Review of Making New Music in Cold War Poland: The Warsaw Autumn Festival, 1956–1968, by Lisa Jakelski

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It has become second nature for scholars of twentieth-century music to acknowledge that the “modern” of musical “modernism” was socially and culturally constructed, and that the meaning and valence of “new music” were contingent. Together with this insight has come the reevaluation of a historiography governed by teleologies of progress, greater interest in the power dynamics determining musical importance, and attention to the processes by which certain musical techniques were defined as “advanced.” Yet, if “new music” was contingent, on what was it contingent? And if these other accompanying tropes were constructions, by whom, where, when, why, and how were they constructed?

Lisa Jakelski’s *Making New Music in Cold War Poland: The Warsaw Autumn Festival, 1956–1968* is a strike against the passive voice and vagueness implied by the sentences above. Her resolutely historical approach and embrace of a wide array of archival evidence, types of witnesses, and reception documents result in a well-rounded and unusually specific account. The book argues that the Warsaw Autumn Festival was a particularly rich location for the exchange of ideas and the meeting of minds, and provides numerous examples of encounters and events that had both local and global impact on the practices of contemporary music.

Rather than producing a year-by-year chronicle of the institution, Jakelski has focused her material differently in different chapters, while still maintaining an overall chronological trajectory from the early 1950s precursors of the Warsaw Autumn Festival through 1968, after

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1 For several examples, see endnotes 3–9 in the book’s introductory chapter.
which the Festival’s founding administrative personnel began to wane in influence. The book’s principal sources are institutional records, press archives, and interviews; the most heavily consulted records include those from the Polish Composers’ Union, which had the controlling interest in artistic planning, as well as the collections of state ministries and individual composers. Jakelski allows a wide range of protagonists to enter her frame; she is interested not only in composers, the default heroes of many new music narratives, but also instrumentalists, administrators, conductors, musicologists, critics, and audience members. Though she does occasionally offer a few notes on musical style, this book is not focused on how Polish contemporary music sounded. Curious readers unfamiliar with the repertoire might tally a list of composer names and pieces mentioned in the text, in order to create their own soundtrack to Jakelski’s history.

The Introduction lays out a research perspective cued by Howard Becker’s seminal *Art Worlds*, which established that art is produced not exclusively by individual artists but by a large number of active agents performing a wide variety of artistic and administrative tasks that guide and enable artistic creation. Within new music’s “art world,” Jakelski wants to make a special claim for the influence of new music festivals in the negotiation of “new music,” in particular because contemporary music was deliberately constructed as existing apart from other spheres of music-making. While this holds broadly for new music festivals, Jakelski argues that the Warsaw Autumn Festival was a particularly significant site of such negotiation because of its geographical, historical, and political position. She argues against Eastern Europe’s peripheral

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2 Jakelski’s periodization decision is justified on p. 8. She revisits some sources and events first treated in Cynthia E. Bylander, “The Warsaw Autumn International Festival of Contemporary Music, 1956–1961: Its Goals, Structures, Programs, and People” (PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 1989).

3 Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
historiographical status, noting that modernism was under constant and thoughtful construction in Poland, often in ways that interacted with and illuminated the activities in better-studied new music communities, such as her primary foil, the Darmstadt Summer Courses. With its foundational premise of internationalism, the Warsaw Autumn helped to construct a definition of contemporary music that was social and transactional, traveling in many different directions and further inflected by its position “on the Cold War’s cultural fault line” (p. 3). Jakelski warns against using “the Cold War” as shorthand, however, questioning the stability of standard binarisms (modernism vs. socialist realism, democratic freedom vs. totalitarian control) and reminding the reader that the postwar history and politics of Poland were not one stable context, but were constantly changing, as was the relationship between state power and cultural production.

Chapter 1 shows how composers and administrators created a paradigm within which Poland could become an important part of the international contemporary music community. The first Warsaw Autumn Festival, in 1956, cemented some initial values, such as stylistic diversity and a commitment to the modernist classics that had been neglected under Stalinism. The planners wanted to educate audiences and demonstrate to outsiders that Poland was a relevant force in new music. They justified the festival in part within the sphere of cultural diplomacy, which allowed access to funding sources and ensured a more international contemporary aesthetic. Jakelski makes these processes concrete in a section focused on the invitation of foreign orchestras from both East and West; though not all of the invitations were accepted, their scope becomes evidence of the planners’ goals and principles. Jakelski also uses the negotiations over programming to explore the emerging construction of “internationalism” that would govern the Festival’s ethos in years to come. “Contemporary” was another essential term in search of
broader consensus, with implications for canon-building and the articulation of generic boundaries. Jakelski enriches her evidence from the institutional archives with abundant journalistic material on these topics, a discourse that demonstrates a broader cultural investment.

Building on the emerging identity of the Warsaw Autumn as “international” and “contemporary,” Chapter 2 focuses on aesthetic pluralism and the institutional mechanisms meant to ensure the proportional representation of diverse styles. The festival’s pretense of neutrality enabled avant-garde music to be included if it was balanced out (down to the minute!) by moderate or socialist realist works. Jakelski has used documentary evidence to show how musical categories were under active construction by composers and musicologists working to create and approve the proposed concert programs for the 1958 and 1959 festivals. Planners’ categorizations of and judgments about specific works suggest a multiplicity of modernisms, while still reinforcing consensus notions regarding what music was most contemporary or “advanced.” While the Warsaw Autumn Festival’s self-presentation insisted that it was merely reflecting the diversity of contemporary music on offer, its activities did much to shape the vision of the contemporary that was received by audiences. Jakelski’s discussion of these committees is fascinating; she spotlights a type of process that, multiplied over hundreds of places and occasions, has determined canonicity and access worldwide.

