

Copy (the Music) and Share (the Tape). On the *Institutionalization* of “Piracy” in the Polish People’s Republic

Dariusz BRZOSTEK¹

Abstract: *The article concerns practices related to the so-called the “second circulation” of musical materials in the Polish People’s Republic. This phenomenon is studied in relation to the issues of contemporary economics, technological progress and, above all, issues of social institutionalization. The author considers the problems of reception of popular music in the country behind the Iron Curtain and methods of providing access to various types of recordings and their official and alternative tracks.*

Key-words: *Polish Radio, popular music, Polish People Republic sound storage medium, recordings, copying, piracy, bootleg*

1. Introduction

The title of this paper, *Copy the Music and Share the Tape*, makes perfect sense also if we reverse the word order: copy the tape and share the music, as the essence of the discussed issue lies in the culturally determined tension between access to music (absent from the official circulation) and the value of sound storage medium (record, magnetic tape). This tension was adjusted in the Polish People’s Republic (*Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa*, PRL) by the radio which performed its primary function as a conveyor, enabling making, collecting and distributing music recordings from outside the Eastern Bloc. Polish Radio and the state-owned radio engineering industry in the PRL acted as a peculiar institutional resource for the circulation of music recordings made with disregard of international regulations concerning copyright. The problem of so-called “second circulation” of information and cultural texts in the Polish People’s Republic has inspired numerous research

¹ Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, darek_b@umk.pl

papers comprising monographs (Błazejowska 2010; Sowiński 2011) as well as articles devoted to selected facets of this issue (Czapliński 2007; Olaszek and Wołk 2013). Their authors tend to stress the political dimension and oppositional character of samizdat publications, providing an alternative source of historical and political knowledge, as well as creating Polish identity outside of the official circulation of information dominated by propagandist content. It is somewhat rarer that so-called “third circulation” of culture in the Polish People’s Republic is acknowledged although journalists and social researchers noted its presence and specific character already in the 1980s (Pęczak 1988a; Pęczak 1988b), while the term was first used by Rafał Jesswein in 1985 (Jesswein 1985). “How do they know this song?” – enquires Jesswein during a punk gig in Świnoujście. And he makes a prompt reply:

Punk is a movement independent from anyone or anything, punk is the third circulation of information, the third circulation of culture, aside from the official circulation and political opposition. People bring cassette recorders along to gigs and record the music with a microphone or – if possible – via the sound engineer’s mixing console; cassettes circulate all over the country, endlessly copied and distributed in this community (Jesswein 1985, 37).

It is worth stressing that Jesswein used the third circulation category in the context of a very concrete cultural phenomenon – the punk subculture with its DIY tactics, fanzines and the widespread practice of copying audio cassettes, as well as its defiant attitude, distrustful of and questioning the official circulation of culture, and rather disdained by the democratic opposition gathered around the “second circulation.” However, the “independence” of the punk movement and its subcultural practice of disseminating information and cultural texts, emphasized by Jesswein, was apparent. Aside from having to obtain the permission of political decision-makers to organize major music festivals (Jarocin), the success of Polish promoters of punk culture was contingent on directors of municipal culture centers and schools – who could allow or disallow access to rehearsal rooms and sound systems, the hegemony of the official circulation of music releases, whims of sound engineers who could or could not assent to the request for recording gigs “via the mixing console” and, finally, the tastes of music journalists broadcasting foreign music on Polish Radio to their liking, usually nowhere near punk aesthetics. Notwithstanding, as Jesswein points out, the third circulation was surprisingly effective at operating beyond the system or even against the system: “people are familiar with lyrics which are published exclusively in punk zines, they know

melodies which are never released or played on the radio or television." (Jesswein 1985, 37) As a result, the category of the "third circulation" of cultural texts was indissolubly linked to the domain of counterculture, youth subcultures, the expansion of rock music (punk rock, reggae) and related fanzines². Here too, however, successive researchers concentrate on the defiant character (in political rather than moral terms) of such social phenomena as mass festivals dedicated to so-called New Generation Music or independent and alternative circulation of cassette releases (Głowacki 2010; Głowacki 2014)³. Yet this successful distribution of subcultural content was attainable in Poland at that time because of a practice prior to and far more widespread than punk – with a social network and technological base already at its disposal – the practice of copying and sharing (copied) music supported by official cultural institutions as well as Polish Radio. This issue should be approached with regard to three principal contexts: economic, technological and social, while the conclusions ought to raise some questions related to the anthropology of communication.

