Eugenia Umińska

* 4 October 1910 in Warschau (Warszawa), Polen
† 20 November 1980 in Krakau (Kraków), Polen

"Jej występ jest przeżyciem artystycznym nie tylko dlatego, że jej gra jest solidna, ale i dlatego, że odczuwamy to przeżycie artystyczne w niej samej. Odczuwamy, że występ jej jest nie tylko rezultatem pracy i przymuszenia wykonywanego utworu, ale jest ponadto przeżyciem estradowym, wynikiem jej odpowiedzialności i wzruszenia, które artysta musi odczuwać, gdy staje przed publicznością."

"Her performance is an artistic experience not only because her playing is solid, but because we experience it as one. We feel that the performance is not only the result of working on and thinking about the piece, but also a stage experience – a result of the sense of responsibility and emotion that an artist should feel when standing in front of an audience."

Profile

Following her studies with Józef Jarzębski at the Warsaw Conservatory and masterclasses in Paris with Otokar Ševćik and George Enescu, Eugenia Umińska performed as a soloist and with chamber ensembles in numerous European countries. During the Second World War she actively continued to perform, even though it was only possible to do so in underground and secret concerts. After 1945 she returned to public concert life and was among the most important violinists in Poland for many years. She also taught at the music conservatory in Krakow, where she held the position of Chancellor from 1964 to 1966.

Cities an countries

Eugenia Umińska was born in Warsaw and worked there until 1944. She lived in Krakow from 1945 and taught there until her death in 1980. Concert tours took her to Italy, Germany, France, England, Sweden, Holland, Norway, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Bulgaria and the Soviet Union.

Biography

Eugenia Umińska was born the daughter of Teodor Umiński and Stanisława Umińska (nee Czeczott) in Warsaw. "[My mother] discovered my musical talent and perfect pitch very early, before my fifth birthday. She chose the violin for me because she was impressed by concerts given by the Danish violinist Cecylia Hansen, a student of Auer, who appeared in Warsaw [in February, 1915]" (family archive; one of Eugenia Umińska’s responses in a questionnaire by Mrs Manturzewska concerning women violinists).

Eugenia Umińska attended the Warsaw Music Society School from 1915 until 1918. Her teacher was Mieczysław Michałowicz, who also taught Ida Haendel, Bronisław Huberman, Henryk Szeryng and Roman Totenberg. She entered the Warsaw Conservatory in 1919, joining Grażyna Bacewicz in Józef Jarzębski’s violin studio. Umińska passed her school exams in 1926 and completed her studies at the Warsaw Conservatory with distinction in 1927. She continued her violin studies at summer schools with Otokar Ševćik in Pisek, Czechoslovakia (1927, 1928) and then with George Enescu in Paris (1932–1934). Ševćik perfected the young violinist’s tech-
nique. Enescu broadened her horizons, deepened her sensitivity to the beauty of sound in its various forms, enriched her battery of self-expression and made her into an artist in the fullest sense of the word” (Kazimierz Wiłkomirski: Pamięci Eugenii Umińskiej, in: Ruch Muzyczny 1981, Nr. 5, p.5, transl. Trevor Pichanick). During her time in Paris she was a member of the local ‘Society for Young Polish Musicians’ and performed in their concerts.

Her career began as concertmistress for the Polish Radio Orchestra in Warsaw (1932–1934). From 1935 until 1937 she was assistant concertmistress for the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra and appeared in concert nationally as a chamber musician. She was first violinist in the ‘Warsaw Music Society String Quartet’ and also played in the ‘Polish Quartet’. As part of a duo with Karol Szymanowski she performed his compositions several times, for example, in Bologna in 1933 and on the Berliner Rundfunk in 1934. Her solo debut took place on 5 January, 1934, when she played Johannes Brahms’ violin concerto with the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Clemens Krauss. In the 1930s she appeared as a soloist in England, France, Germany, Holland, Sweden, Norway, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Bulgaria and the USSR.

In 1938, she performed the Polish premiere of Robert Schumann’s violin concerto, almost a year after Paul Hindemith’s edition was first performed by Georg Kulenkampff.

The years 1939–1945

With the German occupation it became impossible for Polish musicians to pursue their careers in an official manner. The philharmonic hall, the conservatory and the radio broadcasting service were closed, and public concerts were held very rarely. As a result, other forms of musical activity and presentation developed, especially semi-official concerts that were subject to censorship and which took place in coffee houses.

