

Beyond Hitler's reach: American music and the cultural diaspora of the 1930s

The flight from Behemoth

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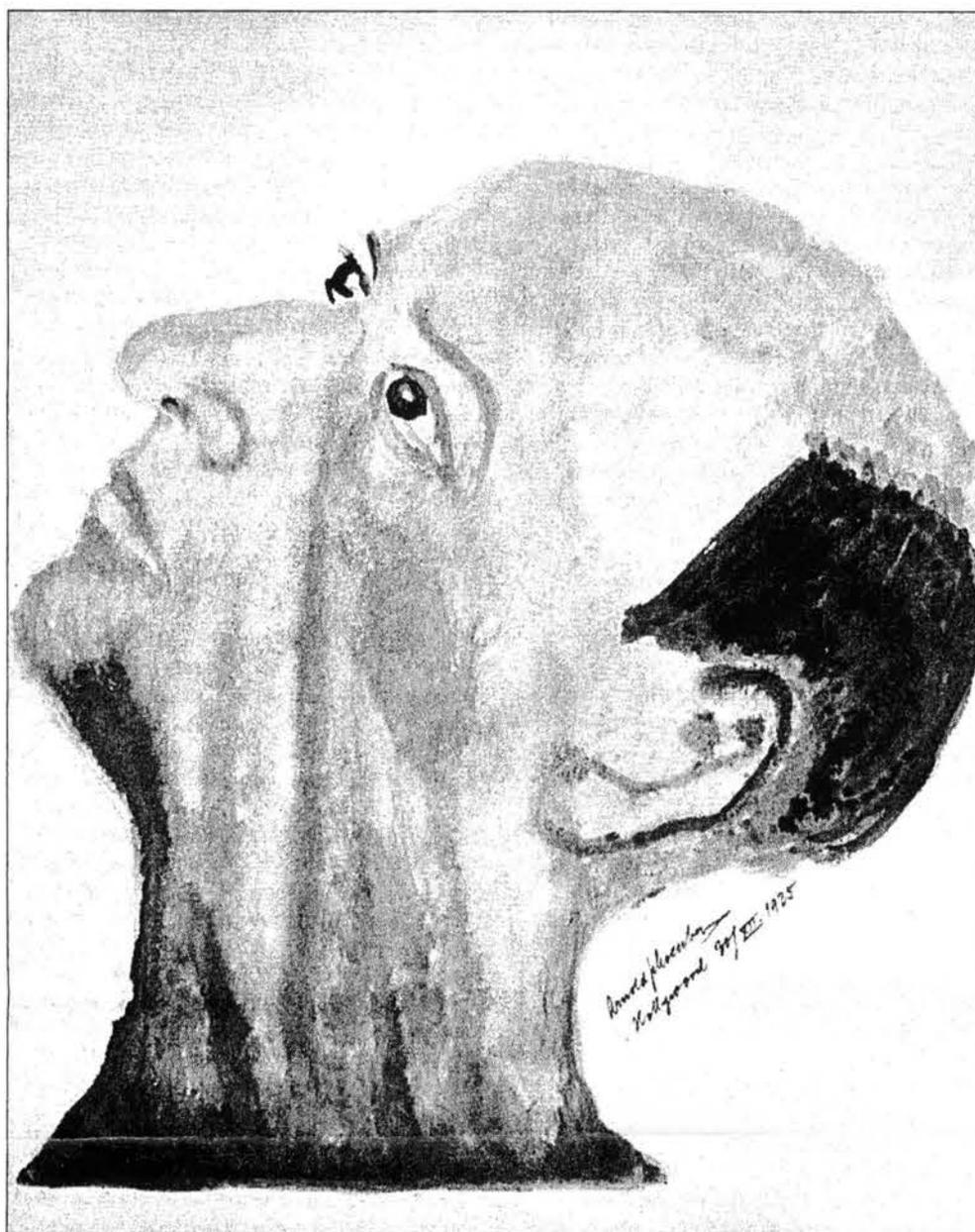
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DRIVEN INTO PARADISE

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Arnold Schoenberg, self-portrait, signed "Hollywood", 1935

In the calendar of America's long struggle for cultural autonomy, the last day of October 1933 carries an admonitory asterisk. Across the river from Manhattan, the *Ile de France* docked at Hoboken, New Jersey, and among the disembarking passengers were Gertrude and Arnold Schoenberg and their one-year-old daughter. There were no reporters or press photographers waiting for them. But five frustrating months of exile in Paris were over, and for the remaining fifteen years of his life Schoenberg was to be a formidable presence in the United States. The authority he commanded in his lifetime survived him for about a quarter of a century.

