

Erazm Parys, *Józef Sikorski,*

*and Church Music in the Polish
Lands in the First Half of the Nine-
teenth Centur*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the testimony of the Revd Erazm Parys, a nineteenth-century parish priest in Sterdyń, Podlasie, published by Józef Sikorski in *Pamiętnik Muzyczny i Teatralny* in 1862 under the title ‘Głos jednego z proboszczów’. Particular attention is devoted to Parys’s efforts to establish and maintain a parish instrumental chapel composed mainly of peasant boys, his methods of musical education, the acquisition of repertory, and cooperation with local society. The study also analyses his reflections on musical life in the provinces, social inequalities in access to musical education, amateur music-making, and the circulation of repertory and pedagogical materials. The correspondence is thus presented as a rare ego-document recording the experiences of a rural priest and highly committed amateur musician. Finally, the study places Parys’s account in the changing context of church music in the mid-nineteenth-century Polish lands and considers Sikorski’s reply, especially his harsh criticism of Wacław Raszek’s *Kancjonał muzyki kościelnej*.

Keywords: church music, nineteenth-century Polish music, ego-document, music chapels, musical education

In 1857, Józef Sikorski—one of the most distinguished figures in nineteenth-century Polish musical life, a pupil of Józef Elsner, a collaborator of Oskar Kolberg, and the father of Polish music criticism.¹ He founded *Ruch Muzyczny*, the first Polish periodical devoted entirely to music, which laid the foundations for sustained musical discourse and criticism in partitioned Poland. In 1862, the periodical appeared as *Pamiętnik Muzyczny i Teatralny* and covered a variety of subjects relating to contemporary musical culture and music history, including reviews and polemical debates.² In this periodical, Sikorski published the article ‘Głos jednego z proboszczów’ in several instalments, in keeping with the journal’s editorial practice,³ together with his own commentary.⁴

The correspondence may originally have been prompted by Sikorski’s so-called ‘appeal’ of 1849. No copies of this document are known to survive, but its

full text was printed in *Przegląd Muzyczny* in 1925.⁵ Sikorski addressed the Polish clergy, urging them to help preserve the musical legacy of church ensembles by sending him broadly defined information on music, including inventories, historical accounts, music scores, and even descriptions of church sculptures that might illuminate local musical history. This letter led to several discoveries, subsequent articles on the subject, and correspondence with people interested in the history of Polish music. Although sacred music did not occupy a central place in Sikorski’s work, he had been involved in its performance and composition from the beginning of his musical education. His interest in the field was first awakened through participation in a church-music class taught by Józef Stefani at the Warsaw Lyceum. Recalling this period later in life, Sikorski wrote:

I soon became one of the best boy sopranos at the Lyceum, and word of my talent spread quickly to all the churches [in Warsaw – JBP] where God was praised through sacred music. ... For I soon became an official and paid singer at the university masses at the Visitation Sisters’ church, and in the same year, I was promoted from chorister to soloist!⁶

These close connections with Warsaw’s sacred-music circles, however, did not lead to more extensive studies of church music of the early nineteenth century; nor did Sikorski publish fuller recollections from his youth, although these might have made a valuable contribution to knowledge of the subject. Regarding the 1849 letter, Elżbieta Szczepańska-Lange observed that, despite the progressive and ambitious character of Sikorski’s initiative, it ultimately produced few significant results.⁷ His later travels to Pułtusk, Częstochowa, Piotrków, and Łowicz in search of traces of musical life may have been prompted by correspondence with church authorities, but no evidence of this has survived.⁸

⁵ *Przegląd Muzyczny*, 1/1 (1925), 13–15. The text was later reprinted in Katarzyna Morawska, ‘Badania nad muzyką dawną w Polsce’, in *Szkice o kulturze muzycznej XIX wieku. Studia i materiały*, ed. Zofia Chechlińska, vol. 3 (Warsaw, 1976), 42–45.

⁶ PMT, 434–435.

⁷ Szczepańska-Lange, ‘Józef Sikorski’, 41.

