

THE LESSONS OF OLD SCORES

We talk to Assoc. Prof. Paweł Gancarczyk from the PAS Institute of Art about how early music was perceived at the time when it was being composed, what modern musicologists regard as new discoveries and how our identities are shaped by sound.



ACADEMIA: You are currently working with a team of academics from several universities, studying the attitudes during the late medieval period and the early Renaissance to music composed some centuries earlier. How much do we know about 16th-century perception of music written in the 13th century? Was it seen as something noble and classic which showed refinement and sophistication, or rather something fusty and antiquated?

PAWEŁ GANCARCZYK: Well, during the 16th century people simply weren't aware of 13th-century music because it was never performed; the only exception were chants which dated back even further and were sung during liturgy. Early music was performed occasionally, but it didn't date back as far as the 13th century. There is evidence of 15th-, even 14th-century works being known during the 16th century, but they were elements of existing traditions; it is unlikely they were dated and placed in time or context the way we think of music now. Historical consciousness was only just beginning to take shape, but people were more likely to refer to old traditions, melodies and songs as though they were "suspended in time." In fact, historical consciousness was so poorly defined that pieces composed just one generation previously were often thought of as "early."

Were "early" compositions valued purely because they were old?

That really depended on factors such as environment or location. There were communities which built their music traditions around early works by shaping their own identities around them. But there were also communities which focused solely on contemporary music. In this respect, those days were no less complicated than today. When you or I go to classical music concerts, we mainly listen to works composed a long time ago – the repertoires rarely feature music being written now. There are festivals dedicated to contemporary music, sure, but if you go to the philharmonic, you will likely hear Beethoven, Brahms, Mahler. This also applies to popular culture; many people are very well versed in hits from the 1970s but know next to nothing about pop music being made today, because their music consciousness is rooted in their memories

Assoc. Prof. Paweł Gancarczyk, PhD, DSc

specializes in music of the Middle Ages and the early modern era. In 2016, he was awarded the French Prix de Muses for his book "Music and the printing revolution: Transformations in the musical culture of the sixteenth century". He is currently working on the project "Sound memories: The musical past in late-medieval and early-modern Europe" funded by a Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) grant awarded by the European Commission. pawel.gancarczyk@ispan.pl

of their youth. Perhaps this is why we tend to prefer works written in the past.

What were things like during the period you study?

It is generally believed that thinking through the prism of the past and referring back to earlier music are something we invented recently. This is not the case; the past was not so one-dimensional. Many royal and noble courts focused on music being written at the time, while others relied on early music, even though they were often not aware of it. An excellent example of the huge diversity of the period is Venice. In music historiography, Venice is frequently described as the most important music center at the turn of the 17th century, in particular for sacral music. But when we take a closer look at the music culture of the time, it turns out that many of the works we now see as representative of Venice were in fact rather marginal. The music then actually resounding at St. Mark's Basilica would have generally been rooted in tradition dating back centuries; this is the focus of my colleague Bartłomiej Gembicki's research. Our project aims to

classes, especially in the 16th century. We have no information at all about ordinary people, the working classes or peasants. Ethnomusicologists are trying to identify old layers of music repertoires by studying field recordings taken around the turn of the 20th century by subjecting them to close analysis, but everything is based on hypotheses. Much as today, there were two main aspects of music taste. On one hand, new, refined works which could surprise listeners were highly valued, especially by the educated upper classes; on the other, local tradition was also important. We should remember that sacral music, incredibly important for the audiosphere of the day, centered around the Gregorian chant. They have an ancient history rooted in melodies dating back as far as the 9th century. They also changed over the centuries, but it was a tradition which evolved slowly and gradually. Musicians were experimenting in vocal polyphony and instrumental music for lute or keyboard instruments. And there were people who welcomed innovation enthusiastically while remaining deeply rooted in tradition. It's something we tend to forget. When writing about the history of music or art in general, we tend to focus on works which were progressive for their time, which introduced something new. And we often overlook other works, which were just as important but which were written while looking back towards the past.

Was sacral music, which brings together identities of religious groups, the most conservative?

Everyday music forming part of the liturgy at individual monasteries or other religious centers was built on traditional foundations. During the 16th century, the need arose to create a brand-new Protestant music tradition, which nevertheless had to be rooted in Christianity and Catholicism. One of the members of our Warsaw team, Dr. Antonio Chemotti, is studying a Silesian hymnbook from the mid-16th century, compiled by the Lutheran preacher Valentin Triller.

