

REGINA CHŁOPICKA (Kraków)

*Krzysztof Penderecki's Eighth Symphony,  
'Lieder der Vergänglichkeit' –  
from inspiration by nature to existential  
reflection*

*The beauty of nature,  
which reflects the spirit of its Creator,  
lies beyond the reach of human endeavour*

(Saint Augustine)<sup>1</sup>

*That this your art as far as possible  
Follows, as the disciple doth the master;  
So that ypor art is, as it were, God's grandchild.*

(Aristotle according to Dante)<sup>2</sup>

ABSTRACT: In the Penderecki oeuvre, symphonic music has been pivotal, with eight symphonies written over the span of forty years, including Symphony No. 6, which remains in the sketch stage. As he admits, the sequence of symphonies constitutes a sort of musical autobiography.

In the life and work of Penderecki his interests in nature and culture have long run parallel, and in both spheres the moment of creation has been particularly significant. Penderecki's artistic work has clearly focused on two domains: composing music and moulding the nature which surrounds his Lusławice house – the space of the garden and park. The latter type of art concerns nature not in its primeval form, but rather in the shape imposed on it by man.

Over the last decade, the composer's two passions have tended to drift closer together and intertwine. During this time, he has written his Eighth Symphony ('Lieder der Vergänglichkeit'), devoted to trees, and *Three Chinese Songs*, permeated by his enchantment with the beauty of nature.

In his Eighth Symphony, Penderecki employs poetic and musical images to show the beauty and diversity of the forms of the surrounding world of nature, in which it is given to man to live the successive phases of his life. However, a relevant dimension of

---

<sup>1</sup> Jan Białostocki, *Pojęcie natury w teorii sztuki renesansu*, in *Sztuka i myśl humanistyczna* (Warszawa, 1966), 47.

<sup>2</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (Boston, 1867), 'Inferno', Canto XI.

the symphony is that of looking from a distance at the fate of man – the existential reflection offered mainly by the commenting choral parts, as in ancient tragedy. What dominates is a sense of transition, the sadness of decline and the thought of the inevitability of the fate of man, who searches for a way to unravel the mystery of existence.

KEYWORDS: nature inspirations in music – symphony genre – 20th century music – Polish music – Eighth Symphony by Krzysztof Penderecki – word-tone relations

In the life and work of Krzysztof Penderecki, his interests in nature and culture have long run parallel, and in both spheres the moment of creation has been particularly significant. Penderecki's artistic work has clearly focused on two domains: composing music and moulding the nature which surrounds his Lusławice house – the space of the garden and park. The latter type of art concerns nature not in its primeval form, but rather in the shape imposed on it by man.

Composing the garden has, for me, much in common with composing a musical work. In the one as in the other, what counts is the constructive imagination, the ability to think of the whole. A garden is, after all, nature mathematized, just as music is emotion mathematized.<sup>3</sup>

Over the last decade, the composer's two passions have tended to drift closer together, to intertwine and combine with one another. During this time, he has written his Eighth Symphony ('Lieder der Vergänglichkeit'), devoted to trees, and *Three Chinese Songs*, permeated by his enchantment with the beauty of nature.

In the Penderecki oeuvre, symphonic music has been pivotal, with eight symphonies written over the space of forty years, including Symphony No. 6 ('Elegy for a Dying Forest'), which remains in the sketch stage. The composer has often stressed the significance of the symphony genre, as well as his attitude to the great symphony tradition and its role in his own art. As he admits, the sequence of symphonies constitutes a sort of musical autobiography.

In his First Symphony, which ultimately closed the sonoristic phase of his oeuvre, Penderecki attempted to construct a large instrumental work which would concretise his vision of a new world order: 'I have always been fascinated by holistic, universalistic thinking, and the symphony form gave [me] the best opportunity to pursue it'.<sup>4</sup>

When writing his Second Symphony, he described the transformation of his attitude in the following way:

The Second Symphony (Christmas Eve), finished seven years later, referred fully to the late-nineteenth-century symphonic tradition – Wagner, Bruckner, Mahler,

<sup>3</sup> Krzysztof Penderecki, *Labyrinth of Time* (Chapel Hill, 1998), 39.

<sup>4</sup> Krzysztof Penderecki, *Labirynt czasu* (Warsaw, 1997), 77.

Sibelius, Shostakovich – filtered through the sensibility and means of expression of a composer who had experienced the avant-garde. The earlier intention of re-founding the world gives way to the need for internalization and for describing the drama of existence. I could say, in Mahler's words, that my music refers to 'the whole man', to the 'feeling, thinking, breathing, suffering man'.<sup>5</sup>

Discussing his symphonies, the composer specified his attitude to tradition:

Placing oneself within the continuity of tradition consists not at all in copying models, but in responding in a creative way to what is already circulating in the veins of culture. By synthesis, I understand the process connected with the crystallisation of my musical language, which dates back to the mid 1980s. The best examples of this synthesis are my symphonies – the Third, Fourth and Fifth, as well as Seventh and Eighth, composed several years later.<sup>6</sup>

Penderecki's fascination with late Romantic music concerns, apart from 'the need to describe the drama of existence', the sphere of expression, for which the composer seeks an appropriate form:

The composer may have different goals: those which are purely aesthetic, and those which transcend the aesthetic domain. I have a tendency to see in music a powerful means of communicating emotions. I am unable to remain indifferent, coldly objective, in what I do. The use of a particular compositional procedure always serves, in my music, musical expression. For me, it is form that is primary, as it is form that provides a framework for emotions.<sup>7</sup>

Penderecki has repeatedly emphasised his aspiration to perfection when composing a clear formal plan, as was the case with consecutive symphonies

---

<sup>5</sup> Penderecki, *Labyrinth of Time*, 60–61. From a 1906 letter to Bruno Walter, in which Mahler announces the completion of his Sixth Symphony. Quoted in translation in Ulrich Schreiber, 'Gustaw Mahler: une musique des contradictions sociales', *Critique* 339–340 (1975), 919–939.

<sup>6</sup> 'S'inscrire dans la continuité de la tradition ne consiste nullement à copier les modèles, mais à répondre de façon créative à ce qui circule déjà dans les veines de la culture. J'entends par synthèse le processus lié à la cristallisation de mon langage musical, dont le début se situe au milieu des années 80. Les meilleurs exemples de cette synthèse sont les symphonies: la *Troisième*, la *Quatrième*, la *Cinquième*, de même que la *Septième* et la *Huitième*, composées des années plus tard.' Interview in *Festival de création musicale. Présences 2006* (Paris, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> 'Le compositeur peut viser différentes fins: celles proprement esthétiques, et celles dépassant la sphère esthétique. J'ai tendance à voir dans la musique un puissant moyen pour communiquer des émotions. Dans ce que je fais, je ne suis pas capable de rester indifférent, froidement objectif. L'utilisation de tel ou tel procédé de composition sert toujours, chez moi, l'expression musicale. Pour moi, c'est la forme qui prime, car c'est elle qui donne un cadre aux émotions', in *ibid.*

of highly varied form: both single-movement symphonies, the 'Christmas' Symphony No. 2, 'Adagio' Symphony No. 4 and 'Korean' Symphony No. 5, and also multi-movement symphonies, the five-movement Symphony No. 3, seven-movement Symphony No. 7 ('Seven Gates of Jerusalem') and Symphony No. 8 ('Lieder der Vergänglichkeit'), with an even larger number of movements.

In his Eighth Symphony, Penderecki achieves a synthesis of the individual style of a contemporary composer and the tradition of the vocal-instrumental symphony (since the times of Ludwig van Beethoven), late Romantic song with orchestra (Gustav Mahler or Richard Strauss) and cantata-oratorio music.

The 'Lieder der Vergänglichkeit' (Songs of Transience), for three soloists, choir and orchestra, exists in two versions. The first version (comprising nine movements) was completed in 2005 and first performed in Luxembourg on 26 June 2005.<sup>8</sup> The world premiere of the second version of the symphony (extended by three extra movements) took place on 24 October 2007 in Beijing, while the first European performance was given on 31 January 2008 in Warsaw.

In his Eighth Symphony, Penderecki turned to texts by outstanding German poets. His selection of poems – by Joseph von Eichendorff and Rainer Maria Rilke, Bertold Brecht and Karl Kraus, Johan Wolfgang Goethe and Herman Hesse, as well as Hans Bethge and Achim von Arnim – reveals the ways in which his ideas formed his artistic imagination (see Figure 1).

On one hand, the poetic texts are filled with a delight at the beauty of nature: meadows at sunrise and by moonlight, streams like silvery threads and a deer falling asleep, a beloved tree and a spring lilac in bloom. On the other hand, they reveal the truth of the frailty of human existence and the sadness resulting from life's transient nature.

The periods in life referred to by the poetry stretch from nostalgic remembrance of a first love and happy times, through a poignant sense of the loneliness of a human being wandering in the fog, to an awareness of decline and the approaching end. Along this path, there initially appears a vision of the Creator blessing the world ('The Lord passes along the peaks and blesses the silent land'), but the sky is rough, heavy and forbidden. Filled with melancholy, man anxiously searches, pleads to be shown the way, wishing to move towards light, but the 'road is endless' (*Unendlich ist die Bahn!*).

---

<sup>8</sup> The soloists were Olga Pasicznik, Agnieszka Rehlis and Wojciech Drabowicz. The Orchestre Philharmonique de Luxembourg and EuropaChorAkademie were conducted by Bramwell Tovey.

I	Joseph von Eichendorff Rainer Maria Rilke	'Nachts' 'Ich sehe seit einer Zeit.' (1st stanza 'Ende des Herbstes')
II	Bertolt Brecht	'Der brennende Baum'
III	Joseph von Eichendorff	'Bei einer Linde'
IV	Karl Kraus	'Flieder'
V	Hermann Hesse Rainer Maria Rilke	'Frühlingsnacht' 'Von Mal zu Mal...' (2nd stanza 'Ende des Herbstes')
VI	Johann Wolfgang Goethe	'Sag' ich's euch, geliebte Bäume?'
VII	Hermann Hesse	'Im Nebel'
VIII	Hans Bethge	'Der Blütengarden'
IX	Joseph von Eichendorff	'Abschied'
X	Hermann Hesse Rainer Maria Rilke	'Vergänglichkeit' 'Jetzt bin ich bei den leeren...' (3rd stanza 'Ende des Herbstes')
XI	Rainer Maria Rilke	'Herbsttag'
XII	Achim von Arnim	'O grüner Baum des Leben'

Figure 1.

In the musical interpretation of the poetic texts in the Eighth Symphony, there emerge two musical spheres linked by a special relationship: the sphere of references to nature and the sphere of references to the internal world of human experiences and thoughts. The images of nature – scenery or landscape – usually constitute the musical context in which the lyrical, dramatic or reflective phrases of the soloists develop the musical narration of consecutive songs. Two variants of the image of the night are examples of nature images in the songs: the mysterious night in the dark forest ('Nachts' / 'By Night') and the spring night, full of promise, in the fifth song, 'Frühlingsnacht' ('Spring Night').

Another example are two images of fog: the image of evening fog – reddish, stifling – which opens the dramatic second song, 'Der brennende Baum' ('The Burning Tree'), and the image of impenetrable fog in which a lonely man wanders, in the seventh song, 'Im Nebel' ('In the Fog').

A special significance for the whole series, however, is held by the main nature-related motif which appears in all the poems: the tree. It is shown in the poetic images as

- a beloved tree with young buds, a blooming tree,
- a tree sleeping in the moonlight,
- a burning tree with black branches jutting out fearfully and enduring heroically until it collapses,

- a lonely tree,
- the tree of life, which sheds leaf after leaf.

