

Beethoven as “Paradigmatic Socialist Warrior”:  
The Reception and Performance of Classical  
Music in the GDR

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*Kurt Masur with pianist Annerose Schmidt outside the Campus Inn at the University of Michigan,  
1989<sup>1</sup>*



*The Leipzig Gewandhaus concert hall at night, 2016<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Ken Fischer, *Kurt Masur and Pianist Annerose Schmidt, May Festival, 1989*. Ann Arbor District Library, Ann Arbor. [https://aadl.org/ums\\_photos\\_01735](https://aadl.org/ums_photos_01735).

<sup>2</sup> Ichwarsnur, *The Gewandhaus at the Augustusplatz in Leipzig with the Mendebrunnen at night*, Wikimedia Commons. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=82082008>.



*Poster for the congress and music festival of the Verband Deutscher Komponisten und Musikwissenschaftler, 1954.<sup>3</sup>*



*Map of East and West Germany, 1961.<sup>4</sup>*

<sup>3</sup> Günther, Kirstein & Wendler Leipzig, *Kongress und Musikfest 1954*, Stadtgeschichtliches Museum Leipzig, Leipzig. [https://www.europeana.eu/en/item/08547/sgml\\_eu\\_php\\_obj\\_p0006056](https://www.europeana.eu/en/item/08547/sgml_eu_php_obj_p0006056).

<sup>4</sup> *The Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic (1961)*, Institute of European History, Mainz. [http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/map.cfm?map\\_id=363](http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/map.cfm?map_id=363).

**Abbreviations:**

**KMA:** Kurt Masur Archiv

**DDRmSB:** Deutsche Demokratische Republik mit sowjetischer Besatzungszone (1945-1990)

**BKSMMK:** Bildung, Kultur, Sport, Medien, Ministerium für Kultur collection

**BL:** Bundesarchiv-Lichterfelde

**VDK:** Verband Deutscher Komponisten und Musikwissenschaftler collection.

**GDR:** German Democratic Republic

**FRG:** Federal Republic of Germany

**Statuko:** Staatliche Kommission für Kunstangelegenheiten

**FDJ:** Freie Deutsche Jugend

**FDGB:** Freier Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund

**SED:** Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands

### Introduction:

*It is only over a hundred years after Goethe had to put his pen down forever that the workers and peasants, the clerks and tradesmen, the scientists and technicians, that all of the working class of the German Democratic Republic have begun to write this third part of Faust through their labor and through their struggles for freedom and socialism.*

-Walter Ulbricht, “An alle Bürger der DDR! an die ganze deutsche Nation.”<sup>5</sup>

From the princely courts of the Holy Roman Empire to the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), German-speaking states have sponsored and regulated the performance of what we today call classical music. The German Democratic Republic (GDR) was no exception in this regard, and members of East Germany’s ruling party, the Socialist Unity Party (SED), took a deep interest in the reconstruction of musical life after the Second World War. Music came to serve a political purpose for the German Democratic Republic, demonstrating, in the eyes of SED functionaries, the cultural superiority of East Germany over the “decadent” and Americanized FRG, while also promoting progressive socialist values among the citizenry at large.<sup>6</sup> Though the SED portrayed the East German state as a worthy inheritor of the best works of German culture, it also faced the task of re-appropriating a German artistic heritage that had been misused by the Nazis for their own propagandistic ends. From the state’s establishment in 1949 to its end in 1990, East German musicologists, conductors, and musicians confronted the task of re-interpreting the works of individual composers or even entire artistic movements through a Marxist-Leninist lens.

In this thesis, I examine the performance and reception of works of classical music in the GDR. In terms of chronological scope, I focus primarily on the later years of the regime in the

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Ulbricht, “An alle Bürger der DDR! an die ganze deutsche Nation,” cited in Elaine Kelly, *Composing the Canon in the German Democratic Republic: Narratives of Nineteenth-Century Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 16.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid 16.

1970s and 1980s because of the relative dearth of scholarship on musical reception and performance in the GDR in that period, though I also discuss developments from the earlier years of the regime when necessary throughout my thesis. Examining the East German state's cultural policy in its more "mature" phase allows a better understanding of how musical life in the country came to function beyond its Stalinist roots. Though party functionaries initially sought to control all aspects of musical life in the country, state control over classical music and musicology loosened somewhat after the Stalinallee uprising in 1953. More generally, focusing on the 1970s and 80s provides a better understanding of cultural life in the GDR at a time when SED rule had become a simple fact of life for most East German citizens and the world at large.

Though much of the historical or musicological writing on this subject is relatively recent, there are nonetheless a growing number of books, journal articles, and other publications which focus on classical music in the GDR in general. In one of the most influential books on classical music in East Germany, *Composing the Canon in the German Democratic Republic: Narratives of Nineteenth-Century Music*, Elaine Kelly explores the East German establishment's attitudes towards nineteenth-century music by focusing on aesthetic policies formulated in the early 1950s. Kelly discusses the approach towards musical aesthetics pioneered by followers of Georg Lukács, whose writings seemed to provide a ready-made defense of bourgeois culture that was compatible with socialist politics. According to Kelly, this approach towards musical aesthetics was an essentially anti-Romantic one, locating a "progressive" attitude towards music in Enlightenment-influenced neoclassicism rather than Romanticism, which was seen as "irrational" and backwards-looking. Kelly uses Beethoven as an example of how this approach towards musical interpretation played out in practice, noting that East German critics preferred to

draw attention to the “heroic” and “optimistic” qualities in Beethoven’s music and present him as an essentially “classical” composer rather than an iconoclastic founder of musical

Romanticism:

The construct of the heroic Beethoven was heralded as a prototype for the socialist citizen, and a tradition of realistic dialectical composition, with its origins in classical sonata form, as a musical expression of the socialist public sphere. The irrational and mystical tendencies of romanticism, in contrast, were identified as early signposts of the false path that Germany had taken en route to fascism, war, and foreign occupation.<sup>7</sup>

This equation of Romanticism with fascism was by no means one unique to East Germany.

Many in the West also subscribed to what scholars like Celia Applegate now refer to as a schematic “Wagner-Hitler nexus” that overemphasized the links between German Romanticism and Nazism, drawing special attention to Hitler’s lifelong fascination with Wagner’s operas.<sup>8</sup>

Such discourses dominated most scholarly discourse on 19th-century classical music in the early years of the regime. Such rhetoric was embraced by both the state, which aimed to advance the aesthetic ideals of socialist realism, and the “mighty handful” of influential musicologists who dominated East German musicology in the 1950s.<sup>9</sup>

However, Lukácsian musicology gradually gave way to other theoretical approaches, a fact which Kelly notes in the second part of her book, titled “Critiquing the Canon.” Starting the 1970s and continuing through the 1980s, artists, musicologists, and composers “rehabilitated” Romanticism by adopting approaches similar to Ernst Bloch’s utopian Marxism. Unlike in the first half of her book, Kelly focuses the efforts of artists, writers, and composers when she discusses the “rehabilitation” of Romanticism, though she also analyzes the scholarship of

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<sup>7</sup> Elaine Kelly, *Composing the Canon in the German Democratic Republic*. 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> Celia Applegate, “Introduction: Music Among the Historians,” *German History* 30, no. 3 (September 1, 2012): 329–49, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghs039>. 333.

<sup>9</sup> Elaine Kelly, *Composing the Canon in the German Democratic Republic*. 35.

certain academic musicologists. Kelly notes that these efforts were spurred in large part by “very significant chasm that had evolved between GDR’s scholarly discourse and its concert life,” as denunciations of Romanticism in musicological journals continued while audiences continued to attend performances of works by Romantic composers in large numbers.<sup>10</sup>

While Kelly’s book is a well-researched account of developments among musicologists, *Composing the Canon* tends to focus on the East German intellectual elite over the audiences, orchestras, and state institutions that were responsible for determining the actual content of concert programming. Though Kelly does note briefly that a large gap had opened up between concert life and musicological discourse in the country by the 1970s, she does not elaborate on this observation in her monograph. In general, *Composing the Canon* seems to be far more concerned with intellectual discourse than the concrete cultural policies of East Germany. Kelly’s book is probably the most comprehensive study of East German musical life so far, but gaps exist in her book with regard to the actual structure and content of concert life; I will fill in some of these gaps through this thesis, which discusses musicology, but focuses for the most part on cultural policy. Kelly also overstates the hegemony of anti-Romantic discourse among musicologists. Though she depicts anti-Romantic polemics as omnipresent in the first part of her book, East German officials and musicologists were often more interested in finding the “realist” content in any work of music than denouncing a specific artistic movement. In fact, in most East German scholarship, Romanticism seemed to be of relatively minor concern, more ignored than denounced by musicologists.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 145.

In *Composing the Party Line*, David Tompkins fills in some of the gaps in Elaine Kelly's work, but does not focus on musicological discourse. Instead, he provides us with a thorough examination of how the East German state supported and controlled musical life in the 1950s. Though Tompkins's early work on the subject—for instance, an article titled “Orchestrating Identity: Concerts for the Masses and the Shaping of East German Society”<sup>11</sup>—focuses exclusively on East Germany, his scholarship is also comparative in nature, with *Composing the Party Line* analyzing cultural policy in both Poland and East Germany. Tompkins's fundamental argument is that the SED and other Communist parties in Soviet-dominated states in the 1950s viewed music as a tool that was capable of establishing their hegemony in the cultural sphere: as he writes, “Music helped the parties establish legitimacy; both extensive state support for musical life and messages in the music itself encouraged musical elites and ordinary citizens in the audience to accept the political elite's dominant position and political mission.”<sup>12</sup> His book aims to understand how the East German and Polish regimes attempted to develop organizations and institutions (like composers' unions) that would both support the efforts of artists and also bring them into line with the regime's artistic objectives. Though Tompkins's work presents a comprehensive account of musical life in East Germany in the 1950s, he does not venture far beyond this relatively limited chronological scope. Thus, his book does not explore how East German artistic policy developed through the later decades of the GDR. While using his work as a starting point to examine the origins of particular musical or cultural institutions I focus more

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<sup>11</sup> David G. Tompkins, “Orchestrating Identity: Concerts for the Masses and the Shaping of East German Society,” *German History* 30, no. 3 (September 1, 2012): 412–28, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghs042>.

<sup>12</sup> David G. Tompkins, *Composing the Party Line: Music and Politics in Early Cold War Poland and East Germany* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2013). 2.

on the years of East German history that Tompkins's book and other publications have not addressed.

One of the leading scholars on music in German history, Celia Applegate, does not deal directly with the GDR, yet her influential article aptly titled "Music Among the Historians"<sup>13</sup> provides the theoretical backing for this thesis. It also provides a strong overview of recent developments in the history of music that have influenced my approach towards the thesis as a whole. In particular, the distinction that Applegate draws between "social" and "intellectual" approaches towards musical history has influenced my general approach towards this thesis, and I have tried my best to integrate both approaches by discussing both cultural discourse in the form of musicology and state policy towards the arts. In particular, I argue that we can perceive similar patterns of limited cultural liberalization in the form of state concessions to the demands of the "artistic intelligentsia" and concert-goers beyond the 1950s in both musicology and musical performance.

Applegate has also edited several volumes collecting contributions from musicologists and historians on various subjects in German musical history, including *Music and German National Identity*, which contains Joy Calico's "Für eine neue deutsche Nationaloper" an article that draws attention to the party's criticism of two modernist operas by Dessau and Eisler.<sup>14</sup> Though musical modernism is somewhat outside the scope of this thesis, Calico's article draws attention to the East German state's somewhat conservative stance towards musical composition, with SED functionaries often favoring music that drew on established 19th-century models over

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<sup>13</sup> Celia Applegate, "Introduction: Music Among the Historians," *German History* 30, no. 3 (September 1, 2012): 329–49, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghs039>.

<sup>14</sup> Joy Calico, "'Für eine neue deutsche Nationaloper': Opera in the Discourses of Unification and Legitimation in the German Democratic Republic," in Celia Applegate and Pamela Maxine Potter, eds., *Music and German National Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

atonal music. In addition, Beth Snyder has discussed the reception of Mendelssohn in the GDR in an article titled “Once Misjudged and Banned.”<sup>15</sup> While Snyder relies on Kelly’s work to contextualize the reception of 19th-century music, she also draws attention to the GDR’s attempts to deal with the legacy of Nazi anti-Semitism.

Finally, I have also tried to integrate scholarship around the broader “cultural Cold War” to provide proper context for some aspects of my argument. Though my thesis focuses primarily on domestic East German discourse and cultural policies, it is impossible to ignore the specter of the Cold War when discussing classical music performance in East Germany and by East German musicians abroad. Jessica Gienow-Hecht’s work on the subject, particularly her article “The World is Ready to Listen,” offers an excellent analysis of classical music performance as a form of cultural diplomacy, though it focuses primarily on “American global symphonic propaganda,” as she describes it.<sup>16</sup> Gienow-Hecht argues that orchestras essentially “enact the desire to perform the country they represent in front of silent audiences by displaying hierarchy and leadership,”<sup>17</sup> a claim that I have found applies just as well to East German efforts at cultural diplomacy as American ones. I have also found the work of Gordon Johnston helpful, particularly his article “Revisiting the Cultural Cold War,” which provides a detailed overview of the “cultural turn” as it impacted Cold War scholarship and analyzes different approaches towards the broad category of Cold War cultural history.<sup>18</sup> Though my first two chapters do not

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<sup>15</sup> Beth Snyder, “Once Misjudged and Banned: Promoting the Musical Heritage in the GDR and Discourse Surrounding the 1959 Felix Mendelssohn Festwoche,” *Twentieth-Century Music* 16, no. 2 (June 2019): 319–52, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S147857221900001X>.

<sup>16</sup> Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, “The World Is Ready to Listen: Symphony Orchestras and the Global Performance of America,” *Diplomatic History* 36, no. 1 (January 2012): 17–28, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2011.01005.x>. 25.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Gordon Johnston, “Revisiting the Cultural Cold War,” *Social History* 35, no. 3 (August 2010): 290–307, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2010.486581>.

address the question of the Cold War directly, as they deal primarily with domestic East German cultural policy, my third chapter on the life of Kurt Masur discusses the cultural Cold War in far greater detail.

While the historiography surrounding my topic is not as extensive as the scholarship on other aspects of East German history, musicologists, historians, and other academics have written a substantial number of articles, books, and monographs discussing the history of classical music in East Germany. I integrate this scholarship into my thesis, but I also try to challenge some of its central assumptions, including the seemingly central role that anti-Romanticism played in discourse about 19th-century music in East Germany. In addition, I expand the historiography's focus by concentrating more on the less explored later years of the regime's history.

I arranged my chapters in a thematic rather than a chronological fashion. In my first chapter, titled "Interpreting the Canon: Musicology and Late Socialism," I focus primarily on the efforts of musicologists to create a uniquely East German understanding of the classical music canon, one which was influenced by a mixture of Marxist philosophy, the processes of nationalist canon formation in the 19th century, and the aesthetics of socialist realism. To provide the necessary context for my arguments, I discuss the origins of several dominant models of musical criticism in the GDR in the 1950s, although I remain focused on the 1970s and 80s. In the next chapter, titled "Programming the Canon: Performance and Censorship" I examine how the SED exerted its influence over concert programming in East Germany, focusing in particular on how the SED's policies towards music might have been subject to pressure from below. My third and final chapter, titled "Performing the Canon: The Case of Kurt

Masur,” focuses on the life of Kurt Masur, one of the most famous musicians to emerge from the former East Germany. I use Masur’s life to illustrate the difficulties and benefits that a musician could face living in East Germany. Though Masur was far from a “typical” East German musician, the analysis of his life demonstrates how the East German regime secured the allegiance of its most prestigious artists up until the point of its downfall.

The close examination of this particular aspect of the country’s culture and intellectual life demonstrates broader themes in the history of the GDR. Historian Mary Fulbrook commented that many East Germans felt that it was possible to live “perfectly ordinary lives” in the former GDR, despite our perceptions about the country’s authoritarian political system.<sup>19</sup> In line with Fulbrook’s influential scholarship on East German politics and society, I argue that ordinary citizens, musicians, and musical academics had a much greater degree of agency in shaping musical performance, scholarship, and programming than a “totalitarian” interpretation of East German history would suggest, especially by the 1970s and 80s. East Germany was by no means a democratic or open society, but it was one where popular pressures could shape state policy to a limited extent, especially in the cultural sphere. Thus, examining the history of classical music in East Germany allows us to understand how broader social and political developments in the GDR came to be reflected in the cultural sphere.

