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# Nikolai KORNDORF

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**Concerto capriccioso for cello, strings and percussion**

**Triptych for cello and piano**  
**Passacaglia for solo cello**

Alexander Ivashkin, cello  
Russian Philharmonic Orchestra of Moscow  
Konstantin Krimets, conductor  
Anya Alexeyev, piano

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# NIKOLAI KORNDORF: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

by Martin Anderson

Nikolai Korndorf had a clear image of what kind of a composer he was. In a 'Brief Statement about my Work' he wrote:

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, the relationship of the spiritual and the anti-spiritual.<sup>1</sup>

But it would be wrong to assume that those words suggest some kind of aloofness – he knew he had to touch his audience:

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. I even accept that at times my music arouses negative emotions – as long as it is not indifference.<sup>2</sup>

Born in Moscow on 23 January 1947, Nikolai Sergeyevich Korndorf studied composition at the State Tchaikovsky Conservatoire of Music there, under Sergei Balasanyan; after he was awarded his doctorate in 1973, he went on to study conducting at the Conservatoire under Leo Ginsburg. Thereafter he developed two careers: between 1972 and 1991 he lectured in composition, conducting, musicology and theory at the Conservatory; and, after winning the National All-Union Conductors' Competition in Moscow in 1976, he guest-conducted throughout the Soviet Union. In May 1991 he emigrated to Canada, where he concentrated on composition.

Korndorf said of his music that it 'reflects the medieval choral, elements of modern rock music, folk music and underground music and it contains elements of romantic music, European vanguard music and American minimalism'.<sup>3</sup> One powerful influence – perhaps initially prompted by the nationalist concerns of his teacher, Sergei Balasanyan, who was born in Turkmenistan and active in Tajikistan – was the music of old Russia: the hymnody of the early church, and the inheritance of Slavic folk melody. His forms thus tended to favour the processional rather than the dramatic or the developmental, and he usually allowed himself space to work his ideas out.

<sup>1</sup> Text published on Korndorf's website, at <http://www.korndorf.ca/old/main.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*



*Concerto capriccioso* recorded live at the Great Hall of Moscow Conservatoire, 21 November 2005

Recording engineer: Farida Uzbekova

*Triptych* recorded live at the Lazaridis Theatre, Perimeter Institute, Waterloo, Canada, 1 December 2006

(courtesy of Marshall Arts Productions)

Recording engineer: Ed Marshall, Marshall Arts Productions

*Passacaglia* recorded at Studio One, Moscow Radio House, 3–6 August 2001

(courtesy of Megadisc Records)

Recording engineer: Liubov Doronina

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of the Moscow Conservatoire, Philharmonia Hall in St Petersburg, Birmingham Symphony Hall, Usher Hall in Edinburgh, Johannesburg Symphony Hall, Dewan Filarmonik in Kuala Lumpur, Palais Montcalm in Quebec City, Glenn Gould Studio in Toronto, Salle Pierre Mercure in Montreal and Bargemusic in New York.

She has been a soloist with Royal Philharmonic orchestra, BBC Philharmonic, Moscow State Symphony, Vienna Chamber, The Philharmonia, Royal Scottish National, Deutschland Radio, City of Birmingham Symphony, Bournemouth Symphony and Sinfonietta, St Petersburg Philharmonic, London Mozart Players, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, English Chamber, Malaysian Philharmonic, Belgian National Symphony and Quebec Symphony.

She has recorded for EMI, Dutton Archive and Marquis Classics. In 1995, she premiered Paul McCartney's first solo piano piece, *A Leaf*, which was later released on CD for EMI Classics. Her performances have been broadcast by the BBC, CBC, GMTV (UK), Deutschland Radio, and numerous other radio stations across the world.

Since 2002 Anya Alexeyev has been on the faculty at Wilfrid Laurier University in Canada.

