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The Idea of Gebrauchsmusik – Revisited[1]

Stephen Hinton

In his invitation to give a keynote lecture at the 2015 conference 'Neue Sachlichkeit or Vernacular Avant-Garde', Michael Fjeldsøe posed a series of questions that included the following at the very end: 'What happened to the notion of *Gebrauchsmusik*?' By way of response I initially contemplated a paper that would essentially rehearse the history of the term that I had presented in extensive detail in the entry on 'Gebrauchsmusik' for the *Handwörterbuch der musikalischen Terminologie*.[2] On further reflection, however, I opted to take a somewhat different approach, one that reviewed not only the term's history, but also my own scholarly engagement with that history. The result is an amalgam of three main ingredients: part lexicography, part disciplinary history, part academic autobiography.

The lexicographical purpose of the *Handwörterbuch* involved balancing the competing claims of system and history by delineating how the word *Gebrauchsmusik* has been variously used over the past century. Some of the connotations have been historiographical in nature, some more overtly linked to cultural politics, some essentially descriptive, others unabashedly prescriptive, some positive, others pejorative. Following the term's coinage and rapid rise to prominence in the mid-1920s, as the quoted sources amply demonstrate, the compound noun enjoyed widespread currency both in Germany and in Anglophone circles. Of particular note in this latter regard are the lectures that Paul Hindemith gave at Harvard in 1950 and subsequently published as *A Composer's World* in 1952.[3] With reference to his own music, while downplaying the cultural-political battles in which he had himself been embroiled as a young composer, Hindemith included the oft-cited and rather misleading account of the term's history and significance. Seeming to take credit for being the first to have used the word, he was nonetheless at pains to distance himself from its cultural impact and importance.

1 This is a revised version of the keynote lecture at the conference *Neue Sachlichkeit, Political Music, or Vernacular Avant-garde? Hanns Eisler and his Contemporaries* (Copenhagen, 2015). The title alludes to my monograph *The Idea of Gebrauchsmusik*, cf. fn. 7.

2 'Gebrauchsmusik', *Handwörterbuch der musikalischen Terminologie*, Auslieferung 15 (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1988); reprinted in H.H. Eggebrecht (ed.), *Terminologie der Musik im 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1995), 164–74.

3 Paul Hindemith, *A Composer's World. Horizons and Limitations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952).

> A quarter of a century ago, in a discussion with German choral conductors, I pointed out the danger of an esoteric isolationism in music by using the term *Gebrauchsmusik*. Apart from the ugliness of the word – in German as hideous as its English equivalents workaday music, music for use, utility music, and similar verbal beauties – nobody found anything remarkable in it, since quite obviously music for which no use can be found, that is to say, useless music, is not entitled to public consideration anyway and consequently the *Gebrauch* is taken for granted. … [When] I first came to this country, I felt like the sorcerer's apprentice who had become the victim of his own conjurations: the slogan *Gebrauchsmusik* hit me wherever I went, it had grown to be as abundant, useless, and disturbing as thousands of dandelions in a lawn. Apparently it met perfectly the common desire for a verbal label which classifies objects, persons, and problems, thus exempting anyone from opinions based on knowledge. Up to this day it has been impossible to kill the silly term and the unscrupulous classification that goes with it.[4]

As I stated in my subsequent *New Grove* entry on the term, history has shown that Hindemith was more successful in wrongly being considered the term's inventor than in distancing himself from its relevance to his own music and that of his contemporaries.[5]

After World War II, not only was the notion of *Gebrauchsmusik* considered 'silly', as Hindemith put it in his Harvard lectures; in an age that sought autonomy at all costs, even at the expense of 'public consideration', it acquired emphatically negative connotations. Karlheinz Stockhausen, for example, went so far as to denigrate his modernist colleague Bernd Alois Zimmermann by calling him a 'Gebrauchsmusiker' on account of how he used preexisting musical materials rather than create wholly original, previously unheard ones. To quote the conclusion of the *New Grove* article, 'lack of absolute autonomy became synonymous with a lack of artistic value. The earlier generation in the interwar years had thought otherwise; it was for them that the term had had its positive, historically significant meaning.'[6]

It was above all with the interwar period that I had principally been concerned in *The Idea of Gebrauchsmusik*, a study of musical aesthetics in the Weimar Republic that I submitted as my Ph.D. thesis to the University of Birmingham in 1984 and published

4 Ibid., p. viii.

5 'Gebrauchsmusik', *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edn. (London: Macmillan, 2001), vol. 9, 619–21. Among the documents consulted in the *Handwörterbuch* entry is an unpublished manuscript titled 'Betrachtungen zur heutigen Musik' from 1940, in which Hindemith offers a different account from the one presented at Harvard 10 years later. 'I must admit', he writes there, 'that I do not feel entirely uninvolved whenever the word "Gebrauchsmusik" is uttered. I think back to the time some 15 years ago when people in Europe began to realize that neither for music nor for the musician could a normal and healthy path forward be seen in the continual development of concertistic [*konzertanter*], especially symphonic forms'; see 'Gebrauchsmusik', *Handwörterbuch*, 5.

