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THE POETRY OF ZBIGNIEW HERBERT AS INSPIRATION FOR
ZYGMENT MYCIELSKI'S COMPOSITIONS*

Zygmunt Mycielski (1907–87) was a composer who often reached for the written word in his work. He was particularly sensitive to poetry, including works by authors whom he knew personally and who were his friends. He composed cycles of songs to poems by Czesław Miłosz (*Ocalenie* [Rescue] for mezzo-soprano or baritone and piano, 1945–48) and Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz (*Kragły rok* [All year round] for baritone and piano, 1965–68), as well as vocal-instrumental pieces to the poetry of Konstanty Gałczyński (*Portret Muzy* [Portrait of a muse] for reciter, mixed choir and small orchestra, 1947; *Kwiaty na tor* [Flowers on the tracks] for mixed choir a cappella, 1949) and Paweł Hertz (*Nowy lirnik mazowiecki* [New Mazovian lyricist] for soprano, baritone, mixed choir and orchestra, 1955). From his early period comes probably his most popular song cycle, written to words by Bruno Jasiński (*Pięć pieśni weselnych* [Five wedding songs] for soprano and piano, 1934), as well as songs preserved in manuscript to poems by Leopold Staff, Cyprian Kamil Norwid, Emil Zegadłowicz, Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska, Maria Modrakowska and the composer himself. The list demonstrates that Mycielski was particularly fond of Polish poetry, although his compositions also include *Stimmen eines jungen Bruders* to words by Reiner Maria Rilke (1938) and *Wolność* [Freedom] to words by Alexander Pushkin translated into Polish by Julian Tuwim (1949). Towards the end of his life, he turned to religious texts in Latin (*Psalms* for baritone, mixed choir and orchestra, 1982; *Liturgia sacra* for mixed choir and orchestra, 1984–85), as well as the poetry of Juliusz Słowacki (*Frag-*

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menty [Fragments] for choir and small orchestra, 1986–87). Yet at this point I would like to focus on the role played in Zygmunt Mycielski's oeuvre by the verse of another outstanding Polish poet, Zbigniew Herbert (1924–98).

Mycielski met Herbert most likely in the early 1950s, when the poet moved from the Gdańsk conurbation to Warsaw. He was already regarded as a promising writer. The two men moved in similar circles, and in 1956–57 Herbert began to work for the Polish Composers' Union as office manager.¹ Although Mycielski was no longer a member of the PCU Board, he certainly visited the organisation's office and must have had contact with its manager. In any case, there would have been more opportunities for the two men to talk. Their relations were not as close as Mycielski's friendship with Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Paweł Hertz or even Czesław Miłosz, as Herbert belonged to a different generation, but they did remain warm. The composer was also strongly influenced by Herbert's poetry. It inspired his *Six Songs* for orchestra (1978) and *Eight Songs to Words by Zbigniew Herbert* for baritone and piano (1984). The composition of both works coincided with the composer's stay at a fairy-tale Californian ranch in Ojai as a guest of Mima (Germaine) Porter, sister of his long-time French friend, the composer and pianist Marcelle de Manziarly. He first went to Ojai in 1978 and visited Mrs Porter again in 1980, 1981, 1984 and 1985. He composed *Six Songs* for orchestra there in 1978 and *Eight Songs to Words by Zbigniew Herbert* for baritone and piano in 1984.

Herbert's poems had absorbed Mycielski's musical imagination even before that. He had thought about composing music to them at least since the early 1970s. In January 1972 he noted in his diary: 'a hundred ideas and versions heard, vivid, hot; songs to words by Herbert as well'.² In the autumn of that same year, he added: 'Nadia is right in saying that songs to Herbert's words must be translated into some well-known language: Italian, French, English...'³ So there is no doubt that the idea kept niggling at him to such an extent that he discussed it with Nadia Boulanger. Was he already thinking at that time about turning selected poems into purely orchestral works, without a solo voice and without words? Or was it perhaps Nadia's remarks about translating the poems from Polish into a language more understandable to non-Polish listeners that turned his thoughts in that direction? It is hard to provide an unequivocal answer to these questions.

- 1 The archive of the Polish Composers' Union contains Zbigniew Herbert's personal file with his application for the position of office manager, dated 7 June 1956. It reads as follows: 'Please accept my application for the position of office manager. More information about me can be provided by Mr Stefan Kisielewski'. However, as early as 27 December 1956, Herbert asked to be dismissed, justifying his request as follows: 'My request has been prompted by the pressure of literary and editorial work, which makes it impossible for me to discharge my duties'. The Board of the Polish Composers' Union accepted his resignation and terminated its contract with Herbert on 28 February 1957. Archive of the Polish Composers' Union, personal file 'Herbert, Zbigniew (PCU Office Manager)'.
- 2 Zygmunt Mycielski, *Niby-dziennik* [Quasi-diary], ed. Zofia Mycielska-Golik, Warsaw 1998, p. 39, entry from January (no day given).
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 67, entry from October 1972 (no day given).

