

Anna G. PIOTROWSKA (Kraków)

## **A Few Words About Alternativity — Based on Polish Popular Music**

In light of reflections on 20th-century composers, or taking into account the thoughts of culture researchers, musicologists and philosophers, a question could be asked: is popular music an alternative to art music; and as a consequence, are the terms ‘popular music’ and ‘alternative music’ synonymous? Or, is the notion of ‘alternative music’, rather, present in both popular and art music as a complementary phenomenon that needs to be considered in reference to the so-called mainstream?

The influence of art music on its popular counterpart (and vice versa) has been an important driver of the development of musical culture on one hand, but also sometimes a source of heated debate and academic reflection upon the superiority of one kind over the other. Music theorists have been clearly distinguishing popular music trends from art music, saying, for example, that the former ones are “types of music that are considered to be of lower value and complexity than art music, and to be readily accessible to large numbers of musically uneducated listeners rather than an elite.”<sup>1</sup> Roger Scruton, a philosopher and theorist of culture, criticized popular music, asserting that—by

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard MIDDLETON, Peter MANUEL, *Popular Music in the West*, [in:] Stanley Sadie (ed.) *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, MacMillan Publishers, Ltd, vol. 20, London: 2001:128.

not actively engaging audiences and by not stirring their emotions—it is in principle intended for unsophisticated members of society.<sup>2</sup> A different view was presented by the American researcher Richard Shusterman in his *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*.<sup>3</sup>

Various composers have also been voicing their opinions on the matter. And so, in 1937 Alan Bush wrote that “popular music [...] had always existed alongside the official ‘art music’ of the various periods”.<sup>4</sup> The avant-garde American composer Harry Partch thus complained: “Do you write classical or popular? This is a frequent question, when I say I am a composer. We can be amused by the oversimplification, yet it indicates—among simple people—a profound feeling of a basic difference. Yes, a dichotomy—and in my opinion an annoyingly unhealthy one”.<sup>5</sup>

However, in 1961 the British composer Michael Tippett commented in the following fashion: “The enjoyment of popular art, in my opinion, is much more often of the same kind as the enjoyment of the more serious art (though not of the same quality) than snob circles like to think. [...] there is indeed a great deal of jazz and rock where the dissonances and distortions of voice or instruments, the energy and passion and often brilliant timing of the performance, combine to produce an enjoyment which is of better quality.”<sup>6</sup>

Various manifestations of musical culture are not in opposition but rather complement each other, and in a sense are undoubtedly alternatives one to another.

The category of alternativity considered in this article is, in my opinion, associated with three main factors in popular music:

- ideology
- identification
- commercialization

---

<sup>2</sup> See: Roger SCRUTON, *Przewodnik po kulturze nowoczesnej dla inteligentnych* (trans. by J. Prokopiuk, J. Przybył) [An Intelligent Person’s Guide to Modern Culture], Thesaurus, Wrocław 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Richard SHUSTERMAN, *Estetyka pragmatyczna—życie, piękno i refleksja nad sztuką* (trans. A. Chmielewski) [Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art], Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Alan BUSH, *In My Eighth Decade*, Kahn and Averill, London 1980: 27

<sup>5</sup> Harry PARTCH, *The Rhythmic Motivations of Castor and Pollux and Even Wild Horses*, [in:] *H. Partch an anthology of Critical Perspectives*, OPA, 2000: 19.

<sup>6</sup> Michael TIPPETT, *Towards the Condition of Music* (1961), [in:] Michael TIPPETT, *Music of the Angels*, Eulenburg Books, London 1980: 24

Specific attributes of alternativity often overlap with one another, but also operate in entirely independent contexts, and their often random application toward musical repertoire results in their being tagged as alternative. This results in a plethora of terms connected with alternative music as well as a variety of music styles that are interpreted as alternative. It is also associated with the fact that the creators of popular music have always vigorously responded to social and cultural changes, incorporating, for example, in the lyrics political issues and emphasizing them.

### 1.

In the ideological model the political aspect comes to the fore. It focuses on the well-articulated resistance within a music style, which is connected to both the censorship and possible harassment of artists. From the sociological point of view,<sup>7</sup> resistance is a concept which is hard to define; however, the participation of two opposing parties is assumed, and the possibility of a third party's presence (as an observer of an act of resistance) is also acceptable. Musicians expressing their resistance direct their criticism at political and belief systems or party activists, while their audience may be approving, understanding or just indifferent to it at the same time. Alternative music in this model is being defined as revolutionary, parallel, opposing, unofficial, secondary, etc.

