

## CHAPTER 2

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# Propagated, Permitted or Prohibited? State Strategies to Control Musical Entertainment in the First Two Decades of Socialist Hungary

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When examining the history of popular music after the communist seizure of power in Hungary (1948–49), one needs to stay sensitive to the changing nature of the regime's cultural policy. In the 1960s, western popular music was treated in a substantially different way than in the 1950s. The purpose of this chapter is to challenge a wide-ranging assumption which holds that the communist authorities continuously rejected, if not persecuted, the productions of western popular culture and they only supported the model of socialist realism. It is hypothesised that by the end of the 1960s the regime, while not giving up completely on propagating the ideals of aesthetic education and socialist mass culture,

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tried to realise political and (later on) commercial profit from the popularity of dance music, jazz and pop-rock. The following analysis was primarily based on media coverage, interviews with the most popular musicians of the period<sup>1</sup> and archival data of the Institute of Political History (Documents of Hungarian Communist Youth Association), the National Archives of Hungary (Documents of Ministry of [People's] Education, the Association of Hungarian Musicians, the Hungarian-Soviet Society and the Communist Parties of Hungary) and the Archives for 20th–21st Century Hungarian Music in the Institute of Musicology, Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

### STRUCTURAL CHANGES IN POLITICS AND IDEOLOGY AFTER 1956

The Soviet Union and its satellites had already tried to overcome the legacy of the Zhdanovian musical resolutions from 1953.<sup>2</sup> However, they insisted on not adopting the 'bourgeois' discrimination between serious music and light music as they were committed to the demarcation between politically 'useful' and 'useless' (or hostile) arts and not one between the 'higher' and 'lower' spheres of art (Groys 1997: 28–31). Although musical experts had to handle the questions of the two musical spheres simultaneously, in practice the spheres were not treated on equal terms. Popular music was usually judged by the criteria of (socialist) high culture. By the late 1960s, the cultural leadership tried to establish a socialist mass culture, and at the same time acknowledged the right of the socialist man to entertainment, thus legitimising the existence of popular music in socialist culture. There was also a further demarcation within the different genres of popular music. Depending on whether they were described as useful or hostile to socialism, a few musical segments of popular culture (even that of western origin) were adopted and used by the Party (e.g. operetta in the 1950s and later on, jazz), and comrades occasionally attempted to create ideologically valuable new popular genres themselves. Moreover, Hungarian cultural policy, including the treatment of aesthetic and musical questions reflected the events of the Cold War. In particular, the assessment of popular music was influenced by Hungary's peculiar relation to the Soviet Union and the West (György 2014: 67). The mechanical imitation of the Soviet models and isolation from western countries came to an end after the suppressed revolution in 1956. The revolution resulted in the adoption of a new political leadership which was, however, also unable to break ties with the Soviet Union, as evidenced by

a number of documents from 1957 onwards (Vass and SÁgyári 1964: 504–513). Nevertheless, in the 1960s, Soviet policy opened towards the West and advocated a ‘peaceful coexistence’ of the two camps. The favourable political atmosphere triggered economic and cultural reforms and a reconsidered foreign policy in Hungary which aimed at improving the western bloc’s opinion about the Hungarian socialist regime in the aftermath of 1956 (Rainer 2004: 20).

As a consequence of the gradual ‘Thaw’ in the 1960s, the Iron Curtain turned out to be not so impenetrable anymore, as was ostentatiously announced in György Péteri’s famous pun, the ‘nylon curtain’ (Péterri 2004). Still, free communication between the East and West was not allowed, but by absorbing more news from the other side of the Wall, citizens of the Soviet Bloc were nevertheless capable of forming a more realistic picture of the West. In their everyday life, they were irresistibly drawn to the presumed prosperity, cultural effervescence and freedom of the West, and thus, to the new western forms of leisure and entertainment (K. Horváth 2015). Despite being physically isolated from the consumer goods and intellectual products of the West, Eastern Europeans became gradually more informed about western popular culture from the 1960s onwards. As a result, they also liberated their imagination and created cultural artefacts which could be consumed as substitutes for the western ones and later on, they established a new culture of their own which operated as the alternative or counter variant of the official, mainstream culture. This meant a new challenge for the government which had to find new solutions to handle their citizens’ modified perception of reality.

The Party’s aesthetic and political evaluation of western popular music underwent a spectacular change from the end of the 1950s onwards. After 1949, in terms of ‘cultural revolution’, the Stalinist cultural policy still aimed at developing an ‘aesthetic totalitarianism’ in popular culture. Besides its administrative measures against jazz and western dance music, it tried to define all of those compositional and stylistic elements which made the transformation of popular music possible according to the Zhdanov principles (Groys 1992). The Party’s major ideologist and Minister of People’s Education, József Révai (1898–1959) advocated this transformation himself since he believed that arts and literature should be the most important media of communist ideology, and they should all serve daily political purposes.

Radical changes were inaugurated in the popular musical scene from 1949/1950 onwards. The newly established musical institutions set up

working groups, while the Ministry of People's Education announced a call for Hungarian composers to write popular songs of the new kind following the general aesthetic ideal of 'national in form, socialist in content'. At the same time, the Popular Music Department of the Association of Hungarian Musicians and its joint committees put serious effort into defining this new quality in popular music. The work in the committees often started with finding and naming the enemy. The aim was, on the one hand, to purge the musical repertoire of any song that may contain elements of western dance music, and on the other hand, to eliminate unwanted components from the music composed under the aegis of the Party and the Association of Hungarian Musicians. It was not only orchestration that could exude the influence of Americanism or imperialist jazz (such as the use of a saxophone, a brass section, a clarinet or pistons), but also the frequent use of certain types of chords (such as non-chords or eleventh chords), and techniques of melody-making (chromatic turns) rhythms that can be turned into swing, the more informal types of performance dotted with syncopations, or the atmosphere of a song itself. The second phase of the work concentrated on designing a new, 'Hungarian' (nationalistic) style of dance music. The most appropriate way seemed to be the modernisation and recycling of village folk music or folkish urban music which could be brought into harmony with the features of dance music. Composers and performers were encouraged to study the very features of folk songs and discover a particular Hungarian style of performance.<sup>3</sup> (Ignác 2016). A well-known example of that period is the dance-song *Szállj, te madár* (*Fly, you bird* 1952) composed by István Pethő, which was modelled on the nineteenth-century Hungarian operatic-style, showcased by the operas *Bánk Bán* and *Hunyadi László* of Ferenc Erkel.

This programme survived Stalin's death (1953), as well as the dramatic changes in Hungarian domestic policy in June 1953, which forced József Révai to resign. However, the newly announced government programme which aimed to overcome Révai's dogmatic approach was not completely effective. Songs produced under the supervision of the so-called Opinion Committee, the state founded dance music composing schools or the Consultation Groups (which fully controlled composing up to the tiny details) were treated in the same manner as before. The regime had not with standing to acknowledge that creativity should not have been oppressed in the name of popularity and clarity.

Cultural leaders of the post-1956 era emphasised high standards of (musical) education and taste. The Party drew up only the general ideological framework, and it was the artists' and theoreticians' personal responsibility to comply with the guidelines of socialist realism in their own individual ways. What is more, theoretical debates over the shaping of the official line were encouraged to involve the non-Party-member Marxist intellectuals. The Party refrained from interfering with the working methods of those authors 'who [were] ready to serve the people'. However, the regime condemned those persons 'who [were] working against the collective interest' of society, and withdrew its support of artworks which were 'indifferent to the common concerns of society' in the continued struggle against the spreading of individualism and egoism. The Leninist principle of 'partiinost' (partisanship or party-mindedness) prevailed. Nevertheless, the well-known slogan of the Party leader János Kádár 'anyone who is not against us is with us', was extended to cultural policy. Politically neutral artists or consumers were no longer persecuted. A new three-grade system of cultural support was introduced by the new head of cultural policy György Aczél (1917–1991) in 1958, the so-called 3 T's, after the Hungarian words 'támogatott, tűrt, tiltott'. In this system not only propagated/supported (támogatott) and prohibited (tiltott) works of art appeared but, as a new category, tolerated/permitted (tűrt) works.

Contrary to its predecessor, the post-1956 regime was no longer under the illusion that providing ideologically correct works (e.g. the socialist realist music) would be automatically converted to correct popular belief system. The comprehensive control of popular musical life stayed in place, but the emphasis shifted from aesthetic and compositional questions to those of institutional positions and the circumstances of production and distribution.

Melinda Kalmár argues that in the post-1956 period, the arts played a less important role in the transmission of ideology than previously. Science was designated to assume that responsibility. Leaders of cultural policy assigned a more important role to philosophy (aesthetics) and the humanities in general (e.g. sociology) than to art in spreading the ideal of socialist realism. From then on, scientific results were used in all domains of the construction of a socialist and eventually communist society (Kalmár 1998, 2004). This new turn was palpable in the field of popular music too. The former approach of aesthetic totalitarianism was replaced by a sociological one, which was based on large-scale public opinion polls

focusing on the musical taste and leisure time activities of the masses (e.g. Losonczy 1963). On an institutional level, this meant that the control exercised by the above-mentioned Association of Hungarian Musicians and its departments was handed over to the newly established National Organising Office, which became responsible for issuing musical performance licences and organising all concerts in Hungary. To reinforce the control, more power was delegated to the Communist Youth Association (CYA), which translated a former pure musical (or ideological) matter into social and youth policy. An effective youth policy was among the main goals of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party (HSWP) that concentrated its entire policy on the young generation to counteract the fact that students played a crucial role in the short democratic turn in the autumn of 1956. The efforts of János Kádár and his faithful supporters gave the unwanted impression that without convincing the youth the future of communism was endangered.

One cannot compare the popular musical scene of the 1950s with that of the 1960s without mentioning the changes in the structure of the public sphere. With the acceleration of Sovietisation of the country (from 1949), a system of political vassalage and representative public sphere<sup>4</sup> (Behrends 2005 and Lázár 1988) emerged in both domestic and foreign policy. The arrangement of the reconsidered Hungarian-Soviet interstate relationship served as a model for the operation of the Hungarian Working People's Party ([HWPP], the predecessor of HSWP). The leadership of HWPP became subordinated to the Kremlin and, being eager to win the favour of Stalin, tried permanently to outperform Soviet expectations.

The same applies to the relations between the inner and outer circle of the Hungarian Party and their ministries: no one was allowed to contradict the decisions of the most powerful leaders. Regarding cultural life, this granted absolute authority to József Révai, especially after 1951. His expectations were accepted, supported and put into practice by his dependents. It seemed as if Révai and the Ministry of People's Education were behind all cultural (and therefore musical) decisions or administrative measures. Although heads of the cultural policy, similar to other Party leaders, behaved as delegates of the working class and even the oppressed classes, they were not interested in the opinion of the lower ranks of society, but looked down upon the masses and wanted to establish contact only with the intellectual elite. The regime expected the upper classes to be the very medium of the new political and aesthetic ideals who would stake out the course for average individuals.

The Kádarian regime regarded cultural work as being the most difficult and time-consuming of all forms of work. It tried to put an end to elitist behaviour as well as reach an agreement with various social groups. There were a few precedents for asking the people, and submitting (mostly insignificant) questions to vote. The effect of this seemingly democratic turn was making itself felt in a number of Party resolutions and declarations as well. It is no accident that in scholarly discourse, this gave rise to introducing the terms of simulated or quasi-open publicity. In communicating their political decisions, comrades always pretended to have regard for opinions of the masses. The media, which also became instrumental in the transmission of ideology, were required to exercise the same care. The Party recognised the opportunity of a rapidly growing news consumption and created new strategies for reforming the (printed) media market (Kalmár 1998 and Takács 2012).

Youth magazines showing signs of the new approach started to be published as early as 1957. Entitled 'Hungarian Youth' [Magyar Ifjúság] and 'Youth Magazine' [Ifjúsági Magazin; from 1965], they communicated current political issues and at the same time served as substitutes for western pop magazines, so that they could meet the growing interest of the young generation in western fashion and music. By involving teenagers in the editorial process, these magazines hoped to exercise political influence and control over them. Well-known examples of expressions of opinions were the first Hungarian pop charts that, contrary to western practice, were compiled according to readers' polls, and votes cast for contestants in Hungarian Dance-Song Festivals. The contemporaries attributed great importance to the polls and votes since these occasions gave people the impression that they had their freedom back, at least in their musical taste (Breuer 1967: 83).

It is worth considering here the relationship between nationalism and communism in socialist Hungary. Starting from the Zhdanovian admonitions that 'internationalism is being born where nationalistic art is thriving' and 'only those nations who have their own, sophisticated musical culture can appreciate the wealth of the music of other peoples' (Zhdanov 1949: 69–70), the Stalinist heads of cultural policy made their stand, to the effect that the total negation of foreign tendencies in music was inevitable and the support of (national) folk music or 'progressive traditions' of classical music (e.g. 19th century national opera) was an absolute imperative. A new state-funded popular genre came into being which combined anti-western sentiments with socialist realism and national pride: the so-called 'national dance music' (Ignác 2016).

After the suppressed revolution of 1956, the new Party leader János Kádár made it clear that he no longer shared the views of the former regime on nationalist questions. The first resolutions of the Party in 1957 already used the term ‘socialist patriotism’ and displayed how the emphasis in the political rhetoric shifted from the national aspect of socialism to an international one. The new doctrine reversed the relation: one cannot be a nationalist without appreciating the Eastern Bloc. The good patriot of the socialist motherland was expected to recognise the ‘congenial interests’ of Hungary and other countries of the Warsaw Pact. The good patriot was expected not to put up a fight against an external enemy but rather against an internal one, for example, against the ‘reactionary ruling classes’ who had popularised ‘pseudo-nationalism’ during the ‘counter-revolutionary’ events in 1956. In a peculiar way, the shift of focus from the external to the internal enemy reinforced the growing tolerance towards western products. The regime, nevertheless, did not dismiss the idea of establishing a pure Hungarian popular culture which would be capable of putting an end to the inflow of western music and consumer goods. It is no accident that amateur bands ready to ‘play the game’ of the Party were the ones winning the ‘tolerated’ label. These ‘beat’ groups (i.e. bands that tried to create their own musical manner adopting the style of the early Beatles and Rolling Stones<sup>5</sup>), predominantly placed in the capital Budapest, the members of which were descended mostly from upper-class families with good political connections, were allowed to perform covers of western hits along with their own new-style songs, if they avoided emulating their western idols in behaviour and physical appearance, and if they concentrated most of their efforts on composing original songs with Hungarian lyrics. The communist leadership (especially through the agency of the CYA) facilitated the evolution of Hungarian beat music with administrative measures. For example, at state-organised amateur pop music competitions, the participants were required to compile their repertoire from foreign and Hungarian songs in equal measure. Youth magazines aimed to create local ‘stars’ by compiling Top 10 charts (from August 1968) of only Hungarian hits and publishing more and more articles about local bands.<sup>6</sup>

However, the comrades seem to have held false expectations, when at a closed debate session of the Youth Association, held on February 22, 1968, they stated with smug satisfaction that by supporting the most promising local endeavours they could ‘divert’ the youngsters ‘(away) from the adoration’ of western mass culture. The independent and



quasi-self-catering Hungarian rock culture was indeed born in the late 1960s, but its members continued to look up to and pine after capitalist western living and entertaining standards, and were still looking to adopt musical examples of the West.

## AESTHETIC EDUCATION

During the transition period of consolidation (1957–1962/63), the right of the ‘socialist man’ to entertainment was not yet fully acknowledged, and the regime did not yet exploit ‘the taste forming ability of the “light” musical genres’ (Vass and Ságvári 1968: 205). However, neither did it want to impose strict rules on artistic activities. Rather, the regime tried to lead the young masses in the direction of (already existing) high-quality artworks and schools. It was not only about ideological consideration but rather an attempt to solve generational conflicts that became universal in the early 1960s. Makers of cultural policy also represented the predominantly conservative ‘adult society’ which continuously criticised the dealings and taste of the young generation.

In a document written for the Youth Association in 1964 entitled ‘The role of arts and art institutes in the appropriate use of free time for the young people’ the authors explained the necessity of state intervention in musical taste to which former governments (even the one led by Mátyás Rákosi) had not paid due attention. In the 1950s, the document claimed, the struggle against bad taste had been badly neglected, and thus, the ‘remains of kitschy, petit bourgeois worldview could survive, even if in a guise of socialist common sense’.

The concept of ‘aesthetic education’ focused on youngsters since teenagers and students were supposedly not able to distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ (art) and therefore it seemed necessary to protect them from the negative effects of bourgeois arts. ‘Most of the adults’, the document stated, ‘grew up on corny, mawkish culture... and it would be a sin to give the children the same culture. It is said, that [the corn] is to the taste of the youngsters. It is until they don’t know the “higher level in entertainment”’.

The Party, as demonstrated in secret documents as well as in cultural columns of youth magazines, initially recommended that teenagers listen to folk tunes, rallying songs and classical music. It soon became clear, however, that the youth were more interested in products of western culture and those local amateur bands that popularised western hits.

From 1957, quite a few new bands specialised in different musical genres (e.g. Benkó Dixieland Band [dixieland, 1957], Atlas [skiffle, 1960], Scampolo [rock'n'roll, 1961]) and performed regularly in pubs, clubs, community centres and the Budapest Youth Park (opened in 1961). In 1963, the CYA itself organised the first amateur pop music competition in the Budapest Sports Hall which provided an opportunity for bands operating in relative isolation (among others, the much-talked-of Illés and Omega) to become acquainted with each other and to play in front of not only their fans but a heterogeneous audience.

However, the reforms of musical taste could only achieve the desired results if the Party could find a genre which was attractive to the youth, represented the 'high level' of entertainment, and was capable of counterpointing the flow of new musical genres from the West. The choice fell on jazz. Jazz was associated with the programme of aesthetic education in 1961/62. The current change of Soviet attitude towards jazz came at just the right moment. In April 1961, an editorial article was published in the journal 'Life and Literature' (Élet és Irodalom) which referred to a paper of the famous Soviet jazz singer Leonid Utesov (entitled: 'Reflections on Jazz'). According to Utesov, it was 'inconsiderate to identify jazz with imperialism and colonial oppression' and 'good jazz [was] required since it could serve the aesthetic education of the youth' ('Szükség van a jó dzsesszre' 1961: 12).

The Party attempted to collaborate with those few who fought for the emancipation of jazz, by separating the terms 'jazz' and 'dance music' from each other (since earlier jazz often simply meant American dance music), ideologically whitewashing jazz<sup>7</sup> and, finally, assimilating it to the 'socially useful' genres, namely folk music and classical music. As it appeared in a panel discussion conducted in the beginning of 1962 by the music pedagogical journal *Parlando*, 'by means of its ambitions, its great educational effect (in sense of rhythm, improvisation, etc.) and in general, of its moods, jazz is capable of bringing closer our youngsters to modern serious, contemporary music' (Nagy 1962: 11). Two years later, a resolution of the Youth Association described the popularisation of jazz as an 'obligation of the state' since it had a great effect on the 'development of musical taste' of the youth. The role of jazz in the programme of aesthetic education was still a perennial topic in 1968, the same year when beat music fever culminated in Hungary. A secret report, issued for the Party, stated that beat represented 'neurotic snobbism' and 'unwanted consequence', such as promiscuous behaviour. The report also emphasised

that ‘it [was] obvious that one can exert political influence on young people only under peaceful and calm circumstances, conducive to sustained concentration. Jazz guarantees these circumstances; the fundamental effect of this genre is the peace (of mind).’

One of the major consequences of the Party’s jazz policy was the establishment of youth jazz clubs, starting with the *Dália Presszó* in Budapest, and later on in bigger regional centres of the country. However, apart from a few appearances of amateur bands, such as *Omega*, *Bajtala*, *Mediterrán*, these clubs became forums of a narrow and very elitist professional circle who aimed at keeping the greatest possible distance between jazz and other western genres, particularly beat and modern dance music, and underlined the higher artistic level of jazz music.<sup>8</sup> This finally diverted the teenagers from visiting the clubs which had obviously undergone a crisis by the beginning of 1964, as demonstrated by the closing of *Dália* the same year.

The case of jazz clubs pointed out how important the control of places of entertainment was for the Party. Virtually, these clubs were more than just ‘rooms’, they also constituted a ‘free and informal form of education’. Leaders of cultural and youth policy believed that without (state) subsidy, those places where young people may be drilled to ‘good’ and ‘proper’ music would not be successful.

The CYA had already organised undergraduate dance courses in 1959, and then in 1962/63 it launched a nationwide dance competition. An important change, however, occurred in the Party’s sentiment between the dates. In 1959, the communist leadership was still looking for teachers who ‘[had] the ability to create choreographies which are based, if possible, on Hungarian folk motives, and which improve the taste and the sense of rhythm’, whereas during the competitions of 1962/63 contestants were allowed to choose swing or Latin dances (rumba, samba, etc.), not only waltz and *czárdás*. The regime made no secret of relaxing their stance on the pursuit of different types of dance, such as swing or boogie woogie. ‘It must not be done to condemn the new partner dances’, they said, ‘just because they are more heftily pulsating and they are differing from the former dances’. From then on, theoretically only eccentric, and scandalous dancing and behaviour proved to be ‘wrong’. Finally, in 1964, the Youth Association wanted to organise the training of hundreds of new dance teachers in order to ‘help with the spreading of international dance style’ in Hungary.

The latter endeavour was part of a year-long large-scale project as a result of which, on 13 June 1964, a resolution was passed with the title ‘Useful and practical spending of the leisure time for young people’. This was a key document of its time since it summarised all those above-mentioned changes of cultural policy related to popular music in the 1960s. It reflected the new scientific approach of the regime using international literature of contemporary experts, such as the works of Joffre Dumazedier, or results of opinion polls, and it was widely discussed in the media, especially in the major youth magazine, *Hungarian Youth*. The resolution can be also considered as a watershed in the history of political decisions concerning popular music genres, since it distinguished between education and entertainment, even if it still claimed the necessity of connecting leisure time with raising cultural standards and developing the versatile personality of young people. It was the very first resolution in which an important Party organisation officially accepted the hegemony of ‘modern dance music’ among young people. Although it characterised the whole phenomenon of growing Occidentalism in popular music as ‘expected’ but ‘unfortunate’, they also admitted that post-revolutionary Hungarian dance music could not keep abreast of new western genres in terms of high standards and popularity. Among others, the recognition led the Youth Association and eventually also the Ministry of Culture to determine new conditions of a socialist mass culture.

### SOCIALIST MASS CULTURE AND COMMERCIALISM IN POPULAR MUSIC

The well-known Party resolution about socialist realism, published in June 1965 (Vass and Ságvári 1968: 175–208), stated that due to mass communication popular genres kept expanding at a steady pace in Hungarian culture. In the same document, the HSWP encouraged local artists to relinquish their ‘aristocratism’ and strive for creating up-to-date ‘entertainment art’. However, the major cultural ideologist, György Aczél pointed out that ‘high culture’ should not be relegated to the background, even if ‘low culture’ worked in full conformity with state requirements (Aczél 1968: 37).

In his famous 1968 speech on the ‘most important questions of cultural and ideological life’ (Aczél 1968), Aczél declared that the state should not

fail to satisfy all generations and social groups. However, he drew a distinction between individual and common taste. He emphasised that the proper authorities of cultural organisations in this regard are not permitted to behave according to their own accord: they have to represent 'common taste' and consequently the Party's intentions concerning the shaping of popular taste and its principles of cultural or aesthetic education. The authorities responsible for popular music, such as leaders of popular music departments in national radio and television, and heads of the State Record Label became the 'guardians' of the official cultural ideology while enjoying growing freedom for autonomous action from the middle of the 1960s.

From 1965 onwards, there were some attempts to domesticate different forms of western-type entertainment in socialist culture, and to take the edge off their hostility, or fill them with 'socialist content'. This can be illustrated by three revealing cases: the Hungarian Dance-Song Festivals, the first Hungarian beat movie, and the genre 'political beat'.

The Hungarian Dance-Song Festivals (Táncdalfesztivál), which are considered to be among the most successful musical contests in the history of Hungarian media, were established as an initiative of Hungarian Television in 1966. The festival was inseparable from the special musical genre of 'dance-song' (táncdal) which blended beat music with the traditional dance music of the 1940s and 1950s by compelling beat musicians to work together with official lyricists or performers of traditional hits in order to play compositions of acknowledged composers, or to rescore guitar-centred music of their own into the manner of traditional songs arranged for big band or string orchestra. A good example is the first prize winner dance-song *Nem leszek a játékszere*d (*I'll Be Not Your Puppet*) from 1966, sung by the popular female beat music singer Kati Kovács. The first big Hungarian-speaking hit of the band Metró, *Mi fáj?* (*What Is Wrong With You?*), composed not by the band but by the traditional dance-song composer Ottó Nikolics, was also released in 1966. The first prize winner piece of one of the most successful composers during the Stalinist period, Júlia Majláth, *Nem várok holnapig* (*I Don't Wait Until Tomorrow*) from 1967, was sung by Sarolta Zalatnay, accompanied by the band Omega, and was arranged for guitar ensemble by the pianist and major composer of Omega, Gábor Presser.

These amateur groups had to show up well-combed and well-dressed to play their songs with discipline and decency more appropriate to classical

than beat music.<sup>9</sup> For the organisers and the jury, the collective form of music-making was sometimes unmanageable: composers and lyricists of the songs, as well as the singers, had to be pre-nominated and in many cases, front men had to perform separated from the rest of the band. However, economic considerations gradually appeared to prevail over ideological ones and the popular band Illés was allowed to win the contest of 1968 and, what is more, it did so with its own song *Amikor én még kisserác voltam* (*When I Was A Little Kiddie*), a piece which is probably the best example of how Illés endeavoured to create a type of urban folklore by combining traits of the tolerated beat genre with those of (rather Serbian than Hungarian) folk tunes.

Illés also played a major role in *Ezek a fiatalok* (*These Youngsters*, 1967) by Tamás Banovich, which was the first Hungarian beat movie. The film tells the story of a naive 18-year-old László Koroknai who is about to take his A-level exams and considers his career options. The generational conflicts between adults and teenagers are eliminated rather than solved. The father easily accepts László's decision of becoming a skilled worker rather than going to university, and in one of the final scenes, he also joins his fellow adults in a standing ovation to László who turns out to be successful as a beat musician as well.

Both political and economic considerations interfered with the eventual releasing of the film. When the movie was screened in cinemas around the country, the estimated number of viewers hit almost a million in a few months. This extraordinary success can be explained by the fact that *These Youngsters* provided a platform for the most prominent contemporary Hungarian beat bands to present their own works and the twelve songs of the film were released on LP by the state record label. However, the film was directed by a marginalised filmmaker with a questionable record. Tamás Banovich had been sentenced to a ten-year period of silence in 1956 after making a children's film with political overtones. Banovich did not want to risk any political innuendos in the film's plot only one year after his reintegration into the professional world of filmmaking. He completely eliminated various factors of beat music (such as dynamism, anti-regime lyrics and rascal fans), which were likely to annoy the Party, and it was probably for the same reason that he decided to work with the so-called trinity of the three most popular bands, Illés, Metró and Omega since they had already proven their musical compatibility with the system. It is worth noting how diffident and reserved the performances of the

bands are in the film's concert scenes: short-haired youngsters in suits are playing without moving around on stage and with no apparent signs of excessive passion. Their audience is made up of likewise well-dressed people listening attentively to the performance in respectful silence (Ignác 2016b). Reviewers and audience alike claimed that the visual content and music were too restrained, failing to portray authentically the 'beat generation'. Nevertheless, the film achieved its ideological goal by influencing the musical manner of the bands and leading them in an acceptable direction.

The above-mentioned examples shed some light on the rules of performance and reception. The genre 'political beat' or simply 'polbeat', made under the supervision of cultural policy, however, raises compositional questions. In 1966, the Youth Association announced a call for young musicians to compose 'revolutionary songs of modern times', and a few months later it wanted to organise an international musical meeting in Budapest to popularise unknown compositions of the Cuban revolution, peace marches or protest songs, and anti-Vietnam war pieces in Hungary. It encouraged the local few interested in these types of music to join the efforts of Hungarian Television and the Ministry of Culture. A year later (1967), a nationwide contest was organised with the title "Festival of Political Songs" (Polbeat fesztivál). Contrary to the original idea of allowing only individual guitarist-singers and groups of amateur supporters of the international protest song movement to perform at the festival, the organisers were finally compelled to invite popular beat and rock bands in the expectation of making the event more attractive to the youth.

The beatniks were certainly expected to play music of their own style but with texts based on 'topical and militant political message' written by politically committed poets and lyricists (primarily István S. Nagy).<sup>10</sup> These administrative measures and the commercial considerations contradicted the official goals of the genre according to which protest songs were the manifestation of individual efforts in the quest for truth by politically active revolutionary youngsters who protested colonial capitalism and the exploitation of the poor (Maróthy 1967; Mezei 1967). Moreover, after the failure of the second festival (1968), only a few comrades remained convinced of the importance of these folkish beat songs with political lyrics, even if they embodied an ideal of socialist mass culture. In fact, the official cultural policy tried to dismiss the bands and genres that made some small profit as quickly as possible.

## CONCLUSIONS

By the end of the 1960s, albeit not giving up completely on propagating the communist ideals of aesthetic education and socialist mass culture, the regime tried to realise as much profit as possible from the enormous popularity of beat music. It thus began to separate mainstream pop from the alternative and underground schools in order to develop a new funding system of culture in which the successful but ‘useless’ products financed the costs of the ‘valuable’ but financially non-profitable high cultural items (Aczél 1968). As far as musical life was concerned, non-classical musicians were prevented earning as much money as their professional colleagues, because they had to pay additional charges (better known as ‘kitsch tax’ in the slang). This practice continued into the next decade even more spectacularly: for example, the State Record Label often funded the release of its classical musical LPs with the income generated from the sale of popular musical records.

Nevertheless, the effects of this model on popular music and musicians were not entirely negative. The permitted and tolerated works of popular music became not only a determinant factor of the domestic economy, but also an important export product as a consequence of which Hungary was often referred to (along with Yugoslavia) as a ‘great power’ of rock music behind the Iron Curtain. The band Sirius made a name for itself in Australia in 1971, Locomotiv GT in the UK and the US in 1973/1974, and Omega became world-famous and toured regularly abroad, up to the democratic transformation of 1989/1990 (and further to the present day).

The conservative turn in domestic policy, following the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia (1968) and the suspension of the reforms of the New Economic Mechanism (1972/73), did not stunt the liberalisation and commercialisation process of the Hungarian pop market. On the contrary: in 1972/73 the Party officially acknowledged that citizens held the right to entertainment, and further on, it struggled less enthusiastically to control the leisure time of people. Eventually, it lost its faith and power in creating state art of any kind.

## NOTES

1. See the oral history collection on the website of the Archives for 20th–21st Century Hungarian Music in the Institute of Musicology, Hungarian Academy of Sciences. <http://www.zti.hu/mza/index.htm?m0703.htm>



2. Following its campaigns against literature and philosophy the Soviet leadership began to intervene in the internal affairs of musical life at the beginning of 1948. The major party ideologist Andrei Zhdanov delivered two speeches during the convention of Soviet musical experts in the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, in which he incited them to struggle against formalism and cosmopolitanism. His words soon became party resolutions and were looked upon as doctrines for all musicians in the Soviet Union and its satellite states.
3. Verbunkos is an 18th Century dance and dance music genre in Hungary whose melodic and harmonical structure originates from folk music or folkish urban popular music.
4. The term ‘representative publicity’ was first used by Jürgen Habermas (Habermas 1990)
5. Beat or beat music (beatzene) was a collective designation which was related to the modern guitar ensembles or dance musical genres coming from the West. Later on, it was widely used in the Hungarian musical discourse for different types of popular music and was often blended with ‘rock’ or ‘pop’. The origin of the term is unclear. However, the same expression was used in the (Eastern) German musical scene (Beatmusik).
6. To be sure, from 1965 a growing number of local bands composed their own songs and, simultaneously, reduced the number of covers in their repertoire. Among the front-line fighters of ‘Magyarization’ one can find many of the most influential and most popular bands and musicians of the pop-rock scene: Illés, Omega, Metró, Atlantis, Sirius, etc. In this respect, the very first Hungarian beat-hits (*On the Street* [*Az utcán*]; *Ah, Say It* [*Oh, mondd*]; *Be a Little Good To Me* [*Légy jó kicsit hozzám*]), composed by the band Illés, were looked up on as the most important pointers, even for the rivals: the first own songs of Metro (*Sweet Years* [*Édes évek*]; *Diamond and Gold* [*Gyémánt és arany*]) and Omega (*I Love You* [*Szeretlek én*]; *Rose-Trees* [*Rózsafák*]) were released e.g. only in 1966/67.
7. The genre took on a new ideological meaning, as an originally folk-music based genre of poor black people in the United States who have the same fate and therefore have a lot in common with white proletarians.
8. Aladár Pege or György Vukán began their careers in the Dália which also regularly hosted the Qualiton Jazz Quartet led by János Gonda.
9. ‘Deviant’ behaviour on stage always implied grave consequences. Following their extravagant performance in 1966, the band Illés came near to being disqualified from the competition.
10. E.g.: Sirius: *Black Rat* (*Fekete patkány*), Omega: *Just Because Your Old Man Is a Boss* (*Azért mert faterod egy góré*), Atlantis: *Who Killed Kennedy?* (*Ki ölte meg Kennedyt?*).

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