

Iwona Sowińska-Zająć

The Krzysztof Penderecki Academy of Music

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7053-6607>

Krzysztof Penderecki's *St Luke Passion* as an Example of the Poetics of Violence in the 20th Century Music

At the source

The question of whether violence is an integral part of human nature or rather has evolved throughout history as a result of social inequalities is one that has always preoccupied philosophers. Archaeological and historical research indicates that violence was an essential part of life both in prehistoric times and in later eras. As a consequence, evolution was more a question of fighting techniques, weapons or strategy than a purely human need. Jörg Barberowski notes that "Whatever violence is, it is consistently present as a deviation, an aberration, a blindness or a disease that will one day be cured. Once the disease can be diagnosed, healing will be possible [...] through civilization, tolerance or social justice. [...] Any search for the sources of violence is futile."¹ In Antiquity, the Greek word δύναμις that appears in translations of Aristotle's works, [dúnamai], used in its traditional sense of potentiality, lost its connotations with the concept of force, and instead

¹ Jörg Barberowski, *Przestrzenie przemocy* [Spaces of Violence], transl. by K. Markiewicz (Warszawa: Instytut Pileckiego, 2022), 31 and 33.

“force” was no longer associated with “violence” (βία) and necessity. Violence was understood as being dictated by necessity, which in turn excluded any role for the will or freedom and stood in opposition to common sense, as did the absence of good. Violence was thus presented not only in an ontological sense, but also in an existential one. For Aristotle *Pathos* is a destructive or painful act, such as death on the stage, agony, wounds etc.²

In his book *Violence: six sideways reflections*, Slavoj Žižek, assigned each chapter musical agogic-expressive terms in line with the movements of Beethoven’s *String Quartet in C sharp minor No. 14, Op. 131*, and distinguished three types of violence: subjective, objective and systemic³:

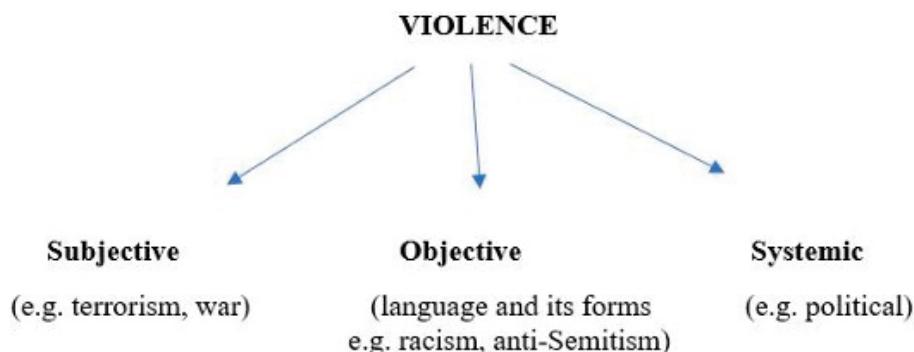


Figure 1

Žižek believes that no common perspective for the aforementioned types is possible. Subjective violence requires adopting a “zero” degree of violence, whereas systemic violence is an immanent feature of the state of “normality.” The intricate relationship between subjective and systemic violence is based on the premise that violence is not a direct property of acts, but instead stretches between acts and their context, between activity and its absence [...].⁴ Zizek draws three fundamental conclusions from his reflections, the first of which resonates particularly strongly:

the absolute reproof of violence, the condemnation of it as “evil,” is an ideological operation par excellence, a mystification that serves to cover all the fundamental forms of social violence. It is significant that Western societies, so sensitive to various forms of harassment, are at the same time capable of

2 Aristotle, *Poetyka [Poetics]*, transl. by H. Podbielski (Warszawa: Polskie Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 2010), 134.

3 Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 9 and ff.

