

Cedille Records  
5255 N. Lakewood Ave.  
Chicago, IL 60640  
(773) 989-2515  
www.cedillerecords.org

Press contact: Nat Silverman  
Nathan J. Silverman Co./PR  
1830 Sherman Ave., Suite 401  
Evanston, IL 60201-3773  
Phone (847) 328-4292  
Fax (847) 328-4317  
Email: natsilv@aol.com

# News

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## ROBERT KURKA'S ROBUST ORCHESTRAL MUSIC RECALLS A VIBRANT CAREER CUT SHORT

### *New CD Surveys American Composer's Symphonic Works*

The first CD devoted exclusively to the robust orchestral music of twentieth-century American composer Robert Kurka (1921-1957) looks beyond the two best-known works of his too-brief career, *The Good Soldier Schweik* opera and orchestral suite, to illuminate a truly original talent.

The Chicago-area native, a rising musical star of the 1950s whose teachers included Otto Luening and Darius Milhaud, died of leukemia at the age of 35, while completing his opera.

The new CD, *Symphonic Works by Robert Kurka* (Cedille CDR 90000 077), presents the world premiere recordings of Kurka's *Julius Caesar*, *Symphonic Epilogue after Shakespeare*, Op. 28, and *Music for Orchestra*, Op. 11; the first CD recording of *Serenade for Small Orchestra*, Op. 25; and only the second compact disc with Kurka's *Symphony No. 2*, Op. 24.

Performed by Chicago's Grant Park Orchestra under its principal conductor Carlos Kalmar, the works were recorded in late June 2002 and 2003 at summer-festival concerts in Orchestra Hall. (The venerable, municipally funded orchestra embarks on its seventieth season this June 23.)

The single movement *Julius Caesar* (1955) opens with a muscular theme evoking imperial triumph. The introspective, lyrical melody that follows may imply the inner conflicts of the "noble" assassin Brutus. A march evolves from naive to menacing and builds to a tragic theme, followed by a mysterious passage that suggests Caesar's ghost. The piece ends with a dirge-like coda.

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Brilliant orchestral pyrotechnics, neoclassicism spiced with dissonances, and jazz-influenced syncopations — all Kurka trademarks — are on display in the Symphony No. 2 (1953), which was commissioned by the Paderewski Fund for the Encouragement of American Composers. It moves from a powerful opening theme to an eloquent and lyrical second movement to a vigorous and optimistic finale. ClassicsToday.com critic David Hurwitz calls the piece a “three-movement fiesta in sound.”

Kurka completed *Music for Orchestra* in 1949, but it wasn't premiered until the June 27 and 28, 2003 performances captured on this CD. In the CD booklet, annotator Richard E. Rodda likens the dramatic piece to “a compressed symphonic poem . . . with muscular, thematically related fast sections alternated by slower episodes.”

For his *Serenade for Small Orchestra* (1954), Kurka affixed quotations from Walt Whitman poems to reflect, in Rodda's words, “the expressive essence” of each of the Serenade's four movements. The first movement is associated with the poem “Song of Myself,” which begins, “I celebrate myself, and sing myself”; the second with Whitman's famous “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd”; the third with Whitman's “Song for Occupations” (referring to jobs, not military takeovers); and the fourth with the poem “A Song of Joys”: “O to make the most jubilant song!”

Months before he died, Kurka received an award from Brandeis University, accompanied by the unfortunately ironic declaration, “to a composer at the threshold of a career of real distinction.” Cedille Records' president and producer James Ginsburg says the new CD underscores that assessment. “Had he lived longer, Kurka's name would likely be mentioned today alongside those of distinguished American composers such as Barber, Piston, and Diamond.”

Ginsburg says the CD will be of interest to audiophiles for the way it conveys the full scope of Kurka's impressive orchestral palette: the impact and sweep of his bold gestures and the sweetness of his tender themes. The project's recording team — engineers Bill Maylone and Christopher Willis and producer Ginsburg — was the same as for Cedille's 2003 CD of Brahms and Joachim violin concertos with violinist Rachel Barton and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra,

conducted by Kalmar. Also recorded in Orchestra Hall, that CD was nominated for a 2004 Grammy Award as “Best Engineered Recording, Classical.”

*Symphonic Works by Robert Kurka* is Cedille’s second recording with the Grant Park Orchestra, Kalmar conducting; the first was 2002’s *American Works for Organ and Orchestra*, with organist David Schrader (Cedille 90000 063). This is also the label’s second recording of Kurka’s music, following its world-premiere recording of the opera *The Good Soldier Schweik* with the Chicago Opera Theater (Cedille CDR 90000 062), also released in 2002.

Cedille Records (pronounced say-DEE) is dedicated to showcasing the most noteworthy classical artists in and from Chicago. The nonprofit label is an arm of The Chicago Classical Recording Foundation.

For a free catalog and the locations of local retail outlets, consumers are invited to contact Cedille Records, 5255 N. Lakewood Ave., Chicago, IL 60640-2220, call (773) 989-2515; E-mail: [info@cedillerecords.org](mailto:info@cedillerecords.org); [www.cedillerecords.org](http://www.cedillerecords.org).

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***SYMPHONIC WORKS BY ROBERT KURKA***  
**(Cedille Records CDR 90000 077)**

***Julius Caesar, Symphonic Epilogue after Shakespeare, Op. 28 (1955) (8:52)***  
***Symphony No. 2, Op. 24 (1953) (21:19)***  
***Music for Orchestra, Op. 11 (1949) (13:44)***  
***Serenade for Small Orchestra, Op. 25 (1954) (19:42)***

**Grant Park Orchestra**  
**Carlos Kalmar, conductor**