insights. In particular, the discussion of the opera as *modern* in both Britain and the GDR offers intriguing possibilities for further consideration of Edmunds' discussion of politically influenced responses to avant-garde music, and of the extent to which the contrasting fates of the opera in Britain and the GDR are reducible to a binary East–West conflict. I shall argue that, far from presenting 'a world of Marxist orthodoxy', the history of *Wat Tyler* points towards the complex positions of two peripheral nations in the cold war cultural conflict.

Contrasting Stories of Success

To give a brief synopsis, the opera opens with a 'Herdsman' and 'Escaped Serf' discussing the growth of rebellion as peasants, meeting secretly, sing the 'Cutty Wren', a folk song believed to have originated at the time of the Peasants' Revolt.⁸ In the remainder of Act I, Wat Tyler is supported by the people of Maidstone in resisting the Poll Tax. Later, Tyler strikes the Tax Collector, Sir Thomas Bampton, in defence of his daughter, and decides to lead the uprising. The Peasant Army storm Maidstone Prison and free John Ball, the radical priest. In Act II, the King and nobles debate the rebellion and decide to meet the leaders. At the meeting with Tyler, the King agrees to the demands for freedom from serfdom but, in response to provocation from Bampton, Tyler draws his dagger and is killed. In the final scene, taking place shortly after Tyler's death, the peasants again meet with the King, who revokes his promises to end serfdom. The private grief of Tyler's wife in this scene is counterpoised with the final quietly stated chorus of belief in future freedom.

The English performances were hampered by difficulties. The BBC broadcast was achieved only after an exchange of letters and repeated hearings lasting nearly five years. The 1974 performance followed years of attempts to secure a professional production. It was organized by a company set up by Bush's own Workers' Music Association, and was hampered by financial and casting problems.⁹ Both critical reactions and the several detailed assessments of the work at the BBC objected to what was seen as the work's regressive idiom and the naive and simplistic drama and characterization. Leonard Isaacs at the BBC, writing in 1953, complained of

⁸ For a left-wing discussion of the song's origins, see A. L. Lloyd, *The Singing Englishman: An Introduction to Folksong*, London: Workers' Music Association, 1944, pp. 7–9.

⁹ For detailed information, see British Library (BL) Alan Bush Collection, MS Mus. 628–630, Correspondence relating to *Wat Tyler* vols 1–3.

the undistinguished and monotonous music, and the lack of individuality among characters crudely drawn as either working-class heroes or feudal villains.¹⁰

The many productions and favourable press reactions to the opera in the GDR stand in marked contrast. Despite the problems of talking of ‘success’ in this context, as shall be discussed, it is immediately notable that, according to Gerd Rienäcker, the vast majority of new operas premiered in the GDR in the 1950s were not performed again.¹¹ Rienäcker names only Karl-Rudi Griesbach’s *Kolumbus* and *Marike Weiden*, Jean Kurt Forest’s *Tai Yang erwacht* [Tai Yang Awakes] and Brecht and Paul Dessau’s *Die Verurteilung der Lukullus* [The Condemnation of Lucullus] as operas that enjoyed repeat performances, with parts of other operas broadcast. In this context, the three productions over a decade and the broadcast of a substantial portion of the opera are a striking achievement.

A Regressive Culture?

Was this popularity due to the political reasons and a regressive musical culture in the GDR? Peter Pirie underscored this conclusion when he wrote of Bush ‘continuing a tradition established by Ethel Smyth and Joseph Holbrooke, but for rather different reasons. Indeed, Bush’s music is much like theirs: diatonic Wagner with a social message’.¹² Certainly, GDR musical culture was heavily influenced by the Soviet Union. As Elizabeth Janik has noted, in line with the 1948 Soviet Central Committee Resolution and the Declaration of the Prague Congress against musical formalism,¹³ the ruling Socialist Unity Party (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, SED) gradually undertook a comprehensive campaign against formalism by the end of 1950.¹⁴ The founding conference of the Union of German Composers and Musicologists (VDKM) in April 1951 was ‘dominated by questions of musical formalism’. The speech on ‘Realism, the Vital Question of German Music’ by Ernst Hermann Meyer, a member of the VDKM Secretariat, attacked the avant-garde. Echoing the Soviet Resolution’s call to respect the ‘best traditions of Russian and western classical music’,¹⁵ Meyer set a mandate of the VDKM to

¹⁰ Memo from Leonard Isaacs to Head of Music Programmes, BBC Written Archives Centre, R27/556, Music Reports, 1928–1954, Buc-Bush, A., 23 Nov. 1953.

