“DEGENERATE” MUSIC: JONNY STRIKES UP THE NAZIS’ DISAPPROVAL

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ABSTRACT
Following the disorganized and unstable Weimar Republic, the Third Reich attempted to obtain order and stability, including in aspects of creative life. Music in particular was reformed through a purge that was coordinated with socio-political propaganda. Motivated by anti-Semitism, the German term “Entartete” (degenerate), denoting moral deterioration, was employed as a label for artistic works associated with racial decay. This came to a head in the Entartete Musik exhibit, which featured composers and their works in an unpleasing manner in order to achieve propagandistic ends. The question to be raised is: in what ways was music itself considered inherently degenerate? Composer Arnold Schoenberg, for example, was deemed degenerate because of his Jewish descent, but also for his atonal compositions which, by definition, eschew the Western tonal system. It is not surprising that in the Third Reich, music lacking a tonal structure would be cast out because of its rejection of traditional Austro-Germanic cultural values. Similarly, Ernst Krenek’s opera Jonny spielt auf was deemed degenerate for its atonal but also its jazz qualities, which were a retaliation and response to the “order” of the styles that preceded them. Moreover, the racial implications of the title character Jonny, a sexualized African-American fiddle player, were blatantly degenerate. In this case, “degenerate music” in the Third Reich was not inherently degenerate; rather, it was the work’s cultural and political implications and associations that caused it to be labeled as such, just as the rejection of atonality and jazz stylings were cultural and associative.

INTRODUCTION
Conceived in the 19th century by doctor and criminologist Cesare Lombroso, “Entartete” or “degenerate” was a term that referred to a condition of “moral and spiritual deterioration.”1 Adopted by the Nazis in the 1920s, this term came to be used as a concept of censure and denunciation for modern culture that in Hitler’s mind, “manifested symptoms of national decline.”2 This was included but not limited to music, art, literature, and more often than not, was used to describe these areas of modern culture in terms of racial decay and anti-Semitism. The label of degeneracy against music took an especially dark turn, causing many German composers to be forced into exile. The questions that must be asked then are as follows: what were the qualifying characteristics that made music degenerate? Was it the music that was inherently considered degenerate, or rather the composer or program of a work? Perhaps it was not the music that was degenerate, but rather its cultural and political associations.

MUSIC IN WEIMAR GERMANY
To gain a deeper understanding of how music in the Third Reich came to be judged, we must first take a look at the musical era that preceded it, known as the Weimar Republic. The Weimar Republic was the federal republican government system, which was established in Germany in 1919 after the First World War and was then suspended in January of 1933 with the appointment of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor. The republic was often referred to as a “democracy without democrats,”3 because it lacked a firm liberal support and failed to secure the deference of the German societal elitists. The Weimar Republic faced a number of socio-economic and political complications, which led to the system’s overall lack of order and stability.4 Music, as a result, reflected this instability. As Erik Levi, author of Music in the Third Reich states:
The Weimar Republic still remains one of the most stimulating periods of 20th-century music history, a period in which Germany seemed to throw off the shackles of national romanticism and opened its doors to an unceasing stream of artistic experiments, which included Neue Sachlichkeit (new objectivity), 12-tone composition, flirtations with jazz and novel conceptions of music-theatre.  