6 'Gebrauchsmusik', *New Grove*, 621.

as a book in 1989.[7] In posing his question Michael Fjeldsøe was not only inviting me to consider the history of *Gebrauchsmusik* during the Weimar Republic and beyond as discussed in the dissertation, but also to subject to scrutiny the recent literature on the subject. To that extent, by undertaking a form of critical self-examination, I also felt obliged to adopt what is sometimes called in musicology the 'confessional mode', a mode of discourse to which I am typically not inclined, but which seems indicated here. At the Copenhagen conference I was really reviewing two careers: the career of a widely used musical term and that of a scholar who had chosen to write a dissertation and a number of follow-up publications on it.

'How, 25 years later', Fjeldsøe wondered in his invitation, 'would I capture the mindset of Eisler, Weill, Hindemith? Were there perceptions within musicology, in the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall [the year, as mentioned, in which the dissertation was published as a book] that were marked by Cold War blind spots, or were these perceptions captured in modernist discourses that did not leave room for the appreciation of functionalist aesthetics? Are we in a better position to deal with "engaged music" today?' The short answer to these last questions is a resounding 'yes'. Parallels have emerged, as I explain, between the 1920s and the waning years of the Cold War, the years of my graduate study in the UK and Germany, during which I was trying to begin a career as a musicologist.

'A quarter of a century ago'

There is something necessarily daunting about revisiting a project that was nothing more, but also nothing less, than what the Germans call a *Gesellenstück* – an apprenticeship exercise. It is not only daunting, in some respects it is doubly painful. Did I really write that? Who was that person who has become so much older and necessarily sees things somewhat differently now? In a sense, however, as with all such academic projects, I have been revisiting the obligatory apprenticeship exercise in a variety of ways ever since. There is no getting away from it: our dissertations are part of our identity as scholars; they are an expression of who we were and, at the same time, inform what we go on to do, often quite extensively, later in our careers. In responding to the invitation, I will address both aspects of my topic – first, what attracted me to it to begin with some thirty or so years ago, and secondly, some of the ways in which my work on 'Gebrauchsmusik' – and the musicological discourse in general – has changed in the interim. Along the way, I will touch on the work of two of the seminal figures mentioned in particular: Hanns Eisler, a principal point of focus at the 2015 conference, and Kurt Weill. There is an autobiographical significance in choosing them in that my interest in the topic really began with Eisler but, for the past quarter of a century, has been nourished chiefly by Weill.

7 Stephen Hinton, *The Idea of Gebrauchsmusik: a Study of Musical Aesthetics in the Weimar Republic with Particular Reference to the Works of Paul Hindemith* (New York: Garland, 1989).

As a high school student I really couldn't make up my mind what to study in college, whether to study Music or German or something quite other, like Economics. After a certain amount of agonizing and prevarication, I opted for a compromise solution by enrolling in a so-called combined honours programme in Music and German at the aforementioned University of Birmingham, one of the very few such programmes in existence at the time. The contrast between my two areas of study turned out to be considerable, a kind of disciplinary schizophrenia, such that realizing the 'combined' part of 'combined honours' was largely up to me. In the Music Building students studied Classical Music, with a capital C and a capital M, whereas in the German Department things were much less narrowly canonic. The fundamental disconnect quickly became evident, and my attempts to resolve it kindled an already nascent interest in philosophical aesthetics. It was especially stark when it came to the twentieth century. In the German curriculum there was a popular course known as 'soc. lit.', short for 'the sociology of literature'. It was taught by the Marxist scholar Wilfried van der Will, a graduate of the University of Cologne and self-confessed lapsed Catholic, who saw his students as post-1968 disciples (with Stuart Hall's Centre for Contemporary Studies just three floors above us). In Music, things could scarcely have been more different. We took the obligatory survey of twentieth-century music and related seminars, all of them taught, not by a musicologist, but by the modernist British composer John Casken. This arrangement was typical at the time. Instructors in twentieth-century music were invariably composers themselves. As such, they tended to teach music history from their own perspective as artists, not as aesthetic critics, to use Oscar Wilde's distinction. As Wilde wrote in his brilliantly insightful and brilliantly entertaining essay 'The Critic as Artist':

> Technique is really personality. That is the reason why the artist cannot teach it, why the pupil cannot learn it, and why the aesthetic critic can understand it. To the great poet, there is only one method of music – his own. To the great painter, there is only one manner of painting – that which he himself employs. The aesthetic critic, and the aesthetic critic alone, can appreciate all forms and modes. It is to him that Art makes her appeal.[8]

