

A portrait of Peter Jablonski, a man with long dark hair and a beard, wearing a blue suit jacket over a white shirt. He is standing with his arms crossed against a background of vertical red wooden planks.

ONDINE

PETER
JABLONSKI

PLAYS

GRAŻYNA BACEWICZ

Piano Works



GRAŻYNA BACEWICZ

GRAŻYNA BACEWICZ (1909–1969): Piano Works

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6	Etude No. 5: Andante	3:25
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PETER JABLONSKI, piano

Bacewicz: Piano Works

Grażyna Bacewicz (1909–1969) was a formidable woman, a major Polish composer and a versatile musician: a child prodigy violinist, she was also an accomplished pianist. As a composer, she is known for her inventive, complex, and original musical language, and many of her works for violin, both solo and with orchestra, are well known. The same cannot be said about her piano compositions, at least not outside of Poland.

Witold Lutosławski wrote about her:

When I think of Grażyna Bacewicz, I cannot limit myself to her music alone. I was fortunate to belong to that group of people who were bound with her by virtue of professional friendship. Thus I was privileged to know her closely for many years. It allowed me to observe and admire her character first hand – her integrity, honesty, compassion, and her willingness to share and sacrifice for others. This image of her as an artist and human being ought to be an inspiration to the succeeding generations of composers in Poland and throughout the world. (Foreword to Judith Rosen's *Grażyna Bacewicz: Her Life and Works*, 1984)

We are fortunate to have Bacewicz's own depiction of the characteristics for which so many remembered her:

I possess this little unseen engine, and thanks to it I accomplish a task in ten minutes which takes others an hour or more; I normally do not walk but run; I speak fast; even my pulse beats faster than others' and I was born in the seventh month [two months early]... slow and phlegmatic people make me sick. I was born for action, not for empty talk, so I hate any sort of meetings and empty talk. I have always hated any sort of interviews and the same questions repeated by some silly male journalists which run: can a woman be a composer? Can a woman be a full-blooded composer? Should a woman composer get married? Should a woman composer have children? I used to run away from them, but in private I will tell you: a woman endowed with creative powers can be a composer. She can get married, have children and travel extensively all over the world giving concerts. There is only one little essential needed: "*motorek... [little engine]*"—without it don't bother. (Quoted in: B. Maciejewski, *Twelve Polish Composers*, 1976)

During her relatively short life, Bacewicz experienced many hardships that could have brought her down, but adversity only made her stronger. Born into a musical family in Łódź (also the birthplace of Arthur Rubinstein), she was first taught piano and violin by her father, and gave her first concert at the age of seven. Before she turned twelve, she performed a number of violin concerti with a local orchestra, and completed her first composition, *Preludes for Piano*, when she turned thirteen. She went on to study violin, piano, and composition at the Warsaw Conservatory

of Music, where her teachers were Kazimierz Sikorski, Józef Jarzębski and Jan Turczyński, graduating with 1932 with *summa cum laude*. The renowned Polish composer Karol Szymanowski was one of composition professors at the Warsaw Conservatory, on whose advice many young Polish composers went to Paris to study with Nadia Boulanger. Bacewicz received a generous scholarship from Paderewski, which enabled her become Boulanger's student at the Ecole Normale de Musique in Paris, and also to study violin with André Touret and Carl Flesch.

On her return from Paris, she briefly taught violin and music theory at the conservatoire in Łódź, and in 1934, after a hugely successful recital of her major works for violin and piano in Warsaw, was offered the place of concertmaster of the Polish Radio Orchestra. This position proved invaluable to her as a composer, giving her insights into each instrument's possibilities and orchestral composition. She remained in Warsaw for the duration of the Second World War, continuing to compose despite deprivations and a basic need to survive, and giving birth to her only daughter Alina. After the war, she resumed her concert activity, had many of her works performed in Poland and abroad, and in 1949 received the Warsaw Prize for her creative work. She also recorded her Fourth Sonata for violin and piano with her brother Kiejstut.

In 1954, she was involved in a serious car accident, which made her give up her performing career and focus even more on composition—something she intended to do in any case, with the accident precipitating it.

During her career, she received a number of prestigious awards and prizes, was one of the founders of the Warsaw Autumn festival, and sat on

juries of international competitions such as the Wieniawski International Violin Competition in 1957, and the first Tchaikovsky Competition in 1958.

Bacewicz believed that each new work composed today becomes the past tomorrow, and that it is important therefore for composers to move forward and develop creatively. She did not like to explain her own creative process, and held composition as something deeply personal and private, commenting:

Contemporary composers, and at least a considerable number of them [...] explain what system they used, in what way they arrived at something. I do not do that. I think that the matter of the way by which one arrived at something is, for the listeners, unimportant. What matters is the final result, that is the work itself.' (From the interview for Polish Radio given in 1964, published in *Ruch Muzyczny* 33 No. 3, 1989)

As a composer, Bacewicz stands proud among her contemporaries, both in Poland and elsewhere. Sharing not only some aspects of the musical language but also compositional practice with Szymanowski (like him, she could also compose several works at the same time), her music also displays many characteristic traits of the twentieth-century that are to be heard in the writings of Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Bartók, and Lutosławski, among others.

