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AN ETHNOMUSICOLOGIST BETWEEN THE STAGE AND THE JURY TABLE. THE POLISH CASE

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Summary (abstract):

In the ethnomusicologists' activity a phenomenon of traditional music competitions becoming the main medium of researchers' influence on the subject under study. Many ethnomusicologists saw there an opportunity to encourage musicians and singers to cultivate rare and archaic phenomena, while limiting the influx of new ones. But from the other hand the form of competition, requiring the presence of an "expert" and often with multi-stage structure, surrounded by coaches and consultants, engaged numerous ethnomusicologists, occupying their time and thought, while significantly changing relations between the researcher and the subject, and the perception of the study subject by ethnomusicologist. This in turn impacted scientific activity of ethnomusicologist and the consciousness of performers, as well as their repertoire. The Polish case is a good example to discuss this phenomenon, where it still lives on for many years, making it an attractive study subject.

Keywords: *ethnomusicologist, traditional music, competitions, festivals, changes of traditional music.*

When browsing through the collections of Polish documentalists of traditional music, almost from the very beginning we may notice quite frequent lamenting of its looming demise. Undoubtedly, to a large extent it was an expression of a nostalgia for the disappearing world, common in many researchers of culture. However, in the situation of Polish society, which from the end of the 18th century until the end of the I World War was devoid of state sovereignty, this documenting and popularization of the phenomena of local culture was inscribed in the strategy of preservation of national identity, and each change in culture was regarded as a threat to the existence of the nation. It is no wonder then that researchers of musical traditions developed a feeling of a special social role, which was not abated after the independence was regained. Quite to the contrary – musicologists and musicians interested in the traditional music of the interbellum period quite often allowed themselves to denounce phenomena which, in their view, were detrimental for the tradition, and to publish again and again appeals to the society. Stanisław Mierczyński, who was especially active in this field, saw here the potential for activity of national agendas, schools, churches, social organizations or folk theatres, which should follow the still remembered local traditions, including publications. In 1934 he wrote that:

„The labour of revival and preservation of our own music and song in the country will be hard, often requiring studies of musical past of a given area, because the currently distributed melodies should not stray away in their character and form from the old ones. A certain help in this respect for the organizers of the above-mentioned action could be the published collections of songs and melodies of our country (...). Further work, after the collection and inspection of materials regarding music, song and rituals of a given area, would mainly consist in creation of choral ensembles, folk bands, whereas in many cases certain instruments would need to be rejected – those

that have recently become fashionable – and the instruments of old or the disappearing ones reintroduced, like in many areas koza [bagpipe], in others – the hurdy-gurdy etc.”ⁱ

These and similar appeals were reflected in a trend dynamically developing already in 1930s of scenic presentation of folk theatres and folk music festivals, which were influenced undoubtedly by the ethnomusicologists through their publications and speeches.

This influence increased in Poland after the II World War, when – due to political changes in our part of Europe – the Polish United Worker’s Party, a puppet organization of the Soviet Union, came to power. Following the Soviet examples, the communist ideologues strived to widely engage all professional groups in the political and social reconstruction of the country. The ethnomusicologists were expected to, among others:

- 1) Document the whole repertoire before the planned quick disappearance of musical folklore, resulting from changes of social and economic relations,
- 2) Support with repertoire the amateur and professional artistic community, which in turn was being coaxed to mass-stylize the musical folklore; it was to be an interim solution in the process of building of a new, socially engaged popular music,
- 3) Ensure expert support in staging and styling of folklore, which would lead to its control and centralization.

Despite the political attempts the musical culture did not disappear and the collection of records, started in the 1940s, still goes on. In their turn, amateur and professional artistic communities, freed from the ideological pressure, gradually emancipated themselves and today only seldom use the patterns of traditional music, or just keep to the patterns acquired during the first 25 years of cooperation with the academic community. However, surprisingly good – despite the initially infrequent activitiesⁱⁱ – the expert activity of ethnomusicologists was accepted on the grounds of festivals, giving a wide possibility to influence the shape of cultivated musical traditions.

