

Gilfillan, Daniel: *Pieces of Sound. German Experimental Radio*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2009. ISBN: 978-0-8166-4772-9; 211 S.

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In „Pieces of Sound“, Daniel Gilfillan analyzes the work of various German artists, producers, and theorists who experimented with radio broadcasting from the 1920s through to the present day. For those who do not read German, „Pieces of Sound“ provides an unprecedented introduction to the work of key figures in German radio, including Hans Bredow (director of the Reichs-Rundfunk-Gesellschaft), Hans Flesch (artistic director of Radio Frankfurt 1924-1929, director of the Berlin Radio Hour until 1932), Friedrich W. Bischoff (director of the Silesian Radio Hour 1929-1933), and Alfred Andersch (host of programs on several FRG regional stations in the 1950s). Gilfillan has studied not only theoretical writings left by such individuals, but has also painstakingly pieced together descriptions of their radio productions from production notes, contemporary reviews, the occasional transcript, and the even rarer recording. His work rescuing ephemeral radio productions from the dustbin of history will prove invaluable for German and non-German readers alike.

It is clear that Gilfillan's sympathies lie with these experimental broadcasters and their desire to push at limits of radio, and at times they lead him dangerously close to technological determinism. At one level, Gilfillan is very interested in showing how German radio broadcasting industry was shaped and reshaped by the political and socio-economic framework in which it developed. However, experimental broadcasters are the true focus of the book, and this developmental history becomes simply a „backdrop“ (p. 28) for their quest to forge a unique, artistic and interactive radio in the face of the mainstream tendency to reduce it to a one-way channel for redistributing the cultural products of other media (musical recordings, literature, etc.) to passive listeners. Of course, prior to the 1920s radio was more „interactive“ in the sense that

operators both transmitted and received, and thus Gilfillan's overall narrative becomes one of isolated human visionaries struggling to reclaim certain qualities inherent to radio as a technological device or medium that were lost when it was developed as an entertainment industry. At moments, Gilfillan loses sight of his human visionaries and ascribes the struggle for interactivity to the medium itself, suggesting for example that the Internet component of Atsuhiko Tanaka's 2002 multimedia piece, *Wiretapping the Beast*, „provides for that mode of audience participation and synchronous communication that radio has always longed for“ (p. 20).

Gilfillan is at his best when analyzing discourses, whether the theoretical and artistic productions of German radio pioneers, or the laws and bureaucratic directives that shaped the landscape in which they worked. However, the social historian or historian of technology will be disappointed at the relative lack of attention paid to the interest groups and economic forces that shaped such discourse. For example, when discussing Weimar broadcasting, Gilfillan points to the disjuncture between the goals of an experimenter like Hans Flesch and the dominant Weimar view on broadcasting, as exemplified by Hans Bredow's 1923 statement on the role that broadcasting could play in uniting the nation and boosting morale in troubled economic and political times (p. 45). Based on discourse alone, however, it is difficult to see why Flesch's prescriptions for are „experimental“ and Bredow's „mainstream.“ Both after all held managerial positions in German radio, Flesch as artistic director of one of Germany's larger regional stations and Bredow as director of national broadcasting.

The absence of a solid socio-economic dimension is particularly jarring given that many of Gilfillan's subjects critiqued the radio institutions of their day from a Marxist standpoint. As Gilfillan notes, for example, in 1927 Bertholt Brecht explicitly argued that the bourgeois class had a clear economic interest in ensuring radio duplicated artistic content from other venues, since they already owned that content, and had a clear political interest promoting passive consumer listening as a means of pre-empting social cri-

ticism (p. 89-90). Similarly, in 1950s producer Alfred Andersch designed his *Abendstudios* and *Features* to promote a kind of critical listener engagement that he believed was anathema not only to his Nazi predecessors but also to the commercial culture of his own day. It is difficult to know how to evaluate such critiques without a better sense of the content of ordinary non-experimental broadcasts, how they were financed, and the socio-economic composition of radio personnel and advisory boards.¹ The material and institutional relationships between broadcasters and earlier cultural industries, such as record companies, the press and theaters also deserve greater study. Royalty fees, for example, were a subject of major concern for broadcasters, musicians, composers, and record companies alike, and negotiations over compensation often shaped decisions about what material would be broadcast and what format programs would take.²

Finally, greater attention to broadcasting outside of Germany might also both enhance Gilfillan's work and complicate some of his findings. Social histories of early British broadcasting have shown that early BBC producers also deplored the kind of passive consumer listening that men like Flesch, Brecht, and Andersch fought, although they by no means felt that listeners should have any voice in programming. As members of a bourgeois cultural elite, they tended to see national, publicly funded broadcasting as a last bulwark against the commercialism undermining the moral and mental habits of the working classes and middle-class adolescents.³ At the same time, experimental broadcasters

were not the only radio producers interested in developing more interactive relationships with their audiences. From the 1920s, pioneering American and European commercial broadcasters also sought to involve listeners more directly in their programs. They actively solicited listener mail and read it over the airwaves, designed programs that featured listeners as contestants and guests, live studio audiences, or call-in contributors, and they organized and promoted fan clubs for listeners off-air. Such programming choices were equally innovative in their time, but quickly became an accepted part of mainstream entertainment broadcasting, and one wonders how Gilfillan's conclusions about experimentation, mediacy, and interactivity might change if they were added to the picture. Similarly, while Gilfillan's discussion of Radio Dreyeckland, and its transformation from pirate to alternative community station is fascinating, he makes no mention of the most famous European pirate stations: Radio Luxembourg in the 1930s⁴, offshore stations like Radio Caroline in the 1960s, and frequency modulation (FM) pirates in the 1980s. The producers and artists who manned these stations presented an equal challenge to mainstream conceptions of radio as an industry, a medium, and a technology, but one that was not necessarily incompatible with profit, the transmission of commercial pop music, or the promotion of passive consumer listening.

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¹ Although Gilfillan mentions a need to attract audiences and revenue from license fees, he does not specify the exact relationship between them or pursue this line of questioning for later decades. A useful source would have been Karl Christian Führer, *Wirtschaftsgeschichte des Rundfunks in der Weimarer Republik*, Potsdam 1997.

² In the United States, for example, the growth of radio audiences led performers and composers to demand greater royalties and appearance fees, which in turn encouraged broadcasters to develop national networks that could offset the increased costs. See Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio. The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934*, Washington, DC 1994.

³ See especially, D.L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy. Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars*, Oxford 1988, p. 138-154.

⁴ Radio Luxembourg was legally licensed by the Luxembourg government, but denied an internationally sanctioned frequency until after World War II.