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Dancing with devils: Carl Orff and National Socialism revisited

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Abstract

Orff's work, particularly *Carmina Burana* and the *Schulwerk*, has been popular for many decades. But since Orff established himself as a successful composer and educator during the Third Reich, there has always been the issue of his relation to National Socialism. Historical research has so far presented an unclear picture, oscillating between seeing him as a supporter or a resistance fighter. Most recent research offers much more complex perspectives. The purpose of this article is to utilize the most recently published German research to revise the notion the international music education community has of Orff's connection with National Socialism.

Keywords: *Carl Orff, Schulwerk, National Socialism, music education, politics, Germany*

“My father was no hero. He always chose the conflict-free way ... he was, as many others, just frightened. He had no talent for martyrdom.” (Orff, 1995, p. 51)

Introduction

After the beginning of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, Russian artists around the world found themselves in a challenging position since they were questioned about their opinion on Putin and the war. Thus, the mayors of Milan and Munich demanded from Russian conductor Waleri Gergijew a clear statement that he did not agree with Putin and his war—or would otherwise be dismissed (Eißer, 2022). Since Gergijew did not give such a statement, in March 2022 the city council of Munich fired him as principal conductor of the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra (Deutsche Presse-Agentur, 2022). In the first wave

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of emotions after the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the public might have welcomed such an action. But this matter is not as simple as it seems. There is, for instance, freedom of speech and art in a democracy. So, is it correct to ask Russian artists about their opinion concerning Putin? And, if their personal stance does not agree with public opinion, to dismiss them?

These and many more issues are certainly important to raise—and people today are not the first ones to be confronted with them. In autocratic and dictatorial regimes of all times, the questions were similar, although the political context was different. Particularly during National Socialism, every citizen and every artist in Germany was confronted with the need to take a political stance, in some way or another. While there were artists in opposition or agreement with the National Socialist ideology, many were caught up in between, trying to find personal ways to survive or to succeed. Even though from today's point of view it seems easy to judge, historians advise to be careful (Rathkolb, 2022). It might be an oversimplification to expect artists to either sacrifice their lives as members of the resistance or to leave the country. The situation is often much more complex, as the life of German composer and music educator Carl Orff (1895–1982) shows. His connection to National Socialism has long been unclear or contested (Kater, 2000). New research (Rösch, 2021; Rathkolb, 2022) tries to shed a more differentiated light on Orff's activities during the Third Reich.

The purpose of this article is to revise the notion the international music education community has of Orff and National Socialism. It uses the most recently published research in German (Rösch, 2021; Rathkolb, 2022) to answer the question about Orff's relation to National Socialism, both as a composer and a music educator. Additionally, it situates the new research results in the broader context of German music education during the Third Reich, particularly regarding the *Schulwerk*. There have not been any articles about Orff and National Socialism for an international music education audience in recent years. This paper thus tries to offer new perspectives. The title “Dancing with devils” indicates metaphorically Orff's undecided and changing position concerning National Socialism, which makes it difficult for research to present a clear picture. The article starts with a brief overview of research about Orff and National Socialism. Then, general considerations about the opportunities and challenges of historical research regarding the political positions of artists in troubled times follow. It continues with a brief overview of Orff's work as a composer during National Socialism, before investigating his educational work, also in relation to German music education during the Third Reich. Final thoughts about musicians in difficult times conclude the article.¹

1 I would like to thank Michaela Fridrich, author and journalist at the *Bayerischer Rundfunk* in Munich, for inviting me to be part of a panel discussion about Orff and National Socialism at Benediktbeuren Abbey, August 31, 2022. Furthermore, I would like to thank Orff's student, composer Wilfried Hiller, for many conversations about Orff. The video of the panel discussion about Orff and National Socialism is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ohsa4eZp68>

Revisiting research about Orff and National Socialism

Although there has been a reasonable amount of research about Orff and National Socialism, the results have not been completely clear so far. Kater (2000, p. 111) asserts about Orff that “there is probably no modern composer whose life and career, especially after the Nazi-takeover, have been as shrouded in mystery or confusion as his.” While there might be many reasons for this—one probably being Orff’s own advice to stay focused on his work and not his life (Kohler, 2015)—this can lead to one-sided positions in research. It might be too simple to assume someone who established himself professionally during the Third Reich to be a supporter of this system; or to see Orff as a resistance fighter due to his friendship with Kurt Huber (1893–1943), a significant member of the *Weisse Rose* resistance group (Kohler, 2015).

