PROGRAM NOTES
by Phillip Huscher

Witold Lutosławski
Born January 25, 1913, Warsaw, Poland.
Died February 7, 1994, Warsaw, Poland.

Concerto for Orchestra

Lutosławski began this work in 1950 and completed it in 1954. The first performance was given on November 26, 1954, in Warsaw. The score calls for three flutes and two piccolos, three oboes and English horn, three clarinets and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, four trumpets, four trombones and tuba, timpani, snare drum, side drums, tenor drum, bass drum, cymbals, tam-tam, tambourine, xylophone, bells, celesta, two harps, piano, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-eight minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Lutosławski's Concerto for Orchestra were given at Orchestra Hall on February 6, 7, and 8, 1964, with Paul Kletzki conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performance was given November 7, 8, and 9, 2002, with Christoph von Dohnányi conducting. The Orchestra has performed this concerto at the Ravinia Festival only once, on June 28, 1970, with Seiji Ozawa conducting.

For the record
The Orchestra recorded Lutosławski's Concerto for Orchestra in 1970 under Seiji Ozawa for Angel, and in 1992 under Daniel Barenboim for Erato.

To most musicians today, as to Witold Lutosławski in 1954, the title “concerto for orchestra” suggests Béla Bartók's landmark 1943 score of that name. Bartók's is the most celebrated, but it's neither the first nor the last work with this title. Paul Hindemith, Walter Piston, and Zoltán Kodály all wrote concertos for orchestra before Bartók, and Witold Lutosławski, Michael Tippett, Elliott Carter, and Shulamit Ran are among those who have done so after his famous example.

Witold Lutosławski's was the first important concerto for orchestra composed in the shadow of Bartók's great work, but that appears to have inspired rather than intimidated him—Bartók served as a touchstone, a reminder of what could be done within a certain style and with a specific aim. For Lutosławski, as for Bartók, the concerto for orchestra was a characteristic twentieth-century idea, a reflection of the unprecedented virtuosity of the modern orchestra and, at the same time, of the desire to pour new wine into old bottles. The hallmarks of Bartók's masterwork are here as well—the arch form of the first movement, the broad chorale of the last, a certain similarity of gesture, tone, and language that's easy to hear, although less simple to pinpoint in the score—and yet Lutosławski's score is entirely his own. (Lutosławski's Musique funèbre, written four years later, was dedicated to Bartók's memory.) Still another composer links Bartók's and Lutosławski's concertos. In the fourth movement of his work, Bartók parodies the battle music from Dmitri Shostakovich's Leningrad Symphony. In the toccata section of his finale, Lutosławski inscribes Shostakovich's well-known musical monogram—DSCH, or D, E-flat, C, B-natural, as translated into musical notation. But the references are quite different. Bartók intended a sly comment about artistic merit. For Lutosławski, Shostakovich represented a major composer responding through his music to a political crisis—a concern he understood only too well. In 1948 Lutosławski's First Symphony was banned by the Polish government; the music written during the next years, culminating in this Concerto for Orchestra, was his response. In 1988, Lutosławski talked with Allan Kozinn of The New York Times about this period:

The government stopped interfering with our musical life very early, probably because they decided that music is not an offensive art. It's not semantic. It doesn't carry meaning in the same way literature, poetry, theater, and film do. So they are not interested in it. I have never felt any pressure to write a certain way. But after my First Symphony, I
realized that I was writing in a style that was not leading me anywhere. So I decided to begin again—to work from scratch on my sound language.

Obviously, I could not immediately begin writing concert works, so I wrote functional music—children's music, easy piano pieces, and small ensemble works. I did it with pleasure, because Poland was devastated after the war and this educational music was necessary. Eventually, I developed a style that combined functional music with elements of folk music, and occasionally with nontonal counterpoints and harmonies.

The Concerto for Orchestra was the climax of this nationalistic, folk-based music—a work that not only spoke to a politically defeated people, but that continues to touch musicians of many lands today. Shortly after writing the concerto, Lutosławski's sound language changed again. In 1960 he heard part of a radio broadcast of John Cage's Piano Concerto, a work that leaves much to chance, and is, therefore, different at every performance. Lutosławski remembers that "those few minutes were to change my life decisively. It was a strange moment . . . I suddenly realized that I could compose music differently from that of my past . . . ."

And so the rest of his career—including the Third Symphony commissioned by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra—was spent exploring and perfecting this new language, one that is based on the juxtaposition of ad lib passages with strictly controlled music.

In an interview given in 1973, Lutosławski expressed surprise at the continuing interest in his early Concerto for Orchestra, calling it "the only serious piece among the folk-inspired works" of the period immediately following the war. On another occasion he said, "I wrote as I was able, since I could not yet write as I wished." His dismissive attitude recalls Bartók, who kept reassigning opus numbers to his scores, each time excluding the earliest works that no longer pleased him.

In this respect, the concertos for orchestra by Bartók and Lutosławski differ. Bartók's came very late in his career—it is, technically, the last music he finished, although the Third Piano Concerto was nearly complete at his death—and finds him at the summit, commanding the language in a way that only years of work and understanding make possible. Lutosławski's early Concerto for Orchestra in no way suggests the direction his music would take.

Borrowing Bartók's favored arch form, the first movement begins and ends with imitative writing set against repeated F-sharps—pounding drums in the beginning, the tinkling celesta at the end. (Structurally, the movement is most closely modeled on the opening of Bartók's Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta.) Midway, the music reaches several big, engulfing climaxes, punctuated by screaming brass. At least two themes are based on Polish folk songs, although Lutosławski, unlike Bartók, treats them like raw material rather than cultural artifacts.

The middle movement captures something of Bartók's famous Night Music, although for Lutosławski night is a time of furtive activity rather than mysterious calm. Again the form is symmetrical, with quickly moving music for strings and winds framing a slower section for brass. This central Arioso, sung first by the trumpets, brings the movement to a terrifying climax. From there the music flickers and dies—the final bars are a duet for tenor drum and bass drum, ppp.

The harps and double basses quietly launch the finale, eventually stating the passacaglia theme (based on a folk song) that will serve as the foundation for fifteen variations, all carefully dovetailed and growing in intensity and activity until the last, which recedes into silence. Lutosławski then launches a powerful, bustling toccata. The music finally dissolves to reveal a solemn chorale intoned by the winds—the ghost of Bartók again (the resemblance to the chorale in the second movement of Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra is clearly intentional)—before the music turns lively and sweeps to its conclusion.

*Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.*