

The Music of East Germany

by Andy Glover-Whitley



Ernst Herman Meyer

Hanns Eisler

Günter Kochan

When in 1990 The German Democratic Republic (DDR, or East Germany to us) vanished from the maps of the world and the Atlases of the classrooms as quickly as it had appeared in 1948, a whole culture and apparatus of a state was dumped, unceremoniously, into a large rubbish heap and consigned to the rubbish tips of history. This has many economic, social and of course political reasons that have been discussed by historians etc endlessly ever since, but by doing this the world became a musically much poorer place for it.

Thankfully though there were some in the reunified Germany who did not forget, and did not consign their unique culture to the bins of history as the world did. Thankfully a few have actually done us a great service by transferring the officially released music LP's to Youtube thus ensuring they are preserved in a way that everyone in the world can now hear, unlike the record companies who have ignored this great resource of material. At the time of their issue most of these works would not have been known outside East Germany and would have been almost impossible to get hold of as imports, and although they still exist in the recorded archives of the old East German State record companies they unfortunately remain unissued and ignored by all commercial labels who took over these archives. For what reasons are unknown.

As the DDR was so closed to the western world and to only a slightly lesser extent to the Communist bloc it created a unique musical world that was insular and yet original. Some of the composers had known life under the Nazi regime, others had fled to Britain (Ernst Herman Meyer), and America (Paul Dessau and Hanns Eisler), others were born under the dictatorship of Ulbricht and Honnecker and knew no other world than the DDR.

The music itself while being bound to the dictates of the communist regimes ideological censorship did create much music of great worth and much of a shade and hue that was

unknown anywhere else on the planet. It had a seriousness and gravity that expressed an almost blind faith in the society that they knew and lived in, rather reminiscent of today's North Korea. How much of this was the communist party's interference is hard to say but generally the party line on the music of their society was liberal unlike on other aspects of society in this small state. Many of the foremost composers of the nation had returned to Germany in 1948 at the behest of the new Government and created wonders under a dictatorship that they generally supported, some with reservations, others wholeheartedly, such as Eisler, Meyer and Dessau. There were no records found in the Stasi (the states dreaded Secret Police) archives to suggest that any composer was ever charged with any anti-government offenses even if the state did not agree with a new work's outlook it was very rare that the work was withdrawn or censored, and the composer attacked in the press, or at worst "vanished", as had happened in the Soviet Union and other eastern bloc states since 1945.

The music itself had a sound world that spoke of its times and this is certainly found in the beauty and weightiness of the works of Ernst Herman Meyer. His "Harp Concerto" is a stunning work with an almost innocent belief in itself that is appealing and delicate. It has a surety of hand and opaqueness in its orchestration that does away with all the dogma found in much of the music of the West, or even in Shostakovich or Khatachurian's works.

<https://youtu.be/5e13TMUICto>

Harp Concerto

<https://youtu.be/yfgYCZVQ6Pk>

Symphony No.3

Meyer was a Berlin born Jew who escaped to England when the Nazi's made life unbearable in 1933. He could have had a high position at Cambridge University, and was offered a lectureship there by Egon Wellesz in 1945. He was enticed back as a Marxist sympathiser and this love of the new 'socialist politik' ideal and his home city had a bearing on his outlook musically. In his magnificently evocative work "Berlin Divertimento" he creates an abstract image of East Berlin in a way no other creative artist was ever able to do. He was head of the German Society of Composers and Musicologists, the East German equivalent of the Union of Soviet Socialist Composers, the official mouthpiece of the state's attitude towards musical life in the country.

Other names and works to have a listen to include:

Paul Dessau - Meer Der Sturme
Fritz Geisler - Symphony No.2
Günter Kochan - Symphony No.3
Siegfried Kohler - Piano Concerto
Frank-Volker Eichorn - Variants
Wolfgang Hohensee - Symphony for a Film
Ruth Zechlin - Polyphony for Orchestra

Wilhelm Neef - Violin Concerto
Gerhard Rosenfeld - Cello Concerto

These are just a few of the names and works of East German composers. At this period in question there were more composers per head of population than any other country in the World, which says something for the East German Governments policies of nurturing the musical arts unlike any of the other arts found in that nation which were censored and controlled in a very Zhdanovian/Stalinist way.

Although East Germany was a closed society many of the composers who returned to the new "Workers State" in 1948 brought new experimental ideas with them, and although these were frowned upon by the state apparatus they tolerated the experimentation that was then passed on to the next generation of the state's composers. Many rejected these experimentations such as avant-gardism, 12 note serialism, free-atonalism for a more modernistic/romantic language of pluralism, some though did use these more experimental techniques to create their works. In many cases the isolationism created some fabulously inventive and creative works such as Fritz Geisler's Symphony No.3

<https://youtu.be/syaZboTO0F0>
Symphony No.3 (part 1 of 2)

And Rainer Kunad's - Concerto for Organ, 2 String Orchestras and Timpani

<https://youtu.be/dLhn66tqiVw>
Concerto for Organ (part 1 of 2)

These are not stand alone works of East German experimentalism but express an ethos that runs as a strand through much of the nation's musical ideologies. The state tolerated, and at times actively encouraged, this mode of expression that they exploited for their own propaganda. A face that they showed to an outside world, especially the west, as the way that their so called Democratic nation was advanced and working in a way that was unique and more advanced as a worker's state than the "*degenerate bourgeois capitalistic corrupt dogs*" (Zdanov 1948) of the more democratic nations of the western world.

So why, in 1990, did a nation ignore the rich advanced language that they had created and developed in favour of the often crass egotistic banalism that we accepted in the west as modern "art music". Probably like much of the former DDR it is unhappy memories of a not so wonderful utopian "Worker's State" that shaped this view. As people rejected much of the music of the pre First World War as being part of the root of the cause of the war, so many people in the former Socialist republic rejected their own musical culture as part of the symptoms that needed to be treated and dealt with. Hence this fascinating musical landscape was lost and is now becoming an ever fading memory in those that lived in the DDR of this period.

It is hard for us in the Western European sphere of influence and who have not lived under the yoke of a dictatorship, such as the DDR was, to understand the importance of

shaking off all the bad things of those grey years. Along with the bad you must also forfeit and destroy the good things to exorcise the ghosts of an awful experience completely. It is only now through the work of a few dedicated followers of this musical culture that we are able to look back and reassess the music written in these forty one years of the DDR in an unbiased and unprejudiced way. Many of the composers of this period are now dead, or are ageing, and many have stopped writing altogether as their music has been ridiculed as naive and irrelevant, and so, unjustly socially blacklisted in a way they never were in the old DDR. As Milan Kundera once wrote in his masterpiece *“The Unbearable Lightness of Being”*,

“The unbearable lightness weighs heavy in favour of the weightiness of a failed state.”

Their time has gone according to attitudes of western society. A pity, and a condemnation, of our own “quick buck” mentality that prizes banalism and commerciality over truth and openness in much of the music we cherish. We ridicule music of depth, ingenuity and frankness without hindrance. Truth in other words is not required anymore. Here in the lost music of this country, no matter its faults; and it had many; we find a musical truth in a way we have never been able to find in our own Western attitudes.

To finish off here is some of that wonderful honesty that was found in the music of the DDR.

https://youtu.be/UeKVIn_X77I

“Sandmann, Lieber Sandmann”.

A strange but haunting little melody that nearly every child in the former state knew well and has remained in their memories as something ‘good’ ever since. Maybe there was something to be said for the way East German society treated its creative musical artists and in particular its art music.

I bet you will now play this again, and again, and again etc, etc, etc!!!!!!!