

## Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil's Nature-Inspired Music

**Abstract.** As we look at the output of the Polish composer Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil (b. 1947) we will see that more than half of her compositions were inspired by nature. In fact using the word “inspiration” is not enough – the composer claims that her music is a reaction to nature, that, somehow, it is its imitation. How strong is the connection between her music and nature we can see in titles of her pieces – cycles “Ekomuzyka” (Eco music), miniatures: “Muszelki” (Shells) or “Strumyk i słońko” (Stream and Sun). She is using new musical forms that she came up with and called “Reportages” which are soundscapes of the places she visited (Egypt, Iceland, Israel). The composer claims that the texture of her pieces and used palindrome-scales are imitating the water waves – the cycle of high and low tides. Also her way of perceiving sounds as colors is connected with nature (e.g. low C is black and a symbol of ground, earth, high C is white and a symbol of the air, sky) and it helps her to “produce” musical equivalents of photos or paintings (by using certain colorful chords she is “painting” a rainbow in her piece). The aim of my article is to show by examples that the most important principle of composing music for Pstrokońska-Nawratil is nature.

**Keywords:** Polish contemporary music, nature, synaesthesia.

### Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil's nature-inspired music

Among Polish composers of the 20th century, we can see many individualities. Almost all of them created their own musical language that is easy to distinguish from others. As examples we can talk about Witold Lutosławski (1913–1994), Henryk Mikołaj Górecki (1933–2010) or Krzysztof Penderecki (b. 1933).

Among them, there is Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil. She was born in Wrocław in 1947. There, she studied composition first under Stefan Bolesław Poradowski's<sup>1</sup>, then Tadeusz Natanson's<sup>2</sup> supervision. Since 1971, she has worked at her *alma mater*, and in 1978, she took part in lectures with such great composers as Olivier Messiaen, Pierre Boulez and Iannis Xenakis in France. Now, she is a professor at the Karol Lipiński Music Academy in Wrocław and she gives lessons to young adepts of composition. Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil is the author of around fifty compositions for various musical settings (mostly for symphony orchestra). In the beginning of her career, her style of composing was influenced by then popular sonorism. After some time she switched to – as Anna Granat-Janki calls it – new humanism (Granat-Janki 2003: 207–216). The aforementioned music theorist claims that in Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil's music we can see three tendencies (Granat-Janki 2003: 207):

- taking care of the human being, his/her fate and future,
- returning to the category of *sacrum*,
- dialog with nature, being connected with it and with cosmos.

We can say that the music of Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil has roots in nature – both human and the one surrounding us – and is connected to it in an inseparable way. To show how her music is based in nature and takes an inspiration from it, I would like to take a closer look at her way of thinking of music, sources of inspiration in her pieces, some composing techniques and her ways of composing that are connected with nature, and lastly show fragments of her music that are referring to the topic of this article.

### 1. Composer's way of thinking

Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil's way of thinking about music is fully connected with nature. She claims that (2005: 144–145) “Music is an organism made of sounds. It lasts in time and space. When it is stopped: it dies like the life of other organisms on Earth or like stars in outer space. Music is fully following the rules of life; it is born, it grows, it disappears – it dies. It is renewed (it appears every time it is played), it reincarnates! (It is being born in a new shape – sometimes after centuries, in another cover, e.g. it is played on other instruments and has a new interpretation.) As a genre it is always developing. At the same time, it is a permanent, lively chronicle of our world.”

<sup>1</sup> S. B. Poradowski (1902–1967) was a Polish composer, music theorist and conductor. He studied in Poznań, Poland (composition, theory of music, law, musicology) and in Berlin, Germany (composition). He is the author of numerous musical pieces, e.g. eight symphonies, two masses, religious songs and folk-inspired pieces. He also published some pedagogical books, e.g. *Akustyka dla muzyków* [Acoustics for musicians]. For more information visit: <http://culture.pl/pl/tworca/stefan-boleslaw-poradowski> (Polish version only).

