

# An open attitude to music

Musicologist Mario Dunkel loves both jazz and punk, is a champion of equality in music education and studies the instrumentalisation of popular music. He recently investigated how right-wing populist content is disseminated through music.

By Constanze Böttcher



Mario Dunkel appreciates the fact that different music genres enjoy equal status at the University of Oldenburg's Institute of Music. The music professor is a jazz pianist, but he used to be in bands that were inspired by metal, rock and punk.

already had a connection to this university long before I actually moved to Oldenburg," says Mario Dunkel on a June evening in the packed auditorium on Haarentor Campus. The guests have come to listen to a concert that is part of the University of Oldenburg's 50th anniversary celebrations.

But before the music starts, Dunkel, a professor of music education and director of the university's Institute of Music, holds a short speech reflecting on one of his predecessors, Egon Kraus. Kraus was head of the music department at the Oldenburg School of Education in the 1960s, before the university was founded. It was pure coincidence, Dunkel recalls, that he came across the name while doing his

doctorate at TU Dortmund University more than a decade ago.

At that time Dunkel was researching the historiography of jazz and was also interested in the role jazz played in the foreign cultural policy of the US State Department in the 1950s. Curious about what had been going on in Germany during that same period, he began researching West German foreign cultural policy, and that's when he encountered Kraus.

As the official head of the liaison office for intergovernmental relations of the German Music Council, Kraus advised the West German Foreign Office and wrote short recommendations on which music groups should perform abroad. But that evening in the auditorium it soon became clear

that Kraus was certainly no role model in Dunkel's eyes: for one thing, the former cultural consultant and elitist music teacher didn't care for jazz and popular music. For another, as Dunkel explained in his speech, there were dark spots in Kraus's past: he had been a cadre unit leader in the Hitler Youth, and as director of the Rhineland branch of the Musicians' Guild he had been responsible for regional music policy under the Nazis.

"Egon Kraus's history has yet to be fully reappraised," Dunkel remarks a fortnight later in his office, which happens to be located in the old School of Education building where Kraus worked. However, as Dunkel points out, the sweeping political changes of the early 1970's – in the course of

which the University of Oldenburg was founded as a reform university – formed the background to Kraus' work. The training of music teachers in Oldenburg changed fundamentally during this period.

"In Oldenburg there was the Kraus group on one side and a group led by his colleague Ullrich Günther on the other," Dunkel explains. Günther was a professor, music educator and one of the university's founding fathers – and he had very different ideas to Kraus about music education: "He was interested in all types of sound", and fundamentally questioned the hierarchies between classical and popular music, for example. For Dunkel, the fact that the Institute of Music still stands for this progressive view of music today is

a key feature of the University of Oldenburg with which he strongly identifies.

After all, according to Dunkel's way of thinking, music educators should come into contact with as many musical genres as possible. It was thanks to his childhood piano teacher that he himself rehearsed a broad repertoire of musical styles, including Schlager music, from an early age. As a teenager, he played guitar, keyboard and drums in various band projects that drew inspiration from a variety of sources: from metal bands like Blind Guardian and progressive rock or punk bands like Yes and Die Ärzte.

The fact that Kraus features as a side note in Dunkel's academic career serves to underscore something that he considers very important: namely,

to look at music in connection with other social phenomena. For example, in the project "Popular Music and the Rise of Populism in Europe", funded by the Volkswagen Foundation from 2019 to 2023, he and other researchers from around Europe examined how right-wing populist parties in particular use music as a tool. They also analysed how much explicitly populist content is found in popular music.

The results show that discourses of crisis play an important role in popular music in all the European countries studied. In response to crises, this music presents, for example, nostalgia, that is the image of a supposedly better past, or the longing for heroism. The social exclusion of minorities is also offered as a solution. With catchy

melodies and lyrics and rousing performances, popular music makes right-wing populist discourse socially acceptable and accessible to broad audiences, the study shows.

The team's work also added an important cultural dimension to the question of why populist parties and groups are gaining ground in Europe. Popular music is a field where society plays out its conflicts, Dunkel says. His research has given him expertise that is socially relevant and in demand. When hundreds of incidents involving revellers singing far-right slogans to the Eurodance hit "L'amour toujours" made headlines last spring, a number of regional and national media outlets such as *Die Zeit*, *Deutschlandfunk*, *ARD*, *ZDF* and *NDR* asked him to analyse and comment on the scandal.

### A lifelong passion for music and academic research

For Dunkel, the topicality of his work is both a warning and an incentive. In his view, his discipline has so far failed to develop adequate approaches and materials to deal with right-wing populist music. "We need to up our game here," he says, making a quick shift from theory to practice: "In a democracy it is crucial that we are literate vis-à-vis this complex media world, including the audio world in which children and teenagers spend their time." Music lessons in schools could contribute here, he adds.

There was little in Dunkel's early life to suggest that his passion for making music would later combine with academic ambition. He turned down a trainee position at the local Sparkasse bank in Cochem an der Mosel, his

hometown, because he wanted "to do something with music". For his teacher training at TU Dortmund University, he chose English as his second subject alongside music – a choice that would have a lasting impact.

