

Rules for Nazi Music

Taken from the Preface to *The Bass Saxophone* by Josef Skvorecky

Josef Skvorecky

1986

Josef Skvorecky is a renowned Czech author who currently lives and teaches in Toronto. He emigrated from Czechoslovakia in 1968. As a young man, living under the Nazi administration, he took part in underground jazz groups. Judging from his stories, the band was obliged to play polkas and other “acceptable” music. When the coast was clear, they could indulge in their real love, jazz.

In the Preface to his novella, *The Bass Saxophone*, he recalls the official Nazi objections to the music his group was devoted to.

Despite Hitler and Goebbels the sweet poison of the judeo-negroid music (that was the Nazi epithet for jazz) not only endured, it prevailed—even for a short time, in the very heart of hell, the ghetto at Terezin...

There was even a swing band in the notorious Buchenwald made up for the most part of Czech and French prisoners... In a concentration camp near Wiener Neustadt sat Vicherek, a guitar player who had sung Louis Armstrong’s scat chorus in “Tiger Rag” and thus, according to the Nazi judge, “defiled musical culture.”

Elsewhere in Germany several swing-men met a similar fate and one local Gauleiter issued an extraordinary (really extraordinary? in this world of ours?) set of regulations which were binding for all dance orchestras. I read them, gnashing my teeth, in Czech translation in the film weekly *Filmovy kuryr*, and fifteen years later I paraphrased them [...]

1. Pieces in foxtrot rhythm (so-called swing) are not to exceed 20 percent of the repertoires of light orchestras and dance bands;
2. in this so-called jazz type repertoire, preference is to be given to compositions in a major key and to lyrics expressing joy in life rather than Jewishly gloomy lyrics;
3. as to tempo, preference is also to be given to brisk compositions over slow ones (so-called blues); however, the pace must not exceed a certain degree of allegro, commensurate with the Aryan sense of discipline and moderation. On no account will Negroid excesses in tempo (so-called hot jazz) or in solo performances (so-called breaks) be tolerated;
4. so-called jazz compositions may contain at most 10 percent syncopation; the remainder must consist of a natural legato movement devoid of the hysterical rhythmic reverses characteristic of the music of the barbarian races and conducive to dark instincts alien to the German people (so-called riffs);
5. strictly prohibited is the use of instruments alien to the German spirit (so-called cowbells, flexatone, brushes, etc.) as well as all mutes which turn the noble sound of wind and brass instruments into a Jewish-Masonic yowl (so-called wawa, Hat, etc.);

6. also prohibited are so-called drum breaks longer than half a bar in four-quarter beat (except in stylized military marches);
7. the double bass must be played solely with the bow in so-called jazz compositions;
8. plucking of the strings is prohibited, since it is damaging to the instrument and detrimental to Aryan musicality; if a so-called pizzicato effect is absolutely desirable for the character of the composition, strict care must be taken lest the string be allowed to patter on the sordine, which is henceforth forbidden;
9. musicians are likewise forbidden to make vocal improvisations (so-called scat);
10. all light orchestras and dance bands are advised to restrict the use of saxophones of all keys and to substitute for them the violoncello, the viola or possibly a suitable folk instrument.

When this unseemly Decalogue appeared in that story of mine ("I Won't Take Back One Word," published finally in 1966 as *Eine kleine Jazzmusic*) in Czechoslovakia's first jazz almanac (it was in 1958), the censors of an entirely different dictatorship confiscated the entire edition.

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