The Jazz Republic

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Chapter 3

Writing Symphonies in Jazz:
Paul Whiteman and German Literature

When I put on . . . one of the magnificent records from Paul Whiteman, I immediately become another person. My pulse is elevated . . . , I imagine the most colorful images and a tremendous need for action (Tatendrang) overtakes me. I then say to myself: “You have the most magnificent symphonies by Mozart and by Bruckner, works that you would go through fire for. . . . And yet—this fantastical effect the music of the jazz band has, you still haven’t felt that with any of them.”

—Jaap Kool (1924)

Symphony and jazz existed at the center of much of the debate about musical culture during the Weimar Republic, in particular through the controversial practice of jazzing the classics, be they Mozart, Beethoven, or Wagner. Together, the pair formed what could often seem like a self-writing script of German jazz criticism—both for the music’s proponents as well as its opponents—pitting an almost sacred symphonic tradition against a profane and racially other jazz. Of course, what made the combination of the terms so evocative was that cultural, musical, and aesthetic developments were constantly threatening to bring the two into ever-closer proximity. As the above statement by ethnomusicologist Jaap Kool hints at, symphony and jazz seemed to exist in worlds apart, yet they were also worlds that seemed to be in a constant state of collision. This meant that in many instances, neither jazz nor symphony could be thought of in this period without also invoking its other, and perhaps no greater representation of their collision existed than the musical genre of symphonic jazz. Most closely associated with the white American bandleader Paul Whiteman, from at least 1926 onward, symphonic jazz dominated the German jazz scene while at the same time shaping German musical culture in innumerable ways.

Still, the importance of symphonic jazz to Weimar culture goes far beyond
its role in German popular music. Beyond this, symphonic jazz and its promise of unifying tradition with modernity (and vice versa) became especially attractive to Weimar-era novelists. Just as composers like Ernst Krenek attempted jazz operas, novelists tried their hand at producing jazz novels. Czech-born Hans Janowitz’s Jazz. Roman (Jazz. A Novel) (1927), Alsatian René Schickele’s Symphonie für Jazz (Symphony for Jazz) (1929), and the Swiss-Austrian Gustav Renker’s Symphonie und Jazz (Symphony and Jazz) (1931) are each examples of such jazz novels, or more specifically of the symphonic jazz novel.\(^2\) Put differently, I want to suggest that each novel represents an example of a literary response to the challenge of symphonic jazz. In this set of novels, symphony and jazz become organizational figures around which these authors experimented with jazz’s aesthetic potential. Significantly and unlike the music’s use in much Weimar literature, jazz in these works acts not primarily as a symbol of social disorder, a Dionysian, racialized, sexualized other, but as an experimental aesthetic. In other words, these works explore, with all its attendant contradictions, the idea of symphonic jazz as synthetic melding of modernity and tradition, as an aesthetic capable of structuring and making manageable the foreign and modern.

To be sure, this pairing of jazz music and German literature may at first seem unlikely, yet it serves two very important purposes. The first is to rethink symphonic jazz and its meaning for German jazz culture. While Whiteman’s name is by no means unknown, the popularity of the corpulent, white Whiteman during the 1920s regularly serves as proof that Germans did not listen to and/or were unfamiliar with African American jazz. If this argument is an important corrective to anachronistic visions of Weimar Germans listening to Louis Armstrong, James P. Johnson, or Fletcher Henderson, as we saw in the previous chapter, by the mid-1920s, African American jazz was routinely felt to be more representative of authentic jazz than white American jazz, albeit for vastly different reasons than today. Yet, the stakes of Whiteman’s symphonic jazz during this period were simultaneously greater and less than was recognized by Weimar critics: greater because symphonic jazz’s influence extended beyond popular music and less because Whiteman’s jazz was hardly the only way by which Weimar Germans came into contact with the music.

Tellingly, such dismissals of Whiteman stand largely in parallel to current judgment regarding the Weimar-era jazz novels of Janowitz, Schickele, and Renker, which aside from isolated treatments have been for the most part ignored within general accounts of the period’s literature.\(^3\) Separately, these works are the isolated endeavor of a one-time novelist (Janowitz), a minor work by a major author (Schickele), or the conservative rant of an author ob-
sessed with racial and cultural purity (Renker). Yet when read together as a set of novels responding to the aesthetic challenge of symphonic jazz, an entirely new sense of their significance emerges. In their common focus on the relationship between symphony and jazz as a means of engaging with modernism, literary and otherwise, they stand as an index not only of the wide-ranging influence of Whiteman but of the profound ways by which jazz affected German culture in the 1920s. In other words, they propel jazz in German literature beyond the superficial and gesture towards the music’s presence at a formal and structural level. Or to speak with a language indebted to jazz itself, these authors use symphony and jazz not as a self-writing script but as a jazz standard: a well-known, popular melody, onto which each author sought to produce a new version through improvisation, variation, and addition. Writing symphonies in jazz, each attempted to carve out a space within the center and, in so doing, gave birth to a new literary genre, the symphonic jazz novel.

It is significant here that this literary genre owes its existence not only to the American Whiteman but to three novelists from the margins, geographically and culturally. Because of jazz’s transnational and geographically indeterminate position, figures like Janowitz, Schickele, Renker and many others seem to have been particularly attracted to jazz as an object of identification and self-expression. As had Grosz and Dix in the early 1920s, these figures use jazz, their encounters with and representations of the music, as a means of symbolically creating a new German culture into which they not only fit but have a hand in creating.

**Paul Whiteman in Berlin**

Still, their experiments owe a great debt to the idea and form of Paul Whiteman’s symphonic jazz. Before looking at Janowitz, Schickele, and Renker, it is first necessary to examine Whiteman’s project as well as the reaction to his music in Germany following his Berlin concerts of June 1926. Born in Denver, Colorado, to a local music teacher, Whiteman’s early life was spent far away from traditional centers of early jazz music in New Orleans, Chicago, or New York. It was only in 1918, he notes in *Jazz*, a 1926 work coauthored with Margaret McBride, that he first heard the music: “My whole body began to sit up and take notice. It was like coming out of blackness into bright light. [ . . . ] I wanted to dance. I wanted to sing. I did them all. Raucous? Yes. Crude—undoubtedly. Unmusical—sure as you live. But rhythmic, catching as the
small-pox and spirit-lifting. That was jazz then.” Soon thereafter, he quit his work for the symphony and turned to playing popular music and jazz. Despite early setbacks (including being fired for not being able to play jazz correctly), he eventually became a sought-after arranger of popular jazz-influenced music on the American West Coast. Out of this early success, he was offered a job playing at the Ambassador Hotel in Atlantic City, where the Victor Recording Company discovered and signed him. In August 1920, he recorded “Whispering,” with its B-side “Japanese Sandman.” This recording is said to have sold more than a million copies and made Whiteman a national and international star. As discussed earlier, Whiteman’s music had an almost immediate impact on the German jazz scene. His “Japanese Sandman” was not only recorded by early jazz pioneer Eric Borchard in 1921, it was also the subject of an early treatment by the German-speaking Prague author Max Brod in 1922.

Yet quite possibly, Whiteman would have remained one name among many in American popular music had he not attempted his “Experiment in Modern Music” in February 1924. There, Whiteman introduced his peculiar fusion of jazz and symphonic music that came to be known as “symphonic jazz.” This concert, held at New York’s prestigious Aeolian Hall, attempted to demonstrate to an elite audience that jazz deserved to be recognized as America’s classical music. As well as jazzed-up selections of popular music, it was here that Whiteman premiered what was to become George Gershwin’s signature piece for the next decade, Rhapsody in Blue. With this concert, Whiteman hoped to showcase the music’s transformation into something that no longer belonged in the brothels of New Orleans’ Storyville district but in the concert hall. This raising up of jazz also had a racial component. “My notion,” he wrote in 1926, “is that the chief contribution of the white American to jazz so far has been his recognition of it as legitimate music.” Whiteman’s attempt to separate jazz qua legitimate art form from its African American roots and transform it into the national music of white America has rightly been criticized. Yet his view of jazz also seeks to rearticulate the relationship of American to European culture, specifically by claiming that jazz belongs amongst the pantheon of great national musics. In seeking to put American jazz music on par and in dialogue with European music, Whiteman’s aspirations were shared by many of his contemporaries, including African Americans like Sam Wooding. To quote Paul Allen Anderson, Whiteman was “not alone . . . in fusing vernacular source materials with large-scale and orchestral instrumentation and scored-through compositions. New Negro composers and concert artists were pursing a simultaneous campaign of syncretism, idiomatic formalization and bourgeois vindi-
cation.” Whiteman’s symphonic jazz should thus be understood as both exploiting Black musical traditions as well as part of the broader trend towards greater appreciation of the aesthetic value of American music and culture.

