3: Positioning Georg Knepler in the Musicological Discourse of the GDR

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You know how tricky it is these days to portray the life of an old Communist without producing either apologies or a whitewash.
—Georg Knepler

This essay seeks to situate Knepler within the musicological discourse of the GDR primarily by assessing his relationship with the regime and the position he took in relevant controversies but also, though to a lesser degree, by reading what his vita as a scholar and author tells us about his attempts to place himself within this context. In terms of the former, I pay special attention to the year 1964, which seems to have been of particular importance for Knepler’s reorientation. In terms of the latter, I suggest that Knepler’s decision to abort his multivolume history of nineteenth-century music and focus instead on History as a Means of Understanding Music (Geschichte als Weg zum Musikverständnis, 1977; 2nd rev. ed. 1982), while in many ways a perfectly logical extension of concerns that had preoccupied him for many years if not decades, also signified a radical repositioning in terms of his modus operandi.

Knepler as Zhdanovite

In the abstract of her article on “Dahlhaus, Knepler, and Ideologies of Music History” (2003), as far as I can see the only sustained discussion of Georg Knepler (1906–2003, born in Vienna) in Anglophone literature, Anne Shreffler stated that Georg Knepler’s work is “comparable to Dahlhaus’s in importance” and that “his ideas anticipate many tenets of the ‘new musicology.’” On a similar note, in his short article on Knepler (also 2003) in Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart, Peter Gülke refers to Knepler as “the most important representative of a self-avowed Marxist musicology,” adding that “his personal impact and that of his works as well as the resistance he encountered tell us as much about the recent history of the discipline as they do about him.” No other musicologist had pursued interdisciplinary communication and cooperation as extensively as Knepler.
as Knepler and he was in fact "an—albeit unknown—founding father of the New Musicology."

Yet clearly such attempts to boost Knepler's status have hardly borne fruit and there can be little doubt that Knepler is cited more often than he is seriously engaged, and he is not all that often cited, at that. For a recent example one can look to the programmatic collection on historical musicology edited by Michele Calabella and Nikolaus Urbanek. In some 450 pages, Knepler is mentioned four times: twice without any further comment as an example for Marxist musicology, once as a mentor in the biography of one of the authors, and only on one occasion does an author, in one sentence, actually make a specific reference to his work. By contrast, the index in this volume lists twenty-seven entries for Dahlhaus, of which eleven refer to multipage discussions of his ideas.

Knepler is best known, then, as the paradigmatic Eastern counterpart to Dahlhaus. In the Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music (2003), for instance, we meet Knepler and Dahlhaus as "the respective grand old men of East and West German music historiography in the 1970s, who "represented almost diametrically opposed views of the past. For Knepler music was to be understood in terms of its social embeddedness and function, whereas for Dahlhaus it was to be understood in terms of its autonomy, its ability to transcend time and place (so that whereas for Knepler the basic category of music history was the musical event, for Dahlhaus it was the work)."

That matters are more complicated than this is a point well made by Anne Shreffler. Even so, Knepler's lifelong preoccupation with the "social embeddedness and function" of music is obviously not in doubt and forms a central continuity throughout his career. As he put it when explaining his reservations about Schenker: "One can identify large harmonic connections in compositions of a specific developmental phase in Europe with his method, . . . . Agreed, . . . . One is then looking at a sort of blueprint or floor plan that does indeed show . . . something one might otherwise easily overlook. . . . But one cannot live in a floor plan. The great Schenker renaissance . . . amounts to reducing music to its floor plan." Similarly, he reasoned in a talk on GDR chamber music in 1964,

If music was just a succession of sounds that are constructed according to certain laws but do not show anything then it would be incomprehensible why human beings enjoy hearing music so much. . . . It is patently obvious that . . . . the sounds are connected to something that stands outside the music. . . . We take music so seriously because . . . when music sounds something transpires that is precisely not just music but that mirrors something occurring in people's lives, in the relations between people and their relations with nature.
If music was a mode of communication, this obviously raised the question of “who communicates with whom when music is made and heard,” which, in turn, promptly leads, inter alia, to the challenge that high culture has consistently been (and, of course, in large part still is) predominantly an elite concern. How this challenge could be met and the canon made relevant to broader sections of society remained an issue close to Knepler’s heart throughout his career and, in the 1940s and 1950s, led him to subscribe to Zhdanovite aesthetics and the dogma of socialist realism. As Knepler explained in an interview with Thomas Grimm published in 1993,

Zhdanov’s basic idea was that one had to make great art accessible to the masses and that, following the abolition of the capitalist constraints, this was an urgent task.

