

# *“My” “Musical”*

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# *“Language”-?*

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**RAFAŁ AUGUSTYN**

University of Wrocław

Email: raffaau@interia.pl

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## ABSTRACT

The problem associated with the musical "language" of a particular composer can be understood either literally, i.e. with some possible analogies to natural language, or metaphorically, as a substitute of style, technique, or manner. I try to combine both usages. In fact, my approach to composing music is not so much – to develop a consistent language ready for use in multiple instances and thus to attain a recognisable personal style, but rather – to try to build a tool for use in one particular composition on many levels of musical "grammar". Another basic problem is the proportion between *impulse* and *design* as defined in a well-known book by Andrzej Panufnik.

The examples discussed illustrate some core problems of the music creation process, such as the deliberately incomplete "monadic" form (*Gamma* from *String Quartet No. 3*); the evolution of style in the process of composition and its dependence on the medium (*Rondeau* for wind quintet); and purely intuitive composition (*Con tenerezza* from *Cinque pezzi diversi*).

**Keywords:** Polish contemporary music, composers' self-analysis, language of music, music analysis, Rafał Augustyn

*I will begin with music – in an afternoon, after-lunch mood, untypical (or is it?) of what I am going to talk about. Importantly, this recording is associated with more than one person present at this meeting.*

[Music – "Innocence", song to a text by William Blake translated by Zygmunt Kubiak, perf. Joanna Hendrich and Cezary Duchnowski. Composition from the 1970s, recording from 2011]

## LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

I am enormously grateful to the Organisers for inviting me to speak in such an excellent milieu, and at that – on a subject that seems to be nearly every artist's favourite. Alas, my satisfaction is mitigated by this reflection: why did you not provide me with a partner in this discussion? It is flattering to hear that I am sufficiently self-aware and eloquent to cope with an analysis of my own oeuvre. On the other hand, it is a little sad that I have lost this opportunity to learn what others see, hear and sense in my music. Experience tells me that sometimes they notice things that are true and genuine; at other times – true but of secondary importance; sometimes – odd and contrary to my intention, or even to facts. Those audience reactions also contain, however, elements that may have escaped the composer's attention, even though they might be worth taking into account.

What is done cannot be undone. Since you have made me speak as both the subject and the object of

this presentation, you will now be punished with a few minutes of theorising.

I am supposed to speak about musical "language". We could treat this word as a harmless metaphor for "style", "method", "technique" and what not. Judging by the organisers' formula: "the language / technique of composition", this is most likely what they had in mind. Nevertheless, I will take our hosts' formulation literally and talk about "language" in the strict sense of this word.

The immortal problem therefore returns: "does it exist at all?" Is there anything like musical language? I am aware that this polemic has a long history and I would not even be able to say what stance "the academic world" presently takes on this subject. When a month ago I talked to the outstanding Danish critic, musicologist and music psychologist Erik Christensen about this conference, I asked him if he could find any language in music, and his answer was "no, obviously not". A more cautious response comes from Robert Jourdain, who, while listing some similarities, emphasises the differences. Still, it is a tempting concept. I will therefore attempt a quick and most likely insufficient survey of the areas where one might look for an existing and functioning language of music.

1. The semantic level.
2. The existence or non-existence of a language (as structure or *langue*) outside a specific work (*parole*) and on a higher plane – outside the individual style of an individual or a group.
3. The co-existence of syntagma and paradigm.
4. The multi-dimensional (or multi-level) character of language.

As you can see, I draw here on the concepts of classic structuralism – which does not preclude the possibility of discussing our music-as-language parallel in communicativist, cognitivist or other terms.

The problem of meaning (sense, reference, etc.) is the one that is discussed most frequently – especially in negative terms. As a subject of systematic study, music does not refer to any external reality, whether made up of sounds or other elements, in any other way but accidentally, that is, in the form of onomatopoeias or conventional symbols determined by their culture of origin. Still, the same topic can be discussed in a broader perspective, with regard to the three qualities of signs, which, according to various theorists, may refer to three different things:

- a) to an object / designate in the real or imagined world;
- b) to an *idea*, an ideatic entity;
- c) to a reaction in the recipient's mind and body.

All these three may be found in music, albeit not in the same degree.

**The first quality** only appears in exceptional cases, in specific forms of "programmatic" music, as well as different forms of quotation and paraphrase, theme in variations, etc. The object may therefore be situated outside or inside the world of music, or in both these spaces simultaneously.

**The third quality** manifests itself on every level or in every channel of communication. In music it is sometimes considered as the central, or even the only form of direct influence. What this influence might consist in is a topic we will leave aside, as in this text we are concerned with the other side of signs, not – of meaning.

**The second quality** – and the one most important to my line of thought – is present most distinctly in those contexts where systematic regularities can be found. For instance, a Haydn-type general pause, disturbing the course of the music, takes on a special meaning in the context of the overall periodicity of that music. Without that periodicity, it would be unintelligible. A Picardy third ending a piece in a minor key refers to the opposition between the minor and the major third, the (more stable) major and the (less-stable) minor mode, and may also be taken as a sign of conclusion, marking the end of the musical narration. At least, it is so in the case of a listener familiar with the classical harmonic triad and the tension-and-release of the dominant/tonic relationship, whereas for audiences focusing mostly on rock music, which is basically modal, this opposition is much less prominent and overshadowed by the subdominant/mediant relations. In a fugue, response refers both to an acoustic fact (the previous entry of the theme) and to the general regularity of the dux/comes relationship. The meaning of a variation is implied by a sense of some (what?) elementary structure organising the whole cycle – and so on, and so forth.

These examples have been derived from music based on tonality, metrical patterns and periodicity – or at least music in relation to which the composer (performer) and the audience share a certain scope of experience. Importantly, this experience is shared to a different extent as far as precise details are concerned. The case with contemporary music (widely conceived) is more complicated. I believe the following diagnoses are possible:

- We live in a "post-linguistic" era; the paradigm in which each artistic work defines its own micro-universe directly precludes the existence of a language. In the Tower of Babel, where everyone speaks in their own individual way, there are only texts, but no language.
- Only individual idiolects exist. They are constructed by individual artists or "jointly and co-operatively" by artistic groups.
- The local "languages" of individual works, or groups of related works, not necessarily by the same author, have their separate existence. In this context, the notion of "language" comes close to that of style.
- "Musical language" is a post-phenomenon that exists between and above works, independently of their authors.
- Or – the whole problem is illusory, because our theoretical approximations (both in the sphere of linguistics, literary studies and musicology) do not reflect what is essential in both musical and linguistic communication.

