



The composer as perfectionist: Continual revision and polishing

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Peter Paul Koprowski has finally decided to finish his compositions. It's not that his many chamber music and orchestral pieces are lying around in varying states of incompleteness, with movements missing or phrases ending in mid-measure. Rather, it's been a case of *Koprowski* continuously revising, polishing and reworking his music, even pieces that have already been performed.

"Right now," he says, "I'm

working on revisions of about two dozen pieces. Nobody denied Brahms the right to spend 20 years on his first symphony and I know that once my works are really finished the way I want them, they will be performed many times. The reason that my pieces have required so much revision is that I write extremely fast. I always have so many ideas. I get inspired—I do believe in inspiration—and I get a vision of a composition. It's not just a blur, but it's more or less concrete in its

form and in the way it will sound. I've done so many compositions so quickly that I haven't had the time to refine them. At least," he adds, "that's what's happened in the past. Now that I've decided to publish some of them once and for all, I'm trying to spend much more time on each piece I'm working on so I won't have to go through the process of refining them again and again."

Koprowski presently has several
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important commissions on his table, and will spend much of the next year writing, refining and, if he is to be believed, finishing them, "once and for all". These include a *Piano Quartet* for Quartet Canada, a *Piano Concerto* for William Aïde, *Requiem In Memoriam Nadia Boulanger* for the Courtenay Youth Music Centre, an *Organ Concerto* for Hugh McLean, a *Sonata for Horn and Piano* and an as yet untitled piece for string orchestra.

In order to find time to devote to these commissions, *Koprowski* will be taking a year's leave of absence from his post as Assistant Professor at the University of Western Ontario. *Koprowski* plans to spend much of his leave away from his home in London, Ontario, in the larger city of that name across the Atlantic, and he also hopes to attend performances of his music, not only in England, but also in Norway, Israel, Hungary, and his native Poland.

Koprowski was born in 1947 in the city of Lodz, a city whose roster of native-born musicians also includes Artur Rubinstein and *Harry Freedman*. *Koprowski's* parents, discouraged by the lack of musical success of Peter's older brothers, were not eager to have young Peter follow in his brothers' faltering footsteps. But the eight-year-old Peter insisted on taking the examination for the State Music School in Lodz. Despite having had no musical education himself, little Peter showed sufficient "musical" perception on tests of pitch and rhythmic discrimination that he was accepted.

"I began there by studying piano," he says, "but I wasn't all that interested in the piano. Right from the beginning, instead of practicing my lessons three hours every day, I would practice an hour and a half and then improvise for an hour and a half. My parents were very disturbed by that and laughed about the music I was 'composing' and my efforts to write down what I was composing without quite knowing how to do it. So, by myself, I read through all kinds of books on theory, harmony, counterpoint and orchestration. In a sense, I was self-taught in composition. I didn't actu-

ally start studying composition in school for a long time. I went on to the State Music College in Lodz simply as a pianist and hid all my compositions from everyone, because I completely lacked confidence in what I was doing. From the age of eight until about 16, I must have written more than 40 pieces for solo piano, plus a piano concerto and two orchestral works, but nobody ever knew about them except my closest friends at school. It wasn't until one of my friends spilled the beans about my composing to our theory teacher that I showed my pieces to anyone else. He asked to see some of my compositions. I was hesitant, but I showed him some of my piano pieces and a few chamber works and a week or two later he took me to see Boleslaw Woytowicz, the most senior of Poland's composition teachers. That was in 1964."

Woytowicz was then about to retire from active teaching, but so great was *Koprowski's* evident talent that Woytowicz took the young composer as his last student.

"Woytowicz opened me up a little bit," says *Koprowski*. "I had been very shy and he started to build my confidence." By the time *Koprowski* was graduated with honors from the College in 1966, he was well on his way toward a career in composition. He had written several works for performance by the school's students, including *Symphony Grottesque*, commissioned for the school's 20th anniversary, and an hour-long opera in 18th-century style. Another orchestral work from his student years, *In Memoriam Karol Szymanowski*, is one of those pieces *Koprowski* has never "finished"; this spring, he was still revising the score, some 16 years after he had started work on it.

