Between Heart and Mind

*The Music of Marta Ptaszyńska
Revisited*

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents in a synthetic way the phenomena characteristic of Marta Ptaszyńska's music, and the key qualities of her output. I focus on those topics that have not been sufficiently explored in existing studies, and those that call for a polemical discussion. These include the ideas that underlie Ptaszyńska's music, the inspirations of her creative process, problems of composition technique, sound language, her style and aesthetic, with particular reference to her supposed links to sonorism. Finally I present an attempt to define the place and significance of Marta Ptaszyńska's oeuvre in 20th- and 21st-century music.

Keywords: Marta Ptaszyńska, color and music, style and technique, harmony, aesthetics

*The purpose of music is to put light
into the darkness of the human soul
– Marta Ptaszyńska¹*

Marta Ptaszyńska's output of compositions is part and parcel of the 20th- and 21st-century legacy of contemporary classical music. She herself, along with Grażyna Bacewicz, is considered as Poland's most recognisable woman composer in that period². Ptaszyńska's output has already gained a permanent place in writings about 20th-century women-composers and their music³, but has not been studied in a strictly scientific way so far, and it still waits to be afforded its proper place in the musical canon⁴.

The possibility of viewing her artistic achievements from a feminist perspective might undoubtedly seem tempting, since it provides a chance for a redefinition of traditionally presented Polish music history and an acknowledgement of its hitherto neglected threads. Ptaszyńska herself, however, quite categorically rejected the suggestion that her artistic activity particularly predestines her to the role of "an ambassador of the present-day generation of women-composers":

I feel I am only and exclusively a composer, with no reference to, or acknowledgement of, gender. Gender has nothing to do with artistic creation, with composing, scientific research, etc. All this is just a state of mind, a so-called specific mental ability, which can be found in different people, both men, women, and children⁵.

I will use this comment, in which Ptaszyńska clearly separates artistic ability from the sex/gender and age of the artist, as a point of departure for my own discussion of her output. Leaving aside the question of the social and cultural determinants of the so-called women's art, I will focus on surveying the composer's achievements in 'traditional' terms of style, technique and aesthetic.

Relatively numerous as the existing publications on Ptaszyńska seem to be (both essays and analyses of selected works⁶), not to mention the unpublished

¹ B. Duffie, "Composer / Percussionist Marta Ptaszyńska". Two Conversations with Bruce Duffie', <http://www.bruceDuffie.com/ptaszynska.html> (accessed 24 September 2019).

² In the fundamental publication *Women & Music: A History*, only these two Polish women-composers received individual attention. Cf. K. Pendle and R. Zierolf, 'Composers of Modern Europe, Israel, Australia, and New Zealand', in K. Pendle (ed.), *Women & Music. A History*, 2nd ed., Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2001, pp. 291–294. The other Polish women-composers listed by name in that monograph include: Joanna Bruzdowicz-Titel, Krystyna Moszumańska-Nazar, Bernadetta Matuszczak, and Bettina Skrzypczak.

³ Cf. e.g. J. Weiner LePage, *Women Composers, Conductors, and Musicians of the XX Century*, vol. 2, Metuchen, N.Y. & London, Scarecrow Press, 1983, pp. 221–239; Pendle and Zierolf, 'Composers of Modern Europe', pp. 291–294; J. Briscoe, *Contemporary Anthology of Music by Women*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1997, pp. 241–259.

⁴ The editors of a volume of analytic studies dedicated to works by 20th-century and contemporary women-composers observe that, of those who are still alive, only Sofia Gubaidulina and Kaija Saariaho have "achieved wider international acclaim and scholarly attention within the still overwhelmingly male domain of contemporary classical composition." Cf. L. Parsons and B.

Ravencroft, 'Introduction', in L. Parsons and B. Ravenscroft, *Analytical Essays on Music by Women Composers. Concert Music, 1960–2000*, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 3.

⁵ A. Masłowska, "Polska muzyka, a zwłaszcza kompozycja, ma się doskonale". Wywiad z Martą Ptaszyńską' ["Polish Music, and Composition in Particular, Is Doing Very Well". An Interview with Marta Ptaszyńska'], <http://meakultura.pl/wywiady/polska-muzyka-a-zwlaszcza-kompozycja-ma-sie-doskonale-wywiad-z-marta-ptaszynska-598> (accessed 24 September 2019).

⁶ Cf. e.g. B. Smoleńska-Zielińska, 'Concerto for Marimba and Orchestra', *Percussive Notes*, vol. 29, no. 4, 1991, pp. 78–82; T.A. Zieliński, 'Poezja brzmień i nastrojów' ['The Poetry of Sounds and Moods'], *Studio*, vol. 14, no. 6, 1994, pp. 27–29; Z. Granat, 'Marty Ptaszynskiej portret w muzyce' ['Marta Ptaszyńska's Portrait in Music'], *Nowy Dziennik*, New York, 13 February, 1997; M. Trochimczyk, 'Percussion, Poetry and Color. The Music of Marta Ptaszyńska', *Musicworks* no. 74, 1999, pp. 34–47; M. Trochimczyk, 'Composing in Colour: Marta Ptaszynska's *Liquid Light*', in M. Homma (ed.), *Frau Musica (nova): Komponieren heute / Composing Today*, trans. M. Homma, Cologne, Studiopunkt Verlag, 2000, pp. 307–330; M. Komorowska, 'Marta Ptaszyńska i jej świat muzyki' ['Marta Ptaszyńska and the World of Her Music'], *Ruch Muzyczny*, vol. 44,

degree/graduate theses concerning her works, as well as the interviews given by the composer herself⁷ and her own writings⁸, which prove to be an excellent source of knowledge – there is still space for more extensive research. I will undertake another look at her output, focusing on those topics that appear to have been least thoroughly explored in existing studies.

THE FOUNDATION

Notably, the titles of studies dedicated to Marta Ptaszyńska definitely emphasise the aspects of sound colour and type of sound, ‘flavoured’ with comments concerning ‘poetics’, ‘mood’ or ‘construction’ as elements relevant to a proper understanding of her oeuvre. This is no accident, since ‘colour’ and ‘order’ are the basic constituents of Ptaszyńska’s musical poetics as concisely described by the composer herself in a 2005 Paderewski Lecture delivered at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. All the same, for this order to take shape, she first needed creative inspiration, which

has played an exceptional role for this artist. Not only does such an inspiration make it possible to form out of “cells or other small structures, something like a fragment of a melody, a single chord, or perhaps even just sound texture”⁹ of the entire musical work, but it also, and most importantly, it affords a sense or glimpse of “the Great Secret of creation.” As the composer puts it, inspiration is the sense of “the presence of the Creator’s Spirit,” a “glimpse of Truth,” revealed at a moment of artistic illumination, which in a state of ‘delight’ ‘pushes’ the artist to carry out the vision he or she has experienced¹⁰.

The extremely strong spiritual foundation of Ptaszyńska’s music is, therefore, an indispensable and irreplaceable element of her composition process. It constitutes the point of departure for all the physical and acoustic ways in which the composer rationalises her music material, but also the vehicle of the listener’s aesthetic experience in contact with her music. What is more, this foundation endows the experience with an ethical value, which the composer so aptly expressed in the words that are the motto of this paper.

In terms of forms and genres in which creative inspiration can manifest itself, Ptaszyńska’s oeuvre demonstrates an impressive wealth and variety. The catalogue of her works (starting with the first ‘serious’ piece, *Four Preludes* for vibraphone and piano, written in 1965) comprises, among others, stage, symphonic, chamber, solo, purely instrumental, vocal-instrumental, and vocal music, pieces with electronics, as well as a large number of compositions featuring her ‘own’ instrument – percussion, multimedia works, and music for young performers, including the astonishingly successful children’s opera *Mister Marimba*. The diversity of forms and means of composition translates into a wealth of sonic and expressive types of music. One of the key catalysts of Ptaszyńska’s creative inspirations are the visual and verbal arts.

