

Canons of Polish Popular Music during the Post-WWII Period

Abstract

This article discusses the formation of canons of Polish popular music after the Second World War. It presents the main actors of canonization and discusses how the politics of canons changed over the time, what types of musicians it benefitted in terms of genres and gender, and how the canonization process in Poland was similar and different from that which took place in the West. It argues that during the state socialist period, Polish professional canonizers showed preference to high-brow subgenres of popular music, such as jazz, symphonic rock and sung poetry. This tendency resulted in the canon being biased towards male musicians, as Polish jazz and rock were dominated by men. There was also a tendency to honour musicians who penned their own repertoire over those who relied on material provided by professionals, disadvantaging pop singers. This tendency was criticized by ordinary listeners, who complained that their taste was not respected, and 'ambitious songs' were prioritized over catchy songs, enjoyed by large numbers of people.

After the end of state socialism and, especially, with the development of the internet and social media, there have been more outlets for ordinary listeners to create their own canons by voting in polls for best Polish songs and records, resulting in restructuring the canon in favour of songs representing a wider variety of genres and, especially, to artists who cross genres. This change benefits female performers, who are more likely to represent other genres than jazz and rock. However, irrespective of who produces the canons of Polish popular music, the music from the mid-1960s till the end of the 1980s is privileged, suggesting a very positive opinion of the audience of this period.

Key words

Polish popular music; canons; jazz; rock; Czesław Niemen.

In this article I discuss the canons of Polish popular music after the Second World War. What interests me is who the main actors were in the process of canonization, how the politics of canons have changed over the time, what types of musicians it benefitted in terms of genres and gender, and how the canonization process in Poland was similar and different from that which took place in the West. Before I move to discussing the issue, it is worth sketching what can be labelled the theory of canon formation in general and popular music specifically.

Approaches to canonization

A canon originally meant an authoritative list of books accepted as Holy Scripture. In due course, it started to refer to a body of works considered culturally important – with a unifying or common set of characteristics – as established, reinforced and perpetuated by the work of cultural institutions, education, the media and so on.

While for a long time the existence of canons was taken for granted by historians of literature, music or film, in the 1980s canons and the very idea of a canon became an object of inquiry and critique. One could observe it first in literary studies and subsequently in other areas of artistic production. This can be linked to the rise of postmodernism, a trend initially

flourishing in France from the end of the 1970s, before taking root in the entire western world, with its distrust, even hostility towards meta-narratives, as stated by Jean-François Lyotard in his influential book, *The Postmodern Condition* (Lyotard 1984: xxiv) and the judgements of the middle-class, middle-aged white western men, who were playing privileged roles in cultural institutions and the media. About the same time as Lyotard published *The Postmodern Condition*, Pierre Bourdieu published his most famous book, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984 [1979]), in which he argued that judgments of taste reflect one's social position (Bourdieu 1984). Both authors thus stated that canons are relative, not absolute and reflect not so much the aesthetic values of a given object, but the powers of those who formulate aesthetic judgements. E. Dean Kolbas, in relation to debates about canons in literary studies, observes:

The rhetoric within them [the arguments about canons] has tended to be quite clearly divided between mutually antagonistic positions. On the one hand are conservative critics who attempt to justify the continuing importance of the Western canon on the grounds of its permanent greatness and the edification that its study will yield, either to individuals or to society at large. They perceive the argument that alternative texts have been undeservedly neglected as symptomatic of the loss of academic standards and the collapse of aesthetic judgment in the face of extrinsic political pressures. On the other hand, liberal critics argue that the canon should be more representative of the true diversity of society and the wide span of its cultural heritage, that the canon should include writers previously excluded from literary history and the educational institutions of the dominant culture. They find the reverence accorded the Western canon indicative of elitism, patriarchy, and ethnocentrism, each of which is antithetical to the egalitarian ideals of democratic societies. They have also discredited the assertion that aesthetic judgments or works of literature can ever be totally aloof from political interests. (Kolbas 2001: 25)

In literary studies, the best-known conservative critic is Harold Bloom, the author of the influential book, *The Western Canon* (1994). In this book, he not only presents his canon, but defends it against what he calls the 'School of Resentment', namely the type of literary criticism that have gained prominence in academia, mainly consisting of feminists and Marxists, who are preoccupied with political and social activism at the expense of aesthetic values.

In comparison with efforts put into deconstructing canons in literature and film, work on theorizing music canon is relatively limited, both in relation to global canon and national canons (Frith 1996; Citron 2000; Antti-Ville 2006; Ciesielski 2022; Trindade 2023). However, in one of the few texts on this topic, Marcia Citron, echoing the relativist approach to canon, notes that 'canons... do not remain the same over time, and theorizing about canons will respond to changing conditions. Even when a given work remains canonic, the reasons why it is canonic will change according to current value systems – what others will dub intellectual fashion' (Citron 2000: 3). In the same vein, Antti-Ville Kärjä observes that canons are never objective: they reflect specific tastes, values and political positions (Kärjä 2006). Nevertheless, in popular music, such a privileged value is authenticity, which results in critics favouring rock, which is presented as a more authentic genre, at the expense of pop, which is seen as manufactured (Frith 2001; Kärjä 2006), resulting in rock works constituting a larger part of national canons than works belonging to other genres.

To recognize the connection between canonization and political power, it is worth differentiating between canonization 'from above' and canonization 'from below'. The former is undertaken by those who possess significant power to impose their tastes on the public, such as journalists, organizers of music festivals, employers in the recording industry,

who make decisions about whether to release and re-release important records; fellow musicians, paying tribute to their favourite artists by covering their songs; and even political authorities, financing commemorative activities, such as building monuments and naming streets after famous artists. The latter is determined by the general public, who may vote in various polls for the best songs or records, in this case Polish songs and records. We can also talk about 'hard' and 'soft' canonization. The first takes place through polls, which provide an explicit hierarchy of the best artists, songs and records; the second by, for example, publishing academic books devoted to specific artists and phenomena. With 'hard' and 'soft' canonization is linked qualitative and quantitative approach to canons. According to Russell Ferguson, 'every act of writing or curatorial practice, whenever it gets to the point of naming a name, is participating in a certain level of canon formation, no matter what the intent of its author, no matter whether it represents a challenge to the status quo or a confirmation of it' (Ferguson 1999: 4). According to the second approach, the presence of a particular name or title on a list cannot be equated with canonization, because canonization requires significant intellectual work and public debate. However, it shall be mentioned that participation in such debate is normally reserved to actors with a significant cultural capital – 'ordinary' consumers of art were historically excluded from such debates.

