

ARMENIAN ROOTS OF POLISH COMPOSER KRZYSZTOF PENDERECKI

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With his first works on, renowned Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki became one of the most famous figures of the world avant-garde music.

At the beginning of the 1970s, in the Komitas State Conservatory of Yerevan, when listening to Krzysztof Penderecki's work "St. Luke Passion" (for 3 voices, narrator, chorus & orchestra), composed in 1965, there spread whispers among musicologists that he had Armenian roots as well. Later it turned out that the information had a real basis: his grandmother was indeed Armenian. It is interesting to note his full name - Krzysztof Eugeniusz Penderecki, and his Armenian grandmother's name was Eugenia, which means that as his second name Penderecki took his grandmother's name: this probably proves their close spiritual connection.

Born in 1933 in the city of Dembitsa of Poland¹ Penderecki studied composition in Krakow -in the State Higher School of Music, where he taught from 1959, and from 1972 he was rector of that educational institution.

Penderecki is one of the greatest and brightest representatives of the Polish musical world and is both a composer and a conductor. As a composer he has always been distinguished by his modern thinking and innovation of composition. His works are notable for their sonoristics and coloristics of sound. Using unique and unusual effects, such as rhythmic declamation and noise techniques, Penderecki was able to achieve impressive expression. He is known to the music world also as an exceptional experimenter, and in creating his every work he combines musical instruments that previously were deemed incompatible, enriching the sound of the symphony orchestra, for example, connecting string and percussion instruments, or revealing new colour opportunities by the combination of orchestral register poles. Penderecki is also the author of jazz and electronic music.

Penderecki's musical imagination is infinite. His works express fundamental human and universal ideas. In his own way Penderecki responded to the great

tragedies that shocked mankind: he called one of his first orchestral works of 1960 "Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima" (for 52 instruments), and later he composed also the oratorio "Dies Irae", devoted to the victims of Auschwitz. Of his remarkable orchestral works are: "Polimorphie" (for 48 instruments, 1961), "Capriccio for the violin and orchestra" (1967), "Partita for the harpsichord, electric guitar, double bass and chamber orchestra" (1971), "Actions" - for a jazz ensemble (1971). He created also a number of works for the piano with the combination of different instruments.

Penderecki has a special attitude towards the choral art for which he has created numerous works. He entered the international music world with his first choral works: Psalms of David (Psalm Dawida 1958) - for mixed choir and percussion, "Strophe" - for the soprano, narrator and 10 instruments (1959), "Dimensions of time and silence" - for a 40-person mixed choir and chamber ensemble (1961), "Stabat Mater" (a capella, 1962), "St. Luke passion" - "Passio et mors Domini nostri Jesu Christi, secundum Lucam" (with the boys' choir, 1965), "Song of songs" - "Canticum canticorum" (1973).

Penderecki first came to Armenia in 2008 and it was indeed a historical event both in his life and in the musical life of Armenia. This is what he told about his roots to "Deutsche Welle": "I have received a strong religious upbringing. My family was very tolerant. My grandfather was a German and Protestant. My father was a lawyer, Greek catholic, and played the violin. My mother was a strong believer and went to church twice a day. My grandmother was an Armenian. So, I have grown up among different confessions: that is the reason why I am so tolerant. I have written a lot of works that sound in old Slavonic texts. Unfortunately, I have not yet written any music accompanied by Armenian speech, but I am going to do it"².

Penderecki considers Armenia his second homeland and for several years he has adapted his extremely tight schedule to the important music events in Armenia. He tries to be here as frequently as possible and to bring his active participation in the musical life of Yerevan. On November 22, 2013 the renowned composer celebrated his 80th birthday, on the eve of which he was awarded with the 1st class medal of the RA President for "Distinguished **Service to Fatherland**". And in 2014, the jubilee 15th year of the international music festival "Yerevan perspectives"³ started with the concert series (from January 13-16) dedicated to the 80th anniversary of Penderecki. During the

¹ «Музыкальная энциклопедия», т. 4, Москва, 1978, стр. 226-227.

