



Biographie Paul Dessau 1894–1979

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Born in Germany to a family with a history of cantorial service, Dessau worked in genres as diverse as orchestral and theatrical music, labor and activist songs of the Zionist movement, and film music.

Paul Dessau was born in Hamburg, where his grandfather and great-grandfather had been cantors. Musical talent also extended to other family members: an uncle was a violinist in the Berlin Royal Opera orchestra. The young Dessau had childhood ambitions of becoming a singer, which he did not pursue, and at the age of six he began lessons on the violin, playing at his first public appearances when he was ten years old.

Five years later he commenced violin studies in Berlin with Florian Zajic at the Klindworth-Scharwenka Conservatory. After a physical impediment to a career was discovered in one of his hands, he turned instead to composition and conducting, studying privately with Eduard Behm and Max Loewengard. In 1912 he became a répétiteur at the Hamburg State Opera, whose resident conductor was Felix von Weingartner, and Arthur Nikisch appeared annually as well. It was during that period that Dessau began to compose on a serious level.

In 1914 his cousin Max Winterfeld, who was well known as an operetta composer under the nom de plume Jean Gilbert, organized a summer position for him as conductor at the Tivoli Theater in Bremen, and when Bruno Eisner played Dessau's piano sonata in Berlin the following year, his recognition as a composer began in earnest.

During the First World War, he served in the German army and was awarded the Iron Cross. But, like many of his generation who came under the influence of socialist thinkers and opponents of the war, his pacifist views had coalesced by the time of the armistice. After a brief period as house composer and conductor at the Hamburger Kammerspiele, Dessau was engaged in 1919 as assistant opera conductor in Cologne, in which capacity he served under Otto Klemperer. He conducted at the opera house in Mainz during the 1923–24 season, after which he was appointed by Bruno Walter to conduct at the Municipal Opera in Berlin. That same year (1925) he won a Schott prize in Donaueschingen for his *Concertino* for violin solo with flute, clarinet, and horn, a work that received independent praise from Paul Hindemith. He then decided to abandon his conducting career in order to focus exclusively on composing. His first symphony was conducted in Prague in 1927 by Wilhelm [William] Steinberg. Meanwhile, Dessau had also become interested in the medium of film, and between 1928 and 1930—despite his decision not to pursue a conducting career—he directed a small orchestra at Berlin's Alhambra Cinema. There he composed original film music, including a number of scores for early Disney cartoons. When sound became a permanent feature of motion pictures, he

collaborated with tenor Richard Tauber and also wrote symphonic scores for Arnold Fanck's epics about mountaineering.

Upon the National Socialists' assumption of power in 1933 as a result of the 1932 elections and their inclusion in the government, Dessau determined to vacate Germany. His fifteen-year "exile" period included three phases: Paris (1933–1939), the East Coast of the United States (1939–1943), and Los Angeles (1943–1948). In Paris he continued to compose for cinema, sometimes under the name Henri Herblay. He worked in that medium with such émigré directors as Max Ophüls and Detlef Sierck (later known in Hollywood as Douglas Sirk). In 1936 Dessau made the acquaintance of the French composer and teacher René Leibowitz, who introduced him to serial techniques and, in particular, to the music of **Arnold Schoenberg**. The Spanish Civil War confirmed and reinforced Dessau's leftist political leanings, and he joined the Communist Party and, under the pseudonym Peter Daniel, wrote songs for the International Brigade. One that became famous was his marching song, *Die Thälmannkolonne*, to a text by his first wife, Gudrun Kabisch.

In the year prior to the German invasion of France, Dessau had presciently left Paris for New York (1939). There he subsisted for four years as a score copyist, a teacher in an orphan home, a composer of minor film music, and a worker on a New Jersey chicken farm. Also during that period he arranged and composed some music for synagogue use as well as biblically based choral settings and Hebrew song arrangements. Some biographical sketches carelessly ascribe that attention to Jewish subject matter primarily if not exclusively to his need for additional income. In fact, his motivations were more deeply rooted and more complicated (not to mention that the income from those projects, though not unwelcome, was negligible). A glance at his opera reveals that he never renounced either pride in his Judaic heritage or an interest in the Zionist enterprise in Palestine and the forging of modern Israel. Whatever ambivalence he might have harbored—and how he was able to reconcile potential conflicts between proletarian-driven internationalist political orientations and liberal Jewish nationalism—have not been explored adequately in existing biographical studies or analyses.

