

Review: Lisa Jakelski “Making New Music in Cold War Poland: The Warsaw Autumn Festival, 1956-1968”

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The trajectories of cultural development drawn by historians would be more even if not swayed by the seemingly contradictory logic of history. In 1956, in the middle of the so-called Cold War, a group of visionaries organised a music festival, whose subsequent editions were called the “Warsaw Autumn”. Within a few years, the event had gained enormous significance, dimension and gravity and was capable of attracting a wide range of composers, performers and audiences, significantly denting not only the area of music itself, but also the space of social, economic and political relations. This is the subject of a book by Lisa Jakelski entitled “Making New Music in Cold War Poland: The Warsaw Autumn Festival, 1956-1968” published this year by the University of California.

It is worth noting that the book is the only published monograph on the festival. In Poland, only one photo album by Andrzej Zborski has been published, including a commentary by Tadeusz A. Kaczyński (“Warsaw Autumn”, PWM, 1983). It is interesting that the doctoral theses of two American authors have been devoted to the festival: Cindy Bylander (1983) and Lisa Jakelski (2009). While in her doctoral dissertation Jakelski, as a musicologist, devoted a lot of space to the repertoire, analysing the works performed during the festival, in this monograph she shifts emphasis to the historical context of the so-called Cold War period.

The facts and anecdotes collated here are compiled chronologically. Such effort spent working through a mass of archives, inquiries and interviews is indeed praiseworthy in terms of the sheer amount of information to sift through. We can find out about various perturbations and strategies, and

about the festival as a platform for the promotion of Polish composers. This modernist festival is depicted as a place for the extraordinary meetings of two major, contiguous sides of the contemporary world, a place where the forces of diplomacy were dominant. Thanks to the transnational, avant-garde power of this family, the Iron Curtain became as frail as a spider's web. The Cold War was heated by the embers of artistic debates. We also learn about scandals, quarrels and boycotts, about the emergence of a specific fashion, and even about contemporary music as... a way of flirting (page 78). And all this in a snappy narrative delivered in an elegant style. However, this does not mean that this book is a mere work of journalese. The author's ambition is to demonstrate that music, which was supposed to be an abstract, autonomous or absolute form is in fact a reaction to the outside world, and is therefore often quite down-to-earth in nature.

To a large extent, knowledge about the Warsaw Autumn is in Poland something of an oral tradition. More often than not, we may learn about this event and other facts from people who either remember the beginnings of the festival themselves or remember other people talking about it. This is knowledge of a different kind than what we are presented with in Lisa Jakelski's book. The narrative of the festival, as spun by our masters, is a story of former glory, of youthful struggle in the name of artistic ideals, of disputes between aesthetic factions, which usually took the form of intergenerational conflict. Meanwhile, in the historical-critical view of Lisa Jakelski, the history of the festival turns out to be entangled in a dense network of social, economic, political and cultural relations. The author writes in the epilogue: "Being aware of this interaction reminds us that 'new music' has never been a stable concept. Rather, 'new music' is something that has been made – and continually remade – by socially implicated actors acting in response to a wide variety of motivations, constraints and possibilities"¹.

Such a perspective may surprise the Polish reader and even provoke opposition in those for whom the main value of "new music" is to transcend social conditioning². It is about the composers, musicologists and theorists who, as Susan McClary puts it, maintain "the illusion that [avant-garde] music is an entirely autonomous realm"³. In fact, one may still come across the

