Azerbaijan:

Censorship, fear and Eurovision

In two months, artists from all over Europe will gather in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, for the world’s biggest non-sport television event, the Eurovision Song Contest. The authoritarian regime that rules the country sees its chance to paint a picture of Azerbaijan as a modern and prosperous country. But native musicians have very limited possibilities to express themselves. Freemuse’s reporter Nicklas Wallén travelled to Amsterdam to interview the significant, outspoken and recently exiled singer-songwriter Azer Cirttan – about censorship, fear and Eurovision.

By Nicklas Wallén

“The reason why I left Azerbaijan is the feeling of danger. I worry first of all for my family. And also I feel that I couldn’t explain myself completely to the people. That the government wouldn’t give that chance. I would like to encourage everyone who reads this, who still has a brain and a free mind, not to close their eyes on the censorship of musicians around the world. It’s very important that we pay attention to it and act against it. Otherwise things will get worse.”

The words come from Azer Cirttan, a musician from the country which soon will be in the tv-limelight of 70 million music loving European viewers.

Months of silence
The first time I talked to Azer Cirttan was a year ago, when I was writing a short essay about music and freedom of expression in Azerbaijan. I was looking for people to interview and many of my contacts named Azer as one of the most significant and outspoken musicians in the country. At that time he was living and working in Istanbul, and I interviewed him online.
Azer was just about to move back home to Baku to his pregnant wife. He had quite ambitious plans for becoming more active with his music, even though he was aware of the difficulties it could imply. He wanted to arrange concerts and maybe teach youngsters how to play rock music.

I admired his courage and hoped it wouldn’t cost him too much.

We kept in contact and I followed Azer’s activities in social forums, where he posted webcam-recordings of his songs. He seemed to be online almost all the time, until suddenly one day he wasn’t. After a couple of months of silence and inactivity, I wrote him an e-mail asking where he was. Azer replied: “Hey dude! I am in Holland. Long story.”

Meeting in Amsterdam
It’s early February 2012 and the massive snowing seems to have taken the Netherlands by surprise. Shortly after my arrival in Amsterdam Central Station I realise that the trains are not running like they normally do. In fact, many of them are not running at all, due to the bad weather.
Azer Cirttan lives with his wife and their five months old daughter in a refugee centre in the northern part of the country. The train-ride to Amsterdam usually takes a couple of hours, but today he ends up stranded in Utrecht on his way to meet me. When he finally arrives, 24 hours later than planned, we head for a café in the city centre and begin to catch up.

Press freedom restricted
Azer Cirttan’s country is a post-Soviet republic, situated in the South Caucasus by the Caspian Sea. The country’s independence in 1991 was overshadowed by the ongoing war with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabach in 1990-1994.

During the social and political turmoil caused by these events, the old communist leader Heydar Aliyev rose to power in 1993. Through constitutional amendments he later managed to be succeeded by his own son Ilham, right before his death in 2003.

Ilham Aliyev was re-elected as the country’s president in 2008 with 87 per cent of the votes, and money from the oil-boom that Azerbaijan has experienced in recent years has helped increasing his power to a point where many consider him a dictator. International human rights organisations have repeatedly criticised his regime for restricting press freedom and for its violent crackdowns on oppositional demonstrations.

Two bloggers imprisoned
“Actually, I decided to show people my music and what I think after the arrest of Emin Milli and Adnan Hajizade. They are two bloggers who were arrested in 2009 only for expressing their opinions with humour. I decided to support them.”

The humour that Azer refers to was expressed in a satire film which criticises corruption in the government and which was distributed on the Internet.

Shortly after making their video, Emin and Adnan were severely beaten by two men in a restaurant in central Baku. When they went to the police station to file a complaint, they were instead arrested themselves, accused of hooliganism. Their arrests were strongly condemned by Reporters Without Borders, OSCE (Organisation for Security and Co-
operation in Europe), and the European Union as well as a number of governments. Adnan Hajizade was sentenced to two years in prison and Emin Milli to two-and-a-half years.

**Being stalked**
Explaining what lead up to his decision to leave the country, Azer tells me that the concerts he tried to make were all cancelled. A while later he started to feel as if being stalked. Some persons were following him around in Baku.

Azer's fear is based on that oppositional people of other professions has been killed. He knows how powerful the government is, and he feels that anything can happen to anyone who is as loudly outspoken as he is in some of his songs. Until this point no musicians have been arrested in Azerbaijan, but there have been a number of incidents where musicians have been harassed.

Azer's wife is an oppositional activist and since they have a little daughter now they came to the point were they felt that they couldn't go on with being that outspoken in Azerbaijan, and none of them can stand being silent. They had to leave in order to still be actively critical, without having to worry about their safety.

**Traditional society**
The breeding ground for independent music in Azerbaijan is very poor. The country lacks the studios, rehearsal spaces and venues needed for creating music that does not primarily serve commercial purposes. The main way to earn a living as a musician in Azerbaijan is to sing or play at private wedding parties. Easily digested, dance-friendly pop music is dominating the broadcast media along with traditional music.