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<sup>19</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *The People’s State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (London: Yale University Press, 2005). ix.

## Chapter I: Interpreting the Canon: Musicology and Late Socialism:

*Wherever the cultural heritage has a living relationship to the real life of the people it is characterized by a dynamic, progressive movement in which the active creative forces of popular tradition, of the sufferings and joys of the people, of revolutionary legacies, are buoyed up, preserved, transcended, and further developed. For a writer to possess a living relationship to the cultural heritage means being a son of the people, borne along by the current of the people's development. In this sense Maxim Gorky is a son of the Russian people, Romain Rolland a son of the French and Thomas Mann a son of the German people.*

-György Lukács, *Realism in the Balance*<sup>20</sup>

After the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945, many German artists and intellectuals who had spent the war in exile decided to return to their home country. Many associated with the pre-war Communist Party of Germany or leftist politics more generally, like Bertolt Brecht, his friend and close collaborator Hanns Eisler, and the writer Anna Seghers, opted to settle in the German Democratic Republic. For the most part, members of the new “cultural intelligentsia” believed that the new East German state offered a better home for people with leftist political convictions than the Federal Republic, and were willing to take advantage of the opportunities that the SED offered them.<sup>21</sup> The first generation of musicologists in the GDR was no exception. The most influential group of East German musicologists in the early GDR, deemed the “mächtiges Häuflein” [mighty handful] by their contemporaries, included scholars like Nathan Notowicz, Ernst Hermann Meyer, Harry Goldschmidt, and Georg Knepler. All of them had already been committed to a Marxist model of musical analysis before the war, and found a receptive home for their scholarly work in the academic establishment of the GDR. Their

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<sup>20</sup> György Lukács, “Realism in the Balance,” in Frederic Jameson ed., *Aesthetics and Politics*, Radical Thinkers 13 (London New York, NY: Verso, 2007). 53-54.

<sup>21</sup> Jean-Michel Palmier, *Weimar in Exile : The Antifascist Emigration in Europe and America* (New York: Verso, 2006). 642.

scholarship defined the general practices of musicology in the GDR for their successors into the final years of the East German regime. However, their model of scholarship gradually fell out of favor among younger musicologists. Despite the dominance of a single, “orthodox” model of socialist realist musicology throughout the 1950s and 60s, the last two decades of the GDR witnessed a broadening of the boundaries of acceptable academic discourse in musicology. By the 1980s, champions of socialist realism shared the pages of *Musik und Gesellschaft*, East Germany’s most prestigious musicological journal, with scholars who promoted Romantic aesthetics and embraced an introspective, utopian socialism that was at odds with the Marxist-Leninist state ideology of the GDR. In general, I would argue that East German musicologists managed to produce original and provocative scholarship within a broadly Marxist framework throughout the GDR’s existence despite the ideological restrictions they faced. By the East German state’s final decade, there was even space for legitimate debate and disagreement among scholars who favored different approaches towards musicological analysis, a development that I attribute to a broader pattern of limited cultural and intellectual “liberalization” in the GDR in response to growing dissatisfaction with the East German state by reform-minded intellectuals.

With the notable exception of Goldschmidt, a Swiss citizen, almost all of the prominent musicologists from the early years of the GDR had spent the years of the Third Reich in exile. However, unlike the figures who made up the political power elite of East Germany, musicologists like Knepler, Meyer, and Notowicz had opted for exile in western states rather than the Soviet Union. In general, they retained close ties to their colleagues in the West, and remained well-informed on the state of musical discourse and composition in the rest of the

German-speaking world. Some among them who had not been German citizens before the war, like Goldschmidt and Knepler, even managed to retain their foreign passports.<sup>22</sup> Despite their relatively close ties with the West, many members of the “mighty handful” managed to find their way to leadership positions in various musical and educational institutions in the early 1950s. For instance, Ernst Hermann Meyer was first appointed the First Secretary of the VDK (Verband Deutscher Komponisten und Musikwissenschaftler, a state-sponsored professional association that included all musicologists and composers within East Germany) in the 1950s, and managed to retain a senior position in the organization into the 1970s.<sup>23</sup> In the end, the willingness of members of the “mighty handful” to toe the party’s aesthetic line in the early 1950s seemed to trump any concerns about their political reliability owing to their close ties to friends and colleagues in the West.

Looking at early musicological scholarship in the GDR explains how the views of figures within the “mighty handful” were so closely aligned with those of the regime. The first generation of musicologists in the GDR firmly believed that a form of “bourgeois” culture like classical music could have a privileged place in what was supposedly a socialist workers’ state. This stance was inspired by the views of the Marxist literary critic György Lukács, who defended the value of bourgeois high art. According to Lukács, “bourgeois” forms of art like the 19th-century realist novel constituted the “cultural heritage” of a particular society.<sup>24</sup> Figures like Notowicz and Knepler imitated Lukács’s approach towards major works of 19th-century realist literature when they argued that the works of Beethoven, Schubert, and other canonical

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<sup>22</sup> Kelly, *Composing the Canon in the German Democratic Republic*. 33-34.

<sup>23</sup> “Referat Prof. Ernst Hermann Meyer,” VKM 56, Archiv der Verband der Komponisten und Musikwissenschaftler der DDR, Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Germany.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 35-36.

composers contained a kind of “progressive” content, one that could, in Lukács’s words, “evoke a response in the broad masses of the people.”<sup>25</sup> The notion of “progressive movement” or content might appear ambiguous at first, but it was clearly inspired by Lukács’s interpretation of the Marxist philosophy of history. Like other Marxist-Leninist theoreticians, Lukács argued that society progressed through various stages towards the ultimate goal of a communist society. Much like the novels of Balzac or Thomas Mann, works of classical music could reflect “progressive” tendencies in various moments in history by giving voice to the genuine aspirations, beliefs, and experiences of the masses at a particular moment in history. Thus, far from being an elitist, bourgeois form of art, classical music was a medium that could represent the social conditions of the era of its composition. Music, a fundamentally abstract and non-verbal medium, could thus be seen as a “realist” artform, much like works of literature or painting. Though Lukács’s argument might seem less plausible when applied to works of music, it provided a theoretical basis for the official aesthetic stances of the SED and other Communist parties in the 1950s, at a time when the dictates of “socialist realism” reigned supreme in the arts.

Indeed, the championing of the 19th-century German canon by early East German musicologists was by no means original: a similar impulse had been present in Soviet music of the 1930s, where, as musicologist Alexander Ivashkin argued, an “overuse of German musical forms in Soviet music education programmes was yet another major component of Socialist Realism.”<sup>26</sup> Soviet composers were taught to emulate the example of great 19th-century composers like Beethoven and Brahms by following the dictates of sonata-allegro form, but they were also encouraged to integrate “folk” elements into their music to ensure that their works

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<sup>25</sup> Lukács, “Realism in the Balance,” in Jameson, *Aesthetics and Politics*. 54.

<sup>26</sup> Alexander Ivashkin, “Who’s Afraid of Socialist Realism?,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 92, no. 3 (2014): 430–48, <https://doi.org/10.5699/slaveasteurorev2.92.3.0430>. 431.

were “popular” in nature and rooted in the musical language of a particular nation or culture.<sup>27</sup> Music, like the realist novels Lukács championed, was to be at once rooted in the “heritage” of bourgeois art and the popular artistic traditions of a particular nation or people.

Because of this Lukácsian focus on cultural “heritage” and the popular roots of high culture, early East German musicology tended to adopt a biographical and historical approach towards musical works. Most musicology was primarily shaped by ideological concerns, as musicologists made great efforts to find “humanist,” “popular,” or “progressive” content in the works of various composers. For instance, the 1952 special edition of *Musik und Gesellschaft*, the official East German musicological journal, featured a special article on Mahler by Georg Knepler. Knepler depicted Mahler as a great “humanist,” whose lack of documented commitment to socialist political causes was of little concern given his general perceived sympathy with progressive politics. As Knepler argued,

Insofar as Mahler thought in such idealistic terms, he did not go beyond the bourgeois worldview of his time. That his ideas were historically limited and that the struggle for his ideals had to be fought on a totally different battleground than that of his scores; that, in a word, the class struggle of the proletariat would create a social order in which his ideals of love and brotherhood could be realized—Mahler possessed no clear awareness of that.<sup>28</sup>

Though Knepler mentioned Mahler’s background as a Jewish convert to Catholicism and the anti-Semitic prejudice that he faced throughout his life in his article, he minimized the importance of religion or ethnic discrimination in Mahler’s life. Instead, Knepler emphasized

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid 430.

<sup>28</sup> “Insofern Mahler in solchen idealistischen Begriffen dachte, ging er über die bürgerliche Weltanschauung seiner Zeit nicht hinaus. Daß diese seine Vorstellungen historisch bedingt waren und daß der Kampf um seine Ideale auf einem ganz anderen Kampfboden auszutragen war, als auf den Seiten seiner Partituren; daß, mit einem Wort, der Klassenkampf des Proletariats eine Gesellschaftsordnung schaffen werde, in der seine Ideale von Liebe und Brüderlichkeit Verwirklichung finden würden—, davon besaß Mahler keine klar formulierte Kenntnis.” “Mahler: Bild eines großen Musikers und großen Menschen” by Georg Knepler, 1952, DR 6169, Deutsche Demokratische Republik mit sowjetischer Besatzungszone (1945-1990), Bildung, Kultur, Sport, Medien, Ministerium für Kultur collection, Bundesarchiv-Lichterfelde, Berlin, Germany.

certain aspects of Mahler's personality that were compatible with the Marxist-Leninist conception of a "great artist," such as his "optimism" and "idealism," as well as his accomplishments in conducting and interpreting the works of older symphonic masters. Though Knepler's article on Mahler might seem little more than a hagiographical account of a well-established figure in the canon of Romantic symphonic music, Mahler's music was relatively obscure in East Germany in 1952, as the Third Reich had banned the performance of his music.<sup>29</sup> Thus, Knepler's article was a pioneering work of musical scholarship, even if it made use of the highly politicized language of Marxist-Leninism. In addition, overly biographical readings of Mahler's work were by no means uncommon in the West, where such interpretations became popular during the "Mahler revival" of the 1960s.<sup>30</sup> Knepler's article, written in the early 1950s, thus constituted a serious effort to re-establish Mahler as a canonical figure in the history of classical music.

The close alignment of East German musicology with the dictates of Marxist-Leninist aesthetic policy and ideology went beyond Knepler's work. For instance, another article in the same issue of *Musik und Gesellschaft* by Harry Goldschmidt examined the possible presence of "social criticism" in Beethoven's Eighth Symphony, with particular attention given to the possible presence of "folk music" in the symphony.<sup>31</sup> Beethoven was the primary focus of one particular 1952 issue of *Musik und Gesellschaft*, a common practice for the journal in its early

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<sup>29</sup> Mahler's music was even viewed by some in the GDR cultural establishment as potentially suspect, with Hans Uszkoreit (an official responsible for modifying concert programs to the regime's liking) claiming that his music "did not do justice to our cultural-political mission." David Tompkins, "Orchestrating Identity: Concerts for the Masses and the Shaping of East German Society," *German History* 30, no. 3 (September 1, 2012): 412–28, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghs042>. 423.

<sup>30</sup> Adam J. Sacks, "Toward an Expansion of the Critique of the Mahler Revival," *New German Critique*, no. 119 (2013): 113–36. 113.

<sup>31</sup> "Beethovens "Achte", ein gesellschaftskritisches Werk?" by Harry Goldschmidt, DR 6169, DDRmSB, BKSMM collection, BL.

years.<sup>32</sup> The composer was seen as a “paradigmatic socialist warrior” of sorts, an idea that was apparently first formulated in the 1920s by Soviet musicologists, who made extensive reference to supposed dialectical tendencies in his music as well as the captivating facts of his biography.<sup>33</sup> Though East German musicologists distorted Beethoven’s actual political leanings to suit his new image as a socialist hero, his music, particularly that from his middle “heroic” period, suited the stylistic dictates of “socialist realism.” Mirroring the official rhetoric of the East German regime in the 1950s, which focused on the reconstruction of East Germany through an arduous yet fulfilling process of “building up” (Aufbau),<sup>34</sup> Beethoven’s music often seemed to depict scenes of ultimate triumph after a time of difficult struggle.

Not all canonical works received the same general acclaim as Beethoven’s compositions, with the works of Richard Wagner proving especially problematic for East German musicologists because of their close association with Nazi cultural politics and overtly nationalist themes. However, East German critiques of Wagner tended to differ substantially from our contemporary focus on Wagner’s anti-Semitism and nationalism, focusing instead on his tendency to embrace “pessimistic,” Schopenhauerian themes in his later work. The “failures” of Wagner’s works were usually excused with reference to the dominance of reactionary political forces in Europe during his lifetime. For instance, when analyzing the works of Wagner for a celebration of his works in 1963, an East German musicologist named J. Patzsche analyzed them in the context of the failure of the 1848 revolutions,

Wagner fell victim to an intellectual attitude that was characteristic of the bourgeoisie of his time: he made concessions to reactionary pessimism, which denied the possibility of renewing society and dismissed all efforts to that effect as “shallow.” This stance was formed through Wagner’s reading of Schopenhauer’s “The World as Will and

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<sup>32</sup> Kelly, *Composing the Canon*. 45-46.

<sup>33</sup> Kelly, *Composing the Canon*. 46-47.

<sup>34</sup> Fulbrook. *The People’s State*. 32.

Representation,” but Wagner himself— and correctly— concluded that there were already features of philosophical pessimism in his work before he familiarized himself with Schopenhauer’s theories: for example, in the figure of Wotan.<sup>35</sup>

Though Wagner’s association with reactionary politics motivated such critiques, East German musicologists usually did not explore the possible affinities between his nationalist and latently anti-Semitic operas and Nazi ideology.

This was perhaps due to the SED’s official ideological stance on the legacy of Nazi anti-Semitism. Though the SED officially condemned anti-Semitism in the strongest terms, it also only recognized Jews as “victims” of National Socialism rather than “fighters against” it. Thus, while Jews in the GDR received some social benefits, they were not granted the same rights and privileges as communists who had also been persecuted under National Socialism.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the founding myth of the East German state tended to blame the rise of Nazism on a small number of political elites associated with German big business, and often ignored mass support for National Socialist policies. The complicity of ordinary Germans with Nazi policies was, for the most part, brushed aside to make room for a narrative that East German citizens had been “liberated” from the fascist yoke by the Red Army in 1945.<sup>37</sup> Nazism was thus portrayed as an extreme example of imperialist and authoritarian tendencies latent in all capitalist states, which emerged in times of crisis. Though this narrative served its desired purpose of establishing

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<sup>35</sup> “Verfiel Wagner einer geistigen Haltung, die für das Bürgertum seiner Zeit überhaupt charakteristisch wurde: Er machte dem reaktionären Pessimismus Konzessionen, der die Möglichkeit, die Gesellschaft zu erneuern, prinzipiell leugnete und alle diesbezüglichen Bemühungen als “flach” (shallow) abtat. Diese Haltung wurde durch Wagners Lektüre von Schopenhauers “Welt als Wille und Vorstellung” mitgeformt, doch legte Wagner selbst- und mit Recht- Wert auf die Feststellung, daß in seinem Werk, zum Beispiel in der Figur des Wotan, ausgeprägte Züge eines philosophischen Pessimismus schon vor der Bekanntschaft mit den Theorien Schopenhauers Gestalt angenommen hatten.” Expose zur Dissertation über Richard Wagner by J. Patzschke, pages 5-6, 1963, VKM 589, Archiv der Verband der Komponisten und Musikwissenschaftler der DDR, Das Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Germany.