**Konstantin Krimets** was born in 1939 in the Ukraine; he died on 8 August 2008. A graduate of the Kiev Conservatory, he took his graduate studies at the Moscow Conservatory, including work with Igor Markevich. Krimets' career took him to many countries in Europe, Asia and the United States. In 1990 he organised and became Director of the Moscow International Symphony Orchestra. He made many recordings and performed with such renowned performers as Emil Gilels, Nikolai Petrov and Boris Berezovsky. For Toccata Classics he conducted Balakirev's *Grande Fantaisie sur airs nationaux Russes pour Le Piano* with accompaniment of an orchestra on the album *Balakirev and Russian Folksong* (TOCC 0018).

'Some of my pieces', he explained, 'are composed using contrasting material. The others – without contrasting material emphasizing a singular emotional state.'<sup>4</sup> That sentence inverts the two distinct periods into which his output falls, the first characterised by those densely textured – but essentially homophonic – processions that have their distant roots in the music of the orthodox church; they are usually in single-movement forms and advance ineluctably towards towering climaxes. In the second, from the early 1980s onwards, though his textures are simpler, the music itself shows a wider stylistic palette, making more use of tonality and developing more complicated structures than in the earlier scores. But, as Gerard McBurney noted, 'they continue his fascination with the seismology of erupting violence. Indeed, the aptly named *Sempre tutti* must count as one of the most physically aggressive orchestral scores by any young composer of today.'<sup>5</sup>

His worklist includes four symphonies (1975, 1980, 1989, 1996) and other orchestral pieces (several of which were premiered under his own baton), the opera *MR (Maria and Reiner)* (1989), a generous quantity of music involving the voice, and a good number of scores for various chamber ensembles, often in fairly adventurous combinations. One of his last pieces, written in 2000, a year before his death, points to his deep involvement with the musicians who performed his work: scored for violin, cello, clarinet, piano and percussion, it is called *Merry Music for Very Nice People*.

*Martin Anderson writes on music for a variety of publications, including The Independent, International Piano, International Record Review and Tempo in the UK, Fanfare in the USA, Klassisk Musikmagasin in Norway and Finnish Music Quarterly. He also runs Toccata Classics and its sister company, the publishing house Toccata Press.*

## NIKOLAI KORNDORF AND HIS MUSIC

by Alexander Ivashkin

Nikolai Korndorf was not an easy person to deal with. Always extremely independent in his opinions and often directly spoken, he was able to argue for hours, even days. He seemed like some ancient Greek philosopher suddenly transported into twentieth-century Communist Russia. I could never imagine him as old or weak; to me, he was always young, strong and full of energy. When I last saw him in 1998, I could hardly believe that he had turned fifty just a year before. Sadly, he was not destined to live into old age: he died suddenly on 30 May 2001 while playing football with his son. He had recently undergone an operation to remove a brain tumour but, typically, ignored his doctor's injunction to take life more easily.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> 'Korndorf, Nikolai', in *Contemporary Composers*, St James Press, Chicago and London, 1992, p. 507.

An extremely strong personality and individual voice was always present in his compositions – as, indeed, in everything he did. There are very few of his works written in the ‘standard’ genres, since he always avoided any form of inertia. Korndorf used to say that since he didn’t fit into any school or direction, ‘I am writing a *netlenka*’ – a Russian slang-word for something spiritual, unusual, and therefore fully comprehensible only by future generations.

He was undoubtedly one of the most important Russian composers after Schnittke. More ‘radical’ young Russians used to call him sarcastically ‘our Rimsky-Korsakov’ – but I see that rather as a compliment. Like Rimsky-Korsakov, Korndorf was one of the most popular teachers at the Moscow Conservatoire where, from 1972, he taught orchestration – of which, again like Rimsky-Korsakov, he was a master. Moreover, his music was always very typically Russian.

Korndorf’s compositions of the 1970s and ’80s are broad in texture, densely scored, and with very intense dynamic profiles. His major works are usually lengthy in duration, lasting for over an hour at the very least; listening to them imparts something of the experience of reading an epic Russian novel. The development throughout is very gradual, almost imperceptible, typical of many ‘minimalist’ compositions. Indeed, he was sometimes called a ‘minimalist’ although, paradoxically, he was in truth more of a ‘maximalist’, trying to find new ways of expressing dramatic and narrative ideas, in the tradition of Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich and Schnittke.

