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THE SACRED IN HENRYK MIKOŁAJ GÓRECKI'S OEUVRE AND THE GREATNESS OF JOHN PAUL II Inspirations and Context

In an attempt to approach the issue of the sacred in Górecki's output, it seems natural to concentrate on the sacred word which is in a relationship to music, principally on how the word connects with the music, on its semantic content, message, and the contribution of music to the creation of the message. On the one hand, one can speak of a predominance of vocal-instrumental music; on the other hand, in Górecki's greatest works the word sometimes plays merely the role of a clarification, infusing with semantic content the drama created by instrumental, i.e., pure music.

Of the manifestations of the human spirit, music has a sublime task, unique and irreplaceable. When music is truly beautiful and inspired, it tells us of goodness, of the value of peace, of the sacred and divine things better than other arts do.¹

John Paul II

For me, music springs from religious concentration and meditation: from seeing clear water, green grass, wholesome forests, breathing in clean air and writing for it.²

Henryk Mikołaj Górecki

THE SACRED IN MUSIC

When the sacred in music—or the sacred dimension of music, for that matter—is contemplated, two main tendencies can be observed. A representative of the first is, for example, Thrasybulos Georgiades for whom music is essentially the profane³ but “it becomes sacred in its connection with the sanctifying

¹ J o h n P a u l I I, Discorso ai componenti del coro Harmonici Cantores, December 23, 1988, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1988/december/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19881223_harmonici-cantores.html. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are my own.

² Cited after: Barbara L a s e k, *Kwartety smyczkowe Henryka Mikołaja Góreckiego*, Master's thesis presented at Akademia Muzyczna in Cracow in 2007 (unpublished), 215.

³ See Thrasybulos G e o r g i a d e s, *Sakral und Profan in der Musik* (München: Max Hueber, 1960), 98

word of God.”⁴ A parallel position, yet concerning literature, is held by Stefan Sawicki, who writes that “the first area [in literature] where the sacred appears is the thematic field,”⁵ adding that what he has in mind is described by terms such as “‘motif,’ ‘theme,’ or ‘plot.’”⁶ In this, he might have been inspired by a much earlier concept developed by Hans Urs von Balthasar, who spoke, among other things, of works that depict objectively religious motifs borrowed from a particular religion, e.g., the birth of Christ, as told by the Gospels.⁷ The second tendency, as Waloszek claims, is represented, among others, by Bohdan Pocij who believes that the sacred can be encountered “in the very musical substance, in a specific language of sound and the structures it builds.”⁸ If we continue juxtaposing ideas on the sacred in music with Sawicki’s concept of the sacred in literature, we might be reminded that “what counts here is not works containing theological senses *per se* but those speaking of God without mentioning his name.”⁹ In the same vein, we can cite von Balthasar’s observation that the religiousness of musical works is communicated by adequate means or stylistic elements.¹⁰ This type of musical religiousness can be described as religiousness or immanent sacredness.

In a multifaceted analysis of issues related to the sacred in music, drawing (obviously) on the concepts of Rudolf Otto¹¹ and Mircea Eliade,¹² Mieczysław Tomaszewski explores the “presence of the sacred in music” from three points of view. First, there are “types of the sacred”; second, there are “kinds of music characterized by contact with the sacred” (i.e., spiritual, religious and church music, with all its variants); finally, what matters is also “the character of works reflecting their creators’ individual experience of the sacred.”¹³

⁴ Joachim W a l o s z e k, “Kategorie sacrum i profanum we współczesnej literaturze muzykologicznej,” *Roczniki Teologiczno-Kanoniczne* 34 (1987): 46.

⁵ Stefan S a w i c k i, “Sacrum w literaturze,” *Pamiętnik Literacki* 71, no. 3 (1980): 169.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ See Hans Urs v o n B a l t h a s a r, “Sztuka i religia,” in *Pisma wybrane*, vol. 2, *Pisma z zakresu sztuki i religii*, trans. Marek Urban and Dorota Jankowska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2007), 93.

⁸ W a l o s z e k, “Kategorie sacrum i profanum we współczesnej literaturze muzykologicznej”: 47.

⁹ S a w i c k i, “Sacrum w literaturze”: 169.

¹⁰ See v o n B a l t h a s a r, “Sztuka i religia,” 93.

¹¹ See Rudolf O t t o, *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (München: C. H. Beck, 1987).

¹² See, e.g., Mircea E l i a d e, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1987.

¹³ Mieczysław T o m a s z e w s k i, “Muzyka wobec sacrum. Próba rozeznania,” in: *Olivier Messiaen we wspomnieniach i w refleksji badawczej*, eds. Marta Szoka and Ryszard Daniel Goliński (Łódź: Akademia Muzyczna, 2009), 39–40.

In the music of Henryk Mikołaj Górecki, the category of the sacred has, in a sense, a permanent presence. When asked, in 1986, about religious inspirations in his work, the composer answered: "I keep writing the same thing"¹⁴—as if he wanted to say that whether he composes a piece with an obviously religious reference or without it, or whether he uses an avant-garde language or one in which traditional qualities rejected by the avant-garde have been recreated, he "keeps writing the same thing."

