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A heroism for the new times in the protest songs of Gerhard Gundermann

DAVID ROBB

Reader in Music, School of Arts, English and Languages, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, Northern Ireland
E-mail: d.robb@qub.ac.uk

Abstract

The story of East German singer-songwriter Gerhard Gundermann provides a vibrant illustration of a much-neglected area of protest song history. Gundermann, who died prematurely in 1998 at the age of 43, was an excavator driver in an open cast mine for most of his adult life. A stalwart of the singing club and Liedertheater *(song theatre) movements in the GDR, he emerged after 1990 as a musical and poetic mouthpiece for the culturally and economically marginalised 'losers' of German unification. This article will examine Gundermann's utopian aesthetic: how he creatively transformed a socialist realist ideal of the heroic into a new narrative persona that addressed the democratic deficits of the GDR and later the growing environmental threat. It will also link his utopianism to his deep entanglement with the state, as reflected in his role as a Stasi informer in his early career. While Gundermann's case is symptomatic of the GDR's heavily state-monitored music scene, this article will also set his work within the wider context of international protest and environmental song.*

Introduction

Gerhard Gundermann was an East German miner and *Liedermacher* (political singer/songwriter) who died prematurely at the age of 43 in 1998. A complex figure, he participated in the GDR pro-state youth singing movement in the 1970s before campaigning for reform in the 'peaceful revolution' of 1989. Post-unification he emerged as a voice for culturally and economically disenfranchised East Germans. He is distinctive in how he created a song-writing aesthetic that bridged both the socialist and capitalist systems he lived under. We see this firstly in his critique of power relationships in the GDR workplace and then, in the 1990s, in his portrayal of the effects of deindustrialisation and the threat to the environment. These are linked by his narrative persona, one that channels non-conventional heroic characters from literature and mythology and aligns itself with nature. With this approach he challenges cultural assumptions in both the GDR and in united Germany regarding the concept of 'Siegen' (winning). This reflects a utopianism which is an integral ingredient of his aesthetic, but which was a contributor to his downfall: as a young man his identification with the utopian aims of the GDR led to his collaboration with the Stasi from 1976–1984, the revelation of which in the mid-1990s broke the momentum of a flourishing career.

One could say that utopianism, and the hope that it embodies, goes hand in hand with protest song. As research of the past decades has shown (for example, Thompson 2007; Anselmi 2011; Dillane *et al.* 2018; Hidalgo 2018; Marx 2022), socially critical music and song has constantly searched for new ideas, connections and spaces that imagine the possibility of a better world. Because such ideas mostly collide with the political hegemony, one may ask the question: how did protest song function in the GDR, a state that already saw itself as a form of utopia, as reflected in its constitution that claimed the worker as an equal stakeholder in the sharing of power (Verfassung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik 1974)?[1]

As portrayed in Andreas Dresen's recent award-winning film *Gundermann* (2018) and Grit Lemke's TV documentary *Gundermann Revier* (2019), Gundermann's story is set in Hoyerswerda, a town in the Lusatian coal-mining region of south-east Germany where he grew up in the 1960s and 1970s. In his free time, he sang and played drums in the Singeklub Hoyerswerda which later, in 1978, would evolve into the *Liedertheater* (song theatre) group Brigade Feuerstein. After an unsuccessful stint as a trainee army officer from 1973 to 1975, he began work in the coal industry, learning to operate an excavator in an open-cast pit in Spreetal. Ideologically committed to the state, Gundermann joined the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) in 1977, having already begun collaborating with the Stasi the previous year. His relationship with the Party, however, quickly became strained owing to an innate insubordination (Schütt 2011; Leusink 2018). He increasingly wrote songs that reflected his non-acceptance of the rigid power structures in the GDR that, contrary to the claims of its constitution, excluded workers from political participation. This culminated in his expulsion from the SED in 1984, the same year as he ceased cooperating with the Stasi. After winning first prize at the prestigious Chanson Convention in Frankfurt Oder in 1987, he recorded his debut album *Männer Frauen und Maschinen* (Men, Women and Machines) in 1988. This was a breakthrough, given that only few performers enjoyed the privilege of making records in the state-controlled GDR music industry. Although originally intended as a Brigade Feuerstein production, the LP was released in Gundermann's name, thus spelling the death-knell of the group and the launch of a solo career.

As his reputation grew, the leading GDR rock band Silly invited him to co-write the lyrics for their album *Februar* (1989). Silly was a New Romantic-influenced outfit with a semi-dissident reputation and the distinction of having a record deal with Ariola in the West alongside the GDR state label Amiga. The lyrics and music of *Februar* reflected the end stage of the GDR, the dark melancholic bitterness of the songs directed at an aging leadership that refused to give up its stranglehold on power (Robb, 2016b). In the *Wende* (turning point) of autumn 1989 Gundermann was at the forefront of the protests of the *Liedermacher* and rock musicians in solidarity with the civil rights movement New Forum (Robb, 2007c). In the early

[1] Article 2.1 of the GDR constitution states that '[a]ll political power in the German Democratic Republic is exercised by the workers in the country' (Verfassung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik 1974).

post-unification years, he acquired his own backing band Seilschaft and recorded two pivotal East German albums of that period, *Einsame Spitze* (A Class of its Own) (1992) and *Der siebente Samurai* (The Seventh Samurai) (1993). For these he availed himself of the production skills of Uwe Hassbecker and Ritchie Barton of Silly as repayment for his work on *Februar*. It was a winning combination: high-end production of folk rock and baroque pop songs with biting proletarian social critique and a commitment to saving the environment. The public perception of Gundermann as the genuine rebel was consolidated.

It was therefore a shock when news broke in 1995 that Gundermann had previously informed for the Stasi between 1976 and 1984. Many of his supporters were dumfounded. Although he had never been classified as a dissident – unlike the banned *Liedermacher* Wolf Biermann (see Connolly 2023; see also Robb 2007b) – his songs and *Liedertheater* scenes with Brigade Feuerstein had consistently rallied against the abuse of power in the GDR. While such bafflement may be misplaced if, as Pedelty argues, there is no such thing as the 'authentic', morally upright protest singer that 'can do no harm' (2012, p. 85), the revelation that Gundermann had voluntarily joined the Stasi certainly crossed the line in many people's minds. A lot was written about this controversy in the East German press at the time (see, for example, Berliner Zeitung 1995; Koerner 1995). In the unforgiving post-GDR media climate of the mid-1990s, he struggled to distance himself from his younger person (see, for example, the TV interview in Lemke 2019). One extract from Gundermann's Stasi files, picked up on by the media, is illustrative of this: as a young recruit he had informed on someone he suspected of being pro-Biermann in his views (see Berliner Zeitung 1995). This was in connection to the controversial expatriation of Wolf Biermann to West Germany in November 1976 after the dissident singer had endured an 11-year performance ban (see Robb 2007c). Many in the singing movement had a negative attitude towards Biermann, not least because he had nicknamed its participants 'the emperor's birthday singers' (Kirchenwitz 1993, p. 51). Indeed, the views on Biermann held by Gundermann and his fellow *Singeklub* members are documented by a recorded concert in spring 1977, in which they quote the opinion of a West German pastor they had met that Biermann was 'damaging socialism' (Krabat und seine Geschichten).[2] Yet only a few years later, there had been a marked turn-around in Gundermann's stance on this: one of the charges made by the SED Party in their proceedings against him was his 'non-acceptance of the measures taken against Biermann' (Schütt 1996, p. 135).[3] This change is indicative of the process of disillusionment Gundermann went through between 1976 and 1984, at which point he was expelled by the Party and ceased work with the Stasi. However, such details of transformation – or his statement 'I cooperated with the state security for seven years and then was pursued by them for seven years' (Lemke 2019) – did little to help him in 1995. Although his core fans and supporters stayed with him, his former alliance with the GDR state security was something he was ultimately to pay a high price for.

[2] All translations of original German lyrics and quotations by this author.

