
Music – Folklore and Politics. Three Life Experiences and Two Approaches

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To what extent can music be an instrument of politics and its programmes and/or activities may be used for propaganda purposes? To what extent may the power of music (operating both consciously and subconsciously) manipulate people? May it be possible to possess people against their will? To what extent, on the other hand, may these not always honestly motivated activities have positive results inspiring people to act appropriately? To what extent, finally, may the wrong and positive results of those activities remain still active, even though the system which created them does not work anymore?

The objective of this paper is to open the discussion about the cultural policy of countries which experienced the harsh rule of an authoritarian and/or even totalitarian system. My contribution is based on my own life experiences of the three periods: that of my childhood (1939–1941) spent under the direct Soviet occupation (Lvov); that of my young years involved very much in the state-managed activity of collecting Polish folklore (1949–1956) in communist Poland; and finally that of my adult years and of my field work in the former Soviet Union (1978– 1990) (Czekanowska 1986, 1993, 2002).

In this presentation I would be happy to include both an insider's and an outsider's looks, attempting to confront them with an intention to be as objective as possible. At the same time, I am fully aware that memory is a

weak instrument and that what you remember from the distant past may not always be true and objective.

Turning to my first experience (1939–1941) means to return to the feelings of rigour, if not of terror under which the children in primary schools were educated. It concerned also the pupils of artistic schools (music), which in the former Soviet Union had a special rank. The rigour started with the demand for punctuality executed in regular primary schools personally by the school's director sitting on duty at the entrance and catching pupils who were late. The efficiency of this practice was so high that as far as I remember, there was only one case of coming late to our class (the school year 1940–1941) and the culprit was a nine years old boy from a class counting 54 children. The victim was caught and later examined by the director, who expected him to know the basic principles of the Communist Manifesto. In the case of secondary school students the examination and the punishment were probably much more severe. Absence from school had to be legitimised by official documents confirmed by state medical offices.

All pupil activities (both in regular and artistic schools) were exactly recorded and assessed in points, according to which pupils were ranked after the principles of an established hierarchy on their individual positions (e.g. pupil number 35th in the class). According to school authorities at the end of the school year the best pupils were distinguished by special diplomas with the symbol of the SU (sickle and hammer) and Lenin's and Stalin's portraits, which documented the position they attained and the collected points. The value of this document was immense. Children marked out by these diplomas were under special State protection. The most important was the privilege not to be deported to Kazakhstan, which was a mass practice at that time in former eastern Poland (ca half of million deported) (Ciesielski, Materski, Paczkowski 2002).

The privileges in artistic schools (special bonuses) also had a flipside. The children were under special control, being obliged to practise intensively (two hours a day for small children). This requirement was addressed also to the teachers who were obliged to find talented children and execute rigorously their practice.

From a long distance of a time I remember this experience as a permanent race from point to point, which I really enjoyed. Actually, we felt needed and fulfilled, despite the many evident paradoxes and this atmosphere of permanent control.

The atmosphere in regular schools was similar, though the pressure – to a certain extent weaker. The programme was overloaded, with evident stress on Russian language and mathematics. According to this programme we learned languages¹: 6 hours of Russian a week, 4 hours of Ukrainian (Lvov belonged to Ukraine), and 4 for Polish i.e. for the local community's tongue. The most prominent was mathematics (7 hours a week). The latter was executed very much like the practice in artistic schools. The other subjects basically referred to the culture of Soviet Union in its extended scope and cultural diversity (e.g. Central Asia, Siberia, the Caucasus); the world beyond these borders virtually did not exist. It created a distorted but still an interesting perspective, which helped us to learn about the culture of this huge country, which for me was new and refreshing. I was really charmed by the creativity of Kazakh or Kirghiz epic story tellers (Djambul Djabaev² and Toktogul Satylganov³, and it is highly probable that the roots of my later interest in Central Asia are to be found in this childhood excitement. The power of Russian musical culture was also immense, we were constantly singing Russian songs, those offered by the propaganda as well as others. The intention to teach us the Russian language and culture was successfully fulfilled

To summarise, I remember this time as a period of intensive learning thanks to which I had the opportunity to make some reserves for the time of German occupation (1941–1944), during which education was limited to the basic counting, reading and writing. Indeed, Germans wanted to educate us as very primitive workers, while the Russians, tried to enlighten us ideologically and to adapt us to the obligatory standards of the Soviet Union. The latter were totally under the command of Moscow, since even the time of Moscow was obligatory in this territory of seven time zones.