Our composer-instructor taught us the modernist tradition of which he felt himself to be a part. It began with Debussy, Stravinsky and the Second Viennese School, even a dash of Ives, and studiously avoided the figures I would soon develop an interest in, before continuing the narrative thread with Stockhausen, Messiaen and Boulez and even that rascal Cage, with his dialectical relation to Schoenberg. British composers such as Benjamin Britten and Michael Tippett put in only a fleeting appearance – Tippett actually more than Britten. Harrison Birtwistle, however, was included and enthusiastically

8 Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', in *Intentions* (New York, Lamb Publishing, 1909), 225.

celebrated as one of the good guys. And so were some of the contemporary composers from Poland, whom Casken knew from having studied there with Dobrowolski and from his friendship with Lutosławski. We were certainly not appreciating 'all forms and modes', but rather a quite exclusive selection. Things are very different now, of course. The curriculum, not just at Birmingham, has expanded considerably. As I was beginning to draft this paper, I received an advertisement for a lectureship at Oxford in Music since 1930 that included the following qualification: 'Please note that this is not a position for candidates who are primarily composers.' As for the candidates' expertise: 'This expertise may embrace a range of interdisciplinary and theoretical approaches to music studies, and may be in any musical tradition, including Western art music, popular, folk and world musics, experimental music, and music for film and mass media.' Times have certainly changed. So to expand my provisional answer to the question about 'engaged music', yes, we are in a better position now to deal with it; we certainly didn't deal with it then in our music history lecture surveys and seminars.

Not that Dr van der Will didn't have his own tub to thump. He was interested in the art of the class struggle, and traced its roots back to groups such as the *Bund proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller* (League of Proletarian-Revolutionary Authors). Later postwar politically progressive associations such as the Gruppe 47 were also mentioned. But the main focus, and one that the 1968 generation had latched onto, was the prewar progressive German culture of the 1920s, which Germanists and others were studying and documenting extensively. And it was not long before the names of figures such as Hanns Eisler and Ernst Busch cropped up because of their prominence in leftwing culture at the time. Our mentor even played old recordings of the 'singendes Herz der Arbeiterklasse', 'the singing heart of the working class', as Busch was dubbed as a performer of Eisler's songs of agitation and propaganda, the so-called *Kampflieder*. And when I later spent a year abroad (a requirement of undergraduate studies in German at Birmingham), I elected to enroll at the Freie Universität in West Berlin, where I was able to cross over easily into East Berlin and stock up on the readily available recordings and scores marketed there as part of the cultural heritage of the German Democratic Republic. Eisler, after all, had written the new National Anthem of the GDR, a recording of which I acquired in a particularly string-rich, rather saccharine rendition that seemed to me at the time quite un-Eislerian.

That Eisler, like Cage, was a Schoenberg pupil and, moreover, formally and quite histrionically broke with his teacher only added to the intrigue for me. I was now able to study that vexed relationship from both sides of the fence, as it were, via the teachings of Dr van der Will on the one side and from those of Mr. Casken on the other. The music of the revolution and the revolution in music – it was quite a heady brew for an impressionable undergraduate.

When it came to picking an undergraduate thesis topic, it was something of a no-brainer, 'Music and Socialism: Hanns Eisler's Development in the 1920s'. German Studies, above all the 'soc. lit.' class, had brought to my attention a composer otherwise

suppressed from the modernist canon, and I was keen to bring him to the attention of my other home department, Music. As my research progressed, I could certainly relate to Eisler's struggles with his teacher. My own composer-teacher didn't threaten to put me over his knee and give me six of the best – a very British form of punishment, as it happens, that was familiar to me from my having attended school in London, and the kind of punitive treatment that Schoenberg actually suggested Eisler deserved because of his subversive ideas – no such threats were made, but the resistance toward introducing sociology and politics into the study of music was hard to overlook. That said, one of my other teachers was quite sympathetic toward my project. He was Dr Nigel Fortune, the distinguished scholar of seventeenth-century Italian music, who was a Labour Party activist with strong left-leaning sympathies. It was Nigel Fortune who encouraged me to remain in Birmingham for postgraduate study.

I mention all of this autobiographical background because in hindsight, as suggested earlier, parallels emerge between the musical culture of the 1920s and that of the 1970s, in particular between the musicological discourses of the two decades. My interest in Eisler brought to light categories that were both necessary, in order to appreciate what motivated him, and useful, in order to question the aesthetic prejudices of my own time. It seemed curiously automatic when my advisor-to-be asked me what I wanted to do research on – a question that I quickly answered in a single word, albeit a compound one: *Gebrauchsmusik*. In 'soc. lit.' I had read about *Gebrauchslyrik* and *Gebrauchskunst*. Exploring *Gebrauchsmusik* would be a fitting way to introduce a 'soc. lit.' perspective to the study of music. So I got to work in search of the origins of the concept, a search that would eventually lead to the *Begriffsmonographie*, literally a 'concept monograph' – or put less loftily, a separate entry – for the *Handwörterbuch der musikalischen Terminologie*, one of the first things I worked on after finishing the dissertation.

