

Nina Noeske

„Was willst du in Milano?“

Musical Images of Italy in Cold-War East Germany

Abstract: The article examines the significance of musical images of Italy in the GDR. On the basis of travel documentaries, films and *Italienschlager*, especially from the 1950s and 1960s, it demonstrates that the traditional image of the South was aimed at a domestic audience – especially because, since the construction of the Wall in 1961, travel to capitalist foreign countries was impossible for ordinary citizens. East German criticism of capitalism, exploitation and, in part, neo-fascism in Italy was intended to cause the people of the GDR to lose interest in Italy. Finally, the debates about the ideal East German *Schlager* lyrics of around 1960 shed light on another aspect that is also relevant for the *Italienschlager*.

„Wer bequem auf der Terrasse sitzt
und im Sonnenschein am Strande schwitzt,
wer im Wagen durch die Landschaft rast
und über Land und Leute spaßt ...

Wer durch Napoli des Nachts spaziert
und so manches noch romantisiert,
findet sicher alles wunderschön,
doch er hat es nur halb gesehen.“

„O Lago Maggiore“ (1962)

[Translation]

„Sitting comfortably on the terrace
and sweating in the sunshine on the beach,
racing through the countryside in a car
and joking about the country and its people ...

Whoever walks through Naples at night
and romanticises many a thing,
will certainly find it all beautiful,
but he has only seen half of it.“

„O Lago Maggiore“ (1962)

Kontakt: Nina Noeske, nina.noeske@hfm-weimar.de

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What the then 25-year-old pop singer and actress Rica Déus sang in „O Lago Maggiore“¹ at the beginning of the 1960s sums up the official, critical, ‚realistic‘ view of the GDR on Italy, distinct from the predominantly ‚consumerist‘ perspective of West Germany. Alongside the usual amenities of a holiday in southern climes, „O Lago Maggiore“ sings of Italy’s ‚exotic‘ beauties; the first stanza mentions, among others, the „black gondolier“ and the „beautiful señoritas“ [sic] (involuntarily reminiscent of Spain),² which are revealed at the end of the two stanzas to be merely external attractions. Even „amore“ (love), the song says, can „never be fully understood“ by those who have only come to know Italy in this superficial way, who have „only half seen“ the country. Nevertheless, listening to this music, we can easily keep dreaming of ‚Bella Italia‘ without being overly disturbed by the dark sides of the capitalist country.³ The banal refrain in particular leaves little room for critical thinking: „O Lago Maggiore, / so it sounds in chorus, / through the whole of Italy in the night. // O Lago Maggiore, / so it sounds in chorus, / because then true life awakens.“ („O Lago Maggiore, / so klingt’s im Chore, / durch ganz Italien in der Nacht. // O Lago Maggiore, / so klingt’s im Chore, / weil dann das wahre Leben erwacht.“) Thus, this song meets both the need to create distance from (Western) clichés and the desire for musical enjoyment.

In the GDR of the early 1960s, Italy was still considered – as it had been in northern Europe for centuries, at least since Goethe⁴ – a land of longing, but also a capitalist foreign country which, since 1949, had been a member of the ‚hostile‘ Western NATO alliance. Thus, during the Cold War, the geopolitical conception of the „South“ changed „with the establishment of ‚Nato’s southern flank‘“, so that the South „remained largely invisible as a separate entity“⁵ – at least for the countries east of the Iron Curtain and from the dominant political perspective. Furthermore, after the building of the Wall in August 1961, Italy had become inaccessible to ordinary East German citizens, creating the need for a new concept of the South.

This article explores cultural representations of Italy using the example of East Germany as a political and geographical context in which such images developed and were linked to communist narratives. The first part deals with the East German view

1 „O Lago Maggiore“, recorded on 24.9.1962. All internet sites were last accessed on 15.6.2023.

2 For example, the song „Fiesta Mexicana“ (1972) sung by Rex Gildo says: „Addio Mexico“ (an Italian, not Spanish farewell). This shows that such *Schlager* are not about the specific countries mentioned, but about exoticism or „the South“ more generally. See also Julio Mendivil, Ein musikalisches Stück Heimat. Ethnologische Beobachtungen zum deutschen Schlager, Bielefeld 2008, p. 325.

3 Christopher Görlich, Capri, Constanza und der verlorene Ort. DDR-Schlagertexte über ferne Welten, in: Zeitgeschichte – online. Thema: Pop in Ost und West. Populäre Kultur zwischen Ästhetik und Politik, ed. Árpád von Klimó/Jürgen Danyel, April 2006, p. 5 (https://zeitgeschichte-online.de/sites/default/files/documents/pop_goerlich.pdf).

4 As an early example see Wilhelm Waetzoldt, Das klassische Land. Wandlungen der Italiensehnsucht, Leipzig 1927, p. 19.

5 Martin Baumeister, Mythos, Gegenbild, Utopie. Der Süden auf der geistigen Landkarte Europas, in: Mittelweg 36. Zeitschrift des Hamburger Instituts für Sozialforschung 27,5 (2018), pp. 13–32, p. 20.

of Italy in general terms, while the second is primarily concerned with representations of Italy in popular music from the GDR. Several key components of these images will be investigated in more detail by drawing on relevant sources such as: contemporary travelogues and (film) documentaries and their corresponding musical staging, a film musical from the 1950s and theoretical statements from around 1960 relating to the debate over ‚Schlager‘, but also the *Schlager*⁶ genre itself. In doing so, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of politically-charged image-building processes related to Italy in popular musical culture. It emerges that political relations with Italy as well as the resulting view of this country had a crucial impact on the representation of ‚Italianness‘ in East German popular culture. After the erection of the Wall in 1961, for example, very few popular songs were produced in the GDR that referred to the Italian south as a place of longing, not to mention even more distant exotic places – politically, this was no longer opportune. While travelogues and documentaries dealt extensively with the social upheavals in Italy, these did not tend to play a role in popular music like the *Schlager*: here, the focus was more on the advantages of one’s own country and thus turned ‚inwards‘.

