

Women in the Musical Culture of Danzig in the First Half of the 20th Century

Joanna Schiller-Rydzewska

Stanislaw Moniuszko Academy of Music in Gdańsk, Gdańsk, Poland

The musical culture of pre-war Danzig/Gdansk remains an area that is not well enough recognized in the scholarly literature. Numerous traces of this musical life are preserved in the collections of the Gdansk Library of the Polish Academy of Sciences. The collection ranges from scholarly publications and scores to an extensive number of concert programs and posters. The collection testifies to the dynamism and diversity of the city's pre-war musical life. Notable among the collected materials is the role of female figures—composers, singers, and instrumentalists who made significant contributions to the shape of Gdansk musical life. In this article, I will present forgotten profiles of musically committed women: Martha Reincke, Ella Mertins, and Lotte Prins. In light of the surviving materials, it can be assumed that they were significant figures in the musical culture and social life of the city.

Keywords: 20th century music in Gdansk/Danzig, women in musical culture, Gdansk Library, musical culture of Gdansk/Danzig

Introduction

The musical culture of pre-war Danzig/Gdańsk¹ is one of the areas that still remain uncovered. Its dichotomous image, arising mainly from nationality-based divisions, remains an established paradigm. Rare studies have attempted to show the entirety of musical phenomena during the period preceding the World War I and the times of the Second Free City of Danzig, which included both Polish and German achievements. Before the World War II, Polish musical life was accompanied by the rhythm determined by the small Polish population in the city. Nowadays, this issue is rather well-documented and researched. However, the actual core of the musical culture remained in the hands of German-speaking Danzig inhabitants, who continued the tradition of the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary's ensemble, numerous singing ensembles, the City Theatre, Conservatoires, and chamber ensembles. Although the level of this musical life was probably not as momentous as that of the musical cultural life of Berlin, Vienna, or even Wrocław, there are many reasons to believe that Danzig inhabitants highly valued their musical culture and participated in it actively.

Traces of the pre-war musical culture of the city are preserved, to a limited extent, in the collection of the Polish Academy of Sciences' Gdańsk Library (PAS GL). This was possible thanks to the takeover, in 1945, of the pre-war City Library building along with its collection that had not suffered any significant damage during the war. The preserved materials concerning the pre-war period include, apart from books and scientific

Joanna Schiller-Rydzewska, Dr.Habil., Assistant Professor, Faculty of Conducting, Composition and Music Theory, Stanislaw Moniuszko Academy of Music in Gdansk.

¹ Before the World War II the city name was Danzig, after that it is called Gdańsk.

publications, documents of everyday life as well as scores. These sources are supplemented by preserved articles and concert reviews published in Danzig press, e.g. in the *Danziger Sonntags Zeitung*, *Danziger Allgemeine Zeitung*, and others. These collections reveal the significant role of women: singers, pianists, teachers, or members of the *Danziger Frauenchöre* along with several piano miniatures and songs of the authorship of pre-war Danzig female composers. From this group of musically active women, figures were selected whose pre-war activities are best documented and partially described, i.e. Martha Reincke—a composer and pianist, Lotte Prins—a violinist and viola player, and Ella Mertins—a pianist and composer. This is obviously a subjective choice determined by the preserved sources.

The musical heritage from the first half of the 20th century, preserved at the PAS Gdańsk Library, includes chamber works, mainly of songs and piano pieces. Local themes relating directly to the city and its districts are clearly predominant in the composition titles and lyrics of poetry used in music: *Mein Danzig*, *In Danzig*, *Erinnerung an Zoppot*, *Erinnerung an Danzig*, *Danziger Studentenlied*, *Am Ostseestrande*, *Heil Danzig*, *Nordlands Venedig*, *Erinnerung an Oliva*, etc. A characteristic feature is also emphasizing the belonging of Gdansk to Prussia and the German ancestry of the city, e.g. *Das Deutsche Danzig*. A number of military songs, marches, compositions dedicated to the Emperor, and particularly pieces referring directly to the troops stationed in Danzig, e.g. *Ein Reiterlied*, *Die schwarzen Husaren*, and *Kaiserhymne* date from before the World War I and from the war era. This is actually typical of the culture of a fortress city which, in the 19th century, served twice (1815-1827 and 1878-1918) as the capital city of the extensive province of West Prussia (Westpreußen) with its powerful stationed garrison. The composition includes several dozen compositions, with the dominant dance pieces: waltzes, polkas, and mazurkas; march pieces; patriotic, military and occasional songs, etc.

