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***Stefan Wolpe and the Avant-Garde Diaspora*. Brigid Cohen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xii + 328. $99.00 (cloth).**

Reviewed by Matthew Friedman, Rutgers University.

Stefan Wolpe has usually appeared in the historiography of modern music more as a footnote than a protagonist. A Jew, a Communist, and a modernist composer of "degenerate" music, he is the archetype of the artist who fled the Third Reich in 1934, but Wolpe never fit very well with the conventional narratives of modern music. Between the binary poles of German serialism, exemplified by Arnold Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School, and Igor Stravinsky and French neo-Classicism, Wolpe is usually characterized as an eccentric wanderer, notable more for his peripatetic career and diverse personal connections than for his music.

That, however, is the point, according to New York University musicologist Brigid Cohen. In *Stefan Wolpe and the Avant-Garde Diaspora*, Cohen contends that it is just this web of connections and relationships that makes Wolpe so important as the agent and exemplar of a diasporic modernism that stands in sharp contrast to Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and their followers. Indeed, Cohen notes that his musical works "were not composed as abstract documents to be sent out into the ether—nor primarily imagined as autonomous members of a vaunted canon—but rather were created as works calling out for concentrated community engagement and dialogue" (207-8). Wolpe's art and wanderings, she writes, are one and the same.

While the notion that the artist and his art are mutually constitutive is hardly foreign to musicology, Cohen's nuanced narrative of Wolpe's life and work provides an original and valuable interpretation of the contested terrain of modernism in the middle of the twentieth century. She writes that the composer raises "ongoing ethico-political questions about national community and memory . . . especially when his music and words are interpreted in relation to one another" (270). Cohen's study is a close reading of Wolpe's writings and music, placing both in conversation with each other and with the composer's life experience.

For Cohen, Wolpe embodies the postwar crisis of modernism and the seeming exhaustion of progressive ideologies in the wake of the Holocaust. A refugee in postwar America, he is a displaced person stripped of everything that made him—relationships, family, professional connections, and ultimately national belonging and *Kultur*. "*I do not belong among the Germans*," he wrote to a colleague in 1948, "No . . . I only learned to speak their language" (63). Yet Cohen

writes that while facing a life-threatening illness in the summer of 1951, and fearing that he had failed to produce a coherent artistic legacy, Wolpe conceived a project of personal and cultural reconstruction.

In a lengthy letter to his second ex-wife Irma Schoenberg, Wolpe despairingly reflects on his narrow escape from Nazi Germany, his wanderings through Europe to the British mandate of Palestine and finally to safety and abject poverty in the United States. Cohen characterizes the letter as "a latter-day, migrant's 'Heiligenstadt Testament'" (57), and like Beethoven, Wolpe emerged from his depression fully committed to his creative mission.

Shorn of the past, Cohen writes, Wolpe was able to construct an alternative modernism as a critical engagement with musical convention and networks of community. It was, she writes, an act of self-revelation that produced meaning in engagement with an audience composed not of listeners but of interpreters. His musical projects, Cohen writes, "realized a relatively optimistic faith in the value of acts of cultural 'translation'—the borderline exchange of meanings both partial and transformative—as a resource in securing such belonging while working against homogenizing communalist impulses" (19).

According to Cohen, Wolpe was able to produce a uniquely cosmopolitan poetics of modern music, drawing on his early training at the Bauhaus in Weimar with Paul Klee, his involvement with the agitprop *Novembergruppe* in the 1920s, and (paradoxically) his flight into exile, through which he encountered Arab music in Palestine. Bauhaus montage provided the composer with a theoretical framework that "both addresses a past of cultural devastation and turns toward a future of surprising possibilities arising from the human 'will to connect'" (94). Wolpe articulated this will further in Palestine by engaging with non-European musical practices in which he "found new possibilities for coping with the extraordinary cultural and personal upheaval he had suffered" (168).

Finding his project of developing a cross-cultural "amalgam" frustrated by Zionist politics, Wolpe departed for America in 1938, succumbing to "periods of intense depression during the 1940s, while receiving the bleakest news of the Final Solution" (200). After 1951, however, the composer resumed the work of "cultural reclamation" that he had begun as montage at the Bauhaus, developed as amalgam in Palestine, and finally articulated in avant-garde praxis in the United States. In this, he engaged in an extended conversation with bebop musicians in New York and fellow art music experimentalists, including John Cage and David Tudor, at Black Mountain College from 1952 to 1956.

Stefan Wolpe and the Avant-Garde Diaspora is a fascinating study of modern music's encounter with and assimilation of tonalities, rhythms, and practices from well outside of the European mainstream, and it accounts for the subsequent production of a critical avant-garde practice in the United States in the 1950s. Cohen makes a convincing argument for the importance of Wolpe to understanding modern music as a much more fluid and dynamic field than either Schoenberg or Stravinsky can account for.

Cohen's close reading of Wolpe's private and public writings, along with her deep analysis of Wolpe's music, excavates the composer's avant-garde connections and poetics in great detail and richness. However, it presumes rather than problematizes the composer's intentionality and agency. Cohen's contextualization is sometimes selective. While she spends a great deal of time discussing Wolpe's training in the radical practices of the Bauhaus and his involvement in revolutionary politics in Weimar Germany, Cohen never addresses his early studies at Berlin's *Hochschule für Musik*, a centre of what would become one of the dogmatic narratives of musical modernism. Her discussion of the relationship of Wolpe's opera *Zeus und Elida* to the interwar *Zeitoper* is merely a passing reference and all too brief. As a result, the composer often appears *sui generis* in Cohen's telling, rather than a full participant in the movements and narratives of interwar and midcentury modernism.

Nevertheless, *Stefan Wolpe and the Avant-Garde Diaspora* accomplishes an important task by reclaiming the narratives of Wolpe's sometimes inconsistent and often un-categorizable work and career, bringing him to the center of the history of modern music. In so doing, Cohen has greatly enriched our understanding of the complex and often arcane meanings of twentieth-century music.