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Citation

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The Music of Lutosławski

THE PREFERENCE for musical minimalism which is evident in the works of many younger Polish composers has found little sympathy in the music of Witold Lutosławski. In the late 1960s and early 70s his younger contemporaries were fond of basing large sections, or even a whole work, on one or more very simple ideas which would then undergo a number of repetitions and permutations. For instance, Zygmunt Krauze, in his *Polychromia* for clarinet, trombone, cello and piano (1968) and *Piece for Orchestra No. 1* (1969) which are played at one dynamic level throughout (usually quiet or very quiet) and sempre legatissimo, and Henryk Mikołaj Górecki,[1*] in his preference for large expanses of very quiet or very loud music in such works as *Refren* (1965), *La Musiquette 2*[•] (1967) and the Second Symphony (1972), seem interested in painting as much of the canvas as possible in one go. While there is evidence that these ideas, though sugared with an emergent romanticism, are continuing, Lutosławski's music, on the contrary, is above all dramatic. Its detail is considerable, and its sonority radiates from within the music: it is not applied to it externally. Transitions between sections and movements and transformations of the music's character are essential for the forward movement, the sense of progression and the dramatic content. Lutosławski has spoken of "the listener undergoing a direct experience, and not of him becoming aware of the actual organization of the musical material",[2] and yet transition and transformation are as vital for the listener in this respect as for the composer.

Transition in its simplest sense in Lutosławski's music was first used in *Trois Poèmes d'Henri Michaux* (1963) to blur the movement from one pitch area to the next in sections of ad libitum playing by means of a slight overlap, or to merge timbres into one another by a similar means, or, in later works, to move into a new section. However, *Jeux Vénitiens* (1961) had been the first work in which Lutosławski used aleatoric counterpoint, repeated ad libitum; here, though, changes from ad libitum playing to conducted sections are abrupt (cf. the first movement), or, as in the last movement, blocks of orchestral colour (in which durations are only approximate) are overlapped to such an extent that the joins are not audible. This latter device resulted from a desire to pile up blocks of sound rather than to form any transition between them.

In the first movement of *Trois Poèmes d'Henri Michaux* ('Pensées') sections are linked by synchronised changes from orchestra to choir. Perhaps as a reaction to the massive effect of *Jeux Vénitiens,* transitions are important here. Precise instructions determine exactly where in his particular mobile[3] the player stops in order to go on to a new one, or to give way to a new timbre. In order to ensure that changes, at the conductor's signal, do not occur at the same time in all parts, transitions are formed either by playing up to the next caesura in the mobile, or by playing up to the end of the mobile itself. This is notated by using a wavy line after the mobile (‖:   :‖﹏﹏﹏✦); where he wants performers to break off suddenly he uses a straight line (‖:   :‖▬▬▬✦). In the String Quartet (1964) this latter device is particularly important. For instance, in (34) of the Main Movement the two violins and viola "repeat the phrase until the pizz. of the cello, then break the phrase and go on immediately to (35)".[4] These two devices have helped Lutosławski to distinguish between transition and dramatic juxtaposition. The implications of transition, however, go deeper, and I would like to examine some of these in more detail.

Since 1961 Lutosławski has been developing a novel concept of form in which the overall structure is divided into two major parts. *Jeux Vénitiens* is in four movements conceived as three plus one, the latter acting not only as a climax to the other three but also balancing equally with them. The String Quartet consists of an episodic Introductory Movement followed by a Main Movement. In the Second Symphony (1966-67) there are again two movements, Hésitant and Direct; the first is fragmentary, the second, employing the full orchestra for the first time and coming only one second after the end of Hésitant, is one continuous development to the climax. *Livre pour Orchestre* (1968) uses the form of four 'chapters' with interludes, but again conceived as three plus one, while the full version of *Preludes and Fugue* for thirteen solo strings (1972) offsets the weighty Fugue with seven clearly contrasted and characteristic Preludes. In the 1960s Ligeti coincidentally developed a similar concept of form: his Cello Concerto (1966) is in two movements, Lento and Agitato, and the Double Concerto for Flute and Oboe (1972) uses the form of Static/Slow – Virtuoso/Brisk.

