

# “Rhapsodie vom Meer des Friedens”

## *GDR-Schlager as a Political Tool in the Cold War*

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### **Abstract**

During the Cold War music was an important means for the socialist German Democratic Republic to gain international recognition. Song festivals offered perfect opportunities to build cultural relations especially around the Baltic Sea and its neighboring Nordic countries which were considered strategic buffer zones between the Eastern and the Western blocks. Using the example of the “Schlagerfest der Ostseestaaten” (the song festival of the Baltic States) in Rostock the article examines the importance of allegedly unpolitical popular music to represent a specific Eastern German identity and enhance the official cultural foreign policy.

Concerning the complex matters of music and politics the example of Schlager might be a difficult one from a German point of view. While other European cultures still witness more or less seamless popular song traditions so that cultural heritage can innocuously be used for modern interpretations the two German dictatorships baffled any naive or unambiguous appropriation of traditional tunes or even the “Volkslied”. Sharing many similarities with other song writing industries such as New York’s Tin Pan Alley German Schlager had been a trademark of the young Weimar music industry with hot sounds, charming melodies, and witty lyrics, often blending in different genres such as operetta, cabaret, and radio music within the blooming entertainment business (Bassler 2021; Wicke 2021).

Like many other parts of the German cultural life Nazi music politics had harsh consequences for the popular arts of music, entertainment, movies,

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and theater. While the most inspiring protagonists soon after 1933 were either forced into exile or persecuted and annihilated in the years to come especially Joseph Goebbels' propaganda machinery tried to incorporate the Schlager's impact and popularity for ideological purposes. Especially during the Second World War Schlager became an important means for Wehrmacht Wunsch-konzerte and "Durchhaltefilme" to propagate music as a political vacuum of nostalgia, Kitsch, and irrational emotionality.

Since then, the ongoing debate about the (a)political nature of Schlager kept pace with the various waves of stylistic renewal. In retrospect, popular tunes by Caterina Valente, Peter Alexander, Bill Ramsey, Hazy Osterwald, Peter Kraus, Vicco Torriani, and Freddy Quinn provided a "typical" musical tapestry for Ludwig Erhard's and Konrad Adenauer's "Wirtschaftswunder" of the 1950s as a refreshing, juvenile substitute of the Nazi-contaminated "Volkslied" which awaited its controversial revival by Heino in the mid-1960s. Strikingly, all these debates focus Schlager with a perspective from Western Germany where – according to its critics – it served as a primary example of the capitalist music industry (Silbermann 1965). Surprisingly the socialist German Democratic Republic – claiming to be the historically legitimate heir of German culture – witnessed a similar phenomenon with Schlager at the core of popular music, in this case even becoming of strategic importance for cultural foreign policy. In recent years popular music in the GDR has become a field of interest for musicological research especially with Jazz studies (Schmidt-Rost 2015). Schlager in contrast has not been addressed, despite its huge impact thanks to the largest audience amongst all popular genres and despite its attention by the authorities. To demonstrate the ambivalent political nature of Schlager in a dictatorship and its musical essentials this essay will focus especially on two different aspects, the GDR's Baltic Sea initiatives to increase international recognition and the creation of a specific Eastern German identity.

## **Generating International Attention – The Baltic Agenda**

After the two rivaling German states had been established in 1949 their entanglement into the Cold War caused various diplomatic complications. Konrad Adenauer's Bundesrepublik started to network intensely with Western European neighbors (which only a few years earlier had been occupied by the Wehrmacht) and despite some suspicion the FRG was welcomed into the military alliance NATO for strategic purposes in 1955. Concerning potential alliances, the Soviet dominated German Democratic Republic had to deal with unfortunate circumstances: In the same year of joining the Warsaw Pact in 1955 the GDR was blocked from all diplomatic recognition by Western or non-aligned countries as a result of the so-called Hallstein Doctrine, named

after the FRG’s State Secretary of the Foreign Office Walter Hallstein (Hillaker 2020). One consequence for Moscow was an enforced rhetoric of peace while trying to establish geographical buffer zones between member states of the Eastern and Western blocks. Accordingly, Walter Ulbricht, General Secretary of the monopolistic state party SED (“Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands”) promoted the Baltic Sea to become a “Sea of Peace” (“ein Meer des Friedens”).<sup>1</sup>

