Abstract

The use of classical music as a tool of propaganda in Britain during the War can be seen to have been an effective deployment both of the German masters and of a new spirit of England in the furtherance of British values and its point of view. Several distinctions were made between various forms of propaganda and institutions of government played complementary roles during the War. Propaganda took on various guises, including the need to boost morale on the Home Front in live performances. At the outset of the War, orchestras were under threat, with the experience of the London Philharmonic exemplifying the difficulties involved in maintaining a professional standard of performance. The activities of bodies such as the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts played a role in encouraging music, as did the British Council’s Music Advisory Committee, which co-operated with the BBC and the government, activities including the commissioning of new music. The BBC’s policies towards music broadcasting were arrived at in reaction to public demand rather than from an ideological basis and were developed through the increasing monitoring of German broadcasts and a growing understanding of what was required for both home and overseas transmission. Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony became an important part of the Victory campaign and there was even an attempt at reviving the Handel Cult of the Nineteenth Century. German music was also used in feature film but pre-eminent composers such as William Walton and Ralph Vaughan Williams contributed to the War effort by writing film music too. The outstanding example is Vaughan Williams’ music for Powell and Pressburger’s Ministry of Information sponsored 49th Parallel, in which the relationship between music and politics is made in a reference to Thomas Mann’s The Magic Mountain. Vaughan Williams’ non-film output included the greatest British orchestral work to have come out of the War, his Fifth Symphony; a work that encapsulated all the values that the institutions of public life sought to promote.
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