

Introduction

THE POLISH MUSICAL AVANT-GARDE AND NATIONAL TRADITION

This is a book about Polish musical culture during the Cold War, but it is not a book about the Cold War. This distinction is important because the musical movement known as the “Polish avant-garde” or the “Polish School” of post-World War II composition has very often been framed—especially by its West European and American audiences—as a direct response to Soviet political repressions and the subsequent cultural Thaw. This framing remains tenacious in the twenty-first century, decades after the conclusion of the Cold War. For example, in 2014 music critic Alex Ross described this period in Polish music history as a “remarkable surge of musical activity,” or a “Polish Renaissance,” that emerged after Joseph Stalin’s death in 1953. The Thaw that followed created a space for the “importation of avant-garde ideas.”¹ This Polish avant-garde was distinct from its Western counterpart, Ross clarified. Thinking back to the 1961 premiere of Krzysztof Penderecki’s *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima* (1960) at the Warsaw Autumn International Festival of Contemporary Music, Ross argued that the piece’s “psychedelic extravagance” reflected the Polish avant-garde’s difference: as a group, they tended to be “less studied, less process-driven, than [their] Western counterpart.”²

It was understandable that audiences heard (and are still hearing!) Penderecki’s unconventional timbres and textures as a gesture of resistance. In 1961, *Threnody* registered as pure reaction, a scream of horror. The visceral sonic qualities of Penderecki’s compositions from this period would later attract a whole host of film directors; his music accompanied Jack Torrance’s crumbling sense of self in

Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), and David Lynch used *Threnody* to evoke the origins of evil in his 2017 return to *Twin Peaks*. The intense affective resonance of this music is undeniable, but this was not the only feature that caught international attention in the early 1960s. For many contemporary observers, Penderecki's employ of key Western avant-garde techniques, including serialism and indeterminacy, signified his and other Polish composers' rejection of the Soviet aesthetic doctrine of socialist realism. This doctrine had called composers working in the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc to reject Western formalism, defined as an embrace of complexity and elitism at the expense of ideological communication with the mass audience. Together, then, both the sound and style of Penderecki's *Threnody* (and many other Polish compositions at the 1961 festival, including Witold Lutosławski's *Venetian Games*) indicated that Polish composers were separating themselves from the Soviet line and announcing a political affiliation with the West. This perception was not entirely wrong, certainly, but there is a more complicated story to tell here, because there were more than two available political and cultural positions in this period. Building on its specific national identity, Poland was blazing its own path.

Even Cold War-era listeners picked up on this Polish in-betweenness. In attendance at the 1961 premiere of Penderecki's *Threnody* was composer and critic Everett Helm, who had served after World War II as chief of the Theater and Music branch of the United States Office of Military Government in Germany.³ Helm was well aware of the contemporary political implications attached to both Western avant-gardism and Soviet socialist realism, and he played up those implications in his review for the American audience. He explained to his readers that Poland had long historical ties to the West, but since the war, it had been a "communistic" nation, and a "member in good standing of the East Bloc."⁴ In describing the Warsaw Autumn Festival, though, he located Poland in an intermediate space, situated between West and East, past and present, and argued that this positioning had given rise to a new generation of composers who were ready to occupy "the front rank of the European avant-garde." There is a curious redundancy in this formulation, suggesting that Helm was placing the Polish composers within the avant-garde of the avant-garde: they were pointed forward, as far into the future as they could go.

That futurity was relative. When Helm discussed the music he was hearing, his language did not indicate that he was hearing it through a lens of its newness alone. In describing Penderecki's "rather terrifying" *Threnody*, Helm explained that "there is no melody, harmony, or rhythm in the traditional sense. Yet the sum total is, remarkably enough, both music and art. The piece creates a strong atmosphere that is perversely romantic." In response to Lutosławski's *Venetian Games*, Helm praised the composer's use of chance procedures in service of a "meaningful structure." His definition of Penderecki's and Lutosławski's avant-gardism there-

fore lay in their “perversely romantic” embrace of both technical innovation and the capacity of music to communicate meaning. This observation pops up again in Ross’s review fifty years later, in his acknowledgment of the fundamental “difference” that characterized Polish music in this period; it felt very new, but somehow it was also more intuitive, more expressive, than its Western counterpart. This music occupied a space between contemporaneity and tradition, between West and East, between formalism and realism. It sounded simultaneously new and old.

