



Bram Stoker's Dracula, dir. F. F. Coppola



The Ninth Gate, dir. R. Polański

Wojciech Kilar: Music inspired by the Moving Image

In his career, Wojciech Kilar strictly observes two basic rules: firstly – autonomous music for the concert hall is in every respect more important than film music, and secondly – silly movies that do not convey any deeper content are not worth writing music for; that time should be spent writing concert music. Despite, and because of this, Kilar has written music for so many outstanding art films, which have passed into the history of Polish and international cinema. that has become himself a part of that history, and he has not yet written his last note!

Urszula Mieszkielo

Kilar gained international fame only in the 90s, when he wrote the music for *Bram Stoker's Dracula* by Francis Ford Coppola (1992); later achievements included *The Portrait of a Lady* by Jane Campion (1996), *The Ninth Gate* (1999) and *The Pianist* (2002) by Roman Polański. Outside of Poland, however, it is not well known that Kilar has been writing for film for fifty years. Over the course of his career he has collaborated with almost all the major Polish directors, including Kazimierz Kutz, Stanisław Różewicz, Jerzy Hoffman, Wojciech Jerzy Has, Janusz Majewski, Krzysztof Zanussi, Andrzej Wajda, Krzysztof Kieslowski, the aforementioned Roman Polański and many others.

He began his film work in the late 1950s as a young composer, still perfecting his craft under the guidance of Nadia Boulanger and

debuting at the 'Warsaw Autumn' festival. He was keenly interested in all theoretical aspects of film music. If the film (and of course the director) allowed it, Kilar eagerly experimented with the music, with various ways of juxtaposing it with the image and with the function of music within the context of the film (K. Kutz *Nikt nie woła*, 1960, *Milczenie*, 1963, K. Zanussi *Struktura kryształu*, 1969). He quickly established himself as a composer who 'felt' the image and was able to illustrate everything in music.

Meanwhile, his career as a composer of classical music developed in parallel to his career as a 'film' composer. He was one of the leading representatives of avant-garde music in Poland. A few years later Kilar was also one of the composers (along with Henryk Mikołaj Górecki, Krzysztof Penderecki and others) who skilfully paved their way to new aesthetics of music in the twentieth century. At this point in Kilar's career film music had to give way to concert music – Kilar was still writing a lot for film, but with the reservation that it was only functional music, and that he could only fully realise himself as a composer through autonomous music. He explained his position in a later interview: "The basis of all artistic activity is form, and in film music, it simply does not exist. These are bits, shreds, more or less gathered. Apart from that, one is not the author of the work, but just another participant in its realisation. [...] The border where craft ends and artistry begins is the ability to tell a story and enclose it within a form. [...] Qualitatively, taking into account the very fabric of sound, film music is valuable. Unfortunately, it is not enclosed

piece"². In another interview he bluntly described the problem with a comparison: "An autonomous composition is a house, and the composer is the architect. In film, the director is the architect, and I'm just the decorator"³.

Despite this dependency, and the problem of 'ragged' form, Wojciech Kilar has managed over the years to create countless masterpieces of film music, drawing on a wide variety of conventions, styles and techniques associated with chamber and orchestral music. From his pen have come many of the most beautiful musical themes ever written, and he has left his personal mark on each of the films for which he has composed music. This, of course, raises the question: what makes Kilar's 'film style' so recognizable, even though all of the parameters are different in each film (different directors, plots, characters, genres, settings...)? Certainly, he has a characteristic way of combining instrumental timbres, and a predilection for certain harmonic and rhythmic structures, but, actually, his individualism lies in the intelligence and sensitivity with which he so aptly interprets the film through the language of music. "First, I watch the film," says the composer. "It gives me an idea of the story, of the narrative. Most important is the relationship of music and image. Only in second place will I consider the content, the psychology"⁴. Elsewhere, he adds, "Always I write music that is my impression of the film. [...] The picture is the inspiration that works on my senses"⁵.

The success of the music of *Dracula* – a film about great passions, love, fear, rebellion against God – is not surprising. Kilar, who is a deeply religious man, read a full palette of



Death and the Maiden, dir. R. Polański



The Pianist, dir. R. Polański



The Portrait of a Lady, dir. J. Campion

Everywhere where something important happens, where people fall into each other's arms, where horses rush, where there is a struggle, where history is made, where there is something to see – there is my world¹.

psychological colour in this story. Among other things, through his music, we see *Dracula* not only as a dangerous monster, but as a human (yes, a human!), who loves and suffers. And in a short, simple lullaby, the bloodthirsty Lucy appears as an innocent woman who will never know the joy of motherhood. The composer had a big orchestra and choir at his disposition (he always writes the entire musical score himself!) and over 70 minutes of film to score. The effect satisfied the creator himself: "It seems to me that in Coppola's film for the first time I managed to get close to my concert music, that both currents – till now quite distinct – have begun to penetrate each other".

