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Polish Music since Szymanowski

Adrian Thomas
in memory of my parents
Let all streams springing from universal art mingle freely with ours; may they impregnate, differentiate and transform it in accordance with its particular attributes. We ought not to lose organic connection with universal culture, because it is only on such a plane that a truly great, living art, including nationalistic music, can flourish.

Contents

List of musical examples  page xiii
Preface xvii
Acknowledgements xx
List of abbreviations xxiv

PART I  The captive muse
1 Szymanowski and his legacy  3
2 The Second World War  16
3 Post-war reconstruction  26
4 Socialist realism I: its onset and genres  40
5 Socialist realism II: concert music  59
  Group ‘49 ◆ Panufnik ◆ Bacewicz ◆ Lutosławski

PART II  Facing west
6 The ‘Warsaw Autumn’  83
7 Engaging with the avant-garde  92

PART III  The search for individual identity
8 The pull of tradition  113
  Bacewicz and Szabelski ◆ Baird ◆ Lutosławski ◆ Serocki
9 Sonorism and experimentalism  159
  The ‘Polish School’, sonorism, and electronic music ◆ Penderecki
  ◆ Gorécki ◆ Szalonek ◆ Schaeffer
10 A significant hinterland  208
  Seven composers ◆ Krauze and Sikorski

PART IV  Modernisms and national iconographies
11 Pursuing the abstract  225
  Lutosławski ◆ Penderecki
12 Music and symbolism I: sacred and patriotic sentiment  253
  Church and State ◆ Penderecki ◆ Gorécki ◆ Kilar
Contents

13 Music and symbolism II: vernacular and classical icons 271
   Kilar ♦ Krauze ♦ Górecki
14 Emigré composers 283
15 Young Poland 289
   The ‘Stalowa Wola’ generation ♦ Warsaw ♦ Experimental and
   electronic music

PART V Postscript
16 After Lutosławski 317

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Cultural events in Poland, 1953–6 320
Appendix 2 ‘Warsaw Autumn’ repertoire, 10–21 October 1956 321
Appendix 3 ‘Warsaw Autumn’ repertoire, 1958–61 324
Appendix 4 Selected Polish chronology (1966–90) 332
Notes 335
Select bibliography 354
Index 366
Musical examples

Ex. 1.2 Malawski, Variations (1938), fugue (Allegro Moderato), bb. 6–10. 
Ex. 2.1 Padlewski, Sonata for solo violin (1941), opening. 
Ex. 2.2 Regamey, Quintet (1944), ‘Intermezzo romantico’ (Lento), second section. 
Ex. 2.3 Panufnik, *Tragic Overture* (1942, reconstructed 1945), fig. 34 ($\lambda = c.100$). 
Ex. 2.4 Padlewski, Second Symphony (1942), opening. 
Ex. 2.5 Panufnik, *Nocturne* (1947, rev. 1955), fig. 7. 
Ex. 2.7 Panufnik, *Sinfonia rustica* (1948), original opening of third movement. 
Ex. 3.1 Palester, Second Symphony (1942), opening. 
Ex. 3.2 Panufnik, *Symphony of Peace* (1951), opening. 
Ex. 3.3 Bacewicz, Concerto for String Orchestra (1948), first movement, opening. 
Ex. 3.4 Bacewicz, Concerto for String Orchestra (1948), second movement, opening. 
Ex. 3.5 Bacewicz, Fourth String Quartet (1951), first movement, figs. 4–6. 
Ex. 3.8 Baird, *Duetto* (1956), second movement ‘Duett’, opening. 
Ex. 3.9 Baird, *Four Essays* (1958), first movement, opening. 
Ex. 3.10 Schaeffer, *Tertium datur* (1958), second movement, harpsichord part, variations 4 (closing section) and 5.
List of musical examples