4 *Ibidem*, 213.

mobilizing a whole host of mechanisms designed to desensitize us to the most brutal forms of violence – often, paradoxically, under the influence of humanitarian compassion for the victims.⁵

However, we would be wrong to accuse Zizek of attempting in any way to justify violence. His book ends with a sentence that takes on an even more profound meaning these days: "Sometimes the greatest act of violence is inaction."⁶

Johan Galtung proposed the following typology of violence⁷:

Table 1

GOAL:	Survival needs	Welfare needs	Identity needs	Needs for freedom
Direct violence	Killing	Mutilation, siege, sanctions, poverty	Desocialisation, re-socialisation, "second-class citizen"	Repression, imprisonment, expulsion
Structural violence	Exploitation (leading to death e.g. from starvation)	Exploitation (leading to illness for example)	Infiltration, division	Marginalisation, fragmentation
Cultural violence				

Finally, in his book *Topology of violence*, Byung-Chul Han made the groundbreaking distinction between negative violence (manifested in "macrophysicality" – a tension between the self and the other, internal and external, friend and foe) and positive violence (devoid of hostility and domination, as an excess of positivity, its accumulation – overproduction, overcommunication, hypervigilance, hyperactivity). The latter is even more dangerous and destructive than the former, as it penetrates in an invisible and unobvious way, paralyzing our "immune system" with its positivity. Han mentions the widespread inefficiency of the individual as an example. Violence penetrates "within" and develops social depression.⁸

5 Ibidem, 210.

6 Ibidem, 217.

7 Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence", *Journal of Peace Research*, 27/3 (1990), 292.

8 Byung-Chul Han, *Topology of Violence* (Cambridge-London: The MIT Press, 2018), 64 and ff.

Violence in the Passion – a Review of Positions

According to Debra Scoggins Ballentine,⁹ biblical descriptions contain all three types distinguished by Galtung – depicted through rhetoric, representation etc. As the author notes, over a period of 2,000 years attempts have often been made to “justify” various manifestations of violence by their presence in the Bible. Anthropologists and sociologists such as Anton Blok, Bettina Schmidt, Ingo Schröder, Göran Aijmer, Jon Abbink and David Riches, among others, stress that the human tendency to label tragic events as “senseless violence” is clear.¹⁰

In his preface to the translation of Enzo Bianchi’s work *Violence and God*, Michał Rychert writes:

Scenes of violence are scattered with varying intensity throughout the Bible. It invades the opening pages of Genesis, culminating in its overwhelming presence in the crucifixion of Jesus. Why is this so? Does the God of the Bible find special satisfaction in the blood of the victims? No, the Bible [...] is simply interested in the human story, and violence (physical, moral, psychological, the violence of injustice, of social structures...) is an integral part of this story. No other anthropological theme is so dominant in the pages of Scripture.¹¹

When considering the issues of violence and the sacred, it is impossible not to mention the figure of René Girard, cited critically by Han. He identified the sources of violence in what he termed “mimetic” competition. This phenomenon occurs as a result of our imitating the desires of others. Things only acquire value because many people desire them at the same time, which provokes violent conflict.¹² This concept does not, however, according to Han, explain the core of violence, which tends to arise whenever the most basic of human needs are not satisfied.

One of the fundamental issues remaining at the heart of many philosophical and artistic inquiries is the trial of Jesus himself. It is the one passage of the passion that has even acquired separate ontological status – as a rhetorical figure in its own right, a *topos* or *intertext*. Trial without judgment. In his book *Pilate and Jesus*, Giorgio Agamben observes:

9 The Cambridge World History of Violence, volume 1: *The Prehistoric and Ancient Worlds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Kindle Edition), 607.

10 Ibidem, 608.

11 Enzo Bianchi, *Przemoc i Bóg* [Violence and God], transl. by M. Rychert (Poznań: W drodze, 2018), 5.

12 Byung-Chul Han, *Topology of Violence*, 8–9.

Since Pilate, however, did not issue a final verdict [...], the encounter between human law and divine law, the earthly state and the heavenly state loses its *raison d'être* and becomes a riddle. [...] The legal order does not fit transparently into the order of salvation, nor the latter into the former. As a result of his indecision, Pilate [...] separated the two orders from each other forever, or at least made their relationship impossible to determine. In doing so, he condemned humanity to a crisis without end; endless because without the possibility of resolution once and for all.¹³

This aspect resonates most strongly, for example, in Paweł Mykietyn's *Passion*. The aesthetics of absence, of disappearance, of subjectivity dominate this work, from which it is difficult to free one's thoughts. According to Agamben,

