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## Institution, Memory and a Brief Flirtation

An Introduction into Soviet Vocal-Instrumental Ensembles

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**Abstract:** VIA – vocal-instrumental ensembles (russ. vokal’no-instrumentalnyi ansambl’) – are a distinct musical phenomenon, helping shape the last decades of Soviet popular culture. Well known from their origin in the late 1960s until the early 1980s, they have since become the subject of recurring and often nostalgic interest. Nevertheless, their musical qualities and the circumstances around their success have rarely been the focus of scholarly attention. This article introduces the broad spectrum of Soviet VIA music by giving an overview of the most characteristic features and discussing the cultural, political and institutional preconditions for its formation and ongoing success. It highlights selected VIAs to exemplify the musical, but also the geographical range of what is still perceived as a multinational phenomenon connecting all republics of the former union. Complementary to this retrospective, the article touches on how the groups and their songs play into current formations of national and post-Soviet identity discourses and shape the collective memory of the “VIA decade”.

**Keywords:** VIA; Soviet popular culture; history of rock music; cultural policy; music industry.





Fig. 1: Still from VIA lalla: “Uchkuduk, tri kolodtsa”, 1982, min. 2:14 and min. 2:24.



Fig. 2: Still from VIA Pesniary: “Vologda”, performed on the TV show *Pesnia-76*, 1976, min. 0:22 and min. 2:35.

## Introduction

Wind howling in the distance, then the soft and clear notes of an electric guitar, mimicked by vibrating sounds from a synthesizer for a long 30 seconds. Finally, a slow vocal intro, followed by the more melodic refrain – the first minute of the five-minute song “Uchkuduk” (1982) by the Uzbek VIA *lalla* takes us back to the soundscape of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Synthetic sounds and the electronic amplification is less pronounced in the highly popular “Vologda” (1976) by the Belarussian ensemble *Pesniary* (*The Songsters*). Instead of a prominent synthesizer, “Vologda” features two accordions (in some recordings replaced by hurdy-gurdies), a violin, and a headless tambourine, next to the subtle guitar. The more harmonious melodic and rhythmic structure is repeated in refrain and soli, and constantly emphasised by percussion, by the undistorted bass as well as by several vocalists. Both songs’ lyrics praise an idealised place, romantically rural, or even mysterious, far away (or at least the end point of a journey), yet clearly located in the Soviet Union.

“Uchkuduk” and “Vologda” have become classics, well-known favourites, and exemplar of the VIA phenomenon and of Soviet popular music in general. They attest to the dissemination of synthesizers and electronic amplifiers, the prevalence of the song

as form and the role of entertainment in the music industry of their time. Yet simultaneously they confront us with the stylistic range encompassed under a single term: VIA. The abbreviation was coined in the mid-1960s. It refers to Soviet music groups, usually with fewer than ten members, most of whom acted as both vocalists and instrumentalists. Musically, VIAs represent the emergence of pop and rock as global trends during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While many forms of modern popular music were highly politicised and in some cases limited to the unofficial sphere, professional VIAs enjoyed official support in the form of record deals and approved concert performances. Groups such as *Pesniary*, *lalla*, *Ariel*, *Gunesh*, *Veselye rebiata*, *Orera*, *Siabry*, *Kobza*, *Zemliane*, *Golubye Gitary* gained widespread popularity and fame from the 1960s until their slow disappearance in the 1980s. Today, many of them have become the object of a nostalgic revival of interest, given rise to cover bands or themselves reformed again.

A similar wave of new bands and new sounds can be observed at that time not only in the Soviet Union, but also in most Eastern European socialist countries. The popular music scenes in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Yugoslavia also show a strong focus on Anglo-American successors, imbued with significant symbolic capital; successful bands were heralded “as the local version of *The Beatles* or *The Rolling Stones*” (Mazierska/Győri 2019: 3). At the same time, the official stance on those western influences remained critical and there were continued attempts at controlling the cultural sphere, sometimes by supporting less ‘rebellious’ groups and styles. For example, Yugoslavia featured beat and pop groups that even share a term, reminiscent of the Soviet VIAs: *Vokalno instrumentalni sastavi* (vocal instrumental sets, abbr. VIS) like *Tsrni biseri* (*The Black Pearls*, formed in 1963) gained an importance in the development of popular culture comparable to some of the most famous VIAs. At the same time, the extent of the institutional integration of Soviet groups, their transnational impact and the range of diversity encompassed by a single label

goes further than corresponding trends in other socialist countries. The VIAs' music, but even more so their institutional position and their role in the late Soviet cultural sphere, differed distinctly from other (Soviet and non-Soviet) musical subcultures of the time and can only be understood against its specific cultural political background.

