



The Mazurka Strikes Back

Poland's traditional music is seeing a wild revival. Simon Broughton reports

In an old fortress in Warsaw, now a trendy restaurant and music venue, there's a swirl of dancers. Couples circle wildly round each other in a sort of counter-clockwise orbit. Driving it all is a small band on stage – the Janusz Prusinowski Trio and with them is a small, aged man in a peaked cap on the violin. His eyes sparkle, he ornaments and bends the notes and his bow dances across the strings as if controlled by an external force. Jan Gaca is 80 – he looks older – but playing music rejuvenates him. Someone stops and whispers: “If you dance to this music you can really go crazy, so be careful!”

People are going crazy and, after Gaca's played a few dances, it's everybody else's turn at the Mazurkas of the World festival to pay tribute to him. Gaca is seated, surrounded by young musicians and singers who play back to him the repertoire they've learned from him. He gives a toothy grin and makes a thumbs-up sign. It's hard to imagine a clearer illustration of the revival of traditional music in Poland than this.

Music that was either deemed too primitive or simply unknown or forgotten has now become cool in a dynamic revival that's something like the Hungarian *táncház* (dancehouse) movement a generation ago.

To an outsider – and probably to most Poles – this traditional music sounds harsh. The irregular triple rhythms are hard to fix. Under the ornamented fiddle line there's no harmonic support, just a rhythmic drone bass. “I can understand why Hungarian music has become better known,” says fiddler

Janusz Prusinowski, “it has four beats, a harmonic structure and a close connection to classical music. It's much more exportable. But a Polish *mazurka* is something else. We quickly realised when we played this music that nobody understood it or knew how it worked.”

I remember Wojtek Krzak of the Warsaw Village Band saying how Polish traditional music was “trance-like.” Listening to Jan Gaca and his disciples I realise how right he was and how exciting this wild music can sound. “Now people come here like to Mecca,” adds Prusinowski, “hungry for this music they've rediscovered!”

The Polish language makes a distinction between *ludowy* (folk) and *tradycyjny* (traditional) music, while in English the terms are often used interchangeably. In Poland, folk music is the music of new groups like the Warsaw Village Band. Traditional music is the pure village music of the dwindling rural tradition.

When I was editing the second edition of the *Rough Guide to World Music* in 1999, there were only two folk bands in Poland on the international radar – the Orkiestra Św Mikołaja and the Kwartet Jorgi, both still active today. Since then the Warsaw Village Band, Kroke, Wołosi, R.U.T.A., Chłopcy Kontra Basia (with a forthcoming album on

Riverboat Records) amongst others have given Polish folk music an international profile. But outside Poland, the traditional music scene is largely beneath the radar.

In the 19th century, thanks to Chopin, salon versions of Polish dances like the mazurka (*mazurek*) and polonaise (*polonez*) became popular across Europe – partly because they are couple dances, and men and women in polite society were able to get their hands on each other. These are triple-time dances, as is the *oberek*, the other staple of the traditional repertoire. Putting it very simply, Polish traditional music is dominated by three-beat rhythms until you get towards Krakow and the south of the country where two-beat rhythms like the *krakowiak* and polka start to be heard, although these days none of these dances are confined to their native areas.

Like a unique island of traditional culture is the music of the Tatra mountains on Poland's southern border. Here the *gorale* (highland) music is one of the most distinctive styles in Europe with its angular melodies on sawing fiddles and cello. The mountain resort of Zakopane became the centre of an arts and crafts movement in the early 20th century and the music was popularised by the composer Karol Szymanowski, who settled there. Most Poles will be familiar with *gorale* culture and the Trebunie-Tutki band, but the music of the rest of the country was very little known.

Gorale music was the first traditional Polish music to be recorded in 1904 – around the same time as the Hungarians Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály started

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their phonograph recordings in Transylvania, when both regions were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was only after World War I, when Poland regained its independence, that systematic collections were made and archives collected in Poznań (4,000 recordings) and Warsaw (20,000 recordings). However, apart from 12 recordings that survived in Berlin, the entire contents of both archives were destroyed in World War II.

And the loss of all the recorded archives was nothing compared to wholesale devastation of Poland in the war. Around a fifth of the population was killed (half of them Jewish), Warsaw was flattened, and many other cities destroyed. The post-war borders shifted westwards with former German territory becoming Polish in the west and Polish territory in the east being absorbed into the Soviet Union. Population transfers from the east to the west of the country cut people off from their cultural roots.

Just as the old city of Warsaw was painstakingly reconstructed after the war, there was a concerted attempt to recollect traditional music in the early 50s. Although this was organised by the Ministry of Culture and Polish Radio, the music was just archived and not played on the radio. According to Maria Baliszewska, who joined Polish Radio in ▶

Janusz Prusinowski (Photo by Piotr Baczewski); Jan Gaca at home with his disciples (Francesco Martinelli)

the 70s, they only played Russian music or the big Polish song and dance ensembles Mazowsze and Śląsk – which still exist. These groups performed sanitised, choreographed versions of traditional music in the style of Soviet song and dance troupes. Their ‘fakelore’ bore little relation to the quirky idiosyncrasies of real Polish music and for most people it simply gave traditional music a bad name.

