

String Quartets of Penderecki: Analyzing Form, Harmony, and a Return to Tradition

By Anthony Cotto

Composers grappling with the problem of “where do we go” after the breakdown of tonal music at the beginning of the 20th century have faced significant challenges in developing their musical language. Many believed that they would find direction in the techniques of serialism pioneered by composers such as Arnold Schoenberg. Krzysztof Penderecki has frequently been hailed as not only one of the most gifted but also among the most influential composers to emerge out of this period of musical uncertainty over the last fifty years. It was at the onset of the 1960s that he began to forge ahead into the new areas of sonic possibilities for which he gained his earliest international acclaim, including the *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima*, (heretofore *Threnody*) for which he earned a third prize in the 1960 Grzegorz Fitelberg Composers’ Competition in Katowice. What makes Penderecki truly fascinating is his response to the avant-garde movement in the next decade. Originally hailed as one of the forebears of this movement, in the 1970s he began to largely abandon many of the techniques for which he had gained his earliest acclaim.

Although he rose to prominence sharply with his early works, he was equally quick to embrace a more lyrical and tonal style of writing as his career progressed. This is largely a reflection of Penderecki’s philosophy on approaching his art. He has stated of all composers that, “We write what we want to write, without any restrictions or directives at all.” In moving forward with a compositional career, one could look to Penderecki as an example of how to fuse one’s own ideas about composition and the music that an individual would wish to write with the musical aesthetics of the day, for he lived through different artistic movements, and through it all he has been both an influential and unique figure, never compromising his own sensibilities to the artistic community, but by merging the two. In particular, I intend to focus on the evolution throughout his career through the changes that can be seen in his string quartets, which include three formal string quartets and one shorter chamber work written for standard string quartet instrumentation.

Penderecki’s music education started relatively early studying violin with Stanislaw Darlak. It would later be said that, “[s]hocking though they seemed by conventional standards, the new playing techniques he was to demand in his string-orchestral works of the late 1950s and early 1960s stemmed from an intimate knowledge of the violin family’s potential and character.” After moving away from the performance occupation, Penderecki began his studies in composition with Franciszek Skolyszewski. He continued his studies at Jagiellonian University and the Superior School of Music (now the Academy of Music) in Krakow with Artur Malawski and Stanislaw Wiechowicz. His education concluded in 1958, when he graduated and took a position at the Academy.

In his early years as a professor at the Academy, Penderecki would meet with one of his new colleagues, the acoustician Mieczyslaw Drobner, who would later help him to devise a serialization technique, which would become a central aspect of his compositional process for the next decade. Many 20th century composers found their voice and sense of direction in the serialism techniques pioneered early in the century. After Arnold Schoenberg made the first steps in the serializa-

tion of pitch, many more composers would follow in his steps trying to expand by serializing the rhythmic aspects of the music. One element of music, though, proved particularly troublesome for composers aiming for total serialism, and that was timbre. Although attempts at serializing timbre had been made by Karlheinz Stockhausen and even as early as Schoenberg himself, it remained more subjective and less quantifiable in nature. Upon his appointment to the Academy, Penderecki worked with Drobner to devise a system by which different timbres could be serialized in a more consistent manner.

The conception of the system that Penderecki and Drobner devised was relatively simple, though the implementation of it would later pose Penderecki many challenges. They began by creating a system that defined the differences between timbre as the different tones created by the contact between different pairs of materials. They divided the five major materials of orchestral instruments, metal, wood, leather, hair, and felt, into primary and secondary materials, depending on their use. The first three are considered primary materials, because they act primarily as ‘resonators’ whereas hair and felt are secondary, as they act only as ‘exciters.’ The aim of the serialization technique was for the final result of the music to have a balance between the use of all of the different materials.

It was important in this technique not only to have the three primary materials resonating equally throughout the work, but also to have each of these resonated by all five components equally. This is where a great deal of Penderecki’s early innovations were derived from. In order to achieve the balance he wanted, he had to change the way that many of the instruments were played, and, in some cases, make drastic alterations to the orchestration. He added more vibraphones to the orchestra and brought in other percussion instruments, like the tom-toms, to satisfy some of his requirements, and developed abnormal playing techniques, for example, playing a piano on the strings with a cymbal or a triangle rod.

The String Quartet No. 1, as with many compositions of Penderecki’s early period, is highly experimental, not only for these unusual techniques, but also for employing his unique and modern approach to pitch and harmony. Far beyond twelve-tone music, this generation of composers sought to use pitch content that extended beyond the notes represented by western tonality. They used quarter-tones frequently in their works. Penderecki, though he achieved much of the same aesthetic as his contemporaries, had a unique approach in this regard as well. Because his timbral system did not take pitch into account, this left him with the freedom to use any pitches he wanted, or, as the case often was, to allow the performer freedom to do so. Whereas Ligeti incorporated quarter-tones as a result of his study of non-Western music, Penderecki’s quarter-tones are often the result of assigning performers to play using “indefinite pitch” in the score (figure 1).