We can also talk about canons produced for internal and external consumption. The first happens when Polish people vote for the best Polish songs; the second through sending artists to international festivals or producing articles and books in foreign languages. It shall also be added that canons are formed post factum, with the benefit of hindsight. A song, which was fashionable at a given moment in time or won an award will not necessarily enter the music canon created twenty or thirty years later (English 2002: 133). However, an unpopular, obscure song at the time of its premiere has much less chance to enter the canon than one which was very popular and critically acclaimed in its heyday. It can thus be argued that immediate success is not a guarantor, but a precondition for being included in the canon.

Canonization is a complex cultural process in which specific music works, styles or genres that have become canonical, develop a normative effect. Their normative function is adopted in cultural practices, resulting, for example, in the process of frequent covering of specific songs by artists of subsequent generations, while ignoring others, and self-perception of artists representing specific genres, as well as awards at music festivals and ranking in specific polls. It is also reflected in internalisation of certain hierarchies by gate keepers, such as music journalists and ordinary listeners. The last phenomenon can be illustrated by the position of disco polo, for many years the most popular genre of popular music in Poland, as measured by popularity of music videos on YouTube, but treated **with a distinct hostility by Polish popular music critics and historians**. It will be interesting to uncover the mechanisms through which such largely unspoken hierarchies are created, but this task is beyond the scope of this article, which would require to employ the tools of sociology and psychology. Instead, here I limit myself largely to the results of applying such mechanisms, namely the status of genres and styles in discourses on popular music in Poland.

Factors affecting canonization of Polish popular music

In his article about the formation of popular music canon, Kärjä mentions that the historiography of popular music is dominated by non-academic interests. 'Popular music histories are more often written by journalists and other connoisseurs than by music scholars or historians per se' (Kärjä 2006: 7). This claim, however, does not apply to Poland in the first decade or so of state socialism. Even later this was not entirely the case. This is because

the socialist state was educational in its design; its purpose was to create a new man, devoted to the project of socialism, which included putting the community above the individual good. Art was seen as an important means to this end. The state was most zealous in using art as a vehicle of education during the period of Stalinism, lasting till the mid 1950s, when the doctrine of socialist realism was promoted through artists' unions and inscribed in state policies. During this period overt and covert censorship was at its strongest. One of the main ideas of socialism was that art should be addressed to the whole society, irrespective of its class and education. For this purpose, composers of serious music were mobilized to produce 'mass songs', with mass appeal and performed by the masses (Tompkins 2013: 24). Few canonical works in popular music were created during this period and discussions about canonization of Polish popular music were practically non-existent. Part of the reason was starting from 'ground zero', which was also the case with Polish cinema. This was because the interwar productions were rejected as pertaining to the low-brow and decadent capitalist culture. An important aspect of this situation was the absence of the specialist popular music press, where discussions about canons usually take place. Similarly, in the first decade after the Second World War, Poland did not have any popular music festivals which would award best productions. The only place where canons could be formed was the radio. It played this role, broadcasting Polish songs and organizing polls for best songs of the month and the year, such that they imprinted themselves on the memory of the listeners. However, Polish radio, at least till the 1970s, was accused of promoting a limited number of songs, particularly those penned by 'insiders', working there, such as the head of the popular music section in the radio, Władysław Szpilman, who started his career before the Second World War and whose taste in music was conservative. In the 1950s, Polish radio ignored the explosion of jazz, and in the first half of the 1960s of rock. It was only when specialised programmes addressed to young audience were created, such the Youth Studio Rhythm (Młodzieżowe Studio Rytm) by composer Andrzej Korzyński, with the collaboration of composer and journalist Mateusz Świącicki and journalist Witold Pograniczny, set in 1965, that the radio acknowledged the existence of what is known as modern popular music.

In the West an important agent of canonization is the recording industry. Publishing charts of the most popular albums and singles is a way to learn about canons created from below, by ordinary people purchasing the music of their favourite artists. Additionally, re-issues of popular records or records deemed important in the history of popular music is a way to recognize and reinforce canonical works. In Poland, the recording industry played a much smaller role in this respect. This was largely due to the socialist economy being an economy of scarcity. There was not enough material and equipment to meet the demand for new records, which resulted in a lag between the specific music reaching the peak of its popularity thanks to the radio and concerts and releasing this music on the record. Moreover, the recording industry was not able to meet demand for most popular records; it simply did not produce enough copies either because it was not aware of the need to do so or because the production of such records would jeopardise the chance of making records of the artists who were further in the queue. Hence, the poorer results of certain records in terms of sales could reflect the tardiness of the recording industry rather than their popularity. Secondly, because profit was not the main objective of the recording industry, but popularization of music with high artistic values, much of the music that attracted crowds when performed live, was not released on records, for example estrada stars of the 1950s, such as Mieczysław Wojnicki and Marta Mirska. Furthermore, charts and statistics were not released by the recording company, so there was no quantitative data published about the sales of specific records. One can, however, find from the 1970s, when Poland took a more market-oriented turn, the lists of the

bestselling records in journalistic articles. What it transpires is that Poles favoured rock and estrada music over other genres (Piastowski 1974).

The history of canonization of popular music in Poland can be seen as a history of increasing the pool of agents of canonization, in terms of institutions and individuals. During the period of rebuilding the popular music industry, till the mid-1950s, the main agents of canonization were the Ministry of Culture. This institution in a rigid way proclaimed what was and what was not worth listening to and the Polish radio, which broadcast a limited number of Polish songs over and over again. From the mid-1950s these institutions were joined by the first popular music magazine in Poland, *Jazz*, established in 1956. It was primarily an agent of canonization from above, by proclaiming in their articles what was worth listening to, but also occasionally publishing letters from readers voicing their opinions on which music deserved special attention and preservation for posterity. The increase of the agents of canonization was accompanied by a less heavy-handed cultural policy of the state, resulting in less censorship. After the demise of socialist realism, the state generally left popular music to its own devices and only intervened in a positive way, awarding some artists with medals and other accolades (Władyka 2009).

In the 1960s, Poland, together with other Eastern European countries, set up its first popular music festivals, most importantly the International Song Contest in Sopot, whose purpose was to promote Polish songs abroad, and the Festival of Polish Songs in Opole, respectively in 1961 and 1963. As I mentioned earlier, participating and winning festivals do not guarantee entering a canon but ensures that the work is noticed and is conducive to remaining in the cultural memory. Television was the co-organiser of these festivals and subsequently became an important agent of promoting popular music. The choices of journalists working there, inevitably, affected the canon also through organising its own competitions of Top of the Pops type, in which the audience took part. The last important medium allowing for widening access to popular music and shaping the canon, is the internet. Its importance lies mostly in allowing ordinary people to take part in various polls for best songs and records and making the results of such choices accessible to a potentially unlimited number of people.

The agents of canonisation of popular music in Poland, as elsewhere, were also academics. This, however, happened, largely after the fall of the Berlin Wall, because popular music attracted little attention from the musicologists or even sociologists in the PRL. It is only in the new century that we observe an explosion of books and articles about Polish popular music and a large part of it concerns specific genres, artists and records.

Jazz as canonical genre of popular music

After the demise of Stalinism in the Eastern bloc, socialist realism was abandoned in Poland, as it was in most socialist countries, with the exception of East Germany. Nevertheless, the idea that popular music should play an educational function was retained. It informed creation of the first popular music magazine in Poland, *Jazz*, in 1956, as already mentioned. As its title suggests, its focus was jazz and its editors tacitly assumed that jazz (unlike in the interwar period) is not pure entertainment, but a type of music which is on par with classical and experimental music and requires virtuosity from its producers and knowledge on the part of its consumers. Jazz contained many articles discussing the connection of jazz with classical music, theatre, ballet and fine arts, often penned by important cultural personalities and translated into Polish, such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Allen Ginsberg. The status of jazz as high art was also conveyed through comparing it favourably with other types of popular

music. Over the next decade or so after its inception, *Jazz* also attempted to familiarize its readers with the history of jazz, which predominantly meant canonical works of foreign composers. Of the Polish composers, the first to be treated on par with western jazzmen was Krzysztof Komeda. The critics appreciated his originality and his role in taking Polish jazz to a higher level, ensuring its status as art and breaking isolation of Polish jazz music thanks to participating in many events abroad, as well as scoring foreign films, including by Polish directors working abroad, Roman Polanski and Jerzy Skolimowski. Komeda's music largely reflected the take on jazz promoted in *Jazz*, which saw jazz as a form of high art and a continuation of classical music. For example, one of his early compositions had the title 'Memory of Bach'. He also composed music for ballet. Komeda achieved his elevated status despite making only three records during his career, *Crazy Girl* in 1962, a fragment of his concert at Jazz Jamboree 64 in 1964 and *Astigmatic* (1966), which many critics list, incorrectly, as his only record made during his lifetime, but which, at the same time, amplifies the importance of his work, making it look as it was all about quality rather than quantity. Komeda's death in 1969, following an accident in the United States, in the age of 37, added to his elevated status.

Komeda was thus the first canonized jazzman in Polish postwar music, and the first canonized Polish popular musician at large. This was reflected, for example, by organizing, during the festival Jazz Jamboree in Warsaw in 1972, a special spectacle titled *Komeda*, scripted by his widow, Zofia Trzcińska-Komedowa and directed by Kazimierz Kutz. There were also numerous reeditions of his records during state socialism, which did not happen to practically any other popular musician. In 1974, Polish Nagrania released the four-record edition of his works; in the 1980s, there were two re-editions of *Astigmatic*; and more reeditions happened in the 1990s. (Niżnik 2019). In each decade the commemorative activities would increase, adding to the cult status of Komeda, including, for example, special festivals of jazz music and film music, taking place respectively in Słupsk and Gorzów Wielkopolski. Komeda also consolidated his position as the number 1 Polish jazzman through hard canonisation. In particular, when the Polish Radio announced a poll for the best Polish jazz record of the postwar period, *Astigmatic* won by a large margin. Ten years later Komeda won in the category of the best Polish jazz musicians and *Astigmatic* won in a poll for the best jazz record in the poll organised by the magazine *Jazz Forum*. An almost identical result was brought by a poll organised by the same magazine in 2015 (ibid.).

After Komeda, the most canonized Polish jazzman on the pages of *Jazz* and *Jazz Forum* was Tomasz Stańko, composer, trumpeter and Komeda's close collaborator. He was one of two Poles, participating in the recording of Komeda's record *Astigmatic* and in 1970 released a record dedicated to Komeda and took part in other activities, commemorating Komeda. Canonization of Komeda and some other jazzmen from his generation, such as Zbigniew Namysłowski, was accompanied by press discussions, principally in *Jazz*, posing a question of the Polishness of Polish jazz or asserting its existence. The tacit assumption of such discussions was that Polish jazz deserves its privileged status because it is, essentially, Polish. It is worth mentioning that such claims reflected the so called 'nationalist turn' in Polish politics and culture, initiated by Władysław Gomułka's regime in the late 1950s, which broke with internationalism, promoted by his Stalinist predecessor, Bolesław Bierut (Machalica 2010: 95-101). It can be also seen in the context of the canonization of Polish classical music. The most edified Polish composer is Frédéric Chopin and it is largely because his music is regarded as very Polish. Tellingly, one of the articles dedicated to Komeda has a title 'Krzysztof Komeda Chopinem polskiego jazzu' (Krzysztof Komeda: the Chopin of Polish jazz music) (Niżnik 2019).

The Polish recording industry also tacitly recognised the superiority of jazz over other genres of popular music and from 1965 started to release records in the series 'Polish Jazz', which has existed to the present day. There Komeda's record *Astigmatic* was also released and, in due course, one with the title *Polish Jazz- Yes!* and one dedicated to Komeda. Ironically, the title of the series and the vast majority of records released in it are in English.

It is worth mentioning that canonization of jazz as the highest genre of Polish popular music had two additional effects. One is a perception that the history of Polish popular music started in the mid-1950s, rather than straight after the Second World War. The other is the masculine character of the canon. Polish jazz bands typically included few female musicians, with Wanda Warska and Urszula Dudziak being exceptions, and practically no female instrumentalists. There were thus almost no women on the list of best Polish musicians and records.

From jazz to rock

The line that jazz is the highest form of popular music and a bridge between popular and serious music was maintained throughout the entire 1960s and most of the 1970s. At this time, however, Polish 'popular taste' was changing, with the younger generation moving away from jazz towards the Polish version of rock music, known in Poland as big-beat or big-bit. *Jazz* magazine had to acknowledge this and in 1963 introduced a special section, titled 'Rytm i piosenka' (Rhythm and song), which filled 20-25% of the content of the magazine and covered a large variety of genres, such as rock, estrada, actor's songs, sung poetry and musicals. Jakub Kasperski rightly identifies it as an important step in what he describes as a 'Polish rockology' (Kasperski 2002: 275). The coverage of these genres was different from jazz, as one barely found articles there arguing about their Polishness or their connections with high art. A large proportion of articles were condescending or negative in their tone, suggesting that Polish popular music was in a state of permanent crisis or under-development and even that it was structurally unable to overcome this crisis. Symptomatic of this approach is a Polish composer and musicologist, Bogusław Schäffer, who in an article, published in *Jazz* in 1966, argues that popular music is worthless, because it is repetitive and lacks individual characters. In fact, the creators of such music work hard to obliterate any individual characteristics. Hence, it does not matter what music we listen to, because essentially it is the same music. Schäffer in this article is particularly scathing about big-beat, claiming that its producers are poorly educated, and that it is an 'anti-culture borrowed from traders' (Schäffer 1966: 7). It is not difficult to find in this argument an echo of Theodor Adorno's criticism of popular music (Adorno 1990), but the difference is that for Adorno the epitome of the anti-culture was jazz, while Schäffer excludes jazz from his opprobrium, arguing that jazz deserves respect due to its authenticity, writing that 'if a jazz musician writes a commercial song, the effect will be always interesting, because he "puts something from himself" in this music' (Schäffer 1966: 7). However, there was a contrast between this and similar articles published in *Jazz*, condemning popular music other than jazz, and letters to the editors, which reflected greater appetite for non-jazz popular music, be it rock or estrada music. Increasingly, they also pointed to the mismatch between the 'canon from above', namely the critics' taste of unmelodic and pretentious songs, on one hand and, the taste of ordinary people, who preferred catchy songs, on the other. They also called for a greater say of ordinary listeners in deciding what is offered to them in the media, first radio, then television, complaining about the pseudo-highbrow approach of these institutions, as well as a limited offer, reflected by a small number of songs repeatedly played on the radio.

While the articles on Polish jazz, published in *Jazz*, often had an eye on posterity, asking what might survive from Polish jazz in the years to come, the same approach was practically absent in the treatment of other genres of Polish popular music, including rock. In this occasion the question was not so much what was good, but what captured the interest of the audience at a given moment. Tacitly and on occasions overtly, authors argued that the approach to rock should be sociological, namely focused on social conditions, in which rock emerges and its audiences' attitudes, rather than its aesthetic value (Kotułowski 1974). By the same token, rock was meant to be excluded from canonization. By the mid-1970s, however, critics of *Jazz* could not maintain this division between 'aesthetic' jazz and 'sociological' rock. This was in part due to the changes in the West, when rock gained a privileged position in popular music and some of its subgenres, most importantly progressive rock, showed awareness of and connections with classical music. Rock also became the favourite genre of young journalists who were employed in the Third Programme of Polish Radio, which was addressed to young people, such as Piotr Kaczkowski, Marek Gaszyński and Dariusz Michalski.

Another factor were the changes in Polish rock itself, which was going in the same direction as western rock. In Poland, the first rock artist to be taken seriously, was Czesław Niemen, largely thanks to his song 'Dziwny jest ten świat' (Strange Is This World), which won the Festival of the Polish Songs in Opole in 1967, leading to a debate exceeding popular music, engaging cultural critics, poets and politicians (Czubaj 2018) and his record *Enigmatic*, released in 1970. This record included four pieces composed to the poems of distinguished Polish poets, including a long composition 'Bema pamięci rapsod żałobny' (Mournful Rhapsody In Memoriam of Bem) to the work of late Romantic poet Cyprian Norwid. Moreover, the record was made with support of some leading Polish jazzmen, such as Zbigniew Namysłowski. In 1970, Niemen was performing with jazzmen, such as Namysłowski and Stańko at the Festival Jazz Jamboree in Warsaw, implicitly reversing the established hierarchy between jazz and rock. Niemen thus established the link of rock with jazz and serious music, the same way Komeda did some years later, composing 'Memory of Bach'. Consequently, Niemen became the first rocker to be canonized. He could be described as the Komeda of Polish rock.

Since the early 1970s, we also observe the gradual supplanting of jazz by rock in the Polish cultural press. This was in part thanks to setting up a new popular music magazine, *Non Stop*, in 1972, which was focused on the genres included in 'Rytm i piosenka', but giving them a wider platform and a more sympathetic ear. Another factor was transformations of *Jazz* magazine. After a break in publishing, following martial law, the magazine was reborn as *Jazz. Magazyn Muzyczny* in 1983, before rejecting the 'Jazz' part in its title, in 1984, after which it operated solely as *Magazyn Muzyczny*, completing the process. Marek Jeziński, in an article with a self-explanatory title, 'Based on Anglo-American sources: Polish music journalism of the 1980s and the canons in popular music' (Jeziński 2022). In this article, Jeziński argues that Polish journalists, working in this magazine, used Anglo-American sources extensively, often without acknowledging their sources (ibid.: 6). More importantly, Jeziński argues that this bias also affected the treatment of Polish popular music: that which best aligned with Anglo-American music received preferential treatment. He also observes that the discussion of political dimension of music, both western and Polish, was avoided in *Magazyn Muzyczny* (ibid.: 12).

This is true. However, there was an explosion of Polish rock bands in the 1980s and they started to be widely seen as politically subversive thanks to conveying the message of freedom, as demonstrated by the fact that some songs were censored in the radio.

Canonization through festivals

Winning festivals, as was already mentioned, does not guarantee canonization, but is conducive to being noticed by critics and ordinary audiences in one's own country, as well as increasing the chance of making a career abroad, given that winners of national festivals tend to be sent to international competitions. In Poland, the most important festival from this respect was the Festival of Polish Songs in Opole, which started in 1963. The categories of awards given at the early editions of these festival were for the 'cabaret-entertaining songs' and 'actors-literary songs'. Establishing these categories suggests that the festival was looking most favourably at sung poetry and songs delivered by actors. Among the winners of these early awards was the singer Ewa Demarczyk, the lyricists Agnieszka Osiecka and Wojciech Młynarski (the former also being a singer), as well as some cabarets, such as Piwnica pod Baranami, where Demarczyk started her career. Among awarded songs we even find ones with lyrics, such as by the subsequent Nobel prize winner, Wisława Szymborska and many other Polish distinguished poets. Privileging lyrics to such an extent implies paying less attention to instrumental music. This was a topic of criticism by ordinary audience members, who felt that music was not sufficiently recognized by the festival jury and composers of songs were sidelined.

By contrast to the literary genres, other genres of popular music, such as rock and disco, and genres utilizing Polish folk elements, did not receive much recognition at these festivals. The situation only changed in the 1980s, when singers such as Olga 'Kora' Jackowska and Izabela Trojanowska, achieved successes in Opole. Moreover, from the 1980s, there were more festivals specializing in a specific genre of popular music, received their own festivals, most importantly Jarocin Festival, founded in 1980, which was one of the biggest rock music festivals in 1980s Europe.

It also appeared that the focus of Opole was on singers and lyric writers, rather than on individual songs. Authors, established there, such as Demarczyk, Osiecka and Młynarski, would dominate festivals and the Polish media for practically the whole period of state socialism. Their work would also be prioritized by the Polish record industry. For example, songs with lyrics by Osiecka would be released on separate records, as 'Osiecka's songs', rather than on records of singers who performed them. They would be also covered repeatedly by singers of different generations. She would herself encourage such a practice and later it would be continued by her friends and her daughter, who put much energy into preserving and continuing her legacy through a foundation 'Okularnicy'.

Mateusz Torzecki and Łukasz Słoński argue that the festival in Opole has been fortunate when it comes to female performers, as demonstrated by the careers of Ewa Demarczyk, Maryla Rodowicz, Kora Jackowska, Edyta Górniak and in the postcommunist period, Dorota 'Doda' Rabczewska and Sylwia Grzeszczak (Torzecki and Słoński 2019). The authors do not explain why women did so well at Opole, but one reason, in my view, was its focus on lyrics and physical appearance. All the singers mentioned here created a distinct artistic persona, with Demarczyk always performing in black, Rodowicz wearing bold, eccentric and kitschy costumes and Kora looking androgynous.

While the Opole Festival remains an important event in the calendar of Polish songs, its canonizing power diminished after the fall of state socialism (Korzeniewska 2021). It lost its dominant position in part due to an increasingly crowded field, with many more music festivals than in the 1960s, the 1970s and 1980s, as well as due to the many more channels to access music than national radio and television.

Official honours

The Polish state, as well as local authorities, also embarked on canonizing certain musicians, by awarding them with medals, either for specific contribution to art or for service to the country. It is impossible to list all the honours bestowed on them, but looking at the CVs of Polish popular singers, it appears that the most awarded were artists representing estrada, traditional pop and cabaret songs. The absolute record-breaker in this respect is Irena Santor (b. 1934), a singer specializing in estrada songs full of pathos, delivered in a strong, clear voice, which she developed working in the folklorist band Mazowsze. Maryla Rodowicz, the most successful estrada singer of the 1960s and 1970s collected fewer, but nevertheless important awards, such as the Golden Cross of Valour. Among the most honoured musicians are the creators of the Older Gentlemen's Cabaret, Jeremi Przybora and Jerzy Wasowski. Przybora and Wasowski have also several streets and squares named after them.

Fewer medals were bestowed on Polish rockers. However, Wikipedia lists in total as many as 15 streets, squares and roundabouts named after Czesław Niemen. He is also, as far as I am aware, the only popular musician who has a museum dedicated solely to him, in the village of Wasiliszki, where he was born, Stare Wasiliszki, which belonged to Poland before the Second World War and now lies within Belarusian borders.

Krzysztof Komeda has not received any state honours during his life, which can be explained by his early death – the political establishment simply did not have enough time to recognize his significance for Polish culture. However, he could compete with Niemen in the number of streets and squares dedicated to him, including in Sopot, a town important for the history of Polish jazz and rock, where they both have streets named after them. The Polish Jazz Museum in Warsaw is also, in large part, dedicated to the memory of this musician.

A specific honour, probably quite unique for Poland, is releasing a series of silver and golden coins, titled 'The History of the Polish Entertainment Music', minted from the years 2009 to 2020. On this occasion the history was reduced to twelve coins, dedicated to seven people, of which two function as joint recipients of this honour. These are, in order of appearance, Czesław Niemen, Krzysztof Komeda, Jeremi Przybora and Jerzy Wasowski, Agnieszka Osiecka, Grzegorz Ciechowski (from one of the most popular rock bands of the 1980s), Republika and Krzysztof Klenczon, a co-leader of the band Czerwone Gitary, popular in the 1960s and the 1970s. What can we make of this choice? From the perspective of genres, rock dominates, given that three of the seven musicians are rockers (Niemen, Ciechowski and Klenczon). The rest covers jazz (Komeda), cabaret songs (Przybora and Wasowski), and song lyrics (Osiecka). What is, again, lacking, is any recognition of lighter genres, such as estrada and disco. Rewarded are authors of songs rather than merely singers, given that all the recipients produced their own repertoire, except from Osiecka, who was just a lyricist. Women on this list are sidelined, which can be seen as a consequence of privileging the supposedly more highbrow genres. The choice can also be seen as a way of honouring artists who died young in tragic circumstances. This refers to Komeda and Klenczon, who both died in accidents in the USA before they reached forty. This explains why Klenczon was

chosen over Seweryn Krajewski, the second leader of the most popular band of the 1960s, Czerwone Gitary and, admittedly, the more prolific, versatile and, ultimately, more successful musician of the two.

Academic discourse on Polish popular music

Serious or even popular books about Polish popular music were rare under state socialism. Probably the first book which deserves the title of an academic work is Anna Barańczak's *Słowo w piosence: Poetyka współczesnej piosenki estradowej* (Word in song. The poetics of the contemporary Estrada song), published in 1983. It is meaningful that this book concerns lyrics, highlighting the fact that word in song was considered in Poland to be more important than music. Academic publications, especially about jazz and rock (Kasperski 2002) exploded after the end of this system, in part thanks to the end of the economy of scarcity, including in publishing and in part due to development of popular music studies in Poland, usually as part of musicology or professional music education. These publications reflect closely the soft canonization of two genres and artists which happened in the previous period, namely jazz and rock and specifically of Krzysztof Komeda and Czesław Niemen. By this point, there are about ten books devoted to each of these artists (for example Kowal 1995; Hendrykowski 2009; Chlebowski 2014). Komeda also features heavily in books about Polish jazz, which mushroomed after 1989.¹

Interest in Niemen became so widespread and multi-faceted that it led to the coining of the term 'Niemenology', as a specific branch of Polish popular music studies. Since 1989, there were also academic books and articles about Marek Grechuta (for example Piotrowska 2022). Most of the books about Komeda and Niemen focus on the aesthetic values of their productions, pronouncing them very high. Social factors concerning their rise to stardom are, on the other hand, overlooked or minimized. To these works we need to add studies devoted to Polish jazz (too numerous to mention here) and, to a smaller extent, Polish rock (for example Zieliński 2005; Idzikowska-Czubaj 2011; Gradowski 2018) and lyrics in Polish songs (Traczyk 2009; Gajda and Chrzęstowska 2019). In contrast to the plentiful work on jazz and rock, there are no academic books and articles about representatives of pop, estrada music, disco or popular electronic music in Polish, either on individual stars or genres. This contrasts with journalistic books, which include numerous biographies and memoirs of estrada stars, testifying to the interest of the general public in the works and lives of these stars and suggesting a gap in the taste in popular music of ordinary people and specialists.

Academic discourse is also reflected in the subjects of dissertations chosen by students of musicology in Poland. Two academics from Warsaw University, Mariusz Gradowski and Przemysław Piłaciński conducted such a study in relation to the musicology at Warsaw University, where modules on popular music constitute parts of musicological undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. They noticed that the first master's thesis in this institution and probably in the entire country was defended in 1959, by Mateusz Świącicki, and was titled 'Three Ragtimes by Igor Stravinsky as One of the First Attempts at Jazz Stylisation in European Music' (Gradowski and Piłaciński 2016: 93). It is meaningful that its author, who in the years to come, would become an important jazz activist, radio and press journalist and pioneer of Polish electronic music, would position jazz close to classical music. Initially, students chose jazz as a topic of their dissertations, but gradually rock supplanted this genre as the favourite topic (ibid.: 91). We shall also mention here Jakub Kasperski's PhD titled 'Popular music as a subject of musicology' (Kasperski 2012), which can be interpreted as a call to treat popular music seriously.

People's canons

It can be argued that there are no proper people's canons of popular music (as well as with literature or art), because people can only choose from what is already chosen for them by radio and television programmers, A&R departments in record companies and, in the context of Eastern Europe of state socialist period, censors. While I accept this argument, I believe that all canons are results of certain constraints – they are thus passive, to some extent. By the same token, I argue in favour of existence of people's canons, which reflect on certain constraints of choice, but also demonstrate that ordinary people have some agency in choosing their favourite music.

During the period of state socialism, ordinary people had few opportunities to express their views about what is best in Polish music, except for buying records of their favourite musicians, if they managed to get hold of them. This led to frustration among the readers of popular music press, who complained about the gap between what is popular 'from above' and what is popular 'from below'.

Complete data of record sales is not available, but one can find in the press articles commenting on sales of Polish records. According to an article published in 1974, the most commercially successful record up to this point in the entire history of Polskie Nagrania was an EP recorded by Piotr Szczepanik in 1966 (Piastowski 1974: 25). Szczepanik was rather unique in the Polish popular music scene, as he bridged two genres: rock and estrada music. He performed with the rock band Ricercar, but his voice was gentler than a typical rock voice, he did not play a musical instrument and his appearance was less of a rock and more of an estrada star. Szczepanik did not make more records till 1987, when his *Greatest Hits* were released. Ironically, in 1990s, when his stardom faded, eight records were released with his old songs. This lack of investment in Szczepanik suggests the indifference of the Polish recording industry of state socialist period to generating profit. If we look at the cumulative statistics of record sales, according to the same article, the bestselling musical act by this point was the band Czerwone Gitary, often compared to the Beatles (ibid.).

After 1989, we can observe a proliferation of various lists of best Polish songs and records, which look back at the entire postwar history of Polish popular music. I examined several such lists. One is the Polish Top of All Times ('Polski Top Wszech Czasów', published every year by the Third Channel of the Polish Radio from 2008 to the current day, although from 2020 in the Radio 357 Channel. Before I present its results, it is worth mentioning that the Third Programme, popularly known as Trójka, played a major role in shaping the musical taste of Polish young people from the ..., traditionally privileging canonical Anglo-American rock music and Polish rock music from the 1980s. The Polish Top of All Times lists reflect these preferences, as it is dominated by a limited number of performers, such as Czesław Niemen, the band Republika and the solo work of its leader, Grzegorz Ciechowski, the bands Perfect, Dżem and Maanam. By the same token, it is a very masculine list, as almost all the bands, with the exception of Maanam, whose singer was female (the previously mentioned Kora) have no female members. It also testifies to the dominance of the 1980s rock in the canon.

Another list is compiled by Open FM Radio, which advertises itself as the largest internet radio in Poland. It published the list of the hundred best Polish songs, chosen by listeners in 2020 ('Top Wszech Czasów 2020: 100 najlepszych polskich piosenek według słuchaczy Open FM'). If we look at the list from the perspective of genres which the 100

songs represent, we can notice the domination of rock, with more than half of the songs on the list belonging to this genre. The other songs belong to pop and estrada. Hence, from this list we can conjecture that the Polish popular music canon remained rock-centred, but the hierarchy within rock music is different for ordinary listeners than for specialists, such as journalists and academics. The list is topped by 'Spacer dziką plażą' (Walk through a Wild Beach), from 1969, performed by Stan Borys. In the 1960s, Borys was one of the most popular rock performers in Poland, whose strong voice was compared to that of Niemen. However, whilst the connotations of Niemen's music were high-brow, because he composed some of his repertoire and turned to poetry, Borys was seen as a more commercial, 'hit-churning' performer, who relied on a repertoire penned by professional composers and lyricists. The second place on this list was given to Ryszard Rynkowski's 'Wypijmy za błędy' (Drink for Our Mistakes). Rynkowski can be regarded as a hybrid, or genre-bending artist. He started his career in the male band Vox, consisting of four singers, which blended rock with disco, and later sung songs in a similar style. In this respect he can be compared to the previously mentioned Piotr Szczepanik, who also fares very well on this list, placing two songs in the first twenty. Niemen's songs are also present on this list, but relatively low down at, 59 and 62.

The first twenty positions are dominated by male singers, either performing in bands or as soloists, which reflects the fact that this canon is rock-centred. The only women featuring here are members of rock bands, Varioux Manx and Bajm, Anita Lipnicka and Beata Kozidrak, respectively. Further down the list, however, we find more women, representing estrada music, such as Anna Jantar, Maryla Rodowicz and Irena Jarocka. None of the songs were recorded earlier than the 1960s, suggesting that earlier music is excluded from the canon, either because it is associated with the disgraced socialist realism or because it has faded from memory. Another observation is the prevalence of songs produced during the period of state socialism. The dominance of the state socialist period over the post-communist period can be explained by the fact that canons, as I already mentioned, are created retrospectively. One needs time to pronounce a given work as a classic. That said, the level of dominance of songs from this period over popular music produced after 1989 suggests that the old music is genuinely appreciated more than the new music by the audience. Of the postwar period, two decades are privileged: the 1960s and the 1980s, which were the two decades associated with the flourishing of Polish rock. The 1980s rock is particularly strongly represented in the first twenty positions, with six songs performed by three bands who had their heyday in this decade: Lady Pank, Perfect and Dżem. From the 1960s, the short list also includes two songs by Piotr Szczepanik, released on the previously mentioned bestselling record, validating the claim that his songs were very popular and held up with the passage of time. Worth pointing out is also the very good position of the band Czerwone Gitary. It has one song at 4th place and another one lower down the list. There are also two more songs by Seweryn Krajewski, one of the members of the band, which confirms that the high sales of their records in the 1960s and 1970s reflected the genuine popularity of the band, which it retained in the subsequent decades.

The Open FM Radio poll was a poll for best songs. By the same token, it practically excluded jazz. This is not the case in the polls for best records, which can include genres such as jazz, film and electronic music. One such poll is included on the platform Rate Your Music (Najlepsze polskie płyty wg polskich słuchaczy na RYM). The list is topped by *Astigmatic* by Krzysztof Komeda, which confirms the canonical status of this record and its author. Ewa Demarczyk's record *Ewa Demarczyk śpiewa piosenki Zygmunta Koniecznego* found itself at the second place, proving that the listeners agreed with privileging sung poetry in the Polish

song tradition and validating the choices made at the Opole Festival. Niemen's *Enigmatic* also found itself on this list, at fifth place, which is, however, slightly lower than one would expect from his elevated status in the academic and journalistic discourse.

The list also testifies to the continuous dominance of rock in the Polish canon, with seven out of ten places being occupied by records belonging to this genre. Two remaining ones are taken by representatives of sung poetry, Demarczyk and Marek Grechuta. Another striking aspect of this list is the prevalence of work created between the 1960s and the 1980s, pointing to the relatively high esteem, in which audiences keep Polish music of the state socialist period after the demise of socialist realism.

If we look at the streaming platforms, most importantly Spotify and YouTube, we notice a very different hierarchy of genres. There, three genres dominate: hip hop on Spotify and disco polo (a version of disco music incorporating elements of Polish folklore) on YouTube, with artists such as Taco Hemingway and Oki (hip hop), Zenon Martyniuk and the band Akcent and Ronnie Ferrari (disco polo) and Dawid Podsiadło (pop) ('Najpopularniejsze polskie teledyski'; 'Most popular artists in Polish pop'). Of course, in this case we talk about popularity rather than canonization, as we do not know if these artists remain popular in twenty or thirty years and whether their popularity will be recognized by the popular music establishment, namely journalists and historians. It is worth mentioning, that by this point disco polo music is treated largely as a sociological rather than aesthetic phenomenon, bringing recollection of the treatment of rock music in Poland in the 1960s.

Deconstructing canons of Polish popular music or pandering to the listeners' taste

In the last twenty years the most discussed attempt of canonization of popular music was probably the poll for best Polish songs, organized by the popular independent portal Screenagers.pl., in 2012, which included 120 songs ('Polskie Piosenki Wszech Czasów' 2012), as it prompted a discussion about popular Polish music canons, for example in the influential weekly *Polityka* and dailies *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita*. This poll, which can be compared to the poll of the best Polish films, organized by the Lodz Film Museum, presents choices of Polish music critics, albeit mainly by those belonging to a (then) young generation. Against the trend which Bloom describes as the 'school of resentment', the journalists taking part in the poll, announced that they wanted to decontextualize Polish songs and look at Polish songs first as songs and only later as the symbols of their times (ibid.).ⁱⁱ The results, like many other polls, demonstrates Poles' fondness of songs created during the late state socialist period (from the 1960s till the end of the 1980s), with 8 out of 10 songs being produced at this period. More interesting, however, is the dethroning of rock on this list, in favour of pop. In the golden ten, there are only three songs which were recorded by rock bands. Two of them, by the band Skaldowie, represent very soft versions of rock, blending with elements of mountain folk music. The list is dominated by songs from the 1980s, which is regarded as the golden decade of Polish rock and the period when Polish rock became political, but we do not find any rock songs from this decade at the top, most likely because the bulk of songs from this period are closely connected to the times when they were produced. Instead, pop dominates. The winner is Andrzej Zaucha's song 'Byłaś serca biciem' (You Were a Beat of My Heart), followed by 'Stan pogody' (Weather Forecast) by Anna Jurkiewicz. Both songs are very melodic, with witty lyrics, by performers who were somewhat underappreciated by critics in their heyday, due to not fitting any specific genres. Overall, the greatest winner was the electronic band Papa Dance, which not only reached number 7 on the list, but found itself with more songs in

the 120 than any other band or performer. This case shows almost a complete reverse of the attitude of critics during the time of their greatest commercial successes in the 1980sⁱⁱⁱ, as at the time the band was held in contempt by journalists, being regarded as commercial, to be played for dancing rather than singing and infantile. We find here also songs by Niemen and the most appreciated rock bands of the 1980s, such as Maanam and Republika, but relatively low down, pointing to the collapse of the aesthetic distinction between the noble rock and the worthless pop (Frith 2001), which we also observe in relation to the Anglophone music. There are hardly any representatives of sung poetry, which during the state socialist period was regarded as a particularly Polish genre and cabaret songs, which were canonized at the festivals of Polish songs. By the same token, the poll pronounces the superiority of melody over text.

Many songs can be described as genre hybrids, and performers of such hybrids, mixing pop with jazz and soul, or folk and rock, such as Krystyna Prońko, are well represented. This is connected with the promotion of female performers, as they tend to represent pop more often than rock. In the first ten songs there are four songs by women and one by a band which has a meaningful name: 'Kobiety' (Women), although a mixed, male-female line-up. The majority of the songs on the list can be regarded as optimistic and cheerful, which can be seen as being antithetical to the Polish national character, seen as melancholy.

Polish canon for foreign consumption

During the period of state socialism, the political authorities were in charge of promotion of Polish music abroad. The main means of promotion, which does not ensure canonization but is its prerequisite, as I have already mentioned, was sending Polish artists abroad, through the state-owned agency Pagart. Reading biographies and memoirs of Polish popular artists we can conjecture that there was a two-tier system of promotion, with jazz artists being sent to the West and estrada singers and rockers to the socialist East and to Polish clubs in the United States. The previously mentioned Komeda travelled extensively up to his death, visiting jazz clubs in West Germany, Scandinavia and France, and reaching Hollywood, where he scored Roman Polanski's films. Fellow jazzmen, Tomasz Stańko and Zbigniew Namysłowski, likewise, travelled extensively.

The soft canonization through academic work benefitted most Komeda and Niemen. Komeda is a subject of a Master's thesis in English (Roy 2016) and he is mentioned in international publications, concerning films, which he scored (Mazierska 2007: 91-114; Kościelski 2013; Pomostowski 2023). His biography was also translated into English (Grzebałkowska 2020). Niemen is a subject of several articles and book chapters and his record *Niemen Enigmatic* was covered in the series of books 33.3 by Bloomsbury, devoted to individual records (Gradowski and Mazierska 2022). Next Polish artist, covered in this series, is a hip hop musician, Taco Hemingway (Rymajdo 2025), suggesting that hip hop is catching up with rock as a product of Polish popular music to be promoted to the foreign consumers.

The collection *Made in Poland*, edited by Patryk Galuszka, whose purpose is providing an overview of Polish popular music for English-speaking readers, tries to offer a more balanced history of Polish popular music, by including chapters about Polish hip hop, disco polo, female performers at the Opole Festival and Polish independent artists (Galuszka 2019). What is symptomatic about this volume is the lack of consideration of jazz and

continuous prevalence of rock, with several chapters dedicated to this genre. The absence of jazz, most likely, reflects the perception that jazz is no longer a genre of popular music.

Foreign interest in other Polish popular musicians, except from composers of film music, is, by comparison, minimal. We can expect that things won't get better for Polish popular musicians in the years to come, due to saturation of old music in the virtual sphere, which makes any new music standing out more of a challenge. This makes old music being rediscovered by new audiences even harder. Another factor is the loss of a special status of Eastern Europe as an oppressed region and, hence, its cultural products benefitting from the 'sympathy vote'. Instead, the country is seen as one of many European countries, fighting for the attention of the global audience.

Conclusions

In conclusion, I argue that during the state socialist period, Polish professional canonizers showed preference to high-brow subgenres of popular music, such as jazz, symphonic rock and sung poetry. This tendency resulted in the canon being biased towards male musicians, as Polish jazz and rock were dominated by men. There was also a tendency to honour musicians who penned their own repertoire over those who relied on material provided by professionals, disadvantaging pop singers. This tendency was criticized by ordinary listeners, who complained that their taste was not respected, and 'ambitious songs' were prioritized over catchy songs, enjoyed by large numbers of people.

After the end of state socialism and, especially, with the development of the internet and social media, there have been more outlets for ordinary listeners to create their own canons by voting in polls for best Polish songs and records, resulting in restructuring the canon in favour of songs representing a wider variety of genres and, especially, to artists who cross genres. This change benefits female performers, who are more likely to represent other genres than jazz and rock. However, irrespective of who produces the canons of Polish popular music, the music from the mid-1960s till the end of the 1980s is privileged, suggesting a very positive opinion of the audience of this period.

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ⁱ For example, Rafał Ciesielski edited six volumes of essays devoted to different aspects of Polish jazz, titled *Jazz w kulturze polskiej* (Jazz in Polish Culture) (Ciesielski 2014, 2016, 2019, 2022, 2023).

ⁱⁱ In one of the few Polish texts on music canon, Rafał Ciesielski, while recognising multiplicity of canons and their different uses, drawing on Roger Scruton, he criticises postmodern, relativist approach to canon (Ciesielski 2022).

ⁱⁱⁱ A sign of their popularity was topping the list of most popular songs, voted by readers of specific magazines. For example, in a popular weekly *Panorama*, in 1986, Papa Dance’s song ‘Ol-La-la’ was voted the song of summer.