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The *Festival des politischen Liedes* and the Soviet Bloc: Hungarian Folk in East Berlin 1970–1980

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Abstract

The *Festival des politischen Liedes* (Festival of Political Songs), held between 1970 and 1990 in East Berlin, was the largest international folk festival in communist Eastern Europe. Over the past three decades, an increasing number of studies have thoroughly explored the event's history, especially its institutional background. However, much less attention has been paid to the Eastern European guests, for whom performing here offered a rare opportunity for transnational mobility. This article, drawing on extensive archival research as well as interviews with organizers and musicians, investigates the festival from a Hungarian perspective. It examines how Hungarian guests came to be invited, what kind of music they performed, and how they adapted to the festival's dominant musical and ideological currents. Finally, the article briefly explores what kinds of foreign influences these artists encountered and how the Berlin event contributed to their future careers.

Key words

Cold War, folk revival, international exchange, Festival des politischen Liedes, Hungary

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Introduction: A Folk Festival in Cold War Eastern Europe

The *Festival des politischen Liedes* (Festival of Political Songs, sometimes also referred to as *Rote Lieder*), held between 1970 and 1990 in East Berlin, was the largest international folk¹ festival in Eastern Europe during the Cold War. Initially launched with artists from just six countries, it quickly evolved into a *mega-event*, attracting musicians, journalists, and researchers from 30 to 40 states across Europe, Asia, Africa, and North and Latin America.² Frequently described as a vital musical forum for the international left, the *Rote Lieder* served as a gathering point for bards, singer-songwriters, and folk ensembles aiming to demonstrate that (popular) music could function not only as entertainment, but also as a vehicle for exposing social injustices, supporting nations and social groups in their struggle for rights and freedom, and expressing solidarity with global political causes.³ A publication related to the 1973 edition went even further, asserting that the event had a primary mission to support global democratic and anti-imperialist movements through artistic expression and to broadly represent both national and transnational trends in music associated with “*the working class and other oppressed and marginalized social groups*”.⁴

Given its slogans and the profiles of its performers, it may appear similar to major Western folk festivals of the 1960s, such as the *Newport Festival* (associated with Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan), or the *Burg Waldeck Festival* in West Germany. However, while artists from the Second World rarely appeared at those Western events, in East Berlin, the majority of performers came from European, Asian, and Latin American countries that were key political allies of the German Democratic Republic (GDR): countries where musicians who voiced real criticism of social injustices or other aspects of existing socialism were systematically repressed, while apolitical artists were frequently co-opted and celebrated as fighters with songs. Moreover, guests from European and non-European socialist states implicitly agreed to participate under constant supervision, as part of official delegations, accompanied by state handlers, and to acknowledge content-related and aesthetic compromises, such as politicizing their repertoires and aligning their performances with the festival’s ideological slogans. Even artists visiting

1 *Folk* or *folk music* is a slippery concept; its definition varies considerably across regions, historical periods, political systems, and academic traditions. In this case study, the concept of *folk* is understood specifically as a genre or current of modern popular music. Rather than referring to traditional peasant music in a strict ethnographic sense, it denotes a range of artistic endeavours emerging in the second half of the 20th century that sought to revive and reinterpret diverse musical traditions—from rural and industrial folk songs to centuries-old forms of art and popular music—through new creative and ideological frameworks. In the following section, I will briefly discuss the starting points of *folk* in this sense, tracing its early manifestations in North America as well as in Western and Southern Europe. To reinforce this interpretation, I will also employ the term *contemporary folk*, which is primarily used in Anglo-American context.

2 HUTCHINSON, Sydney. World music, the Second World, and the Schlossplatz: Remembering (and Forgetting) the Festival des politischen Liedes. *Second World Music* [online]. (cit. 05.06. 2025). URL: <http://secondworldmusic.wordpress.com>. For the concept of *mega-event*, see: ROCHE, Maurice. *Mega-events and modernity: Olympics, expos and the growth of global culture*. London: Routledge, 2000.

3 KIRCHENWITZ, Lutz. *Folk, Chanson und Liedermacher in der DDR*. Berlin: Dietz, 1993, pp. 67–83.

4 MIREAU, Sieglinde (ed.). *Intersongs. Festival des Politischen Liedes*. Berlin: Neues Leben, 1973, p. 33.

from the capitalist West were not entirely free of restrictions: they were typically affiliated with leftist or communist parties in their home countries or openly endorsed socialist ideals and doctrines. And yet, the festival was far from being only about politics or politically engaged music. It also offered a rare chance to showcase a broader spectrum of global folk and world music traditions.

Because of its dual character, the *Festival des politischen Liedes* provides a revealing example of how a state-sanctioned yet culturally meaningful folk festival could be organized behind the Iron Curtain. It illustrates the institutional and ideological conditions that enabled such an event to exist, and illuminates the compulsory performative behaviours through which artists outwardly conformed to political expectations while subtly negotiating an autonomous expressive space within the socialist cultural framework.⁵ By examining its hosts and guests, one can also gain a clearer understanding of the significant differences between various Eastern Bloc states in terms of the development of their folk and singer-songwriter scenes. In certain countries, such as the GDR, the infrastructure and expertise necessary for organizing such a large-scale international event with state support were already in place by the early 1970s. For other countries, where international stars were rarely seen and information about the Western and non-European folk revivals was scarce, the festival represented a unique opportunity for artistic mobility and cross-border inspiration.

