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Listening to Penderecki

Elementary force

It is difficult to remain detached while listening to the music by Krzysztof Penderecki, especially if it is the composer himself who imparts on it its final shape. His music is engaging, moving, bewildering, at times shocking and offensive, yet it always produces a dynamic reaction. The first impressions can best be verbalized by such words and phrases as exuberance, flamboyance, vitality, liberated energy, dynamic chain of sound phenomena, emergence of primary elements. The nature of the sound that reaches the audience is more than that of an object; it is "alive", resonant, vibrant, multihued, articulated and intoned like speech that flows from man to man rather than like text on paper. Penderecki constructs his compositions painstakingly; the format of his scores exhibits a confident hand, leading the various parts according to the rules of counterpoint. All this somehow recedes at the very end before the directness of the "speech." How typical it has become for him to begin a work by pre-setting the audience's mood with long-lasting tones of bass instruments.

The liberation of sound energy began in his earliest scores. This was kinetic energy, the product of the sound of speech, split into its primary

elements (*Dimensions of Time and Silence*), and of the sonorism of traditional instruments, liberated by an almost barbarian hand (*Threnody*, *Polymorphia*) or of new instruments, barely introduced on concert stage (*Fluorescences*). Penderecki made his violins play the tailpiece, the bridge and in-between; hit the strings, the sound-box, even the music-stand – with the bow, the heel; the fingers, the open palm. He attacked the audience with the aggressive sound of the siren and the lastra, of the hammer against pieces of iron (*un pezzo di ferro*), shaking metal sheets (*flexaton*) or chains (*catena*), sawing (*sega*) and grinding, shrill whistles (*fischetti*) or softer whistles and humming accompanying the instrumentalist's own play, with the rattle of the typewriter. At a time, it seemed that Penderecki might have been carried away by the wave of the avant-garde, that he released the elements like a sorcerer's apprentice. As we know, he was able to restrain the effervescent sonority of *Fluorescences* as he later restrained the raging emotions of *Dies irae*; or, still later, the unfettered eloquence of *Second Symphony* and *Concerto for Violin*. Kinetic energy gave way to potential energy, pure sonority to musicality, pure emotionality to controlled expression, extensive form to intensive form.

The discovery of elementary forces went hand in hand with a return to sources, to archetypes. In Penderecki, the man of nature yields to the man of culture; the temperament to the consciousness of belonging to a specific sphere of tradition. He placed himself there quite clearly at the very beginning: with *Psalms of David* (1958) and *Strophen* (1959), respectively an interpretation of selected verses of the Psalmist, calling to God *de profundis*, and of texts by philosophers, poets and prophets pondering the human existence. He could well echo Norwid's line, "David's key opened my mouth, Rome called me a man."

Fully, to the top, to the brim

Since his earliest works, Penderecki has used, among his many other notation marks, two pointers which might symbolise his way of thinking and creative action: they indicate the highest and the lowest possible tones. One is reminded here of Andrzej Hiolski's voice in the aria *Deus meus*, climbing towards the topmost possible note, only to fall two octaves down; or of the ecstatic *Velichanye*, ascending towards the upper limit in *Utrenya I*. How often the voice of the violins in *Paradise*

Lost rises from the darkest depths towards the upper and lightsome registers! Penderecki's music has no middle ground; his experience is that of extreme limits, which, within the thematic sphere, results in eschatological tendencies, in the interest in things primeval (*Paradise Lost*) and terminal (*Requiem, Dies irae*). At the same time, his music is that of completeness, richness, excess.

Some aesthetics limit the assortment of constituent elements of a work of art in a rigorous selection: all classicisms only tolerated the presence of some well-defined type of beauty in a work; sentimentalism only allowed "the most beautiful scenes of the most beautiful nature, the sweetest moments of the best of people." Penderecki stands at the other extremity. He is interested in good and evil, the beautiful and the ugly, simply: in fullness. This is a fullness of the material that can accommodate both harmony and noise, all vocal textures and all classes of instruments, homo- and heterogeneous sound, sound subtle and brutal. This is a fullness of the means, collected throughout the last millennium of music, used as a general principle of construction rather than in imitation or stylisation. This function might be served, in Penderecki, by choral and organ textures, that of the hoquetus and that of the motet, a Dutch or a Venetian style, a post-Romantic or expressionist idiom; and all that side by side with techniques adapted from dodecaphony and post-serialist punctualism, with aleatoric and sonoric procedures. What might have been an eclectic conglomerate becomes, in the heightened creative temperature, a new quality on a higher plane, leading from coexistence to integration.

Richness often borders on excess, the extreme might usher in the monumental, not valued too highly by our century. Yet Penderecki does not fear the path of the rise and fall experienced by Haendel and Hasse; Berlioz and Meyerbeer; Wagner, Bruckner, and Mahler. He fears neither sweeping themes nor sweeping emotions, nor sweeping forms.

