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A SILENT FRIENDSHIP

I think I should start by explaining the title of my paper. Why ‘a silent friendship’? The bond between Witold Lutosławski and Arne Nordheim has very modest documentation, based mainly on accounts by their friends and relatives. We are not familiar with their correspondence; in fact, we do not know if they exchanged any letters at all. What is certain is that Nordheim’s intense contacts with Warsaw’s musical circles came as a result of his interest in electronic music, and this led him to form a close relationship with Polish Radio’s Experimental Studio (Studio Eksperymentalne), founded and directed for many years by Józef Patkowski. Nordheim’s contacts with the Studio began in 1967 and remained intense until 1972. In later years, he frequently recalled his friendship with Patkowski and with Eugeniusz Rudnik, one of the Studio’s sound engineers. Soon Nordheim’s Polish contacts expanded to include the ‘Warsaw Autumn’ festival and also, most probably through Patkowski, Witold Lutosławski. There is a mention in the Polish composer’s diary (12 April 1968) of a concert devoted to Nordheim’s music. It is highly likely that the two men met on that occasion, though it is doubtful that it was their first encounter.

In subsequent years, Nordheim often sat on juries of various composition competitions in Poland in which Lutosławski played a key role, including the First Kazimierz Serocki Competition, organised in 1984 by the Polish Section of the International Society for Contemporary Music, and the First Witold Lutosławski Competition, organised by the Warsaw Philharmonic in 1990. In both instances, Lutosławski served as jury chairman and had a major say on the line-up of the panels. There is no doubt that Lutosławski had great confidence in Nordheim, otherwise he would not have invited him to join the panel of jurors, particularly on

the latter occasion. Accounts by many people from Lutosławski's circle also speak of the warm nature of the contacts between the two composers. I can confirm such views from my own experience as a witness to numerous meetings between Nordheim and Lutosławski from the 1960s to 1990s, mainly during the 'Warsaw Autumn' festival.

A natural continuation of the contacts between the two composers was formed by the frequent visits of the Lutosławskis, from the 1970s onwards, to Norway, where Marcin Bogusławski, Danuta Lutosławska's son and Witold's stepson, lived and worked. He will take up this Norwegian chapter in his own talk. There is much evidence in various publications that Lutosławski – who found Oslo a haven for work and for joyous contact with his family, undisturbed by the intense social commitments at home – remained always at the disposal of Nordheim. This kind of privileged relationship was particularly telling given Lutosławski's well-known reserve in social contacts, which manifested itself, among other things, in a careful selection of the people invited to his home.

Lutosławski was almost a generation older than Nordheim. His career was hindered by the Second World War and the doctrine of socialist realism during the Stalinist period, so he attained his international position only a decade ahead of Nordheim. The enduring strength of the bond between the two men suggests that what brought them together was not only a social environment and a similarity in their characters but also their shared views and creative attitudes, and perhaps even a common mission. These matters have never been discussed before, and in view of the fact that, as I mentioned earlier, the relevant documentation is extremely modest, all one can do is to ask questions and formulate some hypotheses. It seems to me, however, that this will prove a fruitful endeavour, as the stature of the two composers is such that their relationship is relevant to the overall picture of contacts between Polish and Norwegian music during the second half of the twentieth century. And so even if the questions that I am going to ask remain unanswered today, they may, hopefully, encourage or even inspire other musicologists to probe deeper into the musical trends in both countries.

There is no doubt that for both Lutosławski and Nordheim, the art of composition was the essence of their artistic vocation. Both were guided by a creative imperative, and so it was not so much a question of

choosing a path of development as of acting as individuals called to fulfil a role which they considered an inner necessity. Such a view is borne out by the advice Nordheim shared with young composers on 17 March 1994:

AN: Well, if they can't stop it, they must go on. If they can do something else, do that. If they can't live without composing, they must compose. But if you can live without composing, find something else...

BD: So it really must be mandatory.

