

The Fugue Interview

Witold Lutoslawski in Conversation



Witold Lutoslawski was born in Warsaw on January 25, 1913. The nephew of a leading Polish philosopher, his family belonged to a cultural elite, although Lutoslawski's background was not particularly musical. He started piano studies at the age of 11. Three years later, he took up violin and wrote a sonata for violin and piano. He entered the Warsaw Conservatoire, where he studied keyboard under Jerzy Lefeld and composition under Witold Maliszewski — himself a pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov. At the same time, he completed two years of research in higher mathematics at the University of Warsaw.

During World War II, Lutoslawski and other Polish musicians lived in constant fear of deportation. He supported himself by working at a series of odd jobs and by arranging informal musical concerts in Warsaw coffee houses. Several wartime compositions — including a symphony — were later performed. His 1954 *Concerto for Orchestra* brought him international fame, while subsequent works like *Funeral Music for Bartok* (1958) and *Venetian*

Games (1961) consolidated his position as one of the greatest contemporary composers.

Lothar Klein recently talked with Witold Lutoslawski.

The name Lutoslawski is often linked with the avant-garde school of composition; yet your music has achieved a very personal style. Do you consider your work avant-garde, or does it differ from that of composers like Stockhausen and Penderecki?

It's extremely difficult for me to say whether I belong to the avant-garde. It gives me great pleasure when people say that I do because it proves that at least somebody finds something new in my music. But I try to be more than just avant-garde. I strive to find something more stable, more durable, more permanent. In the very notion of avant-garde there is a shade of something temporary, and I'm rather tired of the transitory nature of contemporary music.

Musical fashions come and go very quickly . . .

Yes, but I think that anything solid, anything that will last, must also be new. It can't be an imitation.

Are there any classical composers from whom you have learned?

Oh certainly. I learned a most important lesson about musical forms from the Viennese classical school — especially Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. And I learned a great deal from baroque music as well.

Can you identify any specific baroque composer?

Bach and Handel are obvious. Of course I studied other pieces. But the most important thing I learned from the remote past was the form I studied in the sonatas and symphonies of Beethoven and Haydn.

Do you admire any musical personalities of the nineteenth century? Or is the romantic era alien to you?

Oh no, not alien. For a rather long period I was tremendously influenced by Brahms. Maybe I wasn't terribly fond of Liszt or Berlioz, but I'm still a great lover of Chopin.

What composers in our own century had a decisive influence on you?

Two independent traditions exist in our time. One is the second Viennese school — Schoenberg and Webern — and the other is the school of Debussy and his followers — early Stravinsky, Bartók and others. Schoenberg was trying to create a new functional law governing the sequence of sounds, but he was directed not so much by his sensitivity to the ear as by logical and numerical laws. There was a kind of absolute faith in numbers that is very alien to me. The directing factor in my music is the phenomenon of sound and the classification of different sounds. In this way, I think I'm a follower of Debussy.

Can you name two or three particular pieces of music you cherish?

I could mention lots of Bach. Apart from obvious masterpieces, I could also name some less-established works, such as the third Symphony of Rousseau which influenced me tremendously. But now, quite frankly, I don't listen to much music because I'm involved in my own work.

Would you say that young composers could still profit by studying the music of the past?

I can't imagine a musical education without studying classical music. I don't necessarily mean that the traditional counterpoint and harmony should occupy the majority of a student's time, but a trained musician must have a knowledge of traditional music.