¹ A similar programme was obligatory in many republics of the SU, including even the so-called autonomous republics.

² Djambul Djabaev (1846–1945).

³ Toktogul Satylganov (1864–1933).

It is not an easy task to evaluate properly these memories of early childhood; it is even more difficult to evaluate to what extent we the children could really think – being completely overwhelmed by this race and the pressure of authorities. Actually, it is hard to differentiate between conscious and unconscious feelings – in which music played an important role supporting the pulse of this race and intensifying its emotional impact.

My second experience (1949–1956) was dominated by a certain kind of fascination. It was connected with the discovery of the unknown world of traditional folk culture and music. Despite some earlier contacts with Polish villages I was totally unconscious that this world existed. The wealth of this culture which I had the opportunity to experience during the local parish fair on Saint Bartholomew's Day in the town of Opoczno really struck me.

From the beginning the links of our activity with the official propaganda system were evident but for us, very young students, they went partly unrecognized. It was the project for the Collection of Musical Folklore supported by the highest state authorities in Poland.

The government's propaganda in the People's Republic of Poland decided to gather materials for Folk Ensembles of Song and Dance, actually copying the Soviet ensembles of that type.

This activity was incorporated into the more extended programme of adapting Polish culture to Soviet standards, with an evident admiration for folklore which belonged to the traditional Russian paradigm. For experienced people it was clear that the basic intention of this action was to replace the national culture of a sovereign state (Poland) with the vision of the folk culture of regional communist republic.

In principle the ideology was oriented towards the people of the former lower classes, i.e. 'simpler people, who thanks to these actions should be properly acknowledged and receive a new status'. We, the very young students, actually coming from the former middle classes, did not take these objectives too seriously. For us it was only an opportunity to travel, and get to know our own country.

For our professors, however, it was already evident that they should use this opportunity for specific scholarly goals. This project created a very good chance for the documentation of folk culture. Actually, it concerned not only folk culture and music: respected scholars of merit from that time used this opportunity to preserve and edit many sources of the national monuments, utterly devastated by World War II. The challenge to use a chance for source restoration became the hallmark of that period disregarding the entire propaganda context. The propaganda slogans were usually treated as a topic for jokes.

It does not mean, however, that this way of thinking was common to all people. Attitudes were quite diversified. The people 'from villages and towns' were highly appreciative of the opportunities for the fast social advance and education. However, in the traditional villages that we were usually dealing with these new trends were not present as yet. Very often the distance from the world 'beyond' was immense. In many villages of central and eastern Poland, the people who 'went into the world' were remembered in local transmission almost like a legend. It happened to me several times that I was asked 'am I perhaps this *Aniela* (and/or some other name) who went to the city some years ago and now is coming back?' The time of mass urbanization and industrialization was still a phenomenon of the future. Under these conditions it was clear that one had to document folk culture before the processes of transformation would change it. It was the main source of motivation for our professors Jadwiga and Marian Sobieski (Bielawski 1973; Sobieski 1950).

Over the years, however, people began to value highly the opportunity to be taken on by one of the successful ensembles which enabled you to perform on stage and to become well known. It fascinated especially young people. Many of them made their life careers at that time.⁴ The older generation were usually more critical. They did not like some new fashions and styles. Though they were often very pleased to perform in new local ensembles, were often skeptical of the instructors coming from 'beyond'. They did not like to sing in a multipart fashion according to the standards of Russian

⁴ E.g. The famous singer – Irena Santor.

polyphony, they did not like to dance acrobatic dances rooted in the tradition of the Ukrainian/Russian Cossacks. The popularity of salon waltzes was also limited and could not compete with the folk version of the regional oberek, which was so well stylized by Chopin. The new proposals should have been closer to the traditional concepts, and people were not ready to follow the imported standards.