⁸ The journeys are known from Zdzisław Jachimecki, *Muzykologia i piśmiennictwo muzyczne w Polsce* (Kraków, 1948), 21–23, and Adolf Chybiński, ‘Do dziejów muzykologii w Polsce (O notatkach Józefa Sikorskiego)’, *Kwartalnik Muzyczny*, 1928/29, no. 1, 82–85. In this short article, Chybiński cited Sikorski’s manuscript notes on visits to the four cities mentioned above;

¹ On Józef Sikorski, see Elżbieta Szczepańska-Lange, ‘Józef Sikorski (1813–1896). Szkic biograficzny’, *Muzyka*, 42/1 (1997), 31–69 (with further bibliography).

² Szczepańska-Lange, ‘Józef Sikorski’, 45.

³ *Pamiętnik Muzyczny i Teatralny*, 1 (1862) [hereafter PMT], no. 36, 570–573; no. 37, 581–584; no. 38, 600–604; no. 39, 617–622; no. 40, 630–633.

⁴ PMT, no. 43, 673–680; no. 44, 689–697; no. 45, 705–709.

Given the lack of information on the reception of Sikorski's letter, 'Głos jednego z proboszczów' is especially notable because it shows that the appeal continued to resonate: one response arrived in 1855. It was written by a parish priest who gave a long and vivid account of his life and musical knowledge while insisting that his letter was under no circumstances to be made public. After negotiations, Sikorski obtained the parish priest's reluctant consent to publication. Nevertheless, as he wrote, 'for various reasons', he deferred publication for the next seven years and printed the correspondence. He did, however, anonymise the priest's and the parish's names as well as several other proper names from the two obtained letters, making it challenging to find the principal figure and setting of the account.

By collating the priest's references to locations, distances, historical events, and personal experiences, however, it has been possible to identify him as the Revd Erazm Parys of Sterdyń in Podlasie, an estate of the Ossoliński family. The surviving tombstone⁹ and a list of students of the University of Warsaw¹⁰ indicate that he was born on 14 July 1807 into an impoverished noble family in Łubianka, near Janów Podlaski. He attended the university from 19 October 1829 until an unknown date, was ordained in 1830,¹¹ worked in Hadynów for two years (1835–1837),¹² and became parish priest of Sterdyń in 1845, remaining there until his death on 12 May 1870.¹³ He participated in the January Uprising and was subjected to reprisals, including arrest.¹⁴ Among his

other achievements was his involvement in establishing an innovative hospital in Sterdyń.¹⁵

Erazm Parys's immediate reason for writing to Sikorski was a desire to describe his attempt to establish a conventional parish music ensemble. Writing in 1855, he referred to the initiative as a rather distant memory,¹⁶ so the undertaking probably took place around 1845–1850. By that time, the vast majority of church chapels had long since ceased to function. The institutional system that had formerly sustained and financed such ensembles was no longer operating effectively, and the model itself had fallen out of fashion. At the same time, the emergence of movements advocating the revival of Gregorian chant, the generally poor state of music education in Poland, and the growing popularity of amateur choirs further contributed to changing musical conditions. Against this background, the decision to establish a traditional instrumental chapel may appear surprising. Parys's motivation was probably rooted in the model of church music familiar to him from childhood. Having spent much of his life in a rural environment, he may not have been fully acquainted with newer musical trends, although, paradoxically, organising an amateur choir would likely have been easier than assembling an instrumental ensemble.

To provide music, the Revd Erazm Parys engaged 'four poor little boys from the parish school'. During the winter, he taught three of them the rudiments of keyboard playing and polyphonic singing, as well as the Book of Hours, the Rosary, and similar forms of popular devotion. Two boys learnt the violin, one the viola, and one the cello. In addition, the priest instructed the sacristan to learn the double bass and the local parish schoolteacher to play the transverse flute. The resulting ensemble comprised seven performers (although the priest naturally could not play during Mass).¹⁷ The practice of alternating between playing and singing as required, together with the engagement of church servants, was characteristic of underfunded and depleted chapels in the early nineteenth century;¹⁸ an ensemble comprising almost exclusively pupils was less typical, but the priest presumably hoped in time to develop the traditional system in which older musicians taught younger ones.

Aleksander Poliński used them, without a bibliographical reference, in *Dzieje muzyki polskiej w zarysie* (Warsaw, 1907).

9 I am grateful to Gabriela Lisowska for providing a photograph of the tombstone and valuable information on the history of Sterdyń.

10 'Studenci UW', https://wielcy.pl/wgm/studenci_UW.php, accessed 1 May 2026.

