

The role of Mazowsze State Folk Song and Dance Ensemble in the post-war revival of folk music and dance in Poland

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to examine the role of Mazowsze State Folk Song and Dance Ensemble in the post-war folklore revival in Poland. The initiative was entangled in the processes of propagating ideas of social justice, democratisation of culture and equal access to artistic education. Through insight into the history of the ensemble, the author discusses how different regional traditions of peasant songs and dances have been relocated to theatre stages and public institutions, adopted to the tastes of urban audiences, popularized across Poland and included in the mainstream of national culture. The phenomenon was initiated right after the Second World War as part of initiatives to rebuild cultural life in Poland and revalue folk arts as an important component of cultural heritage, enabling rural artists to gain professional education, social acclaim and international recognition. Over the next seven decades, the ensemble came to represent national identity, exhibiting the diversity of regional cultures and blending Polish folklore with aristocratic traditions, urban fashions and dominant contemporary trends of stage presentation. The article demonstrates how the artistic stylisation of Polish folklore (presented by this company), its social relocation and global dissemination have served the purpose of its preservation. It specifies the effects of the restitution of peasants' traditions in new contexts of urban scenes or cultural centres under protection of the state and artistic elites, discussing the participation, rights and privileges of rural artists in this process.

Keywords: *folklore revival, folk dance, folk music, Mazowsze, Polish folk music and dance*

Introduction

Folk music and dance gained particular importance and state support in the Polish People's Republic. Shifting from being social practices of rural communities to finding new contexts on urban stages, at community centres and in state-sponsored educational institutions, these folk traditions underwent significant changes. Although professional folkloric ensembles played an instrumental role in this process, the matter of their activities and impact on the directions of the "folklore revival" in Poland have so far attracted little scholarly attention. Mazowsze was the first Polish state folk song and dance ensemble, and it inspired the creation of a plethora of amateur and regional folk groups and set a model for their artistic presentations. Therefore, examining its aesthetics, its role in the sustainability of traditional dance and music and its entanglement in political discourses can contribute to understanding the transformation of folk arts in post-war Poland. This research also provides a case study for the process of appropriation

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of peasant traditions by intelligentsia and state authorities under slogans of progress, democratization and social equality.

The article includes the results of research conducted as part of scholarship supported by the Minister of Culture and National Heritage (Poland) in 2021. The project focused on the issue of the representation of national identity in the artistic creations of the Mazowsze ensemble. The methods used in this project included archival research, press analysis, discourse analysis, performance analysis and interviews with five former dancers and ten current dancers of the Mazowsze ensemble (who had each worked in the ensemble for 5-10 years). Sources for this research included archival recordings, photos, concert brochures, press clippings, performance reviews, and autobiographical accounts of several artists of Mazowsze, published in the form of books, mainly reporting the first decade of the ensemble's existence. My position in relation to the researched institution (that is, Mazowsze) can be defined as that of an insider. I work as an educator at the "Karolin" Centre for Polish Folklore, which is a unit of the Mazowsze Ensemble. However, I am not a member of the artistic group, in this way remaining rather an outsider to the interviewed community of music and dance performers. I have also based my findings on informal conversations with artists from traditional folk bands that collaborated with the Mazowsze ensemble in the process of folk music and dance transmission.

Mazowsze State Folk Song and Dance Ensemble – sources, inspirations and objectives

Mazowsze Ensemble was created in 1948 against the background of initiatives to revive Polish culture and preserve regional traditions after the Second World War. The ensemble was founded by renowned Polish musician and composer Tadeusz Sygietyński and his partner, Mira Zimińska-Sygietyńska, who was a famous actress of the interwar period. Right after the end of the war, Sygietyński travelled from village to village of the Mazowsze (Mazovia) region in search of folk songs, as well as children and teenagers skilled in dance and music, with the intention to set up a folk music ensemble. At the same time, he tried to convince the Ministry of Culture and Arts to provide him with financial and institutional support for this artistic endeavour. He aimed to offer talented young peasants a chance for proper musical training. He advocated ideals of preserving and refining traditional Polish songs, dances and costumes. He believed that thanks to creative development of a stylized artistic form of folk music and songs, the traditions could meet the tastes of contemporary audience and be saved from oblivion.

As recorded in the accounts of former artists of the Mazowsze, the authorities of the Polish People's Republic became convinced to support Sygietyński's idea after a concert of the Pyatnitsky Russian Folk Chorus in Warsaw in the fall of 1948. It was then decided to create a Polish equivalent of this ensemble that would be located in Karolin Palace in Otrębusy village near Warsaw. During a meeting of artists, ethnographers and officials at the Ministry of Culture and Arts, the following guidelines were set for the future folk band:

1. The ensemble will consist of peasant children and youth.
2. The repertoire shall include songs and melodies from only one region: Mazowsze.
3. The work should start with a training. Under supervision of specially selected teachers and artists, peasant youth will perform their own songs in their own manner.
4. Both the training and subsequent performances shall be based on pure folklore.
5. Drawing from folklore, artists from all over Poland, both poets and musicians, will compose a new program for the future performances of the Karolin ensemble.
6. In this way, the school will become a training studio for Polish artists. (Zimińska-Sygietyńska, 1990, p. 69)

The accounts of first members of Mazowsze indicate that the initial years of artistic activities in Karolin under Sygietyński's directorship did create an opportunity for talented peasant youth to obtain formal musical training, and the status of professional artists. Staying

in their native villages, where they had no access to music schools, they would not have had the opportunity to take regular music or dance classes.

