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## FACING A NEW REALITY: POLISH COMPOSERS IN THE FIRST YEARS AFTER 1945<sup>1</sup>

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### **Summary:**

*After the WW2 Poland was included into the Soviet zone of political control. The cultural policy of the communist party was soon to shadow the musical life in Poland. But the first years after 1945 was the time of an enormous activity in recreating – after the war pounding – the structures for musical organisations and building the shapes for musical life in the country. Already in 1945 there were created such institutions as Polish Music Publishers (PWM Edition) and the Polish Composers' Union – both to have a great impact on the artistic musical life for the following decades. Especially the years up to 1948 were of particular importance for creating institutions and for presenting important musical works. But together with tightening the political control, symbolised by imposing the doctrine of socialist realism in music (1949), the situation became much more difficult: composers lost their independence and the country plunged into the cultural isolation which lasted until the political thaw in 1956. The article aims to show the strategies that Polish composers took in the first years after WW2 to create both the organisational frames for their existence, and to compose ambitious and original music. The crucial time of “sinking into socialist realism” is presented using selected source materials – mainly the correspondence and speeches by the composer and music critic, Zygmunt Mycielski, President of the Polish Composers' Union in 1948–1950.*

**Keywords:** *Polish Composers' Union, Polish music after 1945, music and politics, music and ideology*

After the Second World War Poland was included into the Soviet zone of political control and the new political situation of the country was also soon to reflect on the cultural life. However, the first years after 1945 was most of all the time of an enormous activity in recreating – after the war pounding – the structures for musical organisations and building the shapes for musical life in the country. In the result, many musical institutions were established or re-established then, such as the Polish Composers' Union (ZKP), Polish Radio, the Polish Music Publishers (PWM Edition), several Philharmonic Halls and orchestras. This was possible thanks to the support of the newly-created Ministry of Culture of Art. As observed by Krzysztof Baculewski,

the post-war revitalisation of cultural life in its organisational, administrative (institutions) and artistic (the presentation of works, commissions, prizes) aspects was indeed made possible by the state, which in the new situation took upon itself the role of patron of culture and the arts.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Baculewski [2006], p. 47. For more about the role of the state in rebuilding musical life in Poland (and DDR) after the war in a context of relationships between the ruling party and the society of composers see also David G. Tompkins [2013].

This role of the state, however, was later to facilitate political control over the musical society, as well as over other artistic associations in Poland. It would soon turn out, that in the post-war reality of the Polish People's Republic associations of artists would serve the needs of the cultural policy pursued by Poland's communist government controlled by Moscow (though Poland did not become the part of the USSR, its government remained completely dependent from Kremlin). Therefore, artistic associations were treated as trade unions, modelled on Soviet examples. Through them the government wanted to control the creative process and works produced by artists. Granting government subsidies as well as a number of privileges (including retreats in artists' residences, allotments of flats, vouchers, decorations, access to government healthcare facilities, special pensions), the authorities expected in exchange that artists would fulfil the tasks assigned to them. In Poland, the Polish Writers' Union was founded in 1944 and the Polish Composers' Union followed one year later.

The Polish Composers' Union, acted during the National Congress of Composers held between 29 August and 1 September 1945 in Kraków<sup>3</sup>, was to play a substantial role on the musical scene in Poland for next several decades, enabling and facilitating – but also controlling – the whole field of musical creativity in the country. Thanks to its contact with the Ministry of Culture and Art on the one hand, and with such institutions as PWM Edition and the Polish Radio on the other, the successive boards of the Union had a power to give subsidies and commissions to their members, as well as to play main role in deciding which works should be performed, published and recorded. Nevertheless, from the very beginning, the Union's most important goal was indeed to protect the work of its members, ensure commissions and pay for them. It appeared soon, that a great part of state subsidies shall be given to commissioning music for amateur choirs and ensembles, as well as for mass songs. This corresponded with the idea of so-called “dissemination of music” (*upowszechnienie muzyki*), which meant popularizing it among broad, uneducated audience, on the contrary to the elitist, “bourgeois” character of music composed before communist era (as it was officially stated). However, the composers wanted to write all kinds of music and the successive boards of the Union indeed followed a very diplomatic path in their dealing with the Ministry of Culture in order to obtain funds for commissioning new works of all genres, usually asking the composers to apply for funds and to inform about their creative plans in advance. It was quite clear for them, that beside fulfilling the demands of the authorities, they shall continue composing according to their own concepts, styles and ideas.

