

Witold Lutosławski about Cello Concerto

I first met Mstislav Rostropovich many years ago; the idea of composing a cello concerto for him recurred frequently in our conversations. The thought was a great temptation and a prospect of writing such a piece sometime in the future gave me a lot of pleasure. It was, however, difficult to realize because of other commitments. Then, about two years before the first performance of the Cello Concerto as it later transpired, by a happy coincidence the Royal Philharmonic Society of London proposed the commission of an orchestral work from me. At that time I had just completed two large orchestral works, II Symphony and *Livre pour orchestre*, so I replied with another idea: to write a work for a solo instrument with orchestra. My idea was accepted enthusiastically: the Royal Philharmonic Society commissioned me to write a concerto for cello and orchestra and engaged Mstislav Rostropovich to be its first soloist.

When I came to write the concerto, the fact that I was writing for such phenomenal artist, not only in his field but also generally - I consider him one of the greatest musicians of our century - was immensely stimulating for me. Already in the first conversation we had had all those years ago, Rostropovich told me not to think about the technicalities of writing for the cello but to concentrate on composing the music; he would take care of making the playing of it technically possible. I don't think it is 100% possible not to think about the technicalities; when one composes for an instrument one should be aware of the specific characteristics of the instrument for which one is writing. However, Rostropovich's encouragement not to worry too much about the technical side made my work much easier. I could propose to him, amongst other things, completely new fingering. It was necessary for the playing of quarter-tones which I used extensively. The quarter-tone passages are perfectly possible on the cello, owing to the larger distances between semi-tones on the fingerboard; significantly larger than on a viola or violin fingerboard. That is why the quarter-tone passages on the viola or violin are much more problematic or even impossible. Later, when he worked on the finished solo part, Rostropovich told me with a smile that after 30 years of playing the cello he had had to learn new fingering! [...]

So, as I mentioned, the two initiatives coincided and I was able to start work happily on the new piece, which I had wanted to write for many years. It took about 18 months to complete. The resulting concerto is a sizeable piece (duration over 20 minutes), written for cello and standard symphony orchestra; the cello part being decidedly soloistic. There is no question of the orchestra dominating the solo instrument as sometimes happens in *sinfonia concertante*. It is a typical cello concerto, although its form does not have, perhaps, much in common with the classical concerto. Traditionally, the role of the orchestra in a concerto is to accompany the solo instrument, to engage in dialogue with it, or to provide tutti sections when the solo instrument does not play. In my concerto the orchestra has a different relationship with the soloist. It is a relationship of conflict. I sought the inspiration for this in other arts, the theatre in particular.



Witold Lutosławski z Mściślawem Rostropowiczem
La Rochele - 4 lipca 1977.

Witold Lutoslawski with Mstislav Rostropovich
La Rochele - 4 July, 1977.

This conflict should be clear to the listener from the first moments: the orchestra intervenes in the cello part, interrupts, even disrupts it. Then come the tentative attempts at “reconciliation” in the form of dialogues, but they are always interrupted by brass instruments, which, in this piece, assume a role of intervention. My underlying intention was to find a deeper reason for using two naturally contradictory elements: a solo instrument and an orchestra. Their relationship changes in the course of the work, there even arrives a moment of complete harmony (cantilena), which, however, quickly provokes the most violent intervention so far by the full brass section. [...]

I think that just as literary works have their epilogues and commentaries and theatre plays have their final scenes which, even if they are not bound directly with the plot, supplement it and provide a dramatic frame, so the coda fulfils the same particular role here [...] Let us imagine that the stage lights have been extinguished and a commentary on the play is being spoken in front of the curtain. [...]

Music can be interpreted in many ways and therein lies its strength and originality. Had I wanted to write a drama about conflict between an individual and a group, I would have used words. What served me sometimes as scaffolding for constructing a musical form was not meant to remain in the work as an immanent structure.