

John Morris

Culture and Propaganda in World War II: Music, Film and the Battle for National Identity

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Review by Alexis Bennett

A paradox at the heart of British musical culture during the Second World War was the continuing popularity and widespread use and performance of German music. As John Morris explores in *Culture and Propaganda in World War II: Music, Film and the Battle for National Identity*, there were significant voices which called for blanket bans on any German, Austrian or even Italian music between 1939 and 1945. However the policies of the BBC, the British Council and various commercial enterprises, including media organisations, were more nuanced. Morris successfully negotiates a thesis in which he argues that in a sense this was a more effective kind of propaganda. By continuing to allow the use of music by Austro-German composers in public service broadcasting, and actively encouraging the airing of music specifically banned by the Nazis, the BBC won a war of ideas. Great music was effectively safeguarded, not permitted to be politicised to an unnecessary degree, and Britain remained musically vibrant. In the eighth and concluding chapter, 'Music's Enduring Instrument', Morris quotes *The Times* from December 1945: 'The old reproach that Britain was das Land Ohne Musik is dead, and everybody knows it is dead.' (180) The war had galvanised British music-making and encouraged composition and performance both as direct propaganda and stoical cultural resolve, and 'rather than a "land without music" Britain in the 1930s and 40s was musically rich in every way, and even more so than [...] Germany.' (180) This remains a central strand of the book, and the chapters combine effectively to argue it convincingly.

In engaging with the culture of Allied (and specifically British) propaganda during the war, he divides his line of inquiry into three broad strands: music *as* propaganda, promoted by organisations such as the British Council and the BBC; music *in* propaganda, for example in films like *49th Parallel* (Michael Powell, 1941) and *Millions Like Us* (Sidney Gilliat & Frank Launder, 1943); and finally, music as the subject *of* propaganda in the cinema of the time, such as *The Great Mr. Handel* (Norman Walker, 1942). The latter is a particularly resonant example in the

context of Morris's book, since the film's subject was – and is – in the minds of the concert-going public, simultaneously a German composer and a great British musical hero. Indeed throughout the book, the author reminds us that German music continued to be used in the context of Allied propaganda; there is a detailed discussion of the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, which became a ubiquitous musical sign of victory across the airwaves, in part due to its use as BBC World Service theme. In fact, by 1939 'there was no question in the minds of ordinary listeners that the music of Bach, Beethoven and a number of other composers of the Austro-German tradition belonged to England.' (12) Morris notes that this was due to some extent to the fact that '[T]hroughout the 1930s the BBC actively pursued a policy of German music, so that the masters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries "reigned" at the corporation, and not only for purely musical reasons.' (12) Further, there was widespread opinion held among the musical cognoscenti that great Austro-German music must be distanced from contemporary German politics, and should be protected as 'belonging' to the common man, and as representing liberty and democracy.

Such is the subject matter of Morris's opening chapter, 'Music in the Context of Propaganda', although in an early disclaimer, he admits that the book will focus on 'classical' or 'so-called "serious" music' (3), and this is held to include such lighter fare as Richard Addinsell's Rachmaninovian *Warsaw Concerto*, which of course started out as film music. In avoiding jazz, popular songs, dance music and other forms of popular music, the author certainly limits his thesis, but it does not detract from the depth of research that has been undertaken here.

The second chapter, 'Morale on the Home Front: Live Classical Performance', continues with the theme of German music as used domestically and in international contexts. A series of concerts held at the National Gallery in London throughout the entire conflict consistently deployed German music: 'in October 1940, at the height of the Blitz, when London had suffered consistent nightly bombing for a month, three Mozart concerts, four Beethoven concerts (the series including all the Beethoven quartets) and two Bach concerts took place.' (34) Wagner - whose music's association with German National Socialism has been enduring but often misplaced and misrepresented - also loomed large in the programming of concerts, especially at the Promenade concerts, where no less than 255 performances of his music were scheduled (some abandoned in air raids). Morris's text is brimming with information such as this, and whilst it shows that the

material has been researched and processed with the utmost scholarly attention, a peculiar dryness becomes apparent here. The rapidity and regularity with which the author summons citations and data very occasionally becomes overwhelming, and leaves the reader wanting for space to breathe.

