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QUESTIONS OF COMPREHENSION, LANGUAGE, AND MEANING IN SOVIET POPULAR MUSIC

This article is by no means a comprehensive study of the role of language in popular music in the USSR.[1] Instead, I have collated my own observations and the work of historians to highlight the relevance of language and ideas of comprehension/meaning/emotion for histories of Soviet music and Soviet listeners. I have framed this through a 1979 film score written by the Estonian composer **Sven Grünberg** but wish to acknowledge the nuances and complexity of drawing conclusions about Soviet popular music given that conditions varied so drastically across the Soviet republics. Despite my own limitations in assessing and accessing information about these variations, I hope this draws attention to further scholarship in the field. While perhaps rooted in my own enthusiasm for the topic, I still believe that scholarship can delve ever deeper into the importance of popular music in people's lives under the Soviet system, and what it continues to mean today.

The film *Dead Mountaineer's Hotel* (*"Hukkunud Alpinisti" hotell)* was released in 1979, based on the 1970 novel by **Arkady** and **Boris Strugatsky** of the same name (*Otel "U pogibshego alpinista"*). Sven Grünberg, a composer in his early twenties with a focus on electronic music, was asked to produce the film's soundtrack after **Arvo Pärt** declined. Pärt was waiting for a tourist visa to be approved, which could come at any moment, and didn't want to inconvenience the film's director, **Grigori Kromanov**. "People literally lived on top of suitcases," recalled Grünberg in 2015 (Kulli). Luckily for Grünberg, Pärt was still waiting in Estonia when Kromanov sought a second opinion on Grünberg's "questionable" new-age compositions, and Pärt gave a literal thumbs-up in approval. Kromanov's concerns regarding Grünberg's unorthodox soundtrack were not the same as the Soviet censors: at the film's Goskino review, a KGB colonel accused the film of sneaking in Western music;

"What! You think we're stupid? You think we haven't heard Pink Floyd here?" (Kulli, 2015).

But it seems that this ambiguity was what Grünberg had set out to create. The soundtrack for *Dead Mountaineer's Hotel* is without words – or at least, without comprehensible ones. Grünberg's score is instrumental, utilising some vocalisations accompanied by harp, organ, and the highly coveted EMS Synthi 100 synthesiser housed in Moscow. The exception is *Ball* (meaning a ball as in a formal dance). Grünberg sings in gibberish – what he himself described as a sci-fi language – yet there is a clear syntax and structure to his lyrics, the verses following a distinct cadence and the same imaginary words repeated in the chorus. At certain moments, you might believe you hear a distorted English or Estonian phrase, but upon the next listen, you'll change your mind. There is a thematic justification for this. *Ball* is played at moments in the film intended to indicate the alienation of our hero, Inspector Glebsky, from his surroundings. The film (and novel) is rife with symbolism along these themes – characters' names, costuming, and set design. The titular hotel is in an unnamed European country; the characters have unclear (and even preternatural) origins. *Ball* plays as the hotel's guests convince Glebsky to partake in a disconcerting, hypnotic dance, our hero indulging in the ambiguity he has found himself in. I find it hard to imagine myself joining him on the dancefloor – *Ball* is not what you'd call music for social dancing.

Of course, this incomprehensibility had thematic (and political) intent. **Näripea** and **Cederlöf** have extensively analysed the film's subtle advocacy for Baltic sovereignty and its deconstruction of Soviet nationality policy (2015). *Dead Mountaineer's Hotel* featured a cast from across the USSR, and dubbing

was employed for multiple actors – this was no obstacle given that the film would be requisitely dubbed into Russian anyway. This also applied to film scores:

> “At that time, it was mandatory that if there were songs in a film, they had to be dubbed into Russian, and the performer could not usually be chosen by the composer.”

The songs would be translated, rerecorded, and used in the Russian-dubbed version as well as released commercially –

> “I couldn’t have **Muslim Magomayev** or any other People’s Artist twisting up these songs in Russian.” (Kulli, 2015)

To avoid any erroneous reinterpretation of his work, Grünberg removed his own voice and voided the song of any concrete, lyrical meaning. Grünberg may not have set out to make a grand political statement, and I won’t suggest that that was his intention or the result. Yet rendering music incomprehensible – and thereby amputating one’s own ability to be understood – seems a twisted reflection of musical realities in the USSR.