The Nordic countries’ importance though was not limited to geopolitical matters but instead based on cultural significance: While Finland was tied to the Soviet empire by means of an unfavorable peace treaty – the outcome of the Red Army’s victory against the alliance of Finland with Nazi-Germany – neutral Sweden was flattered by both Germanies (Bohn & Cornelißen & Lammers 2008; Allers 2009; Wegener Friis, Carlsen & Abraham 2016). The cases of Denmark and especially Norway were even more delicate and tempting: Although the years of the German occupation were still very present and questions concerning the restitution of victims yet unsolved Norway had to deal with the FRG as a new NATO-ally (Frøland 2006). However, previous to the Winter Olympics (which were about to take place in Norway in 1952), the Norwegian parliament made very clear that in case of a gold medal a ceremonial performance of the *Deutschlandlied* would be inappropriate.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary the ties between Norway and the Soviet Union were strong, based on mutual negative memories of Germany during WWII.

Furthermore, more than 150.000 Soviet and Yugoslavian prisoners of war had been deported to occupied Norway as slave workers for the gigantic construction and infrastructure projects of the Organisation Todt (Custodis 2020; Neerland Solheim 2009). Concerning a solid artistic education the famous Leipzig Conservatory had been a traditional place for young Norwegian musicians including Edvard Grieg (Mattes 2019). Although after 1945 the actual exchange of people was never reestablished due to the Cold War’s political circumstances both the mutual anti-fascist and cultural legacy offered valuable arguments for the GDR for cultural diplomacy with Norway.

The idea to reunite countries surrounding the Baltic Sea could have resembled the mutual membership in the Hanseatic League. Of course such a capitalist history was out of the question for the socialist GDR and as the necessity to find support by neutral Western countries was a main priority

1 To unite nine brass orchestras from the Soviet Union, Poland, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway and the GDR Hans Helmut Hunger composed a *Rhapsody from the Sea of Peace* (“Rhapsodie vom Meer des Friedens”) which was credited as a highlight of the 12th Workers Festival in Rostock 1970. This phrase is so telling to demonstrate the GDR’s political ambitions by means of music that it was used for the title of this essay. Cf. *Vorbereitungen auf die 12. Arbeiterfestspiele im Bezirk Rostock*, in: *Neues Deutschland*, 28 May 1970 and “*Rhapsodie vom Meer des Friedens*” erklang. *Glanzvolle Höhepunkte der Arbeiterfestspiele*, in *Berliner Zeitung*, 15 June 1970.

2 Minute of the cabinet meeting on 22 January 1952, online at <https://kabinettsprotokolle.bundesarchiv.de/protokoll/dob1f62b-4d74-4478-9b7b-605f7228a812#K390-a62-436> (30 April 2024).

anyway the Nordic countries turned into primary contacts among the Baltic abutters. The year 1956 with the Hungarian Revolution and riots in Poland temporarily undermined the intended pacifist image so that all ambitions to reestablish cultural exchange soon sparked propagandistic initiatives such as the “Ostseewoche” (the Baltic Sea Week) in 1958 (Linderoth 2007: 74–75). The challenge not only to establish a counterexample to the “Kieler Woche” (mostly a summer festival accompanying a famous sailing regatta) but to present the GDR as the better one of the two Germanies led to the decision four years later to host a music competition called “Schlagerfest der Ostseestaaten”. Such an occasion dedicated to popular tunes was a common format since the famous Sanremo-festival in 1951 which inspired the European Broadcasting Union to start the international Grand Prix Eurovision de la Chanson in 1956.

While the Polish International Song Festival in Sopot since 1961 was open also for non-European contestants the Schlagerfest der Ostseestaaten since 1962 was dedicated mostly to the four Nordic countries Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland, the GDR itself and Poland, in some years also including singers from the Soviet Union. However, for the years 1963 to 1967 also the FRG was represented with contributions, in 1963 by Marisa und Peter Wegen, in 1964 with Peter Steffen even winning a second prize.<sup>3</sup> The reason for this temporary participation of West German artists – in the first years after the Berlin Wall had caused a major international crisis – remains unclear; files of the GDR ministry for culture in the Bundesarchiv Berlin neither mention any circumstances nor discuss this matter.

In 1967 the official record company for popular music Amiga released an album with all winners of the first five seasons.<sup>4</sup> Several details are revealing concerning the political importance of Schlager: Among well-known East German singers of the time such as Bärbel Wachholz, Fred Froberg and Regina Thoss one can find the Schlager-superstar Wenche Myhre, winning for Norway in 1965 with *Men Are Men*. Furthermore, several songs by foreign artists were performed in German. Although English already was established as the standard of international pop music for example German Schlager, French Chanson and Italian Canzone cultivated their “typical” languages which on the one hand underlines their diplomatic relevance as musical export goods. On the other hand, the foreign language skills in most countries were rather low at the time so that it was a usual phenomenon for international artists to record different versions of their music for specific markets.

