

## The two Extremes: Chosen Aspects of Rhythm in Grażyna Bacewicz's and Witold Lutosławski's Music

“Every musician, a composer, a performer or a theorist, will agree that at the beginning was rhythm. The power of rhythm and, speaking widely, the temporal organisation of music is indeed a condition sine qua non of art.”<sup>1</sup>

This is what Grosvenor Cooper and Leonard B. Meyer write about rhythm in their publication “The Rhythmic Structure of Music”. While learning about particular elements of a musical piece, the importance of rhythm's role in building this piece is mentioned. Rhythm was always with human beings – widely understood, it organized the order of life. People determined seasons, days, rhythm of work, and duties. Finally rhythm helped them to communicate with gods, it helped them to go into a trance. It was the fundamental of the dance – some choreographic figures illustrate rhythmic ones. But what is rhythm?

There are lots of definitions.

In “Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart” the author of the entry “rhythm”, Wilhelm Seidel, claims that as long as harmony is an indication of an order of sounds, rhythm is an indication of an order of movement and time. Thus the author recalls Plato's definition of rhythm, in which he assumed that it is the order of movement.<sup>2</sup> In “The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians” Walther Dürr and Walter Gerstenberg interpret this term as: “a subdivision of a span of time into sections perceivable by the senses; the grouping of musical sounds, principally by means of duration and stress.”<sup>3</sup>

According to the authors of an entry, rhythm, together with harmony and melody, are linked inseparably.

However, the definition proposed by Witold Rudziński in “Nauka o rytmie” will help me in a special way with my considerations. According to the researcher, rhythm is: “a matter of movement, ordered movement; it is a group, synthesis. Generally speaking, rhythm is in fact synthesis: its objectives consists of taking away from every single sound its own individuality to lose them all in an uniform movement by the series of units larger and easier to capture, that they are enmeshing one in another and complete each other to come to a total unity.”<sup>4</sup>

For my considerations about rhythm I chose pieces by two Polish composers from the 20th century – Grażyna Bacewicz and Witold Lutosławski. I would like to limit myself to show chosen aspects of rhythm in their output. In that way, I would like to show characteristics of both composers' features in this area. At the same time these features show the two extremes in the sounding of rhythmic structures in their works and show the common feature of these composers' workshop – control over musical material. In Grażyna Bacewicz's music, these features manifest in rhythmical density and in drawing inspiration from Polish folk music. In Witold Lutosławski's music, it is in his controlled aleatorism. At the same time, it is not said that Witold Lutosławski has never drawn inspiration from Polish folk music and Grażyna Bacewicz has never used “advanced” avant-garde techniques.

Grażyna Bacewicz was a composer and a violinist born to a Polish-Lithuanian family in 1909. She divided her music into three stylistic periods: “The first, adolescent, highly experimental, the second, mistakenly called neoclassical in our country and essentially tonal, and the third, to which I still stick. I have attained it in a way of development (not revolution).”<sup>5</sup>

And about her style of composing she wrote: “I have completely lost my cheerfulness. Even though everyone around me is happy – I just don't know how. At the most I force myself, so as not to spoil the atmosphere. Still I always put on a cheerful face. Besides this, there is still another thing that makes life a little difficult (although it is also helpful in a big way). Specifically, I have a completely different tempo of life than anyone else around me. That means, I do everything faster than anyone else, and all who are around constantly annoy me with their slowness. But this also has some good points, like for instance, I am able to write a major work

<sup>1</sup> Cooper, Grosvenor; Meyer, Leonard B. (1960). *The Rhythmic Structure of Music*, Chicago. Quotation after: Dahlig-Turek, Ewa (2006). “Rytmy polskie” w muzyce XVI–XIX wieku, Warszawa: Instytut Sztuki PAN, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Seidel Wilhelm (1998). [entry:] Rhythmus, Metrum, Takt [in:] *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Sachteil 8 Quer-Swi, p. 258.

<sup>3</sup> Dürr, Walther, Gerstenberg, Walter (2001). [entry:] Rhythm [in:] *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, p. 804–805.

