Helmut Loos

Universität Leipzig

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4742-3639

"Describing the Tragedy of Existence." Structure and Meaning in Krzysztof Penderecki's *2nd Symphony*

Krzysztof Penderecki composed his *2nd Symphony* in the winter of 1979/1980. It thus stands at the end of a creative period lasting from 1974 to 1980, which Regina Chłopicka has described using the phrase: "In Search of Universal Values Between Sonorism and Polyphony."[1] According to Wolfram Schwinger, Penderecki turned his drafts for the symphony into its final form on Christmas Eve, conceiving it not as the five-movement work he had initially intended, but as an extended sonata movement. It was then that the composer also came up with the idea of using a quotation from the Christmas carol "Silent Night, Holy Night," integrating its four opening notes into the piece.[2] In the autumn of 1981, Penderecki extended the final section of the symphony, adding fourteen pages to the score.[3]

The symphony's three allusions to the Christmas carol quickly earned it the informal title "Christmas Symphony." Although there is no literal reference to this

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1   Regina Chłopicka, *Krzysztof Penderecki. Musica Sacra – Musica Profana. A Study of Vocal-Instrumental Works* (Warsaw: Adam Mickiewicz Institute, 2003), 94, 233–236.

2   Wolfram Schwinger, *Krzysztof Penderecki. Begegnungen, Lebensdaten, Werkkommentare* [Krzysztof Penderecki. Encounters, Life Data, Work Commentaries] (Mainz and New York: Schott, 1994), 94.

3   Ibidem, 99.

in the original sources, Penderecki did refer to it himself as "Symphony No. 2, The Christmas Symphony."[4] Nevertheless, the name has never been fully accepted acceptance, and the appendage is used most often with a certain reluctance or even irony.[5] Even Mieczysław Tomaszewski claims that the symphony was "nicknamed «Christmas Eve»,"[6] despite being the one who has always pointed out the importance of music quotations in Penderecki's work, including the second important theme in Symphony No. 2: "The motive described […] as 'Polish' or, even more, as a 'Polish highlander' theme, appears in a heroic E flat major in Symphony No. 2."[7] Here, Tomaszewski treats Penderecki's use of key characteristics, and, even more, his "use of figures of musical rhetoric",[8] very much as a matter of course. Penderecki's work is far from any conception of the symphony as absolute music; rather, it is, in the composer's own words, "in full an allusion to the late tradition of 19th-century symphonism",[9] and, as such, it also carries a message.[10] Penderecki even specifies the topic: "describing the tragedy of existence."[11]

But let us first turn to the musical structure. The entire tonal material of the symphony is developed from the theme, which is introduced at the very beginning. It consists of two descending minor thirds, two large upward leaps (major seventh and tritone), and three chromatically ascending notes. The consonant thirds are contrasted with four dissonant intervals, which also turn out to be complementary (a seventh plus a semitone makes an octave, tritone plus semitone makes a fifth).[12]

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4   Krzysztof Penderecki, *Labyrinth of Time. Five Addresses for the End of the Millennium*, ed. by R. Robinson (Chapel Hill: Hinshaw Music, 1998), 60.
5   The Christmas reference is not mentioned by Irina Nikolska, "On Some Symphonic Works within the 80s", in *The Music of Krzysztof Penderecki. Poetics and Reception. Studies, Essays and Materials*, ed. by M. Tomaszewski (Kraków: Akademia Muzyczna w Krakowie, 1995), 45–53, here 49f. The symphony is not included in Barbara Malecka-Contamin, *Krzysztof Penderecki: Style et Matériaux* [Krzysztof Penderecki: Style and Material] (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 1997).
6   Mieczysław Tomaszewski, *Krzysztof Penderecki and His Music. Four Essays* (Kraków: Akademia Muzyczna w Krakowie, 2003), 61.
7   Ibidem, 59.
8   Ibidem, 14.
9   Krzysztof Penderecki, *Labyrinth of Time*, 60. This has been demonstrated by Constantin Floros in a number of publications.
10 See, for example, Constantin Floros, *Musik als Botschaft* [Music as Message] (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1989).
11 Krzysztof Penderecki, *Labyrinth of Time*, 60.
12 Krzysztof Penderecki, *2. Sinfonie* für Orchester (1979/80). Studien- und Dirigierpartitur ED 7223 [Symphony No. 2 for Orchestra (1979/80). Study and Conductor Score ED 7223] (Mainz and New York: Schott, n.d).

