

At Work in Vermont



Laura Koplewitz has written her major works while rambling through the Vermont countryside and along the shores of Lake Champlain.

Story by Noreen Cargill / Photos by Andy Duback

MAKING MUSIC

Vermont composer Laura Koplewitz writes classical works for soloists, ensembles, and full orchestra.

WHEN TALKING ABOUT classical music, the word composer might bring to mind a solemn portrait of, say, Mozart, with the ruffled collar, brocade jacket, knickers, and white powdered wig. But a more current image might be a woman wearing high-heeled boots, plain black pants, and a button-down velvet shirt. There's a bit of lace showing over the top button and her reddish-brown curls fall past her shoulders. This is Laura Koplewitz. She is a modern composer, and a Vermonter.

Koplewitz has written more than one hundred works, including fully notated, improvised, acoustic and electronic pieces. She writes for soloists, small ensembles, and full orchestra; the latter is her favorite. "Orchestras are a living, breathing ensemble," she says. "They are attuned to one another in a split second." She compares an orchestra to a flock of birds, moving in unison as if one mind is at work.



Using a metaphor based in nature is common for this composer. In fact, she's written all of her major works while rambling the Vermont countryside. "When composing, I take long walks," she says. "I spend hours walking—thinking, listening to music, going over ideas, and developing the piece so I can 'hear' it in my head." Her favorite destinations are Shelburne Farms and Shelburne Point. Koplewitz's *Lake Spirit Journey*, a work commissioned by the Vermont Symphony Orchestra, consists of four sections—Water's Edge, Currents, Light and Clouds, and In the Winds—that were inspired by the shores of Lake Champlain.

When Koplewitz is ready to write the score, she works on a laptop in a program called Sibelius. Blank score paper appears on the screen, and her mouse is the "pen" as she adds the notes. As the piece develops, she creates recordings to take on her walks. "It would not be

Koplewitz is an accomplished musician in her own right; she plays piano and classical guitar.



unusual to hear of a composer taking two to six months to complete a 30-minute orchestral work,” Koplewitz says. “Composing a piece happens gradually, every day, over many hours at a time.”

Her music has been described as melodic and impressionistic, taking after American composers Aaron Copeland or Samuel Barber. “There is a feeling of bare simplicity [to her music],” says Joanna Kurkowicz, the concertmaster of the Boston Philharmonic. “Mostly very sunny in character, she surprises us with some dark harmonic elements from time to time . . . She seems to be inspired by nature. Her titles are very poetic, as is her music.”

TAKING AN UNCONVENTIONAL approach for a composer, Koplewitz did not attend conservatory, but instead studied literature and women’s studies at Hampshire College, where she played the classical guitar in ensembles. When she tried her hand at composing, “my mind just loved it,” she says. “It felt as though I was ‘centering’ myself on the page with musical design.” The college provided her space and equipment to set up a small music studio. “I was so enthralled with creating sound collages and learning the piano, I nearly lived in

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that room for two years,” she says. “I knew I had to learn more.” Koplewitz added composing as a minor while getting her master’s degree in cultural studies at New York University, and then went on to become a fellow in the doctoral program in music composition at City University of New York Graduate Center, where she is just finishing up her Ph.D. in music.

Her doctoral work has been important to Koplewitz’s success as a composer, but one-on-one time spent with mentors such as Joan Tower, Stefania de Kenessey, and Alex Shapiro has also been invaluable. Along with encouraging Laura to “create a believable world” in a piece, Tower—a distinguished professor at Bard who won a Grammy this year—also made it clear that composing is an everyday job with hands-on work.

“There are very practical things to learn,” Koplewitz says. “I’m not sitting and thinking, ‘Oh, I’ll be inspired now.’” In order to write a piece, she needs a tremendous amount of technical information. Right now, she is working on a harp concerto, so she needs to find out how fast a harpist can change pedals, how the harp is best highlighted as a solo instrument, and what new techniques can be applied, among other things. She gathers scores to study, matching up a recording with a printed copy of the score.

In preparation for writing this piece, she has listened to Joquán Rodrigo’s 1952 *Concerto for Harp and Orchestra*, a twenty-three-minute score, 30 times already, each time listening for something different and also studying the score in the 150-page

To hear the Vermont Symphony Orchestra...

First assembled in 1936, the Vermont Symphony Orchestra is the oldest state-supported orchestra in the country. Volunteer committees also help in its success by raising funds, selling tickets, and hosting musicians in their homes.

