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IV.
The GDR and Neutral Sweden
In a program on Danish TV, broadcast in Sweden on 13 February 1989, the host Jeanette von Heidenstam quoted the East German artist and singer Gisela May (1924–2016) as saying: “Politics is as important for me as art, and it is through my songs I can spread my message and influence people”.¹ Von Heidenstam then spoke about May’s work as a teacher of song and chanson for young students. In a similar way May had explained in various interviews that she wanted to teach young people that singing is not just about the voice, but it is also about the intellect, the heart and everything else. Von Heidenstam comments: “And when you are listening to her, you really can feel how she is getting under your skin, with her passion and her commitment”.² The TV-program about May, which then followed, was a German-Danish production from 1986 in which May sang several songs by Bertholt Brecht with music by Kurt Weill, Hanns Eisler and Paul Dessau. She was also interviewed about her background and her singing technique.³

Gisela May is an interesting example of the “elite” artists of the GDR.⁴

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⁴ Elaine Kelly, “Performing Diplomatic Relations: Music and East German Foreign Policy in the Middle East during the Late 1960s”, *Journal of the American Musicalological Society* 72.2 (2019): 496.
May had a great career not only in the GDR, but also internationally. She was one of a small number of artists, who were allowed to travel and to perform their music almost anywhere in the world, especially in Western Europe and in the US. In Sweden, too, she was very popular. In fact, she was one of the East German artists who most frequently visited Sweden during the 1970s and 1980s. Her interpretations of Brecht and her singing technique became very popular in Sweden.

This chapter will try to provide some answers to the following questions:

- How was Gisela May’s artistic career influenced by the political and musical context in Sweden and in the GDR?
- How did the political and musical context during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s influence the reviewing of May’s performances in Sweden?
- And how was her career influenced by the Cold War context?

After providing a short biography of May, I will examine some details where ideas about music and politics become particularly clear, such as the way reviews in Swedish newspapers of her performances in Sweden combined an assessment of May’s artistic qualities with comments on her attitude toward the GDR. May’s relationship with critics of the regime is also discussed, as well as the way she was assessed and treated by the State Security (Stasi). Concerned mainly about music in a political context, I focus on texts about music more than music itself.

The establishment of meaning in texts, pictures and movies about music and musicians will be explored, using historical discourse analysis. Discourse is here defined as a kind of social practice, where different kinds of social perception are constructed and different interpretations of reality are negotiated. A historical discourse analysis focuses particularly on facts that are accepted as obvious or natural and not questioned in

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5 This article is part of the project “Between East and West: Aesthetics, ideology and politics in the musical relations Sweden – GDR 1949–1989”, which is conducted at Södertörn University from 2016–2020 by Petra Garberding, Henrik Rosengren, and Ursula Geisler. It is financed by the Baltic Sea Foundation at the Södertörn University in Sweden. The aim of this project is to explore how ideas about music and politics affected the cooperation between Swedish and East German musicians, conductors, orchestras, etc. and how these ideas influenced musical and artistic careers.

6 Achim Landwehr, *Historische Diskursanalyse* (Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus Verlag, 2009), 96.
a society during a specific period and how the interpretations of these facts have changed over time. The study focuses on different interpretations of music and politics within the Swedish and the East German context during the 1960s through to the 1980s, and what kinds of conditions for a musical or artistic career were made possible. According to the Swedish music ethnologist Alf Arvidsson, different discourses in a society influence the production of music as well as the expectations of listeners and consumers of music. Arvidsson also talks about music as an expression of a kind of “contract” between the musician and the society. I will look closer at the types of “contracts” that influenced the reception of May in Sweden.

As Birgitta Almgren has pointed out, culture was a central concept for the SED and the Politburo. Kurt Hager, for example, who was responsible for cultural issues in the SED Politburo, defined culture as something that encompassed the “entire life situation” and a “unity” between politics and economy, as found in a “socialist national culture”. Kurt Eduard von Schnitzler, a television commentator in the GDR, described parallels between cultural workers and soldiers in a speech to Soviet soldiers. While soldiers were supposed to conquer states with force, writers, musicians, artists, and researchers were sup-


posed to infiltrate and occupy the thoughts, language, and world view of people.9 Because of its political neutrality, Sweden was an important target for GDR propaganda, and cultural cooperation with Sweden was described by the GDR government as a central precondition for successful political propaganda work in Sweden. Important here were also Sweden’s contacts with West Germany as well as with the GDR and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and the GDR regime strove to ensure that the cultural terrain in Sweden was by no means left to West Germany to be occupied.10 Cooperation and exchange took place in the field of classical music and musicology, but also in other musical areas; musicians, orchestras, singers, and ensembles were regularly sent from the GDR to Sweden and vice versa. This exchange was mainly organized by two state bodies, the GDR Artists Agency and the Swedish National Concerts (Svenska Rikskonsert). From 1968 onwards there were regular arrangements and contracts.11

