

## DISCO POLO FROM THE PODHALE REGION: THE CULTURAL POWER GAME

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The Podhale Region, located at the foothills of the Tatra Mountains, is a special place in Poland. It is generally regarded as the region which has retained its oldest traditions. The inhabitants of the region – *Górale* – still speak the local dialect, build houses in a traditional style, wear traditional clothes; and they still play, sing and dance to traditional music. Much has been already written about the folk music of Podhale. However, rarely in the literature can one read about the less prestigious genre of music which is called *Górale* Disco Polo.

Nowadays, the popularity of this music in the Podhale region is enormous. It can be heard all the time: in local shops, public transport, discos, and it is also the core of the soundtrack to indigenous wedding parties. You can hear it in thousands of *Górale* houses, mostly because Radio Alex – the most popular radio station in the Podhale region – plays it all the time. Radio Alex is also the institution responsible for the local development of Disco Polo. This banal, simple, uncomplicated music, characterised by the sound of lo-fi keyboards and bawdy texts, also relates strongly to local, *Górale* issues. It is not an export product. It is created exclusively for people from Podhale region, for *Górale*.

During my ethnographic fieldwork, I noticed some interesting threads concerning Disco Polo music. Above all, I argue that the members of the *Górale* local elite treat Disco Polo as a distinctive element in the sense described by Pierre Bourdieu. In their view, this genre has the power to indicate who are ‘real’, ‘authentic’ *Górale* and who are not. Moreover, Disco Polo music is a bone of contention between members of local *Górale* elites and businessmen gathered around Radio Alex. It is a tool in a battle for symbolic power. In the end it is worth asking whether Disco Polo can be called a new local tradition.

**KEY WORDS:** Podhale Region, music, anthropology of music, disco polo, distinction, power game, new tradition

The Podhale Region is a special place in the territory of Poland. Located in the very south of the country, at the foothills of the Tatra Mountains, it is one of the most ethnographically acknowledged regions in Poland. Since the beginning of the 19th century, many travellers, writers and scholars have written about the culture of this region. During the period when Poland had lost its independence, Podhale was seen as a reservoir of ‘Polishness’. Representatives of the Polish intelligentsia treated the

inhabitants of the region, called Highlanders or in Polish *Górale*, as the inheritors of the most ancient and genuine national values and traditions<sup>1</sup>. The process of mythologizing Podhale was influenced by Romantic ideas, which located the national spirit in the countryside under the thatched roofs of rural cottages. Johann Gottfried von Herder can be cited as the most prominent author within this line of thought: he demanded that one look for a sense of national authenticity in the most unreachable and outlying places (Cocchiara 1981, 178–179).

*Górale* became endowed with the most desired ‘Polish’ attributes – such as bravery, gallantry, independence and a love of freedom (Malewska-Szałygin 2017, 43–50). Polish elites believed that making the *Górale* a symbol of ‘Polishness’ would help in retaining the feeling of being a nation, and afterwards in regaining national independence. Thus, elements of local traditional culture were not only admired and promoted in their genuine shape, but were also separated from the local context and introduced to the ‘high’ culture of the Polish intelligentsia. The process of ennoblement of *Górale* people and their culture has had a lot of consequences. One of them, in my opinion, was that the *Górale* believed that they were a special kind of people and that their culture was something of which to be proud. Furthermore, I argue that, to this day, *Górale* still feel some sense of superiority. Perhaps this is why nowadays Podhale is famous as a region which has retained its oldest traditions. The inhabitants of the region still speak the local dialect, they build houses in a traditional *Górale* style, wear traditional clothes for special occasions; and they still play, sing and dance to traditional music. One could say that the region is the folkloric calling card of Poland.

I did ethnographic fieldwork in Podhale in the years 2011–2015. During eight visits, I focused my attention on two distinct, but connected topics: music and tradition. I talked to *Górale* musicians about the music they play. I took part in many official musical events: festivals, competitions, folk music and dance concerts and rehearsals. I also participated in events that were closed to others: in private meetings called ‘posiady’, music lessons, wedding parties and funerals. In addition, I visited many places where music was performed for tourists, such as restaurants and pubs with live music, as well as special lectures about *Górale* culture and music. By analysing the different situations in which music was played, and my interlocutors’ behaviour and statements about the music which they refer to as theirs, I tried to explain what this musical tradition meant to modern *Górale*, what role it played in their everyday life and how it mattered in the process of self-defining and naming the local identity. It should be mentioned that all my interlocutors belonged to the highest class in the local community. Indeed, I call them local elite: they were well-educated, involved in

1 The inhabitants of the Podhale region call themselves *Górale*. In using this expression, they want to be distinguished from other groups that also live in mountain areas.

many actions in favour of local culture and were seen as promoters of ‘góraleness’<sup>2</sup>. They all felt proud of being *Górale*, and worked hard to educate other people, especially children and teenagers, to reproduce the *Górale* culture.