Word of Whiteman’s successes with symphonic jazz soon spread to Germany, and by 1925, German musicians were embracing this new style of music. Not merely an idea, Whiteman’s model was copied by numerous German musicians and arrangers of the period. Bernhard Etté, Marek Weber, Dajos Béla, Julian Fuhs, Efim Schachmeister, and others became implicit ambassadors for symphonic jazz in Germany through the numerous recordings and performances of their “jazz symphony orchestras” (Jazz-Symphonie-Orchester). There were many reasons for the rapid adoption of symphonic jazz. For one, with members numbering between twenty and thirty, symphonic jazz orchestras represent a considerable enlargement over the small group formations of early jazz, common in both America and Germany during the early 1920s. The larger size of the orchestra meant employment for greater numbers of this profession still struggling to cope with losses due to technological innovations like gramophone and radio. Second, symphonic jazz moved the emphasis away from the practice of collective improvisation, something particularly difficult for the conservatory-trained musicians who made up a significant proportion of Germany’s popular ensembles. Though in America the exactness and precision characteristic to performances of symphonic jazz was intended to put jazz orchestras on a level approaching that of the symphony orchestra, classically trained German musicians were simply much better suited to this new form. Finally, from the monetary perspective of practicing musicians, a turn towards symphonic jazz was attractive because it was said to earn a great deal more money. Whiteman, for example, was quoted in the German trade journal Der Artist as saying: “Musicians who had before earned 30 to a maximum of 60 dollars a week, were paid upwards of 150 dollars a week by first-class jazz bands.” For all these reasons, then, Whiteman’s brand of symphonic jazz appeared especially attractive to Weimar-era musicians.

Still, a full two years passed before Whiteman personally presented the case for symphonic jazz to German music critics as opposed to musicians. By the time he reached Berlin, there was a great deal of anticipation. In fact, no other jazz concerts of the period were as widely discussed (or publicized) as Whiteman’s Berlin concerts. Like Sam Wooding’s performance in the Admiralspalast, the site of his concerts was also significant, Erik Charell’s Grosses Schauspielhaus. Designed by Hans Poelzig in 1919 for Max Reinhardt, in the mid-1920s, Charell’s theater featured mid-brow entertainment; but with 3,200 seats, this largest theater in Europe was certainly befitting the
visiting jazz dignitary. Indeed, the American was feted by the German press throughout the month of June; the *Berliner Zeitung* is even reported as having hired a plane to take Whiteman on an aerial tour of the city. Photographs and caricatures of Whiteman were widely reprinted in the daily newspapers, as were regular reports about the concert. For example, an image of Whiteman playing multiple instruments adorned the cover of *Lustige Blätter*, a popular illustrated magazine. One extreme instance of the attention allotted Whiteman during his stay in Berlin occurred when a reporter submitted an article after happening to cross paths with the jazz king on Potsdamer Platz. Whiteman responded by giving numerous interviews to reporters as well as authoring a text about himself for the *Berliner Tageblatt*. According to Albert Henschel, who reviewed the concerts in *Das Tage-Buch*, Berlin was barraged with publicity in anticipation of Whiteman’s arrival: “Placards screamed for weeks: King of Jazz! Jazz Symphony Orchestra!” A report on the Berlin concert from Paul Goldmann for the *Neue Freie Presse* in Vienna noted that Whiteman’s face, his thin mustache and upper lip, were all recognizable before he took the stage due to such publicity. Not only placards, however. Like the *Chocolate Kiddies*, Whiteman also held open rehearsals for the press and was visited by academics, as well as by the composers Arnold Schoenberg and Franz Schreker. In addition, a competition was held for the best German foxtrot, with the winning entry receiving its world premiere during Whiteman’s final Berlin concert. Based on the rehearsal, the *Vossische Zeitung* published an initial article praising the musical virtuosity of Whiteman’s orchestra and the sensation about to happen in Berlin.

By the time Whiteman reached the German capital in June 1926, he had already enjoyed a warm welcome from other European audiences, such as in London. Yet what Whiteman could not know was that Berlin’s music establishment would approach his project not with excited anticipation but with skepticism. So that while Berliners sold out his four concerts and heartily applauded the performances, the response by Berlin’s music critics remained rather cool. Indeed, according to one Whiteman biographer, it was in Berlin that his music met with harsh criticism for the first time. The origin of such resistance is not to be found in the German musical establishment’s rejection of American popular music or even of jazz, as the generally warm response of the press to Sam Wooding and the *Chocolate Kiddies* demonstrates. Nor can the generalized antipathy displayed by reviewers towards symphonic jazz be explained simply by pointing towards jazz’s controversial nature in this period. Instead, as I want to argue, the cooler reception of Whiteman’s symphonic jazz by Berlin’s music critics can best be understood when viewed alongside the question of the per-
ceived decline of the classical European symphony in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

This period witnessed a prolific decline in the number of symphonies produced by European composers. Against the grandiose monumentality of the symphonic form, after 1908 and Schoenberg’s “emancipation of dissonance,” a new generation of composers turned increasingly towards the musical miniature: suites, quartets, and small ensemble chamber music. The period of progress in symphonic composition that could be located between Beethoven and Mahler seemed to have come to an inglorious end. It was, in fact, the professional music critics, those who were most critical of Whiteman, who, according to Karen Painter, kept the form alive as it were. Through their writings, the symphony was imbued with even greater cultural worth than it had in the nineteenth century, transforming the symphony into a central cultural icon of the early twentieth century. As Painter summarizes: “During periods of crisis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, writers repeatedly turned to the symphony and symphonic analogies to reconcile an ideal wholeness and unity that stood opposed to the atomizing effects of democracy, industrialization, and urbanization.”

Out of the musical form of the symphony, these music critics created a cultural trope meant to undergird the German musical establishment against the incursion of modernism and modernity. If the symphony became a sign of tradition threatened, jazz was a primary symptom of that threat. Delivered in raucous, three-minute urban miniatures, it was no less threatening to the idea and ideal of the symphony than an atonal composition by Schoenberg. Perhaps no greater sign of this trend away from the symphony could be found than in the person of Mitja Nikisch. Son of the famed conductor of Bruckner and Beethoven, Arthur Nikisch, the younger Nikisch became one of the Weimar Germany’s best-known practitioners of symphonic jazz. The stakes for German music critics were therefore high; jazz seemed to be taking over the world, and, if the word from abroad was to be believed, Whiteman’s symphonic jazz threatened the concert hall as well. Indeed, just after his Berlin concerts, the satirical magazine *Simplicissimus* featured a caricature of the jazz king Whiteman holding Beethoven’s death mask and commenting “There is one thing I have on him—my music has made a lot people thin” (figure 9). If the threat of jazz to the symphony is clearly lessened through the caption, the image of Whiteman literally holding Beethoven in his hand next to a drum set featuring Native American imagery is suggestive of jazz’s potential power over the classical tradition in the contemporary moment.

Of course, not all of Berlin’s critics fretted over this possibility; some modernists like Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt awaited Whiteman’s arrival more
Figure 9: Cover of satirical magazine Simplicissimus from July 5, 1926, featuring a caricature of Paul Whiteman by Wilhelm Schulz (1865–1952). Courtesy of Dr. Hans Zimmermann of the Herzogin Anna Amalia Bibliothek Weimar.
or less with dispassion, while others like Hans Siemsen embraced the idea. On May 28, 1926, Siemsen reworked his “Jazz-Band” article from 1921 to welcome the news that Whiteman would be appearing in Berlin. Siemsen opens this piece by repeating certain statements from this earlier text but then adds to it by filling in the past five years of German jazz history. Speaking of those from the province who don’t know what a jazz band is or think it to be a trap drum, he notes: “they still don’t know that a jazz band is nothing more than an orchestra constructed according to new principles, whose tonal possibilities are more complicated, richer, and adaptable (wandlungsfähiger) than those of the old . . . orchestra.” He mentions Eric Borchard as the first musician who brought real jazz to Germany and names Sam Wooding and Julian Fuhs as further examples of authentic jazz. Rejecting the earlier clown-like performances of drummers from the period around 1921, Siemsen ends by saying about jazz: “There’s no more joking around. It creates real music.” Much in tune with Whiteman’s own presentation to the Berlin press, jazz for Siemsen has become a serious matter, a serious music, rather than the mere parody thereof. As Whiteman explained to the readers of the Berliner Tageblatt: “We don’t intend to jazz well-known pieces or, as has been done in Germany, execute jazz variations on well-known motifs. Rather, we want to create something new.” Distancing himself partially from the entertainment sphere traditionally understood as jazz’s rightful home, Whiteman emphasizes that he “did not come to Europe to create a sensation for the Europeans. I’ve come to pave the way for the development of futuristic music.” Whiteman, then, wanted to show how jazz had developed into an art music in the strong sense, how it had developed beyond an initial imitative stage and had begun to create unique musical compositions of its own.

Likewise, Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt also authored a piece in anticipation of the concerts. Stuckenschmidt was an important liberal music critic and part of the Berlin Dada movement. In the year 1926 alone, he defended “mechanical music,” wrote separate paens to gramophones and revues, and declared Sam Wooding’s jazz band the “true highlight” of the Chocolate Kiddies. In a word, he was precisely the type of critic for whom Whiteman’s music would seem to have been made. Like Siemsen and Whiteman, Stuckenschmidt suggests that jazz has developed into an art form from the clowning and joking present at its origins, but he also sees in this development a danger that “this most joyous expression of contemporary humanity will go to waste as a result of seriousness and compositional method.” Equally notably, he outlined how he felt the German audience would receive Whiteman and his attempt to elevate jazz to the concert hall as the music of the future. Analyzing
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Whiteman’s place within jazz, and, in turn, jazz’s position within modern culture, Stuckenschmidt writes:

Paul Whiteman, King of jazz, accessible to Germans up to now only through gramophone records, has to his merit that he made these principles acceptable for the concert hall.

With his orchestra . . . he deftly and with the clearest of instincts drew symphonic consequences from jazz. In February 1924 he made a triumphal debut at New York’s greatest concert hall, the Aeolian Hall.

In June 1926 he will tour Germany.

Snobs will have fits of lust. Spectacles will shatter with fright. Musicians will dedicate scores.

And only some will recognize: here one of the most typical emanations of the Zeitgeist of the 20th century’s first half has been formed.33

Jazz emerges within Stuckenschmidt’s positioning of Whiteman and his symphonic variant as a cool, calculated, rational emanation of modern culture. The emotion surrounding Wooding’s appearance of but a year prior is absent, replaced by this reading of jazz and Whiteman as but “the most typical emanations” of modern culture and society.

After weeks of preparation by newspaper articles, advertisements, and airplane tours, Whiteman finally presented his concert program to the Berlin public on June 26 with Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue as its centerpiece (figure 10).34 As with Wooding’s performances with the Chocolate Kiddies, the concert program allows us to better understand the presentation of Whiteman’s symphonic jazz to his audience and contextualize certain idiosyncrasies within the reviews. Most notably, the program contains explanatory notes by noted musicologist Hugo Leichtentritt, who based his remarks in part on Whiteman’s recently published coauthored monograph Jazz. Over two dense pages, audience members learned of jazz’s history and aesthetic developments, and of the virtuosity of Whiteman’s band members. Though certain grotesque, i.e., low-cultural, excesses remain, as Leichtentritt writes in summary: “Paul Whiteman views in jazz the first specifically American musical practice (Betätigung). He leaves open the question of whether jazz has already been elevated to the level of true art. He is, however, profoundly certain that jazz is doing great service for the matter of art in America.”35 Following the introduction, two separate concert programs are included. The first, which was the subject of almost all critical writings, was performed on Friday, Saturday, and Monday evening, as well as the Sunday matinee, with the second apparently offered only once on
Figure 10: Berlin program of Paul Whiteman’s Concerts at the Grosses Schauspielhaus (1926).
Sunday evening. As such, I will focus here solely on the first program, a variation of concert programs Whiteman had given previously on his European tour. It began with Ferde Grofé’s “Mississippi,” which is described as a musical depiction of a trip down the Mississippi river, modulating in style as it takes the listener south towards New Orleans in four movements. The second piece was “Five Popular American Melodies”: the jazz standard “Tiger Rag,” Fritz Kreisler’s “Caprice Viennois,” Zez Confrey’s “Dizzy Fingers,” “Spain,” likely by Gus Kahn, and concluding with Ray Henderson’s “I am Sitting on Top of the World.” The medley was followed by Chester Hazlett’s saxophone solo of the song “Nadine” by B. Hinton. Fourth came “Castles in the Air,” and the fifth piece was “Meet the Boys,” a standard of Whiteman concerts in which individual band members were featured. Also included, though not listed in the program, was Whiteman’s smash hit of 1926, “Valencia,” which was referred to in many reviews of the concert. The program then indicated that an intermission would take place. However, this intermission, as well as the concluding piece, a number to be picked by audience, was skipped for the premiere concert, something that caused some confusion on the part of reviewers. Instead, the program at the premiere ended with what was to be the highlight of the concert: George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*, which as the notes for this piece make clear, became famous after Whiteman debuted it as part of his Aeolian Hall concert in 1924.

The premiere began at 10:00 p.m. and continued until after midnight. It was warmly received by the audience, though according to Whiteman’s biographer, the jazz king had been particularly nervous about the reaction, given what he perceived as the cold demeanor of the Berliners. Most of the reviews that appeared over the next few days began by discussing the marketing campaign that had now gone on for weeks, as well as referencing that all of Berlin society had been present. Almost all of them praised the virtuosity and technique of the Whiteman orchestra. Equally prevalent in the reviews, however, was their rejection of the idea that the concert demonstrated that Whiteman had created a new art form for the future. Despite, or perhaps because of, the framing of Whiteman’s concert by Stuckenschmidt and the coordinated media campaign, Whiteman emerges in the view of Berlin’s music critics as a disappointment. “Before one knows what Whiteman is,” begins the reviewer of the *Vossische Zeitung*, “the concert was at an end.” The reviewer was amazed that at the precise moment he had expected the concert to have an intermission, it was over. Even more negatively, Hans Feld in the *Film-Kurier* maintained that while Whiteman has created perfection in the realm of dance music, “Paul Whiteman is no musician. For this reason, it would be better if he would refrain
from giving concerts and playing symphonies.” Similarly, Dr. Leopold Schmidt wrote in the *Berliner Tageblatt*:

When one heard of the triumphs of Paul Whiteman and his “Symphonic Jazz Orchestra,” there appeared to threaten danger that the boundaries between art and artistry (*Kunst und Kunstfertigkeit*) could be altered. Now we have been satisfied with our own ears by the results of the *Grosses Schauspielhaus* and can be reassured. Jazz remains jazz, whether one plays it well or poorly . . .

Schmidt’s fear of jazz infiltrating high culture receded, as his expectations of jazz as the music of the future were not met. As he writes, the concert “disappointed those who awaited two things: jazz itself and an art developed from jazz that was forward looking.” Along a somewhat different vein, the reviewer in the *Berliner Montagspost* noted of the performance: “Whiteman has really separated jazz from dancing and it almost appears as if the public senses the importance of this day for aesthetic production, even if the originators themselves remain stuck in the variety theaters.” Referring to the continued presence of African American and Black jazz musicians, who, other than Wooding, could never dream of the press and attention heaped on Whiteman, this comment is an important reminder that Whiteman’s jazz, while often the most visible, was not the only example of jazz heard by the German public.

Returning to Whiteman’s June 1926 concerts, one can say that *pace* Stuckenschmidt there were no fits of lust and spectacles did not shutter with fright. Instead, reviewers conclude one of two things from Whiteman’s concert: first, that what they heard that evening was no threat to the classical tradition, or second, that there was more symphony than jazz in Whiteman’s concerts. For example, the reviewer for the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* began his review by noting that “from the perspective of music as art . . . , there is hardly anything serious to be said about that which Mr. Whiteman and his cohort perform.” Or, as Klaus Pringsheim more pointedly wrote a short while later: “We are thankful for the visit of Paul Whiteman because it has given us clarity about that which our future music has to expect from jazz. It has nothing to expect from jazz.” Instead of reeling back in horror or disgust at the grotesque, blasphemous nature of jazz, reviewers repeatedly suggest that Whiteman’s symphonic jazz music is banal and backward looking. Indeed, the tone of many of these critiques borders on mockery. “The symphonic attempts . . . point namely in the direction of the past: ‘Mississippi’ by Ferdy [sic] Grofe towards the area of Grieg; the ‘Rhapsody in Blue’ by George Gershwin is an extremely banal
matter, filled with romantic platitudes.”

