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# At the Bauhaus, Music Was More Than a Hobby

The influential design school never had a proper music department. But musical thinking permeated the lives of its students and faculty.

An image from Oskar Schlemmer's "Triadic Ballet," a version of which used a piano-roll score by Hindemith in one of the little-studied collaborations between the Bauhaus and contemporary composers.CreditCreditullstein bild, via Getty Images

DESSAU, Germany — A centennial is often an occasion to reconsider history, perhaps with discoveries to be had in neglected corners of the past.

Take the celebrations surrounding the Bauhaus, the short-lived yet immensely influential art and design school founded 100 years ago. Here in Germany, new museums that revisit its legacy are opening in Weimar and Dessau. (A third, an expansion of the Bauhaus Archive in Berlin, is planned for 2022.) Female students and teachers, overlooked for decades, are finally getting their due in books, film and television.

Maybe it's also time to rethink the Bauhaus's relationship with music.

Although its mission was to combine all art forms, the school never had a proper music department. But musical thinking permeated the lives of its students and faculty. Some took a synesthetic approach to color and tone, or used the language of symphonies to describe

their work; many were amateur instrumentalists who came together in an exuberant, ad hoc band; and some also cultivated relationships with groundbreaking composers, including Schoenberg and Stravinsky.

Schlemmer attempted, without success, to get Schoenberg to compose a score for the “Triadic Ballet.”Creditullstein bild, via Getty Images

“Music was central to the hearts and minds of Bauhaus people,” Torsten Blume, a researcher at the Bauhaus in Dessau who specializes in the school’s theater and dance history, said in an interview. They had a passion for music, but not always the knowledge, he added, calling them “professional dilettantes.”

When Bauhauslers performed music, it was both simple entertainment and — through an embrace of folk and jazz, as well as noisy non-instruments made from everyday objects — an extension of the school’s innovative ethos. In what amounted to a return to fundamental thinking, painters were considering systems of color; sculptors, forms and space. There were experiments with light, materials and motion.

“They were living in an age of change and movement — of media, social and political phenomena,” Mr. Blume said. (The Bauhaus operated from 1919 to 1933, virtually the same

period as the Weimar Republic.) "They thought: If the world is in motion, then we cannot sit still. And the Bauhaus band was making the sound for this idea."

The school's musical history is thinly researched, and barely documented. And the biographies of Bauhauslers who made a life in music, such as the composers Stefan Wolpe (later a teacher of Morton Feldman and David Tudor) and Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt, mention the school as little more than a footnote.

It doesn't help that the Bauhaus's denizens had varied, sometimes conflicting tastes. Paul Klee, an amateur violinist, adored Mozart; Lyonel Feininger, who created the woodcut cathedral that accompanied Walter Gropius's Bauhaus manifesto in 1919, was known to play Bach fugues, and wrote some of his own. But there were also champions of the avant-garde, such as Wassily Kandinsky, who was close with Schoenberg, and Oskar Schlemmer, who used a piano-roll score by Hindemith for a version of his "Triadic Ballet." In experiments with phonographs, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy prefigured musique concrète and the work of John Cage.

"Klee and Feininger were rather backward-orientated," Steffen Schleiermacher, a pianist who has researched and recorded music of the Bauhaus, said in an interview. "Apart from Kandinsky and [Johannes] Itten — later also Moholy-Nagy — the Bauhaus masters may not have been up-to-date as far as contemporary music developments were concerned."

Despite not having a definitive musical identity, the Bauhaus nonetheless had an appetite for what music could offer the worlds of art and architecture. Kandinsky described his works as compositions, using words like "rhythm" and "melody." Scriabin was a house favorite for his synesthetic blend of music and color, which Gertrud Grunow, who taught at the Bauhaus in Weimar, echoed in her theories about the relationships between sound, color and space. Music, to her, was essential for creative energy. And Heinrich Neugeboren, in designing a monument to Bach by visualizing the lines of a fugue, attempted to make literal Goethe's famous description of architecture as frozen music.

Neugeboren's project was never realized, but he did document it in an essay for the Bauhaus Journal. (The issues of that publication, once accessible only in libraries and private collections, are now widely available in a facsimile recently released by Lars Müller Publishers.) He took four measures from Bach's E flat minor Fugue from "The Well-Tempered Clavier" and represented them graphically, the melodic lines shown rising and falling, to reveal the piece's architectural construction without traditional music notation or training.

