

The *Bitterfelder Weg* and the Path to Political Song in the GDR

Meredith Nicoll

This talk intends to shed light on the music-political theories and policies that paved the way for such musical institutions like the *Singebewegung* and the Festival of Political song that had a huge impact on East German musical life. East German composers and musicologists of the post-war era saw themselves as responsible for several (often conflicting) musical traditions. The imperatives of Socialist Realism, the ideals of the “great” German musical heritage, the traditions of political cabaret and workers’ singing movements of the previous century all influenced the role that music was supposed to play in the *Aufbau*, the construction of a socialist society.

The *Bitterfelder Weg*, the cultural policy that was officially introduced in 1959, formally encouraged artistic engagement among the masses while requiring political engagement among professional artists. Because the human voice was seen as the musical material of the proletariat, songs played an especially important role. With opportunities like the *Arbeiterfestspiele*, the Association of Composers and Musicologists (VKM) bolstered support for the hundreds of ensembles that were already a part of most workplaces. The VKM created *Zirkel komponierender Arbeiter* (Circle of Composing Workers) where professionals and amateurs wrote songs together. The ideal of mutual influence between workers and artists also resulted in some unusual projects, such as the plan for “*Autorenehen*” (literally “author marriages”), in which a poet and a composer would be paired up and sent to live with soldiers on a military base of the newly founded National People’s Army to create a new, relevant repertoire for the soldiers to sing.

By the mid-1960s, the specific rhetoric of the *Bitterfelder Weg* had lost direct influence over cultural policies. Nevertheless, the ideals of grassroots artistic musical practice endured, setting the stage for the artistic legitimacy of the political song for years to come.

Meredith Nicoll is a vocalist, theater maker and musicologist. She studied German language and literature at the University of Southern California, music and theater at the Freie Universität Berlin, and voice in Leipzig and Hamburg. She is a member of the GRiNM network (Gender Relations in New Music), is earning the certificate of gender competence from the University of Hamburg, and is active as a freelance gender and diversity consultant for cultural institutions. Artistically, she is particularly active in contemporary music and is a founding member of the interdisciplinary theater collective *picnic*, who’s current project TERRITORIUM deals with the intersections of folk song, national borders and identity. She is currently working as a research assistant at the HfMT Hamburg and is writing her dissertation on song production in the early GDR.