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Biblical Inspirations in the Works
of Krzysztof Penderecki:
At the Crossroads of Theology
and Music
In memory of the great Polish composer
Krzysztof Penderecki
Deceased on 29 March 2020

ABSTRACT

By taking up Biblical themes in his *œuvre*, Krzysztof Penderecki effectuated the idea of returning art to its Christian roots. Analyses of selected fragments of his outstanding works (*Seven Gates of Jerusalem* and *Passion According to St. Luke*) show that the composer performed a peculiar, apt and suggestive “translation” of Biblical content into musical language, using contemporary compositional techniques as well as alluding at times to the tradition of J.S. Bach.

In the above compositions, Penderecki utilized the sound of the instruments, assigning them symbolic meaning and even experimenting with their construction (tubaphone). He also introduced a spatially-distributed orchestra, assigning the human voice its original, purely declamatory function, without limitations of rhythm or meter. The composer thus took steps to theatricalize the musical work, in order to enable a deeper reception of the Biblical content by the audience.

KEY WORDS: Bible, theology, word, music, Penderecki,
word-music relationships, interdisciplinary

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STRESZCZENIE

*Inspiracje biblijne w twórczości Krzysztofa Pendereckiego
(na pograniczu teologii i muzyki)*

Krzysztof Penderecki, podejmując w swojej twórczości tematy biblijne, realizuje ideę powrotu sztuki do korzeni chrześcijańskich. Analizy wybranych fragmentów wybitnych jego dzieł: *Siedem Bram Jerozolimy* i *Pasja według św. Łukasza*, dowodzą, że kompozytor dokonał swoistego „przekładu” treści biblijnej na język muzyczny w sposób trafny, sugestywny, z wykorzystaniem technik, jakimi dysponuje współczesna sztuka kompozytorska, oraz nawiązując w pewnych miejscach do tradycji związanej ze spuścizną J.S. Bacha.

W wymienionych kompozycjach Penderecki używa brzmienia instrumentów, którym nadaje symboliczne znaczenie, a nawet eksperymentuje w zakresie ich budowy (tubafon). Wprowadza także przestrzennie rozmieszczoną orkiestrę, a ludzkiemu głosowi powierza funkcję pierwotną – czysto deklamacyjną, bez jakichkolwiek ograniczeń rytmicznych czy metrycznych. W ten sposób kompozytor poczynił pewne zabiegi zmierzające do teatralizacji dzieła muzycznego w celu pogłębienia odbioru treści biblijnej przez słuchaczy.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: Biblia, teologia, słowo, muzyka, Penderecki, związki słowno-muzyczne, interdyscyplinarność

Figure 1. Bust of Krzysztof Penderecki. Sculpture by Adam Myjak from 2013, exhibited at the Krzysztof Penderecki European Centre for Music in Lusławice. Photo: Marek Skrukwa



Biblical subject matter finds broad application in musical compositions. Artists have drawn from the content of individual books of Holy Scripture, e.g. the Book of Psalms (or fragments thereof), the Magnificat or selected verses from the Lamentations of Jeremiah.¹ A frequent compositional procedure has been the compilation of texts, for example, the combination of descriptions of Christ's passion and death from different Gospels. We then speak of a so-called Summa Passionis. Another foundation for a musical work could be a certain kind of libretto comprised not only of Biblical, but also liturgical or other texts, e.g. hymns rooted in ecclesiastical tradition.² Such an example is Krzysztof Penderecki's *Passion According to St. Luke* from 1965, which the composer himself termed a collage.³ Another work of his that resulted from the combination of fragments from various books of Holy Scripture is *Seven Gates of Jerusalem* from 1996.

Krzysztof Penderecki's compositions are enduring monuments to our culture. His music is constantly present in the world's musical life and enjoys extraordinary interest. It is a testimony to inspiration from the Biblical word, translated by the artist into an individual artistic language – thus, sounds forming a logical structure. A considerable portion of Krzysztof Penderecki's *œuvre* would not have been written, had it not had its foundation in a theological layer to be found in the pages of Holy Scripture. It is striking with what extraordinary care he chose the texts for his compositions. Sometimes, he changed the language of the translation dependent on the place where his works were performed. This attests to the enormous importance he attached to the semantics of the word in his musical *œuvre*.

In my reflections, I intend to show the transposition of the Biblical word into musical language in selected vocal-instrumental works of Krzysztof Penderecki. At the same time, as a theologian, I shall be particularly interested in the selection and exegesis of the text; and as a musician, in the musical setting of that text.

