The theme of Baltic music history in the letters of Elmar Arro to Karl Leichter


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Among the papers of Karl Leichter in the archive of the Estonian Museum of Theatre and Music in Tallinn there are 18 letters from Elmar Arro, written in Vienna from 1972 to 1982. Some of them are very short and practical – Arro was planning a trip to Tallinn and Riga and after several attempts succeeded in a very short visit to both towns in 1981. But several letters contain interesting and sometimes bitter reflections on the possibility of writing a history of earlier music in Estonia and Latvia. Arro was quite sure that he had been the last one to study in the 1930s some important document collections that were later destroyed or lost in the World War II. Again and again he wrote in his letters that if he happened to die without publishing his studies, those countries would remain forever without a proper music history. Living in Vienna after retirement he compiled an extensive manuscript “Geschichte der baltischen Kirchenmusik und geistlichen Tonkunst. Versuch einer musikhistorischen Rekonstruktion”. From the letters we learn about his search for a possible publisher, but he also discussed with Karl Leichter some details of his work and asked for references. He had no time to finish the work and see it printed. The manuscript (at least the version that Karl Leichter had) is in such a state that I am very doubtful considering its possible publishing. However, our younger musicologists have used it as a starting point for their new research – fortuitously, much more of the sources of our earlier music history have survived than Arro dared to hope.

Karl Leichter (1902–1987) was a leading musicologist in Estonia, active from the 1930s through the war-years and Soviet repressions of the early 1950s until his high age in the 1980s. His archive is a rich source for Estonian cultural historians, because he was involved in and often the initiator of many important projects in musical life and musicological research that are now a part of our cultural history. He was a close friend of several important musicians, who fled from Estonia in the end of the war in 1944 to escape the second Soviet occupation. Karl Leichter stayed in Estonia and, at first, became very active in restoring music education and musicological research after the war. However, when the Soviet ideological control of cultural life strengthened in the end of the 1940s, he was accused in bourgeois nationalism and formalism. For six years he was isolated from teaching at the Tallinn Conservatoire and could not publish under his own name. From 1956 he worked again as the professor of musicology, later also as the chair of the department of composition and musicology at the Tallinn Conservatoire (now Estonian Academy of Music). He retired from teaching in 1968, but was active as a writer on music until high age and in his favorite field of Estonian music history and music-historical research in general he remained the greatest authority in Estonia.

Therefore it is quite normal that Elmar Arro, when looking for contacts in Estonia, had some correspondence with Karl Leichter. Arro and Leichter knew each other from their common years in Tartu in the 1930s. Arro had come to Tartu after defending his doctoral dissertation in Vienna in 1928. At the same time Karl Leichter finished his music studies at the Tartu Higher Music School and continued as a student of philosophy at the University of Tartu. It is evident from those letters that they had had no closer personal relations in Tartu – although they were
approximately of the same age, differences in their background and professional experience at that time were rather significant. Most probably Arro remembered Leichter as an active music reviewer in the 1930s – Tartu was a very small town at that time – but in those letters he refers only once to an earlier memoir related to Leichter (mentions his interest towards Wagner).

They met again in 1971 at the VII International Music Congress in Moscow (4–9 October), that was organized by the International Music Council presided by Yehudi Menuhin at that time in cooperation with the Soviet Ministry of Culture and the Soviet Music Council. The correspondence between Arro and Leichter started with a letter from Karl Leichter immediately after that meeting in Moscow, a draft for it is dated 15. 10.1971, and ended in 1982. Arro died a few years later, in 1985.

Elmar Arro was born in Riga, in 1899. His father, who came from a peasant family in Viljandimaa, south-western Estonia, had become a lawyer in Riga. After a school in Riga Arro entered the university in Berlin in 1922, studying musicology and Slavic philology, then continued with Guido Adler in Vienna and graduated in 1928 with a dissertation “Über das Musikleben in Estland im 19. Jahrhundert”. After that he settled in Tartu (Dorpat), where his family had moved after Estonia and Latvia had become independent states.