Or, from Schmidt: “the pair of ‘symphonic’ pieces . . . , the ‘Mississippi Suite’ or the ‘Rhapsody in Blue,’ — my God, what kind of feeble (dürftig) music is that!”

Even Oscar Bie, who had so greatly praised Sam Wooding, said that these pieces were “undeveloped, of thematic and tonal, rather than musical interest.”

Finally, musicologist Walter Schrenk, writing in the Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung, concluded: “If jazz is to acquire an intellectual and musical meaning apart from a technical one, then it must first create a corpus of significant compositions. What we heard yesterday, the ‘Mississippi’ by Grofe or ‘Rhapsody in Blue’ by Gershwin, was insipid and uninspired, lacking any value whatsoever (ohne irgendeinen diskutablen Wert).”

Yet if Stuckenschmidt’s prophecy that snobs would be appalled at this music did not come to fruition, one assertion did: namely, that a few would see in Whiteman a prototypical example of the modern Zeitgeist. Another prevalent theme of the immediate reviews of Whiteman’s Berlin appearance was that here the culture of New Objectivity, of Americanism, consumerism, and machine-age modernity could be seen flourishing. Frank Warschauer’s article, written seven days in advance of the concerts, typifies this tendency. For Warschauer, jazz, however one may feel about it, is simply, objectively an elemental component of modern society and moralizing about its status or debating whether it is art or commerce, German or American, does little to change this fact.

The same question always arises: whether it [jazz] is art or could some day become art. Answer: the question either cannot be answered at all or at least not immediately. [. . .] It bears repeating that the method usually applied in Europe is pernicious: to point a pistol at every new phenomenon with the demand that it reveal its ultimate aim and pass the test of whether it can be designated art!

Yet as such calculated acceptance of jazz replaced the subjective moralizing of writers like Schmidt, this often resulted in abstracting jazz from its individual elements and transforming it into a mere vocalization of American society, rationalization, and modernity. In other words, Whiteman’s music and persona were often put to the type of trite and predictable uses in the culture war of traditionalists versus modernists that typifies many German discussions of jazz. One example of this is an article in Der Deutsche that simulates a discussion between anti- and pro-jazz critics, in part using passages from earlier textual discussions of jazz. The opponents predictably fail to reach a compromise
and, in the process, frustrate each other and the reader. As the anonymous au-
thor concludes: “In this discussion, two worlds talk across each other. For my
part, I’ll be buried with jazz.” Yet if the “King of Jazz” Whiteman was never
accepted by Weimar’s music critics, the remainder of this chapter will suggest
that Whiteman and his symphonic jazz did exert an influence commensurate
with his chosen moniker in another arena, namely in German literature. For it
was in the jazz novels of the period that not his music but the structure and idea
of symphonic jazz took hold.

Jazz Literature and the German Jazz Novel

Of course, an author didn’t have to be familiar with, let alone be a fan of White-
man, to include jazz in his or her works. Numerous authors of the period used
references to jazz within works from the period. From well-known authors like
Hermann Hesse and Thomas Mann to lesser known authors like Bruno Frank,
Claire Goll, Vicki Baum, Hedwig Hassel, and Klaus Mann, discussions of sax-
ophones, drums, shimmies, foxtrots, Black performers, and other indicators of
the jazz milieu abound within Weimar literature. Even in novels featuring the
word “jazz” in their title, such as Felix Dörmann’s Jazz. Wiener Roman (Vien-
nese Novel) (1925), the music acts as little more than a surface phenomenon, a
mere reference to cultural disorder, rather than gesturing towards the evoca-
tive, if still ill-defined, category of jazz literature. Instead, jazz most commonly
was deployed within Weimar literature as a reified symbol of modernity. As
Marc Weiner summarizes: “Viewed within the cultural vocabulary of the time
as fundamentally antithetical to German cultural traditions, [jazz] both acted as
an icon of non-German forces and provided an acoustical screen for the projec-
tion of fears regarding rapid and violent political change in postwar Ger-

For most writers, then, jazz was more often than not used as a ready-
made symbol of the present, either to be rejected or embraced.

In order to address the ways in which jazz was transformed from its use
as literary topos into a literary form in the novels of Janowitz, Schickele, and
Renker, it is first necessary to investigate what jazz literature would and could
look like to Weimar Germans. Writing in 1927, critic Friedrich Hirth attempted
to understand modern French literature as “literary (literarisierter) jazz.” Searching for commonalities in the post-war French literary scene, Hirth coun-
terintuitively suggests that the work of young French authors tends towards the
grand and colossal. He writes: “A generation that has experienced something
like the world war, can, at base, do nothing other than to aspire towards the
colossal in order not to feel minimized and overwhelmed.”59 Yet, he specifies that these are colossuses with feet of clay: “One might be tempted to compare the newest French writing with a symphony in which new motifs are continually arising. But it is in the essence of the symphony that in the end all motifs and motif beginnings merge with each other. The young French writers do not aspire to any form of merging (Zusammenfassung).”60 Instead of harmoniously uniting individual tones, notes, sounds, and instruments, in this contemporary French jazz literature, the independence of the individual elements is maintained. So that while figures and motifs may sound out simultaneously, they remain fundamentally isolated from each other. For Hirth, this polyphony without harmony is precisely the jazz quality of the new literature. As he writes of his experience reading it: “One almost has the sensation of listening to a gigantic jazz band (Riesenjazz) executed by machines.”61

Hirth’s analysis, with its diagnosis of jazz literature as narrative progression without telos is strikingly similar to Hans Janowitz’s *Jazz. Roman (Jazz: A Novel).*62 To be sure, Janowitz is hardly a figure with whom most would today associate jazz. Instead, he is most famous for his coauthorship with Hans Meyer of the film *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1920). Nonetheless, Janowitz’s jazz novel is a worthy follow-up to this masterpiece of cinematic history. Like *Caligari,* the novel is richly evocative and resonant with broader modernist impulses and can be said to reveal important undercurrents of German culture and society in its modernist experimentation.63 Staging the setting in the then distant future of 1999, Janowitz’s novel begins with his narrator’s attempt to explain the interwar period to contemporary readers living in the “United States of Europe.” Opening the novel in clear, stylistic parody of Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities,* the reader learns of the 1920s: “It was the time of the ‘page boy’ hair cut, it was the time of the ‘short skirt,’ ‘flesh-colored nylons,’ it was the time of prodigal sons and kidnapped daughters” (JR 6). Not only through such grandiose and futuristic evocations does Janowitz’s novel follow Hirth’s description of literary jazz, his novel also displays narrative dissonance. Interruptions, elliptical thoughts, and elisions fracture the narrative of the novel to such a degree that the reflection of the times promised in the opening is more akin to a cubist’s refraction of reality than any form of realism.

The plot begins on a train from London to Paris, where the main character, named Lord Henry, meets Madame Mae R. The two immediately delight in deceiving the other passengers: she pretending to faint and he pretending to be a medical doctor capable of attending to her. After arriving in Paris, Lord Henry responds to an advertisement for musicians and meets the other members of the soon-to-be world famous “Lord Punch’s Jazz Band Boys.” Instead
of chronologically narrating the group’s predictable rise to fame and fortune, Janowitz introduces a separate narrative thread surrounding the figure of Arpad, a Hungarian Eintänzer, or dancer for hire.\(^{64}\) As if playing a similarly coquettish game with the reader’s expectations, Janowitz’s narrator continually veers from the ostensibly principle voice, Lord Henry and his Jazz Band Boys, towards such minor notes. As Jürgen Grandt summarizes: “The narrative voice [in \textit{Jazz: A Novel}], much like the jazz musicians, leaves the basic melody of the story-line behind and improvises to elaborate on anything and everything.”\(^{65}\) In point of fact, while the section on Arpad ends with the narrator’s promise to return to jazz, the text instead sheers in yet another direction.\(^{66}\) Such narrative misfires and misdirection are central to the novel and can be viewed as part of its attempt to recreate jazz in literary form. As the narrator informs the reader in a \textit{mea culpa} to his literary conscience:

I am aware that I’ve portrayed the characters a bit superficially and arbitrarily (\textit{eigenwillig}) and thereby violated on numerous occasions the law of the epic: to provide exposition of the characters through the action and not to ‘narrate’ (\textit{schildern}) the figures of the action. Professional writers aren’t likely to forgive me for this. If one grants me the mitigating circumstance that I’m writing a jazz-novel, either as an excuse or apology, this can be used to demonstrate that this book is no typical novel. I believe there are different laws governing it, just as the laws for a work of jazz are different than those for a sonata for piano and violin. (JR 25)

One senses here more than mere bravado, more than the superficial exploitation of jazz as a literary subject, for example in the oblique reference to the literary-musical coupling of Beethoven’s and Tolstoy’s \textit{Kreutzer Sonata}. Rather, the text gestures towards an understanding of jazz as aesthetic form, something that cannot be incorporated into traditional culture (here, the form of the novel) without consequence. Put differently, one senses that the narrator feels jazz pushing back at him, back at literature.