² "Deutsche Welle", Հովհաննես Իշխանյան, Պենդերեցկին հայերեն խոսքով երաժշտություն կգրի, «Առավոտ», 2013, Նոյ. 30:

³ It should be mentioned that the festival "Yerevan perspectives" has become a member of the European festival association since 2007, and in the whole world only 100 festivals are members of that association.

four concerts more than twenty of his instrumental, vocal, chamber and symphonic works were performed by the best Armenian and foreign musicians, during which the prominent composer acted as a skilled conductor as well. It was Penderecki's third visit to Armenia: "My first visit here was in 2008 and I have to say that every time I come to Armenia with greatest pleasure. Of course this has an emotional side as well connected with the genes: my grandmother was Armenian"⁴, - Krzysztof Penderecki told the mass media.

Maestro told the correspondent of the "Aravot" newspaper that the String Quartet N3 named "Pages of an Unwritten Diary" he composed according to an Armenian theme. In his interview with the correspondent of NEWS.am the composer noted: "Now I am going to write a work based on the text of psalms which will be dedicated to the victims of the Armenian Genocide"⁵. According to the composer he is very enthusiastic about the Days devoted to him, which has become a tradition in our Armenia: "I perfectly remember all the festivals and the performance of my music with great professionalism. I hope it will be continual"⁶.



Krzysztof Penderecki expressed his admiration for Armenian musicians as well, especially pointing out the exceptional mastery of the Armenian choir "Hover"'s (the art

⁴ Սիրանուշ Հայրապետյան, «Առավոտ», 2014, Հունվար 13:

⁵ The famous composer Penderecki about his work dedicated to the victims of the Armenian Genocide and about the Armenian musicians, NEWS.am, Style, 13 հունվարի:

⁶ Ibid.

director and conductor, honoured art worker Sona Hovhannisyan) performance⁷. His wife, President of the “Ludwig van Beethoven” fund Eljbieta Penderecki, gave her high assessment also to the Armenian Youth and Philharmonic choirs which often performs the Maestro’s works with great professionalism. The composer told the Armenian journalists about his Armenian roots. According to him, his Armenian grandmother, Mrs. Eugenia had moved to Poland from Iran, and they used to attend the Armenian church in Krakow together. In her turn Penderecki’s wife added that they are closely connected to the Armenian community in Poland and their daughter has Armenian eyes which will definitely pass from generation to generation⁸.

On January 25, 2016 the Armenian State Youth choir celebrated the 10-year anniversary of its establishment. Krzysztof Penderecki was again in Yerevan on this occasion: “I first listened to the Youth choir two years ago. At that time I liked their performance of my symphony very much. Last year I was present at Sergey’s debut in Poland and I am convinced he has a great future: it is already evident now”⁹. “I am interested in young musicians because I am establishing a music center in Poland”¹⁰. In 2015 he already hosted the choir “Hover” in his center, as well as in his house and showed them his Armenian grandmother’s photos. Armenian singers enjoyed unforgettable moments during concert tours in several cities of Poland. The composer said that he communicated with young musicians all the time since they have great enthusiasm.

Keeping his promise, at the beginning of 2015 Krzysztof Penderecki composed the “Psalm” dedicated to the Centennial of the Armenian Genocide (“Psalmus No.3 for Armenia”) for the choir and soloists. It was performed by the choir “Hover” and soloist Liparit Asatryan in a number of cities, including the famous Carnegie Hall in New York (watch video of the performance). Several other of his choral songs were also professionally performed by “Hover”: “Agnus dei”, “Missa Brevis”, “De Profundis”, as well as the choral song “Miserere” (together with the children’s choir “Speghani”).

In 2016 Krzysztof Penderecki and his wife visited the museum-institute after Komitas where his music was performed. After attending the exhibition halls with silent reverence they left original notes in the memorandum book. The Maestro confessed to the journalists that he had left his note in the form of music notes: it was a part from his work. He also mentioned that Komitas had made a considerable influence on his work.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Գոհար Հակոբյան, «Առավոտ», Հունվար 20, 2016:

“It is an amazing and unique phenomenon, when the composer is also a hero: and Komitas is just like that”¹¹, - said Penderecki in the interview with the correspondent of “Sputnik Armenia”.

It should be added that Krzysztof Penderecki has thrice received “Grammy” and twice “Emmy” awards, and he has also received many prestigious state awards of different countries.

*Translated from Armenian
by S. E. Chraghyan*

¹⁰ «Առավոտ», 2016, Հունվար 25:

¹¹ Sputnik.co.am/Armenia/20160126/1756115.htm Պենդերեցկի. Ինձ վրա ազդել է Կոմիտասի ստեղծագործությունը, Հայաստան, 26.01.2016, Լաուրա Սարգսյան: