

Corvus Corax: medieval rock, the minstrel, and cosmopolitanism as anti-nationalism

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Abstract

This article explores the German band Corvus Corax and their reinterpretation of the Middle Ages as a creative answer to Germany's problematic history of nationalism. Invoking the community ideals and ideological values of the 1960s and 1970s, which, in the context of the GDR took on even more significance, Corvus Corax borrowed 'authentic' medieval texts and melodies, rendering them in acoustic arrangements inspired by medieval performance practices. In short, German 'folk' bands invented 'medieval' rock to sidestep Nazi connotations with the word 'folk'. Besides invoking the semantic shift from 'folk' to 'medieval', I argue that the band adopts the figure of the medieval minstrel and asserts that his multilingual texts, 'foreign' instruments and colourful performance practices speak to an inclusive, diverse and cosmopolitan community. Paradoxically, they do so by first positioning the medieval minstrel as a punked-up, marginalised 'outcast'. The cultural capital of this outcast status helps medieval rock bands like Corvus Corax carve out a space for marginalised voices who, in their new privileged positions, offer a form of retribution for politics of exclusion, racism and authoritarianism.

In 2006, the German 'medieval rock' band, Corvus Corax, released its 'opera' *Cantus Buranus*, based on texts from the medieval manuscript *Codex Buranus*.¹ Written for orchestra, choir and Corvus Corax's loosely defined 'medieval ensemble', the musical setting combines both medieval and modern musical idioms, fashioning an aesthetic that is said to be both rock (metal) and medieval-inspired. With an image that conjures up the subcultural legacies of punk and goth, Corvus Corax seems an unlikely band to witness mainstream success, and yet its live shows garner praise and considerable crowds the world over. Continually headlining at the biggest metal festival in the world, Wacken Open Air, and the largest medieval festival in Germany, Kaltenberg Knights Tournament, Corvus Corax's hypnotic melodies, archaic harmonies, driving percussion, and reedy mix of shawms and bagpipes are only a small part of their mainstream success.

Inextricably tied to Corvus Corax's successful aesthetic is the special role the band plays in reinterpreting 'folk' for the German medieval rock scene. As is well known in the scholarly literature, the very word 'Volk' in German has negative connotations, seemingly unable to escape the associations with 'Volksgemeinschaft', the

¹ *Cantus Buranus*, Corvus Corax, Roadrunner Records, B001RZ7HZ8, 2005. This was followed by several Live DVDs, and *Cantus Buranus II*.

authoritarian, hierarchical, and racist ideologies of the ‘people’s (German) community’ used by the Nazis up to and during World War II.² Bands in post-World War II Germany, and especially, post-reunification Germany, have continued to confront this problematic history, and like Corvus Corax, have developed creative ways to reclaim the idea of ‘belonging’ and ‘the people’ associated with the English word without the exclusionary and racist politics of its German counterpart.³ Of the two *Cantus Buranus* releases, their setting of ‘In Orbem Universum’ best exemplifies this focus as it manifests an invitation to people from all walks of life, with disabilities (‘the righteous and the wrong ‘uns., the blind, the halt, the hunched of back’), and of diverse ethnic backgrounds (‘Roman, Slav, Bohemian’) to join the order of vagrants (*ordo vagorum*).⁴ This ‘community’ of vagrants, characterised by the very ‘difference’ that was not tolerated by the Nazis, can function as an inversion of the National Socialist definition of Volksgemeinschaft. Under the Third Reich, whether Aryan or not, those who were not deemed productive, socially conformist members of the community were persecuted as ‘asocials’, or ‘non-normative’ individuals.⁵ As I will explore, the band’s real power manifests itself in the way they position the performance of medieval songs and settings of medieval texts as products of a ‘marginalised’ or ‘non-normative’ community. Whether choosing the figure of the minstrel or vagrant, Corvus Corax leverages this figure’s texts, instruments and posited performance styles to create a privileged space for marginalised voices, that, in turn, might be interpreted as a retribution fantasy, where contemporary German citizens can celebrate ‘Gemeinschaft’ and folk traditions without the glaring Nazi associations.⁶

Medieval rock: folk rock without the ‘Volk’

Corvus Corax is one of the many groups that formed on the heels of a new German folk rock genre, first established in the 1970s by the band Ougenweide. ‘Ougenweide’ referred to the Middle High German (or medieval German) word for ‘Feast for the Eyes’, and was the title of a song by German medieval composer Neidhart von Reuenthal. Ougenweide’s albums from the 1970s – self-titled (1973), *All die weil ich mag* (1974) and *Ohrenschmaus* (1976) – are a mixture of 1970s progressive folk rock, folk, and archaic musical signifiers.⁷ The peppy flute and recorder melodies, twang of the mandolin, clarity of the glockenspiel and steady sound of the harmonium all provided an acoustic energy and vigour that helped locate and align the medieval German texts in the pastoral landscape of the countryside.

² See for example, Wildt (2014), Pine (2017), Applegate and Potter (2002), Potter (1998, 2016) and Arendt (1951).

³ Simon Frith (1998) and Uwe Schütte (2017) discuss the problems of being a German musician post war.

⁴ This appears as track 11 on *Cantus Buranus II*, although its aesthetic is captured in the whole release. In modern English: ‘the righteous and the wrong ones, the blind, the lame, and the hunchbacked’, CB 219, English translation by David Parlett (1986, pp. 173–7).

⁵ See Pine (2017) and Noakes (1987).

⁶ Corvus Corax is not alone in their desire to counter the Nazi taint on music. Some forms of music, especially serialism, dodecaphony, indeterminacy and electronic music in the Federal Republic of Germany, and socialist realism in the GDR, have been presented as resistant to Nazism since 1945. See for example Kordes (2002, pp. 205–17). See also Silverberg (2007, pp. 35–7).

⁷ Winick (2007, pp. 24–7).

