

From Penderecki to Mykietyn. About the New Polish Passion Music

It is hard to state explicitly the reasons why four Polish artists took up the subject of passion music almost simultaneously within just five years between 2004 and 2009. The reasons for their interest in the genre that had been absent in the Polish artistic output for almost half a century, that is since *St. Luke Passion* by Krzysztof Penderecki, might have been either of religious or purely practical origin acquiring the form of a particular commission¹. Inspiration could have come from the “Passion 2000” project launched by Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart and was meant to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Jan Sebastian Bach’s death with four passions composed by Sofia Gubajdulina, Tan Dun, Osvaldo Golioy and Wolfgang Rihm. Nevertheless, regardless of all direct reasons, taking up the subject of the passion music was connected with the necessity of making an attempt at re-interpretation of the genre which has great tradition abounded in masterpieces, and was a consequence of noticing – **despite the flow of time** – its mighty potential. Clear evidence of the genre’s vitality are two important for the Polish musical culture works – *The Passion According to St. Matthew* (2004) by Krzysztof Knittel and *Passion after St. Mark* (2008) by Paweł Mykietyn, as well as two projects placing the genre in the area of pop music and entertainment – *My Passion* by Łukasz Pieprzyk (2009) and *Passion dance spectacle* by Paweł Łukowiec (2006).

The compositions mentioned above will make the material that allows to diagnose the condition of the genre and reflect upon existence of the category of “musical sacrum” in the first decade of the 21st century. An essential point of reference for the deliberations is going to become *St. Luke Passion* by Krzysztof Penderecki – an outstanding work, showing new perspectives not only to the passion music pieces but also to the whole religious music of the 20th century. The composition, finished in 1965, was such an original and significant proposal that it had taken almost half a century before **the appearance of any attempts** at re-interpretation of the genre and at creation of works that were different in the technical and aesthetical respect.

St. Luke Passion also opened a totally new perspective in Penderecki’s oeuvre. Just a few years after his bright debut at the Warsaw Autumn Festival² and a series of inventive orchestral pieces, the composer clearly turned towards musical *convention* provoking critics’ outrage and being accused of “betraying avant-garde ideals”. However, in spite of using a radical music language, the symptoms of the bonds with tradition were already noticeable in Penderecki’s works such as *Psalms of David* or *Stabat Mater*. The composer was aware of his connections with the past and he expressed it many times saying: “The contradiction between avant-garde and tradition has seemed to be surface only since the very beginning. One cannot sever with the musical past of its strict sense, what is more – with cultural heritage in its broadest sense”³.

An apparently new quality, making *Passion* different from Penderecki’s avant-garde works from the early 60s (*Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima*, *Dimensions of Time and Silence*, *Polymorphia*), is its synthetic character lying in the combination of sonoristic material with the tones of definite pitch (twelve-tone, tonal and microtonal structures). Józef Chomiński⁴ indicated there six different techniques: serial, organ-like, motet, variational, thematic and sonoristic. Nevertheless, despite such a significant diversity of both material and techniques the piece was coherent, motif – integrated (with the predominant motif of “b-a-c-h”, showing how deeply rooted in the tradition of the genre it was), tonally integrated (with the tones of ‘d’ and ‘g’ emphasized) and with two twelve-tone series present. Heterogeneity of the composition mentioned above is well-grounded in its textual layer – sonoristic material appears in dramatic fragments, that is, as Mieczysław Tomaszewski said, when “unleashing the forces of darkness” happen, and unconventional vocal effects create in the *turba* part

¹ *The Passion According to St. Matthew* by Krzysztof Knittel was commissioned by Ryszard Cieśla and Krzysztof Kur, co-founders (together with Tadeusz Kaczyński) of the Romuald Traugutt Philharmony and currently the directors of that ensemble, while Paweł Mykietyn’s *Passion after St. Mark* was commissioned by Wrocław local authorities.

² Krzysztof Penderecki made his debut in 1959 with *Strophes* and in the same year he achieved a spectacular success when awarded at the competition of the Polish Composers’ Association the first prize for *Strophes* and two second prizes ex aequo for *Psalms of David* and *Emanations for two string orchestras*.

³ K. Penderecki, *Labirynt czasu*, Warsaw 1997, p. 66.

⁴ J. Chomiński, K. Wilkowska-Chomińska, *Wielkie formy wokalne*, vol. 5, Cracow 1984, p. 460.

“a suggestive, realistic picture of agitated crowd, full of anger and cruelty, striving to annihilate an individual”⁵ (*The Mocking before the priest and Jesus before Pilate*).

