Chapter 11

Czesław Niemen: Between Enigma and Political Pragmatism

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Czesław Niemen (1939-2004) is regarded as the greatest Polish pop star. He was the first from his country to achieve the status of superstar and from his beginnings in the early 1960s to his death was continuously present in Polish cultural life and never lost his privileged position, even though in the later part of his career his fame was based mainly on his earlier successes.[i]

The purpose of this chapter is to shed light on some reasons why Niemen achieved such success, but also why he failed to become a global star. I will do this by first presenting the artist's biography against the background of Polish political and cultural history and then focus on three aspects: his attitude to politics, his turning to progressive rock in the second part of his career, and his attempts to achieve international fame.

From a child of nature to king of big-beat and beyond: Niemen's career

Niemen was born Czesław Wydrzycki in Stare Wasiliszki, in what is currently Belarus, but what in Poland is usually described as *Kresy* (*Borders*). *Kresy* are not seen as peripheral, but central to Polish culture, because this region is imbued with the memory of a Polish imperial past and the homeland of the most revered Polish Romantic poet, Adam Mickiewicz. Niemen's subsequent posture as a poet-prophet for the new generation of Poles can be reinforced by coming from this 'heart of Poland'. The most conspicuous sign of the artist's identification with his homeland was adopting the artistic pseudonym Niemen, from the river which passes through his home village, although this happened not on Czesław's own initiative, but on the advice of the wife of his first manager, Franciszek Walicki (Michalski 2009: 21).

In 1958 the future pop star moved to Poland with his family in the last cohort of Polish re-patriates. His move coincided with the beginning of what is termed 'small stabilisation'. This was a time after the political thaw of 1956-57, when Poland entered a period of political and economic stability, marked by easing ideological pressure to adjust to communist ideals. The emergence of a vernacular version of the youth culture, including pop-rock, named in Poland 'big-beat', reflected this change (Idzikowska-Czubaj 2011). Young Czesław found

himself on the Baltic coast, the best place to absorb foreign influences, as sailors coming to the Polish ports were a source of foreign records, unavailable elsewhere.[ii]

At first the decision of the Wydrzyckis to move to Poland appeared to be a bad one, given that they found it difficult to adapt to the new circumstances, as confirmed by Wydrzycki senior's death only two years after their repatriation. But they were conducive for Niemen's career, as he was forced to play commercial music to support himself and his family, rather than pursue a career as a classical musician. In the early 1960s he performed in student cabarets in Gdańsk, first singing in foreign languages and later in Polish. Switching to Polish was encouraged by the popular music establishment of this period, especially Franciszek Walicki, who coined the slogan 'Polish Youth Sings Polish Songs'. Such a move reflected a desire on the part of those who made their living from pop-rock to present big-beat as a Polish movement, as opposed to being an import from the West (Idzikowska-Czubaj: 137; Tompkins 2015) and a wider trend of polonisation of state socialism (Machalica 2010).

The drive towards creating Polish songs was beneficial for the future star. By moving from English to Polish he demonstrated that he is not an imitator, but a creator. Moreover, singing in Polish allowed him to develop deeper contact with his audience because language plays a major role in the way a song is received. This was particularly true of Poland, where in the 1960s few people knew English.[iii] Another development in Poland which benefitted Niemen, was the shift in the status of jazz of the 1960s from the hegemonic style of youth to the music of the metropolitan elite (Wilczko 1969: 8-9). The void left by jazz was filled by big-beat. Niemen found himself in the first group of Polish musicians who were identified with this style, thanks to being among 15 winners of a festival for young performers in Szczecin in 1962. This victory allowed him to join the band Niebiesko-Czarni (The Blue-Blacks), one of the first professional pop-rock bands in Poland, operating as a kind of super-band, with a number of leading vocalists performing one after another during the concerts. Franciszek Walicki, who was Niebiesko-Czarni's creator and manager, wanted it to be a training ground for future stars. This was the case with Niemen, who at the end of the 1960s, while still playing with Niebiesko-Czarni, created his own band, Akwarele (Watercolours); the name possibly suggesting a more nuanced approach to music than that offered by Niebiesko-Czarni. In the 1960s, Niemen recorded three LPs: 'Dziwny jest ten świat' (Strange Is This World, 1967), 'Sukces' (Success, 1968) and 'Czy mnie jeszcze pamiętasz?' (Do You Still Remember Me?, 1968). 'Strange Is This World' became the first Golden Record in

Poland, selling over 100,000 copies. ‘Success’ also became a Golden Record, selling about 200,000 copies, establishing Niemen as the best-selling pop-rock artist of the decade.

Niemen’s transition from his first public appearances, through Niebiesko-Czarni, to eventually becoming leader of his own band, was also marked by a change in his image. First he looked unremarkable, in a shirt, tie or bowtie and short hair, which projected the image of a provincial putting on his Sunday clothes to make an impression on his audience. Gradually his hair became longer and his clothes more colourful and fancy, reflecting the influences of folk, psychedelic and romantic music. Niemen was probably the first Polish male rock star who understood the importance of appearance in creating star quality. His distinctive look was the subject of public debate, being read as an aspect of his posture as a rebel.

