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Music review: A Górecki tribute from Jacaranda

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A stupendous spinner of sorrowful songs, Henryk Górecki left us with all we could possibly need to mourn him. So Saturday night, a year after his death, the new music series Jacaranda was at no loss for material with which to remember the wondrous Polish composer whose sad but transcendent Third Symphony became an international sensation in the 1990s.

Still, it wasn't just a haunting melancholy that made Górecki great. It was his vitality. A living heartbeat is palpable in every measure he wrote, no matter how slowly the music moved. He was also funny -- wacky, even. And extraordinarily physical. He had a resonant keyboard technique that could make any piano sound twice as large as it was.

The centerpiece of Jacaranda's all-Górecki program was a performance of "Quasi una Fantasia," the composer's second string quartet. Written for the Kronos Quartet in 1991, the 33-minute score, which is bitter and sweet, was performed with a radiant warmth at First Presbyterian Church of Santa Monica on Saturday (with a repeat Sunday evening) by the Calder Quartet.

The quartet begins with a barely audible cello pulse. The other instruments enter very slowly (the first violin waits five minutes for its turn). A poignant melody quietly drifts over the rocking beat. An air of religiosity hovers over all. That is, until the folk dancing starts.

When the Kronos premiered the Second Quartet in New York, Górecki came. At a rehearsal, he was a monster, stomping the stage, singing parts with a ferocity or an otherworldliness that overwhelmed the room. He also, when he finally noticed that there were observers, kicked everyone out in a rage. The Kronos captures all of that.

The Calder found its own gorgeous way into Górecki. The playing did not lack power or drama, but it was not tense. Instead, these four players exuded a kind of rapture in which they were very much in tune with not only the pulse on the page or the score's moody melodies and richly somber harmonies, but also of each other.

The Second Quartet was followed by the First, "Already It Is Dusk," from 1988 and more modest -- with each quartet (all of which were for Kronos), Górecki doubled the length and scope. This time another young L.A. quartet, the Lyris, played.

Like the later quartet, "Dusk" also alludes to Poland's church and its folk music, but in a more fitful way, and the Lyris, with its tightly focused and marvelously glassy tone, was penetrating.

Also on the program was Górecki's Four Preludes for piano and his "Kleines Requiem für eine Polka." The piano preludes, written in 1955 when Górecki was a member of the dissonant Polish school, make up his Opus 1. From these barbarously virtuosic studies, he could have easily gone avant-garde, but in retrospect, he was already gripping with the ferocity and stunning silences that would engulf his later style. Mark Robson made the preludes mammoth, which I think would have pleased their composer.

A small requiem for a polka? It's not all that small, and a polka can also be a person in Poland. Written for a small instrumental chamber ensemble, the four movements lurch manically between Góreckian tranquillity and a harrumphing drunkenness. Mark Alan Hilt conducted a safe and sane performance. I'm not so sure that Górecki was either, but there is pressing musical substance behind the nuttiness in this score, and bringing it out has its own rewards.

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-- Mark Swed

Jacaranda, First Presbyterian Church, 1220 Second St., Santa Monica; 6 p.m. Sunday; \$35 online or \$40 at the door. (213) 483-0216 or www.jacarandamusic.org.

Photo: Benjamin Jacobson, Andrew Bulbrook, Jonathan Moerschel, and Eric Byers (left to right) of the Calder Quartet during Jacaranda's program at the First Presbyterian Church of Santa Monica. Credit: Arkasha Stevenson/Los Angeles Times.

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