The basis for the formal plan of Krzysztof Penderecki's *Passion* is a typical of that genre traditional way of narration, and the outline of the story is made up of the text of *The Gospel according to St. Luke* reduced to its most crucial moments – from the episode on the Olive Mountain to Christ's death. Three short excerpts from *The Gospel According to St. John*, added by the composer, only intensify the message in the dramatic aspect, and the introduced lyrics of psalms and anthems bring in a lyrical and contemplative element, not upsetting the chronology of the events described. “Originating in Bach, Mieczysław Tomaszewski wrote in the composer's monograph, in his supreme formal idea, dramatic scenes taken from the Gospel will be concluded by Penderecki with lyrical comments. And it will be like in Bach: the dramatic time will put forward events from the Gospel as if they were happening right here and right now, while the lyrical time will persuade one to participate in pensiveness, reflection, deepest sorrow”⁶.

Typical of the passion music narration based on linearity of time has been questioned both in Paweł Mykietyn's and Krzysztof Knittel's *Passions*. These artists do not hesitate to experiment with the text and take up polemics with the genre's tradition, supported by the Judaist *practice* in which not only is the presence of linear time with a chronological order of events crucial but also its theological aspect – revealing the target in the form of the Last Judgement.

Krzysztof Knittel does not limit himself in his *Passion* to a mere description of the Holy Week events using the whole, though significantly abbreviated, text of the *Gospel According to St. Matthew*. The form of his work is made of alternately appearing segments sung by the soloists who give an account of agony and death of Christ (sections A) and choral fragments (B) that are “a sort of retrospective (...), in which six performers simultaneously tell the story of Jesus' life”⁷. A bold, even quite risky idea of presenting the text of the Gospel through choristers' simultaneous recitation against the background of a string orchestra and wood percussion instruments, is also of film origin.

What came as an inspiration for such an original form of *Passion* was composer's fascination with paintings and collages by Jiří Kolář (1914–2002), one of the most outstanding Czech artists of the 20th century. Among his own numerous creative proposals such as: *rollage*, *chiasmage* or *crumplage*, *rollages* seem to be particularly striking, consisting in an alternate juxtaposition of narrow strips of picture reproductions and the picture made thanks to this technique “acquires a new order, primal semantic relations are either emphasized or disturbed, the whole becomes a carrier of a completely new vision of reality”⁸.

Those two alternating threads connect themselves with stylistically different music. An account of the passion is accompanied by the music deriving its interval structure from the intonation pattern of a language, the rhythm of speech. Vocal parts and ascetic instrumental accompaniment are characterized by simplicity and austerity, and music serves “exclusively to emphasize the meaning of words”, is supposed “to stress seriousness and the sense of evangelical text in a discreet and austere way”⁹. Retrospective sections are of different nature and the composer used there a sort of musical collage based on self-quotations coming from his previous compositions (among others: *29 Staves*, “*Ursus*” *String Quartet*, and the final fragment of *El maale rahamim*)¹⁰ combined with the parts recited by choristers and with electronics. The technique of self-quotations, used consequently and on a large scale since mid-90s, has been defined by the composer himself as a recycling technique¹¹, that is a repeat use of music structures or whole fragments in another musical context.

Equally distant from a typical of the genre following the evangelical description of Christ's passion is *Passion after St. Mark* by Paweł Mykietyn. The text of part I already, reduced only to two verses: “Genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David the son of Abraham” (in the soprano and alto parts) and “It's finished” (in the mezzosoprano part) on the one hand marks critical points of the narration developing in next parts, and

⁵ R. Chłopicka, *Krzysztof Penderecki między sacrum a profanum*, Cracow 2000, p. 38.

⁶ M. Tomaszewski, *Bunt i wyzwolenie. Rozpętanie żywiołów*. Cracow 2008, p. 194.

⁷ K. Knittel, composer's commentary, typescript, p. 1.

⁸ E. Neumannova, *Wystawa prac Jiří Koláře z kolekcji Jana i Medy Mlasków*, catalogue trans. by Józef Zark. Ars Cameralis Superioris – Górnośląskie Museum in Bytom, November 1995 – January 1996, p. 3.

⁹ K. Knittel, op. cit., p. 38.

¹⁰ *29 Staves for small orchestra (29 players)*, 1980–81, “*Ursus*” *String Quartet*, 1976, *El maale rahamim... – O God, Full of Mercy... (text from a Hebrew prayer) for mixed chorus and large orchestra*, 2001.

