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## POLISH RHYTHMS IN SCANDINAVIAN FOLK DANCES

We do not know to what extent modern-day Scandinavians associate their *pols* and *polska* folk dances with Polish culture, although it would seem that the very names of the dances ought to trigger such associations. We may certainly assume, meanwhile, that Polish listeners are unaware that in the north of Europe there are dances which have a great deal in common with Polish folk repertoire, at least in its musical layer. And that is no coincidence: the exporting of music during the sixteenth century left a lasting trace in the form of ‘Polish dances’ in the traditional folklore of Scandinavian countries.

A common element of both traditions is a rhythmic principle that I term ‘Polish rhythms’. These consist of triple-time structures in which the greatest density of rhythmic impulses occurs at the beginning of a bar. This means that the bar starts with shorter values and ends with longer values (such structures are termed ‘descending’). In the Polish national dances mazurek and polonaise, we note the presence of just such a principle to the shaping of the rhythm, despite the considerable choreographic and rhythmic distinctiveness of those dances. The use of the term ‘Polish rhythms’ does not mean, of course, that such rhythms occur solely in Polish music or that Polish music employs only such structures. That is obviously not the case. Yet in Poland such rhythms are very widespread and serve a symbolic role.

In their simplest form, descending rhythms in triple time appeared in notated Polish music during the mid sixteenth century. They can be found in dance melodies from the Lublin Tablature, several of which seem to have the features of folk repertoire. Of course, the descending rhythms themselves may be much older, yet their provenance is not clear, and in no way can their origins be derived from Polish music. We know,

for example, that in Czech religious songs of the sixteenth century these rhythms appear earlier than in Polish sources. Yet when those songs were translated into Polish, the presence of mazurka rhythms in the music that accompanied them was much more strongly marked than in the Czech original. This shows that a marked predilection for descending rhythms already existed in Polish music at that time.

During the second half of the sixteenth century, mazurka rhythms were already well known in Polish vocal music, and their presence in instrumental music was also gradually increasing.

Functioning in European music at that time were fashionable dances composed of two contrasting parts, such as the *pavana-saltarello* (or *passamezzo-saltarello*) in Italy, *pavane-galliard* (e.g. in France) and *Vortanz-Nachtanz* in Germany. Irrespective of various local specificities, the general principle was the same: the first dance was calm, in a duple metre, often of a processional character. It was followed by a triple-time dance. Although this was not the rule, the two dances were often based on the same melody, but in a different rhythm. In terms of dance technique, meanwhile, the two parts were completely different. The first was slower and danced 'close to the ground', while the second was lively and energetic. It was usually only the first dance that was notated, since the second was improvised on the basis of the first, according to well-known rules. This was termed a 'change of proportion', hence the second dance was called simply the 'proportio' or 'proportio tripla'.

In German lute and keyboard tablatures of the mid sixteenth century, we find the first double dances termed 'Polnische Tänze'.<sup>1</sup>

In 1602, the German theorist Valentin Hausmann wrote that experienced musicians were capable of creating a *Nachtanz* either after the Polish fashion or, as was customary, in the German way, without detriment to the melody. Hausmann thus clearly indicates that there were two different ways of transforming the rhythm, although he does not specify what they involved.

We may assume that German musicians and theorists were familiar with Polish music and noted its different character from German music. They must have noticed the tendency in Polish music to use descending

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<sup>1</sup> The oldest sources known to us today are the tablatures of Hans Neusidler (1544), Nicolaus Ammerbach (1583) and Christoph Löffelholtz (1585).

rhythms, denser at the beginning of the bar, and the opposite tendency in German music – for ascending rhythms. A tendency to start with the downbeat and to employ descending rhythms are basic features distinguishing Polish music from German music, hence German musicians must have clearly noted that difference in the Polish repertoire and deemed it specifically Polish.

So one of the varieties of the ‘proportion’ was the ‘Polish proportion’, involving the transformation of the first, duple-metre dance into the second, triple-time dance with the use of ‘Polish rhythms’.

