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# **Krzesztof Penderecki 90 – Belief, Episteme and Icon – an Existential Semiotic Interpretation<sup>1</sup>**

Krzesztof Penderecki's music is undoubtedly that of the semiotic age.<sup>2</sup>

## **Introduction**

My actual intention was to compare three composers of the 20th century, each iconic in his own country, namely Jean Sibelius, Heitor Villa-Lobos and Krzesztof Penderecki. The first two I have already examined quite thoroughly from this point of view. In the case of Penderecki, however, I lacked sufficient biographical detail, and thus put off this task until a later date.

In any case, it is rare that a musician becomes an "icon" in his own land, i.e. as an individual who is recognized in every regard, has earned great respect, is even the object of worship, and in some cases has even been elevated to the rank of head of state.

- 1 This article is part of a larger essay devoted to the semiotic analysis of Krzesztof Penderecki's music. Its continuation is presented in a text published in 2024 in "Roczniki Humanistyczne". See: "Krzysztof Penderecki. An Existential Semiotic Study of His Sono-ristic Works and Cello and Orchestra Concerto No. 2", *Roczniki humanistyczne* [Annals of Arts] 72 (2024), 249–278.
- 2 Mieczysław Tomaszewski, "Listening to Penderecki", *Teoria muzyki. Studia, interpretacje, dokumentacje* [Music Theory. Studies, Interpretations, Documentation] 16 (2020), 19.

Examples of such luminaries include Poland's Paderewski of course, as well as Lithuania's Vytautas Landsbergis. Another name to achieve iconic status in his homeland is the Finnish composer Sibelius, even if rather *malgré lui* given the fact that what he really aspired to be was a symphonist of universal appeal in the tradition of Brahms and Bruckner; and yet, he was often labelled a *Heimatkunst*. When he heard that his *Finlandia* had been sung in the US as a hymn, he was at first opposed to the idea, but then he sighed: "If the world wants to sing, there's nothing I can do about it." During the wars Sibelius therefore became an important symbol of his nation, one in whom everyone trusted and believed.

Heitor Villa-Lobos was originally a radical avantgardist who irked his own compatriots in Paris in the 1920s with his anthropological views of his own nation. His *Choros No. 8* was performed in Paris in the same concert as Edgard Varèse's *Amériques*. However, in the 1930s the Brazilian was given the opportunity to serve as the "music teacher" of his entire nation under the aegis of the dictatorship of Getulio Vargas and achieved immortal fame with his *Bachianas Brasileiras*, which draws upon the traditions of both neoclassicism and late romanticism. His reputation as a national icon continued until the 1950s with a series of symphonies and oratorios.<sup>3</sup>

And what about Penderecki? This has been quite a fascinating topic in our recent history. I have met the composer several times, but never entered into a true dialogue with him. The fault was of course mine, because I had insufficient knowledge of his entire output. Still, before we provide an overview of this oeuvre and that enormous quantity of research and analysis on Penderecki conducted in Poland and which I have also managed to familiarize myself with in English wherever this was possible, we must ask ourselves what do we mean when we say that a composer is a national icon. How does one achieve this status, or how is one elevated to such a position?

Before we can discuss the concept of icon we should first consider the notion of **episteme**, namely that system of beliefs which function at a deeper level of a culture and which determine man's sayings and doings. I interpret an episteme thus in the sense that Michel Foucault employed the term in his classical structuralist work, *Les mots et les choses* 1973 and his lectures which I heard during my time as a student at Collège de France in Paris.

Accordingly, an episteme is a structure which articulates extensive periods, such as the "classical" centuries and their prevailing views on, for example, representation,

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3 Cf. id., *Heitor Villa-Lobos: The Life and Works, 1887–1959* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 1995).

as Foucault illustrated through an analysis of Velázquez's painting *Las Meninas*, the princess of Spain. An episteme is not thus the same as the dominant political system of a society or its social practices. Certainly, it represents and shapes the values and norms of a community, that is true, but this is not the same as their application in the day-to-day life of a nation. An episteme is, therefore, based on the modality of belief (*croire*) proposed by the Paris semiotic school which is more fundamental than the modality of knowing, *savoir*. In his now legendary lecture at the 2nd congress of the Semiotic Society of Finland in Jyväskylä in 1983, Greimas claimed that "knowing was only islands in the sea of belief."<sup>4</sup> How well this suits our subject, namely the life of Penderecki, who always emphasized the significance of **belief** (or faith) in human destiny.

Hence, we can say that first we have a modality of belief which is then crystallized into an episteme(s). And the fact of calling someone an icon is based on such a mechanism as the following:

belief..... episteme..... icon

When we think of music history, we can argue that its catalyzing force is to be found at the level of epistemes. I have investigated, among other things, crises of epistemes in cultures, i.e. abrupt changes in epistemes, which, metaphorically speaking, is like a shift in a continental plate during an earthquake (in music one might speak of "intonation crises").

How do periods of musical style emerge from epistemes? Recently I studied the birth of the classical style in Austria in 1740–1782 i.e. during the reign of the Empress Maria Teresia. It was during this timeframe that one of the most congenial creations of Western civilization, i.e. the classical style – Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven – was born. Yet, how was this possible? During Maria Theresa's reign her empire was marked by endless war. It was a period characterized by ultraconservative values on one hand and yet by an effervescent and joyful social life in the capital, Vienna, on the other. What was this mechanism that accordingly transmitted political events into epistemes and from there into a musical style period... a mechanism so universal that in order to understand it, no particular "historical empathy" is

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4 Algirdas Julien Greimas, lecture given at the Second International Symposium of the Semiotic Society of Finland in Jyväskylä Vers la troisième révolution sémiotique (1983). It exists in DVD video form ("Significant Moments in the History of Semiotics in Finland and Elsewhere," for the 9th World Congress of Semiotics by the IASS; Helsinki: EWTEK. 2007).

needed: we listen to a Mozart concerto or a Haydn symphony as plain music and receive its message immediately and directly as if it were talking to us?<sup>5</sup>

After these preparatory reflections and preludizing I return once more to Poland. Our composer Penderecki was born in the village of Dębica in Galicia in Southern Poland in 1933. He had a safe family upbringing in an environment in which life had changed little since the years of *kaiserlich und königlich* during the Austrian-Hungarian empire.