In order to better understand the intricacies of the musical language, I would like to present the basic ideas of the master's compositional technique, as well as analyses of a few fragments of his works, in order to provide a "key" to reception of the complex musical material. Possession of proper tools and use of appropriate research methods will contribute to

1 Cf. K. Mrowiec, *Biblia w muzyce* [The Bible in Music], in: *Encyklopedia katolicka* [Catholic Encyclopedia], Vol. 2, eds. F. Gryglewicz, R. Łukaszyk, Z. Sułowski, Lublin 1995, col. 450.

2 Cf. R. Chłopicka, *Krzysztof Penderecki w kręgu tradycji obrzędowości religijnej Wschodu i Zachodu* [Krzysztof Penderecki in the Sphere of Eastern and Western Liturgical Tradition], in: *Muzyka religijna – między epokami i kulturami* [Religious Music – Between Eras and Cultures], Vol. 2, eds. K. Turek, B. Mika, Katowice 2009, p. 172.

3 Cf. A. Lewandowska-Kąkol, *Dźwięki, szepty, zgrzyty. Wywiady z kompozytorami* [Sounds, Whispers, Dissonances: Interviews with Composers], Warszawa 2012, p. 39.

a proper, deeper reception of a sonic expression that (for lack of a common musical idiom) is more ambiguous to interpret in 20th-century compositions than in the works of earlier eras, which were created on the foundation of certain constant principles.

Programmatic and Aesthetic Premises of Krzysztof Penderecki

In seeking to answer the question “What are the most important ideas that guided Penderecki’s creative work?” I would like to cite a statement of his, in which he synthesized his main compositional premises:

My art, deeply rooted in Christianity, aims to rebuild humanity’s metaphysical space, which has been shattered by the cataclysms of the 20th century. Restoration of the sacred dimension of reality is the only way to save humanity.⁴

The question arises as to how one can use sound to perform a peculiar sort of spiritual catharsis. This challenge becomes all the more difficult in that contemporary musical language evades the conventional perception of the musical work, in which such elements as rhythm or melody – couched in logical structures, devoid of randomness – fulfill basic functions that affect the listener’s perception. In contemporary works, what is showcased is indeterminate sound planes, Sonorist experiments aiming, for example, to shock the listener; the final effect is not infrequently something unexpected even for the composer him – or herself. The lack of constant principles – that is, of the existence of a certain “musical code” that would be used by artists – affects the adoption of specific research methods that aim to carry out a thorough analysis of the musical work. It seems that the overriding principle of contemporary compositions is to showcase, through musical material, one’s own artistic individuality, unlimited by any “rules,” and to at all costs break with what is customarily termed a “compositional school” in music history. The protagonist of my article put it this way:

At a certain moment, in revolutionizing previous musical fundamentals, twentieth-century composers found themselves in a vacuum. The

4 K. Penderecki, *Labirynt czasu. Pięć wykładów na koniec wieku* [Labyrinth of Time: Five Addresses for the End of the Millennium], Warszawa 1997, p. 68.

postulate of extreme individualism and experimentation caused a destruction of any kind of enduring points of reference.⁵

Unfortunately, the accelerated technological development that we encounter at the present time is also not conducive to the quest for a musical expression that would choose as its aim the depth of a human existence that does not end with biological death. Penderecki said that contemporary art

wants to overpower the viewer with its literality and cruelty at all costs. Utilizing the newest technology, it dazzles us with images of aggression, disintegration and death, devoid of any kind of artistic transformation. And it is really not easy to point out artists who would be able by the power of their art to resist these rituals of monstrosity and neutralization.⁶

In this situation, the compositional art of Penderecki created unprecedented new possibilities for musical expression that aimed to rebuild the none-too-good spiritual condition of contemporary humanity.