Undoubtedly, one of the most significant elements of the local culture is music. There is no other region in Poland where traditional music is preserved in such a wide ambit. When carrying out my fieldwork research in the Podhale region, I realized very quickly that the place was full of music. I would even risk the hypothesis that the town of Zakopane – the capital of the region – and its surrounding villages are the most musical places in the Polish landscape. Music plays in all the local restaurants and pubs – it flows from loudspeakers and *Górale* music bands play every evening. A peculiar cacophony rules everyday in Krupówki Street – the main thoroughfare in Zakopane – characterised by different sounds floating from shops and bazaar stands with regional products. On public transport and in shops, one can also hear music broadcast by the local radio station – Radio Alex. In the afternoons, many children and teenagers attend local music schools, where they explore traditional melodies, and practice singing as well as playing the violin and *basy*<sup>3</sup>. Children, teenagers and also adults meet in local community centres where regional dance groups rehearse once or twice a week. Every village in Podhale has its own folklore dance group! They practise and repeat *Górale* dance steps and prepare for upcoming performances. Members of the *Górale* elite meet in the numerous galleries or villas of Zakopane, where they talk about the most important local issues, and here also they sing, make music and dance.

Predominant among the events where music is played are local weddings – none can be held without music. Funerals are also often accompanied by music: men in ‘cucha’ jackets and with violins in their hands walk with the dead from the church to the cemetery, playing farewell melodies. Music is played during holy masses – not only church music, but traditional *Górale* music as well. My interlocutors stated that people often invite musicians even for christening parties. One of them told me: “There is no other region in Poland that is as musically and culturally developed as Podhale<sup>4</sup>.”

By dint of such words, *Górale* musicians tried to convince me how full of music the Podhale region really was. Much has already been written about music in the Skalne Podhale region (Kolberg 1966, 1968, Chybiński 1924, 1927, 1961, Mierczyński 1930, Kotoński 1953, 1956). Moreover, journalists, essayists and scholars still write

- 2 *Góraleness* is a term I use to describe *Górale* culture in its entirety (music, language, architecture, painting, legends, traditional professions, shepherding etc.). *Góraleness* is also a specific local point of view: the atmosphere and way of living in the region of Podhale.
- 3 *Basy* is three-stringed bow instrument, similar to cello. In *Górale* music, it plays an accompanying, harmonic role.
- 4 All quotations from interviews are the words of my interlocutors, translated from the local dialect into English.

about it today (Pinkwart 2006, Trebunia-Tutka 2009, 2010, 2011, Krzyżanowski 2006, 2007, Cooley 2005). However, rarely in the literature can one read about less prestigious genres of music which, nonetheless, are very popular in the *Górale* context. I posit that such genres do not only exist, but that they are highly present in the everyday life of *Górale*. I would like to highlight this oversight and look at one of the non-elite genres of music which has recently developed very intensively in the Skalne Podhale region. More importantly, this genre can be claimed to be the ‘new *Górale* music’. This text is about *Górale* Disco Polo music.

In the next part of the text, I will clearly explain what is meant by the term Disco Polo music. At this juncture, it is important to mention that this genre of music, treated by the local elite as disreputable, as artistic ‘trash’ and as a serious danger for local tradition, seems to me an interesting starting point to consider other processes in contemporary *Górale* culture. I will therefore try to show how the debate on *Górale* Disco Polo music reflects the local class hierarchy, how music is involved in a process of cultural distinctions in Pierre Bourdieu’s sense, and in what ways the music industry is engaged in a cultural power game. In the end, I am going to consider whether *Górale* Disco Polo music can be named a new local tradition.

#### METHODOLOGY – MUSIC AS A WAY OF EXPERIENCING AND ANALYZING

As you can see, music took centre stage in my research, where it appears in two different meanings and dimensions. First of all, in my fieldwork music functioned as a predominant mode of experience. Listening to *Górale* music, hearing the local sounds and taking part in many musical events – these elements dominated my participant observation. In this context, I perceive music as a social process rather than as an irrelevantly existing phenomenon or a work of art. Christopher Small’s approach is very useful in explaining the difference: “The essence of music lies not in musical works but in taking part in performance, in social action. Music is thus not so much a noun as a verb, ‘to music’. To music is to take part in any capacity in a musical performance, and the meaning of musicking lies in the relationships that are established between the participants by the performance” (Small 1999, 9). Small’s idea to turn the word music into the verb ‘to music’ should be understood as an invocation to notice the deep meanings that are being established, played out and experienced during any musical performance. “In that real world where people actually make and listen to music, in concert halls and suburban drawing rooms, in bathrooms and at political rallies, in supermarkets and churches, in record stores and temples, fields and night-clubs, discos and palaces, stadiums and elevators, it is precisely what Dalhaus calls social action, which is to say performance, that is central to the experience of music”

(Small 1999, 11). Thus, by taking part in such musical performances, I shared a social experience, in the sense described by Kirsten Hastrup (1995).