The next entry concerning songs to Herbert's poetry did not come until 1977. In February, Mycielski noted: 'Five songs to texts by Herbert. The first and the last will be the most difficult. I want to do it. That fifth one is tormenting me, although it hasn't been heard yet'.⁴ A month later, he added: 'I'll get down to work on Herbert's texts – songs to them without words or voice, just orchestra'.⁵ So he needed a few years to clarify the question of the instrumentation and form of the work; in the end, Herbert's poems were to inspire orchestral songs without words. To create that opus, however, Mycielski did not refer to the Romantic, Mendelssohnian tradition of such works. Rather, he adopted his own compositional strategy, already used in his Symphonies Nos. 2 (1961) and 5 (1977). In both symphonies, the inspiration for the structure and the musical material came from poems (respectively by Boris Pasternak and Czesław Miłosz); in the final score, however, the composer did not leave any comments about this, and the poetic impulses could only be discovered by analysing his sketches and correspondence.⁶ The same strategy was adopted here.

First and foremost, this cycle of six compositions was planned by the composer not as a set of lyrical miniatures, but as a dramaturgical whole. Mycielski worked on the *Six Songs for Orchestra* intensely throughout 1978, partly during his stay in California. On 30 March 1978, shortly before his return to Europe he noted: 'I wrote Songs IV and V for orchestra in Ojai and started Song VI in Boulder'.⁷ On 1 July 1978, now back in Warsaw, he wrote:

On my desk, 6 *Songs* for orchestra, which could be very beautiful, if I can make them so; I'm now thinking about the second one, to slow it down even more, this flute line on the harp and violin pizzicatos [...].

It can be 'shown' faster in so many forms, in ♩, more slowly, proceeding to the end in a variety of ways... In the first version from Ojai it moves in rather fast values. Should I slow it down, make it a true largo, an adagio? Or go faster? To listen – what is it supposed to mean? Herbert's text is to be the major driving force:

After the rain of stars
on the meadow of ashes
they all have gathered under the guard of angels
in truth they are not many.

The music seems very beautiful to me. Then again: conductors don't get it – here every instrument plays its own music, it doesn't have that sauce which makes it easier for the performers and for the listeners to immerse themselves in that sensory bath we've been taught to use.

4 Ibid., p. 118, entry from 12 February 1977 [Warsaw].

5 Ibid., p. 120, entry from 15 March 1977 [Warsaw].

6 I write more about this in a forthcoming book devoted to Mycielski. See Beata Bolesławska-Lewandowska, *Mycielski. Między muzyką a polityką* [Mycielski: between music and politics], Kraków 2023 [forthcoming].

7 Z. Mycielski, *Niby-dziennik*, pp. 123–124, entry from 30 March 1978 [Boston]. In Boulder, Mycielski visited his nephew, Jan Mycielski, who was a mathematics professor at the university there.

On the other hand, I find tutti hard work!
Everything ends and I begin. I won't be able to make it.⁸

Fortunately, he did make it. He also hoped for a performance, and gave the completed score to Jan Krenz. However, the work was never played. For a long time, it even seemed that there was no complete score. It was only when a bundle of Mycielski's documents was recovered from his flat on Chmielna Street in the autumn of 2019 that a fair copy of the score was found.

Yet the attempt to reconstruct the poetical inspiration behind the *Six Songs for Orchestra* was by no means easy. There is no detailed information about it in Mycielski's diaries. The above record with a fragment of the poem *At the Gate of the Valley* provides the only clue. Later entries bring no more details. The rediscovered score does not contain any references to Herbert's poems whatsoever. It was only when I went through the surviving sketches of the work, which the composer sold to the National Library in Warsaw in 1982,⁹ that I found the desired explanation. The sketches contain the complete record of the verses from Herbert's poems which inspired the successive parts of Mycielski's *Six Songs for Orchestra*. All the poems selected by the composer come from the collection *Hermes, Dog and Star*, published in 1957.¹⁰

The first song was based on the first part of the poem *Drum Song*.¹¹ The second was inspired by the excerpts from *At the Gate of the Valley* quoted above; the com-

8 Z. Mycielski, *Niby-dziennik*, p. 144, entry from 1 July 1978 [Warsaw]. Excerpts from Herbert's poem 'At the gate of the valley' after Zbigniew Herbert, *The Collected Poems, 1956–1998*, tr. Alissa Valles, New York 2007, p. 61.

