



Henryk GÓRECKI

Harpsichord Concerto, Op. 40

Henryk Mikołaj Górecki (6 December 1933 – 12 November 2010) was a Polish composer. As both of his parents were amateur musicians, Górecki developed an interest in music from an early age, though he was discouraged by both his father and stepmother (his mother had passed when he was 2), who forbade him from playing his mother's old piano. Górecki persisted, however, and began violin lessons at 10. From 1951-1953, Górecki was trained as a primary-school teacher, and where he studied clarinet, violin, piano, and music theory. He managed to finish the 4-year program in under 3 years, but the budding composer struggled financially, as teaching posts did not pay well, and the shortage economy made manuscript paper difficult to acquire. Due to this lack of access, Górecki did not formally become a composer until he was 22, after enrolling at the State Higher School of Music in Katowice. Even though he was learning techniques such as 12-tone serialism, Górecki's teacher, Bolesław Szabelski – a former student of the renowned composer Karol Szymanowski – encouraged him to develop his own sound, leading him to compose numerous early works in the neo-classical style. After graduating from the school with honours, Górecki became a professor of composition at his alma mater in 1975, where he began to notice the pestering of the authorities and communist party. In 1979, he resigned from his post in protest at the government's refusal to allow Pope John Paul II to visit Katowice and formed a local branch of the "Catholic Intellectuals Club". Apart from two brief periods of study in Paris in the early 1960s (where he heard the works of Webern, Stockhausen, and Messiaen which were unavailable in Poland) and a stay in Berlin in 1973 cut short due to serious illness, Górecki remained in southern Poland for much of his life. Early in his career, Górecki became a sensation as an avant-garde composer, using dissonance and serialism to firmly place himself at the forefront of Polish classical musicians. However, Górecki would soon stray away from this type of composition, and became more centered on the human voice. Using his love for religion, in 1972 he used a choir in his second symphony to set Psalm verses to music, as well as an excerpt from Nicolaus Copernicus's text on the heliocentric theory. Until 1992, Górecki was only known to music connoisseurs until the release of a recording of his 15-year-old Symphony No. 3 (1977) by the London Sinfonietta. The recording stayed at the top of the US classical charts for 38 weeks, but despite the fame he earned, he changed his style once again for his fourth symphony. Unfortunately, Górecki suffered from frequent illness in the last decade of his life, and passed away in Katowice in 2010.

Concerto for harpsichord (or piano) & orchestra, Op. 40 (1980) was written as a commission for Andrzej Chłopecki, head of the Polish Radio Music Section. This piece marked the first time in over a decade that Górecki had written a purely instrumental piece with no voices. While Górecki's third symphony was uniquely comprised of 3 slow movements, this concerto swings the other way with 2 quick halves. Elżbieta Chojnacka, to whom the piece was dedicated and written for, stressed that each performance of the Concerto – which she had performed worldwide – ended with an encore.

The first movement (*Allegro molto*) consists of a long, slow melody in the strings in octaves, while the harpsichord plays a seemingly unending onslaught of notes. Each new string phrase is accompanied by a rising motif by the soloist. A fairly strict natural minor tonality (Aeolian mode) is set until a contrasting middle section sees the harpsichord shift to tense descending chromatic figures. The strings, which are now harmonizing in thirds, remain rooted in the Aeolian mode, making the chromatic passages of the soloist all the more eerie. The music seamlessly returns to the original material, carrying the movement through to the end. The music becomes quite fractured as it nears its end, finally landing on a sustained major triad.

The second movement (*Vivace*) is dance-like, with a jaunty, nimble melody being passed back and forth between the soloist and the strings. While the movement is in D major, blocks of material are set in contrasting, more complex, sonority. The two forces eventually start to play off each other, as the soloist and orchestra come together with one fleeting reference to the first movement before a final resolution on the tonic triad.