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Introduction: Two Days in Arild

During two hot early summer days in June 2019, a number of musicologists, ethnologists and historians gathered in beautiful Arild in southern Sweden to discuss East German music and its connection to the Cold War. The conference originated in a research project entitled “Between East and West: Ideology, Aesthetics and Politics in the Musical Relations between Sweden and the GDR 1949–1989”, funded by the Foundation for Baltic and Eastern European Studies. The two editors of this volume, Petra Garberding and Henrik Rosengren, participated in the project. This volume is the outcome of those stimulating days when the Cold War was illuminated through interdisciplinary interpretations of the creation of East German music.

Bringing together researchers from several different disciplines, and using the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and its international music contacts as a case study, made it possible to develop broad insight into some of the circumstances that characterized music culture, international music relations and politics during the Cold War. Musicologists contributed their aesthetic and music-specific analyses, ethnologists their tools of cultural analysis and historians their analyses of historical contexts, turning points and processes. The various contributions are linked through their choices of methodology, such as oral history, and biographical points of departure, as well as common perspectives on microhistory, identity, music, reception and socio-politics.

In this work we hope to attract readers with special interest in the field of music and politics in the GDR during the Cold War, as well as to make a discussion of these subjects available to non-experts. We further aim to offer archival data that might stimulate further research and interpretations.
Cultural diplomacy

With its Cold War context, the content of this volume may also be positioned within the field of cultural diplomacy studies. This tradition has emerged as an alternate way of analyzing the Cold War, where cultural ideas, exchanges and contacts are used as elements supporting a broader understanding of Cold War relations. Earlier research tended to be concentrated on the two Cold War superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union.¹ In international relations, music is hardly different from other forms of propaganda aimed at shaping opinions.² As the musicologist Elaine Kelly points out: “[M]usic provided the German Democratic Republic (GDR) with a crucial international platform during the Cold War”.³ Because of being refused international diplomatic recognition until the 1970s, the GDR wanted to use its artists to spread a positive image abroad and “channeled considerable resources to this end”.⁴ Since the GDR was known for its classical German musical heritage, music was an important tool for political propaganda and was at stake in the core GDR propaganda goals of national identity, ideology, and diplomatic recognition.

This volume takes a broad view of music and politics in the GDR during the period from the creation of the state in 1949 until the early 1990s after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Most of the contributions revolve around key events and processes in the history of the short-lived East German state. These include the circumstances of the creation of the GDR and the struggle of the great powers for influence in the former occupation zone. This aspect has also been touched upon by cultural historian Toby Thacker, who writes about the tension between military coercion and cultural persuasion.⁵

⁴ Kelly 2019, 540.
Other topics in this volume include the importance of the returning war refugees for the construction of the GDR, the building of the 1961 wall, central intelligence activities and the struggle for diplomatic recognition. This culminated in 1972 when West Germany abandoned the Hallstein doctrine and opened the door for countries like Sweden to recognize the GDR and ultimately the GDR’s dissolution and merger with West Germany during the years 1989–1990.

A varied picture of the function and position of music within East German cultural policy during the Cold War period emerges from the various case studies in the volume based on a European and especially a Swedish context. While most of the contributions emphasize classical music, referred to in German as ernste Musik, “serious music,” some of them also touch on popular music and jazz. At the center is the relationship of the music with an authoritarian cultural policy, as embodied in the GDR, but also the contacts East German musicians had with Western European countries outside the GDR. From an international perspective and contemporary reflections on the history of the GDR, a complex picture emerges of East German musical life. Here cultural policy dogmatism rubs against artistic freedom, the individual stands against the state, history against the future, memory against meaning, religion against politics and the nation against the international Cold War context.

The GDR held an odd position in Cold War Europe. The country was positioned between the political control of the Soviet Union on the one hand and its historical connection to West Germany and the common cultural heritage on the other. There was no specific East German culture to fall back on and therefore the GDR could only draw its nourishment from the memory of the common German cultural heritage, created in a bourgeois context. This was then directly confronted by the Marxist-Leninist principles imposed by the Soviet Union.6

Obviously, the music created and performed in the GDR, or by East German musicians abroad, did not happen in a political vacuum. A strict, politically controlled, cultural policy in the authoritarian GDR, primarily rooted in (pre-1933) German musical heritage, formed one part of the context, while the bipolar Cold War culture with its two ideologically warring parties formed the other. Large resources were invested in musical life and in the GDR’s identity construction and self-understanding as the rightful heir to the German musical heritage. A memory of the superi-

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ority of German culture became the basis for seeing music as something that could contribute to the construction of a new German identity in the GDR, an identity that might not only unite the young nation but also position it in relation to the outside world. In this respect, famous orchestras and choirs such as the Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig, the Staatskapelle Dresden, the St. Thomas Choir and Kreuzchor were important cultural-political weapons in the battle between East and West.