I accepted this basic concept and in this form I still accept it today. . . . Only later did I grasp that the method he proposed for this purpose and brutally implemented was wrong. I mean the idea that one should let composers compose only in a manner that people would understand. For example, I made the case—one of my worst misunderstandings—that Dessau’s opera Das Verhör des Lukullus should not be performed. I consider this a huge mistake and have said so in front of colleagues more than once, also in writing.10

As we will see, this transformation process became central to Knepler’s self-understanding, yet in his accounts of this transformation he established an underlying continuity (“in this form I still accept it today”) between his principal concerns both before and after he distanced himself from the position he had taken, most notoriously, during the Lukullus affair.

Incidentally, as was so often the case, the regime, or at least its security apparatus, trusted Knepler no more when he was in fact entirely loyal than it did after he had begun to put some critical distance between himself and the regime. Knepler was, of course, more or less automatically suspicious for three reasons: he was of Jewish extraction, he had been in exile in the West,11 and he was a foreigner.

The documents in his Stasi file from the years 1953 and 1954 referred to him as being “entirely Jewish by descent” (Volljuden—a term one might have hoped was sufficiently discredited by the Nuremberg Laws to be considered beyond the pale) and claimed that he was a member of the Jewish community (a suggestion that anyone who knew Knepler would have found most surprising).12 In the reports on file, it is suggested that Knepler “prefers negative people” (i.e., people negatively disposed toward the regime) and “pro-Western” (westlich eingestellt) people, including old Nazis and a student suspected of being a Jehovah’s Witness. Not only had
he emigrated to England during the Nazi period, but he even had an English wife whom he presumably brought back with him, as one of the operatives speculated. He refused to accept criticism and, on one occasion, had tried to evade critical questions by accusing his critic of antisemitism, and this, the incredulous operative commented, despite the fact that the latter was in fact married to a Jewish woman. It was noted that Knepler used his good education and expert knowledge to pull the rug from under his critics' feet. On a slightly more amusing note, it was also recorded that on one occasion he had articulated the "extreme position" that Schubert was Austrian and that his music therefore did not form part of the German cultural heritage.\textsuperscript{13}

This flurry of Stasi activity tallies well with Knepler’s own recollection that he came perilously close to being sacked at this time. In 1998, Knepler wrote to Ernst Hermann Meyer’s widow, Marjorie Meyer, to inquire whether she might have a copy of a letter Meyer had written to the then minister of culture, Johannes R. Becher, “it must have been in 1953 or 1954,” in which he defended Knepler against a number of accusations. As Knepler explained, “there was a letter of dismissal on Becher’s desk, ready for signature,” but instead of signing it, Becher first consulted Meyer, who then persuaded him otherwise.\textsuperscript{14}

### Overcoming Zhdanov

Surveying the streamlining of official musical life in the early GDR, Toby Thacker has quite rightly pointed out that “no Soviet ideologue could have asked for greater commitment or more energetic engagement.” Indeed, “Meyer, Knepler, Rebling and Notowicz, throughout the 1950s went further than the Soviets demanded.” Moreover, on Thacker’s account,

> they also went further than their own convictions, pushed by their own idealism and dedication to the Party. They developed the SED’s musical politics in a climate of Soviet anti-Semitism, xenophobia and narrow-mindedness that was actually profoundly foreign to them. At a number of levels, they were pushed into dishonesty and insincerity, becoming in the process habituated to a way of thinking that George Orwell had presciently characterised as doublethink.\textsuperscript{15}

Is Thacker suggesting that there was an objective dissonance between what can be identified as, in our case, Knepler’s deeper-seated long-term convictions and his position at this particular time, or that Knepler was aware of this dissonance and was therefore conflicted at the time?

As we have already seen, Knepler emphatically stated time and again, in published and private communications alike, that he was acting out of
genuine conviction during his Zhdanovite period. Maren Köster quotes Knepler as saying that “the nonsense didn’t just come from above, we ourselves were the dogmatists.”

Knepler explained his point of view particularly forcefully in a letter he sent, prior to a book launch he would not be able to attend, to the press that published the documents of the Lukullus controversy in 1993, suggesting it could perhaps be read out at the book launch. “I took part in that fateful discussion about Dessau’s Lukullus,” he wrote,

and did so entirely along the line of the struggle against formalism. I did so not because the party wanted it that way—although it did—but because I thought it was right.

