By Tom Zajac

An American

Winter 2011  Early Music America
LAST AUGUST, I had the good fortune to be asked to take part in a ten-day research trip to an early music festival in the small village of Narol in the southeast corner of Poland. The participants would hear concerts of Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque music from Polish sources, meet the musicians and organizers, and take day trips to visit cultural and historic sights in the area. I was invited by Anna Perzanowska, director of music programming at the Polish Cultural Institute New York, upon the recommendation of my friend, keyboardist Christine Gevert. The Institute is an international program of the Polish ministry of foreign affairs, whose mission is to promote Polish arts and culture in the U.S. Every year it sends American artists to Poland in the hope that they will develop projects with Polish music, performers, and composers upon their return. In 2011, the focus was on early music. I was eager to take part, since I have mostly Polish ancestry and a vivid interest in Polish history, culture, and musical heritage. I had visited and performed in Poland back in 1987 and ’88, and I was looking forward to seeing how life had changed there 22 years after the fall of the Communist government.

In a strange coincidence, not two weeks after accepting the offer, I received a Facebook greeting from Wanda Laddy, soprano with the Warsaw-based vocal quintet Il Canto. We had worked together and become friends during one week when the ensemble came to the U.S. in January of 2002, as guests of the Folger Consort, for concerts at the Washington National Cathedral. We had not been in touch since that week, and then, out of the blue, over nine years later, she wrote to say hello. What made this coincidence even more amazing is that Wanda would be accompanying her husband, Paweł Iwaszkiewicz, to a performance of his group at the Jarosław early music festival taking place the same week, 65 km away from Narol. (Imagine – two early music festivals happening not 40 miles away from each other!) These two would become dear friends during my trip and act as guides for my journey of discovery.

I must mention the delightful traveling companions who took part in this trip with me. Ms. Perzanowska, trained as a cellist and ethnomusicologist, but working for the Institute for several years now, did a superb job organizing the trip and filling our days and evenings with rich musical and cultural experiences. The other three were Christine Gevert, a wonderful harpsichordist and organist and director of the ensemble Crescendo! based in western Connecticut; Linden Chubin, director of education and concerts for the Morgan Library & Museum in New York City; and Frederick Renz, director of one of America’s longest established and most highly regarded early music ensembles, Early Music New York.

Our first activity upon arriving in Warsaw was to meet with the project manager of the Institute of Music and Dance, Jarosław Janikowski, and Baroque violinist Agata Sapiecha at the Institute’s temporary offices. Janikowski described the mission and projects of the Institute, which offers incredible support and promotion to performing artists of all kinds in Warsaw and throughout Poland. They just published a comprehensive “Report on the State of Polish Music,” with summaries in...
English. We also heard from the energetic and resourceful Agata Sapiecha, one of Poland’s leading Baroque specialists, who discussed her years working to raise the level of historic instrumental playing in Poland, her educational programs, the early music festival she directs in Wilanów, and the work of her professional group Il Tempo. That evening we heard a concert of Chopin and other Romantic songs and piano works performed by the German soprano Dorothee Mields and renowned Chopin specialist Nelson Goerner, who played on an early 19th-century piano.

The next day, Saturday, our driver brought us to Narol, a lovely little town a six hour drive from Warsaw. The Narol.Arte Festival is a young event, having just finished its fourth year. It’s run by Władysław Kłosiewicz, one of the most respected harpsichordists and early music directors in Poland, and his younger brother Boguslaw. They chose Narol as the location of the festival because with funding they were able to purchase an 18th-century castle on the edge of town. When it is renovated, it will be the site of all the festival activities. For now, concerts are held at one of two churches in town and meetings at the only restaurant. The theme for this year’s festival, “Pana, Wójta i Plebana” (Lord, Alderman, and Vicar) was perfect for the purposes of our study visit, since almost all the concerts on the series were Polish performers presenting programs of Polish early music. The week’s schedule consisted of a daily activity, usually a visit to a nearby historic town or site, an evening concert in Narol, and a post-concert gathering at Sakra, the local restaurant where we had the opportunity to speak with the artists over beer and a plate of pierogis.

