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The Emphatic Qualities of Silence: Selected Aspects of Musical Rhetoric in Iberian and Polish Sacred Music of the 16th Century

Abstract

This article will describe some issues of musical language in the renaissance era. The main object of analysis will be pieces by Cristóbal de Morales, Tomas Luis de Victoria (*Officium defunctorum*), and, on the other hand, by Waclaw z Szamotul (the song *Już się zmierzcha…*). The theme of death in all these pieces functions as a kind of motif: the music by Morales and Victoria might have been sung at the celebration of Masses for the dead[1]; the song *Juz sie zmierzcha…* by Waclaw z Szamotul describes the twilight, which can be figuratively interpreted as human life, drawing near its end. Thus, our central aim will be to read and properly interpret the meaning of silence, which is of great importance in this kind of music. Silence appears as pauses, general pauses, breaths, and some figures. In all cases, this musical incarnation of silence exactly corresponds to the text and tries to illustrate the word or draw out and emphasize its deep meaning. This specific, common musical language and, in some cases, Latin text, unite all these texts, belonging to both cultures, Iberian and Polish; and also allow us to make a comparative analysis.

The book *Silence, Music, Silent Music*, published three years ago by Ashgate Publishing (Edited by Nicky Losseff and Jenny Doctor, Aldershot, 2007), could testify to the importance of topics of silence and muteness in musicological literature. At first sight this kind of issue seems to be nonsensical. Music denies silence, precisely through its very existence. Music is the organization of sounds – as Stefan Kisielewski, Polish critic of music and essayist, has said[2]. In spite of this fact – or perhaps all the more – the silence carries in music a very great weight; and in musical aesthetics, from some point during its development, this fact began to be noticed and properly described. The validity of the presence of silence in music is underpinned – from a philosophical perspective – by the Pythagorean and Boethian conception of the music of the spheres (*musica mundana*), inaudible for human ear, but still perfect and – in the division of the musical arts – not inferior to terrestrial *musica instrumentalis*. "Il Mondo esser composto musicalmente, et i cieli nel girarsi esser ragione di harmonia, et l'Anima nostra con la medesima ragione formata"[3], said Gioseffe Zarlino, the most prominent

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1 See *Music for Philip II*, Gabrieli Consort, Paul McCreesh (Deutsche Grammophon GmbH, Hamburg), CD 457 597-2 (CD-book, p. 5).
2 Stefan Kisielewski, „Do czego służy nam muzyka?", in *idem*, *Muzyka i mózg* (Warsaw, 1974).
3 Gioseffe Zarlino, *Le istitutioni harmoniche* (Venice, 1558, reprint: New York, 1965), p. 4, after Saggi Musicali Italiani, http://www.chmtl.indiana.edu/smi/cinquecento/ZAR58IH1_TEXT.html. English translation (M. L.): the world is constructed harmoniously and the spheres turn according to harmony,

contemporary theorist of renaissance music.

This article is dedicated to the affective functions attributed to silence in early music; when I say "early music", I mean specifically music of the renaissance[4] – the age of the special comprehension of phenomena of illustration and rhetoric in music. My observations will be limited to some chosen composers of Spanish and Polish descent, living in the 16th century. The theme of the works I have chosen will decide the additional restriction of the area of my research, because all of these works, to a certain degree, are connected with the phenomenon of death or with the circumstances pertaining to death.

Of course, this kind of theme can and even should suggest to composers some specific musical solutions, especially if it connects with ritual, as in the case of the *Officium defunctorum*, commonly called *Requiem*. Amongst the composers who wrote such works were the Spaniards Cristóbal de Morales[5] and Tomás Luis de Victoria[6]. First of all we will look at two *Officia defunctorum*: one of them, for four voices, dedicated to Philip II, King of Spain, composed by Cristóbal de Morales, and the other the work of Tomás Luis da Victoria. Philip II's death seems to have been a very special moment for Iberian music culture, because the period of this king's reign is one of the few moments in the history of Spain when Spain was the power to be reckoned with[7] (just as Sigismund III Vasa and Ladislaus IV Vasa's regime influenced a similar flourishing of music culture in Poland in the first half of the 17th century[8]). As the context for the analysis for these two pieces I will make use of the work by Polish composer, Waclaw z Szamotul, the song *Już się zmierzcha…*

