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Review of Zbigniew Preisner, *Requiem for my Friend*

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ABSTRACT: A review of the London premiere of Polish composer Zbigniew Preisner's *Requiem for my Friend*, which marked its first performance outside Poland. Preisner is best known for his award-winning film work, but he crosses over into the classical, and is signed by a well-known classical label. An investigation of Preisner's background leads to his pseudonym, the late 18th-century Dutch composer Van den Budenmayer, whose work contains elements of Beethoven and Mahler.

[1] One living composer to watch out for is Poland's Zbigniew Preisner. March 19, 1999, marked the premiere at London's Royal Festival Hall of Preisner's *Requiem for My Friend*. It is his first work written especially for live performance and recording. Preisner is best known in the United States as an award-winning film composer, foremost for his collaborations with Krzysztof Kieslowski, the friend in the title of the Requiem ([Appendix 2](#)).

[2] Many 20th-century composers have been tempted by film music at some stage. Generally, I consider film music too popular for its own good, but Preisner caught my attention in 1993. Missing the correct screen for my movie, I had accidentally wandered into a film by the Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski. "Three Colours Blue" turned out to be the story of a classical composer who dies in a car accident, and his widow completes his final symphony.

[3] The symphony at the center of the story, which surfaced only in fragments, was monumental, quite unlike anything composed in our century. There were elements of Mahler and Beethoven, but also of Sibelius. Interestingly, simple woodwinds filled the gap between the fortissimo and the pianissimo. There was a noticeable contrast to composers like Gorecki, who is clearly identifiable as a modern imitation of old styles. The final chorus, in French, was drawn from the biblical text on charity: "Though I speak with the tongues of angels, if I have not love, my words would resound but with a tinkling cymbal." In 1995, editors at Oxford University Press wrote to Kieslowski when updating Oxford's music encyclopaedia. They had listened to the symphony segments written by Preisner's pseudonym,

Van den Budenmayer ([Appendix 3](#)), and had had an equal reaction to my own. Now they wanted to include this "brilliant, late 18th century, Dutch composer" in the encyclopaedia, and did not believe Kieslowski when he wrote back to state that the music was written by a living, Polish, composer. Oxford University Press ended up accusing Kieslowski of protecting the privacy of a long-dead genius.

[4] Ignorant of who is who in film music, I had made a similar glitch. Half-hoping to discover some great, unknown talent stacked away in a little wood hut somewhere in the steppes of Poland, I wrote to Kieslowski from Canada in 1993, only to be told that no full-scale work by Preisner existed. He advised me to buy the soundtrack, and it became the first time for me to do so. If you like film music, Hans Zimmer is good. Preisner is good, too. The difference is that Preisner crosses over. Due to the nature of his chosen medium, he has mainly been reviewed by film reviewers, but he was recently signed on by the classics label Erato (Warner) in Paris. The death of Kieslowski may mark a new era in Preisner's life, and perhaps more concert works will follow the Requiem. Meanwhile, his music continues to reach people across a wide range of fields, including--very obviously--the classical.

[5] "We signed him because we believe that Preisner's work spans the classical field more than that of any other film composer," remarks Erato's Christian Hallwig in Paris. "His soundtracks have sold hundreds of thousands of copies, especially in the United States. We hope to reproduce this success with the Requiem."

[6] Kieslowski's death of a heart attack in 1996 prompted Preisner to write *Requiem for my friend*, a highly unusual, modern work for full orchestra which elicited standing ovations and three curtain calls at the sold-out Royal Festival Hall. It is Preisner's first concert music, written not for a mainstream orchestra but for the people who provide Preisner with his roots: the Polish orchestra and soloists with whom he has performed for decades, and whom he knew as a young man. Despite numerous offers, Preisner has never left Poland to live elsewhere. He is loyal to his country and his people, and it is easy to see why. At the end of the concert, a Polish woman beside me, who was not acquainted with Preisner, got carried away during the standing ovations. She exclaimed with moist eyes "we are so proud of him"--speaking, one presumes, for all of Poland. Preisner's rootedness translates into his music, eliciting images of a composer who remains centered in himself throughout the piece, despite the trials and tribulations which are the theme of his unusual Requiem.

[7] The work is divided into two parts, Requiem and Life. Following the Erato recording in Cracow, London marked the first live performance outside Poland.

[8] Requiem is written in nine movements. It is characterised by typical Preisner features, long reverberations and expressive vibrato. He uses small male choir, string quintet, organ and percussion. The voice of an astonishing Polish soprano, Elzbieta Towarnicka, dominates both, the first and the second part of the work. In the second part, Life, the musical background grows into full chorus (the forty-piece Salisbury festival chorus) and a sixty-piece orchestra (the BBC concert orchestra) which includes alto saxophone and recorder.

