

# Music Trade in the Slipstream of Cultural Diplomacy

## Western Rock and Pop in a Fenced-In Record Market

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Western cultural diplomacy significantly influenced the musical preferences and listening habits of music fans in Eastern Bloc countries. Throughout the Cold War era, policy-makers in the capitalist democracies of the West used the popular appeal of genuinely Western genres from jazz and blues to rock, pop, and disco for the purpose of disseminating Western values and ideals in Bloc societies. In the early decades of the East-West power struggle, American authorities including the Department of State and the United States Information Agency (USIS) cooperated with private sponsors to send distinguished jazz and gospel performers on live concert tours through adversarial countries (Davenport; Eschen; Fosler-Lussier). To the excitement of young music listeners in particular, radio stations of countries including the United States, Great Britain, and West Germany transmitted the latest in contemporary hit music deep into Bloc territory (Nelson; Cummings; Schlosser). This chapter looks beyond the direct agency of Western policymakers, showing that the performance of Western sounds on stages and their omnipresence on the ether impacted the production of records and consumption of music in the Eastern Bloc.<sup>1</sup>

Although the state-owned music industries of communist countries had a mandate to promote ideologically unproblematic popular music performed by domestic artists, the familiarity of large audiences with Western pop shaped the repertoire of those record companies. Because of the country's close proximity

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1 This paper is based on a presentation that summarized a dissertation in progress during the research phase. Contemporary witnesses who contributed oral histories to the dissertation research will remain unnamed in this article.

to Western cultural production in geographical and linguistic terms, music fans in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) benefited from this circumstance more than their peers in most other Soviet satellite states. As the GDR music industry sought to profit from the extremely high demand for popular music from Western countries, East Germans depended less and less on Western cultural diplomacy to access recorded content as the Cold War progressed. As its political authorities continued to denounce Western genres as subversive propaganda of cultural imperialists, the GDR's record industry made a habit of acquiring licenses from record companies in the capitalist hemisphere to domestically produce and mass-distribute the works of international star performers. Circulating commercially on disks pressed in East Berlin, Anglo-American rock and pop came to represent a popular cultural commodity among the people and, at the same time, an immensely profitable catalog component for the state-owned industry. This article clarifies that the dissemination of Western music in Eastern Bloc societies did not solely depend on the undertakings of Western cultural diplomats. It reveals that cooperation between record companies in East and West resulted in the familiarization of communist consumers with hit records of the capitalist entertainment industry. By examining the influx of Western pop music into the GDR's walled-in marketplace, it underscores a facet of Cold War contestation that all Bloc states faced in similar ways: Isolationist policies did not succeed in insulating domestic audiences from the appeal of popular Western cultural commodities.

## **BUILDING AN EAST GERMAN MUSIC INDUSTRY**

World War II left Germany's entertainment industry in rubble. In contrast to the Allied zones, where prewar recording companies like Deutsche Grammophon and Electrola resumed production soon after the Third Reich's surrender in May 1945, Germany's East entered the postwar period without a music production infrastructure of its own. Moreover, while the American occupiers enlisted recording labels to disseminate their distinct brand of popular culture in the West, Soviet presence did not trigger any form of cultural Russianization or Sovietization in the Eastern part (see Ignác in this volume). The administrators of the Soviet occupied zone valued German high-brow culture and swiftly reopened renowned sites of classical music performance in Dresden, Leipzig, and Berlin. They also granted a license to press records to Ernst Busch, a staunchly communist folk singer and stage performer who had worked at Radio Moscow during the Third Reich era. Enjoying comprehensive Soviet support,

Busch became the founding father of the East German music industry. The catalogue of his *Lied der Zeit* (Song of the Times) enterprise blended political content with light entertainment. Yet in the course of the new state's efforts to consolidate and nationalize all industrial operations, tensions arose between *Lied der Zeit*'s entrepreneur and Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED, the GDR's Socialist Unity Party). To acquire full control over the country's record production, the political élite opted to disown Busch. In April 1953, *Lied der Zeit* became a nationally owned enterprise ("Lied der Zeit").