Naturally, each of these statements is a far-reaching generalisation, and each of them is conditioned by the omnipresent and intolerable "it depends". We should be wary. Despite the great number of solutions and musical works, differing from one another to a much greater extent than in the previous centuries (including the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), one cannot help but get the impression that somewhere between individual ambitions, methods of work and achieved results there is a greater *quantum* of shared elements than we are willing to admit. Many composers – also among those present in this room, I suppose – have found themselves in a rather schizophrenic position. On the one hand, they would like to express themselves in a unique, unrepeatable manner, but on the other they make use – often quite consciously – of repeatable solutions, or even – though not always consciously – of repeatable principles of composition. I have recently heard a piece for solo flute by a French composer previously unknown to me, whose macro- and micro-form was a near-copy of my earlier composition, which I (and others) had considered quite original. As both works are relatively little known, I rule out the possibility of any borrowings. At the concert, the man sitting next to me (I don't exactly remember who, but he was a musician) said: "there are hundreds of such works" – which, as you may guess, did not make me overjoyed.

Can we then say that “if comparisons are possible, the common ground may be found in what can be called language, *langue*, which is more than a mere sum total of the separate *paroles*?” After all, the two works were not identical; differences on the level of specific detail were significant. Naturally, the very fact of comparing two elements does not offer a proof in itself. If we compare two rolls of bread or two plates of borsch made using different recipes, this need not lead to the discovery of evidence of a language in the culinary art (although we know that structuralists easily discovered a system, a syntagma and a paradigm also in our cuisine). Let us ask a different question, then: Since we have “hundreds of such works”, what does the value of this particular one consist in? We could simply answer: “in *what* has been said using these musical means” or “in *how* it has been made”. We could also naturally dismiss the problem by arguing that “if compositions are so much alike, they do not have intrinsic, self-contained value” – which need not be seen as an expression of a “negative aesthetic”. We have obviously changed since the times when composers consciously produced “hundreds of identical works”, which still had – at least the best of them – some individual qualities. It still is the case in popular music and no one seems to mind – naturally apart from those who criticise popular culture *en bloc*.

But is it only true about popular culture? “I am fed up with pieces that begin by blowing through a bass flute,” Paweł Szymański confessed to me after listening to one more such a beginning (by one of the young Western composers, but this is inconsequential). Can this then be described as a linguistic problem? And on what level, if at all? Is this (stereo)typical opening sound equivalent to a phonological or a lexical component? And can its placement at the beginning of the composition be called a syntactic phenomenon?

“So far, so good,” someone might say, but there are also many pieces that begin with a tonic chord, a static drone or a scale progression – and they need not be clones of the same composition. Rather, they are so many examples of the use of a language. Language, precisely! Is it possible that the same is true of music composed of textures, concentrations and events? Dorota Szwarzman once juxtaposed – unfortunately only as a sample, in some review or essay – several such solutions applied in works created more or less at the same time. The most prominent of them was symmetrical form, opening and closing with one sustained sound, to which close (second or microtonal) harmonies were gradually added. That type of sound soon turned into an (actually or apparently) aleatory section, or into sequences of rhythmic strokes, or something equally typical.

I am not aware of any attempt to create a dictionary of “sonorist” or “texturalist” tricks. Such a list of devices might not be pleasant reading for the composers themselves, but for the lay reader it could prove fascinating.

I use the term “dictionary” quite freely as a *pars pro toto* for grammar – though the very existence of a musical grammar is not accepted universally, nor is its organisation the subject of common consent. The following questions remain relevant nonetheless: Does the choice of (relatively isolated) types of sound depend on principles similar to those known from phonology (e.g. the mutual relations of tones within a scale, or between tones within and outside the scale, sound of definite and indefinite pitch, etc.)? On blocks of homogeneous textures as opposed to heterogeneous ones? Which *Gestalt* is the basic and specific one? Which identifies the system?

Is musical syntax a mere juxtaposition of units on the same level (motifs, periods and their possible counterparts in music not based on distinct melodic-rhythmic patterns)? Or perhaps there is something more to it than a sum total of “sentences” – something that might be considered as the equivalent of the subject group and the verb group? Of active and passive verb forms? And – does music have anything like tense (past, present and future) and mood (indicative, conditional, etc.)? What I refer to here is not the rhetorical *interrogatio* or *exclamatio*, but a more systematic and more abstract type of relations.

Is music inflectional? How is one supposed to interpret the variants of a motif (in Josquin, Beethoven, Ligeti – regardless of historical context) such as inversion, modulation and amplification?

What should we do with music based exclusively on textures (such as Ligeti’s works from the time of *Atmosphères*), where the basic unit not only of “meaning”, but also of the mode of existence and perception – can hardly be distinguished? What linguistic parameter could be used to define the *Klangfarbenmelodie*? How can we interpret the alternation of conducted and aleatory sections in Lutosławski by means of linguistic analogies? Can it be seen as analogous to the pair of “poetry vs. prose”? Is the use of borrowed material in Berio’s “folkloric” pieces (not in *Folk Songs*, but in the more autonomous works, such as *Coro*) a lexical borrowing, or an example of multilingualism?

## THE CONSCIOUSNESS

I have the impression that many composers, including myself, have found themselves in the situation of the famous Mr Jourdain, unaware of the fact that he was using

prose – day in, day out. We speak – we use consciously and autonomously – only the language that we have been able to master, and even that only to a very limited extent.

Naturally one could claim again that the same is true of natural language. The vast majority of its speakers / writers do not bother to reflect on what object they have just used (I have used a direct one) or, having used a participle, do not try to classify it (as “perfect active” in this case). And still we somehow manage to communicate. There is no need to emulate the caterpillar who starved to death for too much self-reflection.