Therefore, one of the goals of the boards of the PCU was to act in such a way, that would allow to secure truly artistic music instead of concentrating only on producing mass songs and cantatas, the genres considered by the authorities as most appropriate for the broad audience. Zygmunt Mycielski (1907–1987), one of the most important figures in the Polish Composers' Union in the late 1940s, in the letter to his fellow-composer Roman Palester (1907–1989) admitted that they (i.e. the Union) have money for commissioning works of a popularizing character and asked him to send something which could be used for such a purpose. He simply wanted to pay Palester for his work and that was the only possibility he saw, although he added openly:

I think, however, that in 1948, we will get something for CREATIVITY and then I sit here and in general I put myself there to look after it and then, within the limits of possible human power and artistic honesty, to separate this, to see and to do this with some artistic sense.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The capital city, Warsaw, was severely destroyed after the Uprising in 1944, therefore the cultural life started to be rebuild first in other cities, mainly Kraków and Łódź, where many artists moved. However, the official seat of the Polish Composers' Union was named Warsaw, also because all the society hope for fast recreation of the beloved capital city. Cf. Baculewski [2006].

<sup>4</sup> Zygmunt Mycielski to Roman Palester, 3 I 1948. Letters are not published, manuscripts are preserved in the Archive of Polish Composers, Warsaw University Library. All the distinctions in this and following letters come from Mycielski himself.

For Mycielski, who was a vice-President and the secretary of the board of the ZKP in 1947–1948 and the president of the Union in 1948–1950, it was obvious that as long as it is possible to use the situation to secure the rights of composers and the artistic quality of their music, it is worth talking to the authorities and also following some of their directions, at least concerning the idea of “dissemination of music”. In fact, the discussion about the status and role of music, also in the context of popularizing it among broader audience, as well as the role of musical education in the society was active in Poland already in the 1930s (c.f. Karol Szymanowski and his writings on the subject [Szymanowski, 1931]). Hence it came up quite naturally after 1945, in the new socio-political reality of Polish People’s Republic. It is worth noting, that newly-created musical journal *Ruch Muzyczny*, which was launched in late 1945 by PWM Edition and soon became the main platform for informing the readers about musical life in the country, published interesting polemics and burning discussions concerning both music and the role it was to play in the communist Poland. In the years 1945–1949 (when the journal was closed by the authorities) *Ruch Muzyczny* also reported broadly on all initiatives taken by the musical society, as well as on new musical works and the successes of Polish artists both in the country and abroad<sup>5</sup>. It was possible because in the first years after the Second World War (up to 1949), the political pressure seemed to be not yet an issue and the artists still enjoyed a certain amount of artistic freedom. The contact with Western countries was not only possible, but even cultivated for the sake of the so-called “propaganda of Polish music”. The state subsidies combined with a true enthusiasm of people who wanted to rebuild their country after the war, brought the revitalisation of many cultural institutions, which supported the structural organisation of musical life. Among them especially the foundation of new symphonic orchestras in several cities around the country were of particular significance as they encouraged composers to write for orchestra, giving them a real possibility for the immediate performance of their works (the situation not possible earlier, because of constant lack of professional orchestras in Poland). That was certainly the main reason that soon after the Second World War, for the first time in Polish history, orchestral music of all kinds and genres seemed to be in full bloom. This soon resulted in the appearance of significant and interesting works, reflecting many original and innovative tendencies. Such composers as Roman Palester, Grażyna Bacewicz (1909–1969), Andrzej Panufnik (1914–1991) and Witold Lutosławski (1913–1994), all debuting before the war, marked their artistic names at the end of 1940s, producing original compositions of a highly artistic values<sup>6</sup>.