The material for this chapter comes from the archives of the Royal Library in Stockholm, the Archives of Swedish National Concerts (Svenska Rikskonserters arkiv, SRA) in the National Archives (Riksarkivet) in Stockholm, the Archive of the School of Art in Stockholm (Stockholms konstnärliga högskola, formerly the State Drama School, Statens Scenskola), the Archive of the Academy of Arts (Akademie der Künste) in Berlin and the Stasi Record Archives in Berlin.12 While the material in most of these archives is accessible to the public, in the Stasi Record archives I also gained access to sources that were created by illegal bugging methods. This means that parts of these sources may not be cited in academic articles and no details may be given. However, they can be used to generalize or summarize.13 Other sources for this study include reviews in Swedish daily newspapers, May’s autobiography from 2002, and radio interviews with May; in these latter sources, May comments only sparsely on her visits to Sweden.14

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9 Almgren 2009, 145.
12 In the footnotes, the Stasi Record Archive is abbreviated as “MfS” (Ministry for State Security, Ministerium für Staatssicherheit).
13 In this article this applies to the files with the signatures HA-XX 12293 to 12300.
14 May’s archive at the Academy of Arts in Berlin was not yet fully catalogued at the
Gisela May: A singing actress

Gisela May was born on 31 May 1924 in Wetzlar in Hessen. She died on 2 December 2016 in Berlin. According to May herself, her childhood in Germany during the Nazi period influenced her strongly.\(^{15}\) She described her father as a Social Democrat and her mother as a Communist. Her oldest brother died in the war. One of May’s worst experiences during this time was that her adored music teacher, Alfred Schmidt-Sas, who also encouraged her to pursue a career as an actor, was executed as a resistance fighter by the Nazis in 1943.\(^{16}\) From 1942 to 1944 she attended the acting school in Leipzig, from 1951 to 1962 she was employed at the German Theater (Deutsches Theater) in Berlin and from 1962 to 1992 at the Berliner Ensemble. After the reunification of Germany, the Berliner Ensemble was brought under new management in 1992, and May was dismissed.\(^{17}\) Nine years later, however, in connection with Kurt Weill’s 100th birthday, she was given the opportunity of a guest performance, which she gladly accepted.\(^{18}\)

May had been a member of the SED since 1958 and also a multiple national prize winner in the GDR.\(^{19}\) From 1972 until 1993, she was a member of the performing arts section of the Academy of Arts in East Berlin, and from 1993 until 2016, she was a member of the performing arts section of the Academy of Arts in (united) Berlin.\(^{20}\)

May was one of the foremost Brecht interpreters in the world and was internationally renowned as such. Among GDR artists, she was one of the foremost Brecht interpreters in the world and was internationally renowned as such. Among GDR artists, she was one


\(^{16}\) May, Gisela, Es wechseln die Zeiten – Erinnerungen (Leipzig: Militzke Verlag, 2002), 28.


of those who performed most often internationally. In an interview with Wolfgang Binder on the German radio (*Bayerischer Rundfunk*) in January 2001, May recounted how she, after a performance of Eisler’s songs with Brecht’s lyrics at the German Theater, was personally encouraged by Eisler to continue with this work.  

However, her first appearance as a solo artist was in Italy and not in the GDR. In West Germany she was often called “the socialist nightingale.”

All her life May combined singing with acting and she emphasized that as a singer she was also always an actress.

Although May, as an internationally known artist, was allowed to travel abroad relatively freely, she was almost constantly under surveillance by the Stasi, especially between 1965 and 1974, when she lived with Wolfgang Harich, a professor of philosophy, author and theater critic. Harich was critical of the GDR and supported reunification with West Germany, which earned him eight years in prison from 1956 to 1964. May’s Stasi files show that she was classified by the GDR government as politically not entirely reliable, a fact that might be surprising in view of her enormous freedom to travel.

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**Gisela May and the Stasi**

Gisela May is an interesting example of a prominent GDR artist who on the one hand clearly positioned herself on the side of the GDR and stood up for a socialist state, but on the other hand was also critical of the

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24 BArch, MsS – HA XX, Nr. 22737, MsS – HA XX, Nr. 12300, MsS – HA XX, Nr. 12299, MsS – HA XX, Nr. 12298, MsS – HA XX, Nr. 12297, MsS – HA XX, Nr. 12296, MsS – HA XX, Nr. 12295, MsS – HA XX, Nr. 12294, MsS – HA 12293, MsS, HA XX- AKG/RK 342–372, MsS ZAIG, Nr. 2018.

