

Marcin Mielczewski's music at Poland's royal Vasa court and its international reception

# Going for Italian



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**Poland's royal Vasa court of the 16th and 17th centuries was dominated by Italian musicians; this makes the career of Marcin Mielczewski, a Polish musician and composer of works still performed today, all the more unusual**

Stylistic changes affecting music across the ages have been interpreted by former historiographies as resulting either from autonomous growth of music as an art form, or from a certain spirit of the age, permeating various genres of the arts and changing artistic tastes. A shift of this type, once considered to run very deep, took place at the turn of the 17th century, seen as marking a dividing line in the periodization of the history of music, a major turning point between the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Today's musicologists, studying musical changes in the context of contemporary philosophical trends and social conditions, propose different periodization frameworks. However, they do not negate the fact that at the turn of the 17th century, increasing numbers of listeners – initially from the courts of princes and cardinals in various centers throughout the Apennine Peninsula and later also from the elites in countries north of the Alps – turned towards Italian-style music, a synonym for *musica moderna*, even though *musica antiqua*, recalling Franco-Flemish style, not only remained in repertoires, but was still being composed.

## Music at the royal Vasa court

In the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, such musical Italophiles included King Sigismund III Vasa (reigning between 1587-1632), the first Vasa on the Polish throne, as well as his sons Ladislaus IV (1633-1648), John II Casimir (1649-1668) and Charles Ferdinand, Prince-Bishop of Wrocław in Silesia and Płock in Mazovia (d. 1655). In 1594, having married archduchess Anna Habsburg of Graz in 1592, granddaughter of Bavarian duke Albert V, patron of Orlando di Lasso, Sigismund III fundamentally changed the court music ensemble his predecessor Stephen Báthory had left behind after his death. It is noteworthy that he searched for candidates to join the music chapel in Italy. Driven by his musical tastes, and likely by his political views, he mainly recruited musicians in Rome, with the support of church hierarchs led by Pope Clement VIII.



Henryk Podgórski/Photographic Archives of the PAS Institute of Art

**Epitaph of Asprilio (d. 1623), one of the Italian chapelmasters at the court of King Sigismund III Vasa**

Between 1595 and the Swedish Deluge that came half a century later, the courts of successive elected kings of Poland from the Swedish Vasa dynasty hosted a major music ensemble (in 1596, there were 22 singers and instrumentalists and a *maestro di cappella*), largely dominated by Italian musicians. Sigismund III's pro-Rome tendencies revealed themselves in his appointing famous musicians from the Eternal City as his chapelmasters. During his reign, the function was performed by renowned composers Annibale Stabile (although he was never active, having died either en route to Kraków or immediately after his arrival at the royal court), Luca Marenzio, Asprilio Pacelli (passed away in Warsaw following 20 years of service; in recognition of his achievements, Sigismund III founded an epitaph to the composer in the collegiate of St. John the Baptist, destroyed during the Second World War), and Giovanni Francesco Anerio. The only *maestro di cappella* from northern Italy was Giulio Cesare Gabussi in the early 17th century, maintaining close links to the Milan cathedral before and after his appointment.

The chapelmasters from Rome had the greatest influence on the style of the royal ensemble and its repertoire, in keeping with Sigismund III's expectations. Musicians playing at the Vasa court also included renowned composers (including Tarquinio Merula) from northern regions of the Apennine Peninsula, with closer links to composition and performance styles of Venice, Bologna, and Milan.

Although royal accounts from the first half of the 17th century have been lost and other source materials discussing the ensemble are unreliable, there is evidence that leads us to believe that at the time, local musicians were involved in the ensemble only to a relatively low degree. However, it is significant that following the customs of the time, younger musicians forming the ensemble were supported by their older colleagues and chapelmasters, who acted as their guardians and teachers. In effect, the Italian musicians assembled by Sigismund III created a hub for musical education at the royal court, teaching music to boys from across the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and as far away as Italy, influencing their musical tastes.



Henryk Podębski / Photographic Archives of the PAS Institute of Art

**Tenement house at 6 Jezuicka Street in Warsaw, half of which was purchased by Marcin Mielczewski towards the end of his life**

Since the royal court was mobile and moved between different residences (initially spending most of its time in Kraków, moving on to Vilnius, and finally settling in Warsaw in 1612), and the musicians performed not just for the courtiers but also in local churches and outdoors, the Italians from the ensemble shaped the musical tastes of listeners (including other musicians) throughout the Commonwealth.

