

# VOLK MUSIC

*Volk*

Laibach

London: Mute Records, 2006

*Kunst der Fuge*

Laibach

Ljubljana: Dallas Records, 2008

*Reviewed by Oliver Pendleton*

Laibach is a Slovenian music group founded in 1980 in Communist Yugoslavia. Although Laibach's music is often classified as "industrial," that term does not begin to capture the band's musical and conceptual versatility. Laibach's releases run the gamut from a Beatles cover album (*Let it Be*<sup>1</sup>), to a heavy metal concept album on God (*Jesus Christ Superstars*<sup>2</sup>), to a "techno" concept album on war, globalization, and Western imperialism in the Balkans (*NATO*<sup>3</sup>), to the two albums under review here: *Volk*, a concept album about nationalism, and *Kunst der Fuge*, an electronic realization of J. S. Bach's *The Art of the Fugue*.

"Laibach" is the German name for the Slovenian capital Ljubljana. The name first appeared in the twelfth century and became "official" after Rudolf von Hapsburg conquered the town in 1278. The name remained in use until the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918. From 1943 to 1945, the name was revived when Slovenia was occupied by the Germans. The Germans found many Slovenian collaborators, who combined Slovenian nationalism, anti-Communism, and pro-German sentiments. After the war, thousands of collaborators were murdered by the Communists, and the very name Laibach was banned. Thus from the beginning Laibach the band was as much about politics as music. Its very name was a challenge to the Yugoslav political order, and beyond that to all universalist ideologies and homogenizing political and economic systems.

Laibach's flirtation with nationalism does not stop with its name. Laibach posters and album covers feature National Socialist propaganda images. And in the video of "Das Spiel ist aus" ("The Game is Up"), the members of Laibach appear in Nazi uniforms—on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and wandering through a shopping mall,

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<sup>1</sup> Laibach, *Let it Be* (London: Mute Records, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Laibach, *Jesus Christ Superstars* (London: Mute Records, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Laibach, *NATO* (London: Mute Records, 1994).

pushing a cart, surrounded by shocked onlookers.<sup>4</sup> (The effect is hilarious.) After the Yugoslavian government banned the use of the name “Laibach,” the group adopted a simple seal: a cross with four equal arms surrounded by a toothed wheel. Is this an ironic juxtaposition of Christian and Communist motifs? Is a cross in a circle meant to resemble a swastika in a circle? Quite a few of Laibach’s songs are sung in German too—although a good many are sung in English, which is perhaps the group’s only concession to the international pop market.

But Laibach cannot be accused of an anachronistic adherence to German National Socialism, if only because of the ambiguous and contingent connection between National Socialism and Slovenian nationalism. Beyond that, Laibach’s work also contains currents of a broader Eastern European nationalism. For example, lead vocalist Milan Fras appears in headgear that makes him resemble the famous Vienna portrait of Vlad the Impaler, a Wallachian nationalist who resisted the power of both Turkish armies and German burghers. Laibach’s 1994 *NATO* album clearly rejects American and Western European imperialism in the name of the “Eastern Nation,” which I understand as a broad Eastern European nationalism. In light of subsequent events in Serbia and Kosovo, the album now seems prophetic.

In 1994, Laibach added an additional twist to its engagement with nationalism by creating its own virtual nation, NSK, which stands for *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, German (!) for *New Slovenian Art*. NSK was founded as an artist’s collective with music, painting, video, graphics, theatre, and theory divisions. It issues passports and postage stamps and conducts foreign exhibitions as diplomatic events.

Thus Laibach’s overriding theme seems to be nationalism as such. To borrow a phrase from Savitri Devi, they are “nationalists of every nation.” The *Volk* album certainly supports this thesis. The album’s fourteen songs are interpretations and transformations of the national anthems of fifteen nations in which fragments of the original words and/or melodies are embedded in new songs with additional words.

Track 1, “*Germania*,” is based on “*Deutschland über Alles*,” the melody of which was composed by Joseph Haydn. The meaning of “*Germany before All*” (or “*Germany First*”) is simply that *for Germans*,

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<sup>4</sup> The video of “*Das Spiel ist aus*” is available on *Laibach – The Videos* (Mute DVD, 2004). The version of “*Das Spiel ist aus*” accompanying the video is available on the compilation *Laibach, Anthems* (London: Mute Records, 2004). Another version of “*Das Spiel ist aus*” originally appeared on *Laibach, WAT* (London: Mute Records, 2003).

Germany should come first in their hearts before all other countries. It does not mean that for non-Germans, Germany should come first as well. (Of course the fact that the song appears first on the CD may indicate that for Laibach too, Germany really does come first.)

Laibach's lyrics ask whether "Deutschland über Alles" will continue to be sung, and, more importantly, will it mean anything in the future: "And in times of misfortune/ and in times of mistrust/ shall this song continue/ from generation to generation,/ from present to past,/ shall this song continue/ more than ever/ in this time of mistrust?" This question is poignant because Germans today are punished by their Allied Occupation regime for openly putting Germany first in their hearts, and for expressing nostalgia for the Third Reich, the last time when Germans put Germany first.

The Third Reich, the War, and the Occupation together constitute a historical "fall" from which Germans must find redemption: "After the unspeakable,/after you have fallen as only angels can fall,/go and find your peace again,/get back home and grow your tree." The trauma of the fall has, however, induced a kind of collective amnesia: "No victory,/no defeat,/no shame, and Fatherland no more . . ." All these are replaced with "only Unity, Justice, and Freedom for all." I take this to mean a universalist credo that will erase Germany in the hearts of Germans—as a prelude to erasing Germany from the world entirely. Laibach's words conclude "There will be no memory/ or there will be no home." The grammar is a little off, but I take this to mean that unless Germany remembers itself, it will be dismembered; it will perish; there will be no home. This is "the lesson you have to learn/ now and in the future./ Do you think you can make it, Deutschland?"

Track 2, "America," begins with the album's only assault of loud, ugly "industrial" noise—a singularly appropriate gesture—followed by a montage of "The Star Spangled Banner," the preamble to the US constitution, the blaring sirens of urban hellholes, the fire and brimstone rantings of televangelists, and Laibach's own accusatory lyrics.

If the Third Reich is Laibach's model of ethno-nationalism, the United States is their model of anti-nationalism. The United States was born with an identity crisis. Culturally and genetically European, the different strands of the American populace could have formed a new European nation with a unified national self-consciousness.

But our founding stock was selected for rootlessness and a penchant for universalistic ideological fixations, religious and secular. This provided fertile soil for an abstract, universalistic, creedal conception of

identity, which became more and more useful with the immigration of ever-more heterogeneous and unassimilable populations. America is now no longer a people, but merely a system: a technological, capitalistic plutocracy at war with its founding stock. Beyond that, the American system is at war with every distinct and independent people, with every culture but pop culture, with every ideal but self-indulgence.

The triumph of this "universal homogeneous state" is what Francis Fukuyama proclaimed "the end of history." History ended first in America, and America's mission is to end it everywhere else. It is not a civilizing mission, but a barbarizing one, spread under the banner of emancipation. Laibach asks: "O the land of the free/ and the home of the brave,/ are you heaven on Earth,/ or the gloom of the grave?" The answer is both, for the heaven of liberal democracy is the graveyard of all nations, cultures, and ideals. America is "the end of history,/ the end of time,/ the end of family,/ the end of crime."

Accordingly, Laibach prays (while mocking the American tendency to inject religion into politics):

Praise the Lord  
 And praise the Holy Spirit  
 To save us from your freedom,  
 Justice, peace . . .  
 from arrogance and pride,  
 from violence and confusion . . .

Your great despair  
 And great depression  
 satanic verses of your superstition,  
 the land of plenty.

Your Bill of Rights, free enterprise,  
 the free will and the unbroken one,  
 your self-esteem and self-desire,  
 your trust in God and the religious fire.

Track 3, "Anglia," is based on "God Save the Queen." If the United States is the Mighty Fortress of the Universal Homogeneous State, the United Kingdom is its "Airstrip One," from which American air-power can depart to rain death upon any nationalist upstarts in Europe or the Near East. Amazingly, this utterly degraded and subordinate role in the process of global denationalization co-exists with

a sturdy nationalism—really more a nostalgia for England’s past imperial greatness. (Americans should not laugh, because we exist in the same position *vis-à-vis* Israel.) Hence Laibach begins: “So you still believe you are ruling the World,/ using all your tricks to keep the picture blurred,/ scatter your enemies,/confound their politics,/so you still believe you are ruling the world. . . . So you still believe you are superior,/ and all other nations are inferior,/ any sedition—hushed,/ rebellious Scots—crushed,/ so you still believe you are superior!” Unfortunately, British nationalism, like American, has been channeled into the destruction of its own people. Hence Laibach adds a single line to the first verse of “God Save the Queen,” which functions as the chorus of “Anglia”: “God save you all.”