Changes in the treatment of art and music in Poland began to appear in 1948 and were directly connected to the resolutions passed at the Soviet Composers’ Conference in Moscow in February 1948, which strongly attacked so called “formalist tendencies in Soviet music”. In his declaration presented at the conference, the General Secretary of the Soviet Composers’ Union and a zealot member of the communist party, Tikhon Khrennikov stated:

The Central Committee of our Party in its Resolution of 10 February 1948 severely branded the anti-democratic formalistic tendencies in Soviet music. The immediate reason for the intervention of the supreme Party organs into musical affairs was the new opera *Great Friendship* by Muradeli, staged by the Bolshoi Theater of the USSR in the days of the thirtieth anniversary of the October Revolution.

[...]

The Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) points out in its Resolution that formalistic distortions and anti-democratic tendencies have found their fullest expression in the works of such composers as Shostakovich, Prokofiev,

<sup>5</sup> In the first years in the journal there was a permanent section about Polish music performances abroad, including reports on music in the US. See Tadeusz Kassern, “Wrażenia amerykańskie”, *Ruch Muzyczny* No. 8–9 (1946), 10–13. With time, however, and especially since the beginning of 1948, there started to appear more articles on both Soviet music and issues regarding formalism and realism in music. Cf. *Ruch Muzyczny*, Vols. 1–5 (1945–49).

<sup>6</sup> For more about the development of symphony and symphonic music in Poland see Bolesławska [2019].

Khachaturian, Popov, Miaskovskii, Shebalin, and others. In the music of these composers we witness a revival of anti-realistic decadent influences calculated to destroy the principles of classical music. These tendencies are peculiar to the bourgeois movement of the era of imperialism: the rejection of melodiousness in music, neglect of vocal forms, infatuation with rhythmic and orchestral effects, the piling-up of noisy ear-splitting harmonies, intentional illogicality and unemotionality of music. All these tendencies lead in actual fact to the liquidation of music as one of the strongest expressions of human feelings and thoughts.<sup>7</sup>

He also attacked music critics:

The Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) notes an altogether intolerable condition of Soviet music criticism. Our critics have lost the most important quality of Russian progressive criticism. They have ceased to fight for the high aspirations of art, for the ideals of realistic and democratic art.<sup>8</sup>

Both then, composers and critics were obliged to work better to fulfil tasks assigned to them by the party, which meant following strictly the principles of the socialist realism in music. Soon the guidelines stated so clearly in Moscow were to spread over other countries within the Soviet bloc. As pointed out by David G. Tompkins:

This Union of Soviet Composers directly influenced its sister organizations in Poland and the GDR, as emissaries traveled to both countries and dispensed advice. Of course the concept of socialist realism had been more fully articulated in the USSR in both theory and in practice, and that combined with its role as hegemon meant that the Soviet perspective carried great weight.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, in May 1948 the Czechoslovakian capital Prague hosted the 2nd International Congress of Composers and Music Critics featuring about 70 delegates from Europe, the United States and Brazil, including representatives of the Soviet Union and a group of composers and musicologists from Poland. Discussions during the congress focused on an analysis of the state of music, with contributors constantly stressing the need to reach out to a wider audience. The composers were to get closer to the masses, e.g. by drawing on folk music in their works and by getting rid of “extreme subjectivism”, as it was stated in the congress’ Manifesto<sup>10</sup>. This was a clear signal of the entry of the socialist realism doctrine onto the international stage. Though called then a “method”, socialist realism was a purely ideological doctrine, which – introduced in the USSR in the 1930s by Maxim Gorky and Andrei Zhdanov – since 1948 would seriously affect the musical circles in countries within the USSR’s sphere of influence, including Poland.

