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## Kenneth Walton: Never mind the World Cup, Polish national pride will be on show at the St Magnus Festival

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By Kenneth Walton

SO FAR, Poland has not had a wonderful 2010. After the air tragedy that wiped out key government officials and military leaders came floods that swamped much of the southern part of the country, claiming yet more lives.

In relative terms, the failure of Poland's national football team to reach the World Cup Finals might seem only a minor setback. But the fact remains, this is a country that could do with something to raise its spirits and boost its national pride.

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All eyes, then, will be on Orkney next week, where the annual St Magnus Festival has chosen to place new Polish music and musicians at the heart of its midsummer arts programme, as well as celebrating the bicentennial of the country's most famous musical son, Fryderyk Chopin.

It was always on festival director Glenys Hughes' mind to mark the Chopin anniversary, but once the initial idea took root, the coincidence of another major UK-wide initiative led to a blossoming of the Polish theme to a point where it now dominates the six-day programme.

That initiative was Polska! Year, a series of events throughout the UK aimed at presenting the very best of Polish arts and culture, which opened in the spring and which ends in Orkney.

Polska! Year itself evolved as a way of answering questions that seemed to be worrying a lot of British people, not least the somewhat pejorative notion that every Polish immigrant is a plumber. "Between 2005 and 2007 one million Poles moved to the UK," explains Pawel Potoroczyn, director of the Polish Cultural Institute and prime instigator of the cultural initiative. "British colleagues started asking honest questions, such as who these people are, and how come most of them speak decent English? We decided to deliver the answer in cultural terms."

As for Hughes, her interest began as a faintly personal indulgence – which seems perfectly reasonable as this, rather poignantly, is her final year as artistic director after three decades' association with the Festival, firstly as co-director with Peter Maxwell Davies, then as sole director.

"As a pianist, I really wanted to do something with Chopin on his anniversary this year, so I began looking at possible ways of developing links with Poland. I was invited to Warsaw and Krakow to see some contemporary Polish artists, and realised that not only were there some very interesting figures there, not so many were familiar to UK audiences."

The inevitable happened. Hughes took full advantage of the Polska! Year opportunities. But this is not a wholesale sell-out. She has engineered a subtle integration of the Polish theme into a wider St Magnus programme that has an unmistakable familiarity about its format and content.