

Music Culture of the Podhale Region (Poland) in Ancient and Contemporary Opinions. The Case of Bartek Obrochta

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Abstract: *In the case of the Podhale region (the Polish Tatra mountains) we have historical records describing the musical culture reaching the first half of the nineteenth century. This puts the ethnomusicologist in a convenient situation, allowing the reconstruction of historical processes of changing traditions. From the perspective of contemporary research it is interesting to trace the evolution of opinions about tradition expressed by the representatives of the Podhale communities as well as the intelligentsia visiting the region in crowds. This allows us to show how the opinions were formed and what their vision is for the continuation of tradition. Meanwhile, this tradition, located on the Polish-Slovak border (Orava, Spis, Liptov) and influenced by other social groups (intelligentsia, Jews, Gypsies), has undergone numerous changes in the past and nowadays.*

The person of Bartek Obrochta (1850-1926), the great musical innovator whose legend still forms the social vision of the Podhale musical tradition, will be the case study for discussing the issues described below.

Keywords: *Bartłomiej Obrochta, Podhale region, culture borderland, mythologization, authenticity, tradition, originality, singularity, extraordinariness.*

In the case of Poland, it is rare that studies of the musical culture of a given region would reach back to the beginnings of ethnologic interest and continue without interruption to this very day. Such is the case of the interest in the music of Podhale, the first glimpses of which were already visible at the end of the 18th century. Dynamically developing throughout almost the whole of the 19th century, it reached its peak during the first years of the 20th century and – over the last 25 years – has also drawn the attention of researchers from outside of Europe (Wrazen 1991; Okamoto 2001; Cooley 1998, 2000, 2005). This puts the musicologist in a convenient position, allowing for a diachronic look both at the musical traditions as such, shaped by consecutive generations, and also at their visions shaped by the researchers and promoters. Of course, in such a short presentation it is necessary to limit the field of observation. It seems that a perfect pretext for discussion of the problem defined in such a way may be the person of Bartek Obrochta (1850-1926), a now legendary Podhale fiddler who – as one of the first in the Polish ethnological literature – stood out among the anonymous mass of musicians and singers and additionally made his mark on the tradition of his own region, on professional music and on the works of composers (Stęszewski 1999: 387-394).



Figure 1.: One of the many regional postcards with the image of Bartłomiej (Bartek, Bartuś) Obrochta.

Bartłomiej Obrochta came from Zakopane, where he also learned to play an archaic gusle (Chybiński 1924: 9) with Jędrzej Kowal of Kotelnica, a musician renowned at the time (Długołęcka and Pinkwart 1992: 17). The music that the young Bartek learned there differed considerably from the one found today in Podhale. This is supported by an analysis of a collection of 120 melodies with lyrics and 192 melodies without lyrics, inscribed at that time mainly in the area where Obrochta operated – Zakopane and the Gąsienicowa Valley – by the most distinguished field researcher and documentalist of Polish musical folklore, Oskar Kolberg (Kolberg 1968). Kolberg himself noticed the abundance of a repertoire characteristic of musical regions located more to the north.¹ And such was the music that Bartek Obrochta played at wedding parties when still a teenager, although many ethnomusicologists have doubts about Kolberg’s volume of the Podhale-region (see Cooley 2005:100-102).

¹ “Both in mountain shepherds’ huts and around the villages, songs are heard which are in the most part variants and less interesting than those I know from the lowlands. Even in shepherds’ huts up in the high peaks, where I stayed overnight several times at the highlanders’ bonfires, I never heard anything else” (Kolberg 1857: 204 - own translation).