For the album’s liner notes Helmut Kaltofen was proud to report that the festival is not a simple entertaining festivity but succeeds to stimulate the

3 Bundesarchiv Berlin, DR 1-22187, documentation of all participants of the Schlager-Festival 1962–1970.

4 See <https://www.discogs.com/de/master/854867-Various-5-Jahre-Internationales-Schlagerfestival-Der-Ostsee%C3%A4nder> (30 April 2024).

Figur 1. 5 Jahre Internationales Schlagerfestival der Ostseeländer (1967)



Accompanied by the Horst Geipel Orchestra the album includes Fred Froberg *Am Kai wartest Du*, Toni Stepanek (trumpet) *Frag nicht*, Anita Hirvonen *Sei doch bloß mal so, wie Du wirklich bist*, Tadeusz Wozniakowski *Giovane, Jeg savner Deg* [without an artist's name], Regina Thoss *Die erste Nacht am Meer*, Bärbel Wachholz *Das kann ich niemals vergessen*, Men Are Men [without mentioning Wenche Myhre], Tadeusz Wozniakowski *Olla-la Mandolin*, *Sangen om Dig* [without an artist's name], Anita Hirvonen *Leg mir keine Edelsteine in den Weg*, and *Zum Tanzen gehören vier Beine* [without an artist's name].

dance music production of the GDR and all participants (“echte Impulse für das Tanzmusikschaffen für uns und für alle Beteiligten”). According to official promo material and newspaper articles the Ostseewoche and its Schlagerfestival remained a success during the following years. A few weeks after Erich Honecker had succeeded the gray Walter Ulbricht in the spring of 1971 press coverage of the official opening of the 14th Ostseewoche pictured the event as a major state affair in the presence of Honecker.<sup>5</sup> Ten chimes at ten o'clock gave the signal to hoist the flags of all participating countries at Rostock's Thälmannplatz along the traditional Baltic fanfare (“die traditionelle Ostseefanfare”). After the GDR's national anthem was over ten thousands of peace doves were released into the sunny summer sky before the new anthem of the Ostseewoche was premiered which was credited to celebrate the longing for peace of all people of Northern Europe (“die neue Hymne der Ostseewoche [...], die das Sehnen der Völker Nordeuropas nach Frieden besingt”).

Unfortunately, the Ostseefanfare and the Ostseewoche's own anthem are unknown today or at least could not be traced in archives so far. The purpose of the Ostseewoche to present the GDR as an independent nation can be recognized the clearest a little aside the official agenda with a distinct feminist undertone. As reports were proud to announce the international women's program for the Baltic Week (“Internationales Frauenprogramm zur Ostseewoche”) deduced the demand for diplomatic recognition especially from the leading role of women in the GDR:

5 Bundesarchiv DR 1-22187, Kulturministerium, 14. Ostseewoche 1971, Informationsbulletin zur Ostseewoche 1971.

This interest in the burning issues of our time is also underlined by the fact that participants in the women's program of the Baltic Sea Week are actively involved in their national committees for the recognition of the GDR. But the 180 delegates, especially the women from the countries of Northern Europe, are visiting the GDR to study how and on what basis the full equality of women in all areas of social life has been realized.<sup>6</sup>

## Demonstrating National Uniqueness – Entertainment versus Ideology

When in December 1972 and early 1973 all major European countries including the FDR began to establish official diplomatic relation – the USA were about to follow in 1974 – the GDR under Erich Honecker had achieved one of its most important successes of foreign policy. In consequence, culture became a priority to demonstrate the country's national originality (Herb 2004; Orlow 2006). Again Schlager seemed one of the most efficient means as it was musically fashionable enough to reach a young audience, not as trendy as Beat and Rock'n'Roll and neither as subversive as Blues, but way cooler than official organizations such as the Oktoberklub (Robb 2007; Bruhn 2019). However, Schlager remained a complicated and contradictive matter: On the one hand, the supposedly unpolitical nature of Schlager was a perfect tool for cultural diplomacy. On the other hand, the popular music business was dominated by Western protagonists, sounds, marketing trends, and record companies. Like in sports, competitions therefore were important events as long as a socialist dominance was predictable. Accordingly, the development of a popular sound that could meet the demands of Socialist Realism was of primary importance. But beyond all formal phrases, what does that really mean?

