

Conversation with Henryk Górecki: Leon Markiewicz, July 1962¹

Translated by Anna Mastowiec

Górecki is notorious for his dislike of speaking in public about his life and music; it is very rare to come across an interview with him. His interview with Tadeusz Marek² is widely believed to be the first and 'only interview with Górecki in any language...certainly the only one in English.'³ However, there is an earlier interview with Leon Markiewicz from 1962, published in *Ruch Muzyczny*.⁴ In this interview Górecki speaks at length about his early works, his thoughts on contemporary music, and other composers. My translation follows the format of the original, editing being limited to one correction (see footnotes).

I chance upon Górecki as he is correcting the last pages of Scontri. While the coffee is brewing I look around the room...reproductions of van Gogh, Kantor, Tchorzewski, Vedova, a huge abstract by Andrzej Urbanowicz and even two abstract paintings by the composer himself. Photographs of Chopin and Szymanowski. Festival posters.... Black clay pots resembling old Slavonic vases, a relief by Sabala from Dębno. On the grand piano, the St John Passion, a Brahms piano sonata, and Prince Igor. On the bookshelf, my eyes light upon works by Tetmajer, Witkiewicz, monographs on van Gogh and Picasso, various books about art, books about Hitler's massacres, and a lot of Highland⁵ artefacts.

I look through the pile of neatly handwritten scores. Instinctively I look for new ones. There are two. I open the first one: Elementi. Under the title there is a motto: 'In the beginning was Movement.' The staves are full of unfamiliar diagrams, lines and symbols. Next to the scores—something for every theorist!—a few books with detailed composer's notes, which are produced before the final notation on the paper. There are many of them for every piece.

¹ The translator acknowledges the kind assistance of Ludwig Erhardt, chief editor of *Ruch Muzyczny*, in providing the composer's photograph as well as permission to reprint copyright material.

² Tadeusz Marek and David Drew, 'Górecki in Interview (1968)—And 20 Years After,' *Tempo* 168 (1989): 25-28. According to Marek, this interview originally appeared as 'Composer's Workshop: Henryk Mikołaj Górecki,' *Polish Music/Polnische Musik* 2 (1968): 25-28.

³ Marek and Drew, 'Górecki in Interview' 25.

⁴ Leon Markiewicz, 'Conversation with Henryk Górecki,' *Ruch Muzyczny* 4 (1962): 7-9.

⁵ 'Highland' refers to the regions of southern Poland in the foothills of the Tatra mountains. [editor's note]

I direct my first question to the composer, who is just bringing coffee:

M: *Thanks to my indiscretion I have just found out about two new works. Could you describe to what degree they are related to the previous compositions, and to what extent they are introducing new problems?*

G: Up to now I would have been seriously puzzled by this question, because I would not have been able to distinguish exactly between old and new. You happen to come at a moment when I have made a sort of reassessment. First of all, I consider my previous compositions, up to *Scontri* [1960] and *Diagram IV* [1961], as the past, in which I emphasised only the individual stages of getting to know the musical material I had come across. However, I knew that this would not last long. Currently, after a long period of reflection, during which I didn't write a single new note, I have given myself the task of trying out the possibilities of sound for myself, possibilities which are still hidden in the performance forces.

New works such as *Elementi* for violin, viola and cello, and *Canti strumentali* for fifteen instruments mark the beginning of the period in which I am under strict self-control, not allowing myself any thoughtless moves. These works open a cycle of pieces with the same title, *Genesis*. The works which belong to the cycle are or will be individual compositions with separate titles and various instrumental groups. I have already sketched the order: *Monologhi II* for voice and groups of instruments, Second Symphony for strings, a piece for percussion, a piece for choir and instruments, for large orchestra, and finally one for soloists, choir and orchestra.⁶

M: *Let me complete the comment from your notebook and clarify for readers the meaning of individual terms: 'The fundamental element linking [the works] into a whole is constantly evolving Energy existing through Movement: a symbol of Manifestation of Life.' But this is exactly the most accurate way of describing all your music! Where does the title of the cycle come from?*

G: In general terms 'genesis' describes conditions which contribute to the beginnings of events, from an embryo to fully developed form. I treated this word [genesis] as a symbol of individual stages of beginning, realisation and development of the three basic elements of music, which I consider to be agogics, dynamics and colour. This is where the title of the first piece in the cycle comes from, *Elementi*, in which these elements appear in an embryonic form.

