



The Composer Essay Project

Nikolai Korndorf: his music and aesthetics

By Jocelyn Morlock

I first encountered Nikolai Korndorf's (1947-2001) music in the listening room of the University of British Columbia's Music Library in 1999, when a fellow student handed me a disc from Sony Classical called *A New Heaven*, and told me I needed to listen to it.

He was right.

On this disc is Korndorf's 45-minute long piece for large orchestra and soprano, *Hymn No. 3 in Honour of Gustav Mahler*. Hearing it was a revelation. I don't use this word lightly. By 1999, I had already heard and studied music of many styles, cultures, and eras, and I wasn't expecting anything to surprise me. Before I say more about *Hymn No. 3*, a few general words about Nikolai Korndorf's music and aesthetic are in order.

Korndorf's music is shocking, in part because it is so massive – it demands a serious expanse of time and a huge emotional commitment. His large-scale forms unveil themselves extremely slowly; a “short” Korndorf piece lasts 20 minutes, a longer one lasts easily over an hour. Even when writing for solo instrument or chamber ensemble, his music contains a very broad sound palette. There is pervasive use of prepared instruments, of percussion, often played by non-percussionists - as in his *Quartet* - and vocalizing is also frequently called for. Any sound that can be created by humans might be called for, as well as many that require non-human reproduction.

One of his significant watershed works, *Yarilo* – written in 1981, named after the Slavic god of spring and fertility, and bearing significant ties to Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* in its use of ferocious rhythm and of semi-disguised, feral birdsongs – is a monumental piece for solo piano, which begins with great delicacy and builds to a fervent climax before gradually tapering off. At this tapering-off point, Korndorf uses a very early version of what nowadays is termed live electronics – the performance is tape-recorded live, and the recording is played back and re-recorded as the piece progresses so that there is a gradual accumulation of sound, and the pianist accompanies him/herself as the piece winds to a close. The combination of live and taped sounds, and the use of certain prepared notes in the piano (very high percussive notes, as well as low gong-like sounds created by weaving coins into the low strings of the piano) create an atmosphere that is slightly surreal, and a much-expanded tonal palette when compared to typical piano sonorities.

You can find a YouTube video posted in March 2014 of pianist Cheryl Duvall playing *Yarilo* at the Canadian Music Centre in Toronto, and an audio recording with still-picture of Korndorf by Anna Levy on YouTube as well.

The form of *Hymn No. 3* is quite unlike anything I've encountered in the music of other composers; although over time the listener gradually recognizes the musical material that recurs, at first it is not possible to do so. The piece starts out with very low, very quiet gong reverberations, and a haunting, offstage trumpet solo. The slowly unfolding trumpet melody is clearly consonant and tonally centered, and the absolutely unique orchestrational choices here create a simultaneously heroic and intimate quality.

(Yes, this is possible.)

Over time the material first found in the trumpet is continually expanded and reworked as extremely long lines of continuous melody, rather than as motivic fragmentation or mosaic-like textures. The choices of timbre remain very surprising, and often quite extreme – the ethereal trumpet line is juxtaposed with contrabassoons and basses in the lowest range of their register, high, prolonged string lines, innumerable bells, and very occasionally a lone soprano voice.

The gradual and methodical build of this piece over the course of 45 minutes speaks to a composer who is a brilliant orchestrator – Korndorf was also an award-winning conductor – and one who used logical, mathematical structuring of register, colour, and proportion to create a compelling musical and emotional arc.

A few words about what links *Hymn No. 3* to Gustav Mahler, other than the title and dedication. To my mind, it has a number of Mahlerian echoes. These include the use of solo soprano voice at certain key sections (like the final movement of Mahler's *Symphony No. 4*), the use of bells (particularly Mahler's *Symphony No. 4*, but also the ghostly almglocken of Mahler's *Symphony No. 7*), the unusual wide-open registral spaces (Mahler's *Symphonies No. 1 and 2*, and to some extent *Symphony No. 7*.) The examination of the idea of heaven, or an afterlife, is far less whimsical in Korndorf's *Hymn No. 3* than in Mahler's *Symphony No. 4*, though it retains much of the same innocence and guileless anticipation.

But the most significant connection between the music of Gustav Mahler and that of Nikolai Korndorf is the overarching aesthetic, the idea that, as Mahler famously told Sibelius in 1907:

"The symphony must be like the world. It must embrace everything."

Korndorf does this with all of his music, he embraces not only the most serious topics (death, afterlife, and rebirth, particularly in *Hymn No. 3*, *Quartet*, and *Welcome!*), but also the most silly.

Merry Music for Very Nice People, written for Vancouver's Standing Wave Ensemble and first performed on April Fool's Day, is rife with in-jokes (pity the long-suffering percussionist), dreadful musical humour, friendly competition, and complaining, and it concludes with an apparently ad-libbed dance meant to fool the audience into... well, audience participation. At this point, the musicians suddenly march off the stage leaving people dancing in bemused silence. Yikes!

(I was told to sit near the back for the premiere, which I did, and avoided most of the foolishness of being coaxed or dragged onstage.)

Korndorf's chamber ensemble piece *Get Out!!!* requires the musicians to play extremely loud, difficult, dissonant, and fast passages of music, at length, and eventually to stomp around and shout at the conductor. *Get Out!!!* pokes a bit of fun at "new complexity" and is by turns challenging, entertaining, and unnerving to watch and listen to. I think it must be quite cathartic, if exhausting to perform.

Korndorf's music also explores aesthetics that are somewhat outside of those typically found in late 20th-century western art music. He often makes reference to jazz, popular music, and classical western art music of earlier centuries, as in the *Mozart-Variationen* for string sextet – a brilliant piece which unfortunately hasn't been commercially recorded as of 2014.

One of Korndorf's oddest and more pervasive uses of "famous" classical music, as well as some electric guitar and rap music (transcribed, in disguise, for the trombones), is found in the third movement of his *Symphony No. 4 – Underground Music* (1996), in which many quotations collide in a manic *scherzo*. Aside from electric guitar, several of his pieces use electric bass and/or drum set; the second movement of the *Concerto Capriccioso*, a fiendishly difficult cello concerto, is an exciting example. Quite late in the finale of the piece, there is a Beethoven quote occurring at the same time as a rather ferocious drum kit solo.

Concerto Capriccioso has been recorded by cellist Alexander Ivashkin with the Mariinsky Theatre Orchestra conducted by Valery Gergiev. A live-performance can be found on YouTube.

Ivashkin has also recorded the complete cello works of Korndorf, mostly on the Megadisc label. A recording of the piece can be found here at Toccat Classics.com.

Nothing that Nikolai Korndorf wrote was ever done by halves – some pieces are designed to provide great comfort, while others are written to disturb the audience. Everything of his that I've heard demands the listener's full attention – it is not "entertainment" and can't be listened to as background music.

For this reason, and because of the technical difficulty and enormous scale of his works, Korndorf's music is not heard as often as it should be; I hope that Ivashkin's recent recordings of Korndorf's cello music and the increasingly frequent live performances of Korndorf's work will finally bring it to the larger audience it deserves.

Jocelyn Morlock. March 2014. Vancouver, Canada.

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