The title of my dissertation, *The Idea of Gebrauchsmusik*, was intended as a more or less obvious allusion to Carl Dahlhaus's *Die Idee der absoluten Musik*.[9] Already as an undergraduate I had seen Dahlhaus give a lecture, on Schoenberg as it happened, and was amazed by the acuity with which he took concepts apart and put them back together again. A friend of mine at the Technische Universität, where I would eventually have the good fortune to work with Professor Dahlhaus as his research assistant and eventually as his 'wissenschaftlicher Assistent', once quipped that the music department there should be renamed 'Institut für Begriffsentwirrung', the institute for conceptual disentanglement. Dahlhaus was the superlative role model for doing historical musicology informed by philosophical aesthetics, an approach that my study of *Gebrauchsmusik* certainly required, if not demanded. Things really took off in that direction when I was awarded a DAAD grant to spend one of my three postgraduate years back in Berlin, during which time I attended as many Dahlhaus classes as I could, both lectures and seminars.

9 Carl Dahlhaus, *Die Idee der absoluten Musik* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1978).

Studying twentieth-century music history with a real musicologist was a revelation, after having learned about it from a composer. With his encyclopedic knowledge and methodological self-awareness, Dahlhaus seemed like the very incarnation of Wilde's aesthetic critic. His *Hauptseminar* on Stravinsky, for which I wrote a paper on neoclassicism, was especially valuable to me, as was the opportunity to trace the concept of *Gebrauchsmusik* back to its origins. I knew the British literature on this topic well, which associated the concept with Hindemith and even suggested, wrongly, that he coined it, and I knew Eisler's comments, both negative and positive, about it. But thanks to my exposure to a whole host of experts in Berlin, including Rudolf Stephan, I would not only discover that the attribution to Hindemith was erroneous, however much he himself embraced that fallacy; I also read enough literature to appreciate that people were already talking with great interest about *Gebrauchsmusik* in the early 1920s in the aftermath of the November revolution and during the period of hyperinflation, which refocused attention on use value (*Gebrauchswert*, to use the Marxist terminology). I learned, too, that the impulse to talk about *Gebrauchsmusik* was as much as anything musicological. Broad cultural interests in the utility of art and scholarly interests in how earlier music was used went hand in hand. The key figure was the musicologist Heinrich Besseler, and he was key for three reasons: first, because the idea of *Gebrauchsmusik* was central to his revisionist work on medieval and renaissance music; secondly, because his philosophical background as a student of Martin Heidegger allowed him to raise the concept to terminological status within his discipline; and thirdly, because he made vital connections between the past and the present by advocating for *Gebrauchsmusik* as something that contemporary musicians should also focus on, which of course Eisler, Weill and Hindemith and many others would do.

Besseler's 'Fundamental Questions'

The key text was and remains Besseler's *Habilitationsvortrag*, the public lecture he gave in 1925 as part of the ritual required for his being awarded the German professorial qualification known as *Habilitation*. As its title indicates, the lecture addressed 'Grundfragen des musikalischen Hörens' (Fundamental Questions of Musical Listening). The intended act of historical and cultural relativization is evident already in the opening sentences:

> When Hugo Riemann wrote his 1873 doctoral dissertation 'On Musical Listening', he stood comfortably within a closed musical tradition that went without saying. [Besseler's difficult-to-translate phrase is 'inmitten der glücklichen Selbstverständlichkeit einer geschlossenen musikalischen Tradition'.] Such a general topic back then could lead without further ado to basic questions of classic-romantic harmony.[10]

10 Heinrich Besseler, 'Grundfragen des musikalischen Hörens', *Jahrbuch der Musikbibliothek Peters*, 32 (1926), 35–52, here 35.

Several sentences later he declares this tradition to be over, or at least called into question:

> In the creation of music, as in its theoretical reflection, assumptions that used to be automatic have become questionable to an extent that music history rarely observes. Naïvely sensing the highpoint of a traditionally closed era is gone, Viennese classicism has been stripped of its absolute standing, R. Wagner is in the process of losing his direct impact and becoming historically distant. Encroaching in the largest measure on the sphere of the present – alongside the new rhythms and sounds of negro jazz bands [this is hard to translate without an extensive footnote: Besseler uses the word *Nigger-Jazzband*, probably fairly neutrally, without all the American cultural baggage] – is early music.[11]