Secondly, I use music as a key to analyze and explain *Górale* culture in a broader sense. I believe Tia DeNora when she claims that music has power: “It is implicated in the very dimension of social agency [...]. Music may influence how people compose their bodies, how they conduct themselves, how they experience the passage of time, how they feel – in terms of energy and emotion – about themselves, about others, and about situations” (DeNora 2000, 16–17). This is why taking part in musical performances, talking about and listening to music can help the ethnographer understand many complicated relations that are meaningful in a particular local context. Tim Cooley stated that music behaviours seem “to be a locus of people’s most deeply held beliefs, motivations, and meanings. Music is especially useful for expressing the unquantifiable and intangible such as religious belief, historical narrative, profound emotion and ideas about identity” (Cooley 2010, 15). I am sure that music can be used as a mirror or even a magnifying glass, in which different aspects important to a particular group, culture and local worldview are reflected.

#### A VERY SHORT GUIDE TO DISCO POLO MUSIC

The main street in Zakopane, Krupówki, is full of souvenir shops and bazaar stalls with local handcraft, and also thousands of CDs with ‘local’ music. The sounds that float from dinky little loudspeakers located outside the shops encourage pedestrians to stop and peruse the offers of the vendors. However, anyone who knows anything about music would very quickly realize that these CDs, for the most part, do not contain traditional *Górale* music. Beautiful albums with dainty names and titles such as: ‘Górale Feast’, ‘Jolly Meeting’, ‘Our Music’ or ‘Górale Mix’ are, without a shadow of a doubt, part of a popular music genre which in Poland is called Disco Polo<sup>5</sup>.

It is commonly acknowledged in Poland that Disco Polo is bad music – that it is banal and has no artistic value. You should never admit that you listen to it, because to do so brings shame. Paradoxically, it is also widely known that since the late 80s this music has become more and more popular. It is hard to define Disco Polo music without pronouncing value judgements – I failed to do this, one sentence above. In my opinion, Zofia Woźniak described the genre very well when she wrote that: “Disco Polo is a Polish version of disco songs that is characterised by simple melodies and Polish text, which invokes the tradition of folk songs, familiar festive songs and gipsy romance” (1998, 187).

5 The name ‘Disco Polo’ literally means that it is the Polish version of disco music.

Primarily, Disco Polo is uncomplicated: it provides fun and is easy to dance to. It has simple melodic lines – which everyone can repeat easily – and trivial texts about parties and romantically naïve or sexual love. The roots of this genre can be found in the peri-urban culture of the inter-war years, when backyard ballads and corny old-fashioned dancing were extremely popular (Leszczyński 1997). Other scholars consider that Disco Polo stems from the activities of amateur local musicians, who played before the Second World War during wedding parties, knees-ups and other family ceremonies. As Woźniak claims, the biggest advantages of Disco Polo musicians were spontaneity, vibrancy and a lack of professionalism. These traits helped everyone to identify with this music and participate in it (1998, 189). Appealing to the most fundamental human needs – to have fun and sing together – was the overriding idea of this banal music. It offered leisure: one did not have to engage intellectually in anything too complicated. This music, later called side-walk music, was played and sold outside the official phonographic market until the end of the 80s. This was the time when “private producers started to release homemade cassettes with this music, which – although it was absent in the media – responded to a great need for publicity” (Leszczyński 1997, 128). The first recordings came from the United States, where Polish emigrants who lived there, missed the Polish style of partying. They also had much broader access to technical support and tools, such as synthesizers, voice recorders, etc., which they used to perform a ‘renewal’ of Polish folk songs. Although they had no promotion, pirate and homemade recordings made by members of the Polish diaspora in the USA were sold successfully at local bazaars in Poland: “Their only advertisement was a continual playback on uncomplicated boom-boxes on the streets” (Woźniak 1998, 188).

The basic make-up of a band consisted of a multifunctional keyboard and a vocalist. These kinds of bands were later called Disco Polo by Sławomir Skręta, the owner of one of the first record labels of this genre. There can be no doubt that Disco Polo music became extremely popular in Poland in the 80s and 90s, and this should not be surprising. More astonishing, rather, is that the phenomenon of Disco Polo is still alive. The Polish essayist Krzysztof Varga (2015) ironically wrote:

Not so long ago [this music] seemed to be a funny relic of the colourful, bazaar of the 1990s, our clunky answer to global mass culture, something that is going to die soon in a natural way, because it was nothing more than bazaar shit. Everybody believed that, after relishing this trash, we would reach for something more ambitious. This kind of thinking demonstrated incomparable naiveté, because today Disco Polo has achieved its great comeback, today Disco Polo celebrates its huge victory. Anyone who doesn't like Disco Polo music is a nerd. On the contrary, we are believers in equality, which means that we should keep down, not up.