This essay is an initial case study, which offers a preliminary approach to the topic through some selected examples. In a 2006 essay, the historian Christopher Görlich examined some aspects of the (politically influenced) lyrics of ‚Italienschlager‘ in the GDR, referring principally to sources from the 1950s and early 1960s.⁷ In comparison to West German *Schlager*, already well researched, the GDR *Schlager* has hitherto been little studied from a musicological or cultural studies perspective. However, Andreas W. Herkendell correctly notes that a „majority of GDR Schlager does not differ in any way from FRG Schlager and is just as conservative“.⁸ We can add that the genre played a similar cultural role in both East and West Germany, and usually fulfilled the same social function as a „virtual social space in which the identities of individuals and places are negotiated“.⁹ Yet, as Julio Mendívil convincingly suggests, even the *Italienschlager* does not aim to report on a foreign world, but rather to exploit foreign places for domes-

6 A discussion of the term and concept of the (German) *Schlager* is beyond the scope of this article. I therefore refer in particular to the work of Julio Mendívil and understand the *Schlager* as a form of ‚discourse‘ in the Foucaultian sense that cannot be given a precise definition, as it depends ultimately on the reception. See Mendívil, *Ein musikalisches Stück Heimat* (see note 2), p. 29; pp. 164–178.

7 Görlich, *Capri, Constanza und der verlorene Ort* (see note 3). Here and below, *Italienschlager* is used to mean a hit in which Italy is the main theme.

8 For this reason, according to the author, the question arises as to the „protest potential“ of GDR *Schlager* (original quote: „Da ein Großteil der DDR-Schlager sich in keiner Form vom BRD-Schlager unterscheidet und ebenso konservativ ist, ist die Frage erlaubt, ob der konservative Schlager in einer sich progressiv verstehenden Gesellschaft nicht auch ein gewisses Protestpotential in sich birgt.“), Andreas W. Herkendell, *Schlager und Politik. Vergleich BRD/DDR*, in: *Musik und Politik. Dimensionen einer undefinierten Beziehung*, ed. Bernhard Frevel, Regensburg 1997, pp. 65–80, p. 77, note 57.

9 Original quote: „virtueller sozialer Raum, in dem Identitäten von Individuen und Orten verhandelt werden“, Mendívil, *Ein musikalisches Stück Heimat* (see note 2), p. 76.

tic purposes.¹⁰ The main difference between East and West was that the *Schlager* discourse in the GDR was to a certain extent ‚directed‘ by the state and the party, though, of course, it did not completely descend into propaganda.¹¹

There is a lack of scholarly literature on East German representations of Italy in general, especially on (musical) popular culture more broadly; this paper thus refers mainly to primary sources. In a 2010 essay, Magda Martini, also a historian, dealt with the historically changing relationship between the Italian Communist Party and the SED, focusing in particular on the resulting cultural contacts and exchanges between the two countries. The article also briefly addresses the difficult relationship between the avant-garde composer Luigi Nono and the GDR.¹² Concrete musical cooperation, at times intensively cultivated, closer contacts between musicians from the GDR and Italy, for example within the framework of the East Berlin annual „Festival des politischen Liedes“ („Festival of Political Song“) (1970–1990),¹³ but also through friendships between individuals, can only be discussed in passing here, especially since these require further investigation. The role of female singers such as Milva or Gianna Nannini, who were very popular in the GDR in the 1980s, would certainly be a fruitful topic for another essay.

Italy in Films and Books: Travel Documentaries

The public image of Italy in East Germany, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, can be summarised as follows: the country’s undoubted beauty contrasted with the severe poverty of some sectors of society, caused by capitalism and exploitation. In addition, there were some dangerous neo-fascist tendencies. However, the communist (or socialist) movement was already beginning to lead the country into a better, fairer future, and so the GDR entered into numerous coalitions, some of which were cultural or musical, with

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 336.

¹¹ Brian Currid has noted the ambivalence of the *Schlager* for the Nazi era; comparable research is needed for the GDR, where substantially different conditions prevailed. See Brian Currid, *A National Acoustics. Music and Mass Publicity in Weimar and Nazi Germany*, Minneapolis-London 2006, especially Chapter 2.

¹² Magda Martini, *Die DDR der italienischen Linken. Erfindung und Entzauberung einer kulturellen Projektion*, in: *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 58,2 (2010), pp. 231–256 (https://www.ifz-muenchen.de/heftarchiv/2010_2_4_martini.pdf; <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1524/vfzg.2010.0012/html>). See also – from a musicological perspective – Katrin Stöck/Gilbert Stöck, *Luigi Nono und die offizielle Musikberichterstattung in der DDR. Verlauf des Diskurses in der Zeitschrift Musik und Gesellschaft*, in: Luigi Nono und der Osten, ed. Birgit Johanna Wertenson/Christan Storch, Mainz 2016, pp. 179–200; Birgit Johanna Wertenson, „Es gibt Unvorhergesehenes, Zufälle, Irrtümer“. Episoden aus Luigi Nonos Aktivitäten im geteilten Deutschland, in: Luigi Nono und der Osten, pp. 229–278.

¹³ Italian musicians performed at the festival in 1970, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1977, 1979, 1980, 1982 and 1989.

,progressive‘ forces in Italy, especially with youth organizations. This can be traced back to several sources.

Specifically, GDR travel documentaries repeatedly made explicit and detailed reference to Italy’s sometimes staggering social inequalities – a topic with a long tradition, even long before the existence of the GDR.¹⁴ In the context of East Germany, it is important to note that travelogues of all kinds are always officially sanctioned by the state and party apparatus, so they are always simultaneously propaganda. For example, in the short 15-minute film documentary „Licht für Palermo“ („Light for Palermo“, DEFA 1960, directed by Karl Gass, music by Hans-Dieter Hossalla), the lives of the rich and worldly are shown exclusively in colour, while black-and-white shots are used for the slums with their narrow and dark alleys full of poverty and disease. Hossalla’s soundtrack reflects this staging: the colour images are accompanied by lively sounds, mostly in a major key, while the black-and-white images of the slums are embedded in atonal or minor-key music. Only towards the end, when the connection between the problems of the poor and the pleasures of the rich becomes clear, are the colour images also accompanied by atonal music. After a short section with exclusively percussive sounds, the film closes – as a symbol for „Italy“ – with a sweet melody played, among others, by mandolins. In this documentary, the Sicilian World Peace Prize winner Danilo Dolci (1924–1997) is staged as the central bright spot, not only advocating for measures against social inequality in Sicily, but also successfully combatting the Mafia. At the end of the documentary, reference is made to the communist struggle of the working class, which, as the film says, was – as in many countries – also beginning in Italy. Thus, from the perspective of the GDR, the country was ultimately on the ‚right‘ path to socialism. The male voice sounds optimistic: „You don’t always see it, but the communists are strong in this country“, it says confidently from off camera.¹⁵