In a very important way, then, Janowitz’s novel is less about jazz than a jazz piece itself. Or as one reviewer put it: “This jazz novel is not so much, as is promised at the beginning, the story of ‘Lord Punch’s Jazz-Band-Boys,’ than it is a story composed and executed in the manner of jazz music.”\(^{67}\) The title, \textit{Jazz: A Novel}, already hints at this productive tension. Here, the generic subtitle “A Novel” is not merely a convention, but exists to connect the two terms “jazz” and “novel.” Most explicitly, the terms’ seeming separation through the colon is easily erased through the substitution of a different form of punctuation, as the nar-
rator does in the above quotation, to form a “jazz-novel” (*Jazz-Roman*) from *Jazz: A Novel* (*Jazz. Roman*). The significance of the proximity between these two terms is, I would suggest, the very meaning of the work. Through its conscious exploration of the formal rules of the novel, Janowitz is investigating the ability of traditional literature to narrate the new. Whereas most other authors saw little difficulty in this matter, deploying jazz as symbol of anarchy, rebellion, primitivism, etc., the fact that Janowitz bothers to ask this question is significant, even if, as I later show, his response remains ambiguous.

While overall *Jazz: A Novel* suggests that modernity’s newness has progressed to a point beyond which traditional narrative form can be relied upon to contain and represent it, Janowitz’s rather traditional narrator struggles with this fact—it is, of course, only with a guilty conscience that he has proceeded with the jazz novel. More significantly, jazz is not the only aesthetic form put forward in the novel as a model for representing the new; instead, jazz remains but one, certainly privileged, example amongst many. All these various attempts eventually exhaust themselves, and the novel concludes on a particularly pessimistic note regarding the very possibility of representing the new. As the narrator states to close the novel:

> As one sees, in general our ensemble fared exactly just as well as every living ensemble on the earth has for a few thousand years—with every day they lost a new day of their lives. The old flaw (*Fehler*) that everything living is condemned to live from its capital, rather than only off the interest. This old fundamental flaw of creation is to blame if in this matter we have nothing new to offer, even to the reader of a jazz novel. (*JR 122*)

As the multiple strands of the plot are finally brought together, the narrator reaches what are, for him, the limits of the jazz-novel: death and ending. While jazz may demand new modes of representation, aesthetic innovation cannot fundamentally alter life and consequently its representation in art. The unexpected entrance of death retroactively undercuts the freedom towards which the narrator seemed to have been striving.

In order to understand why the narrator figures the work as a formal failure, it is necessary to turn the analytical screw once more, to consider the work not only as a jazz-novel but as a novel about jazz, in this case about symphonic jazz. For one, it is important that within the narrative, loose though it may be, Lord Henry and his Jazz-Band-Boys progress from rowdy, anarchic “jazz band boys” in the beginning to members of a jazz symphony orchestra towards the end (*JR 111*). More than merely reflecting the history of jazz in Germany,
when read in the context of the critical rejection by music critics of symphonic jazz as a backward-looking pseudo-revolution, the shift to symphonic jazz also serves to signal the narrator’s turn against jazz. Like the critics who came to view in Whiteman’s jazz but a dressed-up salon orchestra, Janowitz’s narrator slowly but surely gives up on his initial dream of jazz. Most important here is not that he gives up on jazz but how he does so: through a shift in the narrator’s own understanding of the project from jazz novel to jazz symphony. Towards the end of the novel, the narrator states: “I don’t think we even have to be there when our ensemble slides into a catastrophe. This would perhaps suffice as an exciting climax to a dime novel, but cannot provide the final movement of a jazz symphony. It must be said again that different laws are governing the music of these pages than those for a sonata for piano and violin or even a banal finale of an operetta” (JR 111, emphasis added). This is repetition with a difference. The substitution of symphony for novel alters how the references to Tolstoy and operetta function: instead of existing above, or at the very least beside, jazz, they now clearly exist below them.

For if Whiteman took the listener on a journey from “primitive” jazz to “elevated” symphonic jazz, the narrator sees himself taking the reader on an equally important journey through modern literature: mixing the high culture of Dickens and Tolstoy with contemporary, more popular modes like the detective novel. Still, while Whiteman’s “Experiment in Modern Music” was in many ways a demonstration of the brilliance and modernism of symphonic jazz, Jazz: A Novel ultimately exists as a eulogy of this attempt. Though the incorporation of jazz initially pushes the narrative towards ever-greater crimes against the literature, in the end, the narrator pushes back at jazz and does so by way of symphonic jazz. As he suggests in the novel’s conclusion: no matter how daring the escape, no matter how dissonant and syncopated the individual moment, there will always exist a point of ending, a last page, a final word, jazz-novel or not. Still, it is important to remember that though Lord Henry (and the narrative) fails not as jazz band boy, but as part of a jazz symphony orchestra, the narrator refuses to distinguish between the two. Moving from the jazz novel to jazz symphony and then in the final scene back to jazz novel, Janowitz’s narrator ultimately conflates the failure of symphonic jazz with the failure of jazz itself.

**Symphony for Jazz**

While Jazz: A Novel struggles to understand jazz’s significance for German literature, Janowitz’s project of writing the German jazz novel continued in the
works of two other authors, René Schickele and Gustav Renker. Though neither of these later works shares the radical form of *Jazz: A Novel*, their engagement with jazz, symphonic and otherwise, as well as the legacy of Whiteman’s project, combine to form a German jazz literature of its own. Unlike Janowitz or Renker, René Schickele clearly belongs to the canon of German literature. Highly praised for his trilogy of novels *Das Erbe am Rhein* (*The Inheritance on the Rhine*) (1925–31), Schickele’s *Symphonie für Jazz* (*Symphony for Jazz*) appears at first glance to offer relatively little new insight into the meaning of jazz for Weimar literature. It covers the life of composer and jazz musician John van Maray, who makes his way across Europe as a successful popular artist. Early in the novel, van Maray will marry a young woman named Johanna. As the plot progresses, however, their marriage becomes increasingly strained and, after separating, each seeks out a space of his and her own, his wife finding a new life in Berlin, while van Maray moves between Lake Constance, Paris, and Southern France. It is the timing of the separation that is of most interest here. The couple separates just as van Maray sets about composing a jazz symphony, and his progression in the composition inversely mirrors the state of his relationship with Johanna: the more he succeeds with it, the further apart the lovers grow. The two will eventually reconcile at the van Maray home on Lake Constance, but only after van Maray has tossed his saxophone into the lake, thereby forsaking American jazz.

Though unlike Janowitz, Schickele authored further novels, he, too, never returned to the subject of jazz. While the work’s manifest subject matter stands out against his other works, its treatment of Franco-German relationships and, even more so, the strong similarities between the relationship of the composer van Maray to his wife Johanna and writer Schickele to his wife Anna Schickele, firmly place it within the broader context of his oeuvre. The question must arise then: Does it matter at all that Schickele wrote about jazz? The first point to make in this regard is that Schickele’s work can be seen as in conversation with Janowitz and the discourse of symphonic jazz. Beyond the obvious fact that each novel contains a composer who creates a jazz symphony, at the level of content, both works use the saxophone as an organizing metaphor and include a Josephine Baker-like character. Equally important are the formal similarities. Like Janowitz, Schickele uses his jazz subject as motivation to experiment with language and narration. He begins the novel with an onomato-poetic homage to the sounds and rhythms of jazz, such as in the opening line of the novel: “Bäbä, tu. Bäbä, tut. Tut! Bäbä.” Combining, inverting, defamiliarizing, Schickele is playing with these terms and others in the novel’s opening as he moves words, ideas, and sounds like so many pieces on a chessboard—
indeed, nowhere in the novel is he as jazzy as in the opening pages. At the same time, there is much more at stake here than mere play. First, his word play eliminates language’s representational power, and its reduction to sound, rhythm, and form can be read as an attempt to mimic the non-representational nature of music. Second, and by contrast, the ultimate end of Schickele’s opening gambit is not to disregard language’s capacity to signify in a turn towards abstraction. Instead, this opening creates a disjuncture of language and meaning in order to create a space of freedom, which Schickele can later fill with new meaning. Indeed, all the terms referenced in the opening four lines, though stripped of context and content, will come to have very specific meanings within the narrative. For example, “bäbä, tu” is associated with the sound of van Maray’s saxophone and serves as a leitmotif throughout the novel, while a seemingly random reference to a kangaroo will later appear in a discussion regarding technological progress (SFJ 252–57). The language of the opening section is thus both a play with language, demonstrating Schickele’s jazz chops, as well as a straightforward narrative device used to introduce themes from the novel.

