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## Two sides of the Olympic medal - the controversy surrounding "II Sinfonia Olimpica" (1948) by Zbigniew Turski : contribution to the analysis

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## **Two Sides of the Olympic Medal— the Controversy surrounding *II Sinfonia Olimpica* (1948) by Zbigniew Turski. Contribution to the Analysis**

### **Abstract**

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The main topic of the article is *II Sinfonia Olimpica* by Zbigniew Turski, a composer who is barely known in Poland nowadays. The reason of this is the socio-political situation of the country after World War II. The composer was one of first victims of Stalinist cultural policy. At a conference in Łagów Lubuski in 1949, his *II Sinfonia Olimpica* was named formalistic, pessimistic and incompatible with the socialist realism standards. However, the composition had won a gold medal at the XIV Olympic Games in London in 1948 and this success had had a great resonance in Polish music press before the conference. The article has several objectives. The first of them is to present socio-political situation in musical environment. Moreover, it shows the reception of the symphony after its premiere at the conference in Łagów Lubuski. Finally, an attempt to analyze the *II Sinfonia Olimpica* is made. It is noticed that the symphony stands out against other compositions created in the mid-twentieth century particularly by dint of its deeply emotional and dramatic character. The achieved mood results from the traumatic war experience of the composer. Although the Neoclassical tradition is visible, Turski used the innovative musical

language and his attempt to create his own music style is noticeable. According to the author's opinion, if it had not been socialist realism in the mid-twentieth century, *II Sinfonia Olimpica* could be now perceived as one of the most important symphonies created within the last century in Poland.

## Keywords

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Zbigniew Turski, *II Sinfonia Olimpica*, socialist realism

Zbigniew Turski is not an easily recognizable composer in the Polish musical environment today. Meanwhile, his *II Sinfonia Olimpica*<sup>1</sup> is one of a few compositions which provoked so numerous and animated discussion in post-war Poland. The reason for these controversy surrounding the composition was its success abroad, namely the gold medal during the Olympic Art Competitions at the Summer Olympics in London in 1948. This achievement had a great resonance in Polish musical environment, and Polish press enthusiastically wrote about international success of *Sinfonia Olimpica*.<sup>2</sup> In the article in "Odrodzenie", Zygmunta Mycielski quite ironically said about Turski's composition:

And when his symphony will be performed here—it will not be even possible to say anything bad about it, because you cannot be a know-it-all after such a success. Poor winner... They will not leave him alone, he will have to write only masterpieces now.<sup>3</sup>

The Polish premiere of the composition, that took place in Katowice in January 1949 conducted by Grzegorz Fitelberg, was appreciated by critics as well. The articles about Polish premiere of the symphony were

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<sup>1</sup> The world premiere of the symphony took place in October 1948 in London conducted by Grzegorz Fitelberg.

<sup>2</sup> The Polish success during the XIV Olympics in London was discussed e.g. in the following texts: Z. Mycielski, *Złoty medal olimpijski za symfonię Zbigniewa Turskiego*, "Odrodzenie" 1948, No. 29; J. Jasiński, *Olimpijczyk Z. Turski*, "Nowiny Literackie" 1948, No. 39; [author unknown], preface, "Ruch Muzyczny" 1948, No. 15–16.

<sup>3</sup> Z. Mycielski, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

published not only in music press, but also in the popular at that time social-cultural journal “Przekrój”, in which the home performance was called “one of the greatest sensations of the season”.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, Olympic success quickly became a curse. At the end of the 1940s, the cultural policy of Poland, similarly to this of Russia, was adapting more and more elements of socialist realism. Winning the medal during the “imperialistic” Olympics argued with the demand to create art inspired by the Soviet culture, and, what is even more important, to have nothing in common with “degenerated” culture of Western Europe. The promising career of Turski was brutally stopped.

