

Letters of Grażyna Bacewicz and Vytautas Bacevičius (1945-1969; part I)

▲ Letters of Grażyna Bacewicz to Vytautas Bacevičius

1945

● 20 August 1945

Dear Witek: We were so happy when, on August 20th, 1945, we finally received two letters from you (one addressed to me, one to Kiejstut). We see from your letters, however, that you have no idea at all what we've gone through and how much we've had to endure. You write about bombardments in Warsaw as if that had been the only threat. Suffice to say that Warsaw is no more, that the city is gone for but a few houses, that there is no railway station there, not a single bridge, nothing but heaps of ruins. Don't get me wrong: I'm not exaggerating. You must have heard of the uprising in Warsaw, of how we fought Germans with little more than our bare hands, of how the Germans slaughtered the populace etc., etc. Mummy's house does not exist, it has burnt down with Wandzia's whole library and everything, so has Kiejstut's – they have also lost everything. Our house seems to be all right (in fact, our side wing is standing but the front part's collapsed), but it's been looted. (...) We left Warsaw on October 2nd, the Germans took us to the camp at Pruszków. Wandzia was on a stretcher (she was seriously wounded and had undergone an operation – MJS's note). It is thanks to Wandzia that we were put in sick bay – a barrack where they were letting people go. Those from other barracks were being sent for forced labor to Germany. Anyway, they let us go. We took Wandzia, still on a stretcher, to the hospital in Grodzisk (...). Kiejstut and his wife joined us there – when they finally found us. I've managed to save all my compositions (apart from *Overture*, which I've recently reconstructed). (...) I went with Mummy, Alinka and Kiejstut to Lublin. Wanda wrote for a paper (a town column), I performed with Kiejstut as accompanist. (...) After some time Kiejstut and I ran away from Lublin (it's such a hole) and I went to Łódź. I got a job at the

Conservatory (a combination of the Warsaw and Łódź conservatories); also, I preformed a lot and wrote commissioned pieces. I wanted to set myself up as soon as possible so that I could get Mummy, Alinka and Wandzia all down here. And so I did – they joined me after about a month. Kiejstut's at the Conservatory too. He gives additional piano (lessons), and, of course, he also accompanied me and others. (...) My recent feats include music for a play (for the money) and my *Overture* will be performed at a festival in Kraków in a couple of days. I go to Kraków a lot, and to Warsaw too, or Praga to be exact (Praga is the part of Warsaw on the other side of the Vistula, for Warsaw is no more), to play concerts. During the war I wrote a lot of stuff for orchestra and many smaller pieces as well. All I'm waiting for now is an opportunity to shine in the world. Let me tell you a funny thing, too. I'm doing literature as well now. A short story of mine was read on the radio yesterday. I've already written a novel and a half and some smaller texts as well. My penname is Roman Grażowicz.

So here we are in Łódź (we still live in a hotel since we can't find an apartment); Andrzej's in Grodzisk-Warszawa. (...)

I'm in good form, violin-wise. I don't think I've ever played so well. I'm finishing my *Second Violin Concerto*. Your letter arrived by the same post with one from Father (from Lithuania – MJS). He's alive and well, same address. He's working as before (...).

Make sure you write as much as you can. Love (...) Grażyna

- **Paris, Hotel Ramzès, 28 March 1946**

Dear Vitek: I've been in Paris for a week. It took me six days to get here (...). I'm playing Szymanowski's *Concerto No. 1* with Klecki and orchestra at the Salle Playel on May 9th. Klecki is a Paris celebrity (...) and a marvelous conductor. Meanwhile, on April 27th, there's a chamber music concert at the Salle Gaveau with my *Suite for Two Violins*, even before that my recital mostly for the Polish colony here, and then a great recital in Lyon. (...) What about you? (...) You wrote me to

buy your *Sonata* – OK, and what am I supposed to do with it, I don't think I quite got what you meant. (...)

We're very worried for Father; we've heard there are mass deportations now from the Baltic states deep into Russia. Our letters come back undelivered, no news from him. How will this end? (...)

Write me as soon as possible. Love, Grażyna.

1946

- **Paris, 21 May 1946**

Dear Brother: Kiejstut received some old letters by Father (who wrote he'd had some very, very old ones from us). He is now a school inspector, not a school manager anymore. He inspects schools now. This has calmed us down a bit, though the news are almost six months old now (...).

I'm playing hide-and-seek with the Embassy; that is, I pretend to be nice but I keep on going against the grain. I've ignored all their invitations to parties at the Embassy. They know I side with the reactionaries, but they can't turn tell me to go to hell because I'm returning to Poland and could tell on them (...).