Analysis of Selected Fragments

Seven Gates of Jerusalem

In order to understand the master's individual compositional style, it is worthwhile to take a look at a few fragments from his monumental seven-movement work entitled *Seven Gates of Jerusalem*, also known as *Symphony no. 7*. This is a composition commissioned by the mayor of Jerusalem for celebrations of the 3000th anniversary of King David's conquest of this city – a holy place for the three great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The number 7 represents a symbolic message appealing to such concepts as wholeness, fullness, perfection; a divine attribute. This number is also associated with such expressions as the 7 gates of Thebes, the 7 cities of Homer, the 7 hills of Rome, the 7-branched candelabrum in Judaism, the 7 seals in the Apocalypse, the 7 heavens and 7 hells in Islam, and the 7 days of the week.⁷ Penderecki's work, lasting about one hour, is built of 7 parts that do not, however, possess the characteristics of separate

5 Ibidem, pp. 59-60.

6 Ibidem, p. 36.

7 Cf. M. Tomaszewski, *Penderecki: Bunt i wyzwolenie* [Penderecki: Rebellion and Liberation], Vol. 2 *Odzyskiwanie raju* [The Regaining of Paradise], Kraków 2009, p. 228.

movements that can be identified with a concrete description or title. A quite unambiguous allusion to the symbol of the number 7 occurs in parts II and IV of the piece, representing a certain kind of motto that will also appear in the work's finale in the form of 7 *fortissimo* chords, which find release in the final E major sonority that also closes the *Passion According to St. Luke*.⁸

The piece is scored for 5 soloists, a narrator, 3 mixed choirs and orchestra. Also appearing in the ensemble are two tubaphones – new percussion instruments constructed specially for this work. The composer described them as follows:

These are sets of open plastic pipes tuned by adjusting their length. You play them by striking the openings with felt-covered swatters. I based them on bamboo instruments used in Polynesia and New Guinea Their sound proved very interesting. Two tubaphones have a lot to say in the fifth movement.⁹

Figure 2. Tubaphone. Photo taken after *Seven Gates of Jerusalem* concert on 15 November 2009 at St. Catherine's Church in Kraków. Photo: Marek Skrukwa



The composition is based on a text taken in its entirety from books of the Old Testament, above all verses from five of the Psalms of David (47, 95,

8 Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 228-229, 238.

9 M. Zwyrzykowski, *Krzysztof Penderecki on "The Seven Gates of Jerusalem,"* transl. A. Zapalowski, fragment of interview given by K. Penderecki in Kraków on 30 December 1996. Material from CD booklet: K. Penderecki, *Seven Gates of Jerusalem*, CD Accord, 1997 (ACD 036, 011 332-2), p. 19.

129, 136 and 147).¹⁰ The remaining fragments are drawn from the books of the prophets: the Books of Isaiah (Isa. 51:19), Jeremiah (Jer. 21:8), Daniel (Dan. 7:13) and Ezekiel (Ezek. 37:1-10). As usual in his oratorio-cantata works, Penderecki uses here the Latin translation of the Bible – the Vulgate.

The structure of the work as a whole is comprised of the following fragments of Holy Scripture:

Part I: Maestoso: Magnus Dominus	Ps. 47:2; Ps. 95:1-3; Ps. 47:15
Part 2. Adagio: Si oblitus	Ps. 136:5
Part 3. De profundis	Ps. 129:1-3
Part 4. Allegro, Adagio: Si oblitus	Ps. 136:5; Isa. 26:2; Isa. 52:1
Part 5. Vivace: Lauda, Jerusalem, Dominum	Ps. 147:1-3
Part 6. Senza misura: Facta es super me manus Domini	Ezek. 37:1-10
Part 7. Haec dicit Dominus	Jer. 21:8; Dan. 7:13; Isa. 59:19; Isa. 60:1-3; Isa. 60:11; Ps. 95:1, 3-4; Ps. 47:2; Ps. 47:15

It is easy to observe that the Book of Psalms represents the backbone of the composition's word layer. In his book *Labyrinth of Time: Five Addresses for the End of the Millennium*, Penderecki himself wrote:

Currently preparing a composition for the 3000th birthday of Jerusalem, I have decided to return to the Psalms of David. This is a multiple return: to the roots of Judeo-Christian culture, to the sources of music.¹¹

This choice seems to coincide with the opinion of other artists as well as researchers of the Psalms, who consider them to be “a masterpiece of the poetry and literature of the ancient Israelites, in which human thought has dressed in verbal raiment all that is most beautiful and splendid in humanity.”¹²

In creating his peculiar libretto for *Seven Gates of Jerusalem*, Penderecki had been planning to highlight the Messianic motifs contained, for example, in the Apocalypse. In the end, however, he retreated from this plan and abandoned the New Testament texts, justifying this as follows: “[leafing through the Holy Scripture several times,] I found a suitable passage in Daniel which is considered an Apocalyptic book in its own right.”¹³

10 Psalms in this article are numbered according to the Vulgate.

11 K. Penderecki, *Labirynt czasu. Pięć wykładów na koniec wieku* [Labyrinth of Time: Five Addresses for the End of the Millennium], op. cit., p. 40.