### **Zbigniew Turski as a “Villain” of a Conference in Łagów Lubuski**

The famous attack on the composition happened during the National Congress of Composers and Music Critics in Łagów Lubuski, which took place from the 5th to 7th of September 1949. The conference, organized on a request of the Ministry of Culture and Art, was crucial for the shape of Polish musical culture in the years 1949–1956. The Vice-minister of Culture and Art, Włodzimierz Sokorski, was a moderator of the whole event. The aim of the conference was to define concepts concerning current issues of music based on listening to symphonic compositions of that time. The second task was to prepare the First Festival of Polish Contemporary Music; later, its name did not include the part “Contemporary” anymore. The concerts performed by soloists and the Philharmonic Orchestra of Workers from Poznań were provided to help in defining terms “formalism” and “realism”. During the second day of a conference, *Overture* for small orchestra by Kazimierz Sikorski was performed, as well as *Silesian Overture* for symphonic orchestra and two pianos by Zygmunt Mycielski and *II Sinfonia Olimpica* by Zbigniew Turski, but without the first part, because it was “too pessimistic”. The juxtaposition of so stylistically different compositions during one concert was not coincidental. As Tomasz Tarnawczyk underlines, it was arranged to the detriment of

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<sup>4</sup> [Without author], *Muzyka*, “Przekrój” 1949, No. 201, p. 10.

the Turski's composition, that was full of dissonance and emotionally deep, what distinguished it from the remaining pieces, maintained in the classical harmony, with clear melody and transparent texture.<sup>5</sup>

The discussion after the performance of the pieces, was predominated by speeches concerning *Sinfonia Olimpica*. Its beginning phase had to be inconvenient for Minister Sokorski, because opinions about Turski's composition were, in vast majority positive. Piotr Perkowski underlined the exceptional character of a composition:

[...] this symphony, sometimes heard on the radio seemed to be [...] uniformly gray and gloomy. After this performance [Perkowski—K.B.] has to change his mind. Although the language of this piece is completely outlandish for him, the whole composition makes huge impression—it is beautiful in the controlled emotion and tension. *Sinfonia Olimpica* is [...] one of the most prominent pieces of the last years.<sup>6</sup>

Stanisław Wiślocki, who was a conductor of a performance in Łagów:

[...] admits that he had worked on it with great pleasure, mainly because he understood the kind of emotionality that it has. The speaker takes notice of a sophisticated, very beautiful and fluent cantilena of the middle fragment, but the last part he describes as “thrilling”.<sup>7</sup>

Jan Ekier, when comparing given compositions, paid attention to the musical logic of the symphony, although it is characterized by the greatest number of dissonances. “Not only tonal music can be logical—the best evidence is *Sinfonia Olimpica*, in which it is difficult to find any consonance”.<sup>8</sup> However, as we read in the memories of Wiślocki, the approval was quickly covered by the Sokorski critique:

After the performance of *Sinfonia*, I started to speak and I expressed my attitude towards it in superlatives. After me, other people talked in a similar way. Then, one of the speeches was brutally interrupted by Minister

<sup>5</sup> See: T. Tarnawczyk, *Optymistyczna i monumentalna. Symfonia w muzyce polskiego socrealizmu*, Łódź 2013, p. 83.

<sup>6</sup> *Konferencja kompozytorów w Łagowie Lubuskim w dniach od 5. VIII do 8. VIII 1949. Protokół*, “Ruch Muzyczny” 1949, No. 14, p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

Sokorski, who said: “Although I am not an expert in music and I do not know, how to use a bow or play a horn, I think that this symphony is a typical example of formalism”.<sup>9</sup>

Sokorski accused the symphony of lack of logical construction, he thought that the piece confuses, scares the listener and is incompatible with the spirit of the epoch. Also Andrzej Klonecki expressed his criticism. He described march from the Part III as “not worth the effort of writing. This fragment of score would be replaced by anything else, play whatever—only to look at the hand of a conductor”.<sup>10</sup> A discussion about *Sinfonia Olimpica* was continued in the following day of a conference. Such critics as Józef Michał Chomiński, Zofia Lissa and Jan Maklakiewicz started to make negative opinions of the symphony, and the last of them called it “dry chips without value”.<sup>11</sup>

Turski himself spoke only on the last day of the conference. Despite the fact that he resigned from the defense of his composition, he wanted to add some remarks to the discussion. He expressed his regret, that the intentions of the optimistic finale were not properly read:

[...] his [Turski's—K.B.] desire was—when he wrote *Sinfonia*—to end it by positive accents. Concluding from the voices of majority of the listeners, it was not achieved. These remarks are valuable for him, because they allow him to avoid using there the same techniques in the future, to express similar, i.e. optimistic, thoughts.<sup>12</sup>

At the end of the speech, the author of the composition says quite ironically:

[...] Turski claims that after writing one composition he used to think about the next, and because of that he would like to see the patterns, according to which he could arrange his compositions.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> S. Wisłocki, *Życie jednego muzyka*, Warszawa 2000, p. 67, transl. of a citation from: S. Wiczorek, *Na froncie muzyki. Socrealistyczny dyskurs o muzyce w Polsce w latach 1948–1955*, Wrocław 2014, p. 76.

<sup>10</sup> *Konferencja kompozytorów...*, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 27–28.

Obviously, Turski did not receive any pattern, but Minister Sokorski, in the speech in a character of summary of the whole conference, confirmed his earlier opinion about the composition:

An attack on *Sinfonia* written by Turski is considered by the speaker [Sikorski—K.B.] as proper and corresponding to his conscience of a marxist. [...] Musical realism of our epoch of socialism must be differentiated from the realism of the earlier epochs, so it is the aim that we want to achieve and we still feel weak.<sup>14</sup>

### Campaign Earlier Prepared

It must be noticed that there are certain documents confirming that the attack on Turski was prepared in the Ministry of Culture and Art long before the beginning of the conference in Łagów. On the 2nd of February 1949, so few months before the congress, in the correspondence from Lissa to Chomiński we can read:

Now we must have some analytical article in every number of “Kwartalnik Muzykologiczny”. I would like to take the Symphony of Turski first. I count on You. Turski will give you a material for the beginning. Please, take the offer. You can even destroy this symphony, I have listened to it from Katowice. Overrated fame. Not worth Olympic medal. A storm in a cup.<sup>15</sup>

The musicologist did not fulfill the colleague’s request and did not criticize officially the discussed composition. He also did not accept the proposition that he received from Mirosław Dąbrowski, the manager of the Department of Musical Ministry of Culture and Art, to write the article concerning *Sinfonia*. However, in the speech during the conference in Łagów Chomiński criticized the piece, accusing Turski of choosing the concept foreign for the society of popular democracy and taking models from Western culture.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>15</sup> Translation of a citation from: M. Gołąb, *Józef Michał Chomiński. Biografia i rekonstrukcja metodologii*, Wrocław 2008, p. 48.

The solid proof for the fact that actions connected with Turski's symphony had been planned earlier is also correspondence from Chomiński to Adolf Chybiński after the conference in Łagów, in which Chomiński describes his impressions from the event:

[...] during four days of a conference, formalism was attacked and indicated on the examples, using auditions of Poznań Philharmonic. The victim of these actions was Turski and his *Sinfonia Olimpica*. I was sorry for him, but it was impossible to change what was already planned.<sup>16</sup>

### The Symphonic Art of Zbigniew Turski Before 1948

The fate of *Sinfonia Olimpica* made the composition be forgotten in the musical environment. This fact is even more catastrophic that it is one of the best masterpieces composed by Turski, who was forced to start his career again after war. Warsaw Uprising destroyed ninety percent of scores, including *I Symphony*, *Variations* for orchestra and piano, *Small concerto* for piano and string orchestra, *Dance suite* and *Piano concerto* written for his diploma, about which we can read in a positive review of Konstanty Regamey, who wrote about productions composed by young graduates from class of composition:

A big surprise was *Piano concerto* by Zbigniew Turski. We remember too well the last year productions by students of Rytel, to not to be surprised when from the first sounds of *Concerto* we heard dissonances, and then even atonal fragments. [...] *Concerto* by Turski is not completely free from schemes [...], or totally mature [...], but in the comparison with the output of Prof. Rytel's class is something so different that we do not take notice of any mistakes to appreciate the fresh inventions, interesting melody [...], and even sound-colour inventiveness [...] and the nobility of general concept.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>17</sup> R. Jasiński, *Koniec epoki. Muzyka w Warszawie (1927–1939)*, Warszawa 1986, pp. 428–429. It should be added that Zbigniew Turski in years 1933–1937 studied composition at the Faculty of Composition of the National Conservatory of Music in Warsaw in class of Piotr Rytel. Rytel was said to have been a composer of so-called “old school”, against any experimental attempts of his students.



