In the 1970s and 1980s Polish composers became particularly interested in Polish tradition. Zofia Helman sees two reasons for this. Above all, at that time many composers gained a far greater awareness of the fact that Polish music was not a separate phenomenon, and being Polish did not exclude one from being European. This new understanding of national music encouraged composers to adapt Polish folklore idioms and use Polish texts, resulting in pieces such as Wojciech Kilar’s *Krzesany* or Henryk Górecki’s Symphony No. 3 (*Symfonia piesni żałosnych*; “Symphony of Sorrowful Songs”). The other catalyst was political suppression in Poland, to which composers started to respond by citing their country’s religious hymns and patriotic songs as well as making allusions in the titles and dedications of works. Examples of such compositions include Krzysztof Penderecki’s *Requiem polskie* (“Polish Requiem”) and Krzysztof Meyer’s *Symfonia polska* (“Polish Symphony”). According to Anna Czekanowska, this


period is a rare moment in the history of Polish music where national categories have been particularly dynamic and become conveyors of important values.  

Henryk Mikołaj Górecki is among those contemporary Polish composers who used national elements in their works as a significant component. Górecki was born in 1933 and started off as an avant-garde composer and supporter of “sonorism”. In recent times he has been referred to as a creator of reductive music. Some define his style as a “combination of material minimum with expression maximum”. In fact this is very original music in which Górecki’s first biographer Adrian Thomas discerns the following qualities: undulating chords and figurations, dynamic extremes, slowly developing melodic lines along with harmonic stability and various ways of linking and contrasting vertical and horizontal elements.

The composer himself says that drawing on national tradition is for him a kind of creative necessity. Listeners of Górecki’s music often identify its national elements. For example, Walentyna Węgrzyn refers to the national character of his *Salve Sidus Polono*-

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6Ibid., p. 106.
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rum – Kantata o św. Wojciechu (‘Cantata about Saint Wojciech’),
while Adrian Thomas plainly states that much of Górecki’s music results from his ties to his country and national culture. Górecki has drawn on national elements in all his periods of creativity, though naturally less so when he was experimenting with sound and form. For him, as for most contemporary Polish composers, the increased use of national elements emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. The above-mentioned Salve Sidus Polonorum was composed in 1997 and then changed in 2000. Górecki uses different media of Polish tradition but above all he draws on musical tradition. National elements are expressed in a variety of ways. Most frequently he cites Polish musical sources in their original form or makes few alterations to them. According to Krzysztof Droba, “for Górecki a citation plays a specific role: it seems to appear naturally, as if it were a natural development of the composer’s idiom; an idiom that assimilates the cited material but is far from stylizing it.” Another method of alluding to traditional music is through the use of traditional melodic and harmonic phrases or just the sounds of the source in order to capture some of its mood. Sometimes an “initial” work inspires in Górecki an entire composition, at other times he only refers to it at key points such as codas. The influence of tradition on his creative process is so great that several different sources can be found in a single major work.

The national elements used by Górecki may be treated as an indication of his personal interests and set of values. Let us discuss these by grouping them according to the musical procedures by which the national category is expressed. The most important group includes elements taken from early Polish music. Górecki’s interest in this type of music dates back to the late 1950s and early 1960s. Here he primarily draws on Polish compositions of the medieval and Renaissance periods. Of particular significance for him is one of the most beautiful Polish Renaissance choral compositions for four voices, a piece by

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8See Thomas, Górecki, p. 193.
9Droba, Od “Refrenu”, p. 94.
10See Thomas, Górecki, p. 84.
Wacław of Szamotuly known as *Modlitwa, gdy działki spać idą* ("A Prayer for children going to bed").

The Cantus firmus from this song is found in as many as three of Górecki’s compositions: *Choral w formie kanonu* (“Choral in canon form”, 1961), *Muzyka staropolska* (“Old Polish music”, 1968) and String Quartet No. 1 entitled *Już się zmierzcha* ("Dusk is falling", 1988). An anonymous 15th-century song called *Laude digna prole* has been used by Górecki twice: first in the short signal *Wratislaviae Gloria* (1968) and then in the coda of his Symphony No. 2 (1972). Other pieces of early Polish music have been used only once. In his *Trzy utwory w dawnym stylu* (“Three Pieces in old style”, 1963) Górecki uses the cantus firmus of an anonymous 16th-century, four-part *Pieśni o weselu najasniejszego króla Sygmunta wtórego* (“Song of the wedding of King Zygmunt II”), while in the above-mentioned *Muzyka staropolska* he also uses a 16th-century organum *Benedicamus Dominum*. In the *Kantata o św. Wojciechu* (1997, 2000) Górecki introduces motifs of the sequence *Salve, sidus Polonorum*. String Quartet No. 1 is typical for this group of works (see music example 1). Some sections of the work are composed using canon techniques. An Old Polish melody is found in the viola part, while the other instruments play the melody in retrograde motion, inversion and retrograde inversion. Each time the canon is very quiet and slow, evoking the mood of an evening prayer like in the music by Wacław of Szamotuly. The canon sections are separated by “fortefortissimo” sections in fifths.