... How could sensible people ... take a position that is so wrong! While in exile in England, I performed contemporary music, I loved jazz. ... I generally supported new developments in sociology and the arts.—Somebody who, like me, came from purely bourgeois (petty bourgeois) ways of living and thinking and finally grasped the crimes and the danger and the hypocrisy of bourgeois capitalist society ... felt the need to scrutinize his entire repertoire of habits of thinking and living and judgements of value and taste. If one then came across the opportunity to contribute to the establishment of a new society for which no models existed ... and was confronted with the need to work out, together with others, principles, ideals, and decision-making bases ... [i]n this situation—conscious rejection of old ideas and the enthusiastic development of new programs—I was convinced that I knew what new music should be like, that I should prompt composers to compose in a manner that the masses, who were now liberated from social constraints and would develop entirely new cultural needs, would understand. To my mind, Dessau’s music was not suited to this purpose.

This account was virtually identical to the one Knepler offered in a letter to Günter Mayer of April 19, 1998, designed to be read out at a conference on Eisler that Knepler was unable to attend. Interestingly, on this occasion he prefaced his remarks with an example from domestic life, recalling an instance in 1932 in which, despite being a Communist and living in a fairly bohemian milieu, he had taken it for granted that responsibility for the housework lay with his (first) wife and had been put in his place by a female friend. The fear of “bourgeois remnants,” in other words, was anything but paranoid.

For Knepler, any suggestion that his earlier position was opportunistic or owed to duress would only have minimized the extent of his subsequent transformation. How important this notion of genuine change was to him is borne out not least by the fact that Knepler was absolutely outraged when Larry Weinstein’s Eisler film, Solidarity Song: The Hannes...
Eider Story (1996), showed him lost for words in response to Lou Eisl's (unfounded) comments about his role in another one of those iconic disputes in the cultural life of the GDR, the controversy surrounding Eisl's Johann Faustus libretto,²⁰ suggesting to more than one viewer that spontaneous remorse had got the better of him. On Knepler's account, Weinstein had told him only that day that he would be interviewed in English, which had made him unduly self-conscious. It was for this reason that, exhausted from four hours of recording, he had lost his thread, not because of some sudden insight but merely because he realized he would not be able to respond adequately in English.²¹ Given that Knepler and his wife apparently spoke English at home as a matter of course,²² one might wonder about this particular aspect of Knepler's account, but it certainly seems plausible that an interviewee might lose his or her thread after several hours of interviewing without this necessarily indicating that he or she was at a loss for words in a more suggestive sense of the term. More important, though, the extent of Knepler's outrage at the effect created by the film—he went as far as asking his attorney to explore ways of having the sequence excised from the film—²³ demonstrates how central the notion of his genuine transformation following the Lukullus debacle was to Knepler's own self-understanding.

Knepler's accounts of this subsequent transformation vary to some extent, though I see no reason to assume that there is anything sinister about these variations. Evidently a number of factors came together to effect this process, and Knepler merely shifted his emphases depending on the contexts within which he gave these accounts.

In his letter to Günter Mayer he explained that in the first instance he owed his change of heart to the people around him.

Brecht listened attentively to my critical remarks, as he did to all the others, and was charming and gracious. But it was clear that he did not accept my argument. Together with the then minister of culture, Paul Wandel, I had a conversation at the time with Scherchen. With him the situation was similar: he was attentive and gracious but unyielding in his rejection of our critique. Then there was Eisl. ... In the 1950s he publicly admonished two or three colleagues, of whom I was one, to think a little more carefully about our critique. ... My friend Harry Goldschmidt recognized sooner than I—we repeatedly discussed this for hours—what was wrong with the Zhdanov-Stalin concept. Following the embarrassment of my Lukullus critique I began to reevaluate and, above all, to think anew.²⁴

Yet, as indicated, the people around him whom he identified as being primarily responsible for his change of heart could vary.
In an altogether more private setting, for instance, writing on March 23, 2000 to the versatile Marxist scholar, Gerhard Scheit, with whom he was involved in an intense intellectual friendship from the late 1980s until 2002, Knepler explained that “it was very useful for me to extract myself from my Stalinist aberration with the help of my critics. In my case these were Albert Fuchs, Walter Hollis, and not least Florence (Knepler, née Wiles, Knepler’s second wife).” Here we meet a more private and Viennese selection of role models (Scheit himself is based in Vienna), whereas his more public account to Mayer privileges the role of public figures in Berlin.

