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Sounds of War: Music in the United States during World War II by Annegret Fauser is an interesting and informative text concerning the vivid and intense history of Western classical music and its musicians during the war period. The book’s five chapters are divided so as to focus on two main aspects: Chapters 1 and 2 consider the people and institutions that created, performed, and listened to the music being discussed. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 examine the classical music composed and performed in the United States during the war, while also exploring the difference between “music in America” and “American music.” Chapter 4 focuses mainly on music composed by European refugees in the United States, contrasting chapters 3 and 5, which both consider music composed by Americans for Americans. But, before these enthralling chapters begin, the reader is presented with an introduction that provides a brief overview of the book. Fauser’s text is an intriguing read for anyone interested in the importance of music in the United States and its development and evolution throughout the course of World War II.

Chapter 1, entitled “We, as Musicians, Are Soldiers, Too,” begins by discussing the role musicians and composers believed they could play in the war. The chapter also
points out that musicians were not spared from the draft because of their profession, and explains how those who were not recruited for the war still tried to contribute by way of their compositions. Chapter 2 focuses on how music was composed to provide support for the war effort, to rally those on the American home front, and to raise the morale of the soldiers. This chapter also explores how music transitioned from being a statement about war to becoming politically relevant and was used to treat many of the wounded and traumatized soldiers throughout the course of the conflict.

Chapter 3 is entitled “I Hear America Singing” and discusses how music has been used over time to embody a group identity or that of an entire nation. Before the Second World War began, Aaron Copland is quoted as saying he was “anxious to write a work that would immediately be recognized as American in character,” identifying with the nation as a whole, rather than just one isolated geographic area or state. In addition, this chapter also discusses American folk music, which played an important role in music produced during World War II, particularly that written by Copland—a composer, conductor and avid listener.

Chapter 4, “The Great Invasion,” brings to light the significance of exiled musicians, particularly composers, and considers how exile affected their music. Though Copland was not a war refugee, world events still greatly influenced him, and, to quote Elizabeth Crist, “his music between 1932 and 1946 is distinguished by a commitment to...social relevance, expressed within and informed by the cultural and political contexts of the Great Depression and World War II.” This chapter of Fauser’s text also examines the issue of war refugees, particularly Béla Bartók with his Hungarian roots. Late in the war, Bartók was said to have referred to himself as a “voluntary refugee,” who was just one of approximately 138 musicians and composers who emigrated from Germany, Austria, and central Europe after receiving a portion of their musical training. Fauser delves deeply into this time in Bartók’s life, taking every opportunity to show how widespread the emigration of composers and musicians at this time truly was, and how it affected music.

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2 Crist, *Music for the Common Man*, 44.

3 Ibid., 7.

The final chapter of the book, “Hail Muse Americana,” serves as a celebration of music written throughout the war. It discusses those pieces considered particularly commemorative and patriotic during the conflict, such as William Grant Still’s *In Memoriam*, written for soldiers who had lost their lives over the course of the war. This final chapter considers those compositions written throughout the conflict and places them on a pedestal, crediting the composers of these works as active members of the fighting war front. The way in which Fauser discusses the music composed at this time is a worthy tribute to important composers and their compositions. Music was an active and important feature of World War II, and Fauser is clear to emphasize that in this chapter.

Overall, this book contains an extensive amount of information about all aspects of music produced in the United States from 1939-1945. The organization of the book, with chapters linking ideas and compositions chronologically, makes it easy to read. While at times some material may not be the most invigorating, rest assured there is always something coming that is unique and compelling. Each chapter analyzes a single topic and is then divided to allow for an expansion of ideas, theories, and historical context, often involving a description of one or two musicians who played crucial roles in such a difficult time in American history. This type of organization keeps the reader engaged and makes it easy to follow the war’s timeline and how it relates to the concurrent development of music. Most topics discussed are accessible to readers with little background knowledge of World War II, though at times, some terms require research for an effective and complete understanding of the topic at hand.

Much of Fauser’s writing circulates around the idea of American war-time society and its response to the attacks on Pearl Harbor, as well as the American entrance into the war. For example, Kate Smith’s energetic performance of Irving Berlin’s *God Bless America* turned the piece into an unofficial national anthem throughout World War II. It is this type of involvement from composers, musicians, and performers that reflects the important role music played throughout the conflict, both for soldiers abroad and civilians at home. The older generation at the time, to quote Smith, “feared that unless there was an all-encompassing war song, American soldiers would not be inspired to fight and the home front would not rally behind the war effort.” Fauser explains that prior to the attacks on Pearl Harbor, approximately 33 songs meant to unite the nation were written by Tin Pan Alley and hillbilly songwriters, proclaiming

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America as a united front. This artistic effort reveals how those composers and musicians undrafted for the war effort became involved, regardless of their situation.\footnote{John Busch Jones, \textit{The Songs That Fought the War: Popular Music and the Home Front, 1939-1945} (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2006), 182.}

Fauser also compellingly shows that, after the events that transpired on 7 December 1941, it was clear the country pulled together—something that had simply been talked about was now actively happening nationwide as a result of the attack on Pearl Harbour.