The notion of alternative music in its ideological model is reflected in the history of jazz and its reception in Europe (in particular in Poland after 1945), as well as the phenomenon of so-called politically engaged songs.

Polish jazz was deeply embedded in the American tradition, although it has also been characterized by the European Romantic tradition and Polish folk music. The development of jazz in Poland itself was defined by great personalities that have shaped the picture of the Polish jazz school.<sup>8</sup> The history of jazz in Poland starts in the 1920s with swing music played in night clubs by bands led by such artists such as J. Petersburski, K. Turewicz, Z. Karasiński, H. Gold and A. Rosner; their repertoire consisted mainly of American pieces. Considered at first as entirely fresh dance music, it was an alternative to the

---

<sup>7</sup> Jocelyn A. HOLLANDER, Rachel L. EINWOHER, 'Conceptualizing Resistance', [in:] *Sociological Forum*, vol. 19, No. 4. Dec. 2004: 534

<sup>8</sup> See: Roman KOWAL. *Polski jazz*, [Polish Jazz], Wydawnictwo Akademii Muzycznej, Kraków 1995.

then popular waltzes and foxtrots. However, jazz fans were regarded as a fanatic mob of ‘wild followers of the lower, negro music’.<sup>9</sup> In the 1930s, musicians interested in jazz were associated with the YMCA in Warsaw; but the outbreak of World War II halted, sadly, the development of jazz in Poland. After 1945, along with the official ban in Poland, jazz went into a ‘catacomb’ phase as it was deemed to be “a product of the rotten culture of the West and poison for the young, equal to that of Coca-Cola.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, “jazz was opposed by communists and priests (meaning anti-communists) alike. Both groups hated the cheerfulness (Dixieland) and the free spirit of this music”<sup>11</sup>, regarding jazz musicians as imperialistic agents hostile to socialism and the people’s government.<sup>12</sup> Thus, “anyone who played, listened to or supported jazz had to be aware of the consequences”<sup>13</sup> i.e. becoming a publicly condemned class enemy. This was a position agreed on in 1949 during the Polish Composers and Musicologists Convention in Łagów, where it was officially approved that cultivating, listening and dancing to jazz was an overt admission to sympathizing with dangerous ideologies.<sup>14</sup> It is, then, justified to say, after Mariusz Krystek, that Polish jazzmen of the 1950s were not only anti-communist oppositionists of the post-war time with their “weapon being a free, unrestricted music, and loose, colorful cloths”,<sup>15</sup> but also that their playing of music was a politically inclined act of alternativity.

The situation changed slightly after the ‘thaw’ of 1956 when jazz started to gain a wider audience. It was at that time that the magazine ‘Jazz’ was first published, and a Sybil-like festival in Sopot was organized (after two years it was moved to Warsaw under the new name of ‘Jazz Jamboree’). It was also then that a professional jazz community was formed with a mission to foster traditional jazz by stylizing Dixieland (e.g., *Melomani*, started by Jerzy ‘Duduś’ Matuszkiewicz (1928–), *New Orleans Stompers* (est. 1957), *Modern Dixielanders* (from 1956), later joined by *Jazz Band Ball* (est. 1964), *Old Timers* (est. 1965),

---

<sup>9</sup> Krystian BRODAKCI, *Polskie ścieżki do jazzu* [Polish Paths to Jazz], Polskie Stowarzyszenie Jazzowe, Warszawa 1983: 14.

<sup>10</sup> Marek HENDRYKOWSKI, *Komeda*, Wydawnictwo Miejskie, Poznań 2009: 60.

<sup>11</sup> Mariusz KRYSZEK, *Komeda w jazzowej kołysce* [Komeda in the Jazz Cradle], Muzeum Miasta Ostrowa Wielkopolskiego, Ostrów Wielkopolski 2009: 19.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem: 21.

<sup>13</sup> Dionizy PIĄTKOWSKI, *Czas Komedy* [Komeda’s Time], Alpin, Mosina 1993: 87.

<sup>14</sup> Krystian BRODAKCI, *Polskie...* (1983): 11.

<sup>15</sup> Mariusz KRYSZEK, *Komeda...* (2009): 21.

