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Before Chopin Transcript

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'Before Chopin'

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1. Introduction

Good afternoon, and welcome to the last of this season's Gresham lectures on Music. Over the past five lectures, I have tried to sketch out some of the main issues and features of Polish music before Chopin. Today, we come 'up-to-date', as it were, contemplating music and its contexts in 18th-century Poland and, perhaps most intriguingly, in the early decades of the 19th-century when Chopin was born (1810) and brought up, prior to his flight from Poland during the 1830-31 uprising.

We tend, in our general lack of access to Polish culture and history during the 18th century, to view Chopin as a symbol of a new spirit, of the artist battling with adverse circumstances. That, of course, is a perfectly justifiable approach to music in the 19th century. But it is also an approach which explains in different ways how and why Polish music - and Polish arts in general - developed during the Baroque period and the Enlightenment. As we have already witnessed, precise dates and biographical information are often thin on the ground, so a degree of historical conjecture combined with stylistic observation is sometimes the only way to build up a picture of music in 18th-century Poland.

Where we can be more precise is in the political and military contexts of Poland as a nation. I mentioned last time the disastrous connection with Sweden during the 17th century. The wars with Sweden and Russia severely weakened Poland's independence. Given the outstanding military genius of King Jan III Sobieski (1629-96, reigned 1674-96), who famously broke the Turkish siege of Vienna in 1683, was of no avail in halting Poland's decline. The country's system of an elected monarchy, combined with the increasingly self-regarding attitude of the Polish aristocracy, led to the further weakening of what, in earlier times, had been an admirable and mould-breaking system of government. As western Europe developed strong military and political systems, Poland became fractious.

Jan Sobieski was followed by kings brought in from Saxony (1697-1764) and they proved too weak to withstand the imperial ambitions, not only of Russia but also of Prussia, whose monarch Frederick the Great once likened Poland to 'an artichoke, ready to be consumed leaf by leaf' (1752).¹ As the century progressed, there were increasing and increasingly violent protests against foreign influence.

The election in 1764 of the last king of Poland, Stanisław August Poniatowski (1732-98), was a move in the right direction, certainly culturally, but his reign was politically and militarily among the most disastrous. Squeezed by Frederick the Great of Prussia to the West and Catherine the Great of Russia to the East (and Poniatowski had, by all accounts, been Catherine's most ardent 'squeeze' in his twenties, so was beholden to Russia anyway), almost a third of Poland's territories were occupied and partitioned in 1772-73 by Russia, Prussia and Austria.

There was a second partition in 1793, when Russia and Prussia seized even more of Poland than in 1772 (let us not forget that in these intervening 21 years there was turmoil elsewhere too: not only the American War of Independence but also the French Revolution). Tadeusz Kościuszko (1746-1817) led a Polish insurrection in 1794 which, typically, failed. And the inexorable result of this failure was the Third Partition a year later. Poland was then wiped out completely and would not regain full independence until 1918. How the mighty edifice of Renaissance Poland had crumbled, too often aided by poor leadership and internal strife.

2. Church Music

Such is the national and international context in which Polish music tried to survive and develop. For obvious reasons, music outside the church's influence was subservient to the whims of the prevailing political leadership, be that nationally - the Saxon kings Augustus II and III in the first six decades of the 18th century were apparently indifferent to music and in any case preferred their court in Dresden to that in Warsaw - or locally, in the smaller establishments of the Polish aristocracy. These latter were sometimes quite inventive and a number of members of the Polish aristocracy, especially in the last decades of the century, were significant performers and composers in their own right, much like elsewhere in Europe, often delighting in

elaborate entertainments such as *fêtes galantes*. Even so, there was not the infrastructure let alone the will to pursue music as singlemindedly as it was being developed in German-speaking lands to the West.

In contrast, in the early decades of the 18th century, Polish churches and monasteries continued to exercise great influence and patronage. In retrospect, we may say that, without them and their longevity into the 20th century, a great repertoire of vocal-instrumental music would never have been created and protected. The Polish church's conservative nature, however, allowed only a gradual influx of the high Baroque style developing primarily in German-speaking Europe. Here's a characteristic example, probably from sometime after 1690. It is the penultimate movement 'In manus tuas, Domine' (In thine hand I commit my spirit, Psalm 31, v.6), from the *Completorium* by one of Poland's most distinguished composers working in the early decades of the 18th century, Grzegorz Gerwazy Gorczycki (c.1665-1734). Gorczycki followed several composers whom we have met on previous occasions in becoming choirmaster of Wawel Cathedral in 1698.

