
Polish Folk Music in the Period of Polish People's Republic – Look from Afar

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The period between 1944 and 1989 – the time of the formation and existence of Polish People's Republic – from the contemporary perspective constitutes a separate closed unit, which allows for a systematic approach. However, it appears that apart from some quite meticulous documentary and publishing efforts of postwar ethnomusicologists, such issues as the evolution of traditional culture, new cultural environment in the village, or, finally, the government's approach to folk music, have never been analysed properly until now. This article purports to look at Polish folk music after World War II from the point of view of the cultural policy of communist parties (Polish Labour Party – since 1949 Polish United Labour Party), which then played the role of a super-government. This perspective – a kind of 'look from afar' – was rarely formulated in governmental documents, and thus today it may be found mainly in the records of ideological discussions within the party, social organizations, and in the press.

The starting point for this paper is an attempt to answer the following question: How did it happen that an ideology obscure or even hostile in relation to Polish culture quite successfully managed to gain public support for the realization of its plans? Apart from the obvious fact of the Polish state being dependent on the Soviet Union, other after-effects of World War II should also be noted here. Firstly, the borders changed completely, which caused profound changes in the nationality structure of the population, shift-

ing groups which had their own specific musical traditions. Secondly, there were colossal demographic changes in Poland caused by war losses (18% of the population) as well as by war and post-war migrations (at least 32% of the population). It is, of course, impossible to obtain the exact data of the losses and migrations, and the above quoted numbers are tentative at best. Nevertheless, they show us the great dynamics of changes, which influenced at least half of the prewar society. Those changes, according to a demographer, Piotr Eberhardt (2000: 80), resulted in 'total political, social and demographic instability', despite the fact that they transformed Poland into one of the most homogenous countries in Europe in terms of language, religion and nationality. This had an impact on the destabilization of cultural systems in the local scale, which in turn resulted in new approaches to musical traditions. It is worth remembering, though, that – as Anna Czekanowska pointed out (1995: 25) – 'in case of art, the influence of external factors (socio-historical changes) is a bit more indirect.'

Therefore in the Polish environment the first post-war years – despite all the changes – were characterized by a willing return to musical traditions that had been remembered and partly cultivated during the war. The same is true about forms of musical life in villages and towns, animated by schools and cultural establishments, as well as about forms of documentation of musical culture by ethnomusicologists. As already noted by Anna Czekanowska (1995: 28) and Piotr Dahlig (1998: 425), these 'comebacks' were most frequently guaranteed by the continuity of posts responsible for cultural, educational and academic activities. That continuity, however, was to be disrupted already at the end of 1947 and beginning of 1948, when more and more institutions were being infiltrated by activists connected with the pro-Soviet Polish Labour Party. Within just a few months those people took over the key offices and became responsible for cultural, educational and academic policies. Thus, from 1948 the Polish Labour Party (called Polish United Labour Party after the union with Polish Socialist Party) started exerting profound influence on changes in organisation (centralisation of local initiatives), management (removing people whose views differed from the communist ideology from all posts in the system), and the programme (modifications in

the already functioning Polish folk music in the period of Polish People's Republic; introducing and popularizing new solutions based on the Soviet experience).

The cultural policy shaped by the Ministry of Culture and Art was of vital importance to the situation of folk musical traditions in post-war Poland. In the personnel records of that institution, especially in the Department of Music and the Central Institute of Culture, we may at first find a number of names famous for their pre-war research, pedagogical and promotional activities.

From 1947, however, many new people appear, among whom the key role was played by Zofia Lissa from the Soviet Union, who had radical left-wing political beliefs, and who for a few years became the main state policy-maker as far as decisions about musical culture were concerned. Already in August 1947 during a national conference on the popularisation of music organized by the Central Committee of Culture, Zofia Lissa pointed out the main operational directions, highlighting the importance of the mass movement of amateur artistic music. Of course, in Poland the rise of amateur groups took place, according to Piotr Dahlig (1998) already in the last quarter of the 19th century, and the inter-war period was characterized by an active development of amateur groups cultivating local folk traditions.