Musicologist Michael Kater’s (1995) groundbreaking but also controversial article *Carl Orff im Dritten Reich* (Carl Orff during the Third Reich) thus opened up a heated discussion about this issue. It was an important contribution because it did not come from Orff’s circle of friends who had done much of the research before, carefully avoiding the topic of the Third Reich (Kohler, 2015). Kater (1995) not only raised the issue of Orff and National Socialism but made further claims regarding Orff’s music having a certain closeness to National Socialist aesthetics and the *Schulwerk* being connected to the pedagogical ideals of National Socialist ideology. Furthermore, Orff had supposedly exploited his friendship with resistance fighter and musicologist Kurt Huber to clear his name in the process of denazification after World War II. In 1995, the same year Kater’s contested article was published, Hans Maier, a prominent Bavarian politician and a member of the scholarly advisory board of the *Orff-Zentrum* in Munich at this time, addressed some of these issues in a speech. He tried to save Orff by stating that “he was totally a musician and nothing else, concerned with musical, not political effect, obstinately and obsessively committed to the service of music” (Maier, 2015, pp. 3–4). Furthermore, he tried to discourage researchers from further investigating Orff and National Socialism because there would be nothing to find. However, researchers did not follow his advice: In further investigations, Kater (1997; 2000) along with others such as Kohler (2015) analyzed the impact the Third Reich had on Orff’s music. One problem of research about Orff and National Socialism has been that it was mostly focused on his compositions and touched the *Schulwerk* only lightly. A comprehensive study analyzing both his compositions and the *Schulwerk* in relation to National Socialism was lacking. In July 2022, Austrian contemporary historian Oliver Rathkolb presented precisely this investigation. He tries to avoid the moral impetus some research about artists in oppressive systems has in terms of either celebrating or condemning their actions. He found previously unpublished material which helps to revise earlier assumptions. However, Rathkolb (2022) also points out the constraints of historical research regarding artists and their actions in politically difficult situations.

Historical research and artists in troubled times

Historical research as a mode of inquiry generally tries to collect, analyze and interpret evidence to develop a historical narrative (McCarthy, 2013). It uses many different kinds of sources such as documents, photographs, or interviews. Marie McCarthy (2013) states that “using such primary sources, the researcher creates a critical account of the past by analyzing and interpreting the evidence in the larger milieu in which actions and events occurred and developed” (p. 120). While the created narratives are usually rather descriptive in nature, they do not only tell something about the past, but can also be connected to the present (Mikza et al., 2023) and offer new perspectives on significant people’s work or pedagogies such as the *Schulwerk*. Particularly the lives of people in troubled or politically contested times seem fascinating. The hope might sometimes be that historical research can offer answers, based on historical evidence; for instance whether particular artists were supporters or victims of oppressive political systems, including their moral integrity. But historical research is not interested in supporting moral judgments. It can only describe and interpret, depending on available sources.

Oliver Rathkolb has intensively researched artists during the Third Reich, and raises this important issue, thus showing the opportunities, but also the limits of historical research. He investigated artists’ political positions during National Socialism (1991), Orff in particular (2022). He states that for a contemporary historian such as himself, it is much more about political responsibility than about moral judgment (Rathkolb, 1991):

The political responsibility of artists during the Third Reich does not imply criminal or moral allegations. Rather, it concerns the observation that also artists are members of a society and have to live with conflicts of interest and dependencies ... It is not appropriate to retrospectively demand that all democratically minded artists emigrate or become resistance fighters against the National Socialist system. (p. 9)

This puts a different light on the ambitions to see admired artists as heroes, sacrificing themselves for the greater good or leaving the country. It might indeed not be so much about moral judgment than about trying to understand, based on what historical research has to offer. There could, however, be some criteria as points of reference to evaluate if someone collaborated with inhumane political systems or not. This could be an ideological closeness to the National Socialist system, adopting aspects of National Socialist ideology in artistic activities, in private and public life (Rathkolb, 2022). These criteria could be applied to specific people such as Orff in their respective political situations.