Ex. 7.5 Kotoński, *Chamber Music* (1958), second movement ($q = 88$), fig. 6.  
Ex. 7.6 Penderecki, *Strophes* (1959) ($q = 66$, then touches 48 and settles on 55), bb. 69–71.  
Ex. 7.7 Gorecki, *Five Pieces* (1959), fifth movement, opening.  
Ex. 8.1 Bacewicz, *Pensieri notturni* (1961) (Larghetto), fig. 4.  
Ex. 8.2 Szabelski, *Verses* (Wiersze, 1961), first movement, opening.  
Ex. 8.5 Baird, *Sinfonia breve* (1968), first movement, bb. 70–3.  
Ex. 8.6 Lutosławski, *Trois poèmes d’Henri Michaux* (1963), orchestral full score with choral short score, figs. 127–35.  
Ex. 8.7 Lutosławski, *String Quartet* (1964), coda section, fig. 48.  
Ex. 8.8 Lutosławski, *Livre pour orchestre* (1968), first chapter, opening.  
Ex. 8.9 Lutosławski, *Preludes and Fugue* (1972), fugue, figs. 38a–41.  
Ex. 8.12 Serocki, *A piaicere* (1963), one of three ‘panels’.  
Ex. 8.14 Serocki, *Swinging Music* (1970), leading up to letter M.  
Ex. 9.1 Dobrowski, *Music for Tape and Solo Oboe* (1964), 4'00"–4'10".  
Ex. 9.4 Penderecki, *Threnody* (1960), fig. 10.  
Ex. 9.5 Penderecki, *Anaklasis* (1959–60), fig. 113.  
Ex. 9.7 Penderecki, *Dimensions of Time and Silence* (1960–1), figs. 144–53.  
Ex. 9.9 Penderecki, *Dies Irae* (1967), ‘Apokalypsis’.  
Ex. 9.12 Gorecki, *Refrain* (1965), sixth refrain (first half).  
Ex. 9.15 Szalonek, *Mutanza* (1968), section B.  
Ex. 10.1 Bujarski, *Chamber Piece* (1963), conclusion.
List of musical examples

Ex. 10.2 Krauze, *Five Unistic Pieces* (1963), start of no. 4. 215
Ex. 10.3 Krauze, *Piece for Orchestra* no. 1 (1969), beginning. 217
Ex. 10.4 Sikorski, *Echoes II* (1963), Sequenza III, in which the material is pre-recorded twice and one of the two voices is eliminated, leaving only its resonances. 220
Ex. 10.5 Sikorski, *Homophony* (1970), fig. 23. 221
Ex. 11.1 Buijarski, *Similis Greco* I (1979), letter B. 228
Ex. 11.2 Stachowski, *Madrigale dell’estate* (1984), conclusion of no. 1. 230
Ex. 11.3 Meyer, Seventh String Quartet (1985), opening. 231
Ex. 11.4 Lutosławski, *Epitaph* (1979), opening. 233
Ex. 11.5 Lutosławski, *Subito* (1992), fig. 6. 234
Ex. 11.6 Lutosławski, Third Symphony (1983), figs. 81–2. 236
Ex. 11.7 Lutosławski, Fourth Symphony (1992), opening. 239
Ex. 11.8 Penderecki, First Violin Concerto (1976), harmonic kernel, bb. 6–7. 241
Ex. 11.9 Penderecki, First Violin Concerto (1976), conclusion. 243
Ex. 11.10 Penderecki, Second Cello Concerto (1982), Variation III leading into Variation IV. 244
Ex. 11.11 Penderecki, Second Cello Concerto (1982), opening. 245
Ex. 11.12 Penderecki, String Trio (1991), opening of first movement. 246
Ex. 11.13 Penderecki, String Trio (1991), opening of second movement. 247
Ex. 11.14 Penderecki, Fifth Symphony (1992), Tempo di marcia before fig. 37. 250
Ex. 12.1 Opening phrases of five Polish patriotic hymns and songs: (a) ‘Mother of God’ (‘Bogurodzica’), (b) *Dąbrowski Mazurka* (the Polish national anthem), (c) ‘God, who has protected Poland’ (‘Boże coś Polskę’), (d) ‘Song of Warsaw’ (‘Warszawianka’) and (e) ‘Hymn of 1910’ (‘Rota’). 254
Ex. 12.3 Penderecki, *Polish Requiem, Lacrimoso* (1980), soprano entry. 259
Ex. 12.4 Górecki, Third Symphony (1976), third movement, soprano entry. 267
Ex. 12.5 Kilar, *Exodus* (1981), bb. 64–77. 269
Ex. 13.2 Krauze, *Aus aller Welt stammende* (1973), opening. 275
Ex. 13.3 Górecki, First String Quartet ‘Already it is Dusk’ (‘Już sięzmierzcha’, 1988), opening. 279
Ex. 13.4 Górecki, First String Quartet ‘Already it is Dusk’ (‘Już sięzmierzcha’, 1988), bb. 307–18. 280
List of musical examples