Neugeboren then created a relief from the lines, cut at a 45-degree angle resembling a cross-section, and placed it on a pedestal — the music, he wrote, "made tangible as an immortal document of impalpable, incomprehensible genius." (In the same essay, he claimed that this process wouldn't work on the less precise compositions of Beethoven, and was skeptical about the potential of making Schoenberg's dodecaphonic music "come alive" through sculpture.)

This unrealized monument is one of many missed opportunities in the Bauhaus's musical history. During the school's Weimar years, 1919-1925, Schlemmer repeatedly failed to

collaborate with Schoenberg: first, in persuading him to teach at a nearby music school, then in having him write a score for the "Triadic Ballet."

Schlemmer began developing his surreal dance work, which is performed today only as an approximated reconstruction, before the Bauhaus opened, but he completed and premiered it in 1922, while he was teaching in Weimar. The costumes had the metallic futurism of the Fritz Lang film "Metropolis," and Schlemmer was looking for a score to match their formalism.

He tried to commission a score from Schoenberg, but nothing ever came of it. For the premiere, Schlemmer assembled a pastiche of classical and Romantic music, with a hint of modernism from Busoni — who at the time was in Berlin teaching, among others, a young Kurt Weill.

"It was what we would today call a playlist," Mr. Blume said. "But if you listen to this classical music and see the motion onstage, it actually creates a great contrast."

Hindemith's piano-roll score has since been lost.Creditullstein bild, via Getty Images

Nevertheless, Schlemmer aimed for something more contemporary when the "Triadic Ballet" was staged as part of Bauhaus Week, a series of events that accompanied the school's 1923 exhibition in Weimar. At the time, Hindemith was experimenting with mechanized music, and offered Schlemmer a piano-roll score he had punched himself. It has since been lost; this year, a staging in Berlin used a modern score by Hans-Joachim Hespos.

(Other performances during Bauhaus Week included works by Hindemith, Busoni and Krenek, as well as Stravinsky's "L'Histoire du Soldat," a piece whose mixed-media spirit was a perfect fit for the Bauhaus. And Stuckenschmidt supplied piano music for Kurt Schmidt's "The Mechanical Ballet," whose score has also been lost.)

Later, when Schlemmer conducted his theatrical experiments in Dessau, where the Bauhaus moved in 1925, he was less particular about musical accompaniment. Writing in the Bauhaus Journal, he said that each production required an "appropriate aural expression," but added, "For the time being, such simple stimulators as the gong and the kettledrum are enough."

Those percussion instruments aren't too different from the ones used in the Bauhaus band, which began as an ad hoc ensemble for parties. "There was no money," Mr. Blume said, "and they needed music." The makeup was roughly that of a jazz combo, with unusual percussive additions brought in from everyday life — even, at times, gunshots and sirens.

Their leader is thought to have been Xanti Schawinsky, who was trained as a saxophonist, though the players weren't known to have ever practiced. Their sound was bastardized jazz and a blend of folk music from their diverse backgrounds: Hungary, Czechoslovakia and elsewhere, including the United States. Occasionally, they would reimagine a piece by Bach for a banjo or some other nontraditional instrument. Adding to the boisterous spirit was stomping, with the complex rhythm of Central European dance.

"This is the attitude of professional dilettantes," Mr. Blume said. "Of trying to understand things as simply as possible. But a dilettante is open to many directions and curious, so you see this in the connection to their sense of experimentation."

Inside the Bauhaus Theater, at the campus in Dessau, the programming was more refined. Issues of the Bauhaus Journal often included listings of recitals, some of which showcased the cutting edge of contemporary music, like that of Berg or George Antheil. One issue mentions a theatrical work in progress by Kandinsky, "Violet," that never came to be; it will have its premiere, completed by a team that includes the composer Ali N. Askin, at the Anhaltisches Theater in Dessau next month. The artist did finish one project for the stage: "Pictures at an Exhibition," using Mussorgsky's score, which premiered at the Friedrich Theater in 1928.

But as the Bauhaus entered the 1930s — often in a financially and politically precarious position, and now on its third leader, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe — concerts appeared less often in the Bauhaus Journal, which itself began to publish less often. Music, always on the periphery, hardly seemed a priority as a Nazi-controlled city council in Dessau forced the school to close and move to Berlin, where it lasted less than a year before being shut down by the Gestapo.

The legacy of the school, however, is in its diaspora. And the musical culture of composers like Wolpe lived on at Black Mountain College, which opened in the United States the same year the Bauhaus closed in Germany. Its first teacher was the Bauhausler Josef Albers, and — in the spirit of truly combining all art forms — music was officially part of the curriculum.

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