The work of the British Council in wartime musical activities abroad is examined in the third chapter. Founded in 1934, this institution worked steadfastly in neutral countries throughout the conflict to instil a sense of British cultural fortitude. Morris identifies a problem of definition in the role of the British Council, since war muddied the waters of what previously might simply have been the promotion of music-making in the UK: 'the council had taken on a "certain political or publicity tendency in recent times." There was a clear difference, in other words, between "cultural" and "publicity", or "political" propaganda.' (59) Thus Morris begins to explore how the British Council managed to undertake cultural activities abroad without being overtly political, leaving the latter to other departments within government, principally the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Information. Film was certainly within the field of vision of the British Council, who sent representatives to Germany as late as November 1938, in the wake of the Munich Agreement. A screening of *The Drum* (Zoltan Korda, 1938) took place in Berlin, followed by a week-long diplomatic conference and a 'Memorandum on the Development of Cultural Relations with Germany'. Film composers were also active in cultural propaganda policy. Ralph Vaughan Williams and Arthur Bliss, the latter already well known for film scores, and the former soon to develop a parallel career in that field, served on the Music Advisory Committee, formed in 1935; William Walton was commissioned by the council to provide music for international concert exposure. In engaging with such material, Morris impresses with his ability to draw together diverse sources and conjure a picture of a British cultural establishment that was tasked with walking a tightrope between maintaining musical standards and a certain artistic objectivity on the one hand, and continuing to represent the nation in increasingly belligerent circumstances on the other. This is extended into the following chapter, which analyses the role of the BBC, and grapples with the thorny issue of the use of German music on the airwaves. The author carefully sifts through the contentious composers and repertoire, and most fascinating here is the question of hymn tunes, particularly that which originated in the *Poco Adagio* of Haydn's string quartet Op.76 No.3. It was already a well-known basis for two hymns before it was established as the

music for the German national anthem in 1922. (109) This latter development was the reason why this piece became one of the German works to raise objections, since many listeners would immediately think that they were hearing the German anthem; Morris is at his best when recounting these peculiarities of music and broadcasting history, and he does it with economical and precise prose.

Most pertinent to this journal are chapters 6 and 7, 'Handel, Beethoven and Humphrey Jennings: the Use of "German" Music in Film', and 'A British *Magic Mountain*: Original Music in Feature Film Propaganda'. Morris reminds us that while German propagandists were compiling their catalogue of disgraced *entartete musik*, and encouraging those like Herbert Windt, the composer of the score for *Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1934), to write with a suitably 'backward gaze' (195), British filmmakers took a contrary approach and used German music to a surprising extent. *The Great Mr. Handel* is treated with care here, and the author places it in its proper context, even delving into the complex history of Handel's relationship with the British establishment, right back to the use of German as court language only a few years before the events depicted in the film. Furthermore, Morris uncovers some intriguing historical snapshots, such as the gut strings used by the London Philharmonic Orchestra, under Ealing Studios' Ernest Irving. This was a step towards historically-informed performance at a very early stage in the modern early music revival, and a gesture that is still rare in film scoring.

In discussing the output of Humphrey Jennings, the documentary maker who worked for the Crown Film Unit (known as the GPO until 1939), Morris makes effective use of his own term, 'aural icons', which he describes as 'auditory symbols [...] that are peculiar to the time. Churchill's speeches, Hitler's hysterical ranting, the sound of a BBC announcer, an air-raid siren and the "all clear" are obvious items in this catalogue.' (9) Exploring Jennings's work, such as *Listen to Britain* (1942), *Fires Were Started* (1943) and the postwar *The Dim Little Island* (1948), the author adeptly applies this concept as a device to analyse sound and music as a whole (in what Michel Chion might call the *mise-en-bande*). In so doing, Morris brings to the reader's attention the unique sound world of propagandist filmmaking.

Discussion of Gainsborough's melodramas precedes a brief exploration of music in the work of Powell & Pressburger, particularly *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943). Again, Morris sees the material in its proper context, remarking: 'That the Ministry of Information opposed the film

and Churchill hated it was an open secret at the time of its release [...] The cabinet's concern was that it was "derogatory" to the British army'. (154) More might have been done to extend the analysis of the Gainsborough and Powell & Pressburger's output, and this reviewer might have been interested to read of some archival documentation of music choices (such as Schubert in *Colonel Blimp*) if indeed such material exists; it is not clear from these passages whether primary sources for research into directorial music placement are available (letters, cue sheets, etc), and to what extent (certainly Morris has delved deep into government archives and BBC resources). Audio-visual archives relating to specific composers and filmmakers do not feature in the select bibliography, apparently even in regard to Vaughan Williams or Walton, whose film music is the focus of the engaging but short penultimate chapter.

Morris's great strength is in his panoramic vision of British culture and how it manifested itself - contradictions and paradoxes included - in propagandist film and the promotion of British music and music-making at home and abroad during the Second World War. There is the sense that this book might have been twice as long, and could have found scope for more - dare one say it - journalistic flair. Under the thorough scholarship that fuels the text, one feels that there are real human relationships, crises, intrigues and scandals, that might have emerged more colourfully if the author had allowed it, and that they would not have compromised his material. Nonetheless, *Culture and Propaganda in World War II: Music Film and the Battle for National Identity* is a go-to work on British wartime film, music and more.