## Socio-political context

Even during the Thaw, official policy towards popular music had been conservative. Following de-Stalinization in the 1950s, an initial liberalisation saw changes in censorship laws, and new forms of cultural mass events, such as the 6th World Festival of Youth and Students in July 1957 (Tsipursky 2016: 134f.). This facilitated union-wide and even international exchange and brought many new influences and impulses to the cultural scene of the whole union. Nikita Khrushchev, First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1964, is often quoted on his disdain for modern music, especially jazz and modern styles of dance, leading people to “wiggle a certain section of the anatomy” in an obscene fashion (Ramet/Zamascikov 1990: 150). The so-called Manege Affair<sup>1</sup> in December 1962 highlighted not only the sharpness of tone with which the debate about the boundaries of art and taste was conducted, but also led to a restoration of the Party's position of power in cultural matters, where the first years of the Thaw might have de-escalated tensions. At the same time, cultural formats of *samodeiatel'nost'*, that is to say: amateur art, took on new popularity and allowed access to self-expression and entertainment. Amateur theatre performances, such as theatre plays, concerts,

1 The term 'Manege Affair' refers to a public outburst by Khrushchev, in which he expressed a dislike for non-representational art. During his visit to an exhibition by the artists from the collective *Novaia real'nost'* (*New Reality*) in the Moscow Manege, he accused the artists of being incompetent, superfluous and (sexually) degenerate, and announced to increase political control over art and culture.

dance recitals etc., were mostly staged in youth or community centres, university or Pioneer clubs and supported by professional organisers. After years of de-Stalinisation, they were explicitly promoted to foster and strengthen identification and public engagement with the Soviet system (Tsipursky 2016: 101f; cf.: Sokolovskii 1987). The 1960s were also characterised by a new emphasis on culture as a tool for leisure. The consumption of music, cinema and literature for the sole purpose of entertainment and relaxation was reevaluated and valorised. A broad and modern range of options in this sphere was increasingly linked to expectations of quality of life and became a crucial battleground in the competition with the capitalist West. Mass compatibility thus took on a new importance. This trend was never significantly reversed and connects the often contrasted periods of Thaw and Stagnation. The later era, heralded by the show trials of Andrei Siniavskii and Yurii Daniel' in 1966, was marked by the retraction of the Thaw's liberalisation and the changing cultural political landscape under Brezhnev. At the same time, especially in the 1970s - what Steinholt called the “VIA decade” (2004: 25) - the Party-state intensified its attempts to include rock and pop music in the canon of officially accepted forms of popular culture.<sup>2</sup> Entertainment formats sponsored and organised by the state multiplied in response to public appeal, for example in musical television shows or live concerts by VIAs. While this meant more control from above and less support for grass-roots participation, the resulting phenomena of late Soviet popular culture nevertheless paved the way for musicians and other actors in the cultural sphere to play an active role in the transformation of public life in the 1980s and 1990s (MacFayden 2001: 242f; Steinholt 2005: 22). While their influence on political change is not as obvious and unequivocal as that of the cultural underground's, their cautious attempts at a synthesis of official ideology and re-

2 As another example, Tsipursky highlights the jazz festivals of the 1960s to challenge the paradigm of stagnation in favour of a more “nuanced” picture (Tsipursky 2016: 189).

sponses to public demand points to more nuanced discrepancies and tensions in public discourse.

VIAs had to meet a number of requirements to achieve official status and to gain financial and institutional support, but the descriptions of the necessary adjustments, procedures and levels of self-censorship vary widely. From the 1960s to the early 1980s, when rock music finally gained official acclaim, forming a VIA was one of the few ways for musicians playing rock, pop or beat to be registered as a professional artist and thus no longer fall under the official requirement to hold an officially registered job position (Steinholt 2005: 22). Those groups paid by the state formed only the tip of the iceberg: for example, for the year 1974, Bubennikova records as many as 160.000 registered amateur VIA groups – approximately 200-400 in each of the larger cities of the Union, totalling over a million active performers (Bubennikova 2014: 81). Besides this, there was a large number of amateur VIAs but, for the most part undocumented, their histories are difficult to follow.<sup>3</sup>

The record label *Melodiia* played an important role in this process of professionalisation. Founded in 1964, the company was subordinate to the Ministry of Culture and had a monopoly on record production and distribution. *Melodiia* maintained recording studios and record factories all over the Soviet Union, e.g. in Moscow, Leningrad, Riga, Tallinn, Tbilisi, Baku und Tashkent. The individual studios were differently equipped, but generally provided high quality recording facilities. *Melodiia*'s catalogue included classical music, national folklore, a range of products for children's entertainment or education, poetry and eventually Estrada and VIA records. Up-coming projects were planned for a year and then passed on to Moscow for approval.<sup>4</sup> The changes and expansions in *Melodiia*'s release history offer a good overview of important tendencies

during the period of late socialism, such as growing consumerism, rising hybridisation of genres, regional differentiation and the re-appropriation of folk culture. While *Melodiia*'s business plan was increasingly influenced by sales figures, the recording artists' fees remained largely independent of that. The retail price of single and longplay records was comparatively low, a fact that also favoured the circulation of VIA music. The same can be said for the concert scene, which was perhaps even more important for the VIA's popularity. Some band histories even quote multiple performances a day.<sup>5</sup> A growing number of music festivals also furthered the perception of the union-wide interchange. VIA as a phenomenon spanned all republics, from the Baltics to the Caucasus to Central Asia, for example the bands *Ialla* (Uzbekistan), *Pesniary* and *Siabry* (Belarus), *Leine* (Estonia), *Chervona Ruta* (Ukraine), *Dielo* (Georgia), *Siniaia Ptitsa* (Russia), *Orizont* (Moldova), *Gaia* (Azerbaijan), *Integral* (Kazakhstan) and *Gunesh* (Turkmenistan). For a short period from the late 1960s until the early 1980s VIA music was so popular that any list of groups has to remain a selection, highlighting a few expressive examples, rather than being a comprehensive 'Who's Who'.

