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Notes about Musical and Aesthetic Thinking in Slovakia in the 20th Century

***Normative aesthetic Socialist realism
as a search for meaning where there is none***

Keywords: *socialist realism, musical creation, dogmatism, normative aesthetics, musical aesthetics, ideology*

Summary

This paper addresses the little studied area of Slovak music and its influence from 'above': the aesthetic theory (dogmatic aesthetics) created out of the political demands placed on art in the 1950s and 60s. In this relatively short 'Socialist building' period, music as both an adornment of the regime and an ideological tool was promoted in accordance with Lenin's reflection theory and Zhdanov's normative aesthetics using rules, prohibitions and dogma. Fortunately, however, the mission to build and entrench socialism was never fulfilled.

During the early days of the totalitarian regime in Slovakia in the period after February 1948, the government's attitude to art reflected their belief in it as a means of influencing people. The ruling class realized that the social and aesthetic function of art gave them great opportunity to form and unify the masses, a plan that was to be achieved through realistic artistic representation of what were, in fact, the unreal goals and ideals of the

builders of socialism with their utopist vision of imminent Communism. In the end, this never materialised, however, nor did art ever really have the power to help the ruling ideology fully take root.

The socialist realism method in art as a scientific and theoretical generalization of Marxist-Leninist practice was intended to be a creative grounding for artists so that they would know what basic principles they should apply in creating socialist art as a means of taking art to what were seen as higher levels than ever before. Its designers never admitted, of course, that it was merely a collection of norms and rules imbued with dogma. J. Kalašnikov gives us an ‘exhaustive’ definition when he says: “*The method of socialist realism emerged in the form of a generalization, a creative clarification of reality in the production of art itself and one which exults with thoughts of a socialist transformation of the world*” [Kalašnikov, 1961: 54].

The requirements of socialist realism were first formulated in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, the first definition of it appearing in the *Sovietskaja muzyka* magazine in 1934, according to which the task of a Soviet composer was to: “...*focus attention on the victorious, progressive springs of reality and heroic clarity and beauty (!) characterizing the spiritual life of a Soviet citizen*” [Hrčková, 2006: 36]. Art was to be non-conflictual and should celebrate socialist reality; music had to be protected from “modernism and formalism”. This struggle against formalism was declared in 1936 at the I. Congress of the Union of Soviet Composers, the start of the dark era of the crudest ideologization of art embodied by Stalin’s official ideologue, A. A. Zhdanov. Strict instructions and prohibitions started to be imposed; the banning of formalism, for instance, meant the prohibition of all modern musical streams (Modernist trends could already be seen in the work of Debussy (!), not to mention the work of Schönberg, Stravinsky, J. Cage and others). Following study of historical documents, we can state that those most talented composers who were branded as “counter-revolutionary formalists” were never actually denounced as such by their common listeners, however, but earned such epithets from above following authoritarian interference [Kučera, 1965: 373].

As early as the 1930s, the qualitative difference between Lenin’s and Stalin’s understanding of socialist democracy was already becoming clear. J. V. Stalin shifted the focus away from a specialized and politically established central administration to an autocratic centralism. Proletarian culture became isolated from the non-socialist world, rejecting modern art by dismissing it as mere ‘modernism’. The work of the most talented Soviet composers was declared to be unintelligible to the people and dangerously close to the decadent culture of the West. Opportunity to impose Zhdanov’s norms thus came with the broadside ‘ideologization’ of creative art and its evaluation, the intellectually unacceptable identification of the basis of socialist realism with the historically and aesthetical-

ly disproportionate norms of 19th century ‘classical’ music, the negation of any progressive trends in 20th century music (except for mass genres) and the oversimplification of many terms (democracy, nationhood, party allegiance, truthfulness etc.) [Kučera, 1965: 374].

Zhdanov’s “aesthetic conception” had resonance in Czechoslovakia as a result of the symptomatic set of problems facing the development of socialist culture in the specific sociopolitical conditions here. Social development in our country brought an intensification of the so-called utilitarian understanding of art’s social function and above all required active artistic involvement as a tool in the struggle for a new social order. The nature of our postwar musical culture was insufficiently sophisticated, however, and Zhdanov’s conception was taken on too literally and uncritically; it was seen as a norm in the progress of the cultural revolution. In terms of its method, it was dated: its ahistorical approach had become superannated and its content was filled with vulgar terms like sociology, dogmatism and utilitarianism.