AN: It must be. A need, a deep need.¹



Let us compare this with Witold Lutosławski's declaration:

In my work I am mainly motivated by the wish to give as faithful a demonstration as possible of the world existing within me and continually developing, and to render it in a 'material' form. This is combined with my passion for the entire world of music: mysterious, independent and yet intimately connected with man and the human condition.²

Music and its creation is therefore a composer's destiny and fate rather than a choice in life. For a true artist, the creative process is life itself, and in practice it competes with history, philosophy and religion, as Karol Berger argues in his *A Theory of Art*.³ Let me try to follow this line of argumentation, keeping in mind, however, that the biographers of Lutosławski and Nordheim have unanimously claimed that in one fundamental respect they stood worlds apart. Nordheim's primary intention was to give vent to his emotions. He was an expressionist, obsessed with a desire to communicate through his music a wealth of feelings, experiences and personal impressions. According to Nils Grinde, Nordheim had the temperament of a Romantic, lyrical poet. Grinde recalls that in one of his interviews the composer said: 'I often feel as if I were an old-fashioned composer of landscapes, luring people into a romantic trap, without a trace of sober calculation or cultural resolution'. The author of *A History of Norwegian Music* goes on to say, 'With time, the neo-romantic elements in his music have emerged more clearly; and distinctly tonal elements in his music have emerged more clearly; and

¹ Interviewed by Bruce Duffie for WNIB Radio, Classical 97, Chicago.

² 'Notebook of Ideas, 1959–1984', 24 March 1972; taken from *Lutosławski on Music*, tr. and ed. Zbigniew Skowron (Lanham, MA, 2007), p. 314.

³ Karol Berger, *A Theory of Art* (Oxford, 2000).

distinctly tonal elements can be traced in several of the works composed since 1975. The basis for Nordheim's art is a well-developed and extremely sensitive feeling for sounds, which he employs in a deeply emotional musical language of great expressive power'.⁴

Lutosławski's stand is perceived entirely differently. The Polish musicologist Andrzej Chłopecki describes it as 'a rational game with the fabric of music, which proceeds on a plane of new, self-constructed objects and strategies for employing them'. As a result, 'the edifice of Witold Lutosławski's musical output in its entirety, built slowly, from one stage to another, was constructed into an integral oeuvre which is strongly interwoven by its artistic ideas; an oeuvre which is harmoniously coordinated (a rare thing in the history of music) and is a testimony to the music of the second half of the twentieth century, fascinating, distinct and radiating a clear message into the next century. A cathedral'.⁵

Nordheim – obsessed with the idea of expressing himself, writing one piece all his life, searching for directness, blunt in his words and impulsive in his manners. Lutosławski – seeking his own system through a constant improvement of technique, persistently striving to revive a universal convention in new music, carefully weighing each word and controlling every public gesture. What else, apart from the art of creation as their mission and inner imperative, brought these two men together, different as they were?

Reflecting on the past, on tradition and history, brings us to the issue of defining the awareness of one's own role in the contemporary world. Both Nordheim and Lutosławski are ranked among the most outstanding personalities in their nations' cultures. Even though elevation to such a high status was not their goal, it became a fact thanks to the successful realisation of their artistic plans. What were their views then on the historical process and their own role in it? Lutosławski was the first to address these matters in his 'Notebook of Ideas' on 12 March 1961:

Art in Poland was often regarded by artists themselves in an infantile way: 'me too...', 'being equal...', 'a Polish variant of a current...', 'national traits...', 'Polish Picasso, Polish Bartók, Polish Salvador Dali...'. Imitating adults, that's all. The characteristic feature of an authentic artist is the ability to *assume some*

⁴ Nils Grinde, *Contemporary Norwegian Music, 1920–1980*, tr. Sandra Hamilton (Oslo, 1981), p. 103.

⁵ Andrzej Chłopecki, *PostSłowie* [AfterWord] (Warsaw, 2012), pp. 21–25.

responsibility for the physiognomy and fate of the art of a given epoch. Only thus may one achieve something. Even the most modest talent, if he is able to assume even a little bit of that responsibility, has his place in the history of art. The rest are parasites, rabble-rousers, a tiresome mob.⁶

Several months later, Lutosławski wrote:

What is characteristic and substantial in art nowadays is the creation of individual ways of expression, i.e., of languages, contrary to past epochs (such as Baroque) in which there existed more or less common, generally accepted methods of expressing oneself. Today, in this era of an intentionally created 'Tower of Babel', treating one's individual achievement in the realm of language as a common property is not only borrowing, imitation or plagiarism; it is – when all's said and done – *an anachronism*, a transference of an old way of thinking about these issues into an era in which this method has nothing in common.⁷

So the present derived from the past in a judicious way is a serious problem. It is interesting that Arne Nordheim, while referring to entirely different arguments, is almost of the same opinion:

music starts, really, when it takes off from the instruments. It enters people's minds and wanders around there, seeking to identify what I call the 'forgotten experiences' from long, long ago. It's a kind of atavistic memory that you have from long, long, long back. Not you, yourself, but your predecessors, your families from ages before. I think that's what you're seeking. The composer must seek the truth of these sounds which he has never heard, but will recognise at once when he sees them on the paper. I think that is composing.⁸

It is worth drawing attention to the stress which Nordheim placed on the importance of the archetype – for the creative process and, to the same extent, for the reception of music. The focus in Lutosławski's declarations is mainly on the future. A closer look at their music allows us to correct this impression and discover various shades of radicalism. In Nordheim, it is the courage to explore new sound possibilities, while in Lutosławski it is an uncompromising search for the consequences of the discipline of compositional procedures. The difficult task of analysing

⁶ 'Notebook of Ideas', 12 March 1961, taken from *Lutosławski on Music*, p. 299.