The musical traditions of the Polish villages were previously passed on by direct, oral transmission. Songs and dances accompanying feasts, games or rituals were naturally picked up by younger generations during social events. However, the industrialization and migration of the rural population to the cities resulted in a rapid disappearance of the traditional practices of transmission. Therefore, post-war initiatives that would relocate folk music to cultural centres, artistic schools and theatre stages and have their practice taken over by folkloric groups were presented as a chance to save and revitalize those traditions.

In order to achieve the desired artistic effect, singing, dancing and music instructors and administrative staff were employed in Karolin to work on educating young artists and developing the repertoire. Karolin was presented in the media as a “school of rural talents” open to young people from villages and towns². In the beginning, education focused on music. Students were taught solfege, notation, intervals, recognition of classical, romantic, impressionistic and modernist pieces, and other aspects of musical analysis. They also learned to play the piano and various folk instruments (pipes, harmony, violin), rhythmic, folk and classical dance. The education also included continuation of primary and secondary schools³.

As the artists were mostly underage, they did not get paid for their work. In return, they were granted accommodation, food, clothes, artistic education and an opportunity to travel around the world, which was considered a great privilege in communist Poland. Stay and work in Karolin implied certain processes of acculturation of young people from the working-peasant class, which accompanied the post-war migrations from villages to cities. In fact, instead of cultivating their folk traditions, the young artists in Karolin quit many customs and absorbed the cultural practices of intelligentsia.

Ideological fundamentals of folklore revival in the Polish People's Republic

The concept of presenting folklore on stage was neither an innovative idea of Sygietyński, nor was it a phenomenon initiated in the Polish People's Republic. Polish folk or national dances had aroused the fascination of composers and choreographers much earlier. They created their own adaptations of folklore using various conventions of stage presentation and dance techniques, including classical ballet, revue dance, concert-hall dance or acrobatics (Mamontowicz-Łojek, 1972, pp. 22-25, 42-44, 49-55, 59-66; Nowak, 2016, pp. 370-396). The very idea of developing folklore on stage was exemplified by folk theaters, some performances of the Feliks Parnell Ballet and Jan Ciepliński Warsaw Ballet companies, and state-funded ensembles, such as the Polish Representative Ballet directed by Bronisława Niżyńska and Leon Wójcikowski, former dancers of Les Ballets Russes. On the other hand, the formula of an artistic collective supervised by state authorities, who determined the style and narrative of the ensemble, appeared after 1945, and was implemented in Mazowsze. The communist authorities provided institutional support for these initiatives, which enabled their dynamic development in the second half of the 20th century.

The Mazowsze ensemble was a continuation of the artistic activity of its creators in the interwar period, adapted to some extent to the demands of post-war cultural policy in Poland. The 1950s in Poland was a period emphasizing building new culture and developing educational activities, an approach which was to spread an understanding of the ideological and political fundamentals of the construction of socialism. Folk culture had become one of the important concepts subordinated to the socialist vision of the world and used to authenticate the political ideology of the Polish People's Republic. In fact, traditional Polish rural culture had

² The first years of education and preparation for the performances of the Mazowsze were documented in Polish Film Chronicles ("Szkoła wiejskich talentów", no. 4, 1950; available at Digital National Film Archive).

³ The youngest members of Mazowsze were only eleven years old when they were admitted to the ensemble.

already largely disappeared in the early twentieth century, and the post-war authorities used a certain image of it, which was subject to manipulation. The stereotypical, romanticized image of this culture, reified by nineteenth-century ethnologists, reduced folk cultures to static and homogeneous wholes, belonging to the past (Topp, 1997, p. 123). Nevertheless, ideologists of socialism reinterpreted this vision of folklore as the foundations of national culture, and favored its revival (Topp, 1997, p. 124).

Folk art and customs were given special attention and care in the Soviet Union and other countries of the socialist bloc, such as the Polish People's Republic. Isolated from their religious sources, they could serve the purposes of political propaganda and social integration. Postulates of folklore revival, entangled in socialist ideologies, led to the foundation of numerous folk music and dance ensembles in Eastern Europe, examined by dance scholars such as Anthony Shay (2002, 2019), Andriy Nahachewsky (2001), and Buckland and Stavělová (2018). In Poland, the post-war concept of the "folk" was used to refer to all working classes of society (as if in opposition to the idea of a noble nation and elite culture). The proclaimed objective of this redefinition was to eliminate class and regional differences by disseminating slogans of democratization of culture and education.

