

Chapter 7

New Romanticism in Polish Music. Generation 51—Knapik, Krzanowski, Lasoń

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Abstract The subject matter of the paper focuses around a problem of “New Romanticism” in Polish music based on the example of works of three composers referred to as the “Stalowa Wola Generation” (the name derives from the place of their debut, i.e. the Young Musicians for the Young Town Festival in Stalowa Wola in 1976) or “Generation 51” (from the year of birth of the composers). They constituted the first generation phenomenon of such significance in Polish music since the debut of “Generation 33” (Penderecki, Górecki and others). The musical style of these young authors was in tune with the Polish popular phenomenon of 1970s of “New Romanticism”, consisting in returning to certain artistic and aesthetic values lost in modernism and the avant-garde. Relying on the examples of mostly earlier works of Eugeniusz Knapik, Aleksander Lasoń and Andrzej Krzanowski, an attempt is made to interpret the “syndrome” of this phenomenon—including the return to melodies, neo-modality and tonality, and the humanistic message of the compositions.

7.1 Introduction

Leszek Polony wrote about the tendencies in the mid-1970s among young Polish composers and music critics:

What were we about? [...] about finding the fading, lost *sense* [highlighted by K. K.] of music, the creative activity and general human existence in the world. About a glimmer of hope in the world that’s chaotic, disintegrated, and threatened with an apocalypse. About personal attesting to the obvious, however, not new values. We took all these things integrally and very seriously (Polony 1986: 73–4).

When Krzysztof Droba, a Kraków music theorist, started the *Young Musicians for a Young City* festival in Stalowa Wola in 1975, aiming to promote new music by

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young debutant Polish composers, many would look at his actions with doubt. Stalowa Wola seemed to be the last place where such cultural initiatives could count on success. It was a small, provincial, working-class town in South-East Poland whose existence was justified by the local steelworks employing 25,000 people and which was to serve as a model socialistic town. The 1970s of the “rotten” and slowly declining communism were more conducive to tightening censorship than to such an initiative. The Festival’s organizer reminisced:

It was a ghastly period that rationed first and foremost such phenomena as festivals. One couldn’t just set up a festival. The fact that it worked [...] was a miracle. From today’s perspective, I’m amazed that it was allowed because it could have been quickly stamped out. It was permitted due to lack of understanding and also because it was happening in a small centre, a new province, where the security service didn’t operate yet as they were probably supposed to. It turned out fine because it was a peculiar island of freedom. The Stalowa Wola style was not about pomposity but about the fact that everything was taking place in fraternity and unanimity (Pater 2000: 66).

Festival participants remember the special atmosphere of freedom, invaluable at the time, which accompanied the meetings. Charles Ives became the spiritual patron of the Festival—during a few editions of the Festival, a number of this composer’s pieces were performed, the majority for the first time in Poland. Focused on truth and resulting from his adoption of the principles of American transcendentalism, Ives’s aesthetic and philosophical attitude also permeated the atmosphere of Stalowa Wola. Droba wrote:

In keeping with the message propagated here by music of Ives [...] liberation from all forms of restriction, and finally freedom, are to serve the highest good which is the truth that sets you free – that’s how we can put in words the sense of Ives’s presence in Stalowa Wola (Droba 2011a: 8).

The Festival became the place of debut for a new—as it soon turned out—generation of composers born in 1951 and who came from Silesia: Eugeniusz Knapik, Andrzej Krzanowski, and Aleksander Lason. They formed the first significant generational phenomenon in Polish music since the debut of “Generation 33” (Krzysztof Penderecki, Henryk Mikołaj Górecki, and others). Despite significant differences between them, the style of music of these young composers was writing into the “New Romanticism” movement, consisting of a return to certain values which were lost during modernism, in terms of aesthetics, the composer’s attitude, and specific qualities of musical language. In the mid-1990s, Eugeniusz Knapik said:

Our work – the work of composers taking part in the festival in Stalowa Wola – was probably a certain form of opposition against the avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s; against newness as a value in itself; against total destruction (Janicka-Słysz 1995: 24).

Therefore, as Andrzej Chłopecki stated, the basic feature of Stalowa Wola composers was:

[The] restoration of the rules loosened in the 1950s and 1960s of composing music, cultivating repressed values, and reinstating its purpose which was cast into doubt in previous years (Chłopecki 1986: 233).

7.2 Sources, Inspirations, Connotations: The First Reconnaissance

Even a cursory viewing of catalogues of works by Knapik, Krzanowski, and Lasoń in search of common denominators will certainly present two obvious issues: the presence of readable genre references and specific titles in this music which suggest a specific circle of musical meanings and senses set outside of the music itself.

