



Peter Paul Koprowski breaks from his usual style in first piece for NAC Orchestra

‘Something quite different’

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In the late 1960s, Peter Paul Koprowski was living in communist Poland and facing a very difficult decision. The talented young composer found he could no longer tolerate the oppression that was smothering his homeland.

His choice: He could stay, become political and likely face years on the run, or worse, in prison. Or he could leave to embrace his musical talent more fully.

“I couldn’t face the communist system and simply be neutral about it. I said to myself: ‘What can I do better than others?’ I knew that if I got involved in a political movement I would end up in prison and end up doing nothing that I was meant to be doing in music.”

And so he left to study music first in Britain and then later in Canada, where he was accepted as a doctoral student at the University of Toronto. One senses, when talking to Koprowski, that this remains a bittersweet decision.

“I came to Canada because I... felt I could work in peace in Canada and enjoy the beauty of the country.” Speaking from his cottage home in Eastern Ontario, he has been able to do just that.

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Mendelssohn's Reformation

Featuring: Podhale, a new work by Peter Paul Koprowski

What: National Arts Centre Orchestra with pianist Inon Barnatan

When & where: April 17 and 18, 8 p.m. at the NAC

Tickets: At the NAC box office or, with surcharges, through Ticketmaster

CHRIS MIKULA/OTTAWA CITIZEN FILES

Peter Paul Koprowski was a recipient of the NAC Awards, winning \$75,000 to write music for the NAC Orchestra.

Podhale: Composer of 'serious' music

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He is a well-recognized composer of what he calls "serious" music and he has a teaching position at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ont. His works are widely and regularly performed, including his latest, called Podhale, which will be revealed to the world April 17 in a performance by the National Arts Centre Orchestra.

This is the first of three works commissioned by the NAC through its NAC Award. Composers John Estacio of Edmonton, Ana Sokolovic of Montreal, and Koprowski each received a series of commissions and residencies worth \$75,000.

The award aims to ensure that Canadian repertoire continues to grow. Each composer will create three pieces for the NAC Orchestra over a five-year period. And each will teach students during the NAC's annual Summer Music Institute.

Estacio's first, *Brio: Toccata and Fantasy for Orchestra*, will be performed April 20 by the NACO in Toronto. Sokolovic's first piece from this award will be performed May 15.

The fact that Podhale is the first piece to be performed may just be the luck of the draw. "I work simultaneously," Koprowski says. "I was rather well advanced on what will be my second piece when I abandoned it. I decided to do this piece."

That's quite normal with me. I reject about 90 per cent of what I come up with and quite often I start anew.

"I don't know why. I've been that way for my life. I've never been courageous with my compositions and therefore I refuse to publish because I have always felt that my music needed a few finishing touches. I guess I will die before I finish. There is always something you can do with a composition."

Despite his constant tweaking, one thing is certain about this composition.

"This piece, in the end, I decided to make into something quite different from what people normally expect from me — the deep, dark music that I'm best known for. Every once in a while I write compositions that are on the light side and this is one of them."

Underpinning the piece is a drinking song from the Carpathian Mountains in southern Poland. "A Polish person in the hall I'm sure will recognize (the song) that probably he would hear at every reception or party in Poland which accompanies a volume of alcohol."

The song is called *Sto Lat* (May You Live 100 Years). "I don't know how or why I did it, but it works."

He writes, not surprisingly, with a pencil. And he works out ideas on separate pieces of paper. He puts them on the floor and he walks around them.

You can almost picture him pacing the floor of his cottage staring at the notes for Podhale.

In the end the piece is about 13 minutes, as requested by the NAC, but really "the piece wanted to be longer." The piece also wanted to be bigger than the medium-sized orchestra that will play it, and so he has written a bigger version.

The piece is, in a way, inspired by a Polish composer that Koprowski knew from his university days, Henryk Mikołaj Górecki, who lived in the same southern region.

In a way this "homage" to Górecki has brought Koprowski's music full circle. He used to debate music with Górecki as a young man, their disagreements representing the kind of splits that occur in musical composition.

He was more of a "modernist" back then.

But at some point he discovered that he needed to broaden the scope of the music he was working with.

"I decided to embrace more than the current trends."

He decided that being good was more important than in being new. "I had a belief that if you did something well, it would be new anyway."

He has, he says, destroyed many of his modernist works. He found them unnecessary in his repertoire.

"To be a composer today, I think if you are not at peace with yourself and you are constantly striving to be different and modern, that must be quite a challenge."

What does it mean to be modern and current? "I'm not sure." Because it changes from day to day.

"One thing I can say about my music is that I never concerned myself about what is in vogue, I was always hoping that what I write will be equally valid 20 years later."

So far so good. This is the artist's life.

"It's hard work. It's commitment and it's sacrifice."