2. Circulation of the Recordings in the Light of Polish Economical Situation

The first context to be necessarily taken into account in this discussion is the PRL economy determined by such factors as, for instance, the average monthly income the dynamics of which in the period between 1970 and 1990 was as follows: 1970 – 2,235 PLZ; 1975 – 3,913 PLZ; 1980 – 6,040 PLZ; 1985 – 20,005 PLZ; 1989 – 206,758 PLZ; 1990 – 1,029,637 PLZ (Zakład Ubezpieczeń Społecznych 2015). Another significant factor is gross domestic product (GDP) which, in 1980, amounted to 3,730 USD, while in the Soviet Union to 4,190 USD, and in the Federal Republic of Germany to 13,590 USD. These factors undoubtedly affected consumption of technical products in the PRL; its reliable indicator is the number of cars per 1,000 inhabitants: Poland – 32, Czechoslovakia – 102, FRG – 291 (data for the year 1975: Leszczyński 2013). As the goods in question also comprised imported products, most of which (home electronics, LP records, audio cassettes, etc.) came from outside of the Eastern Bloc, fluctuating exchange rates for USD must also be kept in view: 1972 – 80 PLZ; 1980 – 125 PLZ; 1985 – 632 PLZ; 1989 – 5 400 PLZ; these are

² Linking e.g. the situation on the PRL music market with directives issued by the Culture Department of the Polish United Workers' Party in *Założenia programowe polityki nagraniowej i wydawniczej* [Programmatic premises of recording and releasing policy] dated 1983 (Idzikowska-Czubaj 2012, 7).

³ The specific role of compact cassettes in the communicative circulation in Poland is discussed at length by Andrea F. Bohlman (Bohlman 2017).

naturally exchange rates on so-called “black market” as the official rate – e.g. fixed at 4 PLZ in 1972– had no connection whatsoever with the actual price of commodities imported to Poland (Kochanowski 2010).

Let us now regard these economic facts in relation to the sphere which is particularly vital for every music lover and audiophile – to prices of home electronics and music releases from behind the Iron Curtain available on Polish market. The popular mobile stereo radio cassette recorder RMS-451 manufactured by the Kasprzak Radio Plant, allowing its users to listen to radio stations broadcasting on long (160–280 kHz), medium (550–1600 kHz) or very high frequency (88–108 MHz) waves and above all to record programs (in stereo) directly from the radio, could be purchased for 31,200 PLZ in 1986 – with the average salary of 24,095 PLZ. An object of desire for Polish music lovers, the stereo hi-fi cassette recorder Diora MSH-101 cost 12,600 PLZ in 1980 by the average monthly salary of 6,040 PLZ, while the audiophile Unitra ZM 1009 set (comprising a cassette recorder, an amplifier and a radio receiver) was sold at 88,000 PLZ with the average monthly income of 20,000 PLZ in 1985. It must be stressed that these were official retail prices and a substantial number of radio and television sets unobtainable in shops could be bought at “bargain” prices, which were in fact even higher, on the “black market”⁴. The problem of limited availability and prohibitive prices pertained not only to appliances⁵, but also or, perhaps, first of all to sound storage media and original music releases. Here are some examples. In the 1980s, a new blank audio cassette produced in Poland (Stilon Gorzów Plant) was priced approximately at 300 PLZ, the same kind of cassette made in Japan or Germany (TDK, BASF) approximately at 600 PLZ or 0.90 USD in Pewex stores⁶. Polish artists’ vinyl records released by Polish record labels (e.g. Polskie Nagrania “Muza”, Wifon, Tonpress) costed at that time around 500 PLZ, while prices of foreign albums oscillated from 700 PLZ (Hungarian, Czechoslovakian) to 2,000 PLZ (Western releases) – by the average monthly salary of circa 5,000 PLZ (in the second half of the 1970s). Officially released – under the licence – LP records or compact cassettes by Western

⁴ It is difficult to ascertain the prices of radio equipment in the PRL; when reconstructing the value of particular appliances I consulted chiefly Polish online forums for audiophiles.