9 Zygmunt Mycielski, *Six Songs for Orchestra*, sketches, drafts. Music Collection Department, National Library, Warsaw, Mus.4427 and Mus.4428. The reverse side of the last page of the drafts features the following note: 'Zygmunt Mycielski, Warsaw, 1 December 1982, 12,600', informing of the date and the sum the library paid Mycielski for the manuscript.

10 Zbigniew Herbert, *Hermes, pies i gwiazda*, Warsaw 1957. The fragments of the poems noted by Mycielski on the sketches come from this volume.

11 Pastoral flutes are departed
the gold of Sunday trumpets
the vernal echoes the horns
and the strings are departed –
 only the drum remains
 and the drum plays on
 a festive march a funeral march
 primitive feelings keep the pace
 on legs straight as rods
 the drummer boy plays
 thought is one and one the word
 as a drum summons a sheer abyss
we carry gleanings or a tombstone
we take wise orders from the drum
our step pounding the paving's skin
a proud step that will turn the world
into one procession and one slogan (Z. Herbert, *The Collected Poems*, p. 118).

poser took from it the first stanza ('after the rain of stars / on the meadow of ashes / they all have gathered under the guard of angels'), adding a line from the beginning of the third stanza ('in truth they are not many', although the poet's version lacks the dash present in Mycielski's). The third song draws on the poem *I Would Like to Describe*, from which the composer took only the second stanza.¹² The fourth song was inspired by the poem *Voice*, with the composer selecting various lines and creating his own version of the poem.¹³ The fifth song draws on *The Rain*, from which the composer took almost the entire penultimate stanza, omitting only its ending.¹⁴ The sixth and last song returns to *Drum Song*, to the second part of the poem.¹⁵ Thus

- 12 I would like to describe a light
 which is being born in me
 but I know it does not resemble
 any star
 for it is not so bright
 not so pure
 and is uncertain (Z. Herbert, *The Collected Poems*, p. 65).
- 13 I walk on the sea-shore
 to catch that voice
 between the breaking of one wave
 and another
 I walk to the forest
 where persists the continuous
 hum of an immense hour-glass
 where is that voice
 it should speak up
 when for a moment there is a pause
 nothing but whispers
 clapping explosions (Z. Herbert, *The Collected Poems*, p. 67).
- 14 they took my brother
 and carried him out of town
 he returns every fall
 slim and very quiet
 he does not want to come in
 he knocks at the window for me (Z. Herbert, *The Collected Poems*, p. 91).
- 15 at last all mankind is going
 at last all are fallen into step
 the calfskin and two sticks
 razed steeples and solitude
 and silence was trampled too
 death en masse is not so bad
 dust mounts above the march
 the acquiescent sea will part
 we will go down to the depths
 to empty hell and up on high
 make sure no heaven exists
 then freed from its trepidation
 all the march will turn to sand
 carried by the mocking wind
 so the ultimate echo will fade
 of earth's disobedient mold

the composer creates a dramaturgical frame for his work, opening and closing it with the march-like, rather gloomy *Drum Song*. Within that frame, however, he refers to more lyrical and nuanced impressions. Thus by looking at the very arrangement of the texts (which ultimately did not find their way into the composition!), it is possible to discern the formal idea behind the work. Mycielski's *Six Songs for Orchestra* is not a set of brief isolated miniatures, but an integral whole lasting about twenty minutes, with a well-thought-out structure and narrative. This was not the first time the composer had been guided by the word. And even if this time he ultimately left it out of his musical setting, there is no doubt that his music conveys the moods and meanings present in the poems.

The outer parts form up an emotional frame, as it were. The nature of both is similar. The work opens with a melancholic falling flute motif complemented by the strings. It oscillates around the notes F, A flat and C, which – together with the intervals of seconds and thirds surrounding them – suggest a reference to the key of F minor, traditionally associated with a funereal, mournful mood. This corresponds to the atmosphere of a funeral march present in the poem (see Fig. 1).

Obviously, Mycielski does not use the minor-major system, but, as was his wont, he selects a set of notes from which he builds a harmonic-melodic system of references (tables of note combinations have been preserved in the sketches for this composition). The delicacy of the initial phrases, played *pianissimo*, introduces a mood of sadness and nostalgia. A slow introduction is followed by a vivid, march-like rhythm. Short motifs, interrupted by rests, are played by trombones, joined by bassoons and horns, and then by pizzicato strings, with a measured rhythmic pulsation. An increasingly important role is assumed by deep-sounding wind instruments (bassoon, contrabassoon, trombones and tuba, as well as trumpets), supported by the piano. This device, allied to the exclusion of the strings, emphasises the gloomy expression of the march-like section. Mycielski does not use percussion here (there is no percussion group in the score), entrusting the role of the drum from Herbert's poem to other instruments. The intensity of the song gradually increases, its texture – initially light and transparent – becomes denser, leading to climactic chords from the whole orchestra (*fortissimo*) in the finale. This is the composer's way of translating into music the sombre energy of Herbert's *Drum Song*.

