



Photos by Simon Broughton

Kazimierz Dolny

The idyllic Polish town has kept traditional music alive for half a century. Simon Broughton reports

The festival of traditional music in the Polish town of Kazimierz Dolny is an institution. It celebrates its 50th edition this year. Polish Radio have been there virtually since the beginning and many of the best recordings of Polish traditional music were made of artists performing at the festival. Its long-winded, official name is the All Poland Festival of Folk Bands and Singers (Ogólnopolski Festiwal Kapel i Śpiewaków Ludowych), but most people simply refer to it as Kazimierz Dolny.

The festival basically dominates the town over a weekend in June. There are performers wandering around in traditional costume, kitsch souvenirs on sale as well as antiques and musical instruments. On a café seat there's a hairy bagpipe with horns, looking like a sleeping animal. There are few festivals where you can sit so conveniently drinking a

beer at one of the many cafés in the square and have a perfect view of the stage.

Kazimierz Dolny is one of the prettiest towns in Poland. There's a castle on one hill, a monastery on another and at its heart is a charming market square, the *rynek*, where the festival stage is situated. The town is on the river Vistula, about halfway downstream between Kraków and Warsaw, and its heyday was when the river was the principal trade route. It was named in the 12th century after the Grand Duke Kazimierz the Just and was an important trading town for grain and timber. Along the river are handsome monumental granaries with stepped roofs.

In 1334 King Kazimierz the Great gave Jews legal protection and freedom of movement and trade in Poland, which they didn't have in many other places in Europe. Kazimierz Dolny became a significant Jewish town and in the



1930s a prime movie location for the short-lived Yiddish film industry, thanks to its picturesque *shtetl* flavour. Fifty per cent of the population was Jewish and with its market traders in long coats, horses and carts and bundles of cloth, it looked like something from the Middle Ages. All of this disappeared in World War II. The former synagogue is a museum of the town's Jewish history. Former butchers' shops on the small square are now occupied by a popular beer bar selling pork fat among other non-kosher snacks.

The other side of Kazimierz Dolny's history, which is very much alive, is as an artist's colony – a Polish St Ives or Pont-Aven. In the early 20th century painters came to settle and work here, and their subject was largely the town itself. The excellent Celejowska House Museum (Kamienica Celejowska) showcases the quality of their work.



The traditional music festival started in 1956, the brainchild of Jadwiga Sobieska. She and her brother Marian were crucial collectors of Polish folk music after World War II, during which all the archive recordings had been destroyed. It's a competition as much as a festival with a jury of specialists – rather like the Fleadh Cheoil in Ireland. "I'm sure that the festival has helped traditional music survive," says Andrzej Sar, who has been the festival's director since 2007. "Particularly now that traditional music is no longer played at weddings, the festival gives people the impetus to find music and practice it, and the village will take pride if they win a prize."

But many feel the archaic rules and regulations of the competition reek of the old regime. Piano accordions are banned, but button accordions are permitted. Musicians must perform only their local repertoire, although in the internet age this makes little sense. And performers have to wear traditional costumes implying a communist legacy of state-organised folklore that many are uncomfortable with. But Maria Baliszewska, one of Poland's most respected ethnomusicologists and a jury member for 20 years, believes that the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. "We have hot discussions about whether we should have prizes or not, but I think they help. And younger musicians are still learning from the old masters. In the past people were ashamed of village life because it meant a poor existence, but now it's simply a question of identity."

One of the important changes to the festival took place in 2008, when a tent

was created where people could dance to the music – following the model of the Hungarian *tancház* (dance house). This was initiated by Remek Mazur-Hanaj, an important figure in the traditional revival of recent years. "Most of the village music is for dancing so it makes no sense to play for just ten minutes in front of a jury or seated audience," he says. "The full role of the festival should be to create a continuum and this wasn't happening before. Many old musicians do not have students in the villages, but there are students in the towns. It was becoming a festival of performers, but almost no audience." There's no doubt that the dance tent, named *Tyndryndy* (a nonsense but musically onomatopoeic word), brings a sense of energy and fun to the proceedings. Various bands play throughout the evening and then



Clockwise from main image: the festival stage in the *rynek*; Paulina Kwaśniewska and Zdzisław Marczuk in the parade; Rawianie band recording for Polish Radio; Józef Broda with his bark trumpet; the main square; in the dance tent

the music often spins off in informal groups.

In the festival proper there are around 140 artists or groups totalling around 800 performers from 14 of Poland's 16 regions. The competition includes instrumental groups and soloists, singing groups and soloists, revival groups (called *Folklore Continuation*) and, perhaps the most interesting, a master and student section. Here I loved the partnership of Zdzisław Marczuk, a characterful veteran violinist from the Lubelskie region in the east, with Paulina Kwaśniewska, a young girl full of attitude and panache who always ends her pieces with a wonderful flourish. Rightly, they were prize-winners. One of the onstage MCs is the extravagantly bearded Józef Broda, clearly a festival institution, who blows a massive bark trumpet whenever given a chance.

After two days of competition, the Saturday evening ends with a show by a non-traditional artist. Over the years this has included the St

Nicholas Orchestra, the Warsaw Village Band, *Transkapela* and, last year, *Čači Vorba* with singer and fiddler Maria Natanson. On the Sunday morning there's a procession of all the participants through the square before the final prize giving.

It really is a delightful place to hear the best of Polish traditional music. ♦

+ DATES This year's festival will take place June 23-26
+ ONLINE bit.ly/kazimierzdolny