25 BArch, MsS – HA XX, Nr. 22737, MsS – HA XX, Nr. 12300, MsS – HA XX, Nr. 12299, MsS – HA XX, Nr. 12298, MsS – HA XX, Nr. 12297, MsS – HA XX, Nr. 12296, MsS – HA XX, Nr. 12295, MsS – HA XX, Nr. 12294, MsS – HA 12293, MsS, HA XX- AKG/RK 342–372, MsS ZAIG, Nr. 2018. (May, *Es wechseln die Zeiten – Erinnerungen*, 108)

26 BArch, MsS, HA XX- AKG/RK 342–372, p. 20.
same state. For example, as Gisela May applied for permission to travel to Paris for performances in March 1968, she was examined by the Stasi. The document of the review shows that May was classified by the Stasi as “politically unreliable” and “addicted to business”.\textsuperscript{27} In the same document her trips abroad (except for her trips to West Germany) from 1956 to 1968 were also listed, with trips to Sweden listed for the years 1959, 1960 and 1966. It was also mentioned that there were no “operational moments to be observed” (operativ zu beachtende Momente) during these trips.\textsuperscript{28} The Stasi employees considered May’s contacts with men who had become known to be critical of the system to be a problem. According to the Stasi, May maintained further contacts with people who were suspected of being “enemies of the state”, and not only with Wolfgang Harich.\textsuperscript{29} This is probably why May and her acquaintances were meticulously monitored and their telephones were bugged. May herself comments on this as follows in her autobiography from 2002:

Our living together [May and Harich] caused quite a stir in public. In the GDR 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. Wolfgang [Harich] was considered an enemy of the GDR, a dissident who wanted to overthrow Walter Ulbricht. For both of us this was no problem and the “superiors” of the GDR reacted calmly.\textsuperscript{30} This quote shows that May fundamentally supported the policies of the GDR. Nonetheless, she also found it unproblematic to interact with the GDR’s critics. Stasi files show that from January 1978 she held a permanent travel permit for shorter trips abroad.\textsuperscript{31} From her personal files from 1984 and 1987 at the Stasi, it is obvious that May was to be checked in “preferentially and particularly politely” when crossing the border with West Berlin, as she was categorized as a particularly “important person”.

\textsuperscript{27} BArch, MfS – HA XX- AKG/RK 342–372, p. 20–21.
\textsuperscript{28} BArch, MfS – HA XX- AKG/RK 342–372, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{29} BArch, MfS – HA XX- AKG/RK 342–372, p. 22.
No customs check of her luggage should be carried out and she should be allowed to carry film, sound, and other recording equipment. But these index cards also bear witness to regular observations of May's activities and travels.

The example of May can also serve as an illustration of the discourse on music and politics in the GDR and in the context of international cooperation. On the one hand, the great international interest in the works of Bertholt Brecht helped her to gain international attention. During the Cold War, Brecht's criticism of capitalism and his critical texts on National Socialism were particularly popular in leftist and social democratic circles, including in Sweden. Here, she also represented an official image of the GDR abroad that both she and her home country defined as important – and where socialism was propagated as a suitable response. May must also have been an important source of revenue for the GDR. It was probable that the enormous artistic and political importance she held for the GDR provided her with freedom and made her career possible despite the mistrust of the GDR authorities. Perhaps her treatment by the GDR regime might be described as what Elaine Kelly calls “diplomatic soft power” and “music diplomacy”. According to Kelly, the Soviet Union’s “elite artists” were readily used in a kind of ambassadorial role to Western countries. Their task was to promote a positive image of their homeland abroad. May’s central position in the cultural life of the GDR probably also gave her the opportunity to express herself in a politically critical manner, as she sometimes did, for example, during discussions at the Academy of Arts in Berlin. From the material on Academy meetings examined so far, it is clear that Gisela May and other members of the performing arts section by the end of the 1980s were critical of the state and felt patronized by the state in their artistic activities.