In June 1948 the delegates from the USSR visited Polish Composers’ Union, and with the support of the Polish vice-Minister of Culture and Art, Włodzimierz Sokorski, presented speeches about formalism and realism in music. Mycielski, who organised the visit in charge of ZKP board, reported in the letter to his mother:

I write after a very hard day and evening ended with a discussion about musical formalism and the reception that I gave to our (Union) three Soviet guests (Shaporin, Khrennikov,

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<sup>7</sup> Declaration by Tikhon Khrennikov, as well as statements by Zhdanov and the condemned composers (Muradeli, Shostakovich, Khachaturian, Prokofiev) are available online at <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1947-2/zhdanov/zhdanov-texts/discussion-at-a-general-assembly-of-soviet-composers/> [accessed 20 February 2019]. The source for the online publication is Slonimsky [1971], pp. 1362–1376.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Tompkins [2013], p. 96.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Ruch Muzyczny*, No. 13/14, 1948, pp. 26–27.

Jarustowski) with ambassador Lebedev, the whole Soviet embassy, minister Sokorski and [unreadable word] (150 people). It stretched almost to the midnight (from 18th). [...] I briefly greeted them, and after their readings I only said – more or less – literally: “I thank our guests from the Soviet Union for their extremely interesting readings explaining to us so much of the current trends and artistic tendencies in the USSR.” After which I interrupted everything (discussion), inviting everyone to the buffet and announcing our concert tomorrow. The ambassador was dissatisfied and Sokorski too, although I told him – that after vodka the discussion about formalism in music would be easier. That is what happened indeed. [...] All this together is the first in our country big attack on contemporary music and rotten Western currents like Schoenberg and Berg, but also Stravinsky, etc.

Later I also had very interesting conversations in private with many party members. Now I am very concerned with all this issue. [...] The meeting, which I presided and which took place here under my company (almost personal), in practice leaves me very smashed. [...] I am very afraid for the fate and direction, and future atmosphere of the Polish Composers' Union – everyone will give up sooner or later...<sup>11</sup>.

The next step was the addition of the Musicological Section to the Polish Composers' Union, which took place in November 1948, as a precise implementation of the political recommendations coming straight from Moscow. The composers could not refuse the proposal to include musicologists in the Union, but they did everything they could to, on the one hand, prevent the incorporation from weakening the influence of composers on the organisation and on the other – to ensure the government's favour for the ZKP by accepting the musicologists. That is why mutual benefits of the unification were stressed and Mycielski, who was elected President of the Board of the PCU during the same Assembly, said in his inaugural speech:

The most important event for our association, which became a reality during this assembly, is the union of musicologists and composers within one organisational framework. We expect a lot from this collaboration. [...] We expect that musicologists will be interested in and adopt a position on the most important and urgent problems of the present reality. We expect that they will be active and participate broadly in the discussion into which composers have been drawn.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, the inclusion of musicologist was seen precisely as yet another sign of the tightening political control over the composers. Indeed, all this led to imposing the socialist realism as the only and obligatory aesthetic doctrine in music – as it was eventually stated at the National Conference of Composers and Music Critics, which took place between 5th and 8th August, 1949 in Łagów Lubuski (West Poland).<sup>13</sup> This date marks closing the period of public discussions about the possible directions music should take in the communist Poland and symbolizes the beginning of the era of socialist realism in Polish music. It also means, that after the Russians (the problems of Shostakovich and Prokofiev are commonly known, but also other Soviet composers, including Khachaturian, Muradeli, Miaskovskii and Shebalin, met strong “anti-formalistic” attack in 1948, as was presented above) it came to Polish composers to be subjected to the pressures of creating an engaged art, “national in content and socialist in form”. As analysed by Zofia Helman,

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<sup>11</sup> Zygmunt Mycielski to his mother, Maria Mycielska, 16 VI 1948. Unpublished letters collected in the Jagiellonian Library in Kraków, signature: Przyb. 35/50.

