

→ FESTIVAL PROFILE

WARSAW CROSS- CULTURE FESTIVAL

POLAND

Over the past decade, Poland has re-asserted itself as one of Europe's cultural powerhouses. Alongside its visual arts, cinema and classical music, it also has a great world music festival – actually one of *Songlines'* Top 25. Simon Broughton reports

PHOTOS JK WITKOWSKI, UNLESS STATED

Maybe because it's not on the Mediterranean or in the Caribbean – or because it's not home to a diverse melting-pot of cultures – Warsaw seems a surprising place for a world music festival. But it's for those very reasons that the city of Warsaw is keen to have one.

The Warsaw Cross-Culture Festival (Festiwal Skrzyżowanie Kultur, in Polish) started in 2005. "The mission of the festival is to open both residents and guests of Warsaw to the cultural wealth of the modern world," explains artistic director Maria Pomianowska. She is a musician who studied Indian *sarangi* and plays several

different Asian instruments as well as reconstructions of medieval Polish instruments. "The Cross-Culture Festival is also a way to help the residents of Warsaw become more open to different cultures," she adds. While Warsaw is quite a culturally homogeneous city, Poles are now richly contributing to the cultural diversity of other cities in Western Europe – and beyond – and bringing more cosmopolitan tastes home with them. What impressed me was the quality of the music, the dedication of the audience and the fact that it was held in and around the magnificent, Stalinist Palace of Culture and Science in the centre of the new city of Warsaw. This socialist skyscraper was Stalin's gift to the Polish

people in the early 1950s and was the dominant structure on the horizon until capitalist superstructures moved in after 1989. It has become the dominating symbol of the city, with its exaggerated crenellations and socialist realist statues representing the arts and sciences. If you strip away the cultural oppression from Moscow, it's a fine piece of 50s architecture and features the Congress Hall which hosts the opening concert – this year Nigeria's Femi Kuti.

The other concerts take place in a smaller festival tent built outside the hall, but with around 1,000 seats it makes for a more relaxed space for the music. Pretty much all the concerts were full last year with a spectacular list of international names, including Ladysmith Black Mambazo (from South Africa), Haggai (from China), Salif Keita (from Mali) and Buika (from Spain) at the opening concert. Talking to Albert Mazibuko, the spokesman of Ladysmith, he said he was keen to come to Poland because his first job, aged eight, was working on the farm of a Polish landowner in the city of Ladysmith. And he was mightily impressed by the audience – "it's a very nice public and they like dancing," he said.

One of the real assets of the Stalinist monolith is a multi-screen cinema area where music films are shown. I have to declare an interest here as several documentaries of mine were part of the programme. But Poland has a fantastic culture of cinema, the screening facilities are first-class and the audiences are really good and responsive. This year they have films about Fela, *fado*, flamenco, the Guča festival and *Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul*.

The other surprising secret of the Palace of Culture is the Arts Café – an informal place where the musicians go and eat and where there are DJ sessions after the shows. Few festivals have a club-like space like this where audiences and artists can meet so easily.

The festival also has a week of workshops, including a didgeridoo one, pictured below



Warsaw's most recognisable landmark – the Palace of Culture and Science

SIMON BROUGHTON



Revellers dancing in the informal, club-like space, the Arts Café,

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I like the idea that people might head to Warsaw for esoteric musical workshops whilst Poles colonise the world as plumbers

Running alongside the week-long festival, Warsaw also has a week of workshops with top international artists – for a token fee of just 50zł (£10) per course. Last year there was Persian singing with Mahsa Vahdat, Middle Eastern percussion with Zohar Fresco and didgeridoo with Ondřej Smeykal – all of them full. I snuck in to just one of the sessions with Vahdat and it was amazing how much I picked up in two or three hours. Maciej Szajkowski, percussionist with the Warsaw Village Band, was going with his frame drum to the sessions with Fresco. How much can be achieved over five days is shown in a concert on the final afternoon featuring participants in the workshops. And this was no school concert, but a spectacular event, particularly the massed drummers

and didgeridoos. This year Fresco is back for a return visit and there are also workshops in flamenco percussion (with David Cobo Amores), Sámi *joiking* (with Torgeir Vassvik from Norway), tarantella (with Giovanni Amati from Italy) and others. I like the idea that people might head to Warsaw for esoteric musical workshops whilst Poles colonise the world as plumbers. There are workshops in Polish singing, but I wish there was a little more space for Polish roots music in the programming.

The Warsaw Cross-Culture Festival certainly has few rivals in this part of Europe at this time of year (late September) and it's already a musical magnet for people in the vicinity. And while Warsaw isn't Poland's most beautiful city, it is a great European capital that becomes even more interesting while the festival is on. The reconstructed Old Town, with its Royal Castle and churches, not to mention its many bars and cafés, is an extraordinary achievement, rebuilt from rubble after World War II and now looking like it's been there for centuries.

Apart from Femi Kuti, the Cross-Culture



Chinese folk band Hanggai were one of the many bands included in this year's outstanding line-up

Festival has a European focus this year as Poland currently holds the EU presidency. There are concerts from Mercedes Peón and Carmen Linares (Spain), Maria Kalaniemi (Finland), Sara Tavares (Portugal), Psarantonis (Greece), Aynur (Turkey) and many others. Now that Poland is an active presence on the European cultural scene, it's time for this festival to get international attention. ●

DATES Warsaw Cross-Culture festival runs from September 26-30

ONLINE www.festival.warszawa.pl



Main image: Concha Buika's concert in the Congress Hall at the Palace of Culture and Science
 Inset: Warsaw's new Old Town, rebuilt after World War II

TOMASZ BIDERMANN/FOTOLIA.COM

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