For Western audiences, the liminal temporality of the Polish avant-garde was a sign of Poland’s progressive political position within the Eastern Bloc—an interpretation that neither Polish composers nor party-state officials were shy about exploiting when they wanted to promote their own postwar music culture on an international stage. Polish cultural actors were able to leverage the Cold War frame of their reception, as musicologist Lisa Jakelski has shown, to facilitate the cultural mobility of Polish music and musicians between different political zones and to build broad institutional support at home.⁵

Still, there are key questions surrounding the emergence and proliferation of the Polish avant-garde in the late 1950s and early 1960s that cannot be addressed fully within a Cold War frame, because they suggest the presence of longer-breathed historical trajectories and continuities. How did Polish composers build such powerful momentum so quickly after Stalin’s death? How were Poles so successful in resurrecting interwar intellectual networks after the war, and then in using those networks to support “elite” culture under communism? Why were they able to create and promote music grounded in aesthetic ideals and experimental techniques that should, logically, have incurred negative attention from the official sphere? And why in the early 1960s did so many Polish composers turn their attention to musical texture, timbre, and time, developing such a distinct sonic language? What kind of affective power did they intend their music to have, with its synthesis of old and new, and how did they interpret that power in relation to Soviet and Western aesthetic debates about meaning in music?

To answer those questions in the following chapters, I employ discourse and music analysis to interrogate intellectual, political, and aesthetic histories, but there is a common thread running through my investigations: time. In twentieth-century Poland, and especially after World War II, questions of national identity and of Polishness in music were bound up inextricably with the language of time. Progress and tradition, future and past, experimenter and epigone—these tensions animated the musical, cultural sphere in postwar Poland, calling into existence an idiosyncratic timeline against which the sliding scale between opposing coordinates might be mapped and measured. We cannot fully understand the specific arc of Polish musical avant-gardism through the periodicity of the Cold War, which was defined according to the logics of the Soviet and US political machines. While the conditions of Cold War geopolitical struggle shaped the reality in which Polish

composers were working, they were not reacting exclusively to the conditions of that struggle.

In articulating a more expansive temporal frame for postwar Polish cultural life, I draw on precedents set by historians Tony Judt and Timothy Snyder, but I do not use that frame to trace the regional, supranational rhythms of war and its aftermath.⁶ Neither am I primarily concerned with the transnational, global networks and exchanges that flourished under the social, cultural, and political conditions of the postwar years.⁷ Instead, I turn inward, to the nation's interior experience. Philip Gentry makes a similar turn in his study, *What Will I Be? American Music and Cold War Identity*, arguing that the "search for global cultural coherence can sometimes erase important local particularities."⁸ Even within the United States (which was, in many ways, the epicenter of Cold War discourse), Gentry asserts, the threats and challenges posed by the postwar era were felt primarily as domestic, not international, ones. Such a turn to the national perspective can be especially revealing in exploring the power dynamics that activated the interstices between the Soviet and US empires; for instance, in her study of musical sound and political action in later twentieth-century Poland, Andrea F. Bohlman proposes that "local and everyday experiences shaped the symbolic work, discursive nuance, and aural cultures of Solidarity."⁹ Paying attention to these local experiences provides insight into the work that national identity can do, interrupting and rendering contingent the political—and temporal—forces that might otherwise seem all-encompassing.

A turn to the national perspective in my own study uncovers the internal conditions that enabled postwar Poles to imagine a uniquely Polish musical avant-garde: the generational, institutional, political, and aesthetic affiliations that shaped cultural actors' definitions of Polishness and progress in music. Although their definitions were not always compatible, composers, musicians, and intellectuals after World War II shared a desire to generate Polish cultural progress—and a belief that cultural progress was linked to national progress writ large. To achieve those goals, they had to negotiate terms for moving forward, and then to renegotiate when political conditions and power relationships shifted. The musical avant-garde movement, as a symbol both of Polishness and progress, was therefore an expression of a tenuously held consensus, grounded in shared experiences and a desire to establish continuities between past aesthetic and intellectual traditions and contemporary Polish experiences.

WHOSE MODERNITY?

