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## The Work of Sorbian Composers and the Issue of Their National Identity

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Sorbs, currently the smallest Slavic nation, despite the very early disappearance of their elites<sup>1</sup> have continuously been present in the annals of music since the 16th century. The first documents confirming the activity of Lusatian cantors and pipe organ players date back to 1551, and in 1571 the hymn book of Albin Moller (1542–1618) was published, which included the first translations of a selection of psalms, introits and other religious hymns into the Lower Sorbian language (Moller 1574; Rawp 1978: 39). This period (1567, 1573, 1584) also marks the appearance of the first publications of Catholic hymn books of the Bautzen deaconate that bear the mark of the local culture (Rawp 1978: 39). The first half of the 17th century is the time of the artistic activity of the first known Lusatian composers and editors: Bartholomäus Brojnik (Bräunig, 2nd half of 16th cent. – 1st half of 17th cent.; Rawp 1978: 40), Abraham Škoda (Schadäus, 1556–1626), the publisher of *Promptuarii musici* (1611–1613), but first and foremost – Jan Krygař (Crüger, 1598–1662), who was a cantor in the Berlin church of St. Nicholas and the author of *Synopsis Musica* (1630), as well as probably the most popular Protestant hymn book of the 17th century: *Praxis pietatis melica* (1647). All the above-mentioned composers were fully devoted to religious music which reigned almost exclu-

<sup>1</sup> This disappearance took place between the 10th and 12th centuries (Cygański/Leszczyński 2002: 24–30 and 34–35).

sively in Lusatian musical life until the end of the 18th century<sup>2</sup> (save some incidental lay compositions and the music-therapeutic piece *Dissertationem medicam de curationem morborum per carmina et cantus musicos*), and remained a significant aspect of their music until the 2nd World War (Rawp 1978: 38–54). Heightened activity in the area of lay music was noted only in the 19th century, accompanying the so-called national revival (*serbske narodne hibanje*) in Lusatia.

The very question of the identity of Sorbs is not easy to answer. As discussed by Stanisław Marciniak:

Lusatians are, in fact, bilingual and bicultural. It is an absolute truth that every Lusatian speaks German at least as well as his own language. It is also true that a Lusatian is embedded in the German culture as strongly as in his own. The share of Sorbian values in the personal culture of Lusatians is, in quantitative terms, rather insignificant (Marciniak 1992: 12).

Even though the above quote relates to the present, already in the 19th century the wealthier Sorbian families (which were the usual social stratum of origin for most of the composers of interest to us) experienced a similar situation. A good example is Bjarnat Krawc (Bernhard Schneider, 1861–1948), one of the most remarkable Lusatian composers and a director of Dresden Conservatory, whose life and works were described in detail in a publication by Achim Brankačk (Brankačk 1999). The family of the composer, residing in Jitro (ger. Milstrich) near the Upper Lusatian Kamjenc (Ger. Kamenz) spoke both German and Sorbian. Although Krawc's father was Sorbian, his mother was of mixed German-Polish-Lusatian origin and spoke German only. Therefore in his family circle German was spoken, and Sorbian was only the language of interaction between the father and the son. Thus, young Krawc could feel as an heir to both the Lusatian and German cultures. However, this feeling was revised when the 13-year old boy took to learning in the Bautzen teachers' seminar. His roots, as well as his knowledge of the Sorbian language were enough for German school children to denounce him as an alien. This was reflected, among others, in the derogative nickname

<sup>2</sup> Here one should note especially the achievements of Jurij Hawštyn Swetlik (1650–1729) and Michał Wałda (1721–1794).

he was given: “wendischer Brummochse.”<sup>3</sup> In such conditions the feeling of separation grew in pupils of Lusatian descent, resulting in limiting their contacts to the immediate circle of people of the same nationality. This had consequences also for their musical choices.