12 S. Grzybek, *Psalterz – księga naszych ludzkich zobowiązań* [The Psalter – The Book of Our Human Obligations], “Ruch Biblijny i Liturgiczny” 1983 (36), No. 1, p. 1.

13 M. Zwyrzykowski, *Krzysztof Penderecki on “The Seven Gates of Jerusalem,”* op. cit., p. 17.

The fragment under discussion found its place in the final, seventh part of the piece. It is one sentence from a verse in the Book of Daniel (Dan. 7:13), showing the Resurrected One in the role of Messiah-King: “Et ecce cum nubilis coeli quasi Filius hominis veniebat” (“And lo, one like the son of man came with the clouds of heaven”).¹⁴

Figure 3. K. Penderecki, *Seven Gates of Jerusalem*, part VII. Score published by Schott Music in 1997, p. 128

The image displays a musical score for the seventh part of K. Penderecki's *Seven Gates of Jerusalem*. The score is in 4/4 time with a tempo marking of quarter note = 90. It features a vocal line for Bass Solo (B. solo) and instrumental parts for Violin I (VI. I), Violin II (VI. II), Viola (Va.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Contrabass (Cb.). The vocal line includes the Latin text: "Et ecce cum nubilis coeli quasi Filius hominis veniebat". The instrumental parts are highly rhythmic and complex, with various dynamics and articulations like *pizz.* (pizzicato) and *mf* (mezzo-forte). The score is published by Schott Music in 1997, page 128.

In Penderecki’s work, this quote has received a suggestive musical setting. The composer has entrusted the prophet’s words to the bass voice. It is worth noting the particular highlighting of the word „Filius,” thanks to the use of the highest note in the entire statement, *e-flat*¹, reinforced with *forte* dynamics. Emotional gradation is achieved by the ascending

14 *The Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims Version*, Charlotte 2009, OT p. 961. [Note: Pages in this edition are numbered separately for Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT)]. In his *œuvre*, Penderecki utilizes the text of the Vulgate, i.e. the Latin version of the Bible from St. Jerome. Biblical quotes from the scores of *Seven Gates of Jerusalem* and the *Passion According to St. Luke* are therefore given in the Douay-Rheims version, first published by The English College at Rheims in 1582, and by The English College at Douay in 1609.

direction of the melodic line, chromatic notes, an upward leap of a seventh, and the division of the statement into short segments using eighth rests. All of these devices give this bass statement a recitative character. It appears against the background of the orchestral ensemble, whose part extraordinarily clearly gives the music a certain mobility by virtue of accumulating triplet 16th-notes, alluding to the Baroque musical-rhetorical figure *circulatio*, which was used in places where the content referred to words reflecting, for example, circulation or undulation.

Another fragment I would like to point out, on account of its interesting orchestration, is the words of the prophet Ezekiel from part VI. His voice sounds proud and urgent, thanks to the narrator's recitation in the national language, adapted to the place where the piece is performed. This is the only fragment of this work where the composer abandons Latin. According to his intention, Ezekiel speaks Hebrew in Jerusalem; Polish in Poland etc. The aim of such a procedure is for listeners to understand the message and nuances of the text in their native language. Even just the meaning of the prophet's words produces the appropriate emotions, while the musical atmosphere aids in contemplation of their semantic content.

The selected passage – one of the best-known passages from the Book of Ezekiel (Ezek. 37:1-10) – presents a vision of the resurrection of the people of Israel. Yahweh transports the prophet in a vision to a field strewn with human bones. An extraordinary intervention of God causes the bones to become clothed with flesh. Next, the Creator breathes into them a spirit that revives them. This scene alludes to the description of the creation of man from the Book of Genesis (Gen. 2:7). The vision of Ezekiel depicts the situation of the chosen people in exile, dispersed and unable to rise up to new life on their own strength. The prophet teaches that a return from slavery and the resurrection of Israel are still possible, but only by the action of God alone. Only the breath of God's spirit will transform defeat into victory.¹⁵

In his work, Penderecki adds to this extraordinary recitation – representing an exception in the work as a whole – the peculiar, mysterious sound of a bass trumpet, imitating the Biblical *shofar*, that is, ram's horn trumpet: the only ritual instrument used to this day that survived the destruction by the Romans of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE.¹⁶ It was used to appeal to God in times of fire, flood, famine and drought.¹⁷ It has a very long history preserved in the pages of the Bible. It was used on the first