*Ragtime Jazz Band* (est. 1966), *Hagarw* (est. 1966), *High Society* (est. 1969), and *Old Metropolitan Band* (est. 1970). Among soloists, the representatives of traditional jazz included Henryk Majewski (trumpet), Wiesław Eyssmont (trumpet), Władysław Dobrowolski (trumpet), Julian Kurzawa (trumpet), Jan Kudyk (trumpet), Bohdan Styczyński (cornet), Zbigniew Zabiegliński (clarinet), Mieczysław Mazur (piano), Zygmunt Wichary (piano), Jan Boba (piano), Wojciech Kamiński (piano), Andrzej Jagodziński (piano), Tadeusz Fedorowski (drums) and Janusz Kozłowski (bass). On the other hand, progressive jazz was the style of choice for Andrzej Trzaskowski, Jan ‘Ptaszyn’ Wróblewski, Andrzej Kurylewicz, Jerzy Milian, Michał Urbaniak, Zbigniew Namysłowski, Wojciech Karolak and Włodzimierz Nahorny.

In the 1950s and 1960s, individual musicians were often connected with multiple groups, establishing their high regard in jazz circles. The pianist Adam Makowicz (1940–) together with the ‘Polish Miles Davies’, Tomasz Stańko (1942–), established the jazz combo *Darings*, modeled on that of Ornette Coleman.<sup>16</sup> Many Polish jazzmen, e.g., the saxophonists Janusz Muniak and Michał Urbaniak (1946–), won international acclaim, as did Polish jazz vocalists such as Urszula Dudziak with her scat singing.<sup>17</sup>

In the 1980s an interesting initiative that was heavily publicized during international musicological conferences was launched by *Miłość* (*Love*), a group of young musicians playing the so-called ‘yass’ that they defined as a restoration of the original jazz in connection with free jazz, and elements of rock and poetry. The term ‘yass’ itself was proposed by the group’s leader, Tymon Tymański (1968–).

One of the unique traits of Polish jazz is the tradition of arranging and improvising on Chopin themes, which was begun in the 1970s by *Novi Singers*. Twenty years later there was a significant increase in such productions, mainly due to Polonia Records label projects, such as the 1993 recording of the CD *Chopin* by Andrzej Jagodziński. Despite the fact that there are several dozen regular events organized in Poland, jazz is not considered to be either popular entertainment nor dance music (and this is how it was perceived when it first surfaced in the Polish market), and has become a style for connoisseurs. It is,

---

<sup>16</sup> See: Jerzy RADLIŃSKI, *Obywatel Jazz* [The Citizen Jazz], PWM Edition, Kraków 1967.

<sup>17</sup> See: Dionizy PIĄTKOWSKI, *Era jazzu, 1998–2003* [The Era of Jazz, 1998–2003], Oficyna Wydawnicza Atena, Poznań 2003.

however, still remembered that, even though it was not jazz music that “tore apart the iron curtain between the East and the West, [...] undoubtedly [...] it was the first one to rip through it”.<sup>18</sup>

The ideological aspect of alternativity in popular music is clearly visible in the Polish context when looking more closely at the development of so-called politically engaged songs, which in the 1980s were practiced primarily by bards who in an allusive way described the contemporary political situation. This phenomenon existed as a semi-official trend, while its most prominent representatives included Przemysław Gintrowski (1951–2012) and Jacek Kaczmarski (1957–2004). The latter’s protest song ‘Mury’ (Walls) of 1978 (based on Lluís Llach’s *L’Estaca*) became an unofficial anthem of the ‘Solidarity’ movement, deeply embedded in the union’s ethos.<sup>19</sup> The Polish bards were influenced by their Russian counterparts—Bulat Okudzhava and Vladimir Vysotsky,<sup>20</sup> thus their means of expression would most often be acoustic guitars (in a solo or duet setting), with piano accompaniment if need be. The music would often draw on folk melodies, including those with national connotations—Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, French, Spanish, American, etc. Art music was also quoted. The goal of the intentional use of simple melodies was to underline the meaning of the lyrics carrying the political message;<sup>21</sup> the form would usually be the one of a ballade, which was considered the most fitting. Politically engaged songs were deeply rooted in the Polish tradition of sung poetry (*kraina łagodności* in Polish), associated with university student culture. The most popular artists of the sung poetry trend were Ewa Demarczyk, Marek Grechuta, and later the Stare Dobre Małżeństwo group. Both politically engaged songs and sung poetry are categorized as so-called actors’ song (*piosenka aktorska* in Polish), a part of which is—and not politically indifferent either—cabaret. The most well-known cabaret group, famous for their songs of this type, was (from 1956) *Piwnica pod Baranami*, established in Kraków by Piotr Skrzynecki.

