

Chapter 5

Stanisław Moniuszko's Oeuvre as a Builder of National Identity During Partition Times

Magdalena Chrenkoff

Abstract Stanisław Moniuszko's compositional activity took place in the second half of the 19th century, when Poland was occupied by three invaders. In difficult times, such as war, loss of sovereignty, restriction of liberty etc., the need of stressing common cultural heritage and sense of national identity become more important. What is "national", gets the new, deeper dimension. Sometimes the historical context reflexes in artists' oeuvres, showing itself in numerous ways. For some it would be searching of universal values, for others—focusing on the closest, local things. Moniuszko belongs to the second group. In his compositional activity, Moniuszko concentrates on giving the testimony of national identity. The choice of language, subjects and lyrics leads to the kind of music that spreads a clearly national, patriotic message. By this means, his music addresses the needs of that time. However, did his music influence the next generations of composers? Did this cultural heritage withstand the test of time?

5.1 Polish Musical Culture in the 19th Century

The artistic career of Stanisław Moniuszko (1819–1872) fell during a particularly difficult period in Polish history when—after three successive partitions (1772, 1793 and 1795), made by Russia, Prussia and Austria—the country disappeared from the map of Europe (Fig. 5.1).

The loss of independence, as well as the discriminatory policy of the partitioning powers (escalated after two unsuccessful uprisings in 1830 and 1863), had a

Author uses name Poland, although until 1795 the historically official name of the country was Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów [Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth]—the Crown of the Polish Kingdom and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Nevertheless, Moniuszko identified himself as Polish composer and referred to his motherland as Poland.