⁵ Problems with accessibility, price and the possibility of systematic extension of home sound system were common in socialist states; Leszek Lindner, an employee at the Diora Plant in Dzierżoniów, related to the plant’s management some questions that had arisen during a fair in Leipzig, e.g. connected with “tuner, amplifier, gramophone or cassette decks which could be purchased individually and compiled over a period of time” (Lindner 1975).

⁶ A chain of state-owned Przedsiębiorstwo Eksportu Wewnętrznych stores offering imported goods for dollars.

artists were true rarities in Poland. They were scarcely available and their prices on the "black market" were only slightly lower than those of imported goods. Released in 1985 by Polskie Nagrania "Muza", Klaus Schulze's audio cassette *Dziękuję, Poland* documenting his 1983 Polish tour cost 500 PLZ in the official circulation, but it remained a luxury product, unavailable and illegally copied.

This state of affairs is confirmed by recollections of collectors of official releases (and illegal recordings) with Western popular music, featuring predominantly jazz and rock music. Henryk Palczewski, an independent journalist and animator of Polish musical life in the 1980s, talks about the position of rock music behind the Iron Curtain: "Because of such poor access to this kind of music, it was taken extremely seriously. Restricted availability of all goods increased the significance of culture. Not only musical culture. Despite the fact that records cost almost half of the average salary, they were still bought" (Palczewski 2011, 9). Wojciech Czern, an independent publisher and the founder of OBUH Records (1987), has similar memories: "When I was fourteen or so, I first came to Lublin to a record fair which took place in today's Centrum Kultury in Peowiaków Street (called Pstrowski Street back then to commemorate the outstanding miner). I can still remember the vast number of records but each cost an arm and a leg. I actually looked at each and every one of them and I couldn't afford a single one" (Czern 2012, 5). The prices of Western LPs and their status as luxury products are also recalled by Marcin Borchardt, a music journalist connected with the Third Program of Polish Radio (*Trzeci Program Polskiego Radia*) and a promoter of avant-garde music: "When I was a child, I enjoyed looking at colorful LP covers displayed in the window of a local second-hand shop in Elbląg, they seized my imagination. Each album by Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, Queen, Roxy Music or Black Sabbath, the most popular bands in the early 1980s, had a price more or less equivalent to my father's monthly income" (Borchardt and Brzostek 2016, 88).

3. Circulation of the Recordings and Its Technological Context of Functioning

The next important context is technology, related to the practice of amateur recording of radio programs or copying music tapes or cassettes. It should be stated here that numerous science and popular science books – mostly authored by Bolesław Urbański – were published at that time, dedicated to electroacoustics, techniques of magnetic or digital sound recording as well as operating reel-to-reel tape or cassette recorders. Polish audiophiles and music lovers consulted these books for useful tips on acoustic

adaptation of listening rooms, proper assemblage of an audio recording and playing set (comprising a radio and a recorder), stereo sound recording, control of recorded sound quality, choosing the right type of magnetic tape, maintenance of the recorder, etc. (Urbański 1964; Urbański 1971; Urbański 1985; Urbański 1986; Urbański 1989). The problem music lovers wishing to benefit from magnetic sound recording encountered was undoubtedly the poor accessibility of high quality recorders and – especially – magnetic tape that would be durable and provide a high standard of recording, satisfactory to audiophiles. In the second edition of *Magnetyczny zapis dźwięków i obrazów [Magnetic Sound and Image Recording]*, published in 1971, Bolesław Urbański cites some examples of stereo recorders: professional recorder, studio recorder, Polish MS 172 manufactured by FONIA from 1970, and a popular domestic Czech recorder TESLA B46 which “enables one to record broadcasts from the radio, a record player or a microphone” (Urbański 1971, 238). To complete this set he gives a purely technical description of the Japanese, domestic, stereo four-track recorder AKAI X 150D every phono-amateur dreamed of. Urbański discusses at length (monophonic) cassette recorders using Philips EL 3300 as an example, provides technical specification for compact cassettes (European standard size) and points out: “Cassette recorders are easier to build, cheaper to produce and less complicated to operate than reel-to-reel tape recorders” (Urbański 1971, 211). Indeed, the predominance of reel-to-reel tape recorders manufactured by the Kasprzak Radio Plant: ZRK ZK125 (mono) and ZRK ZK-226 D (stereo), in music lovers’ gear, and later their consecutive versions, suitable for magnetic tapes produced by the Polish Stilton or the East German ORWO in the 1970s was superseded in the 1980s by an expansion and growing popularity of cassette recorders and cassettes as the basic sound storage medium in Poland.

