



GÓRECKI

String Quartets
Nos. 1 and 2

Genesis I: Elementi

Tippett Quartet

Henryk Mikołaj Górecki (1933–2010)

Complete String Quartets • 1

Henryk Mikołaj Górecki was born on 6 December 1933 at Czernica in Silesia. He studied music at the High School (now Academy) of Music in Katowice, graduating with distinction in 1960 from the class of Bolesław Szabelski (who had been taught by Karol Szymanowski). Górecki gained his debut concert as a composer in 1958 in Katowice, which in its turn led to hearings at the Warsaw Autumn International Festival of Contemporary Music that included his *First Symphony* in 1959 and *Scontri* ('Collisions') in 1960 – the former piece duly going on to win First Prize at the 1961 Biennial Festival of Youth in Paris. While the style of Górecki's compositions in his formative years owed a considerable amount to Bartók and Stravinsky, from the start of the following decade this was being supplemented with elements of a post-Webern expressionism as well as a selective and often idiosyncratic use of serial technique.

Górecki's 1960s pieces centre on the cyclical works *Genesis I–III* (1962–63) and *La Musiquette I–IV* (1967–70), both of which are scored for chamber ensembles. Whereas *Genesis* adheres to the Polish 'expressive sonorism', a simplification of material is evident with *Les Musiquettes*. These cycles were separated by the orchestral *Refrain*, for which Górecki received Third Prize at the UNESCO International Rostrum of Composers in Paris in 1967. *Refrain* can be seen as a turning-point in his musical aesthetic through the usage of imposing blocks of sound; while textural clusters, and above all the reverberating space around musical activity, heralds such pieces as the *Second Symphony 'Copernicus'* (1963) [Naxos 8.555375] and the *Third Symphony 'Symphony of Sorrowful Songs'* (1976) [8.550822] which – despite its uncertain premiere at the Royan Festival – belatedly accorded the composer international status during the 1990s.

Despite this unexpected success, Górecki continued steadfastly on the highly personal route he had chosen after having composed it, as if reluctant to capitalise on his unexpected fame. Then he had waited over three years before producing his next large-scale work, the

choral *Beatus Vir* (1979) [8.555375] written to mark the initial return visit to Poland of Pope John Paul II. This was followed by the monumental *Miserere* for unaccompanied voices (1981), written in support of the Polish trade union Solidarity, while chamber music was represented by such pieces as *Lerchenmusik* (1986) and the three string quartets written for the Kronos Quartet during 1988–95. Górecki's later years were clouded by illness and largely given to shorter choral and instrumental pieces, though he had been working on a fourth symphony that remained un-orchestrated at the time of his death in Katowice on 10 November 2010.

There is no string quartet from Górecki's earlier years, but he did compose for string trio in *Elementi* (1962), the first part of his triptych *Genesis* (which also includes *Canti Strumentali* for chamber ensemble and *Monodramma* for soprano, double basses and percussion). Written after his return from Paris, where he was able to make contact with Boulez and other leading figures of the European avant-garde, this one-movement piece expounds his emergent idiom with uncompromising immediacy and not least in its recourse to extended playing techniques.

The piece opens with an intense cluster that duly takes on greater rhythmic activity, the three instruments variously confronting each other in a series of assaultive gestures contrasted with more sustained chords. From here the music unfolds in sonic 'waves' of varying intensity, as well as exploiting the timbral extremes of the ensemble. There is little sense of development *per se* until the trio achieves a tenuous accord in a series of calm and even meditative chords.

The three *String Quartets*, written for the San Francisco-based Kronos Quartet, are among the most important of Górecki's mature works. Composed in 1988 and premiered in Minneapolis on 21 January the next year, *Already it is Dusk* is a paraphrase on the first line of a motet by Polish composer Wacław z Szamotuł (c. 1524–c. 1560) which is a prayer for sleeping children

(evocations of childhood are a recurrence of the composer's later music). Górecki duly takes the tenor line from this piece as the thematic basis for the single movement which follows.

The work opens with a declamatory chord that resonates into silence. After this, the ensemble intones a chorale-like theme which is punctuated by further such chords as it unfolds towards a climactic chordal sequence of real vehemence. This dies away to leave the preceding theme in mute uncertainty, before the central section is launched with a hectic, dance-like motion on all four instruments and in which plangent harmonic clashes are unsparingly to the forefront. It builds to a rhetorical climax which rapidly subsides into a resumption of the main theme, now drawing towards a fatalistic close which is made more so by the final cadential gesture.

Górecki's second quartet, *Quasi una fantasia*, followed apace. Composed during 1990–91 then first performed by the Kronos Quartet in Cleveland on 27 October 1991, this four-movement work is cast on a relatively larger scale and takes in a correspondingly wider range of expression (which might explain why this proved suitable for choreography by Itzik Galili, whose staging was seen in Lisbon seven years later). *Quasi una fantasia* explicitly evokes Beethoven, most notably his *Op. 27* piano sonatas, while Beethovenian elements can be perceived throughout its course.