As a state-owned monopolist, the record company evolved into a major player on East Germany's cultural circuit. In 1955, when the GDR's Ministerium für Kultur (MfK, Ministry of Culture) replaced the Ministerium für Leichtindustrie (Ministry of Light Industries) as the supervising body, *Lied der Zeit* became Deutsche Schallplatten (DS, German Records). At the same time, Harri Költzsch, a twenty-seven year-old mid-level supervisor at the MfK with an academic background in Economics, took the general manager position at DS (Register der Volkseigenen Wirtschaft). Mandated to transform the firm into a profitable venture whose musical output would meet the cultural demands of the people, Költzsch remained at the helm for the next thirty-three years and oversaw DS's development in the fashion of a Western tycoon. Under his auspices, DS developed into a flagship enterprise. It maintained five recording studios, operated two manufacturing plants, and employed a labor force of about 750. Its annual industrial output skyrocketed from roughly four million sound carriers in 1960 to seven million by 1970 and reached twenty million by the mid-1980s (Schindler 73). When Költzsch eventually stepped down as General Director in 1988, he did so realizing that "his" company, much like the Eastern Bloc as a whole, had exhausted its potential for economic growth. The development of Deutsche Schallplatten between 1955 and 1988, however, bears testimony to his qualities as a successful manager in an economy of scarcity.

Despite its status as a state-owned monopolist, DS remained surprisingly independent from the GDR's policymakers for a variety of reasons. First, the MfK applied a comparably liberal approach to political supervision. Traditionally a junction for state representatives and intellectuals, the ministry always acted as one of the lesser conformist authorities. The other two producers of recorded music, radio and television, by contrast, reported to committees at the Council of Ministers, which were staffed with SED hardliners. Moreover, DS's General Director succeeded in containing the influence of the party. With the exception of top-level supervisory positions like Director of Artistic Production, the company's employees felt no political pressure. Költzsch's approach of staffing elevated positions with party members provided him sufficient freedom to

emphasize talent and expertise when hiring music producers, sound engineers, and other personnel with professional responsibilities. Most importantly, perhaps, DS flourished economically. The music enterprise was one of very few cultural producers in the GDR that did not permanently depend on state subsidies. In fact, for many years DS represented a significant contributor to the national budget: The earnings that it transferred to the state grew from less than ten million East German marks in 1955 to about eighty million by 1975 and approached the two-hundred million mark in 1989 (Schindler 74). Additionally, DS earned substantial amounts in hard currencies, which the GDR required desperately. Scant surviving evidence suggests that by the 1980s, DS had about two million in freely convertible valuta (predominantly American dollars, British pounds, and West German marks) at its disposal while it likely earned up to three million for the state every year (Ministerium für Kultur, “Staatliche Auflagen”). Költzsch’s ability to satisfy his political superiors, his emphasis on qualifications and know-how in hiring, and the company’s outstanding economic performance under his management guaranteed DS a degree of autonomy that was rare, if not unique, in the GDR’s cultural sphere.

The record company’s successful course of development was not predetermined. After Költzsch took office, he spent much time lobbying for increased investment to modernize the outdated manufacturing facilities. In 1957, Költzsch called for six-figure valuta investments in order to establish the production of long-playing records. In order to deflect the manager’s demand for record presses that needed to be bought for hard currencies, representatives of the state authorities even proposed to stall all modernization efforts and simply outsource the production of albums to the Czech Republic (Ministerium für Kultur, “Fragen”). State authorities provided the means for DS to keep up with the general technological developments in the music industry such as longplay production and stereophony during the 1960s, yet the closing of new development gaps remained the General Director’s top priority. By the early 1970s, the GDR mobilized unprecedented funds to comprehensively modernize its music monopolist. In 1973, the Council of Ministers approved a plan to ensure the “increased satisfaction of the citizens’ cultural demands with recording disks and music cassettes” (Ministerrat der DDR). It allotted millions in domestic and hard currencies for DS to double its annual output of records from eight to sixteen million in only three years, and increase the manufacturing of cassettes twenty-fold in the same period. While buying materials and labor from amounts in domestic currency, DS spent valuta on technological equipment for the recording of music and the manufacturing of sound carriers. Depending exclusively on microphones, mixing desks, vinyl presses, and other facilities made in capitalist

countries, DS resembled an imported industry. Profitability was the key condition for the existence of such a construct, and in order to guarantee it DS required complete control over the home market and free hand to cooperate with partners in the capitalist world.