Historians cite many reasons for Western music’s popularity in the Soviet period, of which the appeal of incomprehensibility is only one. The spread of Western music into the USSR took on speed in the 1960s and 1970s. Illicit listening grew more and more widespread: through foreign radio broadcasters like the Voice of America or the BBC World Service, smuggled records, or officially sanctioned releases that came as a result of the US-Soviet détente in the 1970s (Zhuk 2025, 137). Student bands performed at Komsomol discos or university festivals, and foreign students from socialist and non-aligned countries brought their musical knowledge with them (Zhuk 2010, 87). Much of this music was listened to as well as performed in English (Troitsky 1988, 39). **Fürst** claimed that limited understanding of lyrical content was no barrier – in fact, it allowed listeners to focus on how the music made them feel. An informant interviewed for Fürst’s *Flowers Through Concrete* stated:

> “I, like the rest of young people at the time, was absolutely incapable of listening to any songs produced in the fatherland—not folk songs, not Estrada, nothing in Russian at all. All this had the smell of Sovietness and old-fashionedness to it.” (2021, 242)

The informant goes on to say that English was the most preferred language of music consumption in the 1960s and 1970s, along with Polish, Yugoslav, and Czech. Foreign language music

> “(instilled) a sense of freedom, while the sound of Russian invoked parents, authority, and bureaucrats.” (Fürst 2021, 243)

Fürst asserts that in the 1960s, the ‘wordiness’ of the entire Soviet cultural system, from state television to dissident songwriters, was rejected. A participant describes how they fell head over heels for foreign radio broadcasts:

> “I understood nothing—and yet it seemed to me that the language was my own. The music simply carried me away.” (Fürst 2021, 243)

Troitsky describes Moscow’s early unofficial bands as “live jukeboxes”, tasked with recreating Western music as accurately as possible (1988, 25). In interviews I conducted for my Bachelor’s history thesis on rock music in Soviet Russia, a participant recalled a concert of the VIA (*vokalno-instrumentalny ansambl* – state-affiliated bands) Golubye Gitary (Blue Guitars) in the 1970s.

> “(The concert was) Russian language, Russian music...but the first song was *Can’t Buy me Love* by The Beatles…they knew how to buy the people.” (Pirrie 2024b)

The access Soviet citizens had to Western music varied: large cities with frequent foreign visitors provided a steady stream of smuggled records, but extensive urban radio jamming operations meant rural areas and republics closer to the USSR’s borders had more ready access to foreign radio stations. According to **Zhuk**, some closed cities paradoxically had more access to foreign media and information, as scientists and technicians working in key Soviet industries travelled more frequently and were required to stay up to date with technological advancements abroad. The authorities of each republic also varied in their ability or willingness to crack down on illicit cultural consumption. But by the mid-1970s, the state record label, Melodiya, was sanctioning the release of some Western

records, often including Russian translations. Of course, these releases were carefully selected. Rock music rarely featured; **Yurchak** states Soviet officials saw the sound of rock as distorted, unpredictable, and "moaning", in harsh contrast to the "joyful" and "melodic" music they supported (Yurchak 2006, 227). Komsomol-organised discos acquired ABBA, **Donna Summer**, and Boney M to appeal to their young attendees (Zhuk 2010, 235–237). A special Soviet television show, *Melodies and Rhythms of Foreign Estrada*, was aired regularly from 1977, broadcasting **Elton John** and **Dean Reed** into Soviet homes (Zhuk 2025, 137). Youth magazines covered Western musicians extensively,[2] while toeing the ideological line by extolling The Beatles' anti-war messaging, the class and racial struggles of African American musicians, and requisitely covering musicians from Eastern bloc states (Zhuk 2010, 247–249). It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the increasing numbers of listeners understood the lyrics – and one must ask, did it matter?

