

Ewa Kofin

Radio Music Lessons with Piotr Orawski

Sztuka i Filozofia 45, 141-143

2014

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Ewa Kofin

Piotr Orawski
Lekcje Muzyki (Musical Lessons)
Warszawa: Kle 2010-2014

Radio *Music Lessons* with Piotr Orawski

Seven years ago, ambitious editors of the second channel of the Polish Radio network started broadcasting a long series of programs about the history of artistic music. Its main purpose was educational, as suggested by the production's title, *Music Lessons*. Piotr Orawski, an expert in the field of music, was given the lead role. He proved a perfect fit for the task, and this fruitful cooperation led to a series of nearly a thousand lectures (he wrote 985 lectures), abruptly brought to an end by Piotr Orawski's untimely death at the age of 51. Fortunately, Kle publishing house preserved the great majority of texts of his radio broadcasts, which makes it possible to pass on his legacy. His work was already highly praised during his life, as evidenced by five prizes (including three first places) such as the Prix Musical de Radio Brno and the Złoty Mikrofon award.

There are many books in multiple languages on the history of classical music, however presenting this material on the radio was an altogether different challenge. The radio audience, unlike a reader, cannot simply return to a more complex passage or pause at a particular scholarly term; remembering the details is also often more challenging than it is in the case of books. Piotr Orawski was surely aware of these challenges, and so he included definitions of academic terms, provided examples of relevant musical pieces, and, in general, spoke in a manner easily accessible to a wider audience. His goal was to make the subject matter understandable not only to those already familiar with the topic, but to all radio listeners. Piotr Orawski's lectures had numerous fans who actively engaged in music-related discussion on internet forums. Those charmed by these lessons now have a chance to rediscover Orawski with the publication by Kle. It is a truly unique and priceless opportunity.

The conductor of these *Music Lessons* discussed only a part of the history of music – but a very important part that included four stylistic periods: medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, and Classical. His premature departure ended the series on a discussion of Mahler, but the publisher has yet to release the texts on Romanticism.

Although Orawski's history of music is similar to many other surveys of the subject in that it lists and discusses the works of various composers and examines their biographies, it is also characterized by some unique features. The author is very critical regarding his chosen source material, often scrutinizing it and challenging the accuracy of widely-cited information. In one such discussion he takes on the question of the authorship of the Gregorian chant and writes that "Pope St. Gregory the Great did not actually invent it, despite being credited

with its creation for many years and the form having been named after him.” He goes on to point out that the tale of the chant’s inventor was popularized through a legend about Pope St. Gregory the Great described by Johannes Diaconus in the 9th Century, while music studies revealed that “During the times of St. Gregory the Great the Old Roman chant sounded completely different from the later Gregorian chant” (The lesson on “Origins of the Gregorian chant”). Another example of Orawski’s investigative nature is his disputing the popular belief that Arcangelo Corelli was the creator of the concerto grosso. Orawski claims that the form had been used earlier by Alessandro Stradella (The lesson on “Baroque concerto”). In his insistence on historical accuracy, Orawski would always clearly articulate when he considered a particular piece of information not sufficiently documented, even if he did not directly challenge its accuracy. And so he pauses for a moment to discuss the meaning and origin of the name of the composer Jacob Clemens non Papa. He ponders the alias “non Papa,” which means not-pope, never used by the musician himself. Orawski writes, “It remains unknown whether the alias referred to Pope Clement VII, who was Pope during the composer’s lifetime, or someone else altogether... [possibly] a well-known poet of the time, Jacob Papa” (The lesson on “The 4th generation of Franco-Flemish composers”). This goes to illustrate what great attention Orawski paid to even the tiniest details surrounding composers’ lives.

