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- 1 · Articles
- 2 · Special section, *Neue Sachlichkeit, Political Music, or Vernacular Avant-Garde?*
- 3 · Reviews
- 4 · Bibliography
- 5 · Reports · Editorial

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Neue Sachlichkeit and Schulhoff's Improvisations

Andrew Wilson

Erwin Schulhoff, the eldest son of a German Jewish family from Prague, was born in 1894 and died at the Wülzburg internment camp in Southern Germany in 1942. His activities as composer and virtuoso pianist, first based in Germany until 1923 and then in Czechoslovakia are intrinsically related to the cultural, economic, social, and technological changes which define Weimar Germany. Although chronologically, geographically, and ideologically at the periphery of a narrow understanding of *Neue Sachlichkeit* and despite the probable influence of Czech Poetism, Schulhoff's artistic activities from 1919 onwards are surely related to the movement.¹ Rather than discussing this relationship through some of his better-known compositions, for example the 1930 *Hot-Sonate für Altsaxophon und Klavier* (WV 95)² written for the radio and first performed in Berlin the same year, I will focus on two instances of Schulhoff's improvisations. The first musical example is taken from a recording that is representative of Schulhoff's jazz orientated piano duo, regularly broadcast live from 1931 onwards on *Radiojournal*, Czechoslovakia's first radio operator. This piece, entitled *Sami dva* (*Only two*) and whose score remains lost, was written by Schulhoff's duo partner Oldrich Letfus (1900–1959). The other case study is the first of Schulhoff's *Studie* (WV 119).³ Originally entitled *Optimistische Komposition*, this piece is a notated variant of a solo extemporization he performed in 1936, probably at a worker's gathering in Ostrava, and which he transcribed after the performance.⁴ *Sami dva* and *Optimistische Komposition* offer a unique opportunity to investigate how improvised performance as art might relate to musical *Neue Sachlichkeit*. Both musical examples stage the characteristics of *Gebrauchsmusik*

1 This essay is a revised version of my paper at the conference *Neue Sachlichkeit, Political Music, or Vernacular Avant-garde? Hanns Eisler and his Contemporaries* (Copenhagen, 2015). It draws on Stephen Hinton's discussion of *Neue Sachlichkeit* and its relationship with Heinrich Besseler's concept of *Gebrauchsmusik* in *The Idea of Gebrauchsmusik: Musical Aesthetics in the Weimar Republic with Reference to the Works of Paul Hindemith* (New York: Garland, 1989). It also implicitly builds on Nils Grosch, *Die Musik der Neuen Sachlichkeit* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1999) which examines in detail the cultural and historical changes which characterize the emergence of musical *Neue Sachlichkeit* from the end of WWI to the second half of the 1920s.

2 Erwin Schulhoff, *Hot-Sonate, (Jazz-Sonate), für Altsaxophon und Klavier, (1930)* [WV 95] (Mainz: Schott, 2007 / 2013).

3 Erwin Schulhoff, *Studie. Dvě skladby pro klavír [Studies. Two Compositions for the Piano], (1936)*, [WV 119] (Supraphon: Prague, 1974), [H 5557].

4 See Josef Bek, *Erwin Schulhoff, Musik und Werk* (Hamburg: Von Bockel, 1994), 137.

whose features as musical performance are described in Heinrich Bessler's *Habilitation* lecture of 1925 entitled 'Grundfragen des musikalischen Hörens'.⁵ Schulhoff's improvisations rely on communicative mechanisms, respectively the radio and popular gatherings, which Bessler clearly differentiates from the concert hall and its association with the 'educated bourgeoisie' of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century.⁶ They nevertheless remain bound to the notion of improvisation as art. According to Edgar Landgraf, this conception of improvisation first emerged around 1800 in the contemporaneous writings of Adam Müller and Heinrich von Kleist.⁷ It refers to the identification of improvisation as an inventive tool that generates newness, originality and otherness, attributes which Landgraf claims are inherent to the aesthetics of autonomy and its rejection of 'rule-governedness and mimesis'.⁸ These factors, I suggest, might warrant the inclusion of *Sami dva* and *Optimistische Komposition* in a broad definition of musical *Neue Sachlichkeit*.