[3] This Party document is dated as December 1978, which is clearly a mistake since it mentions events which happened in the period 1983–1984, i.e. Gundermann's duo concerts with his wife Conny during their temporary separation from Brigade Feuerstein as well as the subversive text 'Demokratie-Tango' which also came from the 1983–1984 period.

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At the same time, a close reading of Gundermann's early lyrics helps to shed light on his personal motives. His treatment of the themes of heroism and duty reveals clues to his thinking regarding to whom this duty was owed, the state or the people, and the painful process he underwent before realising these were not the same thing. They reflect an artist caught in a 'utopia trap', a concept I will elucidate later, to describe the plight of many writers in the GDR navigating a path between socialist ideal and reality. This article will explore Gundermann's trap: torn between an unconditional identification with the state's original utopian ideals and his rage at the betrayal of these ideals by the state.

The historical context of protest song in the GDR

To provide sufficient context for an understanding of Gundermann's work, let us firstly consider the distinctive case of the GDR music scene and infrastructure. Unlike in most Western capitalist democracies, the left-wing political song tradition in the GDR was nurtured at an official level because it was viewed as proletarian cultural heritage. From the late-1940s onwards, amidst the utopian spirit of the *Aufbau* (construction) period, the SED attempted to mobilise the historical tradition of German left-wing culture. Particularly after the Nazi's abuse of the German folk song tradition in the Third Reich, the government prioritised the reconnection with the German 'democratic' song tradition. In this context the celebrated singer Ernst Busch recorded numerous LPs of German workers' songs on the Eterna state record label; the Free German Youth (FDJ) produced songbooks such as the *Leben Singen Kämpfen* (Living Singing Fighting) series (1949–1979) for use in schools and in the army (Kirchenwitz 1993); the Workers' Song Archive was founded in East Berlin in 1954; and the folklorist Wolfgang Steinitz's published his ground-breaking two-volume collection *Deutsche Volkslieder demokratischen Charakters aus sechs Jahrhunderten* (German Folk Songs of a Democratic Character from Six Centuries) in 1954 and 1962 (see John and Robb 2020).

A repertoire of workers' songs emerged that also incorporated international songs of freedom, as popularised by Pete Seeger, who performed in East Berlin in 1967. Recognising the potential of popular music to influence minds, the FDJ forcibly took over a relatively informal Berlin youth folk scene in the mid-1960s (Kirchenwitz 1993; Böning 2004; Robb 2007c) resulting in the formation of the state-sponsored singing movement. Its leading group, the Oktoberklub, in collaboration with the FDJ, hosted the annual Festival of the Political Song in Berlin from 1970 to 1990, a showcase to the outside world of local and international music as well as a source of inspiration for GDR artists and fans who did not have the opportunity for Western travel. Over the years the festival featured renowned folk and world music acts such as Seeger, Mikis Theodorakis, Miriam Makeba, Bruce Cockburn, Michelle Shocked, Billy Bragg and many more.

There were, however, clear limits on permitted criticism. New songs had to conform to guidelines set by the ruling SED. These emphasised the need to educate 'socialist personalities' among the youth. The first paragraph of the Youth Law of 1974 indicates the role culture was expected to play 'to educate all young people to become [. . .] loyal to the ideas of socialism, think and act as patriots and internationalists, strengthen socialism and defend it reliably against all enemies' (1974, point 1.1). In cases when new songs were directed against the state itself, problems arose. This was reflected in the aforementioned example of Wolf Biermann, whose expatriation to West Germany in 1976 unleashed a storm of protest from writers and intellectuals throughout the GDR (see Berbig 1994).

As Wicke (1992), Street (1997), Robb (1998), Larkey (2007) and others have observed, all popular music performance in the GDR was policed by a bureaucratic infrastructure, a myriad of institutions who vetted who was allowed to perform, make records or be heard on the radio. For example, the Committee for Entertainment Art, formed in 1973, monitored the ideological development of artists and could issue directives to the other music sector organisations to veto or promote particular ones. However, owing to the clout that popular music had in the GDR, this was not entirely a one-way power relationship. Owing to pressure from musicians, the Committee increasingly took over the function of a performers' association after 1984, when it was re-structured into branches for each musical genre: jazz, rock, chanson, political song, etc. (Hintze 1999).

The irony was that such an embeddedness of the musicians in the system provided them with the infrastructure to organise themselves politically against the regime, as demonstrated most visibly in the autumn of 1989 (Wicke 1992; Street 2012). Musicians even sat on the committees that controlled them (Wicke and Shepherd 1993). An example was Toni Krahl, singer of the band City, a former dissident who had been imprisoned for protesting at the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, who later became president of the Rock Music Branch of the Committee. To take a more local example, Bernd Nitzsche, a member of Gundermann's group Brigade Feuerstein, was also Town Councillor for Culture in Hoyerswerda (Dietrich 2018). Such artists, in the role of functionaries, had the know-how to exploit grey areas in cultural policy to enable more controversial performances to go ahead. For instance, as a programmer of live music for Hoyerswerda youth clubs in the 1980s, Nitzsche put on concerts for dissident *Liedermacher* who were banned elsewhere in the GDR.[4] Reinhardt Ständer, who ran the Feuersteins Musik Palast (FMP) venue in which the group was resident, confirms: 'We had a lot to thank Bernd [Nitzsche] for. He risked a lot for us. Not least because he continually protected Gundermann from the SED and FDJ functionaries' (Ständer 2023; see also Kulturfabrik Hoyerswerda 2017).[5]

Such blurring of oppositional and conformist categories, however, mirrored a contradiction that existed throughout the whole system. As Wicke and Shepherd observe, the artists were 'the people', yet they were often party to the implementation of policy which the people no longer trusted or could live with. The inertia resulting from this stalemate spelled the death knell of the state (1993, p. 35). In the mid-1990s, the full extent of musicians' collaborations with the Stasi was revealed. As well as Gundermann, these included Wolf Rudiger Raschke from the band Karussell and Manual von Senden from Electra or others who, in a common scenario, became entangled with the Stasi involuntarily, such as Peter 'Cäsar' Gläser from Renft (Gläser and Pötzsch 2007, pp. 53–5) and Jürgen Ehle from Pankow (Hentschel and Matzke 2007, p. 79).

[4] Bettina Wegner, Stefan Krawczyk and Ekkehard Maaß all played in Hoyerswerda clubs at that time (Ständer 2023).

[5] See a more detailed account of this phenomenon in GDR *Liedermacher* circles in David Robb (2007c, pp. 227–54).

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Ohlerich (2004) has proposed the model of the 'utopia trap' to explain the circumstances that GDR literary writers found themselves in. In many respects this can be seen to apply to Gundermann, too. Sara Jones (2011) notes that writers in the post-war period, wishing to present themselves as the antithesis of Nazism, bought into the 'anti-fascist' founding myth of the GDR (2011, pp. 9–10). She cites Emmerich's (1993, pp. 278–9) observation that this had resulted in a 'loyalty trap' (Jones 2011, p. 9) for intellectuals in a situation where 'being an antifascist was identical with being a good GDR citizen and vice-versa' (Emmerich 2001, p. 10, quoted in Jones 2011, p. 10). Although many writers projected the idea of utopia as a yardstick against which to contrast the failures of the system, this loyalty trap becomes a utopia trap, whereby '[t]hrough the desire to build a better socialism, intellectuals in the GDR passed over fundamental problems [and] felt unable to voice substantial criticisms' (Ohlerich, quoted in Jones 2011, p. 12). This even extended in a minority of cases, as Jones observes, to 'the willingness [. . .] to inform on friends and colleagues for the Stasi' (p. 13). The young Gundermann provides a variation of this model: unable to separate his utopianism from his sense of duty to the state, he became an informer. However, as this ideological construct gradually crumbled for him in the early 1980s – culminating in his expulsion from the SED Party and the termination of his work with the Stasi in 1984 – he subsequently took his bitter revenge out on the system, relentlessly holding it to account in his songs for its betrayal of its own original utopian aims.

