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On Awangarda: Tradition and Modernity in Postwar Polish Music by Lisa Cooper Vest

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The long-awaited *Awangarda: Tradition and Modernity in Postwar Polish Music*, published in 2020 by the University of California Press, presents the results of Lisa Cooper Vest's twelve-year-long research project tracing discourses of tradition, modernity, and progress in Polish new music composition between 1930 and 1965. Drawing on an extensive body of archival documents, meeting transcripts, essays, interviews, and music reviews, Cooper Vest traces a complicated network of ideas and interests to illuminate the stakes that were at play for different actors invested in the shifting musical milieu in mid-century Poland. The investigated discourse included composers and musicologists such as Karol Szymanowski, Konstanty Regamey, Włodzimierz Sokorski, Zofia Lissa, Stefania Łobaczewska, Witold Lutosławski, Grażyna Bacewicz, Krzysztof Penderecki, Bogusław Schaeffer, Stefan Kisielewski, and Zygmunt Mycielski. In this essay, I offer an overview of the book's main arguments – including its new approach to the history of the Polish School of composition – while highlighting the ways in which Cooper Vest's work can be particularly compelling and useful to the Polish academic audience¹.

¹ I would like to thank Kiersten Beszterda van Vliet for their comments on an early version of this essay.

In the past decade, the history of Polish postwar musical culture has attracted a new wave of scholarly attention among Western musicologists. This has resulted in a body of innovative scholarship on the topic. The influx of new publications began with David G. Tompkins's 2013 *Composing the Party Line: Music and Politics in Early Cold War Poland and East Germany*. His book provides an analysis of the Polish Composers' Union's central role in institutionalizing new music composition – and defining its stylistic and aesthetics parameters – in the years following the Second World War. Following this, Lisa Jakelski proposed a compelling study of the Warsaw Autumn festival in her 2016 book *Making New Music in Cold War Poland: The Warsaw Autumn Festival, 1956–1968*. The book demonstrates how in its initial decade, the festival functioned as a space of mobility, cultural diplomacy, and international exchange, showing a greater permeability of the Iron Curtain than previously understood. Daniel Elphick's 2019 *Music Behind the Iron Curtain: Weinberg and His Polish Contemporaries* traced the Polish, Jewish, and Soviet strands of Mieczysław Weinberg's identity against a wider background of Polish and Soviet cultural history of the 20th century. Finally, the examination of the war and Holocaust trauma in Polish and Polish-Jewish musicians' lives, artistic-intellectual activity, and postwar

musical aesthetics lie at the center of J. Mackenzie Pierce's 2020 article "Zofia Lissa, Wartime Trauma, and the Evolution of the Polish 'Mass Song'"².

POLISH AWANGARDA AND A NEW RESEARCH PARADIGM

While the above works vary in scope and focus, they demonstrate a shared dedication to introducing new theoretical approaches and interpretative tropes to the study of the 20th-century Polish musical culture. Here, the constantly shifting fields of power, agency, and identity – both individual and national – are as critical as questions of musical genre and stylistic evolution.

Awangarda continues this line of investigation. Structural resonances with the recent scholarly lines of inquiry are found throughout Cooper Vest's approach to writing history. Like J. Mackenzie Pierce, Cooper Vest emphasizes continuities between the prewar and postwar intellectual tradition. This approach is notable for contrasting the established trend of perceiving the Second World War as a dividing point between two separate periods of Polish music history. Meanwhile, recognizing how relationships and ideas continued despite the interruption of the war can be productive for our understanding of the postwar period. This recognition is also a reminder that peoples' lives had their own messy trajectories that don't neatly fit with the logic of political history.

Additionally, rather than retreading the worn narrative of Polish post-war music culture as an extension of the broader East-West geopolitical and ideological conflict, Cooper Vest emphasizes the local Polish context. This resonates with Jakelski's work on Warsaw Autumn. Both Jakelski and Cooper Vest move beyond traditional Cold War-centric narratives. Investigating the Warsaw Autumn festival through the lens of Howard S. Becker's artworlds theory, Lisa Jakelski illustrates how it was a particular moment of transformation in Polish history that facilitated the creation of the Warsaw Autumn festival and its

