

The Concept of Organ Repertoire as Sacral Music

For centuries a clear majority of organ repertoire has belonged to the scope of sacral music. This opinion is based on a belief that the organ as an instrument connected with liturgy (Catholic, Protestant) for so long, has itself – in a sense – a sacral character. The organ music, so to say automatically, gets into the sphere of *sacrum*; usually composers share this conviction with the listeners, for whom generally, according to Carl Dahlhaus, “understanding the organ as a secular instrument makes abstraction”¹. From historical point of view, the sacral character of organ music is confirmed by – existing until the death of J. S. Bach – an ideal unity of Function and Beauty, of liturgy and art, of what belongs to the community and what is connected with an individual experience of faith. After 1750, due to growing importance of expressivity and subjectivism in music, the organ lost its exclusive position. The beginning of a process of “demusicalization of the classical and Christian harmony’s world”², as Leo Spitzer called it, was observed already in the Baroque. A serious crisis reached the European culture in the 19th century, along with the romantic ideology. The organ music became a “church sphere”, not anymore belonging to the main stream of musical production. If one considers the evolution of organ music, in a sense of artistic means and composer’s techniques, this tendency was destructive, inevitably leading to conservatism, especially observed in the 19th century music, connected with the choral tradition – both: Protestant and Gregorian chant – and Bach’s polyphony (Mendelssohn’s organ sonatas, *Fugues on B-a-c-h* of Schumann etc.). From the other point of view, “post-revolutionary spirit of egalitarianism” also brought a progression of triviality in the organ music. In the 19th century one of the most typical composers following this trend was Louis James Alfred Lefébure-Wely, the author of the pieces intended for the liturgical purposes, that esthetically perfectly symbolized the Parisian bourgeoisie’s taste. It would be difficult to define how Lefébure-Wely understood the sense of sacral music when he composed organ pieces reminding the style of Italian opera (cavatinas, galops, cancons etc.). On the opposite side we find the music by Cesar Franck, who strictly differentiated church repertoire (*L’Organiste* collection) from the great concert pieces with virtuosity and élan. In his output, the Function and Beauty are not conflicted, their separation seems to be full of Harmony. Then, it is compromise that defines the situation of church music in the 19th and 20th centuries, since, as Alfred Einstein said, “the church music is by its nature reserved to tradition and a little susceptible to changes”³. How difficult and changeable this situation is, indicated in his writings Joseph Ratzinger, the pope Benedict XVI, who mentioned “schizophrenia of the contemporary art production, that oscillates between a pop-current and an elite’s aesthetism”⁴.

But if we consider a more general issue of sacral music as non-church music, but the music inspired by religious themes, forms, or attitudes, one could observe its real renaissance in the first half of the 20th century. This renewal was done by the composers from the retrospective current, such as Igor Strawinski, Carl Orff, Frank Martin, and especially Olivier Messiaen, and in the second half of that century – to Krzysztof Penderecki, John Tavener, Sofia Gubaidulina, and especially Arvo Pärt. But they all – except Olivier Messiaen – created mostly vocal-instrumental works: passions, oratorios, cantatas, which means music regardless of the liturgical purpose, being more free and autonomous than the organ music. (Even their masses, as for example *Polish Requiem* by Penderecki, are far from the church practice.)

However, when we ask about the contemporary organ repertoire, how it is linked to the Christian (Catholic or Protestant) tradition and how far it is still determined by the church functionality, at first it is necessary to characterize the main opposite poles. The avant-garde music of the 1950s and the 1960s negated the sacral character of organ music and rejected the thesis about its historicism (as, for example in the organ works by Bengt Hambraeus, György Ligeti, and Mauricio Kagel). Those composers took a stand on full autonomy and secularity of the organ music. One of the most famous and radical pieces, *Volumina* by Ligeti, inspired by *Constellations* of Hambraeus, provides evidence of a completely new concept of the organ as a musical instrument.

¹ Carl Dahlhaus *Moderne Orgelmusik und das 19. Jahrhundert*. In: *Orgel und Orgelmusik heute*, red. H. H. Eggebrecht, Stuttgart 1968, p. 39.

² Leo Spitzer *Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony. Prolegomena to an Interpretation of the World “Stimmung”*. Baltimore 1963, p. 138.