11 Renata Kulik and Henryk Kulik, 'Ogólny wykaz księży...', Instytut Historii im. Wojtki Kulika, version 01.01.2025, <https://rodzinakulik.eu/>, accessed 1 May 2026.

12 Tomasz Dobrowolski, 'Parafia rzymskokatolicka św. Jana Chrzciciela w Hadynowie. Rys historyczny', <http://www.parafia-hadynow.dzs.pl/parafia/rys-historyczny/>, accessed 1 May 2026.

13 Information from the tombstone.

14 *Kraj Zabraný. Powstanie styczniowe na ziemi siemiatyckiej*, *Studia i materiały do dziejów Siemiatycz*, vol. 3, ed. Józef Maroszek and Ewa Rogalewska (Białystok–Siemiatycze, 2023), 122; *Bojownicy kapłani za sprawę Kościoła i Ojczyzny w latach 1861–1915*, ed. Paweł Kubicki, part 2, vol. 3 (Sandomierz, 1936), 21 (with references to primary sources).

15 *Kurier Warszawski*, 44/228 (7 October 1865), 1193.

16 PMT, no. 36, 571.

17 PMT, no. 36, 572.

18 See, for example, the 1828 description of a chapel in Czerwińsk: *Kurier Warszawski*, 8/248 (1828), 1044.

The initiative soon attracted the interest of a wide range of people from the neighbourhood. For example, Erazm Parys recalled the local tenant farmer as 'a very good man who plays the violin beautifully, and so kind and popular that he did not look down on my lads and played quartets with them'.¹⁹ Others who occasionally joined the ensemble included officials, music tutors to the children of the nobility, and even a hussar captain. The remarks on this collaboration, which reveal the links between the church chapel and local society, are particularly valuable because such accounts are rarely found in primary sources concerning other chapels (perhaps because these were pro bono initiatives and went unrecorded in account books). In his letter, Rev. Parys also mentioned a visit by the Czech musician Angelo Loos, an organist associated with the Bernardines in Warsaw, who was impressed by the boy who acted as the ensemble's leader. Loos reportedly remarked that the Augustinians in Warsaw often played no better than the boys' orchestra from Sterdyń.²⁰

Teaching young peasants posed challenges not encountered in professional ensembles. The boys had family responsibilities and worked on farms. To reconcile their education with everyday life, Rev. Parys taught them in winter, while in summer they could concentrate on agricultural work. On Sundays, however, they were allowed to play in church, since they would attend the service in any event. In an anecdote illustrating this arrangement, Rev. Parys wrote that when Loos wished to meet the boys once more before leaving the parish, they had to be fetched from the fields and quickly washed.²¹ A lack of funds for the ensemble soon became a significant problem. Once the boys had grown up, the parish could not offer them a regular salary. The young musicians therefore dispersed to neighbouring parishes to become professional organists. Although this undoubtedly improved their prospects, it halted the ensemble's development, and after several years of effort the group eventually disbanded.

Following this failure, Parys attempted to provide musical training for girls. He reasoned that this would be cheaper, because girls ate less, and more sustainable in the long term, because a grown woman would marry and remain in the village rather than leave to become an organist elsewhere. He began by teaching an orphan whom he employed as a kitchen assistant and tutored in piano playing. Despite the child's talent, however, the attempt failed because she was too shy to sing aloud. She was nevertheless skilful enough to accompany the violinists.²²

In describing his efforts to shape the musical culture in the provinces, Rev. Parys also discussed the repertory performed by his small 'orchestra'. His account supplements the familiar picture of music collecting, usually reconstructed by scholars from inventories and provenance or acquisition notes, with the perspective of a music director directly involved in assembling and maintaining a repertory. Rev. Parys described several steps in forming the repertory. First, a musician named Szymon Urbanowicz,²³ the founder of a chapel in Zwoleń near Radom, came to Sterdyń, and Parys asked him to write something for the little ensemble. He received a score comprising seven pieces for organ, two violins, and bass. Parys then combined these seven pieces with other unspecified Latin works to form a complete Mass setting for the ensemble. A year later, Urbanowicz returned to Sterdyń and 'did not recognise his own composition', according to Parys (who did not specify whether the reaction was favourable). As a gesture of goodwill, the composer wrote another Mass in Warsaw and sent it by post. On another occasion, travelling musicians passed through the parish, and the priest bought a Mass from one who walked on stilts. Unfortunately, he found it too long and old-fashioned, and decided to shorten it himself, an episode that illustrates performance practice in the mid-nineteenth century. Later, the collection was expanded by a Mass by Elsner²⁴ and a specially composed piece by 'Mr C.'