Figure 1

Like many composers of this era, such as John Cage, rhythm is also notated outside of the standard Common Practice Period methods of

doing so. Although the String Quartet No. 1 does use staff notation, it is provided only as a framework, not an exact representation of the performance requirements. This staff notation is unmeasured throughout, and recital numbers are given in terms of time in minutes and seconds.

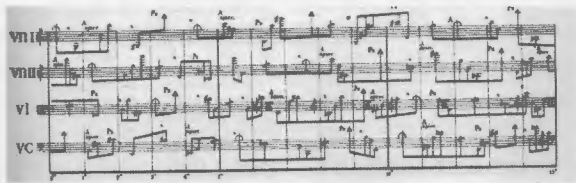


Figure 2

String Quartet No. 1 was a very strong success for Penderecki. Although he had earned fame in Europe for prior works, the quartet helped to make him an international success. It was the first of many of his works to receive its world premiere performance in the United States. In 1960, its premiere performance was given by the LaSalle String Quartet in Cleveland, Ohio. Like many of the timbral works, the reception was mixed overall. Several years later, despite its detractors, the quartet was chosen along with his 1971 Cello Concerto, to appear in the score for the 1973 movie, *The Exorcist*. Penderecki's music was highly praised in this context, with its ethereal sonorities contributing to the otherworldly themes of the film.

As influential as these early works may have been, Penderecki's work with serializing timbre was relatively short lived. By the mid-1960s he was no longer using this particular technique. Although he continued to experiment with the different timbres that the string family could create, he ceased to codify it using the strict methods that he had developed with Drobner. The changes that he made during the 1960s are especially apparent in his String Quartet No. 2. This work, written in 1968, has many sharp contrasts from String Quartet No. 1. Among the most immediately noticeable changes that he made was the removal of the aleatoric, or "chance" element. Notational tools such as the "play highest note" direction are completely removed. The notation precisely includes all playing instructions for the performers.

Like many artists in the early 1970s, Penderecki perceived a disconnect in music between the composers and the listeners. The tonally stretching techniques that he and many of his contemporaries pioneered had driven a divide through the artistic community. At the point of great transition in his artistic techniques, he admits a tendency to look to the music of earlier and more traditional composers, like Franz Liszt and Gustav Mahler. In his own words, "for me, the conscious use of tradition became an opportunity for overcoming this dissonance between the artist and the audience."

In keeping with his tendency towards synthesis, Penderecki also incorporated another technique popular with many late 20th century composers, polystylistics. Many saw this as another effective method of undoing the alienation audiences felt from the intellectual music community. When asked how his music fits into this period, he said, "I do not deny that I always felt tempted by many styles. Polystylistics—so fashionable now—was already present in the *Passion* [According to St. Luke]."

It is this change in the aesthetic value of this period that separates Penderecki from many of the composers of this era. While some were like Penderecki in their desire to reconcile the gap between artists and

their audiences, others, most notably Pierre Boulez, showed an unwillingness to give up the artistic trends of the 1960s. Penderecki has also shown a strong preference for chamber music in more recent years. He wrote, "Today... I see my artistic ideal in claritas. I am returning to chamber music, for I realize that more can be said in a hushed voice condensed in the sound of three or four instruments." His preference for chamber music and ability to "say more with the sound of four instruments" is apparent in a relatively obscure, yet intriguing piece on which I would like to devote more time now: *Der Unterbrochene Gedanke*.

Der Unterbrochene Gedanke ("The Interrupted Thought") is a short yet dynamic work, which Penderecki wrote in 1988. It has an overall formal structure of ABA'. Though not a formal string quartet, this work was written for that instrumentation and is a good reflection of Penderecki's stylistic language during this period. Despite its brevity (with an approximate length of just over two minutes), this piece shows impressive contrast and variety of different styles and techniques. With about twenty years separating it from the Second String Quartet, it is a sharp departure from the style and language of his earlier works. This piece lacks the quartertones that defined most of Penderecki's famous works of the 1960s. Throughout, it shows a far more traditional harmonic development, though not traditionally tonic. What it keeps, however, is Penderecki's expertise in using various stringed-instrument techniques.

The timbral contrast heard throughout *Der Unterbrochene Gedanke* is astounding. Penderecki utilizes variety in terms of character and texture in only 36 measures. The smooth texture of the opening provides a backdrop for a free fugato in the upper voices. Although the B section, which can be easily understood as the "interruption" to the "thought" presented in the A section (and with slight changes in the A' section), it sounds as less of an interruption when first heard.