However, the most dramatic and tragic ruptures in Polish history still lay ahead, the worst being the German occupation. As a young boy Krzysztof saw people being loaded onto wagons and sent away. Only later was he able to portray these memories, in, among other pieces, his oratorio *Dies Irae*. His father had received a broad education and was a connoisseur of ancient cultures. Krzysztof began his musical education with the piano and the violin, and made his first efforts to compose and conduct a band, but these were all amateur endeavors. In 1951 he spent a year in Kraków and experienced what continuity and tradition meant; besides trying his hand at painting and architecture, he also studied classical languages and philosophy, including under the tutelage of Roman Ingarden. Nevertheless, his most important mentor was the mathematician/physician, music theorist and pianist Franciszek Skołyszewski, who not only inspired the young composer but also taught him the disciplined techniques of composing. Later Penderecki said he was indebted to Skołyszewski for everything. Hence, while he adhered to the normal strictures of an academic environment his real spiritual development was already being shaped elsewhere. Following the post-Stalinist thaw in 1956 and the subsequent relaxation in discipline, there were now opportunities to learn more about the European avantgarde and study such modern composers as Bartók, Stravinsky and Messiaen, and later also Nono, Webern and Boulez. On the other hand, the Darmstadt serial school held little appeal for him, arguing while they were interested in dots, he was fascinated by lines.<sup>6</sup> Was this a reference to Kandinsky's *Punkt und Linie zu Fläche*? In her groundbreaking work *Krzysztof Penderecki, Musica Sacra – Musica Profana* (Warsaw Adam Mickiewicz Institute 2003) Regina Chłopicka broke down the entire life and stylistic evolution of the composer into several periods, each 2–6 years in length:

5 Cf. Algirdas Julien Greimas, "Musical Metaphors and Epistemes: The Case of the Classical Style in the Austria of the Empress Maria Theresa", *Roczniki Humanistyczne* 72/XII (2024), 131–161.

6 Regina Chłopicka, *Krzysztof Penderecki. Musica Sacra – Musica Profana* (Warsaw: Adam Mickiewicz Institute, 2003), 218.

1958–1962 – In search of an individual language. Dramatized Sonorism; from *Em-anations* to *Fluorescences*.

1962–1974 – In search of Universal Values. Between Sonorism and Polyphony. From *St Luke Passion* to *Magnificat*.

1974–1980 – In Search of Music's "Paradise Lost" in the Neo-Romantic Vein. From *Paradise Lost* to *Symphony No. 2*.

1980–1986 – In Search of a National Identity. Between the Symphonic-Oratorio Style and the Polish Religious Tradition. From *Te Deum* to the *Polish Requiem*.

1984–1986 – In Search of Extreme Tensions. Between Expressionism and Postmodernism. Around *The Black Mask*.

1986–1992 – In Search of New Areas of Experience. The Classic Convention of Play and The Postmodernist Play of Convention. Between *Sinfonietta* and *Ubu Rex*.

1992–1998 – In Search of a "New Lyric". Chamber Espressivo Style. From *Clarinet Quartet* to *Violin Concerto No. 2*.

1995–1998 – A Time of Synthesis. The Monumental Symphonic-Oratorio Style. *The Seven Gates of Jerusalem* and *Credo*.

Since 1998 – In the Sphere of Classical Beauty. A Musical Dialogue with the Past. From *Sonata* to *Concerto Grosso* and *Sextet*.

## Sonorism

The catalogue needs a little clarification in this phase. What do we understand by sonorism? Danuta Mirka explains this notion in detail in her very extensive doctoral thesis, *The Sonoristic Structuralism of Krzysztof Penderecki* (Katowice: Music Academy of Katowice 1997), which she completed at the University of Helsinki. In fact, sonorism is synonymous with Penderecki's music due to his composition *Anaklasis* (1960) and its spectacular success during the Donaueschingen Music Days in 1961, as well as the triumph of his UNESCO prize-winning *Threnody* and his *Fluorescences* in 1962, to mention just a few. In sonorism sound becomes the most important parameter of music. The inventor of the term, Józef Chomiński described it thus: "Sonoristic regulation consists in an exploration of the pure sound values of the sound material."<sup>7</sup> Naturally, Mirka argues, all music makes a "sound," but whereas melody, rhythm and harmony are usually the primary parameter-

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7 Danuta Mirka, *The Sonoristic Structuralism of Krzysztof Penderecki* (Katowice: Akademia Muzyczna w Katowicach, 1997), 7.

sand sound secondary, in sonorism it suddenly takes center stage.<sup>8</sup> A sonoristic work consists of vast fields and masses of sound. In Germany this phenomenon was given the name *Klangflächenmusik*. Moreover, it was essential that new timbres were produced by unusual playing techniques and touches.<sup>9</sup>

This also leads to uncommon forms of notation. Penderecki elaborated his own particular diagram of playing techniques based on them he prepared a kind of aleatoric graphic notation, in which he portrayed clusters and durations. Durations were indicated by metronome; on the other hand, the between events in the score are also presented the temporal organization. In general, according to Mirka, sonorism was considered a reaction to hyper-formalist serialism and its rigorous technical procedures regarding sound.