But at this point it should be added that during the half-century preceding his birth Podhale ceased to be the perimeter of the “cultural end of the world” (Babiński 1996:20-24), as the highlanders’ regions were depicted at the end of the 18th century from the perspective of Warsaw or the local cultural center – Cracow. A good example is a *singspiel* that was important for Poles, “Cud mniemany, czyli Krakowiacy i Górale” [*The Apparent Miracle, or Cracovians and Highlanders*, 1794], where churlish highlanders enter the world of the dominant culture from a periphery of totally marginal importance, bringing with them second-rate “backwater” culture, if not behavior of troublesome and destructive nature for the dominant culture. The aforementioned Oskar Kolberg (who by the way came from Warsaw) was one of the last authors who, despite the accuracy of his musical documentation, saw the culture of the highlanders as the culture of “the end of the world.” Meanwhile, the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth among three European powers and the annexation of the Małopolska region by the Habsburg Empire forced both Warsaw and Cracow to the status of “end of the cultural world” from the perspective of the “new” capital (Vienna!), while Podhale found itself on the communication route connecting previous capitals with the new one, as well as linking Małopolska with Upper Hungary (as the territories of today’s Slovakia were known at that time). Simultaneously, the development of industry encouraged exploration and exploitation of the natural resources of the mountainous regions and the fashion for Swiss landscapes drew throngs of the less worldly and less affluent tourists from the territories of the Grand Duchy of Posen, the Polish Kingdom (Congress Poland) or the Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria. This region has thus become a “passage borderland,” a transit territory and open in the sense of mixing and mingling of various cultures (Babiński 1996:20-24); an area of emergence of a new inter-group identity. Symptomatic is the fact that in the time of Obrochta still more and more operas were composed in Podhale. The substrate of dramatic conflict was the relations between the highlanders and the nobility (i.e., “Halka,” 1858) or highlanders and Gypsies (i.e., “Manru,” 1901). Functioning in such an environment, the generation of Bartłomiej Obrochta, unlike previous generations, showed openness typical for a “passage borderland.”

During one of the wedding parties – as the family tale has it and as was often mentioned by Obrochta himself – when he was only 13 years old, Bartek as a fiddler caught the eye of one of the last Podhale brigands, Wojtek Mateja, who from that moment would take Bartek with him for mountain raids and robberies in Slovak Luptov (Kitkowski 2006:56). Obrochta himself developed a taste for these trips and for eight years spent almost all his time in the territory of today’s Slovakia and Hungary, where he played, as his daughter would describe, with Romani and other musicians (Dańko 2006). The trips of Podhale highlanders to the Hungarian side for work were popular in those times and many of them would bring back fiddles (Kleczyński 1888: 89) and songs they heard while there.² This time must have been very important for Bartek from the musical point of view, especially if the stories about playing together with Romani musicians are true. They are indirectly confirmed by the opinion of musicologist Adolf Chybiński’s writing about the “Gypsy-Hungarian manner” of playing of Bartek Obrochta, which would include, among

² The best example is the above-mentioned Szymon Krzyś, who worked in the 2nd half of the 19th century on railway construction in Luptov and in a factory in distant Peszt, as mentioned by Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer (Przerwa-Tetmajer 1957: 461).

others, “turn ornaments and grace notes” and “syncopated rhythms,” including “double syncopations – the second following closely the first” (Chybiński 1933: 58), previously not used in Podhale, as proved by the rich documentation available.

Bartek Obrochta came back to Zakopane when he was over 20 years old. Here he started a family³ with whom he soon moved to a house he built himself in Kościelisko. However, used to roaming from an early age, he didn't spend much time there. His perfect knowledge of the Tatra mountain range, great musicality and keen intelligence quickly drew the attention of the pioneer of Tatra tourism, Dr. Tytus Chałubiński, who in the years 1876-1888 would take Bartek on mountain hikes, using his skills as a mountain guide, storyteller and musician. Chałubiński opened to the young highlander a door to the new, previously unknown world of the intelligentsia, including many musicians and composers (such as Jan Paderewski, Jan Kleczyński, Stanisław Mierczyński and Karol Szymanowski) and thus the folk musician, often described by famous travelers to the region, became widely known and admired (see also Cooley 2005: 102-106).

This, however, was a long process, distributed over three decades. At the end of the 1870s Obrochta had to break through the already well-grounded legend of Jan Krzeptowski Sabała (Szurmiak-Bogucka 1995: 51-73) and the fame of his former teacher – Jędrzej Kowal of Kotelnica – and compete with his peers, who entered the local musical market a few years earlier than Bartek, who had spent the time on the southern side of the Carpathians.⁴ Chałubiński, himself a collector of highlander music, considered Sabała to be the most prominent expert in the field, treating Obrochta as a musician of new stylistics and the repertoire collected from the broadly understood Podhale (Chałubiński 1988: 37-38). Also Kleczyński, who, in the company of Chałubiński, Paderewski and Obrochta made on an ethnographic trip in 1884 “to collect melodies” from Podhale, mentioned that “apart from Sabała, the melody is usually played by Bartek Obrochta-Bartusiów, a young and talented fiddler, surpassing Sabała in mechanics, but lacking the typical independence of the other” (Kleczyński 1888: 89). The young fiddler, conscious of his technical advantage, did not understand this respect for older musicians and this influenced his negative view of Sabała even many years after the latter's death (Zborowski 1929: 90) and he described the old melodies played by his rival (which he, by the way, acquired with time and played himself) as “uncouth” (Chybiński 1961: 511, 519). Obrochta was superior in his playing technique, and his band was quite numerous for the time, thanks to the incessant influx of tourists coming for mountain hikes and attending paid concerts for summer visitors.⁵ His music became the yardstick for Polish highlander music for many representatives of the intelligentsia of the time. This resulted in ever more frequent invitations for Bartek outside

³ Marriage to Agnieszka Galica, with whom he had eight children: three daughters (Helena, Agnieszka, Marianna) and five sons (Jan, Stanisław, Józef, Władysław, Kazimierz). Sons Jan and Stanisław and son-in-law Stanisław Szczepaniak-Bajscorz played with Bartek in his band after World War I.

⁴ Jan Stopka (1849–1891), Józef Gąsienica z Lasa, Jędrzej Tatar i Szymon Gąsienica Krzyż z Kościeliska (Chramiec 2004: 30; Mierczyński 1949: 6; Wnuk 1972: 217; Przerwa-Tetmajer 1957: 460-464).

⁵ “Commercial” evenings with presentation of highlander culture in Zakopane were organized from 1886 by Maria i Bronisław Dembowski (Długołęcka and Pinkwart 1992: 40–41, 58).

of the region, starting in Warsaw in 1897 and ending with Paris in 1925 (Szymanowski 1994: 40, 94,99; Kitkowski 2006: 58). Soon, his older colleagues and peers started to pass away, among them those most prominent ones: Jan Stopka (died in 1891), Jan Sabala Krzeptowski (died in 1894), and Szymon Gąsienica Krzyś (died in 1907). Thus, already before 1910, Obrochta became the most important leading fiddler and the venerable doyen and embodiment of the musical culture of Skalne Podhale.

Meanwhile, after the First World War Poland regained independence. The culture of Podhale, in which the Polish national ideologists found refuge for years, underwent a specific mythologization (Kroh 2002). And so the highlanders ceased to be seen as poor peasants, local porters and servants of tourists. The mythologized image of the highlanders consider them a people inherently noble, tenacious and free. This mythologization also encompassed the most important figures of the local community, e.g., Obrochta as an important leading fiddler. It became easier because in the second decade of the 20th century a new generation of researchers took the lead in the studies of highlander culture and its image outside of the region – the documentalist Juliusz Zborowski, the musician Stanisław Mierczyński, the above-mentioned musicologist Adolf Chybiński, and the composer Karol Szymanowski. None of them remembered the older generation of musicians and the peers of Bartek were already few and far in between. The knowledge of documentation collected by earlier collectors was rather superficial and studying it was usually indirect. Therefore it is no wonder that the new generation of musicians and researchers uncritically fell for the musical charm and repertoire of Bartek. His spectacular technique, flavored both with the style and repertoire of the southern slopes of the Carpathians, appealed to the tastes of intelligentsia and started to be considered the gold standard of Podhale music. The best example of this phenomenon is the opinion of Karol Szymanowski, expressed in 1924, about achievements of collectors of Podhale music to his times:

Previous notations of these melodies (if I am not wrong, of Oskar Kolberg and others, and above all of J. Kleczyński) – as much as I know them, do not evoke – let me be frank – my full trust. When I compare them with the real thing, with the living (...) dance music performed by the highlander band of Bartek Obrochta, I cannot not help feeling that these notations (...) are tamed, devoid of the original wildness, as if they were cut to the same bland measure, unnecessarily ‘minorized,’ slightly sentimental “folk songs” (Szymanowski 1924: 8-10).