6 Ibid. *Feierliche Eröffnung des Internationalen Frauenprogramms zur Ostseewoche 1971*: "Sonntag nachmittag im fahngeschmückten Kultursaal der Deutschen Post am Rostocker Ernst-Thälmann-Platz: Mit einem festlichen Konzert von Schülern der Volksmusikschule Rostock begann für 180 Frauen aus neun nordeuropäischen und Ostseestaaten das Internationale Frauenprogramm zur Ostseewoche 1971. [...] Die Versammelten, von den Frauenorganisationen ihrer Länder gewählt, besitzen das Mandat tausender Frauen, die für Frieden, europäische Sicherheit und für normale völkerrechtliche Beziehungen zwischen ihren Staaten und der DDR eintreten. 'Wir lieben unsere Heimat und das Meer. Wir wollen, daß es ein Meer des Friedens sei, Kündler freundschaftlicher Beziehungen unserer Staaten.' So heißt es bereits in einer Erklärung der Teilnehmerinnen an der internationalen Frauenkonferenz zur ersten Ostseewoche im Jahre 1958. [...] Diese Anteilnahme an brennenden Fragen unserer Zeit wird auch durch die Tatsache unterstrichen, daß Teilnehmerinnen des Frauenprogramms der Ostseewoche in ihren nationalen Komitees für die Anerkennung der DDR aktiv mitarbeiten. Doch die 180 Delegierten, insbesondere die Frauen aus den Ländern Nordeuropas suchen die DDR auf, um zu studieren, wie und auf welchen Grundlagen die volle Gleichberechtigung der Frauen in allen Bereichen des gesellschaftlichen Lebens realisiert wurde."

By the mid-1960s popular music in the GDR had witnessed a complicated and contradicting relationship between an intractable youth and a notoriously suspicious state. Until the late 1950s most of the trending sounds and hits originated in the West, enhanced by a massive lack of domestic productions and original talents. The closing of inter-zone border in 1952, the bloody suppression of workers' revolts on June 17, 1953 and the brutal ending of the uprising in Hungary by the Soviets in 1956 increased the exodus of young and well-educated people across the Berlin sector border dramatically. At a conference in 1959, GDR cultural policy initiated the so-called “Bitterfelder Weg”, named after the huge industrial plants there, in order to reduce the distance between artists and workers, to infuse art with real-life topics and to encourage workers to increase their own creativity. However, the resulting amateur art did not find a large audience and soon after a second conference in 1964 the program was ended.

After the Berlin Wall had been erected within a few days in August 1961, the state leadership granted a little more liberty to the arts trying to cool down the public tensions. However, this phase ended abruptly with the eleventh plenum of the Central Committee of the SED in December 1965 (the so-called “Kahlschlag-Plenum”) (Weißbacher 2020: 27–54). Erich Honecker, at this time Secretary for Security Affairs in the Central Committee, stigmatized the dangerous tendencies of films and television programs, plays, literature and music and called for a conservative turnaround. This situation can be traced in the files from the Ministry of Culture afterwards with baffled committees how do deal with the new situation.<sup>7</sup> The cultural administration was well aware that appropriate popular music had to mediate vast contradictions, as a report for the ministry of culture summarized in 1965 while trying to disguise the dilemma in dialectic formalistic language: “Due to its genre-related mass distribution and ease of reception, entertainment art is able to have a decisive and lasting effect on the feelings and thoughts, moral concepts and behavior, in short, on the entire artistic, aesthetic and ultimately ideological judgment of broad sections of the population. It is one of the historically determined contradictions of the art of entertainment that this ability to influence can be both positive and negative.”<sup>8</sup>

7 Bundesarchiv DR 1-23743, Kulturministerium, Einrichtung von Qualifizierungsstützpunkten (1962–65).

8 Bundesarchiv DR 1-27042 Kulturministerium, Vorlage für eine Änderung der Leistungstätigkeit, der Arbeitsweise und der Aufgabenstellung auf dem Gebiet der Unterhaltungskunst, insbesondere auf dem Gebiet der Tanzmusik, 10 May 1965: “Aufgrund ihrer genrebedingten Massenverbreitung und ihrer leichten Rezipierbarkeit vermag es die Unterhaltungskunst, maßgeblich und nachhaltig auf das Fühlen und Denken, auf die Moralvorstellungen und auf das Verhalten, kurz, auf das gesamte künstlerische, ästhetische, letztenendes also ideologische Urteilsvermögen breiter Bevölkerungsschichten einzuwirken. Es gehört zu den historisch bedingten Widersprüchen der Unterhaltungskunst, daß dieses Einflußvermögen sowohl positiver als auch negativer Natur sein kann.”



