
VIEWS

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REFLECTING UPON FREEDOM IN TWO ELECTROACOUSTIC WORKS BY ELŻBIETA SIKORA¹

Abstract: The text's aim is to interpret the political and social aspect of Elżbieta Sikora's (born 1943) two electronic works: *Rapsodia na śmierć republiki* (*Rhapsody for the Death of the Republic*, 1979) and *Janek Wiśniewski, grudzień, Polska* (*Janek Wiśniewski, December, Poland*, 1981–1982). In my paper, I show the two pieces as examples of the 'engaged music' (as Sikora herself called them). I consider the role of their titles, narration, the use of pre-recorded sounds and musical quotation, as well as the circumstances of their creation.

Keywords: Elżbieta Sikora, music and politics, electronic music, Polish music, 20th century music, Polish Radio Experimental Studio, Groupe de Recherches Musicales, Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique

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In 1957, on the wave of the Khrushchev Thaw after the death of Joseph Stalin (1878–1953), the Polish Radio Experimental Studio (PRES) in Warsaw, Poland was established. Even though the decision-makers in the Ministry of Culture wanted it so as to serve the Communists' agenda (mainly, radio propaganda), it also created an environment supporting free and independent spirits like Józef Patkowski (1929–2005), Eugeniusz Rudnik (1932–2016), Krzysztof Penderecki (1933–2020), and later – composers of the KEW group: Krzysztof Knittel (born in 1947),² Wojciech Michniewski (born in 1947) and, a little older than her colleagues, Elżbieta Sikora (born in 1943).³

Elżbieta Sikora was born in Lviv, then, after the war, she moved with her family to Gdańsk. She played the piano in high school but decided to study sound engineering at the Higher State School of Music (today, The Chopin University of Music) in Warsaw – at one of the first departments of sound engineering in Europe. The curriculum contained not only strictly technical classes but also important classes on music as art – harmony, composition, music in film, etc. There, she became interested in electroacoustic music. The composer's mother had a strong influence on her development: a classical philologist fascinated by French culture and with friends in France, she helped her daughter to go to Normandy after her studies. There, Sikora got acquainted with her boyfriend's friend, who helped her to get to the Groupe de Recherches Musicales, where for two years she studied with Pierre Schaeffer and François Bayle. In 1970, after Sikora's parents' serious car accident, she decided to go back to Poland. With her husband Krzysztof Rogulski – film director, they were thinking about moving to France for good but Rogulski did not get permission to leave Poland (because of the supposedly anti-Communist message of his last movie). Sikora started studying composition (also in Warsaw) with Tadeusz Baird (1928–1981) and Zbigniew Rudziński (1935–2019), and she worked in the PRES with Knittel and Michniewski. A few months before December 1981, she went to France on another scholarship (in the Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique – IRCAM). After the introduction of martial law in Poland in 1981, Sikora decided to stay abroad. She

² Andrzej Mądro considers him as one of the most socially and politically engaged composers of his generation, see Andrzej Mądro, *Muzyka a nowe media. Polska twórczość elektroakustyczna przełomu XX i XXI wieku*, Kraków, Wydawnictwo Akademii Muzycznej w Krakowie, 2017, 318–322.

³ More on PRES, see: Michał Libera, Michał Mendyk (eds), *Czarny pokój i inne pokoje. Zbiór tekstów o Studiu Eksperymentalnym Polskiego Radia*, Warszawa–Łódź, Fundacja Automatophone, 2018.

never went back to Poland for good, but she regularly visits her first country – most notably, she was the director of the Musica Electronica Nova Festival in Wrocław (2011–2017).

Even though she is not as obviously involved in social and political issues as her colleague Knittel, she was called by Michèle Tosi in 2016: “une compositrice polonaise engagée” – “a Polish engaged composer”.⁴ Privately, she considers politics as a ‘foreign body’, she is not strongly interested in it.⁵ However, there were times in the stormy 1960s, 1970s and 1980s when she felt responsible for expressing an opinion and reflecting upon political events. In the radio programme *Zapiski ze współczesności* (*Notes on the Present Day*), she recollected events from March 1968 (anti-Communist protests connected to, among other things, the anti-Jewish campaign, pacified by militia):