Figure 11.1

Flamboyant Niemen at the peak of his career. Screen grab from the film *Sen o Warszawie* (*Dream about Warsaw*, 2014), directed by Krzysztof Magowski

In the late 1960s Niemen turned to progressive rock. He started to write longer compositions, approaching twenty minutes and using different instruments. Niemen’s favourite instrument in the 1970s was the Hammond organ. The shift was also reflected in the changing cast of the band, from pop to jazz players, as well as the name, from Akwarele to Niemen Enigmatic. In this decade he was particularly affected by three artists, the jazzman Zbigniew Namysłowski, who was the leader of his band, Helmut Nadolski, who played experimental music on double-bass and Józef Skrzek, who came from a blues tradition. Niemen’s physical appearance also changed – he grew his hair and beard, losing his ‘neat’ image. His clothes also became less flamboyant, giving the impression of a man who does not care how others perceive him, as was often the case with progressive and heavy metal rock musicians.

In the 1980s and 1990s Niemen released only two records with new material: ‘Terra Deflorata’ (1989), and ‘spodchmurykapelusza’ (2001), which attracted relatively little attention. However, re-releasing his back catalogue, the interest of the younger generation of

Polish musicians in his work and his writing for a leading Polish rock magazine 'Tylko Rock' ensured Niemen's continuous presence in the media, up to his death from cancer in 2004.

Niemen and politics

In his essay entitled 'Rock, pop and politics' John Street points to the belief that pop music is seen as politically dangerous: 'Under communism and capitalism, in the name of apartheid and Islam, pop music has been banned and musicians punished' (Street 2001: 243). But Street aptly adds that musicians under state socialism were not only imprisoned and exiled, but also feted and promoted by the state, although this fact tends to be played down in the prevailing narratives of Eastern European rock (see Introduction). It is not always easy to establish the political character of specific music phenomena. Street uses as an example Live Aid, which for some 'promoted a bland, universal humanism, no different from (and little better than) the mass marketing of a commercial product like Coke. For others, Live Aid provided a site from within which it was possible to challenge the (a)moralistic hegemony of Thatcherism' (Street 2001: 250).

When discussing rock and politics we can consider the political activities of musicians, offer textual analysis of their productions and refer to the way the audiences (re)construct political messages transmitted in songs. It is well-known that under state socialism audiences developed the skill of 'Aesopian reading', by deciphering 'dissident' messages planted by the writers, filmmakers and musicians, constrained by censorship, as well as finding them where they were not intended. In this part I want to consider Niemen's politics from these three perspectives. For this purpose, it is worth dividing his career into the 1960s, the 1970s, the 1980s and the period after the fall of state socialism.

In the West the 1960s are remembered as a period of politicisation of young people (Roszak 1995). Rock music both reflected and added to the countercultural climate, as testified by Bob Dylan's songs which broached such subjects as racism and the Vietnam War. In the socialist East and Poland in particular we can observe an opposite process: towards the depoliticisation of private lives, when compared with the period of Stalinism, preceding it. During this decade the authorities still attempted to guide young people, expecting from them a certain asceticism and uniformity, but they interfered less in their private affairs and it became possible for them to carve out a space for autonomous activities. Niemen's work and his behaviour off-stage reflect this shift towards privatisation. In the 1960s Niemen sang predominantly about love, as exemplified by *Wiem, że nie wrócisz* (*I Know that You Will not*

Return), *Nie dla mnie taka dziewczyna* (*Not For Me Such a Girl*) or *Sukces* (*Success*). As he put it himself, 'he did not know and did not want to know what was going on in Polish politics' (quoted in Michalski 2009: 92). Even in the momentous year of 1968, when a large proportion of Polish students protested against the closure of Mickiewicz's play *Dziady* (*Forefather's Eve*) in the National Theatre in Warsaw, allegedly at the request of the Russian Embassy, he showed no interest in anti-communist protest. Such 'cultivated political ignorance' can be explained in two ways. One pertains to the artist's desire to progress his career, which was possible only at the price of staying away from politics. The second explanation is that from early on Niemen regarded politics as unworthy of artistic pursuit. He points to such a reading by smirking at those Western rock artists who were singing about the Vietnam War or, like another Polish popular musician of the 1960s, Stan Borys, about 'bombs falling on our house' (Michalski 2009: 81).[iv] Irrespective of his intentions, such a strategy perfectly worked for Niemen, because on the one hand he succeeded in staying out of trouble with the authorities (even if in his later career he tried to present himself as a victim of political oppression) and, on the other, he presented himself as somebody who does not follow fashion, but creates his own idiom of expression.