<sup>36</sup> Fulbrook, *The People’s State*. 263

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid* 29-30.

a degree of continuity between the Nazi state and the Federal Republic of Germany, it minimized the role of anti-Semitism as a central pillar of Nazi ideology, and ignored the role of racial persecution and exclusion in creating the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*. In short, while anti-Semitism was officially condemned in the strongest terms by the East German state, SED leaders and functionaries did not see combating anti-Semitism as an urgent task compared to their main goal of building a strong communist state in the ruins of Hitler's Germany.<sup>38</sup>

In general, East German musicology in the early years of the regime was highly politicized, and scholarly writing adopted the rhetoric of Marxism-Leninism regardless of its subject matter. Musicologists adopted a somewhat narrow biographical approach towards musical analysis, de-emphasizing formal or stylistic analysis in favor of an approach which paid particular attention to the historical circumstances that had shaped particular compositions. Much like their 19th-century predecessors, East German musicologists focused on producing idealized biographical accounts of individual composers in their scholarly work.<sup>39</sup> However, unlike earlier biographers, musicologists in the GDR reinterpreted the biographies and works of individual composers to argue that they embodied the socialist values of a Marxist-Leninist state. While the SED, as with other Marxist-Leninist parties, promoted works of "bourgeois culture" among the working class, they still required a respectable intellectual backing for their paternalistic goal of

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<sup>38</sup> It should be noted, however, that the SED did not, like its sister parties in Poland and Hungary, did not demonstrate particularly enthusiastic support for Stalin's anti-Semitic show trials, and that there is in fact strong evidence that SED leaders sought to cultivate a better relationship with both Israel and the Jewish community in East Germany than Communist leaders in other Central European states. In general, relations between the SED and the Jewish community in East Germany were, at least during the early years of the regime, relatively friendly. Paul O' Doherty, "The GDR in the Context of Stalinist Show Trials and Anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe 1948-54," *German History* 10, no. 3 (October 1, 1992): 302-317.

<sup>39</sup> Celia Applegate, "The Internationalism of Nationalism: Adolf Bernhard Marx and German Music in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Modern European History* 5, no. 1 (2007): 139-59. 146. Applegate refers to some of the first examples of these highly idealized biographies in her article: Marx's biographies of Beethoven and Gluck.

bringing high culture to the masses. Musicologists fulfilled this goal in the early GDR by tendentiously reinterpreting figures like Beethoven as “socialist heroes.” However, despite the overtly political aims of early GDR musicology, the scholarship produced by figures like Knepler and Goldschmidt cannot be dismissed. Although they often drew dubious conclusions when analyzing particular operas and works, they also produced highly original scholarship that aimed to rehabilitate the reputation of composers whose works had been banned under the Third Reich and shed light on popular influences in the “serious” music of composers like Beethoven.

While the influence of the SED was deeply felt on all scholarship in the humanities in the GDR, it was often not the state, but rather individual academics themselves who were responsible for creating a new model of Marxist-Leninist scholarship within their own disciplines. Though the musicologists of the “mighty handful” were fully committed to serving the interests of the authoritarian East German state, they were also serious musical scholars who sought to interpret “bourgeois” classical music through a Marxist lens long before their time in the GDR; they needed little direction to write works that conformed to the party’s cultural mandates. As Knepler reflected in a 1995 interview, “The nonsense didn’t just come from on high; we ourselves were the dogmatics.”<sup>40</sup> Rather than being forced into compliance by an authoritarian state, musicologists were often willing to participate in the SED’s cultural reconstruction of East Germany, driven by a mixture of genuine ideological commitment, opportunism, and fear of repression. The “mighty handful” were likely glad to have obtained political and institutional support for their long-held approach towards musical criticism in the GDR. Other musicologists were no doubt co-opted through their participation in the Verband

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<sup>40</sup> Köster, *Musik-Zeit-Geschehen*, 81, quoted in Elaine Kelly, *Composing the Canon*, 34.

Deutscher Komponisten und Musikwissenschaftler, a state-sponsored professional association that included all musicologists and composers within East Germany. The VDK brought together musicologists and composers in a state-sponsored organization similar to the Reich Chamber of Music under the Third Reich, one which aimed to both regulate and support the activities of musicians in the GDR. By early 1957, it had a total membership of 339 members, a quarter of whom were SED members.<sup>41</sup> The VDK served as an instrument of state power, but it also paternalistically provided for the well-being of its members, often conducting interviews to determine whether its membership were satisfied with their pay and work conditions. Thus, a mixture of state control and bottom-up advocacy allowed the SED to exert strict controls over all musical scholarship in the GDR.<sup>42</sup>

While East German musicologists in the 1950s and 60s tended to shy away from open debate or disagreement, scholars from the last two decades of the regime often engaged in lively discussion about aesthetic and musical issues, corresponding to a broader pattern of limited “liberalization” in cultural affairs in the GDR. While some figures from the “mighty handful,” including Ernst Hermann Meyer, were still active in the 1970s, they no longer had the decisive influence over East German musicology that they had once commanded. As late as 1974, Meyer celebrated the strengthening of “the focus on a humanistic, popular [volksverbundene] and

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<sup>41</sup> The relatively small number of musicologists active in the GDR might help to explain why the “mighty handful” exerted such disproportionate influence over their discipline. See Tompkins, *Composing the Party Line*. 37.

<sup>42</sup> See the documents, mostly interviews with ordinary musicologists, composers, and music teachers gathered in VKM 444, VDK collection, Akademie der Künste. The VDK took a keen interest in the well-being of its members and often asked them if they were satisfied with their pay and living conditions while inquiring after their health. One particular music teacher named Heinz Roy actually submitted a formal complaint to the VDK, arguing that he had been unfairly terminated from his job because of his religiosity and unwillingness to allow his two children to undergo the secular confirmation ceremony (Jugendweihe) established by the SED.

party-oriented [parteilich] art of socialist realism.”<sup>43</sup> Yet in the 1970s, academic discourse in the GDR had begun to move beyond a narrow focus on “socialist realism” and “party-oriented” music. While references to specific stylistic periods and tendencies were relatively minimal in early musicological scholarship in the GDR, discussion of individual artistic movements, and Romanticism in particular, became increasingly common in the later years of the GDR. In 1976, only two years after Meyer had delivered his speech to assembled members of the VDK, Gerd Schönfelder, an East German musicologist, wrote an article titled “Romantiker und Realist,” rejecting earlier interpretations of 19th-century musical works popularized by members of the “mighty handful.” Schönfelder opted instead to focus on what he viewed as the turn towards introspective reflection in Romantic music, arguing that such introspection gave rise to utopian critiques of capitalism.<sup>44</sup>

Though Schönfelder’s attitudes might have been viewed as unorthodox when he first voiced them in 1976, by 1984, views like his had moved into the scholarly mainstream. Most notably, in 1984, *Musik und Gesellschaft* in 1984 dedicated a whole issue to the topic of “Romanticism in Music.” Though it overlooked Schönfelder, it did feature articles from other musicologists who held similarly pro-Romantic views, such as Klaus Mehner and Hartmut Grimm.<sup>45</sup> The articles they wrote often celebrated Romantic tendencies in music, and, in the case of Mehner’s article, even took inspiration from works of Romantic literature. The form of his

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<sup>43</sup> “In dieser Periode der 50er Jahre festigt sich die Orientierung auf eine humanistische, volksverbundene und parteiliche Kunst des sozialistischen Realismus.” “Konzeption und Entwurf zum Referat,” Ernst Hermann Meyer, VKM 56, VDK collection, Akademie der Künste.

<sup>44</sup> Kelly, *Composing the Canon*, 145-146.

<sup>45</sup> Kelly names Grimm and Mehner as major figures who, like Schönfelder, challenged the consensus established by the first generation of GDR musicologists on Romanticism. Though I do not fully agree with arguments that Romanticism had necessarily been viewed as completely taboo early in the regime, I believe Kelly is correct to argue that the scholarship of figures like Grimm, Mehner, and Schönfelder differed substantially from earlier interpretations of 19th-century canonical music by members of the “mighty handful.” Ibid 145.

article, divided into several numbered sections, paid tribute to “a typically Romantic manner of expression—the fragment,” according to Mehner.<sup>46</sup> He pointed to connections between Romantic literature and Romantic music in his article, arguing that 19th-century composers like Schumann demonstrated “a clear affinity with” Romantic literature in their compositions and music criticism.<sup>47</sup> Unlike earlier East German musicology, Mehner’s article contained little politicized rhetoric. His work was hardly unique in that regard: references to once-popular themes, such as the discovery of “humanist” or “progressive” content in music, were also mostly absent from other articles in the same issue of *Musik und Gesellschaft*. Of course, such rhetoric had not entirely disappeared from East German scholarship. For instance, in an obituary written for Fritz Geißler in the same issue of *Musik und Gesellschaft*, Hansjürgen Schaefer, the chief editor of the journal, wrote that Geißler’s compositions had been “fixated on the present and based on an unshakeable alignment with socialism, [and] with revolutionary development in our country and in the world.”<sup>48</sup> In general, however, the politicized rhetoric that had been prevalent in *Musik und Gesellschaft* during the 1950s had become much rarer by the 1970s and 80s.

Musicology was still generally written in the highly politicized mode popularized by the “mighty handful” up to the beginning of the 1970s. For example, a 1970 conference on Beethoven during the “International Beethoven Congress” focused on the two primary themes of “The Image of Beethoven in History and in the Present” and “The Classical Realism of Beethoven,” while the talks included ones titled “Realism and Anticipation in the Works of

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<sup>46</sup> “Eine typische Ausdrucksweise der Romantik — das Fragment.” Klaus Mehner, “Musikalischer Blütenstaub.” *Musik und Gesellschaft* 34, no. 2 (February 1984): 58–68. 58.

<sup>47</sup> “Gerade Schumann zeigt in seinem Schrifttum deutliche Affinitäten zur Romantik, speziell zu Wackenroder.” *Ibid* 61.

<sup>48</sup> “Fixiert auf Gegenwärtiges und basieren auf der unverrückbaren Parteinahme für den Sozialismus, für die revolutionäre Entwicklung in unserem Lande wie in der Welt.” Hansjürgen Schaefer, “Komponisten als gesellschaftlicher Auftrag,” *Musik und Gesellschaft* 34, no. 2 (February 1984): 89–89. 89.

Beethoven” and “Beethoven’s Relationship to Folk Music and the Popular [volkstümlich] Music of His Time.”<sup>49</sup> After the early 1970s, however, a new generation of musicologists in the GDR, who were not deeply influenced by the scholarship of figures associated with the “mighty handful,” rose to prominence. Thus, scholarship focused narrowly on questions of “realism” gradually gave way to a more diverse range of perspectives and approaches in musicology throughout the later 1970s and 80s.

While musicology in the GDR remained steeped in Marxism throughout the regime’s existence, musicologists active in the 1970s and 80s tended to move beyond the GDR’s official state ideology to embrace a more flexible interpretation of Marx’s ideas. Most notably, musicology in the later GDR turned away from the “scientific” and progressivist interpretations of Marxism embraced by earlier, Lukács-influenced musicologists, favoring instead a utopian Marxism that was inspired by the writings of the unorthodox Marxian philosopher Ernst Bloch. References to “utopia” or “utopian” thought become common in musicological scholarship from the later GDR: for instance, musicologist Gerhard Müller argued in an article about Romantic tendencies in contemporary GDR music that Romanticism’s “historical calling was to project classical utopia onto real historical contradictions and to replace Enlightenment idealism with through the critical [kritizistische] method.”<sup>50</sup> Though Bloch is not explicitly mentioned in Müller’s article, Müller’s argument closely resembles Bloch’s own in *The Spirit of Utopia*. Bloch himself had resettled in the GDR after spending World War II in exile in the United

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<sup>49</sup> I found the list of speeches and the general plan of the conference in the “Arbeitsplan zur Kongreßvorbereitung” and “Liste der Referenten,” VKM 576, VDK collection, Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Germany.

<sup>50</sup> “Zum anderen bestand ihr historischer Beruf darin, die klassische Utopie auf die realen historischen Widersprüche zu projizieren und den aufklärerischen Idealismus durch die kritizistische Methode zu ersetzen.” Gerhard Müller, “Zwischen Sehnsucht und Pose: Romantische Tendenzen in heutiger Musik.” *Musik und Gesellschaft* 34, no. 2 (February 1984): 63-68. 63.

States. Though he was initially given a prestigious and influential academic post when he was appointed Director of the University of Leipzig's Philosophical Institute, his calls for greater academic freedom and unorthodox interpretations of Marxism later compromised his relationship with the SED.<sup>51</sup> Dismissed from his academic posts and subject to increasing persecution, Bloch eventually defected to West Germany in 1961.<sup>52</sup> Though Bloch only spent a little more than a decade in the GDR, he nonetheless came to influence many young students in the GDR through his public lectures and scholarship, inspiring not only dissidents, but also artists and intellectuals with a less antagonistic attitude towards the regime.<sup>53</sup>

I would argue, like Elaine Kelly, that the arguments of East German musicologists associated with the "Romantic revival" were influenced by Bloch's writings. The element of Bloch's philosophy that resonated most with intellectuals in the later GDR was his belief that Marx's writings had been subjected to an overly rationalist and historically determinist reading. Bloch instead emphasized the importance of creativity in the process of creating a socialist future, encouraging his readers to embrace a utopian vision of Marxism rather than a strictly empiricist one. In *The Spirit of Utopia*, Bloch wrote (in his characteristically colorful prose) that

The existing world is the world of the past, and the despiritualized object of science, but human longing in both forms—as impatience and as waking dream—is the mainsail into the other world. This intending toward a star, a joy, a truth to set against the empirical, beyond its satanic night and especially beyond its night of incognito, is the only way still to find truth; the question about us is the only problem, the resultant of every world-problem, *and to formulate this Self and We-Problem in everything, the opening, reverberating through the world, of the gates of homecoming, is the ultimate basic principle of utopian philosophy.*<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Alexander Amberger, "Ernst Bloch in der DDR," *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 61, no. 4 (January 2013): 561-576, <https://doi.org/10.1524/dzph.2013.61.4.561>. 565.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid 568.

<sup>53</sup> Kelly, *Composing the Canon*. 143.

<sup>54</sup> Ernst Bloch, trans. Antony A. Nassar, *The Spirit of Utopia* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000). 206.

Bloch's focus on introspection ("the Self and We problem") and his focus on utopian visions of society influenced the scholarship of musicologists associated with the "Romantic revival" in East Germany. Another musicologist, Hartmut Grimm, wrote an entire article on "philosophical aspects of the early Romantic perspective towards music," titled "Music as a way to the interior."

<sup>55</sup> Though Grimm also does not explicitly reference Bloch's writings, the influence of his ideas on the article is unmistakable. Bloch's extensive writings on the philosophy of music and aesthetic philosophy perhaps also played a role in popularizing his perspectives among musicologists in the GDR. He argued, in reference to great works of music, that one could "gaze into the utopian realms of significance seen through the work's windows, so to speak,"<sup>56</sup> a sentiment that parallels the musicological writings of Müller's musicology and his contemporaries.

Despite the "Romantic turn" in musicology in the later GDR, however, some still adhered to earlier "realist" interpretations of music. The new champions of "realism" differed substantially from older scholars by shifting away, like their pro-Romantic contemporaries, from a biographical approach towards musicological scholarship. Nevertheless, "realist" musicologists realized that their brand of musicology had fallen somewhat out of fashion. Writing in the November 1984 issue of *Musik und Gesellschaft*, which had the "current problem" of socialist realism as its central theme, Michael Dasche acknowledged that the principle of socialist realism itself had become somewhat "suspect" [fragwürdig], and accepted that that a new, perhaps more flexible mode of writing "realist" musicology was needed. As Dasche stated, "Socialist realism, as art and theory of the present, would contradict its own criteria if it presented itself as an

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<sup>55</sup> Hartmut Grimm, "Musik als Weg nach innen: Philosophische Aspekte frühromantischer Musikanschauung," *Musik und Gesellschaft* 34, no. 2 (February 1984): 68-78.