We find a confirmation of this in Krawc’s recollections:

[23rd April 1877 – birthday of the king of Saxony - T.T.N.] Director of the seminar, Leuner, raised a toast “to his Lusatians”. Everyone expressed a wish for the Lusatian seminar students to sing something in the Sorbian language, as there was enough singing in German. We were scared, because we didn’t know too many Sorbian songs; However, our history teacher – Šmit, a Lusatian from Přišec [Preuschwitz] – persuaded us and we sang “Zady našej pjecy kuntwory hraja”.<sup>4</sup> It must have been quite distant from the nightingales’ singing, as we were awarded with a bout of laughter. Such thing cannot happen again. Already on 28th April Rachlowc, a fellow student, called together all Lusatian students, and after a long debate and discussion we established the choir of Lusatian students – “Swoboda”<sup>5</sup> (Brankačk 1999: 25).

Sources such as Krawc’s recollections that depict so vividly the conditions of the coming-of-age and formation of the characters of Lusatian intelligentsia – are scarce, but the activities of many of his fellow Sorbs with similar educational background seem to confirm similar experiences. It is impossible to describe them all in such a short paper, but it is necessary to mention Korla Awgust Kocor (Karl August Katzer, 1822–1904), 40 years Krawc’s elder – a conductor, pianist, pipe organist, singer and teacher, regarded by Lusatians as their most prominent composer and the creator of Lusatian national school of music<sup>6</sup> (Rawp 1958: 28). Born in a humble craftsman’s family, Kocor grew up in the village of Zahor (Berge) near Bautzen, and his first musical experiences did not differ from those of his fellow Lusatians.

<sup>3</sup> We should add here that in previous historical periods calling a German a “Wend” was considered to be offensive, and as such was persecuted by the law (Cygański/Leszczyński 2002: 30). In the collective memory, negative connotations of the term “Wend” survived almost to our times.

<sup>4</sup> A Lusatian folk song popular even nowadays, known from Jan Smoler’s transcription of from the Rakecy area (niem. Königswartha; Haupt/Smoler 1841–43: 96) from around 1840 and also from numerous songbooks (incl. Fiedler 1878: 110–111); its lyrics are sometimes erroneously ascribed to Handrij Zejler (see Šořta 2009: 108).

<sup>5</sup> It should be added that the Lusatian name of the choir means “Freedom”.

<sup>6</sup> On the side it should be noted that in German musical historiography Kocor is either totally ignored, or presented as a German composer, which – of course with due regard to the significance of both composers’ oeuvre – bears some similarity to the treatment of Georg Friedrich Händel (Cf. Reblink 2003).

They included playing birchwood whistles as a child (later fondly remembered), church organ and choral music, as well as the more secular repertoire of the village “trombone choir” (Kościów 2005:11–12). With these experiences, young Korla – just like Bjarnat Krawc – went to teachers’ preparatory school in Bautzen, where he learnt, among others, music theory, the piano, church organ and violin, and then moved on to the teachers’ seminar (*Landständisches Lehrerseminar in Bautzen*). The information included in his first seminar assessment certificate from Easter 1839 seems to provide a very meaningful image of the relations there:

Katzer does not have bad habits, also his body surpasses his mind to a very large extent. He is diligent, but he made only mediocre improvement in his knowledge of religion, while his papers in German are weak both in content and form, betraying his Sorbian pedigree. His advancement in Latin is also average, while he earned praise in music [...] <sup>7</sup> (Raupp 1975: 85).

Despite the rather scornful treatment of Lusatian seminar students, the seminar supervisors provided an opportunity for honing the Lusatian language during extracurricular Sorbian language courses, and permitted the activity of the Lusatian school association. This had a profound impact on the awakening of the national consciousness of Slav students, which was then reflected in their works and activity. For national musical activity it was of great importance that the students were also prepared to fulfil the role of cantors and organists. Therefore the curriculum included learning to play the piano, organ and violin, singing with voice production basics, solfège, harmony, history of music and composition. Moreover, the students sang in choirs, played the organ during masses, and took part in copying scores (of, among others, Cherubini, Haydn, Handel, Mendelssohn, Mozart) for the seminar, the municipal theatre and Chapter Church of St. Peter in Bautzen. The high standard of all these classes was ensured by a composer, cantor and teacher employed in Bautzen seminar, Carl Eduard Hering (1807–1879), the son of a renowned author of solfège and violin study books, Carl Gottlieb Hering (1766–1853), and a student of Christian Theodor Weinling

<sup>7</sup> Acta, das Land-Schullehrer-Seminar betreffend (1837–1840), HiSTA Bautzen, Ldst. Sem. Nr. 4054, p. 79, transl. Teresa Nowak, in: Raupp 1975: 85.