## Musical qualities and periodisation

In hindsight, the range for experimentation with old and new music trends alike is hard to define, yet at the height of the VIA's popularity, the label seemed clear cut. "There seems to be no distinction made between musical genre and style in the minds of those who lived through it", as Alexandra Grabarchuk (2015: 68) comments in her assessment of the Soviet Union's 1960s and 1970s music scene.

The abbreviation itself is often used not as a clear generic classification, but as a sort of place holder,

3 For one example of an attempt at reconstruction and documenting the history of an unofficial VIA, see Tsipursky on VIA *Chaika* (*Seagull*) (Tsipursky 2016: 191-195).

4 Compare for example the interview with Dmitriy Zakon (O.A. 2004).

5 One example from the VIA *Leisia, pesnia* (*Sing, song*): "There were 70-80 concerts a month. I remember there were 11 concerts a day at BAM. And the schedule was scheduled 6-7 months in advance." (O.A. 2004)

a synonym for a state-sanctioned rock or pop band. As such, VIAs appeared in the early 1960s to counter the growing influence of Western popular music in the Soviet Union. Beat and rock music was seen as a western product by the authorities and thus not welcome. But popular demand was so strong that a homemade alternative had to be offered: VIAs incorporated elements of those musical styles, a mixture of electronic instruments, up-beat rhythms with catchy lyrics and a youthful presentation, while excluding aspects that were harder to control or deemed more dangerous. They channelled the developing musical and poetic creativity (Shelkin & Frolov 2007: 14) – whether their origin was due to a strategic invention ‘from above’ or the result of growing interest of the artists and their publics. The word VIA could thus easily and safely replace the words ‘rock’ or ‘band’ in official cultural contexts (Baidabekkyzy 2007).<sup>6</sup>

Despite the phenomenon’s diversity, there are few unifying characteristics and style elements common to most VIAs. They marked a departure from orchestral acts or solo performers on-stage, limiting themselves to a small number of musicians. Vocal parts, mostly unison, are prominent, though not as central as in Estrada acts. The short poetically simple lyrics are set in a clear structure. Melodically, they can be clearly differentiated from 12-bar jazz or blues and their harmonies are less repetitive. The new popularity of the guitar as both a lead and rhythm instrument, as well the greater emphasis on percussion led to the impression of a listening experience, louder and more propulsive than Estrada or other song formats.

Apart from guitars, both electric and acoustic, most VIAs featured synthesizers and electric pianos, drums and bass, sometimes with wind instruments, violins or folk instruments such as bandura, hurdy-gurdy, rubab or dayereh. Not only the phenomenon

in general, but also the style of individual groups as well as their songs themselves were marked by hybrid musical structures, combining elements from jazz, beat, rock and pop music, folk song or elements of folkloristic music traditions, such as polyphonic singing. This inclusion of features from different styles and musical traditions also characterises the development of beat music, and rock and pop in general, presenting the VIA phenomenon as in line with larger trends in 20th-century popular music.

The first steps towards the VIAs’ success were laid in the late 1950s by changes in entertainment formats, performance styles, and last, but not least in the concepts of stardom and public interaction with artists. One example of this is the popular *Ansambl’ Druzhba* (*Ensemble ‘Friendship’*), active from 1955 until 1988. It was originally formed as an amateur collective by students from Leningrad, among them a significant number of international exchange students, such as the Franco-Polish psychology student Edita Piekha, who would later become the face of the group and the predecessor of Alla Pugacheva in the role of grande dame of Estrada. Another member, Anatoly Korolev, went on to found and lead the VIA *Poiushchie gitary*. *Druzhba* spearheaded new trends in stage performance, leaning towards a more active presence on stage, as well as dramatic interpretations and visual cues accompanying the sung words, a technique described as “zrimaia pesnia” (visible song). Their potpourri of songs in a variety of languages and Piekha’s accentuated voice led to the ensemble’s cosmopolitan aura. While framed as politically accepted friendship between nations (Grabowsky 2012: 26), it also formed the basis of an understanding of popular music as a global or at least transnational phenomenon. Other roots of the VIA phenomenon can be traced back to jazz orchestras and big bands, performing dance music of the time. The influence of jazz differs significantly among the VIA groups in the various republics and regional centres, some looking back on vibrant jazz scenes even before Soviet times, for example Caucasian and Baltic countries, especially Geor-

6 One example for this is the marketing of the East-German rock band *Puhdys* as VIA *Pudis* for the publication for a Soviet audience by *Melodiia*. See: <https://melody.su/catalog/estrade/↔54089/> (accessed 09.2021).



gia and Latvia, as well as its strong presence in Moscow and Leningrad. The jazz scene may be the origin of a term that prefigures the label VIA: vocal instrumental orchestras, VIO.<sup>7</sup>

Surveying the three decades of the VIAs' greatest success, three fairly distinct stages can be distinguished.