In 1968, while she held the position of the Vice-President of the Polish Composers' Union, she travelled to Armenia to study Armenian music and to rest after a busy year. There, she caught the flu, and on

her arrival to Warsaw took too many antibiotics too quickly in order to recover as fast as possible. Her sudden death was announced on Polish Radio on 17 January 1969 as a loss of Poland's most eminent artists.

Bacewicz's name is indeed honoured and remembered in many ways in her home country. In the Polish city of Bydgoszcz, there is an area around the Pomeranian Philharmonic building called 'the Music District', where 10 statues of composers are placed. Bacewicz is the only female composer there, taking her place alongside Beethoven, Chopin, Paderewski, Karłowicz, Kurpiński, Moniuszko, Szwalbe, Tchaikovsky, and Wieniawski. In Warsaw and Gdańsk, streets are named after her, and in Warsaw, Łódź, Wrocław, and Koszalin music schools and academies bear her name.

This recording covers only eight short years during which the works presented here were composed and brings together, for the first time, both piano sonatas, and both sets of etudes.

Concert Krakowiak (1949)

Dedicated to Stanisław Szpinalski, Paderewski's pupil and a contemporary of Bacewicz, it is a lively work full of character, attitude, and humour. Bacewicz's harmonies here display their characteristic style and pungency, and are built on a range of combinations of intervals of seconds, fourths and fifths. The composer created this work based on motifs of popular *krakowiak* melodies, which undergo various motivic, harmonic and rhythmic transformations, and frequent changes of

minor and major modes. The Krakowiak is a brilliant, scintillating work that shows the extent of the composer's creative ideas and her fresh approach to the popular folk dance.

Ten Concert Etudes (1956–57)

After the premiere on 21 May 1957 in Kraków by Regina Smendzianka these etudes were quickly hailed by Polish critics and writers on music as a direct and natural continuation of the tradition of Chopin and Szymanowski in Poland, and of course Liszt, Debussy, Bartók, and Prokofiev.

Nothing would describe these etudes better than Bacewicz's own explanations, given in a letter to Regina Smendzianka a few months after the premiere, and shortly before the second performance in 1958 at the Warsaw Autumn International Festival of Contemporary Music:

The first is "banged away" (I can't find a better word), but you do understand me, don't you? It is seemingly schoolish and austere, but in order for the accents to be better, I would like this winding ribbon, which these two-bar structures are, e.g. the first two, to be played more gently, in one breath, as it were [...]. The second with quite a lot of verve, especially the chords (e.g. bars 3 and 4). Coda from piano, but with a very large crescendo until the very end. [...] The third one – not too fast! The fourth faster and not *espressivo*. This is very important for me. Simply flying notes and the impression is to be

achieved by moving from register to register, by constant movement against the background of which we find these rhythmic flourishes. The fifth. These three planes are important. The culmination – large crescendo and even a bit of *avvivando*; then we will achieve this *pp*, which should really be marked *pppp*. The sixth at great speed and with a lot of tension. [In] the seventh [...] all these rhythmic pursuits the 9th should be played very precisely rhythmically at the end, for it to develop more. The tenth – at maximum speed. (<https://bacewicz.polic.pl/en/10-concert-etudes-for-piano/>)

Two Etudes on Double Notes (1955)

These two etudes differ in character, but are united in their purpose: perfecting the repetition of double note figures. The first study is slow, with an almost ballade-like character, followed by the energetic etude that demands artistic freedom of interpretation and technical command of the instrument.

Piano Sonata No. 1 (1949)

Sonata No. 1 for solo piano was composed in 1949, and waited over seventy years to be published (edited for PWM by Peter Jablonski in 2021), which means that finally all of the composer's known surviving works for piano are now available to performers.

1949 was a prolific year for Bacewicz—she composed this sonata at the same time as the Concerto for Piano and Orchestra and *Concert*

Krakowiak, for which she received prizes at the Chopin Composition Competition in Warsaw in the same year. She also composed her sonata for violin and piano No. 4, *Polish Capriccio* for solo violin, *Polish Capriccio* for clarinet and piano, *Melody and Capriccio* for violin and piano, Quartet for 4 violins, *Oberek* No. 1 for violin and piano, *Polish Capriccio* for violin and orchestra, and a number of smaller works for other instruments.

Sonata No. 1 is a demanding work cast in four movements (I – *Moderato*; II – *Andante Sostenuto*; III – *Scherzo*; VI – *Finale: Molto Allegro*); it is technically challenging while at the same time asking the performer for nuanced dynamics and sensitive interpretative skills. In addition to her own, characteristic harmonic language, Bacewicz had a very particular approach to rhythm, which is often intricate and complex, but always effective without being pretentious or enforced.