<sup>4</sup> Rudziński, Witold (1987). *Nauka o rytmie muzycznym*, Kraków: PWM, p. 146. Quotation after: Dahlig-Turek, E., op. cit., p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> Bacewicz, Grażyna. A sketch of an answer to an unknown questionnaire, *Ruch Muzyczny* 1969, no. 7, p. 4.

in two weeks. Sikorski knows this. Sometimes he asks me, when we meet: ‘Well, how many symphonies have you written?’”<sup>6</sup>

By drawing from what Polish folk music offers, Bacewicz referred to traditions reaching at least the Romantic Era. At that time composers used to underline their national identity, folk dance rhythms or they stylized them. On the one hand, it was connected with the then in-fashion technique of using native folklore in music. On the other hand it was connected with the Polish political situation. Recalling the rhythm of Polish dances, it is worth exploring their origin.

Polish culture has a number of characteristic symbols. One of them is precisely connected with rhythm, as Ewa Dahlig-Turek wrote: “Among musical phenomenons that most trenchantly characterize as Polish music, firstly are rhythmic features, commonly connected with folk dance rhythms. However, it is impossible to find recent features that are really unique, some of its elements, especially these present on a ground of folk dance music and present in artistic tradition, come into the canon of symbols of Polish national culture and at the same time to the heritage of European music. Among these elements are rhythmic structures that in musicological works are called ‘rytmy mazurkowe’ (mazurka rhythms).”<sup>7</sup>

Dahlig-Turek dedicated her work entitled “Polish Rhythms” to the aforementioned rhythms. In this book she defines what are the title rhythms, what is their origin and appliance in works of native and foreign composers from the 16th to 19th centuries. The researcher, after Ludwig Bielawski<sup>8</sup>, noticed the influence of medieval theories on the Eastern Slavic territory, on which the triple meter rhythms were widespread. The Western Slavic territory was characterized by duple meter rhythms and the South varied (e.g. seventh-meter from Nowosądecki Region). The ground of “Polish rhythms” was not only medieval *modus perfectum*, but also native speech and its syllabication. The analysis made by Zofia and Jan Stęszewski led to the conclusion that the origin of the Mazurka’s rhythms are linked with Polish speech’s accentuation. In such regions as: Podhale or Kaszuby, where a different type of accentuation still exists, the mentioned rhythms practically do not appear.<sup>9</sup>

There are few characteristic rhythms of Polish dances:



Dahlig-Turek, after she studied the sources, came to the conclusion that the essence of Polishness are those bars that have more notes on the beginning of bar (two eights, two fourths or four eights, one fourth). She called those bars *descendental*. That is visible not only in historical Polish dances, but also subsequent national dances – the polonez and mazur. She noticed that the rhythmic density influences the inner variety of dances from the mentioned group. Because of that fact we can talk about *chodzony*, polonez, kujawiak, oberek or mazur.<sup>10</sup> The researcher discovered that the characteristic feature of Polish melodies – descending – is visible also in structures of duple meter melodies (in syncopation in Krakowiak too) and even in fifth-meter ones (Kurpie).

Let us concentrate on an analysis of chosen works of Grażyna Bacewicz. The first of them is “Oberek I”, a composition for violin and piano. The title of the first composition itself suggests the influence of Polish musical tradition. Oberek is a national dance, whose name comes from the rotating dance movement. It is the fastest of the Polish mazurka-rhythm-based dances. Its other name is ober or obertas. Lightness and agility,

<sup>6</sup> Bacewicz, Grażyna (1947). A letter to brother Witold from 30th of August 30. Quotation after: [http://www.usc.edu/dept/polish\\_music/PMJ/issue/1.2.98/bacewicz\\_let.html#7](http://www.usc.edu/dept/polish_music/PMJ/issue/1.2.98/bacewicz_let.html#7), access: 6.08.2013.

