

On Polish Folkdances and the Finnish Polska

If we are looking for something really Polish in music, then the mazurka and the polonaise should be mentioned first. Originating from Polish folk dances and then spreading through all social strata in Poland and in art music in Europe, their rhythms represent the most distinctive factor of “Polishness” in music and the symbol of the Polish national spirit, reaching their zenith in the works of Frédéric Chopin. They have also become a part of the European musical heritage.

This article is a part of the project focusing on the research of Polish folkdance rhythms in a historical and geographical perspective. The aim of the project is to identify the rhythmic characteristics of the Polish folk repertoire and to compare it: 1) to historical pieces of music known as ‘Polish dances’ in 17th and 18th century Poland and Europe, 2) to the art music *mazurkas* of the most distinguished Polish composers, and, finally, 3) to Scandinavian folk music—namely to the *pols* or *polska* of Sweden, Finland, Norway and Denmark. The present article is intended to share the first observations and hypotheses.

Polonez and *mazurka* belong to the family of dances pervading and dominating in Polish folk music from the Renaissance and the Baroque time. This family consists of triple-time dances performed in different tempo: *oberek* (the fastest), *mazurek* (mazurka), *kujawiak*, *chodzony* (a walk-dance) and, finally, the slowest *polonez* (polonaise). Other important differences between particular forms may be seen in the syllable structure of their vocal versions: *oberek* and *mazurek* are based on 4-syllable elements (that is, four syllables in a bar), while *polonez* and *chodzony* are based on 5–6-syllables. The *kujawiak* is sometimes described as a transitory type between the two.

Mazurka rhythms are among the most typical characteristics of Polish folk music of the lowland regions. The typical *mazurka* formula is based on a maximum four-syllable bar without upbeat, with characteristically “descending” rhythm, that is, more condensed in the first beat, e.g.:



According to Karol Hławiczka (1960), this rhythmic figure is a base upon which all the other (more complicated) variants were developed.

It has been said that *mazurka* rhythms have much to do with the specificity of the Polish language which till the 12th century had shifting stress, then—until the 15th century—a fixed initial stress, and from the 15th century stable paroxytonic accent (penultimate stress). Different authors still discuss whether it was in this last stage that *mazurka* rhythms came into being or, rather, if they resulted from the oldest, initial stress.

Since the end of the 16th century first examples of the so-called ‘Polish dances’ (*chorea polonica*, *polnischer Tanz*, *baletto polacco*, *Tanietz*) have been known in Europe (1583 Ammersbach organ tablature, 1585 Loeffelholz manuscript, 1598 Nörmiger’s *Tabulaturbuch*). The equivalent Polish name, ‘*taniec polski*’, appears much later, in the sources of the second half of the 18th century. Before that time such dances were known in Poland under several names, mostly pointing at their choreotechnic structure, as *swieczkowy* (a candle-dance) or *pieszy* (a foot-dance). It is hypothesised that they evolved from folk dances and assumed independent forms in the new environment.

Not much is left in the Polish sources from the 16th–17th century, and the existing compositions either have no titles, or are identified through text incipits. The identification of a certain group of the repertoire as “Polish dance” (*Polnischer Tanz*) took place mostly abroad, first of all in Germany.

According to the fashion of the period, the music had a two-part structure. The first part, called *Vortanz*, was in duple-metre, and the second one, *Nachtanz* or *Proportio*, was based on the same melodic material, but transformed to triple-metre. And, according to Karol Hławiczka, the crucial point was how this transformation was made.

In 1602, in his tablature *Venusgarten* Hausmann states that experienced musicians would be able to play *Proportio* either in the Polish manner (“nach Art der Pohlen”), or in the usual German way. After examining existing sources, Karol Hławiczka observed here two opposed rules of transformation:

- conventionally rhythmic values of the **second** part of each measure were shortened,
- in the Polish manner the same was done to the values from the **first** part of the measure.

For example, the rhythm:

♩	♩	♩	♩		♩	♩
♩	♩	♩	♩		♩	♩
♩	♩	♩	♩		♩	♩

would be transformed into

in the German way and into

in the Polish way.

We can therefore state that in the German “method” ascendancy of rhythm was a rule, while in the Polish manner the rhythm after transformation became descendent (definitions of both notions will be given in the analytical chapter).