All the same, there are times when we wish we knew “everything”. Several months ago I complained on the phone to Cezary Duchnowski that I felt as if I could not write music at all. “Every composer has such moments,” he said, and added “I am not happy at all when I have the impression that I can write music.” As regards the latter, we soon found out that we had the same thing in mind: that dubious feeling that we have been granted a patent, that we have discovered the trick and the method of writing music “in general”, which the contemporary composer is not supposed even to search for. Even if composers sometimes do make use of such “tricks”, they are ashamed to admit that they do. Naturally, there are exceptions, such as Steve Reich and the like, or – among Polish composers – Zbigniew Bargielski and Hanna Kulenty. (In plastic arts, such an admission has nearly become the rule: Opalka counts, Christo wraps up, Stażewski assembled his reliefs, Althamer provokes people to action, etc.) My (and not only my) problem is different: how to build up attention and consistency to such a degree that the composing process can be fully controlled on all levels, while at the same time preserving one’s original innocence and the freshness of the initial impulse.

### IMPULSE AND FORM

Most of those present at this conference have probably read Andrzej Panufnik’s book *Impulse and Design in My Music*. It is a very interesting and useful little text, but it is also rather saddening, as it proves to what great extent (and a destructive one, not only in my view) design dominated over impulse in the works of the author of *Universal Prayer*. Panufnik’s music, which I have frequently tried to get to like, has invariably weighed me down with its manner of “explaining everything away”, with the schematic filling-in of the pre-conceived external structures with necessary sound material. Still, the author perfectly identifies the problem

in this book, and the same problem is also fundamental to our present discussion.

We could also use other terms. Malcolm MacDonald gave the following title to his commentary for a CD with Schönberg’s music (cond. S. Rattle): *Arnold Schönberg: Will and Idea*, translated into German not literally, but – alluding to Schopenhauer, in agreement with the author’s intention, I believe – as *Wille und Vorstellung*. From my private perspective, this problem is fundamental and by no means banal: To what extent, if at all, is a composition an act of will and a fulfilment of that will? Do the authors create what they want, how they want, and let the audience recognise their wishes? This could be (though I am not sure whether the audience will agree) translated into another question: do the original author (in the imagination), the real author (through the result) and the recipients (including the performer, who is placed here on the passive side – I will consider the active aspect further on) in fact speak the same language? Or perhaps it is the language that speaks through the author, just as the tail wags the dog, and we, the unfortunate artists, are but vehicles for a perfectly organised collection of memes?

### PRO DOMO SUA

What, then, is the case with the author of this essay?

My simplest answers to the key questions would be as follows:

1. Do I “have” my own musical language, or am I still trying to work it out? *No, I don’t, and I do not care to have one at all.* Today we have heard several composers, whom I hold in high regard, declare something quite the opposite. I do not share their priorities, though it does not mean I consider them wrong. We simply have different temperaments.
2. Do I aim to work out principles that will be related to one another and that will integrate the various levels of the composition structure? *Yes, I do.* Wherever it is appropriate, I would like to remain responsible for the whole of the composition, on the levels of its “phonology”, “morphology”, “vocabulary” and “syntax” – naturally with the exception of those situations where such a responsibility is consciously suspended, namely, in open-form compositions with the element of improvisation, in collective works, etc.
3. Does it mean that I see no connections between my own different works, and do not transfer experience

from one to another? *It depends*. Naturally, I learn from my own mistakes, and my own successes. But in most cases I try to create my tools from scratch for each new piece. If I do use some well-tested solutions, it is mostly for the lack of time, or for the lack of a suitable new idea – and this kind of situation does not make me happy.

4. What about works that form series of compositions, especially my *Cyclic Pieces*? *Nothing at all*. Those works are quite dissimilar from one another and their aim is to explore the question of time from many very different angles. If I wish to use the acquired experience directly, I take the material of an existing piece and prepare either a revised or a new version, or a piece bearing a very similar title (as in the case of both *Atlantis I* and *II*, *En blanc et noir* and *Cyclic Piece No. 3*).
5. Do you always take your decisions in a rational and well-motivated manner? *It varies*. There is no rule. I believe every artist has experienced that intense feeling – pleasant at times, demoralising at others – of balancing on the edge between the conscious and the unconscious, will and chance, intuition and calculation, *impulse* and *design*. I have made several attempts at discovering the possible levels of structure on which intuition gains the upper hand over calculation, or the other way round. For some time it seemed to me that the overall idea of my works is “spontaneous”, and deeper down – the more detailed a given technical task is, the more calculation goes into it. Or, to use a linguistic analogy, what is intuitive is the composition (in the sense of the overall plan, as in rhetoric and poetics), syntax is more rational, and morphology (though not necessarily the phonetics) – the most rational of all. But now I think this analogy is quite illusory. At other times I assumed that each individual task requires a similarly strong involvement of both these mental “powers” (if they can be called powers). On still other occasions I had the impression that the relation between these factors depends on the character of the music. For instance, the first half of *Tam*, i.e. of the first half of the would-be diptych for violin and vocal-instrumental orchestra, is in fact a rational realisation and a significant complication of a simple, intuitively developed initial idea, whereas the episodic close of this piece depends, conversely, on a calculated textural mould filled with intuitively formed musical events. But none of these explanations is complete.

### THE MEDIUM

There are composers – also some very good ones – who consciously avoid writing for instruments they know well so as not to fall into the trap of “Spielfiguren”. This attitude is acceptable, I suppose, but very limiting. Ideally, relevant knowledge and experience ought to be combined with freshness. But this is very difficult. The Beethoven-Schuppanzigh paradox has lost none of its relevance, though we should remember that Beethoven himself could play the violin quite well.

My old friend Harald Muenz once wrote a piece (or more, but I am aware of just one) for a musician reading the score *a vista*, where the knowledge of the instrument is important, not the knowledge of the music... I have never heard the result and I am genuinely curious what it may have been like. The question is, though, whether such a result can (and should) be considered in strictly musical, as well as musical-linguistic terms.

