

# A little bit of disco finally boogies into Massey Hall

## It's vital to have stylistic diversity, says composer

By William Littler Toronto Star

Lothar Klein paused a moment, twisted his mouth into a mock scowl and replied to his questioner: "Well, if you really must know, Mrs. Klein and I were out one night at a discotheque. I had just finished my very serious Second Symphony and thought to myself, why not?"

And that, gentle reader, is how the piece with which Andrew Davis will open the Toronto Symphony's concerts at Massey Hall this Tuesday through Thursday came to be called *Musique A Go-Go*.

The title, you won't be surprised to discover, threw the late George Szell, austere music director of the Cleveland Orchestra, into something of a tallspin. "He simply couldn't believe it," grinned Klein from the vantage point of his second-floor studio in the University of Toronto's Edward Johnson Building.

But, in spite of his doubts about the title, Szell thought the piece worked orchestrally and accordingly had his associate, Louis Lane, conduct its premiere in April, 1967, as part of the Cleveland Orchestra's New Music Program.

It wasn't until a year later that Klein joined the University of Toronto's Faculty of Music and it has taken nearly 14 additional years for *Musique A Go-Go* to find its way onto the stands of the Toronto Symphony.

But don't suspect its composer of complaining. The forthcoming performances bring the total for the piece, in Europe and North America, to more than 90 and by Friday yet another Klein opus, a nonet for the Toronto Chamber Winds, is scheduled to receive its premiere at the Church of the Holy Trinity.

In between *Musique A Go-Go* and the nonet, Klein has produced a remarkable variety of music, ranging from *Musica Antiqua*, improbably uniting The Toronto Consort with The Toronto Symphony, to *Six Exchanges* for saxophonist Paul Brodie to a television (and later National Ballet) score for *The Newcomers*.

If the list makes pigeon-holing the German-born, American-educated composer next to impossible, that suits him to the proverbial T.

"It is very important for a composer today to have as great a stylistic diversity as possible," Klein argues. "People don't want to cry all the time and they don't want to laugh all the time."

### Flirting with jazz

"When *Musique A Go-Go* was first done, I think the players enjoyed it. Many of my colleagues did not. They had known me as a serious-minded, more or less serially oriented composer and they accused me of flirting with jazz, of going over to the other side.

"I found their attitude, the notion that there is only one right way to compose, almost totalitarian. Yet I'm afraid I see the same attitudes in Canada — that one style is right in French Canada and another in the rest of the country. That's too bad. Composers should be open to all the possibilities before them."

"When *Musique A Go-Go* was played in Cleveland there was something by Oliver Wendell Holmes in the program. I was unfamiliar with the quotation at the time but I like it very much."

The quotation, dating from 1884, points out that "as life is action and

passion, it is required of a man that he should share the passion and action of his time, at peril of being judged not to have lived."

"I happen to agree with Holmes. To me, the idea of the monkish composer is past. That's why I encourage my students to get involved with the commercial musical world as much as possible. A technique needs to be learned and it can be dangerous, but a young composer today has to be able to do many things because we live in a fragmented society."

Lothar Klein has been doing many things since childhood, when his talent as a pianist threatened for a time to overshadow his budding compositional gifts.

"When I started trying to compose, at 10 or 11, I already had considerable skills at the keyboard, but I had no idea of the mechanics of putting notes on paper. I simply had the urge to do it."

"That isn't too different from the students who come to us today, having heard a lot of rock and done some improvising. They need craft in notation if they are to capture their ideas."

"It's said that composition can't be taught. Inspiration, the ideas, can't be taught, but craft can. Then it's up to the true talent to find its own style and stick to it, regardless of fashion."

### More freedom

"Fashions change. I remember being at Darmstadt in the '60s when you had to be a card-carrying serialist (12-tone composer) to be taken seriously. There is more freedom now."

"There is also much reliance on chance. So many students simply draw a wavy line and write *molto appassionato* (with much feeling) over it, without understanding what they are negating."

"I'm not a terribly good prophet, but I think we are heading toward a more healthy relationship with music, when many musical styles will be appreciated for what they are. We will be appreciating the musical idea rather than the philosophical idea of where music ought to go historically."

The musical ideas in *Musique A Go-Go* are among the lighter to have flowed from the pen of Lothar Klein. "Some people have described it as a cross between Ravel and Stan Kenton," admits its composer. "That isn't too bad, but I have called *Musique A Go-Go* a symphonic melee. It's a free-for-all piece. And I wasn't trying to tweak anyone's nose."

Writing *Musique A Go-Go* apparently took only about two weeks. When you're a professor of music as well as a composer, you either learn how to make a little time go a long way or you don't get much writing done.

"If you are going to be a composer you have to be a composer full time," says Klein. "If I sometimes look haggard before my classes it is because the hour has been late. I'm usually busy writing something."

But how can inspiration be channelled into the available hours?

"I like the Tchaikovsky story about that," Klein smiles. "He answered the question by saying 'I try to be at my desk at nine in the morning and teach the muse to be on time.'"



COLIN McCONNELL/TORONTO STAR

**Versatile:** The notion that there is only one way to compose is totalitarian, says Lothar Klein, who has been condemned by some of his colleagues of flirting with jazz. His *Musique A Go-Go* will open the TSO's concerts at Massey Hall this Tuesday.