We find many examples of this in the music of the seventeenth century. One such example was given by the Swedish author Olav Retzelius, who in 1698 published in Uppsala the dissertation *Disputatio musica de tactu*,<sup>2</sup> in which he included examples of two versions of the ‘polonesse’ dance – one with the ordinary transformation of the rhythm, which he termed the ‘proportio plebeiorum’ (proportion of the lower social estate, based on ascending rhythms), the other with a ‘proportio peritiorum’, for experts, using descending rhythms.

So during the second half of the sixteenth century, numerous German compositions with the title ‘Polnischer Tanz’ appeared among the fashionable two-part dances. Somewhat later, analogous names (*chorea polonica*, *balletto pollacco*, *danza polacca*) emerged in the music of other European countries.

During the second half of the seventeenth century, the second part of the double dance separated into a distinct triple-time dance, which, during the eighteenth century, gave rise to two independent dances: the mazurka and the polonaise. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, when Poland lost its independence, these became national dances of a strongly patriotic character. They were danced at aristocratic balls and composed as instrumental miniatures or operatic music. From that time on, they became symbolic and synonymous of Polishness in music.

So far as we can surmise from a survey of the literature, the first impulse for researching historical ‘Polish dances’ came from the Swedish author Tobias Norlind, who in 1911 wrote a fundamental study of the

<sup>2</sup> Olaus Retzelius, *Disputatio musica de tactu, quam consensu ampliss. facult. philosophicae, in regia academia upsalensi, sub praesidio viri amplissimi celeberrimique m. Haraldii Wallerii... in auditorio Gust. Maj. ad. d. 10 decemb. anno 1698 ad publicum examen modeste defert Suae R. ae M. tis alumnus Olaus Retzelius ostrogothus* (Uppsala, 1698).



history of Polish dances. His interest in this repertoire was motivated by the huge role played by the polonaise in Swedish music. It turns out, however, that the role of Polish dances in Scandinavia was not confined to Sweden alone.

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, so during the period when the 'Polnische Tänze' were achieving great popularity in Europe, the death of the last king from the Jagiellon dynasty, Sigismund Augustus, caused a dynastic crisis in Poland. Following a short-lived solution to the crisis, through the marriage of the deceased king's sister, Anna Jagiellon, it was decided to crown as king of Poland a Swedish prince with Polish roots: Sigismund Vasa, the late king's nephew. Sigismund was crowned king of Poland in 1589. Five years later, he also received the Swedish crown, which made him ruler of two states at the same time (up to 1599, when he lost the Swedish throne).

For a sixteenth-century Pole, Scandinavia was a poor land situated somewhere far away, beyond the sea, known principally for its herrings and its foreign religion.

As Jan Stanisław Bystron writes:

The Scandinavian lands seemed remote, separated by an uncrossable sea. It was known to be a poor country, living solely from herring fishing; and the Swedes were reminded of those herrings at every opportunity!

*O Szwedzie, o Duńczyku tam nie umiem mówić,  
Bom nie bywał na morzu, nie chcę śledzi łowić,  
[Of the Swede, of the Dane, I can only say nothing,  
Since I've not been at sea, have no craving for herring].*

writes Rej in *Zwierciadło* [The looking glass], *Paskwillus o królu* [Pasquill of the king], from the times of the revolt, pokes fun at Sigismund III, who travels 'to Sweden for herring', and later Kochowski calls the Swedes 'lansquenets from herringland'.

Initially, nothing in particular was known about the culture of the inhabitants of that faraway land; Rej writes:

*Lecz słyszę, też tam ludek nie bardzo ćwiczony,  
Niżczemny a plugawy, słyhać na wsze strony.  
Mało, iż z Moskwicinem nie z jednej macierze,  
Także i w obyczajach, i w niedobrej wierze.  
[But I hear the folk there are poorly instructed,  
Shabby and vile, it is heard from all parts.  
Not only no kin of the Muscovite people,  
Also of alien ways and bad faith].*

Later, when the opportunity arose for contact with Swedes at the court of the Vasas, especially when the whole of Poland became acquainted with the splendid Swedish army, the accusations were confined to 'bad faith' and a religiously heightened political hatred. [...] Whilst there were plenty of Swedes in Poland [...] there were but few Poles in Sweden. Relations were livelier only during the period of dynastic ties, beginning with the marriage of Catherine Jagiellon, daughter of Sigismund the Old and Bona, to Prince John, the future king of Sweden; Catherine had Poles in her entourage, above all Jesuits, who delivered sermons in the royal chapel in Polish and pursued Catholic propaganda. [...] When John's son, as Sigismund III, took to the Polish throne and titled himself the Swedish king, personal Polish-Swedish relations become closer for a short time; when the king travelled from Poland to Sweden, his large court had the chance of direct contact with the overseas land. [...] Later, during the wars, it was only Polish riches and Polish books taken by the army from the monasteries that journeyed to Sweden.

