

# Constructing Estonian jazz tradition: shifting

“Jazz is a construct” writes Krin Gabbard in the preface to the *Cambridge Companion to Jazz*.

How can we construct the cultural history of jazz in Soviet Estonia—in an occupied country where Soviet totalitarianism had established its regime?

How can we construct the tradition of music which has contradictory and provocative meanings, in a society where political authorities were trying to keep control over cultural activities with all possible legal and illegal means and where all cultural forms were subjected to the power of “red” ideology?

- How should we start the discussion of jazz under socialism where, in the cultural domain, few elements of technology and no entrepreneurship existed, and where leisure and entertainment were provided by state-owned institutions which shaped the tastes of masses in a spirit of socialist aesthetics?

1. The implications for understanding the essence of Soviet (Estonian) culture in general and jazz as a musical culture in particular (context).
2. The spheres of communication and private—public texts (theory)
3. Myths of Soviet Estonian jazz (example of analysis)

## **Analytical perspectives of Soviet Estonian culture**

- In her article *The obsessions of totalitarianism and/or colonialism: why and how investigate Soviet time* (2003: 25) Eve Annuk summarizes the analytical perspectives for studying Soviet time culture in Estonia and makes the conclusion that in the investigation of Estonian society under socialism the most often used concepts are resistance, subversion, double-thinking, conformism/nonconformism, genocide, sovietization, russification, socialist realism, and colonialism.

# Ideology

- The ideology, by having supremacy in Soviet society, could be called the backbone of the self-reflectiveness of Soviet culture which meta-language was completely ideologized (Lepik 2001: 14).

# Historical context

- Boriss Schwartz makes a brief resumé about attitudes of Soviet authorities to jazz music by saying: „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 (1984: 629).

- Starr(1983: 320): 'those who liked jazz find ways of playing or hearing, whatever policy may be'.
- Valter Ojakäär: 'jazz was not allowed in Soviet Union but neither was it forbidden.'

Why jazz which is at first glance such a marginal cultural phenomenon attracted that much attention from the side of Soviet ideologists?

- Jazz was the music of oppressed people
- the country of jazz's origin was the US-- the biggest ideological and cultural enemy of Soviet Union
- the need for entertainment of Soviet masses
- disobedience to dominating official Soviet paradigms for artistic expression

- Ojakäär (2008: 166) calls the period that started in March 21st 1948 "the hidden-name period" in Estonian jazz.
- The usage of the word jazz was banned;
- jazz orchestras were renamed and called variety-orchestras;
- the authors of less-known pieces of Western origin were 'rebaptized' which meant the replacement of the names of original Western authors by the names of Soviet composers.

Roziner (2000: 177-178) makes in his article *Соцреализм в советской музыке* a summery of principles characterizing Socialist Realism in music.

- songfulness (*песенность*);
- narrativity (*нарративность*);
- groundedness on program (*программность*);
- folkness (*народность*);
- abidance by principles of classical music (*следование классике*), especially to Russian music of 18th century;
- monumentality (*монументальность*);
- modernity (*современность*)—not in a sense of Western intellectual culture, but here modernity means the active reliance on topicality;
- present-minuteness (*сиюминутность*)

- During the enraged war against the saxophone Soviet propaganda came up with several “warnings” like ‘there is only one step from saxophone to Finnish sheath-knife’ or ‘today you play saxophone and tomorrow you betray your homeland’ (Ojakäär 389-390).

(Oswald, I. & Voronkov, 2004)

state/ official-public sphere



private-public sphere

subcultural milieus  
*"tusovka"*  
culture of joking/ folklore

private sphere

family      intimacy

**Figure 2.** Borders of the private–public sphere in late Soviet society

- **Public and private texts**
- In a democratic text, the focal point of the interpretation process is dependent on the reception of texts. At the same time we can describe as totalitarian, the kind of public text that has a strictly controlled, determined meaning defined by one person or group (such as the Communist Party).

## **Barthe's theory of myths**

- In Soviet context, the signified by being dominant and encompassing was rather implied than obscured by the sign. It means that the relationship between the sign and the signified was transparent rather than opaque.

- Sirp ja Vasar´ ([hammer and sickle](#))
- 20.08.1949 Sirp ja Vasar
- Column -- Commentaries from abroad
- **About present day jazz music**
- Author – Valter Ojakäär

- In present-day American musical life, it is jazz that has the biggest say. More than half of radio broadcasts consist of jazz music, record industries fling millions of jazz music records and concert halls are more and more at the disposal of jazz orchestras. It is the brightest example of the “prosperity” of American musical culture [...] The jazz rhythm-based saloon dances, which emerged among whites, opened grandiose possibilities for business-men to make money with this new style of music. Step by step the whites tore from blacks their monopoly on jazz music and developed from it, during the last thirty years, the “music”, which is with pride called by American apologists the clearest expression of American art.

