

THE CROSSROADS OF TRADITIONAL MUSIC. THE CROSSROADS OF TERMINOLOGY

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Less than two months ago, in a seminar in Luxembourg, I took part in a discussion about traditional music. I tried to convince my colleagues that Podhale is the only remaining region in Poland where traditional music survives and, thanks to a few performers, is still evolving without losing its authenticity. Thanks to Podhale, we can still call it traditional music, as opposed to folk music; in Poland, folk music is associated with the inspiration and transformation of original motifs.

I surprised my French colleague with this statement. According to his experience, this kind of primordial music is called folk music, while the term *traditional* implies that it is inspired by the masters known only from archival recordings or, even worse, from ethnographic notes.

For another surprised interlocutor, from Finland, the terms *traditional* and *folk* music are synonymous. When asked how he would characterize music inspired by the original sources, he answered without hesitation: fusion music.

After weathering this terminological storm for a while we all came to the same conclusion. Terms such as *traditional* and *folk* music are understood as synonymous names for musical styles in countries where traditional music has survived in its original form. On the map of central Europe, Podhale is no exception. For Moravians, Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, Romanians, and many others, traditional music means, without doubt, music that has been performed in their home villages for ages. Terms like ethno, fusion, or world music are instead used mostly in countries where the tradition of common, multigenerational music performance has

vanished. The same terms are commonly used in describing anything connected with traditional culture on the modern music market.

How can one communicate under such conditions? Most simply: we should, without pretense, convince our friends from western Europe to describe folk and traditional music as music from living sources. Another adequate term is *roots music*. Ethno, world, and other similar terms should be reserved to name inspiration, transformation, and unification of different kind.

Who is Who: the Crossroads of Traditional Music

Herdsmen Impersonating Citizens

The imprecise terminology suggests stylistic chaos, which is characteristic of different kinds of traditional music and all kinds of further transformations and deformations. In Poland, surprisingly, the fusion method reinforced the popularization of roots music. A good example might be the Trebunie family's experiment, in which great traditional musicians played with a Jamaican reggae band, which even strengthened their image and position as folk musicians. Experiments like this are not destructive, as long as the musicians are conscious of taking part in an experiment, and already have their own characteristic playing style and musical imagination. Otherwise, such a desire to make tradition *better* or *more interesting* are disappointing, and are of poor artistic effect.

Searching for different methods to make their music *more interesting* is common among traditional Polish music bands, although I can see no rational reasons for doing this. Folk bands from the Carpathian Mountains or Podhale are trying to fit their image in rock, pop, techno, and disco style at all costs, trying to be as modern as they possibly can, and trying to fit the commercial media production profile. The final results are ridiculous, and as far from their roots as from modern trends. It is supposed to fit everyone's preferences, but it fits only its performers'.

Citizens Impersonating Herdsmen

Surprisingly, we can watch the reverse as well: images of *countryness* and ordinaryness used by bands in big cities. We can observe many new bands of pseudo-country origin who, aside from their name and their imitation of an image, have little in common with their traditional predecessors. In method they photocopy, in lyrics they use a kind of pseudo-slang intended to resemble language used in the country. The final effect is similar to parody or, even worse, pastiche.

In contrast to the southern and southeastern regions of Poland, traditional music in its original form has almost vanished from the central parts. As a natural consequence, it has become a subject of search and reconstruction. Fortunately, amid large stage dance and singing folk ensembles, which are a rather artificially created communistic invention, some organizations are trying to preserve what is left of the real authentic tradition. In addition to archiving, transcribing, and using ethnological sources, these organizations try to popularize the learning of traditional folk songs and dances, teaching people to play traditional instruments and organizing meetings with the old living masters. Dance houses (called such to recall the Hungarian tradition of the same name) of varying success are active in Warsaw (Polish and Hungarian), Cracow, and Poznan. In contrast, there is Podhale, where analogous places do not try to preserve anything; instead, they aim to facilitate the efforts of children and young people to become acquainted with traditional music, dances, and songs, and allow them to meet the original old performers.

Folk, Shampoo, and Detergent

Recently, the hope has resurfaced that folk music in Poland would act as a defense against the domination of English-language pop culture. Unfortunately, it has been unable to avoid the unification process, quickly tempted by big record companies and their promises of making it

more popular and more widely known. The few folk *hybrids* popularized in the media were followed by many country bands and many others in the cities. The circle is closed. Perhaps it means that Polish folk is finished. What will survive after that? Everything but the trends, fashion, and media buzz. Everything created by authentic artistic needs and inspirations, not by the promise of profit. Traditional music in the last few places of the Carpathian Mountains; jazz music, so close to folk music because of its improvisation and individual spirit; classical music, with its various stylistic diapason and expression; and all other kinds creatively inspired by tradition. What will survive can be simply stated: good music.