And so Bartek was described by this whole generation of intelligentsia as “the greatest musician of Skalne Podhale” (Szymanowski 1927), “the last Zakopane musician of such great style,” “student and friend of Sabala” (Szymanowski 1949: 8), “the musical Ark of the Covenant between the times of Chalubiński and us, the younger generation” (Chybiński 1926: 151), “the king of Tatra fiddlers” (Chybiński 1961: 96), “incredible artist” (Mierczyński 1949: 5), “a stubborn conservative” (Chybiński 1926: 152), who “infallibly stood guard over the ancient music of Podhale” (Szymanowski 1949: 8). This view of Bartek is not surprising, especially since in the Zakopane environment the Podhale heritage seemed endangered at that time, which was signalled by Szymanowski: “At the weddings one tends to hear ever more of abominable waltzes and polkas, absolutely unbearable when performed by a highlanders’ band; many a young boy would already dance a shimmy” (Szymanowski 1924: 8-10).

Against this background, Bartek could really have seemed to be a conservative musician preserving the old repertoire and the style inherited from the ancestors. This, however, could not be farther from the truth and Szymanowski and his peers, grumbling about the spread of a fashionable dance repertoire among the highlanders (with the only possible exception of Adolf Chybiński), totally missed the other influences in the playing of Bartek. We have already spoken about the “Romani-Hungarian style” noted by Chybiński. But also in the collection of instrumental Podhale melodies transcribed from the repertoire of Bartek Obrochta by this musicologist, every fifth tune was defined by the musician himself during the recording as foreign – acquired in Luptov, Orava or Spisz – and of one of them Bartek even said that “Wojtek Mateja brought it from Hungary” (Chybiński 1961: 508-528; Kleczyński 1888: 39-102; Mierczyński 1949). Comparative analyses of contemporary and later musicologists point to the fact that ties with the repertoire of the areas located south of Podhale were much stronger (Chybiński 1933: 48-65). Therefore, Obrochta, with his Slovak and Hungarian past, used to a considerable extent – and similarly, by the way, to Szymek Krzyś, a melody player who worked at times in Peszt and Liptov – the style of those areas.

Obrochta also created new compositions by compiling motifs he knew, which he was not shy to admit (Długołęcka and Pinkwart 1992: 14). He also distinguished himself with great creativity in the creation of new variants, a brave approach to connecting individual motifs and a flashy technique unprecedented for the times and place (Zborowski 1929: 89). All these elements must have been in demand in those times among the population of Podhale; otherwise the fiddler would not have enjoyed such popularity as a wedding musician. His popularity was not limited only to the indigenous people of Podhale; it also spread among the rising numbers of visitors and the Jewish people who would come to settle there (Zborowski 1929: 89-91).

The style and repertoire of Bartek Obrochta were copied by young melody players even during his lifetime and they also inspired many musicians and composers, first and foremost Stanisław Mierczyński and Karol Szymanowski. In this way, in contrast to the historical facts, the myth of their “authenticity” - in the sense of Kivy’s “authenticity” as historical “practice” (Kivy 1995: 80-106) - started to spread. The legend of Bartek Obrochta increased in popularity after his demise in 1926, which, by the way, was the result of him being starved to death by his own wife (Anonymous 1928: 214).⁶ The younger generation were first and foremost impressed by the fantastic technique – today’s Podhale melody players, following in the footsteps of Obrochta, never cease to work on the technique, honing it to a very high level. They copy the ornamentations and variations of Bartek but, above all, the line-up of instruments in bands and the rules of cooperation among band members. Looking for examples to follow, contemporary musicians do not hesitate to reach for recordings and notations. The repertoire of Obrochta, codified in the form of recordings of Juliusz Zborowski and transcriptions of Stanisław Mierczyński⁷ and

⁶ Truly fantastic accounts of the death of Bartek were also provided, but they are not worth mentioning here.