At the same time, Schickele’s opening is a hard act to follow, and the remainder of the novel proceeds in a much less radical manner. As Kurt Martens notes in his critical review of the work, it isn’t clear from the first lines whether Schickele “intends to objectively represent the style of jazz, adapt his writing to it or develop it *ad absurdum*.” If Schickele leaves this question in many ways unanswered, the novel nonetheless builds upon the Weimar jazz literature project in significant ways. After van Maray returns from touring abroad to Lake Constance, two central events take place that simultaneously shape the novel’s trajectory as well as reveal a potential debt to the debate on Whiteman. The first involves the symphonic work for which the novel is named. Having tired of his life as a popular jazz musician, John van Maray travels to the Alps, where he is inspired to write a “symphony for jazz band” (SFJ 53). Upon his return, he proclaims to Johanna: “Let’s go! I’m writing a symphony for jazz, strings (*Streicherkorps*), and organ” (SFJ 54). The specification of “jazz band” and then jazz’s serialization with strings and organ transform the significance and meaning of the novel’s title, which here cannot mean a symphony dedicated to jazz, but rather only to one written for jazz ensemble, i.e., a specific set of instruments. In other words, instead of placing jazz qua musical form on relatively equal footing with the symphony, jazz is here subsumed under the symphonic form, existing alongside and in apparent harmony with traditional bourgeois string instruments and the religiously coded organ. This constellation, as is hinted at in van Maray’s initial description of the piece, can also be
read historically as a reversion from contemporary popular music to bourgeois
religious music. As he explains to Johanna, the symphony will tell “the en-
tire history of us bipeds. From our departure from the jungle to . . . nickel-
plated instrument cabinets. . . . You’ll have nothing to laugh at” (SFJ 54–55). In
part following the seriousness of Whiteman’s experiment in modern music and
in part satirizing the culture of New Objectivity, jazz is ultimately framed in the
work as the loveless result of modern progress from which van Maray desires
to escape.

Yet if van Maray would seek to control jazz by positioning it underneath
the symphony, a jazz experience that evening at a hotel will disrupt his mo-
nopolization of the debate. Shortly after he has announced his intention to
write a symphony, van Maray and Johanna attend a performance by a jazz
band. During the performance, Johanna admits to van Maray that she is in love
with the band’s drummer. As with other depictions of the drums, race plays an
important role here. Though the drummer is white, an “image of a Negro bar-
ing his teeth” is painted upon a percussive metallic surface of his drum (Schlag-
blech) (SFJ 57). Schickele’s description here generally recalls the paintings on
early drum sets such as that seen on the drum of the unidentified jazz band in
Danzig or the one in Dix’s To Beauty. Unlike these examples, however, the im-
age in Schickele has to be continually painted anew as the drummer’s daily
strikes upon it are constantly erasing it. This inventive detail suggests that
jazz’s Blackness, its “primitivity,” exists in a state of tension with its moder-
nity, here represented by the metallic surface upon which the image is painted.
The very next evening, Johanna and van Maray once again attend the nightly
concert of the jazz band, during which they bear witness to the following sen-
sational scene involving the drummer:

At the evening concert the man struck the drum with the mockery of a
self-important Roman augur (“gives me the chills,” whispered Johanna
and timidly edged her knee towards mine under the table)—as planned,
the music stopped to let this single drum hit resound. The man gasped
(schnappte), opened his mouth wide, and blood shot out. The stream of
blood formed an arc and landed exactly on the rim of the drum. The
painted negro skull snarled its teeth. (SFJ 60)

This scene depicting the gory death of the white jazz drummer and competitor
of van Maray raises any number of important questions about the role of Black-
ness within jazz discourse in the late 1920s. In order to answer these questions,
however, it is necessary to investigate the cultural meaning of both the drum
and the saxophone, the instrument associated with van Maray and the one he will toss into a lake at the novel’s conclusion.

That within German and European discussions of jazz the drums were commonly associated with Blackness is well-known from chapter 1. As an instrument dedicated to rhythm in a culture that coded melody and harmony as intellectually superior, before the introduction of jazz, the drums were generally viewed as an instrument of but minor importance for the future of European music. With the entrance (and popularity) of jazz during the first-half of the 1920s, the instrument takes on exceeding importance and quickly became the primary symbol of this music. As we’ve seen, the connection between the jazz music and the drums was so strong that drummers were routinely called “jazzers” and a trap drum set simply “jazz” or “jazz band.” By the time Schickele was writing in 1929, the importance of the drums to jazz had receded significantly. No longer were they the only or even primary symbol of jazz music. Instead, that honor had shifted to the saxophone, which will see increased popularity and production until the stock market crash in 1929 and continue as a means of connoting jazz and modern, American, and foreign dance music well into the 1930s.

The shift reflected in German jazz culture generally and implied within Schickele’s novel specifically can also be connected to the development of symphonic jazz, however. For example, when German jazz critics like Alfred Baresel advised saxophone players to be able to play more than one variant of the saxophone, from bass to soprano, this was due to the practice of doubling within symphonic jazz orchestras, something obviously tied to Whiteman’s popularity, though by no means to his alone as this was also practiced by musicians with Sam Wooding. Revealing a similar historicizing look at jazz in Germany is Otto Dix’s famous Großstadt-Tryptychon (Metropolis-Triptych) from 1927. In the background of the center panel of this masterpiece of New Objectivity, one sees a caricatured Black drummer waving a drumstick in the air, while the foreground features a band dominated by the white saxophone player and in front of him stands a gigantic bass saxophone. The number of saxophones in this very famous painting is thus neither coincidental, nor exaggerated, and here again the indirect influence of Whiteman’s symphonic jazz on Weimar representations of jazz can be seen. Returning to Symphony for Jazz—through the death of the drummer and the almost simultaneous rise of the new jazz composer van Maray and his saxophone, Schickele restages the dominant narrative of jazz’s development during the 1920s.

In one sense, the hotel jazz band functions as an historical remnant of jazz
history, and the death of its drummer stands for the ascension of the saxophone and the white symphonic jazz composer—Lord Henry, John van Maray, and Paul Whiteman. Yet within Schickele’s novel, this transformation from drum to saxophone, from jazz band to symphony, neither removes race from jazz’s identity, nor guarantees its aesthetic success. Like the German music establishment and like Janowitz, Schickele will also render the age of symphonic jazz a failure or, rather, as insufficient from a purely aesthetic perspective. Within Schickele’s novel, there is a distinction between the material success John van Maray’s “symphony for jazz, strings, and organ” will no doubt have and the aesthetic potential of jazz to narrate the history of humanity. Regarding its economic prospects: long before it is completed, photographs of van Maray working on the symphony appear in the illustrated press, portending the success to come (SFJ 188). Yet throughout his separation from Johanna and work on the symphony, van Maray’s life swings back and forth between his career as a popular jazz musician and the spiritual life as an artist-composer of a jazz symphony. To help balance these and to escape the negative influence of the jazz singer Ursel Bruhn, he works in concert with other artists, namely a sculptor, as well as in a church. Yet even after van Maray seemingly overcomes these difficulties and declares the symphony, this “great work,” complete (SFJ 277), he finds himself continuing to compose in his dreams. In order to stop, he is compelled to return to the world, to a “jazz music that does not speak as I do” (SFJ 278). Van Maray, following the symphonic jazz model, sought to separate the jazz of entertainment, the jazz of the world, through the creation of his own artistic jazz of and within the symphony. Yet though he may be capable of achieving this in the abstract, the completion of the symphony, not to mention its commodification as “jazz symphony,” ultimately will not spare him the deleterious effect of the materialism symbolized by this jazz music of the world.

