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The play of nerves. Chopin in the era of mental disorder

ABSTRACT: This article concerns the neurotic image of Chopin that took shape in the 1880s and became popular during the Young Poland period. At that time, features highlighted from earlier descriptions of the composer's character – over-sensitivity, over-sentimentality, excessive delicacy, emotional instability and inner complexity – were most spectacularly portrayed in the works of painters and sculptors such as Władysław Podkowiński, Wojciech Weiss, Bolesław Biegas and the designer of the monument in the Łazienki Royal Baths Park in Warsaw – Waclaw Szymanowski. Critics and writers also helped to form the new portrait of the composer: Stanisław Przybyszewski, Cezary Jellenta, Waclaw Nałkowski and Antoni Potocki. Their utterances allow us to grasp the dependency of the new picture on the theory of neuroses, advanced in 1881 by George Miller Beard and then developed and popularised during the last quarter of the nineteenth century by Richard Krafft-Ebing and Paolo Mantegazza, among others. Nervousness was considered to be the dominated feature of modern civilisation. These concepts were also influential in music criticism. Representatives of nervousness in music proved to be the Richards – Wagner and Strauss – and also Juliusz Zarębski and Ignacy Jan Paderewski. The latter, in a speech from 1911, depicted Chopin implicitly in terms of nervousness, which was also becoming a feature of the Polish national character. However, theories of neuroses were applied first and foremost to the individual psyche. The fundamental inner conflict of modern man, exposed to a surfeit of external stimuli, supposedly arose between the over-developed brain and the rest of the nervous system, as the centre of feelings and will. And it was the paresis of emotions and volition that brought a growth in the role of music, which, depending on a particular author's assessment, either was itself the result and expression of nervous disturbance and contributed to the further deepening of the process of destruction (the stance of Antoni Sygietyński) or else filled the space left by subordinated emotions and enabled them to rebuild (the opinion of the novelist Eliza Orzeszkowa). The view of Chopin as a eulogist of new sensitivity was made manifest in Maurice Rollinat's volume of poetry *Les Nervoses*, which caused quite a stir in the mid 1880s, and it was represented in Poland by Zenon Przesmycki's *Życie*, and a philosophical treatise by Jean-Marie Guyau published in that periodical in 1887.

KEYWORDS: Young Poland, Fryderyk Chopin, modernism, nervousness, scientism, theory of individual genius

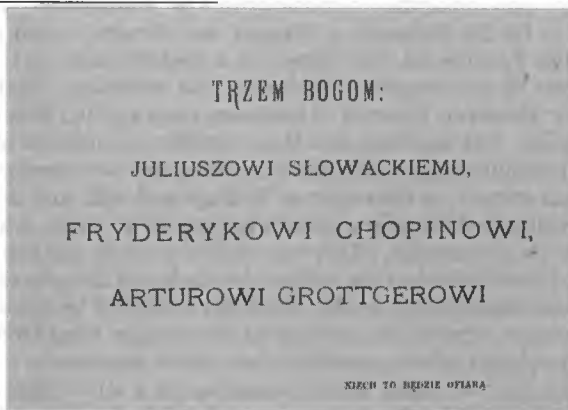
Published in 1889, *Poezje* [Verses] by Waclaw Rolicz-Lieder was preceded by an inscription so stupendous that it might just as well refer not only to the volume, but also to the whole forthcoming epoch:

To the three gods:
 Juliusz Słowacki,
 Fryderyk Chopin,
 Artur Grottger
 Let this be an offering.¹

From Rolicz-Lieder's offering also rises the tobacco smoke of Persian nargiles on

An evening so tedious! One of those evenings
 When one melts in longing² –

– This smoke hides the image of a sophisticated worshipper, who also drew on the heritage of the great ones for the exotic and egotistic threads developed more consistently in the volumes which followed. However, except for Juliusz Słowacki, who was mentioned a number of times by name, the three masters – of word, sound, and patriotic painting – were not directly referred to either in the early or in the later poems of Rolicz-Lieder, even though his literary output, and that of his contemporaries, was under the patronage of the three. Throughout the beginning of the new era, they were like



¹ Waclaw Rolicz-Lieder, *Poezje* [Verses] (Kraków, 1899), dedicatory page. Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska rightly called this dedication “emphatic” [Waclaw Rolicz-Lieder (Warszawa, 1966), 17] in the volume of Waclaw Rolicz-Lieder poetry that she published [*Poezje wybrane* (Kraków, 2003)]; she quotes it in *Komentarz edytorski* [Editorial commentary], 324-325.

² Rolicz-Lieder, *Poezje wybrane* [Selected verses], 63.

“Wieczór p r z e n d n y ! Jeden z tych wieczorów
 W których się człowiek rozpływa z tęsknoty.”

the elements of the air – imbuing imagination and staying unnoticed for most of the time. And if their ubiquity was realised, it took the form of monuments, which was also how the era worshipped itself, and in this way the great artists acquired its characteristic features.

Being a bard and being hypersensitive which, according to Magdalena Dziadek, who also referred to Irena Poniatowska, were the features ascribed to Chopin, were not mutually exclusive, but, on the contrary, often overlapped, especially at the turn of the century.³ Even Stanisław Tarnowski, a representative of the “bard” approach in the interpretation of the composer’s life and work, did not deny Chopin’s “womanly delicacy of nerves”. On the contrary, he reinforced the belief in the composer’s “extraordinarily intricate psyche, even for the age of intricate psyches”⁴. On the other hand, Bronisław Chlebowski, who emphasised the importance of the earlier sensitivity and later hypersensitivity of the artist, a “singer of the restless and womanly souls”, still asserted Chopin’s significance as the teacher of Polish hearts whom he “introduced to Europe’s spiritual life”⁵. For the artists of Young Poland, Stanisław Przybyszewski, Władysław Podkowiński, Bolesław Biegas, Wojciech Weiss, Cezary Jellenta ... – it had been made easier to associate Chopin with neurasthenia. With the twentieth century getting closer, such associations were growing stronger. Jan Kleczyński, who in 1879 fought against the notion of the hypersensitivity of the brilliant pianist, in 1900 could only disapprove of the stereotype. Averse to Waław Szymanowski’s work before it even came to adorn the Łazienki Park in Warsaw, Kleczyński accused it of using a scheme of “a mawkishly conceived head listening to the wind in some neurasthenic rapture”⁶. In the same jubilee year, in his “speech

³ Using Irena Poniatowska’s assumptions, especially about Franz Liszt’s role as the creator of the model of reception that emphasises features such as: “morbidly, femininity, ‘sorrow’”. See Poniatowska, ‘Chopin-Liszt. Uwagi o środkach wirtuozowskich i wzajemnych relacjach obu artystów’ [Chopin-Liszt. Comments on virtuoso means of expression and the relationship between the two artists] in *Historia i interpretacja muzyki* [The history and interpretation of music] (Kraków, 1993), 124. Magdalena Dziadek talks about two opposite models of personality. It was hard to avoid this mixture of contradictions in the company of Juliusz Słowacki. Magdalena Dziadek, *Polska krytyka muzyczna w latach 1890-1914. Koncepcje i zagadnienia* [Polish musical critique in years 1890-1914. Conceptions and issues] (Katowice, 2002).

