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The Letters of Grażyna Bacewicz and Vytautas Bacevičius

(1) The Polish-Lithuanian Home of the Bacewicz

The Bacewicz family is truly a remarkable cultural phenomenon, symbolic for the history of the creative intelligentsia of the former Polish-Lithuanian Empire. The Polish-Lithuanian home of Maria (née Modlińska) and Vincas Bacevičius shaped and helped develop the talents of their four children: Kiejstut, Vytautas, Grażyna and Wanda; the first three chose music, the youngest, Wanda, became a poet.

The father of the family, Vincas Bacevičius, Lithuanian patriot, graduated from the Teacher Training College at Wejwery only to be judged “an subversive anarchic element” and sent away to work in the then Russian-occupied part of Poland. In 1899, he came to Łódź, where he graduated from the well-known School of Music of brothers Tadeusz and Ignacy Hanicki. As Kiejstut Bacewicz reminisced much later, “it was our father who introduced us into the world of art., who paved for us our artistic way. He conducted our musical education with utmost determination even when we were small children.”

Maria Modlińska was brought up in the sphere of Positivist values, among intellectuals who combined their utilitarianism with earnest, organic work for the enlightenment of the society. Dynamic and independent-minded by nature, she was open to the major issues of her time and the various manifestations of cultural life. After graduating from the elitist Marian Institute for Maidens of Noble Birth and additional courses in administration she began work in Łódź. This is where she met the “Lithuanian stranger,” whom she married in 1903; she then concentrated on her family alone. Kiejstut Bacewicz wrote: “We owe to both our parents our respect for work and order, for learning, art and human values in general.”¹

History divided the Bacewicz family. After World War One and the rebirth of the Lithuanian state, Vincas, refused an exit visa by Polish authorities, crossed the border

¹ K. Bacewicz, “Wspomnienie o bracie Vytautasie Bacevičiusie” in *W kręgu muzyki litewskiej. Rozprawy, szkice i materiały* Krzysztof Droba ed. (Kraków: Academy Of Music, 1997), 173.

illegally in 1923, settled in Kaunas and was a tireless worker for the development of Lithuanian national education until his death 29 years later. He was followed to Kaunas by his son in 1926: Vytautas Bacevičius became a Lithuanian citizen and actively joined the ranks of modernist Lithuanian culture, thus helping to create the first Lithuanian avant-garde in his new country.

Kiejstut Bacewicz thus comments of this geographic split in his family: “It is all too clear that, in our civilised world, each individual himself or herself decides on his or her national allegiance, on his or her ties with a particular historical and cultural tradition. It is all a matter of subjectivity, of the sense of an inner connection and affinity to a particular ethnic community and the values it represents. The sovereign right of self-determination is at the same time the right of a free choice of one’s development, self-realisation and co-responsibility for the chosen community. (...) The fact that members of a single family represent different nationalities is far from unique.”²

(2) The roads of siblings – Grażyna and Witold

The future composers Grażyna Bacewicz (1909-1969) and Vytautas Bacevičius (1905-1970) were reared in the love of their “double” homeland, Poland and Lithuania, in a cult of music, inspired by the musical interests of their parents. Brother and sister made music and played concerts together since their early childhood; both graduated from the Conservatory of Helena Kijeńska-Dobkiewiczowa in Łódź.

Grażyna first won her Polish fame as eminent violinist and then moved to become a major neo-classicist composer. By contrast, Vytautas Bacevičius, composer, pianist and teacher, has not yet found his own well-defined place in culture in both aesthetic and axiological terms – for a number of reasons. The years spent in Kaunas, Lithuania, were a time of the development and the bloom of his artistic personality; they resulted in avant-garde compositions free of external stylistic influences evident in his youthful works and in numerous concerts and pianist tours throughout Europe. The outbreak of World War Two in 1939 surprised him in the midst of a South American tour. He reacted to the German invasion of Poland with his *Symphony No. 2 “de la Guerra,”* symbolically

² K. Bacewicz, 170 and 171.

