

Handmade in Poland

**CHICAGO SYMPHONY
ORCHESTRA**
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By Kyle Gann

Once a wealthy French society lady, desiring to commission a piece of music by Igor Stravinsky, balked at the high fee he requested. "But Madam," Stravinsky protested, "it's all made by hand."

Chicago had to wait 11 years for the symphony the CSO commissioned from Polish composer Witold Lutoslawski. Seventy this year, Lutoslawski is one of the oldest of the legion of Polish composers that have made that country a hotbed of avant-garde musical activity since World War II. Under their present government, the Poles, while anxious to keep abreast of musical developments, are often denied access to scores and recordings by "decadent" Western composers, and their reactions to the new music they have heard has typically been enthusiastic but naive. Many Polish composers were strongly influenced by the Greek composer Iannis Xenakis, and appropriated his tone clusters, sound masses, and glissandi in a way that

strikes one as mere effect seeking. Based on such earlier works as the *Trois poemes d'Henri Michaux*, I had once consigned Lutoslawski to this group. This new Third Symphony makes it conclusively clear that this characterization is terribly inadequate.

Well-crafted and brilliantly scored (the orchestration gave me an impression of deep green intermingled with bright gold), the Third Symphony deigned at many points to be simple, even obvious (most European composers would have been embarrassed by the repeated strings of consecutive thirds plucked on the cellos), but never descended to the trite or banal. The first of the three movements provided a very unusual experience, perhaps best described in the composer's own words: "The first is meant barely to interest, to attract, to involve, but never to entirely satisfy the listener. In the course of the first movement the listener is supposed to expect something more important to happen, he may even get impatient." Riddled with silences and thin, soloistic writing, this movement was indeed tentative, discontinuous, at times even embarrassingly vulnerable, all qualities that usually make a bad impression on me. But the delicate

lines were so subtly contrasted, the discontinuity so carefully prepared, and the overall direction so clear, that here the case was quite opposite. With firm compositional control evident at every point, all material was memorable, though nothing went on long enough to give more than a hint of what was to come. The 11 years of rewriting paid off; this was quite audibly music that had been "made by hand."

At last the second movement broke into what Lutoslawski called "the main idea," a sensuously chromatic "endless melody." From here on the piece flirted with tonality, but with a consistent ambiguity that rescued it from the realm of nostalgia. The timbral effects with which the melody was clothed, including some short chordal glissandi in the woodwinds, were truly delicious and never overused. The finale accompanied a Scriabinesque trumpet theme with suitably "mystical" harp and cello pizzicati, culminating in a fireworks display of vibraphones, marimbas, xylophones, and bells, and brought to a swift completion by the forceful four-note motive that opened the work.

For those who heard the CSO play *Cumulus Nimbus* by Kevin

Hanlon last spring, this was the bona fide article of which that piece was a deft imitation. Lutoslawski has traveled a long road from the Bartokian rhythms of his Concerto for Orchestra and the aleatory choral effects of the *Trois poemes*, and few of his most distinguished

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European colleagues can boast a large work with so much personality. Neither conspicuously avant-garde nor dated, this was originality without novelty or gimmickry, tradition without cliché. Though less respectful of some recent works in the past, both Solti and the orchestra seemed aware of the magnitude and seriousness of the work they were performing, and the resulting performance was riveting.

Lutoslawski's work was rather severely contrasted with two works by Haydn and Hummel, the CSO

bending over backward as usual to avoid offending anyone. Haydn's "Military" Symphony, No. 100, was actually a happy coupling, its structure so lean and tight that it was clear why Lutoslawski claims Haydn as one of his favorite models. The four-note trumpet figure in the second movement was even a coincidental anticipation of the figure with which Lutoslawski opened and closed his symphony. Following the Haydn, though, Hummel's Trumpet Concerto (a standard on college senior trumpet recitals) couldn't help sounding flabby and redundant, excellent vehicle though it is for some lovely lyrical trumpet playing. Needless to say, CSO principal Adolph Herseth's golden tone did the piece much more than justice.

This was a very auspicious opening for an interestingly programmed orchestra season, and Solti proved that when he respects a piece, he can be as effective a spokesman for new music as his colleagues Abbado and Slatkin. The audience gave the composer a rousing reception. I hope an indication that they agree that the commissioning and premiering of major works by underplayed composers is one of a good orchestra's most important responsibilities.