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

The flight from Behemoth

DAVID DREW

Reinhold Brinkmann and Christoph Wolff, editors

DRIVEN INTO PARADISE
The musical migration from Nazi Germany to the United States
373pp. Berkeley: University of California Press; distributed in the UK by Wiley, £35. TLS £33. 0520214137

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 Ille 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 parroting the view of his Austrian-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 Fikuyama'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 striped of his grand narratives and reduced to human proportions. Once his 1914 speech has disgorged a suitably parasitical 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 contemporary audience. 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 ignominiously 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 of David Josephson (1971), a "more human" Arnold Schoenberg, and allows him to pause at the Master's grave for long enough to pay his respects but not a moment longer; for "the most brilliant instance of this musical synthesis is of course Kurt Weill". Well 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 successfully that "the genre 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 can make him speak with a voice that is both clear and heartfelt.

Why for him music and song still seem to constitute the grandest of all narratives, and yet remain inseparable from irony, scepticism, as well as hope and desire. 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 Kotsch. It was, they says, Levin, who laid new foundations and prepared the way for the 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 of otherwise "refugee" teachers and academics in American schools and colleges became the subject of a debate about possible 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, Koldaly’s Hungary, and the English of Hoist 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 bouchouses 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 musically to the last period of the documents and music of Tudor times — another period of persecution and recusancy, of probity and betrayal, of craven or flagellant opportunism. Take, for example, the case of Roger Sessions, a celebrated instance. It is no longer possible to explain why the coolly documentary precision with which Josephson records the main and purely American part of his story becomes a callous indifference. For it is here that he charges the East Coast musical Establishment with elitism, snobbery, abject hero-worship and complacency is its watchword. In 1938, he left Princeton to the steady refusal of the leading American poet and Mohy-Dick interpreter, Charles Olson. As for the music Wolfe wrote at Black Mountain, Schreffer is at once helped and hindered by Wolfe’s explosively discontinuous and “open” descriptions. Just as Olson’s “pro- jective verse” opposed the print-oriented verse seem to be no”. The evidence he cites in support of this fairly swiftly judgment is an uncharacteristic and long-forgotten (if ever remembered) setting of Whitman’s “O Captain! My Captain!” Wolfe 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 Wolfe’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 so much a Whitman setting as one that looming hyperreality into which he and his world would eventually seem to dissolve.

Safely docked across the river from Hoboken, Driven into Paradise is that much closer to Broadway and the failure of American Business. Its arrival in time for the new millennium was not inopportune, for even the glaring omissions signal the need for new endeavour. As to its content, the volume ends with an “honour roll” of 150 musicologists who emigrated from Germany, Austria and Central Europe during the fifteen years after Josephson’s original suggestion of Bruno Nettl, it is far from comprehen- sive; yet it recognizes, as the book itself does not, the multiplicity of the host cultures that were at stake, for example, in 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), then Europe had a history of complicity, with the summer of 1940, so did Palestine, Australia, South Africa, Japan, and, closest to hand, the British Isles. While there is space on the occasions of less musicological allure, for either side of the Atlantic waiting to declare at the Harvard conference that the much more recent defeat of another “common enemy” of which the Enlightenment project, despite major controversy and, therefore, the contrary, remained unfinished, it might yet be revived in the reciprocal form proposed in the 1960s. 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.

“Driven into Paradise”, composed by choosing America”, exclaimed Susan Somberg on Radio 4 the other day. Well chose America, and so did Schoenberg; Kornogold chose America, and so did Wolfe. Good for them. So how did they do? And what future composer, if any, might be sought, above all else, to destroy.” For the Willy Brandt who electrified that New York meeting in the mid-1960s, the elderly German- born academic he was directly addressing had been personal witnesses to the last great betrayal of classical Weimar humanism. But barely half a century after the new Behemoth was born, so much of the music to tackle Whitman”, and wonders whether “outsiders” could cope with the problem of Whitman had posed for “even the most tal- ented American composers.” For a composer — could any composer, he seems to mean — surmount the cultural barriers “that Whitman himself transcended”? In the “case” of Stefan Wolfe, Kowalke continues, “the answer would concern a landscape of exile exactly half- way between Europe and California — a semi- paradise where all was harmony, and Schoen- berg’s imperfectly translated Harmonielehre was there to prove it. As the days 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.

It is a very different story for Josephson. 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 — a real culture; a culture that could only end up as “private-soul-at-any- public-wall”, so do Wolfe’s meditation clausule and strive for the same kinetic energy that could only end up as “private-soul-at-any-public-wall”, so do Wolfe’s meditation clausule and strive for the same kinetic energy that could be our Americanism but resonating with lar Americanisms but resonating with national roots, he was deeply suspi­ cious of what he called the bouchouses 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 musically to the last period of the documents and music of Tudor times — another period of persecution and recusancy, of probity and betrayal, of craven or flagellant opportunism. Take, for example, the case of Roger Sessions, a celebrated instance. It is no longer possible to explain why the coolly documentary precision with which Josephson records the main and purely American part of his story becomes a callous indifference. For it is here that he charges the East Coast musical Establishment with elitism, snobbery, abject hero-worship and complacency is its watchword. In 1938, he left Princeton to the steady refusal of the leading American poet and Mohy-Dick interpreter, Charles Olson. As for the music Wolfe wrote at Black Mountain, Schreffer is at once helped and hindered by Wolfe’s explosively discontinuous and “open” descriptions. Just as Olson’s “pro- jective verse” opposed the print-oriented verse seem to be no”. The evidence he cites in support of this fairly swiftly judgment is an uncharacteristic and long-forgotten (if ever remembered) setting of Whitman’s “O Captain! My Captain!” Wolfe 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 Wolfe’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 so much a Whitman setting as one that looming hyperreality into which he and his world would eventually seem to dissolve.

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

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