In 1948, the II. International Congress of Progressive Composers and Music Critics was held in Prague (for complete wording of final resolution „*Provolání II. mezinárodního sjezdu skladatelů a kritiků v Praze*“ see for example. In: [Hudební věda, 1969, year 6, no. 1, p. 94-97]). The evaluation of its results at the time and its evaluation much later greatly differed. L. Burlas states that the congress confirmed a cultural and political orientation towards the wider masses: it addressed the “*critical symptoms of modern music*”, and warned about the danger “*of growing individualism and subjectivity, the danger of overcomplication and construction prevailing at the expense of content and communicativeness*” [Burlas, 1987: 94]. The need to avoid subjective and cosmopolitan tendencies was proclaimed as a means of overcoming this perceived crisis in music and composers were recommended to shift their attention to musical forms which could be more specific in content: operas, oratoria, cantatas, choral works, songs etc. [„*Provolání II. mezinárodního sjezdu skladatelů a kritiků v Praze*“, 1969: 96]. The struggle for “content-rich” music began, music which would poetically represent external events in the same spirit as the bygone ideal of 19th century programme music.

The congress was attended by experts of western and eastern German musicology such as H. Eisler, R. Leibowitz and T. W. Adorno, all of whom had different views from those of the Soviet delegation. T. W. Adorno subjected the document to sharp criticism: part of his book *Prismen – Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* (1955) is devoted to a cogent and critical analysis of how the content of music is assessed according to its text or lyrics and not, as it should be, according to its musical form. Similarly he saw the preference for vocal music as a misuse of the propagandistic function of lyrics and a betrayal of the message of the music itself [Adorno, 1969: 92-101]. After ten days of discussion, the Soviet delegation

managed to insert into the congress's resolution statements about "*intensifying movement towards Socialist realism*", marking the closure of Eastern Europe to the western world. At the same time, the Soviet Union began its merciless struggle against decadent modern bourgeois tendencies [Hrčková, 2006: 38-39].

One well-known and typical example of such ideas is a text by G. Šneerson called *Hudba v službách reakcie* (Music in the Services of Reaction) (1953). Its author was deeply convinced that he had, by applying Lenin's theory of imperialism, discovered the reasons for the serious crisis in the West and with it, the general decadence of musical life in the USA, France, England and other bourgeois countries. The reason for this, he believed, lay in the dichotomy between the spiritual interests of the masses and the decadent work of the formalist composers. In formulating his ideas, he quoted Zhdanov's speeches about the servility of "dollar democracy", about "obscurantism" and "clericalism", corrupt idealistic philosophy and deviant bourgeois art full of "pathological obsession" [Šneerson, 1953: 14]. He described the Russian composer, I. Stravinsky, as being the "*most striking example of a rootless cosmopolitan in art, an extreme reactionary and obscurantist*" [Šneerson, 1953: 28].

Šneerson suggests all modern music of the first half of the 20th century is musical reaction and anti-demotic noise. This is borne out by his rather meaningless definitions: "*Neoclassicism is a reactionary trend in contemporary bourgeois music using old-fashioned forms to create nonsensical and cacophonous works*"; "*Atonalism is destroying music as art and is an expression of the decadence of bourgeois musical culture and its anti-demotic cosmopolitan essence*" [Šneerson, 1953: 84-85]. etc. Such shallow generalizations created a new musical and aesthetic idiom in which the work of Soviet academics was held up as a model for our own academia. Musicologists were given a list of compulsory texts to read which were written by Soviet academics ([See: *Správa o činnosti Ústavu hudobnej vedy SAV*, 1953: 196], says: „*As well as a collective ideological study plan, every institute worker had a personal study plan [...] To improve ideological awareness study of of History of VKS(b), Stalin's writings and material from the XIX. Congress of the KSSS were of most help*").

According to V. Karbusický, Šneerson's work reflects a non-empirical way of thinking because he is selective in presenting facts and the facts he chooses are not so much insights into the situation as it is as motifs and images for creating a "new reality" from an artistic work [Karbusický, 1969: 303]. Not only does he deviate from standards of good taste (through diatribes and lies), he also purports to be absolutely right in his claims, asserting them with immense confidence. Pamphlets by "poeticizing ideologues" are contrived artistic works (novels, symphonies, legends) which purport to be 'scientific

solutions' but which, in fact, convince only their writers of the objective value of their own conclusions as a source of "scientific ideology" [Karusický, 1969: 309].

Propagandist and panegyric art of the utopist socialist regime was, according to W. Malinowski, parareligious in character. Paradoxically, its functions and mechanisms had the features of religious art: "*The problem of Socialist realist music is mostly a problem of faith rather than art – a New Faith which only works of Socialist realist non-art referred to*" [Malinowski, 2006: 43]. The author is thinking here about the ideological expression of the need for final salvation, something in which Communism closely resembled a religious movement. Similarly the musical work of socialist art fulfilled religious decorum, with the artist not so much describing reality as declaring a new belief, a higher truth and faith in a better future symbolized by smiles, the sun, successful work and the contented face of the leader [Malinowski, 2006: 46].

