



# GÓRECKI

String Quartet No. 3  
'... songs are sung'

Sonata for Two Violins

Tippett Quartet

## Henryk Mikołaj Górecki (1933–2010)

### Complete String Quartets - 2

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 did owe 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 centred on 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 the *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 heard as a turning point in his musical aesthetic through its use 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'* (1973) [Naxos 8.555375] and *Third Symphony 'Symphony of Sorrowful Songs'* (1976) [8.550822] which – whatever its uncertain premiere at the Royan Festival – belatedly secured its 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, with ensemble music represented by such pieces as *Lerchenmusik* (1986), or the three string quartets written for the Kronos Quartet during 1988–95. Górecki's last years were clouded by illness and largely devoted to shorter choral and instrumental pieces, though he had been working on a *Fourth Symphony* which remained unorchestrated (though latterly realized by his son Mikołaj Górecki, a notable composer in his own right) by the time of his death in Katowice on 12 November 2010.

As its opus number suggests, the *Sonata for Two Violins* (1957) is among Górecki's earliest acknowledged works. Written while studying at State High School of Music in Katowice, it was inspired by Bartók's *44 Duos* and Prokofiev's *Sonata in C*, and premiered at the Silesian capital's Philharmonic Hall on 27 February 1958 by Edward Cygan and Henryk Gruszka. In its textural and dynamic contrasts, its confrontation between the lyrical and grotesque, the rivalry between instruments and sophisticated compositional technique, it provides a worthy rounding-off of Górecki's formative period and anticipates the more radical idiom to come.

The first movement plunges straight into acerbic interplay, with melody and accompaniment alternating between the instruments. This is brought to an abrupt halt, whereupon a plangent threnody evolves – initially with sparse accompanying gestures, but gradually intensifying in mood and expression. A climax is reached with violins in unison, before a gradual transition into the music heard at the outset, from where a trenchant conclusion is reached. The second movement is an ethereal dialogue, initially with sparse pizzicato accompaniment as threatens to become more confrontational before subsiding into renewed contemplation. It remains for the finale to build on those pizzicato gestures at its opening, from where a voluble interplay ensues with audible folk

inflections carrying the work through to its strenuous ending.

Górecki's first two string quartets [Naxos 8.573919] appeared in quick succession (1988 and 1991), and his *Third Quartet* was seemingly complete by January 1995. The more surprising, then, that it did not receive its premiere until 15 October 2005 at Bielsko-Biala, once more with the Kronos Quartet. The composer was conscious of this delay, noting at the back of the manuscript: 'Only now, in 2005, have I amended it here and there then written it out neatly. During these intervening years there were several dates set for the work's premiere ... but I continued to hold back from releasing it to the world. I don't know why.' Speculation that the belated if massive success of his *Third Symphony* [8.550822] might have been a distraction from creative work seems unlikely; rather it has something to do with this piece's intrinsic nature – its five movements playing for virtually an hour and representing a culmination of Górecki's musical preoccupations over the preceding three decades. Certainly, there is no ostensible compromising of formal rigour or expressive focus across its monumental span.

The subtitle '*... songs are sung*' is as obliquely evocative as any from Górecki's earlier works. Its source lies in a paraphrase of lines from the poem by Russian author Velimir Khlebnikov (1885–1922), though the composer has stated this was no more than a creative starting point:

*When horses die, they breathe,  
When grasses die, they wither,  
When suns die, they go out,  
When people die, they sing songs.*

The first movement begins with wistfully musing exchanges over a halting accompaniment, building slowly in stages to an impassioned melodic statement that never quite emerges – instead, fervently repeated chordal

gestures break off for a resumption of what was heard at the outset, from where the music subsides into numbed resignation. The second movement duly unfolds at an even slower tempo, in which melody and accompaniment seem so closely intertwined as often to seem barely distinguishable. What is striking is the density of texture that changes incrementally yet perceptibly over its course, latterly coalescing into a chorale-like theme of inward affirmation. This proves short-lived as the earlier music resumes after a pause, and proceeds to its pensive close. The third movement, much the briefest, brings the only fast music of the entire work – its driving thematic interplay heading forth impulsively so that considerable energy is accumulated. This is briefly checked by pauses before it heads towards a pulsating conclusion which suddenly loses impetus during the equivocal final bars.

The fourth movement commences with a melodic statement alluded to in its predecessor, but now extended into something that seems to encompass much of this work's essential nature. Unfolding over an unchanging accompaniment, it grows more elaborate and emotive before sinking back into renewed contemplation as if intent on receding into silence. Harmonically this is one of this work's most affecting passages – a searching transition, perhaps, into the fifth and longest movement. This starts with undulating phrases on the cello, the remaining instruments duly entering to create a 'band' of closely intertwined harmonies that alternately expands then contracts in dynamic range. Gradually the music takes on aspects of what was heard at the outset, as though intent on bringing the work full circle, while a plangent climax around midpoint sustains a sense of moving forward towards some undefined goal. Whether or not this is reached, those final minutes touch upon some of the most poignant expression penned by the composer – ultimately fronted by the cello to a conclusion of fatalistic repose.

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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The *Sonata for Two Violins* is one of Henryk Górecki's earliest acknowledged works – its contrasts, instrumental rivalries and sophisticated technique a worthy rounding-off of his formative period. The *Third String Quartet* with its evocative subtitle ‘... songs are sung’ represents a culmination of Górecki's preoccupations with elaborate and emotive melodic shapes and closely intertwined harmonies, its final minutes recalling the beauty and poignancy of the composer's *Third Symphony* (Naxos 8.550822). The *First and Second String Quartets* can be heard on Naxos 8.573919, ‘a recording deserving of the very highest recommendation’ (*Gramophone*).

Henryk Mikołaj  
**GÓRECKI**  
(1933–2010)

	<b>Sonata for Two Violins, Op. 10 (1957)</b>	<b>17:35</b>
1	<b>I. Allegro molto</b>	9:21
2	<b>II. Adagio sostenuto</b>	3:21
3	<b>III. Andante con moto</b>	4:48
	<b>String Quartet No. 3, Op. 67 ‘Pieśni Śpiewają’ (‘... songs are sung’) (1995/2005)</b>	<b>56:57</b>
4	<b>I. Adagio – Molto andante – Cantabile</b>	10:25
5	<b>II. Largo cantabile</b>	12:49
6	<b>III. Allegro, sempre ben marcato</b>	4:57
7	<b>IV. Deciso – Espressivo ma ben tenuto</b>	13:33
8	<b>V. Largo – Tranquillo</b>	15:06

**Tippett Quartet** 4–8

**John Mills, Violin I** 1–3 • **Jeremy Isaac, Violin II** 1–3  
**Lydia Lowndes-Northcott, Viola** • **Bozidar Vukotic, Cello**

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