following institutionalization³. While recognizing the specific local conditions that led to its creation, Jakelski simultaneously challenges the conventional view of the Iron Curtain as impermeable to cultural exchange⁴. Instead, she examines the festival in the 1950s and '60s as a site of mobility and cultural diplomacy. Cooper Vest similarly recognizes how framing the Polish avant-garde within the Cold War paradigm leads to several analytical limitations. While the Polish avant-garde is usually conceptualized along the lines of political resistance and triumph over socialist realism and Stalinism, and as politically oriented towards the West, Cooper Vest finds that in fact the movement exceeded the limits of this Cold War West–East dichotomy. Indeed, for composers, "there were more than two available political and cultural positions"⁵. The goal of Cooper Vest's book is therefore to answer "key questions surrounding the emergence and proliferation of the Polish avant-garde in the late 1950s and early 1960s that cannot be addressed fully within a Cold War frame"⁶. In order to allow for a specific Polish perspective, Cooper Vest "turn[s] inward, to the nation's interior experience", and especially that of the national idiosyncratic sense of temporality inside 20th-century Poland and its role for Polish cultural identity⁷. In other words, while Jakelski illustrates how mobility and exchange at the Warsaw Autumn festival transverse Cold War geopolitical divisions, Cooper Vest demonstrates that the Cold War timeline overlooks many local experiences of musical modernity.

Drawing on debates between composers, musicologists, critics, and party-state representatives, *Awangarda* traces discourses on composing new music in Polish milieu. Cooper Vest demonstrates how – in trying to make sense of Poland's place within musical modernity – commentators relied on the consensus that Poland had fallen behind in its artistic development compared to the West. This idea of Polish backwardness takes the form of two discursive gestures that Cooper Vest borrows from Maria Todorova's

³ L. Jakelski, *Making New Music in Cold War Poland: The Warsaw Autumn Festival, 1956–1968*, Oakland 2017, p. 5. See H.S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, Berkeley, California 2008.

⁴ L. Jakelski, *Making New Music...*, op. cit., p. 7.

⁵ L. Cooper Vest, *Awangarda: Tradition and Modernity in Post-war Polish Music*, Oakland 2021, p. 2.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 2–3.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

² A more comprehensive study of this topic can be found in J. Mackenzie Pierce's doctoral dissertation (See: J. M. Pierce, "Life and Death for Music: A Polish Generation's Journey Across War and Reconstruction, 1926–53", PhD dissertation, Cornell University 2019).

study of Eastern European nationalism: lag and lack⁸. As a result of partitions, failed insurrections and two World Wars, Poland was located “outside of modernity... at some earlier chronological point, previous to the contemporary moment”⁹. In addition to chronological understandings of Polish musical “backwardness” (lag), Cooper Vest, after Todorova, also discerns its understanding based on accumulation of certain qualities (lack). As she states, “if modernity existed as a balance sheet, with certain economic, intellectual, cultural, or experiential benchmarks, then Poland’s backwardness could be measured in terms of its deficiencies or gaps”¹⁰.

To rectify the ideas of lack and lag, the discursive response was either “filling the gap” or “catching up”. *Awangarda* provides an overview of how these concerns motivated composers, musicologists, intellectuals, and party-state representatives alike as they negotiated the direction of Polish music. All aspects of musical life were subject to the rhetoric of lag/lack: new music composition, education, repertoire planning, and the institutional goals of the Polish Composers’ Union. As Cooper Vest brings to light the surprising level of discursive consistency between different groups, she troubles the conventional understanding of the relationship between the party-state and the composers. Commonly characterized in Polish scholarship as antagonistic, the two groups are often portrayed as pursuing competing values. Instead of this narrative, Cooper Vest demonstrates that both the party-state and the composers advanced their interests in reference to a shared concern for overcoming musical – and therefore national – backwardness¹¹.

⁸ See: M. Todorova, *The Trap of Backwardness: Modernity, Temporality, and the Study of Eastern European Nationalism*, “Slavic Review” vol. 64, 2005, no. 1, pp. 140–64. Quoted in: L. Cooper Vest, *Awangarda...*, op. cit., pp. 5–6.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ That the relationship between the party-state and composers did not simply rely on a top-down flow of power was first discussed in detail by David Tompkins in his 2013 book. His work challenged the myth of composers’ unanimous resistance against socialist realism and uncovered the intricacies of voluntary cooperation between composers and the party-state in implementing the new doctrine. He argued that “instead of a still-common conception of artists forced into compliance by an omnipotent party, [...] nearly all composers willingly cooperated in creating a new, socialist realist music [...]. Composers in both countries found significant common ground with a party that sought to educate the population about both past and

More importantly, as made clear in the book’s final chapters, it was the sense of Poland’s unique temporality that played a decisive role in ultimately designing the Polish avant-garde movement as one that simultaneously promised progress and embraced tradition.