The aesthetic of Ougenweide overlaps with the acoustic sounds of the English folk rock bands – Steeleye Span, The Fairport Convention, Pentangle and Amazing Blondel – with whom they shared the stage in a 1975 concert. Besides an interest in ‘archaic’ instruments, these bands sought a ‘return’ to more traditional singing displaced by rock bands Cream, the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin. Embraced largely by an educated class of musicians, whose rejection of the city and commercial forms of music could be characterised as a nostalgia for the premodern, English folk rock shared the ‘communal values’ and ‘artist as craftsman’ notions of the English folk revival as espoused by William Cobbett, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin and William Morris. As Timothy Evans describes, these medievalists revived traditional arts and crafts as a rural, socially meaningful alternative to the alienation they saw labourers experiencing as a result of their work in factories.⁸ Such disillusionment under capitalism was revived by the 1960s and 1970s generation of English folk rock musicians who reacted negatively to the increasing role and power of the record industry, and the mass market for rock music.⁹ As Susan Fast writes about the folk rock revival, ‘On the one hand, there is the yearning for a society structure with characteristics and values much different than our own: quieter, closer to the earth, and more communal; on the other [...] there is the sense of fostering historical continuity by tapping into a historical musical tradition particularly associated with England’.¹⁰ However clichéd this image of folk rock appears today, the promise of an authentic community and the revival of an historical tradition were traded in the development of a parallel scene by Ougenweide in Germany.

This is not to suggest that these ideological values and alternative lifestyles stemmed from England alone. Certainly Germany’s *Wandervögel* movement at the end of the nineteenth century promoted a comparable embrace of nature, the countryside and even medieval traditions, but some of its imagery was later abused by Nazi youth movements, such that it did not lend itself well to the revival process.¹¹ 1950s Germany also witnessed attempts by folklorists to intervene in the alignment of liberal values with music. Wolfgang Steinitz began collecting German folk songs that exhibited democratic principles, while he ignored others that could be construed as having National Socialist teleologies. German musicians inspired by the Steinitz’s collection, as well as by the American folk movement, began to borrow American folk songs, and to perform Steinitz’s songs in styles that varied from the ‘chanson’ to the ‘romantic lied’.¹² Yet even as late as 1965, a ‘corrective’ to Nazi values was needed and, according to David Robb, was offered at that year’s Burg Waldeck festival, where Peter Rohland, a singer from the youth movement, stated: ‘We have to finally correct this concept. German folk songs neither represent “the soul of the people” nor “eternal values”. They are simply songs which embrace the whole aspect of human life’.¹³

However, even the soundtrack of political protest for the 1968 student revolution in West Germany, which was bound up with the burgeoning German folk movement’s engagement with new, old, American and British songs, was not enough to

⁸ Evans (1988).

⁹ Frith (1981). See also Burns (2010).

¹⁰ Fast (2000).

¹¹ See especially, Williams (2007) and Solnit (2001).

¹² Steinbiß (1984) and Robb (2016).

¹³ Peter Rohland, as quoted by Robb, 348.

completely rid folk song of its fascist overtones. Eminently aware of the problematic, racist, National Socialist associations that 'Volksmusik' carried in Germany, Ougenweide thus found a way to convey the sounds and attitudes of 'folk' music while avoiding the word 'Volk' altogether. First, they chose 'German' texts from the Middle Ages by Walther von der Vogelweide, Dietmar von Aist and Neidhart von Reuenthal that were in Middle High German, or 'medieval' German. Some of these took up the same subjects and themes that were privileged as 'folk songs' during the Nazi period, but the language itself – Middle High German – was simultaneously foreign and incomprehensible, and considered to be empty of German National Socialist connotations.¹⁴ The band replaced the word 'folk' in 'folk rock' with 'medieval', a simple sleight of hand justified by the medieval (Middle High German) texts, for medieval rock did not embrace medieval music or medieval performance idioms. If music existed for these medieval texts, Ougenweide rewrote it or simply invented new songs avoiding the three most familiar treatments of Volkslieder: oompah, the chanson and romantic lied. Instead, they sought out the sounds of English folk rock through arrangements on acoustic guitar and other stringed instruments such as mandolin, and by introducing the pastoral sounds of flutes and recorders, and a range of percussion. The alignment with the sounds of folk rock was particularly significant, for, even more than the medieval lyrics themselves, the aural signifiers suggested the 'alternative cultural identity and lifestyle' they so desired.¹⁵ By drawing on 'medieval' texts in a 'distanced' language, and by 'imitating' the sounds of English folk rock, these bands willfully sidestepped folk music's Nazi associations and created a new genre of German acoustic music – medieval rock – in the process.¹⁶

Decades later, one of the founding members of Corvus Corax, Castus Rabensang, is still compelled to explain his band's use of medieval texts along the same lines as Ougenweide. Noting that the image of folk songs is tainted because the Nazis used them as 'Stimmungslieder' or 'mood songs', he declares, 'no wonder this country has such difficulty with the subject of folklore and its culture. With Corvus Corax, we make it easier for ourselves by connecting our music to a time very far before this'.¹⁷ Indeed this long shadow cast over folk song and 'community' through an association with the Nazis was even recently captured in the *Deutsche Welle* article, 'Why Germany is Afraid of its Folk Music'.¹⁸ I do not wish to suggest, however, that the connotations for 'folk' have remained the same since 1945. Regional and national responses to 'folk' culture, folk histories and building 'community' have ranged from ideologically calculated to politically naïve. Debates have also

¹⁴ For a discussion of the semantic distancing of Middle High German in this scene, see Voigt (2008).

¹⁵ Robb (2016), p. 354.

¹⁶ Winick (2007) also comments on Ougenweide's Olaf Casalich, and Frank Wulff sidestepping the negative associations in Germany between German folk song and the National Socialists by drawing on Middle High German texts.

¹⁷ Castus and Venustus in interview with Maurice Summen in *Berliner Zeitung*, 'Corvus Corax über Mittelaltermusik, Instrumentenbau und heidnische Orgien: Deutschland, deine Dudelsäcke', <http://www.berliner-zeitung.de/14983824> ©2016 See also Michael Moll, 'for young people, these songs [folk songs] were and still are highly unattractive', as cited in Winick (2006).