In other words, when serialism was brought to its extreme the result unexpectedly sounded quite similar to an aleatoric cluster score. However, Polish sonorism differed from the approach of Ligeti, who writes notes that are clearly visible, as well as from Xenakis and his mathematical methods. Rather, it was a continuation of the Italian school of futurism and Varèse.

Whatever the case sonorism was a new stylistic experiment designed to upset the musical world and it proved a resounding success. In the June 5, 1966 issue of *Helsingin Sanomat* Erkki Salmenhaara provided the following judgement:

It is characteristic of serial music that it is governed by far-fetched theoretical issues and a highly differentiated musical texture. As early as the end of the 1950s audiences began secretly to tire of this type of music, which assumed maximum concentration from the listener. From this perspective it is understandable that Penderecki's *Anaklasis* was a tremendous breakthrough in Donaueschingen in 1961. His music was like an emanation. In its basic construction it was simple and clear. Its sound world was imaginary, and doubtless very modern, a music without any premodels. Penderecki's works started their triumphs in European concert halls... The beginning of the 1960s saw a major surge in Polish creative music. This surge has continued... Yet, modern Polish music gives the impression of being a strong school. Young composers have maintained Penderecki's belief in the magical power of sound itself; sound material is more important than compositional organization... Composers are constantly searching for new sound

8 Teresa Malecka, "The Phenomenon of the Polish Composing School of the Second Half of the Twentieth Century in the Context of Cultural and Political Changes", in *Music of Change. Expression and liberation in Polish and Lithuanian Music Before and After 1989*, ed. by M. Janicka-Słysz (Kraków: Musica Iagellonica, 2023).

9 Danuta Mirka, *The Sonoristic Structuralism*, 8.

effects. The dense cluster formations of the strings, the eruptions of the percussion, and the wind fields with their lively figurations, recur in different variations.<sup>10</sup>

## A Little History of Poland

Nevertheless, the manner in which Chłopicka arranged Penderecki's life and output into periods logically following one after the other is an amazing reminder of a similar classification of the key ages in Polish history, or as we could now call it: alterations in epistemes. The mere fact of seeing such a diachronic understanding of a composer's life, however, may lead to countercriticism in the light of other cases. Richard Wagner is one such example: he composed in his mind all his operas simultaneously, such that their timing in the creative process is impossible. Some might consider Wagner a German icon, but he was not at all during his lifetime, even if he was an incredibly public figure in a European context of his time. It was only in the 1920s and 1930s that he became an icon, and even then only as a completely misunderstood personality.<sup>11</sup>

Penderecki's life as a composer covers many different spiritual trends in Europe. However, it is important to note that as a Pole he had a quite specific relationship with them. As Norman Davies declared in the West it is hard to understand the closed nature of East-European cultural milieu. In his analytic and highly intellectual interpretations of Polish history Davis has some interesting observations. Firstly:

The imprecision if not the imponderabilia of Polish politics was increased by the habit of conducting the debate in **indirect** terms, and most typically by literary methods... the fact remains that literature served as the most common surrogate for political debate. Western analysts, who are accustomed in their own countries to examining electoral returns, opinion polls, reliable statistics and a press... found great difficulty in comprehending the closed world of Eastern Europe, where except for a fitful interval between the two world wars, such things rarely existed. They had to learn to decipher a new

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10 Erkki Salmenhaara, *Löytöretkiä musiikkiin. Valittuja kirjoituksia 1960–1990* [Journeys of Discovery into Music. Selected Writings 1960–1990] (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 1991), 97, 99–100.

11 Cf. Eero Tarasti, *Myth and Music. The Aesthetics of Myth in Music, Especially That of Wagner, Sibelius, Stravinsky* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1979) and Eero Tarasti, *Semiotics of Classical Music: How Mozart, Brahms and Wagner Talk to Us* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012).

mode of veiled expression where hints, oblique references, allegories and omissions spoke louder than superficial content.<sup>12</sup>

To this one might add that on the side of literature, music was able to manifest these concealed meanings as early as in the 19th century. The beginning of Chopin's F minor *Fantasy* is still interpreted in Paris (by Jules Gentil at *Ecole Normale de Musique*) as representing Poles as prisoners in Siberia... or *Noch ist Polen nicht verloren*.

Theodor Adorno addressed this same issue from the perspective of the epistemes:

All forms of music, not just those of expressionism, are sedimented contents. In them survives what is otherwise forgotten and is no longer capable of speaking directly. What once sought refuge in form subsists anonymously in form's persistence. The forms of art register the history of humanity with more justice than do historical documents. There is no hardening of form that is not to be read as the negation of the hardness of life. That the anxiety of the lonely becomes a canon of the aesthetic language of form betrays something of the secret of loneliness. The protest against the individualism of modern art is so petty just because it fails to recognize its social nature. "Lonely speech" says more of society's own tendency than does communicative discourse.<sup>13</sup>

Davies arrived at the theory of two alternating orientations or "epistemes in the history of Poland: romanticism and positivism. The former is seen as a search for ideals, a striving for the future, for a utopia, a better world; the latter accepts the *Dasein* as such and is satisfied with the supposed positivity of everyday life." In communist Poland it became an ideology in which no one could seriously believe.

Polish Positivist ideology was expounded at a slightly later date but with no less thoroughness. Like Romanticism it could trace its origins in the pre-partition era and it owed a particular debt to the enlightenment. Yet it took its main inspiration from the mid-century disillusionment with insurrectionary politics and with the apparent failure of the Romantics-prophecies, its leading proponents were repelled by the endless catastrophes, violence, and fantasies of Romanticism and called instead for a more cautious constructive, and pragmatic approach to the nation's life. Hence, the emphasis on Education, on Self Improvement, on Science, on Economics, on Social Reform... and above all on Work.<sup>14</sup>

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12 Norman Davies, *Heart of Europe. The Past in Poland's Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 186–187.