### Mielczewski's career

Unfortunately we have no information on the early life of Mielczewski; however, various sources describing his activities at the royal court in the late 1620s allow us to assume that he received at least part of his musical education at the Warsaw court of Sigismund III. His teacher was Franciszek Lilius, son of Vincenzo Gigli (known by his Latinized name Lilius), the Italian musician to the king of Poland for many years; Lilius studied under Girolamo Frescobaldi. Analysis of preserved works by Mielczewski reveals that he was also strongly influenced by Giovanni Francesco Anerio, Sigismund III's *maestro di cappella* between 1624/25–1630, regarded by music historians as the first major composer of oratorios.

Following Sigismund III's death, Mielczewski became the resident musician at the court of his son, Ladislaus IV. His role is first mentioned in historical sources in

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December 1632, with the last note placing him there in 1644. Adam Jarzębski, violinist, composer and administrator of the construction of the Ujazdowski Palace, in his rhymed description of Warsaw *"Gościniec"* (Warsaw 1643) mentions Mielczewski as a composer. He is certain to have performed another function in the ensemble, although it has not been possible to find documents confirming precisely what this role might have been. Since the group of vocalists was heavily dominated by singers from Italy (at the time, Ladislaus IV's court had the first stage outside Italy regularly staging Italian-language operas), it is more likely that Mielczewski was an instrumentalist (the ensemble included many Polish musicians), perhaps playing trombone or bassoon.

Preserved records of baptisms of Mielczewski's children by his two successive wives suggest that the musician had a relatively senior position at the court and enjoyed favor from members of the royal family, with John Casimir and Anna Constance Catherine – siblings of Ladislaus IV – taking on the role of godparents. However, Mielczewski's career was most heavily influenced by the king's other brother, Bishop Charles Ferdinand. From 1645,

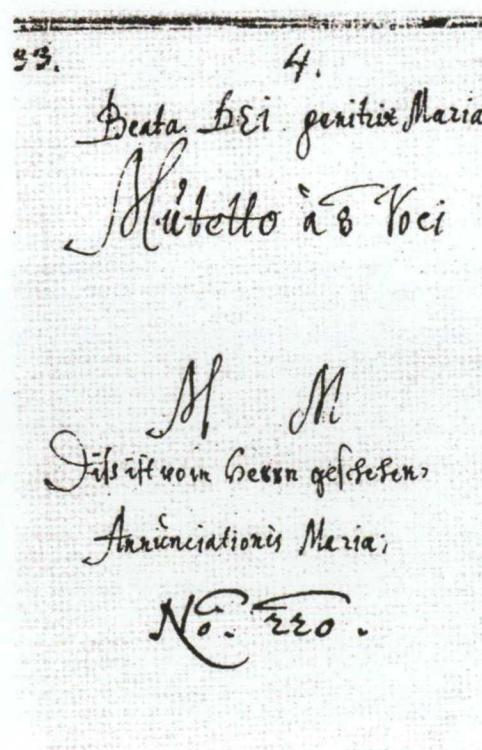
the musician was described as the leader of his music chapel. Together with his patron and his ensemble, Mielczewski travelled to the bishop's residences in Wyszów, Brok and Warsaw in the Mazovia region, to Gdańsk, where in March 1646 Charles Ferdinand stood in for his ill brother to welcome Poland's new queen Marie Louise Gonzaga, to Kraków, as well as spending several months in Silesia at the bishop of Wrocław's residences in Nysa and Opole in 1650. Soon after, the musician bought a house near the Old Market Square in Warsaw, and died there in September 1651.