<sup>56</sup> Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 118.

established code of norms instead of as an open, responsive and changeable principle.”<sup>57</sup> Dasche even condemned earlier denunciations of avant-garde music in the 1970s as a result of aesthetic “dogmatism,” claiming that earlier musicologists had in fact deviated from the true spirit of socialist realism by adopting a prejudiced attitude towards musical modernism.<sup>58</sup>

However, there was not necessarily a strict line dividing the “Romantic revivalists” and continued champions of socialist realism. In some cases, a scholar who wrote academic work discussing themes popular among the “Romantic revivalists” would also write scholarship that focused on questions of musical realism. For instance, Gerhard Müller, who authored an article on “Romantic tendencies in contemporary music” in February of 1984, also wrote an article later that year that focused instead on the “realism problem” of 19th- and 20th-century music. Rather than describing “utopian” impulses in classical music in that article, Müller focused on formal analysis of individual pieces. He observed that the “hell music” of 19th-century operas and symphonies came increasingly to resemble the dissonant, yet rhythmic sounds of the modern, industrial world, citing works like the finale of Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique* and the Nibelung music in Wagner’s *Ring* cycle to prove his argument.<sup>59</sup> Müller’s article, which made frequent references to Marxist theory and “folk” or popular elements in classical music, bore some resemblance to earlier musicology from the GDR. However, unlike his predecessors in the “mighty handful,” Müller was comfortable discussing issues of musical style and periodization. Despite its general focus on musical realism, Müller’s article was also deeply influenced by the

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<sup>57</sup> “Denn sozialistischer Realismus als Kunst und Theorie heutiger Zeit geriete mit sich selbst, mit seinen eigenen Kriterien in Widerspruch, wenn er sich als feststehender Normenkodex präsentierte, statt als offenes, reaktions- und wandlungsfähiges Prinzip...” Michael Dasche, “Sozialistischer Realismus - ein aktuelles Problem?” *Musik und Gesellschaft* 34, no. 11 (November 1984): 564-567. 564.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid 566.

<sup>59</sup> Gerhard Müller, “Verlust der klassischen Utopie: Zum Realismus-Problem in der Musik des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts.” *Musik und Gesellschaft* 34, no. 11 (November 1984): 573-577. 574.

scholarship of the “Romantic revival.” In fact, Müller chose to give his article the subtitle “The loss of classical utopia.” For Müller, Romanticism and realism were not incompatible stylistic categories in music. He argued that,

There is a great gap between historical-philosophical aspects of romantic opera fables and their aesthetic results. In contrast to the ideological grounding [in such operas], the score does not become a place for the revival of court music, but rather for the grandiose arrival of popular music-making. The classical catalog of norms [Normenkatalog] for musical forms is replaced by an unprecedented freedom in dealing with the musical material.<sup>60</sup>

Though Müller, unlike some of his colleagues, continued to defend the value of concepts like musical “realism,” his work bore little resemblance to the older musicology of Goldschmidt, Knepler, and their peers.

More importantly, the very existence of such differing perspectives in *Musik und Gesellschaft* reveals that some space for genuine discussion in the field of musicology had emerged by the final years of the GDR. As old taboos against avant-garde and “anti-realist” music fell away, younger musicologists in the GDR, taking inspiration from sources like Romantic philosophy and literature and the unorthodox Marxism of figures like Ernst Bloch, came to adopt a wider variety of theoretical approaches than their predecessors. The new musicological approaches pioneered by the “Romantic revivalists” were connected more generally to the emergence of a new generation of East German intellectuals and artists in the 1970s. This new generation of the “cultural intelligentsia,” as they were known in the GDR, often chose to re-emphasize the role of individual subjectivity in their works, with the famous

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<sup>60</sup> “Die geschichtsphilosophischen Aspekte der romantischen Opernfabel und die ästhetischen Ergebnisse klaffen auseinander. Im Gegensatz zur ideologischen Anlage wird die Partitur nicht zum Ort der Wiederbelebung höfischer Musik, sondern des grandiosen Einzugs volkstümlichen Musizierens. Anstelle des klassizistischen Normenkatalogs der musikalischen Formen tritt eine bis dahin unerhörte Freiheit im Umgang mit dem musikalischen Material.” Ibid 574.

writer Christa Wolf even openly calling for the “introduction of autobiography into socialist realist art.”<sup>61</sup>

These cultural and intellectual developments were reinforced by broader social developments in East German history: as the East German state proved increasingly incapable of providing substantial political or economic reform, it turned instead towards fulfilling its citizens’ individual needs as best it could, a policy that affected East German culture as a whole. As Mary Fulbrook noted, beginning in the 1970s, there was “a trend [in the GDR] towards bracketing out wider questions about the political whole and its potential future, and an enhanced focus on the individual, or topics to do with personal fulfilment and individual identity in the present.”<sup>62</sup> Among East Germany’s cultural and intellectual elite, a belief in the importance of individual subjectivity and well-being replaced collective visions of utopian social transformation through the state. Thus, the “liberalization” of scholarly discourse in the GDR had less to do with greater cultural openness on the part of the East German state than a more general disillusionment with the state’s failure to achieve its lofty, self-proclaimed goal of creating a democratic workers’ paradise. As the gap between the East German state’s progressive ideals and its ability to achieve them in practice became increasingly clear, artists and intellectuals began to develop an interest in ideological alternatives to the official state ideology of the GDR. Such exploration of ideological alternatives was generally tolerated by the state as long as it was expressed in terms that did not openly challenge the regime’s authority, a testament to the collapse of the SED’s ambitions for the total ideological reshaping of East German society in the 1950s. Thus, the intellectual and cultural elite of East Germany remained

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<sup>61</sup> Kelly, *Composing the Canon*. 142-143.

<sup>62</sup> Fulbrook, *The People’s State*. 254.

committed to a brand of “reform socialism” up to the end of the regime, continuing to promote socialist ideals while distancing themselves from the SED’s state-centered interpretation of Marxism.<sup>63</sup> Concessions to the “intelligentsia” remained limited in one important aspect: scholarship or writing that openly challenged the state’s authority or the validity of Marxist-Leninist ideology remained taboo. While unorthodox Marxist approaches towards the interpretation of an inherently abstract subject like music could be tolerated, scholarship that openly challenged the party’s political authority could not.

Despite their limited degree of academic freedom, East German musicologists still produced a great deal of original scholarship. Although scholars in the GDR were limited to presenting their arguments through the terms of Marxist ideology, some of the questions they posed about the role of classical music in their society remain relevant for musicians and musicologists today. Most importantly, East German musicologists tried to find a valuable role for a “bourgeois” art form in a society that was theoretically committed to equality, social justice, and the advancement of the working class. For figures ranging from the “mighty handful” to the “Romantic revivalists” who succeeded them, classical music still had an important political role to play, either in inspiring and channeling the feelings of the masses or allowing for the kind of introspective reflection that was necessary for genuine political change. While few may see classical music as an essentially politicized art form today, we should not simply dismiss the belief, common among East German musicologists, that classical music could be a truly popular art with the potential to contribute towards the creation of a better society. Although their arguments were tainted to some degree by their association with the ideological

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<sup>63</sup> Kelly, *Composing the Canon*, 211.

stances of an authoritarian regime, East German musicologists were far from alone in holding such views. In the West, Leonard Bernstein expressed the same belief that classical music still had the potential to promote ideals like freedom and transnational solidarity, with Bernstein even performing a modified version of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony to celebrate the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>64</sup> East German musicology, particularly in its later years, adopted an approach towards the problems confronted by classical music in modern society that still seems potentially productive, in spite of its subjection to serious ideological constraints.

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<sup>64</sup> "Upheaval in the East: Berlin; Near the Wall, Bernstein Leads an Ode to Freedom," *The New York Times*, December 26, 1989, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/12/26/world/upheaval-in-the-east-berlin-near-the-wall-bernstein-leads-an-ode-to-freedom.html>.

## Chapter II: Programming the Canon: Performance and Censorship:

*When our artists ask how they should [educate millions of progressive people], then tell them: create closer and closer ties to the working people, especially with the best of them, and study ever more attentively and more thoroughly the character and the characteristics of these people.*<sup>65</sup>

-Walter Ulbricht, quoted in “Some Lessons from the 19th Party Day of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union for Music Students”

In the founding years of the GDR, SED functionaries attempted to emulate the Soviet model as closely as possible in the field of culture. Like their Soviet mentors, figures in the East German Ministry of Culture came to believe that musical performances and culture could help to make devoted socialists out of the East German populace. As East German musicologists noted, “All professional musicians in the Soviet Union are tasked with forming ‘the new type of person’ [Menschen von neuem Typus]. They use music to contribute towards the education of steadfast communists.”<sup>66</sup> Because of this belief, the Department of Music in the State Commission for Cultural Affairs (Statuko)<sup>67</sup> was given broad authority to both act as a generous patron of musical institutions and to determine the content and structure of all musical performances in the country. In a pattern of generous state sponsorship that would continue throughout the rest of the East German regime’s existence, the SED extensively subsidized musical ensembles in the GDR. In

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<sup>65</sup> “Walter Ulbricht sagte auf der II. Parteikonferenz: ‘Wenn unsere Künstler fragen, wie sie das tun sollen (Millionen zu fortschrittlichen Menschen zu erziehen), dann sagen wir ihnen: Schafft noch engere Verbindungen mit den Werktätigen Menschen, besonders mit den besten von ihnen, studiert noch aufmerksamer, noch gründlicher den Charakter und die Eigenschaften dieser Menschen.’” “Einige Lehren des XIX. Parteitages der KPdSU für den Musikstudenten,” DR 1/6169, Hauptabteilung Musik, Ministerium für Kultur- Statuko, Bildung, Kultur, Sport, Medien, DDR mit Sowjetischer Besatzungszonen, Bundesarchiv-Lichterfelde. 4

<sup>66</sup> “Der Auftrag, ‘Menschen von neuem Typus’ zu formen, mit dem Mitteln der Musik an der Erziehung des charakterfesten, kommunistischen Menschen mitzuwirken ist in der Sowjetunion allen professionellen Musikern gegeben.” Ibid, 3.

<sup>67</sup> The State Commission for Cultural Affairs, or Statuko (Staatliche Kommission für Kunstangelegenheiten in the original German) was the predecessor to the East German Ministry for Culture, active in the early years of the regime.

fact, musical ensembles were so generously subsidized that East Germany was the country with the most orchestras per capita in the world in the 1950s.<sup>68</sup> State support of cultural institutions was by no means restricted to orchestras and opera houses. In general, East Germans could enjoy a life with abundant access to culture and entertainment because of extensive state efforts to bring “culture” to the masses. For instance, although East Germany had only a third of the population of West Germany, it had half as many theaters as the Federal Republic.<sup>69</sup> Such generous patronage, however, came at a price. In the case of classical music, it was accompanied by controls over the content and structure of almost all concert programs in the country. However, state control over the content of concert programs in the GDR grew less strict over time to accommodate the demands of audiences and musicians, who favored the performance of older canonical works over contemporary compositions from the GDR. Looking at the changing structure of concert programming in the GDR reveals that the East German state, far from being purely repressive and totalitarian, was in fact responsive to pressure from below, and could accommodate popular demands in the cultural sphere when they did not seriously threaten the regime’s authority.

The SED viewed music as a means through which Marxist-Leninist ideology could be disseminated to the East German citizenry at large. A statistical report from 1951 laid out the goals of the Statuko for music when it specified that concert programs should “always allow the listener to adopt a proper [ideological] orientation towards the music even after the concert.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> David Tompkins, “Orchestrating Identity: Concerts for the Masses and the Shaping of East German Society,” *German History* 30, no. 3 (September 1, 2012): 412–28, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghs042>. 414.

<sup>69</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *The People’s State*. 74.

<sup>70</sup> “Sie müssen die Möglichkeit geben, dem Hörer auch nach dem Konzert und später immer wieder eine Orientierung zu ermöglichen.” “Überprüfung des Kulturfonds im Sept. 1951.” 1951, DR 1/6164, MKS, BKSM, DDRmSB, Bundesarchiv-Lichterfelde.

The same report also called for the SED to bring music to the working class, whose interests the party supposedly represented, under the direction of the FDGB (Freier Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund) and FDJ (Freie Deutsche Jugend).<sup>71</sup> It also called for spoken “introductions” before each performed piece to ensure that listeners arrived at the “correct interpretation” of every composition. Most notably, the report noted the “patchiness” of the repertoire in terms of contemporary music, and recommended a program of “controls and guidance” (underlined in the original) to encourage the performance of more contemporary works.<sup>72</sup>

At first glance it might seem difficult to understand how such “controls and guidance” worked in practice, as most ensembles in the GDR focused, like today’s orchestras, on the performance of major works from the standard symphonic canon. However, a few notable differences emerge upon closer inspection. For example, the “repertoire”<sup>73</sup> of a cellist named Herbert-Otto Hempel included well-known staples of the cello repertoire like Dvorak’s cello concerto, Tchaikovsky’s Variations on a Rococo Theme, and Bach’s cello suites, but also included a composition by Ottmar Gerster, a contemporary composer living in the GDR.<sup>74</sup> Gerster’s works, like those of other contemporary East German composers, were strongly promoted by the East German state, which often made heavy-handed attempts to force the inclusion of contemporary East German works onto concert programs which focused on more

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<sup>71</sup> The FDGB was the only permitted trade union in East Germany, while the FDJ was the official youth organization of the GDR and the SED. Almost all working adults were members of the FDGB, and almost all young people were members of the FDJ. See Fulbrook, *The People’s State*, 4 for more information on these organizations.

<sup>72</sup> “Kontrolle und Lenkung.” “Überprüfung des Kulturfonds im Sept. 1951.” 1951, DR 1/6164, MKS, BKSM, DDRmSB, Bundesarchiv-Lichterfelde.

<sup>73</sup> Such “repertoires” were common in the archives I visited. They listed the pieces that an individual performer or conductor could regularly perform, and served as a kind of advertising brochure for the talents and capabilities of the musician in question. I will discuss more examples of this type of document later in the thesis.

<sup>74</sup> “Repertoire: Herbert-Otto Hempel,” DR 1/6164, MKS, BKSM, DDRmSB, Bundesarchiv-Lichterfelde.

conventional fare. For instance, when an East German choir planned to take a tour abroad in 1957, they were prevented from doing so by a government official responsible for foreign travel, who objected to the lack of East German composers on their proposed concert program.<sup>75</sup> Such censorship was by no means unusual in the GDR: in the first years of the regime, it became a requirement for all major ensembles to send a copy of any proposed program to the Statuko, where Hans-Georg Uszkoreit, the leader of the Department for Music, would modify the program to his liking. Uszkoreit, a devoted party functionary, had some background in music as an organist before the Second World War, but was hardly a member of East Germany's cultural elite, like the musicologists in the "mighty handful" or composers like Paul Dessau or Hanns Eisler.<sup>76</sup> He served primarily as a censor, who represented the party line by suggesting the replacement or prohibition of particular works on concert programs. claiming, for instance, that Paul Hindemith's *Symphonic Metamorphoses* should be replaced with a more "realistic" work in a letter sent to the district council of Schwerin,<sup>77</sup> and that Shostakovich's Ninth Symphony be substituted with a more appropriate work from the same composer in a letter to Suhl.<sup>78</sup> In general, at least before the workers' uprising of 1953 and subsequent ideological concessions made as part of the "New Course," orchestras and other musical ensembles had the ability to determine the broad outlines of their concert programs, though the details were subject to whatever modification officials in the Statuko desired.

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<sup>75</sup> "wir den Reisen keinesfalls zustimmen können, wenn nicht die vorgeschlagenen Programme geändert werden. In sämtlichen Programm ist nur ein Komponist der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik enthalten (Paul Dessau „Proletarier aller Länder vereinigt euch“). Wir sind der Meinung, dass ca. 15-20 Prozent Kompositionen aus der DDR sein müssten." Letter from Spielhagen to Prof. Hans Pischner, July 3rd, 1957, DR 1/302, MKS, BKSM, DDRmSB, Bundesarchiv-Lichterfelde.

<sup>76</sup> Tompkins, *Composing the Party Line*. 74.

<sup>77</sup> Letter from Hans-Georg Uszkoreit to the Rat des Bezirkes Schwerin, July 6th, 1953, DR 1/6161, MKS, BKSM, DDRmSB, Bundesarchiv-Lichterfelde.

<sup>78</sup> Letter from Hans-Georg Uszkoreit to the Rat des Bezirkes Suhl, July 6th, 1953, DR 1/6161, MKS, BKSM, DDRmSB, Bundesarchiv-Lichterfelde.