The composer Orff during the Third Reich

The twelve years of the Third Reich in Germany were a time for Orff to establish himself as a composer and educator. While one could assume that being successful might automatically imply submitting to National Socialist ideology, this would underestimate the complexity of the situation. For Orff, this was a rather vulnerable time when he had to fight for personal and professional survival. While in the first years he was caught up in problems such as being a single father and a freelance composer searching for his personal style,² he later gained some popularity and financial security through the growing success of his compositions, particularly after the premiere of *Carmina Burana* in 1937. But it also put pressure on him to more openly take a political stance.

Studying early music and Bavarian folk music helped Orff to find his personal style, particularly regarding musical authenticity, simplicity, and expressiveness (Rösch, 2021). Thus, at the beginning of the 1930s, he received more composition commissions, although they were not all politically neutral. He was often forced to make politically sensitive decisions. Although he did not, for instance, accept a commission by the German aviation sport society in 1934 to compose a work based on traditional German military music, in 1935 he arranged, with the ensemble of the *Günther Schule* and Gunild Keetman (1904–1990), the music for the radio drama *Der Staat der Sonne* (The Nation of the Sun). This drama featured National Socialist ideas (Rösch, 2021). The polarity of these two decisions exemplifies the challenging situation in which many artists found themselves during this time and the problem of acting consistently.

In summer 1936, the *Günther Schule* participated musically in the Olympic Games in Berlin. Orff supposedly composed music which was part of the *Olympische Reigen* (Olympic dance), *Einzug und Reigen der Kinder* (entry and dance of the children), and *Reigen der Mädchen* (dance of the girls) (Rathkolb, 2022, p. 51). The performances were a huge success, contributing significantly to the growing popularity of the *Schulwerk* and Orff as a composer—although not Orff, but Gunild Keetman (1904–1990) seems to have composed this music (Ronnefeld, 2004).³ Günther (1896–1975) wrote about the performances at the Olympic Games (quoted in Rathkolb, 2022):

A large *Schulwerk*-Orchestra, directed by Gunild Keetman, was hired by professor Carl Diem for the Olympic Festival during the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936. It accompanied the dances for 3,000 children and 1,500 girls I created for this occasion, the so-called *Olympische Reigen* (Olympic dances). It was a triumph and international

2 Orff's only daughter Godela was born in 1921. But his first wife, the singer Alice Solcher (1891–1970), left six months after the child was born, in pursuit of her career (Rösch, 2021).

3 Even though Keetman (not Orff) created this music, Orff did not bring up this point in the denazification interrogations, where this fact would have significantly relieved him from the claim of supporting the National Socialists (Rathkolb, 2022).

success! Every evening when it was performed, it took the wind out of the sails of the enemies of the *Schulwerk*. The frequently repeated accusation that the music and dance of the *Günther Schule* were not truly German was withdrawn and the dance group was considered to be worthy of sponsorship. (p. 54)

This statement underlines the *Günther Schule's* success at the Olympic Games. But it also shows that its approach was not uncontested. However, being featured at such an event that generally promoted National Socialist ideology silenced much of the criticism, at least for some time; but likewise, might bring the key figures closer to National Socialist ideology than they might wish.

