

Deconstructing the Myth of Polishness in Music

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The idea of national music derives from Herder's concept of *Volksgeist* or spirit of the nation, whose identity, he argued, is best expressed and represented by the folk element in culture. Slavdom played a major role in Herder's historiographic concept, which led to a renewed interest in their own past among many Slav nations. This revival was related to hopes for a change of the political situation. The national ideas played a particular role in Poland, which – divided between Russia, Prussia and Austria – ceased to exist as a state for 123 years (from 1795 to 1918). In this most difficult period of Poland's partitions, the national thought laid the foundations for a positivist philosophy, which claimed that the mission of art, including music, was to propagate the idea of national revival and to uphold patriotic sentiments. Music was essentially viewed, as Karol Szymanowski sarcastically observed, as patriotic Polishness immersed in the cloud of a glorious past and directed toward "the dead spectres" of that past. One of the apologists of that past greatness was Zygmunt Noskowski, a Polish composer, conductor and educator living in the 2nd half of the 19th century. His symphonic poem *The Steppe*, written in 1895-97, became a symbol of Polishness and of Polish patriotic pathos. Its programme is related to the atmosphere of the extremely popular novel *With Fire and Sword* by the Polish Nobel prize winner Henryk Sienkiewicz, set largely in the boundless steppes of the Ukraine and perceived by his contemporaries as a work created "to cheer the hearts of Poles." Noskowski's composition performed a similar role and met with a similar reception. Its score was preceded by this invocation: "O wondrous steppe, with song I shall greet you! Among thy vast expanses, the noise of the cavalry's wings and the beat of horse hooves could once be heard, the shepherd's pipe and the wistful song of the Cossacks, accompanied by the torban and the drum, by battle cries and the clatter of clashing sabres. But these gigantic struggles and combats are now over, and the warriors lie in their graves. Only you remain, o immense steppe of eternal beauty and calm..."

Not only Noskowski's, but also Stanisław Moniuszko's music, "derived in equal parts from the gentry and the common folk, encompassing all the nation in its heartbeat and most fully expressing the national temperament" found its place in the positivistic myth of Polishness. Moniuszko's operas and the songs from his *Songbooks for Home Use* enjoyed tremendous popularity in the widest social circles. One example of a patriotic

song in the Polish polonaise rhythm is the vastly popular *Sword-Bearer's Aria* from Moniuszko's opera *The Haunted Manor*, which praises the virtues of a good Pole as a valiant patriot and brave soldier.

As I have already mentioned, the thus conceived ideal of Polishness in music was sharply criticised by Karol Szymanowski, Poland's greatest composer after Chopin. "Is there anything that the National Art was *not* in the past period of national bondage?! It involved going out to the common folk, a veritable hypnotism based on mazurkas and Christmas carols, collecting horrid raspberry-coloured paper cuttings and green ribbons. (...) The Polish folksong drowns in lyricism, moved by its own emotionality, and forms some kind of unbroken line, a never-ending film depicting the sentimental life of peasants. Our own sentimentality responds to the allure of 'folksong' and bathes in its primitive lyricism, forgetting first and foremost to make any critical demands related to our 'civilised' concept of the musical art."

According to Szymanowski, Chopin was the only Polish composer who met the criteria of 'civilised musical art'. On the occasion of a solemn concert marking the 75th anniversary of Chopin's death, held on 16th October 1924, Karol Szymanowski delivered a speech in which he called Chopin's oeuvre a 'Myth of the Polish Soul':

At the bottom of its enchanting beauty, underneath the wealth and diversity of its forms, it always sparkles with the same unchanging truth of its indubitable Polishness. It is in his works that the Nation's deepest truth is revealed as in the most pure crystal, and its essential image gets reflected as in a magic mirror. This quality of ever-present Polishness in which all its Light and Beauty converges as in a lens – is manifest in the output of Fryderyk Chopin, in that Myth of the Polish Soul, not spoken but sung from the ultimate depths of the heart.

