

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Paraorchestra: Symphony of Sorrowful Songs

Sunday 29 September 2024, 5.30pm & 8.30pm

The Clore Ballroom at Royal Festival Hall

Classical music has always had reinvention at its core. Throughout our programme, we at the Southbank Centre – alongside our Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists – capture that trailblazing spirit with works that broke the mould across the ages and brand-new approaches to timeless classics.

However you choose to experience the endlessly inventive world of classical music, we're so glad that you're doing it here with us. Welcome to Classical Music: Autumn/Winter 2024/25.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Górecki Symphony No.3 (Symphony of Sorrowful Songs),
Op.36

55'

Performers

Paraorchestra

Charles Hazlewood *conductor*

Victoria Oruwari *soprano*

This performance lasts approximately 1 hour without an interval.

This is an immersive performance. Audiences are invited – and encouraged – to walk among the players as they perform, creating their own bespoke sonic experience. Limited seating is available if required. Please speak to a member of staff.

Henry Górecki (1933–2010)

Symphony No.3 (Symphony of Sorrowful Songs), Op.36
(1976)

- I. *Lento: sostenuto tranquillo ma cantabile*
- II. *Lento e largo: tranquillissimo – cantabilissimo – dolcissimo – legatissimo*
- III. *Lento: cantabile – semplice*

You may already be familiar with this work's remarkable history: how, though composed in the last three months of 1976 and recorded in the composer's native Poland two years later, it largely slept for 15 years. Then in April 1992 a new recording came out on the Nonesuch label, featuring Dawn Upshaw with the London Sinfonietta conducted by David Atherton. This was soon receiving airtime on the new Classic FM and swept to sixth

place on UK record charts covering all genres, while similar radio-encouraged enthusiasm in the US led to a position at the top of the classical charts for nine months. Worldwide sales of the album passed the million mark, and for three or four years there were performances everywhere, by professional orchestras, semi-professional orchestras, youth orchestras.

The wave then passed. The staged production at the Coliseum in May last year brought the first performances here in almost five years, and the work has not been heard in Britain since. The phenomenon is over, but the music remains.

It is music that seems to come to us out of the deep past. Basing his long first movement on a melody from the Polish folk tradition, Górecki revives the ancient modes of European music, beginning in this movement with the Phrygian mode, which is represented most simply by a white-note scale on E. Górecki transposes this to B and keeps to this mode, very close to B minor, throughout the movement. Where the major-minor harmony of the 18th and 19th centuries is all about transition from one key to another, Górecki's music here stays where it is. A high degree of repetition keeps it there. Nothing suggests it wants or needs to move on.

But though the far past is evoked, this is not, in fact, how any ancient music behaved. Nothing from back then maintains, for instance, a slow pulse for nearly an hour – and certainly nothing from back then is scored for symphony orchestra with the radiant angelic voice of a solo soprano. Those aspects of the work suggest, rather, the late 19th century, as if we were in the presence of something written by a 13th-century composer who had somehow latched on to Bruckner. The slow pace, at which the music is going nowhere, the minor harmony that pervades almost the entire work, and the voice in attitudes of prayer might also recall that same period's music of mourning, as represented by, for instance, the Fauré *Requiem*. Times here are overlaid; the medieval touches the late Romantic, which touches us all – especially at a time when reasons for grief are all around us.

Górecki was evidently beginning to think of such a work by 1973, when he asked an ethnologist, Adolf Dygacz, to find him some folk melodies, from which he chose the one for the third movement, a mother's lament over her dead son, the words probably dating from the uprisings of Silesian Poles against German rule in the aftermath of World War One. Also in 1973, Górecki was struck by an inscription on the wall of a Nazi prison cell in the Polish city of Zakopane. The wall was, he said, loud with protests, but among them was a brief prayer by a teenager, Helena Wanda Błażusiakówna, whose thoughts went to her mother. With these two short texts drumming in his mind, voiced from either end of the mother-child bond, he added a 15th-century song in which the Virgin Mary addresses her son on the cross – again the lament of a mother.

This song arrives at the centre of the half-hour opening movement, between canons for strings in eight parts on a melody whose internal repetitions give the music the glow of a simple figure repeated in innumerable mirrors, eternally circling. The canon first accrues parts rising through the orchestra, from the level of the double basses to that of the violins. It then dissolves, outer parts disappearing to leave just a middle-register E, which eventually the singer takes over. After her song the canon returns, now losing voices from high to low, so that the movement ends as it began, in the depths of the double basses.

