

Penderecki at the Beinecke Library

The Tangeman Lecture delivered as a preconcert interview before a performance of the composer's Credo, April 22, 2005

Good evening. I'm Greg Dubinsky, lecturer in history at the Yale School of Music. Maestro Penderecki, could you tell us something about the genesis of the Credo that you're going to perform this evening.

Yes. It's a pretty long story. Almost twenty-five years ago Helmuth Rilling, director of the Oregon Bach Festival, asked me to write a new piece, a new sacred work. It took many, many years because I was engaged in other pieces. In my first talk with him I wanted to write a Christmas oratorio, which I gave up after a couple of months. Then a *Stabat Mater*—I had written a *Stabat Mater* a capella earlier, but this time it was supposed to be a piece with soloists and choir and orchestra. Then we landed on the idea that I would write a Mass. In my long list of sacred works I never wrote a Mass, really. So I agreed, and after another very large-scale piece, *Seven Days of Jerusalem*, which I finished in 1996, I decided I would now start the Mass, and maybe it would be my last sacred work.

So I started the Mass. I started it with the Sanctus and with the Kyrie, the Agnus Dei; I was afraid to start the Credo, because the Credo is not a text that can immediately inspire a composer. I remember that this was in February, and the first performance was to be in August, in Oregon. In February I started the Credo because I thought that if I did not write it now there would be a Mass without a Credo. There are some Masses like that. I started, and the Credo grew and grew. I forgot about the other movements. After the Credo was an hour long I decided that I was not going to continue with the other movements. Maybe my *Credo* is the longest Credo ever written.

How did you approach the Credo text? I noticed you've added some texts to the traditional words.

Yes. The text is a rather dry text. I was looking for some literature, of course sacred literature. I took other texts like the *Commentary to the Credo*, especially from the Holy Week liturgy, and also others like apocalypses. There are many short but important texts that made this form possible

Did they start to amplify or describe?

Yes, to sometimes edit a text that is dry with some other poetic text.

When I was listening to this work I noticed that you also repeat texts at various points. This is a work of very symphonic dimensions.

Yes, of course, but this is something that all composers do. There are some pieces like the Bach *Amen* that take maybe five minutes—and it's only "Amen." So of course I do repeat. Yes, this piece has a symphonic form. The end of the piece is like a romantic idea, to bring all the subjects together in a finale, to finish.

The end of this Credo I find quite striking. I find your approach to this Credo text overall, in terms of the dramaturgy of the Credo, much different from Credos we might know.

Yes, at that time I was very late. I am a composer who delivers a piece sometimes a couple of days before the performance. This time it was the same. A week before the first performance, actually it was in July, not in August, a week before the performance I finished the last page. In Oregon, I was writing. And I knew, of course, that it's only the Credo, so it has to have a grand finale. And it does. Of course, this is a different kind of Credo from what other composers did, which is only one movement. Here it is the entire piece, with a closed form.

I find the tenor—the tone of this music—for the last half of this Credo rather surprising in some respects, and much different from previous settings. The Resurrexit, which you set, and the Et vitam venturi saeculi, texts that have been set by composers in a very joyful manor, with bright major fugues, have a much different flavor under your pen. Would you care to ...

Ah, yes. Of course, the *Resurrexit*. There are two movements that are almost similar, by all the composers. These are the *Crucifixus*, of course, which is the central movement in this piece. It has been greatly influenced by Bach, by the *B Minor Mass*. That was maybe my real inspiration. The *Resurrexit*, that's the only fragment that allows the movement to ride to allegro or presto. In such a long piece, which is an hour long, I made use of this text, adding, of course, some things, especially from apocalypses ...

I find this apocalyptic tone to be very, very striking, and very, very impressive. It has some unusual sounds in it, as well. Is there anything...

You mean the instruments? I'm always looking for new instruments. For one hundred years we have not had really new instruments; we have to use the same—almost the same—instruments as composers one hundred years ago did. Maybe the newest instrument we use is the saxophone, which is over a hundred years old. So in each piece I try to introduce a new instrument. In this case the percussion instrument I used is the boobam [an idiophone composed of bamboo tubes]. The boobam is the percussion instrument closest to the marimba, but more striking. I think it's a fantastic instrument, and the player, he is excellent.

Where did you find this boobam?

I have a very good friend who is the producer of percussion instruments. Sometimes I visit him and he shows me some instruments.

Have you used some of his other instruments before, or is this the first time?

In *The Seven Days of Jerusalem* I used tubaphones, [which are] also percussion instruments. They are new instruments, never used before. Long tubes. They allowed me to go very low, to A-flat sub-contra [two octaves below bass clef staff]; no other instrument can really use this range.

That's remarkable. It [the boobam] makes an appearance again near the end of the Credo; when talking about sins and so forth this material returns. As I was listening what particularly struck me about your Credo is the very opening of this piece. When the text talks about Dominum Jesum Christum and Filium Dei you have almost ecstatic music, bright triumphs, soaring very, very high. Perhaps it is promising an ending for this composition that will be equally bright and affirmative. And what strikes me about the last third or so of this piece is the degree to which the tone stays stoic; there is a lot of lamenting and anguish, and that tone remains present except at the very end when you have the extraordinary effect of the chorus. They have been singing in

minor chords and with open fifths, but they disappear, and then as if from a distance a major triad suddenly appears, bringing just a little ray of hope to what had been a fairly anguished Credo. I wonder if you can say something about this.