Historian Reinhart Koselleck has argued that in Western Europe, a new understanding of time emerged in the late eighteenth century, one that erected a firm boundary between past and present. This happened as individuals stopped think-

ing about the passage of time in relation to eschatology and the rhythms of the natural world and instead entrained to forces of modernization: secularization, industrialization, colonial expansion, and scientific experimentation. With this shift, the space between experience and expectation widened, and “progress” was mapped upon chronology in a straightforward, diachronic line.¹⁰ Koselleck’s historical argument cannot account, however, for the emergence of modernity in nations or groups who were repressed by or excluded from those same historical forces of modernization. In such contexts, the connection between experience and expectation, past and future, often remained strong.¹¹

During the period covered by this study, extending roughly from 1930 to 1965, Poles used historical experiences of rupture and loss as reference points in interpreting present realities and developing goals for the future. They looked to the partitions of the late eighteenth century (1772, 1793, 1795) that had removed Poland from the European map for over a century, dividing its territory among the Russian, Prussian, and Austrian Empires. They remembered failed uprisings—the November Uprising (1830–31) and the January Uprising (1863–64)—and the waves of repression and exile that followed each one. The reestablishment of an independent Poland in 1918 provided an opportunity to imagine what a Polish future might look like, but World War II brought yet another partition, this time between the Nazis and the Soviets. The extreme devastation and loss of life during the war and the Holocaust traumatized the surviving Polish citizens, and the gradual solidification of Soviet power after the war and the Yalta Conference left them, again, without a fully independent nation. All of these losses, all of these erasures and gaps, led to an urgent collective sense that Poland had become disconnected from the chronological passage of “normal” time, and, as a result, the nation was not yet modern. It was in the context of this sense of temporal displacement that Poles worried about their national backwardness (*zaległość*) and their progress (*postęp*) toward modernity.

Many different words became attached to the language of national backwardness in this period; speakers might alternately address Polish *lag*, *delay*, *lateness*, *isolation*, *deficiency*, or *ignorance* (willful or otherwise). Each of these words had its own set of implications, but two main discursive frames for thinking about national backwardness emerged. One was related to chronological time: if modernity was fixed to a homogenous world-historical timeline, then Poland’s position outside of modernity located the nation at some earlier chronological point, previous to the contemporary moment. The other frame was defined by accumulation: if modernity existed as a balance sheet, with certain economic, intellectual, cultural, or experiential benchmarks, then Poland’s backwardness could be measured in terms of its deficiencies or gaps.

Following historian Maria Todorova, I use the terms *lag* and *lack* in relation to these two different conceptualizations of national displacement from modernity.¹²

Artists, intellectuals, and party-state officials wielded these twinned forms of backwardness as both a specter and a threat, adjusting their language when necessary in response to new challenges or goals. Because *lag* and *lack* each presumed different parameters for measuring modernity, their deployment stimulated different kinds of progress. In the context of lack (*brak*), the act of “catching up” was one of acquiring missing elements. Throughout the 1950s, cultural and political actors constantly invoked various forms of national lack, and they spoke of remediating this problem by “filling the gap” (*zapełnienie luki*). Their language implied that Polish cultural backwardness was confined to specific lacunae and that its reversal would be a simple matter of addressing those quantitative deficits. For lag (*opóźnienie*), on the other hand, “catching up” became an imaginative act of quickening, of propulsion, spinning out connections between past histories and future visions.¹³

Maria Todorova cautions that Western scholars have wielded backwardness discourse in the past to affirm Cold War-era stereotypes about the “real” economic, political, and cultural backwardness of Eastern and Central European nations. Such narratives have routinely presented Eastern Europe as the late inheritor of developments originating in the West. Todorova traces this thread from Hans Kohn’s 1944 division of Western and Eastern nationalism into “civic” and “organic” forms, to studies such as Daniel Chicot’s collection *The Origins of Backwardness in Eastern Europe* (1989) and even to Benedict Anderson’s influential work of nationalism theory, *Imagined Communities* (1983), which, although it disrupts Eurocentric narratives about the origins of nationalism, still puts a premium on firstness in nations’ attainment of “horizontal-secular, transverse time.”¹⁴ In his *Time and the Other* (1983), Johannes Fabian identifies a similar problem in the field of anthropology, arguing that the entire discipline was founded on an unequal power relationship between the West and its Other, and that this relationship had been expressed in terms of time. Anthropologists displaced their objects of study from the present moment, locating them at an earlier point on a developmental timeline.¹⁵ This problem, in both Todorova’s and Fabian’s view, grew out of the presumption of a neutral world-historical timeline. If scholars imagined that their notions of development, progress, and modernity functioned outside the ideological power structures of colonialism and imperialism, then they were bound to reinforce those power structures.