INSPIRATIONS

Arguably not without significance in this context are the composer’s experiences of contact with art (not only music), accumulated since the earliest childhood years, as well as her versatile talents (including mathematical one), the ‘open’ atmosphere of her family home, and

no. 17, 2000, p. 9; M. Trochimczyk, ‘Compassion, Construction and Color – The Music of Marta Ptaszynska’, *Journal of the IAMW*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2011, pp. 1–6; M. Trochimczyk, ‘Kanon [Canon] XIX/XX: Marta Ptaszyńska’, *Ruch Muzyczny*, vol. 59, no. 6, 2015, pp. 8–9; A. Granat-Janki, ‘Muzyka Marty Ptaszyńskiej a sztuki wizualne. Inspiracje i związki’ [‘The Music of Marta Ptaszyńska and the Visual Arts. Connections and Inspirations’], *Polski Rocznik Muzykologiczny*, vol. 13, 2015, pp. 203–219.

7 These include, apart from those listed above, also: B. Smoleńska-Zielińska, “Natchnąć awangardę nowym duchem”. Z Martą Ptaszyńską rozmawia Barbara Smoleńska-Zielińska’ [“To Breathe a New Spirit into the Avant-Garde”. Barbara Smoleńska-Zielińska’s Interview with Marta Ptaszyńska’], *Ruch Muzyczny*, vol. 29, no. 25, 1985, pp. 3–4. L. Polony, E. Cichoń, *Muzyka to język najdoskonalszy. Rozmowy z Martą Ptaszyńską* [Music Is the Most Perfect Language. Conversations with Marta Ptaszyńska], Kraków, Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 2001; E. Cichoń, ‘Dźwięki w czterowymiarowej przestrzeni’ [‘Sounds in Four-Dimensional Space’], *Kwarta*, no. 5, 2000, pp. 1, 3–4; “W komponowaniu kobiety przejmują pałeczkę – mówi Marta Ptaszyńska. Rozmawiał Arkadiusz Jędrasik” [“Women Take Over in Composition,” Says Marta Ptaszyńska. An Interview by Arkadiusz Jędrasik”], *Muzyka* 21, vol. 48, no. 7, 2004, pp. 24–26.

8 M. Ptaszyńska, ‘W poszukiwaniu piękna. Transformacja wiary i ducha w dziele muzycznym’ [‘In Search of Beauty. Transformations of Faith and Spirit in a Musical Work’], *Kwarta*, no. 8, 2001, pp. 8–9; M. Ptaszyńska, ‘Color and Order in my Music’, Paderewski Lecture 2005, Los Angeles, <https://polishmusic.usc.edu/events/pad-lec/paderewski-lecture-recital-2005> (accessed 24 September 2019).

9 Ptaszyńska, ‘Color and Order in my Music’.

10 Ptaszyńska, ‘W poszukiwaniu piękna’, p. 8.

her education, in which composition (as a consciously selected discipline of studies) only came as the last stage, after gaining experience and knowledge in the fields of music theory and contemporary music performance practice¹¹.

In the context of the visual arts, we need to mention synaesthesia, which has been one of Ptaszyńska's gifts. The ability synchronically to experience colouristic and acoustic stimuli, to 'see colours' while listening to music (for instance, she sees Debussy's works as dark brown or dark green)¹² has had immense implications for her music. Most importantly, as the composer emphasises herself, this 'seeing of music in colours' [...] is not based on any formal theory of synaesthesia [...] It is more intuition and almost spiritual feeling on my own part as a composer. Still, it is a palpable and important part of my vision as a composer."¹³ Her statements also imply that she has the extremely rare ability of two-directional synaesthetic perception. Not only does the music she listens to evoke colour impressions in her mind, but she is also capable of 'hearing' colour in paintings. Ptaszyńska explains:

Looking at a painting of Wassily Kandinsky, Yves Tanguy, Max Ernst or Paul Klee, I am able to hear music which I feel already exists in a painting in its 'frozen state' or as an immobile form. I associate such painting with harmonic colors, with specific arrangements of sounds, structures, rhythmic designs, and overall musical form. Obviously, my compositions are not literal descriptions of the paintings, but rather, purely musical reactions inspired from viewing these paintings¹⁴.