¹¹ The process of recycling is also used by the composer in other works – fragments of the composition discussed above, *The Passion according to St. Matthew*, have been used in *The Diary from Warsaw Uprising*.

on the other one it announces an unusual way of presentation. As Andrzej Chłopecki writes about Mykietyń's *Passion*: "based on the text of four Gospels with St. Mark as the guide and the prophet Isaah as a mentor historian, the old-testament <wise man of memory>, the composer compiled his own gospel – the Gospel after Paweł Mykietyń". And even though these words might be a bit exaggerated, obviously we deal here with an original message, a result of composer's postmodern experiences (with its fragmentarism and "multitude of meanings and timeframes"¹²).

An unusual formal idea used by Paweł Mykietyń in his *Passion* consists in three distant motifs carried out parallelly, of which the most important and most varied in a musical aspect is obviously a dramatic description of the Passion compiled from fragments of the four Gospels. The sequence of events goes here in a reverse order – from the words "It's finished" (the last Jesus' words uttered before his death according to *The Gospel of St. John*) time goes backwards up to the final scenes of turning in and capturing Jesus. To illustrate this concept the composer makes use of a wide spectrum of stylistic means – from ascetic, based on a steady pulse of the motif carried out by the boys' choir, playing a part of narrator and commentator, through varied, enriched with numerous melismata and sensual at times part of Jesus (mezzosoprano), up to the dramatic part of a reciter (Pilate), which is accompanied by dynamic sounds of the bass guitar and the vocal part held in a pop music manner (natural voice).

The main plan interweaves with two retrospective threads, the first of which, initiated by the opening verse "Genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David the son of Abraham" and carried out through parts I, III, IV up to the words closing part V: "And Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus who is called Christ", and the background (parts III and IV) is made up of a few fragments taken from the old-testament *Book of Isaah*. Those two distant in time themes clearly contrast with the dramatic main plan through monotonous and unemotional presentation of the text, using steady melodic-textural models and reducing the line-up (the choir conveys the text from the *Gospel of St. Matthew*, basses – from the *Book of Isaah*).

Thus, the plot of this work is set within three time perspectives which correspond to three different musical motifs – two retrospective ones limited to simple repetitive figures and the plan accompanying the Passion – more varied and extended. The threads interact with each other and the simplest form of this interaction is a dialogue, musical dispute or alternate appearance of two different time and sound layers, although there are also examples of a simultaneous juxtaposition of definitely dissimilar musical qualities. Numerous composer's strategies applied in Knittel's and Mykietyń's passions are of postmodern origin. However, they do not come as an aesthetic shock to listeners as it used to be when the *Piano Concerto* by Mykietyń, or *Five Pieces for String Quartet* by Paweł Szymanski came out. Apart from material heterogeneity Mykietyń's *Passion* is characterized by discontinuity manifesting itself through stopping the course of narration or distorting melo-harmonic models – creative techniques which have already become the canon of means for contemporary artists. Mykietyń's *Passion* is not, however, postmodern and an apparent symptom of overcoming this tradition is a departure from deconstruction as the basic formal rule and a return to the idea of "great narration"¹³ so seriously questioned by postmodern artists, treated by the composer in a highly peculiar way, though.

Passion dance spectacle by Paweł Łukowiec and *My Passion* by Łukasz Pieprzyk have a different character and are examples of re-interpreting the tradition of the genre with the use of the mass culture impulses. One can find here a typically postmodern combination of high and pop culture, and as distinct symptoms of populism¹⁴ one can consider emphasizing a visual factor in the form of video screenings and electronic means in Pieprzyk's work and dance in Łukowiec's *Passion*. We also deal here with productions departing far away from the canon of gospel texts, and even denying the essence of the genre – the author of *Passion dance spectacle* passes over the tragic nature of the Holy Week events, while stressing the motif of Mary Magdalene's love for Jesus and Judah's drama. In Pieprzyk's *My Passion* the key role is played by the video screening which is deeply set in the contemporary world, showing anxieties of a contemporary man and threats resulting from civilization transformations.

¹² Jonathan D. Kramer, *O genezie muzycznego postmodernizmu*, "Muzyka" 2000 no. 3, p. 66–67.

¹³ "The success of Mykietyń's *Passion* in Poland confirms the fact that the presence of "great narrations" or yearning for them, at least, are still very important to the community of this country". M. Szoka, *The Music of Paweł Mykietyń in between pas-tiche, deconstruction and great narration*: paper presented at the conference "Polish Music since 1945", Canterbury, April/May 2009.

¹⁴ "For some critics, even for some composers the defining feature of postmodern is an intentional attempt at reaching listeners through such rules of conduct and usage of material that give a chance of favourable reception by the audience". J. D. Kramer, op. cit., p. 63.