FROM ZALEGŁOŚĆ TO AWANGARDA

The book is divided into seven chapters, preceded by a short introduction. Excluding the conclusion, each chapter operates around a narrative leitmotif. This theme serves as a chapter title both in English and in Polish: “Backwardness” (*Zaległość*), “Lack” (*Brak*), “The Dissemination of Culture” (*Upowszechnienie kultury*), “Lag” (*Opóźnienie*), “Modernity” (*Nowoczesność*), and “Awangarda” (*The Polish Avant-Garde*). Each chapter is also centered around “the specific terms that motivated debates about Polish tradition and Polish modernity between the interwar period and the emergence of the avant-garde in the early 1960s”¹².

The use of Polish language both in the title of the book and the titles of individual chapters is integral to the book’s broader politics of translation. Indeed, Cooper Vest often invokes Polish terms, for example, “*geniusz twórczy*” (creative genius) on page 90 or “*pipidówka*” (“a fictional backwater town”) on page 33. Her linguistic choices not only serve to retrieve semantic nuances otherwise lost in translation, but also enable a deeper engagement with the book for Polish readers. Many of the original Polish terms carry an affective force within Polish culture. In particular, key terms implying temporality – such as *Zaległość* or *Opóźnienie* – have an idiosyncratic significance that exceeds their literal connotation. These terms reference epistemologies of lived experience of the period under examination, and the ways such experiences continue to resonate in Polish society decades later.

present music, and also cooperated for other reasons, such as financial incentives, a desire for recognition, and political pressure, though this last was much less powerful than is often asserted in the literature”. (See: D. Tompkins, *Composing the Party Line: Music and Politics in Early Cold War Poland and East Germany*, West Lafayette 2013, p. 248). Nevertheless, one of the first discussions of that problem should be credited to Adrian Thomas. See: A. Thomas, *File 750: Composers, Politics, and the Festival of Polish Music (1951)*, “Polish Music Journal” vol. 5, 2002, No. 1.

¹² L. Cooper Vest, *Awangarda...*, op. cit., p. 8.

Jan Topolski taps on the ubiquitous presence of lag and lack references among music critics and composers in the 1990s in his review of Cooper Vest's book:

It's funny how history likes to repeat itself. I remember that when I first started my adventure with contemporary music in the 1990s, my friends and I would often complain about the backlog of work to be done in Poland. That in the mythical West they derive the spectra, filter the noises, while here it is still the postmodern and some chords carousing. And there are no Polish labels, no publications, no translations¹³.

The recognition of linguistic nuances is consistent with the book's overall orientation towards the local historical and intellectual contexts that fostered the emergence of the Polish musical avant-garde/*awangarda*. Cooper Vest's politics of translation are far from superficial. Rather, they exemplify one of the book's main historiographical premises – namely, finding a model for this history that reaches beyond hegemonic Western epistemologies of the avant-garde. As explained by Cooper Vest, “the Polish manifestation of avant-gardism... did not bear a clear connection to other models of avant-gardism with which we may be more familiar”¹⁴.

To trace the history of Polish *awangarda*, Cooper Vest relies on an extensive body of archival materials retrieved at institutions in Warsaw and Kraków. Documents include transcripts of official meetings within state committees and institutions from the collections of the Central Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw and The Archive of the Polish Composers' Union. Additionally, she provides a meticulous analysis of a number of interviews, essays, and music reviews. These sources allow for construction of the horizon of intellectual debate around new music in Poland in the period under examination. Although the evolution of the discourse surrounding Polish new music is at the center of this study rather than technical and

stylistic tendencies in new music, musical analysis plays a supporting role for understanding the tangible relationship between discourse and composition. For example, considering the new official demand for music's accessibility in 1949, Cooper Vest examines different compositional approaches to neoclassicism in Chapter 1. Here she compares Zygmunt Mycielski's *Silesian Overture* and Turski's *Symphony no. 2, "Olympic"*. In Chapter 4, she discusses the formal construction and pitch organization of Lutosławski's *Funeral Music* vis-a-vis the music critics' pressure exerted on him to embrace dodecaphony in his work.

