Die Musikwissenschaftlerin Zofia Lissa

Zofia Lissa

* 19 October 1908 in Lwów, Polen (heute: Lviv, Ukraine)
† 26 March 1980 in Warschau, Polen

Musicologist, pedagogue, politician

"A fundamental trait that results from our music-historical consciousness is pluralism, the poly-versionality of the musical conception, both in time and in space. We must realise that music-historical consciousness is, in and of itself, a phenomenon of an historical nature; it is different in the individual periods of the past, and there are epochs during which it does not find expression at all."

(Zofia Lissa, On the Essence of Historical Consciousness in Present-Day Musical Culture, Brno 1972, p. 4)

Profile

As a musicologist, Zofia Lissa exerted a decisive influence on Polish musical life during the second half of the 20th century and was strongly committed (until about 1955) to the musical politics of her country. Her scholarly research, which met with international interest especially in the field of musical aesthetics, was translated into many languages and Zofia Lissa thus became the most frequently translated and quoted female Polish musicologist. Her activities paved the way to international recognition for Polish musicology.

Cities an countries

Zofia Lissa lived in Lemberg (Galicia) until 1941, then in Namangan (Uzbekistan) and Moscow. From 1947 she lived in Warsaw, where she was active until her death. She presented numerous lectures on musicology, music theory and musical aesthetics in Berlin, Leipzig, Halle (Saale), Cologne, Munich, Tübingen, Saarbrücken, Copenhagen, Moscow, Paris and Beijing, amongst other cities.

Biography

Zofia Lissa was born on 19 October 1908 in Lwów, Poland (today Lviv, Ukraine). She initially studied piano, organ and music theory at the Lviv Conservatory. From 1925 until 1929 she also studied the subjects of musicology (with Adolf Chybínski), art history, philosophy (with Kazimierz Twardowski and Roman Ingarden) and psychology. In 1929 she received her doctorate with the dissertation "On the Harmonic Language of Alexander Scriabin".

From 1930 until 1941 she taught music theory, music history and music psychology at the Lviv Conservatory. Politically, she was close to communist views, which played a decisive role for her scholarly work and future fate. In September 1939, after the occupation of Lviv by the Soviet Union and the annexation of the city into the Ukrainian Republic, Zofia Lissa accepted Soviet citizenship (a refusal would have automatically resulted in deportation). At the meanwhile nationalised Lviv Conservatory, she was appointed dean of the faculty of music theory and composition. At the same time, she also worked for the radio. Shortly prior to the occupation of the city in June 1941 by German troops, she emigrated due to her Jewish origins and went to Uzbekistan. She received a position as music teacher at the Technical Music School in Namangan.

In 1942 she moved to Moscow. There, she was one of the first members to join the "Association of Polish Patriots", a political organisation founded in March 1943 by Polish communists in the Soviet Union; she took over the post of director of the music department. In 1945 she was appointed cultural attaché of the Polish Embassy in Moscow. She was sent in this capacity to Poland in 1947 in order to supervise Polish musical life.

In Warsaw, as a member of the Polish Communist Party, she took over the position of deputy director of the music department in the Ministry of Education and the Arts. At
the same time, she was committed to the Polish Compo-
sers' Union, founded in 1945 and in which she called for
the admission of musicologists (in accordance with the
Soviet model) in 1948. Starting in 1948 she was a mem-
ber of the Board of Directors there, from 1951 until 1954
deputy to the president and thereafter, again, a member
of the Board. Finally, from 1964 until 1969, she directed
the department of musicology there.
In September 1948 she founded an independent depart-
ment in the faculty of history within the humanistic facul-
ty of Warsaw University which began its work already on
1 October of the same year. Zofia Lissa was the director
of the department from the outset. In 1951 she was na-
med professor, and a full professor in 1957. Over the
course of time, the musicological department attained
the status of a chair, and was renamed Institute of Musi-
cology in 1958, over which Zofia Lissa presided as direc-
tor until 1975.

More on Biography

Zofia Lissa was born on 19 October 1908 in Lemberg (to-
day Lviv, Ukraine); her father was Noe Lissa, the owner
of a well-known photo studio, and her mother was a pia-
nof teacher. She initially studied piano, organ and music
theory at the Lviv Conservatory. From 1925 until 1929
she also studied musicology (with Adolf Chybiński), art
history, philosophy (with Kazimierz Twardowski and Ro-
man Ingarden) and psychology. In 1929 she received her
doctorate with the dissertation "On the Harmonic Lan-
guage of Alexander Scriabin".

From 1930 until 1941 she taught music theory, music his-
tory and musical psychology at the Lviv Conservatory.
During this time she began to conduct research in the
field of musicality of children and youths, and to investi-
gate more closely the role of radio for the dissemina-
tion of music. The result of this research was the publica-
tion of numerous articles. Shortly thereafter, she wrote the
"Manual of Music Theory" (Lviv, 1934), which remains
one of the standard works in this field to the present day.
Politically, she was close to the communist party, which
also played a decisive role for her scholarly views and her
future fate.