19 PMT, no. 36, 572.

20 PMT, no. 37, 581. Angelo Loos is absent from music dictionaries and encyclopaedias, although he may have been related to another Czech musician, Johann Karl Loos, who was active in Bohemia in the second half of the eighteenth century; see Robert Eitner, *Quellen-Lexikon*, vol. 6 (Leipzig, 1902), 217. He was also mentioned several times in the Warsaw press as a recognised young organist living in Warsaw since 1850; see, for example, *Gazeta Codzienna*, 22/166 (1852), 1; *Dziennik Warszawski*, 2/167 (1852), 1; *Kurier Warszawski*, 32/332 (1852), 1748.

21 PMT, no. 37, 581.

22 PMT, no. 40, 631.

23 In the death record of 26 October 1856, Urbanowicz is described as a forty-five-year-old music teacher from Zwoleń: Archiwum Państwowe w Radomiu, Urząd Stanu Cywilnego Parafii Rzymskokatolickiej Zwoleń, Akta umarłych 1856, 143.

24 Parys described the Mass as being 'for the Werner family', so it was probably the work published as *Muzyka podczas Mszy Świętej do wykonania dla Familii Jaśnie Wielmożnych Państwa Werner : jako to Soprano Imo dla Rozalii z Wernerów Szatkowskiej : Soprano Ildo dla Maryanny : Violino dla Leona*

During a visit to a colonel in Warsaw who owned piles of sheet music and instruments, Parys bought a Mass by Johann Caspar Aiblinger²⁵ and two Masses by Johann Baptist Schiedermayr; Schiedermayr's music pleased him most.²⁶ Although he felt inadequately trained, Parys also made tentative attempts at composition: he harmonised the carols that were popular in his parish and Easter hymns, including the oldest examples, whose rhythm caused him difficulty because he did not recognise that the melodies employed a different metrical system.²⁷

Apart from the priest's account, virtually no evidence survives of the ensemble's short-lived activity. No documentation or musical manuscripts have yet been identified. Moreover, because the initiative dates from the nineteenth century, it has attracted little scholarly attention: studies of Polish music chapels generally focus on the eighteenth century, regarded as their golden age.²⁸ One contemporary account has nevertheless survived. Zofia Ścisłowska wrote in her *Wspomnienia z przejażdżki po kraju* that she had visited Sterdyń and met its parish priest, whom she described as a 'true expert and amateur of music'.²⁹ While staying with the priest, she heard him play the violin after dinner. In her book, Ścisłowska also mentioned the ensemble that had once functioned under Rev. Parys's guidance, and recounted the story of a boy educated by the priest and sent to Warsaw.³⁰

: *Viola dla Józefa : Violoncelo dla Antoniego : Wernerów : z towarzyszeniem organów* ([Warsaw, c. 1843]).

25 Aiblinger's musical style changed radically, from large-scale Masses influenced by Italian opera to modest Landmessen and a cappella settings; it is therefore impossible to determine the style of this work. See Siegfried Gmeinwieser, 'Aiblinger, Johann Caspar', *Grove Music Online*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.00343>, accessed 1 May 2026.

26 Schiedermayr's popularity in the mid-nineteenth-century Polish lands is demonstrated by both the large number of surviving scores and the striking frequency of references in the press; see, for example, Wojciech Tomaszewski, *Kronika życia muzycznego na prowincji Królestwa Polskiego w latach 1815–1862* (Warsaw, 2007), passim.

27 PMT, no. 37, 581.

28 See, for example, 'Kapele', in *Słownik muzyków polskich*, ed. Józef Chomiński, vol. 1: A–Ł (Kraków, 1964), 216–261; Alina Mądry, *The Baroque, Part 2, 1697–1795: Religious Music and its Baroque Modus Operandi*, *The History of Music in Poland*, vol. 3, trans. John Comber (Warsaw, 2015).