(1780–1842) – teacher, composer and cantor in St. Thomas Church in Leipzig. Kocor was one of Hering’s first students, and one of only three that received a very good grade from this stringent pedagogue on the school-leaving certificate (Kościów 2005: 12–16, 18).

His financial situation did not allow the talented musician and composer to continue his studies. Therefore the 20-year-old Kocor took a job as a village teacher in Stróży (Wartha). Struggling with poverty, he did not forsake his dreams, which were skillfully nurtured by a freshly acquainted minister and poet from nearby Stróży Łaz (Lohsa), Handrij Zejler (1804–1872). Under his influence (Raupp 1975:93) Kocor, aged only 23, organized in 1845 the first Sorbian Singing Fest (*Serbski spěwanski swjedźeń*). Its relevance to the needs of the German-dominated Bautzen Lusatian community is proven by the fact that already during the second Fest young Kocor was adorned with a laurel wreath. The Fest, organised annually, led Sorbian music out of church aisles and bourgeoisie parlours into public places, becoming a manifestation of Lusatian cultural vitality.

In fact, the very form of the song fest, as well as Kocor’s composing skills,<sup>8</sup> stemmed directly from German culture. Direct inspiration was provided by the German singing associations “Liedertafel” and “Orpheus”, which in 1842 had organised the first Saxon male singing fest. At the same time, the advancing democratisation of social life, including its cultural aspect, brought about the possibility of organizing a similar fest of Lusatian music. It would be impossible, however, to define Kocor’s activity as merely copying the Saxon example; the young composer was very skilled at filling generally accepted musical and organisational templates with motifs of Sorbian folk songs he knew from childhood and the practice of village teaching, as well as from the freshly published collection by his friend – Jan Arnošt Smoler (1816–1884) (Haupt/Smoler 1841–43). However, in his effort to bring the repertoire of Lusatian songs to the level required for German song, Kocor avoided folk lyrics. He made extensive use of the works of contemporary Sorbian poets, whom he knew to an excellent degree: Handrij Zejler, Mikławš Cyž (1825–

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that Kocor’s first songs were settings of the poems/lyrics of Johann Wolfgang Goethe and Heinrich Heine.

1853), Michał Domaška (1820–1897), Korla Awgust Fiedler, Mikławš Jacślawk (1827–1862), Korla Awgust Jenč (1828–1895), Handrij Lubjenski (1790–1840), Křesćan Bohuwer Pful (1825–1889), Jan Arnošt Smoler, and Jan Wjeli–Radyserb (1822–1907). He often worked on folk melodies, using characteristic rhythms or melodic features, and created his own melodies for the songs on this basis. Inspired by the pan-Slavic movement, he was searching for models for a national repertoire in the activities of Polish, Czech and Russian composers. During the music fests, he keenly introduced songs or just melodies from various Slavic countries, such as *Mazurek Dąbrowskiego* or *Mazurek Trzeciego Maja*.<sup>9</sup> which he reworked, added patriotic Lusatian lyrics and published with the idea of building a national music movement (Fiedler 1897: 475–476) (see Figure 9.1). He had a remarkable charisma, bringing together crowds of volunteer singers and amateur musicians in the first exclusively Sorbian bands and musical institutions.

Kocor's public activity, so strongly oriented towards building foundations for national musical life, had a bearing on his compositions, the bulk of which are vocal/instrumental forms of national character. First and foremost, these include cantatas, entitled 'oratorios' by the composer, who was raised on religious repertoire: *Serbski kwas* [*Sorbian wedding*], 1846–50; *Žně* [*Harvest*], 1847–83; *Nalěčo* [*Spring*], 1860; *Israelowa zrudoba a tróšt* [*Israel's sadness and consolation*], 1861; *Podlěčo* [*Early summer*], 1883; *Nazyma* [*Autumn*], 1860–1886; *Zyma* [*Winter*], 1887–89; *So zwoni mer* [*The bells of peace*], 1891. Of these works, only *Israelowa zrudoba a tróšt* and *So zwoni měř* seem to move away in inspiration and direct content from local folk character, shared by most of his cantatas, but all of them are written in the Upper Sorbian language (see Figure 9.2).