<sup>2</sup> T. Natanson (1927–1990) was a Polish composer (studied, among others, under S.B. Poradowski's supervision), pioneer of music therapy in Poland. He composed, e.g. seven symphonies, three piano concertos, chamber music. For more information visit: <http://culture.pl/pl/tworca/tadeusz-natanson> (Polish version only).

In addition, in her other article, *Słyszę to, co widzę* (I hear what I see), she claims that this organism made of sound has a form, structure, pulse, temperature, shape and color (2010: 133).

The aforementioned words are not surprising as long as we know that one of her authorities is St Francis. In addition, one of the first memories of Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil are these connected with nature. As she writes in her article *Muzyka i Morze* (Music and the sea), she has known the sea for her whole life, almost since she was born. Her consciousness dates back to the summer when she visited the Baltic Sea after treks in the Tatra Mountains. She claims that, although she has seen many different seas and oceans, only by the Baltic Sea do deep emotions come to her and she greets it “like an old friend” (1998: 45). In another part of the aforementioned article, the composer writes (1998: 50):

“... hot July night. I last on warm sand, my feet touch waves and my sight is wandering to the sky. I feel the breath of the ground and the sea. I feel the breath of the Cosmos. I am a grain of sand, a drop of water, a vibration of the air. I am the delight of my world and the consciousness of it being lost in time and space ... I am rocked by the harmony of the last fresco “Uru Anna” (Man and light) where Baltic fog flows into the nebulas, birds; swarms into globular clusters and the Earth’s rain into a meteor shower ... The sea, which knows better than me, because it knows the perennial rules, helps me and the golden and deep-blue ocean of stars flows. It flows and tempts with its majesty.”

The composer compares composing to painting, sculpturing and telling stories with sounds. She claims that synaesthesia is a common and natural phenomenon among composers and other artists. In her opinion, all people of art are very sensitive and their perceive world in a different but deeper way. Creators have to receive the right waves from the universe that is full of sound – “the earth, sky and work of a human being play their symphonies” – she writes (2010: 133).

It is significant that her articles on music also show her big interest in nature; they are well known *Muzyka i Morze* (Music and the sea), but also in others: *Ekomuzyka* (Ecomusic) and *Słyszę to, co widzę* (I hear what I see).

## 2. Sources of inspiration in Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil’s pieces

As we look at her output, we will see that she is concentrated on composing pieces for different types of orchestra, sometimes *colored* by usage of a voice or a choir. However, what catch our eyes are the **titles** of her musical pieces – most of them are inspired by nature or referring to it. There are such compositions as:

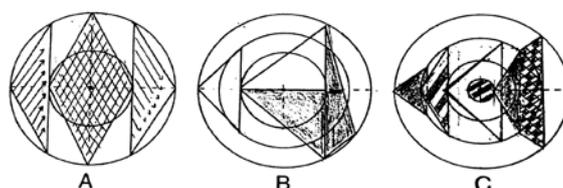
- *Eco per flauto* (Eco for flute; 1980)
- *Pejzaż z pluszczem* (Landscape with white-throated dipper) for soprano and three violins (1986)
- *Le soleil* (The sun) for percussion and symphony orchestra according to Monet, Seurat and van Gogh (1991)
- *Ecomusic I “Terra”* (Earth) for male voice choir and pianos (1995)
- *...el condor...* (The condor), concerto for two marimbas and chamber orchestra or string orchestra from the cycle “Thinking about Vivaldi”. Spring (1996)
- *...como el sol e la mar...* (...like the sun and the sea...) for flute and chamber orchestra from the cycle “Thinking about Vivaldi”. Summer (1998)
- *Strumyk i słońko* (Stream and Sun) for encrusted piano (2007).