It is important to note that Morales and da Victoria were composers who expressed themselves above all in sacred music. Robert Stevenson notes that, while Nicolas Gombert issued in his lifetime only three of his Masses (he wrote nine altogether); Jacob Arcadelt three; Costanzo Festa two; and Adrian Willaert (the most respected composer in Northern Italy during Morales's lifetime) no more than nine, Morales left all in all 21 Masses and 16 of them were printed during the composer's lifetime. Victoria composed only sacred music and his output in terms of masses is no less to Morales's one; he wrote 20 Masses, and in addition around 140 motets, eighteen

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and our soul is shaped after the same principle.

4 The notable cellist and conductor, Nicolaus Harnoncourt, in his work entitled in Polish translation *Muzyka mową dźwięków* makes use of the expression "early music", relating it to music from before the rupture caused by French Revolution. See Nicolaus Harnoncourt, *Muzyka mową dźwięków,* trans. into Polish Magdalena Czajka (Warsaw, 1995), pp. 23-24.

5 See Wojciech Odoj, "Morales", entry in Elżbieta Dziębowska, ed., *Encyklopedia muzyczna PWM. Część biograficzna* (11 vols., Warsaw, 2000), 6: 367; Robert Stevenson, *Spanish Cathedral Music In the Golden Age* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1961), pp. 42-44.

6 See Aleksandra Patalas, "Da Victoria", entry in E. Dziębowska, ed., *Encyklopedia muzyczna PWM. Część biograficzna*, (Warsaw, 2009), 11: 267.

7 See Noel O'Regan, "Italy", in James Haar, ed., *European Music, 1520-1640* (Woolbdridge, 2006), pp. 75-76.

8 See e.g. Alina Żórawska-Witkowska, Dramma per musica *At the Court of Ladislaus IV Vasa (1627-1648)*, in Melania Bucciarelli, Norbert Dubowy, Reinhard Strohm, eds., *Italian Opera In Central Europe* (2 vols., Berlin, 2006), 1: 21-24.

settings of the Magnificat, nine Lamentations and two Passions[9]. The theme of death, fascinating to the collective imagination of this age together with theme of feelings of love[10], was particularly appropriate for musical *imitatio*[11] in the field of sacred music, leaving aside the affects and emotions typical of eroticism. So one should expect that the *Officium defunctorum* would offer a composer a good opportunity to employ this principle of *imitatio*. It is safe to say that Morales made full use of this opportunity; concerning his *Requiem*, August Wilhelm Ambros, the great historian and critic of music, said:

> The *Missa pro defunctis*, though magnificent, inspires terror. One shivers in the presence of this somber, nocturnal masterpiece. One feels as if one were wandering in dark hollows beneath leaden vaults supported by heavy pillars. In it, all adornment has been stripped away, and everything is as plain as could be. Before the face of death all colors fade, and all gaiety ceases. Morales, the Spaniard, conceived death in all its terrible seriousness…[12]

The simplest and also the most obvious element of musical form enunciating silence is the rest, which has a specific meaning in the compact and close textures of polyphonic music of the renaissance and which – unlike a pause in text, for a long time not indicated in writing[13] – mostly took its place in systems of musical notation. Ercole Bottrigari, in discussing in his treatise entitled *Il trimerone de' fondamenti armonici* (Bologna, 16th century) rests in measures *perfectum* and *imperfectum*, mentions that the rest is also called a sigh (it. *sospiro*)[14]. It allows us to have an idea of the emphatic disposition of the rest in renaissance musical texts. Let us examine, then, how Morales solves the question of the application of the rests in his *Requiem*.