⁴ Stanisław Tarnowski, *Chopin i Grottger. Dwa szkice* [Chopin and Grottger. Two sketches] (Kraków, 1892), 11. See also Mieczysław Tomaszewski, *Chopin. Człowiek, dzieło, rezonans* [Chopin. Man, work, resonance] (Poznań, 1998), ch. 1 ‘Struktura osobowości’ [The structure of personality].

⁵ Bronisław Chlebowski, ‘Fryderyk Chopin’, *Ateneum* 7 (1891), 21, 22.

⁶ Jan Kleczyński, ‘Konkurs na pomnik Chopina’ [Competition for Chopin’s monument], *Sfinks* 5-6 (1909). Quot. for Dorota Kielak, *Figury kryzysu. Rzeźba w młodopolskiej powieści o artyście* [The figures of crisis. Sculpture in the novels about artists in the Young Poland movement] (Warszawa, 2007), 126.

made during Chopin celebrations in the concert hall”, Ignacy Jan Paderewski contemplated the relationship between Chopin’s music and the character of the Poles. He stated – using a medical concept - that their common and, at the same time, overriding feature was “an innate national arrhythmia”,

[...] our floating feelings, their infinite expansion, the intensity of their heroism, and the outbursts of madness [...], and this infirmity of doubt, in which thoughts are dark and the will to act dies down.⁷

Emotional lability, oscillating between extremes, giving up easily, weakening of the willpower – these are the features that according to contemporary researchers and soul healers were the evidence of morbid nervousness. It afflicted the whole fellowship, as well as the greatest exponent of its various states. Neurasthenia underwent monumentalisation, found itself on a pedestal.

While writing about Chopin as the exponent of the collective psyche, Cezary Jellenta formulated the following rule:

As in poetry or painting – in music, the style of a great artist is a combination of rhythms, lines, impulses and gestures that summarize and, at the same time, condense in themselves the spirit of the era.⁸

But because the critic did not make a distinction between his own and the composer’s era, he made him the exponent of his own time, the epitome of the power of expression and heroism of art. The article ‘Dzwony Chopina’ [Chopin’s bells], published for the first time in 1905 in the monthly *Ateneum* started with a description of Bolesław Biegas’s sculpture:

The great and enchanting symbol of a musical soul is now finished, and there is no need to search for a new one: the statue of Chopin, made by Biegas, who unexpectedly turns human howls, squeals, the pain of convulsion and paroxysms of despair into marble.

⁷ “[...] falistość naszych uczuć, tę ich rozlewność aż w nieskończoność i to ich do bohaterstwa skupienie, te szalu porwy [...], i tę niemoc zwątpienia, w której i myśl się mroczy i chęć do czynu zamiera.” Ignacy Jan Paderewski, *O Szopenie. Mowa wygłoszona na obchodzie szopenowskim w filharmonii dnia 23 października* [On Chopin. The speech made during the Chopin celebrations at the concert hall on 23 October] (Lviv, 1911), 10, 11. In this way he wanted to give a new meaning to Johann Schucht’s assertion about the musical effects of inconstancy of the “knightly nation” (Irena Poniatowska, ‘Twórczość Chopina w świetle pierwszych monografii. Przyczynek do badań nad recepcją muzyki XIX w.’ [Chopin’s works in the light of the early monographs. A contribution to the music reception studies of the nineteenth century], *Rocznik Chopinowski* [The Chopin annual] 20 (1988), 106-107).

⁸ “Jak w poezji lub malarstwie – tak samo i w muzyce styl wielkiego artysty jest kombinacją rytmów, linii, odruchów i giestów, które streszczają w sobie i zarazem kondensują ducha epoki.” Cezary Jellenta, *Grający szczyt. Studia syntetyczno-krytyczne* [The musical peak. Synthetic-critical studies] (Kraków, 1912), 83.

There, in that group, by the bas-relieved piano, Chopin sits and plays, but his fingers do not touch the keys, but – other fingers, human fingers, fingers belonging to a host of hands and forming a series like the keys of a keyboard. On this rough, twitching and throbbing, living keyboard the master plays [...] plays directly on the people, [...] he does not pervade them [...] with the instrument – but instantly strikes them and smites them, he pours his musical emotional fluid into their hearts not through the piano strings, but through the chords of their bodies, through their fingers and hands.⁹

In Biegas's piece, known as *Marsz żałobny* [Funeral march], *Marsz żałobny Chopina* [Chopin's funeral march], or simply *Chopin*, and in Jellenta's interpretation, one can find a perceptible example of Young Poland's belief in the "indissoluble interfacing" of a work and an author¹⁰, and in consequence, also the belief in the bonding between the soul of the creator with the soul of his listener, spectator, or reader. One might say – belief in direct inter-soul communication, but with one sceptical reservation, that the communication is not a supernatural phenomenon, but happens as a result of psychical hyperesthesia, as a result of the sharpening of senses beyond the senses.

Jellenta's conception, which in 1897 gained the name "intensivism", says that art should bear witness to the whole inconceivable "confusion of impressions" with the utmost intensity, to create "a true echo of a shattered heart", and "turn every feeling convulsing the human soul into a hurricane"¹¹. It should speak the basic language, the language of the elements.