Through a detailed investigation of her sources, Cooper Vest identifies recurring discursive tropes and patterns related to time, progress, backwardness, and tradition. The prevalence of these tropes under various guises reveals a set of unspoken values and beliefs that those in the musical milieu often perceived as self-explanatory, such as Poland's need to catch up with the West or the urgency of establishing a distinct Polish compositional school. Lisa Cooper Vest's fresh, relatively outsider perspective allows her to identify tropes that remain familiar, habitual, and instinctive – but to a certain extent un- and under-examined – in Polish culture to this day. This may provide Polish readers with a deeper understanding of the values upon which even our present-day music-historical and compositional discourses rest.

Awangarda begins with an examination of discourses around musical modernism, modernization, and progress in the interwar period. This was primarily a debate between Piotr Rytel's “conservative” modernizationist circles and Karol Szymanowski's modernist “progressives”. By the end of the first chapter, the reader arrives in 1948 – the last moment preceding the introduction of socialist realism as an official aesthetic ideology in Poland that took place at the infamous 1949 Łagów Lubuski conference. The broad historical scope of the opening chapter demonstrates “the lines of continuity, maintained by the people who lived through the ruptures [of wartime] and brought their experiences and convictions with them”¹⁵. Here, Cooper Vest demonstrates how in the years immediately following the Second World War, there was a shift in priority within Polish music culture. The

¹³ “Zabawne, jak historia lubi się powtarzać. Pamiętam, że gdy rozpoczynałem swoją przygodę z muzyką współczesną w latach dziewięćdziesiątych, często ze znajomymi narzekaliśmy na zaległości, jakie mamy w Polsce do nadrobienia. Że przecież na mitycznym Zachodzie tak te spektra rozkładają, tak te szумы filtrują, a u nas hulają wciąż jakieś postmoderny i akordy. I nie ma polskich labeli, nie ma publikacji, nie ma tłumaczeń”. J. Topolski, *Dogonić awangardę*, „Ruch Muzyczny” 2021, no. 6–7.

¹⁴ L. Cooper Vest, *Awangarda...*, op. cit., p. 7.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 13.

initial sense of urgency to rebuild Polish music culture and mitigate wartime losses evolved into an emphasis on progress and modernization. This led to cementing what the author identifies as the “Marxist-modernizationist” perspective, later integrated into the official Stalinist line¹⁶. This modernizationist group – largely represented by Zofia Lissa, Włodzimierz Sokorski, and Zygmunt Mycielski – accentuated the key role of music in hastening cultural progress and educating the masses. At stake in many debates about modernization was the status of the composer. Some, like Stefan Kisielewski, defended the nineteenth-century trope of an elite, isolated composer and prioritized it over the audience’s interests. Here, Cooper Vest anticipates chapter’s 4 discussion of genius construction by briefly hinting how antisemitism and gender played into many of the conversations about the composer’s role in the society. For example, Cooper Vest notes that as a Polish-Jewish woman Lissa rejected the “insular, exclusionary national” tradition “that deified the canon and genius composers”, since that kind of tradition “would certainly have rejected her”¹⁷.

In Chapter 2, Cooper Vest focuses on the evolving status of the artist-intellectual class between the post-Łagów (1949) and post-thaw (1956) period. She illustrates how priorities broadly changed from a focus on the needs of the mass audience to an emphasis on the needs of the artist-intellectual class. While in the early 1950s the discourse of lack was employed by the party-state-associated Lissa and Sokorski who criticized Polish composers for lacking the skills to serve the masses in ways directed by socialist realism, by 1954 it was composers themselves who found the discourse of lack useful to advance their interests. Leaving behind the restrictions of socialist realism on the wave of the post-Stalinist thaw, composers complained that the Łagów Lubuski conference – the symbol of lack – brought isolation and took away the artist-intellectual class’s freedom and creativity.