The recording of *Sami dva*,⁹ a unique testimony of Schulhoff's understanding of improvised jazz, and the score of *Optimistische Komposition* inevitably confront us with questions of style. Nevertheless, this paper seeks less to discuss these musical examples

5 Heinrich Bessler, 'Grundfragen des musikalischen Hörens', *Jahrbuch der Musikbibliothek Peters*, 32 (1926), 35–52, transl. Matthew Pritchard and Irene Auerbach, 'Fundamental Issues of Musical Listening (1925)', *twentieth-century music*, 8 (2011), 49–70. Unless otherwise mentioned, all other translations are my own.

6 Bessler, 'Fundamental Issues of Musical Listening', 51.

7 Edgar Landgraf, *Improvisation as Art: Conceptual Challenges, Historical Perspectives* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 7–10.

8 Ibid. 8. Referring to the 'first-hand accounts of improvisation performances' in the writings of Karl Philipp Moritz and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, as well as to Carl Ludwig Fernow's 1801 book *Über die Improvisatoren*, Landgraf also underlines the proximity of the idea of improvisation as an art-creating process that does not follow a plan or rule to the aesthetics of genius. However, both Moritz and Goethe remain hesitant in fully endorsing the notion of improvisation as a means of generating newness, originality and otherness. This changes, Landgraf argues, with Müller and Kleist. For his part, Fernow, sees the aesthetics of genius fulfilled by the (Italian) improviser. My understanding of autonomous art draws on Niklas Luhmann's definition of the term in *Art as a Social System* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000) as well as on Landgraf's definition of the term in *Improvisation as Art*, 42–83.

9 The original recording of *Sami dva* is housed in the archives of Prague Radio. The record is an Ultraphone 78 rpm disc with *Sami dva* on one side and a tango entitled *Odešla láska* by Tino Marek, on the other. The recording's original title and archival reference is: 1. Tino Marek: *Odešla láska*. 2. Oldřich Letfus: *Sami dva*. Hraje klavírní duo E. Schulhoff a O. Letfus. Ultraphon A 10612. Gramofon. archiv Cs. rozhlasu, sign, 8412–8413 (Věra Stará (ed.), *Ervín Schulhoff vzpomínky, studie a dokumenty* [*E. S. Memories, Studies, and Documents*] (Praha, 1958), 158). The recording is mentioned in Emanuel Uggè, 'Jazzové klavírní duo čili hodinka s prof. E. Schulhoffem a drem Oldřichem Letfusem' [*Jazz piano duo or an hour with Prof. E. Schulhoff and Dr Oldřich Letfus*], *Revue Ultraphonu*, 3 (1933), 9. Both compositions also appear in some of the radio programmes of the Schulhoff-Letfus duo listed in Stará. The recordings of *Sami dva* and *Odešla láska* have since been released by Supraphononline, see <https://www.supraphononline.cz/album/250478-historie-psana-selakem-album-ultraphonu-4-1933>.

in terms of style and form rather than to highlight the similarities between their 'communicative, medial, and dramaturgical qualities' and those (possibly) associated with musical *Neue Sachlichkeit*.¹⁰

Besseler's Gebrauchsmusik

In 'Grundfragen des musikalischen Hörens' Besseler explicitly addresses the 'aesthetic' potential of *Gebrauchsmusik* and its participatory and communal aspects. Independently from its political connotations, it is defined as a type of music-making which bypasses 'concert-type characteristics' and whose focus is less on 'perfection of execution' than on a form of music-making in which 'the composer takes a back seat'.¹¹ Whilst claiming that this kind of music-making (and listening) has been 'pushed aside by the concert', particularly since the Romantic period, he further qualifies it as music which is 'at its most vital when it emerges out of the moment for the sake of the moment'.¹²

Besseler also argues that contrary to autonomous music, 'the music of the Minnesänger' or 'the Protestant chorale of the sixteenth century' are instances of 'art music' which nevertheless remained bound to 'the interactions of everyday life'.¹³ *Gebrauchsmusik*, moreover, differs in its reception from autonomous music: functional music, he writes, 'is not to be yielded to passively by an undefined mass of listeners, but rather, the listeners should, as a true community of like-minded individuals, approach the music with an active, expectant attitude'.¹⁴

Schulhoff's relationship to Neue Sachlichkeit

Despite an initial interest in expressionism, Schulhoff rapidly rallied after the war to the contemporary anti-expressionist and anti-romantic movement.¹⁵ This attitude appears

10 Niels Grosch, 'Neue Sachlichkeit, Mass Media and Matters of Musical Style in the 1920s', in R. Grüttemeier, K. Beekman and B. Rebel (eds.), *Neue Sachlichkeit and Avant-Garde* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2013), 185–201, at 197.

