

# REDISCOVERING “SONORISTICS”: A GROUNDBREAKING THEORY FROM THE MARGINS OF MUSICOLOGY

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There seems to be an accepted belief among English-speaking musicologists that all important ideas in musicology are available in either English or German. I would like to suggest, however, that many interesting concepts are developed outside of “mainstream” musicology, but because of the language barrier, they remain relatively unknown to the Western world. There are many gaps to be filled in this regard, and to fill one of them is my modest aim in this paper.

The name of this gap is “sonoristics”, but, apart from its English-sounding name, the term is not to be found in any of the standard dictionaries.<sup>1</sup> It can, however, be found occasionally in some sources. An English-speaking reader, for instance, might encounter the noun “sonoristics” in the RILM database, which also indexes its derivatives: an adjective “sonoristic” as well as another, more frequently occurring noun, “sonorism”. These references, however, are rather limited and include mainly selected articles on the subject, mostly by authors from Central- and Eastern-European circles. They do not offer a satisfactory explanation of “sonoristics” or important distinctions between the variants of the word; I will attempt to delineate those in the course of this paper.

Although the existence of the term “sonoristics” in the English language is precarious, its core can lead one to intuitively grasp the semantic field of the term as having to do with sound. This indeed is the case as “sonoristics” is a literal translation of the term “sonorystyka” coined in Polish musicology in the 1950s and associated primarily with the work of its inventor, Józef Chomiński (1906–94), who thought of it as a new branch of study centered on the sound technique of a composition.<sup>2</sup>

The focus on sound is crucial here, for Chomiński’s work—a body of numerous books and articles either specifically devoted to, or revealing, a strong “sonoristic” focus—offered theoretical foundations for an analysis of a musical work in its *sounding* form. Today, this may sound like an obvious truth, but formulated in the early 1960s, in a

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<sup>1</sup> I have recently contributed an article, “Sonoristics, Sonorism”, to *Grove music online*, [www.oxfordmusiconline.com](http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com).

<sup>2</sup> Zygmunt M. Szweykowski, “Chomiński, Józef Michał”, *The new Grove dictionary of music and musicians*, ed. by Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 2001) vol. 5, 705.

period when the prevalent theoretical fascination was with the work's internal structure rather than its sound, Chomiński's ideas were undeniably breaking new ground.

The new term was introduced in a 1956 article of Chomiński's in which he undertook an evaluation of the changes that had taken place in 20th-century compositional technique up to that time and demonstrated a new methodological approach to the music in question based on developments in contemporary music.<sup>3</sup>

For Chomiński, the essential aspect of all 20th-century music had been the search for new sound qualities, which, after the radical changes in the tonal system and its eventual breakdown, had become the growing concern of 20th-century composers. During the impressionist period, he claimed, composers discovered "pure sound", independent from chordal relationships, and this discovery led in subsequent decades to the development of new structural principles, based on transformations of the fundamental substance of music—the *sonus* itself. The most apparent stages of this process, represented by Debussy, Schönberg's *Klanfarbenmelodie*, Webern's "pointillism", Messiaen, Stockhausen, and Boulez, show most clearly that the older analytic categories, especially melody and harmony, are no longer sufficient to describe the new music. The specific qualities of sound generated by this music, stated Chomiński, essentially independent from such factors as a melodic line or a chord, are of a purely sonorous origin. It was these that he termed "sonoristic values".

What exactly are "sonoristic values"? Originally, Chomiński linked the sonoristic element in music with "tone color", the emancipation of which occurred in the impressionist period. Indeed, the French composers' approach to harmony in this period revealed a subtle change of compositional interests: Instead of focusing primarily on the functionality of chords, they began to explore their purely *sonci* (surface) qualities.<sup>4</sup> For instance, argued Chomiński, in the music of Debussy the harmonic element is frequently transformed into a timbral one by means of a specific textural disposition, orchestration, dynamics, and articulation. Thus, although an analyst may still discover in a composition the dominant-tonic relationships, the actual, sounding form of the work "contains something more than its external tonal attire. There arise, from the specific elements of the harmonic or melodic type, sonoristic values."<sup>5</sup>

This subtle but important shift could also be compared to the discoveries made by Symbolist poets such as Mallarmé, Verlaine, and Rimbaud: once they discovered previously unnoticed musical aspects of the words, it was the rich, full-of-various-shades *sound*, rather than the meaning of the words, that began to determine the artistic value of the poem. Similarly, when composers transferred their interest from the "content" (motives, themes, and their development) of the musical work to its "appearance" (sound qualities), the main goal of musical composition became the penetration of the sonic properties of the musical material.<sup>6</sup>