Write again! Grażyna

- **Paris, 17 June 1946**

Dearest Brother: (...) I'm so sad we won't be able to write candidly any longer now that I'm going back to Poland. Try to be more circumspect when you write me there. A musician's been arrested recently, a great friend of mine. He's still in jail. (...)

I wish you much success in all your plans and endeavors. Love and kisses, Grażyna.

When do you think we will get to see you?

- **Paris, 20 November 1946**

Dear Vitek: I'm so sorry you're sad. Don't hate me for my "wise" advice, but it seems so natural. Remember, Little Brother: an artist can only be looked up to by other people! If you keep on complaining to every Tom, Dick and Harry that you're being ignored, that you're in trouble, all you get is pity or thinly disguised joy. When you're down on your luck, don't tell even to your closest friend. Don't forget you don't perform because you don't feel like it, not because you can't. Try to change your tactics, Brother. This is the first step to success. The second: get rid of your debts! This is essential! You're only getting further and further away from your goal if you keep on worrying about us. Why don't you try to concentrate on composing for a bit? They'll perform you once, then twice, then you'll play a piano concerto – perhaps a new one, not too heavy, nice-sounding, not too difficult – somewhere else, and things'll start to happen. (...) Grażyna

- **Paris, 21 March 1947**

Brother Dear: (...) Since you write so much about your work, 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. I don't even talk about good orchestration, because that goes without saying. I've thrown away my old pieces. Now that I know so much more than before I see their many weak points – so what is the point in keeping them? Sorry: I am not God, I don't see anything I do or write as final. Still, this does nothing to stop me from being happy that you *are* God. (...) You write that *Preludes* are trifles when compared to your great compositions. I know, but want the merest trifle to be flawless. And it's not the performance that makes or breaks a work (...).

Don't be so conceited with us; when we write to you, it's to help you, not to be a nuisance. If you feel offended by us, who in the world will be allowed to be candid with you? Will anyone? (...)

- **14 August 1947**

Dear Vitek: (...) I keep on wondering why on earth you should be so keen on the career of a virtuoso. This virtuoso thing is such a nuisance for me in my own life; if you want to know the truth, I would really prefer to be a composer and nothing more. I have the feeling that neither you nor I will ever become great virtuosi, simply because we're both too old and too vulnerable. Małcużyński is at least 10 years your junior. (...) If you want to compose well, you have to concentrate on it (...). And, in general, I think you're not on the right path: you have such a great gift of composition, yet, to tell you the truth, I think you're throwing it all away, worrying about things of lesser value than creativity. You thrash about like a lion in a cage, and where is this going to lead you? For obvious reasons, you cannot return to Poland or Lithuania (...).

As to myself, if someone told me one day that I'm to stop being a violinist, I would only be overjoyed. I play because it seems dishonorable to stop, by pure inertia, and also because that's what keeps me in money in Poland, but I really would rather earn less and care less, and sit at home, and stick to my composing. That's my dream. Yet when I'm in Paris, composing is out of the question (no place to do it etc.); in Poland I'm thrown from one concert to another, so I can only compose in-between, at night. This is all wrong. But enough about me. It's you that I – and all of us – we have at heart!

Every foreigner should find assistance in his fellow expatriates. You've severed all ties with them, or they with you, and now you cannot expect financial aid from anyone. Let me know what you think. (...)

- **Prague, 18 May 1948**

Dear Brother: I'm in Prague for the Festival of Contemporary Music. They played my *Overture* today. It was a great success. I'm playing for the Radio

tomorrow. (...) I'm taking the opportunity of being abroad to beg you, dearest little Witek, 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. They're all being opened on the pretext of being badly sealed. (...)

- **16 February 1952**

Dear Witek: The problem you've mentioned in your letter is my old problem, too. (...) You see, 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.

There has also been a change in my own experience and understanding of music. I decided a new road had to be found. It should lead above all through a simplification of the musical language. A simplification, not a return to the old ways of classicism, of the major-minor system – the quest for the simple and the new, obviously without denying the achievements of the previous epoch, by which I mean the entire first half of the 20th century.

Apart from that, composers seem to be ashamed of their emotional side – so I've thrown all caution to the wind and I now write emotional music. I'm not saying I've already found that new road, for that might take a whole century and dozens of composers. Still, I'm searching, I'm concentrating and, above all, I'm trying to write earnestly.

I've come to the conclusion during my stay in Belgium that western composers are going nowhere. (...) They're still fooling around with noises, colors, interesting rhythms etc., but still there's no Music there.

