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Refugee Composers of the Twentieth Century: The Impact of Displacement on Musical Identity During World War II

—Kylie Smith

I have always loved music, and since becoming a music major at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) I have gained a great appreciation for the history behind it. I decided to conduct independent research while taking my first music history course with Professor Rose Pruiksma, who later became my mentor when I received a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) grant. I chose to apply for the grant because I wanted to experience exactly what a long-term research project entails, and because I wanted to learn more in-depth about twentieth-century music history.

After reading an article titled, “We Refugees” by Hannah Arendt, which discussed the difficulties of being a German Jewish refugee around the time of World War II, I became interested in how the refugee experience affected composers of the mid-twentieth century, specifically Kurt Weill, Bela Bartok, and Arnold Schoenberg, who fled from WWII-era Europe (Arendt, 1994). Although this topic may seem very specific, it pertains to modern-day practices in immigration, music, and the refugee experience. The musical implications are part of a bigger picture of the cultural oppression, assimilation, and destruction that still happens today with immigration and musical hierarchy. The refugee experiences of composers are often just a footnote in their biographies and have not been granted the level of in-depth study that such a significant life experience deserves.

The Importance of Country of Origin

When it comes to studying classical music throughout history, music historians often categorize music by two main aspects: the time period the piece falls in, and the country that the composer is from. Composers write music with a specific audience in mind, and their music tends to represent certain local or national music traditions from their country of origin. For example, Edward Elgar was an English composer who captured the national spirit of the late romantic and early twentieth century period and began what is sometimes called the English musical renaissance. In a more extreme circumstance, Dmitri Shostakovich was forced to write music that could stand up to strict Soviet standards or face severe punishment, such as exile. However, I decided to research what happens to the music of composers who were displaced from their home country during World War II and were faced with creating music within a culture entirely different from their own.

World War II created a massive refugee crisis the likes of which the world had never seen before, with around 200,000 European refugees entering the United States out of millions of people that
were attempting to find safety (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2020). Many who were trying to escape from Hitler’s regime were forced out of the countries and communities that their families had been a part of for generations.

Finding refuge, however, did not mean that the trouble was over for those who had escaped persecution in their own country. Refugees were forced to assimilate to the culture of their new homes and were often regarded as outsiders who could not be trusted. A great number of Jewish people were even placed into internment camps in several European countries and had to publicly agree with the restrictive policies of their new country to avoid being considered enemies of the state (Arendt, 1994). The United States put into place many restrictive immigration policies that turned away desperate refugees who faced death if they returned to their own countries. Kurt Weill, Bela Bartok, and Arnold Schoenberg were lucky enough to escape persecution in their home countries in Europe and make a name for themselves in the United States, mainly due to prior international connections and recognition, but many others were not as lucky. And despite their escape, each of these three composers experienced challenges and difficulties due to their immigration.

Three World War II Refugee Composers

The first step in my research process was to learn more about the backgrounds of Weill, Bartok, and Schoenberg and their experiences surrounding the war. Kurt Weill, a German-born Jewish composer, was a popular classical composer in Germany during the 1920s, but as the Nazi party came into power, they singled him out for his Jewish faith and the communist political views that were expressed in his work, as in his famous *Three-penny Opera* (*Dreigroschen Oper*), which was written in collaboration with Berthold Brecht. The Nazis prevented any of his works from being performed, and it became increasingly unsafe for him to put out any music. After being blacklisted, Weill escaped to France in 1933, and later came to America with the intent of touring *The Eternal Road* (*Der Weg der Verheissung*), an opera about the journeys of the Jewish people. When Weill came to America, he was not met with the same level of recognition and success that he was used to back home, and he struggled for the first few years. Eventually, he was able to get back on his feet and found great success in America.