⁷ Timothy J. Cooley emphasizes in his book *Making Music in the Polish Tatras* the importance of Stanisław Mierczyński and his collection of instrumental melodies from Podhale. Other musicians, ethnographers and also Obrochta were mentioned on the back burner (Cooley 2005: 102-113). It is difficult to agree with that, because 1) the author does not underestimate the importance of other researchers and ethnomusicologists and their influence on the Podhale tourists. And particularly these

Adolf Chybiński – including Bartek’s own compositions and melodies imported from outside the region – also became the benchmark for “authenticity” of the Podhale repertoire,⁸ violations of which are often condemned both by the experts of traditional music and the musicians themselves. Not that many musicians to this day have decided to introduce new repertoires (e.g., Andrzej Knapczyk-Duch, Krzysztof Trebunia-Tutka), which, on one hand, has led to the preservation of old Podhale melodies and final assimilation of melodies imported by Bartek and his peers but, on the other, has resulted in the canonization of this still living culture. In turn, the less glorious facts of his life (greed,⁹ excessive drinking [Rytard 1947: 10-11; Wnuk 1968: 72, Kitkowski 2006: 58], a brigand past and the pitiful circumstances of his death) are currently eagerly ignored, and criticism of the creative approach of Bartek Obrochta is very rare and has the character of a friendly discussion. As an example, a distinguished melody player from Podhale, Tadeusz Szostak Berda, confided to me in 1996:

They talk about this Bartek Obrochta from Zakopane. Then let me tell you something, just don’t take it as a criticism or something, but he didn’t play nicely. (...) And he played the “ozwodna” melody and moved immediately to the “krzesany” melody. And later I met with musicians from Zakopane, but in Zakopane the musicians are all like “Oh our Bartek, you know, Bartek is the best musician!” and that is not true, ’cause here there is one Jasio Karpel or another of those guys who play very nicely – no, they play much better than Bartek Obrochta did. You can play his recordings if you have them and then play those of other melodists [...]. And then I say: “If he were a good musician, he would not put ozwodna into krzesany, ’cause you don’t play it like that. It’s like, you’d play (...) a tango to the guests and you would add a polka on top of that. And how would that look? You play either one or the other.” And then one of ’em says like this: “I don’t

two groups exert pressure on the highlanders in the whole 20. century; 2) the author forgot that not only was the faithfulness of the music notation the virtue of Mierczyński’s transcriptions, but first of all the transcription of the repertoire and the style of Bartłomiej Obrochta, which in this time became the indication for the intelligentsia-visitors of Podhale, for later researchers and folklorists and also for the highlanders themselves. It is also important to remember that Obrochta was the teacher of Mierczyński.

⁸ In 1978 the Tatra Mountains Museum and the Polish Radio branch in Kraków wanted to find out to what extent the melodies of Obrochta were still living among the highlanders. In the hall of the Podhale Highlanders Association the melody players from several bands were gathered and one of the musically educated members of the Association played individual melodies. The musicians almost unanimously confirmed the knowledge of the repertoire, although of course their own names and interpretations differed from the names and transcriptions (Długołęcka and Pinkwart 1992: 17).

⁹ It is worth mentioning the recollection of Jerzy Mieczysław Rytard published in *Gazeta Zakopiańska*, in which the author describes the haggling of Bartek for playing over the grave of Sabala (Długołęcka and Pinkwart 1992: 37–38). Bartek himself, discussing his contacts with guests, most as gerly recollected the gifts, as on the occasion of helping Jan Grzegorzewski in publishing a newspaper, leading Bolesław Prus around the mountains, playing during Advent at a Jewish wedding (Zborowski 1929: 89–91). Certain greed for money of the highlanders of the time is often cited in the 19th-century accounts, with simultaneous explanation of this trait by referring to the widespread poverty in Podhale.

know if you are right or not because it's been said like that and Bartek played like that, so it must have been like that. Still, my dad told me that it doesn't go well together, it mustn't have been like this." You see, the highlanders started to get it themselves!¹⁰

The persona of a fiddler described here, his repertoire and style became the landmark of the regional culture which, preserved in the form of musical transcriptions and sound recordings, achieved the position of a mythologized cornerstone of the culture. At the same time, any criticism of Obrochta's heritage is treated as an attack on regional culture, thus any visible breaches of the local tradition, known widely to the population of the region, are as a rule marginalized or even psychologically repressed.