The transformations undergone by the tree metaphorically refer to successive situations in human life. The periods of life referred to by the poetry stretches

- from nostalgic remembrance of a first love and happy times:
  - Hesse – ‘Frühlingsnacht’ (‘Spring Night’),
  - Bethge – ‘Blumengarten’ (‘Flower Garden’);
- through the dramatic events of life:
  - Brecht – ‘Der brennende Baum’ (‘The Burning Tree’);
- and a poignant sense of the loneliness of a human being:
  - Hesse – ‘Im Nebel’ (‘In the Fog’),
  - Eichendorff – ‘Abschied’ (‘Farewell’),
  - Rilke – ‘Herr: es ist Zeit’ (‘Lord, it is Time’);
- to an awareness of decline and the approaching end:
  - Rilke – ‘Herr: es ist Zeit’ (‘Lord, it is Time’),
  - Arnim – ‘O grüner Baum des Lebens’ (‘Oh, Green Tree of Life!’).

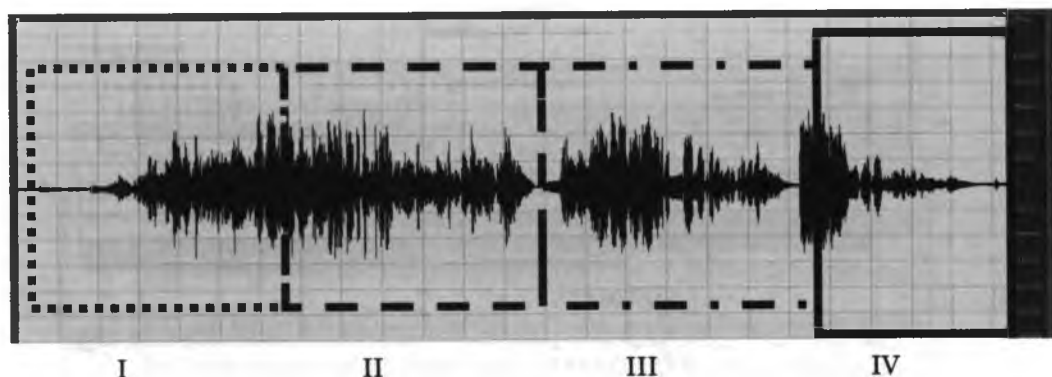
The commenting choral parts which end each song have a special significance in the musical interpretation of the poetic texts linked by the composer with the sphere of existential reflection. The general nature of these parts and the musically emphasised phrases of the verbal text convey the message of the work.

The structure of the first song of the symphony, ‘Nachts’, illustrates the way in which the composer passes from the image of nature to existential reflection. The narration of the song involves four phases (see Figure 2).

The song starts by outlining the image of night with two significant *pianissimo* motifs, based on the F reference plane (see Example 3).

- the first motif seems to measure time (the Cl., VI.I. part). A number of variants of this motif can be found in the subsequent movements of the symphony.
- the second motif appears to delineate space. This is a variant of the sigh motif which appears *pp* in the middle and high registers of the French horn *quasi da lontano* part and the oboe part, complemented by the quasi-echo in the piccolo.

The musical space thus composed is saturated by a cluster of high strings *pp* with a characteristic tone colour. The mysterious nature of the image of night is emphasised by the lyrical, wavering entry of the voice. The voice’s first phrase, however, ends with a commentary from the choir, hidden in the form of an echo or fading shadow, on the words ‘Lebens Rand’ (‘edge of life’), which heralds the sad and melancholic conclusion of the song.