Swedish opinion took little interest in Poland. The country was far away, with a different culture; there was widespread antipathy to Poland as a fanatically Catholic country.<sup>3</sup>

The choice of a Swedish prince as the king of Poland, and then his journeys to Stockholm, together with his court and musicians, strengthened cultural exchange. Sigismund and his sons, Ladislaus IV (1632–1648) and John Casimir (1648–1668), together ruled Poland for almost eighty years. This fact exerted a great influence on Polish-Swedish cultural relations, and through Sweden also on other Scandinavian lands. It also explains how 'Polish dances' could have found their way to Scandinavia.

To gain a full understanding of the situation, it is worth looking at the political situation on the Scandinavian Peninsula at that time. Of the four states existing there, Sweden and Denmark were strong monarchies, whilst Finland and Norway were dependent states.

We may assume that 'Polish dances', as a musical novelty, first appeared at aristocratic courts in Sweden and Denmark, and only later, following a period of cultural assimilation, in urban and rural music. Such a conception explains why we find 'Polish dances' in Swedish and Danish sources much earlier than in Norwegian and Finnish sources.

We may hypothetically posit, therefore, that the exporting of 'Polish dances' to Scandinavia proceeded as follows:

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<sup>3</sup> Jan Stanisław Bystroń, *Dzieje obyczajów w dawnej Polsce* [A history of customs in Old Poland], vol. i (Warsaw, 1976), pp. 104–106.

1. from Poland to Sweden and Denmark – partly via Germany, partly directly;
2. first to aristocratic courts, then to towns and villages;
3. from Sweden to Finland, its dependency, and from Denmark to its dependency Norway.

The oldest documented ‘Polish dances’ in Sweden are four dances preserved in the German church in Stockholm, dated to 1595. Unfortunately, these are records of only the first, duple-time, parts, so we do not know exactly how they were transformed into the triple-time parts.

There are a few mentions in written sources, from which we learn that Polish dances were of a specific, exuberant character. Otto Mortensen quoted information from which it emerges that a ‘Polish dance’ was performed in Denmark at times so energetically that it could prove fatal: ‘at the castle of Koldinghus, one of the ladies of the court of Queen Sophie fell down dead after a dance on 20 November 1587, and the same tragic fate befell Lady Gertrude Kass in 1590.’<sup>4</sup> Regardless of the actual cause of those two dramatic events, this passage reflects the conviction of the fast and furious character of Polish dances.

This is confirmed by eighteenth-century sources. In the play *Jeppe of the Hill* by the well-known Danish-Norwegian playwright Ludvig Holberg, from 1722, we find a humorous mention of a ‘Polish dance’. The titular hero, the rustic Jeppe, is tyrannised by his wife, who threatens him with a broom (called ‘Mr Eric’):

Jeppe, get yourself to the town and buy me two pounds of green soap, here’s the money. But mind you don’t come back in four hours’ time, or Mr Eric will dance a Polish dance on your back.

The fact that musical repertoire was exported is nothing surprising. Old music books are full of dances termed ‘German’, ‘French’, ‘English’ or ‘Italian’. The fashionable repertoire circulated around Europe, and ‘Polish dances’ are neither an isolated nor a remarkable phenomenon. It is surprising, however, that in Scandinavia, following a period of cultural assimilation, they were absorbed into the native repertoire. During the

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<sup>4</sup> Otto Mortensen, ‘The Polish Dance in Denmark’, in Zofia Lissa (ed.), *The Book of the First International Musicological Congress Devoted to the Works of Frederick Chopin* (Warsaw, 1963), pp. 572–577.

eighteenth century, they are noted as *polska* (in Sweden and Finland), *pols* (in Norway) and *polsk* (in Denmark).