But East German identity formation was not only retrospective. While it drew on the memory of a hundred-year-old cultural heritage, it was also forward-looking: through socialist realism, music would contribute to the creation of a new socialist Germany. Some aspects of this basis of East German identity formation, to which contributors to this volume refer, some more, some less explicitly, are the dichotomy between Romanticism and Classicism, the German musical heritage, the importance of the individual in musical understanding, and socialist realism. These phenomena and concepts require, therefore, some attention in this introductory chapter.

**Romanticism and Classicism**

The East German national cultural identity was constructed, among other things, on the basis of a dichotomy between Romanticism and Classicism, where Romanticism became the Western “other” and Classicist humanism became a starting point for enlightened socialism. Some of the most influential East German musicologists saw these two orientations as opposite poles. According to George Knepler, Romanticism represented a feudal, conservative, and Catholic past without thought of progress or democracy. Fate rather than individual endeavor was glorified. None of the ideals, such as struggle and hard work, that were emphasized in socialist realism were discernible in Romanticism, Knepler argued, supported by Hegel’s and Heine’s anti-Romanticism. However, the distinction between Romanticism and Classicism was stronger in literature than in music, and the East German musicologists did not fully agree with each other on whether certain composers should be regarded as Romantic or not. Nevertheless, Knepler and others agreed that, for example, Schubert, Schumann, Berlioz, Verdi, Chopin, Glinka, Smetana, and Brahms could not be considered Romantics. They were all born after the French Revolution but before the mid-1830s. They had experienced the revolutionary and socialist events of the time, something that was
particularly emphasized by the East German musicologists. However, the interpretation of Romanticism as an expression of feudalism and as a reactionary current that paved the way for fascism, a view also underlined by the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (SED, Socialist Unity Party of Germany), did not prevent work by composers such as Bruckner and Wagner from frequently being featured on concert stages.

The legacy of the musical culture
The cultural legacy, or *Kulturerbe*, was filled with ideological content enabling parts of a German cultural canon formed in a bourgeois context, preferably during the eighteenth century, to have a central function in the formation of the identity of the GDR. Both Nazi Germany and the new German states that were proclaimed in 1949 related to German cultural tradition in their politics and identity construction. The Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) as well as the GDR referred to poets such as Goethe and Schiller and composers such as Bach and Beethoven. For the GDR, it was not least important to stress that the new East German territory contained the places where these famous cultural personalities were born or to which they had some kind of connection. This, by definition, turned them into “East German” cultural personalities. The sites included cities such as Leipzig and Dresden and institutions such as the Semper Opera, the Gewandhaus Orchestra, and the St. Thomas Choir and *Dresdner Kreuzchor*. By also reinterpreting a traditional German “bourgeois” cultural canon by describing it as humanist, the GDR sought to show the outside world, and especially the states in the Western political sphere, how to bridge the brutality of the war years by reconnecting to a former Germany, “*Land der Dichter und Denker*” – the country of writers and thinkers. The supposedly democratic spirit of this cultural policy was legitimized by the goal and effort of reaching out to the working class who had not previously been allowed to participate in that aspect of the cultural heritage.

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The importance of the individual in East German understanding of music

East German musicologists opposed the period division of music based on stylistic features or temporal characteristics. George Knepler perceived this as a superficial, bourgeois invention that did not consider broad, historical developments. According to the historical materialist view, it was instead external social circumstances that constituted the driving force behind musical progression. A related difference between Western interpretation of musical history and the East German historical materialist interpretation was the latter’s emphasis on the role of the individual. Among East German music historians it was the study of individual composers that dominated, notably in the first issues of Musik und Gesellschaft (Music and Society) in the 1950s. Knepler’s history of music, Musikgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts, (The History of Music in the 20th Century) is organized on the basis of geographical themes, but with case studies of individual composers. The repeated music festivals in honor of individual composers of the canon, such as Bach, Beethoven, Weber, and others, is typical of the East German emphasis on the importance of the individual in music history.