M. Chrenkoff (✉)

Academy of Music in Kraków, Kraków, Poland
e-mail: zbchrenk@cyfronet.pl

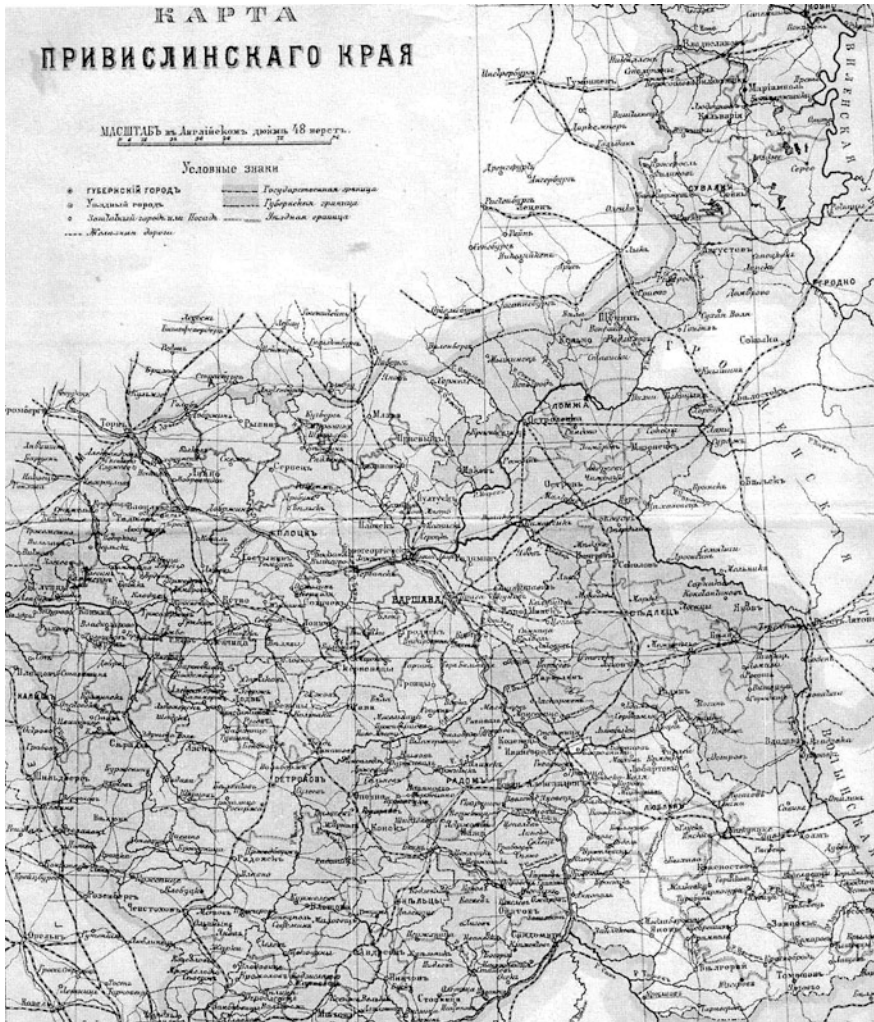


Fig. 5.1 The map of Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth area in the 19th century

dampening influence on both the country’s economy and on the development of cultural life in Polish society. What became the most important task of the subjugated nation, divided among the three partitioning powers, was the conscious maintenance of Polish identity, especially by emphasizing the common cultural heritage.

The context of the historical situation was normally reflected in artists’ oeuvre, manifesting itself in various ways. For some, it would be a search for universal values; for others, an attempt to concentrate on that which was closest to their hearts, on that which was local. Moniuszko numbered among those composers who

were focused exclusively on bearing testimony to their national identity. His choice of language, themes and texts led to the writing of music which bore a clear national, patriotic message—thereby fitting in with the needs of the time. His oeuvre, like that of other artists active in the country, subject to censorship, moved in an area delineated by the Polish socio-cultural realities of Partition times. Local conditions, the current political situation and frequently urgent needs compelled more practical action—more closely associated with everyday life—to be taken. Contemporary critic, Józef Sikorski, admonished artists as follows:

Artists should act in a spirit of national determination. [...] And we musicians, let us take upon ourselves [...] the yoke of serious and productive work, not only for us individually, but also for the nation as a whole. [...] So we shall tell you, composer: *if you want to be a citizen of this nation*, then know what and how you are to speak, so as not to deceive yourself or others (Sikorski 1860: 106).

Stanisław Moniuszko, brought up in a family with strong patriotic traditions, was instilled from childhood with the need to serve his own country and society. He treated his artistic activity as a kind of mission, service to society, patriotic obligation. “If I love my work, then I love it as an honest means of contributing to my country”, he wrote in a now-lost letter from 1860 (Walicki 1873: 104). One of the consequences of such an attitude on the composer's part was an enormous predominance in his oeuvre of vocal-instrumental music, which permitted him to convey national ideas in a manner more accessible to his audiences and, beyond that, facilitated maintenance of the culture of the Polish language—which, given the partitioning powers' Germanization and Russification policies, was of non-trivial significance. Thus, what became his field of compositional activity were song, stage music and religious music.

5.2 Moniuszko's Oeuvre as a Builder of National Identity

5.2.1 *Secular Song*

Moniuszko was the author of over 300 solo songs, written mainly to texts by Polish poets—and that, mostly Romantic (only about 30 of them were authored by foreign poets, but in Polish translation). In the Prospectus to the first volume of *Home Songbooks* Stanisław Moniuszko wrote:

I have been trying to select the lyrics from the verses by our best poets. [...] My songs, though containing various types of music, are of national determination and character (Rudziński 1969: 602).

Concerning even his first attempts in this area (three songs to words by Mickiewicz: *Marzenie* [The Dream], *Niepewność* [Uncertainty], *Do D.D. (Moja pieśzcotka...)* [To D.D. (My Darling Pet...)], published in Berlin in 1838), a German critic stated that:

[...] Moniuszko's **Polish songs**, published with a German text, are love songs which, in word and music, have **something national** about them (Fink 1839: 1022).

