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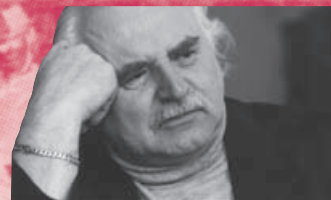
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opera is our treasure

an interview with Jiří Nekvasil

MATĚJ KRATOCHVÍL

Jiří Nekvasil now has just half a season behind him as head of the National Theatre Opera. In this short space of time he has already staged several productions of recent operas there, showing continuity with his earlier approach at the Prague State Opera. At the Prague State he presented a number of works by contemporary Czech and foreign composers, and gave space to composers at the beginning of their careers in the series “Banging on the Iron Curtain”. The reactions to these productions were mixed, and his National Theatre productions have continued to provoke very different reviews from the sceptical to the enthusiastic... It shows there is certainly much to talk about.

You have just half of your first season at the National behind you. It's too early for a full judgment, but what do you think you have achieved so far?

The first season is naturally very much a start-up exercise. Apart from the immediate day-to-day work, there's the planning of the next season and even subsequent seasons. In the Autumn we had the premiere of Jan Klusák's *Bertram a Mescalinda aneb Potrestaná věrnost* [Bertram and Mescalinda, or Fidelity Punished] together with the revived premiere of his *Zpráva pro akademii* [Report for the Academy]. At the moment we're preparing the first of a series of compositions commissioned by the National Theatre. It will be premiered on the 1st of May. The opera is called *Máchův deník aneb Hynku, jak si to představuješ?* [Mácha's Diary or Hynek, what's your idea of it?], composed by Emil Viklický on a libretto by Yohanan Kal-di and it will be staged in the small-scale Kolowrat Theatre. The audience will have the chance to see a freshly completed work, and I think it's a good thing when very up-to-date pieces are written and staged immediately,

even if there's a certain risk attached. Martin Smolka has just delivered his piano version of the opera Nagano with libretto by Jaroslav Dušek, which we shall be presenting in April of next year.

We have put on a replica of the 1969 production of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* with the famous stage design by Josef Svoboda. The Caban brothers introduced themselves to the public in an interesting interpretation of Janáček's *The Cunning Little Vixen*. One of our tasks now is to carry through the project Czech Triptych, which is another series of semi-staged performances of three unknown operas of the pre-Smetana era: František Škroup, Jan Bedřich Kittl and Leopold Eugen Měchura. Next year the idea is to present works by early 20th-century Prague composers in the same cycle. Also in preparation we have the difficult premiere of John Adams's *The Death of Klinghoffer*, and in my view this is quite a historic achievement, because it is the first staging of work of a contemporary American composer at the National Theatre. It will be performed in the original English and it is an example of American minimalism, although not so orthodox as the music of Philip Glass.

So the first season is marking out the road we want to take. Apart from that we're continuing with the project we brought from the State Opera – Banging on the Iron Curtain. The project has already involved production of Zdeněk Plachý and Jiří Šimáček's pasticcio *Karaoke Střeženého Parnassu* [Karaoke of Guarded Parnassus], a very controversial piece that has been provoking discussion of contemporary opera. At the last “Banging” we presented chamber operas by Karel Škarka and Markéta Dvořáková, and we are rehearsing premieres of Miloš Štědroň the younger's *Lidská tragikomedie* [The Human Tragicomedy] and two chamber operas by the brothers Michal and Marek Kepřt. The contemporary works are presented in this chamber form, what we call staged sketches. It is my belief – and not a belief I only acquired when I joined the National Theatre – that for its development opera needs impulses in the form of new works and staging experiments.

Karaoke of Guarded Parnassus aroused quite a storm, favourable and unfavourable. What was your reaction to the production?

Some of the reactions were really furious. The most hostile were from the traditional opera critics, but Vladimír Just, for example, produced an analysis that went right to the heart of the matter, and he was able to read the meaning that Zdeněk Plachý was offering with this provocative form. It's a work that precisely, sometimes spine-chillingly, mirrors the current state of the devaluation of values, and it plays with themes in such a way that we never know how seriously it is meant. It is not persiflage or a practical joke, as the traditional opera critics classified it, and I think it's just the sort of piece that Banging on the Iron Curtain should include. What is important is discussion of the themes and borders of opera, which are naturally moveable and shift as time goes by. I'm grateful that Karaoke was written, and for

the atmosphere in the auditorium, divided into admirers and opponents. It is a work that I think offers a contribution to the discussion of the devaluation of today's cultural values. Zdeněk Plachý isn't afraid to go beyond the conventional borders into an area where intentions are unclear, and absurd connections emerge. It won't let you be complacent, forces you to think, and it's entertaining as well.

How did the Banging on the Iron Curtain project start?

The idea was born in the State Opera when we wanted to find a studio space for chamber operas and couldn't find anything in the building. We looked for other possibilities and in 2000 we co-operated with HAMU (The Music Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts) on a production of Britten's *The Turn of the Screw* which used the principle of the reversed theatre, with the audience sitting on the stage and the auditorium used as an extended background. And so space was one of the reasons. Apart from that we believed these things ought to be tried out and more of them presented than funds allowed on a conventional basis. So that was how we developed a programme in which productions used the space in front of the curtain, since when you actually measure it, of course, you find you could get three mini theatres like the Prague Rubín theatre into it. The productions take place at times when the other performances aren't normally being played, and so there's no disruption to the ordinary schedule. Using the form of the stage sketch we can put on a whole work or parts of it, and test out how it works in front of an audience. It's a kind of workshop in which the composer can get a proper response and not have to write just for his desk drawer. We contribute a certain financial sum, which is neither large nor completely tiny, and people and experience. Commissions are determined by the space in the sense that the production must fit in, and it must be a contemporary opera form in world premiere. Then we can consider further collaboration with the composer or director.

Has any further collaboration yet come out of Banging?

If I take the last Banging in the State Opera, then I think that the German composer Jörn Arnecke was definitely interesting. I'm also curious about young Mr. Štědroň. The stage form of *Žirafí opera* [Giraffe Opera] by Markéta Dvořáková was certainly an inspiration. It was directed by Magdaléna Krčková – the project gives us a chance to get to know the other musicians and artists not just the composer. I wouldn't go as far as to say we would immediately commission a major opera from someone, but the project brings us many potential collaborators and people it's good to know about.



Jan Klusák: *Bertram a Mescalinda*, dir. Jiří Nekvasil

Isn't the project title a little confusing? The phrase "the Iron Curtain" has rather different associations.

It has a symbolic meaning. The iron curtain hides the stage and young artists bang on it to get it to open to them, so they can show what they're made of. Apart from the purely practical meaning – it's played in front of an iron curtain – it is supposed to suggest the gesture of the young generation, who bang on the doors of the big theatres and shout, "Give us the stage and we'll show you..." So it means the opening up of the stage to young composers and contemporary opera.

