

**Vancouver Symphony
Orchestra**

Saturday, September 22, 8pm

Orpheum Theatre

by Colin MacDonald

In times of social unrest, artists are often called on to illuminate the higher qualities of human experience. The first concert of the VSO's 2001-2002 season emerged as a serendipitous celebration of beauty and joy, and conductor Bramwell Tovey dedicated the performance to the victims of the terror attacks in America.

The natural drama of human life was the subject of *Symphony*, an autobiographical work by Toronto composer Gary Kulesha. In person to introduce the work, Kulesha explained that the music was not strictly programmatic, but it did follow the emotional development of his own life. Solo instruments appeared as characters out of his past: a flute represented his mother, a trombone for his father, a string bass for his brother. Kulesha was innovative in the use of a second conductor, in this case Tania Miller, to lead sections of the orchestra in material that was described as a second movement played simultaneously with the first.

In remembering his own life in this way, Kulesha seemed to be retelling the myth of the hero's struggle, a normal life elevated to grandeur. His musical language was complex and dense, with grasping and searching melodic lines leading to moments of violent outburst. The added material that the concurrent second movement introduced was seemingly unrelated to the first movement, increasing the density of the sound. A third movement featured an english horn and viola duet representing a married couple, but was full of sorrow, the two

instruments agreeing to disagree. The finale brought in waves of glissandi that effaced the earlier material, leaving the hero transformed and looking towards an uncertain future. Here were forty years of experience compressed into a little more than thirty minutes, and listeners' ears were quickly overloaded with sound. Kulesha's effort to express in one gesture everything that is important in a life led more to confusion than to clarity.

Ludwig van Beethoven's masterpiece *Symphony No. 9 in D minor (Choral)* expressed the triumph of the heroic spirit, and is revered not only as the German composer's finest work but also as one of the peaks of symphonic composition in any age. His craft is made more impressive by the fact that he was clinically deaf at the time of writing the piece. Beethoven originally conceived the work as two separate compositions: the first three movements as an instrumental symphony for an English audience, and the finale setting of Friedrich Schiller's "Ode to Joy" for a German Symphony.

Although the melodies are sounding a bit dated, Beethoven's gift for variation and transformation of themes is clear throughout the work, and maestro Tovey skillfully guided the musicians through dramatic changes of dynamic and phrasing. The Vancouver Bach Choir and a quartet of soloists joined the orchestra for the choral finale. Their exuberance in singing the "Ode to Joy" threatened to turn into a shouting match as lyrics were barked out, but they managed to regain some sense of phrasing by the end of the movement. In the end, joy triumphed, sending a message to the capacity audience that our fears can indeed be overcome.