Fanfares for the common man

Communist composers tried to create ideologically pure works for the workers — but without any great degree of success

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The engagement of twentieth-century composers with Marxism is less well known than that of their counterparts in other art forms, but it is equally fascinating and no less disconcerting. Music was not an initial priority for Russian Bolshevism. Indeed, Lenin's tastes were quite traditional. But radical aesthetics arose with the creation of the Proletkult movement which sought a new "proletarian culture", and the Futurist writings of Vladimir Mayakovsky and Trotsky.

A few short-lived musical developments resulted, including composer Arseny Avramov devising a system of 17 tones to replace "bourgeois" chromaticism, and a work presented in the harbour in Baku in 1922, which combined sounds from boats, cars, buses and machine guns with renditions of the Internationale.

More enduring was Nikolay Roslavets and the *Assotsiatsiya Sovremennoy Muzyki's* (ASM) promotion of works such as Aleksandr Mosolov's Zavod (The Iron Foundry), in which oscillating repeated figures, pulses and vivid sound effects from an orchestra evoke the captivating and hellish sounds of a factory.

Roslavets was denounced by supporters of ASM's rival, the *Rossiyskaia Assotsiatsiya Proletarskykh Muzykantov* (RAPM) which was implacably opposed to modernism, all things Western, jazz, folklore, nationalism, mysticism, and so on, leaving little other than mass singing, and operas and oratorios formed from political songs. Forced to repent, Roslavets spent a period in inner exile in Uzbekistan, unable to obtain an official position.

But by 1932 both the ASM and the RAPM had been replaced by a new Composers' Union, *Soyuz sovetskikh kompozitorov SSSR* (SSK SSSR) and the doctrine of socialist realism became official cultural policy. All art was required to be relevant and understandable to workers, represent everyday life in a realistic manner, and support the aims of the State and Communist Party. Musicologist Boris Asafyev translated this into music's needing at all levels to imitate sounds and sonic formations from the external world and the inner world of man collectively.

Among Bolshevism's international sympathisers was the German conductor Hermann Scherchen, who had been employed in Russian-controlled Riga in 1914 and interned during the war. Upon returning to Germany in 1918, Scherchen's first activities included directing workers' choirs, for which he made arrangements of songs he had brought back from Russia.

After 1923 this movement became more detached from radical politics, as did the Berlin Novembergruppe, an artists' collective who sought to redirect the impulses of

Germany's failed revolution of November 1918 into art. By the mid-1920s most Novembergruppe musicians were aligned with the Neue Sachlichkeit, a movement embracing modernity and geometry in art, which looked to the USA (Amerikanismus) as a model in opposition to the subjective models of expression of Imperial Germany.

But a few took a different position. Composer Hanns Eisler (right), a former student of Schoenberg, broke with his teacher and joined the *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (KPD) in 1926. He composed highly successful agitprop songs, choral and theatrical works, often with a march-like character, using minor keys for positive messages deliberately to sound more threatening.

Another KPD activist from a modernist background, Stefan Wolpe, produced eclectic music that married avant-garde techniques to diverse musical materials, from workers' songs to African-American genres, as well as didactic texts, including some by Lenin. Eisler went into exile in 1933, living in various countries and writing anti-fascist cantatas and film scores. Having ended up in the US, he appeared before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1947, and was deported back to Europe, despite support from Stravinsky, Copland and Bernstein.

He settled in East Berlin, where he wrote many successful works including "Auferstanden aus Ruinen", which became the East German national anthem. Wolpe, who had gone into exile in Jerusalem then New York City, remained in the latter, where his idiom shifted again towards greater abstraction and austerity.

The dominant early post-war aesthetic events in the Eastern Bloc were the four decrees from Soviet cultural commissar Andrei Zhdanov. After Stalin attended a performance in January 1948 by the Georgian composer Vano Muradeli and apparently believed the hero to be based upon a Politburo member who had opposed the 1930s purges, Zhdanov summoned Muradeli and others involved.
He attacked the opera's lack of melodies and apparent inability to appeal to an audience. A terrified Muradeli pointed to the influence of the "Big Four" of Soviet music — Prokofiev, Myaskovsky, Shostakovich and Khachaturian — and subsequent meetings led to denunciations of even their work as "petit-bourgeois", "formalist", "primitivist", "experimentalist", some charges led by the composer and general secretary of the SSK, Tikhon Khrennikov.

