

Concerto for harpsichord (piano) and string orchestra op 40, by Henrik Mikołaj Górecki. Timeless expression, modern solutions, baroque richness

Leonard DUMITRIU¹

***Abstract:** The present article aims at emphasizing the compositional methods that Henrik Mikołaj Górecki, a Polish musician who passed away in 2010 uses in his Concerto for harpsichord (piano) and string orchestra op. 40. In this piece he composed in 1980, the main striking, effective element is rhythm, which is surprisingly varied and skillfully combined with meter. The apparent lack of colour and dynamic contrast specific of the Baroque music is balanced by skillful rhythmic expression used within the frame of repetitive techniques with American minimalist influence, characteristic of the 20th century. To the listener and the researcher alike, the differences between the ages and trends vanish once the baroque core is revealed underneath its modern cover. In the end of the present research, we pay tribute to the solid musical architecture and the ingenious rhythmic combinations.*

Key-words: *baroque, harpsichord, rhythm, meter, repetition*

1. Introduction

The Polish composer Henrik Mikołaj Górecki (1933-2010) was well known and appreciated in his own native country as well as abroad, in the USA and especially in the UK, his name however has no echo among Romanian musicians and music lovers and his pieces very seldom appear on the programmes of professional musical institutions [1]. I must confess that I knew nothing about this remarkable personality who created a body of copious work until, very recently, in March 2016, after his demise in 2010 I was acquainted with his pieces in my position as conductor. It was the initiative of a Romanian pianist from Timișoara, Adriana Dogariu, who suggested we should perform the Concerto for harpsichord (piano) and string orchestra [2].

The piece opus no 40 was written in 1980, during the composer's mature years [3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8]. On a first audition, its sound may seem strange; for a piece created in the 20th century, the solo instrument, fashionable back in the 18th century, having no great expressive potential as it was replaced in concert halls by the forte-

¹ Arts National University of Iași, leonard_dumitriu@yahoo.com

piano, is rather unusual. No wonder then that the orchestra consists only of string instruments, with the aim of preserving the sound balance between the soloist and the tutti, a sound formula that takes us back to the baroque era and its great representatives, Domenico Scarlatti, François Couperin, Georg Friedrich Händel and Johann Sebastian Bach.

2. Objectives

The present paper does not set as its aim to present Henrik Mikołaj Górecki's general biography, neither does it intend to analyse his entire creation, it focuses only on the features of this particular concerto, in an attempt at a better understanding of the piece's architecture and its artistic devices.

3. Results and Discussions

Despite the fact that the tempi, *Allegro Molto* and *Vivace*, are quite similar, the two parts are more different than a cursory inspection might let one believe, as the perception of the musical course the two is quite different. In the first part, the values of the notes played by the orchestra are mainly large and very large, while the harpsichord line consists mainly of eight notes, which creates the feeling of a staid tempo than that set in the score. The musical discourse of the second part is rich in eight notes and sixteen notes repeated with various accents, in obvious contrast in terms of speed to the preceding movement: the impression created now is that of velocity.

A special feature of the first part is the unison, more precisely, the musical line distributed in octaves and multiple octaves. The form expresses the pattern **A** (bars 1 – 61) – **B** (bars 62 – 81) – **A'** (bars 82 – 141) – **Coda** (bars 142 – 168) and it is easily recognizable as it makes a clear distinction between the musical structures. The musical discourse of the solo instrument unfolds in double octaves only, while, in both **A** and **A'**, the string orchestra has a unison path extended throughout the specific instrumental registers, while in the **B** and **Coda** sections, they have a line in parallel thirds.

There is yet another specific feature of the first part, that of the metric structure; section **A** advances in 6(/4), **B** advances in 4(/4), while at the end the measure 6(/4) re-emerges. Making use of a formula frequently deployed a few decades ago, the composer leaves out the value of the beat, i.e. the quarter note, the fraction is replaced by one figure only, that of the number of beats (hence the brackets in expressing the metric unit). Moreover, in the passage from 6 to 4 and then back from 6 to 4, Górecki finds specifying the corresponding beat unit useless, so there is no indication of it in the score. I will later add some further clarifications regarding the metric structure, which is so masterfully used by the author to set the rhythm off to advantage; the rhythm is a musical category which, in my opinion, is one of the elements that most contribute to the success of this concerto.