I am a very mediocre keyboard instrument player and a mere beginner on the violin. As far as wind instruments are concerned, I have only learnt the basics on the recorder and the gemshorn. What worries me most, however, is my complete lack of conducting talent (unfortunately – confirmed in practice). I have written quite a lot for the piano and the violin, but it would be an exaggeration to claim that my knowledge of those instruments is deep enough to “take advantage” of their full scale of possibilities and to search for new solutions actively. It therefore came to me as a surprise when the violinist Christine Pryn, while preparing materials for some concerts of my music, asked for the name of my violin teacher. “But I have in fact never learnt the violin; only a year of basic training at the academy, though with a very good violinist and a fine musician. His name was Janusz Wylag, if you need it, but I studied with him too little and too late.” “Really? But you write so well for the violin...!” Naturally, I was pleased to hear that, but I am aware that there could also be a kind of minor warning in that praise. Christine Pryn’s repertoire of both solo and chamber music is stylistically very wide, and it is not distinctly dominated by contemporary music. She plays Bach, Classical-period (more rarely) and Romantic (more frequently) music, as well as 20<sup>th</sup>-century works and new music. She is outstanding in her interpretations of Nono, Berio and Boulez; the composer Bent Sørensen called her an ideal performer of his works. But her way of thinking has mostly been shaped mainly by the traditional repertoire, though enriched by contact with more recent compositions. For her, the violin is a partner,

not an enemy that needs to be conquered, So I cannot say to what extent her praise might be an unconscious confirmation of the fact that my concept of the violin is somewhat limited.

When I began to design a series of retrospective albums with my music, it turned out that the repertoire fell into quite distinct groups distinguished by the choice of medium: string quartet, choir, solo voice (almost exclusively the soprano), piano, string orchestra (by itself or accompanied), symphony orchestra with or without soloists; then – electronics combined with acoustic media or without them. I have virtually never used a mixed ensemble of the *sinfonietta* type (such as Ensemble Modern), and this is not because I do not get offers from such ensembles. Rather, I have grown a bit tired of this type of sound, which does not mean I would not like to try it out one day. There are also few duets in the traditional sense in my output – I mean the combination of a melodic and a harmonic instrument. And not many really untypical line-ups.

Why is it so? Naturally, one of the reasons is purely practical: certain performers were simply “at hand”. But we could also consider the question whether the predilection (if it is a predilection) for using certain types of artistic media could not be interpreted in our quasi-linguistic categories. The choice of medium is also the choice of a language, even if we hope eventually to overcome that language (as it has been done by such virtuosi of linguistic poetry as Białoszewski, Karpowicz or – *mutatis mutandis* – Barańczak, who experimented on a specific language, but not – outside the language). This is so even if the basic idea is for the given medium not to sound “typical”, as in several sections of my two *Atlantis* pieces and in a few places in the third part of *Symphony of Hymns*, where the source of sound should ideally not be recognisable at all. Also in my *Quartet No. 2*, where the flute (if it is present at all, as the piece can also be performed without it) should melt into the whole at first to such an extent that it only adds a brighter hue to the intense texture of the strings (a Dutch critic heard electronic and organ sound there), whereas the real emergence of the flute, in the final coda, was deliberately reduced to a few marginal sounds.

Electronics plays a more and more important role in my music, mostly in combination with other media. I belong to a generation that had no contact with the electronic music studio at the academy (such a studio was available only in Warsaw) and therefore had to make individual

effort to “catch up” with the technology (in my case, I received guidance from such friends as Edward Kulka, Mateusz Bień, Magda Długosz, Cezary Duchnowski and Paweł Hendrich). Fortunately present-day technology makes the composers independent of institutions and allows them to gain experience on their own. Having said this, direct contacts, especially in the form of private “lessons”, can greatly enrich one’s concept of one’s own music. This is one of the reasons why I have for many years been attracted to collective composition – in various configurations.

It is sometimes said of one or another composer that he or she “thinks of electronics in terms of instruments,” which was meant as criticism. In my case, I could reverse this statement. I have an impression that many of my instrumental and vocal creations owe their shape to thinking in categories applied in electronic, or – to use traditional terms – in concrete music. Or more precisely: both types of media currently occupy the same territory, where time is to be filled with sound events. When I began to work on parts for orchestral works, I was surprised by the multiplicity and irregularity of rests in the individual parts, which – in comparison with parts in historical music – is certainly above the average. My music is sometimes described as linear or polyphonic, which makes a lot of sense, though not necessarily in terms of traditional linear-melodic thinking. It is rather a kind of co-existence of various musical actions, made up of numerous components. I guess that my technique is akin to work in the studio, or simply has common roots with the studio-type of thinking. Is it possible, therefore, that the choice of medium is a consequence of a certain way of thinking about music “in general”, independently of the performing forces I employ?

### EXAMPLES

The question of language is well illustrated by one of my shortest works – a fragment of my recent *String Quartet No. 3 “Monadologia”*, which has been a work-in-progress since the beginning of this year. I do not have a recording, as this fragment was not included in the premiere performance during this year’s Festival of Premieres. I had not been ready by that time, and even now I am not quite satisfied with the result. I will therefore only show you the score:

## R. Augustyn

sul tasto \_\_\_\_\_

[illegible]

[... jak czegoś ćwierć — albo pół...]

The quartet is an open form, a “model to assemble”, whose individual sections have their “literary” (quote unquote) mottos, listed *modo debussy’ano* at the end of the score. I usually invent the title toward the end of my work on a piece, or after completing the whole. In this case, however, the title was also the initial impulse (“write a series of genuine Leibniz monads, self-governing, independent miniatures”) that appeared as a reaction to Cezary Duchnowski’s very elaborate and liberally conceived monads. With regard to the titles of individual parts, the situation varied. Usually that literal sub-title or footnote was a result of impulse and work on that impulse. Sometimes it drew on extra-musical associations (especially for the formulas of “omaggio a XY”), or on friendly pokes addressed at individual members of the Silesian Quartet, but at other times – as in this fragment – the heading came before the music. It is a quote from Jeremi Przybora’s famous nostalgic litany: “[without you I’m incomplete,] like a half or a quarter of the whole” – an expression of Wiesław Michnikowski’s existential-erotic dilemma.

And here comes the problem. The formal principle of this *Quartet* states that all the pieces should be miniatures. I also assumed (though I do not know whether this can be consistently maintained) that the dynamic range is from *ppp* to not louder than *mf*. Present-day music (also my own) frequently makes use of fragmentary constructs which even on the miniature scale are to appear as complete independent units. And they need not sound “like a half or a quarter of the whole” – not at all. A half of what, my goodness! Since there is no scaffolding in the form of tonality and periodicity, since rhythmic phrases do not have to be regular in order to be complete, and textures can change abruptly all the time – how can one create the impression of incompleteness, “half-ness” or “quarter-ness” without stylisation (which is not supposed to appear in this work)? Paweł Szymański, and Alfred Schnittke before him, have been in a more comfortable situation. They operate with material whose formal patterns and “directional tensions” are clearly recognisable. The same with Lachenmann quoting bits and pieces of popular melodies and of Mozart. Such

elements were not supposed to be used here – though some allusions I may have found impossible to avoid. You can now consider the effect. The problem remains there to be solved. The way I see it, it does look “like a half or a quarter” of something, but one may not necessarily hear it in actual performance.

Another example comes from one of my most frequently performed pieces, and a very uniform one at that, which means that a fragment should suffice by way of presentation. It is one of the *Three Roman Nocturnes*, namely – *Sub Iove*, with text by Ennius:

**TRZY NOKTURNY RZYMSKIE**  
na chór mieszany

To the MacDowell Colony  
**SUB IOVE** RAFAŁ AUGUSTYN  
1986/90

ca 4" - 6"

© Wydawnictwo Muzyczne BREVIS, Poznań 1990, 1993

I said “with text” rather than “to a text”, which reflects the sequence of events. The *impulse* for my composition came from a fleeting but recurrent impression – transformation of the swoosh of wind in the woods surrounding MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire. I was working there on the first version of my *Symphony of Hymns*, and, at the same time, also on the first *Cyclic Piece*. I decided to complete a piece for choir, still without text or title, in just one day, knowing from experience that putting work off would end in constant “hamletising” over each smallest detail, and most likely – in a creative block at any given stage. Once a large portion of the music had been written, the need for

a text became urgent (after all, one knew from the start that there should be some sort of text), especially since I decided not to have my supper before I finished the score. The library stocks being limited, and myself having no access to the internet (which was not yet widely used at that time), I decided to use the texts I collected for the needs of my symphony, and found two sections from Ennius’ *Thyestes*, dealing with Jupiter as a planet and as a god. Hence the title (absent from Ennius), and the idea of calling this piece a nocturne. (Later, when I added the other parts to the then still unintended triptych, I also tried to find texts related in various ways to the subject of the night.) The *impulse*, then, was clear and unambiguous. The *design*, however... and here my memory fails me. The type of texture had been deliberately chosen, but I cannot say how I arrived at the individual harmonies and what decided about the form of the piece (apart from the bipartition of the text). I suppose that form arose “by itself”, “intuitively”, as a variant of the archetypal arch-form or reprise form, though quite freely applied. The overall point of departure was the sound itself – the idea of a choir that sounded both like a choir (they are not disguised in any way) and like an electronic part. (I did not intend another onomatopoeic *Waldweben*.) An ideal interpretation of this piece would harmoniously combine the identity and non-identity of the selected medium; it would be an utterance in a borderline language (I hope this is as clear as can be...).

The third example – too long to quote here – comes from a piece that was planned in detail nearly as a whole. It was the fourth of my *Cyclic Pieces*, entitled *Acqua alta*, for saxophone and “tape”, i.e. unalterable electronics produced in a studio. As for the *impulses*, there were two of them: Elżbieta Sikora’s request for a piece for the outstanding French saxophonist Daniel Kientzy, and inspiration that came from photographs of mosaic floors in Venetian churches. Those photographs, taken by my friend, the architect and graphic artist Tadeusz Sawa-Boryśławski, reveal optic illusions, false perspectives, apparent three-dimensionality, sometimes even close to Escher’s visual paradoxes. This I associated with a story told by another friend of mine from the world of graphic arts, the sculptor Krystyna Litwornia, residing in Italy, about how she experienced a moderate but unstoppable intervention of the high water oozing into the *piazza* “out of nowhere” between the flagstones. Though I have visited Venice many times, I know the *acqua alta* (perhaps fortunately) only from such tales and from pictures. In practice, these inspirations translated into a quite strictly planned structure with predesigned “macro-” and “micro-” proportions, though these proportions do not slavishly follow the Venetian rhythms.

The sound material derives partly from Italy, even from Venice itself. This is reflected in the “plot” of the composition: After a global flood, people manage to dry the world, and the indefatigable children of the much enduring Venetians begin to play football. (Actually I recorded two such small boys – whom I imagined to be incarnations of Pirlo and Buffon – playing in an empty cul-de-sac near Fondamente Nove.) However, most of the sound material for the first, fast section was recorded in Lower Silesia, in Proszowa, where Maciej Kaziński and Francesca Pozzoli collected slates for the floor of the concert hall in their country house. Slates can produce fantastic sound effects. I managed to collect a large set of varied sounds, individual and “collective”, which I then needed to sort, sometimes edit and cut, and arrange into a whole. The procedures I used in this process reproduced almost directly the techniques used by authors of mosaics. (I could, however, do one thing impossible for the stonemasons – I could multiply selected sounds.) Here is an example of a situation in which *impulse* depends on the proper application of *design*.

