

ROBERT KURKA



Symphony No. 2

Julius Caesar

Music for Orchestra

Serenade for Small Orchestra

Grant Park Orchestra

Carlos Kalmar, conductor

ROBERT KURKA (1921–1957)

Grant Park Orchestra

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1 Julius Caesar, Symphonic Epilogue after Shakespeare, Op. 28 (1955) (8:52)*

Symphony No. 2, Op. 24 (1953) (21:19)

2 Allegro molto (7:57)

3 Andante espressivo (6:39)

4 Presto gioioso (6:36)

5 Music for Orchestra, Op. 11 (1949) (13:44)*

Serenade for Small Orchestra, Op. 25 (1954) (19:42)†

6 Allegro molto (6:08)

7 Adagio molto espressivo (4:33)

8 Presto (3:28)

9 Allegro (5:23)

Total Time: (64:00)

All works published by G. Schirmer

* World Premiere Recording

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† First CD Recording

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Symphonic Works by Robert Kurka (1921–1957)

Notes by Richard E. Rodda

Early death always chafes the heart, and with special poignancy at the loss of a gifted creative person. The misfortune that allowed so many composers, great and obscure, to die filled with unrealized music, also befell American composer Robert Kurka. Kurka, of Czech descent, was born in Cicero, Illinois (just outside Chicago) on December 22, 1921. He attended Columbia University, but was largely self-taught in composition, studying only briefly with Otto Luening and Darius Milhaud. After graduating from Columbia in 1948, Kurka taught at the City University of New York and Queens College, served as composer-in-residence at Dartmouth College, and composed to growing acclaim. He received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1951, after completing a chamber symphony, a symphony for brass and strings, a violin concerto, four string quartets, two violin sonatas, and several other works. An award from the National Institute of Arts and Letters came the following year. In 1952, he began an opera based on Jaroslav Hašek's satirical novel *The Good Soldier Schweik*, but had difficulty securing rights to make a libretto from it, so instead worked his sketches into the orchestral suite that has become his best-known composition. Eventually he proceeded with the opera, but he was stricken with leukemia as he worked on the score. He was able to finish it sufficiently before his death in New York on December 12, 1957 — ten days before his 36th birthday — that composer and arranger Hershy Kay could prepare the work for its

premiere, given with considerable success by the New York City Opera on April 23, 1958. The declaration accompanying an award Kurka received from Brandeis University on May 5, 1957 (seven months before his death) proved sadly ironic: "To Robert Kurka, a composer at the threshold of a career of real distinction."

The story of Julius Caesar has served as the inspiration for some two dozen operas. (Handel's version of 1724 is the best known; more recent works include Gian Francesco Malipiero's *Giulio Cesare* of 1936, and the 1971 puppet opera, *Young Caesar*, by Lou Harrison.) Shakespeare's 1599 tragedy, *Julius Caesar*, which takes Caesar's assassination as its dramatic engine, has inspired concert overtures from Robert Schumann, Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Felix Draeseke, and Hermann Hirschbach; incidental music from Darius Milhaud, John Ireland, Hans von Bülow, Marc Blitzstein, Harrison Birtwistle, Vagn Holmboe, and others; and film scores from Miklós Rózsa and Malcolm Arnold. Kurka's *Julius Caesar* dates from 1955; it was first heard in San Diego on July 12, 1955.

Kurka's "Symphonic Epilogue after Shakespeare" (as the piece is subtitled) opens with an aggressive theme evoking Roman conquest and the emperor's might. A lyrical melody suggests the drama's more introspective moments, not least the gnawing guilt of

Brutus. The build-up to what must be the moment of Caesar's assassination is portrayed at the center of the work by a march that grows from naïve to menacing. A tragic theme and a mysterious passage — perhaps music to accompany the appearance of Caesar's ghost — lead to a powerful, dirge-like coda.

The elements of Kurka's characteristic musical dialect — energetic rhythms, jazz-influenced syncopations, sharply profiled themes that are developed with remarkable skill and ingenuity, kaleidoscopic orchestration, spiky but unambiguously tonal harmonies — are abundantly evident in his Symphony No. 2, composed in 1953 on a commission from the Paderewski Fund for the Encouragement of American Composers, and premiered in San Diego on July 8, 1958. The Symphony begins with a muscular theme announced by trombones, bassoons, and low strings; a broad, lyrical melody initiated by the violas and cellos provides the formal second theme. These two subjects are brought into contention as the sonata-form movement unfolds, with the dynamic first theme dominating. The outer sections of the

Andante are based on a long, gentle strain of melancholy character, while the center of the movement's arch form is more animated and expressively intense. The finale is vigorous and optimistic; its driving main theme provides the engine for a fine display of orchestral brilliance.