Traditionally, such phenomena in music had been discussed in terms of coloristics, the element of music that most historians find of distinctive importance in the musical language of Debussy. Chomiński suggested, however, that the terms "coloristics" and "tone color" were not quite applicable to music as the qualities associated with the

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<sup>3</sup> Józef Chomiński, "Z zagadnień techniki kompozytorskiej XX wieku" [Problems of the compositional technique in the twentieth century], *Muzyka* 20/3 (1956) 23–48.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Józef Chomiński, "Ze studiów nad impresjonizmem Szymanowskiego" (1956) [Studies on Szymanowski's impressionism], *Studia nad twórczością Karola Szymanowskiego* (Kraków: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1969) 193.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

art of painting were, as regards material, extraneous to it. Color in music, he claimed, "does not have a visual character, but is simply a substitute term denoting a conscious formation of sonic, [i.e.,] sonoristic values".<sup>7</sup> In addition, he maintained, coloristics, as it had developed since the Mannheim school and throughout the 19th century, is the element of the musical work that has a merely "coloring" role and appears on the basis of other elements, such as harmony. But the development of the sound technique in 20th-century music suggests that "the term can no longer stand for all the sonoristic values [of the musical work]".<sup>8</sup> Clearly, this implies that not only the semantic scope of Chomiński's term is significantly broader than that of coloristics, but also that these very phenomena identified by him as sonoristic had greatly affected the makeup of modern compositions.

Indeed, the sonoristic factor that surfaced in the impressionist period altered the fundamental mechanisms of the musical work, so that soon "the structural and expressive roles were taken over by purely sonic values of the work, enriched by registral differences and the wealth of dynamic, agogic, and articulatory means".<sup>9</sup> According to Chomiński, this new approach to musical composition can already be seen around 1913 in the music of the Viennese composers, in which two important changes occurred: (1) the emancipation of individual notes of a melody, resulting from the breaking of the melodic line into isolated sounds that were placed in contrasting registers; and (2) the elimination of the bass foundation from the sound structure of a composition and the use of the bass register for purely timbral effects.<sup>10</sup> The defining moment of this process was marked by the musical language of Webern, in which the balance between traditional elements, such as melody and harmony, and the sonoristic ways of structuring the musical discourse was reversed.

A fragment of Anton Webern's song *Die Sonne* clearly exemplifies some of the changes in the structure of the musical work that the Polish author was describing [ex. 1]. The song under discussion reveals no traces of melody and harmony in the traditional sense; on the contrary, it shows a complete transformation of both concepts into a sonic universe regulated by rhythm, timbre, and registral contrasts.

According to Chomiński, the harmonic element in this song is reduced to "intensive concords", such as seconds, major sevenths, and minor ninths, which, because of their dissonant force, act here as *accents* rather than chords, and thus display a *dynamic* rather than harmonic character. This limited role of harmony, combined with the emancipation of the bass register from its traditional role of the harmonic foundation, and the overall sonically multi-layered texture<sup>11</sup> make it impossible for the listener to hear the resulting verticalities in functional terms. Instead, the harmonic element in Webern's song has been transformed into a sonoristic one.

Similarly, all horizontal parts in the excerpt from Webern utilize large intervals and thus bring together sounds belonging to diametrically opposed registers. Such lines are distinctly removed from traditional melodic constructs in that they lack one of the basic factors of coherence characteristic of tonal music: the leading tones. Indeed, the

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Chomiński, "Z zagadnień", 36.

<sup>9</sup> Józef Chomiński, "Szymanowski i muzyka europejska XX w." (1962) [Szymanowski and the European music of the twentieth century], *Studia nad twórczością*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Chomiński, "Z zagadnień", 33.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 40.

Example 1. Anton Webern, *Die Sonne*, op. 14, no. 1, mm. 1–6.

potential impact of the leading tones could be demonstrated by transposing the notes of the vocal part in the above example to a common register [ex. 2].<sup>12</sup>

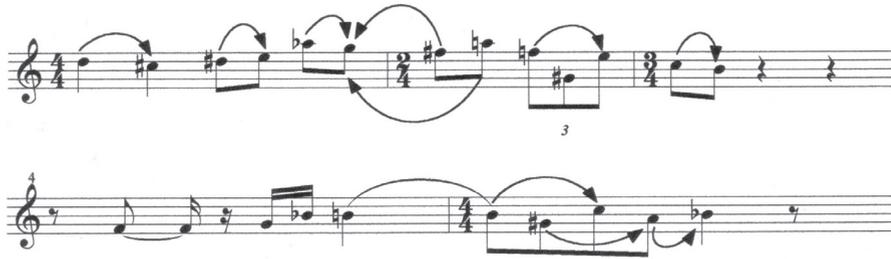
“This manipulation is instructive”, stated Chomiński, “insofar as it helps us understand how much Webern moves away from the conventional melodic structure, to which we had become accustomed in the course of the centuries.”<sup>13</sup> In terms of perception, it reveals the significance of “energetic transformations” that these horizontal structures undergo in his music, for now their traditional directionality ensured by the leading tones is disrupted by means of octave transfers, which “cancel the melodic cohesion of notes, and what comes to the fore instead is their sonoristic value.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, a given melodic structure will be perceived as sonoristic precisely when its essential aspect—continuity—is lost, i.e., when a melody ceases to be itself and becomes a configuration of disparate notes whose temporal succession is powered by means of contrasting intervals, durations, registers, articulation, and dynamics.