I have a test for my own road being not too bad, since my *Quartet* won first prize despite being jotted down in no time between one thing and another! Obviously I'm as far as I could possibly be from saying I've achieved perfection! The West might be playing with their little noises, but I think they've had enough. As to myself, I keep on being tackled (despite all success) for writing "tough"

music – which seems to be the general opinion of my work. Yet as long as I'm not convinced my stuff's too complex, I'll keep on doing what I'm doing now.

I think you've been misinformed on the "commission" system here. In fact it's a wonderful thing that's making the whole western Europe green with envy. We're being paid by the state so that we can work in all tranquility. Did Bach write a single work that didn't have to be commissioned? And I'd rather get the money from the state than from an individual. You're also wrong in believing commissions are only for mass songs. I get contracts for quartets, symphonies, concertos, pedagogical pieces (I like that) etc. The commissions might display certain tendencies – for instance, to produce operas and cantatas accessible to the general public – but, in general, one does what one does best.

(...) A composer must write honestly, for inner satisfaction, yet without forgetting his audience. Gr.

- **11 October 1952**

Dear Vitek: (...) You're asking for an opinion on your teaching, so here's my answer. (...) You can't expect miracles: a composer won't find his own language of expression as long as he has not written 50, 100, 150 pieces of little worth, always reminiscent of someone else's work and imperfect in form, etc. If your student doesn't seem to be able to write more than 4 bars without being reminded of other people's work, he simply doesn't seem to be really set on "learning" composition. I'm writing about learning in inverted commas, because I don't think anyone can be taught composing from the scratch. Still, one *can* teach forms, polyphony, harmony etc., in a practical way. You say he knows all these subjects, yet his knowledge is only theoretical, since he hasn't written a single piece himself. (...)

- **2 September 1954**

Dear Vitek: (...) You wrote me once about the sonata form – about the two views on it. I tend to think that the sonata form doesn't have to be strictly classical (although I've so far stuck to the classical form myself). There must be a conflict, of

course, which was evident in the classical form in the two contrasting themes and their “clash” – (development). I feel that the new quartet I’m starting to write will breathe a little fresh air into the sonata form, and I might be able to write a little more about that then. (...)

- **19 October 1957**

Dear Witek: (...) You once wrote about musical creation in a way that made me think it might be a good idea for you to contact dodecaphonists. As you probably know, there is a fairly large group of composers in France, West Germany and Italy who venture upon untrodden ways. You might be interested, I think. They’re all derived from dodecaphony, but they’re on a road of their own. The whole thing is based on the concept of series. It’s a totally new formal problem that’s of the greatest interest, and it’s also new in terms of tone (instrumentation). It’s mostly Boulez in France, Stockhausen in Germany, and Luigi Nono in Italy. They’re all pretty well known in Europe. (...) I’ll stick to my “conservatism” (the inverted commas are here because my music is perceived as “wild” here), although of course I’m trying to keep abreast of what’s going on in the world at large. I shall not follow those gentlemen because it wouldn’t be honest on my part and I find honesty the most important thing in art. My music is emotional, perhaps somewhat in the old sense; their music creates emotion with completely different qualities: the perfection of conducting the series etc., etc., and that’s what makes me recoil from it. (...)

Love from us all – Grażyna

- **5 October 1958**

Brother Dearest: (...) Your thoughts on form are all very true. There’s only one thing I can’t really agree with: that a composer should write from intuition. Consciousness is essential in our work – my opinion at least. And then your reasoning is a little one-sided: you tend to overemphasize form at the detriment of other elements. You’re not concerned – or so I understand – with the novelty of musical language, as if expressing your musical idea in a new form immediately

resulted in the work's being novel in other ways too – in terms of both harmony and rhythm. How can you be so sure? Other composers in the world are not, and hence all that hunt for completely new ways of creating sound; hence, for instance, electronic music: making music with electronic lamps. The whole music is at a crossroads – that much is clear. I'm too old myself to join those who choose to chase such total novelties. My role is to do what I do more or less well; of course, I don't stand still. And so I'll keep on writing for our old instruments, trying to achieve unified expression by making sure I'm original enough in terms of form and musical language and the choice of instruments. And we'll see what happens – hell knows what.

I feel you're young enough to be able – or so I imagine – to invent new things in any sphere. The truth is that you're actually more inventive than I am, even if you might not have really made use of it yet. Think about it! (...)