Rests appear in the three lower voices (*altus*, *tenorus*, *bassus*) in the first part of the Mass – the *Introitus* – together with the prayerful calling for the perpetual peace for the dead King Philip, on the words "luceat eis"[15] ("may it [eternal light] shine upon them"). This phrase is a legible contrast to the part of the *cantus*, moving chiefly in long and uniform note values. So the rest constitutes a structural element of the

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9 See Dennis Shrock, *Choral Repertoire* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 95-98.
10 Anonimous madrigal composer says: „La morte ed amor insieme vanno". *Ciaccona. In gioia della musica nell' Italia del '600*, Anthonello, Yokishimichi Hamada, (Symphonia,), CD: SY 01187, (CD-book, p. 14).
11 See e.g. James Haar, „Zarlino's Definition of Fugue and Imitation", in *idem*, *The Science and Art of Renaissance Music* (Princeton, 2006), pp. 121-148.
12 After Robert Stevenson, *op. cit*., p. 60.
13 See e.g. Malcolm Beckwith Parkes, *Pause and Effect. An Introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1993).
14 Ercole Bottrigari, *Il trimerone de' fondamenti armonici* (Bologna, without date of printing), after Saggi Musicali Italiani, http://www.chmtl.indiana.edu/smi/cinquecento/BOTTRIG3_MBCMB44.html.
15 We have employed the edition *Officium defunctorum* by Morales after IMSLP/Petrucci Music Library, http://imslp.org/wiki/Missa_Pro_Defunctis_(Morales,_Crist%C3%B3bal_de). In the further text I won't annotate this edition.

motif, used to elaborate the words "luceat eis", and shows us its anxious character, emphasized, in addition, by small values and the melodic contour, rather chant-like, recalling human speech in respect of accentuation. This motif with rests appears first of all in the *bassus*, then comes back imitatively in the parts of the *tenorus* and *altus*, each time worked out more ornamentally. It seems that we are dealing with an intermingling of two aesthetic qualities: the element of silence (in the form of the rest) surprises the listener, hitherto guided fluently along the line of the polyphonic voices, and it signals to this listener a change in the nature of this line (shorter, interrupted phrases). On the other hand, the acceleration of the pace, with smaller note values, reflecting the contour of melodic line, interposes the intensifying atmosphere of anxiety and fear. Corresponding to this atmosphere is the imploring *exclamation*, placed by Morales on the word "Domine" ("Lord"), in a place not provided for in the text of the *Introitus*. So the silence precedes the shout, and then closes this shout, perhaps in order to add expression to it, by constructing this frame. There are repeating motifs several times in each of the voices, except for the *cantus* (four times in the *bassus*, three times in *tenorus*, twice in *altus*), Morales used the principle of echo, popular in early polyphony, a musical form mirrored for example in polychoral technique[16], and fulfilling, first of all, the function of illustration. But in this case the composer uses it to emphasize the suppliant character of his music. The motif comes back, time and again, and with it there sounds the rest that begins the motif. This prayerful tone of the *Introitus* influences us more explicitly in its further part, where the composer uses a general rest in all four voices, after words "exaudi orationem meam" ("hear my prayer") suspending the sound on the radiant triad of B. The muteness – perhaps to some degree it precedes the baroque rhetoric figure called *aposiopesis* ("muteness"), and in a lesser degree the figure called *abruptio* ("interrupting")[17] – *ipso facto* heralds the ending of part of the Mass, in terms of musical logic and endows it with a properly solemn character. The muteness also precedes the final cadence. The general rest – as opposed to the previously-mentioned rests, incorporated into the motif – can be very well heard in all voices; and it also changes its nature fundamentally. The rests incorporated into the motif, that exist structurally as moments of silence (pauses), can be received aurally only as a reduction of musical tone – and it is the purpose they serve. Their structural quality can be properly appreciated considered only with the score.

In the vocal practice the listener is influenced by another aspect of expression in the *Introitus*, connected with the opposition between silence and volume, rather than opposition between silence and sound. Thus it is also connected directly with the aspect of dynamics in music, rather than some aspect of musical rhetoric. Morales leads his *Requiem* from silence to the fullness of sound: the texture begins to be expanded and condensed, while the composer introduces all the voices of the choir in sequence; but at the very beginning

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16 See e.g. Anthony F. Carver, *Cori Spezzati. The Development of Sacred Polychoral Music to the Time of Schütz* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1988), 1: 12-14.
17 See Wiesław Lisecki, "Vademecum muzycznej «Ars oratoria»", *Canor,* 3 (6), 1993, p. 19.

we can hear only the *bassus* – the other voices are mute. This condensation of texture is accompanied by increasing tension, suspended for the next moment of silence and dying sound away between the parts of the *Introitus*, and then on the general rest.