The next example comes from a recent piece, completed in July and first performed in August. Embarrassing as it may sound (considering the composer’s age), it is my *first* composition for a classical wind quintet. The work was inspired by a commission from a Danish festival for a work to be performed by Wrocław’s LutosAir Quintet. I used this as an opportunity to give musical shape to a very old *impulse*, which came to me during a concert in Aula Leopoldina given by PNRSO Quintet – then the best ensemble of this kind in Poland. All the works sounded excellent, but identical. Paradoxically, the homogeneous string quartet provides more opportunities for differentiation than the heterogeneous “four woodwinds and a horn”. (This comes out very clearly e.g. in the old and more recent works by Ligeti.) I resolved to present something quite different: a sonoristic-textural fabric without any allusions to the typical neo-Classical – humoristic – pastoral soundscape of the wind quintet. During my work I decided I would use the form of a rondo, mindful of the remark made by Charles Rosen – (too) frequently quoted here – that one of the most attractive qualities of a rondo is how we anticipate the returns of the refrain, which, given the right attitude, can be predicted down to the precise bar number. The whole trick is how to lead the listener on to this return in an interesting, remarkable fashion. Naturally, this is possible in classical music with its tonal, rhythmic, textural and other constants already mentioned before. What I planned to write was a non-classical rondo that would follow the classical drama of rondo form. Nevertheless, as I progressed with my work the music was becoming more and more classical, as though the pressure of the

medium had proved impossible to resist. In this sense my later quintet debut was not an effective realisation of the original impulse, but rather a reconnaissance or an expedition into a new territory.

After I had sent the score and parts to the quintet, Alicja Kieruzalska, the project coordinator, wrote that it made excellent material for playing, among others because “there are few odd sounds.” “Don’t be too happy,” I replied, “in the next piece there will be exclusively odd sounds.” We are yet to see what will come out of this promise – but, after this initial experience, I would like to go much farther, though I already know it is not going to be easy. In our country even such excellent musicians are not educated to work with untraditional types of articulation.

### THE QUESTION OF PERCEPTION

I willingly talk to my audiences about their impressions of my music. (In such conversations, I try to distinguish polite praise from genuine opinions.) I also admit to reading reviews. Even when the writer’s way of thinking does not agree with mine, this is a very important lesson for me. I have always been interested in the processes and results of perception, also – and perhaps especially – among non-musicians. There is no such thing as an “incorrect” or “inappropriate” type of reception. This does not mean that there are no forms of reception that can be seriously at odds with the author’s intentions. A worse (and quite frequent) case is when the writers describe not so much the work, or even their own opinion of it, but rather the relation between what they have remembered or imagined and some sort of mental scheme.

The first press commentary on my music that I came across was at the same time the press debut of the later long-time Wrocław-based critic and my close friend, Kazimierz Kościukiewicz. He commented on the premiere of two movements from my *String Quartet No. 1* at a student concert at Wrocław’s Academy (interesting, isn’t it? a daily would write about student concerts!) Kościukiewicz presented my piece in a positive light; his only reservation was that I “was too fond of the glissando effect”. The problem was that the glissando was not an “effect”, but a consistently applied building block for the “first theme” of a classical sonata form. (This composition plays with classical forms using non-classical material, and the relation of the detail to the whole is similar as in the *Rondo*.) One could say, then, that what the author meant as an element of phonology, the critic read as part of the vocabulary.

Another interesting case of perception concerns my early *Monosonata*, which I composed still as a student. Maestro Górecki claimed there was “lots of rubbish in it”, to which Szabolcs Esztényi, who never performed this piece, but he did study the score, replied: “What rubbish? There is iron logic in it throughout.” As the composer, I can agree with both interlocutors. Logic and conscious planning undoubtedly govern its macro-form (“syntax” and “composition”), whereas the irregular progressions (the “rubbish”) appear on the lower structural levels – though at a closer look the music reveals regularities that were not necessarily predicted by the composer himself.

The most interesting example of the perception of my music comes from a review of my *String Quartets* released on CD in the interpretations of the Silesian Quartet. This unsigned comment, which I found on the internet, begins with the following words: “Rafał Augustyn has never played, and will not play, any major role in Polish music.” (I quote this now from memory, since I cannot locate this review at the moment, though they say that things don’t just disappear from the web – or perhaps it was a hallucination?) There follows a list of “charges” against my music: it is not creative, derivative, too deeply attached to the past. The only element – mentioned at the end – that forms a counterbalance for those faults is the mastery of performers. The author of this critical review may well be sitting in this room now, and I will gladly (get to) know him or her – not to propose a duel, because every author has a right to pass judgments which I do not wish to question. It is interesting, though, that the author or authors (the text uses the plural form, which could be *pluralis modestiae* or a collective subject) describes my composing procedures quite accurately. What the text refers to is the use of various idioms derived from old and new music and recombined in new configurations. Indeed, this is how it works: I make use of everything that seems fitting, both on the macro-, mini- and medium level, and yet not in the manner of a stylisation. Whether this is eclecticism or a synthesis (an opposition once analysed in an engaging essay by Andrzej Tuchowski) is the question of interpretation. However, I am not quite convinced that this approach is somehow reprehensible. Preserving the appropriate proportions, it is a bit like calling Stanisław Lem backward because he used old Polish phraseology, or blaming Kołakowski for his Enlightenment-style syntax. At least I am trying to create a situation in which the various phenomena of material and technique are submitted to a free but well-motivated process of selection. I consider such phenomena as open form, instrumental quasi-theatre (as in *Miroirs*) or various types of concrete music – as tools or means, not as an end in themselves.

The conditions and context of music presentation are a separate issue. I have made interesting observations while preparing for the premiere of my *Symphony of Hymns*. The composition consists of three parts of unequal length, of which the opening and the closing last more than thirty minutes each, while the central one takes about 18 minutes to perform. I believed (as I still do) that there should be an interval during the concert, at least during the first few performances, since the complex musical matter would be hard to take in for an “ordinary” listener without some rest. Before the Warsaw premiere of the whole (previously only the first part – undoubtedly the most independent section of this work – had been performed) I was wondering whether the interval should come after the first or after the second hymn (the symphony was the only composition in the programme). Both versions had their “lights and shadows”<sup>1</sup>, but two intervals would have marred the form. “What do you need this break for at all?” asked the conductor Renato Rivolta and the director Janusz Marynowski. “This piece is so suggestive and cohesive that one can listen to it in one go without feeling tired!” Also the soloists opted for a performance without intervals, and the ensembles did not protest, so I took their word for it. After all, Mahler’s longest symphonies also take roughly the same amount of time and today we play them in one go. The problem was – my interlocutors knew the piece very well, knew what to expect, and the audience did not (as Olgierd Pisarenko wrote, which may be read as optimistic, “one never knows what will come when we turn this bend”). Cutting long matters short – we overdid with the number of turns without a stop, and many people in the audience, also those favourably disposed towards the music, felt tired. (In the English magazine “Tempo” there is an excellent account by Tim Rutherford-Johnson, who listened to this concert struggling with hunger...) And since I have not been able to repeat this (admittedly very expensive) enterprise, we will still have to wait for an opportunity to test different conditions for the perception of this work.