Already in his Freiburg dissertation on the German suite in the seventeenth century, completed under Wilibald Gurlitt in 1923, Besseler had noted that 'the aesthetic access [*Zugangsweise*] to this music is not through listening but through participation, whether through playing, dancing or singing along; in general, through use [*das Gebrauchen*].'[12] In that sense, the title of the *Habilitation* lecture could be misleading. The *Habilitationsschrift* itself developed this perspective further, this time focusing on 13th- and 14th-century motets, music, he emphasized, that was not 'created for "aesthetic enjoyment"; nor did it really 'concern the "listener" in the usual sense, but rather only believers in prayer and observation.'[13] As he expressly acknowledges in the lecture, his musicological attempt at understanding earlier musical cultures on their own terms was influenced by general phenomenological questions of the kind posed by Heidegger. His perspective, in other words, was at once diachronic and synchronic insofar as he translated his philosophy teacher's fundamental distinction between 'thing' (*Ding*) and 'equipment' (*Zeug*) into specifically musical concepts with historical import: 'autonomous music' (*eigenständige Musik*) and 'utility music' (*Gebrauchsmusik*). The first type he associated with concert music, a relatively recent phenomenon, but one which 'for generations has counted as the highest and, as it were, solely legitimate form of performing and listening to music'. With the second type, aesthetic contemplation is secondary or even irrelevant. Invoking Heideggerian terminology, one could say that its mode of existence belongs to the sphere of 'readiness-to-hand' (*Zuhandenheit*), as opposed to 'presentness-at-hand' (*Vorhandenheit*). Besseler defined such music as 'umgangsmässig', something analogous to the vernacular in language (*Umgangssprache*)

11 Ibid.

12 Heinrich Besseler, *Beiträge zur Stilgeschichte der deutschen Suite im 17. Jahrhundert* (diss., U. of Freiburg, 1923), 14.

13 Published in two parts as Heinrich Besseler, 'Studien zur Musik des Mittelalters', *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft*, 7 (1925) and 8 (1926); quotation here from the Part II ('Die Motette von Franko von Köln bis Philipp von Vitry'), 144.

in the sense of being inseparable from everyday life rather than autonomous. Active participation or involvement is key. The gist of Besseler's theory is encapsulated in this central passage from his lecture.

> For the individual, *Gebrauchsmusik* constitutes something of equal rank to his other activities, something with which he has dealings in the way he has dealings with things of everyday use, without first having to overcome any distance, that is, without having to adopt an aesthetic attitude. With this in mind we might define the basic characteristic of *Gebrauchsmusik* as something with which we are immediately involved [*umgangsmässig*]. All other art … in some way stands in contrast to Being as self-sufficient, as autonomous [*eigenständig*].[14]

In later writings Besseler replaced his original binarism with *Darbietungsmusik* ('presentation music') versus *Umgangsmusik* (literally 'ambient music', a term which has unfortunately become synonymous with background music).[15]

So much for Besseler, whose work has received quite a bit of attention in the interim, both in German and in Anglophone scholarship. I am thinking in particular of Thomas Schipperges' work; Laurenz Lütteken's probing study on Heinrich Besseler's 'musikhistoriographischer Ansatz'; Martin Scherzinger's challenging article from 2006 on 'Heideggerian Thought in the Early Music of Paul Hindemith' (challenging to my own work, that is); and Matthew Pritchard's 2011 article 'Who Killed the Concert? Heinrich Besseler and the Inter-War Politics of Gebrauchsmusik', which included in an appendix the author's own English translation of Besseler's 'Grundfragen'.[16]

Eisler's 'applied music'

Before returning at the end to a key historiographical matter that I raised in the dissertation and which Pritchard raises again in his article a quarter of a century later, I should like to discuss briefly Eisler's concept of *angewandte Musik* (applied music), a variant of *Gebrauchsmusik* that was defined in a gesture of ideological opposition towards it.

14 Besseler, 'Fundamental Questions', 45f.

15 Heinrich Besseler, 'Umgangsmusik und Darbietungsmusik im 16. Jahrhundert', *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft*, 16 (1959), 21–43.

16 Thomas Schipperges, *Die Akte Heinrich Besseler: Musikwissenschaft und Wissenschaftspolitik in Deutschland 1924 bis 1949* ([Munich:] Strube Verlag, 2005); Laurenz Lütteken, 'Das Musikwerk im Spannungsfeld von "Ausdruck" und "Erleben": Heinrich Besselers musikhistoriographischer Ansatz', in Anselm Gerhard (ed.), *Musikwissenschaft — eine verspätete Disziplin? Die akademische Musikforschung zwischen Fortschrittsglauben und Modernitätsverweigerung* (Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler, 2000), 213–32; Martin Scherzinger, 'Heideggerian Thought in the Early Music of Paul Hindemith', *Perspectives of New Music*, 43 (2006), 80–125; Matthew Pritchard, 'Who Killed the Concert? Heinrich Besseler and the Inter-War Politics of *Gebrauchsmusik*', *Twentieth-Century Music*, 8 (2011), 29–48.

