# *The Impact of the Cold War on the Polish School of Composition*

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We know several schools in the history of music: Franko-Flemish, Venetian, Russian—or, generally, national—and, finally, Polish, perhaps the last school among them. From another perspective, there were Polish dances popular in the Renaissance and slightly later, and polonaises composed, for example, by Bach. Speaking of Bach, it is worth referring to his probably best known critic, Johann Adolf Scheibe, who in the mid-18th century described the "Polish style" in the following manner: "we began to hear of it in particular only in this century... [and] the famous Mr Telemann was the first to make it familiar."[1] As we know, in 1705–1708 Georg Philipp Telemann was the Kapellmeister in Sorau (today Żary); he also visited Kraków, getting to know music from the region very well and drawing on it in many of his own pieces. In other words, we owe the promotion to the European musical Champions League—for Scheibe places the Polish style alongside the Italian, French and German—to a German musician.

In the following century, after Poland disappeared from the political map of Europe, we were noticed apparently thanks to music—Chopin's, of course. To this day it has been one of the most recognisable "marks of Polishness" in the world.

1 Johann Adolf Scheibe, *Critischer Musicus*, quoted after Szymon Paczkowski, *Styl polski w muzyce Johanna Sebastiana Bacha* [Polish Style in the Music of Johann Sebastian Bach] (Lublin: Polihymnia, 2011), 38.

In the early 20th century efforts began to be taken to draw attention to "Polish music." There was Emil Młynarski's initiative in Paris in 1903, soon followed by the emergence of "Young Poland" in Berlin, and in the 1920s—of the Association of Young Polish Musicians in Paris. To this we should add initiatives by the pre-war Ministry of Foreign Affairs, such as the Polish Music Festival in Paris in 1925 as well as various "stately" concerts usually of one of Chopin's concertos and Szymanowski's pieces under the baton of Grzegorz Fitelberg and featuring Zbigniew Drzewiecki and Stanisława Szymanowska, whom Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski mockingly called a "propaganda team" of Polish music.[2]

It was not, however, until the 1960s that there emerged a Polish School which was recognised and distinguished by foreigners. Like in Telemann's times, it was noticed primarily in Germany.

Does this mean that we suddenly became so brilliant? I would not say so. There had been good composers before, but for the first time interest in the country seen as an area "somewhere between Germany and Russia" was boosted by politics. Specifically, by the fact that in a world divided after the Second World War by the Iron Curtain into the East and West, which were in a state of Cold War, there emerged in the East an oasis of Western art. The phenomenon was so extraordinary that it attracted attention we could not have hoped for in other circumstances.

Soon after the war a process was launched in the Soviet Union to politicise art even more intensely than before the war. The communist party issued resolutions demanding total eradication of Western influences, regarded *en bloc* as a manifestation of degeneration and decline of culture. This ideology was imposed on the so-called people's democracies, when not only minds but also creative imagination was subjugated.

As a response to this situation in 1950 an institution called the Congress for Cultural Freedom was established in West Berlin. It was a secret plan by the CIA, coordinated mostly by emigrants from Eastern Europe and one of the biggest post-war operations of American secret services. It was addressed

2 See Teresa Chylińska, *Karol Szymanowski i jego epoka* [Karol Szymanowski and His Epoch], vol. 2 (Kraków: Musica Iagellonica, 2008), 345.

initially to the West, where a considerable part of the elites, i.e. the main recipients of arts, were liberal but left-leaning, an attitude that stemmed from the experiences of the recent war. The USSR seen from the perspective of Parisian or Roman cafes aroused more sympathy than representatives of the American government encountered on a daily basis. That is why one of the Congress' first initiatives was a festival of contemporary art organised in May 1952 in Paris. A series of concerts and painting exhibitions was to demonstrate the freedom of Western artists and the resulting diversity of art.

At that time an opposition had already become clear. On the Western side—individualism and liberalism manifested through abstract painting and music that was as far as possible form the traditional, tonal, often simple repertoire supported by the pre-war fascist governments, especially the Third Reich, which, incidentally, resembled socialist realism promoted by Moscow.

This new music was particularly intensely promoted in West Germany, where young musicians decided to completely transform the musical language, starting history "from scratch." The man proclaimed to be the father of the new music was Anton Webern, the most radical pupil of Arnold Schönberg. In 1949 Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno published *The Philosophy of New Music*, in which he announced categorically that the future of music lay only in dodecaphony. In the same year, on 17 May 1949, a Congress of Dodecaphonic Music began in Milan. Concerts, papers and discussions were to reassure a large part of musicians that after the decline of the tonal system now came an era of dodecaphony.

