

When the Whole Earth Mourns



Jacek Jackowski

May devotion in Strzałki (Żdźary parish)



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Jacek Jackowski graduated from the Faculty of Music Studies at the University of Warsaw and the Fryderyk Chopin University of Music. He manages the Phonographic Collection at the PAS Institute of Art.

Academia: What is in the sound recording archives at the PAS Institute of Art?

Jacek Jackowski: *We have one of the world's most extensive collections of traditional music. We have been expanding it since the 1940s, and it is currently undergoing digitalization. It numbers around 150,000 individual songs and melodies, including contemporary recordings, the most recent made by me. I tend to focus on the Mazowsze region, although I don't overlook other parts of the country, either.*

You are interested in traditional religious music. It is generally thought that this type of folk culture is disappearing, yet your studies show that the tradition is alive and well.

It's true to say that we no longer see wedding receptions with traditional folk ceremonies, and the repertoire performed by today's wedding bands has nothing to do with traditional song. One vestigial custom is the now archaic singing of the rosary, although if you venture to the towns of Otwock, Kołbiel, Grójec or Garwolin, you soon realize that traditions do live on. And while you'd be forgiven for thinking that they are dying out, since the majority of people taking part in May devotions to the Blessed Virgin Mary are old ladies, there are also quite a few young people, and even kids.

What sort of music is performed?

Early, old pieces that haven't been sung in church for a long time, that frequently only feature in collections of songs, reproductions or short print runs from, say, the 19th century. The singers either know the music and words off by heart, or they have them written in school notebooks. It can look rather startling: a bright notebook with a cartoon character on the cover, with 19th, 18th or even earlier music noted inside.

You also study religious traditions in terms of the instruments used.

Traditional Passiontide songs

One of the subjects I've studied has been kettle drums used during religious processions, such as during Easter and Corpus Christi services. I am especially interested in activities around Holy Week, in particular folk music performed during that time. One time, when I was visiting Złaków Kościelny, the parish priest – thrilled that I was interested in local traditions – asked, “Why don't you come over to see us singing in the run-up to Easter?” Intrigued, I arrived in Złaków with all my recording equipment.

What did you see?

After the liturgy of Good Friday – that is after the Holy Sacrament was encased in a monstrance and placed in the tomb – the church filled with people who have been cultivating this rite “since forever”. Women were sat on the right of



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Procession with a kettle drum, Złaków Kościelny

the entrance, and the men on the left. One of the singers (Stanisław Żaczek, who passed away last year) intoned the songs. He was joined by the men in the first instance, and after the chorus, the second verse was sung by the women. And they continued swapping like that. The first time I came across this style of singing was in Złaków, although I have been able to record it in many other locations. When talking to locals, I discovered that the ritual can go on until one or two in the morning. And so it is a sustained, contemplative singing, with people who arrive at the church for the Adoration joining in.

Does it only include Passiontide songs?

Yes; it's a Lent and Passiontide repertoire, which has largely been dropped from the mainstream. Its traces can be found occasionally in contemporary songbooks, but generally numbering no more than three stanzas. Meanwhile, the people I have been recording perform original versions in full, running into dozens of stanzas. It's as though the singers have been immune to the shifting styles in sacral music. Perhaps the most significant – at least for me – is the fact that the whole thing happens without the involvement of the priest or organist. It seems to be a wholly popular initiative.

And the songs are sung a capella?

Of course! I see it like this: in folk culture, Good Friday has always been perceived as a very special day in the Church calendar; when He whom we can always pray to for help, He who cares for us, is murdered and placed in a tomb. And we should keep vigil with the body, as we would with an ordinary mortal. This is where the main difference lies: He does not need our temporal support or escort to the other world, and it is us who feel abandoned and terrified. Ordinarily, death in folk culture had been regarded as a point of contact between the human and the divine. But on this day, it is God who dies, and the passing of God is a time when evil forces abound: witches, demons, all manner of evil spirits get to trouble humans with impunity. The church, as a holy space, has always been regarded as safe. And singing, especially singing powerfully, meant creating an acoustic space into which evil forces could not penetrate. This shows a clear overlap between Catholic belief and deep folk symbolism predating Christianity. Some scholars draw parallels between processions and ritual dancing in a circle, which emphasized that everything within the circle is ours, blessed and safe, and everything outside is perilous. Processional walking – leaving the church and returning later – can be interpreted in a similar manner. It is also very likely that ritual noise – banging drums during processions, sounding knockers and clappers – was intended to expand the range of blessing into everywhere reached by the sound.

