

Music-making in the GDR during the Cold War

Petra Garberding and Henrik Rosengren, eds., 2022. *The Cold War through the lens of music-making in the GDR: political goals, aesthetic paradoxes, and the case of neutral Sweden*. Lund: Universus Press. ISBN 978-91-87439-75-9. 257 pp.

The German Democratic Republic, the GDR, existed 1949–1990. It was not the only German state. It was not democratic nor a republic. It was a Soviet colony. However, virtually the GDR existed. There was a territory with (provisional) frontiers, a population and the mimicry of a real state: administration, agencies and institutions. In the real world, the virtual GDR became a substitute for the non-existent state. Fiction became reality in accordance with the famous Thomas theorem: ‘If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.’

In Sweden, the (virtual) GDR led a double existence. It was perceived as a real state and was treated accordingly. It was also perceived as a socialist state that embodied the dirigiste and planned economy alternative to the legal state – *Rechtsstaat* – and the market economy.

The preceding text may seem exaggerated in its characterization of the GDR. However, a main protagonist in the book under review is Gerd Schönfelder. Two chapters in the book are devoted to this man from the GDR and his activities in Sweden. In the title of her chapter on him, Petra Garberding defines him as a ‘musicologist and Stasi employee in Sweden’ (p. 209). (Stasi was the GDR secret police.) Garberding describes Schönfelder’s double role as a scholar and a spy. When revealed as a spy, following the opening of the Stasi archives after the disappearance of the GDR, Schönfelder ‘distances himself from what he describes as Stalinist SED members, while he is himself a representative of democracy rather than of the GDR system’ (p. 234). In the second chapter on Schönfelder in the book Henrik Rosengren writes: ‘When the East German archives became available to researchers, such denial was no longer possible’ (p. 249). This is the book’s last sentence.

Rosengren notes that a main protagonist of musicology in the GDR denied that he had worked on behalf of it. The GDR had been a non-entity. Schönfelder is not alone. In the fifth volume of his social history of Germany the doyen of historical science in Germany, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, declared that the GDR’s short-lived existence led to a dead end in all respects. He devoted only 130 of the volume’s 1187 pages to the GDR (Wehler, 2008).

This said, *The Cold War through the lens of music-making in the GDR* offers insightful analyses of different aspects of the short music history of the GDR. The first chapter by Meredith Nicoll on the political function of music, investigates the role of folksongs in the early GDR. She shows that with the delay of a century 19th century romanticism became revigorated in the socialist state under the banners of ‘canonization’ and ‘folksongization’. While the intentions of composers and musicians

were benevolent, it all ended in sterile *Kadavergehorsam* (Corpse-like obedience): ‘These new songs therefore neither represented the novelty, genius, or elitism of classical works nor the inherent aspects of anonymity, flexibility, or communal performativity of folk practice’ (p. 60).

Nicoll, in spite of her sad conclusion, offers a nuanced story of the role of ‘popular’ music, i.e., easily apprehended musical idioms as a means for the local servants of the colonial power to make the new state emerge as cosy and legitimate. Named after the 5th convention of the party, the SED, in 1958, the *Bitterfeld Path* ‘called upon all artists to exercise “goal-conscious creativity” for the national rebirth of Germany’ (p. 35). Nicoll combines musicological and political analysis in a way that does justice to the complicated social arena in a state which had inherited both the legacy of classical, ‘serious’ German music of earlier centuries and the vibrant cabaret and jazz scene of the roaring German twenties epitomized by Kurt Weill and Hanns Eisler. The latter dimension is given a similarly nuanced analysis in the chapter by Stefan Weiss, ‘How to be useful: the songs of Andre Asriel’. Asriel, who was a Jew, had escaped the Nazis and moved to the UK to return to Berlin in 1946 and to become a pupil of Hanns Eisler in 1950.

Weiss shows that Asriel remained a loyal GDR citizen *and* managed to be true to his musical ego through the use of ‘Aesopian language’ when it came to writing about, and writing songs in the idiom of jazz music: ‘the very “swing” feel of some of his most march-like mass songs was probably responsible for their mass appeal’ (pp. 75–76). In the end, in 1978–1981, Asriel published a three-volume collection of Yiddish songs. Weiss concludes by asserting that Asriel’s last contribution to the music scene in the GDR really was ‘useful’ in that it rescued popular Jewish music from oblivion.