The Statuko's aggressive promotion of East German composers was in part motivated by the demands of the influential East German Union of Composers and Musicologists (VDK) mentioned in the previous chapter. The VDK sought to provide for the success and well-being of its members by ensuring that their works were performed. However, the SED was especially interested in encouraging the performance of works that promoted Marxist-Leninist ideology, and ensured that they used their influence over the VDK (a state-sponsored organization) to prioritize the performance of such compositions.<sup>79</sup> Thus, the contemporary compositions performed in the 1950s (in particular, those set to text) were often openly propagandistic in nature. Such works included a variety of songs composed for the occasion of the 1957 election, which included works titled "The Song of the Red Flag," "Socialism Lives," and "On the 1st of May."<sup>80</sup> Instrumental works were likewise expected to be composed in a "socialist realist" style, with works like Ottmar Gerster's "Thuringian" Symphony adopting a conventional tonal musical language and four-movement structure to convey the "spirit" of a particular region in East Germany.<sup>81</sup>

Nevertheless, composers continued to write relatively non-politicized music in East Germany, such as Hans Stieber's "Die Weise von Liebe und Tod," a cantata on texts drawn from Rilke,<sup>82</sup> and a number of purely instrumental works like symphonies and concertos. For instance, Fidelio Finke, a notable composer from the early GDR, wrote several orchestral suites, string quartets, and sonatas in addition to a cantata set to text by Bertolt Brecht during his time in East

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<sup>79</sup> Tompkins, *Composing the Party Line*. 118.

<sup>80</sup> "Erfolge auf dem Gebiete der Musik," September 27th, 1956, DR 1/316, MKS, BKSM, DDRmSB, Bundesarchiv-Lichterfelde.

<sup>81</sup> Tompkins, *Composing the Party Line*. 47.

<sup>82</sup> "Programmorschlag für die CSR-Tournee des Rundfunkchores Lag." DR 1/305, MK, BKSM, DDRmSB, Bundesarchiv-Lichterfelde.

Germany.<sup>83</sup> In general, even if composers were forced to conform to the party's demands by often composing overtly ideological works, they were also given the freedom to compose non-propagandistic works in all genres, ranging from choral music to purely instrumental compositions. They also had much to gain through their collaboration with the state, given that the Statuko openly pressured orchestras to perform their works as long as they did not contradict the aesthetic standards of socialist realism.

However, the promotion of contemporary East German composers in concert programming was not always well-received by the public. Frequent efforts were made to bring the work of contemporary GDR composers to workers, who often reacted with bemusement or, at worst, hostility to such compositions. At one such performance in 1954, a metalworker named Otto Schnell made his dissatisfaction with the pieces performed clear. Arguing that composers "should create works that the broad masses can tolerate," he cited the example of Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony as a work with mass appeal, and claimed that he and his fellow workers would not return to future concerts if orchestras performed the music of contemporary East German composers.<sup>84</sup> Though it may be difficult to extrapolate any broader trend from Schnell's comments, it seems that East German workers generally preferred established canonical works to contemporary compositions. Orchestra administrators in East Germany consistently argued against the inclusion of an overly large proportion of contemporary compositions in concert programs because of their failure to draw in large audiences. For their part, SED functionaries in the Statuko were also interested in providing entertaining programs that would draw in large

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<sup>83</sup>"Fidelio Fritz Finke." In *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*. New York, NY: Schirmer, 2001. *Gale In Context: Biography* (accessed January 26, 2020).

<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/K2420003527/BIC?u=columbia&sid=BIC&xid=8b6103ea>.

<sup>84</sup> Tompkins, *Composing the Party Line*, 1.

numbers of listeners because of its more general desire to “develop the masses” through musical performances.<sup>85</sup>

State control over the content of concert programs was thus not absolute, and had to take into account the wishes and desires of the GDR’s performing ensembles, composers, and citizens at large. After the Stalinallee uprising of 1953, cultural functionaries relaxed controls over concert programming to some degree, as officials like Uszkoreit could no longer officially make direct modifications to particular concert programs. However, orchestras were still required to turn in programs to the Statuko for “informational” purposes,<sup>86</sup> and could expect to face denunciation in the party-controlled press and possible suspension of privileges like foreign travel (as in the example of the foreign tour attempted by an East German chorus in 1957 cited above) if their programs were deemed to contain too many “formalist” works.

Nevertheless, this move did represent a significant extension of autonomy to orchestras and other performing ensembles across East Germany. After 1953, musical groups were allowed to determine the content of their performances without direct state interference, though they still had to remain mindful of general constraints around performing particular works. In general, state controls began to loosen to accommodate the desires of audiences and orchestras for fewer contemporary works in performance. A statistical report for the first half of the year 1954 indicates that 45.2% of works were performed from the “classical national heritage” (works from the symphonic canon written by German composers), 31.2% were from the “international classical heritage” (canonical works written by non-German composers), while only 16.4% of

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<sup>85</sup> Tompkins, “Orchestrating Identity,” 421-422.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 423.

performed works were from contemporary GDR composers.<sup>87</sup> This was considerably lower than the 25% that East German authorities attempted to enforce in the early years of the regime, but rather than attempting to force orchestras into line, the Statuko instead revised its quota downwards to a more realistic goal of 15%.<sup>88</sup> In general, East German cultural officials seemed to realize the unpopularity of contemporary works among audiences as the decade went on. Though figures in the Statuko and the Ministry of Culture that succeeded it still made vigorous efforts to promote the work of GDR composers, they gradually adjusted their policies in response to popular demand.

It is difficult to identify precise reasons for the relatively unpopular status of contemporary GDR compositions among concertgoers. However, it is possible that the highly politicized nature of many pieces by East German composers might have driven some audience members away from the concert hall. Though works like the aforementioned “Song of the Red Flag” and “Workers of the World, Unite!” might have been high-quality compositions, it is difficult to imagine that they would have been easily integrated alongside well-established works like Bach cantatas or Bruckner’s masses, or that concertgoers would have flocked to a concert devoted to the performance of propagandistic music. However, as I have noted, not all contemporary GDR works that were performed in concert were explicitly political in nature. Many concertos, symphonies, orchestral suites, and other purely instrumental works, often even written in an accessible tonal idiom, were performed alongside well-established Beethoven and Brahms symphonies. Of course, such works may have been (rightfully or not) seen as inferior in

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<sup>87</sup> “Halbjährliche Meldung über stattgefunden Konzerte im 1. Halbjahr 1954.” DR 1/6161, MKS, BKSM, DDRmSB, Bundesarchiv-Lichterfelde.

<sup>88</sup> Tompkins, “Orchestrating Identity.” 424.

quality to known canonical works, with people preferring simply to hear music whose reputation was well-established over newer, untested compositions.

However, the preference of East German citizens for established canonical works over newer ones was not limited to the GDR or Eastern Bloc alone. In fact, it was a trend that dated back to the late 19th century, a time when concert performances had increasingly begun to center on the performance of a few select works from the past. As music critic Alex Ross noted in a *Guardian* column, “Even before 1900, people were attending concerts in the expectation that they would be massaged by the lovely sounds of bygone days.”<sup>89</sup> By the early 20th century something similar had taken place in the United States, where, as Jessica Gienow-Hecht observed, “concert halls changed from places where audiences encountered something new and foreign to places where people went to see a predictable if charismatic maestro conducting the familiar Western canon.”<sup>90</sup> Anything beyond this “familiar canon” was generally rejected by audiences on both sides of the Iron Curtain, who shared similar expectations for classical music despite the political and cultural boundaries that separated them. As the 20th century progressed, fewer and fewer contemporary composers found their way onto concert programs, a trend which even a powerful state like the GDR could not hope to counter.

Musical developments in East Germany in the regime’s later years certainly reflected this tendency to retreat back towards the canon, as controls over concert programming grew even more lax in the later years of the regime. Indeed, the career of Kurt Masur, perhaps the most notable conductor to emerge from the GDR, was representative of a renewed focus on the “familiar Western canon” in the East German state’s final two decades. Masur won acclaim both

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<sup>89</sup> Alex Ross, “Why Do We Hate Modern Classical Music?” *The Guardian*, November 28, 2010, sec. Music, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/nov/28/alex-ross-modern-classical-music>.

<sup>90</sup> Gienow-Hecht, “The World Is Ready to Listen.” 22.

in the GDR and abroad for his steadfast, reliable interpretations of works from the 19th century German symphonic canon rather than his specialization in the works of contemporary East German composers.<sup>91</sup> While Masur was still expected to perform contemporary works for occasions like the opening of the new Gewandhaus concert hall in Leipzig, programs from his time as conductor contained few works from contemporary GDR composers. For instance, though the program for the 1970-71 season of the Leipzig Gewandhaus orchestra made reference to “giving our contemporary socialist music composition its due place in a series of concerts,” and pointed to premieres of two works from the composer Peter Hermann, there were only two or three other works from GDR composers in the entire season, with most concerts not even containing a single contemporary work.<sup>92</sup> The programs for the 1984-1985 and 1985-1986 seasons were similar, with Masur conducting very few works from contemporary GDR composers.<sup>93</sup> Notably, however, Masur regularly conducted performances of Gustav Mahler’s symphonies, whose work had already been successfully “revived” in the West, and whose compositions Masur attempted to re-canonize in the GDR.<sup>94</sup>

Masur himself would later express mixed sentiments towards contemporary compositions in the GDR. He hinted at negative experiences with state demands to perform more works from GDR “state composers” in interviews in 1996,<sup>95</sup> but also remarked in a 2010 interview that the GDR’s policy of making all orchestras in the country “perform a world premiere of a

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<sup>91</sup> John Rockwell, “A Romantic from Leipzig,” *The New York Times*, July 18th, 1982, sec. 2. <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/07/18/arts/a-romantic-from-leipzig.html>.

<sup>92</sup> “Gewandhaus zu Leipzig, Konzertjahr 1970/71,” Werner Felix, Programme 1970-79, Kurt Masur Archiv.

<sup>93</sup> “Gewandhaus zu Leipzig, Konzertjahr 1984/85,” and “Gewandhaus zu Leipzig, Konzertjahr 1985/86,” Programme 1980-89, KMA.

<sup>94</sup> Juliane Schicker, “Beyond the Gewandhaus: Mahler and the GDR,” in Kyle Frackman and Larson Powell, eds., *Classical Music in the German Democratic Republic: Production and Reception*, Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2015). 135-136.

<sup>95</sup> “Ich spüre moralische Verlust,” *Tages Anzeiger*, August 30th, 1996, KMA.

commissioned work by a young composer” every year had been a sign of Erich Honecker’s “respect for the orchestral tradition.”<sup>96</sup> It seems plausible that Masur had a somewhat ambivalent attitude towards the regime’s artistic policies: though he recognized the importance of programming contemporary works alongside staples of the symphonic repertoire, he might have still been uncomfortable with the politicization of composition in the GDR and the effect of state pressure on performing ensembles.

Whatever the case, two clear trends emerge in the concert programming of prestigious ensembles like the Leipzig Gewandhaus and Dresden Philharmonic in the last years of the GDR. The first is that a pattern of state interference in concert programming to promote the works of contemporary GDR composers continued. The second, however, is that the performance of such works became much rarer, at least in the case of East Germany’s most prestigious ensembles. The contemporary works that were performed also tended to be abstract instrumental works rather than the propagandistic choral or vocal pieces promoted earlier in the GDR’s existence. For instance, Masur, in his time as musical director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus, conducted several works by his friend Siegfried Matthus, a contemporary composer from the GDR. Matthus’s works, including a symphonic composition titled “Die Windsbraut” written for Masur<sup>97</sup> and a violin concerto,<sup>98</sup> were generally free of any overtly political content. Likewise, compositions that Masur performed from other GDR composers, like Fritz Geißler, were also

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<sup>96</sup> Joachim Kronsbein and Katja Thimm, “Interview with Kurt Masur: The Spirit of 1989 Has Been Exhausted,” *Spiegel Online*, October 12, 2010, sec. International, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/interview-with-conductor-kurt-masur-the-spirit-of-1989-has-been-exhausted-a-721851-2.html>.

<sup>97</sup> Letter from Siegfried Matthus to Kurt Masur, September 1st, 1985. Korrespondenz K-N, KMA. In this letter Matthus refers to Masur with the familiar “du,” indicating a close degree of familiarity.

<sup>98</sup> “Gewandhaus zu Leipzig, Konzertjahr 1970/71,” Programme 1970-79, KMA.

generally instrumental works that lacked any strong ideological content.<sup>99</sup> While state pressure to program the works of GDR composers constituted a form of ideological pressure in itself, it seems clear that the concert hall had become a relatively depoliticized space by the GDR's final decade, given the strong preference for performing abstract instrumental pieces over vocal works set to often overtly propagandistic text.

It may be inadvisable to generalize the concert programming of ensembles like the Leipzig Gewandhaus to the entirety of East Germany. However, it seems reasonable to assume that the country's most prestigious ensembles would have been subject to a higher degree of scrutiny in terms of their programming than smaller or lesser-known ones. This was certainly the case in the early years of the regime, when concert programs from large, prestigious orchestras would land directly on the desk of the central cultural authorities, while smaller orchestras would first forward their programs to a regional council.<sup>100</sup> Given that the Leipzig Gewandhaus (outside of special occasions like the aforementioned opening of the new Gewandhaus concert hall) performed few works from contemporary GDR composers, it seems likely that most other ensembles in East Germany also focused their performances on symphonic works from the established canon. It is also possible, however, that prestigious ensembles were able to use their position and international renown to negotiate a greater degree of autonomy from state control. Nonetheless, there is little in Masur's surviving correspondence with the East German Ministry of Culture to support the idea that he obtained special permission to perform his planned concert programs.<sup>101</sup> It seems likely that state efforts to promote the efforts of contemporary GDR

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<sup>99</sup> "Dresden Philharmonic, Konzertjahr 1971/72," Programme 1970-79, KMA.

<sup>100</sup> Tompkins, "Orchestrating Identity," 422.

<sup>101</sup> See the materials gathered in Kor. 8, Korrespondenz mit dem Ministerium für Kultur, Minister Hans-Joachim Hoffmann, KMA, Leipzig, Germany. Masur and Hans-Joachim Hoffmann (the Minister of Culture at the time in East Germany) enjoyed a good working relationship, and Masur did ask him from time to time for special favors,

composers had become relatively minimal by the 1970s and 80s. In any case, the days of figures like Uszkoreit modifying individual concert programs to advance the state's ideological goals were long gone by the last years of the GDR.

Paralleling the developments in musicology discussed in my first chapter, I would argue that there was a gradual relaxing of SED efforts to exert influence over or politicize concert programming in the later years of the East German regime in response to pressure from below. Because of resistance to the highly politicized concert programming that defined classical music performance in the 1950s, classical music gradually lost its status as a highly politicized medium that was meant to disseminate the SED's official ideology among the populace at large throughout the GDR's existence. Instead, it assumed a status similar to that it had achieved in the West, as a form of entertainment generally associated with "high culture" and the intelligentsia. In the end, the SED was forced to confront the reality that the canon and practices of what we call "classical music" had been clearly defined across the world long before the establishment of the East German state. Efforts to fundamentally redefine the concert hall as a space devoted to political education and agitation met serious resistance from an audience accustomed to hearing familiar Beethoven symphonies over compositions promoting Marxist-Leninist ideology. The East German state did not redouble its efforts to turn classical music into a propagandistic medium in response, but instead gradually loosened its controls over concert programming. While this was a definite concession to popular pressure in the cultural sphere, it ultimately did little damage to the state's political authority.

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including permission to bring his daughter with him on a trip to the USA on a letter sent on March 6th, 1981. Masur also asked Hoffmann for special permission to invite international orchestras to a festival in Leipzig, including orchestras from West Germany on October 24th, 1983. In all of their correspondence, however, Masur never discussed the content of his concert programs with Hoffmann, and never asked his permission to perform particular works.