Koprowski continued his studies at the Higher School of Music in Krakow, completing the five-year Master's degree program in only three years. While at the Higher School, from 1966 to 1969, *Koprowski* also became Music Director of *Ars Nova*, a group devoted to performances of new music. "It was really an excuse to get my own music performed," *Koprowski* admits. Among the works that *Ars Nova* commissioned were his *String Trio* and his *String Quartet*, his

most-played composition. "My *Quartet* has already been performed over a hundred times," says *Koprowski*, "in Poland and England and France and Canada, but even that piece is still a 'work-in-progress', still being revised, still unpublished."

The year 1969 found *Koprowski*, at age of 22, receiving his Master's degree, being commissioned by the Polish Union of Composers, lecturing at the State College in Lodz, turning down academic appointments at the School of Music and the Higher School in Krakow, and moving to London, England, to become Music Advisor of the Polish-language ZASP Theatre. "I wrote incidental music for their productions," says *Koprowski*, "and even an operetta. But this," he adds, "is the kind of music I try to forget."

Free tuition for one of the poorest students

While in London, something happened that *Koprowski* will never forget. His first composition teacher, Boleslaw Woytowicz, had written to Nadia Boulanger about the young composer, giving Boulanger *Koprowski's* London address. "She wrote to me and invited me to have an interview with her. One of her first questions was, 'How much can you afford to pay?' I told her that I was, at that point, very poor, so she said, 'Well, don't worry. I'll recover the money from someone else.' So I didn't have to pay her anything!"

Koprowski studied privately with Boulanger in London and Paris during 1970 and 1971, supporting himself with his assignments at the ZASP Theatre. "At that time," recalls *Koprowski*, "I had been confused as to where music was going, and where I was going musically. In the '60s, everybody was trying to do something different and revolutionary. Like everybody else, I had done some crazy things then too—12-tone things, happenings, multimedia, even a *Piece for Coughing*, a theatre piece for one person making coughing sounds. I did my Master's thesis on 'total theatre', which was then the latest form of expression, and then I lost hope in that,

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too."

His sessions with Boulanger changed all that. "Because of her," *Koprowski* says, "I haven't been confused since. My meetings with her were not only devoted to talking about my works but, more importantly, about music. It wasn't really composition that I studied with her, but the whole tradition of music. Basically, what I gained from her was faith in music and in the future of music. She made me realize that revolution wasn't the answer, and she showed me the parallels in developments that took place in earlier centuries and the common denominators that you can trace in all styles throughout the history of music. That doesn't mean I now believe in regression—I believe in evolution and, to some extent, revolution—but I don't believe in regression."

Koprowski also now believes in himself and his talent and for this, too, he credits Boulanger. "At that point," he says, "despite my academic successes, despite my professional activities, I still lacked confidence in my ability as a composer. One day, Boulanger simply exploded, 'You can do it! You've got to believe in yourself!' Woytowicz had told me this too, but it was Nadia Boulanger's credibility, that absolutely overpowering authority she had, that finally got the message through to me. Each hour spent with her was like getting your battery charged for the next 20 years! So, from then on, I realized that I had a responsibility to myself, to my audiences, and to music."

Armed with his new confidence, his new super-charged battery and his new sense of responsibility, *Koprowski* decided to start fresh, appropriately enough in the New World. In 1971, with the assistance of fellowships from the University of Toronto and the Kosciuszko Foundation in New York, *Koprowski* realized a long-standing dream and moved to Toronto.

"It may sound strange, but I had chosen Canada as the place I wanted to live when I was still a boy. As a child, I fell in love with my impressions of this country. I had always felt the need for nature and wide open spaces, of being able



to go 800 kilometres in one direction and not see anybody. You can't do that in Europe. As a child, I imagined myself being able to do that in Canada, and it became part of me. Then, when I was in my early teens, someone from Canada came to my school, and answered all sorts of questions about this country, and that triggered my interest even more. I read all I could about Canada, and I was also attracted by the fact that Canada didn't have as much tradition as Europe or even the United States, that it was a country that was newer, more open, where I could find myself at home. And when I came to Canada in 1971, I wasn't disappointed, either. I felt as if I had come home. I love driving across the countryside, all by myself. As a composer, I feel somehow purified whenever I do that."