According to the critic, an excellent example of a work inspired by honesty was *Marsz pogrzebowy* [Funeral march] by Władysław Podkowiński, an artist with "oversensitive nerves"¹². The painting was directed – just like the earlier and far more famous, but in Jellenta's view poorer *Szał* [Madness] – to those whose nerves allow them to experience new impressions, those whose nerves are not "too dull"; to the "nerved ones" – to use the expression borrowed from

⁹ "Już jest gotowe wielkie i czarowne usymbolizowanie duszy muzycznej i szukać nowego nie trzeba: pomnik Chopina dłuta Biegasa, tego niespodziewanego przekuwacza w marmur – ludzkich wyć, skowytów, konwulsyj bólu i paroksyzmów rozpaczy.

Tam, w tej grupie, Chopin siedzi przy fortepianie płaskorzeźbionym i gra, ale palcami nie dotyka klawiszy, lecz – także palców, palców ludzkich, uszeregowanych na podobieństwo klawiszy w całą klawiaturę i należących do mnóstwa rąk. Na tej żywej, nierównej, drgającej i pulsującej klawiaturze gra mistrz [...] gra na ludziach wprost, bezpośrednio, [...] nie przenika w nich [...] za pośrednictwem instrumentu – lecz od razu uderza ich i poraża, przelewa swój fluid muzyczno-wzruszenny w ich serce nie przez struny fortepianu, lecz po strunach ich własnych ciał – po ich palcach i rękach." Ibid., 68.

¹⁰ Michał Głowiński, *Ekspresja i empatia. Studia o młodopolskiej krytyce literackiej* [Expression and empathy. Studies on Young Poland's literary critique] (Kraków, 1997), 28.

¹¹ Cezary Jellenta, *Galeria ostatnich dni. Wizerunki, rozbiory, pomysły* [The gallery of the last days. Images, analysis, ideas] (Kraków, 1897), 309, 311.

¹² Ibid., 266.

Wacław Nałkowski, Jellenta's supporter in his critical campaign, and co-author of the loud *Forpoczty* – and not the “nerveless crowd”.

Of course, Chopin was considered by Jellenta to be the teacher of the language of feelings. But in fact, the apologia of passion and powerful experiences – transposed from music to painting and from lyrics to the “tragedy of despair's madness”¹³ – has incomparably less in common with the art of the author of *Le Marche funèbre* than with the works of the artists from the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, primarily the most widely known and the most influential artistic vision of Stanisław Przybyszewski.

Jellenta came to his conception of art in his own way, and he disagreed with Przybyszewski on many occasions. However, as noted by Tomasz Lewandowski, both of them assigned priority to intuition in experiencing and expression in the creative act, and held in the greatest esteem any artist who had insight into “the extraordinary inner states of a human being and hyperbolized the content presented in a work”¹⁴.

According to a well-known interpretation of the personality and creation of Chopin – the treatise *Zur Psychologie des Individuums* from the year 1892 – the oversensitivity of the composer is imparted to the listener; and as a result their nervous systems seem to be entwined. According to Przybyszewski, the musician:

Gifted with nerves, whose sensibility was so delicate that to the tiniest impression they responded with a volcanic explosion, nerves subtle like tentacles that can feel where the human feeling ability ends, bewitched every emotion that had not even yet entered his consciousness into tones.¹⁵

These sentences, depicting the relationship between the refining of the nerves and music, must have had a special meaning for the writer, as, after seven years, he transferred them *In extenso* to the “poem-essay”¹⁶ ‘Ku czci mistrza’ [In homage to the master], printed in 1899 in *Życie* [Life] and included one year later in the volume *Na drogach duszy* [On the soul's paths] under the title ‘Chopin. Impromptu’.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 311.

¹⁴ Tomasz Lewandowski, *Cezary Jellenta – estetyk i krytyk. Działalność w latach 1880-1914* [Cezary Jellenta – aesthete and critic. His pursuits in the years 1880-1914] (Wrocław, 1975), 177.

¹⁵ “Obdarzony nerwami, których czułość była tak nadmiernie wydélikacona, że najdrobniejsze wrażenie odpowiadały wulkanicznym wybuchem, nerwami subtelnymi jak macki, które tam wyczuwają, gdzie już się kończy zwykła ludzka możność odczuwania, zaczarowywał każde uczucie, co jeszcze progu świadomości nie przekroczyło, w tony.” Stanisław Przybyszewski, *Z psychologii jednostki twórczej* [On the psychology of the creative individual], in *Wybór pism* [Selected writings], compiled by Roman Taborski (Wrocław, 1965), 15-19.

¹⁶ Expression by Tomasz Lewandowski. Lewandowski, *Cezary Jellenta*, 177.

Przybyszewski did that in spite of his decision not to give a scientific explanation for the phenomenon of human genius or to impress with scientific language.¹⁷ In his discourse upon “the psychology of the creative individual”, Chopin is an emissary of evolution, “determines [...] *par préférence* the kenogenetic stage of progress, the newly emerging outline of human spiritual physiognomy, pioneered in the human brain”¹⁸.

Admittedly, Przybyszewski summoned Ernest Haeckel’s biological hypotheses, but at the same time he doubted that the Chopin phenomenon could be fully explained by the empirical sciences, or even by using the “double electricity of molecules hypotheses”, or “theory of atoms with electrolytic properties”; the truth is, he did take quite a few liberties with scientific theories.¹⁹ A true creative artist, an All-being holding divine power, could no longer depend on inborn determinants. As such, he also required a different language, independent of ordinary rules. That is why this portrait of Chopin was placed in a cosmic scenery, and the intensity of lyricism in Przybyszewski’s image of the genius is marked by features of art that is purely expressionistic. The inspiration for this new depiction was provided by Wojciech Weiss’s sketch reproduced in the volume *Na drogach duszy* [On the soul’s paths] just before a piece on Chopin.²⁰ However, it could be said that this inspiration was not new, because what can be heard in the new vision is that language of the elements which Przybyszewski released through his psychological sketches about artists, including the review of the Edvard Munch exhibition in Berlin – that “naturalist of spiritual phenomena *par excellence*”²¹, who with his paintbrush “turns every vibration in the highest ecstasy of the pain of bare nerves into a corresponding colorful impression”²².

¹⁷ Józef Opalski’s comment on the change of the dominant in Przybyszewski’s articles, ‘Fryderyk Chopin. Dzieje recepcji literackiej’ [Fryderyk Chopin. The history of the literary reception], in *Chopin i Szymanowski w literaturze dwudziestolecia międzywojennego* [Chopin and Szymanowski in the literature of the interwar period] (Kraków, 1980), 99-106.

