

Proposal

Conference on Politics in Music and Song (Belfast, 8-10 September 2023)

Title: Irish Rebel Songs in the GDR: Popular Culture and Anti-Imperialist Resistance

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Abstract

In the 1970s and '80s, several East German folk-revival artists started playing Irish traditional music, long before reconnecting with German folk-song material that had been put into the service of extreme nationalist and racist propaganda during the Nazi era (1933–45). Drawing upon ethnographic research among former GDR folk musicians, this paper proposes that many of these post-war artists aligned with the anti-colonial messages of Irish rebel songs, performing a veritable sense of 'Irish' Republicanism, a form of national pride that was considered more socially acceptable than indigenous patriotic German leanings. Adapting Boym's (2001) concept of 'sideways nostalgia', and illustrating crucial distinctions between historical registers of German and Irish musical exceptionalism, the paper purports to unravel trajectories through which this narrative of political alignment is fashioned and sustained, ultimately illustrating music's capacity to sound nationalism's polyphonic trajectories. In particular, it is argued that a powerful top-down imaginary of Irish anti-colonial rebellion was circulated through popular culture and could thus be harnessed by GDR artists from the bottom up. Simultaneously, this adaptation of Irish Republican leanings resonated with the official socialist rhetoric of anti-imperialist resistance.

Biography

Felix Morgenstern is Senior Scientist (Postdoc) at the Institute for Ethnomusicology, University of Music and Performing Arts Graz. As an ethnomusicologist, Irish traditional-music practitioner and former Irish Research Council Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholar (University of Limerick, 2018–2020), his work explores translocal (Irish) folk-/traditional-music practices and polyphonic musical nationalisms in Europe. Morgenstern's current, FWF-funded research project 'Irish Folk in Austria: Evading National Identity' (M 3292-G) examines how the translocal practice and reception of Irish folk music in Austria confronts or elides the traumatic legacy of extreme nationalism in modern European cultural history.

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