It is interesting that we find a very similar musical solution in the case of the *Introitus* from the *Requiem* for four voices by Tomás Luis de Victoria[18]. The elaboration of words "luceat eis" is also based on the short, compact motif preceded by a rest, appearing imitatively in the three lower voices in sequence, while the *cantus* leads the choral melody (as *cantus firmus*) in long, flowing notes. Against the background of this stability, the anxiety, interrupted with rests, of the remaining voices can be clearly heard.

Let us now raise the question with which we are concerned with reference to the liturigcal sequence in the *Requiem* by Morales, as well as that by Victoria. I refer to the relation between the choral intonation of the first verse of every part and its further, polyphonic musical development. It is a well known fact that the renaissance Mass grow out of the trunk of Gregorian plainchant and it preserves the memory of this provenance: first of all as the choral melody, remaining in the highest voice (and thus it is called *cantus firmus*), and then, as the plainchant intonation, opening the section of the Mass and introducing the polyphony. The aforementioned plainchant intonation sometimes assumes the character of a motto in literature; we can also imagine it as a laconic question, after which there follows a complex answer. This impression may be reinforced by the fact that this intonation, fulfilling the function of a question, is generally suspended on the mediant, so with respect to the articulation it has exactly the shape of a question. It is especially noticeable in the *Sanctus* and *Benedictus* or *Agnus Dei* in the Mass by Morales, and also in the *Offertorium*, *Sanctus* and *Benedictus*, *Agnus Dei* and *Communio* from the *Requiem* by Victoria.

It seems a matter of course that between "question" and "answer" that must be a moment of silence: the expectation of the answer. It is a remarkable moment in the structure of the renaissance mass. It does not have the character of a rest (even if it is notated as a rest), but rather a very firmly graphically expressed "breath". The moment of silence between the plainchant intonation of a piece and the polyphony is of great importance as a function of the *caesura*. The textures of question and answer are quite different, fundamentally and comprehensively, and this difference is not only between monody and polyphony, but also between variety of rhythm, tempo, articulation and dynamics (this last naturally connecting with problems of texture)[19]. In this situation the moment of breathe, dividing the part of mass just after its first verse, has very special emphatic meaning. First of all, it influences on aural reception of textural difference: after the moment of silence (breath) the polyphony sounds more firmly and more monumentally against the background of monody, even if (as is

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18 We have employed the edition *Officium defunctorum* by Victoria after IMSLP/Petrucci Music Library, http://imslp.org/wiki/Requiem_for_4_Voices_(Victoria,_Tom%C3%A1s_Luis_de).
19 On practical methods of interpretation of this difference between monody and polyphony see: Robert E. Gerken, preface to *idem*, ed., *Three Mass Proper Cycles from Jena 35* (Madison, 1982), p. xii.

the case in most parts of Victoria's *Requiem*) the entries of the various voices are not simultaneous, but are introduced alternately in imitation. But in the same *Requiem* we can find also places in which the moment of silence is contrasted with a compact block of voices (for example in the *Agnus Dei*). In the first section of this part prevails the the *nota contra notam* ("note against note") type of texture. This means that separate voices move face to face to each other quite regularly, in the same or similar rhythms, and do not disperse so much; and particular vocal lines are not very independent with respect to rhythm and melody.

If we say that the plainchant intonation on the words *Agnus Dei* ("Lamb of God") is quite terse and exceptionally simple (all in all based on two sounds and clearly suspended on the mediant), we can see plainly that moment of silence between the phrase *Agnus Dei* and the next phrase *qui tollis peccata mundi* emphasizes the weakness, the volatility and the elusiveness of the first and the stability, firmness and monumental character of the second. Four-voice construction is not the end of the line in terms of the texture of renaissance Mass settings: settings by Italian or Flemish masters could even reach over a dozen voices. So the rest is for the composer a very efficient method to strengthen the impression of a strong texture – if not a monumental texture.

