

Neue Sachlichkeit and Schulhoff's improvisations

Erwin Schulhoff, the eldest son of a German Jewish family from Prague, was born in 1894 and died at the Wülzburg interment camp in Southern Germany in 1942. His activities as composer and virtuoso pianist, first based in Germany until 1923 and then in Czechoslovakia are intrinsically related to the cultural, economical, social, and technological changes which define Weimar Germany. Although chronologically, geographically, and ideologically at the periphery of a narrow understanding of *Neue Sachlichkeit* and despite the probable influence of Czech Poetism, Schulhoff artistic activities from 1919 onwards are surely related to the movement. Rather than discussing this relationship through some of his better known compositions, for example the 1930 *Hot-Sonate für Altsaxophon und Klavier* (WV 95) written for the radio and first performed in Berlin the same year, I will focus on two instances of Schulhoff's improvisations. The first musical example is taken from a recording that is representative of Schulhoff's jazz orientated piano duo, regularly broadcast live on Czechoslovak Radio (*Radiojournal*) from 1931 onwards. This piece, entitled *Sami dva* (*Only two*) and whose score remains lost, was written by Schulhoff's duo partner Oldrich Letfus (1900-1959). The second example is *Optimistische Komposition*, the first of Schulhoff's 1936 *Studie* (WV 119). These compositions are remembered as the notated versions of solo extemporizations he performed at workers' gatherings in 1936. *Sami dva* and *Optimistische Komposition* offer a unique opportunity to investigate how improvised performance as art might relate to musical *Neue Sachlichkeit*. Both musical examples stage the characteristics of *Gebrauchsmusik* whose features as musical performance are described in Heinrich Bessler's

Habilitation lecture of 1925 entitled “Grundfragen des musikalischen Hörens”. While Schulhoff’s improvisations rely on communicative mechanisms, respectively the radio and popular gatherings, which are closer to the public sphere than to the concert hall, they nevertheless remain bound to notions of improvised performance as “autonomous” art. These factors, I suggest, might warrant their inclusion in a broad definition of musical *Neue Sachlichkeit*.¹

¹ This essay is an extended version of a paper I gave on September 19, 2015 at the conference *Political Music, or Vernacular Avant-garde? Hanns Eisler and his Contemporaries* organized by the Internationale Hanns Eisler Gesellschaft, the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen and The Royal Library, Copenhagen (DK). It draws on Stephen Hinton’s discussion of *Neue Sachlichkeit* and its relationship with Bessler’s concept of *Gebrauchsmusik* in *The Idea of Gebrauchsmusik: Musical Aesthetics in the Weimar Republic with Reference to the Works of Paul Hindemith* (published in 1989). It also implicitly builds on Nils Grosch’s *Die Musik der Neuen Sachlichkeit* (1999) which examines in detail the cultural and historical changes which characterize the emergence of musical *Neue Sachlichkeit* from the end of WWI to the second half of the 1920s. Quotations from Bessler’s text “Grundfragen des musikalischen Hörens”, whose original 1925 title was “Grundprobleme des musikalischen Hörens”, are from the English translation by Pritchard and Auerbach entitled “Fundamental Issues of Musical Listening”. Unless otherwise mentioned other translations are my own.

The recording of *Sami dva*,² a unique testimony of Schulhoff's understanding of improvised jazz, and the score of *Optimistische Komposition* inevitably confronts us with questions of style. Nevertheless, this paper seeks less to discuss these musical examples in terms of style and form rather than to highlight the similarities between their "communicative, medial, and dramaturgical qualities" and those (possibly) associated with musical *Neue Sachlichkeit* (Grosch 197).

Bessler's *Gebrauchsmusik*

In "Grundfragen des musikalischen Hörens" (1925) Bessler explicitly addresses the "aesthetic" potential of *Gebrauchsmusik* and its participatory and communal aspects. Independently from its political connotations, it is defined as a type of music-making which bypasses "concert-type characteristics" and whose focus is less on "perfection of execution" than on a form of music-making in which "the composer takes a back seat" (52-53). Whilst claiming that this kind of music-making (and listening) has been "pushed aside by the concert", particularly since the Romantic period, he further