This is not to say that English lyrics were never translated. Zhuk cites Western culture's mass consumption as the chief reason for English overtaking German as the most studied language in Dniepropetrovsk's schools in the 1960s (2025, 133). A participant in my BA interviews said her love for rock music began with classmates lending their foreign records to translate, as the best at English in her year-group (Pirrie 2024a). Yet it seems that there were limits to what could be translated into Soviet contexts. Zhuk presents excerpts from a young fan's diary, writing in 1966:

> "I would rather prefer the catchy melodies of the Beatles or Rolling Stones than this boring Dylan stuff! [sic]." (2010, 89)

In Zhuk's view, lyrically complex music like that of **Bob Dylan** was less appealing, particularly in provincial cities; listeners preferred music with simpler language and an emphasis on melodies. Even when lyrics were understood, a gulf of relatability remained. One of my interview participants greatly valued Western bands' technique, electric guitar solos and dynamic arrangements. But while, for example, a love-song had universal meaning, there was otherwise a limited applicability to his own life. In his view, the differences in lifestyle between an English rockstar and himself, a schoolboy in Tula in the 1980s, created a gulf of emotional relatability he felt he could not cross (Pirrie 2024c).

People the world over listen to music in languages they don't understand, but some academics suggest that such incomprehension was approached with more intentionality than one might expect. Perhaps Grünberg drew on what Yurchak identified as a collective awareness among Soviet society that one's lived experiences would not be acknowledged as reality – if one does not expect to understand or be understood by the cultural system around them, why try to engage with it at all? Or as one interview participant said:

> "You know what to expect of (state musicians), (but) you go, not again, that stuff…not attractive!" (Pirrie 2024b)

The 1960s saw the emergence of the *estrada* genre and VIA – seemingly the USSR's attempt at recreating the mass popularity of groups like The Beatles. The role of music in the USSR shifted, as many other things did in the 1960s, to providing emotionally fulfilling experiences and meeting consumer demands for Western-style products. **MacFadyen** observes that prior to this, state-produced music was often void of the individual, with a far more detached focus on the patriotic and the collective (2001, 7). The music of estrada and VIA touched on personal themes, performed by singers with clear personalities and emotions and was often available in the languages of the USSR. These musicians were required to be registered as such by profession, and their lyrics were either censored or written in their entirety by each republic's National Union of Composers (NUoC).

This local oversight led to variations in creative freedoms across the republics. Each republic had a source of music that was produced in their national language and somewhat more suited to local tastes. For example, jazz music from the Eastern Bloc and beyond had been more widely popular in the

Baltic states and the Caucasus, and a (sanitised) influence was visible in their official music (Schäfer 2021). These variations in cultural spheres were often known, particularly in the case of the Baltics – their vibrant and modern music scenes were sites of admiration and envy, with budding musicians making pilgrimages to Tallinn and Riga.

However, Soviet directives dictated lyrical content to "evoke optimism, youthful energy, and positive emotions in general." (Bird et al. 1994, 192) Topics were uncontentious and apolitical: sex, sadness, and rebellion were forbidden, watered-down to romance, heartbreak, and nostalgia (Schäfer 2021). One participant described the love-songs of estrada as "sterile" following a formulaic, innocent structure that was ignorant of young people's realities (Pirrie 2024a). Troitsky describes how from the 1960s onwards, musicians faced the dilemma of either remaining unofficial – unable to earn money from their music and committing to a day-job to avoid charges of 'social parasitism', – or registering as a professional group, where they could gain an income and official recognition, but at the cost of being, as Troitsky puts it, "castrated" (1988, 28). The sacrifice of authenticity was one many musicians made, particularly when mechanisms of disseminating unofficial music were narrow. This was one area which contributed to differences in the music scenes among the Soviet republics. There are shockingly few Western academic studies of Central Asian music, but as far as I understand, unofficial music production was minimally tolerated. On the other hand, the Estonian NUoC placed far fewer rigid limits on musicians and musicians like Grünberg moved in between realms of recognition.[3]