In the project that earned you the appointment of director of the National Theatre Opera, you also mentioned commissioning operas from foreign composers. Are there any in the pipeline?

Apart from the opera I mentioned by Martin Smolka, we already have a signed contract for an opera from the Italian composer Lorenzo Ferrero, which will have its premiere in 2005 and has the title *Montezuma*. At present we're considering commissions for the years 2006 and 2007.

Major opera houses construct their programmes mainly from 18th- and 19th-century operas, and contemporary works are in a minority. Does the fault lie with composers, audiences, companies or somewhere else?

The problems exist on several levels, which interact with each other. Up to the beginning of the 20th century it was mainly contemporary operas that were staged and the public awaited new works with great impatience. It was a period more dominated by creation than by interpretation. Then contemporary music became more exclusive and demanded more education. But this is a question of music in general. The 20th century is more a period of the interpretation of the music of the past. On the other hand, there have been and still are movements that try to speak to audiences in a more communicative idiom, to get over elitism and still come up with something new. They include the various neo-movements or Janáček's dramatism, for example, which is very much contact music. In this context minimalism has had been particularly significant. Glass definitely opened up music to a wider public among the young than did Stockhausen, for instance.



Jan Klusák: Zpráva pro akademii, dir. Jiří Nekvasil

In your view is there anyone today who is pushing opera forward in the way Glass did in the Seventies and Eighties?

I wouldn't like to guess, and I may not have enough knowledge for it anyway. I don't know if anything so widely accepted has emerged since minimalism. Minimalism was a movement that brought innovation in the sphere of structure. While the end of Glass's *The Fall of the House of Usher* strikes me as neo-romantic in its emotions, it is still highly contemporary music. Today I don't know of anyone taking development a stage further, and it's more as if various trends are being tried out. Maybe there will be more of a swing to composers who are returning to melody. They may get attacked for slickness by purist critics, but they are dismantling the myth that contemporary opera is a pain in the ears.

What is the main problem of opera written today?

Perhaps the most difficult problem is the choice of libretto and coming up with reasons why a theme should be treated in song and not, for example, in a film. You have to find a reason why ordinary speech is not enough and so the depiction of emotions needs to taken on stylised form. Today one frequent solution is to move over from libretto to screenplay and integrate various other kinds of medium.

Doesn't the fact that story and linearity of narrative are disappearing also have an off-putting effect on audiences?

The retreat from linearity is something you find in 20th-century art in general, for example in the novel. I wonder whether it might have been caused by the emotional impact of two world wars. It is also connected to the rise of new media, above all film, which involve cutting. The visual expression of the last twenty years is ultimately the videoclip, which is based on the cut. All of this is reflected in opera too, but a hunger for the grand narrative and linear form is appearing again as a counter-reaction. This explains the great popularity of 19th-century works, where there is a strong and emotive story. What is important is that these two currents exist along side each other and can influence each other. New things must come into existence even if the price is risk, since otherwise the genre will die of a lack of dynamism and confrontation.

For you, what is the key criterion in choosing works for the opera repertoire?

As the director of the opera, responsible for the whole programme, I can't choose isolated titles, but have to build a structure that will exist in context. I give precedence to programmes structured in particular cycles or series, in which the titles are somehow linked or have a mutual impact within the framework of particular themes. One such series is Czech Triptych, which aims to compare and juxtapose examples of Czech music. We are planning an Italian series, which will start with a stage performance of Verdi's *Requiem*, followed by *Adriana Lecouvreur* by Francesco Cilei, a Czech premiere of the work. Another criterion is sometimes

that a work has never been played in Prague or in the Czech Republic, or hasn't been played here for a long time. I think life is too short and it's a pity to limit ourselves to a few titles. It's better to get to know music in a wider context, but at the same time to return to some things at intervals, because the possibilities of interpretation may have moved on. So I don't want to put something on only because it appeals to me or someone else, but because it fits into certain contexts in the given dramaturgical plan.

Czech audiences have not had a chance to get to know many works of contemporary western opera, because they weren't staged here for ideological reasons. Does the National Theatre as the leading opera house have a certain duty to fill in the gaps?

There definitely are gaps, but you have to realise that the season isn't infinitely elastic. When the plan is drawn up, it is based on three titles, and if we are courageous there are chamber operas in Kolowrat, and Czech Triptych. As far as important works of the latter 20th century are concerned it's a question of the choice. If I put one on, I can't put on another ten. Now the choice has fallen on Adams's *The Death of Klinghoffer* and it will be the start of a series of Anglo-American minimalist operas. The next will be *Beauty and the Beast* by Philip Glass and in the year after that I would like to present Nyman's opera *Facing Goya*. I think this is the type of opera that can draw a different public to the opera houses. But only one such title can be put on in any one season. The minimalist scene is so stimulating and fundamental that I consider it right to get to know it, and it's attractive to audiences as well. The themes are interesting, and *The Death of Klinghoffer* for example is an opera about terrorism, which dams has treated as myth. I agree that the National Theatre is an institution with a duty to mediate cultural values and stimulate the emergence of others. It isn't a private theatre that has to make money at all costs. But of course audience interest is important.

Has the function of opera in society changed in any way?

I don't think there has been much basic shift. If there has, then it's possibly that opera is returning to its function as attraction for the masses, as various mega-events show. I'm fond of definitions of opera as an exotic irrational entertainment. That has always been the case. On the one hand art is unnecessary, but on the other it's essential for life. It is part of our European culture, which isn't only interesting to Europeans, either. Opera is our European discovery and treasure, and we ought to pamper it and develop it further.

austrian military music of the 19th century and olomouc

EVA VIČAROVÁ

Austrian Military Music of the 19th Century and Olomouc

At the end of 2002 the Palacký University in Olomouc published a book entitled *Austrian Military Music of the 19th Century and Olomouc*. It is the first monography in Czech musicological literature to deal with the history of military music in Czech lands, and is divided into two distinct parts. The first is a general account of the history of 19th-century Austrian military music, and considers the types, nature and repertoire of military performances as well as the lives of the most important military bandmasters. The second part looks at the significance of military orchestras for the musical life of Olomouc, one of the most important garrison towns in the Austrian monarchy. The reader will learn which military bands and bandmasters were active in Olomouc, what, when, where and how often they played, and which local institutions they collaborated with. This article summarises the most important facts.