It became possible due to the fact that the post-war festivals from the very outset were forced into the straitjacket of the competition, usually preceded by preliminaries on a local level. The competition formula was initially criticized, as exemplified by the review of Włodzimierz Kotoński of the musical competition of the Podhale highlanders:

„In the view of the majority of the performers and people who are close to those affairs, questioned by me, this show should above all be a show, a display, and only the a competition (one could suppose that from the name of the event). Thus, the focus in this display should be on the propaganda part. Consequently each of the bands taking part in the competition, even the weakest one, should be awarded some sort of a prize, however small. And in general, instead of establishing consecutive places, all bands should rather be qualified in a way that is practiced in festivals – to group I, II and III (prizes). There should in no way be such a difference between the first prize (...) and the further ones. The bands which achieved 5th or 6th place were not so much worse in playing level than the first band, and the prizes they received were often worthless. [...]. These kinds of prizes, and then ignoring the bands which did not receive the prizes, caused disappointment in many highlanders, many of whom went home with a strong conviction that they would never again take part in such competitions”.ⁱⁱⁱ

This disappointment and turning away from festivals seems to be a constant element of such events, which we know not only from many examples of local festivals, but also what in the Podhale context, forty years after Kotoński, was described also by Timothy J. Cooley^{iv}. In fact, really the generation of musicologists of the time (among others, Jadwiga and Marian Sobieski) did not see threat in the form of competition, as well as they didn’t see anything wrong in a repertoire exchange during all-Poland festivals between performers from different regions^v. What they saw in competitions was a great opportunity to encourage musicians and singers to cultivate rare and archaic phenomena and to limit the influx of new ones, which they treated – together with

documenting – as their special mission, which, truth be told, was successful to a certain extent. In 1955, probably purposefully referring to the idea of Stanisław Mierczyński, Marian Sobieski wrote enthusiastically: “Encouraged by us, the traditional musicians again started to play sierszeńkas, mazankas, marynias and the wedding bagpipe”^{vi}. In a report about ethnomusicological activity within the National Art Institute, he pointed out that:

“A significant activity, occupying to a large extent our single unit in Poland, was providing consultancy. It was used mainly by regional bands, to whom we provided melodies and dance descriptions, helped in preparation of stage choreography and scenes related to the elements of rites or dance”^{vii}.

Judging the activity of Jadwiga and Marian Sobieski at the turn of the 1950s, Ludwik Bielawski wrote: “The main goal of all efforts was to popularize and reactivate the folk music among the folk themselves, mainly by the dissemination of authentic recordings”^{viii}. It is no wonder then that Jadwiga Sobieska had similar hopes for the folklore festivals, which were to activate the authentic folklore in the field^{ix} by performing a certain selection of the traditional communication, aimed at promotion of its most precious values^x. Also currently ethnomusicologists ascribe significant functions to festivals – Piotr Dahlig, an extremely active observer of such events over the last 30 years, states that: “The reviews and competitions have a two-way result: the bands start to converge by mutual observation (i.e., the playing level starts to even out), but also the internal leaders of bands are constantly mobilized to come up with new ideas”^{xi}.

In reality, singers and musicians who found their place in such events, after the first phase of spontaneous and off-the-cuff scenic behaviour, in the repeated competitive situation and in the course of gaining positive or negative experiences were faced with what the game theory calls an iterated prisoner’s dilemma. In this case we might talk about the prisoners of the competition’s context, where not only the rules of aesthetics of the community itself apply (the aesthetics of folklore), but also – as noted by Jan Stęszewski in the case of all scenic presentation of musical folklore – the aesthetics of the artistic movement or aesthetics of the audience^{xii} (in our defined case of festivals – mainly of ethnomusicologists in the jury panel).

