A Brief Glimpse of Organs and Churches in Warsaw, Białystok, Białowieża, and Kraków

By Marijim Thoene

If Józef Kotowicz asks you if you would like to play in his recital series in Birchard church, and say “Yes” I did say “Yes” and in July of 2012 had an experience of a lifetime; but I confess I had some sleepless nights wondering what was in store for me, especially knowing that the large organ in the Basilica Cathedral of Our Lady of the Assumption was an early 20th-century tubular pneumatic with 116 stops. Having played weekly on a cumbersome and psychotic 1923 tubular-pneumatic Möller with three undependable general pistons and a cipher at habitually showed up unannounced and unstoppable, I feared the worst. However, my fears were allayed when I heard Józef Kotowicz CD of the organ in the basilica. And who would not want to play in Białowias’ St. Teresa organ in the basilica. And who would not want to play in Białowias’ St. Teresa organ in the basilica. After many years of saying “No,” the congregation wished to expand the church. Here I began to see part of the history unfold of a country of which I knew very little. St. Anne’s Church was built in the 15th century but was destroyed in the 1850s by Swedish and German troops. It was rebuilt between 1740-60 and the present Neo-Classical façade was built in 1788. During World War II the roof was destroyed by the Nazis. The organ was built by Pfitzler Organbau in 1992. The organ case (see photo 2) and the interior of the church are in Baroque style. The rich colors of this organ are apparent on YouTube: Diane Bish performs on YouTube: Diane Bish performs

### Manual I (Hauptwerk) C–a′′

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stop</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Russia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16′ Gedeckt</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16′ Gedeckt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8′ Principale</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8′ Principale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4′ Gedackt</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4′ Gedackt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8′ Gamba</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8′ Gamba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5′ Vece umana</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5′ Vece umana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4′ Spitzflote</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4′ Spitzflote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4′ Octav</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4′ Octav</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4′ Flote</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4′ Flote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2′ 1/2 Quirt</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2′ 1/2 Quirt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8′ Superoctav</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8′ Superoctav</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5′ Mixture IV</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5′ Mixture IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5′ Congeat V</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5′ Congeat V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8′ Tormpete</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8′ Tormpete</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Manual II (Positiv) C–a′′

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Number</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8′ Gemshorn</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8′ Gemshorn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8′ Holzgedackt</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8′ Holzgedackt</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On July 11, Józef—who had just played two recitals in southeastern Poland at the Cathedral in Łużaczow and a church in Krasińscow—had his lovely wife Ewa picked us up and drove us to Białystok. In the old city square the towering spires of the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary dominate the skyline; to the left, connected to the Cathedral Basilica, is a small Baroque chapel, bearing the same name, with an intriguing history (see photo 3). The history of these two buildings reflects the remarkable determination, ingenuity, and spiritual commitment of the people of Białystok. Construction of the chapel was begun in 1611; it was consecrated in 1626 and later rebuilt in 1751. In the 19th century the congregation wished to expand the church. Since at that time the land was part of Russia, the people had to get permission from the Czar to rebuild the church. After many years of saying “No,” the Czar relented only on the condition that no new church would be built, only the present one could be enlarged. The neo-Gothic Cathedral Basilica was built as an addition to the chapel. Its construction lasted up to World War I. Unlike most of the city of Białystok, the buildings were not destroyed by the bombings in World War II.

The concert document that mentions the existence of an organ in the Baroque chapel of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin dates from 1671. The present organ was built between 1751–1752, and it possesses some elements from the older organ. It was an elegant sound for a recital space, where many of the kings of Poland worshipped, including the last king of Poland, Stanisław II August, who ruled from 1764–1795. The pedalboard consists of an octave (see photo 5) and the stops are literally projecting from the wall above the keyboard.