<sup>7</sup> Dahlig-Turek, E. op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Bielawski, Ludwig (1999). *Tradycje ludowe w kulturze muzycznej*, Warszawa: Instytut Sztuki PAN, p. 148. Quotation after: Dahlig-Turek, E., op. cit., p. 61.

<sup>9</sup> Stęszewski, Zofia and Jan (1960), Do genezy i chronologii rytmów mazurkowych w Polsce, *Muzyka* V No. 3, p. 14. Quotation after: Dahlig-Turek, E., op. cit., p. 65.

<sup>10</sup> Dahlig-Turek, E., op. cit., p. 59.

repetitions of melodic and rhythmic figures, a majority of tiny rhythmic values and figurations are characteristic of it. Its metre is 3/4 or 3/8. Bacewicz's stylization preserves the essential features of this dance, such as characteristic irregular accents on the second measure, triple meter the movement of eights in the melody that illustrates rotating movements of the dancers.

Fragments of oberek-like character are present also in "Kaprys polski" ("Polish caprice"). It is a piece for violin solo, "written by a virtuoso for a virtuoso". Between the schematic narration in 2/4, the composer entangles fragments in 3/4 (bars: 45–48, 69–70, 72, 75–78). The rhythmic repetitiveness and the usage of minor rhythmic values decide its oberek-like character.

Many inspirations of Polish folk music are visible in the rhythmic structure of the "4th violin concerto", especially in the third movement. Yet the first theme shows pertness of the mazur – accents on the weak part of a bar are underlined not only by the melody, but also by the articulation (*staccato*). The rhythm of the mazur is visible also by the usage of "descendental" and "equal" bars. The fragment in the third movement shows the inspiration of the kujawiak. The composer used in its construction a rhythmic scheme that consists of the juxtaposition of equal and so called "descendental" bars.

We can find inspiration in the second theme of the third movement in a stylization of Polish national dance from Krakow's region. It is called krakowiak. The characteristic feature of this impulsive dance is that the rhythm is in 2/4 and there are lots of syncopations which brings the accent to the weaker parts of bars.

The second Polish composer – Witold Lutosławski, hit on the idea to engage the element of chance to his compositions after hearing a live broadcast of "Concerto for Piano and Orchestra" by John Cage in 1958. That composition was a source of inspiration for Lutosławski, a ground for his own artistic research. It bore fruit in 1961 with the piece "Jeux venitiens". Lutosławski's conception exposes a mostly rhythmic structure to the influence of chance, controlling pitch at the same time. Besides the strictly determinate sections in the composition, blocks of ad libitum appear. They are in frames, and are not conducted. On that level, Lutosławski's conception seems to be similar to Cage's. But what is specific in the Polish composers's idea? Let us concentrate on his "String Quartet".

The piece is the only string quartet written by Lutosławski. It was composed in 1964 for Swedish Radio commission. Lutosławski wrote on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the concert cycle "Nutida Musik". The first performance was by the La Salle Quartet.

In the piece there are no common time divisions that will be compulsory for every performer in a music section. Every player plays it as his own solo. The rhythmic structure is a sum of every rhythmic structure in parts. It creates a phenomenon that is more complex than any other polyrhythmic structure – there are non-simultaneous accelerandos and ralletandos. Thanks to the usage of controlled aleatorism, his compositions have an "unstable" structure and rhythmic "slenderness". At the same time, Lutosławski do not relinquish his role of composer to the chance or improvisation in instrumental parts. He said: "I do not count on the creative skills of the performers. That is why I do not foresee in my pieces any, even the smallest ones, improvised parts. I do support a clear division of roles between the composer and the performer and I do not wish, even partially, to resign from authorship of music written by me."<sup>11</sup>

The piece, in fact, consists of four separate parts, and at the beginning there was no score. Members of La Salle Quartett asked the composer to send them a score, but it was made later by the composer's wife Danuta.

