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## COMPOSERS SPEAKS

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### INTERVIEW WITH KRZYSZTOF PENDERECKI

**Krzysztof Penderecki** (1933), Polish composer and conductor, is one of the most prominent figures in contemporary music, widely known as an author of avant-garde piece *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima*. He studied composition with Artur Malawski and Stanislaw Wiechowicz at the State Higher School of Music in Kraków, where he later taught and was appointed as chancellor. Penderecki has won numerous domestic and foreign prizes, including the Herder Prize (1977), the Sibelius Prize (1983), a Grammy Award (1988), etc. He has also lectured widely, and since 1972 has been conducting his own compositions.

This conversation was held at the Academy of Music in Kraków, on 2nd October 2010, during the 11<sup>th</sup> International Congress on Musical Signification.

*I. R.: Mr. Penderecki, we meet here in Kraków, near your birthplace on a special occasion. You are an important guest at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Congress on Musical Signification, at which the participants and all the other interested parties can discuss music. Concerning our Congress, I would like to hear your opinion about meaning in music?*

PENDERECKI: You know, music, especially my music, has a very clear meaning. Because, living in... I was born in east Poland. I remember the wall, I

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remember what happened after. Long years of... Forty years of the mental occupation by Russia. So, I decided that music, which is of course an abstract language, but... not only for me... Because I wanted to say something through my music at a time when it was impossible to tell the truth. So, to my interest, especially in sacral music. Sacral music was persecuted. Sacral music was not written. Composers were afraid to write sacral music in the fifties... But, I was writing it... I was a young, angry composer. Actually, all my life I have been doing what I want to. No matter where I was living... So, first... my sacral music. Then, my music which was concerned with the political situation and history, of course... I do not write political music, but... Because of the subject. Universal subjects were particularly important. Especially in our country. Pieces like *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima*, but then the *St. Luke Passion*, which was written for the millenium of Christianity in Poland. Exactly one thousand years since 966. And then the *Polish Requiem*, which is a piece about what I actually witnessed, not directly, but I was living in Poland at that time. War, the victims of slaughter... But of course, this is a part of my music. The other part has nothing to do with the situation and the place in which I am living.

*I. R.: So, you would agree that music is a powerful media to transfer meanings, ideas, values...*

PENDERECKI: Yes. It could. Through the text, situation, titles...

*I. R.: The important thing about this, the story around the meaning, is the very essence of music. Because music is written to be listened to. So, it is meant to be listened to by the audience, by people from different cultures. So... We agreed that your music has a specific meaning and that there is also, I suppose, a specific way, in musical terms, to transfer that kind of message to the audience. Are you sure that your music, especially the one without words, could transfer such a message? That there are some universals in music?*

PENDERECKI: I think that music is a universal kind of language... which is a synthesis of what is going on around me. Music, my music... actually, is mine, it means that I don't belong to any school, movement, or group of composers. I try to be myself. My music is my music. Sometimes it concerns what is going on around me, but of course, this is, as I have already said, no more than ten percent of my music. I wrote maybe one hundred and forty pieces in my long life, writing every day. So, not every single piece has a special meaning.

*I. R.: Yes, but it is important that you have continuous contact with the audience through your music.*

PENDERECKI: Yes, and I really have my audience, which has followed me all these years, actually.

*I. R.: There is a one thing about, let's say, accomplished or great composers that seems odd. Often musicologists neglect the importance of influence during the learning process, at university, for example. No one grows alone. To whom do you owe your current status and knowledge about creating/composing music?*

PENDERECKI: I started playing in a small town, as a child, at the age of six, maybe even earlier. I took lessons in the piano and then the violin. And almost from the beginning, I started to compose. I mean, I couldn't really play well, but I was composing. I remember my first piece, which I wrote for the birthday of my grandmother when I was, I think, seven. But of course, in that time I didn't have lessons in theory, I was just practicing on my instrument. Writing music in the style which I was practising, like Wieniawski, Paganini, which I couldn't really play well, but in that time I was fascinated by that music. So, my first compositions were like the music of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Until I went to school, to Kraków to study music, and then my music started to change. I had a professor who was obsessed with polyphony, the first one. So, he told me that I had to stop composing and start learning counterpoint. And I did, for three years, privately, with this professor. And then I entered the Academy of Music, and again, for three years, studied counterpoint. Because my professor, Artur Malawski, was also very interested in polyphony.