² The original recording of *Sami dva* is housed in the archives of Prague Radio. The record is an Ultraphone 78 rpm disc with *Sami dva* on one side and a tango, not discussed in this paper, entitled *Odešla láska* by Tino Marek, on the other. The recording's original title and archival reference is: 1. Tino Marek: Odešla láska. 2. Oldřich Letfus: Sami dva. Hraje klavírní duo E. Schulhoff a O. Letfus. Ultraphon A 10612. Gramofon. archiv Cs. rozhlasu, sign, 8412-8413 (Stara 158). The recording is mentioned in Uggè's article of 1933. Both compositions also appear in some of the radio programs of the Schulhoff-Letfus duo listed in Stara. The recordings of *Sami dva* and *Odešla láska* can be accessed on-line at <http://mws.unibas.ch/forschung/concepts-of-improvisation/>.

qualifies it as music which is “at its most vital when it emerges out of the moment for the sake of the moment” (53).³

Bessler also argues that contrary to autonomous music, “the music of the Minnesänger” or “the Protestant chorale of the sixteenth century” are instances of “art music” which nevertheless remained bound to “the interactions of everyday life” (63).

Gebrauchsmusik, moreover, differs in its reception from autonomous music:

functional music, he writes, “is not to be yielded to passively by an undefined mass of listeners, but rather, the listeners should, as a true community of like-minded individuals, approach the music with an active, expectant attitude” (52).

Schulhoff’s relationship to *Neue Sachlichkeit*

Despite an initial interest in expressionism, Schulhoff rapidly rallied after the war to the contemporary anti-expressionist and anti-romantic movement.⁴ This attitude appears most strongly in his “Revolution und Musik”,⁵ an unpublished text probably written in the second half of 1919 (Widmaier 106).

³ *Gebrauchsmusik* music includes “work songs” (54), “communal songs” (55), “student songs” (55), “songs of allegiance” (56), etc. Bessler also refers to improvised jazz as “an unadulterated” illustration of functional music (dance music) (52).

⁴ While in Dresden (1919-1921) Schulhoff helped create the local Dada group. His friends and colleagues at that time included the founders of the *Dresdner Sezession Gruppe 1919* Lasar Segall, Conrad Felixmüller, and Otto Dix as well as other artists, such as the painter Otto Griebel, the writer Theodor Däubler and the art critic Wil Grohmann, many of whom were also associated with the *Novembergruppe*.

⁵ The text has been published in Tobias Widmaier (ed). *Erwin Schulhoff Schriften*. Hamburg: von Bockel Verlag, 1995, 11-15.

Schulhoff starts his text by defining art as a sensuous experience and claims that human beings will always seek the physical stimulation of art (Widmaier 11). Music, he further asserts, “is never philosophy” adding that “only a bourgeois is capable to believe that art is philosophy” (Widmaier 13). These arguments progressively lead to the text’s main topic, Schulhoff’s criticism of the “sickly intellect” of “romantic-fantastic expressionism”, a category that includes Scriabin and Schoenberg:

All these works of the above mentioned composers [Schoenberg, Scriabin], who determine the new direction, are, though of great importance, more the result of absolute aesthetic rather than rhythmic intuition, they are throughout sound (Klang), respectively tone colour (Klangfarbe), often with an aftertaste of sickly intellect. This direction may be called ‘romantic-fantastic expressionism’. (Widmaier 14)

The final section of “Revolution und Musik” is a quasi declaration of intent of his music of the 1920s, a period which includes his numerous Kunst-Jazz compositions, the first of which are the *Fünf Klavierstücke* of 1919. In this passage, Schulhoff repeats his appeal for rhythm and dance music, referring in particular to contemporary popular dances, i.e. “One-Step, Foxtrott, Tango, Yazz (Jazz) etc.” (Widmaier 15). He also advocates a music which would draw on “real events”, comparing his understanding of music not only to works of Paul Klee, Marc Chagall, and George Grosz but also to the paintings of Teniers (Widmaier 14-15),⁶ a Flemish Baroque artist who painted numerous scenes of everyday life.

In the 1930s, Schulhoff would further develop his idea of musical realism characterized by its proximity to the aesthetic ideals of socialist realism. In 1941

⁶ Probably David Teniers the Younger (1610-1690).

Schulhoff described his compositions of this “third creative period” as music void of “decadent lyricism and hysterical outbursts. It has become hard, inflexible (unerbittlich) and uncompromising!” (Schulhoff’s diary March 18, 1941).

