Fleeting Thoughts

Songs and Chamber music by

Hilary Koprowski

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Kimball Wheeler, mezzo-soprano • Helena Soukupová, violin
[1]Vít Micka, conductor

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Dr. Hilary Koprowski

What happens when a talented composer selects world-famous poems for his songs? Works of surprising quality and complexity. A self-appointed "servant to the people," Koprowski's passion for poetry equals his passion for music. He particularly likes to select poems from different languages as his source material. In the current collection, eight countries are represented: Japan, Portugal, France, United States, England, Germany, Spain, and Poland. Each has its treasures.

"Ventriloquist" is a truly frightening poem addressed to the poet's wife Sylvia Plath, who committed suicide at 31. Ted Hughes personifies her madness as a tormenting doll. Koprowski's song reflects the situation's horror. It begins quietly, then turns foreboding when the doll wakes with a high-pitched scream. There is dramatic contrast between the doll's terrifying actions (screaming and accusing), which cause much musical agitation, and the poet's passive reactions (lying on a bed, leaning on a locked door). The low-pitched phrase "Kraken of the seas" (a huge mythical monster) is sung as an ominous *sprechstimme*. Logically, there is less musical drama when the doll kills Plath than when it torments Hughes by screaming at the stars, accusing him in front of the world. "Listeners can either faint when they hear it or commit suicide," Koprowski wryly suggests. "They have a choice."

Although Percy Shelley's poem "Dirge" has the line "grief too sad for song," Koprowski proves him wrong. A lyrical Schumann-like melody opens the piece and reflects the instability and the turmoil of Shelley's dejection. The cello is played *scordatura*, which enhances the despondent mood. When Shelley begins pondering the deaths of "those we know," the key and meter shift more dramatically. (Throughout the song, the key changes three times—B-minor to B-major, B-minor to B-major, then back to B-minor—and meter six times.) An instrumental interlude begins with cello *glissandi*, punctuated with exotic koto accompaniment. Koprowski felt Shelley's poem was too short for a dirge, so he used as his final stanza one written by a modern American writer Roger Vaughan. As the diction changes, so does the melody. There are shocking high notes as the big elm sways and the cock crows. The song

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ends in descending notes of falling rain and a low plodding figure of time passing.

"For Kim" is based on Christopher Marlowe's translation of an Ovid fragment from *In Summer's Heat*. Since this is an erotic poem, Koprowski wanted to strip it of all accompaniment, so he composed the song acapella. High notes caress phrases like "how smooth a belly" and "lustie thigh," and at the phrase "down she fell," the melody reclines with a sly wink. As all erotic encounters should, this one ends on a triumphant note.

"The Passionate Shepherd," also a poem by Marlowe, has a charming languid sound, as the lover promises the world to his love. Lyrical and optimistic, the tenor provides an ornamental trill at the line "birds sing madrigals." When he enumerates what he'll give her, the piano plays arpeggios, underscoring the list and providing atmosphere. Soon the song ascends in passionate desperation, then trails off, as if the outcome is not certain. Despite his words, he is not sure whether this love will flower.

The freethinker Sir Walter Raleigh wrote the "Nimphs Response" as a worldly answer to Marlowe's "Passionate Shepherd." It first appeared in print in 1618 as a madrigal by Orlando Gibbons. Koprowski's rendition, while filled with Renaissance melancholy, is more realistic. The mezzo-soprano's voice joyously soars when she sings of the world being "young," yet quickly descends into gloom as she contemplates raging rivers and cold rocks. Low notes spotlight the flowers fading and winter wrecking the crops. Contrasted by high joyous notes about spring, the words "sorrows fall" are sung low and *pianissimo*, as if whispered. Yet *her* version of his list is sung *crescendo*, as if she is increasingly wary. She sings her "ifs" passionately and ends on a note of pure conviction, believing her pessimism more than his shaky proposal.

The chamber piece "Suite" begins with a *fugato* between the flute and strings. A struggle erupts between the instruments for the melodic line. Koprowski intersperses call and answer techniques with angry chords from the cello and yet another *fugato*. The flute begins a fragmented, atonal dance sequence that quickly develops into a frenetic and catchy *gato*, an Argentinean dance melody.

Koprowski dedicated his version of the traditional melody "Hava Nagila" to the violinist Dr. Donald Gilden, Professor of Neurology at the University of Colorado. As this solo violin piece unfolds, there is much variation and invention. Fantasias on the familiar theme burst forth, followed by *pizzicati* episodes and spirited cadenzas. The familiar theme returns with renewed vigor. Toward the finale, there's an ingenious adaptation from Bach's *Violin Partita No. 2* ("Chaconne"). This allegro passage sends the dance into a whirl, before it winds down.

When Koprowski acquired a volume of Haiku from 10th Century Japan, he decided to turn some into art songs, usually at late hours. "When I am trying to write something short at midnight," he says, "I take a Haiku piece and compose the music, then fall asleep." The titles usually refer to characters' names.

"Taira-No-Kanemori" is an impassioned love song that begins with startling high notes, as the poet notices with delight the blush on her cheek. Coy descending notes describe her trying to conceal it. The 5th and 6th bars, proclaiming to all that she's in love, nearly rhyme with the 1st and 2nd, yet the notes are slightly lower, forged to contrast with the final ascending figure, "Where are your thoughts today?" In "Taiken Mon-In Horikawa," the poet doubts her lover's constancy and the melancholic *ritenuto* reflects the holding back of her feelings. Unlike Koprowski's other Haiku transcriptions, this song has no *sforzando*, no affect, as the poet's voice betrays a deep depression. "Suwo No Naishi" is a song of regret at lost opportunity. The *melisma* at the word "head" emphasizes the poet's ambivalence about the contemplated affair. As she wonders if the attachment can last, the phrase rapidly ascends. The music descends with "what might the world have said." In the mood piece "Murasaki Shikibu," piano and cello initially create a mysterious mood, which the voice sustains. Triplets emphasize the broken pace of "someone hurried by," a past lover who sullied her reputation like a cloud overshadowing the moon. The tantalizing rest between "clouds driving o'er the sky" and "obscured the moon on high" adds suspense. The death-haunted "Izumi Shikibu" begins with low notes that es-

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tablish a dark tone. The voice climbs as the poet requests a pleasant memory, ending on a sustained pleading note. The piano trails off like an escaping breath. The hero of "Tadamine Mibu" hates "the cold unfriendly moon" that shines at dawn, reminding him of his melancholia. Koprowski's use of the koto, in addition to providing exoticism, adds a steely pallor, much like the unfriendly moon. The final *melisma* of "dawn" is particularly despondent.

In the instrumental piece "Dialogue – Valse Macabre," tenuous figures introduce the piece, like creatures timidly exploring a dark forest for the first time. Each of the three instruments suggest waltz melodies. There is a *pizzicato*, a *glissando*, then the piece disappears mysteriously, as if snatched by a giant hand.

The song "Mundo Mundo" boldly addresses the world in self-assured 4/4 time, in the key of C-major. The striking crescendo of the ascending figure, "mundo vasto," repeated twice, enhances the enormity. On the repeat, it ends on a bewitching melodic figure of tenderness and confidence, translated as "my heart is bigger than the world."

"De Profundis" bears the inscription "inspired by Fauré," possibly referring to the Gabriel-Urbain Fauré's famous *Requiem* or perhaps the unresolved mild discords he loved to use. Koprowski's song begins with a vocalise in the key of C-minor, which immediately establishes a rueful tone. Federico Garcia Lorca's poem is an elegy for the dead killed in the Spanish Civil War. The composer emphasizes the pathos of the lovers "beneath the dry earth" with a well-placed crescendo. The final theme of the lovers being "asleep forever" is ingeniously punctuated by three somber and prolonged low D's for the word "siempre."

A strange lyrical poem typical of Rainer Maria Rilke, "Ernste Stunde—Solemn Hour" describes how deeply the poet empathizes with people weeping, laughing, walking, and dying. Koprowski chose violin accompaniment because "the violin would reflect the state of the poet's soul more than a percussive instrument, like a piano." Each stanza varies accordingly: the weeping stanza is introduced by the violin bowed *sul tasto*, producing a flutelike sound. The figures rapidly vary in pitch, like irregular sobbing. For the laughing stanza, the meter abruptly changes to 3/4, then resumes the 4/4 of the rest of the piece. The words "laughs with me" is expressed in a chuckling triplet. "Yet the laughter is really sad laughter," says Koprowski, recognizing the deep conflicts in this tragic poem. The tempo becomes more regular in the walking stanza, the notes stable and sure. The dying stanza's tempo slows, the figures lower, ending solemnly on "looks at me," as the poet recognizes the inevitability of his own death.

Perhaps to balance the pathos of so many triste songs, Koprowski composed "Mazurka Apyors," a lively mazurka in the style of Chopin. He sent it to a despondent Swedish pianist to perk up his spirits. Hearing this piece's jaunty rhythms, the pianist must have immediately recovered.