It [1968] was the year of my graduation, but still March. Then, we all felt engaged. I have that dark memory: we got to know what was going on at the University, we went there [...] Suddenly, there was a rumour that the ZOMO [Motorized Reserves of the Citizens’ Militia] was coming, that it was bad, and it would beat with batons. There was a moment of electrification, very unpleasant. Then, Krzysiek had that incredible instinct and said: “We are turning back and going”. And we went through the ZOMO, passing it by, they had not yet got the order to start beating. And just after we left the gate, we heard the screams and beating. I get chills when I am talking about it. We were hiding in the gates, then, we went to the Polytechnic because a lot was going on there as well. A lot was happening. And it was my first real awakening, a moment of visual and physical awareness of where I was and what was happening. Even though I was far from it and I did not see the problem of the Jews’ departure etc. I realized it later. Several colleagues from the University were detained. We started to find out who was who at school, at the University, with whom we could speak openly, and with whom we could not.⁶

She remembered also other important events – from December 1970, when in Gdańsk, Gdynia and other shipbuilding cities there were protests once again violently pacified by militia (with more than 40 fatalities):

⁴ Michèle Tosi, Elżbieta Sikora, *Elżbieta Sikora, une compositrice polonaise engagée*, <https://www.leducation-musicale.com/index.php/recensions-de-spectacles/5666-elzbieta-sikora-une-compositrice-polonaise-engagee> page accessed: 14.11.2019.

⁵ *Zapiski ze współczesności*, 19.10.2019, <https://www.polskieradio.pl/8/22/Artykul/2386627,Kompozytorska-droga-Elzbiety-Sikory> page accessed: 10.3. 2021.

⁶ Ibid.

Then, after my return from Paris, we had Gdańsk's December 1970. I was in Warsaw, I was not directly involved but I heard what was happening. At last, I was going there, after the events. My aunt Ala, who lived in Gdynia just opposite the station (it was then called Nowotko Hill) saw them shooting at the workers. She told us everything. It stuck in my memory, like an afterimage, and it later influenced the *Janek Wiśniewski* piece. It was another sign that I was living in a world that was not going well.

Even though she did not feel powerfully influenced by political events, Sikora herself called her two works for tape 'engaged music': *Rapsodia na śmierć republiki* (*Rhapsody for the Death of the Republic*) prepared in PRES in 1979 and *Janek Wiśniewski, grudzień, Polska* (*Janek Wiśniewski, December, Poland*) composed in GRM in 1981 and 1982. Two other works from her catalogue can also be considered as indirectly referring to social issues: *Guernica. Tribute to Pablo Picasso* (1982) to Paul Éluard's *The Victory of Guernica* for a cappella choir and *Chant'Europe* (1993) to her own words for three children's choirs and orchestra. She also tends to choose socially relevant topics for her works – like in the opera *Madame Curie* based on the life of Maria Skłodowska-Curie (2011). In my text, however, I will focus only on two works for tape, both published in 2012 on the Bòłt Records CD titled *Blanc et rouge* (*White and red* – colours of the Polish national flag),⁷ containing also electroacoustic works by Eugeniusz Rudnik, Krzysztof Penderecki, Krzysztof Knittel, Bohdan Mazurek (1937–2014) and Maria Pokrzywińska (born in 1954).

The older of the two works, *The Rhapsody for the Death of the Republic*, like most of Sikora's electroacoustic pieces, is based on pre-recorded sounds. She admits that the philosophy of GRM and the heritage of *musique concrète* fits her more than working with only synthesised sounds. Sometimes, she even leaves the sounds recognizable: "I very often work with pre-recorded sounds, which I want to be recognizable or, at least, subconsciously receiveable. [...] The potential of distinguishing where particular sounds come from is important to me".⁸ The pre-recorded material of *The Rhapsody...* contains,

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jan Topolski, Michał Mendyk, Elżbieta Sikora "Chętnie zagram znów na buchli. Rozmowa z Elżbietą Sikorą", *Glissando*, 2017, <http://glissando.pl/wywiady/rozmowa-z-elzbieta-sikora/> (accessed: 14th October 2020). More about timbre and sound in Sikora's works, see: Weronika Nowak, "Rola i znaczenie brzmienia w twórczości Elżbiety Sikory", in: Katarzyna Dziewiątkowska-Mleczko, Beniamin Głuszek, Urszula Koza (eds), *Wieloznaczność dźwięku/Sound Ambiguity*, Wrocław, Wydawnictwo Akademii Muzycznej im. K. Lipińskiego we Wrocławiu, 2014, 119–128.

among other things, the sound of the atomic bomb and a human voice from a tape fragment⁹ that was a few centimeters long, accidentally found in the studio. Both sounds are strongly transformed. As Sikora said: “Multiple loops and transformations made it acquire a specific quality of a rhythmical, military scream.”¹⁰

That scream, cut into pieces and looped, appears for the first time just after the introduction and comes back later (Figure 1, yellow frames).¹¹ There is also a second kind of screaming: muted screaming in English – the word “hello” and something which is not intelligible (probably: “There’s something moving”) but having the quality of warning (Figure 1, orange frames). It appears in the phase preceding the one based on sounds of a marching crowd (maybe an army) and machine guns (Figure 1, red frame). Other sounds symbolically referring to the military sphere are the bugle and the snare drum (Figure 1, light blue boxes) and the whistling of a cheerful march-like melody, out-of-tune (Figure 1, white frame). Alongside those pre-recorded sounds of more or less obvious military connotations, the piece contains contrasting, obviously synthetic sounds.

