

The Polish-American Ensemble---Spring Tour 2003

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One often hears that music is the universal language. I have been very fortunate to experience that universality many times during my professional career. At no time has the power of music been more apparent than during a recent tour in Poland. I will attempt to share in words what occurred in sound.

I believe it is important to provide a brief background on how this musical opportunity came about. In February of 2003, Naomi Oliphant and I had the occasion to visit Poland to explore the possibility of establishing a musical exchange program with the Akademia Muzyczna im. Karola Szymanowskiego (Szymanowski Academy of Music) in Katowice. What we found was a progressive and well-established music school whose curriculum was very similar to ours at the University of Louisville School of Music. After considerable discussion, all parties agreed to pursue exchanges of faculty and students, with the hope of broadening the educational opportunities and experiences for all. Both musical institutions have openly embraced this exciting program, and exchanges are occurring at this time.

It would also be valuable to know the general atmosphere within Poland to appreciate how this cooperation became possible. While not a historian or social scientist, I take pride in trying to understand the political and social experiences of the people I meet during my travels. I had almost no point of reference when it came to Poland. I only had the slightest knowledge of its place in history as a country caught between very aggressive neighbors, Germany and Russia, occupied by one or both for many decades and even centuries. I found that their collective experience of occupation fostered a population who has looked for freedom of expression. Since removing the oppressive control of Communism in 1989, the country is alive with people who now have the opportunity to interact and exchange with others throughout the world. Poles have had a long and healthy relationship with their counterparts in the United States. This is due in part to the large immigrant Polish population and our mutual interests in the arts and freedom of expression.

The desire to express one's search for freedom is visible everywhere, especially in the arts. Their literature, painting, theater, film, and especially music display this quest for self-expression. Music plays a very important role in the life and identity of Poland and is revered as one of the most respected professions. Pianist/composer Frederic Chopin is considered a national treasure, and his works are known to all. Internationally recognized contemporary composers Witold Lutosławski and Krzysztof Penderecki received the University of Louisville's Grawemeyer Awards for Music in 1985 and 1992 respectively. Music and all it brings to society is taken very seriously.

While classical music has a long, established tradition, many other forms of musical expression are present throughout the country. Forbidden by both the Nazi and communist regimes, jazz has played and continues to play a prominent role in Poland. There is a very active jazz community with a national jazz society; jazz clubs are in all major cities and most other populated areas. Since 1954, numerous international jazz festivals have brought many leading jazz performers such as Dave Brubeck, Duke Ellington, and Miles Davis to Poland. Native musicians such as trumpeter Tomasz Stanko, pianist Adam Makowicz (who performed at the University of Louisville School of Music in September 2003), violinist Michal Unbaniak, vocalist Urszula Dudziak, and many others are recognized in both their homeland and abroad as exceptional performers.

Jazz education also has a long history in Poland. As early as 1946, jazz was taught in YMCA clubs by Leopold Tyrmand. The Jazz Department at the Academy in Katowice celebrates its thirty-fifth anniversary this year. Founded in 1969, long before many respected educational institutions in the United States even began to recognize the value of the teaching of jazz and improvisation, the Jazz Department in Katowice is the only one of its type in the country. The faculty is comprised of many of Eastern Europe's leading jazz performer/educators. With approximately four hundred students enrolled in their various jazz programs, the department has played a major role in the training of musicians of all ages. Like the larger home institutions, the jazz programs at the Academy and the University of Louisville are very similar. Each focuses on educating their students in the basics and traditions of jazz and improvisation. Combo and small group performance is the primary performing vehicle, with each ensemble directed by a faculty member. The faculty and students are actively involved in joint efforts. Both programs are highly influenced by the teaching materials developed by world-renowned jazz educator and publisher Jamey Aebersold. One would find the same materials and recordings in the studios of each school. You can imagine my surprise to hear many of the same pieces and comments as I hear at home.

