

Introduction

Grażyna Bacewicz (1909–69) was the foremost Polish woman composer of the twentieth century. Although some sixty CDs of her music are listed on Amazon, it is still not part of the established canon. As a virtuoso violinist, she wrote beautifully for string instruments, so it is puzzling that string players are not familiar with her work. This volume seeks to dispel some of these issues.

Opinions about Bacewicz's music come from various sources – woodworm, the critics, performers, prize-givers – and here are some of those opinions. She had just given an inspired performance as the soloist in Karol Szymanowski's *Violin Concerto No. 1*, when, on returning to the artist's room, she found a small, unimposing man, who introduced himself as the Custodian of the Museum of String Instruments. He said that quite often he played one of her violin compositions, and he explained why: 'I discovered some woodworm in one of the old instruments so I take all the violins in turn and play your piece. The woodworm do not like your music and run away in panic. I came to thank you.'¹

The 'woodworm' were out of step with the musical world, who appreciated both Bacewicz's creativity and her warm personality. She won numerous Polish awards (several from the communist government) and half a dozen accolades of European origin. Prizes from the national administration suggest political approval, while awards from Western Europe were a dispassionate appreciation of her skills without any ideological background. Her *Violin Concerto No. 7* (1965) won her the biggest prize – the Gold Medal at the Queen Elizabeth International Competition in Brussels. Her position as a leader in Polish national culture came from her many talents (which we have just listed); she was the doyenne of Polish music of the twentieth century. Her story is remarkable, and more performances of her music are needed to bring attention to its extraordinary integrity and personal expression.

Bacewicz's remarkable life included impressive achievements, and her music is appealing in its vitality, naturalness, and directness. In 2016, the Ambache Ensemble recorded a CD of some of her chamber works, and comments in the reviews included phrases such as 'the genius of Polish composer Bacewicz' and 'a perfect introduction to an important twentieth-century composer'.² There was little knowledge of her work at that time, and there is still not a lot now. Given that her music is accessible and attractive, it is unclear why this is so. One reason must be that, even in the twenty-first century, women are still not taken as

¹ Cited in 'Woodworm Don't Like Your Music', BBC Radio 3 'Composer of the Week – Bacewicz', programme 5 (29 May 2015): www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b05wxt9f/episodes/guide.

² Reviews from *BBC Music Magazine* (March 2017) and *The Arts Desk* (March 2017).



Figure 2 Photo of Bacewicz by Andrzej Ziborski

seriously as men. Then, there is the problem of the musical canon – a kind of catch-22: if you are in, you are in; if you are not, it is difficult to get in. Possibly, performers and audiences still have a tendency to be oriented to the old favourites in German and Italian music. At any rate, there are many male and female composers who are not given due recognition, and they also need contemporary champions.

Some recognition has come for Bacewicz, of course. In 2019 (110 years after her birth and 50 years after her death), there were special Bacewicz celebrations in Poland. The Polish pianist Krystian Zimerman has toured Poland, other European countries, and America performing her music, and has recorded sonatas and quintets for Deutsche Grammophon, receiving fine notices; however, Zimerman's biography on Deutsche Grammophon's website does not mention Bacewicz. Interest lapsed, and she was neglected once again. It is hard to understand the reasons why, because Bacewicz can be recommended for so many things. Exceptionally talented both as a violinist and as a composer, her music is pleasing and straightforward; she developed her own musical language, absorbing contemporary ideas while maintaining her authentic voice. Her natural interest in Polish folk music was one aspect that helped her navigate the difficult and restricted times in Communist Poland, particularly under Stalinist rule. The prizes she won for her compositions illustrate that she was valued, and a Polish

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postal stamp of 2009 recognised the 100th anniversary of her birth. Even so, this author thinks she has not received the attention she deserves.