In September 1939, following the occupation of Lviv by
the Soviet Union and the annexation of the city into the
Ukrainian Republic, she accepted Soviet citizenship (a re-
fusal would have automatically resulted in deportation).
At the meanwhile nationalised Lviv Conservatory, she
was appointed dean of the faculty of music theory and
composition. At the same time, she also worked for the
radio. Shortly prior to the occupation of the city in June
1941 by German troops, she emigrated due to her Jewish
origins and went to Uzbekistan. She received a position
as music teacher at the Technical Music School in Na-
man.

In 1942 she moved to Moscow. There, she was one of the
first members to join the "Association of Polish Patriots",
a political organisation founded in March 1943 by Polish
communists in the Soviet Union. As the director of the
music department of the "Association", she published
song books for children and youths that were intended
for the Polish refugee families. In 1945 she was appoint-
ted cultural attaché of the Polish Embassy in Moscow.
During this period, she started a family with the compo-
sier Wladimir Ivannikov (1906-1987) but was forced by
the authorities to divorce her husband in 1947 and even
to undergo an abortion (from a conversation of the aut-
hor with a former pupil of Zofia Lissa). During the same
year, Lissa was sent to Poland in order to supervise Po-
lish musical life.

In Warsaw, as a member of the Polish Communist Party,
she took over the position of deputy director of the music
department in the Ministry of Education and the Arts. At
the same time, she was committed to the Polish Compo-
sers' Union, founded in 1945 and in which she called for
the admission of musicologists (in accordance with the
Soviet model) in 1948. Starting in 1948 she was a mem-
ber of the Board of Directors there, from 1951 until 1954
deputy to the president and thereafter, again, a member
of the Board. Finally, from 1964 until 1969, she directed
the department of musicology there, and it was on her
initiative that the "Circle of Young People" was founded
within the association.

In September 1948 she founded an independent depart-
ment in the faculty of history within the humanistic facul-
ty of Warsaw University (until then, there had only been
such departments in Lviv, Krakow and Posen) which be-
gan its work already on 1 October of the same year. Zofia
Lissa was the director of the department from the very
outset. In 1951 she was named professor, and a full pro-
fessor in 1957. Over the course of time, the musicological
department attained the status of a chair, and was rena-
med Institute of Musicology in 1958, over which Zofia
Lissa presided as director until 1975.

Throughout her lifetime, Zofia Lissa's principal areas of
interest were scholarly and pedagogical activities. In
1947 she received her doctorate from the University of
Pozn. Her dissertation entitled "On the Essence of Musical Comedy" had already been published in 1938 (in: Kwartalnik filozoficzny I-II, see sources). In the late 1940s she committed herself to the integration of social realism into current Polish music in many essays and articles, encouraging Polish composers to write songs for the masses.

Her exceptional scholarly activity is documented in over a dozen books and approximately 600 treatises of which many were translated into various languages. In addition, she took part in the work on about ten musical encyclopaedias in as many countries. She delivered numerous guest lectures and papers at various universities, including those in Berlin (1961-1965), Leipzig (1963/64), Halle/Saale, Cologne, Munich, Tübingen, Saarbrücken, Copenhagen, Moscow, Paris and Beijing. Beginning in 1964 she was a member of the advisory board and from 1965 to 1977 a member of the presidium of the International Society of Musicology, as well as a member of the Academy of the Arts in East Berlin (from 1955), the Saxon Academy of Sciences in Leipzig (from 1963) and the Academy of Sciences and Literature in Mainz (from 1972).

Together with Józef M. Chomiński, she founded the Research Centre for Frédéric Chopin and His Music at the Institute of Musicology of Warsaw University. Since a certain stagnation could be observed in the scholarly discussion and analysis of this composer, she organised the first International Chopin Congress in 1960, which resulted in important new impulses for musical research.

In 1963 Zofia Lissa founded the festival "Musica Antiqua Europae Orientalis" in Bydgoszcz (Bromberg), which is still regularly held to this day. In 1966, the year of the millennium celebrations in Poland, she organised a musicology congress dedicated to the music of the East. This conference, which took place every three years from that time onward, focussed attention on the music of Central Eastern Europe which had until then been neglected by West European musicologists and also inspired new research approaches in Ukraine.

In 1966, together with Hieronim Feicht, Zofia Lissa also founded the "Documentation Centre of Ancient Polish Music" which was in charge of the publication of the series "Antiquitates Musicae in Polonia". Finally, from 1970 until 1980, Zofia Lissa was chairperson of the editorial committee of the Polish Music Encyclopaedia, published by the Polish Music Publishers.

Zofia Lissa was active as a musicologist almost to the end of her life. She died in Warsaw on 26 March 1980.

Appreciation

The extensive research works of Zofia Lissa can be grouped into the central subject areas of musical aesthetics, methodology of music history, music theory and Polish contemporary music. She was the first female musicologist to concern herself with fundamental questions of musical aesthetics. She carried out pioneering work in the book "Music and Film" (Liviv, 1937), written during a time when hardly anyone was interested in this subject. Beginning in 1958 she regularly delivered lectures on "Music in Films" at the Warsaw State Academy of Music, and in 1964 she published "Aesthetics of Film Music" (Kракow, 1964), a book for which she was awarded the silver medal at the Venice Biennale five years later.