Niemen's stance is reflected in his greatest hit from the 1960s and the song with which he is most identified to this day, *Dziwny jest ten świat* (*Strange Is This World*), despite it being inspired by James Brown's *It's a Man's Man's Man's World*.[v] Niemen singing this song at the Festival of Polish Songs in Opole in 1967 constitutes a pivotal moment in Polish cultural history, proving, at least to the Polish audience, that Polish rock, big-beat or youth music (whatever term we use to describe music of this period), achieved the standard of high art. This has largely to do with the perception that in this song Niemen engages with reality at a deeper level, not unlike the celebrated popular artists in the West, such as Bob Dylan. But is this song political? No, if we regard as political only those songs which through their lyrics advocate a specific ideology, such as capitalism, socialism, feminism, racism or anti-racism, as for example Dylan's *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll*, which expresses the singer's protest against racism in America. By contrast, in *Strange Is This World* Niemen's protests against such general human vices as hatred and lack of respect for other people's dignity, his protest can be embraced by practically everybody, irrespective of his or her political loyalty. The same goes for its positive message, according to which now is the time to destroy these negative feelings in our hearts, and human kindness will ultimately save the world from extinction. Who will disagree with such a message of hope? It can be regarded as Christian,

but also atheist humanist; such discourse permeated, for example, anti-war films of the committed Polish communist Wanda Jakubowska. From this perspective *Strange Is This World* can be compared to John Lennon's song *Imagine*. As Keith Negus observes, for many interpreters this song reveals Lennon's socialist sympathies or even offers a vision of global communism, but it was also collectively sung at a Conservative party conference in Britain in 1987 to greet Margaret Thatcher (Negus 1996: 193-95).

The universal message, combined with Niemen's dramatic performance, which included shouting, made his fans enthusiastic. But not everybody was impressed. The famous Polish poet, Stanisław Grochowiak, accused Niemen of faking engagement in politics through peddling slogans (quoted in Panek 1974: 23-4). What Grochowiak specifically objects to is that Niemen appropriated a certain well-established form (that of a protest song) and filled it with 'fluff' or, to put it differently, emptied a protest song of its substance, leaving only its shell. Such a reading of *Strange Is This World* is in fact in accordance with Niemen's own confession that the song's root was his irritation at the fashion for protest songs and that it is even a protest song against protest songs (Michalski 2009: 81). In this context it is worth mentioning a documentary film about Niemen, *Sukces* (*Success*, 1968), directed by Marek Piwowski, at the time already an outstanding documentarist and subsequently author of the ultimate Polish cult film, *Rejs* (*Cruise*, 1969). Piwowski's specialism was capturing on camera the gulf between the way people see themselves and how they are seen by others. *Success* is based on such a premise. The director allows Niemen to talk about himself, but what we hear is somewhat inconsistent, pointing to two features of Niemen, which no doubt he would like to hide from his fans: his conceit and hypocrisy. We hear Niemen mocking Poles trying to look elegant by wearing ties on elastic bands and saying that everybody should dress like him. At the same time he claims that people should be true to their individual identity. He also claims that he 'feels life deeper' than ordinary people, therefore he tends to be misunderstood and muses on the privileges he enjoys thanks to his fame, such as being allowed into crowded restaurants, which he shuns because he wants to be treated like everybody else. However, the very fact that he ponders on his fame suggests that he is not immune to its pleasures.[vi]

Although in the 1960s Niemen stayed away from 'grand politics', performed in the Party headquarters and during riots, he was not immune from micro-politics by developing links with people who constituted what can be described as 'establishment' in the field of popular music. This can be seen by his choice of collaborators. One of Niemen's first original

songs (as opposed to cover versions of foreign songs), *Pod papugami* (*Under Parrots*, 1963), was written by Mateusz Święcicki, the first chairman of the Polish radio 3rd programme and one of the organisers of the Polish Songs Contest in Opole. According to Michalski, *Under Parrots*, which was a gentle bossa nova, was not really in Niemen's style, but Niemen agreed to sing it because he did not dare to refuse Święciki. Luckily for Niemen, the song turned out to be a hit and till now is among Niemen's favourites. Elsewhere Niemen's biographer mentions that in the 1960s the singer was approached by many lyricists who wanted to collaborate with him, but rejected their offers, but accepted such proposals from Zbigniew Adrjański, Włodzimierz Patuszyński and Edward Fiszer, because all of them hold position of influence in the music establishment (Michalski 2009: 41). Such behaviour confirms Street's observation that while publicly popular musicians present themselves as idealists, in private their behaviour is typically governed by self-interest.

Such a pragmatic approach on Niemen's part became easier to discern in the 1970s, when the authorities realised that youth culture can be an asset for the state and artists were wooed to give tacit support to the authorities. Niemen was not immune to such friendly gestures. This is reflected in the events in which he participated in this decade. In 1977 he took part in the Soviet Song Contest in Zielona Góra, regarded as the most pro-regime music event in Poland. The next year he accepted an invitation to participate in the World Youth Festival in Havana, again an event of distinct political connotation. In 1976 he accepted two high state awards for cultural achievements (Zasłużony Działacz Kultury and Złoty Krzyż Zasługi) (Wąs 2014). Contrary to Niemen's later pronouncements, according to which he was harassed by the political authorities, one gets the impression that the opposite was true – he was their darling.

