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RENEGOTIATING THE BORDERS OF NATIONAL CULTURE:
POLISH ÉMIGRÉ COMPOSERS AND NATIONAL MUSIC HISTORIES
IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

ABSTRACT This review of *From Poland with Music: 100 Years of Polish Composers Abroad (1918–2018)* contextualises the project within a tradition of cultural outreach. Both the project itself (which aims to reach a general audience) and the stories it tells (of émigré artists who left Poland during the turbulent twentieth century) represent the movement of culture across borders. The conveners seek to reintroduce oft-omitted émigré artists into the canons of Polish national music history. In so doing, the volume serves as a successful and useful tool, introducing readers to new repertoire and inviting them to pose complex questions about the various motivations and effects of artists' cultural mobility.

KEYWORDS émigré composers, cultural outreach, Polish music history

ABSTRAKT *Renegocjacja granic kultury narodowej. Kompozytorzy polscy na emigracji i historii muzyki narodowej w XX wieku.* Niniejsza recenzja publikacji *From Poland with Music: 100 Years of Polish Composers Abroad (1918–2018)* rozważa ją w kontekście tradycji upowszechniania kultury. Zarówno sam projekt (który ma na celu dotarcie do szerokiej publiczności), jak i opowiadane historie (artyści–emigranci, którzy opuścili Polskę w burzliwym XX w.), pokazują transfer kulturowy ponad granicami. Celem autorek jest ponowne wprowadzenie często pomijanych artystów emigracyjnych do kanonu historii muzyki polskiej. W ten sposób książka przyczynia się do poznania nowego repertuaru i zarazem zachęca do stawiania pogłębionych pytań o przyczyny i skutki mobilności kulturalnej artystów.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE kompozytorzy emigracyjni, upowszechnianie kultury, historia muzyki polskiej

On the ‘About Us’ webpage for the Polish cultural institution MEAKULTURA, the leaders assert that one of their main goals is to connect audiences with resources and information about a wide variety of music – significantly, these resources are produced and curated by experts, but they are intended for a broad audience of music lovers.¹ Articles about the history of disco music appear on the web portal alongside interviews with contemporary Polish performers and scholarly considerations of the work of major composers such as Krzysztof Penderecki. In pursuing their educational goal, MEAKULTURA participates in a longstanding tradition of Polish cultural outreach stretching back at least to the period following the Second World War, when ‘upowszechnienie kultury’ – educating people about culture – represented an important step in rebuilding the nation after the wartime devastation. Even as they were navigating postwar tumult and newly-established Stalinist political controls, many Polish artists, composers and scholars dedicated themselves to disseminating information about music history, theory and practice to both general and specialist audiences. Just as MEAKULTURA now uses the Internet and social media to disseminate information about music, Polish cultural educators of the 1950s and 1960s took advantage of the technological resources available to them. They used radio and television programming and audio recordings alongside more traditional print formats to share valuable information. Initially, this content was aimed at a domestic audience, but the boundaries of outreach quickly expanded to include international audiences, especially after the founding of the ‘Warsaw Autumn’ International Festival of Contemporary Music in 1956.² Cultural outreach is therefore a rich tradition with a long history in Poland, and it is one founded on the notion of ‘accessibility’, which has emerged anew as a crucial consideration in contemporary discussions about musical cultures in the twenty-first century.

The recent volume of essays published by MEAKULTURA, translated into English as *From Poland with Music: 100 Years of Polish Composers Abroad* (coordinated by Marlena Wiczorek and advised by Beata Bolesławska-Lewandowska)³ extends this tradition of cultural outreach in conjunction with another goal noted on the foundation’s ‘About Us’ page: MEAKULTURA intends to promote the work of

1 ‘O Nas’ [About us], MEAKULTURA, <https://meakultura.pl/o-nas/>, accessed 16 January 2024.

2 For more on *upowszechnienie kultury* initiatives in Poland after 1956, please see Chapter 3 of my monograph, *Awangarda: Modernity and Tradition in Postwar Polish Music*, Oakland 2021.

3 *From Poland with Music: 100 Years of Polish Composers Abroad (1918–2018)*, concept: Marlena Wiczorek, content supervisor: Beata Bolesławska-Lewandowska, eds. Małgorzata Gamrat, Marlena Wiczorek, Cindy Bylander, Magdalena Nowicka-Ciecierska, English translation: Olga Drenda, translation editor: Cindy Bylander. Gliwice–London: Fundacja Meakultura, Scala Arts & Heritage Publishers LTD, 2021, pp. 412. ISBN-10. 1785514075, ISBN-13. 978-1785514074. The first Polish edition: *Sto lat muzycznej emigracji. Kompozytorzy polscy za granicą (1918–2018)*, concept: Marlena Wiczorek, content supervisor: Beata Bolesławska-Lewandowska, eds. Małgorzata Gamrat et al., Gliwice: Fundacja Meakultura, 2018, pp. 358. ISBN 978-83-952271-0-3.