Unlike many orchestras, which often feature musicians from one location performing in a single concert hall nearby, the VSO is all about touring Vermont and bringing music—orchestral, choral, and chamber—to people and communities across the state. In addition to performing in the usual concert halls, the VSO has performed in a huge variety of locations, from armories and gymnasiums to meadows and hillsides.

Once made up of musicians who also worked as barbers, lawyers, and farmers, today most VSO performers are professional musicians; about half come from Vermont and the others from all over New England. The VSO music director, Jaime Laredo, is known worldwide as a violinist, conductor, recitalist, and chamber musician.

The VSO annual season consists of four major programs: a holiday concert series in December, a Masterworks series from October to May, the Made in Vermont program in fall (featuring a work by a Vermont composer), and the Summer Festival Tour, with ten concerts across the state.

For more information on the Vermont Symphony Orchestra and details on upcoming programs, visit www.vso.org or call (800) VSO-9293, ext.10.

book. As she learns more, she will begin to write her own practice pieces, where she will create a piece for harp with gradual increase in the size of the ensemble—maybe a part for flute and then pizzicato strings for the violin.

The research she is doing for the harp concerto is a typical score study for the composer, but even when not in this intense mode, she is often still composing in her mind. “I might be driving the car, shopping, or having a conversation with someone,” she says, “and some part of my brain is working on the string section of measure 12 to 20, and I’m hardly aware of it... then I realize I’m tapping a chocolate chip cookie in three-quarter time while sitting at Starbucks.”

Similar to the way a freelance writer receives payment for writing an article, there are a few ways a composer can approach writing a new piece. Koplewitz can write on spec with a specific player or group in mind (this is the case with the harp concerto); she can write on commission (Jaime Laredo hired her to write *Lake Spirit Journey* for the VSO); or she can write a piece for the love of it. “If it’s in my head,

it’s a piece whose time has come,” she says. Payments also come in the form of royalties for registered works.

Most of Koplewitz’s time is spent on composing projects, but she also works with private students and teaches in the graduate program at SUNY Stony Brook. She enjoys connecting with her students and with people in general. Dialogue is important to her life and her work, whether she’s talking with other artists or talking with family... or both at the same time.

The composer’s sister, Jane Koplewitz, is an internationally established jewelry designer whose one-of-a-kind pieces have appeared in *Elle* and *Vogue*. She and her husband, musician Peter Torrey, own a gallery on Church Street in Burlington that features Jane’s work. “Although we are in

To listen to Laura...

To learn more about Vermont composer Koplewitz, or to buy a CD of her music, go to www.laura.koplewitz.com.

entirely different fields,” Laura says, “we talk almost every day about creative process, design, evolution of ideas, and brainstorming about art and imagination.”

KOPLEWITZ GREW UP IN ST. Albans and went to high school in Burlington, where she spends most of her time today. Her father, Martin, worked as a surgeon and her mom, Judith, as a psychologist (both are retired now). The home was always filled with music. Judith played the cello as a child and into her twenties, performing as first cellist of an all-city orchestra in New York City, playing under Leonard Bernstein. Later, her mother played trio and quartet music at home. “I didn’t realize until I looked back as an adult,” Koplewitz says, “that I learned many of the solo cello lines from famous orchestra pieces because my mother used to hum them around the house.” Laura started studying classical guitar when she was 10 years old and continued for about 12 years, until she became more interested in composing.

Today, her mom and dad live nearby, and she also stays in touch with her brother, Paul, who lives near Atlanta. Koplewitz’s family has been a major influence on her ability to sustain her work, she says. Sometimes it’s as simple as hearing that she should keep going. “You have to have courage not to run away from your own inspirations,” Koplewitz says about working on a piece. “You can create things that feel bigger than you are as an individual... if you let your imagination run free.”

For Koplewitz, inspiration can come from nature, a painting, poetry, and even a speaking voice. She created one piece, *Is this the Wind you Dream Of?*, after hearing a friend from South Africa describe the smell of the landscape there after a rain. “When I was a young child, I had a recurring dream of walking through a hay field,” she recalls. “As my hands brushed the tops of the hay stalks, they were all made of music. When the wind blew across the field, the waves of wind over the wheat sounded like an orchestra. I think that’s why I had to compose. Nature itself sounded so musical. I wanted to learn how to express that; I wanted to learn how to write down that dream.”

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