It was in this atmosphere that guitarist Craig Wagner, drummer Jason Tiemann, and I visited Poland in May, 2003. The reason for our visit was to present educational programs and to perform in schools, clubs, and concert halls throughout the country. Joining us to form the Polish-American Ensemble were two incredible musicians, Jacek and Wojcek Niedziela, both faculty members of the Academy's Jazz Department. Jacek is my counterpart at the Academy (Director of the Jazz Department) and a very gifted bassist. His twin brother Wojcek is an amazing pianist who was a finalist in the Monk Competition a few years ago. While not having played together before and speaking different languages (fortunately for the Americans, Jacek and Wojcek speak English), it was obvious from our first rehearsal that everyone was on the same wavelength. The repertoire consisted of originals, standards, and pieces made up on the spot. Everyone enjoyed the challenge of performing each others' works and creating music together. Students from the Academy sat and listened to our rehearsals, offering encouragement and suggestions. It was amazing how quickly everything came together.

The first few days were used not only to become acquainted musically but to acclimate to the six hour time change. During this period, the American trio interacted with the Polish students by offering suggestions during student ensemble rehearsals, presenting master classes, and teaching private lessons. We each remarked at how similar our students were to theirs.

Our first activity outside of the Academy was at the School of Music in Chorzow where we spent an entire day presenting individual clinics, a collective workshop, and a school performance. The most memorable part was walking in to the concert hall and hearing their student orchestra playing a Mozart violin concerto. The young violinist, about sixteen, was truly gifted, and the ensemble was first rate. The same students were some of the first to ask questions and interact with our jazz group. We were all pleased to see how receptive and knowledgeable the students were.

Other performances and educational presentations occurred at the School of Music in Gliwice, a club in Rzeszow (about 20 kilometers from the Ukrainian border), and in Cieszyn at the Silesian University Department of Arts and Music. Our time in Cieszyn was especially memorable. It is a beautiful town right at the border of Poland and the Czech Republic, about two hours from Katowice. Following our educational presentation and concert in the early afternoon, we walked across the border (a lovely river) to the Czech Republic. While there were many similarities, it was obvious that we were in different country. The Poles take great pride in the progress they have made modernizing their country and becoming more like the 'West'. Tesin, the Czech town, was obviously not as far along as Cieszyn, seemingly more like it was a decade or so ago.

The Silesian University is most noted for its graphic arts courses and program. Their Rektor (President) was highly complimentary of our efforts and took great pride in showing us his students. Their artwork was stunning and highly creative. Everywhere you looked you could find someone creating with clay, watercolors, oils, lithographs, textiles, or computers. No two looked alike, and we were offered samples to take home. What a treat! In addition, a poster was created in honor of our visit, and it now hangs proudly in my office. Completing that day was a jam session with local musicians performing in a club with standing room only. It was great to hear their interpretations of jazz standards. The only language being spoken was jazz.

Our time in Poland ended with a final, formal evening concert at the Academy in Katowice. The group, now having performed for more than ten days, was a very cohesive unit. It was like we had been playing together for years. Everyone felt at home taking chances and stretching musical boundaries. It was also quite gratifying to see people from places we had visited in the audience, having traveled many miles to hear the group once again. We all knew when the music ended that we would try to play together again.

The exchange between our Polish jazz friends did not end with this final concert. Three outstanding students from the Academy were awarded scholarships to the Jamey Aebersold Summer Jazz Workshops last summer. Jamey's workshops are presented annually at the University of Louisville during July. Our visitors were on campus for two weeks and interacted with students from throughout the United States and twelve other countries. It is our intent to continue to award scholarships to worthy students from the Academy.

The Polish-American Ensemble has been able to perform again. Jacek and Wojcek this time traveled to our country as featured artists during the University of Louisville's Jazz Week 2004. The Niedzielas presented a splendid duo set which was followed by a reunion of the quintet. The group also performed in Cincinnati and presented educational clinics in area schools for students of all ages.

I feel certain that I speak for all involved by saying that the exchange that began so modestly last year has exceeded our expectations. Music really is the universal language, helping to open doors and foster cooperation between people wherever it is given a chance. Hopefully this musical relationship will continue and expand in the future.