The retaining of a privileged and attractive – award-winning – position is dependent not only on own productions, but also on productions of competitors, who may not only present folklore remembered by the performer or their predecessors, but also reach back to repertoire learned from more distant sources. In this situation the most effective strategy ensuring if not success, then at least equilibrium, is the protection of own repertoire^{xiii}, and on the other hand – stretching one’s activities closer and closer to the border of the hoax, especially that the probability of being exposed is small, and the penalty is not too painful. It was instinctively noticed and described by the contemporary documentalist of traditional music and essayist, Andrzej Bieńkowski:

„And musicians are intelligent. They uncannily feel who likes what and adapt quickly to the suggestions of ethnographers or musicologists, in order to do well in the folkloristic competition and turn a penny. One of the fiddlers from the Lubelskie region told me during a competition in Kazimierz: “In the old time, sir, were the musics [parties] and the weddings, and today is the time of folklores, so during folklores we play in a totally different way”. [...] And in this way „folklores” become just an amateur activity, possibly valuable and commendable, but referring to different cultural and aesthetical values. Such amateur activity, usually affiliated with the local community centre, is manned with instructors and manuals full of rules: how to behave, play, what to sing and how. The cycle turns a full circle, because it is the city which forces upon the country what is valuable and what is not in its (city’s) belief. And the country remains without its own criteria, fully dependent on the opinion of an activist from the city. I saw rehearsals of singer ensembles, where women before an important folklore festivals were drilled in singing by an instructor with a

stopwatch. The result was in itself interesting, but was it not just a normal (if better-than-average) amateur choir, and not a village singing group?”^{xiv}

Indeed throughout Poland one can observe a discreet, and usually unnoticed by the jury, engineering of the musical traditional culture^{xv} - by selection or book-based supplementing of melodies, tweaking of lyrics or even re-educating the recent sax and accordion players as village fiddlers or harmonium players. Quite often the “improvers of traditional culture” include, apart from ethnographers, the graduates of musicology or other musical faculties. They are aided by the meticulously observed regulations of festivals, minutes of the jury and reviews of competition presentations, treated by the instructors as guidelines for limitations and trends in force.^{xvi} One of the examples is a limitation, found in the regulation of one of the festivals, of maximum three people in a band^{xvii}, a detailed list of instruments deemed to be traditional^{xviii}, as well as a perpetual ban on the accordion, defined in the rules of the 18th Festival of Traditional Bands and Singers in Kazimierz Dolny^{xix}. It is also not a random occurrence that a year after the main prize in Kazimierz Dolny festival went to a group performing funeral songs, the next year saw a real deluge of such presentations^{xx}. A constant element of festivals is the presentation of unique rite and ballad songs, which currently remain only in the memories of single representatives of rural communities, and were reminded to bands by suggestions of festival jury panels, included in consecutive regulations^{xxi}.

A typical system of cooperation between the bands and instructors specializing in the traditional repertoire and musical style is thus described by Piotr Dahlig:

„With the bands themselves, especially the singing ensembles, instructors meet a few times a year. They have a decisive impact on the selection of repertoire for prestigious reviews and competitions. Apart from the oral tradition, the bands sometimes learn songs from tape recording of some older local singer. The instructor must convince the singers’ groups about the value of “protracted melodies” of old ritual songs, which are usually rejected by the bands, at least in terms of melodies. The instructor often encourages the performers to find a new, i.e. still unused, repertoire, and not settle for the texts already copied in songbooks. The instructors themselves perform field research...”^{xxii}

According to Tomasz Rokosz, who refers to the idea of Walter Ong^{xxiii} and Walter Wiora^{xxiv}, the system described above lead to profound changes, reaching down to the core of the traditional musical culture:

„It happens that as a result of cooperation with folklore activists, a „book” version of folklore is created. There are known cases of “improvement” of archaic vocal forms, instructing the performers on dialects, playing styles and instruments. The use of books of Oskar Kolberg, songbooks and printed copies is becoming commonplace – this leads to fundamental change in traditional culture from originally oral to written, with all consequences of that phenomenon. The carriers of authentic folklore were submerged in primeval unawareness, whereas the examples provided above bear witness to change of this situation. It seems justified to state that in the case of the second life of folklore we are dealing with *folklorism* – we are witnessing the reflection of performers over their own culture, to a certain extent even the study of culture by the band leaders. [...] The members of rural singers’ ensembles remain under the influence of aesthetics of folklore in the form which is closest to the source. The value is perceived in the already described: traditional repertoire, dialectal pronunciation, traditional vocal techniques. It also has to be added that the valuing done by the performers is related to external assessment (jurors in festivals), to which they are subjected. Thus, those elements are deemed valuable which ensure stage success and awards^{xxv}.”

