

Composing the party line. Music and politics in early cold war Poland and East Germany

Beitrag vom: 11.05.2015

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The history of music-making in postwar East-Central Europe has lent itself all too readily to clichés. The music, the stereotypes go, was worthless propaganda; the composers were cowed, and the whole region marched in lockstep to the beat of Moscow's drum. Scholars working in the fields of musicology and cultural history have started to add much-needed nuance to this oversimplified picture. David Tompkins is one of them. The product of extensive, painstaking archival research, *Composing the Party Line* traces the encounter of music and politics in Poland and East Germany during the early Cold War, a period Tompkins defines as lasting from 1945 until approximately 1957. Along the way, Tompkins challenges outmoded ways of thinking about the intersection of cultural production and political power in the formerly socialist societies of East-Central Europe.

Tompkins presents a consistent narrative. He notes that, around 1950, Poland and East Germany had much in common. They were roughly equal in population. Cultural life in each country was being restructured along Soviet lines. And party-state actors in both places were interested in using music as a way to legitimate their authority. The parties in East Germany and Poland each had important early successes in promoting their views of socialist realism, an aesthetic that privileged audience accessibility, references to national culture (such as folklore), an optimistic outlook, and traditional conceptions of musical beauty. Idealism, however, soon hardened into dogmatism, much to the chagrin of the elite musicians who, by and large, had initially been willing to work with the parties in pursuit of common goals. Here the stories diverge. The political center in Poland and East Germany each attempted a course correction during the post-Stalin thaw, but only the East German party successfully maintained its influence among a core group of elite musicians. In Poland, on the other hand, composers disentangled themselves almost entirely from party oversight. Thus despite their similarities around 1950, by 1957 the elite musical cultures in Poland and East Germany had become quite distinct. Part of the value of Tompkins's study lies in charting these differences, which demonstrate the diversity, rather than the uniformity, of cultural and political life in Cold War East-Central Europe.

In each of his five chapters, Tompkins demonstrates how this narrative played out at different levels of Polish and East German society. He begins on the plane of ideology, discussing how party officials, state actors, and musicians were conceptualizing socialist realism both in theory and in practice. He then moves to the composers' unions, examining how the communist parties in East Germany and Poland sought to use these organizations as a means to transmit their ideas to composers and musicologists. From union structures, he turns to the commissioning of new works. Finally, he follows these works out into society, where they were

performed at festivals and other concert venues.

This top-down chapter structure might imply that power and ideology in Poland and East Germany radiated unimpeded from the political center. And yet that was hardly the case. Tompkins consistently shows that, far from exerting monolithic, total control, the parties in both countries were engaged in a continual process of negotiation. Even when the cultural sphere was seemingly at its most locked down, there still was some room for musical elites and ordinary citizens to maneuver. In chapter five, for example, we learn that sulky audiences could vote with their feet, refusing to attend the performances that had been mounted for their edification. Party-state actors in both Poland and East Germany softened their hard line in response: in the hopes of getting at least some of their message across, they devised the musical stage revue, a cultural form that aimed to entertain rather than to overtly indoctrinate.

Like audiences, elite musicians could exercise their agency. One of Tompkins's most noteworthy contributions in this volume is his refusal to characterize elite musicians as passive victims of totalitarian control. Instead, he demonstrates that they were active participants in shaping the culture of the stalinist era. Thus in chapter one, we see composers and musicologists debating socialist realist aesthetic theory—adopting some ideas, while challenging others. He compellingly demonstrates that musicians in Poland and East Germany worked with party-state actors to create socialist realism as it was preached and practiced in their respective countries. The picture of socialist realism that emerges from Tompkins's study is therefore one of contingency and fluidity, not that of a rigid, preformed aesthetic template to which composers were expected to adhere.

Aside from showing how socialist realism was articulated in theory, Tompkins also attempts to show how composers worked with socialist realism in practice. He argues that the music of the stalinist years is valuable beyond its status as a historical curiosity. To demonstrate the extent of Polish and East German composers' engagement with socialist realist aesthetics, he presents long lists of work titles accompanied by brief summaries of these pieces' primary style characteristics; the table of contents also directs the interested reader to a website where she can hear some of the music to which Tompkins refers. Tompkins is not a musicologist, nor does he pretend to be. At times, however, the terseness of the musical description causes his claims of the interest and vibrancy of this repertoire to fall a bit flat. With the discussion of the mass song genre in particular, I was curious to learn more about musicians' interactions with the writers who produced most of the song texts, and how these encounters may have affected the negotiations between cultural elites and the political center that Tompkins discusses in such illuminating ways throughout the book.

But these are small quibbles. *Composing the Party Line* is a fascinating book, and a necessary one, especially when it comes to understanding the cultural history of socialist Poland. While historians of East Germany have generally been willing to examine artists' entanglements with political power during the stalinist period, scholars of Polish music have tended to marginalize or otherwise seek to explain away composers' activities during this era. Tompkins's task in *Composing the Party Line* is difficult, because he is attempting to grasp what his historical subjects did and thought at the time, before retrospective assessments of stalinist years cast them as ones of moral compromise and shame. His study is, for this reason, all the more valuable, and it has much to say to musicologists, cultural historians, and all who are interested in the interaction of music and politics in East-Central Europe during the early Cold War. Though this story can all too easily be told in clichés, Tompkins,

through attending carefully to documents from the past, has given us a way to see beyond them.

Zitierweise:

Lisa Jakelski: Rezension zu: David G. Tompkins: Composing the party line. Music and politics in early cold war Poland and East Germany, 2013, in: <https://www.pol-int.org/de/node/134#r2540>.