The late 1960s saw the formation of VIA as an official label. While some groups had already been active before, the first verifiable use of the term appears in 1966. From thereon, VIAs rose in popularity and grew in number. Early examples show clear influences of jazz (*Orera*) or Estrada (*Veselye rebiata*), or appear as a clear answer to *The Beatles* craze and the growing enthusiasm for western beat and rock bands (*Poiushchie gitary*). Some of the most influential VIAs were formed at the end of the 1960s or at the beginning of the 1970s (*Dos Mukasan*, *Pesniary*, *Samotsvety*).

During a second stage in the 1970s, the phenomenon and various groups developed in distinct musical directions. Professional VIAs contrived their own recognisable identities and sounds, or began new musical experiments. Apart from experimentation with other genre characteristics (such as jazz fusion or psychedelic rock), most prominent is the turn towards folkloristic elements and the re-appropriation of ethnic or national traditions of popular music. This variation of a global trend towards world music differs in a significant way from the use of non-western musical elements in western pop or rock bands in the 1970s, since artists often performed in and for their context of origin, while at the same time reflecting on the larger context or a symbolical centre in contrast with their peripheral culture. On the other hand, VIA musicians contributed to the emerging rock opera scene, following the success of the influential *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Shows like *Orfei i Evridika* (*Orpheus and Eurydice*, *Poiushchie gitary*), *Zvezda i smert' Khoakina Mur'ety* (*The Star and Death of*

*Joaquin Murrieta*, *Integral* for the film version), *Alye parusa* (*Scarlet Sails*, *VIA Muzyka*) transcended the boundaries of the song format and took popular music to a bigger stage, while aspiring to a higher aesthetic quality (Grabarchuk 2015: 145ff).

At the beginning of the 1980s, popular music and the consumer culture of the Soviet Union were well-established. In this third stage of the VIA phenomenon, as the political pressure on less acceptable genres lessened, more and more VIAs incorporated heavier riffs and other elements of rock music, and relied even more on electronic amplification and distortion (e.g. *Zemliane*). What VIAs could not provide was the hard edge of rock directed at the system or the rebellious attitude of underground rock. The second half of the 1980s also marked their slow retreat from stage.

Research on the popular music scene of the late Soviet period is now mostly focused on movements of exclusion by means of censorship and responses to that in underground culture. However, VIA were officially registered bands. Their status and inclusion in all manner of institutional formats (concerts and tours, record deals, television shows, performances on major construction sites) attests that cultural policy was not only driven by eliminating unwanted influences, but also by providing an alternative. At the same time, their popularity and the large number of amateur VIAs illustrate the creative and emotional participation of large parts of the population in the offered phenomenon of popular culture.

During their active time of fame from the 1960s to the 1980s, VIAs not only performed at an impressively large number of concerts and festivals, but also appeared on state television<sup>8</sup> and recorded music videos that substantially illustrate the aesthetics of late Soviet popular culture. Sporting dress jackets, large-collared colourful shirts, ornate dresses, traditional or fantastical costumes or Beatlesian mop-top haircuts, they still contrasted with images of western

7 For more on two examples of this label, the VIOs *Rero* and *Changi*, see the article by Irine Beridze in this issue.

8 For more on processes of canonisation and especially the role of various television formats, see the article by Clemens Guenther in this issue.

rock musicians and the defamatory trope of the rock-loving loafer. Aside from a somewhat more clean-cut appearance, the visual aspect of most VIAs' performances has often been described by commenting on their very subdued movement on stage – a criterion sometimes used to differentiate between VIA and rock music.<sup>9</sup>

The melody and text of most songs in the VIAs' repertoire were penned by members of the Union of Soviet Composers or were covered by international artists. Melodic structures tended towards the more harmonious, and songs or other musical pieces with a very heterogeneous melodic structure often remained experimental.<sup>10</sup> As befitting official music groups, lyrics were mostly apolitical or system-compliant and aimed for young energetic optimism, accompanied by cheerful tunes. "Nashi ruki ne dlia skuki, dlia liubvi serdtsa. Dlia liubvi serdtsa toi kotoroi net kontsa. Pust' v serdtse tvoem kak rodniia zhivut naveki vdvoem i liubov i trud." ("Our hands are not for boredom, but for the love of the heart. For the love of the heart that never ends. May love and work live in your heart like kin forever and ever.") – overstated lyrics like these from VIA *Samotsvety's* (*Gemstones*) "U nas molodykh" ("We Young Ones") show attempts to include and shape discourses around not only concepts of fun and entertainment, but also of youth and youth culture. While VIAs' lyrics avoid speaking of sex, rebellion, or a longing for or anxiety about the future, they nevertheless reflect the growing perception of a generational change and of youth as a social group with common values (Kalych 1981: 368; Chuprova, Williams, 2003: 136). Many of them thematically circle around love (though nothing too sexual), a sense of home and patriotism, sometimes even Soviet construction efforts. The attitudes conveyed range from positive cheer to a vaguely localised nostalgia. David

MacFadyen characterises the romanticism of VIA's and Estrada's lyrics as a passive one, "immobile in social spaces, tending as it does towards reverie or a yearning for the past" (MacFadyen 2001: 99). The idealised spaces of "Uchkuduk" and "Vologda" are but two examples. This romanticism nevertheless marked a departure from a more monumental pathos and allowed for expressions of individual longing.

