

VIRTUOSIC PIANO

Wojciech Kilar (1932-2013) *Orawa* (1986)

Two composers from Poland on tonight's Kamloops Symphony programme, Chopin and Kilar. You think, "I know Chopin. I remember struggling with his Preludes, Waltzes, Mazurkas. But who's this Kilar, I've never heard his music?" Not so fast! If you have seen the films, *The Pianist*, with Adrian Brodie, *Portrait of a Lady* with Nicole Kidman, or Coppola's *Dracula*, then you've heard Kilar's music. The music for the trailer of *Schindler's List* is from Kilar's choral epic *Exodus*. He provided music for a great many other films, too, including many by Polish directors in addition to Roman Polanski. He was the composer initially commissioned to write the score for the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Yet, he was also one of Poland's most prolific composers in the classical field.

In his earlier career he was a member of the Polish avant-garde music movement, along with fellow Poles Górecki and Penderecki, later abandoning that trend for his own more Modernist, neo-classical style. Much of his classical music is also characteristically Polish in two respects—first, some of it draws on the long tradition of Roman Catholic church music. Second, some draws its inspiration from the natural world and from the folk music traditions that are rooted in nature. *Orawa* (1986) is a work of the latter kind.

For strings only, it is one of Kilar's pieces that celebrate the Tatra Mountain region of the Polish-Slovak border, through which he evokes the mountain landscape and its indigenous inhabitants. Specifically, he depicts the highland bands that shepherds form to celebrate the end of the grazing season in the mountain pastures. Their tradition is to play and dance a lively "robbers' dance," all of which may explain why Kilar shapes the music to sound archaic, even primitive in places. It certainly explains the surprise that is in store for us at the very end.

Frederick Chopin (1810-1849) *Piano Concerto No.2 in F minor Op.21* (1830)

Chopin wrote six works for piano and orchestra within a five-year span between the ages of 17 and 21 including the concerto on tonight's programme. After that all his compositions were for solo piano. There is a reason: public recitals for solo piano were not yet an established practice—to be heard as a pianist in public you would have to perform pieces for piano and orchestra in a concert that would include other works, orchestral and choral. So young Chopin, seeking a platform for his talent, created several works for his own use in such concerts.

The immediate genesis of this much loved piano concerto was Chopin's visit to Vienna in the summer of 1829—to see his publisher and to perform in two concerts. The Viennese were ecstatic with his playing and improvising: "a master of the highest order," "indescribable mechanical agility," "one of the brightest meteors on the musical horizon . . ." It was Robert Schumann, however, who put it more bluntly: "Hats off, gentleman—a genius!" Understandably, Chopin wanted to replicate that success in his native land, so on his return he set about writing a new work for piano and orchestra, the F minor concerto, which was duly premiered in March 1830.

Chopin's own modest (but candid) account reveals its success: "The hall was full and the boxes and stalls were sold out three days before, but it did not make on the general public the impression I thought it would . . . The Adagio and Rondo produced the greatest effect, and exclamations of sincere admiration could be heard." However, he felt that most audience members didn't really 'get' the unusual Allegro first movement. Nonetheless, the enthusiastic reception prompted a second performance just a few days later along with an

altogether different accompanying programme, plus a different piano for Chopin—there were complaints his playing had been too soft, so a louder make of piano was provided.

If anything this second concert was an even greater success in Chopin's view. In particular, the Warsaw press proudly noted the mazurka-based folk elements in the concerto's last movement. "Chopin knows what sounds are heard in our fields and woods, he has listened to the song of the Polish villager, he has made it his own and has united the tunes of his native soil in skilful compositions and elegant execution." (This could almost be describing Kilar's *Orawa*).

After immediately completing and premiering a second concerto to an even more enthusiastic reception than the earlier work, Chopin left Poland in early November 1830. He never performed this F minor concerto again. He never came back.

Louise Farrenc (1804-1875) *Symphony No.3 in G minor, Op.36 (1847)*

"A woman must not desire to compose—not one has been able to do it, and why should I expect to?" These self-defeating words are those of Clara Wieck, the hugely talented pianist, in the year before she became Clara Schumann. Clearly her words reflect a dutiful acquiescence to prevailing masculine values regarding women's creativity in the early 19th Century, an attitude still requiring amendment in our own day. Clara did end up composing, though her career was more as a performer. Fortunately, there were women in Clara's time able to develop their artistic impulses more fully and successfully. Louise Farrenc was one of them. Yet her name is not familiar. Thus her career also raises questions about talented artists, male and female, who achieve distinction in their own time, only to fade gradually into obscurity, as Farrenc did, in the decades after their death.

Like Clara Wieck, Farrenc, who was from a Parisian family, was a renowned pianist and teacher as well as composer. Her family gave her encouragement and training—the best, in fact, with Johann Hummel (whom Mozart taught) for piano and Anton Reicha (Beethoven's lifelong friend) for composition. Several years of touring, some with her flute-playing husband, led to her appointment in 1842 as Professor of Piano at the Paris Conservatory, the first woman to occupy a full instrumental professorship. She held it with great success for 30 years, although much of the time at a lower salary than her male academic counterparts (. . . you're surprised?)

After composing for the piano in her earlier years, Farrenc produced a great variety of chamber music in the 1830's, 40's and 50's which was admired and popular, some of it revived in recent years. More significant in some ways is her orchestral music, especially her three symphonies—the complexity of the orchestra was thought "more properly" a male composer's domain. None of the three were published in her lifetime, and the third, which we hear tonight, is the only one she heard performed. The reason: unlike Vienna or many German cities, Paris was an opera town that had few instrumental ensembles available to play new orchestral works. These performance impediments may help explain why her orchestral output was small.

If you still harbor any outworn 19th Century sexist preconceptions about there being a "feminine music" style vis-à-vis a characteristically "masculine" style, be prepared to shed them now. In the opening movement, a slow, melancholy woodwind introduction very quickly emerges into a firmly driving allegro that, relieved occasionally by more melodic developments, moves unhesitatingly to its exciting conclusion. The lyrical slow movement is sustained by a theme that is alternately tender sounding and serious. The scherzo is propelled throughout by a persistent rhythm that lightens occasionally but never becomes frivolous. Then, the finale begins restless and brooding, develops passages of considerable drama and emotion before driving forward to

an emphatic conclusion. It matters not that you may hear wisps of Mendelssohn here or Beethoven there. Louise Farrenc's musical voice is utterly distinctive, and fortunately no longer lost to us.