

Oskar Kolberg
(1814–1890)
the Founder of
Musical Ethnography
in Poland



PIOTR DAHLIG

Institute of Musicology
University of Warsaw

ABSTRACT

The article presents the greatest Polish ethnographer, who was also a professionally educated musician. He concentrated his activities on the oral musical culture, still vital in the 19th century but liable to changes. Culture studies by Kolberg concerned mainly rural communities, statistically dominating in those times. He planned to edit 60 volumes geographically covering the first Polish State from before 1772; he managed to print 33 of them in his lifetime and prepare many further anthologies for editing. Up till now, the editorial work is still in progress. The already edited 80 volumes show us an old social culture, folk ceremonies, musical repertoire including ritual singing, songs and instrumental pieces. Kolberg's printed monument is a source of reflection on the past and can inspire social studies, ethnomusicological research as well as musical ensembles performing traditional ethnic music of peasant origin. The size of Kolberg's documentation means that a special Institute of Oskar Kolberg had to be established to continue editorial and research work.

In spite of his positivistic and empirical attitude, Kolberg still kept a romantic faith in the significance of folk songs and singing for the preservation of national components in cultural consciousness. Simultaneously, he developed a model for structural analysis of popular/folk culture and intended to build a cultural atlas of the country, building on the work of his father, professor of the University of Warsaw, an outstanding cartographer. But the core of Kolberg's programme, its "planetary centre", was always music. It was music that gave him the stimulus to interpret the culture of Central-Eastern Europe. To preserve regional diversity, he wrote down more than 20 thousand vocal melodies, song texts and instrumental pieces, paying special attention to variants and ornamentation. For the contemporary composer, Kolberg's volumes are a useful musical reader. These huge anthologies of elementary but highly integrated musical concepts demonstrate the collective creativity and a fascinating prefiguration of mass culture, still open to symbols and to poetry. Kolberg's music transcriptions, catching music in the process of performance, should not be treated as unchangeable patterns for copying, but rather as a source that helps understand creativity in traditional oral culture.

Keywords: traditional folk music, Oskar Kolberg, anthropology of culture, musical ethnography

Oskar Kolberg, the greatest Polish ethnographer, was also a professionally educated musician, piano teacher and composer. As a composer of piano miniatures, stylised dances, songs for voice with piano and some stage music he was a child of his time, but as a researcher of culture and music ethnographer he remains influential until the present day.

His activity developed in three phases. In the 1840s, he concentrated mainly on composed music. Adapting folk tunes, he added a piano accompaniment. In the next decade, he planned to prepare representative anthologies of particular kinds of popular/peasant songs (wedding, calendar songs); this aim was partly accomplished in the collection of ballads and instrumental pieces published in 1857 (*Pieśni ludu polskiego – The Songs of the Polish People*). By considering melodic and textual variants

and honouring traditional monody, he started the real documentation of the first-hand ethnic musical tradition.

Eventually in the 1860s, facing the lack of sources from most territories of Poland under Partitions, he decided to develop and reiterate many times the model of a regional monograph, aiming to build an atlas of traditional culture.

Kolberg's work mainly concerned rural communities, statistically most populous in those times. He planned to edit 60 volumes, geographically covering the entire territory of the First Polish Commonwealth before 1772. Towards the end of Kolberg's life in 1889, it was assumed that his work had annulled the significance of political, Austrian, Prussian and Russian borders which divided the first Republic between 1795–1918, and that traditional culture is more significant than politics.

Oskar Kolberg's parents were of German origin but with time they became Polonised. His father, professor of the University of Warsaw from 1817, had laid the foundations for cartography and mapping in the "Congress" Kingdom of Poland. According to contemporaries, Julius Kolberg (Colberg) worked as a cartographer eagerly and with the "sweetest resignation". He probably belonged to the Masonry, which greatly contributed to preserving Polish cultural identity.