After years of almost non-presence in the avant-garde music, the return of traditional genres in the works of the Stalowa Wola generation of composers turned into a manifesto of a specific aesthetic attitude. Among the traditional genres used, one can distinguish those belonging to chamber music (instrumental as well as vocal and instrumental, including sonatas, string quartets, etc.) and various concert music like concerto grosso—Knapik, *sinfonia concertante*, solo concerto—Lasoń, concerto for orchestra—Krzanowski. However, definite genres appear as well, those which are often a result of reading the old ones anew or “transposing” vocal, instrumental or even literary genres into instruments: Knapik’s *Corale*, *interludio e aria*, *Hymn* and *Versus*; Krzanowski’s *Choral*, *Ode*, *Novella*; or Lasoń’s *Hymn* and *Aria* and instrumental interpretations of ordinary of mass—*Credo* and *Agnus Dei*. A separate genre category form the works (appearing most often in Krzanowski’s compositions) whose titles refer to phenomena (genres, techniques) appearing in visual arts—*Relief*, *Sketches*, *Transpainting*, *Impressions* (*Winter*, *Spring*, *Summer*, *Autumn*), *Sentimental Landscape*. The titles of the works show indirectly the creators’ characteristic properties—great sensitivity to color.

When searching for commonalities, one cannot overlook what is individual. For Andrzej Krzanowski, the instrumental medium was an accordion (the composer was an accordionist); hence, the multitude of works representing different genres written for the instrument. Also, the composer developed a different type of compositions combining literary texts and music called *Programmes*—quasi “radio plays”. Eugeniusz Knapik, on the other hand, starting from the late 1980s, focuses on the opera which does not appear in Krzanowski’s and Lasoń’s works.

As already mentioned, the second, significant and external feature distinguishing the Stalowa Wola composers is the presence of—although singular yet important—instrumental works which have specific, programmatic, yet very general titles: Knapik’s *Islands*, Lasoń’s *Mountains*, *The Cathedral*; and Krzanowski’s *Over the Rainbow*. The titles invoke certain archetypical ambiguous symbols, which Mircea Eliade called “images”. Such symbols as the images of mountains, seas, cathedrals are ambiguous and polyvalent; they express one’s longing for the “lost paradise”, and their “power and mission [...] is to show everything that resists conceptualization” (Eliade 1961: 23). It should be added that, by giving their works such titles, the composers acted against the tendencies in twentieth-century culture which, along with the desacralization process, wanted to throw away the entire sphere of human existence resisting rationalization. Eliade writes:

Modern man has a right to disdain mythologies and theologies, which still does not stand in the way of living on fallen myths and degraded images (Ibid.: 22).

Therefore, turning out to be equally avant-garde and anti-postmodern, the works of the Stalowa Wola composers seem to serve the attempt to reinstate this profound, undistorted perspective of human spirit.

A similar function seem to serve the texts the composers use in their vocal and instrumental works. Eugeniusz Knapik's verbal and musical imagination was initially shaped first of all by Paul Valéry's symbolism (*Just like on the seashore...* for instrumental ensemble and tape to the text of Paul Valéry); only at the end of the 1980 s did a meeting with a Belgium artist Jan Fabre give rise to a new stage in his vocal and instrumental output (*The Minds of Helena Troubleyn* operatic trilogy). The relatively scanty vocal and instrumental works of Aleksander Lasoń are represented by most of all low-key hymns and songs with the texts of Kazimiera Hłakowiczówna about bogeymen and forest creatures (*Three Songs to texts by Kazimiera Hłakowiczówna* for alto, oboe, violin, cello, and piano). The texts Andrzej Krzanowski chose, on the other hand, reverberate with existential accents, which we can find in a specific, dreary, and slightly surreal climate of Jacek Bieriezin's and Zbigniew Dolecki's poetry.

Krzanowski developed yet another type of special, semantic marking of his music—a quotation technique. Although it belongs to strictly musical means, in the composer's works it "operates" in an external way, almost identical to a literary quotation. According to Kosz (1996: 290), Krzanowski became closest to the avant-garde; hence, his ties with the tradition are external in his works. The musical quotations the composer introduced (sometimes words and music) usually carry a strong emotional and semantic load, constituting in the continuum of a composition moments of specific stopping of time. It should be pointed out that such a function of a musical quotation differs from frequently ludic play with quotes in postmodern music.