M: *It seems that on the basis of works such as Symphony 1959, Scontri, Diagrams or even the earlier work Songs of Joy and Rhythm [1959–60], one can assume that emancipation of these elements has been of concern to you for a while. There we find just such movements of sound masses, dynamic explosions and sound complexes. Would I be wrong in saying that what you applied sporadically before, you now want to, let's say, exploit deliberately?*

G: Yes; however, in the Symphony only the first and the second movements demonstrate this clearly, and in the *Diagrams* only part IV. Besides, back then there were successions of short, single sounds; this I gave up in *Elementi*, using only successions of composite groups,

⁶ The *Genesis* series eventually included three works: *Elementi*, *Canti strumentali* and *Monodramma*, which is the work referred to above as *Monologhi II*. The other projected works were not realised. (translator's note)



Górecki (right) and Patkowski (left), c. 1962. Photo by A. Zborski. Reproduced with the kind permission of Ludwig Erhardt, Chief Editor, Ruch Muzyczny.

creating fusions which arise from the complexes. Because *Elementi* opens the whole cycle, what happens there should be treated as an initial movement of some embryonic forms, individual atoms.

M: How is the musical material organised in Elementi?

G: The starting point for me is still dodecaphony, or more precisely, serial technique. Despite other people's opinions that serial technique is outdated, I still see possibilities in it. Schoenberg is the creator of a law which governs sound. He can be only compared with Rameau. The harmonic laws discovered, absorbed and described by Rameau served composers for almost two hundred years as standard laws. They became the basis for the realisation of thousands of works, and an abundance of styles. Today nobody thinks of imitating the style of Schoenberg, but despite attempts to reject dodecaphonic technique, more and more composers are using it; it is becoming a common procedure. Dodecaphony interests me not so much as a way of organising individual sounds, but more in terms of organising sound groups. It helps in creating the form. In *Elementi*—since we are talking about this piece—the O and R sets of an all-interval series provide the basis for the formal design of the whole piece. These intervals are characterised by the different number of semitones in each. I treat semitones not only as the basic sound complexes but also as the smallest formal cells.

M: *I'm not quite clear...*

G: For example, let's consider, the interval c-f#. The six semitones it comprises serve to expose six different sound complexes in six successive time spans. But anyway, why talk about detailed analysis? Personally I'm content that, at least for the time being, I have resolved some constructional problems involving spatial planning and strict control over it. The sound-material—its order, its duration, and dynamics—I regulate exclusively by ear.

M: *As in the major-minor system?*

G: Yes. Once formal consequences are realised, I'm not following series of notes that are presented at the beginning. I chose what seems best to me at any moment.

M: *Since we are talking about construction it is hard not to mention aleatory...*

G: The aleatory that Cage represents contradicts Art, which should be a consequence of a specific material organisation. Here I share Arp's opinion: 'Chance means artistic capitulation, chaos is a negation of artistry.' The outcomes of Cage's ideas cannot be called Art. They are only attempts to find a new track, they are inventions which one does not know what to do with after a while. I'm against Cage's *Concert for Piano* [1959–60]. In my opinion aleatory only makes sense when the composer's data about musical events rules out any unpredictable realisations. Then it is a sort of directed movement, a particular variant of the old 'ad libitum,' 'ossia' etc. Chance understood in this way is applied in *Elementi*. I'm sure that performers will not find any realisations other than the ones I have predicted.

M: *I will come back to the agogics, dynamics and tone colour we mentioned previously. But what about melody, rhythm and harmony?*

G: I take the same position as Boulez: 'At last people have understood that it is impossible to create music out of melody, rhythm and harmony.' For me these terms are the same thing. What I understand by the term Melody is complex sound events characterised by a certain tension and movement. So it is a product of interaction between all elements. I cannot talk about rhythm alone, since it operates exclusively on relative values; I cannot separate harmony because for me even one note is a fragment of a vertical range. Therefore for me there are only three basic elements: agogics, embracing all events measured in time; dynamics, regulating tension and its release; and colour, which I understand as both changes in pitch and its timbral complexity in the usual sense.

M: *How significant is the choice of strings in Elementi? Is there a special reason in choosing strings for Elementi?*

G: Naturally. I regard strings as instruments one can still do a lot with. Before working on *Genesis* I analysed their articulation techniques. You will not believe it, but there are about 300 of them. And this is without tapping music stands or using the body of the instrument: only bow, strings and fingers. Obviously, this number also includes the common kinds of articulation. This does not mean that I use all of them in one piece. In *Elementi* there are about ten; however, the predominant sound is rough, and achieved through stronger bow-pressure.

M: (Here I can't resist breaking into the interview to let readers know that at this moment the composer picked up a violin and began to demonstrate sounds not known up to now. The new sounds and his natural way of playing them absolutely convinced me; till then, I was somewhat sceptical about the role of strings in contemporary instrumentation...)

