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| Warsaw Autumn International Festival of Contemporary Music, The |
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| The Warsaw Autumn International Festival of Contemporary Music [*Warszawska Jesień*] is one of Europe’s longest-running festivals of contemporary music. With two exceptions (1957 and 1982), the festival has taken place 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. |
| File: Festival Poster.pdf  1 Program book cover for the first Warsaw Autumn Festival in 1956 by Stefan Małecki. <http://www.warszawska-jesien.art.pl/wj2012/gallery/950473202>  The Warsaw Autumn International Festival of Contemporary Music (*Warszawska Jesień*) is one of Europe’s longest-running festivals of contemporary music. With two exceptions (1957 and 1982), the festival has taken place 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 hungered for the restoration of 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 of the Warsaw Autumn festival 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 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 globalised 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:  (50 lat Warszawskiej Jesieni [50 Years of the Warsaw Autumn])  (Warsaw Autumn International Festival of Contemporary Music)  (Baculewski)  (Bylander)  (Warszawska Jesień w zwierciadle polskiej krytyki muzycznej )  (Warsaw Autumn as a Realisation of Karol Szymanowski’s Vision of Modern Polish Music)  (Jakelski)  (Kaczyński)  (Kominek)  (Pisarenko) |