
Annotation

The text makes an attempt to follow through the changes, occurring over two decades (from the late 1950s till the end of the 1970s), in the manner Polish composers treated sonoric means, as well as in the role those techniques played in a musical piece. First efforts at incorporating into musical compositions the material of indefinite pitch, resulting from an unconventional use of traditional instruments, already revealed not only coloristic qualities of these means, but also their dramatic and expressive potential. The twilight of avant-garde enabled composers to not only combine, or juxtapose sonorism with the twelve-tone and tonal material but also to make references to the 19th-century tradition of using musical means for conveying non-musical content in a more or less evident way. In the compositions regarded as 20th-century replicas of the 19th-century idea of a symphonic poem sonoric means gain a new quality, becoming one of the most important attributes of program music, a medium for building up evocative images or expressing a wide range of emotions.

Keywords: sonorism, program music, Polish music, avant-garde music.

The first chamber and orchestral compositions by Krzysztof Penderecki, written at the end of the 1950s and in the early 1960s¹, wherein the composer used the material of indefinite pitch stemming from an unconventional use of traditional instruments, already revealed not only coloristic qualities of these means, but also their dramatic and expressive potential. However, composer’s approach to the prospects of presenting different sorts of states, stories or emotions with the help of sonoristics was highly ambiguous at the time. On the one hand he clearly realized what an enormous imaging potential was there and tried to highlight this evocative property in the titles given to his compositions: Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima, Dimensions of Time and Silence, Polymorphia. However, when successive interpretations finding practically an obvious storyline in Threnody started to appear, he strongly and vigorously protested.² Such interpretations are evident, for example, to Siglind Bruhn (2011: 93), who writes that the composition “depicts the brutality of war in a most literal way by evoking – in exact timing – the sonoristic effect of the American bombing of Hiroshima”.

Different approach to a sonoristic material was adopted by Penderecki already a few years later, in the mid-1960s, when his Pasja wg św. Łukasza (St Lucas Passion)³ was written and by the end of that decade when he composed Diabły z Louden (The Devils of Loudun). Passion differed from extremely avant-garde pieces from the beginning of the 1960s in terms of character – heterogeneous, synthetic, based on the combination of sonoristic material and tones of definite pitch (twelve-tone, tonal and micro-tonal structures). This varied sound material was organized according to different rules – integrated in terms of motifs (with the “b-a-c-h” leitmotif indicating how deeply it was ingrained in the tradition of the genre), tonality (with emphasized “d” and “g” tones)⁴, or serialism – thanks to the presence of two twelve-tone series. Nevertheless, in spite of such a profuse material and technical⁵ variety, there emerged a coherent work with a clearly outlined dramaturgy.

2 “Some time ago there was a similar misunderstanding concerning Threnody which I gave the title For the Victims of Hiroshima. Many people were trying to find out later in which place of the score the planes were flying and dropping the bomb, where the explosion was, etc. I am afraid that a similar situation might await me with this composition [Jacob’s Awakening – note by EK-Z] whilst there is no literary quality or illustration here, either” (Droba 1978: 73). It is also worth mentioning that primarily the composition was entitled 8’37” and bearing that title it was awarded the 3rd prize at the G. Fidelberg Composers’ Competition in 1960. Before publishing the score and sending a recording to the UNESCO International Composers’ Rostrum in Paris where in May 1961 the piece won the 3rd prize, the composer made a decision to change the title for Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima.
3 St. Lucas Passion also opened a totally new perspective in Penderecki’s oeuvre. Just a few years after his bright debut at the Warsaw Autumn Festival in 1959 with Strophes and a series of inventive orchestral pieces, the composer clearly turned towards musical convention provoking critics’ outrage and being accused of “betraying avant-garde ideals”. However, in spite of using a radical music language, the symptoms of the bonds with tradition were already noticeable in Penderecki’s works such as Psalms of David or Stabat Mater (Kowalska-Zając 2010: 46).
4 Krzysztof Penderecki was aware of his connections with the past and he expressed it many times saying: “The contradiction between avant-garde and tradition has seemed to be surface only since the very beginning. One cannot sever with the musical past of its strict sense, what is more – with cultural heritage in its broadest sense” (Penderecki 1997: 66).
5 Józef Chomiński (Chomiński, Wilkowska-Chomińska 1984: 460) distinguished there six different compositional techniques: serial, organum, motet-based, variational, thematic and sonoristic.
In this composition it is actually the text that determines positioning of the material – sonoristics appears in particularly dramatic fragments, i.e. while “unleashing of the forces of darkness” (Tomaszewski 2008: 200) takes place, whereas unconventional vocal effects in the turbae part create “an evocative, realistic vision of the agitated crowd, full of anger and cruelty, striving to annihilate an individual”: The Mocking before the priest, Jesus before Pilate (Chłopicka 2000: 38).