Well before the first anniversary of his arrival, Schoenberg was happily ensconced in Hollywood. In October 1934, barely a month after celebrating his sixtieth birthday, he wrote the first of his two speeches "On the Jewish Question". In its closing passage, the image of the expulsion from Eden is transformed by a double inversion, the ironies of which are at once aggressive and benign; he begins by parodying the view of his Austro-German enemies, identifying himself with the snake that has been sentenced to "go on its belly and to eat dust all the days of its life", but ends with a hymn to the new-found land where he can once again "go on his feet", where kindness and good cheer are the norm, and where "to be an expatriate of another country is the grace of God". Thus to be "driven into paradise", as Schoenberg saw it in 1934, was indeed to be fortunate.

Sixty years later, some such conclusion was also implicit in the proceedings of an international conference concerning the musical migration from Austria and Germany to the US in the 1930s and 40s. Convened by the music department at Harvard University, it was jointly chaired by Reinhold Brinkmann – Harvard's Ditson Professor of Music and a leading Schoenberg scholar and editor – and his colleague from the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Christoph Wolff. Papers delivered at that conference have now been elaborated and ably edited, by Brinkmann and Wolff, for publication in the present form. The results are almost always interesting and sometimes outstanding. But, despite the references to recent literature, *Driven into Paradise* is manifestly a product of the period when Fukuyama's notion of the "End of History" achieved its widest circulation.

In that context, so patriarchal and authoritarian a figure as Schoenberg would have been inadmissible, unless stripped of his grand narratives and reduced to human proportions. Once his 1934 speech has disorged a suitably para-

doxical title, it is relegated to a philosophical backwater, and replaced in the foreground by a letter Schoenberg sent in February 1940 to a recently arrived Austrian friend. Practical rather than idealistic, it is the text for the first of two synoptic essays under the rubric "Introductory Thoughts". Brinkmann's "Reading a Letter" serves to introduce such leading motifs as emigration versus exile, psychic trauma, acculturation, and the problems and perils of an actual or hoped-for homecoming. It also provides a platform for the cultural historian Peter Gay, whose own "Introductory Thoughts" tellingly borrow their title – "We miss our Jews" – from the sudden and emotional exclamation with which Willy Brandt in the mid-1960s electrified a New York audience that included a number of German-born social scientists.

Gay contends that Schoenberg "benefited from his transplantation to American soil" in two respects: he became "more human", and he entered "into closer contact with the contemporary world". But had the composer really been any less "human" during the exceptionally happy and productive winter and spring of 1931–2, when he was living more or less incognito in Catalonia? Or more closely in touch with "the contemporary world" than he had been in

cosmopolitan Berlin, on a good salary, after his lean post-war years in a provincialized Vienna? The benefits and blessings of "transplantation" were by no means unfamiliar to the Schoenbergs by the time they disembarked at Hoboken.

Gay appears to be on more solid ground in his fascinating account of the social scientist and former trade-union lawyer Franz Neumann, who emigrated to London in 1933, studied at the London School of Economics, and was adopted by Harold Laski, among others. Perhaps because it is so clearly part of a discarded narrative, Gay does not mention the major work Neumann began in London and completed in New York in December 1941. *Behemoth* was a Marxist study of the totalitarian structures of Nazi Germany, and it concludes with the prophecy that, because of its internal contradictions, the regime will eventually be overthrown by "conscious action of the oppressed masses".

During the fifteen years following Hitler's defeat by quite other means, Neumann was a highly popular teacher of postgraduate students at Columbia. As one of them, Gay suggests that they helped influence Neumann's conversion to a liberal/left outlook. His perception that Neumann "was becoming Americanized without losing his European roots" reminds him of

Laura Fermi's image, in her book *Illustrious Immigrants* (1971), of a "more human" Schoenberg, and allows him to pause at the Master's graveside for long enough to pay his respects but not a moment longer; for "the most brilliant instance of this musical symbiosis is of course Kurt Weill". Weill has already appeared in Brinkmann's own "Introductory Thoughts" as the "paradigm" of an artist who "embraced" immigration and integrated himself and his art so thoroughly into his new homeland and its culture that "even the term 'immigrant' is no longer applicable". Understandably taking exception to "postwar German musicologists" who have been unkind about "the so-called American Weill", Brinkmann almost inadvertently reminds us of the "so-called" German Weill that American musicologists occasionally wrote about in less cautious days – not to mention the generally unnoticed French Weill and, above all, the "so-called" Jewish Weill.

About this side of himself, the composer was distinctively reticent. But together with Schoenberg and Franz Werfel, he is central to an important contribution, "Strangers in a strangers' land", by Alexander J. Ringer, who is perhaps best known for his book *Arnold Schoenberg: The composer as Jew*. Born in Berlin in 1921, Ringer writes with unique authority in the present context: though never directly referred to, his own experiences of the Nazi terror colour much that he has to say, and help explain why for him music and song still seem to constitute the grandest of all narratives, and yet remain inseparable from ironies, scepticism, and ruptures of every sort. For Ringer as listener and seeker, there are no categorical or hierarchical distinctions between, say, Schoenberg's music and Weill's, or between Hebrew cantillation and the universe of popular song.

It is a resolute essay, and a warm one. Its closest companions, though nominally among the furthest removed, are those by Bruno Nettl and Walter Levin. Nettl's account of his musicologist father, Paul Nettl, is humanly one of the most telling passages in the entire book, comparable to Gay's account of Franz Neumann but quietly regretful that Nettl, already in his sixtieth year when he arrived in the United States, was perhaps too old to "embrace" America as fully as his family did. Levin, for his part, speaks of the wider family of chamber music – of the quartets and ensembles formed by such immigrant musicians as Adolph Busch, Rudolf Serkin and Rudolf Kolisch. It was they, says Levin, who laid new foundations and prepared for a time when America would become what it is today: "a major centre of instrumental and chamber music study for musicians from around the world".

During the winter of 1940–1, the employment or otherwise of "refugee" teachers and academics in American schools and colleges became the subject of a debate about positive discrimination that rings many a bell in present-day Europe. The debate forms the culmination of David Josephson's enthralling and superbly organized "Documentation of Upheaval and Immigration in the *New York Times*". It was opened in the *Times* by Olin Downes, the paper's music critic. Downes had been a frequent visitor to Europe since his appointment in 1924. Although predisposed towards Sibelius's

Finland, Kodály's Hungary, and the England of Holst and Vaughan Williams, he had attended the major Austro-German festivals and noted what was afoot. Insisting that the future of American music depended on the development of "healthy" national roots, he was deeply suspicious of what he called the hothouses of Central Europe and their sterile intellectualism. Yet his *Times* readers were left in no doubt as to the realities and the cultural implications of the Nazi seizure of power.

Josephson's own expert summary of the upheavals in Germany after March 1933 owes much to his long experience with the documents and music of Tudor times – another period of persecution and recusancy, of probity and betrayal, of craven or flagrant opportunism. Taken too far, the obvious parallels might explain why the coolly documentary precision with which Josephson records the main and purely American part of his story becomes a little fuzzy in the culminating debate about jobs for "refugee" musicians. For it is here that he charges the East Coast musical Establishment with elitism, snobbery, abject hero-worship and, in the exemplary case of Roger Sessions, callous indifference.

Not as a composer (whose eminence equalled that of his slightly younger contemporary Aaron Copland), but as a teacher based in Princeton and New York, Sessions had written to the *Times* deploring "a movement among certain musicians and 'music lovers' towards a kind of chauvinism which is neither musical nor American", and citing as a particularly vicious example an article about refugee musicians. According to Josephson's indictment, Sessions then took his own "cheap shots" at American musicians, and having made a "straw man" of the "master craftsman", invidiously compared him with the "artist" (in truth, a travesty of his lifelong convictions). Appalled by Sessions's "indifference", Josephson brings forward his principal witness, a voice-teacher from Indianapolis whose plain-speaking honesty and common sense about unexplored possibilities in "smaller communities" put the city slickers to shame.

In sixty pages of otherwise scrupulous documentation, commentary and end-notes, Sessions's prolonged and intensive engagement with political and cultural issues central to *Driven into Paradise* somehow escapes notice. Equally relevant and likewise unremarked is the crucial year Sessions spent in Berlin during the early 1930s – a year that included the Nazi seizure of power and its immediate aftermath. Throughout the rest of that unhappy decade, and indeed for the remainder of his life, Sessions's political, philosophical and cultural outlook was profoundly affected by the experience of witnessing the birth of a new Behemoth. It was not only because Schnabel, Klemperer and Feuermann were among his friends and colleagues during their last year in Berlin that he spoke repeatedly and with such vehemence about America's responsibilities towards refugees and immigrants, and warned against isolationism in all its forms.