Although so far the term “Schlager” was used as if it would represent a more or less homogeneous musical phenomenon, in reality GDR officials used it with several synonyms. While “Tanzmusik” (dance music) and “Unterhaltungsmusik” (entertainment music) refer to practical purposes, “heitere Muse” (literally the “happy muse”) reminds of the traditional distinction between art and entertainment from the Greek antiquity up to the duality of Apollonian and Dionysian which Friedrich Nietzsche had re-popularized in his work *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (1872, “The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirits of Music”). Reports of the ministry of culture about the 4th Days of Chanson in 1977 (“Chanson-Tage”) further discussed the differences between “Lied” (always symbolizing the tradition of Brecht and Eisler) and “Chanson”. Although the association of West-European public television companies hosted the famous Grand Prix de la Chanson Eurovision the GDR organized own “Chanson-Tage” to improve the development of a Socialist Schlager:

The 4th Days of Chanson documented that the events are based on a broad concept of chanson, in which in particular the fluid boundaries to the song are taken into account. [...] The turn to the here and now was strongly noticeable, there were some chansons that convincingly attacked the class enemy, but the chansons of a cheerful, humorous, even sociable character also increased. The attending representatives from large companies in the district expressed their approval of the amusing, entertaining elements of these chanson days.<sup>9</sup>

To identify the political content of song music one usually turns to lyrics first. Nevertheless, the songwriting is equally important – both to emotionally enhance the intended message and to include certain associations which specific sounds, genres or even quoted melodies can provide. Accordingly, Heinz P. Hofmann dedicated much thought to the musical side of the topic in his *ABC of Dance Music* (“ABC der Tanzmusik”), published in 1971.<sup>10</sup> To support the social developments which were predicted up to the year 2000 he analyzed certain GDR-Schlager which represented specific characteristics of dance music associated with the socialist way of life (“spezifische Merkmale einer

9 Bundesarchiv Berlin, DR 1/6226 (Kulturministerium der DDR, Komitee für Unterhaltungskunst 1977–1979): “Die 4. Tage des Chansons dokumentierten, daß den Veranstaltungen ein weiter Chansonbegriff zugrunde gelegt wird, bei dem insbesondere die fließenden Grenzen zum Lied berücksichtigt werden. [...] Die Hinwendung zum Hier und Heute war stark spürbar, es gab einige Chansons, die den Klassengegner überzeugend attackieren, aber auch die Chansons heiteren, humoristischen, ja geselligen Charakters haben zugenommen. Die anwesenden Vertreter aus Großbetrieben des Bezirkes bekundeten ihre Zustimmung besonders zu den vergnüglichen, im besten Sinne unterhaltenden Elementen dieser Chansons-Tage.”

10 Hofmann seems to have been a standard author for the record company Amiga, due to his skilled writing as musicologist, possibly associated to the team of specialists for popular music located at the Humboldt University’s Department for Musicology.



dem sozialistischen Lebensgefühl verbundenen Tanzmusik”) (Hofmann 1971: 90). For example, the Foxtrott *Nimm dir jeden Tag etwas Zeit für mich* (“take some time for me every day”, music Gerd Natschinski, lyrics Willy Schüller, written in 1958) was supposed to remind the listeners of taking responsibility for the community; accordingly the peak of the melodic line stressed the most important call to do it “every” day.

Like a manual for songwriters how to compose socialist Schlager – fusing the attraction of western sounds with socialist content – Hofmann also requested to use different meters following examples like the Beat-Waltz *Die schönste Geschichte der Welt* (“the most beautiful story in the world”, music by Frank Schöbel, lyrics by Dieter Lietz, written in 1970) or the Swing in  $\frac{3}{4}$ -time *Liebeslied* (“love story”, music Klaus Schneider, lyrics Dieter Lietz, written in 1970). In his opinion allegedly “outdated” dance rhythms, sounds, and musical structures were only waiting to be revisited: “And there is really no reason why it should be left to the capitalist music industry to be the first to ‘rediscover’ the tango, Latin American rhythms or Romanic folklore for the musical arrangement of texts that do not even remotely approach the morals and ethics of socialist people” (Hofmann 1971: 103).<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, all political appeals or musicological blueprints remained useless as long as East German singers did not succeed in international competitions. Accordingly, song contests could turn into arenas for Cold War rivalries between socialist and capitalist countries during the 1970s and 80s, for example in Kerkrade (the Netherlands), at the World Popular Song Festival Tokio, or the Coupe d’Europe musicale in the Austrian town of Villach.<sup>12</sup> Several other festivals for socialist countries (for example in Dresden, the Polish Sopot, the Slowenien Bratislava, or in Bulgaria for the famous Golden Orpheus festival in Slănčev Brjag) offered regular opportunities to synchronize and individualize trends in socialist music.