This article, drawing on extensive archival research, as well as interviews with the festival's main organizers and prominent musicians,⁶ aims to examine the significance of the GDR festival from the perspective of one such country: Hungary. First, it outlines the development of the Hungarian folk scene in the 1960s, situating it within a broader regional context. The second section focuses on Hungarian musicians who performed in East Berlin, examining how they came to be invited, what kind of music they performed, and how they adapted to the festival's dominant musical and ideological currents. Finally, the paper briefly explores what kinds of foreign influences these artists encountered and how the event contributed to their future international careers.

Emergence of the Folk Scene in Socialist Hungary

The most significant foundations of what we call *folk* or *contemporary folk* today, were laid primarily in the mid-to-late 1950s, in, on the one hand, the United States and Great Britain, and on the other, in Western and Southern Europe. In the former, *folk revival* was a resurrection of earlier musical movements tied to interwar political parties and

5 Cf. KOIVUNEN, Pia. *Performing peace and friendship. The World Youth Festivals and Soviet cultural diplomacy*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2023.

6 In recent years, I conducted research in the Archives of Akademie der Künste (Berlin), Bundesarchiv (Berlin), Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv (Potsdam), Archives of the Institute for Musicology, Humboldt University (Berlin), Hungarian National Archives (Budapest), and the Archives for 20th–21st Century Hungarian Music, Institute of Musicology, ELTE RCH (Budapest). I carried out interviews with Lutz Kirchenwitz and Elke Bitterhof (main organizers of the festival), Jürgen Elsner, János Vas (Gerilla, Monszun, Orfeo), János Bársony (Monszun), and János Balázs (Gerilla, Orfeo, Gépfolklór).

cultural organizations of the left: movements also spearheaded by folklorists such as Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and A. L. Lloyd.⁷ Meanwhile, in continental Europe, it was shaped by a more conscious, intellectual engagement with musical and poetic forms, drawing inspiration equally from medieval and early modern bardic storytelling, as well as politically charged songs composed by professional composers in the 19th and early 20th centuries (chansons, sung poetry, etc.).⁸

In Eastern Europe, folk emerged somewhat later as a new form of modern popular music. However, from the outset, socialist countries displayed considerable differences in the visibility of the genre, the access to information on Western and Third World trends, and the activities of disseminate actors (musicians, political officials, and intellectual elites).

Among the most developed and internationally connected countries during this period were Czechoslovakia and the GDR, each offering contrasting models of how Western folk could be interpreted and utilized. Both states were actively engaged in the Eastern Bloc's efforts at an *alternative globalization*, seeking to link global leftist-Marxist intellectual forces.⁹

In Czechoslovakia, interest in folk revival stemmed primarily from its perceived high aesthetic value and its stylistic divergence from the mainstream of Western popular music. This enthusiasm peaked in the mid-1960s, marked by Pete Seeger's concert in Prague (1964), the participation of Czech artists and theorists at the West German *Burg Waldeck Festival*,¹⁰ and related essays by renowned popular music critics like Lubomír Dorůžka.¹¹

In East Germany, such music was from the outset framed with a strong emphasis on its social and political functions. This emphasis had deep local roots, particularly in the traditions of workers' songs, which, in the broadest sense, encompassed both the various manifestations of industrial folklore and works by professional composers intended for workers' audiences or leftist organizations, most notably those by Hanns Eisler and Bertolt Brecht.¹² From the 1960s onward, this tradition and the "600-year-old repertoire of democratic folk songs" that narrated the struggles of oppressed classes became increasingly accessible, thanks to the institutionalized Marxist music folkloristics and workers' song research conducted by figures such as Wolfgang Steinitz and Inge Lammel.¹³

The emergence of folk and political song was further supported by a long-standing ideal: the attempt to create a new (socialist) popular culture, free from capitalist influ-

7 EYERMAN, Ron – JAMISON, Andrew. *Music and social movements. Mobilizing traditions in the twentieth century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.; COLE, Ross: *The folk. Music, modernity, and the political imagination*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2021.

8 MARC, Isabel – GREEN, Stuart (eds.). *The singer-songwriter in Europe. Paradigms, politics and place*. London: Ashgate, 2016.

9 MARK, James et al. (eds.) *Alternative globalizations. Eastern Europe and the postcolonial world*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020.

10 Cf. HOLLER, Eckhard. The Burg Waldeck Festivals, 1964–1969. In *Protest song in East and West Germany since the 1960s*. David ROBB (ed.). Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 2013, pp. 94–132.

11 See BLÜML, Jan – OPEKAR, Aleš. *Popular music research behind the Iron Curtain: Czech musicology in the context of Central European culture and politics*. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2025, pp. 133, 137–148.