¹⁸ “oznacza [...] *par préférence* kenogenetyczny stopień rozwoju, nowo wynurzające się rysy duchowej fizjonomii człowieka, które uitorowane zostały w ludzkim mózgu.” Przybyszewski, *Z psychologii jednostki twórczej*, 16.

¹⁹ Some of the scientific assertions, eg. “the double electricity of the molecules hypothesis”, referred to by Przybyszewski, was the product of his own invention. Editor’s note to *ibid.*, 18.

²⁰ Stanisław Przybyszewski, *Na drogach duszy* [On the soul’s paths], 87; see also Lewandowski, *Cezary Jellenta*, 177.

²¹ Stanisław Przybyszewski, *Psychiczny naturalizm. (O twórczości Edvarda Muncha)* [Psychical naturalism. (On the works of Edvard Munch)], in *Synagoga szatana i inne eseje* [Satan’s synagogue and other essays], selection, introduction and translation from German by Gabriela Matuszek (Kraków, 1993), 99.

²² *Ibid.*, 98.

In his ecstatic portraits of Chopin: in the sketch mentioned earlier, in the vignette of Cracovian *Życie*, or in the oil painting, today known only from colourless reproductions, Weiss brought out “the idea of motion” – through multiplying the image of hands over a keyboard that is invisible or “hidden beyond the composition”²³. Wiesław Juszcak denoted the source of this idea precisely in the following fragment of Przybyszewski’s discourse upon creative individuals:

If one considers man in his eternal, unbroken mobility, if one considers the successive freezing and enlivening of the outline of his face, the shadow and light playing on it, constantly flashing back and forth, invisible for the man who is unaware of this play set in motion by an invisible hand, then one comes closer to the thought of music coming from a similar source, being a mysterious equivalent to the continual inflow and outflow in our nerves, [...] as a result of fibres moving with no parallel spiritual process.²⁴

Thus the lines swelling on Weiss’s drawing are not only – as Przybyszewski says in his extensive interpretation – “lines, in which the soul was to develop”²⁵, reaching for all the signs of life, but also – the writer did not leave out physiological references – “the trembling nervousness of oversensitive people”, so to speak, neural fibres released from their anatomic plexus. Indeed, they are not exposed anymore and are placed in the background, but they are responsible for the “eternal inflow and outflow of morbid emotionality, the eternal dissatisfaction and fatigue of excessive delicacy”²⁶.

Antoni Potocki also noted the role of the human body as a screen reflecting neural processes, when he wrote in 1900 about Rodin’s sculptures, presented in a separate pavillion at the Paris exhibition. In his reflections, realistic aesthetics linked with the classical one by the common denominator of mimetism, is replaced by scientifically supported modernistic aesthetics:

There appears, forged in stone, not a human-gymnast, not a human-Apollo, but a human-human. The exquisite play of muscles is replaced by the game of nerves. The model disappeared, and the powerful soul of the artist has emerged, the soul

²³ Wiesław Juszcak, *Młody Weiss* [Young Weiss] (Warszawa, 1979), 70.

²⁴ “Jeśli się popatrzy na człowieka w jego wiecznej, nieprzerwanej ruchliwości, jeśli się rozważy kolejne zastyganie i ożywianie się jego rysów twarzy, igrające na niej cienie i światła, przemykające ustawicznie tam i z powrotem, chociaż człowiek nic o tej grze, niewidoczną ręką w ruch wprawianej, nie wie, wtenczas bliską staje się myśl o podobnym pochodzeniu również muzyki, będącej tajemniczym odpowiednikiem ustawicznego przyływu i odpływu w naszych nerwach, [...] wynikiem włókien ruchomych bez wtóru jakiegokolwiek równoległego procesu duchowego.” Przybyszewski, *Z psychologii jednostki twórczej*, 19-20.

²⁵ Przybyszewski, *Na drogach duszy*, 92.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

of a man looking with “the eyes of his soul” at as many human beings, as the Greek saw “divine outlines”.²⁷

In Biegas’s sculpture, Jellenta saw an incarnation of the same idea that four centuries earlier was depicted by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, yet he explained it in a quite peculiar way. There also

[...] the Creator’s breath came directly into the created [...] as though by the shortest route that electric current chooses, or like a lightning crossing from one cloud to another.²⁸

In this way, in *Dzwony Chopina* [Chopin’s bells], Buonarrotti’s vision was associated with biological phenomena, discovered two hundred years later by his compatriot Luigi Galvani, and described in the theoretical language of physics for the first time by the Englishman Michael Faraday in the 1830s. How did that association appear in Jellenta’s mind? Was it not from the same source as Antoni Lange’s, who already in 1887 presented Charles Baudelaire to Polish readers as the incarnation of the “Wertherian spirit extended to the extreme, the spirit of melancholic analysis turning into a morbid neurosis”²⁹. Lange explained the appearance of this spirit in the capital of the hurried European civilisation in these terms:

The meeting of this deep and sensitive soul with its spoiled and restless era – developed the author’s precognitive abilities – and developed his capability for drinking poisons. Also the neural system, developed in this way, subtly felt some of the quiverings of its era and almost became its conductor.³⁰

Lange, a true child of his era, used the language full of the terminology of pure sciences that in the nineteenth century were constantly being enriched by new knowledge in different areas of study, including the human interior. It

²⁷ “Przed oczyma obnaża się z kamienia nie człowiek-gimnasta, nie człowiek-Apollo, lecz człowiek-człowiek. Na miejscu przepięknej gry mięśniów wystąpiła na plan pierwszy gra nerwów. Model zniknął, ujawniła się potężna dusza twórcy, dusza człowieka widzącego ‘przed oczyma duszy’ tyle ludzkich istnień, co Grek widział – ‘boskich kształtów’.” Antoni Potocki, ‘Sztuka na wystawie paryskiej’ [Art at the Paris exhibition], *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* [Illustrated Weekly] 34 (1900); I took note of this statement thanks to Dorota Kielak’s discourse, *Figury kryzysu* [The figures of crisis], 107/108.

²⁸ “tchnienie Stwórcy przeszło w stworzonego wprost [...] jakby po najkrótszej linii, którą sobie wybiera elektryczny prąd, jak błyskawica przerzuca się z chmury w chmurę.” Cezary Jellenta, ‘Dzwony Chopina’ [Chopin’s bells], in Jellenta, *Grający szczyt*, 69.

