

A Festival of *Art and Ideas*

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The Warsaw Autumn festival has grown out of the 20th-century avant-garde movements. Even in cases when the music presented at the Festival did not draw directly on the aesthetic qualities associated with the given avant-garde “school”, the Festival has been dominated by the modernist trend, represented by various “individual avant-gardes” – i.e. by attitudes oriented toward novelty and change, sometimes relating aesthetic to socio-cultural issues. Thus the Polish avant-garde of the 1950s and 60s derived from opposition against the authoritarian system, against a state that interfered in every area of life and even tried to determine artistic and cultural “priorities”. The first, dodecaphonic European avant-garde – three decades older than the Warsaw Autumn, but nevertheless presented during the first Festival editions in an attempt to “clear the backlog” – undermined the conventions of post-imperial society. The second, post-WWII avant-garde defied the bourgeois culture and rejected the right to aestheticism – since it felt a shared responsibility for the wartime hecatomb. Finally the third, led by John Cage, reacted to the dehumanisation of the market-oriented society. These are naturally simplifications; I simply wish to signal a certain way of thinking and demonstrate that the avant-gardes, far from being limited to the world of aesthetics, also have their values and ethical concerns.

Coming back to modernism as a broad field of which the avant-gardes were an ideological distillation – it manifested itself to a lesser or greater extent in different periods of the Warsaw Autumn. Even the references to the past, which were sometimes viewed as a move away from modernism, could in fact be considered in a dialectic sense as a continuation of modernist “progress”, a reconfiguration of elements and symbols of the past and their incorporation into modernity. Everything depends on how those references are made, to what extent stylisation and affections dominate over structuring and patterning. This is why the modernist movement includes not only Varèse, Boulez, Lachenmann, Ligeti and Xenakis, but also such composers as Pärt, Silvestrov and Sciarrino.

“My” editions of the Warsaw Autumn are going to be a part of my work in the service of new music at large, but will also have a cognitive aspect, in a *direct* rather than a *hesitant* sense of the word. Naturally, everything depends on what kind of music is going to be created. I assume that music will always remain a field of experimentation and explorations. My intention is to continue along the lines of thinking that determined the policies not only of the illustrious Tadeusz Wielecki, but also – of the Warsaw Autumn as a whole.

I once found myself under a strong impression of the installation-festivals held in the 1980s’ Warsaw by Janusz Bogucki and Nina Smolarz, which took the form of intercultural journeys. Taking their own disciplines of art as a point of departure, they attempted to discover past and modern cultural paths in various disciplines of art. As director of the Warsaw Autumn, I would like to feel that the Festival addresses important existential problems, not only the sound matter itself. I want the Warsaw Autumn to continue as a Festival that concerns ourselves and our ways of thinking, even if those ways are not always literally reflected in the music. I could also talk here about some of my personal predilections, but I would rather have the Festival audience discover them gradually by themselves. Besides, I do not create this Festival on my own. I have friends and colleagues in the Repertoire Committee, each of whom sees the world of contemporary music in a different manner.

This year’s edition of the Festival has been tinged by radicalism understood as a coherently structural mode of thinking, lack of sentimentalism, decreased interest in quotations, references and stylisations. One could sense the boldness of the musical gestures, which is not always the same as expansionism. Zygmunt Krauze and Alvin Lucier are also radical in many of their works, even though they “do not shout out” their radicalism.

In the context of the Warsaw Autumn, we often mention avant-garde music without being quite aware of what we mean by this term. Both in this and in the following years, I will therefore try to test the thesis that the avant-garde stance partially overlaps with radicalism, as well as that other, not quite explicitly formulated thesis that radical thinking results from attempts to relate to reality – not as a treatise or doctrine, but in its subtle aspects of deep “immersion”. That composers do intend to change the world for the better. While listening to the music of Alexander Schubert, Johannes Kreidler and Jacek Sotomski – whose works were presented at this year’s Warsaw Autumn – we face a vision of the world of mass culture deprived of hierarchies of values by online communication and the fast flow of information. Their music is an act of aestheticisation of everything that we deal with in today’s world, but also – a quest for fundamental meaning. In this way, important cultural issues lurk on the margins of sound.

I would like to discuss these matters partly in opposition to the typically Polish stance that locates art somewhere far from reality, which is historically justified by the centuries-old split between the public (political) and personal worlds in this part of Europe and the fact

that the internalised values could only be expressed in the latter, personal sphere. I try to examine to what extent radicalism is also a type of social-cultural thinking. The topic of the most recent edition of the Warsaw Autumn – “The Trans-Avant-Garde” – the story of how the radical stance has unfolded in time – leads us to the conclusion that despite voiced views about our world being postmodern, postmodernist and syncretic, we do live in a world of trans-avant-gardes, of constant transformations, and we are sentenced to heroic discoveries and modernisations. I would even cautiously venture the thesis that perhaps also today we are at the stage of another neo-avant-garde, or a meta-avant-garde – a sum total of various individual, cognitively active and ethically sensitive attitudes. Despite the fact that the future Festival editions will have their own keywords and highlights, the motto of this year’s Warsaw Autumn ought to be seen as an element of its general profile also for the future.