Between the sacred and the profane

The preponderance of sacred subjects in Penderecki is visible at first sight. It seems obvious that his creative path is mainly defined by works inspired by the Old and the New Testament: *Psalms of David* and *Stabat Mater*, *Passion* and *Utrenya*, *Canticum canticorum* and *Magnificat*, *Paradise Lost*, *Te Deum* and *Polish Requiem*. These are complemented

by *Strophen*, *Dies irae*, *The Devils of Loudun*, *Kosmogonia* and *The Black Mask*, i.e. works dealing with philosophical and moral issues clearly related to religion. On the other hand, the numerous and varied group of purely instrumental compositions seem to create a magnificent and effervescent background, from which vocal-instrumental works emerge. It is, at the same time, a laboratory for means later used in sacred forms. Or vice versa: at times, instrumental compositions appear on the margin, as it were, of the material shaped in the other. And yet: at least *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima*, *De natura sonoris II*, *Symphony No. 1*, *The Awakening of Jacob*, *Violin Concerto*, *Symphony No. 2 "Christmas,"* the cello concertos – all show that Penderecki's "pure" music can well do without word, plot, or scene.

One might conjecture that the composer's fascination with the sacred and his constant lingering within that sphere stem from the mystery of human existence in both of its parallel and complementary perspectives: the metaphysical and the ethical. Penderecki's choices of his subject vary, yet quite meaningful is his preference for those that deal with the ultimate situations of sin and guilt, pain and death, that lie in-between the human and the divine and, at the same time, are issues of a universal dimension and resonance. One might suspect at times that the composer is interested solely in their humanist aspect: injustice, enslavement, intolerance, inhumanity; but elsewhere, when his music becomes pure contemplation, ecstasy and ardour – this happens particularly in oases of *a capella* choruses – another perspective seems to appear. That Penderecki's inherent strong feeling of independence drives him to adopt unorthodox or even *quasi*-heretical approaches, is still another matter. The emphasis on "the sacred tradition, lost or discarded at a certain point" became, for Penderecki, an act of conscious choice and, in his own words, "a major turning point" in his artistic biography.

The thick black line

Penderecki's themes, while still *in statu nascendi*, are characteristic in their specific and heightened mode of expression. The primitive reactions of the mob in *Passion*, the apocalyptic orgy of evil in *Dies irae*, the lamentations, painful concentration and ecstasy of *Utrenya*, the scenes of demoniac possession and auto-da-fe in *The Devils of Loudun*, the exalted and ecstatic moments of *Magnificat*, the intense prayer of *Te Deum*, the

anger and fury in the infernal scene of *Paradise Lost*, the horror and the frenzy in *The Black Mask*, the heavenly *Song of the Cherubim* – how could anyone react to this with musical neutrality?

Penderecki reacts to the emotional content of his texts with no fear of transgressing anybody's imaginary barriers. His reaction is extreme and intensely concentrated. Lament becomes lament, frenzy becomes frenzy, euphoria is euphoria. In this, he comes close to expressionism – the more so as his emphasis is on the expression of negative emotions and resentment. At times, he does not shrink from garishness or brutality, from the art of the poster rather than of painting (*Death Brigade*, *Dies irae*, the finale of *Paradise Lost*). But there are also scenes there of an exceptional subtlety; one might even speak of Penderecki's other, lyrical strand, of his lyricism of love (entire parts in *Canticum canticorum* and *Paradise Lost*) and of religion (the contemplative moments in *Passion*, *Utrenya*, *Te Deum*, *Polish Requiem*). The more aggressive their sound context, the stronger is their impact.

The lucidity of expression is determined by the choice of expressive means itself. All kinds of singing and all modes of speech are possible, as are shouting and whispers, crying and laughter, or even whistling and breathing. Melodic motives carrying words of particular import are drawn with utmost intensity; it is then impossible to forget the expression of the sequences of the second in *Deus meus* or *Agnus Dei*, or in the diminished sixth's leap in *Lacrimosa*. The moments in which Penderecki operates through tonal explicitness are delineated with equal clarity: the luminous E flat major at the word "Gloria" explodes in full *tutti* in *Magnificat*; the expression of A flat major at "Dominus" in *Te Deum* is unmistakable. It really does seem as if Penderecki marked the bass line with a thick, black pen; his music, which often opens "upwards", is nevertheless firmly based on the ground.

Rhetorical gesture

But is the expression of Penderecki's works a manifestation of his own emotions? Not infrequently, it also seems to be a theatre of expression, an expression performed.

The borderline between the stage and the bandstand is often indistinct in Penderecki. A devotee and connoisseur of the Antique, he is sympathetic to the concept of threefold chorea, where the word and the sound,

together with the movement (dance and stage gesture) used to be one. His music develops in an imaginary space as well as in time. Its aplomb and gesture has been noticed, as were the slow movement of musical "images," hieraticity, *al fresco* painting, and similarity to the Baroque idiom.