This narrative is complicated by two factors, though. First, and here Thacker may be on to something, Knepler’s antiformalist pronouncements in the 1950s do tend to sound remarkably flat. Now, one may well wonder, of course, how pronouncements against “formalism” might conceivably not sound flat. One is left wondering whether perhaps Knepler’s desire to make this case outstripped his actual ability to do so on any substantive grounds. Here is one of Knepler’s more coherent statements during the infamous discussion of Dessau’s *Lukullus* that took place in the AdK on March 15, 1951:

> There is no need to tell Dessau that a work of art must serve the cause of peace, he knows that. The tragedy is that he nevertheless does not serve peace with this work. . . . One needs to reiterate this so the discussion does not go in the wrong direction. Nobody may doubt Dessau’s honesty and past. Yet this work nevertheless seems to me to be on the wrong path. I hasten to add that musically it is in no way a success. Dessau should listen carefully who says what and who likes his work. . . .

> No composer creates anything new under his own steam. The tradition of Dessau’s music lies in the period after World War I, in what was then modernity . . . this music developed . . . not [from] the position of somebody who stands above this capitalist chaos, rather [from] that of somebody who stands in its midst and sees no way out. . . .

> It is a fallacy if our friend Dessau assumed one could express something positive today with the means of an obsolete era. This is why, alas, one must reject this work.26

Second, as we saw, there was also a defensive strand to Knepler’s account of his transformation, which, none too surprisingly, seems to have become stronger after the *Wende* as Knepler became worried about appearing all too apologetic. This is perhaps most obvious in his letter to Leo Karl Gerhartz, head of music at the Hessischer Rundfunk, of August 2, 2001.

> I have said clearly . . . that what I said back then was wrong, indeed stupid, and that I disavow it. I have not made a big deal of this,
given the errors of judgement of many people within and beyond the music world. . . .

But, Dear Leo, is all well with the world when composers compose what they think is right? Do certain problems not remain? Is not the fact that you support Friends of the Earth an expression of your awareness that the world still requires change? Not all composers know this and some compose, in West and East alike, all sorts of mindless and reactionary stuff. 27

1964: A Year of Clarification?

We also find this trope in the already cited lectures on GDR chamber music that Knepler gave in May 1964, the year that I have suggested was something of a crossroads for him. Here Knepler differentiated between what he called “committed” (bekennirschafft; literally, confessional) and “playful” (spielerisch) music. Whereas committed music sought to work through the tensions inherent in a specific content, playful music remained merely abstract. This distinction, he explained, could be mapped on to a shift from large forms to lighter small forms characteristic especially of the interwar period. Yet this tendency was not entirely without influence even after 1945. 28

As an example for the perseverance of this trend, he singled out the slow movement of Ruth Zechlin’s Trio for Oboe, Viola, and Cello of 1957:

It is important to her not to portray big outbursts of pathos or anything of this kind, but to produce clean and clear music. This she has no doubt achieved. But . . . the piece achieves no major heights, it has no major conflicts, no major contrasts; it flows calmly. . . . It is noncommittal music and I think one can say it is abstract music. . . . It does not refer to a specific content and thus, to my mind, remains abstract. 29

Knepler then proceeded to juxtapose to the weakness of this movement the strengths of examples of the “novel type of committed chamber music” created in the GDR that was quite clearly connected to “the socialist consciousness of the composers.” 30 As he reiterated, the problem was that “a number of composers . . . assumed one could operate with sounds themselves, experiment with them, invent new systems without necessarily connecting them to a specific content.” These “experiments that do not want to mean anything in the first place” one clearly needed to reject. 31

Earlier that year, on the other hand, on February 23, Knepler had written a long and detailed letter to Walter Ulbricht, the First Secretary of the governing SED’s Central Committee and the GDR’s head of state,
articulating “concerns, thoughts, and suggestions that have preoccupied me for years.” He wrote that “the work of our party seems to me to be constantly at risk of being paralyzed by bureaucratisation and formalism” (note the choice of the term “formalism”!). The focus had increasingly shifted “from the mobilization of the masses for the implementation of the party’s goals” toward “the avoidance of mistakes and deviations in the process of mobilizing the masses.”

The cooperation between the leadership and the grassroots consisted mainly of instructions being passed down from the former to the latter. The lower echelons of the party were not being encouraged to inform the leadership about the ideas and concerns of people at the grassroots level. Where initiative, independent thought, and the careful adaptation of measures to specific circumstances should be the goal, the exact opposite was the case. Time and again the main purpose of party meetings seemed to be the avoidance of critical questions. “Over the years I have witnessed a hundred times the well-known phenomenon that the actual concerns and problems of the party comrades were only brought up in private conversations after party meetings.”