Some of her compositions are organized in cycles called *Reportaże* (Reportages). Pstrokońska-Nawratil came up with an idea to compose soundscapes from places that inspired her. This is how reportages, a new **genre** of music, came to life. The first of them is called *Niedziela palmowa w Nazareth* (Palm Sunday in Nazareth, 2009); it was composed for saxophone, percussion and organ. It was inspired by a visit to Israel during the Holy Week. Second reportage *Figury na piasku* (Figures on the sand) was inspired by a visit to Egypt in 2007, it was created in 2014 and is for flute quartet. The last one – *ICE-LAND tęczowe mosty nad Dettifoss* (ICE-LAND rainbow bridges over Dettifoss), although was written in 2011 it is numbered as the third of the cycle. It was inspired by the title country and is for string orchestra and amplified harp. The idea of this genre is to catch the musical phonosphere, to transfer visual phenomena onto auditory ones.

## 3. Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil’s composing techniques

Now let us look at the composer’s workshop. As it was mentioned before, the composer is very sensitive to nature, and because of that, it is not surprising to find out that she compares her music to it – especially to motions of the sea. She writes (1998: 48) that both her music and the sea are made up by waves. She also claims that (1998: 46) “My music is being born from emotion, that like a wave absorbs encounter colors, that shapes its space and time to, now consciously, come back to structure and form.”

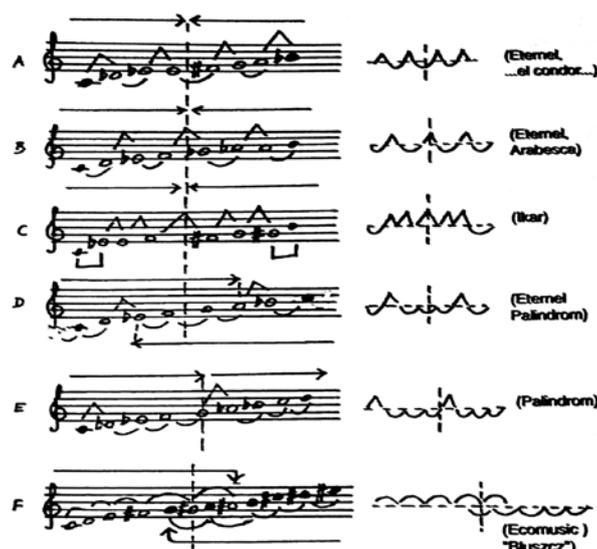
The form of her pieces can be understood by looking at the diagrams that she makes. We can see there circles that are water circles in which the music is built in. In addition, her method of shifting structures is inspired by both nature and polyphony (Ex. 1).



Example 1. Form built-in water circles: A – Second Fresco “Epitaphios”, B – Third Fresco “Ikar”, C – Fifth Fresco “Eternal”.  
 Reproduction after: Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil, *Muzyka i morze* (Music and the sea), in: *Dzieło muzyczne między inspiracją a refleksją. Księga pamiątkowa na 60-lecie urodzin Marka Podhajskiego* (Musical piece between inspiration and reflection. Book of remembrance of Marek Podhajski’s 60th anniversary), ed. Janusz Krassowski, Gdańsk 1998, p. 51

This characteristic method of composing was inspired by motions of waves – high and low tides, collisions, accumulations and absorptions – and polyphony – canonic imitation. It is used by the composer to obtain constant changes in music. The shifting can subordinate not only melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, dynamic and timbre structure of a piece, but also temporal and spatial (1998: 48).

The composer employs many self-created scales in her compositions. To do so, she uses the laws of symmetry. Her scales are at the same time palindromes<sup>3</sup>. The same happens with the intervallic structure of scales that Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil uses – it is centered in a point of symmetry in the middle of a scale. The inspiration for that can be seen in the symmetry of organic shapes but also in the waves of the sea (Ex. 2).