* Notes at the end of the article.

For Lutosławski, however, the placing of the main movement at the end of the work ensures the audibility of the arch shape, with which he has been working since *Funeral Music* (1958), which he significantly dedicated to Bartók. Here the first movement closely follows the arch shape of the first movement of Bartók's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* with its 2:1 (Fibonacci) proportions. Lutosławski has said: "It seems to me that what can be described as 'fulfilment' can happen only once in a musical work";[5] from this it follows that there must be a progression through the earlier movements, or the first part, towards the climax in the second part. In this respect, transition is important not only between and within sections of a movement, but also between movements themselves in order to transform the essential character of the music. There are a number of ways in which this takes place.

The climactic point of the first movement of *Funeral Music,* and indeed that of Bartók's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta,* represents not only the highest point of the arch shape before the downward curve, but also a simultaneity of events, both intervallic and rhythmic. It is possibly from this example that Lutosławski developed one of his finest and most compelling methods of reaching his 'fulfilment'. In *Jeux Vénitiens* we are presented with a paradox in the first movement: sections A,C,E and G (aleatoric counterpoint) for accumulating woodwind, percussion, brass and piano are extremely nervous and agitated, and yet the overall effect is static. On the other hand, sections B,D,F and H (measured) for strings consist of long held notes with only occasional sudden movement from isolated instruments: the effect here is of a much faster music. The sudden changes between sections are enhanced by the durations, and transition is neither present nor intended. But during the course of the last movement Lutosławski brings the (static) ad libitum sections into line with the (faster) measured sections by progressively shortening the durations of aleatoric sound blocks until their entrances become so frequent that an inevitable single pulse emerges. A more sophisticated example of this, probably the finest, is to be found in the Second Symphony where the transition from the ad libitum playing of Hésitant to a measured 3/4 dictates the form of most of the second movement.[6]

In simple terms the whole of Lutosławski's Second Symphony is about transition and transformation. Hésitant consists of two contrasting ideas which I have called A and B,[7] both of which are subjected to transformations of pitch and timbre. Chattering semiquavers predominate in all appearances of A, whereas B, a trio for double reed instruments, is characterised at first by long semibreves and a tenuto crotchet pulse which diminishes in value until B approaches A in terms of rhythmic intensity. At this point Lutosławski has reached a moment of crisis, where the rhythmic identities of A and B are in danger of merging. So far there have been five alternating appearances each of A and B after the introductory exposition of the pitch and interval group (cf. Example 3). Each appearance of A is organised according to the following scheme: statement – brief pause – brief postlude (repetition of pitch content and timbre) followed by a pause before B. Thus the whole texture is fragmented but systematically ordered and strictly controlled. Where A and B almost merge, a continuous quasi-development (C) begins, based on A1-5. Entrances of timbres come increasingly quickly here, and in this way Lutosławski anticipates the Direct movement, forming a subconscious link, or transition, between the two. Example 1 shows how the timbres of A and B are transformed, illustrating that transitional ideas are at work even when the structure is fragmented.

A2 is related to A1 (in timbre) as a lower resonance in a manner not unlike the relationship of tuba and piano to flutes and harp in the first movement of Tippett's Concerto for Orchestra (1963). (In fact, if one examines Tippett's groupings there are striking similarities.) A3 and A4 act as another related pair, and A5 (prior to the development) is a modified superimposition of A1-4 (cf. Tippett again). The timbres of B1-5 progress from treble instruments downwards. This downward movement is the raison d'être of the closing section (B6) of Hésitant, where B in its original long note-values completely takes over, attracting even the brass instruments we heard in A (this time without horns but with tuba). Lutosławski thus forms a transition between AB1-5 and B6, both in terms of timbre and of movement. The continuous and very characteristic 'straight-line descent' lasts between three and four minutes, and can be summarised as in Example 2; (vi) and (vii) are repeated:

Transformations of timbre are also perfectly matched by transformations of the basic interval group. Lutosławski has briefly discussed his ideas on pitch organisation in Nordwall's book: "I am primarily interested in those twelve-note chords whose adjoining sounds give a limited number of interval types... Twelve-note chords constructed from one, two or three types of intervals have for me a distinct, clearly recognizable character, while twelve-note chords comprising all types of intervals are colourless – they lack a clearly defined individuality."[8] As for timbre he believes that: "most sophisticated combinations of instrumental colours sound rather dull... if the intervals and harmonic aggregations do not contribute to the colour effect".[9] Example 3 traces transformations of the basic group, and illustrates how each appearance of A and B has its own special intervallic and harmonic construction.

Example 1.   Lutosławski: Second Symphony, Hésitant.

A   3 tr.   4 cr.   3 tn.   (introductory exposition)

A1   3 fl.   5 tom-toms   celesta

B1   2 ob.   c.ing.

A2   4 cr.   gr. cassa   tmb. rull./picc.   arpa

B2   2 ob.   c.ing.

A3   3 cl.   vibr.   pf.

B3   c.ing.   2 fg.

A4   2 pltti.   tam-tam   celesta   arpa   pf.

B4   ob.1   c.ing.   fg.1

A5   3 fl.   3 cl.   3 cr.   5 tom-toms   cel.   arpa   pf.

B5   ob.1   c.ing.   fg.1

C   = A1–5

Example 2.   Lutosławski: Second Symphony, Hésitant.

B6   (i)   2 ob.   c.ing.

     (ii)   tr.1   tn.1   tba.

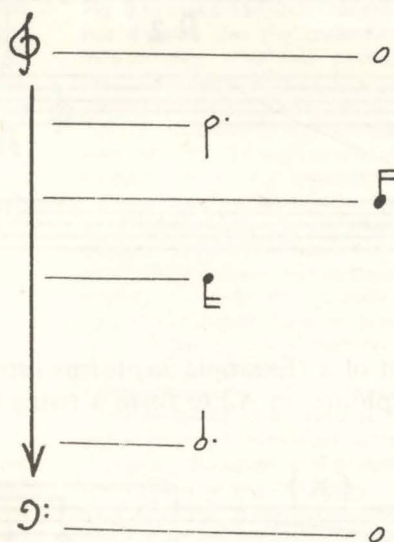   (iii)   3 fg.

     (iv)   tr.1   2 tn.

     (v)   3 fg.   (+tn.3.)

     (vi)   2 tn.   tba.

     (vii)   3 fg.

     (vi)
     (vii)

(approximate rhythmic symmetry)

5

Example 3.   Lutosławski: Second Symphony, Hésitant.

Basic interval group exposed in A and its transformations:

a)

x = major second, fifth and tritone.

y = transposition of x, where fourths replace fifths to complement the first hexachord. By splitting up the resulting twelve notes into four trichords, we can see that Lutosławski's concern for intervallic unity is not unlike Webern's.

Secondary groups, themselves transpositions of x(i), are already present in the complete sequence of pitches:

b)

The pitch class content of A1 is directly related to that of A (Example 3a), but more interesting are the relationships that exist between the instruments in A1: each is related at the unison to the other's retrograde (sometimes modified) of its initial statement:
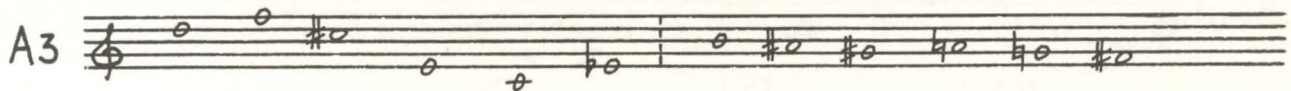
c)