Ex. 15.1 Knapik, String Quartet (1980), start of second movement. 292
Ex. 15.2 Krzanowski, Study II (1974), start of first movement. 294
Ex. 15.3 Krzanowski, Second Symphony (1984), figs. 60–1. 296
Ex. 15.4 Lason, Third String Quartet (1992), start of second movement. 298
Ex. 15.5 Szymanowski, Sonata (1982), bb. 37–47. 301
Ex. 15.6 Szymanowski, Piano Concerto (1994), second movement, bb. 41–3. 305
Ex. 15.7 Krupowicz, Only Beatrice (Tyłko Beatricze, 1988), 3’54”–4’10”. 307
Ex. 15.8 Kulenty, Trigon (1989), p. 37. 309

Table

Table 7.1 *Polish Compositions 1957–9* 100
Preface

In the late 1960s, I encountered two pieces of post-war Polish music: a score and recording of Lutosławski’s *Trois poèmes d’Henri Michaux* and a recording of Górecki’s *Refrain*. To someone being schooled in Western avant-garde modernism, their impact was immediate, not least because they managed to be both contemporary and communicative as well as sounding totally different from current Western European music. When I visited my first ‘Warsaw Autumn’ festival in 1970 and spent a short period of study in Kraków on a British Council grant, I discovered that this combination was characteristic of most Polish music of the time. As more scores came to my attention, I began to realise how complex were the cultural and political currents in Polish post-war music. This book is therefore an attempt to encompass those aspects that seem to me to have been central in shaping Polish music of the past sixty years or so.

I have not aimed to be comprehensive. Without resorting to long lists of composers and their works, this would have been well nigh impossible. It would also have been counterproductive, because so few of their names and titles, let alone the music itself, are known outside Poland. I hope that the many composers on whose imaginative and invigorating work I have not elaborated will forgive my concentration on what, for want of a better word, is my personal ‘canon’. Over the years, many individual pieces have caught my ear, especially at the annual ‘Warsaw Autumn’ festival, yet it remains a fact that only a few Polish composers have international reputations. It is therefore inevitable that they should be central to any survey of post-war Polish music. In the 1960s, it was Penderecki and Lutosławski who became especially prominent; in some European countries, notably West Germany, a few other composers were also known, such as Serocki, Baird and Górecki. Only in the 1990s, however, did the music of Górecki rival that of Penderecki and Lutosławski internationally, while the profiles of Baird and Serocki faded (they both died in their fifties in 1981). There is, therefore, a revisionist ambition for this volume, which attempts to broaden the discussion in order to contextualise the music of Lutosławski, Penderecki and Górecki, counterpointing it with that of other Polish composers whose music is also worthy of attention yet which today often languishes on shelves, even in Poland.
Polish music has experienced amazing peaks and troughs in the almost seven decades since the death of Szymanowski, Poland’s best-known composer of the first half of the twentieth century. The book is geared to these main turning points. The music covered in Part I, 'The captive muse', for example, is viewed through the lens of overpowering military and political circumstances. It is therefore as concerned with polemics as it is with music. It attempts to reveal how Polish composers reacted to the pressures of the Second World War and the period of socialist realism that followed in the post-war decade. 'Facing west' charts the volte-face of Polish musical culture in the second half of the 1950s as composers engaged with the Western avant-garde; particular acknowledgment is made to the pivotal role of the 'Warsaw Autumn' festival, which began in 1956. Part III, 'The search for individual identity', which covers the 1960s, is a series of composer profiles with detailed discussion of the most significant compositional issues. In some cases, the time-frame has been extended into the 1970s: Lutoslawski and Penderecki’s music is taken to the mid-1970s, when each showed a shift in emphasis, while the output of Baird and Serocki is considered up to the end of the decade. In their several ways, these twenty or so composers represent the range of individuality in the 1960s; they also helped, to a greater or lesser degree, to create the phenomenon often referred to as the ‘Polish School’ or sonorism. These profiles are therefore intended to chart the mix of distinctiveness and commonality that each composer developed. Parts IV and V are primarily concerned with developments since the early and mid-1970s, with particular emphasis on the significance of continuing modernist ideals, of secular and sacred Polish traditions in the shaping of post-sonoristic idioms, and of the compositional concerns of the post-war generation of Polish composers, including elements of postmodernism and experimentalism.