I	Ich stehe in Waldesschatten Wie an des LIEBENS RAND, Die Länder wie dämmernde Matten. Der Strom wie ein silbern Band.	
II	Von fern, von fern nur schlagen die Glocken, Über die Wälder herein, ein Reh hebt der Kopf erschrocken und schlummert gleich wieder ein. Der Wald aber rühret die Wipfel Im Traum von der Felsenwand,	
III	Denn der Herr, geht über die GIPFEL Und segnet und segnet das stille Land.	Eichendorff
IV	Ich sehe seit einer Zeit, wie alles sich verwandelt. Etwas steht auf und handelt UND TÖTEN UND TUT LEID.	Rilke

Figure 2. The first song of the symphony, 'Nachts' – overall structure

The vocally elaborate second phase of the narration clearly evokes the musical image of bells in full swing. Upon its completion, the musical narration changes. In the following phases, musical images of nature give way to two different reflective commentaries.

In the third phase, a solo voice with polyphonically elaborate chorus sings a joyful song of adoration, showing the Lord walking above mountain peaks (culmination on the word 'Gipfel' /'summit'/ and a D Major /F sharp Minor/ triad) and blessing the land (see Example 4).

**8. Sinfonie**  
Lieder der Vergänglichkeit

**Nachts**  
(Joseph von Eichendorff)

Krzysztof Penderecki  
• 1933

**12/8 Andante sostenuto**

Flac. (3)

Ob. 1

Cl. 2 (Clarineto in La)

Cr. 1/2

Fag. *Più mosso*

Arpa

Mazzorini

Ich - du - läßt - dich - schen - ken wie er den

**12/8**

VI. I *con azz.*

1/2

3/4

5/6

VI. II

7/8

9/10

11/12

Vc. *plac.*

Cb.

Example 3. Penderecki: Symphony No. 8 – *Lieder der Vergänglichkeit*, I *Nachts* – phase I.



The image displays a page of a musical score for Krzysztof Penderecki's Symphony No. 8, specifically the section 'Lieder der Vergänglichkeit, I Nachts - phase III'. The score is arranged in systems for various instruments and vocal parts.

- Woodwinds:** Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet (Cl.), and Cor Anglais (Co.).
- Strings:** Violin I (Vl. I), Violin II (Vl. II), Viola (Vc.), and Cello/Double Bass (Cb.).
- Vocal Parts:** Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The lyrics are in German, including phrases like "Herr, aus der Ferne... der Herr... geht...".
- Tempo and Dynamics:** The tempo is marked 'tranquillo' and the dynamic is 'pp' (pianissimo).
- Measure Numbers:** The score includes measure numbers 27, 15, 18, and 19.
- Annotations:** There are several annotations and markings, including 'Crescendo subito' and 'Piano subito'.

Example 4. Penderecki: Symphony No. 8 – *Lieder der Vergänglichkeit, I Nachts* – phase III.

The return to the main tonal centre (F) and the pure harmony of the octave in a high register (with added fifth) seems to constitute the conclusion of the whole song – in an atmosphere of intimate confidence.

However, the narration is only suspended. The last phase reveals another dimension of existence – the world of death and suffering. And this reflection, drawn in relation to the poem by Rilke, constitutes the proper, highly pessimistic, conclusion. In the musical interpretation, the tonal centre is shifted to A flat on the accented, saturated chord (F-A flat-B-C-E) which underlies the descending, declamatory phrase of the tenors (ending with the G-D fifth) as well as the triple funereal motif of the kettledrums (G), referring to the first motif (see Example 5).

A similar role is played by the choral part ending the 'Frühlingsnacht' ('Spring Night') movement, which sets a poem by Hesse. In the quiet, serene image of night, resembling a nocturne with trees nodding in the moonlight, a baritone voice carries on a meditative, lyrical dialogue with the voice of the solo instrument (*cor anglais*). The choral part in the conclusion reveals the fleeting nature of this dream. The dark tremolo of the kettledrums introduces into the choral part a melancholic reflection on dying and decline (descending in seconds), drawn in respect to Rilke's poem.