Knepler then proceeded to elucidate the problem with an example from a field “with which I am very familiar,” namely, cultural work. It is telling that he began these remarks by distancing himself from his former boss, Ernst Fischer. Evidently hoping that he had shored up his own credibility by doing so, Knepler then continued:

Our position is made more difficult by the fact that we have an insufficiently developed theoretical basis for some aspects of culture, especially concerning socialist realism, the relationship between “artistic method” and “style,” between ideological and aesthetic questions, and related issues. . . .

When in the past—and in part to this day—we spoke of bourgeois art of the last eighty or ninety years, this has mostly happened in the form of abuse or via the positing of untenable theories. . . .

The fear of appearing to be positivistic, or the fear of becoming contaminated with the poison of decadence if we deal with it, have prevented a theoretical penetration of the problem."
discussion with a member of Ulbricht’s staff who, “even though he was not a Hofrat [royal official],” had the technique of placation characteristic of Austrian royal officials down to a fine art (die Technik österreichischer Beschwingungshofrätze beherrsche er vorzüglich). 36 What the letter and its tone clearly demonstrate, though, is that for all his exasperation and determination, Knepler did still assume—indeed to an almost puzzling degree—in early 1964 that it was worth raising these issues with the leadership and that the response might be constructive.

Later that year another notorious controversy erupted, that concerning the special commemorative issue of Sinn und Form for Hanns Eisler. As far as Knepler’s direct involvement is concerned, this controversy primarily concerned Eberhard Klemm’s (1929–91) essay on dodecaphony in Eisler and Schoenberg. Klemm suggested that a “not inconsiderable” number of Eisler’s works “gravitated toward” dodecaphony or utilized the twelve-tone technique “in a more or less strict fashion.” All his skepticism notwithstanding, Eisler had “critically and creatively engaged” the technique throughout his career; indeed, even his final completed work, Erste Gesänge, Klemm argued, “is inconceivable without his experiences with that composition method.” 37 Citing Schoenberg’s 1932 comments to Rudolf Kolisch on the limited uses of dodecaphonic analysis, 38 Klemm argued that Schoenberg himself had been primarily interested in “an altogether traditional manner” in categories such as “themes, motifs, antecedent, and consequent phrases, transitions, codettas, etc., and only secondarily in the rationale of the series.” 39 The gap (or, as some would have it, chasm) between Schoenberg and Eisler was not therefore as fundamental as one might think. The crucial distinction lay in the fact that Eisler interpreted the technique’s utilization by Schoenberg as an expression of angst and catastrophism and disavowed its “Schoenbergesque hysteria” (Hysterie Schönbergischer Provenienz). 40 Ultimately, Eisler was influenced primarily by dodecaphony’s asceticism and what the two men had in common was, above all, their “exact imagination.” 41 Klemm had tried to preempt likely criticism by expressly stating that dodecaphony was “certainly not a central category” for Eisler, yet to no avail. 42

The editor of the special issue, the writer, theater man, erstwhile Brecht collaborator, and first head of the Brecht Archive, Hans Bunge (1919–90), eventually labored under the tight control of the journal’s new editor in chief, Wilhelm Girmus (1906–85). They were advised by five leading subject experts: Paul Dessau, Harry Goldschmidt (1910–86), Georg Knepler, Ernst Hermann Meyer, and Natan Notowicz (1911–68).

As Paul Dessau, clearly infuriated, noted in a letter to Girmus of August 15, 1964, 43 he, along with Goldschmidt and Knepler, had been in favor of including Klemm’s piece and only Meyer and Notowicz had been against. He therefore considered the decision to exclude it a breach
of democratic practice and consequently no longer wanted his name to be associated with the special issue.\textsuperscript{44}

Ernst Hermann Meyer, who reportedly characterized dodecaphony as being at best “suited to characterize an iceberg in a movie,”\textsuperscript{45} sent his comments on Klemm’s piece to Notowicz, who passed them on to Girnus on June 23, 1964. Meyer asked, “of what use is it to us to show whether, where, when, how, to what extent, for how long, and why Hanns did or did not engage in twelvetonery [gezwölftoner Laut]?” Arguably a tad over-confident, he then added: “In ten years the whole twelvetonery [12-tönere] will be as secondary an issue as isorhythm.”\textsuperscript{46} He then went on to criticize Klemm’s style as too verehochmütet, thus introducing a term of Yiddish origin, implying that Klemm had sought to disguise his lack of substance with a flourish of pretentious and fanciful formulations.\textsuperscript{47}