Young Oskar Kolberg wanted to be a musician and composer. Still, after the November Uprising of 1830–31, when many ambitious Poles and the artistic elite had to emigrate to France, he realised that, remaining to some extent outside the cultural mainstream because of his Protestant denomination, he was the only educated musician in Poland deeply interested in local peasant music. From the Western perspective of that time, in Eastern Europe there lived the vaguely indefinite, crazy or lazy Slavs. Therefore in the beginning Kolberg made it his task to characterize Slav music in general terms. It was only in his later life that he recognised and documented the huge ethnic and regional diversity in our part of Europe.

Kolberg carefully planned his research and journeys. He was an impresario, an artist, an audience, a wandering ethnomusicologist – something like a hurdy-gurdy playing beggar-singer, all in one. He had an astonishing ability to translate all that he had seen and heard into writing. Each of his thousands of letters to dozens of his collaborators he wrote twice, to remember better whatever was discussed in it. At the same time, he created an advanced system of culture description based on the current state of research in Western Europe. The structure of this

description was his intellectual construct representing an image of the mainly oral musical culture:

The Land – history, geography, towns and localities.

The People – their social and material culture.

1. The annual cycle of ceremonies and the associated songs – determined by natural seasons, the agrarian calendar, the ecclesiastical year;
2. The cycle of family rituals (birth, wedding, funeral) and the associated songs;
3. The everyday musical repertoire not bound up with the cycles;
 - a. Songs grouped according to their textual content (e.g. matching lovers);
 - b. Songs assigned to specific social functions (types of occupation and the milieu of singers and listeners);
 - c. Instrumental, usually dance repertoire played on the fiddle, the pipe and probably also other instruments;
4. Examples of oral literature – tales, proverbs, fables, etc.

Each of Kolberg's regional monographs is unique with respect to the proportions of the above mentioned chapters; new accents prove Kolberg's elasticity and perceptiveness; the overall structure, however, remains stable.

The traditional, oral and peasant culture was still alive in the 19th century but underwent changes. Culture transformations usually inspire historical documentation, especially as the researchers grow older. Kolberg finally formulated his research program when he was fifty one.

As explained above, he intended to build a cultural atlas of the country. Perhaps with the same determination as his father, Oskar Kolberg managed to print 33 volumes in his lifetime and prepared dozens of further anthologies for editing. Up till now, editorial work is still in progress. The size of Kolberg's documentation means that a special Institute of Oskar Kolberg had to be established to continue editorial and research work. The already published 85 volumes represent the historical social realities of the countryside, traditional rites and ceremonies, the musical repertoire including ritual singing, thousands of everyday songs and instrumental pieces.

Oskar Kolberg was a Protestant rooted deeply in his faith. God was for him the greatest Composer. Kolberg built his ethnography with music in a central position, as if it were a planetary system with a musical sun. He worked unceasingly; he was a confirmed bachelor and a genuine workaholic.

He wrote down about 25 thousand melodies, songs and instrumental pieces, most of these – collected in the original environment of the countryside. Such musical stenography was natural for Kolberg, just as playing music is for a musician or writing notes for a composer, especially since singing was in those times a common

activity and demonstrated a wide social, regional and psychological diversity. If we compare the readiness to sing two hundred years ago and today, we confront the Amazonian forest with a small town park.

There is a chronological coincidence between Kolberg's regional monographs and anthologies prepared and edited by other European folklorists. Let us list some of the most important events and publications:

1837 *Chanson de geste – Roland's Song* found in Oxford Library;

1838–1845 *Die deutschen Volkslieder mit ihren Singweisen* by Ludwig Christoph Erk and Wilhelm Irmer;

1840 *Deutsche Volkslieder mit ihren Original-Weisen* by Anton Kretzschmer and Anton Wilhelm von Zuccalmaglio;

1841–1846 *Srpske narodne pjesme* by Vuk Karadžić, Vienna, six volumes;

1842 *Schlesische Volkslieder mit ihren Melodien* by August Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben and Ernst Richter;

1843 *Old English Songs* by John Broadwood;

1844 *Ancient National Airs of Gwent and Morganwg (Wales)* by Mary Jane Williams;

1845 *The Cambrian Minstrel* by John Thomas;

1855 *The Ancient Music of Ireland* by George Petrie;

1855–1859 *Popular Music of the Olden Time* by William Chappell;

1858–1859 *Chansons populaires in France* by Teophile Dumersan and Hipolit Colet, three volumes;

1876–1881 *Traditional Ballad Airs* by William Christie (English songs);

1853 *Danmarks gamle Folkeviser*, seven volumes of Danish ballads by Svend Grundtvig;

1853 *Norske Folkeviser* by M.B. Landstad;

1853–1856 *Svenska Folkmelodier* by Richard Dybek;

1861 *Svenske Folke-Sange og Melodier* by Andreas Berggreen.

