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Carl Maria von Weber in Silesia

200 years have passed from Carl Maria von Weber's arrival in Silesia, where he would assume the post of chapel master in the contemporary municipal theatre of Wrocław. This particular aspect of Weber's professional activity has been so far devoted relatively little attention in the extensive literary materials on his life and musical output, in spite of the fact that the composer's two-year stay in the capital of Lower Silesia—which fell to the years 1804–1806—may be easily classified as one of the most important episodes in his biography.

The exact date of Carl Maria von Weber's birth is not known. The sources inform us only of him being baptised, and that this event took place on the 20th of November 1786 in the small village of Eutin, situated not far from Lübeck¹. He was raised in the family of musician Franz Anton Weber, who was also head of the travelling theatre troupe. The exposure of the talented child to his father's theatre made it develop particular interest with the genre of opera. Young Weber was educated in supervision of many musicians, including Michael Haydn in Salzburg or Johann Nepomuk Kalcher in München. Relatively early in his life, for already in his childhood, small Carl proved to have an outstanding musical talent. It was due to this fact that his father, in line with the spirit of the contemporary epoch, made a decision to develop his son into a prodigy who would play and improvise on the piano and also compose dramatic works. Weber's first opera, which unfortunately did not survive to the present day, was composed by him at the age of 12. The second one, composed two years later, was named *The Silent Forest Maiden* (*Das stumme Waldmädchen*). Weber's third dramatic work was the opera *Peter Schmoll and his Neighbors* (*Peter Schmoll und seine Nachbarn*), whose first performance took place as early as in 1803 in Augsburg. The direction of Weber's further career was determined by his acquaintance with Viennese organist and composer Georg Joseph Vogler, who was also his teacher. It was of Vogler's recommendation that Weber was appointed to the post of chapel master of the Royal Privileged Theatre of Wrocław (Königlich privilegiertes Breslavisches Theater).

With the close of the 18th century the seat of the Royal Privileged Theatre of Wrocław was the edifice located at the junction of ul. Oławska and today's ul. Piotra Skargi. Thanks to the building's reconstruction in 1782² the theatre auditorium was enlarged to hold 700 seats. A dozen or so years later, following another reconstruction in 1798, both the stage and the dressing rooms were enlarged. With its space thus arranged, the building housed the theatre up until 1841 when the institution was moved to the newly built Municipal Theatre on ul. Świdnicka.

¹ E. Bartlitz, H. Schnorr, 'Weber, Carl Maria Friedrich Ernst von.' (*Die Musik in Geschichte und in Gegenwart. Allgemeine Enzyklopedie der Musik*, edited by. F. Blume, volume XIV, Kassel 1968, pp. 285–323).

² R. Ludwig, 'Zur Jubelfeier des Breslauer Theaters' (*Schlesische Zeitung*, R. 1898, issue no. 34); T. Broniewski, M. Zlat, *Sztuka Wrocławia*, Wrocław 1967.



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About the condition of the contemporary cultural life of Wrocław we learn from a journal by an anonymous traveller, published by magazine *Der Breslauerische Erzähler* in November and December of 1804, that is during the first months of Weber's sojourn in the city. We read there as follows: 'Despite the enormous public interest in music the town does not offer any regular concerts. Many music lovers organize concerts on their own initiative, which are available for only a restricted number of members [listeners—Maria Zduniak] ... Cultural events offered to the general public are in fact limited to theatre performances which take place every day'³. However, as far as the personal make-up of the Wrocław theatre was concerned, in the period prior to Weber's appointment, the anonymous reporter of *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* described it as follows: 'The theatre hires eighteen actors and thirteen actresses ... including three beginners ... six people are being hired for support roles and they are always miscast, six people are dealing with singspiel ... seventeen people perform in theatrical plays ... five women act in operas, this including three singers, as well as ten men, including five singers ... This personnel works every day over the period of six winter months, and six times a week over the period of four [spring-autumn—M.Z.] months, and five times a week during the period of two summer months ... What is more, every fourteen days the personnel is obliged to prepare and stage a new play'⁴. Similar was the case with the orchestra and the choir. Staffing shortages in the main line-up of the orchestra forced the conductor to hire instrumentalists from other orchestras or the so-called dilettantes, that is, amateur musicians. These circumstances made the chapel master face problems which were particularly hard to solve while his preparing new opera performances.

