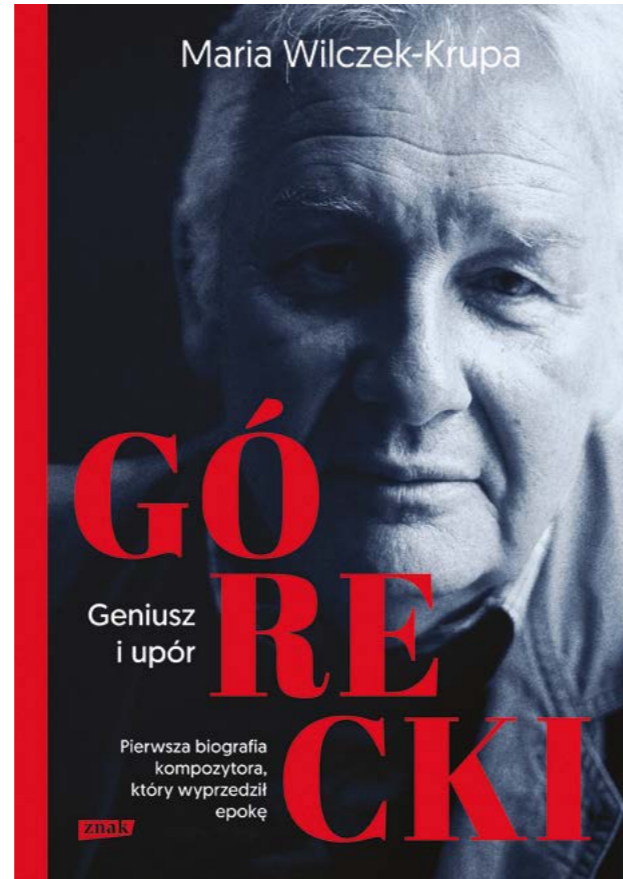


Górecki. A Stubborn Genius



Górecki's *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* passed Sting, Madonna and Nirvana in British and American music charts

Górecki: *A Stubborn Genius* is a biography covering the entire lifespan of the composer, who died in 2010 and whose *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* passed Sting, Madonna and Nirvana in British and American music charts and was used in twenty films; its recording has sold a million copies. Henryk Mikołaj Górecki and his music figure most significantly in this book, but the author also describes the political background (especially the realities of socialist Poland), which heavily influenced the life of the protagonist. The atmosphere of places where the composer lived is brilliantly conveyed, especially that of Silesia, where he hailed from. The reader discovers much about the musical circles Górecki moved in – about his teachers, friends, pupils and important music festivals. Maria Wilczek-Krupa has succeeded in describing the complexity of the composer's personality. On the one hand, we are presented with evidence of Górecki's (titular) improbable stubbornness, manifesting itself in his drive to pursue his goals despite numerous

obstacles. We find out that it is true – although quite unbelievable – that young Górecki was forbidden to touch the piano and he only learned to play it when he was eighteen. He gave up his teaching job to study music composition at the age of 22, despite gaps in his musical education. Moreover, he struggled with various illnesses all his life. On the other hand, we get examples of the composer's difficult, fiery temperament. He was easily set off, he liked to offend people and was able to sever years-long acquaintances.

Even if Henryk Mikołaj Górecki didn't achieve commercial success, this biography still serves as an example of a life fulfilled and evidence of his uncompromising fealty to his art. To her account, the author has previously published a well-received biography of yet another composer, Wojciech Kilar. I am thus convinced that this book is also bound to succeed.

Andrzej Mirek, translated by Anna Błasiak

It all started when David Drew, the then director responsible for expanding the catalogue of London publishing house Boosey & Hawkes, met Henryk at the Warsaw Autumn Festival during the first performance of "Lerchenmusik" in 1985. He went back to London intrigued with the unusual personality and immense charisma of this supposedly simple guy from Silesia. He took home a small pile of music scores from PWM (Polish Music Publishing House). He began studying them. The first was a copy of *Symphony No. 3 (Symphony of Sorrowful Songs)* opus 36.

One page, then another. Very low double basses, then cellos, then violas... A dark canon being built up by the strings. And suddenly – a penetrating soprano. David Drew jumped up and ran to see his boss.

Tony Fell, the then head of the publishing house, listened to the agitated soliloquy about the discovery David Drew made in Poland.

"This is a revelation! It's magic, it's an absolute force!" Drew was persuading him. "This'll be a sensation, this guy's a volcano! And barely anybody knows him in his own country..."

Indeed, there was still an embargo on Górecki's music in Poland. The National Philharmonics' musicians were still resentful. *Symphony No. 3* had been in fact released on a longplay in Poland, but it wasn't easy to find the recording by Jerzy Katlewicz and Stefania Woytowicz. In a word, Górecki didn't exist in his own country.

David Drew had a good intuition. A dog's olfactory sense – Szabelcio might phrase it that way, he who also prided himself in having the same talent. Tony Fell sensed good business.

He immediately got in touch with the heads of PWM Muzyczne in Kraków. Then with Górecki himself, who was nonetheless sceptical. Once a publisher from the West was interested in him in the 1970s. The composer got very excited because Schott had a reputation of being the main and oldest publisher in the world, together with Breitkopf & Härtel. But it all resulted in just a few editions of his works and that was that. The end.

But this time it was meant to be different.

The final agreement between Górecki, PWM and Boosey & Hawkes was signed in 1988. They signed a co-edition contract for 10 years. During this period the copyright was supposed to remain with PWM and the Polish publisher was to take care of the distribution of Henryk's scores in the Eastern Bloc, while Boosey was to promote his music in the West.

At around the same time, the British pianist Paul Crossley thought back on *Symphony No. 3*. At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, he was the artistic director of the London Sinfonietta. Crossley first heard Henryk's piece in 1983 in Berlin, when he entered a music shop and saw his record. He was mesmerised. With flushed cheeks he played the recording to

his friends in London: to the Sinfonietta's director Michael Vyner, and to the conductor and co-founder of the group, David Atherton. They wanted to start playing Górecki in the UK. (...)

Atherton conducted *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* for the first time in the 1987-88 concert season. He persuaded the Australian soprano Margaret Field to collaborate, as well as two well-known British symphony orchestras: the BBC Radio Orchestra and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. *Symphony No. 3* began its career in England. (...)

Meanwhile David Drew got cracking. *Symphony No. 3*, with his vigorous support, travelled from hand to hand. Even before Boosey signed the official agreement with Górecki, it had found its way into the hands of the rock legend David Bowie. In June 1987, the British singer played the *Third Symphony's* extensive fragments during a break at his London concert at Wembley. Bowie's fans, hypnotised with Górecki's music, listened. Pretty much no one among the seventy thousand people in the audience left the room.

John Sherba, a Kronos Quartet violinist from California, was in the audience that day. This is how he described the impression made by *Symphony No. 3* written by the unknown composer from Poland: "Yes, during the intermission this incredible music came on... (...) And everybody's reaction, including my own, was – what is this? It was the *Third Symphony*! David Bowie knew the piece very early... It made a great impact on lots of people..."

Excerpt translated by Anna Błasiak



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Awards

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