

Krzysztof Penderecki: “Great music is always music of meaning”

I think that the rational and the emotional are equally important and that they compliment each other. You cannot just improvise and count on the inspiration of the moment, which in the process of working either appears or does not. Though, when this inspiration has already appeared, when a thought or idea has come, you then are forced to examine it thoroughly and work it out completely.

What role does the performer play for you? Are they co-authors or do they work for the composer, a role, which is limited to the most accurate reproduction of the author’s text.

Without question, the performance should not be an exact reproduction. Performance should be playing and not torture. I always require from the performer that they bring something of themselves to the piece. Surely, every new performance differs from the previous, right? Correspondingly, every performer must take at least one step forward. An even better performer, by his interpretation, is required to strengthen the expressive qualities of the composition’s form. Besides that, I would really like to perceive and assess the way that he hears my music.

The piece that you wrote for the Tchaikovsky Competition, which was required of all performers, is called “The Total Cello.” The cello is an instrument, which is closer in timbre and expressive properties to the human voice. Is this the reason that you love to write for the instrument?



Not only because of this, but also because the cello is a universal instrument. It is much more universal than the violin. Its body is larger and therefore allows for a bigger volume of sounds. It is also good that you can use the whole body of the cello in a work. For example, already in my early compositions, such as *Capriccio per Siegfried Palm*, for solo cello (1968), I used what was called the “total” cello. Composers use not only the standard approach to the instrument, but also tapping, noises and using different parts of the instrument, which are normally not played. My prescribed extraction of absolutely different sounds is sometimes random. Much in this case depends on the construction of the instrument, for example when playing on the bridge is required. Sometimes it turns out that you get completely unexpected sounds. These unforeseen things are very important because it is this very unpredictable quality that leaves a field of boundaries for the artist, expanding the scope of what is possible in his interpretation.

What performing qualities and technical abilities must a cellist have in order to adequately convey the ideas inherent in your composition?

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Galina Zhukova

The XIV International Tchaikovsky Competition took place from the 15th through the 30th of June 2011 in Moscow and St. Petersburg. The participation of Krzysztof Penderecki on the jury and his agreement to compose a new work, entitled “Violoncello totale,” for the cello competitors significantly increased the credibility of the competition in the European art scene. As a correspondent for reMusik.org, I was able to speak with the composer about the process of creation, musical thought and about the “total cello.”

Mr. Penderecki, people often cite your music as having “mathematical emotions.” Does this mean that the primacy of rationality over emotionalism in composed music is inevitable?

In this piece, written for the competition, I use the aforementioned elements, which I was already using in the 1960's. Because of this, the piece carries the title "The Total Cello." These elements enrich the cello and give it another dimension. It is as if the instrument transforms from a strictly stringed instrument to a universal one. As regards the performing techniques directly involved with this work, it's difficult to say. The only thing is that if a performer hasn't, in general, played contemporary music, then he might run into a few problems while reading through the score.

What in your opinion would be the bearer of musical meaning in European contemporary classical music? Is it possible to identify some common structural unit of meaning in the musical language of the 20th century?

You see, all great music is music of meaning.

Illogical music is always a bit "disheveled." However, there are works in which composers didn't at all want there to be logic. For me these works are not interesting because it already borders on dilettantism. These kinds of compositions were quite common in the 60's, when we had the so-called "Secondary Dada" period. Anything was possible then - any type of noise. Rustles assumed a certain "identity," which I regularized a bit by throwing out the unnecessary and optional.

In your work with poetic texts in different languages (from the Slavic Church languages to Armenian), do you feel that the language of the literary source is something complete, like a way of understanding the world? Does this affect the intonational features of your vocal music in every case?

Yes, certainly, in every case, works are produced differently. There was a period when I was more interested in the coloration of the human voice. At the time, I was occupied by a search in the realm of coloration of instrumental timbres and

found new possibilities in the frames of sonorous layers. In the aftermath of that, it was the contents of the actual text that began to inspire me. Later, how the contents are realized in a particular language, and correspondingly, the sound itself of this language stuck me with a few suggestions. It was becoming like a new additional layer. I had already been thinking about structure based on the multidimensional and intonational richness of the particular language.

I have written my vocal works on texts from many different languages and they all sound musically different. For example, in "Kaddish" (2009), there is really an Aramean text, correspondingly, with its own particular intonation. It turns out to be really interesting, a sort of game with the language. Certainly, I always want to convey the contents, which is carried by the language. At the same time, these contents must be in some way already transformed. After all, the artist doesn't have to portray nature exactly as it is in reality, but only in a modified way.

You often say that music that sounds around us interrupts our concentration and because of that you prefer not the listen to the works of your contemporaries and not to attend concerts. For what reasons did you agree to participate in the cello jury of the Tchaikovsky competition?

That, about which I spoke, refers to my participation in the jury of composition competitions. I don't feel that I have the strength to assess in a short period of time such a volume of new music. It can sometimes be up to 70, 100 or even 200 scores. It's impossible to "digest" all of this. There is a risk to really make a big mistake and offend someone. Besides that, I almost always have at these competitions a particular opinion, which strongly differs from the opinion of my colleagues. Also, in connection with this, I really consider that it would be better to completely say goodbye to competitions. At the given moment, it's a different situation. After all, the Tchaikovsky competition is a competition

of performers. Considering the fact that I wrote a new work, I was invited on the jury, but only on the last round. I only listened to the final and my voice "hung" much lower in the general system of scoring (more exactly, less than two thirds), than the voice of those jury members who heard all three rounds. Any other way wouldn't have been fair.

We at the St. Petersburg Center for Contemporary music, in the conclusion of our conversation, would like to take the opportunity to ask if you will be in St. Petersburg any time soon and if so, what works can we expect to hear in the near future.

Yes, there are some plans. Valerie Gergiev is planning to present my opera "The Devils of Luden" in St. Petersburg. This will probably take place already in your new theater (however, I don't know when they will finish building it – in three or four years). I can already say, though, that I am working on the new score of the opera. When a new score is being written, something always changes. I'm going to add two or three more scenes so that the result will be a slightly different work. The libretto was and will stay in the original German. The language cannot be changed, because, like I say, vocal music is written "to the language," to the defined intonation. If the text is unsuccessfully "planted," it won't be understandable. In general, musical intonation is an intangible thing.

*More about Krzysztof Penderecki:
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