*I. R.: Was it a fruitful experience to study so much polyphony?*

PENDERECKI: Yes, for at least six years I had polyphony. I think this is necessary, writing polyphony... fugues, canons... whatever... *notam contra notam*, for one year almost, *floridus*, all this...

*I. R.: I supposed it helped you to develop the technique to express yourself?*

PENDERECKI: Yes, I think polyphony develops the possibility, the ability to hear music, horizontal, not vertical. My music is also horizontal. My music is very polyphonic.

*I. R.: The epoch in which one artist could be a competitive contributor to different disciplines is a matter of the past, I think. We should remember the Renaissance. Nevertheless, apart from being a prominent figure in the Western tradition of serious, classical music history, you have an active international career as a conductor, a very long experience in the position of an academic lecturer, you were the dean of a Faculty and, above all, had an outstanding influence on various as-*

*pects of organizational matters concerning musical life. How do you handle and balance all these areas?*

PENDERECKI: You know, I was primarily always interested in my compositions. I was teaching, of course. But this was secondary for me, being the dean or chancellor of the Academy. That was something I was asked to do. Because, there was political pressure on the school. They wanted to change a professor.

*I. R.: For a political reason?*

PENDERECKI: Yes. A strong political influence. My colleagues asked to nominate me as chancellor. I have very good people working for me, actually. I have always continued to write music. I was teaching, of course, for many years. And then I went to Japan, the USA. I was teaching for years. But primarily, I was interested in my compositions, always.

*I. R.: These other aspects didn't bother you much, you had time?*

PENDERECKI: Yes, but... they bugged me. The problem is... Here, the level is very high, in Poland. But in America, it is very low. The students come to study composition... They have no idea about harmony, counterpoint, you know, orchestration, which I had to study, I think, for five years. Because, I was in secondary school, also, music school. And then high school. I studied for many years. But I was teaching, you know, especially in the States. But it wasn't very pleasant. The students were not prepared. Without counterpoint you cannot really be a composer. You can write songs or something, but not really write a symphony.

*I. R.: They haven't any basic knowledge?*

PENDERECKI: No. Very little. What I have learned is that we were lucky because, you know, Kraków was one of the cities which was not destroyed and all the professors from Warsaw, Vilnius, which was a Polish city, came here to Kraków to escape. Because this was the only untouched city after the war. So, we had really fantastic possibilities to study.

*I. R.: Could you name one student who had a particular interest in composition during your teaching career?*

PENDERECKI: Yes. Marek Stachowski. He was my student. The hall in this school is named after him. He is a very interesting composer. Then... Stanislaw Radman. He is a little bit different in direction. He wrote music for movies and theater. However, he was a very gifted composer. And then, these last years, I had some... But, you know... Students now... They are... We were starving, we didn't

think about making money or anything. The idea was important. Now the students want to make money. One is in Hollywood, writing music for movies, Abel Korzeniowski. He is a very gifted one. So, from time to time you have some good students, but, you know. You teach for ten years. And in ten years, you have one really good student, who will continue.

*I. R: You once said that you have always written very personal music. Is there any other feature of your musical language that connects various phases you have gone through in all these years?*

PENDERECKI: This is, maybe, inspiration. In these years, I mean I am talking now about the fifties, I became very interested in electronic music. This was a source of inspiration for the pieces *Anaklasis*, *Threnody*, *Polymorphia*. It was very important for me. But then I started to write sacral music, and then the text became the source of inspiration... the sacral text, from the Old Testament. You know, I was not only writing Catholic music, I was also writing Orthodox music for the Slavonic Church. I wrote *Utrenja*, *The Song of the Cherubim*.

Also, I wrote some music inspired by Hebrew music: *Kaddish*, *Seven Gates of Jerusalem*. So, I am open to all kinds of inspiration.

*I. R: But, there always has to be some specific reason, some motivation.*

PENDERECKI: Not always. You know, actually, I wrote *The Song of the Cherubim* after I visited your country. I was listening to some choral music of the Church. And I wrote *The Song of the Cherubim*. So, right after the visit I wrote *The Song of Cherubim*. So, you know, every composer needs inspiration.