### Chapel of the Assumption, Białystok

#### Manual

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stop</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Russia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8′ Principal</td>
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<td>8′ Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16′ Bourdon</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>8′ Major flet</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8′ Major flet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8′ Amabilis</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8′ Amabilis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4′ Spiefllet</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4′ Spiefllet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2′ Octava</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2′ Octava</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8′ Gedackt</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8′ Gedackt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4′ Octava</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4′ Octava</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4′ Minor flet</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4′ Minor flet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2′ Piccolo</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2′ Piccolo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3′ 1/2 Tenza</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3′ 1/2 Tenza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2′ 1/2 Quinta</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2′ 1/2 Quinta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8′ Mixture</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8′ Mixture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1′ III Cymbel</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1′ III Cymbel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pedal coupler F–f

Upon entering the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption of Our Lady, one feels transported in time by the soaring, graceful arches and the large sober faces of the church patriarchs in the stained-glass windows. Here I first encountered the image of the Polish saint and mystic, Saint Faustina (d. 1938), and the painting of Christ that she inspired.
4. Richard Onopa, organist in Baroque Chapel, Assumption of St. Mary, Białystok
5. Pedalboard of organ in Baroque Chapel, Assumption of St. Mary, Białystok

**Church of St. Theresa, Białowieża**

**Walcker**

**Hauptwerk (II Manual C–g’)**
- 8' Principal
- 8' Gemshorn
- 4' Oktave
- 2' Schischke
- 1 5/15' Mixture IV–VII
- 8' Trompeta

**Rückpositiv (I Manual C–g’)**
- 8' Gedackt
- 4' Nachthorn
- 2' Principal
- 8' Sesquialtera II
- 1 1/2' Quinte
- 1' Schaff

**Pedal (C–'P)**
- 16' Subbaß
- 8' Oktavbass
- 4' Pommer
- 16' Positiv

**Couplers:** II/II, I/P, I/P/P

Every stop of the organ, from flute to trumpet, spoke with great clarity and brightness. The specification:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stop</th>
<th>Pitch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hauptwerk</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8' Principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8' Gemshorn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4' Oktave</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2' Schischke</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 5/15' Mixture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8' Trompeta</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rückpositiv</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8' Gedackt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4' Nachthorn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2' Principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8' Sesquialtera</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 1/2' Quinte</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1' Schaff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pedal</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16' Subbaß</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8' Oktavbass</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4' Pommer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16' Positiv</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The church was near not only an ancient forest, but also the Czar of Russia’s private railroad and hunting lodge. The latter has been converted to a gourmet restaurant. The priest of St. Theresa, Fr. Bogdan Poplawski, took us to lunch here—what an amazing place of genteel elegance steeped in history.

**St. Casimir (Kazimierz) Church**, close to Białystok’s central business district, is a relatively new church, built in 1981. Its namesake is St. Casimir Jagellon (1458–1484), the patron saint of Poland, whose feast day is March 4. It is modern in design, with high ceilings, and flooded with light. By the altar ests of Europe. The church is decorated with branches and horns, reminders of another Polish saint, Maximilian Kolbe, whose photograph was hanging on the wall.

Henryk Ząkowski

The “village” church of St. Theresa in Białowieża, built in 1927, is on the edge of one of the oldest primeval forests of Europe. The church is decorated with branches and horns, reminders of the forest outside. Here I discovered another Polish saint, Maximilian Kolbe, whose photograph was hanging on the wall. A Polish Franciscan friar, remembered for volunteering to die in place of a stranger in the Auschwitz concentration camp during World War II, he was canonized in 1982 by Pope John Paul II, who described him as the “Patron saint of our difficult century.”

When I arrived on Saturday night to practice, I found the music rack holding all the material for the Mass in the morning (see photo 7). I watched the parishioners arrive on foot and by bicycle, and leave their faithful dogs outside. Many pilgrims arrive on foot and on bicycles, and the entire prelude and fugue with the pedalboard of organ in Baroque Chapel, Białystok

**Walcker**

**Hauptwerk (II Manual C–g’)**
- 8' Principal
- 8' Gemshorn
- 4' Oktave
- 2' Schischke
- 1 5/15' Mixture IV–VII
- 8' Trompeta

**Rückpositiv (I Manual C–g’)**
- 8' Gedackt
- 4' Nachthorn
- 2' Principal
- 8' Sesquialtera II
- 1 1/2' Quinte
- 1' Schaff

**Pedal (C–’P)**
- 16' Subbaß
- 8' Oktavbass
- 4' Pommer
- 16' Positiv

**Couplers:** II/II, I/P, I/P/P

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Schwellwerk (C–q3) III. Manual