Although one might not agree with everything he says, many music journalists still agree that “disco polo is bad music, it is objectively bad” (Sroczyński 2015). This

does not change the fact that Disco Polo has a devoted audience which is still growing<sup>6</sup> and a huge market: with its own TV stations, websites and festivals organised in the biggest and most prestigious concert halls in Poland, it has gone way beyond being a music only for wedding parties (Woźniak 1998, Cieślik 2011). Even more significantly, however, everyone in Poland knows the most popular songs of Disco Polo, and in this context the phenomenon can be considered our common cultural reference.

#### WHAT IS GÓRALE DISCO POLO?

One can hear Disco Polo music everywhere in Poland, so it is not surprising that this music is also played and listened to in Podhale. But the most fascinating aspect of the issue is that *Górale* have their own Disco Polo music, which is as simple and banal as the countrywide versions of it. *Górale* Disco Polo is also characterised by keyboards and unsophisticated texts, but aside from this, without ‘missing a beat,’ it also relates strongly to local, *Górale* issues and to elements of the *Górale* music tradition. How does this happen? Firstly, *Górale* Disco Polo vocalists often sing in the local dialect. Their vocal style is similar to that characteristic of traditional local music: it is loud, strong and often sung in two voices. Furthermore, in the songs’ texts we also encounter figures characteristic of the local culture, such as *Górale*, shepherds (called ‘*baca*’ and ‘*juhas*’ in *Górale* language), highland robbers (‘*zbójnicy*’), the Tatra Mountains, sheep and other features that can be associated with the region.

In addition to keyboards, guitars and percussion, violins are also used in *Górale* Disco Polo music, as the violin is the most *Górale* of all instruments. The violin leads the melodies in a characteristic *Górale* style and is accompanied by other instruments used by *Górale* musicians in restaurants and pubs, such as accordion or double bass, but is rarely or never used in standard Polish Disco Polo music<sup>7</sup>.

*Górale* Disco Polo bands do not play under English-sounding names, which, as the examples ‘Bayer Full’, ‘4Ever’, ‘Fanatic’, ‘Boys’ or ‘Mega Dance’ indicate, is normal practice in this genre of music. On the contrary, they prefer local-sounding names, like ‘Ogórki’ Band (Ogórki is the last name of the band’s leader, and also means

6 Mariusz Cieślik announces that in polls conducted by OBOP (Polish Centre for Public Opinion Research) in 2011 29% of interviewees named Disco Polo as their favourite music genre (2011). <https://www.newsweek.pl/kultura/dyskotekowy-charakter-narodowy/szrtpo> (accessed: 11.01.16).

7 The traditional *Górale* band consists of three violins (which play first and second voice) and the *basy* (which accompanies). These kinds of traditional bands play during competitions, and regional dance and music groups shows. Whereas in restaurants and pubs perform ‘modern *Górale* bands’ (violins are accompanied by accordion, viola and double bass). The repertoire is also different. They do not play traditional *Górale* melodies, but rather Gypsy, Hungarian, Balkan and Slovakian melodies, as well as covers of popular Polish songs (Cooley 2005).

‘Cucumbers’ in Polish) or ‘Baciary’ and ‘Basioki’ (both names mean ‘Rascals’ in Polish). On stage, musicians and vocalists wear costumes that in part equate to traditional clothing – they dress up in jeans with white shirts and traditional shepherds’ hats or belts. *Górale* Disco Polo music often echoes Slovakian, Hungarian and Gipsy music, styles also rarely heard in Polish Disco Polo, but popular in Podhale. One of the musicians I talked to explained what *Górale* Disco Polo music was in these words: “They remake everything, I tell you. They remake *Górale* traditional music: they use Slovakian melodies, and replace the words with local ones. So it is totally mixed, it is a kind of hodgepodge”.

To elucidate further, I will give as an example a short analysis of one of the *Górale* Disco Polo songs. For this, I have chosen the song entitled ‘Jo jest górol’<sup>8</sup> (‘I am a Góral man’) from the repertoire of ‘Baciary’ band. The title clearly indicates that there is a reference to ‘góraleness’ – firstly, it contains an explicit declaration of identity, and secondly, it is in the local dialect. The song is perfectly suited for dancing – we hear a regular beat, in a quadruple metre – everybody can move to it. The composition starts with a kind of prelude, in which the violin plays the main melody, accompanied by percussion, accordion and keyboard.