12 ROBB, op. cit.

13 IGNÁ CZ, Ádám: *A munkásdaltól a popdalig. A munkásdalkutatás transzformációi Magyarországon és a keleti blokkban*. Budapest: Hungarian Research Network, 2025.

ences. In line with this objective, East German cultural diplomacy also embraced an openness to the so called *other America*, which highlighted not only activist figures and cultural products critical of U.S. foreign policy, racism, and the capitalist economy, but also the values inherent in folk traditions. This openness was facilitated not only by domestic journals of popular music and visiting musicians (Paul Robeson, Joan Baez, Pete Seeger), but also by migrants from Western Europe and North America.¹⁴ One notable example is Canadian musician and activist Perry Friedman, who had relocated to East Berlin in 1959. He founded Berlin's first club in the early 1960s modelled after North American *hootenannies*, spaces where young people performed and debated international folk songs, workers' songs, and protest songs.¹⁵ The model proved so successful that by the mid-1960s, similar clubs had emerged across the country, the most significant of which was the one in Berlin, later became known as *Oktoberklub*.

The success of dissemination efforts and the influence of foreign knowledge is evident in the fact that *contemporary folk* and *guitar poetry* had become a major trend in both popular music scenes of Czechoslovakia and the GDR. Thousands of amateur musicians participated, forming clubs or performing original songs and adaptations. In contrast, Hungary's folk scene remained far smaller and less visible. No major foreign stars visited the country; only a handful of articles on protest songs and Western folk revivals appeared; the records of Seeger and others were largely unavailable, and this kind of music could primarily be obtained through illegal channels, such as by listening to Western radio stations.¹⁶

This lack of knowledge and access was not simply a result of Hungary's relative diplomatic and cultural isolation after the failed 1956 anti-Soviet uprising. Other Western genres like beat-rock and jazz flourished during the same period, making Hungarian popular music a regional force by the 1970s. The delayed development is better explained by a few domestic factors. First, music folkloristics and public discourse on folk songs in Hungary were, both in the interwar period and under state socialism, predominantly shaped by composers and traditional folklorists, such as Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, who regarded domestic village folk music as the most valuable source for musical education and the most important foundation for a contemporary musical culture bridging the gaps between the lowest and highest spheres of music. Second, official and amateur choirs continued to play a dominant role in Hungarian (mass) music well after the Stalinist 1950s. They also appropriated the first ideologically acceptable forms of world music from outside the socialist camp—such as American spirituals or revolutionary songs from Latin America and Asia—thus leaving little room for younger, more modern interpretations of folk and workers' songs.¹⁷ Finally, it should be noted that after the experience of 1956—when many young people and workers were drawn into the uprising against Soviet oppression—the new regime led by János Kádár adopted a cautious stance toward

14 SCHUBERT, Maria. "We Shall Overcome". *Die DDR und die amerikanische Bürgerrechtsbewegung*. München: Schöningh, 2018.

15 KIRCHENWITZ, op.cit, pp. 27–28.

16 IGNÁCZ, op. cit.

17 Ibid.

socialist internationalism and revolutionary movements, even those in socialist countries like Cuba. Consequently, Hungary invested far less in promoting leftist ideals through cultural products than its aforementioned allies. Instead, Westernization in Hungary mainly referred to the import of politically innocuous commercial goods and high-modernist abstract cultural forms.¹⁸

Given this context, the folk scene in Hungary remained very small and was largely centred in Budapest, among left-leaning university students and intellectual circles with strong political connections. These groups employed folk songs and guitar poetry as instruments of political expression. Bands such as Gerilla (founded in 1965) and Monszun (1967) adapted international protest songs from the Western civil rights and student movements, as well as from Latin American revolutionary traditions, alongside works by George Brassens, Peter, Paul and Mary, and Pete Seeger. They also composed original pieces, typically with simple guitar accompaniment, protesting against colonialism, ethnic oppression, the Vietnam War, and other injustices of capitalism.¹⁹ Eventually, these musicians began seeking both domestic and international high poetry capable of conveying rebellious and uncompromising attitudes.

The early dominance of political folk in Hungary was also influenced by its advocates within the intelligentsia, such as János Maróthy—well known in international networks of Marxist musicology and workers’ song research—who also collaborated with Lloyd, Lammel, Steinitz, and other folklorists. A member of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party and, from 1961, an employee at the Bartók Archives of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Maróthy offered extensive support to Gerilla, Monszun, and similar ensembles. Using his political connections, he attempted to open public channels for their work. In 1966, he published the first songbook for amateur guitarists in Hungary, featuring revolutionary and folk songs from the Soviet Union, North America, Latin America, Asia, Germany, and Italy.²⁰ He regularly attended the ensembles’ rehearsals, provided musical advice and translated lyrics for them, and even granted access to his own large collection of protest song and folk recordings, thereby actively shaping their repertoire.²¹

Festivals as Tools of State Appropriation

From the early to mid-1960s, amateur musicians involved with hootenannies and folk ensembles across the Eastern Bloc were connected to the party-states primarily through the cultural infrastructure they utilized: they performed in youth clubs, theatres, cultural centers, and summer camps, while most of their exposure to Western and non-European

18 MARK, James – APOR, Péter. Socialism goes global: Decolonization and the making of a new culture of internationalism in socialist Hungary, 1956–1989. *Journal of Modern History*, 2015, vol. 53, no. 4, pp. 852–891.