Martha Reincke

In this group of preserved musical works, the name of the female composer Martha Reincke appears. Only seven pieces of her authorship have been preserved, yet the opus number 61 on one of them indicates that her artistic output was significantly larger. Five pieces were published in print, while two remain in manuscript. The figure of the female composer is hardly known to us. The lexicon by Peter Oliver Loew (n.d., pp. 227-312) includes only a brief note on her. The exact date of Martha Reincke's birth and death is unknown. The author of the lexicon approximates them to the second half of the 19th century, and the beginning of the 20th century. The name and surname of the composer can be found in the preserved Danzig residence registration books of 1902. According to these documents, Martha Reincke, a maiden, a piano teacher, lived in Danzig at ul. Św. Ducha 21 (Heilige Geistgasse) (Kafemann, 1902).

The same source from 1931 (Kafemann, 1931, p. 324) mentions the pianist and composer for the last time. It can therefore be assumed that by this time, she was an active piano teacher who (Kafemann, 1914, p. 405) lived at ul. Piwna 58 (Jopengasse) until 1913 or 1914.

The compositions by Marthe Reincke preserved in the PAS GL collection include:

1. *Neue patriotische Volkslieder* op. 12—a collection of four songs composed for piano with lyrics, self-published in Danzig in 1915:

- *Der gute Kamerad* (lyrics by Max Kolbe)
- *Südwestafrikanerlieder* (lyrics by an unknown poet)
- *Mein Schatz, das ist ein Reiter* (lyrics by Bruno Pompecki)
- *Wiegenlied* (Friedl Löhry)

2. *Erinnerung an Danzig, Tyrolienne für Klavier*, op. 61—self-published in Danzig before 1924 (as cited in P.O. Loew)

3. *O du mein Danzig, heut ich marschieren* (Bruno Pompecki)—a song arranged for piano with lyrics, manuscript kept at the PAS GL

4. *Danzig, du mein Heimatland* (Marta Hinz)—a song arranged for piano with lyrics, manuscript kept at the PAS GL

In his lexicon, Peter Oliver Loew also mentions an aria entitled *Wachet und betet* and *Albumblätter* written for piano (probably a collection of teaching pieces).

The compositions dating from the early 20th century, particularly from the World War I period, are clear testimony to the circumstances in which they were created. Four songs from the collection *Neue patriotischer Volkslieder* are a direct commentary on war: they refer to soldiers' dilemmas, address the subject of battles on the South African front, and praise the Leibhusaren regiment, i.e. the pride of the Danzig community. In the last song, a lullaby *Wiegenlied*, the theme of waiting for a soldier's happy return from the front appears. The songs, written in the spirit of patriotic euphoria, are musically unsophisticated, in terms of both tonality limited to major and minor, and the melodics. These features directly testify to the "practical" nature of the pieces. The two songs preserved in manuscripts are maintained in a similar patriotic spirit. Here, however, the local element clearly dominates: *O du mein Danzig, heut ich marschieren* and *Danzig, du mein Heimatland*.