The Sonata is rich in a variety of rhythmic, motivic, and harmonic elements that undergo development and transformation in the *Moderato*, shows the composer's clear and lucid lyrical writing in a songlike, folkloristic melodic style in the *Andante Sostenuto*, and also displays the technical brilliance in *Scherzo* and *Finale*. In this work, Bacewicz's virtuoso writing always remains true to its artistic integrity, and with a strong folkloristic character.

Piano Sonata No. 2 (1953)

Grażyna Bacewicz gave the world premiere of the sonata herself, on 17 December 1953 at a Polish Composers' Union concert in Warsaw.

Together with the *Ten Concert Etudes*, it was the composer's favourite work out of all her compositions for piano.

Bacewicz greatly cared about the form in all her compositions, and perhaps nowhere is it shown better than in this sonata. She wrote to her brother:

I walk quite alone, because I mainly care about the form in my compositions. It is because I believe that if you place things randomly or throw rocks on a pile, that pile will always collapse. So in music there must be rules of construction that will allow the work to stand on its feet. Naturally, the laws need not be old – God forbid. The music may be simpler or more constructed – it's unimportant, it depends on the language of a particular composer – but it must be well constructed.

(Letter to Vytautas Bacevicius, 21 March 1947, <https://polishmusic.usc.edu/research/composers/grazyna-bacewicz/>)

The second sonata is a work in three movements: *Maestoso. Agitato; Largo; Vivo*. The first movement opens with a two-bar introduction, *Maestoso*, leading to the electrifying *Agitato*. This very expressive, fierce, dramatic movement features complex rhythms, parallel sixth chords in the right hand set against sharp ostinato figures in the left, with a sound world that is distinctively twentieth-century, yet harking back to the classical period and juxtapositions of moods and characters.

Largo brings the first moments of calm, beginning with a lucid, dignified chorale. The chorale's melody in the upper voice will appear in various places throughout the movement, which closes with an unexpected fugato section and a return of the slightly modified initial chorale. This movement demands great care in the choice of a tempo that is calm yet has a natural flow.

The third movement *Vivo* is marked *Toccata*, cast in 3/8 time, and in a form of the Polish folk dance *oberek*. Full-blooded abandon, energy, dare, rhythmic vigour may give the listener a glimpse into the composer's own character, so well described by Bacewicz herself: with the little motor constantly running behind her, which allows her to achieve things beyond the conventional.

Both sonatas make an important addition to the twentieth-century piano sonata genre as a whole. Poland produced many artists, writers, and musicians who achieved world-wide recognition, and Bacewicz's versatile musical talent certainly places her alongside her compatriots and contemporaries, and gives these two works their rightful place among major piano sonatas of the century.

Anastasia Belina

Peter Jablonski is an internationally acclaimed Swedish pianist. Discovered by Claudio Abbado and Vladimir Ashkenazy and signed by Decca at the age of 17, he went on to perform, collaborate, and record with over 150 of the world's leading orchestras and conductors, including the Philharmonia, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Leipzig Gewandhaus, Mariinsky, La Scala Philharmonic, Tonhalle Zurich, Orchestre Nationale de France, NHK Tokyo, DSO Berlin, Warsaw Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Philadelphia and Cleveland Orchestras, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Valery Gergiev, Kurt Sanderling, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Riccardo Chailly, Daniele Gatti, and Myung-Whun Chung, to name a few.

He has performed and recorded the complete piano concertos by Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, and Bartók, and all piano sonatas by Prokofiev. Hailed as an 'unconventional virtuoso', during his three-decade-long career he developed a diverse repertoire that includes works by Barber, Gershwin, Szymanowski, Lutosławski, Copland, Stenhammar, and Nielsen, with most recent additions by such Scandinavian and European composers as Valborg Aulin, Elfrida André, Laura Netzel, Johanna Müller-Hermann, and Alexey Stanchinsky.

He worked with composers Witold Lutosławski and Arvo Pärt, and had a number of works composed for, and dedicated to him, including Wojciech Kilar's First Piano Concerto, for which he won the Orpheus world premiere performance award at the Warsaw Autumn Festival. He remains a supporter of today's composers and regularly gives world premieres of new works, together with those that have been neglected by music history.

Jablonski's extensive discography includes recordings on Decca, Deutsche Grammophon, Philips, Altara and Octavia labels, and now Ondine. He has received numerous awards for his recordings, including the Edison award for best concerto recording of Shostakovich's First Piano Concerto, Rachmaninov's Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, and Lutoslawski's Paganini Rhapsody with Ashkenazy and RPO for Decca.

www.peterjablonski.com

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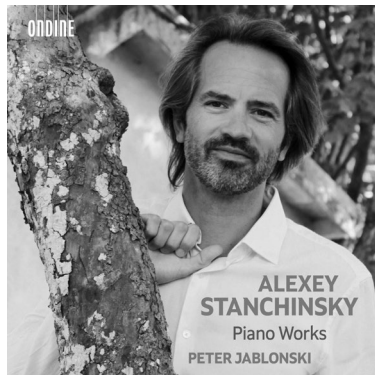
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PETER JABLONSKI, piano



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