Why did that happen? Of course, Bartłomiej "Bartek" Obrochta was undoubtedly a fascinating figure who, according to numerous contemporary accounts, stands out from an anonymous environment of traditional culture. However, in my view, his extraordinariness lies not only in his prolific and wide-reaching talents, but also in the fact that he was an open person, able to use to the maximum the opportunities arising from his functioning on the borders – between the culture of the Polish and Slovakian highlanders; between semi-professional Carpathian music and fully professional music of the Hungarian Gypsies; between the local rural community and the universalistic intelligentsia. His approach coincided with the right time and situation, as Podhale ceased to be the perimeter of the "cultural end of the world" and has thus become the "passage borderland." Bartłomiej Obrochta showed not only openness typical for a skilled navigator of the territories of the "passage borderland," but also an individual openness which secured him maximum gain from the contemporary geopolitical situation.

Additionally, Obrochta, as a musician operating in the border zone between the local community and the all-Polish intelligentsia community coming to Podhale as tourists, researchers, and finally ideologists and creators of national culture, with the evolution of his own playing style also transcended the borders which the guests defined between art, culture and their contradictions. The grounds for the delimiting of those borders for the contemporary intelligentsia consisted in the definition of the relation – a real one or one existing only in the imagination of the newcomers – of a representative of local culture to values such as authenticity, tradition, originality, singularity, extraordinariness, and usefulness, judged against the background of general tendencies in a community. James Clifford, while discussing in his paper on collecting art and culture and the interdependencies between the qualities listed above, referred to the usefulness of the semiotic square of Algirdas Greimas that allowed him to discern four qualities: art, culture, non-art and non-culture (Clifford 2000: 233-248). The art in this concept is defined by originality and singularity, the culture by traditionality and collectiveness. Non-art and non-culture are the opposites of the above qualities. At the same time, the art and culture are connected by authenticity, while the lack thereof binds non-culture and non-art. Further, the category of masterpiece exists at the border between art and non-culture, while the category of artefact is at the meeting point of culture and non-art. Of course, this is just a general outline of his concept in which a detailed understanding of terms is historically

¹⁰ An interview with Tadeusz Szostak Berda by the author of this article, May 30, 1996, in Košne Hamry.

fluid and mutual relations of delineated fields may be different, depending on the conditions in a given community. However, even a such generally described model allows us to interpret the evolution of the perception of Bartek as a musician by outsiders. The art in this concept is defined by originality and singularity, the culture by traditionality and collectiveness. However, with old fiddlers passing away and a gradual shift in the local preference and with Bartek's acquisition of the repertoire of his elders and an increasing individuality of his playing style, he started to be perceived by the newcomers (mainly artists or wannabe artists such as musicologists and folklorists) as a the greatest singular musician or even a true artist. In this way his image crossed the boundary into the field of art, characterized by originality and singularity. And this was to change again after Poland regained independence. The culture of Podhale underwent a specific mythologization. This mythologization also encompassed the image of the "king of the Tatra fiddlers," gaining momentum after his death. (By the way, this coincided in time with the propagation of the Bela Bartok's concept of traditional village music in Poland.) In this way, this "extraordinary" artist, already perceived as a "conservatist," became a paragon of the traditional and collective, entering the field which Clifford defines as culture. The views of outsiders were appropriated at the local level (Clifford 2000:17, 265-271), becoming a cornerstone of a specific cultural canon.

The above case study is a unique opportunity to follow the evolution during which, in the right environment, innovative is accepted as conservative, extraordinary as typical, and singular as communal. Moreover, one can see the huge potential impact of the presence of a large number of musically competent strangers, including researchers, which for ethnomusicologists – especially today – should for many reasons be food for thought.

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