Despite the relative depoliticization of concert programming within the GDR's borders, classical music performance remained a potent ideological weapon in the cultural Cold War. As in the early years of the regime, the success and international prestige of East German orchestras and other musical ensembles became a way for the East German state to project its cultural "soft power" across the world, and to prove its superiority as a "steward" of German high culture, or the "classical humanist cultural heritage," over the Federal Republic.<sup>102</sup> By demonstrating the high quality of its ensembles and conductors to the world, the East German state could legitimately claim cultural parity with the Federal Republic, even as it was becoming increasingly clear that the SED could not provide its citizens with the level of material prosperity that those in West Germany enjoyed. Yet, as I will argue in the next chapter, such indirect cultural competition interfered little with the day-to-day lives of GDR musicians, who could go on performing Brahms and Beethoven symphonies without contemplating the wider geopolitical consequences of their performances. I would suggest in closing, then, that classical music in the GDR gradually became "depoliticized" in the same sense that it was in the West: though any artistic performance is inherently political, instrumental classical music remains the most abstract of all artistic genres, as well as the most standardized when it comes to international performance. As Gienow-Hecht observed, "symphony orchestras differ from theater productions, jazz concerts, exhibitions, or shows in that they offer nothing new. They are not culturally peculiar; instead, they conform to the international norm of performance and repertory."<sup>103</sup> Thus, it became easy for classical musicians on both sides of the Iron Curtain to understand their task as the dissemination of a humanistic and fundamentally apolitical form of art with universal

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<sup>102</sup> Kelly, *Composing the Canon*. 15-16.

<sup>103</sup> Gienow-Hecht, "The World Is Ready to Listen." 23.

appeal, distancing them from the wider political consequences of their performances. Because of this assumption, musicians in the GDR viewed themselves as no more complicit in the goals of their state than musicians in West Germany or the United States.

### Chapter III: Performing the Canon: The Case of Kurt Masur:

*Only someone who hadn't lived in the GDR would see a contradiction there. Leipzig is one of Europe's music centers. Bach, Mendelssohn, Brahms, they all worked there, and the Gewandhaus belongs to the heart of the city. As its director, of course I had to work with the people who ran the country and the city. I welcomed Mr. Honecker (the GDR's leader from 1971 to 1989) to my concert hall just as graciously as I would have kissed the Queen of England's hand if she had come there. I was the host.*

-Kurt Masur, in an interview with *Der Spiegel*, 2010.<sup>104</sup>

This chapter examines how musicians themselves understood and navigated cultural life in East Germany from the 1970s onwards by looking at the life of Kurt Masur, one of the most prominent musical figures to emerge from the GDR. Masur's life exemplifies both the benefits of state sponsorship for musicians in the GDR and the restrictions that even the most privileged artists in the GDR faced throughout their careers. Though Masur was by no means representative of a "typical" musician in the GDR because of his privileged status and international renown, his career serves as an example of the agency that certain artists could acquire under the East German regime. Masur and other musicians like him negotiated with the regime and often took advantage of its patronage without explicitly promoting the SED's ideological objectives, an aspect of East German history that is lost when the GDR is presented merely as a repressive "totalitarian" state by historians. The goals of major cultural figures and the East German regime aligned in many respects, which allowed them to establish a mutually beneficial relationship when it came to matters like the construction of new concert halls and the subsidization of concert tickets for the working masses. Ultimately, Masur's career demonstrates how a musician not committed to the regime or its ideology could nonetheless acquire a privileged status in East German society. Though Masur never joined the Socialist Unity Party,<sup>105</sup> his international

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<sup>104</sup> Kronsbein and Thimm, "Interview With Conductor Kurt Masur."

<sup>105</sup> Michael White, "Time Changes", *The Independent on Sunday*, April 3, 1994, KMA.

reputation as a skilled conductor as well as his directorship of some of the most prestigious musical ensembles in East Germany gave him some measure of influence over cultural policy in the GDR, which he skillfully used to obtain Erich Honecker's backing for the construction of the only concert hall ever built in the GDR.<sup>106</sup>

Born in Brieg, Silesia in 1927, Kurt Masur grew up in the Third Reich, and was drafted into the German military in 1944. After the war, he ended up in the Soviet zone of occupation, and, after a few years studying composition at the University of Music and Theater in Leipzig, was offered a position at the Landestheater at Halle an der Saale.<sup>107</sup> He later became the director of many of the most distinguished orchestras and ensembles in East Germany, including the Komische Oper in Berlin, the Dresden Philharmonic, and most famously, the conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra from 1970 to 1996, where he presided over the construction of the new Gewandhaus concert hall.<sup>108</sup> Masur also toured internationally with the Leipzig Gewandhaus, and served as a guest conductor at American institutions, including the New England Conservatory.<sup>109</sup> Though Masur was largely uninvolved in political activities throughout his life, in 1989 he briefly came into prominence as a political figure after the downfall of the East German regime, with some suggesting that he run for the presidency of a new, democratic East German state.<sup>110</sup> Masur had shown few signs of dissidence through his long career in the GDR, but his role in preventing violence during the Leipzig demonstrations was widely

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<sup>106</sup> Claudius Böhm, "History," Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, 2018.

<https://www.gewandhausorchester.de/en/orchester/history/>

<sup>107</sup> Johannes Forner, *Kurt Masur : Zeiten Und Klänge* (Berlin: Propyläen, 2002). 50-51.

<sup>108</sup> Margalit Fox. "Kurt Masur, Conductor Who Transformed New York Philharmonic, Dies at 88", *The New York Times*, December 19, 2015, sec. Arts.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/20/arts/music/kurt-masur-new-york-philharmonic-conductor-dies.html>.

<sup>109</sup> Letter from Mark Churchill to Kurt Mazur [sic], March 8, 1983, Box Kor. A-E, Kurt Masur Archiv, Mendelssohn Haus, Leipzig.

<sup>110</sup> Geir Moulson, "German Conductor Kurt Masur Dies at 88; Reinvigorated New York Philharmonic," *Los Angeles Times*, December 20, 2015, <https://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-kurt-masur-20151219-story.html>.

celebrated. In 1989, while police, Stasi, and army units were deployed in large numbers on the streets of Leipzig that year, they made no attempt to stop the protest at the Nikolaikirche on the 9th of October, thanks to the efforts of Masur and three local SED functionaries. Together, the four delivered a statement calling for peaceful discussion about political reform rather than violent repression. After Egon Krenz, the last general secretary of the SED and Honecker's successor after his deposition, gave his approval to their statement, the police and army units deployed in Leipzig dispersed.<sup>111</sup> After the events of 1989, he was seen as a figure with the kind of moral authority that could fulfill the mostly ceremonial duties of a new German president. Masur, however, quickly went back to conducting, first continuing his tenure as music director of the Gewandhaus before he was appointed the new music director of the New York Philharmonic in 1992. Masur continued conducting around the world until his death in 2015. By that time, he was primarily remembered for his role in the peaceful downfall of the East German regime rather than his decades-long career as a conductor in the GDR.<sup>112</sup>

In 1990, despite widespread praise for his role in preventing violent repression in Leipzig during the events of the previous year, Masur's status as one of the East German regime's favored musicians was still far from forgotten by some. Journalist Marc Fisher, writing for *The Washington Post*, questioned Masur's relationship with the now ousted and discredited regime, particularly in light of an infamous letter Masur sent to Honecker wishing him good health after

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<sup>111</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *The Divided Nation: A History of Germany, 1918-1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). 328-329.

<sup>112</sup> For examples of this general attitude towards Masur, I would recommend looking at both the obituaries I cited above as well as this article from the Washington Post. Matt Schudel, "Kurt Masur, Conductor Who Was a Unifying Force in a Divided Germany, Dies at 88," *The Washington Post*, December 19, 2015, sec. Music, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/music/kurt-masur-conductor-who-was-a-unifying-force-in-a-divided-germany-dies-at-88/2015/12/19/83651238-a667-11e5-9c4e-be37f66848bb\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/music/kurt-masur-conductor-who-was-a-unifying-force-in-a-divided-germany-dies-at-88/2015/12/19/83651238-a667-11e5-9c4e-be37f66848bb_story.html).

his forced resignation. “Which Masur is the real one?” Fisher asked. Was he “the friend of ousted Communist boss Erich Honecker and supporter of a now-discredited regime? Or the man who risked his career to help avert a Tiananmen Square-style suppression of the Leipzig demonstrations that sparked East Germany’s autumn of change?”<sup>113</sup> Though Masur was hardly a “supporter” of the East German regime, Fisher’s article raises worthwhile questions about the interpretation of the political actions of artists like Masur who, while offering principled resistance to the regime during its collapse, had also benefited greatly from the East German state’s generous patronage.

Kurt Masur did not imagine himself to be deeply involved in furthering the ideological aims of the East German regime. Masur never joined the party, and he possessed a generally unsympathetic attitude towards Marxist-Leninist principles in the field of culture. In 1963, Masur was sent a series of questions closely related to the ideological aims of the SED by Anni Hanser-Kruschke, a journalist working for the party-sponsored publication *Sonntag*. The questions included “How much/how can music influence, strengthen, and inspire the workers in our GDR?”; and “What is your opinion on contemporary works of music, especially those from the GDR?” Masur’s answers were often brusque. To the former question, he merely answered that “Music can strengthen and influence all people,”<sup>114</sup> explicitly rejecting the implicit premise of the question that music should primarily benefit the “Werkstätigen.”<sup>115</sup> He also showed little

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<sup>113</sup> Marc Fisher, “The Maestro’s Leipzig Crescendo,” *The Washington Post*, January 3, 1990, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1990/01/03/the-maestros-leipzig-crescendo/dcec1364-f3fc-42bf-9560-33b1f51f66f1/>.

<sup>114</sup> In the original German: “Wie weit bzw. Auf welche Art kann Musik gerade die Werkstätigen in unserer DDR beeinflussen, stärken, und beflügeln?” and “Wie beurteilen Sie das zeitgenössische Musikschaffen, speziell das in der DDR?” Masur’s answer was that “Musik kann alle Menschen stärken und beflügeln.” Letter from Kurt Masur to Anni Hanser-Kruschke, September 28th, 1963, Box Kor F-J, KMA.

<sup>115</sup> “Werkstätigen” is a specifically Marxist-Leninist term for “workers,” including any who were in employment that was thought to be “productive.” It was not widely used outside of East Germany, where workers were (and are still) referred to by the term “Arbeiter.”

special regard for contemporary compositions from the GDR, claiming that he respected only “the good ones,” in response to Hanser-Kruschke’s second question.<sup>116</sup>

Indeed, contrary to what journalists like Marc Fisher believed, Masur was not always one of the regime’s favored musicians. In fact, there was even a brief period starting in 1964 when he was unofficially blacklisted from conducting orchestras in the GDR. According to Masur, this blacklisting was the result of a public dispute between Masur in his time as conductor of the Berlin Komische Oper and Hansjürgen Schaefer, the influential chief editor of *Musik und Gesellschaft* and a music critic for the party newspaper *Neues Deutschland*. Having little to do with his political stance towards the East German regime, the dispute began over Schaefer’s negative review of Masur’s performance of Haydn’s “Surprise” Symphony, which he deemed a “sin” against Haydn’s music. Feeling provoked by Schaefer’s remarks, Masur wrote a hasty response defending himself against the prominent music critic’s attacks. Schaefer responded by sarcastically acknowledging his “guilt” in a response which referred to Masur as an “angry critic from the Komische Oper.” At this point, Masur, having made a serious mistake by antagonizing one of the most influential members of the East German musical establishment, soon found himself out of a job and in dire financial straits.<sup>117</sup> With the help of his influential friends, including the composer Siegfried Matthus, conductor Kurt Sanderling, and opera director Walter Felsenstein,<sup>118</sup> Masur was eventually successful in persuading the East German authorities to halt the ban on his domestic performances by conducting a series of critically acclaimed performances abroad. This incident demonstrated how even celebrated and prestigious musicians could be sanctioned by the regime for mostly non-political reasons. Because of the extensive

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<sup>116</sup> “Die Guten.” Letter from Kurt Masur to Anni Hansser-Kruschke, September 28th, 1963, Box Kor F-J, KMA.

<sup>117</sup> Johannes Forner, *Kurt Masur*, 131-132.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid 133-136.

degree of control that the SED exercised over all aspects of cultural life in the country, any misstep could result in the end of an artistic career, especially in the earlier years of the East German regime, when music and art were generally more politicized than in the regime's last two decades.

Despite his blacklisting, Masur did not have a strongly antagonistic relationship with the East German government or the regime's cultural functionaries throughout his career in the GDR. After 1967, when he was appointed as musical director of the Dresden Philharmonic, Masur maintained a good relationship with the regime, and emphasized in public interviews the compatibility between his artistic goals and the cultural policy of the East German government. In particular, Masur supported the SED's efforts on making classical music accessible to those "layers of society" which did not ordinarily attend classical music concerts, a paternalistic aim which matched his desire to bring classical music to a larger audience. In fact, Masur showed genuine enthusiasm for staging performances for the working-class citizens of the GDR. In 1979, during an interview with the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, Masur stated that "We will play our first concert for them in the new concert hall with confidence, and we hope that a portion of 'our' construction workers will then decide to visit the Gewandhaus more often."<sup>119</sup> Though Masur had rejected the view that music should be performed primarily for the benefit of a particular class or group of people over another in 1963, he had no strong objections to the East German regime's attempts to make forms of "high art" — like classical music or drama — more accessible to working-class citizens.

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<sup>119</sup> "Mit Sicherheit werden wir unser erstes Konzert im neuen Haus für sie spielen, und wir hoffen, daß sich ein Teil "unserer" Bauarbeiter auch entschließen wird, das Gewandhaus öfter zu besuchen." "Musik bedeutet in meinem Leben alles", *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, 28/29. Juli 1979, KMA.

Masur would later lament the loss of the East German state's generous patronage, feeling that the situation for the Leipzig Gewandhaus and other East German ensembles had grown worse after German reunification. In an interview in 1990, Masur reflected sadly that the government subsidies which had once kept ticket prices low were no longer available. He noted that "In the old East German system, musicians enjoyed a high degree of security and stability; and ticket prices were kept extremely low."<sup>120</sup> Though Masur was no apologist for the East German regime, he did believe that its paternalistic aim to bring culture to the masses was beneficial for musical ensembles in the former GDR.

Indeed, the SED sought to win the East German state's cultural institutions international acclaim and prestige through state patronage, which included efforts at promoting and sponsoring the performances of East German artists like Masur abroad. International performances of symphonic classical music performance played a major role in the Cold War projection of "soft power." For instance, Leonard Bernstein's 1960 trip to Berlin with the New York Philharmonic, financed by the Ford Motor Company, was described by Henry Ford II "as a fine opportunity to aid the courageous people of West Berlin in ideological battle with Communist East Germany" and to demonstrate American artistic accomplishments.<sup>121</sup> Bernstein himself, however, saw the trip in less adversarial terms, emphasizing what he viewed as the universal appeal of Beethoven's music and the ability of classical music to transcend national boundaries in a lecture delivered before the performance.<sup>122</sup> Though financed by the East German

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<sup>120</sup> Excerpt from London Philharmonic program notes, titled "Orchestrating the Winds of Change", Richard Morrison, 1990. Box Programme 1989-1998, KMA.

<sup>121</sup> Jonathan Rosenberg, "'The Best Diplomats Are Often the Great Musicians': Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic Play Berlin," *New Global Studies; Berlin* 8, no. 1 (2014): 65–86, <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.1515/ngs-2014-0006>. 68.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid* 76-78.

government rather than a private American corporation, Masur's performances abroad served a similar function to Bernstein's, projecting an image of the East German state as a cultivator of a universal, yet deeply German cultural tradition. While the East German state was often reluctant to permit its citizens to travel abroad, fearing that artists would permanently emigrate, it made a number of exceptions for prestigious cultural figures and musicians who officials believed were politically reliable. At times, such policies backfired, as in the case of Klaus Tennstedt, Masur's friend and fellow conductor who defected on a trip to Sweden in 1971. However, the East German regime managed to reap substantial benefits from Masur's performances abroad, as the conductor successfully demonstrated the musical prowess of East German musicians to the wider world while remaining, at least on the surface, a loyal citizen of the GDR. Masur's performances were very well-received in the West, with a *Washington Post* review of the Gewandhaus Orchestra's 1982 performance of Mahler's First Symphony describing it as the "freshest, most graceful one this listener has heard in quite some time."<sup>123</sup> In the same newspaper earlier that year, a Gewandhaus recording of Brahms's serenades was called "one of the year's most treasurable orchestral releases."<sup>124</sup> The government continued to approve of Masur's guest conductor appointments with ensembles like the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra until 1989 with few reservations.<sup>125</sup>

Despite the privileges provided to Masur, state authorities continued to scrutinize musicians in ensembles he directed closely when they traveled abroad. Of particular concern for

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<sup>123</sup>"Gewandhaus Orchestra," *The Washington Post*, October 25th, 1982. Box Pres 5, KMA.