Still towards the end of the eighteenth century, they were functioning as two-part structures, as in the Renaissance, yet from the beginning of the nineteenth century that two-part form appeared only as a relic – in wedding dances.

Some single parts of this kind lived on as separate melodies. This repertoire played a special role in Sweden, where *polska* dances not only survived a passing fashion but played an important role in shaping cultural identity.

From 1922, the monumental Swedish edition *Svenska lатар* documented thousands of *polska* melodies in many parts of the country. In Norway, their scope and roles were limited to some regions, with Røros being a particularly important centre for the tradition of the *pols*. In Finland, which was still under Swedish political rule, *polska* dances spread mainly in regions adjacent to the Swedish border, so in the west of the country. In Denmark, this repertoire soon disappeared and never played any great role.

In my opinion, the assimilation of ‘Polish dances’ in Sweden, Norway and Finland was possible for several reasons: above all because this phenomenon was adopted among lower social strata, the music of which was always more conservative and resistant to temporary fashions than so-called classical music.

Of course, the influence of Polish dances (or rhythms) on Scandinavian culture is not due solely to what happened during the seventeenth century. As already mentioned, in Poland, the development of this repertoire proceeded along two different tracks:

- one them led to the emergence, during the eighteenth century, of the polonaise, with a relatively slower tempo and dense rhythm
- the other gave rise to the quick and rhythmically simple mazurka, the oldest sources of which date from c.1750.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, when Poland lost its independence, these two dances gained huge popularity among the nobility and aristocracy, acquiring the status of national dances. They were composed by professionals and amateurs alike. The nineteenth-century mazurka and polonaise became widely popular across Europe, also reaching Scandinavian countries.



The influence of the polonaise is obvious when we look at *polська* melodies from eighteenth-century music books. Collections from the early twentieth century also show that the Swedish polonaises are closer to the Polish polonaise than to Polish folk dances. This would appear to show that ‘Polish rhythms’ reached Scandinavia through European art music, and not through direct contact between popular, folk cultures, which in any case would have been rather difficult.

So during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, ‘Polish rhythms’ in folk culture flourished in two centres: Poland and Scandinavia. Yet the musical practice looked fundamentally different in those two centres.

In Scandinavia, folk music was divided from professional music by just a fine line; rural musicians not infrequently trained with professional musicians; they were organised into guilds and secured licences enabling them to play at weddings. They could read music, so were able to learn new repertoire and write down their own, thanks to which many sources have come down to us. Today, we are familiar with *polська* and *pols* dances not just from twentieth-century documentation, but also from numerous preserved manuscripts dating from as early as the eighteenth century.

The musical tradition of rural Poland, meanwhile, has been and remains a wholly verbal tradition. The teaching/learning process was linked strictly to family and social life. Singing was learned in natural circumstances, at work and at play. Playing on instruments was somewhat more institutionalised than the learning of singing and was usually based on a master-pupil relationship. This multistage process encompassed instrument tuning, fingering and repeating tunes from memory. A budding young musician would also learn the basic terminology. Yet the teachers were bearers of the same rural tradition, not trained urban musicians. The ability to read music was appreciated as a special competence enabling new repertoire to be learned, yet some musicians assert in interviews that it curbs imagination.

The sources at our disposal, old and new, come from folklore scholars or musicologists, but not from musicians themselves. Thus we do not have material comparable with that available to Swedish or Norwegian scholars.

Our knowledge of Polish folklore dates back to the mid nineteenth century, when the most outstanding Polish folklore collector, Oskar

Kolberg, began his monumental editorial work, travelling the length and breadth of the country and collecting melodies from various regions. That work shows that 'Polish rhythms' were present in folk culture both in the form of the polonaise and mazurka understood as national dances and above all in simple folk melodies. Still today, they remain hugely popular in most ethnomusical regions of Poland. They appear in the large family of dances known as *oberek*, *mazurek*, *kujawiak* and *chodzony*, and also in countless dances with local names.