The second song brings an expressive contrast. It begins *lento*, with a long flute phrase against a subtle accompaniment of woodwind and then harp and strings (see Fig. 1). Its calmness and lyricism correspond to the words of the poem *At the Gate of the Valley* ('after the rain of stars / on the meadow of ashes / they all have gathered under the guard of angels / in truth they are not many'). The 'flute line on the harp and

leaving only a drum a drum

the dictator of the forgotten [originally 'guttet'] music (Z. Herbert, *The Collected Poems*, pp. 118–119).

violin pizzicatos' (as the composer noted in his diary entry quoted above) eventually gives way to the strings on their own. The composer then gives a separate role to the violins and violas, while the cellos and double basses merely complement the sound of the whole (a solo viola phrase appears as well, reversing, as it were, the earlier line of the flute). The song is dominated by subtlety and lyricism. 'The music seems very beautiful to me', noted the composer in the fragment quoted earlier. It would be hard to disagree. The soft melodic phrases presented against the background of calm, quiet chords from the strings and the harp convey the angelically ethereal nature and subtle sweetness of the music. The rarefied texture and transparent harmony, dominated by second-third combinations, contribute to the vivid, dissonant and yet warm sounds of this part of the work (see Fig. 2).

The image shows a page of handwritten musical notation for the opening of 'Six Songs for Orchestra, No. 2' by Zygmunt Mycielski. The page is marked 'Lento' and 'II.' at the top. The score is written for Flute (Fl.), Violin (Vln.), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vcllo), and Contrabasso (Cb.). The music is in 4/4 time and begins with a piano (p) dynamic. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings like 'pizz' (pizzicato) and 'arco' (arco). The score is numbered 5 and 10 at the bottom.

Fig. 2. Zygmunt Mycielski, *Six Songs for Orchestra*, No. 2, opening. Zygmunt Mycielski Archive, part two, National Library, Warsaw, III 15132

The third song, *vivo*, brings with it a great deal of animation. Introducing a brisk tempo, the composer exposes the brass instruments. After their intense, chorale-like introduction, calm is brought by the strings, with a *pianissimo* theme emerging against a background of cellos and double bass. This 'light which is being born in me' gradually spreads, passing from the strings to the winds and leading to a climax. After it has died down, the initial *vivo* returns, closing the work with energetic chords repeated by the winds and the piano, without the string quintet. This time, the 'uncertainty' from the end of the poem is conveyed, in a rather topsy-turvy manner, by music with a lively rhythm and vivid progression (though interrupted by rests).

The fourth song is again slow and marked by undulating, overlapping phrases of the strings in a musical equivalent of the sea present in the words of the poem ('I walk on the sea-shore / to catch that voice / between the breaking of one wave / and another'). The composer creates a mood of pensiveness and calm melancholy. This is facilitated by muted dynamics (the term *calando* – slowing down, turning down – appears at the very beginning) and the fact that the undulating phrases are entrusted exclusively to the strings. Contrast appears in the middle section, where the overlapping lines give way to a vertical texture marked by short solo motifs in the winds as well as *staccatissimo* chords from the French horn (*p*) and then the piano (*ff*); this can be linked to the final words of the poem ('where is that voice / it should speak up / when for a moment there is a pause / nothing but whispers / clapping explosions'). At the end, the composer returns to the character of the opening fragment, muting the whole in undulating phrases until the final, slowly fading notes.

Similarly muted (*smorzando* – dying away), persistently repeated notes from the harp (B flat alternating with A flat) begin the fifth song. This provides a background for a lyrical theme introduced by the bassoon, joined by the clarinet. Later on, the song is dominated by 'marching' strikes of the harp, subsequently taken up by the double basses and cellos. Against this background, solo phrases emerge in the violins, as well as lyrical phrases in the woodwind. This song is a uniform piece, dominated by a persistent, measured rhythm appearing either in the harp or in the low notes of the strings. This is the composer's way of emphasising the feeling of anxiety corresponding to the content of the poem ('They took my brother / and carried him out of town / he returns every fall / slim and very quiet / he does not want to come in / he knocks at the window for me'). The short solo lines of selected instruments introduced against this background add a note of sad lyricism. The music grows until the culminating *forte* in the final segment (the chord f sharp-b flat-d flat/c sharp appearing in bar 36, strengthened by the horns), subsequently muted in a slow diminuendo until the final, slowly repeated chords (g-b-d sharp-d in the strings; e flat-d-b flat-c flat in the harp, see. Fig. 3)

Overlapping dissonances, mainly minor seconds, enhance the mood of anxiety, although it is toned down by the soft sounds of the strings and the harp. This makes

(a.a.)