Musicals were also written with the war as their focal point, one example being Irving Berlin and James McColl’s \textit{This Is the Army}, a musical considered at the time to be “the ultimate patriotic piece.”\footnote{Ethan Mordden, \textit{Beautiful Mornin’: The Broadway Musical in the 1940s} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 96.} After an eleven-week tour with the show, Berlin was quoted as saying, “The American G.I. is getting the war songs he wants—something sentimental about home and love.”\footnote{Smith, \textit{God Bless America}, 132.}

Music was not, however, written freely at this time. There were guidelines set out by the Office of War Information, strongly encouraging songwriters to write in a way that would not glorify the armed services.\footnote{Ibid., 64.} Fauser examines how people, both soldiers and civilians, realized the horror of the conflict of the war and began turning to music for comfort and protection. To quote Berlin, referring to the soldiers, “The boys like sentimental songs.” Smith, elaborates on this, explaining that the majority of soldiers preferred listening to dance music on a jukebox rather than the music played by military bands.\footnote{Ibid., 132.} Music reminded many soldiers of loved ones far away—and popular and classical music served as a means to spark these memories.\footnote{Nicholas Tawa, \textit{The Great American Symphony: Music, the Depression, and War} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 85-86.}

While Fauser examines many engaging conversations and topics, her use of abbreviations often forced me to pause and look up what each one stood for so I could understand completely what I was reading. While the abbreviations and their meanings are included within the book, the constant use of them often causes confusion and makes for disjunct reading. Perhaps if Fauser chose to use fewer abbreviations—there
are 46 in all—and instead used a full phrase or title, the text would not be so disjointed. Given that many of the acronyms are not well-known, it was easy to confuse them with one another or be unable to remember what they stood for at all. Providing some abbreviations in footnotes may have increased the “readability” and clarity of the text, especially when more than one was used at the same time.

Another confusing aspect of the book concerns the number of different names mentioned over its course. I recognize that naming musicians and giving them credit is important, but I found the number of names overwhelming at times. Indeed, there were many names throughout the book unfamiliar to me. In the event that Fauser used multiple pages to describe at length what a specific musician experienced or how s/he contributed to music at this point in history, then I completely support the use of their name. If a certain musician appeared only in passing, however, perhaps adding helpful footnotes or an appendix to the book with brief background information for some of the more obscure names might have aided the issue. Indeed, this would have allowed for clarity while also giving credit where it is due. Additionally, this would allow more curious and specialized readers to build upon Fauser’s intriguing details.

A third aspect that made the book harder to understand appears in Chapter 4, where Fauser describes—in great detail and at great length—the unfortunate situation of refugees from Axis Powers who were forced to flee their homes and countries. She spends a great deal of time discussing this subject without explaining the terms she is using. This yet again results in confusion and a lack of clarity for the reader, or a disjointed read. For example, one subsection of Chapter 4, entitled “Refugees of Axis Nations,” describes how composers fled their home countries and how they then interacted with the Allied Powers. Fauser’s terminology, such as “Axis Nations,” may be unfamiliar to those with a limited knowledge of World War II. I believe it would be helpful to spend some time expanding these terms, allowing for a greater understanding of the larger picture in this chapter and the book as a whole.

Annegret Fauser provides a thorough and richly detailed account of a significant moment in United States’ history and the development of musical composition concurrent to it. Overall, she does an exceptional job. She brings to life many important aspects of musical development at this time, and accounts for the vivid and significant impact the war had on composers. She communicates all of this in a manner that is readily accessible to readers. This historical basis can now aid in informing musical analysis, and will allow for a reconsideration of the historical influence of this music. Overall, Sounds of War is an informative and intriguing read, organized, for the most part, in a unique and easy-to-read manner. While at times readers may need to consult outside sources for a clear understanding of the overall picture, with a general
knowledge of World War II and an extensive knowledge of musicians at this time, the reader will benefit greatly from what Fauser elegantly presents.

For Further Reading:


