

Musical power and the East-West international diplomacy

Review by Anthony Grégoire

Music and International History in the Twentieth Century

by Jessica C. E Gienow-Hecht, ed

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If the idea of interdisciplinarity is increasingly lauded as good scientific practice, the reality is more complicated and interdisciplinary research, in any field, is harder than it seems (Borofsky, 2002). In the present case, Jessica C.E. Gienow-Hecht (editor of *Music and International History in the Twentieth Century*, published in 2015) highlights the same situation in the fields of music and history. Within this book, she successfully establishes a dialogue between historians and musicologists with the idea that music – particularly classical music – is not only a musicological object but can even be a powerful tool for historians to understand and narrate the history of international relations in the 20th century. In this vein, contributors to the book were selected among both disciplines according to their respective interests within the related sub-disciplines of history and musicology, and also for their attention to particular concepts and theories the editor decided to highlight – genres (musical), Cold War, manipulation, communication, and the state.

This book is divided into two sections. The first one, *Music, International Relations, and the Absence of the State*, brings together the first chapters. Chapter 1 (*The Wicked Sisters*) explains how music can travel between Europe and America without retaining its meaning. Presenting the case of the Barrisons Sisters' use of sexuality in their burlesque musical performances at the end of the 19th century, David Monod demonstrates that even if the musical performance arises from a shared tradition, it is culturally bounded and not necessarily translatable. The author suggests that an international approach can provide a complete portrait of the history and the development of musical reception according to

different times and places. In chapter 2 (The International Society for Contemporary Music and Its Political Context (Prague, 1935)), Anne C. Shreffler shows how the decision of the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM) to keep a neutral position in the particularly high-tensioned political situation between communists and socialists in the context of the rising of fascism is a political act in itself. In fact, the motivation of the ISCM to provide an apolitical space of freedom and creativity for modern and contemporary composers obligated itself to “bound” its identity in a distinct social role to avoid the intrusion of party politics in its musical sphere. For the author, this decision of the ISCM to take a strong neutral political orientation, articulating international collaboration and artistic freedom, permitted the society to resist party political pressures internationally. Thus, Shreffler suggests, the idea that music and political spheres could be distinct is not congruent with the reality even if disparities exist between both.

The second section, Music, International History, and the State, comprises six other chapters (chap. 3 to 8). Chapter 3 (Music and International Relations in Occupied Germany, 1945-49), by Toby Thacker, discusses the importance of music in diplomatic relations between the Allies in the paradigm shift from physical coercion to cultural persuasion after World War II. If the focus of the text is on the German musical restructuration program of the Allies, the core of the chapter highlights the duality of the program between cultural re-education and denazification which will come to define international relations between America, Britain, France, the Soviet Union and Germany. While almost all of the authors of the book examine classical music, Thacker is the only one to accord a significant importance to both classical and jazz music, taking them as ideological tools to detach the German working class from its own culture. However, the author affirms popular music was the most powerful tool in Germany with which to control people during the beginning of the Cold War, an interesting assertion introducing, nonetheless, a potential bias against popular music, which is very difficult to define as the last chapter demonstrates.

Chapter 4 (Instruments of Diplomacy. Writing Music into the History of Cold War International Relations) is interesting as it portrays music as “soft power” (p. 118) because of its informational function – communicating ideas and values, and its capacity to affect the cultural preference of others and to build complex social relationships. Taking classical music performances as a mediator of prestige and a vehicle of social aspirations, Danielle Fosler-Lussier demonstrates that both top-down and bottom-up socio-political relations are involved in the process of constructing international

relations, which then accord agency to both citizens of host countries and, in that particular case, the United States. Chapter 5 (“To Reach... into the Hearts and Minds of Our Friends”. The United States’ Symphonic Tours and the Cold War), written by Jonathan Rosenberg, examines how the United States’ blend of classical music idealism and national self-interest surpasses economical decisions in achieving its geopolitical objectives. Although the American plan against communism was to demonstrate that liberal capitalism can be a fertile milieu for the creation of high caliber artistic institutions, it seems to be, the author suggests, more the belief in music’s universality and music’s power to establish a peaceful international order than any political leadership enterprise that was perceived by citizens. On this point, Rosenberg mentions that more research into local sources would be necessary to understand the listeners’ experience and perception of the musical element in international relations at this level.