MUSIC 1 Gorczycki *Completorium*/6 'In manus tuas, Domine'

In his *Completorium*, Gorczycki demonstrates both the continuing vitality of the early Venetian Baroque style and the influx of a more contemporary chromatic style and expressive *affekt* (it is an example of how recent has been any extensive understanding of Polish music before 1800 that this multi-movement masterpiece was discovered only in 1961, in a parish church north-east of Kraków).

In contrast, the *Veni consolator* by a Piarist monk, Damian Stachowicz (c.1660-99), is a much more obviously contemporary work, even though it may well have been composed earlier than Gorczycki's *Completorium*. Its *concertato* idiom and form (that quintessential Baroque operatic structure, the *da capo* aria), as well as the evident vocal and instrumental virtuosity that it requires, are really rather stunning. Here are the opening and middle sections of *Veni consolator*.

MUSIC 2 Stachowicz *Veni consolator* (beginning)

For my third example of music for voices, I have chosen a familiar text -*Laudate pueri*- by J. Staromieyski, who was active in the middle of the 18th-century. Not much is known about Staromieyski, not even his full first name. His *Laudate pueri* belongs to that wonderful strand of dancing Baroque choral music so familiar to us from the music of Bach and Handel.

MUSIC 3 Staromieyski *Laudate pueri* (beginning)

Let us not automatically link such triple-time rhythms to Polish dance. While Bach, Telemann and others, in keeping with the 'Saxon' period of Poland, may have appropriated Polish dances *alla polacca* as examples of the exotic 'East', there is little evidence of such national sentiments in Polish music of the first half of the 18th century. It was only as the century was drawing to a close, and the political situation was becoming increasingly fraught, that nationalism in music began to surface as a serious cultural aspect of life in Poland. By that stage, as the Enlightenment rather belatedly took root in Poland, composers' attention, while by no means abandoning church music, was drawn increasingly to instrumental music and particularly to the genre of the symphony.

3. Orchestral Music

The Enlightenment came late to Poland. While Stanisław August Poniatowski did not always show the most astute political judgment (one commentator has called him 'feckless'²), he was well-educated, passionate about architecture, the visual arts and literature, encouraged Enlightenment thinking to develop and promoted the reform of state institutions. Under his aegis, for example, the four-year *sejm* (parliament) debated reforms in 1789-92 and in 1791 Poland adopted the world's first written constitution, the Constitution of 3 May (more of which anon).³

In architecture, Poniatowski's legacy includes renovated interiors in the Royal Palace and the rebuilding in the Classical style of his retreat, the Łazienki Palace, then on the outskirts of Warsaw. Italian painters of the calibre of Bernardo Bellotto (1720-80)⁴ came to his court; Bellotto's paintings of contemporary Warsaw (still to be seen in the Royal Palace) were crucial much later, after World War II, in enabling the ruined 18th-century buildings in the city to be rebuilt with a high degree of accuracy.

Some of you may have seen the exhibition *Treasures of a Polish King* at the Dulwich Picture Gallery in 1992, and you may still see many of the exhibits there. Although almost 200 items had been purchased by Poniatowski's contacts in England by the

early 1790s, they were never delivered because of the political turmoil back in Poland. Instead, they became the basis for the collection now housed at Dulwich.

As to music, Poniatowski unfortunately showed much less interest than in the other arts, and this must explain in part the paucity and timidity of Polish symphonies and the absence of the Polish string quartet at a time when these two genres were setting the pace elsewhere. Still, foreign composers and performers did visit: Cimarosa came in 1765 and towards the end of his reign Poniatowski commissioned a *Te Deum* from Paisiello for the second anniversary of the enactment of the Constitution of 3 May in 1792. But to the best of my knowledge, neither Haydn nor Mozart came to Poland, although Mozart's operas were often produced in Warsaw shortly after their premieres elsewhere.

After Haydn and composers at Mannheim had developed the genre of the symphony out of the Italian opera *sinfonia*, this new genre filtered slowly into Polish musical life. An early example is the *Symphonia de Nativitate* (1759?), which maintains the traditional Italian pattern of three movements, fast-slow-fast. A symphony by A. Haczewski (fl. second half of 18th century) follows the same three-movement tradition. Composed in 1771, it reflects the growing sense of nationalism, as not only is the second movement a polonaise 'Alla Polacca' but the lively finale seems to evoke the *cracovienne* (*krakowiak*), a dance whose title tells us that it originated in the old Polish capital. Here's the beginning of the 'Alla Polacca'.