32 BArch, MfS, Index cards (DZK) Gisela May-Honigmann, index cards from 20 January 1984 and from 5 May 1986.
33 BArch, MfS, Index cards (DZK) Gisela May-Honigmann.
35 Elaine Kelly, “Performing Diplomatic Relations: Music and East German Foreign Policy in the Middle East during the Late 1960s”, Journal of the American Musicalological Society 72.2 (2019), 496.
Gisela May and Sweden

From 1959 Gisela May visited Sweden regularly, initially with the German Theater and the Berliner Ensemble, later also as a solo artist. In Sweden May became especially known as a “Brecht singer” and her performances were, according to organizers and critics, highly appreciated by the audience. Since 1969 there has also been a regular exchange between the Berlin School of Drama (Staatliche Schauspielschule) and the Stockholm School of Drama (Statens scenskola). As part of this collaboration, students from the Stockholm School of Drama regularly traveled to East Berlin to attend classes for 12–14 days. The Stockholm School of Drama also regularly invited teachers from the Berlin School of Drama to give seminars and workshops for Swedish students. From 1973 to 1983 Gisela May frequently taught song and chanson at the Stockholm School of Drama. On average she taught there about 30 hours per year and her collaboration was highly appreciated by the school. In a letter to the Swedish Institute in 1971, the Principal of the Stockholm School of Drama stressed the great cultural importance of Sweden’s cooperation with the GDR:

Our cooperation [with the GDR] is of the utmost importance for our school and, in a broader perspective, for the whole Swedish theater life. In reality, it can be said that our cultural life benefits from the large investments in art and culture that the GDR makes possible. It is my wish that the Swedish Institute expresses an official thank you [to those responsible in the GDR]. At the same time, I would like to express my wish that the Swedish Institute will support the desire for even more extensive cooperation between the GDR and Sweden in every way. Swedish cultural life can only profit from such a deepened cooperation.40

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38 Stockholms konstnärliga högskola (SKH), E 1 A:13, Diarieförda handlingar, Dnr 186/71, Hans Wigren to Stiftelsen Svenska Institutet (Swedish Institute), 17 December 1971.

39 SKH, Gisela May, Personnel file, 240531-0000.

This quotation is one of many examples illustrating Sweden's great interest in cultural cooperation with the GDR. A view that was widespread in Sweden at this time was that the GDR regime actively promoted cultural life in the GDR and artists from the GDR were also seen as a guarantee of high artistic quality. There was a widespread opinion that Swedish cultural life could benefit from a close cooperation with the GDR and even with other East European countries.41

Most of May’s tours in Sweden were organized by the Swedish National Concerts Bureau, often in cooperation with the GDR’s Cultural Center (DDR-Kulturzentrum) in Stockholm and with the GDR Artist Agency (Künstleragentur der DDR). May’s name occurs frequently: the Swedish National Concerts Bureau tried to organize tours with her as often as possible.42

One of the earliest articles about Gisela May in Swedish newspapers can be found on 26 December 1955 in the newspaper Expressen. It is an announcement about a movie with Gisela May, Heinz Rühmann and Heli Finkenzeller. In Swedish the movie was called Som ett brev på posten (Like a letter in the post). Four years later, the Arbetartidningen announced a tour by the Berliner Ensemble in Scandinavia and complained that the Brecht tour would not come to Sweden.43 The author, Nils Lalander, was disappointed by the low level of interest in the Berliner Ensemble’s activities in Sweden. In his article, he described the development of the Berliner Ensemble and Helene Weigel’s plans to create a “theater boat”, that was to sail around the Baltic Sea and visit different cities along the coast, and invite people to various performances with texts from Brecht.44

But already during the 1960s, interest in Brecht’s literature and songs had been growing in Sweden. Brecht’s critique of capitalism and commercialization and Gisela May’s interpretations and performances fit well with Swedish society at this time. Other important topics during this

44 Lalander, 18 February 1959.
period were the anti-war movements, protest against the Vietnam War specifically, and criticism of nuclear weapons. Here, as well, May and the Brecht tradition came at just the right time.

One of the first articles about a performance by Gisela May and her colleagues from the German Theater in Berlin can be found in 1960 in Göteborgs-Posten. May performed “Seeräuber-Jenny” (“Pirate Jenny”), “Von der Judenhure Marie Sanders” (“Ballad of Marie Sanders, the Jew’s Whore”) and “Friedenslied” (“Peace Song”). May’s facial expressiveness was praised as much as her fantastic voice. In a review of another performance in Gothenburg the following day, May and her German Theater colleagues were again congratulated on a great performance. The reviewer was surprised by the quite simple performance style of the ensemble, which he commented on in a positive way, and praised May’s broad vocal register. According to the Swedish daily newspapers examined here, and according to sources from the Stasi archives, Gisela May did not visit Sweden between 1960 and 1965, so the next review about a performance in Sweden dates from 1966.