The violin theme evokes a Hungarian *csárdás* with the verve and bravura of a Gypsy virtuoso show. It is accompanied by short shouts of ‘hej’, ‘hej’ and whistling. When the prelude finishes, the vocalist starts to sing in the high pitch characteristic of traditional *Górale* singing. After the first musical phrase, the second voice joins in, leading the melody at the interval of a third, as is also very popular in *Górale* music. The words sung in the local dialect narrate a story:

I am a Góral, I have nothing, but one tiny lover, with whom I dance.  
I am a Góral, I have nothing, but one tiny lover, with whom I sleep.

Then follows a second instrumental fragment, very similar to the first one. There are also a few seconds dedicated to a violin virtuoso show in a Gypsy style. Afterwards, the second verse is sung:

She laid down and she gave her lover a kiss.  
She laid down and she gave her lover something more.

The whole composition ends with a third instrumental fragment that is almost identical to the initial prelude.

8 You can listen to it on youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkfqriDMwXg> (accessed: 28.08.2017).



This song can be seen as a representation of the *Górale* independence ('I have nothing'), so important in Podhale mythology<sup>9</sup>. Because the main character has nothing, he cares about nothing and is attached to nothing. He can thus spend his life dedicated to the most enjoyable subject – love. Love is the overriding theme in both traditional folk songs and modern Disco Polo music. In the style typical of this genre, the story is told in a ribald and rather obscene way. The text is not sophisticated, but everyone can easily understand it and, more importantly, everyone can easily remember it. The melody is simple as well (it is based on six tones of the major scale, which are harmonically arranged in the most banal way – tonic, sub-dominant, dominant and tonic again), so everyone can repeat it. The majority of Disco Polo songs have a very similar harmonic character.

The popularity of local Disco Polo music in Podhale is enormous. You can listen to this music in discos, at wedding parties, during open-air summer festivals, in normal *Górale* households, and in cars and public transport, because the most popular local radio station – Radio Alex – broadcasts it all the time. The most interesting fact for me was that *Górale* Disco Polo is not an export product for those visiting the region. Tourists can buy CDs of this music, of course, but primarily it is local people who listen to it. This is a product made by the *Górale* for *Górale* clients, and *Górale* consumers buy it.

#### ASSESSING GÓRALE DISCO POLO MUSIC

It was not so much the music itself that I was interested in, but more the question of evaluating and assessing this kind of musical activity. I would at this juncture again stress that most of my interlocutors belonged to the highest social class in the region of Podhale – the local elite. These people were almost all musicians, who have identified themselves very strongly with *Górale* culture, with 'góraleness'. For these interlocutors, *Górale* Disco Polo deserves to be placed in the lowest possible position in the ranking of musical activities. Krzysztof Trebunia-Tutka, one of the most renowned of the *Górale* musicians, leader of the folk band 'Trebunie-Tutki', and a teacher and a journalist told me: "To tell you the truth, I am fighting against pseudo-*Górale* Disco Polo music with all my strength". His words in a very direct way express the elite attitude to local Disco Polo music – it is a terrible phenomenon against which one should fight.

9 Independence is one of the most important attributes stereotypically imputed to the *Górale*. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Polish intellectuals described the *Górale* as independent, stubborn and adamant people. They wrote that it was the harsh mountain nature that was responsible for this. These attributes differentiated them from the rest of the Polish peasants. Anna Malewska-Szałygin gave this stereotype the name of the "free son of the Tatra Mountains" (2017, 42).

According to my interlocutors, most of the musicians involved in Disco Polo music can hardly be called ‘real’ musicians: on the contrary, they are amateurs who play in a slapdash way, and their musical and technical skills are at best average, and sometimes scandalously bad. Or, as my interlocutors put it: “These boys, who only yesterday learned how to hold a bow” enter recording studios and their songs are played on Radio Alex. The music itself, in my interlocutors’ opinion, is ‘trash’, a ‘piece of shit’ or a ‘pot-boiler’. However, I was curious why Disco Polo music – evaluated so negatively – had so many listeners among the local inhabitants. I was also interested why the *Górale* elite treated it as a real danger, and not simply as a local colourful *curiosity*.

The answers to the first question revealed some interesting issues. Above all, my interlocutors tried to assure me that Disco Polo music is not listened to by ‘real’ *Górale*. Those who are familiar with traditional music cannot accept it:

When they are not well up on music, they prefer to listen to Radio Alex, to the kind of shit that young boys play nowadays. Shit is shit. I can’t stand it. I don’t listen to Radio Alex!