*I. R: How do you understand the phenomenon of time, particularly in a musical context? The relationship between our being-in-time and the time of a musical piece is important in much of your works, even those from the avant-garde period. After all, music unfolds and lives in time.*

PENDERECKI: Yes, this is, of course, an important subject. Because when writing long pieces, big pieces, like I do, time is very important. You cannot just write an hour-and-a-half piece without thinking in terms of form. Form is time, of course. So, this is, I think... I always write bigger pieces, like the symphony. I make hundreds of sketches. But the first idea is very important. Writing on a piece of paper, the shape of the piece I want to write. The specific timing, like the sketches in which you have the high points of a piece, the finale, and so forth. And then, when I am writing the piece I always have in mind the whole piece. Even when writing the tails, I am thinking in terms of what this fragment will be later in the whole piece. So, for me, this is thinking in time. Because the architec-

ture of the piece is very important for me. Maybe the most important. Because music is easy to write. But to know exactly, you know, what the situation of this note will be in the whole piece, that I always have in mind.

*I. R.: In advance.*

PENDERECKI: Yes. Absolutely.

*I. R.: The notion of narration is important.*

PENDERECKI: Everything. I write hundreds of pages of sketches. And then I write the piece.

*I. R.: We were saying that the source is important in music. So, philosophically speaking, what is actually the source of a sound – precisely, a new sound never heard before in music history? Is it just an instrument, the human voice, some new technology or a certain concept and idea?*

PENDERECKI: Everything is important. I introduced some instruments, new instruments which are very rarely used. Like in *The Seven Gates*, tubaphones. An instrument which plays a very important role in this piece. So, we are always searching for a new sound, a new combination of sounds. But also some instrument. Because, we are using old instruments, museum instruments actually, you know. Almost every instrument is a museum instrument. But there is also the style of orchestration which is very important. In this I have a very good background. Because, all three of my professors of orchestration were very good.

*I. R.: It is interesting how, for example, Edgar Varèse first had the idea of a sound. And he would try to search for that particular sound in a symphonic orchestra. Then, only later, did he come to this new instrument. So, in his case, first it was the longing and then the fulfillment.*

PENDERECKI: Yes. I think this is just the imagination of the composer. He has to realize what he wants to hear. Usually, it's the combination of existing instruments. But sometimes, of course, you have to invent some new instrument.

*I. R.: You were and you still are a rather welcome guest in Belgrade. You were there several times, on different occasions, in different roles. Last time, nearly two years ago, your Second Concerto for violoncello and orchestra had its premiere in the capital city of Serbia. What memories do you have about musical life in Belgrade?*

PENDERECKI: Very good. I remember. I always have a very good audience. The time you have mentioned, the *Second Concerto*, there was a 'cellist. She is

from Belgrade, Maja Bogdanović, and she is a professor at the Music Academy in Berlin. I remember she gave a fantastic performance. Really.

*I. R: And the orchestra?*

PENDERECKI: Very good. This is a very difficult piece, the *Second Concerto*. The most difficult piece for orchestra I've written, really. It was in 1982. At that time I was using a very virtuoso orchestra.

*I. R: But you were satisfied with the orchestra?*

PENDERECKI: Yes. A very good performance.

*I. R: How do you comment the current status of classical/serious music, particularly its life in the modern mass media. Would it be wrong to say that Western classical music has somehow merged with contemporary cultural flows or we should speak about, the still strongly defended elitist position?*

PENDERECKI: I am mostly concerned about my music. I have no influence on what is going on around me. Of course, there is something... now... especially, so-called light music or pop music is a little bit closer, now, to the kind of... Because, you know, even the word contemporary was only, actually used for the music which we were writing, which was avant-garde. That was contemporary music. And now they use the word contemporary for everything. But, not only that. They use some innovations, which we discovered in our music, avant-garde music. So, now there is not such a big distance, or difference between the two kinds of music.

*I. R: Yes, the relationship is now different from what it was in the fifties and sixties. In some of your interviews, it is apparent that you sense some sort of crisis in musical development that was going on after the late fifties of the previous century.*

PENDERECKI: Yes. I think that after this very rapid development of the avant-garde, which was in the second half of the fifties and sixties, music in the seventies already became very scholastic. Counterpoint music, especially the Darmstadt School, the Donaueschingen Group and also, in Poland, the Warsaw Autumn. It was very scholastic music. Music which really didn't develop. It was just repeating and repeating... What we did fifty years ago... I don't see any innovation, real innovation in our time, now.