¹⁸ Arne Birkenstock in interview with Philipp Jedicke, <http://www.dw.com/en/why-germany-is-afraid-of-its-own-folk-music/a-16297458> (*Deutsche Welle*) 11 October 2012. This is a plug for the documentary 'Sound of Heimat', a documentary by Arne Birkenstock and Jan Tengeler.

raged over the adoption of symbols from German history, their possible connotations or alignment with National Socialism, and at what point, if ever, some symbols may begin to lose their far-right connotations.¹⁹ As scholars have discussed, there is a tendency to label symbols along a teleological line from German Romanticism to National Socialism without adequately exploring the context, intentions or lyrics. Bruno Kramm, for instance, defends bands that have been accused of fascism based on their use of certain images, arguing that the context and content for the music and lyrics provide a more complex engagement with these symbols, and that some of these bands use such symbols to force fans to think critically about the past.²⁰ At the same time, some groups are destined to be received as fascist if they flirt with imagery that is associated with National Socialism: Von Thronstahl, whose medieval knight imagery and musical aesthetic of 'bombastic and militaristic sounds with sampled spoken vocals that focus on the words *Heimat, Erde, Vaterland*, as well as war cries', leaves little room for fans to be critical of this glorification.²¹ As a result, the Antifa movement and Grufties gegen Rechts (Goths against the Right) have cautioned bands to be more aware of and take responsibility for the symbols they use.

Corvus Corax: from medieval to medieval 'rock'

Founding members of Corvus Corax, Castus Rabensang and Wim Dobbrisch, began their careers in the subcultural hotbed of the GDR's Prenzlauer Berg area of East Berlin before defecting to the West after being denounced for damaging the state's so-called Free German Youth (Freie deutsche Jugend).²² The rationale behind their adoption of unconventional music was described in one magazine, in 2006: it was 'not a good idea to show your opposition in a political way. So, they began to play folkloristic and medieval music on the street. The lyrics were in Latin or old European languages, which no one could understand'.²³

As is well known, folk music (Volkslieder) had played an important role in the musical culture of the GDR since its formation in 1949. Besides supporting the socialist image of east Germany, folk music would function as a critique of Western society, namely its 'capitalist structures of hierarchy and exploitation'. This version of folk music was also the main component of the state-controlled Singing movement (Singebewegung), intended to support and promote socialism among youth. An alternative political faction and a musical style that resembled the political chanson was more prominent at the Free German Youth's Festival of Political Song (Festival des politischen Liedes) until 1975 when it came under the Free German Youth's

¹⁹ Schütte, 'Introduction' to *German Pop Music* makes the comment that David Robb showed that the Liedermacher of the 1960s and 1970s successfully removed German folk song from Nazi connotations (p. 11). For discussion on the contested use of symbols see Kahnke (2013) and Burns (2008).

²⁰ Kramm (2000).

²¹ Eckart (2005).

²² Uwe Sauerwein, 'Mittelalter von unten, Die Berliner Band Corvus Corax begreift sogar die Carmina Burana als Rockmusik', *Die Welt*, 'They had begun clear opposition to the "Free German Youth-choir movement" in the final days of social realism, accused of destroying the folklore [traditional stories/songs] of the GDR', <https://www.welt.de/print-welt/article689035/Mittelalter-von-unten.html>

²³ Norri Drescher in interview with *Gothic Beauty Magazine*, no. 20, 2006, courtesy of Norri, Corvus Corax.

Central Committee.²⁴ In the 1970s and 1980s, as David Robb argues, folk song performed in the GDR that resurrected texts from the 1848 Revolution had strong anti-SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany) meanings for listeners. These folk songs contained polyvalent meanings in their specific GDR contexts ('we all have to keep quiet', for example, was understood to refer to observations by the secret police).²⁵ As Juliane Brauer, among others, has argued, one site of youth resistance centred on the rejection of the 'socialist personality', defined by the state as the demand to follow society's norms, values, education, and especially, to cultivate a utilitarian 'purpose'.²⁶

It is this resistance to utility or 'purpose' that became a theme of protest for Corvus Corax, and which is immanent in their adoption of medieval and 'folkloristic' music described above. Corvus Corax's embrace of purposelessness can thus be understood to carry more anarchistic and political value than might be obvious upon first glance. Their first album from 1989, *Ante Casu Peccati* [*Before Original Sin*], includes medieval songs recorded for a short 'fairytale' film, called *Oh Dear Me* (Ach du jeh – Ein Hans Dampf und Wurst Dokument), made shortly before their escape to the West. In the context of the GDR, this film spoke to German traditions of *agit prop* kitsch and absurdity that one might have witnessed in Germany's Weimar Republic, and that were captured by the political chanson, or Liedermacher.²⁷ The film director, Jürg Foth, was already known for his *Duo of Tubas* (Tuba wa duo), which depicted passers by mocking the absurd sounds and messages coming from two tuba players positioned on a rooftop in Berlin, until finally a crowd begins to throw out official party slogans. The 'plot line' of *Oh Dear Me* follows several groups of street musicians, interviews with whom reveal a self-deprecating humour and the absurdity of their 'success'; they have, after all, rejected the idea of 'purpose'. The musicians play unusual instruments such as the bagpipe and shawm, and some of the structural characteristics appear to be borrowed or inspired by the Studio der Frühen Musik, especially the doubled speed recognisable in the Studio's nuba-styled performances. The kitsch album cover contains the crudely drawn image of a naked man and woman with genitalia both hidden and amplified by hand cymbals and the shawm, an obvious mockery of the courtly tradition of love songs of the German Minnesinger. Names of band members are given pseudonyms such as Meister Selbfried, Venustus Oleriasticus, Castus Rabensang, Robertus Stupidus and Fried Wandel. On this album, they perform the by now famous medieval tunes such as the 'Saltorello', 'Tourdion', 'Pälastinalied', 'Saltatio Mortis' and a verse from the famed 'Merseburger Zauberspruch'.²⁸

During this early stage of Corvus Corax's career, then, they were devoted to Middle High German texts, like Ougenweide, but, distinct from this earlier band, Corvus Corax sought to replicate the music of the Middle Ages. As mentioned above, their renditions share much in sound, structure, and ornamentation with the well-known, Munich based, ensemble Studio der Frühen Musik, who recorded

²⁴ For a thorough discussion of this topic, see Robb (2007).

²⁵ Robb, pp. 349–57.

²⁶ Brauer (2012).

²⁷ See Robb (2007), for discussion of this phenomenon.