Let's go back to the question of history. Is it possible to trace the sources of this music?

I have been researching ethnomusicology and ethnography texts in search of its origins, and I have not found any works dedicated especially to this subject. For example, when Kolberg [19th century Polish ethnographer and composer – trans.] describes wedding ceremonies, he always includes a lot of detail about preparations at home – betrothal, arrival of the groom, blessing, journey to church. At this point the description moves smoothly onto the bride and groom leaving the church and the music and dancing at the inn or wherever the reception is held, but he provides virtually no information about what actually happens at the church. Here we have a real problem with sources.

What options do you then have, as a scholar?

There is some information in the history of liturgy, as well as sociological and ethnographic analyses of belief and piety. The historical Catholic press is also a useful source, although it needs to be assembled painstakingly from short references. For example, when discussing folk sacral music, why do we frequently recall the Medieval or Baroque periods? First of all, towards the end of the Middle Ages, Polish belief was closely tied with the trends of asceticism and sorrow, of experiencing human suffering through God's suffering. It was practiced by Francis of Assisi, and later Ignatius of Loyola. The subjective perception of God not as the creator but simply as God-man who died a man's death at the hands of men was revived in the 17th



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A Good Friday service in
Kocierzów

century. The return to penitential forms and practices, known since the Middle Ages, coincided with the Counter-Reformation. It marked the beginning of some distinctive Polish religious traditions, including building field chapels, holding processions, and so on. Secondly, 17th-century fraternities formed around the Counter-Reformation were important in bringing together nobles and royals with ordinary burghers and even peasants. One characteristic feature of many of the groups were Passiontide and penitential practices, introducing the motifs of co-suffering in the spirit of Confraternity Compassion. The oldest songs performed by people keeping vigil at the Tomb of the Lord reach for repertoires of those days; in terms of ideology, we are talking about early piety dating back as far as the first Christians.

How did this concept of common suffering spread by the Fraternities translate into folk piety?

Of course we no longer have flagellants, but as late as during the last century, singers gathered round the Tomb to perform songs numbering dozens of stanzas, with onlookers evoking Mater Dolorosa in their mourning and contemplation of Christ's wounds, their pain joining the entire world and nature. I believe that this singing goes along with the concept of compassion. My works focus on the concept of common suffering through song. Let's stress once again the importance of pilgrimages of various kinds. Calvaries provided an alternative to pilgrimages to the Holy Land, which would have been out of bounds for most people. They allowed participants to physically experience the Way of the Cross and fulfill their need to commune with God. The experience was made all the more complete because - despite restrictions imposed in the wake of the Council of Trent - many paraliturgical customs and rites survived, in particular sung repertoires in Polish, allowing ordinary nobles or peasants to sing to their heart's content and understand the words of their own prayers. At the time, Passions for many voices became popular as adaptations of Latin texts, interspersed with songs written in Polish. Until then, Passions composed for ensembles and instruments were beyond the means of average believers, existing more as concerts supporting their faith.

The intermediary songs were intended to be performed in Polish?

Yes, and they were musically simpler than other elements of the Passions. They were named after plaints, which were laments or dirges expressing grief or mourning. The story of the plaint "Weep, O Angels, Weep, O Holy Spirit" from the 18th-century Passion penned by Kotowicz is fascinating. It focuses on nature - in its 25 stanzas, Christ's death is mourned by mountains, hills, lakes, rivers, forests... It is still being sung until the present day.

Although Passions have not survived in their original form, the plaints have - why is that?

When Poland lost her independence, monasteries, convents, collegiates and cathedrals were dissolved and had their assets seized. This brought an era of austerity; Passiontide celebrations featuring soloists and choirs were no longer affordable and could not be maintained. But the plaints were folk forms; ordinary people believed that this special time must be filled with solemn song.

Do you ever worry that you are recording something that may vanish at any moment?

I'm afraid this is the case for folk Passiontide songs, although I have a lot of trust in the younger generations - I believe they must surely notice the beauty and power of folk culture and belief. ■

Interview by Anna Zawadzka

Further reading:

- Jackowski J. (2006). Pieśni wykonywane podczas czuwania przy Grobie Pańskim w Wielki Piątek w Żłakowie Kościelnym i Kocierzewie (Łowickie) [Good Friday Vigil Songs Performed in Żłaków Kościelny and Kocierzew (Łowicz Region)]. *Twórczość Ludowa*, nr 1-2 (61), 15-19.
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