It is generally the case with my (and not only my) music that one can grow accustomed to it. I have frequently observed the evolution of the views of people who – having heard a piece twice or more – came to accept or like it. I have always been kind of prematurely serious, and now I have become deeply convinced that my music is simply... for grownups.

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<sup>1</sup> In the Polish version the author introduces a kind of humorous wordplay with an innuendo, exchanging the first letters in this phrase (“zady i walety”), which could be approximately rendered as „sights and laddos” [translator’s comment].

Another problem is the hierarchy of structures, or even superstructures. We have already analysed this issue on the example of *Quartet No. 1*. Another example: A commission from the Hans Christian Andersen Cultural Foundation – a piece for four instruments, a “Messiaen-type” quartet (clarinet, violin, cello, piano) written a decade ago, based on Andersen’s famous *The Shadow*. It was long and painstaking work as usual, and the music went through many stages, with different phenomena at the centre of the composer’s attention, which was also to be the centre of the structure of this musical product. I planned, for instance, an electronic layer derived from overlapping and mutually suppressing different language versions of Andersen’s tale. The instrumental parts were conceived as a mere counterpoint for the main structure in the form of this linguistic-electronic *cantus firmus*. This variant was rejected, however, for technical reasons, as the piece was meant to be performed – and still is performed – in many different types of space. It also turned out that Andersen’s tale is not as universally familiar as I had thought. Since my music follows the plot quite closely, the text returned, but in the form of excerpts read by a speaker before the successive parts. In the process of composition, I added another, quasi-theatrical layer. When towards the end the princess, manipulated by the impostor, agrees to have the learned man executed, the clarinetist and the violinist rise and, together with the pianist, perform a parody of a funeral hymn on the piano, while the cello – impersonating the learned man – plays the final cadence asynchronously.

During the Polish premiere at the Musica Polonica Nova festival, I myself assumed the role of the speaker, also creating a mini-stage design for that occasion. The reviewer, very favourably disposed toward my composition, focused on this dual situation (reading-and-concert) as the key concept of the piece, whereas in reality it was only one of the many possible manners of presentation. (I still do not exclude the possibility of creating the originally planned electronic version out of many translations of the tale.)

It may be interesting to look at one’s own work from the outside (as far as possible), for instance with a view to organising one’s output of compositions. My new CD features choral works from different periods, written in many different styles (or “languages”?) What struck me most in this purely chronological juxtaposition of four cycles that can be performed by a chamber choir was that it may be interpreted as an answer to the question “what is a choir?” For that occasion, I wrote a text that eventually was not included in the CD booklet, and which I therefore decided to quote here in full, as I believe it well summarises this problem.

### WHAT IS A CHOIR?

An angelic choir, a soldiers’ choir, a school choir, a chorus of sirens, a patriotic choir, a choir of prisoners, monks, guests, a choral society, a meeting of choirs, a choir of sport fans, a choir of uncles... who in fact are the choristers, all together and each of them alone? There are several stereotypes of a choir as a social phenomenon, most of them static and not very encouraging (the boredom oozing from images of angelic choirs could be a fine proof for the existence of the devil...) There is also the dancing Greek chorus, but who knows what exactly they were doing there...?

The compositions on this CD have “collected themselves”. It is a moderately consistent collection of music that can be performed by a professional mixed chamber choir and contained on one disc. There are no pieces for children’s (*Szczepreszyn*) and men’s (*In partibus*) choirs, no folk song arrangements, no carols, and no works with orchestra. The compositions are arranged chronologically, but I believe they also form a fine sequence, not only musically, but also – so to speak – sociologically-symbolically.

The *Three Roman Nocturnes* introduce in succession: first-person narrative delivered, as it were, “in the name of Man”; then a dialogue of lovers bantering with each other under the proverbial rose, which guarantees secrecy; finally, a supra-personal reflection by Seneca that bears no direct relation to the context of speaking.

The *Mass* introduces two subjects: a Polish choir (or rather a *congregatio*) and a professional Latin-language choir. The former is involved ideologically and ceremonially, while the latter – formally (though this does not preclude the former types of involvement). I wrote this mass for a competition, where it did not physically arrive, though. The *Credo* had not yet been completed at that time; I added it at the last moment, in late 2012.

*Od Sasa. Sounds-Rests-Events* presents four separate situations: the problem of consumption (including the so-called “bad meat” – that smoked fish went through hell) and the division of reality in the process of perception. Then – a choir of sport fans in this and the other worlds (are there different leagues in the afterlife? and policemen?) This is followed by the “lyrical us” on a sick leave, and the subject as an *exemplum*. Sas wrote it just before or shortly after graduating in Polish philology.

And finally Herbert – an attempt to complete “mission impossible”. I have always considered Herbert as a non-musical poet, some of whose texts may be sung as songs, if read – then rather quietly, so as not to trample the poetry into the ground with rhetorical boots (unless one

is someone like Zapasiewicz). I began composing this cycle with *Rovigo* and my own journeys to Italy, from which I recall the characteristic announcements from my computer speaker, introducing the thematically arranged files (the right formulas for those announcements were provided by my friend Emmanuele Cosentino of Palermo, to whom I am very grateful). All this ends with the soul train and gongs as symbols of the "ultimate things". "With such sinister pomp and ceremony is the mandarin inhumed..."?

There are many Polish texts – apart from the first cycle, they are present in all the works, though not only and not always in the forefront. "The contemporary composer" (a figure of speech borrowed from Lutosławski) frequently withdraws into foreign, old, sometimes dead languages or sprays the language into minute particles. Naturally, this may have a deep and wide sense, but it may also at times look like an escape. This time, then, I have tried not to shrink from the problem of language and direct meaning, but face it bravely and accept all the consequences. Also here the problem of "what is a choir?" is presented directly – coupled with the other question: "Who is the composer"...