**NAZI ATTACKS ON THE ARTS**

If the Weimar Republic was a time of instability and experimentation, the Third Reich attempted to create order, especially in music. The markedness of controversial musicians such as Arnold Schoenberg and Hans Eisler in the 1930s allowed the Nazis to distribute the conception that these controversial Jewish composers were plotting to cast down the national musical values of Nazi Germany. Due to a period of economic disaster and high unemployment rates at this time, the Nazi’s propaganda reform gained further credibility, allowing them to stress a strong commitment to the removal of the Jews from musical life and the dismantling of the Weimar Republic’s musical influence in order to regenerate German national music. German musical life came to be under the control of Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s appointed Reich propaganda minister and leader of the censorship of Germany’s cultural life (with the exclusion of education and Prussian theater and opera). In September of 1933, Goebbels established the Reichskulturkammer (RKK), or Reich Culture Chamber, an organization made of seven chambers that pertained to all aspects of creative life including the fine arts, theatre, literature, press, radio, film, and of course, music. The Reichsmusikkammer (RMK), or Reich Music Chamber, was created on November first, 1933, and contained seven professions to be surveyed: composers, performing Musicians, concert management, choral and folk music, music publishers, music dealers, and German instrument trade. The chamber was meant to regulate the social and economic aspects of Germany’s musical life using laws and ordinances. Membership was required and maintained through monthly fees, though given only to those considered to be “racially and politically ‘reliable.’” As a result, any musician who refused (or were refused) membership could be removed and would therefore be unable to work in Germany. Through 1938, questionnaires were distributed to musicians in order to obtain their personal and educational background. Any members who could not validate an Aryan ancestry were bereft of employment. In addition, the RMK could at any time require a member to take a professional exam that dealt with music theory and performance if any questions were raised about the member’s credibility. Failed exams could cause the member to be removed from the RMK. Naturally, these exams were often created and used as a means to remove members of unwanted backgrounds, for example, jazz musicians. Not long after the establishment of the RMK, official ordinances were promulgated that forbade the public musical performances of works by Jewish composers in Nazi Germany, especially in concerts and radio broadcasts. Laws were created that denied the employment of non-Aryan, Jewish musicians in both German opera houses and concert halls, and by the end of 1933, non-Aryan musicians were banned from memberships to many of the musical organizations set up by the Nazis themselves.  

On February 28, 1933, the Nazis attempted to seize complete control through the use of emergency legislation. From March through May of 1933, the Nazis would conduct a massive purge of German musicians from authoritative and influential positions. The main goal was obviously to purge musicians of Jewish descent; however, the Nazis also included under their umbrella those Aryan musicians in which they deemed to have culturally and politically degenerate affinities such as Ernst Krenek. By June of 1933, those Jewish composers such as Arnold Schoenberg, Kurt Weill, and even the non-Jewish Krenek, who were deemed “degenerate” by the Nazi regime, had been cast out from German society and had no choice but to emigrate. On April 6, 1933, Berlin Radio banned the broadcasting of all jazz music and in the same month, music critics in support of music of the Weimar Republic were removed from their positions. To the Nazis, music of the Weimar Republic was considered “‘bolshevist,’ meaning communist, ‘internationalist’ and ‘degenerate.’” As a means of increasing control through propaganda, the Nazis consistently maintained “the image of the Jew as the true enemy of all national interests.” As a result, anti-Semitism was portrayed through all forms of musical journalism including newspaper articles, academic writings, and even musicalogical books, creating a climate change of
opinion and successfully washing out the influence of unapproved “degenerate” musical styles of the Weimar Republic.\(^{19}\)