Even though Orff's work had become more well-known by then, his breakthrough as a composer didn't come until he was 42, with *Carmina Burana* in 1937. This work was not commissioned by the National Socialists (Rathkolb, 2022), as has sometimes been stated. On the contrary, due to the Latin lyrics and some possible "jazz-atmosphere" sounds, *Carmina Burana* was aesthetically contested (Rösch, 2021, p. 20). But it nonetheless helped establish Orff as a successful composer. After the premiere, Orff received various commissions for new compositions supporting the National Socialist ideology (Rösch, 2021). Again, he did not act consistently. He did not accept the request to compose a *Festmusik für die Feiertage des Deutschen Volkes* (Festival music for the holidays of the German people), featuring parts of the German national anthem and the *Horst Wessel-Lied*,⁴ but he did compose the work *Aufruf zu einer nationalen Feier* (Call for a National Celebration) for the *Deutsche Turn- und Sportfest* (German sports festival) in Breslau in 1938. This composition featured in some parts the *Deutschlandlied* (German national anthem) and at its premiere, it functioned as background music for a short speech by Hitler, given during a fermata (Rathkolb, 2022). The inconsistency of these decisions might again exemplify the difficult situation of artists during the Third Reich—although it cannot be an excuse in all situations. However, Orff also continued to compose works unrelated to National Socialist ideology, such as the opera *Der Mond* in 1939, presenting Bavarian folk music and Jazz elements,⁵ along with some references to Wagner, Puccini, and his own work (Rösch, 2021).

After Hitler's invasion of Poland in 1939, Orff's music to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was premiered. This piece was a commission by the National Socialists with the intention of replacing Jewish composer Felix Mendelsohn-Bartholdy's (1809–1847) famous music. Orff knew this intention from the beginning. While he later claimed artistic reasons for his work, with this composition he supported National Socialist propaganda, whether that was his intention or not. Most likely, he was politically naïve and under financial pressure; it was a time when bailiffs frequently visited the Orffs, due to unpaid bills

4 The *Horst-Wessel-Lied* is a political song which has been used since the 1920s as an anthem of the National Socialist party.

5 For more information on National Socialism and Jazz see Kater (2003).

(Rösch, 2009). However, Orff's life as a composer mainly continued with seemingly unpolitical works such as the third version of *Orpheus* in 1940, his opera *Die Kluge* (1943), or *Carmina Catulli* (1943). Although he seemed to have found some kind of arrangement with the political situation in Germany, his music was never uncontested. While the National Socialists appreciated some of his works, there were always doubts about his style and musical influences. His music did not present the German values and sounds those in power would have liked to hear (Rösch, 2021).

However, when in 1944 the *Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda* (Ministry of Propaganda), initiated by Joseph Goebbels, created a list of artists who should not be forced into military service—the *Gottbegnadeten-Liste* (God-given list)—Orff was on this list, among many other musicians, actors, directors, dancers, and painters (Rösch, 2021). Even though his age of 49 might have protected him anyway, being on this list showed an appreciation of his work by those in power. Another event underlines this as well. In November 1944, the Vice President of the *Reichskulturkammer* (Reich Chamber of Culture), Hans Hinkel, wrote to German artists, including Orff, asking for an acknowledgement of their support of the *Führer* Adolf Hitler. Orff did not decline this request. Rather, he chose a stanza of the well-known poem *Das Schicksal* (Fate) (1793) by the German author Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843) and dedicated it to “Dem Schirmherrn Deutscher Kunst” (the patron of German art) (Rösch, 2021, p. 33).⁶ While this might seem like publicly surrendering to National Socialist ideology, the situation is much more complex. Declining this request would have had serious consequences. Orff tried to word his support carefully by referring to a poem by a well-known German writer, and thus was not obliged to write a statement himself.

Eventually, due to various reasons (Rathkolb, 2022), the denazification process after 1945 put Orff in the category “Grey acceptable” (Kohler, 2015). This means that he did not play a significant role during the Third Reich and was not an active National Socialist, in contrast to black, signifying a Nazi supporter; or white, standing for people in opposition to the regime.⁷ Thus, he was allowed to continue working as an artist and educator; and was able to further develop the *Schulwerk* with Keetman.