Sometimes the eagerness to satisfy the wishes of ethnomusicologists assessing the folklore presentations is leading to caricature. A good example is a quote from a singer in the Meto family band, cited by Andrzej Bieńkowski:

„We had a master of arts coming to us from the city of Łódź, he got together all the singers and told us to sing, so we sang songs we knew from our fathers, but he interrupted us: - No, no, don't sing that, it's from a different region – so we sang again, and he goes: -- it's not the way it should be sang, you have to change the last verse... Finally he told the band to play. When he saw the bass that my husband used to play throughout his entire life, he shouted: What? Four pegs? Remove one and seal the hole, in this region basses had three strings.”^{xxvi}

Usually ethnomusicologists and folklore activists in their opinions about the consequences of festival activities stress only the positive sides, i.e. the return to archaic forms and their popularization. This results mainly from the observation of the process from the perspective of the jury table, contacts and interviews with the laureates of festival, who in the eyes of the researchers are the most valuable informants, and finally in “hidden” or conscious ideological programs. Meanwhile, there is also the other side to this activity, barely noted by Włodzimierz Kotoński, cited above – discouragement or even abandonment of practicing of traditional repertoire and performance styles by persons who are not distinguished in said festivals and reviews. Quite often lack of award does not equate to “non-authenticity” or “non-traditionality”, or low quality of performance – the formula of the competition by itself limits the number of available prizes. At the same time the level of preservation of elements of traditional music culture that are preferred in competitions (repertoire related to rituals or deemed archaic; specific scales and melodic solutions, interesting rhythmic and agogic phenomena, timbre and performance mannerisms, and finally instruments and even the outfit in which the repertoire is presented^{xxvii}) is uneven, and even within the frames of relatively small regions considerable differences are observed. And in festival competitions, which is especially visible in the Kazimierz Dolny festival, bands from various regions and social groups meet. In reality, the awarded prizes consist from the outset of a collection of results of a function, dependent mainly on the level of preservation of tradition of a given community, further – the detail of reconstruction, and only then on the performance skill. This goes in a way against the competition's formula, which by its nature bears towards the comparison of mainly skill, towards which end similar phenomena are grouped (regional federations, groups, leagues, rankings), and the chances are balanced out (handicaps). Against this background, the competitions of traditional music are an absolutely separate phenomenon, they are governed by their specific rules. These rules – by their uniqueness – are often misunderstood in communities, breed frustration and confusion. It would be naïve to believe that perennial losers will affirm the supremacy of performers from other regions, whose music is made according to alien rules, sometimes conflicting with those cultivated by them. The verdict of the jury becomes incomprehensible and unacceptable, and the sustained defeats cause frustration, change of profile of activity or its full rejection. A long-term lack of expected results also causes the patron and donors to turn away from the performers. As pointed out by Tomasz Rokosz,

„As may be judged from the words of Nina Nikołajuk, a multiple laureate of the Festival of Traditional Bands and Singers in Kazimierz, the bands are subject to a strong external pressure: ‘those that do not receive awards, are disbanded, the community stops to support them’”^{xxviii}.

Meanwhile, as observed by Piotr Dahling,

„The Singer groups are created in a community often as a means of protest against the indifference or passiveness of the closest society. That is why the signal of support from outside of local

community has a strong psychological impact. In turn, a hasty criticism from the outside, e.g. in competitions, may lead to the disintegration of the band^{xxix}.

In the awarded communities the folklore activity gains an increasing support. Thus, from a national perspective, the disproportion grows between the regions, and the music-making communities from the less traditional regions, and in effect less-awarded ones, are sliding into the genre of party music.