²⁸ This album and next (*Congregatio*, with Zumpfkopale) treat 'actual' medieval music and draw on a wider variety of instruments – the mouth harp, bells, shawm, crumhorn, bagpipes, a wide range of frame drums and percussion with the high-energy performance that has come to characterise them.

songs from the *Codex Buranus*, a variety of courtly and liturgical medieval music, as well as two albums of German popular songs, and one of 'European' popular songs all dating from c. 1500.²⁹ The ideological values associated with Corvus Corax's music can be said to overlap with the Studio's 1970s performances of medieval music in Germany, speaking to influence as well as to the values communicated in the scholarship the two groups absorbed. Binkley made distinctions between 'the serious realm of religious music', and popular song, and noted that the dichotomy between Court and street was transferred on *Spott- und Bauernlieder* to a dichotomy between city (high) and country (low). He writes, 'the robust joy of living and the inexhaustible pleasure in mocking and quarreling typical of that age are granted unbridled expression here'. He describes the peasant as the object of 'condescending and malicious mockery' and his backwardness and sexual habits are joyfully and freshly exposed, certainly ideas that find resonance in interviews with and reviews of Corvus Corax.³⁰

Not surprisingly, and as I have written elsewhere, the values of the early music revival's ensembles such as the New York Pro Musica, the Early Music Consort and the Studio der Frühen Musik were largely defined through early twentieth-century folklorists' and medievalists' contact with 'early music', since folk song and art music of the Middle Ages were viewed as 'unified and interdependent'.³¹ Moreover, performances of medieval music in the 1960s and 1970s bore some of the same ideologies that contributed to studies in folklore, namely, social codes of democracy, harmony and community, the polar opposites to the hierarchical and competitive codes of classical music charted out by Laurence Dreyfus in his 'Early Music defended against its Devotees'.³²

Medieval rock: resonances with punk and goth

After the wall came down, Corvus Corax's musical aesthetic shifted away from the idiom of medieval performance to embrace visual and musical elements of punk and goth. The darker, edgier imagery of these genres replaced the quirky, pastoral sounds of Ougenweide, which seemed to lose its ideological capital in the 1980s. Corvus Corax began writing their own songs to accompany medieval texts, which were sometimes extracted or slightly abbreviated from lengthier poems. Drones, ample percussion including frame drums, and the lower registers of their chosen instruments, the bagpipes and shawms, came to characterise their sound. When they chose to perform a medieval text with its 'original' melody, the band would frequently perform it in 4ths or 5ths, invoking the medieval practice of paraphony, but also suggesting the guitar movement of heavy metal. Indeed, although Corvus Corax do not use guitars, as Isabella van Elferen notes, their music is popular in the metal scene because it is largely driven by the same parallel intervals.³³

²⁹ *Bauern-, Tanz- und Strassenlieder in Deutschland um 1500*, SAWT 9486-A (1964), *Spott- und Bauernlieder um 1500*, Telefunken, Das Alte Werk, München, AWT 8042 (1967), *Pop Anno 1500*, His Master's Voice (EMI) 5 C045-29 157, 1973.

³⁰ Binkley liner notes for *Spott- und Bauernlieder*.

³¹ See Yri (2006, 2010). For the flavour of this, see also Denis Stevens, in the notes for *The Three Ravens, Songs of Folk and Minstrelsy out of Elizabethan England* (Vanguard, VSR- 479, 1956.

³² Dreyfus (1983).

³³ Van Elferen (2009).

Corvus Corax's visual style is a hybrid of subcultural imagery from heavy metal and 'heavy medieval' including long hair, leather, chains, as well as nods to jerkins, tabards, baldrics and arm bracers, all conjuring up symbols of masculinity, aggressiveness and brawling. Punk symbols of dog collars, spiked hair, studded leather and tattoos carry connotations of anarchy and provide the cultural capital of subversion to their image. The East German punk aesthetic has also found its way into some of their songs. In her discussion of East German punk, Juliane Brauer notes, 'Punks lived the principles of dynamism; their music was fast, loud, extreme and aggressive; they were full of energy, craving fun, life and emotions. Where the emotional style of the state was restraining, controlling and synchronising, that of the punks was chaotic, lively and individual'.³⁴ This aesthetic is most obvious in 'Najo Ratte', a fast paced song written in the cant of thieves, or Rotwelsch, which is delivered with yells and slams that easily align it with the chaos of squatters' quarters of East Berlin's Tacheles.

Corvus Corax also flirt with gothic imagery in numerous ways. Their name is Latin for 'black raven', which conjures up the famous poem by Gothic favourite Edgar Allan Poe. Morbid imagery surfaces in some of their songs' titles or lyrics such as 'Cranaid Brain', whose text includes the line: 'ravens shall pick the necks of men'.³⁵ When the music and texts have a goth theme, it is likely to be supported by goth-styled makeup, costumes and album imagery.³⁶

The GDR has long been discussed as the 'land of the gothics', and even gothic bands from West Germany today have a larger audience in the East, probably, as Johannes Berthold states, because the genre captures the social anomie of their experience of oppression by the state and Stasi.³⁷ Yet this gothic is perhaps less obsessed with the aestheticised feelings of horror and terror as discussed by Linda Bayer-Berenbaum.³⁸ As Gabriele Eckart notes, the GDR goths (or Grufties) wished for a 'more organic form of traditional life as an escape from the functionally differentiated modern society and its rationalising effects on human life'.³⁹ In her discussion of Corvus Corax's industrial side project Tanzwut, Isabella van Elferen articulates the goth's 'active confrontation with unease'. By addressing and even personifying what she calls the 'shadow side of culture, or the margins', the gothic gives voice to the irrational, exposing the dangers, fragmentations and distortions of the self and reality.⁴⁰ The experience of anomie, or alienation and anxiety, is the outcome of a disconnect between a goal-driven society in keeping with capitalism's 'success' and the bureaucratic systems that continually thwart these goals. For rebellious youth in the communist GDR, the government mandates for utility and purpose

³⁴ 'They complained about feelings of stagnation that provoked an "urge to go wild", and to protest against the coercive pressure to fit into society's norms, suggesting that the "workers" and farmers' paradise of the GDR was in fact "the most boring country in the world"' (p. 61); Brauer (2012).

³⁵ This image of the raven not be confused with the Nazi symbol of the eagle, which evoked the 'hunt' and 'power'.

³⁶ Album themes shift with the particular texts or regional/geographical/historical subjects – for example, their goth image is replaced by Viking imagery on *Sverker*.

³⁷ Johannes Berthold, 'Musik ist furchtbarkitschig', <http://www.laut.de/vorlaut/interviews/2002/03/13/02616/10/27/02>, as cited by Eckart (2005), p. 549.

³⁸ See Bayer-Berenbaum (1982), Clery (1995) and Brown (1995).

³⁹ Eckart (2005), p. 551.