The history and functions of Austrian military music parallel the history and functions of military music in the other European powers. The 19th century was its golden age. This was a period in which the institutional basis for the creation and reproduction of music was transformed. Court and church music, representing the two richest groups in feudal society – nobility and church – were gradually losing their original standing. The emergent bourgeoisie, continuously on the rise as the 19th century wore on, saw music as a public affair and so brought concerts and operas out of closed private spaces and into halls accessible to everybody. The new bourgeoisie also wanted to be entertained. They wanted music in open-air settings, in the country, in squares, parks and inns. For these purposes it was military bands – perhaps rather paradoxically – that proved the most versatile and usable. While the newly developing theatre, school, municipal, and other ensembles had to struggle for resources, military bands were subsidised by the state and were never hampered by money problems in their musical work. It was also very difficult for civilian music institutions to com-

pete at the level of thousands of musically trained soldiers in dozens of regimental bands. With technical improvements to wind instruments and the possibility of adding strings to orchestras, military orchestras were capable of performing practically anywhere.

From the early 19th century their field of activity shifted ever further towards the non-military public, since what was known as "extra-service productions" were increasing in importance. The elaborate system of public performances by military bands played a significant role in the democratisation of music, although – paradoxically – the army itself was hardly a democratic institution. No other musical productions were so easily accessible for the lay public. When anyone could go and hear them without in most cases needing a ticket or evening dress, they were considerably more open than opera, concerts and events organised by associations of one kind or another.

In terms of style and genre, the range of repertoire presented by military bands was unusually wide, from folk music, popular music deriving from folk music to dance



Title of the march composed by J. N. Fuchs for 54th regiment

music and from specific military genres to the best elite music of the day and the classics. The repertoire of military orchestras, representing a kind of sui generis type of "semi-serious" music, thus influenced the tastes and habits of musical response of the general public to a much greater extent than is generally acknowledged.

The high standard of performance in Austrian ensembles, confirmed by a number of victories in international competitions, was to a considerable extent the result of the hiring of civilian conductors and the training of the young musical generation. Austrian military music was also distinctive for the multifarious national origins of its musicians. The other European powers with a highly developed military musical tradition – Prussia, France, Britain or Russia – were countries with a relatively homogeneous national identity, while Austria, sometimes branded as the "prison of nations" was made up of a relatively balanced spectrum of very diverse ethnic groups. No other European state covered so many different lands as the Austrian monarchy of the time. The musicians of the Austrian army therefore moved over a far larger and more variegated territory than their colleagues from other European countries. These circumstances found reflection in both the distinctive composing style of the bandmasters, and the specific performing methods of the military ensembles. The two factors on the one hand emphasised the musical roots of players and conductors, and



Orchestra of the 54th regiment in Těšín, cca 1910

on the other influenced elements of the musical idiom of the regions in which the orchestras were active at one time or another. The result was the legendary "exotic charge" which characterised performances of Austrian military orchestras and resulted from the unique combination of Balkan and Hungarian temperament with Viennese sentiment and Czech musicality. In the view of many it was this combination that played the greatest part in the success of Austrian military bands.

The best known Austrian military bandmasters – and also composers and arrangers – were Philipp Fahrbach, Andreas Leonhardt, Alfons Czibulka, Carl Michael Ziehrer and Joseph Franz Wagner.

Czech musicians, who formed up to two thirds of the members of military orchestras in Austria as a whole, contributed to the success of Austrian music through a number of outstanding bandmasters and bandmaster composers, such as Karel Komzák the younger, for example, Julius Fučík, Rudolf Nováček, Karel Šebor, Antonín Emil Titl, Jan Šubrt and Wilhelm Wašek. The ambitions of the Czech military musicians were crowned in 1856 with the founding of the Military Music School in Prague, which then trained young musicians for the needs of the whole monarchy for four decades. Lasting benefits also derived from Czech production of musical instruments, thanks especially to the instrument making workshop of Václav František Červený's firm (founded in 1842).

The part played by military ensembles in the musical life of Austrian garrison towns can be illustrated by the situation in Olomouc. There were always several military ensembles active in this strategically important town. A significant role was played by the

music of the 54th Infantry Regiment, for example (e.g. the bandmasters Josef Hickl and Karl Hackensöllner), which had its territorial reservist area here.

The capital of the Haná region became known throughout the monarchy thanks to several visits by the emperor and its hosting of a number of meetings between heads of state and military dignitaries at international level. The prestige of Olomouc and its garrisons was increased particularly when two sets of manoeuvres were held there in 1851 and 1853. The cultural programme accompanying the second of these manoeuvres, which included performance by as many as fifteen hundred military musicians under the direction of army bandmaster A. Leonhardt, became an event of legendary stature. The audience at this "meeting of majesties" included Anton Bruckner, who expressed his impressions in his 8th Symphony.

Apart from programmes that were part of military activity, such as the changing of the guard, service concert, the last post, ceremonial reveille and the "monsterconcert", the military musicians put on promenade and military concerts that attracted the attention of the citizens of Olomouc. These productions became ever more frequent, until at the end of the 19th century the public were encountering military music almost daily. Through these events the military ensembles presented a repertoire that was rich and various in terms of repertoire. In addition to the marches, favourite dances, potpourri and fantasia on new opera and operetta themes, they presented opera and operetta preludes, ballet music, and even symphonic, concerto and chamber music.

The military musicians in Olomouc also played for dancing and listening at dance

meetings, soirees, masked balls and balls organised by the regiment, the town, restaurants, and local clubs and organisations. We should also mention a series of charity performances, which especially during the 1st World War proved a way of raising substantial sums to support the war funds and such-like.

Whole orchestras and individual musicians developed close contacts with almost all the local musical institutions. They collaborated particularly intensively with the Utraquist choral societies – the Männergesangverein, and Gesangverein in Neu- und Greiner-gasse. In 1881–1913 the military ensembles took a major share in the productions of the Czech Žerotín Music Society, at which they presented some orchestral pieces by themselves and took part in performances of important cantatas, oratorios and operas (e.g. Smetana's *The Bartered Bride*, Dvořák's *The Wedding Shirt*, Brahms's *German Requiem* and Beethoven's *Symphony no. 9*). The Municipal Opera Company also engaged military musicians to help with more difficult operas (specifically Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, *The Flying Dutchman*, *Rhinegold* and *Tristan and Isolde*).