Its capacity to generate highly sought-after valuta is crucial to conceptualizing the dual nature of DS as a communist corporation. On the one hand, it represented a monopolist that controlled the GDR's strictly isolated marketplace for recorded music. Apart from occasional joint ventures with fellow monopolists in communist brother states, DS supplied all sound carriers that East German money could buy. Költzsch never tired of calling on his contacts in the MfK to rigorously suppress even the slightest ambitions of unaffiliated music producers to distribute recordings independently. These efforts became frequent when music cassettes enabled musicians and other actors to disseminate their creations commercially in small editions (Meyer). On the other hand, DS was a recording company with a profoundly international orientation and a wide network of partner firms in the capitalist world. These relations had formed during the postwar era, when *Lied der Zeit* turned to firms in Germany's West to purchase materials like pvc granulate, paper labels, and record sleeves. Even after the GDR had walled in its domestic market in 1961, DS intensified relations with its capitalist partners to be prepared for material shortages that may have stalled the production flow. As these business relations across the Iron Curtain blossomed regardless of the frosty geopolitical climate, Western companies developed an interest in something DS had to offer to them: classical music.

## **CLASSICAL MUSIC AND CULTURAL PRESTIGE**

In the aftermath of World War II, East Germany developed into a stronghold of classical music. After the Soviets had promoted Germany's classical heritage in their attempts to create diversions during the immediate postwar period, the GDR's cultural policymakers continued on that trajectory. The MfK poured enormous sums into world-renowned classical music institutions such as Staatskapelle Dresden and Gewandhausorchester Leipzig. Presenting itself as the patron of the German nation's high-brow heritage, the GDR hoped to gain prestige in cultural and diplomatic circles. Cautious of progressive genres like jazz and outright anxious about the challenges that rock music posed to social norms in Western societies, GDR cultural planners decided to heavily promote classical music on the home front as well. Werner Rackwitz, who chaired the musical division at the MfK, insisted that "historical continuity from the heydays

in human civilization” was indispensable for the development of the GDR’s “musical life and the socialist national culture” to fend off the “destructive aberrances [and] impoverishment” that contemporary Western styles represented (Rackwitz 1-2). As modern socialist approaches to contemporary song and dance failed to strike a chord with the public, cultural officials resorted to acting as the true guardians of Germany’s musical heritage. Naturally, East Germany’s recording industry became a main beneficiary of state support for classical music. The MfK insisted that DS’s classical music division, Eterna, received priority access to talent, funds, and technology to represent the GDR in the international market for recorded high-brow content.

Eterna was the undisputed flagship of Deutsche Schallplatten. The classical music department employed the largest workforce among DS’s labels, maintained recording studios in two churches, and enjoyed priority access to imported machines and materials. “Over the entire course of my career at Deutsche Schallplatten,” a former sound engineer for Eterna recalled, “I never had to use domestically produced recording tape just once. Anything that had relevance for the sound was imported from the West.”<sup>2</sup> Beginning in 1984, the MfK allocated four million East German marks to DS for the purpose of building new production facilities that enabled Eterna to create stereophonic recordings digitally while the GDR was many years away from making digital playback devices available (Stadtrat Mitte). Imported technology incurred additional valuta expenditure. Yet these efforts served a clear purpose: Eterna produced recordings of classical works with world-renowned artists and orchestras that could be licensed to record companies in capitalist countries. In order to make those recordings appealing to Western firms, the quality standards had to be on par with what consumers in the Cold War West had grown accustomed to. The GDR invested heavily in Eterna to enable DS to earn valuta by either co-producing classical recordings with Western partners in the GDR, or by simply exporting finished tapes under licensing agreements. DS prioritized co-productions and licensed exports as the GDR economy grew increasingly dependent on hard currency investments during the second half of the Cold War. Between 1978 and 1988, the share of co-productions among Eterna’s album projects grew from less than two-thirds to about ninety percent (Ministerium für Kultur, *Produktionspläne*). Re-record companies from West Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Japan, and elsewhere were keen to cooperate with DS because the partner-

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2 “In meiner gesamten Zeit im Betrieb [Deutsche Schallplatten] hab ich nicht ein einziges Mal mit [einer] DDR-Band arbeiten müssen. Alles das, was Einfluss auf den Klang hatte, kam aus dem Westen” (former Eterna sound engineer).

ship gained them state-of-the-art classical music at very affordable prices in Western currencies.