⁴⁰ Van Elferen (2009), p. 122.

were objects of scorn, as illustrated in the film *Oh Dear Me*, but were just as likely causes of alienation as their capitalist equivalents.

Corvus Corax thus sits at the intersection between punk and goth, crossing boundaries between communism and capitalism. Their punked-up image suggests anarchy and resistance to authoritarian power while their goth symbols reverberate with the dark side or 'margins'. In their attitudes and intentions, Corvus Corax's 'purposelessness' is directed to engage punk's specifics of class warfare as well as the goth's use of the body as a site of freedom from oppression.

Corvus Corax: building community in the street

Corvus Corax speak at length in interviews about their intentions and social practices, frequently returning to concepts of 'the people', 'travelling' and 'the street'. Their interviews show them to be particularly interested in how their fans ought to react to their music, in short how they build 'community'. The people's (folk) community that Corvus Corax build steers clear of the 'ruling class' associated with Germany's present and past. Meister Selbfried notes, 'our music was more likely to be heard in the lower and middle class, and certainly in the squares of the newly developed cities in the taverns at the fairgrounds, at weddings, children's parties. In these pieces we find musical structures closer to the people. Music folklore or folk songs or banal songs – intrinsic to them is this song structure, improvisation, sequences and simple harmonic patterns'.⁴¹ Their selection of medieval texts and the 'composers' who wrote them is bound up in a class-based interpretation of medieval institutions and laws. Castus explains, 'We don't want to have anything to do with Minnesang and Church Music'.⁴² Evidence from interviews also suggests that the band rejects the uniformity and institutional power of the Christian church, and associates liturgical music with an oppressive institution that not only ruled from the top down, but was authoritarian in its imposition of rigid rules concerning musical and human expression. In this way, the German medieval rock scene espoused by Corvus Corax shares much with recent German historical films and biopics set in the Middle Ages, where 'religious oppression' and 'corrupt power' are conveyed by images of self-flagellating monks and power hungry cardinals scheming in the shadows.⁴³ As Meister Selbfried writes, 'Although this music [liturgical] is actually the music of heaven, salvation and the angel, there is no trace of hope or good news. Nietzsche had already remarked to Zarathustra, mockingly: "They would have to sing better songs for me to believe in their Saviour: his disciples would have to appear more redeemed!"'.⁴⁴ The nihilism present in Selbfried's assessment of church music is on one side of the spectrum – medieval dance music or minstrel music, as the remainder of his missive contends, is on the other:

When we play the music of the Middle Ages and in particular dance music, we do not feel gloomy. This music is not dark or sombre. If church music still produces this impression, secular music sounds like free speech, sun and moon, meadows and hay, flowers and beer. It does not rain in these songs as in most films about the Middle Ages.

⁴¹ Meister Selbfried, 'Heitere Mittelalter', pp. 66–71, in *Gothic!*

⁴² Castus in interview with Sascha Blach, 2006, *subkultur.de*

⁴³ Two that come to mind are *Vision-Aus dem Leben der Hildegard von Bingen* and *Die Päpstin*.

⁴⁴ Meister Selbfried, 'Heitere Mittelalter', pp. 66–71, in *Gothic!*

These songs convey the reality between exuberant, world-dance and transcendence. The closeness to life and death, to beginnings and endings, which the medieval person experienced every day. Every new day could also be the last. Life was a gift that one had to work hard to keep each day, but which one could also enjoy to its fullest.

Minstrel music is thus cheerful music. No rain, no mist, no ruins. Rarely is a cathedral or the plague, or death in war, the theme of the songs.

This 'Cheerful Middle Ages', to borrow the title from Selbfried's short essay, is distinct not only from the medieval church music as described, but it also captures a moment of 'brightness' amidst the doom and gloom of the goths' anomie: 'It has been coloured. Light and joy come to us today. [...] colourful flags are blowing within the fortress walls of ancient castles. Laughing and dancing dominate the atmosphere – and music. Music that speaks of life and of fun. [...] The seasons, the taverns (of course!), and the beautiful sides of life and craft are sung ... It is bright in this music'.⁴⁵ That such a statement would be included in a book devoted to gothic culture is a striking example of how uneasily the band occupies its aesthetic. Most important here, and this is another area in which the band overlaps with the alternate genres of goth, punk and metal, is a privileging of the informal (secular) status of the musician (minstrel) and an attitude resistant to social and religious forms of power, even if its most significant elements, at least in Selbfried's opinion – brightness, cheer, colour – are contrary to the gothic ideal.

The fact that Corvus Corax avoid performing the music of the Minnesang, the medieval German courtly love tradition, also appears to be based on class. As love songs cultivated for performance at the courts both by and for nobility, this genre's association with upper-class status makes it almost as unattractive a genre as church music. Besides this, the noble man's expression of love to a lady in the guise of courtly tradition conjures up images of social decorum that certainly contradict the band's imagery and 'class' content.⁴⁶ As Norri quips – perhaps with some humour – the band prefers music 'where the bodies touch'.⁴⁷ This rejection of Minnesang and the 'ruling class' in medieval rock has not gone unnoticed, as Robert Lug observed, a privileging of 'medieval music of the people' as opposed to aristocratic, or clerical music came to dominate the medieval rock scene early on.⁴⁸

The pursuit of 'medieval music of the people' seems responsible for Corvus Corax's turn to the figure of the Spielman or 'minstrel' as the closest match for their ideal and aesthetic. Adopting the songs, performance practices and even instruments of the minstrels, the band's own image is transmuted through the minstrel's status as a street musician.⁴⁹ Castus confirms, 'the minstrel was a marginalised musician, who could only play music in the street and faced daily discrimination. He was forced to leave the cities he played in by the stroke of midnight'. Further, he was required to wear ankle rings and colourful clothes to 'identify' him and because

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Corax does not appear to reject the *Spruch* form of the Minnesang, undoubtedly on the basis that this 'simpler', single stanza form was sung by itinerant musicians rather than noblemen. Later poets are known to have written songs in both the *Spruch* and 'Lied' forms.

⁴⁷ Castus in interview with Sascha Blach, 2006, subkultur.de, <https://goettertanz.wordpress.com/2006/07/13/corvus-corax-die-gitarre-des-mittelalters-interview/>.

⁴⁸ Lug (1993).