13 Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, transl. by R. Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 37–38. German version: Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 47.

14 Norman Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 179.

Yet, according to Davies, Polish history, from the battle of Poltava up to Solidarity can be perceived as a series of 30-year long periods:

The dynamics of the debate between the Romantic and Positivist camps is sometimes seen as the cause of the characteristic cyclical rhythm of Polish politics, where one of the two camps would gain the upper hand for a season, only to decline in due course and give way to the other.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, Davies remarks that the interaction between romantic thought and political activity crystallized in the terms Word and Deed. "The Word inspired the Deed, the Deed inspired a new Word: and the new Word inspired a further Deed; further deeds inspired further words [...]"<sup>16</sup>

How well this suits music and Penderecki in particular. His output often features violence; in his music he portrays the most tragic phases in Polish history, in fact, not only the history of Poland but of humanity in general, as in his opera *The Devils of Loudun*. Music is a means to master such horror somehow. In our later zemic model, we might say it is a way to sublimate horror while at the same time negating it.

His music does indeed display, as all commentators note, a desire to correct injustices, to react to them, bring them afore, fight against them. One of his main themes is **rebellion** – and soon we come to analyze Penderecki as a composer of resistance.

Penderecki admits himself that he may represent an overintellectualized interpretation of history, although he maintains his thesis. It is clear that Penderecki represents the Romantic trend in Davies' classification. Likewise Davies's other arguments support the nature of Polish epistemes: protagonists of Polish literature and fiction such as Konrad Wallenrod or Pan Tadeusz are as real to Poles as actual historical figures. They blend together to form one **collective Polish episteme**. If one compares the situation to, say, that in Finland, the difference is clear: in Finland no one has ever identified him/herself with the protagonists of J-L. Runeberg's *Field Surgeon Stål*, such that they would emerge as irrefutable ideals. On the other hand, every Finn is familiar with Sandels, Döbeln or Sven Dufva, the Finnish counterpart of Soldier Svejk in Czech history (however, the case may be different with Väinö Linna's novel of the last war, *Unknown Soldier!*)

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15 Ibidem, 184.

16 Ibidem, 204.

## Penderecki in Polish Musicology

How have Polish musicologists delineated Penderecki's personality and his character as a composer? Perhaps the best synthesis has been made by Mieczysław Tomaszewski who published many articles on his friend. In addition, Teresa Malecka has placed our composer in the context of the history of Poland as a whole and political events since 1956 in particular, including the temporary post-Stalinist thaw and the opening up of Poland to the West and, similarly, the rush of Polish composers to embrace international avant-gardist influences. Against this background, however, were Penderecki's own experiences with the Darmstadt electronic music studios and its approach to sound. However, sonorism did not make use of electronic devices and in this sense remained "actorial." Malecka highlighted the importance of the concepts of "generation" and the "spirit" of a time. Musical elements embraced a new hierarchical order; what this means for zemic analyses we shall soon see. Malecka presupposes what she calls **generational experience**, but is this at the same time **epistemic**? She also refers to the period of "intertextuality," but what does this mean exactly? Does it denote interaction between different arts or rather the way in which one text refers to another?<sup>17</sup>

After a period of radical sonorism humanistic topics once more gained the ascendent in Penderecki's work with his composition *St Luke Passion* in 1962–1965. As music must have a liberating function the composer resorted to traditional forms, by means of which one can better reach the audience with which the composer coexists in a broader sense. Music is thus linked to Polish society, but not in the sense understood by Jacques Attali, i.e. in being able to predict the future, but rather as a reaction to what is happening now.<sup>18</sup> Regina Chłopicka highlighted this aspect by showing how Penderecki reacted to political events quite literally.<sup>19</sup> Religious works were composed as a counterstatement to the efforts of the communists to suffocate the jubilee celebrations of the Catholic Church marking 1000 years of Christianity in Poland.

When he quotes hymns familiar to all Poles but not recognized by foreigners, Penderecki's religious music on the one hand marks a return to Polish history. As

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17 Teresa Malecka, "The Phenomenon of the Polish Composing School of the Second Half of the Twentieth Century in the Context of Cultural and Political Changes", in *Music of Change. Expression and liberation in Polish and Lithuanian Music Before and After 1989*, ed. by M. Janicka-Słysz (Kraków: Musica Iagellonica, 2023), 32, 41.

18 Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, transl. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

19 Regina Chłopicka, *Krzysztof Penderecki. Musica Sacra – Musica Profana* (Warsaw: Adam Mickiewicz Institute, 2014), 417.

such there is a parallel here with the Finnish composer Joonas Kokkonen and his opera *Last Temptations* in which Kokkonen literally cites the hymn of religious sect leader Paavo Ruotsalainen. On the other hand, however, Penderecki is also promoting rebellion. Penderecki is responding to the rise and fall of Solidarity in his music. He is very much embedded in the present. Here music is a social force. His work is engaged even when on the surface it appears not to be.