## **PURCHASING POWER AND POPULAR MUSIC**

The second-largest division of DS was Amiga, the GDR's only label for popular music. Amiga remained a necessity in the perception of cultural planners from the earliest days of DS, when music producers and political officials clashed over questions of whether music styles like jazz and beat should feature at all in East Germany's music market, to the second half of the Cold War, when the nation's recording artists struggled to compete with stars from capitalist countries. Amiga released about two-thousand albums, contributing slightly more than a quarter of all albums available in the GDR. These releases, however, accounted for at least half of all album sales in the national market, a circumstance that bore testimony to the high demand for popular content (Rauhut and Rauhut 8). Amiga's commercial relevance fueled suspicions on the part of the party that the label may risk instilling the wrong ideas in young socialist minds. To ensure ideological transparency, all native performers of popular music had to sing in German, and their lyrics had to be submitted long in advance of the scheduled production dates. An allotment key prescribed genre quotas for Amiga's musical output as an additional means to curtail the influence of Western styles. Releases in contemporary pop, rock, and dance music—contemporary genres that had evolved under the creative leadership of Anglo-American artists—could not exceed twenty-five percent of catalog numbers in the annual repertoire. For balancing purposes, the same share was reserved for schlager, a distinctly German blend of upbeat music with sentimental lyrics. The remaining half of release slots required the production of albums with jazz and blues, song and folk, musicals and operettas, children's entertainment, and other content (Leitner 182). While pop music labels in the West specialized in particular genres, striving to create recognizable label identity, Amiga for its monopoly position had to operate in the fashion of a one-stop shop.

The hottest items in Amiga's store were albums that contained contemporary rock and pop music and, to a lesser extent, some releases in the schlager column. The GDR music scene produced a few rock bands and disco outfits that more or less expertly emulated the style and sound of their Western role models. Bands such as Puhdys, Karat, and Stern Meissen represented the most prolific domestic rock bands while artists including Silly, Peter & Paul, and Inka epitomized East Germany's pop sound. With performers like Hauff & Henkler, Frank Schöbel,

and Wolfgang Ziegler, the GDR also managed to establish a few homegrown vocalists of the more sedate schlager genre in opposition to the supremely popular West German and Austrian stars. The concentration of power over the production of pop records in the Amiga offices and the lack of state-of-the-art recording equipment for productions outside classical music, however, hampered the appeal of domestic artists in comparison with their Western counterparts. Aware of the citizens' access to Western radio signals, and perhaps also hoping to retain some minimal control over the musical intake of younger generations, cultural policymakers and repertoire managers at DS opted for an approach that blended cultural liberalization with economic profitability. Catering to widespread demand, the GDR's music monopolist integrated the original productions of predominantly American, British, and West German artists into Amiga's catalogue.

Licensed records—albums and singles that contained original recordings by Western artists but were pressed by DS in East Berlin—gradually became a staple position in Amiga's catalog. As far as contemporary pop and rock music were concerned, licensed records accounted for about forty percent of albums and twenty percent of singles released in that category between 1964 and 1990 (Rauhut). As licensed releases were strictly limited in the number of units made, they became a much sought-after commodity. Contemporary music purchasers remember waiting in line much longer than usual when licensed albums were rumored to go on sale. "To us," one GDR record collector recalled, "buying licensed records felt like acquiring material tokens of the big, wide world that was beyond our reach."<sup>3</sup> For consumers of popular culture, Amiga's expanding program of licensed records metaphorically resembled a widening crack in the Wall.

Licensed Amiga disks premiered in 1964. When Beatlemania had just begun to sweep America, young music fans in the GDR were able to purchase early Fab Four singles as "Ain't She Sweet" even before their peers in some Western European countries gained the opportunity (The Beatles). In the second half of the 1960s, DS began releasing the first albums by artists from the United States. For the time being, the two groups who qualified for admission into the communist marketplace were representatives of the urban leftist folk milieu (such as Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, and Joan Baez) as well as famous African American jazz performers (including Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, and Duke Elling-

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3 "Für uns fühlte sich das [Kaufen von Lizenzplatten] an, als würden wir materielle Dinge aus einer Welt kaufen können, zu der wir keinen Zugang hatten" (GDR record collector).

ton). At least at the beginning, Western artists had to be outspoken adversaries of capitalism or members of disenfranchised minorities to have records released in East Germany. In the following decades, however, Amiga constantly expanded and diversified its Western licensed album program. After the enormous investment offensive of the mid-1970s, DS released hit albums by a large variety of iconic artists that included classic superstars such as Elvis Presley, counterculture icons of Jimi Hendrix's caliber, and disco pioneers like ABBA. In the 1980s, DS fully embraced the Western musical mainstream and offered GDR consumers top sellers by Madonna, Whitney Houston, Michael Jackson, and ZZ Top. Choosing from an album repertoire that captured the corporate music culture of Reagan America, East German record buyers were among the first to enjoy the effects of ideological and political liberalization when the Cold War began to wind down.