11 Besseler, 'Fundamental Issues', 52–53.

12 Ibid. 53. *Gebrauchsmusik* music includes 'work songs' (54), 'communal songs' (55), 'student songs' (55), 'songs of allegiance' (56), etc. Besseler also refers to improvised jazz as 'an unadulterated' illustration of functional music (dance music) (52).

13 Ibid. 63.

14 Ibid. 52.

15 While in Dresden (1919–1921) Schulhoff helped create the local Dada group. His friends and colleagues at that time included the founders of the *Dresdner Sezession Gruppe 1919* Lasar Segall, Conrad Felixmüller and Otto Dix as well as other artists, such as the painter Otto Griebel, the writer Theodor Däubler and the art critic Will Grohmann, many of whom were also associated with the *Novembergruppe*. Concerning Schulhoff and the *Dresdner Sezession Gruppe 1919*, see Tobias Widmaier (ed.), *Erwin Schulhoff. Schriften* (Hamburg: von Bockel Verlag, 1995), 105. Otto Dix, Conrad Felixmüller, Otto Griebel and Will Grohmann were all associated with the *Novembergruppe*; see Shearer West,

most strongly in his 'Revolution und Musik', a text probably written in the second half of 1919.¹⁶

Schulhoff starts his text by defining art as a sensuous experience and claims that human beings will always seek the physical stimulation of art.¹⁷ Music, he further asserts, 'is never philosophy' adding that 'only a bourgeois is capable to believe that art is philosophy'.¹⁸ These arguments progressively lead to the text's main topic, Schulhoff's criticism of the 'sickly intellect' of 'romantic-fantastic expressionism', a category that includes Scriabin and Schoenberg:

All these works of the above mentioned composers [Schoenberg, Scriabin], who determine the 'new direction', are, though of great importance, more the result of absolute aesthetic rather than rhythmic intuition, they are throughout sound (*Klang*), respectively tone colour (*Klangfarbe*), often with an aftertaste of sickly intellect. This direction may be called 'romantic-fantastic expressionism'.¹⁹

The final section of 'Revolution und Musik' is a quasi-declaration of intent of his music of the 1920s, a period which includes his numerous Kunst-Jazz compositions, the first of which are the *Fünf Klavierstücke* of 1919. In this passage, Schulhoff repeats his appeal for rhythm and dance music, referring in particular to contemporary popular dances,

The Visual Arts in Germany, 1890-1937: Utopia and Despair (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 112, 114; see also Frank Almai, *Expressionismus in Dresden* (Dresden: Thelem bei w.e.b., 2005), 228, and Franziska Lampe, 'Zum Holzschnitt als visuelle Strategie um 1918/19', in Nils Grosch (ed.), *Novembergruppe 1918: Studien zu einer interdisziplinären Kunst für die Weimarer Republik* (Münster, New York: Waxmann, 2018), 45.

16 Erwin Schulhoff, 'Revolution und Musik', in Widmaier (ed.), *Erwin Schulhoff. Schriften*, 11–15, cf. 106.

17 Ibid. 11: 'Das Werk im allgemeinen entspringt gesteigerter menschlicher Sinnlichkeit, der Grad der Bedeutung des Werkes entspricht dem Grade der menschlichen Sinnlichkeit! Da der Mensch sinnlich ist, d. h. eine starke Steigerung des Empfindens unausgesetzt anstrebt (Tempobeschleunigung durch die Maschine dadurch erzeugtes Bequemlichkeitsempfinden, – Besuche der Kinos, Erzeugnis der Erlebnisempfindung u.s.w), ist ja schon an und für sich jede Möglichkeit einer Kunstabschaffung ausgeschlossen, es wird sogar die Maschine zum Kunstwerke, wenn man bedenkt, daß sie ja zur Sinnessteigerung, ja sogar zur Ekstase aufschwingen läßt, von der die Masse ergriffen und gewirbelt wird (Grammophone, Orchestrione, Aeroplane, Autos, amerikanische Vergnügungsetablissemments etc., dies nur als einzelne Beispiele herausgenommen), dann muß ja natürlich das Kunstwerk in diesem Sinne bestehen bleiben.'

18 Ibid. 13: 'sie [Musik] ist niemals Philosophie, sie entspringt dem ekstatischen Zustande und findet in der rhythmischen Bewegung ihren Ausdruck. Nur der Bourgeois ist fähig zu glauben, sie sei Philosophie ...'

