

Street Music. A case study of three European cities: Vienna, Warsaw and Wrocław

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Abstract: Street performance has a long history (the blind singers on the Balkan Peninsula, for example) and the history of music contains many articles, books and studies about historical music performances in open-air public places, be it street cries, barrel organ players or broadside ballads singers (Grochowski 2010, Tyllner 2001, Barański 1986 and others). While there exist some case studies about present-day music in open spaces (e.g. Tyllner 2001), busking (street music making) is a field with a lot of space for further research to conduct as it takes a different form in different cities. Differences come from a great variety of factors: weather, legal rules, musical education, character of public space, tourism, cultural and artistic potential of urban areas. The purpose of this case study is to compare these notions in several selected cities.

Keywords: street music; street performance; busker

Introduction. Literature, Sources and the Research.

This article is a part of a larger study about street music in Poland, a research I am conducting for my PhD thesis. In this article I am going to focus on the present-day street music in three different European cities. While some analogies and dissimilarities between those three might seem obvious, others require a more thorough approach. I would like to discuss the relationship of street music and the character of the particular cities, weather and culture life.

While the topic of street music seems to be very popular contemporarily, especially in newspapers, it is astonishing that not every musical encyclopedia has an article about it. Neither *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* nor *Die Musikgeschichte und Gegenwart* has at least one paragraph on this vivid subject. The phrase “street music”, however, can be easily found in two other publications: in *Oesterreichisches Musiklexikon* (2006) and in *The Oxford Companion to Music*, which “is probably the first on its subject that has appeared in any musical work of reference” (1970: 986).

Currently, to the best of my knowledge, several Universities conduct or conducted research on the matters of street music: R. Allgeyer-Kaufman and A. Schmidhofer at the University of Vienna, L. Tyllner at the University of Passau¹⁶. On the other hand, there are still countries, e.g.: Slovakia, in which there is not a single researcher occupied with street music studies.¹⁷

Street Performances and Street Music

In order to venture into the field of street music, one have to define what she understands by "street music". The simplest definition seems to be: “music performed on streets” (Weber 2006: 2325 – 2326). I generally agree with Weber on this point, however, this definition requires some additional restrictions, as not every music which can be heard in public spaces is what I would call street music. E.g.: music from radios or mp3 players (except for the music which is used for accompaniment as a half-playback), religious ceremonies' songs, concerts organized by the offices and institutions for mass audiences - this is not what street music is in my understanding. This is a part of something what Murray Shafer called *Soundscape* (1977: 11-20) or a part of *music in the city* (which stands in opposition to *music of the city*¹⁸). In my opinion they are not included due to its structured top-down nature and source of funding (if we meant also concerts on the stage

16 These studies are already finished and some results were published (Tyllner 2001).

17 Information from private correspondence with Professor Oskar Elsček - Chairman of the Department of Ethnomusicology at the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava. Date: 30.03.13

18 Losiak has written about *music in the city* and *music of the city*. The first one is present in the urban space, however, is not associated with it historically or thematically. In opposition to it is a *music of the city* - historically related to that of the village, eg urban bugle call, the music of church bells, chimes or secular, urban folklore music. (Losiak 2008: 255).

in open public spaces).

For the purpose of this study I define street music as music performed in open and closed, yet public spaces like streets, buses, metro stations or cemeteries. An important factor is that music should be played not just for musicians or their friends, but for “unknown people”, passersby who form an audience during the performance.

Field Work and Methodology

In order to explore the street music in Vienna, Warsaw and Wrocław, I conducted ethnographic two-week long field work in Wrocław (in Autumn 2013) and in Vienna for over three weeks (August 2013). Since 2009 I have been observing the street music phenomenon in Warsaw.

I approached the topic as a participant-observer and collected data through direct interviews, photography and audio recording. In order to depict the nature of busking more thoroughly, I played on streets myself in order to capture the perspective from “the inside”. Therefore, in my study, I use both *etic* and *emic* approaches.

On location

The close distance between the three cities was an important element in the place selection process. Bearing the geographical closeness in mind, finding similarities and differences seemed like a good starting point for underlining non-geographical factors that affect street music.

