



Traditional dance in Poland

The social changes that took place in Poland in the second half of the 20th century led to the disappearance of many traditional dance forms with their original functions. Participants of today's wedding receptions or dance parties only rarely and in few regions engage in old-time local dances and dance games. Yet they proved important enough for many circles to give them new – often symbolic – significance and function, and continue to practice them today.

1. Dance traditions

The history of traditional dance in the Polish territories up until the end of the 18th century is vaguely known. Only the writings by 19th century documentalists reveal how diverse rural dances were across the territories that now constitute Poland. The most typical Polish dances were those seen in the middle and upper Vistula basin, that is in Mazovia (Mazowsze) and Lesser Poland (Małopolska), respectively. The rest of the territory boasted some specific dances, yet borrowed extensively from their neighbours: Germans, Czechs, Slovaks, Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Lithuanians. Also present, even to this day, have been references to the dance cultures of Ashkenazi Jews and Romani people.

Traditional dances, if modified under the influence of changing trends and fashions, survived as social or ceremonial dances, up to the 1950s-1980s (and in a few more isolated enclaves, even to this day). Later, new dance phenomena gained popularity thanks to audio recordings, film, the television and the radio, pushing traditional dance to the margins of popular culture. Naturally, they are still fixed in the memory of many older residents of Polish towns and villages. One of the videos presented is an amateur recording made by Andrzej Bieńkowski in 1986 documenting people dancing the mazurka (3/8 metre) in a traditional home in central Poland to the accompaniment of the violin and a frame drum. The dance has specific elements (steps, stamps, leanings, changes of the direction of rotation, small jumps), but has never been danced to a pre-arranged choreography: the selection is up to the dancer's creativity. This was characteristic for the majority of Polish traditional dances.

2. Traditional dance on the ballet stage

Dance has been performed on fair, school, and even court stages at least since the 16th century. Yet peasant ballets or operettas with ballet interludes featuring local dances appeared in Poland only in the second half of the 18th century. The only production of this kind that is still staged today is the Singspiel *Cud mniemany czyli Krakowiaczy i Górale* (The Presumed Miracle, or Cracovians and Highlanders). Up



until the 1920s, *The Presumed Miracle...* – along with the ballet *Wesele krakowskie w Ojcowie* (Cracovian Wedding in Ojców) drawing on the Singspiel and the ballet *Pan Twardowski* (Master Twardowski) based on a legend about a 16th century wizard – were the mainstream stage shows featuring folk dance. A change came with *Harnasie* by Karol Szymanowski, a composer with an affection for the musical folklore of Polish highlanders. The choreography of this ballet and mime piece focuses on rendering the idea of freedom and non-conformity characteristic for highland braves. First staged in Prague in 1935, the show became famous thanks to Serge Lifar's 1936 production. Premiered in Poland in 1938, it has been put on over 20 times ever since, and remains one of the most important Polish stage productions drawing on rural dances.

A major piece inspired by traditional highland dances is *Krzesany* (1979) by prominent Polish artist Conrad Drzewiecki, set to 1974 music by Wojciech Kilar. A contemporary example of this genre is *Widowisko taneczne Harnasie* (*Harnasie Dance Spectacle*) choreographed by Kaya Kołodziejczyk. Apart from the original *Harnasie*, the choreographer has drawn on *Krzesany*, yet making her work a contemporary dance piece. The show brings together representatives of Poland's leading contemporary dance circles, highlanders of the Podhale area, and... parkour artists, who embody the qualities of robust, free and easy highland bandits.

3. Traditional dances dressed to the nines

Along city theatres, since the 1840s, we have been seeing in Poland the dynamic development of folk theatres. Its creators believed that each show should combine reinterpreted folk dance and singing.

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the concept was adopted by amateur companies adapting traditional dances of their region for the stage. Such performances became very popular between the first and the second world wars and in the mid 20th century. However, already in 1934 a new concept had emerged thanks to the Parnell Polish Ballet (*Ballet Polonais de Parnell*), winner of the gold medal of the 1936 Berlin Tanzolimpiade. The company fused elements of traditional, classical and expressionist dance, as well as grotesque and acrobatics. The formula was then adopted by such companies as Bronislava Nijinska's Polish Ballet and, after WWII, the state-established folk groups “Mazowsze” and “Śląsk”.