4. Circulation of the Recordings and Its Social Context of Functioning

And lastly, there is the social context shaped to a substantial degree by Polish Radio as a means of providing music lovers with access to music otherwise unavailable in Poland, but also encouraging formation of fan communities sharing recordings. It is worth starting with the observation that two Polish Radio channels (PR2 and PR3, and occasionally PR4) very regularly broadcast more than twenty shows playing mainly popular Western music (American, British, German): *Wieczór płytowy*, *Klub stereo*, *Cały ten rock*, *Kanon muzyki rockowej*, *Katalog nagrań*, *Klasyca syntezatorów*, *Muzyczna poczta UKF*, *Muzyka dla kolekcjonerów nagrań*, *Muzyka młodych*, *Muzyka na syntezatory*, *Muzykobranie*, *Na rockową nutę*, *Niech gra*

muzyka, Nowa płyta, Płyty z gwiazdką, Minimax, Romantycy muzyki rockowej, Słuchajmy razem, Studio nagrań, Studio stereo, Trzy kwadransy jazzu, W tonacji Trójki, Zapraszamy do Trójki. I ought to stress here that I have included in the above list only those programs which routinely played entire records or extensive excerpts from them – splitting track lists to present them in successive shows. Some of these programs offered their listeners the possibility of recording audio material in stereo as suggested by their names (*Klub stereo, Studio stereo*), and some PR2 shows (*Wieczór płytowy*) were normally preceded by a shortened stereo test for them to prepare to record the album to be played. It was also customary for hosts to announce the title of the record to be presented in a week's time as well as its approximate (or exact) playing time, thus allowing all interested to procure an adequately capacious storage medium. Names of Polish Radio hosts and DJs, including Piotr Kaczkowski, Marek Gaszyński, Jerzy Kordowicz, Tomasz Beksiński, Marek Wiernik or Wojciech Mann, were (and still are) well-known among music lovers, with particular persons usually associated with specific genres (jazz, blues, electronic music); amateur radio enthusiasts could easily define their musical preferences by bringing up presenters' tastes and common comments such as "Kaczkowski played this" were perceived as a straightforward recommendation or stylistic classification of a track. It is exactly this guiding function of state radio stations that is the subject of Henryk Palczewski's remark: "Our radios were modelled on Western radios and most radio hosts promoted what they had heard on Western radio" (Palczewski 2011, 9). Marcin Borchardt adopts the same tenor as he recalls:

The radio was a major source of music. In the 1980s, I hugely enjoyed the Third Programme's broadcasts by Tomek Beksiński, Marek Wiernik and Jerzy Kordowicz, but it was the Koszalin-based outsider Przemysław Mroczek's *Rock pod prąd* [*Rock against the Current*] that was a particular favorite of mine. His twenty-minute show was on every second week, and he always played outstanding music" (Borchardt and Brzostek, 2016: 92).

Borchardt goes on to talk about his own career at Polish Radio:

Grzegorz Brzozowicz and Maciej Chmiel asked me to join them at their Sunday show *Dzika rzecz* [*Wild Thing*] on the Third Program. I was free to play whatever pleased me for half an hour. The first song I presented was P. J. Harvey's *Dress* which was played from a cassette as I had recorded the track from John Peel's show. I was a regular visitor at the Third Program for over a year. Brzozowicz,

Chmiel and Filip Łobodziński also invited me to their Saturday night show Radio Clash, which – as far as I can remember – lasted from 11pm to 3am. On my first visit there I devoted most of the time to avant-garde music. I never played entire records, I preferred to present a selection of the most interesting tracks” (Borchard and Brzostek 2016, 92).