The costs of the Milan meeting of composers were covered by the Congress for Cultural Freedom. The assembly was presided over by the Secretary General of the Congress, the composer Nicolas Nabokov, a cousin of the renowned writer Vladimir Nabokov. He disliked dodecaphony as he later disliked serialism, but he was aware of the fact that just as socialist realism became the musical voice of the communist bloc, dodecaphony and atonality were the voice of the "free world."

The dogma of national socialist art or socialist realism was followed by the dogma of the avant-garde. The decisions concerning "correctness" were no longer within the domain of politicians but musicians themselves. There

were no administrative forms of pressure, but those who were insufficiently revolutionary were doomed to marginalisation and non-existence in the world of the so-called new music. Its leaders included such effective demagogues as Pierre Boulez, who said that composers not using the dodecaphonic technique were completely useless and that opera houses should be blown up.

In the East dissonant and atonal music was denounced as formalist, in the West, consonant and tonal music—as a product of fascism.

The East closed itself to the West, while the West lost any interest in the East. As late as in 1962 Marion Dönhoff, in the article "We Have No Eastern Policy," quoted the West German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Heinrich von Brentano, who said that "it does not make sense to develop cultural relations with Eastern European countries (...), because culture has become there as useless a concept as it was in the Third Reich."[3] Indeed, the number of performances of music by Polish composers living in Poland until the mid-1950s were very few and far between; composers from other socialist countries sank into similar oblivion. Only Russian music still occupied quite a prominent position in the programmes of Western orchestras. Years later Richard Taruskin wrote that "without the cachet of stylistic as well as political 'dissidence' an Eastern European artist could not attract much sympathetic attention during the years of political stress."[4]

In the meantime, on the other side of the Iron Curtain the implementation of the doctrine of socialist realism imposed by the Soviets varied. In Russia those who resisted were deprived of the means to earn their living; the situation was similar in the GDR and Czechoslovakia. In Poland the restrictions imposed from above were not as ruthlessly enforced, especially in music, and in the first post-war decade Polish composers were not much interested anyway in more recent techniques. Dodecaphony did

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3 Marion Dönhoff, "Wir haben keine Ostpolitik" [We Have No Eastern Policy], *Die Zeit* (05.10.1962).

4 Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music,* vol. 5, *The Late Twentieth Century* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 54.

not arouse much interest, although some had been familiar with it since the pre-war times, and Zofia Lissa was enthusiastic about Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schönberg.[5] It appeared in some works by Konstanty Regamey, Roman Haubenstock and Roman Palester even before they moved to the West. At the height of socialist realism elements of the twelve-tone technique were used by Kazimierz Serocki in his Suite of Preludes for piano (1952). Otherwise, Polish composers remained faithful to the ideals of their youth, i.e. from the pre-war period, usually continuing the pre-war neoclassicism and folklorism. As late as in 1955 nothing suggested that their style would change, so when in 1956 the first Warsaw Autumn (not yet known under this name at the time) was held, Palester criticised his colleagues in Radio Free Europe, saying,

> I understand that older composers—Malawski or Lutosławski—have their creative visions so entrenched that they do not need any change or development of their means of expression, but that these tendencies are not manifested even in the slightest in the oeuvre of the young – this is rather worrying. ...We need in Polish music works that are experimenting, we need more personal expression. But we also expect composers to set more difficult tasks and artistic goals for themselves. For the most beautiful task of each artist is to doubt, explore and try something new.[6]

One month later, talking in a radio programme entitled "The need for change in Poland's musical life," he repeated, apparently quite impatient, that

> It is not our fault that for a long time we have had to keep returning to one and the same topic: to the strange and incomprehensible "failure to catch up," on the part of musicians and composers, with the speed of liberalisation, which is much livelier in all other spheres of art.[7]

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5 Krzysztof Droba, *Odczytywanie na nowo. Rozmowy z Mieczysławem Tomaszewskim* [Re-Readings. Conversations with Mieczysław Tomaszewski] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Bosz, 2011), 86.

6 Roman Palester, "Muzyka obala granice" [Music abolishes the borders] no. 191, Radio Free Europe programme of 31 October 1956. Manuscript copies of Palester's programmes are kept in the Warsaw University Library (Archive of Polish Composers).

