

# MUSIC-RELATED EXPERIENCES OF GIRLS IN THE THIRD REICH

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## ABSTRACT

In order to reconstruct music-related experiences of girls in the Third Reich, 13 women were interviewed by means of narrative interviews. The results of the analyzed interviews were then contrasted with written programs of contemporary music educators. Generally speaking, the intentions of those music educators can be regarded as successfully implemented. This outcome applies to gender education (which of course did not only imply the teaching of music) as well as to communal education and to the interrelations of culture and politics. Singing in particular stimulated girls to identify with the lyrics, and they did so in a way that even those girls who actually disapproved of Nazi ideology were lured by the songs.

“How could it ever happen?” has become an often-asked question in Germany since 1945, since the end of World War II and the insanity of the Holocaust. Aiming to understand the phenomenon of Nazism in its historical and cultural contexts, it is necessary, too, to investigate the everyday life of that period. An insight into how Nazi ideology was capable of taking possession of so many faithful devotees will contribute to an appropriate working up of the German past and the question of guilt.

## 1. BACKGROUND

It is in this context that I would like to introduce my research project and its most important results. „Musikbezogene Erfahrungen von Mädchen im Nationalsozialismus vor dem Hintergrund musikerzieherischer Intentionen“ (“An Analysis of Music-Related Experiences of Girls during the Period of National Socialism against the Backdrop of General Music Educational Intentions”): this is the title of my doctoral dissertation at Cologne University of Music in 1998 (Niessen 1999). The main point is to disclose the role of music and singing within the alarmingly smooth functioning of Nazi dictatorship. Focussing on one group of people, that is to say girls not having been persecuted during the Third Reich, I can of course gain a limited insight into the matter only. Considering the underlying concept of my thesis, however, it is unavoidable to concentrate on girls: girls still are a research desideratum, and since boys’ and girls’ education used to be extremely different due to opposing role models and responsibilities, conclusions cannot easily be drawn.

## 2. AIMS

The primary problem of the dissertation refers to the kinds of music-related experiences girls made in Nazi Germany within the wider contexts of music education as well as their individual (music-related) biographies. The project is explicitly conceived as a piece of music educational research. What do empirical data contribute to a theory of music-related experience, to a re-assessment of the history of music education as well as to

gender aspects of music education? The detailed analysis of source texts serves to shed light on music education of girls in the Third Reich. The project’s main emphasis is on the analysis of interviews carried out with women who were girls still during the Third Reich. It is on the basis of their memories that music-related experiences of girls shall be made accessible.

## 3. METHOD

The analysis of source texts concerning music education of girls during the Third Reich was based on hermeneutic methods. I employed methods of qualitative social research in order to elucidate the perspectives of the women concerned: 13 narrative interviews were carried out and subsequently analyzed by means of „Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse“ (qualitative analysis of contents) (Mayring 1990) and „Sozialwissenschaftliche Paraphrasierung“ (sociological paraphrasing) (Heinze, Klusemann 1979; Heinze 1992). Immediately after the interviews I sketched my first impressions, transcribed the interviews, divided them into segments, found categories and interpreted the cuts first and then the whole texts. The single steps bear some similarity to Spöhring’s method, especially concerning the initial holistic perspective and the following phrase-by-phrase-interpretation while looking for striking details (Spöhring 1989, S. 160). I found further impulses in the research works of the following authors: Wiedemann (1986), Stübe (1995), Rosenthal (1986; 1987), and Reese (1989). I have decided on a hybrid form concerning the analysis and presentation of the results, as, for instance, realized by Stübe (1995). Individual portraits were sketched on the basis of select interviews while the other interviews were analyzed in a cross-sectional manner. Thus the methods employed refer to „pädagogische Biographieforschung“ (pedagogical biography-research). As to the objective of the project and the period in question, the study bears resemblance to Oral History and the historical gender research as well.

## 4. RESULTS

Music education for girls as mirrored by the source texts presents itself as having been functionalized on various levels: by dealing with music, music became functionalized for educational purposes. Specific Nazi ideals were imparted through it. Education on the whole served to put through socio-political views. The girls’ dedication to their future tasks as women and mothers was meant to guarantee the efficiency of the „Volksgemeinschaft“ (national community), the increase of the birthrate and, last but not least, the effective preparation of the war and the so-called „Ostkolonisation“ (colonization of the Eastern countries). Methods and aims of the girls’ education were derived from the patriarchal view of women predominant in Nazi Germany. These tendencies refer to music educational ideals of the pre-national socialistic period, but they also show some characteristics typical of Nazism.