To arrive at such a credible picture of the crowd tormented by extreme emotions it was crucial that vocal means, modeled after instrumental effects, should be tackled in a special way. Actually, while gaining in expression and intensity of a dramatic impact the composer loses clarity of the message behind its semantic layer, however it was not a priority for Penderecki (as examples of his other works prove, e.g. Kosmogonia). Similar means (as well as similar outcomes of putting them to use) can be noticed in the central movement of Trois poèmes d’Henri Michaux (The Three Poems by Henri Michaux) by Witold Lutosławski, for whom “in many places words constitute a purely sonic component, reaching listeners in the form of different kinds of murmur, noise, din, as sound complexes (...) of no particular meaning” (Schiller 1964: 9). They convey, however, a very clear and unambiguous image of a fight, mutual struggle of two counter-powers.

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Another, though equally spectacular and evocative, use of sonoristics for expressing emotions included in the textual layer of a vocal-instrumental composition are scenes from the 2nd act of *The Devils of Loudun* by Penderecki, an opera drawing on historical events from the 1st half of the 17th century, from 18 August 1634 to be exact, when a priest – Urban Grandier – charged with satanic practices was burnt at the stake in Loudun after a two-year trial. As Regina Chłopicka writes elaborate scenes of exorcism determining the character and expression of the second act (2000: 48), are “filled with dramatic tension, though not missing out the touch of grotesque and irony”. Like in *Passion*, what matters in these scenes are solo vocal parts and choral ones, in which the composer used original Latin texts applied at the time while performing an exorcism. Their presence ensured an effect of “a particular tension between the sphere of the ritual and the sphere of reality, the tension being even more heightened by a language contrast” (Chłopicka 2000: 48).

A different use of sonoristics can be observed in the musical scores from the early 1970s, which referred to the 19th-century idea of conveying non-musical phenomena, images or stories through music. The idea, which left distinct traces in the Polish musical life of the first half of the 1970s, was to draw on cosmological motifs and Boethius’ category of “music of the spheres” that had been present in the music culture for ages. The special interest in the issue resulted from a grand-scale commemoration of the quincentenary of Nicolaus Copernicus’s birth celebrated at the time. Among numerous compositions written then, one should pay a particular attention to those going beyond an occasional character, spurred on by the need for tackling the matter of a cosmic dimension and making an attempt to contemplate the universe in a musical way –
Second Symphony by Henryk Mikolaj Górecki, Cosmogony by Krzysztof Penderecki and In Honorem Nicolai Copernici by Bronisław Kazimierz Przybylski.

Composers raising this issue must have been aware that “the current situation is, however, much more complicated than in the times when science faced out the Ptolemy – Copernicus dichotomy” (Voisé 1973: 146). In view of numerous model solutions, contemporary scientists are willing to concur with the statement that “the cosmos has no inner logic in a standard meaning of the word but tends to make a string of coincidences subject to some laws. The laws themselves are, however, irrational and do not stem from any fundamental order” (James 1996: 13–14). Chaos and indeterminism – motifs dominating in the 20th-century science – start to play more and more important role in art, too, which is reflected in a great deal of works with a different degree of indeterminacy. They constitute one of the most important achievements of the European avant-garde from the beginning of the second half of the 20th century.

The aforementioned compositions by Penderecki and Przybylski are, therefore, a sentimental journey back to the times when one model of the universe was in use, as well as represent a peculiar act of their authors’ courage – since the 20th century, in spite of all its diversity, did not favor program music. Compositions with the titles bringing to mind a certain non-musical content were placed away from the mainstream, the following stages of which were marked with technological advances and the most frequently used, or even overused, word was a structure.

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7 The composition was commissioned by The Secretary General of the United Nations to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the organization.

8 Bronisław Kazimierz Przybylski – born in Łódź, 11 December 1941; died in Łódź, 4 April 2011. Composer and academic teacher. Since 1963 he has been associated with the State Tertiary School of Music in Łódź (since 1982 the Academy of Music), where he has been a Professor of composition and Head of the composition section since 1987. His pieces have been presented at many prestigious contemporary music festivals, such as The Warsaw Autumn, The Poznań Music Spring, Musica Polonica Nova in Wroclaw, The World Music Days in Tel-Aviv, Musikprotokoll in Graz, or The International Composers’ Rostrum in Paris (Kowalska-Zając 2013; 1013). Principal orchestral compositions: Quattro studi (1970); In honorem Nicolai Copernici // Omaggio a Nicolaus Copernicus (1972); Scherzi musicali (1973, 1978); Memento (1973); Guernica – Pablo Picasso in memoriam (1974); Sinfonia polacca (1974, 1978); Sinfonia da Requiem (1976); Animato e festivo (1978); Gottbuscher overtuire (1980); A Versoie (1981); Sinfonia- Corale (1981); Sinfonia-Affresco (1982); Fulkhóre (1983); Jubiláums-Sinfonie // Sinfonia-Anniversario (1983, 1995); Return – quasi symphonic poem (1984); Midnight Echoes Music (1985); Lacrimosa 2000. Holocaust – Memory (1991); The Night Flight (2008); Cztery nokturny kurpiowskie (1973, 1975); Program „S” hommage à Karol Szymanowski (1982); North (2011).
In his two-part *Cosmogony*, Penderecki presents “two eternal human strivings: a yearning to understand the universe and a desire to break away from the planet” (Erhardt 1975: 159). Whereas *In honorem Nicolai Copernici* by Przybylski, composed in 1972, shows the four phases of a human thought development in four pictures. *Almagest*—is the Ptolemaic system of the universe, *Planetarium* is a manifestation of numerous cosmic associations, the two following parts: *Commentariolus* and *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* are two phases—the early and the advanced one—of detecting a new order in the cosmos. Hence, in these compositions there are two aspects interwoven: a reflection upon the history of space exploration with the history of a rapid (as it was believed at the time) conquest of it.