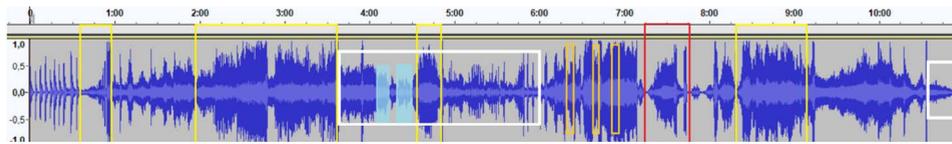


Figure 1: Wave graph of *The Rhapsody for the Death of the Republic* by Elżbieta Sikora; yellow frames – a cut and looped unarticulated human scream, orange frames – scream in English, light blue boxes – the sound of a bugle and a snare drum, white frames – whistling, red frame – marching and machine guns.

Some of them are used extensively, repeated many times or used as a basis for particular phases (like the scream, the whistled melody, the artificial sounds), or even as a means of integrating the whole piece. That function is assumed mainly by the tremolo snare drum-like sound – sometimes clearer and in the foreground, sometimes muffled and hidden in the background. Some sounds, on the other hand, are shown only a few times, and

⁹ Bolesław Błaszczuk, essay in the booklet of CD album *Polish Radio Experimental Studio. Blanc et rouge*, Bôlt Records 2012.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The sound example is available online at the official New Sound YouTube channel: <https://youtu.be/4ac11XFd5E4>

treated rather as symbols (bugle and snare drum signalling, English language screaming, metallic sounds resembling metallic idiophone). In between, the sounds of marching and machine guns can be situated – they occur only once but constitute a separate phase and their obvious war connotations emphasize the title of the work.

Despite so many military-related sounds, however, the work does not indicate any particular war. Sikora herself stated:

There is no direct reference to the French Revolution, but indirectly there is to any “deaths” of emerging – here and there, now and then – “republics.” And their noble ideas disappear giving perverse power to some while making others lose their freedom and dignity. A critical aspect? Certainly. Nevertheless, one cannot use music to criticize anything. It’s an expression of personal protest against repetitive historical situations as well as a reflection of the futility of the human being [...]. First of all, however, it’s a sound story without words, aiming at evoking certain images and associations.¹²

The overall structure of the piece can be considered in terms of those words. It has a multi-phase narration, with a clear introduction based on repeated string sounds and with the closing phase based on the already known whistled melody, softening and, finally, disappearing. But it does not have a strong dynamic climax – rather, many local culminations and phases of release. However, we can consider the marching and machine gun phase as a semantic climax, because of its occurrence only once, its placement about two-thirds into the piece, its power, and clear extramusical associations. One can associate that formal freedom with the “story without words” mentioned by the author and with the genre that Sikora decided to put in the title of the piece: “rhapsody” – a kind of epic poetry, without a fixed structure, partially improvised and with strong expression.¹³ And, naturally, the musical rhapsody – a narrative genre with a free, flowing form.

But there is also another story hidden behind that piece. In one of the interviews, Sikora stated that it had primarily been part of the music for a pantomime.¹⁴ The composer wrote only one pantomime for the Warsaw Chamber Opera (Warszawska Opera Kameralna) – it was a work prepared in the Groupe de Musique Expérimentale de Bourges in 1978. In different

¹² Ibid.

¹³ John Anthony Cuddon, *Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory*, London – New York – Ringwood, Penguin Books, 1999, 747.

