

Rewriting Austrian Jazz Histor(iograph)y. A Critical Approach

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Primer

Jazz and the history of its study field have been historicized and glorified as androcentric, from time to time “good-looking” female singers are mentioned in the scholarly texts (Pellegrinelli 32). By taking a closer look at gender relations in jazz, questions in connection with instrumentalist and vocalist positions arise repeatedly. The traditional division of artistic expression and musical education that historicizes women as singers and occasionally pianists, male musicians as instrumentalists and singers, can be described as similar to other popular music styles (Björck/Bergman 44). Female jazz singers are visible through presence and positioning on stage, at the same time excluded from jazz research and the canonization of the genre by association between singer, commodification, and sexuality (Ibid.).

Female musicians like the vibraphonist Vera Auer (1919–1996) or the singer Erni Bieler (1925–2002) are hardly mentioned in Austria’s jazz history, furthermore they are considered as exceptions in the historiography of Austrian jazz. My paper deals with the documentation of jazz as a knowledge culture, marginalizing women in its historiography. I begin my inquiry with a brief introduction of the history of Austrian jazz. Along the way, I focus on the historical and current role of female jazz musicians who were active in the post war era based on artist’s biographies and their image constructed by significant institutions and personalities to question the system of inclusion and exclusion, within a hegemonic system. My perspective poses questions of image construction, representation, and negotiation through the artist’s individual work and a conglomeration of works. My research includes aspects of performance as well as writing and speaking about jazz. Given their historical relevance, I study how jazz collections in libraries and archives reflect and shape narratives and mythologies of the genre. These sources show the role of significant institutions and personalities in shaping the (inter-)national reception of Austrian jazz by not only documenting selected aspects of Austrian jazz history, but primarily to draw on how this history was publicly told, and how jazz was employed to form androcentric aspects of the Austrian cultural identity.

The Development of the Austrian Jazz Scene

In the late 1910s and early 1920s, Austrian jazz was dominated by ragtime and old-time jazz played predominantly in dance halls. The first documented performances of the genre referred to as jazz took place in the Viennese *Metropoltheater* around 1919/1920, where the American Syncopated Orchestra appeared. In the period from 1922 to 1934, the Viennese *Weihburg Bar* became the centre for jazz (Schulz 20). Foreign jazz formations played regularly, especially from Germany, France, and the U.S.; simultaneously Austrian musicians came in contact with jazz during engagements abroad. Until the 1930s, jazz was probably an exception in the repertoire of dance orchestras, but from the 1930s onwards Austria could already boast ensembles with extensive jazz repertoire.

In the period from 1938 to 1945, jazz and jazz idiomatic music in Austria were frowned upon, a further development of jazz and swing music was therefore severely hampered during the Nazi regime. The music was not broadcast on domestic radio stations and prohibited from being listened to on foreign radio stations. For this reason, jazz activities mostly took place in the underground. Jam sessions were held in private homes where a youthful jazz subculture developed (Schulz 42). However, the dance orchestra of the *Reichsrundfunk* or the pianist Ernst Landl played quite freely in swing stylistics. The song titles were germanised, the “Tiger Rag” was changed into “*Schwarzer Panther*” (“Black Panther”) or “*Tabak Trafik*” (“Tobacconist”) (Ibid.).

After the end of World War II, a great interest of Austrian musicians in the genre jazz increased, many ensembles, which soon had a comprehensive repertoire, quickly formed. Austria was divided into four occupation zones; each occupying power established its own radio program. The U.S.-led station “*Rot-Weiß-Rot*” (“Red-White-Red”), with its satirical-critical radio shows that included jazz music, became very popular. As one of the most important popular music orchestras of that time, the Vienna Dance Orchestra (founded in 1945) played bebop tunes. One of the most significant post war employers for musicians were the soldiers’ clubs of the occupying powers that widely played swing and bebop (Kraner/Schulz 31).

