

Michael Haas tells the tragic tale of a lost musical generation

By Jessica Duchon Friday 26 April 2013

In his new book, *Forbidden Music: the Jewish Composers Banned by the Nazis*, Michael Haas, formerly music curator for the Jewish Museum in Vienna and an award-winning record producer, has set out to tell the full, devastating story of a lost generation.

From its pages shine Franz Schreker, an opera composer of genius who was hounded into an early grave in 1934; Schoenberg's experiments in 12-tone serialism; Hanns Eisler's communist agitprop cabaret; Hans Gál's Brahmsian symphonies; Erich Wolfgang Korngold's exile to Hollywood; Kurt Weill's transition to Broadway; and many more. Covering more than a century, the tale traces a complex web of cause and effect from the emancipation of Austria's Jewish community in 1867 to the lingering anger among the families of the displaced or deceased in the postwar years.

The Nazi regime banned music for a variety of reasons: not only Jewish composers, but also jazz – viewed as the music of African-Americans; politically disapproved music by non-Jews; and atonal and Serialist music, considered inherently subversive. The muddled result was a widespread view that Jewish composers were primarily writing avant-garde music. Yet that was far from true.

Instead, many – but for the visionary Mahler and, later, the influential Schoenberg – were on the other side of a virulent split between innovation and tradition originating with Wagner and Brahms and their respective attitudes towards both music and the Jews. Wagner, the experimental creator of "music of the future", emerges as anti-Semitic villain-in-chief. Brahms, by contrast, often befriended young Jewish musicians. After that, numerous Jewish composers turned towards his musically conservative approach; and it is often their output that has been overlooked. One fine example is the excellent Gál, a Viennese composer who escaped to the UK.

Much has been written on the Nazis' suppression of avant-garde music, whatever the ethnicity of its composers. This strand of composition in the 1950s became a musical rebellion against fascism and dominated the world of new music, despite often alienating listeners. Meanwhile, much tonal music by Jewish composers was simply forgotten.

Had they not been suppressed, exiled or murdered, the full picture of 20th-century music might have looked very different.

'Forbidden Music: the Jewish Composers Banned by the Nazis', by Michael Haas, is published by Yale University Press