I don't know, because I am always writing a piece as a whole. I'm not a composer who sees the piano and plays some chords. The concept is, from the beginning, thinking of the whole piece. And of course I have high points connected with the text, but sometimes not, sometimes connected with the music, which is even more important, I think. I am sometimes only using the text while writing my music. The music goes and the text follows. This many composers did, I think, before me; it's nothing new. But this is maybe the only way to overwhelm the large form.

Czesław Miłosz, the Polish poet, has said that he felt that one of the almost defining characteristics of Polish poetry, especially after the Second World War, and of Polish literature, is what he sometimes terms catastrophism—in other words, an awareness of either impending doom, or of the precariousness of everyday life. He said that one of the great contributions that Polish art has made since the Second World War is that because Poland has been through so much history its art serves as a great witness to that. Do you feel that at all?

Yes, of course. It happens that I lived through the War, and then the long, long, dark Russian occupation. There was not much space for light and hope sometimes, only despair. So it's not only Polish literature, Russian is the same, and Czech, and all of the Eastern European literatures, behind the Iron Curtain. And the music. And of course Slavic music is more dramatic and personal when compared to Western music. Very romantic. I was very much aware of where I was living. I wrote some pieces that are very much connected to that history that I witnessed. In 1959 I wrote *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima*, and then the *Auschwitz Oratorio* in 1967. *The Passion according to St. Luke* is not only the passion of Christ, it is a very dramatic work. And other pieces, of course, because of the place. If I lived in New Zealand, maybe my music would be completely different.

I'm sorry for my voice, because I caught a cold, and I am happy that I am conducting and not singing tonight.

Speaking of conducting, you do conduct a great deal. Is that important for you as a composer?

Yes. I learn a lot, much more than you learn in a school, conducting. Because I deal with live musicians, not with a computer, fortunately. And they give me...always, it is a source of inspiration for me, working with an orchestra. And of course there is something that I will always say, that the composition is much richer and bigger in the imagination than the composer is able to really write. This happens in each piece I am writing: I think I could have written it much better than I did, but there is no way...and something is lost during working. But conducting, especially if there is a good acoustic, a good orchestra and choir and soloists, then I can bring it back, something that has been lost. Some atmosphere, some color of the orchestra. So there is always excitement in recreating the piece once more, and again and again. This is important for the composer. In the past almost all the composers we know were also conducting, with few exceptions.

As a performer as well as a composer you occupy yourself a great deal with the music of the past, and it keeps percolating up through your music. I've noticed in different interviews that you've given over the years that the composers who are very important to you change with the

times. Bach, and then Ockeghem...

Bach is staying always. I change other composers, but never Bach.

So who are you taking a fresh look at nowadays, composers that you've maybe enjoyed in the past but who all of a sudden seem much more...

Sorry to say, but I prefer always the past, and the distant past sometimes to the contemporary. Of course some composers of the twentieth century have been very influential in my music. Certainly Stravinsky, Bartok, Olivier Messiaen. Not so many, actually. But always I find inspiration in Beethoven's music, and of course Bach, Monteverdi, sixteenth-century polyphony. I think this is the most important for me, the inspiration. I'm forgetting—of course there was a period, maybe a short one, when I was very much inspired by, for example, Bruckner, Mahler, but maybe more Bruckner. In that time I wrote my *Christmas Symphony Number 2*.

You've been composing many, many symphonies, especially in the 1990s. I think you're completing symphony number eight now.

I'm here, in New Haven.

I'm noticing certain sorts of parallels in your thought. Many of your works deal with giant cosmological themes: apocalypse, redemption. You're very interested in large symphonic forms—large works that sort of have a beginning, a genesis, and movement through to an end, that are sort of a world unto themselves. I also realize you've created a personal world all for yourself at your home...

Yes, every five or seven years I take a sabbatical, and write music that I really like, which is chamber music. This is a fantastic time for me. In 1999 and 2000 I wrote two large chamber works—this is always very personal music. It's my *musica domestica*. And they were written in my country house, quiet, in my park. I don't know if you know this—I'm very much interested, and I started an arboretum at my country house. It's a big park, over six hectares, fifteen hundred species of trees. This is my passion after music. Sometimes in the spring I plant the trees maybe even more than music. In my asylum there I am writing chamber music. This is the place where I feel in the mood to write very personal music.

We have just a little time left. If I might ask you one final question. In the 1970s you taught here at Yale at the School of Music. Do you have any recollection, fond recollections, of your time in New Haven, or any remarks about that?

Yes, I was writing here very important pieces, like the *First Violin Concerto* for Isaac Stern. I wrote here *Paradise Lost*. Many, many pieces. I must say that now after working with the orchestra and choir and soloists here I think that almost thirty years later there has been enormous progress in the level of the young musicians. Working with them is really a pleasure, no problem at all. They're very open, technically fantastic. I don't think I could have done thirty years ago such a concert as I hope will be tonight.

We're all in great anticipation of this concert tonight. Thank you very much.

Born in Debica, Poland, in 1933, Krzysztof Penderecki is one of the most esteemed and widely discussed composers of our time. The development of his compositional style has reflected the evolution of new music from the avant-garde of the 1960s up to the present day, through which time he has preserved his own distinctive voice. He is the recipient of numerous awards, prizes, and honorary degrees, and is an honorary member of the Royal Academy of Music in London, the Royal Academy of Music in Dublin, the Accademia di Santa Cecilia in Rome, the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm, and the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, and bears the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany and the designation Freeman of the City of Strasbourg.