Comparing this heritage of research, we must say that Kolberg was the most prolific ethnographer in Europe. His musical competence, patience and impartiality allowed him to offer us a deep insight into the traditional musical culture and life of people in the central-eastern part of our continent.

In European countries, the image of ethnic cultures, comparatively well preserved in peasant communities due to their natural conservatism, served the expression of national, regional, even tribal group sentiments determined by cultural isolation that still existed in the 19th century. Everywhere an anthology of local musical ideas based on oral tradition was like a guide for a tourist in an unknown land. The modest, locally and orally functioning songs thus became an element of the

wider culture system in which the collector, folklorist, or composer interpreted the local traditional musical concepts for frequently ignorant urban outsiders. That is also why Kolberg initially added a piano accompaniment to country melodies and followed the English method of popularising folk music well tested since the end of the 18th century. Another reason for adding an accompaniment was Kolberg's eagerness to propagate national/folk tunes as part of salon music repertoire performed on the then modern and desired piano.

In spite of his pragmatic and empirical attitude, Kolberg still romantically kept faith in the value of folk songs and singing for the preservation of national content in the cultural consciousness. He used to say that nations last if they sing. It was not insignificant that in their youth Kolberg and Chopin were neighbours living in the same building in today's campus of the University of Warsaw. Both were eager to keep in touch with, and understand national music. Having experienced and appreciated Chopin's art of improvisation, Kolberg had the unique habit of collecting variants of individual songs with special regard to ornamentation. When possible, Kolberg noted down vocal and instrumental versions of the same melody, paving the way to a study of performance practice.

Kolberg's printed monument is a source of reflection on the past, which was facing changes in the 20th century. It can affect social studies, ethnomusicological analyses, and inspire contemporary young musicians who perform traditional ethnic music. In fact, Kolberg's regional monographs remain a starting point for any field research. From among the ethnomusicological topics that can be extracted from Kolberg's documentation and studies, we can list: typologies of songs, analyses of "wandering" melodies, studies on dance and musical instruments, comments on the specific ways of performance and culture changes as reflected in music.

Musical transcription is crucial for such work and it is always an individual evaluation and interpretation of the perceived sound performance. This instant choice of elements to be written down is determined by the competence of the transcriber, his or her abilities of hearing and listening. The greatest Polish ethnographer had to make some corrections and changes for the printed editions. However, he usually preserved the original sound transcription. It was only in 1890, the year of Kolberg's death, that the Edison phonograph came to ethnographic use.

Evaluation of Kolberg's musical transcriptions in the 20th century was determined by the current state of research. In the first half of the 20th century, Kolberg's

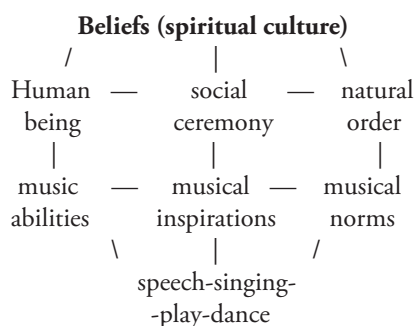
works demonstrated the necessity of phonographic documentation, which could complete the soundscape of traditional musical cultures. In the second half of the 20th century, after the documentation and studies on the sound-acoustic image of Polish folklore had been carried out, the historical value of Kolberg's monographs was discussed, and scholars emphasised the need to reedit his printed volumes and edit his numerous manuscripts.