If Laibach thinks that National Socialist Germany represents the past of nationalism, track 4, “Rossiya” indicates that the group thinks its future lies in Russia. Furthermore, Laibach seems to share the surprising fusion of Russian nationalism and Communism in the minds of many Russian nationalists today. “Rossiya” combines the Communist anthem “The Internationale” with the current “State Anthem of the Russian Federation,” which is based on the 1944 Soviet national anthem. Although the current Russian anthem removes the phrase “an unbreakable union” from the old Soviet anthem, Laibach quietly restores it, speaking of “an unbreakable union of fraternal states, united forever in Great Russia’s embrace.”

After the fall of Communism and the integration of Russia into the global capitalist marketplace, Russians learned that Communism, for all its faults, at least did not hand the resources of the nation over to international robber barons based in New York, London, and Tel Aviv. To Russians condemned to cold, hunger, and hopelessness by the transition to capitalism, there was a new poignancy to “The Internationale”: “Arise, the prisoners of starvation,/arise, the damned of the earth.” To this, Laibach adds: “let’s gather together,/ let’s break us free,/ the world is changing at its core!” Communism, like nationalism, is collectivist in spirit. And in practice, Soviet Communism was nationalistic. Thus the move from national Communism to international capitalism was seen as a step in the wrong direction.

And what of Communism’s decades of terror, its tens of millions of victims? These seem to be minimized or forgotten. Or perhaps they have merely been assimilated to the harsh environment, the Mongol hordes, and the cruel autocrats that made the Russians the toughest nation in Europe. Laibach’s opening verse captures this fiery, frozen

crucible of the Russian character: "United forever in vast, endless space,/ created in struggle by unhappy race,/ where sunrays of freedom/ are frozen in ice,/ united forever in Great Russia's embrace." Ironically, by alleviating such conditions, liberal democracy and consumer society might prove greater threats to the survival of the Russian nation than Communism ever was.

This connection between Communism and Slavic nationalism<sup>5</sup> is underscored in track 12, "Slovania" ("Slovenia"), which is based on "Hey Slavs," the unofficial pan-Slavic anthem which later became the anthem of Communist Yugoslavia. Laibach's own contribution consists in dedications of "Hey Slavs": "These words are for those who died,/ these words are for those left behind./ These words are for you, Poland,/ and these ones for my homeland." The other dedicatees are "the spirit of our fathers," "the glory of our sons," "the power of the Spectre" (Communism?), "the Holy Alliance" (the 1815 alliance between the Russian Empire, the Austrian Empire, and the Kingdom of Prussia against the ideals of the French Revolution), "lovers," "warriors," and "all communists." The final lines are cryptic, but they hint at a modern, Russian-oriented pan-Slavism: "Out of the feudal darkness,/ away from the Nameless One/ we stand alone in history,/ facing East in sacrifice." The references to Communism and the Holy Alliance indicate that the spirit of this pan-Slavism will be collectivist, anti-liberal, and Christian.

Track 13, "Vaticanae," is a suitably ethereal arrangement of the "Papal Anthem and March," which indicates that for Laibach, Slovenia's western-looking Catholicism, like its eastern-looking pan-Slavism, is an important aspect of the nation's identity.<sup>6</sup> Track 14, "NSK," a version of

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<sup>5</sup> A similar connection is drawn in "National Reservation" on *NATO*. A remake of "Indian Reservation," a Cherokee lament that became a US number one single for Paul Revere and the Raiders in 1971, "National Reservation" substitutes "Eastern" (i.e., Eastern European) for "Cherokee" and leaves the rest of the song pretty much unaltered, including the lines "Though we wear shirts and ties,/ we're still the red men [i.e., Communists] deep inside."

<sup>6</sup> Consider the imagery of *Also sprach Johann Paul II*, by the Laibach side project 300.000 V.K. (= 300,000 Verschiedene Krawalle, 300,000 Assorted Riots) (A.M.D.G., 1996). On the back cover, the Polish pope is depicted as Vlad the Impaler, as portrayed in Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 movie *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. On the CD itself, John Paul's voice is mixed with Richard Strauss' *Also sprach Zarathustra* over a throbbing, martial techno beat. The CD evokes the muscular, heroic, crusading Christianity of those who resisted the Muslim invasions of Europe, not today's decadent Christianity that has thrown open the gates.

"The Great Seal" from Laibach's *Opus Dei* album,<sup>7</sup> is the anthem of Laibach's own state Neue Slowenische Kunst. Over a march that sounds like it is being played on a scratchy vinyl record from the 1940s, an electronic voice intones the stirring concluding words of Winston Churchill's "We Shall Fight on the Beaches" speech of June 4, 1940. In light of "Anglia," the irony is delicious.