Example 1

The chromatic three-tone motif dominates the melodic and polyphonic sections of the symphony, which are largely chromatic overall; they are repeatedly interrupted by tonal chordal blocks (a consonant with a minor third). The connection of these blocks does not follow any tonal rules, but rather is completely free. Thus, at the beginning, B minor and F minor (tritone), E minor and F-sharp minor, and A minor and C-sharp minor all stand side by side, connected only by two falling minor sixths separated from the three-tone motif (the second connection between the chords ends with a fifth). The three-tone motif proves to be extremely suitable for a motivic-thematic transformation; already at the first occurrence (bar 5), there is an inversion in the bass; in the varied repetition of the theme (2 bars before No. 1), the inversion is directly connected to the original theme. After the two introductions of the theme, the three-note motif takes the lead in the third section (3 bars after No. 1) until the third chord block.

Example 2

This again presents a three-part form similar to bar form (Stollen, Stollen, Abgesang). A passage with a three-note motif leads to the theme (without tritone), now performed by three trombones *maestoso* over C-sharp minor (5 bars after No. 2). The theme is taken over by four horns in *forte* (No. 4), followed by the quotation of the first four notes of the Christmas carol "Silent Night, Holy Night" in G major, characteristically played by woodwinds, the instruments of the shepherds in the field. The theme is played twice more by the basses over A minor (14 bars after No. 4) and, in *fortissimo,* by all five horns over G major (No. 5), followed by a long E flat major chord played four times in *fortissimo* by the brass (No. 6). The contrast is provided by a horn solo marked *cantabile* and *piano* with a curving melodic line (with a sixths motif, No. 7), which, with respect to character, could be considered a 2nd theme or secondary movement in classical sonata form [Tbsp.]. The passage is brought to a close by descending minor seconds; the theme appears once more in the basses (two bars after No. 8).

Progression sketch

Figure

1	**Theme** over F-sharp, chords with sixths	**Exposition**
2	Upswing, **Theme** C-sharp f	
3	Transition	
4	**Theme** B-flat minor f, Sigh, **Silent Night** G major ppp, Upswing, **Theme**	
5	**Theme** *G* forte, increase ff. Termination	
6	ff **E flat major chord** 3x, three-note motif	
7	cr solo p sixths motif, ob solo, fl, f sharp minor	
8	pp F-sharp minor **Theme** in basses, b flat minor sighs	

