

When music never sleeps

Peter Paul Koprowski has won pretty much every composing award Canada has to offer. Paul Gessell learns the North Gower musician has only just begun.

Most people find their thoughts occasionally invaded by idle daydreams; Peter Paul Koprowski has, to deal with entire new symphonies that come crashing out of nowhere and then refuse to leave.

He can be driving down the highway, walking his two German shepherds, trying to fall asleep or engaging in any other normal day-to-day activity when, all of a sudden, the string section of an orchestra starts playing, kettle drums rumble and maybe a whimsical trombone acts up.

Sometimes, the music plays more frequently than Koprowski, the composer, would like. It distracts him from other pursuits, like sending his agent papers requested two months ago, getting his music published or arranging for recordings of his compositions. At times, that hard-working orchestra in his head can become a curse.

"It is, absolutely," Koprowski says as he sits in his favourite black leather armchair in the library of his large, modern home in North Gower, a half-hour drive south of Ottawa. "You know, how often I wish I were a plumber and that I have a 9-to-5 involvement with my profession."

But Koprowski feels much too passionately about music to give it all up for plumbing or any other profession.

He's been composing since age 11, while still in his native Poland. Now, at age 50, he feels he is just in "mid-career." His music is constantly evolving. He's not sure what will come next, but he smiles in anticipation at whatever it will be.

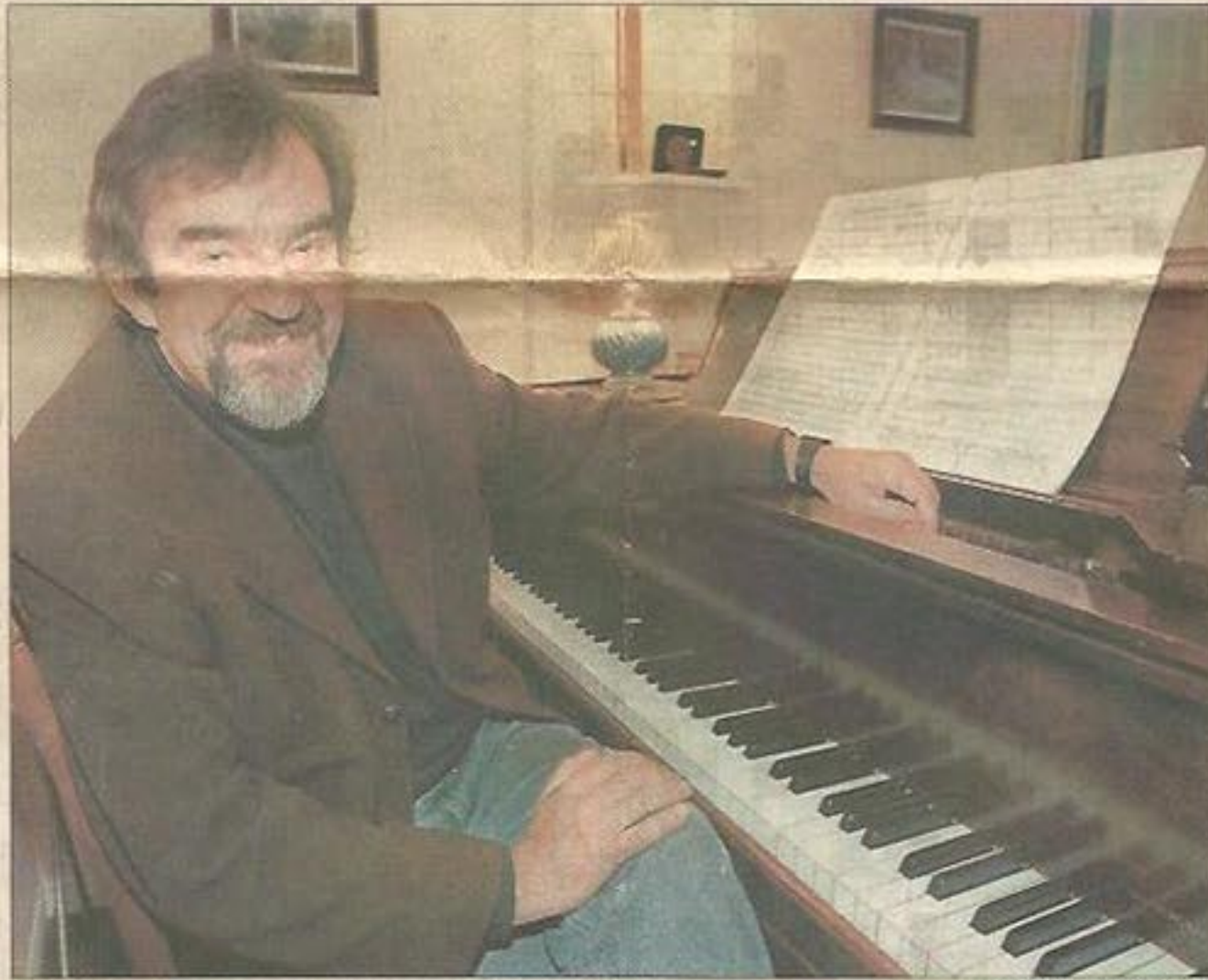
Koprowski has won pretty much every composing award Canada has to offer. The latest, announced recently, is the 1997 Jean A. Chalmers National Music Award for four orchestral compositions, *Nordic Tales*, *Saga*, *Ancestral Voices* and *Viola Concerto*.

