

LAIBACH

How does one deal with a band whose every record's a departure, including, impossibly, the very first? Looking back, 1984's single *Panorama* can be associated with early Einstürzende Neubauten and SPK, as well as Throbbing Gristle - but, not only did it emerge out of Yugoslavia, roaring without context for us puny westerners, it also flew out of the turnstiles in total negation of the band's own earlier punk-influenced roots with declarative, ominous horns drowning in harsh industrial rhythm and noise, obliterating everything that came before and starting a sonic/aesthetic war with music, ideology, art and politics. Avi Pitchon caught up with Ivan Novak for an insight into the band's machinery.

T H U S S P

Laibach continued treading their self scorched earth path similarly throughout a 37-year trek of destruction, reconstruction and confusion. From industrial to OTT, bombastic Wagnerian stompers pushing western pop and rock to the mud with jack-booted cover versions to Queen, Beatles, Rolling Stones and, er, Opus; then techno, industrial metal (on 1996's *Jesus Christ Superstars*), some decidedly weird interpretations for 14 national anthems (including the fictitious 'state in time' the band belonged to, NSK, on 2006's *Volk*), some abstract, impenetrable takes on Bach (2008's *Laibachkunstderfuge*) then what bordered eurotrash and turbo-folk, constituting the band's most pop/ulist release ever, with 2014's *Spectre*. Now, with the flimsy excuse of creating a soundtrack for a theatrical adaptation of Nietzsche's explosive novel *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, directed by Matjaž Berger for the Anton Podbevšek theatre in Novo Mesto, Slovenia, Laibach negate *Spectre*'s totalitarian spaghetti western mobilising anthems and doom-pop incantations of warning, and come up instead with a work of dark, menacing, nightmarish, orchestral industrial ambient. The amazing thing, though, is that no matter where Laibach turn, each departure remains instantly recognisable. Whatever genre they touch turns to Laibach gold (or plutonium, if you will). It's uncanny, scary, confounding and addictive. The easiest way to connect the dots would be to point to vocalist Milan Fras' distinct, inimitable bellow. However, on *Zarathustra*, his role is sparse, like that of a guest narrator (he indeed performed in the play itself), emphasising intently the philosopher's fiery words within what is mostly an instrumental soundscape that is as majestically

uncomfortable as watching *Twin Peaks The Return*. If one skips right to the two closing tracks, 'Vor Sonnen Aufgang' ("before sunrise"), a delicate-yet-overwhelming gem of cinematic melodrama led by Mina Spiler's angelic, almost Cocteau Twins-like delivery (she doesn't sound like that when shouting "You Who Challenge!" through a megaphone on stage), followed by 'Von Den Drei Verwaldungen' ("of the three transformations"), seven and a half minutes of a pulsating, vertigo-inducing fall into the abyss, all grasp with Laibach's continuity and narrative is lost and one becomes suspended in musical limbo. Laibach's spokesperson and founding member (he joined the original core alongside Fras during 1980) Ivan Novak, is characteristically unimpressed by my awe, wonder and confusion. Laibach thrives on such reaction, not only thanks to the music but also to the contradictory use of 19th and 20th century aesthetics spanning romantic and modernist art movements and those of the left and right's totalitarian regimes - communism, fascism and nazism. Most recently they caused further uproar and delight when becoming the first 'western' band to perform live in North Korea (as movingly documented on Morten Traavik's film *Liberation Day*). Laibach, as Novak calmly points out, declared their methods as early as 1982, in a founding document entitled *The Ten Items of the Covenant*: "We actually explained this a long time ago and we can only repeat it: "Laibach is the knowledge of the universality of the moment. It is the revelation of the absence of balance between sex and work, between servitude and activity. It uses all expressions of history to mark this imbalance. This work is without the limits; God has one face, devil infinitely many." In other words - we know how to metamorphosise without losing our essence."

Zarathustra isn't the first time Laibach have created a soundtrack. With the exception of 1986's *Baptism*, written

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for their Neue Slowenische Kunst collective comrades the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater’s monumental production, the band also accepted external commissions, and created one of its uttermost powerful works with their 1990 soundtrack for a German adaptation of *Macbeth*, and most recently the rather loony score for the tongue-in-cheek Naziplotation flick, 2012’s *Iron Sky*. In addition to the aforementioned Bach interpretations, there was also a 2009 orchestral reworking of Wagner, aptly titled *Volkswagner*, the only work mentioned yet to be released. “It probably won’t be,” interjects Novak, “But maybe yes.” You are probably approached a lot and asked to commission special work. What does it take for you to accept? For example, what was behind doing *Macbeth* at the time? And of course, what is behind doing *Zarathustra* now? “We need to be intrigued by the project and we need to get an offer that we cannot refuse. For *Macbeth* and *Zarathustra* we had both conditions fulfilled. The invitation for *Macbeth* came from legendary German theatre director and Deutsche Schauspielhaus intendant Peter Zadek, and for *Zarathustra* we got an invitation from the equally important Slovene avant-garde theatre director Matjaž Berger. We usually use theatre productions to experiment with sound and music a bit more than we normally do. It was a satisfactory creative dialogue. Our dictate was very subtle.”

Fans and critics have already stated that it is surprising that Laibach did not address Nietzsche before. It’s as

if an intuitive bond was made in people’s eyes and ears between Nietzsche’s Will To Power and Laibach’s simultaneously elating and oppressive sound and presentation. How would you characterise the relationship of his ideas to Laibach’s, or more specifically the book after which the play is titled? Novak is again equally concrete and elusive.

“We never really studied Nietzsche or were obsessed by him; we simply have Nietzsche ‘incorporated’ within our Laibachian plasma. And we always loved his moustaches. With Laibach you also have the idea of an Overman, the concept of the Eternal Recurrence, the Will To Power expressed in self-overcoming, and the metamorphoses. We don’t really know how his ideas sound. We can only guess, like everyone else.”

Laibach’s 2003 album *WAT* (‘We Are Time’) and the band’s overall approach to notions of time expressed as early as 1992’s masterpiece *Kapital* is very tempting to hook up with Nietzsche’s concept of the eternal return/ becoming. In both cases there’s an essential subverting of linear time in favour of the cyclical, and a general toss-up of past, present and future.

“Repetition is the foundation of our modus vivendi,” confirms Novak. “We live in repetitive time loops - the present time is constantly decanting into our tomorrow’s past and this past is our future, so ‘every minute of the Future is a memory of the Past.’ [This is a line off Opus’ *Live Is Life*’ which Laibach covered - AP]. We are Time.” ☺