Polish artists who are working abroad. While there are certainly contemporary sources available that have published information about Polish musical artists (for example: the PWM *Encyklopedia Muzyczna*; the POLMIC web portal; and Marek Podhajski's *Polish Music. Polish Composers 1918–2010*), the *From Poland with Music* project is distinguished from these other resources by its exclusive focus on artists who emigrated from Poland in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.⁴ By adopting this focus, the volume promises to perform a different kind of cultural outreach than the educational initiatives described above: instead of disseminating information about Polish music, *From Poland with Music* traces the paths of the composers whose own lives represent a kind of 'upowszechnienie kultury', a movement of Polish musical culture across borders, convening new audiences and communities in new places. The volume traces national culture on the move during a particularly fraught period of time that contributor Jolanta Guzy-Pasiak frames as the 'emigration century', drawing on the work of Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller.⁵ In her essay, 'Towards the Four Corners of the World: Directions of Emigration', Guzy-Pasiak maps the artists' movement in geographical space, providing a compelling depiction of the transnational, transcontinental movements that form the subject of this book.

From Poland with Music features profiles of sixty-three émigré composers, whose histories span different generations, historical and political conditions, aesthetic orientations, and musical traditions and practices. While all of these composers are Polish, their relationships to the Polish nation and to 'Polishness' are very different, as are their reasons for emigrating. Their decisions to cross borders were motivated by geopolitical, professional and personal conditions, and sometimes all three scales were operating simultaneously. In recognition of these complexities, the organisers of the *From Poland with Music* volume have also included fourteen longer essays written by musicologists and music critics. These essays each tackle a different set of questions related to the canon of Polish émigré composers that has been compiled by this volume, but at the centre of them all lies a fundamental concern about the multiple meanings attached to emigration and about the liminal in-betweenness of the émigré identity.

Wieczorek and Bolesławska-Lewandowska direct readers' attention to these central concerns in their opening discussion, 'Instead of an Introduction'. Wieczorek poses the crucial question in her first statement: 'what does the term 'emigration' mean?' (p. 15). Bolesławska-Lewandowska replies that the answers to this question

4 *Encyklopedia Muzyczna PWM*, ed. Elżbieta Dziębowska, 12 vols., Kraków 1998; *Encyklopedia Muzyczna PWM Online*, <https://polskabibliotekamuzyczna.pl/encyklopedia/>, accessed 16 January 2024; *Polish Music. Polish Composers 1918–2010*, ed. Marek Podhajski, Gdańsk–Lublin 2013.

5 Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, New York 1993.

must always take into account their subjects' historical context. The emigrations of Chopin or Paderewski, as cosmopolitan virtuosi, must necessarily take on different meanings than those of Roman Palester or Andrzej Panufnik, whose emigrations stood as acts of political protest, or the more recent international movements of contemporary artists such as Hanna Kulenty or Wojtek Blecharz, who consider themselves 'citizens of the world' and have left Poland to pursue professional or educational opportunities. Already in this first exchange, we have been introduced to the many different kinds of movement built into the concept of emigration. In the past century, Polish composers have sometimes emigrated away *from* violence or negative conditions, and they have sometimes moved *toward* new adventures. Their emigrations have been political, artistic, personal, practical. Their new lives abroad have sometimes been temporary, and sometimes permanent. Leaving the nation has been, for some émigrés, deeply traumatic and has led to deep feelings of alienation; for others, meanwhile, this act of leaving has been an exciting choice, transformative, fulfilling. Emigration can be a process of great loss, but it can also be one of surplus, of addition. In one of the collection's final essays, 'Composing as an Autobiography', Aleksandra Bilińska invokes the work of Paul Ricoeur to suggest that, despite all of this variation in the experience of emigration, there is a common requirement that émigrés must practise a form of creative forgetting, making room for new possibilities (pp. 155–156).⁶ This forgetting is a loss, but it also introduces the potential for additive value, hybrid forms and new identities. Even when the connection to nation remains, this relationship is transformed through time and distance.