²⁹ Antoni Lange, *Studia z literatury francuskiej* [Studies in French literature] (Lviv, 1897), 3.

³⁰ “Zetknięcie się tej duszy głębokiej i wrażliwej ze swą epoką nerwową i zepsutą – rozwinęło wróżebność autora – i zaostryło jego zdolność do picia trucizn. Rozwijany też w tym kierunku system nerwowy odczuwał subtelnie pewne drgnienia swej epoki i stał się niemal ich przewodnikiem elektrycznym.” *Ibid.*, 4-5.

became the subject of study of branches of science that were new, or were gaining a new methodological base, such as neurology, psychology and psychiatry.

The Orgelbrand Encyclopedia in the volume from 1865 did not as yet include the entry “neurosis”, but only timidly presented the general idea of “neuropathology”, which referred to the “pathological system, according to which all illnesses come from a morbid condition of the nerves. This science never developed sufficiently to provide a basis for establishing a school of neuropathology”³¹.

The situation was similar in Italy, as was noted with regret by one of the greatest promoters of “neurosis” theories in Europe – Paolo Mantegazza, a professor at Florence University. Author of many scientific and popular scientific works about neuroses, and even a novel *Chora miłość. Romans higieniczny* [Sick love. A hygienic romance], together with a Viennese neurologist, psychiatrist and sexologist Richard Krafft Ebing, he came up with the definition of the “nervous century”, used more and more generally from the mid-eighties in reference to the fading nineteenth century.³² The latter published the work *Über gesunde und kranke Nerven* in 1885, translated into Polish one year later. In 1887, Mantegazza published the highly journalistic *Wiek nerwowy* [The nervous age] (*Il secolo nevrosico*; Polish translation came out around 1890); the first part of a trilogy supplemented by volumes about *Wiek sceptycyzmu* [The age of skepticism] and *Wiek obłudy* [The age of hypocrisy]. Nevertheless, priority in describing neurotic illnesses, and claiming to establish their dependence on the condition of highly organised communities, belongs to a New Yorker, George Miller Beard, who introduced the term neurasthenia (1869) and wrote the discourse *American Nervousness, with its Causes and Consequences* (1881), which had a high degree of resonance in Europe and gave American features to the continental nervousness. It was acknowledged to be a result of processes happening most violently among the citizens of the United States, and somewhat more slowly in “all the civilised nations”³³ – the result of the violent expansion of industrial civilisation and a derivative of democratization in all aspects of life. Research on neuroses was influenced by this dynamics and sped up enormously during the last twenty five years of the nineteenth century. Meanwhile, the assertions of Krafft-

³¹ Samuel Orgelbrand, *Encyklopedia Powszechna* [Orgelbrand’s Encyclopedia], xix (Warszawa, 1865), 296.

³² Mantegazza also suggested that all of the discomforts caused by neurosis should be called neurosis discomforts (*Wiek nerwowy* [The nervous age] was translated from Italian by Jakub Wollerner (Złoczów [ca 1890]), 4), but the term did not come into usage either for describing “the state of the body”, or the state of the era.

³³ *Ibid.*, 6.

Ebing, Mantegazza and other scientists and scientific writers³⁴, who were becoming more and more popular, shaped the consciousness of Europeans, especially the young. They started to recognize the nervous types in each other, while in themselves they searched for features of neurasthenics, victims of an egalitarian, over-civilised society. In this way, a certain characteristic of the modern mentality came to be established: a highly critical attitude to collective, social life is combined with an introspective, understanding and even lenient view of the interior of the neurotic individual.

Paradoxically, the reductive view of human psychical structure and social interactions led to the revelation of the boundless internal complexity of human beings. However, simplifying the sophisticated neuroses syndrome to one issue, one could say that the cause of every neurotic disorder – as it was believed at that time – is a disturbance of the balance between the brain and “the lower nerve centres”, between the realm of thoughts and the domain of feelings and the will. This disproportion is most apparent in the constitutions of most developed individuals, exposed more than most to the growing number of stimuli coming from the outside. “A creative individual – as Przybyszewski explained in his introduction to the characterisations of Chopin and Nietzsche – has a neurulation extraordinarily variable, and because of that it knows no boundaries when it comes to feelings”³⁵.

The physiological interpretation of the phenomenon had an even simpler, elementary base in the physical law of conservation of energy. In her sketch about Antoni Lange, Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska notes that far-reaching artistic effects were explained on the basis of this law, understood according to the then popular monistic view of the world. Thus it was believed that “nature is the substance from which everything results and to which everything returns, in accordance with the law of conservation of energy”³⁶. From this, Lange, being an oversensitive poet and interpreter of the nature of all being³⁷, drew the conviction that mankind should of necessity return to the state of its original happiness.

Nevertheless, what on the one hand gave hope both to artists and philistines as a diagnosis and a prescription for many of life’s inconveniences – from childhood worries (*Nerwowość u dzieci*³⁸ [Nervousness in children]) to

³⁴ An absorbing summary of these works was presented by Krystyna Kłosińska in her discourse *Powieści o “wieku nerwowym”* [Novels about “the nervous age”] (Katowice, 1988), ch. *Teorie neurozy* [Theories of neurosis].

³⁵ Przybyszewski, *Z psychologii jednostki twórczej*, 8.

³⁶ Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska, *Młodopolskie harmonie i dysonanse* [Harmonies and discords of the Young Poland movement] (Warszawa, 1969), 84.

³⁷ Comp. Przybyszewski, *Na drogach duszy*, 19.

³⁸ Andrew Combe, *Nerwowość u dzieci. Cztery odczyty* [Nervousness in children. Four lectures], tr. Henryk Nusbaum (Warszawa, 1904).

the dilemmas of the financial players (“financial neurosis”³⁹) and the powers that be (*Polityka nerwowa*⁴⁰ [Nervousness in politics]) – on the other hand raised doubts. Therefore, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the 1903 volume of *Wielka Powszechna Encyklopedia Ilustrowana* [The Great universal illustrated encyclopedia] presented the phenomenon differently from its predecessor from forty years earlier. It was described, one might say, from the other end, not focusing on the uncertainty as to the future of these studies, but regarding the results with some caution:

Neurosis – every neural illness, whose anatomic cause has not yet been discovered. The nature of neuroses lies, as most doctors think, in some molecular changes in the central nervous system, inaccessible to anatomic study at present.⁴¹

Adopting a practical attitude, the author of *Zielnik lekarski, czyli opis ziół leczniczych z podaniem ich uprawy i zastosowania* [The medical herbarium, or description of medicinal herbs, their cultivation and use] wondered if indeed “mankind in the nineteenth century, over-emphasising happiness, contributed to the spreading of nervousness”, and worried that:

[...] among the people, the word “nervousness” causes great misery and wanders around like a phantom impossible to avoid. [...] Therefore, dear readers [...], before you pronounce the word “nervousness”, [...] think carefully about what your actual problem is. You will discover then that in fact you are completely healthy.⁴²

³⁹ See Tadeusz Bujnicki, *O “neurozie pieniężnej”* (*Kromnicki i Płoszowski w “Bez dogmatu”*) [On “financial neurosis” (Kromnicki and Płoszowski in “Without a dogma”)], in volume *Pieniądz w literaturze i teatrze* [Money in literature and theatre], ed. Józef Bachórz (Sopot, 2000).

⁴⁰ Jan Ludwik Popławski, ‘Polityka nerwowa’ [Nervousness in politics], *Przegląd Wszechpolski* [All-Poland review] (1897); Mantegazza had already written that “nervous politics is the factor of nervousness”, and parliamentarism is “a substitution of power by critique”; Mantegazza, *Wiek nerwowy* [The nervous age], 82.

⁴¹ “Nerwica (neurosis) każda choroba nerwowa, której podłoża anatomicznego wykryć dotąd nie zdołano, tak bywa nazwana. Istota nerwic polega, jak przypuszcza większość lekarzów współczesnych, na jakichś zmianach cząsteczkowych (molekularnych) w układzie nerwowym, ośrodkowym, dotychczas badaniu anatomicznemu niedostępnym.”

Entry signed with the cryptogram Dr M.B. [Bornstein M.] in volume i, series 2 of the encyclopedia.

⁴² “pomiędzy publicznością słowo ‘nerwowość’ tworzy straszliwe nieszczęście i błąka się wokoło niejako upiór, przed którym ująć niepodobna. [...] Proszę więc łaskawe czytelnicy i czytelników [...], zanim słowo nerwowość wymówią, [...] ażeby się dokładnie namyślili, co im właściwie dolega. Przekonacie się zwykle wtenczas, że istotnie jesteście zupełnie zdrowi.”

Dr. Hromus, *Zielnik lekarski, czyli opis ziół leczniczych z podaniem ich uprawy i zastosowania* [The medical herbarium, or description of medicinal herbs, their cultivation and use] (Chrzanów, no date), 66.

This warning – justified on the one hand, was delusive on the other, because the fundamental factor of neurosis development was the “cerebral” process of intensified auto-analysis, the mechanism of dissection or vivisection, sometimes taken to the lengths of conducting – in the words of Krystyna Kłosińska, an expert on *Powieści o “wieku nerwowym”* [Novels about the “nervous age”] – “a psychological experiment on oneself”⁴³. A grim, meaningful and, for many, attractive example of that was the self-torments of Władysław Podkowiński, who achieved the glory of being a martyr of the new sensitivity, with Chopin as its unsurpassable model.

Following the route marked out by Henryk Markiewicz in his draft *Bezdogmatowcy i melancholicy*⁴⁴ [The doctrine-less and the melancholics], Kłosińska described the “neurotic” trend in Polish prose of the late nineteenth century. The title of her discourse refers not only to those specialist publications, but also to the 1887 novel by Leo Belmont *W wieku nerwowym. Moja spowiedź* [In the nervous age. My confession], advertised as “the first Polish psychological novel”. In the same year *Pamiętnik Daniela* [Daniel’s diary] by Alfred Nossig⁴⁵, was published, followed by *Hrabia August* [Count August] by Aleksander Mańkowski, *Bez dogmatu* [Without dogma] by Henryk Sienkiewicz, *Śmierć* [Death] by Ignacy Dąbrowski, *Fachowiec* [The specialist] by Waclaw Berent, *Nauczycielka* [The teacher] by Tadeusz Miciński, *Melancholicy* [The Melancholics], *Dwa bieguny* [Two poles] and *Ad astra* by Eliza Orzeszkowa and *Emancypantki* [The Suffragettes] by Bolesław Prus in the successive years. The neurotic fascination was also apparent in the first Polish example of reportage, *Pielgrzymka do Jasnej Góry* [Pilgrimage to Jasna Góra] by Władysław Reymont⁴⁶, *Dzienniki* [Journals] by Stefan Żeromski, and also in the poems of Leo Belmont, Antoni Lange, Jan Kasprówic, Zenon Przesmycki, Bogusław Butrymowicz and Józefat Nowiński...

“Neuroses epidemic” (the expression introduced by Teodor Jeske-Choiński) became the subject of numerous analyses and diagnoses and started appearing not only in literary and artistic criticism, but also – as convincingly demonstrated by Magdalena Dziadek – in musical criticism, espe-

⁴³ Kłosińska, *Powieści o “wieku nerwowym”*, 27.

⁴⁴ Henryk Markiewicz, *Bezdogmatowcy i melancholicy* [The doctrine-less and the melancholics], in *W kręgu Żeromskiego. Rozprawy i szkice historycznoliterackie* [In the circle of Żeromski. Historical-literary discourses and sketches] (Warszawa, 1977).

⁴⁵ This prose piece, included in the volume *Poezje* [Verses] (Lviv, 1888), could compete with Belmont’s novel for priority, especially as it belongs not only to the wide trend describing nervousness, but also is a record of internal states in the form of a diary.

