

Henryk Mikolaj Górecki



Henryk Mikolaj Górecki Photo © Malcolm Cro

An introduction to Górecki's music by Adrian Thomas

Henryk Mikolaj Górecki belongs to the generation of Polish composers (which includes his exact contemporary Penderecki) that found itself poised to take full advantage of the post-Stalin thaw of the mid-1950s. A plethora of youthful works from 1955-59 saw the composer ranging freely from the exuberant and dynamic vitality of the *Songs of Joy and Rhythm* op.7 (1956, rev.1960) through to experimental scores owing more to Webern and Boulez. Henceforth, the evolution of Górecki's musical language has been a consistent search for the most truthful expression of his musical roots.

It quickly becomes apparent that Górecki holds Poland's musical past, its church and its folk culture in unwavering awe; for him they are the unchallengeable rock on which both his and his country's identity and true heritage are securely founded. From the combustive, flamboyant energy of the orchestral *Scontri* (*Collisions*) op.17 (1960) to the reflective lamentations of his best-known work, the *Third Symphony* op.36 (1976) and on to his most recent chamber works such as the string quartet *Already it is Dusk* op.62 (1988) and his piece written in memoriam Michael Vyner, *Good Night* (1990), it is this deeply-felt awareness of his roots that gives his music a directness and emotional impact all its own.

In creating this particular world, Górecki calls upon a number of sources. The folk and religious elements are both abstract (immediate granitic textures, large-scale canvasses, slow tempi) and specific (folk songs and texts mainly from his beloved Tatra mountains, plus modal hymnody and references to old Polish music). In times past these were often treated beyond recognition, but in the 1970s Górecki came to confide in their innate simplicity and let them stand for themselves, as in his recent folksong settings and Marian hymns. Occasionally he will also make passing reference to phrases or harmonic progressions from composers with whom he feels a special closeness, such as Beethoven, Chopin or Szymanowski. Such allusions or quotations are an integral part of the musical flow, of the personal vision that has marked out Górecki's unique voice from that of his contemporaries and compatriots.

His restrained approach to his material should not, however, be confused with the minimal aesthetics of certain Western European or American composers. It is a quite specifically Eastern European phenomenon (one he shares in some

measure with the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt) which Górecki has refined to a remarkable degree. Long regarded in his native Poland as a composer of uncommon individuality, Górecki is now beginning to be acknowledged in the West as a major figure of considerable stature whose music transcends cultural and political boundaries.

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