

The history of the mazurka and the polonaise

The Polonaise
– one of the most
Polish dances,
here in a painting
by Korneli Szlegel
(1819-1870)



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The Origins of Polish Rhythms

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According to music sources, the origins of the Polish national dances – the mazurka and polonaise – can be traced back to the 16th century. German composers and theorists of that period were first to notice special Polish rhythms that soon became popular in European music

If we seek to identify the idiom of Polish music, we will certainly find it above all in rhythm. At the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries two distinct though in some aspects simi-

lar dances, the mazurka (*mazurek*) and polonaise (*polonez*), became musical symbols of “Polishness.” From this time on, they were composed throughout the 19th century by almost everyone who was involved with music. This tendency, sometimes called “mazuromania”, resulted in musical output of varying value. Only the unquestionable genius of Frederic Chopin was able to create a new musical quality of mazurkas and polonaises that made stylized dance-music into forms of the highest artistic significance.

However, these so-called “national” dances had their origins in the distant past. Their documented history dates as far back as the 1st half of the 16th century, in the organ book of Jan from Lublin, the oldest collection of dance tunes partly recognized as being of folk origin, and, at the same time, the oldest source containing rhythmic structures today defined as “mazurka-rhythms.” Since the further development of these rhythms proceeded in two

directions – that of the mazurka and that of the polonaise – the term “Polish rhythms” seems to be more apt.

The term “Polish rhythms” refers to triple-time rhythmic groups one measure long, with decreasing rhythmic condensation. In other words, these are structures with more notes at the beginning than at the end of a measure, as in the following examples:



Two hypotheses

The first of the above rhythms, composed of two short and two long notes placed against a “natural” accentuation, that is, short notes on the first (strong, accented) beat and two long notes on “weak” beats, was the basic rhythm from which much more complicated structures evolved, leading to the 18th century polonaise.

As to the origins of “Polish rhythms”, two hypotheses should be mentioned. According to some researchers, their emergence has much to do with the change in accentuation in the Polish language, namely the transition from initial to paroxytonic stress that took place at the end of the 15th century. Their hypothesis is based on the fact that those regions of Poland where older types of accentuation have been preserved (like Podhale in the very south and Cassubia in the north) as well as those which were already inhabited in the phase of initial stress (even if they use paroxytonic stress today), hardly know such rhythms at all.

Contrary to this, some other musicologists consider the prolongation of the second-to-last syllable to be of little importance. In their opinion, Polish rhythms emerged first in Western regions as a result of the overlapping full beat construction of bars, motives and phrases, and the descendent rhythm in bars resulting from the descendent (initial) stress in the language.

One real difference between the two hypotheses lies in the phase of stress development they refer to. For the former researchers, the mazurka rhythms are a little bit younger and closely bound to the Polish language while, for the latter their emergence would be earlier, albeit not necessarily Polish.

The very beginning

The oldest mazurka tune in Poland is the four-part song *Veschel schą polska Corona* (Be joyful, oh Polish Crown) by Nicolas from Cracow (Mikołaj z Krakowa), 1540. It is, however, necessary to bear in mind that the notion of mazurka did not exist at all at that time, the terminology being applied by musicologists *post factum*.

Interestingly, “mazurka” rhythms were present in Czech music even a bit earlier than in Polish music. A “mazurka-like” song regarded to be originally Polish, “Prze-

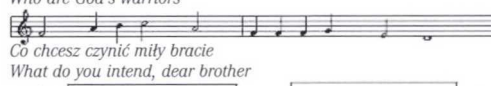
strach na złe sprawy” (“Fear of the Evil Affairs of Human Life”) of 1558, to the verses by Polish poet Mikołaj Rej started with a line “Co chcesz czynić miły bracie”, is in fact a version of the Hussite song *Ktoż jsú boží bojovnicy* of 1530. Differences between the Polish and the Czech tune can be found in their verse structure, musical scale and rhythm. “Mazurka”-rhythms, which are clearly visible in the Czech version, are consequently led through the entire melody in the Polish tune.

Ktoż jsú boží bojovnicy
Who are God's warriors



Có chcesz czynić miły bracie
What do you intend, dear brother

Ktoż jsú boží bojovnicy
Who are God's warriors



Có chcesz czynić miły bracie
What do you intend, dear brother



Let's do the mazurka

One may presume that many Polish “mazurka-like” tunes of the 16th century were of foreign origin, but they only retained the original melody, changing the rhythm according to the Polish tendency for descendability. Even if it is not possible to state whether the structures defined later as “mazurka” rhythms are definitely of Czech or Polish origin, we can say for certain that they found a good foundation for development in Poland due to the properties of the language. From newer times we know numerous examples of songs originally in 4/4 time that were changed in the oral (folk) tradition into a triple-meter with “Polish rhythms.”

Well-established in Polish music, such rhythms gave rise to a whole family of dances, which on the one hand survived in the folk tradition, and on the other created a Polish idiom in art music. This idiom, first noticed in the 16th century by German musicians, was then exploited in the 17th century in so-called “Polnische Tänze.” “Polish dances” were two-part structures in which the melody in duple-meter (the first part) was transformed into triple-meter (the second part). This transformation was based on the use of descendent rhythms as typical of Polish music. Soon the second part became an independent form, from which new dances emerged in mid-18th century: the polonaise and mazurka. ■

Further reading:

- Dahlig-Turek E. (2003). The Polish Dance in Scandinavia and Poland. In: Märta Ramsten (Ed.), *Ethnomusicological Studies. Skrifter utgivna av Svenskt visarkiv 17*. Stockholm, 11-25.
- Hlawiczka K. (1968). Grundriss einer Geschichte der Polonaise bis zum Anfang des 19. Jahrhunderts. *Svensk tidskrift för musikforskning*, 50, Stockholm, 51-124.