When, in *Magnificat*, bass begins to chant "Fecit potentiam", and kettledrums and brass join in with low strings, the passion of this moment is perceived as a Baroque *teatrum*. The same happens in *Te Deum*, when the solemn "Tu, rex gloriae" resounds, interspersed with the exclamations of chorus ("Christe!") as the music leads us into a dramatic space. Many other scores (*Dies irae* and *Polish Requiem*) contain that theatrical gesture, an expressive mode in which convention prevails over directness of expression, theatrical pretence over realistic truth. In a way that is not conventionalised, as in the Baroque, yet certainly with much resemblance to the poetics of that time, and – it is certain – unconsciously, Penderecki employs techniques and tropes in which one could well identify old-style *exclamatio*, *abruptio*, *anabasis*, *gradation* or *climax*. Thus he restrains the elemental expression with conventional forms. The effect is paradoxical: the use of figures of musical rhetoric enhances the power of expression. This play of forces might become dangerous in bad performance: loftiness is just a misstep away from pompousness, passion from pathos.

Pure play

Penderecki's early scores were combinatorial, much in the spirit of dodecaphony and serialism, supplemented with the composer's own exploration. The first version of *Dimensions of Time and Silence* was based on the old magical square – an attempt at a musical adaptation of the technical postulates of Paul Klee. Specific series of numbers regulated the rhythmic flow of *Anaklasis*. Strict permutations of a few articulation modes supported the structure of *Quartet No. 1*, and the middle movement of *Threnody* was made up of an intricate, 36-voice canon in punctualist texture.

In the most general terms, this idea of searching for the possibly most precise form for the sound material remained with Penderecki until today ("I do not believe in open form"). It only discarded external automatisms and became thoroughly internalised. Even those early combinatorial

choices of the mind were accompanied by those of the ear; later on, experience with sounds and direct intuition began to dominate over pure play. At the same time, contrapuntal logic started to prevail over permutation procedures; and the vindication of timeless formal principles (refrain and the recapitulation, modification and development, stratification and *stretto*) was a consequence of personal experience. "I think", he said in 1976, "that no new form can ever be created. A number of forms have been around since the beginnings of music, and all attempts at their destruction have been futile". Obviously, these words must not be taken literally. None of Penderecki's *passacaglias* resemble old forms in all but the most general structural idea. Whatever we still call counterpoint is now a far cry from its original cast; only its elementary principles have been preserved. Dodecaphonic thinking has left an indelible mark on the way Penderecki shapes the melodic line, even that born of a post-Romantic aura; the stratification method (*Magnificat!*) has resulted in counterpoint of counterpoint.

It is equally obvious that constructive thinking underlies each score by Penderecki; the question is whether it is a manifestation of pure play, or whether it serves a particular expression. In this sense there is a difference between e.g. a halftone pitch alteration of second strings in *Emanations* (1958), and basing the tonal structure of *The Black Mask* (1986) on two halftone-removed circles of fifths. In the former, the sound image becomes slightly off-focus and, to a point, accidental; in the latter, the structure of sounds is sharpened, while their more discernible dissonance increases the dynamics of the musical narration.

There are other sanctuaries of pure play in Penderecki. These include, to some extent, concerto works for violin, viola, cello, harpsichord. His tendency to play with form manifests itself in the occasional reappearance of the capriccio cycle: for Wanda Wiłkomirska's violin, Heinz Holiger's oboe, Siegfried Palm's cello or Zdzisław Piernik's tuba. This is the Penderecki *buffo* of his provocative interviews, and the same Penderecki is now working on the opera *Ubu Rex*.

Clashing contrasts

Serialism is confronted with sonorism in the *Threnody*; singing in the spirit of the chorale and dodecaphonic technique combine in the sound matter of *Passion*; in *Dies irae*, the sacred vision of St. John is interrupted

by the profane madness of Aeschylus' Eumenides; Religion and eroticism, contemplation and frenzy clash in *The Devils of Loudun*; in *Paradise Lost*, the universe of God is confronted with the universe of Satan in the language of music; dozens more examples could be added here. As stated by Władysław Stróżewski, "Penderecki's *oeuvre* is an immense musical realisation of dialectics, of dialectics stretched between extremes, somehow coping with them and, at the same time, keeping them alive."

Just as Ecclesiastes, who identifies the various antitheses clearly and succinctly when he speaks of "a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak"; just as Ecclesiastes, then, does Penderecki clearly set contrary universes against each other. His mastery of the varied wealth of modes of expression permits him to articulate through musical structures and to clash against each other such categories as joy and pain, love and hate, good and evil, the heavenly and the infernal, the human and the inhuman.

