

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

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David Tompkins' *Composing the Party Line* is a unique work in that he undertakes a transnational comparative analysis of specific cultural aspects of the Stalinist period, namely the production, performance and reception of music, primarily classical and modern music, but also popular music like mass songs and entertainment combining music and spoken word. Unless the reader is already familiar with the history of Stalinism in Poland and the GDR, it is best to read this work with other books on the cultural history of the period. [1] The Stalinist era started with the creation of the GDR in 1949 and the establishment of the PZPR, the Polish United Workers' Party, in 1948. It was marked by the interval of the June uprising in East Germany in 1953, and concluded with Khrushchev's secret speech and the Polish October of 1956. For a full appreciation of the book's argument, the reader may also want to consult the audio samples chosen by the author, assembled here: <http://people.carleton.edu/~dtompkin/DavidTompkins/music.html>.

Tompkins' intervention in studies of the Stalinist period is valuable due to its precise focus on the role of music in the functioning of official cultural life in the new socialist states. His basic argument is quite simple, and he illustrates it with a generous use of archival data detailing the various aspects of the professional lives of Polish and East German composers and musicians. His data concerns primarily the type and number of compositions written as a result of commissions and party directives, meant for performance in factories, schools, rural locations, as well as reviews of such performances. He discusses many instances of such ideologically-tinted (or not, as it turns out) performances and their context. What is really valuable about this volume, however, is how the author presents the patterns structuring the musical world of that era, such as the tug-of-war between party officials and everyone else concerned, or the relationships between performers and audiences as well as between promoters and the state – which is a very interesting section of Chapter Five, "The Concert Landscape," entitled "Unauthorized Concerts" (p. 218-221).

What emerges is a picture more nuanced than what readers may expect from a cultural history of the period. First, Tompkins demonstrates to what extent the people operating in the musical world of both countries, although with important differences, were actually largely sheltered from the brutal workings of the state security apparatus. As he argues in the first chapter, composers were mostly free to follow or contest and expand the directives concerning the form and content of their work, since the directives were presented by musicologists who, while backed by the party in their efforts to "re-educate" composers about how their craft should conform to the needs of their new societies, were nevertheless still considered just musicologists, whose

views may and did clash with the opinions and goals of composers. What is more interesting, however, is when these views did not clash and produced a body of work that is not as negligible as it may seem. To demonstrate how relaxed the position of composers was in relation to the state, Tompkins interrogates the earnings of Polish composers ("The Struggle over Commissions," p. 135-144). He cites surprisingly impressive sums disbursed not only as payment for finished new mass songs, cantatas, and dances, but also as scholarships or stipends. These were often associated with numerous music festivals or other celebrations, like Stalin's 70th birthday, which called for new musical material to be performed during countless hours of concerts, sometimes stretched over the course of months. Such evidence suggests that despite the concessions composers may have felt they had to make, they were able to live quite comfortably thanks to state support for their craft, even if it only partially conformed to the realist socialist model, which sheds a new light on the condition of these musical elites and their relationship with the state.

This assessment corresponds with a first-hand account by a Polish diplomat who defected from the Polish People's Republic in 1953, dr. Marek Stanisław Korowicz, who contained his memories of Stalinist Poland in his "W Polsce pod sowieckim jarzmem" ("In Poland under the Soviet Yoke"). In this interesting memoir, which Tompkins did not consult, there is a whole section on classical music, which Korowicz enjoyed, and his glimpse reveals that "Music is a good profession, musicians are sought after, especially outside of big cities, and they belong to the best paid categories of workers" (p. 179). [2] He speaks of several good orchestras operating at the time, among them the Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra (mentioned by Tompkins on page 223), which often traveled throughout the country, performing non-communist themed works to sold-out houses, despite the high prices and scarcity of tickets in relation to demand (p. 180-181).