16′ Pommer
8′ Principal
5′ Flöte d’oppo.
8′ Salicional
8′ Schwebung
8′ Windflöte
4′ Oktave
4′ Rohrflöte
3′/2 Sechzehntel II
2′/3 Holzflöte
2′/2/3 Sechzehntel VII 5′/3, 7′/5 Terzinthum III
16′ Fagott
8′ Oboe
4′ Schalenflöte
2′/3 Zinkenflöte

Pedalwerk (C–f1)
32′ Contra-Principal
16′ Principalbass
16′ Unterpédalement
16′ Rohrflötenbass
8′ Gedackt Flöte
8′ Oktavflöte
4′ Choralbass
4′ Holzflöte
2′ Waldflöte
1′/3 Scherzó
5′/3 Bassquint
4′ Hintersatz IV–VII
32′ Contra-Pédalement
16′ Positiv
16′ Possum
8′ Trompete
4′ Clarine
2′ Zinkenbass

The suspended tracker action made the touch light and sensitive, and infinite levels of memory made it a joy to play. Fr. Wojciech Lasewski, the rector of the parish, spoke to the audience and introduced each organ piece, and after the recital we were invited to an elegant dinner in the rectory.

What a heart-warming experience to play three recitals in Poland in churches filled with people who appreciate organ music, who gave me such a warm welcome, and who thanked me, in English(!), for playing for them. I could only say hello (dziens dobry!) and thank you (dziękuję) in Polish. It was gratifying to have the priest at each church talk to the audience and describe the music before we played, and as if we weren’t enough to have the privilege to play, to be invited to a feast afterwards. Józef arranged for our food, lodgings, and transportation, and provided a car with one of his students, Rafał Pluszczech, who explained the vagaries of setting the general pistons and turned pages for me.

After playing the recitals, I had the luxury of being a tourist in Białystok, and Józef showed us some of the most interesting organs in the city. First on the tour was the organ at the massive St. Roch Church. The architecture is avant-garde even by today’s standards, even though it was built between 1927–46. It is now undergoing restoration. It used to be one of the largest parishes in Białystok, with 40,000 people attending Mass each weekend. Józef was organist there for two years, beginning in 1991, and played eleven Masses on the weekend, as well as Masses in the evening throughout the week. The parish sisters have since been changed and the congregation is smaller.

The organ and pipes were discovered at the end of World War II in 1945 in an abandoned boneyard in the train station in Białystok. The legend is that the workers from the train station asked the priest if he wanted an organ and so for a couple of cases of beer it was delivered to the church. The plate on the organ reads “Schlag und Sohn, 1945.” The general pistons are set by a toggle system similar to the one in the cathedral. The organ case creates the illusion that all the pipes are of equal length (see photo 8, organ case, St. Roch Church).

The organ has a great presence in this cavernous space.

We were privileged to have a tour of the stunning new Opera House in Białystok scheduled to open this fall. We were fortunate to get to hear the new 64-rank organ, built by the Polish builder Zych Zakłady Church, played by Professor Andrzej Chorosinski of the Chopin Conservatory in Warsaw, who was there to inspect the organ and rehearse for his inaugural recital (see photo 9). The specification of the organ:

**Organ Case, St. Roch Church, Białystok**

8′ Sifféle
1′ Oktave
5′/3 (Terz–Quintzimbel III
8′ Mützett
4′ Singend Regal
Tremulant

**Schwellwerk (C–q3) III. Manual**

16′ Pommer
8′ Principal
5′ Flöte doppo.
8′ Salicional
8′ Schwebung
8′ Windflöte
4′ Oktave
4′ Rohrflöte
2′/3 Sechzehntel II
2′/2/3 Sechzehntel VII
5′/3, 7′/5 Terzinthum III
16′ Fagott
8′ Oboe
4′ Schalenflöte
2′/3 Zinkenflöte

**Pedalwerk (C–f1)**
32′ Contra-Principal
16′ Principalbass
16′ Unterpedale
16′ Rohrflötenbass
8′ Gedackt Flöte
8′ Oktavflöte
4′ Choralbass
4′ Holzflöte
2′ Waldflöte
1′/3 Scherzó
5′/3 Bassquint
4′ Hintersatz IV–VII
32′ Contra-Pédalement
16′ Positiv
16′ Possum
8′ Trompete
4′ Clarine
2′ Zinkenbass