<sup>12</sup> Mycielski [1957], pp. 518–519.

<sup>13</sup> A broad study of both the genesis and effects of the socialist realism in Polish music is presented by Thomas [2005], pp. 40–79. The relationships between the musical society and communist authorities in Poland during the first years after the war were also discussed by Tompkins [2013], while an extensive analysis of socialism realism in the context of written documents and text were made by Wiczorek [2014]. About Łagów conference see also Bylander [2015].

According to the principles of the style called socialist realism, the content was supposed to be the fundamental expression of a musical work. Thus, forms that were closely connected to text were moved into the foreground: operas, cantatas, and especially songs for the masses. The music that realised the new content was supposed to be emotional, mobilising, optimistic, and “ideologically active”.<sup>14</sup>

In a word, the music of the new era of socialism was to serve the construction of that system and reach broad masses. Composers were required to write simple and uncomplicated music, using tonal language and referring as frequently as possible to Polish folk tunes, which was ostensibly supposed to lead to the creation of music of national content. All compositional attempts to search for a new musical language that belonged to the twentieth century, such as experiments in terms of sound, harmony and form were immediately met with accusations of formalism (the antithesis of realism) and an alliance with the decadent art of the West, and instantly condemned to artistic non-existence. Such works simply disappeared from concert programmes and the radio. The role of musicologists and music critics was crucial as they had to judge whether or not each work fulfilled the guidelines of a socialist art.

Facing a new reality, Polish composers tried to find their own ways to deal with the present situation. Zbigniew Turski (1908–1979) was the composer most strongly condemned in Łagów. His Symphony No. 2 “Olympic”, written in 1948 and awarded at the Olympic Composers’ Competition in London the same year, was blamed formalist and not suitable for the new era of socialist realism.<sup>15</sup> Turski, forced to make a speech in which he accepted all the criticism, never fully recovered artistically and concentrated mainly on composing incidental music in his later career<sup>16</sup>. Palester decided to remain in Paris for good and this decision caused that he was sentenced for artistic non-existence in Poland: the Board of the ZKP cancelled his membership of the Union and his music was officially banned. Panufnik decided to concentrate on re-arranging early Polish music, while his more ambitious works from the early 1950s, such as the *Symphony of Peace* (1951) and *Heroic Overture* (1952), despite their much simplified musical language compared to his works from the late 1940s (*Nocturne*, *Lullaby* and *Sinfonia Rustica*) and extra-musical meaning suitable for the authorities (peace, heroism) still met accusations of being formalist<sup>17</sup>. Finally, in 1954 he escaped Poland and asked for political asylum in Great Britain, where he stayed until the end of his life.<sup>18</sup> In the result, he shared the fate of Palester, joining the group of émigré artists condemned to oblivion in the country (the official ban for both composers was cancelled only in 1977<sup>19</sup>). Lutosławski focused on writing incidental music for radio, film and theatre, on adapting folk music and writing children’s songs. His significance rose few years later, after he completed and presented his Concerto for Orchestra (1950–54), the piece which assured him the top position in Polish musical life, the place he was since to hold up to the end of his life.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Helman [1985], pp. 73–74.

<sup>15</sup> See *Ruch Muzyczny*, No. 5, 1949, and Thomas [2005], pp. 46–49.

<sup>16</sup> He indeed composed his Third Symphony in 1953, but the piece, based mainly on folk tunes and using tonal musical language, presents considerably lower artistic quality compared to the ‘Olympic’ Symphony.

<sup>17</sup> Panufnik was one of the most original and innovative Polish composers at the end of the 1940s. With the beginning of socialist realism period he had to simplify his musical language according to the new rules. His *Symphony of Peace* with words by Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, the writer highly acclaimed by the authorities in Poland, was the piece in which Panufnik tried to adopt the new guidelines. After he left Poland, he decided to withdraw the symphony but later used its material to create *Sinfonia Elegiaca* (1957), devoted to the victims of the Second World War. Cf. Bolesławska [2015].

