

Georg Philipp Telemann and the Invention of ‘The Polish Style’

Musical Polishness in the Early Modern German Imagination

Abstract for the IMSODA 2024

‘Polish’ music and dance formed an important and familiar part of the everyday lives of many inhabitants of early modern German lands. Dances known as ‘Polish’ were popular at weddings, balls, and fashionable gatherings, while instruments such as the ‘Polish violin’ and ‘Polish bagpipes’ were a common sight at courtly processions and tavern entertainments alike. Around the middle of the eighteenth century, a handful of German writers began to describe ‘the Polish style’ of composition: these same writers singled out Georg Philipp Telemann (1681–1767) – a German – as a leading practitioner of this style. This dissertation explores the history and cultural significance of ‘musical Polishness’ (that is, music or dance referred to as ‘Polish’ by sources outside Poland) in German lands from the early sixteenth century to the late eighteenth, with a particular focus on the Polish-style works of Telemann. I show that traditions of Polish-style music and dance (whose connections with actual musical practices in Poland could range from direct to tenuous) often played a prominent role in shaping the social, cultural, and regional identities of German-speaking subjects, especially in the Baltic coast region, in Saxony, and in Silesia. The findings of this dissertation shift present-day scholarly narratives in three fundamental ways.

First, I suggest that the idea of ‘the Polish style’ of composition is best understood as the joint invention of Telemann and his theorist colleague in Hamburg, Johann Adolph Scheibe (1708-1776). Several different strands of ‘musical Polishness’ can be traced back at least to the sixteenth century: most notable are the aforementioned ‘Polish’ dances (of which there were several distinct regional traditions), as well as ‘Polish violins’ and ‘Polish bagpipes’. However, I show that it was only in the eighteenth century (in particular, in the 1730s, at a time of increasing German interest in national musical styles) that these distinct – and sometimes unrelated – strands of musical Polishness were synthesized into an overarching style category by Telemann and Scheibe, and in the process were placed on a par with the better-known

French and Italian national musical styles. This finding has important implications for how we might study early modern 'Polish-style' repertoires today. While there has been a tendency to assume that 'the Polish style' would have been a familiar concept throughout German lands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this dissertation shows that there is little evidence that the notion had currency outside of Hamburg, c1720-1760. I argue that if we want to explore the social and cultural meanings of music which people from elsewhere in German-speaking Europe called 'Polish', we are best served by identifying which strand(s) of musical Polishness would have been at play in that particular local context, rather than defaulting to monolithic conceptions of Polishness in music.

Second, I critique the idea that early modern Polish dances were defined by rhythmic patterns known as 'Polish rhythms'. Many recent scholars who study the early modern precursors of the dances now known as the 'polonaise' and 'mazurka' subscribe to this notion that a certain family of rhythmic patterns were, from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, regarded throughout Europe as 'distinctly Polish'. Through a reassessment of early modern musical sources and written descriptions of 'Polish' dances, I demonstrate that no rhythmic pattern (nor family of rhythmic patterns) was viewed as so distinctly 'Polish' as to be diagnostic of a Polish dance style, nor does the corpus of extant early modern Polish dances come close to being uniformly characterised by these so-called 'Polish rhythms'. Instead, the historical source record reveals the extent to which factors other than written-out rhythms (especially factors which are poorly communicated by written scores such as tempo, articulation, choreography, and other aspects of live performance) were often decisive in giving Polish dances their distinctive character. My findings therefore call into question the reliability of the common modern-day practice of identifying 'hidden' (i.e. unlabelled) polonaises and mazurkas in the works of eighteenth-century composers.

Third, I show that early modern accounts of 'Polish' music and dance in German lands can complicate the idea, prevalent in present-day discourse, that Poland was viewed as an exotic Other by Germans during this period. In an influential 1994 study, historian Larry Wolff argued that the eighteenth-century witnessed the invention of the concepts of Eastern and

Western Europe, where the former (including Poland) was positioned as a backwards, barbaric and undeveloped foil to the modern, enlightened and cultured latter. From 1772 to 1795, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was erased from the map of Europe through a series of territorial partitions between Prussia, Russia and Austria. Around this time, idioms such as 'Polish parliament' ('polnische Reichstag') and 'Polish economy' ('polnische Wirtschaft') became popular in German lands as synonyms for chaos and confusion. Scholars of early modern Polish-style music often treat the adjective 'Polish' in formulations relating to music and dance (e.g. 'polnische Musik', 'polnische Tänze', 'polnische Sackpfeiffen', etc.) as having similar associations of disorder and deficiency as the Partitions-era idioms. This has resulted in 'Polish' music in German lands being read through the lens of musical exoticism, as a symbol of a cultural-political gulf between Poland (peripheral/Oriental) and Germany (civilized/Occidental) in the eyes and ears of early modern Germans. However, some of the most important traditions of Polish-style dancing in German lands testified not to a stark East-West divide, but rather to shared German-Polish cultural identity, and a blurred boundary between 'Germanness' and 'Polishness'. Moreover, instruments such as the 'Polish bagpipe' could often be a well-respected point of common cultural reference for Germans and Poles alike, rather than an emblem of Polish musical backwardness. This conclusion is supported by an analysis of German-language descriptions of Poles and Poland in travel writings, geographies, natural histories, political polemics, biographies, poem, and plays from the period c1680-1780. My analysis reveals that the negative and 'othering' German perspectives on Poland were often absent from sources prior to the Partitions era. Thus, I demonstrate how discourses around music and dance can offer new evidence that modern geopolitical notions of Eastern and Western Europe are ill-suited for understanding early modern German-Polish relations, and that the most decisive processes of identity formation often took place at a regional (rather than national) level.