In the opinion of Andrzej Bieńkowski folklore festivals had one more dimension, related to the fact of giving great importance to archaic phenomena, as well as to the fact that the context of competition required shortening and condensing of traditional behaviours both in time and space^{xxx}:

„When the ‘folklores’ started (in the country, it is the name by which people call festivals and reviews), it was the fiddlers of the 3rd group [i.e., those lowest in the rank, playing only for themselves or in *jams*, organized only for the pleasure of playing or for a treat – T.N.]. The wedding fiddlers had to adjust their repertoire and playing to the tastes of wedding guests, otherwise they would not be invited. The musicians of the 3rd group were not subject to this pressure, they played only for themselves and in a way ‘petrified’ their skills from the past, carrying them to the present in a relatively unchanged form. Their abilities are far inferior to the skills of fiddlers from the 1st group [the best and most expensive ones, who played in weddings and better parties – T.N.]. The fiddlers of the 3rd groups retained the way of playing from many years ago, but on the other hand their ability to ‘vary an oberek’ (in the country it is the basic criterion of assessment of a fiddler’s skill) are limited. I often feel that these limited abilities make these musicians so valued in the city, because their playing responds well to the fad of crudeness and rawness. As it appears, the tastes of the city and the country do not converge by a wide margin.”^{xxxi}.

Simultaneously, the fate of the musical culture rooted in the peasant culture is sealed. The competitions and festivals of traditional music, which Jan Stęszewski included in the “galvanizing” trend, only postponed, and keep postponing, inevitable processes, bringing temporary rise to the dying or dead traditions in their basic form^{xxxii}. It seems that the communities of folklore activists, including those engaged in the festival movement, are becoming increasingly aware of that, which is reflected in the appearance and rise in importance of initiatives similar to reviews of reconstructed folk music. This phenomenon accompanies the increase in interest, over the last 20 years, of musical folklore in its primary form among the high school and university youth, together with the budding tradition-inspired and *in crudo* music publishing industry, builders of traditional instruments, musical essays, and above all – workshop form of making music.

Within these trends, an ever growing group are the representatives of the youngest generation of Polish ethnomusicologists, preparing and publishing recordings, articles and popularization brochures, creating and recording artistic projects, finally – teaching in ethnomusicological workshops, and... taking part in festivals as jurors. In this way, it seems, this particularly “applied” dimension of ethnomusicology, initiated by popularization publications and festivals, will not only be prolonged into the future, but it will most probably grow. Consequently, the impact of ethnomusicologists on their environment related to the traditional culture will grow, causing more profound modifications of the traditional culture itself.

ⁱ Stanisław Mierczyński. *Zachowajmy rodzimą pieśń i muzykę na wsi*. „Teatr Ludowy” 1934, no. 3, p. 28.

ⁱⁱ Polish Music Festival (Warsaw 1949), First Podhale Competitive Display of Highlander Musics (Zakopane 1952), Regional Folk Band Competition (Łódź 1957), 2nd All-Poland Folk Singer and Dancer Competition (Kielce 1959), Great All-Poland Festival of Music, Song and Dance with 3rd All-Poland Festival of Folk Bands, Singers and Dancers (Łódź 1961), or finally the Festival of Traditional Bands and Singers (Kazimierz Dolny 1967).

ⁱⁱⁱ Włodzimierz Kotoński. *Po konkursie kapel góralskich w Zakopanem*. „Muzyka”, 1952, vol. 28–29, no. 7–8, pp. 85–86.