<sup>124</sup> Marc Fisher, "Brahms's Serenades", *The Washington Post*, January 31st, 1982.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/1982/01/31/brahms-serenades/bf4dad1a-a420-4279-822f-b6189d6efe8b/?noredirect=on>

<sup>125</sup> Lawrence B. Johnson, "Pride plays a big part in Israeli orchestra," *Detroit News*, August 16th, 1998. From Box Pres 6, KMA.

the regime were unmarried, younger musicians, who were seen as most likely to defect.<sup>126</sup> Indeed, Masur's attempt to secure travel privileges for several musicians in his orchestra to Yugoslavia in 1977 ran into difficulties. The trip appeared to be personal in nature and was planned as a joint vacation for the musicians rather than a formal tour. A detailed list of every musician who was scheduled to go on the trip was attached to correspondence between Masur's personal secretary and a certain Comrade Blaimer, the head of the division for Cadre Education (Kader/Bildung) in the Ministry of Culture. The list itself contained a column next to each musician's name denoting whether the person in question had relatives in the FRG. This information was obtained from the self-reporting of the musicians, who were asked to write notes listing relatives that they had in West Germany.<sup>127</sup> Writing to Blaimer, Masur justified the vacation by claiming that he considered it "a reward for the accomplishments of the musicians in question."<sup>128</sup>

In general, the documentation demonstrated the many obstacles to travel for some of the most accomplished musicians in East Germany. The fear of defection to the West was near-constant for East German government functionaries, and their willingness to demonstrate the cultural accomplishments of East German musicians to the world was always balanced by the fear that such musicians might defect. In fact, many talented musicians from orchestras like the Dresden Staatskapelle and Leipzig Gewandhaus emigrated to the West in the 1950s, motivated by better pay or by dissatisfaction with the GDR's government.<sup>129</sup> Defection remained a somewhat frequent occurrence through the later years of the regime: though only a handful of

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<sup>126</sup> Johannes Forner, *Kurt Masur*. 224.

<sup>127</sup> The notes and the report were both in Box Kor 15, KMA attached in the same folder.

<sup>128</sup> "Auszeichnung für die verdienstvolle Tätigkeit der betreffenden Musiker." Letter from Masur to Blaimer, November 8th, 1977, Box Kor 15, KMA.

<sup>129</sup> Tompkins, "Orchestrating Identity."

musicians from the Leipzig Gewandhaus left the GDR during Masur's time as conductor, other ensembles, like the Berlin Staatskapelle, saw one to two of their musicians defect every year.<sup>130</sup> However, musicians did not seem to defect in large enough numbers to prompt great alarm on behalf of the Ministry of Culture. In fact, the musicians of the Leipzig Gewandhaus were not even held under permanent Stasi surveillance during their travels abroad, though they were expected to report their activities to Masur himself, who was then held responsible for any defections that might occur under his watch.<sup>131</sup> East German musicians did not defect in larger numbers because there were significant material incentives for them to remain in the GDR. In particular, the nation possessed a disproportionately large number of orchestras relative to its population,<sup>132</sup> thus guaranteeing employment to many musicians who might not have been able to find it in the West. Many of the early defections from East German orchestras came from its most prestigious ensembles, whose members were promised better pay in the West, while less skilled musicians might have had a difficult time securing a secure position elsewhere. Thus, the East German state did not maintain the loyalty of its musicians through fear and repression alone, but also offered significant material advantages to incentivize them to remain in the GDR.

Furthermore, the SED also proved itself a generous patron of the arts in a more spectacular fashion through major construction projects, such as the new Leipzig Gewandhaus concert hall opened in 1981. The construction of the hall was approved by Erich Honecker and other senior figures in the East German government, who gave the project extensive financial support. The construction of the new Gewandhaus was a major propaganda coup for the regime,

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<sup>130</sup> Johannes Forner, *Kurt Masur*. 227.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid*, 226

<sup>132</sup> Tompkins, *Composing the Party Line*. 222. Tompkins specifies the exact number of orchestras as 1 for every 220,000 inhabitants of East Germany in a note. He goes on to make comparisons to the situation of orchestras in West Germany, which had 1 orchestra per 690,000 people, and the United States, which had 1 for every 1.6 million.

with Honecker and his wife Margot present at the spectacular opening of the concert hall. Masur recalled the inaugural concert more than a decade later, stating that it was “something I think he [Honecker] regarded as one of his proudest moments. A moment of triumph. The people of the city were happy that this house was built. Huge crowds turned out to celebrate. Yes, I think this was his moment.”<sup>133</sup> In building the Gewandhaus, the GDR was trying to match major construction projects for artists in the West, such as the Berlin Philharmonie concert hall. The Philharmonie opened its doors in 1963, only two years after the erection of the Berlin Wall. The hall itself was located at the easternmost point of West Berlin, only 200 meters from the Wall itself. It came as no surprise, then, that the building itself was viewed as a strong ideological statement: at its opening ceremony, a West Berlin city official even openly declared the building a representation of West German democratic ideals.<sup>134</sup> Such projects demonstrated the superior economic and cultural power of the West to East Germans, who were made acutely aware that their great concert halls and opera houses were still yet to be rebuilt after their wartime destruction.

The fact that East Germany’s prestigious ensembles, in contrast to their counterparts in the West, lacked adequate performance spaces might have been on Honecker’s mind when he received a letter from Kurt Masur in 1971. In the letter, Masur requested state support for a new concert hall in Leipzig by explaining that the Gewandhaus Orchestra, one of East Germany’s most prominent ensembles, had been forced to perform in temporary, ad hoc venues, including a hall in the Leipzig Zoo, since the Second World War. He showed his skill at making use of the

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<sup>133</sup> Michael White, “Time Changes”, *The Independent on Sunday*, April 3, 1994.

<sup>134</sup> Hugh Campbell, “‘The Bright Edifice of Community’: Politics and Performance in Hans Scharoun’s Berlin Philharmonie,” *Arg : Architectural Research Quarterly; Cambridge* 11, no. 2 (June 2007): 159–66, <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.1017/S1359135507000632>. 159-160.

highly politicized rhetoric favored by the regime when he claimed that “The Gewandhaus will celebrate in 1981 the 200th anniversary of our entry into our first hall, which gave our ensemble its name. This historic occasion still possesses great political significance today because it documented in the finest way the joining of the progressive bourgeois forces with artists.”<sup>135</sup> About a month later, Honecker wrote back to Masur, informing him that he had assigned the Chairman of the State Planning Commission, Gerhard Schürer, to look into the possibility of building a new concert hall “despite the difficulties in the building plan for the district of Leipzig.” Honecker went on to state that the Commission had suggested that the new concert hall could be integrated into the next five-year plan (from 1976-1980) and that construction work could feasibly be completed before the 200th year anniversary of the Gewandhaus in 1981.<sup>136</sup> Honecker promised to seriously consider the proposal, and soon put his stamp of approval on it.

Masur involved himself closely with the construction of the building, and suggested Rudolf Skoda, a native Leipziger, for the position of lead architect. After gaining Honecker’s approval for the proposed draft, Masur and Skoda began the construction of the concert hall, free of most bureaucratic interference thanks to the support of their powerful patrons.<sup>137</sup> Though Masur left the design of the building itself to the architects, he suggested several changes to the design of the auditorium in order to improve the acoustics of the hall. Most notably, he demanded the removal of a planned amplifier positioned above the orchestra, which Masur believed would have destroyed both the atmosphere of the hall and the natural sound of the

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<sup>135</sup> “Das Gewandhausorchester wird im Jahr 1981 den 200. Jahrestag des Einzuges in den ersten Saal feiern, der diesem Klangkörper seinen Namen gegeben hat. Dieser historische Tag hat heute noch hochaktuelle politische Bedeutung, weil er in schönster Weise das Zusammengehen der damaligen progressiven bürgerlichen Kräfte mit den Künstlern dokumentiert.” Letter from Masur to Honecker, July 1st, 1974, Box Kor 1, KMA.

<sup>136</sup> “trotz der Schwierigkeiten in der Baubilanz des Bezirkes Leipzig.” Letter from Honecker to Masur, August 12th, 1974, Box Kor 1, KMA.

<sup>137</sup> Johannes Forner, *Kurt Masur*, 248-249.

orchestra. He also selected the organ for the new hall, enlisting the services of an organ builder in Potsdam that had also constructed the organ in the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church and the Thomaskirche in Leipzig.<sup>138</sup> In general, Masur was granted extensive authority and financial support to construct the new Gewandhaus building, thanks to the support he obtained from influential members of the government like Honecker and the Minister of Culture, Hans-Joachim Hoffmann.<sup>139</sup> Masur, like artists in the West, managed to reap the benefits from his state's involvement in Cold War cultural competition. By sponsoring projects like the reconstruction of the Gewandhaus and the Dresden Semperoper, the East German state demonstrated that it could support cultural institutions just as, if not more, generously than its rivals in the West. However, like Leonard Bernstein, East German artists like Masur did not see themselves as agents serving their state's diplomatic agenda: even as they benefited from the SED's patronage, they imagined themselves to be engaged in a universalist, humanistic project.

The concert hall finished on time and opened on the 8th of October, 1981, an occasion attended by about 100,000 people, or a sixth of the population of the city of Leipzig. Along with senior SED officials, many of the construction workers who had built the concert hall were invited to attend the inaugural concert.<sup>140</sup> In total, the building cost 120 million East German marks to construct,<sup>141</sup> a relatively modest sum compared to the construction costs of the Palast der Republik<sup>142</sup>, which cost a monumental sum of a billion East German marks,<sup>143</sup> but still a

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid, 250-251.

<sup>139</sup> Letter from Masur to Hoffmann, December 31st, 1981. Box Kor 8, KMA. Hoffmann's involvement with the construction of the Gewandhaus is demonstrated through this letter, where Masur thanks him for his support and help in allowing the new Gewandhaus building to be constructed and opened in time.

<sup>140</sup> "Das dritte ist das beste," Leipziger Blätter, Herbst 1982. Box Pres 5, KMA.

<sup>141</sup> Johannes Forner, *Kurt Masur*, 255.

<sup>142</sup> "Palace of the Republic," the building that housed East Germany's parliament, built on the site of the former Berlin Palace. It has since been demolished to make room for a reconstruction of the Berlin Palace.

<sup>143</sup> "Deutscher Bundestag - Palast der Republik," Deutscher Bundestag, accessed October 23, 2019, <https://www.bundestag.de/parlament/geschichte/schauplaetze/palast>.

significant one for a cultural institution. While Masur celebrated his role in finding a permanent home for his ensemble and enriching cultural life in the city of Leipzig, his patrons in the SED used the occasion to advance their political aims. By attending a concert along with construction workers and ordinary citizens, Honecker emphasized his commitment to carrying out the lofty goals of the SED's cultural programs, which were supposed to bring the best of German culture to the working masses. However, his attendance also drew attention to the new concert hall's close association with the regime's patronage, thus firing another shot in the cultural war with West Germany. The Leipzig Gewandhaus, as Masur pointed out in this letter, was an especially significant site to make this statement: as Masur described it, the Gewandhaus had been "founded by progressive forces of the bourgeoisie of the city. [The Gewandhaus is] one of the few prestigious orchestras known across the world whose history is not based on the courtly tradition."<sup>144</sup> By patronizing the Gewandhaus, which Masur skillfully linked with the "progressive" bourgeoisie rather than the "reactionary" aristocracy, Honecker could demonstrate the East German state's commitment to maintaining the world-famous ensembles it had inherited. At the same time, Masur and the Leipzig Gewandhaus could (like the West German Berlin Philharmonic) now perform in a world-class concert hall, one worthy of the Gewandhaus Orchestra's status as one of the most prestigious orchestras in pre-war Germany.

While the letter demonstrates Masur's familiarity with the rhetoric favored by the East German regime and his willingness to employ it, it does not prove any definite commitment to the regime's ideological principles. Indeed, it seems that Masur had, like any notable public

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<sup>144</sup> "gegründet von progressiven Kräften des Bürgertums der Stadt. [Das Gewandhaus ist] eines der wenigen Spitzenorchester mit Weltruhm, dessen Geschichte nicht auf höfischer Tradition beruht." Letter from Masur to Honecker, July 1st, 1974, Box Kor 1, KMA.

figure in the Soviet Union or its satellite states, learned to “speak Bolshevik.”<sup>145</sup> To interact with figures like Hoffmann or Honecker, Masur had to explain his artistic endeavors using the terms of Marxist-Leninist ideology. His skillful use of the discourses favored by the regime ensured that his pleas for a new concert hall did not fall on unsympathetic ears, and also accounted for the general success of his career in East Germany. Masur was not deeply devoted to the regime’s political aims for music, but he was willing to demonstrate the compatibility of artistic causes with the GDR’s state ideology to gain state sponsorship.

Those more suspicious of Masur’s ties to senior SED figures claim that Masur was more than willing to accommodate the regime’s demands to advance his career, and point to a letter he wrote to Honecker in 1989 after he stepped down as evidence that Masur’s support for the East German regime was stronger than he later claimed.<sup>146</sup> The letter in question was sent on the 30th of October, 1989, exactly twelve days after Honecker had been forced out of his position as General Secretary and before the SED as a whole lost power. In this brief letter, Masur wrote that

I am overjoyed over the spirit of optimism in our country, and yet I cannot forget the important decisions in the realm of musical culture that you made in years past, which possessed great merit...  
I would like to thank you for that and wish you good health in this time, which I know must not be easy for you.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> The term, which I am adapting outside of its original context, is taken from Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain : Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>146</sup> Kronsbein and Thimm. “Interview With Conductor Kurt Masur.” This Spiegel interview provides a particularly good example of the doubts that some still had even years after the downfall of the East German regime about Masur’s sincerity with regards to his relationship with Honecker.

<sup>147</sup>“So glücklich ich bin über die ‘Aufbruchstimmung’ in unserem Lande, so wenig konnte ich vergessen, was Sie in der zurückliegenden Zeit bei wichtigen Entscheidungen im Bereich der Musikkultur an Verdiensten besitzen... Ich möchte Ihnen dafür danken und Ihnen in der sicher für Sie nicht leichten Zeit persönliches Wohlergehen wünschen.” Letter from Masur to Honecker, October 30th, 1989, Box Kor 1, KMA.

The letter mystified many observers, who wondered why Masur would have felt the need to send a sympathetic letter to a now discredited former dictator. However, the documentation does not support the claim that Masur had close personal ties to Honecker himself,<sup>148</sup> as Masur never went beyond using the impersonal pronoun *Sie* to refer to Honecker. In general, Masur's interactions with Honecker over the course of his career were cordial, but never close. Over the course of their correspondence, Honecker thanked Masur for his contributions to musical life in the GDR and invited him to official functions, like the 35th anniversary of the GDR in 1983. Masur, for his part, forwarded positive testimonials from visitors impressed by the new Gewandhaus building in 1986. Both exchanged postcards and well-wishes for their respective birthdays every year, but there is little evidence of any close friendship between the two.<sup>149</sup> To explain the letter, Masur claimed that he simply wished to express his thanks to his former patron. As he remarked in an interview with the *Washington Post* in 1990, "I wished him health and thanked him for building this house... You know, this man Honecker had dreams as a young man. Sigmund Freud should discover what happened to him."<sup>150</sup> Masur might have also sent the letter as a way to maintain ties with a once-influential political leader in case the SED maintained its grip on power. At the time he sent the letter, there still seemed to be a serious possibility that a reformist wing of the party would remain in power for some time longer.<sup>151</sup> Though Masur's decision to write the letter seems like a miscalculation with the benefit of hindsight, he might have found it a

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<sup>148</sup> Fisher mentions rumors of Masur's supposedly close friendship with Honecker circulating among West German journalists in the 1990 article on Masur he wrote for *The Washington Post*. Fisher, "The Maestro's Leipzig Crescendo."

