

→ FESTIVAL PROFILE

ETHNO PORT

Poznań, Poland

Ethno Port offers a feast for the ears, eyes, feet and belly. There's nothing else like it in Poland: Tim Cumming visits the idyllic town of Poznań to find out why it's so special

I'm leaving my hotel the morning after Ethno Port's closing night, wondering how to get to Poznań's airport, when I fortuitously meet festival coordinator Bożena Szota. We repair to her offices in an early 20th-century Imperial Castle, built for the German Emperor William II, and used as a base by Hitler during World War II. It's now a cultural centre, with enormous rooms and echoing hallways straight out of the set for *Citizen Kane*.

Ethno Port's offices are high up in the building, in rooms that were once the wardrobe to the empress of Poland. A manual typewriter sits on a windowsill behind ancient metal blinds. The dust on its case looks like it settled with the Iron Curtain. You can see a monument to the

1956 uprising from the window.

Bożena Szota has been with the festival since its beginning in 2008, and has helped it grow into Poland's most significant world music gathering – what Szota describes as “an annual celebration for the fans of the less easily definable, of the ever-more interweaving cultures of the world, as well as for purists seeking sensations closer to the raw tradition.”

Previous years have featured Staff Benda Bilili and Hanggai (2010), *qawwali* singer Faiz Ali Faiz, Juju and Colombian group LA-33 (2011). Last year's festival included Titi Robin, Maallem Mokhtar Gania and Celso Piña. This is a town festival; there's no camping here. Festival-goers wander down from town around midday to catch the

lectures, workshops and films on show before the music begins. When the live programme finishes, there's a late-night festival club where DJs sets mix with more informal, communal live performances. Eclecticism remains the key. “It is hard to believe,” enthuses Szota, “that during one night the crowds applauds a charismatic rocker from the UK, a traditional pipe player from Greater Poland and Palestinian virtuosos of the Arabic *oud*.” That may be par for the course at a global gathering like WOMAD, but here in Poznań there's nothing else like it.

The festival site comprises a marquee and open-air main stage with a busy bar between them, in the grounds of the old channel of the Warta River. Nearby is an

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enormous red-brick power station, long decommissioned and occasionally used by experimental theatre groups. It's a few blocks down from Stary Rynek, Poznań's almost absurdly picturesque cobbled town square that dates from the 13th century and which is very much the thriving centre of the city.

Here, ranged around the Renaissance architecture of the Town Hall, you'll find a slew of terraced bars on the ground floors of striking 16th-century merchants' houses. Around it lies a warren of narrow streets dotted with boutiques, clubs, restaurants, even a good independent record store. As luck would have it, a slow food festival had moved in, too, which meant a banquet of dishes from all over Poland – breads, cakes that take 72 hours to prepare, fruit liqueurs, Pomerian beer and berry wines, Benedictine pick-me-ups and gargantuan sausages, alongside arts and crafts, military horses and an organ grinder.

Typical of Ethno Port's adventurous programming was the showmanship and shamanism of South Korean ensemble Noreum Machi. They perform music of percussive intensity called *samul nori* in elaborate costumes, their headgear trailing long streamers that swirl around their heads like streaks of light. They also field large drums, gongs and cymbals, each evoking essential forces – sun and moon, earth, fire and water. The latter is a modern staging of an ancient peasant ritual steeped in shamanism and animistic fire, called *pungmul nori*. It's strikingly dramatic and exotic, and helps to keep the open-air festival crowd of 1,000 or so people warm against the grey skies and intermittent drizzle of an unusually chilly Saturday night.

Poland and its neighbours' porous folk traditions are a festival speciality. Though they didn't top the closing night bill – that went to BBB (Balkan Beat Box) and their



new Occupy-era album of bare-chested political rock-rap – young all-female band Vidlunnia showed great potential. The name is Ukrainian and means ‘echo,’ and their inspiration comes from the traditional songs of Ukraine, Belarus and Poland, and from their own song-seeking travels through those regions. Intimate and largely acoustic, Vidlunnia stripped back the centuries while remaining rooted in their own time, with a shout-singing style and folk instruments mixing with 21st-century synthetic sounds.

But even they were topped on the closing night by a marquee set of glorious vocal polyphony from Satovcha, a small mountain village in south-west Bulgaria, courtesy of the women of Na Visoko. Their songs are short – often less than two minutes – but their performance is extraordinary; earthier and punchier than the academy-trained *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares*.

Three women from the group had come to find Bożena Szota as we were walking towards the festival offices the following morning. They had brought with them gifts of an apron, slippers and a shawl woven by the singers themselves in the village colours. Their opportunities for international travel are limited, but the impact of their performance is universal. “Their music drills deep inside me,” one festival-goer told me as the set ended. Szota agrees. “It is a pure tradition, unadorned and offering no easy access,

but they put a spell on listeners. I had the impression that it was the most applauded concert this year.”

Each year, the festival features a special commission. For 2013, it will be Poland's young indie electro-folk trio Dagadana working with high-energy string band *Vołosi*. For 2012 it was Moroccan Gnawi Maallem Mokhtar Gania with jazz improviser Michael Zerang and clarinetist Waclaw Zimpel. Gania was on fire and in command, setting a supersonic pace with heavy, deep *gimbri* rhythms that the jazzers struggled to match.

With 2013's programme promising mercurial Hungarian violinist Félix Lajkó, Boban and Marko Marković and veteran Italians Canzoniere Grecanico Salentino [who are a Top of the World review this issue], Ethno Port retains its promise of lasting musical encounters and dramatic juxtapositions. It's a relaxed and intimate celebration of the larger community that music brings together, where you'll find intriguing, often spellbinding regional acts – the Bulgarian Women of No Visoko come to mind – that you simply won't find elsewhere. And if you're lucky, that slow food festival will have swung back into town, to satisfy the taste buds as profoundly as the music satisfies the heart, the feet and the ears. ■

DATES The next Ethno Port festival will take place June 6–9 2013

ONLINE www.ethnoport.pl

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