One might say that the case of Górecki exemplifies a situation discussed in various studies on the connection between art and religion, for example, in that by Tadeusz Dzidek, who mentions works that "express the artist's subjective religiousness,"¹⁵ adding that from the point of view of a theological analysis of a given work, it is important that the artist's religiousness, his or her attitude of faith, is clearly revealed.¹⁶ In contrast, von Balthasar observes that a creator, if indeed subjectively religious, sees his or her material, whether religious or secular, through the eyes of an already religious person; therefore, their selection of a particular subject and the perspective they take on it are influenced by the creative religious moment.¹⁷ In addition, Dzidek highlights that it is also important to know whether an artist has experienced a crisis of faith, its disappearance, or even a religious rebellion which can find its expression in his or her specific work.¹⁸ This, however, is not the case of Górecki, who was a man of profound and unshakeable faith.¹⁹ However, Dzidek believes that the most significant fact is that "the beauty of a particular piece can be a vehicle for a journey towards transcendence."²⁰

BEAUTY

It is beauty indeed—and the message conveyed in Górecki's works—that will inspire us in the subsequent considerations. "Beauty is to enthuse us for work, and work is to raise us up"—a quote from one of Cyprian Kamil Norwid's poems is invoked by John Paul II in his Letter to Artists,²¹ in which, he also

¹⁴ The comment was made by Górecki during the seminar organised by the Academy of Catholic Theology and the Union of Polish Composers in 1986.

¹⁵ Tadeusz Dzidek, *Funkcje sztuki w teologii* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2013), 42.

¹⁶ Ibidem, 38.

¹⁷ See von Balthasar, "Sztuka i religia," 94.

¹⁸ See Dzidek, *Funkcje sztuki w teologii*, 38.

¹⁹ For an extensive discussion of this issue see Teresa Malecka, "Górecki: Homo Religiosus," *Scontri* 1 (2013): 89–96.

²⁰ Dzidek, *Funkcje sztuki*, 59.

²¹ John Paul II, Letter to Artists, April 4, 1999, Section 3, The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists.pdf; see Cyprian

recalls the message addressed to them by the Council Fathers: "This world ... in which we live needs beauty in order not to sink into despair."²² "Within the vast cultural panorama of each nation, artists have their unique place. Obedient to their inspiration in creating works both worthwhile and beautiful, they not only enrich the cultural heritage of each nation and of all humanity, but they also render an exceptional social service in favor of the common good."²³ From a somewhat different perspective, Roman Ingarden remarks on the relationship between man and beauty: "Man is the only creature which can create works and situations that are in no respect useful. He creates them, rather, only for their beauty and to enrich through their existence a specifically human world."²⁴

Władysław Stróżewski speaks of beauty in the following way: "Beauty, an eternal theme in philosophy and reflection on art, has never betrayed its secret. It may be that mystery is beauty's quintessence. It may also be that mystery indeed made the word 'beauty'—whose purpose has always been, after all, to signify the essence of beauty—increasingly ambiguous and helpless."²⁵ Stróżewski's words indicate, on the one hand, the eternal nature of beauty as an object of reflection and, on the other, our helplessness when confronted with beauty. Despite that, or perhaps because of that, we are continually fascinated by beauty.

A FEW NOTES ON CONTEMPORARY ART

Henryk Mikołaj Górecki was, as he would say, "an opponent of ... destruction in art"²⁶; he was also "against destroying the most precious thing in the human being—e m o t i o n."²⁷ In 2008, when pondering the condition of art, the composer spared no harsh words: "Art has been brought to a point of total devastation, destruction, almost ruin.... we now live in a time of sanctified boorishness or, as Sławomir Mrożek put it more bluntly, a time when being

Kamil Norwid, "Promethidion: Bogumił," in Cyprian Kamil Norwid, *Pisma wybrane*, vol. 1, ed. Juliusz Wiktor Gomulicki (Warszawa: PIW, 1968), 216.

²² John Paul II, Letter to Artists, Section 11; see Paul VI, Address to Artists (Closing of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, December 8, 1965), The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651208_epilogo-concilio-artisti.html.

²³ Ibidem, Section 4.

²⁴ Roman Ingarden, "On Human Nature," in Roman Ingarden, *Man and Value*, trans. Arthur Szylewicz (Washington, D. C., München and Wien: The Catholic University of America Press and Philosophia Verlag, 1983), 22.

²⁵ Władysław Stróżewski, *W kręgu wartości* (Kraków: Znak, 1992), 151.

²⁶ Henryk M. Górecki, "Wystąpienie doktora honoris causa," *Teoria Muzyki: Studia, Interpretacje, Dokumentacje*, no. 3 (2013), 111.

²⁷ Ibidem.

a boor has been sacralized.”²⁸ Outraged, he went on to say: “One might as well yell at this point, with all one’s might, ‘This world in which we live needs beauty in order not to sink into despair!’”²⁹ and added: “We all probably know this quote?”³⁰

