Fosler-Lussier on Jakelski, 'Making New Music in Cold War Poland: The Warsaw Autumn Festival, 1956-1968'

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Reviewed by Danielle Fosler-Lussier (The Ohio State University) Published on H-Diplo (April, 2017) Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)


Lisa Jakelski’s Making New Music in Cold War Poland is an important contribution to international and transnational history, for it demonstrates in detail how musical activities created and maintained personal and institutional networks. Logically organized and lucidly written, the book describes the annual Warsaw Autumn International Festival of Contemporary Music, which was founded in 1956 and continues to the present day. Jakelski brings together a great deal of new information from Polish archives with a broad array of other primary sources to explain what this international festival meant to Polish composers, the bureaucrats who funded the festival, its audiences in Poland, and its international participants and observers.

As Jakelski points out, the Warsaw Autumn Festival was part of an international circuit of festivals featuring avant-garde concert music. Peopled by nomadic performers and composers who frequented multiple festivals each year, this circuit was “a zone of cultural mobility” for individuals, ideas, and works of art (p. 88). At the time of its founding, the Warsaw Autumn was the only such festival located in Eastern Europe. Because most Eastern Europeans were not granted permission to travel to the West, the Warsaw Autumn was for some years the only festival of contemporary music where invited Western Europeans and Americans could meet their colleagues from the Soviet Bloc and hear their music, and where sizable numbers of Eastern Europeans could hear modern concert music from
Western Europe and the United States.[1] The Warsaw Autumn drew considerable crowds, won critical acclaim, and helped Polish composers to cement a reputation for innovation outside their home country.

Jakelski shows that the annual event of the Warsaw Autumn Festival fulfilled several important functions; indeed, some of the excitement around the festival was generated by the inevitable clashing of those functions. As an international event, the festival drew tourism and hard currency, valued by bureaucrats and composers alike. For composers, the Warsaw Autumn was a way to exchange new technical ideas and printed music, both of which were difficult for Poles to obtain through other means, and to hear newly composed works from afar. Festival organizers, many of whom were also composers, worked especially hard to bring in performers and composers from Western countries, rebuilding the international networks that had been disrupted by Stalinist restrictions on travel and communication. Perhaps most importantly, though, the festival was a showcase: composers and performers were understood to represent their national musical traditions, and their contributions were assessed critically by audiences and peers. As Jakelski points out, “festivals entail practical decisions—what music to program, which performers to invite—that result in acts of grouping and exclusion that imply judgments of relative value” (p. 1).

These judgments were not incidental to the festival: they were instrumental in its establishment. As Poland emerged from Stalinism, state and party leaders were well aware that Western opinion of Eastern European music was low. The postwar imposition of socialist realism, which stipulated that music be “national in form, socialist in content,” had suppressed avant-garde trends in favor of accessible music with national traits throughout the Soviet Bloc (p. 133). Composer Kazimierz Sikorski recalled in an interview that when the festival idea was proposed in 1954, the first secretary of the Polish United Workers’ Party, Bolesław Bierut, accepted the conflict of musical values as a challenge: “make it a confrontation between East and West. Let them show what they have, and we’ll show them what we have” (p. 18). Because the accepted styles of concert music had diverged so sharply between East and West, the choice to perform or neglect a particular style of music indicated allegiance to a particular political position. Throughout the early history of the Warsaw Autumn, the festival was at once a cosmopolitan institution advocating for avant-garde and even experimental music and a state-supported program that continued to promote socialist realism as a legitimate form of modern music. Each year festival organizers had to make decisions about how to mediate among these contradictory priorities. For example, music from the West typically occupied more of the program and drew more audience attention than did music from the Soviet Bloc, but the organizers took care to ensure that the total running time of the music from the Soviet Bloc was comparable to the running time of music from the West.

Yet this musical “arms race” was not played out on equal terms. Western European compositional methods, claiming to be founded on “technical advancement,” provided the standard by which the showcased performances were judged (p. 134). At the outset, the festival’s organizers allowed Eastern European musicians to choose their own programs, but they also saw that the socialist realist reliance on folksy idioms and nineteenth-century styles could do their reputation “more harm than good” (p. 122). The organizers felt they had to demonstrate—by Western standards—that the East was not “backward” (p. 25). Although concert agencies in the Soviet Bloc asserted significant control over what could be sent from those countries to the Warsaw Autumn, festival programs in the 1960s increasingly featured “unofficial” Soviet music—works featuring Western compositional techniques...
that existed in a gray zone of neglect or outright suppression. Because this music engaged with the serial techniques that were esteemed in the West, it opened some possibility of parity. Even as Eastern European composers were mindful of invidious comparisons with their Western peers, however, many did not adopt Western methods wholesale. Rather, the festival provoked meaningful debate about what new socialist music could and should be. The stories historians tell about the role of modernism in the Cold War have too often highlighted the “backwardness” of Eastern Europe and the “advanced” qualities of Western European music without situating these values within the social dynamic of transnational music making. By providing a detailed study of how these values were negotiated in practical terms, Jakelski’s study offers a valuable corrective.