It is in Webern, then, that we reach a turning point in the history of musical technique; here the functions of traditional elements, such as melody and harmony, had

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Józef Chomiński, “Nauka harmonii a nowa technika dźwiękowa” [The study of harmony and the new sound technique], *Muzyka* 21/2 (1957) 13.



Example 2. Vocal part of Webern's *Die Sonne* transposed to a common register (after Chomiński 1956).

been diminished so considerably that they had become no more than cofactors of a new autonomous element of the musical work: sonoristics.<sup>15</sup>

Here we come very close to understanding the original and one of the essential meanings of the word "sonoristics", which clearly functions as an umbrella term encompassing all aspects of the work's sonority; i.e., all the phenomena that in the course of the 20th century were commonly subsumed under the notion of timbre. For instance, Karlheinz Stockhausen once noted that Webern's music, as early as 1910, contained in embryonic form what was to gain significance some 40 years later: "'Timbre' is no longer a garb, a package, [or] a disguise, but it is *form*."<sup>16</sup> Similarly Pierre Boulez, commenting on the development of compositional technique in the middle of the 20th century, perceived dynamics and timbre as "no longer content with their decorative or expressive role, but, while preserving these qualities, seeking also a functional importance, which increases their power and importance...."<sup>17</sup> Chomiński went a step further, for his identification of sonoristics as a new musical element was in fact the recognition of an entirely new layer of a musical work; its impact transcended the function of any single element but rather manifested itself through their interaction. These elements first and foremost included timbre, texture, registers, articulation, dynamics, rhythm, and agogic, but the list does not end here; according to Chomiński, both melody and harmony may also be included among sonoristic means, but it is usually their interaction with other elements that generates sonoristic values.<sup>18</sup>

By introducing the new term, Chomiński also attempted to rationalize analytical terminology, for "sonoristic", a derivation from the French word *sonore* ("sonorous"), was a musical term designed to capture the novel sound qualities of 20th-century music that could not be explained satisfactorily by older music theory. Indeed, the latter, with its reliance on "negative" language with terms such as "atonal", "athematic", "asymmetric", or "noise," defined new musical realities in terms of absence, while "sonoristic value" clearly placed the emphasis on presence and implied that a sound phenomenon, no matter how radical, represents a positive aspect to be realized in a composition.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Chomiński, "Ze studiów nad impresjonizmem", 194.

<sup>16</sup> Karlheinz Stockhausen, "Arbeitsbericht 1952/53: Orientierung", *Texte zur elektronischen und instrumentalen Musik* (Köln: M. DuMont Schauberg, 1963) vol. 1, 36.

<sup>17</sup> Pierre Boulez, "Alea", *Stocktakings from an apprenticeship*, trans. by Stephen Walsh (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) 35. (Orig publ. in *Relevés d'apprenti*, Paris 1966.)

<sup>18</sup> Chomiński, "Z zagadnień", 31.

<sup>19</sup> It has also been suggested that the term "sonoristic value" implies a primary aesthetic idea of a composition. See Hanna Kostrzewska, *Sonorystyka* (Poznań: Ars Nova, 1994) 11.

The sense of the increased importance of this new element in music was reinforced by further discoveries in the realm of sound that were made in the course of the 20th century. The road to these explorations had been laid out by such pieces as Edgard Varèse's *Ionisation* (1929–31), the first composition written for percussion-only instruments, or John Cage's experiments with the prepared piano, such as *Amores* (1943).<sup>20</sup> The former validated the structural use of unpitched sounds in a musical composition; the second opened the path to unconventional uses of traditional instruments as a way of enriching the sound palette of a contemporary composition.

This development reached its peak in the avant-garde music of the 1950s and 1960s, which displayed a plethora of new sound effects that suggested the existence of completely new structural laws governing the musical work. And it was primarily in this context that Chomiński's ideas proved especially useful for they allowed a systematic description of the latest developments in new music. In addition, it was at that time that the term "sonorism" was coined to describe a radical style, associated with works by Penderecki, Górecki, Kilar, Serocki, Szalonek, and others, which made extensive use of unconventional sounds. In addition, there are compositions whose titles clearly evoke the stimulus of Chomiński's term, such as *De natura sonoris* by Penderecki, *Equivalenze sonore* by Bogusław Schöffler, or *Les sons* and *Improvisations sonoristiques* by Włodzimierz Szalonek, to mention just a few. This fact cannot be overlooked for it proves that Chomiński's concept also served as a methodological approach to composition itself.

