A DELAYED SENSATION: THE INITIAL FAILURE AND ULTIMATE SUCCESS OF GORECKI’S THIRD SYMPHONY

April 16, 2014
A Delayed Sensation: The Initial Failure and Ultimate Success of Gorecki’s Third Symphony

Over the last several decades the world of popular music has become acquainted with the concept of popular sensations and one-hit wonders. Rarely do popular superstars slowly rise to the top, but rather overnight success seems to catapult these entertainers to the forefront of the public eye where, depending on how prolific the performer may be, his or her career could last anywhere from a few months to several decades. In the modern world of classical music, such an occurrence is rare, perhaps even unheard of. Music of classical tradition is rarely the subject of a worldwide sensation, being popularly perceived as old-fashioned (certainly not novel), snobbish, and inaccessible to the uninitiated—boring, even. For this reason, Henryk Górecki’s Symphony No. 3, “Symphony of Sorrowful Songs,” is enigmatic.

Written in 1976 and premiered the following year, this “classical” music work endured roughly fifteen years of obscurity to break out suddenly into the popular music scene, becoming the first and only classical work to be listed on Billboard’s Top Ten list of highest-selling albums.\(^1\) The symphony owes this sensational success largely to its unimpressive premiere and the subsequent criticism therefrom. This paved the way for the work’s introduction into popular media in the next decade, ultimately climaxing in the recording that sold over one million copies. After finally achieving a level of renown, the symphony developed a mythology relating to its composer, its origin, and its purpose—still very much alive and widely believed—that propelled the work even further into the favor of an adoring public.

Henryk Mikołaj Górecki was the most prominent member of the avant-garde school of composition in Poland during the 1950s and 60s.\textsuperscript{2,3} He grew up in an “ugly” industrial town near the border of then Czechoslovakia and received music instruction from an early age. As Poland became more receptive to western influence, Górecki learned of and incorporated Webernian serialism, pointillism, and experimentations with indeterminate pitch in his compositions.\textsuperscript{4} Those compositions in the 1950s, according to Mellers, were “striking” and “exciting,” for example his First Symphony, written in 1959.\textsuperscript{5} Górecki was a textbook example of the European avant-garde, experimenting with new sounds and techniques. His music reflected the same air of innovation as that of his contemporaries, including but not limited to Penderecki.

His style changed dramatically over the course of his lifetime, however. *Three Pieces in the Old Style* (1957), the title of which references medieval modality, was the first inkling of the composer’s transition from the harsh, percussive dissonance of the contemporary avant-garde style to the “plain modalism of Polish folk song” and “liturgical incantation harking back to the Middle Ages.”\textsuperscript{6} This “harking back” permeates his iconic Third Symphony. The Second Symphony (1972), the composer’s most monumental score, earmarked another important shift in the composer’s change to a style not only more tonal, but also more consonant. This was also an important precursor to the Third Symphony.\textsuperscript{7} This transition from avant-garde to a kind of medieval retrospect was a very quiet and gradual process, such that, according to Howard, “by 1977,” when the Third Symphony premiered, “[Górecki] had detached himself from the Western

---

\textsuperscript{3} Wilfried Mellers, “Round and about Górecki’s Symphony No. 3,” *Tempo* 168 (March 1989), 22.
\textsuperscript{4} Thomas, “Górecki, Henryk Mikolaj.”
\textsuperscript{5} Mellers, “Round and about Górecki’s Symphony No. 3,” 23.
\textsuperscript{6} Mellers, “Round and about Górecki’s Symphony No. 3,” 23.
\textsuperscript{7} Thomas, “Górecki, Henryk Mikolaj.”
European avant-garde so successfully that few noticed his absence.” This greatly influenced the early demise of the Third Symphony.

The Symphony has three movements, all of which are marked for slow tempo. The majority of the work is understated without any significant sense of tension and release – primarily modal, repetitive, and without traditionally functional tonic-dominant relationships. Compelling incidental dissonances occur, but without any real need on the listener’s part for resolution. For some it is easy listening, for others it is long and tedious. In either case the piece has elicited very strong emotional responses from listeners from its beginning. The work was commissioned by West German radio, representing an interesting connection between the East and West during the Cold War era, and by 1976 the work was completed and ready for public performance.