The sound that first seemed to encompass yearning as well as youthful energy and acted as a role model for a large number of VIAs was that of *The Beatles*. Other Western rock, beat or jazz artists provided further influences, though none as deep and far reaching as the 'Fab Four' from Liverpool.<sup>11</sup> "*The Beatles'* happy, harmonious vocal choir proved to be just the voice for which our confused generation was waiting, but was unable to create for itself." (Troitsky 1987: 23) Beatlemania ("bitlomaniiia") also reached behind the Iron Curtain, even though the first official publication of one of their albums in the USSR happened as late as 1986 (*A Hard Day's Night* by *Melodiia*). Hairstyles, turtlenecks and narrow ties, but also their choice of instruments or stage performance techniques shaped the aesthetic choices of many groups in Soviet popular music. On the one hand, Beatlemania fuelled those idealised conceptions which are today summarised as the imaginary west (Yurchak 2005: 158), on the other it fuelled reactionary mechanisms such as the stigmatisation of rock fans (Ryback 1990: 25f). In the end, *The Beatles'* backbeat proved to be more influential than blues, rock'n'roll or the R&B of the 1940s-1970s – not least because its brisk, yet constant rhythm was easier to combine with different popular song traditions already established in the Soviet Union. Especially among the multitude of amateur VIAs emerging during the 1960s, many are reported to have filled their repertoire mostly with English beat and rock num-

9 Compare for example, Ventsel 2016: 81, who registers this in comparison with Estonian rock groups oriented more openly to Western rock.

10 Something the music critic Artemy Troitsky describes as distinctly Russian, without commenting on other Republic's attitude towards it (Troitsky 1987: 23).

11 "It seems to me that Elvis and rock'n'roll were nice, but too exotic for our public. The rough Black rhythm, the fast tempo, the shouted vocals or hypersexual intonations were all magnificent and ideal for new dances, but how could we identify with them?" (Troitsky 1987: 14; 23-24).



Fig. 3: VIA Orera: N/T (1970).

bers, playing songs by *The Beatles*, *The Tremeloes*, *The Rolling Stones* and more, and only occasionally mixing it up with Russian melodies to appease critical observers (McMichael 2005).

Before rock music, jazz had fulfilled a similar role as the declared enemy image, presented as an epitome of decadent western culture.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, its musical qualities and even more so forms of performance and reception shaped music consumption and the popular music scene, often imparting a cosmopolitan image and a sense of contact with ‘zagranitsa’ culture.

In the 1960s, the pressure on jazz musicians decreased and orchestral jazz entered the official canon, e.g. with the appointment of Georgy Garanian as leader of *Melodiia*’s big band. The Georgian VIA *Orera* started in 1958 as a jazz quartet (some members had previously been active in jazz bands), before first being dubbed a vocal-instrumental ensemble. Especially in their earlier works, they are rhythmically less like beat music, including influences from jazz and swing as well as elements of the Georgian musical tradition. Apart from the rhythmic structure or the occasional saxophone or bongo solo,

12 For more on the development and official conceptualization of jazz in the Soviet Union, compare Starr 1983 and Tsipursky 2016: 54-73.

the impact is also a visual one: in early music videos or on record sleeves (see above) the members wear tuxedos and bow-ties, and sometimes straw boaters reminiscent of barbershop performances.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, *Orera*’s band members frequently talked about the impression *The Beatles* left on their music.<sup>14</sup> Not only Georgia, but the Caucasian republics in general formed a particular context for the emergence of VIA groups. A strong mutual exchange among artists created opportunities for developments independent of Moscow’s hierarchical demands.

While groups like *Orera* were already active prior the label’s creation, fans name in particular two bands as contenders for the title of ‘first VIA’: *Avangard* from Donetsk and *Poiushchie gitary* (*The Singing Guitars*) from Leningrad (Yasenov 2012; Vasil’ev 2012). *Poiushchie gitary*, later reaching a bigger following, formed in 1966 in Leningrad, toured extensively and recorded eight EPs as well as several songs on various mixed LPs over the next ten years. Throughout, their line-up varied heavily, as was often the case with professional VIAs. Among other things, they were involved in the premiere of the first Soviet rock opera (then marketed under the title ‘song opera’) *Orpheus and Eurydice* (Pchelintsev 2000). After its premiere in 1975, *Poiushchie gitary* largely concentrated on this project and stopped performing as a VIA until their reunion in 1998. Some of their most famous numbers attest to the frequent practice of covering songs from foreign languages: While “Byl odin paren’...” (“There Was a Guy...”), a song about an avid fan of rock music, that was first performed as “C’era un ragazzo che come me...” (“There Was a Boy Who, Like Me...”) by Gianni Morandi, is a more or less straightforward adaptation, relying on translated lyrics and slight variations in instrumentation

13 Compare <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2jQOvzm9w0> “Ach Turpav, Turpav” and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=abg9078nxxg> “Ty mne verish’ ili net” (“You Believe Me or You Don’t”) as performed by *Orera*.