As reports Hans Heinrich Borchardt, Carl Maria von Weber was appointed as director of the Wrocław Musical Theatre⁵ on the 11th of July 1804 of G. J. Vogler's recommendation. One of the few surviving contemporary theatrical performance schedules informs us that only a couple days following Weber assuming the new role, namely, on the 17th of July, he gave in the theatre a piano solo recital during the intermission between two theatrical shows that were taking place that evening⁶. Such performances of soloists virtuosos on the occasion of staging theatrical plays were a very common phenomenon in the first half of the 19th century and with this in mind it would be reasonable to suspect that this was probably not the only time when the young chapel master presented his pianist and composing talent in front of the local theatrical audience.

At the outset of his career in Wrocław Weber managed to win the trust of the theatre's management and obtain their permission for extending the line-up of the orchestra as well as for raising the musicians' salaries. The young chapel master, who was only 18 years old as he started his work but full of enthusiasm and energy, launched the preparations for the first performance of W. A. Mozart's opera entitled *La Clemenza*

³ *Der Breslauerische Erzähler*, R. 1804, issue no. 50, p. 787 (all the quotations from the contemporary Wrocław press were translated by M.Z.).

⁴ *Schlesische Provinzialblätter*, R. 1804, vol. XL, pp. 504–506.

⁵ H. H. Borchardt, 'Carl Maria von Weber in Schlesien' (*Schlesische Heimat-Blätter. Zeitschrift für Schlesische Kultur*, R. 1909, issue no. 8).

⁶ This was Brockmann's comedy entitled *Das Schloss Limburg* and dramatic bagatelle entitled *Der Perückenstock* (cf.: *Einzelne Theaterzettel aus den Jahren 1798–1804*, Wrocław University Library, cat. no. Y v 1040).



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di Tito, which took place on the 1st of August and was very well received by both the audience and the critics, and discussed by the press as follows: ‘The fine form of the choir and the orchestra proves how much has our opera house gained thanks to the engagement of its new music director, Sir Weber ... whom we may none the less criticise for speeding up the tempo of the piece too much’⁷.

Weber introduced many innovations to the Wrocław theatre during his time. The author of the encyclopaedic dictionary of Wrocław musicians cites a relevant source highlighting the outstanding skills of the young conductor, his precision and confidence with which he led the orchestra. He also mentioned that Weber was not only outstandingly good at inspiring the orchestra under his baton with his lively gestures but he also knew how to warn them against undesirable surprises with only a slight nod of his head. None the less the report also contained some amount of criticism concerning the new arrangement of instruments that was introduced by Weber: the first violins, the oboes, the horns, one double bass and one cello were seated to the right and the second violins, the clarinets, the bassoons, accompanied by violas—to the left, and right behind them there were the trumpets and the kettledrums. The author of this report, whose attitude towards this proposal was obviously negative, stated that such arrangement of the orchestra was not dictated by acoustic considerations, and that the sound of the presented work may be only fully received when being seated in the box or at the back of the ground-level auditorium. Furthermore, such arrangement made it difficult for the musicians to hear one another when playing, for the first and the second violins were separated with the double bass and the cello, as well as with the conductor himself. The writer of his criticism also accused Weber himself of devoting too much attention to the orchestra while neglecting the soloists as well as of speeding up the tempos too much⁸.

During Weber’s tenure as chapel master, the repertoire of the Wrocław theatre included the following Mozart’s masterpieces: *The Magic Flute*, *The Abduction from the Seraglio* (which was being staged at the time under the title of *Belmonte und Constanze*, *Don Giovanni*, *La Clemenza di Tito*. A Few months prior to the end of his tenure Weber prepared a new performance of opera by Mozart—*Così fan tutte*, which was actually being staged under a different title—*Mädchenrache*. What is more, the contemporary repertoire of the theatre included many more or less ambitious works like for example *Das Donauweibchen* with music composed by Ferdinand Kauer, Joseph Haydn’s *Der Ritter Roland*, *Die Schwestern von Prag* with music by Wenzel Müller or *Axur ré d’Ormus* by Antonio Salieri.