In chapter 6 (Music Diplomacy in an Emergency. Eisenhower’s “Secret Weapon”, Iceland, 1954-59), Emily Abrams Ansari explains the military conception of music in Eisenhower’s official communications to help both articulate Cold War power and resistance to it. In this case, the necessity of safeguarding a positive image of the American Air Force base in Iceland required the president to build up a public diplomacy which consisted of “image building” (p. 180), and sharing classical music perceived as non-imperialistic. While it was more the amount of money given to Iceland and the timing with the Soviets’ announcements that saved the situation for the Americans, the use of musical public diplomacy brings the author to see these acts as “smart power” (p. 182), combining the power of coercion and seduction (stick and carrot?) in the same strategy. Chapter 7 (Intimate Histories of the Musical Cold War. Fred Prieberg and Igor Blazhkov’s Unofficial Diplomacy) was for me the most interesting chapter because of Peter J. Schmelz’s originality: he brings us into unofficial and personal transnational networks that formed a formidable exchange of information about music thoughts and musical reality between the West and the USSR during 1960s. It is a history of “the inner life [that] both reframes and refines microhistory, while also sounding in counterpoint to grander public histories” (p. 192). In his chapter, Schmelz considers actors’ privacy as a potent channel of interconnection for imports and exports of music materials, and a way to obtain a portrait of the larger sociopolitical and aesthetic assumptions in a given political context. Here, as a model to observe dynamics at the intersection of music and society, intimate history, through the study of intimate correspondence, he shows that seemingly apolitical music “became politicized to the core, implicated in all sorts of international relations as it was constructed, framed, bought, and sold” (p. 215).

In the last chapter (“Where I Cannot Roam, My Song Will Take Wing”. Polish Cultural Promotion in Belarus, 1988), Andrea F. Bohlman explains how the Festivals of Polish Song orchestrated different types of international history, one of soft diplomacy behind the events themselves, and a common identity performed through songs. Here, under the notion of musical universality were hidden geopolitical intentions and interests integrated in two successive phases of musical normalization between socialist countries (Poland, Belarus, and Soviet Union) that led to the redefinition of the different expressions surrounding the word “music”, and to reach musical publics “with a less hardened sound” (p. 234). This chapter shows how constructing a program and setting diverse musical resources across the borders for an international festival of this kind is an illustration of a “multinational understanding of an Eastern Europe rooted in multinational culture” (p. 245).

In sum, while the three first chapters of the volume are not precisely oriented within the Cold War context like the others, they do ground our understanding of the use of music as an instrument of diplomacy in an interesting chronological way which I think is very compelling. Despite the fact that the book does not have a concluding chapter, the close links between the chapters give the book a general sense of coherence. In fact, the proximity of the different texts is remarkable also by the fact that the authors almost all cite each other, giving the impression of a kind of “collective-styled” monograph on the Cold War. I would have liked to see more possibilities or more examples of the instructive use of music in international history in the 20th century which is seemingly not limited to the Cold War, or that the book label itself as a consideration of a particular historical period. In this view, I think it is important to underline what Gienow-Hecht herself wrote in her introduction about ethnomusicologists doing the same kind of research since the 1960 or the like, and to ask, “Is there other international relations in the world in the 20th century or so that could (or could not) be observed without focusing on the United States’ own international relations?”

For ethnomusicologists’ desire to understand cultures of the World, and since Bob W. White (2012) published about the dynamics of globalization, it is clear for me that a book illustrating international diplomatic relations without any word on or about peoples outsiders of the East-West dialectical view present a certain lack of integration of what the editor herself urges to do: “to consider music [...] as an instrument of hegemony and resistance; a reflection of identity and protest” (p. 20). Always focusing on East and West as the “bringers of international relations”, particularly when associating music and history of international relations seems to reveal a bit of ethnocentrism which is important to leave

behind. An interesting point to observe then may be our understanding of international relations in the 20th century as the equivalent of international diplomacy, a (mis)conception restricting the openness of searching fields. International relations can also be seen as a cultural contact that offers other point of analysis that can be missed by the study of diplomacy. Notwithstanding this criticism, it should be said that the collective of musicologists and historians presented in this book is a beautiful example of interdisciplinary work “to examine to what extent music and musical events became targets of state control while, at the same time, contributing to the decentering of the state and the transformation of international relations since the 1970s” (p. 20). Finally, *Explorations in Culture and International History Series* seems to promise a great deal to our understanding of international relations, and despite the fact that the editor did not try to include an analysis of culture or of the specificity of Western culture, the seventh volume of this series fits perfectly with the editor's intended goals.

References Cited

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