The inconclusiveness inherent in the meeting of the two worlds, in the meeting of Pilate and Jesus, finds its confirmation in two key ideas of modernity: the one proclaiming that history is a "process," and the one that assumes that, since this trial does not end in any verdict, it is in a state of perpetual transition. In this sense, the trial of Jesus is an allegory of our times [...].¹⁴

It seems that Penderecki perfectly understood this added value of the passion theme and its topicality when he embarked on *St Luke Passion*. The composer hesitated between the Gospels of St Mark and St Luke. The composer recalls:

At that time the Millennium of the Baptism of Poland was approaching. The Church was making preparations for these celebrations, but the State tried to keep everything quiet, and ignored this pivotal date in Polish history. The Millennium, therefore, was also one of the main reasons why I composed the *Passion*. At first, I did not know whether it would actually be performed in the country. After all, this was at a time when if a religious piece was to be played in a philharmonic had to be without a text in the program.¹⁵

The two orders of the trial meet in the work: the human and the divine, the temporal and the eternal.

13 Giorgio Agamben, *Piłat i Jezus* [Pilate e Gesù], transl. by M. Surma-Gawłowska, A. Zawadzki (Kraków: Znak, 2017), 87–88.

14 Ibidem, 88.

15 Penderecki: *Sluchacz "Pasji" uczestnikiem ewangelicznej opowieści. Wywiad z Anną Bernat* [Penderecki: The Listener of "Passion" is a Participant in the Evangelical Story. Interview with Anna Bernat], <https://culture.pl/pl/artykul/penderecki-sluchacz-pasji-uczestnikiem-ewangelicznej-opowiesci-wywiad> (last accessed: 22.04.2024).

Musical Gesture or Emergence?

One concept that may prove useful in such an interpretation is that of musical gesture. Gestures of violence are relatively common in music composed after World War II, although this has not been catalogued. Among the many theories of musical gesture proposed, Robert Hatten defines a gesture as “any energetic shaping through time that may be interpreted as significant”¹⁶. In his *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics and Tropes* he gives a very broad and comprehensive definition consisting of twelve points in three areas: discovery, nature and meaning.¹⁷

Hatten’s theory is nevertheless characterized by a certain reductionism. Hence, perhaps it is better to go in the direction of emergentism? Emergence is a philosophical concept denoting a process in which a higher degree of being is created through the overlapping and interaction of lower degrees of being. The deeper layers of consciousness participate in the emergence of the new, as it were, on their own, and the synergistic interaction in the synectics of the creative process enhances the creative symbiosis of the various layers.¹⁸

Emergence, as a phenomenon of highly complex thought, denotes for us in general the emergence of a new, unexpected quality connected with a change in the conditions arising from the integrative properties of the aesthetic elements in the hidden and unpredictable layers of our consciousness. This problem is illustrated by the old myth of transcendental emergence highlighted in Goethe’s notion of “falling upwards” (*der Fall nach oben* in *Faust*, part two). Emergence thus lifts latent elements of the sense-making units of aesthetic experience (e.g. Edith Stein and her text *Word, Truth, Sense and Language*) from the deeper layers of our subconscious up to the higher layers of our consciousness. The element of synergy plays a generative role in this process. The synergetic interaction enhances the symbiosis of the different forms of being in the subconscious layers.¹⁹ In passing, it might be worth considering the gesture-mental (perceptual) schema relationship.

Gestures or motifs of violence constitute only part of the poetics of violence. The latter consists of expression, dramaturgy of form, word-sound relationships, melodic-

16 Robert S. Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes. Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 2006, 1.

17 Ibidem, 93–96.

18 Gerhard J. Dürschke, “Emergencja i paradoksalny kamuflaż w architekturze współczesnej. Teoria emergentnych systemów przestrzennych” [Emergence and Paradox Camouflage in Contemporary Architecture: A Theory of Emergent Three-Dimensional Systems], *Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura* [Technical Journal. Architecture] 7-A/1 (2010), 64.

19 Ibidem, 65–66.

harmonic progression, timbre, color, agogics, articulation, and rhythmics. Poetics, on the other hand, concerns the type and manner in which all musical elements interact.