Gundermann: from the *Singebewegung* to *Liedertheater*

In the 1970s Gundermann was a member of the Singeklub Hoyerswerda which, alongside the Oktoberklub, was one of the leading groups of the *Singebewegung*. The popular anthem of this movement was 'Sag mir wo du stehst' (Tell Me Where You Stand) from 1966. In propagandistic fashion, the song openly called for youths to back the GDR's policies as opposed to falling for Western ideology. Lines in the text reflected the SED's belief that the GDR was forging a utopian path in creating a socialist state: 'Backwards or forwards, you have to decide/We're making history step by step!/You can't indulge yourself with us as well as with them/For if you go round in circles you'll just stay behind' (Oktoberklub 1967). This belief reflected the idea of the working class as the 'Sieger der Geschichte' (victor of history), the Marxist notion of a worker's state as an historical inevitability. However, by the 1970s, as the predicted utopia remained elusive, younger *Liedermacher* began questioning this. With the political thaw that accompanied Erich Honecker's coming-to-power in the GDR in 1971, lyrics with a much wider spectrum of literary and cultural reference began to emerge, shifting the perspective from the collective to the individual, dealing with the necessity of experiencing a full life in the present, not waiting for utopian predictions to be realised (see Robb 2007c, 2016b). Gerhard Gundermann, too, had begun to question the notion of the 'Sieger der Geschichte', interrogating what exactly 'Siegen' (winning) could mean for workers like himself. As will later be examined, he developed his own notion of the heroic: assessing what a realistic form of heroism could entail in the GDR, distinct from the pathos-laden view of valiant workers propagated by the ruling SED Party.

Gundermann explored these ideas within a new artistic development known as *Liedertheater* (song theatre). This multimedia form had its roots in the Blue Blouse

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agitprop or Red Revues of the 1920s in its incorporation of lyrics, music, costumes, dramatical scenes and slide projections. Features such as masked role-play and slapstick clowning were borrowed from *commedia dell'arte*. A strong Brechtian influence could be seen in Brigade Feuerstein's use of parables containing socially critical analysis and, generally, in the development of a 'theatre as a social laboratory' approach. With their agitprop approach, comparisons can be made with the socialist music theatre company 7:84 in the UK. Their historical plays in the 1970s and 1980s told the stories of injustices in local communities through scenes, music and song, whereby the audience was invited 'to participate, to challenge perceptions and views actively' (Karoula 2018, p. 28).[6]

The foray into acting of Brigade Feuerstein and the other *Liedertheater* groups – Karls Enkel in Berlin and Schicht in Dresden – was a response to the cul de sac that political song had run into in the wake of the Biermann affair with the resulting clampdown on protest (Robb, 1998). Teschke has observed that the 'song theatres' were also a response to a deficit of contemporary theatre in general due to the climate of censorship (2015, p. 83). With theatre, however, there was a greater potential for expressing irony and ambiguity than with song lyrics, which were more easily censorable. Music, too, often had a theatrical function. Brigade Feuerstein's music was characterised by a variety of styles – from international rock and pop through folk, freedom and workers' song to music theatre – all feeding into the melting pot. Unusually for a GDR *Liedertheater* group, Brigade Feuerstein also used tape recorders and synthesiser to create rhythms and sounds that reflected their surrounding industrial environment.[7] This was a practice more commonly associated with contemporary West German groups such as Kraftwerk (see Carpenter 2016) or Einstürzende Neubauten (see Schütte 2016). As will later be examined in relation to their production 'Geschichten aus dem Koraktor' (Stories from the Koraktor), the use of music as a means of representation was a technique that Brigade Feuerstein was highly familiar with, well-schooled, as its members were, in the dialectical approach to composition of Hanns Eisler (see Betz 1982; Robb 2007b), who had an iconic status in the GDR.[8]

While the main composer in the group was keyboardist Alfons Förster, who was a music teacher by profession, Gundermann also contributed original melodies. Throughout his career his influences were audibly Springsteen, Dylan, Neil Young, but also – to a lesser extent – from Celtic folk.[9] In his orientation towards Anglo-American sounds, he set himself apart from other prominent East German *Liedermacher* such as Wolf Biermann or Hans-Eckardt Wenzel who were much more rooted in continental European musical traditions such as chanson and cabaret. To add to his uniqueness, Gundermann's gravelly voice situated him more in the sphere of blues rock than that of the *Liedermacher*.

[6] Unlike 7:84, however, Brigade Feuerstein was not a professional acting group, but like most groups in the GDR singing movement, consisted of semi-professional singers and musicians who, made their living from day jobs. Gundermann was the self-appointed autodidact dramaturg who spurred the group on to spend virtually all its free time rehearsing and performing relentlessly (Dietrich 2018).

[7] There were, however, distinct limitations regarding how far they could take this, reflecting the scant technological resources available to musicians in the GDR (see Winter 2009).

[8] This was the case despite Eisler's well-documented tensions with the regime (see, for example, Calico 2019).

[9] For accounts of GDR folk scene see Robb (2007c, 2016a), Leyn (2016) and Morgenstern (2018).

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This leads to another characteristic of Brigade Feuerstein that distinguished them from other GDR *Liedermacher*, namely their rock band instrumentation and use of pop hits from the West[10] as contrafacta for Gundermann's lyrics. Such use of well-known melodies as a means of dissemination of political messages is a long-established technique in the history of protest song. It was widespread, for example, in the German revolution of 1848 where tunes from folk song or opera were frequently employed (John and Robb 2020). Contrafactum often functions by the power of association whereby the theme of the new song mirrors that of the original. While Western pop always had a rebellious connotation among the youth in the GDR owing to being viewed by the Party as an expression of Western decadence (see Robb 2016b), Gundermann's choice of melody often had a particular semantic motivation. One example can be seen in the production 'Eine Sehfahrt, die ist lustig' from 1984, in which Gundermann artistically processed his expulsion from the ruling Socialist Unity Party. Here T. Rex's 'Children of the Revolution' was used as the tune and refrain for a song that attacked a distant Party leadership, whom Gundermann saw as having betrayed the 'revolution'. Another example is the use of 'Sweet Dreams' by the Eurythmics for the song 'Herkunft' (Origin). Here the longings for freedom of a suppressed young generation correspond to the desire to 'travel the world and the seven seas', as conveyed in the original (Eine Sehfahrt, die ist lustig 1984). From 1988 onwards, in his solo career, Gundermann continued the practice of contrafactum using, for example, Abba's 'Eagle' for 'Hoywoy' (1988) or Bruce Cockburn's 'Nicaragua' for 'Cuba' (1990).

Brigade Feuerstein also often made contrafacta out of traditional workers songs. In 'Sehfahrt' they used Brecht and Eisler's 'Einheitsfront-Lied' (Song of the United Front) as the musical framework for a rock adaptation that criticises the Party. In a satirical inversion of the original, Gundermann modifies Brecht and Eisler's demand that workers need a full stomach: he now urges that workers also need their questions answered and should be involved in the decision-making process:

And because a man is human,
he's not a simple dumb work horse,
he wants to be used for how he is,
or he'll be on his knees.

But because a man's a worker,
he has to work, whatever it shall be,
produce, govern and supervise,
and never be stumped.

Musically it retains the tune of the well-known song but adds a swing jazz inflection in the chorus line 'Drum links *links*' (So left, left) instead of the expected straight marching rhythm of the original with its equal crotchets: 'Drum links zwei drei' (So left two three). In this way, musically as well as lyrically, it pays homage to the proletarian tradition while simultaneously updating it, giving it a more critical relevance to the present.

[10] Western pop was well known in the GDR. Apart from the Dresden area in the south-eastern corner, television ariels in the GDR could pick up West German TV easily (see Larkey 2000).

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Brigade Feuerstein's relationship with the institutions

Many of Brigade Feuerstein's productions dealt thematically with problems in the GDR industrial workplace. Owing to the political sensitivity of such material, it was important that it had support from within the institutions that 'mentored' its development. In this regard the group enjoyed a patron in the form of the Akademie der Künste in Berlin. The Brecht singer Ernst Busch, one of the Akademie's most famous members, even invited them to perform their production 'Brandgesänge' (Songs of Fire) at his eightieth birthday in 1980. According to Schwarz (1999), the Akademie viewed Brigade Feuerstein as 'one of the most important projects of modern, socialist art, one which dissolved the line between serious art and entertainment as well as the division of labour between work, art and politics' (p. 44).