The ambivalence surrounding Schulhoff attitude towards *Neue Sachlichkeit* is particularly striking in his answer to a friendly suggestion asking him to adapt, for the stage (as a ballet or pantomime), his first Symphony of 1925, premiered in Berlin in 1928. In his reply, Schulhoff strongly condemns the use of the term *Neue Sachlichkeit* to designate contemporary music in Germany as in his view “the German never got rid of his sentimentality. The current Bach and Handel renaissance is nothing else but a sign of impotence which is covered up by the slogan ‘Neue Sachlichkeit’”.⁷ Nevertheless, the “sachliche” potential of his music was not restricted to his compositions. While Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt mentioned his “élan musical” in his 1926 article “Der neue Klaviervirtuose” (82), Bek acknowledges the “absence of excessive pathos” and “strict objectivity” (strenge Sachlichkeit) of his pianism noticeable in the 1928 recordings for the German label Polydor (157).⁸

As a pianist, Schulhoff has regularly been described as the perfect post WWI virtuoso, whose anti-romantic attitude was further characterized by “a phenomenal memory, a flawless talent for sight-reading, innate technical aptitudes, and an absolute peace of mind when performing in small or large venues”.⁹ His modern pianism, the capacity to control his nerves in all circumstances, his skills in improvisation, and wide repertoire, which included works from the early 18th century

⁷ Letter to Emil Hertzka, dated May 18, 1928 as mentioned in Bek (84).

⁸ These recordings have been reissued by Parnassus Records in 2014.

⁹ From Brokesova as quoted in Bek (154), originally from Stara (39).

to the 20th century, were additional sought after assets in the ever growing market of live radio broadcasts of the interwar period (Bek 157; Gregor 88).

Improvised free fantasies and improvisation on given themes probably make up the bulk of his skills in extemporization, which he must have acquired in his youth. When and where Schulhoff acquired these skills remains undocumented, although Josef Bek, Schulhoff's main biographer, relates it to his musical education (14). Whether he was capable of improvising fugues on given themes is unknown. However, his brief employment at the Czech State Conservatory in Prague in 1929, teaching "sight reading and figured bass" (Fach Partiturspiel und Generalbass) (Schulhoff's diary, December 10, 1929), suggests that he must have been capable to realize a piano (keyboard) thorough bass part at sight.

Schulhoff was probably also capable of what Riemann's music dictionary of 1908 labels as "fantasia-playing", that is improvisation which "gives free rein to the fancy". This mode of improvisation might account for the compositional process of his unmeasured fantasy-like prose pieces of 1919-1922. Moreover, according to Riemann's dictionary, between the improvised fugue and the free fantasy "stands the varying of a given theme— a fantasia on a melody—of which every ordinary musician ought to be capable". The Czech pianist would later merge these skills with forms of extended tonality, syncopated rhythms derived from African American dance music, and whatever scraps of authentic (African) American jazz he might have come across in the 1920s.¹⁰

¹⁰ Although improbable, one cannot fully discard the idea that Schulhoff heard authentic African American jazz in one form or another in the first half of the 1920s. Nevertheless, and similarly to many of his contemporaries, he did refer to the novelty pianist Zev Confrey as a jazz pianist. A documented contact with a "legitimate" white

Sami dva

Sami dva, translated as *Only two*, is a composition by Oldřich Letfus (1900-1959),¹¹ Schulhoff's first partner in his jazz-oriented live radio broadcasts. The recording is allegedly one of the only two remaining audio testimonies of the Schulhoff-Letus duo. This collaboration started at the beginning of 1931 and had initially been suggested and organized by Karel Boleslav Jirák,¹² the Czech composer and conductor, who in 1930 was also the program director of the Czech Radio Corporation based in Prague (Bek 118).

While these radio broadcasts were partially financially motivated, they were also related to Schulhoff's desire to promote jazz in Czechoslovakia in the same spirit as his failed project of starting a "Gebrauchs-Musik Schule" (school of functional music) in 1931, whose aim was to train Czech musicians in jazz and "radio" music (Bek 120). Schulhoff also composed pieces similar in style and form to *Sami dva*, for example *Pulnocní mátohy / Midnight Ghost* (1933),¹³ which also served as platforms for their improvisations.¹⁴