Our day trips included a visit to the historic wooden churches in the area and trips to the nearby historic cities of Jarosław, Łańcut, and across the Ukrainian border to the former Polish city of L’viv (Lwów in Polish). Most memorable was the town of Zamość, a gem of a Renaissance planned city modeled on an idealized North Italian city-state. All of these towns would prove to have musical significance for us as well. We even fitted in a lovely bike ride through the Polish countryside.

The opening concert of the festival was performed Saturday night by a Polish ensemble, but it did not consist of Polish music. The program was entitled “Orient-Okcydent” and was a collaboration between three members of the group Schola Wegajty and two Persian classical musicians. The Village Theater Wegajty was started in 1986, at the end of the Communist era, after the period of martial law, when the country’s arts communities were searching for meaning in their historical and cultural traditions.
cultural roots. It is a cooperative of musicians, actors, and scholars who explore the worlds of ritual theater, folk music and dance, and traditional and Medieval sacred arts. The Schola is the branch of the cooperative that now focuses its efforts on the production of liturgical dramas and the exploration of chant and other sacred musical arts. It is led by Wolfgang Niklaus, a native German who came to Poland in the ’80s to study theater with famous experimental director Jerzy Grotowski.

The trio of musicians from the Schola alternated short sets of 11th- to 13th-century chant and polyphony with performance of traditional Persian songs and improvisations by Warsaw-based ney player Mohammed Rasouli and tar player Mohssen Hosseini. As is common with this type of East-meets-West program, the Eastern musicians, immersed as they are in their instrumental techniques and unbroken performing traditions, stole the show. Especially notable was the heart-rending beauty of Rasouli’s ney playing. The collaboration was most successful when, at the very end of the program, the two groups nicely merged their styles in performances of Persian settings of Rumi texts.

On Sunday morning, at our opening meeting, Kłosiewicz gave us an excellent and welcome overview of the history of music in Poland from early sources of chant and polyphony to the symphonic and choral works of the late-18th century. He then introduced us to the life and works of Kaziemierz Piwkowski, the founder of historically informed performance in Poland in the 1960s and ’70s. He is still active today at the age of 90 and was scheduled to meet with us that day, but a non-life-threatening surgical procedure prevented him from doing so. His importance cannot be overestimated; he filled roughly the same role in Poland as Noah Greenberg did in the U.S., but also did so much more. He was a tireless promoter of Medieval and Renaissance music, he built all the instruments that were used in his ensemble Fistulatores et Tubicinatores Varsovienses, and he did most of the research and transcribed much of the music that the group performed. In its most active years, from 1964 to ’74, the group toured all over Europe, performing almost 500 concerts, and all this while working under an oppressive Communist government! The talk was supplemented with a documentary film about Piwkowski with wonderful archival footage.

Later that day we visited the town center of the nearby city of Jarosław, the location of the other early music festival. As dusk turned to night in the town center of the nearby city of Jarosław, the audience instinctively knew when to dance a mazurka, an oberek, or a polonaise to the Telemann tunes played by a group of five musicians calling itself The Orchestra in the Time of Pestilence.
square, five musicians began to play, performing on the unlikely combination of violin, bagpipe, regal, trombone, and string bass. In this clever program conceived by Paweł Iwaszkiewicz, the musicians, dramatically calling themselves Orkiestra Czasów Zarazy (Orchestra in the Time of Pestilence), attempted to recreate both the ensemble and the music that Telemann heard as a young man sometime between 1702 and 1705 when visiting a tavern in Kraków. He described this visit in his autobiography: “It is hard to believe what wonderful ideas these pipers and fiddlers have when, during a break in the dancing, they will begin to play fantasias. In just eight days of listening they will provide an observant man with a stock of ideas that will last him a lifetime.” With great fortune, 31 melodies identified as Polish dance tunes, some in Telemann’s own hand, have recently come to light in the Rostock library in Northern Germany. The playing by the band of Iwaszkiewicz’s arrangements was heartfelt, joyous, and lusty, but what marked the concert as a complete success was the dancing done by many in the audience, who instinctively knew by listening when to dance a mazurka, an oberek, or a polonaise to these tunes. After a very impressive fireworks display, the bagpipers led the audience into a beer garden where general revelry and more dancing took place.