The movement between realms of "officialdom" was not limited to Estonia, although it occurred less frequently. Key examples of this were the performers of bard music (sometimes called guitar-poetry), popular in the 1960s and 1970s. While some may

have had backgrounds in the arts, a defining feature of Soviet bard music was its lack of (initial) official recognition. Many travelled across the USSR performing in venues ranging from concert halls to apartment kitchens. Lyrics were distributed as *samizdat*, and as recording technology grew in accessibility, songs were spread as *magnitizdat* (from *magnitofon* – tape recorder). Figures like **Alexander Gorodnitsky** and **Yuri Vizbor** gained popularity for their descriptions of Soviet everyday life, presented in artistic yet simple language. Bards who stuck to these themes often eventually transitioned into official spheres, with the state considering their work aligned with their promotion of amateur involvement in the arts. However, bards like **Vladimir Vysotsky, Alexander Galich,** and **Yuliy Kim**, whose work strayed towards more contentious themes, faced political consequences. They lost their jobs, faced accusations of black-market involvement, and fell victim to press smear campaigns. By the mid-1970s, as Baccara and **Billy Joel** began to be distributed through official channels, Galich had been forced to emigrate, and Kim went into hiding for many years. Yet their music continued to resonate with listeners. **Neumeyer** described Vysotsky's music as a "vehicle for anxieties" otherwise ignored in approved media (2021, 523). She features a letter from a Ukrainian fan who wrote to him about her struggles raising her daughter after the death of her son, and her obsession with his music – "I've been suffering on this earth for a long time" (2021, 520).

The 1980s brought new forms of music that could resonate with audiences. Mass accessibility to cassette recorders forever altered the creation and distribution of unofficial music, as did the availability of higher-quality instruments and an expansion of governmental tolerance. Troitsky observed that by the late 1970s and early 1980s, English-language music was becoming "old-fashioned" (1988, 66), and that while listeners previously cared more about sound than lyrical content, this was changing. In 1979, **Boris Grebenshchikov** of the group Aquarium commented in the *samizdat* rock-music periodical *Roksi*: "We need our rock… our reaction to our lives." (McMichael 2005, 675) Troitsky described his first encounter with Grebenshchikov's music in 1979, saying "Finally I was hearing in Russian what I'd heard for so long in English" (1988, 52). **McMichael** claims many musicians felt great anxiety over adapting Western music to Soviet contexts, yet it was by doing so that the music of the 1980s cemented their

star-status across the USSR and was able to play a profound role in the imminent societal changes. In a 1987 interview with the newspaper *Argumenty i Fakty*, **Viktor Tsoi** asserted that lyrics and sincerity were the only thing Soviet amateur music had to offer, given that Western musicians and domestic "professional groups" (VIA and *estrada*) had superior recording equipment and music technologies (Golovanova 1987, 6). When asked why fans might lose interest when amateur groups became professional, Tsoi posits that this stems from the compromise artists make when doing so:

> "Honesty means one can be forgiven for practically anything… but when honesty disappears, nothing is forgiven…The main thing is whether others consider you honest. A person who knowingly writes music in order to live well, but sings about being a fighter for an idea, is simply not believed." (Golovanova 1987, 6)

Cushman discusses what authenticity meant to musicians in *Notes from Underground*, stating that underground musicians' motivations in creating music were "a response to different experiences within the Soviet industrial modernity," (1995, 92) – the dissonance of official culture contrasting with their lived experiences was expressed through music, and this resonated with listeners. A participant recalled the opening line to the song *Dal'she Deystvovat' Budem My (We'll Take It From Here)* by Kino – *We want to see further than the windows of the house across from us* – "And that's exactly how you feel." (Pirrie 2024a)

Cultural historians utilise the concepts of adaptation and replication when analysing how foreign cultural products influence a population; these products constitute a range of tools that can be utilised to express domestic culture and concerns. **Regev**, a sociologist of popular music, situates music that expresses 'cultural uniqueness' in a continuum of inter-cultural influences from traditional folk to products of cultural imperialism, yet emphasises the development of 'ethno-national pop rock' as an important part of developing contemporary national music cultures (2007, 332). Features from global (chiefly Anglo-American) pop-rock music genres are adopted into domestic music scenes as musicians' personal interests in global rock trends prompt adaptation of these features to fit domestic contexts. Regev explicitly gives the example of artists inspired by the work of Bob Dylan going on to utilise their own heritage in a similar way to him (2007, 324). This example is particularly prescient when examining Soviet music: influential musicians like Grebenshchikov and **Andrei Makarevich** of Time Machine were described by Troitsky as Dylan's "spiritual children" (1988, 115). Yet as mentioned previously, Zhuk noted that Dylan himself was relatively unpopular in the USSR. This somewhat proves Regev's argument: it wasn't Dylan, but Soviet musicians who translated their observations of societal problems and everyday realities into music and were similarly beloved for it. For some of my BA participants, what piqued their interest in groups such as AC/DC and Led Zeppelin were the musical arrangements and superior technology. (Pirrie 2024b, 2024c) For an emotionally resonant response, they sought out Soviet unofficial music. When in the 1980s, Soviet groups were able to combine meaningful, relatable lyrics and innovative musical arrangements with increasing frequency – as a participant put it, "Wow. That's Shakespeare." (Pirrie 2024b)