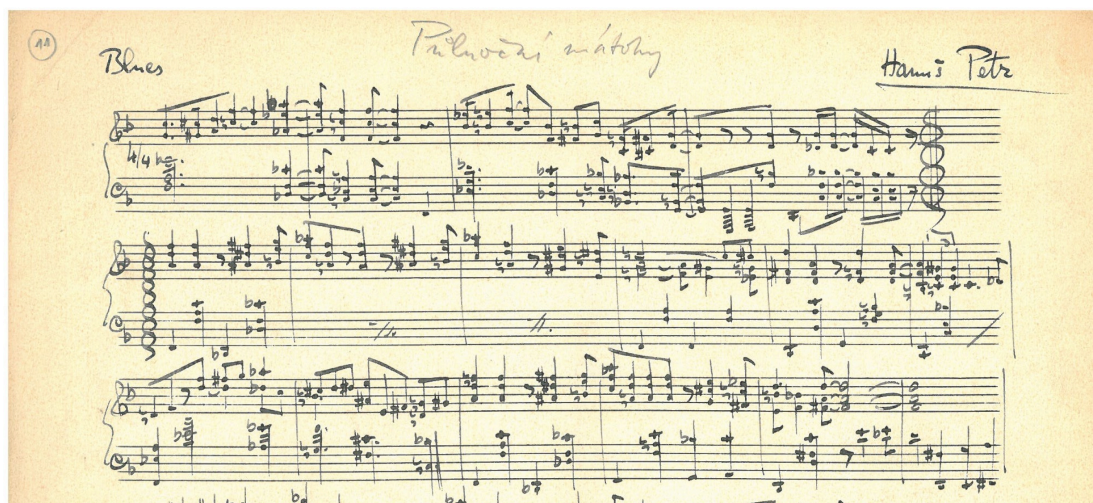
jazz musician took place in 1930, when he performed the radio premiere of his *Hot-Sonate* together with saxophone player Billy Barton as mentioned by Gutman in the journal *Melos* in 1930 (252).

¹¹ For a short biography of Oldřich Letfus see *Československý hudební slovník osob a institucí, svazek první*. Praha (Prague): Státní hudební vydavatelství, 1963, 828.

¹² Stara refers to January 24, 1931 (149), Bek mentions November 13, 1930 as the beginning date (118). The date mentioned in Uggè's 1933 article is December 1930.

¹³ Schulhoff's manuscripts mentioned in this paper are all housed in the National Museum of Prague - Czech Museum of Music. A printed version of his 1936 *Studie* can be found at imslp.org.

Pulnocní mátohy / Midnight Ghost (1933). Signed Hanuš Petr, one of the numerous pseudonyms used by Erwin Schulhoff. Measures 1-16. National Museum of Prague - Czech Museum of Music. Call number: S 173-508.



Possibly in a self-conscious desire not to be associated, as a composer, with this less prestigious musical genre, Schulhoff signed these *Schlager* (hit songs) with pseudonyms, e.g. Hanuš Petr in *Pulnocní mátohy*. While the use of pseudonyms, highlights his ambivalent relationship as a composer to *Gebrauchsmusik*, Schulhoff the performer, or more specifically in this case the radio broadcasting improviser, never felt inclined to mask his name. On the contrary, his capacity for extempore playing was consciously publicised as in a 1933 interview printed in the monthly

¹⁴ Schulhoff was also active as a pianist in Jaroslav Ježek's jazz orchestra at the Osvobozené divadlo (Prague Liberated Theatre) from 1933 to 1935 (Schulhoff's diary, March 10, 1941).

journal of the Czechoslovak Radio Corporation (also named *Radiojournal*).¹⁵ In this article, Schulhoff describes his collaboration with Letfus and claims that these radio events are instinctive musical dialogues between himself and his partner similar to the improvised performances of “pure” jazz bands, the notated scores serving as springboards for their improvisations (Uggè 9).

Sami Dva / Only two, undated (1933?), Oldřich Letfus. Draft transcription from the recording by Carlos Gil Gonzalo (2015), measures 1-20.

While *Sami Dva* was probably part of the duo’s program prior to 1935, it is also one of the pieces included in their live radio experiments of 1936 with Letfus performing from Prague and Schulhoff broadcasting from Moravian Ostrava (Stara

¹⁵ Emanuel Uggè. “Jazzové klavírní duo čili hodinka s prof. E. Schulhoffem a drem Oldřichem Letfusem.” *Revue Ultraphonu* 3 (1933): 9.

132, 139, 149).¹⁶ In the recording, improvisation primarily consists of agogic and dynamic variations of the melodic lines. New material is also added in the form of fills, for example the rhythmic fills introduced in the repetition of part A.