This Element is laid out chronologically, starting with Bacewicz's birth in Łódź, studies in Warsaw, and life during World War II in Section 1. In the decade following the war, she guided her composing career through the restrictive world of Polish socialist realism and communist control (Section 2). Her last fifteen years are considered in two connected parts in Section 3 (Parts 1 and 2), covering her experiments with sonorism and serialism, and the founding of the Warsaw Autumn Festival (with Tadeusz Baird and Kazimierz Serocki). To conclude, there is a description of her legacy in both Poland and the wider world. The compositions are described within the context of her European setting, and her personal circumstances are given as a background to her achievements.

Social attitudes have limited women's activities. The musical arena is crowded, and twists of fate have made life difficult for female composers. However, people are now increasingly recognising a wider field of contributors, and some of the main UK organisations (such as the BBC) are gradually increasing their inclusion of their music. Radio 3's 'Composer of the Week' featured Bacewicz in May 2015, and each day's broadcast had an expressive title: 'An Unseen Little Engine'; 'A Mood of Determined Resistance'; 'A False Dawn'; 'Opening the Modernist Floodgates'; and 'Woodworms Don't Like Your Music'.³ Curiously though, the BBC Proms, 'the World's Greatest Classical Music Festival', has given only one performance of her music: the *Piano Quintet No. 1* in 2019, at the Cadogan Hall.⁴

I mentioned earlier that her string works are not generally known to performers. Any string player would be pleased to study and play Bacewicz's works, as they are so gratefully written. The accessibility of her style means that her pieces are not 'difficult' modern music, and her use of folk ideas makes them immediately resonant. Her excellent compositions would appear more frequently in concerts if more players, teachers, and programmers were familiar with them. Her substantial contribution to the string repertoire alone includes seven string quartets, five violin sonatas, a *Quartet for Four Violins*, and a *Quartet for Four Cellos*; this music is very rewarding for both players and audiences.

Considered her finest work, Bacewicz's *Concerto for String Orchestra* (1948) has several YouTube performances. At the time of this writing (during the coronavirus pandemic) there are no live performances, but the last one

³ A Radio 3 'Composer of the Week' highlights programme, featuring sections from all five programmes, is available for download: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02sln1f.

⁴ See the BBC Proms Performance Archive: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/3SsklRvCSPvHr13wz6HCJ/proms-performance-archive.

livestreamed online was in October 2020.⁵ Her *Concerto for String Orchestra*, and her music in general, communicates a rare combination of energy and honesty; the slow movements come from the heart. Her natural affinity with the traditional music of her country imbued her own music with local colour in rhythm and melody. Studying with Nadia Boulanger in Paris brought her in touch with the neoclassical style, which suited her musical temperament. As musical language changed, serialism and sonorism were explored; she took what interested her and absorbed it into her own manner. This combination of the national element, current ideas, and her own voice added up to quirky, witty, exciting, and original music of a personal nature. She explained her vitality as coming from what she called a 'motorek':

I possess a little unseen engine, and thanks to it I accomplish a task in ten minutes that it takes others an hour or more; I normally do not walk but I run; I speak fast; even my pulse beats faster than others and I was born in the seventh month. I was born for action, not for empty talk . . . There is only one essential needed: 'motorek . . .' – without it don't bother.⁶

Her death just before becoming sixty was a surprise, and many people were shocked by losing her. Here is an account from her colleague, Polish composer and conductor Jan Krenz (1926–2020):

The effects of her life are simply extraordinary. She was, of course, very industrious, but also very well organised. She knew how to use time . . . If she got involved in something, she did it authentically, with full devotion. Sometimes famous artists just give their name, while others do the work for them. But it was not Grażyna's case. She was able to happily combine many activities, achieving good results. She had a smile and cheerfulness for everyone. She never revealed any of her dilemmas, personal problems, which bother us, artists, and which certainly weren't spared her . . . She was emancipated through and through, her natural traits included personal independence and self-reliance.⁷

Before presenting her story, here is a brief overview of Polish music.⁸ Starting at the end of the nineteenth century, music was based in the conservatories, music

⁵ Livestream concert given by The Orchestra Now, conducted by Zachary Schwartzman (17 October 2020): www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBwf-ldcd1g.