19 Cf. K. HORVÁTH, Zsolt. Pol-beat: forradalmi népzene egy poszt-heroikus korban: A Gerilla együttes a globális forradalmi tematika és az állami midcult között, 1965–1971. In *A magyar populáris zene története(i)*. Ádám IGNÁCZ, (ed.). Budapest: Rózsavölgyi és Társa, 2020, pp. 313–368.

20 MARÓTHY, János – SZATMÁRI, Antal (eds.). *Forrongó világ*. Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1966.

21 Personal conversations with János Vas and János Bársony, February 2023.

folk trends came through official, state-controlled media channels. By 1966–1967, however, communist authorities—through musical institutions, state youth organizations, and committed left-wing intellectuals—adopted a new approach. Rather than simply tolerating these initiatives, they aimed to bring musicians under closer supervision and to channel their activities toward ideological objectives.²²

As this kind of music grew in popularity, several countries launched songwriting competitions, calling for new works that addressed socialist patriotism, internationalism, and important social issues. State campaigns also encouraged the adaptation and reinterpretation of old folk songs and workers' songs employing the tools of modern popular music.²³ The most effective form of appropriation and control, however, proved to be the state-organized music festivals.²⁴ These not only integrated contemporary folk ensembles and singer-songwriters but also provided opportunities to widely disseminate new, artificial forms of popular music carrying political and social messages aligned with official ideology, works that were grouped from now on under the label *political song*.

Eastern European festivals of political songs generally followed two basic formats. The first can be described as mainstream pop festivals featuring traditional hits with political lyrics, modelled after the *Red Carnation* (Красная гвоздика) international song festival held in Sochi, Soviet Russia, while the other the above-mentioned Western folk festivals in the US, Italy, or West Germany.

In Hungary, the local communist youth organization (KISZ), the state radio and television, and the Bartók Archives (represented by János Maróthy), initially supported the second model. According to a 1966 KISZ document, they aimed to organize a contest featuring local songs about national liberation and peace, alongside international pieces associated with the Cuban revolution or the Vietnam War. Invitations were also considered for renowned international performers, such as Wolf Biermann (GDR), Dieter Süverkrüp (West Germany), or Pete Seeger (USA). The idea was to expose Hungarian youth, with limited knowledge of international political songs, to these artists directly.²⁵

However, the event, eventually named *Pol-beat Fesztivál* (read: Political Beat-Rock Festival), materialized on a much smaller scale, excluding foreign performers, and fell short of its original goals. The line-up included acoustic folk ensembles such as Gerilla, but popular rock bands like Atlantisz, Syrius, and Omega, along with pop singers such as Sochi-participant Péter Máté, were also invited to perform new, trendy political songs with lyrics by the most influential lyricist of the period, István S. Nagy.

A year later, another festival of political songs was held in Budapest, as part of the television programme *Halló fiúk, halló lányok* (Hello Boys, Hello Girls), that followed

22 DJAGALOV, Rossen. Guitar poetry, democratic socialism, and the limits of 1960s internationalism. In *The socialist sixties. Crossing borders in the Second World*. Anne GORSUCH – Diane P. KOENKER (eds.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013, pp. 148–166.

23 See e.g. Hungarian National Archives. A KISZ KB dalpályázata közéleti és társadalmi témájú dalok megírására. MNL OL PIL 289.f/13 44.d. Documents of the Hungarian Communist Youth Association (KISZ).

24 IGNÁ CZ, op. cit.

25 Hungarian National Archives. Tervezet a KISZ KB és a Rádió és TV első politikai dalfesztiváljához. MNL OL PIL 289.f/13 49.d. Documents of the Hungarian Communist Youth Association (KISZ).

a similar structure and approach. This time, performers from East Germany, Finland, Romania, the Soviet Union, and France were invited, but most of them were accompanied by the local rock band Atlantis. GDR singer Jürgen Pippig, who participated in the event, critically remarked in his informal travel report sent to the Free German Youth (FDJ), that many performers experimented with blending political content with rock or estrada music, a practice he found quite unusual and genre-inappropriate from an East German perspective.²⁶

As indicated by Pippig's report, the GDR did not experience the same commercializing tendencies as Hungary. Instead, the more non-conformist and strongly political branch of folk came to the forefront in East German public discourse in the late 1960s. In 1966, the local communist youth organization FDJ and the Ministry of Culture issued their first resolutions on political song, outlining plans to oversee existing *hootenannies* and organize a new song movement. This state-directed initiative, which from 1967 became known as the *Singebewegung*, was modelled, in terms of repertoire, institutions, and platforms, on the Western folk revivals.²⁷

From 1967 onward, hundreds of *Singeklubs* were established across the country. That year also saw the launch of annual *Werkstattwoche* (workshop weeks), featuring concerts, lectures, and discussions. While nationwide in scope, these were complemented by strong regional initiatives. Notably, the Oktoberklub's birthday mini-festivals in Berlin stood out. Hosted by the country's most influential folk group, they were the first to invite foreign guests, including Hungary's Gerilla. Ultimately, these gatherings laid the groundwork for the *Festival des politischen Liedes*, which, beginning in 1970, was held each year in mid-February to coincide with the Oktoberklub's anniversary.