Tell us more about it.

The essence of the repertoire was Triller's direct references to songs he described as "old," which were well known in the region. So on one hand he created a regional, Silesian identity, while on the other he strived to save early songs from oblivion, even though they were Catholic. Written sources inform us that they date back to the turn of the 15th century. The songs are rooted in old Catholic traditions which Triller used to create a new tradition of Lutheran songs.

Was music of different religions highly diverse? Hussites and Lutherans are said to have favored archaic styles.

Once again we could easily overcomplicate everything. John Calvin's doctrine stated that music should

not be performed in church at all, but of course people performed music at home. Scores written during the Reformation stressed the importance of spirituality and community beyond church and encouraged prayer in local languages, which made songs all the more significant. There was supposed to be no music among Calvinists by definition, but in practice it existed.

Did that include secular music?

No, just religious songs, both homophonic and polyphonic. Special Calvinist hymnbooks were being written, so doctrine and real life didn't always go hand-in-hand. It was the same in Jewish circles. The degree to which Catholic and Protestant groups intertwined depended on the region. For example, in Silesia Catholic and Protestant communities lived peacefully side by side. On the level of music culture, the intertwining of the repertoire is very clear. Protestants consciously took over Catholic songs, while Catholics sang Protestant songs after altering the texts. This intertwining, characteristic of Silesia, makes for a fascinating field of study. Getting back to Triller's hymnbook, which to some extent referenced Catholic songs and compositions from Utraquist books – the Utraquists were a moderate faction of the Hussites from Bohemia – it is widely known that this Protestant collection was also used by Catholics. It was owned by a Catholic organist who introduced several corrections, made amendments and used it as it suited him in his practice, as revealed in his extensive notes. But there were also communities where divisions were very strict. In German speaking countries, the repertoire was rarely shared once Protestant hymnbooks were created, since no tradition can be built out of nothing – it must reach for what is already there.

We know this from manuscripts and early prints. How often are new music sources or compositions discovered? Is it always regarded as a major breakthrough?

That's a fascinating question, and we should start by defining what we mean by a discovery. Archives and libraries hold catalogues of documents and sources, but unless a scholar who understands them reads them, we may never discover their full potential, even when the materials are at our very fingertips. People who study them could well make momentous discoveries. Sometimes unknown sources are discovered suddenly, having been lost or forgotten, perhaps on the antiquarian market, but this is highly unusual. In any case it's about asking the right questions, finding and reading sources, and getting to know the repertoires. This happens all the time. Our project turned up a manuscript catalogued and kept at the Silesian Museum in Opava in the Czech Republic, which hadn't been previously considered as a poten-

tial source for musicologists studying 15th-century repertoires. We uncovered a previously unknown work by Petrus Wilhelmi de Grudencz, a medieval composer who lived and worked in present-day Poland. He was a very important figure in 15th-century Central Europe. We don't have many sources dating back to the 15th century, so any new works from the period, in particular polyphonic ones, are worth their weight in gold. The pinnacle of achievement for musicologists is bringing such compositions to the stage or the recording studio – bringing them into widespread circulation. But first the music needs to be transcribed and adapted into contemporary notation. This also forms a part of our project. We work with a Dutch music ensemble which aims to present compositions we uncover – "the early music in early music" – at concerts and festivals.

Will they perform works by Petrus Wilhelmi?

They will, although I don't know which specific piece will be included in the program. Musicologists and musicians work closely together, but their aims fre-

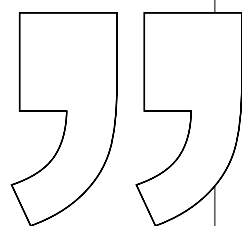
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quently clash. Elements which are relevant to musicologists – historians of music – aren't always relevant to musicians, and vice versa. Musicians have artistic aims; musicologists have academic goals. This brings us to some conflicts with our ensemble to find the perfect balance between performance practice and history.

You work with Ascoli Ensemble from the Hague, specializing in rare medieval music.