¹⁴ Jan Topolski, Michał Mendyk, Elżbieta Sikora, op. cit.

places, it figures with a slightly different title (in both languages – Polish and English): *In the Night, Face towards Heaven, The Night Face Up*. The last version of the title is also the title of the short story by Julio Cortazar, which had been published in a Polish translation just a year before Sikora's work was composed (and Sikora admits she is a bookworm¹⁵). Unfortunately, there is no commentary by the composer on that topic, only the review by Olgierd Pisarenko in which the journalist supposed that the pantomime's story was about a woman who lost her sight in an accident but instead gained some kind of sixth sense.¹⁶ Cortazar's short story also includes an accident on a motorcycle. Its main character thinks he is in the hospital and dreams about a war in Aztec times – the war of the blossom, the hunt for humans to be sacrificed. He ends as an offering – killed by his compatriots – realizing that it was the motorcycle accident that was the dream. The short story is full of images of fear, running away, and the atmosphere of war. But only some sounds of that piece are similar to the sounds in *The Rhapsody...* – it does not contain any sounds directly related to war. Nevertheless, the potential existence of that imagery as the basis of the later piece seems to be important.

While Sikora's first engaged work is political in the broad sense only, the second – *Janek Wiśniewski, December, Poland*, on the other hand – is connected to two very particular political events. The first is already indicated in the title. It alludes to a famous figure in Poland – Janek Wiśniewski, and to the time – December, and to the place – Poland. Certainly, to December 1970 in Gdańsk, where Sikora then lived. That year, just before Christmas, the prices of food increased suddenly by about 20%. This led to fierce public protests and strikes in Gdańsk (among other cities), during which the militia opened fire on the workers, killing at least 42 people. The day was later called Black Thursday. But another event and another December had their impact on Sikora as well – in the Summer of 1981, she went to France because of the scholarship she had been granted by the French government. The GRM commissioned a new electroacoustic composition from her, and

¹⁵ Daniel Cichy, Elżbieta Sikora, "Fale tsunami powoli ustępują, wywiad z kompozytorką przeprowadzony przez D. Cichego", *Ruch Muzyczny*, 8, 2006, <http://www.ruchmuzyczny.pl/PelnyArtykul.php?Id=75> page accessed: 10.11.2019.

¹⁶ Olgierd Pisarenko, "Ariadna Elżbiety Sikory", *Ruch Muzyczny*, 10, 1979, <http://www.encyklopediateatru.pl/artykuly/203952/ariadna-elzbiety-sikory> page accessed: 10.11.2019.

she started the work on the part of the triptych *La Tête d'Orphée* (*The Head of Orpheus*, 1981). But on the 13th December that year, when martial law was introduced in Poland, Sikora decided not to go back to Poland. She remembers:

When in 1981 I had started working on the new GMR commission, I had had an entirely different idea, but when I was finally in the studio, martial law was burning in Poland. The primary project did not come off. I asked myself, how I should act, how to express my point of view. I decided that I would use as a starting material four chords from the song *Janek Wiśniewski padł*. I found the recording somewhere, that was not so easy in France at that time. I exaggerated and transformed those initial sounds which became very sharp, the rest of the work is electronic, without pre-recorded sounds.¹⁷

The song mentioned by the composer is one of the best known popular songs from Communist times in Poland: *Ballada o Janku Wiśniewskim* (*Ballad about Janek Wiśniewski*). The main character, fictional but based on the real one (possibly Zbyszek Godlewski, killed in the strike) became a symbol of the Communists' violence. The poem was printed unofficially just after Black Thursday. The probable author of the text was Krzysztof Dowgiałło. The first version of the music was written by Mieczysław Cholewa, and it is probably his performance, that was recorded on a vinyl disc *Postulat 22. Songs from the New Polish Labour Movement* published by Šafrán in Sweden in 1980 (in the USA in 1981). In July 1981 Andrzej Wajda's movie *Man of Iron* was premiered – featuring the second version of the song, with a slightly changed text and different music composed by Andrzej Korzyński, performed by Krystyna Janda. The text is very simple, with the refrain “Janek Wiśniewski has fallen” and many allusions to the political and social situation, and even to particular people.

Although between *The Rhapsody for the Death of the Republic* and *Janek Wiśniewski, December, Poland* there were only two years and both pieces were inspired by politics, the second work is quite different. The pre-recorded sounds are not as crucial, and the whole electroacoustic fabric of the piece seems denser, with the more frequent use of the illusion of moving in space (in both cases I worked with stereo recordings from the Bôlt CD from 2012).

Sikora stated that in *Janek Wiśniewski...* she had used only one kind of pre-recorded sounds – the chords from the *Ballad*. They can be heard at least

¹⁷ Jan Topolski, Michał Mendyk, Elżbieta Sikora, op. cit.

a few times, each of them in an important moment of the work (Figure 2, yellow frames).¹⁸ For the first time, they are present at the very beginning – the whole introduction is based on them. For the second time, we hear them at the beginning of the second phase of the piece (green bracket). For the third time, it appears just before the climax of that part. And for the two last times – in the end, before the last gradation to another culminating point, and as the final figure of the whole work. The chords are strongly distracted; if we did not have the information from the composer, we probably could not recognise the source of those main gestures.