⁴⁹ DJ Cypher with Norri, 2005, courtesy of Norri, from Corvus Corax. In the words of Norri, 'Our medieval "street music"-style is really different to other medieval groups, which are playing the music of the "medieval upper-class".'

his life had no value. No punishment was meted out for his death, and he was 'fair game' for attack (*vogelfrei*).⁵⁰ Castus's description of the minstrel's lack of rights is telling for the way it parallels the 'statelessness' that Hannah Arendt identified as a Nazi strategy that robbed Jews of German citizenship, and rendered them unprotected and *vogelfrei*.⁵¹ Arendt's own well-known account of her stateless status in which she describes learning to trust only her wits also resonates with the interpretation of the minstrel's life. 'To survive and resist succumbing to despair and suicide, one [Arendt] needed a sense of that "natural freedom" and joy in living'.⁵² The resonance with Selbfried's essay is obvious, and the point here is not to argue for intentionality on his part, but to show the continuity of these themes and suggest that audiences, too, could appreciate the similarities.

A more prominent thread for the band is the focus on the idea of the minstrel as a travelling musician performing music in the streets for 'everyday' people, 'covering' the popular songs and carrying them from town to town through Europe (and further). Much of what Selbfried and Castus relay resonates with Walter Salmen's *Der Spielmann in Mittelalter* who maps out and describes the journeys of the travelling minstrels, and their roles in picking up and then disseminating songs in areas as far reaching as the East.⁵³ It was 'the music of everyday life', and as I have already noted, was viewed by the band as the dance music of the Middle Ages and the 'pop' music of its times.

Although Corvus Corax would never claim that their medieval rock is authentic, they study the social history of the period, the history of the music, illustrations and descriptions of instruments, as well as theoretical treatises on music and descriptions of sound. Indeed, it seems they try to be truer to medieval traditions than their flamboyant costuming might suggest. Although they are musically educated, they say their 'real' music schooling took place at the library since music institutions only taught the music of the church and court. Castus claims that, 'We use medieval theory to compose our music, which means that we renounce chord formations since they didn't happen until the Renaissance'.⁵⁴ They do acknowledge, however, that a great deal of fantasy goes into their musical arrangements even when they use a medieval tune. They are also known to learn from the many traditional musicians they have met on their tours, and to apply other 'folk' traditions to their own. The music they play is not rhythmically notated which allows them great freedom to use loops, layers and systems of repetition and metre to their choosing. They derive some of their melodies from manuscripts that use unheighted neumatic notation rendering accurate pitch somewhat inaccessible. One of their members, Wim, builds their bagpipes, strings and winds, while a specialist builds their drums following particular specifications. They also 'improve' and alter instruments as they come across instrument makers from around Europe and the Middle East.

In keeping with the idea of the minstrel, the band only selects texts and tunes that they can claim as part of an oral or popular tradition. They admit they

⁵⁰ Summen in interview with Castus and Venustus, *Berliner Zeitung*.

⁵¹ Arendt (1967), pp. 267–302.

⁵² Bernstein (2005).

⁵³ Salmen (1960, 1983); see Bachfischer (1998), pp. 44–46; for a different interpretation of the minstrel's status, compare Dobozy (2005).

⁵⁴ Castus, and further, that 'You can work with fifths, fourths, and thirds, but you have to be careful not to create a chord'.

sometimes perform music of the 'lower Minne', but only if the song was truly popular and widely disseminated. Texts and songs that have multiple concordances in medieval manuscripts from different regions across Europe are viewed as proof of widespread popularity, signs of inclusive, democratic musical practices. The polyglot nature of some of these texts, as well as the *contrafactum*, also 'proves' this image as the music is said to have appealed to diverse groups of people, and was heard and understood by different language groups. 'You could say therefore, that the folklore (Geschichte) of the Middle Ages in Europe is a type of pop music that reaches beyond regional borders'.⁵⁵

Our music dates from the 1300s when Marco Polo was on his travels, the enlightenment was already underway, and the inquisition of the church was not as bad as it became. At that time, there were still many heathenistic traditions that were considered normal, and this is what you can hear on our recording. Although we are influenced from different cultures and regions, the style of Corvus Corax is still recognizable. It is a musical world tour of the minstrel [Spielman].⁵⁶

Corvus Corax focus on music and texts from the twelfth century in which a range of unusual instrumental timbres feature, from organistrum and bagpipes, to shawms, hurdy gurdys and percussion. It is striking that one of their favourite instruments, the bagpipe, is described as a marginalised, or 'underground' instrument: Castus points out that playing the bagpipe is still forbidden in some public places in Germany, such as in Munich.⁵⁷ The band is also well aware that a class status existed between different groups of instruments. They know for instance that loud instruments were not considered suitable for nobles because they distorted the face, but they could be played by peasants or minstrels.⁵⁸ Hence the bagpipes, shawms and hurdy gurdys certainly carry sound over crowds and distances, but they also have connotations with a lower rank.

Medieval rock at medieval markets

Medieval rock such as that Corvus Corax performs can be heard at the hundreds of annual medieval markets (Mittelaltermärkte) around Germany. These spaces easily secure the 'medieval' context for the old songs and texts in environs that frequently date from or have architectural hallmarks of the period. Located in centrally planned, historical villages and towns, medieval markets embrace the 'communal' values of a 'premodern' society along the lines of the English folk revival. The markets furnish a space for medieval inspired jewelry, crafts, household items and clothing, which purport to represent time long passed. It is obvious that medieval markets need to be sanitised versions of the Middle Ages (unsanitised versions – *The Vikings*, *Game of Thrones* – are only possible on screen). As Iwen Schmees notes, 'no human being is tortured, exposed to the pillory of the market-place. Nor does one meet the existential poverty suffered by most of the population, nor the horrors of a lawless society in

⁵⁵ Maurice Summer, with Castus and Venustus, *Berliner Zeitung*, 'Corvus Corax über Mittelaltermusik'.

⁵⁶ Castus interview with Sascha Blach 2006, subkultur.de.

⁵⁷ <http://www.metal.de/interviews/corvus-corax-36229> 2006, courtesy of Norri, Corvus Corax.