But as a newcomer to Polish radio, Baliszewska and fellow producers Marian Domanski and Anna Szotkowska, wanted to start playing the real thing. “We went to record Kazimierz Metó and his band in 1975,” Baliszewska remembers. “He lived in a very old house with everything in one room – brothers, wives, grandchildren, an oven and dogs and sheep. He took his fiddle and started to play. It was perhaps the most important moment in my life, but it was certainly the most important moment in his life. Polish radio had come to record him!”

Was there any political change at this point that meant this was now acceptable whereas it hadn’t been before? Baliszewska says not. “My predecessors thought this music was too primitive and preferred something more arranged and ‘beautiful.’ But as part of my studies, I’d recorded in small villages and had come to understand this music. I could see that it was disappearing and that time was short to do it.”

These twice-weekly programmes of traditional music, which also led to the excellent *Sources of Polish Folk Music CDs*, had a surprising impact. Most importantly on Andrzej Bienkowski, a painter who’d had his passport taken away and couldn’t travel because he was part of a dissident group. This was in the early 80s, the time of the birth of Solidarity and the imposition of martial law. He was amazed to hear music by Kazimierz Metó and others on the radio and started to meticulously document these last traditional musicians in excellent books, audio recordings and films.

“Kazimierz Metó’s music was from the pre-war generation,” Bienkowski says. “He had his violin tied to his wrist so he didn’t drop it at a dance and get it trodden on. The music had no harmony. It was just sinuous melody over a rhythmic drone cello. But meeting people like this changed my life.”

Bienkowski started his record label Muzyka Odnaleziona in 2007 in order to release Metó’s music because everyone else just laughed at the idea. He took the CD they recorded to Metó’s house shortly before he died. “He didn’t really know where he was, but he was whistling mazurkas. We played the CD for him and he said: ‘Who is that playing? They are playing so beautifully.’”

Bienkowski speaks with an animation and passion, and the fiddlers Kazimierz Metó, Józef Kędzierski and the brothers Jan and Piotr Gaca were openings to a lost world. “In the old days before the war there were no folk bands because everybody could play the drum and the

bass. For a wedding you’d make a deal with a fiddler who’d bring a bass and drum and the guests at the wedding would play them themselves. A fiddler could earn as much at a two-day wedding as working four days in the fields.” Bienkowski has the finest private collection of rural music and photographs in Poland.

It was Bienkowski who first introduced Prusinowski and his colleagues to Jan Gaca – and started a chain reaction. In 1993, they formed a loose group called The Brotherhood of the Poor – and the whole movement started to grow as young musicians learned from the old players, and took the music to Warsaw where they created a Hungarian-style dance house to spread the word. They then started to organise local festivals and reintroduce the music in the villages.

Having seen the impact of the revival in Warsaw, I wanted to go and

see the music in its natural habitat. Where better than the home of Jan Gaca? In the tiny village of Przystałowice Male, near Radom, in central Poland. Gaca’s house is humble but beautiful. He used to close the curtains when he practiced because he was afraid people would laugh at him. But for the past 15 years his house has become a place of pilgrimage for many young fiddlers because the old master has been so willing to pass on his skills. He’s a natural teacher.

I ask if he can demonstrate the difference between a mazurka and an oberek? He picks up his violin and dances his bow across the strings. He plays and sings a mazurka tune – explaining they’re generally in a moderate tempo. Then he

dives into an oberek – you can’t sing to that, it’s got a faster and more complicated rhythm. It’s as clear a demonstration as I could want. And how does he feel about all these musicians coming to learn from him? “You have to keep inventing things or it would be like a cement mixer.”

Sadly Jan Gaca died in August, which shows time is running out. At least, after very many lean years, he lived to enjoy some celebrity and pass his music on and now there is a body of musicians who understand that this music isn’t remotely primitive, but incredibly sophisticated. The Janusz Prusinowski Trio have pepped up the music with clarinet and trumpet, and have toured in Europe and the US. Other groups like the Kapela Brodów, Manugi and the Gaca Orchestra are following in their footsteps. Nowadays on the cultural channel of Polish Radio there are about eight hours of traditional music a week, a substantial amount. The mazurka strikes back. ♦

✦ **BONUS CD** Hear a selection of Polish music on the bonus covermount CD, see p11 for tracklisting details

✦ **FESTIVAL** Read more about the Mazurkas of the World Festival in the next issue, #98

“A FIDDLER COULD EARN AS MUCH AT A TWO-DAY WEDDING AS WORKING FOUR DAYS IN THE FIELDS”



Clockwise from top: A village dance (Photo by Piotr Baciewski); Jan Gaca performing at a wedding in the 1980s (Andrzej Bienkowski); Jan Gaca in Warsaw (Simon Broughton); Janusz Prusinowski Trio (Simon Broughton)



DISCOGRAPHY

The best website to find Polish music is wsm.serpent.pl/sklep



Janusz Prusinowski Trio, *Mazurki* (Sluchaj Uchem, 2008)

The trio’s debut with a great selection of core repertoire.



Gaca Brothers, *3 x Gaca*

(Muzyka Odnaleziona, 2012)

Archive recordings of the three Gaca brothers on disc one and the young students on disc two.



Various Artists, *The Last Great Musicians*

(Muzyka Odnaleziona, 2008)

Bienkowski’s collection of old masters – Kazimierz Metó, Józef Kędzierski and many more.



Various Artists, *Sources of Polish Folk Music*

(Polskie Radio)

A series of 27 CDs supervised by Maria Baliszewska of Polish Radio covering all the Polish regions, minorities and customs. An amazing resource which has recently been re-issued. Available from www.sklep.polskieradio.pl