However, what Zofia Lissa announced was a major modification of the hitherto directions of development – an abandonment of local experiences in favour of a repertoire of a wider provenance; a shift in emphasis from slight stage modifications to artistic elaboration in which the musical material had to be largely transformed; and finally, an adaptation of Soviet patterns (mass singing, characteristic instrumental ensembles). Ethnomusicologists were particularly concerned about the expected scale of the phenomenon, which was to affect the whole country. The finally accepted proposal left no hope – the Central Committee of Culture was to accelerate the action of documenting folklore due to its expected decline under the pressure of the amateur movement. In that situation, some proposals – like the one put forward by Jadwiga and Marian Sobieski to create a 'musical folklore reserve' – sounded somewhat outdated. They suggested that no new ensembles be

formed in that protected territory 'at least' (though, as the phrasing suggests, the proponents hoped for a more permanent effect) until the completion of musical documentation (Bielawski 1973: 26–27). Such a way of thinking, derived from the inter-war period, still seems to be applied by many of today's Polish folklorists (including amateurs) searching for 'pure' areas of musical culture and remaining averse towards the amateur folkloristic movement.

Let us go back, though, to the 1940s. 1948 was a year of full-scale organizational changes, leading to the centralization of all activities and consequently – following the example of the Soviet Union – to the introduction of Marxist ideology into all spheres of life. The aims of cultural policy in the field of music were emphatically presented by Zofia Lissa at the musicology congress. Lissa restricted folk music to the class dimension of peasant folklore and to working class street music and described it as: 'an expression of regressive social forms of art' of 'modest forms and means' and of 'crude, emotional' character. The aim was clearly expressed in the statement – 'to lead out' 90% of the society 'from under the influence of the regressive pole', which meant – superseding that music of non-artistic character with artistic music, or at a pinch to 'blur the borderlines' between folk and the artistic trends (Lissa 1948; Chomiński and Lissa 1951). To achieve the aim it was necessary to prepare the majority of the society for the changes by going through a transitional period – that of popular music with many features of artistic music. Equipping village with radios and the mass artistic movement in villages and towns were to serve that aim. The National Song and Dance Ensemble 'Mazowsze' was to become the role model for the amateur movement. The ensemble was founded by a decision of the Ministry of Culture and Art as a copy of the Soviet Pyatnitsky Russian Folk Chorus (Jackowski 1951: 49,56). Also the brass bands, accordion and mandolin ensembles then promoted by the state (Powroźniak 1955) looked up to Soviet models.

Formal support for the ensembles was secured by labour unions (Gąsiorowicz 1951), 'Samopomoc Chłopska' – farmers' union (Piotrowski 1951) and the Polish Youth Society (ZMP). Each of the organizations helped the musicians in essential matters, publishing and training. Venues for this activity were provided by taking over and extending the network of day-rooms and com-

munity centres. Due to a change in the priorities of cultural policy, the activity of the Central Institute of Culture was terminated and superceded by the Agency for the Coordination of Amateur Movement. In response to the numerous efforts of ethnomusicologists, a plan was drawn up for the early 1950s to start a great project whose objective was to collect musical folklore so that the music doomed to extinction would be documented. The death sentence was irrevocable because many of the party's activists thought that the "bourgeois" oppression suppressed the revolutionary songs of the folk' and in folk music itself 'among the wealth and treasure of folk songs there is much class-hostile trash that was planted there by the gentry and the clergy' (Piotrowski 1951).

The dynamic campaign which began in this manner was hailed by Bolesław Bierut (then president of the Polish People's Republic) as a 'cultural revolution' (Bierut 1954). The campaign coincided with the start of the six-year plan, which was to transform the agricultural-industrial Poland into an industrial-agronomic state with a socialist system of ownership. It is also mentioned in the plan that the 'cultural-educational revolution' should be 'expanded and deepened'. The revolutionary assumptions included – apart from the obligatory education of the young generations and reducing illiteracy among adults up to 50 years old – also other elements, such as the mass development of artistic movement, which reached its peak point in the years 1952–1955. In press articles from those years one may find many interesting examples of the new approach to folk music.

Despite its failure to achieve many of the expected results, the six-year plan caused a rapid transformations of the environment which was the medium for musical traditions. By as early as 1955, 3.5 million people moved from villages to cities, which was the result of the expanding heavy industry.