The currently available works describing the history of music are often criticized for focusing solely on a discussion of the most famous composers – those widely considered musical geniuses – while neglecting the contributions of other less prominent, yet often very significant, musicians. Piotr Orawski naturally devotes a lot of time to the greatest composers, dedicating 16 lessons to the analysis of Beethoven’s works, however he also reacquaints the audience with some of the “forgotten composers.” Who today remembers the contributions of one like Guillaume Bouzignac? Orawski dedicates a whole lesson to him, writing, “It was he [Bouzignac] that invented a new type of overture known since as the French overture, proposed new formal resolutions in his stage pieces, adjusted the Italian recitative to the French language prosody creating its new value [...] he created the national French music style, which then, very quickly for its time, spread all around Europe soon achieving the status of the universal style” (The lesson on “Guillaume Bouzignac”).

Even such prominent figures as Jean-Francois Le Seur are not mentioned in some encyclopedias of music, and thus remain obscure to most. Orawski, on the other hand, devotes a separate lesson to him (The lesson on “Oratorios by Jean-Francois Le Seur”), pointing to the fame he enjoyed during his lifetime and discussing the great number of works that he left behind, including monumental oratorios, masses, cantatas, and, most of all, operas. He adds that Le Seur wrote the opera *Ossian* specifically for the occasion of Napoleon Bonaparte’s coronation, at the emperor’s request.

Orawski offers many more intriguing details from the history of music. Some are quite startling, like the fact that Heinrich Biber wrote *Missa Salisburgensis*, a mass for a stunning number of 53 singers, at the request of the Salzburg cathedral (The lesson on “Mass in the Baroque period”). He also informs the audience

that some of the scholarly terms used in history of music have evolved through the years and thus could have had a very different meaning at some point in the past. In one such example, he explains that “Missa parodia,” popular in the second half of the 15th Century, at the time had nothing in common with the current use of the term – which implies a ridicule – but instead constituted a form of mass, “the themes of which were based on religious or secular polyphonic composition” (The lesson on “Nicolas Gombert”). Likewise, the author discusses the term “countertenor,” which is nowadays associated with a male alto or even soprano, while during the Middle Ages it described the lowest male voice. He also addresses the fact that the term “cantata,” presently of a single meaning, throughout the ages was connected to various forms such as concerto, serenate, dialogo, motetto, ode, psalm, artus funebris, artus tragicus, anthem, or even symphonia sacra (The lesson on “Cantata – formal structure and themes”).

Some of Orawski’s “dementi” are simple curiosities such as the mention of the fact that during the Middle Ages the interval of sexta was treated as false harmony and was not recognized as a consonance until the Renaissance (The lesson “At the onset of Modernity”). The author addresses the terrible peril of a composer’s life, in which the musician “can fall victim to his own masterpiece” – that is, have all of his other works forgotten due to the fact that he created one particular outstanding piece of music. Here Orawski cites the example of the famous Canon in D major by Johann Pachelbel as well as Vivaldi’s familiar *Four Seasons*. Their current popularity is undisputed; however, when asked about other works of Vivaldi, most people have nothing to say (The lesson on the “*Four Seasons* by Antonio Vivaldi”).

We are introduced to another astounding fact in the lesson “French orchestra suite” devoted to music of the 17th and 18th Centuries. Piotr Orawski claims to have discovered the first ever use of a musical cluster in Jean-Féry Rebel’s suite *Les Éléments* (*The Elements*), justifying his claim in the following manner: “[the overture] begins with a rough unresolved dissonance of the whole orchestra, which is hard to define using the functional criteria of the dur-moll system. It is probably the first cluster, an overtone composed of sounds adjacent to each other on the musical scale, in the history of orchestral music. Clusters are structures typical to the 20th century music. Rebel employed this sound effect, very unusual for its time, so that he could more clearly [...] illustrate the chaotic nature of elements right after the creation of the universe.”

Piotr Orawski’s radio broadcasts can be described as lectures of a music expert characterized by great academic knowledge, attention to detail, scrutiny of various historical sources, and dedication to making the subject matter easily accessible.

The introduction to the *Music Lessons* series includes a quote from the author, which nicely illustrates the uniqueness of his approach: “I wrote this book, because my audience and students taught me how to write it.” The reader will enjoy pondering exactly what he meant.

*Translated from Polish by Kornel Krysa
ewakofin@vp.pl*