19 Ibid. 14: 'Alle diese Werke der hier aufgeführten Componisten [sic], welche die "neue Richtung" bestimmen, sind, obwohl von großer Bedeutung, mehr Erzeugnis absoluter ästhetischer Intuition als rhythmischer, sie sind durchwegs Klang bezw. Klangfarbe, häufig mit einem Beigeschmack krankhaften Intellekts untermischt. Man kann also diese Richtung als "romantisch-phantastischen Expressionismus" bezeichnen.'

i. e. 'One-Step, Foxtrott, Tango, Yazz u.s.w.'²⁰ He also advocates a music which would draw on 'real events', comparing his understanding of music not only to works of Paul Klee, Marc Chagall and George Grosz but also to the paintings of Teniers, a Flemish Baroque artist who painted numerous scenes of everyday life.²¹

In the 1930s, Schulhoff would further develop his idea of musical realism characterized by its proximity to the aesthetic ideals of socialist realism. In 1941 Schulhoff described his compositions of this 'third creative period' as music void of 'decadent lyricism and hysterical outbursts. It has become hard, inflexible and uncompromising!'²²

The ambivalence surrounding Schulhoff's attitude towards *Neue Sachlichkeit* is particularly striking in his answer to a friendly suggestion asking him to adapt, for the stage (as a ballet or pantomime), his first Symphony of 1925, premiered in Berlin in 1928. In his reply, Schulhoff strongly condemns the use of the term *Neue Sachlichkeit* to designate contemporary music in Germany as in his view 'the German never got rid of his sentimentality. The current Bach and Handel renaissance is nothing else but a sign of impotence which is covered up by the slogan "Neue Sachlichkeit"'.²³

Nevertheless, the 'sachliche' potential of his music was not restricted to his compositions. While Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt mentioned his 'élan musical' in his 1926 article 'Der neue Klaviervirtuose',²⁴ Bek acknowledges the 'absence of excessive pathos' and 'strict objectivity' of his pianism noticeable in the 1928 recordings for the German label Polydor.²⁵

As a pianist, Schulhoff has regularly been described as the perfect post-WWI virtuoso, whose anti-romantic attitude was further characterized by 'a phenomenal memory, a

20 Ibid. 15.

21 Ibid. 14f.: 'In einem Zeitalter, in welchem Materialismus und Realismus vorherrscht, gibt es also auch nur demnach eine entsprechende Kunst, d. h., "Kunst", nicht mehr als die lächerlich große Geste, sondern gänzlich aus dem realen Erlebnisse heraus, nicht mehr übergrösses Pathos, sondern Selbstverständlichkeit, und wie einst Teniers als einer der ersten niederländischer Klassik in der Malerei Kunst als reales Dasein erfasste, wie heute Klee, Chagall, Grosz u.s.w. Kunst gänzlich realisieren, warum sollte dies am wenigsten in der Musik möglich sein?' The painter is probably David Teniers the Younger (1610–1690).

22 '[Musik frei von] dekadenten Lyrismen und hysterischen Ausbrüchen. Sie ist hart geworden, unerbittlich und kompromisslos!' Schulhoff's diary, 18 March 1941. – *Schulhoff's diary (Schulhoffs Tagebuch)*. Original lost. Copy kindly provided by Tobias Widmaier of a transcription of the original compounded by Josef Bek and Marketa Kralovcova in 1971. Concerning the loss of Schulhoff's diary, see Bek, *Erwin Schulhoff*, 164.

23 '[...dass] der Deutsche nie aus seiner Sentimentalität herauskann. Die augenblickliche Bach- und Händelrenaissance ist nichts anderes als ein Zeichen von Impotenz, welches mit dem Schlagwort "Neue Sachlichkeit" bemäntelt wird.' Letter to Emil Hertzka, 18 May 1928, as quoted in Bek, *Erwin Schulhoff*, 84.

24 Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt, 'Der neue Klaviervirtuose', *Der Auftakt*, 6 (1926), 79–82, at 82.