This focus on the individual was not only something cultivated in musical life, but was also characteristic of several parts of East German society. While the roots of the worship of the creative “genius” can be found in nineteenth-century Romanticism, it became, in the historical materialist interpretation, a model for the connection between the individual and the public and an expression of historical continuity. “The socialist personality” and “socialist man” personified the aims of the socialist state. After socialist realism was turned into the official aesthetic ideal in the Soviet Union in 1932, a “cultural Holocaust” in the words of Katerina Clark, it did not take long before this ideal made its mark on, for example, Soviet literature and Soviet filmmaking. Clark has shown how the individual as hero, portrayed as an ordinary person who acted extraordinarily, could be described in the Soviet context in terms such as

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9 Kelly 2014, 41–42.
“calm”, “tough” and “vigilant”. This image of the hero was transferred to the GDR and was not least linked to the myth of the anti-fascist state and its proponents. German soldiers returning from Russian captivity could be seen as everyday examples of transformation from Nazi Germany to the socialist GDR. Composers were also described in terms taken from the notion of a socialist hero, with an emphasis on the person belonging to the collective. By describing the composer as an ordinary human being, the potential of every socialist human being was emphasized. At the same time, the extraordinary artistic efforts of these composers expressed the individual heroism required to pursue the socialist utopia. Composers could thus be entered into the contemporary Cold War discourse as “opponents of cosmopolitanism” or as “defenders of the nation.”

Socialist realism and formalism – ideologically driven aesthetics

The overarching starting point for the understanding of music in the GDR was the concept of socialist realism, whose origins were Soviet and emanated from the Russian writer Maksim Gorky and the Russian politician and cultural ideologist Andrei Zhdanov. In connection with a music conference in Leipzig, Ernst Herman Meyer, one of the most influential music personalities in the GDR who was a composer and professor of musicology at Humboldt University in Berlin, defined in thirteen points his interpretation of socialist realism. The following key concepts might be said to encapsulate Meyer’s thoughts. Socialist realism meant an emphasis on the composer’s individuality and personality. Music should be life-affirming, positive and forward-thinking and directed toward the working class. Music should be peace-affirming and reflect reality – it should not be abstract. Further, music should be popular and national in form and express the national character. Music ought to be grounded in folk music and be based on the composer’s awareness of his social responsibility.

The antithesis of socialist realism was formalism. In formalism, formal aspects of music were supposedly given more importance than the

12 Kelly 2014, 42–45.
content. Dissonance, atonal music and twelve tone music were in general regarded as expressions of formalism, and composers like Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg personified this unwanted and ideologically constructed musical category.\textsuperscript{14}

### The GDR as a political system

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and German reunification the following year, several theoretical models have been used in attempts to understand the GDR as a political system. The model of totalitarianism, which in its generic form was based on similarities in the systems of government and the methods of communist and fascist states, has since had a number of interpreters in relation to how the GDR should be understood. Political scientist Juan Linz has described the GDR as a frozen post-totalitarian regime which includes a solitary central power, a solitary, exclusive and often anti-traditional ideology, and which seeks to mobilize the masses, based on its professed popular nature. Unlike similar totalitarian states, such as Poland and Hungary, the GDR was also characterized by the continuity of the control mechanisms used by the party and thus the state for maintaining power.\textsuperscript{15}

Most researchers have touched on the fact that musical life in the GDR should not be read as being totally controlled by the ideals of the authoritarian state. The absolutist interpretation of the GDR as a totalitarian state has been challenged during recent decades, not least in studies of its musical life.\textsuperscript{16} The political intentions were met by a struggle for artistic freedom, a struggle that does not have to be seen as deliberate and explicit opposition to the state but rather as an expression of the freedom of art. Official ideological interpretations varied across both time and space. Influential interpreters of music history did not always agree on how this history should be interpreted in relation to the identity of the East German state.

\textsuperscript{14} Tompkins 2013, 18.


\textsuperscript{16} Elaine Kelly “Reading the Past in the German Democratic Republic: Thoughts on Writing Histories of Music”, in \textit{Musikwissenschaft und Kalter Krieg: Das Beispiel DDR}. Eds. Nina Noeske and Mattias Tischer (Köln: Böhlau, 2010), 117–123.
Historian Corey Ross talks about how the political system of the GDR was not only about coercion, but was also based on participation; it might ultimately be characterized as a negotiation between the state and society. The state’s political intentions could never be fully realized, despite its totalitarian foundations. The state depended on the loyalty of its citizens, and there was often room for alternatives, albeit restricted by the asymmetric power relationship.\textsuperscript{17}

