Ongewunschte muziek: De bestrding van jazz en moderne amusementsmuziek in Duitsland en Nederland, 1920-1945

Wouters, C.A.T.M.

Citation for published version (APA):
This book discusses the suppression of ‘undesirable’ popular music in Germany and the Netherlands between 1920 and 1945. The first part describes how new dances (blackbottom, jimmy, charleston) and Jazz were introduced in these two countries after the First World War. The response of the established music world to the new phenomenon was by and far negative: ‘The world of Jazz reflects inferiority and madness in contrast to the higher art forms’, wrote the German composer Hans Pfitzner. ‘Lewd, wild and loud’, ruled his colleague Karel Mengelberg in the Netherlands. The criticism was couched in a language reflecting fear for whatever was different. Both the dance and music style were described as primitive and erotic. This criticism resonated with many groups within society. Youth leaders and pedagogues associated Jazz with decadence, excessive alcohol consumption and philandering. The churches warned against the ‘sophisticated techniques of lust’ and focused in particular on modern dance.

In Germany, as a result of the agitation by the ‘Kampfbund für Deutsche Kultur’ and the writings of music reviewers such as Frits Stege, who continuously attacked Jazz in the ‘Periodical for Music’ (Zeitschrift für Musik), the debate became highly political. The ‘irritating nigger music’ was the product of American and Jewish ‘Culture Bolsheviks’ and was considered a threat to European civilization. This conclusion was also emphasized in the final rapport of the ‘Dutch Governmental Committee Regarding the Dance Question’ published in 1931. The committee concluded that Europe needed to arm itself against the superficial and instinctual tendencies of American popular culture. However, at this time the consequences of these sentiments were limited to a few changes in the licensing system for hotels, restaurants and bars.

The national socialist government in Germany did also not respond immediately to the appeals to censor Jazz music. After 1933, when the Nazis seized power, the Department for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda first concentrated on the ‘arayanization’ of culture and the establishment of a central power structure. Only after the 1936 Olympic Games did members of the Imperial Music Chamber
(Reichsmusikkammer) and the Imperial Music Testing Agency (Reichsmusikprüfstelle) take steps to cleanse the popular music repertoire from the ‘undesirable elements’ including Swing and Jazz.

In the Netherlands, state sanctioning of popular music remained limited. Only the mayor of Amsterdam, De Vlugt, prohibited public performances of musicians of Surinam descent in 1936. This, however, changed after the German invasion and occupation of May 1940. The measures introduced by Goebbels and the ‘Reichsmusikkammer’ in Germany, were also introduced in the Netherlands. During the first months of the occupation era there were very few actual restrictions enacted, but after the establishment of the Department of Popular Enlightenment and the Arts and the installation of the Dutch Chamber of Culture, musicians, journalists programmers and bar and restaurant owners were flooded with ordinances restricting or prohibiting Swing and Jazz.

Nevertheless, both in Germany and the Netherlands the enforcement of these regulations was rather opportunistic, especially in the case of radio broadcasting. During the 1930’s did the director of the Dutch broadcasting group AVRO, Willem Vogt, relied on listener ratings to program his shows. Goebbels, and later the director for the State controlled Dutch Broadcasting Company (Nederlandsche Omroep) Willem Herweyer, followed suit. Vogt was careful in programming ‘Hot Jazz’ because he feared the music would offend listeners. He relied on the more mellow music of the Kovacs Layos ensemble as a counterweight to the British dance orchestras. Likewise, Goebbels relied on ideologically correct dance music to appease popular demand. This sanitized music also served to counter the Jazz music broadcasted by allied propaganda transmitters without alienating the German soldiers. The musical compromises that resulted from this dual policy of restriction and appeasement led to considerable dissatisfaction, both among the policy makers at the Department of Propaganda as well as among the listeners. Director Herweyer of the Dutch Broadcasting Company was also not able to create an acceptable musical alternative for Swing and Jazz. To keep the listeners tuned to his station he had to compromise the repertoire and style instructions of the Department of Popular Enlightenment and the Arts.

The authorities showed restraint when dealing with radio programming but this was not the case when they dealt with Jazz fans individually. Young Jazz lovers in Germany were at risk. For instance, the activities of the Hamburg ‘Swing Youth’ and similar groups elsewhere were characterized as a blemish on the German ‘Volkskraft’. Their dress and behavior stood in stark contrast with the values and codes of the Hitler youth. Hence, they experienced prison terms, early draft notices for military service and even incarceration in concentration camps. ‘Surveillance of and combating the Cliques are critical to the war effort’, wrote Himmler. In the Netherlands the treatment of young Jazz lovers was less harsh. ‘Swingnozems’
and ‘Sorrij Lummels’ had to deal with curfews, street patrols and an only partially enforced juvenile protection code. The greatest risk was internment into a forced labor unit.

In the Netherlands the moral objections to Jazz music from the pre-war era mostly subsided. Whereas German Swingers who remained loyal to their passion were regarded as traitors, many parents in the Netherlands after 1940 eased or dropped their criticism of Jazz as a result of the changing context. The entry of the United States in the war resulted in a dramatic revision of the negative image of America prevalent during the thirties. Jazz was no longer the music of ‘a primitive and uncivilized nation’ but now belonged to the victorious and the liberators. Syncopation, swing and improvisation were no longer associated with animalistic instincts and eroticism, but represented liberty, individualism and vitality.

Members of the NSB (Dutch equivalent of the National Socialist party) at the Department of Popular Enlightenment and the Arts on the other hand, tried to exploit the old Anti American sentiments and the prejudices against ‘uncivilized Negro music’. They continued to present Jazz and Swing music as a product of a primitive, inferior culture. In that sense they can be considered the guardians of the pre-war norms of respectability and decency which rejected the improvisational dance and music style. Their opposition to Jazz and Swing also served a political motive. Jazz was ‘Feindmusik’, music of the enemy, and should therefore be eradicated from Dutch music programs. In the end this effort proved unsuccessful, but attempts to define Jazz were more successful in the Netherlands than in Germany. In Germany the authorities came up with only brief and vague explanations to justify the exclusion of ‘Niggerjazz’. In 1939 a prohibition of Swing and Negro music in Pommern qualified Hot music as ‘exaggerated yanking’ and ‘howling on instruments’. ‘Howling Musik, irregular rhythms and everything Negroid should be suppressed’, the decree concluded.

Thanks to the contributions of Willem van Steensel van der Aa, the Dutch criteria for evaluating popular music were much more precise in describing ‘Negroid elements’. Van Steensel van der Aa employed musicological terms to formulate arguments against Jazz and Swing. Where the Department of Popular Enlightenment and the Arts initially had to rely on moral arguments, van der Aa presented the objectivity of science.

Compliance with the regulations for popular music was required after the issuance of the Popular Music and Dance Decree in 1943. An official report from those days concluded that ‘the restoration of the European spirit was achieved by stripping the primitive Negroid element, which should be considered a violation of the European sense of sound and composition, of popular dance music’. However, although required by law, the regulations were often ignored because
the authorities lacked the means to enforce them. Nevertheless the fight against 'undesirable music' was to be continued by the Department of Popular Enlightenment and the Arts throughout the German occupation era. Without ever reaching the desired result.