One could hardly find in the entire Polish literature any text that expressed the concept of national music in such florid style and with such involvement as this speech by Szymanowski. It is also impossible to overlook the myth-building impact of his words. He elevated Chopin's oeuvre to the status of a model nonpareil of Polishness derived directly from the soul of the Polish folk and illumined by the composer's own genius. Chopin's mazurkas were the fullest expression of the idea of Polishness. Historians interpreted them as national music rooted in authentic musical tradition. They invariably pointed to such folk elements in the mazurkas

as the Lydian fourth, drone fifths, as well as brief repeated motifs based on narrow-range scales. We know, however, that the ‘national’ style of the mazurkas was not inspired by authentic folk music, with which Chopin had rather brief and superficial contact. Much closer to his heart was the stylised ‘folk dance’ and ‘folksong’ assimilated into Polish national operas, operettas and vaudevilles by such composers as Kurpiński, Elsner and – via the ‘folk’ mazurkas for piano composed for the salon audiences – by, for instance, Maria Szymanowska. The mazurkas are national music, but exhibit no essential and authentic folk content. Formally and melodically innovative, brilliantly expressive, they only feature fragments or ‘traces’ of folk tunes. It is for this reason that they have always served as excellent material for mythopoetic interpretations, eventually becoming the most recognisable symbol of Polish national music.

On the eve of regaining the Polish state’s independence, the problem of national style was taken up even more intensively and became the subject of a fierce dispute between the adherents of old national Polish tradition and the followers of European modernism. Szymanowski believed that, in the freshly revived Poland, art ought to free itself from patriotic didacticism and strive to abolish the division between what is Polish-national and what is international, universal or European. However, the new trends in European music of that time, represented by such composers as – among others – Stravinsky, Bartók, Janaček, Enescu, and Szymanowski himself, were not accepted by Polish critics of the older generation. Stanisław Niewiadomski wrote: “Today no one can imagine national colour without dance rhythms and turns or phrases akin to our folksongs. For this reason, the audience cannot sense Polishness in Szymanowski except when he brings in reminiscences of Chopin. Polishness cannot be experienced for the simple reason that those rhythms are not there, while the melodies and harmonies have too much of the modern international element in them for the national note to be audible.” Conservative critics and composers clearly identified the national style with simplicity of the composition technique. National symbols, claimed Niewiadomski, can only be recognisable when “the formal aspect of the music becomes absolutely clear.” Musical patriotism was to be based on unchangeable Classical-Romantic principles, well known to the audience.

Overcoming the trite and superficial ‘folkloric’ convention of expressing Polishness as a surrogate of Polish music is what Karol Szymanowski achieved in

his *Mazurkas*, in *Kurpie Songs*, and, most of all, in his ballet-pantomime *Harnasie* [*The Highland Robbers*] Op. 55, composed in 1923–1931. It tells the story of a girl kidnapped by highland robbers, who promptly falls in love with their leader (the *harnas*). This ballet played a special role in the process of the mythopoeia of Polishness in music, the foundations of which had been laid by the Polish poet-novelist Kazimierz Tetmajer (died 1940) in his cycle of 40 tales entitled *Among the Rocks of Podhale* and the novel *Legend of the Tatra*, which depicts the life, customs and culture of Tatra highland robbers, hunters and young shepherds. The highland legends told in *Among the Rocks of Podhale* were complemented by woodcuts created by Polish painter and sculptor Władysław Skoczylas, watercolours by well-known Polish painter of the interwar period Zofia Stryjeńska, and by Szymanowski’s *Harnasie*. In this way literature, the visual arts and music allied to conjure up the image of a previously unknown world which gradually became part and parcel of the Polish consciousness. The Polish poet, prose writer, literary and theatrical critic Jan Lechoń (d. 1956) wrote:

Highland culture as presented by Tetmajer, Skoczylas and Szymanowski was an artistic and, in a sense, also ideological movement that penetrated to the entire nation (...). *Harnasie* brought to Polish art an apotheosis of unrestrained joy, a voice of creative Polish instinct triumphing over weakness. (...) With *Harnasie* the Polish myth became part of humanity’s shared dream of its highest beauty, comprehensible to everyone and equal to the myths of others.