Exposition / Development

9 Allegretto, Sound surface D minor, Upswing, A flat minor, **Theme**, Sighs

10 **Theme** A minor ff, sigh, E minor f, sigh

11 Allegretto, Upswing

12 **E-flat major**, Upswing

13 minor third down/up forte, sigh, up/down

14 minor third down/up, three tone motifs processed, sound fl. strings ff

15 Sound surface broadened to tutti

16 *d* trills unisono, resolutions, departure, sighs

17 Quarter *f e* repeated unison ff, *f* beats f repeated, departure

18 Sigh, Upswing, Cluster pp, **Theme** oboe solo, Upswing

19 Tempo I, minor third downwards, upswing forte, **Theme** *B G sharp g e*,

20 minor third downw., upswing, **Theme**, **Polish Theme** ff E flat major 3x

21 Upswing transitional, **Silent Night** A major "Quasi da lontano" ppp

22 E flat major pp sixths motif (see m. 6/7)

23 Sesto motif

Development

24 f furioso descending, **Theme** tn

25 Sound surface D minor, C-sharp major **Theme**

26 Sound surface C minor **Theme**

27	**Theme**, sound surface blurs into cluster	
28	*e(-g)* ff, *es c* **Theme** var.	
29	Continuation, **Theme**	
30	g-d sound surface pp, three-tone motif, theme	
31	Continuation, **Polish Theme** piano fl ob2 *es-g*, *g f as g*	
32	**E flat major,** sigh ff	
33	Rising trills, sighs cresc. p-ff, crash, quarter wdh. *c a*	
34	**Theme**	**Recapitulation**
35	interrupted by processed three-tone motif	
36	**Theme** literal, instrumentation intensified	**Recapitulation**
37	**Theme** literal, instrumentation amplified, spun on	
38	Three-tone motif	
39	**Theme** over C minor	
40	A minor, three-tone motif	
41	Allegretto, E-flat major, Upswing, three-note motif	
42	Upswing, three-tone motif, sigh	
43	minor third, three-tone motif	
44	D minor, B minor, **Theme**, chromaticism, three-tone motif	
45	Three-tone motif	
46	Sound surface cluster	
47	sf C-sharp tr *d as h d*, ff furioso resolutions, tr *d* upsurge, [chaos ff]	
48	[Chaos ff] Upswing, dissolution, f *d* tr	
50	[Chaos ff] tr *b*, upswing, sound surface *d es f e – a b e f h c des* – …	
51	Quarter *f e* repeated unison ff,	
52	*f* strokes f repeated, departure	
53	ff **Polish Theme** augmented E flat major	
54	**Polish Theme** augmented E flat major	
55	ff E flat major, Upswing Downswing, E flat major	
56	f **Theme** maestoso to sound surface	
57	f pesante C As G, ff – p – pp	
58	**Silent Night**, **Theme** p,	
59	minor third, F *sharp*	

The association with the sonata form is not a coincidence, since Penderecki clearly composed a recapitulation. The exact theme is taken up again at No. 34, with somewhat stronger instrumentation, and, after a brief interruption, it is repeated note-for-note from No. 36 to No. 38. Other distinct elements of the structure are the "Silent Night" quotations at numbers 4, 21, and 58, and the heroic Polish theme in E-flat major at Nos. 20 and 53/54. At number 6, the heavy E-flat major chords of the brass, in a lower register *fortissimo*, anticipate this theme to a certain extent and are repeated at No. 32 after a rather restrained quotation of the Polish theme. "Silent Night" and the Polish theme are always in direct proximity to each other, and thus mark important passages in the form of the symphony. The exposition of the symphony seems to conclude at number 8 with the two characterizing themes, the suggestion of a second theme, a reminiscence of the theme, and falling seconds.[13]

The second section of the form would then run from No. 9 to the first appearance of the decided Polish theme (No. 20) and the "Silent Night" quotation immediately thereafter (No. 21). It is not possible to determine with certainty whether this is a varied repetition of the exposition or a first part of the development. The finale is a melodic passage with the sixths motif (secondary theme) in the basses (No. 22) and violins (No. 23). From No. 24 onwards, an extensive elaboration of the theme functions as a development, with tonal surfaces in D minor, C sharp major (No. 25), and C minor (No. 26) dissolving into a cluster-like tonal surface. It culminates on note *e* (with *g*), to which the third *E-flat – C* is added and further developed with a three-note motif (No. 28). This formal section ends after a very soft quotation of the Polish theme (6 bars after No. 31) with the heavy E-flat major chords of the brass (No. 32), a vehement outburst of sound, and five quarter-note repetitions of the notes *c1* and *a,* marked *pesante* and played by brass and strings (No. 33). This is immediately followed by the recapitulation.

After the repetition of the thematic passages (Nos. 36/37), the recapitulation develops its own dynamic and builds towards an almost chaotic climax with cluster-like sound surfaces (Nos. 46-50, added in 1981), which merge into a unison of repeated quarter tones *f e* (No. 51) and single beats of the tone *f* (No. 52), just as they had already appeared in the second section of the form on the way to the two characterizing themes (No. 17). The Polish theme now appears twice and is augmented, as an apotheosis in an orchestral tutti *fortissimo* (Nos. 53/54). The theme follows this *maestoso* in *fortissimo* (No. 56), after which comes the "Silent Night" quotation *pianissimo* in C major, the theme once again in *piano*, with the

13   Irina Nikolska, *On Some Symphonic Works*, and Wolfram Schwinger, *Krzysztof Penderecki*, 198–204, offer quite different analyses of the sonata form.

symphony fading away after two minor thirds, *A – F-sharp*, on the note *F-sharp,* just as the piece began. This closes a grand musical arc of extraordinary stringency and unity, thematic penetration, and logical development in the best symphonic tradition.

