

## The Warsaw Autumn International Festival of Contemporary Music

The Warsaw Autumn (*Warszawska Jesień*) is one of Europe's longest-running festivals of contemporary music: with two exceptions (1957 and 1982), it has occurred annually since 1956. During the Cold War, the festival was an important venue for transnational connections. In the early 2010s, it remains one of Poland's liveliest cultural institutions.

Tadeusz Baird and Kazimierz Serocki are often credited as the Warsaw Autumn's initiators, yet the idea for the festival came from the Polish Composers' Union as a whole. The timing of their proposal reflected the expanded possibilities of the mid-1950s, when hard-line Stalinist policies were giving way to the limited political and cultural reforms of the Thaw. Many composers were hungering for a restoration of the foreign contacts that had been severed by Poland's occupation during World War II and its subsequent absorption into the Soviet bloc. They hoped that an international festival of contemporary composition would counteract years of isolation and bring Polish musical life into the modern age. Crucial early support came from higher-ups in Poland's communist party, who approved the Warsaw Autumn based on its potential as an arena for Cold War competition. And the festival delivered: the first institution of its kind, it featured an eclectic line-up of compositions and performers from both the American and Soviet zones of influence.

The Warsaw Autumn quickly became a significant transfer point in the circulation of modernist music across East-West borders. Audiences during the earliest years received a crash course in Bartók, Stravinsky, and the Second Viennese School—composers still relatively unknown in Poland at the time. They were also schooled in emerging trends, an education aided by Western luminaries who travelled to Warsaw: Karlheinz Stockhausen (1958), David Tudor (1958, 1964), Pierre Schaeffer (1959), Cathy Berberian (1961, 1963, 1974, 1977, 1978), and John Cage (1964, 1972), among others. An adventurous new wave of Polish composers listened closely, and soon wowed festival audiences with their own experiments in sound production and musical texture. For these artists—most prominently Krzysztof Penderecki and Henryk Mikołaj Górecki—Warsaw Autumn exposure was a gateway to further professional opportunity in Western Europe and the United States. Their older colleagues—such as Witold Lutosławski—likewise benefited from the chance to hear a variegated spectrum of contemporary music, and to make contact with the Western culture brokers who could commission new works and facilitate performances outside Poland. For Eastern European and Soviet musicians, the Warsaw Autumn offered a taste of the modernist fruit that was still officially forbidden in many of their home countries. The flow of information was not unidirectional, however. By the mid-1960s, festival concerts regularly featured works that confounded Western expectations of what new music from the Soviet bloc might be, including the forays by Edison Denisov, Arvo Pärt, and Alfred Schnittke into serial methods of compositional organization.

Political intrigue was a fact of life in the socialist period. Negotiations with the Soviet Union, for example, reliably caused organizational headaches. Creatively lean years posed another problem for an institution whose most enduring aim has been reviewing the current state of composition. But perhaps the biggest threat occurred during the early 1990s, when the Warsaw Autumn nearly fell victim to post-socialist belt-tightening. The Cold War's constraints had provided the festival with a clear rationale, and it took several years for the Warsaw Autumn to adapt to Poland's new political, economic, and social conditions. In the late 1990s the festival again found its footing.

Its venues expanded beyond traditional concert halls to encompass a variety of performance spaces located throughout the city. Promotional materials and audience outreach programs aimed to reach a culturally sophisticated younger crowd not comprised solely of music professionals. Responding to a world increasingly inundated with information, Warsaw Autumn organizers started to play a more forthrightly curatorial role than they did in the past. Since the late 1990s, festival instalments have focused on defined geographical regions, such as Scandinavia, or specific themes, including electroacoustic music, pianism, and socially engaged composition. The Warsaw Autumn's promises also morphed to meet the needs of a globalized population. Instead of a window to the West, the festival offers its twenty-first century audiences edgy alternatives to commercialized popular culture. Thus the Warsaw Autumn not only disseminated modernism during the Cold War; through continuing to promote innovation and a compositional elite, it has enabled modernist musical aesthetics to persist into a new century.