Zhdanov issued the music decree featuring such denunciations on 10 February 1948. Just three months later a Second International Congress of Composers and Music Critics took place in Prague, with attendees including Eisler, Khrennikov and the British composer Alan Bush. A Zhdanovite Prague Manifesto resulted, calling on composers to reject "extreme subjectivism", ally themselves with their countries' national cultures in opposition to "falsely cosmopolitan tendencies", produce music with concrete content, especially texts, and work to supply musical education to all.

The Prague conference also sought an international association of "progressive" figures to ensure this with chapters in each country. Bush, a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain since 1935, wholeheartedly endorsed and proselytised for the manifesto and Zhdanov's decree, finding these amenable to an "English" style he was already cultivating, resulting in his socialist realist opera, Wat Tyler, and the Nottingham Symphony.

The views from Moscow and Prague were disdained by others including Theodor Adorno and Jean-Paul Sartre, who published his essay *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* the same year. Sartre's call nonetheless for writers to find ways to communicate with the proletariat stimulated a debate on *musica impegnata* ("committed music"), and then a scathing attack from Adorno in his 1962 essay "Commitment".

The Italian avant-garde composer Luigi Nono (right, in 1957), inspired by both Sartre and Scherchen, joined the *Partito Communista Italiano* (PCI) and during the 1950s composed pieces about anti-fascist subjects. His works from the mid-1960s allude to wider events: the dehumanisation of factory work in *La fabbrica illuminata*, the Vietnam War in *A floresta é jovem e cheja de vida*, and the death of Chilean revolutionary leader Luciano Cruz in Como una ola de fuerz y luz. He married such subject matter to a complex musical language including electronic sounds and collage-like structures. Emigré German composer Hans Werner Henze, who also joined the PCI, wrote similarly politicised works in more neo-romantic idioms.

A new generation of West German composers (too young to have had responsibility for events before 1945) came to prominence in the late 1960s, informed in part by Western Marxist thinkers including Adorno and Hans Magnus Enzensberger.

Helmut Lachenmann articulated a perceived need for music to resist habituated, passive modes of listening, following this principle with fearsome intensity in his work. Mathias Spahlinger, more interested in improvisation and jazz than the others, was especially concerned with the role of the composer and their social interactions, and made some more concrete allusions, as in his *el sonido silencioso*, funeral music for Salvador Allende. Nicolaus A. Huber in time came to make increasing references to aspects of contemporary and popular culture, and in the late 1970s concentrated on Politische Revuen for performance in pubs and assembly halls.

But in contrast to these advanced political sensibilities, others chose a far more didactic approach, informed by Mao Zedong's new political ideology. The American composer Christian Wolff had been part of the circle around John Cage from the 1950s. His 1972 Accompaniments features a pianist playing aleatory music, also using a pedal drum, while reading a text about the increases in women's sanitation under Mao. While he eventually withdrew this work, Wolff continued to integrate politicised and identifiable musical materials within an estranged and esoteric idiom. Cage himself made highly favourable references to Mao in writings for a few years from 1971, even comparing him to Gandhi or Martin Luther King and citing him to legitimise censorship.

Others who moved in a similar direction in the early 1970s include Japanese composer Yuji Takahashi (right), who turned away from earlier "stochastic" idioms towards free settings of revolutionary songs from the Navajo Indians, Puerto Rico, Vietnam, and elsewhere. His Kwanju, May 1980, alludes to the uprising and massacre of protestors following the military coup that year in South Korea.

American pianist-composer Frederic Rzewski wrote semi-improvised works with political texts, then employed a modified late-romantic idiom in virtuoso piano works such as *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* and *De Profundis.*

In the Netherlands, radical young musicians in the mid-1960s, including Louis Andriessen, embraced American traditions including minimal music, while themselves seeking to replace establishment figures. One of their biggest critics was German-Dutch composer Konrad Boehmer, who was involved in Maoist groups in the 1970s and even composed music for a North Korean film.