Małgorzata Janicka-Słysz has written an extensive essay on the experientiality of music. It is both conative i.e. it aims to have an impact on the listener, and also emotional, i.e. it expresses the ego and feelings of the composer – according to Roman Jakobson's well known theory of the functions of communication. Melancholy emerges from reminiscence. In turn, Iwona Sowińska-Fruhtrunk quotes another scholar, Władysław Stróżewski, who contended that Penderecki's work constitutes an enactment of dialectics by music, and dialectics between extremes on an enormous scale, while at the same time keeping them alive.<sup>20</sup>

Iwona Sowińska-Fruhtrunk argues that Penderecki returns to the past and repeats himself while at the same time also following Picasso and Stravinsky in always moving forwards, changing his manner of expression from one moment to another. Stravinsky said: *Je ne vis ni dans le passé, ni dans le futur, je ne vis que dans le présent.*<sup>21</sup> Yet, if we adopt the Adornian view of dialectics set out in *Negative Dialektik* Penderecki does not adopt a Stravinsky an regression in his music. If anyone were to consider Penderecki an existential composer, Adorno would refute such a classification in his own dialectics: "The notion of absolute freedom of choice is as illusionary as that of the absolute I as the world's source has ever been."<sup>22</sup>

Adorno claims that for existentialism all objectivity is indifferent. Existentialism tried to derive the political standpoint from fundamental ontology but remained the prisoner of idealism. The idealistic components of existentialism are functions of politics.<sup>23</sup> However, I should add here that an existential semiotic analysis of resistance would shed some light on Penderecki's approach.

Regina Chłopicka places all the stylistic changes in Penderecki's music alongside shifts in the Polish political landscape. On the one hand, musical narrative constitutes a constant line throughout his output; the composer actually quoted Umberto Eco's theory of narrative. In the *Passion of St Luke* he entered into a dialogue with

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20 Ibidem, 18.

21 Eero Tarasti, *Semiotics of Classical Music*, 394.

22 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, transl. by E.B. Ashton (London—New York: Routledge, 2004), 50. German version: Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), 60.

23 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), 19.

musical tradition, which as a twenty year old he had categorically rejected. The path taken by Finnish composer Kalevi Aho mirrored Penderecki and Arthur Schnittke in this respect, i.e. abandoning the avantgarde in favor of traditional expression.<sup>24</sup>

Not all understood this gesture. When Solidarity ushered in a brief period of hope in Poland<sup>25</sup> Penderecki wrote his *Polish Requiem*. When Marshall Law was imposed he composed *Dies Irae*. All his religious works have a Polish dimension and feature quotations of hymns well known to Poles. This was followed by a postmodern turn, reflected in his opera and alto and flute concerto.

And yet what is actually postmodern in a Polish framework? Iwona Sowińska-Fruhtrunk gave much thought to this question in her essay "Postmodern Polish Music after 1989. Freedom as a Value or Burden." Due to political obstacles earlier postmodernism only began to make its mark in Poland in the 1980s and 1990s. Poles had limited opportunities to read books on such topics.

Generally speaking, in my opinion West European postmodernism can be crystallized into the following principles: 1) too much of everything: books, music, events, as a consequence of which nothing can be taken seriously any longer, 2) an ironic attitude, 3) inner and outer conflicts are accepted as such, 4) the rediscovery of the subject but now as a *sujet excentré*, as a disparate, not a coherent subject, 5) the end of great narratives. Someone thus said that a postmodern man/woman accepts the Dionysian and Apollonian principles simultaneously. According to Dorota Krawczyk Polish music is characterized by four basic types: playing with historic styles, dialectics, anarchistic and radical eclecticism (quoted from Sowińska-Fruhtrunk<sup>26</sup>).

If in France the model of the postmodern can be derived from Francis Poulenc's Concerto for two pianos (even though Poulenc's work actually preceded the years of postmodernism proper), as Daniel Charles has proposed, it would mean a fragmentary style in which opposing sections follow one another surprisingly. What is crucial is the presence of pluralism in the sense employed by Deleuze. A shift from axiology to epistemology, i.e. the manifestation of values in epistemes, could be interpreted in this case in our own context. Isaiah Berlin writes: "I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men's acts of will. I want to be a subject

24 Kalevi Aho, *Taiteilijan tehtävät postmodernissa yhteiskunnassa* [Challenges of the Artist in Postmodern Society] (Jyväskylä: Gaudemus, 1992).

25 Regina Chłopicka, *Krzysztof Penderecki. Musica Sacra*, 239.

26 See: Iwona Sowińska-Fruhtrunk, Lecture *From Topos to Testimony: Krzysztof Penderecki's St Luke Passion as an Example of the Poetics of Violence in the 20th Century Music*, presented during Symposium "Krzysztof Penderecki. Music as an Experience" (6.12.2023, Krzysztof Penderecki Academy of Music, Kraków).

and not an object [...]."27 What is involved is freedom and choice, but obviously in a somewhat different meaning proposed by Sartrean existentialism. In the modern perspective everything is subordinated to higher aesthetic principles. Hence the notion of freedom is essential (I should add here that in existential semiotics there is no freedom without the idea of transcendence).

However, one has to agree with Krzysztof Szwajgier when he argues:

At different moments of history we have different truths at our disposal. These collective beliefs can be called a worldview, a paradigm, a spirit of the times; occasionally simply a style, an expression of an era. They find their expression in a sequence of cultural formations, including artistic ones.<sup>28</sup>

In 2014, on the initiative of Mieczysław Tomaszewski a conference was held in Kraków entitled *Music as a Message of Truth and Beauty*. At that conference I myself delivered a lecture on "The Existential and Transcendental Analysis of Music," which then appeared in the proceedings of the symposium.<sup>29</sup> However, a large section at the end of the anthology was devoted to Penderecki, to which I did not then pay any attention. And yet it included a knowledgeable essay by Tomaszewski himself – "Penderecki, The Structure of A Creative Personality."<sup>30</sup> The first part of the essay bore the title "Rebellion and Liberation." The essential point here is that Penderecki's musical development should be interpreted as a series of rebellions and liberations. *Threnody* represented a struggle against the Western avantgarde, which had forgotten the power of the emotions. His second rebellion was also against the avantgarde, this time for ignoring the importance and existence of the sacred. This insurrection was apparent in *St Luke Passion*. Ten years later Penderecki rebelled against the unwritten yet enforced prohibition on the use of stylistic flashbacks in all creativity aspiring to aesthetical correctness. His final act of liberation was against himself, expressed in an inner dissent against repeating himself in subsequent works and against excessive monumentality. Liberation from excess could be used to describe that stage in his work in which *claritas* became the dominating principle, as in Thomas Aquinas. The factor which best characterizes Penderecki is the spirit of independence. We could even argue that he was *un esprit contestataire*.

