

TERESA MALECKA (Kraków)

Górecki's creative journeys between nature and culture. Around the 'Copernican' Symphony

ABSTRACT: Henryk M. Górecki's *oeuvre* is characteristic in its almost constant oscillation between meditation on the world, the universe, nature, and implication in history, tradition, culture; between the delight in the beauty of nature and the delight in culture.

'We were no longer the centre of the universe, we became nothing.'¹

This idea of the composer was fundamental for his creation of his II Symphony. Its two-movement form was a consequence of his own understanding of the Copernican revolution.

Its Latin text was derived from the Book of Psalms; due to the circumstances of its commission, it also includes a fragment from Copernicus tractate.

The distribution of tension in the first movement is non-trivial. Judging by the composer's "cosmic" fascinations, the beginning is a "Big Bang". The central climax of this movement appears in its finale, when the huge chorus sings and cries the words of the Psalms.

In Movement Two we are ushered into a different, a lyrical world of contemplation. The soloists are singing in traditional and simplest possible way. The chorus, harmonized modally is singing the words of Nicolaus Copernicus about the "heaven" – "beauty" relation. Chorale-like, they place us in a transcendental dimension.

The work is crowned with long-standing yet pulsating sonorities of the orchestral mass in pentatonic interval structure, resolved into an A flat major triad: in the tradition of Baroque rhetoric, depicts emotions of stillness, of the calm of the night; in late Romanticism – the emotion of mild and solemn. Perhaps these sonorities of the orchestral mass in the finale – that is exactly the sound of the Universe as Górecki has been expressed?

KEYWORDS: Henryk Mikołaj Górecki, Copernicus, symphony, nature, culture, beauty, contemplation, universe, singing, sonority

¹ Adrian Thomas, *Górecki* (Oxford, 1997), 74.

'The entire act of divine creation is much like a perfect symphony'.²

The above words of Reverend Michal Heller, which the composer is fond of quoting, may serve as an expression or description of the phenomenon of his oeuvre. There is a telling and almost constant oscillation in Górecki between his reflection on the world, nature and the universe, on one hand, and his immersion in history, tradition and culture, on the other; between his delight in mountains, forest meadows and streams (nature) and his enchantment with poetry and music: Ludwig van Beethoven, Karol Szymanowski, Fryderyk Chopin, Juliusz Słowacki, Cyprian Kamil Norwid, Czesław Miłosz (culture). And all this is invariably seen from a transcendent perspective. He once said:

For me, music is the result of religious concentration and meditation. To see pure water, green grass, healthy forests, to breathe pure air. To see the Creator of it all – and to write for Him.³

When he wonders at his own love of the Podhale region of Poland, his thoughts once again hover between nature and culture:

I am a man bound to nature. I have hiked... I have enjoyed the forest, the stream, the field, a nice cabin... I have no idea why, of all places, I've ended up in Podhale. Is it because of Szymanowski, is it because of music, after all?⁴

The composer's dilemma might be solved by the words of John Paul II: 'Art is the discovery of nature's landscape'⁵ and 'Our wonder opens up for us not only the oft-forgotten path to nature as God's creation, but also the path to art, understood as an activity of creative man'.⁶

We were no longer the centre of the universe, we became nothing.⁷

This idea of the composer's is the key to his work commissioned by the Kosciuszko Foundation for the 500th anniversary of the birth of Nicolaus Copernicus. At first, he had some doubts: 'What can you write about Copernicus

² Michal Heller, quoted in Górecki, a conversation with students of Kraków Academy of Music, Katowice, 29 April 2008.

³ Natalia Budzyńska, 'Pieśni śpiewają' [... songs are sung] in *Przewodnik Katolicki*, 2007/15, quoted in Barbara Lasek, 'Kwartety smyczkowe Henryka Mikołaja Góreckiego' [The string quartets of Henryk Mikołaj Górecki], M.A. thesis, Akademia Muzyczna w Krakowie (Kraków, 2007), 215.

⁴ Górecki, a conversation (see footnote 1).