The *Schulwerk* and National Socialism

The *Schulwerk* was originally created in a culturally vibrant atmosphere in Germany. Since 1900, a criticism of European culture inspired new perspectives in various areas. Innovative concepts

6 The last verse is “*Was groß und göttlich ist, wird bestehen*” (What is significant and divine will remain). Orff added the words “*An der Schwelle des/Jahres der Entscheidung, /Dezember 1944*” (At the threshold of the year of decision, December 1944) (Rathkolb, 2022, p. 125).

7 There was also the category *Grey unacceptable* for someone being closer to National Socialist ideology. For more information on denazification and classical music see: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/15/arts/music/classical-music-nazi-world-war-ii.html>

such as *Reformpädagogik* (progressive education) or movements such as the *Jugendbewegung* or the *Wandervogel* proposed different ways of life and learning. It was about renewing the society through the visionary energy of the youth, the holistic power of the arts, and a natural way of life (Gruhn, 2003; Kertz-Welzel, 2004). Likewise, the rhythmic and dance movement as well as modern or character dance proposed new approaches, e.g. Mary Wigman (1896–1973) or Harald Kreutzberg (1902–1968).

Particularly inspired by the *Wandervogel* for which singing was important to build a community, the *Jugendmusikbewegung* developed and elaborated such ideas. Music educator Fritz Joede (1887–1970), who was the leading figure in this movement, aimed at renewing German society and culture through a new meaning of music. He criticized the passive consumerism of the middle class and argued for everyone’s active music making. He called his musical ideal *Musikant*, a non-professional who loves and regularly makes music, alone or with others, e.g. as *Hausmusik*. Thus, Joede published easily accessible music, including instructions for movements and dance for children’s songs.⁸ The *Jugendmusikbewegung* was an important predecessor of the *Musische Erziehung*, the main music education approach during the Third Reich. It was based on the ancient Greek notion of *Musiké* as a unity of the arts, reuniting music, dance, and language.

Inspired by various ideas, in 1924, Orff and Dorothee Günther⁹ founded a training institution in Munich for gymnastics, rhythmic, music, and dance: the *Günther Schule*. Orff’s concept of *elementare Musik*—simple, expressive music connected with movement and language—was the conceptual foundation of this school for young women. For Orff, the *Günther Schule* was a laboratory where he could try out his ideas, also regarding non-European music and the replica of non-European instruments¹⁰ which later became the Orff instruments.¹¹ The dance ensemble of the *Günther Schule*, presenting this new approach to music and dance, including the use of non-European instruments, started performing in Germany in 1926.

Since 1931 Orff began introducing the *Schulwerk*, which was the educational approach resulting from the experiments at the *Günther Schule*, outside of Munich and abroad (e.g. in Palestine, Switzerland). By giving courses, he hoped to get more people interested in this new approach which used music, movement and language as well as improvisation as ways for nurturing young people’s creativity—but also to develop further his and Keetman’s ideas (Rösch, 2021). The first series of the *Orff-Schulwerk – Elementare Musikübung*, created with

8 Some instruments such as recorder or lute became particularly important in the *Jugendmusikbewegung*.

9 She was a gymnastics and dance teacher, an author, and graphic artist.

10 He originally came into contact with them through the director of the *State Collection of Musical Instruments* in Berlin, Curt Sachs (1881–1959).

11 First, Orff created these instruments with the help of harpsichord builder Karl Maendler (1872–1958), who was supported since 1949 by Klaus Becker-Ehmck (1927–1976), the founder of *Studio 49*. They tried to build replica of non-European instruments in well-tempered tuning and which were easy to use for children.

Gunild Keetman¹² and Hans Bergese (1910–2000), was published from 1932 to 1935. In 1932, Leo Kestenberg (1882–1962), powerful musical adviser in the Prussian Ministry of Culture, wanted to introduce the *Schulwerk* in schools in Berlin.¹³ After Kestenberg, who was Jewish, was forced to retire in 1932, the Ministry financially supported Orff to offer *Schulwerk* projects in Berlin until 1933. But Kestenberg’s idea to generally introduce the *Schulwerk* in Berlin schools was never implemented, to Orff’s regret.