The Jarosław Festival, “Song of our Roots,” where these opening night events took place, is a very hip, youth-oriented festival whose very programming challenges the definition of early music. Combining performances of early music and traditional music from Poland and other Eastern European cultures with morning and evening plainchant services, workshops, lecture/discussions, and late-night folk dancing, the week-long festival draws college students, young artist types, and people of all ages who are interested in their own history and traditions and those of the world’s cultures. I had a couple of brief interviews with the artistic director of the festival, Maciej Kaziński (who also performed in the two previously mentioned concerts). He was a very busy man that week but graciously took time out to ensure that I was treated as an honored
guest and to speak to me of the festival and its mission: bringing these varied repertories to a wider audience in a welcoming and joyful environment. Now in its 19th year, the festival’s activities center around a restored Benedictine monastery that is today also used as a conference center and hotel. For the equivalent of about $200 (less for a student with school ID), a participant can get a week-long festival pass, which includes a room in the monastery, three meals a day, and entrance to all concerts and events! Beautifully designed program booklets add to the charm. This year’s lineup of concerts, besides Orkiestra Czasów Zarazy, included Georgian liturgical music and table songs, Russian Cossack songs, Byzantine Akathist hymns, Polish 18th-century funeral songs, and a program of 16th-century Italian songs by the Italian bowed-string player, singer, and rising early music star Viva Bianca Luna Biffi.

On Monday evening: Ars Cantus, directed by Tomasz Dobrzański, performed music of the 15th-century composer Petrus Wilhelmi de Grudencz (Piotr z Grudziądza). This performance was a revelation both because of the quality of the music of this little-known composer (his works are scattered about in several central European sources),

Links
Polish Cultural Institute
www.polishculture-nyc.org

Narol Arte Festival

Jaroslaw Festival
www.festiwal.jaroslaw.pl/eng/index.html

Schola Węgajty
www.wegajty.pl

Sabionetta
www.sabionetta.pl
www.myspace.com/sabionetta

Janusz Prusinowski Trio
www.januszprusinowski.trio.pl

Camerata Silesia
www.camerata.silesia.pl/en

Narol Baroque
www.narol.free.ngo.pl/n-baroque.htm

Ars Cantus
www.arscantus.art.pl

Orchestra in the Time of Pestilence
www.youtube.com/watch?v=DKWF4x1G88&feature=related

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Poland

including the *Glogauer Liederbuch* and the Bohemian *Codex Speciálník*) and to the high quality of the ensemble itself, which stands among the finest European groups performing late-Medieval repertories. Petrus came from a Prussian family who sent him to the University at Kraków, and he worked, at least in his later years, in Silesia, in the western part of the kingdom. His works consist almost entirely of sacred and ceremonial motets in Latin that are settings of his own poetry. Sometimes his style is reminiscent of Ciconia, at other times he successfully mirrors the fauxbourdon style of Dufay hymn settings. With only one exception, the texts form an acrostic of his name – a hidden signature – where the first letter of each of the first five words spell his given name, as in this panegyric to Saint Martin of Tours:

Præsulem
gphebeatum,
Trabateum,
radiatum
Venustemus
sedulo….