Tompkins also offers an analysis of the different socio-historical contexts in which the parties of People's Poland and the GDR operated. He discusses the ties dating back to the wartime era that some principal musical actors – like the German composer Hans Eisler or the leading Polish musicologist Zofia Lissa – forged with Soviet socialist-realist theoreticians during their exile in the USSR (p. 23, 47). He also points to the traditions that competed with Soviet models for both writing and playing music in both countries, such as the older local festivals in small towns like Rheinsberg or Görlitz, which were reinvented by the new system to involve the participation of amateur musicians and discussions between composers and audience (p 184-185). Interesting examples of opposing forces were prewar impresarios, who undermined the state booking agency's monopoly in the GDR for a while (p. 220-221), or the relatively strong Polish composers' union (founded before 1948, therefore predating any explicit relationship to the party) (p. 97), and major orchestra directors, who bended the rules of the game to their advantage (p. 72, 224, 229-230).

The differences between the situations of performers in both countries are also sufficiently appreciated here, in the foregrounding of such factors as the freedom to move between the two Germanies in the fluid period before the rise of the Berlin Wall. The East German authorities felt even more compelled than the Polish ones to legitimize themselves in the eyes of the populace due to the presence of a Western alternative that also strove to appropriate the German musical tradition in its effort to establish itself as the rightful and truly progressive German state (p. 208, 227).

Defections among East German musicians were apparently common and they were not matched by a corresponding influx of musicians from the West, which created a problem for GDR authorities, while some of the festivals organized in the East, like one in 1952, attracted a sizeable group of West Germans in its audience (p. 183), which makes for an interesting twist. But the emphasis that both states placed on the role of music in remolding their respective societies was so great that it created problems across the board in that there were not enough professionally trained performers to step up to the challenge of bringing the new music to the people in all towns, villages, and workplaces, which was the authorities' ambitious and practically unattainable goal. What resulted instead was a series of orchestra breakups or mergers and a proliferation of substandard entertainment, often in the form of "Estradenkonzerte" or "imprezy estradowe" (p. 224, 227) which were marked by an uneasy balance between the desire of the parties to both entertain and educate.

The only shortcoming of this monograph is that in some instances the author fails to satisfy the reader's curiosity concerning the stories of specific composers or pieces, which could be enriched by adding more comments on reception, or an analysis of the lyrics of mass songs, like on pages 61-62, where in the space of one paragraph Tompkins mentions ten different songs written by various composers, without giving the reader so much as a hint as to how they were evaluated by audiences. And titles like "Fritz the Tractor Driver," "Thanks to the Soviet Army," or "The Party is Always Right" just beg for some kind of a human-interest story. Perhaps a closer reading of memoirs, like Korowicz's, or an accompanying oral history would enhance this aspect of the research.

[1] For a good grounding in this subject area, you may want to look up *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-cultural History of the GDR* (ed. by K. Jarausch), in which such terms as "the welfare dictatorship" or "modern dictatorship" are introduced in an attempt to define the character of East German society. As Jarausch points out, "State and party rule established in the first two decades of the GDR's existence developed a remarkable measure of modernizing elan, a belief in progress, and a will to tackle problems." At the same time, East Germans also witnessed the crushing of their civil society and "stifling of innovation and dynamism," which set the stage for the continuing paradoxes of "real socialist" life (Jarausch, p. 20).

Jarausch, Konrad H (ed.) *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2009.

It is also recommended to glance at David Bathrick's discussion of the dynamic relationship between Marxist theory, socialist practice, and conservative criticism of avant-garde bourgeois art forms (Bathrick, p. 88, and his discussion of Bertold Brecht) for a better understanding of the struggle over the form and meaning of socialist music.

Bathrick, David. *The powers of Speech: the Politics of Culture in the GDR*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995.

In Poland, the Stalinist era is all too often portrayed as filled completely with shame, injustice, and waste. In this context, Tompkins' work corresponds to Andrzej Paczkowski's earlier evaluations of the overblown and incompetent bureaucracy that was created in the years 1945-1952 in Poland in order to replace previous forms

of management in both the economy and administration at large (Paczkowski, p. 156).

Paczkowski Andrzej. Pół Wieku Dziejów Polski: 1939-1989. Warsaw: PWN, 2007.

[2] Korowicz, Marek Stanisław. W Polsce Pod Sowieckim Jarzmem. London: Katolicki Ośrodek Wydawniczy Veritas, 1955.

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