The two seemingly contradictory interests: “artists’ dreams for elite cultural production”, and the responsibility to “uplift the mass audience” would eventually become reconciled through the pressure to create new music institutions in the post-1956 years,

as analyzed in Chapter 3¹⁸. These included The Polish Radio Experimental Studio and the magazine *Ruch Muzyczny*. The existence of these two music institutions relied on their ability to disseminate culture and “prove their usefulness in meeting the needs of the mass audience” while simultaneously serving the elite audience in an effort to overcome Poland’s musical backwardness¹⁹. As demonstrated by Cooper Vest, the leaders of the Polish Radio Experimental Studio project upheld the dual narrative to legitimize and protect the studio’s activities.

While the trope of lack was certainly powerful in its effects on Polish musical culture, Cooper Vest argues that this discourse lost much of its relevance in the post-Stalin political reality – a reality that also included Władysław Gomułka’s “Polish road to socialism”²⁰. The idea motivating change was no longer about filling gaps in Polish music culture – now musical discourse was all about progress. Chapters 4–6, then, are an analysis of the discourse of lag – a discourse, moreover, that allowed critics, musicologists, and composers to reconcile an orientation towards the future with a longer national tradition, eventually leading to the creation of a distinct Polish avant-garde. In the latter half of the book, Cooper Vest traces how concepts of genius, innovation, and a distinctly Polish national tradition contributed to the birth of the Polish School.

Chapter 4 illustrates a reorientation of discourse in the 1950s and the revival of the trope of the genius composer—a unique individual capable of blending tradition and modernity in his work. This (old-) new perspective of the composer’s role relied on “reinvigorating tropes grounded in early nineteenth-century romantic nationalism about the creative and political responsibilities of artistic genius”²¹. Cooper Vest argues that this process was facilitated by a noticeable shift in the discourse around Karol Szymanowski. Analyzing the works on Szymanowski from the 1950s by Stefania Łobaczewska, Stefan Kisielewski, and

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 24.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 30.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 62.

¹⁹ Ibidem, pp. 63-68.

²⁰ As a consequence of Stalin’s death in 1953 and the subsequent 1956 political transformation in Poland, the power was taken over by a new first secretary, Władysław Gomułka. His governing style was based on a so-called “Polish path to socialism”, striving to maintain more autonomy from the USSR.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 89.

Zygmunt Mycielski, she notices a significant shift in how the composer was perceived and portrayed. Around the period of cultural thaw, the discourse around Szymanowski changed into one of “a predecessor-genius”, a unique individual capable of overcoming Polish backwardness²². The lasting nature of the Romantic paradigm of Polish artists beyond the nineteenth century – and, in particular, the gendered impact of this paradigm on in Polish history, literature, and art – has been thoroughly examined within the literary and feminist studies²³. Cooper Vest’s intervention reveals the particular way in which the trope of the Romantic genius was integrated with the idea of overcoming Polish musical backwardness. Following this logic, a composer should synthesize tradition with progress (which, it was believed, Szymanowski did) in order to create an idiosyncratic Polish path forward rather than relying on Western standards of musical modernism. It was believed that the ability to reconcile the seemingly incompatible ideas of tradition and progress required a level of independence only achievable by a true genius, a national baird (*wieszcz*). Cooper Vest demonstrates how – once a lineage of Polish genius composers was established from Chopin to Szymanowski – musicologists such as Schaeffer, Jarczyński, and Łobaczewska characterized Lutosławski as the next in line. The discursive placing of Lutosławski as the next Polish genius was largely facilitated and solidified by the reception of *Funeral Music* (1958): emphasizing the work’s innovatory nature and the role of dodecaphony (despite Lutosławski’s declaration that he was not a dodecaphonist) on the one hand, and the expressivity and communicative power of the piece on the other. Consequently, Lutosławski’s genius became characterized specifically as the ability to reconcile the new with the old, the progressive with the traditional.

Not everyone was satisfied with this Romantic lineage, however. A new generation of composers that “felt suffocated by the conditions of lag discourse” enters

the stage in Chapter 5²⁴. Among them was Bogusław Schaeffer, who believed that a true avant-garde artist needed to make a clean break from tradition. By analyzing Schaeffer’s compositions and writings, Cooper Vest demonstrates his “understanding of progress [as] thoroughly and irrevocably grounded in a timeline that moved in only one direction: forward, into the future”²⁵. As such, Schaeffer rejected both the lag and lack narrative, proposing a competing vision for the Polish avant-garde movement, “predicated on newness and experimentation”²⁶.