Just in 1929 a new music(ological) journal “Eesti muusika kuukiri” [The Monthly Journal of Estonian Music] was founded in Tartu by the local musical society and Arro became the acting editor. Unfortunately, though the quality of the journal was certainly the best that could be published in Estonia at that time, it failed to find enough subscribers and had to finish in the end of the same year. From 1931 Elmar Arro taught at the Luther-Institute, a small German theological institute in Tartu, later also at the Herder-Institut in Riga, Latvia (1936-38). This decade 1929–1939 occurred to be his most active period of research and he was one of the very few musicologists who studied musical documents at the archives of Tartu and Riga before the second world war. His main interest was the earlier music history in Estonia and old Livonia. In 1932 he published his most extensive study about the town musicians of Tartu. Several later works, some left in manuscript, are based on the archival studies of those years.

Elmar Arro refers in his letters to the fact that he did not speak Estonian well enough to feel comfortably in the Estonian-speaking academic society, he complains that living in Estonia he was a stranger and later in Germany he was also a stranger. However, even so many years after leaving Estonia he sincerely tries to write to Karl Leichter in Estonian and changes into German only when disturbed by illness or discussing some more complex problems. The choice of the language was evidently an important emotional issue for him, because he knew that his addressee is quite fluent in German and still struggled with his rusted Estonian. Working in Tartu and Riga, Elmar Arro had close connections with the local Baltic-German community and he left for Germany together with the Umsiedlung of Baltic Germans in 1939, but in 1941 he was taken into the army and imprisoned in the end of the war. After returning to Germany in 1955, his most important engagement was building up a research center for studies in East-European music, first at Freiburg (1959), later at the University of Kiel (Johann-Gottfried-Herder-Forschungstelle für Musikgeschichte). This center was famous for its extensive library and its publication (Sammelbände der J.-G.-Herder-Forschungstelle für Musikgeschichte) “Musik des Ostens”. Arro was the editor of the first four volumes (1962–1967). In 1966 he retired and moved to Vienna, continuing there his efforts to advance East-European and Slavic studies in the West. The result of his long and occasionally rather hopeless struggle was an extensive publication, collection of

Several of Arro’s letters tell us about the long publication process of “Musica Slavica I”. The full title of this planned series was “Beiträge zur Musikgeschichte Osteuropas” and in the following volumes he had planned to publish two of his own studies, one was a Russian music history and another a Baltic music history. Also he planned some collections of articles including also studies of non-Slavic music from Eastern Europe and asked for Estonian contributions, articles by Karl Leichter himself, Leo Normet and Herbert Tampere. But that was all dreams. The only extensive study by Arro mentioned in those letters that really existed in manuscript and was discussed in detail was his comprehensive survey “Geschichte der baltischen Kirchenmusik und geistlichen Tonkunst. Versuch einer musikhistorischen Rekonstruktion”, that he had started in Germany in 1955–1960 using his earlier studies, but also the Baltic archives in Göttingen and Marburg. This thorough history is still in manuscript, but Elmar Arro sent a copy of it to Karl Leichter and there are some more copies in different archives. As many of his sources have been lost during the war years (in particular, he complains about the loss of the town archive of Riga that burned together with the Riga town hall in the war), it is a unique document of earlier Estonian and Latvian music history writing, though unfinished and partly rather fragmentary.

Parallel to discussing the Baltic music history, Arro writes also about his book on Estonian music, the first part of which was published in 1933. We do not understand, who supported the idea of publishing it anew in Estonia and in Estonian – most probably the main proponent of it was Avo Hirvesoo. But from the very beginning he mentions also the possible obstacle – his person and political associations. According to his view, all his attempts to published were undermined by that. Arro wrote (16 Dec 1971):

*It would be a great honour [... if my Estonian music history could be published in Estonian. [... Forty years have been passed already – a very long distance! This rewriting (renovation) could be a very pleasing task. Only one does not know: isn’t my person too ambivalent (the prejudice that I represented the German “Kulturträger” ideology)? I wrote about that already to Herr Tormis. It was very unfair that I considered the beginning of Estonian music to be that moment, when the first art song with an original Estonian text was composed. Today I see it in a different way – either the beginning is identical with a) the beginning of “professional music” (i.e. the 17th century, the output of the first köster-school), or b) the formation of Estonian church song (i.e. the 16th century, the period of the Reformation).*

