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# Eisler and the ‘Coon Song’

Tobias Faßhauer

New Objectivity embraced jazz.<sup>1</sup> This statement is a truism, and, as with most truisms, it oversimplifies the facts. What was labeled jazz in the Weimar Republic was rarely jazz in the modern sense of the term; rather, it encapsulated North and Latin American music that reached back to the last third of the 19th century. In the four decades preceding World War I, Germans had become acquainted with the minstrel and ‘plantation’ song, habanera, spiritual, Methodist gospel hymn, American march, Boston, two-step, one-step, cakewalk, ragtime, tango, and maxixe, and all these genres continued to shape the German image of the Americas and their music during the twenties. Foxtrot and shimmy (whose names were almost synonymous with jazz in Germany) were just two new dances in a trajectory of musical imports from the New World. To be sure, there were indeed new dimensions to German reception of American music after the war. Americanism now became a dominant factor in the national culture of popular music, American dances conquered the realm of art music, new standards of dance band instrumentation were established, and the term ‘jazz’ itself implied a shift of focus from composition to a new kind of performance practice that appealed to audiences for its alleged barbarism and savagery. Still, there seems to be no essential break between German prewar and postwar reactions to American music. To put it pointedly, ‘jazz’ was just a new name for an already familiar if highly dynamic phenomenon, and for that reason we should avoid speaking indiscriminately of jazz reception in Weimar Germany. In my view, the term ‘musical Americanism’ should be used instead.

In fact, the so-called *Kunstjazz*<sup>2</sup> of Paul Hindemith, Ernst Krenek, and Kurt Weill was shaped to a far greater extent by prewar American music than by any contemporary popular style, such as urban blues, New Orleans and Chicago jazz, Harlem stride piano, novelty piano, or the new type of Broadway and Tin Pan Alley song that emerged around 1920. One need only hear the first ‘jazz’ number in Krenek’s opera *Jonny spielt auf* of 1926 to understand that Weimar *Kunstjazz* is deeply rooted in the popular music of the 19th century, and that there was little sensibility for and knowledge of actual jazz. Krenek’s piece,<sup>3</sup> supposedly played by the band of the title character, the

1 This essay is a revised version of my paper at the conference *Neue Sachlichkeit, Political Music, or Vernacular Avant-Garde? Hanns Eisler and his Contemporaries* (Copenhagen, 2015). My thanks go to Nicholas Baer for his English editing and some valuable hints.

2 For a discussion of this term see Ingeborg Harer, ‘Kunstjazz’, *Oesterreichisches Musiklexikon online*, [http://www.musiklexikon.ac.at/ml/musik\\_K/Kunstjazz.xml](http://www.musiklexikon.ac.at/ml/musik_K/Kunstjazz.xml), accessed 2 July 2019.

3 See the piano vocal score (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1926 [U. E. 8621]), Part 1, Scene 3, bars 573–672.

African-American violinist Jonny, behind the scenes, is a strange kind of kozachok with occasional blue notes. Jazz is identified with deliberate primitivism by the composer, thus providing its reactionary opponents with arguments against it.

When Hanns Eisler reviewed the first Berlin production of *Jonny* for the communist newspaper *Die rote Fahne* in 1927, he was especially critical of Krenek's jazz imitations: 'As to the music, it should be noted: The otherwise talented Krenek has completely failed here. ... The interspersed dance pieces are really poor; you can hear better ones these days in any coffee house.'<sup>4</sup> A little later, Eisler, who was striving for a socially effective musical language, adopted Americanist elements himself. His film and incidental music, ballads and fighting songs owe many of their attributes to Kurt Weill, who had developed a much subtler and more refined Americanist style than Krenek had done for *Jonny spielt auf*. But in the works of all three composers, the jazz character that was generally ascribed to them is primarily a matter of instrumentation, or to put it more precisely, of the use of saxophone, banjo, and, in Krenek's case, flexatone. Admittedly, punctuated and anapestic rhythms that were considered characteristic of the foxtrot and shimmy are ubiquitous in their *Kunstjazz*, but syncopation seldom exceeds a degree that can be found in minstrel songs and American cut-time marches. In the music of Weill and Eisler, blue notes are equally rare. Eisler, however, displayed a special predilection for certain 'jazzy' instrumental effects: flutter-tongue, growling trombone glissandi, and the use of wah-wah mutes in the brass.