Unlike mass culture, which never made claims to exclusivity, socialist realism felt that it was essentially exclusive: its destructive influence lay not in recommendations but in prohibitions, not in the art which it demanded but in the art which it restricted. In the early pioneering years lasting up to the mid-1950s, almost all cultural issues discussed were seen in relation to the propagandistic effect of music or their identification with the party line. Strong attacks on modern art for being misguided and decadent and a prescriptive approach to what could and could not be done seemed to be aimed at destroying creative freedom and the desire for change which is inherent in art: "*Art cannot be free because that would suggest that people are not free; art must not be negative because that would suggest existence itself is negative*" [Adorno, 1969: 93]. Such deformed elements of truth were posited in the services of ideology. T. W. Adorno talks about how art should "borrow" discipline from society so that it can then cover up the crisis in society; a true artistic crisis, however, should uncover not cover up a real crisis. Without that conflict, art would lose both its critical and aesthetic element and become just a meaningless game [Adorno, 1969: 93]. Hatred of difficulty in music and attempts at simplicity as an act of conciliation towards the masses thus became a symptom of a backward perception of the role of music.

In Prague in October 1948 the first working congress of Czechoslovak composers and musicologists was held and lent its support to the findings of the international congress of a few months earlier by defining socialist realism as both a creative method and an artistic programme. Its substantive qualities were class and party loyalty and recognition of the common people. As a theory of art it would form part of scientific Communism. As a philosophy of art, it was cultivated in accordance with the Marxist-Leninist aesthetic, which normatively determined how this art of the revolutionary working class should contribute to "*the Communist transformation of the world and society*" [Burlas, 1987: 55].

The essence of socialist realism lay in the effort to react to socialist reality through art. Model types of artistic opinion were represented by three tendencies: the first was a reliance on tradition and the effort to preserve the continuity of current development; diametrically opposed to this was the avant-garde, distinguished by innovations in content and form and inspired by the premise that a revolutionary society needs revolutionary art; the third were antimodernistic opinions, typified by a reduction of expressive means and simplification, representing proletarian art: the so-called *Proletkult*, an agit-prop artistic movement serving the needs of the proletariat revolution. The aesthetic principle was also seen as being the essence of socialist realism. Ideologues believed in the strong power of art, especially music, as an indispensable means of aesthetically delineating life in order that the philosophical, emotive, aesthetic and ethical features of a work of art would all come together to form a new person.

Truthfulness presented itself as a key feature of realistic art. In terms of the socialist function of the artist, however, a greater collective truth was sought: the truth of the epoch showing the real possibilities of a person, his/her development and potential to overcome difficulties and find a way to prosper (The words ‘truth’ and ‘artistic truthfulness’ were popular buzzwords in the ideologization of art.). The expressiveness of socialist art was understood not as a state but as a tendency and movement towards a better world. Artistic truth was to be united with party truth and should promote qualities such as goodliness and optimism. The aim was to eradicate aesthetic autonomy and individualism. These Soviet ideas spread to the other countries in the Socialist bloc and the character of musical life in the 1950s was formed according to Soviet experience. J. Lexmann states, however, that the demands placed on artist were less demands made by society than demands made on society [Lexman, 2002: 120].

Many writers have classed the late 1940s and early 1950s as a time of cantatas and songs for the masses. In the words of F. Braniš, these musical forms always appeared on the stage of musical history at times when “*social development needed clear musical expression during times of greater belligerence*” [Braniš, 1959: 333]. Z. Nováček cites three cantatas with ‘Socialist content’ which were performed at a ceremonial concert to mark the IX. Congress of the KSS (Slovak Communist Party) in 1950 as shining examples of the creative method of Socialist realism in music and a qualitative shift in Slovak music thanks to its application. In his words, they depicted “the most important moments in the life of our new society” [Nováček, 1955: 93], their composers boldly embracing such themes as J. V. Stalin, the Communist party and the first people’s president (K. Gottwald) and their work seen as a collective effort of mainstream composers united in a common political struggle and the formation of a working class philosophy.