But trust is good, control is better. Meeting minutes and evaluation reports document that the ministry of culture regularly discussed how to change the rules of GDR song contests and influence the juries in favor of their own or at least of other socialist participants. In 1977 Peter Czerny, member of the Directorate-General of the Entertainment Arts Committee, complained about the results of a song festival where only Yugoslavia had won a prize, especially because the existing realistic elements would have been inadequately appreciated in contrast to the traditional Schlager-like ones: “In my opinion, the jury’s

11 “Und es gibt wahrlich keinen Grund, warum man es der kapitalistischen Musikindustrie überlassen sollte, daß sie zur musikalischen Gestaltung von Texten, die nicht im entferntesten an die Moral und Ethik sozialistischer Menschen heranreichen, den Tango, lateinamerikanische Rhythmen oder die romanische Folklore als erste wieder ‘neu’ entdeckt.”

12 Bundesarchiv Berlin, DR 1/25934, Akten der 1970er Jahre zur Kooperation der sozialistischen Länder im Bereich der Unterhaltungskunst, Abschnitt “Festivals in kapitalistischen Ländern”.

work showed serious elements of lack of concept.”<sup>13</sup> The 3rd International Song-Festival “People and Sea” (*Menschen und Meer*), hosted in Rostock in July 1979, gathered singers from 19 countries and raised similar trouble: From a GDR point of view each member in the international jury too easily could make too subjectivistic decisions which “distorted” the group of finalists. The GDR contribution therefore did not receive the evaluation it deserved.<sup>14</sup>

It is a common and well-known phenomenon that official orders and ideological paroles differ widely from real circumstances. Although GDR-Schlager tried to exceed the Western dominance and demonstrate political superiority prominent West European stars regularly were much welcomed guests in TV productions and popular shows such as *Ein Kessel Bunes*, *Schlager-Studio-Melodien*, *Schlager-Karussell*, *Schlagerstudio DDR*, *Klock 8 achtern Strom*, and *Da liegt Musike drin*. Papers from the East German Television document the vast amount of domestic money and valuta that was used to provide these productions with an international flair. A strategic report, dated January 1973, suggested on the one hand to take care that soloists from foreign capitalist countries should be convinced to stick not solely to their own repertoire but also to perform at least one genuine GDR-title.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, artists from non-socialist countries should be invited according to a prioritized ranking: a) Scandinavian countries, Latin American countries, African nation states; b) Italy, France; c) Benelux countries; d) England, USA; e) FRG.

To get an idea how much money was involved the invitation of Wenche Myhre to the show *Ein Kessel Bunes* on 23 September 1972 demanded 17.500 Mark altogether, with a honorarium of 14.000 Mark to be paid in the West German currency DM and additionally 754 DM for plane tickets. Compared to the Finnish singer Jukka Kuopamäkki this salary was exceptional. For an invitation in November 1972 also to this show he was granted 3.600 Mark of which only 936,60 DM had to be paid in valuta. The German singer Katja Ebstein however, who finished third with *Wunder gibt es immer wieder* at the Grand Prix in Amsterdam in 1970 and had just returned from a tour through the Soviet Union with the Paul Kuhn Orchestra before she performed at *Ein Kessel Bunes* next to Kuopamäkki, was appreciated like an international star with 16.000 in East German Mark and 8.000 DM in valuta.

13 Ibid., report by Peter Czerny, Generaldirektion beim Komitee für Unterhaltungskunst, zum ersten Liederfestival, 19 July 1977: “Die Arbeit der Jury zeigte nach meiner Auffassung ernste Elemente von Konzeptionslosigkeit.”

14 “Ein einzelnes Jurymitglied kann durch subjektivistische Wertung das gesamte Spitzenfeld verändern. Der DDR-Beitrag fand darum in diesem Jahr auch nicht die ihm gebührende Bewertung durch die internationale Jury.” Bundesarchiv Berlin, DR 1/6226, Information der Abteilung Kultur über das 3. Internationale Liederfestival “Menschen und Meer”, Rostock 12–14 July 1979.

