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| Witold Lutosławski (1913-1994) |
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| The music and life of Polish composer Witold Lutosławski (1913-1994) pivoted around key events in his country’s tumultuous twentieth-century history. The so-called cultural ‘thaw’ at the end of Stalinism in the mid 1950s permitted Poland’s composers to begin experiments in a range of modernist styles. Lutosławski forged a unique voice by exploring tensions between the classicist sensibility underpinning his neoclassical pre-thaw compositions (a style that had brought him into a position of preeminence in Poland) and more radical, avant-garde alternatives. So while he created individualistic and, often, beautiful solutions to post-tonal compositional problems of pitch organization, rhythm, texture, orchestration and long-range musical structuring, his greater contribution was marshaling his technique to compose powerfully affecting musical narratives responding, albeit obliquely, to the events and cultural atmospheres of his life and times. In major works including his *Trois poems d’Henri Michaux*, String Quartet, *Livre pour orchestre*, Cello Concerto, *Mi-parti*, Piano Concerto, *Chain 2* and Symphony No. 4 – compositions that brought him international recognition as one of the mid-to-late twentieth century’s finest composers – Lutosławski created (to speak drily) modernist musical narratives exploring the problems of plot and representation in an innovative language, or (to speak more evocatively) structures of feeling and form that transcend the mundane specificity of programme music to offer visceral, spellbinding and moving testimony on the late-modern human experience, and from a distinctive Polish perspective.  From the outbreak of World War II until Stalin’s death in 1953, Poland existed (when its territory existed at all) in a kind of art music bubble. Composers, if they were able to work, mainly operated within a pre-war, neoclassical framework that later proved adaptable to Stalinist socialist realism. Consequently, the cultural thaw following Stalin’s demise delivered musical shocks of the new and not so new. Through channels including the vital Warsaw Autumn festival, Poles discovered developments of musical high modernism emanating from centres like Paris, New York and Darmstadt; they also began more fully to explore earlier modernism and other classicisms emerging from the West and further east. Encountering ‘new’ voices ranging from Berio to Britten, Stravinsky to Stockhausen, Polish composers redrew music’s map, seeking their place within its territories.  Poland’s most accomplished musical cartographer was Witold Lutosławski. His finest works from the mid 1960s until his death in 1994 mark the most nuanced response to Poland’s modernist musical moment. Aged 40 by the end of Stalin’s reign, and a composer whose technical mastery had already been displayed in the Technicolor symphonism of his magnificent *Concerto for Orchestra* (1950-54), Lutosławski’s first modernist achievement was to synthesize a unique voice. Steering clear of fads and fashions from total serialism to sonorism (Poland’s own high modernist calling card) – with a life scarred by Bolsheviks, Nazis and Stalinists, Lutosławski loathed cultural hegemony in any form – he cherry-picked solutions to technical problems: a touch of aleatory here (chance procedures add avant-garde fizz to his rhythms and textures from *Jeux vénitiens* [1960-61] onward), a tenet of serialism there (the local microstructures of his pitch organisation and other parameters are often fastidiously controlled, although this is never a key point of his music). Equally, however, Lutosławski rejected certain stylistic traits of musical high modernim. In place of the harmonic greyness he experienced in some serial music, he went back to Debussy and Ravel to focus on interval and orchestral colour, creating a post-tonal language in which to compose themes distinctive enough to act as agents in perceptible long-range structures; thus rejecting moment or open forms, but not the potential of musical plot to innovate and confront expectations, he continued his pre-thaw interest in the psychological richness of Beethoven and Chopin’s approaches to structure. Other Poles attempted similarly protean stylistic blends, but failed. How did Lutosławski pull it off, beyond his superior core compositional technique?  One answer lies in what he termed his music’s ‘actions’. In diverse sonic settings – the evocations of which ranged from dreamscapes to battlefields, dark nights of the soul to crowd scenes – Lutosławski deployed his musical means to intensely dramatic ends that undercut the more beguiling qualities of his soundworld with the gestures of violence, tragedy, lament and pessimism which reveal his connection to broader currents of modernist discourse. Within one recurring form (an end-accented, or hesitant then propulsively goal-directed, two-part structure), a profound symbolic archetype emerges: one experiences it in works such as his String Quartet (1964), *Livre pour orchestre* (1968), Cello Concerto (1969-70), *Preludes and Fugue* (1970-72), *Les espaces du sommeil* (1975), *Mi-Parti* (1975-6), and in later music where rhapsodic melody soars into prominence above more lucid textures of chromatic harmony, such as his *Partita* (1984), *Chain 2* (1984-5), *Chain 3* (1986), and Symphony No. 4 (1988-92). Often, conflict between materials – always open to being interpreted in a wide range of musical, cultural or political contexts – leads to the brink of resolution but jackknifes into catastrophe; cathartic transcendence is glimpsed but then evaporates or gets crushed. Like the composer’s individual style, this symbolically reverberant structure fuses old and new, as Polish Romantic pessimism merges with late-modern bleakness. Lutosławski’s strongest pieces invite one in with their beauty, theatricality and intelligence of design, exalt and then assault one, before sending one away with a haunted, remapped mind. |
| Further reading:  (Będkowski and Hrabia)  (Gwizdalanka and Meyer)  (Kaczyński and Lutosławski)  (Rae)  (Reyland)  (Skowron, Lutoslawski on Music)  (Skowron, Lutosławski Studies)  (Thomas)  (Varga)  (Whittall) |