Korndorf’s works have been widely performed in different countries. His opera *MR (Marina and Rainer)* was staged in Munich to wide critical acclaim in 1994; his orchestral work *Epilogue* was played in Montreal the same year; his Third Symphony was performed in Frankfurt. His chamber works have been premiered in Australia, Germany, the Netherlands and New Zealand.

When I sent him New Year greetings on 1 January 2000, mentioning the fact that it was a new century and a new millennium, he disagreed, saying: ‘No, please let me reside in the Twentieth Century for another year’ (quite correctly dating the new century from 2001). Alas, he had only five more months to live. Indeed, he was – like Stravinsky or Schnittke – a typical twentieth-century composer: his music embraces new techniques but also very old, even ancient, Russian and European traditions.

When he emigrated to Canada in 1991, one of the Moscow newspapers reported that ‘Korndorf has left Moscow for a Canadian village.’<sup>6</sup> Yet he felt very happy. As he wrote to me on 6 April 1992:

No money, no job, but I am fine. [...] Every day I wake up praying ‘God, thank you for bringing me to this blessed country [...] where I can breathe easily [...] where I don’t need to adjust myself to the idiotic environment and co-exist with it simply in order to survive.

The compositions he wrote in Canada opened new horizons: they are less complicated and certainly less dense. As such, his work written in the 1990s is simpler on the surface but yet more complex underneath.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Ivashkin, ‘Ia ved’ pishu netlenku...’ (‘I am writing a netlenka...’), *Muzikal’naiia Akademiia*, 2002, No. 2, p. 71.

**Alexander Ivashkin**, born in the Russian Far East, began his music education at the Gnessin Special School of Music for gifted students at the age of five, playing both piano and cello; the suggestion that he choose the career of a solo cellist came from Mstislav Rostropovich. Ivashkin established an international reputation both as an interpreter of the standard repertoire and as a proponent of contemporary music. His highly acclaimed recitals, radio and TV recordings, and appearances with orchestras have included performances in more than 40 countries. Since 1995 he has been Artistic Director of the Adam International Cello Competition and Festival and directs a number of other annual festivals in London, including the Rostropovich Memorial Festival in Wigmore Hall and the VTB Capital International Cello Competition.

Alexander Ivashkin has been the first performer, and dedicatee, of many works by important contemporary composers. With Rostropovich and Natalia Gutman, he was one of the cellists for whom Alfred Schnittke composed, and he has collaborated with John Cage, Lyell Cresswell, George Crumb, Sofia Gubaidulina, Mauricio Kagel, Giya Kancheli, Nikolai Korndorf, James MacMillan, Arvo Pärt, Krzysztof Penderecki, Alexander Raskatov, Peter Sculthorpe, Brett Dean, Rodion Shchedrin, Vladimir Tarnopolsky, Augusta Reid Thomas and Gillian Whitehead, among others. He gave the premiere of Cord Garben’s reconstruction of Brahms’ Cello Concerto in Hamburg in 2005. A recording artist for the Chandos, BMG and Naxos labels, Ivashkin has award-winning recordings of the complete cello music by Rachmaninov, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Roslavets, Tcherepnin, Schnittke and Kancheli to his credit. He appears on the Toccata Classics CD *Schnittke Discoveries* (TOCC 0091) as both soloist and chamber musician. He has taught at schools of music in Russia, the USA, Europe, Australia and New Zealand, and is currently Professor of Music and Director of Performance Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London. He plays a Giuseppe (Joseph) Guarneri cello of 1710, courtesy of The Bridgewater Trust. He also plays electric cello, viola de gamba, sitar and piano and is the author of a biography of Alfred Schnittke published by Phaidon Press.