⁵⁸ Schmees (2008).

which the right of the strongest rule prevailed, and violence and anxiety determined the daily life of many peasants'.⁵⁹ Although it is not possible to generalise about the people who visit the markets, certainly the musicians who play there have a diverse range of values as seen in the varying degrees of 'fantasy' and 'authenticity' that accompany the range of musical 'styles', be it music to accompany a Knights tournament or music of the minstrels. What is apparent in the market atmosphere is the commitment to different communities coming together, celebrating the regional and 'class' differences of the music, among other 'products'.⁶⁰ Although bands like Corvus Corax are clear about being anti-fascist, other groups, particularly those interested in historical authenticity, leave few clues about their ideologies, and trade magazines such as *Karfunkel* and *Pax et Gaudium*, devoted to medieval reconstructions and histories, reveal little.

Over the past 30 years, Germans have witnessed a rise in the popularity and number of medieval markets. The first was organised in 1981 by Ritterturnier Kaltenberg Veranstaltungen GmbH with a capacity of 1200. Today Kaltenberg hosts the largest knight tournament in the world, and boasts more than 100,000 annual visitors. I would even go so far as to suggest that the medieval market's ascent – peaking in 2010 with over 2000 registered markets in the country – is related to the 'folk' festival's decline, a seemingly inevitable result of the inability to overcome the exclusionary connotations of 'folk' despite the attempts of the 1970s and 1980s. Germany has fewer than 50 folk festivals on the roster today. Only a handful specifically use the word 'Volk', while others borrow the English word, or are aligned with the seasons or the harvest.⁶¹ However, one could speculate as to other reasons for this decline: a change in demographics, a rejection of the 'older' musical aesthetic of the *Volkslied*, or perhaps a reaction to the 1990s revival of *Heimatschlager* that, as Mechthild von Schoenebeck illustrates, celebrated nostalgic themes of love, beauty, nature and happy childhood in the wake of German reunification, but that also advocated downright old-fashioned and sexist notions that a generation of Corvus Corax musicians would potentially reject (women's place was in the home; men's domain was in the tavern).⁶²

The variety of musical styles considered under the category of medieval rock and presented at medieval markets illustrate that the 'rock' label is not usually stylistically descriptive as many of these bands do not use guitars or amplification. They provide venues for a vast array of acoustic 'folk' (Die Streuner, Die Irrlichter, Blackmore's Night), medieval music and medieval rock (Corvus Corax, Cultus Ferox, Fabula, Saltatio Mortis, Faun, In Extremo, Rabenschrey, Medieval Spectaculum). This latter includes diverse crossovers with the subgenres pagan, metal and goth. Bringing to life the character of the minstrel has meant that multiple versions of famous medieval songs constitute a 'body' of repertoire for bands and fans. Contrary to rock and pop, which, like 'written' traditions, favour one 'original'

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.13.

⁶⁰ See Zeppezauer-Wachauer (2012).

⁶¹ These are Cannstater Volksfest, in Stuttgart, and Nürnberger Volksfest. All others are named after the town, or season. Some folk festivals (using the word folk, not Volk), that in Ingelheim for instance, maintain the aesthetic of 1960s–1970s folk song (*Volkslieder*) that would later come to be recognised as outmoded. <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volksfest>;

⁶² Schoenebeck (1998) uses the 'Folk-like' to mean songs that are marketed as folk in the mainstream media such as TV.

version, music of the medieval markets adopts the oral transmission of the past. It has thus produced a tradition that replicates the definition of 'folk' music, even if the musicians perform the songs in different acoustic styles with varying degrees of authenticity.

Corvus Corax's medieval rock as cosmopolitan music

Significant for Corvus Corax is the attention to 'Gemeinschaft' or 'community' in terms of bringing people together and creating a space for engagement. Castus says,

Scenes are mutually exclusive. We don't want that. On the contrary, we want our audience to be as mixed as possible and to party together. I think it's great that so many different people meet at our concerts and find out, 'Hey, the guy there looks different from me, but he can't be that bad since we both like the same music'. So, in a certain way, we have a unifying [verbindendes] element.⁶³

At the same time, the band highlights their success and appeal to people across regions and genres, because of 'the archaic element of our music, which is based on complex rhythms and hypnotic melodies. In every culture you can find similar archaic music, of course played with different instruments, but it is always music for dancing'.⁶⁴ Their commitment to the world music ethos, or perhaps even an 'ethics of hospitality' is a reminder of their awareness of Germany's troubled past: 'Our music is not "better" than any other and we would never want to live during the Middle Ages but we show that it is possible and important to support the different cultures of musical expression all over the world'.⁶⁵

Corvus Corax's focus on community might be understood along the lines of cosmopolitanism, or the recognition of a common humanity, in the band's view, a humanity that includes and celebrates the marginalised and different. To be sure, the term 'cosmopolitan' has a lengthy history in Germany, and one with which band members and German audiences would be familiar. Here, too, the band may be seen as inverting previous social attitudes towards the marginalised. Under the Third Reich, to be described as cosmopolitan was pejorative as the term was used to condemn Jews for their 'lack of patriotism' as 'rootless cosmopolitans'.⁶⁶ Under the GDR, however, cosmopolitanism was demonised differently, namely, as departing from the agenda of the socialist state, and commonly denounced as embodying an American or capitalist influence (or even being more international in scope).⁶⁷ This is not to suggest that the negative associations between Jews and cosmopolitanism failed to exist in the GDR, but rather, that the charge largely shifted to the West as the threat to the German communist state.⁶⁸

It is thus, against the context of Germany's previous indictments of cosmopolitanism that we might fruitfully view Corvus Corax's adoption of the minstrel, and where his marginalised, wandering, even 'vogelfrei' status are celebrated through the

⁶³ Harmann der Drescher (aka Norri) with Metal.de, <http://www.metal.de/interviews/corvus-corax-36229/>

⁶⁴ DJ Cypher interview with Norri, 2005, courtesy of Norri, from Corvus Corax.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ See especially Gelbin and Gilman (2017), pp. 9–27 and 144–86.

⁶⁷ Silverberg (2007), pp. 116–26. See also Silverberg (2009).