### THE GRASS IS ALWAYS GREENER...

...on this and the other side of the fence. But is it? Today many composers, except for a few lucky ones, suffer because of the lack of a reference point. Naturally, this affects reception. Performances are frequently few and far from perfect, recordings – not always successful. Even electronic music composers, working with "the box", may have problems with inappropriate sound emission. I have myself witnessed my composition murdered by too loud sound projection. On another occasion, sitting behind the mixing console, I contributed to the demise of my colleague's work. I also witnessed the protest of the authors of a Spanish *Hörspiel* which was presented at a competition in a room of inappropriately large dimensions. Their request was granted and the broadcast was repeated in smaller space, after which the piece won the Grand Prix.

I often have bad luck in some areas, and really good luck in others. Those brighter sides of my artistic life include work with excellent performers, both Polish and foreign. But even they cannot always save a piece from making a poor effect. I once made a list of recordings of my compositions with respect to how representative they are. The results were better than expected, but still not quite optimistic:

As the "dead certs" (not one hundred per cent dead, but almost) that reflect the author's intentions well – I selected

six of the thirty recordings available to me (including two of the same piece, but in different versions). That makes one fifth.

Ten of the recordings will just about do, though the interpretations are not always what they should be (this especially concerns too slow tempi and poor rendering of the internal drama).

Four recordings include unpleasant performance slip-ups, some – evident for the listener, and anyway effectively ruining the mood of the piece. In one case the mistake cannot be detected if you do not know the composition; it is even worse as it occurs at the culminating moment of the whole piece, which, for the lack of one instrument, goes harmonically astray, in a quite unintended manner. (NB. The same recording contains my own nasty mistake in English prosody – both errors were corrected in a more recent recording, which is unfortunately *live*, with no re-broadcasting rights.)

Eight recordings represent a dissatisfying performance standard. This is unfortunately also true of some very well-known and otherwise excellent performers. One interpretation was great, but the poor mixing destroyed the hierarchy of details and disturbed the narrative flow.

Two, or in fact three of the recordings are virtually useless. Despite this they have been broadcast, and one even selected for a re-release, disregarding my protests.

To this I should add four choral pieces on my new album, my attitude to which continues to be ambivalent. Basically they are very good, but one could expect more energy, and, most of all, a different setting of the microphones. As it is, we just have what we have.

Even performers closely familiar with the music of both the past and the present sometimes allow themselves the kind of licence that would be unthinkable in a performance of traditional music, playing semiquavers like crotchets or extending crotchet tremolos so that they take a whole bar, or introducing emphatic crescendos and nearly Baroque phrasing into a completely static section. What can the composer do in such cases? Add footnotes to every successive interpretative usurpation?

The moral is very simple: before you make your judgement – O Listener, Critic, Editor – look behind you three times.

### WHAT IS ALL THIS FOR?

The question concerning the aim of creation has not been separately asked by the Organisers. Nevertheless, let us try to consider this issue as well, using – as before – the questionnaire format.

- Do I write to express myself? – *No*. If the author's personality clearly manifests itself in the music and appears to be the aim of the composition, it is a sign of weakness (of both the piece and its author).
- Do I attempt to refer to some extra-musical (philosophical, religious, social, etc.) issues in my music? – *Not directly*. I have often repeated that art is morally dubious, that it is a luxury capable of fulfilling some "higher" non-artistic aims only to a limited extent. If it does fulfil them, it is probably the result of chance, and it would be sheer impudence for the author to claim any merit.
- What, then, do I hope to achieve? *I hope to create certain interesting situations (experiences) for the listener, certain interesting tasks for the performer, and certain intellectual challenges for the author* (in this particular order).
- Do I think that successful communication between the composer, the performer and the listener is possible? *It is, but to a very limited extent*. In a way, they speak three related but mutually foreign languages. They are like scientists at an academic session using a kind of pidgin English with different accents ("Bad English is the language of science," one of them once said).

## TO FINISH WITH

I would like to finish with a brief piece which I can with full conviction describe as satisfying for the author. Even more – the author is in a way proud to have written it. The problem is, it represents perhaps the most extreme case of a composition I cannot explain in any way. *Nescio quid*. I have no idea how it really came about. What I can recall is the first impulse – a chord I struck on the piano, which, like many other such chords played without any particular intention – had some Messiaen-like qualities. I also know it was to be one of the many, probably the last, of my *pezzi diversi* for violin and piano, and that its first performers – and also probably the last, as the work was intended for private home use – were to be (and indeed became) Piotr Drożdżewski and the undersigned. The music was to be slow and "pensive". Then more ideas unfolded, some related, some quite at odds with those that had come before. Somewhere on the way we added the concept that Marietta Morawska used as a motto for a whole chapter dedicated to my music: the idea of an unbroken sequence of sounds, or in fact – of one never-ending, at times barely distinguishable sound, like "a thread suspended between two towers. When it breaks, all is lost, and we fall."

### 5. Con tenerezza (A O. M.)

RAFAŁ AUGUSTYN  
1996

Molto sostenuto e semplice  
sempre legatissimo al fine

© Wydawnictwo Muzyczne BIRNIS, Poznań 1997

BRE 205

22

→ sul l. → ord. non vibrato m → più vibrato

Quasi più mosso, rubato

Tempo I

23

24

Thank you for your attention.

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**Rafał Augustyn**, born on 28<sup>th</sup> August 1951 in Wrocław. Studied composition in Wrocław under Ryszard Bukowski and in Katowice with Henryk Mikołaj Górecki. He also studied Polish literature at the University of Wrocław, which has been his workplace until now. Active as a music and theatre critic in the press, radio and TV. Music events organiser, long-time member of the programme board of the Warsaw Autumn festival. Co-director (with Marek Pijarowski) of the Musica Polonica Nova festival in Wrocław. His research focuses on the correspondence of arts, contemporary theatre (also music theatre) and the theory of culture.