

Penderecki's *St. Luke Passion*

Performed April 6, 2002

When Krzysztof Penderecki's *Passio et mors Domini nostri Jesu Christi secundum Lucam* (The Passion and Death of Our Lord Jesus Christ According to Luke) premiered in 1966, few people would have predicted it would not only be an immense success but also be critically acclaimed as one of the most significant choral works of the twentieth century. It seemed an unlikely combination. Penderecki himself was little known outside of his native Poland. He had grown up in a secular, socialist society and yet he had chosen not only one of the most significant of religious themes, but one which had largely been untouched since Bach's towering achievements. And it had only been a decade since the music of the Eastern bloc nations had been freed from official Stalinist neo-Romantic realism, yet Penderecki developed a musical language so daringly original and avant garde that he had to invent his own notation for the score.



Krzysztof Penderecki was born in Debica, Poland in 1933. Although he took piano and violin lessons as a boy, he did not develop a serious interest in music until he was eighteen. He enrolled in Krakow University where he completed a five year curriculum as a violin major in just two years. He entered the Krakow Academy of Music, where he changed his concentration from violin to composition. He had become so accomplished that he was given his own composition class immediately upon graduation. He achieved instant prominence in 1959 when the three compositions he submitted to the Second Annual Polish Composers' Union competition won all three top prizes. In 1961 his *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima* won the UNESCO Prize of the International Composers' Jury, giving him his first international success. But it was the *St. Luke Passion*, written for the 700th anniversary of the founding of the cathedral of Münster and commissioned by the West German Radio, which catapulted him into international fame. The premiere was well attended and was both a popular and critical success, and within a few years had been widely performed across Europe and the United States.

The *Passion* refers to the gospel text dealing with the events of Jesus's arrest, interrogation before the High Priest, arraignment before Pilate, crucifixion and death. It occupies a central place in Christian theology and has long been in liturgical use. It is traditionally recited, chanted or sung in services during Holy Week, the time immediately preceding Easter. There have been a number of musical settings of the Passion, but by far the best known are the two monumental oratorios of J. S. Bach, the *St. Matthew* and *St. John* Passions. Penderecki knew his *St. Luke Passion* would beg comparison with Bach's, and he did not dodge the issue. When asked about his choice of text, he replied that he had chosen the St. Luke gospel "not only for literary reasons, on account of the especially beautiful language, but rather because there had already been two unusually good Passion compositions based on Matthew and John." He makes the connection even more explicit by basing much of the thematic material on the **B-A-C-H** motive. In German musical notation, B represents B-flat and H represents B-natural, so Bach's name can be spelled out musically. (Click to hear the [B-A-C-H motive](#).) Penderecki was not the first composer to take advantage of that coincidence; Bach himself worked his name into *The Art of the Fugue*. Penderecki takes this to an extreme, however; the B-A-C-H motive

appears well over a hundred times in various guises and provides the principal thematic material for much of the Passion.

There are many similarities between Bach's and Penderecki's treatment of the Passion. Both divide the Passion into two parts. Both feature the narrator or Evangelist prominently, although in the *St. Luke Passion* the Evangelist speaks rather than sings, and the spoken part is often set simultaneously with sung parts. Both supplement the gospel text with additional material to emphasize the dramatic quality of the Passion story. This dramatic element is very important to the *St. Luke Passion*. Penderecki pares the gospel narrative down to its essence, especially in the dialogue where he removes all the "he said" and "they said," almost like a screenplay. But he also supplements the gospel with hymns and psalms taken directly from the Catholic liturgy. Penderecki's *Passion* is not just a dramatic work, but also a work of faith.

Penderecki manages a subtle political statement with the *St. Luke Passion*. The year of the premiere, 1966, also corresponded to the thousandth anniversary of Poland's conversion to Christianity. Alone among Slavic countries, Poland was Christianized by the West, accepting the Latin rite rather than the Orthodox rite. The Polish language was transliterated into the Roman alphabet rather than the Greek-inspired Cyrillic. In religion, culture and politics, Poland has always looked toward the West. A generation of Russian domination had placed a veneer of socialism over a millennium of Catholic tradition. Penderecki's setting of a Latin Passion underscored Polish tradition and national identity. It also provided another, possibly intentional, irony. The year 1966 also saw the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, one of whose reforms encouraged the use of the vernacular in the liturgy. Penderecki's use of the traditional, conservative Latin form provides an ironic contrast to his modernist, avant garde musical language.

Penderecki's unique musical language in the *St. Luke Passion* requires some comment. Penderecki composes in episodes or blocks of sounds. While there is a temporal relation between the episodes, the music largely flows somewhat irregularly, without the sense of a strong, fixed beat. Within each episode, the rhythm of the notes and the exact timing of the entrances are often at the discretion of the conductor or the performers. It gives the sense of music continually coming into and out of focus.

Harmonically, the *St. Luke Passion* is fundamentally atonal, but Penderecki rejects the strict and often dry formalism of serial music. There are repeated unison pitches which serve to organize and focus the music. Penderecki makes extensive use of dissonance, but harmonic cadences also appear through the piece, most notably whenever the chorus has the word *Domine* (Lord). And despite the generally atonal character of the music Penderecki produces a number of melodies of great beauty.

The *Passion* is perhaps Penderecki's most experimental work in terms of exploring novel sounds. There are often thick clusters of sound rather than defined pitches, especially in the strings, which are also asked to occasionally play in quarter-tone intervals. He divides the choir into three choruses, which produces an interesting spatial separation of sounds. He often sets the same music for the three choruses but offsets the pitch for each by a half-step. His most distinctive technique is distributed melody or distributed text, in which each note or syllable in a phrase is given to a different instrument or voice. The chorus is asked to produce a variety of sounds including whistling, groaning, shouting, speaking on pitch (*sprechstimme*), glissandi (sliding from pitch to pitch) and making

percussive sounds. While this may sound contrived, Penderecki's unique musical language never stands between the listeners and the sense of the Passion, but rather serves to reinforce the essential drama and emotion of the text. Listeners rarely come away from the *St. Luke Passion* unmoved.

Structure of the Work

The *Passion* begins with a traditional Latin hymn, *Vexilla regis proderunt* (Carry the banner of the king), which serves as an introduction to the gospel text. Written in the seventh century by one of the first great hymnists, Venantius Fortunatus, it is used liturgically at the end of the Holy Thursday service. It is sung while the altar is stripped, the tabernacle is opened and the blessed sacrament is taken away, symbolically representing the arrest of Jesus with which the gospel story begins. Penderecki displays much of his musical palette in this opening section. It begins with a strong unison which "resolves" to a 12-tone chord. An a cappella section follows which moves freely and is based on the **B-A-C-H** theme. There are glissandi in the chorus, sprechstimme, and a beautiful a cappella melody to the text *te fons salutis* (thou font of salvation.) The Evangelist then begins the story with Christ praying on the Mount of Olives and the baritone, who portrays Jesus throughout, singing Christ's words. This moves into a setting of Psalm 22 (which again is part of the Good Friday liturgy) set for baritone and chorus. The scene ends with a somewhat agitated soprano solo.

The second scene begins with an orchestral section followed by the narration of Jesus' betrayal by Judas. The scene closes with a choral lament taken from the *Lamentations of Jeremiah*, followed by a beautiful a cappella setting of the first verse of Psalm 10, ending with the *Domine* cadence. It is interesting that while the *Passion* calls for enormous musical forces, there are many places like this in which Penderecki uses small ensembles, providing music of elegant simplicity and clarity.

The third scene centers around Peter's denial. The chorus begins the narrative with sprechstimme, each chorus with the same text but offset from each other, like a crowd of people all eagerly trying to tell their version of the story. The bass solo takes the part of Peter and the chorus his accusers. After the narrator finishes the story there is a short bass aria pleading for forgiveness.

The fourth scene recounts Jesus being mocked and beaten after his arrest. It begins with very agitated orchestral music with the chorus joining in with rapid percussive sounds like a noisy mob, followed by mocking laughter. After Jesus responds to his tormentors, the soprano solo returns to the text from the *Lamentation of Jeremiah* and the chorus closes with an extended a cappella psalm. The distributed text can clearly be heard as divisi basses begin with the word *miserere* (have mercy). The melody is again based on the **B-A-C-H** theme.

The final scene of Part I begins with an orchestral introduction in which the chorus eventually joins in wordless humming. The chorus shouts out accusations against Jesus in front of Pilate, with Jesus responding. The chorus picks up the narration alternately speaking and using sprechstimme as Jesus is sent to Herod and back again to Pilate. The bass solo, as Pilate, tries to release Jesus, but the crowd shouts for Barabbas instead, and the scene ends with the chorus shouting "Crucify him!"

The first scene of Part II begins with a brief choral psalm, followed by a lengthy processional as Jesus carries his cross to Golgotha. The text is from the *Improperia* (The Reproaches), taken again from the Good Friday liturgy. The scene ends with a chanted invocation in both Greek and Latin asking for mercy.

Scene seven begins with the Evangelist briefly recounting the crucifixion. The soprano solo follows with a portion of the hymn *Pange lingua* (Sing, my tongue). This is not the familiar hymn by St. Thomas Aquinas but rather another hymn by Fortunatus. This is also part of the Good Friday liturgy, sung as the cross, veiled in purple cloth, is carried in. The chorus follows with *Ecce lignum crucis* (Behold the wood of the cross), the antiphon sung as the cross is gradually uncovered.

The eighth scene follows Jesus on the cross. He asks the Father to forgive those who crucified him while the soldiers gamble for his clothes. The chorus returns to Psalm 22, and Penderecki produces some of his most eerie, chilling music for the text *dinumeraverunt omnia ossa mea* (I can count all my bones.) The crowd mocks Jesus, with the chorus again making buzzing, percussive sounds and derisive laughter. The two thieves join in with the chorus taking the words of the first and the bass solo taking the part the second.

The ninth scene opens with a brief narration after which Jesus addresses his mother from the cross. The chorus follows with the hymn *Stabat mater* (There stands the sorrowful mother). Penderecki originally composed this as a stand-alone piece for a cappella chorus and later used it as the foundation upon which he built the *Passion*. It was in this piece that he developed many of the techniques he later employed for the *Passion*, including distributed text and both spoken and whispered sprechstimme. The *Stabat mater* ends with a massive D-major chord.

The final scene is the death of Christ on the cross. Jesus utters his final words, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit," and one of the boys' voices echoes "It is finished." There is an orchestral interlude and then the chorus begins the last section with fragments of music from the previous sections. The boys' choir then introduces the comforting words of Psalm 31 (In you, O Lord, I put my trust). The chorus joins in and the intensity builds until the *Passion* ends on a glorious E-major chord.

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