

ELŻBIETA SIKORA - COMPOSER

Biography (short)

Elzbieta Sikora

Born in 1943 in Lwow, Poland, **Elzbieta Sikora** studied music composition with Tadeusz Baird and Zbigniew Rudziński in Warsaw, Poland, with Betsy Jolas in Paris and electro-acoustic music composition with Pierre Schaeffer and François Bayle in Paris. In 1973 she founded, with Wojciech Michniewski and Krzysztof Knittel the Group of Composers KEW. Scholarships from the French Government at IRCAM, Paris, the City of Mannheim, and the Kosciuszko Foundation at CCRMA (Computer Center for Research in Music and Acoustics), Stanford, have enriched the composer's international outlook.

Elzbieta Sikora has received among others: II Prize for her opera Ariadna, at the Composers Competition in Dresden, Germany, Prix Magisterium for Aquamarina in Bourges, France. She has been awarded by SACEM, received the SACD Prize Nouveau Talent Musique, in Paris, France for her opera L'Arrache-cœur. She received the Cross of Merit from the Polish Government in 1997. In 2004 she was named Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres by the French Ministry of Culture. From 1985 to 2005 Elzbieta Sikora taught at the Music Conservatory and at the Fine Art School in Angoulême. In 2004 and 2007 she was visiting professor at the University of Chicago. For her last opera Madame Curie she received several prizes in Poland and in France. From 2011 to 2017 Elzbieta Sikora was artistic director of Musica Electronica Nova Festival, Wrocław, Poland.

Elzbieta Sikora lives and works in Paris, France.

Her works, published by PWM, are performed around the world.

Many are on CD's.

Biography (full)

Music is everywhere. In the gusts of wind, in the rain pounding the windowsill, in the rhythm of architectural forms, in the flight of birds, in people's conversations on the underground trains, in the drubbing of carriages on the rails, in the din of machinery, in the shouting of crowds, in the words one reads. I search and search, constantly. I observe, write down, record, and try to remember. This is how I recharge my batteries.¹

Born in Lwów, Poland (now Lviv, Ukraine) on October 20, 1943, Elzbieta Sikora began her music education in Gdańsk and graduated from a State Music Lyceum before continuing at the Department of Sound Engineering of the Warsaw Music Academy under the legendary Polish recording engineer and pioneer in the field, Antoni Karužas. Already in the early 1960s the Sound Engineering Department at the Academy of Music applied an innovative approach of combining music and technology. After obtaining her degree in Warsaw, Sikora studied

electroacoustic music with Pierre Schaeffer and François Bayle in Paris during the years 1968-1970.

Thereafter Elżbieta Sikora returned to the Music Academy to study composition with Tadeusz Baird and Zbigniew Rudziński. Her 1971 composition, *Widok z okna* [View from a Window], created at the Polish Radio's Experimental Studio led Sikora—together with Krzysztof Knittel and Wojciech Michniewski—to form the composer's group "KEW" (the abbreviation representing the first letters of their names). A few years later, KEW presented at the 1974 *Warszawska Jesień Festival Drugi poemat tajemny* [The Second Mystical Poem], widely recognized as Poland's first multimedia work combining electroacoustic music with slide projections. Hailed as trailblazers in Central Europe, KEW was invited to perform at a number of concerts and festivals in Poland, Sweden, Austria and Germany. Sikora's early achievements as an avant-garde composer were rewarded with scholarships from the City of Mannheim, Germany, and from the Kosciuszko Foundation in New York, which allowed her to study with John Chowning at the Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics of Stanford University. Following the world premiere of her composition *Głowa Orfeusza* [Orpheus' Head] at the *Warszawska Jesień Festival* in 1981, Sikora was invited to join the *Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique* (IRCAM) as a French government scholarship recipient, and afterwards she decided to permanently settle in France.

Between the years 1985 and 2008, Elżbieta Sikora taught electroacoustic music composition at the Conservatoire and the *École européenne supérieure de l'image* in Angoulême, Université Paris-Est Marne-la-Vallée, and the University of Chicago. In addition to these assignments, Sikora conducted composition courses in Gdańsk, Munich, Hamburg and Ulm. Currently she serves as the Artistic Director of the Wrocław-based *Musica Electronica Nova Festival*, and is a Visiting Professor at the Chopin Music University in Warsaw. Since 1978 Elżbieta Sikora has been a member of the Polish Composers' Union and in 1999 she received the degree of *Doctor es Arts* from the Wrocław Music Academy.

Addressing her lifelong interest in electronic music, in a Polish Radio interview Elżbieta Sikora stated that,

I started composing electronic music in 1968, when it already had a long history and was in a full bloom. Since then, the technology has changed a lot. In 1981, I happened to be at the Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique, where there were huge computers. In order to compose, you had to learn the program. For most musicians (and for me) it was a stage of "suspense" in anticipation of a friendlier technology. And it quickly appeared. Nowadays, composing electronic music is so easy that anyone can do it.