The results based on the analysis of the interviews cannot be regarded as representative but as authentic statements („Ist-Aussagen“). The phenomena in question have been described by single or several women. However, this does not mean that they are true for all girls or even for the total population of Nazi Germany. The musical experiences of the girls varied strikingly and depended on their parents' attitudes and the age of the girls. A few common features can still be recognized: none of the girls associated negative emotions with singing nor did any of them remember to have rebelled against singing. All of them enjoyed singing on the whole and they still view it positively, whether or not they believed in Nazi ideology. They also share the experience not to have talked about the song lyrics: a critical approach was not desired. Nearly all of them claim that they have not reflected on the lyrics at all. The fact that the women still have clear recollections of the songs is remarkable indeed: some women say that the songs still come to their minds spontaneously every now and then, some can recite the lyrics without any mistake and only a few women report that they would not remember the songs unless they heard them again.

Considering the music educational intentions in Nazi Germany in relation to the girls' experiences, it can be concluded that the intentions were successfully implemented. This outcome applies to gender education as well as to communal education through singing and also to the interrelations between culture and politics coined by songs. According to the memories of the women, their experiences made in those three realms correspond to the intentions of the music educators. The similarities mainly concern songs and singing: it is obvious that music and politics interacted strongly on this level of musical activity. The realms overlap because gender education and communal education essentially are political fields, too. They will be presented separately, though, because of their significance and the effects they had on contexts other than politics.

#### 4.1. Gender education by means of songs

Most of the studies dealing with music education of girls in that time contain statements to gender qualities and the music education suitable for girls. The leading idea then was the concept of qualities and tasks of women determined by their ability to give birth. Girls were meant to pass on songs to their children, thereby transferring 'German culture' to the next generation. Music education thus included the imparting of a huge song repertory, a basic understanding of masterpieces and listening training. There was an ongoing discussion about the selection of songs: girls were recommended to sing folk songs, lullabies and mother-songs. The authors argued about battle and marching songs: while male music educators wanted to keep girls away from those songs, females encouraged them to sing them.

The fact that all of the interlocuted women were instructed in the national socialistic attitude towards nature and determination of women suggests that these ideas were widely spread and not established by the Nazis but based on a very old patriarchal conception of women. Music education is not remembered as having been gendered. For example, the women were not aware of a specific song repertory: the recommended mother-songs were nearly unknown and therefore hardly sung; at best lullabies were part of a folk song repertory typical of girls. Marching

songs were often sung and to some extent girls identified with the boys who were actually addressed. Most of the women had not at all thought about gender aspects of singing before. One reason may be found in the system of separate schooling: neither in school nor in youth organizations did the interviewees have contact to boys. In the end they admitted that there might have been a relation between songs and gender; nevertheless, in their memories gender education has not been as effective as contemporary music pedagogues had aspired to.

The function of music in this context can be summarized as follows: the ideal concept of womanhood was transferred to girls mainly by non-musical influences but supported by songs, especially by folk songs with suitable lyrics. It is remarkable that these influences were not at all recognized by women or after a long time only - a hint as to the hidden efficiency of experiences with music.

#### 4.2. Communal education by means of songs

The authors dealing with music education in the Third Reich considered community to be the starting-point and aim of their efforts. This aspect was part of the tradition of music education. The term 'community' referred to smaller groups as well as to the community of the nation as a whole, but always in connection with Nazi ideology. On the one hand music was intended to be expressive of community, on the other it was to reinforce and shape community. Singing in particular was considered to be promoting community, but nobody attempted to analyze the underlying mechanisms. The authors apparently took these effects for granted. They often used the term community in order to justify their own individual aims.

Girls actually perceived singing as supportive of community, but only when they identified with a group could this feeling of belonging be strengthened. For some of them singing was the only expression of community because in „BDM“ (= „Bund deutscher Mädel“, the Nazi organization for girls) girls tended not to speak about this issue. Singing was particularly effective if the lyrics of the songs showed some relation to the team spirit in which the song was sung: the closer the wording was to the girls' own experiences the stronger its power of identification. The girls' emotions played an important part in this context: if the girls felt happy and safe while singing, these emotions would be connected with the songs for a long time. From their present point of view, the women state that the intensity of their feelings prevented them from reflecting critically on songs and singing. They presume that singing was used intentionally in order to strengthen community and to bring about political education. Thus the aims of the authors appear to be mirrored by the memories of the women. Girls identified with the (national) community as planned, provided that they were ready for a feeling of community.

Ernst Klusen's hypothesis concerning the role of music can be confirmed: singing was not capable of establishing a community, but it could strengthen it or help to prepare people for it (cf. Klusen 1989, S. 175-176). Both lyrics and tunes were significant in that respect as both influenced the singers' emotions, thus preventing a critical stance towards the contents and the situation. So far music cannot be called national socialistic, but the melodies of the songs served to secure national socialistic ideas and convictions.

### 4.3. Political impact of songs

The music educators of the Third Reich described music education („Musikarbeit“) as part of the cultural and thus of the political training. Many considered culture and politics to be one and the same. According to them, songs in particular formed an important link between music and state. They were considered product and expression of the „Volksgemeinschaft“ (national community) as well as educational means. Singing was intended to mould characters. The songs that were written in the Third Reich were regarded as particularly valuable. All in all, the comments on songs and politics are on a very general level and lack reasoning.