Following the example of international hot clubs, the Hot Club Austria (later the Hot Club Vienne) was founded in 1951 (Schulz 59). The club was considered as significant meeting place for the Viennese jazz scene. In addition to concerts, lecture evenings were held to promote the understanding of jazz. In the year 1952, the first writings on the subject of jazz in the form of the magazine *Jazz Podium* appeared in Vienna before it was later published in Stuttgart (Kumpf). When the occupying powers left Austria in 1955, the soldiers’ clubs were abolished which led to the deterioration of the work situation for Austrian jazz musicians. Since the cultural institutions and the radio stations were failing miserably, leading musicians left Austria (Kraner/Schulz 32). One of these musicians was the vibraphonist Vera Auer who spent several years in Germany before moving to the U.S.

Vera Auer

Even back in the late 1940s, the Austrian jazz scene could already boast one instrumentalist who played an instrument “untypical” of women: Viennese-born vibraphonist Vera Auer (1919–1996) was among the first European women jazz musicians to add modern jazz to their repertoire. Biographical notes can be easily accessed in her entry in *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* written by the Austrian jazz researcher Klaus Schulz. Except Auer’s few recordings, there are hardly any other documents that give information about her life, career, or musical style. Auer was mentioned a few times in German jazz magazines: *Der Drummer* (1956), *Schlagzeug* (1958) or *Jazz Podium* (1963). Given its historical relevance to the historiography of Austrian jazz, this section gives an insight into Auer’s biography and presents some excerpts from the aforementioned articles.

Auer had graduated from the Vienna City Conservatory as a pianist, she also played the accordion. In 1949, she became acquainted with the Hungarian guitarist Attila Zoller (1927-1998), who introduced her to jazz (Vogel 258). Though she first worked as an accordionist, Auer later on worked mainly as a vibraphonist, performing together with Zoller. Following initial success in a radio competition for amateurs, she shifted to the professional realm and founded her own ensemble in the Viennese jazz scene: the Vera Auer Combo, which included prominent musicians such as Hans Salomon (1933-2020) and Joe Zawinul (1932–2007). The ensemble toured through Europe. In 1954, Auer left Austria to develop her musical style in the Federal Republic of Germany and moved to the U.S. after marrying an American in 1960. She attended workshops by Gunther Schuller, John Lewis, and George Russell at the Lenox School of Jazz. The Austrian jazz researchers Dietrich Kraner and Klaus Schulz state in *Jazz in Austria* (1972) that “Attila Zoller and Vera Auer moved to the U.S., where Zoller was able to advance to the top class of guitarists, and Vera Auer was invited, at least, with her group consisting for instance of the trumpeter Ted Curson to play in New York’s Birdland”¹ (Kraner/Schulz 23, translation by the author). A close reading of the passage reveals that Zoller was able to expand his style virtuously, he belonged to the “top class of guitarists”, while Vera Auer “at least” was able to make appearances in one of the most popular New York jazz clubs. By not mentioning Auer’s commitment to jazz and her stylistic approach, Kraner and Schulz ignore the vibraphonist regarding the androcentric narrative of the Austrian jazz history.

Around 1970, the vibraphonist recorded an LP entitled *Positive Vibes* with her quintet, which was released in 1977. She worked as a journalist, wrote poems, and played at jazz vespers services in New York. In 1982, Auer led a quintet at the *Wiener Jazzfrühling* (Viennese Jazz Spring). She retired in the mid-1980s and lived as Vera Auer-Boucher in New York until her death.

By taking a look at the documentation of Vera Auer’s career in the *Jazz Podium* series, I found out that she was first mentioned in 1956 after an incident in Cologne: “Vera Auer sometimes strikes hard when improvising on the vibraphone. After all, it is not easy for a woman to man up in the world of jazz. Well, in an incident in Cologne that endangered the existence of the group, it was the calm and equanimity of Vera Auer that smoothed out the excited waves. Sparkling temperament and calm reflection – at the right moment – these are the characteristics

¹ “Attila Zoller und Vera Auer gingen nach den USA, wo Zoller zur Spitzenklasse der Gitarristen vordringen konnte, und Vera Auer immerhin mit ihrer Gruppe, der u.a. der Trompeter Ted Curson angehörte, im New Yorker ‘Birdland’ gastierte.”

of a woman like Auer”.² (Vera Auer 9, translation by the author.) It takes a woman to settle a dispute. The article alludes strongly to Vera Auer’s gender and gender stereotypical traits that neutralized the situation.