25 Bek, *Erwin Schulhoff*, 157: 'Vortrag mit elegantem Ausdruck ohne übertriebenes Pathos, strenge Sachlichkeit mit durchaus auch kontrolliertem Gefühl'. These recordings have been reissued by Parnassus Records in 2014. See Erwin Schulhoff, *Complete Piano Recordings 1928/29*, Parnassus Records, 2014.

flawless talent for sight-reading, innate technical aptitudes, and an absolute peace of mind when performing in small or large venues.²⁶ His modern pianism, the capacity to control his nerves in all circumstances, his skills in improvisation, and wide repertoire, which included works from the early 18th century to the 20th century, were additionally sought-after assets in the ever-growing market of live radio broadcasts of the interwar period.²⁷

Improvised free fantasies and improvisation on given themes probably make up the bulk of his skills in extemporization, which he must have acquired in his youth. When and where Schulhoff acquired these skills remains undocumented, although Josef Bek, Schulhoff's main biographer, relates it to his musical education.²⁸ Whether he was capable of improvising fugues on given themes is unknown. However, his brief employment at the Czech State Conservatory in Prague in 1929, teaching 'sight reading and figured bass,'²⁹ suggests that he must have been capable to realize at sight a piano (keyboard) thorough bass part.

Schulhoff was probably also capable of what Riemann's music dictionary of 1908 labels as 'fantasia-playing,' that is improvisation which 'gives free rein to the fancy'.³⁰ This mode of improvisation might account for the compositional process of his unmeasured fantasy-like pieces of 1919–1922, which he defined as musical prose.³¹ Moreover, according to Riemann's dictionary, between the improvised fugue and the free fantasy 'stands the varying of a given theme – a fantasia on a melody – of which every ordinary musician ought to be capable.'³² The Czech pianist would later merge these skills with forms of extended tonality, syncopated rhythms derived from African-American dance music, and whatever scraps of authentic (African)-American jazz he might have come across in the early 1920s.³³

26 Ervina Brokesova as quoted in Bek, *Erwin Schulhoff*, 154, originally from Stará, *Ervín Schulhoff*, 39: '...phänomenales Gedächtnis, die Fähigkeit tadellosen Lesens vom Blatt, angeborene technische Begabung und absolute Ruhe im Vortrag auch in großen Konzerten.'

27 Bek, *Erwin Schulhoff*, 157; Vladimír Gregor, 'Ostravské působení skladatele Ervina Schulhoffa v letech 1935–1938' [Musical activities in Ostrava of the composer Erwin Schulhoff], *Sborník Ostrava*, 2 (1964), 82–123, at 88.

28 Bek, *Erwin Schulhoff*, 14.

29 *Schulhoff's diary*, 10 Dec. 1929.

30 Hugo Riemann, 'Improvisation', *Dictionary of Music*, transl. J.S. Shedlock (London: Augener, 1908 [4th edn.]), 368–69.

31 See Katrin Bösch and Ivan Vojtěch, 'Der Briefwechsel zwischen Erwin Schulhoff und Alban Berg', *Schweizer Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft*, 13–14 (1993–1994), 65–68.

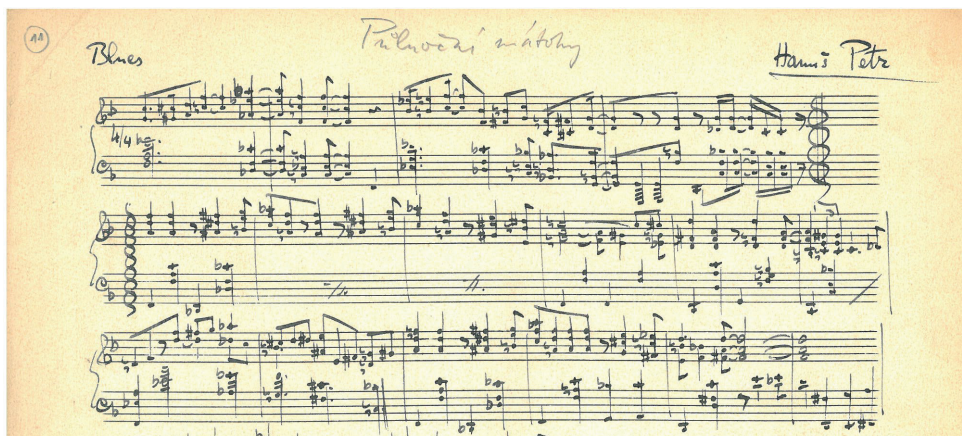
32 Riemann, 'Improvisation', 368–69.

33 Although improbable, one cannot fully discard the idea that Schulhoff heard authentic African-American jazz in one form or another in the first half of the 1920s. Nevertheless, and similarly to many of his contemporaries, he did refer to the novelty pianist Zev Confrey as a jazz pianist. A documented contact with a 'legitimate' white jazz musician took place in 1930, when he performed the radio premiere of his *Hot-Sonate* together with saxophone player Billy Barton: 'Zu erwähnen: der famose Bläser Willy Barton, ein Jazzspieler von Beruf. Schulhoff erklärt, nur solche könnten seine Sonate spielen.' Hanns Gutman, 'Neue Musik im Berliner Sender', *Melos*, 9 (1930), 251–52, at 252.

