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## Music and International History in the Twentieth Century

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# Review

## ***Music and International History in the Twentieth Century***

Jessica Gienow-Hecht (ed). New York: Berghahn Books, 2015.  
278pp.

### Frédéric Ramel\*

For several decades, musicologists have dealt with the role of music in international relations using their own tools. They have focused on musical change in the context of modernity, especially how traditional music and folk music interact with music from other localities. Paradoxically, musicologists have contributed more to the field of international relations than historians or political scientists. Fortunately, those in history and political science have initiated an acoustic turn which aims to fill the gap. Jessica Gienow-Hecht is one historian who has promoted this movement thanks to her well-known monography dedicated to cultural American-German relations in early twentieth century (Gienow-Hecht, 2009). *Music and International History in the Twentieth Century* extends earlier work by building a bridge between musicologists and historians. It echoes research programs that aim at the cross-fertilization of various disciplines (Ahrendt, Ferrugatto, and Mahiet, 2014; Urbain, 2008). According to the eight contributors to this work, music must not be isolated from other social facts because it is a part of history. Defined as a sounding

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activity, music embodies “a measuring stick for the quantity as well as for the quality of an international relation” (2). As commerce or science, it helps to unify but also to divide at the global level.

What is interesting about this book? First, each chapter focuses on one genre of music—classical music. This kind of aesthetics is less studied because of its seemingly apolitical nature. Current research shows that at the end of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century new interests grew for disseminating operas and other forms of classical music abroad. In addition, composers were influenced by the ideological context within the U.S. during the Cold War period.

Second, this book highlights the benefits of music in the study of international history. How do we analyze this art? Music does not embody strictly “something to give for influencing people” as concluded by most works on cultural diplomacy. It is also “a medium, a transmitter, and a symbol for a message as well as a reflector for identity and communication” (12). *Music and International History* proposes a sensitive reading of international relations because it finds music to be “a transporter of atmosphere, of mood, and emotion in the making of international affairs” (20).

The book is divided into two (unbalanced) parts. The first part (covering two chapters) explores music “without the state” by focusing on two case studies: the reception of the American Barrison sisters in the 1890s concerts in Europe and how different ethical codes concerning the links between voices and the soul are used by the audience; and the role of the International Society for Contemporary Music as a transnationalized movement during the 1930s that was contrary to the Nazi perspective on music. The second part (covering six chapters) describes how states use classical music in different contexts: France, the U.S., the UK and the Soviet in Occupied Germany; the U.S. during the Cold War; and the Polish-Belarusian musical relations at the end of the Cold War. These two parts are enriched by an introduction that provides the state of present knowledge, as well as research programs that should be continued.

Without giving an exhaustive review of each contribution, it is enough to say that a number of chapters propose new perspectives on musical policies adopted by states. For instance, the chapter about music during the German occupation demonstrates how music is linked to military coercion. The Allies became rivals over the creation of radios and orchestras. They implemented different musical policies based on their conceptions of audiences and contents. Although the Americans did not organize concerts of jazz in order

to distance themselves from the Nazi stereotype of American identity, they did work against French interests. During the symbolic Concert of Beethoven concertos for violin with Yehudi Menuhin and Furtwangler, the American troops spoiled this symbol (104). In other words, periods of post-conflict reconstruction provided opportunities to develop rivalries between the Allies.

Of the points made in these chapters, two stand out as being particularly counter-intuitive. First, states do not consider classical music as an instrument limited to the sphere of cultural diplomacy. They associate musicians with military efforts to manage major international crises. This was the case with President Eisenhower, who decided to organize classical concerts in Iceland during an emergency (168–69). This music program in January 1955 must be construed as an American defense tool. The musicians of the Boston Symphonic Orchestra were transported to Iceland by military aircraft. They were “part of Eisenhower’s Cold War army of private citizens—cultural diplomats employed to safeguard the future of a military alliance essential to U.S. and NATO security” (175).

Second, the use of music by political leaders is nothing but nuanced. The audience shows genuine agency by asking for quality even though listeners may not like Western music. Symphonic tours and concerts abroad organized by the Department of State can cause strong reactions on the part of “beneficiaries.” The audience is not silenced or passive; rather, they evaluate the quality of performers. Receiving renowned American orchestras or notable artists can strengthen diplomatic relations. However, if the audience perceives a lack of prestige and significance of the musicians, they will express their dissatisfaction (125–26). The American choices are interpreted as pure propaganda that disrespects people. By describing such mechanisms, Danielle Fosler-Lussier mobilizes the classic notion of soft power. But it is the concept of gift which is relevant here. The sociology of the gift highlights two social configurations in which the present exchanges operate: situations of relative equality of the players and situations of major inequality of the players. In the second case, the gift becomes an instrument of prestige that expresses donor superiority. How do we interpret the musical gifts from the United States? Do the receivers make gifts in return? How is reciprocity organized? The stimulating chapter by Fosler-Lussier does not use this approach of gift but it underlines convincingly that influence and cultural reduction differ from a unilateral phenomenon that moves only from a dominant power to other actors. It is negotiated between the parties.

American tropism is a part of these case studies. But the twentieth century embodies an American century and focusing on classical music is justified because the academic literature dedicated to popular music is abundant. However, the main idea defended may raise questions. The structure of the book relies on the progressive appropriation of music by states. States have developed an increasing interest in the use of music for political ends. Transnationalization of music comes first though this idea is debatable. In the American case, it occurs because of state design. Music embodies a practice developed in the social sphere and should not be subject to public intervention. Progressively, due to international circumstances which requires a change in American foreign policy, Washington invests in this field. But is this trend confirmed for other states, particularly European powers? In addition, during the history of long-term, the idea of gradual appropriation by states is not probative. The emergence of the modern state in the sixteenth century entails the promotion of prestige abroad that passed through the use of musical means, as illustrated by Charles Quint or in a more iconic way with the King-dancer Louis XIV.

Jessica Gienow-Hecht insists this book is an accident. After the publication of her monograph *Sound Diplomacy*, she said she did not have enough energy to engage in a new adventure. Well, she did. This book shows that music is not the “dessert,” but “the meat and the potatoes” (Buzzanco [2000], quoted by Fosler-Lussier, 119). In short, it nourishes our understanding of international history. IR scholars, especially rationalists or structural realists of IR, should read *Music and International History in the Twentieth Century*.

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