The Ideological Context for the Study of Soviet Estonian Jazz

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Abstract

As a part of my larger project on Soviet Estonian jazz this study provides some ideology-related thoughts for the analysis of jazz. While dealing with these primarily at a conceptual level and setting out implications for the construction and investigation of the jazz tradition in Soviet Estonia, the paper seeks answers to following questions: What was the role of ideology in the cultural life of the Soviet Union in general and in jazz culture in particular? How does the ideology interact with Soviet cultural paradigms in the construction of the discourse of jazz in Soviet Estonia? How can we interpret in an ideological context the famous saying of Valter Ojakäär that jazz was not allowed in Soviet Union but neither was it forbidden? Or we can ask metaphorically: how was the voice of jazz tuned by the articulations of ideology?

Keywords*:* Soviet Estonia, jazz, ideology

Introduction

"Jazz is a construct" writes Krin Gabbard (2003) in the preface to the *Cambridge Companion to Jazz.* Indeed, jazz has been constructed from various historical, musical, aesthetic, ideological, sociological and cultural perspectives which together have formed the discourse of jazz – the way the story of jazz has been told and presented by scholars, critics, journalists and the musicians themselves. But factually, the narrative of this music has been told predominantly from an American perspective, which represents jazz as a distinctively American cultural phenomenon speaking with a unique American voice. As Atkins (2003, p. xiii) asserted, "Practically all jazz discourse rests on the premise of American exceptionalism, the dogmatic conviction that democracy, individualism and social mobility, civil society, free enterprise, ingenuity, and inventiveness, and material wellbeing are peculiarly American traits."

In spite of the fact that jazz is a phenomenon of American origin, which could only have emerged in the American cultural context, it played a role in wider early-twentieth century social, cultural and political processes. Those processes were related to both national or geographical particularities as well as more general global forces. Jazz as part of the early 20th century global trends was first received, then adopted and finally practised by musicians of diverse nationalities all over the world, despite the diverse social and political profiles of each country that accepted the music. But the music was not received homogeneously: during the acculturation process jazz, by being in open dialogue with different traditions, was appropriated to local cultural contexts – via the process of glocalization. Thus, in terms of the basis of musical and cultural diversity in jazz, we can talk in Bakhtin´s (1981) terms about a multivocality of jazz discourse, which instead of one hegemonic voice consists of multiple unique voices. This is a discourse where every local tradition has its own sonic and cultural voice. While on one hand local jazz ´voices´ take part in the construction of the common jazz tradition,[1] on the other hand they deconstruct the jazz tradition[2] by bringing out alternative discourses to hegemonic American jazz discourse.

As we know, jazz has never been a pure and neutral form of music existing only for its own sake, that is art for art´s sake. Whenever or wherever jazz made its voice audible in the cultural arena, it always developed in a dialogue with local historical and cultural environments. Whether we are talking about interaction between dance and swing culture,

bebop's revolution against commercialism or the reciprocal influence of jazz and *stilyagi* culture in Soviet Russia in the 1950s, jazz has always taken inspiration from the surrounding society and culture. Comprehension of this context is especially important in discussions of jazz in the Soviet Union in general and in Soviet Estonia in particular, where the mechanics of culture deviated radically from norms of Western culture, from the norms of culture where the music originated.

The culture that was permeated with Soviet ideology[3] and functioned under the dictatorship of the Communist Party had its own paradigms which are not easily comprehensible for outsiders. Hence, the aim of the present article is primarily to provide the contextual framework enabling meaningful discussion of jazz as a cultural phenomenon in the Soviet Union. As a part of my larger project on Soviet Estonian jazz[4], the study provides some ideology-related thoughts for the analysis of jazz. While dealing with these primarily at a conceptual level and setting out implications for the construction and investigation of the jazz tradition in Soviet Estonia, the paper seeks answers to following questions: What was the role of ideology in the cultural life of the Soviet Union in general and in jazz culture in particular? How does the ideology interact with Soviet cultural paradigms in the construction of the discourse of jazz in Soviet Estonia? How can we interpret in an ideological context the famous saying of Valter Ojakäär that jazz was not allowed in Soviet Union but neither was it forbidden? Or we can ask metaphorically: how was the voice of jazz tuned by the articulations of ideology?

