

IN SEARCH OF THE COMMONWEALTH VALUES

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1.

I would like to present the topics of this conference, i.e. the East – West relations and the media – in the context of Poland and from the perspective of Orkiestra św. Mikołaja (St. Nicholas Orchestra) whose member I am. I'll begin with a few words about Orkiestra. Orkiestra św. Mikołaja is a folk music group and organisation working at Marie Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin. Apart from music, we deal with various forms of popularising culture inspired by folklore and tradition. Our group has recorded seven albums so far. The main activities of Orkiestra as an organisation are: folk music festival Mikołajki Folkowe (every year on the second weekend of December), folk music magazine *Gadki z Chatki*, and summer artistic workshops which take place in the valley of Jawornik in Bieszczady mountains on the site of a former village inhabited by Lemkos.

When in 1988 Orkiestra started its adventure with folklore, the notion of folk music¹⁾ was virtually unknown in Poland. Although there were groups playing Celtic and Andian music, the distinctiveness of this current as music inspired by folklore was barely perceived. Mikołajki Folkowe in 1991 was the first Polish festival which attempted to grasp this entire phenomenon in all its aspects. The magazine *Gadki z Chatki*, started in 1996, played a similar role in creating the identity and autonomy of folk in Poland. It is the only folk music magazine in Poland

1) In the discussion following the presentation, Skrzypek explained the meaning of the English phrase *folk music* as they use it within the Polish context: it is contemporary music, which is inspired by traditional music – both folk and ethnic, local and international. In this sense it resembles most what is called *world music* in the Czech lands. [Note by I.P.]

today. This would be all as for introduction and self-presentation. Let us move on now to the issue of media. From our perspective – of 17 years' experience and various initiatives undertaken by us – it seems that in Poland there is no such thing as a lasting trend of interest in inspirations by traditional culture.

The reasons for this may be found in the following factors:

- attitude of the Polish towards tradition
- specific features of music inspired by folklore
- character of recipients of this music
- comparatively expensive CDs
- quality of media

2.

The attitude of the Polish to tradition is based on its negative stereotype inherited from the period of the Communist Poland, when folklore was persistently used by the state as an instrument of propaganda. This destroyed the basis of reception of music inspired by folklore which requires certain knowledge and openness from its listener. Folk music cannot be listened to without reflection, just as pop music. Such knowledge and openness to listening folk music can be found only in a very scattered group of recipients which is additionally very diversified in terms of age, interests and earnings, and therefore it cannot constitute a target group in the commercial sense and therefore cannot be medially addressed to e.g. in advertising campaigns promoting folk CD. The problem of the general economic circumstances also contributes to the situation. CDs are not cheap and the CD market (also commercial one) is very weak. As a consequence, few people can afford to buy a CD just to try it and become interested in folk music which they did not use to listen. The same situation is with concerts – the most frequently they are for free because otherwise people would not come.

A considerable upturn in folk music and the media's interest in it occurred in the second half of the 1990s, when pop music was going

through a crisis. There appeared several professional groups, referring in their music to ethno and folk motifs. They soon achieved unprecedented success. However, their popularity declined significantly after their second CDs, and their music departed from traditional inspirations. That upturn also had its economic basis. When companies see the sense of competing for their customers' pockets, they are more willing to sponsor local events aimed at a broad audience, where folk appears as one of the offers. As a result, an upswing in record companies and in the media follows. When marketing becomes weakened or takes another form, an interest in folk declines, as well. This was what we experienced in the last years. Perhaps we are witnessing an increasing tendency again at the moment.

The media in Poland work according to the rules of struggle for the average recipient – for the middle of the Gaussian curve – in close connection with entertainment trends. The media take the line of least resistance and therefore contribute to the homogenisation of culture even more. In such a situation, alternative and niche musical currents, e.g. hip-hop, must take a form of pop music in order to become visible in media. Such cases are rare in folk music and they occur rather among artists who have good contacts with the media and, consequently, guaranteed sale of their product. Journalists can say nothing more than clichés about folk music. In their articles I have never come across a reference e.g. to the contents of traditional texts or to the ritual context of music. They do not have a proper body of terms and evaluations or they avoid using it lest a reader should not understand. There are no mechanisms which would force them to improve their qualifications in this area. An average listener of folk knows about it more than a journalist. In such circumstances the culture-creating activity of the media becomes virtually impossible, especially because, as I have mentioned before, culture inspired by tradition is not easily receivable, but requires education and innovative forms of promotion.