Patronage over the folk arts was to generate new possibilities for the social promotion of village inhabitants. This idea was supported by various forms of state sponsorship, including a system of scholarships and awards for folk artists, as well as funds for cultural institutions and amateur collectives cultivating folklore. However, it was not the peasantry who primarily shaped the new image of the revived folk culture. Ethnographers and art historians were usually appointed to take care of rural traditions, whereas artists were involved to "refine" the folk arts, or "translate" them into an artistic form that could be understood by broader audiences. They set their standards, focusing on the aesthetic values of those folk arts and neglecting their social or religious importance in the original context. This led to the aestheticization of folk culture, an example of which was the transformation of rural rituals into folklorist performances, being an artistic stylization of folklore. The artistic shape of these transformed rituals was usually supervised and judged by scientists and artists. As Ewa Klekot (2021, p. 13) notes, folk art, produced for mass use and external markets, was assessed by experts from other social strata, who prioritized setting its standards and its concepts of beauty, and evaluated individual works in terms of their value and authenticity. For this reason, the term "folk art" (shaped by *intelligentsia*) should be distinguished from traditional, rural creativity, which used to serve the needs and preferences of a specific local community.

In the opinion of Polish ethnologist Józef Burszta, folklorism in dance and music was to integrate the cultures of various social classes, to combine folk culture with the national one. Folklorist creations were mostly a reflection of "folk reality" in a specific artistic convention of elite culture (Burszta, 1974, p. 308). The "national folklore" shaped in this way played an important role in representing Polish cultural heritage, separate from the traditions of other countries or cosmopolitan culture. Thus, it was also used as an important tool in cultural diplomacy, and was subject to supervision of the state.

After Mazowsze's debut performance in 1950, its first successes and trips abroad, life in Karolin began to come under increasing government control with the help of appointed officials. Attempts were made to indoctrinate young people by introducing ideological training or by persuading them to join the Polish Youth Union (modeled on the Soviet Komsomol). Officials also tried to interfere with their religiosity by prohibiting them from going to church, praying, or hanging holy pictures or rosaries in the dormitory. As in many spheres of social life during the Stalinist era, freedom of speech or faith was limited. This led to conflicts between the representatives of the authorities and the ensemble founders, and eventually, to Sygietyński's resignation from work in Mazowsze for some time.

This path of social advancement through Karolin required artists to be subordinated to the founding state authorities. In return for education and an artistic career, the communist authorities expected “loyalty” to the state from the ensemble members. Artists who showed resistance were punished by not participating in the tours abroad (Czerwonkówna-Resler, 2001). Foreign trips behind the Iron Curtain created an opportunity to escape to Western Europe or America. Thus, the artists were under constant supervision while touring there. Nevertheless, over several decades of the communist regime in Poland, some members of the ensemble escaped to Germany, France (Czerwonkówna-Resler, 2001; Mizikowska, 2004) or the United States. This indicates that they were not satisfied with the economic or political situation in their motherland, although employment in Mazowsze was considered very prestigious and provided them with a possibility for social promotion.

The function of the Mazowsze State Folk Song and Dance Ensemble in postwar politics can be compared with the role played by the Soviet Igor Moiseyev Ballet in the cultural Cold War, described by Anthony Shay (2019). Many folk song and dance ensembles founded in Central and Eastern Europe, such as Mazowsze and the Virsky Ukrainian Ballet, followed the Soviet model of theatricalization of dance folklore, with a certain tendency to convey socialist ideology. There were, however, certain differences regarding the social background of performers and the intentions to reconstruct source traditions, disseminated in the first years of the Polish ensemble.

Initially, the founders of Mazowsze recruited the ensemble’s members mainly among peasant children and teenagers. Gradually, the amateurs were replaced by professionally educated dancers or talented dance students from various backgrounds, which further facilitated the process of spectacularizing folk dance. The tendency to employ alumni of ballet schools intensified from the beginning of regular performances abroad. It also concerned the orchestra and choir sections, to which mainly graduates of music schools and academies were recruited, as well as amateurs with previous stage experience. This led to a decrease in the proportion of people coming from villages and towns⁴.

In the case of Moiseyev’s ballet, from the very beginning its founder and performers came from the professional ballet world. Dancing in Moiseyev’s ballet required training in classical dance and was much more clearly embedded in the aesthetics of ballet than was Mazowsze. Increasingly, attempts to integrate ballet with folk dance were also developed in Mazowsze. As Shay notes, composers and choreographers coming from urban artistic circles played the role of mediators in the process of reappropriating the cultural expressions of the villagers to the tastes of the intelligentsia and urban audiences. According to Nahachewsky, ballet aesthetics were so widespread and ballet was considered such an elite art, that it served to “translate” the distant folk cultures into a widely acceptable tradition. By adopting ballet qualities, traditional Ukrainian dances could be also seen to rise in status (Nahachewsky, 2001, p. 233). The new conventions adopted from proscenium dance theatres and ballet included: frontal-ness, monumentality, unison, textural density, amplification of movement, linearity in composition and virtuosity. These qualities can be observed in choreographies of Mazowsze, as well as in its choir presentations. My informants most frequently pointed to Moiseyev’s Ballet and the Virsky Ballet (rather than the Pyatnitsky Choir) as the companies whose aesthetics are closest to the folklore stylization developed by Mazowsze choreographers (personal interviews with M. Włoczkowska, W. Milczuk, I. Andrzejak, M. Zawada, D. Kuźnik, M. Ludwikowski, A. Czechlewski, September-November 2021).