The label "sonorism", however, although clearly inspired by Chomiński's writings, was more closely linked with the work of younger scholars and critics, who tended to view the above mentioned group of Polish composers as a school of sorts. Chomiński himself, on the other hand, preferred to use the term "sonoristics" and extended the use of this word to encompass a broadly conceived compositional technique which focused on sonic, or timbral, explorations.<sup>21</sup> This technique, he maintained, "is a compositional tool analogous to harmony, counterpoint, and orchestration."<sup>22</sup>

In a larger context, Chomiński's work represents an attempt to find an analytical method appropriate for the music in question. Such a method would strive to explain the essence of a contemporary work based on its actual *sounding* form, as opposed to older theories, which generally treated its structural elements in an abstract way, independently of their sonorous realization.

For instance, Hans Mersmann's division of musical elements into primary and secondary ones was still a stronghold of European music theory in the 1950s;<sup>23</sup> similarly, some of the newer approaches to 12-tone music oftentimes focused on the mere enumeration of respective row notes, while leaving the actual musical work outside

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<sup>20</sup> See Józef Chomiński and Krystyna Wilkowska-Chomińska, *Teoria formy: Małe formy instrumentalne* [A theory of form: Short instrumental forms] (Kraków: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1983) 127–31.

<sup>21</sup> Józef Chomiński, "Wkład kompozytorów polskich do rozwoju języka sonorystycznego" [The contribution of Polish composers to the development of the sonoristic language], *Polska współczesna kultura muzyczna, 1944–1964* [The Polish contemporary musical culture, 1944–1964], ed. by Elżbieta Dziębowska (Kraków: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1968) 95–119. Also, Józef Chomiński, "The contribution of Polish composers to the shaping of a modern language in music", *Polish musicological studies*, ed. by Zofia Chechlińska and Jan Stęszewski (Kraków: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1977) vol. 1, 167–215. (The last essay was originally published in Chomiński, *Muzyka Polski Ludowej*, Kraków, 1968).

<sup>22</sup> Józef Chomiński and Krystyna Wilkowska-Chomińska, *Historia muzyki* (Kraków: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1990) vol. 1, 288.

<sup>23</sup> Surprisingly, this classification was retained by some theorists well into the 20th century. Cf. Leonard Meyer, *Style and music: Theory, history, and ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

of such numerical analyses.<sup>24</sup> Chomiński questioned the existing analytical methods as he believed that the problems of sonoristic phenomena in 20th-century music required that analysis focus on

the factors shaping the sound of the work, i.e., the selection of performing means, instrumental and vocal texture, dynamics, agogic, articulation. These are factors that Mersmann considered secondary elements of the musical work.<sup>25</sup>

Although in theory these considerations were generally thrust aside, in practice

each composer was bound to take them into account . . . in order to be able to write his composition and make its performance possible. In sonoristics, it is impossible to treat these problems from an abstract point of view, since any kind of composing is bound to start with the actual sound effects of the composition.<sup>26</sup>

This view led Chomiński to introduce a new classification of formal issues which formed the essence of an analytical method that became known in Polish musicology as the theory of sonoristics. Already in 1961 he defined this theory as a “new branch of study, with the sound technique of our century as its subject” and subdivided it into the following categories: sound technology, rationalization of time, formation of horizontal and vertical structures, transformation of elements, and formal continuum.<sup>27</sup> Chomiński realized his theoretical postulates most fully in an excellent monograph devoted to Polish music after World War II, entitled *Muzyka Polski Ludowej*, published in 1968.<sup>28</sup> I will briefly discuss these categories based on this monograph.

**SOUND TECHNOLOGY.** In Chomiński’s theory, sound technology “comprises the entire set of procedures associated with the selection and treatment of generators of sound, both traditional and new”.<sup>29</sup> As such, it includes the hottest musical invention of Chomiński’s time—electronic music—which epitomized for him the ultimate ideal of sonoristic composition, for it reached into the very essence of sound: its spectrum and wave structure.<sup>30</sup> This clearly reflects the view of contemporary composers, who, like Karlheinz Stockhausen, considered “Klangkomposition” to be the compositional challenge of the day:

The unique and non-transferable composition of one’s sound material is to my mind just as important today as, for example, the selection of themes, motives and formal schemes was in earlier compositions, for the composition of timbres is indeed no longer the colouration of a musical structure . . . but is from the very beginning fully equal to all other procedures that one employs in the production of a musical composition.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Chomiński’s criticism was directed primarily against the theories of Kurth, Mersmann, and, with regard to twelve-tone music, Leibowitz and Rufer. See Chomiński, “Z zagadnień”, 26–29 *passim*.