There are two songs from Eisler's Americanist work of the years around 1930 that stand out, as they do not just critically adopt a general trend in popular music but explicitly address the social background of the musical influences from across the Atlantic. These songs are *Ballade vom Nigger Jim* (1930) and the *Niggerlied* from his music for the anti-war film *Niemandsländ* by Victor Trivas (1931). The way they reflect on the racial aspect of musical Americanism makes them the exact opposite of Krenek's unintelligent and implicitly racist approach to African-American music in *Jonny spielt auf*.

It seems that these two songs by Eisler refer quite intentionally to the German derivative of an American genre, the 'coon song' that had evolved from the tradition of blackface minstrelsy. According to Sam Dennison's definition in the *New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, the coon song is

[a] genre of comic song, popular from around 1880 to the end of World War I, with words in a dialect purporting to be typical of black Americans' speech. The term 'coon' in early blackface minstrel songs had usually referred to the racoon,

4 Hanns Eisler, 'Ernst Krenek: *Jonny spielt auf*', in Hanns Eisler, *Gesammelte Schriften 1921–1935*, ed. Tobias Faßhauer and Günter Mayer, in collaboration with Maren Köster and Friederike Wißmann (*Hanns Eisler Gesamtausgabe*, series IX, Vol. 1.1; Wiesbaden, Leipzig, Paris: Breitkopf & Härtel, 2007), 48–50, at 50: 'Ueber die Musik wäre zu sagen: der sonst begabte Krenek hat hier vollkommen versagt. ... Die eingestreuten Tanzstücke sind sehr dürftig, in jedem Kaffeehaus kann man heute bessere hören ...'.

whose meat was supposedly preferred by plantation slaves ... . Soon the term became synonymous with the slave himself ... . By 1880 the term 'coon' was used disparagingly of Blacks in general ... . As a social phenomenon the coon song epitomized white attitudes of the period toward Blacks. Musically, it was often exciting and innovative ...<sup>5</sup>

In the late 1890s, the coon song became associated with ragtime. This trend is exemplified by Joseph E. Howard and Ida Emerson's *Hello, Ma Baby* from 1899, which found its way to Europe and even seems to have influenced Claude Debussy in the composition of his cakewalk *The Little Nigar*, 1909. Apart from the cakewalk pattern in the refrain (the rhythmic motive  $\text{♩} \text{♩} \text{♩} \text{♩}$  projected onto a two-note pendulum), typical elements in this song include a continuous punctuated rhythm in the verse, so-called ragtime progressions, i.e. chains, or at least pairs, of (secondary) dominants, and especially the disposition of that harmonic pattern in such a way that the double and even the triple dominant appear at phrase endings.

German reception at the turn of the century was little aware of the distinction between the older minstrel songs, like those of Stephen Foster and James A. Bland, and the more recent coon song. This indifference is mirrored by several Wilhelmine collections of what was called *Negerlieder* or *Negergesänge*. The three collections which I consulted for this article assemble music of different types under the same label, mostly minstrel songs, especially by Foster, a few coon songs in the proper sense of the term, and also some spirituals.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, none of the collections gives a composer's name, thus suggesting that all the music they contain is 'authentically' African-American, and what's more, from a folk tradition. (In fact, two of the minstrel songs are written by an African-American composer, James A. Bland, but these conform to the general genre conventions.)

Since Foster's songs influenced German notions of African-American music so deeply, a survey of the German response to the coon song fad should begin with an examination of them. Foster's minstrel style is well exemplified by his *De Camptown Races* from 1850. As is typical for American songs of the mid-19th century, it is written in a kind of double-function form which projects a binary verse-and-refrain structure onto a rounded binary or three-part song form: Within the pattern AA<sup>1</sup> AA<sup>1</sup> BA<sup>2</sup> the strain

5 Sam Dennison, 'Coon song', in H. Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie (eds.), *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, Vol. 1 (London: Macmillan Press Ltd. & New York: Grove Dictionaries of Music Inc., 1986), 493f.