Meyer’s usage of this term seems remarkable in at least two respects. First, the fact that Meyer would use a Yiddish term at all, and such an uncommon one at that, is surprising, given that Meyer was, however he may have felt about his Jewishness in private, hardly an out and proud Jew.\textsuperscript{48} One might well wonder whether it is a coincidence that he thought of a Yiddish term when seeking to describe negative qualities, and specifically negative literary qualities, at that. After all, the association of Jews with forms of literary production (supposedly) geared primarily to superficiality, showmanship, and commercial success (Literatentum) was a well-established trope in German cultural discourse. At the very least, then, his use of a Yiddish pejorative at this juncture played to this discourse, whether intentionally or not. Second, he must have assumed that Girnus would understand the term, which suggests the existence of a mode of communication presumably available not just to Meyer and Girnus in which Yiddish terms could feature as pejorative buzzwords.

Knepler, as we saw, was in favor of including Klemm’s article. On June 16, 1964, he wrote to Bunge that he found it “interesting, full of new ideas and suitable to encourage a discussion...I do not agree with all his formulations and will have one or two things to say in the discussion; but precisely for this purpose the article should be published.”\textsuperscript{49} That Klemm’s article ultimately was not included in the special issue would seem to speak a clear enough language. Yet that matters were in fact rather more complicated is already indicated by the fact that, though not included in the special issue, it was nevertheless published in a regular issue of \textit{Sinn und Form}, and that responses by Knepler and Notowicz followed early in 1965.

There Knepler characterized Klemm’s undertaking as “legitimate and necessary.” Notowicz was right, though, Knepler argued, in insisting that Eisler and Schoenberg had parted ways not over issues of musical syntax but on ideological grounds.\textsuperscript{50} On the other hand, Notowicz had paid too little attention to questions of musical syntax, and Klemm was
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egitimate ins\[s\] consisting of musical swicz had emm was therefore entirely justified in picking up this issue. One could not account comprehensively for the relationship between Eisler and Schoenberg without tackling "the problem of the renewal of tonal language." 51 Even Notowicz, while discussing Klemm's contribution in a rather haughty manner, conceded that the topic as such, while not of particular urgency, was worthy of research. 52

Yet the controversy surrounding Klemm's contribution was in fact part of a much broader struggle for the soul of Sinn and Form. 53 Not least due to the increasing incapacitation and untimely death of Girmus's predecessor, the writer Bodo Ullse (1904–63), Hans Bunge had in fact been largely to his own devices in the early phases of planning the special issue for Eisler and subsequently took on the responsibility for a number of other special issues as well. He pursued an unusually forthright line throughout. For better or for worse, he gave no consideration to tactical concerns and, by the standards of the time and place, was extraordinarily provocative and intransigent.

Bunge subsequently also took on special issues on Thomas Mann and, initially, Brecht, even before Girmus took up his position as Ullse's controversial successor. In all three cases, Bunge seemed to be going out of his way to break as many taboos as possible. He invited contributions from Wolf Biermann, Stefan Heym, and Walter Janka for the special issue on Thomas Mann and evidently planned to document critical comments by Brecht on the controversy concerning Eisler's Faustus and the events of June 17, 1953 in the special issue on Brecht. Among the writers from whom he solicited (subsequently rejected) contributions for the special issue on Eisler were Wolf Biermann, Heiner Müller, and Georg Lukács.

None of these decisions need individually have led to open conflict. The operation of a comprehensive system of precensorship, as was effecti-\[v\] in place in the GDR, does not invariably guarantee (or even aspire to) a unitary response to any and every output. Priorities shift, differing arenas may require varying levels of vigilance, and not least the attitude of the censors may be uneven, especially when it comes to music and scholarly literature on music. What may seem unproblematic or not worth making a fuss about on one occasion may well cause massive controversy on another. The fact that within months of one another Klemm's article could not appear in the special issue for Eisler but was published in a regular issue of Sinn and Form is an obvious case in point. Moreover, what might cause grave concern when done by one person need not necessarily do so when done by another. As Parker and Philpotts point out, Ullse had invited Lukács to submit a contribution in 1957, almost immediately after the events in Hungary that had made him persona non grata, and back then nobody had batted an eyelid. 54