One problem with both Todorova’s and Fabian’s arguments, despite their crucial disciplinary correctives, is that they do not leave space for thinking about why individuals or nations might designate themselves as Other, or why they might aim the language of backwardness at themselves.¹⁶ Wielded reflexively in mid-twentieth-century Poland, the language of backwardness was not necessarily disempowering, nor did it rely exclusively on the comparative mode; on the contrary, this discourse generated agency for its speakers and allowed them to advocate for

their own personal and national goals. Important signs of progress—such as an internationally recognized avant-garde movement—could then be interpreted as evidence that the caesuras in national tradition had been remediated, and that the vital arc between past, present, and future had been reestablished. It was in embracing an internal national timeline that artists and political leaders were able to instrumentalize Poland's spatial, geopolitical position within the East-West divide, leveraging their in-between status to attract support from domestic and international audiences alike.

Polish cultural actors used backwardness discourse to think about modernity and time—its durations and even its directionality—in radically relative terms. In the fields of indigenous studies, postcolonial studies, and queer studies, scholars have long argued that time does not run along a homogenous, chronological line, and that modernity exists not as a monolith, but as a plurality of modernities. Indigenous studies scholar Mark Rifkin, for example, proposes a decolonized, phenomenological understanding of time that acknowledges the effects of “collective histories and anticipations” on contemporary experiences of time. Rifkin reminds readers that indigenous communities may purposely inhabit “tradition” in a manner that seems anachronistic or conservative in order to push back against the hegemony of settler culture, articulating their own “distinctive way of being-in-time.”¹⁷ Queer theorist Heather Love argues similarly that in the case of many queer modernist literary figures, “backwards turns” and an embrace of the past allowed them to relive painful experiences of loss, laying bare the contingencies and the costs of modernity. They reclaimed the past “as something living—as something dissonant, beyond our control, and capable of touching us in the present.”¹⁸ Although I want to avoid drawing facile equivalencies between the Polish national-historical experience and postcolonial, indigenous, or queer experiences, the theoretical principles underlying Rifkin's and Love's work are resonant in the case of Poland (and also other Central and East European nations). Their critical lenses allow us to imagine historical subjects who traversed timelines that were not always linear. For Poles, a perpetual state of historical displacement collapsed the space between past, present, and future, allowing them to look simultaneously backward and forward. The realization of future potential was not necessarily linked to the chronologically new; in a qualitative sense, it might also represent the successful manifestation of the past within the present.¹⁹

The Polish manifestation of avant-gardism therefore did not bear a clear connection to other models of avant-gardism with which we may be more familiar. It did not resemble literary scholar Peter Bürger's well-known characterization of early twentieth-century European avant-garde movements as a rejection of the late-nineteenth-century, bourgeois foundations of artistic modernism, or Renato Poggioli's location of avant-gardism at the intersection of activism, antagonism, nihilism, and agonism.²⁰ Both of those definitions refer to the ephemeral, reactive

quality of early twentieth-century avant-garde movements. Bürger and Poggioli presume the avant-garde artist's rejection of tradition and, along with it, notions of the autonomy of the artwork and of romantic creative genius; however, the Polish avant-garde did not participate in that act of rejection.