For people like me, who live in families in which tradition is an important issue, Disco Polo is not music. Do you know any musician, who doesn’t feel offended by Disco Polo? There are three chords in this music, that’s all! Let’s be honest, there are people who play Disco Polo who come from Podhale region, they are inhabitants of Podhale, of the surrounding villages. It is hard for them to break away from the image of the *Górale*, because they are *Górale*. The problem is that this Disco Polo music reaches people here. But it is not the kind of music of which people are proud here. Thousands of people do not identify with it, they are ashamed of it. They don’t want to have anything in common with Radio Alex. But for whom is this music made? Not for ‘real’ *Górale*, not for real musicians and their families, not for people who have attended folk dance groups.

In considering the words above, one can come to the conclusion that the ability to value music properly is a ‘distinctive factor’ in terms described by Bourdieu<sup>10</sup>. Pierre Bourdieu argued that people with a high volume of cultural capital – which tends to be inherited rather than inculcated in schools – impose on others what constitutes taste within society. Good taste is, in this sense, something that distinguishes the elite from those with lower volumes of capital (Bourdieu 1984). The attitude to *Górale* Disco Polo music can thus be seen as a litmus test. In the elite’s opinion, whoever listens to local Disco Polo music is a lowbrow person and cannot call him or herself a ‘real *Górale*’. Bourdieu would say that the fans of this music are located at the lower level of the class hierarchy: *Górale* Disco Polo music is a product for local people who do not understand their own roots and culture, and who do not possess the most

10 In an article titled “Musical Distinction of the Skalne Podhale Region”, I wrote more about music as a distinctive element in the modern Podhale region. In my opinion, music is an important element of symbolic capital, which is used by representatives of the local elite, in order to establish and sustain local social hierarchies (Małanicz-Przybylska 2019).

elementary musical competence. One of my interlocutors said: “The receivers, most of them, are lowbrow. They need something totally simple, something to dance to, which you don’t need to concentrate on; you don’t even have to listen to it. You know, it plays, because it plays. Nothing more”.

A lot of musicians with whom I talked suggested that the popularity of Disco Polo music in Podhale is a result not only of the minimal musical expectations of local people, but of something else. They argued that Radio Alex, which plays this music all the time, had falsely created a Disco Polo boom. What is more, the owner of the radio (the editor-in-chief), Piotr Sambor, is responsible for recording this ‘terrible’ music on thousands of albums. My interlocutors saw the activity of Radio Alex as a gross transgression, as a self-perpetuating mechanism which is concentrated only on creating financial benefits for its owner:

There is this local radio, Radio Alex, which promotes this music all the time, because it is paid to do that. And because it is paid, it plays it all the time. And because it plays it all the time, people buy the recordings. And because people buy these recordings, Disco Polo musicians have free promotion. And this is a closed circle. People want to listen to Disco Polo music, because Radio Alex plays it. People want to listen to the local radio, because they need locality. They need a sense of familiarity.

According to my interlocutors’ statements, Radio Alex’s policy works as follows: the radio enables recordings of Disco Polo music, plays them on-air and does not pay the performers. In exchange for this, Disco Polo musicians get free advertising: the radio gives the telephone numbers or the websites of the bands. People can easily contact them, buy CDs and invite them to wedding parties or discos. In this way, young boys play their music, earn some money and are satisfied. The radio owners are satisfied as well, because the cost of the copyright is much lower and they, as producers, also earn through selling the recordings.

All my interlocutors were convinced that this was a kind of a package deal beneficial to all the participants: the radio, the recording company and Disco Polo musicians. The business seems to be excellent and Radio Alex, which some years ago used to promote good folk music, now plays almost exclusively Disco Polo: “Formerly, when they played other music, people used to phone them and ask: why don’t you play our *Górale* music? Now they play only this Disco Polo. I mean, they do whatever they want. The performers are much worse. I would pack them all in a sack and throw them into the Dunajec River. They ruin our music. There is no *Górale* music in it at all”.

Radio Alex functions as the local organizer of the music industry, which decides what kind of music the *Górale* listen to. Or, to put it in the terms proposed by John Storey (2010), it defines the use value of the products that it produces. At best, the receivers passively take what is being offered to them, and at worst, they are “cultural

suckers”, ideologically manipulated by the music they listen to. The music industry does not give the audience what they want, but rather what the industry wants, and then persuades the listeners that these are their own desires (Storey 2010, 118–137): “As I say: it is played over and over again, like a mantra. People do something, they don’t think about the music, and the music is played on the radio all the time”.