From the late 1960s a large proportion of Niemen's songs were written to the classic poems of Polish literature, authored by Cyprian Kamil Norwid and Adam Asnyk. Such choice, apart from dignifying popular music as a form of adaptation of high art again implied Niemen's aloof attitude to politics. It is worth mentioning here that in Polish postwar history, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the classics were appropriated both from the left and from the right. After the war the East and the West shared the view that classics denazified, but in different ways. The Americans believed that they inculcated not only foundational anti-Hitlerist values, but also anticommunist ones through explaining the basic concepts of democracy as opposed to the communist system' (Caute 2005: 253). For the ideologues of state socialism, on the other hand, the classics were instrumental in forging an anticapitalist

humanist ethos because they fostered the belief in the equality of human beings and peoples (Nothnagle 1999: 47). In Poland of the 1960s the classics were presented in school books as 'friends of the people' and patriots, which from the 1960s was a good thing (Machalica 2010)[vii]. However, in 1968, as I already mentioned, the staging of Mickiewicz's *Forefath*ers' *Eve* was interpreted both by the audience and the authorities as anti-Russian and anticommunist.

Subsequently Niemen claimed that his choice of Norwid was dictated by his desire to criticise the political establishment. Even if this was the case, one had to be very proficient in Aesopian reading to regard Niemen's interpretation of Norwid's poetry as an attack on Gomułka or Gierek's governments. For the bulk of the audience, the effect of using high poetry did not lie in conveying any specific messages, but a mood of seriousness, elevation and melancholy, which could be embraced by those advocating different political positions. Although Niemen confessed on many occasions that there is a particular fit between Norwid's poetry and his music, he never elaborated on what he took from Norwid's ideology. Niemen's attitude to politics exemplifies a wider trend in Polish pop-rock of the 1960s and 1970s, well captured by Alex Kan and Nick Hates: it was 'ideologically sterile compared to its neighbours in both the East and the West' (Kan and Hayes 1994: 41).

In 1980, 'Solidarity year', in the Sopot song contest Niemen sang *Nim przyjdzie wiosna* (*Before Spring Comes*) to a poem by Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, for which he received the Grand Prix. Again, the choice was poignant, as Iwaszkiewicz was one of the best Polish twentieth century writers, but also one of the most loyal supporters of the state socialist regime. However, Iwaszkiewicz's artistic reputation did not suffer thanks to maintaining high artistic quality (as confirmed by adapting of his works by Andrzej Wajda) and avoiding direct engagement with politics in his works. Again, from the perspective of politics, the choice of his poem can be seen as a safe bet. Thanks to that Niemen can be seen as tacitly supporting the regime or simply 'joining forces' with one of the best Polish poets, with whom he shared Weltanschauung. *Before Spring Comes* concerns the beauty of nature in winter, which has such an effect on its protagonist that he feels connected with the universe, as well as being filled with love for the whole of humanity.

Due to its universal message *Before Spring Comes* bears similarity to *Strange Is This World*, even though its manner of performance is different. *Strange Is This World* conveys anger, like a protest song, while *Before Spring Comes* serenity, an emotion more appropriate

to a mature man, whom Niemen had become by this point. In this sense it is also in tune with Niemen's other productions from the 1970s and especially the 1980s, as their subject is usually the beauty of the world. The message is that contemplation of nature makes one a better human being. The nature is fragile; the world is at risk of being destroyed by people, as conveyed by the title of Niemen's sole record from the 1980s, 'Terra Deflorata'. Again, few people will disagree that we should respect our planet. Disagreement might appear if the artist becomes more specific, for example by voicing his protest against building a nuclear plant. This was not the case with Niemen; his green credentials were restricted to passing the most general statements about the Earth. In summary, during the period of state socialism Niemen kept his distance from politics and such an attitude helped his career. Had he been overtly anti-communist, he would have lost the support of the authorities and even his job. Had he praised socialism more overtly, he would lose a large chunk of his audience, who since the 1970s were increasingly critical about the system and expected rock music to be rebellious. At the same time his universal messages, combined with dramatic performance, gave the impression of an 'engaged' artist: a 'grandson' of great Polish Romantic poets.

After the fall of state socialism, Niemen was engaged in politics in a less subtle way, publicly supporting one of the post-Solidarity parties, Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność (Solidarity Electoral Action, the AWS). Such conspicuous engagement could be seen as making up for the times when he was politically neutral, proving that deep down he was always on the 'right side', namely against state socialist rulers. At the same time, it awakened suspicion that if he did not engage in politics before, it was due to his conformity, rather than due to being locked in his own refined world. Niemen's political choice in part invalidated his pretensions to being a follower of Norwid. This is because one of the most distinct values promoted in Norwid's poetry is internationalism. By contrast, the AWS was a party of a distinctly nationalist inflection, and one supporting Catholic values and criticising cosmopolitanism.

