

## **I CARE ABOUT RHYTHM. AN INTERVIEW WITH KATARZYNA BONDA**

She is dubbed the “Queen of Polish Crime Fiction”, which is hardly surprising given that Katarzyna Bonda’s novels have sold over a million copies. The main protagonists of her thrillers are the criminal profilers Hubert Meyer and Sasza Załuska, but the value and success of her books relies on many other interesting characters. This polyphonic prose has earned Bonda, once a wannabe pianist, numerous awards, including the Audience Award at the International Crime and Mystery Festival in Wrocław.



**Grzegorz Chojnowski: A quaver or a minim?**

**Katarzyna Bonda:** A minim.

**I have to say I'm quite surprised... An opera house or a philharmonic?**

A philharmonic.

**Madame Butterfly or Elton John in concert?**

Tough choice. Elton John.

**Listening to music in the car or at night?**

Listening to music in the car at night.

**Chorus or verse?**

Verse.

**Do you play or have you played any instruments?**

I used to play the piano. From the age of five until near the end of high school. I was never planning to become a writer, this wasn't my childhood dream at all – I was supposed to be a pianist. I would practice several hours a day, my father had to take on an extra job to buy the piano – which was a very eccentric thing to do in small-town Hajnówka, many people found it downright absurd. But I liked this training. I loved getting new sheet music and learning it, so that later on, in the dark, I could focus on playing and interpreting the piece. I was convinced that I would end up in some philharmonic orchestra and that music would play an important role in my life.

**So why didn't Katarzyna Bonda become a pianist?**

I think it happened when I was in the penultimate year of high school – the time of making choices. I went to my professor and told her my plans – I had thought she'd support me, but she said: "You know what, Kasia, there are so many other interesting art disciplines – photography, for example...".

**And this was enough?**

I think this was the most brutal way I could have found out. But she knew me well, she knew that what I loved most was perfecting a piece and playing for myself, but I felt blocked at concerts. I wouldn't have made a good pianist. Concerts are the most important thing. You prepare a piece in order to perform it, not the other way round. So my current occupation, writing books, is something for me – here, the entire fight takes place out of sight. When the reader takes a book, it's already over, they have no awareness of this struggle.

**Do you have a favourite composer?**

It's still Chopin – his music hasn't aged in the slightest. I love the dark space and sadness of his music. It's difficult to play, but I was good at it. Apparently I have brilliant hands – they're quite large, but I have slender fingers. I was able to play Chopin's chords, for example the *'Raindrop' Prelude*.

**Does your musical education and experience help you write?**

Yes, especially in getting the feel of the language of a novel. I'm always very cautious about the rhythm and melody of the language. Of course the plot and structure of a given scene are key, but the language is important too. It takes people a relatively short time to read my thick books – apparently they're easy to 'digest'. This isn't down to the informal, colloquial or sometimes vulgar language, but to the melody of the story. I owe this ability to music. This is stronger than me, I've had it in my blood ever since I was a child. Besides, the same hemisphere of our brain is responsible for musical and analytical, mathematical thinking – and the rational approach to life is something I hold dear.

**Writing novels could be compared to composing. It's like arranging a symphony for a number of instruments and voices.**

If I hadn't had that musical experience, I would probably be daunted by the task of writing a novel. Writing short stories or a different literary genre is completely different. In a novel, all the elements come together to create a whole. I didn't become a musician, but I believe that fate has pushed me to a place where I can avail myself of this other opportunity thanks to music.

**If we treat a novel like an orchestral score, then of course the solo voice is the most important one, but in your case virtually all instruments, all sections are important.**

This solo voice, the main protagonist, acts as a guide to this world. The reader follows Hubert Meyer or Sasza Załuska, but the most important events take place in the background, among characters that only appear in this particular volume. You have to hear all these sounds in your head: the harp, the violin, the moment when the double-bass or drums come in. When I'm writing subsequent scenes, I know what I should bring out, which notes should be played in what order. Music and writing are very similar. I now like to take my daughter to the philharmonic, because I think that music, especially classical music, is able to give order to our unconscious reality, it's like an alphabet, something that gives you a sense of security.

**And yet in *Lampiony (Lanterns)*, which is set in Łódź, you can only hear hip hop and rap. Did this music seem more appropriate to you?**

Yes, because we're talking about the explosion zone. Not only because this volume is devoted to the element of fire, but also because almost all protagonists are angry about the problems plaguing their city. Rock

music wouldn't be able to convey that, but rap is ideal, because it has this kind of edge to it which I associate with picking at a wound or free-riding. I don't listen to hip hop, but I think this music brilliantly conveys the emotional space of the guts of this city.

**In *Girl at Midnight*, you chose to include 90s music – grunge, Nirvana...**

This is because a large part of the plot is set in this decade. There are also Róże Europy [an alternative rock band formed in the 1980s – translator's note], which was an important band for young people at the time. After all this was a breakthrough period when, after the end of communism, we experienced a wave of rock music from the West. Music served as a good binder for different aspects of the book, connecting individual threads and people. If we see Kurt Cobain on the T-shirt of one of the protagonists, this sends a certain message to the reader, and builds his or her relationship with the novel.

**So you don't listen to rap, but did you have a Kurt Cobain T-shirt in your wardrobe?**

I used to wear one.

**In *Girl at Midnight*, the plot is built around a song – a hit single. Do you also have an all-time favourite song?**

I wouldn't be able to pick just one, it changes with time. Change is something permanent in my life – every now and then I shed my old skin and don a new one. In the past this song was *Jedwab* by Róże Europy, and Nirvana was my favourite band. Of course these things stay with us, but new sounds keep on coming. Certain events from our lives are associated with music, with specific songs – which don't always have to be outstanding to strike a chord with us and illustrate our emotions. I once worked with Marcin Wrona [the Polish film director who died in 2015 – translator's note] on a script – and I have a song by Adele playing in my head whenever

I think about this time and Marcin, which might seem absurd to those who knew him. Of course all my subsequent boyfriends also have 'their' songs from the time we were together, but I'll spare them now and won't give you any titles.

**And *The White Mercedes*? I guess there's not that much music there, because of all the flashbacks to World War II.**

There's music in this novel too. I name a Belarusian rock festival and quote some songs. This is a festival I used to go to. For Belarusians rock was like a breath of freedom – they were deprived of it for many long years, they still are, so they take it out in music. I'm not one to show off my knowledge of music, performers and songs. The music is in the background for a reason and it serves

a specific purpose. If someone tells me that they haven't noticed it when first reading the book, I take it as a compliment. This is not my point. The plot is the most absorbing in a crime story, but I take care about each detail, because everything is important in how a book is received.

**What music will we hear in *The Red Spider*?**

I can't reveal that. But there will be music. You've inspired me with our conversation, I think it'd be good to throw in some classical music.

**When will the book be published [in Poland – translator's note]?**

In 2018.