PROGRAM NOTES
by Phillip Huscher

Witold Lutosławski – Symphony No. 4

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

Symphony No. 4

Witold Lutosławski died one year and two days after he conducted the premiere of this symphony, his last major work. He had celebrated his eighty-first birthday just two weeks earlier. Writing in The New York Times a few weeks later, Alex Ross considered why Lutosławski’s importance is so hard to pin down. "With him there is no easy talking point, no glamorous profile or notorious stance of the kind that recently put a posthumous spotlight on Leonard Bernstein and John Cage," Ross wrote. "He was an innovator, but he did not lead a vanguard or attract many imitators." Today, nearly fifteen years after his death, it seems more certain than ever that Lutosławski will be remembered as a master—a singular figure who managed to forge a unique identity amid the chaos of late twentieth-century music, and a composer whose works will be played far into the future.

Lutosławski started composing shortly after he began to study piano as a boy. His idols then were those of his father: Beethoven and Chopin. He later became "intoxicated" by Scriabin and by Szymanowski’s Third Symphony, the most "modern" music he would hear for many years in restrictive Communist Poland. One of his own first works, Symphonic Variations, had a successful premiere in 1939. That same year, after the Nazi invasion of Poland, he joined the Polish army; he was later arrested by the Nazis, but escaped and returned to Warsaw where he organized underground concerts of music banned by the Nazis. After the war, he wrote functional music—children’s music, easy piano pieces, and small ensemble works—rather than concert music. "I did it with pleasure," he explained years later, "because Poland was devastated after the war and this educational music was necessary."

When his own First Symphony of 1947 was banned as "formalist" (and not performed for ten years), he turned to composing music based on Polish folk material, culminating in the still popular Concerto for Orchestra of 1954 that was a homage to Bartók. As he later said, "I wrote as I was able, since I could not yet write as I wished." His dismissive attitude recalls Bartók, one of his musical heroes, who kept reassigning opus numbers to his scores, each time excluding the earliest works that no longer pleased him.
In 1960, Witold Lutosławski happened to hear 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 later said 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."

Lutosławski did not become a Cage disciple and his subsequent scores sound nothing like Cage's works. "Composers often do not hear the music that is being played," he said later, recalling the ways that listening to Cage that day changed him.

It only serves as an impulse for something quite different—for the creation of music that only lives in their imagination. It is a sort of schizophrenia—we are listening to something and at the same time creating something else.

After discovering Cage's music, Lutosławski began to introduce the idea of chance—through freely notated, "improvisational" passages—into his developing personal language. The Venetian Games of 1961 was the breakthrough piece, and it made Lutosławski a leader of the avant-garde from which he had once been excluded. His major works of the next decades—including his 1983 masterpiece, the Third Symphony written for the Chicago Symphony—all benefited from the use of various kind of ad lib music alternating with conventionally notated passages. As Lutosławski wrote,

There is no improvisation in my music. Everything that is to be played is notated in full detail and must be precisely realized by the performers. The sole, though basic, difference between the ad libitum (nonconducted) sections and sections noted in the traditional manner (divided into bars of designated meter) stems from the fact that in the former case, there is no overall scheme of subdividing time to guide the various players. In other words, each plays his part as if he were playing alone and does not coordinate with the other performers. The result is a distinctly "elastic" synthesis of complex, capricious rhythms which cannot be produced by any other method.

As Lutosławski admitted, such freedom for the performers, even in playing elaborate and demanding material, "restores a pleasure of music making which was neglected when music got very complicated."

Lutosławski's four symphonies span his entire career—forty-five years separate the First and the Fourth—and they reflect the course of his development into one of the twentieth century's great individualists. The Third Symphony was immediately acclaimed as a landmark following the Chicago premiere in 1983, and in 1985, it was the first recipient of the Grawemeyer Award for music composition, now considered music's highest honor. When the Los Angeles Philharmonic asked Lutosławski to compose a Fourth Symphony, he demurred, claiming he never accepted deadlines or advance fees, but that he would let them know if some ideas for a new piece came to him. Since he had kept the Chicago Symphony waiting eleven years for the Third Symphony, L.A. music director Esa-Pekka Salonen was stunned to run into Lutosławski three years later and learn that the symphony was finished—without so much as a signed contract or an agreed fee.
The Fourth Symphony turned out to be another landmark, not just in Lutosławski's output, but in the history of the twentieth-century symphony. In 1992, the year he finished the Fourth, Lutosławski talked to a reporter about how his symphonies relate to convention:

I was not always happy with the Brahmsian tradition. In Brahms, there are two main movements, the first and the fourth. In my experience as a listener, that is too much. . . . I believe that the ideal relationship is achieved in Haydn's symphonies. And I thought that perhaps I could find some other way to achieve this balance. My solution is to view the first movement as preparation for the main movement. The first movement must engage, interest—it must intrigue. But it must not give complete satisfaction. It must make us hungry, and, finally, even impatient. That is the right moment to introduce the main movement.

That is the method of the Fourth Symphony, but the way these two movements fit together to make a single arch is remarkably subtle. The first movement alternates two different kinds of music—long, slowly unfolding melodies over dark chords and faster, more spontaneous sounding episodes. (In these ad libitum sections, the conductor presides over the written "improvisations" of the various instruments without dictating the way they unfold.) The second movement, which flows seamlessly from the first—the score doesn't even label it when it starts—introduces a lush new lyrical theme that is interrupted, complimented, and sometimes overshadowed by dazzling quicker music. At the end, the music dwindles to a single phrase in the violas and then flares back to life in a sudden, brilliant coda. Despite the complexity of ingredients, textures, and tempos—and the dialogue of fast and slow, and of strict and free—the whole has the thrilling sweep of one breathless, nonstop paragraph.

After the Fourth Symphony, Lutosławski wrote little. He completed a four-minute test piece, Subito, for the 1994 Indianapolis International Violin Competition, and then began work on a violin concerto for Anne-Sophie Mutter. When he died, he left behind no more than a few pages of sketches for the concerto—and instructions that the piece should be left unfinished.

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