Besides electronic music, Sikora's catalogue of compositions includes a number of chamber, orchestral and vocal works as well as operas. Her first opera, *Ariadne* (1977), was an artistic compromise of sorts since—according to the interviews given by the composer—the operatic genre "was not an attractive and adequate form of expression to engage the public."² Undeterred in her quest to forge a new path in the operatic repertoire, Sikora's next stage work, *Derriere son double* (1983), was a radio opera for voice, instrumental ensemble and electronic sounds. She continued with *Wrywacz serc* [The Heart Extractor], a chamber opera to the libretto based on a novel by Boris Vian. Working on this project throughout the mid-1980s, Sikora revised it thoroughly in 1992. Directed by Mariusz Treliński, *Wrywacz serc* was finally premiered in 1995 by the National Opera at Warsaw's Grand Theatre, while the French version was first performed at Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1997.

Sikora's latest operatic project, *Madame Curie*, celebrated the International Year of Chemistry and the centenary of awarding Polish scientist Maria Skłodowska-Curie the Nobel Prize in Chemistry. This extensive work in three acts received its world premiere on November 15, 2011 at the UNESCO Hall in Paris. The Polish premiere of *Madame Curie* was given ten days later by the Baltic Opera in Gdańsk. A subsequent DVD recording was honored with the Académie du Disque Lyrique Award in France. Discussing the genesis of her latest opera, Elżbieta Sikora pointed out that,

[Marie Curie's] life story is a truly operatic libretto, so we didn't have to look far and invent a lot, and really nothing needed to be embellished; we only needed to appropriately interpret and present the facts of her life. That's exactly what happened with this opera's libretto. Of course we were not presenting Maria Curie's biography, only highlighting a problem she herself might not have had. The question is whether everything we want to discover ends well, and whether discoveries bring good things into our life and contribute to the world's progress, or whether they also have negative consequences. We all know that there are good and bad sides to everything, including medical field discoveries. Marie Curie's doubts are the main thread of this opera. [...] I did not want Marie Curie to be a personality we know from textbooks—a scientist who worked day and night on her discoveries—but a human being who also walked this earth, who had her own intense emotional and intellectual life in all of its forms. I wanted to show her as a fully-living human being, and as a woman. This opera is basically a monodrama and Maria is always on stage. That's how it's notated in the score. Besides the comments from the choir and a few orchestral interludes, she must constantly sing something. That's why, together with Marek Weiss, we looked... actually we didn't look since both of us instantly knew who would sing that role. Anna Mikołajczyk was our first and only choice and I'm delighted that she premiered the title role.³

*Critics like Weronika Nowak, for example, have noted the appeal of Sikora's vocal music, In Sikora's operas, like in her songs, for instance *Le Chant de Salomon* (1989-1991), the sound of the vocal parts is truly hypnotic. The variety of singing styles and vocal techniques, such as *bel canto*, *melo-recitation*, *whisper* or *shout*, are used by the composer as a tool for creating a wide range of moods, stretched somewhere between an introverted lyricism and an expansive drama.⁴*

In her review of *Madame Curie*, Chantal Cazaux also praised the sensuous qualities of Sikora's music:

... Elżbieta Sikora's score is sparkling, generous, [and] often percussive and brassy—perhaps in order to get close to the dangerous luminosity of radium. Its energy infuses the title role, never getting weighed down with useless pauses. It is colored with fine, lively touches, and often with deep, long and anguished sounds. The composer's language, which mixes orchestra and electronic part, is expressive, rich and also poetic. Marie's lament over the body of her dead husband, "Pierre, I want to tell you..." is a jewel of emotion and vocal grace. For Sikora's vocal writing, though ample and emotive, is nonetheless coherent, combining the wild gesture with a pleasing melodious quality...⁵

Sikora's musical language seems to undergo constant search for perfection, a process she defined in an interview as follows, "I slowly began to abandon pure experimentation and decided to retain in my musical language only what was needed to express emotion or musical intensity."⁶ The composer's sensuous relationship to sound is often inspired by her travels across the world, where Sikora becomes a musical archeologist and chronicler of the environment, be it street noise in Lisbon or melting glaciers in Patagonia. Always recording and collecting sounds, Sikora later internalizes and refines them before utilizing them in her

works. Summing up her career, Sikora averred that she keeps on composing "... because I don't know how to do anything else ... Composition is a constant search for something that does not have a real dimension ... it's a ceaseless task of trying to find the most perfect form for expressing in an abstract language of music something that burns with really fire deep within us."⁷