One of the goals of *From Poland with Music*, as Wieczorek explains in her opening remarks, is to capture the featured composers 'as people', addressing not only their biographical details but also their personalities and the impact that emigration had upon them, both personally and artistically (p. 20). There are various levels on which the volume seeks to meet that expressive goal. The clearest example lies in the considerations of the composers' personalities in each of their individual entries, but as a reader I found these descriptions less revealing than the moments when the composers' own words appeared in the text, as in the section of Wieczorek's own essay under the subheading 'In Their Own Words'. The testimony of Roman Palester, for example, raises the interesting question of the composer's own self-identification as an émigré (or his resistance thereof). Addressing the repression that both he and his music faced in the People's Republic of Poland until the late 1970s, Palester noted that 'During the first twenty years of my life in exile, I was closely connected to the life of our country... that's why all this talk about emigration is quite ridiculous,

6 Bilińska cites 'Wydobywanie dobra. Z Paulem Ricoeurem rozmawia Brat Emil z Taizé' [Bringing out the good: Paul Ricoeur in conversation with Brother Emil of Taizé], tr. M. Prussak, *Więź* 44 (2001) no. 12, pp. 11–24.

since I was literally connected with national issues from morning to evening! No—it certainly wasn't emigration!' (p. 56).⁷ Identifying more closely with the experience of exile, then, Palester rejected the notion of emigration, which he seems to have associated with choosing a new homeland, making a new life in a new home, and breaking contact with the previous home. And although there is much difference between Palester's experience and that of the younger generation coming of age after the end of communism in Poland, it is interesting that they, too, seem uncomfortable with taking on the mantle of 'émigré' as an identity. For example, in Marta Wryk's essay, 'Independent and True to Themselves: The Migration of Young Polish Composers', it becomes clear that the composers under discussion (Wojciech Blecharz, Jagoda Szmytka, Praszal, Szymon Brzóska, Jakub Ciupiński and Marcin Banasik) have found different ways to imagine their relationship both to Poland and to their new homes; they often pursue careers in multiple places at once, taking advantage of the different kinds of opportunities afforded by their various locations. They embody a form of cultural outreach that moves in many different directions at once, perhaps best captured by Banasik's admission that 'Actually, I'm on the internet' (p. 115).

Another way that we may hear from the composers directly in this volume is through their music. One of the most useful elements included in each entry about the émigré composers is a set of recommendations of music from these composers' oeuvres. As I read *From Poland with Music* for the purpose of writing this review, I turned frequently to YouTube and listened to many of the compositions recommended by the expert authors. I listened to most of this music for the first time; even as a scholar who has spent nearly twenty years studying Polish music, much of this repertoire was new to me. It was exciting to hear a variety of music from artists such as André Tchaikowsky, Zbigniew Seifert, Piotr Moss, Szymon Laks, Jan A.P. Kaczmarek and the Orkiestra Ósmego Dnia, and Paweł Klecki. Many authors in *From Poland with Music* include descriptions of music written by the composers under discussion, but Iwona Lindstedt's essay, 'Music in Transit: Currents and Styles', offers a deeper meditation on the relationship between emigration and musical style, raising questions that (as she argues herself) call for further study in the future. There is a tension in Lindstedt's essay, and it is one that informs the entire volume: this is a tension between a composer's internal musical voice, which of course they take with them when they emigrate, and the impact of external conditions, experiences and opportunities on that voice. She points out that there have been points in time, such as the difficult postwar decade, when Poles abroad were able to instigate new developments in Polish music, encouraging new modernist directions when such exploration was not possible at home (p. 82). But on the other hand, there have also

7 Wiczorek cites Roman Palester, 'Prawda źle obecna' [Truth badly present], in: *Muzyka źle obecna* [Music badly present], ed. Krystyna Tarnawska-Kaczorowska, Warsaw 1989, vol. 1, p. 34.

been points when Polish musical developments have moved into an international space, transported by émigré composers, and those developments have subsequently taken on a life of their own; such was the case with the international reception of ‘sonorystyka’ in the 1960s.

In most cases, it seems that the artists discussed in *From Poland with Music* have been able to follow their own artistic and creative paths in emigration; the words ‘independent’ and ‘individual’ appear quite frequently in the composer entries. A few exceptions appear in discussions of émigré artists who struggled to find a place in industries such as film, which has historically held its creators to very specific stylistic and procedural expectations. However, a significant theme that emerges across the volume is the impact of reception in framing each composer’s relationship to ‘émigré’ and ‘national’ traditions. Such reception narratives have enormous impact, often determining the canons to which composers will belong, the concert halls in which they will be heard, and the legacies and influences that adhere to their music in the world. In other words: the composers themselves have not always had final control over how their music has been understood in national and international spaces. The essay by Beata Bolesławska-Lewandowska and Krzysztof Stefański, ‘Do We Know Them? Does the World Know Them? The Presence of Musical “Nomads” in Poland and Abroad’ presents several examples. Especially compelling is the authors’ discussion of the ‘Muzyka źle obecna’ [Music badly present] conference convened in Warsaw in 1988. This conference, as a form of reception and historiographical redress in and of itself, opened important discussions about the different factors that might lead to a composer’s alienation or exclusion from a national tradition: the composers’ own creative convictions, their political and institutional affiliations, and their critical reception both in Poland and abroad. For example, as Palester himself pointed out, Antoni Szałowski’s music had been excluded by Polish cultural authorities after the war, but his exclusion was not a reflection of Szałowski’s own political beliefs. Rather, ‘the ban affected him simply because we [Palester, Panufnik and Szałowski] were considered the three official émigré composers in the 1950s’ (p. 93).⁸ The influence of reception from state authorities is heavily marked, due to its connection to the political sphere, but *From Poland with Music* is filled with examples in which audience and institutional reception, both Polish and international, have actively shaped composers’ careers. PWM Edition, for instance, which has published music by some Polish émigré composers, has certainly impacted those composers’ relationship to the Polish national canon; the same is true for composers’ inclusion in the ‘Warsaw Autumn’ International Festival of Contemporary Music, coverage in *Ruch Muzyczny* or *Glissando*, or recordings by Polskie Nagranie or Bôlt Records.