Particularities of Estonian Culture

Estonia was under the illegal occupation of Soviet Union throughout the period 1940–1991. Although the country had the legal status of an independent Soviet republic with its own governmental, economic and political institutions, in reality it was under Moscow's rigid political leadership without any rights for self-determination and independence. Local government functioned only as an institution for monitoring and executing the commands and ideology of the Communist Party. Because of the inseparable linkage with the USSR it is necessary to contextualize and discuss all the historical, cultural, political issues of Soviet Estonia in relation to general Soviet paradigms. This is why the present study

examines the interactions of jazz culture and ideology mainly from a holistic Soviet perspective.

Nevertheless, Estonia also exhibited some differences related to the country´s geographical, historical and cultural particularities. The location of Estonia was one reason for these differences: situated at the periphery of the Soviet Union, far from its ideological centre in Moscow, the country enjoyed from time to time a more weakened grasp of ´red´ ideology. For instance, the emergence of the first Estonian jazz festival in 1949 that took place during the most brutal years of Stalinism is an obvious sign of politicians´ inability to exercise all-encompassing control over cultural life. The culture-related reason for Estonia´s disjunction from the rest of the USSR was to do with cultural affiliation. The country had firmly established its position in European cultural space by 1940 when Soviet troops marched into Estonian territory, so that the Soviet occupation, with the intense pressure of its highly ideologized culture, was incapable of fully sovietizing Estonian culture. Compared to the rest of the USSR, Estonian cultural tradition and values remained more Western in orientation. Thus Estonia, as a Western oasis against a thoroughly sovietized backdrop, occupied a position of 'Soviet West' (*sovetskii zapad*) among the republics (Aarelaid, 1996).

This Western orientation was apparent also in Estonian jazz culture. Jazz as an established part of the Western cultural heritage retained its *élan vital* in Estonia even during the most cruel years of Stalinism, when jazz suffered the harshest repression of its entire history within the Soviet Union. Although Estonia did not remain untouched by anti-jazz politics emerging from Moscow, jazz musicians were successful in keeping the tradition alive. Furthermore, Estonians used the postwar period of repression to establish themselves as the most active and innovative jazz musicians in the USSR. The jazz music of Estonia established the standards which were taken later as a model by musicians across the Soviet Union. As stated by Starr (1983: 230): "Because of the head start they gained these years, the jazzmen of this tiny Baltic nation, like their conationals in so many other fields, unwittingly set the standards of creativity to which Russians were later to aspire in the post-Stalinist era."

Another factor in the continuity of the cultural tradition is the Estonians' high level of participation in cultural activities. The active involvement in the creation and consumption of culture goes back to Estonian days of independence when the norms of cultural participation were established. Interestingly, the Estonians' intense desire for a distinc-

tive and autonomous culture coincided with the aims of Soviet cultural politics that promoted the ideal of flexible and fully developed Soviet personalities in its satellites. Estonians were eager to take advantage of this Soviet ideal: the dedicated involvement in a wide variety of cultural activities contributed to the maintenance of a high cultural consciousness which in turn was considered as a guarantee of the survival of a nation.

Despite the fact that the propaganda underlying cultural activities was aimed at serving Soviet ideology, in reality few thought about these ideological goals but, rather, people enjoyed the benefits of the free distribution of culture. The culture was the only sphere that afforded to Estonians an opportunity to feel more freely without direct omnipresent ideological pressure. As Aarelaid (1996: 54) said, "there was almost half-democracy in cultural spheres." When the actual consumption and dissemination of jazz in Soviet Estonia are investigated, then it is evident on the basis of the life stories of Estonian jazz musicians that the multiplicity of opportunities for musical activities and a high social demand for music were factors which facilitated the development of their musical identity. For example Lembit Saarsalu (L. Saarsalu, interview, July 09, 2008) emphasizes the role of the wide variety of musical activities available during his childhood. Playing accordion in sauna-evenings and village parties, participating in weekly wind orchestra rehearsals, accompanying folk-dance ensembles and performing inmandolin orchestras were activities through which he satisfied his inner urge for music-making and gave momentum to his further engagement with jazz.

