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CONCERTS

Fusion of spiritual and political

AS THE culmination of a full day of events commemorating the centenary tomorrow of the birth of the pianist Arthur Rubinstein, the Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki was at the **Festival Hall** on Sunday to conduct the BBC Symphony Orchestra, Singers and chorus, in the first British performance of his "Polish Requiem."

Put together slowly over a period of four years, between 1980 and 1984, the dedications of some of its individual sections are in themselves an indication of the affirmative, the at once deeply personal and nationalistic, spirit in which it was conceived.

Composed first was the Lacrimosa, commissioned by Lech Walesa in 1980 as a memorial to those killed ten years before, in the 1970 Gdansk uprising. Next came the Agnus Dei, written for the funeral service in April 1982 of Cardinal Wyszinski. Six more were added to its 14 sections for a concert at the Kennedy Centre in 1983 celebrating Penderecki's own 50th birthday.

The Recordare, which weaves into its solo and choral textures the old Polish hymn Swiety Boze, is dedicated to the remarkable Polish priest Maximilian Kolbe who willingly sacrificed his own life on behalf of others in Auschwitz in 1941, the opening of the Dies Irae, with its violent and turbulent imagery, to the victims of the 1944 Warsaw Ghetto uprising on its 40th anniversary.

Throughout, the sacred and the political, the spiritual aspiration of an entire nation and people and the inner security of the composer's own faith, intricately mesh and fuse in music pervaded with an impassioned conviction and ardently expressed commitment.

Yet for all its fervent sincerity, its compulsion and burning desire to be written, it is only intermittently successful in fulfilling both its ambitions and the spacious grandeur of its romantically inspired design. Where it grips the imagination most plausibly is in those passages that are still clearly related to Pendericki's earlier style in the anguished, drooping intervals of the Lacrimosa, the affecting simplicity of the unaccompanied Agnus Dei, the shimmering instrumental clusters, slowly ascending choral and orchestral glissandi, and cavernous, long-held bass notes in which time seems to have stood still.

Elsewhere and particularly in the more recently composed sections, it tends to settle all too easily into music of a dense and coagulated grandiloquence, its effect dulled an undermined by a superficially rhetorical dependence on a few basic ideas that posses neither the strength nor the character to bear the visionary' weight of so formidable an enterprise.

With splendidly confident choral singing, and an able, if rather rough and ready quartet of solists, it emerged under the composer's direction as a work that only occassionally lives up to its clearly expressed purpose, to create a sense of hope, of freedom and spiritual rescurrection, while posing few problems, and winning from the capacity audience an enthusiastic ovation.

Robert Henderson