In 1963, Eric T. Vogel reports on Vera Auer’s impressions and experiences in Europe and the U.S. in the article “*Von Wien über Deutschland ins Birdland*” (“From Vienna via Germany to Birdland”) that describes Auer’s career in Austria, her experiences in Germany and the United States, her role as vibraphonist and her status as a German-speaking musician in the U.S. The gender question, Auer’s position as female instrumentalist, isn’t eye-catching but – through close reading – in some passages, a devaluation of Vera Auer’s gender through her words is recognizable in Vogel’s article. The caption on page 260 “*Sie setzt sich durch: Vera Auer*” (“She prevails: Vera Auer”, translation by the author), would probably have been chosen differently for a male musician by the author.

Auer comments on the band name, the Vera Auer Combo, that the musicians felt that she had become better known for her appearances on radio broadcasts and concerts than any other band member. Besides she describes Attila Zoller as the bandleader, because he knew more about jazz than her, but the music was mostly based on their common idea (Vogel 259). The passage about Auer’s wedding and her husband seems to be significant as she attributes more musical knowledge to her husband, who had a huge record collection, than to herself. While attending a jam session, Auer was invited by the club owner to join the session but waited for her husband’s reaction. Auer also addresses the difficult earning potential for jazz musicians in the early 1960s. Additionally, the precariat and gender relations were discussed. In the paragraph on vibraphonists, Auer mentions the female vibraphonist Marjorie Hyams who retired from professional life. Auer describes her as married and dedicated to her family. At the same time, Auer states that she doesn’t know any vibraphonist who performs constantly. The last passage deals with German or German-speaking musicians in the U.S. Those musicians rely heavily on the support of U.S.-based colleagues to gain awareness in the scene. After the publication of Vogel’s article Vera Auer has been mentioned twice in the *Jazz Podium* series during the 1960s and 1970s. Regarding articles about Vera Auer, which were rarely published in contrast to writings about her fellow male musicians, journalists mainly express pride for her achievements especially in U.S. jazz scene.

Erni Bieler

Another female musician, who was significant for the Austrian popular music scene in the 1950s, was the singer Erni Bieler (1925–2002). Ernestine Geisbiegler was born in Vienna; primarily trained as a coloratura soprano, she turned to popular music. In collaboration with her classmates Ina and Toni Winkler, she founded the *Vienna Terzett*. The three singers were enthusiastically celebrated for their excellent vocal performances, even if their pay was not expressed in crackling banknotes at the time, but – in the aftermath of the war, still very much desired – in edibles of all kinds.

Gerhard Mendelson, producer of the label *Elite Special*, was impressed by the vocal qualities of the young artist Ernestine Geisbiegler, but suggested two things:

1. off the “English disease” that meant her phrasing influenced by jazz singing and
2. to get a popular stage name, so Ernestine Geisbiegler became “Erni Bieler” (Krassa).

Erni Bieler never recorded one of her numerous jazz titles; between 1947 and 1949 she sang so-called “second recordings” for *Astra-Schall* and *Harmona*. Secondary recordings were songs that had previously been popularized by a far more famous artist. Her first solo records “*Am Zuckerhut*” (“On the Sugarloaf Mountain”), “*Tschiou Tschiou*”, “*Coca Cola*”, and the tango song “*Armer Gondolier*” (“Poor Gondolier”) were accompanied by the Hot Club Vienna.