Analysis of musical life in Olomouc in 1848–1918 has shown that in the 19th century military ensembles and musicians were as great an influence, possible even a greater influence on musical life and the development of general musical knowledge and taste outside the Austrian capital as court ensembles were for the development of general musical culture in the 17th and 18th centuries.

the quiet music of alois piños

IVO MEDEK

Alois S. Piños (*1925) is a professor at the Music Faculty of the Janáček Academy of Performing Arts in Brno and one of the key figures in Czech music since 1960, both in composition and theory, and in teaching. The defining features of his personality are a positive outlook on the world, humour and vitality, a continuing taste for discovering new things, the ability to share them with others and an energetic commitment to his work that many two generations younger might envy. He is among those Czech composers who have been strongly influenced by the second avant garde but do not reject or deny roots leading back to Janáček or Bartók. He has composed both symphonic and chamber music, and his electronic and electro-acoustic work has also attracted attention. His works have been played in concerts all over the world and have been broadcast by major stations. He has won the Classic Prize for composition twice. Piños's contributions to music theory lie mostly in the generalisation of his own techniques as a composer. His work in this context includes exploration of the possibilities of interval orders and tone groups (Piños, A.: Tónové skupiny, Panton 1971, Piños, A.: Tone Groups, JAMU 2002), the creation of a series of pieces using general principles of composition and the specifics of team compositions. In the 1960s he himself led a team of composers and today – together with Miloš Štědroň and Ivo Medek – he is a member of another composing team, with which he has written two chamber orchestras and a symphony. Piños's lectures and publications are also important. Since 1984 he has been a permanent lecturer at the international courses in Darmstadt and has presented papers at dozens of conferences throughout Europe. In addition to the books mentioned above, he has been publishing regularly in the specialist journals for more than forty years. His teaching, as well, deserves recognition since he has been teaching without a break at the Janáček Academy for more than fifty years. Thanks to his

contacts with trends in composition in Europe as a whole, and to his personal courage, even in the times of the repressive communist ideology of art in the Seventies and Eighties he always taught in the spirit of contemporary music throughout the world. His reputation drew many students from Slovakia and Prague. This year Piños was awarded the City of Brno Prize for Lifelong Achievement. We used the opportunity to ask him a few questions.

Do you think we can still expect some new development in contemporary music, and if so, can its direction be predicted?

Faith in progress in the arts, especially in the sense of continuous improvement, has been shown to be a chimera, but change and development in the arts, as in the whole of society, goes on. The arts and music with them keep changing. Just so long as they are not going round in circles! I only hope that the sparks of imagination and desire for aesthetic search and exploration won't be extinguished in the ocean of technically perfect and accessible automatic sound machines and that serious, I mean "non-popular" music won't be drowned in cheap eclecticism and commercialism. One can try and predict directions in musical development, but I doubt that any specific longer-term forecasts would be reliable.

How do you – as a still active teacher at JAMU [The Janáček Academy] – see developments in what is known as the "Brno School of Composition"?

The Brno school of composition crystallised in the 1960s. It was innovative, open to worldwide trends in new music, took a position opposed to the ruling "socialist" cultural policy and had its own specific distinctive features, from the updated tradition of Janáček to a fondness for montage and collage, multimedia projects, music happenings and team composition. Even in the 1970s and 80s, under the hardline communist regime after the Soviet invasion, the Brno school of composition stuck to its identity in tough conditions. The composition depart-

ments of the other Czechoslovak universities – HAMU in Prague and VŠMU in Bratislava – were conformist and conservative. Following the revolution of 1989 these other schools also opened up to the world and improved the teaching staff, so that some of the differences were ironed out, but even today Brno composing has very distinctive features, such as greater "vitality", "pithiness", sense of humour and interest in multimedia and team work.

Is there any point in training new generations of composers at university level when most fields of incidental music (film, theatre etc.), i.e. the areas in which there is the best chance of making a living by composing – are dominated by people without higher musical education?

There would definitely be no point at all if the purpose of the five-year university music course were just to ensure its graduates a chance of making a living by composing and getting well-paid positions.

Do you keep up with developments among the youngest generation of composers? What is your view of the present situation of young composers – their possibilities and their position?

As a teacher of composition at JAMU I've been in contact with the youngest generation of composers at the school for fifty years. As a jury member for the "Generation" composition competition open to people under 30, every year I look at dozens of new pieces by young men and women from all over the country, and I follow their activities at concerts, on the radio and so on. What's more, I have two representatives of the present young generation in my own family – my son Mikuláš and my daughter-in-law Kateřina, née Růžičková. If young composers want to devote themselves purely to serious, i.e. "non-popular" music and build a life on that basis, their situation is very hard and sad. The field has low social prestige, and interest in it is marginal. This means that the only young people with a hope of success are young people with great talent, enthusiasm, perseverance and assertiveness, who can manage to make a living in other fields at the same time, for example as instrumentalists, managers, journalists, popular composers,



information experts etc, or who have a very helpful and affluent family willing to support this eccentric luxury activity.

The titles of your pieces are often peculiar. Your recent work for example includes "Nomen omen or 13 portraits of a snake" and "Bestiarium". What importance do you attach to titles?

The title of a piece is important to me. It is a kind of key to the work, not just an arbitrary label. It has to have a basic, fundamental meaning for the piece. The title should not lead to descriptiveness. Music ought always to work simply in itself and non-musical inspirations and associations are a sort of extra, although they can be very important. If a title needs explanation, I won't refuse it.

Many of your pieces, especially the recent ones, could be regarded as programmatic. What do you think about programmatic music?

The contrast between absolute and programmatic music became sharp in the 19th century. Today it is not so pressing. "Absolute" music can be latently "program-

matic" and "programmatic" music can be "absolute" in its musical essence. As far as I am concerned, even when I write a piece which has inspiration from outside music and I disclose this to the public, for example in the title, I always try first and foremost to make sure that the music is also "absolute", i.e. that it would be understandable and logical even without a knowledge of this reference outside music. The "rationalisation" of musical illogicalities, the subordination of natural musical development to non-musical considerations and the literary descriptiveness that degrades music are foreign to my poetics. But of course, conversely, a piece in which there is no encoded element from outside music can inspire listeners to all kinds of non-musical ideas. Some experts regard all my music as purely absolute, while others consider nearly all my work to be the result of stimuli from outside music, albeit it in a very broad sense. Both are true in their way.

What is important to you when you are composing? What gives you the impulse to compose?

For me the process of composing includes

all kinds of preliminary activities; thinking through a conception, playing with ideas even when they don't work out, deciding which of the potential variants to start to write now and which later, and inspirations of all kinds, reading, films, walks, debates, analysing and replaying pieces and so forth. In order to actually start composing a particular piece I have to have a good internal reason of my own. I can write in response to a request from performers or institutions so long as the commission speaks to me, interests me, and gives me enough space and time to realise the things that interest me. When I'm composing, what is important for me is ensuring the harmony of the whole with the inventiveness, appropriateness and fully worked out character of the details. Neither aspect should be sacrificed to the other. I am frightened off by pieces where an interesting idea, project or concept is mechanically "filled up" with sterile music, or on the contrary by pieces which are teeming with detailed ideas, but as wholes just create chaos. One detail overwhelms and upsets the next and the listener is soon confused and weary. I often find the right kind of inspiration for my composing methods and techniques in universals that are not overburdened by established musical categories. It is a world open to other kinds of art, science and life experience. It provides me with continual impulses to find conceptual and specific solutions at all levels of composing including the details.

You are known for your activities in the field of team compositions. In the Sixties you founded and led a team of this kind and you are working with a team today. Are you planning something new in this line?