After 1968, Hungary no longer hosted international folk festivals and rarely welcomed artists from other Eastern European countries. Events that combined folk with mainstream pop-rock soon disappeared even at the local level. By contrast, by the late 1960s, the GDR had established a platform that provided Hungarian and other Eastern European performers with lasting international exposure. Crucially, it also created an institutional framework that allowed representatives of the folk and singer-songwriter scenes to distinguish themselves from other genres of popular music and operate independently.

Narrow Paths to the Berlin Festival

Over the past three decades, a growing number of studies have examined the history of *Rote Lieder*, its institutional foundations, and the way it evolved from the Oktoberklub's mini-festival format into a major international event. These studies have also highlighted the festival's strong ties to the *World Festival of Youth and Students*, the support it received from numerous state organizations and media outlets, and its pivotal role in facilitating the

26 Bundesarchiv. Bericht über Budapest-Chansongfestival, DY24 6773 66–70. Documents of the Free German Youth.

27 See Archives of the German Academy of Arts. ADK-O 5364. Documents of the Berlin Archives of Workers' Songs.

import of Western and Latin American folk music—successfully bringing world-renowned artists such as the Chilean group Quilapayún, American singer Pete Seeger, or South African Miriam Makeba behind the Iron Curtain. However, much less attention has been paid to the Eastern European participants of the festival, including Hungarian guests, for whom performing in Berlin offered a rare opportunity for international mobility.

Hungary possessed a unique relationship with the event from the very beginning, as it was the most represented country among all Eastern European participants. As **Table 1** indicates, over the first decade (including the Gerilla’s appearances at the Oktoberklub’s mini-festivals in 1968 and 1969, but excluding rock performances at the 1973 special edition, which became a side event of the same year’s *World Festival of Youth and Students* in East Berlin), 14 Hungarian soloists and ensembles performed in East Berlin. Between 1970 and 1980, Hungary was the only country from Eastern Europe to be represented every single year, with some years featuring three or four different acts.²⁸

Compared with, for example, Czechoslovakia, these numbers are particularly noteworthy. During the same period, 13 performers from Hungary’s northern neighbor participated, yet only two appeared more than once, and in just two years were at least two Czech or Slovak acts invited to Berlin. More importantly, only a handful of performers attained significant fame and recognition in their home countries (remarkable exceptions being Pavol Hammel and the ensemble Český Skiffle).²⁹ According to Jan Blüml, this may be linked to the suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968 and the country’s subsequent conservative political shift, known as normalization.

During this period, key opinion makers in Czechoslovak popular music (journalists and academics alike) as well as prominent figures in folk and guitar poetry generally regarded participation in state-organized political song festivals as a form of collaboration with the oppressive regime, often carrying a heavy stigma.³⁰ In Hungary, by contrast, the list of performers suggests that such reservations were far less prominent. The Hungarian delegations continuously consisted of artists who were also respected by critics and enjoyed a loyal fan base at home. It is therefore fair to say that Hungary was represented in Berlin during the 1970s by the elite of its folk and singer-songwriter scenes.

All the Hungarian artists listed in **Table 1** travelled to Berlin as part of official national delegations, following formal coordination between the FDJ, the festival organizers, and the KISZ. These delegations also included interpreters and chaperones accompanying the musicians.³¹ As confirmed in personal interviews with several artists, these individuals were responsible for compiling reports on the musicians’ activities and ensuring that their performances adhered strictly to the pre-approved setlists and agreements established between the hosts and guests.³²

28 Archives of the German Academy of Arts. Künstlerdossiers Ungarn. Festival-des-politischen-Liedes 101, 102. Archiv zum Festival des politischen Liedes. Cf. recordings of the festivals at the Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv.

29 Archives of the German Academy of Arts. Künstlerdossiers CSSR. Festival-des-politischen-Liedes 72,73. Archiv zum Festival des politischen Liedes.

30 Personal conversation with Jan Blüml, July 2025, Olomouc.

31 IGNÁ CZ, op. cit.

32 Personal conversation with János Vas, János Bársony, and János Balázs, February 2023, Budapest.

Name	Year	Style	National/International	Berlin repertoire
Gerilla	(1968, 1969) 1970, 1971	political folk	International	1. Adaptations of North American and Latin American protest songs 2. Own compositions with own lyrics and based on Hungarian and Latin American poetry
Judit Csaba (solo)	1970	political folk	International	1. Own compositions with own lyrics
Monszun	1971	political folk	International	1. Adaptations of Brecht&Eisler compositions 2. Adaptations of Gerilla songs 3. Roma folk song adaptations 4. Own compositions based on Hungarian poetry
Orfeo	1972	political folk	International	1. Adaptations of Brecht&Eisler compositions 2. Adaptations of Quilapayún songs 3. Own compositions based on Hungarian Betyár ballads 4. Own compositions in the manner of Latin American <i>Nueva Canición</i>
Kaláka	1972, 1973, 1974, 1980	guitar poetry	National	Own compositions based on Hungarian poetry
Vízöntő	1973	authentic folk	National	1. Hungarian peasant song adaptations 2. Own compositions based on Hungarian Betyár ballads