6 Hans Schmid-Kayser (ed.), *Amerikanische Negerlieder mit anglo-amerikanischem und deutschem Text zur Laute oder Gitarre* (Magdeburg: Heinrichshofen's Verlag, [1916]); Max Pilippson (ed.), *Negerlieder-Album. 14 der bekanntesten Coon Songs mit englischem und deutschem Text für eine mittlere Singstimme mit Klavierbegleitung* (Hamburg: Verlag von Anton J. Benjamin, [ca. 1910]); *Negerlieder. Nigger Songs. Auswahl ernster und heiterer, alter und neuer Negerlieder (mit englischem und deutschem Text) für eine mittlere Singstimme mit Klavierbegleitung und ein- oder mehrstimmigem Chor ad lib.* (Leipzig: Max Brockhaus, [1898]).

B and the recapitulation A<sup>2</sup> are defined as the chorus or refrain. Later American song composers would abandon this formal concept, but the rounded binary form survived in Broadway and Tin Pan Alley practice as the standard model for 32-bar refrains.<sup>7</sup> Other elements that contribute to the 'Americanness' of Foster's song include the call-and-response pattern in the verse, the polka-like bouncing quaver pulse, and, above all, pentatonicism. Foster's melody is almost completely pentatonic, while the harmony is confined to the tonic, dominant, and subdominant, the latter being reserved for strain B. The alternation of the tonic and the subdominant, or the 'plagal pendulum', as it could be called, is in fact a hallmark of the minstrel style, especially when combined with pentatonic and syncopated melody. It is exactly this combination which accounts for the national character in the 'American' works of Antonín Dvořák, although it is not an American invention but can be traced back to romantic settings of traditional Irish and Scottish melodies. Ironically, by the early 1890s, when Dvořák was in the United States, American composers had already modernized the style of popular songs, including coon songs, by introducing chromatic harmony and reducing pentatonicism.

German *Negerlieder* of the Wilhelmine era mixed elements of the minstrel song, the coon song, and the cakewalk with native traditions. For obvious reasons, they did not adopt the specific racist stereotypes that marked American minstrel and coon songs, e. g. the standard attributes of African-Americans on sheet music covers and in lyrics: watermelon, chicken, and razor. In a society where black people made relatively rare appearances, the genre would naturally lean toward exoticism. Against the backdrop of the young empire's colonialist ambitions, German composers and lyricists would often combine Americanist musical means with an African ambience of the text, which indicates that the former were indeed seen as black rather than American forms of expression.

More than once, *Negerlieder* dealt with interracial sexual relationships. For example, in the cabaret song *Das kleine Niggergirl* by Walter Kollo and Herman Klink, published in 1908 (see Example 1), a young African woman is tempted by a German colonial governor to cheat on her boyfriend. The text paints a cliché-ridden picture of Africans – the boy is a good dancer, singer, and banjo player – but it also mocks colonialist hypocrisy: 'Black and white match perfectly,' the governor argues, 'I am a patriot.' (Black and white were the national colours of Prussia.)

Kollo's polka-like setting may indicate that pentatonicism was considered a more important feature of African-American music in Germany than even syncopation, and in fact it is handled by the composer in a highly inventive manner. The motivic core of the song is the configuration which opens the vocal line of the verse, a palindrome consisting of a major second and a minor third and embedded in a pentatonic melodic

7 For the evolution of American popular song forms see Ralf von Appen and Markus Frei-Hauenschild, 'ABA, Refrain, Chorus, Bridge, Prechorus. Song Forms and Their Historical Development', *Samples. Online-Publikationen der Gesellschaft für Populärmusikforschung / German Society for Popular Music Research e. V.*, [www.gfpm-samples.de/Samples13/appenfrei.pdf](http://www.gfpm-samples.de/Samples13/appenfrei.pdf), accessed 3 July 2019.

Unserem lieben genialen Chef Paul Schneider-Duncker in Verehrung gewidmet.

Walter Kollo  
Herman Klink.

## Das kleine Niggergirl.

Worte von Herman Klink.

Gesungen von Paul Schneider-Duncker.

Öffentlicher Vortrag für Humoristen  
und Sängerinnen sowie Wiedergabe in  
Grammophonen Phonographen etc. in  
allen Staaten verboten. Zuwiderhand-  
lungen werden strafrechtlich verfolgt.