- ^{iv} Timothy J. Cooley. *Authentic Troupes and Inauthentic Tropes: Performance Practice In Górale Music*, „Polish Music Journal” 1998, vol. 1, no. 1, http://www.usc.edu/dept/polish_music/PMJ/issue/1.1.98/gorale.
- ^v Jadwiga Sobieska. *Jeszcze na marginesie festiwalu*. In: Jadwiga and Marian Sobieski, *Polska muzyka ludowa i jej problemy. Wybór prac pod redakcją Ludwika Bielawskiego*. Kraków: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1973, pp. 543–549.
- ^{vi} Marian Sobieski. *Dorobek badań folkloru muzycznego w dziesięcioleciu*. In: Jadwiga i Marian Sobieski, op. cit., p. 552.
- ^{vii} Ibid., p. 565.
- ^{viii} Ludwik Bielawski. *Działalność Jadwigi i Mariana Sobieskich na polu dokumentacji i badań polskiej muzyki ludowej*. In: Jadwiga and Marian Sobieski, op. cit., p. 30.
- ^{ix} Jadwiga Sobieska. *Folklor muzyczny w dwudziestoleciu*. In: Jadwiga i Marian Sobieski, op. cit., pp. 571–572.
- ^x Violetta Monika Murawska. *Stereotypy a rzeczywistość. Z badań nad kulturą muzyczną północnej Chełmszczyzny*. M.A. thesis, Warsaw, Institute of Musicology of the University of Warsaw, 2003, p. 98.
- ^{xi} Piotr Dahlig. *Tradycje muzyczne a ich przemiany. Między kulturą ludową, popularną i elitarną Polski międzywojennej*. Warsaw: Art Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences, 1998, p. 289.
- ^{xii} Jan Stęszewski. *Rola folkloru muzycznego w kulturze okresu powojennego*. „Muzyka” 1975, vol. 78, no. 3, p. 53.
- ^{xiii} Violetta Monika Murawska, op. cit., p. 100.
- ^{xiv} Andrzej Bieńkowski. *Ostatni wiejscy muzykanci: ludzie, obyczaje, muzyka*. Warsaw: Prószyński i S-ka, 2001, p. 16.
- ^{xv} Jadwiga Sobieska. *Kazimierskie święto folkloru*. In: *Festiwal kapel i śpiewaków ludowych w Kazimierzu Dolnym 1967–1987*. Lublin: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1989, p. 14.
- ^{xvi} Ibid., s. 14. Andrzej Sar. *Funkcje Festiwalu Kapel i Śpiewaków Ludowych w Kazimierzu nad Wisłą z perspektywy dokumentacji festiwalowej*. MA thesis, Warsaw, Institute of Musicology of the University of Warsaw, 2010, pp. 24–25, 26.
- ^{xvii} „Praca Świetlicowa” 1957, no. 3, p. 47.
- ^{xviii} Alfons Pellowski. *Festiwal jakich mało*. „Poradnik Muzyczny” 1961, no. 9, p. 6.
- ^{xix} Andrzej Sar, op. cit., p. 16.
- ^{xx} Ibid., p. 22.
- ^{xxi} Jadwiga Sobieska. *Kazimierskie święto folkloru*. Op. cit., p. 14. Tomasz Rokosz, *Od folkloru do folku. Metamorfozy pieśni tradycyjnych we współczesnej kulturze*. Siedlce: Wydawnictwo Akademii Podlaskiej, 2009, s. 73. Comp. also: Anna Czekanowska. *To Return or just Escape: On New Trends in East-Central Europe. Some Experiences of Ethnomusicologist*. In: *Pathways of Ethnomusicology*, Warsaw: Institute of Musicology of the University of Warsaw, Warsaw Scientific Association, Polish Academy of Sciences, 2000, pp. 231–244.
- ^{xxii} Piotr Dahlig, op. cit., p. 288.
- ^{xxiii} Walter Ong. *Orality and literacy: the Technologizing of a Word*. transl. Józef Japola, Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictw Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 1992, p. 29.
- ^{xxiv} Walter Wiora. *Der Untergang des Volksliedes und sein Zweites Dasein*. „Musikalische Zeitfragen: Das Volkslied heute” Kassel 1959, vol. 7, pp. XX, 9–25.
- ^{xxv} Tomasz Rokosz, op. cit., pp. 67–68, 71.
- ^{xxvi} Andrzej Bieńkowski, op. cit., p. 15.
- ^{xxvii} Compare: Jadwiga Sobieska. *Kazimierskie święto folkloru*, op. cit., pp. 12–15.
- ^{xxviii} Tomasz Rokosz, op. cit., p. 71.
- ^{xxix} Piotr Dahlig, op. cit., p. 289.
- ^{xxx} Jan Stęszewski, op. cit., p. 52.
- ^{xxxi} Andrzej Bieńkowski, op. cit., p. 14.
- ^{xxxii} Jan Stęszewski, op. cit., p. 51–52.

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