The extensive introductory text to the popular illustrated coffee table book „Italy“, published by Brockhaus in Leipzig in 1973, also follows this *per aspera ad astra* narrative of a country moving from capitalist darkness towards the socialist light. We will therefore quote this text by Plinio Salerno¹⁶ in more detail: „The picturesque aspects of Italy are made up by those to whom Italian life seems picturesque because they see it from the outside. ... But those who experience Italian reality in the country itself realize that

14 Martin Baumeister, *Diesseits von Afrika? Konzepte des europäischen Südens*, in: *Der Süden. Neue Perspektiven auf eine europäische Geschichtsregion*, ed. Frithjof Benjamin Schenk/Martina Winkler, Frankfurt a. M. 2007, pp. 23–47, here p. 35; according to Baumeister, the „enthusiasm for the picturesque“ and the „complaint about backwardness and depravity“ are closely connected in this image of Italy. See also Baumeister, *Mythos, Gegenbild, Utopie* (see note 5). From the second half of the 18th century onwards, this contrast was mainly defined in terms of the North-South-divide within Italy.

15 Original quote: „Man sieht es nicht immer, aber die Kommunisten sind stark in diesem Land.“ (<https://www.progress.film/search/asset/50627562>: 13:43–13:48).

16 Nothing is currently known about the author; the name Plinio Salerno may be a pseudonym.

it is almost always bitter and tragic.“¹⁷ According to the common East German interpretation of the 1970s, this refers – as mentioned in the film – to poverty („bitter and tragic“) and, with it, cruel social inequalities that those who see Italy merely as ‚Other‘ are unaware of. A purely objectifying view does not allow for insight. In a later passage the book says:

„Despite the hardship and misery ... there are still millions of Germans, French and English who believe that Italians live in joy, that they are a people who are ... cheerful and happy. ... But guitars and mandolins do not always ring out in Naples. ... Italy is in reality a dreary country. De Brosse writes that through the beauty of nature and the cities ‚here the eyes are satisfied‘, ‚but the heart is dissatisfied‘.“¹⁸

The author thus sets out to comprehensively question the typical (Northern) European ‚Othering‘ of the South (in this case Italy) in the tradition of the Western ‚Orientalism‘ described and analysed by Edward Said,¹⁹ while at the same time implicitly inviting his readers to look more closely at the country and its people. What must be eradicated is nothing less than the common colonial gaze (although it is questionable whether Salerno can completely discard this gaze himself).

Additionally, the author stresses the relatively backward nature of gender relations in Italy, for which he principally blames the Catholic Church, but also the ‚ruling class‘: „A woman ... is not regarded as a free human being“, but treated in legislation as little more than „a kind of slave“; the „modern girl“, on the other hand, is „almost unknown“ in Italy.²⁰ (As is well known, the GDR claimed to have achieved complete gender equality under socialist conditions.²¹) As in the aforementioned film „Licht für Palermo“, the

17 Original quote: „Das Pittoreske am Bild über Italien reimen sich jene zusammen, denen das italienische Leben malerisch erscheint, weil sie es von außen her sehen. ... Wer aber die italienische Wirklichkeit im Lande selbst miterlebt, erkennt, dass sie fast immer bitter und tragisch ist“, Plinio Salerno, Einführung, in: Italien, Leipzig 1973, p. 5.

18 Original quote: „[T]rotz der Not und des Elends ... gibt es noch Millionen Deutsche, Franzosen und Engländer, die glauben, daß die Italiener in Freuden leben, daß sie ein Volk sind, das ... fröhlich und glücklich ist. ... Doch Gitarren und Mandolinen erklingen nicht immer in Neapel. ... Italien ist in Wirklichkeit ein tristes Land. De Brosse schreibt, daß durch die Schönheit der Natur und der Städte ‚hier die Augen befriedigt werden‘, ‚aber das Herz ist unzufrieden‘“, *ibid.*, p. 14. Salerno is probably referring to Charles de Brosse's „Viaggio in Italia. Lettere familiari“ (1739–1740).

19 See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York 1978. According to Baumeister, it was Roberto Dainotto who transferred Said's „Orientalism“ to the inner-European space: thus, the South represents the „Orient“ as the „Other“, which simultaneously embodies a utopian promise contrasting with rational modernity and something deficient. Baumeister, *Mythos, Gegenbild, Utopie* (see note 5), pp. 18 f.

20 Original quote: „Die Frau wird nicht als ein freies menschliches Wesen angesehen. ... Das beweisen ... die Gesetze über die Ehe und über uneheliche Kinder, die die Frau als eine Art Sklavin behandeln ...“, Salerno, Italien (see note 17), pp. 14 f.

21 See Nina Noeske, (Neue) Musik und Gender in der DDR. Annäherungen, in: *Gender und Neue Musik. Von den 1950er Jahren bis in die Gegenwart*, ed. Vera Grund/Nina Noeske, Bielefeld 2021, pp. 119–136, in particular pp. 119–123.

working class, which is „quite powerful“ in Italy, especially in Milan, is presented in the book as a fundamental ray of hope for the future. Not only are „[t]he majority of peasants ... communists and socialists“, but „almost all the big cities of Emilia, with Bologna at their head, ... are run by leftist circles“; in Tuscany „the communists“ even „have the most votes“.²²

The image of Italy described by Salerno in 1973 was already in circulation in the 1950s, for example in the reportage on Venice „Barkarole 1957 – Venezianische Epigramme“ („Venetian Epigrams“) by Albert Donle, published in the travel magazine „Unterwegs“ („On the Way“) in 1958,²³ even before the construction of the Wall. Here, too, the focus is on social inequalities, the accompanying poverty and crime, the inadequate, objectifying view from the outside, but also capitalist usury – Venice as a tourist trap. In detail, the author denounces the lack of hygiene and the small apartments, the heavy traffic, the unscrupulous entrepreneurial spirit of the Venetians („there is not a metre of beach on the blue Adriatic near Venice where you can get into the water for free“²⁴), the crime, the excessive prices, the hordes of (American) tourists and the souvenir kitsch; finally, in Venice, too, there is the „impudent luxury of smug idlers living alongside the misery of creative hands ..., unconcerned and blind“.²⁵ According to the author, the contrast between rich and poor was almost unbearable.