Alicja Jarzębska claims the state of culture and art described as “postmodern” is rooted in modernism. She writes: “The new (modernist) meaning of the term ‘music’ definitely departs from the centuries-old tradition of linking this concept to ancient Harmony and the myth of Apollo, and to the agreeable sense of order associated with the idea of beauty interpreted in terms of proportions and symmetry.”³¹ Jarzębska also believes that “this ‘new aesthetics,’ which rejects the idea of beauty, was instrumental for the twentieth-century reflection on art.”³² She refers, among others, to the thought of Theodor W. Adorno, who claimed: “Spiritualization in new art prohibits it from tarnishing itself any further with ... the true, the beautiful, and the good... it is art that should introduce chaos into order rather than the reverse.”³³ “Beauty ... became the ugly.”³⁴ Half a century later, Pope John Paul II—artist (poet, actor), philosopher and theologian—asked anxiously: “Is the mirror of negativity used by contemporary art not becoming an end in itself? Does it not encourage one to relish in evil, rejoice in destruction and fall, or lead to cynicism and the insult of man?”³⁵ The Pope, invoking the ancient way of thinking about beauty as being inseparable from goodness, recalled the concept of *kalokagathia* and said: “The link between good and beautiful stirs fruitful reflection. In a certain sense beauty is the visible form of the good.”³⁶

GÓRECKI’S PATH TO BEAUTY AND THE SACRED

Polish music did not evade the meanders followed by the twentieth-century music at large; however, its evolution saw the constant interplay of the political

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ Ibidem.

³¹ Alicja Jarzębska, *Spór o piękno muzyki: Wprowadzenie do muzyki XX wieku* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2004), 14.

³² Ibidem, 37.

³³ See Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 118.

³⁴ Ibidem, 72. See Jarzębska, *Spór o piękno muzyki*, 38.

³⁵ John Paul II, Ansprache an die Publizisten und an die Künstler, November 19, 1980, Section 5, The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/de/speeches/1980/november/documents/hf_jp_ii_spe_19801119_artisti-giornalisti.html.

³⁶ John Paul II, Letter to Artists, Section 3.

and the historical with the artistic, the aesthetic, and the spiritual. It is well known that Górecki's generation embarked on its creative journey during the 1956 political crisis, at the time of a momentary "thaw," particularly visible in the sphere of culture. The era of the first "Warsaw Autumn" International Festivals of Contemporary Music was a period of fascination with novelty, dodecaphony, serialism, and sonorism, manifested by many Polish composers of the time. Krzysztof Penderecki's *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima* and *Polymorphia*, or Górecki's instrumental cycle *Genesis* had shocking newness about them; *Genesis* was described by Krzysztof Droba as "a treatise of sorts on the form-creating role of timbre."³⁷ The *Refrain* (1965), with its opposition between simplified means and the augmented role of expression, became one of the composer's several landmark works. In the Poland of the time, political changes were imminent. Added to this, the election of a Polish pope in 1978 and John Paul II's first pilgrimage to his homeland coincided with major stylistic and ideological changes in Górecki's creative output, including transformations in his language of sound and compositional technique, as well as changes in the sphere of ideas and messages embodied by his works. His path was marked, as it were, by a gradual "sweeping of the field," which was essentially a shift from serialism and sonorism to diatonics, his works still containing dissonances achieved through oscillation in *Refrain*, dissonance struggling with consonance, sharpness juxtaposed with mellowness in *Ad Matrem* and Symphony no. 2 (*Copernican*) to reach fully emancipated consonance, fully-fledged melodic pattern with a traditional melody and harmony (in the modal or tonal order), all building powerful emotional tensions and strong expression, while emanating beauty in the *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* and in the Psalm *Beatus vir* dedicated to Pope John Paul II—pieces that represent the apogee of the composer's oeuvre. It is in these works that Górecki has most meaningfully manifested and embodied the value of beauty for the sacred.

In an attempt to approach the issue of the sacred in Górecki's output, it seems natural to concentrate on the sacred word which is in a relationship to music, principally on how the word connects with the music and what verbal form it takes, on its semantic content, message, and the contribution of music to the creation of the message. On the one hand, one can speak of a predominance of vocal-instrumental music: instrumental pieces with lyrics or ones with just a title, hence not devoid of words; on the other hand, in Górecki's greatest works the word sometimes plays merely the role of a clarification, infusing with semantic content the drama created by instrumental, i.e., pure music.

³⁷ *Encyklopedia muzyczna PWM*, vol. 3, s.v. "Górecki Henryk Mikołaj" (by Krzysztof Droba), (Kraków: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1986), 426.

It is in Górecki's early creative phase that we already come across the first instance of harmonizing word with sound as, for example, is the case in the *Three Songs*, op. 3 (1956): "To Mother and What Bell of Mourning," featuring texts by Juliusz Słowacki, and "The Bird" set to Julian Tuwim's poetry. Masterful building of a relationship between word and sound is part of the vocal tradition. Later, fascination with novelty and avant-garde, accompanied by the quest for new means of artistic expression, new compositional techniques, and new aesthetic attitudes, were the features of (mainly) instrumental music. The word—almost always sacred, dense, and even aphoristic at times—made a spectacular comeback in the 1970s and, one might say, began to prevail in Górecki's work, which was now at its most mature. This comeback happened somewhat by accident, when the lyrics of the piece were reduced to only one but meaningful word: "Amen."

Amen (1975) is one of the best-known works of Górecki for a *cappella* choir, perhaps by reason of its radical scaling down of the semantic layer to a single word: "amen" (meaning "it is so" or "let it be so"), which is repeated sixteen times in the piece. The task of music in the case of this piece, which carries a profound message, is building the emotional and dramatic expression. One word, "Amen," explicitly places this musical work within the realm of religion—of the sacred. The simple narrative of choral singing, unfolding across several equivalent modal scales, is subject to pronounced "oscillations" of emotional expression between a pensive, calm, and sad mood and a joyful brightening up. When the piece is apparently drawing to a close, the initial "Amen!" in A Minor returns with a joyful A Major chord but sung *subito piano*—Pociej writes it is "a melody inspired by the spirit of Gregorian chant."³⁸ It transpires, paradoxically, that the verbal economy and emotionality attained through music alone creates a more powerful impression of the sacred atmosphere.