While early Polish music elements are noticeable only to qualified listeners, more familiar elements of Polish folk music are recognised by almost everyone. Górecki composer appreciates Polish folk music


12From the *Antiphonal of the Brothers of the Grave of Christ at Miechów*.


14From the *Antiphonal of the Nuns of St Clare at Nowy Sącz*.

15From the Diocesan Museum at Tarnów.
for its simplicity and sincerity. He refers to the anthology of Polish songs by 19th-century ethnographer Oskar Kolberg\(^\text{16}\) as the entire history of Poland.\(^\text{17}\) Górecki knows Polish folk music from personal experience. Already in the 1960s he travelled and recorded highland music.\(^\text{18}\) In 1992 he paid tribute to Szymanowski by citing *Harnasie*

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\(^{17}\)See Thomas, *Górecki*, p. 149.

\(^{18}\)It is worth noting that Górecki’s first contact with music from the Polish Podhale region was through Szymanowski’s ballet *Harnasie*. 
in his own composition *Concerto – Cantata*. He also played with local musicians – on the violin with, among others, Władek Obrochta (d. 1993), whose ancestors had been close friends of Szymanowski. Gorecki is at his closest to folk music in his collections of songs for an *a cappella* choir written 1979-1984. These song collections include *Szeroka woda* (“Broad waters”, 1979), *Wieczór ciemny się uniża* (“Dark evening is falling”, 1981), *Wisło moja, Wisło szara* (“My Vistula, grey Vistula”, 1981), *Trzy kołysanki* (“Three lullabies”, 1984), *Ach mój wianku lawendowy* (“O my little garland of lavender”, 1984) and *Idzie chmura, pada deszcz* (“Cloud comes, rain falls”, 1984). Unfortunately, only three of the six collections have been published so far. Although the original folksongs were drawn from various sources, three collections are particularly prominent: Oskar Kolberg’s 19th-century collection, Jadwiga Gorzechowska’s collection, and Jadwiga Gorzechowska and Maria Kaczbina’s collection. The songs used by Gorecki come chiefly from the regions of Mazowsze, Kurpie and Pomorze. Each of Gorecki’s collections is compiled according to a particular theme, e.g. Polish rivers or life seen through the eyes of a woman. Gorecki treats the folk songs from all six collections in a similar way. The folk melodies are maintained in their original forms. The tempo is predominantly slow, the mood pensive rather than cheerful. In certain songs there is a striking arrangement of meter, e.g. alternating double- and triple-time or the combination of a lively triple-time mazurka with two undulating chords in double-time. The treatment of the songs is decidedly homophonic. Harmonically, the composer persistently applies the dominant chord in the second inversion. From time to time a chromatic inflection is introduced in the melody or harmony (see music example 2).

The Symphony No. 3 (1976) can also be mentioned in this context. Its last part includes a folk song *Kajże mi się podziół mój synocek miły* (“Where has he gone my dearest son”). It is a song from Opole whose text originates from the time of the three Silesian

19See Kolberg, *Dzieła wszystkie*.