Actually we researchers were following our instinctive feelings and the experience of our professors. In practice we neglected many of the warnings and instructions which had been sent by our highest authorities (the Ministry of Culture under the command of the Prime Minister responsible for Culture and Security). We did not pay special attention to the songs about class conflicts, and we did not take into account many social dimensions – actually, in most cases we were acting against our instructions. But, we did not accept these commands especially since they were coming directly from Moscow. However, in reality we could not be totally independent, as we often needed protection and help.

Since we were working in the framework of an officially recognised state action, every group was legitimised by special documents signed by the highest state authorities⁵, which bid the local authorities to provide us with help and protection. It was necessary - not for the local peasants who were very friendly towards us, but for the local clerks who could not understand what was going on. It was the duty of every group's leader to register at the regional police and security offices, which were usually deeply concealed, because it was still a time of the anticommunist underground's activity in the countryside.

Our protection was supported by the ideology evidently imbued by the Russian enthusiasm for folk tradition. This pro-folkloristic trend was in fact rejected by a considerable part of the Polish intelligentsia and by many artists and composers. Despite some quite successful compositions in the folkloric style the artists felt uncomfortable being pressed to create this kind of works (Pilarski 1958). Paradoxically, the interest in folk tradition was much higher

⁵ The highest authority supporting this campaign was Edward Ochab (1906–1989), Secretary of the Polish Communist Party in the years 1950–1956.

in the pre-war Poland, and the compositions inspired by folk music were 'in the old days' much more popular and successful.⁶ Similarly, many institutions supporting folk art and especially folk handicraft⁷ were also popular in the prewar time, as were the festivals of folk songs and dances organized by regional and state authorities (Dahlig 1998). Actually, our professors were acting according to the principles elaborated in the prewar Poland including its evident conservatism and the appreciation of the source. The historical bias dominated the sociological one. In final result our methodology was not affected by ideological intervention.

Despite some critical observations, I remember this research as an emotionally intensive experience, not only because we learned very much about folk culture and its bearers, but also as a memory of the very special atmosphere which had an inspiring power for the whole of my life. Our instructions and their propaganda elements could not distort the good relations with the subjects of our research and their tradition. At that time nobody spoke of 'participant observation' yet, but we were actually recognized as 'insiders' as their 'own', actually as those *Anielas* who returned from the city after some years. The whole system, its ideology and security measures were far away.

It should also be pointed out that many monograph studies which were prepared at that time (e.g. the studies of Włodzimierz Kotoński on the music of Polish highlanders) (Kotoński 1953, 1954, 1956) would probably not have been written if composers and/or scholars had not been motivated and/or even inspired by this specific atmosphere. This kind of mental inspiration supported by state protection, typical of autocratic states, was very helpful. Work in a group toward a specific goal, whatever the approach might be, gives people a feeling of power and of fulfilment, and/or even carrying a special mission. In these psychological mechanisms, the authoritarian systems try to find an excellent instrument for manoeuvring people, quite consciously using music to this end. It depends only on the degree of people's

⁶ E.g. the compositions of: Stanisław Mierczyński, Roman Palester, Jan Maklakiewicz, Michał Kondracki.

⁷ E.g. the co-operative for folk art – *Lad*.

awareness: to what extent they could maintain their distance and proper judgment, and to what extent they could remain relatively independent.

During the years 1978–1991 my nostalgia for Central Asia was finally fulfilled. After some years of looking for opportunities it became possible to go there and do research thanks to the exchange between the Polish and Soviet Composers' Unions. It was already the experience of an adult researcher and the author of methodological studies thanks to which I understood how much I had to change in my methods. It was no longer an activity based on intuitive feelings, but rather the application of a proper scholarly approach. It was also for the first time a challenge to get to know a very different culture, which was superficially modified by the ideology enforced by the political system and the strong Russian influence. My familiarity with this system was in this case very helpful.

The methodology we were dealing with did not yet include questions of the culture's authenticity. This kind of approach was not taken into consideration. We were dealing with the actual reality, with the traditional legacy as well as that undergoing a transformation, treating both as authentic. The local people of those years were deeply involved in current processes. They were simply 'their own', they were growing and changing with them, accepting the dominant system without denying its authenticity; they lived with concepts and slogans without paying attention to the results which they could bring. Thanks to the initiatives of former generations the oldest sources had already been documented. It was very fortunate, because the dominant culture of that time actually reflected choices made by the cultural administrators who organised the local culture according to their own concepts. Actually, those choices were in many cases not improper and not devoid of links with tradition. Their success depended on good adjustment to the general expectations. But, still it was the result of an evident manipulation.