Starting with *Ad Matrem* (1971), lyrics in Górecki's works are religious. The poetry of the Psalms was always his principal inspiration, alongside the no less important lyrics of church hymns and folk songs. He would draw on the greatest Polish poets: Juliusz Słowacki, Cyprian Kamil Norwid, Stanisław Wyspiański, and Tadeusz Przerwa-Tetmajer.

THE HEIGHT OF GÓRECKI'S CREATIVITY

There are two grand pieces by Górecki in which the idea of the sacred is supremely expressed: *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* (1976) and the Psalm

³⁸ Bohdan Pociej, *Bycie w muzyce: Próba opisanja twórczości Henryka Mikołaja Góreckiego* (Katowice: Akademia Muzyczna im. Karola Szymanowskiego, 2005), 166.

Beatus vir (1979), preceded by *Ad Matrem* (1971) and the *Copernican* (1972), both masterpieces in their own right. There are also other compositions, chiefly for a *cappella* choir, of a different kind, size, and weight, reaching for the idea of the sacred, i.e., *Church Songs*, *Marian Songs*, and, importantly, *Totus Tuus*, dedicated to Pope John Paul II. However, Górecki's legacy turned out to be more than that. After his passing in 2010, his unfinished scores were discovered, including two with a distinctly religious inspiration: *Kyrie* and the *Oratorio Sanctus Adalbertus*.³⁹

In *Ad Matrem*, with a dedication: "In memory of my Mother," the dramatic effect fundamentally hinges on contrast, a factor that plays a major role in Górecki's mature and late style.⁴⁰ In this case, there is a harsh contrast between the dramatic, dissonant, sharply orchestrated, loud *ffff* "calling" of the orchestra and the choral *tutti*: "Oh, my Mother" (*Mater mea*), addressed probably to the prematurely lost mother, and the simple, syllabic, soft *p* singing of the soprano solo, against the extended, gentle chords of the orchestra, with the words close to the sequence *Stabat Mater dolorosa*, a prayer to the Mother of God, who stood, agonized, at the cross of Christ.

In Symphony No. 2 (*Copernican*), the contrast principle was necessary to articulate the dramatic nature of the Copernican revolution. Górecki recalls his conversation with Krzysztof Zanussi: "Zanussi said that, in fact, Copernicus ... was one of the greatest tragedies in the history of the human spirit: an entire system of thought, the way of thinking on which man's attitude to the reality out there was based, was in ruins. We were no longer the centre of the universe, we become nothing."⁴¹ Górecki's idea of symphony was that of contrast: "First the whole mechanism, let us say, of the world, followed by contemplation."⁴² In music, in the first movement, the harsh tones, the sweeping dissonant chords performed *tutti ffff*, separated by radical general pauses, all invoke an image of this "world mechanism" or, shall we say, cosmos. Eugeniusz Knapik noted that "the tremendous force and the mighty sound of the first movement captures the awe the universe inspires and the terror of man, who realizes the ramifications

³⁹ The other unfinished scores were edited by the composer's son, Mikołaj, and published, and they now have a presence in contemporary music: *Symphony No. 4 "Tansman Episodes"* and *Two Tristan Postludes and the Chorale*.

⁴⁰ For a more extensive discussion of the issue see Teresa Malecka, "Word, Tone, Sacrum in the Music of Henryk Mikołaj Górecki in Terms of the Category of Logos," in *Re-interpreting Music: Mieczysław Tomaszewski's Kraków School of Music Theory; Studies—Syntheses—Constructs*, ed. Kinga Kiwała et al. (Kraków: Akademia Muzyczna w Krakowie, 2022), 109–128.

⁴¹ Henryk Górecki, "Powiem Państwu szczerze..." (I shall tell you frankly...), *ViVO*, no. 1 (1994), 45. Quoted in Adrian Thomas, *Górecki* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 74.

⁴² Górecki, "Powiem Państwu szczerze...", 45. Quoted in Thomas, *Górecki*, 75.

of Copernicus's discovery."⁴³ Mieczysław Tomaszewski likens this movement to the "apocalyptic chaos of the Beginning."⁴⁴ Then, in the second movement, we encounter a stark contrast: a different, lyrical world where beauty is contemplated—a singing melodic pattern based on the text of the Psalms, a calm and more consonant instrumental layer. The melodic line of the baritone rises and reaches the peak in the brightened harmony of the A-flat Major triad⁴⁵—at the word 'light,' which is the fulcrum of the whole symphony. The melody of the soprano, according to Władysław Stróżewski, "seems to be taken to the limits of Transcendence."⁴⁶ The words of Copernicus's treatise: What is more beautiful than the heavens that encompass all that is beautiful? infused with musical yet archaic modality, bring this work to completion and constitute an apotheosis of beauty. They carry us to another dimension, to the realm of the sacred.