⁵ John Paul II, 'Świat pozbawiony sztuki z trudem otwiera się na wiarę i miłość' [A world devoid of art has difficulty in opening itself up to faith and love], in *Wiara i kultura* [Faith and culture] (Rome and Lublin, 1988), 281.

⁶ John Paul II, 'Natura i sztuka drogami prowadzącymi do tajemnicy Boga' [Nature and art: paths leading to the mystery of God], in *ibid.*, 209.

⁷ Thomas, *Górecki*, 74.

– that he stopped the sun and moved the earth? That's banal.⁸ Similar doubts assailed the composer during the difficult time of his struggle with the 'Copernican' theme. His conversations with director Krzysztof Zanussi proved crucial. He recalls:

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 was based, was in ruins. We were no longer the centre of the universe, we became nothing. It was then that the entire subject became clear to me and obvious in its musical form.⁹

This was the origin of the general idea of the Second Symphony as a work for large symphony orchestra, mixed chorus, soprano and baritone. Górecki derived the binary form from his understanding of the 'Copernican' revolution. In his own words: 'first the whole mechanism, let us say, of the world, followed by contemplation'.¹⁰

As often in Górecki's work, the path to the Latin text led through the Book of Psalms; due to the circumstances of its commission, it also includes a fragment from Copernicus' *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres* (see Table 1).

Deus		God,
Qui fecit caelum et terram	Ps. 146 (145), 6	Who made heaven and earth,
Qui fecit luminaria magna		Who made great lights,
Solem in potestatem diei		The sun to rule by day,
Lunam et Stellas		The moon and stars
in potestatem noctis	Ps. 135 (136), 7–9	to rule by night.
Deus		God,
Quid autem caelo pulcrius,		Who indeed is more beautiful than heaven,
Nempe quod continet pulcra omnia?		who of course contains all things of beauty?
N. Copernicus, <i>De revolutionibus orbium caelestium</i>		

Table 1.

The two movements of the Symphony, 'the mechanism of the universe' and 'contemplation', are two radically contrasted realms – contrasted in terms of both sound and, more importantly, semantics.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 74–75.

¹⁰ Ibid., 75.

The strident tones of the first movement, of 'the mechanism of the universe', are of differentiated texture – all the more so as they are divided by radical general pauses. The movement is dominated by repeated or shifted *ffff* chords in tutti, full tone in structure and over an extensive compass; their upper components often combine to create a falling minor second motif, usually associated with an expression of pain and of suffering (the tragedy of the Copernican revolution as interpreted by Zanussi?). (See Example 1 on page 181.)

Calm returns with the long, static and dense sonorities played *pp* in the strings, only slightly coloured by a couple of winds (see Example 2 on page 182). Sonoristic, somewhat aleatory, 'moving' tone figures in the winds stand in sharp contrast to the rest of the material; the same is true of the multilayered groups of clear rhythmical structure, which impart to the music an almost dancing, almost ludic character. And all of this is punctuated or reinforced by recurring and drastic strikes of the timpani and bass drum.

The distribution of tensions in the first movement is significant. It seems to begin with the first climax. Knowing the composer's 'cosmic' fascinations, the beginning can be heard as a 'Big Bang': strong *ffff* strikes of three kettle drums and the bass drum, followed by powerfully articulated and dissonant sonorities (see Example 3 on page 183).

Yet it then becomes clear that the real climax of this movement appears in its finale, and that this is the moment when the meaning is imparted to the 'instrumental events'. Over familiar full-tone chords in the orchestra, the huge chorus sings and cries, *con massima passione, con massima espressione, con grande tensione – ma ben tenuto*, the words of the Psalms: 'God who made heaven and earth, who made great lights' (see Example 4 on pages 184–185).

Eugeniusz Knapik states that 'the gigantic power and glory of sound in the first movement convey the horror of the force of the universe and man's dismay at the consequences of Copernicus' discovery';¹¹ Mieczysław Tomaszewski compares this movement to 'the Apocalyptic chaos of the Beginning'.¹²

And then (*attaca*, movt. II), we are ushered into a different, lyrical world. In the composer's terms, this is the world of contemplation; it is tempting to say: the world of the contemplation of beauty. A baritone solo – typically for the later Górecki, in a melody once again anchored in a falling minor second, this time needed for man's fundamental cry of 'God' (*Deus*) over a gentle and more consonant background of strings and piano – continues to unfold the psalmic themes. The gradual rise of the baritone's melodic line (from E flat to

¹¹ Eugeniusz Knapik, review of the honorary degree bestowed on Henryk Mikołaj Górecki by Kraków Academy of Music, 12 May 2008.

¹² Mieczysław Tomaszewski, review of the honorary degree (see footnote 12).

E¹ flat) reaches its apogee in the brightened harmony of an A flat triad at the symphony's keyword, *light*. At this point, the melody is taken over by a soprano solo, which continues to ascend all the way to G² flat. According to Władysław Stróżewski, 'the soprano part seems to attain the limits of Transcendence'.¹³

Once again, although not for the last time, the mood of the music brightens completely; just for a moment, a pure A flat major triad appears in the orchestra, paving the way, at the same time, for a simple and octave-paired song of baritone and soprano that seems to express human wonder – that of man and woman confronted with the God-made universe, very much like in the Book of Genesis: 'God saw all that he had made, and it was very good'¹⁴ (see Example 5 on page 186).

The work resolves in a *mp sempre* song of the chorus, in even values, harmonised modally (in the Aeolian mode). In a noble and simple way, the words of Copernicus' treatise are thus put to music: 'What indeed is more beautiful than heaven, which of course contains all things of beauty?' Chorale-like, they are an apotheosis of beauty and, at the same time, they place us in an entirely different dimension. To use the terms of Tomaszewski, they can be said to produce a moment of epiphany, an appearance of the beyond, relating to a sacred idiom. Such 'moments of epiphany' can be found in many works by Górecki; at times, such references to the sacred are made in quotations or, as in *Beatus vir*,¹⁵ quasi-quotations of, say, a psalmic tone. It is moments like these that transport the listener, to repeat Stróżewski's description, into a transcendent dimension.

And thus the Copernican text of praise for the beauty of nature acquires a sacred dimension through beauty. It may be said, in a way, that music has made the beauty of nature sacred (see Example 6 on page 187).

The work is crowned with the lengthy yet dynamically pulsating sonorities of the orchestral mass in a pentatonic interval structure, 'purified' and resolved again into an A flat major triad – a key that, in the tradition of baroque rhetoric, depicts the emotions of fear and terror, but also those of stillness, even of the calm of night; in late romanticism, it is the dreamy expression of a fullness of emotion, yet at the same time gentle and solemn. This music cannot but bring to mind Gustav Mahler's comment on his *Symphony of a*

¹³ Władysław Stróżewski, review of the honorary degree (see footnote 12).

¹⁴ Book of Genesis 1:31.

¹⁵ As noted by Kinga Kiwała, 'Problematyka sacrum w polskiej muzyce współczesnej na przykładzie wybranych utworów związanych z osobą Ojca Świętego Jana Pawła II' [The problem of the sacred in contemporary Polish music, on the example of selected works connected with Pope John Paul II], M.A. thesis, Akademia Muzyczna w Krakowie (Kraków, 2002), 74.

Thousand: "Try to imagine the whole universe beginning to ring and resound. These are no longer human voices, but planets and suns revolving."¹⁶

Górecki once said that 'the universe has its own tone, so does the earth. Or the forest [...] I've never been in the steppe, but I can imagine that it must be something [...] the heat, the warmth [...] the light' (see Example 7 on pages 188–189).

Perhaps the pulsating sonorities of the orchestral mass, as described above in the finale of the 'Copernican' Symphony, perhaps the cleansing of the sound of pentatonic sonorities to the pure A flat major triad – perhaps that is exactly the sound of the universe?