Despite this support, the *Liedertheater* groups could not entirely escape the wrath of the censor. On one hand, the wider folk and political song scene they inhabited displayed some of the characteristics of a Western social movement, as defined by Eyerman and Jamison (1998), for example, the collaboration between academics and practitioners in establishing 'cognitive praxis' between performer and audience. This could be seen, for example, in the Akademie der Künste's distribution of the *AKTIVA* song pamphlets (1985–1989) which nurtured collective memory of the revolutionary song tradition in a creative and subversive way, alluding to its continued relevance with itis inclusion of contemporary songs (see Robb 1998, 2007c). At the same time, such publications, as well as the spaces and parameters in which the *Liedertheater* groups operated, were closely monitored and restricted, unlike the spontaneous actions of public protest in Western social movements. In the GDR, despite the aforementioned grey areas in the implementation of policy, the punishments meted out for infringing ideological restrictions (for example, performance bans or even expatriation to the West, as in the cases of Biermann, Bettina Wegner, Stephan Krawczyk and the rock band Renft) were a lot more serious than in Western societies where protesters are simply ignored by the media, as Manabe writes about with regard to anti-nuclear voices in Japan (2015).

At the same time, with their close audience relationship, Brigade Feuerstein were able to exploit the dynamics of the live performance space, reflecting Seeger's idea of 'the politics of participation' whereby meaning is 'framed' by performer and audience alike (Rosenthal 2018, p. 84). In this intimate atmosphere the group could exploit the subterfuge of the hidden messages in their lyrics. As Manabe (2015) has noted in relation to Japanese public protest, emphasising its stricter climate of censorship compared to Western social movements, 'space' is not purely a physical entity. She describes Henry Lefebvre's 1991 conceptualisation of space 'as the product of physical, mental and social space [...] of hegemonic control and the acted-out responses of people in that space [...] Through imagination, the inhabitants seek to appropriate the space that otherwise dominates them' (pp. 15–16). One can apply this model to the concerts of Brigade Feuerstein in the FMP venue in Hoyerswerda, where, as evidenced by the audience response on tape recordings, their regular followers – under the eyes of Party and Stasi officials – were well accustomed to the art of deciphering the counter hegemonic messages of Gundermann's plays and songs.[11]

[11] Manuscripts and tape recordings of the *Liedertheater* performances of these groups were collected by Karin Wolk in the Akademie der Künste where they are still available for consultation.

Despite support from the Akademie, *Liedertheater* was viewed by the authorities as a suspicious development. The popular annual *Lieder & Theater* workshops in Dresden organised by Schicht from 1980 to 1983 were discontinued after FDJ funding was withdrawn (Kirchenwitz 1993). The workshops had gained a reputation for their critical level of discussion and had become a magnet for academics, journalists, and artists in general (Liedzentrum der Akademie der Künste 1982). This reflected a general censorious climate of GDR popular music. None of the productions of Schicht, Karls Enkel (see Robb 1998) or Brigade Feuerstein were ever published in the GDR. Despite such containment by the state, the story of these artists provides a good illustration of what Mary Fulbrook describes as the 'world that is not often represented in traditional political histories of the GDR', one 'in which there was far more openness and genuine debate [...] than might be thought' (2005, p. 9, quoted in Jones 2011, p. 5).

Gerhard Gundermann's literary reference points

John Street writes: '[Music] has the advantage for those living under authoritarian regimes that songs (like poems) can disguise their politics in metaphor and gesture, enabling their performers to avoid systems of censorship organised around the literal and the visual' (2001, p. 244). This was a widespread practice in the *Liedermacher* as well as in the rock scene of the GDR (see Robb 2016b). It could be seen in Gundermann's conscious referencing of literary and mythological characters in his lyrics. This was already a distinctive feature of GDR *Liedermacher* in general, well-known proponents being Wolf Biermann and Hans-Eckardt Wenzel (see Robb 2007b). Such a practice reflected how GDR political song – like its counterpart in West Germany – often straddled the boundaries between popular and high culture. It also reflected a wider practice among GDR authors and playwrights too, famous examples being Christa Wolf and Heiner Müller. In a climate of censorship, the adaptation of motifs from a literary past was a way of constructing a paradigm of one's own existence in the GDR. It functioned as a tool for establishing a narrative code of communication between artist and public, again reminiscent of the 'cognitive praxis' model that Eyerman and Jamison have applied to social movements (1998). In this way a silent protest was voiced by the creation of an alternative social identity via aesthetic experience (see Robb 2007b).

The phenomenon of protest singers steeped in literary tradition – less common in the Anglo-American sphere, but more so in Italy with its *Canzone d'Autore* (see Orlandi 2018) – had its roots in the engagement of German poets, writers and musicians in oppositional struggles such as the 1848 Revolution or the workers' movement of the Weimar Republic (see Robb 2007a; John and Robb, 2020). However, while singers such as Wolf Biermann or Hans-Eckardt Wenzel consciously evoked the plebeian style of subversive historical poets such as Heinrich Heine and Bertolt Brecht or played on socially critical motifs of the romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin (see Robb, 1998, 2007b), Gundermann's points of reference were more contemporary. Two pivotal ones were the GDR novels *Krabat oder die Verwandlung der Welt* (Krabat or the Transformation of the World (1976) by Jurij Brězan and *Franziska Linkerhand* (1974) by Brigitte Reimann. Channelling the inner conflicts of the protagonists of these novels – as well as heroic figures from mythology or film such as the Russian peasant warrior Ilja Muromez, the Arthurian Lancelot or the Japanese

Samurai – Gundermann explored possible responses to political contradictions of, firstly, socialism in the GDR and, secondly, capitalist Germany in the post-unification period of the 1990s.

Gundermann first tentatively challenged the *Sieger der Geschichte* (victor of history) concept of time in 'Krabat und seine Geschichten' (Krabat and his Tales) in 1976 (see Robb 2024a). This prototype *Liedertheater* performance of the Singeklub Hoyerswerda in 1976 marked the beginning of his exploration of the theme of Krabat. The latter was a mythological figure of Slavonic culture, whose story had been adapted by Jurij Brězan in *Krabat oder die Verwandlung der Welt*, first published in 1976 in both German and the Slavonic Sorb language. For Gundermann, the original connection to this book lay in its immediate geographical and cultural location: the area surrounding his hometown of Hoyerswerda where Sorb is still spoken by a minority. The novel follows Krabat, the underdog on his quest through history in search of 'Glücksland' (the land of happiness) continually thwarted by his arch enemy Count Wolf Reissenberg. While Krabat represents the eternal spirit of resistance of the downtrodden, whether of the Sorbian peasantry or Spartacus's army of slaves, Reissenberg represents the ruling class. In this way, both figures symbolise the opposing sides of the historical class conflict and, at the same time, imply the duality of the human condition – that both characteristics exist side-by-side within everyone (see Auer 1978). This contradiction will only be resolved when 'one hangs the other up from a tree, his blue tongue between his teeth' (Brězan 1989, pp. 49–50, 200). However, Krabat and Reissenberg's struggle over the centuries is never resolved, implicitly contradicting the notion of communism as a definable endpoint.