"SYMPHONY OF SORROWFUL SONGS"

In 1976, Henryk Mikołaj Górecki presented his Symphony no. 3 (*Of Sorrowful Songs*) at the Music Meetings in Baranów Sandomierski as his most avant-garde work, although it is regarded as a manifestation of the most radical turn towards tradition in the twentieth-century art music. At that time, opinions varied widely: from rapture flowing from genuine emotions to severe, even acrimonious criticism. A decade or so later, in the 1990s, the work achieved unprecedented success in contemporary world culture.

The semantic core of Górecki's Symphony no. 3 is the relationship between the mother and the lost child, both in the human and divine dimensions. The texts used by the composer, while varied in content and demonstrating in each case a different historical language and style, form a tripartite structure. The lyrics of the first movement describe the lament of the Mother of God for her dying son; in it, she prays that the Son of God will share his wounds with her, and that

⁴³ Eugeniusz Knapik, A review of Henryk Mikołaj Górecki's oeuvre written in connection with awarding him an honorary doctorate by the Academy of Music in Kraków to Henryk M. Górecki (May 12, 2008), *Teoria Muzyki: Studia, Interpretacje, Dokumentacje*, no. 3 (2013), 86–90.

⁴⁴ Mieczysław Tomaszewski, A review of Henryk Mikołaj Górecki's oeuvre written in connection with awarding him an honorary doctorate by the Academy of Music in Kraków (May 12, 2008) (May 12, 2008), *Teoria Muzyki: Studia, Interpretacje, Dokumentacje*, no. 3 (2013): 79–86.

⁴⁵ In the baroque rhetoric, A-flat major is the key that depicts emotions of fear, or horror, but also the inactivity, or even tranquillity of the night; in the late-Romantic convention it evokes dreaminess, conveys intense feelings, while being mellow and solemn.

⁴⁶ Władysław Stróżewski, A review of Henryk Mikołaj Górecki's oeuvre written in connection with awarding him an honorary doctorate by the Academy of Music in Kraków (May 12, 2008), *Teoria Muzyki: Studia, Interpretacje, Dokumentacje*, no. 3 (2013), 90–95.

he will comfort her before his passing. Religious symbolism is clearly part of the ideas communicated by the *Stabat Mater* and pronounced most powerfully here. In the second part of the symphony, the words a highland girl wrote on the prison wall during her detainment by German officers are simple. As the composer said at meeting in Baranów, the lyrics were “laconic.” On the one hand, it is a message from a daughter to her mother, who is probably worried about her: “Mother, do not weep, don’t.” On the other hand, the message is transformed into the girl’s personal prayer to the Mother of God: “Oh, Fairest Queen of Heavens...”; she eventually uses the phrase “Hail Mary,” well-known in the tradition of the Catholic Church, and adds the words “full of grace.” The lyrics of the third movement are drawn from a traditional song sang in the Opole region at the time of the Silesian Uprisings, and express a mother’s pain after her son has died at war. On the one hand, they express her protest against the evil people who killed him; on the other hand, they render her complaint of being helpless, if not desperate, especially that she does not know where his grave is. Eventually, she turns to the birds to ask them to sing for him and to the flowers to bloom for him: “Let my sonny / at least lie pleasantly.”

Music—simply, naturally yet elaborately—builds up, almost autonomously, the tragedy of motherly pain. This was made possible by one of Górecki’s greatest discoveries: the restored importance of the melodic pattern which is simple, beautiful, and naturally connected with words. The modal-tonal mood, the natural and simple soprano, once fully communicating pain (in the first movement), another time drawing on the folk style (in the second and third movements), but prayerful (in the second movement), the sound of the grand symphonic orchestra enriched by the colorful nuancing of the piano and the harp (present in many of the composer’s vocal-instrumental pieces), all create an original, unreal, as it were, aura of sound. The slow pace of all three movements creates a unique, leisurely flow. While in the previously discussed works the category of contrast played an important role in building the dramaturgical component, the *ostinato* principle turns out to be important for the Symphony no. 3 as a whole.⁴⁷

The famous, one might say, extremely consistent and elaborate, ten-voice canon for a large string orchestra (in the climax) takes us to the mother’s lament, marked by a powerful expression and an exquisite beauty of singing: “My son, dear and only, share your wounds with your mother...” As Krzysztof Droba pointed out, the placement of the lament within the work is highly original, making the word–sound relationship acquire a new dimension.⁴⁸ The

⁴⁷ For a more extensive discussion see Malecka, “Word, Tone, Sacrum in the Music of Henryk Mikołaj Górecki in Terms of the Category of Logos.”

⁴⁸ See Krzysztof Droba, “Jeszcze o III Symfonii Henryka Mikołaja Góreckiego,” *Zeszyty Naukowe Zespołu Analizy i Interpretacji Muzyki* (1978): 55–66.

words are used in a short “sorrowful” song that forms the core of the first movement, which is the longest in this symphony, as a vocal, lyrical “enclave” in a masterfully crafted instrumental canon. By building up tension systematically and by adding new voices in this intricate polyphony, the music is brought to a climax; by withdrawing the successive voices and reducing the dynamic range, the composer leads us to a solo singing, to the mother mourning her son’s death. This simplest, yet expressive singing with its folk and religious lyrics is, as it were, an explanation, an addition to the drama created by the orchestral canon without words. Adrian Thomas describes this situation as rendering “human has hitherto been only instrumentally implied.”⁴⁹

“BEATUS VIR”

The Psalm *Beatus vir* from 1979 is apparently the composer’s response to the historical events of the time, a profound and authentic reaction to Karol Wojtyła being elected pope. Among the countless works of art in various ways related to that event, alongside *Te Deum* by Roman Palester and *Te Deum* by Krzysztof Penderecki, *Beatus vir* is no doubt a response of the highest artistic order. The history of the work, which was commissioned in 1977 by Cardinal Wojtyła to celebrate the nine-hundredth anniversary of the death of St. Stanislaus the Martyr and which the composer dedicated to the Polish Pope John Paul II and performed in 1979 in his presence, reinforces the relationship between Górecki and the future Saint. Their brief conversation was described by the composer as the most important moment in his life.