Another relationship between the image of nature and existential reflection can be found in the song 'Im Nebel' ('In the Fog'). The voices of the choir, moving relentlessly forward in even values against the background of the ostinato, not only open and close the movement, but dominate it entirely, lending it a grim mood. Through images of nature in which a bush, stone or tree do not see one another, the world of the experiences of a man wandering in the fog is shown. The expressive soprano part is an attempt to recall the bright moments of life, yet the prevailing image is the recurring vision of each and every man being condemned to loneliness.

The tonal centre of the work is constituted by the 'Vergänglichkeit' ('Transience') song, written to a text by Hesse. The metaphysical dimension of human experience is constituted by the intensity of expression in the solo and choral parts. Indeed, this is an elaborate lamentation, in which the choir, fully attuned to the soprano, gains a peculiar intensity of harmony and a certain element of funereal pathos, bringing to mind Karol Szymanowski's *Stabat Mater* (see Example 6). In the close, the distance of the commentary is missing, too, since in the *a cappella* choir there appears a dramatic vision of the heavy, closed heavens, and it is only the nostalgically fading tune of the French horn that brings melancholic reflection.

10

„Ende des Herbstes“ (I. Strophe)

poco più mosso

Cl. b. (F)

Tr. 1-3

Timp.

Perc.

Violoncello

S.

A.

T.

B.

VI. I

VI. II

Va.

Cb.

Cl. b. (F)

Timp.

Perc.

S.

Chorus

Va.

Cb.

Example 5. Penderecki: Symphony No. 8 – *Lieder der Vergänglichkeit, I Nachts* – phase IV.

The image shows a page of a musical score. At the top, it is labeled 'Perc.' and 'Piano = 2'. Below that, there are five vocal staves labeled 'Soprano solo', 'S', 'A', 'T', and 'B'. Each vocal staff has a line of German lyrics underneath it. The lyrics are: 'wie machst du, wie machst du, was - kan, was - kan was hast noch glühe, ist bald ver - sen - ken'. Below the vocal staves are five instrumental staves labeled 'VL I div.', 'VL II', 'Va.', 'Vcl. celli', and 'Cb.'. The instrumental staves contain musical notation with various dynamics and articulations.

Example 6. Penderecki: Symphony No. 8 – *Lieder der Vergänglichkeit, X. Vergänglichkeit*

In the last movement, the dramatic calling of the trio of soloists and the choir, 'O zeige mir die Wege' ('O show me the way'), corresponds to the recitative part of the bass trumpet – a voice from 'another, sacred reality'.<sup>9</sup> The strings and choir harmonies move towards this voice (following the last words of the soloists: 'Unendlich ist die Bahn' – 'the road is endless'), symbolically ascending and then gradually dissipating and fading into silence (see Example 7).

In his Eighth Symphony, Penderecki employs poetic and musical images to show the beauty and diversity of the forms of the surrounding world of nature, in which it is given to man to live the successive phases of his life. However, a relevant dimension of the symphony is that of looking from a distance at the fate of man – existential reflection offered mainly by the commenting choral parts, as in ancient tragedy. What dominates is a sense of transition, the sadness of decline and the thought of the inevitability of the fate of man, who searches for a way to unravel the mystery of existence.

*Translated by Władysław Chłopicki*

<sup>9</sup> Reference to the symbolic value of the bass trumpet, which represents the voice of God in the sixth movement of *Seven Gates of Jerusalem* by Penderecki.

The musical score is arranged in a standard orchestral format. At the top left, the number '39' is printed. The staves are labeled on the left as follows: Fl. (C), Perc., Arpa, Pianoforte, Soprano solo, Alto solo, Baritone solo, S, A, T, B, VI I, VI II, Va, Vc, and Cb. db. The vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Baritone, and all four voices) have the lyrics 'Ich - und - Ich ist die Bäume.' written below them. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like 'piano', 'pianissimo', and 'pizzicato'. A large, thick black arrow is drawn across the lower half of the page, starting from the bottom left and pointing towards the top right, indicating a specific musical progression or performance instruction.

Example 7. Penderecki: Symphony No. 8 – *Lieder der Vergänglichkeit*, XII. 'O gruner Baum des Leben' – ending