In the area of music theory she was primarily concerned with questions concerning the history of harmonic language. Her dissertation "On the Harmonic Language of A. Scriabin" was an essential work in this field. In this work, she postulated the thesis that there were certain analogies between the harmonic language of Scriabin and the twelve-tone technique. She also dealt with this interrelation in her article "Historical Pre-Form of the Twelve-Tone Technique", published in 1935 in the journal "Acta Musicologica". Twenty years later she created important new incentives in researching Chopin, whose style she regarded from the perspective of the New Music ("Chopin's Harmonic Language from the Perspective of Sound Techniques of the 20th Century", published in the "Deutsches Jahrbuch der Musikwissenschaft", 1957 and 1958, as well as in "Annales Chopin", Warsaw 1959). Her works about contemporary compositions were of great significance, e.g. her extensive article on the Concerto for Orchestra of Witold Lutoslawski, which she wrote prior to the world premiere of that work.

In Polish musicology, which until then had worked historically for the most part, she was, together with Stefania Łobaczewska, one of the first who intensively concerned herself with questions of musical aesthetics. Methodically speaking, her works were based on Marxist convictions which she expressed in a treatise on "Several Questions concerning Musical Aesthetics in Light of J. W. Stalin's Work 'Marxism and the Questions of Linguistics'" (Kракow 1952, in German as "Fragen der Musikästhetik", Berlin 1954). Beginning in 1955, when the first measures of de-Stalinisation could be sensed, she distanced herself from dogmatic Marxism in musicology and from socialist realism, which she had earlier propagated as the most advanced direction in the development of the New Music.
As before, however, she discussed music in its social and historical context, emphasising the close connections with socio-economical conditions. She always regarded a work of music as a means of communication between composer and addressee (listener) based on the constant changes of the historical and social context (see "New Essays on Musical Aesthetics", 1975). She underlined the historical variability of the term "national style" which was a particularly controversial issue at that time.

Zofia Lissa also acquired great merits in the areas of music dissemination and mediation, especially for children and youths. The experience that she had gained through her research into the musicality of children and youths was an important basis for her commitment. Amongst other things, she was responsible for the preparation of about 600 radio broadcasts including a six-year course "Music History for Children". She was the author or co-author of numerous educational books; amongst these was the book written together with Stefan Szuman entitled "How We Hear Music" (Warsaw 1948).

More on Appreciation

It is difficult to categorise and evaluate Zofia Lissa’s role in Polish musical life. On the one hand, she propagated Marxism and music for the masses; on the other hand, she delivered lectures on music that was forbidden during the Stalinist period (e.g. music by Stravinsky), and enabled the priest Hieronim Feicht to carry on scholarly and pedagogical activities in the area of sacred music. On the one hand, she denounced colleagues to the Polish Stasi (proven by the copies of the accusations discovered after her death; see "kopie znaleziono w domowym archiwum po jej śmierci"), but, on the other hand, also protected several musicians from political “inconveniences” thanks to her contacts.

Reception

Zofia Lissa made a particularly valuable and essential contribution to Polish musicology after the Second World War and was the most frequently translated female musicologist in Eastern Europe. Numerous articles from a wide variety of fields were translated into 14 languages and published.

In addition, she was awarded numerous prizes: the Prize of the Polish Composers’ Union (1950), the National Prize, 2nd Degree (1953), the Prize of the Radio and Television Committee (1966), the Prize of the Ministry of Higher Education 1st Degree (1965 and 1977) and 2nd Degree (1971 and 1976) as well as the Prize of the International Music Council (1979).

115 master’s theses and 15 doctoral dissertations were written under her supervision. As a professor, she was extremely popular with her students, whom she often regarded as members of her family.

Research

Many of Zofia Lissa’s publications are considered, up to the present day, standard works in the fields of musical aesthetics, music theory and musicology and are accessible in all the larger libraries worldwide. On the occasion of her 100th birthday in 2008, a new selection of her writings was issued by Zbigniew Skowron; this included extensive commentaries in which her importance as a musicologist is also acknowledged.

Need for Research

It would be interesting to investigate the conditions that led to the fact that in Poland, unlike many other European countries, female musicologists such as Zofia Lissa and Stefania Lobaczewska (also from Lviv) were able, already during the 1930s, to attain important positions.

Authority control

Virtual International Authority File (VIAF):
☐ http://viaf.org/viaf/29658590
Deutsche Nationalbibliothek (GND):
☐ http://d-nb.info/gnd/103862552
Library of Congress (LCCN):
☐ http://lccn.loc.gov/n81032906

Author(s)

Danuta Gwizdalanka, 10. September 2009

Editing status

Editorial staff: Regina Back
Translation: David Babcock
First edit 05/12/2009
Last edit 04/12/2018

mugi.hfmt-hamburg.de
Forschungsprojekt an der
Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hamburg
Projektleitung: Prof. Dr. Beatrix Borchard
Harvestehuder Weg 12
D – 20148 Hamburg