Directly before and after regaining independence in 1918, as well as after World War II, defining Polishness and the national style in music became – for various reasons – a central theme of musicological publications in Poland. Some researchers embraced Herder’s idealism, while others, such as Stefania Łobaczewska and Zofia Lissa, assumed that there can exist a set of shared and unchanging psychic predispositions characterising a given community regardless of historical era and determining all its creative efforts. They looked for the source of that national character in the emotional aura of folklore as a representation of the nation’s psyche, of its attitudes and its habits of music reception. The national community was believed to possess some lasting systems for the transmission of national qualities, which made possible the sense of bond, of self-identification and of a shared identity.

The category of Polishness in music, thus intuitively and imprecisely defined, provided the fundamental criterion for the classification and value judgments passed on works and trends in Polish music history. Historians aimed to narrate national music as a system of links and a set of continued qualities accepted as Polish. One of the most representative histories of Polish music written in this convention is that by Józef Reiss, which was entitled *Polish Music is the Most Beautiful of All. An Outline of Historical Development against the Backdrop of Social Transformations*, and published in 1946. In the introduction, Reiss wrote: “Polish song has flowed from the Polish mountains and valleys. It was the Polish folk that gave the nation its native songs, which have existed for as long as the Polish nation itself. They appeared at that very moment when the Polish nation entered the stage of history. These songs, like the Polish mother tongue, are an intrinsic part of the national organism. Their melodies sprang from the Polish soil; they germinated for centuries in the nation’s soul, in order subsequently to penetrate deep into our musical culture, bestowing on this culture its characteristic tone and distinctive colouring.”

The category of national music or Polishness in music thus understood either as its spirit and cause (*Volksgeist*), or as a mechanism of the nation’s collective psyche has not been critically revised and examined in Polish musicological studies. It now seems certain that the contemporary research has undermined many of the key assumptions that underlay the idea of national music. One of the most dubious claims is the very notion of ‘folk music’ as a determinant of Polishness in music. The ethnic purity of folk music is a myth and a simplification that has little to do with reality. If by the ‘Polish folk’ we understand the rural populations inhabiting the historical and the present-day territory of Poland, it obviously turns out that the music created by those populations and labelled as Polish has in fact been an amalgam of heterogeneous ingredients resulting from contacts and from intercultural exchange. Similar doubts have been voiced with respect to the Polishness of the music of Podhale, which owes its distinct and separate identity to the strong influence of Carpathian highlander culture, differing in many ways from Polish lowland culture. Also the very concept of folk origins calls for a reinterpretation, since not everything we normally associate with the Polish idiom in music has originated in peasant culture, usually considered as the key indicator of folk character. The most recent studies on Chopin’s music prove that this topic ought to be approached with distance and caution.

The above does not mean that there are no criteria for defining Polishness as an immanent quality of works sometimes referred to as Polish national music. Polishness is a myth and a form of narration, a construct created at a definite time in response to specific social and political needs. This narration is built out of many components selected from the heterogeneous intellectual and artistic legacy, to which symbolic meanings have been attributed, reflecting values desirable from the point of view of national interest. In this process of ‘inventing tradition’, one should add, a considerable role has been played by the individual interests and preferences of intellectuals and artists, of whom Szymanowski is an eminent example.

Regardless of what processes and contexts shape the national narrative, it has played a major role in the nation’s self-identification and in defining its identity. This is particularly true of music and of narrations concerning music, because it is an art that involves human emotions to a unique extent. By deciphering the ulterior or openly expressed ideological contexts and assumptions, we can hope to arrive at a better understanding of the complex cultural realities in which the national component clashes and interacts with the universal one.