The style of dance performed by “Śląsk” (Silesia), founded in 1953, was set by its choreographer Elwira Kamińska. Her choreographies, set against a symphony-like musical background, used big groups of dancers, exaggerated characteristic elements of traditional dance (especially decorative steps and gestures), and



included acrobatic elements and other movements created by the choreographer to surprise the audience.

Both of the professional groups – “Mazowsze” and “Śląsk” – are often a point of reference for a few thousand amateur ones operating in Poland, whose style of dance – if simpler - represents the same approach to original folk dances. The groups are usually active internationally through such organisations as Conseil International des Organisations de Festivals de Folklore et d’Art Traditionnels (CIOFF®) or Internationale Organisation für Volkskunst (IOV).

4. Traditional dances today

Today's balls traditionally held for secondary school students a hundred days before their school-leaving exam open with the participants dancing the polonaise together. The tradition goes back to the 18th century, and follows up on the practice of opening balls with the polonaise popular on Polish courts and among the nobility as well as dance showcases held at schools at the time. What is interesting, the choreography of the prom polonaise is increasingly often shaped by the students themselves, who perceive participating in the dance as a sign of reaching maturity, or even an honour.

Dances popular among the Polish nobility and bourgeoisie in the 18th and 19th centuries, and perceived as national ones (the polonaise, mazur, krakowiak, oberek, kujawiak), started to become obsolete at the beginning of the 20th century. In the 1960s Jadwiga Hryniewiecka came up with the interesting idea of performing them as ballroom dances. The concept was taken up by Marian Wieczysty more than a decade later and linked with the formula of dance competitions. Today Poland may boast a few thousand registered dancers who compete as part of more than a dozen of tournaments. The programme includes four national dances: the krakowiak, kujawiak, mazur, and oberek. There are also set dancing competitions. The style of the dances draws on models from the late 19th century, although differences in costume and the competitive formula prompt participants to look for new solutions within codified steps and approaches.

5. Attempts to revive and reintroduce traditional dance

The latest development are "dance houses", inspired by the Hungarian *táncház* movement started in the early 1970s, when the Hungarian youth and intelligentsia would travel to Transylvania to take lessons in dance, music-making, and singing from local residents. They would then bring their experiences back to Hungarian cities. In Poland the same formula was launched in 1994 by a group of folk aficionados from Warsaw and the neighbouring area. With time, similar groups sprang up in Poznań, Kraków, Wrocław, Gdańsk, Łódź, Toruń, Olsztyn, and a few



smaller towns. They have established and now run dance houses (*domy tańca*) in their cities as well as dance clubs in the country. The movement is not very numerous (gathering around two thousand participants in total), but very active. The idea behind is to learn directly from local dance and music masters by participating in dance parties and social gatherings. A new trend is emerging now in this context, with attempts at formulating a methodology of teaching traditional dances in the unmodified form.



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Tomasz Nowak studied musicology at the University of Warsaw (1993-1997), where he later completed his doctoral studies (1997-2002). He also studied dance theory at the Fryderyk Chopin Academy of Music in Warsaw (2003-2005) and the management of culture (2005-2006) at the University of Warsaw. Assistant Professor at the Institute of Musicology of the University of Warsaw, he lectures at the Fryderyk Chopin University of Music. He has published four books and more than 40 scientific articles, mainly on the traditions of Polish minorities along the eastern borders, musical traditions in the Polish Tatra mountains, contemporary Balinese and Upper Lusatian musical culture, historical sources Polish folk music and dance. Tomasz Nowak is a member of the International Council for Traditional Music, the Polish Seminar in Ethnomusicology (Vice-President), the Musicologists Section of the Union of Polish Composers (General Secretary), the Polish Forum for Choreography (Chair) and of the Polish section of the International Council of Folklore and Traditional Art Festivals Organizations (expert).

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