⁴⁶ I try to demonstrate this in the article ‘Sceptyk idzie na pielgrzymkę’ [A sceptic goes on a pilgrimage], published in the volume *Chrześcijańskie dziedzictwo duchowe narodów słowiańskich* [Christian spiritual heritage of the Slavic nations], series 2 *Wokół kultur śródziemnomorskich* [Around Mediterranean cultures], i: *Literatura i słowo* [Literature and word], ed. Zofia Abramowicz and Jarosław Ławski (Białystok, 2009).

cially “in the nineties”⁴⁷. Richard Wagner, who “gets on one’s nerves”⁴⁸ like no other, and other composers and performers irritating to the senses, were criticised by: Zygmunt Noskowski, Stanisław Meliński, Ignacy Matuszewski, Kazimierz Danilowicz-Strzelbicki, Czesław Jankowski and Antoni Sygietyński. This last, a miscellaneous critic, writer and pianist, lecturer at the Warsaw conservatoire, expressed the conviction, strange for a professional instrumentalist, that “the dynamic development of the music culture [...] at the close of the nineteenth century is not an optimistic symptom, but – as reported by Dziadek – evidence for the spiritual decline of society, which relieves its psychological anxiety with nerve-irritating, sensorial artistic experiences and hides its lack of direction, uncertainty and lack of ideas under the pretence of artistic fascinations”⁴⁹.

Sygietyński tried to exclude the Romantics, considered by the artists of the late nineteenth century to be allies, comrades and elder brothers in doubt, from among the neurotic suspects. He contrasted the works of Byron, Chopin, Słowacki and Mickiewicz with Przybyszewski’s statements and the creations of the “new art”, “fruit of the loins of neurasthenics, who identify a toothache with the universal pain of mankind”⁵⁰. In *Porachunki* [The accounts], he wrote in an exaggerated, accusatory manner that:

[...] there is more sadness and dreams, pain and happiness, in one of Chopin’s nocturnes than in the whole modern output, which, in spite of its moans and cries and howls would not shed one honest tear, even when squeezed, because contemporary works of art, if these trifles can be called that at all, are conceived in a sick brain, not in a heart dripping with blood.⁵¹

However, Sygietyński did not aim only at opposing the stereotype proposed by the eulogists of melancholy feelings and at reminding readers of the wealth of emotions expressed by Chopin; he also wanted to raise the issue of the authenticity of these feelings, their reliability or – referring to Taine’s aesthetics, valued by Sygietyński particularly highly – their importance.⁵² He

⁴⁷ Dziadek, *Polska krytyka muzyczna*, 252.

⁴⁸ Zygmunt Noskowski, ‘Polihymnia’, *Tygodnik Mód i Powieści* [Weekly Trends and Novels] 43 (1890), 324; quot. for Dziadek, *Polska krytyka muzyczna*, 253.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁵⁰ Antoni Sygietyński, *Porachunki* [The accounts], in *Pisma krytyczno-literackie* [Essays in literary criticism], selection and introduction by Tomasz Weiss (Kraków, 1971), 504.

⁵¹ “[...] w jednym nokturnie Chopina mieści się więcej smutku i marzeń, cierpienia i radości niż w całej produkcji nowoczesnej, z której mimo jęki, szlochania i wycia rozpaczne, gdyby ją ścisnąć mocno, nie pocięłyby może ani jedna łza szczerza, gdyż dzieła dzisiejsze, jeżeli w dodatku drobiazgi dziełami nazywać się godzi, poczęte są w mózgu chorym, nie zaś w sercu krwią ociekającym.” *Ibid.*

⁵² See Jan Detko, Antoni Sygietyński, *Estetyk i krytyk* [Aesthete and critic] (Warszawa, 1971), 256 and the following.

could not accept the different way of understanding feelings, especially the higher ones, which – according to the theorists of neuroses – subordinated to the intellect and constantly analysed or stimulated with continuous external “jolts”, become downgraded to the level of instincts⁵³, and deprived of moral strength, begin to count mainly as stimulants. They become elements of an art which, following in Baudelaire’s footsteps, looks for “new thrills”. Although Sygietyński cannot be regarded as a conservative, he did not want to see the artists he held dear treated with such contempt.

Meanwhile, in 1885, three years after Sygietyński completed his aesthetic studies in Paris, a volume of poems exalting Chopin as a genius of oversensitivity and a source of nervous thrills in the style of Baudelaire, caused a great deal of agitation. It was called *Les Névroses*. The author, Maurice Rollinat, belonged to the group of admirers of *Les Fleurs du mal*, who took particular delight in frenetic motives.⁵⁴ Polish readership could find out about him in two notes, in Miriam’s [Zenon Przesmycki’s pen-name] first two yearbooks of the Warsaw *Życie* [Life], a weekly that not only deserved the title of the herald of the approaching modernism, but also the title of the press prophet of nervousness. In reports from the latest literary output in France, Rollinat was characterised as Baudelaire’s descendant, and a relative of “Edgar Poe and Chopin”. The influence of the Polish composer on the poet’s (and musician’s) imagination was supposed to be the greatest.⁵⁵ Then, writing in his own name, Miriam repeated these poetic-genealogical findings, adding that “not many Frenchmen succeeded in feeling Chopin’s morbid inspirations as he did”⁵⁶; he highlighted the chimerical and delirious character of the poems and – referring to a portrait from the *Neurozy* [Neuroses] frontispiece – the demonic character of their creator.⁵⁷

Jean-Marie Guyau’s sketch *Walka wiedzy ze sztuką. Kwestia estetyczna* [Knowledge against art. The issue of aesthetics], printed by Miriam in issues one to eleven as a discourse supporting the programme of his publication, threw an interesting light on the strange tangle of nerves and music, new sensitivity and chopinism. Guyau, who supported art, was – like the majority of

⁵³ See Kłosińska, *Powieści o “wieku nerwowym”*, 16–18.

⁵⁴ Miriam described them as “poets of corpses and morgues”; Zenon Przesmycki (Miriam), *Wybór pism krytycznych* [A selection of critical writings], edited by Ewa Korzeniewska, i (Warszawa, 1967), 49. The graveyard scenery of their works, their vanitas and perverse motifs, correspond with the last phase of Władysław Podkowiński’s paintings. Rollinat devolved one of his poems to *Marches funèbres* of Beethoven and Chopin; Maurice Rollinat, *Les Névroses* (Paris, 1885), 52.

⁵⁵ ‘Literatura francuska za rok 1886 w świetle własnej krytyki’ [French literature for the year 1886 in the light of its own criticism], *Życie* 6 (1887), 92.