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27 Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty", in Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*, ed. by H. Hardy (Oxford—New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 178.

28 *Music as a Message of Truth and Beauty*, ed. by T. Malecka, M. Pawłowska (Kraków: Akademia Muzyczna w Krakowie, 2014), 372.

29 *Ibidem*, 25–54.

30 See: Mieczysław Tomaszewski, "Listening to Penderecki", *Teoria muzyki. Studia, interpretacje, dokumentacje* [Music Theory. Studies, Interpretations, Documentation] 16 (2020), 341–352.

## Composer of Resistance

Now we have arrived at the point where I wish to discuss Penderecki from the perspective of existential semiotics. In my work *Sein und Schein*<sup>31</sup> I posited a particular theory of resistance. Would it be appropriate for an interpretation of the case of Penderecki?

The basic category of resistance is **negation**. The first transcendental act is the negation of our *Dasein*, which can liberate us from new possibilities.

I wrote then:

We are all capable of pursuing the spiritual and pragmatic operation that one may call negation. Negation is a crucial notion in existential semiotics. It is also relevant in Hegelian logic, as that which puts the world into motion. Negation is followed by Becoming. But what if we should intervene at this stage... and presume that negation is instead followed by a return backwards?<sup>32</sup>

In other words, we have to find the counter-current of signs. Normally we think that in communication everything proceeds forwards linearly from left to right, from sender to receiver. Yet, what if the stream should go in the other direction? By way of an example I then referred to Peter Weiss' book *Ästhetik des Widerstandes* from 1978, in which he analyses Géricault's painting *Le radeau de la Méduse*, which depicts a shipwreck. The idea of resistance emerges, on the other hand, from the Heideggerian notion of *Scheitern* ("collapse"). How well this notion has been borne out in the history of Poland and how artists have reacted to it!

In my theory I distinguish between three forces of resistance: being, memory and history; in Umberto Eco's theory being is a mystic counterforce or reality. In Peirce's semiotics, it is a dynamic object, as he calls it, which limits our endless talk and discourse about *Dasein*. It speaks to us, as it were, in Eco's mind: Talk, talk about me, take me into account!<sup>33</sup> How often this occurs in Penderecki's music when he selects topics of which one could not talk publicly earlier. Being in this sense is a state of thrownness, i.e. *Geworfenheit*, into a certain situation as Heidegger puts it. If this is unbearable the only alternative is resistance.

But how is this possible in theory? And theory is necessary if one wants to change the world. Otherwise our speech is mere sermon. Signs may go backwards and we can return to moments which may have happened in the past. In philosophy this is called

31 See: Eero Tarasti, *Sein und Schein. Explorations in Existential Semiotics* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2015).

32 Ibidem, 6–7.

33 Ibidem, 163.

counter factuality. But at the same time as we move in countercurrent we should be aware that *Dasein* itself can also change in the meantime... as it has occurred already in the basic model of our transcendental acts. When our subject is pursuing his/her negation and encounters nothingness, *Dasein* has turned into a new position. And so our subject returns to a different world wherefrom it departed.<sup>34</sup>

In other words, if the artist in his or her act of negation has developed a new style – for instance a negation of sonorism, a return to the status quo, a traditional style – the object of the negation no longer exists! The situation has changed, and something else has taken place which demands again a new form of negation. In this Protean transformation within the pulse of Polish epistemes our composer Penderecki was a master. In fact, his evolution should not be compared with Stravinsky's metamorphoses, since the latter's path led him from maximalist symphonic ballets to neoclassicism and serialism, whereas Penderecki moved in the opposite direction, away from serialism and sonoristic avantgardism towards classical idioms and then, eventually, towards maximalized church music works.

However, I would also argue that the movement or flux of reality does stop merely being even when motion no longer acts dialectically (cf. *être/faire*); the very act of such stopping can also constitute a moment of resistance. In this sense, the adoption of an **aesthetic** attitude can serve as a form of resistance stagnating the process of becoming occupied by regressive forces in the sense of the above-mentioned positivist ideology (Davies).

According to one theory of the aesthetic, this only occurs in a certain relationship with things, referring to the objects themselves:

An aesthetic attitude stops at the emotional value of a phenomenon. Yet a disgusting emotional value cannot be stopped because its disgusting nature repels us from it. It makes it impossible to stay there... its emotional impact changes immediately into a motif of will and forces us to act<sup>35</sup> (my comment: to resistance).

However, we ought to add here that:

...towards both disgusting and action-motivating phenomena we can assume an aesthetic attitude when they are little farther away in time and place, or no when they longer occur in their full sensual reality, but rather in the imagination, and, as a result, such phenomena have been dealt with a great deal in the arts.<sup>36</sup>

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34 Ibidem, 167.

35 Finnish aesthetician K.S. Laurila, see: Kaarle Sanfrid Laurila, *Estetiikan peruskysymyksiä* [Basic Questions of Aesthetics] (Helsinki: Werner Söderströmin Osakeyhtiö, 1947).

36 Ibidem, 47–48.

Hence, we could argue the same with many of Penderecki's works from *Dies irae* to *Devils of Loudun*. K.S. Laurila, the Finnish aesthetician, argues furthermore that: "Art proves that the aesthetic attitude is possible in relation to all forms of existing being... Being as a whole can be an object of art."<sup>37</sup>

To underline the attitude as such constitutes neokantianism and originates from Ernst Cassirer, who thought that it only defined myth.<sup>38</sup> However, to stop being can mean for instance, in a completely abstract musical work, that the listener remains in an aesthetic now-moment and abandons following the teleological, "organic" progress of the music. We shall soon see how this is related to our *zemic* and its category of *Soi1* or values and norms.