MUSIC 4 Haczewski Symphony/II 'Alla Polacca' (beginning)

Some examples of the Polish symphony still survive from the 1770s onwards, but the supply is not plentiful. In general, Polish symphonies inhabit a benign expressive world, far from the world of *Sturm und Drang* that has traditionally been associated with Haydn's symphonies of the same period as Haczewski's. A composer of a slightly later generation, such as Jan Wański (c.1762- after 1821), who was based in Poznań rather than in the capital, still illustrates the fact that Poland was not moving with the times. In this first movement, from one of several of his symphonies in D major, the idiom is uncomplicated. Even so, the phrasing of the opening idea does not conform to standard 4+4 patterns and Wański has clearly learned Haydn's trick of bringing in the orchestral tutti earlier than expected (on the cadence, rather than after it).

MUSIC 5 Wański Symphony in D/I (beginning)

Wojciech Dankowski's Symphony in E flat, composed around 1788, while he was music director at Gniezno Cathedral, is interesting for its inclusion of two clarinets as obbligato instruments. The first of Haydn's symphonies to use clarinets (no. 99, also in E flat) did not appear for another five years (1793), so it is likely that Dankowski knew the music of Mozart, who had first used clarinets in his symphonies ten years earlier (no.31, 'Paris'). The influence of Haydn is once again apparent in the entry of the tutti, in b.16 instead of 17, while the harmonic idiom is more advanced than the two previous examples.

MUSIC 6 Dankowski Symphony in E flat/I (beginning)

During last year's Music lectures, I explored aspects of the composer-virtuoso in 19th-century Polish music, such as the music of the violinist Henryk Wieniawski and the pianist Juliusz Zarębski. Chopin was their immediate precursor (as composer rather than virtuoso), and he too had predecessors. Notable among them were two violinists, Feliks Janiewicz (1762-1848) and Karol Lipiński (1790-1861). Janiewicz is best known, historically, for his string trios, although he might enter curiosity corner with works with English titles such as *Peggy's Love* (c.1805), *The Birthday of Freedom* (1805) or *Indian War Hoop* (c.1815). All of these pieces were published in this country because, having travelled widely in Europe and, incidentally, met Haydn and Mozart in Vienna in 1785, Janiewicz decided to settle in this country in 1792 and contributed greatly to British musical life for the remaining 56 years of his life. He died and was buried in Edinburgh. Here's the finale of his Fifth Violin Concerto (1803-07). It is in the same key as Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto (which it precedes by almost 40 years). The folk element - it is a polka - is evident from the start. Janiewicz seems to anticipate not only Mendelssohn, but later 19th-century Slavonic composers such as Dvorak.

MUSIC 7 Janiewicz Violin Concerto 5/III (beginning)

An even more precocious violin talent was Karol Lipiński, who not only met Paganini, but performed in concert with him. He had three symphonies under his belt before he was 20 (and they are not minor works: no.3 is over 28 minutes in length). It may seem perverse in his case to choose not to play one of his four violin concertos, but only one is recorded - no. 2 'Militaire' (1825-6) - and its military cast has not worn well. Instead, here is the opening of the finale from his String Trio op.8 (published 1821). It was not uncommon for performers to make arrangements of concerto-like pieces for chamber ensemble (this way they could tour them more easily), even though at times the texture strains the limitations of just three instruments! And this is a work of symphonic dimensions - over 40'. The finale is curious for another reason: it is described as a 'Bolero' and there is

certainly a Spanish tinge here (a very early example of such exoticism), but the underlying rhythmic pattern might also be heard as a very fast polonaise!

MUSIC 8 Lipiński Trio in G minor/III 'Bolero' (beginning)

4. Opera

I am aware that I have paid scant attention to opera in these lectures, and I am afraid I am going to continue to do so. The reasons are simple: firstly, precious little of the music survives and, secondly, almost none of it is recorded. This is particularly disappointing, because there were some important developments in the second half of the 18th century and early 19th century, such as operas based on Polish history, like the late example of *Jadwiga, Queen of Poland* (1814) by Karol Kurpiński (1785-1857).

Not least of the Polish stage works from the Enlightenment period is an opera, or rather a vaudeville, by Wojciech Bogusławski (libretto) and Jan Stefani (music), called *The Apparent Miracle or Cracovians and Highlanders*, which was premiered in Warsaw on 1 March 1794. As you may recall, 1794 was the year of the Kościuszko Uprising and a year before the final partition, so it will not come as a surprise to learn that *Cracovians and Highlanders*, with its contemporary subject matter and fairly undisguised political sideswipes, alongside its clear roots in Polish folk music, was banned after just three performances. Patriotism had come into its own in Polish music and it has never really left it, even today. And one measure of the significance of *Cracovians and Highlanders* for Poles is that Lipiński, whose Trio we heard a moment ago, wrote a set of variations on one of its themes (*Fantasia* op.33, c.1826), honouring it like so many other composers continued to honour operas by Mozart, Bellini, Donizetti and many others in their operatic paraphrases.