⁶ Grażyna Bacewicz, *A Distinguishing Mark (Znak szczególny)*, 3rd ed., trans. A. Clarke and A. Cienski (Orleans, Canada: Krzys Chmiel, 2004), pp. 25–6.

⁷ Jan Krenz in conversation with Elżbieta Markowska in *Rozmowy o muzyce polskiej*, (Kraków: PWM, 1996), pp. 65 and 67. See also 'Bacewicz: Personality-Human Being', *Polmic.pl*: <https://bacewicz.polmic.pl/en/human-being>.

⁸ Detailed accounts about Polish music can be found in the following volumes: Maja Trochimczyk (ed.), *After Chopin: Essays in Polish Music*, vol. 6 (Los Angeles: Polish Music Center at USC, 2000) and Adrian Thomas, *Polish Music Since Szymanowski* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

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societies, and the development of choirs and musical literacy. Gathering together to rejuvenate their music, the 'Young Poland' group (*Młoda Polska*) followed new directions.⁹ Mieczysław Karłowicz (1876–1909) and Ludomir Róžcki (1883–1953) wrote symphonic poems. Ignacy Paderewski (1860–1941) was a composer, international virtuoso pianist, and an important Polish statesman; his opera, *Manru*, was performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1902. Karol Szymanowski (1882–1937) composed operas, symphonies, violin concertos, a ballet (*Harnasie*), and a *Stabat Mater*. Perceived as the most famous 'modern' Polish composer of his day, Szymanowski's late romantic style developed to include impressionist and oriental ideas, and he was influenced by folk music of the Górale people (of southern Poland). Originating from the plains of Mazovia around Warsaw, the 'mazur' (mazurka) had become Poland's most typical musical/cultural export, largely thanks to internationally celebrated Fryderyk Chopin (1810–49). Also originating from Mazovia was the 'oberek' folk dance, and the fast and syncopated 'krakowiak' came from Krakow, further in the north. Many pieces by Chopin, Szymanowski, and Bacewicz incorporate characteristics of these and other Polish folk tunes.



Figure 3 Karol Szymanowski

⁹ See Teresa Chylińska, 'Young Poland', *Grove Music Online*: <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.49416>

To provide a foretaste of the historical and political background that will be encountered in this Element, it should be noted that Poland first became independent from the Russian-controlled *Mitteleuropa* in 1918 – when Bacewicz was nine years old. Following Independence, the Polish population centres (notably Warsaw, Kraków, and Łódź) grew, and the economy improved until the Great Depression that darkened Europe (1929–39). Increasingly aggressive, Nazi Germany invaded Poland in 1939, and Warsaw fell on 27 September. Many cultural institutions were closed at this time, and the careers of many musicians came to an end. In the underground resistance movement there was a clandestine Music Council, and Bacewicz hosted some of their off-the-record concerts, keeping Polish music alive. The Warsaw Uprising of 1944 ended with the Germans destroying the city. A communist government was agreed upon at the end of World War II, and there was a particularly oppressive period under Stalin's control (1948–53) with the diktats of socialist realism, when the creative process was compromised by state censorship. However, there was a liberalising trend from 1956 onward. Started in 1956, the Warsaw Autumn was a major international festival of contemporary music, and Bacewicz was part of its creation.

Times have changed, and we can now appreciate the strength Bacewicz brought to the many challenges of her life. She was, and still is, an inspiration to musicians, Poles, and people in general in the way she led her life as a composer, violinist, humanitarian, and ambassador for her country. This Element aspires to contribute to her regaining recognition.

