

1. Title:

Red Vienna and the Weimar Republic Between the Wars: Gender, Music, and Cinema

2. General Description:

Eric Weitz observes that “*The revolution and the founding of the republic unleashed one of the greatest periods of artistic and intellectual creativity in the twentieth century.*” His statement, referring to the Weimar Republic, captures an era marked by a profound rejection of tradition and a sweeping transformation in both social life and artistic expression. This period of extraordinary creativity was inseparable from new discourses on social justice, gender equality, evolving views of sexuality, and the pervasive influence of the American way of life—colloquially termed *Americanism*.

In this context, *Americanism* largely referred to new methods of production management, particularly Taylorism and Fordism. Frederick Taylor’s system increased industrial efficiency by breaking down labor into repetitive tasks, timed and incentivized with piecework pay. Henry Ford applied these methods to his automobile factories, implementing assembly-line production. This revolutionized not only the mass production of goods, but also the mass production of culture—especially through cinema and radio—making them accessible to broad audiences. In music, the arrival of jazz challenged the conventions of European classical traditions, long confined to elite concert halls.

Cultural critics such as Oswald Spengler and Stefan Zweig decried what they saw as the flattening of culture and the erosion of individuality caused by American technology and mass culture, while Otto Bauer criticized the American production model itself. In contrast, Austrian novelist Helene Scheu-Rietz welcomed American culture as a force for renewal, countering what she saw as Europe’s cultural decline. Likewise, Felix Salten, author of *Bambi*, argued that technology and mass culture could uplift and educate the public, while writer and translator Anna Nußbaum envisioned the liberation of African Americans as a model for European proletarian emancipation.

The early years of the Weimar Republic saw marked changes in gender roles and social structures. The proportion of female industrial workers rose from 18.3% to 23%, while women in white-collar and public-sector roles increased from 6.5% to 12.6%. In Austria, the 1919 election brought eight women into parliament; between 1920 and 1923, twelve women served as representatives. Moral boundaries separating “respectable” from “indecent” women began to blur, while loosening sexual taboos gave rise to new female archetypes—such as the Vamp and the Flapper—who embodied sexual autonomy and relationships free of long-term commitment. The decriminalization of abortion became a central cause for the women’s movement. Marianne Pollak, editor of *Arbeiter-Zeitung* and *Das kleine Blatt*, argued in her essay *Vom Reifrock zum Bubikopf* that fashion has historically reflected class hierarchies, with short skirts and bobbed hair emerging as symbols of liberation. In *Zutrauen zur Zukunft*, Stefan Zweig described the “new woman” as one freed from the traditional role of housewife, envisioning future male-female relationships as partnerships rooted in camaraderie.

Magnus Hirschfeld profoundly shaped contemporary understandings of sexuality. In 1919, he founded the Institute for Sexology in Berlin—the first institution of its kind—offering medical treatment, counseling, sexual education, and even sex-reassignment surgeries. A pioneering advocate for LGBTQ+ rights, Hirschfeld campaigned to abolish Paragraph §175 of the German Criminal Code, which criminalized same-sex relations between men. He argued that same-gender attraction was innate and proposed a spectrum of sexuality with forty-three million possible combinations, based on variations in genitalia, physical traits, libido, and emotional characteristics. While based in Germany, Hirschfeld co-founded the World League for Sexual Reform, which held congresses in Vienna between 1928 and 1932.

In Austria, the executive committee of the Socialist Party (SDAP) established two key institutions to shape cultural life in pursuit of the *neue Menschen* (“New People”): the *Sozialistische Bildungszentrale* and the *Sozialdemokratische Kunststelle*. The former organized lectures, maintained worker libraries, trained party functionaries, and hosted cultural festivals—its network of libraries loaning over a million books by 1927. The latter brought music, theater, and art to workers, employees, and students, significantly reducing ticket prices to operas, concerts, and plays. Victor Adler, the party’s founder, saw socialist culture as essential to resisting the hollow cultural forms of the bourgeoisie.

Cinema became a central medium of mass culture after 1918, and by the mid-1920s it was increasingly recognized as a legitimate art form. In 1919, Germany produced roughly 500 films from over 200 companies, with 3,000 theaters drawing a daily audience of one million. The UFA studio employed 2,500 people and ran eleven theaters. Films often addressed pressing social concerns: Murnau’s *The Last Laugh* explored the decline of tradition; Lang’s *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler* examined moral collapse; *Metropolis* depicted the modern urban dystopia; *M* addressed criminality; Pabst’s *Threepenny Opera* blurred moral boundaries; and *Pandora’s Box* reflected on the rise of the “new woman.”

Viennese cinema never matched Berlin’s scale or innovation but maintained a strong local presence. While early 1920s production peaked at 100–140 films annually, by the mid-1920s output fell to 20–30 films per year. Nonetheless, early silent films in Austria sometimes featured ambitious sets and casts. Crucially, Red Vienna used cinema as a political and educational tool. The Social Democratic municipality produced propaganda films showcasing achievements in housing, health, and welfare, while worker cinema movements sought to make film a vehicle for socialist education. The city’s own cinema network, the *Kinobetriebsgesellschaft* (KIBA), ensured the dissemination of ideologically aligned films to working-class audiences.

Music of the interwar period remains less studied than film or gender politics. Composers such as Ernst Křenek, Kurt Weill, and Hanns Eisler sought to create music for the masses, integrating jazz, writing for film, and exploiting new media like radio and phonographs. Paul Hindemith coined *Gebräuchsmusik* (“utility music”) for works playable by amateurs and accessible to working-class audiences. Aligned with *Neue Sachlichkeit* (“New Objectivity”), these composers favored clarity and restraint over Romantic excess, often drawing on Bach and Händel. Jazz, symbolizing American vitality and a break from bourgeois norms, influenced much of this music; Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt claimed that 90% of modern music owed a debt to jazz.

Zeitoper, closely linked with Weimar culture and especially Weill, blended jazz elements, popular idioms, and accessible narratives. Křenek's *Jonny spielt auf* (1927), the first Zeitoper, was an unprecedented success, with 421 performances in 45 German cities during the 1927–28 season and further international acclaim. Set in modern spaces like train stations and hotel lobbies, its plot centered on a stolen violin passing from a European virtuoso to an African-American jazz musician.

Although Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* did not belong to Zeitoper nor incorporate jazz, it used a modern idiom to portray the life of a marginalized soldier. Anton Webern, another Second Viennese School composer, conducted the Vienna Workers' Symphony Orchestra and Chorus (1922–1934), funded directly by the Social Democratic Party. Hanns Eisler went furthest in politicizing music, rejecting elite concert culture and denouncing “civilized music” as “musical fascism.” His compositions were unapologetically political, designed for mass engagement.