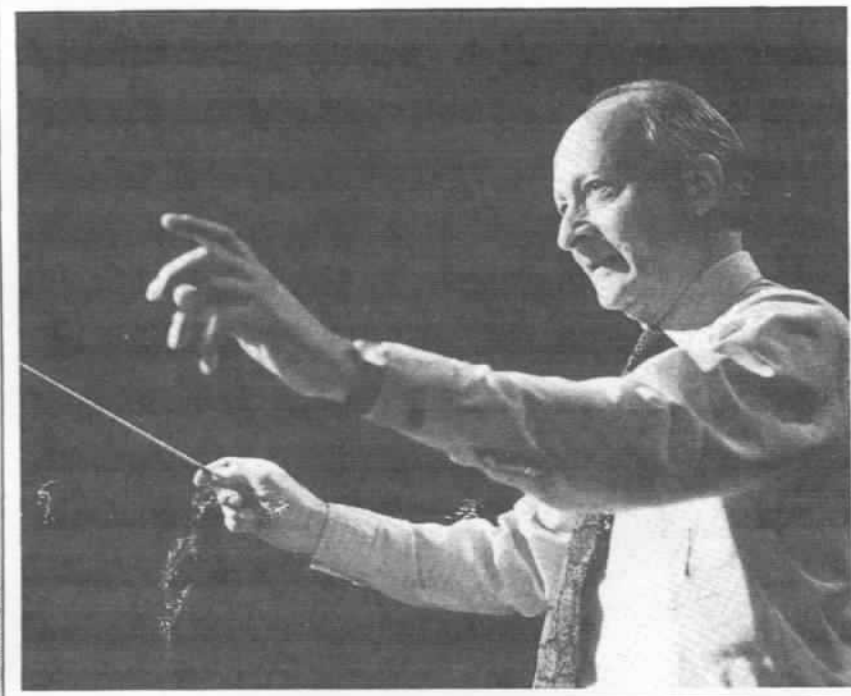
Can you suggest any ideas that might be incorporated into a musical curriculum?

I'm really quite an amateur as far as teaching is concerned. I once taught some summer courses in composition, but the curriculum was always based on my own music. I taught what I know myself.

Isn't there a danger of students copying their teacher?

I don't find copying dangerous. Conscious imitation of a good teacher is the right way to learn composition. Only after having achieved some skill in imitating other people should a young composer try to express what he personally has to say.

BBC Photograph



What do you recall of your own student days?

There are tremendous differences between the state of affairs in my youth and now. With recordings and sound libraries, students can be aware of everything that is going on in the whole of the musical world. That was not the case when I was a student.

Do students now have too many temptations?

It's difficult for me to judge, but the image of myself as a student with tapes of everything interesting in the current season makes me tremendously happy. We were pretty far away from musical life before the war.

In fact, your first Symphony, composed from 1941 through 1947, doesn't reflect any of the horrors of wartime Warsaw.

It's amazing how little the war influenced my composition. I was quite independent. Of course life experiences must influence the creativity of an artist, but the connection may be quite unconscious.

What did a composer do in Warsaw in those days when music was far from people's minds?

Musical life was practically nonexistent because it was forbidden. The organization of concerts was considered dangerous or subversive, so musicians were forced to work in cafés and to play for audiences who had come to drink coffee. Sometimes we organized very

sophisticated programs for café concerts. For more than five years a colleague and I worked in a piano duet. We prepared more than 500 pieces — everything from Bach to jazz.

After your first Symphony, there was a symphonic silence of 20 years until 1967, when your second Symphony appeared. Does the second Symphony reaffirm a lost faith in the symphonic idea?

Only partly, because I feel more respect than love for traditional instruments. They don't correspond to the imagination of a contemporary composer. And new instruments are not yet adequate to substitute for traditional instruments. But I use what I have at my disposal. Today's orchestra is far from an ideal means of expression but we have no better one, so I translate ideas that may not be precisely orchestral into the language of the symphony orchestra.

Your 1961 composition called the Venetian Games was your most radical break with tradition.

It was certainly the first time I used the chance element in music, and I considered it very important for my personal development.

You have often mentioned your fondness for some of the ideas of John Cage. Was he responsible for your discovery of chance in the Venetian Games?

In a way, although the piece is not really similar to any of Cage's work. The idea of losing the time connection between notes was his, but my own interpretation was quite different.