Oboe (Oboe)

Clarinet (Cl.)

Bassoon (Fag.)

Violin (Vln.)

Viola (Vcl.)

Cello/Double Bass (Cb.)

40

di - mi - nu - en - do
e ritenuto (h) (pp)

di - mi - nu - en - do
e ritenuto (pp)

di - mi - nu - en - do
e ritenuto

40

Ojm 27. II. 1977.

Fig. 3. Zygmunt Mycielski, *Six Songs for Orchestra*, end of No. 5, Zygmunt Mycielski Archive, part two, National Library, Warsaw, III 15132

The image shows a page of handwritten musical notation for the ending of Zygmunt Mycielski's 'Six Songs for Orchestra'. The score is arranged in systems, with each system containing staves for different instruments. The instruments listed on the left include Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Trumpet (Tr.), Trombone (Tbn.), Percussion (Perc.), and Piano (P). The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. Key markings include 'p' (piano), 'ff' (fortissimo), and 'fff' (fortississimo). Performance instructions like '(lunga)' (long) and 'pesante' (heavy) are written above the staves. The score is numbered '139' at the bottom left. On the right edge, there is a vertical inscription: 'Zygmunt Mycielski, 1978'.

Fig. 4. Zygmunt Mycielski, *Six Songs for Orchestra*, ending. Zygmunt Mycielski Archive, part two, National Library, Warsaw, III 15132

the song far different from dramatic or hysterical spasms. Mycielski wrote this part of the work over the few days of his first stay at Mrs Porter's ranch. The score bears the following inscription: 'Ojai, 27 February 1978'.

The final part adds a strong *deciso* to the sombre march from the opening *Drum Song*. This is not a literal repetition, but a continuation, as it were, swiftly developing in its measured rhythm and full orchestral sound. The composer rounds off the work with a final 'explosion' of Herbert's drum, in line with the words of the poem ('leaving only a drum a drum / the dictator of the forgotten [originally 'guttled'; it is unclear why Mycielski replaced that word] music'). Thus he gives the cycle a powerful ending (see Fig. 4).

Zbigniew Herbert's poetry enabled Mycielski to forge a work that is a precisely structured six-part whole. It is rich in musical hues – from turbulent and gloomy, strongly marked by the sounds of the brass, through nostalgic and charming (in the strings), to lyrical, with moments of sweet sadness. Mycielski's harmonic language, stemming from a complicated system of tables with note combinations, remains essentially clear. One can even find in it references to tonal combinations (like the initial mournful 'F minor'), although augmented in a manner that is far from obvious by densely overlapping dissonances, including the composer's favourite seconds, as well as ninths and sevenths, often juxtaposed with thirds. So there is no shortage of warmth and nostalgia in these combinations, juxtaposed with the rawness of the marching passages, with their expressive rhythm and steady pulse, enhanced by the sounds of the brass. This is certainly music worth exploring more closely, particularly in light of its links to the poetry of one of the greatest Polish poets of the twentieth century. In the final version of the score, Mycielski abandoned the idea of including Herbert's poems. He must have concluded that the poetic inspiration did not have to be meaningful to the listeners, that it could be known only to him (however, he did include a dedication: 'à Marcelle de Manziarly', see Fig. 1). The listeners should be moved by the music itself. However, this work was never performed.

That may also explain why Mycielski returned to Herbert's poems a few years later. In the spring of 1984, he went to California for the fourth time. On his way there, in Paris, he received Herbert's collection of poetry *Report from a Besieged City*, newly published by Kultura of Paris.¹⁶ He immediately started reading. His fascination with Herbert's poetry returned, as did a desire to set it to music. In the heat of the moment, he noted in his diary: 'At night (almost all night) I read the *Report from a Besieged City* – Herbert's poems. Strangely UNPOETIC, and yet – and yet what? I select texts for songs – (*Six Songs for Orchestra* are also from Herbert's poems!). [...] Perhaps I'll manage to compose them in Ojai?'¹⁷ He went on to select excerpts with specific songs in mind: the first from the poem *To the River*, the second to selected lines from *The Trial*.¹⁸ Then: 'I wanted to take something for the songs from *Mr Cogito on the Need for Precision* – but I can't. So I draw on the poem *Mr Cogito – Notes from the House of the Dead*.¹⁹ Noting down selected words from the poem, Mycielski wrote: 'I couldn't calm down. I'd like to start writing the song straight away, but be-

16 This is mentioned by Andrzej Franaszek in his biography of Zbigniew Herbert: 'In 1984 Zygmunt Mycielski will arrive in Paris, where he will finally get the *Report* [...], published by Kultura', Andrzej Franaszek, *Herbert. Biografia*, vol. 2, *Pan Cogito*, Kraków 2018, p. 471.

