Music As A Nationalistic Tool Essay, Research Paper

Music has been a powerful force throughout history. Its power has affected all aspects of people?s lives. The ideas and attitudes people have toward their country can easily be seen in their music. While music in the early part of the modern era (1400-1900) served to promote patriotism and nationalism, music?s role in the late 20th century seems a reversal and has been a deconstructive force challenging nationalistic feelings.

The origin of all music is cultural (Nettl 940). Folk songs tell a story of one?s culture (Nettl 940). The traditions of a nation and the feelings of people towards that nation are first displayed in folksongs. (Nettl 76). ?Culture grew from everyday life of the people. It was made up from all that was specific to a particular nation: their native speech, their folklore, their religious deviations, their idiosyncratic practices.? (1). The origins of modern European nations can be traced to ancient folksongs and lore.

The folk songs and the musical style reflected the inner characteristics of the culture (Nettl 7). Epic songs were the earliest of musical stories (Nettl 93). These songs were told by traveling minstrels about the history of an area (Nettl 93). ?The Song of Roland? typifies the epic song as they impact folk culture and feelings of nationalism (Nettl 93). In ?The Song of Roland?, the main character extols the people:

Says Oliver: ?Pagans from there

I saw; Never on earth did any man

see more. Gainst us their shields

a hundred thousand bore, that laced

helms and shining hauberks wore:

and, bolt upright, their bright brown

spearheads shove. Battle we?ll have

as nev? was before. Lords of the

Franks, God keep you in valor!

So hold your ground, we be not overborne?

Then say the Franks ?Shame take

him that goes off: If we not

die, then perish one and all? (2)

In the minds of the Franks a nationalistic spirit was already forming.

From the folklore and myths emerged some of the greatest modern operas of Europe (Davies 20). These operas promoted nationalism by appealing to national pride insuring their popular success (Grout 411). Operas appealed to pride by utilizing the ancient folktales known by all (Grout 411).

During the Romantic Era many new composers utilized their nation?s folksongs and music (Romantic Era np). One example is Felipe Pedrell (1941-1922), a Spanish composer who used folksongs and folk music of the past to compose his most famous opera, La Celestina (3) (Grout 482). Pedrell was a hardened nationalist who adapted the folk music to his own aims (Grout 482). Other examples of composers absorbed in nationalistic spirits include Polish composers Mathias Kamienski (1734 ? 1821), Jan Stefani (1746 ? 1829), Hungarian composers Andres Bartay (1798-1856), August von Adleburg (1830-1873), Jino Hubay (1858-1937) and French composer Jean-Fran?oise Lesueur (1760-1837). All added to the nationalistic feelings in their emerging nations (Grout 482). But perhaps one of the best examples of nationalistic opera is from Italian composer Guissepe Verdi (1813-1901). One of Verdi?s greatest operas, A?da, gave rise to patriotic demonstrations and made ?Viva Verdi? a cry for Italian national unity (Grout 362). Verdi?s musical call for national unity in Italy was one of the key factors that led to a unified patriotic state.

Another composer who made as great a contribution to history and nationalistic spirit was Richard Wagner (1813-1883) of Germany. Wagner used the same tactics as Pedrell and Verdi using common folktales and songs as basis for his musical dramas (Davies 532). One of the earliest examples of this is ?Tristan? (1865) (5). ?Tristan? is an opera based entirely on the Celtic myth ?Tristan and Isolde? (Grout 413). This opera was popular but was surpassed by Wagner?s most famous work.

Wagner?s most famous musical drama was ?Der Ring des Nibelungen? finished in 1876 (Davies 230). The basis of this opera was a famous Teutonic myth known by all Germans. It told of the life and adventures of folk hero, Sigfried (Davies 230). The opera was written in four parts over a seven-year period; the installments were Das Rheingold (1969), Die Walkure (1870), Sigfried (1872), and G?tterd?mmerung (1876) (6) (Davies 230). These Celtic and Teutonic myths helped provide Germany with a national identity that led to a nationalistic spirit that would continue in Germany until the present.

The beauty of Wagner?s operas and his own horrible personal bigotry were at opposite ends of the spectrum. Wagner was an extremely anti-Semitic individual as shown by his diaries and essays (Solomon np). ?Only one thing can redeem you (Jews) from the burden of your curse: the redemption of Ahaversus ? total destruction.? (7)

Wagner?s operas were not without signs of his anti Semitism. While he was not so open as to give the evil characters Jewish names, he reached his audience emotionally by making the evil characters sing the flattest notes and making them appear greedy and without emotion (Solomon). In Der Ring des Nebelungen Wagner portrays the character Mime as a poor, stinking Jew with brown hair and eyes, while the main character, Sigfried, is a strong noble man with blond hair and blue eyes (Solomon). Sigfried killed Mime simply because Sigfried hated his appearance (Solomon).