WALTER KOLLO.

**Allegretto.**

GESANG.

PIANO.

1. Auch in den hei-ssen  
2. Doch liebt' das Nig-ger-  
3. Sei nicht so nie-der-

Zo-nen, im wil-den A-fri-ka, wo schwar-ze Men-schen woh-nen, ist  
weib-chen auch einst ein Gou-ver-neur, doch lä-chelnd sprach das Täubchen, ich  
träch-tig, sprach zu ihr der Des-pot, schwarz, weiss das passt doch prächt-ig, ich

ein Gott A-mor da. Es lieb-te sich ein Pär-chen in schön-ster Har-mo-nie, nun  
lie-be schon mein Herr. Er ist nicht zu er-rei-chen, wo-rin es auch sein mag, 's gibt  
bin ein Pa-tri-ot. Und als im Monden-schei-ne, still schief dje gan-ze Welt, lief.

Copyright 1908 by Harmonie-Verlag, Berlin.

Example 1. Walter Kollo, *Das kleine Niggergirl* (excerpt), taken from *Für frohe Kreise: Musikalisches Elite-Album der bekanntesten und beliebtesten Operetten-Schlager, Tänze, Cabaret-Lieder u. v. a.* (Berlin: Harmonie 1910), 146–48.

context. As the first six bars of the verse demonstrate, the pentatonic scale allows for two transpositions of this motive. When the melodic palindrome reappears in the refrain ('Komm' mein feines, reines, kleines'), the tonal reference point of its pentatonic material is shifted from E $\flat$  to B $\flat$ , the dominant, and the order of its two transpositions



schon so man-ches Jähr-chen und prü-gel-te sich nie. Und je-den A-bend  
 nie-mals sei-nes-glei-chen, in Tanz, Sang, Ban-jo-schlag. Es fällt dir si-cher  
 doch die schwar-ze Klei-ne zu ihm des Nachts ins Zelt. Und durch die Som-mer-

sang-er zu des Ban-jos Klang. Komm' mein fei-nes, rei-nes, klei-nes  
 schwer, ver-suchst du's mal wie er: Ich bin ein cha-rak-ter-fe-stes  
 nacht tönt's an ihr Ohr ganz sacht: Komm' mein fei-nes, dum-mes, klei-nes

Nig-ger-girl oh, oh, oh, komm' zu dei-nen tren-en, klei-nen, schwarzen Kerl, oh,  
 Nig-ger-girl oh, oh, oh, und du bist ein kul-ti-vier-ter, wei-sser Kerl, oh,  
 Nig-ger-girl oh, oh, oh, lass doch bloss von dei-nem wei-ssen, mie-sen Kerl, oh,

Example 1 continued.

is reversed. Interestingly, the first note of the first motive is now the emancipated ninth C of the underlying dominant chord.

The melodic pentatonicism of the song points back to Foster, but in harmony *Das kleine Niggergirl* is indeed close to the latest coon songs. Especially remarkable are the ragtime progression in bars 28–30 and the ending of the first and the third four-bar



double phrases of the verse on the double dominant (see bars 7–8 and 15–16). On its second occurrence this chord is surprisingly resolved into the sixth chord of the supertonic.

Without much musical development, the genre continued to flourish in Germany after the war, while in the USA it fell out of fashion. However, colonial exoticism was now replaced by what can be called the 'Jo(h)nny topos', the portrayal of the black man as a virile, seductive, and immoral musician. As Alan Lareau has observed, there was quite a chain of 'Johnnies' in the popular music culture of Weimar Germany, from Friedrich Hollaender's *Jonny! Wenn du Geburtstag hast* of 1920 to Krenek's *Jonny spielt auf*.<sup>8</sup> (In fact, that topos had been anticipated in a few pre-war songs.<sup>9</sup>) As a critical response to this phenomenon, Eisler's two 'coon songs' were anticipated by the *Niggersong* that was launched in 1929 by the agitprop group 'Rote Raketen'. This song, which Albrecht Dümmling included in his audio documentation of *Entartete Musik* ('degenerate' music),<sup>10</sup> places the performances of black entertainers before a white bourgeois audience within the context of exploitation and class struggle. According to Dümmling, agitprop numbers like this one shed new light on the music called jazz by distinguishing between its producers and its recipients.<sup>11</sup> Musically, the *Niggersong* by the 'Rote Raketen' contains no African-American elements whatsoever but is a quite conventional cut-time quick march.