Name	Year	Style	National/International	Berlin repertoire
Lajos Boros (solo)	1973, 1974, 1975	guitar poetry	National	1. Own compositions with own lyrics and based on Hungarian and German poetry
József Dinnyés (solo)	1974	guitar poetry	National	1. Own compositions based on Hungarian poetry
Sándor Csizmadia (solo)	1974	guitar poetry	National	1. Own compositions based on Hungarian poetry
Muszty&Dobai (duo)	1974, 1975, 1976	guitar poetry	International (in 1974) National (in 1975, 1976)	1. Own composition with own lyrics and based on Hungarian poetry 2. North American country 3. North American protest songs
Theatre 25	1977	synthesis of authentic folk, political folk, and guitar poetry	National	1. Own compositions based on Hungarian poetry 2. Hungarian peasant song adaptations 3. Soundtrack of the Hungarian movie <i>Roter Psalm</i> 4. Adaptations of German and Hungarian songs from the interwar labor movements
KISZ Folk Pódium	1977	synthesis of authentic folk and guitar poetry	National	1. Own compositions based on Hungarian poetry, and folk ballads 2. Hungarian peasant song adaptations
Gépfoklór	1978	folk-rock	National	1. Own compositions based on Hungarian peasant songs

Name	Year	Style	National/International	Berlin repertoire
Tamás Berki (solo)	1978, 1980	(parody of) political folk ethno-jazz	International	1. Parodistic adaptations of North American and Latin American protest songs and Brecht&Eisler compositions 2. Own compositions based on German and American poetry
Kormorán	1979	folk-rock	National	1. Own compositions based on Hungarian peasant songs

Tab. 1 Hungarian artists at the *Festival des politischen Liedes* 1970–1980

This may suggest that the selection of performers was governed entirely by strict oversight from the Hungarian and East German authorities. In reality, however, entry into these delegations could follow very different paths, pointing to a surprisingly decentralized mechanism. Artists who had some kind of direct East German connection were often given preference. For example, the band Gerilla had met members of the Oktoberklub during a vacation in lake Balaton in 1967, leading to invitations to the Oktoberklub’s mini-festivals and later to *Rote Lieder* itself.³³

Another direct channel was represented by János Maróthy. He was the sole foreign participant at the very first side event of the festival, a roundtable on the past and future of the *Singebewegung* organized by Inge Lammel.³⁴ Archival documents further confirm that in 1972, Fred Krüger, composer at the Oktoberklub and FDJ functionary, visited Maróthy in Budapest at the Institute of Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (the legal successor to the Bartók Archives), where the musicologist informed him about recent developments in Hungarian folk and proposed artists for future festival line-ups.³⁵ It is worth noting that in 1971, 1972, and 1973, Monszun, Orfeo, and Vízöntő were all invited on his recommendation.³⁶

33 Personal conversation with Lutz Kirchenwitz, August 2022, Ribnitz-Damgarten.

34 Archives of the German Academy of Arts. Diskussion über die neue Lieder (textliche und musikalische Faktur) und Interrelationsformen der Singebewegung. February 18, 1970. ADK-O 0793. Documents of the Berlin Archives of Workers’ Songs.

35 RING, Orsolya. Törd a kerítést s a falakat át. Az Orfeo zenekar két éve (1971–1972). In *Műfajok, stílusok, szubkultúrák. Tanulmányok a magyar populáris zenéről*. Ádám IGNÁ CZ (ed.). Budapest: Rózsavölgyi és Társa, 2015, p. 144.

36 Personal conversation with János Vas, February 2023, Budapest.

Some artists earned their spot through domestic events, in a manner that was similar to how Hungarian pop and estrada musicians were sent to international showcases, such as the *Bratislavská Lýra* or the *Dresden Schlager Festival*. For example, Lajos Boros won the political song category of the popular Hungarian television talent show *Ki mit tud?* (Who Knows What?) in 1972. One of the prizes was participation in the Hungarian musical delegation at the 1973 *World Festival of Youth and Students*, which also included the special edition of the *Festival des politischen Liedes*. Another, although later, example may be Gépfolklór, discovered at the *Fiatal Dalosok Találkozója* (Meeting of Young Singer-Songwriters), a major domestic folk festival, launched in 1973. That event's organizational board and jury included János Maróthy and former Gerilla leader Tamás Berki, as well as other artists who also regularly appeared in Berlin.³⁷

Also among the Hungarian contributors were the Theatre 25 and the KISZ Folk Pódium, two of the few state-supported institutions that in the 1970s provided performance opportunities for various singer-songwriters and folk ensembles. Their hybrid performances at the Berlin festival showcased this diversity and richness.