8 Ibid., p. 31.

From Poland with Music: 100 Years of Polish Composers Abroad (1918–2018), as a publication of MEAKULTURA, is, of course, actively participating in this tradition of reception. The authors are contributing new layers of historiographical consideration for these twentieth- and twenty-first-century artists, linking them to a longer historical trajectory as laid out by Danuta Gwizdalanka in her essay ‘The History of Music often Means the History of Emigrants’, which opens in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. There are several clear goals associated with the volume’s act of reception: the first is articulated by Bolesławska-Lewandowska in the introductory essay: ‘I hope that, thanks to this kind of guide, we will at least be able to partially remove a barrier between composers in Poland and those in exile. I hope that the latter will become closer and more “tangible” for a wider audience, who will actually get to discover this music’ (p. 18). This is a goal that is internally-directed, focused on building (or rebuilding) a contemporary Polish national musical canon, one that is more geographically inclusive and that perhaps complicates our understanding of what twentieth-century Polish music sounds like. This goal also makes space for asking difficult questions about why some of these composers have faced exclusion, and why they may have felt compelled to leave Poland in order to explore their artistic ideas or pursue their professional goals. There is a sense that this book aims to redress these exclusions, reintegrating these composers into the nation’s canon and forging new musical connections for new audiences.

The volume also has an externally-focused reception goal, as evidenced by its translation into English: this is the version that I read for this review. In an excellent translation from Olga Drenda, edited by Cindy Bylander, the English version aims to promote Polish music culture to the English-speaking world, but this goal is perhaps less clearly articulated than its internally-focused counterpart. As the book moves into an international space, it necessarily joins larger discussions that are taking place about emigration, diaspora and cultural mobility in musical life. Even recognising the organisers’ goal to remain accessible to a broad audience, I would have loved to see more engagement with the contemporary international scholarly literature. Stephen Greenblatt’s concept of ‘cultural mobility’, for instance, might have been a fruitful theoretical lens through which to consider some of the movement (of people, of music, of ideas) captured in this volume.⁹ Emigration has remained a crucial topic in the twenty-first century, with new political and climate crises motivating refugees to move across borders, including Poland’s own. These emerging patterns of movement form the larger historical context against which the

9 *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Cambridge 2009. Two pieces of relevant scholarship using this framework in their analysis are the following: Lisa Jakelski, ‘Pushing Boundaries: Mobility at the Warsaw Autumn International Festival of Contemporary Music’, *East European Politics and Societies* 29 (2015) no. 1, pp. 189–211; Andrea F. Bohlman and Florian Scheduling, ‘Hanns Eisler on the Move: Tracing Mobility in the ‘Reisesonate’, *Music and Letters* 96 (2015) no. 1, pp. 77–98.

emigrations discussed in this book must be understood.¹⁰ *From Poland with Music: 100 Years of Polish Composers Abroad (1918–2018)* opens important questions about Polish music and emigration, and I look forward to seeing where these questions will lead in future work by the authors gathered in this volume.

As a professor who often teaches about Polish music to my English-speaking students, I can readily imagine using this volume as an introduction to composers with whom my students are not familiar. As they are always looking for new and exciting repertoire, I predict that my students will appreciate this guide very much, and that they will contribute to the realisation of Marlena Wieczorek's wish, expressed in the introductory essay, that the book will lead to new performances, recordings, and a greater presence of these composers in Polish and international concert life. I will employ the volume, as I hope the contributors and MEAKULTURA have intended, as both a reference text and a twenty-first century example of cultural outreach, an example that highlights the element of movement that has animated Polish music over the past century.

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10 Recent additions to the literature on music and cultural mobility and emigration demonstrate the continued vitality and diversity of this musicological area of discussion, to which *From Poland with Music* has contributed. See e.g. *The Routledge Handbook of Music and Migration*, ed. Elena Dubinets, Abingdon 2024; Elena Dubinets, *Russian Composers Abroad: How They Left, Stayed, Returned*, Bloomington 2021; Alex E. Chávez, *Sounds of Crossing: Music, Migration, and the Aural Politics of Huapango Arribeño*, Durham 2017.

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