As regards the authors of lyrics to these songs, two figures connected with Danzig can be mentioned, i.e. Bruno Pompecki and Marta Hinz. Especially the former is included among the major writers of Danzig (1880-1922). As reported by Peter Oliver Loew, Pompecki was born in Świecie and studied at three universities: in Marburg, Wrocław, and Königsberg. He worked as a teacher in Wejherowo and Oliwa (now a district of Gdańsk), although he probably never resided in Danzig itself. As a literary historian, he was the author of the book *Literaturgeschichte der Provinz Westpreußen*, published in 1915, and his poetic writings were published in the local press. He also published several volumes of verse and often addressed subjects related to Danzig (Loew, 2005, pp. 51-52)². On the other hand, Marta Hinz (born in 1870), an author of somewhat lesser importance, came from the city of Olsztyn. In 1915, she moved to Danzig to take up the position of junior librarian at *Danziger Volksbücherer*. She became a well-known writer and an author of poems and short stories based on Danzig-related themes (Rasmus, 1984, p. 66).

The only purely instrumental piece by Marta Reincke, preserved in the PAS GL collection, is *Erinnerung an Danzig* again self-published in Danzig under the opus number 61. The composition uses similar technical solutions in textural terms: a simple melody is accompanied by a schematic accompaniment. The form draws on the 19th century's practical artistic output with a clearly defined arrangement of motifs and phrases. The entire composition is based on major and minor chords, and the triple metre may indicate its practical use for dancing purposes.

Today, we do not know how this artistic work was received at the time. The PAS GL collection of social life documents includes a preserved concert programme from May 14, 1918,³ which mentions, among other pieces performed, a composition by Martha Reincke. The concert, entitled *Husarenabend*, was held at the Sporthalle (today's Baltic Opera building) on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the presence of the

² Compare: Peter Oliver Loew, *Gdańsk literacki 1793-1945*, Wydawnictwo Mestwin, Gdańsk 2005, pp. 51-52.

³ PAS GL's collection, Laboratory of Social Life Documents, File No. Od 23415 4°.

Leibhusaren (1st Hussar Regiment) in Danzig. According to this programme, the song *Mein Schatz, das ist ein Reiter*, with poetic lyrics provided by Bruno Pompecki, was performed by the combined male singing ensembles: *Sangerbund* and *Binderscher Männergesang-Verein*.

No more information is available about Martha Reincke herself. She was probably mainly engaged in teaching piano, as indicated by the above-mentioned *Adressbuch*. It is likely that Reincke's compositions appeared more frequently in programmes of numerous singing ensembles' concerts, yet there is no clear evidence of this apart from the programme presented above. The collection of her works was certainly much more extensive, as indicated by the high opus number of the piano composition. However, no traces of her artistic oeuvre have been preserved in the PAS GL collection. The character of these works, especially the focus on the local element and the military references, perfectly reflect the public mood of Danzig inhabitants during the first two decades of the 20th century. The piano miniature, dating from the early days of the Second Free City, no longer has the mood associated with the German Empire and its military might. It is simply a dance piece with a local element in the title.

Ella Mertins

Another female figure on the map of Danzig's musical life was Ella Mertins: a pianist, accompanist, composer, and piano teacher. She was very active as an artist, as her name is mentioned in numerous concert programmes. Therefore, it can be assumed that she was an accomplished pianist who willingly undertook various musical challenges. There is a rather extensive entry on Ella Mertins in the Encyclopaedia of Gdańsk, or *Gedanopedia*, by Jerzy Marian Michalak. The research conducted at the PAS GL confirmed the subsequent musical activities taken up by the pianist.

Ella Mertins, born in 1894 in Danzig, was the daughter of Danzig-based merchant Paul Karl Heinrich Mertins. Initially, she studied piano at one of Danzig conservatoires, i.e. the Westpreußisches Konservatorium, and took lessons from the well-known Danzig teacher, Fritz Binder. She later continued her education at the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik in Berlin in the years 1911-1915, where she studied the piano, pipe organ, and composition. A confirmation of this period of Berlin studies can be found in the *Goniec Czesłochowski* paper of 12 September 1915, which advertised a benefit concert featuring Ella Mertins, a pianist from Berlin⁴.

Upon her return to Danzig, Ella Mertins became active as a teacher, concert musician, and composer. No works of Mertins' authorship have been preserved at the PAS GL, although the collection of social life documents contains programmes testifying to her compositional activities.