---

<sup>18</sup> Wojciech FULEK, ‘Trzęsienie ziemi’ [An Earthquake], [in:] *Jazz Forum* No. 7–8, 1996: 43.

<sup>19</sup> See: Karolina SYKULSKA, *Jacek Kaczmarski—szkic do portretu* [Jacek Kaczmarski—A Sketch to his Portrait], [in:] Jadwiga Sawicka, Ewa Paczoska (ed.) *Bardowie* [Bards], Ibidem, Łódź 2001.

<sup>20</sup> W. MASZENDA, ‘Chcę konfrontacji’ [I Long for a Face-Off], (interview with Jacek Kaczmarski), [in:] *Tygodnik Solidarność* No. 18 (85), 1990: 8.

<sup>21</sup> See: Krzysztof GAJDA, *Jacek Kaczmarski w świecie tekstów* [Jacek Kaczmarski in the World of Lyrics], Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań 2003: 105.

2.

As pointed out by ethnomusicologists in particular, “music is socially meaningful not entirely but largely because it provides a means by which people recognize identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them”.<sup>22</sup> In this context, alternative music appears to be one that neither concerns mass identification (‘I listen to the music that everyone out there is listening to’), nor individual (‘the music I choose reflects who I am, and shows my background, my taste, education, etc.’), but rather a group identification (‘my music is the music of my group’). Many a time, music styles interpreted as an alternative through the prism of this principle are defined more specifically as subcultural, progressive, underground, alternative, inhomogeneous, un-dominating or countercultural.

The style associated with questioning reality and being a manifestation of the beliefs of its generation<sup>23</sup> was rock ’n roll (gradually turning into rock). Rock music as a version of broadly understood popular music, at the same time being one of the building blocks of popular culture, is inextricably linked with political and social contexts and became a platform for exchanging views and confronting ideological attitudes, and a forum for expressing critical comments and even protests. In their lyrics, artists would emphasize opposition to a political situation of their country, and the musicians’ (often instantaneous) response to the surrounding reality became a hallmark of rock music. In the face of dramatic events and with quick dissemination of information about them through mass media, rock music was transformed into a sort of ‘Hyde Park Corner’ that allowed the opinions of the artists to be expressed. With time, rock music became rooted in the cultural landscape of the 20th century. Wojciech Siwak rightly indicated that “rock music is an artistic and social phenomenon, specific to the culture of the second half of the 20th century that epitomizes the time’s characteristic traits”.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Martin STOKES, *Introduction* [in:] Martin Stokes (ed.), *Ethnicity, Identity and Music. The Musical Construction of Place*, Oxford, New York, Berg 1994: 5.

<sup>23</sup> See: Wiesław WEISS, *Sztuka rebelii: rozmowy ze świętymi i grzesznikami rocka* [The Art of Rebellion: Interviews with the Saints and Sinners of Rock], Res Publica Press, Warszawa 1997.

<sup>24</sup> See: Wojciech SIWAK, *Estetyka Rocka* [The Aesthetics of Rock Music], Semper, Warsaw 1993.

Rock music came to Poland in the late 1950s: in 1959 Franciszek Walicki (1921–) established the first Polish rock'n'roll group, *Rhythm and Blues* (the members were Leszek Bogdanowicz, Leszek Szymański, Andrzej Sułocki, Jan Kirsznik, Edward Malicki, and Bogusław Wyrobek). Even though the band performed for one year only, its tradition was taken up by numerous followers, including those remaining under Walicki's supervision. In 1960 rock'n'roll music started to be called *big bit* (the Polish equivalent of the English 'big beat', meaning heavy, or strong beat) in order to avoid the criticism of the communist administration. A new slogan was coined: "Polish youth sing Polish songs", which would drive the need to employ Polish words in the composition of songs. Established in 1960, the group *Czerwono-Czarni* reached star status, performing at various festivals, similarly to their peers and competitor *Niebiesko—Czarni* (est. 1962). The most popular group, however, was *Czerwone Gitary* (est. 1965) with its melodious lines, moderate tempos, lyrical ambiance and sentimental words. At first, the leader of the group was Krzysztof Klenczon (1942–1981), and later Seweryn Krajewski (1947–). Their compositions were played both on radio and TV, unlike the recordings of the group *Blackout*, established in 1965 by Tadeusz Nalepa (1943–2007), which was criticized for its pro-Western attitude (e.g., men wearing long hair, the blues-rock style, or the characteristic timbre of Mira Kubasińska's voice). *Blackout* changed its name in 1968 into *Breakout*. In the late 1960 star status in Poland was enjoyed by Czesław Niemen (born Czesław Wydrzycki, 1939–2004), first a member of the *Niebiesko—Czarni* group and later of other bands. In 1967 he recorded his protest song *Dziwny jest ten świat* (Strange is this World) winning the first prize at the Fifth Festival of Polish Song in Opole. An artist, singer, composer and multi-instrumentalist, Niemen experimented with psychedelic and symphonic rock and jazz. Some of the players collaborating with Niemen established in 1971 their own band *SBB* (acronym for *Silesian Blues Band*) with Józef Skrzek (1948–) as its leader; they soon earned a reputation as the most avant-garde Polish rock band, mixing blues rock, jazz rock and progressive rock together.