In the world of music, composers and concert organizers might loyally try to adhere to socialist realist ideals, but like the political authorities, they were at the same time dependent on the audience’s approval and on the position of the German cultural canon in people’s cultural understanding. This provides an important explanation for the fact that concert arrangements could contain works both by composers who were explicitly put on a pedestal by the political authorities and by composers whose works and historical and political roots stood in opposition to stipulated ideals.\textsuperscript{18} To this might be added the inherent room for interpretation of music and the impossibility of objectively relating a sound, a sequence, or a melody to a political ideal based on tonal aspects. This was part of the reason why the demarcation lines between permitted and impermissible music were not absolute in a concert context. The ideologization of music was most noticeable in musicological contexts and was, for example, manifested in the musicologist George Knepler’s above-mentioned influential \textit{Musikgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts} of 1961, in which he interpreted the history of European classical music based on socialist realistic ideals and a Marxist-Leninist understanding of music. Another example was the state-controlled musicology journal \textit{Musik und Gesellschaft}. To this we can add the official music festivals and anniversaries of composers such as Bach, Mozart and Beethoven.\textsuperscript{19} What was invoked in these contexts was the musical expressions or composers that were traditionally associated with historical events and political or national contexts that could be linked to the formation of East German identity.

For a musician, the challenge lay in finding a balance between musical-political dogmatism and personal artistic freedom. The German musical heritage became a tool used to create meaning for the present and preparedness for the future.

\textsuperscript{17} Ross 2002, 55.
\textsuperscript{19} Kelly 2010, 121.
Sweden and the GDR

Sweden has been seen as an island in the context of the Cold War, politically neutral and with longstanding cultural connections to the German musical heritage. Sweden had been a harbor of hope for victims of and refugees from Nazism, some of whom later returned to German soil to take part in the building of the socialist German state and its musical cultural identity.

Due to Sweden’s official political neutrality, the country was also a possible venue for East German musicians and orchestras whose policy agenda was not least to demonstrate the GDR’s ability to manage Germany’s musical heritage. Ultimately, these musical actors were serving as political tools with the aim of making Sweden a political ally in the struggle against the West. The Swedish Germanist Birgitta Almgren has pointed out that the GDR had designated Sweden as a Schwerpunktland, i.e., a country that was prioritized in East German cultural propaganda. Until 1972, the overall goal was to persuade Sweden to recognize the GDR diplomatically. East German foreign policy played an important role in this. There were also some political ties. Sweden was, together with Denmark, the Scandinavian country that had received the largest number of German Communist Party (KPD) refugees during World War II, and the Swedish Communist Party (SKP) was one of the SED’s most important international partners. German communists who had been refugees in Sweden became important intermediaries for unofficial contacts between the GDR and Sweden. Special mention should be made here of the music critic Maxim Stempel and the music ethnologist Ernst Emsheimer.

Laura Silverberg believes that most countries outside the Eastern Bloc regarded the GDR as a pariah, which is correct in terms of the official attitude of these countries. Sweden also falls into this category as the country did not recognize the GDR until 1972. But the pariah designation does not provide the whole picture, and strong musical relationships show that the GDR was also seen as a cultural and educational pioneer.

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The East German music scene with its highly respected venues represented a potential career opportunity for Swedish musicians, who wanted to test their abilities in a much livelier musical environment than the Swedish one. The musical careers of the Swedish conductors Carl von Garaguly and Herbert Blomstedt in the GDR demonstrate this with all possible clarity.\(^{24}\)

Research on the relationship between Sweden and the GDR, or on the Nordic countries and the GDR, is scarce, and in the field of musicological research there have been very few publications so far. There are some publications on trade relations, cooperation in the field of education, foreign policy and diplomatic relations, migration and political propaganda.\(^{25}\)

The editors of this anthology have published a few articles concerning the musical relations between the two states. These publications deal with the careers of Swedish musicians in the GDR, the touring of East German musicians and choirs in Sweden and the Stasi’s activities in the Swedish music scene.\(^{26}\)

Throughout the period under study, the GDR’s foreign policy was dominated by a quest for diplomatic recognition, and almost all contacts with other states were intended to contribute to this. Sweden was the


country that was most prioritized in East German foreign policy apart from Finland, which due to its complicated relationship with the Soviet Union did not recognize West or East Germany and yet still had the most formalized relationship with the GDR among the Nordic countries. Propaganda and culture were central parts of this recognition campaign. East German decision-makers believed that there was a strong Swedish interest in East German culture, and their aim was to reach an agreement on cultural cooperation that could in itself function as a recognition of the GDR’s constitutional legitimacy. Swedish authorities, however, were reluctant to cooperate officially for precisely this reason.