Moreover, the special issue for Eisler, for all that it did not contain, did touch critically on the Faustus controversy. It documented a letter by
Thomas Mann in which he confirmed the receipt of, and praised, Eisler’s *Johann Faustus* libretto.\(^5\) This was followed by a contribution on Eisler and literature, of which Ernst Fischer (who by now had himself fallen from grace, hence the need for Knepler to distance himself from Fischer in his letter to Ulbricht) devoted the final quarter to the libretto.\(^6\) He noted that it had caused great controversy at the time but added that, looking back now, its merits were uncontestable.\(^7\) Initially he had added that the controversy concerning the *Johann Faustus* libretto had left Eisler despondent but agreed to cut the two sentences in question on Girmus’s request. Girmus worried that this statement “might provoke an unnecessary discussion.”\(^8\)

Yet if none of these decisions individually need have gotten Bunge into hot water, the fact that he was responsible for all of them and evidently unwilling to compromise except under genuine duress made his position increasingly untenable. Following the infamous Eleventh Plenum in December 1965 he was sacked (and unable to find alternative employment for the following two years).

As we saw, Knepler was one of the subject experts accompanying the preparation of the special issue on Eisler in an advisory capacity. It therefore seems highly likely that he would have been privy to this background. This would imply that in speaking out in favor of the publication of Klemm’s essay, he was in fact taking a position on rather more than merely the merits of this particular contribution. Moreover, Bunge’s downfall will only have reinforced the sense of futility already aroused by the response his letter to Ulbricht had received.

**Hiding in Plain Sight**

Knepler’s remarks, in his letter to Ulbricht, about the “insufficiently developed theoretical basis for some aspects of culture, especially concerning socialist realism, the relationship between ‘artistic method’ and ‘style,’ between ideological and aesthetic questions, and related issues” and the need to abandon “untenable theories” posited in response to bourgeois art must surely be read as an urgent plea for precisely the sort of work that subsequently culminated in Knepler’s own *History as a Means of Understanding Music*.

To be sure, this work signifies no departure from his commitment to Marxist musicology or his preoccupation with the “social embeddedness and function” of music, and it is in an important sense simply the logical continuation of this preoccupation. Yet, as I suggested at the outset, it also signified a radical repositioning in terms of his modus operandi. For Knepler, it was central to his process of post-Zhdanovite transformation. He made this very clear in his already cited letter to Leo Karl Gerhartz. “I have written an entire book,” Knepler wrote there,
called *History as a Means of Understanding Music*, published in 1977, in which I develop an aesthetics opposed to that of Zhdanov.

... Zhdanov's method of placing the burden of writing music for the masses on the composers was idiotic. To transcend the chasm between great art and the people—that is a task for generations. I began to recognize this when people whom I valued (Brecht, Eisler, Scherchen, and others) responded to my comment on *Lukullus* in a friendly but skeptical manner. The events after the death of Stalin and the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU in 1956 led me and many others to rethink our whole position. The mentioned book is a result of this thought process.59

Yet more important perhaps, this work took Knepler at one and the same time to the core of what Marxist musicology really needed to be doing and at the same time shifted his activities to a sphere of abstraction that removed him to a considerable extent from the day-to-day vagaries of ideological contestation to which he would certainly have been far more exposed had he, say, continued his multivolume history of nineteenth-century music.60 Not least, of course, the ambitious focus and multidisciplinary nature of this new project placed much of it well beyond most people's grasp anyway. Thus he was able to remain loyal to the cause despite becoming increasingly despondent in his attitude toward both the regime in general and much of the musicological scene in the GDR in particular.

This strategy is indicated in a rather telling manner by the fact that Knepler, who had been elected to the AdK in 1950,61 refused to hold office in the AdK and focused his attention instead on the Akademie der Wissenschaften (Academy of Sciences), to which he was elected, as coincidence would have it, in 1964. The sciences are, of course, a much greater challenge to the censors than the arts and humanities. As a scholar coming into the sciences sideways, as it were, Knepler would have been particularly hard to comprehend and therefore to control for those overseeing the work of the AdW.

When Knepler attended a meeting of the music section of the AdK on December 1, 1978, soon after the publication of *History as a Means of Understanding Music*, to discuss the book, Sigfried Matthus, in his introduction, stated that "we very much regret that you are not one of our members. When I look at your book I am tempted to say that you are perhaps in quite the right place there [in the AdW]. This book shows the connections to other disciplines, hence the rootedness in that academy."62

It would seem that Knepler had successfully carved out for himself a niche, albeit one that was neither private nor quietist in nature and from which he was able to present a far-reaching critique of mainstream Marxist musicology hidden in plain sight. His skill in doing so is doubtless one of
the principal reasons why the book has received virtually no serious reception, even among those well disposed toward his project in principle.