Ars Cantus, at least in this formation, consisted of four wonderful singers and a fine instrumental ensemble of two wind players (the director himself and one other playing recorders and shawms), a sackbut, a vielle, a chamber organ, and a mandora (a type of plectrum lute also played by the director). Dobrzański was also the maker of several of the instruments played in the concert. This is not unusual in Poland, as quality instruments were all but inaccessible before 1990 and prohibitively expensive for years after that, so the players often became their own makers. If that weren’t enough to keep Dobrzański busy, he also finds time to direct an annual early music festival, Forum Musicum, which takes place every August in his hometown of Wrocław.

Tuesday night: Another day, another revelation! The folk music of most Eastern European countries has been well documented on recordings, well revived by younger players, and in some cases (think Bulgarian women’s voices) has
Poland

become a big hit. Poland has been an exception. Access to Poland’s folk traditions, at least in the U.S., has been limited largely to a few archival recordings and to the narrow crossover appeal of a group such as The Warsaw Village Band. So it was a tremendous ear opener to hear the music of a quartet led by Janusz Prusinowski – fiddle, cello-sized drone-bass, percussion (the player using a small sidewise held bass drum with attached cymbal and triangle), and flute/shawm. The musicians fused a reverential respect for tradition with the sensibilities of avant-garde performance and improvisation. The music, upon first hearing, sounds simple, but as you enter more deeply, you hear complexities of rhythm that are rooted in the dance but defy analysis. Their music was simultaneously primordial and bracingly contemporary.

Fiddle player Prusinowski’s authoritative playing comes from his many years of visits with old masters in the small villages of rural Poland, learning their tunes and their techniques. Now he and his ensemble are at the forefront of a belated but welcome folk revival.

On Wednesday night, we heard Sabionetta, directed by Angnieszka Obst-Chwała, with the vocal trio Tempestus. The very talented Obst-Chwała had appeared earlier in the week as vielle player with Ars Cantus, and now she fronted the youthful ensemble of instrumentalists (recorder, bowed strings and percussion) and singers. In this group, all

From the music library in the Łańcut Castle, the score for La Donna Bizarra by Marcello di Capua (pseudonym of Marcello Bernardini).
in their 20s and early 30s, we saw the future of early music performance in Poland. They played and sang with vibrancy and enthusiasm, but perhaps were not shown in their best light. The program of music from the 1559 Kan-
cionał Zamojski consisted of short, multi-
versed, often homophonic Protestant
motets, hymns, and psalm settings, and
while this publication was very impor-
tant in the history of music in Poland, a
whole concert of its contents did not
make for a compelling listening. Later
that evening, the director confided to me
that this was not the group’s first choice
of program (they prefer lately to do
14th-century Italian repertory), but
Kłosiewicz had asked her to present a
16th-century program because that peri-
od was under-represented in the festival.
Obst-Chwala comes from an early music
family. Since 1983, her father, Krzysztof
Obst, has directed the ensemble, Capella
all’Antico, made up entirely of high
school and university students from the
city of Zamość and the surrounding
area. They perform in Renaissance cos-
tumes (very convincingly in this very
Renaissance city), play on instruments
mostly made by the director, and per-
form in festivals throughout Poland
and beyond.

Thursday’s day trip deserves special
mention. We visited the beautifully pre-
served Łańcut castle, a mini-Versailles
and home of the royal Lubomirski fam-
ily from the 1630s on. In the late-18th
century, Izabela Lubomirksa built up
the castle’s stunning music library; it
now contains over 1,500 volumes from
the late-18th to mid-19th centuries. She
was a talented amateur musician who
commissioned works by Polish pianists
and Italian opera composers and col-
lected chamber music from all over
Western Europe.