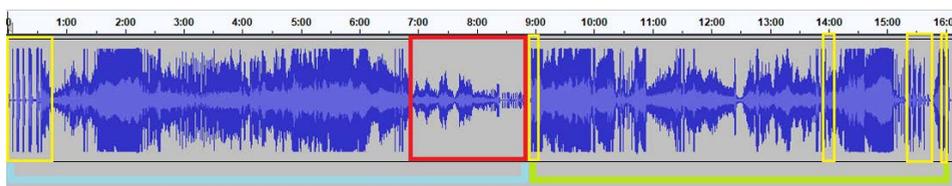


Figure 2: Wave graph of *Janek Wiśniewski, December, Poland*; light blue bracket – the first phase of the work, green bracket – the second phase of the work, yellow frames – looped guitar chords from the song *Janek Wiśniewski padł*, red frame – middle section in *piano*.

The form of *Janek Wiśniewski...* is much clearer than the form of *The Rhapsody...* The second work consists of two, distinct phases. The section in the middle, in low dynamics (Figure 2, red frame) is not the contrasting section in the loud-quiet-loud structure but rather a ‘false ending’ of the first part, after which the initial gesture comes back with even more power.

The last thing I would like to mention in the context of that piece is its placement within *The Head of Orpheus* cycle. Sikora titled *Janek Wiśniewski...* differently when she decided to change the idea of the work but she still considers it as a part of that cycle, and she finds the technical, as well as the semantic basis for this connection: “...in *The Head of Orpheus* there is only one pre-recorded sound as well – the scream, the sigh of a woman, the rest is achieved by electronic means”,¹⁹ and: “In the same period [as *The Head of Orpheus II – DM*] *Janek Wiśniewski, December, Poland* for tape was made. [...] So, in one piece and the other, the shadow of Polish history is present. Orpheus – that mythological character – became for me Janek Wiśniewski-

¹⁸ The sound example is available online at the official New Sound YouTube channel: https://youtu.be/x2c_6BCC4KA

¹⁹ Ibid.

ki. [...] In *The Head of Orpheus II* the solo instrument is standing up to the world around him...”²⁰ I am not convinced the connection can be perceived by listeners who are unaware but I would let the other artist, painter Ladislas Kijno (1921–2012), whose metaphorical and suggestive description of *Janek Wiśniewski*... Sikora herself quoted in the note to the work, said:

In the mercury light of Gdańsk’s factories, workers carry the body of the dead Janek Wiśniewski on a door, high above their heads. The victim of absurd cruelty, Orpheus returns to hell: a great musical metaphor erupts with a series of sonoric bolts of lightning... S.O.S.: an abstract telegraph, contaminated insects, songs of the dead from Tibet, primaevial percussions, the speleology of thought, irony, sarcasm, and laughter. Eros–Thanatos. A Gregorian ritual... Liquid music, a metaphysical organ, sign–as–shock, sign–as–wall, sex–sign, eye–sign, sting–sign, a wind from space, where bumble-bees explode in the rhythms of the bullets that killed Janek Wiśniewski. The struggle between the Angel and Jacob, Freedom and Death...²¹

It is easy to believe that Elżbieta Sikora, as a young, rebellious person not deeply engaged in political events on an everyday basis, answered to or reflected upon the situation that had truly touched her with honesty and spontaneity. That her works are examples of *ars vera* (authentic art) – composed from a genuine personal need²² and praising values recognised commonly as true: the notion of republicanism (understood in a general way, as a synonym to democracy, not in any particular political way), freedom, human life and human dignity. Sikora has never again committed herself to political music as such. Although she wrote some other works that can be considered as socially involved (like the aforementioned *Chant’Europe*), she has never again made any gesture so strong and direct, as *The Rhapsody*... and, particularly, *Janek Wiśniewski, December, Poland*.

²⁰ Daniel Cichy, Elżbieta Sikora, op. cit.

²¹ Ladislas Kijno, fragment of the diary entry, *ACOUSMA FORUM – SIKORA 75*, Wrocław, Narodowe Forum Muzyki, 2019, 5, https://www.nfm.wroclaw.pl/images/Sezon_2018_2019/MEN_2018/omowienia/4_Akusma_MEN.pdf (access: 12nd March 2021).

²² For the question about truth in engaged music, see: Mieczysław Tomaszewski, “Beauty and Truth, Imagination and Expression”, *Teoria Muzyki. Studia, Interpretacje, Dokumentacje*, 2016, 8/9, 546.