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### Eastern Europe: Introductory Thoughts

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## EASTERN EUROPE

### Introductory Thoughts

*Barbara Milewski*

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Any discussion of Eastern European choral music of the nineteenth century holds unique challenges. How do we discuss distinct national choral music traditions born and nurtured in an age of multiethnic empires and against the backdrop of shifting boundaries and socio-political realities? And how do our present-day geopolitical conceptions of modern countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Russia shape our understanding of these vibrant but culturally distant nineteenth-century choral traditions? Decades after communism's collapse, our knowledge of the region's choral music is fragmentary at best, a consequence, in large part, of a half century of Cold War politics, language barriers, and limited scholarly exchange. It is thus important for us to approach these choral developments not only on their own terms—that is, as the unique products of both empire building and national striving, and the myriad ways such agendas more often than not intersected—but also as formative musical contributions that now culturally define autonomous (and far more homogenous) Eastern European nations today.

Beyond these rather global concerns, there are the more immediate difficulties of registering the specific political conditions that fostered each of the four national choral traditions touched on in this chapter. At the end of the eighteenth century, Poland, then known as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, was divided among Russia, Prussia, and Austria, and eradicated from the map of Europe, creating distinct socio-cultural circumstances that differentiated choral music development in each of the three foreign-controlled territories during the nineteenth century. At the same time, Hungary and the Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia were subject to Habsburg imperial authority and tolerated (to lesser or greater extents) Austro-German cultural hegemony, with only the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary bringing domestic self-rule to Hungary in 1867. And while Russia was not subject to foreign political dominance, attempts to move away from a century of Western musical influence and establish a choral music practice based on indigenous Russian vocal traditions paralleled nationalist impulses in other parts of Eastern Europe.

Then there is the matter of geographic place names. The shift from national strivings in the nineteenth century to full-fledged, independent national identities in the twenty-first—not to mention the various geopolitical realities of the twentieth century in between—has rendered an Eastern Europe defined over time in multiple languages, its cities still known to us today by names that bear the traces of shifting national boundaries, and periods of foreign occupation. For the purpose of these chapters focusing on Eastern Europe, then, we have provided place names as they

were most commonly used in the nineteenth century, followed by modern-day place designations, that is, names one would encounter more recently, or if traveling the region today.

Despite the unique geopolitical and socio-cultural circumstances that prevailed upon different developing choral traditions across Eastern Europe, generally speaking we can see some common trends. With the exception of the Polish territories, all-male choirs dominated the Eastern European choral music landscape until the last quarter of the century, when women's and mixed choirs began to flourish alongside them. Public sacred concerts, ever more popular in the regions under discussion here as the century progressed, allowed for sacred choral works to be heard in extra-liturgical settings (as was the case in other parts of Europe). Finally, socio-political changes after the revolutions and reforms of the 1860s led to the emergence of greater numbers of vibrant choral music societies that, though largely amateur, did an enormous service to the development and advancement of separate national choral traditions.