The first important post-war composition of Turski was *Sinfonia da camera* from 1947. The title of this piece refers more to the size of a composition than to instrumentation, which consists of symphonic orchestra (two flutes, oboe, two clarinets, bassoon, two horns, two trumpets, trombone, expanded percussion section and strings). *Sinfonia da camera* is divided into three parts, from which the first and the last one are characterized by deep emotionality. The balance for the impulsiveness of the first and last parts is lyricism of a middle part. The world premiere of a piece took place in Prague on the 8th of October 1947. Orchestra of Czech Philharmonic was conducted by Rafael Kubelík. The piece was appreciated by public, and, if the further development of cultural policy had been different, it would have become the element of constant symphonic repertoire of philharmonic orchestras. Among symphonic pieces representing the output of Turski from the first half of the 20th century, next to *Sinfonia Olimpica* there is also *Suita on Kurpia motifs* for symphonic orchestra from 1948.

## ***II Sinfonia Olimpica***

*II Sinfonia Olimpica* was written in 1948 and is dedicated to the wife of a composer. Beside dedication, a proof for its personal character are also circumstances which decided about its creating. The composer himself admitted that he wrote *Sinfonia* under influence of the experiences from years of war; he wrote it “as if in the moment of lighting the Olympic flame on the stadium of XIV Olympics, the smoke of crematories would arise”.<sup>18</sup> As a consequence, both form of a piece and extremely modern musical language seem to be subject to the hidden meaning. A composition consists of three parts played *attacca*, and every of them is internally divided into smaller, what results in a form of many phases. By this, Turski desired to achieve a unity of a cycle, what is associated more with symphonic poem than with symphony. The composer, using the achievements of sonata form and juxtaposing episodes in contrast with expression, kept certain traditional elements of a symphony genre, but he did it in the individual and not strict way.

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<sup>18</sup> *Konferencja kompozytorów...*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

The symphony starts with 19 bars of the introduction, in which the key role is played by dark sounds of double basses and cellos, that together with horns and bassoons create gloomy and dismal atmosphere. After introduction, there is *Allegro non troppo*, the exact part I, maintained as a sonata form. The first subject appears in the starting bars. It is characterized by huge rhythmic variability and successive polymetre,<sup>19</sup> what underlines the tension, additionally created by wide intervals in the melody of a subject. In the following bars of part I, Turski uses motifs from a subject, and motifs are developed mainly in brass section. Subject II brings the change of tempo, reduction of the number of instruments and slowing of tempo. Lyric melodic line is realized in dynamic *piano* by woodwind instruments what creates the atmosphere of relaxation after strong and expressive main subject. A short development the strengthen tension that culminates just before recapitulation. The composer uses here mainly the material from the introduction to the symphony. Together with the following bars, the tension gradually decreases and the artist prepares the listener for the total change of mood in the following part—*Larghetto*.

Leaving huge instrumentation for treating instrument as soloists,<sup>20</sup> quiet dynamic and slow tempo make impression of fuzzy, impressionist timbre. In this part, a huge sensitivity for colours of Turski appears. “Here, characteristic for Turski long-breathe phrase transferred between the instruments is visible.”<sup>21</sup>

Part III is a rondo, in which chorus is based on motifs from introduction arranged as an oberek, and next couplets introduce two new subjects. The main subject, quite humoristic and light in its character, is also based on the rhythm of oberek, and the another subject is march-like in its character. In the last bars of the symphony, texture becomes more dense and the saturation of the sounds increases. It seems that all instruments achieve their greatest level of dynamic. In the final part, an element of optimism can be heard, although, what was planned by the composer himself, according to critics was not

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<sup>19</sup> During the fragment of nine bars, Turski uses the following metre: 4/4, 5/4, 4/4, 2/4, 4/4, 2/4, 4/4.