For example, in a final fragment of *Programme III* for reciter, soprano and instruments (trumpet, baritone saxophone, two accordions, electric guitar, and percussion), the composer used the text of a shocking fragment of Jacek Bieriezin's *Emigration*, describing the last moments of a poet who committed suicide. After the words "At last the light flared out of the open veins", a climactic fragment of part II of Henryk Mikołaj Górecki's "*Copernican*" *Symphony* is introduced, played from a tape, with the words "luminaria magna"—"grand lights" (Krzanowski was Górecki's student, and there are many connections between the style of their works).

7.3 Music

The authors who research the works of Stalowa Wola composers emphasize its strong emotionalism and rehabilitation of the melodics, which is often lyrical. Andrzej Chłopecki wrote:

Back in favor is the melodic line thinking, cantilena, which has started to replace thinking with a mental plane, a blotch, a mass. The effect here is, among others, a return to a song-like expression (Chłopecki 1982: 12).

Very often, this leading role of melodics goes hand in hand with the application of well thought-through and distinguished instrumental hues, which gives away the creators' sensitivity to colors as they were acquainted with the experiences of the quests for color and sound of twentieth-century music. These composers knew it well as active performers of contemporary music. For instance, Knapik—a composer and pianist—was known for his interpretations of Messiaen's *Vingt regards*.

Works of Knapik, Krzanowski and Lason allow one to observe another significant feature of the music—its being euphonious. This music is “for listening” as it is familiar to the recipient. This property is ensured by neotonality and neomodality. Knapik is closer to the former (although his music also features diatonics of a modal provenance), while Lason uses elements of the latter, like in the *String Quartet I*. In Chłopecki's opinion (1986: 238–9), in many pieces written by Krzanowski, which are associated with sonorism the strongest, readable tonal references—dominant tonic play a role of nodal points which divide the form.

In the works of Stalowa Wola composers, very characteristic is the previously mentioned high sensitivity to colors. The pieces written by each of them have a specific recognizable color trait. Andrzej Krzanowski's music, especially his accordion music, is determined by his search for new sound qualities. Knapik's music is closer to darker, full and saturated hues. Aleksander Lason, who is also a jazz piano player, can be described as a virtuoso of instrumental coloring and his world of sound is determined by mostly light colors.

Shaping of time is also very characteristic for the music of “Generation 51”. Stanisław Kosz wrote about this aspect in reference to the works of Knapik:

It is a time that is slow, natural for *homo sapiens*, close to singing, to that which is natural (Kosz 1996: 292).

In the works of the composer of *Islands*, the issue of time takes on particular importance, not only as a purely musical aspect but above all as a phenomenon which is tightly connected with human existence. It resonates in the texts the composer selects, in the titles of his works (*Tha' Munnot Waste No Time*), and in the peculiar, understated programmes of the works. The author spoke about his *Islands* in the following way:

[I]n this piece, there is reconciliation to the irreversible course of things. At the same time, there is joy from the fact that we were given time from the moment of appearing somewhere on the horizon until the moment of disappearing beyond its line. This time is all each of us have (Ibid.: 294).

Similar accents reverberate in Edward Estlin Cummings's poetry, which became a canvas for three out of four songs in the *Up into the silence* cycle for soprano, baritone and orchestra composed for the occasion of the end of the 20th century:

*In time's a noble mercy of proportion
with generousities beyond believing...
...there's time for laughing and there's time of crying –
for hoping for despair for peace for longing-
a time for growing and a time for dying:
a night for silence and day for singing
but more than all (...) there is time for timelessness.*

Connoting the styles of Mahler and Strauss, the final part of the song seems to speak, as Wojciech Stępień writes:

With the strength of purity and metaphysical elation. Scanty in means of expression, the song, simple and harmonically purified, ascends into the sphere of the spirit (Stępień 2011: 60).

7.4 Conclusions

Originality is not about being different from others, about producing something completely different. It's about grasping that which is original in the etymological sense of the word. About capturing the roots of both us and the roots of the things (Pater 2000: 60).

These words, taken from the book edited by Herbert Read, served as the motto of Krzanowski's Symphony No. 2. They also played a significant function in the shaping of Knapik's artistic personality.

The essence of "New Romanticism" in the version of Stalowa Wola composers is not some musical "retro style"; it is rather a return to certain lost spiritual values of art. Its significance, as Knapik said in 2011, consists in helping us to "arrive at understanding that which is an unequalled dream, pain, and yearning, an eternal human desire" (Droba 2011b: 62). By stressing this profoundly humanistic meaning of art, the Stalowa Wola composers express their objection against not only its degradation in some avant-garde trends but also speak against postmodernism with an attempt to prove that the time of "grand narrations" has not passed.

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