The situation of black performers to which this song refers is exactly that of one of the protagonists of the anti-war film *Niemandsland*, the variety artist Smile (!), played by American dancer Louis Douglas, who more or less plays himself. This character is introduced by showing him doing a step dance on the stage of a Paris cabaret.<sup>12</sup> The

8 Alan Lareau, 'Jonny's Jazz. From *Kabarett* to Krenek', in Michael J. Budds (ed.), *Jazz & the Germans. Essays on the Influence of "Hot" American Idioms on 20th-Century German Music* (Hillsdale: Pendragon, 2002), 19–60. For the Jonny topos also see Eckhard John, 'Jonny und Jazz: Die Rolle des schwarzen Musikers auf der Bühne der zwanziger Jahre', in Nils Grosch (ed.), *Aspekte des modernen Musiktheaters in der Weimarer Republik* (Münster etc.: Waxmann, 2004), 101–18.

9 See e. g. Arthur Steinke, *Bimbo! Der schwarze Musikant*, lyrics by F. W. Hardt (Berlin: Alfred Sommerfeld, [1912]) and Siegwart Ehrlich, *Cake Walk Bengel* (Leipzig: Pierrot Verlag, 1912); in the latter song the black man is a dancer. As early as 1913 a 'Johnny' – who also arouses erotic desires through his dancing – appears as the protagonist of a song by Osborne Roberts, *Johnny-Rag-Time*, lyrics by Lorand Degré (Braunschweig and Leipzig: Lieder-Verlag). However he is not clearly identified as a black man.

10 Albrecht Dümmling (ed.), *Entartete Musik. Eine Tondokumentation zur Düsseldorfer Ausstellung von 1938*, CD 1, 'Säuberungen', track 8 (Berlin: POOL Musikproduktion GmbH, 1988).

11 Albrecht Dümmling, 'Musikalische Verfahrensweise und gesellschaftliche Funktion: Hanns Eisler und der Jazz', in Helmut Rösing (ed.), *"Es liegt in der Luft was Idiotisches ...": Populäre Musik zur Zeit der Weimarer Republik* (Beiträge zur Populärmusikforschung, 15/16; Baden-Baden: CODA-Verlag, 1995), 118–38, at 123f.: 'Auch auf den Jazz fiel durch einzelne Agitprop-Szenen ein neues Licht, indem zwischen Produzenten und Rezipienten unterschieden wurde.'

12 For a detailed discussion of Louis Douglas' role in *Niemandsland* see Tobias Nagl, *Die unheimliche Maschine: Rasse und Repräsentation im Weimarer Kino* (München: edition text + kritik, 2009), 735–45.

accompanying music is Eisler's *Niggerlied*, as performed by the Lewis Ruth Band in a purely instrumental version. A piano-vocal reduction of the introduction, first verse, and refrain is presented in Example 2.

Why the anti-racist lyrics by Leo Hirsch were eventually suppressed is not quite clear, at least it was not by external censorship. In a free translation, the first verse and refrain read:

It's hot down there in Africa,  
 Therefore I'm black, my heart is white,  
 The skin doesn't care for the heart,  
 It stays that black. Fatal! Scandal!  
 [Refrain:]  
 Défendu d'être noir,  
 Forbidden to be black.  
 My, how can I get rid of it?

Musically, the *Niggerlied* does not owe much to the coon song or *Negerlied* tradition, save for some cakewalk syncopation in the trumpet part (bars 6 and 8) and a ditty-like melody. However, the chordal pendulum in bars 5–8 (the subdominant with added sixth alternating with the tonic) could indeed recall the plagal progressions so common in minstrel songs if it did not appear in B $\flat$  minor (the overall key of the song) but in a major key. The song's most striking harmonic feature conveys unspecific exoticism rather than Americanism: the Aeolian progression i-III-i in the introduction and the refrain.

