

SPOTLIGHT LAIBACH

Julie Andrews, forever young, runs through the perennially green meadows of the Austrian Alps. The British film star presents an image of joy, familiar to anyone who has ever come into contact with *The Sound of Music*, Robert Wise's award-laden film from 1965.

Andrews represents an effervescence of youth and, as the swelling theme of the film's soundtrack – written by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein – soon announces, the timelessness of this intoxicating elation.

The hills are truly alive, and, at the end of the film, they offer an escape route for the heroic von Trapp family as it flees the Nazis. But what the creators of *The Sound of Music* could not have anticipated was that the score would some 50 years later inspire a Slovenian art-rock ensemble to remould it into something entirely different.

Laibach, formed in 1980 in the mining town of Trbovlje in what was Yugoslavia, have produced a version of *The Sound of Music* that you can march to. 'Climb Every Mountain' becomes an order, and 'Lonely Goatherd' a disco-saturated ballad, the sweet melancholy of the original turned dark by Milan Fras' growling vocals. But, most extraordinarily of all, this project was conceived as a result of their performance in North Korea in 2015. Indeed, the video to Laibach's 'The Sound of Music' contains footage from the visit, the Pyongyang audience looking utterly bewildered by their encounter with the first rock group to visit the secluded country.

So, what's going on? A paragraph from Laibach's manifesto – *10 Items of the Covenant* – stating that art is subject to political

manipulation, provides a starting point. The band has its roots in a reactive provocation that takes aim at organizational and performative power, its sounds and imagery. Laibach sees little distinction, in terms of method, between political rallies and huge rock concerts. Both forms share a common medium of mass organization and pomp to signal power and to communicate raw emotion. The band's name comes from the German word for Ljubljana, used when the city was part of the Habsburg Empire, a place that has experienced decades of totalitarian imagery – from Nazi to post-War socialist realist art.

Courting controversy is nothing new to this band, which fluctuates between four and seven members. In Yugoslavia its critique of socialist/Soviet power was denounced as fascist. Laibach isn't fascist – it uses the tools and iconography of totalitarian propaganda to draw attention to the processes of state power. Given this background, the invitation to play in Pyongyang – an event filmed by Morten Traavik in his documentary, *Liberation Day* – was too good to miss.

Founder member Ivan Novak says they were partly attracted to the North Korean project because of their own history in Yugoslavia. But he points out an important difference. 'While any kind of negative, sarcastic and cynical humour is officially forbidden in North Korea, Yugoslavia [from the 1950s on] was full of sharp-edged black humour that eventually helped to collapse the country.'

The band didn't go to Pyongyang to laugh at the dictatorship, though. 'That would have been a very childish thing to

do, especially in a place like North Korea,' says Novak. 'We behaved like guests that arrive with good intentions should... We were thrilled to go there; you don't perform in North Korea every day.'

The Sound of Music is a popular film in North Korea, which remembers acutely its own occupation by, and resistance against, Japanese imperialism. It also resembles North Korean *Heimat* films and Kim Jong Il (the current leader's late father), a great film lover, saw himself as a kind of von Trapp father figure to his (trapped) nation, says Novak. He agrees with fellow Slovenian Slavoj Žižek that it is 'a much trickier film' than one might expect. 'It's officially Austrian resistance to Hitler and the Nazis, but if you look really closely, the Nazis are presented as an abstract cosmopolitan occupying power and the Austrians are the good small nationalist fascists, so the implicit message is almost the opposite of the explicit message. A slight twist and this could also be seen as a Nazi propaganda film – even though it was mainly created by a Jewish production team.'

For all their provocations, Laibach know that there is one institution that is not to be messed with: Julie Andrews herself. 'She's a fantastic actress,' says Novak, with no equivocation. 'We all wanted to become part of the von Trapp family because of her, wearing uniforms and sharing the bed with her as Maria.' ●

THE SOUND OF MUSIC IS RELEASED ON 23 NOVEMBER 2018 BY MUTE RECORDS. MORTEN TRAAVIK'S FILM OF LAIBACH IN NORTH KOREA, LIBERATION DAY, IS AVAILABLE FOR DOWNLOAD AT: LAIBACH.ORG VIDEO LINK: YOUTU.BE/ZOD0W6SSBUA