After two distinct introductions of four bars, the piece consists of a regular repetition of two idiosyncratic melodic lines of eight measures each (A and B). Each melodic line is played twice (a + a'; b + b') and then followed by a contrasting section (or bridge). There are three different bridges, two of eight measures and one of four. Each bridge occurs twice throughout the whole performance, whose overall structure is summarized below.

***Sami Dva*, overall structure**

Intro	Intro 1 + Intro 2 (8 measures)			
Part A	a + a' (16 measures)	bridge 1 (8 measures)	a + a'	bridge 2 (4 measures)
Part B	b + b' (16 measures)	bridge 3 (8 measures)	b' (8 measures)	Intro 2 (4 measures)
Part A	a + a' (16 measures)	bridge 1 (8 measures)	a + a'	bridge 2 (4 measures)
Part B	b + b' (16 measures)	bridge 3 (8 measures)	b' + ending (8 + 2 measures)	

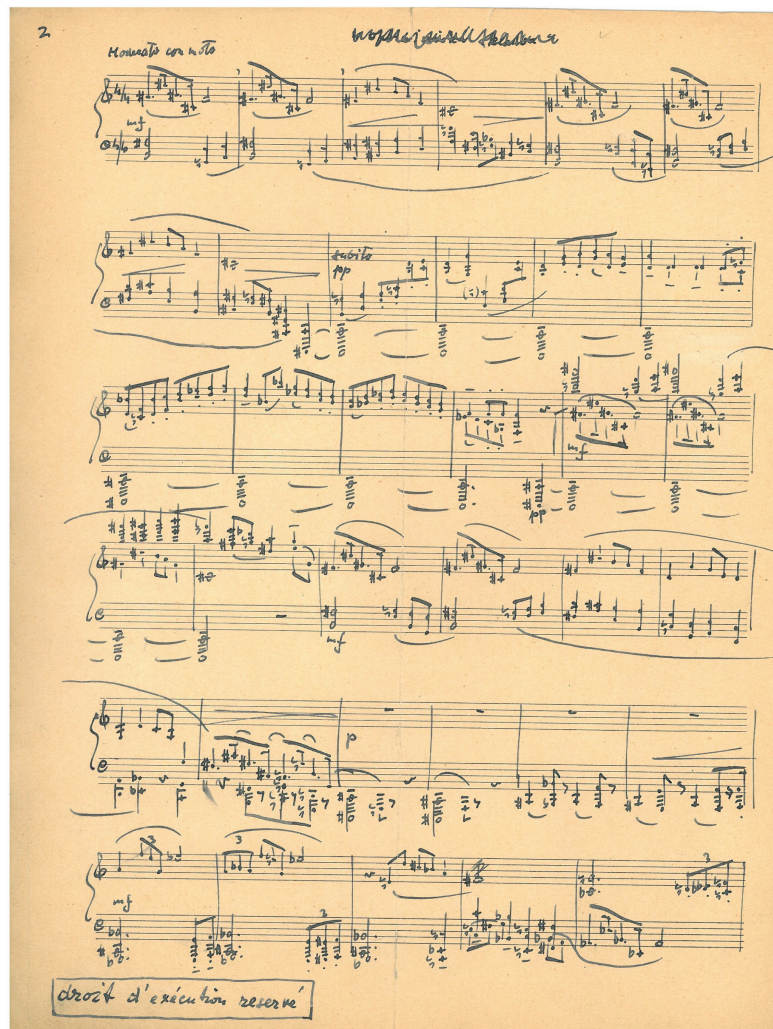
***Optimistische Komposition*, the first of Schulhoff's 1936 *Studie* (WV 119)**

The “frivolity” of *Sami dva* contrasts strongly with the more purposeful music of *Optimistische Komposition*. Schulhoff's improvisation, as notated in the transcription

¹⁶ Letfus's original score of *Sami dva* remains missing. It is neither in the National Museum of Prague - Czech Museum of Music nor in the Prague Museum of Popular Music.

of the first *Studie*, starts with an initial sober quasi-modal polyphonic texture that builds up to a climactic sequence of polychords before returning back to its initial texture. The impression of an arch form is reinforced by the ending, which is a mirror inversion of the initial two phrases (ms 1-8 and ms 9-16). Moreover, the improvisation seems to have mainly relied on the repetition, transposition and variation of the musical material of measures 1-16.