Throughout her life, Elżbieta Sikora's work has been recognized with many prizes and awards including, among others, the 1978 Carl Maria von Weber Composers' Competition in Dresden, the 1980 Competition of Electroacoustic Music in Bourges, the 1982 Women Composers' Competition in Mannheim, two SACEM awards in 1994, and the 1996 French Association of Dramatic Authors and Composers Award. The recipient of the 2000 Heidelberger Künstlerinnenpreis, in 2002 Sikora received the Special Distinction of the Paris Jury de l'Académie du Disque Lyrique for *Le Chant de Salomon* and *Eine Rose als Stütze*, which were released on a Chant du Monde/Harmonia Mundi CD. In 2008 Elżbieta Sikora was proclaimed winner of the Sztorm Roku vote organized by the *Gazeta Wyborcza* daily, and her *Oliwa Concerto* for organ and orchestra won in the classical music category. Together with Anna Mikołajczyk, Sikora received the 2012 Sztorm Roku Award for *Madame Curie*, an opera which also garnered the composer the 2012 Splendor Gedaniensis Award, Gryf-Pomeranian Arts Award, and the 2013 Polish Music Composers' Union Award. The Government of Poland decorated Sikora with the Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic in 1997, and in 2004 she received the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres from the French Minister of Culture.

Elżbieta Sikora's music has resonated across the world at such festivals as *Warszawska Jesień*, *Poznań Musical Spring*, *Avignon Festival*, *Festival Estival in Paris*, *Syntèse in Bourges*, *Festival ICMC in Bucharest*, *Brighton L'Espace du Son*, *Festival Acousmatique de Bruxelles*, *Fylkingen in Stockholm*, *Dresden Music Festspiele*, the *Braunschweig Festival*, *Berlin Festspiele*, the *Alexandria Festival of the Arts*, the *Bath–Newcastle Festival*, the *Heidelberg New Music Festival*, *Antidogma Musica in Turin*, *Festival International de Musica Electroacustica in Havana*, the *Seoul International Computer Music Festival in South Korea*, the *EMF Festival in New York* and the *International Festival of Today's Music in New York*. Her compositions are now published by *Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne*, (before also: *Chant du Monde*, *Stokłosa Editions*, and *Adriane Verlag*).

Among performers of Sikora's works are such prestigious ensembles and soloists as the *Anabella Gonzales Dance Theater*, the *Ballet of Monte Carlo*, the *Baltic Philharmonic Orchestra*, *Centre Pompidou*, *Nouvel Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France*, *Orchestre Pasdeloup*, the *Polish National Philharmonic Orchestra*, the *Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra*, the *Poznań Philharmonic Orchestra*, *Orchestre Symphonique du NFM*, *Wrocław*, *Orchestre Poitou-Charentes*, *Orchestre Stadt Ulm*, the *Camerata Varsovia*, the *Warsaw National Opera*, *Danel Quartet*, *Ensemble Aventure*, *Ensemble Itinéraire*, *Ensemble 2E2M*, *Court Circuit*, *Wilanów Quintet*, and the *Heidelberg Festival Ensemble*. Over the past few decades Elżbieta Sikora collaborated with conductors *Jean Deroyer*, *Gabriel Chmura*, *James-Alain Gaehres*, *Jacek Kaspszyk*, *Michał Klauza*, *Jerzy Maksymiuk*, *Farhad Mechat*, *Wojciech Michniewski*, *Annick Minck*, *Michel Tabachnik*, *Tadeusz Wojciechowski*, *Jean Thorel*, *Pascal Verrot*, and *Antoni Wit*, soloist *Pierre Yves Artaud*, *Jean Efflam Bavouzet*, *Elisabeth Chojnacka*, *Robert Dick*, *Alexandra Greffin Klein*, *Jadwiga Kotnowska*, *Linus Roth*, among others, and numerous performances of Sikora's works have been recorded by the *Polish Radio*, *WDR*, and *Radio France*.

- ¹ Elżbieta Sikora. Translated from the website: <http://manu.nazwa.pl/sikora/index.php> [Ed.]
- ² From Sikora's biography at Culture.pl [Ed.]
- ³ Burzliwe życie Madame Curie—an interview with Elżbieta Sikora and Marek Weiss at Dwutygodnik.com [<http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/2839-burzliwe-zycie-madame-curie.html>] [Translated by Ed.]
- ⁴ Weronika Nowak, Między emocją a abstrakcją. Wokół twórczości Elżbiety Sikory. [Between Emotion and Abstraction. Elżbieta Sikora's Musical World], Meakultura 2013
- ⁵ From: <http://manu.nazwa.pl/sikora/recenzje>
- ⁶ Weronika Nowak, Między emocją a abstrakcją. Wokół twórczości Elżbiety Sikory. Meakultura 2013.
- ⁷ Ibid.

Marek Żebrowski, Polish Music Center, Los Angeles 2016

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