HART/ MURDOCK ARTISTS MANAGEMENT

1979-1980

Singers

Joanne Dorenfeld,
soprano
Rosemarie Landry,
soprano
Diane Loeb,
mezzo-soprano
Catherine Robbin,
contralto
Glyn Evans, tenor
John Keane, tenor
Ronald Murdock, tenor
Donald Bell, baritone
John Dodington, bass

Soloists

Douglas Bodle, organist
Jane Coop, pianist
Mireille Lagacé, organist
John O'Donnell, organist
Paul Pulford, cellist
Ray Sealey, guitarist
Patrick Wedd, organist
William Wright, organist

Ensembles

The Galliard Ensemble
The Locke Brass Consort
of London
The Vancouver
Chamber Choir

Attractions

The Huggett Family
Maple Sugar
Mermaid Theatre
Orkidstra
Stringband

191 COLLEGE ST., TORONTO
CANADA M5T 1P9
416-595-1886

The composer's conscious responsibility for all details in his creation seems to be diminishing with the introduction of chance factors.

Well, personally, I'm not interested in composing music in which chance is a deciding factor. I use the element of chance to enrich my means of expression. It never has the leading role because I want to remain the author of my music to the smallest detail.

But in your String Quartet there is no such thing as a full score. Only the parts of the individual players exist. How can the performers coordinate their efforts?

It's very precisely coordinated by certain remarks put on the parts. I've heard it played by four or five quartets and there were no more differences than among Mozarts or Bartoks played by different groups. The music remains the same. Every performer has direction remarks at the end of each section. For instance, he is supposed to wait for a certain note, observe the other performers, or give some direction to another performer. It's so strictly organized that it is always played as if conducted.

All of this seems highly technical. Is the notion of inspiration foreign to you?

Certainly not! Everything is a question of invention. I don't believe in technique whatsoever. What is musical technique? Everything must result from inspiration.

How long do you compose every day?

It depends on the stage of my work. If I am finishing a piece, I can work up to 12 hours or more a day because the idea is, in fact, already composed in my imagination. In the early stages I can't work for more than four or five hours, sometimes without results.

Of all music's elements — say harmony, melody, rhythm and form — what interests you most?

They all interest me. My special concentration on large-scale form resulted in a series of my greatest pieces, but I have studied harmony for ten years now. Harmony was abandoned by composers when serialism attracted their attention to the functional laws between intervals and notes, but this introduced quite a mess.

You frequently conduct major European orchestras where there is a strong sense of tradition. What is the attitude of European orchestral players to newer music?

It varies according to orchestras. I think

a composer must be absolutely responsible for the notation and the way he wants the musicians to play. Otherwise he loses a lot. I try to be terribly precise in my notation, which is why I meet a lot of understanding among traditional orchestras. I have even conducted the choir of Santa Cecilia in Rome and there were no problems because my notation was clear.

Do you think new composers have a better chance in Europe?

The availability of radio orchestras throughout Europe has been a tremendous help to young composers. Such orchestras require repertoire and consequently contemporary music flourishes. Furthermore, European orchestral players have a great deal of time to practice and rehearse. The normal rehearsal time for a Polish orchestra is five days, from nine until one each day. And musicians are quite familiar with contemporary music and strange kinds of notation. It is really a tremendous opportunity for young composers to be performed.

Composers on our side of the Atlantic would be green with envy. In North America there are fewer radio orchestras, and composers must be much more concerned with box-office appeal. Would you say that this is a good or bad state of affairs?

Rather bad. If a composer has to be disturbed by the question of whether his work must be sold or not, he may be quite lost.

Could it not also act as stimulation?

For myself, finding the right form for communication is most important. I can't bother about audiences. They will come with time.

You have a very optimistic view of the future. Someone once said that neither music nor any other art will exist in the future. How do you react to this pessimism?

I don't react at all because what interests me is the present and not the future. The future doesn't belong to me. I'm interested in doing what I have to do. I must realize my message, and I do that not with words and sentences but with notes and rhythms and sound colors. □

Lothar Klein is a composer and Chairman of the Graduate Department of Music at the University of Toronto. His work has been programmed by many international orchestras. This interview took place in Warsaw and was conducted in English. Klein and Lutoslawski have been friends for many years.