This was the least direct implication of Wagner?s hatred of the Jews. Wagner?s many essays on music all convey a harsh resentment of the Jews (Solomon). Wagner often compared the Jewish moneylenders to curses and demons with a lust for gold and wealth (Solomon). Wagner?s hatred, displayed in all media utilized by him, both reflected and helped kindle the nationalistic hatred of the Jews in Germany. Other forces later utilized this hatred.

?With the exception of Richard Wagner,? wrote Hitler, ?I have no forerunner.? (8). Hitler and the Nazi movement found power in opera and tied the operas of Wagner to the nationalistic movement of Germany (Davies 995). A young Hitler praised Wagner (Solomon). Hitler had often claimed he had read everything written by Wagner (Solomon). The Nazis used Wagner?s scores as a tool of aggression against the ?lower quality? sounds of Slavic countries (Nettl 7).

Hitler used his master?s work to promote anti-Semitism throughout Germany, praising Wagner as a national hero and connecting his operas to Germany. Hitler used the operas to tie Germany?s need to scour the planet of all Jews (Solomon). Hitler used the beautiful operas of Wagner to raise an extremely patriotic nation, one willing to turn blind eyes away from atrocities as long as the nation benefited.

Nazism did not end with World War II. In fact, the ideas of Nazism have been reborn and refashioned to fit a modern era (Resistance). These neo-Nazis use music as a weapon of propaganda and white supremacy. ?White people know what?s happening?to their racial family and culture, all around the world, and are very upset about it,? hails the front page of the neo-Nazi record company, Resistance Records on their web page (9) (Resistance).

The headquarters of this resurgence of Nazism would be, of course, Germany. German bands, such as Annett call for a complete upheaval of the government (Resistance). They demand all races be put back ?where they came from? (Resistance). This revolutionary charge shows how some in modern Germany have moved from Hitler?s brainwashed patriotism to a conscious demand for racial rebellion. It also shows how the role of music has changed. No longer is music a tool for nationalism. It is now a deconstructive force.

Germany is not the only country with National Socialists bands. The most famous band of all neo-Nazis comes from Great Britain. Skrewdriver follows the ideas of most neo-Nazis with a yell for a new pure white nation (Resistance). ?I am not the type of person to creep and crawl to a bunch of weak-kneed, pacifist lefties and two-faces Zionists,? yells lead singer Ian Donaldson (10) (Skrewdriver online). The ideas of the musicians certainly do not stop with their beliefs: this rebellious tone expands throughout their songs. With songs like ?White Rider? and ?White Warrior? they demand all whites ?fight for your race? and ?answer the white man?s call? (11) (12).

Deconstruction is not limited to white supremacists. In fact, probably the most anti-establishment anarchist of the modern era may have been the punk rock movement.

Punk rock calls for the destruction of all government and establishment (Henry 1). Bands like the Sex Pistols and The Clash encouraged revolution through music (Henry 1). The musicians, like their music, threw out all accepted ideas and strummed three chords while screaming revolution (Henry 2).

Punk musicians often came from lower classes and they resented the wealth and unfair advantages of the upper class (Henry 2). These anti-capitalist and anti-bourgeois feelings led to anarchist feelings (Henry 2). The music conveyed the anti-capitalist feelings as much as the musicians themselves. The Sex Pistols sing, ?I am the Antichrist, I am the anarchist,? not only conveying their hatred for government but also for religion and adding shock value to their songs (13).

This shock value led to more revolutionary tactics and anti-norm feelings (Henry2). The shock value horrified parents and captivated adolescents (Henry 3). The punks further drew fans by using absurdity and surrealism in magazines and art (Henry3). In all the Punk rockers did, revolution was front and center (Henry 4). The revolution was against normal bands, normal fashion and normal people (Henry 4). There was no need to play well or sing well as long as your band had a message to convey (Henry 5).

Punks were the modern expressionists. They hated all things normal, disregarded authority and called for a complete destruction of the organized governments. Complete anarchy was their motivation.

With the beginning of the Modern Era, patriotism was the message promoted by composers and musicians. Composers such as Verdi and Wagner filled the men of the eras with great pride in their emerging nation states. As the nations grew older, individuals sometimes manipulated that pride, but the national pride remained.

As the twentieth century became middle aged, the music turned from supportive nationalistic songs to a cry for anarchy and rebellion. Between raging white supremacist and musical apathetic punks the pages of history continue to be changed by music. Music is both a reflection of men?s souls, dreams, and desires and a force to change men and nations.

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