Niemen's case demonstrates that with few exceptions it is difficult to assign popular artists operating within the system of state socialism to the category of 'dissident art' and 'conformist art'. The vast majority of them tried not to upset the authorities, as the state was their principal employer, and not to praise them too ostentatiously, either because this would alienate the audience who wanted to see their idols as rebels rather than conformists. The authorities, on their part, at least in Poland, left the artists much freedom and provided them with perks which were beyond the reach of 'common people', such as access to foreign travel,

including to countries beyond the Iron Curtain. Niemen used strategies which did not place him in a grey zone between conformism and dissent but rather made him appear to be an asset for either side of the political divide.

Niemen and the discourse of rock as high art

An important reason why Niemen achieved a privileged position in Polish culture is the attitude to pop-rock which developed in Poland in the 1970s and lingers to this day. To understand it, I shall start with some comments on the division between pop and rock offered by Keir Keightley, who observes that: 'The idea of rock involves a rejection of those aspects of mass-distributed music which are believed to be soft, safe or trivial, those which may be dismissed as worthless "pop" – the very opposite of rock. Instead, the styles, genres and performers that are thought to merit the name "rock" must be seen as serious, significant and legitimate in some way' (Keightley 2001: 109). Later he adds 'Negotiating the relationship between the "mass" and "art" in mass art has been the distinguishing ideological project of rock culture since the 1960s. Rock involves the making of distinctions within mass culture, rather than the older problem of distinguishing mass from elite or vernacular cultures' (Keightley 2001: 109-10).

On occasions rockers looked at the strategies of elite culture to increase their distance from pop musicians. One such strategy was progressive rock (known also as 'classical rock', 'art rock', 'symphonic rock'), a style developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, primarily by British musicians, such as the bands King Crimson, the Moody Blues, Procol Harum, Emerson, Lake, and Palmer, Genesis, Yes, Jethro Tull, Van der Graaf Generator and Deep Purple, which attempted to blend rock and pop with elements drawn from western art-music traditions. These art-music elements included using 'non-rock' instruments, such as harpsichord, writing pieces of extended length, which allowed the showcasing of instrumental virtuosity by the musicians, as well as exploring complex metrical schemes, atonality and free-form improvisations (Covach 1997: 4). Progressive rock was not only about stylistic innovation. Equally important was

> an attitude of 'seriousness' - critics often called it pretentiousness – that many of these musicians brought to their music making. Among the most ardent fans of progressive rock at the time, there was the perception that these musicians were attempting to shape a new kind of classical music – a body of music that would not disappear after a few weeks on the pop

> charts, but would instead be listened to (and perhaps even studied) like the music of Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms, for years to come. (Covach 1997: 4)

Progressive rock also reached Poland. However, there its discourse was shaped in a different way than in Britain. In Britain, even in its heyday, it shared the stage with other types of pop-rock. Its status was never hegemonic and it could not claim exclusive rights to some of the values it espoused. The early 1970s was also the period of development of glam rock, represented by David Bowie, who came across as no less high-brow than Procol Harum or Yes, and achieved this position without shameless borrowing from Bach or Brahms. In the late 1970s and 1980s the status of progressive rock moved to marginal, being replaced by punk and new-wave, which called for the return to simplicity, and started to be seen as derivative and regressive, in the same way adaptations of literary masterpieces are often seen as being below films based on original scripts.

In Poland the perceived artistic distance between progressive rock and other genres was greater than in Britain and the dominance of this type of music lasted well into the 1980s. This resulted from greater value being attached to high art in the socialist world than under the conditions of capitalism. Even if Polish pop musicians and journalists were in opposition to the socialist ideology (as later almost all of them claimed to be), they assimilated its approach to art. Another factor ensuring the high position of progressive rock had to do with the fact that, unlike in the West, where music was reaching its audience through many channels, including concerts and record shops, Polish consumers relied predominantly on the radio. There a narrow group of music journalists and DJs, such as Piotr Kaczkowski, working on Polish radio's 3rd programme, presented their favourite western records as if they were representative of the 'best of the West'. They adopted the style of gentle preachers, promising transcendence to those who (metaphorically and literally) tune in to their programmes. These influential journalists were ardent admirers of progressive rock and edified it at the expense of other genres of popular music, such as punk, new wave, rap or disco, which they either ignored altogether or denigrated as being non-art. Their taste remained stable, as was their position as trend-setters, accounting for progressive rock's high position lasting in Poland longer than in Britain and the West at large. [viii]

Niemen benefitted from the high status of progressive rock thanks to being the first and chief representative of this genre in Poland, as reflected in his record 'Enigmatic' (1970), which has only four tracks, including *Bema pamięci rapsod żałobny* (*Mournful Rhapsody in*