Moniuszko wrote songs throughout his lifetime. Viewing his oeuvre as a kind of mission, he wanted to create a new song repertoire, intended mainly for amateurs, in order to fill in—as he said in the letter to Józef Sikorski—“the broad empty space in the catalog of our national music” (Rudziński 1969: 111). Thus, he alluded to folk songs (Lithuanian, Belarusian, Ukrainian, Polish) and urban folklore, as well as the “historical song” tradition cultivated at noble courts.

In 1843, he began to publish his songs in the so-called *Home Songbooks*, a cyclical publication modeled on the literary almanacs fashionable at the time. He wanted pieces both diversified in terms of content and varying in difficulty of performance to reach the largest possible group of recipients. The *Songbooks* were meant to encompass the entire gamut of interests and become reading material adapted to varying moods and tastes. But at the same time, one can speak of a deliberate act of musical education, aiming to purge such items as Italian arias or French romances from the home repertoire and, simultaneously, accustom society to Polish poetry, which could in this manner become present in the everyday life in Poland under the Partitions. This was the conscious and clearly designated aim about which the composer wrote in his “Prospectus” to *Home Songbook 1*; this document almost miraculously escaped censorship in St. Petersburg (the censors in Vilnius and Minsk continued to refuse permission).

Moniuszko managed to publish six volumes of the *Songbooks*; another six were published after his death (see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1 Stanisław Moniuszko. *Śpiewniki Domowe* [Home Songbooks]

No.	Year of publication	Place of publication
(1)		
1	1843	Vilnius
2	1846	Vilnius
3	1851	Vilnius
4	1855	Vilnius
5	1858	Vilnius
6	1859	Vilnius
(2)		
7	1873	Warsaw
8	1908	Warsaw
9	1908	Warsaw
10	1909	Warsaw
11	1909	Warsaw
12	1910	Warsaw

(1) Published by Stanisław Moniuszko

(2) Published after composer's death



Fig. 5.2 Ubiel—Moniuszko family residence (picture by Napoleon Orda)

Moniuszko's songs became widely popular on account of their simple language and ability to combine music with text, as well as their extraordinarily rich and lively melodic imagination. They became basic repertoire for Poles, playing an important role—both societal and patriotic. In a certain sense, they became an unofficial textbook of literature in the native language, which was not taught in the Russified (or Germanized) schools. Moniuszko believe deeply that:

Those who live in the land in which they were born and grew up, will never stop liking that which pertains to their nation, their country, their locality - that which is an echo of their childhood memories (Rudziński 1969: 602) (Fig. 5.2).

5.2.1.1 *Do Niemna* [To the Nemunas]

Among Moniuszko's 17 pieces written to words by one of Poland's greatest Romantic poets, Adam Mickiewicz, one of the most beautiful is the lyric song *Do Niemna* [To the Nemunas]. *Do Niemna* is an erotic poem—the image of the peacefully flowing river serves as a counterweight to the amorous experiences and longings of the lyric subject, and symbolizes the passage of time. But at the same time, for the poet-in-exile, the Nemunas—the “home river” whose waters had life-giving and cleansing power—not only symbolized a happy childhood, filled with joy and hope, but was identified with home, with the motherland. The final statement that ‘all is past’ speaks of longing not only for his beloved woman.

In the song, the rolling of the lazily-flowing water is conveyed by the lyrical and fluid process of the musical narrative, as well as by a calm, diatonic melody, shaped

Andantino

[p]

Nie - mnie, do - mo - wa rze - ko
fleu - ve où s'hu - mec - talent mes

mo - ja! gdzie są wo - dzy, któ - re nie - gdyś cze - rpa - lem
lè - vres en - fan - ti - nes, ó cher Nie - men, com - bien de fois

w nie - mo - wle - ce dło - nie, na któ - rzych po - tem w dzi - kie ply -
vers les gran - des ci - tés, tu m'em - por - tas au loin sur

Fig. 5.3 Stanisław Moniuszko. *Do Niemna* [To the Nemunas], mm. 1–6 (S. Moniuszko, *Pieśni*, vol. III, ed. E. Nowaczyk, Kraków: PWM, 1968: 90)

in a long legato phrase (Fig. 5.3). On the other hand, segments of more emotional import, speaking of longing, more closely resemble a dramatic *recitativo*.

