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POLONAISE – THE POLISH HERITAGE IN MUSIC, DANCE, AND CULTURE

“[...] from observations of the polonaise movements accompanied by the music, one may perceive the whole national history, the character of the customs, and the spirit of the people [...]” (Brodziński as cited in Mestenhauser, 1888) wrote Karol Mestenhauser in his 1888 book *The School of Dance*. This short expression partially explains why polonaise is performed even now across Poland and why its tradition has spread beyond the Polish border and appeared in the courts, in salons and on stages all around Europe. This quote from Mestenhauser’s book also explains why this dance form has become an inspiration for so many Polish and foreign composers. Considering the words of Brodziński and analysing the history and the choreography technique of polonaise, one may conclude that this dance is a representation of numerous elements that create Polish character and style. From the moment polonaise was created until today, it has maintained its position as an illustration of the Polish society, serving as a certain strand of DNA containing everything that is Polish; it encompasses the cultural and the traditional heritage of the nation. Being a specific ambassador of the Polish culture abroad, it has become a common international possession that other cultures adapt to their own habits and of which they create their own versions. As the only national dance, polonaise is practised nowadays all across Poland and amongst the Polish living abroad.

Historical sources depicting polonaise as the Polish court dance date back to the 16th century. There are descriptions of the dance form in the works of literature of those times defining polonaise as a slow procession. The most significant source confirming the practice of polonaise at that time are the music notes entitled as *the Polish Dance* available in different languages. German archives have many such notes, although those compositions are quite different from the commonly known construction of polonaise. Those are the duple-metre dances that have a very simple structure with repeated elements, followed by a fast triple-metre dance with the rhythmical features of Polish mazurka. The dance combination based on the scheme ‘slow duple-metre dance – quick triple-metre dance’ is reminiscent of the Renaissance model of pavana-gagliarda. This structure consists of the slow, two-dimensional

part whose character is representative, as it is performed as a procession, with the dancers placed in pairs according to their hierarchy. The second part (the three-dimensional one) draws attention to the technical skills, its rhythm is fast and its style is dynamic and lively. In that initial form of polonaise, one may see the typical elements of its character: first, polonaise is danced slowly, yet ceremoniously, solemnly, and seriously. The dance has certain visible military elements: this relates to the tradition of Polish knights who mainly practised martial arts and horse riding and took part in court parades when such were organised at the kings' castles. Weapons attached to hips, typical Polish clothing, and knee-length shoes on heels have become the elements that determined the movements and the character of polonaise. In his 1589 work *Orchesographie*, French dance master Thoinot Arbeau explains to his student why Poles would move in a particular way:

“Their heels are enhanced with the cork or iron they are filled with, that is why they do not run as easy as we do. If you take a closer look at them, you will see that all animals (except for a few) move in that way (tip-toying). This is the reason why Poles appear to be two–three toes taller than they really are”. (Arbeau, 1589)

During the 17th century, polonaise was becoming increasingly common in the Polish courts. Performed at balls, it was more elegant and lighter and gained new figures and symmetrical elements. Polonaise appealed to foreign people visiting Poland with its originality and the diversity in its styles, as well as with its representational and social functions. This is how a French traveller Le Laboureur described polonaise seen at the Vasa court in his notes:

“I have never seen anything so serious, delicate, yet at the same time respectful [...]. It was danced in circle: two ladies would dance together, then two gentlemen, and so on. The first part consisted of bowing and stepping to the music rhythm. Sometimes a leading female couple would suddenly return quickly through the inner part of the circle as if they were trying to escape from the pair of men following them”. (Laboureur, 1647)

Additionally, another traveller Galeazzo Marescotti also left a description of the Polish dance performance he observed at the court of King Michał Korybut Wiśniowiecki:

“When the king willed to dance with the queen, he would take her hand and would lead her to one side of the circle. Afterwards, he would start

dancing with different personalities who were preceding him in pairs, so that those most dignified would be dancing close to the royal couple”. (Morrescotti, 1839 as cited in Niemcewicz)

This description illustrates that polonaise was an integral part of royal ceremonies and engaged the highest members of society. Preceded by the bows, the procession included female, male, and mixed pairs of dancers. The typical polonaise figures evolved, among which were: the big circle, columns and ‘excuse-me dances’. Nevertheless, it was the 18th century that became the time of true blossoming of the Old Polish form of polonaise. Besides, this was also the time when the dance eventually got its official name originating from the French term *la polonaise*. Together with the name, its performative elements also adapted the French style: polonaise of the 18th century was an illustration of the royalty ‘par excellence’. In its construction, dance figures and the rhetoric, one may observe the habits of the Poles of those times, their social relations, even the way they moved, primarily determined by the typical Polish clothing. Such an image of polonaise was presented by Carol Czerniawski who wrote about its old form:

“Polonaise is a dance of mature men, senators; it is also a conversation, an image of deliberation. Polonaise processions were led by the most important person, ‘primus inter pares’, who was followed by dancing couples, sometimes standing age-wise, and everybody was equal and solemn. There was the King, and then there were the senators following his majesty. It looked like a big sort of snake of wisdom which was slithering in diverse turns, zig-zags and circles! ... then there was a hundred dancing pairs – what a splendid view! The dancing men would have the hats under their arms, the outlets of their robes waving back as the procession went on, their gray shaven heads often covered with scars; they were stepping solemnly and smoothly, although one could hear a clatter of a sword, a slug of a shoeblack, and spot a knee bent if front of a lady”. (Czerniawski, 1860)

This is where the representative function of polonaise was illustrated and also where an important symbolical aspect also appeared. The most typical noble gestures described in the choreography of polonaise are as follows:

- Solemn and proud noble posture with a hand placed on the handle of a sword;
- Noble marching that intends stepping with respect and majesty;

- Various bows, from the deep ones that include taking a hat off and sweeping the floor with it to the small gesture of lowering one's head;
- Wide and open arm and shoulder gestures;
- The gesture of curling moustache that indicates satisfaction and;
- Putting away the outlets of one's coat as a sign of readiness for the dance and coquetry.