⁴ According to art critic and researcher Aleksander Jackowski, while at the beginning of the team 77 members came from villages, in the early 1970s only 6 persons were of peasant origin (1974, p. 52).

Folk songs and melodies under protection of professional artists and supervision of state

Following the example of the Pyatnitsky ensemble, the founders of Mazowsze focused on arranging folk music for an orchestra and choir, presenting folk songs in a chorus of voices. It was an innovation in the traditional art of singing in Mazovian villages, which had been mainly performed in unison and accompanied by small bands of musicians playing on violins, drums, clarinet and accordion. While composing the music for the performances, Tadeusz Sygietyński drew from many sources. Some of the songs and melodies arranged by Sygietyński came from the collections of the famous 19th-century Polish folklorist and ethnographer Oskar Kolberg and from old volumes of Polish songs, such as *Lutnia Polska*. The repertoire also includes songs brought to Karolin by young artists who learned these songs from their ancestors or from seasonal workers coming from other regions. Tadeusz Sygietyński arranged them for choir and orchestra, adding harmonic and instrumental frames, while Mira Zimińska-Sygietyńska edited their lyrics. Some of the songs were originally sung in dialects of the Polish language, which could be difficult to understand for Poles from other regions. Therefore she sought to bring their lyrics closer to the standardized Polish language (Zimińska-Sygietyńska, 1990, pp. 95-96). Some of the songs, brought by the ensemble's members, have become well-known hits of Mazowsze (such as *Kawaliry*, *Kukuleczka*, and *Bandoska*).

The selected songs presented in their new context and arrangement demonstrated a particular representation of gender and ethnicity. Most of the repertoire consisted of flirtatious and wedding songs, based on a dialogue between a young girl and a wooer or a monologue of one of these characters (See Figure 1). While analyzing their lyrics, one can read the old norms of behavior, rural traditions, wedding customs (e.g. matchmaking, arranged marriage or dowry), gender roles and echoes of social divisions or antagonism between nobility and peasantry. There were also many humorous elements in them, as the songs presented on stage were to amuse audiences. The dialogues were often playful, frivolous and sometimes mocking, demonstrating a particular model of femininity and masculinity. Lyrics illustrate preferences and criteria for assessing candidates for a future wife or husband.

Based on an analysis of the content of these songs, bachelors paid attention mainly to the beauty, youth and diligence of their future wives. Young girls valued such qualities as prudence, diligence, honesty, faithfulness and good character. The girls also drew attention to the candidate's social background (region, class) and financial status, but ultimately the feeling for a boy could prevail over these criteria. An example of such a narrative can be found in one of the songs from the Kurpie region titled *Kawaliry* [English *Suitors*]:

Why do you gentlemen come here?
My chamber should not be in your thoughts,
My room is made of hewn wood,
Not for such suitors as you,
What I want is a well-born suitor,
Not one of the same kind as I myself,
One after whom I should not have to go on foot,
I want six pairs of horses and a carriage,
It must be a carriage with windows in it,
The horses should have plumes,
But if there were someone I'd take a fancy to,
Him I would follow and barefoot too.⁵

⁵ English translation from Mazowsze's folders prepared for US and Canada tour in 1964 (*S. Hurok presents Mazowsze Polish Song and Dance Company*).

It is one of the songs included in the repertoire of the “Kurpianka” folk band, who in the beginning of the 1950s was invited to Karolin to teach Mazowsze artists traditional songs and dances from the Kurpie region. Originally, the song formed part of the traditional wedding repertoire of the Kurpie community living in the Green Forest in the Mazowsze region. These wedding songs and dances are still cultivated by the inhabitants of the Green Forest during a celebration called “the Kurpie Wedding”, held each year in Kadzidło village (See Figure 2).



Figure 1. Songs from the Kurpie region performed by the Mazowsze choir in costumes from the “White Forest”. Stanisławów 2021. Photograph by the author.



Figure 2. Staged tradition of the “Kurpie wedding” performed by “Kurpianka” Regional Song and Dance Ensemble with a real wedding couple – a bride and groom from the Kurpie region, getting married in traditional dress of the “Green Forest”. Kadzidło 2022. Photograph by the author.

The traditions of the “Kurpie wedding” have been also recorded by dance researcher Grażyna Dąbrowska in her book under the same title (Dąbrowska, 1985). As we can learn from Dąbrowska’s report and the reconstructed wedding celebrations, the song titled *Kawaliry* was sung during the arrival of a groom to a bride’s house before a marriage ceremony (Dąbrowska 1985, p. 44). This rite often involved feelings of sadness and nostalgia on the part of the bride leaving her maternal house to start a new life with the family of her husband. The stylized version of this song, isolated from this original context, distorts this ritual dimension and evokes different emotions than when it was sung during traditional wedding in the Kurpie region. The song, performed (between other cheerful and humorous songs) by the Mazowsze choir of smiling young women, seems to be a flirtatious expression of a young girl selecting her fiancé according to her preferences and will. Thus, in Mazowsze’s interpretation, the heroine seems to have more self-confidence and agency than could have taken place in the Kurpie communities in the past. Gender representation in the performances of Mazowsze resemble typical models of masculinity and femininity, described by Shay in his analysis of folklorist ensembles from other socialist countries (2002).