5. Popular Song

This is perhaps an opportune moment briefly to consider the patriotic song, because this genre sprang up at precisely the time of insurrection and partition. Among the songs best-known today are the *Kościuszko Polonaise* (c.1792), *To Arms, Brothers* (1794) and the *Dąbrowski Mazurka* (1797), now the Polish national anthem, which I have already played at these lectures. Another example is the *Mazurka of 3 May*. This, like the *Polonaise of 3 May*, refers to the Constitution of 3 May mentioned earlier. While the text of the *Mazurka of 3 May* is contemporary (1791), the melody to which is now sung came later. There has even been a suggestion that the youthful Chopin may have had a hand in fashioning it before he left Poland.

MUSIC 9 (Chopin) Mazurek Trzeciego Maja (beginning)

Such a dance-song, celebrating a political as well as a national event, is a clear precursor of the type of politicised songs, sponsored by 20th-century governments, some of which I explored in my first year of lectures at Gresham.

6. Keyboard Music

But mention of Chopin, however obliquely, brings me to the final section of this lecture, which I am devoting to music for the keyboard. Musically speaking, did Chopin spring unaided into being? Or were there precedents for his choice of medium, style and genre? There is little in the 18th-century that suggests any immediate forebears. But when we reach even the early years of the 19th century (remembering that Chopin was born in 1810), there are signs that, desperate though the years of partition were proving to be, there was musical life and creativity in the different sectors of divided Poland. We have already heard some striking music by Lipiński from 1821 and I could, if time allowed, explore the music of Chopin's teacher, Józef Elsner (1769-1854) or Chopin's near contemporary Ignacy Feliks Dobrzyński (1807-67), whose Piano Concerto op.2 (1824) makes for an instructive comparison with Chopin's two piano concertos (1830, 1829).

It is perhaps more revealing to investigate who were Chopin's antecedents in the repertoire for solo piano. I must admit that I have been taken aback on two fronts, firstly how adventurous some composers were and, secondly, how big a gap there is between other composers of mazurkas, polonaises and etudes and Chopin's contributions to these genres.

I can almost guarantee that no-one here has heard much of Józef Kozłowski (1757-1831) or Franciszek Lessel (c.1780-1838). Neither, until recently, had I. Kozłowski spent most of his career in the service of Russian courts and was court musician to the famous Ogiński family. He composed many ceremonial choral pieces, many of them polonaises. His *Polonoise* 'Larghetto Espressivo' is in the key of F minor, a key reserved in the Enlightenment for tragic or reflective music. It has a very different mode of expression from the ceremonial pomp of the traditional polonoise. It is played here on a harpsichord.

MUSIC 10 Kozłowski *Polonoise* in F minor (beginning)

Franciszek Lessel is definitely a composer awaiting wider recognition. His abilities were such that he studied with Haydn for several years. One of his most astonishing works is his *Fantaisie in E minor* (1813). In its 17-minute span, Lessel goes through a freewheeling, almost sprawling sequence of ideas, the like of which is rarely found at this time. Lessel created the *fantaisie* as a genre in Polish music, having observed the variation technique of composers such as Hummel and Clementi. And of course Chopin was to develop the idea much further, as in his *Polonoise-Fantaisie*.

While Lessel's *Fantaisie in E minor* shows elements of the *brillant* style that was to characterise Chopin's keyboard writing, the overwhelming impression is one of tempestuous emotions. And this is hardly surprising, given the work's context: the *Fantaisie* is dedicated to one Cecylia Beydale. She was Lessel's first great love, but the affair came to a traumatic end when it was discovered that they shared the same mother. Not for the first time in Polish music, and not for the last time in 19th-century music, the theme of incestuous love gave rise to impetuous music. **5** Here's the tortured passage leading up to the return of the principal theme, whose rhythmic and melodic character is evidently folk-derived.

MUSIC 11 Lessel *Fantaisie in E minor* (lead-in to 'recapitulation')

When placed alongside such music, my next examples may seem puny. But they show different aspects of Polish keyboard music, namely the salon versions of the mazurka and the newer genre of the etude. My examples are by Maria Szymanowska (1789-1831), the first female Polish composer of any note and a pianist much admired in her lifetime. In contrast to Chopin's mazurkas, hers are dainty and undeveloped. Yet they unmistakably belong to the thread that leads from earlier references to the mazurka rhythm and from the popular songs of the late 18th century. While many of Szymanowska's mazurkas are simple affairs - and they are all very brief ternary designs - there are some with more sophisticated features. No.20, for example, is interesting in that it cuts across the 3/4 metre, giving the music greater stature and, simultaneously, denying the genre's characteristically emphatic second beat in one bar only to stress it in the next.