Hungarian-born composer and ethnomusicologist Bela Bartok was forced to escape to the United States in 1940 because of his anti-fascist politics. Back in Hungary, his ethnomusicological studies focused on both local folk music and music from around the world, which he documented and incorporated into his own music. This led to an outcry from nationalists and the Nazi party. They disapproved of him for exploring what they considered the “lesser” forms of music, called peasant music, and for not committing to Nazi ideals. Because of the political trouble he faced, Bartok finally decided he needed to leave his beloved country to find safety in another. Once in America, he faced many obstacles, including failing health and a complete cutoff of communication with his home country. When faced with an expiring visa, he wrote in a letter, “I lost all confidence in people, in countries, in everything” (Stevens 1993, 96).

Jewish-Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg fled the rise of the Nazi party and anti-Semitism in Austria, coming to the United States in 1933. Interestingly, Schoenberg embraced his Jewish heritage primarily after moving to the United States, and was publicly critical of American culture, but he also worked hard to advocate for the acceptance of more refugees. He struggled to feel at home in the United States, and the effect of his emigration on his musical compositions is still under debate to this day.

This statue of Bela Bartok stands outside the home (now a museum) where he lived in his beloved Hungary until he emigrated to America in 1940. Photo credit: Burrows, Wikimedia Commons.
In many ways, Schoenberg was the opposite of Weill, as he stayed truer to his European roots rather than assimilating and becoming an American.

With a basic background on Weill, Bartok, and Schoenberg under my belt after planning my SURF research, I began to delve deeper into the details of their lives and musical compositions.

Research Methods

In order to conduct this research, I first needed to understand the historical background of World War II refugees in the United States in general and the intense expectations put on these individuals when it came to assimilation and culture. I researched the different kinds of messages being put out by both the American government and other refugees for new immigrants to consume. I also read firsthand accounts from actual World War II refugees to gain a more personal perspective. These materials were relatively easy to find, as there are several books and articles about war refugees that account for all different aspects of refugee life. I looked into this subtopic primarily in the beginning stages of my research process, but I would check back in throughout my research for additional insights.

Once I had a good grasp on World War II refugee history in general, I shifted to examining the experiences of Weill, Bartok, and Schoenberg in particular. I analyzed their music scores and letters; government documents about the war effort; and reviews of their music written at the time. I wanted to see if there were differences in composition and style before and after they emigrated to the United States. I was also interested to see how they were perceived by the public and the musical community. When I found compositions of special significance or a strong stylistic change, I looked for a parallel between what was happening in their lives and their refugee experience (and there usually was). For example, both Schoenberg and Weill embraced their Jewish roots while in America (and not during their time in Austria or Germany), which was important because it separated them from Nazi Germany in the eyes of Americans. Additionally, each of the three composers had a period of more audience-friendly “tonal” work after they arrived in America, as if trying to find their footing to fit into their new environment.

There were times when I was overwhelmed with how much information there was to discover. At some points, the sources I consulted contradicted each other directly (mostly when it came to Schoenberg) and I had to decide which perspective I agreed with more, or whether I agreed with them at all. It took a very long time to decide what I thought, because I didn’t want to be wrong. However, when it comes to historical and musical analysis, there aren’t right or wrong answers, just well-informed or ill-informed ones, and I had to learn and understand this as the research process continued.

A Closer Look at Kurt Weill’s Refugee Experience

Weill moved to America in 1935 and was very active in the music scene with personal projects, but during the war a large part of Weill’s work was meant to be used as American propaganda. He devoted himself to showing his loyalty to the United States and to being a voice for immigrants and the German-Jewish people that were trapped in Europe and still in need of assistance. Weill wrote often to government officials and the public to speak on behalf of his people so that they could lead safe lives in the United States. Interestingly, although Weill did not even identify
completely with his Orthodox Jewish background, he turned to “the Jewish music of his youth” to speak on behalf of the Jewish plight (Jarman 1982, 70).

Weill spoke in favor of cultural assimilation in an interview from 1941, asking his fellow German refugees, “[H]ow can you ever become Americans if you still cling to the language and the customs of a country that has become the most un-American country in the world?” (Marshall 1941). In this exchange and in many of his other conversations, Weill advocated for a complete education in American culture and embraced his new home as his only home.