15 Bundesarchiv Berlin, DR 8/1273, *Zur Schlagerpolitik im Fernsehen der DDR*, January 1973: “Bei Solisten aus dem kapitalistischen Ausland sollte schon bei der Verpflichtung zunehmend Wert auf die Interpretation eines guten DDR-Titels gelegt werden.”

## Stagnation and Pragmatism: Schlager-Kitsch versus Rock-Activism

As much as Schlager had served as the officially most promoted GDR-sound until the 1970s as rapidly did rock and pop music take over in the 1980s as the most important youth movements (Rauhut 2002). Strikingly, it was the GDR-band Karat who presented the first chart hit in Germany on both sides of the iron curtain, *Über sieben Brücken mußt Du gehen*: Originally the winning title in 1978 at the International Schlager-Festival in Dresden the song became an even bigger hit when Peter Maffay (originally a West-German Schlager-artist who became a rock musician in the late 1970s) presented a more rocking cover version two years later. Especially the official youth movement "Freie Deutsche Jugend" could not ignore these tendencies and discussed how the more rebellious energy of rock could be incorporated into the general ideological framework.

In 1982 the Secretary of the Central Council of the FDJ and the General Direction at the Committee for Entertaining Arts discussed with young artists the needs and expectations of teenagers concerning dance and popular music ("Tanz- und Unterhaltungsmusik"). As often in such documents the formal language is so stiff, bureaucratic and complicated that it seemed necessary to present these arguments in the context of a longer quotation:

It is natural that the rock and pop music of the GDR can only exist within international dance and popular music and is therefore significantly influenced by its development trends. Rock music in the GDR in particular – which is now also internationally recognized – has proven that a certain independence, a musical language of its own, can be successfully developed within the framework of international developments. We therefore need even more of an attitude among rock and entertainment musicians to draw inspiration from international developments in order to translate them into their own language and to critically examine every new trend for usability at an early stage. In the case of the Tagesschlager, this independence still seems too little developed in the musical field and is currently limited to a few top interpreters of the song-like Schlager. In everyday musical practice – dance, concert, disco – the best GDR productions are still not used enough. Apart from the culturally necessary and correct 60:40 ratio, the prevailing superficial dissemination of international titles conveys false standards of value. Everyone knows that this is also a question of the quality and danceability of GDR music, but too little use is made of the existing high quality. In

this way, many entertainers are shirking an important cultural and political responsibility.<sup>16</sup>

In retrospect, the FDJ's ambitions seem naïve, especially if one remembers the fear by GDR officials of Udo Lindenberg (one of the most famous FRG rockers at the time): In his inimitably brash manner, Lindenberg openly criticized the division of Germany shortly after Erich Honecker had come to power (Custodis 2023: 130–139). On his hit album *Alles klar auf der Andrea Doria* (1973), he sang about his love for an unnamed girl in East Berlin and the tragedy of the complicated romance gave the song its title *Wir wollen doch einfach nur zusammen sein* ("we simply want to be together"). Documents of the Staatssicherheit show his unsuccessful attempts to play concerts in East Germany as early as 1974, and the GDR state leadership saw his efforts to promote communication and exchange between the two Germanies as a growing problem.

Frustrated at not being allowed to sing in the "German Desillusion Republic in terms of cultural exchange" ("die Deutsche Desillusions Republik in Sachen Kulturaustausch"), as he ironically put it in interviews, he landed a coup in 1983 with a cover version of Harry Warren's and Mark Gordon's swing classic *Chattanooga Choo Choo* (1941): In Lindenberg's version, a special train ("Son-derzug") now rolls into Pankow, the center of power of the GDR political elite for decades. Contrary to all diplomatic conventions, the unmannerly song lyrics pose the simple question in the style of an open letter to the "head Indian" ("Oberindianer"): "Oh, Erich ey, are you really such a stubborn scoundrel? Why won't you let me sing in the workers' and peasants' state?" ("Och, Erich ey, bist Du denn wirklich so ein sturer Schrat? Warum lässt Du mich nicht singen im Arbeiter- und Bauernstaat?"). The song ends with a Russian news

