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## An Open Invitation: VIA as a Field of Research

**Abstract:** Vocal-Instrumental-Ensembles, abbreviated as VIA, were a distinct format of late-soviet popular culture. Music groups carrying this label enjoyed tremendous success from the mid-1960s until the mid-1980s and have since become the object of a nostalgic revival. As a research subject, they offer important insight into cultural politics and the music industry of their time, as well as movements of negotiation, popularisation and canonisation of new sounds, aesthetics and performance techniques. This issue invites scholars to take a more active interest in the VIA's musical and institutional qualities and offers first explorations into this multifaceted phenomenon.

**Keywords:** VIA; Soviet Union, popular culture; rock music; pop music, cultural policy, era of stagnation



In the early 1960s, the Soviet government was trapped in a delicate situation. The Soviet youth, inspired by the liberalisation of the Thaw, lusted for entertainment and light music but the Soviet cultural bureaucracy had nothing like this in its repertoire. Western influences in musical culture like Jazz or Tango had been discredited during Stalinism and were only hesitantly appropriated after the dictator's death. The latest exports of Western pop-music like *The Beatles* or Elvis Presley, were no option either. They even unsettled large parts of Western audiences, not to mention the Soviet public, which was even less used to polemical lyrics, permissive outfits, and provocative body language. A mere imitation of Western styles was neither a political, nor a cultural option. Stalinist mass culture was no alternative either, since it echoed the excesses of the 1930s and was no longer wanted by a youth seeking individuality. What should be done?

The Soviet answer to this problem was the invention of a new, Soviet-style pop-music. Its flagship project were Vocal-Instrumental-Ensembles, abbreviated as VIAs. From the mid-1960s onwards, amateur and professional groups under this label spread through the empire. From Belarus to Central Asia, from Moscow to Tbilisi, VIAs blended different musical styles and genres like pop, beat, rock, jazz, synth-pop, progressive rock and electronic music. With catchy melodies, a good dose of experimentalism and a solid technique, they managed to gain popularity while maintaining high production and recording standards. By performing at festivals across the Soviet Union and abroad, on steamers and on State television, the VIAs became a genuine late-soviet musical phenomenon which went beyond a simple adaptation or 'indigenisation' of Western musical, aesthetical and lyrical devices.

Surprisingly, this initiative had its success. Every bigger city in every republic had its local VIA groups, most of them grouping together around universities and youth clubs. Some of them professionalised and toured the empire, where they were greeted as Soviet superstars. They recorded their LPs on the state label *Melodiia* and sold millions of

copies. Admittedly, lyrics were censored and most of the revenues were taken by the state. Hence, some band members decided to leave the groups to start a solo career or even to search for their luck abroad. But this did not significantly limit the success of VIA-groups. After the 'first generation' of VIA groups like *Poiushchie gitary*, *Veselye rebiata*, or *Orera* had established the label, in the early 1970s, a 'second generation' emerged which shapes the image of VIA music until today. Groups like *Pesniary*, *Samotsvety* or *Ialla* revolutionised VIA music. By wearing colourful dresses or folk costumes and by integrating beat-music and indigenous folk songs, they appealed to a wide audience. With the advent of a 'third generation' of VIA groups in the second half of the 1970s, the label was changing again. The style of groups like *Zemliane* or *Gunesh* was more audacious in its inclusion of rock elements and its approximation to world music. With the establishment of rock music and the liberalisation of the Thaw, during the 1980s, VIA music declined. It became less popular, was less often broadcast on state television and fewer LPs were recorded and sold. The label seemed to be doomed before it found a surprising revival with the rise of Soviet nostalgia in Russia.

In spite of its historical significance and its wide appeal, VIA music has long been neglected by scholars. For long, it was mostly dubbed a failed imitation of Western pop music, an offspring of the politics of co-optation during the epoch of 'stagnation' without any aesthetic values. Although late Soviet popular culture seems to emerge as a new subject for scholars in the last years, this trend has not reached VIA music yet. While focusing on subcultures like *Grazhdanskaia Oborona's* punk or on the so-called *russkii rok* of *DDT*, *Nautilus Pompilius* and *Mashina Vremeni*, the radar of scholarship has failed to detect the musical, aesthetical and poetical peculiarities of the VIA phenomenon. However, a closer look at the VIAs reveals a plethora of relevant aspects reflecting the characteristics of late Soviet popular culture and allows to question the notion of that epoch as a period of (cultural and musical) 'stagnation'. It can also complement approaches focusing on musical

activities in the capitals of Moscow and St. Petersburg with a perspective deriving from the provinces and the peripheries of the empire.