<sup>25</sup> Chomiński, “Ze studiów nad impresjonizmem”, 183.

<sup>26</sup> Chomiński, “The contribution of Polish composers to the shaping of a modern language”, 168.

<sup>27</sup> Józef Chomiński, “Technika sonorystyczna jako przedmiot systematycznego szkolenia” [The sonoristic technique as the subject of a systematic training], *Muzyka* 25/3 (1961) 4.

<sup>28</sup> Józef Chomiński, *Muzyka Polski Ludowej* [The music of the Polish People’s Republic]. Wydział i nauk solectnych Polskiej Akademii Nauk. Studia o Polsce współczesnej (Kraków: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1968).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>30</sup> See, for instance, Chomiński, *Teoria formy*, 235.

<sup>31</sup> Karlheinz Stockhausen, as quoted in Roger Smalley, “Momenté: Material for the listener and composer. 1”, *The musical times* 115/1571 (January 1974) 23.

Such technical manipulations of sound objects are totally different from the conventional activities of a traditional composer. Nevertheless, traditional instruments are also used to create sonoristic pieces in which composers, rather than concentrating on conventional units of musical meaning, such as themes, melodies, harmonic progressions, or contrapuntal relationships, focus on concrete “sound objects” and their transformations. Since these objects are approached as real, i.e., aurally perceivable phenomena, analysis—according to Chomiński—should begin with the description of the specific performing forces that are used to generate them, the specific kinds of articulation employed in their execution, and their dynamic features. All these elements form the first category of sonoristic theory, which Chomiński called “sound technology”.

A fragment of Krzysztof Penderecki’s composition *Anaklasis* (1959/1960) shows clearly the increased roles of these elements in the structuring of the specific sound objects and their unfolding in time [ex. 3]. Clearly, since the composition is not about melody or harmony, but rather about various sound objects and their transformations, i.e., the purely sonic qualities determine its structure, it can be said to be “sonoristically regulated.”<sup>32</sup>

Example 3. Krzysztof Penderecki, *Anaklasis*, segment 3.

**RATIONALIZATION OF TIME.** The consideration of time organization in 20th-century works led Chomiński to the discovery of two operating procedures which transcended the older categories of meter and rhythm: monochrony and polychrony. Monochronic regulation of time in a composition, according to him, employs a single primary temporal unit to which the most diverse rhythmic and metric patterns can be related. In this type of temporal organization, which had been the basis of music from the mensural rhythmic system to the most complex polymetric structures of contemporary music, all such relationships are relative and independent from the agogic factor.

<sup>32</sup> “Sonoristic regulation”, another term for “sonoristic technique”, was used by Chomiński in his later writings. See Chomiński, *Teoria formy*, 126.

In contrast, polychronic organization, which represents a “synthesis of various factors, namely agogic, metric and rhythmic values,”<sup>33</sup> involves constant variability of dynamic temporal units, and in effect exhibits an aleatory character. In the music based on this principle the temporal flow of sound impulses is measured, and graphically represented in scores, in seconds, but within these precisely measured spaces the duration of individual impulses remains variable. Such polychronic organization has been utilized in *Anaklasis*.

The two terms introduced by Chomiński—monochrony and polychrony—represent remarkably perceptive descriptions of the present-day musical reality; indeed, one only needs to recall Pierre Boulez’s equivalent notions of “smooth” and “striated” time<sup>34</sup> to realize the unique proximity of sonoristic theory to the actual compositional practice of Chomiński’s time.

**HORIZONTAL AND VERTICAL STRUCTURES.** In our description of the excerpt from *Anaklasis* we have so far discussed, in a somewhat general manner, how the sounds are generated and organized temporally. But we have yet to define the nature of the specific sound objects we are dealing with here, which are clearly far removed from typical melodic and harmonic constructs of tonal music. According to Chomiński, these formations could be discussed systematically only in very general terms, as horizontal and vertical structures, and it was these two terms that the Polish musicologist adopted as the third category of his sonoristic theory.

The main structural constructs in this fragment of *Anaklasis* are tone-clusters. As opposed to traditional harmonic structures like chords in which the selectivity of individual sounds is preserved, tone-clusters accumulate a number of small intervals, in this case semitones, which cause the loss of this selectivity. According to Chomiński,

clusters can be seen as a result of the transformation of a vertical structure into a horizontal one, which in effect completely destroys the harmonic factor. This kind of transformation, however, does not lead to a restitution of melodic qualities, for the new horizontal structure may swell, increase its sound mass, or become a static sound block, i.e., acquire properties that are diametrically opposed to those of a dynamic, mobile melodic construct.<sup>35</sup>

For instance, Penderecki differentiates the clusters in the above example by means of their distinct pitch and timbral constitution as well as contrasting positioning in the chromatic sound space. The resulting sound objects and their interplay create a sense of constant balancing between the horizontal and vertical dimensions; in effect, they generate neither exclusively melodic nor harmonic values, but rather purely sonoristic ones.