The contributions by Nicoll and Weiss demonstrates both the resilience of the German tradition in the music life of the GDR and the appropriation of African American music in spite of the latter’s reputation of being ‘not serious’ and to be an American weapon in the Cold War. The remaining chapters focus on the careers and fate of individuals.

Mattias Tischer writes about the friendship and tutor–pupil relationship between Paul Dessau in East and Hans Werner Henze in West Germany. The analysis of the musical idiom of the two is combined with descriptions of the influence of their respective social and political environment. Dessau became frightened by Soviet antisemitism whereas Henze was harassed in West Germany because of his sexual identity. Tischer asserts that in the 1950s and 1960s, the endeavour of the two was to develop a nondogmatic contemporary musical language that could be described as forbearing the playful postmodernism of the 1970s. There is a lengthy quotation from Dessau – covering two pages in English translation and an additional one and a half page in the original German – concerning his programmatic anti-imperialist composition *Quattrodramma*, which premiered at a festival in Stockholm in 1966. Dessau managed to demonstrate that by contributing uncompromising modern music when representing the GDR he was able to enhance the international reputation of the state. *Quattrodramma* could and would in the future be referred to by younger composers. Tischer demonstrates how

individuals such as Paul Dessau could transcend identification as a tool of a dictatorial communist regime and become tolerated as its representant by the same regime! This example demonstrates that ideological characterization of music, any music, is arbitrary; it lies in the eye of the beholder.

Andreas Lueken and Henrik Rosengren each contribute a chapter on East German boys' choirs in Sweden. Lueken concentrates on the St. Thomas Choir of Leipzig. Rosengren treats also the Dresdner Kreuzchor. It was a challenge for the rulers of the atheist GDR to capitalize on the reputation of the two Christian choirs. Lueken shows that the trick was to label church music by Bach and others as 'humanist cultural heritage' and make a 'socialist appropriation' of the church's tradition. In the long run the church got the upper hand. After its nadir in the especially repressive 1960s, the share of religious compositions increased steadily to make up more than 90 percent of the St. Thomas Choir's repertoire by the late 1980s. An important part of traditional German music survived in the GDR.

In the concluding section of the book, 'The GDR and neutral Sweden', Petra Garberding writes about 'Gisela May in Sweden'. The singer Gisela May was born in 1924. She became famous when she sang songs by Bertolt Brecht with music by Kurt Weill, Hanns Eisler and Paul Dessau. The Stasi classified May as 'politically unreliable'. Nevertheless, May could perform internationally. The GDR authorities recognized her immense value as an instrument of soft power. Garderbring has a very informative quote from May's autobiography (2002): 'I was considered as one of the leading artistic representatives of the state, and I also agreed with the state's goals - which we did not achieve, however' (p. 193). Garderbring goes on to note that, because 'from the mid-1960s new cultural currents in Sweden [...] were highly influenced by left-wing politics' (p. 205), articles on May in the Swedish press mirrored the artist's own moral dilemma. The GDR did not embody socialist ideals but those ideas remained valid anyhow. Garderbring does not mention it, but this stand is answering in the affirmative the critical - satirical - characterization of the GDR society by the dissident Rudolf Bahro as 'really existing socialism', i.e., the negation of genuine socialism (Bahro, 1977).

Lars Klingberg writes the only chapter which hardly evokes any sympathy for its subject: 'Marianne Gundermann alias Johanna Rudolph: communist - emigrant - traitor - Auschwitz survivor - Guardian of the Cultural Policy of the GDR'. This is the title of the chapter. It conveys the career of the protagonist. Rudolph wrote her dissertation on George Frideric Handel, whom she approached 'almost exclusively through the written word rather than through his music' (p. 100). She initiated a propaganda campaign against West Germany's Nazi-like (!) treatment of Handel. The chapter ends with an appendix: a transcription by Klingberg of Johanna Rudolph's speech at a meeting of the Handel Society in Halle in 1960 and its translation into English by Klingberg.

Throughout the book authors quote from various German sources in English translation with the original German given in the footnotes. In some of the articles sheet music appears in the text. This allows the reader to grasp the impact of a song such as 'Helgolandlied' by Andre Asriel and Helmut Rahnsch from 1951. It was written for the

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World Youth Festival in Berlin in 1951. Its lyrics make it stand out as the exemplary Cold War song.

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References

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