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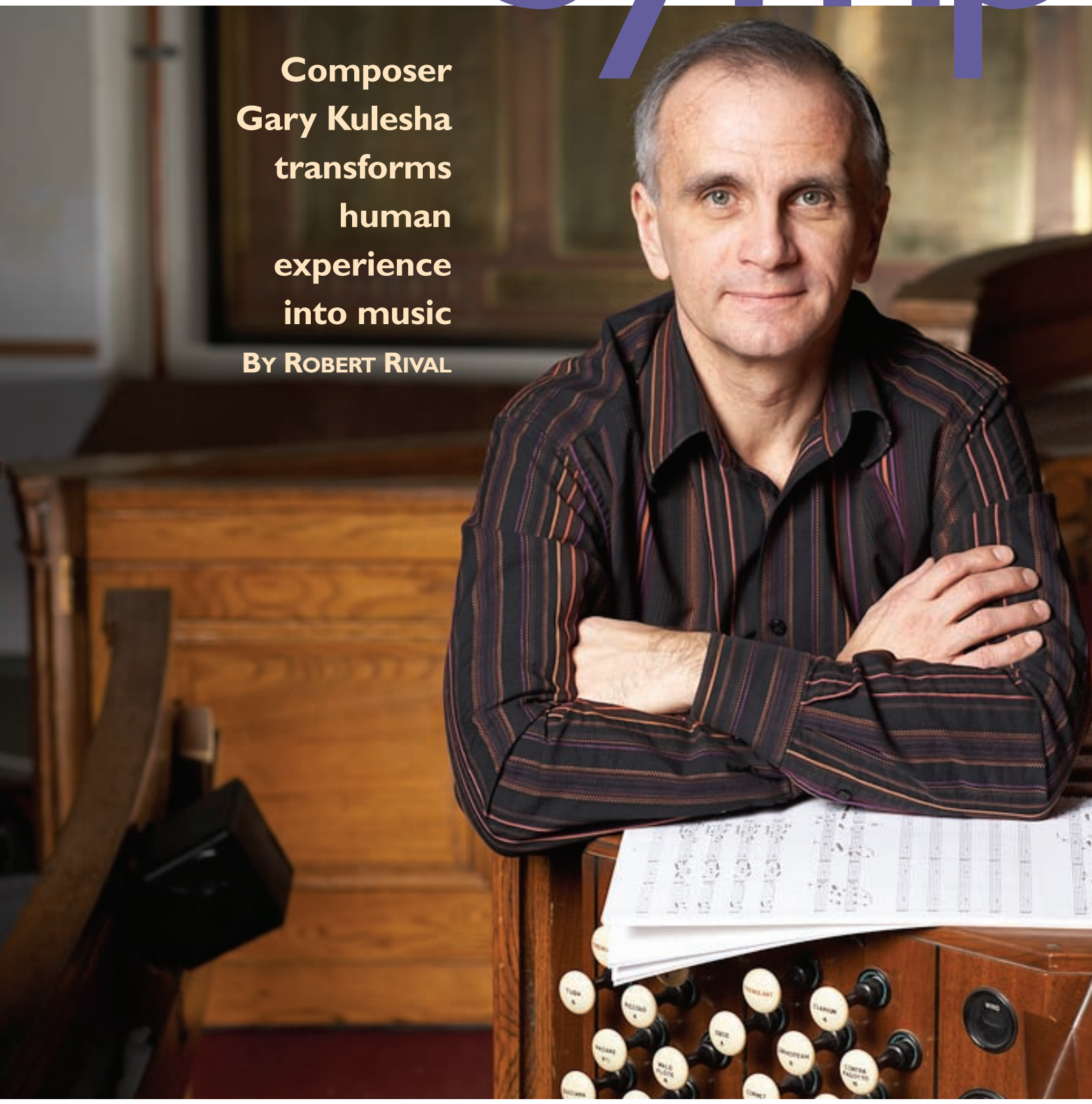
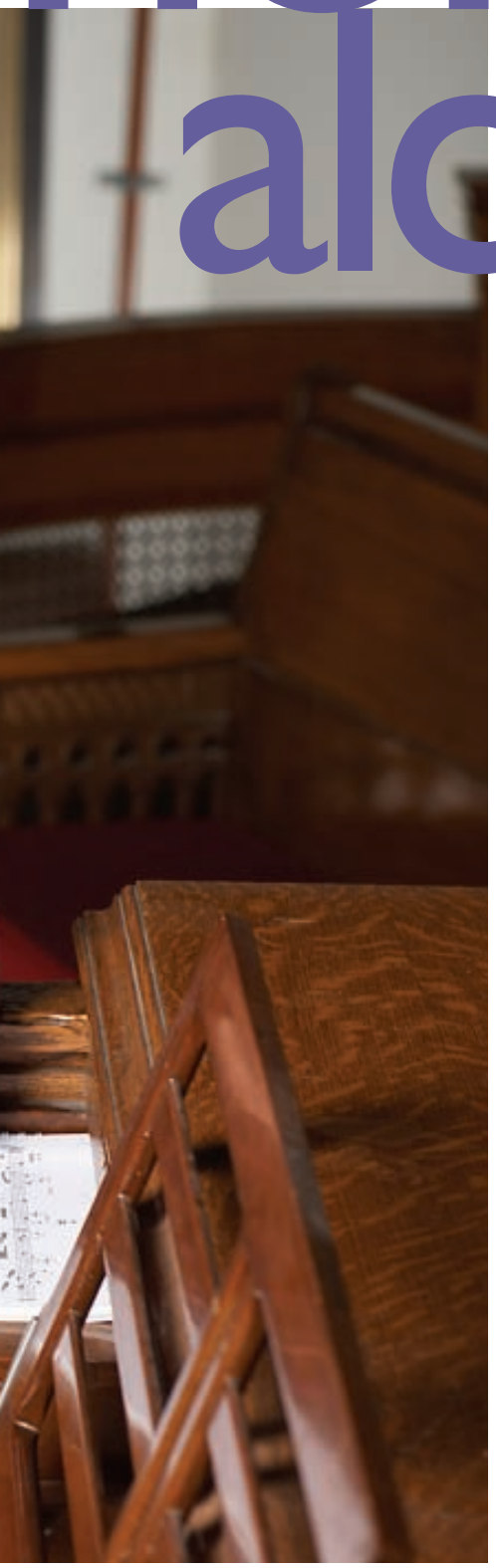