This canvas is large and the range of works deserving of discussion is enormous. Bearing in mind, however, that much of the repertoire is unfamiliar outside Poland, I have tried, wherever possible, to cite and discuss works that have been published and/or recorded commercially. Fortunately, for several decades after the war, Poland’s primary publishing firm, PWM, was led by a determined editorial team headed by Tadeusz Ochlewski and Mieczyslaw Tomaszewski. They promoted a vast array of music with innovative layouts and cover designs. Unfortunately, access to these materials outside Poland, apart from those few composers with Western publishers such as Boosey & Hawkes, Chester Music and Schott, has always been haphazard. With regard to CD recordings, certain composers have had wide Western releases (initially with reissues of Polskie Nagrania LP recordings...
on Olympia, more recently with new performances issued by companies like Argo, Decca, Deutsche Grammophon, Elektra Nonesuch, EMI, Naxos, ProViva and Wergo). Most works, however, have been recorded only on the limited-issue ‘chronicle’ LPs, cassette tapes and CDs of performances at ‘Warsaw Autumn’ festivals. And while these never had wide distribution, they are often the only way to hear music by lesser-known composers as well as that by composers as high-profile as Bacewicz, Baird and Serocki whose commercial CD catalogues are woefully incomplete. Regrettably, gaining access to materials outside Poland is still difficult. Some centres do exist – such as the Central European Music Research Centre at Cardiff University (UK) and the Polish Music Center in Los Angeles (USA) – and Polish Cultural Institutes in different countries may also have conduits to recordings, scores and books.

The number of people who have enhanced my understanding of Polish music over many years is legion and I owe them all a great deal. Many composers have discussed their music with me and donated recordings and copies of unpublished scores. Just as importantly, those involved in the promotion and dissemination of Polish music have been unfailingly helpful: Mieczyslaw Tomaszewski, Leszek Polony, Andrzej Kosowski and their colleagues at PWM, Elżbieta Markowska, Bohdan Mazurek and Józef Patkowski at Polish Radio, Kazimierz Nowacki, Stanisław Czopowicz and Iza Hilmi at the Library of the Polish Composers’ Union (ZKP), and Jolanta Bilińska and her successors at the ‘Warsaw Autumn’ Festival Office at ZKP. Elżbieta Szczepańska and Michal Kubicki have been a constant support over many years and without their help and advice my task would have been much more daunting. I have also, I hope, learned much from my non-Polish friends and colleagues, including Jim Samson, John Casken, Martina Homma, Charles Bodman Rae and Steven Stucky. The unreserved academic support and research funding from The Queen’s University of Belfast since the early 1970s, and latterly from Cardiff University, have been crucial factors. I would also like to thank the UK Arts and Humanities Research Board, whose financial support in 2001–3 contributed to the research for Part I.

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remaining errors of fact or perception are mine alone; I simply hope that what follows will spur readers to investigate this often extraordinary period of European music in new and divergent ways.

Adrian Thomas
Cardiff–London, Easter 2003
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AK       Armia Krajowa (Home Army)
ISCM     International Society for Contemporary Music
PWM      Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne (Polish Music Publishers)
PZPR     Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza (Polish United Workers’ Party)
WOSPR    Wielka Orkiestra Symfoniczna Polskiego Radia (Great Symphony Orchestra of Polish Radio)
ZKP      Związek Kompozytorów Polskich (Polish Composers’ Union)