16 Bundesarchiv Berlin, DY 24/20617 Arbeitsmaterial zum Treffen des Sekretariats des Zentralrates der FDJ mit der Generaldirektion beim Komitee für Unterhaltungskunst der DDR und jungen Unterhaltungskünstlern am 8. Februar 1982 im Gästehaus des Zentralrates der FDJ, Pistoriusstraße 6, Beginn 15 Uhr: "Es ist natürlich, daß die Rock- und Schlagermusik der DDR nur innerhalb der internationalen Tanz- und Unterhaltungsmusik existieren kann und deshalb maßgeblich von deren Entwicklungstendenzen beeinflusst wird. Gerade die – inzwischen auch international anerkannte – Rockmusik in der DDR hat bewiesen, daß im Rahmen der internationalen Entwicklung eine gewisse Eigenständigkeit, eine eigene musikalische Sprache erfolgreich entwickelt werden kann. Wir brauchen deshalb noch mehr die Haltung bei Rock- und Unterhaltungsmusikern, aus der internationalen Entwicklung Anregungen zu schöpfen, um sie in eine eigene Sprache zu übersetzen und dabei frühzeitig jeden neuen Trend kritisch auf Verwendbarkeit zu prüfen. Beim Tagesschlager scheint uns diese Eigenständigkeit auch auf musikalischem Gebiet noch zu wenig ausgeprägt und gegenwärtig auf einige Spitzeninterpreten des liedhaften Schlagers beschränkt. In der alltäglichen Musikpraxis – Tanz, Konzert, Diskothek- finden die besten DDR-Produktionen noch zu geringen Gebrauch. Abgesehen von dem kulturpolitisch notwendigen und richtigen 60:40 vermittelt die vorherrschende vordergründige Verbreitung internationaler Titel falsche Wertmaßstäbe. Daß das auch eine Frage von Qualität und Tanzbarkeit der DDR-Musik ist, weiß jeder, aber das vorhandene, qualitativ Hochwertige wird zu wenig genutzt. Damit entziehen sich viele Unterhaltungskünstler einer wichtigen kulturpolitischen Verantwortung."

report stating that even the Supreme Soviet would have no objection to Mr. Lindenberg making a guest appearance in the GDR.

When the song was broadcast on the Berlin radio station RIAS II and the ZDF magazine *Kennzeichen D* in January 1983 it caused a perfect scandal: In the opinion of the Staatssicherheit, passages of the song lyrics were “objectively suitable [...] to grossly violate the personal dignity of a person and at the same time to disparage the social reputation of the Chairman of the State Council of the GDR because of his state activity”.<sup>17</sup>

Although the GDR authorities initially reacted drastically to prevent the song from being disseminated, the tide quickly turned: Lindenberg not only received an invitation to take part in the FDJ prestige program “Rock for Peace” (*Rock für den Frieden*) with a fifteen-minute performance in Berlin’s Palast der Republik on 25 October 1983. The long-awaited promise of a tour the following year was also suddenly in sight. Despite meticulous preparations for Lindenberg’s visit by the security authorities and ideological instructions for the hand-picked FDJ audience, the self-proclaimed panic rocker proved to be incalculable: in front of the GDR television cameras, Lindenberg initially castigated the stationing of American Pershing missiles in the Federal Republic, only to demand the scrapping of the Soviet SS-20 missiles in the same moment. The tour planned for 1984 was promptly canceled even before it had begun.

Despite all ambitious plans by state committees and official organizations the general decline turned into undeniable facts in the 1980s with brittle conditions of industrial sites and manufacturing plants as well as a shortage of consumer goods, in the case of music especially of instruments and electronic equipment such as mixing consoles and PA systems. At the same time, the oppositional trade union movement *Solidarność* in neighboring Poland increased the pressure for reform in the GDR, which steadily grew thanks to peace groups and church circles. Towards the mid-1980s, the GDR bureaucracy’s steady loss of control was also evident in music, which, after a phase of drastic sanctions, for example began to tolerate the punk movement (Lipp 2021). Meanwhile Schlager had accumulated such a degree of Kitsch and sentimentality that this image still overshadows the entire history of the genre. While the GDR soon was to become history itself, the vision of a “rhapsody from the Sea of Peace” became reality when the unification of Europe assembled all countries around the Baltic Sea in one mutual cultural area.

17 Bundesarchiv Berlin: *Stasi Mediathek*. <https://www.stasi-mediathek.de/themen/schlagwort/Sonderzug%20nach%20Pankow/> (1 May 2024): “objektiv geeignet [...], die persönliche Würde eines Menschen grob zu verletzen und zugleich das gesellschaftliche Ansehen des Vorsitzenden des Staatsrates der DDR wegen seiner staatlichen Tätigkeit herabzusetzen.”

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