Although the Singeklub Hoyerswerda's 'Krabat und seine Geschichten' was a rather tentative beginning, only cautiously addressing the ambiguity inherent in Brězan's idea of 'the land of happiness',[12] Brězan's sub-text itself contains a clear ideological critique of the SED's one-sided portrayal of history. This had implications for Gundermann and his generation, locked in a state-ordained quest for utopia, one that appears to ignore the importance of living fulfilled lives in the present. This is also a major theme of Brigitte Reimann's *Franziska Linkerhand*. Gundermann created a proletarian adaptation of the figure of Franziska in Brigade Feuerstein's first production 'Geschichten aus dem Koraktor'[13] in 1978 (see Robb 2024b). This had critical potential: while GDR literature of the 1950s and early 1960s had promoted the unambiguous ideological standpoint of well-rounded 'socialist personalities' who would sacrifice individual aspirations for the good of the collective, *Franziska Linkerhand* was an example of a quest for a more realistic literary heroine where self-realisation in the present becomes an important issue (see Brosig 2010, p. 162). In the novel, the older generation of socialists are portrayed as having secured all positions of power in the 1950s, leaving nothing for the younger generation to do. The early-career architect Franziska struggles to assert herself within GDR structures, her aesthetic idealism is rejected, her advice discarded; she feels

[12] In fact, many of the songs, mostly written by Gundermann, proudly celebrate the construction of the new industrial town of Hoyerswerda, as if it was indeed the dawning of a new age for workers (Krabat und seine Geschichten). The young Gundermann was clearly still at an early stage of working through the socially critical implications of the novel for himself, something that would be a work-in-progress over the forthcoming years.

[13] In Slavonic mythology the 'Koraktor' is Krabat's magical book of tales.

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that her life is in limbo. Everything appears as a trial run for the real thing 'like this quite provisional town, its provisional streets and provisional plans' (Reimann 2018, p. 345). The idea of 'a wasted life' emerges in relation to characters who have lost all their idealism, including her lover, who spent four years in jail for alleged political dissidence. People in general are depicted as 'waiting', which appears as 'a type of imprisonment, time standing still' (p. 553).

Gundermann picks up on these ideas in 'Geschichten aus dem Koraktor', in which his proletarian version of Franziska is similarly waiting for her calling. Finally given an opportunity as a factory apprentice, her attempts to contribute to decision-making are rejected at every turn by her male superiors who mock her revolutionary zeal (Brigade Feuerstein 1978). Franziska's working world is thus the antithesis of a new stage in history; in response to this, Gundermann uses the song theatre workshops of Brigade Feuerstein over the next few years to explore solutions to the GDR's woes from the perspective of the workers themselves. This culminated in the production 'Eine Sehfahrt, die ist lustig' (A Seeing Voyage, that's fun) in 1984, which was a scathing verdict on a government that had completely lost touch with its people (see Hain 2000) and which anticipated Gundermann's role in the opposition movement for change five years later in the 'peaceful revolution' of autumn 1989 (see Robb 2007c).

The role of music in 'Geschichten aus dem Koraktor'

The unresolved tensions of Brigade Feuerstein's 'Koraktor' production – the barriers to Franziska living a fulfilled life, the hierarchical conflicts and the hypocrisy of power – are also represented in the musical arrangements. These are composed primarily by Alfons Förster with contributions by Werner Schickor and Gundermann. Reflecting knowledge, as stated, of the dialectical tradition of Hanns Eisler as well as the musical theatre of Kurt Weill, the music provides an aesthetic of contrasts. This entails a montage of different styles, each carrying their own semantic associations for a listener. For example, Gundermann opens the production singing the 'Krabat-Lied'. Its pulse is established by the incessant rhythm of a factory machine. Old and new, rural and industrial collide when, in contrast, the song is delivered in the style of a market-place balladeer: 'Good day you people/Don't look up at me so amazed/You want to know who I am./I'm like you a human child.' The musical accompaniment of the flute and mandolin, reminiscent of Jethro Tull, evokes the natural world of the utopian figure of Krabat, set against the modern world of work, ideology and hierarchy.

In Gundermann's autobiographical 'Spinner Lied' (Nutcase Song) – about an over-zealous, ideologically committed worker – the irony is conveyed by the light-hearted Vaudeville piano accompaniment. Likewise, the parody of the official manipulation of factory production targets in 'Lied vom Gut gehen' (Song about Doing Well) is supported by the contrafactum of the popular *Volkslied* 'Mutter, der Mann mit dem Koks ist da' (Mother the man with the coal is there), its jovial fairground *Volksmusik* accompaniment in waltz time clashing with the seriousness of the theme. Similarly, the parodic cabaret approach to 'Eins zwei drei, Männer sind so frei' (One two three, men are so free), in its mock celebration of men, points to the plight of the woman worker. The composition for 'Zufriedenheit' (Contentment) likewise has a dialectical approach: the discordant psychedelic

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bridge section creates a tension with the happy-go-lucky McCartneyesque verse, alerting listeners to the dangers of political complacency.

Music is also used in the group's exposé of the unequal power relationship between leadership and the people. 'Rote Fahne' (Red Flag) suggests a partisan song in the socialist tradition of Mikis Theodorakis. However, the theme of a distant and dogmatic Party leadership diverges from this association. The tension is expressed by the rolling drum pattern, which forms a counterpoint to the conventional marching rhythm. This – together with the electric bass and guitar riff – updates the genre of partisan song, by relating to a democratic deficit in GDR reality.

The culmination of the show is the 'Schlußlied' (Final Song). In West End or Broadway fashion, this uses a montage of different musical styles and moods to summarise the main ideas. There are four separate musical parts with distinct melodies and time signatures. The third forms an emotional pinnacle, the pathos-laden lyrics being sung in harmony by the cast in a style reminiscent of the musical *Hair*: 'We've stretched the ropes/High in the rainbow sheen./We'll pull the sky down to the ground./We want the sky for all in its entirety!' This utopian perspective, however – effectively predicting a socialist heaven on Earth – is relativised by the coda. This more sober and down-beat verse, part spoken, part sung by Gundermann, urges caution: there can be no celebration if exploiters like Wolf Reissenberg are still at bay.

Narrative technique: Gundermann's 'heroic' role-play

Gundermann's adaptation of the characters Krabat and Franziska in his songs and plays forms an example of his distinctive narrative role-play. Simon Frith writes: 'All songs are implied narratives. They have a central character, the singer, a character with an attitude, in a situation' (1998, p. 169). There are numerous examples of this with protest singers. In Germany Ernst Busch embodied the worker in Brecht and Eisler's battle songs of the 1930s. In the USA Pete Seeger, influenced by the proletarian realist folk tradition of activist Joe Hill, sang songs of heroic workers (Ingram 2008). Woody Guthrie sang with the narrative perspective of Oklahoma refugees, in essence playing that part, embodying their experience and concerns; during the 1984–1985 UK miners' strike, the songs of Billy Bragg and Dick Gaughan identified with the British worker resisting the Thatcher government's dismantling of the coal industry. In singing style, social accent and mannerisms such artists are credible in these roles because – at least in the public's perception[14] – that is who they are. Channelling a concept of Barthes, Dillane *et al.* (2018) describe how Irish singer Damien Dempsey displays 'the grain of the (working class) voice' (p. 456) where 'grain' is defined as 'a dual production – of language and of music' (Barthes 1977, p. 181), 'the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue' (p. 182). This idea appears reminiscent of Brecht's notion of *Gestus*, whereby 'gesture is a socially coded expression' that includes verbalisations as well as body language, bearing and attitude (Mumford 2018, p. 53–4). Gundermann, too, is easily identifiable in this way from his proletarian accent, mannerisms, down-to-earth lyricism and

[14] Although Woody Guthrie empathised with the world he sang about, Pedelty (2012) dismantles the myth that he was the farmer or labourer he embodied in his songs. In essence he was a professional singer, and this was role-play.

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rasping, soulful singing voice. His narrative in the GDR was that of the worker with a utopian vision and later, in the 1990s, that of the East German who had been economically and culturally left behind.