Weill’s contributions to the war effort came from a different angle than American-born citizens who were simply focused on winning the war, as he needed to help others and “prove himself above suspicion” (Fauser 2013, 59). When German immigrants were labeled as enemy aliens in 1941 by the US government, Weill responded with the idea of an “Alliance of Loyal-Alien Americans,” a group that would show their commitment to the United States and hopefully improve perceptions of immigrants. Working closely with the American Theatre Wing, Weill collaborated with other musicians and composers and served as head of the production of Lunchtime Follies, which was performed starting in 1942 in manufacturing plants to provide entertainment and a morale boost to workers on their breaks in short, bite-sized nuggets. It made a strong impact on American theatrical tradition and is called by some “the birthplace of a real people’s theatre” (Fauser 2013, 60). Ironically, because Weill was not an American citizen at the time, he was not allowed to enter some of the factories because he was still technically categorized as an enemy alien. The discrimination he faced in America during the war made things much more difficult than was necessary.

Despite actively contributing to the war effort, Weill still did not have the full respect that was given to other composers who were not refugees. Weill’s extreme pro-American stance and devotion to writing solely propaganda music during the war speaks to the lengths refugees had to go to fit in, and also how Weill was able to adapt to his new environment and find success.

When Weill gained citizenship in 1943, he worked closely with the US Office of War Information by producing music like Wie Lange Noch [How Long Still?] to play behind enemy lines in Germany to affect morale, as well as other similar projects. But he also went on to pursue more personal creative projects that he had taken a break from since emigration. In these projects he allowed himself to criticize some aspects of American culture. For example, in 1947 his musical Street Scene contained a nuanced but clear commentary on life in New York City (and how it isn’t always pretty).

Weill was still American through and through when it came to his musical technique. He comprehended the musical structures and ideas of blues music and American composers well enough not only to imitate but also to compose original works in that style, synthesizing their pitch organization, harmonic structures, and forms. From 1945 to 1947, he also did this with the assistance of Langston Hughes, who “escorted the composer to Harlem, where they listened to blues artists in local clubs, as well as the sing-song voices of street children as they played” (Virginia Opera 2018, 15). Writing and producing music until his death in 1950, Weill saw many successes, and had a major impact on American music.
The Refugee Experiences of Bartok and Schoenberg

Bartok and Schoenberg had experiences in America very different from Kurt Weill's, and through my research, I concluded that this was because of differences in health, attitude toward American culture and assimilation, and each individual's musical philosophy. Whereas Weill wrote for the people (in keeping with his politics and earlier experience of music meant for workers), Bartok and Schoenberg wrote for a more academic crowd, leading them to use their professional connections to succeed, rather than changing themselves and their musical ideals. Schoenberg eventually found success and a lasting impact with music theory, and as such is widely recognized as a founder of twentieth-century musical techniques. Unfortunately, Bartok's failing health prevented him from doing a lot of what he wanted to do in life, and the doctors never really knew what was wrong with him. He missed his country to his last day, and never completely assimilated. When it came to Bartok in America, “it was still Hungary that claimed his spirit. He could have been content nowhere else,” and this was obvious when it came to the music that he produced (Stevens 1993, 38). Rather than switch to a more American musical language, Bartok used Hungarian musical references like verbunkos, a Hungarian national dance style.

Connection to Modern-Day Refugees

I knew this research was important before embarking on the project, but as it progressed, I realized just how relevant it is to current events. The current refugee crisis is the worst the world has seen since World War II, and in Syria alone over twelve million people have been displaced from their homes in the last decade (USA for UNHCR 2021). Unfortunately, the problems that immigrants like Weill, Bartok, and Schoenberg faced in the 1930s and 1940s are not all that different from the problems that immigrants face today. Immigration today is a hot button debate in the United States, with harsh rhetoric surrounding the issue, such as “This is America, speak English,” and talk of refugees coming over to steal people’s jobs. Although this messaging may not always be as direct as it was eighty years ago, the sentiment remains. And when it comes to music and modern-day refugees, many from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa, do not often fit into the typical Western musical language that is more widely understood and appreciated in the United States, making acceptance and success here even more difficult.

