

Nikolai Korndorf Profile

All too often great artists go unrecognized in their own lifetimes, only to have their work noticed by the general public after they have died. Such is the case of composer Nikolai Korndorf, a Russian-born musician who for the past ten years made his home in Burnaby, and who passed away suddenly in May of this year, at the age of 54. Korndorf was a widely respected symphonic composer in Eastern Europe, but was virtually unknown in North America, where he chose to move in 1991. On Saturday, September 15th, he will be remembered by friends and colleagues in a memorial concert at the UBC School of Music.

Korndorf was born in Moscow in 1947, and studied composition and conducting at the Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatory, where he himself became a professor of musicology, theory, composition, and conducting from 1972-1991. Although he began composing in the dramatic atonal style of the avant-garde, around 1980 he went back to writing tonal music, and became more concerned with expressing a profound spirituality in his work. From the liner notes to his 1996 Sony release, *A New Heaven*, Korndorf writes: “The idea that the purpose of music is to serve as a link between people – that every piece of music is a message from artist to audience, and that this message ought to be about something important – is an idea that was central to artists who worked under the pressure of the Communist system. Such Eastern European composers as Schnittke, Pärt, Silvestrov, Kancheli, Górecki, whose world view I feel a strong connection to, were all non-conformists and opponents of music that served merely as propaganda, as a kind of entertainment. The main ideas in our music are philosophical and religious – about our existence, our world, our life. And for that reason, we have all made frequent use of liturgical and religious texts.”

This independent spirit and non-conformist attitude started to have a negative effect on the presentation of Korndorf’s music in his own homeland. The Ministry of Culture of the former Soviet Union discreetly oversaw all commissions and performances of large musical works, and effectively blocked the work of composers who did not serve the ideals of the government. Korndorf was not one of the “official” composers, so performance of his work became less frequent until by the mid-80’s his pieces were rarely played at all. Following in the footsteps of composers like Edison Denisov and Sofia Gubaidulina, who found success outside of the Eastern Bloc, Korndorf gave up his teaching position at the Moscow Conservatory to move to Canada in 1991.

Living in Vancouver gave Korndorf the freedom to compose what he wanted, and to make his living exclusively as a composer. He was a very active supporter of the new music community, and made strong and lasting friendships with many artists across the country. For years he sat in on composition seminars at UBC, just to keep himself involved in the active discussion of contemporary music. UBC composition professor Keith Hamel remembers the impression that Korndorf left on those who knew him: “You learned a lot from being around Nikolai. The people who were close to him learned a lot about personal commitment and conviction. He would not compromise at all in the

creative process,” he says over the phone. “He took art very seriously...He spent a lot of time and energy learning about art. It’s what he devoted his life to, really.”

News of Korndorf’s unexpected death shocked the community, and the memorial concert on September 15 will give local supporters the opportunity to pay their respects through his music. The event has been completely organized by volunteers, and all of the musicians involved have donated many hours of their time to learn some very challenging repertoire. All of the proceeds will go to the Korndorf family, his wife and two sons, as he made his living from composing and had no other means of support. Donations to the family can also be made through the Korndorf Fund.

Words from the late composer’s website (<http://mypage.direct.ca/k/korndorf/>) sum up Korndorf’s vision of the artist connected to the community: “I belong to the direction in Russian music which, independent of the composer’s style, typically addresses very serious topics: philosophical, religious, moral, the problems of a person’s spiritual life, his relationship with the surrounding world, the problem of beauty and its relationship with reality, as well as the problem of loftiness and meaning in human beings and in art, relationship of the spiritual and the anti-spiritual. All this means that most of my works were written not for fun and in no way can be classified as entertainment. As much as possible I strive to ensure that every one of my works contains a message to each listener and that my music leaves no one indifferent, but aroused with an emotional response.”