In general, the *Niggerlied* bears the marks of a typical Eislerian ballad but is distinguished by the conciseness of its basic structure (note however the extension of the verse to nine bars) and shimmy characteristics displayed more blatantly than usual. Here, the driving rhythm and the neo-baroque semiquaver runs of the instrumental accompaniment may embody the social and economic conditions that force the black dancer to dance for a paying white audience, making him the partner in suffering of the 'handsome Gigolo' in the famous tango song (*Schöner Gigolo, armer Gigolo*). The pressure that the show business puts on those who have to make a living in it is cleverly visualized in *Niemandland*: At the beginning of the respective sequence Smile is seen on the stage, bowing to an applauding audience. He then rushes to the side stage to change costumes for the next number, the aforementioned step dance. This change of clothes, in which he is assisted by a stage manager, is shown in time lapse and accompanied by a hectic first rendition of the *Niggerlied*. Finally, a cymbal crash makes him striking the pose for re-entering the stage and putting on the smile that is expected from him, as if at the push of a button. To emphasize the merciless tempo of the show two bars (corresponding to bars 17 and 21 in Example 2) are shortened by a crotchet in one occurrence of the refrain.

**Poco rit.**

The musical score is presented in a standard format with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is 2/4. The score is divided into several systems, each with a measure number at the beginning. The lyrics are written below the vocal line, with German above and English below. Dynamics such as *ff* and *p* are indicated in the piano part. A percussion part is also indicated with 'Perc.' and a rhythmic symbol.

1 In A-fri-ka, da

6 ist es heiß, drum bin ich schwarz, mein Herz ist weiß, der Haut, der ist das

10 Herz e - gal, sie bleibt so schwarz, fa - tal, Skan - dal!

14 **Refrain**  
Dé - fen-du d'êt - re noir, for - bid-den to be black.

18 Es ist ver-bo-ten, schwarz zu sein, oh Schreck, wie krieg ich's weg.

Example 2. Hanns Eisler, *Niggerlied* from the music to *Niemandsland*. Author's transcription of bars 1–21 for voice and piano, based on the autograph full score: Archiv der Akademie der Künste Berlin, Hanns-Eisler-Archiv 921, fol. 1<sup>r</sup>–5<sup>v</sup>.

Eisler's earlier and much better known *Ballade vom Nigger Jim* op. 18/6 with lyrics by Robert Gilbert alias David Weber is the more complex and interesting of his 'coon songs'.<sup>13</sup> Weber's text, which presents its title character as a victim of racial segregation and finally of lynching, pushes racist clichés to absurdity. Having come directly from the jungle, Jim buys a ticket for the tramway of New York where he is attacked by white passengers for entering the 'wrong' compartment. (Actually, there was at least no official segregation in New York City public transportation.)

In formal terms, *Nigger Jim* is a modern song. It consists of an introduction, a verse divided into two parts, as in a number of Weill songs, and a refrain in the rounded binary form typical for Broadway and Tin Pan Alley songs. With regard to musical content, however, one can distinguish between three different layers of style and historical allusion: first, the minstrel and coon song, second, the shimmy according to its contemporary German reading, and third, the blues, which is given a degree of prominence found in no other work by Eisler of that time.

The greater part of the melody, with its jaunty polka rhythm enriched by Scotch snaps, refers to the minstrel style. One melodic element, though, belongs to the late rather than the mid-19th century: the C accompanied by the tonic triad E $\flat$  major, the so-called Viennese sixth, which is approached by the leading tone D as an appoggiatura. An even more modern stylistic level is suggested by the blues inflections of the melody which I will discuss below.

The A strains of the refrain contain the aforementioned minstrel-like combination of pentatonic and syncopated melody with a plagal pendulum, the subdominant being represented by its minor variant in bars 44–45 and 52–53 (both forms of the subdominant appear with the added sixth). On the one hand, the juxtaposition of the major and the minor subdominant within a plagal pattern can already be found in turn-of-the-century cakewalks (including Debussy's *Golliwogg's Cakewalk*),<sup>14</sup> on the other hand, Eisler seems to pay homage here to Kurt Weill's song style, where this device plays a crucial structural role. As in the first part of the verse, the Viennese sixth is integrated in the chordal accompaniment, which would have been virtually unthinkable in pre-war popular music. The repeated syncopated motive that carries the words 'weiße' and 'schwarze Gentle[men]' and is harmonized with the minor subdominant is slightly reminiscent of the 'doodah' exclamations in *De Camptown Races*, although it does not constitute a call-and-response structure.