### Further Reading

[no author]. *50 lat Warszawskiej Jesieni / 50 Years of the Warsaw Autumn*. Warsaw: Związek Kompozytorów Polskich; Warsaw: Międzynarodowy Festiwal Muzyki Współczesnej 'Warszawska Jesień', 2007, multimedia DVD.

This dual-language (Polish-English) DVD was produced to commemorate the festival's fiftieth anniversary. Aside from a summary of each Warsaw Autumn to date, it features a rich array of audio examples, images, and video clips detailing the institution's history and situating it in broader historical and aesthetic contexts.

[no author]. 'Warsaw Autumn International Festival of Contemporary Music' official website. <http://warszawska-jesien.art.pl>

The Warsaw Autumn website not only provides information about the current festival; it also presents an overview of the institution's history, photographs of past festivals, video clips, and access to the complete Warsaw Autumn index, which lists all of the compositions that have been performed at the festival since 1956.

Baculewski, Krzysztof. *Warszawska Jesień: Kalendarium subiektywne pięćdziesięciu festiwali*. Warsaw: Warszawska Jesień, 2007.

This dual-language (Polish-English) volume summarizes each Warsaw Autumn that took place between 1956 and 2006. Many entries are informed by Baculewski's own experiences of festival history.

Bylander, Cynthia E. 'The Warsaw Autumn International Festival of Contemporary Music, 1956-1961: Its Goals, Structures, Programs, and People'. Ph.D. dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1989.

Bylander draws on archival sources in her exhaustive account of the Warsaw Autumn's first five years. English-language translations of the festival's founding documents are an especially useful feature of her study.

Droba, Krzysztof, ed. *Warszawska Jesień w zwierciadle polskiej krytyki muzycznej. Antologia tekstów z lat 1956-2006*. Warsaw: Warszawska Jesień, 2007.

This volume provides insight into the Warsaw Autumn's reception, as it collects Polish-language responses to its concerts; each festival from 1956 to 2006 is represented by at least one review.

Jagiello-Skupińska, Aleksandra and Anna Grywacz, ed. *'Warsaw Autumn' as a Realisation of Karol Szymanowski's Vision of Modern Polish Music*. Warsaw: Polish Composers' Union; Warsaw: Polish Music Information Centre; Warsaw: Warsaw University Institute of Musicology, 2007.

This English-language volume presents the collected proceedings from a conference that took place 24-26 September 2007. Several authors consider the Warsaw Autumn's past history and evaluate its future.

Jakelski, Lisa. 'The Changing Seasons of the Warsaw Autumn: Contemporary Music in Poland, 1960-1990'. Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2009.

This study examines the Warsaw Autumn both within the specific conditions of socialist Poland and as part of the cultural Cold War more broadly defined.

Kaczyński, Tadeusz and Andrzej Zborski. *Warszawska Jesień—Warsaw Autumn*. Kraków: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1983.

Produced to commemorate the Warsaw Autumn's twenty-fifth anniversary in 1983, this volume includes photographs, brief overviews of each festival, complete concert programs, and indexes of the composers and performers that appeared at the festival between 1956 and 1981.

Kominek, Mieczysław. *Nowa dekada: Związek Kompozytorów Polskich 1995-2005*. Warsaw: Polish Music Information Centre, 2006.

Festival-related materials in this volume include: an overview of Warsaw Autumn history by its director, Tadeusz Wielecki (in Polish, pp. 80-5); a list of the Polish compositions and Warsaw Autumn commissions that were performed between 1995 and 2005 (in English, pp. 86-106); and a guide to the contents of the Warsaw Autumn sound chronicles that were produced from 1995 to 2005 (in English, pp. 115-29).

Pisarenko, Olgierd. 'Warszawska Jesień'. In *50 lat Związku Kompozytorów Polskich*, ed. Ludwik Erhardt, 181-98. Warsaw: Związek Kompozytorów Polskich, 1995.

Pisarenko's essay presents a condensed account of Warsaw Autumn history, with a particular emphasis on the institution's entanglements with socialist-era politics.

Suggested image: Program book cover for the first Warsaw Autumn Festival in 1956. The design is by Stefan Małecki. The image is available online at the following URL (to access, click on the first image in the upper left-hand corner):

<http://www.warszawska-jesien.art.pl/wj2012/gallery/950473202>

