



# ENGAGING WITH ÉMIGRÉ MUSIC IN BRITAIN

von NORBERT MEYN

Why we should take a fresh look at the music  
of the Émigrés from Nazi-ruled Europe

Since 2012, I have been exploring the musical legacy of migrant musicians from Nazi-ruled Europe in Britain through the project ‘Singing a Song in a Foreign Land’<sup>1</sup> at the Royal College of Music and with the London-based Ensemble Émigré. Today we are engulfed in multiple debates about the cultural and economic impact of migration, and it is timely to take a fresh look at past migrations in this context. Music, this universal and mobile art form that can easily cross language barriers, can offer something special here.

Jutta Raab Hansen estimates that there were approximately 400 professional musicians among the circa 46,000 refugees who arrived in Britain from Germany and Austria between 1933 and 1939.<sup>2</sup> Many of them were Jewish and had escaped the Holocaust, while others had been politically active against the Nazis. Their contribution as performers, teachers, conductors, broadcasters or publishers during and especially after WW2 was hugely important. Germany and Austria’s loss became Britain’s gain.<sup>3</sup> While many of them were able to build successful careers, their compositions struggled to gain recognition. It may have been a disadvantage then that as migrant composers they did not have a clear national identity that fitted into traditional narratives of ‘national’ schools of music. Nowadays, when transnational identities are so much more common and migration, both voluntary and forced, has become a much larger phenomenon, their musical legacies are turning out to be a treasure trove that can help us with the challenges we face today.

Among them were: Karl Rankl (1898–1968), a pupil of Schönberg, who wrote over 50 English songs, 7 symphonies as well as string quartets and other chamber music during his time in Britain. His opera ‘Deirdre of the Sorrows’ won an Arts Council prize in a competition at the Festival of Britain in 1951, but it was never performed, even though he was at the time the music director of the Royal Opera.<sup>4</sup> Egon Wellesz (1885–1974), another Schönberg pupil, wrote nine symphonies and as many string quartets during his years living and teaching in Oxford. Hans Gál (1890–1987), who wrote more than half of his entire oeuvre in Britain, continued to publish works with major publishers, although he was mostly known for his monographs of composers, including Schubert, Brahms, Wagner and Verdi. Mátyás Seiber (1905–1960), a pupil of Kodály, wrote songs for Peter Pears and Benjamin Britten and, among many others, the score for the famous animation film of Orwell’s *Animal Farm*. Leopold Spinner (1906–1980), a pupil of Webern who came to Britain in 1933, was hugely influential as an

editor at Boosey & Hawkes but continued composing throughout his life. For the virtuoso pianist Franz Reizenstein (1911–1968), the influence of English music (he studied with Paul Hindemith in Berlin and later with Vaughan Williams in London) was as formative as his earlier musical training in Germany.

Much of the music by these remarkable composers remains to be explored and evaluated widely. Much of it, coming out of the second Viennese school tradition, did not fit into the dominant narrative of post war culture. In order to integrate it in our cultural heritage we need to better understand the context in which it was created.

First of all there are works that were written before the Nazis came to power. This would include, for example, the operas, ballets and many other works Hans Gál, Egon Wellesz, the early works of Berthold Goldschmidt (1903–1996) or almost the entire oeuvre of Robert Kahn (1865–1951), who settled in Britain at the age of 73. In most cases this music never recovered from the onslaught of Nazi propaganda, the removal of printed copies of their works from libraries and the ban on public performances.<sup>5</sup> This important legacy of major early-mid-twentieth century music needs to be recovered. It can be a revelation to audiences if this music is heard alongside other music from the period that is better known.

Secondly, there are those works that are directly connected with the experience of persecution, the holocaust and the war. For example, Robert Kahn responded to his experiences with a kind of ‘inward emigration’ even before leaving Germany, and kept his ‘Tagebuch in Tönen’, a unique musical diary consisting of a staggering 1160 piano pieces composed throughout the war. Hans Gál’s *Huyton Suite*, his revue *What a Life!* and Peter Gellhorn’s *Mooragh* for male chorus and string orchestra without double bass, all written during British internment; and Karl Rankl’s song cycle, *War*, written in Oxford in 1942, are clearly defined by their context.<sup>6</sup> Performing this music will have an element of remembrance and evoke the cruelty, loss and hardship, but also the creativity linked with migration, experienced by so many today.

It is the third category, music written by the émigrés once they had settled in their new home country that presents perhaps the greatest challenges but fascinates me enormously. This music requires us to question and leave behind the habit of associating music with simple narratives of nationality. It is not fully German or Austrian, but neither has it ever been fully accepted as ‘British music’. It is perhaps, if anything, European. Recent research has introduced the concept of ‘multiple transnational belonging’ (*transkulturelle Mehrfachzugehörigkeit*), acknowledging that humans can of course feel connected to more than one culture, and move freely between them.<sup>7</sup> Music written by migrants can provide a window into this transnational space. However, only once we expand our narratives in musical practice and scholarship and celebrate composers with transnational identity rather than see them as ‘fallen between the chairs’ can we truly accept their works.

There is a significance in the work of many migrant composers that goes beyond their place in the ‘rankings’ of twentieth-century music. When migrants are integrated, a transfer of skills, traditions, insight and outlook occurs in both directions. Performing and re-evaluating the compositions of migrants can bring us face to face with this transnational space. Culture, and especially music, has been relying on transnational exchange for new impulses and dynamic innovation almost since it began. Our often irrational fear of losing our identity and security in the face of change can make us blind towards the value and the opportunity represented by the interaction with what is perceived to be foreign. Migrants are pioneers in defining a space where cultural values, traditions and visions can be negotiated and shared, and the example of the generation of émigré musicians who arrived in Britain in the 1930s and the transformative effect they had on ‘national’ music culture provides us with ample evidence of the importance of it. By celebrating their work and listening to their music, we can enter this space they helped to create, and explore its potential for building a more inclusive, curious and ultimately global cultural environment.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.rcm.ac.uk/singingasong](http://www.rcm.ac.uk/singingasong)

<sup>2</sup> Raab Hansen, Jutta, *NS-verfolgte Musiker in England*, von Bockel Verlag, Hamburg 1996, p. 19

<sup>3</sup> Snowman, Daniel, *The Hitler Emigrés: The Cultural Impact on Britain of Refugees from Nazism*, London: Pimlico, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> See Nicole Ristow, *Karl Rankl*, Neumünster:

von Bockel, 2017, p. 201

<sup>5</sup> See Eric Levi, (editor and author) *The impact of Nazism on Music* Böhlau Verlag Vienna, 2014 or Haas, *Forbidden Music, The Jewish Composers Banned by the Nazis*, Yale University Press, 2013

<sup>6</sup> The recent revival of the music of Hans Gál is a good example here, see [www.hansgal.com](http://www.hansgal.com)

<sup>7</sup> ‘Mooragh’ by Peter Gellhorn (1912–2004). Free-to-download sheet music: <http://researchonline.rcm.ac.uk/69/>.

<sup>8</sup> Melanie Unseld, ‘Wohin mit der Musik? Das Konzept der Transkulturellen Mehrfachzugehörigkeit in der Musikwissenschaft’, paper presented at the conference ‘Music and Migration’ in Salzburg, October 2016 (see [www.musik-und-migration.at](http://www.musik-und-migration.at)).