Sami dva

Sami dva, translated as *Only two*, is a composition by Oldřich Letfus (1900–1959),³⁴ Schulhoff's first partner in his jazz-oriented live radio broadcasts. The recording is allegedly one of the only two remaining audio testimonies of the Schulhoff-Letfus duo. This collaboration started at the beginning of 1931 and had initially been suggested and organized by Karel Boleslav Jirák,³⁵ the Czech composer and conductor, who in 1930 was also the programme director of the Czech Radio Corporation based in Prague.³⁶

While these radio broadcasts might have been partially financially motivated, they were also related to Schulhoff's desire to promote jazz in Czechoslovakia in the same spirit as his failed project of starting a 'Gebrauchs-Musik Schule' (school of functional music) in 1931, whose aim was to train Czech musicians in jazz and 'radio' music.³⁷ Schulhoff also composed pieces similar in style and form to *Sami dva*, for example *Pulnocní mátohy / Midnight Ghost* (1933),³⁸ which also served as platforms for their improvisations.³⁹



Example 1. *Pulnocní mátohy / Midnight Ghost* (1933), bb. 1–16. Signed Hanuš Petr, one of the numerous pseudonyms used by Erwin Schulhoff. National Museum of Prague – Czech Museum of Music. Shelfmark: S 173–508.

34 For a short biography of Oldřich Letfus see *Československý hudební slovník osob a institucí, svazek první* [Czechoslovak Music Dictionary of People and Institutions, Volume One] (Praha: Státní hudební vydavatelství, 1963), 828.

35 Bek mentions 13 November 1930 as the starting date: 'So entstand ein Jazz-Klavierduo, das den Hörern zum erstenmal am 13. November 1930 vorgestellt wurde' (Bek, *Erwin Schulhoff*, 118). The date mentioned in Uggè's 1933 article is 13 December 1930, Uggè, 'Jazzové klavírní', 9.

36 Bek, *Erwin Schulhoff*, 118. About *Radiojournal*, see <https://www.radio.cz/en/static/history-of-radio-prague>.

37 Ibid. 120.

38 Schulhoff's manuscripts mentioned in this paper are all housed in the National Museum of Prague – Czech Museum of Music.

39 Schulhoff was also active as a pianist in Jaroslav Ježek's jazz orchestra at the Osvobozené divadlo (Prague Liberated Theatre) from 1933 to 1935 (Schulhoff's diary, 10 March 1941).

Possibly in a self-conscious desire not to be associated, as a composer, with this less prestigious musical genre, Schulhoff signed these hit songs with pseudonyms, e. g. Hanuš Petr in *Pulnocní mátohy*. The use of pseudonyms highlights his ambivalent relationship as a composer to *Gebrauchsmusik*. However, Schulhoff the performer, or more specifically in this case the radio broadcasting improviser, never felt inclined to mask his name. On the contrary, his capacity for extempore playing was consciously publicized in a 1933 interview by Emanuel Uggè entitled 'Jazzové klavírní duo čili hodinka s prof. E. Schulhoffem a drem Oldřichem Letfusem' ('Jazz piano duo or an hour with Prof. E. Schulhoff and Dr Oldřich Letfus') printed in the monthly journal of the Czechoslovak Radio Corporation. In this article, Schulhoff describes his collaboration with Letfus and claims that these radio events are instinctive musical dialogues between himself and his partner similar to the improvised performances of 'pure' jazz bands (*míním čistý jazz*), the notated scores serving as springboards for their improvisations.⁴⁰

While *Sami dva* was part of the duo's programme prior to 1935, it is also one of the pieces included in their live radio experiments of 1936 with Letfus performing from Prague and Schulhoff broadcasting from Moravian Ostrava.⁴¹ In the recording, improvisation appears to primarily consists of agogic and dynamic variations of the melodic lines. New material is also added in the form of fills, for example the rhythmic fills introduced in the repetition of part A.

After two distinct introductions of four bars, the piece consists of a regular repetition of two idiosyncratic melodic lines of eight bars each (A and B). Each melodic line is played twice (a + a'; b + b') and then followed by a contrasting section (or bridge) (see Example 2). There are three different bridges, two of eight bars and one of four. Each bridge occurs twice throughout the whole performance, whose overall structure is summarized below (see Table 1).