Reports of this kind appear repeatedly in the East German media. Thus, among others, the weekly news magazine „Der Augenzeuge“ 1960 in the two-minute film documentary „Italien – Traum und Realität“ („Italy – Dream and Reality“) reports on the social inequalities, the struggle of the working class against fascism, terror and exploitation and the cautious optimism with regard to the successes already achieved.²⁶

22 Original quote: „Hier ist die Arbeiterklasse recht machtvoll. ... Die meisten Bauern sind Kommunisten und Sozialisten. Fast alle großen Städte der Emilia, an ihrer Spitze Bologna ..., werden von linksgerichteten Kreisen geleitet. ... Hier [in der Toskana] wie in der Emilia haben die Kommunisten die meisten Stimmen“, Salerno, Italien (see note 17), p. 8.

23 Albert Donle, Barkarole 1957 – Venezianische Epigramme, in: Unterwegs. Magazin für Wandern – Bergsteigen – Zelten – Reisen 2,2 (1958), pp. 24–28. The magazine „Unterwegs“, published by the Komitee für Touristik und Wandern in der DDR (KTW), was published monthly from November 1956 to September 1962 in an edition of 50 000–70 000 copies and was discontinued in 1962 due to an alleged lack of paper. See Christopher Görlich, Zur DDR-Reisezeitschrift „Unterwegs“ 1957–1962, in: Die DDR in Europa – zwischen Isolation und Öffnung, ed. Heiner Timmermann, Münster 2005, pp. 506–527.

24 Original quote: „[E]s gibt nicht einen Meter Strand an der blauen Adria vor Venedig, wo man kostenlos ins Wasser steigen könnte“. Donle, Barkarole 1957 (see note 23), p. 26.

25 Original quote: „[F]reicher Luxus blasierter Nichtsteuer neben dem Elend schaffender Hände ..., unbekümmert und blind“, *ibid.*, p. 28.

26 <https://www.progress.film/search/asset/50622990>; more information: <https://www.defa-stiftung.de/filme/filme-suchen/der-augenzeuge-1960a-59/>.

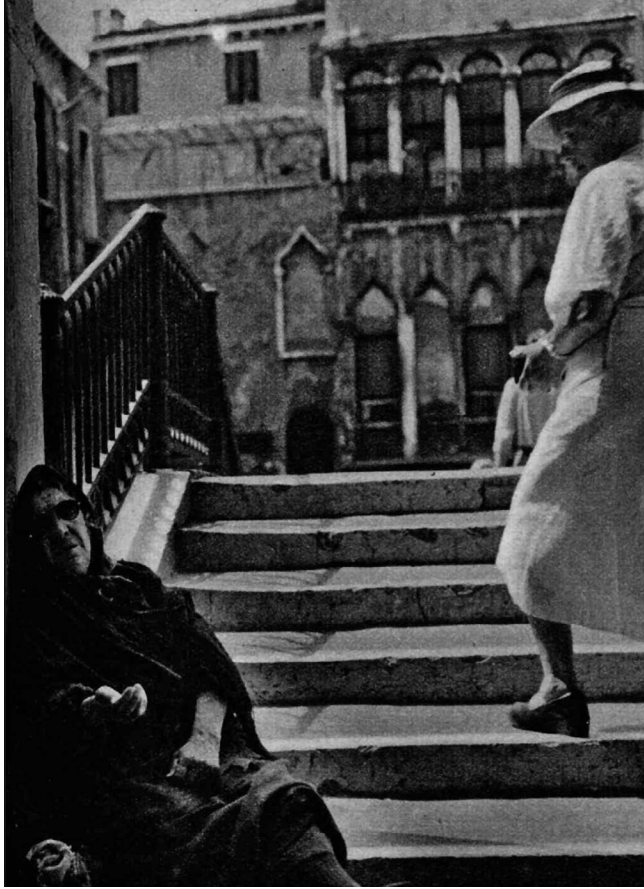


Fig. 1: „Una lira signora!“.

The structure of the background music, which transforms very rapidly, is particularly interesting: it begins with apparently intentionally ‚kitschy‘ music,²⁷ an exaggeratedly beautiful melody that distantly echoes Franz Schubert’s song „Ständchen“ D 975, no. 4. The music then becomes a little more agitated in the style of Hanns Eisler’s politically engaged songs, composed in around 1930, with their characteristic marching rhythm (e. g. „Solidaritätslied“, with lyrics by Bertolt Brecht, written for the film „Kuhle

27 In fact, the music here is staged as ‚Kitsch‘. For a discussion of the concept of Kitsch see e. g. Nina Noeske, *Kitsch avant la lettre? Anmerkungen zum musikalischen Diskurs vor 1870*, in: *Kitsch und Nation. Zur kulturellen Modellierung eines polemischen Begriffs*, ed. Kathrin Ackermann/Christopher F. Laferl, Bielefeld 2016, pp. 185–202; Katrin Eggers/Nina Noeske (Eds.), *Musik und Kitsch*, Hildesheim 2014 (*Ligaturen. Musikwissenschaftliches Jahrbuch der HMTMH* 7).

Wampe“), and finally very restless. The film first presents postcard Italy, then characterises tourists as superficial and snobbish, and finally makes reference to the poor. At the end, the film portrays the communists and social democrats leading the country into a better future after bloody clashes in Genoa and elsewhere:

„Italy. Sunny South. Rome, Genoa, Venice, St. Mark’s Square – the paradise of painters and poets of past generations. And the template of today’s Schlager composers to be nibbled at again and again. // Italy. The Mecca of many, mostly superficial and snobbish tourists, who have always seen everything, but rarely more than the guidebook says. //

„Kitschy‘ music

Italy. Even poorer than elsewhere are the alleys here, the poor brothers of the Via Appia. More extensive still is the outback of the palaces. // Italy. Yes, this too is Italy:

Music a little more agitated, allusion to Eisler’s „agitation“ style

the home of communists and social democrats acting in unison, of those former partisans whose anti-fascist actions have filled the columns of the world press in recent weeks. // It began in Genoa with the police attack on demonstrating workers protesting against the neo-fascists’ intended congress.