7 Roman Palester, "Muzyka obala granice" no. 192, Radio Free Europe programme of 7 November 1956.

Incidentally, during their talks with the authorities about the future festival, its organisers used a cunning argument, probably not aware of the fact that the same argument had been used four years earlier in Paris. They said to the politicians that their objective would be to demonstrate the superiority of our culture and our system over the culture of Western capitalism.

Palester's was not a voice "crying in the wilderness." The speed of the changes occurring in Polish music thanks to its opening to the world was very much in evidence already during the second festival, in 1958, when works performed included Witold Lutosławski's *Funeral Music*, Tadeusz Baird's *Four Essays* and Kazimierz Serocki's *Heart of the Night*, and were clearly different from the music hitherto composed in Poland. There was also the debut of the oldest among the generation of composers completing their studies at the time, Henryk Mikołaj Górecki, followed one year later by Witold Szalonek and Krzysztof Penderecki. Soon the foreign press—mainly German—describing the impressive entry on the European music scene of a group of Polish composers, began to use the term "Polish School." The moment regarded as its birth was 1961, marked by the premieres of Lutosławski's *Venetian Games* and Penderecki's *Threnody*, two works that went on to influence the language of European modernism.

As of the second Warsaw Autumn the festival guests began to include more and more representatives of Western radio stations, philharmonic halls, publishers and leading critics, mainly from the German-speaking countries. For the first time after the war Polish composers began to receive commissions from the West and their works were performed at contemporary music concerts and festivals. The German company Hermann Moeck added the latest Polish compositions to its catalogue.

As an Autumn participant since 1960, I became, involuntarily, a witness to this encounter between the East and the West. I listened to pieces the extraordinary nature of which was fascinating to me. It seemed to me natural that composers were using means which until recently would not have been considered music and were writing works that outraged conservative listeners. It seemed natural to me that the older generations adapted to this change, switching almost overnight to serialism, pointillism and

aleatory technique. This was the case of 63-year-old Bolesław Szabelski (in *Sonnets* for orchestra, 1958), 51-year-old Grażyna Bacewicz (in String Quartet no. 6, 1960), and even staunch supporters of tradition, like 64-year-old Tadeusz Szeligowski (in Piano Trio). A relatively young man in this group was 48-year-old Witold Lutosławski, who in 1961 introduced the aleatory technique in his *Venetian Games*, breaking with the style of not only Concerto for Orchestra but also *Funeral Music*.

Émigré composers behaved in a completely different manner. The new techniques did not seem attractive to Aleksander Tansman, Michał Spisak or Antoni Szałowski in France, Michał Kondracki and the Łabuński brothers in the USA or Roman Maciejewski and Andrzej Panufnik. We can learn what Panufnik thought about the novelties coming mainly from Darmstadt, Paris and Milan from the recently published correspondence with Zygmunt Mycielski.[8] There is no doubt—both thought the novelties were a dead end and sometimes even fraud. Yet at some point Mycielski capitulated, writing, at the age of 54, his serial Symphony no. 2.

I would not like anyone to see my words as a charge of opportunism directed against my older colleagues. They simply found themselves in a situation which posed unusual challenges to them. In any case, they were not the first. When Sergei Diaghilev arrived in Paris in the late 1900s, he unequivocally let "his composers"—primarily Igor Stravinsky—know that if they wrote music similar to the one written by the French, they stood no chance for arousing any great interest. And then came *The Rite of Spring*...

In the 1950s composers aware of the fact that only the avant-garde had any chance for arousing people's interest included Mauricio Kagel and György Ligeti. In Ligeti's case in particular we can see how clearly his language changed after his escape from Hungary. A similar experience was that of those who went to the ISCM Polish Section's festivals, like, for example, Lutosławski.

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8 *Zygmunt Mycielski – Andrzej Panufnik: Korespondencja. Część 1: Lata 1949–1969* [Zygmunt Mycielski – Andrzej Panufnik: Correspondence. Part I: 1949–1969], ed. Beata Bolesławska-Lewandowska (Warszawa: Instytut Sztuki PAN, 2016).

Years later Ligeti called the avant-garde every name under the sun, but if he had not joined it, he would not have found himself in such a prominent position in musical life at the time. Times were conducive to experimentation. Now Polish composers, too, had a chance to experiment. Thus, Polish music became an oasis in the otherwise uninteresting post-Soviet sphere.