<sup>18</sup> For more details about Panufnik’s situation and reasons for his escape from Poland see Bolesławska [2002]. The slightly different perspective, underlining Panufnik’s engagement into the official line of cultural policy in Poland before his escape to the UK, is presented by Thomas [2003]. For more about Panufnik’s life and music composed on emigration see Bolesławska [2015].

<sup>19</sup> Even after the political thaw of the 1956, the situation of émigré artists was difficult as there were still treated as the enemies of the People’s Poland. That is why the censors’ ban was cancelled only in 1977.

<sup>20</sup> For more about Witold Lutosławski’s life and music see Rae [1999] and Thomas [2005].

The composers who explicitly decided to take up and follow the new doctrine of socialist realism were those of younger generation: Tadeusz Baird (1928–1981), Kazimierz Serocki (1922–1981) and Jan Krenz (b. 1927), who during the Łagów conference proclaimed the so-called “Group’49”<sup>21</sup> As it soon appeared, however, the acceptance of the new guidelines was rather a clever tactic taken by them than musical reality of their works, as under the facade of abiding by the new rules they mainly continued with a neo-Classical idiom. Thus, by proclaiming their group, the composers tried to escape any accusations of being formalist and find a possibility for presenting their music to the listeners. They indeed made strong artistic entrance soon after the Łagów conference, but their artistic role and significance for Polish musical life was to be realised after 1956, in the different situation resulted by the political thaw.<sup>22</sup>

Therefore, as it appeared, the aesthetic doctrine of socialist realism did not bring any spectacular artistic effects in Polish music. Quite the opposite: it constrained the composers’ imagination and creativity. The modernist line, Polish composers showed in their works written shortly after the Second World War (Panufnik, Palester, Lutosławski, Turcki) was stopped by the cultural policy of the communist government. The demands of socialist realism not only stopped the truly artistic creativity but also put the Polish musical life in a state of complete stagnation, which was also the result of closing the borders and cutting off contacts with the Western countries. It caused the situation, which was analysed by Mycielski in 1955 with the following words:

I must admit emphatically that unfortunately we live in a world that is closed – and practically speaking – isolated from the artistic life surrounding us. Even numerous official visits, congresses or conventions, which only a few, usually the same, artists and virtuosos attend, do not help here. That is not true artistic contact. Artistic contact means a concert life and concert programs on which one can find the best achievements of music from around the world; it means easy access to publications, an exchange of the finest soloists and conductors. [...] We are becoming a provincial land, in which we cannot imagine either how or what is being played or produced in other places. We do not know what the level of an orchestra, violinist, or oboist is, or how a conductor interprets a particular work. Here in Poland the majority of musicians are not acquainted with Prokofiev’s symphony for cello and orchestra; we do not know all of Shostakovich’s symphonies, or even the compositions of Janaček or Bartók, or the current works of Honegger, Stravinsky, Britten, or Messiaen. [...] Such is the state of things. Ignorance of what is happening in our field elsewhere increases every year; this is more than dangerous.<sup>23</sup>

However, it took some time until the efforts taken by the musical society in Poland, coinciding with the 1956 “political thaw”, brought tangible results, entering Polish music into new, avant-garde era, symbolised by the establishing of the International Festival of Contemporary Music “Warsaw Autumn” in October 1956.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Marek [1953].

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Thomas [2005] and Bolesławska [2019]. Baird and Serocki composed their best works after 1956, while Krenz stopped composing in the early 1950s, concentrating on his conducting career. He is recognised as one of the best Polish conductors of the second half of the 20th century.

<sup>23</sup> Mycielski [1955], quoted in Bylander [1989], pp. 79–80.

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