Tracks 5 through 7 deal with France ("Francia"), Italy ("Italia"), and Spain ("España"). "Francia" is based "La Marseillaise," but Laibach rallies the "children of the fatherland" not against French monarchists and their allies, but against "foreign hordes" transforming France into an African (and Muslim) nation stretching from the Congo to Calais. "Italia," based on "Il Canto degli Italiani" ("The Song of the Italians") also called "Fratelli d'Italia" ("Brothers of Italy"), is *Volk's* most straightforward (and beautiful) adaptation of an anthem. Yet it adds two cryptic and sinister verses describing Italy as "the slave of Rome" and asking Italy if she will die for her freedom or forget her past and its ties. "España" is a melodic, martial, and triumphant fusion of the music of Spain's wordless national anthem "La Marcha Real" ("The Royal March") and the words of "El Himno de Riego" ("The Song of Riego") the anthem of the Spanish Republic, which was banned under Franco. It is hard to see how the Communist Republic has anything to do with a healthy Spanish nationalism, but "El Himno de Riego" is truly a stirring call to arms. Laibach's interpolations, moreover, have nothing to do with Communism, invoking instead the masculine and heroic Christianity of Spanish tradition: "Brave is your Jesus—El Toreador!" and "Brave is your Jesus—El Conquistador!"

Tracks 8 through 11 deal with non-European nations. Track 8, "Yisra'el" ("Israel") is an ironic blending of the Israeli national anthem, "Hatikvah" ("The Hope") with the martial Palestinian national anthem "Biladi" ("My Country"). Track 9, "Türkiye" ("Turkey") is based on the Turkish national anthem "İstiklâl Marşı" ("Independence March"). Track 10, "Zhouguó" ("China") blends "The Internationale" with the Chinese anthem "Yìyǒngjūn Jìnxíngqǔ" ("March of the Volunteers"), for in China too, Communism has fused with nationalism. The hauntingly beautiful track 11, "Nippon" ("Japan"), is based on the Japanese anthem "Kimi ga Yo" ("May Your Reign Last Forever").

If you are encountering Laibach for the first time, *Volk* is definitely the place to begin. Musically, it is Laibach's most melodic and accessible

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<sup>7</sup> Laibach, *Opus Dei* (London: Mute Records, 1987).

recording, yet all the group's distinct sonic trademarks are present. Conceptually, it is the group's most ambitious and thought-provoking project so far, yet it is also rich with humor and irony (but only at the expense of its enemies).

Laibach's latest release, *Kunst der Fuge*, is a Laibachian electronic realization of Bach's last, unfinished work *The Art of the Fugue*. I found this choice surprising, but I shouldn't have, since Laibach's earlier works demonstrate a wide knowledge of classical music, including Baroque counterpoint. (This is used to droll effect when combined with a monotonous, thumping techno bass line on NATO's cover of the Swedish glam-metal band Europe's "The Final Countdown.")

"Original instruments" purists, of course, would dismiss such electronic performances without a listening. But Bach himself did not write *The Art of the Fugue* for a particular instrument. And for those of us who first heard Bach played by Walter/Wendy Carlos, synthesizers are original instruments anyway. I have a number of performances of *The Art of the Fugue* in various arrangements—piano, organ, string quartet, and chamber orchestra—and Laibach's has taken its place among them as a legitimate and sometimes revelatory interpretation. Like all of Laibach's works, there are playful and ironic moments. But the core is deeply serious, even spiritual. At the brink of death, Bach was writing pure, Platonic *Gedankenmusik*, and it is Laibach's electronic realization, precisely because of its iciness and inhumanity—its cold interstellar vastness—that brings this listener right to eternity's edge.

Is Laibach mystical then as well as militant, in the tradition of the Christian warrior-monks like the Templars and Teutonic Knights? The closing words of "Das Spiel ist aus" certainly seem to view European man's struggle for survival from the aspect of eternity:

Was erstanden ist, das muss vergehen.  
 Was vergangen ist, muss auferstehen!  
 Wir der Böse sind, und wir sind Gott.  
 Wir sind zeitlos. Und du bist tot!  
 Raus! Das Spiel ist aus!<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> "What has risen must pass away./ What has passed must rise again!/ We are the Devil, and we are God./ We are timeless. And you are dead!/ Out! The game is up!" This is Gnostic or Vedantic non-dualism, of course, not orthodox Christianity.