Introduction

How to Hear a Fascist

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It is September 2025: everyone has been talking about fascism for at least a decade. Scarcely a day goes by without hearing some use of the term. It still abounds in historical analyses, of course; these days they are less often searches for the specific social and economic conditions that produced the regimes and movements of the interwar period, whether in Italy, Germany or elsewhere, and more frequently reconstructions of the significance of their rituals, modes of communication and culture in general. But fascism also increasingly feels like the most fitting term we have to describe the large range of contemporary political phenomena extending from the populist far right to extra-parliamentary extremists, wherever these are found, and whether or not they resemble or honour their infamous interwar predecessors. From this perspective – and especially if one subscribes to the outcries of social media, now in some places more commonly trusted as 'news' than its mainstream predecessor – it can seem that there is a fascist impulse in everything, and everywhere, and it is operative all the time.[1] One obvious fear is that fascism is a gathering force that cannot be effectively legislated against, because its haphazard networks increasingly cross conventional legislative boundaries. As Alberto Toscano recently put it, we have witnessed 'the sinister connubium between mainstream neo-authoritarianism ... and white nationalist or neo-fascist street and ideological movements ... with the latter often functioning as incubator or intercessor for the former'.[2] Another fear, more fundamental, is that fascist claims of crisis and victimisation, and their violent remedies, make a base emotional appeal that few may be able to ignore.

Publishers have been quick to respond to these anxieties and the fascination that always accompanies them. Scores of books published in the last decade have notably angled towards a popular readership, far beyond historians and political scholars focusing on the Third Reich and Italian *ventennio*. Many of these originate in the anglophone world, particularly the US public intellectual sphere – Madeleine Albright, secretary of state under Bill Clinton, or the Yale professors Jason Stanley and Timothy Snyder – sparked by fears over the succession of Republican administrations from George H. Bush to Donald Trump and their mass-movement

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affiliations (though the Obama and Biden governments were also regularly called fascist).[3] But one can just as easily look to publishers anywhere else to find the same kind of argument for endemic fascism, often with a tendency to gallows humour largely unknown in the US discourse, but no less indicative of its self-conscious anxieties through satirical inversion. A 2018 book by the Italian novelist Michela Murgia includes a self-diagnostic 'Fascistometer'.[4] If you agree with statements like 'Universal suffrage is overrated' and 'Boys should be boys, girls should be girls', you may be on the road to becoming a fascist 'patriot', to throwing off all 'democratic impositions' and becoming a 'point of reference for others less advanced or less motivated than you'.[5]

Consider, too, the example of the British-based Vintage Books, an imprint of Penguin, which recently published a small collection of Umberto Eco's political essays – in a handy pocket-sized format, and priced cheaply as an impulse buy at the checkouts of art galleries and other institutions for the discerning. Eco (born in 1932) spent his earliest formative years in Mussolini's Italy, saluting wildly because everyone did and writing school exercises with rhetorical titles like 'Dobbiamo noi morire per la gloria di Mussolini e il destino immortale dell'Italia?' ('Must we die for the glory of Mussolini and the immortal destiny of Italy?'). His 1995 essay 'Ur-Fascism' was actually written as an address to American students at Columbia University, in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombings and acute fears over the emergence of a new American extreme right. Yet, in republishing it under the new collective title *How to Spot a Fascist*, Vintage taps directly into our contemporary zeitgeist in a way that both invokes popular culture cinema – zombies, werewolves, talismans; 'they walk among us' – and, rather uncomfortably, the denunciatory directories mass-marketed by certain fascist regimes to mark out their eternal enemies. This title also draws direct attention to the common attempt, echoed by Eco's core diagnostic checklist of 'possible characteristics' of fascist ideology, to paint a recognisable fascist antagonist without straying into the contested territory of fascism's generic or ideal-typical definition. Anti-modernism, traditionalism, xenophobia, conspiracy theory and so on: these are the hallmarks of Eco's 'Ur-Fascism' (or, in its Italian version, 'fascismo eterno').[6]