In Aristotle's *Exhortation to Philosophy*, Pythagoras is shown to consider himself 'an observer of nature', and that 'it was for the sake of this that he had been released into this way of life' – for this reason and 'to observe the heavens'. Anaxagoras, when asked 'for what reason anyone might choose to come to be and be alive', responded in much the same vein: 'To observe what's in the heavens, the stars in the heavens, as well as the moon and sun'.¹⁷

Górecki, clearly fascinated with the thought of Heller (his discussion of the universe and the attractive metaphor of 'divine creation'/nature as a 'perfect symphony'/culture), ended his acceptance lecture at his honorary degree award at the Academy of Music in Kraków with a quotation from Podhale literature, 'the beautiful phrase "HEAVENLY MEADOWS".' He said: 'If there are Heavenly Meadows, then perhaps there are Heavenly Beings too?' And, finally: 'Heavenly Meadows – Heavenly Beings. And we send our musical thoughts – THERE.'

It is impossible at this point not to be reminded of the famous words of Immanuel Kant: 'Two things fill the mind with ever-increasing wonder and awe: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. For me, they are evidence that there is a God above me and a God within me [...]'.¹⁸

Translated by Jan Rybicki

¹⁶ Bohdan Pociąg, *Szkice z późnego romantyzmu* [Sketches from late romanticism] (Kraków, 1978), 149.

¹⁷ Arystoteles, *Zachęta do filozofii* [Exhortation to Philosophy] (Warszawa, 1988), 9.

¹⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Krytyka praktycznego rozumu* [Critique of Practical Reason], trans. Jerzy Gąlecki (Warsaw, 1984), 256.

Examples

The image displays two pages of a musical score for Example 1, Copernican Symphony. The left page contains measures 4 and 5, with the numbers '4' and '5' written above the first and second staves respectively. The right page contains measures 11, 12, 14, 15, 17, 18, and 20, with the numbers '11', '12', '14', '15', '17', '18', and '20' written above the corresponding staves. The score is arranged in two systems. The first system includes parts for Flute (Fl), Oboe (Ob), Clarinet (Cl), Bassoon (Bs), Trumpet (Tp), Trombone (Tb), Percussion (P), and Piano (P). The second system includes parts for Trumpet (Tr), Cor (Cr), Fagot (Fg), Trombone (Tb), Percussion (P), Guitar (Gc), Piano (P), Violin (Vn), Viola (Vl), Cello (Vc), and Double Bass (Vb). The piano part is marked 'P.C.' in the right system. The score is written in a standard musical notation with various clefs and time signatures.

Example 1. Górecki, *Copernican Symphony*

MOLTO LENTO $\text{♩} = 30-32$ *tranquillissimo - cantabilissimo*
- larghissimo 17

2 4 2 4 2 4 2⁶

fl.
 cor.
 tn.
 pp pp pp pp pp

p sempre

Vn.
 Sos.
 Vi.
 Vl.
 Vc.
 Vp.

1) Vn. i Vc. bawia tak jak napisane - LOCO. Vn. I, II stron? do notatek - LOCO
 2) Wzmocnienie tak jak napisane - w URSYBANKIE LVC. Wz. stron? do notatek (in URSYBANKIE z Vc).

Example 2. Górecki, *Copernican Symphony*

TEMPO 1=92 *Marcatisimo* **I** - con massima passione - col massima espressione
 con grande fermezza - ma ben tenuto

2 4 2 4 2 4 3 4 2

Przy zmianach tempa nie zmieniać tempa - absolutnie bez najmniejszego przerwania. Przy zmianach tempa nie zmieniać tempa - absolutnie bez najmniejszego przerwania. Przy zmianach tempa nie zmieniać tempa - absolutnie bez najmniejszego przerwania.

without a slightest interruption between the shifts, if they change, if the shifts are related, a slight stress on the last.

TUTTI. AD LIB. CON MOLTO RITCO

1) Niezmiernie ważne: przy zmianach tempa nie zmieniać tempa - absolutnie bez najmniejszego przerwania. Przy zmianach tempa nie zmieniać tempa - absolutnie bez najmniejszego przerwania. Przy zmianach tempa nie zmieniać tempa - absolutnie bez najmniejszego przerwania.

2) Zmiana na 3/4: 1ms II brzmienie o skrajnie wyżej. 1ms II brzmienie o skrajnie wyżej. 1ms II brzmienie o skrajnie wyżej.