At the University of Toronto, *Koprowski* began work that would lead to his Doctor of Music degree in 1977. "In my studies there with *John Weinzweig*," he says, "I learned to pay more attention to the practical aspects of composing, how notation relates to the performing situation. Thanks to *Weinzweig*, I became more aware that a composer needs to be concerned about every detail of a composition."

Meanwhile, *Koprowski* taught part-time at the University of Toronto (1971-73) and was appointed Assistant Professor at McGill University (1973-74) before joining the Faculty of Music at the University of Western Ontario in the Fall of 1974. There, he has been teaching theory and composition as well as conducting the university's

New Music Ensemble. From 1978 to 1979, he was elected Vice-President of the Canadian League of Composers, and he remains a member of the League's Executive Council.

Koprowski's "Canadian" works include *Canzona for 13 Soloists* (1972); *Sonata for Cello Solo* (1975); *Time, Space and Silence* electronic tape (1975); *Nocturne* for mezzo-soprano, harp, piano and percussion (1976); *Peripetelia* for orchestra (1977); *Youth Concerto* for band (1977); *Quotations* for voices, tape and synthesizers (1978); *Lullabies for an Angel*, for soprano, flute and piano (1979).

Koprowski's electronic pieces, *Time, Space and Silence* and *Quotations*, were outgrowths of his studies in Toronto with *Gustav Ciomaga*. "I took his course," says *Koprowski*, "because I wanted to convince myself that my suspicions were actually right, that traditional instruments still have much to offer and that I prefer to work with them." About *Quotations*, which he wrote for the *Canadian Electronic Ensemble*, he says, "I valued the experience, and I think I created something which made sense, but I now know that electronics is not my cup of tea."

Koprowski is much happier about his instrumental pieces. Of the *Canzona*, scored for three clarinets, two trumpets, two pianos, two percussionists and four celli, *Koprowski* says, "I'm still young and I hope to write a lot more music, but I feel very comfortable about this piece. I was very honest in it. It's hard to say of any piece that it's 'my best'."

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but I would have to say so about this one.

"I'm also very happy about the *Cello Sonata*, which I wrote for Tsuyoshi Tsutsumi, although I can still see points where I can refine it and I'm going to do that this summer. In the *Cello Sonata*, I feel I was coming back to something that I was doing years ago, around the time I wrote *In Memoriam Karol Szymanowski*—the use of a wider variety of intervals and milder textures, making the music perhaps more appealing to the ear."

Much of *Koprowski's* music is genuinely "appealing to the ear", and one always hears his obvious mastery of the craft of composition. His music seems to know exactly where it is going, avoiding the gaucheries often encountered in the music of other young composers. Describing the style of *Koprowski's* music is more difficult.

"Because of the environment in which I grew up," he says, "there

are similarities in texture and sonority between some of my works and the works of other contemporary Polish composers. But in terms of how I treat my material, the structures I use, I'm quite different from any other composer I can think of. I don't know to what extent an individual voice emerges from my music, but I know that I have, at least, been honest in everything I've written. It's always been *me*; I've never tried to be somebody else. Even when I was a boy, and wrote pieces that sounded like Rachmaninoff and Scriabin and Szymanowski, that was because that was the kind of music I felt. Since then, I've found myself not so much influenced by any specific styles as much as by some of the structural procedures of composers as varied as Ockeghem, des Pres, Brahms, and my boyhood favorites, Scriabin and Szymanowski.

"I want to write music," continues *Koprowski*, "that can become part of the repertoire of musicians in and outside of Canada. Whenever I've shown my music to

performers, they've always been interested in playing it. It's always been me who's withheld the scores, not following up on the opportunities for performances. I could have had hundreds of performances by now, but I preferred to wait until I could release the final product, until I was comfortable enough about each work to let it go and be on its own. I don't regret doing all this editing and rewriting, because I know that I've improved many works a great deal.

"I've only now decided to leave certain works as they are, or as I've recently revised them. I'm ready to publish now, because at last I know how several compositions will look, in their more or less final version."

"More or less final?" *Koprowski's* reluctance to finish his pieces is still there and, admitting this, *Koprowski* closes the interview with the comment:

"I just hope that ten years from now, I won't be talking to you about some further revisions I still want to make!" □