The composers I studied (along with many other immigrants) provided an incredible amount of culture and music to the United States in the twentieth century while facing great adversity. I believe that we can learn from how this country treated refugees during World War II and implement policies to help refugees in a better way in current times. I would like to do more research on this topic in the future. For example, organizations like the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers and the National Committee for Refugee Musicians provided relief and funding to composers of the twentieth century, which allowed them to continue composing, and many people in power also reached out to help when the composers needed it most. If they had not done so, we would not have some of the groundbreaking music that has shaped American musical composition ever since they were published. Today, these organizations do not operate in the same way, and their goals have taken a more American-focused lens. In the future, I would like to look more into the kind of assistance (if any) that is offered to today’s refugees when it comes to music.

Conclusion

Going into college, I didn’t realize that there were so many questions to ask about music and so many pathways that I could go down to research. I learned an incredible amount about twentieth-century composers (both musically and as people). I understand much more about their compositional styles and techniques, and the pressures they were under from society to produce music. My favorite part of the research process was reading through the old letters of the composers I studied, because this made them feel like real people. For example, Bartok seemed like someone I would be friends with when he was my age, and I never would have known that if
I hadn’t had the opportunity to read the dry humor in his letters. I want undergraduates to know that they can look into many things beyond what is traditionally taught in their classes. History inevitably is written with biases, and there is always more to the story than what we are led to expect.

I would like to thank everyone who helped me throughout this research project: my mentor Dr. Rose Pruiksma for her guidance and wisdom, my advisor Dr. David Upham for his support over the last three years, and my family and friends for always being there for me when I need them. I am also very grateful to the Donald J. Wilcox Endowed Fellowship Fund and Ms. Crystal Napoli, who funded this endeavor and allowed me to spend my summer conducting research that I am passionate about. Lastly, I am so thankful to all my past and present teachers who believed in me and inspired me, because they have given me the tools I need to succeed.

References


Author and Mentor Bios

Kylie Smith came to the University of New Hampshire (UNH) from her hometown of Plymouth, Massachusetts, to study music. She is in the University Honors Program. She applied for a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) for 2020 because she knew she wanted to conduct a large research project during her time at UNH. When she read the article “We Refugees” by Hannah Arendt for a history class, she was hooked. With her faculty research mentor, Dr. Rose Pruiksma, she designed her SURF research to study refugee composers in World War II-era America. In addition to gaining valuable research skills through the endeavor (for example, a different organizational structure is needed for such a large project like this) Kylie reached a deep understanding of the compositional styles and techniques of the composers she studied. She decided to publish with Inquiry to share her research and to get some experience with the publishing process. After earning her bachelor of arts degree in 2022, Kylie hopes to continue researching and studying viola along with working in music education. Graduate school
is also in the plans, but exactly what kind of program is yet to be decided. Kylie notes that her research experience has helped her realize there are many exciting options for both research and career paths.

**Rose Pruiksma** has been a lecturer in music history at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) since 2010. She teaches classes on music history, music in world cultures, film music, music and social change, and a general introduction to music. Her research has centered on music, dance, and identity in seventeenth-century court ballet and opera. Kylie's engagement in the sophomore music history course sequence, specifically with the historical details and the broader cultural contexts in which composers worked, made Dr. Pruiksma especially supportive of Kylie's idea for a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) in 2020. Dr. Pruiksma felt that Kylie's interest in European composers' experiences as World War II refugees in the United States was especially relevant "in light of our current time, in the midst of another worldwide refugee crisis, anti-immigrant sentiment, and musicians on the move." Dr. Pruiksma says that it was a pleasure to mentor Kylie, and to see her go from her original idea to digging more deeply into each composer's circumstances, compositions, and compositional practices, and how those changed, or not, in response to their new contexts. She explains, "Kylie was also able to frame this work in light of current events, and to think about how study of the past might inform us right now simply confirmed for me the value of her research."

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