5.2.1.2 *Skarbczyk Polski* [Polish Treasures]

Moniuszko read Polish poetry carefully, used found sources, but also followed the latest publications. The subject matter and expressive content of the texts in large measure determined the type of musical interpretation. Thus, he wrote lyric songs (for example, love songs, reflective songs), pastoral songs (concerning everyday life and customs), dance songs (with *krakowiak* and *mazurka* rhythms) and ballads, as well as historical songs. The latter turned out to be particularly important, for they contributed directly to the maintenance of memory concerning the country's glorious past and, thereby, of national identity. An exceptional publication in this area was a cycle of songs to words by Maria Ilnicka, announced by the anonymous author in *Kronika Wiadomości Krajowych i Zagranicznych* [Chronicle of National and International News] from October 1860:

One of our local book dealers, Mr. [Aleksander] Nowolecki, intends to publish [...] an ornate edition of *Skarbczyk polski* [Polish Treasures], a collection of historical poetry by Mme Maria Ilnicka, with notes by Mr. Józef Bogdan Wagner and music by Stanisław Moniuszko, with woodcuts presenting kings and historical scenes from our past (Anonymous 1860).

The beautifully-illustrated little volume, finally entitled *Six Songs*, contained a song cycle whose protagonists are former kings of Poland (Fig. 5.4).

The words of the first song explain the aim of listening to tales of the country's proud history:

And he who hath such a patrimony,
Is even so quite wealthy too.
But thou shouldst know thy treasures, O my child,
[...]
Thou shouldst, I say, know them and honor them,
In thy filial heart with love preserve them,
So they do not fall upon the dust (Ilnicka 1861).

In each song of the cycle—with the exception of the first—the title evokes the name of the protagonist: *Piast*, *Bolesław Chrobry* [Bolesław the Bold], *Kazimierz Wielki* [Kazimierz the Great], *Jadwiga*, *Jan III Sobieski*. All of the songs are written in moderate tempi, with a predominantly march-like rhythm; beyond this, all of them are maintained in sharp major keys, appropriate to the expression of heroic feelings. One even wonders why the censors did not prevent its publication...

5.2.2 Religious Songs

Among Moniuszko's many religious songs (whether songs, hymns or Marian songs), it is worth noting those which have been interpreted musically as "prayers" or occasional songs. In reading the poems selected by Moniuszko, one could get the impression that the composer was in large measure guided not only by religious feelings, but also by a peculiarly-conceived artist's obligation to the motherland. There appeared multiple allusions or references to national affairs; the place of *personal prayer* was taken by *collective prayer for the motherland*.

In *The Lord's Prayer* [To Thee, O Lord] (words by Józef Bohdan Zaleski), this would be a plea for mercy upon the country, whose fate is more important than human suffering:

To Thee, O Lord, we raise our pray'rs to Heaven,
As we traverse life troubled without measure,
For all the thorns in this world put together
Have stabbed our hearts through, wounded, pierced and cleft them;
Yet not on us, O Lord, but rather firstly
On Mother Poland, we pray Thee, have mercy.