These patterns may all reflect the drastic transformation in the public visibility and reception of the Hungarian folk scene after 1968. Following the low-attendance political song festivals in Budapest in 1967 and 1968, contemporary folk and political song increasingly lost their privileged status as genres supported by the state. The withdrawal of unified support manifested in the termination of large state-sponsored festivals and contests, the diminishing presence of folk ensembles on television and radio, and the increasing reluctance of the state record company MHV to release or distribute their recordings.³⁸ While state media largely ignored them, folk musicians in Hungary during the 1970s often relied on individual patrons who, through personal networks, could help secure official permission for their participation at the *Festival des politischen Liedes*. One such patron was Maróthy and the Institute of Musicology, or the Theatre 25, which sought to revive the ethos of interwar avantgarde and agitprop theatres. Director László Gyurkó had promoted musical-poetic evenings since the early 1970s and regularly commissioned composers and performers such as Ferenc Sebő (founder of the authentic folk and *táncház* movement) and Tamás Cseh (well known for his ironic and grotesque songs) for plays and political shows. Both contributed to the theatre's Berlin performance in 1977.

The Repertoire of Hungarian Performers in Berlin

Some recently published studies have attempted to analyse the repertoire of the *Festival des politischen Liedes* and classify the songs performed there. Based on the official compilation albums released annually by AMIGA, for example, Jesse Freedman distinguished between two basic categories: on the one hand, “*anthems with a strong political*

37 IGNÁ CZ, op. cit.

38 K. HORVÁTH, op. cit.

orientation”, focusing on themes of war, peace, or solidarity; and on the other, apolitical “*folkloric popular music*” characterized by distinctly “*exotic or ethnic rhythms and sounds*”.³⁹ While this dual categorization appears reasonable, the present paper proposes a different analytical framework, one that distinguishes between *national* (i.e. country-specific) and *transnational* repertoires.

From a Hungarian perspective, the national repertoire is exemplified by performances that featured authentic interpretations of traditional Hungarian (or more broadly, Carpathian Basin) peasant music, or by musical settings of poetry by prominent Hungarian authors, typically performed with guitar accompaniment.

The transnational repertoire can be further subdivided. First, significant emphasis was placed on internationally recognized revolutionary songs, which were performed in national language versions and with individual instrumental arrangements. These included older worker’s songs and political songs, pieces associated with the Western social and student movements of the 1950s and 1960s, as well as iconic songs from contemporary socialist revolutions in Latin America. Second, singalongs were held, where all participants collectively performed songs like the “Internationale” or Anatoli Novikov’s “Anthem of the Democratic Youth” in their respective languages at the opening and closing ceremonies, events in which Hungarian artists also took part. Songs in the first two categories arguably served as the primary points of connection between Hungarian artists and performers from the First, Second, and Third Worlds. They often functioned as vehicles for the festival’s core political and ideological messages. However, their inclusion served more of a *performative function*, legitimizing the presence of less overtly political or more obscure pieces. A further layer of the transnational repertoire included adaptations of old German worker’s songs, Brecht–Eisler compositions, as well as original pieces by foreign artists performed in German translation. These were incorporated by Hungarian performers such as Gábor Boros, József Dinnyés, the Monszun, and the Theatre 25, as gestures of goodwill toward the host country.

Finally, certain trends gained considerable traction in Eastern Europe thanks to the festival. Chief among these was the Latin American *Nueva Canción*. Following the performance of Quilapayún in 1971, numerous Eastern European musicians, including Hungarians such as the Orfeo ensemble, performed songs popularized by the Chilean group or composed their own pieces in the manner of *Nueva Canción*.

During the festival’s first three years, when it still retained elements of its grassroots character, Hungarian guests with a pronounced political and internationalist orientation were invited to participate. After 1973, however, as the festival evolved into a large-scale event and considerably expanded its musical spectrum to embrace world music, rock, and jazz, artists specialized in the authentic rendition of Hungarian peasant music or in guitar-accompanied poetry rooted in Hungarian literature began to dominate, gradually sidelining more overtly political and internationalist content. This shift can be attributed, in part, to the festival’s growing aesthetic and stylistic diversification. Yet it would be misleading to conclude that political slogans and internationalist themes vanished from

39 FREEDMAN, Jesse. *The precarity of sonic geographies: Politics and identity of Chilean Nueva Canción in East Germany*. PhD dissertation. University of California, 2022.

the Berlin stage after 1973; rather, the duality between political and apolitical gigs, as Freedman observed, became increasingly pronounced during the latter half of the decade.