Penderecki employs an array of sounds in this short composition. These are more traditional effects than some that were heard in the earlier quartets, including glissandos, pizzicato, tremolo, and spiccato. The way in which these techniques are used helps to delineate the form, by way of the effects being used to create different sound palettes between the outer sections and the middle section. The A and A' sections of the piece are slower, in a grave tempo. The cello in these sections plays low sustained tones to create a canvas for the other instruments to play over. The Viola and the Violin are then set up to play a dialogue over this canvas. The upper parts in this section are playing this section *con sordino*. Other techniques used in this section include harmonics, which are used to help create a smoother texture, which is contrasted by the B section.

The B section is quite different from the two outer ones. In the beginning and end, there is a more placid texture, which gives the listener a feeling of wandering, with no clear direction. This is an important difference from the middle, which has a clear direction towards a sort of climax, which is made by the rhythms continuously becoming shorter and faster and by the increase in dynamic level throughout the B section. This feeling of tension from the increase in speed is also aided by a composed *accelerando* and the use of pizzicato, spiccato, tremolo and trills. These articulations, which appear at the beginning of the B section, have the effect of tightening the notes and pushing the piece forward. All of these aspects combine to bring this section to a climax on measure number 29.

The A' section of this piece, similar to a recapitulation of the first

section, begins as the B section abruptly breaks off, leaving the solo cello again at first. This time, however, the unmuted sound of the upper parts dominates over the cello notes. Penderecki then utilizes an effect that he saved for the end of the piece. In the second to last measure, the Violin I and Viola both play a glissando with double stops. In both of these parts, the glissandos move at different rates on each string, which enhances the feeling of wandering previously mentioned in the A section, and leaves the piece with an unresolved quality. It is this quality that seems to give the piece its interesting title. When heard as a whole, the first section sounds as a thought, which is then 'interrupted' by the B section. When the A' section is finally heard, by the time the listener is aware of the return to the beginning, the glissandos wipe away that texture and end the piece.

Penderecki has often said in his later career that a traditional approach to form is one method that he and other composers can use in an attempt to reconnect with audiences. The proportion of this piece shows a nearly symmetrical ternary (ABA') form. Specifically, the proportions are: 8 bars in the A section, 21 bars in the B section, and 7 bars in the A' section. The form is largely understood by looking into the motivic connections being utilized throughout. This is a new concept among the pieces being discussed here. The different sections of the first two string quartets were not divided by any clear thematic or motivic development. Divisions were delineated in the timbric contrast; motive and melody was of less importance (or almost no importance) in the composer's conception. In this newer work, the motives drive the form and push the tension toward the climax.

As already stated, the two decades that passed between this work and the previous string quartet were a major turning point of Penderecki in terms of his compositional style, and this is no more apparent than in his approach to harmonic and melodic content. By the time of this composition, the most prominent elements of his early music are gone. Following the pattern set by String Quartet No. 2, there is a lack of chance elements. However, by this time Penderecki had gone one step further, and removed all of the quartertones. Although the harmonic content is more reserved than the previous string quartets, it does not mean that this piece is lacking in chromaticism. In fact, Penderecki continued to use chromatic harmonies frequently in nearly all of his later compositions.

These tonal characteristics help to give *Der Unterbrochene Gedanke* a sound that is almost neo-Romantic. Although many composers have rejected these labels such as this one, Penderecki has been quick to acknowledge the influence that Romantic era composers have had over his later works. The harmony is largely created through the use of motivic connections that appear between the different instruments. A harmonic analysis of these motives shows tonal centers based around the keys of B minor and B flat minor. These two keys exist together throughout the composition. This is yet another facet of the duality that exists throughout this work. The two voices pull against each other throughout the work, yet Penderecki also combines them in a more complementary fashion. At many points in the piece, he most frequently uses tones, which are common to both of these keys. The most commonly visible chromatic pitches appear to be the F sharp/G flat and C sharp/D flat. By using enharmonic spellings, both of the keys can be represented simultaneously. Possibly the best example of this comes at the beginning of the second section, where in measure 11, the cello is playing solo, and uses all four of these pitches (figure 3).



Figure 3 - Measure no. 11-Violoncello

Being aware of the interaction between these two keys is essential to a harmonic analysis of this piece. Initially, the pedal tone in the cello suggests a key of F to the listener. However, upon the entrance of the viola, nearly all of the tones can be enharmonically understood to be part of the key of B flat minor. As all of the other instruments enter, the pedal F, which is still sounding, begins to sound as the dominant of B flat minor. As measure 6 begins, the first violin even plays an A moving on to a B flat, suggesting the leading tone relationship in that key. By this time, as the key of B flat minor has been more firmly established, the second violin enters with a sustained B natural.