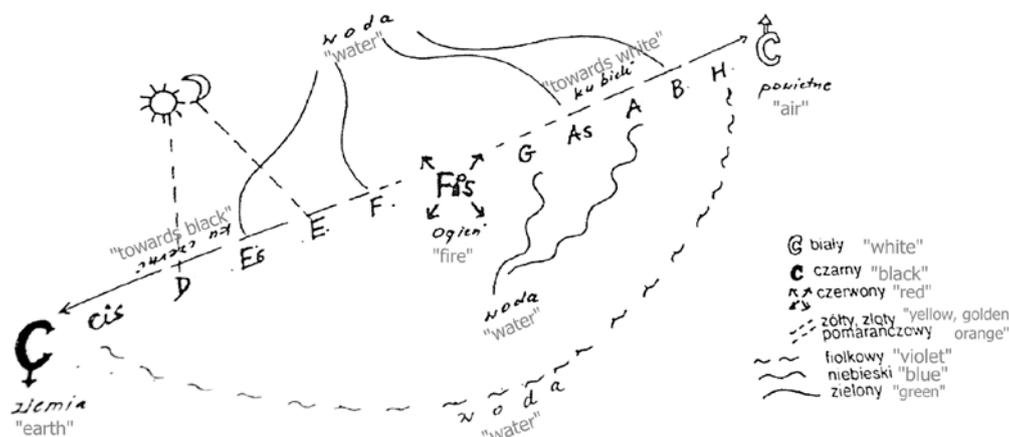
Example 2. Scales-palindromes.  
 Reproduction after: Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil, *Muzyka i morze* (Music and the sea), p. 52

In addition, the composer’s way of perceiving sounds as colors is connected to nature – to the rainbow. The composer writes (1998: 49):

“The color palette of my music is not entirely true to the laws of physics and painting terminology. My ‘rainbow’ is spread between black (the lowest used note C – the symbol of earth) and white (the highest note C – the symbol of air). The centre is red (F sharp in a middle register – the symbol of fire). The rest of the colors-sounds are gold-yellow (D) and orange (E) that are carrying light of sun and moon, and colors of sea: violet (C sharp, B), blue (G, A) and green (F, A flat, B flat, E flat). The colors on poles of this bowstring black and white are emanating on the others, according to a logical low: the higher register – the brighter (grayness disappears, clearer and vivid colors), the lower register – the darker (grayness increases, opalescent color).”

<sup>3</sup> As we read in the Oxford Dictionary of English, the word palindrome has roots in Greek, where *palindromos* is translated as running back again. Palindrome is a word or a phrase that we can read the same way backwards and forwards. See: *Palindrome*, in: *Oxford Dictionary of English* (computer program).

At the beginning of her career, Pstrokońska-Nawratil used bright and vivid colors, then she was fascinated by *mélange* of it, especially by the combination of colors of the sea – green and grey-blue. The color palette helps the composer to write what she sees.



Example 3. Color palette of Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil.  
 Reproduction after: Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil, *Muzyka i morze* (Music and the sea), p. 52

#### 4. Nature-inspired musical pieces in Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil's output

##### 4.1. *ICE-LAND tęczowe mosty nad Dettifoss* (*ICE-LAND rainbow bridges over Dettifoss*) – the usage of colors from the palette

One of the best examples on how the composer uses her palette is a piece called *ICE-LAND tęczowe mosty nad Dettifoss* (*ICE-LAND rainbow bridges over Dettifoss*). The title of the composition refers to the name of the country that the composer visited, but the use of a dash in between shows another intention. By separating these two words Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil underlined what Iceland consists of – it is a word play which is seen in the score – fragment entitled *Ice* from the beginning and *Land* from Bar 103. In a subtitle – *rainbow bridges over Dettifoss* – the composer used a metaphor – she did not call the rainbow by its name but used the word *bridge*. For Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil rainbow has many meanings – it is an interesting visual phenomenon, a bridge connecting Heaven and Earth, but also a symbol of travel and overcoming problems<sup>4</sup>.