Beatus vir, which is a psalm for mixed choir and orchestra, is an oratorio based on—which is typical of Górecki—the Book of Psalms. The piece is a plea for mercy, a confession of faith and entrustment, culminating in the explanation: “O taste and see that the Lord is good; How blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!” (Ps 34:8). The figure of the “blessed man” might be doubly symbolical, referring to St. Stanislaus, in whose memory the work was commissioned, and to the Pope, who commissioned the piece and to whom it is dedicated. This monumental prayer is clad in music: simple, characteristic of Górecki’s work at the time, yet sublime, full of inner tension, leading to great culminations and then retreating from them. Folklore elements intertwine with references to Church music; the psalm-like tone⁵⁰ in

⁴⁹ Thomas, *Górecki*, 89.

⁵⁰ See Kinga Kiwała, *Problematyka sacrum w polskiej muzyce współczesnej na przykładzie utworów związanych z osobą Ojca Świętego Jana Pawła II*, Master’s thesis presented at Akademia Muzyczna in Cracow in 2002 (unpublished), 74.

the final section performed by an *a capella* choir takes the listener to another, as it were, supernatural reality, which can arguably be described as a “moment of epiphany.” This is the phrase Tomaszewski uses to describe a sudden appearance of something new in the work, as if “from the outside,” and to invoke the idiom of sacredness.⁵¹ In 1980, referring to *Beatus vir*, Pociąg asked bewilderedly: “How come we have this unusual greatness in music? Why has the greatest, religion-inspired work been composed just now?”

LATER WORK

When the enthusiasm of the years 1978–1980 in Poland waned and when martial law was declared, Górecki—after the presence of the sacred in his work reached its peak and culmination—limited the range of his musical means, retreating into modest simplicity (he then composed mostly folk and church songs for a *capella* choir and chamber music). That was a late stage of his work, and, according to Tomaszewski’s idea of the nodal and turning points in a composer’s life, a sense of existential threat crept in the pieces he composed.⁵² However, “papal theme” recurs in them and Górecki’s fascination with the thought, teaching, and personality of John Paul II is continued. The composer once said: “In truth, I am alive only because I had this lucky chance—it is not much but enough for me—of meeting him.”⁵³

In 1985, *Totus Tuus* for a *cappella* choir was composed, and in the final years of the composer’s life (as we learned only after his death), it was followed by *Kyrie*, op. 83 for mixed choir, percussion, piano, and string orchestra, and *Sanctus Adalbertus*, op. 71 (written between 1997 and 2010), an oratorio for soprano, baritone, mixed choir, and orchestra.

Totus Tuus for a *cappella* choir, dedicated “To Pope John Paul II on his third pilgrimage his homeland,” is, as it were, a coming together of the ways in which the composer and the Pope venerated Mary the Mother of God. The title and lyrics of the piece come close to the center of the papal thought, coinciding with the motto of John Paul II’s pontificate. Górecki, however, shifts the emphasis from “I am all yours” to the invocation “Mary,” repeated forty times (and often

⁵¹ See [Mieczysław Tomaszewski], “Sacrum i profanum w muzyce: Z prof. M. Tomaszewskim rozmawia M. Janicka-Słysz,” *Maszkaron* 1–3 (2003): 30.

⁵² See Mieczysław Tomaszewski, “Życia twórcy punkty węzłowe: Rekonesans,” in Mieczysław Tomaszewski, *Muzyka w dialogu ze słowem* (Kraków: Akademia Muzyczna, 2003), 35–48.

⁵³ Górecki said that in a conversation (held in Katowice in May 2008) with students of the Academy of Music in Kraków. See “Muzyka jest rozmową: Prof. Henryk Mikołaj Górecki w rozmowie z Anną Satylą i Krzysztofem Cyranem,” *Jubinalia*, no. 4 (2008): 3. *Jubinalia* is a magazine published by the students of the Academy of Music in Kraków, under the supervision of Prof. Małgorzata Janicka-Słysz.

written in large type), and “Mater,” repeated twenty times, while “Totus Tuus” recurs only seven times in the entire work. The tranquil narration, dominated by an almost constant three-measure rhythm, a simple, small-interval melodic pattern, and diatonic harmony is at times embellished with a sudden intrusion of chromaticism or enharmonics. The repeated invocations to the Mother of God in the ending are in a way “suspended” (at the dominant of the initial key); they create an unreal atmosphere, as if this Marian prayer were taken to another, transcendent (as one might wish to say) dimension.

