

Reviews

***Music, City and the Roma Under Communism.* By Anna G. Piotrowska. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. 208 pp. ISBN 978-1-5013-8081-5
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Romani bands are an everyday presence in the public spaces of contemporary Kraków, Poland, as in many comparable European cities. Relying on their musical virtuosity and their intimate understanding of how to craft musical performances that appeal to their customers' desires, they negotiate the precarity of the informal economy and the arm of the state as their predecessors and older relatives used to do in state socialist Poland. Yet their history in Kraków's urban space, Anna Piotrowska shows in this detailed monograph, actually dates back to at least the early 19th century, when the Habsburg Empire had occupied southern Poland and Vienna's musical cultures became strong influences on Cracovians' tastes – if not to the mid-16th century, when there is evidence of Romani musicians at the court of King Sigismund I. This longer historical view, which also takes in the meanings and practices of Romani music in 19th-century Hungary and Bucharest to illustrate the transnational contexts that have shaped the musicians' professional traditions, reveals that despite its title, *Music, City and the Roma Under Communism* is more than a study of Romani music and musicians in state socialist Poland alone. It also has much to say about their contributions to vernacular musical cultures before and after state socialism – always with an emphasis on agency, even as Piotrowska illustrates how Romaphobia, class inequality, attitudes to disability and state power have operated to constrain the conditions in which they have been able to exercise it.

Piotrowska comes to this as an expert on Romani music in European culture who now turns this lens towards her own memories of experiencing Romani music-making in the streets of Kraków. These give her the situated knowledge to follow leads such as the life of the celebrated street violinist Stefan Dymiter 'Corro', who died in 2002, but also to understand, for instance, just how comprehensively another dimension of Romani musical culture in state socialist Poland went on to be silenced by the communist authorities. This was the state-supported folkloristic ensemble ROMA, which formed in Kraków in the early 1950s, gained national recognition, performed abroad as part of Poland's cultural diplomacy, and astonishingly defected almost en masse to Sweden in 1978 without their director's knowledge after the Gierek regime had subjected him to years of escalating political pressure. Its premises in Kraków were turned over to new tenants, who disposed of all its papers, and never again would it be mentioned in the state socialist Polish press.

For Romani musicians who had survived the Nazi occupation of Poland or had been displaced into Poland from further east during World War II, state socialism also profoundly affected the conditions for everyday and street performance in Kraków. At the same time as the socialist regime was representing Romani culture

as a quaint folk tradition to be expressed through its dominant ideological aesthetics (that is, until the defection of ROMA), it was also using its power to force itinerant Romani communities into settled housing. What Polish communist ideology perceived as ‘emancipation’ was, to the Roma, a coercive destruction of cultural tradition through measures such as the confiscation of Romani caravans in 1952 and the legal crackdown they termed the ‘Great Halt’, and propaganda would have made much of the Kraków region’s already-sedentary community of Carpathian Roma moving into the flagship new industrial town of Nowa Huta, on Kraków’s urban periphery, as examples for Roma from other itinerant groups to follow. In Nowa Huta, amateur Romani bands initially formed to play at spontaneous entertainments, and in the 1950s began playing unofficially at restaurants, workplaces and maternity hospitals in Kraków itself. There, they unknowingly replaced pre-war Kraków’s Jewish musicians, whose community had been eliminated during the Holocaust, and entertained the workers with whom the communist authorities had repopulated the former Jewish quarter after the war.

Besides its detailed insights into the historic and present-day roles of Romani musicians in Kraków – which scholars of everyday musical cultures in other cities with Habsburg pasts may read with interest – *Music, City and the Roma Under Communism* also manages to incorporate critical themes from the study of disability, most of all in its discussion of Corro, whose uniqueness as a violinist was inseparable from his physical disabilities in the myths created around him by residents of Kraków. The book’s emphasis on centring the agency of Romani musicians continues into how it explains how Corro adjusted his playing style and improvised physical aids to accommodate his impairments, while acknowledging that for his able-bodied spectators the sight of him playing could take on a ‘voyeuristic’ note. Indeed, since disability is generally still understudied in ethnomusicology and popular music studies (with exceptions such as George McKay’s work (2013) on disability in Western pop and rock), the book could even have connected itself in more depth with critical theoretical perspectives on disability and/or the emerging disability history of state socialism. Nevertheless, this section, like the rest of the book, successfully deconstructs the so-called myth of ‘Gypsy musicality’ which has been projected on to – but also creatively instrumentalised by – Romani musicians. Readers interested in Romani musical cultures, street performance or state-sponsored folklore well beyond Poland may all find fresh observations in this example of what can happen when a musicologist like Piotrowska brings her expertise home.

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Reference

McKay, G. 2013. *Shakin’ All Over: Popular Music and Disability* (Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press)