The other two movements, where again small orchestral motifs constantly lap like wavelets on a calm sea, are together no longer than the first. Thinking of that cell in Zakopane, in the mountains

to the south of Poland, Górecki gave the second movement, as he said, 'a highland character' and 'wanted the girl's monologue as if hummed ... on the one hand almost unreal, on the other towering over the orchestra.' The movement opens with a bright figure on A that we might associate with mountain sunshine, or with the gilded cover of a book, which then opens on darker pages. The tonality slips to B flat minor (though again we are in the Phrygian mode) for the song. Eventually there is a return to the opening music, this time with the voice singing the initial figure, but then the shadows come back. This final time, Helena Wanda Błażusiakówna's words are completed by a one-note chant of the first words of the Ave Maria.

Gentle oscillations set the finale in a kind of motion that is perfect stasis and balance. This is now pure white-note music, on A and suggesting A minor, an open space that is waiting for something to enter it but is meanwhile content. Light chimes come first, then the singer, whose melody defines the music as a lullaby, even though addressed to a child who has been killed. The orchestral harmony becomes richer, until it magically enters A major for the poem's last two verses, where the mother calls on birds and flowers to take over from her. This could be the end, but there is a return to A minor and a rediscovery of A major, for chords that slowly descend. For Olivier Messiaen, A major represented the blue of the sky and of heaven. Perhaps for Górecki too.

Programme notes © Paul Griffiths, 2024

Symphony of Sorrowful Songs

1. A mother speaks to her dying son.

Synku mity i wybrany.
Rozdziel z matką swoje rany;
A wszakom cię, synku mity,
w swem sercu nosiła.
A także tobie wiernie służyła.
Przemow k matce,
bych się ucieszyła,
Bo już jidziesz ode mnie,
moja nadzieja miła.

2. Deep underneath the Gestapo headquarters in Zakopane, inside Cell No.3, on 26 September 1944, the then 18-year-old Helena Wanda Błażusiakówna scratched this prayer on one of the stone walls. Helena asks the Holy Mother not to cry for her.

Mamo, nie płacz, nie.
Niebios Przczysta Królowo.
Ty zawsze wspieraj mnie.
Zdrowaś Mario.*

* 'Zdrowas Mario' (Ave Maria) – the opening of the Polish prayer to the Holy Mother

3. A mother weeps for her son.

Kajze mi sie podziot
mój synocek mity?
Pewnie go w powstaniu
złe wrogi zabity.

Wy niedobrzy ludzie,
dło Boga świętego
cemuście zabili
synocka mojego?

Zodnej jo podpory
juz nie byda miata,
choć bych moje
stare ocy wyptakała.

My son, chosen and loved,
Let your mother share your wounds
And since, my dear son,
I have always kept you in my heart,
And loyally served you,
Speak to your mother,
make her happy,
Though, my cherished hope,
you are now leaving me.

No, Mother, do not weep,
Most chaste Queen of Heaven
Help me always.
Hail Mary

Where has he gone,
My dearest son?
Killed by the harsh enemy, perhaps,
In the rebellion.

You bad people,
In the name of the Holy God,
Tell me why you killed
My dear son.

Never more
Will I have his protection,
Even if I weep
My old eyes away,

Choćby z mych łez gorkich
drugo Odra była,
jesce by synocka
mi nie ozywita.

Lezy on tam w grobie,
a jo nie wiem kandy,
choc sie opytuja
miedzy ludzmi wsandy.

Moze nieboroczek
lezy kaj w dotecku.
a mógłby se lygać
na swoim przypiecku.

Ej, ćwierkeycie mu tam,
wy ptosecki boze,
kiedy mamulicka
znaleźć go nie moze.

A ty, boze kwiecie,
kwitnijze w około,
niech sie synockowi
choć lezy wesoto.

Text from *Volkslieder* (folksongs) from the Opole region.

Or if my bitter tears
Were to make another River Oder,
They would not bring back
My son to life.

He lies in the grave
I know not where
Though I ask people
Everywhere

Perhaps the poor boy
Lies in a rough trench
Instead of lying, as he might,
In a warm bed.

Sing for him,
Little song-birds of God,
For his mother
Cannot find him.

And God's little flowers,
May you bloom all around
So that my son
May sleep happily.

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