Born in Moscow into a family of concert pianists, **Anya Alexeyev** started studying at the Gnessin Music School at the age of five, and in 1989 entered the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory to become a student of Dmitri Bashkirov. The following year she was awarded a scholarship to the Royal College of Music in London, winning numerous prizes while studying there, including Elizabeth, The Queen Mother’s Award for ‘the most outstanding contribution to the Royal College of Music’, first prize at the Newport International Piano Competition (1991), Young Concert Artists Trust (1992) and The Capital Radio/Anna Instone Memorial Prize (1993).

Anya Alexeyev has performed extensively in many countries across Europe as well as in the USA, Canada, Argentina, Malaysia and South Africa. She has performed many times in all of London’s major concert halls, as well as in such venues as the Philharmonie in Berlin, the Konzerthaus in Vienna, Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires, Herodes Atticus Theatre in Athens, Bridgewater Hall in Manchester, the Great Hall



7 Dante's text from *Purgatorio* used in the Passacaglia

Canto 16, lines 16–17

*Io sentia voci, e ciascuna pareva  
pregar per pace e per misericordia*

Voices I heard, and every one appeared  
To supplicate for peace and misericord<sup>10</sup>

Canto 25, lines 7–9

*così intrammo noi per la callaia,  
uno innanzi altro prendendo la calca  
che per artezza i salitor dispaia.*

In this wise did we enter through the gap,  
Taking the stairway, one before the other,  
Which by its narrowness divides the climbers.

Canto 25, lines 112–17

*Quivi la ripa fiamma in fuor balestra,  
e la cornice spira fiato in suso  
che la riflette e via da lei sequestra;  
ond' ir ne convenia dal lato schiuso  
ad uno ad uno; e io temèa 'l foco  
quinci, e quindi temeva cader giuso.*

There the embankment shoots forth flames of fire,  
And upward doth the cornice breathe a blast  
That drives them back, and from itself sequesters.  
Hence we must needs go on the open side,  
And one by one; and I did fear the fire  
On this side, and on that the falling down.

Canto 26, lines 28–29

*Chè per lo mezzo del cammino acceso  
venne gente col viso incontro a questa*

For through the middle of the burning road  
There came a people face to face with these

Canto 27, lines 16–17

*In su le man commesse mi protesì,  
guardando il foco*

Upon my clasped hands I straightened me,  
Scanning the fire

Canto 27, lines 49–51

*Si com' fui dentro, in un bogliente vetro  
gittato mi sarei per rinfrescarmi,  
tant' era ivi lo 'ncendio senza metro.*

When I was in it, into molten glass  
I would have cast me to refresh myself,  
So without measure was the burning there!

Canto 27, lines 55–57

*Guidavaci una voce che cantava  
di là; e noi, attenti pur a lei,  
venimmo fuor*

A voice, that on the other side was singing,  
Directed us, and we, attent alone  
On that, came forth

<sup>10</sup> Translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

He often spoke about the importance of vision for an artist; of seeing the familiar anew, and with an open eye. His music often sounds simple, like folksong, but yet is simultaneously presented as an esoteric ritual. His work *Da!!* ("Yes!!"), written in 1984, is an unlikely combination of Christian mystery play, pagan ritual, opera and oratorio. His music makes the connections between folk, sacred, classical, minimalist and popular styles. Even when he writes a purely instrumental work, the performers are required to play percussion instruments (as in his 1996 piano trio *Are you ready, brother?*), or to sing (as in the 1986 *Amoroso* for chamber ensemble). In his String Quartet (1992) the players are asked to recite the text of an Orthodox funeral prayer.

One of the important aspects of Korndorf's aesthetic was writing music that is technically extremely demanding to perform. I remember that, after the premiere of Edison Denisov's String Trio in 1969, where the players were sweating and tired and complaining about the technical difficulties within the score, Korndorf was inspired by the performers' unhappiness, telling me: 'I would love to write a piece which my performers would be even more dissatisfied with!' Indeed, he wrote a number of pieces that exemplify this aesthetic: the 'unplayable' was always very important for him, with scores often verging on the impossible. But they would contain an enormous energy of resistance, so to speak, and always result in a spiritual ascent *per aspera ad astra* – as in Dante's *Commedia*, which was the major inspiration of his music.