What did girls think about the connection between songs and politics, and how do they, as women, view it retrospectively? Girls experienced songs as part of the Nazi education, even though they have become aware of the interrelations only nowadays. The interlocutors explain that even the singing of political songs was connected with positive emotions and that they did not think about the lyrics. They easily identified with the contents because they did not discuss them: the songs contributed to the transportation of rather vague political views and, most of all, enthusiasm. The interviewees held their ideologically uniform world responsible for this effect: Nazi songs, for example, easily matched the folk song tradition. Only some of the elder girls or those, whose parents refused to go along with national socialistic ideology, dissociated to some degree from the Nazi lyrics. Most interviews testify to the identification which was aimed at. The hypothesis of a close connection between lyrics and ideology is unambiguously proved by some cases, partly by others.

The role of music in this context is similar to the one concerning gender and communal education: since music strongly evoked positive emotions, singing facilitated the identification with the lyrics' contents even in those girls who otherwise refused to go along with the ideology. Music again served to support general tendencies.

### 4.3. Some remarks concerning folk songs

In many interviews it was not clear whether the women were aware of the difference between Nazi and folk songs when they were young. In order to distinguish the term folk song from the rather vague and obscure term national socialistic song, I define the latter as a song which was either written in Nazism or which became monopolized by Nazis so that it could henceforth be called a symbol of the national socialistic ideology. The mixture between both types of songs as was common in Nazi Germany is remarkable for several reasons:

- Folk songs were seemingly 'harmless' because their lyrics were not obviously political.
- Yet folk songs often conveyed certain ideas, attitudes or ideologies. However, it was more difficult to discern those features than to recognize typical Nazi songs which could be easily declined, after 1945 at least (s. Abraham 1967, S. 80-92).

- For kids in particular it was difficult to distinguish between so-called folk songs and typical national socialistic songs - the more so since there are a lot of songs which cannot be classified as one type or another. Hans Baumann's songs, for instance, were written in Nazi Germany and can still be found in modern song-books. Their lyrics are ambiguous; they can be described as influenced by the National-socialistic ideology, as „jugendbewegt“ (referring to the youth movement) or even as apolitical (cf. Abraham 1983).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

At the beginning of this text I explained the primary problem of my research. It is intended to contribute

1. to a theory of experiences with music,
2. to the history of music education, and
3. to gender aspects of music education.

1. The term „musikbezogene Erfahrung“ (music-related experience; cf. Kaiser 1992) seems to be very useful regarding the recording of individual experiences with music, for empirical qualitative research purposes especially. This kind of research allows, on the other hand, defining the term in more detail. The complex interplay of experience as process and result, of knowledge and of memories is not yet completely clear, for example. Has the process of experience come to an end the moment one reports about it? Is an experience changed the moment one reports about it? What about the quality of construction due to the search of identity while talking? Should it not be emphasized as an essential aspect of experience and thus of music-related experience? What effect does the interplay of experience and speech have? Based on the results of my research, it can be concluded that the social aspect appears to be highly significant of experiences with music. It is of great importance for subsequent research that the extra-musical elements of the musical experience can be reported more easily than the genuinely musical elements.

2. Regarding the specialized music education for girls, earlier findings concerning the general or the boys' education can be confirmed: music education was used for political ends, in theory completely and partly in practice. The analysis of the interviews showed that some essentials of the music educators' intentions were actually realized in the women's experiences. Socialization and general education surely also had a strong impact. Future music education will continue to aspire to reach certain aims by means of music. The demand that those aims should always be reflected on is not new but seems to need emphasizing again and again (Abel-Struth 1978).

3. Music in the Third Reich was not an independent force. Due to its emotional power, however, it was capable of supporting certain trends and images and thus contributed to the girls' education. Nowadays this phenomenon seems to be even more significant regarding the influence of the media on children and

teenagers and their general socialization. Hence it has become important all the more to keep an eye on the current trends and developments of songs, video-clips, images and stars. It can be assumed that the mediated stereotypes bear an influence on the subjective experiences with music. A qualitative investigation appears to be useful for further research in this field, too.

„How could it ever happen?“ This question was the starting point of my text. The results of my research did not offer a definite answer to this question, but they contributed to explain some aspects of the mechanisms that enabled Nazi dictatorship in Germany to gain ground. One of the women I interviewed described her feelings like this: „Und dann kommt eben heute diese, ja so eine merkwürdige Mischung von Verantwortung und manchmal auch Schuldgefühl und manchmal auch Überlegung: Was ist dadurch alles passiert, dass uns so ein paar Lieder beigebracht wurden?“ („Today there is a strange mixture of responsibility and a feeling of guilt and sometimes I ask myself: What did it lead to, our learning a couple of such songs?“)

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