I am not the first scholar to note that Bürger's definition does not hold when applied to avant-garde movements arising after World War II. British historian Perry Anderson has argued, in fact, that this incompatibility invalidates the existence of postwar avant-garde movements; the increasingly hegemonic power of late-stage capitalism has, in his view, left contemporary Western artists "without an appropriable past, or imaginable future, in an interminably recurrent present," doomed to replicate the economic and political structures that surround them.²¹ Anderson's pessimistic perspective hardly leaves room for thinking about the proliferation of avant-garde movements after the war on both sides of the Iron Curtain.²² His words are particularly inaccurate or unhelpful, though, in unpacking the shades of meaning that adhered to the Polish postwar musical avant-garde within the context of state socialism, or in noticing the destabilizing effect of the movement's investment in pastness and futurity upon the experience of the present moment, which might alternately feel as if it were lagging behind or rushing ahead in chronological time. The antithesis of German *Stunde Null* (Zero Hour) narratives, which required collective forgetting in service of a new national beginning, Polish narratives about time and cultural identity after the war depended on continuities, and the avant-garde movement became, in that context, a manifestation of the endurance of Polish national tradition.²³

BACKWARD AND FORWARD

I have retained the Polish-language word *awangarda* in the title of this book, in place of its more common French form, because I want to emphasize the specificity of the discourses that anchored Polish avant-gardism to its national context, in which notions of progress, modernity, and tradition took on very particular social and political meanings. Those meanings were not fixed; they shifted flexibly according to the needs of their speakers, allowing them to navigate the constantly-changing power relations between party, state, and cultural spheres and to perform their identities differently in public and private spaces. The shared referent of the nation facilitated productive conversations and mutual investments in cultural progress, even when speakers envisioned divergent national futures growing out of that progress.

I use each chapter to explore the specific terms that motivated debates about Polish tradition and Polish modernity between the interwar period and the emergence of the avant-garde in the early 1960s. Each of these terms relates to temporal movement, but the differences between them reveal the shifting political and

aesthetic tensions that characterized the period. In chapter 1, I will consider narratives about Polish modernity and attendant concerns about Polish backwardness (figured as *zaległość*) that arose in the 1930s and then again after the war in the late 1940s. Steeped in intellectual history, this chapter articulates the division between interwar so-called “conservatives” and “progressives,” whose debates would establish many of the key aesthetic definitions of musical progress and musical Polishness that remained in place throughout the postwar period. In chapter 2, I argue that members of the artist-intellectual class during the Polish *Zhdanovshchina* wielded language of lack (*brak*)—lack of materials, lack of experiences, lack of knowledge—to advocate for the continued value of their specialized expertise in determining the cultural future of the nation. To do that, they relied on continuities with interwar intellectual networks—networks to which they themselves had belonged, before the war—to link the past and present in a manner that was relatively resistant to external Soviet interventions. The vitality of Polish national identity as an alternative political-cultural position in this moment would also motivate the Polish October Revolution of 1956. The institutional repercussions of the post-1956 Thaw play out in chapter 3, in which I trace strategies for aiming cultural outreach (*upowszechnienie kultury*) at “elite” audiences, thereby filling the gaps in knowledge and experience left by Stalinist-era cultural controls in the early 1950s. Those strategies were only partially successful, requiring constant renegotiations between institutional leaders and the party-state cultural apparatus, which demanded that elite culture serve the needs of the mass audience.

In chapters 4 and 5, I interrogate opposing strategies for realizing cultural modernity in Poland. First, I examine the logic of lag (*opóźnienie*) as a generative conceptual space for imagining a national future that grows directly out of a national past. I read the reception of Witold Lutosławski’s *Funeral Music* in these terms, and argue that his subsequent “elevation” to the status of national genius allowed his colleagues and audiences to articulate the specificity of Polish modernist achievement while simultaneously asserting the value of this music on an international stage. By contrast, in chapter 5, I follow the rise of the first major representative of the postwar compositional generation, Bogusław Schäffer, whose definition of modernity (*nowoczesność*) relied on technical innovations that pointed forward, ineluctably, into the future. The tension between the two generations led to conflict, as middle-generation artists and intellectuals felt that this new temporal frame negated their own modernism, which was predicated on a synthesis of tradition and innovation. Finally, in chapter 6, I turn to the question of the Polish avant-garde movement (*awangarda*). In its initial appearance, critics hewed closely to Schäffer’s understanding of progress as a function of newness, but the discourse shifted as the composers gained prestige and experience. After 1960, new narratives presented the Polish avant-garde as a manifestation of national

tradition, wrapping the new generation of composers into the same narratives that had arisen around Lutosławski a few years earlier. The result was a robust discourse that framed Polish avant-gardism as a sign of Polish cultural forwardness, remediating the historical traumas that had previously displaced the nation from its rightful place as a European leader in the contemporary music community.