Music even more restless

Italy’s Christian Democratic Prime Minister Tambroni ordered his henchmen to shoot, as he had only been able to come to power with the votes of the fascists. // The conflict intensified when a general strike was called. In Reggio Emilia, in Rome, Palermo and Genoa, there were again bloody riots by the police. A sudden shift to the left went through the country. There was no stopping the mass movement. Hundreds of thousands went to the last resting place of the victims of terror in all the big cities of Italy.“²⁸

²⁸ Original quote: „[„Kitschy‘ music] Italien. Sonniger Süden. Rom, Genua, Venedig, Markusplatz – das Paradies der Maler und Dichter vergangener Generationen. Und die immer wieder auszuknautschende Vorlage der Schlagerkomponisten von heute. // Italien. Das Mekka vieler, meist oberflächlicher und snobistischer Touristen, die immer alles, selten jedoch mehr, als im Reiseführer steht, gesehen haben. // [Music more agitated] Italien. Ärmlicher noch als anderswo sind hier die Gassen, die ärmlichen Brüder der Via Appia. Größer noch ist das Hinterland der Paläste. // Italien. Ja, auch das ist Italien: [Music even more restless] die Heimat einheitlich handelnder Kommunisten und Sozialdemokraten, jener ehemaligen Partisanen, deren antifaschistische Aktionen in den letzten Wochen die Spalten der Weltpresse füllten. // Es begann in Genua mit dem Überfall der Polizei auf demonstrierende Arbeiter, die gegen den beabsichtigten Kongress der Neofaschisten protestierten. Italiens christlich-demokratischer Ministerpräsident Tambroni gab seinen Schergen Schießbefehl, hatte er doch nur mit den Stimmen der Faschisten an die Macht kommen können. // Die Auseinandersetzung verschärfte sich, als daraufhin der Generalstreik ausgerufen wurde. In Reggio Emilia, in Rom, Palermo und Genua kam es erneut zu

Remarkably, although the concrete occasion for the report is political, the news programme first goes into considerable detail – supported by the music – about the clichéd image of Italy, which is then deconstructed. In fact, in the summer of 1960, the left-wing parties were outraged at the intention of the post-fascist party Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) to hold its party conference in Genoa, the former stronghold of the anti-fascist resistance. This led to protests and demonstrations. On 7 June, street battles with the police broke out in Reggio Emilia, resulting in the deaths of seven demonstrators, members of the Communist Party (PCI). Fernando Tambroni himself tendered his resignation on 19 July 1960. Thus, in the „Augenzeuge“ current affairs were used to reaffirm the East German image of Italy outlined above, a process in which music plays a crucial role. If we consider the anti-fascist founding myth of the GDR, it becomes clear why the greatest possible distance was also maintained from (Italian) fascism. (The Wall, which was erected a good year later, was seen by East Germany as an „anti-fascist protective wall“.)

The film „Toscana Rossa“ (DEFA 1971, director: Uwe Belz, approx. 13 minutes) also focuses on communists, as in the Florentine town hall, and socialists, as in Siena, in addition to the workers' and partisan movement in Tuscany: it reports, for example, on the courageous women workers who occupy a textile factory to prevent its closure.²⁹ The tenor of these portrayals is always that Italy overall is characterised by exploitative capitalist conditions, injustice and a massive contrast between great wealth and abject poverty, that fascism recurrently flares up dangerously, but that all this must sooner or later, almost inevitably, lead to the victory of communism. In the GDR, friendship with Italy was also expressed through declarations of solidarity with ordinary Italian people and the country's ‚workers and peasants‘, but also with the progressive youth³⁰ – culturally reflected not least in musical cooperation, for example in the field of political song. At the „2. Festival des politischen Liedes“ („2nd Festival of Political Song“), held in East Berlin in February 1971, music groups from Italy (alongside those from Finland, Vietnam and Chile, among others) occupied a prominent space.³¹ Numerous (daily) newspaper articles also reported on occasions such as the „Treffen der Weltjugend“ („Meeting of the World Youth“) in Berlin (July 1973), at which the Italian composer Luigi Nono conducted a concert as a guest of honour,³² and politically engaged music groups such as the

blutigen Ausschreitungen der Polizei. Ein Ruck nach Links ging durch das Land. Die Massenbewegung war nicht mehr aufzuhalten. Hunderttausende gaben den Opfern des Terrors in allen großen Städten Italiens das letzte Geleit.“ (<https://www.progress.film/search/asset/50622990>: 00:12–02:15).

²⁹ <https://www.progress.film/search/asset/50627765>: 05:43–08:25.

³⁰ See Martini, *Die DDR der italienischen Linken* (see note 12), with further bibliographical references.

³¹ <https://www.progress.film/search/asset/50628010>.

³² See also Stöck/Stöck, Luigi Nono (see note 12), p. 200, according to which the GDR's relationship with Nono improved from 1972 onwards; according to Birgit Johanna Wertenson, Nono was regularly performed in the GDR from 1974 onwards, so the concert in July 1973 was still somewhat exceptional. See Wertenson, „Es gibt Unvorhergesehenes“ (see note 12), p. 253.

Canzoniere delle Lame from Bologna performed hits such as the famous „Bella Ciao“: „The audience sings along with the finale of the partisan song ‚Bella Ciao‘. Shouts of approval go up and everyone joins in with ‚Avanti popolo‘.“³³ Conversely, musicians from the GDR were invited to Italy on various occasions, for example to Florence in 1975 at the national festival of the PCI (Partito Comunista Italiano), to which the FDJ singing group from Hoyerswerda was asked as representatives of the ‚guest of honour‘ GDR. The newspaper „Neues Deutschland“ reported on this on 5 September 1975: „Standing ovation when the girls and boys from the mining town sing the Italian partisan song ‚Bella Ciao‘.“³⁴

Meanwhile, the „DDR-Musiktage“ („GDR Music Days“) also made a guest appearance in the spring of 1976, in Reggio Emilia in northern Italy; the guest of honour, 81-year-old composer Paul Dessau, was unable to attend due to illness. The official newspaper report says, again in the style of the aforementioned socialist narrative, that on 1 May red flags, chants, banners „with slogans against imperialist policies, against exploitation and fascism“ could be seen everywhere. In particular, the northern Italian, communist-administered workers’ city that hosted the „Musiktage“ had a „decades-long tradition of proletariat struggle“: „from the ranks of the demonstrators, Italian workers’ songs ring out: ‚Bandiera rossa‘, ‚Bella ciao‘ ... And then suddenly, songs of the German proletariat resound over the loudspeakers, the *united front song* and the *solidarity song* with Ernst Busch.“³⁵ We could easily continue the examples of musical-cultural exchange.