By the close of 1805, there emerged certain obstacles which hindered further realisation of Weber’s objectives in terms of new repertoire. His ambitious programme did not translate into the expected income. As a means of example, we may present here data quoted in specialist literature, where we read that the income of the performance of drama work entitled *Das Donauweibchen* amounted to 219 thalers, whereas *Don Giovanni* was 100 thalers less profitable, that is, produced only 119 thalers of income⁹. In the face of such crisis the management of the theatre decided to put a curb on the theatre’s finances, which resulted with ‘the lowering of bar’ in terms of the quality of both acting and repertoire. This decision, just like certain circumstances of personal

⁷ *Schlesische Provinzialblätter*, R. 1804, vol. XL, pp. 273.

⁸ C. J. A. Hoffmann, *Die Tonkünstler Schlesiens*, Breslau 1830, pp. 453–454.

⁹ M. Schlesinger, *Geschichte des Breslauer Theaters*, vol. I: 1522–1841, Berlin 1898, p. 109.



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nature, made Weber resign from the post of theatre's musical director in summer of 1806, which was commented by the local press as follows: 'The Theatre has lost both its music directors—Sir Weber for the reason of him deciding to leave, and Sir Janetczk—during his time highly regarded as a violinist—for the reason of him passing away'¹⁰.

Weber—a pianist and a virtuoso—has also made a tremendous mark on the concert life of Wrocław. The authors of some publications have nonetheless marginalized his activity in this sphere¹¹. In Weber's time concerts for the general public were organized mostly by touring musicians and were rare events. At the same time, what was taking place regularly were the so-called 'subscription concerts', which were also described as private. They gained on popularity at the outset of the 19th century to the extent that musical events with the participation various ensembles took place every week, becoming an important element of the local social life. They were named after days of the week—Monday, Tuesday, Thursday Concerts etc. They were not treated as events open for the general public and that is why they were neither announced in the press nor reviewed. Hence, it is possible that Weber performed also on their occasion.

It follows from a number of surviving contemporary press reports and one concert schedule that Weber, who was appointed in the theatre as music director, had organized there four jubilee concerts, during which he performed a triple role—that of conductor, composer and pianist. These events took place on the following dates: 11th of April and 27th of July 1805, and the farewell concert on the 3rd of April 1806¹². The April concerts which were organized on Good Friday were largely falsely interpreted in the Weberian literature, for their dates overlapped with those of the annual (from 1800) performances in the Wrocław University's Aula Leopoldina of Haydn's oratory *The Creation*, initially conducted by Janetczk and later by the distinguished for the musical life of Wrocław composer and cathedral chapel master Joseph I. Schnabel¹³. This circumstance was frequently justified with Weber's potentially negative attitude towards the initiative of Schnabel, who allegedly did not show to the young composer due respect on his arrival to Wrocław. From our current perspective and in the face of inadequate data on the subject it would be very difficult to determine authoritatively what were the true reasons which made Weber organize his benefit concerts particularly on Good Friday, both in 1805 and in 1806, that is on the dates normally reserved for the performances of Haydn's oratory in Aula Leopoldina. The answer to this vexing question may be found in the report of the reviewer of the *Berliner Musik-Zeitung*, which claimed that the management of the Wrocław theatre allowed Weber to organize jubilee concerts in the theatre hall only on this particular day, despite the fact that all theatrical performances were generally suspended during the Holy Week, from Wednesday until Easter Monday¹⁴.

Despite the aforementioned concerts, Weber also performed twice as part of performances organized by the instrumentalists from the theatre orchestra whose first

¹⁰ *Schlesische Provinzialblätter*, R. 1806, vol. XLIV, p. 546.