Nevertheless, Orff and his colleagues continued to intensely promote the *Schulwerk*, even though the political situation became more difficult after Hitler’s seizure of power in 1933. Orff tried to make the *Schulwerk* attractive for the National Socialists: not because he agreed with their ideology, but for promotional purposes. Orff referred to this idea in an ironic manner when he wrote in April 1933 to his editor at Schott Publishers, Franz Willms: “The *Schulwerk* has matured immensely. It is now rather fair-haired and has a parting in its hair” (quoted in Rathkolb, 2022, p. 26). This statement seems, even if it was possibly meant to be “ironic”, misjudging the political situation completely (Rathkolb, 2022, p. 27). Orff thought the *Schulwerk* to be easily adaptable and to work in different contexts, so that for instance framing it with new introductions by people close to National Socialism such as music educator Fritz Reusch would support its success—and possibly make it more German or “fair-haired.” Thus, Reusch wrote in 1933 an introduction to the first issue of the *Schulwerk*, invoking “völkisch” and other ideas to indicate a connection with National Socialism (Rathkolb, 2022, p. 29).¹⁴

Orff also offered courses of the *Schulwerk* to National Socialist youth organizations such as the *Hitler Jugend* and the *Bund Deutscher Mädel*, for instance in Nuremberg in 1934. The *Schulwerk*, however, did not provide the kind of military marching music which these organizations needed (Rathkolb, 2022). Furthermore, there were pieces which sounded more “exotic” than Germanic-Aryan, e.g. due to musical models such as the Bordun or non-European instruments. Orff tried to replace those pieces with “approved pieces in major keys” to present more familiar sounds (Rathkolb, 2022, p. 45). His publisher Schott likewise tried to identify music which could be used by the *Hitler Jugend*, to have a selection for them rather than the entire *Schulwerk* series.¹⁵ Additionally, Orff wanted a new introduction to the *Schulwerk* by Ludwig Strecker of Schott Publishers, proving for instance that percussion instruments were part of Germany’s musical heritage and referring to old

12 She was a student at the *Günther Schule* from 1926, and later became Orff’s assistant.

13 Kestenberg was a highly influential music educator who changed the course of German music education, although his ideas for significant changes could not be implemented due to the beginning of the Third Reich in Germany. For more information see Gruhn (2015).

14 In contrast, in 1935 Orff also wrote an introduction which avoided such references and was only focused on music and music education (Rathkolb, 2022).

15 Orff suggested Wilhelm Twittendorf (1904–1969), a musicologist and music educator close to National Socialism, as possible author of an introduction to this selection of pieces (Rathkolb, 2022).

German songs and dances showing that the musical style of the *Schulwerk* had been part of German musical traditions for centuries (Rathkolb, 2022).

While all of this could be seen as an attempt to “Germanize” the *Schulwerk*, Orff did this mainly for promotional purposes since there was constant criticism of the *Schulwerk*. In September 1933, for instance, the journal *Deutsche Kulturwacht* published a critique because of Orff’s arrangements of early music and because of his “*artfremdes*” (foreign to the German race) *Schulwerk* (quoted in Rösch, 2021, p. 16). Orff replied by explaining the *Schulwerk* would not be against German *Hausmusik*, but rather support it. Both *Hausmusik* and the *Schulwerk* consist of children’s songs, folk songs, and folk dances, fostering “*Primitivformen*” (simple musical forms) which have been one foundation of classical music (Rösch, 2021, p. 17). In 1937, *Die Musik*, the most important publication for music during the Third Reich, published another critique. Even though Orff’s educational work had been praised two years earlier (Rathkolb, 2022), it was now criticized because of its *Bausteine* (modules) and components “alien to the German culture, non-European and part of primitive cultures,” the “primitivizing of all music by Marxist feelings of inferiority” and “primitivity of stone-age exotics” (Sonner, 1937, p. 762).