Musical reality in the 19th century must have been much more varied and rich. It does not mean, however, that examples on CDs coupled with contemporary studies on traditional music should completely replace today work on transcriptions of sound recordings. While transcribing, we explain for ourselves the musical structure, we are preparing pieces to be compared later, and we test our imagination. The transcriptions by Kolberg could nowadays be treated in three ways: as printed sources for a theoretical timeless model, as an intangible reflection of the musical culture and knowledge of the 19th century and, in more contemporary terms, as an incentive for music making to shape and develop our musical potential and ability to improvise – all because Kolberg wrote down songs and instrumental melodies in the hope that they could be brought back to life in future. In this context, Kolberg's notated transcriptions, which attempt to grasp music in the process of performance, should not be treated as unchangeable patterns to be copied. Rather, they can help us to understand creativity in traditional oral culture.

It is useless to criticize the reduction of live experience to print. No composer would confirm the identity of his composed message with the life experience that underlies his music. Facing the art of nature, as Béla Bartók understood folk music, it is better to do something to preserve the so-called (by the UNESCO convention) intangible cultural heritage of the world than to allow long-lasting, unique traditions to disappear without a trace. Kolberg, the witness of lively regional cultures, had to simplify and standardize real music to fit it to notes. Let us try – without any technical equipment, with only pencil in hand – to write down the performance of a good fiddler after one hearing. Asked for a repetition, the fiddler never performs the melody identically. The cult of the possibly most accurate transcription evolved only in the first half of the 20th century. Naturally, Kolberg plucked the songs out from real life, and from spiritual matter he made a printed fossil; from a countless number of possible variants following only general rules, he extracted a unique formula. These difficult choices can be called the "bottle-necks" of Kolberg's documentation: a musical process → a musical product; live performance →

→ a printed piece; spiritual matter → a definite label; countless possibilities in performance → a unique version as a prescription for performance. That is why any musical example taken from Kolberg's work is only a starting point for performance, like a standard in jazz, or like a type of musical behavior in the traditional matrix of music culture.

The ethnomusicologist can critically analyze and interpret Kolberg's music notes, then compare them with a living oral tradition, which is to some extent still possible in central-eastern Europe, meditate on culture change and construct anthropological patterns deduced partly from Kolberg's work. I will offer one of such patterns:



Scheme 1. *Beliefs (spiritual culture).*

Since the 1970s, the revival of unarranged, “pure” ethnic music in the cultural landscape, in media broadcasting and sometimes also in “educated” opus music has usually still been based on the living memory, and was a revitalisation of old things for new tasks. Kolberg's works, along with phonographic and video collections of traditional music, will probably have a greater cultural importance in future than they have today, as the first-hand oral traditions will most probably die out in the course of this century in our part of Europe. On a higher level, while risking any cultural diagnoses we should consider the different tempos of cultural change and recognize the human need for intimate, face-to-face expression and communication. For the contemporary composer, Kolberg's volumes can be a useful and relaxing musical reader. Those huge anthologies of elementary, but highly integrated, musical concepts demonstrate the collective inventiveness and the fascinating shape of the old collective mass culture, still open to symbols and to poetry.

Piotr Dahlig, Ph.D, ethnomusicologist, professor of the University of Warsaw since 2002, on the faculty of the Institute of Musicology where he is Head of the Division of Ethnomusicology. Since 1982 he has also collaborated with the Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences. Since 1975 he has carried out intensive field research in Poland and Ukraine. He has published five books: *Muzyka ludowa we współczesnym społeczeństwie* [Folk music in contemporary society] (Warsaw 1987); *Ludowa praktyka muzyczna w komentarzach i opiniach wykonawców w Polsce* [Folk music practice in the comments and opinions of performers in Poland] (Warsaw 1993); *Tradycje muzyczne a ich przemiany. Między kulturą ludową, popularną i elitarną Polski międzywojennej* [Musical traditions and their transformations. Between the folk, popular and elite cultures of interwar Poland] (Warsaw 1998); *Muzyka Adventu. Tradycja gry na ligawkach* [Music of Advent. The tradition of playing on ligawka wooden horns] (Warsaw 2003); *Cymbaliści w kulturze polskiej* [Dulcimer players in Polish culture] (Warsaw 2013). He has published 144 articles discussing the results of intensive field research in Poland since 1975, mainly about traditional ethnic music and folk instruments in Poland, the music of national minorities, migrations, the history of musical culture and of musicological research, as well as studies on Chopin's music.