¹¹ E. Bohn, 'Carl Maria von Weber in Schlesien' (*Breslauer Zeitung*, R. 1886, issue no. 829); Borchardt, *op. cit.*

¹² *Schlesische Zeitung*, R. 1805, issues no. 43, 86; R. 1806, issues no. 37, 72.

¹³ M. Zduniak, *Muzyka i muzycy polscy w dziewiętnastowiecznym Wrocławiu*, Wrocław 1984.

¹⁴ Borchardt, *op. cit.*



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names are unknown to us—violinist Dötzer (21th of August 1805) and flutist Adam (21th of April 1806)¹⁵.

It would be also worth to turn our attention to the programmes of the aforementioned concerts, during which Weber presented to the Wrocław music lovers the following pieces of his authorship: *Freie Phantasie nebst Variationen über Naga's Arie aus der Oper »Samori« von Georg Yogler* (11th of April 1805), overture and trio from the opera *Peter Schmoll* (27th of July 1805), *Variationen für Violine und Klavier*—Weber's alleged composition (21th of August 1805), overture and *Geisterchor* from the opera *Rübezahl* (3rd of April 1806 r.), overture from the opera *Peter Schmoll* and *Freie Phantasie* for the piano (21th of June 1806). As it follows from the above list, Weber presented himself to the Wrocław audience as a versatile composer. At the same time what may be surprising is that he included neither of his operas in the theatre repertoire.

Next to his own works Weber favoured mostly the works by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Except the premières of operas he gave in Wrocław a performance of one of Mozart's piano concertos and of a sonata for two pianos (KV?) with co-participation of his friend—organist and composer Friedrich Wilhelm Berner. What is more, these concerts also saw the performance of several pieces of G. J. Vogler—Weber's teacher¹⁶.

Due to his numerous occupations and duties Weber was not left much time for creative work, yet in spite of this fact the period nonetheless saw his development also as a composer. During his stay in Wrocław Weber for instance came up with the sketches to his fable-theme opera entitled *Rübezahl*, which was composed by him to the libretto by the contemporary director of the theatre Johanna Gottlieb Rohde¹⁷. The legendary figure of *Rübezahl*, connected with the Karkonosze Mountains (*Riesengebirge*), enjoyed a great popularity in Wrocław. Unfortunately, Weber's work remained unfinished. At the same time, what he managed to complete was his piece entitled *Romanza Siciliana per il Flauto principale*, composed for Weber's Wrocław friend, merchant Conrad Jacob Zahn. At the time Weber also came up with the sketches of the *Ouverture Chinesa* and two vocal-instrumental works: a song for a solo voice accompanied by the piano *Jüngst saß ich am Grabe der Trauten allein* and funeral song for four voices and orchestra *Leise wandeln wir im Geisterhauch*¹⁸.

Carl Maria von Weber's stay in Wrocław also brought him a wealth of professional experiences—most importantly in the area of theatre work—which he gathered in the process of preparing numerous premières of new operas, as well as new performances of the old ones. This experiences concerned cooperation with soloists, choir and orchestra. They bore fruit several years later when the composer became engaged in a long-term cooperation with the Prague opera theatre, and then in Dresden, as well as during his guest performances in Berlin, Vienna and London.

¹⁵ *Schlesische Zeitung*, R. 1805, issue no. 98; R. 1806, issue no. 32. These concerts are also mentioned by R. Conrad Kiessling in his manuscript entitled 'Nachrichten über Konzerte in Breslau 1722–1836', Wrocław University Library, cat. no. R. 2907.

¹⁶ These included the overture and introduction to the opera *Samori*, and two performances of the cantata *Lob der Musik* in three tones by J. J. Rousseau.

¹⁷ Schlesinger, *op. cit.*; cf.: M. Zduniak, 'Webers Wirken am Königlich privilegierten Breslauer Theater' (*Schriftenreihe der Hochschule für Musik 'Carl Maria von Weber'* Dresden, 10 Sonderheft, Dresden 1987, pp. 245–256).