The organ in the recital hall in the Academy of Music, Białystok

**Main Manual I**
16′ Gedackt
8′ Prinzycal
5′ Flöte harm.
8′ V da Gamba
4′ Oktava
4′ Flöte
4′ Traversflöte
2′ 3/4 Korneta
2′ Superröhrenkornet
Kornet 1′ Oktav IV–V
8′ Trompete magna
8′ Trompete
4′ Clarine

**Main Manual II**
8′ Prinzycal
5′ Salicional
8′ Flötenuß
5′ Gemshorn
4′ Fagura
4′ Prinzycal
2′/3 Schalmei
2′ Oktava
1′/2 Terz
Cymbel III
8′ Trompete magna
8′ Kleinornet

**Main Manual III**
16′ Gedackt
8′ Schalmei
8′ Flötenuß
8′ Flötenuß
8′ Oboe
8′ Anglisa
8′ Vox coelestis

**Manual IV**
8′ Flötenuß
5′ Gedackt
8′ Salicional
4′ Schalmei
8′ Prinzycal
8′ Cymbel
1′/2 Oktava
8′ Singend Regal

**Pedal**
32′ Voluta
16′ Prinzycal
16′ Salicional
10′ Voluta
10′ Gedackt
10′ Bourdon
8′ Oktava
5′ Cymbel
8′ Cymbel
4′ Mischwerk
Mischwerk IV
16′ Fagott
8′ Trompete
8′ Trompete harm.
8′ Trompete magna

The organ console is red and green, truly one of the most exuberant organ consoles I’ve ever seen (see photo 10). We also toured I. J. Paderewski School of Music, where Józef has been on the faculty for twenty years. He recently acquired a beautiful tracker for the recital hall, built in 1976 in Denmark by Troels Krohn, it is reminiscent of the typical North German Baroque organ. The specifications:

**Paderewski School of Music, Białystok**

**Troels Krohn, 1976**

**Positive**
8′ Salicional
8′ Gedackt
8′ Piccolo
2′/3 Quint
2′ Schalmei
1′/2: Teich

**Swell**
8′ Gemshorn
8′ Octavflöte
8′ Regal
2′ Paflotte
8′ Oboe

**Pedal**
16′ Subba
Manual to Pedal couplers

Last on the tour was Santa Eclesia, which has a 39-rank, three-manual German tracker built by Friedrich Weis- senborn, again mirroring the disposition of the North German Baroque instru- ment. The sound of the organ is lush as well as brilliant; however, the key action is very heavy.

In the Church of St. Judwiga in Białystok there is a 57-rank organ from the Philharmonic concert hall in Szalzburg. The organ was built by E. F. Walcker & Co. in 1970. The church had no organ before acquiring this one.

Tragic epochs in Poland, including the loss of independence in the 19th century, World War II, and the 50-year Communist regime, had a devastating effect on the rich musical tradition of the church and on organ building. A traditionalist could begin with the rich musical tradition in the early organ tablatures of Kraków ca. 1548, the Gdańsk tablature of 1591, and the tablature of Johannes of Lublin, who stipulated the rector of the church should not return to Poland at all. I learned that organ building in Poland came to a halt during the Communist regime, and that many churches had no organs because there was no money. During these years the rich musical tradition of the church was silent; but during this bleak time their faith grew stronger and their love of organ music did not die.

Since the fall of Communism in 1989, churches started looking for organs they could afford and found they could purchase instruments from Germany, where many churches were closing. Currently Poland has a growing economy in Europe and they are building new churches—big churches. It has been Józef’s mission to help churches find organs and to make organ music accessible. He began by creating a concert series in the cathedral in 1996, which has grown to include several other venues. This summer he organized 19 recitals in five different churches in Hajnowka, Białystok, and Białowieza, and invited 12 organists from Poland, Norway, and America.

Józef pointed out that crucial to the rebuilding of the rich musical tradition of the church has been the attitude of the clergy toward music and having church music classes in the schools. When Józef finished his studies in 1981 he was the first organist in the diocese; now there are thirteen. There are now two outstanding organ builders in Poland: Zych Zakłady Organów, and Zych. Zych Zakłady Organów, zych.com, and Andrzej Kamiński Organ- bilders: kaminski@kaminski-organy.pl.