<sup>20</sup> The main subject *Larghetto* is played by horn and oboe.

<sup>21</sup> T. Tarnawczyk, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

fully realized. Perhaps it was not a kind of humour that seemed appropriate for socialists, because Turski in the last part quite ironically and grotesque treats the musical pattern, e.g. interrupting the rhythm of oberek by using quartile, introducing irregular rhythmic patterns and pauses and juxtaposing instruments in contrast. As Tarnawczyk writes in his work: “a final part of *Sinfonia Olimpica*, determined by humour, could not have impressed the socrealistic ideologists, or even count for identification with postulated optimism.”<sup>22</sup>

When analyzing the sound language of *II Sinfonia Olimpica*, it should be noticed that in comparison to Polish compositions created in the middle of the 20th century, it is extraordinarily courageous. Melody based on the innovatory intervals, lack of tonal centres, melodic line built from dissonances, saturated harmony and sophisticated sounds—it all decides about the fact that the symphony of the winner of Olympic medal seems to be unconventional composition, breaking the rules of tonal system. How difficult is to listen to such a brave piece, wrote Józef M. Michałowski, a reviewer of Polish premiere of a composition:

Scraping dissonances, sinister and stormy lower sounds of cellos and double basses, dense instrumentation—it is a picture of this part, not explaining the title at all. The second part, strongly contrasting in terms of musical content and orchestral techniques used by a composer [...], lyrical in its general content, also had no connotations with the Olympics. Scarcely in the third part, in a character of march and fanfares, let us dream about some pictures of effort made by athletic bodies and Olympic triumph. *Sinfonia Olimpica* by Turski, three-part by its formal scheme, is not limited by breaks between parts, and by this—less perceptible for not prepared listener, it goes far from the clear scheme of a classical symphony and should be rather called a symphonic poem. And I mean a poem that seems to consist of some program, lack of which the intelligibility of the composition is problematic.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>23</sup> J.M. Michałowski, *Życie muzyczne w kraju*. Katowice, “Ruch Muzyczny” 1949, No. 5–6, p. 22.

## Conclusion

Negative opinions that Turski heard because of his *II Sinfonia Olimpica* imposed on him to change the chosen artistic path and leaving the main trend of symphonic music for music to film, theatre, radio and illustrative music. Nevertheless, even after the conference in Łagów he wrote compositions that are some kind of a nod towards postulate of socially engaged art. Despite his spoken declarations, the following *III Symphony* was not written until 1953, five years after *Sinfonia Olimpica*. In this piece, Turski resigned from all these techniques that in *II Symphony* would be seen as the most creative and individual. Four-part formal cycle, clearly divided into individual parts, optimistic final in form of oberek ending with C major chords in the whole orchestra and lack of dissonances and free subjects make the piece quite conventional. The transparent texture and easy harmony are characteristic features of *Small overture* from 1955 as well. The composer used there folk melodies from region of Rzeszów, composing in a cheerful, quite playful character.

The 1950s in the creative activity of Turski are full of musical illustrations for theatre and movies. Illustrative music was a vast majority of his art until the composer's death. It was, on the one hand, a proof of his interest a position of a composer, on the other, however, it as a kind of assurance and musical compromise.

*II Sinfonia Olimpica* has its origin in the neoclassical tradition, it is also visible that the composer desired to accomplish his own musical language. Subjectivity and expression of the musical language as well as individualism in using harmonic techniques cause the fact that this composition, in the context of pieces written in the middle of the last century, surprises us by its originality. Only political circumstances caused that the composition has not been widely known by the musical environment and today it practically does not exist in the symphonic repertoire. Negative opinions stopped the popularisation of Turski's art. Firstly, however, it forced the composer to resign from those techniques that in *Sinfonia Olimpica* we find the most original and creative, and that in the following compositions would be even more impressive and let Turski be one of the most important composers of Polish post-war symphonic music.

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