Exploring the early repertoire of the Mazowsze ensemble, one can notice that apart from love songs, its founders also chose songs that exhibited the villagers’ passion for music, dance and fun. Peasants were depicted as cheerful and vigorous young people, fit and capable to perform impressive dance steps and athletic movements. The songs often celebrated the attractiveness or character of the inhabitants of specific regions. The sense of cultural distinctiveness of a particular, regional community was reinforced by colourful folk costumes, modelled on authentic traditional attire of that region. Some songs praising the characteristics of a particular community, like *Łowiczanka (A girl from Łowicz)* or *Krakowiaczek (Cracowian)*, can be considered an expression of regional identity. However, when combined with suites of songs and dances from other regions of Poland in one performance, they were designed as a manifestation of national identity in its regional diversity. The mosaic of folklore of various ethnic groups, each with their own costumes, dances and songs, was to show the country’s cultural richness. Anthony Shay noted that similar manifestations of the “rainbow of ethnicity” were popular among folk ensembles in Eastern and Central Europe. Folk dance choreographers, such as Moiseyev or Virsky, used this strategy to celebrate the ethnic diversity in the Soviet Union as cultural richness of the state. The peasantry’s passion for music and dance and their sense of regional and social identity is depicted in many songs and dances performed by Mazowsze, such as the *oberek* from Opoczno:

We would dance, but the room is too small
If we took out the stove, there’d be room enough
Oj dana moja dana, Sir I will not marry you
But only one who comes from my own kind [class]
I don’t want a noblewoman, she would destroy me
She would drink coffee before getting out of the bed⁶.

The lyrics and melody of this song were taken over from village musicians from the Opoczno area, where Sygietyński travelled to explore local culture and find inspiration for future repertoire. Based on music, dance steps and samples of traditional dress from this area, Mazowsze developed its first presentation of regional folklore, staged in 1950 during the debut performance of the ensemble.

Traditionally, folk songs constituted a unique space where peasants’ voices could be articulated. While singing, they allowed themselves to make jokes about higher classes (as in the *Opoczno Oberek*); they could also speak out regarding difficulties of rural life or problems of social exploitation (as in the song titled *Bandoska*). Nevertheless, most folk songs from the

⁶ English translation from Mazowsze’s folders prepared for US and Canada tour in 1964 (Sol Hurok Presents, 1964).

early repertoire of Mazowsze illustrate a colourful image of the Polish village, rich in traditions, transmitted by regional communities who enjoy life and the surrounding nature. Problematic social issues (e.g. experiences of suffering, violence, discrimination) were avoided in the Mazowsze repertoire, in spite of the fact that the songs reflecting the problematic aspects of peasants' life constituted a significant part of the old collections of Polish folk songs compiled by Oskar Kolberg and other folklorists (Małanicz-Przybylska, 2021). One reason for this exclusion lay in the role of the ensemble, which was to entertain and spread a positive image of the Polish nation. These songs were no longer sung and transmitted solely by peasants. Their new propagators from the urban milieu focused on those aspects of rural life that matched the stereotypical vision of the idyllic village, living in harmony with the rhythm of nature.

Political circumstances surrounding the beginning of Mazowsze allowed public authorities to interfere in the performing arts. Thus, in the first decade of the ensemble's activity, Mazowsze's repertoire was subject to censorship by the officials. For this reason, the first published Mazowsze songbook (Grudziński, 1953), opens with four propaganda songs (*A song about Bierut, Friendship Parade, A Song about a six-year plan, Our Song*), which were included in the repertoire due to the interference of government representatives in the artistic programs. The presentation of the songs in performance was expected to empower all working classes and glorify the new social order, in which there should have been no place for social exploitation, discrimination or inequality.

Compared with professional folk dance ensembles in other socialist countries, such as the German Democratic Republic (Walsdorf, 2018, p. 61), the references to political doctrine in Polish folklorist ensembles were not explicitly conveyed and clearly expressed. After 1956 the "socialist" subject matter, such as propaganda songs, disappeared from Mazowsze's repertoire. Its director and choreographers were not devoted to political doctrine, as they focused more on aesthetic values. The aim of their performances was to reconstruct the past, in particular old village life, so subjects related to contemporaneity were avoided. The role of the performances in reinforcing socialist ideology was created through discursive practices and the accompanying ideological framework, imposing certain ways of interpreting the folk dance and music. Without that discourse, the performances became a mere presentation of folklore in a stylized form, largely inspired by the aesthetics of stage folk dances from the interwar period. Perhaps that is why Mazowsze's performances, isolated from socialist discourses after the regime collapse in 1989, are viewed as folk songs and dances by audiences. They are still presented and well received in the format developed in 1960s, without significant changes.