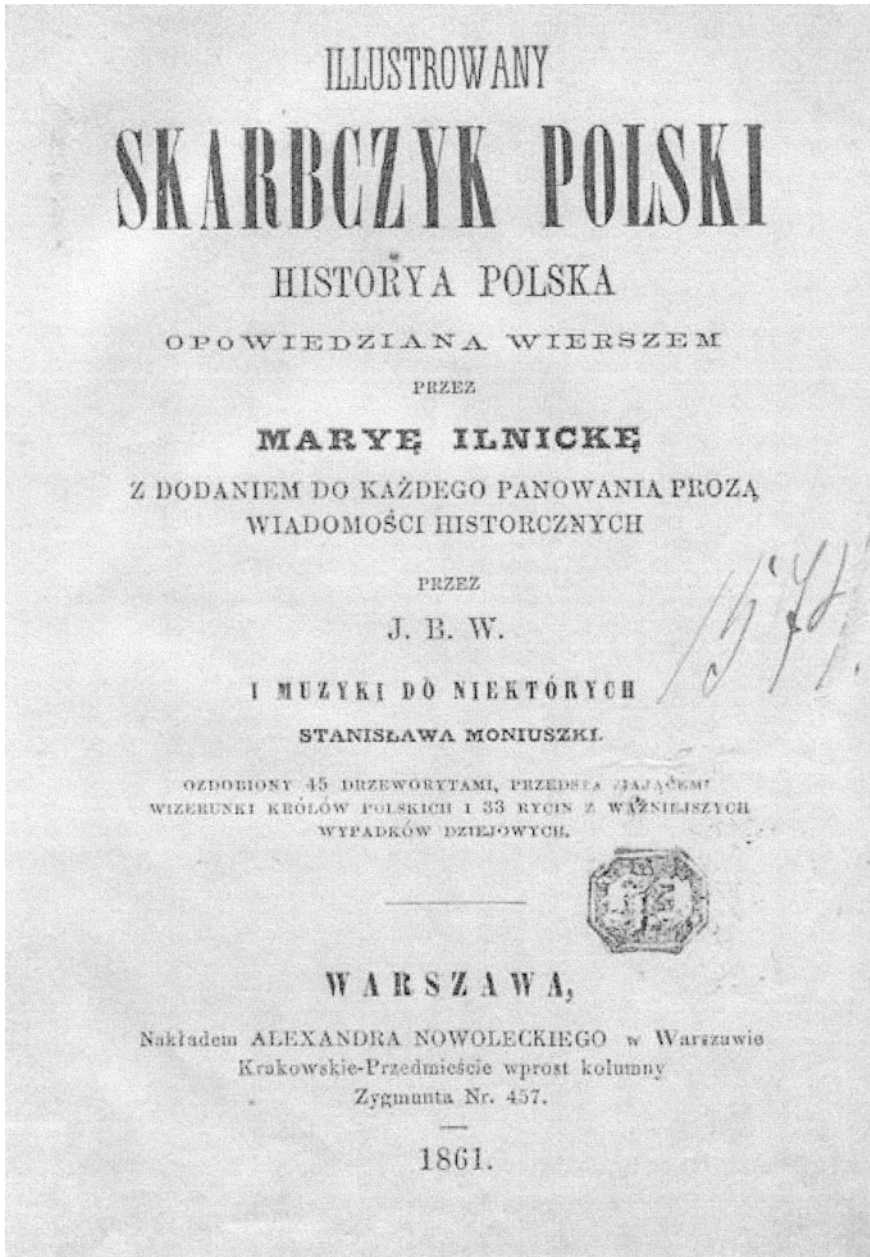


Fig. 5.4 Maria Ilnicka. *Skarbczyk polski* [Polish Treasures], 1861

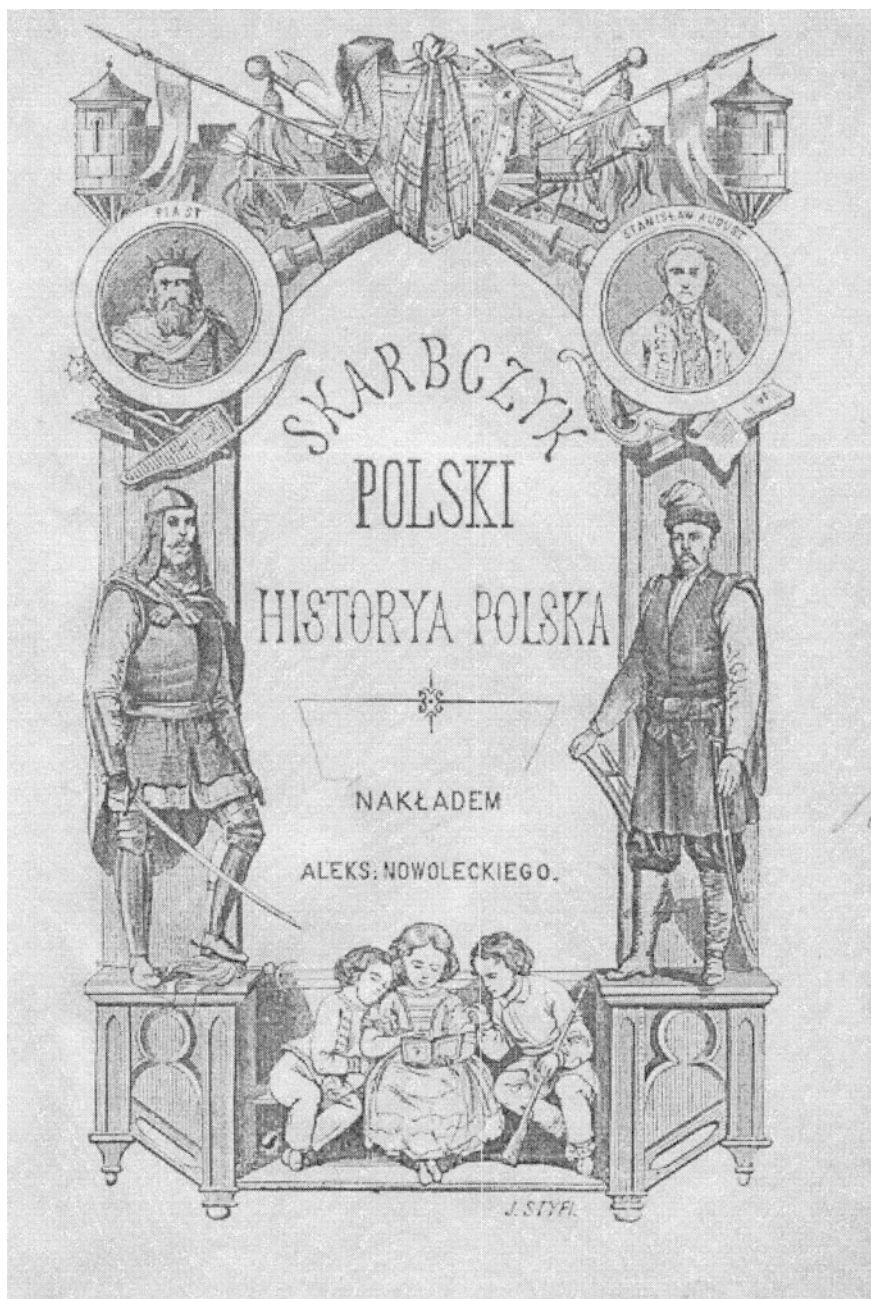


Fig. 5.4 (continued)

In *Modlitwa. W poświstach wichrów losu* [Prayer. In Whistling Winds of Fortune], with words written by Edmund Wasilewski, it would be a plea for help in the fight with the partitioning powers:

There, bringing affliction, winds blow

From the steppes and people hunger,
And silence frightful and hollow
Descends on towns large and small,
Ere there is no one left over,
Cleanse them, O God of all!

Even in the occasional song *Nabożeństwo* [Divine Service], alluding to folk religion, Moniuszko utilized a text by Kazimierz Brodziński, containing a clear reference to the political situation in the country:

**The parson has now said the war's begun
That will sprinkle the earth with blood.**

Sister for brother, mother for son
During church let them pray to God.

[...]

**For they that bow their heads before the Lord,
Shall never bend before their foes.**

The religious songs with the most patriotic message, unlike the calm, subdued psalms or hymns, have been set to music using the entire range of dynamics—to emphasize the ardor of the feelings involved. Additionally, they are normally scored for lower, usually male voices (baritone, bass).

