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Mieczysław Tomaszewski

"No Way Except by Struggling Down…" Penderecki's Creative Path[1]

He once said, "there is no way towards fulfilment except by struggling down a circuitous path." Elsewhere, he expressed this even more directly: "real art must be a struggle, an unending quest."

There is no doubt that any distant view of the author of both *Threnody* and *Credo* must expose its truly spectacular variety. A close reading, however, discovers its dialectic and dialogic character. This constant dialogue – at times taking on the form of radical controversy, at times a more complementary relationship – is invariably conducted between a rootedness in tradition and a fascination with modernity. Another way to observe this phenomenon is that in terms of two layers of personality; one may actually believe that Krzysztof Penderecki underwent spectacular change in his nature's surface structure while he remained untouched in his deep structure – untouched as to the most significant and fundamental matters and ideas. One may even attempt to isolate the complex of beliefs and properties that produce such a basis: his spirit of independence and his spirit of defiance; his complete engagement with the here and now; his propensity to the extreme, to the strongest possible themes and means; his seeming ecumenicity and anti-orthodoxy; his inner sense of empowerment stemming from its dual roots in heaven and earth.

[1] Mieczysław Tomaszewski, *Pendereckiego droga twórcza* [in:] program book of the *Krzysztof Penderecki's Festival on the Occasion of the Composer's 80th Birthday*, E. Siemdaj (ed.), Warszawa 2013.

His deepest r o o t e d n e s s is that in his native Dębica and in the royal city of Kraków. He reminisced, "there was a single church and as many as five synagogues in Dębica. I remember the sound of the songs from the Jewish temples; I have that music in my ears." To the newcomer from that old Galician shtetl, Kraków could offer the heady mixture of noble tradition and manic avant-garde, the latter spearheaded by the theatre and the theatricals of Kantor. "Old Kraków made me feel the essence of unbroken and unified tradition, so that I could see myself as an inheritor of Mediterranean culture." He began to study ancient culture and philosophy at the Jagiellonian University; he forsook his ambition to become an artist and chose the difficult path of a composer.

His first f a s c i n a t i o n w i t h d i f f e r e n c e happened in 1958 when the doors to the West opened just a tad. Together with Górecki, Szalonek and Kilar, he soaked in all that had been forbidden and inaccessible, trying to become part of the Western avant-garde. His first three scores modelled on Boulez, Nono and Stockhausen successfully ushered him into Europe. At the same time, they defined his ideology: *Strophen* proclaimed, in the words of Isaiah, "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil." The texts taken from *Psalms of David* are hardly accidental as well: "*Ad Te, Domine, clamabo! Exaudi orationem meam*…." Yet it took another series of works – such as *Threnody*, *Anaklasis* and *Fluorescences* – to conquer Darmstadt, the Mecca of the Second Avant-Garde. He became a true barbarian in that garden when he unleashed a turmoil of elemental, archetypal and savage sound: he supplemented singing with screaming in his brush with bruitism. Yet his expressive sonorism dared confront art devoid of all human expression. He reached limits of expression himself when he wrote his *Death Brigade*. It was necessary for him to express his rebellion, to exorcise socialist realism and its nontruth.

Then came the unexpected moment referred by some as "the betrayal of the avant-garde:" in 1965, Penderecki shocked the high-brow universe of modern music with his masterpiece, *St Luke Passion*. He entered his phase of b r e a k t h r o u g h in an attempt at f i r s t s y n t h e s i s: a courageous combination of expressive sonorism with the centuries-long tradition of the sacred genre. "It is not I who betrayed the avant-garde," he explained. "I was quick to realize that all this novelty, mostly reduced to formal experiments and speculation, is destructive rather than constructive." At the same time, *Passion* became yet another challenge to the system. Through his international success, Penderecki restored once-rejected sacred music to the public stage. He was the first; others soon followed. He continued to embark upon great projects*: Dies irae*, *The Devils of Loudun*,

Utrenya, which quite naturally joined timeless themes with avant-garde means of expression. Then came further sacred scores: *Magnificat* and *Song of Songs*. But that was it, for yet another change of personal style was just around the corner, advocated by a creative instinct that warned him against repeating himself.

The immediate impulse was born of a new fascination: with late-Romantic symphonism, and especially with the music of Anton Bruckner, which seemed to have come to its close at the end of the 20th century. Penderecki faced it at close quarters, entering a unique dialogue with past regained, which resulted in a new series of great musical narratives: his *Christmas Symphony, Paradise Lost* and *Polish Requiem*. The alibi for this new stance and style that may well be referred to as retroversive is contained and verbalized in one of his inimitable turns of phrase at once witty and weighty: "we are now in situation where the most creative thing we can do is to open the door behind us." The Penderecki phenomenon consists in the fact that he was in front of everyone else when he "opened the door behind him." It took a while for others to follow him there.

