Promotional poster for Slovenian rock band Laibach's North Korean tour.
Laibach in Pyongyang

Rocking the Boat

As the first Western rock band to perform in North Korea, Slovenian group Laibach has drawn the attention of world and Chinese media. NewsChina talks to the band about China’s secretive and mysterious neighbor

By Liu Yutong

“Edelweiss, edelweiss, every morning you greet me,” Laibach’s Milan Fras sang on stage at Pyongyang’s Ponghwa Art Theater on August 19, 2015. Steps away from the theater is the Ministry of People’s Security building of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK).

About a thousand North Koreans saw the avant-garde industrial metal band from Slovenia firsthand. It was the first time a Western rock band performed in North Korea. Yet for most of the time, audience members sat quietly and responded to the band with polite applause. Only when the concert was over did they stand up and applaud loudly, which, to the band, looked more like a “mechanical, prearranged procedure” to celebrate that “the show was finally over.”

But the band was comforted to learn that “an old North Korean man from the audience summed our main achievement up quite brilliantly when he was interviewed by the Associated Press after the concert,” a band member who goes by the pseudonym Ivo Saliger told NewsChina. “He said: ‘I didn’t know that such music existed in the world. And now I know that it exists.’”

The 50-minute gig was one of the performances celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Korean peninsula’s liberation from Japanese control. The band performed nine songs, including a cover of The Beatles’ “Across the Universe,” several songs from the movie The Sound of Music and Korea’s famous folk song “Arirang.”

The stage’s LED screen flashed images of the rising sun, infinite sky, the country’s Mount Paektu and rockets, symbols which frequently appear in North Korea’s propaganda. Laibach’s usual backdrop of war scenes and people dressed in unconventional costumes wasn’t accepted by the country’s censors.

The next day, the band’s final concert of its two-show tour went well, too. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un didn’t go to either show or the band’s rehearsal, even though Laibach’s performance was a national first. “Maybe he was too busy restarting the conflict in the [Demilitarized Zone] with South Korean loudspeakers,” Saliger said. On August 20, the day of the second show, North Korea fired a rocket at South Korea, which retaliated with artillery fire. Tensions rose on the Korean peninsula, with Kim even threatening an attack on South Korean loudspeakers if they continued to blast propaganda across the border.

Bridging

Norwegian director Morten Traavik worked for a year to arrange Laibach’s tour in the DPRK. As one of the few Western artists who has established a stable connection with North Korean authorities, Traavik acted as an intercontinental bridge, successfully organizing a number of cultural communication and exchange projects between North Korea and his homeland. In 2012, because of his efforts, North Korean teachers taught the Norwegian army a mass performance method that accompanies the folksong “Arirang,” which they performed for the public in the Norwegian town of Kirkenes.

In 2014, Traavik directed Laibach’s music video for “The Whistle-blowers,” one of the band’s most recent tracks. Laibach members’ radical music and visual esthetic in which they adopt symbols of totalitarianism, neo-nationalism and state power, though often exaggerating everything to the edge of parody, convinced Traavik that North Korea’s officials might find rapport with the band’s message. So Traavik went to Laibach with a proposition — a North Korean tour.

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“By bringing a band like Laibach to North Korea we introduced a new way of looking at artistic expression – that art can be read in many different ways,” Traavik told NewsChina. In his opinion, for a country like North Korea where art and public expression in general is expected to carry a positive message of state propaganda or be only political decoration, Laibach’s tour was “no small step.”

When the band agreed to the tour, Traavik started communicating with North Korea’s authorities. Many wondered whether he had received backing from Kim Jong-un directly. “It is a misconception that Kim Jong-un personally decides every little detail of what is going on in North Korea,” said Traavik. He told NewsChina that he just collaborated with officials from the country’s Ministry of Culture and its Committee for Cultural Exchange in order to receive official approval for the concerts.