A joyous *portamento* opens the song "Za Moich Mlodych Lat (When I was young)," its high notes betraying a trace of yearning. Then the pessimism of "now there's no spring like that" darkens the tonal color with groups of descending figures in the key of C-minor. When the mezzo-soprano sings of the "scented flower of love," the *portamento* repeats and again the somber coloration returns, this time *molto ritenuto*, as the black cloud drifts over the poet's life. "In contrast to my colleagues whose atonal music reflect *their* emotional state," says the composer, "my music tries to reflect the mood of the poetry." In this respect, Koprowski's songs tend to be expressionistic.

However, many of his instrumental pieces are impressionistic. Two of them were dedicated to his assistant Andrea Goodstein-Curtis, who plays them. "For Andrea 1" is a balmy mood piece played andante, with playful flutters and tenuous forays, like a love letter sent out awaiting a reply. In the middle, there is a charming chorale. "For Andrea 1" ends *mysterioso*, Debussy-like, leaving the listener eager for more. "For Andrea 2" is another mood piece, a sentimental elegy that suggests cool nights and fleeting joy.

"Autumn Song" may be Koprowski's most ingeniously constructed song. It is a Paul Verlaine poem, about the poet's heart drowning in the languorous tone of the violin. The winds blow to and fro, to a four-note figure that leisurely wavers. The song has a late 19th Century feel, as if the

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ghost of Ernst Chausson flitted through Koprowski's room while he was composing. Yet Koprowski chose this poem for an additional reason. He realized that the famous poet Stefan George had translated it into German. George changed Verlaine's feminine rhymes into rough masculine ones. Realizing that he now had virtually two different songs, Koprowski composed for the German translation accordingly. While the French half is restrained, refined, in the key of F major, and metered in 4/4 time, the German half has a more unstable 3/4 meter in the key of A major. The piano figures are also more prominent and rapidly traverse the scale. The winds now blow in 16th note gusts, the mood turns tempestuous, and the song sounds more like Hugo Wolf than Chausson.

"First Sight" is Philip Larkin's symbolic poem about lambs encountering the "wretched width of cold" of youth's adversity. Koprowski uses clever musical effects. Descending figures almost seem to shiver. The piano ambles while the lambs walk. The phrase "earth's unmeasurable surprise" is itself a delightful surprise. The bar's last note violates expectation by going up instead of down. When Larkin asserts that the lambs will soon transcend the inimical snow, the song ends optimistically, with an ascending *mezzo forte* figure.

When Koprowski's beloved dog Icarus died at an early age, he composed "Elegy for Icarus" as consolation. Although the piece was crafted as an improvisation, its changing tonalities and its plaintive delicacy is reminiscent of the moods in Brahms' *Intermezzi*, Opus 117. It is, as Brahms said of his third Intermezzo, "a lullaby of all my griefs."

With a shake of the maracas and the burst of a flute, the "Avatar of Shadows" opens. Accompanied by dissonant chords, the piece assumes a tango rhythm. But not for long. Suddenly, the "Habanera" from *Carmen* emerges from a curtain, then hides coyly, as if its makeup is slightly awry. Like Francis Poulenc, Koprowski showers the listener with new themes, one right after the other, restating some as *ritornellos*, abandoning others. The finale, according to Koprowski, "marches up to the gates of heaven and right through them. All is happiness and love."

—*Peter Bates*

Dr. **Hilary Koprowski**, born in Warsaw, Poland, was faced with a choice between a career in music or in science. He graduated with a major in piano from the Warsaw Conservatory but turned to medicine, obtained his M.D. degree in Warsaw in 1939, and adopted scientific research as his life's work. His musical studies were continued in Rome, where he graduated from the Santa Cecilia Academy in 1940. Soon he moved to the United States where he became Director of The Wistar Institute in 1957. There, he brought to life a venerable but decaying institution and made of it a leading research center for the investigation of cancer and viral diseases, and built up a staff of top biologists from all parts of the world.

Dr. Koprowski, during the 45 years of his scientific career, has become one of the outstanding scientists of our time. He has been awarded memberships in many learned societies, such as the National Academy of Sciences, as well as being the recipient of many honors, including the Légion d' Honneur, the Philadelphia Award and the Scott Award. He has made numerous basic research contributions which have included the development of a live oral poliomyelitis vaccine and a new rabies vaccine that is more effective and less painful than the traditional Pasteur vaccine. In addition, Dr. Koprowski pioneered the development and use of monoclonal antibodies for the detection and treatment of gastrointestinal cancer.

It is only now, following great success and notoriety in his career as a scientist, that Dr. Koprowski has allowed himself the time to pursue his musical interests which have always meant so much to him. In 1995, Dr. Koprowski began studying musical composition via the styles of such great composers as Bach, Brahms and Schubert and, since then, has progressed to studying the more contemporary styles of Schönberg and Messaien. It is in this contemporary mode of composition that Dr. Koprowski has truly found his niche and enjoys producing works in this genre.

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