dedicated to his sister Grażyna. History presented Bacevičius with another alternative: he decided to embrace the fate of an émigré and went to his foster-homeland, the United States, where he remained in New York and Bridgeport, Connecticut, until his death in 1970. The life of an expatriate meant for him a struggle for survival, both physical and artistic. For many years, the Lithuanian citizen was threatened with deportation. The constant political and financial problems had a destructive impact on the psyche of the composer, who, fully aware of his powerful personality – actively resisted the hostile reality. This state of being at odds with the real world added to the artist’s frustration and perceived alienation. Bacevičius had a clear-cut system of opinions and a formulated programme of ideas he consistently realized in his *oeuvre*. Uncompromising and averse to adapt his ideology to the pressures of life, he did not allow himself any bargains in his aesthetic views and his ethical “declogue.” This made his life in the New World extremely difficult: he was unyielding in his refusal to modify his individual programme to better suit expected modes of behaviour. It should be added that Bacevičius’s programme defined his spiritual code as well as his musical poetics. Spiritual work, “mental effort” – to use the composer’s own phrase – were probably his most important preoccupations both in his life and in his work. He could only contact his loved ones – his family – by means of letters, written almost daily in New York and Bridgeport, on A₄ pages with added notes on smaller pieces of paper, which combine to create a unique record of the struggle for survival of man and artist, a peculiar chronicle of creative experience.

(3) The letters of Grażyna and Vytautas: sources for a reconstruction of their views and aesthetic positions

The archive of Grażyna Bacewicz has been taken in hand by her sister Wanda, still living in Warsaw; she has also preserved Grażyna’s letters to their brother Vytautas. The manuscripts have been deposited at the national Library in Warsaw, while typewritten copies meticulously made by Wanda Bacewicz have been included into her materials on Vytautas Bacevičius. His archive was in turn kept by his brother Kiejstut in Łódź: it included letters of the composer and biographical information, concert notes, essays on

his work and a list of his compositions (as compiled by Kiejstut Bacewicz), and musical scores. All this material, including the correspondence, is now in the hands of the Lithuanian Archive of Art and Literature in Vilnius, handed over during the 6th Polish-Lithuanian Musicological Conference in Łódź in 1995. In order to prepare a data bank necessary for my research on Vytautas Bacevičius, the entire archive was copied at the Academy of Music in Kraków and a detailed catalogue has been produced.³ It is this archive and the material preserved at the Centre of the Lithuanian Culture in that is the source of Bacevičius's scores, mostly in manuscripts; the composer's *oeuvre* still awaits and requires a critical and complete edition.

- Vytautas Bacevičius's letters to his family and friends are the main resource for reconstructing his views and opinions. Their number is truly imposing: there is more than 1600 of his American letters to his family in Poland alone, this being only a fragment of the composer's huge epistolary heritage – ample proof of his need for a constant contact with his loved ones, for permanent communication, for a discharge of his dynamic and intensive mental work. “The thousands of letters to his family present a portrait of the man: a nature torn by conflicts, a veritable «font of spurting antinomies», to use Gombrowicz's phrase.”⁴

In his letters, Bacevičius relates everyday matters, shares his political opinions, discusses philosophy, aesthetics in general and strictly musical issues of composing technique. The language of his correspondence is colourful, expressive, suggestive and stylistically powerful. The author states facts and appends his own commentary; he also has the ability of quasi-photographic illustration of events and persons. He is quite expressive. He paints vivid images of his psychological and emotional states at various moments in his life and creative career. The composer's attitude to life is active and earnest; the world is not external to the composer, it is internalised within his mind. This dynamic perception of reality might explain the idea of the equivalence of micro- and macrocosm, the basis of his “cosmic music.” This concept was born during the Kaunas

³ This catalogue, in the form of a computer printout (144 pages), was prepared by Krzysztof Droba and Małgorzata Janicka-Słysz in 1995. It was appended to the *Vytautas Bacevičius Archive* handed over to the Lithuanian side; c. f. K. Droba, M. Janicka-Słysz, “Dokumentacja Archiwum Vytautasa Bacevičiausa,” *Rodzeństwo Bacewiczów*, M. Szoka, ed., *Rodzeństwo Bacewiczów...*, 239-264.

