

A Preliminary Look at Two Groups of Refugee Musicians Who Settled in the United States: Those Who Came Primarily From Austria and Germany, 1938 to 1943, and Those Who Came From Estonia, 1944 to ca. 1950¹

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Abstract

Much has been published about internationally known European composers and performers who fled the Nazis just before and during World War II and settled in the United States. Little is known about the approximately 2,000 musicians, mostly from Austria and Germany, who were assisted by the National Committee for Refugee Musicians 1938–1943. The Committee was created by the American composer Mark Brunswick (1902–1971). The refugees were helped to obtain entry visas and then to gain employment as musicians.

Another group of refugee musicians came to the U.S. somewhat later, from Estonia, fleeing both the Nazi and Soviet regimes. The largest number emigrated in 1944. Few of either groups of refugee musicians came directly to America. The complicated and sometimes discriminatory immigration laws and practices of the U.S. government are discussed in some detail.

Archival research has established where many of the Western European refugee musicians eventually worked in America. Equivalent archival research is needed to establish what assistance Estonian refugee musicians received in the U.S. This may make it possible to understand their contribution to American culture, while they simultaneously maintained the vibrant culture of their small country for other Estonian refugees who settled in the United States.

These days the word “refugee” once more conjures up terrible images of suffering – primarily in the Middle East, with serious repercussions for all of Europe. We know there are groups in other parts of the world who may not be in the current headlines but are nevertheless experiencing the trauma that has afflicted human beings for the millennia about which we have some information. Today I will talk about a relatively small group of refugees who were able to settle in the United States, musicians who came primarily from Austria and Germany just before and at the beginning of World War II, and musicians who came from Estonia towards the end and just after that war.

Please forgive me if I combine personal comments with more scholarly statements in this paper. Given the nature of this conference, dedi-

cated to the memory of our dear friend and colleague, Urve Lippus, and the fact that I was unable to be at her funeral last May, there may be more personal comments than usual.

Why did I choose to compare these two groups of émigrés? Some twenty-five years ago I began a detailed study of an organization, the National Committee for Refugee Musicians, that was then almost unknown among those musicologists who were concerned with refugees from World War II (see Babbitt 1999: 52).² Much had been published about the major European composers, as well as about many important performers, and some scholars, both historians and theorists, who came to America as exiles from their home countries. To name just a few of those composers: Arnold Schönberg, Paul Hindemith, Ernst Krenek, Béla Bartók, Kurt Weill, and Darius Milhaud. Famous

¹ I would like to express my thanks to Aime Martinson Andra for help translating sections of the book by Avo Hirvesoo (Hirvesoo 1996), to Evi Arujärv of Estonian Music Information Centre for providing a copy of that book, and to the Estonian Musicological Society for inviting me to participate in the conference of the society on 23 April 2016 in Tartu, dedicated to the memory of Urve Lippus. The present contribution is based on my paper held in the conference.

² Apart from the citation of Mark Brunswick’s work with the Committee (see below) in small dictionary articles, this was the first public mention of it, more than ten years after I began my research and recorded oral history interviews with some of those refugees.