Thus, during the Third Reich, Orff had to constantly defend the *Schulwerk* and its very foundation of the *Elementare*, the connection between music, movement, and language, simple musical forms, and the adaptation of non-European instruments which made music easily accessible for everyone. This continued struggle is surprising in view of the fact that the *Schulwerk* corresponded in many regards with the main music education approach during the Third Reich, the *Musische Erziehung*. Similar to Orff’s ideas, this concept was based on the ancient Greek notion of *Musiké* as a unity of music, dance, and language/literature. It promoted a holistic education, rebalancing mind and body, emotions and intellect. The *Musische Erziehung* aimed at a transformation of society through the power of music. It was about a new human being and a new German nation, a national community under strong leadership (Gruhn, 2003; Kertz-Welzel, 2004). To be reconciled, to be freed from “aberrations” of civilization and an overemphasis on the intellect, participatory music making through easily accessible music was important—whether singing nationalist songs in schools, making music at home, or playing in ensembles of the National Socialist youth organizations. In 1933 Ernst Krieck (1882–1947), one of the leading educational researchers during the Third Reich, published the programmatic book *Musische Erziehung*, presenting the philosophy of this approach. He described its intentions in this way: “To redeem the soul from the realm of intellectual notions, purposes, and compulsion and to open the door to a realm of freedom. Without that, really humane and intensive life is not possible” (quoted in Abel-Struth, 1985, p. 34). Many music educators in Germany supported Hitler, believing in music’s transformative power to create a new nation and world, including redeemed human beings. The National Socialist ideology matched their own intentions of music education for social change perfectly.

There are certainly similarities between the *Musische Erziehung* and the *Schulwerk*, most likely due to the time in which both were developed and the origin in the ancient Greek *Musiké*. But Orff and Keetman were not so much interested in broad societal changes as in music and young people. They created an approach which would help children to develop their creativity and musicality. While this certainly has an impact on the society, this was not Orff's and Keetman's foremost goal – and the *Schulwerk* is not explicitly connected to any kind of ideology and it is not racist. Furthermore, as indicated in the National Socialist criticism of the *Schulwerk*, non-European musical models and instruments made it difficult to be accepted as a truly German approach. Certainly, the *Schulwerk* is flexible and can be adapted in various contexts. While this flexibility of the *Schulwerk* has certainly been one reason for its international success, regarding the National Socialists, this did not work. After all, the *Schulwerk* was never officially supported or promoted by the National Socialists, but had also not been banned, as Orff briefly mentioned (Rösch, 2021). Its distribution during the Third Reich was rather limited and it did not play an important role in German music education at this time.

After the success of *Carmina Burana*, Orff retreated from the *Günther Schule* in 1938 and focused more on his compositions. But he certainly did not completely refrain from continuing his work on the *Schulwerk*, particularly after the end of National Socialism in Germany.

Conclusion

Even though Orff established himself professionally during the Third Reich, this does not mean that his music or the *Schulwerk* were completely accepted by the National Socialists, never mind used as propaganda. Rather, his work has been aesthetically and ideologically contested, and he was often forced to defend it against criticism. His compositions played only a minor role in public life (Klein, 1984) and the *Schulwerk* was just one music education approach among others. Certainly, Orff found some kind of arrangement with those in power. Thus, he was sometimes careful, sometimes misjudging situations, acting naively and unreflecting in his relation to National Socialism (Rösch, 2021; Rathkolb, 2022). It might, however, be that “Orff's attempts at political willingness—not attempts at political compliance—regarding certain Nazi people with power were, compared with other artists' attempts of ingratiation, rather reserved” (Rathkolb, 2022, p. 159). Compared to other artists such as the conductor Herbert von Karajan (1908–1989) or actor and director Gustav Gründgens (1899–1963), Orff was indeed relatively reluctant regarding the National Socialists. Orff's focus was mainly on surviving and on pursuing his career. But he indeed misjudged situations, for instance concerning *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Orff was neither a supporter of the National Socialists nor a resistance fighter, even though he was friends