„Italy‘ in the GDR-Schlager

The *Schlager*,³⁶ and entertainment culture more generally, presented a fairly undifferentiated image of Italy. As in the West,³⁷ it was shaped by clichéd ideas of the ‚South‘ more broadly, including the supposed mindset of the inhabitants. But such stereotypes

33 Original quote: „Das Finale beim Partisanenlied ‚Bella Ciao‘ singen die Zuschauer mit. Bravorufe erklingen, und alle stimmen schließlich ein in ‚Avanti popolo‘“, Berliner Zeitung, 30.7.1973, p. 6 (Anja Braatz).

34 Original quote: „Beifall auf offener Szene, wenn die Mädchen und Jungen aus der Bergarbeiterstadt das italienische Partisanenlied ‚Bella Ciao‘ anstimmen“, Neues Deutschland, 5.9.1975, p. 6 (Anonymous).

35 Original Quote: „Aus den Reihen der Demonstranten erklingen italienische Arbeiterlieder: ‚Bandiera rossa‘, ‚Bella ciao‘ ... Und dann erklingen plötzlich Gesänge des deutschen Proletariats über die Lautsprecher, das *Einheitsfrontlied* und das *Solidaritätslied* mit Ernst Busch.“ Hans-Joachim Kynäß, Botschaft in der Sprache der Töne. DDR-Musiktage im norditalienischen Reggio Emilia, in: Neues Deutschland, 5.4.1976, p. 4.

36 On the term and concept of the *Schlager* see note 7.

37 See e.g. Andreas W. Herkendell, „Wenn bei Capri die rote Sonne im Meer versinkt“. Das deutsche Italienbild der fünfziger und sechziger Jahre im Schlager, in: Geschichte lernen 51 (1996), pp. 55–59. The author refers exclusively to West Germany.

were challenged even in the 1950s, as illustrated by the feature film „Meine Frau macht Musik“ (DEFA 1958, directed by Hans Heinrich), among others. This film premiered on 3 April 1958 at the East Berlin Babylon theatre. In the „Berliner Zeitung“, it was not only characterised as „lowbrow“ but also as „markedly backward“ („penetrant vorgestrig“).³⁸ The Italian singer Fabiani encourages the protagonist Gerda Wagner, a housewife and mother, to pursue a singing career – much to her husband’s annoyance. Fabiani, modelled on the Swiss singer Vico Torriani (1920–1998), corresponds to all the clichés of the sensual to schmaltsy and frivolous Italian: he indiscriminately distributes his erotic affections among all the women around him, who in turn adore him, yet his feelings remain superficial. He thus stands, as Stefan Soldovieri has noted, „for superficial feeling and a lack of authenticity“, while Gerda „embodies the deeper capacity for emotion that her last name – Wagner – evokes“.³⁹ At the very beginning of the film, accompanied by his pianist and assistant Francesco, a kind of modern Leporello, he sings his first song with the banal lyrics: „I come from Italy, the beautiful land of songs (chorus: Signore, sì, sì, signore, sì, sì), / there’s a melody there that you sing over and over again (chorus: Signore, sì, sì, signore, sì, sì).“⁴⁰ All the women present in the store, where the concert takes place, are obviously delighted.

Later, in anticipation of his first visit to Gerda Wagner, he not coincidentally sings the beginning of Giuseppe Verdi’s „La donna è mobile“ from „Rigoletto“, sung in the original opera by the Duke of Mantua in expectation of his next romantic adventure,⁴¹ whereupon his assistant is urged to take the precaution of clearing away the portraits of Fabiani’s mistresses scattered around the room.⁴² Finally, in the ‚Tivoli‘ theatre, Fabiani performs the song „In Sanremo blüh’n wieder die Rosen“ („In Sanremo the roses are

³⁸ Original quote: „Es ist sicher nicht einfach, einem anspruchslosen Unterhaltungsfilm etwas vom Geist der Gegenwart mitzugeben, aber der Versuch wenigstens könnte ja wohl nichts schaden.“ („It is certainly not easy to imbue an unpretentious light entertainment film with something of the spirit of the present, but at least the attempt could do no harm.“), Berliner Zeitung, 9.4.1958, p. 3 (H.U.E.). The otherwise apolitical film was banned in the GDR after 1959, because Kurt Henkels, director of the Leipzig Radio Dance Orchestra which was featured several times in the film, left the GDR.

³⁹ Stefan Soldovieri, Not Only Entertainment. Sights and Sounds of the DEFA Music Film, in: Marc Silberman/Henning Wrage (Eds.), DEFA at the Crossroads of East German and International Film Culture. A Companion, Berlin-Boston 2014, pp. 133–155, at pp. 150 f. Soldovieri also draws attention to the fact that the film had to be extensively shortened before its premiere; in particular, this reveals „the concern of culture bureaucrats that the film looked too much like a West German or UFA-era revue“.

⁴⁰ Original quote: „Ich komme aus Italien, dem schönen Land der Lieder (Chor: Signore, si, si, Signore, si, si), / dort gibt es eine Melodie, die singt man immer wieder (Chor: Signore, si, si, Signore, si, si).“ The film is available on YouTube channel „DEFA Filmwelt“: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEb9xRmB3_A (no access outside Germany), 00:03:57–00:05:40.

⁴¹ Here, as often in pop culture, the aria stands for a man’s erotic desire, which he seeks to justify through the woman’s supposed inconstancy (which is in fact his own).

⁴² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEb9xRmB3_A (no access outside Germany), 00:27:30–00:27:52.