15 Cf. *New American Bible (Revised Edition)*, New York 2012, p. 1043.

16 Cf. J. Montagu, *Musical Instruments of the Bible*, Lanham/London 2002, pp. 19-24.

17 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 134.

day of the year to call the Israelites to repentance for sins committed.¹⁸ It also fulfilled the role of a military trumpet. For example, it appears in the description of Gideon's liberation of the chosen people from the oppression of the Midianites (Judg. 7:16).¹⁹ It also appears in the Book of Leviticus in the context of celebrations of the jubilee year, whose arrival was announced every fifty years with the sound of this particular instrument:²⁰

You shall count seven weeks of years – seven times seven years – such that the seven weeks of years amount to forty-nine years. Then, on the tenth day of the seventh month let the ram's horn resound (Lev. 25:8-9).²¹

This description is all the more important in that it invokes the symbolic riches of the number 7, which represents an important point of reference in Penderecki's work.

The composer himself justified as follows the selection of this instrument, which finally appears in the work in symbolic form:

I would use a *shofar* or ram's-horn trumpet, considering its important role in the Hebrew tradition. However, the range of this instrument is very limited and it would even be difficult to tune with the orchestra. That's why I gave up the idea and instead used a bass trumpet which, for me, symbolizes the voice of God ...²²

It is worth adding that presently, a modern trumpet is also used at certain Reform synagogues instead of the *shofar*.²³

Let us take a look at how the composer utilizes the peculiar-sounding bass trumpet, which embodies the *shofar* in this piece. In the musical material of the trumpet part, we discern the symbolically-presented, as it were, materialized voice of God, heralding the revival of the dry bones lying in the field, under the influence of God's breath. The trumpet melody is of signal-like character. It appears in *forte* dynamics and initially oscillates within the interval of a second. Next, its amplitude expands, and 16th-note diminution causes an increase in mobility. The melody aims upward, often in tritone leaps, to finish its course an octave away from the initial note. Thus, the segment as a whole is bracketed, as it were, by

18 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 26.

19 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 22.

20 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 20.

21 *New American Bible (Revised Edition)*, op. cit., p. 142.

22 G. Michalski, *The Seven Gates of Jerusalem*, transl. A. Zapalowski, material from CD booklet: K. Penderecki, *Seven Gates of Jerusalem*, CD Accord, 1997 (ACD 036, 011 332-2), p. 10.

23 Cf. J. Montagu, *Musical Instruments of the Bible*, op. cit., p. 136.

a perfect interval. The tension thereby achieved, centralized on the final long *forte* note, serves to bring out the words of the narrator reciting in the national language: “Behold, I will send spirit into you, and you shall live” (Ezek. 37:5).²⁴

Figure 4. K. Penderecki, *Seven Gates of Jerusalem*, part VI. Score published by Schott Music in 1997, p. 120

Penderecki prepares the entire atmosphere necessary to create this mystical mood through an initially subdued orchestra; and then, through murmurs produced by the strings, which are joined by sounds coming from specially-selected percussion instruments. Such a utilization of the orchestra – which is, let us add, situated peculiarly in the performance space – brings out in an exceptional manner the mood associated with the expansive field from Ezekiel’s vision, covered with human bones, from which difficult-to-identify sounds emanate. Long, tied notes bring out the stillness reigning in this space.

Passion According to St. Luke

Another work by Krzysztof Penderecki, *Passio et mors Domini Nostri Iesu Christi secundum Lucam*, is a masterpiece written, as he himself said, “above all for the millennium of the baptism of Poland,”²⁵ although the occasion also coincided with a commission he had received from the Westdeutscher Rundfunk in conjunction with the 700th birthday of the cathedral in Münster. The composition continues to enjoy extraordinary popularity. It is

24 *The Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims Version*, op. cit., OT, p. 934.

25 Cf. A. Lewandowska-Kąkol, *Dźwięki, szepty, zgrzyty. Wywiady z kompozytorami* [Sounds, Whispers, Dissonances: Interviews with Composers], op. cit., p. 40.

worth mentioning that after its world première on 30 March 1966, it “went around the world and was numbered by music historians among the most distinguished works of the 20th century.”²⁶ According to information from 2007, it has been performed worldwide over 1000 times.²⁷ The performance ensemble is comprised of 3 soloists and a narrator; beyond this, 3 mixed choirs and a boys’ choir appear, along with a symphonic orchestra that is not infrequently utilized in a very understated manner.