After the symphonic piece dedicated to the turn of the millennium, "Byly časy, byly" ["There were times, there were"], which was performed twice by the Brno State Philharmonic, we are returning to chamber opera, a genre in which we were very successful in the Nineties. This time we are planning to produce a full-length opera. I shall once again be working in a team with Ivo Medek and Miloš Štědroň. I am not going to tell you what it's about.

You are also known as a theoretician of contemporary music. Tell me about your activities in this field in the last few years.

Last year I wrote a study of multimedia work, with Ivo Medek tacking the second part. It will be published this year. My study "Glosy '99", in which I analyse the state of contemporary music at the turn of the millennium was published in the journal Melos-Etos in Bratislava, and next year the journal of HAMU in Prague will publish my article "The Importance of Timbres for the Contemporary Composer". On a running basis I write chapters on contemporary composition techniques. These are partly supposed to serve as a teaching text for students of composi-

tion. I am also taking on the subject of the transformation of sound objects and quotations and their integration into contemporary compositional structures. This is a work on which I am collaborating with Arnošt Parsch and Jaroslav Šťastný. Recently I have lectured abroad at symposia in Saarbrücken, Dresden, Edlach an der Rax and in Lublyana.

You yourself wrote text for your new pieces *Bestiarium* and “Nomen omen or 13 portraits of a snake”. What is your understanding of text in relation to music? Do you plan to write other non-theoretical texts?

I choose the texts for my compositions and treat them with the same care and attention that I bring to actually composing the music. I've been writing “non-musical, non-theoretical texts since my youth. In his article “Questions of Creative Thinking in relation to the Composers Aloise Piňos and Roman Berger”, Jaroslav Šťastný classified them, analysed them and published some of them. His conclusion was that some of my creative techniques were common to both music and non-musical spheres. I have already used my own texts for my compositions before, for example in the team vocal symphony “Ecce homo”. With many vocal pieces the final text would be chosen from hundreds of alternatives, for example the choice of lonely hearts ads for the piece “Seznámení” [“Introductions”] and the choice of the proverbs for the pieces “Dicta antiquorum” and “Příslovi” [“Proverbs”]. With the Kafkaesque scenes, “Zatčení” [“The Arrest”] and “Obžalovaný” [“The Defendant”] the most fundamental idea was that of taking just the dialogues or even monologues out of certain chapters of the novel “The Trial”. And finally, in the case of many texts we deliberately abridged and added greater emphasis to certain passages. As will be clear to you, work with texts interests me and I see it as an important part of invention. That means it is likely that I shall be doing it in future too, and if I need it to fulfil my composition ideas, I shall be happy to write another text for my music myself.

In recent years you have written a lot of very quiet, delicate music, often with religious references. Has something fundamental changed in your poetics or sources of inspiration?

Nothing fundamental has changed in my poetics or sources of inspiration. You can find quiet music in my output earlier as well – just randomly I could mention the Concerto for Harp and String Orchestra – and also philosophical-spiritual composition concepts. For example there is the cantata on Old Testament texts “Gesta Machabaeorum”, describing the victory of a small nation against huge odds, the contemplative and hymnic Concerto for Organ and Large Orchestra, “Pastorela” on Christmas folk verses and the choral triptych “In extremis” on the words of St. Matthew’s Gospel. The last piece I wrote in the first years of the Soviet Occupation. It begins with the words,

“Lord, save us, we perish” and ends with “Libera nos – Free us!”. My friend the choir-master of the Brno madrigal singers Josef Pančík, liked all aspects of the triptych, but in the end he said, “If we sing that at a concert, they’ll immediately lock both of us up!” There have therefore been no fundamental changes in me, but of course over the years, and affected by new realities and experiences – there have been and still are certain changes of taste and greater emphasis on the kinds of theme that are now my priority. But even today, apart from such quiet pieces as “Mortonography”, dedicated to the composer of quiet music Morton Feldman, and gentle reminiscences on Gruber’s song “Stille Nacht”, my work still includes sharp, vital music for Dama-Dama – “Music of Good Hope or Stormy Music” and the phantasmagorically grotesque “Bestiarium”. I think Jaroslav Šťastný has summed the matter up very accurately when he wrote that, “...Piňos’s music is distinctive for the absence of depressive and nostalgic elements. In him we find a clearly positive attitude to life, however complicated... In recent years he has been emphasising the theme of hope, crystallising in the form of struggle against the forces of evil.”

You have just added another award “to your collection”. What meaning has the City of Brno Prize for you in the context of your other honours?

The two prestigious Classic Prizes recently awarded to me were for specific compositions, with the 3rd String Quartet and “Stella matutina” being judged “compositions of the year”. In contrast the City of Brno prizes are awarded more for longer term “meritorious activity” to academics and artists in various fields, one of them being music. The prize can go to a concert performer, conductor, composer, musicologist, ensemble or institution... It gave me great pleasure to have been chosen this year, and so to find myself in such good company. Others who were honoured with the prize this year included the outstanding poet Zdeněk Rotrekl, persecuted under communism, and among the previous winners are my good friends and contemporaries the painter Miroslav Šimorda, the director and former rector of JAMU Alois Hajda and the stage designer Inez Tuschnerová. I am not the kind of person who gets a lot out of official occasions, but I have to say that the ceremony and celebration was warm and cordial and that the award is as it were a shot in the arm given the tough present circumstances for composers of serious music. It would be nice if the various awards sometimes had an impact on how much works are performed.

milan knížák the musician

PETR FERENC

Until recently only a small circle of the Czech public had much idea of the musical activities of Milan Knížák,

best known as controversial artist, bombastic personality and director of the National Gallery. Despite the large number of copies issued, his only double album ever to be released in Czechoslovakia passed without much notice at the beginning of the 1990s. Otherwise until recently his musical side was represented only in Petr Kofroň and Martin Smolka’s book “Grafické partitury a koncepty” [Graphic Scores and Concepts] and on the attached CD produced by Agon. At the end of last year and beginning of this spring, however, the Anne Records company at last took on the task of releasing another album that had waited for ten years – Navrhuju krysy [I Propose Rats], and the recordings by the legendary group Aktual, previously only circulated in samizdat versions. The music that has earned Knížák some reputation (and recordings) abroad, i.e. his “destroyed music” still has to be ordered abroad.

Obviously the needles were destroyed...

Destroyed music was something Knížák started to work on as early as 1963-4. He acquired a gramophone and collection of records and experimented by playing them speeded up or slowed down, and later damaging them by burning them, gluing layers on, putting together bits of different records, scratching and so on. He first presented this kind of music as the 2nd Manifestation of Topical Art in 1965, and has been giving occasional concerts with a set of gramophones and synthesizers ever since. But Knížák was not to be satisfied with the mere playing of destroyed records, and he immediately set off from this starting line in three directions, which he combines in every possible way.