14 For a more detailed perspective on *Orera* and the idiosyncrasies of the Georgian VIA scene, see the article by Irine Beridze in this journal.



and rhythm, the famous “Pesenka velosipedistov” has undergone an even more layered history.<sup>15</sup> Apart from stylistic changes, the song text’s topic is altered fundamentally: The cheerful tune started as “Uno tranquillo” (“A Quiet One”, first performed in 1967 by Riccardo del Turco), a celebration of an easy-going attitude to life; as “Suddenly You Love Me” (1968) by *The Tremeloes*, it lamented a promiscuous and volatile romance, while the 1969 version by *Poiushchie gitary* turned it into a light-hearted hymn of technological progress in the broadest sense.<sup>16</sup> Whether regarding those translated or thematically rededicated cover versions, or regarding the practice of releasing a Russian version to VIA hits in other languages (sometimes with significantly more innocuous lyrics), language politics and the languages’ symbolic value play an important role in the history of Soviet pop culture.<sup>17</sup>

VIA *Veselye rebiata* (*The Happy Guys*), founded in the same year as *Poiushchie gitary*, takes its name from the successful jazz comedy from 1934, directed by Grigorii Aleksandrov and composed by Isaak Dunaevskii. Despite the name, the musical influences of jazz on the ensemble are minimal; synth-pop elements have taken the stage. What remains is the film’s happy-go-lucky attitude<sup>18</sup> and the strong link to earlier examples of Soviet entertainment culture, e.g. jazz comedies. In the 1960s, the musical comedy and its continued popularity also became an example of the triumph of enthusiastic consumers over political censorship and revision: when the film was re-released in

1958, abridged and re-synchronised, the changes had to be revoked by popular demand just a few years later. VIA *Veselye rebiata*’s role on the public scene was less controversial and their content rarely wavered from the focus on apolitical and individual happiness. Most of their album titles speak a clear language: *Liubov’ – ogromnaia strana* (*Love – a Great Country*, 1974), *Druzhit’ nam nado* (*We Need Friendship*, 1978), *Rozovye Rozy* (*Pink Roses*, 1988), followed in recent years by *Liubi menia, kak ia tebia* (*Love Me, Like I Love You*, 2011). From 1974 until 1976, the group was joined by Alla Pugacheva, the icon of Estrada music. Many other members of the VIAs were later active in the Estrada music scene – highlighting the porous genre borders and semantic and musical similarities.

*Samotsvety*, another Moscow-based VIA, was formed in 1970 by Iurii Malikov. For five years, the group toured extensively in the USSR and abroad. Apart from concerts in the GDR, Poland and Czechoslovakia they performed in Central and South American as well as African countries – one of many examples of official Soviet music ensembles being ‘exported’ to allied states within the Eastern Bloc. In 1975, most members left *Samotsvety* and formed the VIA *Plamia* (*Flame*). In the following years Malikov led the band through several major lineup changes and in 2006 even founded the musical successor *Novye Samotsvety* (*New Gemstones*) with young musicians, including his daughter. Even today, *Samotsvety* are most famous for the song they performed on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the USSR’s foundation: “Moi adres – Sovetskii Soiuz” (“My Address is the Soviet Union”). Their repertoire was generally more expressively patriotic and in this it resembles the VIA formed by their erstwhile members. Besides love themes and the motif of home(land), VIA *Plamia* performed songs with clear military themes (“U derevni Kriukovo” [“In the Village of Kriukovo”] and “Idet soldat po gorodu” [“A Soldier Walks Around Town”]). From *Samotsvety*, they brought with them the cheerful “Stroim BAM” (“Building BAM”), a kind of hymn to the last big Soviet construction project, the

15 For an in-depth description of its many variations, see the article by Manuel Ghilarducci in this issue.

16 Other adaptations include a French (“Siffler sur la colline” by Joe Dassin in 1969), a Serbo-Croatian (“Nisam više taj” by the band *Crni Biseri* in 1968) and a Malaysian cover version (“Keindahan Pantai” [“Beauty of the Beach”] by M. Shariff in 1971).

17 For an example of the practice of double-releases as well as the influence of censorship, see the article by Irine Beridze in this issue. On the role of translation, or rather: retextualisation, see Yurchak 2005: 190ff.

18 “In a parallel endeavor, Soviet officialdom sponsored the creation of a clean-cut group called *Happy Guys* in 1968, whose basic message was, the world (at least in the USSR) is fine.” (Ramet, Zamascikov 1990: 151)



Fig. 4: VIA *Samotsvety*: *U nas molodykh* (1975), combining starched suits with bell-bottoms and ornaments.

Baikal-Amur Mainline. Not only *Plamia*, but many VIAs were part of a cultural program framing the construction sites and organised for the education and entertainment of workers and young volunteers. Contemporary witnesses tell of a certain degree of disorganisation around official cultural events and a variety of self-organised concerts in all manner of musical styles (see Ward 2015). Nevertheless, the presence and engagement of VIAs in this large-scale project from 1974 until 1984, constitutes an important moment in the structure of the late Soviet cultural scene and its role in political mobilisation.