In the first phase, i.e., until 1640, the Polish Proportio spread first of all in Eastern and Western Prussia, and after 1640 it is most common in Czech, Sweden and Hungary. Toward the end of the 17th century this second triple-metre part of the “Polish dance” became independent and often appeared as a separate dance.

In the 18th century ‘Polish dances’ belonged to the culture of the higher social strata—the aristocracy and nobility, from whom they were then assimilated by the peasants and bourgeoisie. Although terminologically they seem to be the predecessors of the *polonaise*, they do not display the rhythmic features of this dance and have instead much in common with the *mazurka*.

During the entire period of their existence, these dances were composed in two manners: as music for dancing and music for listening. And although there is no doubt that they shared roots with folk dances, they gained new specificity under new circumstances—in towns and mansions.

Around 1800 the name ‘Polish dance’ was replaced by the originally French term ‘*polonez*’. Together with the change of the name, the form became more complex. The simple folk dance of vocal origin developed into an instrumental court *polonaise*.

In the folk tradition *polonez* rhythms may still be found in *chodzony* (walk-dance), *pieszy* (foot-dance), *wolny* (slow dance). The *polonez* thus had its prototypes in Polish folk dances, evolving into its established form among the upper social classes and returning to peasant culture.

As opposed to this, *mazur* (or *mazurek*) was a peasant dance accepted in urban and aristocratic circles. As far as can be deduced from the sources, its rhythm did not change. Music examples from the 17th century contain the same rhythmic structures that we know from the 19th century notations of the *mazurka*. As far as can be deduced, the name “*mazurka*” appears for the first time as late as in the second half of the 17th century in Hungary, and in the 18th century in Poland. *Mazurka* rhythms as such (but still without the name) were already known in Europe in the mid-17th century, but the dance called “*mazurka*” became popular much later—in the mid-19th century.

In various historical periods rhythmic patterns regarded as Polish spread all over the Europe, penetrating the art and folk music of many countries. As to the way of export, music historians are sure that the court of Augustus II, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland (1697–1733), played an important role in introducing Polish rhythms to Germany and then to France.

As regards “Polish dances” in general, the case of Scandinavia is most spectacular. One should remember that at the turn of the 16th century Poland already had a

king from the Swedish dynasty of Vasa, which could be the easiest explanation regarding the origin of *polska*-dances.

In *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, however, in the entry 'Polska' we can read that in Sweden 'polska' was "danced mostly by peasants from the 16th century until the early 18th", which seems to be too early for this kind of import. We find the same information about the 'polskdans' in Denmark. The date of introducing 'polska' to Finland, around 1700, seems much more probable, and so is the (same) date suggested in the entry 'Sweden'. Erkki Ala-Könni supposed that *polskas* have been known in Sweden and Denmark since the 17th century.

The importance of the problem of relationships between historical "Polish dances", Polish folk dances and *polskas* for both Polish and Scandinavian music culture can be seen from the amount of literature on both sides. But even if the importance of the *mazurka* and the *polonaise* for the Polish national identity seems to have always been unquestioned, it was probably Tobias Norlind who first provoked Polish musicologists to study the problem of "Polish dances".

The next part of the article presents an analytical sketch intended to compare a sample of Finnish *polskas* to Polish folk dances.

Material and method

My method of comparing Polish and Scandinavian material is based on the computerized analysis of rhythmic structures. In the first stage I studied rhythms of different types of Polish dance-tunes to identify their characteristics. For this purpose I used a representative sample of 96 *mazurkas*, *kujawiaks* and *chodzony* from the region of Cuiavia¹. Then I did the same for 119 Finnish *polskas*² to ascertain their relation to Polish dances. Both collections contain tunes performed on the violin. Earlier I used the same method to compare Chopin's *Mazurkas* to folk *mazurkas* and I found the results satisfactory.

Tunes were encoded into a computer database using EsAC³ and then processed.

The basic information, and the lowest level of analysis, is how the value of the metric unit (in this case—one quarter-note time) is internally arranged. Three basic

¹ Material was taken from: Barbara Kryżaniak, Aleksander Pawlak, Jarosław Lisakowski: *Kujawy*, vol. 2. Kraków 1975.

² I owe many thanks to Antti Koiranen, who kindly sent me a selection of *polskas*. The tunes I analyzed come from the book *Ilmajoen nuottikirja*, ed. Erkki Ala-Könni, Tampere 1973.