21See Jadwiga Gorzechowska and Maria Kaczbina, *Jak to dawniej na Kurpiach bywało* (“How it was once in Kurpie”), Warszawa 1969.
uprisings (1919-21), although the melody probably dates back to the 19th century. Górecki first presents the basic form of the song in triple-time against a background of double-time chord undulations, before introducing a short cycle of melodic variations. While in his vocal pieces Górecki uses folk music from various regions of Poland, his instrumental compositions are primarily associated with the music of Podhale. A synthetic impression of how Polish highland musicians perform can be discerned in the middle part of the String Quartet No. 1. Here Górecki divides the musicians into two pairs: one plays the leading melody, while the other plays the ostinato. In some excerpts the violins play in major and minor thirds, which is typical for melodic instruments in highland folk bands. A clear allusion to highland folk music can be found at the end of the fourth movement from his Symphony No. 1. Here violins play a perfect fifth (a-e) pppp.
Furthermore, in the second part of *Lerchenmusik* a cello and clarinet play their arioso in parallel thirds. Górecki himself admits that two constantly recurring structures in his music such as the motto *e-f♯-g* or the turn *e-g-f♯* have highland provenance. Górecki’s ideal is to compose music that reflects the atmosphere of the mountains. Pieces that fit into this category include his Harpsichord Concerto where an incredibly fast succession of sounds symbolizes highland wind, and the second movement of his Symphony No. 3, where a seemingly hummed melody rises above the orchestra to symbolize the silence of a mountain landscape.

The next group of national elements in Górecki’s music is associated with Poland’s religious tradition. His *Pieśni kościelne* ("Church songs"), completed in 1986, and the more modest *Pieśni Maryjne* ("Marian songs"), completed a year earlier, are his greatest tribute to this aspect of Polish culture. Neither of these collections have yet been published. In both cases Górecki used as his source the *Śpiewnik kościelny* ("Church song-book") compiled by Jan Siedlecki in 1878. For the 20th century this book, containing many old songs, remained one of the main sources for hymns and other music sung in Polish churches. Górecki’s choral treatment of selected melodies is similar to his instrumental works.

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22 Thomas, *Górecki*, p. 118-119, provides a list of works with these two motives.
23 Górecki has spent a great deal of time in the mountains, he frequently went hiking there and in 1978-1989 hired a house on the banks of the Czarny Dunajec. He has listened to the mountain rivers and streams, the Halny and Orawski winds as well as to other sounds of nature and to the silence of the mountains. All these experiences have developed in him the opinion that the nature of the mountains forms the most beautiful organ in the world.
26 From this book Górecki selected 4 of the 5 songs to the Virgin Mary and 20 of the 21 church hymns. Some texts and melodies, either separate or together, have been in his works several times. An example of this is the widely known hymn *Pod Twoją obronę* ["Under your protection"].
to that of the above-mentioned folk songs. Church music is as much of an influence on Górecki as that of the highlands. Much of his original music, not cited from other sources, is written in the church style. Examples of this are his Dwie pieśni sakralne (“Two sacred songs”, 1971), Amen (1975) and Beatus vir (1979) (see music example 3). It is interesting to note that the last of these works was commissioned by Cardinal Karol Wojtyła for the 900th anniversary of the murder of Stanisław, Bishop of Krakow, who was later made a saint.

The most common feature of national identity is the use of Polish texts. Górecki composed over a dozen works for choir or solo voices with accompaniment that are based on texts of Polish poets such as Julian Tuwim, Juliusz Słowacki, Cyprian Kamil Norwid, Stanisław Wyspiański and Maria Konopnicka. Julian Tuwim (1894-1953) is the poet whose texts Górecki has used most often. In his avant-garde Epitafium (1958) he used Tuwim’s bitterly ironic aphorism commenting on the period following the poet’s death. A choir is the conveyor of this aphorism, supplemented by small drums, cymbals, piccolo flute, trumpet in C and viola that are played in a high register to produce a sharp sound (see music example 4).

Years later, in 1972, Górecki wrote Dwie piosenki (“Two songs”) for a choir of four voices which explore the same register. These two songs apply quite different aesthetics.27 Rok i bieda (“Year and poverty”) is a slow Mazurka whose d-Aeolian mode arises from Górecki’s motto. Ptasie plotki (“Bird gossips”), on the other hand, is a lively, quickly recited song which uses the rhythm of a Krakowiak.

As has been pointed out above, national elements form an important component of Górecki’s music. Their presence does not diminish this music in any way or limit the audience to compatriots. This was emphatically proved by the Symfonia pieśni żałosnych, with Polish texts and Polish melodies.28

27 The poems have been taken from Julian Tuwim, Wiersze (“Poems”) (J. Tuwim, Dzieła, Vol. 1), Kraków 1955, p. 295 and 296.

28 Its fourth recording from 1992 (Elektra Nonesuch 9 79282-2. Dawn Upshaw, soprano, and London Sinfonietta conducted by David Zinman) has become very popular in Great Britain and the United States of America.
Music example 3: H. Górecki, *Dwie pieśni sakralne*, No. 1
Music example 4: H. Górecki, *Epitafium*