Thursday evening’s concert by Narol
Baroque was led with finesse and author-
ity from the organ and regal by festival
director Kłosiewicz. The small and tight
ensemble of recorder, violin, three violas
da gamba, and theorbo was joined by
five early trombones in a program fea-
turing the instrumental works of 17th-
century composer Adam Jarzębski.
Jarzębski was a violinist based in Warsaw,
and his wonderful and sometimes
Poland

idiosyncratic music survived in a single collection, the Canzoni e Concerti, published in 1627. The mixed ensemble presented these works with a great variety of expression and instrumental color, with all players, in turn, having their moments to shine. The delightfully pungent regal was a popular continuo instrument at this time but is rarely heard in U.S. performances of 17th-century music. It was exciting to hear, but sometimes it overpowered the string instruments. That was not a concern for the trombones (who called themselves Trombastic in what I can only assume is a turn of ironic self-referential humor). They played mostly at medium to full volume and with plenty of brassy punch. This worked splendidly in the dance numbers early in the concert, but in the more sophisticated sonatas and in the mass movements and motets that rounded out the program, I longed for a more nuanced, vocal approach. As these five players are clearly very proficient at their instruments, it seems this approach is a matter of their own choosing and not due to any technical limitations.

Friday evening we were treated to a double feature of splendid early keyboard literature performed in two churches by Maria Erdman and Christine Gevert, one of the American guests. Gevert presented a generous sampling of Baroque keyboard works as a tribute to Wanda Landowska, the groundbreaking Polish harpsichord virtuoso who championed the instrument at the beginning of the 20th century. Gevert lives in Lakeville, Connecticut, the same town where Landowska eventually made her home after 1941, and she has become something of an advocate of her life and work. Among the offerings: the always-shocking Toccata No. 7 of Michelangelo Rossi, the luscious Handel Suite in D Minor, and some dazzling French character pieces by Rameau.

In my small contribution to the festival, I led the audience with my bagpipe from one church to the other through the streets of Narol. When we arrived at the other venue, we were treated to the

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The initial response upon hearing a concert of clavichord music is always one of shock. The instrument seems impossibly soft in a large space surrounded by an audience of 60. But the ears adjust and pull the music into focus as if under a microscope. However, by adjusting to the quiet sound, any extraneous sound becomes amplified as well. Rustling cloth is a windstorm and a cough is a shotgun blast. So it was extremely irritating, to say the least, that there were several photographers who were taking pictures throughout the concert!

Maria Erdman’s exquisite playing, however, overcame all obstacles as she explored the expressive possibilities of this flexible instrument. She framed the program with two delightful sonatas in galant style by the late 18th-century Christian Wilhelm Podbielski. The remainder of the program were dances, ricercares, and chanson intabulations from various Polish keyboard tablatures. Erdman is in demand as a continuo player and has made a reputation for herself, performing both Renaissance repertories and as an organist championing 19th-century Polish organ literature. In this she follows in the footsteps of her late father Jerzy Erdman, who was a preeminent organist, teacher, and scholar.

On Saturday, the group journeyed across the border into the Ukraine to visit the city of L’viv, where we toured the town center and had a brief meeting with Roman Stelmaszczuk, who directs both a vocal ensemble, Acapella Leopoli, and an annual early music festival. He kindly gifted us with CDs of his ensemble’s performances, which upon my return to the U.S. revealed a treasure of unknown repertories from the outer edge of Eastern Europe.

The final concert of the week was a very festive performance by the 18-voiced choir Camerata Silesia, directed with razor-sharp precision by Anna Szostak. The group, based in the city of Katowice, ranks among the finest vocal ensembles in Poland and has made many recordings of gems of Renaissance and Baroque literature as well as contemporary works, many of which were written for the group. Saturday’s concert started with a lovely impressionistic piece by Zygmunt Krauze on texts from the letters of Chopin, written in 2010 for his 200th anniversary year. The remainder of the program was devoted to some of the great choral works of the Polish Renaissance and Baroque, ending with four motets and the splendid 12-voiced Magnificat by the great Venetian-trained composer Mikołaj Zieleniński.

I heard wonderful concerts on this trip, met delightful, talented, and passionate musicians, and visited historic towns, churches, and castles in the region. I learned more than I possibly could have imagined about Polish history and culture. Every day brought new revelations and musical discoveries of unknown repertories, sources, and composers. All of these experiences are etched in my mind and will stay with me always.