The hexachordal content of x (Example 3a) forms interesting semitone and whole-tone relationships with y, and these are exploited in A2 to form a rising ('straight-line') progression of pitches:
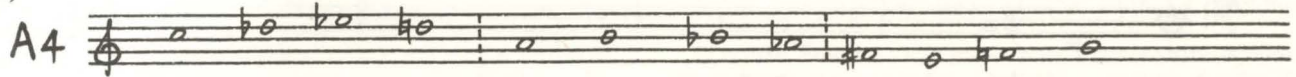
d)

6

In A3 the two hexachords take on quite different characters: thirds and sixths for the three clarinets, and semitone clusters for vibraphone and piano:

e)

In A4 each of the three pitched instruments keeps to its own four pitch classes, fully exploiting the intervallic possibilities in all registers:

f)

The pitch class content of the celesta part is a transposed retrograde of the last four notes of A3's second hexachord (Example 3e); those of the harp and piano are thus derived from the newly established interval group.
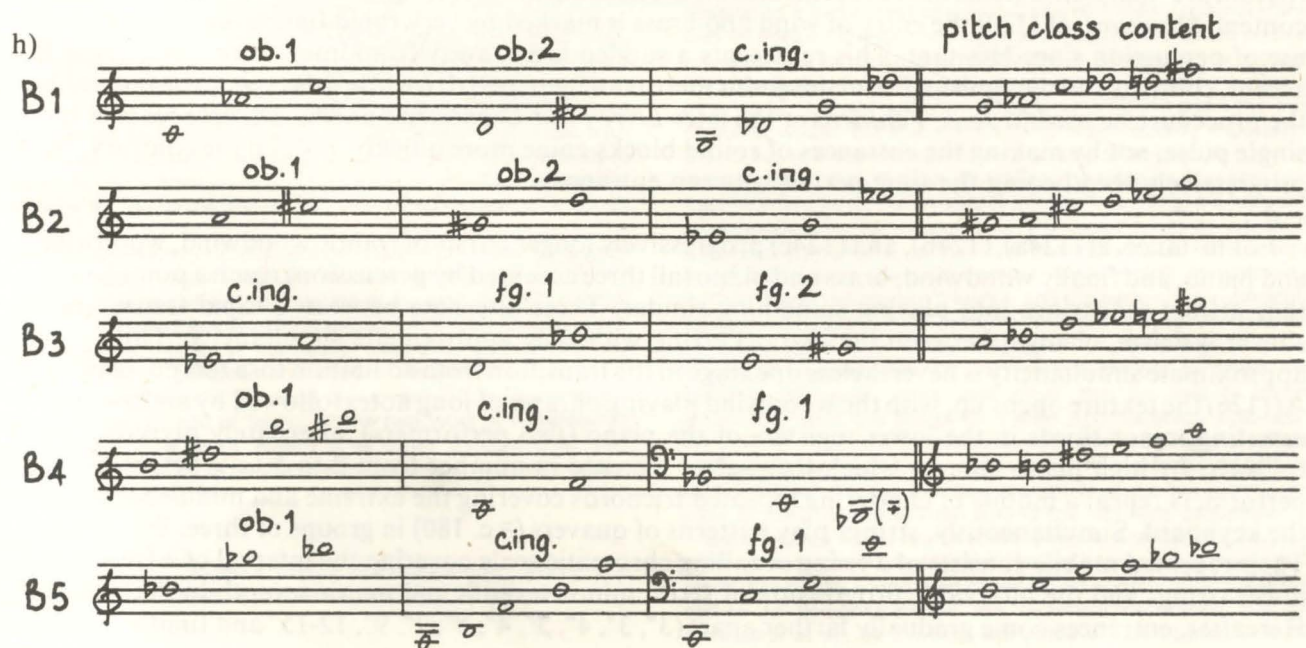
A5 is characterised not only by the generously spaced twelve-note chord of the repeated mobile, but also by scalic fragments which relate to earlier sections (especially A1). Pitch classes appear in one- or two-octave transpositions, but these pitches have been chosen here to illustrate the intervallic content.