The wide recognition of polonaise in the 18th century may be confirmed by the huge number of its Polish compositions: eleven volumes of polonaises of Queen Anna Maria Saska, 30 polonaises of Karol Kurpiński and 50 of Józef Elsner. A typical musical structure of polonaise consisting of three parts was crystallised at that time as well: it included parts A and B with repetitions, the middle part – so-called 'trio' – and parts A and B. The dance was constructed with many functions, huge groups and pair dance figures, complex choreography, diverse characters, and original gesticulation which was amazing and inspiring at the same time. This encouraged other European countries to practise it locally. The famous ball arranged in Dresden on 4th September 1719 in dedication to the wedding of Prince Frederick Augustus with Archduchess Maria Josepha of Austria began with a regular polonaise led by King Augustus II himself with his wife: "[...] accompanied by the beautiful music, the ladies and gentlemen proceeded couple by couple. Only after the polonaise, the young men danced the minuet performed in German and English styles" (as cited in: Żórawska-Witkowska, 2003–2004). The spreading of polonaise was also stimulated by the Polish international affairs with other European courts (Augustus II and Augustus III on the Polish throne or Maria Leszczyńska on the French throne as the wife of Louis XV), as well as by the presence of foreign artists on Polish lands. Polonaise was included in the regular repertoires of the court dances from Paris to St. Petersburg. German countries defined the so-called 'Polish style' in both dance and music in such a way that detailed information on the development of polonaise may be found in the works of German dance masters. Gottfried Taubert described the figures, gestures, and the style of polonaise, whilst its steps were specified by Christof Gottlieb Hänsel. Some characteristic polonaise figures may be found in the dance notes written in the Beauchamp-Feuillet notation in the work of Adam Wolfgang Winterschmid. The number of composers composing their music pieces based on polonaise is fascinating: starting from the great Bach, to Telemann, Rameau, Mozart, Beethoven, Rossini, Bellini, Weber, Liszt, Tchaikovsky and Schubert – all of them wrote music based on the rhythm and the character of polonaise. Many of those music pieces were created for operas, and their mission was to transfer the specific spirit of that dance connected to the

artists' imaginations on what was Polish. Those are very solemn and respectful compositions and, simultaneously, energetic and exhilarating, such as in the case of Bach's creations. Sometimes, they refer to the march form and have martial character. However, sometimes they are more melodic and delicate, fascinating with their elegance and melancholy.

At the end of the 18th century, Poland lost its independence and faded from the European map. This political situation led to polonaise becoming a source of patriotism and nationalism as Polish people were trying to protect their culture and identity through their art. Karol Hławiczka, a Polish musicologist, wrote about that time:

“The tragical faith of the Polish country and the uprisings that were being born to change that faith, as well as the life in immigration caused that Polish composers who were helpless in fight with the political realities, express their feelings composing the Polish dance which was the symbol of the old power and glory of the nation. This is why the polonaise music accompaniments combine the memories of the merry past, the pride for the times of knights, the spirit of rebellion, but also resignation, melancholy, sorrow, and sadness. This is reflected in the titles of the polonaises written by Polish composers: *Les adieux à la Patrie*, *Polonaise sérieuse*, *Patriotic Polonaise*, *Sad Memories*, *Commemorating Polonaise*, *Melancholic Polonaise*, *The Struggle of Poles Polonaise*, *To the Polish Battalions Returning to the Neighborhood*, *The Battle Under Raclawice*, *Kościuszko's Polonaise*”. (Hławiczka, 1976)

The art form of polonaise is used in all kinds of music, from opera (e.g., polonaises-arias performed in Polish operas), to concert music (e.g. polonaises of M.K. Ogiński, J. Elsner and later, famous polonaises of F. Chopin) and sacred music (Christmas carols, such as *Bóg Się Rodzi*, or Easter songs such as *Nie Zna Śmierci Pan Żywota*). In every case, the use of the polonaise construction is related to the attempt of expressing relevant contents typical for this dance. When it comes to sacral songs, the lyrics of such music pieces are celebratory, solemn, and ceremonial; the opera arias express patriotic, serious and proud senses; in instrumental compositions, polonaise becomes the image of the Polish spirit longing for the independent neighbourhood, torn by desperation and uncertainty, yet full of pride and steadfastness.

Polonaise 'shaping' during the 18th and the early 19th centuries was influenced by various form and style changes of the certain epochs. Nevertheless, it managed to keep its character and the function of the medium of the Polish heritage.

This is confirmed by the words of Franz Liszt who was fascinated by the compositions of Frederic Chopin:

“Polonaise represents the spirit of the Polish nation in the best possible way, it shows the nation’s most noble feelings of firmness, dignity, knight harsh life besides the simplicity and the religious life: quiet, yet schmaltsy feeling of home with tendency towards dreaming, love, male’s youth, and female’s sweetness changing each other”. (Liszt as cited in Mestenhauser, 1888)

To draw a conclusion, polonaise has been a medium of the characteristic ethos of the Polish royalty since the very beginning of its existence despite its diverse musical structure. From time to time, under the influence of certain political affairs, the dance was enriched with patriotic, nationalistic and socially-important contents. Therefore, it became an ambassador of the Polish culture, customs and mentality on the international arena. For Polish people, polonaise is still a symbol of the Old Polish tradition, a tale of Polish history throughout its long years. The power of this dance, the beauty of its form, and the richness of its contents make polonaise present in the civil, social and artistic dimensions of Poland.

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