Fig. 2: „Meine Frau macht Musik“ (DEFA 1958, dir. Hans Heinrich).

blooming again“)⁴³ with professional stage decoration and orchestral accompaniment, while the stagehand Pappke comments sarcastically, and in a clearly audible ‚Berlin‘ accent on Fabiani’s customary success, referring to the use of mere paper roses: „I’m also amazed that the trick still works!“ („Ick staune ooch, dass die Masche noch zieht!“)⁴⁴ In this way, the suggested Italian sensuality and ardour, which in Fabiani’s case has become mere routine (and is thus turned into its opposite), is contrasted with (Northern) German sobriety and coolness – another cliché. There is thus no escaping the stereotypes, at least not in a film of this kind, which is, paradoxically, staged here in a self-reflective manner. Pappke’s remark functions as a quasi-Brechtian refraction, as it were, adding an interesting level of commentary to the film.

A year before the premiere of „Meine Frau macht Musik“, 1957, a lively debate about the future direction of the *Schlager* took place in the recently established magazine „Melodie und Rhythmus“ („Melody and Rhythm“), the quarterly specialist journal

⁴³ Sanremo has been the venue of the important annual music competition „Festival della Canzone Italiana“ since 1951.

⁴⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEb9xRmB3_A (no access outside Germany), 01:10:21–01:10:24.

for dance and light music in the GDR.⁴⁵ For example, Wolfgang Carlé demanded in his article „Sorgenkind Schlagertext“ („Problem Child Schlager Lyrics“) that the *Schlager* should not under any circumstances, as in the West, „stultify and distract the masses from the reality of life“ („zur Verdummung und Ablenkung der breiten Masse von der Realität des Lebens ablenken“). This also reflects the critical attitude towards German Schlager that was widespread in the West. Instead, he argued that the genre should entertain „in a substantial, good way. The lyrics should therefore be true to the content. As with all art, it has the self-evident obligation to provide a realistic portrayal of the world“.⁴⁶

Unfortunately, according to the author, all too often this was not the case in his own country; even in the GDR, a „majority of our lyrics are mendacious“.⁴⁷ There is, and here Carlé refers to the East German writer and cultural official, a prominent member of the SED Politbüro, Alfred Kurella, a disproportion when countless pop songs take countries like „South America, Texas, Hawaii or Italy as their thematic topic“ and the lyrics are almost exclusively about „fiery caballeros and gauchos, Texas cowboys and gold prospectors, silver moons over Hawaii, Italians who incessantly warble funny little songs and drink wine, and Parisian women who are just as constantly in love“ – „[d]o only the sailors in the ports love, are only ladies in Italy and France kissed?“. The text continues:

„Of course, you can't sing a hit song about how the moon shone golden over the – let's say – Kombinat Böhlen during a first kiss. It should be clear that we do not mean such experiments, which are necessarily doomed to failure. ... There are natural beauties in our homeland ...; there are not only Jonnys and Jans as sailors, not only amore, but also love, not only glowing-eyed *señoritas*, but also very charming saleswomen in the HO department stores.“⁴⁸

45 See also Herkendell, Schlager und Politik (see note 8), p. 73; Görlich, Capri, Constanza und der verlorene Ort (see note 3). In general on the debate over the *Schlager* and especially *Schlager* lyrics in the GDR from the 1950s, cf. Dietrich Kayser, Schlager. Das Lied als Ware. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der Illusionsindustrie, Stuttgart 1975, pp. 41, 43 and 114.

46 Original quote: „... auf gehaltvolle, gute Art unterhalten. Der Schlager text muß daher inhaltlich wahrhaftig sein. Wie für jede Kunst gilt auch für ihn die selbstverständliche Verpflichtung, ein realistisches Abbild der Welt zu liefern“, Wolfgang Carlé, Sorgenkind Schlager text, in: Melodie und Rhythmus 2,4 (1957), pp. 6 f. and 32; at p. 6.

47 Ibid.

48 Original quote: „Lieben nur die Matrosen in den Häfen, werden vorzugsweise nur Damen in Italien und Frankreich geküßt?“ – „Man kann selbstverständlich nicht in einem Schlager davon singen, daß bei einem ersten Kuß der Mond golden das – sagen wir – Kombinat Böhlen überglänzt habe. Es dürfte klar sein, daß wir solche, notwendig zum Scheitern verurteilten Experimente nicht meinen. ... Es gibt Naturschönheiten unserer Heimat ...; es gibt nicht nur Jonnys und Jans als Matrosen, nicht nur Amore, sondern auch Liebe, nicht nur glutäugige Señoritas, sondern auch sehr charmante Verkäuferinnen im Warenhaus der HO“, *ibid.*, p. 32.

So, according to Carlé, the future of the Schlager lies „in the sparkling, humorous couplet and in the quieter, more delicate, cultivated chanson“. ⁴⁹ The Schlager should ultimately become something different – but it did not succeed.

A few months later, in April 1958, Carlé took the subject up again. In the same magazine, this time under the title „Nochmals: Sorgenkind Schlagertext“ („Once again: Problem Child Schlager Lyrics“), he remarked that the *Schlager* was „fundamentally (like all art) a political issue“, even in the West, where it had a „very political mission to fulfil“, namely „to distract the listener from the reality of life and the damnably hard problems of a crisis-ridden present through kitschy depictions of a non-existent dream world“. In his own country, on the other hand, the aim should be to voice an „affirmation of life“ and to sing about „the beauties of our homeland“ – and especially when it comes to love, directly and in a way that was „morally clean without ambiguity“. A young girl in love, for example, is not „a ‚lover in herself‘ set in an unreal world“, but can be „a very real saleswoman or conductor or light bulb maker in our republic“. ⁵⁰ Julio Mendivil recounts in detail that the distraction from politics and the retreat into the private sphere were repeatedly perceived and discussed as a political issue, in West Germany as well, and that this connection was even a „favourite topic of Schlager research“, especially during the politicized 1970s. ⁵¹ In passing, he further notes that the GDR *Schlager* is also, as in West Germany, ultimately intended to create a sense of home, in this case referring to East Germany as one's homeland – after 1989 more than ever before. ⁵²

The fact that the *Schlager* had so far not sufficiently reflected social grievances in Italy also appears recurrently, for example in an unlikely place such as review of a novel in „Neues Deutschland“ in April 1959. In an anonymous review of Dinah Nelken's novel „addio amore“, the author makes the criticism that, unlike the novel in question, the genre of the musical *Schlager* (not only in the GDR) has so far been remarkably „unrealistic“:

49 Original quote: „... im zündenden, humoristischen Couplet und im leiseren, zarteren, gepflegten Chanson“, *ibid.*

50 Original quote: „Der Schlager ist grundsätzlich (wie jede Kunst) ein Politikum. ... Der streng ‚unpolitische‘ Serienschlager des Westens hat eine sehr politische Mission zu erfüllen: durch verkitschte Schilderung einer nicht-existent Traumwelt den Hörer von der Realität des Lebens und den verflucht harten Problemen einer krisengeschüttelten Gegenwart abzulenken. ... Die Texte, die *wir* erstreben, sollen von unserer Lebensbejahung künden und die Schönheiten unserer Heimat besingen; sollen spießbürgerliche Überreste in Fühlen, Denken und Handeln humorig kritisieren und die Liebe ohne Zweideutigkeiten moralisch sauber darstellen. ... Man muß sich nur, wenn man einen Schlagertext hört, der von der Liebe eines jungen Mädchens spricht, vorstellen können, daß dieses Mädchen keine in einer irrealen Welt angesiedelte ‚Verliebte an sich‘, sondern eine sehr reale Verkäuferin oder Schaffnerin oder Glühlampenarbeiterin unserer Republik ist“, Wolfgang Carlé, *Nochmals: Sorgenkind Schlagertext*, in: *Melodie und Rhythmus* 2,8 (April 1958), pp. 6 f. and 30, at p. 7.

51 Mendivil, *Ein musikalisches Stück Heimat* (see note 2), p. 212.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 320. In particular, the author's conversations with the East German *Schlager* singer Frank Schöbel have shown this.

„There are said to be and have been in our latitudes ... nearly a hundred Italian hits, but in none of these songs is there any mention of the rice workers in the Po Valley, who have work for a few weeks a year and no other unemployment benefits; of the workers in the Reggiane, who worked for peace enclosed in the factory for nearly a year ...; of the low-paid tobacco workers; of child labour; of the squatters of Sicilian agricultural workers, driven by hunger to the fallow fields; of the hiring out of pretty, gifted children for the purpose of begging, dancing, singing, and thus making money; of the two and a half million or so unemployed in Italy!“⁵³

In fact, the *Schlager*, which almost by definition has always been more concerned with escapism than with political protest, does not seem an appropriate genre for such representations. As a consequence, with regard to Italy, political realities are still most noticeable in *Schlager* lyrics around and after 1960 when, with the building of the Wall on 13 August 1961, the country became unreachably distant for the citizens of the GDR. This was also the reaction of the *Italienschlager*, for example in the song „Was willst du denn in Rio?“ („What do you want in Rio at all?“), published in early 1962 (lyrics: Siegfried Osten, music: Jürgen Hermann). Its essential message is along the lines of: Why go far away when you can find love in your own country?

Here it again becomes clear that the discussion about the (Italian-) *Schlager* (and especially *Schlager* lyrics) in the GDR from the late 1950s was ultimately not about portraying the political and social realities of the country south of the Alps, as was the case in travelogues – this is not even possible for the *Schlager* genre. Rather, the authors involved in the debate were concerned with directing the focus towards their own country, the GDR. Thus the later *Schlager* song lyrics from 1962 are again about a global and undifferentiated ‚South‘, represented simply by the names of Rio, Milan, Zambezi and Trinidad, which ultimately exists only in the Northern-European imagination. (Added to this in the following stanza are Rio, Greenland and the Congo, to include other random parts of the world.) Ultimately, the objective is to erase the ‚foreign‘ or ‚strange‘ in the imagination of one’s own citizens by appropriating it: accordingly, love in particular is the same everywhere – with such an apolitical programme, the *Schlager* in turn comes into its own. But immediately after the construction of the Wall, this is an eminently political project.

53 Original quote: „Es soll in unseren Breitengraden ... annähernd hundert Italienschlager geben und gegeben haben, doch in keinem dieser Lieder ist die Rede von den Reisarbeiterinnen in der Poebene, die im Jahr ein paar Wochen lang Arbeit und sonst keine Arbeitslosenunterstützung haben; von den Arbeitern in der Reggiane, die fast ein Jahr im Werk eingeschlossen für den Frieden arbeiteten ...; von den minderbezahlten Tabakarbeiterinnen; von Kinderarbeit; von den Landbesetzungen sizilianischer Landarbeiter, vom Hunger auf die brachliegenden Felder getrieben; von dem Vermieten hübscher, begabter Kinder zum Zwecke des Bettelns, des Tanzens, des Singens und somit des Gelderwerbs; von den etwa zweieinhalb Millionen Arbeitslosen in Italien!“ B. K., „Italien – kein Traum“, in: Neues Deutschland, 4.4.1959.

„Was willst du denn in Rio,
was willst du in Milano,
was willst du in Sambesi und auf Trinidad?
Schau, hier in diesem Städtchen
gibt's manches hübsche Mädchen,
das deinetwegen ganz verweinte Augen hat.

Drum lass doch dein Gepäck und fahr erst gar nicht weg.
Die Liebe ist in Rio, in Grönland und am Kongo
genau nicht anders als bei uns zuhaus.
Man sitzt auch gern beim Vino in Dresden und Berlino
mit einer zuckersüßen Maus.“

„Was willst du denn in Rio?“ (1962)

[Translation]

„What do you want in Rio,
what do you want in Milan,
What do you want in Zambezi and Trinidad?
Look, here in this little town
There's a pretty girl
Who's all teary-eyed because of you.

So leave your luggage and don't go away at all.
Love is in Rio, Greenland and the Congo
no different than at home.
We also like to sit with vino in Dresden and Berlino
with a sugar-sweet mouse.“

„What do you want in Rio at all?“ (1962)

Sources of Figures

Fig. 1: Unterwegs. Magazin für Wandern – Bergsteigen – Zelten – Reisen 2,2 (1958), p. 25.

Fig. 2: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEb9xRmB3_A (no access outside Germany), film still: 00:04:00.