Prepared Spiritually and Mentally

This past June, Traavik received an email from North Korean authorities confirming the performances. With that email came a wave of pressure, as such an avant-garde band had never before performed in one of the world’s most secretive and mysterious countries. Traavik sent the band members a personalized guide to brief them for the shows, suggesting they not be “openly critical of the system.” “Remember that in this project we are all pioneers – both us and the North Koreans – and a lot of experiences will be new to everyone,” he wrote in the guide.

As Traavik was busy ironing out the details with North Korean officials, Laibach’s members returned to the Slovenian city of Trbovlje, where the band originally formed, and rehearsed at the performing arts center Delavski Dom (Worker’s Hall). Besides “trying to obtain as much relevant information about North Korea as possible,” they were “spiritually and mentally” preparing themselves “collectively at Mount Kum, a mountain near Trbovlje,” Saliger told NewsChina.

Perhaps to better engage their new audience, the band members decided to cover three traditional North Korean songs – “Honorable Life and Death,” “We’ll Go to Mount Paektu” and “Ariang.” They also prepared four songs from the movie The Sound of Music, as it is used in North Korean schools as part of the English-language curriculum. They also picked a selection of Laibach “classics” – “Life is Life,” Europe’s “The Final Countdown,” The Beatles’ “Across the Universe” and “The Whistleblowers.” “All songs are somewhat similar to uplifting Korean pop and marches,” said Saliger.

Compromise

On August 12, Laibach arrived at the Pyongyang airport. They were received by officials from the Ministry of Culture and the Committee for Cultural Exchange.

Soon after, photos of Laibach members in North Korea’s “people’s suits,” plain gray outfits styled after those favored by DPRK officials, started to pop up on news sites from around the world. These suits were commissioned for the band members by North Korean authorities. But “it was our idea to have these suits made, and we wore them as a sign of respect for North Korean culture and tradition,” said Saliger.

Although they sent all the lyrics and their Korean translations in advance and received no objection, the band members were still met

In traditional Korean costume, Laibach’s vocalist Milan Fras sings on stage at Pyongyang’s Ponghwa Art Theater, August 19, 2015
with interference from censors during their one-week rehearsal period in Pyongyang. They were instructed to skip “Honorable Life and Death” and “We’ll Go to Mount Paektu.”

“Both ‘Honorable’ and ‘Mount Paektu’ are songs that have a special significance politically and ideologically in North Korea,” said Traavik. “When Laibach did their versions… the songs were no longer recognizable to [the censors]… They were worried that the audience would react negatively and think that Laibach was making fun of and disrespecting the Korean culture.”

Nonetheless, the band members weren’t frustrated. “Of course we had to make some compromises – we always have, even when we play in the United States, Russia or the country we’ve always wanted to play but haven’t had the chance yet – China,” said Saliger.

The only Korean song Laibach was allowed to play was “Arirang,” for which they combined the traditional Korean arrangement with bubblegum pop and experimental electronics. A female North Korean pianist accompanied them on the song, which earned the night’s biggest round of applause.

Overall, during both concerts’ 50-minute sets of nine songs, all went well. “The vice minister of culture, who is a musician himself, was very happy with the concert,” Traavik told NewsChina. “And we also got a very positive review in the Rodong Sinmun,” the daily newspaper of the Worker’s Party of Korea and an official mouthpiece for the North Korean government.

The band felt they had experienced something special. “The general people of Korea are definitely the brightest jewel in the country. We couldn’t find any cynicism, sarcasm, irony, vulgarity and other ‘Western characteristics’ in their eyes, on their faces and in their behavior,” said Saliger in an interview with Rolling Stone. But of course everything wasn’t rosy. “Pyongyang is a leisurely, comfortable city to walk around – if they let you walk around,” he said. The band members and their entourage were taken care of by five Korean “helpers, guides and translators” who also made sure that they did not act “too freely” and vanish into the night.

Laibach members in “people’s suits” in Pyongyang