5.2.3 Operas

In a letter to Edward Ilcewicz, Moniuszko wrote:

I am writing three operas, each of them half done: Korzeniowski's *Rokiczana*, Wolski's *Countess Dianna* and Chęciński's *The Pariah* - all of the libretti have turned out very well. It's just a pity that the censors have cut the king out of *Rokiczana* (Rudziński 1969: 364).

In another letter, mentioning *Rokiczana*, he explained to its addressee:

I have been bored with this work ever since the censors left it kingless (Rudziński 1969: 353).

The censors demanded that the character of Kazimierz the Great be removed from the libretto, supposedly to defend the dignity of the royal name. In the end, the censors did not change their minds, depriving the opera of its main protagonist (and *raison d'être*), so Moniuszko left the opera unfinished.

This was neither the first nor the last time that the composer had to fight for the opportunity to have his works performed. It was with the operas that he had the most trouble. Even the author of the libretto to *Halka*, Włodzimierz Wolski, abandoned plans to print the original version of his poem (at that time entitled *Halszka*), because the Warsaw censors had removed—from among the 493

surviving verses—163 of those most important to the content and the author's views; and on top of that, 27 verses were so thoroughly erased that there was no way to read them. In preparing the libretto for Moniuszko, Wolski sent the finished text to the censors in Vilnius—where, fortunately, no one had any idea that the poem had previously been slashed up so badly in Warsaw.

However, strictly speaking, *Halka*—the opera that made Moniuszko a name as the creator of Polish national opera—possessed not national, but rather societal content. Only in subsequent operas by Moniuszko is it possible to find the national element. For example, in *Hrabina* [Countess] (1860), whose libretto—authored by Wolski—contained many allusions and oblique statements concerning past times (understandable, however, to the audience). Moniuszko emphasized these allusions using musical means: in this case, he depicted the simplicity and beauty of the rural world (identified with the national world), thereby criticizing cosmopolitanism. What became the culminating point of the opera was the *Polonaise* (reminiscent of old times), in which “patriotic tasks” were concentrated. The censors removed fragments that were too obviously political, but the *Polonaise*, introduced by the composer at the last minute, in a certain sense surprised the censors (cf. Rudziński 1961: 237).

Confusion reigned among the censors as well - it was never possible to calculate what they would leave, and what they would delete (in print, they would permit that which they had banned on stage) (Rudziński 1961: 244).

The opera *Straszny dwór* [The Haunted Manor], written in the face of the disastrous January Uprising, was termed by Moniuszko a “comfort for the current disasters”, and received by the audience as a revelation of the national spirit (Fig. 5.5).

In creating this opera, both the librettist, Jan Chęciński, and the composer were aware of its patriotic effect. This was manifested on several levels:

1. the action—which, for political reasons, obviously could not be set in contemporary times—was shifted into an otherwise undefined past;
2. the successive scenes contain images understandable to the Polish audience: the return of a soldier from war (prologue), displays of cultural customs (greeting at the family home, girls working at the loom, a mazurka dance);
3. among the fragments most readily interpreted in a patriotic manner in terms of the text are:
 - the soldiers' declaration “And wherever evil comes to make of paradise a hell, let my hand take not the plowshare when our God and country call!” (Prologue) (Fig. 5.6);
 - Stefan's aria, i.e. the aria with carillon “I hear how Father this song is freely crooning, when for the holiest cause he hastens to give blood...” (Act III) (Fig. 5.7);
 - Hanna's aria “When heaven's will requires sacrifices, here your fiancée her fears shall conquer. O my youthful knight, above your wedding, I myself shall show you holier altars! A soldier's wife regards not the hardship, signing the Cross, she sends him to glory” (Act IV).