Jakelski situates musical developments not only within the competitive dynamic of East-West conflict in Europe but also within the network of connections that musicians maintained and cultivated throughout that conflict. The Warsaw Autumn offered composers a sense of participation in a “transnational music community whose boundaries were determined by the presence of shared values and knowledge, rather than the presence of national, state, or geopolitical divisions” (p. 136). This research productively challenges the Cold War binary, offering a much more nuanced view of how individuals and musical organizations operated in their highly politicized environment. Understanding the entanglement between music and politics in this way helps us see composers’ opportunities and constraints accurately, without making unwarranted assumptions. Whereas Eastern European composers have often been portrayed as renegades working against the state, Jakelski shows conclusively that many Polish composers held positions of power within the party-state apparatus, and that they retained considerable ability to negotiate, musically and politically. Jakelski offers us not the romanticized (and largely untrue) story of composers unilaterally oppressed by the nation-state, but a well-grounded history of composers as citizens working with, through, against, and alongside the state’s power toward their desired ends.

And this is a particularly Polish story, as well as a transnational one. Musically, Poland was a special case in the 1950s and ’60s: artists there claimed more freedom from state strictures than did musicians in any other Soviet Bloc country. Though the state restricted composition and performance in some ways, Polish music flourished during this period, as talented composers (Witold Lutosławski, Krzysztof Penderecki, Tadeusz Baird) produced innovative music and gained international recognition. Historians of music have long needed better information about how Poland’s musicians succeeded, and Jakelski’s study helps us recognize how the Warsaw Autumn fostered that success. The desire to showcase Poland’s achievements annually in the internationally visible festival meant that the state had good reason to support its composers. In a Cold War world where everyone was watching everyone else, seeing that Polish music was esteemed outside of Poland helped Polish composers and critics argue for the significance of their own music; and Westerners who braved travel difficulties to observe the triumphs of avant-garde music in Poland carried home word that the Poles were a musically sophisticated people.

Indeed, this sophistication was received with surprise and even envy in the West. To Western critics who were accustomed to the idea that modernism had been suppressed in Eastern Europe, the existence of a festival of avant-garde music in Poland symbolized freedom. The American composer Elliott Carter, who visited the Warsaw Autumn in 1962, explained that at the festival “the Polish people seem so interested, so much alive and intelligent and even gay in the middle of their physically shattered splendor and thus reveal a spiritual splendor even more” (p. 86). Polish state support for a
specialized form of concert music also offered a sharp contrast with the American scene, for the US government had long resisted the idea of funding musical enterprises. In a widely read article published in the United States, Carter praised the rich resources and performance opportunities given to Polish composers and argued that the United States should do more for its own composers. Thus, the festival’s influence did not flow only from West to East, as one might assume: the Warsaw Autumn impressed Western observers and even showcased some advantages of socialism. Here again, Jakelski’s narrative of integration offers an innovative perspective.

The sixth chapter, “The Limits of Exchange,” is a tour de force of careful research and expert historiography. Here Jakelski describes the challenges of presenting the Warsaw Autumn Festival in 1968, after Poland sent troops to assist in the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia. Western delegations were divided on whether to boycott. Some withdrew works of music or material support for that year’s festival. Several prominent musicians chose not to attend, including the soprano Cathy Berberian, the Italian composer Sylvano Bussotti, and the entire governing board of the International Society for Contemporary Music, which had co-sponsored that year’s festival. A renowned Czechoslovak ensemble, Musica Viva Pragensis, canceled its appearance. Others arrived on schedule, citing their warm friendships with Polish musicians and with the festival. Many who came claimed that music should be above partisan politics. Yet, as Jakelski describes it, the experience of the festival that year “remained mired in Eastern Europe,” shaped by the very geopolitical forces participants wanted to overcome or ignore (p. 160). Jakelski manages to convey the commitments of individual actors while offering a compelling reading of their situation as a whole.

The book is a great read; each chapter has a concise and well-defined story to tell and vivid quotations from primary sources. Along the way we learn a great deal about the individual personalities involved in avant-garde musical life both inside and outside of Poland, about the complexity and inconsistencies of governments’ attempts to sponsor and regulate music, and about the nature of the avant-garde in relation to other musical movements of the day. Making New Music in Cold War Poland will be well received by the large number of scholars and lay readers who are interested in transnational networks, the arts, or Eastern Europe—as well as those who are curious about the ways in which music is (and is not) political.

Notes

[1]. Beginning in 1961, a biennial festival of contemporary music was held in Zagreb.


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