29 Zofia Ścisłowska, *Wspomnienia z przejażdżki po kraju*, vol. 2 (Warsaw, 1857), 173.

30 Ścisłowska, *Wspomnienia z przejażdżki po kraju*, 174–175.

In addition to describing his own ensemble, Rev. Parys listed similar initiatives known to him. Most are also known to scholars from other sources, but the letter mentions otherwise overlooked ensembles. The priest particularly admired the chapel active in Miedzna. Music there has been mentioned only once in musicological literature, on the basis of an archival document from the diocesan archive in Siedlce, according to which a fund for two trumpeters was established in 1773.³¹ The patron, Michał Butler, is also said to have had a musical ensemble, as reported in the mid-eighteenth-century press.³² Parys's account sheds new light on musical life in the town. In addition to the six trumpeters whom he remembered, the priest recounted that Butler had brought in an Italian teacher to teach the townspeople music; this tradition continued after the first patron's death, as evidenced by the fact that Rev. Parys himself played with them on several occasions in churches during the 1830s. Ultimately, the orchestra was dissolved, apparently because the local parish priest was not interested in maintaining it, despite the available funds.³³

Another aspect discussed in the priest's letters was his own musical development. This is another rare example of such an account and differs markedly from the early careers of contemporary professional musicians, whose training was financed from childhood by their families or patrons.³⁴ For rural musicians and people from non-musical families or otherwise unfavourable circumstances, scholars can usually do little more than speculate; the parish priest from Sterdyń described his childhood experiences in detail. In a letter, he complained that he had had no opportunity to obtain a musical education, although he had dreamed of playing the piano. His first encounters with music were military bands, which he observed and tried to imitate. At the age of ten, he carved himself a pipe and embarked on self-instruction, using Józef Niedzielski's *Szkoła na flecik polski*, a textbook first published in 1821.³⁵ This led

31 Wiktor Łyjak, 'Kapele w diecezji łuckiej', *Muzyka*, 31/3 (1986), 110.

32 *Muzyka w czasopiśmie polskich XVIII wieku. Okres stanisławowski (1764–1800)*, ed. Jadwiga Szwedowska (Kraków, 1984), 69.

33 PMT, no. 37, 582; no. 38, 602.

34 See, for example, Grzegorz Piekarczyk, 'Twórczość mszalna Józefa Władysława Krogulskiego (1815–1842)', *Musica Ecclesiastica*, 19 (2024), 144–147; Bronisław Dobrzyński, *Ignacy Dobrzyński* (Warsaw, 2007), 9–33.

35 Jan Prosnak, 'Środowisko warszawskie z życia Fryderyka

to more advanced study of the transverse flute, violin, viola, and guitar, supported by extensive copying of every available music score. He remembered that in his youth, the noble households he visited possessed instruments—clavichords and harmoniums, as well as metal-strung guitars played by boys and girls. He recalled that simple, short mazurkas, waltzes, and cotillions were composed and printed in Warsaw,³⁶ making new music accessible in the provinces, a quality he greatly appreciated. Strikingly, Rev. Parys stated that the prospect of learning music was one of his reasons for becoming a priest, as seminaries provided at least basic instruction in choral singing. His memories from childhood also included dancing to Jewish music and communal singing, a tradition that supposedly began to fade away in subsequent decades:

In the past, the youth from the village, whether weeding or raking hay, with a sickle at harvest time, or sifting grain in the granary, they were always singing, either devotional, secular, or just entertaining songs, and they even improvised verses and tunes—especially nannies rocking the children; the little girls sang most beautifully. Now it is as quiet as if their mouths have been sealed shut.³⁷

The Sterdyń parish priest also wrote at length about provincial musical culture and various social classes; as a parish priest, he had insight into virtually every social group. He noted that in the homes of the lesser nobility, a mediocre governess might be learning the piano, a pupil at the county school might be taking private violin lessons, and a schoolgirl might take piano lessons. However, ensemble music-making in such circles took place only on Sundays. A visitor from Warsaw might criticise a teenager and discourage further playing; a girl might likewise be told that her waltzes were out of fashion. Rev. Parys himself tried to visit the more prosperous manors in the area and persuade the neighbours to play quartets, taking parish pupils with him, but the nobility reportedly looked down on the boys, or even humiliated them, treating them as too low in social standing to engage in the arts. Another aspect of social inequalities noted by the priest was the discrepancy between the musical culture in the major cities and that of the provinces, which,

as he aptly observed, widened in the mid-nineteenth century.³⁸

Parys's thirst for music is vividly illustrated by an anecdote in which a merchant from Warsaw sent him some purchases wrapped in Viennese and Warsaw music scores, mainly chamber music. On discovering this, the priest sent the merchant money and asked for all his wrapping paper, so that the sheet music would not be wasted. Unfortunately, not a single composition could be pieced together from the merchant's packing paper.³⁹