1980 saw the organization of the first season of the legendary Jarocin Festival:<sup>25</sup> it was *de facto* a continuation of concerts organized since 1970; how-

---

<sup>25</sup> See: Krzysztof LESIAKOWSKI, *Jarocin w obiektywie bezpieki* [Jarocin through the Lens of the Secret Police], Instytut Pamięci Narodowej. Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu, Warszawa 2004.

ever, this one was entirely focused on rock music. By 1995 the festival—with its atmosphere favorable to defiant demonstrations and hailed as ‘the Polish Woodstock’—influenced the shape of Polish rock music by promoting select styles (mainly punk) and their artists. The groups performing at the festival included those that were officially negated, and forbidden. They played songs with lyrics slipping out of censorship, while the audience was left a large margin of freedom in their behavior (expressing themselves with wild rounds of applause, whistling, pogo dancing, loose sexual norms). The festival, despite its formula, was tolerated by the communists who regarded this kind of an event as a sort of controlled safety valve for frustrated and emotionally unstable youth.<sup>26</sup> Along with promoting alternativity, the Polish festival assumed for many the status of a symbol.

The turn of the 1980s marks a change in the content of rock lyrics: a clear drift toward lyrics about the political situation in the country is noticeable. Polish punk music of the early 1980s in particular is characterized by references to martial law or the economic crisis of the time.<sup>27</sup> The most famous punk rock bands of that period were *Brygada Kryzys*, *Tilt*, *KSU* and *Dezserter*.<sup>28</sup> New groups representing the new wave in music that were expanding the choice of instruments used by incorporating electronic instruments (e.g., *Republika*), would also often resort to political allusions.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, starting in the 1980s, a trend of heavy metal music represented by *TSA* (est. 1979), *Acid Drinkers* (est. 1986), or *Vader* (est. 1986) started to develop in Poland. The Polish rock scene has always been responsive to the political and economic situation in the country, and not indifferent to foreign influences.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> See: Anna IDZIKOWSKA-CZUBAJ, *Funkcje kulturowe i historyczne znaczenia polskiego rocka* [Cultural Roles and Historical Meanings of Polish Rock Music], Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań 2006.

<sup>27</sup> Izolda KIEC, ‘Kreacja czy autobiografia?: literackie portrety zbuntowanych wychowanków PRL-u’ [Creation or Autobiography?: Literary Portraits of Rebellious Youth of the Polish People’s Republic], [in:] *Czas Kultury* No. 5/6, 1995: 32–37.

<sup>28</sup> See: Bartosz KUROWSKI, *Punk-pokolenie pustki* [Punk—A Generation of a Void], Anabasis, Kraków 1997.

<sup>29</sup> See: Przemysław ZIELIŃSKI, *Scena rockowa w PRL: historia, organizacja, znaczenie* [The Rock Scene in the Polish People’s Republic: History, Organization, Meaning], Wydawnictwo Trio, Warszawa 2005.

<sup>30</sup> See: Beata HOFFMANN, *Rock a przemiany kulturowe końca XX wieku* [Rock and the Cultural Changes of the Late 20th Century], Semper, Warsaw 2001.