WORKS FOUND AFTER 2010

“KYRIE,” OP. 83

FOR MIXED CHOIR, PERCUSSION, PIANO, AND STRING ORCHESTRA

After the premiere of *Beatus vir*, John Paul II urged Górecki to compose works of sacred music. In the 1990s, the Pope even asked him to write a mass. Górecki's conversation with the Pope during a private audience in 2003 turned out to be momentous for the composer. He became so emotional that he could hardly remember anything, as he was crying the whole time. Yet he was able to hear the Pope's playfully nudging him to work on the mass.⁵⁴

Kyrie, the only movement of the mass ever composed, was written in from 2004 to 2005.⁵⁵ The lyrics of *Kyrie*, ascetic by nature, combine the Latin text with the Polish one: “Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison, Panie zmiłuj się nad nami.” There is an air of anxiety in “Kyrie,” a dramatic cry to God to have mercy, which becomes even more dramatic in “Kyrie eleison!” But there is also an air of softness, a simple choral singing, and a humble request: “Christe eleison,” “Chryste zmiłuj się nad nami.” The whole, however, is dominated by an unrelenting *ostinato*, permeated with tritone–second correlations that convey a dismal and tragic sense of inevitability. The juxtaposition of word and sound in *Kyrie* provokes questions about the work's message: Why is the (collective) lyrical subject dramatically calling, if not crying out, when addressing the Lord? And why does the subject pray to Jesus Christ singing gently? Well, the Catechism of the Catholic Church indicates that petitioning God can have different shades: “The vocabulary of supplication in

⁵⁴ See “*Kyrie* Henryka Mikołaja Góreckiego do wysłuchania w Niniatece,” PWM <https://pwm.com.pl/pl/aktualnosci/szczegoly/3458248,kyrie-henryka-mikolaja-goreckiego-do-wysluchania-w-ninatece.html>.

⁵⁵ *Kyrie*, op. 83 is a piece for four-voice mixed choir, percussion, piano, and string orchestra. The premiere took place on April 21, 2014, at St. John's Archcathedral in Warsaw during the concert entitled “The Threshold of Hope: A Tribute to John Paul II,” performed by the Choir of the Polish Radio and Aukso, the Chamber Orchestra of the City of Tychy, conducted by Marek Moś.

the New Testament is rich in shades of meaning: ask, beseech, plead, invoke, entreat, cry out, even ‘struggle in prayer.’”⁵⁶ However, as indicated above, it seems that when listening to the dramatic *Kyrie*, Henryk Mikołaj Górecki’s penultimate work, we remain within the scope of Christian hope. What kind of hope is this? As John Paul II would say, this is the hope “reaching beyond the limit.”⁵⁷ And one more question: Isn’t *Kyrie*—with its relentless *ostinato* pace—a depiction of some kind of pilgrimage toward hope?

THE CONCLUDING WORK IN THE SACRED CIRCLE

In their conversations and correspondence, the composer and the Pope would constantly return to the idea of Górecki composing more works of religious music, perhaps even a larger cycle about Polish saints. Having paid tribute to St. Stanislaus in *Beatus vir*, Górecki considered writing a commemorative piece for St. Vojtěch (Adalbert) and St. Hedwig; he also intended to compose a piece dedicated to St. Maximilian Maria Kolbe. As far as we know, in 2000, Górecki composed the *St. Vojtěch Cantata* “*Salve sidus Polonorum*,” op. 72 to commemorate the millennium of Gniezno and the death of St. Vojtěch. The history of creating the oratorio *Sanctus Adalbertus* is little known. In an anonymous note (posted on the Ninateka website) about the piece in question, one can read that the score of the complete composition was found by Górecki’s son after the composer’s death.⁵⁸ In 2015, the oratorio was published by Boosey and Hawkes⁵⁹ and premiered in Kraków.

Drawn on Psalm 116 (or 115 in the Vulgate), the lyrics of *Sanctus Adalbertus*, “Credidi, propter quo locutus sum...” (Ps 116 (115):6), are laconic; already at the verbal level, the text builds a unique sense of drama, typical of Górecki’s music, by using numerous yet irregular repetitions. It is sung alternately in Latin and in Polish (there exists a Czech version, which is understandable, given the nationality of St. Vojtěch).⁶⁰

The titles of the first three movements reflect the genre categories of non-liturgical chants: the psalm, the lauda, and the hymn. Musical arrangements

⁵⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Section 2629, The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P97.HTM.

⁵⁷ John Paul II, “Hope Reaching Beyond the Limit,” in *The Place Within: The Poetry of Pope John Paul II*, trans. Jerzy Peterkiewicz (New York: Random House, 1994), 162.

⁵⁸ See “*Kyrie* Henryka Mikołaja Góreckiego do wysłuchania w Ninatece.”

⁵⁹ See Henryk Mikołaj Górecki, *Sanctus Adalbertus*, op. 71 (1997–98), oratorio for soprano and baritone soloists, chorus, and orchestra, Boosey & Hawkes, <https://www.boosey.com/cr/music/Henryk-Mikolaj-Gorecki-Sanctus-Adalbertus/51565>.