Boehmer also criticised Stockhausen (to whom his earlier work was indebted) as a representative of bourgeois music. But his critiques were mild in comparison with those of British composer Cornelius Cardew, whose involvement with Maoism began in 1971, under the influence of guitarist Keith Rowe. Cardew joined the fundamentalist Communist Party of England (Marxist-Leninist), which despised Khrushchev's rejection of Stalin and all manifestations of American imperialism and consumer culture, while identifying "incipient fascism" in most aspects of social life. Mao was viewed as the true heir to Stalin, before later assigning Enver Hoxha in Albania to this role.

Cardew, in his 1974 book Stockhausen Serves Imperialism, rejected earlier "individualistic, elitist, fragmented" avant-garde music, including his own. Instead, he composed settings of Chinese, German and Irish revolutionary songs, with only elementary harmonic competence. The notion of this music speaking to Cardew's imagined "international proletariat" seems quaint.

Since the 1980s much of this movement has dissipated. There were diminishing political allusions in the work of Wolff, Rzewski and Takahashi. Andriessen and his comrades became the new Dutch musical establishment. Boehmer, disillusioned with the possibility of a progressive music which could communicate with the working classes, returned to mainstream composition while remaining a provocateur through his writings. Nono's works from the mid-1970s are characterised by increased fragmentation, sparseness and introspection. Cardew was killed by a hit-and-run driver in 1981.

However, over the last 15 years, there has been something of a revival led by figures linked with the term *Neuer Konzeptualismus* and associated movements, including Johannes Kreidler, Stefan Prins, Patrick Frank, Trond Reinholdtsen and Jennifer Walshe.

Many such composers profess their opposition to an avant-garde establishment (whilst seeking advancement within it), and replace sophisticated musical content with performative political statements, such as Kriedler's destroying instruments of the SWR *Symphonieorchester* during a concert (for which it later transpired he had been paid), or "outsourcing" the composition of his work *Fremdarbeit* to others from outside the Western world. The musical content of the work of Kreidler and others is mostly highly derivative, automated, or simply bland.

Neuer Konzeptualismus has informed wider composers whose work relies upon allusions to major world issues (climate change is the current favourite). This acts as simultaneously a form of virtue-signalling and emotional blackmail, and also a strategy to focus public discourse away from the work's musical content.

Back in the 1960s, Adorno recognised that “the so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it”, and equally all the problems involved in rendering traumatic events as aesthetic spectacles. But contemporary perspectives rarely engage such concerns.

When I presented a revisionist view of Cardew at a 2011 conference attended by true believers, one writer stormed out and later issued a denunciation replete with distortions. Another decried “a diatribe against Mao, Stalin and Hoxha”. It gave me an inkling of what it might have been like to function in a communist country.

It is hard to find evidence of such composers having had a wider political impact, other than implicitly adding artistic legitimacy to reprehensible political events, including the Soviet purges, the Nazi-Soviet Pact, the invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the carnage of the Chinese Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, and the regular tendencies within communist countries towards police states, murder, torture, and mass disenfranchisement.

Nonetheless, the strength of the musical content of the work of Eisler, Wolpe, Nono, Henze, Rzewski and some others has a presence over and above the politics. The music of Lachenmann, Huber and Spahlinger may embody a greater integration of aesthetic ideology and musical process, but its outcomes are open to plural interpretations.

Nonetheless, Eisler and Bush did lend some legitimacy to Stalin and Stalinism, while Cardew left behind a risible body of late music aligned to a disturbing worldview, blindly supporting mass murderers and patronising workers as needing crude melodies provided by privileged people such as himself (his education had been as a chorister at The King’s School and Canterbury Cathedral, followed by the Royal Academy of Music).

Many of the greatest composers of the past are today denigrated for alleged complicity with, or even responsibility for, imperialism, racism and more, in language reminiscent of the worst excesses of the RAPM and Zhdanov. It would be better to allow a healthily critical attitude towards composers seduced by the promises of Marxist ideology whilst disregarding the consequences in practice, and afford equal scepticism towards composers today (and their acolytes) for whom exalted political claims and exploitation of trauma too often serve to distract from musical limitations.