Most of the music of Polish rock bands has been a reaction to the “affective alienation of the youth in the geography of everyday life”.<sup>31</sup> Rock music is a voice of the young generation, the generation that is open, sensitive and closely following the events of the world around it. The lyrics resemble their grievances, talk about their desires, and are filled with a strong commentary on the current social and cultural condition. These lyrics, which met with an approving public reception,<sup>32</sup> have been stigmatized with the subjectivity of the audience. The words commenting on reality express a resistance and are a contestation of the surrounding world, yet they rarely offer any ideological or philosophical ideas. Wojciech Siwak asserts that the manifestos present in rock songs are stuck in the domain of “wishful thinking”<sup>33</sup>—while their universality is transformed into a far-reaching conventionality. Their alternative character is conveyed by literary means such as exploiting un-literary (often) or dialectical (sometimes) expressions. The text itself—as Marek Garzdecki wrote—“uses the concrete, fact, situational realism, and there is no taboo for it...”<sup>34</sup>

A *space*, being a platform uniting members of an individual social group (although not in a physical sense) includes not only the predilection for a certain music style, but also other aspects, such as a specific *dress code*, at times imposing both trends in fashion and hair styles, body language, and even a manner of speaking.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, there is the situation in which a style of music is connected with a specific location; identification through belonging to a specific *place* in a geographic sense, e.g., place of residence understood in the micro scale (as a neighborhood, settlement, village, town) or macro scale (as a region, province or even a country) causes an alternative music to be treated as one coming from various regions, and classified as foreign, strange, exotic, oriental, or distant.

An example of musical identification through strong connections with a *space* is rap, which is an element of a larger whole, namely hip-hop culture,

---

<sup>31</sup> Zbyszko MEŁOSIK, *Postmodernistyczne kontrowersje wokół edukacji* [Postmodernist Controversies centered on the problem of Education], Edytor, Toruń–Poznań 1995: 265.

<sup>32</sup> Wojciech SIWAK, *Estetyka...*(1993): 77.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem: 77.

<sup>34</sup> Marek GARZDECKI, *Rock. Od Presleya do Santany* [Rock Music. From Presley to Santana], PWM Edition, Kraków 1978: 82–84.

<sup>35</sup> David MUGGLETON, *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style* (in Polish translation by A. Sadza as *Wewnątrz subkultury. Ponoroczesne znaczenie stylu*), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2004: 50–57, 153–157.

characteristic of specific urban circles.<sup>36</sup> Hip-hop culture appeared in Poland in the mid-1980s as a dance form, the so-called break dance: the first dance groups such as *Be-bob* (later, *Broken Step*), *Scrab Beat*, or *Gold Street Boyz* participated in the Polish Championship in 1985.<sup>37</sup> As an element of the hip-hop culture, rap emerged in Poland in the early 1990s, when the band *Salem* released its first songs; *Bad Master C* soon followed their footsteps. In the middle of the decade, Polish rappers started to enjoy their first noticeable successes: 1995 saw the release of the first *Liroy* recording, *Alboom* (first as a tape, and then compact disc), *Wzgórze Ya-Pa 3* released its *Wzgórze Ya-Pa 3* album, and in 1996 *Kaliber 44* debuted. In the 1990s the Warsaw-based *Radio Kolor* started to play rap; however, most of the rap productions in Poland were released as demo tapes known as 'nielegale' (illegals).<sup>38</sup>

There are a few discernible categories of Polish rap: street rap, esoteric-psychedelic rap, and intellectual rap. The first type stays under a strong American influence, drawing on the similarities between the situation of American ghetto youth and its Polish counterpart closed in the projects, the so-called 'dresiarze' (Polish version of the English *chavs*) that create their own subculture. The most famous representatives of this trend usually come from the medium-size towns, e.g., Kielce (*Liroy* or *Wzgórze Ya-Pa 3*).<sup>39</sup> The lyrics are characterized by strong and blunt language, often drawing on a slang full of slurs, with a subversive message. A belligerent attitude toward the world is also present within rappers' circles, with private wars fought (the weapon being mainly their lyrics and comebacks) between such artists as *Tede* and *Eldo*, or *Peja* and *Gural*.

Psychedelic rap is best represented by *Kaliber 44*, which prefers an emotional style of expression, rapping about metaphysical matters, questions of faith, fear or death. The third trend, intellectual rap, is most often present in the media. It employs poetry with an optimistic message and tends toward more

---

<sup>36</sup> See: Jakub PAKUŁA, *Polski hip-hop* [Polish Hip-Hop], Wydawnictwo Kastor, Warsaw 2007.