This review describes a performance by May in Sweden on 3 October 1966. On that occasion she took part in a charity concert for children in Vietnam at the National Museum in Stockholm. She flew from Venice, where she was performing, to Stockholm to be present at the concert. “She gave the evening a hot pulse” and received great encouragement from her audience, according to the reviewer in the Dagens Nyheter.

Two years later, 7 October 1968, the Swedish audience was able to hear Gisela May at a Brecht evening in the National Museum in Stockholm, where she performed various songs by Eisler and Weill. The Swedish music journalist Carl-Gunnar Åhlén reviewed the concert: “How is it possible to live together with these terrible texts for more than a decade without either being dulled by the constant routine or drowning as a human being?” He was full of admiration for May’s acting skills, her fantastic voice, which he compared to Marlene Dietrich and Zarah Leander and which was even better than Lotte Lenya. According to Åhlén, you could listen to May “as if bewitched”; she knew how to cast a spell over her audience.

49 Åhlén, 7 October 1968.
In 1971, May did five concerts in Sweden: in Gothenburg, Karlstad, Lund, Falun and Stockholm. Her tour was organized by the GDR Artist Agency in cooperation with Swedish National Concerts. In Stockholm, she performed songs at the National Theater Dramaten to a full house. The reviewers praised May’s charisma, her amazing voice and “stage personality”. It was an “unforgettable evening”. May sang songs from *Happy End*, *The Threepenny Opera*, *Mahagonny* and “To Potsdam under the oak” with music by Kurt Weill. She also performed some songs by Hanns Eisler from *Schweyk im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (“Svejk during the Second World War”). A reviewer in *Arbetartidningen* was critical of the performance of the Eisler songs to the accompaniment of piano, bass, and two wind instruments instead of two pianos as in the original. The *Arbetartidningen* reviewer did not consider Dessau’s music to be as good as Weill’s and Eisler’s. The Dessau songs were from *Mutter Courage* and the reviewer missed the strong pull that he experienced when listening to Weill and Eisler. Other songs in this concert were Brecht’s “An die Nachgeborenen” (“To the Later Born”) and “Peace Song”. *Dagens Nyheter*’s reviewer Hans Axel Holm was also impressed and highlighted May’s excellent performance technique, her way of using her whole body, and her special way of singing individual words to bring the content to the public. At the Dramaten in Stockholm, May’s audience was extremely enthusiastic, and she sang four encores.

May’s performances in Sweden can be seen both as examples of a striving for authenticity and of what Alf Arvidsson describes as “alienation”. The performers who were popular from the mid-1960s until the 1980s were those who were perceived as honest and “genuine”, that is, the audience had the feeling that the musician personally supported the message he or she was delivering. However, Arvidsson also sees Brecht’s texts and songs as examples of “alienation”, namely the attempt to dilute the illusion of realism in the text or song and thereby force the listener to think about the issue behind what is being performed. May’s strong presence in the songs she performed, her active body language, and facial expressions clearly appealed to Swedish audiences. At the same time,

54 Arvidsson 2008, 119.
May also participated in another important new discourse at this time on could dub “contact with the audience,” in other words, as a professional musician, actor and teacher, she should be close to her audience, something she emphasized in various interviews.\textsuperscript{55} Previously music was performed from a stage in front of a public there to listen quietly, but now the public should interact with the artist and engage with the artist’s political statements. Artist and listeners alike were expected to be – or to be turned into – political subjects. In other words, the active audience was part of the performance process. The audience was supposed to reflect on the political message in, for example, song lyrics, and to be critical and questioning of contemporary society. In this process, direct contact between musician and audience was definitely desired.\textsuperscript{56}

In 1960s Sweden it was still quite unusual for musicians to speak directly to their audiences, particularly in the field of classical music, though this was beginning to be seen as desirable. For example, the Swedish-British opera singer Dorothy Irving reported that an important reason for her employment by the Swedish National Concerts in 1963 was that she was already used to communicating with her audience and not just singing for them.\textsuperscript{57} The concept of “contact with the public” can also be interpreted as an attempt to bring music to new social groups. Classical music, or music that was categorized as politically “educational” by concert organizers, was to be made familiar to a wider audience than before. From the 1960s onwards, there was a growing feeling that classical concerts, opera evenings and theater performances should no longer be the preserve of the middle and upper classes, but rather that such cultural expressions should be made accessible to people from all social classes.\textsuperscript{58} The original purpose of the Swedish National Concerts was therefore primarily popular education: to introduce classical music to those social groups that did not normally attend classical concerts. Later, this was extended to include other musical genres, such as jazz and folk music. Or, as Klas Gustavsson puts it, “With cultural policy as a battering ram, the

\textsuperscript{55} Tv-program, “Fönster mot Norden”, TV 1, Sweden, 13 February 1989.
\textsuperscript{56} Arvidsson 2008.
\textsuperscript{58} Klas Gustavsson, Levande musik i hela landet. Rikskonserter från början till slut (Bo Ejéby Förlag, 2011), 25–39.
resistance of the working class to bourgeois culture was to be broken."