Composer Gary Kulesha transforms human experience into music

By Robert Rival

honic alchemist



In a tour de force, the first two movements of **Gary Kulesha**'s *First Symphony* are performed simultaneously by two subsections of the orchestra, each led by its own conductor. They breathtakingly fade away in a battery of percussion. This sets the stage for an atmospheric third movement in which time comes to a standstill. The finale is ominous: the layering of material from the previous movements evolves into a dense, lush — even romantic — climax of startling power. And yet the symphony ends tentatively, as if in a daze, its energy sapped completely.

Kulesha considers this symphony, premiered in 1998 by the Toronto Symphony Orchestra (TSO), his most important work to date. His *Second Symphony*, premiered in 2005, again by the TSO, is a sequel that begins with the very same sonority with which its predecessor ends, but develops in broad, dramatic brushstrokes. The next installment is a *Third Symphony*, to be premiered in May, a commission from Ottawa's National Arts Centre Orchestra (NACO), where Kulesha is one of three multi-year NAC Award Composers. But followers of his symphonic journey might be surprised by this one, he warns me during an interview in his office at the University of Toronto, where he is a senior lecturer in composition in the Faculty of Music.

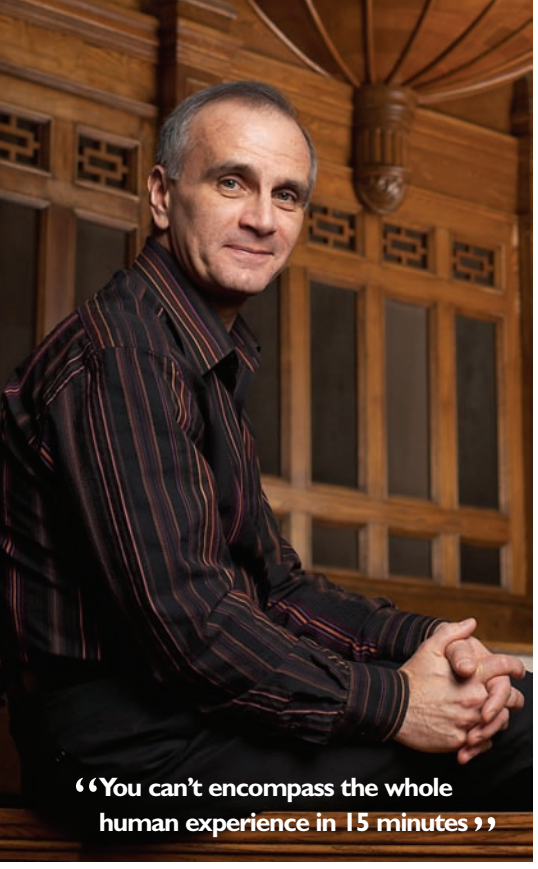
"This is my pastoral symphony," he says, referring to Beethoven's *Sixth*, itself a follow-up to the dramatic *Fifth*. For Kulesha, whose music is often propelled by rhythmic drive and peppered with astringent harmonies, an extended meditation in a more lyrical vein is somewhat of a new direction. It's a direction that he already began to explore a year ago with his *Trio for Horn, Violin and Piano*, to be premiered by Joan Watson and the Gryphon Trio in March in Toronto.

The turn to a gentler idiom — though not to pure tonality, Kulesha is quick to add — has much to do with his assessment of concert music's shortcomings in the second half of the 20th century. "One of my pet peeves is contemporary music that is incapable of being anything other than relentless angst or agitation," he says. "These are the two clichés of the latter part of the 20th century. We can write really agitated, angst-ridden music but we have a lot of trouble writing really beautiful, exquisite and tender music."

