

Telemann à la Polonaise ~ from folk to formal

“When the court spent half a year in Pless, an upper-Silesian territory ruled by the Promnitz family, I became acquainted, as in Kraków, with Polish and Hanakian (Moravian) music in its true barbaric beauty.” - Georg Philipp Telemann (1681 - 1767)

Telemann was something of a musical wunderkind. Avidly discouraged by his parents from pursuing a career in music, he obtained what instruction he could and taught himself the rest. With an insatiable curiosity and formidable industriousness, he mastered many instruments, and as a composer produced copious quantities of works in every form and style.

As an exemplar of the “learn by doing” school, he absorbed different national styles by studying music by the masters of France (particularly Lully and Rameau) and Italy (Campra, Caldara and Corelli), then funneling his insights into works that reflected the best of both worlds. In the words of German composer Johann Joachim Quantz:

“When we know how to choose with proper discrimination what is best in each from the musical tastes of the different peoples, there comes from this a mixed taste, which, without stepping beyond the bounds of modesty, may very well be called the German taste: not only because the Germans discovered it first but also because it was introduced into various districts of Germany many years ago and still flourishes, nor is displeasing in Italy, France or other countries.”

Telemann carried his stylistic fluency with him when, in his 25th year, he left his post as music director at the Neukirche in the city of Leipzig to become Kapellmeister for the court of Erdmann II, Count von Promnitz in Poland. He had to move on again in about a year, but in that time experienced so much of the local folk music that it transformed his compositional style. “After only a week of hearing what is played [in Polish taverns],” wrote Telemann in his autobiography, “you will have enough ideas to last a lifetime. In short, there is much to be gained from this music, if you know how to work with this material properly.”

Like all the best composers of the period, Telemann was always on the lookout for novelties to enliven the sequence of dances in his ouvertures (also known as suites). He was never without pen and music paper, and while in Poland found much of interest to transcribe during his tavern visits. Thus, many national dance forms of Poland found their way into his concert works, sometimes (in the composer’s words) “clothed...in an Italian dress” to accommodate the sensibilities of his aristocratic listeners.

A notebook in Telemann's hand with 31 Polish folk tunes came to light only in 1986 at the University of Rostock in Germany, notated in just two parts – the melody and the bass. At tonight's concert, you will hear some of these Rostock manuscript tunes, presented "unclothed" in their original form – played in a manner similar to how the composer first heard them – and "dressed up" in some of his concert works.

Essential to Telemann's Polish style are the distinctive rhythmic patterns of the various national dances. The *polonaise* is a stately Polish procession performed by couples who dance (a ceremonial walking step) around the dance hall; the music is in triple meter and moderate tempo. There are two characteristic rhythmic patterns: the succession of one eighth-note, two sixteenths and four eighth-notes at the opening of the dance, and the cadential formula of four sixteenths followed by two quarter notes.

The *mazur* and *mazurek* (i.e. diminutive *mazur*), or in English *mazurka*, are general terms for a series of Polish folk dances in triple meter, which originated in the plains of Mazovia around Warsaw. The dances comprise more than one type: *mazur* or *mazurek*, the *obertas* or *oberek*, and the *kujawiak* from the neighboring district of Kujawy. They are linked by common rhythmic and choreographic traits. *Mazurs*, *obereks*, and other dances from this group are in triple meter and contain the mazurka rhythms, consisting of a pattern of two sixteenths followed by two eighth-notes (in a three-eighths meter), i.e. two short and two long notes. In the music, strong accents are irregularly placed on the second or third beat of the measure.

Although Telemann did not get as far as those areas now part of the Czech Republic, their folk music traveled to the Polish lands, and also became part of his musical language. Referring to dances from the Haná region of Moravia, the eastern part of the present-day Czech Republic abutting southern Poland, musicologist Robert G. Rawson writes, "Foreign composers from the late 17th to 18th centuries occasionally included 'Hanák' movements in their instrumental works, often as an exotic alternative to the minuet." Telemann's *hanáks* (variously called *hanác*, *hanaque*, *hanquoise*, and *hanasky*), feature energetic repeated rhythmic patterns, unison textures and drone basses.

Interspersed among the more familiar dances on tonight's program are movements variously labeled Polonoise, Polonaise, Mazurka: Obereck, Hanaque & Sarrois, and Hanaquoise, as well as dances depicting national characteristics such as Les Moscovites and Les Turcs. Yet despite the abundance of geographical influences, one is never in doubt of Telemann's singular musical sensibility. In the words of Frederick Renz, "Arguably, what places Telemann in the same sphere of importance as Handel and Bach is his intuitive recognition that folk music touches a chord that resonates with everyone. The joy and energy of these folk tunes elevate even the most formal of his concert works."

-- Daniel Guss