**ERNST KRENEK’S *JONNY SPIELT AUF (JONNY STRIKES UP)* AND NAZI HATRED OF JAZZ**

In Düsseldorf, May of 1938, following the successful *Entartete Kunst* exhibit in which artistic works were displayed in an “anti-aesthetic”\(^ {20}\) manner, meaning they were depicted in a manner that lacked a pleasing appearance, in conjunction with derogatory commentaries for the purpose of “propagandistic success,”\(^ {21}\) or exaggeration in order to spread a political cause, Professor Adolf Ziegler commissioned the *Entartete Musik* exhibit. With the help of conductor Paul Sixt and music critic Herbert Gerigk,\(^ {22}\) the exhibit created a hasty portrayal of “defamed” composers such as Ernst Krenek, Arnold Schoenberg, and Igor Stravinsky for their use of musical styles such as jazz, atonality, and neoclassicism, or for composer’s like Schoenberg and Goldschmidt, their Jewish descent,\(^ {23}\) exploiting primarily the musical compositions and composers of the Weimar Republic era.\(^ {24}\) The major feature of the *Entartete Musik* exhibit was the gallery of photographs and portraits of various modernist composers considered by Ziegler himself “to have had the destructive influence upon German music.”\(^ {25}\) The range of composers was vast and included not only leading figures such as Arnold Schoenberg, Igor Strawinsky, and Ernst Krenek, but also those composers of Jewish operetta including Oscar Straus and Leo Fall. Accompanying each portrait was “a crude slogan attacking the character and racial origin of the particular musician.”\(^ {26}\) Musical degeneracy was further demonstrated through theoretical works by modernist composers such as Schoenberg’s *Harmonielehre*,\(^ {27}\) a listening booth of degenerate music by composers like Hindemith, Weill, and Krenek on gramophone records, and in the middle of the exhibit, a giant advertisement attacking the harmful influence of jazz on Nazi musical life. The exhibit was unveiled with a speech by Ziegler in which he described the exhibit’s intent and his definition of degenerate music:

> The *Entartete Musik* exhibition presents a picture of veritable witches’ Sabbath portraying the most frivolous intellectual and artistic aspects of Cultural Bolshevism…and the triumph of arrogant Jewish impudence…Degenerate music is thus basically de-Germanised music for which the nation will not mobilise its involvement…it is the last measure of snobbist adoration or pure intellectual consideration.\(^ {28}\)

Ziegler believed that the exhibit “would help ‘to clarify matters’ for future generations, so that ‘creative musicians in Germany will once again be able to breathe, live, and work freely in a clean atmosphere.’”\(^ {29}\) If there was one work in particular that Ziegler wanted to “clarify” for future generations through the exhibit, it was Ernst Krenek’s *Jonny spielt auf* (*Jonny Strikes Up*).

*Jonny spielt auf* was a “hugely successful opera” that “constituted a near-perfect symbiosis of both modernist atonality and jazz styles.”\(^ {30}\) Advertisements for the degenerate music exhibit featured a caricature of Krenek’s lead character, Jonny, portrayed in a “monkeylike” manner playing the saxophone.\(^ {31}\) Jonny’s simian features were a sign of deeply rooted hierarchical standards, for in the time of colonial Germany “blacks were placed well below the white man and in the proximity of primates.”\(^ {32}\) Essentially, by characterizing Jonny with ape-like features, the Nazis were displaying “Jonny’s blackness as an animalistic and corporeal primitivity, thereby seeking to exclude Africans and African Americans from the human race,”\(^ {33}\) much in the same way they sought to exclude the Jews. To further their viewpoint, Jonny was drawn wearing the Star of David on his lapel,\(^ {34}\) symbolizing the “Nazi’s ideological project of linking atonal, that is, ‘Jewish,’ music with African American Jazz,”\(^ {35}\) much in the way Krenek employed both jazz forms and atonality in his opera, though for stylistic purposes rather than for propagandistic success like the Nazis.

Born August 23, 1900 in Vienna, Austria, Ernst Krenek was an Austrian born composer who had a great compositional output and career both in Germany and the United States.\(^ {36}\) Krenek began composing in Berlin, Germany in the 1920s during the time of the Weimar Republic. It was there that Krenek was highly influenced, thanks to the recommendation of pianist and composer Artur Schnabel, by the music of American composers such as George Gershwin and Irving berlin. Prior to his discovery of American music, Krenek had been developing works with atonal expressionism, however, by the mid 1920s he decided in order to make “quicker money,” he would write a light opera that would “imitate
popular music,’ ‘and probably do it better.’” Combined with a storyline inspired by a jazz-influenced single by Berlin cabaret composer Frederick Hollander, *Jonny spielt auf* was born. The work premiered at the Neues Theater in Leipzig on February 10, 1927. Within two months it had taken audiences by storm, and was playing in nearly seven different cities. By the end of its first season, it had grown to 56 cities and had been translated into six different languages. In the first few years following its premiere during the Weimar Republic era, the work gained in popularity and received great praise from Krenek’s contemporaries. Music critic Adolf Aber stated the following about the work: “We owe a great deal to the young Ernst Krenek for an opera…that almost entirely corresponds to the sensibility and events of our day.” What seemed to be “sensible” and telling of the times to Aber, however, was seen to Nazi socialists as a “a potent symbol of cultural decay.”