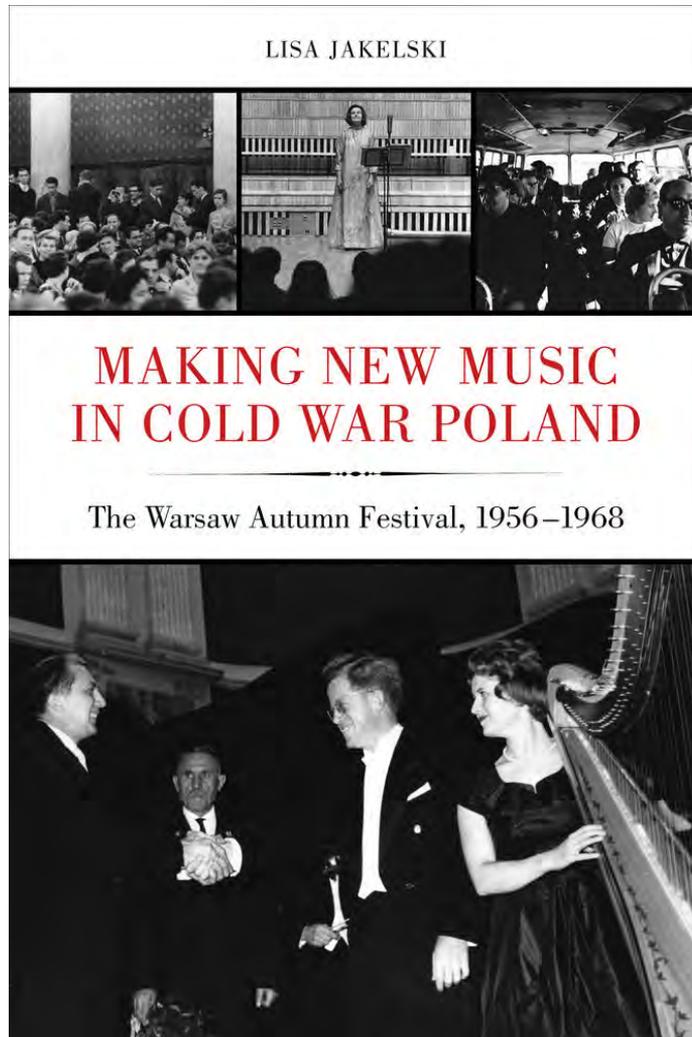
¹ L. M. Jakelski, *Making New Music in Cold War Poland: The Warsaw Autumn Festival*, p. 163.

² Cf.: "(...) avant-garde music's glory lay in the illusion that it had transcended social context altogether." (S. McClary, *Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde Music Composition*, p. 63).

³ *Ibidem*, p. 73.



notion that factography, similar to the one that is carefully compiled and systematised by Jakelski, may be a kind of curiosity or anecdote. However, this draws attention away from the main idea that the festival was a forum for the exchange of artistic ideas, a celebration of "real" and "modern" musical art...



The Cold War, present in the title of the book, provides a kind of scenography for the story. We learn about certain relationships between the worlds of politics and art, the most evident of which is the boycott of the festival by Western musicians in response to Poland's involvement in the invasion of Czechoslovakia a few weeks before the beginning of the festival (1968).



Mostly, however, the Cold War runs alongside in the background, a kind of "meanwhile, back in politics...". Analysis of analogous phenomena in the so-called Western Block reveals closer links between the realms of art and politics⁴. Perhaps this type of relationship was easier to mask in the communist bloc than in the case of American agencies, for example. Perhaps the documentation is no longer available and only the accounts of witnesses remain. Of course, monographs delving deeper into this sphere would transcend the interest of the music theorist or musicologist, and would require the involvement of specialised historians and political scientists. It is also worth noting that the influence of the Cold War politics is not only related to the material area, but reaches into the ideological core of modernism, as a defined worldview, towards the ultimate definition of that which, in the end, both sides of the political conflict fought for. The Warsaw Autumn and similar events provided arenas for this conflict.

According to the postulate offered by Lisa Jakelski, writing about transformations in music without taking into account the various deep-rooted influences results in a mythologised picture. Her book is an important item, a kind of double take "from the outside". Firstly from a non-Polish perspective, secondly from a non-ideological perspective. The conceptual shape of today's Warsaw Autumn is most interesting when viewed in this light. In the program published for the last edition of the festival we read about the dramatic collisions of the avant-garde, anti-avant-garde, trans-avant-garde... Will we have to wait another half a century for a book that will ask the question: *who pays the piper?*

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⁴ Cf.: I. Wellens, *Music on the Frontline: Nicolas Nabokov's Struggle Against Communism and Middlebrow Culture*; G. Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*; F. S. Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War. The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*.



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