17 Zygmunt Mycielski, *Niby-dziennik ostatni 1980–1987* [Last quasi-diary 1908–87], eds. Barbara and Jan Stęszewski, Warsaw 2012, p. 451, entry from 21 May 1984 [Paris].

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 451–452.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 452.

fore that I need to stop crying while reading it'.²⁰ This shows how greatly moved he was. He also considered the last poem from *Report from a Besieged City*: 'This might be impossible to sing, but I'd like to save it.'²¹ He then added: 'If I do these songs, I'll call them *Last Songs. To Texts by Zbigniew Herbert*'.²² One week later, he was in California. On 23 June he noted: 'I've been here since 28 May. Writing the seventh song to Z. Herbert's words. I'm so absorbed by this that I don't record any considerations here'.²³

The cycle was indeed completed in California, and Mycielski called it simply *Eight Songs to Words by Zbigniew Herbert*. After returning to Warsaw, on 23 November 1984, he wrote to the poet: 'I wrote there 8 songs to your texts and – it seems? – I sent you the texts I'd chosen. However, I'm sending them to you once again – fearing that you'll dig in your heels and be outraged that these are excerpts and not the whole poems'.²⁴ And then he went on to explain: 'I've composed quite a few songs, and I've had no problems with authors. Miłosz and Iwaszkiewicz gave me a *carte blanche* of the "choose what you want" variety. I don't know if you'll be as generous'.²⁵ And in a postscript he added: 'If you write to me that this is a massacre of your poem – then I won't know what to do. In the *All Year Round* songs (published), I have similarly massacred Iwaszkiewicz... A weak argument – but still'.²⁶ Fortunately, Mycielski's fears proved unfounded. Herbert replied briefly: 'Of course you can do whatever you want with my poems – it'll be a great honour for me. My complete *placet*', which Mycielski recorded on the title page of his manuscript.²⁷

Mycielski indeed selected only fragments from Herbert's poems, sometimes choosing isolated lines, omitting substantial fragments between them. But that had nothing to do with a deliberate modernist or postmodernist idea of deconstructing the chosen model. What he really wanted to achieve was to create his own version of a poetic whole which he would then interpret musically. He had indeed used a similar tactic when composing *All Year Round* to the poems by Iwaszkiewicz (1965–68), but then he selected whole poems or at least whole stanzas.²⁸ In the case of Herbert,

20 Ibid., pp. 454–455. Words from Herbert's poem noted down by Mycielski: 'perhaps / I alone / still hear / his voice / echoing // thinner and thinner / softer / farther and farther / like the music of the spheres / the harmony of the universe // so perfect / as to be inaudible' (Z. Herbert, *The Collected Poems*, p. 415).

21 Ibid., p. 455.

22 Ibid., p. 456.

23 Ibid., p. 456, entry from 23 June 1984 [Ojai].

24 Zygmunt Mycielski to Zbigniew Herbert, Warsaw 23 November 1984, quoted after Zygmunt Mycielski, 'Dwa listy do Zbigniewa Herberta' [Two letters to Zbigniew Herbert], in: *Głosy Herberta* [Voices of Herbert], ed. Barbara Toruńczyk, Warsaw 2008, p. 190.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., p. 191.

27 Words written down by Mycielski on the score, after a card sent to him by Zbigniew Herbert on 28 January 1985, quoted after *ibid.*, p. 197.

28 For more on this, see B. Bolesławska-Lewandowska, *Mycielski. Między muzyką a polityką*.

however, his ‘massacre of the poem’ went much deeper, as he carefully selected lines of the longer poems and put them together to build shorter, ‘new’ poetic content. By employing such a strategy, he managed to focus on the ideas and emotions he wanted to reflect in his music. He also created the narrative entity which was to indicate the musical structure of his songs. This becomes clear when comparing the text of each song with Herbert’s original poems.

The first song is composed to the last (third) stanza of the poem *To the River* (‘teach me stubbornness and endurance / so that I shall deserve in the last hour / to repose in the shade of a great delta / in a holy triangle of beginning and end’²⁹). The second song is based on lines selected from the fifth stanza of the poem *Trial* (‘though so many years I had been composing a final speech / to God the world’s tribunal and conscience / one aimed at the dead rather than the living / dragged to my feet by the security guards / I just managed to blink’³⁰), with the composer omitting the beginning of the first line and the last three lines of the stanza and shortening the ending of the last line (the original reads: ‘I only managed to blink and at that moment’, which provides a logical connection to the following verse: ‘the courtroom burst out in hearty laughter’).³¹ Songs three and four feature fragments of the poem *Mr Cogito – Notes from the House of the Dead*. The third song is based on fragments selected from the second part of the poem and complemented by the message of part three (‘in the very / heart of the treasure house / under guard of cruel priests / under guard of cruel angels / their name for him was Adam / [...] / Adam’s cry / was composed / of two or three vowels / [...] / then / a sudden / pause / [...] / Adam was taken away’³²). Song four, to be performed without a break (marked by the composer in French, *enchainez*), is a musical setting of the last two fragments of the poem (‘perhaps / I alone / still hear / his voice / echoing // thinner and thinner / softer / farther and farther / like the music of the spheres / the harmony of the universe // so perfect / as to be inaudible’³³). All the poems used in the first four songs come from the collection *Report from a Besieged City*. In the following four songs, the composer returns to poems from the collection *Hermes, Dog and Star*, again setting stanzas he had earlier selected for *Six Songs for Orchestra*. The arrangement of the stanzas and selection of lines is identical to that from the earlier composition. What changes is their order in the cycle.