In this way the composer could "play" with polyphony, monody and silence in every part of work – he could even make this "play" the fundamental principle of the construction. We can observe it, for example, in the responsory "Credo quod Redemptor" ("I believe that my Redeemer liveth") for four voices, that closes Victoria's *Requiem*. The verses are set by Victoria alternately in monody or polyphony, according to the principle of responsorial chant, in which the singing of the faithful singing intertwines with the soloist's chant[20]. Each of the four choral verses, set chorally, has a firmly marked, vertical cadence: it prepares adequately the moment of the rest and then the choral response by the soloist. On the other hand, each of the four verses of choral writing opens on the mediant and pauses on the mediant. The moment of silence fulfills another function in each of these cases: in the case of a choral verse the silence that precedes the choral chant first of all has to create the possibility for the sound to reverberate, spreading itself into the church's interior (remember that we are still in the huge space of the cathedral in Toledo)[21]. The silence therefore prepares this interior for the entry of the choral music, that sounds less loud. On the contrary, the choral verse, so to speak, naturally turns into silence, vanishes in the silence. This happens without the effect of contrast, and the resonance is in large measure natural.

Let us now consider a song for four voices, by Wacław z Szamotuł, called Szamotulczyk – a 16th century composer, living and working at Sigismond II August's

20 See *Responsorial singing*, *Responsory*, entries in Don Michael Randel, ed., *The Harvard Dictionary of Music* (Harvard, 2003), p. 720.
21 Nicolaus Harnoncourt discusses the relationships between the space and structure of music in the early period. See the previously-quoted work, *Muzyka mową dźwięków*, pp. 81-111. See also Leo Beranek, *Concert Halls and Opera Houses. Music, Acoustics, and Architecture* (New York, 2004), pp. 8-18.

court. His works were also published in Nuremberg, and he was one of the greatest Polish creators of culture of his age; nevertheless we have very little information about his life and work. He is the author of music to Andrzej Trzecieski's song entitled *Modlitwa, gdy dziatki idą spać* ("The prayer, when the children go to bed"):

> *Już się zmierzcha, nadchodzi noc,*
> *Poprośmy Boga o pomoc,*
> *Aby On naszym stróżem był,*
> *Od złych czartów nas obronił,*
> *Którzy najwięcej w ciemności*
> *Używają swej chytrości*[22].

The main motifs in this text are: twilight, the coming night, and the fear of evil and darkness. The poet, Trzecieski, refers to the universal opposition between light and dark, and to its symbolic representation: good and evil. The human being feels anxiety at walking alone through the darkness. So he calls for God, because He is man's only refuge. Darkness in the imagination of early cultures symbolizes death – the twilight of human life. Thus it is the way that everybody must experience alone.

The musical setting of this song enters into correspondence with the literary text. Naturally, silence is exploited in this correspondence. First of all, the main character of piece is quite different from the case of the two *Requiem* Masses by Morales and Victoria. It is very intimate and lyrical, filled with a subtle atmosphere, created chiefly by the precise use of dynamics: the texture is quite simple (*nota contra notam*) and the melodic line based on one plain motif, wandering uphill and downhill. All emphatic effects rely on intensifying the dynamics – from pianissimo to forte – and then an interruption with an unexpected general rest. What is the function of this rest? It does not divide two kinds of texture or musical technique. It is strictly connected with the most dramatic point of the lyrics, the prayer "defend us from devils" ("aby On… od złych czartów nas obronił"). As human confusion and fear increase, so also the dynamics of the illustrative music increase; and at some moment the music has to cease, because the dusk of death is impenetrable and unknown, so man lacks a means of expression. And then his answer to death is silence, existing in music in the shape of the rest. Silence expresses not only the fear of death and loneliness, but also pious respect.

Roman Ingarden said that a work of musical art contains not only sound elements, but also elements besides sound[23]. These elements, beyond any musical structure, are also of great importance. Composers of the previous epochs used to employ the natural emphatic qualities of silence, mirrored in human speech; thus, in a piece of music a rest signes astonishment, uncertainty, anxiety, meditation, and very often it is more efficacious than the beauty of harmonious consonances.

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22 After http://www.edukator.pl/portal-edukacyjny/waclaw-z-szamotul-juz-sie-zmierzcha/5134.html.
23 See Roman Ingarden, *Utwór muzyczny i sprawa jego tożsamości* (Kraków, 1974), p. 60.

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