⁶⁸ See Lorenzini (1997).

band's adoption of his performance traditions, diverse instruments, wide-reaching songs and social behaviour. This kind of performativity has been theorised by Dana Gooley as a practice of cosmopolitanism enacted through 'behaviours, social performances, patterns of travel, [and] networks of communication'.⁶⁹ In recent years, by playing festivals outside of Germany, and perhaps as a response to their fans, Corvus Corax have even amplified the regional differences between songs on their albums. Many recent examples illustrate that Corvus Corax is not simply trying to rid music of 'local' colour, but celebrate it. In these cases, Corvus Corax seeks to locate, to borrow a phrase from Derek B. Scott, 'the Self in the Other', to identify with rather than 'speak for' the Other.⁷⁰ *Viator* (1998) features 'Skudrinka', a Macedonian Oro, or folkdance, with a duo of bagpipes playing the melodies to a foot-stomping, complex polyrhythmic metre whereas *Tritonus* (2004) contains the Ottoman song 'Neva Cengi Harbi', with prominent frame drums, shawms and bagpipes alternating between heavier 'drone' sections and sequenced melodies. *Seikolos* (2002) pursues the path of the ancient Greeks treating melodies that are German, French, Serbocroatia, Albanian, Turkish, Balkan and even Chinese. 'Seikolos', the title-song, borrows a melody written on a 2000 year old gravestone excavated in the south of Central-Asia, whereas 'Chou chou sheng' is a '3000 year old Chinese emperor hymn written on mud-plates'.⁷¹ The description of *Venus Vina Music* (2006) is telling: 'The story of the album centres on a minstrel who lived during the 13th century. He fell in love with the most beautiful woman, an Indian princess and he travelled through Europe, North Africa and Asia to find her. The songs are musical expressions for the countries he visited'.⁷² Another review of the same album highlights, 'The Indian and Tibetan influences are very clear. It will be noted that the songs on the recording influence each other as we are inspired by Japanese, Arabic and Chinese culture as well as the Celtic culture of Scotland and Ireland'.⁷³ Cosmopolitanism also seems inherent in *Sverker* (2011), which takes up the world of Viking journeys and Celtic themes, and borrows Danish, old Norse and Gaelic texts. *Gimlie* (2013) mixes Anglo-Saxon poems (Beowulf), Roman songs (one by Julius Caesar) and Gaelic folk songs, and is multi-lingual with its Latin, Old English, Gaelic and Icelandic. Although, as they admit, their sound is recognisable, they do not want these explorations to become a levelling of all of these traditions, nor do they want to engage in a form of appropriation that is problematic. Rather, by showing the connections, the shared songs, and hybrids across regions, the band undermines any notion of 'nation' as a 'pure' community.

When, in 2006, Corvus Corax released the 'opera' *Cantus Buranus*, German fans were given the opportunity to recontextualise the famed 1937 composition by Carl Orff, a setting of 25 poems from the *Codex Buranus* with a problematic reception history. By the 1940s, Orff's *Carmina Burana* was celebrated by the National Socialists as a staple of musical theatre, and reviews described the cantata in language that

⁶⁹ Gooley (2013).

⁷⁰ Scott (2016).

⁷¹ Norri in interview with Cinsearae, *Dark Gothic Magazine*, <http://bloodtouch.webs.com/darkgothicmagazine.htm>, courtesy of Norri.

⁷² Norri in interview with Arturo, 2007, for NotMusa (Mexico) courtesy of Norri.

⁷³ Sascha in interview with Castus, 2006, *subkultur.de*, <https://goettertanz.wordpress.com/2006/07/13/corvus-corax-die-gitarre-des-mittelalters-interview/>.

epitomised Nazi slogans.⁷⁴ It is striking that Corvus Corax originally sought permission to perform Orff's version; however his heirs denied their request, forcing the band to write new music for the texts. By choosing poems from the famed *Codex Buranus* manuscript, and employing unison choir and extended percussion driving out rhythms that could rival Orff's, Corvus Corax's *Cantus Buranus* seemed destined to conjure up the unsettled reception of the original. The formal structure of the opera provided the wandering goliards, or marginalised 'vagrants', a status and presence that was absent in Orff's cantata. In part because the two works drew from some of the same poems, one of the ideological messages – the rejection of the church and its authoritarian control – was shared by both. Unsurprisingly, Corvus Corax's *Cantus Buranus* would be attractive for the gothic, punk and folk rock fans' aesthetics. The vicissitudes of fate in 'Fortuna', the toxicity inflicted by gossip and betrayal in 'Lingua Mendax', the indictment of money as a corrupting power in 'Nummus' and a satire on bribery in 'Curritur', are just a few examples of the overall disdain for bourgeois systems of 'control', the 'timeless' (or clichéd) symbols of disillusionment that are easy targets for derision. Add to this the themes of unadulterated passion in 'Dulcissima' and 'Venus', and what emerges is an updated version of Orff's themes for *Carmina Burana* without, or perhaps even countering, its supposedly fascist overtones. The band's second *Buranus* album focuses even more on community, enacting a 'call' to join the 'order of vagrants' in 'In Orbem Universum', and, as stated in the outset, where people from all walks of life and diverse ethnic backgrounds can come together. Using simple, short melodic motives that are sequenced and repeated, often with parallel intervals, set against the archaic medieval modes with frame drum percussion in the forefront, *Cantus Buranus I* and *II* convey an aesthetic of immediacy and urgency that seems even more warranted for today. Their hypnotic melodies, archaic harmonies, driving percussion and brash mix of instrumental timbres may appear to return us to the celebrations of 'community' so often discussed with regard to Orff's cantata. Yet as Corvus Corax represent it: this 'community' is open to diverse voices and wishes to be resistant to the social strictures produced under any system, be it capitalist, communist or authoritarian. As the numerous live versions staged in open air stadiums around Germany attest, *Cantus Buranus* offered an enormous public event where 'Germans' and 'non-Germans' could seemingly celebrate community without the undertone of intolerance.

For those of us a long way from the medieval markets in Germany, Corvus Corax speaks to the complex intersections between specifically situated communities and cosmopolitanism, as empowered by globalised discourses and local ideologies. While groups such as Corvus Corax may want to construct discourses on their own terms – in this case those of inclusion and anti-authoritarianism, their efforts are nevertheless constrained and augmented by the lingering associations between community and ultra-nationalism. Yet this should not be a cause for despair but rather an affirmation of our constant need to resist nationalist discourses, to invoke language and actions that creatively and positively counter hateful ideologies. Although historians may dismiss Corvus Corax as misconstruing medieval German music history in their reimagining of the minstrel and his music, the

⁷⁴ Kater (2000), p. 21, Kowalke (2000) and Taruskin (2008), p. 163.

band's alignment with goth and punk is devised to keep us beating our drums, turning up the volume on our shawms, and especially, our bagpipes.

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