TMCO ENCORE OF AUGUST 10

TANGLEWOOD MUSIC CENTER ORCHESTRA ENCORE PERFORMANCES, Program VI
Streaming from Monday, August 10, at 8pm through Sunday, August 16

Hosts: Stefan Asbury with Thomas Adès
Thomas Adès, conductor

ADÈS Asyla
LUTOSŁAWSKI Symphony No. 3

Recorded August 12, 2019, and July 30, 2018

Thomas ADÈS Asyla, Opus 17 (1997)
I. \( \cdot \) = 76
II. \( \cdot \) = 58 – 62
III. Ecstasio, \( \sigma \) = 65
IV. Quasi leggero \( \cdot \) = 52
THOMAS ADÈS conducting
(2019 Festival of Contemporary Music, concert of August 12, 2019)

Witold LUTOSŁAWSKI Symphony No. 3 (1983)
THOMAS ADÈS conducting
(2018 Festival of Contemporary Music, concert of July 30, 2018)

Notes on the Program

The musical life of THOMAS ADÈS (b.1971) has several interconnected levels, making him the ideal choice as the BSO’s first-ever Artistic Partner. He also holds the concurrent title of The Merwin Geffen, M.D. and Norman Solomon, M.D., Festival of Contemporary Music Director. In these roles he leads the BSO and the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra; performs as pianist in recital and with the Boston Symphony Chamber Players, and, of course, his works are featured in both chamber music and orchestral concerts. In the spring of 2019, his new Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, a BSO co-commission, was premiered by Kirill Gerstein under the composer’s direction at Symphony Hall, also traveling to Carnegie Hall and later being issued on CD. His similarly substantial orchestral work Inferno was premiered by the Los Angeles Philharmonic and Gustavo Dudamel in May 2019. Most of Adès’s composing time in recent years has otherwise been devoted to large-scale, high-profile orchestral and dramatic projects. His opera The Tempest (after Shakespeare) was commissioned by the Royal Opera-Covent Garden, where it was premiered in 2004; a new production was staged at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 2012. His latest opera, The Exterminating Angel (based on Luis Buñuel’s film), was premiered at the Salzburg Festival in 2016 and produced at the Metropolitan Opera in 2017. Among Adès’s works with orchestra are Polaris, with optional projected video components by Tal Rosner; his Violin Concerto Concentric Paths; and his large-scale Totentanz for soprano, baritone, and orchestra, which he premiered with the BBC Orchestra in 2013 and conducted with the BSO in 2016. Adès’s musical brilliance began to be noticed in England by the time he was in his early twenties following performances of such works as his Chamber Symphony and Living Toys; his deft, cheeky chamber opera Powder Her Face, staged at the Cheltenham Festival when he was twenty-four, upped the ante yet further. The excited and positive response to the premiere of his orchestral work Asyla by the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and Sir Simon Rattle in November 1997 led Rattle to reprogram the piece as part of his final concert as music director of the CBSO in August 1998, at which time it was recorded for CD. In 2000 the piece won the University of Louisville’s Grawemeyer Award, making Thomas Adès the then-youngest-ever winner of one of classical music’s most prestigious prizes.
Asyla is a four-movement orchestral piece of just over twenty minutes’ length, with a dance-inspired third movement and a slow second movement. Virtually every commentator on the work has referred to its symphonic qualities. On the other hand, Adès avoids the pitfalls of calling the work a symphony, with all of the cultural and technical baggage that designation suggests, by giving the work its evocative title. The music’s details are unquestionably modern, the aesthetic inherently progressive. Even the title of the piece speaks of contradiction: the plural of “asylum,” it implies both “sanctuaries” and “mental institutions”—a dichotomy of safety and uneasiness that parallels, somehow, Adès’s musical arguments.

Asyla follows the basic four-movement layout of a traditional symphony by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, or Brahms. The individual movements, though, separated by pauses of controlled length, correspond more readily to movements of a Baroque suite, that precursor to the Classical era’s symphonic form. The first movement begins like a surreal Baroque overture with its dotted rhythms; but the orchestral sonority is heavily weighted to cowbells, the carriers of what can pass as melody. Shadowing that line is one of the upright pianos, tuned a quarter-tone low, as well as strings playing harmonics, giving the texture an unfocused, oneiric quality, suspending the concrete “reality” of the passage. The movement seems to coalesce and become clearer as it progresses. References to the music of the later movements—only retrospectively apparent, of course—occur as the energy builds.