Song five is based on lines from *The Rain* (‘They took my brother / and carried him out of town / he returns every fall / slim and very quiet / he does not want to come in / he knocks at the window for me’). The sixth song features lines from *At*

29 Z. Herbert, *The Collected Poems*, p. 344.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 397.

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 397–398.

32 *Ibid.*, pp. 412–414.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 415.

the Gate of the Valley ('after the rain of stars / on the meadow of ashes / they all have gathered under the guard of angels /.../ in truth they are not many'). Song seven is based on *I Would Like to Describe* ('I would like to describe the light / which is being born in me / but I know it does not resemble / any star / for it is not so bright / not so pure / and is uncertain'). Song eight draws on themes from *Voice* ('I walk on the sea-shore / to catch that voice / between the breaking of one wave / and another /... / where is that voice / ... / nothing but whispers / clapping explosions', see references connected with the poems used for the *Six Songs for Orchestra*).

Thus the composer rearranged Herbert's eight poems in his own composition. Moved by the poems of *Report from a Besieged City*, Mycielski complemented them with stanzas from the earlier tome of verse, with which he was so familiar. In his orchestral composition, he had used no words; here, he did not want to give them up. Thanks to them, he was able to compose a song cycle as a dramaturgical whole. While there are analogies in the mood of the music Mycielski composed for both works (after all, both the orchestral and the vocal songs draw on the same words from Herbert's verse), there are no literal translations. This is not the same music. The translation of poetic inspiration into orchestral music remains independent from the setting of Herbert's poems to music for baritone and piano. There are different sets of notes, different melodic lines and even different rhythms, although it might seem that it was the rhythm of the poems that largely determined that of the successive *Six Songs for Orchestra*. Although inspired by the same poetry, the two cycles remain artistically independent creations. In *Six Songs for Orchestra*, the composer took Herbert's poems as a starting point for forging the musical atmosphere of his work and used purely musical means to create specific moods and emotions; in *Eight Songs to Words by Zbigniew Herbert*, meanwhile, it is the text itself which remains the most important element of the composition. For Mycielski, the music serves here solely to underline the meaning of the text, which always comes first and must be clearly heard by the audience. So he adopted two completely different compositional approaches in these two works. That also explains why the two works, although partly based on the same poetry, are musically completely independent.

Significantly, while the first cycle was completed in 1978, *Eight Songs to Words by Zbigniew Herbert* was composed in the early 1980s, when the situation in Poland was marked by martial law, arrests, hope and sadness – and that situation is clearly present in Herbert's poems as well. Yet one would search in vain in Mycielski's songs for drama, accusations or great tensions. Instead, the composer creates a world that is focused and intimate, even lyrical. Although the lyricism is austere, far from Romantic mellifluousness or sentimentalism. Mycielski comes closer here to expressionistic trends. The vocal part develops either in stepwise motion or in substantial intervallic leaps, dominated by sevenths, and not very comfortable for the singer. As in Mycielski's previous song cycles (to words by Miłosz and Iwaszkiewicz particularly),

the voice often resorts to melodeclamation, and the clear message of the text is of prime importance to the composer (as already stated). It builds the expression of the work. The task of the music is to highlight that message. Of great importance here is the piano part. It contains both dense chords (even cluster-like at times) and more sophisticated figural passages, as well as delicate phrases with muted dynamics introduced wherever the composer wanted to add some musical subtlety (e.g. in the fourth song).