This journal issue can be regarded as a first step to establish VIA music as a subject in the academic field. It aims to develop analytical perspectives for a theoretically informed reconsideration of the VIA phenomenon. It is inspired by the research on popular culture in cultural studies and tackles issues like canon formation, intercultural transfer and hegemony and subversion. Originally, it was planned to discuss these and further questions in the course of an international conference in Berlin in April 2020. Since the pandemic thwarted our plans, this issue figures as an, unfortunately, shortened outcome of this initiative. Hence, it can not demand to give an encompassing picture of the phenomenon, addressing its spatial and stylistic range. Instead, it wants to put a spotlight on some central issues of VIA music and hopes to be complemented soon by other scholars who might find some inspiration for their research in the following papers.

Christiane Schäfer provides an introduction into VIA music and its labeling. She traces the history of VIA music, discusses its most pertinent stylistic features and presents the infrastructure behind the label. One characteristic feature of VIA music is its regional diversity. Belarus, Georgia and Central Asia were particularly important for the evolution of VIA music, since the phenomenon here received distinct local features. On behalf of the examples of *Gunesh*, *Pesniary*, *Dos Mukasan* and many more, she demonstrates how local actors could use the label to pursue their own goals and to develop a distinct musical style and political message under the roof of the VIA label.

Irine Beridze, in her contribution, takes up this approach and gives a case study on the evolution of Georgian VIA music. Her analytical lens is guided by the tension between submission and subversion within the Soviet empire. She shows how groups like *Orera*, *Dielo* and *Iveria* used the VIA label as a platform for linguistic experimentation and Georgian national memory, bringing contested topics like

Georgia's struggle for independence to the fore. Following Alexandra Grabarchuk, she reads songs and rock operas as a practice of "living vnye", fighting for open spaces through a subversive smuggling of Georgian language, indigenous heritage and Western pop music into only seemingly unpolitical pop music.

Manuel Ghilarducci also considers such complex processes of cultural transfer and appropriation in Soviet popular culture. He focuses on the role of Italian music for Soviet VIA groups and relates his findings to larger discussions of Soviet *italomania* in late socialism. On a close reading of lyrics, album covers and Soviet magazines, he detects the considerable influence of Italian music for the formation of Soviet VIAs. His article gives three case studies, which comprise Anna German's transfer of Neapolitan music into Soviet Estrada, the reception of Robertino Loreti as the "singer of the stars" and the crucial influence of Gianni Morandi and Marino Marini on *Poiushchie gitary* and *Orera*.

The special issue concludes with Clemens Günther's paper on the canonisation of VIA music in late and post-Soviet Russia. On the examples of the first VIA-monographs and popular TV shows, he demonstrates how two competing canonisation threads of VIA music evolved during late socialism: One attaching VIA music closely to national and international rock music, the other equating VIA music with Estrada. After the fall of the empire, VIA music was widely discredited and had to struggle to survive, as he exposes in an analysis of the mixed reception of VIA music in TV-shows of the decade. His contribution concludes with the revival of VIA music in Putin's Russia and the nostalgic commemoration of the phenomenon on the internet.

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## Bio

**Clemens Günther** is a research fellow at the Institute of East European Studies (Osteuropa-Institut) at FU Berlin. He specialises in Russian literature and intellectual history from the 19th-21th century, focusing on the historical novel, the relation between literature, culture and ecology and the imaginative history of the imperial periphery. He is the author of *Die metahistoriographische Revolution. Problematierungen historischer Erkenntnis in der russischen Gegenwartsliteratur* (Böhlau 2021) and articles on the cultural history of Soviet cybernetics, documentary literature, literary meteorology and the imaginative histories of Baku and Turkmenistan.

**Christiane Schäfer** is a research fellow at the Peter Szondi Institute for Comparative Literature of the Free University of Berlin. She is the co-editor of *Literatur und Arbeit* (2018, with Maria Fixemer, Elisa Purschke and Vid Stevanović) as well as the author of articles on ideals of work in pirate novels or adventurous agency in the context of Soviet realism. Her current doctoral project analyses the interplay of adventure and work in novels from the United States and the Soviet Union.

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