In Gundermann's case, however, his narrative role play is augmented by his identification with literary and mythological characters. While being well schooled in the portrayals of socialist realist heroic workers in protest song tradition, Gundermann knew that such imagery – as propagated by the SED – was no longer applicable in the GDR amidst a population that had become immune to ideological preaching. Across both political systems he lived in, a major part of his narrative explored what a realistic form of heroism could entail, faced with the political and environmental realities of the present. Of particular interest to Gundermann, in terms of the theme of heroism, was the figure of Krabat. As the scientist Jan Serbin declares in the novel, Krabat was unlike traditionally one-sided violent heroes such as Siegfried or Hagan of Troy (p. 88). Rather Krabat displayed a different type of heroism that 'knew the depths of the centuries, the deserts of powerlessness, the oceans of injustice, the infinite land of resurrection, the horizons of happiness' (Brězan 1989, p. 23). In his songs Gundermann also channelled characters such as Ilja Muromez, the peasant warrior from the Soviet film *The Sword and the Dragon* (1956), the Arthurian Lancelot, as adapted in the Soviet play *The Dragon* (2012) or the noble Samurai fighter from the Japanese film *Seven Samurai* (1954). As will be explored later, these are all heroic figures, but none are straightforward. All are marked by a streak of ambiguity which makes them non-conventional. As will be examined, all are portals to a wider philosophical discussion on the theme of 'Siegen' (winning). Through these, Gundermann questioned assumptions regarding the binary opposition of winners and losers, thereby attempting to navigate moral and ideological considerations he faced regarding his own life in the GDR and, afterwards, his position in the early post-unification period, in which the notion of 'Siegen' takes on a renewed significance.

The revelations in 1995 of Gundermann's Stasi involvement – and his own critical reassessment of this in interviews (Schütt 2011) – allow a more nuanced reading of his appropriation of the heroism motif. This, as expressed in his early lyrics, was linked to his sense of duty, a crucial factor in his biography being the period he spent as a trainee officer in the GDR army from 1973 to 1975. Summarising his political orientation in those years he stated:

> I had three parents – mother and father but also the state. I wanted to give something back one day – because up till that point I'd only taken. For me it was a question of the most effective way to serve. I wanted to be a scout, to work for state security in an exposed position, so I thought the army route was possibly the best. (Interview with Schütt 2011, p. 77)

In the officer training school Gundermann had come into conflict with the hierarchy. As the leader of the singing group, he refused to perform a song in honour of a visiting general. This and what he described as his 'lack of usefulness' as a military officer resulted in him leaving the army (Schütt 2011, pp. 79–80). He still retained an ideological commitment to the GDR, however, and when asked to co-operate with the Stasi in 1976 'to safeguard the achievements of Socialism', he had no objections (Schütt 2011, p. 90). Although in retrospect he acknowledged that, in informing on others, he betrayed himself and his socialist ideal, at the time he was on a mission to combat petit-bourgeois behaviour in society, which he viewed as 'hostile' to the state (p. 92). He had a romantic heroic notion of himself as a revolutionary figure in the mould of Tamara Bunke, a GDR citizen who had been a companion of Che Guevara (p. 93). Although he maintained a sense of responsibility for his own actions, he had, as a young adult, a total trust in 'the higher intelligence of the Party' and, above all, wanted to serve (p. 94).

In 'Geschichten aus dem Koraktor' Gundermann explores the applicability of such notions of heroism in the character of Franziska. On one hand, one sees in Franziska's criticism of complacent workers, Gundermann's own condemnation of petit-bourgeois traits in the workforce. On the other hand – showing autobiographical self-reflection on his own part – Franziska is forced to retreat from her high ideals. She is advised that she will not be able to change these workers: rather she should take everyone with her on her journey (Brigade Feuerstein 1978). In another early piece, the aforementioned song 'Ija Muromez' from 1977, one again sees the expression of a naïve heroism side-by-side with a questioning of its validity, hinting at the beginning of a critical self-awareness. The subject emphasises the lengths to which this 'old warrior' from Russian legend will go to fulfil his duty. However, after all his battles are over, he reveals a weakness – a longing for his wife – that he must suppress:

Then there wakes a yearning that long has been asleep
I place it on a maple leaf and bury it fathoms deep
I have to stretch the bow, the blades I will keep sharp
I set my heart in iron for I must not be weak. (Gundermann 2006, p. 45)

Here the artist's probing of an unambiguous concept of duty is mirrored by the tension of the musical accompaniment. This sets the style of a socialist partisan song within a Western pop framework: the recurring picked acoustic guitar riff in the style of Neil Young sits side-by-side with a verse melody typical of a GDR political song (see documentary film Engel 2016, 13.00).

The victory and defeat dichotomy

Gundermann's treatment of the theme of *Siegen* (winning) can be traced to a scene from *Krabat* which he adapted for Brigade Feuerstein's 'Das große Match' (The Big Match) in 1980. Here, against the backdrop of Cold War confrontation between East and West, Gundermann pondered the question of the use of force that only results in cyclical violence. While Spartakus leads his army of slaves against their Roman masters, a slave questions the point of a victory that would only result in the enslavement of the other side. However, while aware that victory does not necessarily lead to a changed reality, Spartakus maintains a positive slant: 'But we have given hope to the world [...] We are the beginning' (Das große Match, adapted from Brězan 1989, pp. 176–7). Following this passage, the cast sing Gundermann's song 'Danach' (Afterwards). The pathos of the slaves' historical struggle is mirrored by the highly dramatic music in the style of a funeral march, sung partly as a round. In its progressive development, the music reflects the epic dimension of the story, this effect intensified by an extended folk-rock instrumental passage, reminiscent of Jethro Tull, featuring distorted electric guitar.

In later songs and productions Gundermann examines the dilemma of victory further by means of the characters Lancelot and the Samurai. He was influenced by the portrayal of Lancelot in the Soviet dramatist Evgeny Shvarts' play *The Dragon* (2012).[15] Here Lancelot slays a dragon that has been tyrannising a city for years. However, his heroic actions appear to have been pointless because the people merely re-subjugate themselves to the dragon's successor. Lancelot must adapt to a new reality in which victory can no longer be measured by the defeat of a dragon, but by the success of a fulfilled life under changed circumstances. In his song 'Lancelot's Provisional Assessment' (1988) Gundermann sings of a would-be hero whose efforts to find a meaningful role for himself in society have been thwarted. This is a veiled allusion to his own experience of having been expelled from the Party in 1984 as well as his ceasing of co-operation with the Stasi that same year. Now, in the late 1980s, the subject reassesses his previous self-image as a hero, one that is no longer relevant to his present life. He has moved on from this past, must rebuild himself: 'Today I will forget my name, today I will burn down my house'. However, his path is unclear. To a pop acoustic guitar accompaniment in the style of a Bowie of the *Hunky Dory* era, he sings:

And I don't know if I can still jump a man and stick it in his throat
And I don't know if I can still sing a song and win somebody's soul
And I don't know if I can start anew in the wider world
And I don't know if can wait to be counted by the world. (Gundermann 2006, p. 21)

In Gundermann's incorporation of human shortcomings in his heroism aesthetic there was a strong personal aspect. In the making of the documentary film *Gundi Gundermann* in 1982, Richard Engel identified 'a reality of fractures' in the singer's life, one in which 'the possibility of failure' was always present (Engel 2011, pp. 50–1). In this respect Gundermann's biography allows a glimpse of an underside of GDR society that did not match up with the SED's vision of a heroic proletarian as the historical 'winner'. As a worker in the mines, Gunderman was well aware of the gap between the image of the enlightened worker propagated by the Party and the reality on the ground. The ultimate expression of the brutal harshness of working life can be found in two of the final songs before his death: 'Und musst du weinen' (And if it makes you cry) portrays characters whose lives consist of strife and basic survival: 'For they have hardened hands and a hardened heart/They never tire of fighting and die before their time/They search all life for pleasure but all they find is pain/They get by with a lie but never learn to live' (1997). The song's content is mirrored in the robust folk-rock treatment with echoes of Springsteen in lyrics, music and delivery. In 'Engel über den Revier' (Angel above the Colliery), written after the closure of Gundermann's mine in 1996, the subject refers to tragic workplace accidents his colleagues endured over the years and reflects that his own guardian angel has now deserted him too: 'There flies an angel across the smoke-filled heaven/above the colliery/He's watched over me almost half my life/Now he's leaving me' (1997). A sadness emanates from the minor key and the untypical fragility of the singer's delivery. As the music builds in intensity, however, there is an epic feel corresponding to the theme of the ending of a long working life. As employees are forced to search for new pastures elsewhere, the song portrays the ultimate antithesis of the heroic worker; it forms the culmination of Gundermann's treatment of the 'Sieger' and 'Verlierer' dichotomy.