Failing to reach personal equilibrium through completion of the symphony, he seeks refuge in the Black Forest and then in St. Moritz, where he meets Angelica, a young girl who turns out to be van Maray’s daughter from an earlier affair. After she arrives, the two quickly become very close until Angelica leaves one day to go out into the wintry landscape. When she doesn’t return, van Maray goes in search of her, only to find her severely injured and alone in the snow. It is only after she dies as a result of her injuries that van Maray realizes he was her father. After her death, he retreats to his home on Lake Constance, and enraged for having squandered his life and fearful that he will lose Johanna forever, he goes to the lake intent upon destroying the symbol of the materialist side of his life and of the jazz of the world: his saxophone. It has finally become clear to him
that this metallic instrument, no matter its potential, is not capable of creating a form of art untainted by the materialism of modernity.

“Down with dancing Nigger bottoms (Niggersteiß)!” he called out and lifted the instrument up so that he could smash it on the cliff.

“Down with black money (schwarze Kasse)!”

“Long live the forty-eighth parallel with all its fruits and vegetables and wine and the women—if things like that also flourish there! Down with I.G. Jazz-Industry!”

As he held the saxophone in his raised hand, about to execute the destructive blow, John noticed to his surprise how the silent water was washing a star on the stone, a magical movement, always the same, tiny star.

“I see,” he said—“Of course.”

And instead of continuing his rant, he went quietly into the house and came right back out with a cord and an iron weight.

He took the saxophone and sank it, like a cat’s cadaver (krepierte Katze), into the lake. (SFJ 352)

Here van Maray does more than merely reject jazz and the racial difference and materialism for which it stands to him; he simultaneously recognizes that his pursuit of jazz was spurned on by a desire within himself to throw off the civilization that would support it. That he does not destroy, but rather sinks, the saxophone may result from the universal connection he sees between nature and music; in other words, the potential reconciliation symbolized by the idea of the jazz symphony may still be attainable, though not for him and not in this life. As he looks into the lake, the water’s motion across the star’s reflection on the stone reminds him the same daring combination of high and low, of symphony and now sunken jazz that had once inspired him.

When Symphony for Jazz is viewed in comparison to Janowitz’s Jazz: A Novel, a number of important parallels, as well as differences, emerge. In both novels, an attempt is made to formally recreate the aesthetic principles of jazz through language and innovative narrative form. While Janowitz carries this experiment to a much further extent, both texts eventually abandon the ephemeral modernity of jazz in favor of tradition—death in Janowitz and nature in Schickele. At the same time, in its deployment of race and Blackness as a means of figuring jazz’s difference, Schickele’s work anticipates the turn taken in the final example of symphonic jazz literature, Gustav Renker’s Symphony and Jazz from 1931.
Requiem for the Jazz Symphony

If Schickele’s *Symphony for Jazz* and Janowitz’s *Jazz: A Novel* would seem to generally fit within a modernist debate surrounding jazz, symphonic and otherwise, and the possibility of a German jazz literature, the Swiss-Austrian author Gustav Renker’s contribution occupies a more tenuous position. Perhaps best described as a melding of the jazz novel with the genre of the *Heimatroman*, this work fails to make any attempt at incorporating jazz, formally or structurally, and instead narrates a fairly typical tale of city versus country, young versus old, sick versus healthy. At the same time, Renker’s work is significant not only for the ways it differs from Janowitz and Schickele, but for how, in its own way, it continues the project of jazzing up German literature. Selectively taking up the idea of the symphonic jazz novel as it had been developed in Janowitz and Schickele, in Renker’s work, key elements, such as the saxophone, drums, the mountains, and, of course, the jazz symphony, receive new meaning.

Whereas the previous two examples displayed an at times positive, if ultimately negative, relationship to jazz, Renker’s *Symphony and Jazz* for the most part dispenses with any such pretenses. Indeed, the binary relation between the terms implied in the title is furthered through the splitting of the composer character well-known from Janowitz and Schickele into two figures. First there is Othmar Wehrberg, an aging composer residing in Vienna whose brightest days seem to be behind him. As the novel opens, he is struggling to finish his latest symphony and the reasons for this soon become clear: in the urban, “Jewish” Vienna he has lost all relationship to his native Alpine village Maltatal. It will only be through his return to his *Heimat* towards the end of the novel that Othmar Wehrberg will regain his rootedness and once again be a creative composer. The work of art resulting from this turn homeward will by no means consist in his combining jazz and symphony, however. Instead, this task will fall to his son, Richard “Ricki” Wehrberg, who, like Lord Henry and John van Maray, will rise to international success through the composition of a jazz symphony. His youth and interest in jazz and “primitive,” non-European music mark his relationship to his father and, as Tobias Nagl notes, shape the narrative as “an Oedipal conflict carried out through music.” Yet whereas the other two jazz-symphony composers maintain an indirect and tenuous relationship to Blackness, Ricki cultivates not merely a connection to African American culture but to the African continent itself. Unlike the implicit historical development of jazz within the previous two novels, in which the music progressed
from Blackness to whiteness, Ricki’s vision of symphonic jazz would seek to return jazz to an original, “Black” state. As he notes of his artistic goals: “I want to remain at the source, to go to it. With the first big royalty fee that I earn, I will travel to Africa” (SUJ 29). He further states that supposedly great German composers like Pfitzner, Strauss, Wagner, and Mahler are degenerate, claiming that they are examples of “music that has lost its foundation. Music is authentic only insofar as it is primitive” (SUJ 31). What emerges over the course of the novel is that both father and son represent less opposites than two sides of the same issue—the loss of Bodenständigkeit, or “rootedness,” in German art. This lack in each is further highlighted through their shared relationship to the “rootless” music critic Paul Hirsch, whose Jewishness and degeneracy are referenced throughout the novel.

The ultimate terminus of the false path of the prodigal son Ricki is embodied in the figure of Hesekiel Makua-Taka. In this African American figure named after a Hebrew prophet, Renker remixes elements from Janowitz, Schickele, and the German reception of Whiteman to create a monstrous image of a Black mammonite, whose sole desire in the novel is to monetarily exploit Europe for the last of its cultural potential. More than this, the alignment of an African American jazz musician with Jewishness, in addition to the stereotyped presentation of the critic Hirsch, amount to something qualitatively new in the symphonic jazz novel. As I want to argue, Makua-Taka's inclusion is indicative of an important shift within the German theorization of jazz that takes place towards the end of the 1920s and one that intensifies with the rise of National Socialism. Specifically, the linkage effected here between urban, foreign Jewishness and the modernist, popular music jazz takes up the long-standing trope of “Jewish modernism” ("die jüdische Moderne") that, as historian Scott Spector has shown, was particularly pronounced in German-speaking Central Europe. This idea acts within discussions of modernism and modernity as a trope for the fear over the dissolution of deep rooted traditions and their substitution with a superficial, ephemeral, nonunique urban popular culture. In other words, the discourse on “Jewish modernism” enables speakers within this space to mediate between “true,” “authentic” art and “mass culture” like jazz. As Spector summarizes: “The complexity of the relations between the figures of modernism and of Jewishness stems in no small part from the famously ambiguous status of modernism itself, as well as its relationship to modernity on the one hand and popular culture on the other.” According to Spector, this notion of the “Jewishness” of the modernism and modernity, which reaches at least as far back as Richard Wagner, served this crucial role not only for conservatives
like Renker but also shaped the self-understanding of modernism itself. It is thus important to see how Renker’s figuration of Makua-Taka profits from both of these strains within German culture. As we will see in chapter 6, from the late 1920s onward, this connection between Jewishness, Blackness, jazz, and modernism will become increasingly prevalent, not only in the writings of jazz’s detractors but, through the translation of Harlem Renaissance poetry, also in those of its modernist defenders.