The second movement is much more diverse in terms of form, which, when considered from the particular to the general, reveals at least two layers that can belong to different patterns. One presents itself as a chain form with fine Rondo influences: **A** (bars 1 – 86), **B** (bars 87 – 124), **C** (bars 125 – 164), **transition** (bars 165 – 172), **D** (bars 173 – 201), **C** (bars 202 – 238), **transition** (bars 239 – 250), **Coda** (bars 251 to the end). The other one is closer to the simple formula of the lied: **A** (A, B, C, and the first transition), **B** (D, C and the second transition), **Coda**.

The influences of the American minimalist technique are obvious in the musical progress of the Concerto for harpsichord (piano) and string orchestra by Henrik Mikołaj Górecki [9]. The conceptual basis of the piece is the repetition of certain rhythmic and melodic formulae; once adopted, this technique requires exceptional combinatorial imagination, otherwise the resulting flatness would be very hard to avoid. Fortunately, the Polish composer is a master of rhythmic imagination; this proves a source of diversity that balances the ensemble's lack of variance, which is knowingly accepted; this is doubled by what has been mentioned earlier, namely that the musical discourse is created relying on the principle of the unison distributed along the specific registers of the solo instrument and of the string ensemble. Górecki does not create musical themes based mainly on melody, instead he chooses to use rhythm as the vital element of expressiveness, so that the piece is indeed interesting in this respect. The meter efficiently concentrates the musical discourse and gives it flesh in a most inspired manner, which sets off the performers (soloist, instrumentalists, conductor) to an advantage.

Allegro Molto (♩ = 184)

1 **6**

sempre legato ma ben marcato

Cmb *f*

quasi f, sempre legato, cantabile

V. 1 *f*

V. 2 *f*

VI. *f*

Vc. *f*

Vb. *f*

The image shows a musical score for the opening sentence of a concerto. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system is for the harpsichord (Cmb), with a treble and bass clef. The second system is for the strings, with five staves labeled V. 1, V. 2, VI., Vc., and Vb. The harpsichord part features a continuous eighth-note pattern in both hands. The string parts are marked with long, sweeping lines, indicating a continuous, legato texture.

Fig. 1. *The opening sentence of the concerto*

It is remarkable how Górecki groups together the eight notes in the harpsichord score, which creates a feeling of continuity, of seamlessness, as is required by the composer in his notation *sempre legato ma ben marcato*.

The image shows a musical score for rhythmic formulae. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system is for the harpsichord (Cmb), with a treble and bass clef. The second system is for the strings, with five staves labeled V. 1, V. 2, VI., Vc., and Vb. The harpsichord part features a continuous eighth-note pattern in both hands. The string parts are marked with long, sweeping lines, indicating a continuous, legato texture.

Fig. 2. *Rhythmic formulae*

At this point in the beginning, the process does not stand out, but further on it becomes obvious that the graphic aspect of the eight notes lends a contour to certain rhythmic formulae and contributes to a better understanding of the piece, as the previous figure shows.

Polyrhythm is apparent, both horizontally (in the harpsichord score, each bar is different from the other two), and vertically (harpsichord vs orchestra). The conductor's gesture can be expressed only in the 2-beat schema, but the orchestral discourse in the previous fragment can be easily associated to a 3-beat schema, with a half note as the beat unit.

The image shows a musical score for measures 23, 24, and 25. The top two staves represent the harpsichord part, showing a complex polyrhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The bottom four staves represent the string orchestra part, showing a simpler pattern of half notes. Downward arrows in the string parts indicate the half-note beat units.

Fig. 3. *Half notes highlighted*

The section consistently associated to a 1-beat measure can only be explained as a component of the repetition principle. It is the beginning of the motif, ascending throughout, expressed in a twofold manner, by thirty-second notes when it occurs before a 6 beat and by triplets of eight notes before the 4-beat measure. In fact, the first part is built entirely on the motif in the two bars at the very beginning of the concerto, especially in the second cell, which is developed in the polyphonic manner. Apparently stumbling in its form, this musical sentence creates an austere atmosphere, reminiscent of Gothic cathedrals and of light filtered through stained glass. This statement is highly subjective and comes from the synaesthetic

sensations I experienced conducting in the rehearsals and in the performance of the concerto, which can be illustrated by the following examples:

1 4

62 *marcatissimo e con pressione ma legato*

ff 3

quasi ff, marcatissimo e con pressione ma legato

66

Fig. 4. A possible reflection in sapphire(blue) stained glass

1 ¹¹ 6

82 *sempre legato ma ben marcato*

f

quasi f, legato, cantabile

86

Fig. 5. A possible reflection in turquoise (green) stained glass

Both are cold colours of the spectrum and this is the sensation suggested by the fragments quoted above, the music seems remote, broody, replete with what seems to be sorrowful ripples. Towards the end of the first movement, from rehearsal mark 14, the string orchestra only plays B flats, D and E notes, which are cutting, harsh, cold, then they are suddenly annihilated by the warmth of a major chord with the tonic on D, presented in the last bars as a Picardy cadence at the end of a piece in a minor key. Although it does not have the usual classical harmonic pillars, of a tonic, dominant and subdominant, type, which would be related to tonality, the first part of the Concerto for harpsichord (piano) and string orchestra by Henrik Mikołaj Górecki seems to be conceived of in an octave mode based on a minor third, starting from D.

The second movement of the concerto starts from the same major chord with the tonic on D, so the sound is entirely optimistic, open, evidently warmer compared to the previous movement, with which it is set in an obvious contrast from the very first bars; these bars carry an unobtrusive theme contour into the discourse of the solo instrument:

Fig. 6. An unobtrusive theme contour

The reader can notice repetition and combination technique used by the composer to create a simple musical thinking, which is subsequently adopted by the entire string ensemble. Górecki remains faithful to the responsorial method in the following melodic rhythmic treatment, whose path is inlaid with repetitions and combinations of cells and motifs and is first presented by the harpsichord and then by the entire orchestra. The analysis of the melody combinations reveals the following pattern:

32 Frază repetată

1. celulă; 2. repetare; 3. repetare; 4. inversare; 5. inversare cu extinderea intervalului;
6. secvențare

Fig. 7. *The pattern of melody combinations*

The progress of the previously introduced **A** section in the **Rondo** is created on these principles. Section **B** retains repetition as the underlying element, but alters the manner in which it acts:

87 Motiv Motiv repetat

④ Motiv Motiv repetat Motiv repetat Motiv inversat

91 Celulă Secvență Celulă Secvență Celulă Secvență Secvență Secvență

Motiv repetat Motiv repetat

Fig. 8. *Repetition*

The fragment is presented no less than 8 times and is sequenced in the lower second of the last bar every second repeat.

Section C has a special contour, reminiscent of Stravinsky's notation system and of the Russian composer's rhythmic treatment. Górecki ingeniously groups an unbroken chain of values: the combination of three eight notes is repeated twice, identically in terms of the melody, three eight notes follow, on different sounds, which are accented. A structure emerges, which consists of four elements, in a square-like configuration. On analysis, the fragment fascinates: the metre is binary, the conductor's beat in 1 (given the tempo), with gestures that can be imagined in a 3-beat schemata, while the eight notes are organized in groups of four in a ternary manner.

The figure shows a musical score for a section titled 'Groups of eight notes'. The score is in 2/4 time and features a complex polyphonic texture. The top staff shows a melodic line with a dynamic marking of 'ff'. It is divided into two sections: 'Motiv' and 'Motiv repetat variat'. The 'Motiv' section consists of four elements: 'Celula 1', 'Secvență', 'Secvență', and 'Celula 2'. The 'Motiv repetat variat' section consists of four elements: 'Celula 1', 'Secvență', 'Secvență', and 'Celula 2 variată'. The bottom three staves show a rhythmic accompaniment with a dynamic marking of 'ff'. Arrows point from the top staff to the bottom staves, indicating the relationship between the melodic and rhythmic parts.

Fig. 9. *Groups of eight notes*

The sound itself is reminiscent of the scenes of the ballet *Le sacre du printemps*, especially in the persistent repetition by the orchestra of the same sounds, however, the Polish composer's masterful combinatorial skill manifested in the co-existence of different rhythmic and metre developments stands out.

The rhythmic imagination is fresh in section D, where the use of polyphonic technique (repetition, imitation, reversal) helps Górecki achieve a striking, conceptually interesting sound surface.

