

AT THE CROSSROADS OF MUSIC AND NATIONALISM

Book Review:

Performing Propaganda: Musical Life and Culture in Paris During the First World War

By Rachel Moore

Alexandra Doyle

In *Performing Propaganda*, Rachel Moore argues that the First World War was a turning point for music and its use as propaganda, not only in France but throughout the world. Situated between the Franco-Prussian War and the modern era, music professionals in the early 20th century stood between Wagner and the Second Viennese School – both facets of the Austro-German music tradition. For the French, this resulted in the following questions: “What music is acceptable for us? Which cultural artifacts should we embrace, and which should we shun?” The war brought other considerations, including how citizens should make music during a time of national mourning and what aspects of music production and performance to nationalize in the interest of spreading French culture to neutral and allied nations.

To explore the cacophony of answers to these questions, Moore devotes chapters to France’s musical institutions during the war and to musical propaganda in general. She then dives into lengthy examinations of a few selected institutions. Over the course of her book, Moore does an excellent job balancing readability with the richness of information that one would expect from a research volume. Casual readers might find the later chapters dense, but scholars exploring these narrow topics will find her book to be a trove of valuable information. Potential readers should know that Moore intentionally avoids discussing French avant-garde music from this time, as its relative lack of popularity made it a poor propaganda device.

The first section of *Performing Propaganda* addresses France’s musical institutions at-large during the war. At the war’s outset, musical institutions ceased operation, partially out of a sense of decency. However, when the war became a chronic rather than acute condition, many Parisians sought a return to as much normalcy as possible. Soon, artistic performances came to be viewed as a patriotic activity because of the importance of maintaining citizen morale on the home front.¹ Concerts often returned to the “miscellaneous” format popular in the 19th century, wherein a series of works or excerpts from a variety of genres were presented on the same program. These also often included readings of poetry or plays. Moore notes the necessity of wartime concerts appealing to many tastes within the same program because of the dramatic decrease in frequency of concerts.²

¹ Rachel Moore, *Performing Propaganda: Musical Life and Culture in Paris during the First World War* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2018), 20.

² Moore, *Performing Propaganda*, 40-43.

The next chapter of Moore's book deals with wartime propaganda, both musical and otherwise. Most musical propaganda served to depict French culture in a positive light, whereas a great deal of written propaganda was negative and anti-German.³ The author delves into these distinctions and gives examples of positive French musical propaganda, such as international concerts in neutral countries, especially those that combined French and local performers.⁴ Moore also spotlights the differences between private propaganda and government-sponsored propaganda throughout her book, highlighting the change that occurred in 1916 as the French government took a more active role by creating an office for artistic propaganda.⁵

Moore's next topic is Saint-Saëns's *Germanophilie*, a series of five articles the composer published in the *Écho de Paris* beginning in 1914. In them, Saint-Saëns argues against the performance of German music within France, and specifically against works by Wagner. Most music publications stayed silent on the Wagner issue, instead dismissing Saint-Saëns as a product of an older generation who did not like to see change on the horizon.⁶ Moore concludes that Saint-Saëns's argument was ultimately ineffectual because he was viewed as part of an outdated musical culture that most of France had long since left behind, even though his propaganda methods themselves were *à la mode*.⁷

The following section is devoted to the *Matinées Nationales*, a government-sponsored series of Sunday afternoon concerts that took place throughout the war. Like other concerts during the time, they were often infused with poetry readings, excerpts from plays, and other non-musical works of art.⁸ Moore uses the *Matinées* as a case study in "quasi-official" propaganda and delves into the repertoire chosen for these concerts, including the initial lack of works by Austro-German composers. Although the *Matinées Nationales* persisted for three years, by the end of the conflict, many civilians had lost the patriotic fervor that drove the concerts' success, especially as they were faced with severe food shortages and other wartime desperations.⁹

Next, Moore discusses the Paris Opéra, which faced enormous difficulties at the outset of the war. Its personnel were greatly reduced, and high fuel costs and taxes made operation of the building itself nearly impossible. Additionally, the Opéra's biggest financial gains before the war came from staging Wagner's music dramas, which were politically uncouth during the war.¹⁰ After a brief hiatus, the Opéra reopened in December 1915 and turned to a kind of French historicism, which sought to demonstrate France's cultural viability and wealth by remembering its rich cultural past.¹¹ Some of this nostalgia took the place of reconstructing past concerts, such as one that took place at the court of Louis XIV.¹² Moore explores these concerts as examples of musical propaganda because of their glorification of French music history.

The final section of *Performing Propaganda* is devoted to music publishing during the war. As with other facets of life, music publishing became a nationalistic endeavor, and purchasing music

³ Moore, *Performing Propaganda*, 47.

⁴ Moore, *Performing Propaganda*, 59.

⁵ Moore, *Performing Propaganda*, 50-51.

⁶ Moore, *Performing Propaganda*, 89-91.

⁷ Moore, *Performing Propaganda*, 95.

⁸ Moore, *Performing Propaganda*, 97-99.

⁹ Moore, *Performing Propaganda*, 138.

¹⁰ Moore, *Performing Propaganda*, 139-41.

¹¹ Moore, *Performing Propaganda*, 154.

¹² Moore, *Performing Propaganda*, 154.

editions became an exercise in patriotism. German editions became taboo, instead replaced by “French national” editions.¹³ The war inspired French music publishers to begin to view their goods as exportable propaganda, especially to neutral and allied nations.¹⁴ Moore discusses the 1917 Congrès national du livre, a conference that included all types of French publishers. She posits that the discussions of music publishing at the conference show that music transitioned during the war from a luxury good to a commercial good and therefore an extension of written cultural propaganda.¹⁵

Although lengthy chapters of her book are devoted to specific case studies, Moore does an excellent job painting a cohesive picture of musical propaganda in France during the First World War that includes not just performance but also publishing and musical academia. The book will no doubt be a worthy purchase for enthusiasts of music, politics, and the intersection thereof.

About the Author

Alexandra Doyle is a doctoral candidate in clarinet performance at the College-Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati, where she has earned a cognate in musicology and is a participant in the Preparing Future Faculty program. She is the Adjunct Instructor of Clarinet at the Stivers School for the Arts in Dayton, Ohio, and regularly performs with orchestras in the Cincinnati area.

ALEXANDRA DOYLE

doyleas@mail.uc.edu | alexdoyleclarinet.com

¹³ Moore, *Performing Propaganda*, 173.

¹⁴ Moore, *Performing Propaganda*, 176.

¹⁵ Moore, *Performing Propaganda*, 210.