Besseler's focus on the mode of access or *Zugangsweise* to music – in short, on how music is used – may include but is not exhausted in the act of listening, as mentioned. In any case, it is as much about the sphere of reception as it is about conception. Music is no more inherently *Gebrauchsmusik* or *Umgangsmusik* than it is *eigenständige Musik* or *Vortragsmusik*, still less 'absolute music'. Bach reception offers one of the more dramatic examples of a conceptual shift in reception from the sphere of pragmatism and utility to the sphere of the absolute, with its attendant metaphysical connotations. But there are plenty of other examples from history, where the musical traffic moves in both directions. Born of a particular historical moment, in which the classic-romantic tradition no longer goes without saying, Besseler's binarisms serve as conceptual aids to illuminating this very fluidity of music's ontology – a point underscored above all by Lütteken.

Moreover, from the phenomenological perspective that Besseler adopts, it could be argued that *Gebrauchsmusik* effectively amounts to a tautology; all music is used in one way or another, even *Darbietungsmusik*. The concept ceases to be tautological only within the tradition of aesthetic autonomy, in which, as Oscar Wilde famously quipped in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 'all art is quite useless'.[17] Wilde's manifesto represents the extreme *l'art pour l'art* position. In a brief essay entitled 'What is "extramusical"?' from the book *Was ist Musik?* that he coauthored with Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht, Dahlhaus raised the question of what 'music' means in Eisler's angewandte *Musik*, a term coined in contradistinction both to *Gebrauchsmusik*, from which the composer wished to distance himself politically vis-à-vis his contemporaries, and to absolute music, from which he wished to distance himself as a renegade Schoenberg pupil. 'When he spoke of "angewandte Musik"', Dahlhaus observed, 'as a counter concept to absolute music – a concept, that is, in which the social and political functions are supposed to be contained in the thing itself and not imposed from without – [Eisler] unwittingly clung to the premise that "pure" music, unencumbered by texts or functions, were music "proper": he allowed his coinage to be dictated by what he was negating.'[18] Dahlhaus's point is well taken. There are numerous facets of Eisler's life and work that support the notion of his having clung to this premise, not so much unwittingly as quite knowingly. He may have broken with his teacher in an almost oedipal way as a young man, but in later life he would narrow the gap that had opened up between his generation and that of his mentor. The applications of his music were in part imposed from without, as expedient measures to be taken in response to socio-political circumstances. 'Only after the seizure of power by the proletariat', Eisler maintained, 'can a new musical culture arise.' He was talking here about a music whose comprehension had hitherto been 'the prerogative of the ruling class', the very culture in which he himself had been schooled. Even in 1927, as his concept of *angewandte Musik* was emerging, he bemoaned that 'the

17 Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Ward, Lock & Co., 1891), vii.

18 Carl Dahlhaus, 'Was heißt "außermusikalisch"?', in Carl Dahlhaus and Heinrich Eggebrecht, *Was ist Musik?* (Wilhelmshaven: Noetzel, 1985), 66.

enjoyment of complicated works of art is denied the greater part of people'.[19] He looked forward to the day when that wouldn't be the case. In his controversial Schoenberg lecture to the Akademie of Arts in East Berlin given in 1954 he stated that '[m]illions of workers and farm labourers who live in countries emancipated from capitalism will have little or no affinity toward Schoenberg for the time being'.[20] Note the qualification: for the time being. Eisler envisaged a utopia in which music could again be 'pure' or 'absolute', not necessarily applied or *angewandt*.

Eisler's development provides a particularly drastic illustration of the dilemma that faced all classically trained composers of his generation. This tension between utility and autonomy is something I have pondered quite a bit since writing the dissertation. In the entry on 'Gebrauchsmusik' for the *New Grove*, I was keen to emphasize the basic methodological point that the same piece of music can be viewed both in terms of its use value and in terms of its autonomous features and that these two perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Historically, artistic autonomy manifested itself as a complex of practices that involve three overlapping areas: the social, the aesthetic and the theoretical. First, autonomy is a sociological category: the composer's employment status or sources of patronage, the context of musical presentation and the nature of music's social function. Secondly, autonomy concerns questions of presentation, how musical objects are approached, and hence the status of music as a discrete work. Aesthetic autonomy also informs the kind of criticism and interpretation that music attracts as well as matters of musical form. Thirdly, the dimension of music theory encompasses questions of formal taxonomy and other structural factors. Seen in this way 'autonomization' is the process whereby composers become their own bosses, freed from direct service to institutions and patrons; their musical works are conceived less for specific social occasions, more as discrete works, independent of immediate social function; and the identity of their works, in formal and structural terms, increasingly resists their being subsumed under generic norms. Autonomy and the postulate of originality are closely linked. This consideration of Besseler's binarism in terms of a historical dialectic led me to the following observation in the *New Grove* entry:

> One need not subscribe to Adorno's negative dialectics, which posits social relevance in artistic isolation, in order to appreciate one principal point of his critique: namely, that proponents of *Gebrauchsmusik* could not – or rather would not – relinquish certain facets of their autonomy as composers. They remained modern professional composers, with all the aims and aspirations implied by the ultimately irreversible

19 Hanns Eisler, 'Musik und Musikverständnis', *Die rote Fahne*, 16 November 1927; in Tobias Faßhauer und Günter Meyer (eds.), *Hanns Eisler, Gesammelte Schriften 1921-1935* (Wiesbaden et al.: Breitkopf & Härtel, 2007), 55–59, here 58f.

20 Hanns Eisler, 'Arnold Schoenberg', in Günter Mayer (ed.), *Hanns Eisler. Musik und Politik: Schriften 1948-1962* (Leipzig: Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1982), 329.

> division of labour. The choice, then, was not a simple one between 'autonomy' and 'utility', concepts which insofar as they denote types of music exist merely as abstract constructs. Even 'autonomous' music has its uses. Rather, the call for *Gebrauchsmusik* functioned historically as a corrective to extreme, not necessarily desirable manifestations of autonomy. Composers in the 1920s were rejecting not the hard-won autonomies of Beethoven so much as the extreme isolation of the Schoenberg school.[21]

Weill: Gebrauchsmusik *vs.* Verbrauchsmusik

Weill, like Eisler, defined himself in opposition to Schoenberg, albeit more emphatically in his later period than in the early part of his career when he readily expressed admiration for Schoenberg in his reviews for the journal *Der deutsche Rundfunk*. (Before joining Busoni's master class, he had briefly contemplated studying with Schoenberg.) And like Eisler, he sought to develop a concept of utility that distinguished his own approach from that of others. Whereas Eisler took particular aim at amateur music-making as practised by Hindemith and others by distinguishing between their *Gebrauchsmusik* and his 'applied music', Weill, for his part, applied the concept of *Gebrauchsmusik* to his own work, but did so by dismissing commercial popular music as ephemeral, hence his counter concept *Verbrauchsmusik*, music that is merely consumed. In fact, thinking dialectically, he hoped that the difference between these two categories, between *Gebrauchsmusik* and *Verbrauchsmusik*, and even between them and art music (*Kunstmusik*), might eventually be erased, a historical process for which he used the Hegelian expression *aufheben* (indicating the synthesis or 'sublation' of opposites). He saw himself as committed – and he would remain committed throughout his career – to attempting something that many twentieth-century composers dismissed as futile, if not impossible, namely 'conducting an experiment to create music that can satisfy the artistic needs of broad social strata, without sacrificing its artistic substance'.[22] My book *Weill's Musical Theater: Stages of Reform* explores in detail Weill's attempts to realize that aim in a realm in which he cast himself in the role of reformer.[23]

What has happened?

To return to Michael Fjeldsøe's question: What happened to the notion of *Gebrauchsmusik*? It has certainly not gone away, as Matthew Pritchard's recent article on Besseler testifies. Pritchard asks a similar question to Fjeldsøe by taking up the following

21 'Gebrauchsmusik', *New Grove*, 620.

22 Kurt Weill, 'Die Oper wohin? "Gebrauchsmusik" und ihre Grenzen', *Berliner Tageblatt*, 31 October 1929; in Kurt Weill, *Musik und musikalisches Theater: Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Stephen Hinton and Jürgen Schebera, with Elmar Juchem (Mainz: Schott, 2000), 92–96.

23 Stephen Hinton, *Weill's Musical Theater: Stages of Reform* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

conclusion that I drew in my dissertation thirty years ago, when I wrote that 'Gebrauchsmusik as practised by Weimar composers did not bring about changes of either radical or lasting consequence'.[24] I was writing then; Pritchard is writing now, yet he added that my claim 'still poses a challenge to any scholar arguing for the importance of this movement. On the face of it one simply has to agree.' He also quotes my claim that the methodological problems broached by Besseler are ones 'with which musicology has subsequently concerned itself and, in many respects, solved, or at least learned to live with'. 'The "solution"', he continues, 'involves re-inscribing all of those further, subdisciplinary divisions, superficially convenient but at some deeper level untrue, against which we have been struggling ever since Dahlhaus – between historical musicology and ethnomusicology, classical music and popular music, analysis and cultural studies.'[25] That is surely the main point. When I began my research in the late 1970s a radical reinscription had taken place, especially in Western Europe. My disciplinary schizophrenia at Birmingham in an 'uncombined' honours programme reflected a musicology curriculum whose sole focus was a historical narrative of autonomous music or, put more accurately, of music made to fit the paradigm of autonomy.