*I. R: So, there is some kind of recycling process of old ideas going on.*

PENDERECKI: This is a recycling of already used material.

*I. R.: Why is this happening? Was this legacy too heavy?*

PENDERECKI: Yes. It's very simple. A lack of great talent, you know. Because, if you are writing very counterpoint music nobody can tell if it is really good or not, at the first view of the score. The score looks very complicated. Maybe it's genius or something.

*I. R.: But you can't tell at the moment. You've mentioned the commercial aspect. Today, you have to sell your music.*

PENDERECKI: Yes, also sending in music for competitions. If the score looks very good, contemporary, maybe you will get the first prize. But a score written in a more classical way has no chance. It is a tendency. They think that the avant-garde can exist permanently. It cannot. Because we did what we had to do, at that time. That music cannot be continued.

*I. R.: One important part of your compositional career is connected with films. As in your regular genres you are a very productive force. Can you...*

PENDERECKI: But I am not writing music for movies.

*I. R.: Your music is used.*

PENDERECKI: My music has been used.

*I. R.: Your name is there, in the movies, it's connected with them. Can you tell us something more about your collaboration with directors?*

PENDERECKI: There is no collaboration. It's just like... Kubrick called me one day in Kraków, and he asked me if I had the time and the will to write music for him, for the movie he was making. At the time, it was *Shining*. I said I was sorry. Then I was writing a piece for which I had already signed a contract. But I said: I can give you some ideas. Maybe a score, some pieces. He was listening to... and then he called me and he said: Yes, I decided that and that and the fragment of... And he really used fragments, only. Because, you know, a long piece... It was maybe 58 seconds, or something.

*I. R.: Yes, but they function very well in the film context.*

PENDERECKI: Yes. But this is always the idea of the good director, who knows how to do it. And also, in the last two years, there was Vajda's movie, *Katyn*. He used my music and my student was helping him find the fragments. But now there are also other movies with my music. for which I just give permission, but not collaboration.

*I. R: You are not involved in the process of film-making?*

PENDERECKI: No, no. But they sometimes do a very good job.

*I. R: Yes. We can agree that music is vital for a picture. So, it is important. Your music has its own life in the film.*

PENDERECKI: Yes. There are some people who know my music only through the fragments from movies. It's not my music, really. But it is such a time now. What can you do? I give permission because I think this is also a way for my music to belong. Some people never go to concerts, only to the movies.

*I. R: That is the aspect we were talking about. Because people today are not so interested in going to concerts. They listen to music in other circumstances. On the radio and so on. For the end, I would like to ask you for an elaboration of two of your brilliant metaphors. One is about a labyrinth, which is a representation of the artist's quest for an idea and also a challenge to his talent. And...*

PENDERECKI: I have several doctorates, *honoris causa*. *A propos*, also from Belgrade. But this was a scandal. Because I was talking at that time about the oppression by the Communists in Poland. It was such a scandal. The ambassador, who was planning to give a dinner for many people afterwards, canceled it after my speech. This was the speech I had to deliver after getting the title of *honoris causa* at several universities. This is that labyrinth. In many places in the world.

*I. R: But also in connection with the challenge of the composer's talent. Because the talent has to be great in order to pass through the whole labyrinth. I was thinking about that aspect.*

PENDERECKI: This is, of course, the idea that actually came to me from my park, which I planted. The labyrinth, now, is the second one. The labyrinth where you get lost, actually. The labyrinth in which you cannot follow a straight path. You have to change directions, to go back, start again... Exactly like the life of the artist. You make errors, of course. Many, many times. And then you have to go back. There are many roads leading to the wall. Many. But you have to choose.

*I. R: The composer needs to have strength to endure this path.*

PENDERECKI: Yes.

*I. R: The second metaphor concerns this notion of roots, both upward and downward, which is exemplified in the tree itself. You have a nice arboretum.*

PENDERECKI: To me, this is symbolic. Because I am very interested in trees. I have always been. I have my own arboretum, planted one hundred kilometers from here, at my country house. For me, the tree is really a symbol of the artist, which has to have roots in the earth. It means in tradition. But also trying to reach heaven, like the tree. This is very symbolic, of course.