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WARSAW AUTUMN FESTIVAL AND ITS LEGACY: AN INTRODUCTION

**I**nternational Festival of Contemporary Music ‘Warsaw Autumn’ was established by the Polish Composers’ Union in 1956. Since then, the festival became one of the most important platform for contemporary music not only in the Soviet bloc, but internationally. Throughout the decades of its existence, the Warsaw Autumn was a ‘meeting point’ between the West and the East, and the place, where the composers and musicians from both sides of the Iron Curtain could meet and inform each other about their newest musical trends. That was the ideal, although – as was analysed by Lisa Jakelski – the first years of the festival had to face many problems, including the threat to its existence in the late 1950s due to harsh criticism from the musical officials from the USSR and GDR.<sup>1</sup> However, the Warsaw Autumn survived, and during the decades of its existence the festival have made a great impact on the musical world in Poland, but also outside; its influence is clearly visible in the musical cultures of many countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain, and did not disappear also after its fall.

Going back to the origins of the festival, it is worth reminding that during the years of socialist realism, which was imposed on Polish composers in 1949, the natural link that Polish culture had maintained with the West before the Second World War and in the first post-war years collapsed. According to the political rules connected with socialist realism, Polish composers were not allowed to compose freely, and all more advanced musical ideas were condemned and accused of formalism. Moreover, the international contacts with Western countries were strictly limited, which caused the country to sink into

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Jakelski, *Making New Music in Cold War Poland. The Warsaw Autumn Festival, 1956–1968* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

ever greater isolation. In 1955, two years after Stalin's death, the composer and music critic Zygmunt Mycielski stated:

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>2</sup>

That was the state of things at the time, when the idea of launching an international festival in Warsaw started being discussed among the Polish Composers' Union. As recalled by Tadeusz Baird, who is considered as one of the initiators of the Warsaw Autumn Festival:

A continuation of this period of stagnation could have badly threatened Polish music: art can indeed exist (or rather vegetate), but it cannot develop without a flow of information, without new impulses, without mutual influences, without confrontations, otherwise it is threatened by inevitable sterility and decay. Thus, it was an urgent issue, in the name of the very preservation of Polish music, to counteract the existing situation.<sup>3</sup>

The Polish Composers' Union had already organized two festivals of Polish music: in 1951 and 1955.<sup>4</sup> They both presented exclusively Polish music and had also served into propaganda purposes of the communist government cul-

<sup>2</sup> Zygmunt Mycielski, 'O twórczości muzycznej dziesięciolecia', *Muzyka*, No. 7-8, 1955, quoted in English in Cynthia Bylander, *The Warsaw Autumn International Festival of Contemporary Music 1956–61: Its Goals, Structures, Programs and People*, PhD thesis, Ohio State University, 1989, 79-80.

<sup>3</sup> Tadeusz Baird; in: Tadeusz Baird and Izabella Grzenkowicz, *Rozmowy, szkice, refleksje* (Kraków: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1982), 106.

<sup>4</sup> See Adrian Thomas, *Polish Music since Szymanowski*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005; or Cynthia Bylander, *Engaging Cultural Ideologies: Classical Composers and Musical Life in Poland 1918–1956*, Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2022.

tural policy,<sup>5</sup> however the organisational experience definitely helped the PCU in planning a festival on a much larger, international scale. The idea was discussed with the officials and finally approved by the Ministry of Culture and Art, which was possible thanks to the political thaw which started filtering into Poland after the death of Stalin, and took its climax exactly in 1956, with the significant changes in the leadership of the Polish United Workers' Party. The first secretary of the party became Władysław Gomułka, who was interned during Stalinist years. His main goal was to assure Poland took a more national course of socialism, less dependent on the Soviet Union. After brief but tense negotiations, the Soviets gave permission for Gomułka to stay in power. This meant the temporary liberalization of life in Poland and the end of the Stalinist era in the country.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, October 1956 marked a significant change in Polish history, named the Polish thaw or Polish October.

This coincided with the first edition of the International Festival of Contemporary Music, as the last stage of Gomułka's negotiations with the Soviet hierarchy (which included Khrushchev, who came to Warsaw) took place at the same time as the closing concerts of the new-established festival. As underlined by Lisa Jakelski, 'while, strictly speaking, the Polish October Revolution did not cause the Warsaw Autumn, the political upheaval nevertheless colored festival participants' experiences in 1956'.<sup>7</sup>

The establishment of the Warsaw Autumn festival gave birth to a new situation in Polish music. Hence, the date 1956, remains crucial not only in Polish 20th-century political history, but also in the history of Polish music: it marks the beginning of contemporary era in Polish musical culture. The success of the Warsaw Autumn opened up possibilities for contacts with Western musical culture, which resulted in breaking the cultural isolation of the previous years. Thanks to the Warsaw Autumn Poland renewed its participation in European cultural life, while a knowledge of the most recent musical trends allowed Polish composers to change their musical languages and develop most innovative musical ideas, which soon resulted in the appearance of new Polish music on the international scene.<sup>8</sup> In next years, the Warsaw Autumn became not only a symbol of the new state of freedom in art in Poland, but also served

<sup>5</sup> See Adrian Thomas, 'File 750: Composers, Politics, and the Festival of Polish Music (1951)', *Polish Music Journal*, 5/1 (Summer 2002): <https://polishmusic.usc.edu/research/publications/polish-music-journal/vol5no1/composers-politics-polish-music-festival/> (accessed on 10 July 2025).