Reflections on the selection of the gospel account for the *Passion*, as well as on the entirety of the work’s text, were undertaken multiple times by Penderecki. As I have already mentioned, this work is in a certain sense a collage. The main backbone is represented by a Passion account – both intellectual and poetic – based on the Gospel According to St. Luke. It is a description left by an erudite person who possessed a Classical knowledge base. The composer wanted to mark this account with a greater dramatic element; this is why he also utilized three key fragments drawn from the Gospel According to St. John.²⁸ They are to be found in Part II of the work, and describe events that took place on the Way of the Cross (“and carrying the cross himself he went out to what is called the Place of the Skull, in Hebrew, Golgotha” – John 19:17)²⁹ and after the Crucifixion: the scene beneath the Cross, i.e. the conversation with his Mother and St. John, as well as “Consummatum est” (John 19:30) (“It is consummated”³⁰ or “It is finished”³¹).

The structure of the Passion narrative as a whole, which is comprised of various text fragments, proceeds as follows:

26 M. Tomaszewski, *Penderecki: Bunt i wyzwolenie* [Penderecki: Rebellion and Liberation], Vol. 1, *Rozpętanie żywiołów* [The Elements Unleashed], Kraków 2008, p. 205.

27 Cf. R. Chłopicka, *Temat męki i śmierci Chrystusa w twórczości Krzysztofa Pendereckiego* [The Subject of the Passion and Death of Christ in the Works of Krzysztof Penderecki], in: *Perły muzyki kościelnej: chorał gregoriański i „Gorzkie żale”* [Pearls of Church Music: Gregorian Chant and the Lenten Psalms], eds. R. Tyrła, W. Kałamarz, Kraków 2007, p. 109.

28 Cf. P. Ćwikliński, J. Ziarno, *Pasja o Krzysztofie Pendereckim* [A Passion About Krzysztof Penderecki], Warszawa 1993, pp. 71-72.

29 *The Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims Version*, op. cit., NT, p. 129.

30 *Ibidem*, NT, p. 130.

31 *New American Bible (Revised Edition)*, op. cit., p. 1336.

PART I	Introductory Chorus – Hymn: <i>O crux Vexilla regis prodeunt 21-26</i>
Scene 1	<i>Jesus on the Mount of Olives</i> Luke 22:39-44 Ps. 21:2-3; Ps. 5:2: <i>Deus, Deus meus</i> – aria Ps. 14:1; Ps. 4:9; Ps. 15:9: <i>Domine, quis habitabit</i> – aria
Scene 2	<i>Arrest</i> Luke 22:47-53 Lament: <i>Jerusalem, Jerusalem</i> Ps. 9:22: <i>Ut quid Domine</i> – a cappella chorus
Scene 3	<i>Peter's Denial</i> Luke 22:54-62 Ps. 42:1: <i>Iudica me, Deus</i> – aria
Scene 4	<i>Mocking at the High Priest's Residence</i> Luke 22:63-70 Lament: <i>Jerusalem, Jerusalem</i> Ps. 55:2: <i>Miserere mei</i> – a cappella chorus
Scene 5	<i>Jesus before Pilate</i> Luke 23:1-22
PART II	Ps. 21:16: <i>Et in pulverem mortis</i>
Scene 1	<i>Way of the Cross</i> John 19:17 Improperia: <i>Popule meus</i> – <i>Passacaglia</i>
Scene 2	<i>Crucifixion</i> Luke 23:33 Antiphon: <i>Crux fidelis</i> – aria Luke 23:34 Ps. 21:16-20: <i>Et in pulverem mortis</i> – a cappella chorus
Scene 3	<i>Mocking of Christ Crucified</i> Luke 23:35-37 <i>Jesus Between the Thieves</i> Luke 23:39-43 <i>Conversation with Mother and John beneath the Cross</i> John 19:25-27 Sequence: <i>Stabat Mater</i>
Scene 4	<i>Death of Christ</i> Luke 23:44-46 John 19:30 Instrumental elegy
Finale	Recapitulation of principal motifs Ps. 30:2-3, 6: <i>In te, Domine, speravi</i>