On July 17 we bid our farewells to Józef and Ewa in Białystok and took the train to Kraków, where Józef had arranged for us to stay in the Academy of Music. The medieval city of Kraków keeps its history alive by the daily performance of trumpet music played from one of the windows of the tallest tower of the Gothic Cathedral of St. Mary. During the 13th and 14th centuries a trumpet player at dawn and at dusk to signal the
opening of the city gates. He also kept watch for fires or enemy invaders and would sound the alarm with a bugle call. Today a short bugle call is played on the hour beginning at 8 am and ending at 11 pm from one of the towers of the cathedral. The plaintive bugle call is a melody that ends abruptly. This live performance is an hourly remembrance and commemoration of a heroic trumpeter who warned the city of invading Tatars in 1240 and who died from the enemy’s arrow while sounding the alarm.

The Old Town of Kraków is filled with sounds, from horse-drawn carriages circling around the historic market place, to a band of accordion players playing Bach’s Toccata in D Minor on the steps of the cathedral. Equally prominent are reminders of the pipe organ, which showed itself to be part of the fabric of life, past and present. These findings—whether in a fresco, a Book of Hours, a sculpture, a choir loft, or a recital hall—were dazzling to the eye and imagination and underscore its importance in providing music that provides solace and lifts the human spirit. I found these images in diverse places, ranging from the National Museum to Wawel Cathedral, from the Jagiellonian University Library to the Academy of Music.

From my bird’s eye view, organ music appears to be alive and well in Kraków. I heard a new organ student practicing in the recital hall in the Academy of Music (see photo 11). This three manual tracker organ (not pictured) contains seven stops (see photo 14.) A positive organ (not pictured) contains seven stops and was 1998 built by Tomasz Fala. The big organ in the rear gallery (see photo 15) dates back to 1908 and has been rebuilt many times. The last general rebuilding took place in 1987–1989 by organbuilder Włodzimierz Truszczyński. Now the organ has mechanical action and 56 stops. For specifications of the three organs, see http://organy.pingwin.waw.pl/index.php?f=kr_mariacki.htm.

Conclusion

The organs and images of organs I saw in Warsaw, Białystok, Biłgoraj, and Kraków represent only a tiny amount of what exists in Poland. I am grateful I had the opportunity to savor the sounds and sights of these instruments, experience such kindness, and witness the appreciation and love for organ music on many faces. I have great admiration for the composers, performers, and audiences who have survived one of the darkest times in history and are dedicated to preserving and building upon their rich tradition of organ music: Exciting new organ repertoire has been composed by contemporary Polish composers, such as Marian Sawa (1937–2005), Tadeusz Paczkowski (1916–1995), Romuald Filarowicz (b. 1930), Henryk Mikolaj Górecki (1933–2010), and Wojciech Kilar (b. 1932). Beautiful new organs are once again being built by Polish builders, including Zych Zakłady, Andrzej Kamiński, and others. The organ music filling the churches and the people who listen signify that in Poland, and especially in Białystok, “the music cannot be stopped” —in fact, like the phoenix, it is soaring.

Marijim Thoene received a Ph.D. in organ performance from the University of Michigan in 1984. She is an active recitalist and director of music at St. John Lutheran Church in Dundee, Michigan. Her two CDs, Mystics and Spirits and Wind Song are available through Raven Recordings. She is a frequent presenter at medical conferences on the topic of the image of the pipe organ in medieval manuscripts.

Photo credit: Marijim Thoene

### Keyboard Specifications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organ Type</th>
<th>Stops</th>
<th>Principal Stops</th>
<th>Pedal Stops</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organ I</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8′, 4′, 2′</td>
<td>8′, 4′, 2′</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organ II</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8′, 4′, 2′</td>
<td>8′, 4′, 2′</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organ III</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8′, 4′, 2′</td>
<td>8′, 4′, 2′</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Pipe Organ Repertoire

The organ repertoire has been composed by contemporary Polish composers, such as Marian Sawa (1937–2005), Tadeusz Paczkowski (1916–1995), Romuald Filarowicz (b. 1930), Henryk Mikolaj Górecki (1933–2010), and Wojciech Kilar (b. 1932). Beautiful new organs are once again being built by Polish builders, including Zych Zakłady, Andrzej Kamiński, and others. The organ music filling the churches and the people who listen signify that in Poland, and especially in Białystok, “the music cannot be stopped” —in fact, like the phoenix, it is soaring.