First, he regards a vinyl record treated in this way as a certain kind of musical notation in itself. The short text *Destruovaná hudba* [Destroyed Music] (in: *Nový ráj*) ends with the words, "Although music created by playing destroyed gramophone records cannot be transcribed into notes or another language (or only with great difficulty), the records themselves can be considered to be notation"

Second, Knížák decided to treat traditional scores in the same way as the records. By striking out or adding notes, signatures and other signs, changing the order of bars or directly collaging different pages of notation, he produced a "more exact" equivalent of his work with the records. Why more exact? Because there is always inevitably an element of chance in the work with records, while in work with written (printed) scores all the consequences of changing the score can be identified. One example of this kind of work was *Fantasia* "by a collective of composers", i.e. W.A. Mozart, F. Suppé, H. Lemoine, V. Polívka, M. Knížák, or *Quartet + Piano*.

Third, the records have a visual, decorative aspect. At the end of the 1970s Knížák was indirectly inspired by Gino di Maggio to work on the records as art objects as well as musical products – art objects in which the music is only present "latently". Examples included Knížák's Lenin installation at the Venice Biennial in 1990 or on the wall of the Prague Rudolfinum at the exhibi-

tion Hnízda her [Nest of Games]. All the jackets of the books and recordings on which the destroyed records are depicted fall into the same category, for instance the jackets for the albums *Broken Music* and *The Ceremony of Burning Mind* (part of the run was issued with an inserted record drilled with holes and inscribed with the words "Kill Yourself And Fly")

In 1991 Knížák produced a series of scores combining all three approaches. Records (and bits of compact disks) were inserted directly into scores between the note signs (*Quasi trillo*), and fragments of the scores were glued onto paper with the instruction "use any order" (*Spiced symphony*) and suchlike. This is already purely conceptual territory, since the gluing of the record fragments onto a surface makes them impossible to play (the broken up CD was likewise unplayable), but these pieces were nonetheless a pregnant summary of what Knížák called destroyed music.

One of the aims of this article is to offer at least a partial account of Knížák's discography. It is impossible to give a complete list since examples of the destroyed music are often undisclosed and in the hands of foreign galleries, which are not institutions linked to the music market network. Let us at least mention a few albums, however. Knížák published his first destroyed music under the heading of the *Aktual Community* as a samizdat multiple in 1965 – it cost 10 Kč and apparently nobody bought it.

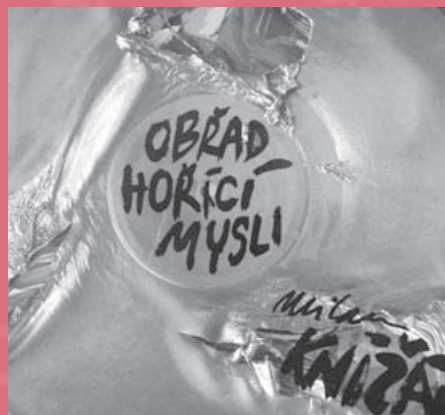
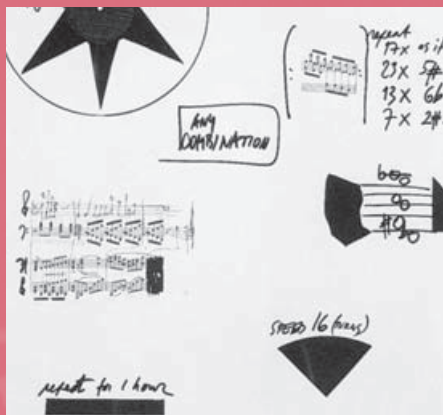
It was probably from these records that the album *Broken Music* (Multhipla Records) was compiled in Italy in 1979, and later this was published without the author's knowledge on CD by the Chicago firm Amphere (undated). Both these albums contain the same five compositions (numbered 1–5) with tracks lasting from three to nineteen minutes. I do not have the original LP edition, and while the CD notes are hand-somely presented, unfortunately they lack the sleeve-note and only contain the English translation of the text *Destroyed Music*, the score of *Fantasia*, photographs of the destroyed records and a picture of Knížák in the *Aktual* group studio. In other words, there is no information on the pieces themselves, and we can only guess the kind of records and number of gramophones used. The longest track, *Composition 1*, seems to

be put together from fragments of records arranged on top of a base record like pizza ingredients. The crackle where the needle hits the glued on transitions comes and goes in rhythm, and in places individual grooves keep coming back (clearly because of a layer of glue), giving the composition a more tranquil, minimalistic character. Around the sixth minute the transition from monotonous repetition to another passage is so abrupt that it is seems quite likely somebody moved the arm to prevent the motif repeating ad infinitum. Roughly between the eighth and ninth minute the record is played at 45 rpm, and then goes back to a more tranquil 33. As the piece nears its end, the beats speed up until they merge into noise. The other trio of pieces appears to use the same principle, although *Composition 2*, is put together so that the jumps of the connections between the records used do not form a rhythm, number 3 employs beat and pop records, and the fourth composition sounds as if more than one gramophone is being used. The concluding *Composition 5* is not a patchwork, but involves a record whose grooves have been ground down. The needle wanders around where it wants, and there is use of the spoken word.

I know nothing about the content of the cassette *Destroyed Music* (Edition Hundertmark, Köln, 1983), and my only information is that a small gold "destroyed disk" was sold with it. The collection of articles on destroyed music with jacket by Knížák and a CD recorded by the Arditti Quartet is even more of a mystery. I have not managed to discover the date of issue, publisher or contents, and am only aware of its existence thanks to an interview in a book of texts by the *Aktual* Band.

Cage & Kmoch

At the end of 1967 Knížák was asked by some younger musicians from Mariánské Lázně to collaborate in a new beat group. The group lacked a drummer, vocalist and repertoire, since the musical skills of the beat fans were nothing to write home about. Knížák got his friend the experienced drummer Jan Maria Mach to come from Prague and over four years he wrote more than fifty songs for the band. After several changes of name the band decided to call themselves



Aktual, and a mere eight performances were enough to make them a byword.

Partly because the most members of the band had so little musical experience, and partly because Knížák became the dominating figure and had other ideas, the sound produced by Aktual in the first phase of its existence (1968) bore not the slightest resemblance to beat. All sorts of sound sources were used in the songs (metal drums, whistling of the amps, a motorcycle), the instruments were played in deliberately unprofessional style, the rhythm was unvaried, and the declaimed / sung text was based on the repetition of expressive phrases (*Miluju tebe a Lenina* [I love you and Lenin]). The rock instruments usually kept to simple accompanying figures, and were often quotes ("the dove flew from the rock" in *Gl gl gl*, or the completely "appropriated" *Prznění národních písní* [The Rape of National Songs]). The concerts were enlivened by elements of "happenings": the musicians would play in skirts, wood would be cut on stage, a motorcycle would ride through the hall and so forth.