The generally upward motion of the first movement is negated by the melodic sigh of the second, a lamenting figure presented, again, by cowbells with their piano shadow. The movement acts somewhat like a passacaglia, a form fashionable in the Baroque era that has a repeating pattern in the bass, or a repeating harmonic progression, with continuous melodic variations spinning out above. That genre has served Adès well as the basic model for many a formal structure up to and including some of his most recent music. The passacaglia idea here is less heard than sensed, the movement signifying something original while touching on the memory of something old. The descending melodies are a chain of small laments; the mood of the movement is subdued.

The third movement, Ecstasio, has received the most attention from commentators and reviewers. Anticipated by a tempo increase at the end of the second movement and beginning in stasis with the sustained high strings of that movement’s end, Ecstasio indicates its disposition with the entry of repeated sixteenth-notes in glockenspiel and a syncopated rhythmic pattern in piano. The course of the movement is an inexorable buildup of repeating patterns of similar or greater complexity, ever louder and more frenzied. The scene Adès paints is an abstraction of a night out at one of London’s clubs—the pounding, constant beat of techno-dance music (with occasional brief respites) combined with evocations of motion, contact, lights, confusion, and even the illicit drug use of the club set (the movement’s title implying both the mood of ecstasy and the social drug of the same name). This dance-themed movement parallels and parodies the dance movements—minuets, Ländler, the occasional waltz—of the traditional symphony.

The final movement is a summing up of what has gone before, and contains elements from each of the previous three. Most apparent initially is the sighing figure of the second movement, but also present are brief flashes of Ecstasio’s ostinatos and the first movement’s rising figure. Hearing this movement brings into sharper focus the sense that the first three are also interconnected, and that each continues, but changes radically, the musical discussion of previous movement. The ending is one both of repose and of a continuation of that yearning restlessness that permeates the rest of the piece, recalling the music of Asyla’s beginning.

Robert Kirzinger

Composer and writer Robert Kirzinger is the Boston Symphony Orchestra’s Associate Director of Program Publications.

“If the essence of music could be conveyed by words, music itself would lose its mystery, its ‘magic suggestiveness’ according to [Joseph] Conrad, and would become unnecessary.” This remark summed up one of the indispensable articles of faith that shaped the compositional activity of WITOLD LUTOSŁAWSKI (1913-1994)—his passionate belief in music’s inherent ineffability, in the face of which language’s descriptive qualities were not only powerless, but potentially trivializing. Lutosławski’s allusion to Conrad’s fin-de-siècle sensibility is telling: in the post-Second World War period, in which composers became ever more loquacious about what their work “meant,” Lutosławski stood apart, remaining true to the spiritual ideals of late romanticism and early modernism. Stylistically, too, Lutosławski’s orientation was in many respects a fusion of pre-First World War French and Slavic modernist currents. As such, it could be argued that one of his principal achievements was to have preserved and enlarged upon those currents, not only by adapting them to the technical findings of the post-1945 European avant-garde, but by
using them to construct sophisticated large-scale symphonic forms. Likening him to Bach and Brahms, the late Steven Stucky felt Lutosławski would be remembered “as a grand, inclusive synthesizer; as an artist who knitted together all the best traditions and discoveries of his time into a broad, flexible language, capable of an unusually wide range of expression.” And there can be little doubt that that “wide range of expression” was closely tied up with Lutosławski’s steadfast preservation of his music’s “magic suggestiveness.”