Even if people do not pay attention to the music, they hear it. The radio achieves the power to create its popularity through the perpetual repetition of the same songs. The effect of continual repetition is to promote passive listening, which Theodor Adorno argued (1941) is the most primitive mode of music perception. Adorno, one of the first men to write about popular music, claimed that the main difference between ‘lowbrow’ (popular) and ‘highbrow’ (classical) music is not its complexity or sophistication: “standardization and non standardization are the key contrasting terms for the difference” (Adorno 1941)<sup>11</sup>. By standardization, Adorno means that all the music pieces belonging to the category of popular music are the same in terms of their general structure. “Standardization extends from the most general features to the most specific ones [...]. The detail has no bearing on the whole, which appears as an extraneous framework. Thus, the whole is never altered by the individual event and therefore remains, as it were, aloof, imperturbable, and unnoticed throughout the piece” (ibid). Popular music in Adorno’s opinion was banal, trivial and did not provoke listeners to any intellectual effort.

Naturally, his statements have to be understood in the context of critical theory promoted by the Frankfurt School, as Adorno was one of this group of ardent critics of modern society. He wrote that “listening to popular music is manipulated not only by its promoters, but, as it were, by the inherent nature of this music itself, into a system of response mechanisms wholly antagonistic to the ideal of individuality in a free, liberal society” (ibid). Adorno’s forthright rejection of popular music has proven controversial: his statements have been broadly criticised and the author himself called “prejudiced, arrogant and unformed in this field” (Paddison 1982, 201). Despite this, I would agree that, in terms of Adorno’s categories, Disco Polo music is standardised. Disco Polo songs are based on what people already know: they use the melodies of traditional *Górale* music or rewrite popular hits. As Zofia Woźniak states: “The best recipe for a Disco Polo hit is to use a commonly known melody – a folk song, Polish pop song or local version of a great international hit. I do not have to explain that this kind of operation provides easy success with minimal effort. Disco Polo musicians just latch on to people’s habits and sentiments” (1998, 191). The second aspect of the repeatability effect, which promotes passive listening, is that people hear

11 [http://www.icce.rug.nl/-soundscapes/DATABASES/SWA/On\\_popular\\_music\\_1.shtml](http://www.icce.rug.nl/-soundscapes/DATABASES/SWA/On_popular_music_1.shtml) (accessed: 01.10.2019).

the same compositions a thousand times on the radio. They are played over and over again or, as one interlocutor said, *like mantra*. Even if listeners initially feel distaste, they remember the songs and, in the end, begin to like them.

In the opinion of *Górale* musicians, Radio Alex is responsible for stupefying local people and for destroying traditional *Górale* self-knowledge. As one of my interlocutors said, as a result of the activity of Radio Alex, a lot of children, as well as adults, regard local Disco Polo as real *Górale* music. In the end, this is logical: the local *Górale* radio plays it, so it must be *Górale* music. According to my interlocutors' statements, it is however not necessarily a catastrophe that this kind of music exists. If treated as a local, internal and colourful element of *Górale* reality, it could be acceptable. Disco Polo could be, for example, played at wedding parties. Truly alarming to them was the fact that, through the activity of Radio Alex, many unmindful *Górale* started to identify with this music and call it *Górale* music:

Unfortunately it is treated as *Górale* music. This is the case, because these CDs are titled 'Górale party' or 'Górale mix', and it is played non-stop on Radio Alex. People here in Podhale listen to it, for example construction workers. On the building site of my house, Radio Alex was played very loud, and on that of my neighbours', and on a third building site as well. Everywhere the same music. Disco Polo, over and over. Non-stop. People listen to it in cars, at homes, everywhere. Even my students – I asked them at the beginning: what bands do you listen to? They listed some titbits. Of course, I couldn't deride them, but later I tried to point them towards better music. Disco Polo is the worst thing that could happen to 'góraleness', Radio Alex is the worst.

As they say, Radio Alex cares only about money: it sells people "trash" packed in a traditional *Górale* costume. Some of my interlocutors predicted that Radio Alex would in the future even contribute to the disappearance of traditional *Górale* music:

Rr: What Radio Alex does, is...

R: The final nail in the coffin.

Rr: It is a kind of a steamroller, which is not going to stop. Disco Polo will be the new *Górale* music soon.

It seems to me that all these very negative opinions about both Disco Polo music and Radio Alex's activity result from my interlocutors' feeling of not being able to control the situation as they should, being the local elite. Pierre Bourdieu claimed that people with high cultural capital should be able to determine and impose on others what is good taste and what is not (Bourdieu 1984); but this form of 'symbolic power' does not work here. In regard to their control of the content of traditional music, the local Disco Polo industry acts arbitrarily. The game is about power, but it is also about class distinction and the local elite's prerogative to define what is valuable, desirable, and good for the community. In my opinion, members of the local *Górale* elite regard it as their duty to care for the musical education of other *Górale* people:

Disco Polo, this music that is nowadays played in the Podhale region, irritates me. It irritates me that it reaches a wide audience, including *Górale* – the local people. You know, it's fun to play something unambitious, something simple, at a party. But it all depends on the question: are we going to educate our local inhabitants musically, or not. Am I right?