[15] This was performed at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin in the mid-1960s, as Schütt tells us, in an adaptation by Benno Besson (1965, p. 121).

Nature as an antidote to 'Siegen'

Severed from his previous ideological certainties, as portrayed in 'Lancelot', Gundermann increasingly viewed the natural environment as his new metaphorical home throughout the 1990s. It is here that he found a meaningful heroic stance in his songs urging the saving of the planet. Previously we have seen how he connected aesthetically with literary characters in his narrative roleplay. In doing this he created a utopian moment by linking into a larger, more universal world from whose perspective he dealt with the intractable antagonisms he experienced in his own life and society.[16] In making a similar aesthetic connection with nature, he feeds off the tension between the deindustrialisation that threatened his job as a miner and his awareness simultaneously of the damage caused to the environment by coal production (see Gundermann's interviews with Schütt, 2011). If, as Pedelty states, '[m]usicians transform geographic regions into living myths' (p. 83) then Gundermann did exactly that with the Lusatian coalfields. In such visual portrayals of himself – in his lyrics as in photographic portraits – as a miner and musician, one sees how he is as inextricably linked to this image of place as Woody Guthrie is connected to the Dust Bowl (see Pedelty 2012, p. 37; Curtis and Rose 1994). It is against this dark, polluting backdrop of the mines that Gundermann wages his war against the pollution of the planet.

Before looking at Gundermann's treatment of nature, it is useful to set him in the context of recent academic approaches to environmental issues in international popular music. Because of Gundermann's background in the socialist realist tradition of worker's song, an inevitable comparison can be made with Pete Seeger who, together with Malvina Reynolds, released the environmentalist album *God Bless the Grass* in 1966 and founded the Clearwater Project in 1969 to combat the pollution of the Hudson River. Although the expression of ecological concerns in songs of Guthrie and Seeger had an aspect of 'sentimental adherence to a pastoral ideal of America' (Ingram 2008, p. 25) and as such differed to musical responses from the 1980s onwards to human-induced climate warming, there are points of overlap between Seeger and Gundermann. Both reflect a tension between environmentalism and the traditional workers' demands for the development of industry. Gundermann was torn between his concern for the livelihoods of workers, such as himself, faced with the deindustrialisation of the East in the 1990s and his concern for the planet. However, just as Seeger was able to connect environmental destruction to capitalist exploitation (Ingram 2008), Gundermann, too, was scathing on the cynical calculation, he believed, the powers-at-be had made: 'The bastards. People and nature don't feature in their plans. They know the boat is full and they're selective, for themselves, that's clear. Their calculation is done without us all' (interview with Schütt, 2011, p. 159).

Yet Pedelty (2012) writes that there are very few commercial recording artists in the present day who make environmentalism a central concern of their work. He mentions the important position that rock and pop have in the world where 'the earth is becoming a central "place" in our musical consciousness' (p. 21), but he asks '[w]here are all the environmental songs?' (p. 45). He cites possible reasons as

[16] Hain (2000) describes how Gundermann's linking with objects from the material world around him in his lyrics enabled him structurally 'to express in wonderfully dialectical figures what most people only perceive, and to enjoy with all his senses the things that sounded so plain in theory', p. 100.

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musicians' fear of sounding hypocritical (giving the example of the massive carbon footprint of a U2 tour), artists' doubt as to the effectiveness of such songs, or the fact that producers and record companies have traditionally shied away from overt political statement. Apart from the many examples of isolated environmental songs from singers such as Joni Mitchell, Cat Stevens and John Denver, to name but a few, Pedelty suggests the only commercial artist to create a body of work on the theme of environmentalism was the 'uncompromising' Pete Seeger (Pedelty 2012, pp. 46–7).

Gundermann, on the other hand, never shied away from a direct treatment of the environment in his songs. As far back as Brigade Feuerstein's production 'Liebestraum im Weltenraum' (Love Dream in Space) from 1981, humans, nature and machines collude in harmony as a counterforce to nuclear war. In a variation on Kraftwerk's 'Computer Love' from 1981, the computers of Soviet and American spaceships fall in love and refuse to obey orders from their respective High Commands to attack, thus saving the world from destruction (Brigade Feuerstein 1981). In this production one observes the depiction of a Cold War nuclear threat shifting to the broader ecological concerns of the present.[17] The US and Soviet astronauts now, too, connect with each other and make friends. Threatened with disciplinary measures for not carrying out the nuclear attacks, they now see themselves as green guardians of the environment and promptly deliver the following ultimatum to Earth: 'Within 48 hours the pollutant emission of all objects on earth must be reduced to below the norm we have set. All objects over this limit will be shot with targeted laser beams'. The show finishes with Gundermann and Alfons Förster's 'Lied der Raumschiffe und Kosmonauten' (Song of the Spaceships and Cosmonauts), encapsulating the image of humans, nature and machines in harmony:

Listen, we see this earth from afar.
Listen, we don't know any other star.
The universe won't offer us any other landing site,
if it bursts apart, this globe of ours.

So may humans, trees and rivers shake hands,
wash oil, salt and soot from the farmland,
let's set the ground free that nourishes us well,
so our home is nice when it only belongs to us.

So may humans and machines shake hands,
may the ship that they built not drag them to hell,
and may the spirits they called make them big and strong,
so they no longer flee from them, crying, naked and bare.

So may humans and brother humans shake hands.
May it remain unsaid what divides our countries,
may we fix the world, no one can do it alone,
so that we don't burn one day in the beautiful sunshine! (Brigade Feuerstein 1981)

In 1988, the hitherto most direct expression of Gundermann's awareness of the emerging ecological crisis appeared in the song 'Halte durch' (Persevere). Addressing the planet, he urges: 'Persevere however you can/Cause you're a clever girl/You're such an experienced world/And all we give you is hell' (1988). The anguished message is

[17] Lucy Robinson (2023) speaks of a similar shift in her chapter 'The Eighties in Green Time and Space. Glastonbury, CND and Greenpeace, 1981–82'.

bolstered by the urgency of the driving rock accompaniment and its melodic echoes of Dylan's 'Idiot Wind' in the bridge section. In the song the singer acknowledges his own environmentally unfriendly role as the operator of a coal excavator: 'I, too, am an enemy soldier/who has eaten from your skin'. However, he anticipates he will at some point choose sides: 'I haven't been able to run over [to you] yet/But I'm your true son/One day I'll come' (Gundermann 1995, p. 26).

His appraisal of a rampaging capitalism devouring the world's resources can be further examined in the context of the end of the GDR (see Schütt 2011; Hain 2005). After the tumultuous *Wende* period of 1989–1990 in which he alongside many *Liedermacher* and rock musicians campaigned for a reformed socialism, events moved quickly towards a unification with West Germany. Thousands lost their jobs in the wake of the privatisation of obsolete GDR factories and entered government-funded temporary job schemes to facilitate re-entry to employment. In this context, Gundermann emerged in the early 1990s as a musical spokesman for the so-called 'losers' of unification: East German workers who had been doubly let down, firstly by state socialism and now by the empty promises of capitalism. The universal applicability of his Krabat-inspired aesthetic – embodying the perennial social underdog in tune with the natural environment – enabled him, unlike many other ex-GDR *Liedermacher*, to survive the transition into the new political system.

In spring of 1992 the discussion on the winners and losers of unification was already in full swing in the public realm.[18] Gundermann expressed the 'Sieger/Verlierer' dichotomy in the figure of the Japanese Samurai. In Kurosawa's film *Seven Samurai* the warriors who have freed a village from the tyranny of bandits, no longer have a function once their military strategy and skill are no longer required. As Gundermann asserts: 'Only when he [. . .] can change his programme from that of a killer to a farmer, can and should he live on' (Schütt 2011, pp. 121–2). In his song 'Der siebente Samurai' (The Seventh Samurai) from 1993, Gundermann references the Japanese warrior. This figure is torn between desire to prove himself and the knowledge that his fighting skills are no longer relevant, but who finds an alternative in love and tending the land: 'Give me my hidden jack boots again/Outside my last day's howling loud/How I'd love to come back home to you/For you don't care if I'm not a winner'. The song's highly melodic Irish folk signature tune played on the whistle evokes the rustic environment of the Japanese peasants. The ballsy rock rhythm underlies the passion of the subject's delivery as he reflects on his dilemma as a 'Sieger' who is forced to take stock in a new world.

