

Magdalena Grzebałkowska, *Komeda: A Private Life in Jazz*

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Hypothetically speaking, any list of modern jazz musicians warranting consideration in the context of film music history and analysis should include that of Krzysztof Komeda (1931–1969). He wrote scores for at least thirty motion pictures (though there are disagreements between sources) and in several national contexts including Poland, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium, Britain, and the USA. And comparing him to other prolific composers invoking the jazz idiom in their scores would at least yield a sense of Komeda's preference for modern jazz as an aesthetic *choice*, commencing with Roman Polanski's student film *Two Men and a Wardrobe* (1958). Komeda also stretched the parameters of his jazz scores according to his unique talent for assimilating classical and Eastern European folk influences, which set him apart from other Polish and European jazz musicians playing with him and in other ensembles across the 1950s and '60s. And Komeda moved completely outside of the jazz idiom in much of his film music, orchestrating a range between classically melodic passages and abstract sound effects nevertheless intimately tied to the visual material at hand. All told, Komeda is something of an oddity among 1960s-era jazz musicians as well as film composers of the time.

As it so happens, a biography *has* been endeavored for said Polish jazz musician and film composer Krzysztof Trzcíński, who began to employ the last name "Komeda" according to the trend among jazz musicians to adopt a pseudonym. This is *Komeda: A Private Life in Jazz* by Magdalena Grzebałkowska. Its 2018 publication (and Halina Maria Boniszewska's

2020 English translation) would appear to reflect a larger impulse to re-evaluate Komeda as an artist of lasting significance. The book was anticipated by two feature documentaries, *Komeda: A Soundtrack for Life* (2010) and *Komeda, Komeda* (2012), both of which interview many of the same individuals such as Roman Polanski. However, it is fair to say this isn't a typical biography whose researcher strives for a cohesive narrative thrust in the direction of the subject's ultimate worth or contribution to society. Instead, it might be described as a straightforward "log" of entries both anecdotal and archival. Arranged chronologically, these are derived from interviews with surviving individuals who were intimately involved with Komeda. One should concede a degree of arbitrariness to these entries according to the fact that certain individuals in a position to offer an authentic account were either unavailable or unwilling, the biographer admits, to be interviewed. "But from the eighty-two meetings," she defends, "a picture of Komeda and times slowly emerged" (p. 413).

There is a decided air of "doom" conferred upon the book by organizing the chronological progression of its fifteen chapters according to "years and days remaining" in Komeda's tragically brief lifetime. (He suffered an accidental head injury in 1968 while living in Los Angeles, which brought on an extended coma and his eventual death in 1969.) As appropriate as this approach would seem, it makes the biography awkward as a ready-reference guide to the defining periods of the musician's life and development as a composer. Rather than organizing sections according

to defining events and/or periods (“youth,” “early Polish jazz festivals,” “first film scores,” etc.), for example, the book relies on the scholar to assign means of relocating useful entries.

In transcribing and ordering so many individual reports of a man’s life, there is little or no attempt on the author’s part to advance an overarching meaning or even to analyze Komeda’s music. Rather, this is simply a detailed, “play-by-play” account of his life, sans any apparent bias or academic agenda. That is, the biography *presumes* Komeda’s greater relevance rather than setting out to substantiate it. Nevertheless, it remains both consistently accessible and interesting. This is a man who grew up during the Nazi occupation of Poland, although certainly not in as threatening circumstances as Polanski within the Jewish ghettos of Kraków. Komeda also developed polio as a boy and yet still managed to hone his musical talent as well as complete his medical training to become a nose and throat specialist—an admirable career path he ultimately renounced for the sake of his insurmountable jazz-making impulses. One has the impression from the biography that, although he did his share of social drinking within the many live performance venues and house parties around Poland where he invariably found himself seated at the piano bench, he never fell prey to trappings of the 1960s jazz underworld and its many alcoholics and heroin addicts. Apparently, then, it really wasn’t the typical pattern of abusive consumption that finally silenced his musical genius, as much as a haphazard occurrence within the surrounding Hollywood lifestyle that eventually drew him in.

For what this biography does *not* attempt to do, I would suggest its usefulness derives from the details it provides about Komeda’s *formative* period as a jazz composer—but less so in terms of his development as a film music composer. The author appears to have prioritized gleaning accounts of the “Polish” phase of the musician’s life, rather than his experiences working on feature film projects produced abroad (or perhaps traveling costs made the latter purpose more prohibitive). Details such as Komeda’s early piano lessons practicing Bach and Chopin, as well as his leading a high-school band on an accordion, go some distance in explaining how his own eventual jazz sextet would assimilate classical and folk influence into its jazz compositions. For example, at one point, when the band had only been playing jazz standards, it was suggested they adapt Bach’s *Invention in B flat major* to the jazz idiom. As it turned out, improvising on a Bach theme turned out to be a huge hit with

early jazz festival attendees in Poland. And the book provides ample discussion of how the postwar communist regime under Soviet dominance affected Komeda’s later ensemble work. For example, he incorporated Russian and other regional folk music so the Polish government wouldn’t censor the group for playing “imperialist” American jazz.

As for his approaches to film music, the biography provides some testament to his inclination to work intimately with a filmmaker, watching the given film, discussing the music, and then setting off to compose it, cue by cue. At one point, the biographer makes the claim that “Of all the jazz styles, Komeda believes that modern jazz lends itself best to film” and then cites the composer himself as stating, “Jazz harmonizes well with the atmosphere of films with contemporary subject matter; especially psychological and detective films, and thrillers” (p. 204). But, as I’ve suggested already, the author does not attempt to offer any interpretation of *why* Komeda held this conviction. Subsequently, she quotes him declaring, “I am opposed to the overuse of film music. I believe that it should only exist where it is really necessary, and that it’s actually better to have less of it than more” (p. 204). And “I go beyond jazz in film. That departure is going to be something new in my work as a composer” (p. 204). Indeed, Komeda *does* move beyond the jazz idiom in many of his film scores. But it is also *beyond* the purpose of this biography to explain more precisely *in what capacity* he does so.

Grzebałkowska’s biography, or, rather, chronology of interviews and archival documents, provides an intimate glimpse into the life and development of a Polish jazz musician whose unique talent for hybridizing musical forms made its greatest impact across an international spectrum of film soundtracks.

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