The shimmy, as the epitome of German 'jazz', is represented by the same characteristics that mark the *Niggerlied* from *Niemandsland*: dance band instrumentation,

13 See Erwin Ratz' piano-vocal score, Vienna: Universal Edition, 1932 [U. E. 3742<sup>f</sup>], and the study score in: Hanns Eisler, *Balladenbuch. 4 Balladen für Gesang und kleines Orchester op. 18*, Vienna: Universal Edition, 1998 [PH 548].

14 See Tobias Faßhauer, 'Amerikanismus bei Weill: A French Connection?', in Andreas Eichhorn (ed.), *Kurt Weill und Frankreich* (Veröffentlichungen der Kurt-Weill-Gesellschaft Dessau, 9; Münster and New York: Waxmann, 2014), 39–62, at 45–48, 56, 58.

stomping quavers in the lower voices of the accompaniment, and the anapestic rhythm in the middle voices, which J. Bradford Robinson identified as an emblematic motive of Weimar 'jazz'.<sup>15</sup> These allegedly jazzy elements are typical for Eisler's works of that period in general, but are not primarily used for their racial or national but rather for their social connotations as stylistic means of international urban entertainment music. The anapestic pattern, by the way, already occurs at one point in Kollo's *Niggergirl* (see bar 17) and can be found in many other songs and dances of the Wilhelmine era.

The blues pervades the song in two ways. First, it infiltrates, so to speak, the minstrel-like melody with the minor third, G $\flat$ . Considering the harmonization of this note with the chord of the lowered submediant, C $\flat$  major, one could debate whether the G $\flat$  is actually a blue note, since the underlying sonority is firmly established in the harmonic vocabulary of late-19th-century popular music, as is the German sixth chord with which it is almost identical. (See for instance the inversion of the German sixth in *Das kleine Niggergirl*, bar 17). The question if the G $\flat$  in Eisler's melody is a blue note or not is decided by the harmonic context: In conventional harmony the lowered submediant and German sixth chords almost inevitably lead to the cadential six-four chord. But in the verse of Eisler's song the lowered submediant is used in alternation with the ninth chord of the double dominant, while at the end of the refrain it is changed to a minor subdominant seventh chord by the subtraction of a third, A $\flat$ , in the bass. Since the G $\flat$  does not emerge from conventional romantic harmony, it may indeed be considered a blue note.

The second manifestation of the blues in the song is much more significant. It consists in the instrumental breaks between each of the first three vocal strains of the refrain and also at the very end of the song. These breaks do not only introduce another blue note, the lowered seventh degree D $\flat$  as an addition to the tonic triad, but also establish in the leading part of the trumpet or respectively of the trombone a triolic 'feel' which contrasts with the otherwise dominant quaver pulse.

There is one verse which lends itself as a key to the interpretation of Eisler's compositional approach, although it was neither included in the printed editions of the song nor by Ernst Busch in his 1931 recording. However, it was published in a special issue of the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* (26/1931), titled 'Leben und Kampf der schwarzen Rasse' ('Life and Struggle of the Black Race'). Translated freely, it reads:

When Nigger Jim played in the jazz band his bar was the nicest one  
 Between Harlem and Manhattan.  
 There the mighty men drank heavily and enjoyed the sentimental songs  
 And vomited on their white cuffs.  
 And they soaked like animals and they bawled like bulls

15 J. Bradford Robinson, 'Jazz Reception in Weimar Germany: In Search of a Shimmy Figure', in Bryan Gilliam (ed.), *Music and Performance during the Weimar Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 107–34.

The moonlight melody.