Memoriam of Bem), which lasts over sixteen minutes and bears many similarities with the precursor of this genre, *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida* (1968) by Iron Butterfly. On this record Niemen went even further than British progressive rock musicians because he dignified rock not only by bringing it close to symphonic music, but also serious poetry. All four tracks were composed to the works of distinguished Polish poets. Apart from *Mournful Rhapsody*, which used a verse of Cyprian Kamil Norwid, we find here *Jednego serca* (*Of One Heart*) to the poem of Adam Asnyk, *Kwiaty ojczyste* (*Flowers from My Country*) to the poem of Tadeusz Kubiak and *Mów do mnie jeszcze* (*Talk to Me More*) to the poem by Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer. Furthermore, Niemen collaborated with renowned jazz musicians, such as Zbigniew Namysłowski and Michał Urbaniak, which added to the high-brow character of this album because by this point jazz functioned in Poland as a modern serious music. The belief that progressive rock is the highest form of popular music even now informs evaluations of Niemen's music. As an example can serve a recent essay by Piotr Chlebowski, devoted to *Mournful Rhapsody in Memoriam of Bem*, which argues that recording this piece by Niemen was a breakthrough in Polish popular music, because it 'moved popular music from a song to artwork, from a simple to a complex form... Since 1969 in Poland a rock record became a coherent whole, as opposed to being a collection of banal songs' (Chlebowski 2010: 61).

Figure 11.2

Niemen performing *Mournful Rhapsody in Memoriam of Bem*. Screen grab from the film *Sen o Warszawie* (*Dream about Warsaw*, 2014), directed by Krzysztof Magowski

Niemen's works throughout the 1970s and later decades were also produced under the sign of 'progressive rock'. His record 'Niemen vol. 1' and 'Niemen vol. 2' (1973) includes tracks written to poems by classics of Polish poetry: Cyprian Kamil Norwid, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Leszek Aleksander Moczulski, Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska and Bolesław Leśmian. The only track whose lyrics were written specially for this record, *Requiem dla Van Gogha* (*Requiem for Van Gogh*) has arty connotations due to the status of its composer, Helmut Nadolski, a musician and performance artist, whose work is closely linked with the avant-garde, its subject, which is the demise of Van Gogh, and even its title, 'requiem', which is normally used for serious music. Some of the music released on

subsequent records was produced for theatre, for example, one of three records comprising 'Idee Fixe' (1978) includes music for the performance of *Sen srebrny Salomei* (*Salomea's Silver Dream*), a play written by another Polish Romantic poet, Juliusz Słowacki. Working for the theatre (apart from helping Niemen's finances at the time when he stopped producing hits), increased his cultural capital as an artist who moved from popular to elitist art. The titles of some of his later records, such as 'Terra deflorata', which uses Latin, were also taken from the discourse of high art.

While 'Enigmatic' received excellent reviews and was regarded as a breakthrough in Polish music, Niemen's later records were received with at best mixed reviews. Most critics complained that they lacked a clear concept (even if, ironically, they presented themselves as 'concept albums') because the multiple sources on which the artist drew did not add up. Not surprisingly, after 'Enigmatic' interest in Niemen's new productions diminished. This, however, did not negatively affect Niemen's standing among the general public, because after the 1970s he was seen not as a man who 'lost track', but rather as a sage, who produces music too complicated to be appreciated by 'common people', not unlike painters who moved from realistic to abstract art. This status was further augmented by the fact that his last records were produced entirely by himself: he wrote his own lyrics, composed and recorded music and, of course, sang on them. This approach, betraying the temperament of not only a star-auteur, but a solitary figure, was also conveyed by the lyrics, such as *Spojrzenie za siebie* (*Looking behind Oneself*) or *Status mojego ja* (*The Status of My Identity*) on 'Terra Deflorata', about solitude chosen by somebody disappointed with the trivial and materialistic world.

By this point, Niemen was seen by many younger musicians as a fatherly figure and he seemed to enjoy this role, performing with many of them. He took part in the concert of Perfect in 1995, one of the most popular Polish bands of the 1980s, and recorded the song *Pieśń ocalenia* (*A Song of Salvation*) with Kayah, a singer over twenty years younger than he, who received international recognition thanks to making a successful record with Goran Bregović. Teaming up with these younger artists was seen as a way of bestowing on them a high-art status by 'Sage Czesław' rather than a means of reviving his career.

Paradoxically, Niemen's posthumous high status is augmented by legal battles his widow, Małgorzata, fights with everybody, who illegally, in her opinion, tries to capitalise on her husband's fame, releasing material which did not reach the public domain during the artist's life. Whatever her ultimate motif, it has the effect of rendering 'Niemen' as an

exclusive good, which has to be approached with special care. It helps to preserve Niemen's myth, because myths are based on gaps in human knowledge rather than its surplus.

Niemen's intenational connections

In Polish literature on Niemen we find comments that Niemen deserved worldwide fame. Even a fellow pop star from Eastern Europe, Karel Gott, is quoted as saying that Niemen was the best voice in the region and should become a global star (Gott, quoted in Panek 1974: 23). This did not happen, but neither was his career confined to Poland. He gave concerts and made records in France, Italy, West Germany, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. He was the first Eastern European musician broadcast on the famous Radio Luxemburg. One of his songs, *Czy mnie jeszcze pamiętasz* (*Do You Still Remember Me?*) was covered by Marlene Dietrich. In the late 1960s- early 1970s, Niemen was probably the greatest Eastern European star in the whole of Eastern Europe, alongside Gott, before being eclipsed by Omega and Bijelo Dugme.