g)
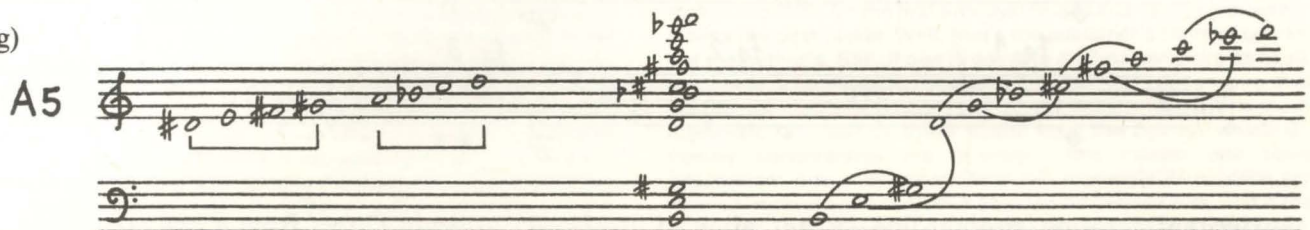
In simple terms, the 'diatonicism' of A and A1 has returned. And as A was rich in secondary-group implications, so A5 is rich in 'sub-harmonic' implications.

Sections B1-5 consist of transpositions of one interval-group, that of major third/minor sixth and tritone (with important octave transpositions within each section). Example 3h gives the pitch content (in ascending order) of the repeated mobile. Notice how the tritone group is systematically moved. (The same interval-group is used for the brass interjections in the first movement of the Cello Concerto.)

h)

B6 (cf. Example 2) consists of seven parts:

i)

ob.1 ob.2 c.ing.

B6(i)

tr.1 tn.1 tba. = B3

(ii)

fg.1 fg.2 fg.3 = B6(i)

(iii)

tr.1 tn.1 tn.2 = B5

(iv)

fg.1 fg.2 fg.3 = B2

(v)

tn.1 tn.2 tba. = B5

(vi)

fg.1 fg.2 fg.3 = B4

(vii)

Hésitant's closing 'straight-line descent' allows Lutosławski to begin Direct from a low, almost inaudible level (entrance of the double basses). In this way the 'ascent' to the single pulse is given purpose, greater perspective and increased power. There are, however, a number of implied 3/4 ideas in Hésitant itself, which again link the movements. For instance, the first silent bar is a 3/4 bar, and the first three notes of the first trumpet imply a unit of three. In A1, the players' parts are regulated by individual metres (but played ad libitum), and here, especially in the tom-toms (actually in 3/4), there is a strong preference for units of three (e.g. 3/8, 9/16).

After the strings have emerged from the depths with a great deal of microtonal blurring of the harmonic field, the rest of the orchestra is introduced as unobtrusively as possible. Here contrasts of timbre and rhythm are minimal; Lutosławski concentrates on broadening and defining the harmonic field and pitch content. However, at (120) the entry of wind and brass is marked by very rapid figurations and the first use of percussion since Hésitant. This represents a sudden break away from integration back towards accent, contrast and dynamism. From this point there is an increased drive towards regularity, but unlike the procedure he used in *Jeux Vénitiens* or the later *Livre pour Orchestre* Lutosławski here reaches the single pulse, not by making the entrances of sound blocks come more quickly, but, on the contrary, by progressively lengthening the time period between entrances.