MUSIC 12 Szymanowska Mazurka 20 in F

You may recall that my first lecture in my second year of lectures was called 'Chopin in the Hands of Others'. In that talk, I discussed the approach of other composers and performers to Chopin's Etudes. There were, of course, a number of precedents to Chopin's two sets of Studies. Among them are the etudes by Szymanowska. Chopin will no doubt have been familiar with Szymanowska's etudes (which are more developed than her mazurkas), and in one or two cases one could be forgiven for thinking that he decided to improve on her example. Here's Szymanowska's Twelfth Study, which to my ears unmistakably connects to Chopin's op.25 no.4 in A minor, complete with unexpected harmonic swerves.

MUSIC 13 Szymanowska Etude 12 in E flat

Well, we have come almost to the end not only of this lecture and of this series but also of my three-year tenure as Professor of Music at Gresham College. It has been an enormous privilege for me and I hope that in my eighteen lectures I have succeeded in some measure in opening up the repertoire of Polish and Eastern European music, from medieval times to our own. As my *pożegnanie*, or 'farewell', I could hardly do better than play you perhaps the most famous polonoise apart from those by Chopin (again, Chopin will have known this polonoise and used it and others by the same composer as a spur for his own compositions).

It is important, however, to acknowledge that Poland is more than just her dances and songs, that her composers have contributed substantially to European music regardless of identifiably Polish features. And one of the most enduring qualities of Polish music is its expressivity, often its melancholic expressivity, and you will find it anywhere from a piece of Renaissance polyphony to a string quartet by Górecki. As it happens, this polonoise by the last Great Treasurer of Lithuania, Michał Kleofas Ogiński (1765-1833), encapsulates this sentiment perfectly.

Ogiński, who had studied with Kozłowski, may have begun *Pożegnanie Ojczyźno* (Farewell to the Fatherland) as early as the

turbulent 1790s. What we do know is that he completed it around 1823, when he left Poland permanently to live in Italy. 'Farewell to the Fatherland' has come to symbolise musically, almost as much as Chopin's most evocative pieces, the nature of the relation of Poles and their country. In this performance, the pianist has adopted the then contemporary practice of embellishing the score. And I guess that he also has a certain family entitlement to do so, given that he is Ogiński's great-great-great-grandson!

MUSIC 16 Ogiński *Pożegnanie Ojczyzna*

1 quoted in Norman Davies, *God's Playground*, vol.I (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), 515

2 M.B.Biskupski, *The History of Poland* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000), 18

3 cf. Adam Zamoyski, *The Last King of Poland* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992)

4 Bellotto is sometimes known as Canaletto the Younger, being the nephew and pupil of Antonio Canaletto

5 cf. Karłowicz's symphonic poem *Anna i Stanisław Oświęcimowie* (1907) and Wagner's *Ring* cycle.

Playlist

Grzegorz Gerwazy Gorczycki *Completorium* : 6. 'In manus tuas, Domine'
(c.1665-1734)

Damian Stachowicz *Veni consolator*
(c.1660-99)

J. Staromieyski *Laudate pueri*
(fl. mid-18thC)

A. Haczewski 1770 Symphony in D/II 'Alla polacca'
(fl. 2nd half of 18thC)

Jan Wański Symphony in D/II 'Allegro'
(1762- after 1821)

Wojciech Dankowski c.1788 Symphony in E flat/I 'Allegro molto'
(c.1760- after 1800)

Feliks Janiewicz 1803-7 Violin Concerto 5/III 'Allegretto'
(1762-1848)

Karol Lipiński c.1816 P684/7 Trio in G minor/III 'Bolero'
(1790-1861)

Fryderyk Szopen? *Mazurek 3 Maja*
(1810-49) (Mazurka of 3 May; text c.1791)

ózef Kozłowski *Polonoise 'Larghetto Espressivo'*
(1751-1831)

Franciszek Lessele 1813 *Fantaisie in E minor*
(1780-1838)

Maria Szymanowska Mazurka no.20 in F
(1789-1831)

Etude no.12 in E flat

Michał Kleofas Ogiński 1823 Polonoise *Pożegnanie Ojczyzna*

(1765-1833)(Farewell to the Fatherland)

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