How, then, to hear a fascist? Clearly this question must be posed with tongue lodged awkwardly in cheek. But still it is worth asking, if only as opening gambit, in order to appreciate how restrictive and tendentious any musical checklist must be, and how it must fail to capture the contradictions that animate fascist thought, the 'structured incoherence' that, as

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Toscano notes, is essential to fascism's wide social appeal.[7] It is undeniable that, historically speaking, the genres of nineteenth-century bourgeois nationalism and the monumental language typical of them have accrued particular esteem in those regimes we now dub fascist: hymns, choruses, symphonic poems, symphonies. It is also undeniable that those we think of as fascist, probably more than those deemed liberal and democratic, have usually had an interest, however erratic or inconsistent, in bureaucratising and instrumentalising the arts so that enemies can be identified and excluded, heroes lauded, glorious pasts and futures evoked and patronage and prizes handed out to those willing to pose in the state's image. All this has long exerted considerable fascination in imagining, sometimes imprecisely and contrary to convincing evidence, vivid fantasies of totalitarian fascist regimes with a stranglehold on musical life. It still does, as we see from the claims of Alexandra Birch's 2025 book *Hitler's Twilight of the Gods*, according to which 'music was a functional tool within the Third Reich', 'classical music was tightly regulated' and an 'explicit artistic goal' became 'to champion Wagner and "truly" represent his works'.[8]

To maintain such a rigid frame, however, often means edging out the many other accommodations that fascists might make with music in its energising entanglements in everyday life – not just through the 'folksong' of, for example, organised youth movements, or the marches of the ritual calendar, but through the popular songs sung for pleasure by a generation of schoolchildren or the on-request radio shows to which many thousands directed their musical whims. Beyond the ideological characteristics that he lists, and beyond the examples of Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany, Eco proposes that 'there is always a way of thinking and feeling, a series of cultural habits, a nebula of obscure instincts and unfathomable drives'.[9] He is talking about his 'Ur-Fascist' trait of humankind, of course, but he could also be talking about music; the correspondence alone hints that the interfaces of music and fascism must be much more extensive, much more widespread than the musical stereotypes that we can safely triage as non-art, or as political propaganda.

Indeed, if the successes of fascists are in part a matter of their well-practised ability, traditionally disdained by their adversaries, as Ernst Bloch famously lamented, to mobilise popular support around a fundamentally irrational core,[10] then music and musicians must surely be central to any project that its proponents have conceived and could conceive. And there is no particular reason for the instincts and habits these musicians evoke to draw on the tired bourgeois arts alone – or at all. Moreover, there is no reason why we should continue to rely on direct historical analogy to

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Fascist Italy or Nazi Germany in understanding the present. Heeding Toscano's call, we can try to understand the role of music and musicians in the 'longue durée of fascist potentials' across specific economic and socio-political contexts, thus moving away from a static checklist of Ur-Fascist traits and towards a focus on the processes by which fascism propagates and persists.[11]

This is why we see the present moment as apt for a *Cambridge Companion to Music and Fascism*. We believe we are the first to put together a collected volume on this topic. There are, of course, numerous landmark studies of musical life in Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and Francoist Spain, and there are studies of composers under oppressive regimes of different political colours. Many of these will be cited throughout this volume and in the suggestions for further reading at its end, as will several monographs on fascist musical alliance, typically treating Italy and Germany. There also exist collected volumes with a considerable degree of subject overlap with the present volume. One such is *Composing for the State: Music in Twentieth-Century Dictatorships*, marshalling contributions on musical works commissioned, produced and disseminated by a series of states throughout the twentieth century – states that, in many cases, we are accustomed to labelling as fascist, or at least as strongly authoritarian or dictatorial.[12] The latter volume's approach by way of detailed case studies avoids any possibility of direct comparison, let alone an attempt at generic definition across wildly different cases. But it does, of course, necessitate some kind of credible evidence of state intervention, which in turn narrows considerably the avenues of enquiry, not to mention toting the heavy baggage of 'State Music'.