<sup>37</sup> See: Basia ADAMCZYK and Piotr TARASIEWICZ, *Encyklopedia polskiego hip-hopu* [Encyclopedia of Polish Hip Hop], In *Rock*, Poznań 2004.

<sup>38</sup> See: Andrzej BUDA, *Historia hip-hopu w Polsce, 1977–2002* [History of Hip Hop in Poland, 1977–2002], Andrzej Buda–Wydaw. Niezależne, Głogów 2001.

<sup>39</sup> See: Radek MISZCZAK, *Beaty, rytmy, życie: leksykon muzyki hip—hop* [Beats, Rhythms, Life: A Lexicon of Hip Hop Music], Wydawnictwo Kurpisz, Poznań 2005.

melodious lines. The most famous representatives of this category are *Paktofonika*, or *Fisz* (the soloist).

Whereas rap is a style associated with the urban environment, 'disco polo' is linked with the performers and audiences of rural origin, in particular coming from the former state-owned farms, identifying themselves with this kind of music. *Disco polo* begins its history in the middle of the 1980s, with its peak popularity enjoyed in the early 1990s; the infatuation of its first few years subsided significantly with time. However, since Poland joined the EU (in 2004) a growing interest in disco polo is evident.<sup>40</sup> *Disco polo* was modeled on its Italian predecessor, *Italo disco*, but refers to the Polish folk tradition, in particular in its simple (often naïve) lyrics. The instruments used include the accordion and electric instruments, such as guitars and keyboards (oftentimes automatically programmed, providing the beat background). In the 1990 *disco polo* artists came from amateur or semi-professional circles, and established bands looking up to the American boy-band model. *Disco polo* was cultivated in the rural communities, in particular during occasional parties and weddings. With time, the first tapes with this music started to appear on the market, released by small, independent record labels (Blue Star, for example), and distributed via unofficial channels (private stands, during church fairs, etc.). Such a situation was mainly due to the fact that *disco polo* was not present on TV or radio; a slight change came with *Polsat* (a privately-owned TV station) deciding to broadcast a program called *Disco Relax* (in the years 1994–2002), and *Disco Polo Live* between 1996–2002), hosted by Tomasz Samborski. In 1992, Warsaw's prestigious Congress Hall (Sala Kongresowa) was the scene for the first *Gala of the Party and Disco Polo Songs*. Mass *disco polo* parties were organized in rural locations; the buildings of former state-owned farms, transformed into dance halls able to accommodate thousands of fans dancing to the beat of *disco polo*, served as the actual venues.

*Disco polo*, classified as dance music (called at times *chodnikowa*, *biesiadna* in Polish), also enjoyed great popularity because of the genre's success among Polish Americans. The most famous artists included *Shazza* (a female singer) and bands like *Boys*, *Bayer Full* and *Top One*. The latter released, in 1995, the song

---

<sup>40</sup> Anna G. PIOTROWSKA, *Challenging the Concept of Anti-Europeanism in Music*, [in:] Birte Wassenberg, Frédéric Clavert, Philippe Hamman (ed.), *Contre l'Europe? Anti-européisme, eurosepticisme et alter-européisme dans la construction européenne de 1945 à nos jours (Volume I): les concepts*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Wiesbaden 2010: 227–228.

'*Ole Olek!*' for the presidential campaign of Aleksander Kwaśniewski. Political engagement, along with the style's features (simple, cliché-like lyrics, overuse of melodic patterns taken from Western pop music of the 1960s and 1970s, heavy reliance on electronic instruments fitted with ready-to-use rhythmic formulas, an amateur manner of singing, low quality of the arrangements) were the primary reasons for *disco polo* being criticized as a caricature of folk music, and charged with flattering the tastes of unsophisticated listeners. However, some well-known Polish artists used this style as a vehicle for refreshing their performing career (Andrzej Rosiewicz, for instance) or to make fun of it; initially intended as a pastiche of *disco polo*, the song *Mydło Fa* [The Fa Brand Soap] of 1991 performed by Marek Kondrat and Marlena Drozdowska paradoxically became the hallmark of the style. Many *disco polo* artists started to consciously use kitsch as a means of artistic expression, transforming the artlessness and simplicity of the style into its main assets. During concerts, the stylized boy-bands perform choreography with both movements and exaggerated elements of the stage image (torn jeans, bare torsos, etc.), highlighting their not-so-serious take on the repertoire presented.