So, can we draw the borderline, behind which experiments and modifications lead to the severance with the genre archetype? Grzegorz Gazda, referring to avant-garde tendencies from the second half of the 20th century, wrote that the amplitude of structural modification of the genre became so big that it provoked the reflection whether the bond with the genre's tradition was still tangible, or we dealt with a case of "creating the genres being in opposition to their model sources" and, by analogy to the situation in literature, whether we could say about an avant-garde's spur "to create anti-genres whose bonds with tradition can be determined only by negation". After all, there were "anti-operas"¹⁵ created at the time, so could there be anti-passions on the eve of the 21st century? Hasn't the genre of passion music undergoing such radical modifications lost something that constituted its essence – the sense of musical sacrum? Indeed, as Mieczysław Tomaszewski wrote about oratorian music: "The genres whose timeframes go beyond liturgical time, performed by and large on stage, it's natural that they are doomed to symbiosis with the profane"¹⁶. Is it still, however, symbiosis? Can a listener find in those works the qualities which Rudolf Otto linked with the presence of the "numinosum" category in art – sublimity, magic and some kind of understatement expressed in music through silence?

The canons of musical sacrum evolve, undergoing, similarly to other trends in music, stylistic and technological transitions, and the changes of language, that is used by artists to talk about elevated things, are spurred by cultural and civilization transformations witnessed by us in the 20th and at the beginning of the 21st centuries. Nevertheless, excessive originality and radicalism of religious compositions are welcome not only with approval of the audience and critics – what gave rise to controversy was both using sonoristic means by Krzysztof Penderecki and employing the bass guitar, or holding a vocal part in a pop music manner by Paweł Mykietyn.

Compositions such as *Passion after St. Mark* by Paweł Mykietyn, or *The Passion According to St. Matthew* by Krzysztof Knittel, giving an original re-interpretation of the genre's tradition could provide, thus, important impetus stimulating the development of Polish religious artistic output dominated by conservative tendencies for decades. And, although not each listener of Mykietyn's *Passion* might have a feeling of communion with the sacred, I am still certain that none of them will remain indifferent to this work.

Translated by Elżbieta Fesnak-Przybylska

Santrauka

Nuo Pendereckio iki Mykietyno. Apie naujųjų Lenkijos pasijų muziką

Straipsnyje pristatomos dvi lenkiškos pasijos, sukurtos pirmąjį XXI a. dešimtmetį, kurios yra reikšmingos naujai Lenkijos muzikos kultūrai. Tai Krzysztofo Knittelio „Pasija pagal Matą“ – solo balsams, mišriam chorui, dviem mušamiesiems, styginių orkestrui ir elektronikai (2004) bei Paweło Mykietyno „Pasija pagal Morkų“ sopranui, skaitovui, chorui ir kameriniam orkestrui (2008).

Krzysztofo Pendereckio *Passio et mors Domini nostri Jesu Christi secundum Lucam* yra nuostabus kūrinys, atveriantis perspektyvas ne vien tik šio žanro raidai, bet ir visai XX a. sakralinei muzikai, todėl jis bus esminis atramos taškas šioje diskusijoje. 1965 m. užbaigta Krzysztofo Pendereckio pasija buvo tokia originali ir reikšminga, kad tik tai praėjus beveik 50 metų pasirodė šio žanro reinterpretacijos.

Krzysztofas Knittelis savo pasijoje pateikia originalius ir stebinančius sprendimus, paveiktus Ježi Kolažo tapybos bei koliažų ir vadinamus „pakartotinio panaudojimo“ (*recycling*) technika. Paweło Mykietyno kompozicija yra originali dėl jos stilistinio heterogeniškumo, kurio ištakos siekia postmoderniąją estetiką ir poetiką. Be šių dviejų reikšmingų kūrinių, reikia paminėti dar du projektus, kurie įkomponuoja pasijos žanrą į populiariąją muziką (Łukaszo Pieprzyko *Mano pasija* ir Paweło Łukiewieco *Pasijos šokio spektaklis* sopranui, baritonui, chorui ir dideliam simfoniniam orkestrui, 2006). Šios kompozicijos sukelia diskusijas apie žanro padėtį naujo šimtmečio pradžioje ir verčia susimąstyti apie sąvokos „sakralinė muzika“ esmę.

¹⁵ Roman Haubenstock-Ramati composed in 1968 an anti-opera *Comédie* (to the text by Samuel Beckett) which is in clear opposition to the convention of the genre.

¹⁶ M. Tomaszewski, *Muzyka wobec sacrum*, (in:) *Olivier Messiaen we wspomnieniach i refleksji badawczej*, Łódź 2009, p. 42.