³ Alfred Einstein *Muzyka w epoce romantyzmu*. Trans. M. and S. Jarociński, Kraków 1965, p. 17.

⁴ Joseph Ratzinger *Nowa pieśń dla Pana*. Trans. J. Zychowicz, Kraków 1999, p. 168.

The organ sound, its colour (*Klangfarben*), dynamic and spatial volumin have been treated as the main factor of the construction. Cluster became the main means of shaping sound and texture, through changing its density, pitch, structure, inner fluctuations etc. Though Ligeti made a mention about the element of musical tradition in his work (allusion to the passacaglia form), its character is undoubtedly experimental and secular.

The most interesting avant-garde achievements in the Polish organ music date back to 1970s and to the music of Norbert Mateusz Kuźnik. In the pieces such as *Organochromia II* or *Multiplicatio* he developed the idea of the organ as an instrument completely free of sacral connotations and able to respond to composer's highest expectations. Through the preparation of the organ and unconventional using of organ registers Kuźnik introduced sonority to the organ repertoire. His compositions from that time, at present are known only to the small group of specialists: organists or composers, since in the situation of postmodern culture, the avant-garde comprehended as an experiment, art of provocation or rejection of existing conventions and tradition in general, is not appreciated by the postmodern audiences. It seems that radicalism of Ligeti's attitude towards the organ as an instrument, based on the negation of its historical and religious implications, has not found any successors. Even combining the organ sound with electronics and its spatial shaping by, for example, Wolfgang Mitterer (in his *Mixture V* from 1995 or *bwv.* of 2000) reminds music from the 1960s. It is interesting however, that modernity of his musical language doesn't exclude using by the composer several quotations from J. S. Bach (*bwv.*).

What is than dominant in the contemporary organ works if any real avant-garde exploration of completely new means doesn't appear? On the one hand we have a trend of functional music, with pronounced preference for the chant, written just for church purposes, determined very strongly by the tradition of tonal language and historical forms (polyphony, choral etc.), but also by the church regulations. Since the Vatican II limited the contribution of solo organ music in the Catholic liturgy, one can observe almost an invasion of the musical "production" dangerously close to the pop-music stylistics (so called "sacro-pop music"). There are mostly, more or less successful copies of popular songs with adequate texts. Since the function almost entirely dominates the artistic aspect, this kind of music could be described as a kind of "correctness", no political but artistic one.

From the other side, the field of music more autonomous aesthetically, but still inspired by church music, expands. The example of the greatest composer of the 20th century organ music, Olivier Messiaen, is significant and somehow ambivalent. Undoubtedly, we owe him the renewal of the idea of organ music, which he achieved in his monumental organ cycles, successfully combining modern, advanced and sophisticated composer's techniques with theologically profound message. He liberated organ music from the 19th century's conventionalism and church functionalism. Somehow, his maximalistic, visionary music reminds the architecture of medieval cathedrals or stained glass windows, that inspired the composer so much. Messiaen also omitted traditional forms of church organ music in his output. Some features of typical virtuoso toccata one can find in *Diptyque* and *Dieu parmi nous* from *La Nativité du Seigneur*; *Le Banquet céleste* reminds a sort of so called *élévation*, often appearing in the romantic French organ music. But first of all, Messiaen is recognized as an author of programm music. Using many quotations from the Bible as mottos, he created very specific programm music, without visual connotations. The theological message of his music requires separate commentaries, which the composer used to write himself⁵. In his early piece, *Diptyque*, the picture of life on earth (the first part in C minor) is set against the vision of Paradise (in C major). The depictive tendency one could see also in his two cycles: *L'Ascension* and *La Nativité du Seigneur*, but they don't represent a "musical painting", so typical of Romanticism and impressionism. Messiaen tried to find in music expressive equivalents of a mystery (part VIII of *La Nativité du Seigneur: Les Mages*), an ecstatic joy of angel's chant (part VI: *Les Anges*), or suffering (part VII: *Jésus accepte la souffrance*). But all those pieces cannot be used as liturgical music, understood literally, because of their range and advanced musical language. Even *Messe de la Pentecôte*, written for the church use, with its five parts (*Entrée, Offertoire, Consécration, Communion, Sortie*) and more consistent narration, because of the application of serial technique and very complex rhythm procedures, stayed apart from the liturgical claims of "music acceptable by the community".