The award includes \$25,000, and a trophy someone accidentally dropped and broke the day he received it in Toronto. (Ottawa audiences will be able to hear *Ancestral Voices* performed May 13 and 14 by the National Arts Centre Orchestra.)

Still, the awards have not made Koprowski a household name. Every major orchestra in Canada, including the NAC Orchestra, and some in the United States and Europe, particularly in Poland and Scandinavia, have played his music.

But utter his name and the classical music specialists at Ottawa music stores look puzzled. Their computers find no Koprowski CDs in stock, although some of his compositions exist on recordings by such diverse outfits as the Oslo Philharmonic and the CBC Vancouver Orchestra. A mass-marketed CD dedicated to Koprowski compositions has still to be produced.

Signs of Koprowski's music are everywhere in his home. There is a niche for his trophies, including two Jules Leger Prizes for composing, beside the grand piano in the living room. There is a dining room table completely papered with sheet music from compositions still in progress. There's a cabinet in the library filled with tapes of his recordings. There's a



JOHN MAJOR, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Peter Paul Koprowski has been composing since age 11 and has many awards to show for his long career, although they have not made him a household name. He recently won the \$25,000 Jean A. Chalmers National Music Award for four orchestral compositions.

cabin in the backyard with another piano so Koprowski can compose in private and not jar his family with music fragments jumping out of the living room piano at irregular intervals.

This is a man who has to think for a moment before he can recite his hobbies. (He mentions, half-heartedly, swimming and skiing.) He admits he

A composition, almost fully formed, enters his consciousness, all the main elements there, demanding to be scripted.

does not relax enough and then congratulates his wife and 14-year-old daughter for tolerating his obsession with composing.

Koprowski starts talking, excitedly, about a cello concerto he is creating. It is difficult to tell, as he paces the room, whether he is referring to some long-range project or a composition taking shape in his mind at this precise moment.

He is, after all, simultaneously subjecting himself to an interview, hunting for one of his ever-present cigarettes, fiddling with the sound level of a tape deck, debating whether to answer the ringing telephone and managing to sound coherent.

So, why couldn't there be a cello

playing, unheard by regular mortals, in his mind at the same time?

A minute later, he returns to sit in the black leather chair. Simultaneously, he lights a cigarette, dismisses the phone, answers some questions, points out the highlights of one of his concertos playing on the stereo and, for all anybody knows, continues to compose, surreptitiously, that cello concerto. (Could that sudden, slight twitch in the armchair be caused by the crash of cymbals ending the first movement?)