As can be observed from the above schematic table, the piece is comprised of two parts. The first begins with the solemn hymn *O crux*, after which the following scenes ensue: the prayer on the Mount of Olives, the arrest, Peter's three-time denial, the mocking at the High Priest's residence, the judgment at Pilate's residence. Each of the above-mentioned scenes closes with a fragment of contemplative character, couched in the form of a solo aria (e.g. *Deus meus*) or a psalm sung *a cappella* (e.g. *Ut quid Domine*). An exception is represented by the final scene, interrupted by the dramatic cry of the *turba* chorus: "Crucify him!" The second part of the *Passion* presents the Way of the Cross, the Crucifixion, scenes playing out in the area surrounding the Cross, and Christ's death scene closing out the drama of Golgotha. Just as in the first part, here as well, each event is followed by a lyrical commentary comprised of, in turn: Improperia (*Popule meus – Passacaglia*), a psalm (*In pulverem mortis*), a sequence (*Stabat Mater*), an instrumental elegy and a final chorus filled with hope – *In te, Domine, speravi*.

The manner of selection or combination of the texts, the two-part form given to the work, the narrative part (the Evangelist), the dramatic segments (*turba* choruses, scenes with division into roles) and lyrical segments (solo arias, psalms), as well as the exordium beginning the piece (*O crux*) and the *conclusio* closing it (*In te, Domine, speravi*), all allude to the Baroque oratorio-cantata Passion form. Penderecki was invoking the model par excellence represented by the Passions of J.S. Bach. As he himself said, "Aside from Johann Sebastian Bach, I had no other models."³² Asked once where he got the audacity to measure himself with the already existing and well-known Passions, he said, "I think I was too young for my hand to waver. I simply had no idea what I was getting myself into."³³

Let us see how Penderecki prepared the musical setting for the culminating moment of the *Passion According to St. Luke*, i.e. Christ's death scene. The composer juxtaposed here fragments from the accounts of St. Luke and St. John. In the Gospel According to St. Luke, no extreme emotions appear. Jesus calls upon the Father and prays in the words of Psalm 30:6: "Pater, in manus tuas commendo spiritum meum" (Luke 23:46) ("Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit")³⁴. This psalm is

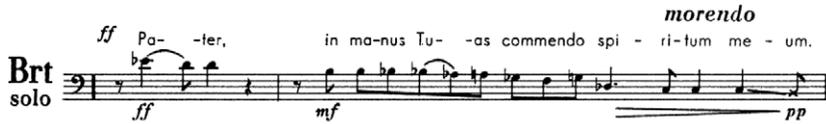
32 Cf. A. Lewandowska-Kąkol, *Dźwięki, szepty, zgrzyty. Wywiady z kompozytorami* [Sounds, Whispers, Dissonances: Interviews with Composers], op. cit., p. 39.

33 The text comes from an interview given to M. Tomaszewski, in: *Rozmowy lusławickie* [Lusławice Conversations], Vol. 1, Olszanica 2005, pp. 151-152. Cited according to: M. Tomaszewski, *Penderecki: Bunt i wyzwolenie* [Penderecki: Rebellion and Liberation], Vol. 1, *Rozpętanie żywiołów* [The Elements Unleashed], op. cit., p. 205.

34 *The Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims Version*, op. cit., NT, p. 101.

simultaneously a lamentation and the grateful prayer of a person who has difficult trials behind him. However, these experiences do not contribute to a weakening of the trust that this person places in Yahweh, who is a faithful God.³⁵

Figure 5. K. Penderecki, *Passio et mors Domini Nostri Iesu Christi secundum Lucam*, PWM Edition, Kraków 1982, p. 109



The compositional procedure I would like to point out concerns the setting of one word, demarcated from the context with rests: “Pater.” It emerges from Christ’s lips like a scream, which finds reflection both in the *fortissimo* dynamics and in the utilization of the high note *e-flat*¹. It is worth adding that this is the only place in the *Passion* that adopts a setting of the word “Pater” in which the melodic line descends, in this way evoking the emotions associated with Christ’s impending death. In the remaining places, this word has been expressed by an ascending melodic line.

The subsequent statement of Christ, after the word “Pater,” forms a now-uninterrupted structure. Jesus expresses his final submission to the will of the Father for the last time. The musical setting takes the form of a descending melodic line that finally dies away, depicting the end of a human life marked by transitoriness and emptiness. Everything dies down through lengthening rhythmic values and *pianissimo* dynamics. The composer marked this place in the score *morendo*, i.e. “dying away.” The words of Christ “Into thy hands I commend my spirit” are heard solo, with no support from any instrument, which places an additional emphasis on their significance.