The opera, whose libretto was written by Krenek himself, tells the tale of a group of musicians, and one non-musical main character. Max, the composer, Anita, the opera singer, Jonny, the African-American virtuoso violinist, and Yvonne, the chambermaid and only non-artistic leading character in the show. The opera begins with Max, a composer who has fallen in love with the opera singer, Anita, while meeting at a resort near a mountain glacier. Anita has a show in Paris, and though Max begs her to stay, she leaves for her next performance, promising to come back for him. While in Paris, Anita is interrupted by Jonny, who attempts to make sexual advances towards her, despite his relationship with the chambermaid, Yvonne. In the translated libretto, Anita reacts to Jonny’s advances by saying: “No one has ever spoken so to me before. He disarms me with his shameless frankness. He disgusts me and I feel my strength ebbing away – I am swooning.” Jonny is halted when Daniello happens upon the situation and pays him off to leave. This is where the Nazis took their first offense. The portrayal “of an (abortive) sexual relationship between Jonny and Anita was particularly scandalous,” and was criticized by “conservative music press.”

Linked with the fact that Jonny, in addition to being African-American, was a jazz musician, only strengthened the Nazi ideal that African-American jazz music would lead to a woman’s “sordid sexuality.” The plot continues when Anita, won over by Daniello’s heroism, spends the night with him. During their lovemaking, however, Jonny sneaks into their room and steals Daniello’s violin out of revenge, hiding it in Anita’s banjo case that she had been carrying around for her next role. This blatant portrayal of love-making by the sensual Anita is expressed musically in mm. 1185 through sung imitation of her moans and sighs, offending the Nazis further for the portrayal of a woman’s far from pure behavior. The next morning, Daniello discovers his violin is missing and immediately accuses Yvonne, resulting in her subsequent firing and then rehiring by Anita who takes pity on the innocent girl. Anita politely rejects Daniello, informing him of her already taken heart by the composer, Max, but gives him her ring as a token of remembrance before leaving for her next operatic role. Overcome by vengeance, Daniello gives the ring to Yvonne, asking her to inform Max that it is from him. As Yvonne takes off to deliver the ring to Max, Jonny follows in attempts to chase the violin he hopes to steal.

Act two begins with Max alone, waiting for Anita to return. Anita does not appear until the next morning, and upon her arrival Yvonne delivers the ring, causing Max to leave in an angry rush for his glacier. Meanwhile, Jonny returns and steals the violin from Anita’s banjo case. Max, now inconsolable by the glacier, hears Anita’s voice over the radio and realizes his endless love for her, rushing to the train station to meet her there before she leaves for her next role in America. Following the broadcast of her voice, Jonny’s jazz band plays and Daniello, who has followed the group to the hotel, recognizes the sound of his violin in the broadcast and reports to the police. Jonny, realizing he has been recognized, flees for the train station. However, upon arrival he notices the police are already there, and so he stashes the violin unknowingly with Max’s luggage before hiding. Mistakenly, Max is arrested for Jonny’s crime, and Anita, realizing what has happened, pleads with Yvonne to tell the truth about Jonny in order to protect Max’s innocence. However, Daniello intervenes, hoping to take revenge on both Max and Anita. In the heat of the argument, Daniello is pushed by Yvonne onto the train tracks and killed by the oncoming train. Cleverly, Jonny frees Max from the hold of the police and still manages to leave with the violin. As they return to the station, “Jonny strikes up the band” and plays for the passengers waiting at the station. The opera finishes with the station clock, which has been changing throughout this scene,
transforming into a globe. Jonny is subsequently standing on the globe, representing his “triumph over the world.”