- **23 October 1958**

Dear Witek: (...) Why on earth do you start worrying all of a sudden whether or not a piece is a reflection of reality? Only one thing is certain: a composer cannot think about it while writing music. It's good old Plato who said that it's wrong for an artist to work with anything but his own pleasure on his mind. The later fate of what had been written of one's own pleasure – that's a whole other story. It is my opinion that (if the author is good enough) a work can be a reflection of reality in some sense – yet to be honest, I couldn't care less. I am obsessed with a totally different matter: with how people attach too much attention to themselves and their actions. I'm dreaming of writing a book about it, a book I know I'll never write. (...)

As to our musical discussion: there is an argument for the dodecaphonists, for the possibility of writing beautiful music within their system. This an argument by analogy: aren't Bach's fugues beautiful despite the constraining form? (...) Do you know Berg's *Violin Concerto*? I'm sure you do. It's beautiful music, even if it's dodecaphonic. (...)

You and I seem to agree and understand each other, yet we think in our different ways. You approach your profession, that of the composer I mean, in a highly Romantic fashion. I'm not saying this because of all the things you've been writing to me about soul (...), but because you could get carried away or something like that.

I treat the job of the composer as carving in stone, and not as a transmission of the sounds of imagination or of inspiration. Most of the world's composers work like bureaucrats, in an ordered way. When their muse abandons them for a while, they do their technical homework. (...) I would never hold it against anyone that he or she allows a single voice for a longer time. Quite the contrary: it's much better than when all keep on playing, or at least seem to. Then all contrast of color, register, intensity etc., is gone. Contrast is a very important element of art. For how can one use contrasts when everyone keeps on playing? (...)

- **30 June 1960**

Vitek, (...) While composing, avoid looking at the work of Shostakovich. He is not a good example. He is behind the times. Avoid chromatic scales in wood. That's outdated. On the other hand, don't shun long notes in strings, then e.g. some movement in wood, or some trashing brass about. You must make a kind of switch in your musical thinking in order to move as far away as possible from your part one. Make it a point of honor to build the following parts completely different one from the other! Don't forget to make your percussion more diversified. (...)

- **Venice, 8 July 1960**

Dear Vitek: We're leaving Venice for Florence tomorrow morning. We made sure we didn't waste our time here. Apart from old painting and architecture we stumbled upon the Biennale, a global exhibition of modern painting and sculpture. (...) Things are now much worse at home than a year ago – censorship is killing writers and journalists. In the Academy of Fine Arts, for instance, it has been announced that Socialist Realism is again the official style – except that the young people laugh at that and pledge allegiance to abstract art. Even we, musicians, are

being meddled with. It's obviously not a return to Stalinism; still the hard-liners are gaining ground. It's much more difficult to go abroad than it used to be, and even artists' wages are controlled to make sure we don't get too much. Letters (those from abroad) are opened and read from time to time. We can't write too much about that from Poland; I can do that here though. (...) Some of our "leaders" and ministers and politicians are scared shitless of the Soviets, who are once again on the rebound. Still we can't oppose them too openly because of our unfortunate geography. (...)

- **3 August 1960**

Dear Witek: (...) Only today did I take a closer look at your symphony. In terms of music it's very interesting and coherent! Congratulations! However, I do have many reservations as to your instrumentation. One is very general: all winds, both wood and brass, prefer rising figures. It's much more difficult to play them the other way round, especially if the figures themselves are tough. (Detailed references to instruments in the score follow – MJS). (...)

- **12 September 1960**

Dear Witek: I'm poring over your symphony trying to find a place for a celesta. A celesta could really add color to the score. We're so happy because of the publication of your Sonatas and Capriccio. Thank you for sending us a copy. (...) Isn't it true that a composer feels so much better when he is published? Well then, congratulations! Have you already received official information about having been granted resident status? Allow me to say that things are looking much better for you than they did some two years ago.

(...) My *Sixth Quartet* has been performed at the festival to the annoyance of the old (e.g. Sikorski) and the surprise of the young. The latter have already thought I can't go any further, so now they've recognized me all over again. What's really happened is that the moment has arrived when a composer wants at any price to leave all that has been behind and starts looking for new things in music. The young might be a little too weird (as is their right) and the middle generation are trying to

preserve as much music as they can in the “weirdness,” not just experiments. Anyway, there is no progress without the freedom to experiment. As a result, I still have the upper hand. (...)

- **5 May 1962**

Dear little Vitek, (...) 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.

- **28 October 1962**

Don’t forget the vibraphone, which blend notes really well. (...) Glissandos can be done with a celesta (in its white keys).”

- **18 December 1962**

I wish you well. Just stop writing those crazy letters to people. Some of the worst misfortunes come from letters!

- **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.

- **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).

- **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.

Elaboration: Małgorzata Janicka-Słysz (Music Academy, Kraków)

Translation: Jan Rybicki