

Ewa Poblocka

SILENCE

In winter 1990 rumours were spreading around Warsaw about the home-coming of Andrzej Panufnik, a composer shrouded in a mysterious - if not hostile - silence for dozens of years. Now he was believed to be returning to his home country to conduct his music at the Warsaw Autumn festival. The planned repertoire included his *Violin Concerto* (with Wanda Wiłkomirska), *Tenth Symphony*, and *Piano Concerto*. I was fortunate enough to have been offered the opportunity to perform the latter as a soloist. As soon as I received the proposal, I began to look for a piano reduction of the score, which finally reached me when I was touring the UK with the Cracow Philharmonic Orchestra. And so I began to study Panufnik's *Piano Concerto* travelling by coach from town to town, as is expected during a tournée. An evening concert, a night spent in a hotel, the morning packing, then travelling, a quick rehearsal and another concert... When I opened the score for the first time, through the coach windows I could catch the glimpse of yellow golden chain trees in bloom, the sure sign of English spring. The score was clear, understandable from the first glance. The concerto is divided into the traditional three movements, the first (*Entrada*) an introduction. The second movement is very austere and seemed to me to convey a mystery in which sparse notes create the musical material and something beyond the music; a philosophy shown in long, single sounds. The third part is showy, rhythmical and somewhat jazzy, with a fantastic culmination built over many bars. The very act of exploring the score set my musical imagination to work. I was already imagining how I was going to play it. I did not know of any recordings of the concerto (at that time I believe there was only one available). Soon on that 'blank canvas' I began to note down my impressions, ideas and questions. I wanted to ask the composer these questions directly, and so my next trip to England was planned for July 1990, two months before the scheduled first performance.

When I arrived in London I was expecting to be met by an assistant or driver, but to my astonishment and delight I was instead greeted by Andrzej Panufnik himself and his wife, Camilla. After a short ride we reached a magnificent 18th century house in Twickenham, once belonging to Camilla's grandmother, situated in a lovely, fantastical garden, with the Thames flowing less than a hundred meters away. Panufnik's studio was in a small building in the garden; inside, there was silence, not only due to its location, but also its ascetic furnishings. A grand piano, a big desk with a dozen or so well-sharpened pencils and a huge wooden box to keep scores in were all that occupied the studio. A small window near the roof let in some daylight and the rustle of leaves. There was also a phone — always silent. Only Camilla was allowed to call, and only then if the matter was of grave importance.

I entered the studio a few hours after my arrival to practice, but before that I was shown around the house. There was a huge music room furnished with, among other things, an organ and a harp; a room with a mantelpiece, full of modern paintings, and a charming kitchen where we later enjoyed all our meals amongst wooden furniture, china figurines, copper pots and a copper violin hanging on the wall. Camilla turned out to be a culinary genius. Andrzej was a wonderful host. One of his usual kitchen tasks was bread slicing. Bread was kept in a separate copper bin and sliced on a dedicated cutting board with a special knife with the inscription "*Bread*" running down it. I found that moment magical every time I witnessed it. Andrzej's face expressed concentration, almost devotion. He tried not to lose a single crumb. The taste of bread was commented upon at the beginning of each meal. When I recall that moment now, I think that for Andrzej contact with bread was the return — just for a brief

moment – to war time, when bread was scarce, a painful but somehow sought for contact with the world that was past and gone for good.

I keep giving this lengthy description of the kitchen, but there was also the guest-room, which became my room for a while. Situated upstairs, with windows overlooking the garden and the Thames, it had wardrobes built into walls covered with floral wallpaper, wicker bookshelves bending under the load of beautifully bound books, a mantelpiece and a desk - small but exquisite, situated between the two windows, with a lot of drawers and a fine writing paper set with the embossed inscription „Riverside House". There were also two comfortable beds that used to serve Nadia Boulanger and Leopold Stokowski (the latter even requested that no other conductor was ever to sleep there after his visit). That room was my pied-à-terre at the Panufniks' house. I slept there, but I also spent much time there listening to recordings of Panufnik's works. I wanted to delve deep into that music, recognize its unique features. Every day I listened to *Sacra* and *Rustica* symphonies, the bassoon concerto, *Concerto Festivo*, *Autumn Music*, all played by excellent orchestras under great conductors. What I found special about Panufnik's music was the instrumentation containing a lot of percussion and the rhythm obtained from this, as well as a certain order resulting from the composer's love of symmetry and clarity of form.