In the autumn of 1939 the cellist Kazimierz Wilkomirski and his pianist sister Maria Wilkomirska invited Eugenia Umińska to form a piano trio. They found official employment in a coffee house by the name of ‘SiM’, which was housed in the ‘Zachęta’ Building of the then art museum, allowing Eugenia Umińska a certain amount of normalcy and enabling her to hold an ‘Erlaubniskarte’, which protected her from deportation to the work camps in Germany. Umińska later stated that this chance to make music together made it possible for her to survive the war: “The war years could have been a phase where my violin technique wasted away and everything that I was able to do was destroyed; they became a period of rapid development, however, thanks to the constant immersion in pure music. And although each day brought new tragedy and could have been the last for any of us, I look back fondly on those irretrievable days, in which my supreme happiness was music” (Kazimierz Wilkomirski: Pamięci Eugenii Umińskiej; in: Ruch muzyczny 1981, No. 5, pp.5–6).

The activity of the trio was temporarily halted by the Ministry of Propaganda, which closed the Zachęta coffee house in response to one of the trio’s programs that included works by Polish composers (Władysław Żelenksi, Karol Szymanowski and Ludomir Różycki). It was some time later that the trio found a new venue, this time in a coffee house run by the pianist and composer Bolesław Woytowicz. Concerts took place every Tuesday, always with a new program. As such the trio had to work with a broad range of repertoire, which led to their performance of Beethoven’s Triple Concerto with the host, Boleslaw Woytowicz, on piano.

In February 1941, Eugenia Umińska founded a string quartet with Kazimierz Wilkomirski, in which Roman Padlewski played 2nd violin and Henryk Trzonek viola. From then on she appeared in Woytowicz’s coffee house twice a week: on Sundays with the trio and on Thursdays with the string quartet.

Eugenia Umińska also participated in secretly organised concerts that took place in private homes, where she mostly played works forbidden by the Germans. At the writer Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz’s house in Stawiska (near Warsaw), one could make music relatively undisturbed: “Yesterday [29 July, 1942] Umińska played at our house with her quartet. It was a beautiful summer day but very hot. They arrived after lunch and started to play straight away [...] Umińska also played a couple of pieces for violin by Karol [Szymanowski] accompanied by Witek Latosławski [...] everyone was pleased. They said that the acoustic in our salon was outstanding and that they had known they would be playing for a group of people who were few, but who were great lovers of music [...] In the
evening, following a good wine that I had just gotten from somewhere, we took them to the train. It was comical to see the whole group, including us, spread out on the road as we made our way to the train [...] We looked like a traveling troupe of musicians who had lost their way in the forest. The moon rose. Easily the happiest day of the occupation.” (J. Iwaszkiewicz: Notatki 1939–1945, Wroclaw 1991, pp. 74–75)

In November 1943 Eugenia Umińska refused to take part in a concert for the Germans at the Warsaw State Theatre, a decision that could have led to her arrest and deportation to the concentration camps. At one of the following concerts at Woytowicz’s coffee house, during which she appeared for the first time in a duo with the violinist Irena Dubiska (and with whom she had played in the ‘Polish Quartet’ before the war), she received a fake identity card hidden in a bouquet of flowers. The following day she took to the countryside, where she remained under a false identity for several months.

Despite significant risk, she continued to perform and appeared in secret house concerts held by her friends. On such occasions, donations for underground artists such as Władysław Szpilman were taken. One of the last secret concerts that she took part in had an unusually festive character, taking place on 3 May, 1944: a national holiday to commemorate the Polish Constitutional Declaration of 1791. She played the Violin Concerto No. 2 by Karol Szymanowski, one of the ‘forbidden’ composers. Accompanying her as a piano duo were Witold Lutosławski and Andrzej Panufnik, who, similar to Eugenia Umińska, supported themselves during those years by playing in coffee houses.

During this time Eugenia Umińska made numerous recordings in a radio studio that was operating underground, and completed a number of transcriptions for violin (including five Mazurkas by Karol Szymanowski), which were later destroyed, however, in the Warsaw Uprising.

In the summer of 1944, Eugenia Umińska was trained as a medic for the Home Army [Armia Krajowa]. On the eleventh day of the Warsaw Uprising she was taken prisoner and sent to the labour camps in Germany. During transportation, she managed to escape and lived with friends close to Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski until the end of the war. Roman Padlewski, one of her string quartet partners, died in battle.

After 1945

By the end of the war, Warsaw had been completely destroyed. Krakow, however, had been spared such desolation and rose up as a new centre for culture and therefore musical activity. Eugenia Umińska also settled there and took to the concert platform once again on 28 June, 1945, playing Johannes Brahms’ Violin Concerto in D Major with the Krakow Philharmonic Orchestra under Andrzej Panufnik. In 1949 she appeared in Germany for the first time after the war: she performed Karol Szymanowski’s Violin Concerto No. 1 in Berlin under the baton of Grzegorz.