### *Musica moderna of the Baroque*

It is likely that Mielczewski was at his most prolific under Charles Ferdinand's patronage. He composed utilitarian pieces to be performed during church services and Catholic mass, as well as instrumental music to accompany mealtimes, receiving visitors and times of rest; the music was bound to suit Charles Ferdinand's tastes. The vast majority of Mielczewski's works (there are approx. 90 pieces surviving to the present day, with a further 30 compositions known from preserved titles or fragments only) can be described as *musica moderna*, although it is known

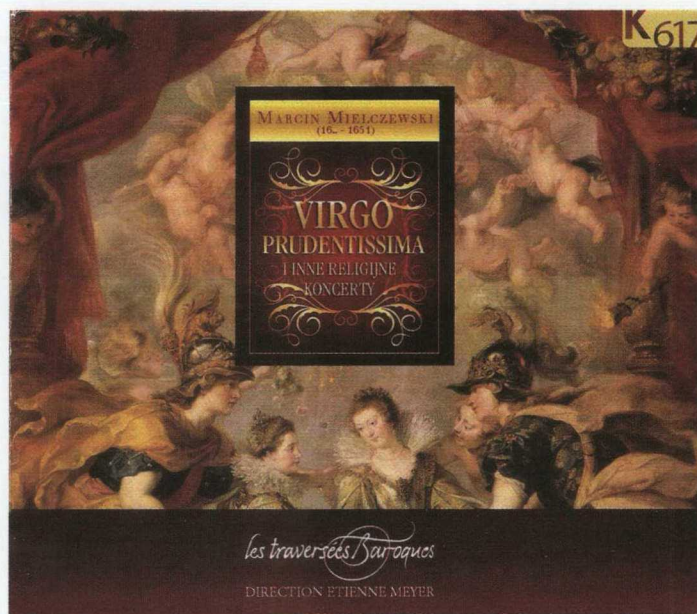


Marcin Mielczewski:  
Gaude Dei Genitrix,  
part for voice  
Tenore II; manuscript  
dating from 1656



Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz

Marcin Mielczewski:  
Beata Dei Genitrix, title  
page of manuscript  
drawn up in Wrocław,  
mid-17th century



that Mielczewski composed far more *musica antiqua* pieces than have survived to today. Analysis of Mielczewski's compositions allows us to define them as stylistically Italian (while including individual and local color thanks largely to his use of excerpts of melodies popular in Poland at the time), as well as indicating specific themes known from the works of Italian composers working under the patronage of Poland's Vasa dynasty and in various Italian and Austrian Habsburg courts.

### Wrocław collection

Italian music tastes of the 17th century, elitist during Sigismund III's day, gained in popularity across Europe in Protestant as well as Catholic circles. It is likely that during Mielczewski's life and for a few decades afterwards, his compositions were copied for the repertoires of various church, monastery, school and court music ensembles in Kraków, Łowicz, Gdańsk and Przemyśl, as well as abroad in Moravia, Upper Hungary (present-day Slovakia), Silesia, Thuringia, Baden-Baden, and Schleswig-Holstein. They were also known in the Grand Duchy of Moscow.

The largest collection of Mielczewski's vocal and instrumental compositions (signed, as many other 17th-century manuscripts with music by this composer, just with the initials MM), containing almost 40 items, exists thanks to musicians from the Lutheran

Church of St. Mary Magdalene in Wrocław; while they shared their musical preferences with Charles Ferdinand, they frequently had to adapt pieces for the Catholic bishop to Lutheran liturgy by changing lyrics and editing music to meet local performing practice.

This incredibly valuable collection was unavailable for decades; taken out of Wrocław in 1945 by the Soviet Army, during the 1950s the vast majority of it was moved from Moscow to the Staatsbibliothek in East Berlin. It was finally rescued from its hiding place after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Following studies of the works monogrammed with MM, adding the necessary attributions and preparing scores, the collection was returned to the performers and audiences. We can now get to know Mielczewski's compositions through concerts and recordings. ■

**Marcin Mielczewski's works on CD: an album from the Opera omnia cycle and Virgo prudentissima and other religious concertos**

### Further reading:

- Szwejkowscy A and Z.M. (1997), *Włosi w kapeli królewskiej polskich Wazów* [Italians in the Royal Ensemble of Poland's Vasa Kings]. Kraków: Musica Iagellonica.
- Przybyszewska-Jarmińska B. (2007), *Muzyczne dwory polskich Wazów* [Music in the Courts of Poland's Vasa Kings]. Warsaw: Semper.
- Przybyszewska-Jarmińska B. (2011), *Muzyka pod patronatem polskich Wazów. Marcin Mielczewski* [Music Under the Patronage of Poland's Vasa Kings: Marcin Mielczewski]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Sztuki PAN.