Naturally, music albums by Western artists needed to be approved before they could appear as licensed albums on the Amiga label. The review process, however, was a surprisingly laissez-faire matter. Amiga music producers recommended Western releases to their editor-in-chief; once he had signed off, obtaining consent from DS's top-level creative supervisors and economic managers constituted a mere formality. Although translated lyrics for every song had to be forwarded to all DS affiliates involved in the approval process, the projects that Amiga's music producers proposed at their discretion usually made it into stores. Rather than adhering to specific directives of a supervising body, the producers based their decisions on what they considered common sense. "We were aware and did not need to be told that no song could promote drug use, instigate violence, or criticize the great accomplishments of the Soviet Union," one of the producers recalled.<sup>4</sup> Minor adjustments to the original Western releases, however, became necessary every now and then. When Amiga released ABBA's album *Arrival* renamed as *Dancing Queen*, for example, the record's biggest hit was absent. ABBA's iconic single "Money, Money, Money," a tongue-in-cheek celebration of affluence and the good life, could not be considered funny in the self-proclaimed "workers' and farmers' republic," and so Amiga substituted the band's mega hit with an older and obscure flipside (ABBA).

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4 "Wir wussten schon—und brauchten auch nicht erinnert zu werden—dass die Lieder nicht Drogen verherrlichen konnten, oder zu Gewalt aufrufen können, oder Kritik an den großen Errungenschaften der Sowjetunion äußern konnten" (former Amiga editor).

Amiga encountered little interference from state authorities regarding its licensing program. The label remained largely autonomous in its repertoire development and did not have to obtain consent for its Western releases from the corridors of political power. DS's Director of Artistic Production emphasized that the enterprise neither had to arm-wrestle cultural policymakers nor adhere to formal criteria in the process of producing licensed Western records. "It was known," Hansjürgen Schaefer stated in his last interview, "that Deutsche Schallplatten was bolder than broadcasting, especially when it came to lyrics" (Wicke and Müller 117). As licenses had to be paid in hard currencies, and since the company's valuta budget was always tight, DS preferred to buy Western pop music from the same companies that were buying classical music from them: EMI in London provided licenses for the pressing of the Beatles and Queen, the American giant CBS contributed recordings by Supertramp and Johnny Cash, and the West German Deutsche Grammophon supplied tapes by Cream and The Police. Eventually, DS found itself spending much of the hard currencies it was earning from the export of classical recordings on acquiring licenses for the large-scale import of contemporary popular content.

## CONCLUSION

The evolution of Amiga's Western licensed music program illustrates a cultural dilemma that virtually all Eastern Bloc countries faced in similar ways. Much like its communist brother states, the GDR failed not only politically and economically but also culturally. Opposed to Western innovations in popular music and unwilling to free cultural production from state monitoring and interference, the country's policy-makers promoted high-brow traditions from bygone centuries that failed to strike a chord with the general public. Cultural authorities came to realize that the popular appeal of Western popular genres was difficult to challenge with state-commissioned counterproposals off the communist drawing board.

Particularly in the GDR, where a vast majority of citizens routinely accessed Western radio and television programs with relative ease, young music fans turned their ears and eyes to the West for modern and exciting sounds. Deutsche Schallplatten responded to the preferences of East German citizens by importing hit music from the United States, Great Britain, West Germany, and other countries west of the Wall. In this sense, Amiga's Western licensed album program represented the admission of lacking competitiveness from a state-owned monopolist that depended on attractive product to exhaust domestic

purchasing power. Yet the GDR's music trade with Cold War adversaries also illuminated the remarkable permeability of the Iron Curtain in both economic and cultural regards: It remained at all times penetrable for Western capital, and it was always too porous to keep Western music out. As a result, music trade across the East-West divide manifested in the slipstream of Western cultural-diplomatic endeavors because communist music markets could not defy the cultural and economic hegemony of the capitalist music industry.

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