The next day, after the customary afternoon tea, the time came for us - the composer and the soloist - to meet in Panufnik's studio. This was the moment I had been awaiting for many weeks. I must admit I was very nervous. Every time I am supposed to play a piece of music in front of the composer for the first time, I torment myself with the thought „let's hope I won't ruin it". I always ask myself whether what I actually play is what the composer imagined. Finally, I braced myself and played him the piece. Of course the concerto sounded incomplete without the orchestra or even the second piano, but I was offered some valuable remarks relating mainly to the tempo. The first movement was to be slower but more „pronounced", the second played exactly as was written in the score – very slow, virtually still, and the third movement quick, with very audible and perfectly played syncopation. That syncopation later proved to be the biggest problem in working with various orchestras. The conductors that coped splendidly with the task were Wojciech Michniewski, who understood every „rhythmic atom" of the score, and Kazimierz Kord, who had a phenomenal grasp of the entire form. My favourite movement is the second one which refers in its melodies and intensity to the traditional Polish hymn *Boże, coś Polskę* [*O God who through the ages hast girded Poland with power and fame*]. It is that movement that attracts even famous composers to come and listen to Panufnik's *Concerto* multiple times; as I understand it, they come for the silence. The second movement requires concentration, not only to stay precisely in tune with the orchestra but mainly in order to play 'about the same thing'. Having finished playing the part in front of Panufnik for the first time I asked him some questions about certain places in the score, about the harmony and its implications, about pedalling and about phrasing. I was listening to the music, but at the same time trying to analyse it. It was here that Panufnik surprised me by saying: „Ewa, stop thinking, just play, play what you feel...". Sometimes I think that „feeling" is more important than knowing. I will once more use the word "silence", as it is necessary for an artist to enter his or her own world, and by entering it reach the original idea of the composer.

My next meeting with Panufnik took place in Warsaw. Sadly, he came to Poland already very ill and he conducted only part of the concert. I played together with Wojtek Michniewski. Our performance was received enthusiastically by the audience and the composer himself seemed pleased as well. This performance resulted in an invitation to take part in a recording with the London Symphony Orchestra for Conifer Records. We had only two sessions to complete the task, both held on the same day. Panufnik was very weak, so weak that another conductor was

waiting ready to replace him in the event of sudden indisposition. Fortunately, all went well. The recently knighted Sir Andrzej was conducting very clearly, with sparse movements; he listened to the orchestra intently and, if needed, made some brief but apt remarks. His attention was focused entirely on the music, working to achieve the result he was dreaming of. There was no sign of showing off in his conducting manner or his music; he was like an invisible intermediary between the score and the sound. The orchestra played splendidly, treating him with respect and sympathy. The sound engineer carried out all his suggestions concerning the placement of microphones for the best acoustic result. And above all presided Camilla — kind, discreet, but firm whenever necessary.

The next day, regretfully, I had to leave London. Later I had the chance to return several times to Riverside House, but that was after Andrzej's death. Greatly moved, I visited his grave at the Twickenham cemetery, where the tombstone was laid to mark his resting place with the geometrical vision of *Arbor Cosmica*.

To conclude with one final recollection: during one of my later visits to London I went together with Camilla and my own family to hear the first performance of Panufnik's *Cello Concerto* played by the LSO and Rostropovich. As always, Camilla wanted to attend the rehearsal, so we went along. When the opening sounds of the solo cadenza were played, Camilla said with tears in her eyes: „It is as if Andrzej were singing...”.

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