As we take a closer look at the sounds used in the beginning of the piece – in part called *Ice* – we can see that, mostly, they are connected to the existence of water – there are green and blue ones used. In addition, another analogy to the ice is seen in the technique used in string instruments. In the beginning of the piece, the composer used harmonics that are creating a “transparent”, “glassy” and “cold” sound. Delicate glissandos in harp are representation of a stream. However, one of the most interesting parts of this reportage is Page 19. By using a B major chord with 9th the composer illustrated a **rainbow**. The musical equivalent of it comes to life gradually – the first sound is initiated by violas in the first bar of the piece. The composer compared this gradual coming into being to the wind that is mixing colors and making them more intensive. All of this leads to the full rainbow on Page 19 of the score in bars: 89–90 and 93–94. The analogy to the rainbow is seen as we analyze the colors of the sounds here – B is violet, F sharp – red, D sharp – green and C sharp – violet. The last sound closes the rainbow (see Ex. 4). The chord is *colored* by the usage of microtones. The composer compared that to different intensity of colors in arts. This also gives the *halo* effect.

From the fragment *Andante* in Bar 291 **geysers** are shown. The composer used here trills that have a bigger and bigger range. While instrumentalists play trills, they shall also play harmonics accidentally. First, they are shown in a very *dark* register – in contrabasses and cellos (see Ex. 4). Geysers are getting more powerful in time, which in music is mirrored by the use of more and more instruments and a bigger trills' range. Then they explode and its representation in music is short ascending motifs in all strings in short rhythmic values. These geysers are the background for musical equivalents of rainbows. This is also connected with the composer's observation, which said that when water drops meet light rainbows come to life.

<sup>4</sup> Information after: Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil in an interview with the author of the article, Wrocław, 21 April 2015.



#### 4.2. Seventh Fresco “Uru Anna” (Man and light) – musical representation of different types of light

In 1972, Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil started writing her cycle “Frescos”. The last one – the Seventh Fresco – was composed in 1999. “Frescos” are large musical forms composed for a large symphony orchestra. Each of them refers to a different topic connected to man’s life:

- First Fresco “Reanimation” (Man and life) for a large symphony orchestra (1972);
- Second Fresco “Epitaphios” (Man and death) for a large symphony orchestra (1975);
- Third Fresco “Ikar” (Man and dreams) for a large symphony orchestra (1979);
- Fourth Fresco – Concerto “Alla campana” Tadeusz Baird in memoriam (Man and memory) for piano and symphony orchestra (1982);
- Fifth Fresco “Eternal” (Man and faith) for soprano, boys’ choir, mixed choir and large symphony orchestra (1987);
- Sixth Fresco “Palindrom” (Man and longing) for string orchestra with cembalo (1994);
- Seventh Fresco “Uru Anna” (Man and light) for a lyrical tenor, large mixed choir and large symphony orchestra (1997).

Let us concentrate on the last one. The title – “Uru Anna” – is an ancient name for the Orion constellation and means “the light of Heaven”. The subtitle of the composition is “Man and light” that suggest us a way of understanding the piece, as well as the source of inspiration. The composer refers to the natural phenomenon – light – but also shows her understanding of it – seeing it in a metaphoric and transcendental way. The composer said in a commentary to the piece (1999: 232): “The leitmotiv of the Seventh Fresco is light – from the light of stars to the light of Christ”.

The Seventh Fresco consists of three movements called:

1. Luminaria magna (archaico) – Great Lights (archaic);
2. Lux caelestium (cosmico) – The Light of Heavenly Bodies (cosmic);
3. Lumen Christi (quotidiano) – The Light of Christ (everyday).

As we see, the titles suggest the inspiration with light. This impression is deepened by the texts and words chosen by the composer. Apart from the ones that come from the Bible (Genesis, 39th Psalm and the Gospel of Mathew) Pstrokońska-Nawratil used also such words as: Saiph, Heka or Bellatrix – the names of stars from the Constellation of Orion. It is interesting to interpret these texts. In the first movement the choir singers, as if they were the people, ask God to give them light in heaven, light on Earth and the eternal light. There is also a part of the text from Genesis used, which is about God creating two lights – a smaller one that would shine at night and a bigger one that would shine during the day. It is easy to conclude that this fragment is about Moon and the Sun. In the second part, the composer used names of stars from the Constellation of Orion. At first, in the choir parts there is no text, then in the fragment entitled “The Sketch of Orion” the rhythmic-and-melodic models are used. The models contain names of heavenly bodies from the Constellation. They are introduced in the following order: first model A – “Saiph”, then a single shout “Riegel”, model B – “Heka”, Model C – “Bellatrix, Betelgeuse” and at last model D – “Mintaka, Alnilam, Alnitak” in Bar 127 (see Ex. 6). After their material is introduced, models are performed simultaneously, creating at the same time an impression of space in music. In the third part of the piece, at the beginning the tenor asks God to listen to his prayer. The Lord is described here as the one giving breath and sustaining man’s life. The composer used a fragment from the Gospel of Matthew about people walking in the darkness that saw a great light. In the composer’s interpretation, this light is Christ – the light on Earth and Heaven, Jesus, the eternal light.