The cycle *Eight Songs to Words by Zbigniew Herbert* was composed in its entirety during Mycielski's last stay in Ojai, between 29 May and 2 July 1984 (the dates on the first and last songs). So he wrote them very quickly. Fortunately, he also lived to hear them in concert. The performance took place on 28 November 1985 at the Fryderyk Chopin Academy of Music in Warsaw, during a concert presenting the music of Florian Dąbrowski, Stefan Kisielewski and Zygmunt Mycielski (the singer was Ryszard Cieśla, accompanied by Beata Swanidze).³⁴ Many years later, on 25 November 2005, Mycielski's songs were sung during the Zbigniew Herbert Poetry Festival in Warsaw by Jarosław Bręk (accompanied by Katarzyna Jankowska).³⁵ The patron of that performance was Michał Bristiger, who sometime later lent his copy of the score to Barbara Toruńczyk, thanks to which selected pages of the music were included in *Głosy Herberta*, published by the Zeszyty Literackie Foundation in 2008.³⁶

Both of Zygmunt Mycielski's compositions examined here, *Six Songs for Orchestra* and *Eight Songs to Words by Zbigniew Herbert*, remain an important testimony to the composer's links to the finest Polish poetry of the twentieth century. They place Mycielski's oeuvre within the context of important literary references, confirming Herbert's role and the impact of his verse on Mycielski's musical sensibility.

Translated by Anna Kijak

34 The concert preceded a two-day conference of the Polish Composers' Union, during which participants discussed the oeuvres of these three composers (29–30 November 1985). See *Florian Dąbrowski, Stefan Kisielewski, Zygmunt Mycielski. Melos – Logos – Etos* [Florian Dąbrowski, Stefan Kisielewski, Zygmunt Mycielski: melos, logos and ethos], ed. Krystyna Tarnawska-Kaczorowska, Warsaw 1987. The book lacks information about the concert preceding the conference. In the copy of the concert programme preserved among Mycielski's papers, the name of the planned pianist (Andrzej Guz) is crossed out and replaced with a handwritten note: 'Ms Wierzbicka'. The materials preserved in the Polish Composers' Union archive confirm, however, that the pianist was Beata Swanidze.

35 At this point, I would like to thank Mr Henryk Citko for providing me with detailed information about this event, as well as other valuable information concerning Zbigniew Herbert in the context of his relations with Zygmunt Mycielski.

36 *Głosy Herberta*. Chapter VI: 'I would like to describe the light' encompasses two of Mycielski's letters to Herbert, Mycielski's letter to Michał Bristiger, and excerpts from the score of *Eight Songs to Words by Zbigniew Herbert* (pp. 187–200).

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POEZJA ZBIGNIEWA HERBERTA JAKO INSPIRACJA KOMPOZYCJI
ZYGMUNTA MYCIELSKIEGO

Zygmunt Mycielski w swej twórczości kompozytorskiej wielokrotnie inspirował się poezją. Słowo uruchamiało jego muzyczną wyobraźnię, wielokrotnie wyznaczając nie tylko nastroje kompozycji, ale i jej strukturę. Niekiedy, jak w przypadku *II Symfonii* (1961) czy *Sześciu pieśni na orkiestrę* (1978) kompozytor zrezygnował ostatecznie z ujawniania poetyckich pierwowzorów, które legły u podstaw powstania jego dzieł. Informacje na ich temat ujawniają dopiero szkice kompozytorskie oraz zachowana korespondencja. W przypadku pieśni sytuacja wydaje się prostsza. Słowo wybranych wierszy pozostaje dla kompozytora najważniejsze, muzyka ma je dopowiadać i wzmacniać. Przy czym niejednokrotnie twórca dokonuje zmian w tekście poetyckim, wybierając z dłuższych poematów poszczególne wersy i układając z nich własną niejako całość, by ją następnie umuzyczyć.

Szczególną rolę odgrywają w muzyce Zygmunta Mycielskiego utwory inspirowane poezją polskich autorów XX w.: Czesława Miłosza (cykl *Ocalenie* na baryton lub mezzosopran i fortepian, 1946–48), Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza (*Brzezina* na sopran i fortepian, 1951, cykl *Kragły rok* na baryton i fortepian, 1965–68), Pawła Hertza (*Nowy lirnik mazowiecki* na sopran, baryton, chór mieszany i orkiestrę, 1955), Konstantego Ildefonsa Gałczyńskiego (*Portret Muzy* na recytatora, małą orkiestrę i chór mieszany, 1947, *Kwiaty na tor* na chór mieszany, 1949). Kompozytor był z tymi twórcami zaprzyjaźniony, a ich poezja oddziaływała mocno

na jego muzyczną wyobraźnię. Podobnie jest w przypadku twórczości Zbigniewa Herberta, którego kompozytor znał od lat pięćdziesiątych XX wieku. Wiersze poety zainspirowały dwie kompozycje Mycielskiego – *Sześć pieśni na orkiestrę* (1978) oraz *Osiem pieśni do słów Zbigniewa Herberta* na baryton i fortepian (1984). Artykuł przybliży obydwie te utwory w świetle ich związków z poezją Herberta, ukazując szerszy kontekst ich powstania, z uwzględnieniem niepublikowanych źródeł zachowanych w archiwum kompozytora, w tym szkiców do obu utworów oraz korespondencji.

Beata Bolesławska-Lewandowska

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