The sphere of non-musical references, significantly determining the structure, makes an essential component of the compositions mentioned above and the vision of the universe is depicted through evocative means of a contemporary musical language. What is more, it seems that sonoristic means finally provide composers with the tools suitable for creating sonic equivalents of the cosmos and they cannot be, as it was commonly believed, against the laws of nature since they substantially help to reproduce it.
Compositions by Penderecki, Górecki and Przybylski emphasize different elements of a musical work, despite a similar performing ensemble – symphony orchestra, which turned out to be a perfect medium for conveying the ideas. Przybylski’s piece opens up with an image of harmony of the spheres. “This music is generated by [as we can read in Scipio’s Dream (Cyceron 1994: 14)] a rotary motion of the celestial spheres themselves, at the same time through combining high pitches with the low ones arises a harmonious, though diverse, symphony of them. Since such powerful movements cannot take place in silence, according to the laws of nature extreme spheres resound with high-pitched tones on the one side and with the low-pitched ones on the other. Thus, the highest sphere – the sphere of the skies – with the fastest rotation moves with a high-pitched and sharp sound, whereas the sphere of the moon – the lowest one – also resounds with the lowest tone”. Przybylski recreates this harmony of the spheres with retained tones in the parts of wind instruments played against the fifth in double-basses resounding throughout the whole movement. Quintal harmony and the sound of the organ realizing the plainsong chant give part I an archaic character which the last part lacks – in spite of apparent similarities to the first one. The 2nd movement shows rich abundance and complexity of the universe, a contemporary vision of space as a chance creation devoid of any logic, and the third one – the successive phases of attempts to grasp it with a human mind, symbolized by the titles of Copernican works.

For Penderecki it was important to show the dynamism of the creation process itself in Cosmogony – from the simplest fundamental means to the complex ones, both in terms of sound material and texture. The low-pitched tone played by double-basses, soon enriched with a glimmer of harmonics in the strings, becomes the background out of which a picture of the world is slowly emerging. The dynamism of the process is expressed by means of texture, gradual shifting from static streams to more varied melodic lines, increasing density, intensifying motion. The central point of the composition, an E flat chord symbolizing the sun, marks the border between the first phase showing the processes undergoing in nature and the second one indicating an increase in human activity, which led to a human being leaving the Earth.

Visions of the universe created by Penderecki and Przybylski indicate associations with the 19th-century tradition of programmatic music, of the need for referring to the roots, starting a dialogue with the past. What helps to orient listeners’ imagination towards appropriate areas are the titles of movements – Genesis (Genesia) and Nieskończoność (Infinity) in Cosmogony by Penderecki, Almagest, Planetarium, Commentariolus, De revolutionibus orbium coelestium in Przybylski’s composition, or Copernicus’ surname appearing in the title of the work. What matters are also texts, though not always clear enough to a listener\(^9\), but when put into a concert program they effectively play the role of a commentary. Apart from these purely outward operations, artists also referred to musical attributes of programmatic works (Golianek 1998: 90 and next) in the form of quotations (the plainsong chant in In honorem), use of certain instruments (e.g. the organ for evoking an archaic atmosphere), or symbolic use of keys (E flat major in Cosmogony).

Cosmogony by Penderecki and In honorem Nicolai Copernici by Przybylski were written almost at the same time, between 1970 and 1972, and the palette of means which was at composers’ disposal at the time got significantly enhanced through sonoristic solutions applied in these compositions, in a conscious and consistent way, for creating certain programmatic connotations.

Presented examples of the use of sonoristics in order to generate an emotional atmosphere, or to convey the programmatic content are clear evidence of a change in artists’ approach – from a typical avant-garde negation of the tradition and use of sonoristics as the material enabling them to sever with tonality to postmodernist pluralism. We also deal here with a paradoxical situation – the means which were supposed to help realize the idea of “the past vs present dialectics” (Kramer 2000: 67) were not used for coming into conflict with it but, as the aforementioned author writes, for peaceful co-existence with the past. Whereas sonoristics, a tool which was supposed to revolutionize the language of music, turned out to harmonize perfectly with a flagship category of Romanticism, that is presenting a non-musical content with the help of music, and led to the reactivation of a symphonic poem genre, becoming more attractive thanks to its new sonic format.

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\(^9\) In Cosmogony the composer used quotes from Sophocles, Ovid, Lucretius, Leonardo da Vinci, Giordano Bruno, statements of astronauts – Jury Gagarin and John Glenn, as well as fragments of the Holy Scriptures.
References