When the cello begins the line shown above, the motives begin with B flat, which can be understood enharmonically as an A sharp, the beginning of the second section is composed almost entirely out of tones diatonic to B minor, but more tones are quickly introduced that are common to both B flat and B natural. When the viola enters a few measures later, the two move forward with a very contrapuntal texture, which prepares for the beginning of the fugato themes, which dominate the texture of the music at this point. The viola begins the



first of the two fugato themes in measure 17 (figure 4).

Figure 4 - Measure No. 17-Viola

This theme is heard twice in the viola and once in each violin part between measure 17 and the last time it is heard in measure 24 in the Violin II. As shown above (in Alto clef), this theme is almost entirely in the key of B minor (with the exception of the high F in the first bar). The theme is transposed by the intervals of a diminished 4th, perfect 4th, and then a perfect 5th. When the Violin I has the third entrance of the theme, a second fugato theme is heard, overlapping with the first



(figure 5).

Figure 5 - Measure 21 and 22 - Violins I & II

This second fugato theme develops very quickly, as it is heard only from measure 21 through measure 24. Both of the themes conclude this bar and move on to a free counterpoint section, which lasts until measure 29. Although the fugato themes disappear at this point, the

are several short motives in each instrument, which help draw the B section to a close. The heightened chromaticism as these motives progress in both B minor and B flat minor combines the pizzicato and accelerando (as mentioned earlier) to tighten the music toward the final chord of the section. Until these last few measures of the B section, all four of the instruments have not been heard together in the more contrapuntal texture. The combined sound with the rapid note repetitions gives the conclusion to this section the most dramatic sounds heard in the piece. The final chord before the return of the A section is highly chromatic, using double stops spaced at a 7th in both violins and the viola. Appropriately, the most prominent tones in these three parts are F (Viola), B flat (Violin II), and B (Violin I).

While these three parts are playing the chord, the cello plays a descending chromatic line, which leads to F in order to set up the final section of the piece. Harmonically speaking, the next few measures are not significantly dissimilar from the beginning until the conclusion in measure 35. In the second beat of this measure, the violins join together on a chord, which has a very strong dominant quality in B minor (a dominant 7th chord except for the presence of a C natural in the Violin II). This chord however does not resolve to B minor, but instead an A and A flat in the Violin II and an F and F sharp in the Violin I. As this happens, the cello descends to a low D. When combined with the F and A sound of the violins, this establishes D as the new tonic, although D has not shown any particular significance in the piece up to this point. Just as the texture of the piece was “wiped away” by the glissandos, this new tonic has a similar effect on the harmony of the piece.

Despite all of these innovations that are apparent in Penderecki’s later period, as many (including the composer himself) have noted, this music is, in many ways, a synthesis of a late Romantic style with many aesthetic features that arose in the mid-20th century. This has led many critics of contemporary music to reach a conclusion that music, and indeed all forms of art, have stagnated in terms of new innovations. This topic has been a great concern for Penderecki over the last few decades. In his writings and lectures, he has frequently argued against the popular notion that “no new music will be written at least the next thirty years.” In articles such as, *For Me the Possibility of Arts in the Next Generation is a Certainty*, he has frequently asserted that he is “convinced that our fin de millenaire, with its tonality of satiation and enervation, does not at all signify the end of art, the end of creativity. I have no doubts of the capacity of art for regeneration.”

It was many years after the first two string quartets that Penderecki would eventually compose a full piece in this form again. This did not occur until one of his most recent works, String Quartet No. 3 (‘Leaves from an Unwritten Diary’), which was completed in 2008. This work was commissioned by the Shanghai String Quartet, which has performed it national since its debut at a festival in Warsaw for the composer’s 75th birthday. Although scores for this work have not yet been made available, recordings very quickly reveal a composition that is solidly in a new period of the composer’s life, distant from the experimental period of the 1960s, and even from *Der Unterbrochene Gedanke*.

The transformation that takes place is within these works, and in all of Penderecki’s compositions, takes a major role in his writings and speeches of later years. In his book, “Labyrinth of Time”, he quotes Julian Klaczko, a political commentator, who, paraphrasing Goethe

said, “Just as in literature, so also in the life-story of every eminent human being, we can see the epoch of the Iliad and the epoch of the Odyssey.” Penderecki sees this in his own life. The Iliad here is represented in this instance by his avant-garde period, an “era of youthful rebellion and faith in the possibility of changing the way of the world through art.” He regards the last few decades in the way of the Odyssey, as a search for home, full of nostalgia. Although this metamorphosis has been shown as a characteristic of Penderecki and his music, it is a trait shared by many composers. The influence that composers such as Mahler and Bartok had on him is reminiscent of the influence that the music of J.S. Bach had on Mozart and Beethoven. Perhaps this is the strongest link between Penderecki and earlier generations of composers; the nostalgic desire to rekindle the genius of those that have come before us.

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