

## Knussen's meticulous, luminous classical music has a sound all its own

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Nothing about the British composer and conductor Oliver Knussen is off-the-rack. Not his famous debut at age 15 in 1968, when he conducted his First Symphony with the London Symphony. Not his grizzly bear girth and lumberjack beard that cut an unusual profile in the concert hall. Certainly not his music, which is meticulous, mysterious, luminous and bewitchingly original.

"My music is extremely refined in many respects and carefully wrought," he says, chuckling at the understatement. "But I love the irrational side of music, things going on at the same time that don't quite fit or give expressively conflicting statements.

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"If I feel comfortable writing a piece, I get extremely suspicious, because it means that I've probably done it before and probably better. There needs to be a bit of grit to produce the pearl."

At 55, Knussen makes a long overdue debut with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra this week. He leads an adventurous program of two uncommon scores by Stravinsky and two of his own works, the prismatic miniature "Flourish with Fireworks" and the mercurial Violin Concerto with charismatic soloist Leila Josefowicz. These are landmark concerts for the DSO, which has never performed Knussen's music.

Knussen is a major figure whose unique voice places him in the top echelon of today's composers. But he is also underrated, because his small but potent output has sometimes been overshadowed by his eccentricities, bouts with writer's block and near-legendary penchant for missing deadlines. He also makes his living primarily as a lucid conductor of modern and contemporary music, further diverting attention from his own works.

But Knussen remains the rarest breed of composer: He sounds like no one else.

Gunther Schuller, the composer-conductor with whom Knussen studied at the Tanglewood Music Center in Massachusetts in the early '70s, puts it this way: "Olly has a gift, and it's given to very few composers, which is that he's developed a truly individual voice, and that's the most important thing one can do."

### A DSO admirer

Knussen spent an hour last week talking about his music and career from Chicago, where he heard Josefowicz play his concerto with the Chicago Symphony and conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen. Knussen has been to Detroit once -- sort of. He drove through 35 years ago on his way from Tanglewood to Chicago. Still, he has admired the DSO from afar, retaining fond memories of growing up with LPs recorded by the orchestra during the '50s with conductor Paul Paray.

After a relatively dormant period in the late 1990s, Knussen's productivity has picked up steam, even as he endured difficulties in his personal life. His wife died in 2003, and he spent several months in the hospital in 2005 because of conditions brought on, says one friend, by years of neglecting his health.

Knussen dates the renaissance to the Violin Concerto in 2002, which was followed by a Requiem for his wife based on poems by Emily Dickinson, Rainer Maria Rilke and others. He has nearly finished a long-simmering 25-minute work for the Cleveland Orchestra, and there's also a piano piece and a cello concerto that, the composer says, "are in various stages of disarray."

"My music needs mulling, you know?" he says with a gently lilting accent. "But then very often it comes out very quickly. The Violin Concerto I wrote very swiftly, but that's because the ideas have been thought about over years."

"It's all about choices. Especially as I get older, I have difficulty deciding, for goodness' sake, which order to put my clothes on in the morning, or whether to take the garbage out, or do the washing up first, let alone figuring out whether I should make this harmonic move."

Knussen's music is eclectic in influence but organic in sound. He appears to have swallowed the tradition whole, from Bach through the highly systemized and dissonant post-World War II avant-garde. But unlike many composers who cherry-pick from historical styles, Knussen never creates pastiche and never mortgages his modernist bona fides.

In the Violin Concerto, for example, a romantic spirit dances through concise baroque forms. The twittering violin melodies and alluringly ambiguous harmony recall the heartfelt early 20th-Century atonality of Alban Berg. The twilight dreams wink at Alexander Scriabin's mysticism. The flashes of orchestral color, popping like fireworks across the sky, suggest Stravinsky.

But in the crucible of Knussen's imagination, the music emerges in a seamless rush of delirious lyricism and layered secrets. "The music is incredibly theatrical, suspenseful and dramatic," says Josefowicz, who has become the concerto's most ardent champion.

"There's never a wasted note. Olly is extremely aware of form, and that's what I appreciate -- how it makes sense to me, and how I can make sense of the different moods for the audience. And the second movement is one of the most free, lyrical, romantic, beautiful movements ever written."

### **At 14, a symphony**

Knussen, who lives in Suffolk, England, was born in Glasgow, Scotland. His father was principal bassist of the London Symphony, and young Olly was already writing music for fun when he had the first of two encounters that cemented his destiny. At 9 he sat with his father on stage during a rehearsal of Schoenberg's hyper-romantic "Gurrelieder" conducted by Leopold Stokowski.

"With the chorus behind me and orchestra in front, I was mind-boggled," says Knussen. "It was a completely defining moment. I knew I wanted to write something like that."

At 12 he met Benjamin Britten, the towering hero of 20th-Century English music. Speaking to the 12-year-old as a fellow composer, Britten asked, "Do you plan what you write? I've always found it a tremendous help with my music to plan very carefully." The advice stuck.

Knussen's First Symphony, written at 14 and premiered a year later, caused a sensation, especially when the conductor got sick and Knussen stepped in to lead it himself. The whole enterprise was repeated a week later at Carnegie Hall. The experience opened doors but also left scars.

For a while Knussen had no notion of whether the music he was writing was any good, because he was either lavished with unqualified praise or met with fierce resentment. Knussen became, in his words, "tremendously self-conscious," and the issue has always seemed to gnaw at his creativity.

His fast start, however, did pave the way for him to attend Tanglewood at 18, where he began a fruitful apprenticeship with Schuller, whose capacious intellect became a playground for his prized student. "When he studied with me, I was just blown away by how much he had already absorbed, and how eager he was to absorb even more," says Schuller.

Nothing seems to make Knussen happier than that he's been able to repay Schuller for his early guidance by taking him on driving holidays around the United Kingdom, spending hours in the car exploring the terrain and talking music.

Knussen "stumbled" -- his word -- into maturity with his Second Symphony (1970-71), an expressionist setting of strange fin de siècle poetry by Austrian Georg Trakl. The Third Symphony (1973-79) is based on Ophelia's mad scene from "Hamlet." He spent the '80s working on a pair of one-act children's operas with fanciful author and illustrator Maurice Sendak, "Where the Wild Things Are" and "Higgledy Piggledy Pop!"

### **Relationship with the past**

From the late '40s through the early '70s, classical composers were largely defined by the avant-garde monolith of atonal and so-called serial music. The wall tumbled in the '70s as many composers returned to tonality. A smorgasbord of styles emerged, from a stripped-down, aggressively consonant minimalism to audience friendly neo-romanticism.

The challenge every composer faced -- and still does -- is to forge a healthy relationship with the past.

"I've heard hundreds of pieces that sound like bad Sibelius, or bad Strauss or bad Shostakovich, and that's no answer," says Schuller. "The thing about composers like Olly is that they don't go back. They just incorporate the best of the past in what they do."

When Knussen was young, the high priests of the European avant-garde like Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen preached a complete rejection of history. But Knussen never felt bullied.

"The most interesting developments in music going back centuries have come about because of cross-fertilizations of many different things," he says. "The most obvious example is Mozart, with his use of the German stuff and the Italian stuff, Austria being a clearinghouse for all kinds of culture.

"The same thing remains true now. I think the more crossbred things are, the healthier it is. I hope I'm not wildly eclectic, but I hope I'm not identifiable as one particular kind of a composer."

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