When in 1969-70 Knížák (and later J. M. Mach with him) was staying in the USA, he wrote some songs with a more complex structure and more of a rock sound, although they were still highly unconventional. At High Noon for example is composed of the repeated note C, while in *Shoeshine For Free* the vocal line has a rhythm different from that of the accompaniment etc. After Knížák's (and Mach's) return the band was revived. Aktual was reinforced by several skilful musicians (including the trumpet player Arnošt Pšajdl and the bass guitarist Josef Slavík "Pěnkava") and embarked on the most interesting phase of its life. It is at this point that there appear at least hints of Knížák's dream of a "wild, vivid, disharmonic" orchestra, with Pšajdl's trumpet and the thickly employed traditional percussion music heading in the direction of brass band music (*Pochod Aktuálů* [March of the Aktuals], *Život je boj* [Life is a Struggle], *Milujte Jižní Čechy* [Love South Bohemia]). On the other hand there were also shifts towards quieter, disciplined style, some pieces being less aggressive and revealing signs of grief and tenderness. The most striking examples of this quieter tendency are *Jak by to bylo božský* [How divine it would be] with recorder and bells and the choral utopian anthem *Město Aktuálů* [City of the Aktuals] just with acoustic guitar.

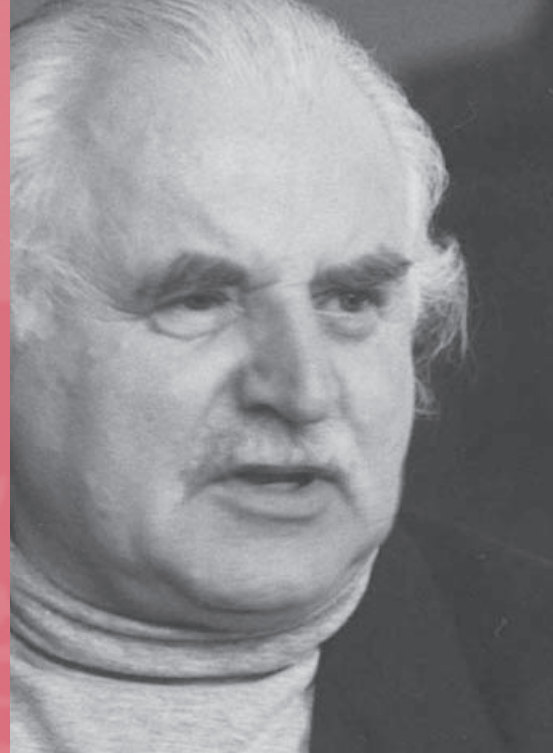
Problems with rehearsal space, equipment and the onset of the political repression known as "normalisation" forced Aktual to give up most musical instruments. They rehearsed in the open air, and new pieces were collectively recited into paper megaphones. The *Skladba pro bicí a mnoho ječících dirigentů* [Composition for percussion and a lot of shrieking conductors]; in which apart from a few beats and the final yelling the group just gesticulated, was a sort of culmination of this development. Two pieces could be seen as presaging this final

phase. They were *Vyslanci z kosmu* [Envoys from the Cosmos] – a choral recital with drumming, and *SOS*, in which the whistling of the title signal is accompanied by the sound of water from a tap. Both these are quite intense in terms of sound, but are far from having the shattering resonance of the early repertoire.

Aktual concerts often never made it to the end of the programme and tended to meet with hostile reactions from the public, but today there can be no doubt about the role played by the band in the context of Czech alternative music. Thanks to two appearances with Plastic People (26th of Sept. 1970 in Suchá u Nejdu and 26th of Feb. 1971 in the Prague Music F Club), Knížák's group became known to the emergent Prague underground, which was fascinated. Under the influence of Aktual, Plastic People began to consider using Czech in their lyrics and Milan Hlavsa founded DG 307 together with Pavel Zajíček. Knížák himself, however, had a great many reservations about the life of the Czech underground and didn't take much part in it. His reasons are best illustrated by a couple of letters he wrote in 1975 – one addressed to Ivan Jirous, and the second "to everyone who knows the circle around Jirous and me as well" (in: *Bez d_vodu*). A verse in one of his post-Aktuál songs "Long live Adolf Jirous, President of the Underground" also gives a clear indication of his attitude.

Three sound recordings of Aktual remain, all from the band's last phase. The first is an hour-long recording of a Prague performance warming up for Plastic People (fourteen pieces), while the second, also from 1971, is a thirteen-minute recording from the rehearsal room (four pieces), and the third a fourteen-minute recording from 1972 (four pieces). A recording distributed by Petr Cibulka on the cassettes of his samizdat publishers S.T.C.V., under the title *Atentát na kulturu* [Assassination of Culture], contained four pieces from the first and the whole of the second recording. This Cibulka recording seems to be the final part of a longer tape which according to the sleeve-note was wiped when its owner recorded a Status Quo album over it. This might be a fragment of the tape that Knížák sent to John Lennon and Yoko Ono, whom he met during his time in America. He never had got any response from them, and according to an interview with Jaroslav Riedl (Písně kapely Aktual [Songs of the Aktual Band]), he believes that the package never got past the Czechoslovak frontier.

This year's CD, prepared by Riedl, is once again called *Atentát na kulturu* [Assassination of Culture] and contains nineteen songs, i.e. the whole of the first and second recordings and only the song *City of the Aktuals* from the third recording, which otherwise contains songs available on the first and second recordings with better sound quality. The rousing Prague recording starts with the stirring *March of the Aktuals*, while the following track, *Vana rumu* [Bath of Rum] is



based on the scraping of the violin up beyond the bridge, with guitars and percussion simply providing a rolling rhythm to give underlying colour to the vocal line, which is three times repeated as the track acquires an atmosphere on the borders of minimalist rock and chaotic noise. The mantric *Krystáhnou do boje* [The Rats are off to war] is based on a simple rhythm, unison shouting of the central slogan and off-key piping. *Koks* [Coke] has a similar structure, except that the recorder is replaced by a wild and wheezy harmonica. In both pieces the basic rhythm instrument is Mach's vozembouch (kind of percussion instrument). Aktual's most famous song – *Atentát na kulturu* [Assassination of Culture] is a stirring rock opus, framed at beginning and end by general improvisation during which the musicians are allowed to make any sort of noise on anything and for however long they want. In the recorded version, however, this finishes after five minutes with Knížák's authoritative yells "Dost! Dost! Dost!" ["Enough! Enough! Enough!"]. The track *Fuck 'em* is based on long notes under individual verses, and the shouted refrain is accompanied by just a few strikes in the rhythm of the title phrase. The final song of the Prague concert was *Vyznání* [Credo], a wall of sound with a tenderly erotic text.