With the course of time, the antithetical is joined in Penderecki by the complementary, contrast by concord. In the climax of *Te Deum*, the pleading melisma of soprano's "Salvum fac populum Tuum, Domine" harmonises with the contemplative texture of the unexpected Polish hymn, *Boże coś Polskę*. In the climax of *Polish Requiem*, the poignant "Święty Boże, Święty, Mocny" in chorus is contrapuntally commented upon by the solo song of "Recordare Jesu Pie." Thus the national is in accord with the universal.

After *St Luke Passion*, Penderecki was accused of betraying the avant-garde: as if tradition and modernity were incompatible. Pascal noted: "We do not display greatness by going to one extreme, but in touching both at once, and filling all the intervening space."

Obsessions

Penderecki likes to come back and repeat himself, even though he follows Picasso's and Stravinsky's example by going ever forward, changing his external expression modes from time to time. He likes, then, to repeat words, motet-like (*Agnus Dei*) or aria-like (*Deus meus*); he likes recapitulations, even allusive ones (the ocarinas in *The Awakening of Jacob*); he likes refrains of all kinds. Their presence in *The Black Mask*

makes it possible to listen to the opera with eyes closed as its music is structurally autonomous.

The Black Mask seems to be a work the composer has been unconsciously building up for many years, one that brings together a number of earlier tendencies. The sequence of *Passion*, *Utrenya*, *Canticum canticorum Salomonis* and finally *Magnificat* seems to suggest that he have been following his own hidden ecumenical agenda. The plot of *The Black Mask* gathers at a table representatives of almost all creeds. The theme of *Dies irae*, ominously resounding in one of the opera's climaxes, has been tormenting Penderecki for years; we remember it from the Auschwitz oratorio, from the final scenes of *Paradise Lost* and obviously from the *Requiem* as well. The catastrophic finale of *The Black Mask* has also had its own anticipations.

It can be said that Penderecki has been treading around dark subjects: Death, the Holocaust, the Apocalypse, Hell. The works that deal with these also include projects as yet not realised: Dante's *Inferno* and *The Last Judgement*.

Through word, through sound and beyond sound

Krzysztof Penderecki's music is undoubtedly that of the semiotic age. It has discarded the tradition of art for art's sake together with the rejected Hanslick's paradigm. It has rediscovered the long-lost functions of music, eliminated by the domination or the monopoly of the aesthetic function: expressive and appellative, phatic and symbolic. A work of music can again express things, make appeals, help to establish a relationship and carry a message; yet it can do so only if it meets the highest criteria in itself, in its sound matter and formal structure.

Obviously, the message is easiest to read in works that carry words. These are never accidental in Penderecki; their choice and setting is usually determined by the composer himself. One glimpse at the texts of *Psalms* or *Strophen* is enough to see that he uses others' words to express his own programme. Although, to avoid a too literal impact of the text, he has long used textures and techniques preventing the direct reception of its content, he always makes an exception from this rule for the significant, sense-bearing words and phrases; these are invariably emphasised in a specific way which further enhances their expression. Lacos Peris, who stresses Penderecki's dependence on the word, observes that "it is often

the word moving one to the core, the word described by Heidegger as the «home of Being», the word treated by the composer as the liberating word." Penderecki himself said in 1976 that all one needs to be able to compose is "just one book, the Holy Writ."

Penderecki's parallel message is conveyed by the musical text. For the composer, this is a category that may be called "meaningful form." A differentiating system is once again set in place. To make things simple: positive connotations are carried by clear sound, not by hums or noise; *cantabile* or *espressivo* melodies rather than any other variety; chords (mostly elliptic) or unisons are positive too, but not so dissonance multiple chords or clusters. It is by no means a coincidence that works such as *Stabat Mater*, *Passion* or *Magnificat* resound in pure D, E, and C, respectively. If such moments are endowed with the force of expression, it is also because they serve, at the same time, as vantage points: surrounded and preceded by music from the other extremity, one that can connote chaos and danger.

Relatively recently, a new, sense-conveying means of expression has appeared in Penderecki: culminations created by the "revelation" in the work (unexpected yet well-prepared) of music endowed with deeply symbolic meaning. The Bach chorale *O grosse Lieb* in *Paradise Lost*, *Boże coś Polskę* in *Te Deum*, *Święty Boże* in the *Requiem*, *Cicha noc* in *Symphony No. 2*, the chorale *Aus tiefer Not* in *The Black Mask* are only apparent quotations. In fact, these moments are an organic part of the work, its heart rather than an addition, a *cantus prius factus* of sorts. The type of their musical material strongly helps to determine the other themes of the work, just as *cantus firmus* once used to determine the counterpoints it produced. As word-music entities, these "revealing" themes carry meanings which might be described as a vindication and a justification of foolishly squandered values.

Transl. by Jan Rybicki