The method of folklore stylization developed by Mazowsze spread throughout Poland, affecting not only amateur folkloristic ensembles, but also individual folk amateurs and hereditary performers in villages. Thanks to radio, the songs reached back to their places of origin. The versions of songs performed by Mazowsze were so popular that some of the local people began to change the way they sang them, following the version popularized by the ensemble. These aesthetics have also inspired many folklorist groups throughout Poland. Similarly, manifestations of the influence of the Mazowsze stylization on folk artists can be observed in aspects of folk dance and costumes.

Aesthetics of folk dances and costumes for stage performance

In the first years of Mazowsze's existence, Sygietyński focused on developing folk songs, whereas dances were a later addition. In order to train artists for dance performances and to create choreography, dance teachers and choreographers were also employed in Karolin. Most of them came from ballet ensembles, and were experienced in the stage adaptation of folk dance. They were not rural artists. They got to know the steps of folk dancing in direct contact with village people. They adapted the traditional dances to the form of a stage performance, enriching them with various figures and show-offs.

In 1950, Eugeniusz Papliński, a well-known choreographer and dance soloist of the Poznań Opera, joined the ensemble. He choreographed dances for Mazowsze based on Kurpie and Opoczno folklore, which were included in the first artistic program of Mazowsze. According to the memories of the first artists of Mazowsze, Eugeniusz Papliński participated in meetings with folk dancers, observing the steps they performed (Kruk and Sroga, 1960, pp. 44-50). Nevertheless, he incorporated choreographic solutions that he had learned while dancing in the Parnell Ballet in the interwar period. These are mainly acrobatic figures, such as a male dancer's turns in the air with the support of a female dancer in the *Opoczno oberek* (see Figure 3). Such elements were absent in the village dances, where the limited spaces of its social practice (like houses, inns) determined a small range of motion. This example illustrates how folk dances were influenced by ballet and stage dance popular before Second World War, and then continued by teachers and choreographers of Mazowsze.



Figure 3. *Oberek from Opoczno* by Mazowsze, Stanisławów 2021. Photograph by the author.

Furthermore, the methods of presenting Polish folk dances were impacted by global fashions. A significant change in the manner of presenting folklore took place at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, when Mazowsze was preparing for its first US tour. Following recommendations of the American impresario Sol Hurok, efforts were made to make the program more attractive to foreign spectators. Since the songs in Polish were the least understandable for overseas audiences, singing parts were significantly reduced in favor of dance presentations. Each new program, especially prepared for the next tour to America, generated the need to develop, first of all, new arrangements of regional dances and costumes. Zimińska-Sygietyńska focused on enriching and diversifying the visual side of performances and their dynamics. Sol Hurok advised that concerts should include as many changes, colours and dances as possible. In the opinion of the current impresario of Mazowsze, Krzysztof Kurlej, it was a breakthrough in the company's trajectory:

Witold Zapała had been already working in Mazowsze [as a choreographer] and Mira Zimińska-Sygietyńska started to compose this program in a slightly stylized way. Later, we faced some objections that we stylize this folklore too much, but thanks to the fact that she started introducing certain stage and artistic evolutions, arranging dances or designing costumes, the concerts became more understandable for foreign audiences

and well received by them. Press reviews spoke for themselves. Mazowsze's concerts aroused a wave of admiration. Perhaps, otherwise, Mazowsze would have not achieved such success and fame. (personal interview with K. Kurlej, 16 November, 2021)

Folk costumes were also modified for the purposes of stage presentation. Many costumes were made in accordance with regional traditions, and they are relatively similar to "authentic" clothes worn in the second half of the nineteenth century or the first half of the twentieth century. This had both benefits and disadvantages. On one hand, the traditional wool fabrics turned out to be more tear-resistant when the dancers performed various acrobatic figures. On the other hand, it was an additional challenge for the dancers, who sometimes had to carry an extra 18kg of costumes while dancing in costumes from Central Poland (e.g. from the Łowicz area) (see Figures 4 and 5).

Zimińska sometimes decided to modify the cut, for instance: lengthening the skirts and lowering the waist in the Łowicz costume, or shortening the skirts in the highlander costume (personal interview with M. Włóczkowska, 2 September, 2021). She also allowed herself to change colours of the clothes, according to her preferences, for example by replacing the pink colour of the Lachy Sądeckie skirt with a burgundy one. She carefully selected and modified the shades of the costumes so that they would look good in the stage light. She also wanted the artists to look similar in them. Moreover, the colours of the costumes in some choreographies were harmonized with the artists' on-stage movements in space. According to Małgorzata Włóczkowska, the influence of Soviet folk groups, such as Moiseyev Ballet, on the Mazowsze's choreographers, especially Witold Zapała, is evident in this matter (personal interview with M. Włóczkowska, 2 September, 2021).