In the field of Polish cinema, Kilar has been associated in recent years with the "Polonaise" from *Pan Tadeusz* and the "Mazur" from *Zemsta* (directed by A. Wajda), which both emphasize national traditions on a grand scale. The composer inscribed the essence of 'Polishness' upon these two examples. However, Kilar likes to write dances, not just those of a national character, and he has a special talent for this. Examples of this talent include the waltzes from the film *Promised Land* by A. Wajda and *Trędowata [The Leper]* by J. Hoffman and from *Zazdrość i medycyna* by J. Majewski. The music for the 'intellectual' films by K. Zanussi is completely different from most of his music for other directors' films. "His films are an opportunity to create more ambitious, almost a philosophical commentary. There, the music must express something that cannot be said in words or image," says the composer. It is difficult to imagine *Iluminacja* with any music other than that composed by Kilar.

A particular feature of Kilar's craft is his respect for the film as a whole. His music never dominates the image, never overwhelms it. In the films *The Pianist* and *Death and the Maiden* by Polański, where the works of Chopin and Schubert are almost characters within the film, Kilar's music subtly recedes into the background, and at the same time it continues to fulfil its function in a brilliant way, avoiding banality.

In one interview, Kilar said that the quality of the music found in the score is irrelevant, good or bad – it only matters how it works in the film. However, objectively speaking, Kilar never writes bad music. While he does not treat film music on par with concert music, he is never complacent. Outside of his main artistic activity in the field of concert music, Kilar has scored more than 150 films. It comes easily to him: "In a week or two, sometimes in one day. Effortlessly, without creative dilemmas" – just like it has been with all the greatest composers....

Transl. L. Davidson

- 1 J. Anna Łużyńska-Doroba *Najważniejsze jest rzemiosło*, "Kino" no. 2/3, 1993 [interview].
- 2 P. Sztompke *Forma w strzępach*, "Film" no. 5/1997 [interview].
- 3 K. Bielas *Napisz nam złą muzykę*, "Gazeta Wyborcza" no. 78/1997 [interview].
- 4 A. Bimer *Po prostu... Kilar*, "Machina" no. 2/1998 [interview].
- 5 K. Bielas *op. cit.*
- 6 P. Sarzyński *Czas na Broadway*, "Polityka" no. 46/1993 [interview].

Dracula,

Suite from F.F. Coppola's film (1992), 25'
coro misto-4444-4442-batt (6esec) cel 2ar pf-archi

Death and the Maiden,

Suite from R. Polański's film (1994), 13'
2220-4331 – tmp batt(3esec) ar cemb pf – archi
(8.7.6.5.4)

The Portrait of a Lady,

Suite from J. Campion's film (1996), 30'
4fl a becco 100-0000 pf-archi

The Ninth Gate,

The Vocalise from R. Polański's film
(1999), 4'
S solo-0000-0000-pf cemb-archi

The Pianist: Moving to the Ghetto,

Theme from the R. Polański's film (2002)
for clarinet & string orchestra, 2'

Zemsta [The Revenge],

Mazurka from A. Wajda's film (2002), 3'30"
3(+1 picc) 332-4330-batt(3esec)-archi

Pan Tadeusz,

Suite from A. Wajda's film (1998), 25'
3332-4330-batt(3esec) 2ar pf(CEL)-
-archi(16.12.12.8.8)

Pan Tadeusz,

Polonaise from A. Wajda's film (1998), 5'
3332-4330-batt(3esec)-2ar-pf(CEL)-
-archi(16.12.12.8.8)

Suite from K. Zanussi's Films (2009), incl.:

Hipoteza (1972)
2(picc)111-4331-batt(4esec) cmb 2ar
cel(anche pf)-archi(6.4.4.4.2)

Iluminacja (1972)
cmb-archi(12.4.4.4.4)

Bilans kwartalny [Quarterly Balance]
(1974)
1100-0100-2ar-cel cmb pf-archi(12.8.6.6.4)

Kontrakt (1980)
0000-0300-tmp tmb c.c. 2gng-pf-
-archi(12.12.8.8.8)

**Kronika wypadków miłosnych
[Chronicle of Amorous Events]:**

Cavalry March,
Theme from A. Wajda's film (1985), 5'30"
4444-4441-batt (4esec) 2ar pf-archi

Chronicle of Amorous Events:

Witek and Alina,
Theme from A. Wajda's film (1985), 4'30"
1100-0000-cel/cemb 2ar pf-archi

Smuga cienia [The Shadow Line],

Theme from A. Wajda's film (1976)
for piano & string orchestra, 3'

Trędowata [The Leper],

Waltz from J. Hoffman's film (1976), 5'
2221-4020-batt cel 2ar-archi

Ziemia obiecana [The Promised Land],

Waltz from A. Wajda's film (1975), 3'30"
2(+1picc)222-4220-cel ar-archi