The content of the anthology

The Cold War through the Lens of Music-Making in the GDR is arranged by theme. The first, “The Political Function of Music,” contains a single chapter in which Meredith Nicoll discusses the definition of “Lied” and its relation to the socio-political context. Through a case study of the Union of German Composers and Musicologists (Verband Deutscher Komponisten und Musikwissenschaftler – VKM), she investigates the political function of song.

The second theme “Musical Individuals in a Political Context” contains studies spotlighting individual actors. Stefan Weiss writes about the East German composer Andre Asriel who was loyal to the political doctrines of the GDR and able to support himself as a composer. He became the musical front figure of the GDR in the 1950s as a composer of mass songs, although his jazz-influenced compositional style was attacked by adherents of socialist realism. Asriel published a book on jazz in 1966 and wrote political chansons during the 1960s. He had one foot in the mandatory musical environment with its roots in classical German musical heritage and one in the opposing camp of jazz.

Lars Klingberg discusses Marianne Gundermann/Johanna Rudolph, who was employed at the GDR Ministry of Culture and a devout Stalinist. Although she had no musical education and could not read music, she was important for the creation of the image of Handel in the

GDR and can therefore be seen as contributing to the formation of East German national identity. She had been arrested by the Gestapo in the Netherlands as a communist and a Jewish woman, taken to Auschwitz and eventually brought to Sweden by the “white buses” of the Swedish Red Cross.

Matthias Tischer contributes a text about two composers, the West German Hanns Werner Henze and the East German Paul Dessau. These two composers, separated by the Iron Curtain, collaborated on a number of works, and Tischer’s chapter provides an analysis of their common references – poetic, aesthetic and political – in these works.

The third theme, “East German Choirs and Cultural Diplomacy”, begins with an article by Andreas Lueken on the St. Thomas Choir and the tension between the choir’s traditional church repertoire and the GDR’s anti-religious stance in the period 1949–1990. The analysis addresses in what ways and to what extent the choir was a political instrument for the GDR. The article looks at the East German state’s need to profile its cultural policy through established institutions such as the St. Thomas Choir and to benefit from the choir’s international reputation, which, ironically, is based on the fact that they were and are carriers of the sacred Bach repertoire.

Henrik Rosengren deals with the Swedish and East German reception of the St. Thomas Choir’s and the Dresdner Kreuzchor’s Swedish tours, and how these choirs might have functioned as political propaganda tools during foreign tours, especially in neutral countries like Sweden. After the St. Thomas Choir’s first Swedish tour in 1949, the choir was regarded as the epitome of successful East German cultural diplomacy.

The final theme, “The GDR and Neutral Sweden”, contains three case studies of East German guest appearances and East German-Swedish cooperation that throw light on the potential friction between aesthetics, musicology, and politics.

Petra Garberding writes about Gisela May’s frequent tours in Sweden and uses discourse analysis to describe how the political context in the GDR and Sweden affected the Swedish reception of May. Focus is especially on May’s performances in Sweden during the 1960s and 1970s, a period when Swedish cultural policy discourse underwent a change that paved the way for a positive reception of May’s Marxism-based cultural ideas. Garberding also touches on the ambiguity expressed by May in relation to the GDR’s treatment of Wolf Biermann and how this figured in the Swedish debate.
In the next contribution, “Gerd Schönfelder: musicologist and Stasi employee in Sweden,” Petra Garberding writes about the activities in Sweden of this East German musicologist, opera director and unofficial Stasi employee, especially with regard to his connection with the Swedish Royal Academy of Music. Through this case, Garberding shows how the aesthetics of music and aspects of musicology interacted with politics in forming the musical relations between Sweden and the GDR.

Finally, Henrik Rosengren writes about the debate surrounding the opera *Gustaf Wasa*, a collaboration between the Swedish Royal Opera and the Semper Opera in Dresden, which opened in 1991, after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It was performed only a few times and generated much criticism in the Swedish media regarding collaboration with Gerd Schönfelder whose Stasi connections were known.

**Works Cited**


Garberding, Petra, “”We could smell that he’s Stasi...’’: Power and justification strategies of the Stasi in music life in the GDR and in Swedish-German music contacts,” in *Ethnologia Scandinavica*, 50 (2020): 43–66.


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