10

185

188

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a concerto. The first system, starting at measure 185, is marked with a circled '10'. It consists of six staves. The top staff (treble clef) features a melodic line with eighth notes and slurs. The second staff (treble clef) has a similar melodic line with a different intervallic structure. The third staff (treble clef) contains a more complex melodic line with slurs and accents. The fourth and fifth staves (treble and bass clefs) show sustained notes with long horizontal lines above them, indicating a sustained harmonic texture. The sixth staff (treble clef) has a melodic line with slurs and accents. The second system, starting at measure 188, also consists of six staves. The top staff (treble clef) has a melodic line with slurs. The second staff (treble clef) has a melodic line with slurs. The third staff (treble clef) has a melodic line with slurs and accents. The fourth and fifth staves (treble and bass clefs) show sustained notes with long horizontal lines above them. The sixth staff (treble clef) has a melodic line with slurs and accents.

Fig. 10. Polyphonic technique

On closer inspection, the technique of layers can be identified, which was so frequently used by Stravinsky.

Section C is repeated identically, while the **transition** that follows repeats the first cell of three eight notes, which is reproduced 11 times before the **Coda**, in a similar construction as section B; both share the same orchestral path, but a descending chromatic scale is added on an interval of an eleventh followed by 40 repeated bars.

The figure displays two systems of musical notation. The first system, starting at measure 251, consists of five staves: two treble clefs, two bass clefs, and a double bass clef. It shows a complex orchestral texture with various rhythmic patterns and accidentals. The second system, starting at measure 255, features a circled number '15' above the first staff. This system includes a harpsichord part with a descending chromatic scale in the upper register, indicated by a series of 'v' marks above the notes. The lower staves continue the orchestral path from the first system.

Fig. 11. *The onset of the Coda and the orchestral path are retained, as well as the chromatism in the harpsichord part*

The seven final bars bring back the initial motif of part I, presented by the harpsichord in a dual harmonic context, while the final two chords create a major sonority, specific of the endings of pieces in a minor key characteristic of the Baroque.

The image shows a musical score for measures 337 to 343. The top system is for the harpsichord, with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). Above the staff, the numbers 4, 2, 6, 4, 2 are written, indicating fingerings for the right hand. The harpsichord part begins with a rest, followed by a melodic line starting in measure 338. Dynamic markings include *f* (forte) and *fff* (fortissimo). The bottom system is for the string orchestra, with a bass clef and a key signature of one sharp. It features sustained chords and moving bass lines, with some notes tied across measures.

Fig. 12. *Dual harmonic context*

4. Conclusions

At the end of the analysis of the Concerto for harpsichord (piano) and string orchestra, op. 40 by Henrik Mikołaj Górecki, we are confident that we are presented with a piece which is extremely interesting in terms of musical architecture and highly expressive in terms of sound. Moreover, the intense study of the score and its filtered through one's own mental ear can be conducive to synaesthetic experiences and even philosophical musings.

The instrumental formula the author chose and the entire sound development take us back to the Baroque era, in the first section due to its austere aspect, in the second section due to its decorative nature and its brilliance, both characteristics of this musical trend. The devices used for the sound treatment are concurrent with the period of instrumental polyphony, however, repetition, imitation, reversal are closer

to the minimalist technique, which was characteristic of a short-lived period in the history of music in the latter half of the previous century [9]. Nevertheless, the rhythm and metre take modern shape, remarkable for its galvanizing originality; this is the very characteristic of the Polish composer's music that makes the novelty in the concerto under discussion. Górecki's innovation is precisely the polyrhythmics and polymetrics coexisting with Baroque melody and colour, combining to create an ethos whose ageless humanity transcends trends and periods.

I express my deep admiration for the musical piece analysed here and again express my regret that Henrik Mikołaj Górecki's music, generous and universal in its message, is so little known to Romanian musicians and music lovers.

5. Acknowledgements

For the purpose of the present study, the author used the 1982 edition of the score of Henrik Mikołaj Górecki's Concerto for harpsichord (piano) and string orchestra, Kraków, Poland, made available by the "Banatul" Philharmonic Orchestra, Timisoara, and offered by the Polish Institute of Bucharest for the concert on March 24 2016.

6. References

1. *Grove Music* III-rd. edition
2. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harpsichord>
3. Thomas, Adrian 2005. *Polish Music since Szymanowski*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
4. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henryk_Górecki
5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_compositions_by_Henryk_Górecki
6. http://www.usc.edu/dept/polish_music/composer/gorecki.html
7. http://www.naxos.com/person/Henryk_Gorecki/26071.htm
8. <http://culture.pl/en/artist/henryk-mikolaj-gorecki>
9. <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/cult-fame-discontents>