Radio Alex disturbs them in this task. In many conversations which I have had with *Górale* musicians, I felt a kind of powerlessness and regret, even sorrow. They were convinced that it is impossible to stop this machine or to exert any influence on it. Radio Alex has a very strong position in Podhale: most of the time it is the radio of choice there. Why is this so? The answer is simple. Radio Alex transmits regional information very effectively and widely. I listened to the radio for some time during my investigation, and I must admit that it really is an invaluable source of local information. One can get news concerning local politics, the local economy, or infrastructural works that are currently underway. There are cultural and sport events' announcements, as well as hourly local news bulletins and current weather forecasts. Radio Alex dedicates a great deal of attention to religious subjects, which also obviously contributes to its popularity, as Catholicism is an important element of modern *Górale* identity.

In my opinion, the non-musical side of Radio Alex is a major factor, why this radio station is commonly perceived as a *Górale* one. It is almost inconceivable that the local community would not listen to it. My interlocutors were very aware of the impact of this issue, and this would explain their evident regret at its non-involvement in a 'proper' identity building process among the *Górale*, particularly in the musical sphere: "They are *Górale*, so they listen to a *Górale* radio. One could sell a lot of interesting things through this radio". Everybody is also convinced that it would be impossible to compete with Radio Alex, which emerges as a kind of a hegemon, who has conquered the *Górale* souls and destroyed their musical self-knowledge.

#### IS DISCO POLO A NEW FOLK MUSIC?

Some music journalists, musicians and scholars claim that Disco Polo is becoming new, or even perhaps the only possible, folk music. For example, Maciej Szajkowski, a member of the famous world music group 'Warsaw Village Band', made the following comment in an interview for one of the most popular Polish newspapers: "For all the rest, today Disco Polo is a folk music which fulfils all the necessary criteria – it is a music belonging to villages and provincial communities, it accompanies rites and ceremonies like weddings, and finally it is collectively sung and desired" (Sankowski 2012). Marta Trębaczewska, who was looking for modern versions of folk music, states that one can use this expression for pieces of music which meet the following conditions: they are performed for fun and pleasure; they accompany important local

community events; and their texts deal with everyday topics. “If additionally [this music] is performed spontaneously and in a casual way, without perfect respect for the details and if it enables one to react to everyday troubles [...], then today the easy, facile and enjoyable music, which Disco Polo music constitutes, can also be named a new folk music” (Trębaczewska 2011, 147).

*Górale* Disco Polo basically fulfils the conditions needed for it to be considered folk music. Apart from Radio Alex, it can be heard at local discos and weddings, it is made for fun and accompanies local customs. It definitely addresses everyday life and certainly has a value of locality: it differs from Disco Polo music elsewhere in Poland and the *Górale* treat it as their own local music. It also fulfils, to a certain degree, the conditions of spontaneity that Trębaczewska describes (2011). Local Disco Polo music also satisfies a simple need for fun. It helps people join together in dancing or singing. In the terms proposed by Tom Selwyn, this kind of music could be matched to the category of ‘hot’ authenticity, in contrast to that of ‘cool’ authenticity, which might rather be applied to traditional music (1996, 18–28). ‘Hot’ authenticity refers to the way we experience the world – emotionally, affectively: feelings and subjective feedbacks play a dominant role here. If people like this music, if they enjoy it, if they need it and treat as their own – it is authentic in a hot way. ‘Cool’ authenticity, by contrast, must be validated scientifically, institutionally; it needs hard data, evident proofs. Traditional music of the Podhale region can be assigned to this category: as it is well described in scientific literature, it benefits from institutional education, and it is commonly approved and officially valued.

Members of the *Górale* elite believe rather in the markers of ‘cool’ authenticity. Moreover, they should be seen as guards of genuine traditional in its unchangeable form – even if this is mostly imagined (Shils 1983). For them, Disco Polo music is understood as bad practice and is not valued positively, whereas tradition, by definition, has to be affirmed (see: Shils 1983). My elite interlocutors argue that this music destroys the image of *Górale* people and ‘góraleness’. But even they, occasionally, do enjoy this music. It all depends on the context. To repeat the words of one of my interlocutors: “To tell you the truth, this music is wonderful to dance to. Disco Polo is ok at a wedding party”.

But, paradoxically, even non-elite *Górale* do not call Disco Polo traditional music. They used expressions such as: local, *Górale*, our. In the opinions of all my interlocutors, *Górale* Disco Polo music was seen as not genuine. Sometimes it invokes tradition, while on other occasions it steals from it, borrowing different elements. The most interesting fact is that no one, neither antagonists nor adherents of this music, acknowledged that Disco Polo music has anything in common with a broadly understood notion of tradition, even if the traditional inspiration is obvious in this music at first glance.

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