**TRANSFORMATION OF ELEMENTS.** The most essential aspect of sonoristic theory has to do with the concept of transformation. According to Chomiński, transformational processes in music encompass a variety of phenomena, some of which I have already mentioned in the context of the hitherto discussed analytic categories of his theory. In contemporary music, for instance, the most noticeable kind of transformation is

<sup>33</sup> Chomiński, “Wkład kompozytorów polskich do rozwoju”, 107.

<sup>34</sup> Pierre Boulez, *Boulez on music today*, trans. by Susan Bradshaw and Richard Rodney Bennett (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971) 88–99. (Originally published in *Penser la musique aujourd’hui*, Paris 1963.)

<sup>35</sup> Chomiński, *Muzyka Polski Ludowej*, 153. Unless otherwise noted, this and the following translations are my own.

the one found in electronic music, where “a specific sound object is indeed subjected to transformational manipulations”.<sup>36</sup> As regards traditional performing means, however,

one may speak of transformation in the modern sense only when certain instruments are used in a manner different from that applied formerly, [i.e.] against their natural properties and original purposes; in other words, when generators of melody and harmony are transformed into tools that serve to produce rustling effects and tone colors.<sup>37</sup>

For example, the methods of articulation on string instruments that Krzysztof Penderecki used in his *Threnody “To the victims of Hiroshima”* for 52 strings (1960), a work which has gained the status of a sonoristic manifesto, were so radical—they included, for instance, striking the body of the instruments—that several European orchestras refused to perform the piece in the early 1960s.<sup>38</sup> But, as Penderecki explained, we still “remain within the bounds of a characteristic ‘instrumental sound,’ which does not cease to be itself even though we are gradually expanding it by means of new effects”.<sup>39</sup>

As has been mentioned above, such unusual sound effects were frequently found in works by Penderecki, Górecki, and many others, and were perceived as the defining feature of sonorism as a style. What it means in practical terms is that the range of the musical material has been extended to include a variety of non-musical sounds, a fact that sonoristics recognizes as an enrichment of contemporary music.

But the problem of transformation is by no means limited exclusively to the new sound effects of sonoristic pieces. On the contrary, claimed Chomiński, “the evolutionary processes of music in general can be reduced to constant transformations of sonic phenomena”,<sup>40</sup> and many of them involve changes of the functions of traditional elements. Already in the 19th century one frequently finds metamorphoses of the harmonic element, a chord, into a dynamic value, an accent. In newer music, such dynamic treatment of harmony is frequently found in Bartók. A different kind of transformation takes place when the melodic element loses its original character and instead gains a coloristic function. This is frequently caused by rapid figuration which obliterates the distinctiveness of the line in favor of sonic plateaus, such as the ones found in Stravinsky’s *Loiseau de feu* or *Le sacre de printemps*. “The idea of transformation”, perceptively noted Michał Bristiger, “allows sonoristics to retain as valid the idea of [musical] elements and at the same time to adapt this terminological apparatus for the description of contemporary works.”<sup>41</sup> But at the same time, we might add, it allows one to view older music in a new way, a point to which I will return shortly.

**FORMAL ISSUES.** Chomiński believed that there was a general crisis of form in 20th-century music, which originated around 1910 and continued well into the 1960s. Nevertheless, the Polish musicologist distinguished form as a separate category of his

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> See Ludwik Erhardt, *Spotkania z Krzysztofem Pendereckim* [Meetings with Krzysztof Penderecki] (Kraków: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1975) 36.

<sup>39</sup> Tadeusz A. Zieliński, “Współczesny kompozytor a tradycja: Rozmowa z Krzysztofem Pendereckim” [A contemporary composer and tradition: A conversation with Krzysztof Penderecki], *Ruch muzyczny* 12 (1963) 8.

<sup>40</sup> Chomiński, *Muzyka Polski Ludowej*, 163.

<sup>41</sup> Michał Bristiger, “Sonorismo e strutturalismo”, *Collage* 9 (1973) 73.

sonoristic theory; apparently he regarded it as a perceivable and analyzable trait of contemporary music that should be accounted for by a modern theory.