In the next year (16 Dec 1973), he wrote already about bringing the manuscript of his Baltic music history with him when coming to Estonia:

*Wegen der Schmerzen war ich auch monatelang nicht gut arbeitsfähig und wäre sowieso nicht gern mit leeren Händen gekommen: ich würde gern einige unveröffentlichte Manuskripte in der Heimat deponieren, vor allem ein großes Buchmanuskript, eine Musikgeschichte des Baltikums (Estland uns Lettland gemeinsam) von etwa 1200 bis 1700 (einschließlich Schwedenzeit) – wollte jedoch die Manuskripte überarbeiten und auf den neuesten Stand bringen.*

In 1978, five years have passed. Musica slavica has just been published, but further prospective seem hopeless and Arro writes to Leichter, describing the work, that Leichter had not yet seen (7 Mai, 1978):

*Leider bleibt meine große baltische Arbeit als zwecklose Makulatur nach meinem Tode übrig. Es ist eine mittelalterliche Musikgeschichte des Baltikums (Lettland und Estland:...*

In the fall of the same year, the hopes to print the book (Bärenreiter-Verlag) are the strongest and in some letters they even discuss the details, Arno is really working, preparing the manuscript (9 Nov. 1978):


Three years later, immediately after his visit to the Baltics, Arno mentions the book again, but evidently all hopes to publish it in the West have perished and he has met some interest in Riga (5 Nov. 1981):

In Riga I got valuable new materials — and started to rework by history of the earlier Baltic music from the new standpoints. As I got some hope to print it in Riga, I need not adapt it to the German-Baltic views: the Herder Institute in Marburg is here the only authority in Baltic
questions and considered as a censor in this field — demands categorically to subjugate oneself to the German-Baltic “Kulturträger”-ideology. [...] Now I have to restitute the original text and to include once again those two first chapters about the “pagan” independence period that I had to cut out. I know that church music in general is not a recommended issue — but earlier music history begins only with that. What can be done? One cannot “repair history” (how the Russian colleague calls it).

Meanwhile there are again some letters about printing his Estonian music history in Tallinn and the last hopeless letter actually has this work in mind, but the reasons that Arro counts explaining why he is failing and failing again over his publication-problems in general (8. Dec 1982):

Es ist nicht einmal in Eesti selber möglich, daß etwas von mir über estnische Musikgeschichte an Ort und Stelle publiziert wird. Ich habe darüber gleichzeitig an einen Kollegen schreiben müssen — und lege eine Kopie jenes Schreibens bei!

1) Die Gründe sind mir völlig klar (obwohl ich sie für unsachlich halte):
   1) ich bin nur ein “Kadakasaka”, der nicht einmal genügend die Sprache beherrscht. Und Mischlinge werden überall verachtet.
   2) Ich bin nur ein Emigrant, d. h. zwangsweise “Reparatierter”, der das Baltikum verlassen mußte, da er nicht einmal soweit die beiden Landessprachen (Estnisch und Lettisch) beherrschte, um dort arbeiten zu können.

Hier kann ich ebenfalls nicht publizieren:
   1) Weil sich hier niemand für die Musikgeschichte Osteuropas interessiert.
   2) weil diese Themen hier äußerlich an sich als unerwünscht gilt und
   3) weil ich bereits gleich bei den Nazis ein diesbezügliches Arweits- und Publikationsverbot erhielt;

   4) weil ich es dennoch in der BRD versuchte, und dafür das Verbot für mich als noch bestehend erklärt wurde — und ich erneut emigrieren mußte.


Rather unexpectedly we encounter the motive of interest from Sweden in the very end of the last letter and then a postscript is added:


Arro evidently wants to save himself from further disappointments. What we know about the interest — only a line in Karl Leichter’s letter from 25. 11. 1982:

And now one more question concerning directly yourself: I have been addressed from Sweden and asked for your manuscript “Geschichte der baltischen Kirchenmusik und Geistlichen
Tonkunst", for learning to know it. To publish (print) it there. From Sweden they had turned also directly to you. As that is your manuscript, then I could not satisfy their request without your permission. And that is probably the only copy in Estonia.