The best-known and longest-running show broadcast by Polish Radio is surely *Minimax, czyli minimum słów, maksimum muzyki* [*Minimax, or Minimum of Words, Maximum of Music*], still there to be listened to on the Third Program, the original name of which – *Minimum de bla-bla, maximum de musique* – was coined by its initiator, the French radio correspondent Gabriel Méréfik. It first went on the air on the 28th January 1968, and it was only in September of the same year that the program was taken over by its most famous host, Piotr Kaczkowski, who remains an icon of music journalism on Polish Radio. The program occasionally and significantly changed its name for Broadcast for Music Lovers or My Tape Recorder and it specialized in playing “entire albums” so that they could be recorded on reel-to-reel or cassette tape. The Beatles’ *White Album* was played in this way in December 1968. On the 26th July 1984, the program had its first stereo broadcast, while on 18th December 1986 the first tracks from a CD were played. For several decades, this kind of show remained the main – if not the only – access provider to foreign releases for Polish music lovers who, wishing to compile a collection, could not go abroad or afford to purchase original recordings of Western artists. It seems worth mentioning that popularity of these broadcasts has not ceased which is possibly motivated by nostalgia for the PRL observed in Poland nowadays, or pop-cultural retromania; (Reynolds 2011) there is even a fan site at <http://gembon.rockmetal.art.pl/> offering almost complete playlists presented on Polish Radio along with dates and hosts’ names. This nostalgia is fully intentionally invoked by an advert published by Polish Radio on social media on the 30th December 2016, announcing reactivation of the Second Program show *Wieczór płytowy*, whose initiators, Przemysław Psikuta and Tomasz Szachowski, openly say: “We are going to listen to entire records, from beginning to end” (Polskie Radio 2016).

We have now reached the highly intriguing aspect of the problem in question – the peculiar institutionalization of music piracy in the PRL, an institutionalization to which Polish Radio contributed substantially as a go-between and a medium. Clinton Heylin is right to claim that “Accessibility has always been the key to putting out bootlegs” (Heylin 2003, 34), because it conjoins the collector’s desire (and its market representation – demand) with the possibility of releasing unavailable (as

well as unofficial or outright illegal) recordings independently from the official circulation. Heylin also highlights the encouraging role of the radio whose archives frequently served as a source of bootlegs (Heylin 2003, 34). However, it must be stressed that in Poland there was only faint awareness of what phonographic bootlegging actually meant. One of the first articles in the popular press devoted to this subject was *Bootleg – zło pożądane* [*Bootleg – A Desired Evil*] written by Jerzy Tolak, a record collector, and published in 1985 by the music magazine "Non Stop" (Tolak 1985). It examined the question for the sake of Polish music lovers but it was nevertheless largely incomprehensible in the social context of the time, discussing the practice of illegal releasing of unofficial (gig, session) recordings of artists whose albums were widely available on the market. The problem faced by Polish phono-amateurs was radically different – they were more than willing to pay for official and legal releases of foreign artists, but these were unobtainable on the home market. Surmisedly, it is not by coincidence that Clinton Heylin's compelling monograph on bootlegging also discusses the Polish context, starting from the 1990s when Poland, as well as the other former countries of the Eastern Bloc, found itself in the official international circulation of cultural texts. In those days, piracy – initially still dominated by compact cassettes – took the form of quasi-legal private enterprise, while previously it had been a social network, supported by the institution of Polish Radio.

The involvement of Polish Radio as a state institution in the development of an unofficial circulation of popular music recordings was not the only manifestation of the (un)intended institutional support for the "third circulation of culture" in the PRL. Interesting information regarding this issue can be obtained from the Diara Radio Plant archive in Dzierżoniów, which contains, for instance, business trip reports written by Norbert Bergner, a trade specialist, who visited the International Sound Festival in Paris or the Funkausstellung in West Berlin. Aside from the fundamental concern with sound quality or attractive modern design of radio equipment fabricated in Poland, there is the recurrent theme of Polish manufacturers' commitment to the interconnected "radio-cassette recorder" system and – in the 1980s, following the introduction of compact disc by Philips in 1979 – a sort of disregard for digital sound storage media considered too expensive for Polish buyers used to copying music. This amply demonstrates that Polish radio engineering industry considered not only the law of markets (demand/supply), but also the preferred way of building up a collection and distributing music or – at that time – recording radio broadcasts and copying audio cassettes with foreign music. Hence the privileged position (over the technological marvels of the time – CD player and CD) of

cassette recorder as a medium of recording and copying music (or putting it in an unofficial and inexpensive circulation). Another intriguing manifestation of the institutionalization of those practices are so-called “music clubs” hosted by local culture centres (Domy Kultury), which not only organized record fairs but also had specially adapted “recording studios” for copying original “Western” albums under the pretense of “collective listening” to music. This led to – with intermediating state institutions (radio, culture centers) – the emergence of social networks comprising music collectors who exchanged recordings and cooperated in copying them.