All were bewitched by whisky and songs and they didn't listen to the new text  
That Jim had made for them.<sup>16</sup>

The 'new text' consists in a variant of the refrain. The statement 'Therefore there's a compartment for white gentlemen' is turned into a question: 'Why is there a compartment for white gentlemen?' ('Warum gibt es ...') According to Albrecht Dümling, this verse 'criticizes the commercialization of jazz that is accomplished at the expense of the musicians'. For Dümling, this conflict is mirrored by the relation between text and music: 'Eisler consciously adopted the motor rhythm of dance music in his setting of the text in order to highlight the contrast between production and reception of jazz, its transformation from a mode of social expression into a commodity.'<sup>17</sup> It should be added that this criticism is not just indicated by a twist between text and music but is expressed within the music itself. Eisler remarked in 1931 that 'you have to distinguish between jazz as a technical matter and jazz as the disgusting commodity which the entertainment industry has made of it.'<sup>18</sup> However, in *Nigger Jim*, the object of his satire is less the latest dance music than the minstrel and coon song, old-fashioned but still effectual music *about* Blacks, which is commented on by music *by* Blacks, the blues. The blues in this song is the musical equivalent to the subversive unheard 'new text' which Jim has written for his white audience. By text *and* music, the coon song is turned against itself, or, as Eisler would have put it, is refunctioned (*umfunktioniert*). We may conclude that Eisler was well aware of both the backwardness and the 'whiteness' of the majority of German Americanist music, including his own, and that he deliberately exploited this deficiency for the purpose of social criticism. Eisler closes *Nigger Jim* with an emblematic blues chord, the tonic major triad with a minor seventh. By this effect, it seems, he wants to tell us that the oppressed classes will have the last word.

16 'Als Nigger Jim bei der Jazzband war, war seine Bar die schönste Bar / Zwischen Harlem und Manhattan, zwischen Harlem und Manhattan. / Da sofften sie mächtig, die mächtigen Herren und hörten die traurigen Lieder so gern / Und bekotzten die weißen Manschetten, und bekotzten die weißen Manschetten. / Und sie sofften wie die Tiere und gröhlten wie die Stiere die Moonlight-Melodie. / Alle waren von Whiskey und Songs wie behext und hörten nicht auf den neuen Text, / Den Jim gemacht für sie!' Quoted from Nagl, *Die unheimliche Maschine*, 750.

17 Dümling, 'Musikalische Verfahrensweise und gesellschaftliche Funktion', 134: 'Die zweite Strophe kritisiert die Kommerzialisierung des Jazz, die auf dem Rücken der Musiker ausgetragen wird. Eisler übernahm in seiner Vertonung bewußt die Motorik flotter Tanzmusik, um den Kontrast zwischen Produktion und Rezeption, die Verwandlung des Jazz von einer sozialen Ausdrucksform in eine Ware hervortreten zu lassen.'

18 Bertolt Brecht, Slatan Dudow, and Hanns Eisler, 'Anmerkungen [zu *Die Maßnahme*]', in Eisler, *Gesammelte Schriften 1921-1935*, 115-19, at 118: 'Man muß nämlich unterscheiden können, zwischen dem Jazz als Technikum und der widerlichen Ware, welche die Vergnügungsindustrie aus ihm machte.'

## Abstract

Americanism is generally regarded as an essential feature of New Objectivity, and, in the realm of music, it is usually equated with the reception of jazz. However, a closer look at the music of Krenek, Weill, and Eisler reveals that its 'Americanist' substance is more shaped by turn-of-the-century genres, such as the cakewalk and two-step, than by any type of American popular music of the 1920s. Thus, musical Americanism constitutes a moment of continuity that links New Objectivity to pre-war popular culture.

Eisler's *Ballade vom Nigger Jim* (1930) and his *Niggerlied* from the film *Niemandsland* (1931) refer in both content and music to the tradition of the minstrel song, and particularly the 'coon song'. The coon song, a vocal genre close to ragtime and essentially based on racist stereotypes, found reverberations in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century, e.g. in Walter Kollo's *Das kleine Niggergirl* (1908), and had an even longer life there than in the United States.

A comparative analysis demonstrates how Eisler's 'coon songs', and especially *Nigger Jim*, turn the genre and its racist implications against themselves. Through textual elements and compositional procedures, the coon song is 'refunctioned' (*umfunktioniert*), as Eisler would have put it. In the case of his coon songs, then, the idiomatic backwardness in relation to contemporaneous American music proves to be an instance of artistic calculus.

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