But Chomiński's discussion of form in the context of sonoristic regulation was reduced to only one level: that of technique. Musical compositions have long existed, he argued—such as the canon, the fugue, or variations—in which technical procedures held priority over strict architectonic principles; and it was also the case with much contemporary music, in which, as he put it, “mainly technical matters come to the foreground; they totally match the problems of form”.<sup>42</sup> Thus, form *sensu largo* can only be defined in very general terms, as “the resultant of the interaction among various regulatory elements”,<sup>43</sup> while the task of analysis is to elucidate the actual forming processes employed in a particular piece of music.

Chomiński's maneuver to place the equal sign between form and technique nevertheless offers some interesting implications for formal analysis. His focus on the particularity of form, as opposed to schematism, implies that the analysis of form in contemporary music need not necessarily be directed towards the internal structure of the work, but may instead point to its surface, i.e., the level on which the sonic phenomena are heard. Thus, sonoristics replaces “formal symbolism”, which was sometimes viewed as its weakness,<sup>44</sup> with a view of form as a sounding phenomenon. This fact alone situates sonoristics on the opposite side of other contemporary theories, e.g., that of Schenker, whose analytic graphs always point away from the surface of the piece toward the inner, and abstract, “fundamental structure”.

Such a method of analysis, which does not search for the deep structure of the work but instead seeks to answer the most fundamental question—how does it sound?—proved to be a very attractive analytical tool, capable of illuminating a variety of musical traditions. The new methodological stance offered by Chomiński had an enormous impact on other scholars, who applied the concept of sonoristics to composers such as Liszt, Chopin, and Szymanowski.<sup>45</sup> In addition, Chomiński himself demonstrated the fertile applicability of this concept to 19th-century composers such as Wagner and Beethoven.<sup>46</sup> In both cases he convincingly showed that it is possible to hear their music “sonoristically”.

But how does one listen to 19th-century tonal music sonoristically? For an answer to this question we turn to the already mentioned “sonoristic” composer, Krzysztof Penderecki, who in 1963 described a specific kind of music perception. He suggested

listening to a Čajkovskij symphony, putting aside its harmonic course and specific pitch content and concentrating solely on the development of instrumental sound: its timbre, dynamics, register, durations of individual tones, density and width of the sound throughout the score, types of figuration in the strings, etc. It will become evident

<sup>42</sup> Chomiński, *Muzyka Polski Ludowej*, 166.

<sup>43</sup> Chomiński, *Teoria formy*, 15.

<sup>44</sup> Bristiger, “Sonorismo”, 73.

<sup>45</sup> Władysław Malinowski, “Problem sonorystyki w ‘Mitach’ Karola Szymanowskiego” [The problem of sonoristics in Karol Szymanowski's *Myths*] *Muzyka* 2/4 (1957) 31–44; Antoni Prosnak, “Zagadnienie sonorystyki na przykładzie etiud Chopina” [The problem of sonoristics in Chopin's études] *Muzyka* 3/1–2 (1958) 14–32; Monika Gorczycka, “Nowatorstwo techniki dźwiękowej *Années de pèlerinage* Liszta” [The innovation of sound technique in Liszt's *Années de pèlerinage*] *Muzyka* 6/4 (1961) 47–59.

<sup>46</sup> Józef Chomiński, “Wagner i muzyka współczesna” [Wagner and contemporary music], *Ruch muzyczny* 10 (1963) 4–6; Chomiński, “Beethoven (1770–1970)”, *Muzyka* 15/4 (1970) 3–15. The last essay was also published in English as “Beethoven”, *Polish musicological studies*, ed. by Zofia Chechlińska and Jan Stęszewski (Kraków: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1986) vol. 2, 54–73.

that this trajectory is in itself extremely interesting, rich, and altogether consciously composed. As an artistic value of the piece, it at times significantly surpasses its harmonic content—suffice it to compare it with the piano reduction alone. Of course, in Čajkovskij, these aspects are still closely connected, and the listening I have proposed ... is an artificial manipulation. Nevertheless, it allows one to realize that the habits of sonic perception of music were developing long ago, though originally they were grounded in strictly intervallic progressions.<sup>47</sup>

It was precisely this mode of perception that lay at the basis of Chomiński's concept of sonoristics. While certainly anachronistic, "sonoristic hearing" is also highly rewarding, for, by breaking away with the established manner of listening and opening one's ears to the intricacies of a composition in its actual sounding form, one becomes capable of discovering an entirely new aspect of the music in question.