Moreover, Ptaszyńska's music is frequently inspired by literary texts taken up by the composer, especially those that contain "beautiful phrases, sonorous words endowed with a beautiful sound, which [...] encourage [me] to work on a musical setting as a kind of counterpoint."¹⁵ Ptaszyńska found such inspiration in the poetry of William Shakespeare, Reiner Maria Rilke, Federico García Lorca, Paul Verlaine, and other 'classical' masters. Her creative imagination has also been captivated by contemporary poetry, for instance by Modene Duffy's poems from the cycle *Liquid Lights*,

used as the basis for an eponymous composition for mezzo-soprano, piano, and percussion¹⁶. The 'intermediary' for this work were Paul Gauguin's paintings, replete with bright fauvist gestures, translated in Ptaszyńska's music into "rich tertian harmonies derived from the thick vertical structures of massive sound blocks."¹⁷

Ptaszyńska also derives inspiration from the broadly understood sphere of ideas, among which the Christian tradition occupies a prominent place, in forms translated into a universal humanist message, such as that found in the mystic Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's *Hymn of the Universe* and Leslie Woolf Hedley's *Holocaust Memorial Cantata*, complemented with Yehudi Menuhin's 'postscript' related to its current context. At this point I should also mention the *Missa Solemnis ad honorem Sancti Joannis Pauli II*, in which sections of the mass ordinary are interwoven with 'meditations' based on liturgical texts and with the Polish Pope's personal notes. Most characteristic, however, of Ptaszyńska's music are the numerous references to various musical, cultural and philosophical traditions belonging to different epochs and geographic contexts, such as the European mythology (in compositions drawing on the myth of Orpheus), the art and ideas of the Far East (as in *Un grand sommeil noir* for female voice, flute and harp and *Ajikan – Unfolding Light* for flute and percussion), jazz (*Charlie's Dream Concerto* for saxophone), and popular culture (*Graffito* for solo marimba). Finally, one must not overlook the 'Polish elements' in Ptaszyńska's output, the various fragments and symbols of Polish-ness, such as the numerous quotations from her favourite *Bogurodzica* (*Mother of God*, a medieval Polish hymn), as well as the themes and titles of some works. Her response to the Chopin tradition, which also belongs to this category, has taken the form of arrangements of his music for vibraphone, occasional pieces commissioned for Chopin anniversaries and therefore featuring direct references to the Polish pianist (*Fanfare in Memoriam Frederic Chopin*; *Of Time & Space* for percussion, tape and orchestra; an opera entitled *The Lovers from the Cloister of Valldemosa*), as well as subtle references contained in works composed quite independently of any such occasions – for instance in the aleatory

¹¹ All the biographical information presented here comes from the extensive interview with the composer found in: Cichoń and Polony, *Muzyka to języka najdoskonalszy*.

¹² Cichoń and Polony, *Muzyka to języka najdoskonalszy*, p. 60.

¹³ Ptaszyńska, 'Color and Order'.

¹⁴ Ptaszyńska, 'Color and Order'.

¹⁵ Cichoń and Polony, p. 65.

¹⁶ Extensive analytic comments on this work can be found in Trochimczyk, 'Percussion, Poetry, and Colour', especially pp. 42–45.

¹⁷ Ptaszyńska, 'Colour and Order'.

texture of a section from *Inverted Mountain*, whose motifs bring to mind, among others, associations with Chopin's mazurkas.

TECHNIQUE AND STYLE

Marta Ptaszyńska's *Paderewski Lecture* ends with the following words:

My music starts from inspiration and intuition; but it can only be realized and finished through technical procedures based on the use of logic and technique. [...] I use both my heart and my mind when composing. That seems to me to be the path of true artistic creativity¹⁸.

This statement explains, in the most concise way imaginable, how the composer solves the problem of tension between the roles of the intellect and emotions in the creative process, between elaborate technique and the expressive-semantic qualities of the music. Such tension has been experienced by composers not only in the most recent times. In Ptaszyńska's output, however, these two 'sides of the coin' very strongly and mutually condition each other. Their mutual balance, and the choice of specific means of artistic expression aiming to maintain such an equilibrium, is largely facilitated by the composer's already mentioned gift of synaesthesia.

Filled with admiration for the logic and beauty of the "digital universe," manifesting itself in such elements of nature as, for example, the "beautiful symmetries of a flower or a snowflake, the intricate construction of a single pine cone or the engineering marvel of a spider web," Marta Ptaszyńska frequently organises her sound material, the harmony, rhythms and form of her compositions in ways that are rooted in mathematics – in algebra and geometry. For instance, she used the arithmetic progression 1–2–3–4–5–6, which reflects the make-up of the logarithmic (Archimedean) spiral represented in nature by a spider's cobweb, to construct the instrumentation, rhythmic motifs and phrasing in her *Spider Walk* for solo percussion. For the melodies of her string quartet *Mosaics* she drew on the technique of quadruple symmetry of instrumental lines (similar to the patterns painted on the walls and floors of mosques), and for the forms and types of movement applied in the successive sections of *Linear Constructions in Space*

for percussion sextet¹⁹ (inspired by the paintings of Piet Mondrian) – on specific arrangements of geometric figures and lines.

Ptaszyńska frequently bases her forms on the principle of proportionality, in particular – by introducing the 'golden section'. Of the greatest importance, however, as far as 'mathematical thinking' in her works is concerned – is the organisation of pitch, including harmonic structures. The composer explains:

For each work I compose a separate set of pitches from which I may build a constellation of sounds using self-transposing or rotating motivic cells. These constellations of sounds are generated in the course of the piece through various pitch rotations, transpositions or symmetrical pairings. [...] Harmonic layers and chordal structures are often derived from the use of a particular pitch set or scale. For each composition a new, individual harmonic plan is created. This plan includes not only the structure of chords, but also the specific harmonic progressions which produce characteristic colors and timbres²⁰.

Such harmonic-colouristic correlations work both ways. On the one hand, the colours and sound types applied in Ptaszyńska's music result from the use of specific sounds and harmonic structures. On the other hand, the colours, shapes and lines found in the visual works that inspire the composer translate into specific colouristic-harmonic patterns. This is the case, for instance, in *Pianophonia* for piano, where each étude represents its own harmonic language derived from Ptaszyńska's 'hearing' of paintings by Kandinsky ("fourth-chord structures"), Ives Tanguy ("harmonies built on tritones, sevenths and seconds"), and Paul Klee ("continuously repeating notes [...] sweeping upwards and downwards")²¹, as well as in *Moon Flowers* for cello and piano, where the various recurrences of the B–F–G notes translate the composer's aesthetic impressions of a painting by Odilon Redon²².

Another example is the cycle *5 Improvisations after J.R.*, created as a 'response' to the colourful geometric paintings by Julie Rafalski, bearing such titles as: *Footnotes*, *Dear Mondrian*, *Rip*, *Ghost IV*, and *Ghost III*. This example is the more interesting since, apart from translating the painter's colours and shapes into specific sound patterns and types of movement, this collection of vibraphone

¹⁸ Ptaszyńska, 'Color and Order'.

¹⁹ "[...] the first movement represents a circle, the second movement represents a multitude of lines in spaces, and the third movement is constructed in the shape of a pyramid." Ibid.

²⁰ Ptaszyńska, 'Color and Order'.

²¹ Ptaszyńska, 'Color and Order'.

²² 'Natchnąć awangardę nowym duchem', p. 4.

PIANOPHONIA

IMPROVISATION WITH BLUE (after Wassily Kandinsky)

MARTA PTASZYŃSKA (* 1943)

Musical Example. Marta Ptaszyńska, Pianophonia: Improvisation with blue (after Wassily Kandinsky), mm. 1–10.

miniatures also translates the ‘immediate’ character of the visual forms into the aphoristic-epigrammatic character of the music²³.

Ptaszyńska’s harmonies are structurally related to the organisation of rhythm (with polyrhythms and polymetry as her favourite techniques) and textures (frequently aleatory). However, the most tangible effect of applying all the above-mentioned material-ordering concepts and techniques is the colouristic and sound-centred nature of Ptaszyńska’s music, which is the trademark of her individual style. The sophisticated and refined types of sound, combined with the atmospheric and sensual character of her musical progressions, have frequently led the scholars studying Ptaszyńska’s music to talk about her links to the so-called sonorism. Can the composer’s exceptional colouristic sensitivity justify the use of this term? If we accept that sound and colour are not simply the most original components of Ptaszyńska’s music, but also determine its character, can her oeuvre then be defined, as Maja

Trochimczyk and others have suggested, as “an individual variant of sonorism”?²⁴

My answer is in the negative, for two reasons at least. First of all, sonorism has been defined as “the style within Polish music of the 1960s that explored contrasts of instrumentation, texture, timbre, articulation, dynamics, movement, and expression as primary form-building elements”²⁵ and “an artistic direction (trend, movement, group, genre, phenomenon, idea, or approach) which has its own style, aesthetic, technique, impact, expression, qualities, and set of musical works,”²⁶ initiated by Polish composers in the early 1960s. For Ptaszyńska, sonorism was one of many avant-garde trends that informed contemporary music in the years when her artistic personality was taking shape. As she herself admits, of more fundamental importance to her in that period were the soundscapes of electronic music and *musique concrète*,

²⁴ Trochimczyk, ‘Kanon XIX/XX’, p. 88.

²⁵ ‘Sonoristics, sonorism’, Grove Music Online. 22 Oct. 2008, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.00008cor2822.han.buw.uw.edu.pl/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0002061689> (accessed 24 September 2019).

²⁶ K. Szwajgier, ‘Sonoryzm i sonorystyka’, *Ruch Muzyczny*, vol. 53, no. 10, 2009, p. 6.

²³ Cf. J. Rafalski, ‘Colour and Music’, <https://www.julierafalski.com/Blog/Colour-and-Music-208> (accessed 24 September 2019).

as well as the eye-opening “timbre-rich quality of the percussion.”²⁷

Secondly, the idea of sonorism cannot explain away the specific qualities of Ptaszyńska's music and her characteristic creativity in the field of sound colour. Sonorism, as its existing definitions inform us, is distinguished, among others, by “the unidentifiability of the sound source” and the “unrecognizability of pitch,” that is, elements that are fundamentally foreign to Ptaszyńska. Suffice it to recall her declaration: “I am unabashedly a ‘pitch composer’.”²⁸ Naturally, this does not mean that there are no pitch-unspecific elements in her works, but the major role played by pitch organisation and by harmonic language in her output makes the associations with sonorism highly questionable. A more relevant point of reference for her music can be found in the aesthetic and technique of Witold Lutosławski, for whom limiting the role of pitch in music was unacceptable (“if we limit music to murmurs, timbres, rhythms, dynamics and such like, then we impoverish it by taking away an element of fundamental importance,” he warned²⁹), and who at the same time demonstrated how pitch organisation can greatly enhance the “purely sound-related” qualities of the musical work³⁰, by emphasising those qualities that belong to the technical category of sonoristics³¹, but do not fall within the definition(s) of sonorism.

27 Cichoń and Polony, pp. 20–21.

28 Ptaszyńska, ‘Color and Order’.

29 W. Lutosławski, ‘O rytmie i organizacji wysokości dźwięków w technice komponowania z zastosowaniem ograniczonego działania przypadku’ [Rhythm and Organisation of Pitch in Composing Techniques Employing a Limited Element of Chance], in Z. Skowron (ed.), *O muzyce. Pisma i wypowiedzi* [On Music. Writings and Statements], Gdańsk, Towarzystwo im. Witolda Lutosławskiego and słowo/obraz terytoria, 2011, pp. 115–116.