For the Nazis, Jonny’s triumph represented “the triumph of black over white culture.” For them “it was blasphemy to have the main character of Krenék’s opera Jonny Strikes Up, an American Negro playing a jazz fiddle, emerge victorious at the end of a tortured plot, throughout which Western classical music was derided and white heroines succumbed to the black musician’s charms.” Particularly notable in this scene as well, is what the chorus sings as Jonny stands on the globe: “The transit has begun! Thus Jonny strikes up the band for our dancing. The New World comes across the sea in radiance, and inherits ancient Europe by means of dance!” It should be noted that Nazis had a “disdain” for American culture, and that for national socialists, dance had a sensuous affinity that they believed led to cultural decay. Musically, Jonny plays the violin after this is sung. This strong statement made by the chorus then, implies that “ancient Europe,” a culture the Nazis hoped to preserve, was to be integrated into the “New World,” the land of Jonny’s people, through dance, and musically, jazz. Thus, as demonstrated just in this statement made by the chorus alone, the content of Krenék’s opera posed as a threat to the Nazi’s political and propagandistic agenda, causing them to deem the work, and Krenék himself due to his political and cultural affinities, as degenerate.

**JAZZ AND NAZI RACISM**

If there was one particular musical genre from the Weimar Republic era that the Nazis disapproved of in Krenék’s *Jonny spielt auf* as was demonstrated in the *Entartete Musik* exhibit, it was jazz. For many creative artists in the Weimar Republic era, jazz was a symbol of modernism, greater equality, emancipation, and overall, democracy for Germany. Jazz in the Third Reich, however, was besmirched across music journals, newspapers, and government directed radio broadcasts. Primarily, this bias against jazz was rooted less in the musical qualities of the genre, and more in its political and cultural implications. For example, the National Socialist party had a great disdain for the genre’s American and non-Aryan African origins. Long before the Nazi Socialists had come into power, Africans were stereotyped and singled out by Germans “for their disorderliness, want of emotional depth, lack of imagination, laziness, brutality, [...] compulsion to lying and theft,” and above all, their “sordid sexuality.” In the early 1930s, at a time when nationalist ideals were stiffening, critics were labeling jazz as “nigger noise,” claiming that its only purpose “was to introduce obscenities into society.” More specifically, jazz had a clear connection with dance, an affinitive symbol in Nazi Germany for sensuality that would entrap the “Nordic German womanhood in sordid sexuality” and yield young white girls “to the lures of the erotic saxophones.” It is no wonder then, that in Germany after the Great War, Negrophobia was joined with anti-Semitism, for “Jews were often portrayed as racially akin to blacks and possessed of similarly objectionable characteristics.”

While the Nazi bias towards jazz and the African presence in the genre was not primarily musical, Nazi musicologists attempted to define their disdain for the presence of Africans in jazz. They criticized first the use of syncopation, which they identified as “unsuitable for marching,” even though J.S. Bach and other revered composers had employed syncopation in many of their works. Next, they criticized the exploitation of their beloved and noble saxophone to accentuate the genre’s “already arousing rhythms.” Finally, they criticized the genre for its “insidious sexual powers,” “alluring sensuality,” and its attempts to corrupt “national morality.” It is no wonder then, that Jonny, which featured an African-American jazz musician as the main character and prominently showcased the genre of jazz in its orchestration, was considered “degenerate” in the Third Reich. What is interesting about *Jonny spielt auf*, however, is that musically it is not a “jazz-opera.” While gestures are made to the genre in the orchestral accompaniment for symbolic effect, as well as in the work’s diegetic references to Jonny’s jazz band, the opera’s overall musical effect “does not achieve a full integration of jazz.” That is not to say, however, that Krenék abandoned the integration of the genre into the work altogether. From the very beginning of the show, jazz is featured in the orchestration. Frequently, Krenék uses the “un-marchable” syncopation as his subtle jazz-influenced accompaniment. Beginning with the introduction music before the first scene in m.10 at the “ancora poco piú mosso,” the clarinets enter with an abrupt syncopated eighth, sixteenth, eighth, eighth note figure beginning on the and of beat four, that repeats itself again in m.11. Variations of this motive occur throughout the work, including during sung
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numbers, for example in Act One, Scene One, m.86 after Anita sings “Ah ein Mensch,” and then again in m.89 by the clarinets after Max has just sung to Anita “guten tag!” The motive is reminiscent of a typical “sensual” jazz dance rhythm. Syncopation is featured again in the postlude music of Scene One beginning in m.204 and continuing through to the beginning of Scene Two in m. 276.

