

## Tallinn State Conservatoire's 1948 Academic Session in the Context of Soviet Ideology

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### Summary

During the Soviet regime the discipline of history was primarily seen as a propaganda tool and as a possibility for spreading communist ideology. One of the strategies for implementing the Soviet worldview was the re-evaluation of past events and rewriting the history of the Soviet nations in the fields of politics, literature, art and music. While the subject of creating "a new Soviet history" of the Estonian people has been more thoroughly researched, the area of rewriting Estonian music history has hitherto lacked a comprehensive study.

This article aims to shed some light on this little studied topic by focusing on how the ideological aspects were manifested in the papers<sup>1</sup> of the first academic session of the Tallinn State Conservatoire, which took place in December 1948. The organisation of this event was directly influenced by the resolution of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union "On Muradeli's Opera *The Great Friendship*", which was issued on 10 February 1948 (Nadžafov, Belousova 2005) and which marked a significant increase in ideological pressure on the musical life of the USSR. In accordance with the demands of the Party, the session concentrated on (re)evaluating Estonia's musical heritage according to the principles of Marxist-Leninist aesthetics and on finding the relationship between Estonian and Russian culture. The article examines which elements of Soviet ideology were present in the texts and how and by what means the authors associated them with Estonian music history.

Analysis of the session papers indicates that the session marked a considerable shift in the rethinking and rewriting of Estonian music history. The presenters, the academic staff of the conservatoire (Jaak Ottender, Herbert Tampere, Bruno Lukk, Anna Klas, Aurora Semper, Karl Leichter, Artur Vahter), tried to interpret Estonian music life through the lens of Marxism-Leninism and of the official postulates that pertained to Soviet art, its aims and its characteristic features. Among the ways the ideology was conveyed in the papers was, for example, through the use of quotations by Stalin, Lenin and other political figures as well as by emphasising the primary role of ideology in the creative and educational fields. There was also a tendency towards more ideological introductions and conclusions, while the main body of the text could be relatively neutral. An important place was given to explanations of Soviet art as a phenomenon and to the official theory of Soviet art – socialist realism, which was juxtaposed to formalism. Art was repeatedly symbolised as a weapon and the fact of its "belonging to the people" was also emphasised.

As one of the main goals of the session was to discover the positive influences of the Russian nation and Russian culture on Estonian (music) culture, the speakers repeatedly highlighted the historically friendly relations between Estonians and Russians, while portraying the Germans as a common enemy. This narrative was relatively easy to implement due to both Estonia's history and geographical location as well as to the nationalist movements that had been strong in Estonia in the 1930s (Undusk 2003: 46; Lippus 1995: 5; Tamm 2003: 64–65). Among the other main topics were an emphasis on the leading role of the Party in controlling art and the importance of (self-)criticism. The new Soviet approach to the past was implemented by new vocabulary and rhetoric and repeated slogans as well as by using half-truths and facts taken out of context.

It can be assumed that for the majority of the session's lecturers Soviet ideology was disagreeable and often unacceptable. Several of them – including Karl Leichter, Aurora Semper – belonged to the group of intellectuals active during the period of the independent Republic of Estonia and were deeply rooted in Estonian/Western culture. However, the ideological aspect appeared to a greater or lesser extent in all the presentations. The most pressing reason for this was certainly the fear of being fired –

<sup>1</sup> The papers are kept at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre library archive.

the first conservatoire professors had already been dismissed in August 1948 –, repressed or even arrested.

Despite the fact that the ideological aspect can be observed in all the presentations, it did not save the entire authorship from criticism; in the case of musicologists Aurora Semper and Karl Leichter this only worsened as time went on, ending with their dismissal from the conservatoire in the following years. However, with the assistance of the academic session an attempt was made to move forward along the path of Soviet ideology. Amongst other things, its continuation can be seen in the long process of compiling a Soviet history of Estonian music and the subsequent academic sessions of the conservatoire, which merit a separate study of their own.