Because I was asked by the journal *Twentieth-Century Music* to serve as a reader for Matthew Pritchard's essay, and agreed to do so and reveal my identity to the author, I had an opportunity to revisit that old claim myself. Here's what I wrote to the editor, who then passed on my comments to the author, concerning the conclusion of the piece.

> It has to do with Bekker's sociological interpretation of the symphonic genre as an alternative to Besseler's anti-concert rhetoric. It is worth mentioning here that Weill, who revered Bekker, appropriated his idea of the 'gesellschaftsbildende Kraft' of music to apply to his own conception of musical theater, which, as the author acknowledges, was presented as a form of *Gebrauchsmusik*. I'm thinking here of articles such as 'Gesellschaftsbildende Oper', *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, 19 February 1929. (It should be noted, however, that Weill first used Bekker's term in the article 'Der Rundfunk und die Umschichtung des Musiklebens' in 1926.) Weill's own theories can be seen to mediate between the poles of Bekker and Besseler. And if I were to have the opportunity to provide a gloss on my statement ... written nearly 30 years ago – that '*Gebrauchsmusik* as practised by Weimar composers did not bring about changes of either radical or lasting consequence' – I would be inclined to point to Weill's musical theater works composed in the United States as representing a continuation of the changes that the composer had sought to bring about in Weimar Germany.

24 Hinton, *The Idea of Gebrauchsmusik*, 40.
25 Pritchard, 'Who Killed the Concert?', 47.

I strongly recommended publication of the article, noting that 'I leave it up to the author whether he/she would like to stray into the fleshpots of Broadway and/or toward the contested intentional "Kitsch" of *Down in the Valley* (a *Gebrauchsoper* for use in institutions of higher education)'.

To return to Michael Fjeldsøe's questions: yes, when I began work on *Gebrauchsmusik* in the UK there were certainly perceptions captured in modernist discourses that did not leave a whole lot of room for the appreciation of functionalist aesthetics. In the UK, German Studies were tapping into the student movement's interest in interwar progressive German culture. And in Germany, Dahlhaus's pupils such as Albrecht Dümling along with others associated with the journal *Das Argument* were shining a spotlight on the music of Eisler and other composers of *Gebrauchsmusik* (or, as Eisler preferred to call it, *angewandte Musik*). Are we in a better position to deal with 'engaged music' today? Undoubtedly. *Gebrauchsmusik* is alive and well in musicology, even if it goes by other generic names. To cite a very recent example. In March 2016 the University of California at Berkeley hosted a conference on what it calls EZ Music ('EZ' evidently a pronunciation respelling of 'easy'). The call for papers defined the label as 'simple, generic, kitschy, or trivial music, usually for amateur performers or listeners. Examples might include music for children, community or church choirs, pedagogical compositions or practices, and music that endeavors to be low-brow or populist in spirit.' EZ Music and *Gebrauchsmusik* obviously overlap without being synonymous. The challenge, I think, remains, not only to appreciate the specific disciplinary impasse that prompted Besseler's binarism in the first place, but also to apply his categories not as actual, clearly circumscribed musical phenomena, but as heuristics for coming to grips with complex figures such as Eisler and Weill. The same heuristics lend themselves to exploring all kinds of other music, too, not least music that might fall under the rubric 'EZ Music'.

If that's my principal conclusion, there is one more thing I should mention that has preoccupied me in my recent research and which I have touched on here with respect to my own formation, and that is to revisit Cold War research into the Weimar Republic as itself a topic of historical inquiry – the history of history, if you like. What were the postwar motivations in studying 1920s culture? What was the *Erkenntnisinteresse*, as Habermas would say – and how did that interest colour the findings? The Nazi years provide an important clue, but they remained something of a blind spot (a Cold War blind spot, perhaps, to recall one of Fjeldsøe's questions). The tendency to leave those years out of conference programmes has diminished, of course, but Cold War histories of the 1920s still deserve further analysis and scrutiny. In the context of my research on Weill it has become increasingly evident in the past 20 years or so just how much postwar images of the composer were shaped by a desire to welcome him back from emigration with a positive German identity, one that in hindsight seems as much a construction as the negatively construed American identity.

Abstract

The author revisits the history of *Gebrauchsmusik*, a musicological term that was coined in the early 1920s in musicological circles and which soon became a slogan with international currency. In documenting shifts in the term's meaning and cultural significance and scrutinizing the role it has played in musicological discourse, the author reviews his own scholarly biography, from 1970s England, via Berlin during the 1980s, to his current home in the US. Apart from Paul Hindemith, who is widely but wrongly credited with having invented the word, composers discussed here who were similarly working in a culture that promoted the idea of *Gebrauchsmusik* include Hanns Eisler and Kurt Weill.

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