The issue of Niemen's international career can be approached by asking two contrasting questions: why did he achieve so little in the West, given his talent or so much, given that he upstaged many Eastern European artists of his generation. To answer them, we should realise that an important factor in an artist reaching international fame is his/her proximity to the Anglo-Saxon centre, given the rule that pop-rock is exported from there to the periphery.

The opposite direction constitutes an exception, suggesting that the 'gates' dividing the centre and the periphery loosen. I tried to explore this porous border in my monograph on the Austrian singer Falco, who achieved global success in 1985-86, largely thanks to one song, *Rock Me Amadeus*. Then I pointed to the situation in the global pop-rock in the 1980s, as marked by increased speed of turnover of musical acts, which allowed outsiders to usurp positions occupied earlier by bands from the centre, especially Britain.[ix] If Falco tried to do it in the 1960s or the 1970s, most likely he would fail. Moreover, while recording *Rock Me Amadeus* the Austrian artist was ahead of the game, so to speak, utilising some traits which were not common at the time, such as including extraneous material in a song (the voice of the speaker presenting the history of Mozart) and hybridising several styles in one piece, such as rock and rap. The song also capitalised on the global popularity of Mozart, following the success of Milos Forman's film, *Amadeus* (1984) (Mazierska 2014: 88-95).

Niemen's greatest chance to make a career abroad was in the heyday of his Polish popularity, which was in the early 1970s. By this time he recorded a number of hits and moved to the terrain of progressive rock. If we are to believe his biographer, he made this transition as early as 1967, when he played the first version of *Mournful Rhapsody in Memoriam of Bem*, hence one year before Iron Butterfly recorded their most famous piece. If Niemen had acted earlier, he might be recognised as a forerunner of progressive rock. However, three years passed before he recorded this song and by then he was just one of many musicians identified with this genre. Moreover, while Falco's international strategy was to offer himself at his most commercial, and in versions suitable for specific national audiences, creating many versions of the same songs for specific markets, Niemen did not have any strategy worth its name. This is demonstrated by his making a record for Columbia in early 1974 with a group of American musicians. Rather than recording American versions of his most accessible songs, he used the resources provided by Columbia to experiment and offer his work at its most difficult (Michalski 2009: 225-26). Not surprisingly, Columbia postponed the release of this record and when it eventually reached the audience in 1975, it was a very low-key affair. Another difference between Falco and Niemen's approach to international career pertains to the way they presented their own culture to foreigners. Falco sold his national culture by creating its 'touristy versions', condensed to its landmarks. Niemen, by contrast, made little effort to repackage Polish Romanticism in a way that would be comprehended by foreigners. For example, he insisted on including on his American record *Mournful Rhapsody in Memoriam of Bem*, although such a song was difficult for foreigners to comprehend.

Another factor in Niemen's failure to conquer the world reflects the fact that in the 1960s and the 1970s, the global scene was less welcoming to newcomers from the periphery than in the 1980s. The same applies to the attitude of the musical establishment in one peripheral country towards outsiders from another peripheral country, reflecting on the period of embedded liberalism in the West, marked by strong unions and the protection of national markets. Niemen's failed attempt to make a career in Italy, illustrates this point very well. Although he spent more than a year in Italy in the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, and there achieved some popularity and even became romantically involved with Italian singer Farida, on several occasions his attempts to move up were cut short by local politics of pop music. He was not selected to perform in the main Italian festival, San Remo, in favour of an artist from Turkey, as such a choice was supported by Italian trade unions of musicians, who did not

want to upset their Turkish partner and jeopardise the chances of Italian musicians to perform in this country (Michalski 2009: 128)**.** Niemen also frequently failed to tune into the expectations of specific audiences. A case in point is inviting jazzman Zbigniew Namysłowski, to dominate his performance in German clubs by prolonged saxophone solos or singing *Mournful Rhapsody in Memoriam of Bem* in Italian discos (Michalski 2009: 127). The fact that Polish musicians over-indulged in alcohol when touring in Italy was another factor which diminished his chances in Italy and possibly elsewhere. In the 1980s, on the other hand, where some of the barriers erected to prevent incomers attempting to move to the centre of pop-rock were torn down, Niemen was out of kilter not only with global musical trends, but even national ones.

Despite lacking a sophisticated strategy to attract foreign listeners, Niemen made a mark abroad. This was in part because he got a lot of help from Polish state institutions and specific individuals with contacts in the West, such as ex-patriates living in France or Germany. What is also interesting from this perspective is the map of his journeys and his connections with foreigners. Its logic can be compared to that invented by Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito, known as the 'movement of non-aligned countries': countries peripheral to the global political system who attempted to gain in strength by collaborating with each other. By analogy, Niemen did well in countries marginal from the perspective of global popular music, with whom Poland was on good terms. His first foreign trip was to France where with Niebiesko-Czarni he performed in Olympia, a legendary venue, along with such future stars as Stevie Wonder. Later he travelled extensively in Eastern and Western Europe, but relatively little in the United Kingdom and the United States, despite the fact that these two countries are traditionally of great importance for musicians from all over the world.