Towards a Poetics of Violence

Let us ask a general question here: how do we understand poetics in 20th and 21st century music? In the first decade of the 21st century, the term "poetics of experience" gained extraordinary popularity in literary studies. Martin Jay's work on the subject (*Songs of Experience*) appeared in a Polish translation in 2008, and in 2012 Ryszard Nycz's widely cited *Poetics of Experience* was published.

We are confronted with a threefold understanding of the Passion oeuvre: the experience of God, the experience of Man and the experience of the enemy. Both Penderecki's Passion and Rihm's Passion refer explicitly to the experience of the Holocaust. As Ryszard Nycz writes, this is "an experience that does not exist," because "one is entitled to doubt whether we are still dealing here with an experience at all."²⁰ Despite this fact, the experience of the Holocaust was to a great extent externalized not only in the works of composers who witnessed the Second World War, but also in later composers who did not witness it "directly" and who viewed it precisely as a kind of reckoning with the past. Here, the aesthetic experience of music gave way to an ethical experience. The Holocaust is often referred to as an unrepresentable or unimaginable experience. A "failed" experience, to use Ernst van Alphen's phrase, which "excludes the possibility of a voluntarily controlled memory of the event."²¹ Are there, therefore, any limits to how the Holocaust can be represented? Van Alphen believes that representation can express even extreme experiences: "[...] experience is not as direct and unmediated as is usually thought, but is fundamentally discursive. [...] The forms of experience do not depend only on the event or story that is experienced, but also on the discourse in which that event is expressed/thought/defined."²²

When speaking of the Passion Penderecki confesses:

In the 1960s the war was still fresh in our memory, its traces were still visible everywhere and also remained alive in our consciousness. I experienced the war in a small town, in Dębica. The experience was not as drastic as it was,

20 Ryszard Nycz, *Poetyka doświadczenia. Teoria – nowoczesność – literatura* [Poetics of Experience: Theory – Modernity – Literature] (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2012), 142.

21 Ernst van Alphen, *Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, and Trauma, in Acts of Memory. Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. by M. Bal, J.V. Crewe, L. Spitzer (Hanover—London: Dartmouth College, 1999), 27.

22 Ibidem, 24.

for example, for the people of Warsaw. A Lot contributed to this piece. Also, there was the knowledge of what happened in the camps during the war. *The passion* is very dramatic, although it also has a lyrical character.²³

The role played by language in the phenomenon of "objective" violence is worth mentioning here. As Byung-Chul Han writes, "Language has two functions: symbolic and diabolic":²⁴ Wallace Stevens associates violence with a specific kind of diegesis, with "description without place" or a virtual space without place or time, which we could, after all, recognize as a property of art.²⁵ The role of languages in *Passion* works is particularly important, both at the stage of the dramaturgical conception of the whole, as well as in its execution and reception. Krzysztof Penderecki wrote in the score "perform only in Latin." As Regina Chłopicka writes, "Latin, an archaic and ritual language, creates a distance from the listener, distracting attention from the details of the text."²⁶

However, attention is drawn away from the Evangelist's main narrative anyway through the simultaneous creation of a parallel dialogic sphere of psalm texts, hymns and a *Stabat Mater* sequence. They are no longer mere incrustations; they constitute an equal semantic-symbolic layer and have the effect of blurring the boundaries of identity between the participants in the Passion events. Three passages of particular dramaturgical and symbolic importance in the text come from the *Gospel of St John*: when mention is made of Golgotha (which opens the way for the *Improperia*), in the conversation between the Mother of Christ and John at the foot of the cross (followed by the *Stabat Mater*) and the words "it is finished." This choice and arrangement of texts already imposes an interpretative trail. Each of the psalms and hymns contains a key word that gives the following gospel passage a particularly significant character – directing our attention towards a different emphasis or aspect of the text. This "dialogue" between the texts brings to mind the words of Mikhail Bakhtin: "Every word is dialogical because it is in a chain of other utterances, because it turns to a subject already prefigured in the word, because it anticipates the reaction of the hearer."²⁷

A controversial part of the New Testament present in Passion music is the *Improperia*, beginning with the words *Popule meus* (Micah 6:3). For Bianchi, these

23 Penderecki: *Stuchacz "Pasji"* uczestnikiem ewangelicznej opowieści.

24 Byung-Chul Han, *Topology of Violence*, 104–105.

25 Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, 5.