Next, the listener’s attention is riveted by the interesting setting of the last words of the Savior, from the account of St. John (John 19:30) “Consummatum est” (“It is finished”):

35 Cf. *Księga Psalmów. Wstęp, przekład z oryginału, komentarz, ekskursy* [The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Translation from the Original, Commentary, Excurses], ed. S. Łach, Poznań 1990, pp. 204–205.

Figure 6. K. Penderecki, *Passio et mors Domini Nostri Iesu Christi secundum Lucam*, PWM Edition, Kraków 1982, p. 110

The image displays two musical staves. The upper staff, labeled 'rag s' (soprano), features a melodic line with a yellow rectangular highlight. Above this highlight, the text 'Consumma - -tum est.' is written, with a fermata over the final note. A 'pp' (pianissimo) dynamic marking is placed below the first note of the highlighted section. Below the staff, the text 'Heavenly space' is centered. The lower staff, labeled 'org' (organ), shows a descending melodic line with a red rectangular highlight. A 'p' (piano) dynamic marking is placed below the first note of this section. Below the staff, the text 'Earthly space' is centered. A vertical dashed line on the right side of the image connects the two staves.

First, a descending melodic line that is a symbolic presentation of imperfect, mortal human nature appears in the organ part. This entire segment, from Christ’s words “Pater” up to the closure in the organ part, is marked by death in the purely human, temporal sense, while the choir of boy sopranos quietly singing “Consummatum est” (“It is finished”) is an expression of a completely different reality. The melody aims upward, reflecting the heavenly sphere. It is intriguing that the last words of Christ play the role of a commentary and are heard already after his death.³⁶ It is, as it were, a depiction of the voice of Jesus’ soul – free, entering into heaven. Many composers have turned their hands to a description of the last words of the Savior transmitted by St. John, for only in this account does the Greek word *τετέλεσται* (“It is finished”)³⁷ appear. It means the perfection of the finished work, the fulfillment of the Son of God’s salvific mission.

Penderecki’s settings of the Biblical text show the extraordinary care taken to ensure that the word be reflected by the sound as precisely as possible, as is particularly visible on the example of the most important statements appearing at the key moments in the *Passion*. One could get the impression that the composer employed procedures alluding to the musical rhetoric that we encounter in the works of the Cantor of Leipzig. At the

36 Cf. R. Chłopicka, *Temat męki i śmierci Chrystusa w twórczości Krzysztofa Pendereckiego* [The Subject of the Passion and Death of Christ in the Works of Krzysztof Penderecki], op. cit., p. 121.

37 Cf. *The Greek New Testament*, 4th revised edition, 11th printing, eds. B. Aland, K. Aland, J. Karavidopoulos, C.M. Martini and B. Metzger, Stuttgart 2006, p. 399.

same time, Penderecki used compositional techniques typical of contemporary music. He created twelve-tone series, made use of quarter-tones. He utilized Sonorist experiments. Not infrequently, the human voice can sound surprising, e.g. when the choir shouts, performs the lowest or highest possible notes, or – as in the fragment I am describing – sings in a just barely audible *pianissimo*, without instrumental support.

Summary

By taking up Biblical themes in his *œuvre*, Krzysztof Penderecki effectuated the idea of returning art to its Christian roots. Analyses of selected fragments of his outstanding works (*Seven Gates of Jerusalem* and *Passion According to St. Luke*) show that the composer performed a peculiar, apt and suggestive “translation” of Biblical content into musical language, using contemporary compositional techniques as well as alluding at times to the tradition of J.S. Bach.

In the above compositions, Penderecki utilized the sound of the instruments, assigning them symbolic meaning, and even experimenting with their construction (tubaphone). He also introduced a spatially-distributed orchestra, assigning the human voice its original, purely declamatory function, without any limitations of rhythm or meter. The composer thus took certain steps to theatricalize the musical work, in order to enable a deeper reception of the Biblical content by the audience.

Penderecki consciously undertook to translate theological content into his own individual language, and did so in such a distinctive manner that we can analyze the composer’s *œuvre* and discern his premises without the ambiguity so often encountered in contemporary music. This consistency engenders a certain feeling of harmony in the recipient, resulting from proper relationships between word and sound. The manner in which the composer musically set theologically-important words or lengthier statements enhances their message, evoking specific emotions and experiences in listeners, without leaving them as passive participants in the musical performance. This happens because the scale of the sonic impressions, in combination with the revealed word, achieves the aim intended by the composer, evoking an extraordinary state of artistic experience among listeners.

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