with Huber and an acquaintance of other members of the *Weisse Rose* resistance group.¹⁶ The American military psychologist Bertram Schaffner, who examined Orff in 1946 as part of the denazification process, identified him as a “passive anti-Nazi” (Rathkolb, 2022, p. 159): on one hand, Orff tried to distance himself from the National Socialists, while on the other hand, he needed their support for his professional success. Likewise, the *Schulwerk* was not banned during the Third Reich,¹⁷ but was also not particularly useful for or promoted by the National Socialists (Rathkolb, 2022). Orff never publicly supported National Socialist ideology through racist or antisemitic statements or actions in his professional or private life. He was never a member of the National Socialist party: but it is important to mention that this would also not have been possible, since Orff had a Jewish grandmother and for party membership he would have needed a *Großer Abstammungsnachweis* (major proof of decent) going back to 1800 (Rathkolb, 2022). His membership in the *Reichsmusikkammer* (Reich Chamber of Music) was mandatory for every musician during the Third Reich in order to be allowed to work.

Do Orff’s actions during the Third Reich have an impact on how we perceive the *Schulwerk*? This might be much more a philosophical than a moral question regarding whether we can separate the author from his work, as has been discussed extensively concerning Richard Wagner (1813–1883) (Kurbjuweit, 2013). In spite of the ambiguity of Orff’s actions during the Third Reich, the *Schulwerk* is certainly no work of National Socialist ideology; and Günther’s and Keetman’s support of the National Socialists does likewise not diminish its value for music education (Ronnefeld, 2002).¹⁸ There are many reasons for people’s actions in oppressive political systems, and, as already mentioned, one cannot expect everyone to be a hero or leave the country. Aside from their works, many artists were just like many other people, frightened by possible consequences of resistance against a powerful oppressive system—and often just tried to survive and to pursue their artistic missions.

Orff’s daughter Godela (1995) wrote about the political position of her father during the Third Reich:

My father was no hero. He always chose the conflict-free way, also in this dark time; he was – like many others – just frightened. He had no talent for martyrdom. I cannot see this as guilt. However, people criticized him later because of this cautious indifference. (p. 51)

¹⁶ There has been an intense discussion of Kater’s (2000) claim that Orff was a member of the *Weisse Rose* resistance group. Orff himself would presumably have mentioned this in the denazification process. But there is no historical evidence for this claim, although Orff and Huber were friends (Rathkolb, 2022).

¹⁷ In a letter to Friedberg in 1963, Orff claimed that it had been banned, but this is not correct (Rathkolb, 2022).

¹⁸ Ronnefeld (2002) states that Keetman applied for party membership, but never picked up her party membership card, that Günther paid the membership fees, and that the membership was eventually withdrawn in 1937.

This statement calls for being careful with moral judgments, an approach likewise taken by historians such as Rathkolb (2022). Often, it not possible to have sufficient information about the time, the circumstances of life, and the individual psychological dispositions of artists. Yes, there are criteria which can help to evaluate how people acted under oppressive political regimes, as mentioned above. But historical research can never completely capture a personal or political situation.

The Third Reich and the actions of people living during this time certainly offer some aspects one can learn from, although the general political situation was different to the current politically contested circumstances. But in view of a growing political climate of hate and autocratic world views today, the political situation before and during the Third Reich underlines that it is important to defend democracies so that such oppressive systems never emerge or stay in power. This particularly concerns people living in different political situations today which demand answers from everyone engaged for democratic values, equal rights, or environmental issues. It might not be so much about looking to the past for moral judgments—maybe, people of the future will look at the situation today in a similar way as people today look at Orff and his time. There are many political issues which people need to address in today's contested world. If people do not get engaged as citizens of democratic societies, democracies might soon not be there anymore. Unfortunately, Orff is not an ideal example for this kind of battle. But there have been other motivating figures in world history or national histories who showed how to fight for important values. We should try to address the political and educational challenges of our time—after having learned from the past.

Author biography

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