Lutosławski in a correspondence to the first violinist of the La Salle Quartet, Walter Levine, wrote about his "String Quartet": "The composer undertook appropriate means to avoid unwelcome effects of ... freedom. If the performers precisely follow the instructions written in their parts, no occurrences will take place that the composer has not foreseen. All of the possible cuts of sections' time in parts cannot influence the final result decisively."<sup>12</sup>

In that moment I would like to recall the definition of rhythm written by Witold Rudziński, that I quoted at the beginning of my paper: "Generally speaking, rhythm is in fact synthesis: its objectives consist of taking away from every single sound its own individuality to lose them all in a uniform movement by a series of units larger and easier to capture, that they are enmeshing one in another and complete each other to come to a total unity."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Lutosławski, Witold. O roli elementu przypadku w technice komponowania, *Res Facta* 1967, No. 1, p. 38.

<sup>12</sup> Lutosławski, W. (1968). Fragments of a correspondence with Walter Levine from the score of "String Quartet", Kraków: PWM.

<sup>13</sup> Rudziński, W. (1987). *Nauka o rytmie muzycznym*, Kraków, p. 146. Quotation after: Dahlig-Turek, E., op. cit., p. 22.

The pieces by Grażyna Bacewicz and Witold Lutosławski that I have chosen, trenchantly show the justification of this definition. Rhythm is an orderly movement of rhythmic values. The effect of the overlap of the parts becomes a unity. Every value sinks in the mass of sounds in way predicted by the composer. It is an artistic decision if the unity movement is completely ordered (like in Grażyna Bacewicz's music) or seemingly unordered (like in Witold Lutosławski's pieces).

The examples from the paper show only two approaches to the rhythm problems in these Polish composers' output. I chose these artists because their approach to the music was inspiring for other ones. The presented works were meant to picture the two extreme approaches to rhythm (but characteristic for those composers) – full accuracy (Bacewicz) and controlled aleatorism (Lutosławski). Both composers took the full responsibility of their works' sound. The aim of my paper was to outline the rhythmic issues in pieces by the mentioned composers. I hope it will spark your interest in Grażyna Bacewicz's and Witold Lutosławski's music regarding the aspect of rhythm.

### Santrauka

#### **Du kraštutinumai: kai kurie ritmo aspektai Gražynos Bacewicz ir Witoldo Lutosławskio muzikoje**

Ilgą laiką ritmas buvo išskirtinis lenkų muzikos elementas. Daugelio šios šalies regionų muzika skyrėsi dėl tam regionui būdingų ritmų. Susiformavo lenkų nacionaliniai šokiai: krakoviakas, mazurekas, oberekas, kujaviakas ir polonezas.

Pirmiausia liaudiškais ritmais grįsta muzika plėtojosi romantizmo laikotarpiu. Tais laikais lenkų liaudies šokius stilizavo ne tik žymūs lenkų kompozitoriai (Fryderykas Chopinas, Stanisławas Moniuszka ar Henrykas Wieniawskis), bet juos naudojo ir kūrėjai iš kitų šalių, pvz., polonezas skamba P. Čaikovskio operoje „Eugenijus Oneginas“.

Nieko keista, kad ir XX a. lenkų kompozitoriams ritmas išliko svarbus, jų kūryboje vis dar buvo ryški romantizmo tendencija – naudoti tautinių šokių ritmą. Liaudiškų kompozicijų galime rasti kompozitorės ir smuikininkės (gimusios lenkų ir lietuvių šeimoje) Gražynos Bacewicz kūryboje. Jos muzikoje (pvz., kūrinyje „Oberek I“ ar Ketvirtojo koncerto smuikui fragmentuose) dažnai girdimas obereko ir krakoviako ritmas. Witoldas Lutosławskis – lenkų kompozitorius, kuris taip pat domėjosi ritminiais aspektais. Jis atrado originalią kontroliuojamos aleatorikos techniką. Ji pagrįsta ritmine laisve, bet turi ir harmoninių sąskambių atlikėjų partijose. Straipsnyje parodoma, kaip ritmą traktavo Grażyna Bacewicz (kūrinyje „Oberek I“) ir Witoldas Lutosławskis (Styginių kvartete).