

# Music by the living

## Rare programs bring new classical works before the public

BY STEVEN MAZEY

If every week at the concert hall were like this week, composers would be happier and critics wouldn't keep accusing orchestras of turning classical music into a museum art form devoted almost entirely to famous dead people.

By coincidence, two Ottawa orchestras are performing music by living, breathing composers this week. For music lovers who think that today's composers should be heard in the concert hall alongside the classics, it's a rare feast.

Tomorrow and Thursday, the National Arts Centre Orchestra will perform major pieces by three acclaimed contemporary composers. Britain's Oliver Knussen, 48, who has been called the greatest living composer-conductor after Pierre Boulez, will conduct a program consisting entirely of music that was written or arranged between 1941 and 1996.

One of only four NACO concerts of this season's 18 subscription programs to feature contemporary music, the evening includes Knussen's *Symphony No. 2* for soprano and orchestra (with American soprano Lisa Saffer as soloist); German composer Hans Werner Henze's *Symphony No. 1*; American-Canadian composer Peter Lieberman's *Free and Easy Wanderer*; and Stravinsky's

arrangement of Tchaikovsky's *Blue Bird Pas de Deux* from *Sleeping Beauty*.

Next Monday on the same stage, conductor David Currie will lead the 100-piece Ottawa Symphony Orchestra and the Ottawa Choral Society in the world premiere of Ottawa composer Peter Paul Koprowski's *Millennium Cantata: Restitution*, set to poetry by Ellen Brodigan. Part of a concert that also includes music by Stravinsky and Charles Ives, Koprowski's 35-minute piece for orchestra and choir was commissioned by the Music Canada 2000 Foundation, the organization that commissioned dozens of pieces of new music for ensembles across Canada.

Currie has often shown a strong commitment to Canadian music. Though the orchestra presents only five concerts this season, two include works by Canadians, and the orchestra in recent seasons has performed substantial pieces by composers including Jacques Hétu and Ottawa composers Koprowski, Patrick Cardy and Jan Jarvlepp. It's a better ratio than many Canadian orchestras can boast.

Still, orchestra managers say new music can be difficult to sell. The NAC Orchestra allows subscribers to put together their own packages by choosing the six concerts they want to see. This week's concert was not the season's biggest seller.

But Koprowski applauds orchestra director Pinchas Zukerman for bringing Knussen to town for such a concert. He says that if such programming were more common, audiences would be more open to new music.

"I'm thrilled that Ottawa audiences will be able to hear Oliver in a program like this," says Koprowski, 53. "I have great respect for him both as a composer and a conductor. This is exciting programming. Music lovers should not miss it."

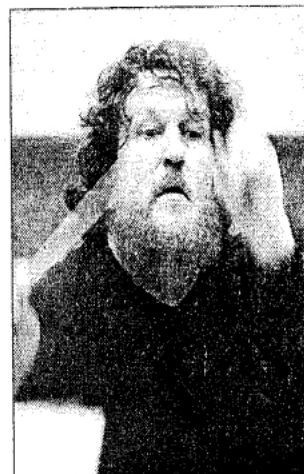
The NAC is holding free pre-concert talks at 7 p.m. each day at which Knussen will chat about the music on this week's program.

Koprowski, who was born in Poland and moved to Canada in 1971, says such informal lectures are exactly the kind of thing orchestras should do to reduce the wariness that some conservative audiences feel about new music.

"I think when orchestras are presenting new music, they should make better use of the composer to make connections with audiences. And I think we composers have a duty to try to communicate with people.

"I think some people have memories of composers' program notes in the 1960s that sometimes sounded as if they were written only for other musicians."

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BRIGITTE BOUVIER, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Featured musicians from top: Oliver Knussen, Lisa Saffer and Peter Paul Koprowski.



# Living: Eager for new music

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Koprowski isn't sure if he will talk to the Ottawa Symphony audience before next Monday's concert because, he says, the poetry he has used for the piece can speak for itself.

Koprowski has enjoyed more success than many living composers in convincing orchestras, not just in Canada but internationally, to perform his music.

Pinchas Zukerman and the NACO played Koprowski's *Epitaph* on their 1999 cross-Canada tour and on their international tour last fall. Orchestras in Canada, the U.S. and Europe have performed his concertos and symphonies at sites including the Tanglewood Festival.

In 1997, Koprowski won the prestigious ~~\$25,000~~ Chalmers National Music Award. The ~~Toronto-Based~~ awards jury praised "the great beauty of Koprowski's music, the mastery of his orchestral writing and his remarkable ability to speak with his own voice. His music is expressive, highly sophisticated and while demonstrating a high level of craftsmanship retains a capacity to move and excite audiences."

Currie, who has programmed Koprowski's music regularly, said at the time that the composer's music "speaks emotionally and directly to audiences, with tonal music that speaks from the heart."

Next month, CBC Records will release a disc devoted to Koprowski's concertos, featuring the Toronto Symphony, conductor Jukka Pekka Saraste and soloists including violist Rivka Golani, flutist Robert Aitken and accordion virtuoso Joseph Petric.

Koprowski knows that orchestras sometimes have a difficult job selling new music, but he says "they owe it to audiences and to music to take a leadership role by presenting this music with celebration and excitement. I long for a time when audiences are excited to hear what a certain composer will say next, the way I was excited about composers when I was growing up."

With the right approach, it's possible to develop audiences who are eager for new music. The Winnipeg Symphony's new-music festival draws capacity crowds every winter and has made audiences more open to hearing new music during the regular season. The Ottawa Chamber Music Festival has had similar success presenting entire concerts of new music.

Koprowski says his experience with the Albany Symphony in November was a model for how new music can be presented. The orchestra, conductor David Alan Miller and cellist Maya Beiser performed the premiere of Koprowski's *Cello Concerto*, a 40-minute piece. The only other work on the program was Bruckner's *Symphony No. 7*.

The orchestra organized several events around the performance for audiences, including a pre-concert talk that drew a capacity crowd of music lovers eager to hear about the piece. There was a fund-raising party that used Koprowski's presence to attract people interested in chatting with the composer. The *Albany Times Union* published an advance article about the performance that gave as much prominence to Koprowski's pieces as to Bruckner's.

The concert was sold out. An Albany reviewer praised Koprowski's piece as "substantial and seriously introspective, decidedly tonal and very deep and personal."

"I had the feeling everywhere I went that the orchestra took the music seriously and was presenting it without apprehension or apology," says Koprowski, who once heard a conductor jokingly apologize to an audience in advance of a piece of new music.

That kind of mocking attitude tells an audience that such music is unworthy of attention, he says.

"If you present music in the right way, you can develop an audience that's curious and interested. That's all that composers ask for, and of course, more performances," he says.

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Oliver Knussen conducts the NAC Orchestra tomorrow and Thursday at 8 p.m. He gives free pre-concert talks at 7 p.m. each day. Tickets start at \$25, with half-price tickets for students with I.D.

David Currie conducts the Ottawa Symphony Jan. 22 at 8 p.m. Tickets start at \$15 for adults and \$13.65 for students and seniors. Tickets to both concerts are available at the NAC box office, or, with surcharges, through TicketMaster outlets (755-1111)