

Henryk Górecki. In Memoriam...

Written by bluesever

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Henryk Górecki, who died on November 12 aged 76, was a Polish composer who achieved immense popularity in Western Europe and America in the 1990s thanks to the ethereal splendour of his *Symphony No 3* (Symphony of Sorrowful Songs), which briefly reached No 6 in the British charts, just behind Paul McCartney.

He had started his musical life as a pioneer of the Polish avant garde and his work was often dismissed for its violence, both in its sound and in the manner of its performance. However, the success of *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* – indeed much of the composer's later success – comes from the opposite: simplicity and religious minimalism. Gone are the complex, jarring chords of the modernists; instead, Górecki finds a new voice with a calm and serene sound that is focused in conventional tonality.

Gorecki Symphony of Sorrowful Songs

Symphony of Sorrowful Songs was originally conceived as a tribute to the victims of the Holocaust. In each of the three movements a soprano sings a Polish text: a 15th-century lament; a message scribbled on the wall of a Gestapo cell; and a Silesian prayer of a mother searching for her missing son.



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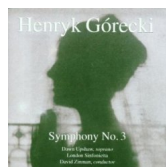
Henryk Mikolaj Gorecki

The work was written in 1976, but in 1992 it was released on the Nonesuch label sung by **Dawn Upshaw**

with the London Sinfonietta conducted by

David Zinman.

Not only had the political landscape changed in the intervening years, but so too had the economic and musical landscape in the West.



Symphony of Sorrowful Songs, cover

It soon became the most successful recording of a new composition in the history of the classical record business. As the cultural commentator Alex Ross wrote: *"It is not hard to guess why [Górecki] and several like-minded composers achieved a degree of mass appeal during the global economic booms of the Eighties and Nineties; they provided oases of repose in a technologically oversaturated culture."*

Despite the work's almost incessant airing on the nascent Classic FM radio station, there was much more to Górecki and his music. Works such as *Three Pieces in Old Style* (1963) and *Muzyka staropolska*

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(Old Polish Music, from 1969) often draw inspiration from the folk music and traditions of the Tatra region, the highest part of the Carpathian Mountains and once a northern outpost of the Ottoman Empire.

Henryk Gorecki – Works

In 1975 Górecki was appointed rector of his former music school in Katowice but, lacking political sophistication, was forced to resign after protesting against the government's refusal to allow the Pope to visit the city. His response was *Beatus Vir*, a glorious setting of the psalms for choir and orchestra, which he conducted for the Pope in Kraków.



Henryk Mikolaj Gorecki

In April 1989 a celebration of Górecki's music (and that of the similarly-minded Russian composer, Alfred Schnittke) by the modernist ensemble, the London Sinfonietta, proved a turning point in British understanding of the Eastern post-Shostakovich musical landscape. It confirmed the composer's importance as an original voice, which found even greater resonance when, within months, popular revolution swept across Eastern Europe.

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After the success of *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*, which sold more than a million copies, Górecki was finally able to purchase the Mercedes that he had long dreamed of, as well as a cottage in his beloved Tatra mountains.



Tatra Mountains

There were several musically-significant works in the 1990s, including *Kleines Requiem für eine Polka* (1993), which was recorded twice, for Philips and Nonesuch, yet nothing again quite gripped the public imagination – both in content and timing – as *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*.



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