

at by Elissa Poole

mid-career, composer **Peter Paul Koprowski** describes himself as a former prodigy, a dinosaur, a would-be philosopher and a family man. Born in Lodz, Poland, in 1947, Koprowski has now lived more of his life on Canadian soil than in his birthplace, and if there is a tendency for the musical establishment to identify him with central European currents, he views himself as solidly Canadian. His work—most of it orchestral—has been acclaimed for its accessibility, sophistication and expressive power, and he is booked so far in advance that he is usually several commissions behind. “Music,” says Koprowski, “is always flowing in my head.”

His numerous awards include two Jules Leger Prizes (in 1989 and 1994) for chamber music and a 1997 Chalmers National Music Award for four orchestral works (*Symphony of Nordic Tales*, *Saga*, *Ancestral Voices*, and the *Viola Concerto*). He has written music at the request of flutist Per Oien and the Oslo Philharmonic, the National Arts Centre and The Berlin Philharmonic Wind Quintet; he was the Canadian Opera Company’s composer-in-residence in 1988; and he has been a professor of composition at the University of Western Ontario in London since 1974.

This year has been a busy one for Koprowski. His *In Memoriam Karol Szymanowski*, *Ancestral Voices*, *Symphony of Nordic Tales* and *Sinfonia Concertante* were performed in February and March by orchestras in Edmonton, London, Ont., and Vancouver. Early in May, he conducted a concert including his *Ancestral Voices* in Caracas, Venezuela. The same work was scheduled for a May performance by Ottawa’s National Arts Centre Orchestra under Trevor Pinnock.

Koprowski’s new *Trumpet Concerto* was unveiled March 6, by soloist Eric Schulz and Sinfonia Mississauga, in that city’s new Living Arts Centre. And a recording is in the works: Following performances of his *Viola Concerto* by Rivka Golani and his *Flute Concerto* by Robert Aitken, both with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra in June, the TSO, conducted by Jukka-Pekka Saraste, will record a CD for CBC Records devoted entirely to Koprowski’s concertos.

An early start

A quiet, ruminative man with a fascination for scientific literature, Koprowski discovered his vocation early. He was eight when he entered the State Music School in Lodz to study piano, and he started composing almost immediately. Some of the piano preludes he wrote when he was only 12 are still, he thinks, worth playing today.

Koprowski kept his composing a

secret until he was 16. But once his fledgling works were out of the closet, he was taken under his theory teacher’s wing and the world of music started to open up.

“I dove right in,” he says, “assimilating all the current trends of modernism, from aleatoric music to serialism, from theatre pieces to minimalism. But as soon as I was through with one of these so-called trends, I felt there was something wrong with the philosophy behind them. I realized that none of them were mutually exclusive—not even tonality.”

Subsequent study took Koprowski to Paris and Nadia Boulanger, probably the single most influential musical peda-

gogue of this century. Boulanger gave him confidence in his talent and prepared the ground for his present style by making him aware of the various common denominators in musical thought that have engaged composers throughout history.

When Koprowski emigrated to Canada in 1971 he was still feeling the pull of two different aesthetics. “My earliest influences were Szymanowski and Scriabin, but I grew up around the musical *avant garde*—in a world of abstraction and metaphor, with Ionesco and Beckett and a strong dose of the absurd. There was a dichotomy right from the start.”

Gradually, however, he backed away from the *avant garde* and

looking for new values now. We are at a point of consolidation. Originality today is dependent upon the capacity to present *alternative*, not necessarily *new*, realities.”

In light of this perspective, Koprowski’s reverence for Brahms—a composer often labeled a conservative—is not surprising. Extolling Brahms’ *German Requiem* in particular, he says: “You can see through the moment to the wealth of history behind it. To me Brahms was as fascinating and as progressive as anyone else of his day.”

Koprowski’s personal history is as much a part of his music as is the history of music at large. Much of his own work, he says, is about the hurts and pleasures of family life. He thinks his most

ahead by a century



PHOTO: JIM ANDERER

“As composers we don’t have to reinvent the wheel,” stresses

Peter Paul Koprowski.

“The whole vocabulary is there for us to use. We must have the tools of the entire 20th Century at the tips of our fingers.”

the influence of composers like Stockhausen, and returned to earlier, less conceptual and more euphonious roots. (In 1977 he even revised one of his teenage compositions, the orchestral piece *In Memoriam Karol Szymanowski*. It remains in his catalogue of selected works.) Time-honored concerns like direction and arrival, melody, tension and balance engaged him to a greater degree, and his search for new ways of using traditional means took him as far afield as the Renaissance for inspiration.

“As composers we don’t have to reinvent the wheel,” says Koprowski. “The whole vocabulary is there for us to use.” In particular he stresses, “Composers must have the tools of the entire 20th century at the tips of their fingers.”

Koprowski now roams freely among the diverse modernist materials of contemporary composition while remaining true to what is essentially an unabashedly Romantic aesthetic. If listeners catch glimpses of Schmittke, Shostakovich or Part in Koprowski’s music, they do so in passing, and while he may occasionally write passages in minimalist style, his music is never minimalist at heart.

In fact, Koprowski expresses a certain impatience with today’s experimental school. “We’re past the stage of research into sound and resources,” he insists, “and we’ve lived through the provocative aspect of music. That was authentic right after the war, perhaps, when there was a rejection of the old values. But we’re not

satisfactory collaborations have been with his wife, the poet Catherine Sivier, and he wrote his “tamest” work, *Nordic Tales*, as a piece his 14-year old daughter could relate to. “Music,” he says, “is a mirror of all you live through.”

It is also, of course, the marriage of inspiration—or the music flowing in Koprowski’s head—and craft. He has both in abundance.

“Sometimes people look at my pencil copy and are amazed that there are so few erasures. But I don’t start writing until I hear the whole piece in my head. It’s like looking through frosted glass: You know what it is but you don’t see the details. I sketch the moments that are the clearest first—a climax, a transition, whatever—but it might take a year to bring a piece from its inception to actually writing it down.”

That’s not to say there isn’t a fairly complex architecture at work in many pieces. The listener may simply not hear it. The mathematical proportions in *Sinfonia Mystica*, for example, aren’t audible. Nor is one likely to hear that his *Canzona* is totally serialized according to the Golden Proportion.

Koprowski’s sense of humor may also go undetected, since his scores are filled with oblique musical references. These private entertainments, or “red herrings” as he likes to call them, include such items as a waltz out of context or a fugue that breaks all the rules, a motive with obvious resemblances to Schumann or a joke on Wagner.

Chamber music more risky

Asked how his music might differ if he were to receive fewer orchestral commissions and more for chamber music, Koprowski surmises that it is this humorous quality—this love of the absurd—that might blossom. “Chamber music invites more risks,” he says. “Still, such a variety of commissions have come my way that I’ve managed to get out of me the things that needed to get out. But I’m curious: Without that stimulus, what would I become?”

With two big commissions to complete—one a cello concerto for the Albany Symphony, the other a string orchestra piece for The Thirteen Strings in Ottawa—Koprowski won’t get a chance to answer that question soon. Nonetheless, he can’t help pondering the mystery of inspiration.

“No matter how specific I try to be about the source of my music, I can’t explain the impulse. There’s magic about it: I hope I’ll never lose it, and I guess I hope I’ll never come up with answers to some of these questions.” **W&M**