³ The Essener Assoziative Code, developed at the University of Essen, became a base for a series of programs for notation and analysis of one-part music (authors: Barbara Jesser, Helmut Schaffrath, Ulrich Franzke).

units create a higher unit—a bar. Bars are combined into phrases, and phrases into tunes. The network of interdependences between units creates a rhythmic grammar of the repertoire.

To begin with, I identified an alphabet of basic rhythmic groups from which the repertoire is constructed:



Then in a few procedures I examined:

- frequency of each of the basic rhythms
- number of different rhythmic groups in one tune
- types of bars and their frequency
- combinations of bars and their disposition in phrases, with special attention to opening and closing bars.

Analysis

All the most important results are shown in the table.

First, it shows the most frequent rhythmic groups for each type of dance. Polish dances are quite consistent in this respect. Finnish *polskas* have three basic rhythms of major importance, but they hardly make use of triplets and dotted rhythm.

The number of different basic rhythms in each group of dances shows how rich their rhythmic structure is. With 11 basic groups, *polskas* are more complicated than Polish folk tunes, of which *mazurkas* are built on 7 rhythms, *chodzone* on 8, and *kujawiaks* on 10. Chopin's works are the extreme case with 16 different groups.

The percentage of *long groups* (like half-note or dotted quarter-note) is especially high in fast dances and low in slower ones. Rhythms of *higher density* are more frequent in slower tunes. The difference between both categories is most striking in the case of *polskas*.

The next stage of analysis reveals combinations of basic rhythms into bars. The table shows which type of bars are most frequent in each group. Many of the bars show some similarities in the disposition of rhythmic density, which I call 'rhythmic contour'. I distinguished five such groups:

- a : ascendental, starting with longer notes, like 
- d : descendental; ending with longer notes, like 
- e : equal; having more or less the same density on all the three beats, like 
- : upper arch-type; bars with a dense group in the middle, surrounded by quarternotes on the first and third beat, like 
- : lower arch-type; reversed structures, that is, bars with a quarter-note on the second beat, surrounded by denser groups, like 

The rhythmic contour of the bars is of special importance for this kind of material because it has often been said that descendentality of bars is a distinguishing factor for the *mazurka* rhythm.

Calculations show that only in *kujawiaks* are all the contour-types represented in comparable amounts. In *mazurkas* and *kujawiaks* descending (d) bars prevail, while in the slow *chodzone* equally condensed (e) bars dominate. The same is the case with *polskas*. It is interesting to note what an important role descendental bars play in Chopin's works. In this respect his *Mazurkas* are much closer to the so-called national *mazurka* than to the folk repertoire.

The *phrase structure* is similar in all dances: 4-bar phrases dominate, only Polish *chodzone* (walk-dances) and *polskas* tend to have longer phrases. In the *chodzone* it is mostly due to internal repetitions of singular bars, while in *polskas* phrases often have a structure of 4+2 bars.

The most interesting bars are those at the *beginning* and *end* of each tune as the points of the crucial importance. As to opening bars, all Polish tunes, irrespective of their tempo, are quite similar.

The same calculation made for *rhythmic contours* shows the exceptional role of descendental (d) bars as closing formulas. At the beginning of phrases and melodies, equal (e) bars dominate in all groups, and in *polskas* in particular. Only in *kujawiaks* are ascendental (a) bars more frequent.

Conclusions

Comparison of the most important results of the calculations presented lets me draw some general conclusions. The question which I tried to answer was: is the classification of Polish triple dances based on the tempo of performance only, or, are there perhaps also important structural differences.

The Polish repertoire has many similarities on each level. In all three groups the same basic rhythms ( and ) dominate, together accounting for almost 80 % of the material.

They all have the same dominating bar (♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩), as well as the opening bar (♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩).

Some differences seem to be a logical consequence of different performance tempi. *Mazurka*, which is the fastest dance, has the highest percentage of long basic rhythms and the lowest percentage of condensed rhythms. Consequently, the slow *chodzony* evinces the opposite trend: the highest percentage of condensed rhythms and lowest percentage of long groups. The *kujawiak* in both respects lies between the two.

It would be easy to conclude that the slower the tune, the more sophisticated and condensed its rhythm can be. This, however, is not true, since *kujawiaks* have the greatest number of basic rhythms and different bars. It is an argument for qualitative discrepancies between the tunes analysed, in all probability resulting from different choreotechnic structures.

The closing bars are especially strongly determined by the dance movement. The majority of *mazurkas* end with an accented bar, which corresponds to foot-tapping. In less vigorous *kujawiaks* and *chodzones* the endings are more differentiated, and mostly 'smoother' in contour. The same is the case with *polskas*.

Chopin's *Mazurkas*, apart from the obvious effects of the composer's technique, differ greatly from the folk tunes analysed, being a kind of compromise between the folk *kujawiak* and the so-called *national mazurka*, existing in Polish art music since the end of the 18th century. Its influences can be seen especially in

- a very strong descendentiality
- dominance of the bar called a typical *mazurka figure* (♩. ♩ ♩ ♩)
- high frequency of dotted rhythms.

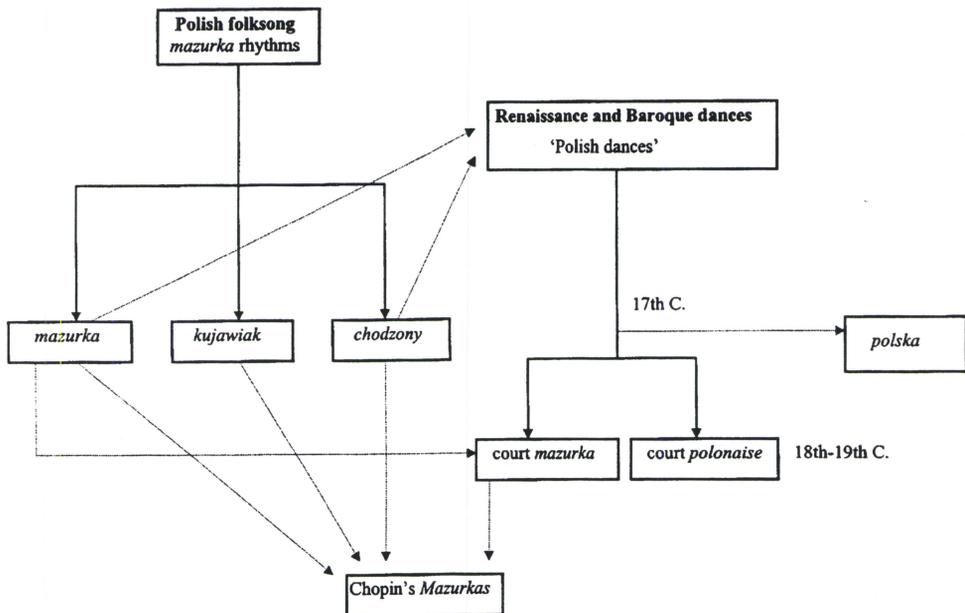
If we try to compare Finnish *polskas* to the Polish repertoire, in my opinion the rhythmic structure of Finnish tunes is more complicated than that of Polish tunes. This can be seen in a high number of basic rhythmic groups in the material as well as in the surprisingly high number of different bars of which they are composed. This points to the art music influences. The *polskas* analyzed reveal some similarities to the *polonaise*-type (in my analysis represented by the Polish *chodzone*)—this is reflected in their equally condensed bars, high density and diversity of rhythms as well as in the closing bars, which represent the type characteristic of the court *polonaise* (♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩).

Bearing in mind that in Poland certain rhythmic patterns result from the Polish language and that they can be found in the deepest strata of the vocal repertoire of the pre-Christian symbolism, I believe that the source of this tradition is to be looked for in Poland. At least some Finnish authors share this opinion: "The 'polska' was influenced by the music and dance of Poland (from whence comes its name),

and came to Finland by way of Sweden in the 17th century” (Heikkilä 1988, 8).

A hypothetical model of the development of all these dances could be as follows (Diagram 1.):

Diagram 1.



1. From the most archaic Polish folk tunes with mazurka rhythms developed different types of dance music.
2. From Renaissance and Baroque ‘Polish dances’ in general, emerged the “court” *mazurka* and *polonaise* as so-called ‘national dances’.
3. Polish folk dances influenced Renaissance and Baroque ‘Polish dances’, leading from folk *mazurka* to the “court” *mazurka*.
4. Renaissance and Baroque ‘Polish dances’ came to Scandinavia, where they developed into *polskas*—without direct influence from the Polish folk repertoire.
5. Finally, Chopin’s *mazurkas* should be considered a mixture of Polish folk dance elements and “court” *mazurka*.

To test or verify this hypothesis, however, one needs to examine large samples of both historical and contemporary folk and art music material. And, of course, a morphological study should be followed by musicological, historical and sociological interpretation.

Literature

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