Among the other matters raised in Parys's extensive correspondence, one is particularly striking because of the discussion it subsequently provoked. He mentioned that he taught his pupils the rudiments of music from Wacław Raszek's 1825 songbook, which had once been the best elementary textbook in common use in Poland, adding that copies had become difficult to find. Indeed, *Kancjonał muzyki kościelnej* was the only government-funded textbook on the principles of music published in the first three decades of the nineteenth century.⁴⁰ Although its contents are generally known to musicologists, the reception of the book has not previously been studied. The testimony of Erazm Parys is therefore the earliest evidence identified so far of the book's wide circulation. In the following three issues of his periodical, Sikorski commented on several matters raised by the priest from Sterdyń, adopting a plainly condescending attitude towards the provincial musician. Approximately one-third of his text is devoted to Raszek's book—or, more precisely, to severe criticism of almost every aspect of it.

The first issue raised by Sikorski is his indignation at the large sum of 1,000 złp earned by the author, a detail whose source is itself unclear. What follows is a long and colourful review that presents Raszek in the worst possible light.⁴¹ Sikorski's extensive critical assessment of Raszek's opus magnum is highly unusual. The founder of *Ruch Muzyczny* rarely devoted such a long text to a single work; moreover, he seldom discussed theoretical books

Chopina', *Kwartalnik Muzyczny*, 7/28 (1949), 50. The textbook was printed three times in the 1820s, attesting to its popularity; Niedzielski also wrote other tutors and short pieces for these instruments. No surviving copy of the book is currently known.

³⁶ On music scores printed in Warsaw during Parys's youth, see Wojciech Tomaszewski, *Bibliografia warszawskich druków muzycznych 1801–1850* (Warsaw, 1992).

³⁷ PMT, no. 39, 619.

³⁸ PMT, no. 38, 603.

³⁹ PMT, no. 39, 620–621.

⁴⁰ See Jolanta Bujas-Poniatowska, Andrzej Godek, and Kamil Poniatowski, 'Życie i aktywność Wacława Raszka (1764–1837) w świetle źródeł', *Muzyka*, 67/1 (2022), 31–32.

⁴¹ The scope of the present article precludes a full assessment of Sikorski's arguments. In brief, he makes several valid observations but also criticises numerous aspects of the book without evident justification, raising doubts about the impartiality of his judgement.

at such length, especially a low-impact, no-longer-used Kancelon published almost forty years before the article. These factors suggest that a personal history may have contributed to Sikorski's prejudice against Wacław Raszek. Sikorski was beginning his musical career when Raszek had recently achieved his greatest successes—recognition in Warsaw and in the provinces, employment by the prominent Czartoryski family, establishment of a music school, and publication of the book—so he probably knew of the composer and may even have met him personally. Furthermore, Sikorski's teachers must have formed an opinion of Raszek and may even have known him during his years in Warsaw. Thus, Sikorski's resentment may have reflected either his own conflict or that of one of his mentors with the composer, a history now impossible to reconstruct.

This unique ego-document—the recollections of a nineteenth-century priest deeply committed to music despite lacking professional training, who sought to preserve the remnants of older musical culture in a provincial church—significantly broadens our understanding of several aspects of nineteenth-century church music. It sheds light on the social and economic foundations of musical practice far from Warsaw, the difficulties involved in acquiring musical knowledge and the necessary resources for collective singing and performance, and aesthetic attitudes markedly different from those cultivated in the capital. In addition, it provides a wealth of historical details that enrich this still insufficiently explored area of musicological research. Although Parys himself was reluctant to publish his reflections, his testimony offers invaluable insight into the musical culture of partitioned Poland and its modern scholarly interpretation.

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