In the 1950 and 1951, Erni Bieler recorded exclusively in the German *Schlager*-genre with her partner Rudi Hofstetter. At the beginning of 1952, the song “*Ich möcht’ gern dein Herz klopfen hör’n*” (“I want to hear your heart beating”) became a huge success, both musicians gained public attention in Germany. In 1952, Erni Bieler performed for three months in a yacht club on an island off Istanbul (Turkey), where the High Society spent their summer holiday. Viennese musicians, such as Attila Zoller (guitar), Hans Hammerschmid (piano), and Vera Auer (vibraphone), provided the musical accompaniment.

² “Vera Auer schlägt manchmal hart zu, wenn sie auf dem Vibraphon improvisiert. Es ist für eine Frau immerhin nicht ganz leicht, in der Welt des Jazz ihren Mann zu stehen. Nun, bei einem Zwischenfall in Köln, der die Existenz der Gruppe in Gefahr brachte, war es die Ruhe und Besonnenheit von Vera Auer, durch die die erregten Wogen wieder geglättet wurden. Sprühendes Temperament und ruhige Überlegung – jeweils im rechten Moment – das sind die Kennzeichen einer Frau wie Auer.”

Bieler recorded under her pseudonym Kitty Sisters for *Heliodor*. She sang German-language versions of famous U.S. hits by Nat King Cole, Teresa Brewer, Janis Martin, and the Chordettes. The multi-track technique made it possible for Bieler to accompany herself. Even though the singer can be described as successful during her active period, she is hardly mentioned in publications on the Austrian jazz history.

The Situation in Post-War Graz (Styria)

Subsequently, I want to refer to other female musicians who were mentioned or depicted unidentified in significant Austrian Jazz research. On 2 February 1948 at 8 p.m., an event approved for civilians took place at the Hawkesworth Barracks Theater in the barracks Wetzelsdorf (Graz) with a poster announcing the Gerhard Wehner Band as “Austria’s no. 1 Broadcasting Orchestra”. The announced singers were Geri Hermann and Otto Arlic as well as Paula Cornelius who sang “Sentimental Songs”. Furthermore the “Roller Skating Speciality” of the “Two Donalds”, the Fakir Josef Lehner, a certain Friessnegg with “Tricks” and Marga Novotny (real name: Marga Bäuml) “with her electrical guitar” were announced (Kolleritsch 55). Marga Bäuml was later appointed as professor of guitar to the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz.

In Elisabeth Kolleritsch’s book *Jazz in Graz*, the author mentions the *Steirerhof Orchestra* that was named after the hotel the orchestra performed in. Some of the musicians played temporarily with the orchestra, therefore they remained nameless in pictures of the orchestra’s performances. Two performances are depicted in the book on page 243. The orchestra consisted of male musicians and a female singer. On the picture above the singer’s name Rosemarie Vorgin is mentioned, however the singer on the second picture remained nameless.

Conclusions

As a matter of fact, these processes – female musicians remain nameless, scholars do not explain or at least note the absence of their names – are not limited to Austria; women have always been in the minority and marginalized in jazz, commonly being “thought of and historicized as a ‘man’s world’, sometimes decorated by ‘girl singers’” (Tucker 256). Given its historical and social relevance, Jazz as a culture of knowledge marginalizes women in its historiography. Sources for Austria’s jazz history such as the magazine *Jazz Podium* or the scholarly works of Klaus Schulz, Dietrich Heinz Kraner, and Elisabeth Kolleritsch illustrate the role and function of important institutions and personalities in shaping the (inter-)national reception of Austrian jazz. From the 1980s onward, female instrumentalists ceased to be merely peripheral figures, instead becoming fixtures of the Austrian jazz scene. Through the aforementioned achievements, these musicians appeared in the media and reached larger audience.

When jazz as a culture of knowledge is understood as a participatory process linking the critical reflection of its historiography and the approaches to rewrite its history by including socio-cultural developments, gender attributions, staging strategies, and aspects of diversity, it is necessary to turn a critical eye on Austria’s jazz historiography and to rewrite its history.

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