

## FIELD OF RESEARCH

# Eastern European Organ Music

Organist **Gail Archer** evaluates the influences, improvisations and ecclesiastical economy of Eastern Europe's organ music

In the summer of 2003, I travelled to Poland for the first time to present five organ recitals. In contrast to concert attendances at such recitals in the US or Canada, the Polish churches were full of people who had a deep appreciation and wide knowledge of classical music. These experiences sparked my curiosity about organ music in Eastern Europe. Was there new music being written by native composers? How did hymns and the rhythms and melodies of folk culture influence the composition of new music for the organ?

Since that first tour, I have returned to Eastern Europe annually for concerts, and have recorded four albums of Russian, Ukrainian, Polish and Bulgarian organ music, performing pieces from Hymnody and Gregorian Chant traditions. A notable example is 'Improvisations on a Polish Hymn Święty Boże' by Polish composer Mieszysław Surzyski (1866–1924). It opens with a simple statement of the chorale in D major, followed by intricate variations on the familiar tune, permitting the organist to take advantage of the solo reed registrations of the instrument. Turning to the minor mode, the central funeral march is dark, powerful and propelled by dotted rhythms.

In Bulgaria, the most notable female organist is Neva Krysteva (b. 1946). She draws on the liturgical chant 'Victimae paschali laudes' for her technically demanding work. At this piece's outset, powerful arpeggios are answered by the low-pitched bass of pedal-reed stops for a grand fanfare. Then follows an ethereal section with spare and widely spaced chords played by the left hand, and triplets elicited by the right. Krysteva juxtaposes duplets and triplets with both hands and feet in alternating 7/8 and 9/8 bars in the third section. Another female Bulgarian composer, Radosveta Hurkova, wrote a work entitled 'Evharistia' inspired by a Bible verse from 1 Corinthians: 'Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that God's Spirit lives in you.' While all the measures are in compound time, the number of eighths in each bar changes constantly, ranging from a simple 6/8 to 18/8. Hurkova's other organ work is 'Variations on the Song 'Polegnale e Tudor'. Here, the traditional dance rhythms of the 'Bulgarian nine' rhythm animate the whole piece: 2+2+2+3.

Eastern European music is striking because it is inspired by pentatonic, octatonic, whole-tone and acoustic scales, forming a glistening, distinctive harmonic language that is entirely fresh and unique to the ear of Western musicians and the general public who appreciate classical music. In contrast, most concert organists in the West play the music of Bach and French Romantic music from the 19th century. All of this music is tonal and based upon the diatonic major

and minor scales. In addition, the measures are organised in regular duple or triple patterns that are consistent throughout the entire composition. The folk music and folk dance rhythms of Eastern Europe are naturally irregular in the organisation of the rhythmic groupings in a single piece, often responding to the accentuation of the national language. The listener cannot predict what will come next in a given composition, making each new work a marvellous sonic path of discovery.

Art song [Western vocal music, usually comprising of just one voice with piano] is also a source of inspiration for organ music. César Cui (1835–1918), a member of the Russian Five of composers, wrote over 200 songs for solo voice and piano. His two brief organ works, the 'Prelude in G Minor' and 'Prelude in A Major' contain elegant melodies which rise well above the range of the human voice. Yet they have the lyrical quality of an art song. In a similar fashion, Polish composer Wyncenty Rychling (1841–1896) composed about 100 organ works published under the title *Pastoralki* in 1906. 'Pastorale in F# Major' is a brief work performed in 6/8 time, which gently alternates between major and minor modes, while making unexpected inflexions of chromatic alternation in the harmony.

Improvisation and spontaneity mark the work of many Eastern European composers. Russian composer Sergei Slonimsky (1932–2020) conducted extensive research on the Russian folksong tradition. 'Toccata' is one of his only two organ works; it's angular, rhythmic and written in two keys simultaneously. The player is constantly challenged to hear and think on two levels, while executing the changes. Other notable compositions include 'Kantata for Organ' by Henryk Mikołaj Górecki (1933–2010), 'Piece in Five Movements' by Ukrainian composer Tadeusz Machl (1922–2003) and 'Esquisse for Organ' by Polish composer Grażyna Bacewicz (1909–1969).

Studying this music has refreshed my approach to all organ literature, as one tries to capture the spirited originality of music that will not be bound by centuries of what may be considered the norms of traditional Western European classical composition. Beauty is found in this unpredictable, innovative and, ultimately, brilliant music. ♦



Gail Archer, performing on the Oliwa Cathedral organ in Gdansk, Poland



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