A year earlier, Bolesław Bierut praised the achievements in the development of cultural institutions – 500% more village day-rooms, 700% growth in the number of village artistic groups, and the construction of 72 community centres – a brand new phenomenon in Polish culture (Bierut 1954). However, the main objective of the campaign remained unachieved. The project of collecting musical folklore, which in the original plan was to continue till 1954,

proved that, although villages were transforming rapidly, traditional music was still cultivated by the older generations. The problem to grapple with was now the composition and propagation of mass songs, which despite some progress had not become the high spot of the repertoire. The Minister of Culture and Art, Włodzimierz Sokorski, deplored also the fact that the participation of village inhabitants in artistic life, measured by the number of tickets sold, increased only very slowly (Sokorski 1954: 5). Zofia Lissa found an explanation for that fact: namely – that the workmen and peasants, neglected for generations ‘could not make up for all the cultural backlogs, did not forget and did not learn to listen to music so quickly’ (Lissa 1954: 17). The widely planned offensive, or perhaps we should say the cultural revolution, began to slow down, and this was even more evident after the political crisis of 1956.

The state’s cultural policy in the second half of the 20th century remained essentially unchanged, which was due to both: the lack of new ideologies and the resolve to continue the achievements of the previous period. The expansion of the network of cultural centres continued, as well as the system for supporting cultural activities through the training of new managerial staff and subsidies for the operation and organization of regional and national competitions. The popularization of mass songs was, however, given up in favour of attempts to influence the evolution of popular music. At the same time, there could be observed certain symptoms of change, which were the effects of the campaign from the late 1940s and early 1950s. The direction of change in the traditional repertoire ‘on one hand, was towards broadening the repertoire so as to include non-folkloristic items, and on the other, reaching for folkloristic material from other regions’ (Sobieska 1968: 573). There were noted, however, some restraints on the activity of amateur folkloristic ensembles, whose evolution was supported by ‘grants and the prospect of winning prizes at competitions’ and which ‘fatigued both the performers and the listeners’. According to Sobieska – the amateur movement ‘was unable to receive all the ethno-historical values of folklore’, as it used artistic arrangements as its main tool, which ‘for traditional folklore and its active representatives was a hairpin bend’ (Sobieska 1968: 573–578).

In later years the issues of musical folklore and its stage counterfeits were losing their political significance, though they remained the point of interest for research centres and the Central Guidance of the Amateur Artistic Movement operating under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and Art. However, at the same time, there appear a number of publications of documentary character and the system of training staff for the purpose of the amateur movement develops greatly.

The situation changes rapidly in the time of the political and economic crisis in the 80s. The state was no longer able to sustain the monstrously developed network of cultural centres. More and more establishments and associations were affected by the crisis and withdrew their subsidies from the cultural sector. The aggravating economic situation causes the outflow of managerial staff. At the same time, a rapid decline in the old musical traditions in villages was also observable –the older generations were being replaced by younger ones, already brought up in amateur artistic groups and growing up with mass popular song or arranged folk songs. In the United Labour Party's documents more and more often we could find desperate proposals like the following:

[...] self-management, labour unions, labour unions' boards, central cooperative unions and others dramatically reduce their expenses on culture. This must be handled in no other way but through discussion, suggestion, and party management, because the means of administrative or economic coercion may only have an interceding or supportive character (Świrgoń 1985: 2).

As time proved, the economic situation of the country as well as the slow deterioration of the party apparatus already then left such appeals without any chances for realization.

From the present-day perspective, observation of the above described processes indicates that even the largest-scale projects for cultural revolution, despite earlier enthusiasm fuelled by the socio-political destabilisation caused by the World War II, were unable to transform the already existing musical traditions. Certainly, the initiatives of the 1940s accelerated cultural changes in the Polish village, nevertheless, we can still find musicians and singers presenting the old repertoire and we can still meet the young searching for

'authentic' musical culture. Despite the fall of Polish People's Republic, amateur and professional ensembles still exist and present folklore rearranged for onstage performance. They are now part of the international movement associated in CIOFF (Conseil International des Organisations de Festivals de Folklore et d'Art Traditionnels) and IOV (Internationale Organization für Volkskunst).

And most importantly, there still exist a multitude of local groups presenting mass popular songs which are situated somewhere between folk and artistic culture. That phenomenon – poorly documented and outside the scope of interest of Polish ethnomusicologists – is perhaps the best memorial of the achievements of the communist party, those 'engineers of souls' of the 1940s and 1950s.

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