



PASO ROBLES, CALIFORNIA

PADEREWSKI VOICES

MAREK ZEBROWSKI

A 2004 search for a piano in Paso Robles grew into two decades of musical connections between California and Poland.

When Marek Zebrowski came to Paso Robles hoping to revive a festival honoring Ignacy Jan Paderewski, one of his first problems was decidedly practical.

He needed a place to have a concert.

Zebrowski visited vineyards around Paso Robles looking for a possible concert venue before eventually arriving at Cass Winery. Owners Steve and Alice Cass were away, but manager Erin du Fresne showed him the winery, opened the Barrel Room and even took him to the Cass residence, where she suggested they might use Alice Cass' piano.

Zebrowski found another possibility.

After talking with then-Paso Robles school superintendent Pat Sayne, he located a Steinway concert grand at Paso Robles High School. By summer 2005, Zebrowski was meeting with Steve Cass, who had offered the winery as a concert venue without charge, and making arrangements for the piano and recital.

BRINGING THE FESTIVAL BACK

There was already a history to revive.

Founded in 1991 by Virginia Peterson and Barbara Partridge, the Paderewski Festival held its first festival in 1993. It celebrated the renowned Polish pianist, composer, statesman and humanitarian whose ties to Paso Robles included extensive landholdings, vineyards and almond orchards.

But 2003 brought two significant losses. Peterson died in April. Eight months later, the San Simeon earthquake seriously damaged Flamson Middle School, leaving unusable the longtime home of Festival concerts.

Zebrowski, who became director of USC's Polish Music Center in 2004, believed Paderewski belonged in the story of Paso Robles.

Other California communities celebrated composers who had never set foot there, he noted. Paderewski had. He had put down roots as an almond and grape grower and considered Paso Robles his American home.

In October 2006, English pianist Jonathan Plowright performed at Cass Winery, marking the festival's return.

Zebrowski wasn't there. He had concert commitments in Europe.

After returning to Los Angeles, he eventually drove back to Paso Robles, met then-Mayor Frank Mecham for breakfast at the Paso Robles Inn and continued the work

of turning a successful concert into something more permanent.

Cass invited Joel Peterson — Virginia Peterson’s grandson — to lunch.

“We began getting the Board together,” Zebrowski recalled.

At first, Zebrowski said he envisioned only the festival.

What grew from it became considerably larger.

BUILDING CONNECTIONS TO POLAND

A few years later came the Youth Piano Competition, created in part to encourage higher standards of piano study and performance on the Central Coast. Then came another idea: a Cultural Exchange Program connecting young musicians in California and Poland.

In 2008, Festival board members traveled to Poland to begin establishing it.

Zebrowski could not have anticipated all that would grow from those relationships, he said — connections with Poland’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, music schools, academies and universities, as well as summer programs in which the festival participates.

For more than two decades, Zebrowski has been a common thread connecting Paso Robles with musicians, students, educators and cultural institutions from Los Angeles to Poland.

During the 2008 visit in Poland, Joel Peterson described him as the group’s “fearless leader,” translating as conversations ranged from music to politics and invariably returned to Paderewski.

“Until Marek Zebrowski got involved, we really wouldn’t have had this credence,” Peterson said at the time.

The relationships established during that period helped lead to the sister-city connection between Paso Robles and the Tarnów region of Poland and, in 2009, the festival’s first student cultural exchange.

Three Central Coast pianists traveled to Poland for individual instruction, practice and performances at places including Paderewski’s former estate at Kąśna Dolna and Jagiellonian University in Kraków.

Contemporaneous coverage described Zebrowski as organizer, musical mentor, intermediary, guide, translator and scheduler as he worked alongside students, teachers and their hosts.

That role has continued as the festival’s connections have grown. Zebrowski works with young musicians, teachers and performers, helps prepare students for concerts and brings together people and institutions on both sides of the Atlantic.

Sometimes he is at the piano himself.

‘ARTS CANNOT EXIST IN A VACUUM’

For Zebrowski, those relationships are not separate from the music. They are part of what allows the arts to matter.

“Arts cannot exist in a vacuum,” he said. “They must be sustained by the communities in the widest sense of this term. They must be relevant to today’s life and minister to the needs of the society in which they seek to thrive.”

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His work with Paderewski has also extended well beyond the festival stage.

Zebrowski has spent decades studying Paderewski’s life and legacy. He is the author of *Paderewski in California*, exploring Paderewski’s extensive ties to the state, including his years as a landowner and agricultural pioneer on the Central Coast.

His research has also helped shape how Paderewski’s history is presented locally, including work on the historical timeline developed for the interactive

Paderewski exhibit at Paso Robles' Pioneer Museum.

Yet after writing books and giving presentations about Paderewski around the world, Zebrowski said the subject still surprises him. Each time he prepares a new lecture, he said, he discovers something new about Paderewski's "rich life and admirable legacy."

Paderewski's significance, in Zebrowski's view, reaches far beyond his fame as a pianist and composer.

He was a statesman, humanitarian and benefactor who supported musicians, veterans, hospitals, educational institutions and other causes.

Paderewski, Zebrowski said, provided "a shining example of a public person who devoted his life to the common good."

The festival that Zebrowski initially imagined simply bringing back eventually grew to encompass concerts, the Youth Piano Competition, Cultural Exchange Program, master classes, films about Polish music, history and culture — and, fittingly for Paso Robles, wine.

A SUMMER AFTERNOON AT ŻELAZOWA WOLA

In 2025, two Central Coast students participating in the Cultural Exchange Program visited Żelazowa Wola, Frédéric Chopin's birthplace about 40 miles west of Warsaw.

During the visit, staff unexpectedly invited the students to play a new Steinway in a small salon next to the room where Chopin was born.

They played Chopin's Ballades Nos. 3 and 4.

Through open windows and doors, the music carried into the surrounding park on a late-summer afternoon.

For Zebrowski, it was unforgettable — "a life-changing experience for two American students brought to Poland by the Paderewski Festival."

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This year, the exchange continues in the other direction.

Two young pianists from Poland, ages 12 and 17, are coming to California. Zebrowski described both as remarkably accomplished young artists. Their willingness to devote themselves to a difficult musical career, he said, gives him hope that the traditions of concerts, festivals and the arts will continue.

After more than 20 years, Zebrowski remains delighted by how Paso Robles has embraced the festival — through board service, financial and in-kind support and audiences that gather each November for music, wine, history and a connection with Poland.

He hopes people from California and beyond will continue coming to Paso Robles each November "to hear fine music, taste great wine, learn about world history and generally have a great time in this charming Central Coast town."

And if Paderewski himself could attend this year's festival?

"Undoubtedly, he would smile broadly sipping wine from one of his old vineyards before any of our concerts planned for this fall."



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