A later example of institutional lyrics is “Trava u doma” (“The Grass by the House”) from the Leningrad-based VIA *Zemliane* (*Earthlings*), formed in 1978. The song talks about the longing for a home that isn’t found in spheres of public progress but one’s own backyard has been called the anthem of Soviet and later Russian space travel. With a more prominent intermodulation distortion and guitar riffs with a harder edge than their predecessors, *Zemliane* have been called “heavy metal” by Artemy Troitsky and receive a mention in his *Back in the USSR. The True Story of Rock in Russia*, where he also insinuates that their rather tame lyrics and the pomposity of official popular music work was a pretext to

get away with heavier musical elements and “avoid accusations of propagating violence” (Troitsky 1987: 84; 114). The prevalence and direction of these presuppositions is well demonstrated in the praise given to *Pesniary* in a music history from the early 1980s: “By the way, [*Pesniary*’s] guitars are the least reminiscent of the boring ‘Beatle’ instrument: they never rattle, are not rude and obtrusive” (Kalish 1981: 383).

A different synthesis of official and popular interests can be found in songs and bands leaning less towards heavy rock, but rather highlighting folkloristic elements. These appear in the choice of text material, e.g. by setting poetry or folk tunes to VIA music. Also very common was the use of traditional melodies or instruments, e.g. *Orera*’s polyphony or the *kobzi* or *bandury* (string instruments similar to lutes) of the Ukrainian VIA *Kobza*. Last, but not least, folk elements were also present in VIAs’ performance aesthetics, stage dressings and outfits. While folk rock and the use of folkloristic aesthetics had already been prominently used in western rock bands,<sup>19</sup> in the Soviet Union this took on yet another role: it spoke to the all-union character of official culture and mirrored the importance placed on ethnic and national representation, however superficial. VIA music could thus serve folk’s interest in the countercultural elements inherent in the recourse on pre-urban culture or ‘world music’ as well as the official motto of the friendship of all nations, while appearing authentic and not a mere copy of Western role models (Grabarchuk 2015: 73).

How authentic or prominent those elements actually were largely depended on the respective VIA. “However, to some degree almost all vocal or vocal-instrumental groups working on stage turn to folk music”, states a 1981 history of Soviet Estrada (Kalish 1981: 367). In any case, the “mid-seventies flirtation with ethnic folklore” (Troitsky 1987: 34) left a long

19 Ramet and Zamascikov argue that only after *The Beatles* and other Western bands used unusual instruments did “Soviet groups decid[e] that the traditional instruments might be adaptable to rock music after all.” (Ramet, Zamascikov 1990: 164)



Fig. 5: Double release of songs by *Pesniary* and *Orera* (1979) featuring both groups in stylized folkloristic clothing.

lasting impact that in some cases is still largely responsible for the individual VIAs continued appeal.

The most prominent example for this trend is the Belarussian VIA *Pesniary*. As seen in the television recording of “Vologda” introduced earlier, they often performed in outfits inspired by folkloristic costumes and sometimes added hurdy-gurdies, accordions, violins and flutes to their instrumental range. Previously active under the name *Liavony*, they formed in 1969 as *Pesniary* and quickly gained union-wide fame. At the height of their popularity, their songs appeared in films and cartoons, such as “Nu, pogodi!” (“Just You Wait!”), and they were one of the few bands to perform not only in the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, but also the United States, where they toured together with the folk group *The New Christie Minstrels* in 1976.<sup>20</sup> During their long career, *Pesniary* experimented with different styles, including a capella music and choral interludes. One of those musical experiments is the rock-opera (sometimes called cantata) “Gusliar” (“The Zither Player”), based on the poetry by the Belarussian poet Janka Kupala. Other song texts used e.g. the works of Jakub Kolas.

They were one of the best-known Soviet bands in the 1970s and today have become an icon of Belarussian culture (Survilla 2003, Lysenka 2020). There are

currently three different successor bands waging an ongoing dispute about their respective legitimacy: *The Belarussian State Ensemble Pesniary*; *The Belarussian Pesniary* and *Pesniary* under the direction of Leonid Bortkevich. In 2014, the VIA inspired the project *Re:Pesniary*, a tribute album with covers by contemporary musicians performing in a wide range of genres, but exclusively those songs written in Belarussian.<sup>21</sup>

Another group known for their use of folk elements is *Ariel'* from Cheliabinsk, singing about Baba Yaga or historical topics of the Ural region such as the popular insurrection under Emelian Pugachev. Today, they emphasise that they were never really a VIA – a genre they characterise as “lightweight pop” – and instead point to their early covers of British rock bands as indicative of their direction.<sup>22</sup> However, this emphatic denial is not the norm (Yarushin 2003). On the contrary, many groups that are still active benefit from the nostalgia surrounding the late Soviet period. *lalla*, earlier introduced by one of their most recognisable songs, even today often perform in colourful caftans resembling traditional Uzbek garments, heavily decorated for the stage. They started their career in one of the Soviet Union’s most popular musical contests on TV, *Allo, my ishchem talanty!* (*Hello, We are Looking for Talents*), playing an Uzbek and a Russian folksong. According to the history published on their homepage, their rise to fame is also largely due to their mastery of Uzbek folk instruments.<sup>23</sup> This strong emphasis on the folkloristic part of their creativity in some places drifts into a latent self-exoticisation. The group’s homepage presents the band name in stylized Arabic letters; current concerts are visually accompanied not only by elaborate costumes, but also by lightly clad belly dancers. Again and again, *lalla* plays the song that made them famous. “Uchkuduk” (or “Three Wells”, the translation of

20 <https://valerydayneko.wordpress.com/2019/07/09/usa-1976/> (accessed 09.2021).