The symphony has iconic elements throughout, including but not limited to a soprano soloist in each of the three movements, singing Catholic-leaning Polish text related to maternity and loss, as well as a roughly twelve-minute canon that opens the first movement, repetitive but continually growing in dynamic and in number of voices. The second movement is perhaps the most easily recognizable with its striking opening motive that contrasts sharply to the end of the first movement. Mellers argues that while the “soaring” soprano sings in arch-like phrases, there is no climax. Like Cizmic’s suggestion that listeners feel no need for resolution, Mellers suggests about the second movement in particular: “The exaltation, like the suffering, is as it was, is now,

---

9 Maria Cizmic, Performing Pain: Music and Trauma in the 1970s and 80s in Eastern Europe (Ph.D. Diss., University of California Los Angeles, 2005), 179.
10 Thomas, “Górecki, Henryk Mikolaj.”
12 Mellers, “Round and about Górecki’s Symphony No. 3,” 23.
and ever shall be. The symphony’s pervasive minor tonality easily marks it as a vehicle for mourning, an element that would bolster its appeal in subsequent decades, but would do nothing to impress the critical audience of its premiere. Regardless of any reaction to the symphony in any generation, the symphony does not reflect the avant-garde style – a fact which would lead to its preliminary failure, but the work in general had a “fresh appeal” to the mass public, a fact which would lead to its subsequent popularity.

By 1977 when the Third Symphony premiered at the International Festival of Art in Royan, France, Górecki’s established reputation as the forefront of the Polish avant-garde worked against him. He had spent his active career in the 1950s and 60s composing in the harsh, dissonant style of the avant-garde, and while some his previous works lightly foreshadowed his move to simplistic modalism with religious undertones, they had not prepared the audience at its premiere for the sheer contrast of the Third Symphony to anything else they would hear there, or anything Górecki had written to that point. The illustrious International Festival of Art had developed the reputation since its inception several years prior as the place of premiere for the most widely regarded avant-garde composers. It prided itself in premiering the newest groundbreaking works, and as such was a magnet for music critics and connoisseurs. Reactions to the premieres influenced international reception of the works performed, i.e., good publicity from the Festival in Royan was key to creating widespread interest in a composer’s new output.

13 Mellers, “Round and about Górecki’s Symphony No. 3,” 24.
14 Thomas, “Górecki, Henryk Mikolaj.”
16 Mellers, “Round and about Górecki’s Symphony No. 3,” 23.
17 Howard, Reluctant Requiem, 83.
The premiere of Górecki’s symphony that year did not produce good results. Rather than some clashing statement of orchestral grandeur to begin what was expected to be an avant-garde symphony, the first movement began with an unsettling and almost imperceptible solo bass, the subject of the opening canon.\(^{18}\) The symphony concluded with overwhelming negative reaction from the audience. It did not incite riot, but the stir was palpable. Scathing reviews resulted, defaming the work as “the antithesis of all that musicians had come to respect in contemporary music,” and that the “simplification of materials and extended repetition” were a disgraceful step backward in musical progress.\(^{19}\) There was nothing “new” about the Third Symphony,\(^{20}\) the exact opposite of the ideal of the avant-garde. French and German critics agreed, and everywhere else the Western world knew Górecki’s new symphony only as “a troubling and difficult work.”\(^{21}\) Because its premiere proved disastrous, international interest in the work dropped.

In Poland, however, on the other side of the Iron Curtain, there was immediate positive interest in the symphony. Polish critics at the premiere in Royan recognized the symphony’s references to Polish folk song and the “rural Catholicism” of its music and text.\(^{22}\) The work had struck a nationalistic heartstring in Poland and it was almost immediately recognized nationwide as a masterpiece. From 1978-1987, performances of the Third Symphony occurred in Poland on almost a yearly basis. Other countries in the Eastern bloc oversaw performances of the Third Symphony as well, but it was the positive press from *Polish Music* that seemed to neutralize the negative reaction from Royan and maintain the symphony’s vitality.\(^{23}\) Without this lasting

---


\(^{19}\) Howard, *Reluctant Requiem*, 88, quoting Tadeusz Zielinski.


\(^{21}\) Howard, *Reluctant Requiem*, 90.

\(^{22}\) Howard, *Reluctant Requiem*, 88.

\(^{23}\) Howard, *Reluctant Requiem*, 90.
positive response from the masses of Poland in the wake of undesirable reactions at Royan, Górecki’s Third Symphony may have dwindled into obscurity.

Acclaimed French film director Maurice Pialat could not have known that his incorporation of the symphony’s first movement at the end of his 1985 film Police would light the kindling of a public fire of interest in that symphony. The original Polish recording with soloist Stefania Woytowicz was uncredited in the film, but soon the film studio became inundated with inquiries about the striking music at the beginning of the credits. This led the recording company Erato to produce the first recording of the symphony on LP widely available in the West in 1986. It was marketed, unwisely, under the guise of being the film’s soundtrack, and the LP did not sell well. This failure is attributed to the fact that LP records were on their way out of popular use by this time, and that calling it a soundtrack did not accurately portray what the symphony actually was. The LP sleeve contained no information about the composer or the work and did nothing to satiate the listener’s curiosity.