The politicians engaged in building the Swedish welfare state saw it as central that political, social, and cultural reforms were combined in order to achieve social equality. Important strategies to the end included bringing classical music – and other music that had been classified as culturally valuable – out into the countryside – to schools and hospitals and to workers in the factories. There was therefore a similarity between official cultural strategies in Sweden and in the GDR. May’s performance style and interpretations of Brecht accorded well with this ideal. She performed in close contact with her audience and her songs were seen as educational and socially critical.

As mentioned briefly above, there were sometimes long gaps between May’s performances in Sweden. For example, after the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, May did not perform again in Sweden until 1966. There might of course be practical reasons for this, for instance that May was very much in demand and had to prioritize other engagements. But it is also possible that political events led to a diminution of Sweden’s interest in the GDR. Earlier research on the connections between Sweden and the GDR has noted that opinions about the GDR in Sweden were not unified or stable. There were those who praised the GDR for its socialist system, its criticism of capitalism and commercialization, and its commitment to the equality of all citizens. Others were critical of the GDR because of its restrictions on free speech and free traveling. Some specific events increased the number of people whose opinion of the GDR was unfavorable, to cite a few: the building of the Wall in 1961, the contribution to the suppression of the Prague Revolution in 1968, and the banishment of the singer Wolf Biermann from the GDR to West Germany in 1976. These events were heavily criticized in Sweden and were detrimental to cooperation with the GDR. It is possible Sweden’s more negative attitude toward the GDR also had an impact on the cultural

59 Gustavsson 2011, 53.
64 Almgren 2009; Abraham 2007.
cooperation between Sweden and East Germany and led to a reduction in the invitations to Gisela May. Further data should be analyzed to test this hypothesis.

In interviews with Swedish journalists, May often explained that it was important and natural for her to combine her artistic performances and her political mission.\(^{65}\) She said, for instance, in an interview with two Swedish journalists at her home in Berlin in April 1976: “My performances in the Western countries I see as a political mission”.\(^{66}\) This referenced Brecht’s ideas of fighting against fascism, war, capitalism and the class society. But she also saw it as her mission to represent the GDR abroad and to spread a positive image of her home country. In the 1976 interview she expressed the opinion that the GDR had not yet reached the society Brecht was aiming for, but still – unlike in Western countries – industrial production in the GDR was in the hands of the workers and the level of education was high.\(^{67}\) In the resulting article, the two Swedish journalists were carefully critical of May. The title of the article is: “She lives a luxurious life – Normal people are looking at her with envy and admiration – She says: I am not rich”.\(^{68}\) The journalists describe May’s apartment in central Berlin, her West German car (an Opel Rekord) and her freedom to travel almost everywhere in the world, while many other GDR citizens were rarely if ever allowed to leave the GDR. The authors also mention her membership in the SED since 1958, though without further comment.

Here again the discourse on social equality – the idea that everyone should have the same rights regardless of income and social status – shines through. Although May was politically and artistically committed to “working-class culture”, the journalists believed that she did not live what she preached. Because of her privileged position in the GDR, the legitimacy of her statements might be questioned.

\(^{65}\) See for example: Lars Bjelf och Pea Björklund, “Hon lever i lyx”, Aftonbladet, 10 April 1976; Marianne Hühne, “Politiken är lika viktig som konsten för mig”, Aftonbladet, 26 April 1981.

\(^{66}\) Bjelf and Björklund, 10 April 1976.

\(^{67}\) Bjelf and Björklund, 10 April 1976.

\(^{68}\) Bjelf and Björklund, 10 April 1976.
Gisela May and the expatriation of Wolf Biermann

On 13 November 1976, the singer Wolf Biermann was deprived of his East German citizenship while performing in West Germany. His expatriation caused a great deal of protest in Sweden, also among those who were normally supportive of the GDR (along with protest in West Germany and many other places in the world). The left-wing newspaper Ny Dag, for instance, published criticism of Biermann’s expatriation by several well-known artists and writers, who referred to themselves as “Swedish socialists and cultural workers”. These argued against the expatriation by insisting that it was a human right to be allowed to criticize one’s own home country and that no one should be punished because of his or her critical political opinion.