When we look at notated Polish, Swedish and Norwegian melodies, we are immediately struck by a visible similarity: we note various historical layers to the development of the rhythm, from the simplest mazurka rhythms, which often appear in Norwegian *pols* melodies, through to complex polonaise rhythms, often in Swedish *polska* tunes.

Thus the common roots of these rhythms seem clear and obvious. However, that clarity becomes blurred when we listen to the music. Despite the similarities of structure, musical practice follows its own path, deriving completely different qualities from the music.

A few years ago, this observation moved three musicologists, Dan Lundberg, from Stockholm, Bjoern Akسدal, from Trondheim, and myself, to carry out an experiment.<sup>5</sup> Its aim was to see whether the ostensibly related rhythms of Polish, Swedish and Norwegian dances functioned in living practice. How would the same notated music be interpreted by musicians representative of different national and regional traditions? Could the rhythmic similarity render those melodies interchangeable?

We asked three violinists to take part in the experiment, one from each of the countries.<sup>6</sup> We chose three melodies for them (also one from each country) and asked them to play them in their own peculiar way. The provenance of the melodies was not revealed to the musicians.

In the second stage, the method of assimilating the melodies was altered: instead of reading music, the violinists learned from recordings made by their foreign colleagues. We recorded their renditions and then subjected them to discussion. We asked the violinists themselves to comment on the melodies which they had to tackle and on the foreign performances of their native melody.

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<sup>5</sup> With regard to acoustic studies, we were supported by Rebecca Sager, from the US.

<sup>6</sup> On the Polish side, Bartosz Niedźwiedzki took part in the experiment.

In the third phase, dancers were added to the experiment.<sup>7</sup> After all, this music is intended for dancing, so the participation of dancers represented the final practical test of whether the foreign melodies assimilated by the native violinists would be danceable.

The experiment generated many interesting observations and conclusions. Although the tradition of Polish dances (*polska*) is strongest in Sweden, the rhythmically dense type of melody that dominates there is closer to the courtly Polish polonaise than to the folk mazurka.

The Norwegian *pols*, situated between the polonaise and the mazurka in terms of rhythmic density, is rhythmically closer to Polish dances. This was also demonstrated by the experiment: the Polish violinist and the Polish dancers clearly had trouble with the adapted *polska* melodies, whereas the *pols* was assimilated without any great difficulty.

In my opinion, the explanation is as follows: due to the inclination among the Swedish aristocracy for courtly dances, polonaise rhythms took hold particularly strongly in that country. Although polonaise rhythms can be found in Polish folk dances as well, they are never as dense or complicated as the courtly polonaise. That accounts for the difficulty in adapting Swedish dances (particularly those from the south of Sweden) ‘in folk fashion’.

Compared to Polish folk dances, Norwegian *pols* dances are also rhythmically more complex, but to a lesser degree than the Swedish *polska*; hence they are more easily ‘Polonised’.

The Polish dancers complained that the Swedish melody was ‘hard to dance’, too ‘regular’; ‘it has no energy for whirling’; it was not foot-tapping music, not ‘wild’ enough. Similarly, the violinist stated that the *polska* could not be rendered in the vernacular, that it was a kind of waltz.

The comments regarding the *pols* melody were much more favourable. The dancers stated that they liked the melody, which was conducive to whirling and foot-tapping; they also said that ‘it sounds very similar to ours’. The violinist also found this melody easier to assimilate than the Swedish *polska*.

Whilst for Poles there is nothing more Polish than the polonaise and the mazurka, the Scandinavian relatives of those dances – the *polska*

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<sup>7</sup> Dancers associated with the House of Dance (Dom Tańca) in Warsaw took part in the experiment, under the direction of Piotr Zgorzelski.

and the *pols* – are of crucial significance in their countries for defining local identity. The Scandinavian life of these dances began as a result of the exporting of art music, which was assimilated and adapted in total isolation from any potential Polish source. Thus the *pols* and the *polska* developed from the same rhythmic idea which during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was recognised as characteristically Polish, but they developed independently of one another. In the new cultural context, as part of the existing native musical tradition, the ‘Polish dances’ acquired new life, new meaning and new identity in Scandinavia.