Apart from cantatas, a significant place in Kocor's oeuvre is occupied by songs (often combined in cycles, such as *Wěnc hórskich spěwow* [*A collection of highland songs*], 1860), among which the vast majority (c. 100 songs) are composed to Upper Sorbian lyrics.<sup>10</sup> Other works in the national vein include *Jakub a Kata* [*Jacob and Kate*] (1870–1871), *Serbski rekwiem* [*Sorbian Re-*

<sup>9</sup> "Pan-Slavic" *contrafacta* were undoubtedly inspired by Jan Arnošt Smoler, a graduate from the Slavic philology department in Wrocław (1841–1845), although this trend seems to be well established also in the activities of other authors (por. Cyž 1984: 511–513; Hajnec 1984: 643; Měťškowa 1984: 355).

<sup>10</sup> He composed a total of 43 songs to German lyrics, mainly in his youth.

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nam'ka hilo - sy, lu - bosć nam'ka hilo - sy.

2. Předeljo, duž spěwajmy, našom' pucej slawa!  
Spěw budź towarš rejšomny, to su serbske prawa; sama  
žolna k morju dom z němym ertom njeđiže, swoju  
rejžu z pluskotom :: daloki kraj přeidže. ::

3. Wšitke ptacki z nalećom z dalokeho kraja při-  
chajnu ze spěwanjom a swěj lóšć tu maja, dožj so haje  
nježoka, dožj jim hoja časy, hač ze spěwom dźelenja  
:: wučahuja zasy. ::

**17. Přezpolo jutrownych čaharjow na raniši kemš.**

*Andante.* *mf* Kocor.

1. Hdže su mi ban - ty čef - wje - ne na  
swje - džen wje - so - ly, što módrych, bě - lych  
při - nje - se na swje - džen ju - trow - ny, što

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módrych, bělych přinješe na swjedžen jutrow - ny?

2. Hdže sy, mój pyšny koniko, a što so zradujes?  
:: Kaž slónčko skoći skhadžejo, ty zo mnu zejhrawješ. ::

3. Hdže je mi woda jutrowna ze zórła čerstwego,  
:: što mi tej jasnej načerpa do slónca na ranko? ::

4. Hdže su mi jejka pisane, jich dawno žadny sym,  
:: što džen je kulec zo mnu chce na brjóžku zelenym? ::

5. Hdže su mi rjane khorhowje na swjedžen do-  
byća, :: to bubony a pišćeło do swjatoh' kheriša? ::  
H. S.

**18. Na trawičku.**

*Andante.* *p* *cresc.* Kocor.

1. Tra - wič - ka ty mó - lič - ka, praj, što maš do  
dže - la? „Še - ru ze - mju wo - dže - wam,  
dra - sčić - ku ji rja - nu dam, zo so lu - hje  
4

Figure 9.1 Songs from Fiedler's popular song-book – Kocor's simplified compositions written for the Sorbian Singing Fests (Fiedler 1878: 24–25)

quiem] composed in 1894, or *Wodžan* [Vodyanoy] (1896). His remaining works, mainly chamber music,<sup>11</sup> seem to cater for the national repertoire for home use, with quite frequent musical links to Lusatian folk melodies or Kocor's popular vocal compositions (see Figure 9.3).<sup>12</sup>

The importance of Kocor's works and activity for the culture – not only musical culture, but also national, including awareness and identity – finds confirmation in the already quoted recollections of Bjarnat Krawc:

Our singers became a strong foundation for the large choir “Lumir”, conducted during large Lusatian concerts by Kocor. [...] Folk songs and Kocor's songs opened our hearts

<sup>11</sup> Incl. *8 kusow za husle a gitaru* (1848), *Tři sonatiny za husle a klawěr* (1848–50), *Frühlingslied i Schlummerlied* (1851), *Smyčkowy kwartet* (1879), *Thema mignon z wariacijemi za husle, wiolu a wioloncello* (1884), *3 Kantileny*, *4 Impromptu* (1888), *Serenada za husle, wiolu a wioloncello* (1889), a number of minor works and a few arrangements of other composers' works.