- The further the content of jazz songs from reality became, the better it earned the interests of American monopolists. With the pieces about the “fairy-tale life” of Hawaiians and other colonized countries the illusions of “happy” and “hopeful” life were created. It is clear, that jazz music should, and in reality had, lost its essential values and headed to the external sensual effects and aspirations [...]
- At the same time the vogue of swinging-up classical music started. The masterpieces of Brahms, Bach, Tchaikovsky and Grieg were ruthlessly harnessed by jazz. For increasing the appetite for jazz among people, it became necessary to feed them with familiar melodies from classical music. This barbaric “entertainment” continues until today, in spite of the fact that swing has given way to other styles.

One of the newest styles of jazz is the so-called bebop which emerged after World War II. Its name comes from Negro jargon and means heavy exaltation. This style offers senseless combinations of sounds and rhythms while text is replaced by empty babbling. [...]

Bebop style was followed by a new fad: Stan Kenton's progressive jazz. The most sensational pieces of progressive jazz were Kenton's *Concerto To End All Concertos*, *Artistry In Percussion*, *This is My Theme* where the soloist June Cristle cantillates an inarticulate rhymeless and metreless poem about broken window glasses and the beat of a thousand marching feet, about the „senseless echo of the distance“. All this is accompanied by occasional cries of nine brass instruments and distracting ploncks on drums. .

- The yardstick of music in America, as it is for other arts, is dollar. The soloists and orchestras are evaluated by the sums of money their performances can collect. This is why several serious and talented musicians like Lily Pons and Oscar Levant, have proceeded because of more cost-effective income to the field of jazz and decadent light music. [...]
- The main magnet of jazz music is external effect, and unprecedented efforts to be original and astound the listener at any cost. One of the most popular ensembles is *Spike Jones and his City Slickers*. Under this banal name we find a number of highly qualified musicians who have to specialize on tickling the laughing-nerve of an undemanding audience with banal jokes. As musical instruments alarmclocks, police-whistles, bicycle-pumps etc are used, and glasses broken.[...]

- Slim Caillardi's trio piece called „The avocado seed soup symphony”:
- This musical bacchanale which consisted of senseless babbling of three singers, accompanied by piano guitar and bass, lasted nine minutes. Audiences were lured by musicians who were under the influence of a drug made of marihuana-plant. In general, the culture of abandoning reason and worshipping total mental emptiness are parts of jazz music. What is one to think of music that has titles like „Mop, Mop”, „Blop, Bah”, „Pom Pom”, „Grip a axe, Max”, „Don't beat your wife with a spide” etc?

Although in jazz orchestras, colored musicians are performing side by side with whites, the borderline has not disappeared. At concerts, Negroes can take only back seats. Some Negro musicians may even be audience favourites, but outside the stage they are treated in the same humiliating way as the other blacks.

Modern American jazz music is a vivid reflection of the condescending mentality of American bourgeois society, and its rapid approach to decline.

- But when was then jazz played? Only when it was somehow connected to criminal offence [---]. If the producer wants to open the inner world of the person with the help of music, he uses folk music for a positive character and jazz for negative.

(Tsfasman's article as cited in Ojakäär, 2008: 426):

- Myths related to Western world and values.
- Myth about jazz in general
- Myths about particular jazz styles
- Myths about relationships between classical music and jazz
- Myths about race

# The essence of Soviet myths

- Finally, and above all, this myth is, in essence, poverty-stricken. It does not know how to proliferate; being produced on order and of a temporally limited prospect, it is invented with difficulty. It lacks a major faculty, that of fabulizing. Whatever it does, there remains about it something stiff and literal, a suggestion of something done to order. As it is expressively put, it remains barren. In fact, what can be more meagre than the Stalin myth? No inventiveness here, and only a clumsy appropriation: the signifier of the myth is not varied in the least. It is reduced to a litany. (Barthes, 1993: 147-8)

- It must be said that our jazz musicians haven't thought a lot about what they are playing. They think that jazz is jazz and American foxtrots are the holiest of holy. When faced with this question they shout bemusedly/bi 'mjuusidli/: "What are you expecting from us? We are playing the latest jazz-news from England and America. This is the best we have in our repertoire. When composing new music we take this as a model."
- That is how musicians think, but front-ranking Soviet music-listener thinks in another way. His requirements have grown beyond the degenerated Western-European aesthetics. Soviet audiences are not content with rumbling and squawking/skwooking, kraaksuv/ foxtrots which rather tend to get onto nerves than give a real esthetical satisfaction.

“The programs of our jazz orchestras contain plenty of eccentric western foxtrots.

The hysterical swing and hot music writhing in cramps with a throaty broken rhythm and absence of melody—this is what is considered to be “real” jazz.

Are things really like this? Can it be allowed that Soviet jazz takes its course towards hysterical eccentricism, where the erotic reek of barrelhouses and formalist tricks are mingled?

The answer is certainly no! This culture should flourish where it was born, but Soviet jazz musicians must create their own jazz music, which is not for barrelhouse visitors but for Soviet people who listen to music in theatre and concert.

# **Spheres of communication**