At the same time, Renker’s characterization of Makua-Taka not only draws on the idea of the “Jewish modernism” but on a Weimar jazz reception caught between Black and white, between, for example, Sam Wooding and Paul Whiteman. For Makua-Taka is not only Jewish and Black, he is also the novel’s saxophone-playing “King of Jazz” (Jazzkönig) (SUJ 32). There were, of course, Black jazz performers who were called or went by the name “jazz kings” and/or “kings of jazz” during the 1920s, beginning at least with Mitchell’s Jazz Kings in 1920 but also including George Bartheleme’s 1919 reference to James Reese Europe as “jazz master” and the Black jazz musician Evandale Roberts in Berlin in the summer of 1921, not to mention the marketing of Wooding as the “King of the Jazz Band” as early as August 1925. For Renker, by contrast, one fundamental aspect of Whiteman’s symphonic project remains inaccessible for the Black Makua-Taka: the composition of the jazz symphony itself. The call for the creation of a corpus of jazz compositions, it will be recalled, was an essential complaint by Berlin music critics against Whiteman’s concerts. In Symphony and Jazz, Makua-Taka’s genius, however, is merely imitative and the promethean act of creation is left to the white European Ricki Wehrberg.

After enjoying initial success in America with a jazz piece, a “blues,” Ricki next composes a jazz symphony, later premiered by Makua-Taka at an American concert hall. The description of the concert reveals not only the success but the construction of the difference between American culture’s productive primitivity and the stilting weight of cultural tradition in Europe:

If someone were to start dancing to Bruckner’s Fifth in one of our philharmonics, he would be thrown out with grand effect. In America the noble benefactor of our Ricki [i.e., Makua-Taka] just played his jazz symphony in a concert hall where the middle was open. This removed the ceremonial constraints on our instinct to move. The band plays and people listen. But if one of the listeners feels the need, if the rhythm sparks in him the need to shake about (durchrütteilt), he is free to do so and to heed the call. (SUJ 161)
As with Makua-Taka’s use of the saxophone, Ricki’s jazz symphony mediates between the body and the mind, between high and low culture, rhythm and melody, and serves to reawaken the “natural” relationship between the Volks and culture. At the same time, it is important that the success of the jazz symphony takes place outside of Germany. While jazz and symphony may coexist in America in a productive relationship, in Europe, jazz is a symptom of the degeneracy of culture and its combination with the symphony but the worst imaginable scenario. So though the novel may contain surprisingly positive remarks about the jazz symphony, these primarily act as a reminder of what European music has lost: namely the connection to its folk culture.

This didactic element of *Symphony and Jazz* becomes especially apparent after father and son travel back to Maltatal and the Alpine community Wehrberg left when he departed for modern Vienna. Father and son are here aided by a female figure, Hilde, who, through her gender and Swiss roots, still seems to possess the healthy relationship to nature the two men lack. In Maltatal, all three share experiences of beautifully simple local folk culture and the invigorating natural surroundings. As we have already seen with Schickele and as is the case in Ernst Krenek’s jazz opera *Jonny spielt auf (Jonny Strikes Up)*, the Alps function within the German jazz imagination as an inexhaustible source of cultural invigoration. The corrosive influence of Hirsch and Makua-Taka slowly recedes in this space, and once there, Wehrberg begins to understand all he has lost in his twenty years in the city, overcomes his compositional difficulties, and, finally, is able to produce a new work, albeit a requiem. This rural paradise, acting as nature’s sanatorium, also comes with significant danger, and in the novel’s climactic scene, a violent storm strikes the village. The sublime power of Alpine nature causes within Wehrberg an epiphany that the nearby Malta river will flood, destroy the house, and kill him and a little village girl playing there. With this insight Wehrberg rushes into action, taking the young girl into his arms and leaving the doomed house. Though he is successful in his rescue of the girl, his exposure to the storm makes him ill, and he soon lapses into a coma. Upon waking fourteen days later, he finds Hirsch at his bedside and learns that his son Ricki’s latest work *Das Weinen des Urwalds (The Weeping of the Jungle)* is at that very moment having its European premiere in Munich. Though there is no radio, Wehrberg mystically hears the music. Surprisingly, in his dying words, Wehrberg mollifies his opinion regarding jazz, remarking of the saxophone, “I wouldn’t have thought one could get so much from the instrument,” and praising his son’s work as “entirely new, sounding like a distant call” (SUJ 233). If death brings the elder Wehrberg to at least partially recognize all that he has lost and that which his son is attempting
to regain, neither the experience of his father’s *Heimat*, nor even his father’s death alters Ricki’s path. Instead of embracing his Alpine heritage and a heterosexual pairing with the Swiss Hilde, following his father’s funeral, Ricki embarks with Hirsch on a trip to Africa. Unmoved, unchanged, at the novel’s end, the symphony embodied by the father exists only as a requiem, while the false-folk culture of jazz continues to lure European youth ever further from its cultural heritage.

**Between Symphonic Jazz and Jazz Symphony**

In this final act of cultural resignation, Renker’s novel joins those of Janowitz and Schickele. Each of their separate attempts to reconcile the conflict between ascendant jazz and declining symphony ends with resignation. For all three, symphony and jazz may coexist, but never harmoniously and hardly in a manner that can guide Europe towards a better future. Like the Berlin critics of Whiteman, each author also sees in symphonic jazz the music’s apotheosis and ultimate failure. Even so, it is equally clear that symphonic jazz became a means for them to respond to the challenge of jazz in both modern and traditional aesthetic forms.

Behind this shift lies Whiteman’s symphonic jazz. In many ways legitimizing the very idea of jazz as art, Whiteman’s music laid the groundwork for a German jazz literature by showing that the music could also function as a formal, aesthetic principle. Here, it is important to note that though clearly influenced by Whiteman, in their German form, symphony and jazz stand in inverted relation to Whiteman’s own experiment in modern music. Whereas Whiteman desired to create a symphonic jazz and to make jazz music respectable for a bourgeois public, the novelists created jazz symphonies. In other words, they sought to bring jazz to the symphony rather than the other way around. The hierarchy in this envisioning clearly favors the symphony, which remains the universal category of musical production, while jazz is tested as to whether it can fulfill this promise, in a strange way echoing Warschauer’s concern over the European method for judging new cultural forms, that is: “to point a pistol at every new phenomenon with the demand that it reveal its ultimate aim and pass the test of whether it can be designated art.”

If these experiments in symphonic jazz literature remain marked by ambiguity, both on their own terms and as attempts to incorporate jazz into German literature, the persistent and repeated attempts to do so hint at a more fundamental change to the function of jazz within German literature ushered by
Whiteman’s idea of symphonic jazz. Before Whiteman, jazz in Weimar literature existed as a symbol—of chaos, revolution, disorder—and such one-dimensional use of jazz is precisely the reason why so many other novelists seemed to exhaust the subject with little discussion, through the addition of a secondary character or a particularly salacious scene for example. Yet in the wake of Whiteman’s concerts, jazz also became more than a symbol; it became a project, a shifting, moving, living thing. It is thus significant that each fictional composer of a jazz symphony, Lord Henry, John van Maray, and Ricki Wehrberg is associated with water.\(^7\) While this certainly positions jazz as a floating music and culture, aligning it with the mobility of modernity against the fixity of tradition, the very same idea of fluidity can be applied to the project of German jazz literature. Each author works with and through an almost identical knot of questions in order to present a vision, not “just” of jazz but of cultural production more generally. From Janowitz’s almost abstract representation of narrative form; to Schickele’s rumination on the relationship between humanity, nature, and art in modern Europe; and finally to Renker’s requiem for the lost relationship between them, these are less reflections of an abstract Zeitgeist than variations, or rather, improvisations on a common theme. That each chose to do so via the jazz symphony was neither accidental, nor coincidental. For these three novelists, symphony and jazz were anything but an empty field into which they inserted themselves, and Whiteman’s symphonic jazz can be said to have legitimized the high stakes of their own literary, rather than musical, experiments. Through Janowitz, Schickele, and Renker, as well as the many other discussions and applications of symphonic jazz, Whiteman became a figure of even wider cultural significance. For better and for worse, Whiteman’s claim to have elevated jazz’s cultural status made possible the creation of the grand, if flawed, literary genre of the symphonic jazz novel.

It is also clear, however, that these jazz novels were exceptions to the many other literary works that sought to incorporate jazz. Yet even these exceptions followed one rule of representing jazz in Germany: women and, in particular, the “new women” of Weimar Germany were essential players within Weimar jazz culture. From white women like Madame Mae R. or Johanna dancing to jazz music, to the inclusion of a series of Josephine Baker clones, and even the Swiss Hilde’s short cropped hair, these jazz novels draw upon the debate over the shifting boundaries of gender identity and sexuality. Though there were many cultural spaces where this debate was carried out, perhaps none was as conspicuous as the popular revue stage.