<sup>149</sup> Letters in Box Kor 1, KMA.

<sup>150</sup> Fisher, "The Maestro's Leipzig Crescendo."

<sup>151</sup> Fulbrook, *The Divided Nation*. 330-331. Mary Fulbrook provides a good timeline of the exact events leading up to the SED's complete loss of power, and by October 30th, when Masur wrote his letter, there had not even been a promise of democratic elections yet.

prudent decision in the tumultuous days leading up to the fall of the East German regime and German reunification.

Regardless of his motivations for writing the October 30th letter to Honecker, Masur did not view himself as a strongly political figure in general. Parties like the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany), which wanted a candidate that was “not bound to any party, but closely tied to the process of democratization,”<sup>152</sup> made unsuccessful attempts to encourage Masur to run for the presidency of a newly established East German state but, as *Neues Deutschland* reported in 1990, Masur did not want the position.<sup>153</sup> Masur returned to his musical career after the events of 1989, and remained for the most part uninvolved in politics. However, Masur did make occasional comments in newspapers about the process of German reunification and its consequences. He was generally in favor of establishing an independent, democratic East German state before a gradual process of reunification, and spoke out against the use of Article 23 to reintegrate the East German states into the Federal Republic of Germany.<sup>154</sup> Masur was at least somewhat disappointed with the results of reunification, and particularly the effect that the collapse of the East German state had on the cultural institutions he had directed. For instance, Masur claimed in a 1994 interview that he had stepped down from his post as music director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus because of extensive cuts to state subsidies, saying that he had no wish to “[dismantle] what I once built.”<sup>155</sup> Even in 2009, Masur still emphasized that reunification had not been a purely positive experience for many East Germans, claiming that in the former GDR,

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<sup>152</sup> “parteipolitisch ungebundene, dem Demokratieprozeß so verbundene Persönlichkeit wie Masur.” “SPD schlägt Masur vor,” *Der Morgen*, January 1990, Box Pres 8, KMA.

<sup>153</sup> “Masur will nicht President werden,” *Neues Deutschland*, March 6th, 1990, Box Pres 8, KMA.

<sup>154</sup> “Ich lasse mich nicht zum Hasse zwingen,” *Die Welt*, March 17th, 1990, Box Pres 8, KMA.

<sup>155</sup> “[abbauen], was ich einst aufgebaut habe.” “Ich spüre moralische Verlust,” *Tages Anzeiger*, August 30th, 1996, Box Portraits ab 1978, KMA.

“Almost no one ever had to come home and say to his wife and children that he was now unemployed. Too many people have lost dignity in this way today. I find that very depressing.”

<sup>156</sup> Though Masur had little sympathy for the ousted East German regime, he, like many other former East Germans,<sup>157</sup> felt the need to defend the accomplishments of their former country by emphasizing the benefits of life in the GDR, including a strong social safety net and generous state subsidies for the arts.

Though one might be tempted to dismiss a longing for life in the GDR as a simple manifestation of “Ostalgie,”<sup>158</sup> it is better to understand such apparent nostalgia as a defensive reaction against the often dismissive treatment of former East Germans by “Wessis” after German reunification,<sup>159</sup> one which Masur perhaps saw in the claims of West German journalists that he had done too little to stand up to figures like Honecker. For citizens in the GDR, including Masur, enduring the regime’s heavy-handed censorship and control of public life while accepting the benefits it offered was a fact of everyday life. While those benefits might have been associated with the methods of an authoritarian “welfare dictatorship,” as Konrad Jarausch deems it,<sup>160</sup> there was little reason to not take advantage of the state’s generosity when it was offered. Furthermore, it was possible for many citizens to perceive state sponsorship of cultural life in East Germany as something separate from the state’s repressive and anti-democratic

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<sup>156</sup> “es gab kaum einen Mann, der nach Hause kam und seiner Frau und seinen Kindern sagen musste, er sei arbeitslos. Die Würde ist bei zu vielen verloren gegangen. Das empfinde ich als sehr bedrückend.” “Ich bin immer noch ein Lernender,” *Berliner Morgenpost*, September 6th, 2009, Box Portraits ab 1978, KMA.

<sup>157</sup> Karen Leeder, “Introduction,” *Oxford German Studies* 38, no. 3 (December 2009): 236–41, <https://doi.org/10.1179/007871909x475544>. 1.

<sup>158</sup> A nostalgia for certain aspects of life in the former East Germany supposedly felt by many former East Germans today, usually not related to any fondness for the SED or East Germany’s political system, but rather directed towards products, symbols, and cultural artifacts from the former GDR, like the Trabant car or certain brands of East German food.

<sup>159</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *The Divided Nation*, 344.

<sup>160</sup> Konrad H. Jarausch, “Realer Sozialismus Als Fürsorgediktatur. Zur Begrifflichen Einordnung Der DDR [1998],” *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung. Supplement*, no. 24 (2012): 249–72.

nature, especially in the later years of the regime. While music was viewed as a possible vehicle to disseminate Marxist-Leninist ideology among the populace in the early years of the East German regime,<sup>161</sup> there is little evidence that the Leipzig Gewandhaus played much overtly propagandistic music under Masur's baton.<sup>162</sup> State sponsorship of institutions like the Leipzig Gewandhaus was motivated in large part by Cold War competition, but this was of little concern to practicing musicians, who appreciated the material benefits of the GDR's desire to project its own "soft power" around the world.

Though Masur's "compromises" with the regime were by no means exceptional, and he was far from any kind of strong believer in Marxist-Leninist ideology or the SED's goals for East German society, there was still some overlap between Masur's understanding of his role as a musician and the SED's beliefs about the role of art in society. Though Masur was an "exceptional" figure in the history of East German music, he did not hold particularly idiosyncratic views about the role of music in society. At the very least, he is a compelling example of how cultural figures came to understand and rationalize their role as favored artists of the regime. Masur frequently declared his belief, both before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall, that the playing of classical music was an inherently "humanistic" endeavor, one which could bring people together regardless of their creed, nationality, or political beliefs.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> David G. Tompkins, *Composing the Party Line : Music and Politics in Early Cold War Poland and East Germany* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2013). 2.

<sup>162</sup> I refer here to my findings in the Kurt Masur archive, where I looked through the complete seasonal schedules for all performances of the Leipzig Gewandhaus from 1970 onwards. Programs were (as they are in American orchestras today) dominated by music from what we call the "common practice period," though a few performances of contemporary works from GDR composers like Siegfried Matthus are sprinkled throughout. These works, however, did not necessarily seem to possess any sort of strong political message. They included works like Matthus's "Die Windsbraut" and Fidelio Finke's "Concerto for Orchestra." Box Programme 1970-79, KMA.

<sup>163</sup> "Musik als Botschaft des Humanismus: Ein Pressegespräch mit Gewandhauskapellmeister Kurt Masur." *Frankfurter Rundschau*, January 5th, 1990, Box Pres 8, KMA.

Though this idea was somewhat at odds with the SED's belief that classical music performances should be directed towards the needs and preferences of the working class over those of the bourgeoisie, it was not incompatible with the party's cultural line. Indeed, from its founding the SED attempted to position itself as the inheritor of a "humanistic" German culture first established by authors like Goethe and Schiller against the militarism and Americanization supposedly embraced by West Germany.<sup>164</sup> According to their own words, many of the GDR's founders had the intention of creating in the GDR a state built upon a kind of "humanistic socialism," one that would "implement the progressive aspirations of generations of German democrats and socialists."<sup>165</sup>

Masur did not necessarily associate "humanism" with socialism, as many figures in the SED did, but he was using a concept that was popular among SED functionaries and officials. Yet Masur's opinions about music, similar to those of his contemporaries, like Leonard Bernstein, would also not be out of place among musicians today. Many notable conductors and musicians have expressed similar ideas about music as a "humanistic" art: a notable recent example would be that of Daniel Barenboim, who, when speaking about the musical academy he established for Israeli and Palestinian musicians in 2016, presented it as "an attempt at creating peace through the means of music... not a political project, [but] a humanistic project."<sup>166</sup> A belief in music as a "humanistic" project was well-established not only in Masur's GDR, but among musicians across the world today and in the past. Even as artists and intellectuals were

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<sup>164</sup> Kelly, *Composing the Canon*.

<sup>165</sup> Konrad H. Jarausch, "The German Democratic Republic as History in United Germany: Reflections on Public Debate and Academic Controversy," *German Politics & Society* 15, no. 2 (43) (1997): 33–48. 39-40.

<sup>166</sup> Kate Connolly, "Daniel Barenboim Opens Berlin Music Academy for Middle East Students," *The Guardian*, December 8, 2016, sec. Music, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/dec/08/daniel-barenboim-opens-berlin-music-academy-for-middle-east-students>.

disappointed by the GDR's failure to live up to its promises of creating a democratic and egalitarian society, they were treated well by a regime which claimed to follow the same humanistic principles that they valued, as long as they did not voice public dissent.

After German reunification, Masur's beloved Gewandhaus Orchestra experienced serious financial difficulties, with the end of once generous state subsidies for the orchestra and for ticket prices. Masur expressed his anger at the situation, saying in a public interview that,

Before unification, I imagined my life would be settled by now... Instead I end up fighting. That's one reason I accepted the New York Philharmonic: I felt it would give me a more independent status and more power to fight back in Germany. But always this fighting. People say that I want to become a politician. Don't I have enough to do, arguing for money, arguing for players?<sup>167</sup>

Though Masur's anger was primarily directed towards the lack of funding for his orchestra, a frustration at the loss of status that an esteemed cultural institution like the Gewandhaus Orchestra had experienced after reunification is also perceptible. Perhaps left unspoken is the belief that in the former GDR, Masur would never have had to "fight" simply to keep his orchestra afloat. The SED's commitment to preserving a "humanistic" German high culture had ultimately resulted in concrete material benefits for artists and musicians, which were not lost after reunification.

The experiences of Kurt Masur in the GDR do not provide us a complete picture of musical life or even of the lives of most practicing musicians in East Germany, but they do reveal how the SED exerted control over cultural life. Far from pursuing heavy-handed censorship at every turn, the SED offered powerful incentives to skilled musicians who could demonstrate the high quality of East German musicianship abroad. Such musicians did not need

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<sup>167</sup> White, "Time Changes."

to demonstrate a strong commitment to Marxist-Leninist ideology: as long as their performances brought them international acclaim and they steered clear of political affairs, they were rewarded with the freedom to travel abroad and the ability to direct some of East Germany's best musical ensembles. Furthermore, the SED's patronage of the arts fulfilled several of the state's self-proclaimed goals: it allowed the party to demonstrate the GDR's devotion to upholding German high culture and its continued commitment to the humanistic principles that supposedly underpinned East German society. Although repression was a constant reality in a society where the state exerted such control over cultural life, the SED, for the most part in the 1970s and 1980s, seemed mostly unconcerned with forcing individual musicians to toe the party's ideological line, and was generous in rewarding those with clear talent or skill.

In any case, looking at the life of Kurt Masur should remind us that East Germany was not a totalitarian *Unrechtsstaat*<sup>168</sup> characterized purely by repression. As Mary Fulbrook writes, "outward conformity was at times more important than inner commitment"<sup>169</sup> in East German society, and many figures, like Kurt Masur, could advance far in their careers without joining the party or expressing a strong commitment to its principles. Furthermore, the state offered powerful incentives to those who demonstrated a basic degree of conformity. Just as the East German state offered a strong social safety net for the working populace at large, so too did it patronize cultural life in the country, ensuring that esteemed cultural institutions like the Leipzig Gewandhaus were well-funded and subsidizing ticket prices to ensure that the concert halls were always filled. Though such policies served the purpose of propping up an authoritarian regime and its policies, they also guaranteed a basic standard of material well-being to citizens of the

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<sup>168</sup> A term used to refer to regimes in which the power of the government is not constrained by any constitutional order or law. In German, this term was almost always applied to the former GDR.

<sup>169</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *The Divided Nation*, 252.

former East Germany. It is understandable that the sudden transition to West German social market capitalism came as a shock, and then a serious disappointment, to people and organizations that lost this guarantee. While few mourned the end of state control over cultural life, many, like Masur, felt a longing all the same for the concrete material benefits that the GDR had once offered its musicians.

### Conclusion:

In 1989, as the Berlin Wall fell, Leonard Bernstein performed Beethoven's Ninth Symphony to celebrate the occasion. He conducted an international orchestra of musicians, including players from both East and West Germany and the four powers that had occupied Germany after the Second World War. To symbolize the triumph of democracy over the authoritarian East German regime, Bernstein altered the text of the Schiller poem set to music in the final movement, substituting the word *Freude* (joy) with *Freiheit* (freedom).<sup>170</sup> The last blow in the cultural struggle between the Federal Republic of Germany and the GDR was dealt, with Beethoven, once seen as a paradigmatic socialist hero, providing the music to the collapse of the East German state.

Americans like Bernstein and West Germans might have seen the collapse of the GDR and the Soviet Union as the ultimate triumph of Western democracy over Communist tyranny, but the former citizens of the GDR had more ambivalent attitudes towards the end of the East German state. Despite the authoritarian nature of the East German state, the citizens of the new Bundesländer did not see German reunification in universally positive terms. In 2009, surveys published revealing that one in nine East Germans still wished that the GDR existed, and that 57% of them believed that life had been better under Communism.<sup>171</sup> There are legitimate reasons for the emergence of *Ostalgie* since 1989. The caricature of the GDR as a purely

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<sup>170</sup> "Upheaval in the East: Berlin; Near the Wall, Bernstein Leads an Ode to Freedom," *The New York Times*, December 26, 1989, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/12/26/world/upheaval-in-the-east-berlin-near-the-wall-bernstein-leads-an-ode-to-freedom.html>.

<sup>171</sup> Karen Leeder, "Introduction," *Oxford German Studies* 38, no. 3 (December 2009): 236–41, <https://doi.org/10.1179/007871909x475544>. 1.

repressive, totalitarian “Stasiland” ignores the fact that millions of former East Germans felt that they were able to live normal, fulfilling lives in their former state, despite the reality of state oppression.

The existence of seemingly apolitical cultural pursuits no doubt reinforced the impression of “normalcy” that historians like Mary Fulbrook note in their scholarship on the GDR. Subsidized tickets and support for cultural and academic institutions had a similar effect to the wide range of social benefits that the East German state offered its compliant citizens: they served as a form of reward for conformity with the state’s objectives. By the 1970s East Germans could enjoy world-class performances of Beethoven and Brahms symphonies at affordable costs without having to hear openly propagandistic pieces performed alongside them. Musicians, in turn, could practice their art without fear of declining audiences or funding shortfalls, secure in the knowledge that the East German state had a vested interest in supporting musical life in the country. Musicologists, though perhaps dissatisfied with the SED’s failure to live up to its idealistic principles, could nonetheless engage in lively debate within the pages of East Germany’s leading musicological journal, much like their counterparts in the West. Such privileges, which often had no parallel in the West, came at the cost of conformity, but not necessarily obedience. Even musicians who never joined the party could ascend to the directorship of the most prestigious musical ensembles in East Germany, as proven by the case of Kurt Masur.

While the harsh treatment of political dissidents in the GDR revealed the authoritarian reality behind the state’s professed “progressive” and “humanistic” principles, most East German citizens could live a satisfying life if they did not engage in political activity beyond what the

SED deemed acceptable. This was especially true in the case of musicians and musicologists, who could enjoy the spoils of the GDR's cultural war with West Germany if they did not question the state's cultural policy. Thus, musical life in East Germany serves as an illustrative example of how the East German state was able to maintain its power for over forty years. Because repression alone was not enough to establish the SED's power over East Germany, the state offered concrete material benefits to those who were willing to demonstrate even a minimal level of conformity, and was willing to accommodate demands from below if they did not compromise the regime's authority. In the world of classical music, the benefits offered by the East German state were especially generous, and the amount of state control relatively minimal by the last decades of the regime. It is not difficult to imagine, then, that musicians like Masur would have especially conflicted attitudes towards the collapse of the East German state. Though the East German state made a mockery of the progressive, democratic ideals it claimed to uphold, its defense of "humanistic" high culture went beyond mere rhetoric.

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