Regarding articles published in the Danzig press, Peter Oliver Loew also mentions a number of works of her authorship, including chamber pieces (*Sonata in C minor "In Modo Preclassico"* for violin and piano, *Quartet* for flute, violin, cello, and piano), pieces for piano (*Waltz in D-flat major*, *Rhythmische Suite* for four hands, and *Schwedische Tänze*), and songs to lyrics of various German poets. Kurt (Curt) Koschnick wrote about her music in 1942 that it was maintained "in einer gemässigt modernen, innen klingenden Tonsprache" (in a rather modern, internally sounding tonal language) (Loew, n.d., pp. 281-282)⁵, and in 1937, referred to the *Sonata for violin and piano* by E. Lindow as "eingängiger Schlichtheit" (catchy simplicity) (Loew, n.d.)⁶.

⁴ *Koncert dobroczynny [Charity concert]*, "Goniec Czesłochowski" 1915 No. 223 (12 IX), p. 3.

⁵ C. Koschnick "Danziger Vorposten" 1942, as cited in: Peter Oliver Loew, *Lexikon Danziger...*, pp. 281-282.

⁶ E. Lindow "Danziger Vorposten" 1937, as cited in: Peter Oliver Loew, *ibidem*.

Apart from this well-documented compositional activity, Ella Mertins was primarily a pianist who was particularly active in chamber music. According to Jerzy Marian Michalak, between 1916 and 1945 she performed in more than 150 concerts (Michalak, 2021). In 1921, she established the *Danziger Trio*, which performed in varying line-ups until 1944. The PAS GL collection has preserved the evidence of these activities in the form of programmes of concerts held on 9th November and 8th December 1927.

Ella Mertins also performed various piano parts with an orchestra. In this context, Jerzy Marian Michalak mentions, e.g. Edvard Grieg's *Piano Concerto in A minor*, Haydn's *Piano Concerto in D major*, and Mozart's *Piano Concerto in D major* (the Coronation Concerto). The library's collection has preserved, among others, a programme of Ella Mertins' performance of one of the solo parts in J. S. Bach's Concerto for Four Pianos and Orchestra in A minor in 1931 with the accompaniment of the City Theatre's orchestra conducted by Henry Prins. The concert was held in a hall at the Friedrich-Wilhelm-Schützenhaus.

Among Mertins' more significant concerts, Jerzy Marian Michalak mentions the first-ever performance of Alexander Scriabin's *Piano Sonata in F-sharp major* op. 53 in Danzig, which was held on 9th March 1924 in the City Museum's refectory. She also appeared in radio broadcasts, and on 21st January 1939, she performed a full concert programme for the Danzig broadcasting station (Danziger Rundfunk) and presented works by Robert Schumann, Carl Maria von Weber, and Franz Schubert.

The library collection has preserved numerous programmes of concerts featuring Ella Mertins as an accompanist at chamber soirées and a pianist performing in concerts of singing ensembles. A considerable portion of the collection comprises programmes of concerts of lighter repertoire, especially those organised as part of the cyclical event "Kaffestunde der Danziger Hausfrau". The concerts were organised by the Danzig Women's Association (Danziger Hausfrau Verein) at the Friedrich-Wilhelm Schützenhaus.

Testimony of Ella Mertins' teaching activities can be found in the preserved programmes of student performances, which indicate that the pianist was a music teacher at the Ludwig Heidingsfeld Danziger Konservatorium.

During the World War II, she continued to be extremely active. Peter Oliver Loew also mentions in a biographical note on Ella Mertins that in the years 1942-1943, she completed a *Wermachtstournee* of France and Belgium, which, after all, is not too surprising a feature of these times. After 1945, she emigrated to Rostock, where she worked at the *Volkstheater* (People's Theatre) as a soloist tutor, continued to perform at concerts, and was socially active, e.g. she was a co-founder of the Gesellschaft der Freunde des Zoologischen Gartens (Zoological Garden Friends' Society).