The ´Red´ Ideology and Its Attitudes toward Jazz

The specificity of the socialist formation was that it created its own inner-state system of historical, social and cultural order and relationships, which were all formed by and subjected to the prevailing ideology. Peet Lepik (2001) defines in his article Soviet Culture and Ideology the essence of the ideology in Soviet Marxism in terms of ten basic characteristics: 1) the role of gender role in social awareness; 2) ideology as a synonym for philosophy; 3) it is the scientific model and the 4) only true one; 5) the ideology has a tendency to sharply and permanently label phenomena to categorize and set them up as contrasts; 6) it has pretensions to the position of ultimate value to dominance; 7) ideology

is foundation upon which are constructed the institutional rules which hold the political system together; 8) it functioned for the ideologue and his followers as a moral-political imperative; 9) ideology is a weapon and 10) ideology is dedicated to the assessment of communism. The analysis of Soviet ideology leads Lepik (2001: 14) to conclusions that the relationship between culture and ideology can be described as aggressive, with ideology infiltrating and attempting to subordinate culture The ideology, by shaping culture as a means to exercise political power, was meant to function as a "weapon" imposing self-censorship. Because of its supremacy in Soviet society, Lepik calls ideology the backbone of the self-reflexiveness of Soviet culture, in which meta-language was completely ideologized.

The effective propagation of Marxist-Leninist ideology in order to form a politically homogeneous population loyal to the communist regime, was the main purpose of Soviet cultural politics. Although, the concept of culture, in orthodox historical materialism, as a category of social education, has always been of secondary – if not tertiary – importance[5], the ideological principles of the society were first of all put into practice through such cultural spheres as literature, art, cinema, music and theatre. In actual cultural life, ideologization meant the inculcation of a rigorously controlled and centralized system of institutions, and the application of both direct as well as ideological pressure on the creative intelligence and artistic production (Kreegipuu, 2007).

Jazz was a relatively marginal cultural phenomenon in Soviet culture but still attracted much attention from the ideologues. But the problem for the Communist authorities was that they could not devise an ideologically correct univocal approach to jazz. The status of the music was shifting from acceptance to full prohibition. Why was the tolerance of ideologists so changeable?

There are several possible answers to that question. First, the status of jazz was highly dependent on the prevailing political climate: every ruling political clan shaped its own orientation towards jazz. The degree of tolerance to the music was contingent on the ideological paradigms of the moment. A succinct resumé of attitudes of Soviet authorities to jazz music is presented by historian Boriss Schwartz (1984: 629). He stated: "Jazz has had a checkered history in Soviet Russia. Popular in the 1920´s, suppressed by Stalin, disliked by Krushchev. Belittled by Khrennikov, jazz has managed to survive and grow in popularity."

A second reason for jazz music´s ambiguous status in Soviet culture was linked to the ideological equivocation of the music embedded in its class and racial origins. On the one hand, jazz was the music of oppressed people – of American Blacks to whom the attitude of Soviet politics was always sympathetic. On the other hand, the music originated from America, the country which represented for the Soviet Union the greatest ideological and cultural enemy. As stated by Atkins (2004: xxvi): "Communist Party officials bounced between characterizing jazz as a legitimate proletarian music of a suppressed racial group, and as a product of bourgeois decadence and Jewish capital." At the same time the Soviet cultural officials had to face the bitter reality: just like their counterparts in the Western world their citizens needed some kind of entertainment, and jazz music happened to be one of the means of feeding the needs of the masses. In this situation the Soviet Union had upheld the concept of "socialism in one country" and set standards within that culture, which were trying to exclude – at least officially – any influence of Western culture, including jazz (Beumers, 2005). However, in spite of official orders and bans those who liked jazz found ways of playing or hearing the music, whatever policy might be (Starr, 1983: 320).

Jazz and Popular Culture

The inescapable topic in discussions on jazz in Soviet Union is the status and meaning of popular culture in Soviet society. Historically, jazz has been seen as something separate from popular culture. The popular–commercial or high versus low cultural dichotomy has been a part of jazz discourse since the late 1930s, when the struggle for the music´s high art status started. The battles for the music´s status entered a significant new phase during the bebop era when jazz was transformed from popular dance music to a more demanding status of art music.

In the former Soviet Union, the term popular culture had divergent meanings. The Soviet regime wanted to create a sophisticated high culture and to make it accessible to Soviet people. The aim of the regime was not to adapt culture 'down' to the masses but on the contrary, to raise the educational standards of the working class in order to make high culture available to wide audiences. A whole system of institutions was created to ensure control over the artistic production of creative people. The state owned organizations, such as the Soviet Union of Composers, Houses

of Culture, centralized concert organizations, official publishing agencies, all of which were established for only one purpose – to control the ideological correctness of artistic activities. The ideological and political correctness of culture was often of primary importance, leaving aside the notion of appealing to the masses (Beumers, 2004).