While Warsaw is the biggest city in Poland (over 1.7 million population – similar to Vienna), Wrocław is the largest city in the western part of the country (0.6 million). Warsaw and Vienna are both capital cities, Wrocław is the capital of the Silesia Region. Each of them has a large area of high cultural and tourist activity, “cultural districts”, in which street music plays an important role.

Each city is located nearby a corresponding river: Vienna by Danube, Warsaw by Wisła and Wrocław by Odra. In Vienna and Warsaw the rivers are farther from the city centre and do not affect the leisure and cultural life that much. Wrocław represents quite a different situation. Odra river bends through the city center, has numerous bridges over it. Odra's banks are inseparable with the city and many places close to the river are important spots for street music, e.g.: Włostowic Boulevard or Ślódowa Island or Tumski Island. This results in water being accompanying Wrocław street music. The sound of the river seems to be very significant for the Wrocław's soundscape¹⁹ (including the poetic whispers of fountain water).

19 Broadcast „Hear the City” <http://www.polskieradio.pl/80/1007/Artykul/968909,Slyszec-miasto-Magda-Skawinska>

On Nationality

In Poland, street players are usually Polish, but a lot of guest musicians from the Eastern Europe seek their fortune here, especially from Ukraine and, less frequently, from Belarus. What is more, Romanian people are also often seen performing street music in Poland. In Vienna people who play on streets are mostly of Slavic origin, in most cases from Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Poland. Obviously, few Austrian performers are present on the streets, too.

An interesting note for me as a researcher is that in Vienna the Polish language appeared to be very helpful in my interviews not only when speaking with Polish people, but also with Slovakian.

Unfortunately, I could not speak with every busker I wished due to a language barrier. In Poland one can encounter numerous street-performing Gypsies, but only those groups which lived many years here speak Polish fluently enough to communicate successfully. Vienna is, again, a very similar situation: a lot of Romanian, Bulgarian and people of Slavic origin play music in open public spaces. In many cases they speak only their mother tongue and know only a few words in other languages. This is, of course, a great obstacle in field work.

Types of Street Musician

There are different types of street musician. The simple typology is: permanent musician (a person who is playing during whole year, making a living out of playing on the streets) and occasional busker, who is playing from time to time (e.g.: during holidays).

The second typology includes three types of musicians. First category is musician-artist, who plays the same way in a concert hall and on the street. Musician-performer is the second category - they use special clothes, animals and other means to draw the attention of the audience. The third category is based on similarities between the street musician profession and this of a beggar; and it is called Musician-*in spe* (latin. "in the future"). There are many (notably Romanian) performers, who cannot actually play their instruments, but they carry them as requisites, props, which are supposed to legitimize their begging and to disguise as musicians, not beggars, for better profit. Sometimes it seems to be a difficult task to distinguish a musician from a beggar. German language contains a very unique word combining the two professions as one: "Bettlermusiker". In Poznań (West Poland) the situation reflects the same tendency of understanding both beggars and street musicians as one group. There are no legislation rules for street musicians, but local government launched an anti-begging project, which differentiates

several beggar categories, one of them being a "street musician with an instrument". Similarities between these two are problematic - both, beggar and musician are active in public space (streets, public transport), both are collecting free tips from passersby almost in the same fashion. What is more, both groups are using clothes and props to draw public attention. Furthermore, beggars, too, can use instruments as accessories. A common practice for both groups is to use an animal, especially dogs, in order to become more appealing, persuasive and effective.

It is quite intriguing, observed from historical perspective, as both beggars and musicians used disguise and accessories for their work in the past centuries. For example in 19th century Krakow beggars used children to draw the people's attention. When it comes to animals, it is important to mention traveling groups of bear-tamers, so called "niedźwiednicy". Niedźwiednik was often portrayed as a Romanian man who used a drum to make a bear dance - bears were trained to perform (Baranowski 1986: 99). Another animal which was broadly used in public performances is the parrot. A parrot or a monkey²⁰ were the most popular, almost iconic companions of barrel piano players. Today, in the open-space of the Polish capital you can still meet a barrel-piano player who is performing with a parrot. As he performs all year long, he uses an artificial one in cold, Winter times (Grygier 2011: 142). While the performative aspects of street musician's work is close to the beggar's methodology, the similarities and differences are a riveting topic yet to be fully explored.