The case of Biermann is particularly useful as an illustration of Gisela May’s complex attitude to music and politics and therefore should be examined here in some detail. When May visited Sweden in February 1978 she was interviewed by the writer Agneta Pleijel and was asked about her opinion of the case of Biermann. The interview took place in a car from the airport at Arlanda to Uppsala, where May was due to give a performance. In the introduction to her article, Pleijel expresses her ambivalence toward May. On one hand, she admired May greatly for her fantastic voice and her fabulous Brecht interpretations, but she also expressed skepticism of May’s political commitment. As mentioned above, in earlier interviews May had emphasized that music and politics belonged together and that her artistic engagement always also was a political one. After the expatriation of Biermann, this attitude was problematic for many Swedish people. Pleijel writes in the introduction to her article:

During this year, the climate in Europe has changed to a colder one, in the tracks of Wolf Biermann several artists from the GDR have left their home country. Is it possible to have a good conversation about this during a short car trip in a snowy Uppland?

70 Almgren 2009, 351.
71 Almgren 2009, 352.
May was invited to Sweden for the celebrations of Brecht’s 80th birthday. In her article Pleijel is wondering whether it would be feasible to talk to May about the possibility of keeping Brecht’s critical intellect alive even during all these anniversary celebrations in the GDR? May’s answer was:

Brecht [is] more up to date than ever before [...]. The disagreements in the capitalist countries were so obvious, and the unemployment is just increasing. Brecht’s main enemy was fascism, now we see, how fascist tendencies increase in many places in Europe...

Pleijel agreed, but asked: “What [is the situation] in the GDR?” May’s opinion was that in this case, Brecht’s goal had already to a great extent been realized. When Pleijel asked her about Biermann, May answered that she believed that Biermann had himself provoked his expatriation and that his concert in Cologne had been a deliberate challenge. She argued that Biermann could have sung about “so much else”, but he chose to sing about the GDR almost the whole time. “He should have understood that we do not accept every insult against our country”, May said, and continued:

And here in the West everything is going well for him. He is getting rich, has bought a house. I do not mean that he has sold himself. No, I do not think that. But we have a proverb that says that you sing for those who feed you.

Pleijel’s conclusion here is that what May says is similar to official, “frosty” (kyklagna) pronouncements from the GDR. But there is a difference between how May talks about Biermann and how GDR officials talked about him. Pleijel’s view is that May sounds frank and also a little bit sad: “Biermann has put himself outside. She is inside. The quoted proverb is valid for herself, too.”

original: “Under detta år har klimatet i Europa blivit frostigare, i Wolf Biermanns spår har en rad konstnärer från DDR lämnat sitt land. Går det att föra ett vettigt samtal om sådant under ett par mils bilfärd i ett snöigt Uppland?”


Pleijel, 4 February 1978.
In Sweden, Gisela May took a somewhat clearer stand against Biermann than she did in her native GDR. Files in the Stasi archives in Berlin show that after Biermann’s expatriation she avoided taking sides, whether for Biermann or against him. The files also clearly show that Biermann’s expatriation divided GDR citizens into two camps: those who were against his expatriation – many of whom signed letters of protest – and those who considered his expatriation a proper political measure.\textsuperscript{76} The GDR authorities used this issue to assess – often through illegal surveillance measures – which citizens supported the state and which were critical of it. Numerous examples show that it could be dangerous to speak out publicly against Biermann’s expatriation – many were arrested.\textsuperscript{77} While the Stasi archives show that May refrained from open criticism of the Biermann decision, information from her index cards in the Stasi archives demonstrates that May had told the West German press that she found “the intervention” against Biermann “unusually harsh”. She also made it clear that she and Wolfgang Harich would “refrain from any activity”.\textsuperscript{78} It appears from various sources in the Stasi archives that May regarded Biermann as a talented artist and that she was critical of his expatriation. But she also believed that Biermann had gone too far in his criticism of the GDR and that therefore he had himself to blame. Given this mixed background, the statements that May made in Sweden, which are primarily critical of Biermann, can be understood as an expression of different national discourses on music and politics. The strong criticism of Biermann’s expatriation by many in Sweden caused great damage to relations between Sweden and the GDR. The Swedish Pen Club and several Swedish universities issued an open letter of protest to the Council of Ministers of the GDR, and even *Ny Dag*, the main organ of the Swedish Communist Party (\textit{VPK}), published a protest piece on 19 November 1976, in which Biermann’s expatriation was described as an “assault not only on Wolf Biermann, but on all of us for whom socialism and freedom of culture are inseparable”.\textsuperscript{79} Gustav Korlén, professor emeritus in German studies at Stockholm University, ended his cooperation with the GDR