⁴ Krzysztof Droba, “Korespondencja Vytautasa Bacevičiausa z rodziną w Polsce,” *Rodzeństwo Bacewiczów...*, Marta Szoka ed., 178.

phase and extensively developed in his “American” period. Apart from their informative value, Bacevičius’s letters are of a high literary standard: they exhibit both his philosophical personality and his literary talent. Most letters are in fact many-page “novellas” or “essays” rather than simple reports serving to maintain ties and communication with his loved ones.

- In her letters, Grażyna Bacewicz presents not only a different personality but also a totally different existential and psychological situation. She experienced the Second World War in Poland and then the bitterness of the “liberation” by the Red Army; she also felt the consequences of the proclamation, at the Conference of Polish Composer in Łagów Lubuski in 1949, of normative aesthetics of Socialist Realism, which prescribed music “socialist in content, national in form.” She went through the various ebbs and flows of Communist policy, the various ups and downs of the Iron Curtain. This organic historical context of post-war Poland in the fifties and the sixties is reflected in her letters to her brother Vytautas; it was difficult if not well-nigh impossible to maintain candid contacts with one’s family in the West, especially in the United States. The letters were opened, censored and at times confiscated by the authorities. There is clear difference between her letters written in Poland at the turn of the forties and the fifties, and those sent from outside the country, e.g. from Paris, where Grażyna Bacewicz gave concerts in her guise of eminent violinist. The tone of the former is controlled, of the latter – more open and confessional. In a letter from Prague (18 May 1948), where she took part in a Festival of Contemporary Music, Grażyna asks her brother: “I’m taking the opportunity of being abroad to beg you, dearest little Vitek, to stop writing all those foolish things in your letters or we’ll all end up in jail. (...) All your letters are being censored in Poznań (underlined by Grażyna Bacewicz). They’re all being opened on the pretext of being badly sealed. (...)”

In the opinion of Małgorzata Gašiorowska, author of the monograph on the work of Grażyna Bacewicz, the language of her letters is “straightforward, unwieldy, awkward at times, «Pantagruelian» (Rabelais was the Polish composer’s favourite author), non-discursive. Is her style an «in-born» quality, an unconscious reflex of infatuation with avant-garde linguistic experiments that began with the futurists, or a

tendency to a «conciseness» of expression?”⁵ Just as Vytautas Bacevičius is very much himself in his letters: an emancipated and questing personality, so does Grażyna Bacewicz present her true image of a rational and constrictive person, given to classical order and the idea of formal beauty. In a letter from Paris (21 March 1947), she confesses: “Let me say a few words about myself. You see, Polish composers have long freed themselves from Szymanowski’s influence and have gone their various ways. I go my own way, for I pay most attention to form. I think that just as by piling stones one on another, with no plan, no order, one will never build a house and the pile will always crumble, there are some principles of construction in a work of music that must help it to stand. Of course, the laws don’t need to be old, God forbid. Music can be either simpler or more complex, no matter – it all depends on the language of the composer – but it must be well constructed.” This optimistic approach of the author of *Music for Strings, Trumpets and Percussion* is rooted in her rationalist vision of the world and in her deep conviction of its determinist nature; the imperative of positive action and of following one’s vocation has been already imparted on the four Bacewicz children by their parents. The family’s ordered Positivist image was significantly tarnished by Vytautas, always a dynamic and transgressive personality. He shared his creative passion with Grażyna e.g. in his letter (New York, 9 September 1958): “Just as a bird must sing, I must compose, play concerts, work ceaselessly in my field and strive to perfection; yet to achieve this, one must hope.”

(4) “Building a world “ through dialogue

A look at the Bacewicz/Bacevičius correspondence from a metanarrative perspective exhibits its ultimate drama. Just as in music, certain themes – four, to be exact – are quite evident.

- The first theme is immanently connected with the discussion on the condition of the artist in the modern world, his/her aesthetic and ethical attitudes. A letter by Vytautas Bacevičius (New York, 9 September 1948) contains a checklist of the composer’s ethical decalogue, consisting of dignity, honour, ambition, creative

⁵ M. Gąsiorowska, “Formacja kulturowa Rodziny Bacewiczów,” *Rodzeństwo Bacewiczów...*, Marta Szoka ed., 29.

vision, talent, inspiration, determination, faith, will, enthusiasm, hard and ceaseless work based on perfection, revision and self-criticism, a drive to improve oneself, quest for justice, unbounded love to all, modesty and hope. This long list of “spiritual factors” (in the composer’s words) “defines the direction of (...) every human being with important aims.”

Grażyna also shares her considerations (16 February 1952): “I’ve realized a couple of years ago that composers have really ended up in an impasse with all that avant-garde. And something had to be done about it. To go on didn’t make any sense. In fact, compositions no longer pleased even the composers themselves (remarkable geniuses excluding). Music is a beautiful art; the things written were not.” She does not avoid criticising herself (14 November 1966): “Music has changed so much in the last 20, let alone 40 years, that not only am I worried when they play my symphonies (luckily this happens very seldom) – I would never agree to a new print edition. It goes without saying that I’ve thrown away lots of pieces and that I would have never allowed their publication or performance.”

- The second theme is associated with a particular kind of self-reflection and self-presentation: references to individual musical language and style, both assumed as modern and progressive.

For Vytautas, the modern character of music is tantamount to its atonality. He expressed it in his prophetic statement: “there is only one road into the future: the endless and wonderful ocean of atonality...” (Bridgeport, 29 December 1958). In his opinion, atonality – or, more precisely, anti-tonality, guaranteed the necessary freedom to use the full dodecaphonic material. Yet he did stress earlier that “I have my name for this: the synthetic style (...), I do not reject the past because I’ve been convinced that the most atonal chords (...) can be successfully combined with (...) the classical ones. That makes me a semi-tonalist” (New York, 29 January 1952).

He described himself as a supporter of absolute music; he liked to understand it as “language beyond language.” As he confessed in another letter, “I’ve been preparing to write my sixth symphony (for the sixteen I wrote to you about are but “Words” for

orchestra) (New York, 24 September 1958). His version of this metalanguage uses abstract concepts; the “word” assumes the antique sense of “*logos*.” He formulates the following reservation in another of his letters: “The content of a musical masterpiece is more than just notes and their bizarre rhythms, orchestral colours, the latest means (...): it is the creative and magnetic power of the artist’s immortal spirit. (...) Mere sound and rhythm (...) is not enough – it must be different (...) that crucial content” (Bridgeport, 15 December 1962). He also shows himself as *homo ludens*. “My nationality?” he asks provocatively, only to answer in the same manner: “It is simple! My nationality is musical? What is my race? The atonal race. And that is all” (New York, 9 September 1958).

- The third theme has been combined with practical issues of composing technique. The correspondence abounds in letters betraying some secret’s of the two siblings’ “laboratory:” pieces of paper with pages from scores and instrumental parts. Brother and sister eagerly discuss matters of notation and instrumentation, possible forms of the course of music. How fascinating is this invitation to the usually concealed world of composers’ nuts and bolts! “Dear little Vitek,” instructs Grażyna subtly (5 May 1962), “This short fragment seems to me (sorry!) not too well instrumented. I think there’s too much piano thinking here. The trumpet has v. tough leaps; what is more, it is written over three bars from the highest to the lowest note (technically unfeasible). That’s very unpractical. (...) It is my dream to wrote a piece that could be performed by an average orchestra after two and a half rehearsals – and performed well.” And, to give one more example: “Don’t forget the vibraphone, which blends notes really well,” lectures Grażyna (28 October 1962). “(...) Glissandos can be done with a celesta (in its white keys).”

The letters are also evidence of their authors’ exchange of value judgments. Grażyne writes openly (1 August 1966): “Today it’s all about *Word No. 7* (for two pianos – MJS). Well, I like it very much, it’s terribly difficult but playable and learnable. The whole course of the work is v. interesting! I have one tiny little qualm – that coda. It’s fine, except for the technique you used (so very much not piano-like).”

- The fourth theme is that of revealed sources of inspiration and of shared creative experiments. Vytautas thus begins his discussion of cosmic music: “Kiejstut asked me what made me call my (sixth) symphony “cosmic,” knowing me as an advocate of absolute music. (...) You see, I’m trying to build a new theory of musical creativity based on the philosophy of Claude Bragdon (the occultist), who maintains that music is the most important element of the existence of the Universe (...), a product of ceaseless vibration of the Cosmos, producing a magnetism that hold the entire Universe in a balance. (...) Since everything has its position in the Universe and its reason for its existence, (...) so does Music, as a symbol of the Supreme Idea, progress towards the core and the source of the Universe’s existence. (...) When I compose, I feel suspended in the expanses of the Universe, though obviously not in a physical sense. I hear Bach also had his supreme symbolic goal” (Bridgeport, 13 March 1960).

The sphere of Bacevičius’s cosmic music includes parapsychological and occultist experiments: “Last night I dreamt, my little Grażyna, that we were listening together to you playing the violin on the Radio. You were playing, very beautifully, one of your own works with orchestra and suddenly static interrupted the transmission. (...) I’ll now read a little in bed and then I’ll talk to you via telepathy,” confesses the author of *Cosmic Symphony* (Bridgeport, 23 January 1965). Then he becomes prophetic once again: “Thought is the fastest means of communication; this is so clear to me that the entire Universe with its billions of stars and planets is in fact the size of my fist or perhaps just a little bigger (say, the size of a TV screen or a sky map). There will be a time when we’ll travel by telepathy, lying in bed and embracing the entire Universe. That is my prophesy (Bridgeport, 13 October 1966).

Bacevičius’s experimental passion led him to present a new strategy for formulating the primary construct of a musical work: “I plotted each musical idea gradually and slowly, and I could thus record my musical ideas in almost a hundred percent (...). It is a kind of a film of the score (New York, 14 January 1963). Grażyna responded (18 January 1963): „I still have inner reservations against a graphic notation of musical ideas, because they do not yet constitute a work of music. On other hand, Wanda (their sister – MJS) says poets nowadays try to log whatever is born of their unconscious,

so it's quite possible I'm just being old-fashioned. I still think, though, that to realize the graphic image, to 'fill' it with sounds, will be a Herculean task. The next thing to do would be to invent a new score notation for this realization, since the traditional would never satisfy you anyway." Vytautas continued their discussion by answering her arguments: "Yet it *is* a Herculean task, this is terminally exhausting mental work. (...) Grażynka dearest, you have no idea what kind of mathematics this is – (...) a veritable astronomy (underlined by VB). My work has it all: its goal, its sense, its logic; it is the core of my Universe" (Bridgeport, 23 I 1963). "Graphic-astronomic charts pave the way for a new constructivism in music" (Bridgeport, 11 IX 1964).

Obviously, the repertoire of the recurring themes in the Bacewicz correspondence is much broader and abundant. I have pointed out only those that reappear refrain-like and generate much inspired discussion, thus showing their authors as true creators of culture. Their "talking shop" flows alongside equally fascinating "conversations" on life and everyday problems, on family matters, health, feelings, on loved ones and chance acquaintances, on events tragic and comic. It is Vytautas who plays the role of the leader of this metanarration, of the *agent provocateur* of personal confessions and taking a stand. In one of her letters (18 December 1962), Grażyna even tells her brother: "I wish you well. Just stop writing those crazy letters to people. Some of the worst misfortunes come from letters!"

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To conclude, I would like to quote a stanza from a poem by Wanda Bacewicz, meaningfully entitled: *Writing Letters*.

*What a relief it is
When I take my pen
And turn the eagerly flying words
into a structure
of no predefined dimensions
free from all prohibitions.*⁶

⁶ W. Bacewicz, from the 10th volume of her poetry.