The numerical scale: individual groups of strings enter throughout the score, but in the passages of 1ms II sound an octave higher than the staff of 1ms II sound an octave higher

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Example 3. Górecki, *Copernican Symphony*

54 LO STESSO TEMPO (♩=72-74) **MARCATISSIMO - CON MASSIMA PASSIONE - CON MASSIMA ESPRESSIONE**
 - CON GRANDE TENSIONE - MA BEN TEMUTO

1 4 2 4 2 4 5 4

The score includes parts for:
 Fl. 1 & 2, Ob., Cl., Fg., Eb, S.A., CORO (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass), T.B., Tr., Cr., Tm., Tpt., Tbn., Tpt. b, Tbn. b, Gc., Tmt., Jf., Vn. 1 & 2, Vla., Vc., Vb.

Key markings include **TRATT. VORZ.** and **TRATT. VORZ.** with a **fff** dynamic.

At the bottom, there is a handwritten note: *2) lunga in chiave di MI: III! Mi-2 the clef in MI: I*

Example 4. Górecki, *Copernican Symphony*

The image displays two pages of a handwritten musical score. The left page features a complex rhythmic structure with time signatures of 2/4, 2/4, 2/4, 6/4, and 4/4. The right page features time signatures of 4/4, 6/4, and (6). The score includes parts for various instruments: Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet (Cl.), Bassoon (Fg.), Trumpet (Tp.), Trombone (Tb.), Percussion (P), Violin (Vn.), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vcl.), and Double Bass (Vb.). There are also vocal parts for Soprano (S.A.), Coro (Chorus), and Tenor (T.B.). The lyrics for the vocal parts are: "DE US OMNIFECIT IN UNUM" and "LIL-NA-NI MA-GNA". The score is densely written with notes, rests, and dynamic markings, characteristic of a working draft or a composer's manuscript.

Example 4. (Cont.)

TEMPO $\text{♩} = 76$ con massima espressione e grande tensione. **ALLARGARE**

8 8 6 2 6

ff **CRISTIANO** fff

ff **CRISTIANO** fff

6 4 8 2 4

LARGO $\text{♩} = 46$ Tranquillissimo e solennissimo

ff

Example 5. Górecki, *Copernican Symphony*

The image displays two pages of musical notation for Example 6, Górecki's Copernican Symphony. The notation is dense and complex, featuring multiple staves with various musical symbols, including notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The left page is marked with circled numbers 1, 2, 4, and 6 at the top. The right page is marked with circled numbers 6, 2, 4, 6, and 4 at the top. The notation is highly detailed, with many notes and rests, and includes dynamic markings such as 'p' and 'f'. The overall appearance is that of a highly technical and intricate musical score.

Example 6. Górecki, *Copernican Symphony*

21 22

fl. 1. 2. 3. 4.
 ob. 1. 2.
 cl. 1. 2. 3. 4.
 fg. 1. 2.
 tr. 1. 2. 3. 4.
 Cr. 1. 2. 3. 4.
 tn. 1. 2. 3. 4.
 tb.
 Vn. I
 Vn. II
 Vln.
 Vl.
 Vc.
 Vb.

p mf f ff ffff
 p mf f ff ffff

x) Oddychy są dowolnym miejscem. Nieregularnie i niejednocześnie.
 Breaths are to be taken at any points, irregularly and not simultaneously.

Example 7. Górecki, *Copernican Symphony*

A page of handwritten musical notation featuring six staves. At the top, there are six 'M' characters and a '9'. The notation includes various rhythmic and melodic lines, with some sections marked with 'ff' and 'mp' dynamics. The page is densely filled with musical symbols and lines.

A page of handwritten musical notation with multiple staves. At the top, there are numerical markings: '9', '13', '34', and '7'. The notation is complex, with some staves containing large letters like 'P', 'p', 'v', and 'pp'. A large 'G' is written at the top right. The page is filled with musical lines and symbols.

ff *mp* *pp* *v* *pp* *G*

Example 7. (Cont.)