She then moves from administrators to a category of agents of whom it is considerably harder to find evidence: listeners. In Chapter 3, she describes how audiences were imagined by different stakeholders, and shows that state actors and festival planners were invested in understanding audiences as a stand-in for “the people,” referring to attendance numbers to shore up the festival’s populist credentials. Stitching together first-hand accounts of audience behavior, journalistic reporting on scandals, and administrative documents, Jakelski explores the work that
was being performed by Warsaw Autumn audiences when they participated in practices of concert-going. Given that the relationship between avant-gardes and audiences was of paramount importance, she argues, rituals of scandal and reaction were forms of communication and meaning-making, and helped to constitute the avant-garde. Yet aesthetics is only part of that story; she posits concert attendance as political action and as a social encounter among like-minded individuals. In her account, such social and political dynamics feed into the aesthetic experience and cannot be separated from them.

The book’s second half (Chapters 4–6) occasions a shift in Jakelski’s focus to processes that crossed national boundaries. International and transnational engagement was central to the Warsaw Autumn’s institutional ethos, and the festival became part of the “established itinerary” for the musicians and acolytes of the international new music world (p. 88). The festival’s organizers aimed to have worldwide influence, and saw the development of a reputation at this scale as evidence of its value. Foreign visitors engaged with the Festival and then broadcasted their responses to it in the press or in correspondence. Its reputation grew as musicians came to perform and to listen; tourists came from the West but even more from the Eastern Bloc, making the Warsaw Autumn a multidirectional conduit for the construction and transfer of ideas about musical modernism. Personal connections and critical attention originating at the Festival led to opportunities for composers abroad, which in turn influenced the flow of money and prestige. The movement of people in and out of Poland for the Warsaw Autumn Festival, whether officially sponsored as cultural diplomacy or a more informal exchange through tourism, facilitated other kinds of movement, such as the circulation of scores and recordings and the production of knowledge about composers and their works. Visiting artists disseminated and further shaped ideas of an international avant-garde, and helped to secure and maintain the
Festival’s place within it. Visitors from the Eastern Bloc, for example, brought with them different potential definitions of “socialist music,” shaped by formal and informal encounters with “unofficial” composers. Jakelski’s methodology allows all of the visitors to and participants in the Warsaw Autumn to be agents in the reception and production of modernist music.

These border-crossing chapters are a bit dispersed argumentatively, as Jakelski attempts to bring diverse phenomena into a cohesive frame. But one of the most striking patterns to emerge from them is the multiplicity of interactions and points in time through which prestige was produced, composers and works became “contemporary,” and individual attendees and participants altered their tastes and understanding. Many times in Jakelski’s account we see plans fall through or change, allowing us to witness music history’s exact pivot points. The social and cultural contingency of that which masquerades as self-evident musical judgment becomes absolutely concrete here.

Chapter 6 is exceptionally focused, as Jakelski chronicles the coordination between the 1968 Warsaw Autumn Festival and the International Society of Contemporary Music’s annual Music Days, which took place in Warsaw that year. Organizers had high hopes for the diversity and musical achievements the joint festival would allow, and saw it as a symbolic confirmation of Poland’s musical relationship to Western Europe and the rest of the world. Poland’s involvement in the suppression of the Prague Spring, however, led to boycotts and cancellations from some Western participants. These events explicitly politicized an organization that had premised itself on neutrality, internationalism, and collaboration among an avant-garde that itself was supposed to transcend the political divisions of the Cold War. The chapter crackles with institutional detail, documenting a roller coaster of planning and disappointments. Yet even this dramatic series of events benefits from Jakelski’s cautious and measured gaze: while 1968 might
have been fraught in a particularly visible way, she warns, the other Warsaw Autumnss were equally shaped “by the continual interplay of constraints and possibilities” (p. 162). Money mattered, politics mattered, logistics mattered, always: this is no mere “context,” nestled around pieces of music like packing material, but the stuff of which and by which the art was made.

The book’s prose is engaging and comfortable, completely free of jargon. Background information about historical and political events is succinctly provided, and biographical sketches are gathered into an appendix for quick consultation, rather than cluttering the main body of the text. The archival apparatus behind the research is extensive, and at many points the text hints at ample raw material that could not be included in the monograph. Jakelski’s choices are judicious, and the book never feels overstuffed in its vibrant presentation of events and examples. A short epilogue sketches the more recent manifestations of the festival, including its response to the end of the Cold War and its ongoing reevaluations of the meaning of musical modernism.

Jakelski’s historical perspective is characterized by a combination of skepticism and curiosity. This book explicitly complicates the inherited “givens” of twentieth-century music historiography, such as the default Cold War oppositions of East and West, the seeming self-evidence of a monolithic modernism, and ideas of cultural center and periphery. Yet Jakelski is no antimodernist.4 It would be a mistake to assume that to call attention to the constructedness of new music is inevitably to debunk it. Instead, Jakelski shows a clear respect for the multivalent labor necessitated by contemporary music in Poland. Her accounts of the making of modern music through such activities as administrative meetings and critical debates feel urgent. Such

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4 In this, Jakelski’s work serves as a counterexample to Björn Heile’s characterizations in the article “Darmstadt as Other: British and American Responses to Musical Modernism,” *twentieth-century music* 1, No. 2 (2004): 161–78.
work brings home the mundanity that enables even (or better, especially) the most high-art musical events to take place, and thereby both demystifies the imperatives of modern music’s “progress” and gives contemporary music a plurality of human faces. Through her investigations of institutional dynamics, personal connections, musical events, audience behavior, financial constraints, and other important factors, Jakelski demonstrates how these supposedly extramusical activities have actively helped to define, create, and support contemporary music, a research model that could be fruitfully extended to other ecosystems in which new and old musics are made.

EMILY RICHMOND POLLOCK