Yet Lutosławski’s emphasis on ineffability poses particular difficulties for discussion of his Symphony No. 3 (1983), one of the undisputed landmarks in the form in recent decades. Given the score’s tumultuous, Beethovenian sweep—Lutosławski compared it implicitly to the *Eroica*—observers have been hard-pressed to ignore the shadows cast by political events that unfolded while it was being composed. Polish music specialist Nicholas Reyland recalls a British interviewer asking Lutosławski:

“Did the events in Poland influence or affect your music at that time?” The events in question were hardly insignificant. They included the bubble of optimism inflated by the Solidarity movement in the Gdańsk shipyard strikes and its puncturing by the period of martial law exacted by Poland’s communist government—events that contributed, ultimately, to the fall of the Berlin Wall, the demise of the Soviet Union, and the reestablishment of a democratic Poland. Moreover, to some listeners, Lutosławski’s Symphony No. 3 sounds like a struggle to forge a melody capable of uniting an entire orchestra—a song of solidarity, as it were. Yet Lutosławski had a one-word answer to this question: “No.”

Calibrated for an international audience, Lutosławski’s curt “no” is best not taken literally: only when pressed would he concede that his work naturally, albeit non-straightforwardly, reflected the society of which he was a member. In 1983, he received the Solidarity Prize for his refusal to support the state organs following the imposition of martial law two years before, and for the Third Symphony itself, a recording of which he sent to members of Lech Wałęsa’s dissident union, who reputedly “understood fully the significance of such a clandestine gesture of support,” as another Lutosławski chronicler put it. While Lutosławski still denied that the work bore any meanings—“political” or otherwise—he was nevertheless pleased that his music had partaken in the social ferment precipitated by Solidarity, and that his compatriots knew it. Lutosławski was walking a tightrope: he wanted his symphony to speak to the national context, though in a kind of veiled voice, while retaining “universal” relevance.

Still, it is best not to unduly underline the symphony’s “double-voiced” character, not least because Lutosławski began composing it in 1972. He worked at it for over a decade, sidetracked by other projects, by far-reaching renovations to his vocabulary, and by his desire that it constitute a mature summation of the possibilities (and constraints) afforded by large-scale structural thinking. (Lutosławski’s desire to “get it right” led him to discard an extended attempt at the piece’s long central section, which he estimated cost him two years’ work.) The textural and coloristic hallmarks that lend Lutosławski’s idiom its hallucinatory, incandescent atmospheres remained in evidence. Among them was his “limited aleatoricism,” a notational strategy giving performers a degree of freedom in tempo, conceived to generate flexible “bundles” of sound masses. Yet more than ever before, in the Third such elements are put in service of what Lutosławski called the “psychological” aspects of musical structure—age-old essentials like expectation, tension, and surprise (here his models were Haydn and Beethoven), which he felt had lost little of their usefulness, even in the face of all the novel techniques developed in the postwar period. The Polish term akcja (literally, “action” or “plot”) gets at Lutosławski’s intentions, capturing the strategies that governed his ever-evolving, conflict-driven musical canvases. It is those procedures that lend the Symphony its unmistakably Beethovenian impetus.

Lutosławski’s allegiance to akcja principles led him to a new kind of structure, which the Symphony exploits: a continuous, two-part form, the first “movement” fragmentary and non-developmental, establishing but never fulfilling certain expectations, and the second limning, if not necessarily “resolving,” earlier frictions and antagonisms. The Third expands on this model: the introductory “movement” now has its own preamble, while the main “movement” is followed by a substantial, Beethovenesque coda-cum-epilogue. The principal signpost for these divisions is a “signal” (Lutosławski’s word), an E forcefully rapped out by brass and timpani. It is both the first and last event heard in the score; a kind of call to attention, it guides the listener through the piece.

After a few “palate-cleansers” teasing the stratified textures that will dominate the introductory “movement,” the signal cues the “movement” proper, which begins with quiet violin tendrils. It consists of three episodes, each initiated with another E tattoo, and each rounded off with an uneasy drifting refrain for clarinets and bassoon. These episodes are half-whispered suggestions, climaxes only alluded to, as if the listener were overhearing snatches of an urgent, forbidden conversation. The first episode is all nervy, broken arabesques; the second offers a first real attempt to “forge a melody,” a halting English horn statement atop cushions of horns, harps, and piano. The short third episode begins with pizzicato cello plodding that will later assume greater significance. A
Spare intermezzo tries to tie some of these strands together, but it repeatedly fails, and is overtaken by the last of the circular woodwind refrains.