30 I. Lindstedt, ‘Lutosławski and Sonoristics’, in L. Jakelski and N. Reyland (eds.), *Lutosławski's Worlds*, Woodbridge, Boydell & Brewer, 2018, pp. 167–181.

31 The term ‘sonoristics’ was introduced by Józef Michał Chomiński and linked to attempts to “focus on purely sonic values as the main means of expression, and thus a structural element of a composition”. Cf. Józef M. Chomiński, *Muzyka Polski Ludowej* [Music in the People's Republic of Poland], Warszawa, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1968, p. 127. Chomiński's theory of sonology also attributes an important role to ‘sonoristic harmonies’ related to vertical and horizontal sound structures that serve as vehicles for those “purely sonic values.”

Nevertheless, with reference to Ptaszyńska's music also the concept of musical sonoristics appears insufficient. Our quest for the sources of her unique treatment of sound leads us more toward Edgar Varèse, whose legacy was ‘sensed’ (in a performance of her *Siderals* for two percussion quintets) by the US critic Paul Hartelendy in his 1977 review for ‘Oakland Tribune’³². In Polish music, rather than emulating the ‘manifestos’ of sonorism such as the works of Krzysztof Penderecki, Henryk Mikołaj Górecki, and Wojciech Kilar, Ptaszyńska seems to come much closer to the works of Kazimierz Serocki and Grażyna Bacewicz³³, which, as Adrian Thomas puts it, “share some of the textural and timbral concerns” of the exponents of sonorism, “but which in essence could not be called sonoristic.”³⁴

AESTHETICS AND MEANING

Of profound importance to Marta Ptaszyńska's aesthetic development has been a sense of artistic individuality and freedom, evident in the choice of contemporary artists whom she considers as particularly dear to her mind. They are such composers as Witold Lutosławski, Olivier Messiaen, György Ligeti, Iannis Xenakis, and Toru Takemitsu, “who [...] created their own music, characteristic only of themselves, and fundamentally remained outside any stylistic trends, fashions and new directions.”³⁵ Those artists earned a place for themselves in music history owing to their non-dogmatic approach to avant-garde concepts and their unique solutions to the problems that preoccupied music composers in their times.

Even the most intriguing sound effect turns out to be dull, even banal, if it appears in music for its own sake, as the main and only idea of the piece. In my view, such ‘novelty’ cannot be the main aim of composition, says the composer, and immediately adds that the aim is “aesthetic experience with its persuasive power, followed by its

32 Cited in LaPage, pp. 234–235.

33 Maja Trochimczyk comments on the affinity between the uses of percussive sounds in the 3rd section of Ptaszyńska's *Liquid Lights* and the technique of ‘kaleidoscopic sonorism’ applied in Bacewicz's orchestral music from the 1960s as well as in her last string quartets. Cf. ‘Percussion, Poetry, and Colour’, p. 44.

34 A. Thomas, *Polish Music since Szymanowski*, Cambridge University Press, p. 162.

35 ‘Natchnąć awangardę nowym duchem’, p. 4.

technical realisation in the form of specific organisation of music material.”³⁶ Ptaszyńska’s stance on avant-garde ideas has been shared by many artists, including Lutosławski, all of whom believed that the pursuit of novelty for novelty’s sake inevitably leads to solutions that are easy, superficially impressive and ephemeral, but which do not form any lasting value. Ptaszyńska solves this dilemma by observing novelty from a distance and by consciously and selectively incorporating its elements into her own musical language. She also avoids literal ‘returns’ to ideas that have already been exhausted and have become a thing of the past. Such a stance guarantees originality to her artistic work. She combines innovations in the field of sound with more traditional means, such as melodic expression and forms based on ‘classical’ models, albeit invariably approached in a creative fashion and equipped with new meanings that result from the heterogeneous postmodern space of contemporary music.