At that time and in this area nobody spoke about invented tradition. However, the offered programmes could be viewed as examples of this phenomenon, though they were much more deeply rooted in the still vital past. Among the organisers of this research programme one could find some highly

educated scholars (mostly Russians)⁸ who tried to control this process, and what was the most important to educate the local scholars of the young generation. Many of them later became excellent ethnomusicologists⁹ The co-existence of these two different cultures (traditional and transformed) presented an excellent material for studies. The historical and socio- anthropological methodologies were very much in demand. We tried to concentrate on the discovery of the deep roots of traditional paradigms, though the dynamics of current transformation also fascinated us. The most important, however, was the proper relation to the subjects of our research, to whom the local researchers were fortunately very close.

For me as a Polish scholar, it was not easy to establish a proper approach to this unknown culture and to examine my deeply rooted biases. The first impressions were evidently dominated by an outsider's look. With time, however, thanks to the help of our local colleagues I learned a lot, and actually exchanged my own experiences with them. Our colleagues were fascinated by the achievements of international scholarship, which were totally unknown to them. We were even more struck by the independence of their thinking developed on the basis of their authentic feeling for the local culture.

It does not matter to what extent it concerned the traditional legacy and to what – that which was already transformed. Very much the same concerned their relation to propaganda. Briefly speaking, people had simply learned to live with this talk and those activities, remaining satisfied with the small profits which they could achieve thanks to them. Nevertheless, the most advanced students, especially those educated by famous professors in the best universities¹⁰, had developed already a certain sensitivity in this area and a sense of humour. Our contacts with them were perfect, we became the best friends.

The visible changes emerged, however, only after the evident weakening of the Soviet state's power. The consequences of this change were im-

⁸ Victor Belaev, Victor Uspenski, Victor Vinogradov.

⁹ Bagdaulet Amanov, Asija Mukhambetova, Saira Amanova, Saule Utegalieva.

¹⁰ Former Leningrad and Moscow Conservatories, One should not forget the leading role of Evgen Gippius?

mense. The people started to find their former life unsatisfactory; they started to discover many lies and to discredit the evident propaganda talk. Many things began to be seen in a totally different way. The old custom to receive some presents on the days of special state feasts (the day of the revolution or the first of May), formerly highly appreciated, now became the subject of scoffs; individual work started to be appreciated more highly than the formerly highly appreciated work of the collective. The composers started to address their works to religion. The latter as well as local history returned by the broadly opened gate.¹¹ All the same, in many cases people have serious problems with approaching religion and especially understanding Islam. The consequences of a strong atheistic education are very persistent. Not too many people, however, have had the chance to notice that, having rejected one propaganda, they started again to operate in the framework of another propaganda and in the framework of new slogans.

These revolutionary changes destroyed the former structures, frequently making proper observation more difficult. Under these conditions the researcher had to develop new approaches again, concentrating on the preservation of his or her own scholarly identity and proper contacts with the subjects of the research. The new reality penetrated both the researched and the researcher. Only authentic fascination with the culture of the old sources could help to maintain a proper judgment. The most seductive was the danger of limiting oneself to superficial observations.

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The analysis of autocratic systems is a subject for political science. Scholars concentrating on the analysis of culture may, however, better understand the complex nature of psychological phenomena: those of people being terrorized by political systems and those of simple manipulation by the mass trends and fashions. Both are dangerous because they annihilate human independence, and the freedom of the scholar in this particular case.

The most dramatic, however, is the fact that many results and consequences of the old system still remain rooted in human minds. It concerns the evident

¹¹ i.e. Alfred Schnittke, *Requiem* (1975).

feeling of fear, especially ‘the fear of being frightened’¹² and the tendency toward an easy fascination, or, on the contrary, to exaggerated rejection

The most dangerous seem to be the negative feelings of hate and revenge, which deeply hidden for many years may now explode with a great force. People affected by the totalitarian system need some time to react normally. Let’s hope in these cases music will play a positive role. People from Central Asia believe in that.

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¹² A popular saying in the difficult years 1968, 1969, precisely formulated by Polish sociologist – Jan Szczepański.