To focus on music and fascism, by contrast, as we have done here, requires a distinct, more flexible kind of comparative lens. One advantage of our approach is that, amid examples of dictatorship that have only fleetingly been treated in English-language scholarship (Greece, Austria, Vichy France), we can include cases that, while consistently associated with fascism, cannot accurately be called dictatorships (South Africa, Japan), or at least not without significant distortion. Moreover, while fascist musical practices are sometimes aimed towards a state, party or leader (whether real or imagined), they go far beyond composing, and indeed need not involve composing in the conventional sense at all. The disadvantage is that, as the preceding introductory remarks imply, to begin from this topic area opens up a vast expanse of potential case studies in which fascism and music come into contact: from the present day back into the late nineteenth century (and arguably even before that, if one permits proto-fascisms and

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fascistic behaviour more broadly). This has to happen in a mere 125,000 words; we hope, then, that readers will find the following chapters as much inspiration for further comparative study as present interest.

The volume is organised in the following way. We have asked contributors in the first five chapters, collectively entitled 'Frameworks' (Part I), to focus comparatively on the 'classic' pre-1945 examples of both Italy and Germany, entailing in turn that they move outside the nationally determined fields of research in which they have made their reputations, and according to which the study of music and fascism has typically proceeded. To take this approach, however, is immediately to court controversy in certain quarters. To label Nazi Germany 'fascist' may not, as is popularly assumed, confirm a self-evident fact, though the sheer weight of scholarly work that is prepared to treat both regimes under a single rubric does tend to suggest that a consensus has been reached. For their part, Nazi ideologues – including Hitler – tended to approve the obvious comparison with Fascism but also to emphasise their distance from this Italian enterprise.[13] The point, accordingly, of 'Frameworks' is not to assume a priori that a bond of generic fascism is always present, but to see how the label might be apt in the complex circulation of musical policies, ideas and practices from Italy to Germany and back again in the first half of the twentieth century. Eco, with no pride, but no shame either (for him it seems simply a matter of record), ventures that 'Italian Fascism was the first right-wing dictatorship to dominate a European country' and that 'all similar movements later found a sort of common archetype in Mussolini's regime'.[14] Part I takes this as a cue for further enquiry in critical mode, bringing together the familiar fascism-studies topics of propaganda, censorship, institutions, mass media and cultural alliance and exchange and submitting them to a comparative analysis spanning the 'classic' cases of Italy and Germany.

The second part of the book proceeds in a series of case studies distributed widely across the twentieth century and across geographical expanses. It continues in the critical and comparative vein of 'Frameworks'. Again, our contributors are alive to the fact that, though all these cases stem from regimes or time periods that have often been called 'fascist' and are often understood to fit into a continuous history of fascism, their association with the term is no simple given. Where it is in evidence at all, musical fascistisation (i.e. transmission of fascist musical practices, typically from Italy or Germany) is a complicated process in each case and is powerfully inflected by national circumstances. In some instances, monumental music of the European bourgeoisie is marginalised or barely involved (Japan,

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Spain, Portugal); in another – Austria – there are at least three fascist entities with musical interests, not all of them dictated by Nazi German developments as one might assume; in still another – Greece – there are separate fascist regimes, with differing motivations and influences, at different points of the mid twentieth century. In South Africa, meanwhile, a fascism that still haunts the apparently autonomous works of the concert hall is a matter of peculiar national history, rather than direct European influence. An Epilogue returns us to the present day and its immediate past: the United States of George W. Bush and Donald Trump, and the growth of the alt-right and its music in what are, arguably, the circumstances of a newly 'inverted' totalitarianism distinct from the 'classic' models of the previous century.