⁵⁶ Zenon Przesmycki (Miriam), ‘Profile poetów francuskich’ [Portraits of French poets], *Życie* 35 (1888), 35.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

neurasthenics of that time – a scientist by education. Having declared that “the most active organ is, and always will be, the human *brain*”, for “it rules over all the powers of the body”⁵⁸ – he stepped into the field of speculations about the effects of the progress of civilisation on anatomy:

According to some anthropologists, a civilised human’s nervous system is 30% more developed than that of a savage. With time, this will grow further at the expense of muscles. One can thus formulate the following physiological law as the rule governing the development of humanity: the nervous system will develop more and more, leaving the body exhausted and only able to nourish itself and to reproduce. If a man built only of nerves and brain could exist and reproduce himself, the human kind would try to achieve that state, realising Diderot’s dream, expressed in *D’Alembert’s dream*.⁵⁹

Further on, he moved on to consider the area of art, particularly music:

The idea of a melody always corresponds to some mental and moral human dispositions, that change with the passing of time. Thus the idea itself will change too, and follow new tracks together with mankind. Some musicians, such as Chopin, Schumann or Berlioz, expressed through sound the feelings belonging to our era and corresponding to the sensitivity of the nervous system, of which Haendel, Bach and Haydn had no idea.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Jean-Marie Guyau, ‘Walka wiedzy ze sztuką. Kwestia estetyczna’ [Knowledge against art. The issue of aesthetics issue], [translation by Zenon Przesmycki], *Życie* 1 (1887), 12; the author of translation established by Grażyna Legutko, *Zenon Przesmycki (Miriam) – propagator literatury europejskiej* [Zenon Przesmycki (Miriam) – promoter of European culture] (Kielce, 2000); his role is interpreted by Małgorzata Okulicz-Kozaryn in the article (soon to appear in print) ‘Filozofia Życia? Miriam jako obrońca poezji w dobie postscjencytycznej’ [*Life’s philosophy? Miriam as a defender of poetry in the post-scientific age*].

⁵⁹ “Według niektórych antropologów system nerwowy człowieka cywilizowanego jest o 30% więcej rozwinięty, jak u dzikich. Z czasem rozmiar ten wzrośnie jeszcze kosztem systemu muskularnego. Można więc – jako regułę rozwoju ludzkości – postawić następujące prawo fizjologiczne: system nerwowy rozwijając się coraz silniej, wycieńczy resztki organizmu, zostawiając mu jedynie siłę odżywiania i reprodukcji. Gdyby człowiek zrodzony z samych nerwów i mózgu, mógł istnieć i odradzać się, rodzaj ludzki dążyłby do osiągnięcia tego stanu, sprawdzając marzenie Diderota wypowiedziane w *Śnie d’Alemberta*.” Guyau, ‘Walka wiedzy ze sztuką’, 28.

⁶⁰ “Idea melodii odpowiada zawsze pewnym umysłowym i moralnym uposobieniom człowieka, które zmieniają się z postępem wieków. I ona więc zmieniać się będzie i na coraz nowe wstępować tory razem z ludzkością. Niektórzy muzycy, jak Chopin, Schumann, Berlioz, wyrazili za pomocą dźwięków uczucia właściwe naszej epoce i odpowiadające wrażliwości systematu nerwowego, o jakiej Haendel, Bach i Haydn nie mieli najmniejszego pojęcia.” *Ibid.*, 29.

However, it is worth remembering that “the feelings of our era” differed significantly from the earlier ones. The representatives of the new sensitivity were thought not to be able to feel at all:

[...] unable to experience ordinary feelings,
They place an inflamed thought on their nerves.⁶¹

Characters in novels about the nervous age struggle with the issue of growing emotionally barren, and the attempts to solve the problem include music, also that of Chopin. Admittedly, in Sienkiewicz’s *Bez dogmatu*, Leon Płoszowski only accidentally contemplates music, or rather the relationship between the understanding of it and experiencing the native landscape, while in Aleksander Mańkowski’s *Hrabia August* the main character simply avoids it and takes a position even more extreme than Sygietyński and says that “a well written nocturne can be damaging, especially if it was written by Chopin or Schumann”. For music is “more harmful than morphine” for our highly nerved body:

It unsettles both body and soul. From a theatre, or a concert-room, everybody comes out damaged.⁶²

But, in the end, it was hard to deny that music had a reviving power. Suffering from severe melancholy, Cezaryna Olszewska, a character from Leo Belmont’s *W wieku nerwowym* [In the nervous age], when she started to feel better, “several times sat at the piano and played Chopin’s mazurkas”⁶³. Music gives a metaphysical comfort, a taste of heaven to the tubercular Józef Rudnicki in Ignacy Dąbrowski’s *Śmierć* [Death], even though he listens to very conventional works. The hero of *Ad astra* pores over Chopin’s compositions and discovers that he can love, discovers his love for a pianist:

This time I did not have to reject cold-fingered analysis; it left of its own accord, and I let myself be filled with the sweet and painful tide of the tones of Chopin’s nocturne. As these tones continued, the tide grew in me, higher and stronger, until it filled me completely and awoke my every nerve, and every particle of my brain, to emotional life.⁶⁴

⁶¹ “[...] do uczuć zwykłych już nie zdolni, Rozpłomienioną myśl kładą na nerwy.” Bogusław Butrymowicz, *Wybrane poezje* [Selected verses], appendix to: *Studia o Bogusławie Butrymowiczu*, introduction, selection and editing Wiktor Czernianin (Wrocław, 2006), 105.

⁶² “Prócz ciała rozstraja duszę. Z teatru albo koncertu każdy wychodzi nadwerężony.” Aleksander Mańkowski, *Hrabia August* [Count August] (Warszawa, 1890), 137.

⁶³ Leo Belmont, *W wieku nerwowym* [In the nervous age] (Warszawa, no date), 82.

⁶⁴ “Tym razem nie potrzebowałem odrzącać od siebie analizy o zimnych palcach; odeszła sama i bezpodzielnie oddałem się tej fali bolesnej i słodkiej, którą wlewały we mnie tony Szopenowskiego nokturnu. W miarę trwania tych tonów wzmagala się we mnie ta fala,

Music filled the space left by emotions, offering a substitute emotional life, but it could also awaken authentic emotions again. Chopin turned out to be even more exquisite.

Translated by Zuzanna Gulczyńska

wzbierała w wysokość i siłę, aż napełniła mię po brzegi i do uczuciowego życia obudziła każdy nerw mój i każdą drobinę mózgu.” Eliza Orzeszkowa, Juliusz Romski [Tadeusz Grabowski], *Ad astra. Dwugłos* [Duet] (Warszawa, 1950), 376.