

## Episode 10

### The Essence of Henryk Mikołaj Górecki's Music

The Revealer who had laid the essences of the Universe, in infinite song, before men's worship  
G. D'Annunzio, *Il Fuoco*.<sup>161</sup>

In all the music of Western culture, in all its works, as well as in the developmental history of the compositional process, we can attempt to distinguish substance (in other words, that which is fundamental, essential) and accident (that is, chance events, additions arising out of substance). Already in Aristotelian thought, substance is everything that belongs to the essence of some entity, and accident is those properties of an entity that do not belong to its essence. Following upon this distinction ensues a distinction among causative actions. A cause can produce an effect that is either essential or accidental by reason of said cause. This second manner constitutes the source of randomness in the world.

In considering the essence of music and beauty, Górecki had a lively interest in these issues.

... Now I am looking in mathematics, reading Rev. Prof. Michał Heller. How intriguing are those reflections of his: Creation – creativity, accident – non-accident in the Creator's actions.<sup>162</sup>

Conversations with the author of the present book show that Górecki had read and was well-acquainted with such works by Michał Heller as *Filozofia Przypadku* [*Philosophy of Chance*] and *Filozofia Kosmologii* [*Philosophy of Cosmology*].

In turn, Thomas Aquinas said that substance is a thing that is entitled to exist not in something else, but in and of itself.

Descartes, on the other hand, contended that substance is that which needs nothing else in order to exist and be known. And it is God Who is such a substance.

Though these reflections concern Western culture and – aside from the aforementioned authors – the scholastics, Leibniz, Fichte and others also occupied themselves with this problem, it should be noted that such an understanding of the primitive stage of conveying expressive spiritual states is characteristic of all cultures, both Far Eastern and primitive.

Let us also cite Baruch Spinoza, to whom Aleksander Tansman often referred while living in Hollywood, during his nocturnal disputes with such personages as Thomas Mann, Aldous Huxley and Igor Stravinsky. As Spinoza wrote in his *Ethics*,

By substance, I understand that which is in itself and is conceived through itself; in other words, that, the conception of which does not need the conception of another thing from which it must be formed,<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> G. D'Annunzio, *The Flame of Life*, transl. K. Vivaria (pseud.), P. F. Collier, New York 1900, p. 198.

<sup>162</sup> A. Satyła and K. Cyran, 'Muzyka jest rozmową. A. Satyła i K. Cyran w rozmowie z H. M. Góreckim' ['Music is a Conversation: Anna Satyła and Krzysztof Cyran in Conversation with H. M. Górecki'], *Jubinalia* no. 4, May 2008, special edition.

In the extremely rich history of European music (and it is mainly of such music that we are speaking here), in its evolution, its dialectical development, we observe how its material grows richer, how intensively its accidents arise, proliferate and differentiate.

Referring now directly to music, let us say that substance is: melodic-harmonic-rhythmic structure; and accident is: tempo, volume, timbre, expression, symbolism.

Together with the development of music, over the course of history the field of substance has changed and expanded, enriching itself with the concept of timbre, alongside the already familiar melody, harmony and rhythm. This is associated with the development of orchestral music and of instrumentation, which plays an increasingly important role in 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century music. We could pose the question of what still remains essential, substantial in music in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries – after all of those revolutions, transformations, turning points, new directions, aleatorisms and aformisms in which we came to a point where even the act of composition itself became decreasingly important, and music became a flow of certain sonic states, often electronically generated.

However, among the vast majority of composers, an awareness of substance, essence, a feeling of substantialism remained. One could say more: that we instinctively long for and joyfully accept works in which we sense that substantiality; and, whether consciously or otherwise, we know that that is where the very core of its value resides. Among those composers in which that awareness remained – and was even particularly brought out and raised to the highest standing – was Henryk Mikołaj Górecki. The composer took part in all of the above-mentioned transformations; he was immersed in them, he himself contributed to their creation. It could not have been otherwise – after all, the 20<sup>th</sup> century represented an improbable development and variety of compositional techniques, styles and trends. Every 10 or 20 years brought a change and an expansion of possibilities in the utilization of accidents.

The 1970s arrived and Górecki realized – and not only he, furthermore – that it was time to return to the core of values, to what is fundamental, to the essence of compositional things. It is not necessary to think up new, overly-complex techniques, or expand such systems as dodecaphonism, Serialism, Sonorism, aleatorism or other ‘isms’, but rather to focus on substance, on sound, on expression of emotions and ideas, in order to say that which is important and universal, to bear witness.