The Cold War also influenced Polish audiences. They welcomed new music much more warmly than Western audiences. Concert halls were full—during the first Warsaw Autumns even more than full. The craziest compositional ideas were regarded as breaths of freedom and accepted with interest as fruit that had until recently been "forbidden."

Particularly refreshing were contacts with West Germany. First of all, this was because traditionally there were more musical centres in Germany than elsewhere. While in the inter-war period the power of German musical life was determined by orchestras and opera houses, now they were joined by a new potentate, key to new music, i.e. radio stations.

Under the Marshall Plan the network of German radio stations was rebuilt and was to play a key role in the re-education of the Germans. Each of these radio stations had an orchestra. Thanks first to the American financing and then their own income from licence fees—which rose with the country's economic miracle—the ensembles were well-paid and could pursue their bosses' repertoire policy without being concerned about the proceeds from ticket sales. In addition, electronic music studios were set up at the radio stations, starting with the Cologne station. Soon the same happened in Poland, when Józef Patkowski's initiative made it possible to open such a studio in Warsaw (in America, with its commercial radio stations, only universities could afford to create such luxury conditions for composers). The station most active in its support for new music was the Südwestrundfunk (SWF), which became involved with the previously chamber-scale Donaueschingen festivals. As early as in 1959 new music from Poland was represented there by Włodzimierz Kotoński, and in 1960 the composer attracting particular attention was Krzysztof Penderecki with the premiere of his *Anaklasis*.

Such repertoire rarely appeared in the programmes of ordinary subscription concerts and if it did appear, there were usually protests from the

audience and the critics. Young rebels were, therefore, given other opportunities to work in the form of new music festivals and radio concerts, which was facilitated by the post-war economic boom and a policy of transferring huge sums to phenomena hitherto found on the margins in art. Tradition-demolishing music was intensely promoted, with its composers being provided with very decent financial conditions—commissions, royalties, scholarships. I remember going in the 1980s to various festivals—for example to Witten, a festival under the aegis of the Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR)—and how we often complained about its programme full of "modernity," which in the meantime had become petrified, but at the same time enjoyed the pleasures courtesy of the generous organisers.

Thanks to the radio stations, when in 1967 the truth about the financing of the Congress for Cultural Freedom by the CIA came to light, this caused no serious perturbations in musical circles. Numerous artists taking advantage of the Congress' funds (mainly coming from the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations), and unaware of their sources, found themselves in a difficult situation, as the opinion about the CIA in their milieu was very low. There was no longer reason to keep the Congress and two years later it was disbanded. By that time the avant-garde had acquired its own, European patrons.

Many Polish musicians began to visit Darmstadt in 1957. Sometimes passport formalities were prolonged for such a long time that a planned trip did not take place in the end, but this could hardly be regarded as a deliberate attempt to block contacts. To put it simply—the authorities generally did not accommodate the citizens, creating a wall of bureaucratic obstacles making it difficult to cross the Iron Curtain. I experienced this personally, when in 1968 I was late for a scholarship with Nadia Boulanger in Paris because of such obstacles.

On the one side—the authorities or the government, and in practice—money. On the other side of "great politics"—specific individuals with different experiences whose commitment would be key to the course of events and fate of various persons. In 1956 Józef Patkowski went to a musicological congress in Hamburg. He met there Wolfgang Ziółkowski, professor at the city's School of Music and Theatre.

Ziółkowski was a Polish violinist born in Rhineland, who during the Second World War found himself in a terrible situation of a German Pole. The two men became friends; both cared about Polish music, but each had different possibilities. Ziółkowski was well acquainted with Hermann Moeck, one of many German music publishers and a producer of recorders. Soon Moeck came to the 2nd Warsaw Autumn and discussed with members of the union possibilities for collaboration beneficial to both sides. He came back to Germany with a permit from the Ministry of Culture and Art to officially represent Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne (PWM Edition) in the Federal Republic of Germany and—consequently—"in the West." This led to the publication of the so-called *Polonia Edition* of Polish orchestral music, as part of which Moeck published a catalogue of works issued by PWM.[9]

Ziółkowski once told me: "We had to choose—there were two—and Penderecki was chosen." We meaning who? I do not know, because I did not ask specifically. Perhaps it was Moeck and I, perhaps someone else. In any case, as part of an "opening up to Poland" and in a favourable atmosphere, Polish music was brought to the fore, with Krzysztof Penderecki being the centre of focus. In this centre was another important figure in an official position, i.e. Otto Tomek, the boss of the music section of the WDR. Years later he recalled:

> The artistic and financial capabilities of the WDR were practically unlimited at the time, so I had no problem obtaining a contract for a composition. ...The then director of the WDR, Klaus von Bismarck, strongly supported the plan, as he was personally very interested in Polish-German reconciliation, which during the Cold War seemed rather utopian. But music made it possible.[10]

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9 For more on the subject, see Sebastian Borchers, "Wgląd do polsko-niemieckiej relacji w muzyce współczesnej 1956–1976 w tle współpracy kompozytorów polskich z instytucjami muzycznymi w NRF i NRD" [Insight into Polish-German relations in contemporary music 1956–1976 in the light of the cooperation of Polish composers with music institutions in the FRG and the GDR] in *W kręgu kultury PRL. Muzyka. Konteksty* [In the Circle of Culture of the Polish People's Republic. Music. Contexts], eds. Karolina Bittner, Dorota Skotarczak (Poznań: Instytut Historii UAM, 2016), 79–90.

10 Otto Tomek, "Nowa muzyka i zimna wojna" [New Music and Cold War], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 47 (2008).

This led to the writing of *St. Luke Passion*. From a ghetto of new music Penderecki jumped onto a higher level. He already had under his belt the *Threnody*, the title of which brilliantly incorporated (his) music into the political landscape of the Cold War and the horror of a nuclear war.

Looking for other traces of the impact of the government's interests on music or musicians, we find such episodes as Krzysztof Penderecki's professorship at Yale—brief but fitting in with the policy of attracting outstanding figures from Eastern Europe to the Western elites. Of importance were also "goodwill tours" of the United States organised by the Department of State—those who were able to take advantage of them included Witold Lutosławski, Marek Stachowski and Zbigniew Bujarski.

In the East the avant-garde supported the "myth of freedom" in the West. In fact, Pierre Boulez functioned as a "French Khrennikov," for those who did not subscribe to his views could forget about having a career in France. An example is Henri Dutilleux, who was marginalised for many years.

The government welcomed the successes of Polish composers in Western Europe, because they could be presented as achievements of the socialist cultural policy. The extent to which the authorities realised what an asset this was for Poland is something we realised during the martial law period, when the authorities—General Jaruzelski and the Military Council of National Salvation—even insisted on the organisation of the festival, which in the view of the neighbouring socialist countries deserved only ideological condemnation.

Despite the political tension between the two countries, people in Poland were aware of the international significance of the German new music circles. On the other hand, in West Germany, impressed by the atmosphere of the Warsaw Autumn and recognising the originality of the Polish composers' oeuvre, Polish composers could hope for considerable support and interest. Recognition from these circles were decisive in establishing the reputation of the Polish School in the world.

Someone might ponder on the paradoxical nature of the link between clusters or glissandi and "great politics." Yet this was indeed the case. In fact, there was nothing strange about it. After all, centuries earlier disputes

over compositional techniques—polyphony or homophony—also involved politicians. True, they were ecclesiastical rather than secular, but, taking a broader look at this—in those days, too, it was about views.

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**ABSTRACT**

*The Impact of the Cold War on the Polish School of Composition*

Polish distinctiveness in music, sporadically recorded from the 18th century onwards, did not really make its presence felt until the emergence of the so-called Polish School of Composition in the 1960s. This was caused, however, not only by the artistic value of the works written by Polish composers at the time,

**STRESZCZENIE**

*Wpływ zimnej wojny na polską szkołę kompozytorską*

Polska odrębność w muzyce, sporadycznie odnotowywana od XVIII wieku, na dobre zaistniała dopiero wraz z tzw. polską szkołą kompozytorską w latach 60. minionego wieku. Powodem tego była jednak nie tylko artystyczna wartość dzieł tworzonych wówczas przez polskich kompozytorów, ale również sytuacja

but also the political situation, specifically — the Cold War between the East and the West. At that time Poland was a sensation as an oasis of Western art in the East.

**KEYWORDS** Polish School of Composition, Cold War, music and politics, Polish-German relations

polityczna, a konkretnie — zimna wojna między Wschodem i Zachodem. Polska budziła bowiem sensację jako oaza zachodniej sztuki na obszarze wschodnim.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE** polska szkoła kompozytorska, zimna wojna, muzyka i polityka, relacje polsko-niemieckie