At first, he felt alienated by the cultural mindset of some of the instructors at the Dortmund Institute of Music. But studying English opened up new worlds for him: African American Studies, Gender Studies and Queer Theory appealed to his intellect. He felt at home at the Institute for English and American Studies, also because most of the other students "spoke English just as poorly as I did", he quips. His first study trip abroad, to Atlanta, Georgia, kindled his interest in literature – and academic writing. And when he returned to the US to teach German at Hamilton College in Clinton (New York State), he discovered how much he enjoyed teaching.

At that point it still hadn't occurred to him to embark on an academic career, let alone become a professor. The 42-year-old describes the fact that he ended up back at the Institute of Music and Musicology at TU Dortmund University after doing his PhD on a cultural topic in American Studies – on a scholarship from the German National Academic Foundation – as a happy chance.

It was also happy chance that the University of Oldenburg advertised the position of Junior Professor in Music Education with a Focus on Transcultural Music in such a way that Dunkel's rather unusual qualifications fitted the bill. Dunkel got the job and five years later, in 2023, he was made full professor. One of the things he likes most about Oldenburg is the strong focus on teacher training, because through his work with teacher trainees and students who are doing their master's in musicology or media studies he can

also make a contribution to society, he explains.

His main focus when it comes to music and music lessons is "reflecting on culture and our everyday activities". One example of this is a joint project on digital music production and teaching financed by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), which he is currently leading. "Music production has become very accessible. Nowadays you can record music to a decent standard at home with a mobile phone," Dunkel points out. Yet this is barely acknowledged in music lessons, he adds. At the same time music production is associated with certain stereotypes that can make female pupils in particular feel excluded. "Ultimately, we want to anchor aspects of social equality and justice in digital music education using a science-based approach."

### How to make music education more equitable

Dunkel has many plans for the future – including projects with his "fantastic colleagues" at the university. He is still very preoccupied with the topic of right-wing extremism, digital culture and music, for example. He also supervises doctoral students who share his interest in matters of diversity and justice and are researching questions such as what it is like for "Women Music Students of Colour" to study at German music colleges, or the extent to which antisemitism plays a role in music lessons. And he continues to pursue his passion at the interface of American Studies, where he is working together with a colleague from Vienna, Magdalena Fürnkranz, on a handbook to contemporary jazz research.

## Social inequalities, ocean models and medieval chivalric romances

Every year, the Universitätsgesellschaft Oldenburg e.V. (UGO) gives an Award for Outstanding Doctoral Thesis in memory of Gerhard Wachsmann, as well as an Award for Excellent Research. The sociologist Gundula Zoch is the recipient of this year's research award in the humanities, social sciences and cultural studies category, which comes with 5,000 euros in prize money. Geoecologist Sinikka Lennartz received the same award in the natural sciences, mathematics and medicine category. The outstanding doctoral thesis award, which is endowed with 2,000 euros, went to German Studies scholar Martin Sebastian Hammer.



### Award for Excellent Research

Prof. Dr Gundula Zoch has been serving as Junior Professor of Sociology with a focus on Social Inequalities at the Institute of Social Sciences since 2021. Her research centres on social inequalities in work, family, and education, with an emphasis on analysing inequalities over the life course. She employs empirical methods to study large-scale longitudinal survey data, such as the National Education Panel Study (NEPS). Zoch receives the UGO research award in recognition of the social relevance of her research, addressing issues like the effects of the Covid pandemic and disparities between East and West Germany. Zoch studied in Leipzig and London and earned her doctorate in Bamberg. Prior to joining the University of Oldenburg, she conducted research at the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW Berlin), the University of Bamberg, the Leibniz Institute for Educational Research (LifBi) and the University of Oxford.



### Award for Excellent Research

Prof. Dr Sinikka Lennartz has been serving as Junior Professor of Biogeochemical Ocean Modelling at the Institute for Chemistry and Biology of the Marine Environment since 2022. Her work focuses on analysing the global carbon cycle, in particular on organic substances dissolved in seawater and their role in carbon sequestration. She translates chemical and biological processes into mathematical equations that are incorporated into global biogeochemical ocean models. Lennartz receives the prize in recognition of her innovative research, which has challenged decades-old assumptions about the organic carbon dissolved in the ocean and provided evidence that this natural carbon reservoir reacts more sensitively to environmental changes than previously thought. Lennartz studied in Tübingen and Braunschweig, completed her doctorate at the GEOMAR – Helmholtz Centre for Ocean Research Kiel and continued her research in Oldenburg and at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.



### Award for Outstanding Doctoral Thesis

In his thesis in German medieval studies, Dr Martin Sebastian Hammer examined metalepsis in courtly romance. He analysed the chivalric epics Erec, Parzival and Wildhelm von Österreich, texts that originated around 800 years ago in medieval royal courts and which in many ways "function" differently to modern novels. He receives the UGO award for his application of modern narratological concepts to earlier literary epochs, which paved the way for a new understanding of the term metalepsis. A metalepsis is the combination of two otherwise separate narrative levels – for example, when the "fourth wall" is broken in a film and the narrator addresses the main character directly. Hammer studied at the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nuremberg and conducted research at the Universities of Oldenburg, Wuppertal and Braunschweig. He is currently a research associate at the Technische Universität Braunschweig.