A few years later Nonesuch Records recognized an opportunity. The label teamed up with conductor David Zinman, directing the London Sinfonietta and soprano Dawn Upshaw, in creating what is now the definitive recording of Górecki’s Third Symphony, which has sold over one million copies. Nonesuch Records had resources available to them for the dissemination and publicity of the symphony, allowing the recording to be aired frequently on radio stations and widely distributed. Other marketing strategies were taken into consideration and made up where Erato had failed six years prior, such as including biographical information, text translation, and procuring an appropriate visual image that matched the mood of the symphony.

---

26 Thomas, “Górecki, Henryk Mikolaj.”
for the cover of the recording. Nonesuch also produced it as a compact disc, which was becoming more and more the norm for commercial recordings. It was an investment that created a worthy return for the record label.

As the symphony gained exposure, popular fondness for the work resulted in misleading mythology about the piece propagated by the mass media – misleading, although which likely served to advance its universality and therefore appeal. Three overall myths developed about the work, and are yet widely believed: first that Górecki was a mystical hermit, living near Auschwitz; second, that the symphony itself was written as a memorial to Holocaust victims; and third, that the 1992 recording of the symphony is a symbol of decades of Eastern European suffering.27 The third myth was particularly powerful in the early 1990s, the shadow of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall.

All three myths seem true enough – a composer like Górecki is certainly lesser known than other 20th-century names like Stravinsky or Copland and very well could have been a recluse, and for what other reason would a 20th-century composer from Poland write a symphony called “Sorrowful Songs” than because of World War II? The connection is too easily formed, and the conclusion too easily made. Moreover, in light of capitalism’s “triumph” over communism, a perceived evil in the West, it may not be unrealistic to assert that Western listeners wanted to mourn alongside the masses of communist nations, in a sort of catharsis that would lead them to celebrate the instigation of capitalism in these previously oppressed nations. In other words, the symphony represented some vindication on the part of Western capitalists, who for decades had fought against the form of government seen as the reason for the sorrows of

nations like Poland. Whatever the reason, the symphony hit a contemporary nerve and became “one of the most potent cultural phenomena of the late twentieth century.”

Ironically, Górecki never meant for the symphony to represent World War II or the Holocaust. He denounced the public myths and distanced himself from them. The texts of the three movements all have Catholic and other general Christian overtones, with the common theme being motherhood. The first movement is a Marian lament in reference to Jesus nailed to the cross, the second movement is taken from an appeal to the Virgin Mary inscribed on the wall of a Polish Gestapo prison, and the third movement is an appeal by a mother to God to make intercession of her son, missing in the faraway war, whom she assumes dead. But herein lies another evidence in favor of the popular mythology: one need only say “text from a Gestapo prison inscription” to think of Jewish imprisonment under Nazi rule. The text being in Polish, any given Western listener (presumably illiterate in Polish) would not understand the textual reference to the Virgin Mary, and would therefore, with little other factual information about the movement, miss the Catholic terminology and abide by the incorrect liaison to the Holocaust. Although imprisonment in a Gestapo prison would have only happened during the Nazi occupation of Poland, Górecki’s purpose in using this text was less about the specific circumstances surrounding its inscription and more about the subject matter of a child speaking to comfort her mother. Furthermore, this text is from the second movement, which was the most widely heard movement of the symphony. In part because of its relatively short length (8-10 minutes, as opposed to the approximately 27-minute and 16-minute first and third movements respectively), and in part because of its greater accessibility to the musically uninitiated listener,

of the masses who had heard the symphony, it was likely that the majority had only heard the second movement, and had received insufficient information regarding such.

Whether Górecki’s Third Symphony, despite its unprecedented success, will stand the proverbial test of time and enter into the symphonic standard repertory has yet to be seen. Górecki’s publishing company, Boosey and Hawkes, shows no planned performances of the work,\(^{31}\) however the Internet Movie Database shows that since its inclusion in the film *Police* in 1985, the Third Symphony has been included in the soundtrack of fifteen other films since then, most recently in 2013.\(^{32}\) Regardless of the work’s future, its past is dynamic and sensational. It is the story of the disguised pearl that was passed over, only to be found and admired by a different crowd in a different time. Its popularity and admiration in the public eye was not necessarily short-lived as its popularity and admiration has not completely died out. Further research would indicate the trend of performances of the work – is the work becoming more and more obsolete? Whatever the case, the symphony has made its mark in history, whether Górecki meant it to or not: the underappreciated, soft-spoken tribute to the victims of the Holocaust written by a Polish mystic who mourned decades of Eastern European oppression through his compelling music.