<sup>12</sup> E.g. the middle part of *Klawěrne trio* (1873), *Tři serbske salonowe reje za klawěr* (1879), as well as a few overtures and c. 60 arrangements of folk songs.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for a soprano aria. It consists of four staves. The top staff is the vocal line, with lyrics written below it. The lyrics are in Sorbian: "Słonce kral ze smičateho stw - ta w polnj horcu, wochi wusypa, wotac xamja, wotac switla" and "no - ta, wotac slowarba wotac xama!". The bottom three staves are for piano accompaniment. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (ff, mf, f, dec, dim), articulation (accents), and performance instructions like "32.". The handwriting is in black ink on aged paper.

Figure 9.2 Manuscript of the soprano aria *Słonce kral* from the oratorio *Nalěčo*

to our Sorbian roots. [...] We were discussing the situation of Sorbs and other Slavic peoples, [...] which awakened our national awareness (Brankačk 1999: 26).

Moreover, the works of Korla Awgust Kocor became a lasting blueprint for other Lusatian composers for many years to come, incl. Korla Awgust Fiedler (1835–1917), Jurij Pilk (1858–1926), Bjernat Krawc, Jurij Słodeńk (1873–1945), or Jurij Winar (1909–1991). Invariably, until the 1950s, vocal or vocal-instrumental genres, including operas and operettas, were especially favoured by them. A regular and important, although insignificant in terms of numbers, field of Lusatian composers' activity were the arrangements of Sorbian songs from the folk song collection of Jan Arnošt Smoler (Haupt/Smoler 1841–43). The singer movement developed simultaneously, resulting in the establishment in 1923 of the Sorbian Singing Groups Association (*Zwjazk serbskich spěwnych towarstwow*). Amateur choral movement, much later in comparison



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**7. Na serbsku Lužicu.** Kocor.

*Andante.* *cresc.*

1. Rja - na Lu - ži - ca, sprawnu, pře - čel - na, mo - jich  
 2. Bít - wu li - ja - chu hor - ou, ze - lez - nu ně - hdy  
 3. Zrud - ny so - lo - bik ma nětk Hro - mad - nik, so - wa  
 4. Bo - ha Čor - ne - ho sta - re kra - le - stwo ra - pak  
 5. K lu - da na - do - bi nej - su zhu - da - li tam - ni  
 6. Ča - so při - chod - ny, lu - džeš za - kóóó ty? O zo

*cresc.*

1. serb - skich wót - cow kraj, mo - jich zbóž - nych so - now  
 2. serb - scy wót - co - jo, wóju - ske spě - wy spě - wa -  
 3. su - ta z Pra - ši - cy, ma tam swo - je ska - lo -  
 4. nět - ko wo - by - dli; sta - ry moch so ze - le -  
 5. sta - ri lu - da - cy do - statk Ser - bow při - chod -  
 6. by - chu z two - je - ho kli - na wu - šli mu - žo -

*cresc.*

*f* *p*

1. raj, swja - te su mi two - je ho - - na!  
 2. jo. Štó - ha pej' - da wa - še .spě - wy?  
 3. by. Wje - le - pom - ni - tej, wój ho - - rje!  
 4. ni na ska - le, kiž wol - tař bě - - še.  
 5. ny. Čas nětk nje - pra - ša - ny wě - - šći.  
 6. jo, hód - ni wěč - noh' wo - pom - ni - ka!

*f* *p* H. Zeiler.

Figure 9.3 Kocor's patriotic song for male choir – today's Sorbian Anthem (Kocor 1886: 13)

to the remaining part of Germany, over the years established its position of a social circle responsible for awakening and reinforcing the Lusatian national tradition, becoming a trademark of Sorbian culture. Today it would be hard to find a larger Lusatian community in Germany that does not have its choir.