Koprowski, like his music, can accomplish several things simultaneously. Much of his music involves instruments and harmonies competing against each other. There can be a sweet-sounding flute melody hounded by urgent booms from the percussionists. Sometimes there are two parallel groups of strings vying for attention.

Much of Koprowski's music is fast, insistent and aggressive. One does not fall asleep while a Koprowski piece is being played.

Even when the beginning is sentimental, something unexpected — an angry drum roll or a burst of minor chords — soon interrupts to put the listener back on the edge of his or her seat, wondering: What on Earth will happen next?

Back in the 1960s, Koprowski experimented with what he calls the "avant-garde." That's a reference to unmelodic music that cannot ever be hummed

in the shower. Trying to understand it can be as difficult to the uninitiated as trying to visualize what the model really looks like in one of Picasso's cubist paintings.

Now, Koprowski composes music he calls more "romantic." The sound is more traditional, but all dressed up with sly jolts from the avant-garde.

Koprowski says his music now is a "fusion" of the traditional and the modern, a hybrid born from the mating of old and new. Aside from that, he eschews labels and resents those who try to pigeon-hole his music.

Koprowski started studying music seriously at age eight at the State Music School in his hometown of Lodz, Poland. Composition was immediately his first love.

"Right from the beginning, instead of practising my lessons three hours every day, I would practise an hour and a half and then improvise for an hour and a half," Koprowski told the magazine, *Canadian Composer*, in 1980. "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."

In 1969, at age 22, he had earned his master's degree. He promptly moved to England, where he studied under the legendary Nadia Boulanger there and in Paris.

"In the '60s, everybody was trying to

do something different and revolutionary," he told *Canadian Composer*. "Like everybody else, I had done some crazy things then too — 12-tone things, happenings, multi-media, even a *Piece for Coughing*, a theatre piece for one person making coughing sounds."

Then, in 1971, Koprowski fulfilled a childhood dream and moved to Canada, beginning work at the University of Toronto that would lead to a doctorate in 1977.

There followed a series of academic postings and stints as composer in residence. Koprowski currently teaches composition at the University of Western Ontario in London, commuting every second week from North Gower.

He takes pride in the fact that, in the past 20 years, every one of his compositions has been a commission.

Koprowski likes the peace of his home in a small subdivision of North Gower, but sometimes misses the socializing with peers that could be found in a city. Some of that socializing could also help his career, by putting him in contact with the power-brokers of the music industry. But Koprowski seems to have little time or patience for music politics.

"Let's face it, I don't want to be remembered as a composer whose biography will list the number of boards and committees that person was on. This is not the most important thing in the end."

"On the other hand, at the time, if you choose that road, you meet people; you become well-known."

Koprowski says he is sometimes astounded when he hears his music being played.

"How on Earth did I do it?" he sometimes asks himself. "What do I know about viola, flute or whatever? It's a kind of intense moment followed after almost by a surprise that whatever comes out, comes out the way it does."

Listening to his own music can be "exhausting and emotional." In one recent incident, he had to ask a famous conductor, whom he declined to name, to stop playing a recording of his music because he found the experience too intense.

After 30 years of professional composing, Koprowski still does not understand the process.

He knows that a composition, almost fully formed, enters his consciousness, that by the time he starts pencilling in notes or playing a few bars on the piano, the main elements and the accoutrements are all demanding to be scripted.

Painters don't start in one corner and work toward another, he says, without knowing what the finished product will look like. It's the same with music; the entire piece is in your head before the notes appear on paper or fingers touch the keyboard.

But where does the music come from? How does it, so completely, seize him? Who is playing that cello that insists on filling his thoughts?

Koprowski lacks answers. He simply offers thanks, saying: "It's a magical and humbling experience."

Paul Gessell is a Citizen arts writer.