And this romanticising way of expressing one's attitude towards reality, towards history's humours and horrors, this, too, had its expiry date. The horizon grows dark, there falls the shadow, as in Eliot, or the shadow line, as in Conrad. Starting with *Paradise Lost,* Penderecki begins to hover, more closely than ever before, over the ultimate situations of death and sin, destruction and apocalypse, hell rather than heaven. His reaction to the 1980s in Poland required more powerful and more concise means. *Te Deum* appears as a clear act of protest; in its finale, Penderecki makes his chorus sing the ancient hymn, "O Lord, bring our country back!" Yet this reaction is above all evident in two works that seem to confront each other in their own and different expressions od philosophical distance, sarcasm and pessimism: the tragic *Black Mask*, correctly referred to as "*danse macabre*" and the absurdist *buffo* of *Ubu Rex,* a veritable bottomless pit in terms of theme. In their own and different ways, too, the two works used a narrative plotted from motifs, topoi and gestures that had already made their mark on culture. This new style had its starting point in Penderecki's concept of the intertextual era: "to absorb all that has been."

To describe the exit from the maze in which he found himself at the threshold of the 1990s, Penderecki called a spade a spade: "Today, having learnt my lesson of late Romanticism and having used up the potential of postmodernist thinking – I find my artistic ideal in claritas." Mozart and Schubert now replaced Bruckner as his partner in dialogue. This gives rise to the serenity and the light of *Trio, Sinfonietta, Clarinet Quintet* and *Sextet*. His possibly inborn

tendency to monumentalism was overtaken by a penchant for classical forms and textures, for works written with a lighter pen. He explained, "I return to chamber music with a belief that one can say more in a quieter voice." Full voice was reserved for the lyricism of musical narration marked by the place of its birth: in the composer's new home he had been making with his wife since the 1970s, the manor house and the park of Lusławice. What he himself referred to as his "escape into privacy" was also expressed in his arguably most personal piece he ever wrote, in *Credo*. The motif of the Lenten song "O my people" resounded there with a cathartic power and an emotional depth. Although the extensive *Seven Gates of Jerusalem* bore witness to old habits dying hard, it is an echo of younger years, consisting as it does of psalms that once helped him pave his way.

With the whole dramatism characteristic of his late phases, there is alsoa deepened and reflexive lyricism in the present phase of Penderecki's creative path, just begging to be called the phase of second synthesis and new beginning. In the acceptance speech of one of his honorary degrees, he stated that "the need for synthesis is characteristic for the entire modern epoch. This is the response to the poignant feeling of the disintegration of the world." He tried to elaborate on that as follows: "the chance of survival is only given to the music which is written in a natural way and constitutes a synthesis of everything that has happened in the last few decades." Sooner or later, the Tower of Babel must be abandoned in the need for a universal language representative of its times. Penderecki began with himself; the dozen or so pieces of his final years are expressed in a narration of similar character: his concerto for violin "Metamorphoses," for piano "Resurrection" and for horn "Winter Journey;" his 8th symphony nicknamed "Songs of Transience"; the cycle entitled *A sea of dreams did breathe on me… Songs of reverie and nostalgia*; finally, too, the quartet of *Pages from an Unwritten Diary*, nostalgic musings of memory. The lyrics of both song cycles became the composer's own; they liberated his reserves of deepened reflection. It is a time when Penderecki confesses, in Rilke's words, "Herr: es ist Zeit," and that is a very poignant thing to say. Then there was his astounding reading of the last two centuries of Polish poetry to construe his own view of his country and its remarkable representative, Chopin. It is an inescapably emotional experience to listen to his musical rendering of Tetmajer's verse, where bells toll for *Angelus*, or of that phrase from Norwid's arch-poem, "and now you have ended your song…"

"The more one ventures into life," he once said, "the more one becomes a loner." The selection of texts by the "late" Penderecki seems to confirm this quite well. Yet it also confirms his own need to share his own highest values with his audience.

In a conversation at Lusławice in 2005, he confessed, "I am interested in a great theme. Yet death? In my mind, death loses to love, or faith, or hope." In another of those talks – as if to reiterate the sense and the sentiment of what he speaks of in the words of his poets – he says, "I love Poland just the way it is. The way it existed in literature, the way it never existed in real life. This is the Poland of my dreams."

And he continues to think of works he would like to write, including several opera. *Phedra* may be the one closest to completion…

Kraków, October 2013