

JAN TARASIEWICZ

David C F Wright, DMus

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The Polish composer, Jan Tarasiewicz was born in September 1889.

Poland, as we now know it, was divided between Prussia, Russia and Austria in the eighteenth century and then incorporated into the Russian Empire until becoming independent after World War I.

His father was Alexei Andreyevich Tsarasievich from the province of Minsk, a nobleman born on 15 March 1847. Minsk was then in Belorussia, now known as Belarus, and was bordered by Lithuania and Latvia. He became a violinist and graduated from the Military Engineer College in Vilnius. He took part in the Russian -Turkish War of 1877 -78. He married Maria Ivanovna Kushel, a noblewoman from the province of Grodno and from a famous family. They had four children, Anna, Stephan, Konstnatin and Jan.

Jan was present at his sister Anna's lessons and began to compose before he could write music. His mother died of cancer in 1900 and, two weeks later, his father died suddenly on a train en route to Pskov. Jan was only eleven. His mother's cousin Leokadia and her husband Nichipor Ulozovsky became his foster parents.

Jan could play Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody no. 2 at the age of ten as well as some waltzes by Chopin. He also learned the violin. In accordance with family tradition he entered the military college and, after graduation, began to study piano at the St Petersburg Conservatory. His theory teacher was Glazunov. The student played Rubinstein's Piano Concerto no. 4. He later studied with Jazep Vital otherwise known as Joseph Wihtol. During holidays, Jan travelled throughout Belorussia studying their folk songs.

Rachmaninov and Sibelius were impressed with Tarasiewicz. In 1915 he was called up for military service taking part in World War 1. He was wounded and rewarded for his bravery. He also met Maria, the daughter of Tsar Nicholas II and lived in the Winter Palace for a while but, after the Bolshevik revolution and the establishment of Communism, he returned to the Shindel estate and became its owner when it was willed to him by his uncle and aunt Ulozovsky. His brother, Stephan, who would have inherited the estate, had drowned in the river on 25 August 1912. The house had also been robbed and damaged in the war and had to be rebuilt and repaired which Jan Tarasiewicz did himself.

Vatslav Ivanovsky, rector of the Belorussian Teaching University in Minsk wanted to create the National Belorussian University and Tarasiewicz was asked to be the head of music. But political upheavals prevented this and he stayed where he was in Sokolka where he taught, was an accompanist and popular, particularly with child students.

Communism taught the communal ownership of property and thereby wanted the abolition of private ownership of property which was also to eliminate social class. Under Stalin the communalization of property was through the agency of the State and led to a brutal totalitarian dictatorship. The wealthy stratum of Russia were the kulaks and Stalin had them liquidated. He also had all opponents to his ideology assassinated. Communism took hold in many European countries including Poland.

The Riga Peace Treaty found Jan in the borders of a new country although he had not moved. He had no future in the now 'Soviet' Belorussia as he was a son of a soldier loyal to the Tsar and the owner of land and property. If he did not tow the party line he would be imprisoned or put to death. Therefore he stopped giving concerts but kept composing, although not publishing his works.

In 1939 he moved to Latvia to avoid the German army coming from the west and the Soviet army coming from the east. He went to live in his sister's house and took up teaching. In 1941 he returned to his estate in Sokolka where he found his house destroyed. The government confiscated his land and property and he was the subject of investigation by the secret police of the Communist party.. He moved to Bialystok.

He had to start all over again. He worked as a pianist in a restaurant for a couple of years and in 1947 taught music in a private school, later taken over by the state. He began to become known. Jerzy Maksymiuk was one of his pupils. Tarasiewicz was a very kind man and hugely popular with children. Consequently he composed much piano music and songs.

A stroke ended his playing career. His health was in decline. He had a heart attack at the end of the 1950s and a fatal one on 15 June 1961. He was 76.

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