Compared to the West, in Soviet society the essence of the division between high and low culture was more complex. However, Macdonald (1998) draws a parallel between mass culture in the capitalist world, serving commercial aims, and mass culture in the USSR, serving political aims. The term mass culture remained synonymous with the commercial and the bourgeois throughout the Soviet period. Nonetheless the aim of officially promoted politically correct culture was still to reach to the broad masses. In order to divert the audience from mass or trash culture, the centralized Soviet propaganda machine aimed to manipulate the taste of the masses by all possible means.

Popular culture in the Soviet Union, as suggested by Beumers (2005) consisted of several concurrent trends. On the one hand, popular culture encompassed official culture, which was made widely available by the state system of distribution. Yet, this culture was taken as kitsch because all the officially promoted occurrences met resistance and disdain on the part of audiences. At the same time, the areas of culture that were craved by the masses, were driven into the underground. This type of culture was considered exotic due to its status as a forbidden practice. Those two trends of popular culture were represented respectively by the official party ideology and dissident intelligentsia. In addition to dissidence, members of the intelligentsia saw their role as articulators and advocates of moral values of the society.

Between those two trends existed the third group of people who were neither interested in ideology nor in politics. This large group of people was preoccupied mostly with everyday life. They sustained the "second economy" by providing goods and objects like foreign books, American jeans, and Western fashion on black markets and in the underground for consumption. In opposition to Western popular culture, which functioned for commercial aims and was highly dependent on mass consumption, the Soviet Union had neither a proper cultural industry nor a consumer market. In commercial terms, the state was unable to satisfy the demands of people for cultural products, which engendered the deficit problem. The latter in fact was evoked purposefully by the regime for keeping the tastes of masses under control.

Jazz as an experimental art was part of underground culture in Soviet Union and thereby provided one additional reason for party officials to dislike and oppress the music. In this rigidly controlled world, jazz rather than being the accompaniment for dancing, succeeded as the music for intellectuals. Jazz became primarily the music for young people, who by practising this musical form liberated their souls from societal pressures and enabled them to escape from ´grey´ reality. A number of musicians have expressed the music´s role as a saviour in their lives. As Lembit Saarsalu, an Estonian saxophonist said "the music saved me" (L. Saarsalu, interview, July 09, 2008).

In her article Black Music, White Freedom, Irina Novikova conceptualizes jazz´s position in Soviet society in terms of a counterculture. For her, black music became an expression of yearnings for white freedom. That is how she portrays jazz as a countercultural phenomenon:

> Apart from stylistic influences on different schools in the USSR, jazz became a distinct countercultural space of resistance and dissent in which the principles of polyrhythm, spontaneity, and improvisation became expression of political counterpoint and "underground" social geography across constructed political borders and ethnosocial boundaries. The soviet postwar jazz counterculture enabled people to challenge prevailing cultural and political stereotypes by representing themselves as complex subjects with multiple and contradictory experiences (2003: 74).

Socialist Realism

The form of artistic expression which was found to be most conformable to Communist ideology was highly praised Socialist Realism. The slogan-like principles of Socialist Realism projected the bright future of the USSR into a simplistic, linear plot and a realistic form. From 1932 until the end of the existence of Soviet Union in 1991 Socialist Realism remained, though with more limited force in the 1980s, the official state art style indicating the official directions for artistic activities of the creative intelligence. The phrase best illustrating the very essence of Socialist Realism is Stalin's ''an art which is socialist in content and national in form" (Slonimsky, 1944: 6).

The principles of Socialist Realism were applied first in Soviet ′masterpieces′ of literature and visual arts, but its conceptual principles were also appropriated to other forms of artistic expression, including music. Roziner (2000: 177–178) identifies in his article Socialist Realism in Music (*Соцреализм в совецкой музыке*) a summary of principles characterizing Socialist Realism in music. According to Roziner, eight basic musical features characterise Socialist Realism are melodic nature (*песенность*), narrativity (*нарративность*), groundedness in a program (*програмность*), folkness (*народность*), conformity to principles of classical music (*следование классике*) – especially to Russian music of the18th century –, monumentality (*монументалность*), modernity (*современность*) – not in the sense understood by Western intellectual culture, but here modernity means the active reliance on topicality – and topicality (*сиюминутность*) that reflects, in an indirect way, the actual state of affairs at the present moment.