“Traditional music is accepted by the regime and sometimes even used as an ideological weapon. But if you play for example rock music, you will have “handicaps” in society – even if your music is not political. Azerbaijan is a quite traditional society, and rock music is regarded a Western product,” Azer explains: “You can do something, but within limits. Problems begin if you express conceptions which are in opposition to those of the government.”

**Concerts are cancelled**
Censoring of music is not official in Azerbaijan. There is no official censorship board and no list of banned musicians known to the public.

“Officially, we are a democratic country,” explains Azer Cirttan. “We are a member of the Council of Europe, and officially we are trying to do everything they tell us to do. But there is a department of the presidential office which practices censorship, and all of our tv and radio channels are controlled by the government or people closely related to them. Some artists and some lyrical themes will never be heard on the radio in our country, because government only wants to present their own view and the music that doesn’t question it.”

In order to arrange a public event in Baku, one needs to apply to the Baku City Administration. Not because the law requires the organiser to have a permission, but to notify them. Still they can turn your application down, and they will decide where your event can take place.
To avoid this bureaucratic and sometimes costly process, most concerts are held in small clubs. There, the organiser only has to make an agreement with the club administrator. But many of these concerts get cancelled simply by a phone call from the authorities.

Azer Cirttan gives an example:
“In March 2011, I tried to organise a concert at a rock club in Baku. Just two hours before the concert was going to start, someone called from the presidential office and told the administrator to cancel the show.”

Also, he mentions examples of clubs that have been shut down after hosting the “wrong” artist or concert.

Self-censorship
The immediate effect of this situation is self-censorship. Azer tells me that many artists limit themselves in order to be able to make music at all. He describes the different methods that are used discourage musicians from being outspoken:

“If you express criticism towards the government you might be thrown out of university or loose your job. This is the most powerful weapon of the government: fear. They also have all the skills needed for censoring you, to listen in on your telephone calls and even stalking you as you walk the streets of Baku. The censorship pressure grows as the government’s system has grown stronger. But it is hard to say for sure how much, because we never counted or measured this. We don’t know the rate of censorship. It just happens.”

Supporting youth movements
At the same time, the activities of the independent musicians seem to be increasing too. According to Azer Cirttan there is a growing number of creative and outspoken persons who are willing to show their work to other people. The scene for the sharing of these activities is, of course, the Internet.

“Even if the government would like to control the Internet, it is not possible to do it. This is why Internet is very important for alternative musicians.”

Even though the independent musicians and the country’s oppositional parties have a common cause in opposing the government’s policies towards divergent views on the Azerbaijani society, there are no obvious examples of cooperation between the musicians and the politicians. But when it comes to the democratic youth movements, which has gained some popularity in the last couple of years, there is an active exchange. Several bands and artists have supported these movements by writing anthems, and Azer is one of them. He recently wrote a song for the up-and-coming youth movement Nida Civil Movement.

The person who produced and recorded the song wants to remain anonymous, tells Azer Cirttan: “He doesn’t want to be officially associated neither with me nor Nida. It feels strange to be unable to give him credit for the work he did, but that is how it is.”

Eurovision in Azerbaijan
In May 2012, the Eurovision Song Contest will be held in Baku and president Ilham Aliyev has put his wife Mehriban Aliyeva in charge of this major event. During the last couple of
years, the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, under the leadership of the Azerbaijan’s first lady, has invested a large sum in the country’s strive for success in the Eurovision Song Contest.

The regime definitely sees its chance to show Europe the country from its best side. Azer Cirttan can not understand how a Eurovision Song Contest can be a priority in a country like Azerbaijan, where about 40 per cent of the population live in poverty.

“Our one hand of course it is good that people will come to Azerbaijan, and for people to learn where the country is situated on the map. But on the other hand... Eurovision is absolutely nonsense for my country. I don’t understand why we need it now when we have an actual war going on, we have a lot of political problems inside the country, and we have so many refugees. Many people are going out of the country – and we’re bringing the Eurovision Song Contest. We don’t deserve it! European musicians and others who want to protest against this regime should do that by not coming to Baku. It wouldn’t be a protest against the competition or the country, but against the government that denies its citizens fundamental human rights.”

When the interview is over it is almost midnight and we are now in an apartment in the outskirts of Amsterdam. All the cameras and recording devices are turned off, and I’m thinking about the great news Azer told me at the café, earlier today, just after we met: One week ago he and his family received their residence permits to live in the Netherlands. Now they don’t have to worry about going back for at least five years.

About the author
Nicklas Wallén visited Azerbaijan in 2011, when he was studying Caucasus Studies and Global Sociology at Malmö University in Sweden. He is currently studying Russian language and has an internship in a social project in Georgia, run by Österlens Folkhögskola. He is also a singer and guitarist in the band The Great Decay.

Nicklas Wallén can be contacted at e-mail: nicklas.wallen.963@student.lu.se

About the video interview
The video interview was recorded in February 2012 in Amsterdam in the Netherlands. See the video on freemuse.org/sw46307.asp or youtube.com/user/freemuseorg

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This Music Freedom Report is part of a series of articles published on the occasion of the annual Music Freedom Day 3 March 2012. More information about the reports and about Music Freedom Day can be found on: musicfreedomday.org

More information
For more information about music and censorship in the region, see: freemuse.org/sw10281.asp
Map of Azerbaijan

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