### 3.

The commercialization of contemporary life influenced the way the division of music styles was seen in the context of the sales of music products (tapes, CDs, concert tickets, or sheet music), which led to a common feeling of discrepancy between artists focusing on financial results and artists clearly negating the economic aspect of their cultural reality. Music styles preferred by both groups reflect this dichotomous thinking about music and culture as commercial and non-commercial, the mainstream and nonconformist separation from it. Usually rock music, also called alternative, college or independent (indie) rock, is associated with the world's struggle with the non-commercial aspect of music. In Poland, however, the development of the so-called *piosenka podwórkowa* (backyard, courtyard or street song) movement has been noticeable; it is not entirely devoid of the economic aspect, yet it has not been commercialized.

*Piosenka podwórkowa*, an element of the urban folklore which can be traced back to the 19th century, is still present in a few Polish towns. During the communist rule in Poland, the dynamics of the movement subsided, but since the

1989 change of political system the tradition has once again been cultivated, though to a lesser extent. *Piosenka podwórkowa*, mainly associated with the cities of Lvov<sup>41</sup> (today Lviv, in Ukraine) and Warsaw, is defined by its simple melodies, easy chordal progressions and uncomplicated dance rhythms. The most characteristic features of the lyrics is the use of the local dialect and the inclusion of references to the town's topography, its famous people, events familiar to inhabitants, etc. Even though there is no strictly defined set of instruments to be used (it depends on the availability of the musicians at hand), easy to carry instruments are the most obvious choice: accordion, violin, clarinet, guitar, and (at times) double bass. The groups—wandering from one block to another and compensated by the townspeople throwing them coins wrapped up in paper—are known as *kapela podwórkowe* (street bands). Their repertoire includes popular dances, hits, original compositions, etc.; they also often play pieces requested by their audiences. *Piosenka podwórkowa* is thriving in Poland at various competitions, e.g., in Przemyśl (organized since 1976). One of the most famous groups of this kind is *Kapela Staśka Wielanka* from Warsaw.

\* \* \*

From the linguistic point of view, it is interesting that in all of its forms alternative music is often defined by joining the particle 'non' or 'un-' with the terms belonging to the styles representing the mainstream. At times, 'non' (as in nonconformist) is replaced with 'anti'. The selection of the negative adjectives is evidence of perceiving alternative music in a dual perspective that is clearly distinguishing alternative music from non-alternative, with the former being assigned the role of an element undermining the position of the main pillar, being subversive in nature, having at times a negative influence on its audiences, and being in opposition to the established and accepted social order. The music considered as alternative is sometimes viewed even as a threat; and, as a consequence, alternative styles have been officially banned (such as jazz in Poland during the 'catacomb' period), or ignored (rap by Polish radio stations in the 1990s), doomed to ostracism (often the case of heavy metal), or sneered or scoffed at (*disco polo*). The indistinct boundaries between alternativity and the lack of it, resulting from changing social inclinations or the number of fans

---

<sup>41</sup> See: Jerzy HABELA i Zofia KURZOWA, *Lwowskie piosenki uliczne, kabaretowe i okolicznościowe* [Lvov Street, Cabaret and Occasional Songs], PWM Edition, Kraków 1989.

of a particular style, for example, are the reason behind the constant fluctuation of some styles that balance between the extremes within so-called popular music, and are the source of the perception of them as representative of the mainstream at one time, and alternative music at another. A similar process can be noticed (in the history of music) with reference to some music styles categorized first as popular, and then as art music (e.g., the case of Vienna operetta). Alternativity is then a feature that belongs to both art and popular music, while its understanding is based on numerous volatile factors; it is a variable defined in an arbitrary and historically dependent manner.

### **Abstract**

The author proposes and discusses three main models of alternatives in Polish popular music. The first one—according to the author—exploits ideological associations (predominantly connected with political ones). As examples the writer presents Polish jazz and so called politically engaged song (e.g. by Jacek Kaczmarski). The second type of alternative music she associates with self- or group identification focusing on rock as a voice of generation. Furthermore, Polish rap (with its street, esoteric, and intellectual subgenres)—as connected with urban space—is contrasted with rurally originated disco polo. The third kind of alternative music the author links with commercial tagging. These different genres of Polish popular music are discussed as exemplifications for the theoretical framework providing readers not only with the general approach to the alternativeness in music, but also familiarizing them with the Polish popular music in general.

**Keywords:** Alternativity in Polish popular music, Polish jazz, Polish rap music, Polish street song, Polish disco polo music