¹⁸ Borcherdt, *op. cit.*



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It is also worth to mention the issue of Weber's close friendship with Berner, who throughout the period of ca. 8 years, that is, between 1796 and 1804, worked as clarinetist in the Wrocław theatre¹⁹. That is why the hypothesis that Weber's increasing interest with clarinet at the time could have been initiated by his friendship with Berner might be close to the truth.

In the autumn of 1806 Weber left Wrocław and, invited by Duke Eugen of Württemberg, headed to Pokój (Karlsruhe)—a small town owned by the Duke located in Opole Silesia, nearby Opole. Duke Eugen's ambition was to transform his estate into a lively cultural hub. In Pokój—in the neighbourhood of the centrally located square and various buildings—there was situated a theatre where performances were staged two times a week and every Thursday and Sunday—concerts of an outstanding orchestra²⁰. Independently of the concerts offered to the general public, private music events were organised each day within the Duke's closest family circle, as Eugen himself was a talented oboist, the Duchess played the piano and Weber added amusement to these parties with his solo singing and piano playing.

Weber's visit to Pokój, which was only a couple months long—from the autumn of 1806 until the 23th of February 1807—was an important episode in his biography. In this quiet place, far from the big city hubbub, Weber composed two symphonies, Concertino for horn and orchestra, two cycles of variations, some songs and a flourish for 20 trumpets. The months he spent in this scenic location were not only free from worries over the material aspects of life, but also crucial for Weber's musical activity, for it was there that he developed his interest with folklore, which was later reflected in his piece for bassoon and orchestra entitled *Andante e Rondo Ungarese* op. 35. The first version of this piece, based not on Hungarian but on Silesian folklore, was composed in October 1809 in Ludwigsburg. What is especially intriguing about it is the melody of the rondo principal theme, which is in fact a direct quotation from a popular Silesian folk melody entitled *Mietlorz*, starting with the following words: 'Tańcowała ryba z rakiem, a cebula z pasternakiem'²¹ (English: The fish danced with the crayfish and the onion with the parsnip). The piece was later recorded under the number 447 in a collection of Songs of the Polish nation of Upper Silesia (*Pieśni Ludu Polskiego w Górnym Szląsku*) by Juliusz Roger with the note: 'z p. Rybnickiego i wszędzie'²². Weber most probably heard this melody being sung by the local Polish residents. Curiously enough, it continues to be popular even today.

Historical turmoil caused by the Napoleonic Wars put an end to Weber's idyll. The court of the Duke—who was appointed to the army—a strict cost-saving policy was introduced. The music ensemble had been disbanded, and Weber, equipped in a letter of recommendation from Duke's brother Ludwig, left Pokój and headed to Stuttgart via Wrocław. From then on he was condemned to a life of wandering—with occasional stops in Mannheim, Darmstadt and Prague—to finally settle down in Dresden in 1816.

¹⁹ J. G. Hientzsch, *Friedrich Wilhelm Berner* (Eutonia, Breslau, volume I, R. 1829, pp. 271–310).

²⁰ C. Kořmaly, 'Carlo' (*Schlesisches Tonkünstler-Lexikon*, issue 3, Breslau 1846, pp. 178–179).

²¹ A. Wojatycka, 'Śląski motyw w *Andante e Rondo Ungarese* Karola Marii Webera' (*Tradycje Śląskiej Kultury Muzycznej, Prace Archiwum Śląskiej Kultury Muzycznej przy Bibliotece Głównej Państwowej Wyższej Szkoły Muzycznej w Katowicach*, no. 6, Katowice 1980).

²² *Pieśni Ludu Polskiego w Górnym Szląsku z muzyką zebrał i wydał Juliusz Roger*, Wrocław 1863.



NARODOWY PROGRAM
ROZWOJU HUMANISTYKI

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The memory of Weber's stay in Pokój in Opole Silesia has been kept alive until the present day. In 1986, to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the Composer's birthday, a special, occasional medal has been minted by the Music Society of Opole, and a year later a memorial plaque has been placed on the wall of the local church, as the palace had burned down during the military operations of the last war.

Translated by Katarzyna Hussar