One needs to think in terms of substance, but not in terms of a ‘dust of phenomena’, but rather in terms of pure values.<sup>164</sup>

Simplifying musical language and giving it a new expression was the way to do that. By the law of antithesis, a return to roots ensues; what re-emerges is the originally substantial: the melody, the harmony, the rhythm, the chord.

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<sup>163</sup> B. Spinoza, *Ethics*, transl. W. H. White rev. A. H. Stirling, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., Ware, Herts. 2001, p. 3.

<sup>164</sup> H. Elzenberg, *Kłopot z istnieniem. Aforyzmy w porządku czasu* [*The Problem with Existence: Aphorisms in Order of Time*], Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków 1963, p. 274.

As Henryk Elzenberg wrote, distinguishing two symbolic planes for musical art, the near and the distant:

... tone is a feeling, harmony is tangles and combinations of feelings, in their multifarious nature; changes in power and tempo are changes in said power and said tempo in the emotional stream – that central current of human life. But in the more remote plane, these combinations, these increases and decreases in power and tension, these accelerations and decelerations, there is something more: these are forms of being itself; and tone is a pure, sublime substance.

To the one listening to great works, being is given directly twice: as fluid in the form of feelings; and as crystallized – though in motion! – in this transposition into tones.<sup>165</sup>

In what does the essence, the substantialism of Henryk Mikołaj Górecki's music consist, and what makes us immediately sense the unprecedented expressive power of his music?

It is

sonic concreteness of essential structure [that] provides this music with its extraordinary power. Górecki's music is characterized by particular sonic clarity, internal structural transparency; focused on essential structure, it is substantial to its very roots.<sup>166</sup>

From there, we can immediately attempt a description of the character, the type of this music. So, this will be:

- A raw music, devoid of all ornamentation;
- A music laden with expression of emotions and ideas, very powerful, indeed sensual;
- A music full of extremes;
- On the one hand, laden with sonic aggression and harshness of sound;
- On the other, full of tenderness, of heartbreaking lyrical expression.

From one note, one sonority, one cluster will emerge a melody and a chord. Despite that intentional poverty, an extraordinary concentration of expression ensues. Is there anywhere else that such great significance is taken on by the sound of a single chord?<sup>167</sup>

The music is served up plain. The manner in which the composer presents the sonic substance is directly audible. But then again, Górecki does not address us either plainly or directly. Nonetheless, that sonic concreteness provides an extraordinary effective power. The characteristic 'clarity of sound and simplicity, the transparent structure of the work, focused on the essence' – we can call Górecki an essentialist – are traits that distinguish Henryk Mikołaj Górecki and permit us to recognize him immediately. If we add words to this – of which there are none in *Tansman Episodes*, but there are in many other works – then in Górecki's case we obtain an extraordinary effect of correlation between the music and the

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<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 391.

<sup>166</sup> B. Pocij, *Bycie w muzyce, Próba opisanja twórczości Henryka Mikołaja Góreckiego [Being in Music: An Attempt to Describe the Work of Henryk Mikołaj Górecki]*, Karol Szymanowski Academy of Music, Katowice 2005, p. 82.

<sup>167</sup> M. Gąsiorowska, 'Czas zatrzymany Henryka Mikołaja Góreckiego' ['The Stopped Time of Henryk Mikołaj Górecki'], *Ruch Muzyczny* 1983, no. 25, p. 4.

word, an effect that will find release in the form of emotional and lyrical expression, as for instance in *Symphony no. 3*, but mainly in the sacred works.

However, since the composer serves up to us that which is substantial in the simplest possible manner – ‘All ordinary things but done in no ordinary way’<sup>168</sup> – then it becomes very important for all descriptions, dynamic markings, tempi and agogic markings to be in the foreground. The music is ‘naked’. If it is not properly interpreted and performed, it will lose its effective power and can become banal. It is for this reason that Henryk Mikołaj Górecki polished these elements so carefully and was so demanding in precisely this regard. And all of this, so that the recipient

of works whose ontological power and sonic energy result directly from the sonic material [...] listening to them, experiencing them and being affected by them, unveiled the very core of creation from the sonic material [...] so their particular dialectical harmonization of the volatile spirit (which *fiat ubi vult*) and concretely hard material – and consequently, the harmonization of the sacred with the secular, otherworldliness with the world, *heaven with earth* – was perceptible.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Pope John XXIII, *Journal of a Soul*, transl. Geoffrey Chapman, Bloomsbury Publishing, London/New York 2000, p. 110.

<sup>169</sup> B. Pociąg, *Bycie w muzyce...* [*Being in Music...*], *op. cit.*, p. 12.