Fig. 5.5 Stanisław Moniuszko. *Straszny dwór* [The Haunted Manor], score, the title page



Fig. 5.6 Stanisław Moniuszko, *Straszny dwór* [The Haunted Manor], Prologue, soldiers' song (Podlasie Opera and Philharmonic—European Art Centre in Białystok Opera, the premiere performance, 28 September 2012)

The patriotic ideas contained in the opera are in large measure coded in symbols—in both the words and the music (e.g. the carillon melody resembling Ogiński's polonaise *Farewell to the Motherland*). However, the audience understood the work's message perfectly, reacting especially enthusiastically to the Prologue and the Aria with carillon, which resulted in the censors' ending *Straszny dwór's* run after the third show. In the letter to Edward Ilcewicz (after 7 October 1865) Moniuszko wrote:

The Haunted Manor has been suspended by our mother censorship. No one can guess for what reason. You can imagine how unpleasant this is for me (Rudziński 1969: 492).

The musical score is written for piano and consists of four systems. Each system has a treble and bass clef staff. The key signature has two flats (B-flat major), and the time signature is 3/4. The first system is marked *pp*. The melody is primarily in the right hand, with a steady accompaniment in the left hand. The piece concludes with a final chord in the right hand and a sustained bass note in the left hand.

Fig. 5.7 Stanisław Moniuszko. *Straszny dwór* [The Haunted Manor], Act III, carillon from Stefan's aria

So, then, the Partition authorities quickly noticed the danger that this “anti-tsarist” music carried with it. *Straszny dwór* returned to the Warsaw stage only after Poland regained its independence.¹

¹After Moniuszko's death, this opera was presented in Warsaw very rarely—and that, in a version with altered text.

5.3 Final Remarks

Stanisław Moniuszko is an extraordinary figure in Polish music history. His oeuvre has, however, always been received with ambivalence. On the one hand, he has been placed on a historical pedestal as the creator of Polish national opera and art song; on the other, this most distinguished composer of vocal music in 19th-century Poland is sometimes treated with indulgence, as a provincial musician who did not keep up with the artistic achievements of the West (cf. Dziębowska 1997: 14). In December 1850, embittered by an article placed in the *Gazeta Warszawska* newspaper, he wrote to Józef Sikorski:

If someone is so stupid as to comfort themselves with me after the loss of Chopin, it is not my fault and I have never stood alongside even any *certified* European celebrity, much less Chopin, for whom my adoration knows no limit!!! (Rudziński 1969: 161).

Did Moniuszko's music have any influence on subsequent generations of composers? He found continuers only among certain song writers still rooted in Romanticism. The opera, even at the moment when he created it, was of exclusively local significance. Moniuszko knew the latest trends, studied Wagner's scores; but at the same time, he understood that in Poland, what was needed was another kind of music, perhaps more accessible, strongly rooted in tradition, resonating with folk notes from Lithuanian, Belarussian, Ukrainian songs, with Warsaw folklore...

He fought a daily battle for the preservation of historical memory, maintenance of tradition, respect for that which was native to Poland. Limited by censorship, he tried to carry out the tasks he set himself. He completely agreed with Sikorski's view that:

Art should be homegrown, until it comes to life - and it should be so afterwards as well, to remain in life and keep pace with it, to be its translator and ennobler. Then it may be cosmopolitan, inasmuch as it can be so without forgetting about the home origins from which it draws its inspiration. [...] Thus, the writer of songs conceived in a national spirit is more popular than the composer writing symphonies and operas for the whole world (Sikorski 1860: 723–4).

For this reason, Moniuszko addressed his works not only to professional musicians, but above all, to amateurs. He himself contended that he worked “for *home use*, a field in which everyone will admit that it is difficult to gain momentum” (Rudziński 1969: 161).

Among 20th-century Polish composers, it is difficult to find one who would appeal to Moniuszko's tradition. Karol Szymanowski wrote in 1920:

Despite its great value, his art does not display any broader horizons, any paths of development, so he has remained a mere memento from the past [...] (Chylińska 1958: 47–8).

Translated by Cara Thornton.

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