The merely parochial is one of those forms, and complacency is its watchword. On neither count is *Driven into Paradise* entirely innocent. So what does it have to say in the test case of the composer Stefan Wolpe? Fleeing from Berlin to Vienna in March 1933, Wolpe spent the rest of the year there, and then moved to Palestine. During the four years he was teaching at the conservatory in Jerusalem, he steeped himself in Jewish and other folk musics, made settings of contemporary Hebrew and Yiddish poets and of biblical texts, and renewed the entire basis of his thinking. In 1938, he left Palestine for the States, where Aaron Copland was notable among those who welcomed his

arrival. Some of his earliest students were to become leading figures in American big-band jazz, an area that had fascinated him since the heyday of Paul Whiteman.

Anne C. Schreffler's invaluable contribution to the Harvard symposium concentrates on Wolpe's four happy and productive years teaching at Black Mountain College in rural North Carolina. Founded in 1933 by a pioneering American educationist whose vision of progressive education owed much to post-1918 Germany and England and a bit to the kibbutz ideal, Black Mountain had become by the 1950s an essentially American venture. When Wolpe arrived with his third wife – Hilda Morley, the young American poet he had married in 1948 – it must have seemed a sort of Eden. Among the friends he made there were John Cage, Merce Cunningham and Robert Rauschenberg; but his closest bond was with the leading American poet and *Moby-Dick* interpreter, Charles Olson.

As for the music Wolpe wrote at Black Mountain, Schreffler is at once helped and hindered by Wolpe's explosively discontinuous and "open" descriptions. Just as Olson's "projective verse" opposed the print-oriented verse



Erich Wolfgang Korngold and his family arrive in Los Angeles, October 26, 1936

that could only end up as "private-soul-at-any-public-wall", so do Wolpe's writings resist closure and strive for the same kinetic energy and subversive power that animate his finest music. From the war years onwards, it had been an identifiably American music, if not in the sense Downes might easily have recognized. Yet the positive impression of it conveyed by Schreffler's essay is by no means as clear as the strikingly negative one left by a single paragraph in Kim H. Kowalke's key essay, "Reading Whitman / Responding to America: Hindemith, Weill, and Others".

Having distanced himself from "the fundamental assumptions of postwar European modernism" in general, and Eurocentric Exile Studies in particular, Kowalke asks which European composers were "fluent enough in the American idioms of both language and music to tackle Whitman", and wonders whether "outsiders" could cope with the problems Whitman had posed for "even the most talented American composers". Could a composer – could any composer, he seems to mean – surmount the cultural barriers "that Whitman himself transcended"? In the "case" of Stefan Wolpe, Kowalke continues, "the answer would

seem to be no". The evidence he cites in support of this fairly sweeping judgment is an uncharacteristic and long-forgotten (if ever remembered) setting of Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain!" Kowalke proceeds to demolish it.

Published in 1946 and clearly intended for the kind of musical events still being promoted in the pre-McCarthy era by the far Left and its remaining allies in the labour unions, "My Captain!" is Wolpe's only Whitman setting. Unlike his pre-war settings from the Hebrew, or even the relatively unimportant Brecht settings dating from the Black Mountain period, it is not a song that even the most fervent of his admirers would be keen to promote. No worse and perhaps slightly better than many a political song concocted for the French and Italian Resistance movements only two or three years earlier, it owes little or nothing to European modernism, and is relevant to Kowalke's purposes only because a setting of "My Captain!" is the first in a set of Whitman songs composed in 1942 by Kurt Weill. Including in his appraisal a song Weill added in July 1947 for a commercial recording, Kowalke boldly describes the *Four Walt Whitman Songs* as "a compelling mini-drama, inflected with vernacular Americanisms but resonating with Schumann, Puccini, and Mahler – a mediation, if not a resolution, of the conflict between the Old World and the New". This is asking much of a handful of songs, however richly endowed they may be with American homespun and alleged intertextual subtleties from the other side.

As if from the clandestine cellars of Anton von Webern's Vienna in the early 1940s, one lonely essay, by Claudia Maurer Zenck, issues forth and studies the "Challenges and Opportunities of Acculturation" as exemplified in the Californian "exile" of Schoenberg, Stravinsky and Ernst Krenek. Whether it is Schoenberg's fault for allegedly lowering his standards and postponing his obligations to serialism so as to meet the demands of the American marketplace, or Stravinsky's for worrying about his cash-flow problems in wartime Hollywood, or Krenek's for flirting with American folklore in Palm Springs, the remorselessly misconstrued evidence of compromise, backsliding and venality already reveals itself for what it is in the third of the eighty-five footnotes: "The outward forms of adaptation may be as obvious as they are amusing, such as Schoenberg watching a tennis match clad in a T-shirt and cap, Stravinsky wearing swimming trunks in his garden, or Krenek switching to orange-juice-and-whisky cocktails."