The most literal use of jazz in Krenek’s opera is the diegetic music of Jonny’s band. Beginning in Act I, Scene Three, the English translation of the libretto reads: “an invisible jazz-band is playing down in the lobby.” The musical tempo is marked as “Shimmy (schnelles ‘Grammophon’ Tempo)” or “Shimmy (fast gramophone tempo)” beginning in m.580. The instrumentation of the recognizable jazz-band sound includes the woodblock, trumpet, trombone, piano, banjo, and of course, the Nazi-dreaded “arousing” saxophone. The band’s “set” begins with “an isolated woodblock” that strikes a figure of “two eighths followed by three quarter notes in an upbeat cut-time tempo.” In the Weimar era, composers used this pattern, which is referred to as the “shimmy figure,” to “indicate a jazz mileu.” For Krenek, the shimmy-figure was used “to signal the shift within the musical world of the opera from the neo-romantic, tonally ambiguous introduction to that of Jonny – tonally centered and dominated by a succinct yet powerful rhythm.” Also typical in this passage of jazz is the harmonic presence of flatted thirds, sevenths, and ninths, which though traditional in jazz, “can be strange to a [classically] attuned ear, until it has learned to accept this.” For example the Bb (flatted third) is played in the piano in Act One, Scene Three, m. 590 and is then melodically featured by the saxophone. The band is featured again over radio broadcast in Act Two, Scene Six. This passage in particular is very syncopated, however, unlike the first time the band is featured, contains a different instrumentation. This particular “segment” features a prominent solo violin (for the sake of the plot) and piano beginning in m.1412. Perhaps the most striking semblance of jazz in Krenek’s work is Jonny’s solo violin passage at the very end of the opera, marked to be played “espressivo” beginning in m. 2418. The passage is played with a “sliding or smearing effect” between pitches, typical of jazz. For the Nazis, this sliding of pitch mutates the “serenity of sound so valued in classical music […] to an ambiguous or ‘dirty’ state.”

Similar to jazz, the second “degenerate” quality in Krenek’s work was the presence of atonal “Jewish” music. Atonality, as defined in the Oxford Companion to Music is music “that which does not adhere to any system of key or mode.” Both the characters of Anita and Max sing with predominantly atonal motives, as was noted by their lack of a tonal center. For the Nazis, this demonstrated their link between “racially inferior blacks and Jews,” for the music of both groups existed in Krenek’s work, side-by-side. It is not surprising then that Krenek, though not himself Jewish, was identified by Nazi Germans, in addition to being a “cultural Bolshevist,” as a “Czech Jew.”

CONCLUSION

The Nazis’ qualities of “musical degeneracy” may seem multifaceted to the naked eye based on the broad number of composers and works targeted and discriminated against during the Third Reich, however, their judgment for degeneracy was in fact much simpler. The only true quality that the Nazis needed to deem a work “degenerate” was its political and cultural background. The political message and cultural exploration of the plot of Jonny spielt auf surely caused its degeneracy in their minds. However, even their musical disapproval of the work with its atonal and jazz influences rose from a political background. Jazz, for its history of origin and association with African-Americans, and Atonality for its history of origin and association with Jewish composers such as Kurt Weill and Arnold Schoenberg. Degenerate music in the Third Reich, then, was not inherently degenerate. In fact, it was not the music that caused the degenerate label at all; rather, it was the work’s cultural and political implications and associations.
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