<sup>6</sup> For more about Polish Thaw, see Anthony Kemp-Welch, *Poland under Communism: A Cold War History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Jakelski, *Making New Music in Cold War Poland*, 13.

<sup>8</sup> More about the relations between the Warsaw Autumn and the so-called Polish School of Composers, as well as about its impact on Polish symphonic music, see: Beata Bolesławska, *The Symphony and Symphonic Thinking in Polish Music since 1956* (London-New York: Routledge, 2019).

as the most important platform for exchange of contemporary music from the both sides of the Iron Curtain.

Considering the rich and complex legacy of the Warsaw Autumn, we decided to organize the international conference entitled ‘*Warsaw Autumn*’ Festival – *Its Role and Significance for the Musical Life of the Countries on Both Sides of the Iron Curtain (and after its Fall)*. It took place online (due to the time of Covid pandemic) in 16–17 September 2021, as the 4th Conference in the ‘Polish Music Abroad’ (Muzyka polska za granicą) series programme, realized by us in the Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. The conference was organized in cooperation with the Polish Composers’ Union and the Warsaw Autumn Festival.

The main goal of the conference was to reflect on the role and significance of the “Warsaw Autumn” International Festival of Contemporary Music to the music and musical life of countries of both sides of the Iron Curtain – and also after its fall. As was already mentioned, Warsaw Autumn is not the only festival of new music, but its position has been unique from the very beginning – the festival was launched on the wave of a political thaw and for many years it was often the only source of information about new musical trends for the musical circles in the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries. At the same time, by coming to Warsaw the West had an opportunity to get to know contemporary music created in Poland and in other countries on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain. Warsaw Autumn as a place where the East and the West met has been discussed on numerous occasions, and also has a firm place in the musicological literature.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, it was indeed worth looking back at this unique festival, as is proved by the essays collected in this volume. There are eleven texts written by the authors of various countries. Their perspectives present a versatile and rich picture of the impact given by the Warsaw Autumn Festival to the musical cultures of the discussed countries.

The book *Sounds of Freedom, Echoes of Control: The Warsaw Autumn Festival across the Iron Curtain* is divided into four parts, each of which presents a different perspective on the festival’s impact. The first three contain three texts each, and the last one includes two articles. Part One: *Between West Germany and the Soviet Union* presents the origins of the Warsaw Autumn and its significance for Polish music (Iwona Lindstedt), as well as its image seen from the West German (Marianne Nowak) and Soviet (Daniel Elphick) per-

<sup>9</sup> Jakelski, op. cit.; Thomas, op. cit.; Ruth Seehaber, *Die Polnische Schule in Der Neuen Musik: Befragung Eines Musikhistorischen Topos* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH & Co, 2009); Bolesławska, *The Symphony and Symphonic Thinking in Polish Music Since 1956*, op. cit.; Lisa Cooper Vest, *Awangarda: Tradition and Modernity in Postwar Polish Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020); Cindy Bylander, *Engaging Cultural Ideologies: Classical Composers and Musical Life in Poland 1918–1956* (Newton: Academic Studies Press, 2022).

spectives. Part Two: *Within the Eastern Bloc* discusses Slovak (Michal Štěpán), Croatian (Nataša Leverić Špoljarić) and Ukrainian (Olena Berehova) music in relation to the Warsaw festival. Part Three: *Beyond the Western Borders* shows the inspirational role of the Warsaw Autumn by presenting new music festivals modelled on it, organized in Dublin (Harry White), Palermo (Monika Prusak) and Rio de Janeiro (Semitha Cevallos). The final part concludes by recalling the festival as a platform for bringing the music of selected Polish émigré composers back to the country: Antoni Szałowski and Michał Spisak (Elżbieta Szczurko), as well as Andrzej Panufnik, Roman Palester and Roman Haubenstock-Ramati (Blake Parham).

The selection of topics and issues, although certainly far from exhaustive, significantly broadens the existing perspective on the festival, reinforcing the fairly widespread belief in the role of the Warsaw Autumn as a ‘window to the world’ for Polish music. Thanks to the collected texts by authors representing different countries and various research approaches, the reader receives a picture that clearly shows the range of the festival’s influence on a musical culture of countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain. One can see how important Warsaw Autumn was and still is on the map of new music, and how significant role it played in promoting contemporary and Polish music in Europe and around the world.

The “Warsaw Autumn” International Festival of Contemporary Music has been organized by the Polish Composers’ Union continuously since 1956. It remains one of the most enduring and important cultural assets of 20th- and 21st-century Poland. As editors of this volume, we hope that it will not only provide many thoughts on the history of the festival and its significance, but will also contribute to further research on its role and impact on musical creativity and musical life in various countries.

In presenting this volume of our series “Polish Music Abroad”, we would like to thank the authors for entrusting us with their texts, and we are delighted to be able to share the results of their research with our readers. We are also thankful to the reviewers, Prof. Katarzyna Naliwajek from Warsaw University and Prof. Ewa Wójtowicz from Krzysztof Penderecki Academy of Music in Kraków, for their valuable comments. We present this volume of our series in English, believing that the topics discussed here will be of interest to an international group of researchers involved in contemporary musical culture. It was possible to complete the volume thanks to funding received within the framework of the research project *Polish and Lithuanian Music in the Global Perspective: Migration, Diasporic Identities and Homeland*, implemented under the DAINA 3 programme funded by the National Centre for Science, Poland, project no. 2024/52/L/HS2/00067.