¹¹ Gerd Rienäcker, ‘Zur Entwicklung des Opernschaffens der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik: Bemerkungen zu einigen Tendenzen’. in Hans Alfred Brockhaus and Konrad Niemann, eds, *Sammelbände zur Musikgeschichte der DDR*, vol. iv, Berlin: Verlag Neue Musik, 1971, p. 12.

¹² Peter J. Pirie, *The English Musical Renaissance*, London: Gollancz, 1979, p. 188.

¹³ For the texts of both documents, see Nicolas Slonimsky, *Music since 1900*, 4th edn, London: Cassell, 1972, p. 29.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Janik, *Recomposing German Music: Politics and Musical Tradition in Cold War Berlin*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005, p. 229.

¹⁵ Slonimsky, *Music since 1900*, p. 1360.

'encourage realistic music that emphasized musical content over empty form, that cherished the German national musical heritage, and that was in the literal sense *Volksmusik* ("music of the people")'.¹⁶ There were also clearly particular issues for the dramatic element of opera in line with socialist realism. David Bathrick, writing on literature in the GDR, has spoken of the prohibition of any equivocation of meaning or textual ambiguity in works of art: 'Works of art that explicitly or implicitly encouraged or enabled ambiguity were, *by that very fact alone*, lacking a clearly articulated sense of *Parteilichkeit* [political commitment]'.¹⁷

To what extent did Bush's opera complement this political and aesthetic context? Certainly, the suitability of the popular subject and national idiom of *Wat Tyler* was noted by the SED. Their official newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*, described it as 'an outstanding example of a realistic work, national in form and progressive in content'.¹⁸ In dramatic terms, too, Bush wrote pertinently regarding his operas:

At the moment in the West pathological states of mind and guilt are fashionable subjects. ... I avoid in my subjects unrelieved murky pessimism and triumphant corruption, and aim to represent objective pictures of human life, past and present.¹⁹

In contrast, for example, to *Peter Grimes*, which was very likely in Bush's mind in this passage, in *Wat Tyler* (except in the two pastiche minstrel songs of Act II) Bush's word setting is highly syllabic, and characters interact with rigorous realism in only singing what would be spoken – a quality contributing to the perceived naivety of the characterization by British writers but appropriate to socialist realist dictates.²⁰ Where *Peter Grimes*'s moral complexity is, as Lew has noted, 'a mark of its modernity', Bush's opera may seem contrastingly non-modern in its realism in comparison. Finally, Bush had personal connections to leading musical figures of the GDR, particularly Meyer. Bush's opera was first introduced to the GDR when he played excerpts at the inaugural conference of the VDKM, as a result of which he was offered first the broadcast on Berlin radio and subsequently a full production.²¹ As Joy Calico notes, securing a performance of a new opera appears to have been strongly linked to prominent membership of the VDKM, an honour accorded to those of irreproachable politics, rather than, necessarily, the

¹⁶ Janik, *Recomposing German Music*, p. 237.

¹⁷ David Bathrick, *The Powers of Speech: The Politics of Culture in the GDR*, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995, p. 16.

¹⁸ Anon., 'Weltaufführung der Oper "Wat Tyler" in Leipzig', *Neues Deutschland* 8 Sept. 1953, p. 4.

¹⁹ Alan Bush, "'Wat Tyler" and the Purpose of Opera', *Opera* 25/6 (June 1974), p. 490.

²⁰ Alan Bush to Doreen Jacobs, 22 June 1950, BL Alan Bush Collection, MS Mus. 452, Miscellaneous Correspondence Jan.–June 1950.

²¹ Alan Bush, 'In My Eighth Decade', in *In My Eighth Decade and Other Essays*, London: Kahn & Averill, 1980, pp. 21–2.