The two competing visions of Polish avant-garde are contrasted in Chapter 6. Cooper Vest demonstrates how the “second Polish *awangarda*” eventually prevailed over Schaeffer’s iconoclasm. This tradition-oriented model of avant-gardism gained momentum in the 1960s with the amplification of the discourse of genius that had emerged around Lutosławski. Here, Cooper Vest echoes Martin Iddon’s compelling study on the Darmstadt school from his 2013 book *New Music at Darmstadt: Nono, Stockhausen, Cage, and Boulez* to point out that the Polish School phenomenon was invented, a negotiated consensus, rather than a group that emerged organically²⁷. The idea of a distinct Polish avant-garde came about as a discursive conflation of the national genius narrative, the backwardness/lag narrative, and a promise of finally overcoming the musical backwardness.

The discursive construction of the Polish School – suggesting a cohesive group – relied on erasing differences in style and generation (Lutosławski, included in the Polish School narrative, was significantly older), and ignoring Bogusław Schaeffer who did not comply to the concept. This rhetorical work, as Cooper Vest demonstrates, was largely accomplished by musicologists – Bohdan Pociąg, Tadeusz Zieliński, Henryk Schiller – who created the idea of the Polish School through their writings²⁸. Moreover, it was the reinterpretation of the idea of sonorism – a term initially

²⁴ L. Cooper Vest, *Awangarda...*, op. cit., p. 166.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 120.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 157.

²⁷ M. Iddon, *New Music at Darmstadt: Nono, Stockhausen, Cage, and Boulez*, New York 2013.

²⁸ This included reviews of Górecki’s and Penderecki’s pieces at the Warsaw Autumn in 1959 and 1960, Mycielski’s and Kisielewski’s 1958–59 criticism of avant-garde as “too mechanical,” Erhardt’s dystopian vision of artist’s elite isolation from the audience.

²² Ibidem, p. 99.

²³ See: M. Janion, *Gorączka romantyczna*, Warszawa 1975; M. Janion, *Czy będziesz wiedział co przeżyłeś*, Warszawa 1996; A. Graff, “Gender, Sexuality and Nation—Here and Now. Reflections on the Gendered and Sexualized Aspects of Contemporary Polish Nationalism,” [in:] *In Intimate Citizenships. Gender, Sexualities, Politics*, ed. E.H. Oleksy, New York and London 2009, pp. 133–146.

used by Józef Chomiński in a purely theoretical context – and conflating it with the Polish School, that gave the group both internal cohesion and idiosyncrasy at the same time. Despite divided opinions about the newly “invented” avant-garde, the memory of the socialist realism prescriptions of Łagów Lubuski loomed large at the 1960 Assembly of the Polish Composers’ Union. Among participants there was an acute “fear of a return to backwardness” that eventually led to the Union’s official endorsement and institutionalization of the national-traditional Polish avant-garde²⁹. The benefits of legitimizing the national-traditional model were significant. By constructing a coherent avant-garde movement, this model brought international prestige and interest to Polish new music. This was ultimately advantageous for Polish composers, both younger and older. Notably, the institutionalization of the Polish School also enabled a symbolic end to Polish backwardness.

The book’s concluding chapter provides a brief overview of the consolidation of the Polish School’s centrality in Polish musical life throughout the 1960s. After the Polish Composers’ Union’s open dismissal of his plagiarism complaint against Henryk Mikołaj Górecki in 1962, Bogusław Schaeffer gradually removed himself from the Warsaw scene and continued his artistic vision in the Kraków circles. Meanwhile, the newly sanctioned Polish avant-garde was gaining the support of the party-state, despite the avant-garde’s clear “formalist” nature. Some, like Lissa, believed that the experimental phase was only a temporary stop on Polish trajectory to the future socially engaged and largely accessible repertoire. Others simply enjoyed the international prestige that the avant-garde was attracting. Even long after each of the members of the group moved on to the subsequent – often stylistically disparate – phases of their careers, the idea of the Polish School of sonorist composers continued to function “as a sort of ‘brand’ for the promotion of Polish musical innovations domestically and internationally”³⁰.