Contemporary inspirations by tradition are not among the priorities

of the cultural policy of the state, either. The only state organisation which attempts to face the contemporary challenges in this area is the Radio Folk Culture Centre of the Polish Radio, but it also has to struggle for finances and for recognition by the government. The media event of the Centre is the Festival Nowa Tradycja – a competition for groups, mostly debuting, with accompanying concerts. This year the Centre organises the Folk Festival of the European Broadcasting Union in Gdańsk. It can be claimed that media coverage of folk exists only owing to a handful of people who fulfil their personal interest in folk music, with more or less success. Folk in Poland remains an elite hobby and it should not be expected that this will change rapidly in the nearest future.

3.

Orkiestra św. Mikołaja consists of people whose way of living is often shaped by folk culture inspirations. They cannot stay idle. Constant development is in the nature of such enterprises as Orkiestra. So where should we search for challenges and a space for activities if they are scarce in Poland?

As far as music is concerned, there is a big temptation to look for them in the West and play as they like it THERE. However, we do not feel any pressure in this respect from the media, market and audience. We try to make them curious rather than to adjust to their expectations. We do not find in the West any models worth noticing, we rather associate the West with commercialisation and electronic sound while our music is 100% acoustic. It is not sure whether pushing it in another direction would bring good results, and it would certainly entail sacrificing artistic ambitions of some of us. Therefore, we prefer to remain ourselves, to follow our interests and develop them in a natural way. Moreover, cultural diversity is conditioned by relative isolation from foreign influences. No doubt we take many ideas and inspirations from others, as all musicians and artists do, but to the same extent from the West as from the East. We work along the axis: tradition – contemporaneity, rather

than: East – West and we see our uniqueness in this.

Nevertheless, a precise definition would be useful here, because sides of the world are relative – they are determined in relation to where we are and who we are. When Orkiestra travels to the West, it is an ambassador of the culture of the East where there are rich resources of the European traditional sounds, in contrast to African, Asian and American traditional sounds which prevail in the West. Orkiestra has always had eastern inclinations in this respect. Lublin lies in the eastern Poland and if we play music based on Polish tradition, it comes mostly from this region. Our interest in folklore originated from the Lemko region and hiking in the mountains, where, from our point of view, eastern cultural influences are very obvious. Then there was the mythical and mystical Hutsul region – that is the Ukrainian Carpathians – and beyond: Romania. Our latest CD *About Love at Hay-Raking* is a kind of Carpathian synthesis, because it is based on Romanian music to the lyrics by a folk poet Wanda Czubernatowa from Podhale region of the Tatra mountains. This year, with the support of the Education for Democracy Foundation, we prepared a common programme with the Hutsul band Czeremosz of our old friend Roman Kumłyk from Werchowyna in the Hutsul region. Next we are going to deal with music from around Lublin.

Contrary to what it seems, it is very difficult for us to estimate how this music is received by listeners from other countries – how international it is, how much it is associated with Poland and, generally, what values of this music are visible outside. Personal musical experiences of listeners are so varied that I would be glad to organise a conference for them myself to learn something about their impressions.

As far as the non-artistic, popularising area is concerned, our activities are similar: we would like to represent the East in the West and additionally to be a kind of an outpost of the West in the East. We do it more and more frequently, because of our need to participate in the community of values. I have already mentioned how this community looks in Poland. In the West, we have long and very friendly contacts

with the organisation Bund Deutscher Pfadfinderinnen (BDP) and their environment. In this respect, the East is a terra incognita for us, and yet these countries have very strong awareness of the domestic tradition and a great potential of the autonomous, independent culture. Therefore, we play in Ukraine more and more often. The Open Stage competition for debuting artists at the Mikołajki Folkowe festival has been dominated for several years by groups from Ukraine and Belarus. We are going to prepare soon, with the support of the Open Source Culture Foundation, websites presenting folk music of Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine, in Polish and in English, at the address www.gadki.lublin.pl Similar sites about Polish folk music, prepared by us at this address, have gained considerable popularity. Each section, concerning particular countries, will consist of the parts: Artists, People, Festivals and Articles. The purpose of the site is to become a guide for western journalists or folk music listeners, providing them with basic, but comprehensive enough information on particular countries and directing them to other interesting sites in the Web.

We are aware that our experiences can help create the identity and cooperation network of the folk movement in post-Communist states. We do not overestimate our role, but we also know that we have this persistence and constancy which is necessary in long-term activities, and only such activities count. We are creating a vision of local tradition which will be inherited by future generations. This tradition must be as strong as possible and capable of further development in order to survive both a flow of expansive traditional cultures from all over the world and local degeneration of culture through pressure of the commercial mass culture.