⁷ 'Notebook of Ideas', 10 November 1961, taken from *Lutosławski on Music*, p. 300.

⁸ From a telephone interview with Arne Nordheim recorded by Bruce Duffie on 17 March 1994; <http://www.kestudio.com/nordheim2.html> (accessed 23 February 2016).

the two composers' music has been undertaken by many musicologists, and a great deal can be said about their grounding in the European tradition. I am sure this is an issue that will be taken up by other speakers at this conference.



At this juncture, following the line of argument outlined in Karol Berger's theory of art, let us note that the attitude to tradition also includes an ethical aspect, that is, a set of norms and principles governing our lives. Like Berger, however, we have to bear in mind the specific nature of the presence of tradition in the contemporary world, as examined by Alasdair MacIntyre in his study *After Virtue*.⁹ The special character of this presence consists in the permanent 'dispute with tradition', resulting in the rejection or acceptance of a set of 'goods' (principles, values and views) that are significant for the present time. Lutosławski's attitude to Nordheim should be viewed precisely on this plane, albeit from today's perspective. With extremism sweeping through the world, 'conversation' is a more fitting description than 'dispute'. At any rate, while the two composers demonstrated the same attitude to the past (history, culture, tradition), they differed in the selection of specific 'goods' from the past. One cannot help feeling, though, that given today's increasingly ominous war rhetoric and practice in many parts of the world, Lutosławski's dramatic statement of almost fifty years ago could be the two composers' joint declaration:

If our civilization is to perish soon, and the disintegration of art expresses this, I don't feel personally interested in contributing my works. The thought of annihilation arouses in me a totally opposite reaction. Not: 'I perish, all is perishing, let us express it', but: 'perhaps all is perishing, let us express something which would have a chance of survival'. So an instinctive search for what seems to be immortal in music. Among other things, a search for a form which would be something more than a result of its disintegration.¹⁰

For an artist, ethical norms come to the fore with a particular urgency in his attitude to other people, to his potential and actual audience. This is an area where issues such as the role of art, the importance of and need for communication, and the sense of artistic creation are resolved.

⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd edn (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

¹⁰ 'Notebook of Ideas', 2 October 1966, taken from *Lutosławski on Music*, p. 313.

In the case of artists so determined as Lutosławski and Nordheim, for whom creative work was a mission without any alternative, these issues also touch upon the sense of their lives. So, to conclude, let us hear what both of them had to say on these subjects. What we can see is a proximity, if not convergence, of their stands. Is this a sufficient explanation of their friendship?

In 1994, Arne Nordheim said:

I am the creator and the first listener; it's two persons in one! I know that so many people are like me. That's why I have to be honest to myself and just take the things that I do appreciate most, or even love, because I am a stand-in for the audience in this process. At the same time I'm writing for myself and I am writing for the audience.¹¹

More than twenty years earlier, Witold Lutosławski had confessed:

I feel an ardent wish to communicate with people through art all the time. The goal of my efforts, however, is not to win over as many listeners and followers as possible. I do not want to win people over, I want to find those who, deep down, feel the way I do. How to achieve this goal? Through the utmost sincerity of artistic expression at all levels, from technical details to the more secret and intimate depths. I am aware that an attitude like this eliminates right away a large number of potential listeners for my compositions. Yet, those who will stay are an invaluable treasure. They are people dear to me even though I have never met them. Artistic creation can be thus viewed as a hunt for human souls resulting in a cure for the most acute of human sufferings, a sense of loneliness.¹²

When Lutosławski jotted down those notes, he was the same age as Arne Nordheim, a generation his junior, was in 1994. It is surely no coincidence that loneliness was already then one of the central strands in the Norwegian composer's music.

¹¹ Nordheim/Duffie telephone interview, see above, n. 8.

¹² 'Notebook of Ideas', 24 March 1972, taken from *Lutosławski on Music*, p. 314.