Mentioning the text, it is interesting to see that in the first and third parts of the piece, the composer used the same melodic motifs on words *lux in terris* (e.g. in soprano part in bars 12–13 of the first movement: a-g-b flat-a (see Ex. 7), in bars 224–226 in the third movement also: a-g-b flat-a (see Ex. 8), in bars 274–275 of the third movement: g-f-a-g). At the same time this motif creates a cross motif and refers to the understanding light as Jesus Christ.

In the second movement, the composer refers to the cosmos. To depict it and heavenly bodies she used such effects as loud breaths, tremolo played with fingertips, with glissando on the piano string at the same time, clusters in string instruments, and whispers. Additionally, a graphic notation is used. This is the most sonoristic part in the piece (see Ex. 9). Although this movement can be seen as a big opposition to the first and the third part and one can ask why Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil used such a combination of texts and such contrasting music, but knowing that her way of perceiving God is very close to pantheistic one, because she sees Him in nature just as St Francis did. This piece is at the same time an affirmation of God but also his creations – heavenly bodies that are part of nature.

Example 6. Usage of rhythmic-and-melodic models. Seventh Fresco “Uru Anna”, 2nd movement.  
 Reproduction after: Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil, Seventh Fresco “Uru Anna”, the autograph version of the score

Example 7. *Lux in terris*, Seventh Fresco “Uru Anna”, first movement, soprano part, bars 12–13.  
 Reproduction after: Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil, Seventh Fresco “Uru Anna”, the autograph version of the score

Example 8. *Lux in terris*, Seventh Fresco “Uru Anna”, the third movement, soprano part, bars 224–226.  
 Reproduction after: Grażyna Pstrokońska-Nawratil, Seventh Fresco “Uru Anna”, the autograph version of the score



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## Grażynos Pstrokońskos-Nawratil gamtos inspiruota muzika

### Santrauka

Kompozitorės Gražynos Pstrokońskos-Nawratil kūryba yra unikali ir kelianti susižavėjimą, savitai jungianti muziką su gamta. Apie muziką ji mąsto kaip apie gyvą organizmą, tad ir jos kompozicinė technika – besitransformuojančių struktūrų metodas – yra susijusi su gamta, ypač su jūra. Jūra ir jos bangos lėmė savitą muzikos formą, jos kūryboje konstruojamą tarsi vandens sūkurius. Kompozitorės unikalumą lemia ir jos muzikos spalvų paletė, garsų sąsaja ne tik su spalvomis, bet ir su simboliais – saule ir vandeniui. Gamtos aspiracijos akivaizdžios beveik visuose jos kūrinuose, bet įdomiausi iš jų yra *ICE-LAND tęczowe mosty nad Dettifoss* (*ICE-LAND vaivorykščių tiltai per Dettifossą*) ir septintoji freska „Uru Anna“ (*Žmogus ir šviesa*). Pirmajame kūrinyje kompozitorė muzikine kalba vaizduoja vaivorykštes, ledą, žemę ir geizerius, antrajame demonstruoja skirtingus šviesos vaizdavimo būdus – nuo saulės, mėnulio ar Oriono žvaigždyno šviesos iki Jėzaus Kristaus šviesos. Tarp daugelio kitų kompozitorių Gražynos Pstrokońskos-Nawratil muzika yra labai savita ir verta tyrinėjimų.