Over the 26 years that followed, Eugenia Umińska appeared as a soloist in almost all of the larger cities in Poland. She also performed abroad, be it less often, as the movement of artists in Europe was very limited as a result of the Cold War. Umińska also continued to work as chamber musician. In 1946 she founded a string quartet in Krakow that was active with various members, for over 15 years.

From 1947 she worked with various Krakow musicians, including trios, and completed numerous radio recordings. She also performed in a violin duo with Irena Dubiska. Starting in May, 1945, Eugenia Umińska taught at the public music conservatory in Krakow (now the Academy of Music), taking on a professorship in 1963. She taught there until her death in 1980. She became the head of the strings department in 1957, was the chancellor of the conservatory from 1964 to 1966, and patroness of the Academy of Music until 1969. She also taught at the public music school and at the music lyceum (high school).

Appreciation

Eugenia Umińska, along with Irena Dubiska and Tadeusz Wroński, was one of the three most important figures in the Polish string scene during the mid-twentieth century. She gained important achievements as an artist, a teacher and as a publisher, and it is a remarkable testament to the degree of ‘feminisation’ of the Polish string scene that in 1948 only female solo violinists appeared with the Warsaw Philharmonic, Eugenia Umińska being among them (see Z. Mycielski: Ucieczki z pięciolinii, p.353).
Umińska participated very actively in musical life. She was one of the founders and most active members of SPAM (‘Polish Musicians Society’, which she chaired from 1959 until 1965), the ‘Szymanowski Society’ and the ‘Polish String Musicians Society’. She was furthermore an honorary member of the ‘Wieniawski Music Society’ in Poznan and the ‘Eugène Ysaïe Foundation’ in Brussels. She received numerous awards for her artistic achievements, including the ‘Medal for Work’ (1949), the ‘State Music Prize Second Class’ (1952 and 1955) and first class distinctions from the Polish Ministry of Culture for her pedagogical and didactical work (1964 and 1974).

Commitment to New Music

Of crucial importance to Eugenia Umińska’s interest in new music was her introduction to Karol Szymanowski. Their first concert together took place on 18 June, 1930 and was followed by many more performances together, including all of his works for violin and piano. She soon added Szymanowski’s two violin concerti to her repertory and also premiered numerous works from other composers (details under ‘Repertoire’). For her commitment to new music she received the Polish music publisher PWM’s prize for the highest number of premieres of works by Polish composers. She also completed numerous recordings for radio.

The Pedagogue

Eugenia Umińska’s first student was the younger stepsister of Mary and Kazimierz Wilkomirski, Wanda Wilkomirska, who studied with Umińska in Warsaw during the German occupation. Among Eugenia Umińska’s students in Krakow were Kaja Danczowska (prize-winner in violin competitions in Naples 1969, Genf 1970, Munich 1975) and Wiesław Kwaśny (prize-winner in Dallas 1977).


Reception

In recognition of everything Eugenia Umińska achieved for the Polish violin tradition and school, a competition for young violinists took place in 2005, initiated by her students in Poznań.

Repertoire

Eugenia Umińska performed classical and romantic repertoire just as much as she did works from the twentieth century, including the complete works of Karol Szymanowski. She played Szymanowski’s two violin concerti many times, most notably under the batons of Grzegorz Fitelberg and Artur Rodzinski.

The string quartet in which she played during the Second World War premiered many works composed during this period, including works by Roman Palester, Roman Palester, Stanisław Wiechowicz, Grażyna Bacewicz (2nd string quartet), Kazimierz Wilkomirski and Witold Rudziński.

On 14 July, 1946, Eugenia Umińska was the soloist in the premiere of Roman Palester’s violin concerto with the BBC Orchestra conducted by G. Fitelberg at the World Music Festival in London. She also played the violin part in the premiere of Witold Lutosławskis Recitativo e ariosso for violin and piano (Krakow 1952).

She commissioned or co-commissioned several compositions. Michał Spisak wrote a sonata for violin and piano for her, while Grażyna Bacewicz and Michał Spisak composed works for two violins for her and Irena Dubiska.

Research

There are a number of sources regarding the life and work of Eugenia Umińska, such as her writings and editions, that remain largely unexplored. Eugenia Umińska’s daughter, Marta Taranczewska, is currently (2010) compiling a chronicle that will undoubtedly bring further insightful details concerning her mother’s biography to light.

Need for Research

Further research into Eugenia Umińska’s musical and political activity in the time during and after the Second World War is required. It would also be very informative to investigate her contribution to the ‘feminisation’ of the
Umińska, Eugenia

Polish string scene more closely.

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