



Steinway & Sons covered piano at the Polish Radio, 1969. Photo: NAC

ARTYKUŁ

## Strike for a “Chopin” piano

Author: **KAMIL DWORACZEK** 27.05.2021

In the years of the Solidarity's revolution of 1980-1981 in Poland a wide social movement demanding crucial changes in the country was created. It consisted of blue and white collar workers, farmers, students...

Finally, they could fight for their rights and talk about their problems out loud. The listeners of the Wrocław State Academy of Music became part of the group as well.

## **Gigantic crisis**

At the end of the 1980s, the country experienced a gigantic economic crisis. It affected universities too, as they were constantly underfinanced. There was a lack of literally everything. Scientists had no modern equipment necessary for conducting research. There were little to none halls and rooms, and those existent often required general repairs. There was no vacancy for students in dormitories, and the occupied rooms did not live up to the most basic hygiene standards. At the Wrocław "Armadillo" (dormitory of the University of Wrocław) there were only several showers in one, big hall and rooms were often wormy. It was similar with the students' canteens which were visited by the State Sanitary Inspection on the daily basis. The situation of the State Academy of Music in Wrocław was not an exception in this regard. There, there was a serious lack of equipment needed to learn how to play on instruments. In the case of this university it was a crucial matter, without proper instruments it was impossible to study.

## **Promised pianos**

In May 1980, the Ministry of Art and Culture promised two Steinway pianos for the school brought for the Chopin Competition in 1975 - they were supposed to be handed to the university after the Chopin Competition of 1980. It greatly pleased the academic environment, as it were to be the first high-class piano in the entire 32 years-long history of the State Academy of Music. Other instruments were 60 or 70 years old and were unrepairable. However, in the autumn it turned out that the school would only receive one piano. Students and lecturers could not agree with that decision, since the promised pianos were essential for the normal functioning of the music academy. The enraged students sent their delegation to the ministry where they encountered a wall in the form of officials who showed a total lack of interest in the hard situation of the school.

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Students acquired information that three high-class pianos (two Steinways and one Bösendorfer), brought for the 1980 Chopin Competition, were being kept in the warehouse of the National Philharmonic and demanded to give them to the State Academy of Music in Wrocław. The Ministry promised to review the situation by the end of the year. In the case of the inability to send these pianos, the officials pledged to order an “imported” instrument, what in reality meant purchasing a Czechoslovakian “Petrof” piano. The students could not agree to that and were determined to get the best instruments for the university.

## **Radical steps**

The officials once again showed ignorance and incompetence, as the students never received any response regarding the instruments kept in the warehouse of the National Philharmonic. As a result, they decided to take radical steps. In January 1981, they delivered an ultimatum to the ministry, in which they demanded to be given the Steinway piano along with the information on when to pick it up. The proof of determination in the fight for the instrument was the announcement of the readiness of the Independent Students’ Union of the State Academy of Music to strike. The students also threatened with a strike proclamation which would mean the interruption of classes and occupation of the university’s building. Unfortunately, the Union did not receive support from students of other universities – they were all preoccupied with the large strike in Łódź which had fundamental meaning for the Independent Students’ Union on the scale of the entire country. There, the students fought for the legalisation of the Union, and the State Academy of Music fought for a single piano. That is why the Wrocław school stood alone in its struggle against the ministry.

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Finally, the strike readiness was announced at the university. It was probably due to that action, as well as in the face of the threat of the occupation strike, that the representatives of the ministry sat down to negotiate with the students. Persons from the Province Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party, the university’s management and representatives of the “Solidarity” movement and the academic communities of the

Communist party also took part in the talks. In the end, the students managed to negotiate a brand new Bösendorfer piano which was to be bought and given to the academy by the end of April 1981. Tomasz Stocki from the Independent Students' Union recalled that the school received two pianos after all (Bösendorfer and Steinway) which then served the students for many years. What is more, the Ministry of Art and Culture pledged to include the construction of the new building of the State Academy of Music in Wrocław in the plans for 1981-1985 as one of the most important investments.

Unfortunately, the university finally got its new building only in 1993. Nonetheless, its students showed great determination and responsibility for its school. They managed to make use of the favourable time of the post-August thaw to improve their situation which seemed impossible before August 1980.

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