Notes

Epigraph: Georg Knepler to Michael Schulte, August 15, 1991, AdK Knepler 320. All translations from the German are mine. I am grateful to Werner Grünzweig and his colleagues at the archive of the AdK for their support and kindness. I dedicate this piece to my dear friend Karin Kunstreich, who died during its completion.

1 I suggest this with some measure of apprehension insofar as the archival holdings I have been able to access so far are very thin and uneven for the early GDR period itself and much fuller for the post-Wende period. My perspective regarding the earlier years may therefore be skewed.


7 Knepler to Werner Grünzweig, May 18, 1989, AdK Knepler 149.


12 I thank Knepler’s son, John Knepler, for confirming that his father “never showed the slightest interest” in the Jewish community (communication of August 29, 2013). I will discuss Knepler’s attitude toward his own Jewish background, Judaism, Jews, and Israel in more detail elsewhere.

13 AdK Knepler 616.
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17 Joachim Lacchesi, ed. _Das Verhältnis der Oper_ (Berlin: BasisDruck, 1993).
18 Knepler to Kirsten Thietz, April 17, 1993, AdK Knepler 414.
19 AdK Knepler 43.
22 Knepler to Bruno Netzl, April 13, 1993, AdK Knepler 265. Both John Kne-
pler (communication of August 31, 2013) and Ernst Hermann Meyer’s daughter,
Marion Kant (communication of September 15, 2013), have suggested to me that
Knepler’s contention is perfectly plausible in that the everyday English spoken
at home would have been very different from the sort of English required
in this particular context. They may have a point. On the other hand, this would
suggest that the communication between Knepler and his wife effectively did not
go beyond the purely mundane, which would contradict his statements about her
significance for his intellectual and political development. I intend to examine this
issue in more detail elsewhere.
24 AdK Knepler 43.
25 AdK Knepler 52.
26 Lacchesi, _Verhältnis der Oper_, 113–15.
27 Knepler to Leo Karl Gerhartz, August 2, 2001, AdK Knepler 30.
29 Ibid., II/5–6.
30 Ibid., III/3.
32 “Dokument,” in _Weg und Ziel_ 50, no. 1 (1992), 43–45, here 43. I am grateful

to colleagues at the HSG in Amsterdam for providing me with a scan of this
document.
33 Ibid., 43–44.
34 Ibid., 44.
35 Ibid., 45.
45.
38 See Anne Shreffler and David Trippet, eds. “Kolisch and Schoenberg,” in
_Musiktheorie. Zeitschrift für Musikwissenschaft_ 24, no. 3 (2009), 280.
40 Ibid., 781.
43 Ibid., 784. This was presumably a reference to Adorno’s comments on Schoenberg in “Der dialektische Komponist” (1934), Theodor W. Adorno, Gesammelte Schriften (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998), 17: 203. Adorno’s perhaps now better-known statements on the “exact imagination” in Die Aktualität der Philosophie or Negative Dialektik would of course not have been published in 1964.


47 Paul Dessau to Girns, August 15, 1964, AdK-O 58. Dessau had previously spoken vehemently against Girns’s election to the AdK. See Matthias Braun, Die Literaturzeitschrift “Sinn und Form” (Bremen: Edition Temmen, 2004), 67.

44 See Matthias Tischer’s chapter in this volume for a discussion of Dessau’s engagement of Schoenberg.

45 Joachim Herz to Peter Gülke, May 10, 2005, AdK Herz 1373.

46 AdK-O 58.

47 Here Meyer seems to have appropriated the evidently by no means common Yiddish term fárkläsites, based on a word of Hebrew origin, khokhe, which can mean wisdom and wit but also witicism, joke, or facetious remark. I am grateful to David Katz and Helen Beer for helping me clarify the meaning of this term.

48 Golan Gur discusses some of the implications of Meyer’s Jewish background in his contribution to this volume.

49 Knepler to Bunge, June 16, 1964, AdK-O 58.


51 Ibid., 262.


54 Ibid., 140.


56 Ernst Fischer, “Hanns Eisler und die Literatur,” in Sinn und Form Sonderheft Hanns Eisler (1964), 264–70.

57 Ibid., 266.


60 This project would merit closer attention in its own right. For a short discussion of Knepler’s interpretation of Wagner in this work, see Peter Kupfer’s contribution to this volume.

61 AdK-O 477, Mappe 1, Bl. 13.

62 AdK-O 912, Mappe 2, Bl. 204.
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