21 For more on *Re:Pesniary* and the construction of *Pesniary*’s heritage function see Lysenka 2020.

22 <http://www.yarushin.com/istoriya-arielya/> (accessed 09.2021).

23 <https://yallaofficial.ru/#next> (accessed 09.2021).





Fig. 6: *Gunesh: Vizhu Zemliu* (1984), featuring the abstract, ethereal aesthetic of fusion and psychedelic rock.

city's Uzbek name) is based on a poem, but not from a folk tradition, but penned by Iurii Etin, former editor of *Melodiia*'s children's section and playwright for Soiuzmultfilm's cartoons. *Ialla*'s hit was first performed in 1981, a mere two years, after the uranium mining city Uchquduq, lauded in the song, had lost its status as a closed town. Different framing processes of the Soviet Central East converge in the song's context and melody and the performance's aesthetic.<sup>24</sup>

Many VIAs from Central Asia or other peripheral regions of the Soviet Union seem to have taken different paths than groups from the centre of the former empire. *Dos Mukasan*, sometimes called the "Kazakh Beatles", are still active today. Their 'calling card' is the song "Toi zhyry" ("Wedding Song"). New adaptations cement not only its cult status as a wedding hit, but sometimes use the song to illustrate concepts of quintessential Kazakh identity.<sup>25</sup> Some of their other songs feature less simple

melodies with earworm-character, but more musical experimentation. Their untitled LP from 1972 starts off with "Betpak-Dala" (the central Kazakh steppe region), an almost psychedelic eight-minute intro with a long drum solo, a stuttering guitar, choir parts and quickly changing rhythms. Later tracks lean more towards the side of slow and accentuated folk melodies, only sparingly using synthesiser. *Firyuza* from Turkmenistan, not so much a VIA as an instrumental ensemble, display a similar love for experimentation.

The same can be said for *Gunesh* (*Sun*) from Turkmenistan, combining jazz and rock influences with Central Asian *makams*. Today, their vinyl LPs fetch record prizes among collectors due to the fame of the VIA and their drummer Rishad Shafiev as a jazz fusion icon. The opener of *Gunesh*'s 1984 album *Vizhu zemliu* (*I See the Earth*) features desert winds, vaguely reminiscent of *Ialla*'s "Uchkuduk", before they are joined by church bells, a ticking clock and the roaring exhaust of a firing rocket, drawing the listeners from 'Baikonur' (the song title) into space, leading to soundbites from Iurii Gagarin and operators of the Baikonur cosmodrome. The album continues with soundscapes for the Caucasus and India. *Gunesh*'s mixture of influences, the prominent electric distortion, the jazz-oriented experimentation and the improvisation of the group's alleged creation process all point towards a diversity that might not have been possible at the beginning of the 'VIA decade'. The VIA's story is often ended by pointing out that a growing relaxation of the party's position towards rock in the 1980s made 'VIA' obsolete. As a marker for official status or for a synthesis of popular taste and ideological adequacy it slowly lost its descriptive appeal. With the end of the Soviet Union, the label as well as the groups withdrew from the spotlight. But since then, as part of an ongoing wave of nostalgia for the Soviet era, the VIAs have once more attracted attention – as classic hits from one's youth, as retro dance club music, sometimes

24 I have to thank Dmitrii Kostiuskin for bringing those nuances to the table during the planning of the conference and the journal issue.

25 E.g. this music video featuring not only a variety of stereotypes representing modern Kazakh society, but also a cameo of the VIA *Dos Mukasan*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j5iSshwN3kU> (accessed 09.2021).



as forgotten gems for connoisseurs.<sup>26</sup> Most archival efforts or partial historiographies of the VIA phenomenon are undertaken by fans or by the artists themselves, while researchers of late Soviet culture and history focus by and large on the emerging rock music and the underground scene of the 1980s. Analytical reevaluations have to confront the existing presuppositions about the differentiation of high and low culture and about the interference of censorship vs. public taste and demand in the Soviet Union.

Many of those VIAs still active or since reformed (sometimes rejuvenated) cater to specific identity discourses, e.g. *Pesniary* in their function as Belarusian state ensemble or *Dos Mukasan*, embodying a tradition of Kazakh popular music, and also as statues all over Kazakhstan. How individual groups are classified – whether they are inscribed in the VIA tradition or rather the annals of jazz, rock or Estrada music – frequently adumbrates borderlines within the post-Soviet memory discourse. Vocal-instrumental ensembles illustrate a post-Soviet collective memory and set the empire to music.

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## Bio

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<sup>26</sup> One example of a current nod to the VIAs is the Russian crime television series *Vokal'no-kriminal'nyi ansambl'* (2019), quoting the music trend as one of many elements of their take on a sepia-coloured 1970s aesthetic.

of adventure and work in novels from the United States and the Soviet Union.

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