In reality, however, the political influence on Slovak music was both superficial and short-lived. O. Elschek states that most composers did not compete with each other in making slavish efforts to conform. Composers retained their creative identity and ideological and political influences remained limited during the short period up until the mid-1950s, especially in genres which were supposed to react to social requirements [Elschek, 1997: 215]. This applied mainly to the texts of vocal compositions, genres with a didactic purpose written for various bodies, the genres of march music and music as entertainment. The theoretical and aesthetic principle of Socialist realism made comprehensibility the key requirement. This was achieved by simplifying compositional approaches, by a naivety of singing and by rudimentary levels of harmony and form. The nationalist requirement was fulfilled by imitating the intonations of folk music, the requirement for political engagement by composing suitable lyrics, giving the work an appropriate theme and title, and dedicating it to the right event or person [Lexman, 2002: 123]. V. Donovalová however points to the fact that the party was unsuccessful in winning over artists and so tried to seize control over art itself [Donovalová, 1969: 304]; (The creative act did not occur spontaneously but was forced. Hence this was a time when “a large number of works were composed, all very alike in their coldness, impersonality and lack of involvement and which made little impression on their listeners”).

After 1948, radio broadcasting greatly contributed to the aesthetic devaluation of music by attempting to offer music to the largest number of working people. The aim of this was to develop the working man’s “aesthetic” feelings by playing him entertaining march music or so-called ‘mass songs’ which would play for hours in factories and out in the streets. This special genre of mass songs included songs for the so-called ‘society builders’, factory workers, miners, pioneers and youth. J. Lexman described them all as an “attempt at creating a new socialist folklore” [Lexman, 2004: 265], though it was one mostly imported from the USSR and a copy of Soviet Communist culture. Such songs were performed and played very widely; as songs to be sung socially, at parties and weddings etc., however, they never became popular in our country.

The most fundamental requirement of socialist realism was the demand for “engagement”, disengaged art being merely a display of bourgeois decadence. Party allegiance was a key factor determining class loyalty and recognition of the common people; the word engagement was really just another word for Communist party allegiance. And Zhdanov’s conception of art was neither artistic nor aesthetic but came about as a result of political requirements. According to P. Faltin, if we want to judge music composed during the 1956-1965 period, it is impossible to focus merely on its autonomous musical structure, but we also have to consider its ideological-political metastructure [Faltin,

1997: 175]. This metastructure needed artists to give the ruling powers a semblance of legitimacy and to transport totalitarian ideology to the masses.

Ideology required art to fulfil a primarily hedonistic and celebratory function. When assessing Polish music composed during the totalitarian period (1944-1989), M. Tomaszewski uses the term “panegyric music” and states that it would be difficult to imagine totalitarian power without a panegyric background to it. The term *panegyrikos* originally described a speech celebrating a person or a statement full of lofty words which is usually sychophantic in character. It has two attributes: an authentic value but also an only apparent one: and a show of homage, which may be sincere but may also be insincere or benighted [Tomaszewski, 1995: 42]. The writer states that panegyric work is *musica falsa* and warns that if the show of homage is false, it is done in a spirit of pretence and negativity which its author is fully aware of. Such work is exemplified by the cantatas and mass songs of the 1950s in our country and other countries of the surrounding socialist block.

The typical efforts of dogmatic aesthetics thus led to the reduction of art to ideology. In his analytical work *K technologii pamfletů o hudbě z let 1948-1952* V. Karbusický examined the common features of ideology and works of art in terms of the ontology of art. This led him to take an interesting standpoint: although identifying science with ideology is meaningless, he claimed, parallels between art and ideology do have a certain meaning. By resigning to its denotative function as a symptomatic feature of art, which does not aim to achieve perfect representation but often remains elliptical and implicit, we can turn art into a “non-aggressive ideology” [Karbusický, 1969: 308]. Art is not about representing a perfect and empirically provable reality but is only a free and unrestricted reaction to this reality. Such a non-aggressive ideology seeks to present a vision of reality without trying to impose it; nor does it *impose* a system of values or ethical appeals. If however this “defenceless ideology” becomes “ideology as a weapon”, it stops being art and becomes propaganda [Karbusický, 1969: 308-309], propaganda which wilfully twists reality and reduces itself to a mere magic-ritualistic wish fulfilment fantasy.

Real art has always resisted canonization and can never be categorically and singly pigeonholed. Instead it has always tried to break free of structural formulae as soon as it has become stereotyped and reflective of a “systematized” ideology. The efforts to create a hard-and-fast artistic manner were a result of Zhdanov’s theses on art, which required a clear, well-organized and comprehensible structures, above all iconic, with tried and tested formulaic ingredients, positive and negative imagos etc. History has shown, however, that this formula for perfect art was doomed to failure. The same applies to efforts at creating a believable embodiment of a “superartistic” ideology in the much dreamed-of and well-planned world of Socialist art.

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