Lotte Prins-Becker

Finally, the last of the female figures frequently appearing in the PAS GL collection of documents of everyday life is Lotte (Charlotte) Prins-Becker, a violinist and viola player born in Danzig in 1899 (Franke, 1927, p. 93). As reported by the *Gedanopedia*⁷, she was the daughter of a Jewish merchant named Julius. The above-mentioned address books actually include an entry for a merchant named Julius Becker residing just by the Mottlau River along the current Wartka Street (Becker Julius, Händler, Ambrausenden Wasser 2) (Kafemann, 1926, p. 20).

⁷ Compare: https://www.gedanopedia.pl/gdansk/?title=PRINS_HENRY.

A biographical note on Lotte was also included in the 1927 edition of the Danzig Residents Biographical Dictionary (*Danziger Bürgerbuch: Bilder aus Leben und Wirken Danziger Männer und Frauen in Politik, Wirtschaft, Presse, Kunst, Wissenschaft, Volksbildungobecnq*, published by the F.W. Burau publishing house in Danzig)⁸. Information about Lotte Princ-Becker can be found among information concerning the other women included in the publication. It can therefore be concluded that she was a well-known and popular person in the Danzig community. Thanks to this publication, we also know with certainty what the violinist looked like, as her photograph is shown in the book. The dictionary provides only a few laconic words about Lotte herself, but at least it is revealed that she studied in Danzig with Heinrich Davidsohn, and in Berlin with Professor Bernhard Dessau at the Stern Conservatoire (Stern Konservatorium).

In 1915, she married Henry Prins, about whom the dictionary provides more information, which is rather important because Henry Prins was a significant figure in the musical life of the city of Danzig. This violinist, conductor, and composer was born in Hertogenbosch, the Netherlands, in 1884. He studied at several universities, *inter alia* in Amsterdam, Cologne, and Brussels. At the age of 17 (1901), he became the concertmaster of the Philharmonic Orchestra in Prague, and in 1906, concertmaster of the Chemnitz orchestra. According to the *Gedanopedia*, he toured extensively, e.g. with Max Reger⁹. In 1909, Prins came to Danzig, where he took up a teaching position at the *Westpreußisches Konservatorium*. He was an exceptionally active musician and organiser. In 1911, Henry Prins founded the Musical Society (Musikalische Gesellschaft), in 1912, the Danzig Orchestral Society (Danziger Orchester-Verein), and in 1920, the Philharmonic Society (Philharmonische Gesellschaft). In addition to playing the violin, he performed many times as a conductor of a symphonic orchestra. He also managed a concert booking agency that organised chamber and symphonic concerts at the City Theatre, the Wilhelms Theatre, in a hall at the Danziger Hof hotel, and in a hall at the Friedrich-Wilhelm Schützenhaus (Friedrich Wilhelm Shooting Fraternity House). Together with his wife, they formed the core of the Danzig String Quartet (des Danziger Streichquartett).

Due to repressions in the 1930s (from 1933), Prins was excluded from active public work, as were other Jewish artists in the city. He probably left for his native Netherlands with his wife before the outbreak of war (Kafemann, 1939)¹⁰. According to the *Gedanopedia*, both deportees died in a concentration camp, possibly Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The PAS GL collection has preserved numerous materials documenting the artistic activities of the married couple of Lotte and Henry Prins. Lotte is mentioned in them as a concert violinist and viola player in both solo performances with an orchestra and chamber performances with a piano accompaniment. Some of these include:

Vereinskonzert, 1st March 1928(?), Henry Prins—conductor, Gustel Heinrichsdorff—vocals, Lotte Prins—violin, Eva Boehm—violin, Paul Najda—violin, Elisabeth Abramowski—harpichord and piano, Der Danziger Orchestverein, programme: G. F. Händel—Concerto grosso No 20 in F major, songs by Ch. W. Gluck and G. B. Pergolesi; William Brade—*Tänze für Streichorchester*, Frederick the Great: *Symphonie in G major*; J. S. Bach—aria from the *Passion acc. to St Matthew*; Atonio Vivaldi: *Concerto for three violins and orchestra*, the Petrischule Hall.