Ptaszyńska’s distance to the avant-garde and to those 20th-century phenomena that constituted a contestation of, and a reaction to, the avant-garde – can also be explained in terms of artistic generations, which is a category frequently applied in the study of Polish music, especially that composed after World War II³⁷. To Ptaszyńska’s generation (other composers born in 1943 include Krzysztof Meyer, Elżbieta Sikora, and Joanna Bruzdowicz³⁸) the avant-garde was an experience on their way to artistic maturity that called for a critical reappraisal. Rather than rebelling, as did the ‘Stalowa Wola generation’, against turning the avant-garde into a fetish, and rather than effecting a spectacular turnabout

in the direction of Romantic-type attitudes, Ptaszyńska’s generation selectively adopted the achievements of the avant-garde in an attempt to ‘breathe a new spirit’ into them. Ptaszyńska’s ‘Warsaw Autumn’ debut in 1977 – *Quodlibet* for solo double bass and tape, a work whose form can be constructed in an infinite number of ways, abounding in innovative sound effects – was accompanied in the festival programme by such works as Henryk Mikołaj Górecki’s *Symphony No. 3*, Louis Andriessen’s *De Staat*, and Steve Reich’s *Clapping Music*, whose soundscapes introduced a new, but altogether different quality into contemporary music. On the other hand, the programme of the same 1977 edition of the festival also included, among others, Lutosławski’s *Mi-parti* and Serocki’s *Ad libitum*, which effectively proved that originally conceived aesthetic and technical foundations can serve to create music that combines freshness of sound with a convincing emotional impact, even if the composer does not choose to emulate the latest trends. There was, therefore, a great wealth of possibilities and trends, and in this context the quest for one’s own path, aims, and means to achieve them must have been far from easy. It was a task that required courage, determination, and (feminine?) intuition.

Tadeusz A. Zieliński once claimed that Ptaszyńska’s music demonstrates a ‘spiritual affinity’³⁹ with the style of such great masters as Chopin, Karłowicz, Szymanowski, as well as – more recently – Panufnik and Lutosławski. One could hardly think of a more prestigious and status-forming way of introducing a composer in the context of the entire 20th- and 21st-century output of Polish music. Nevertheless, the types of sound and expression that Zieliński refers to in order to justify his ‘diagnosis’ are, first and foremost, a generalisation of the ‘very Polish qualities’ that are supposed to confirm the existence of a certain aesthetic tradition in Polish music. Those arguments do not sufficiently explain the major significance of Ptaszyńska’s output to Polish music history. What decides about the value of her music (which still remains an open chapter) is, quite apart from any national affiliations: the originality and flexibility of her technical means, stylistic cohesion, communicativeness, and the universality of artistic ideas, which together create the image – as the (already quoted) Paul Hertelendy put it – not so much of a “genteel ‘lady composer’” as of “a forceful, contemporary composer who happens to be a woman.”⁴⁰

36 ‘Natchnąć awangardę nowym duchem’, p. 4.

37 Usually we speak of the ‘Generation 1933’ (the year when Krzysztof Penderecki and Henryk Mikołaj Górecki were born, though this term also refers to the other composers of the so-called ‘Polish school of composition’) and the ‘Generation 1951’ (also called the ‘Stalowa Wola Generation’, featuring such musical personalities as Eugeniusz Knapik, Aleksander Lasoń, and Andrzej Krzanowski).

38 We could even talk, following Krzysztof Baculewski, of ‘the wartime generation’, in which this author includes also: Zygmunt Krauze (b. 1938), Tomasz Sikorski (1939–1988), Edward Bogusławski (b. 1940), Bronisław Kazimierz Przybylski (1941–2011), Aleksander Glinkowski (b. 1941), and Piotr Warzecha (b. 1941). Baculewski omits Barbara Buczek (1940–1993) from his list. Cf. K. Baculewski, *Współczesność (1939–1974)* [The Contemporary Times (1939–1974)], Part 1, Warsaw, Stutkowski Edition, 2012, <https://sklep.nck.pl/pl/p/Historia-Muzyki-Polskiej-Tom-VII%2C-cz.-1-Wspolczesnosc-1939-1974-e-book/606> (accessed 24 September 2019).

39 Zieliński, ‘Poezja brzmień i nastrojów’, p. 29.

40 Cited in LePage, p. 234.

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