For instance, at (124a), (124b), and (124c) progressively longer bursts of frantic woodwind, woodwind and piano, and finally woodwind, brass and piano (all three accented by percussion) reach a point where they attract the strings into playing something similar. These alternate between a rapid frenzy and a slower lyricism, changes between the two occurring with only approximate simultaneity. This approximate simultaneity is nevertheless one stage in the transition from ad libitum to 'a tempo' playing. At (126) the texture opens up, with the woodwind playing phrases of long notes followed by arabesques, arresting minor thirds in the lower registers of the piano (two performers), alternately preceded and followed by high piano chords, which themselves increase in number from 2 to 5 to 9 before both performers repeat a mobile of chattering repeated trichords covering the extreme and middle ranges of the keyboard. Simultaneously, strings play patterns of quavers (= c. 180) in groups of three, five or six. Their repeated mobile consists of a rising or falling chromatic scale covering the interval of a fifth in the lower strings and the intervallic progression of sixth, minor seventh and major seventh in the violins. Hereafter, entrances come gradually farther apart (3″, 3″, 4″, 5″, 4″, 5″, 7″, 9″, 12-15″ and finally into 3/4

time), and mobiles of colour are gradually transformed into mobiles of rhythmic articulation based on quaver units (i.e. audible rhythmic units) where the number three becomes increasingly important (cf. Example 4). Not only are the entrances farther apart, but within these mobiles are carefully written-out rallentandos (cf. Example 4) which pull against the onward-going ostinati.

Example 4.   Lutosławski: Second Symphony, Direct, page 58

In this manner one begins to listen to rhythmic tension rather than the interplay of larger rhythmic sound blocks. Yet even when the 3/4 is established at (133) its identity is disguised by triplets and quadruplets and later by a brief return of the ad libitum playing at (134). It is only after a battle in which syncopations and polyrhythms make it seem as though Lutosławski has forced ad libitum ideas into a strait-jacket that the real, long-awaited homophony arrives, and the relationship between aleatoric and non-aleatoric passages is made quite clear. The increased rate of harmonic change from mobiles to single pulses where the harmony changes on every beat corresponds to the change from a dream world to physical reality, from fantasia to muscular symphony, from expectation to fulfilment. Careful manipulation, therefore, of pitch content, rhythmic articulation and timbral distribution in both movements ensures that the shape is totally successful despite the fact that he composed Direct first. To this end, transition between and transformation of these parameters is a prerequisite of the 'fulfilment' of which the composer has spoken. Looking back at the *Trois Poèmes d'Henri Michaux,* we can now see how fruitful were Lutosławski's ideas about transition and how they led him towards a greater awareness of the possibilities of straight-line movement, particularly with regard to pitch and timbre (cf. especially (29) to (142) of 'Pensées').

In *Livre pour Orchestre* timbral transitions are vital in transforming the character of the last Interlude and disguising the starting point of the Final Chapter. The Interludes are really quite insignificant, intended to serve as points of relaxation after the taxing main movements where the audience can cough, shuffle and so on. Each Interlude lasts about 20 seconds: the first is for three clarinets, the second for two clarinets and harp and the third for harp and piano. There are thus timbral links between the Interludes but only gradually does one realise that the last Interlude is growing into something much larger. Example 5 illustrates this transformation.