⁸ *Danziger Bürgerbuch...*

⁹ Compare: https://www.gedanopedia.pl/gdansk/?title=PRINS_HENRY.

¹⁰ This information is extracted from the *Gedanopedia*, according to which Henry Prins left in 1938. An inquiry of the residence registration books does not confirm this information, as the names of Lotte and Henry Prins are listed in them in 1939. Compare: https://www.gedanopedia.pl/gdansk/?title=PRINS_HENRY; *Danziger Einwohnerbuch: mit allen eingemeindeten Vororten und Zoppot 1939*, A. W. Kafemann, Danzig 1939.

Vereinskonzert, 13th April 1929, Henry Prins—conductor, Lotte Prins—violin, Der Danziger Orchestverein, programme: W. A. Mozart *Serenata notturna für 2 kleine Orchester*; Giuseppe Tartini *Violinkonzert in d minor*; W. A. Mozart: *Divertimento No 11* for oboe, two French horns and string orchestra, auditorium of the St John Secondary School (Realgymnasium zu St. Johann) at Fleischergasse 25/28.

Vereinskonzert, 17th March 1932, Henry Prins—conductor, Lotte Prins—violin, Max Begemann—baritone, Der Danziger Orchestverein, programme: J. S. Bach *Konzert für konzertierende Violine, Streichorchester und Cembalo* in A minor; Arcangelo Corelli *Concerto grosso* for string orchestra op. 6 No 12 in F major, J. S. Bach *Kantata "Ich will den Kreuzstab gerne tragen"*; G. F. Händel *Concerto grosso* op. 6 No 5 in G minor, a hall at the Danziger Hof hotel.

Liederabend, 15th February 1931—*An Evening of Songs*; Elly Sachsenhaus—vocals, Otto Selberg—piano, Lotte Prins—viola; the programme includes songs by Haendel, Benedetto, Marcello, Giovanni Martini, Francesco Durante, Franz Schubert, Johannes Brahms, Hugo Wolf, and Gustav Mahler; the Loge zur Einigkeit hall at Neugarten 8 (Nowe Ogrody).

As part of her chamber music activities, Lotte Prinz performed with the Danzig String Quartet both classical works by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, and those from the turn of the 19th century, including works for string quartets by Dvořák, Reger, Strawiński, and Ravel.

Despite her Jewish origins, Lotte Prins took part in the so-called Geistliches Konzerte held in many churches of the city, e.g. the St Mary's (Saint Marien) Church and St Bartholomew's (Bartolomei) Church, until the 1930s. Like Ella Mertins, the violinist also performed in concerts organised by women's associations (*Danziger Hausfrau*), the so-called "Kaffestunde". The relatively large number of preserved documents testify to the important role that Lotte Prins played in Danzig's musical life. She was certainly the leading violinist of this milieu until the early 1930s. Later on, together with her husband, they performed in concerts but limited their activity to the Danzig Jewish community, which was actually a characteristic feature of artists of Jewish origin in the city in the second half of the 1930s. Despite emigrating, she was not able to escape her tragic fate.

Conclusion

All of the collected materials, as well as encyclopaedic entries and press reports, testify to the significant role that these musically talented and active women played in pre-war Danzig. The figures presented above did not limit themselves to one role, as they usually served many of them as performers, teachers, composers, and organisers of musical life. However, they were active during a difficult time of ominous political transformations in the city's history. The complete list of their achievements, the roles they served, and their everyday lives are probably impossible to reconstruct these days. The materials that have survived to this day only show an outline of the women's musical life of Danzig, which came to an end in 1945. This bygone world with its multiple tones is remembered in the hope that the collections preserved by the PAS GL will be researched more extensively and in greater depth in the future.

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