

WITOLD LUTOSLAWSKI
PRELUDES & FUGUE FOR 13 SOLO STRINGS
WARSAW PHILHARMONIC CHAMBER ORCHESTRA
CONDUCTED BY WITOLD LUTOSLAWSKI

Side 1.	Preludes.	17.42
Side 2.	Fugue.	17.40

At one time a fairly prolific composer, Witold Lutoslawski has produced a relatively small number of works since 1956 – the year Poland threw off her politically imposed artistic shackles. The sudden influx of new and not so new Western music at that time was quick to leave its mark on many Polish composers, but Lutoslawski bided his time. He had recently gone through a period – culminating in the well known Concerto for Orchestra – in which folk music influenced many of his compositions, but even during this time he was searching for a technique that would open up for him a sound world that already existed in his imagination. It was 1960 before he found the means he required; it seemed that he was well on the way to adopting serial methods with 'Musique Funebre' (dedicated to the memory of Bela Bartok) – a work that perhaps did even more to enhance his international reputation than the Concerto for Orchestra. It was with 'Jeux Vénitiens' that the new sound world became a reality and the key that unlocked the door to this was John Cage's Piano Concerto. Today Lutoslawski is not at all sure he really heard this piece, for while listening to it the liberating means he was seeking occurred to him in a flash, inevitably occupying his mind largely, if not wholly, to the exclusion of the music being played. No two composers could be more different, but all Lutoslawski's compositions from 'Jeux Venitiens' onwards have resulted from the field opened up by Cage's 'chance' methods. The big difference is that, whereas Cage set out to relinquish his responsibilities as a composer and let chance take over, Lutoslawski's aim has been to maintain complete control. To do this entailed a tremendous amount of work when it comes to detail in his compositions,

although the overall conception often comes to him quickly. This is one reason why he spends two years or more on a single work; another is that he is not interested in repeating himself. Each new work since 'Jeux Vénitiens' has brought with it new technical problems to be solved, and each has turned out a masterpiece.

Commissioned by the American conductor Mario di Bonaventura, Preludes and Fugue was completed in 1972 and first performed that year at the Styrian Autumn Festival at Weiz in Austria by the Chamber Orchestra of the Zagreb Radio and Television with Mario di Bonaventura conducting. The British premiere took place three months later at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London where the London Sinfonietta honoured Lutoslawski, who conducted, with the whole programme devoted to his music. Scored for seven violins, two cellos and a double-bass, the work consists of seven linked preludes followed by a fugue of large proportions, occupying as much time as all the preludes together. Although the textural variety, coupled with the intensity of expression, ensures there is no danger of monotony, the composer took into account the possibility of occasions where the whole work might prove too demanding for an audience or, indeed, for the performers, as well might be the case with a student ensemble, for instance. To this end he allows a selection of the preludes to be played in any order, followed by any one of four shortened versions of the fugue. Since the preludes are dove-tailed into each other, this means the same instruments (violins 2, 4, and 6, violas 1 and 3, and cello 1) provide the linking passages in each case. When the work is performed complete, as it is on this record and almost always will be in the concert hall, no alteration of the order of the preludes is permitted. Here, as indeed in all Lutoslawski's compositions since 1961, aleatoric (free) passages exist side by side with others that have to be played exactly as written and are notated more or less in the conventional manner; on occasion the two techniques are employed simultaneously. Freedom, where it is given to the players, concerns



only the precise placing in time of the notes and in no way affects pitch or even harmony. There is no question here of performances varying to a greater degree than, say, those of a classical symphony or concerto. Indeed, it is not always possible for the ear alone to tell which passages are aleatoric and which are precisely 'fixed', although in the concert hall one can do this by watching the conductor, who must not beat time during the 'free' sections.

Since some of the preludes contain strong contrasts within themselves, a brief description of each may help listeners to recognise boundaries. The first has four sections, the second of them very short and the third (for three violins only) making a prominent feature of downward glissandos; the last leads into Prelude 2, which opens emphatically with three pizzicato notes and, after the dove-tailing link has ceased, sets off with four violins in unison, again playing 'pizzicato'. Virtually the whole of this prelude is in 'fixed' notation. No. 3 again begins 'pizzicato', but this time on the lower instruments only. They provide the accompaniment to the seven violins, which begin with repetitions of the same note. After the 'pizzicato' has ceased abruptly there is another shorter section for violins only followed by the next linking passage. No. 4 is again predominantly in 'fixed' notation at first, with chordal progressions moving at a moderate pace, but the explosive interjections of repetitions of the same notes are 'free' as is the last part of this prelude. No. 5 is easily recognisable. Beginning quietly and 'pizzicato', it is a solo for the double-bass with a variety of subdued but colourful accompaniments. Similarly No. 6, which opens emphatically, features the two cellos as soloists. The final prelude is at first fast and furious,

but eventually it gives way to a sequence of quiet long notes. Here again there is a linking passage to enable this last prelude to lead into any other, but when the work is played complete it is allowed to peter out. If listeners do not immediately recognise the Fugue as such, this is because it differs from traditional ones mainly in one essential. Its themes are not single lines but 'bundles', as the composer has called them. This is a very apt description since the strands resemble each other without being precisely the same, as in a bundle of firewood, for instance. It is not a question of setting fully harmonised lines against each other, as has been done in the past. Here each theme is presented by anything from two to five instruments, which play the same notes at different times and in similar rhythm. There are six themes in all, and each is presented in an aleatoric manner. Although some relationships exist between them, they are strongly contrasted, but they all have a feature in common – their range is restricted to within the octave. This is necessary for clarity. To help listeners recognise them, here are their expressive indications and the instrumentation of their initial presentations.

- I. Cantabile – viola and two cellos
- II. Grazioso – four violins
- III. Lamentoso – two cellos
- IV. Misterioso – two cellos and double bass
- V. Estatico – two violins and three violas
- VI. Furioso – four violins.

The introduction in 'fixed' notation returns in varied forms during the course of the Fugue, and also separates the initial entries of the themes. After all these have been exposed they are elaborately developed in combination; at one point, shortly before the main climax, all six appear simultaneously.

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