The significance of the work is not only evident in the two characteristic themes, but also by the broader subject matter, which is permeated with musical rhetoric. The "Silent Night" quotation clearly alludes to Christmas, but it is not referring to the domestic gift-giving festival of the bourgeoisie, as is often assumed,[14] but rather to the Christian feast of the birth of Jesus. As is well known, the song was written in 1818 by Franz Xaver Gruber for the Christmas Mass of the church of St. Nikola in Oberndorf near Salzburg, i.e., as a church hymn. It owes its success to the incorporation of the old tradition of Christmas music,[15] which is evident in the pastorale with its swaying 6/8 time and the simple melody in thirds over a pedal tone in the bass. After the rationalist "cleansing" of church music in the late 18th century, this traditional Christmas expression was well received and, starting in Leipzig, had an impact in circles far beyond the church.[16] The central message of the Christian Christmas is the biblical announcement of the angels to the shepherds in Bethlehem "in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis" (peace on earth to men of goodwill). Since its origins, Christmas has always been a festival of peace; its secularized bourgeois version as a celebration of family gift-giving has not changed this. The Polish theme in Penderecki's *2nd Symphony* in heroic E-flat major is clearly an apotheosis in terms of content.

The motifs of the opening theme acquire their meaning in the course of the symphony. Just as the opening third does not prove itself as a message of peace until the song quotation, the chromatically ascending three-tone motif also gains significance in content in the course of the piece: upswing/optimism and confidence. It is used at many points as the main motif of energetic and decisive musical progressions, for example, from No. 9 (Allegretto exposition/development) or No. 35

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14   Kinga Kiwała, "«Meaningful Moments» in Krzysztof Pendedecki's «Christmas Symphony No. 2», in the Light of the Phenomenological Concept of Time", in *Music as a Message of Truth and Beauty*, ed. by T. Malecka and M. Pawłowska (Kraków: Akademia Muzyczna w Krakowie, 2014), 383–390.

15   Helmut Loos, *Weihnachten in der Musik. Grundzüge der Geschichte weihnachtlicher Musik* [Christmas in Music: Basics of the History of Christmas Music] (Bonn: Gudrun Schröder, 1991).

16   Helmut Loos, "Zum Topos des Weihnachtsliedes in der Aufklärung (Das Weihnachtslied in katholischen Gesangbüchern des späten 18. Jahrhunderts)", in *175 Jahre "Stille Nacht!" Symposionbericht* [On the Topic of the Christmas Carol in the Enlightenment (The Christmas Carol in Catholic Hymnals of the Late 18th Century], ed. by Th. Hochradner, G. Walterskirchen (Salzburg: Selke-Verlag, 1994), 41–61, esp. 41 and 60f.

(truncated recapitulation). The inversion of the three-tone motif also signifies an inversion in terms of content, here expressing resignation and suffering. This becomes particularly clear when, reduced to two notes, it becomes a classic "sigh" figure, as in 2 bars before No. 10. The entire symphony is permeated by such formations, which are easy to follow. The extensive motivic-thematic processing and spinning of the three-tone motif thus becomes an image of the perpetual struggle between confidence and resignation, departure and suffering. This is "the tragedy of existence" (Penderecki).[17]