[9] The Times of London was not quite sure about the high number of minor thirds which hold the two parts of the work together. It made no mention of some of Preisner's more unusual features, which are only for acquired tastes (like using the alto saxophone for a solo between the two parts). But like everyone else, London's most prestigious newspaper praised Towarnicka. The "Lacrimosa," which features prominently in both sections, suggests that her voice must be somewhere around the seven or eight octave range.

[10] Not much is known about her, an interview was not possible. A short biography informs that she studied with Barbara Walczynska at the Krakow Academy of Music in 1978. She worked for the Krakow opera, singing soprano parts in operas like *La Boheme*, *La Traviata*, *Dido and Aeneas*, and *Tosca*. She performs regularly in Germany, Italy, France, Russia, the United States, Canada and Sweden. Oratorio and cantata are her preferences.

[11] Preisner is self-taught. He was born in 1955 near Krakow, Poland, and graduated from Krakow university with a degree in history. His interest in music caused him to buy scores and read along as the music played on the radio. He started writing small pieces for cabaret before going into larger works. He met Towarnicka when working at the local cabaret in Krakow, and then Kieslowski in the early eighties. The three began a collaboration which would take them around the world—and result in many of Kieslowski's best-known works.

[12] Preisner's music belies his lack of formal training, perhaps fueling the myth that some of the best composers are self-taught. He writes for every instrument in the orchestra and then some, including the organ, and even wine glasses. The London concert finished with the theme from "Blue," played on a recorder. In stark contrast, this was preceded by the full-chorus "Song for the unification of Europe," which had provided the chorus finale of the symphony in the movie "Blue."

[13] Eduardo Ponti, a filmmaker and the son of Sophia Loren, was chosen by Preisner to create a concept for the stage version of his Requiem. "A requiem is a ceremony for the Living as much as for the Dead," Ponti says. "The show was to be a dialogue between the one who has left this world, and the one left behind here. I wanted it to be simple, human, direct, inspired by the integrity and purity of the requiem. I wanted an ambience of light and shadow, but also of courage and hope."

[14] Preisner describes his own music as "border line. It is not quite film music, and not quite classical. Somewhere in between. I make creations, creative music. I think in the Requiem I took one major aspect from film music. My music has names, the title defines it: Silence, or Peace. 'Life' is a story about life, the part we have lived, and the part we are still going to live. I think about death, and for me the question is 'how shall we live and die with dignity?'"

[15] Preisner wrote the first part of the Requiem while Kieslowski was in hospital, dying. "He had gone for a bypass operation, and was joking about things he would do when he would leave again. But he never did," recalls Preisner. "I composed some music for his funeral, just organ and voice, and later expanded it into a full requiem. The final part of the work is a prayer of Hope, asking for the strength to go on living." "This is very personal," Preisner says. "I am asking for the strength to go on living in this sad situation. In my life, there were only very few people I wanted to spend time with. One of them was Krzysztof. This prayer is also a request, that such friendship could be found once more."

[16] Recently, Preisner was commissioned to write the music for People's Century, a 26-part series on BBC television documenting the history of the 20th century. Co-produced with WGBH Boston, it is going to be shown on PBS in the United States.

Appendix 1: Some of Preisner's Major Film Works

- Kieslowski: Three Colors Blue, White, Red, Dekalogue, Double Life of Veronique
- Malle: Damage
- Holland: Europa Europa
- Mandoki: When a Man loves a Woman
- Ponti: Liv
- Babenco: Foolish Heart

Appendix 2: Principal Awards and Citations

1991

- Los Angeles Critics Association Award, : the year's most outstanding composer of film music, first citation

1992

- Los Angeles Critics Association Award, second citation
- Golden Globe Award nomination for At Play in the Fields of the Lord
- Cesar Award of the French Film Academy (nomination for Dekalog and Double Life of Veronique)
- Award of the Polish Minister for Foreign Affairs (for presentation of Polish culture abroad)

1993

- Los Angeles Critics Association Award (year's most outstanding composer, third citation)
- Golden Globe Award (Nomination for Three Colours Blue)

1994

- Major of Krakow's Medal (for lifetime achievements)

1995

- Cesar Award of the French Film Academy (three colours Red)

1996

- Cesar Award of the French Film Academy (citation for Elisa)
- Royal Television Society Craft and Design Award for Original Music (title music: People's Century)

1997

- The Silver Bear, Berlin