In his above-mentioned 1970 article, Chomiński attempted a unique and daring analysis of Beethoven's music, conducted to reveal the prognostic character of the composer's musical language. The results were enlightening. For instance, the stationary sound in the opening of the ninth symphony exemplifies for Chomiński a sonoristic phenomenon, one that is not "born out of a melody, but out of a search for pure sound,"<sup>48</sup> i.e., it is regulated primarily by timbre and dynamics. Similarly, the tenth variation of Beethoven's *Diabelli variations*, op. 120, is viewed as a stage in the process of condensation of the harmonic space, which links the chord with the added sixth in the Beethoven piece with microtonal verticalities found in 20th-century music.<sup>49</sup> By the same token, the thirteenth variation of this work contains the embryos of isolated sounds, free from melodic relationships, that were to be fully sanctioned as compositional means only by Webern.<sup>50</sup>

Obviously, the sonoristic character of these phenomena in Beethoven can only be noticed from the perspective of 20th-century music. In this way sonoristics becomes a retrograde method of analysis that, like a microscope, "makes it possible to investigate imperceptible elements of the musical work."<sup>51</sup> But perhaps the most important is the fact that, in the theoretical landscape of the 20th century, where the general tendency of music theory was toward abstraction and objectivity based on mathematical models, sonoristics represented a search for a different kind of objectivity, one that is always verifiable aurally. As such, it opens up a world of interpretive possibilities for many different kinds of music from different eras, traditions, and cultures. This aspect certainly makes sonoristics a valuable tool for modern scholars, apart from the fact that it was created outside of mainstream musicology.

In the course of this essay I have attempted to sketch an outline of the concept of sonoristics and define the three main meanings of the term as they can be deduced from Chomiński's writings: from the description of a new musical element that became prominent in 20th-century music, to a technique of composition associated with the mid-century *avant-garde*, and finally to an analytic theory that focused on the issues of timbre and texture.

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<sup>47</sup> Zieliński, "Współczesny kompozytor a tradycja", 8-9.

<sup>48</sup> Chomiński, "Beethoven (1770–1970)", 5.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 8–9.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

But such a broad semantic concept of Chomiński's term (an issue made much more complex if one also considers the notion of "sonorism") impedes its precise definition. "It is difficult to characterize it in one sentence", wrote Elżbieta Dziębowska in 1979, one of Chomiński's students, but "it undoubtedly involves a new concept of analyzing the musical work, the essence of which has to do with studying the evolution of the actual sound as the carrier of musical expression. This theory concentrates on the issues of timbre (understood broadly, as the sonic qualities inherent in the traditional elements of the musical work as well as sound structures intrinsic to contemporary music) and texture."<sup>52</sup> The uniqueness of Chomiński's approach had been recognized even earlier; in 1973, Michał Bristiger suggested that sonoristics represents "a totally new realm of musical thought, on the border of music theory, compositional practice, and the psychology of hearing."<sup>53</sup>

But no matter how we define it, sonoristics remains largely unknown to the musicological community at large; similarly, the fame of its derivative "sonorism" in the West does not fare much better, either. The need to include these concepts in our thinking is clearly evident from the following two statements.

In 1974, John Vinton, having just edited the *Dictionary of contemporary music*, noted that all the stylistic categories of 20th-century music are troublesome for "none of them specifically mentions a central characteristic of our time, the rise of texture and timbre as prime thematic elements."<sup>54</sup> Undoubtedly Vinton would have been quite pleased to discover that the stylistic category he wished for had already existed and functioned successfully in Polish musicology for 14 years. But although "sonorism" had the potential of becoming one the most important 20th-century "isms", it has never moved beyond the Iron Curtain and remains associated with certain avant-garde developments in Poland and Russia. And in 1987, in his celebrated book on the history of music analysis, Ian Bent maintained:

The analysis of music as sonorous material had remained comparatively undeveloped, apart from the work of Pierre Schaeffer, who followed his *Traite* of 1966 . . . with his *Guide des objets sonores* (1983), and from that of two Norwegians, Lasse Thoresen and Olav Anton Thommessen, who in the early 1980s were formulating a verbal and symbolic language for formal description of sound qualities.<sup>55</sup>

Contrary to Bent's statement, "the analysis of music as sonorous material" has, in fact, not only been undertaken but also developed in a full-fledged theory, and it did so some 20 years before Bent's book was published. As the theory of the musical work that took as its point of departure the compositional techniques of the 20th century, sonoristics remains one of the most inventive contributions to modern music theory. The fact that it continues to await wider recognition proves that the road to global musicology lies still ahead of us.

<sup>52</sup> Elżbieta Dziębowska, "Koncepcja realnego kształtu dzieła muzycznego" [A concept of the actual shape of the musical work], *Muzyka* 24/4 (1979) 15.

<sup>53</sup> Michał Bristiger, "Krytyka muzyczna a poetyka muzyki" [Music criticism and the poetics of music], *Współczesne problemy krytyki artystycznej* [Contemporary issues in art criticism], ed. by Alicja Helman (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1973) 109.

<sup>54</sup> John Vinton, "A change of mind", *The music review* 35/3–4 (November 1974) 301.

<sup>55</sup> Ian Bent, *Analysis* (New York; London: W.W. Norton, 1987) 71.