Given the time when the symphony was composed makes Penderecki's message clear. In 1979/1980, Polish society was reaching a boiling point. Independent trade unions had been formed, were organizing strikes and expressing their views freely, for example in the "Charter of Workers' Rights" (September 1979). There was a real danger that any uprising would be brutally suppressed. After much negotiation, in December 1981 General Wojciech Jaruzelski imposed martial law on the country and imprisoned the leaders of the *Solidarność* trade union. The fact that this did not lead to bloody riots, and that the population remained calm in the end, is certainly due in no small part to Pope John Paul II, whose Christian beliefs prevented him from endorsing a violent uprising; rather, he relied on the assertiveness of people of good will. This is the basic message of Penderecki's symphony. The Polish theme and the firm, unshakable E-flat major chord stand for the unswerving, heroic efforts of Poles in those days; theseremain unchanged, increasing in intensity over the course of the symphony, until they reach an apotheosis. The Christmas carol, in the *pianissimo* "Quasi da lontano" a distant vision of peace, rises from G major through A major to C major, which, in a sense, is the target key of a climax (Climax or Gradatio). At the end the "Quasi da lontano" is also missing, a cautious sign of hope for balance and peace.

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17   Krzysztof Penderecki, *Labyrinth of Time*, 60.

Example 3

The fact that the symphony ends on the same note, *F-sharp*, as it began, points to the fact that the struggle between confidence and resignation is not to be regarded as situationally unique, but as a fundamental, unchanging element of human existence. The *F-sharp* stands in opposition, at the greatest possible distance from *C*, the starting note and the middle of our tonal system. It dissonantly divides the scale of C major into two tritone steps without belonging to it. C major is also the target key of the "Silent Night" quotation. As much as man strives longingly for the middle (μεσότης, Aristotle), for peaceful balance, the origins of his existence are just as uncertain, floating in the nowhere, and thus he is destined for perpetual struggle.

Translation Sean Reilly

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Summary

Krzysztof Penderecki composed his *2nd Symphony* in the winter of 1979/1980. It thus stands at the end of a creative period lasting from 1974 to 1980, which Regina Chlopicka describes using the phrase: "In Search of Universal Values Between Sonorism and Polyphony." According to Wolfram Schwinger, Penderecki turned his drafts for the symphony into its final form on Christmas Eve, conceiving it not as the five-movement work he had initially intended, but as an extended sonata movement. It was then that the composer also came up with the idea of using a quotation from the Christmas carol "Silent Night, Holy Night," integrating its four opening notes into the piece. Compositionally, Penderecki developed the entire symphony from a seven-tone theme, which, in addition to a minor third, contains above all a chromatically ascending three-tone motif. Drawing on musical-rhetorical tradition, this can be interpreted as an eternal struggle between departure and confidence as well

as resignation and suffering, "the tragedy of existence." The overriding theme is the longing for peace, as represented by the Christmas message.

Keywords: Christmas, "Silent Night, Holy Night", Poland, martial law, sonata movement

Helmut Loos – born 1950; studies in music education in Bonn (state examination) followed by studies in musicology, art history and philosophy at the University of Bonn; doctorate 1980, senior doctorate (Dr. habil.)1989. Research fellow at the University of Bonn Department of Musicology from 1981 until 1989. Director of the Institute of German Music in the Eastern Europe in Bergisch Gladbach between 1989 and 1993. Professor and Department Chair of historical musicology at the Chemnitz University of Technology since April 1993 and at the Leipzig University from October 2001 till March 2017. Appointment to Professor honoris causa at the Lyssenko Conservatory in Lviv on October 22, 2003. Dean of the Department of History, Art history and Oriental studies at the Leipzig University between 2003 and 2005. Honorary member of the *Gesellschaft für deutsche Musikkultur im südöstlichen Europa* (Society of German musical culture in Southeast Europe) in Munich since 2005. 2014 honorary doctor of the Universitatea Națională de Muzică din București.

Member of international editing councils for the periodicals *Hudební věda* (Prag, until 2019), *Ukrainian Musicology* (Kiew), *The Culturology Ideas* (Kiew), *Musicological Thought of Dnipropetrovsk Region* (Dnipro), *Art of Music. Theory and History* (Moskau), *Lituvos muzikologija* (Vilnius), *Menotyra. Studies in Art* (Vilnius), *Ars & Humanitas* (Ljubljana), *Musicology Today* (Bukarest), *Muzica. Romanian Music Magazine* (Bukarest), and *Studies in Penderecki* (Princeton, New Jersey).

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