TEMPORALITY AND MEMORY

The central position of time, narrative practices, and the idiosyncratic sense of temporality places Cooper Vest’s book in dialogue with recent contributions to the study of Polish and Eastern European history. As she notes, “in the fields of indigenous studies, postcolonial studies, and queer studies, scholars have long argued that time does not run along a homogenous, chronological line, and that modernity exists not as a monolith, but as a plurality of modernities”³¹. But temporality and the perception of historical time—or chronology of events—have also been a crucial category of reflection within Polish and Eastern European studies. For example, scholars have extensively discussed a particular chronology of Polish feminist movement. In their respective works, Agnieszka Graff and Magdalena Grabowska have traced the history of women’s emancipation and women’s rights activism in Poland to demonstrate that its chronology differs significantly from the Western theoretical frame of three feminist waves. Consequently, they argue against considering Polish feminism as a delayed disguise of the Western movement³². In her 2018 book, Grabowska further argues against the “broken genealogy” historiographical practice of Polish women’s emancipation which relies on erasing the era of the socialist Polish People’s Republic as an illegitimate part of Polish history. She instead traces women’s activity and agency during the socialist period, advocating for its inclusion in a new, more comprehensive historical timeline of Polish women’s emancipation³³.

³¹ Ibidem, p. 7. She mentions works by Mark Rifkin and Heather Love, as those whose “critical lenses allow us to imagine historical subjects who traversed timelines that were not always linear”.

³² See: A. Graff, *Lost between the Waves? The Paradoxes of Feminist Chronology and Activism in Contemporary Poland*, “Journal of International Women’s Studies”, 2003, no. 4(2), pp. 100–116. M. Grabowska, *Bringing the Second World in: Conservative Revolution(s), Socialist Legacies, and Transnational Silences in the Trajectories of Polish Feminism*, “Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society”, vol. 37, 2012, no. 2, pp. 385–411.

³³ M. Grabowska, *Zerwana genealogia: Działalność społeczna i polityczna kobiet po 1945 roku a współczesny polski ruch kobiecy*, Warszawa 2018. Interestingly, Grabowska’s analysis of three common narratives about Polish feminist movement’s history includes a lack narrative (arguing that there has been no feminist movement in Eastern Europe), and a convergence narrative (essentially a lag narrative, arguing that women’s movements in the region are delayed in comparison to the West). This theoretical overlap between Cooper

²⁹ L. Cooper Vest, *Awangarda...*, op. cit., p. 191.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 199.

Historiographical concerns have also appeared in the domain of Eastern European political history. In his 2018 *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*, Timothy Snyder points to the traps of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century models of thinking about time and history – the teleological “politics of inevitability”, and the cyclical “politics of eternity” – and demonstrates their fundamental consequences for international politics problems affecting Eastern Europe (including Russia’s 2014 and 2022 invasion of Ukraine)³⁴.

Cooper Vest’s book challenges common tropes guiding the understanding of Polish postwar music among English-speaking readers – it complicates the Cold War periodization, as well as the dichotomous tropes of East versus West, and collaboration versus resistance. But it upsets the national histories told within the local Polish music historiography, too. Within the post-communist paradigm, the existence of a centuries-long, distinct Polish tradition as a strong foundation for an almost teleological idea of musical progress has been taken for granted and rarely challenged. Additionally, the practice of documenting Polish musical culture of late 1940s and early 1950s is marked by the returning question of ethics – one that governs contemporary historiography of the Polish People’s Republic more broadly³⁵. As explained by historians Katarzyna Chmielewska and Anna Kowalska, “the Polish historiographical discourse on communism is [...] strongly value-laden, primarily in that it almost always situates the past in the axiological realm. [...] What we are discussing is, in fact, [...] the moral judgements of involvement in the system”³⁶.

progress have influenced diverse discourses invested in Polish twentieth-century history.

³⁴ T. Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*, New York 2018. Another example of a study demonstrating the relationship between an unconscious historical chronology (taking a form of a “collective amnesia”) and contemporary Polish identity is Andrzej Leder’s *Prześniona rewolucja. Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej* (Warszawa 2014.)

³⁵ Polish People’s Republic (Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa, PRL) was the official name of the country between 1952–1989.