Via this imagery, Gundermann rejects the capitalist world's definition of success and posits an alternative form of heroism that nurtures the well-being of the planet. He suggests a new, more modest definition of *Siegen* where civilisation no longer sees itself 'in the centre ground' (interview with Schütt 2011, p. 133). He stated: 'We win by beating the other. That is one possible form of existence [. . .] The final, higher possibility could be, however: to win by [being able to take] the beatings' (p. 108). Gundermann reflects that the result of humans' blindness in viewing themselves as victors, is that they have lost sight of who they are. This

[18] In interview East German protest singer Hans-Eckardt Wenzel related the 'Sieger/Verlierer' debate to the wider context of Western civilisation in the twentieth century, referring to Bertolt Brecht quotation from *Fatzer*: 'From now on and for a long while/there will be no more winners/in your world, but only more/vanquished' (Brecht 1978, p. 116; quoted in Robb 1998, p. 177).

finds expression in the exploitation of the natural world: the illogicality of globalised market forces results in unsustainable carbon footprints (p. 30) and the increasing gap between rich and poor. Taking the stability factor of the sandbanks in his coal mine as an analogy, Gundermann believes there will be a tipping point when society is no longer sustainable and the whole edifice will come crashing down (p. 45). In terms of nature, he uses the example of the energy inefficiency of his own excavator to demonstrate that people must put back into the world what they take out (pp. 27–33).

In the 1990s, Gundermann's aesthetic solution to the environmental problem was to blend his narrative persona with nature itself, just as he had blended in other songs with literary characters. This is visible on songs such as 'Gras' (Grass) and 'Soll Sein' (Shall Be) from the 1992 album *Einsame Spitze* (Out of this World). Played as a waltz in a stately baroque-pop style, 'Gras' reflects on the healing powers of a self-renewing nature: 'Ever higher grows the grass/Wild and tall and green/Till the scythes go slicing past/In their arc so green/Ever higher grows the grass/Heals our wounds anew/Often strong and pale as glass/Just like me and you' (Gras 1992). In 'Soll sein' he sings to a Springsteenesque rock accompaniment, evoking the fervour of a newly committed eco warrior: 'Once more I shall be talking to the animals/And I shall be listening to the grass/What it whispers in the summer evenings/As the people walk on past'. In the proclamation of the final chorus line, one sees Gundermann's new heroic role in his fight to save the planet: 'Don't ask me how, don't ask me when/This is just a song/But a little song/Is where I begin' (Soll Sein, 1992). In 'Grüne Armee' (Green Army), from the same album, reminiscent of the militant anarcho- rock of the West Berlin group Ton Steine Scherben (see Robb 2023), he sings his utopian manifesto for the environment, urging resistance to the factory bosses:

We'll patch up the ozone hole, we'll filter the Rhine
We'll bring back the forest, we'll make ourselves small
Sweet cream for the children, clover for the cows
So says the flag of the Green Army

We'll slaughter the polluters both here and over there
Where the factory boss mutinies, that's where we'll go
We'll smash them, whether private or state-run
Under the flag of the Green Army

Conclusion

Gerhard Gundermann is an example of GDR artist caught in a 'utopia trap', but one that had a distinct form of its own. On one hand his artistic approach, by which his narrative persona blended with literary characters, machines, nature and the cosmos to form an aesthetic unity, exuded a utopianism which was his hallmark. In the GDR he used this to expose the falseness of the regime's claim to be a progressive state. On the other hand, in his early years that same utopian streak had spawned a fanatical idealism leading to a collaboration with the Stasi that became his ultimate downfall.

Of all the writers caught in the utopia trap few paid a higher price than Gundermann. By 1995, at the height of his career, in the wake of two critically acclaimed albums, he was feted by a growing East German following and wooed by Vivi Eickelberg, a leading West German music agent who managed celebrated artists such as Herman van Veen and BAP (Meinhardt 2018). When the Stasi revelations broke in the media, this contact was abruptly broken off. The friendship with Silly was suddenly under strain too. His next album *Frühstück für Immer* (Breakfast for Ever, 1995) would no longer benefit from the production skills of Uwe Hassbecker and Rüdiger Barton. In one of the final songs before his death, 'War Dein Freund' (Was Your Friend), a contrafactum of Springsteen's 'Downbound Train', a song similarly about rejection, Gundermann raged at Hassbecker's repudiation of their friendship: 'You ride on a borrowed stallion/So entitled and elegant/You judge me for my weakness/but you've fenced off your heart/You won't see me anymore/And I was your friend'. Gundermann presumably took the view that such judgement was harsh since few artists could claim they had never compromised with the GDR regime: the 'participatory dictatorship' that Mary Fulbrook talks about (2005) entailed artists playing the game – to bigger or lesser degrees. Indeed, the Silly vocalist, Tamara Danz, herself had been one of the lead singers in the politically loyal Oktoberklub in the mid-1970s (see video 'Das geht los').

In interview in 2013, Hassbecker and Barton, looking back on their relationship with Gundermann, regretted the way it had ended. After the Stasi revelations, they had set up a meeting, but Gundermann, feeling under interrogation, had walked out (Werner 2013). In the documentary film by Lemke (2019), Hassbecker spoke fondly of Gundermann, but regretted that, far from changing the world, he had ended up writing 'the most horrible day-to day trivia' about people. Barton spoke of a 'quite significant loss of trust' though, as he added, 'it wasn't as if we didn't ever want to see him again' (Lemke 2019). The pair returned to produce Gundermann's final CD *Engel über dem Revier* (Angel above the Colliery) in 1997. However, as artists who, against the odds, had honed a unique reputation in the 1980s as a band that withstood state interference, Silly's continued association with Gundermann was clearly not straightforward. While Gundermann refused to accept the judgement of others, he did exercise self-criticism: 'I stand guilty before myself and the idea of socialism' (interview with Schütt 2011, p. 92).

A year after Gundermann endured the trauma of the Stasi scandal, his coal mine finally closed. Although he could make a living from music, he had always maintained he derived artistic inspiration from working life, particularly from the sonic rhythm of his excavator machine (Lemke 2019). He began retraining as a carpenter while meanwhile still performing regularly with Seilschaft and releasing his two final CDs with the Buschfunk label. He died on 21 June 1998 at the age of 43 from a stroke.

Over the 25 years since his death Gundermann's legacy has been cultivated in the East German media and by live events. As well as Dresen's film from 2018 and the various documentaries, his life and songs are remembered in the form of tribute acts and live shows by his former backing Seilschaft. Concerts and discussion rounds are sponsored by the association Gundermanns Seilschaft e.V. The Kulturfabrik in Hoyerswerda is home to the Gundermann Archive which alongside the Akademie der Künste in Berlin contains many of the unpublished manuscripts and recordings of Brigade Feuerstein.

Despite the highly contentious nature of his political history, the cultural fascination with the figure of Gundermann remains strong in East Germany. The key to the continuing popularity of his songs lies in his aesthetic approach: a combination of utopianism and harsh realism. Here he presents his eternal hope in his 'heroic' image of humankind that is aware of its own fallibility, but also of its strength as part of the cycle of nature. In interview with Schütt, Gundermann famously stated: 'I'd like to be something like a filling station for losers. I'd be happy if people said they needed bread, water and songs by Gundermann. Songs as sustenance for life' (Schütt 2011, pp. 39–40). In this respect his embodiment of the underdog, as influenced by Krabat, struck – and continues to strike – a chord with audiences living in a society that only deals in victory.

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