The second force of resistance is **memory**. Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* is in this sense a negation of French society in its entirety, even if it is on the surface an affirmation, without the reader even noticing it. Nevertheless, only when everything has been remembered and told, is the truth arrived at and the narrator ego becomes a writer. The basic category of Rudolph Carnap's fundamental work *Der logische Aufbau der Welt* is the remembrance of similarity, *Ähnlichkeitserinnerung*. The idea of continuous becoming is an illusion in this system. Its core idea is pure subjective experience (or rather, as he calls it, *Das Gegebene ist subjektlos*), in line with Husserl. Hegel had declared that the essence of spirit is freedom. This was possible because causality did not exist elsewhere other than in our imagination. There was no logical reason for world A to change into world B. We call this horizontal appearance, *horizontale Erscheinung*. As a consequence, there is no obstacle preventing world A from also becoming a better world B. "Still a new day can change everything," said the national poet of Finland. J.L. Runeberg. Or, as Hannah Arendt put it: the infinitely improbable can still be realized.

Nevertheless, for this we need memory so that we can fetch alternatives from history: what might have happened if... Let us again return to the idea that we can imagine the countercurrent of communication. What to do if something has already happened? Paul Ricoeur's book *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* ends with the chapter *pardon difficile*. In it, he deals with the theme of guilt, forgiveness, happy memory, and unhappy history, and at the end the theme of forgetting.<sup>39</sup> If we have remorse for the message we have sent, and if we want to cancel it, which is impossible if it has already happened (I shall not begin here to ponder the prob-

37 Ibidem. I am indebted to Aleksi Haukka for rediscovering Laurila, a remarkable Finnish aesthetician.

38 Eero Tarasti, *Myth and Music*, 24.

39 Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* [Memory, History, Forgetting] (Paris: Seuil, 2000), quoted from Eero Tarasti, *Sein und Schein*, 177.

lem of so-called cancel culture), the only alternative which remains is to choose, forget, forgive. This attitude is expressed in Brahms' *Ein deutsches Requiem: und ihre Taten folgen sie nach...* but it may be that there is an exit from this impasse. Finally, I wrote in my *Sein und Schein*:

The fact is that all history as a retrospective activity, as a collective or individual memory is also a narrative of resistance, because in such an activity one always transcends the surface of reality... in this respect merely to defend the existence of history is itself resistance – and progress.<sup>40</sup>

It is in this context of resistance and rebellion that I wish to position my interpretation of Penderecki. Yet there still remains the most important problem: how does all this happen in music itself when we follow its purely musical laws. I believe that one approach that could help us here is my own method of existential semiotics. Although I have already applied its central 'zemic' model to several composers, I have not yet done so in the case of avantgarde music proper. I recall a seminar on musical semiotics in Budapest in 1986, attended by, among others, Daniel Charles and Marta Grabocz and the academician Jozef Ujfalussy. During this seminar Charles declared: "You music semioticians are kings, that is true, when you study the classico-romantic repertoire. But what about when you shift to the avantgarde, such as John Cage?" And why not also Penderecki, at least in his radical period?

## The principles of zemic analysis

In fact, the guidelines for this analysis are easily identified. It begins with Hegelian logics and its categories of being: *an-sich-sein* and *für-sich-sein*. The former means being as such but undetermined, while the latter denotes being for someone else, as observed and limited by someone else, and thus as something social. When we add to these the categories of Me and Society, i.e. the French *Moi* and *Soi*, we arrive at a field of four terms: *an-mir-sein*, *für-mich-sein*, *für-sich-sein* and *an-sich-sein*, or being-in-myself, being-for-myself, being-for-oneself and being-in-oneself. These terms can be placed in the 'semiotic square' or the semiotic school of Paris (Greimas), which has its roots in linguistics: i.e. *s1 vs s2* and *non-s2 vs non-s1*. When we make a semantic investment here, keeping what is meant by the human mind after all, we obtain the following cases: 1) body, 2) person or actor, 3) social practice and 4) values and norms. In other words, we shift from the axis of the *sensible* in the sense used by Lévi-Strauss, towards the new dimension of *intelligible* or Adorno's categories

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40 Eero Tarasti, *Sein und Schein*, 180.

of Me vs Society. I call this model zemic because it is a) emic i.e. portrays the world from inside, as it is phenomenologically experienced, and b) there is a movement of Z in two directions: either the body gradually sublimates (Freud!) into values, or values gradually concretize into a body (in English I use the terms sublimation and embodiment for these movements). In this way I also resolve the problem of the Greimassian cartesian, a tough, achronic and rigorous system, which transforms into a temporal and dynamic process and better corresponds to what happens in the *Dasein* in reality.

The model thus depicts the elements of which the human mind is comprised. In order to define this model we always need the following four aspects:

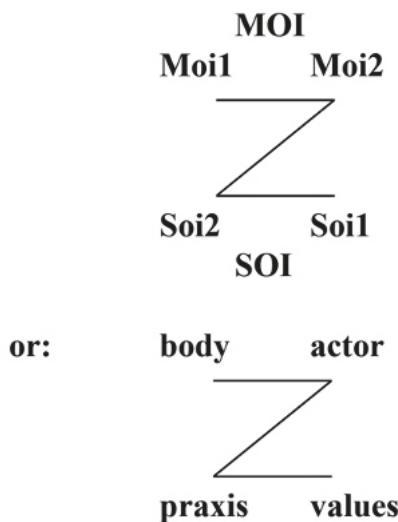


Figure 1

Yet, when we now examine such man-made objects as a text or an artistic work, such as music we shift from the zemic model towards **sig-zemic** or sign-zemic, which is a mere sign of the original zemic situation. What is involved is a complex representation of zemic into sig-zemic. In the case of music, for example, these modes of being M1 M2 S2 S1 correspond to the following cases:

Furthermore, we may recall that behind the square also loom Greimas's modalities: will M1, can M2, know S2 and must S1. Moreover, the modality of belief is also included here and it leads to *Soi1*, to epistemes. Finally, on this side of this im-

manent process of signs lies the idea of transcendence. This means that empirical transcendence is the same as *Soi 1*, perhaps the invisible values of a society, from which one ascends to the level of reflection or *supra-zemic*, which corresponds to Hegel's concept of *Wessen*, i.e. essence... and from there on to that radical transcendence which we can gauge only by means of metaphors.