⁵ The comprehensive interpretation of Messiaens music from the theological perspective has been delivered recently in "Messiaen Trilogy" by Siglind Bruhn (Pendragon Press, Hillsdale, NY, 2008).

To sum up, Messiaen's concept of organ music as an absolutely modern art with metaphysical deposit, has its sources – as Paul Thissen proves⁶ – in the works of Jacques Maritain⁷. In the French philosopher's opinion, the Christian, Catholic art just has to be modern, and like the avant-garde art – fully autonomous, but its primary aim is God – "l'art pour Dieu". And Olivier Messiaen while writing his first organ composition as "hommage a Dieu", exemplified in music this concept. As he emphasized:

"Doch muss man das Wort Freiheit in seiner weitesten Bedeutung fassen. Die Freiheit von der ich spreche, hat nichts zu tun mit Fantasie, Unordnung, Revolte oder Gleichgültigkeit. Es handelt sich um eine konstruktive Freiheit, die durch Selbstbeherrschung, Ehrfurcht vor den anderen, Staunen vor dem geschaffenen, Meditation des Geheimnisses und Suche nach der Wahrheit erlangt wird. Diese wunderbare Freiheit ist wie ein Vorgeschmack der himmlischen Freiheit"⁸.

Faith as the main motivational factor in composing music – this is how we can summarize the attitude of Messiaen, who succeeded in preserving independence from composer's canons and social functions, but created his own specific world entirely and deeply affirmative to God.

Jehan Alain, 3 years younger Messiaen's colleague from the organ class of Marcel Dupré, potentially could also play an important role in the 20th century organ music, but he died at the age of 29 as a French soldier during the second World War. Though Alain and Messiaen, in musical terms, seemed to follow "almost the same path"⁹, especially at the beginning of their careers, the main difference concerns the religious involvement of their compositions. Out of 30 organ works by Alain, only 8 could be qualified as *musica sacra* (3 *Chorals*, *Amen*, *Christe*, *Litanies*). Since the line of great French organists and organ composers of second half of the 19th century (beginning with Cesar Franck) and first half of the 20th (including Charles Marie Widor, Louis Vierne and mentioned above Marcel Dupré) constitutes a magnificent tradition of organ repertoire, in two fields: one of virtuoso concert music and the other of valuable liturgical works, lack of which in Alain's organ output must be significant. His organ music is neither marked so strongly by the personal religious involvement as in the case of Messiaen, nor connected with the Roman Catholic Church heritage, as music by Marcel Dupré was. The "secularity" of Alain's organ music, with such important manifestations as *Trois Dances* or *Deux Dances a Agni Yavishba*, introducing to organ music his openness to other, non-Christian religions, could be then perceived as a novelty – not only from the historic perspective of the French music. From this point of view, Alain could be treated as a precursor of avant-garde attitude towards organ music in general.

This tendency graduates in the second half of the previous century. Among the main trends in organ music, singled out according to stylistic and technological criteria:

- sonorism
- using electronic medias
- neo-classicism
 - post-dodecaphonic linearism
 - post-romantic harmony and neo-tonality
- Messiaen's influence

religious inspiration appears only in the third and fourth one. But in many cases strict qualification is impossible; it becomes quite clear if we consider some of the most important organ works of Polish composers from the last three decades. Let's examine some chosen examples:

Koncert B-A-C-H for organ, violin and orchestra (1985) by Bogusław Schaeffer (born 1929), is one of the earliest and the most characteristic postmodern manifestations; a combination of quotations and parodies of different music styles represents a type of a game with the listener, free from religious connotations.

⁶ Paul Thissen *Katholizismus – Autonome Kunst – Avantgarde. Jacques Maritain and Olivier Messiaen*. In: *Zur Orgelmusik Olivier Messiaens*. Teil 2: Von der *Messe de la Pentecôte* bis zum *Livre du Saint Sacrement*. Ed. Hermann J. Busch and Michael Heinemann, Bonn 2008.

⁷ Especially: *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*. Washington 1952, *Art et scholastique*. Paris 1920.

⁸ Messiaen's speech on the occasion of Praemium Erasmaeum, 25.06.1971, Amsterdam, according to P. Thissen, op. cit., p. 64–65.