The *Concerto capriccioso* of 1986, scored for an orchestra of strings and percussion, waited nearly twenty years for its premiere, when I played it in Winnipeg with the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra under Andrey Boreyko, on 26 January 2004. It has a starting point in aspects of the ecstatic improvisations of *sufi* and *maqam* in Muslim art and repetitive ritualistic ceremonies in pagan and Christian cult, as well as some of the elements of rock music. Like many of Korndorf's compositions from the 1980s and '90s, the *Concerto capriccioso* bears some features of minimalism related to the ritualistic repetitive formulas of Russian paganism and to elements of the aesthetics of absurdist poetry by Velimir Khlebnikov, Daniil Kharms and Alexander Vvedensky. The beginning of the Concerto (marked ♩ = 68) <sup>1</sup> clearly suggests a *maqam* improvisation. The music becomes more emotionally engaged as well as vaguer in terms of uncertain, improvisatory pitches and rhythms, finally replacing them with glissandos. This approach represents a concept of form typical in the *maqam* tradition, where improvisation was often structured as a replica of the act of physical love, with a long introduction, very slow development and ecstatic climax and conclusion. The processional-like music dominates in the middle part of the first movement before the recapitulation brings back the improvisatory and slightly exotic flavour of the beginning, but in less heated, more relaxed mood. The bottom string of the cello has to be tuned down from C to B, and then to A at the end of the first movement.

The second movement, which is marked ♩ = 108 <sup>2</sup>, is built on patterns familiar from tongue-twisters: the same note is repeated a number of times but always with slight permutations and changes inside the formula. At some stage the quasi-minimalist *perpetuum mobile* is transformed into a typical rock-music design. The theme, which is audible 'behind' the minimalist passages (and usually played by metallic percussion instruments), is

reminiscent of Buddhist bells. Thus, the border between non-European folk music, ritual, western art and rock music becomes non-existent in Korndorf's *Concerto capriccioso*. The title 'capriccioso' is probably about this 'capricious' flexibility and changeability in genre and style, as the music crosses the boundaries of various 'musics', transforming static energy into active motion.

The three constituent movements of Korndorf's *Triptych: Lament, Response and Glorification* (1998–99) for cello and piano can be played separately, but together they form a cycle embodying the idea of ascent to be found also in his *Passacaglia* for solo cello, written only a year earlier, in 1997. The first movement, *Lament* [3], is based on a number of different (and not always obvious) models of the *lamento*. Here again Korndorf straddles stylistic boundaries, occupying a position between the vocal *plach* ('lament') of the Russian folk tradition and the *lamento* of the Baroque *opera seria*. As a result, it is difficult to define this particular *Lament* in stylistic terms. The piece starts with a cello monologue exploring a very wide range of the register of the instrument, moving from a sustained tone D upwards and downwards, evoking the physical act of bowing, or stooping, as performed in a Russian *plach*. The chordal writing in the piano is reminiscent of church bells, of which Korndorf states: 'the most impressive feature of any Russian instrumental style is its roots in the sound of church bells.'<sup>7</sup> He often recalled<sup>8</sup> his walks as a child around Novodevichy Convent (or Cloister), the only place in Moscow where one could hear church bells during the Soviet era. The final section of the first movement is written in the style of a *lamento* in Baroque opera, with a descending ostinato bass line in the piano part (D–C–H–B–A–G).

The second movement, *Response* [4], written in a clear G major (the key in which the *Lament* finishes), is a transcription of Korndorf's orchestral piece *The Smile of Maud Lewis* (1998) inspired by spiritually uplifting neo-primitivist paintings by the handicapped Canadian folk-artist Maud Lewis (1903–70). 'Play like a child', writes the composer in the score. Repetitive figurations around the note G in the piano part are probably based on the idea of 'organic' growth (a gradual 'acquisition' of the neighbouring tones A, B, C, D and E); at the same time the cello presents a 'child-like', naïve, largely pentatonic tune.