Example 5. Lutosławski: *Livre pour Orchestre*, figs. (401)–(410).
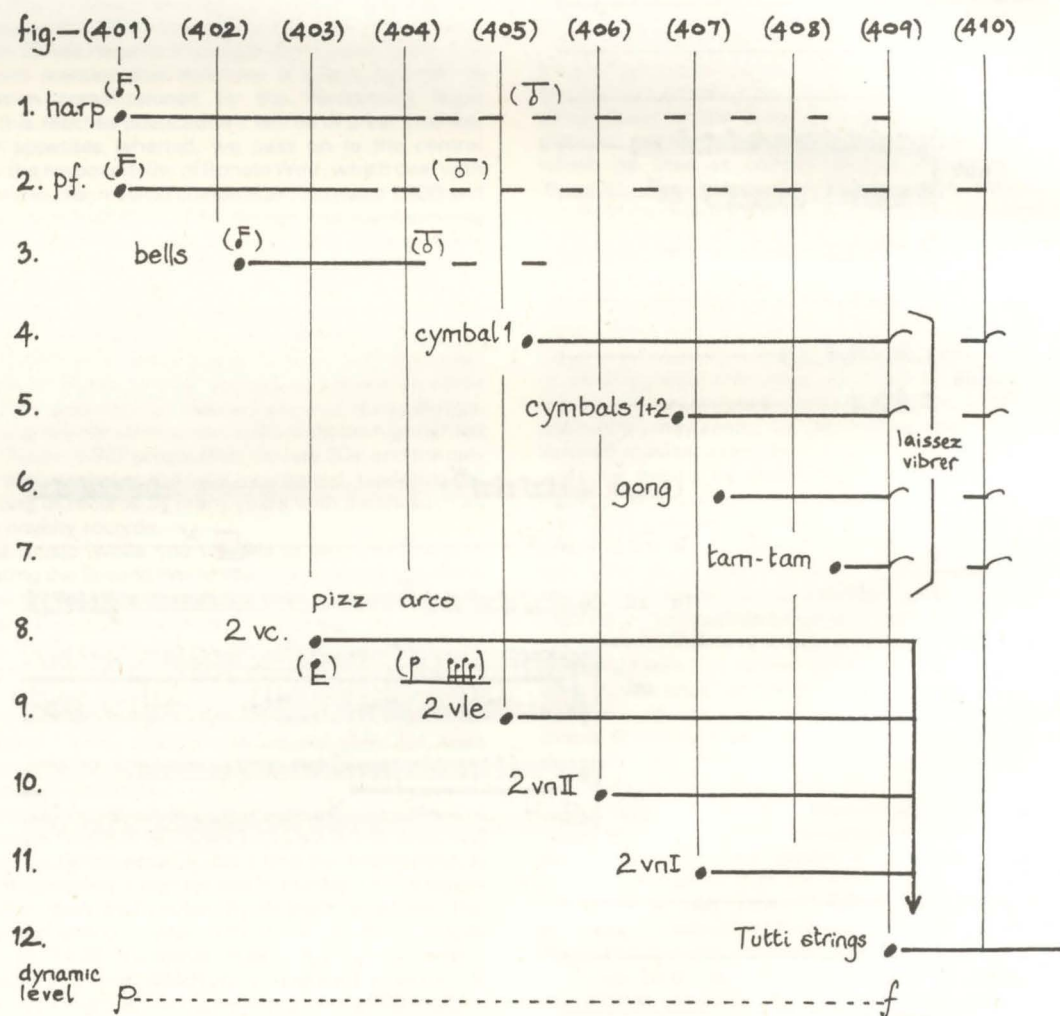
While the harp, piano and bells begin with quick notes and fade out with long notes, the second layer (strings) have fairly consistent figurations of long and short notes. But because their number is multiplying, there are more occurences of short notes which give the impression of quickening movement. Cymbals, gong and tam-tam have irregular patterns of one to four strokes throughout from

(401) to (410). The pitch field of harp, piano and bells broadens out from pitches in close position to extreme registers. Similarly in the Final Chapter, two cellos begin by oscillating between two notes a tone apart (pizzicato) and then a semitone apart (arco), gradually attracting the remaining ten pitches from the other stringed instruments.

This slow release of energy spreads outwards from soft undulations, the music becoming increasingly potent and physical until the whole texture throbs in rhythmic sychronisation. Taking less time to reach a homophonic driving pulse than the second movement of the Second Symphony, the Final Chapter of *Livre pour Orchestre* is more immediate in its impact, more poetic in its means and much less cataclysmic, despite similar proportions of build-up, climax and recession.