That's right. It's an ensemble of international musicians, as is often the case for early music or music groups in general. Early music tends to be highly specialized, which makes ensembles all the more likely to be international. Singers and instrumentalists performing music from the 13th century have very different skills from those working on 16th century music. Baroque requires different kind of specialization again, with different competences, voices and skills.

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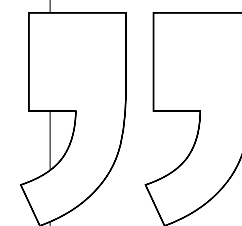
challenge the way we think about 15th and 16th century music; we want to show that music tradition and the notion of identity that was rooted in it were just as important for people living at the time.

How were tastes in music evolving back in those days? Would you say that 16th-century Europeans had better, more finely developed music tastes than those living in the 13th century? Is that something which we can discern from manuscripts and prints? Are they good sources for this kind of research?

We know nothing about the music culture of the vast majorities of societies at the time. By definition our sources of information about 15th and 16th century music originate from people who could read and write. Music which was written down was being composed by professionals, and they were all a minority.

Music was frequently commissioned, wasn't it?

That's right. This means our understanding is superficial, and in any case it is only of middle or upper



received 605 applications, yours was among the 18 that received funding. You work alongside scholars from Utrecht, Cambridge, Heidelberg, Prague and Warsaw. Which city leads the research?

Each major project has a leader. Our project was initiated by Prof. Karl Kügle, based in Utrecht. He selected the other centers and participants. This makes Utrecht the administrative center of the project, but in research terms all participating institutions are equal.

When is the project coming to a conclusion?

At the end of August 2019. Papers will continue being published after that date, partly due to the production cycle of the English-language book which will present a review of all aspects of the project. There will also be several PhDs, articles, popular science texts and

is an example of this distinctive genre. By subjecting it to rigorous musicological analysis, looking at elements such as structure, we find that the repertory preserves elements of music from the 14th and even earlier centuries. There is a gap in our knowledge, however, so we don't know exactly how this happened. Elements typical of 14th-century French and Italian music were somehow moved to and absorbed in Central Europe, and these music structures formed the basis of compositions unique to this region. In certain communities, in particular Czech Utraquists, this survived until the 17th century.

How did this shift across Europe come about?

It is likely that universities played a key role, in particular the Charles University in Prague, which was a major hub of science and philosophy. Academic exchange between universities meant repertoires from the West reached our part of Europe, where they were adapted to suit local needs. Unfortunately, much documentation was destroyed during the Hussite Wars, so this remains the realm of theory, although it is interesting that we find mid-15th century compositions rooted in the 14th century which had been adapted and were still being performed.

In those days, did musicians travel between courts and churches in different countries to perform?

They did – it's always been part and parcel of the profession. Migratory musicians are one of the most important subjects in musicology. One of the main reasons why musicians always travelled far and wide was that the courts where they worked were themselves frequently mobile. Courts, especially those whose rulers were ambitious, often sought out musicians from regions renowned for their musical maestros. For example, the court of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III hired Flemish musicians, while the king of Poland Sigismund II August favored Italian and German musicians. Music ensembles comprised performers from all regions, not just local ones. There were also Polish musicians based in Siena. Musicians travelled all over Europe, always bringing their scores and sharing repertoires. The advent of print in the 16th century made this process fully international: if a composition came with a French text, it could be deleted and replaced with, say, Latin so it could be used elsewhere.

So building regional identities through music isn't a modern invention?

Not at all. Some elements of "early" music were always being referenced.

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concerts. We host seminars and meetings for undergraduate, postgraduate and PhD students at various institutions. Academic research is extremely important in HERA projects, but it is also essential that results reach society as a whole.

What's the value of the grant?

It's a total of 1.2 million euro, divided among all participating centers. EU projects are logistically difficult, because countries have slightly different legislation and rates. HERA projects also have their own directives, so we have to navigate through various regulations in participating countries and the EU. It can be rather complicated. Some of the participants work on the project part-time, also being employed elsewhere. On the other hand, five full-time positions have been created for PhD students and postdocs.

That works out as one per institution. Your part in the project is titled "Ars nova music in 15th-century Central Europe". What can you tell us about it?

In the 15th century, music repertoires in Central Europe – Bohemia, Silesia, Saxony, Austria, Hungary and Poland – were unique to the region. Petrus Wilhelmi

INTERVIEW BY ANNA KILIAN

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