Optimistische Komposition, the first of the 1936 *Studie* (WV 119), Erwin Schulhoff, page 1. National Museum of Prague - Czech Museum of Music. Call number: S 173-335-2.



While the lighter minded jazz oriented improvisations are musically closer to his works of 1920s,¹⁷ these improvisations on “revolutionary songs and on his own themes” (Bek 137), mirror Schulhoff’s compositions of the 1930s. They are similar in spirit to his political songs, for example *Píseň o Thälmannovi / Song about Thälmann* (1933), a genre probably influenced by the songs of Hanns Eisler.¹⁸

The musical events, which included improvisations as well as some of his own compositions, were organized in collaborations with the Czech DDOČ, the Association of Communist Theatre Workers of Czechoslovakia (Bek 137). According to testimonies of contemporaries who witnessed these events, *Optimistische Komposition* was improvised during a memorial evening of the three Ls (Lenin, Liebknecht, Luxembourg) at “an Inn at Herlinger in Silesian Ostrava on January 14, 1936” (Gregor 100-101). Together with *Der Marsch der Tschechischen Arbeiter*, another instance of Schulhoff’s improvisations influenced by socialist realism, they were later notated and regrouped under the title *Studie*.

Schulhoff’s anti-romanticism initially expressed in “Revolution und Musik” is not only reflected in his work as a composer and as a classical interpreter but also in these two instances of improvised performance. Rather than a concert-like display of virtuosity, performed by “the inspired genius that Romanticism valued so highly” (Esterhammer 9), Schulhoff’s examples create the illusion of a participatory and

¹⁷ Schulhoff continued to broadcast in Ostrava, where he had moved to in 1935, together with a new partner Jan Kaláb (1908-1979).

¹⁸ Jiranek claims that “already before the time when, in Germany, the *Ebert* government suppressed the Spartacus League, Schulhoff bound a close artistic friendship with German revolutionary artists, in particular with *Bertold Brecht* und *Hanns Eisler*” (210-11).

communal type of music making: *Sami dva* embodies the latest trends in popular dance music and *Optimistische Komposition* echoes the musical material of popular and/or revolutionary songs. Furthermore, both performances are staged as events unrelated to any type of concert environment. The radio and the public space recreate modern conditions for music listening which mirror Bessler's pre-classical music listening and which, according to the German scholar, favours the audience's active involvement.

In these performances, Schulhoff merges the aesthetic potential of *Gebrauchsmusik* with his contemporized knowledge of classical and pre-classical extemporization techniques, the *Sachlichkeit* of his pianism, and particularly in the case of *Optimistische Komposition*, his understanding of extended forms of tonality. These innovative uses of the artistic quality of *Gebrauchsmusik* remain strongly related, I would suggest, to the notions of agency and inventiveness which characterize "autonomous art" (Landgraf 46).

Conclusion

Although it is possible, there is no evidence that Schulhoff was aware of Bessler's texts or vice versa. However, the aesthetic potential of *Gebrauchsmusik* summarized in Bessler's "Grundfragen des musikalischen Hörens" is strikingly close to the Czech artist's interest in and contact with non-concert types of music making. The text is therefore an important theoretical-historical document related to the evolution of Schulhoff's aesthetic views.¹⁹

¹⁹ Another example of Schulhoff's fascination with functional music can be seen in his article entitled "Manifest zur Wirtshausmusik" (Manifesto to Inn or Tavern music). The text was printed in *Der Auftakt* in 1924 and signed Erwin Hoff. It ends with a call for musicians to first learn music from those performers who have not

As mentioned in the introduction, Schulhoff's oeuvre might remain at the periphery of a narrow understanding of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, especially one that centres exclusively on Weimar Germany. Nevertheless, the artistically staged performance of music as a communal activity rather than as "an object" (Bessler 66), embodied by the performance of *Sami dva* and *Optimistische Komposition*, gives us a novel angle from which to observe the relationship between *Gebrauchsmusik* and musical *Neue Sachlichkeit*, the former being an aspect of the latter, as Hinton has argued in reference to Kurt Weil's understanding of the term (Hinton 90-91). Moreover, if one considers musical *Neue Sachlichkeit* as an aesthetically mediated or induced representation of non-autonomous art, a category which surely includes the type of music-making and listening described in Bessler's lecture, then one can only but consider the *Gebrauchsaesthetik* of Schulhoff's improvisations as related to the "communicative, medial, and dramaturgical" qualities of musical *Neue Sachlichkeit*.

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