In the 1970s his main target was West Germany. Not only was this country closer to Poland, making travelling there much cheaper than to the United States, but also had a thriving music scene, in part reflecting its overall prosperity in this period and strong students' culture. The 1970s was a period of krautrock and cosmic rock, as reflected by the work of such bands as Can, Kraftwerk, Tangerine Dream, Faust and Neu!. Niemen's music in this period had much in common with the productions of these bands, as he also went electronic, and 'cosmos' rather an earthly existence became his main preoccupation. However, Niemen never sought contact with these potentially brotherly souls, despite the fact that some of them were keen to collaborate with musicians from different cultures (Can was interested in Gypsy music). He was waiting to be 'discovered' by the world, rather than actively fighting for a

place in the American, British and German charts. At the same time, he was aware that he had more to lose than to gain by prioritising his career abroad, because being a super-star in a country of over 35 million people ensured much prestige and material rewards. If Niemen failed to conquer the West, this was not because the totalitarian state confined him in his borders, but because he did not make the most of its help.

Conclusions

Niemen's career demonstrates well that success in popular music does not depend only on the talent of musicians but also on a specific fit between their music and audiences, including the 'gatekeepers', such as in the case of Poland's influential music journalists and the authorities. Such a fit existed between Niemen's music and the tastes and values of these gatekeepers, thanks to him avoiding political topics and using the strategies of high art. Abroad such a strategy was insufficient and indeed Niemen lacked any distinct strategy for conquering foreign markets, except from recording his songs in local languages.

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[i] The high status of Niemen is reflected not only in the fact that there is more books devoted to him in Polish than to any other rock-pop musician, but also his presence in foreign literature. His career occupies a large part of the chapter 'Big Beat in Poland' in the collection *Rocking the State* (Kan and Hayes 1994) and a whole chapter is devoted to him in a German book, *Rock Stories* (Wawerzinek 2009). He is also frequently mentioned in Timothy Ryback's *Rock Around the Block* (1990).

[ii] One can see a parallel between the career of Niemen and the Beatles, as these artists came from coastal towns, where foreign records were easier to obtain than elsewhere.

[iii] This opinion is somewhat at odds with the views quoted in the most comprehensive monograph on Polish rock culture, authored by Anna Idzikowska-Czubaj, who argues that in the 1960s texts of the songs mattered little (Idzikowska-Czubaj 2011: 142-43). This might be true in the sense that foreign language did not put off the audience, but understanding the lyrics of a song is always a bonus and accounts for popularity of many songs.

[iv] After the 1960s in the 1970s we also encounter artists who take pride in not being engaged in politics, for example German Can, whose leader, Holger Czukay, argued that Can was revolutionary due to rejecting politics an focusing on music.

[v] Some authors go as far as claiming that Niemen plagiarised Brown's song (Michalski 2009: 88-9).

[vi] In the subsequent years Piwowski was accused of breaking the artist trust by not involving him in editing his film (Michalski 2009: 109). This fact his biographer, Dariusz Michalski, regards as a proof that the documentary was manipulated. He also mentions a rumour that it was made on the request of the political authorities, who wanted Piwowski to present the singer in a negative light (Michalski 2009: 101). When I discussed *Success* with its director, he claimed that he did not embark on making a film discrediting Niemen and he involved the singer by sending him in advance his questions so that he could prepare his answers in advance. These often condescending or silly statements are Niemen's, not Piwowski's. Ultimately, claimed Piwowski, no matter how he would edit his film, the result would be similar. Piwowski's take on Niemen as a vein man, whose pose of a prophet hides vacuum, was not unique, but concurred with that offered by the previously mentioned Stanisław Grochowiak. For the more extensive analysis of the film and its reception see Pławuszewski 2015: 111-13.

[vii]The importance attached by the state to the classics in the 1960s is well captured in the film , *Dwa żebra Adama* (*Adam's Two Ribs*, 1963), directed by Janusz Morgenstern. We find there a leader of the local council, somewhere in the province, who proposes to name a street in his town after a local engineer, who achieved successes working in Africa. This idea, however, is opposed by other members of the council who want the street to be named after Adam Mickiewicz, which in this context reflects both the nationalistic bias of Gomułka's regime and a desire for stabilisation, for returning to a 'safe', depoliticised tradition.

[viii] These 'dinosaurs' of music journalism, such as Piotr Kaczkowski, are still active and occupy prominent positions in the media, contributing to high position of progressive rock in Poland even now. More importantly, this approach is inherited by younger generations and critics and historians. For example, Przemysław Zieliński in his short history of pop-rock in Poland, *Scena rockowa w PRL-u: Historia, organizacja, znaczenie*, published in 2005, regards progressive rock as the breakthrough in the development of rock music and for the same token regards Niemen as the greatest Polish rock artist,an author who break with the banality, pertaining to the earlier forms of pop-rock (Zieliński 2005: 87-8).

[ix] The 1980s is seen as a period when Britain lost its central position in the global pop (Frith 1991).