26 Regina Chłopicka, Krzysztof Penderecki. *Musica Sacra – Musica Profana. A Study of Vocal-Instrumental Works* (Warsaw: Adam Mickiewicz Institute, 2003), 36.

27 Henryk Markiewicz, "Polifonia, dialogiczność i dialektyka: bachtinowska teoria powieści" [Polyphony, Dialogue and Dialectics: A Bakhtinian Theory of the Novel], *Pamiętnik Literacki* [Literary Diary] LXXVI/2 (1985), 91.

Psalms convey a significant message: "they are particularly important and necessary because they sanction the principle that – even in the face of injustice and evil suffered – the believer refrains from dispensing justice and is not tempted to respond to evil with evil, to violence with violence, but leaves the restoration of justice to God."²⁸ Bianchi explains that

The shocking character of these malignant psalms is largely related to the poetic form, metaphorical and hyperbolic, inherent in the Semitic mode of expression, which differs from our Western sensibility – more reserved and cool. Above all, we should bear in mind that the Hebrew language avoids abstraction; the tendency to personalize phenomena is also not insignificant. The stigmatizing formulas are uttered in a literary form characteristic of Oriental-Semitic culture, which amplifies feelings, is bold in its use of hyperbole, and uses unrestrained imagery, and excess in describing feelings. The curse, therefore, will be blunt, violent and more astringent than the enemy against whom it is directed [...].²⁹

Penderecki puts the words *Popule meus* into the mouth of the chorus, which has the effect of removing the burden of the words of reproach from Christ himself.

Example 1. K. Penderecki, *St Luke Passion*, PWM, Kraków 1967, number 16

Regina Chłopicka identifies the presence of two semantically opposed sound worlds in *St Luke Passion*: the spheres of the sacred and the profane. However, the most unusual, original and at the same time moving feature of the work is

28 Enzo Bianchi, *Przemoc i Bóg*, 30.

29 Ibidem, 36.

the constant interpenetration of these worlds. As Penderecki warns, "Anyone can be drawn in by this passion crowd that demands the crucifixion of Christ, just as everyone is concerned with Redemption."³⁰ In the case of the crowd, all it takes is a spark to ignite a rebellion. The prayerful concentration of the chorus, which gradually transforms into an aggressive *turba*, sometimes requires no words. The aggression is expressed in the very vowels, the laughter, the shouts – agreement without words and a lack of agreement in spite of words (as on the Tower of Babel). This act of "birthing" the word in the chorus part evokes distant echoes of Moses' declaration: "O word I lack." The composer admits: "It was also wrestling with God"³¹ (example 2). Probably not without significance was the inspiration behind Hieronymus Bosch's last painting *Christ Carrying the Cross*, in which we see two completely different images of Jesus. One might argue that we are dealing here with a dialogue between diegesis and mimesis.

Why then the poetics of violence? Aristotle in his *Poetics* – a treatise on the art of literature focuses on the principles of poetry and drama, outlining what makes effective storytelling and structuring plays and stories to be more meaningful and engaging. According to Nycz, the poetics of experience is "a research tendency"³², "a response to the need to restore the empirical dimension of literary research and, above all, of literature and the reader's contact with it,"³³ "an extracted knowledge of the techniques of that miraculous distillation (Schulz's term) of experience into literature; a distillation that is at the same time an enigmatic, hieroglyphic testimony to the inextricable bond between experience and literature".³⁴ In music theory, I am particularly fond of Małgorzata Janicka-Słysz's treatment of this category in Karol Szymanowski's work.³⁵ Principles and tendencies are distinguished here, such as inspiration/experience, skill and proficiency, primacy of expression, modernity combined with the memory of tradition, which may have a universal function, especially in the case of the *Passion*. One legitimate method and at the same time promising perspective entails lining the various levels of violence with the genesis, the context of the work, the experience of the creator and the modes of sonic and aesthetic execution.

30 Penderecki: *Sluchacz "Pasji" uczestnikiem ewangelicznej opowieści*.

31 *Chciałem napisać oryginalną "Pasję". Rozmowa z Krzysztofem Pendereckim* [I Wanted to Write an Original "Passion". Interview with Krzysztof Penderecki], <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/3327-chcialem-napisac-oryginalna-pasje.html> (last accessed: 22.04.2024).