⁶⁰ Incidentally, numerous composers have reached for this particular psalm, e.g., Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, Claudio Monteverdi, and Anton Bruckner.

vary. The final movement, *Gloria*, contains liturgical singing, and it constitutes a monumental finale, the goal of all parts of the work. It derives, as it were, from the hymn *Bogurodzica* (Mother of God). Given the historical circumstances, the following interpretation springs to mind: The premiere of the oratorio honoring the Polish–Czech patron saint (one of Poland's three patron saints) was to take place at the turn of the millennium in the presence of the Polish pope—when the sense of freedom and national identity were being reborn in Poland. Featuring the first Polish anthem (*Bogurodzica*), the work starts with a gentle reminder of its first few notes (at the beginning of the fourth movement), only to reach its grand culmination, and eventually return to a downscaled epiphanic aura. *Sanctus Adalbertus* can be interpreted as a path, traced by the oldest national anthem, towards the roots of Polishness.

POST SCRIPTUM

The period in which Górecki composed his last sacred works was also a time when he engaged in deep reflection. His views on music, art, culture, and the world, set in the context of the passage of time, ripened and crystallized; simultaneously, he was overtaken by increasing doubts. His attention focused mainly on two problems that were of fundamental importance to him both as a composer and as a deeply religious man, namely music and its essence and the universe and God.

In a lecture (which resembled a testament) he delivered upon being awarded an honorary doctorate by the Krzysztof Penderecki Academy of Music in Kraków in May 2008, Górecki said: “To me, the era of authoritative statements, judgements ... is over. Now is the time for reflection, doubt, and contemplation.”⁶¹ In the concluding part of the lecture, his confession: “My whole life is *music*,”⁶² was completed with a statement of doubt: “I do not know anything specific about it.”⁶³ To address his doubt, the composer invoked Leszek Kołakowski's thought that music was an unworldly guest, and in doing so, he hinted at the perspective from which he contemplated music—the perspective of transcendence. He recalled “a beautiful term existing in poetry and the stories written in Podhale: *Heavenly Glades* [*niebiańskie polany*]. If there are Heavenly Glades, are there also Celestial Beings?” He closed his

⁶¹ Górecki, “Wystąpienie doktora honoris causa”: 118.

⁶² Ibidem.

⁶³ Ibidem.

lecture by saying: "Heavenly Glades—Celestial Beings. Our musical thoughts fly *There*. We are Here, They are There. We—Here, They—There."⁶⁴

And John Paul II wrote: "Music, like all other domains of art, brings man closer to God, who has prepared for those who love Him 'what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived'" (1 Cor 2:9).⁶⁵

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⁶⁴ Ibidem.

⁶⁵ Karol Wojtyła—Jan Paweł II, *Muzyka: Antologia tekstów w serii Muzyka wobec poezji i nauczania Karola Wojtyły i Jana Pawła II*, eds. Dariusz Radziechowski, Teresa Malecka, and Kinga Kiwała (Kraków: Akademia Muzyczna w Krakowie, 2011), 261–62

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ABSTRACT / ABSTRAKT

Teresa MALECKA, The Sacred in Henryk Mikołaj Górecki's Oeuvre and the Greatness of John Paul II: Inspirations and Context

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The author argues that the sacred informs Henryk Mikołaj Górecki's oeuvre. The considerations start with a brief examination of the sacred in music in general, based on research in literary studies, philosophy, and theory of music. At the center are the composer's religious works, which define the *differentia specifica* of his output. To describe them, the author uses the method of integral interpretation developed by Mieczysław Tomaszewski. Due to the importance of the textual element in the composer's works, special attention is given to the relationships between word and sound, sacred text and sacred music. Górecki's important statements are analyzed as interestingly documenting his self-reflection and, above all, his unique personality. Since Górecki drew unfaltering inspiration from the intellectual outlook and personality of Pope John Paul II, the author of the paper scrutinizes, on the one hand, the teaching of John Paul II on music and art and, on the other, the special bond between the composer and the Pope.

Keywords: Henryk Mikołaj Górecki, the sacred, John Paul II, music, word, beauty

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Teresa MALECKA, Sacrum w twórczości Henryka Mikołaja Góreckiego i wielkość Jana Pawła II: Inspiracje i kontekst

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W artykule postawiona została teza o obecności sacrum w twórczości Henryka Mikołaja Góreckiego. Punkt wyjścia stanowią krótkie rozważania dotyczące sacrum w muzyce – w oparciu o literaturę przedmiotu z zakresu teorii literatury, filozofii i teorii muzyki. W centrum rozważań znajdują się religijne dzieła kompozytora, będące zarazem jego *differentia specifica*. W celu zaprezentowania utworów zastosowana została metoda interpretacji integralnej autorstwa Mieczysława Tomaszewskiego. Ze względu na ważność tekstów dzieł kompozytora szczególną uwagę zwrócono na zagadnienie relacji słowo–dźwięk, tekst sakralny–muzyka sakralna. Przypomniane zostały istotne wypowiedzi kompozytora stanowiące ciekawy dokument jego autorefleksji, a przede wszystkim jego oryginalnej osobowości. Ze względu na nieustające w życiu twórcy inspiracje osobowością i nauczaniem Ojca Świętego Jana Pawła II oczywiście okazało się ukazanie kontekstu, jaki stanowią myśl papieska, zarówno poglądy na sztukę, jak i – w szczególności – na muzykę, oraz specyficzny rodzaj relacji między Henrykiem Mikołajem Góreckim a św. Janem Pawłem II.

Słowa kluczowe: Henryk Mikołaj Górecki, sacrum, Jan Paweł II, muzyka, słowo, piękno

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