Although my aim here is not so much to provide a detailed analysis of the compatibility of jazz music with the ideas of Socialist Realism, it should nonetheless be clear without any exhaustive analysis that certain elements of jazz music contest the very principles of socialist realism. Thus, one of the major reasons for the equivocal status of jazz in Soviet society was its resistance to dominant official Soviet paradigms for artistic expression. The only category adaptable to jazz was folkness, an ethnical dimension of art used for ideological purposes. It coincided with the ′socialist in content and national in form′ artistic principle. Folk art of different nationalities of the USSR was described as "the art from below" being in accordance with the "art from above", thus satisfying the demands of ideology. While a primarily sonic category like folkness is indeed clearly compatible with the aesthetics of jazz, then the non-sonic related principles like narrativity, monumentality and groundedness on a program are less, if at all, consistent with the expressive capacity of jazz music. Therefore, jazz, which in its basic essence is an abstract non-programmatic (that is, 'absolute' musical form without references to concrete literal content), excludes any overt musical reference to Socialist Realism in particular and Communist ideology in general. The music not only had minimal resonance with ideology, but moreover, the essential stylistic particularities of jazz were in sharp contrast with the ideologically loaded principles and rigid norms of Soviet music.

This music, with an expressive capacity that owes a debt to such stylistic and artistic features as shared improvisations, call-and-response

technique, complexity of rhythmic structures, experimentation and spontaneity, was in opposition to the dictated parameters of classical music that valued qualities such as autonomy, complexity and universality. The ideology-based principles of classical music were considered as the rules for shaping the musical tastes of Soviet people. In Lucy Green´s (1999) terms, we can talk here about the ideological construction of value where the different musical categories are manifested only in contradistinctions to others and where a hierarchical approach to musical styles dominates. For instance, by the established Soviet musical norms the element of improvisation was regarded as an inappropriate mode of musical expression. Soviet jazz historian Aleksei Batashev (as cited in Novikova, 2003: 77) remembers the debates of the 1950s among Soviet top composers: "You say--improvisation? A composer is in the torture of creating music at home, and you mean that it is created directly here, on stage, one-two-three, and it is ready? Isn´t it shameful to take your experimentations and impromptus into the public arena?" Yet, jazz by expressing the borderlessness of musical imagination became, as Novokova (2003: 75) put it, the symbol of ´tonal resistance´. Free expression became a symbol of freedom – freedom from repressive society. The freedom of expression embedded in improvisation was an uncontrollable and unpredictable quality and thereby made the communist authorities insecure.

Conclusions

As we have seen, ideology is one of the key factors that shaped the discourse of jazz in the former Soviet Union. Jazz, which was perhaps more than any other cultural phenomenon burdened with ambiguous meanings, had become for Soviet ideologists (despite its marginality as an artistic field) an entity located at the forefront of ideological struggles. The music had to resist the rigid paradigm and purges of Soviet ideology. But it also had to defend itself against the proponents of high-culture, survive the cultural policy of Socialist Realism and experience the status of underground culture. As we can say metaphorically – discussions about jazz in Soviet Estonia will make audible the particular jazz voice which is colored and articulated with dissonances caused by ´red´ ideology.

Notes

1. Constructing the jazz tradition refers here to Scott Deveaux´s oft-cited essay in which he challenges readers to re-think the master narrative of jazz history (DeVeaux, 1991)

2. Sherrie Tucker uses the phrase deconstructing the jazz tradition in her essay Deconstructing the Jazz Tradition: The ´Subjectless Subject´ of New Jazz Studies (2005) to characterize the new wave in academic jazz studies called the New Jazz Studies. This new approach deconstructs the dominating monolithic narrative which excluded all the other understandings of what jazz was, who played it, and how it was developed.

3. Ideology as interpreted in the Soviet context, is an official dogmas of Marxsism-Leninism to which the Soviet leadership, party and state are formally commited.

4.Estonian jazz is a relatively little investigated area of research. The only writing on Estonian jazz written from scientific perspective is Tiit Lauk´s doctoral dissertation *Jazz in Estonia in 1918–945* (2008) the aim of which is to investigate how jazz music reached Estonian cultural space. Another document of Estonian jazz is Valter Ojakäär´s three volume series on history of Estonian jazz: Ojakäär. V. (2000). *Vaibunud viiside kaja***.** Tallinn: Tallinna Raamatutrükikoda; Ojakäär, V. (2003). *Omad viisid võõras väes: 1940–1945***.** Tallinn: Ilo; Ojakäär, V. (2008). *Sirp ja saksofon*. Tallinn: Kirjastus Ilo; Ojakäär, V. (2010). *Oma laulu leidsime üles: 1950. aastatest tänapäevani*. Tallinn: Ilo.

5. The changes of cultural paradigms in Soviet philosophy took place as late as 1977/78, when culture was recognized as an important category of historical materialism.

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