Far from obvious and much more amusing is Bryan Gilliam's splendid account of how the former Viennese opera composer Erich Wolfgang Korngold coped with the challenges and opportunities America offered him. Driven into paradise only in the sense that he was invited to its West Coast by Max Reinhardt, Korngold refused to call himself a refugee, succeeded brilliantly as a Hollywood film composer, and was never the victim of anything but the fickleness of fashion, once the opera he had composed in Vienna at the age of twenty, *Die tote Stadt*, had brought him temporary fame and fortune on both sides of the Atlantic. Gilliam's remarkable essay on "Korngold's Double Exile in America" argues that European composers who reached the New World without any high-modernist credentials were fated to suffer a second exile, once they were there.

Even while Korngold and Weill are occupying the commanding heights that once were reserved for the likes of Schoenberg and Sessions, the editors of the Harvard symposium observe the old-world courtesies, and invite Sessions's former pupil Milton Babbitt to reminisce. Anecdotal history with a touch of valedictory poignancy, Babbitt's reports and reflec-

tions concern a landscape of exile exactly halfway between Europe and California – a semi-paradise where all was harmony, and Schoenberg's imperfectly translated *Harmonielehre* was there to prove it. As the doyen among the contributors to *Driven into Paradise*, Babbitt is an indispensable witness to the once-vivid reality of a musical culture that has vanished more slowly but quite as surely as the ice in Krenek's cocktail glass.

Safely docked across the river from Hoboken, *Driven into Paradise* is that much closer to Broadway and the faltering narratives of Show Business. Its arrival in time for the new millennium was not inopportune, for even the glaring omissions signal the need for new endeavour. As if to correct, at the last hour, the otherwise incorrigible, the volume ends with an "honor roll" of 150 musicologists who emigrated from Germany, Austria and Central Europe during the fifteen years beginning c1930. Compiled at the suggestion of Bruno Nettl, it is far from comprehensive; yet it recognizes, as the book itself does not, the multiplicity of the host cultures that remained beyond Hitler's reach, and the dangers of isolating and privileging any one of them. If the US represented a kind of paradise (or its opposite, though one doesn't hear of that) for those who had fled from mainland Europe by the summer of 1940, so did Palestine, Australia, South America, Japan and, closest to hand, the British Isles. While there is space on the "honor roll" for a German music critic who left for France in 1938 and yet became an assiduous contributor to the *Pariser Zeitung* during the Occupation, there is none for the unfortunate who ended up in Stalin's Russia.

"Perhaps it is part of our destiny", wrote Sessions in August 1945, "to help bring once more to existence something like that 'good European' of whom Goethe and others dreamed, and whom our common late enemy sought, above all else, to destroy." For the Willy Brandt who electrified that New York meeting in the mid-1960s, the elderly German-born academics he was directly addressing had been personal witnesses to the last great betrayal of classical Weimar humanism. But exactly half a century after the new Behemoth had been defeated, there were no scholars from either side of the Atlantic waiting to declare at the Harvard conference that the much more recent defeat of another "common late enemy" might be the occasion for demonstrating that if the Enlightenment project, despite majority reports to the contrary, remained unfinished, it might yet be revived in the reciprocal form proposed by Sessions in 1945. The Old World was no longer on the agenda, except in so far as its former gods were driven from its shores and made "more human" in the New.

"You become American by choosing America", exclaimed Susan Sontag on Radio 4 the other day. Weill chose America, and so did Schoenberg; Korngold chose America, and so did Wolpe. Good for them. So how did they fare in later years? Pretty well on the whole; but not always and not everywhere. "You complain of lack of culture in this amusement-arcade world", wrote Schoenberg (from LA) to Oskar Kokoschka (in London) in 1946; "I wonder what you'd say to the world in which I nearly die of disgust." He surely wasn't thinking of Alma Mahler-Werfel's champagne parties up the road in Beverly Hills. He didn't only mean "the movies", as he assured his old friend. He was talking, by way of example, about an advertisement; and describing, without knowing it, that looming hyperreality into which he and his world would eventually seem to dissolve.

David Drew is currently co-ordinating European plans for the Wolpe centenary in 2002.