The quality of their music is another factor that can be used to distinguish musicians from beggars. However, evaluation is not always so obvious, and differentiating *true* art, including all of its technical and emotional complexity, from just a mediocre act will always be debatable. This diversity makes the street-scene a very different experience than this of a more formal, structured concert, like the one in philharmony. In an open-public space practically anybody can try their luck and show his artistic skills. Both graduated and self-taught musicians play as street musicians, creating a melting pot of great variety and levels.

Repertoire

Songs and music performed on streets is yet another topic worth looking into. In Poland the Gypsies' repertoire consists of numerous Polish hits from 80' and 90'. In Vienna there is much more classical music performed. What might be quite surprising, in Polish cities and in Vienna the repertoire is almost the same. Certain songs are equally popular among

20 See the pictures in "barrel piano" Arthur W.J.G Ord-Hume, in "Nev Groove Dictionary of Music and Musicians" ed. Stanley Sadie, Volume 2, Massachusetts 2001: 765.

street musicians both in Vienna and in Wrocław, e.g.: "Besame Mucho" composed by Consuelo Velázquez, very often played by Gypsies. Well known hit "Tico-Tico" written by Z. de Abreu, and "Hallelujah" by L. Cohen are also an important part of buskers' repertoire. In Warsaw I have encountered very interesting version of Cohen's "Hallelujah". Tragic plane crash in 2010 year evoked both grief and political controversy (accusations of assassination arose), inspired one of the Warsaw singers, W. Kuszewski, to write a song about it. For the song he used Cohen's melody. This procedure of rewriting songs is referred to as *contrafactum* and was very popular in the past. There were a lot of ephemera publications of songs, where only words were rewritten and the melodies perpetuated. In such cases the printer wrote suggestions one should sing to a particular melody. While the song titles treated about contemporary matters, the melodies were already old and well-known (Grochowski 2010: 53).

When it comes to Polish busker's setlists, composed before the second world war tango "This Last Sunday" and "By The Fireplace" remain extremely popular nowadays and are willingly performed on the streets.

It is significant that the traditional or folk music played on the streets, in most cases, is not related to local tradition. In Vienna, it is common to hear Slovak blind singers who sing Slovaikian traditional music. It is not geographically surprising because of the close distance to Slovakia (it takes only about one hour to travel from Vienna to Bratislava by train). Secondly, Vienna is a city of rich multicultural traditions dating back to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In Poland, Wrocław passersby can often hear a "Scottish" bagpiper, Łukasz, of Polish origin, who plays mostly Scottish marches and evergreen melodies like "Scotland the Brave" or "Amazing Grace", strongly associated with the instrument he carries. Furthermore, Wrocław is a busker's stage for two fiddlers (one of them sings): Joanna and Józef Gruszka. They perform songs from Carpatian Mountains, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and other places. Another example of traditional music not directly related to the city it is performed in is a Russian trio (dulcimer, accordeon, and bass balalaika) playing in Vienna.

Conclusion

This paper gathers information concerning the character of street music in three cities, which are: Vienna, Warsaw and Wrocław; and it is written on the basis of the field-works. I presented some general question, like my own typology of street musician as well some details of the music in three cities mentioned.

Each of the described city has its own unique features of street music. Wrocław street

music is strongly bound to the river Odra, as there are a lot of bridges in the City Center. The Odra does not cut the city in half but it is an integral part of the city. That is why many buskers spots are located close to water. Neither The Danube in Vienna nor The Vistula River in Warsaw make significant, permanent busker spots.

What is significant is that a lot of foreigners is playing on the streets. In Poland there is a lot of Romanian musician, in Austria pretty much people with Slovenian origin. But of course in all three cities one can meet musicians who play on the street very often and are recognizable figures of the city.

The repertoire is an interesting issue. There are some of tunes which are common. This question needs another research in the future, we can now just suppose that the repertuar is in some part the same because of global culture. No doubt, currently we can say, that no street music is completely unique but each of them has a local character. Even if has a lot of common features (e.g. some tunes and songs).

However, each city because of weather, legal rules, musical education, character of public space, tourism, cultural and artistic potential of urban areas has a little beat different street music and buskers. This is what I tried to show on the example of Wrocław, Warsaw and Vienna. I believe that we need more local studies about street music to know better the whole phenomena.

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