While still in Germany during the Weimar years, he wrote a number of Judaic choral pieces, including a setting of the liturgical hymn *Adon olam*, for tenor cantor, mixed choir, winds, double bass, percussion, and organ (1927), and settings of Psalm 5 (1927) and Psalm 3 (1930). In Paris he composed a dramatic oratorio based on the **Passover** narrative, *Haggadah shel Pesach* [haggada shel pesah] (1936) to a text by Max Brod (performed in its entirety for the first time in 1994 in Hamburg). He scored a film that was made in Palestine by Swiss photographer and filmmaker Helmar Lerski: *Avoda* [Awodah] (1935), a documentary that was screened at the Venice Film Festival. Later, during his American years, he scored another film that Lerski made in Palestine ca. 1947, *Adama*, which was released in the United States as *Tomorrow Is a Wonderful Day*. In addition, Dessau enthusiastically participated in a project conceived and supervised by the German-Jewish émigré musicologist Hans Nathan, which involved creating artistic arrangements with piano accompaniments for *ḥalutz*, *kibbutz*, *aliya*, and other Zionist-related songs (*shirei am*; folksongs, or songs of the people). Nathan had compiled most of these songs from postcards issued by the *Keren Kayemet L'Yisrael* (Jewish National Fund), each of which displayed—in place of the usual pictorial image—a musically notated song (melody line only) with text underlay in Roman characters and all additional strophes in vocalized Hebrew characters. In accepting Nathan's invitation, Dessau joined a roster of other prominent composers who responded positively to

Nathan's solicitation: **Darius Milhaud**, **Arthur Honegger**, **Stefan Wolpe**, **Aaron Copland**, **Ernst Toch**, **Erich Walter Sternberg**, **Lazare Saminsky**, **Frederick Jacobi**, and **Kurt Weill**. Nathan intended to publish the new arrangements (whose melody lines were for the most part left intact by each of the composers of the piano parts) in an ad seriatim collection to be known as *Folk Songs of the New Palestine*. Some were indeed so published as fascicles in 1938 and 1939; others were not. The volume he prepared and edited when he later returned to the project contains seventeen of the songs under the title *Israeli Folk Music: Songs of the Early Pioneers*, but it was published only posthumously in the series *Recent Researches in the Oral Traditions of Music* (A-R Editions, Middletown, Wisconsin, 1994) under the general editorial guidance of Philip V. Bohlman, who also wrote a foreword and an afterword for it. Among Dessau's contributions to the "Hans Nathan project" were arrangements of the songs *Alei giv'a sham begalil* (Atop a Hill in Galilee); *Hine aḥal'la baḥalil* (Lo, I Play Upon My ḥalil [flute]); *V'ulai* (Perhaps); *Ali b'er* (Ascend, My Well); *Al s'fat yam kinneret* (On the Banks of the [lake] Kinneret); and *Gamal, gamali* (Camel, My Camel). His arrangement of *Al s'fat yam kinneret* was also published together with *Shirat ro'e* (Song of the Shepherd) in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, in 1937 as *Zwei Palästinensische Volkslieder* (Edition Omanut) in a series of songs in the same vein. While in New York, he also evinced an interest in academic considerations and deliberations of Jewish music, and he participated in the intellectual Jewish music life there. He served on the governing board of the short-lived Jewish Music Forum—Society for the Advancement of Jewish Music Culture, **Abraham Wolf Binder's** breakaway organization from **MAILAMM** that subsequently became known simply as the Jewish Music Forum. In one of its journal issues (the *Jewish Music Forum Bulletin*) he published an erudite article analyzing **Arnold Schoenberg's** *Kol Nidre* from Judaic as well as musical perspectives.

In 1943 Bertolt Brecht, whom Dessau had met in Europe, encouraged him to relocate in Los Angeles, where he might find better opportunities to compose for film. Most of his work there for the next few years involved editing, fixing, or orchestrating film scores by other composers—a remunerative task to which he referred nonetheless in characteristically left-wing terms as "slave labor." He joined the American Communist Party (CPUSA) in 1946, at a time when he was collaborating with fellow Communist Brecht on anti-Fascist songs as well as larger works, such as the oratorio *Deutsches Miserere* and an opera, *Die Reisen des Glücksgotts*, which remained uncompleted at his death.

In 1948, his utopian faith in Communism undiminished, Dessau returned to Germany with his second wife, the writer Elisabeth Hauptmann—to the eastern sector of Berlin, which was in the Sovietzone and part of Communist East Germany (the Democratic Republic of Germany). There he worked closely with Brecht's Berliner Ensemble, composing music for the company's now legendary productions of *Mutter Courage* and *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis* (The Caucasian Chalk Circle). He also collaborated with Brecht (as the librettist) on the opera *Die Verurteilung des Lukullus* (The Trial of Lucullus, 1949–51). But after a trial performance conducted by Hermann Scherchen at the Berlin State Opera it was condemned by official Communist Party critics as "formalist and alien to the people." Not only did it embrace dissonance, which was perceived as an affront to "the peoples' sensibilities," but it also promoted Dessau's and Brecht's commitment to pacifism. After seven months of political debate, during

which they made substantial revisions, the opera was permitted a public performance, but the Stalinist puppet regime continued to regard it with suspicion, and it was not produced again until the mid- 1950s, during a period of slight political thaw following Stalin's death.

By 1952 Dessau had become one of the leading musical figures in the German Democratic Republic, and he was elected that year to the [East] German Academy of Arts. Later he served as its vice president (1957–62). In addition to four national or state prizes, he was awarded the Order of Karl Marx in 1969 and an honorary doctorate from Leipzig University in 1979.