\textsuperscript{76} BA\textit{Arch}, Mf\textit{S} – HA XX, Nr. 12296.
\textsuperscript{78} BA\textit{Arch}, Mf\textit{S}, Index cards (DZK) Gisela May-Honigmann, information from 21 November 1976.
\textsuperscript{79} Abraham 2007, 288.
Cultural Center in Stockholm after Biermann’s expatriation, and after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 he even described Biermann’s expatriation in 1976 as a “mortal blow to the cultural reputation and credibility of the GDR” in Sweden. 80

Biermann’s expatriation highlighted differences between Sweden and the GDR as regards the discourse on culture and politics. As Alf Arvidsson has shown, from the mid-1960s new cultural currents in Sweden had challenged and sought to renew traditional cultural life. In the 1960s and 1970s, these currents were highly influenced by left-wing politics. Culture was now not only to be produced for and consumed by an elite, but be there for all citizens to participate in. These currents also contained strong anti-capitalist tendencies and sympathy for socialist influences. Culture should become more communicative and accessible to all, and it was also expected that cultural workers would become aware of the political positions they were conveying through their cultural work. 81 However, artistic freedom was also important in Sweden, and this should not be restricted by those in power. Biermann’s expatriation was a great shock for the Swedish supporters of this view. A discursive boundary was crossed here: it was not acceptable for politicians to try to prevent freelance artists from singing socially critical songs.

Against this background it is not surprising that Pleijel expresses a certain disappointment with May’s statements about Biermann. The impression is that Pleijel had hoped for a different, probably more critical, answer from May. Here we can see an encounter between two different discourses on music and politics. May here represents a hegemonic discourse in the GDR, according to which a musician, in his artistic work, may only criticize his own state up to a certain limit – and Biermann, in her opinion, had exceeded this limit. Pleijel’s questions and comments, on the other hand, illustrate a hegemonic discourse in which individual freedom of opinion is placed above political conformity.

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Gisela May: An unconventional political artist in Cold War Europe

During the Cold War, various discourses on music and politics emerged in both Western and Eastern Europe. Swedish newspaper articles and reviews discussing May can be seen as reflecting these discourses. Sweden is an interesting example here, because it was positioned at an intersection between Eastern and Western Europe, and therefore it could be argued that it was here that the different discourses clashed most clearly.

The conditions of musicians and music production and performance underwent dramatic change in 1960s and 1970s Sweden. There were clamors for a new musical landscape and new music, and especially that classical music should be made available to everybody and not only to people in the larger cities. At the same time music and art in general were turned into commercialized products, while nevertheless social democracy and left-wing politics dominated the political landscape. An important element of the Swedish discourse was the idea of creating an equal and classless society, and this discourse included criticism of capitalism and the commercialization of art. As Alf Arvidsson has pointed out, there were calls in Sweden for a “new musician”. This was to be someone who was open about his or her political stance, was aware of being a political subject and was willing to express criticism of capitalism and the commercialization of music. May and the Brecht tradition could fit this role nicely.82

The Swedish articles and reviews about Gisela May can also be interpreted as expressions of a discursive struggle about music. It is true that we can observe hegemonic discourses in Sweden about a classless, socialist society, where solidarity with others was valued over individual profit and where music was expected to reflect political positions. But there were also other discourses that challenged these ideas, and the articles by Bjelf, Björklund, and Pleijel discussed above contain examples of these rival discourses. May, for example, was criticized for not living according to her ideals, when she enjoyed many privileges in the GDR that others had no access to. She did not live her song, so to speak. In Pleijel’s report of her talk with May about Biermann, another discourse can be identified. This is the discourse of free speech, which has always been dominant in Sweden – even if always accompanied by a discussion of how far this freedom should go. Through the Biermann case hegemonic

82 Arvidsson 2008, 385.
Swedish discourse becomes visible: it should be natural for a democratic state to allow all citizens to criticize their own government – without fear of oppression. As Pleijel described it, May was, in this respect, too loyal to her own government.

To be sure, Gisela May represented new ideas about how to embody authenticity as an artist, how to build a relationship with the audience, and how to make them think. Clearly, her desire to combine her acting and her singing with her political message – something that found resonance during the 1960s and 1970s in both Sweden and the GDR – contributed to May’s great success during this period.

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