The beginning of the main “movement” violently wrenches the listener out of this hazy reverie, the E signal assuming newfound urgency, now punctuated with a tubular bell, and hence associations of danger and alarm. With the violas and violins seemingly being “given chase,” the music enters a new, disturbing realm: tense bursts of the tattoo, forlorn clarinet and tuba soliloquies, fearsomely terminated climaxes. Eventually comes something like a “development” section (though Lutosławski rejected this description), in which a transformed version of the earlier pizzicato plocl mingles with the string tendrils. After the rest of the orchestra joins the melee, the “beset” violin theme returns, by a striving, strained outpouring from strings and trumpets. It builds to yet another failed climax, which now assumes genuinely tragic dimensions. A series of “dramatic recitatives” (Lutosławski) for strings initiate the epilogue proper, in which the tread of timpani punctuate a determined string ascent. After a recall of the introduction’s inert woodwind refrain, the buildup to the finish begins on a defiant ostinato-pedal, with various instruments (horns, trumpet, flute) lending their voices to the mounting tide of resolution. The music at last opens onto a new vista, marked by exultant, weightless tuned percussion. Only a glimpse of this “other” space is allowed, though, before the full group cuts back in, with bleating brass and a final, unison toll of the E tattoo—a conclusion Reyland reads as “undercut by an unrelentingly bleak sense of Romantic Polish futility.” Yet it could just as easily be argued that the signal is here transfigured, finally shedding its function as a rude awakening, and instead morphing into a defiant affirmation of the here-and-now. “Magic suggestiveness,” indeed, that one of the most dynamic concluding paragraphs in the entire late 20th-century orchestral repertoire could elicit such divergent responses.

MATTHEW MENDEZ

Matthew Mendez is a New Haven-based musicologist, critic, and annotator who was the 2014 Tanglewood Music Center Publications Fellow. He was the recipient of a 2016 ASCAP Foundation Deems Taylor/Virgil Thomson Award for outstanding music journalism.

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Artist

THOMAS ADÈS

The 2018-19 season was composer-conductor-pianist Thomas Adès’s third as the BSO’s Deborah and Philip Edmundson Artistic Partner, a position extended through the orchestra’s 2020-21 season. Born in London in 1971, he is renowned as both composer and performer, works regularly with the world’s leading orchestras, opera companies, and festivals, and was made a CBE in the 2018 Queen’s Birthday Honours. His operas include The Exterminating Angel, premiered at the 2016 Salzburg Festival; The Tempest, commissioned by and first performed at the Royal Opera House in 2004; and Powder Her Face (1995), written for the Cheltenham Festival and the Almeida Theatre, London. Orchestral commissions include those from the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Berlin Philharmonic, Carnegie Hall, the New World Symphony, Berliner Festspiele, BBC Proms, Los Angeles Philharmonic, London’s Royal Festival Hall, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. His catalog also includes numerous celebrated chamber and solo works. Mr. Adès coaches piano and chamber music annually at the International Musicians Seminar, Prussia Cove. As a conductor, he appears regularly with the Los Angeles, New York, and London philharmonic orchestras, the Boston, London, BBC, City of Birmingham, Melbourne, and Sydney symphony orchestras, and the Royal Concertgebouworkest. In addition to his own works, he has conducted such operas as The Rake’s Progress and the world and European premieres of Gerald Barry’s Alice’s Adventures Under Ground. Recent piano engagements include solo recitals at Carnegie Hall and London’s Wigmore Hall, a solo Janáček program in London, Paris, Lisbon, and the Czech Republic, Schubert’s Winterreise at Wigmore Hall with Ian Bostridge, and duo-recitals with Kirill Gerstein at Carnegie Hall and Boston’s Jordan Hall. Mr. Adès’s honors include the Grawemeyer Award for Asyla (1999), the Ernst von Siemens Prize for Arcadia, the British Composer Award for The Four Quarters, and the Léonie Sonning Music Prize. His recording of The Tempest (EMI) won a Gramophone award; the DVD of the Metropolitan Opera’s production was awarded the Diapason d’Or de l’année, Best Opera Grammy Award, and ECHO Klassik Music DVD Recording of the Year. The Exterminating Angel won the World Premiere of the Year at the International Opera Awards. Thomas Adès made his BSO
conducting debut in March 2011 and has since led both the BSO and the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra on numerous occasions.