A researcher of contemporary Lusatian musical culture cannot overlook the fact of the ubiquity of secular songbooks, the tradition of which stems from the collection published by Korla Awgust Fiedler in 1878. Every few years there is another version of the songbook published in Lusatia, and at its core are the songs of Kocor and his followers, supplemented by Smoler's transcriptions folk songs, and then by popular songs in subsequent editions. It would be difficult to imagine a house of nationally-conscious Sorbs where at least one version of this songbook would not be kept and used. Also in families that do not speak Sorbian anymore, but are aware of their heritage, the songbook and Sorbian singing practice constitute are important to upholding the tradition. No family occasion or social meeting can be complete without this, and the knowledge of the songbook's content is universal. One interesting phenomenon is the identification of the Fiedler songbooks' repertoire, including the songs composed by Korla Awgust Kocor, with both national and... folk culture.

Here one should pause to think about the reception of the aforementioned composers' works outside the Sorbian community. It seems that the rooting of Lusatian culture in the lower social classes, with limited economic power, together with the perception of Sorbs by the representatives of the dominant German musical culture, as well as the fact that most of the repertoire is in the Upper Sorbian language, did not support the development of talent or the promotion of Lusatian music. For example, it was only after 7 years of work on his rural post (he was 27 by then) that the highly talented Korla Awgust Kocor managed to obtain the authorities' permission for a mere half-year leave for "further advancement in knowledge in one of the conservatories" (*Tydźenska Nowina* 1849). However, due to difficulties in finding a substitute, and also probably due to many obligations related to the organization of the singing fest, even such modest plans for improving his composer skills came to nothing (Kościów 2005: 29–30). On the other hand, his devotion to vocal compositions in his native language and his unwillingness to translate the lyrics into German resulted in a situation when, outside the almost 200,000

strong Sorbian community, his vocal works did not achieve any wider success.<sup>13</sup>

Krawc, almost 40 years younger, followed a slightly different path: after graduating from Dresden Conservatory, despite his adherence to national ideals, he also tried his skills in composing symphonic and chamber works, which gained him an increasing popularity and even some reputable functions in the musical community of Dresden. Nevertheless, he also sometimes met with negative reactions to his national identity, which is well illustrated in a critical essay that was published in 1899 in Dresden:

Krawc is nothing more than a translation of the name Schneider [Ger. tailor] into Sorbian, which makes it more probably a provocative attempt than a needless pseudonym for Mr. Schneider. If manifesting his roots is so important to him, it would be more proper for him to move out to where he came from. There he will find more acceptance for his peculiarities, but not in Dresden (Die Deutsche Wacht... 1899; Brankačk 1999: 74).

Such problems, experienced by Kocor and Krawc, were also familiar to other composers mentioned above, which partly explains the low popularity of their compositions, as well as the fact that they are constantly being left out in even the most comprehensive German lexicography.

Finally, one should ask the question about the relations between the national identity and musical works of contemporary Sorbian composers. It is quite important to notice that such a small community has yielded quite a number of composers, most notably Jan Bulank (b. 1931), Detlef Kobjela (b. 1944), Jurij Mětšk (b. 1954), Jan Paul Nagel (1934–1997), or Jan Rawp (b. 1928). It seems that a side effect of the intensive activities aimed at developing national awareness has been the discovery and development of many talents, stemming, among others, from the mass choral movement. The composers in question usually have among their works at least one vocal-instrumental piece inspired by Sorbian folk music. It cannot, however, be said that it is an important streak in their work – the bulk of their compositions usually does not divert too far from the mainstream of European musical trends. Still, the nurturing of their Lusatian identity, which currently takes place in

<sup>13</sup> Even more so that his German songs come mainly from his youth. Still, one should note that some of his works were published outside Bautzen – in Leipzig and London – during his lifetime (Mětšk 1971: 32).

totally different and very complicated conditions, brings about unexpected advantages – vivid interest from the Sorbian radio, press, scores of amateur musicians and the single national professional ensemble. It should also be remembered that despite the continuous decline in funds for cultural development from the Saxon and Brandenburg authorities, the Lusatians still obtain means allowing them to promote their national culture. It seems, however, that for an average Lusatian the simple awareness of the Sorbian nationality of the composer whose works are being performed is much more important than the program, or the musical content of his works. This is a significant difference in comparison to the activities and reception of Lusatian composers in the 19th century, when the national awareness was awakened and expressed in the music.

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