No less Beethovenian is the follow-through of movements that brings to mind that composer's 'late' string quartets. The first movement begins with a sombre theme on viola over pulsating chords from cello, creating a sense of expectancy which intensifies as this theme is gradually elaborated. At length violins emerge in doleful counterpoint, as well as filling out the texture prior to a brief pause – after which, the music continues at a reduced dynamic level and with the four instruments coming together in a halting

accord that thereafter tails off into silence.

The second movement sets off with hammering chords (redolent of those found in some of the *scherzi* from Shostakovich's string quartets), against which the viola attempts to assert itself. Violins then emerge to enhance the mood of steely remorselessness, briefly allayed by a muted chordal gesture which does little to alleviate the acute violence until its belated re-emergence, now sustained so as to bring about an inward though hardly serene conclusion.

The third movement is designated *Arioso* (likely another Beethovenian reference) and here the expressive ambit, though no less intense than its two predecessors, at least allows for a degree of flexibility as the music switches between its yearning initial theme then a calmer though more harmonically dissonant idea. The latter stages are centred upon another of those chorale-like themes that are so much a feature of this composer's later music, here with a confiding intimacy which is affecting in spite (or even because) of its underlying starkness.

The final movement commences in the greatest possible contrast, its driving initial ideas bringing melody and accompaniment into febrile accord for a mood as desperate as it is determined. The music briefly loses its momentum as quiet pauses intervene in the prevailing texture, but this is soon regained on the way to a pulverising climax; itself cut short as it returns to the rapt chorale texture hitherto. Out of this the opening viola theme, over its cello accompaniment, returns in modified form to see the work through to an ending whose calm is less that of a journey fulfilled than one left in exhausted abeyance: a quality Górecki was to take up again in his third and final quartet of the following decade.

Richard Whitehouse

Tippett Quartet

From left to right: John Mills, Jeremy Isaac, Lydia Lowndes-Northcott, Bozidar Vukotic

Photo: Cathy Pyle



The Tippett Quartet appear regularly at King's Place, the Purcell Room, Wigmore Hall, the Queen Elizabeth Hall and Bridgewater Hall, and perform frequently on BBC Radio 3. They have performed at the BBC Proms and toured Europe, Canada and Mexico. Their broad and diverse repertoire highlights the Tippett Quartet's unique versatility. Their impressive catalogue of recordings has been released on several labels including Naxos to universal critical acclaim and with classical chart topping success. The Tippett Quartet worked on a ground-breaking reimagining of Beethoven's *Op. 135* with composer/soundscape artist Matthew Herbert for a BBC Radio 3 broadcast, which was also used as the BBC TV ident. They have also given numerous world and UK premieres including newly discovered works by Tchaikovsky and Holst, as well as new works by John Adams, Howard Goodall and Alissa Firsova. The Tippett Quartet have worked with Peter Maxwell Davies for a performance of his *Ninth Quartet* at the South Bank, with Anthony Payne on his *Quartet No. 1* for a live BBC broadcast from the Spitalfields Festival, and Hugh Wood on his *String Quartet No. 3* at the Presteigne Festival. This is the Tippett Quartet's sixth recording for Naxos.

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With the belated success of his *Third Symphony ‘Symphony of Sorrowful Songs’* (Naxos 8.550822), Górecki emerged in the 1990s as a composer of world stature. Between 1988 and 1995 he wrote three string quartets for the Kronos Quartet that are among his most important mature works. *String Quartet No. 1* reveals chorale-like themes, so much a feature of his later writing, as well as hectic, dance-like motion, while the *Second Quartet’s* wider range of expression explicitly evokes Beethoven. *Genesis I: Elementi* offers a powerful contrast – a string trio from 1962 of uncompromising immediacy.

Henryk Mikołaj
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(1933–2010)

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| 1 | String Quartet No. 1, Op. 62, ‘Już się zmierzcha’
(‘Already it is Dusk’) (1988) | 15:13 |
| 2 | Genesis I: Elementi, Op. 19, No. 1 (1962) | 12:32 |
| | String Quartet No. 2, Op. 64 ‘Quasi una fantasia’ (1991) | 32:50 |
| 3 | I. Largo sostenuto | 8:26 |
| 4 | II. Deciso – Energico | 6:51 |
| 5 | III. Arioso: Adagio cantabile | 8:02 |
| 6 | IV. Allegro | 9:29 |

Tippett Quartet **1** **3–6**

John Mills, Violin I **2** • **Jeremy Isaac, Violin II**

Lydia Lowndes-Northcott, Viola **2** • **Bozidar Vukotic, Cello** **2**

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