5. Conclusions

It would be interesting to know whether there was a specific model for the development of relationships between fans of popular music in the PRL. I believe that there is a very interesting analogy to be drawn in the context of cooperative networks aimed at making, collecting and distributing music recordings with some observations made by M. C. Heller who wrote about communities of jazz musicians forming in New York lofts in the 1970s. Admitting that this practice was a form of self-organization and mutual assistance triggered by limited access for Afro-American avant-garde musicians to the mainstream of jazz promotion, Heller points out that these artists established communities founded on four basic identity categories: economics, musical practices, neighborhood involvement and racial identity. By collaborating, they were able to organize performances, book venues, make and distribute records and, last but not least, play together (Heller 2017, 110–119). Basing on experiences and activities of Polish music lovers in the 1970s and 80s, we could effectively recreate an analogous principle behind phono-amateur networks enabling them to make, collect and distribute music recordings. For obvious cultural (social and political) reasons, we should of course modify the criteria used by Heller to describe New York jazz communities. Instead of Communities of Pay, Play, Place, and Race (Heller 2017, 110–119), we should talk about Communities of Pay, Copy, Sharing, and Class, as the “third circulation” network was characterized by the following categories: economics; recording/copying practices; networking/sharing; class/political identity. These were communities of people collaborating in the spheres of economics (purchase of expensive original releases), recording practices (coming together to copy music from original sources with high quality audiophile gear), distribution of recordings (sharing records, tapes, cassettes), and social position (people who could not afford

to assemble original releases and sought contact with other music lovers in a similar situation). Examples of such network-based collective activities of Polish music lovers in the 1980s are easy to find. A very popular practice when buying foreign jazz or rock albums involved splitting their cost among several people; this led to common ownership of an LP record which was then copied on tape or cassette, while the "original" was passed to consecutive owners "for a listen", for a specified period of time. Very frequently, owners of different LP records borrowed them from one another "for copying"; cassettes with copied music were also exchanged – for this purpose the copying person often copied music from an original medium without having an interest in this particular genre but intending to exchange it with someone who wanted to have it. In practice, this meant that all accessible original releases were copied as goods for exchange. And finally, a very common form of networking consisted in compiling the necessary audio recording equipment where specific items had different owners, e.g. gramophone or hi-fi cassette recorder, amplifier or stereo AV receiver, etc.

An unintended effect of those practices was the formation – in the 1970s – of a social and technological base for later subcultural (the expanse of punk scene) and counter-cultural phenomena (the "third circulation" at the intersection of youth subcultures and democratic opposition). The spectacular success of audio cassette exchange as well as distribution of officially unavailable recordings (e.g. amateur recordings of gigs by censored punk groups) was a consequence of piracy and samizdat (or DIY) activities previously stimulated by the state, aimed at ensuring accessibility of Western music, the determining factor in the development of illegal releases according to Clinton Heylin. It may be, however, that this generational experience also produced delayed effects, providing the foundation for a vernacular "copy and share" culture, successfully transferred to the world of new media, characterized chiefly by unofficial and illegal filesharing on the Internet. Mass protests against the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA), which occurred in Poland in 2012, seem to confirm this intuition. Protesters believed that the agreement was aimed above all against the possibility of downloading audio, video, game or program files free of charge. The situation was somewhat similar to that years ago, which was aptly described by Marcin Borchardt: "The exchange of audio cassettes with copied music in the 1980s was, in principle, no different to filesharing today. The *modus operandi* and the scale of the phenomenon is, of course, incomparable" (Borchardt and Brzostek 2016, 89). And so in 2012, a new generation of Poles growing up in a world of new media technologies and social acceptance of unofficial copying and distributing cultural

texts originating in the days of the PRL, decided to demand preservation of this post-socialist privilege.

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