The final movement, *Glorification* [5], presents another important source of Korndorf's music: the use of Russian Orthodox ritual, psalmody and prayer. In the words of the composer's widow, Galina Averina-Korndorf, 'this is a prayer [...] and a hymn to God at the same time.'<sup>9</sup> In the rhythm of the initial cello *pizzicato*, one can clearly trace the words of Russian prayer *Gospodi pomilui* ('Lord, have mercy'). The conclusion brings back the repetitive texture and the G major key of the second movement in ecstatic final jubilation.

The *Passacaglia* for solo cello is an instrumental version, a 'digest' of Dante's *Commedia Divina*. The work was written as a present for my 50th birthday and dedicated to me, and I gave the first performance a year later,

in the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, on 9 October 1999. While writing the work Korndorf was pre-occupied with the numerous, unexplored possibilities of a single-voiced music, as in Gregorian chant. One of the ideas pursued in the *Passacaglia* is an attempt to find a musical equivalent to Dante's *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* in microtonal, diatonic and whole-tone-scale textures respectively. Moreover, the performer must recite lines of text from *Purgatorio*, to whistle and (at the end of the piece) to sing in order to produce triads together with the double stops on the cello.

The tonal palettes in the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* sections of the *Passacaglia* are very different. In the first section [6], the voice is absent; instead, unusual *col legno battuto* effects produce additional tones, so that the one-voice texture becomes double-voiced with a hidden 'mirror' effect. This innovation was one of Korndorf's discoveries in the string-instrument technique: by moving the bow closer to the bridge, one gets lower *col legno* tones (in combination with the higher tones determined by the left-hand finger-strokes). This effect might be related to the symbolic ambiguity of the 'direction' in the *Inferno*, where Virgil and Dante are moving physically downwards and spiritually upwards at the same time.

In the middle section of the *Passacaglia* [7] texts excerpted from the *Purgatorio* are employed. The lines chosen by Korndorf (to be recited by the cellist) are about the burning fires from which both Dante and his companion Virgil should escape, or about the 'voices' by which they should be led. These 'voices' are presented by strange 'fanfares' played by the cellist behind the bridge; the *col legno* effect can be seen as a warning sign to keep away from the flames....

In the concluding section (related to the *Paradiso*) [8], a diatonic atmosphere is established, and the cellist's voice forms chords with the instrumental double-stops, resulting in a chorale-like effect.

The composer's choice of title ('passacaglia') is quite enigmatic, possibly addressing the etymology of the word, from *pasar*, to walk. Perhaps Korndorf saw the form itself as a symbol for Dante's travels through Hell and Purgatory to Paradise. In any case, the music certainly seems to represent a voyage of some sort. The bass theme, as one would expect of a *passacaglia*, is represented by open strings (the C string is tuned up to C sharp, thus bringing a constant element of triton-based anxiety). The evocation of a voyage – the main thematic implication of the *Passacaglia* – is present everywhere, even portrayed through the traversing of the different open strings. At the beginning, in the *Inferno* section, the 'theme' is played *pizzicato*; later, in the *col legno* section, open strings are often articulated *arco*. In *Purgatorio* section the 'theme' is presented by various tones played behind the bridge, but still on different 'open' strings; in the final section of *Purgatorio* (after the recitation) the 'theme' is played *arco*. Finally, in *Paradiso*, open strings re-appear again played *pizzicato* – similar to the very beginning. Here, though, it is not a 'theme' anymore, but rather an accompaniment to the glorifying three-part chorale (*arco* double-stops combined with the performer's voice and whistling).

<sup>7</sup> Evgeniia Chigareva, 'Nikolai Korndorf: vozvrashchenie v Rossiiu' ('Nikolai Korndorf: Return to Russia'), *Muzыkal'naiа Akademiia*, 2011, No. 4 p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>9</sup> Private correspondence with the author, 2011.