40 Uggè, 'Jazzové klavírní', 9: 'Někteří skladatelé již pro nás píší v duchu na 2 klavírech. Obvykle však pracujeme improvisačně [sic], hrajíce ze 2 totožných exemplářů notového materiálu. Reagujeme na sebe navzájem instinktivně a podle toho tvoříme. Naše hra je tudíž zcela analogická čistému jazzovému tvoření, které spočívá na schopnosti dokonalé improvisace, což je podmíněno přesným a správným hudebním citem a intuicí.' ('Some composers already write for us with two pianos in mind. Usually, however, we work improvisationally [sic], playing from two identical copies of sheet music. Our playing is therefore completely analogous to pure jazz creation, which is based on the ability for perfect improvisation, which is conditioned by accurate and correct musical feeling and intuition.')

41 Stará, *Ervín Schulhoff*, 132, 139, 149. Letfus's original score of *Sami dva* remains missing. It is neither in the National Museum of Prague – Czech Museum of Music nor in the Prague Museum of Popular Music.

Intro 1

Intro 2

9 **A**

13

17 **a'**

Example 2. Oldřich Letfus, *Sami Dva* / *Only two*, undated (1933?), transcribed by Wilson (2017) from the recording, bb. 1–20.⁴²

42 The transcription of *Sami dva* was made possible thanks to the invaluable help of Elia Marcionetti and Carlos Gil Gonzalo.

Intro	Intro 1 + Intro 2 (8 bars)			
Part A	a + a' (16 bars)	bridge 1 (8 bars)	a + a'	bridge 2 (4 bars)
Part B	b + b' (16 bars)	bridge 3 (8 bars)	b' (8 bars)	Intro 2 (4 bars)
Part A	a + a' (16 bars)	bridge 1 (8 bars)	a + a'	bridge 2 (4 bars)
Part B	b + b' (16 bars)	bridge 3 (8 bars)	b' + ending (8 + 2 bars)	

Table 1. *Sami dva*, overall structure.

Optimistische Komposition

The ‘frivolity’ of *Sami dva* contrasts strongly with the more purposeful music of *Optimistische Komposition*. Schulhoff’s improvisation, as notated in his transcription of the first of the two *Studie*, starts with an initial sober quasi-modal polyphonic texture that builds up to a climactic sequence of polychords before returning back to its initial texture (see Example 3). The impression of an arch form is reinforced by the ending, which is a mirror inversion of the initial two phrases (bb. 1–8 and 9–16). Moreover, the improvisation seems to have mainly relied on the repetition, transposition and variation of the musical material of bb. 1–16.

While the lighter minded jazz oriented improvisations are musically closer to his works of the 1920s,⁴³ these improvisations on ‘revolutionary songs and on his own themes’⁴⁴ mirror Schulhoff’s compositions of the 1930s. They are similar in spirit to his political songs, for example *Píseň o Thälmannovi / Song about Thälmann* (1933), a genre probably influenced by the songs of Hanns Eisler.⁴⁵

The musical events, which included improvisations as well as some of his own compositions, were organized in collaborations with the Czech DDOČ, the Association of Communist Theatre Workers of Czechoslovakia.⁴⁶ According to testimonies of contemporaries who witnessed these events, *Optimistische Komposition* might have been improvised during a memorial evening of the three Ls (Lenin, Liebknecht, Luxemburg) at ‘an Inn at Herlinger in Silesian Ostrava on January 14, 1936’.⁴⁷ Together with *Der Marsch*

43 Schulhoff continued to broadcast in Ostrava, where he had moved to in 1935, together with a new partner Jan Kaláb (1908–1979).

44 Bek, *Erwin Schulhoff*, 137.

45 Jiranek claims that ‘already before the time when, in Germany, the Ebert government suppressed the Spartacus League, Schulhoff bound a close artistic friendship with German revolutionary artists, in particular with Bertolt Brecht und Hanns Eisler’, Jaroslav Jiranek, ‘Die tschechische proletarische Musik in den 20er und 30er Jahren’, *Beiträge zur Musikwissenschaft*, 4 (1962), 205–34, at 210f.