⁹ Claude Samuel *Entretiens avec Olivier Messiaen*, Paris 1967, p. 143.

The work by Roman Berger (born 1930), Polish composer living in Slovakia, *Exodus* (1981–82, 1997), with its four parts: *Musica profana*, *Dies irae*, *Labirynt*, *Psalm* and *Finale* represents a monumental style of quasi fresco-cycle. As Jerzy Kukla noticed¹⁰, this work is unique in the history of organ music, as never before has the composer who is not an organist created such a great, large-scale, dramatic work. Berger also employed some quotations and allusions, like *Dies irae*, *b-a-c-b* motifs, or choral melody of *Ein feste Burg*. But the metaphysical character of this music resulted not from the quotations, but from contemplative expression, symbolism and plurality of composer's means.

Witold Szalonek (1927–2001) as a composer represented very advanced techniques and high level of artistic consciousness; organ music evidently wasn't his favourite field of sonoristic explorations. However, his *Toccata e corale* (1988–89) belongs to the best achievements of the Polish contemporary music. Monumental, very complex and technically challenging work recalls the organ tradition (*toccata*, *choral*) on the one hand, on the other one, allusions to Chopin's motif and Webern's mirror glass technique points out a wide spectrum of meanings.

In the work *Wziemięwzięcie* (the title is a play on words game: Assumption – to the earth) for the organ and orchestra (2003) Wojciech Wiślak (born 1971), who represents a younger generation of Polish composers, has abandoned conventional forms and composer's techniques in favor of sonorism and limited aleatorism. The rich sound of different instrumental combinations (for example of the organ, harmonium, vibraphone, bells and harmonics of strings) gives this composition, which reflects the arch form, a specific dark, elegiac mood.

These four works exemplify and somehow symbolize the situation of a concert type of organ music at present. They belong to the contemporary output with all attributes of modern techniques, but do not represent so-called 'sacral' music due to their emancipation from the religious influences. The paths of faith and contemporary culture (including art and music) seem to diverge more and more... Return to their primordial unity as far seems to be not possible.

Santrauka

Vargonų repertuaro kaip sakralinės muzikos koncepcija

Didžioji dauguma vargonų repertuaro šimtmečiais priklausė sakralinei muzikai. Ši nuomonė grindžiama įsitikinimu, kad vargonai kaip instrumentas, nuo seno susijęs su liturgija (katalikų, protestantų), turi sakralinį charakterį. Vargonų muzika tarsi automatiškai patenka į *sacrum* sferą; paprastai kompozitoriai dalijasi šiuo įsitikinimu su klausytojais, kuriems, pagal Carlą Dahlhausą, „vargonų, kaip pasaulietinio instrumento, supratimas formuoja abstrakciją“. Istoriniu požiūriu sakralinį vargonų muzikos charakterį (bent jau iki J. S. Bacho mirties) patvirtina ideali vienybė tarp funkcijos ir grožio, liturgijos ir meno, to, kas priklauso bendruomenei, ir to, kas susiję su individualia tikėjimo patirtimi. Po 1750 m. dėl augančio ekspresyvumo reikšmės ir subjektyvizmo muzikoje vargonai neteko savo išimtinės pozicijos.

Už vargonų muzikos idėjos atgaivinimą XX a. esame dėkingi Olivier Messiaenui, kuris monumentaliuose vargonų cikluose sėkmingai sujungė modernias, pažangias ir rafinuotas kompozicijos technikas su teologiškai gilia prasme. Priešingoje – 1950 ir 1960 m. avangardinės muzikos – pusėje galime pastebėti vargonų muzikos sakralinio pobūdžio neigimą ir tezės apie jo istoriškumą atmetimą (pvz., Bengto Hambreuso, György Ligeti ir Mauricio Kagelio muzika).

Pranešime tyrinėjami šiuolaikinės vargonų muzikos situaciją nusakantys faktoriai, atsižvelgiama į jos kultūrinį, religinį ir etninį pliuralizmą, ypač aptariant naują vargonų repertuarą postmodernizmo paradigmos kontekste.

¹⁰ Jerzy Kukla, commentary: CD Roman Berger Exodus, Acte Préalable AP0091-92, 2003.