Kurka composed his *Music for Orchestra* between November 1948 and May 1949, but it was not premiered until Carlos Kalmar conducted it at the Grant Park Music Festival on June 27, 2003. The work is rather like a compressed symphonic poem: a symphonic showpiece with muscular, thematically related fast sections alternated by slower episodes.

Kurka's *Serenade for Small Orchestra* (subtitled "after lines by Walt Whitman") was commissioned by the La Jolla Musical Arts Society and premiered in that lovely California seaside town under the direction of Nikolai Sokoloff on June 13, 1954. Rather than provide a program note for the work, Kurka affixed quotations from Whitman's poetry to reflect the expressive essence of each of its four movements:

*I celebrate myself, and sing myself;
And what I assume, you shall assume;
For every atom belonging to me as good as belongs to you.*

*When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
I mourned — and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring. . . .*

*A song for occupations!
In the labor of engines and trades, and the labor of fields,
I find the developments,
And find the eternal meanings. . . .*

*O to make the most jubilant song!
Full of music — full of manhood, womanhood, infancy!
Full of common employments — full of grain and trees.*

Also by Robert Kurka on Cedille Records



Robert Kurka: The Good Soldier Schweik (CDR 90000 062)
Jason Collins (tenor), Marc Embree (baritone), Kelli Harrington (soprano),
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Chicago Opera Theater / Alexander Platt, conductor



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Dr. Richard E. Rodda has provided program notes for the Orchestras of Berlin, Cleveland, Chicago, Dallas, and Cincinnati, as well as for the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, the American Symphony and Orpheus Chamber Orchestras in New York City, the Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra, the Grant Park Music Festival, the Curtis Institute of Music, and many other ensembles and organizations across the country. He has written liner notes for Telarc, Sony Classical, Decca, Angel, Arabesque, Newport Classics, Delos, Azica, Dorian, and Cedille. Dr. Rodda teaches at Case Western Reserve University and the Cleveland Institute of Music.

Carlos Kalmar, conductor



Carlos Kalmar is the Principal Conductor of Chicago's Grant Park Music Festival and Music Director of the Oregon Symphony. Mr. Kalmar was born in 1958 in Montevideo, Uruguay, to Austrian parents. He studied conducting with Karl Österreicher at the College for Music in Vienna, and won First Prize at the Hans Swarowsky Conducting Competition in Vienna in June 1984. From 1987 to 1991 he was chief conductor of the Hamburg Symphony Orchestra, and general music director and chief conductor of the Stuttgart Philharmonic Orchestra between 1991 and 1995. From 1996 through 2000, Carlos Kalmar was the general music director of the Opera House and Philharmonic Orchestra in Dessau, Germany. Between 2000 and 2003, he was principal conductor and artistic director of the Tonkünstler Orchestra in Vienna.

Since his German debut with the NDR Symphony Orchestra in 1985, Maestro Kalmar has guest conducted numerous orchestras throughout Europe, Asia,

Australia, and North and South America including the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra, Seattle Symphony, Detroit Symphony, Minnesota Orchestra, Cincinnati Symphony, Indianapolis Symphony, Bamberg Symphony, Berlin Radio Symphony, National Orchestra of Spain, Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra, Vienna Symphony, São Paulo Symphony Orchestra, Singapore Symphony, West Australian Symphony, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, and the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra in New York. He has received critical acclaim for his conducting at top European opera houses including the Vienna State Opera, Hamburg State Opera, Zurich Opera, National Opera of Brussels, and Vienna Volksoper.

Carlos Kalmar has recorded CDs with the Jeunesse Musicales World Orchestra (Alban Gerhardt, cello soloist) and Vienna's Tonkünstler Orchestra for Austrian National Radio. This is his third recording for Cedille.

Grant Park Orchestra

The Grant Park Orchestra is the resident orchestra of the Grant Park Music Festival, which is dedicated to providing the public with free, high-quality orchestral performances through the presentation of classical-music concerts. Founded by the Chicago Park District in 1935 and co-presented by the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs since 2001, the Festival is the nation's only remaining free, municipally funded outdoor classical music series. The Grant Park Orchestra was created in 1943. Nicolai Malko was named the first principal conductor in 1945, a post he held through 1956. Since then, other prestigious conductors have held the position, including Irwin Hoffman, Leonard Slatkin, David Zinman, Zdenek Macal, and Hugh Wolff. In October 1999, Carlos Kalmar was named the Festival's newest principal conductor and James Paul was installed as the Festival's first principal guest conductor. In addition to performing an array of classical repertoire, the Grant Park Orchestra is renowned for its focus on contemporary American music. The Grant Park Music Festival runs for ten consecutive weeks each summer. In 2004, the Festival moves to its new home, the Jay Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park, a state-of-the-art venue designed by internationally renowned architect Frank Gehry. This is the Grant Park Orchestra's second recording for Cedille Records.

Also with Carlos Kalmar on Cedille Records



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