

# Witold Lutosławski's *Venetian Games*

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In 1960 Witold Lutosławski (born January 25, 1913, in Warsaw) began experimenting with aleatoric techniques in *Venetian Games* (1960-1961). The piece won first prize at the Tribune Internationale des Compositeurs (May 1962) and marked Lutosławski's emergence as one of the world's leading composers. Lutosławski himself considers *Venetian Games* to demonstrate his "first maturity as a composer."<sup>1</sup>

The work written before *Venetian Games* was Lutosławski's *Three Postludes* (1960), a symphonic cycle for which *Venetian Games* originally was to serve as a completion. However, *Postludes* remained a torso after Lutosławski heard a 1960 radio broadcast of John Cage's *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra* (1957-1958). This piece acted as a catalyst for Lutosławski, and it was also during this time that Andrzej Markowski commissioned Lutosławski to write a piece for the Chamber Orchestra of the Cracow Philharmonic which was to participate in the Venice Biennale in 1961.

Known for his slow, meticulous working pace, Lutosławski completed only preliminary versions of the first, second, and fourth movements of *Venetian Games* for its world premiere on April 24, 1961, at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice. The fragment reproduced here is from the second movement, measures 37-55. The revised four-movement version was performed in Lutosławski's home town, Warsaw, on September 16, 1961, by the Warsaw National Philharmonic Orchestra under the direction of Witold Rowicki.

When Lutosławski wrote to Cage and acknowledged being influenced by the Piano Concerto, Cage asked him to send the full score of *Venetian Games* for publication. Cage was in the process of publishing a collection of manuscripts and presumably acquired the revised manuscript version for all four movements.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile the conceptual diagrams and preliminary score fragments from the first, second, and fourth movements which were premiered in Venice were being held by the Hermann Moeck Verlag in Celle, Germany.<sup>3</sup> Moeck published the final version of *Venetian Games* in 1962, and in June 1963, letters from Herbert Höntsch of Moeck and Lutosławski confirmed that Moldenhauer had acquired the preliminary fragments.<sup>4</sup> There are six conceptual diagrams for portions of the second and fourth movements (two are unidentified) and nine score fragments from preliminary versions of the first, second, and fourth movements. The majority of the diagrams and fragments reflect revisions made in the final movement.

Handwritten musical score for Lutosławski's *Jeux Venitiens*. The score is written on aged paper and consists of two systems. The first system contains measures 135 through 143, and the second system contains measures 146 through 156. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. A circled number '3' is visible in the top right corner of the first system. The bottom of the page lists the instruments for which the score is written: fl., ob., cl. B., cor., trbn., xyl., vib., and str.

Lutosławski JEUX VENITIENS

The title *Venetian Games* pays homage to both Venice, the city of its premiere, and to the freedom of play and interpretation which occurs during performance. Many details of sound realization are left to chance. However, unlike John Cage's indeterminate works, open form is not a predominant feature in *Venetian Games*. Instead, a more formal organization prevails. For a successful realization of the work, all elements of chance must yield to Lutosławski's structural framework.

Lutosławski uses the term *aleatory counterpoint* to define the loose rhythmic structure between simultaneously sounding instruments and groups of instruments.<sup>5</sup> In the aleatoric portions of *Venetian Games*, individual parts have no identical time organization or common pulse; each part is independent in time. Players perform as if off by themselves. In this way a complicated-sounding performance is achieved through the simultaneous combination of different rhythms, tempi, and agogic nuances.<sup>6</sup> However, there is no room for improvisation in *Venetian Games*, and no pitches are left to chance. A conductor guides the players through Lutosławski's uncompromising form, and, in the end, "the composer remains the directing force."<sup>7</sup>

Not only does Lutosławski explore the fascinating prospects in the development of sound organization through techniques of controlled chance, but he also arranges his ideas according to harmonic relationships. "The fundamental unity of which I make use in my latest pieces is a vertical aggregation of all the notes in the scale--a phenomenon of harmonic nature."<sup>8</sup> In *Venetian Games* he builds specific twelve-note chords which have a characteristic color. He assigns groups of instruments to particular notes of the chord and then explores the interplay between the contrasting chords. However, he denies any connection with serial music except for the fact that there is a "chromatic whole." Rather than professing a kinship with the Viennese school, Lutosławski is linked in his work to Debussy, Stravinsky, Bartók and Varese.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Steve Stucky, *Lutosławski and His Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 133.

<sup>2</sup> See Bálint András Varga, *Lutosławski Profile: Witold Lutosławski in Conversation with Bálint András Varga* (London: Chester Music, 1976), p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> See the letter of June 11, 1963, from Herbert Höntsch of Hermann Moeck Verlag to Hans Moldenhauer.

<sup>4</sup> See the letters from Herbert Höntsch and Lutosławski to Moldenhauer of June 11 and June 20,

1963.

<sup>5</sup> See *Lutosławski*, ed. Ove Nordwall (Stockholm: Nordiska Musikförlaget, 1968), p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> See Jean-Paul Couchoud, *La musique polonaise et Witold Lutosławski* (Paris: Stock Plus Musique, 1981), p. 99.

<sup>7</sup> See *Funeral Music--Venetian Games* (Phillips PHS 900.159, 1967), record jacket information by the composer.

<sup>8</sup> *Lutosławski*, op. cit., p. 145.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.