Over its first five decades, the ensemble developed dances and songs of over 40 ethnographic regions of Poland, going beyond the initial intention to limit the repertoire to the folklore of the Mazowsze region. Due to such a wide choice, performances consisting of approximately 20 short regional suites, each lasting around 5 minutes, began to be created in the 1960s. Each suite consisted of several songs and social dance sequences selected from a specific region, derived from various contexts (e.g. weddings, agricultural rites, or dances showing dexterity and strength). At the beginning of the 1960s, Witold Zapała developed a particular performance structure, starting with a folk version of the polonaise (*chodzony* – "a walked dance"), followed by the *Opoczno oberek*, a krakowiak dance at the end of the first act, and a spectacular *Final* piece at the end. This format is popular to this day, and artistic stylization is a distinguishing feature of the ensemble's work.



Figure 4. Mazowsze's artists singing folk songs in costumes from Łowicz, Stanisławów 2021. Photograph by the author.



Figure 5. Łowicz residents parading in their traditional dress during the Corpus Christi procession, Łowicz 2021. Photograph by the author.

Theatralization of folklore and discussions on authenticity

The circumstances surrounding the formation of Mazowsze influenced social perceptions of the role of stage folk dance in Poland. As it appears from a discourse analysis of archival performance reviews, critics tended to describe the first performances of the ensemble (consisting of trained amateurs of peasant origin) as “authentic” and “pure folklore”, slightly “refined” into the form of art. In the following decades, as the repertoire encompassed more and more regional songs and dances, the performances started to be identified as cultural legacy of the whole country, and described as an expression of the “soul” or “true character” of Polish nation. This type of reception spread abroad, where audiences might have been less aware of the differences between Mazowsze’s performances and the source traditions that inspired them. Stage folk songs or dance steps and figures were often understood as, and equated with, “authentic” revived Polish folklore. Increasingly, this misperception began to arouse resistance on the part of the traditional folk music performers and a critical attitude of some ethnographers towards labelling stylized performances of folklorist groups as “folklore”.

Conservative circles of traditional musicians argued that professional folklorist ensembles adopting folk songs and dances to the preferences of broad audiences, significantly distorted their aesthetics. In their opinion, the image of Polish folk culture presented in the performances was fragmentary and incoherent. As described earlier, a standard performance of Mazowsze combines folklore of different periods and regions; folk songs are presented in isolation from their ritual context, as a form of entertainment; and amusing aspects, technical virtuosity and other aesthetic values are emphasized in the presentation. These characteristics

were unfavoured by hereditary artists and some ethnographers. The disputes between these protagonists and advocates of embellished folk dance and music continue to this day.

In the opinion of art historian Aleksander Jackowski, Tadeusz Sygietyński can be considered to have continued the trends in arranging musical folklore initiated by such composers as Fryderyk Chopin. He argued that Chopin's mazurkas and scherzos were distinguished by longing and lyricism, characterized by turbulent, violent and dramatic passages. Sygietyński composed obereks, mazurkas and krakowiaks, creating an atmosphere of ecstasy and madness that could be compared more to Ravel's *Bolero* than to Polish folk music documented by Oskar Kolberg (Jackowski, 1974, p. 27). According to Jackowski, this approach to folklore lacked authenticity, but he described it as a method of "refining" folk music and dance. He explained that:

Sygietyński had his own concept of folklore. At a time when the coarseness (often bordering on vulgarity) or maudlin sentimentality of folk culture was being accentuated, he strove to emphasize the pure, crystalline lyricism of a maiden's song and the almost orgiastic verve and vitality of a galloping cracovienne or the whirl of couples engrossed in the oberek. (Jackowski, 1974, p. 26)

In the opinion of Jackowski, deviation from the rural tradition was necessary to enable its continuation in the form of a stage art. He argued that the folklore transferred to the stage had to be adapted to its new roles, "just like a lullaby adapted to the needs of art changes its function and it is supposed to arouse the emotions of viewers, not to put them to sleep" (Jackowski, 1974, p. 27).

Similarly, nowadays the representatives and spokespeople of Mazowsze tend to explain its aesthetics in relation to the tasks of stage art. According to Wioletta Milczuk, Mazowsze's former dancer and ballet director in the years 2008-2021, artistic stylization serves the main function of the ensemble today, namely to provide entertainment and aesthetic experiences and to educate the viewer/listener about cultural diversity of Poland. She explains:

We stylize folklore. Nobody in the villages danced like Mazowsze does. Nobody jumped in this way or a girl never lifted a boy... It never happened, the dances are simply stylized here... When we have a dancer who has some extraordinary skills, it inspires us to go a little further in a given suite, go out beyond that tradition... When something inspired us from regional dances, it was simply transposed onto the stage. But the stage has its own rules and a given suite or dance must adapt to these rules of the stage. We are an ensemble that is supposed to stir positive emotions, move and entertain the spectator. The viewer is supposed to find that we have diverse and beautiful folklore... Therefore, this dance repertoire must also be impressive. And it will make an impression when it will be technically difficult, seemingly impossible to perform. (personal interview with W. Milczuk, 15 November, 2021)

The dancers of Mazowsze share similar opinions, as illustrated in the following statements:

Mazowsze is a professional and stylized ensemble, it is not a folk dance taken straight from an inn or a rural wedding, but the repertoire has already been developed, steps have been developed and this form is strictly designed for stage performance. I think that in general, there are a lot of such elements in choreographies, in our kujawiak, for example, and these are influences not only from the classical dance. These are also inflows from other cultures. (personal interview with A. Szafran, 15 November, 2021)