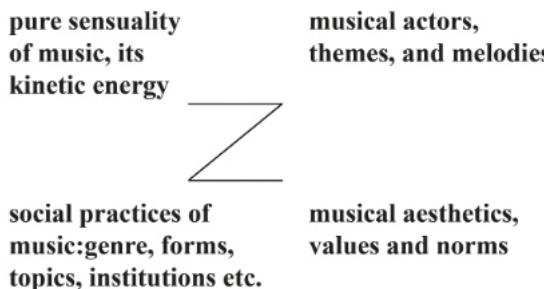


Figure 2

Accordingly there are two movements: *trans-a-scendence* or elevation to transcendence, or as Sartre argues: we create transcendence in our minds, when our concrete living world is so chaotic and incomplete. Yet the other movement is *trans-de-scendence* and it starts from the epistemological choice that the only thing that is truly real is that radical transcendence for which all the worldly issues constitute only its metaphor: *alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis* (Goethe *Faust II*).<sup>41</sup>

The concept of transcendence is, however, quite relevant precisely in Penderecki's case, as he himself stated in one of his interviews (cited from Chłopicka):

My art which grew from profoundly Christian roots, aims to rebuild the metaphysical space of the human being, shattered by the cataclysms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The way to save man is to restore the sacred dimension of reality.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, Małgorzata Pawłowska quotes two similar statements that Penderecki made: "[...] Art should be a source of difficult hope" (Penderecki 1997), and "[...] On entering the path of avant-garde music I had the feeling that one cannot break from one's spiritual roots [...] I see even more clearly that only homo religious can hope for salvation."<sup>43</sup>

41 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust, Erster und Zeiter Teil* [Faust, First and Time Part] (München: Wilhelm Goldmann Verlag, 1964), 339.

42 Regina Chłopicka, *Krzysztof Penderecki. Musica Sacra – Musica Profana*, 13.

43 Małgorzata Pawłowska, "Musical Narratives on the Gates of Jerusalem by Bronius Kutavičius and Krzysztof Penderecki", in *Music of Change. Expression and Liberation*

The variations of log-zemic can be portrayed by means of a special notation and it may be amusing or at least noteworthy that it sometimes evokes the notation devised by Penderecki himself. How these principles are applied in a proper analysis of Penderecki's sonoristic works (Threnody, Fluorescences, Anaklasis), I have tried to show in another forthcoming essay: *Krzesztof Penderecki: An Existential Semiotic Study of His Sonoristic Works and the 2nd Concerto for Cello and Orchestra*.<sup>44</sup>

### Log-zemic actions

sublimation embodiment transascendence transdescendence



how kinetic energy, aesthetic idea becomes transcending thus is transcendental idea  
khora becomes an gradually concrete not any idea, but it is announced in  
actor, genre and value is revealed during the musical material  
(Freude theme)  
(Isolde's Liebestod)

(both ways at Bruckner's Eighth symphony  
slow movement)

dialogue



communication, either benevolent or aggressive themes are in struggle or harmonized - like in Mozart concerto, so there are two spheres of dialogue; a theme can be benevolent i.e. euphoric...but sometimes the performer does not care about it ("Not all like angels!")

fragmentation



themes, musical actors, are egocentric, selfish, do not care each other (serial music?)

toward



striving towards something, teleology themes are opposed movement is backwards meeting resistance, i.e. an actor is against its Umwelt

against



That is what happens in purely musical sense, but how the drama behind it on stage and libretto have exercise their impact?

Figure 3

in Polish and Lithuanian Music Before and After 1989, ed. by M. Janicka-Słysz (Kraków: Musica lagellonica, 2023), 209–210.

44 In Roczniki Humanistyczne 72/XII (2024), 249–278.

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## Summary

The essay is an effort to scrutinize the composer profile of Penderecki both as a music historical, and cultural phenomenon. It is striving for a synthesis of his output using the socalled existential semiotic approach.

Composer's style periods in 1958–1998 have been characterized by Regina Chłopicka. When Polish sonorism became known in the West in the 1960, it was admired by the magical power of the sound itself. "Sounding material was more important than compositional organisation" said the Finnish composer Erkki Salmenhaara then.

Yet, Penderecki can be also approached via the history of Poland and its alternating "epistemes" waves of romanticism and positivism (Norman Davies), "first one aiming for utopias, the latter accepting the *Dasein* as it is." The epistemic structure of Polish collective mentality has been called by Teresa Malecka as a series of "generational experiences." Thus, Penderecki participating to these intellectual and political movements became a composer of resistance, whose works reflect being, memory and history as the categories negation. "Yet only homo religiosus can hope for a salvation," said the composer once. In this sense he might be also called a "transcendental" musician. These notes try to contextualize his output by large, later analyzed in more details by the socalled "zemic" model and its instances of Moi1, Moi2, Soir2 and Soi1.

**Keywords:** sonorism, collective episteme, resistance, negation, religion, transcendence, zemic analysis, existential semiotics

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