³⁶ “Dyskurs polskiej historiografii na temat komunizmu ma [...] charakter silnie wartościujący przede wszystkim dlatego, że niemal zawsze sytuuje przeszłość w polu aksjologicznym”. K. Chmielewska, *Narracje historyczne o komunizmie*, [in:] *Debaty po roku 1989. Literatura w procesach komunikacji. W stronę nowej syntezy* (2), red. M. Hopfinger, Z. Ziątek, T. Żukowski, Warszawa 2017, p. 82. “De facto spieramy się

This discourse, Chmielewska notes, relies on creating a simplistic, dichotomic (and therefore disjunctive) collection of the history’s agents: the authorities and the society. Society, in turn, is divided into other two dichotomic groups: those who resisted communism, and those who adapted to it. “In this way, contemporary historiography creates a narrative macrostructure, an overarching story of fidelity and its absence, that is, a precondition, an axiological presupposition”³⁷. As a result, the functioning of the Polish Composers’ Union under the Stalinist period is often perceived along the logic of a struggle between “heroes” (avant-gardists—but not Schaeffer!) and “villains” (the authorities and socialist realist composers). Unrestrained by this contemporary local nation-making paradigm, Cooper Vest’s narrative is insightful, penetrating intricate psychological and intellectual motivations for composers and musicologists’ choices, yet uninterested in giving verdicts on what these historical figures owe contemporary politics of post-communist memory.

Finally, the book’s compelling arguments, thoroughly researched history, and creative use of archival materials propose a unique contribution to scholarship on Polish new music. Indeed, Cooper Vest’s book is a timely intervention, as other musicologists strive to evaluate the constructed nature of the Polish School of composition. In her 2018 article, Iwona Lindstedt noted that while the term “Polish School” continues to be well recognized and broadly used in Poland and abroad, there has never been an unanimous definition of the school³⁸. According to Lindstedt, there is an emotional dimension to why so many people value the story of the Polish School so much, “beyond and above the categories of truth and falsehood”³⁹. Indeed, in the West the Polish School became a symbol of the Cold War victory. In Poland, in turn, as

nie o PRL (ten oceniany jest jednoznacznie negatywnie), ale o moralne oceny zaangażowania w ówczesny system”. A. Kowalska, *Wokół dyskursu o PRL*, [in:] *Debaty po roku 1989...*, op. cit., pp. 57–58.

³⁷ “W ten sposób historiografia najnowsza tworzy makrostrukturę fabularną, nadrzędną opowieść o wierności i jej braku, czyli warunek wstępny, aksjologiczną presupozycję”. K. Chmielewska, *Narracje...*, op. cit., p. 79.

³⁸ See: I. Lindstedt, *The Polish School of Composition in 20th-Century Music – a Recapitulation*, “Musicology Today” 2018, vol. 15, no. 1, p. 33.

³⁹ Ibidem, p. 39.

demonstrated by Cooper Vest, the School became a symbol of overcoming the perceived Polish backwardness while invigorating national tradition. *Awangarda*, therefore, serves as a reminder that music history can be mobilized and transformed into a powerful discursive consensus, one that can build up a sense of national identity, and govern the politics of collective memory.

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SUMMARY

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On Awangarda: Tradition and Modernity in Postwar Polish Music by Lisa Cooper Vest

Awangarda: Tradition and Modernity in Postwar Polish Music (University of California Press, 2020) by Lisa Cooper Vest traces discourses of tradition, modernity, and progress in Polish new music composition between 1930 and 1965. Drawing on an extensive body of archival materials, Cooper Vest demonstrates ideas, interests, and stakes that were at play for different actors invested in the shifting musical milieu in mid-century Poland.

This essay offers an overview of the book's main arguments—including its new approach to the history of the Polish School—while highlighting the ways in which Cooper Vest's work is compelling to Polish audiences.

Rather than retreading the worn narrative of Polish post-war music culture as an extension of the broader East-West ideological conflict, Cooper Vest emphasizes the local Polish context. Mid-century musical discourse relied on a consensus that Poland had fallen behind on a fixed path of development. This idea of backwardness takes the form of two discursive gestures: lag and lack. Tracing the return of the nineteenth-century Romantic ideas about compositional genius, attributed first to Witold Lutosławski and later to a new group of young composers, Cooper Vest demonstrates that the Polish School phenomenon was a negotiated consensus, rather than a group that emerged organically. At the same time, the author documents the rise and fall of Bogusław Schaeffer and his individual vision for avant-garde composition. This unique contribution to the field of musicology also poses broader questions about mobilizing history and memory to consolidate a sense of national identity through music composition.

Keywords

awangarda, new music, Polish School, socialist realism, Polish Composers' Union, Lisa Cooper Vest, Bogusław Schaeffer