46 Bek, *Erwin Schulhoff*, 137.

47 Gregor, ‘Ostravské püsobení’, 100f.

2

Moderato con moto

Wagnerian Scherzo

droit d'exécution réservé

Example 3. Erwin Schulhoff, *Optimistische Komposition*, clean copy of the manuscript of the first of the 1936 *Studie* (WV 119), pag. 2. National Museum of Prague – Czech Museum of Music. Shelfmark: S 173-335-2.

der *Tschechischen Arbeiter*, another instance of Schulhoff's improvisations influenced by socialist realism, they were later notated and regrouped under the title *Studie*.

Schulhoff's anti-romanticism initially expressed in 'Revolution und Musik' is not only reflected in his work as a composer and as a classical interpreter but also in these two instances of improvised performance. Rather than a concert-like display of virtuosity, performed by 'the inspired genius that Romanticism valued so highly',⁴⁸ Schulhoff's examples create the illusion of a participatory and communal type of music making: *Sami dva* embodies the latest trends in popular dance music and *Optimistische Komposition* echoes the musical material of popular and/or revolutionary songs. Furthermore, both performances are staged as events unrelated to any type of concert environment. The radio and the public space recreate modern conditions for music listening which mirror Bessler's pre-classical music listening and which favours (according to Bessler) the audience's active involvement.

In these performances, Schulhoff merges the aesthetic potential of *Gebrauchsmusik* with his contemporized knowledge of classical and pre-classical extemporization techniques, the *Sachlichkeit* of his pianism, and particularly in the case of *Optimistische Komposition*, his understanding of extended forms of tonality. These innovative uses of the artistic quality of *Gebrauchsmusik* remain strongly related, I would suggest, to the notions of agency and inventiveness which Landgraf claims characterize autonomous art.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Although it is probable, there is no evidence that Schulhoff was aware of Bessler's texts or vice versa.⁵⁰ However, the aesthetic potential of *Gebrauchsmusik* summarized in Bessler's 'Grundfragen des musikalischen Hörens' is strikingly close to the Czech artist's interest in and contact with non-concert types of music making. The text is therefore an important theoretical-historical document related to the evolution of Schulhoff's aesthetic views.⁵¹

48 Angela Esterhammer, *Romanticism and Improvisation, 1750–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 9.

49 Landgraf, *Improvisation as Art*, 46.

50 For instance, Schulhoff might have come across Bessler's text when a key passage was reprinted in the first issue of *Musik und Gesellschaft* in 1930; see Heinrich Bessler, 'Der Zugang zur Musik aus der Alltäglichkeit', *Musik und Gesellschaft*, 1/1 (1930), 3–5, reprint, ed. Dorothea Kolland (Berlin: verlag das europäische buch, 1978).

51 Another example of Schulhoff's fascination with functional music can be seen in his article entitled 'Manifest zur Wirtshaussmusik' (*Manifesto to Inn / Tavern music*). The text was printed in *Der Auftakt* in 1924 and signed Erwin Hoff. It ends with a call for musicians to first learn music from those performers who have not 'studied' music ('Musiker – lernt einmal erst Musik von denen, welche die Musik nicht "gelernt" haben, denn diese Nichtmusiker sind viel mehr lebendiger als ihr'). Widmaier (ed.), *Erwin Schulhoff. Schriften*, 19–20.

As mentioned in the introduction, Schulhoff's œuvre might remain at the periphery of a narrow understanding of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, especially one that centres exclusively on Weimar Germany. Nevertheless, the artistically staged performance of music as a communal activity rather than as 'an object',⁵² embodied by the performance of *Sami dva* and *Optimistische Komposition*, gives us a novel angle from which to observe the relationship between *Gebrauchsmusik* and musical *Neue Sachlichkeit*, the former being an aspect of the latter, as Hinton has argued in reference to Kurt Weil's understanding of the term.⁵³ Moreover, if one considers musical *Neue Sachlichkeit* as an aesthetically mediated or induced representation of non-autonomous art, a category which surely includes the type of music-making and listening described in Besseler's lecture, then one can only but consider the *Gebrauchsaesthetik* of Schulhoff's improvisations as related to the 'communicative, medial, and dramaturgical' qualities of musical *Neue Sachlichkeit*.

52 Besseler, 'Fundamental Issues', 66.

53 Hinton, *The Idea of Gebrauchsmusik*, 90f.

Abstract

Sami Dva (1933), a rare testimony of Erwin Schulhoff's jazz orientated piano duos, and *Optimistische Komposition* (1936), a transcription of one of his solo extemporizations, are evidence of the Czech musician's skills in improvised music. These two examples also offer a unique opportunity to discuss how certain forms of improvised music might relate to a broad definition of musical *Neue Sachlichkeit*.

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