I think that the choreographers, on the basis of key steps and character of regional and national dances, created choreographies that had to be well-received by a theater audience and a ballet viewer. Mazowsze has performed on the stages of the largest theaters, both in Poland and all over the world, and a pure, simple form would not attract the audience's attention so much. Mazowsze presents a form adapted to the needs of higher art. (personal interview with A. Czechlewski, 16 November, 2021)

As indicated by these statements, the theatricalization of folklore was a key step that allowed Mazowsze to reach audiences from all over the world, and to perform at the most prestigious stages. Its way of presenting Polish folklore aimed to create a positive image of the Polish culture and nation abroad. Thus, the Polish village presented in the performances was colourful, joyful, and full of singing and dancing. Such a vision of folklore was attractive to audiences and stirred an interest in Polish folklore, not only in Poland (inspiring the folklore revival movement), but also abroad.⁷

According to Jackowski, Mazowsze contributed to restoring the value of, and respect for, rural culture, as well as eliminating the inferiority complex experienced by the villagers in relation to the city and its culture. Thanks to the ensemble, Jackowski believes, many cultural traditions were saved from oblivion in the context of the dynamic industrialization of the village (Jackowski, 1974, p. 87). This ensemble was one of the most important popularizers of folk dance and music, not only in the 1950s and 1960s (the focus of this article), but also in the more recent times of political transformation. The beginning of the 1990s (after the fall of communism in Poland in 1989) turned out to be a difficult period for many folk song and dance groups, which disbanded due to the lack of subsidies. It was a period of decline in the popularity of folklore. A part of Polish society tended to regard folklore a relic of the previous system and associated it with backwardness. Meanwhile, Mazowsze as a state company could still travel abroad, where the same program was still received with enthusiasm by Polish migrant communities and foreign audiences, for whom Polish folklore was still something attractive and unavailable on a daily basis.

Currently, in response to market challenges, Mazowsze continues to develop new theatrical and educational performances with elements of folklore, which are devoted to Polish audiences, including children and young generations. The opening of its own modern auditorium in 2009 brought possibility to create a new type of performance with stagecraft and using modern technical solutions. Regular outdoor events are organized, to which traditional folk musicians are invited. Besides, Mazowsze performs on one stage with artists belonging to the popular music scene in Poland. Such events provide an occasion to trace the changes in transmission of traditional music repertoire, as well as its continuity in new, refashioned forms.

Conclusions

The Mazowsze State Folk Song and Dance Ensemble has been a leading company representing Polish folk performing arts in front of local and foreign audiences for over seventy years. Throughout the changing historical periods, the ensemble presents the legacy of several generations, recontextualizing old songs and dances from various regions of Poland in the form of artistic stylization, which was subject to certain transformations, in response to changing cultural trends. On the one hand, the group presents songs, melodies and dance steps taken from folk traditions. On the other hand, the method of its presentation has been shaped by theatre,

⁷ As Jackowski points out, the repertoire of Mazowsze was picked up by foreign artists, including the Folclorico Mexico ballet, the West Wind and Candy groups from Los Angeles, the Alicja Alonso ballet from Cuba, several Soviet song and dance ensembles and dozens of Polish groups. During their concert tours, the artists of Mazowsze demonstrated Polish folk and national dance steps in ballet schools in Australia, England, France, Japan, Mexico, the Soviet Union and Switzerland (Jackowski, 1974, p.100).

opera and ballet artists, coming from different social backgrounds from rural performers. The development of the repertoire was supported by state subsidies and patronage of the authorities, which also influenced its artistic form and programs. Meanwhile rural performers had a rather minor voice in discussions about the shape and presentation of folklore. They provided inspiration, but were more performers rather than creators of this artistic vision.

These insights into the history of Mazowsze reveal that the success and continuation of Mazowsze's work largely resulted from its ability to adapt traditions to the stage and to meet the expectations of contemporary audiences. This naturally implied a change in the aesthetics and significance of the presented folk legacy. As some ethnomusicologists point out, due to the disappearance of the original background of these traditions (old rural rituals and customs), maintaining them in an unchanged form and with unchanged meaning would not be entirely possible (Kubinowski, 2002). Each transfer of a tradition into a different context must imply a change in a way it functions, along with its place and role in society.

Post-war revival of Polish folk music and dances was intended to preserve folklore, disseminate it among various social classes and fight class inequality, in particular by enabling access to professional music education. Employment in Mazowsze was considered a social promotion and distinction, particularly in 1960-1980s, when the ensemble's prestige increased due to regular overseas tours and performances before heads of state or famous artists. The Polish People's Republic supported folklore revival for its ideological purposes, at the same time limiting the artists' freedom of speech, political or religious belief, and self-expression. The state officials tried to impose a specific ideology on their repertoire, control them and intervene in their personal life. Therefore, postulates of democratization and social equality in the field of national culture were tempered by an expectation that artists would be subordinate to the political ideology and aesthetical reappropriation of traditional dance and music.

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