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“Degenerate” Music Recital

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Music that was once labeled “degenerate” and banned by the Third Reich was showcased in April 2010 in a chamber music recital called Entartete Musik.

The program was the idea of adjunct professor and Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra clarinetist Ron Samuels. The recital featured five composers—Bohuslav Martinu, Pavel Haas, Franz Schreker, Hans Krasa and Alexander Zemlinsky—whose works were censored and discredited by the Nazis as part of a systematic repression of the arts between 1933 and 1945.

While these featured composers are relatively unknown to the majority of classical music listeners, they are representative of a generation of musicians whose work was silenced because it offended the Nazis in some way.

According to Samuels, no consistently applied principles provoked The Reich’s arbiters to apply the entartete label, but in general Nazi aesthetic standards were extremely conservative. Many artistic genres, including jazz and surrealist, cubist and expressionist painting, were deemed degenerate, and the list of artists to see the label applied to their output includes Pablo Picasso, Louis Armstrong and Franz Kafka, among many others.

More important, the fact that an artist was Jewish, black, Romany, a homosexual, a communist or a member of any other persecuted group was enough to invite censorship.

Samuels programmed the recital featuring composers usually classed among the post-Romantics. In this case the notion that their compositions were censored because they share a form of musical expression is giving the Nazi ministry of culture “way too much credit,” Samuels explained. “The music of that period was deemed degenerate because of the race or political ideology of the composer, rather than because of the musical style,” he said.

Entartete Musik featured clarinet works and included five pieces composed between 1896 and 1956. Each of the composers showcased in the recital lived to see his work banned by the Nazis. Two of them perished in the infamous Theresienstadt (Terezín) concentration camp.

The performers included faculty colleagues from the Mary Pappert School of Music and special guest Marc Moskovitz, a cellist and author of a biography of one of the composers, Zemlinsky: A Lyric Symphony (Boydell & Brewer Ltd. Press, 2010).

“This period was an incredibly fertile time in music and this program is part of the treasure trove. Regardless of the silencing of these composers during their lifetime, their music is inextinguishable. It lives on,” Samuels said.