1 Early Maturity to 1945

Grażyna Bacewicz was born in 1909 in Łódź, Poland, when her country was still partitioned between Austria, Prussia, and Russia.¹⁰ Both her parents were musical, and they gave her a well-grounded childhood. Her mother, Maria Modlińska (1871–1958), the daughter of a Warsaw engineer, had a cultured upbringing, worked in bank administration, and was a fine amateur pianist. In 1903, Maria married Vincas Bacevičius (1875–1952), a Lithuanian and music graduate of the Teacher Training College in Veiveriai (Kaunas, Lithuania).¹¹ Bacewicz was the third of their four children (two boys and two girls), and the children's names – Kiejstut, Vytautus, and

¹⁰ Łódź is Poland's third most populated city, after Warsaw and Kraków. The name Łódź translates as 'boat', and the inhabitants call themselves *Łódzianie*, the 'boat people' – possibly referring to the historic multicultural nature of the city's inhabitants.

¹¹ From 1795, the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth was dissolved by Austria, Prussia, and Poland, effectively erasing them from the map. In 1885, Russian became the official language in Lithuania, and many Lithuanians emigrated. Vincas shared the fate of other teachers in Lithuania in being forbidden to teach, and was deported to Poland in 1899.

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Grażyna – were more Lithuanian than Polish, except for the youngest, Wanda.¹² Bacewicz's eldest brother, Kiejstut, said of family life:

We owe to both our parents our respect for work and order, for learning, art and human values in general. We inherited musical dispositions from both our father and our mother, but that genetic legacy is not all. What really affected the development of the children's personalities was the atmosphere of their home and educational effort on the part of both parents.¹³

Passionate about music, Vincas Bacevičius pushed all his children to practice and play from an early age. Bacewicz later recalled that she was engulfed in sound as a baby, and two of her short stories refer to her father's teaching and devotion to music. In 'A Lyrical Introduction', a grouchy relative was convinced he was harming the children by submerging them in music from a very young age.¹⁴ 'Still More Lyrical' spoke of how her younger sister, aged four, was pushed to play in the family string quartet. Dreaming of poetry, Wanda hid under the table, hoping not to be found.¹⁵



Figure 4 Vincas Bacevičius, 1920s

¹² Grażyna is derived from the Lithuanian adjective *gražus* meaning pretty.

¹³ Kiejstut Bacewicz, 'Wspomnienie o braci Vytautasie Baceviciusie', in Krzysztof Droba, ed., *W kręgu muzyki litewskiej* (Kraków: Akademia muzyczna w Krakowie, 1997). Kiejstut Bacewicz (1904–93) went on to become a highly esteemed pianist, composer, and teacher in Polish musical life. His full biography can be found on the website of the Grażyna and Kiejstut Bacewicz Academy of Music, Łódź: www.amuz.lodz.pl/en/52-system-en-gb/academy.

¹⁴ Bacewicz, 'A Lyrical Introduction' in *A Distinguishing Mark*, p. 7.

¹⁵ Bacewicz, 'Still More Lyrical', *ibid.*, p. 8.

Vincas taught Bacewicz the violin and the piano as a child, and she was immediately fond of the violin. All four children played chamber music (in the aforementioned family string quartet), both in their home and in public. Vincas wanted to prepare his children for the Conservatory and so urged them on: there was little free time. Bacewicz said, 'from the earliest days we lived in a world of sound because of his love of music'.¹⁶ She probably learnt her work ethic from him.

Bacewicz showed considerable musical talent early on: a printed programme lists the seven-year-old appearing as a pianist and violinist during *Podwieczorek Muzyczny* (Tea Music) in June 1916. She commenced regular schooling in 1919, entering the Humanistic Secondary School in Łódź, and the Helena Kijeńska-Dobkiewiczowa Music Conservatory to study violin, piano, and theory. Regarded as something of a child prodigy, she played several violin concerti with the orchestra at the Kijeńska-Dobkiewiczowa Conservatory before the age of twelve. She then started to develop an interest in writing music and began composing from the age of thirteen.¹⁷ She soon discovered pleasure in creating instrumental pieces, and her early works include *Four Preludes* for piano (1921) and *Preludium and Fugue* for piano (1927) – welcoming the challenge of writing fugues. *Five Pieces for Four Flutes* (1929) followed, and also a *Sinfonietta* for chamber orchestra (1929). However, she wasn't always pleased with her compositions and sometimes discounted them from her oeuvre. A couple of string quartets (1930 and 1931) went that way.

Independence

Poland's national symbol is the white-tailed eagle, denoting vitality, strength, and tenacity: these were all qualities Grażyna Bacewicz possessed in abundance. Her intense early music education coincided with momentous changes for Poland. In November 1918, when she was nine years old, Poland achieved national independence (with the Treaty of Versailles) after 123 years of occupation by Prussians, Russians, and Austrians. This was a significant moment for all Polish people, and the liberation of their country had profound creative effects, including a sense of responsibility for Polish music. Uniquely, Ignacy Paderewski (1869–1941) was both a musician – a composer and an international touring virtuoso pianist – and an important Polish statesman: he was intimately involved with events leading up to Polish independence and served for a time as

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Bacewicz spoke about this in a radio interview in 1964, reprinted in *Ruch Muzyczny* 1989, no. 3, p. 7.



Figure 5 The Polish Eagle

Poland's first prime minister.¹⁸ Even as a child, Bacewicz would probably have been aware of Paderewski's celebrated performances of the music of Chopin, a composer whose influence on generations of Polish composers (including Bacewicz's) was both lasting and profound. One of the first Polish composers to use elements of Polish folk music in his works, Chopin also was a national symbol of resistance and a source of cultural identity.

Regarding influential female role models, the young Bacewicz would likely have known of two-time Nobel Prize-winner Marie Curie (1867–1934) and of Polish composer and virtuoso pianist Maria Szymanowska (1789–1831), who was described by Goethe as 'a great talent bordering on madness'.¹⁹ Maria Konopnicka (1842–1910), a poet, author, and activist for Polish independence, was also familiar to Bacewicz: she later wrote the music for a 1960 film based on Konopnicka's story *Marysia i krasnoludki* (*Maria and the Dwarfs*). Other possible role models on Bacewicz's radar may have been the composer Tekla Bądarzewska-Baranowska (1829/1832–61), whose most famous piece, *The Maiden's Prayer*, first published in Warsaw in 1856, was still selling well in

¹⁸ For further information, see Jim Samson, 'Paderewski, Ignacy Jan', *Grove Music Online*: <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.20672>; and 'Jan Ignacy Paderewski', Polish Music Center: <https://polishmusic.usc.edu/research/composers/ignacy-jan-paderewski>.

¹⁹ 'das größte Talent gleichsam nur als Folie', letter from Goethe to his daughter-in-law Ottilie (18 August 1823), cited in E. Zapolska Chappelle, trans. F. Goodman, 'Maria Szymanowska (1789–1831): A Woman of Europe': www.maria-szymanowska.eu/ku-to-jest-en?cmn_id=1017&ph_content_start=show.



Figure 6 Marie Curie

Melbourne, Australia, in 1924; and Regine Wieniawska (1879–1932), daughter of Polish composer Henryk Wieniawski, who composed songs, violin pieces, and orchestral works under the pseudonym of Poldowski.

A Family Break-up and Warsaw

The years 1918–20 also saw Lithuania gain independence, something which prompted Bacewicz's father to give thought to returning to his home nation. Vincas eventually left Poland for Lithuania in 1923 – when Bacewicz was fourteen – and settled in Kaunas, where he worked for the Lithuanian education system for the next twenty-nine years, until his death. Although the intention probably was that his family would join him in Lithuania, this was not to be. Vytautas (the second eldest son) chose to follow his father back to Lithuania in 1926. While there, as well as giving piano recitals, he helped develop original radical composition ideas in his new country.²⁰ Bacewicz, her mother, and her two other siblings remained in Poland, eventually moving from Łódź to

²⁰ Bacewicz's second eldest brother, Vytautas Bacevičius (1905–70), became a Lithuanian composer and pianist, who established his career in Lithuania before permanently settling in America after the outbreak of World War II. For further information, see 'Vytautas Bacevičius', *Music Information Centre Lithuania*: www.mic.lt/en/database/classical/composers/bacevičius.