In *Preludes and Fugue* transition is perhaps more important than in any of Lutosławski's other works. In the preface to the score the composer says:

> **The work can be performed whole or in various shortened versions. In case of the performance of the whole, the indicated order of the Preludes is obligatory. Any number of Preludes in any order can be performed with or without a shortened version of the Fugue. The Preludes are always to be played without rests between them; in fact they are composed in such a way that the overlapping of the ending of any Prelude and the beginning of any other one is possible (my underlining).[10]**

Transitions between Preludes thus have to act as *real* transitions between any two, possibly chosen at random, rather than as sections merely placed at the ends of Preludes. Pitch organisation here provides the vital link.

If we examine the transitional material (repeated ad libitum) at the end of each Prelude, we observe that Lutosławski restricts himself to six pitch classes, which are complemented by the opening of the succeeding Prelude (see Example 6). The opening of the first Prelude to be played is, of course, heard without any simultaneous, overlapping material. Intervallic links between the transitions and the Prelude openings exist in the exploitation of fifths (and fourths), chromatic groups separated by a minor third and 'submerged' tritones (Example 6). All transitional material, consisting of repeated pitches, is harmonic. Musical ideas in the Preludes tend towards the melodic, but because the harmonies invariably result from an overlap of melodic lines which themselves form part of a fixed harmonic field, the line between melody and harmony is now oblique. The transformation of melody into harmony, and vice versa, has taken place.

Example 6.　Lutosławski: *Preludes and Fugue*

11

Just as each Prelude has its own characteristic textures and ideas, so the Fugue uses six clearly defined subjects (S1-6), played ad libitum and ending in a repeated mobile. Between the subjects appears episodic material (E1-6) in which the rhythms are strictly notated. The subjects are thus static (=exposition) and the episodes dynamic (=modulatory episode), thus forming transitions between subjects. In the introductory episodes rhythmic movement is followed by a point of repose. As the episodes progress, rhythmic movement becomes more important, until in E3 and E4 points of rest have virtually disappeared. At this juncture the move into S4 and S5 is imperceptible. However, in E5, the longest episode, movement and repose are again on equal terms, and this sharply defines the metrical nature of the episode. This is linked to the next section by gradually shortening the time period between the entrances of the individual subject blocks in S6, where S1-5 are brought back as an accompaniment to S6 until they almost reach a metrical pulse in a manner similar to the Second Symphony and *Livre pour Orchestre*. Likewise, a blurring of identity occurs between (51) and (52) after the simultaneous appearance of all six subjects, where Lutosławski confines the ad libitum subject material to strict metrical control before allowing it to break away after (52).

Such devices of disguising the distinctions between ad libitum sections and metrical music have helped Lutosławski to reach that 'fulfilment' which he seeks. As such, transitions and transformations are becoming, in his more recent music, much more sophisticated. Transformations in the character and shape of different musical ideas are now an essential part of his development technique towards that one goal where all differences are ironed out, where the horizontal and vertical fabric is indivisible. It is significant that all six subjects in the Fugue are capable of superimposition, illustrating I believe, just how oblique the line between harmony and melody has become for Lutosławski, and how deep-rooted were those implications of transition and transformation in the early 1960s.

[1] See John Casken, 'Music from Silesia', CONTACT 5 (Autumn 1972), p. 23ff.

[2] Quoted in 'The Composer and the Listener', *Lutosławski,* ed. by Ove Nordwall (Stockholm: Wilhelm Hansen, 1968), p. 121.

[3] The term 'mobile' is used here to describe a melodic unit repeated ad libitum, in which the pitch content is strictly limited to a number of characteristic intervals. See also Note 8.

[4] Instructions in the score.

[5] In Nordwall, *op. cit.,* p. 115.

[6] Lutosławski has said: "I would. . . suggest that form be capable of definition in one sentence". (*Ibid., p.* 105.)

[7] Lutosławski himself refers to them as 'episode' and 'ritornello'.

[8] *Ibid.,* p. 109ff.

[9] *Ibid.,* p. 113.

[10] Instructions in the score.