M: *I've noticed that the notation of Scontri, Diagrams, Elementi and Canti Strumentali often resembles the notation of electronic pieces. Some critics have also pointed out the similarity of some sections of Scontri to electronic-like sounds. Is there a real influence from electronic music?*

G: I think that electronic music has attracted the attention of all composers and directed it towards the value of vertical sonorities, as well as horizontal ones. But—even though I still think about trying my abilities in the electronic studio (but for now, I'm pretty scared by montage)—I have never tried to imitate any electronic sounds, soft rustlings or noises. If, today, percussion instruments are used to produce some rustling sounds, it is a consequence of normal development of music. We simply have a different way of organising and using the whole sound-scale. But it is true that today's realities—technology, electronic miracles—allow us to notice something different. Have you noticed the fantastic sound event produced by a stadium full of thousands of people? The joyful yell of thousands of throats?... It's difficult to ignore it. You see, music is not only f#-a-b, but as Debussy said, 'the rustle of forests and sounds of sea.'

M: *I must say that your last sentence surprises me. You have talked only about musical material and its organisation. Extra-musical aspects were foreign to you. The best proof of this is your own comment about Scontri in the Warsaw Autumn program in 1960: nothing but the division of a scale, pitch range, complexes, notes. I can see that the new cycle of pieces does not only bring changes in terms of musical material. Do you believe in non-autonomous music?*

G: In my firm opinion it is only possible to talk concretely about technical matters; others cannot easily be expressed by words and this is why they are communicated through music. In the twentieth century, the view that what counts is an idea, its expansion and its relationship to the development of musical material etc. has become particularly popular. But is that all?

Let's take Stravinsky, the main proponent of the cult of craftsmanship. I wonder why he couldn't resist music for the stage, texts with huge emotional weight. Why did he choose the *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*?⁷ Why didn't he use syllables instead of words?

I agree that up to now I have talked only about technical matters; however, haven't you noticed that most of my pieces have titles which do not merely reflect the formal design of a piece, for instance *Songs of Joy and Rhythm*, *Epitafium*, 'Lauda' or 'Invocation'⁸ For me art is a manifestation of life to which I try to bring all possible and available means. Some people are fully satisfied by all the things that constitute craftsmanship. But maybe these are people who are devoid of that secret of music that makes music Art?

⁷ *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* is, of course, by Debussy. Perhaps, Górecki was thinking of *Persephone* or *Oedipus Rex*. (translator's note)

⁸ 'Lauda' and 'Invocation' are the fourth and first movements respectively of *Symphony 1959*.

M: *Does a title characterise the work in a definite way? What about double titles given to one composition, such as Phase and Obelisk for Auschwitz? What about the relative metamorphosis of titles, from an abstract one like 8'37" to a deeply realistic one, Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima? I think that what they really amount to is the fact that in the end, the only matters beyond dispute, which exclude all possible interpretations, are the form and all the technical aspects of the piece.*

G: All these matters are a bit hypothetical, and difficult to talk about. Perfect craftsmanship should always be the first condition for any art work. And as for a creator not having a definite view of his own work, I wouldn't want to get involved in looking for reasons. I can speak only for myself. I decide to write a piece, and I don't expect any surprises concerning either technical matters or 'substance.'

M: *What is your attitude towards other composers ?*

G: I'm primarily interested in those composers whose craftsmanship has an ideal characteristic: logic interwoven with consequential development and simplicity. Here I can point to Webern and Bartók. I also value the attitude of a composer towards himself and other people: a firmly defined idea and the consequences of its realisation, linked with an individual approach to musical material. You can probably guess that I'm talking about Messiaen and Nono. A scarcely lesser impact for me came years ago from meeting a less well known composer,



Górecki, 1995. Photo by Anna Masłowiec.

Franco Evangelisti. He pointed out some problems of sonority and technique, which helped me to find something I was looking for. Naturally we now stand on opposite sides.

I particularly value artistic honesty, which is based on one's ethics, psyche and interests. Unfortunately, with today's developments in music not many composers can stand on their own two feet; often their abilities are overstretched by the ideas they take up. This often goes hand in hand with liking to talk about themselves and criticising almost every other composer. In this respect, I'm closer to those composers who remain true to themselves and maybe work in the shadows, but work honestly, and what they produce simply has the hallmark of good music.

M: I would like to ask about your impressions of Paris, but we will have to postpone this for another occasion... You are going to be there again for three months. I guess this is your plan for the near future.

G: No, I'm not going to France until Spring. I'm spending my holidays as usual, in Podhale. I love the Highlander village: its hospitality, poverty, art and its particular philosophy of life. Every year my wife and I cannot wait for the moment when we can just cast loose. You cannot imagine what interesting people we come across! Such sculptures, such architecture! And music, which I don't spend a night without, in the great company of highland people. Paris can wait. First Podhale.

M: Well, enjoy your trip. And on behalf of our readers I should like to thank you for the honesty (so rarely found these days!) of your responses.

July 1962

Leon Markiewicz