We have also dedicated space in the volume to the victims and opponents of fascist regimes and movements. They appear across many of its pages, as well as in the specific chapters on Vichy France (with its partial focus on musical resistance to the imposed regime), on the exploration of an 'anti-fascist' music in migrant communities, and on musical life in the cafés of Nazi-occupied Warsaw. It is important that we should make this representation. Even so, perhaps the key lesson of the volume is that there have been countless artists, intellectuals and cultural luminaries – not mere dupes or thugs, these, but intelligent people in both words and musical tones – who have thrown their support behind these fascist causes and movements and regimes, and not just because they have benefited from them, whether in financial, prestige or career terms. They believed in them: they were, and are, fascists.

Without taking away from the experiences of those who have clearly been the victims of fascism or shifting the focus entirely from those who were clearly the perpetrators of harm, it is in our view high time to start talking more objectively and realistically about the musical proponents and beneficiaries of fascism, those who have thrived under the structures it inherits or borrows or puts newly in place. For increasingly pressing reasons in the early twenty-first century, we may still wish to try to understand what fascism is, primarily so that we might pour cold water on its seductions. If that is so, we surely need to grasp its appeal, and how fascists have extended and embedded that appeal, turning it from a noisy call-to-arms into an emotionalised necessity; if that is so, then we could do worse than understanding the motivations and efforts of the myriad musicians who have carried its manifestations over the past hundred years.

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Notes

1. On the newsworthiness of social media, see, for example, Michael Savage, 'Social Media Overtakes TV as Main Source of News in US, Analysis Finds', *Guardian* (17 June 2025), www.theguardian.com/media/2025/jun/17/social-media-overtakes-tv-as-main-source-of-news-in-us-analysis-finds.
2. See Alberto Toscano, *Late Fascism: Race, Capitalism and the Politics of Crisis* (London: Verso, 2023), 45.
3. See Madeleine Albright, *Fascism: A Warning* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019); Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (New York: Random House, 2018); Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (London: Bodley Head, 2017).
4. Michela Murgia, *How to Be a Fascist*, trans. Alex Valente (London: Pushkin, 2020). Originally published as *Istruzioni per diventare fascisti* ('Instructions for Becoming a Fascist'; Turin: Einaudi, 2018). Published English translations of texts are used in this volume whenever possible. All uncredited translations are by the chapter authors themselves.
5. Ibid., 99–112.
6. Umberto Eco, 'Ur-Fascism', in *How to Spot a Fascist*, trans. Alastair McEwen and Richard Dixon (London: Harvill Secker/Vintage, 2020), 16–26. For the Italian, see Umberto Eco, 'Il fascismo eterno', in *Cinque scritti morali* (Milan: Bompani, 1997), 25–48.
7. Toscano, *Late Fascism*, 110.
8. Alexandra Birch, *Hitler's Twilight of the Gods: Music and the Orchestration of War and Genocide in Europe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2025), 16–18.
9. Eco, 'Ur-Fascism', 6–7.
10. See Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, trans. Neville Plaice and Stephen Plaice (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 60.
11. Toscano, *Late Fascism,* 71.
12. Esteban Buch, Igor Contreras Zubillaga and Manuel Deniz Silva (eds.), *Composing for the State: Music in Twentieth-Century Dictatorships* (New York: Routledge, 2016).
13. See, for example, the many related remarks in Christian Goeschel, 'The Cultivation of Mussolini's Image in Weimar and Nazi Germany', in Jan Rüger and Nikolaus Wachsmann (eds.), *Rewriting German History: New Perspectives on Modern Germany* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 247–66. Hitler's remarks on Mussolini's blackshirts as influence on National Socialism can be found in *Hitler's Table Talk, 1941–1944: His Private Conversations*, trans. Norman Cameron and R. H. Stevens (New York: Enigma, 2000), 9–10, 266–7.
14. Eco, 'Ur-Fascism', 9.

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