

Penderecki's Journey

BY DAN WEBSTER



Birthday honors may range from a pat on the back to the touch of a jeweled sword on the shoulders of the kneeling hero. But how to classify the near-Olympic celebration preceding the 75th birthday of Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki? Has any composer—ever—been swept into such a tidal flow of honors, performances, tributes and world travel on the occasion of a 75th birthday?

Verdi? Strauss? Stravinsky? Puccini? Doubtful, but for many reasons. Mass communications, ubiquitous sound reproduction and speedy travel were not theirs. But for Penderecki, the times and the planets have aligned themselves so that his every work, boosted by political coincidence, by historical events and by the theatricality of his writing, has sounded—and touched—listeners in Jakarta, Rabat, Melbourne, Tokyo, Warsaw, Philadelphia and... and...

When Philadelphia hosts the composer in October, it will be one city among dozens devoting performances and honors to the peripatetic Pole as he continues a world-circling journey which began a year ago and will return him to Warsaw for his actual birthday on November 23.

His has been a remarkable journey. Born in a Poland under the heel of first Nazi and then Soviet occupiers, he found music the path to spiritual freedom. He espoused no compositional style and accepted few dicta from the

past. He had found a new musical world, and from the earliest pieces shocked listeners and apparatchiks with his ideas.

His music seemed based in political storms. His first international hit—that word is apt—was his *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima* (1960). His score looks like flights of airplanes across the page, and the grinding agony of the writing—string players played below the bridge to produce that anguished outcry—gripped audiences everywhere. Was it the emotional power of the subject or the uncanny skill of the writing which made it an instant concert entry? At any rate, the work became part of everyday language around the world. The Philadelphia Orchestra played it (in January 1969). It was its first brush with the composer.

Yet Penderecki's music had been heard here first in 1968. John Butler created *Ceremonies* for the Pennsylvania Ballet using three early works, *Fluorescences*, *Cello Sonata* and *Anaklasis*, all of which were iconoclastic, but harbingers of his core thinking through his entire long life of invention. Those three works treated instruments in new ways, asked listeners to forget traditions of harmonic progress and to savor clouds of new sounds.

Page 16: Krzysztof Penderecki, photo by Donald Lee

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That this music could come from a nation muffled by Soviet rule made it sound all the more exciting. How could the closed Red Fist allow Penderecki—and his predecessor Witold Lutoslawski—to imagine such stuff and to send it out into the world? The answer is that it had no choice, for music—like ideas—has a way of slipping under doors, and into the air where other musicians hear it.

Penderecki levered open closed doors, too, by writing music for the Church. His catalog has included big works from the ancient traditions of the Church, from the beginning to this minute. *Aus den Psalmen Davids*, written 50 years ago, swept like wind through Poland. His early *St. Luke Passion* is a standard for chorus and orchestra; his *Polish Requiem*, written at the height of Poland's move to democracy, remains one of his most performed works, and has been programmed during his birthday progress. The Philadelphia Orchestra, programming his monumental *Utrenja*, brought the composer here for the first time in 1970. That work, about the entombment of Christ, filled the Academy of Music with mystical sounds, like that of voices heard within ancient stone cloisters, the Temple Chorus singing antiphonally in Old Slavonic, the orchestra challenged by complex rhythms. Baffled, Eugene Ormandy had to have the composer mark the score so he could conduct in four.

The composer looked around Philadelphia with an air of amused detachment rather like that The Beatles wore on their first American visit in 1965. Philadelphia was not a hotbed of musical innovation when Penderecki came. Walking past Curtis Institute, he asked who taught composition. When told that Gian Carlo Menotti and Rosario Scalero shared teaching, Penderecki said “Ah, Salieri.”

Nothing in his scores seemed ordinary or traditional. He wrote *Dimensionen der Zeit und der Stille* for choir—and big percussion group. He rejected the word “experimental” because he was not seeking the unusual for its own sake. He knew what he wanted and was searching for ways and instruments to fulfill his vision. When available performers or instruments could not, he invented instruments—like the tubaphones in his *Seven Gates of Jerusalem*—to place the exact sound in the precise moment in the music.

No area of music has been out of his reach. He has written for electronic instruments and written works on tape, including *Ekechejria* for the ill-fated Munich Olympics in 1972. He took notice of jazz in 1971 with *Actions*. Film buffs treasure his music in *The Exorcist*, *The Shining* and the mountain climbing epic *Fearless*. His massive operas—*The Devils of Loudon* and *Paradise Lost*, in particular, have demanded their place in the repertoire.

What of iconoclasm? Listeners who admired his daring, his ear for innovation, his utter independence, also have charted what appeared to be a steady retreat from adventure. He heard the rumblings and said that in his youth he had had to invent, to explore, to question. But, he noted, everything in music has been discovered, he didn't need to seek something new.

When 14 composers were invited in 1995 to write sections of the *Requiem of Reconciliation* for the victims of World War II, the audience in Stuttgart heard wildly disparate musical styles. Luciano Berio, Judith Weir, Marc-André Dalbavie, Alfred Schnittke and György Kurtág were among them. After hearing Penderecki's *Agnus Dei* they came away believing Penderecki was reconciling himself to music in A minor.

The composer would agree, for he consciously has searched music's history for styles and approaches that appeal to him. Critics identified a period when he was heavily influenced by Bruckner. Bruckner of all people. But he has also reconstructed Bachian counterpoint, classical gestures and post-romantic manners. Nothing musical is foreign to him!

That seems borne out by the repertoire for his world tour. In Philadelphia, the Orchestra is playing his *Concerto grosso for three cellos and orchestra*, a recent instrumental work reshaping the musical styles of Vivaldi and other early clas-

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sical writers. Orchestra musicians will play his *Clarinet Quartet* (Hello, Brahms), his *Sextet*, the *Violin Sonata No. 1* and solo works for tuba, cello and viola. The titles are from historic tradition; the music from radical restructuring.

On the World Tour, he conducts orchestra works with chorus, his new *Horn Concerto*, *The Polish Requiem*, *Stabat Mater* and even his hit, *Threnody*. This 75th birthday recognition is more than deserved, for Penderecki has written from his heart to the hearts of people around the world. That isn't learned in the conservatory, nor is it a commercial trick. Musicians value his innovations at the same time they marvel at his grip on tradition, even convention. Music for an occasion? His music makes the occasion. Music for a sacred text? It rings with conviction and spirituality. Instrumental work? The *Horn Concerto* and the *Concerto grosso* reassure that there are far horizons in music.

The birthday progress—something Victoria might have envied—touches Philadelphia and moves on. Penderecki is the focus of wonder and admiration for having created a repertoire that speaks directly to listeners on every continent, every land, in every ensemble. No wonder so many listeners want to see him this year.