In fact, the change had another underlying cause: Hungary struggled to reconcile the nationalist and internationalist currents represented in East Berlin. As noted earlier, the Hungarian folk scene underwent a profound transformation after 1968. After the invasion of the Warsaw Pact troops in Czechoslovakia, the overall political climate, particularly in the realm of cultural policy, did become more hardline in Hungary. This led to increasing repression of folk ensembles that sympathized with radical leftist ideologies or promoted socialist internationalism while also being critical of existing socialism. Groups such as Gerilla, Monszun, and Orfeo came under growing pressure from the state security apparatus and faced increasing restrictions on their media appearances.⁴⁰

By the early 1970s, therefore, a paradoxical situation had emerged: while these groups found increasingly difficult to operate at home, they were still able to represent Hungary at the Berlin festival thanks to their East German contacts and their private patrons, such as Maróthy. The years 1972–1973 symbolically marked the end of this period: by that time, all three ensembles had disbanded. And since they had only ever had a relatively narrow, urban intellectual fanbase, there was no real successor generation to carry forward the political, internationalist branch of Hungarian folk.

This can be most clearly illustrated through the examples of the Orfeo and Vízöntő ensembles in 1972 and 1973, two groups whose line-ups were essentially identical. Orfeo, founded by former members of Gerilla and Monszun directly during the 1971 Berlin festival, gave its performance on February 15, 1972. Their programme featured three-part vocal arrangements with guitars, flute, charango, and panpipes, and included both Hungarian and international pieces. The most significant among the latter was “Canción de Soldados” by the Spanish singer Chicho Sánchez Ferlosio, a song presumably composed in the early 1960s that became a symbol of resistance against the Franco regime. What made Orfeo’s interpretation especially distinctive was its sound and instrumentation, which closely followed the style of the Chilean ensemble Quilapayún, a group that Orfeo’s members had encountered live at the 1971 Berlin festival and had considered their primary role model ever since. The influence of Quilapayún was so pronounced that Orfeo performed excerpts from their “Elegia” and introduced an original composition, “Carmen Cienfuegos”, dedicated to a Cuban revolutionary, written in the stylistic mold of the Chilean ensemble.

By contrast, Vízöntő’s performance at the 1973 festival centred exclusively around arrangements of traditional Hungarian and Carpathian Basin peasant songs. While thematically still aligned with the event’s broader concerns, such as dealing with poverty and exploitation, these songs were musically quite different from Orfeo’s earlier programme. The setlist included “Úgy elmennék, ha mehetnék” from the northern Mezőség region, a “Cantata” about a poor peasant, as well as Hungarian and Bulgarian folk ballads about vagrants and outlaws. The session concluded with a composition by Ferenc Sebő, a leading figure in Hungary’s authentic folk scene.

40 IGNÁ CZ, Ádám. A latin-amerikai populáris zene útjai a kádári Magyarországon. In *Zenétörténetek Közép-Európából*. Gergely FAZEKAS, et al. (eds.). Pécs: Kronosz, 2024, pp. 300–322.

From this point onward, the number of international songs in the repertoires of Hungarian performers declined dramatically. When international elements did return, they often took on a parodic form, as seen in the solo performances of former Gerilla member Tamás Berki in 1978 and 1980.

Hungarian Folk and International Mobility

The above-mentioned example of Orfeo ensemble also highlights the fact that Hungarian performers benefitted directly from their participation in Berlin: in this case, they encountered Latin American folk music, and this live experience significantly shaped their stylistic development. However, this was not the only case when participation in *Rote Lieder* influenced musicians' careers or led to further exchanges. According to the recollections of its former members (János Vas, János Balázs),⁴¹ Orfeo, following their success in Berlin, was invited on a tour across other major cities of the GDR. Throughout the decade, other Hungarian artists received similar invitations. Kaláka, which performed at the festival four times over a ten-year period between 1970 and 1980, frequently gave concerts elsewhere in East Germany and, as a result of their successful debut in 1972, was also included in *Rhythmus 73*, another youth festival held in East Germany.

With the exception of Tamás Cseh, who appeared as the member of the Theatre 25, members of Kaláka were the only artists among those listed in **Table 1** who released an LP in Hungary during the 1970s. For a long time, the Hungarian folk discography was limited to just a few singles or double EPs, a situation that only began to change in the 1980s. As mentioned earlier, little interest was shown in folk and political songs from the late 1960s by the Hungarian Radio and the state record label MHV, leaving musicians in a constant struggle to gain visibility within the official public sphere. For this reason, it was a significant development that the same performers were able to make recordings in the GDR and even in Western Europe. Gerilla, for example, which released only two singles in Hungary, had already appeared on an Oktoberklub anniversary album in 1968 and later contributed to the official compilation of the very first *Festival des politischen Liedes* in 1970 (*Song 1970*). Kaláka also featured on such a compilation in 1973, and that same year appeared on *Hallo Nr. 7*, an AMIGA youth music compilation.

It is therefore reasonable to assert that the Berlin showcase played a pivotal role in advancing the international careers of Hungarian musicians. One could even argue, borrowing Ferenc Hammer's term, that the event served as "substitute publicity" (*pótnyilvánosság*) for a scene that lacked visibility in its home country during the 1970s. This case study also underscores the divergent trajectories of Eastern European folk during the Cold War and even suggests that the political, social, and aesthetic conditions affecting the visiting countries' music scenes also left a discernible imprint on the festival's programming.

41 Personal conversation with János Vas and János Balázs, February 2023, Budapest.

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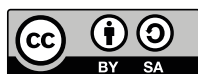
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