Kulesha's solution, however, is not to replace angst with beauty but rather to embrace both extremes, and their many subtle gradations, within the same piece. His model is Bartók. "How does Bartók, in the *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion*, do this dark, atonal stuff and emerge with that glowing C major at the end and make it completely convincing? I don't know."

Pastiche is not the answer. Nor is Russian composer Alfred Schnittke's polystylism, in which multiple styles freely interact and coexist (although Kulesha admits Schnittke did that well). "I need an organically blended language in which all of these elements coexist and

Photos: Corey Mihailiuk



"You can't encompass the whole human experience in 15 minutes"

somehow make a coherent artistic statement."

Kulesha calls the search for such a language "the quest of a lifetime." But **Jeffrey Ryan**, Vancouver Symphony Orchestra (VSO) composer-in-residence, thinks Kulesha is already creating a compelling synthesis. Ryan says Kulesha's *Cello Concerto* (premiered by Shauna Rolston and the VSO last November) is a stunning work filled with raw emotion. "And what strikes me about Gary's music," he adds, "is that it's very modern and yet clearly part of a long history of music."

I wonder aloud why composers are so concerned with innovation. After all, is human experience so different today than it was 200 years ago? "We are at our core the same as human beings were 200 years ago," replies Kulesha. "There are just many layers of experience added to that. An artist is a matrix at the centre of some kind of human experience," he continues. "To be a matrix you need to have *all* the layers of technical process at your command that were contemporary in their day. Bach was a core. Around that is the layer of Mozart, Beethoven, etc., until the present. It's a pretty frightening thing for a composer to look at all those layers of technical process — never mind the human experience that goes along with that — and to be able to freely and easily move between all of them."

According to Kulesha, this layered view of history helps explain the enduring appeal of Mozart. "But there are modes of experience that Mozart was completely unfamiliar with which are our daily bread and butter. Those are the things we need to add to the artistic experience."

Although Kulesha acknowledges that his music doesn't even remotely sound like Mozart's, he cites the Viennese master as the biggest influence on the way he thinks. "He is an influence on me because of the absolute clarity and purity of the music," he says. "You are never aware of his technique, which is flawless."

There are many other composers who have influenced Kulesha's sound, including Schubert, "for the unexpected twists and turns: 'If I want to go there, I go there.' He modulates — or not. I find that very contemporary and I found it wonderful as a kid."

Now in his early 50s, Kulesha is concerned that the concert-music scene sometimes overlooks the contributions that his generation of established composers have yet to make. Composers tend to get better as they age, he says, and the fickle enthusiasm for novelty risks cutting their development short.

But no one can accuse Kulesha of selfishness. He is unanimously admired as a conductor, particularly by musicians who appreciate his efficient use of rehearsal time, and he has applied these skills to premiering many pieces by colleagues and students. "Gary is very interested in hearing new sounds," Peter Oundjian, music director of the TSO, tells me by telephone. "He's very curious about what's being created in Canada."

Kulesha's students are particularly grateful for his dedication to getting their own music performed by professionals. But although he recognizes his students' strengths, he also pushes them to explore techniques and styles to which they do not naturally gravitate. "After every lesson he recommends two or three pieces to look at," says William Rowson, in his third year of the doctoral program at the University of Toronto. "They're often composers whose scores I haven't even seen."

Besides insisting his students explore music beyond their comfort zone, Kulesha's advice to young concert-music composers is simple: be sure you're passionate about what you do. And make sure you find a mentor.

Kulesha's role as an educator is not limited to his students. As composer-advisor to the TSO, a position he has held since 1995, he also helps shape what music reaches the concert-going public. "He's in a way like our radar," says Oundjian. "He tries to know what's going on throughout Canada and the international scene. And he brings things to us, far more than we could ever program. He's also very fair in that he doesn't try to impose his own views on me."

Oundjian is acutely sensitive to the challenges of making new music palatable to a core symphony audience that digests Beethoven more readily than Berio. "Although nobody wants to admit this openly," he confides, "audiences all over the place are still — and always probably will be — afraid of names they don't know. To pretend otherwise is to be blind to the problem. Yes, challenge them, but it does no good to frighten them away."

Kulesha's music, which is frequently performed by the TSO, satisfies these two criteria: it's challenging yet accessible. "Even at first listening," observes Oundjian, "you can take something from his music."

Perhaps what audiences are responding to is the capacity of his music to capture the wide range of emotions that it confronts in today's complex world. To achieve this wide range, Kulesha needs a large canvas. "In the 21st century, you can't encompass the whole human experience in 15 minutes," he says. "And I've been trying, in my own way, to restore some of music's power to be deeply human by experimenting with any kind of technical process I come across."

When the NACO unveils Kulesha's *Third Symphony* in May, Ottawa audiences will be the first to hear the fruits of these ambitious experiments.

Robert Rival is a composer and music writer living in Toronto

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