32 Ryszard Nycz, *Poetyka doświadczenia*, 139.

33 Ibidem.

34 Ibidem, 149.

35 Małgorzata Janicka-Słysz, *Poetyka muzyczna Karola Szymanowskiego: studia i interpretacje* [Musical Poetics of Karol Szymanowski: Studies and Interpretations] (Kraków: Akademia Muzyczna w Krakowie, 2013).

CORI

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2 *Più mosso*

4

Example 2. K. Penderecki, *St Luke Passion*, PWM, Kraków 1967, choral part in number 13

Finally, I would like to recall Penderecki's words, which are particularly resonant in these times, times of violence: "Everyone is entitled to their visions of life, their spaces, as long as they do not endanger others."³⁶

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36 Penderecki: *Śłuchacz "Pasji"* uczestnikiem ewangelicznej opowieści.

Summary

How do we understand the poetics of violence in the 20th and 21st century passion music? In the first decade of the 21st century, the notion of the "poetics of experience" has gained extraordinary popularity in literary studies. In Passion music, we encounter a threefold understanding of this category: the experience of God, the experience of a man and the experience of the enemy. Krzysztof Penderecki's *St Luke Passion* refers explicitly to the experience of both everyday life and the Holocaust, i.e., in the words of Ryszard Nycz, "an experience that does not exist," as one is entitled to doubt whether we are still dealing here with experience at all? In spite of this, the experience of the Holocaust was strongly externalized not only in the works of composers who witnessed the Second World War, but also in the works of later composers who did not witness it "directly" and for whom it represented a kind of reckoning with the past. Here, the aesthetic experience of music gave way to an ethical experience. The role of language in the phenomenon of objective violence is worth mentioning on this occasion. As Byung-Chul Han writes, "language has two functions: symbolic and diabolic." Wallace Stevens associates violence with a specific kind of *diegesis*, with "description without place," or virtual space without place and time, which we could after all call a property of art. The role of languages in Passion works is particularly important, both at the stage of the dramaturgical conception of the whole, and at the stage of realisation and reception. After all, Penderecki wrote in the score of his *Passion* – perform only in Latin. Regina Chłopicka believes that "Latin, an archaic and ritualistic language, creates a distance from the viewer and distracts attention from the details of the text." In this text, however, we will not allow ourselves to be distracted from the details – it is the details that help to formulate the repertoire of musical and verbal-musical gestures that form the canvass of the title poetics.

Keywords: Poetics of violence, Krzysztof Penderecki, Byung-Chul Han, Passion music

Iwona Sowińska-Zająć – Dr, conductor and music theoretician, assistant professor in the Department of Theory and Interpretation of Musical Works at the Krzysztof Penderecki Academy of Music in Kraków, plenipotentiary of the Rector for the Quality Evaluation of the Academy's Scientific Activities. Graduate of the Kraków Academy of Music and the College of Musical Arts in Bowling Green, OH. In 2002–2010 she was an assistant conductor at the Grand Theatre-National Opera in Warsaw. She has published over a dozen scientific articles and essays and

participated in many international conferences (including Helsinki, Canterbury, Jerusalem, London, Vienna, Belgrade, Cluj-Napoca, Stavanger). She was the director of the PRELUDIUM 11 research project of the National Science Centre: *Musical Representation in Contemporary Aesthetics, Philosophy and Semiotics. Arnold Schoenberg's Output in the Context of Representation Category*, which partly overlapped with the issues of her PhD thesis, and one of the main executors of the Polish-Lithuanian research project DAINA1 *Music of Change: Expression of Liberation in Polish and Lithuanian Music before and after 1989*, funded by the National Science Centre. In 2020, she received the Prime Minister's Award for an outstanding doctoral dissertation prepared under the supervision of Prof. dr hab. Teresa Malecka and defended in 2019. In June 2024, she was awarded the Prize of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage for her scientific activity (implementation of the DAINA 1 project). Her interests include issues of musical aesthetics, mainly related to categories of musical representation and expression, the works of the Second Viennese School, as well as issues of postmodernism and postmodernism in Polish contemporary music.