Regev's point takes on further salience when we consider previous points: across the Soviet republics, music tastes diverged, musical histories had evolved differently, musicians occupied different roles in society. And overall, societal concerns and desires between different groups of the USSR were far from uniform – but unity began to be created within these groups, with music becoming part of organised movements demanding national sovereignty and change. The 1980s was the culmination of decades of foreign media consumption accumulating within society's cultural vocabulary, and the upheaval of **Gorbachev's** reforms unleashed long-silenced demands for change. It was more possible than ever to use culture to express not only everyday realities, but hopes for an alternate future, and these expressions reached larger audiences than could've ever been imagined. In the Baltics in particular, music became a vital method of civic organising for independence movements. Rock groups like Latvia's Perkons and Lithuania's Antis played their part in the Singing Revolution alongside 19th century folk songs, string orchestras, and choirs made up of tens of thousands of voices that had long felt themselves to be unheard. In 1989, **Jüri Leesment** and **Alo Mattiisen** added the following lines to a song based on **Lydia Koidula's** poem *Sind Surmani* (*You Till Death*), a text associated with Estonia's national awakening in the 19th century and with emancipation from Russian

imperial rule: "Can the same words, the same melody, hold us now, as back then?" (Ryynänen & Talviste 2023)
The easing of state control on musicians' outputs due to Glasnost' and Perestroika was felt across the USSR. These conditions allowed truly critical music to reach ever wider audiences – acerbic tirades against authority from Siberian punk and politically charged takedowns of the Soviet-Afghan war, but also songs that became anthems for national sovereignty movements. The soundtrack to Soviet collapse was not Scorpions' *Wind of Change* or **John Lennon's** *Imagine*, nor was it written with input from the NUoC. It feels against the spirit of this article to list what the potential anthems of the USSR's collapse might be. By 1991, music in the USSR had reached a point where each republic, each city, each social group, and each individual might have had their own unique backing track to the end of the socialist period. Armenian rock, Ukrainian hymns, Tatar opera and the nascent Western-style girlbands manufactured in record label offices all reflected facets of individuals' lives in ways that twenty years before were unseen, unheard, unmet, and unexpressed.

1989 saw the peaceful protest of the Baltic Way, where two million people joined hands from Vilnius to Tallinn in solidarity against their oppression; ten years before, Sven Grünberg had withheld his voice to prevent it being taken from him and used in ways he did not believe in. The USSR moved so quickly from a time when being understood was so impossible that it was better to surrender oneself to incomprehensibility, to a time when individual voices and desires had the chance to be heard, met, and contribute to world-altering change; the music that carried them there still carries them into the present.

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Endnotes

1 The term popular can be interrogated, but in this article, I use it to distinguish classical, folk, or art music etc. from the music discussed.

2 It is important to note Zhuk's consistent theme in *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City* regarding the fact that the desire to access Western music contributed to Russification through cultural consumption, in Ukraine and the USSR as a whole – language of magazine publications, subtitled films, lyric translations were often only available in Russian. This was one of countless ways Russification was proliferated but illustrates the more 'innocuous' ways Soviet hierarchies were enforced, alongside the importance of considering cultural consumption in histories of the USSR and its legacy.

3 For a comprehensive examination of artists' relationships with the state in the Baltics, see Svede and Verdinš' chapter, 'Nearly Underground in the Near-Abroad: Outliers in Soviet Baltic Culture' in *The Oxford Handbook of Soviet Underground Culture.*

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