Sensing music in a shoe...

In the 1970s and 80s Knížák turned to what was known as architectonic music, which was an attempt to translate spatial bodies into notes and vice versa. Knížák laid down a three-axis system in which one axis represented the pitch of a note, the second its length and the third loudness. Using this system it was possible to depict simple forms (two- or three-dimensional – in view of the subjectivity of the axis expressing loudness), and conversely to translate sound into



geometry, at least in outline. On the basis of his calculations Knížák then created monotonously vibrating sound walls, spaces, barriers and so forth. Later he moved on to deriving individual pieces of music from mathematical formulae and, vice versa, to deriving mathematical formulae from the notation of pieces. Recordings of these experiments are not available, because the author's researches are said to be far from complete. One short text – Music as Architecture – can once again be found in the journal *Nový ráj*. In the 1970s as Knížák's happenings changed into what he called "processes for mind", his ideas on music took the same direction. In the later 70s he therefore started to work with sensed music [hudbou tušenou]. "Music can be sensed every where", he wrote in the text *Sensed Music* (1978, in: *Nový ráj*). "We can think of anything as music. (...) An old shoe can be used as notes, a picture, an idea, a rainbow, the movement of a hand, the twinkling of stars (...)" What seems to be involved here is a touch of a game of associations, and a reminder of one of the most fundamental starting points of music, which is the realisation of intrinsic, intimate musicality from which all the rest unfolds.

In the 1970s and 80s, however, Knížák also produced pieces that in his own words were "traditional in basic form, using no surprising recordings, and not deviating from what we normally call music. Nonetheless I believe that they are not traditional. After one has known boundary possibilities it isn't possible to go back." (Traditional Composition, in: *Nový ráj*).

Unfortunately, information and recordings relating to this chapter are thin on the ground. You can find information on the recording of two pieces – *Traditional Suite* and *Bossa Nova Suite* – in the discography. As far as I know, in the Czech Lands probably all that has been published is the record-

ing of Kofroň's realisation of the concept *nl* (the permutation of five notes: C – C sharp – D – D sharp – E) on the CD that went with the book *Grafické partitury a koncepty* [Graphic Scores and Concepts].

Neckář wanted to sing Love Burns...

In 1991 Knížák broke his public musical silence with the double album *Obřad hořící mysli* [The Ceremony of Burning Mind]. It was all the more surprising for being a collection of pop songs in conservative arrangements. Apparently Knížák wrote them with the idea of "more intelligent hits" for specific pop musicians (Petr Spálený, Michal Tučný and others), who had no idea of the plan at first and then refused the offer. When he played his songs in piano version in the Viola Club he was approached by Zdeněk Rytíř, and then recorded the pieces in the latter's Condor studio and sang them himself. The album is nearly ninety minutes long, and so the CD has to omit four songs. The majority of the pieces are relatively calm, and so the unusual features and jokes stand out all the better. Live instruments and synthesizers are used in equal measure, and the rhythm is often created by piano chords. Among the solo instruments guitar is most often to the forefront. The rather short solos are in no way inventive, but the soft, mainly veiled and slightly gurgling sound makes for a pleasant atmosphere. The opening track, *A kde je Bůh* [And where is God?] is conceived without rhythm instruments, and its mood is sometimes disrupted by the tawdry wordless vocals. *At žije přátelství* [Long Live Friendship] (like *Padám* [I am Falling] left out of the CD) is not very successful rock and reminds one most of all of the Pražský výběr band. The four songs *Modrej svět* [Blue World], *Něžný trpaslík* [Tender Dwarf], *Voníš* [You Smell Fragrant] and *Bohužel* [Unfortunately] make up a kind of album inside the album. They all have the same melancholy mood, relaxed tempo and dominating piano part, and they are among the strongest places in the whole collection. The sarcastic *Mozek středně velký* [Middling Large Brain] is surprising for the range of different arrangement tactics it uses – from the string introduction to the balladic middle section to the rock conclusion – without losing any of its consistency. The two tracks *Jen tichem přežívám* [Only by Silence I Survive] and *Šedivej pes* [Grey Dog] turn away from the album mainstream towards blues, the first in a light night-club form with saxophone, and the second – for me the peak of the whole album – almost Waitsian despite the use of synthesizer. The first part of the collection ends with a remake of the Aktual song *How Divine It Was*, this time without recorders and with just voice and bells. The next song *Děti bolševizmu* [Children of Bolshevism], a new arrangement of an Aktual text, is rousing brass band music with a determined communist-style male choir. The otherworldly lovesong *Až budeš stoletá* [When You Are a Hundred] gets its terse atmosphere from the

contrast between a vernal accompaniment with merry recorder, violin and piano and the doleful text. In the song *Na náměstí* [On the Square] Knížák's voice is accompanied only by backing vocals balancing the standard classical harmonies and idiosyncratic voiceband. After this the album seems to run out of fuel in its last quarter. The songs are often affectedly varied – spasmodic, without very catchy melodies. Just a few songs are exceptions: The accordion-style piece *Divná kytice* [Strange Bouquet] which includes half-hearted applause at a fake end, the cabaret *Kdo to přečká* [Who Can Wait It Out] and the dulcimer piece with accordion *Jak šel život dál* [How Life Went On]. The last track on the album, however, raises the standard again. *Banality* [Banalities] a freely flowing credo, its own possible banality parodied at the end when Knížák shouts "Adore me, I'm a genius". The shortened recording of *Assassination on Culture* from the Prague appearance by Aktual seems to be a rather needless reminder of a past, and quite different creative field.

A small Messiah but our own....

So far I have avoided the subject of Knížák's singing and texts. The right time to look at them is probably now, before we consider the second of his song albums *Navrhju krysy* [I Propose Rats].

In Aktual times Knížák was a rousing orator, whose texts combined provocation, the utopian dreams of the Sixties and imperatives calling for awareness of human dignity. Obviously there was no lack of black humour. The provocation often involved ironic treatment of the attributes of real socialism (*Mesiáš Bolševik* [The Boshevik Messiah], *Children of Bolshevism*, *I Love You and Lenin*) or "the decent society of condemned themes" ("I'd like to have a bath of rum and an atom bomb..." – *Bath of Rum*, "The intelligentsia must be killed, wake up Father Koniáš..." – *Assassination of Culture*. We don't find provocative use of vulgarism for its own sake, but only in combination with another message ("Getting a smash in the face in the pub, finding your love sucking off someone else, committing suicide with triphenyldol – that's all worse than war..." – *Mrdej a neváľi* [Fuck and Don't Make War]). Knížák's utopia often appears in a longing for human community and the creation of ideal circumstances for mutual understanding ("There will be a city of Aktuels, we shall live there together, and every day at sunset polish up our hearts..." – *City of the Aktuels*). Interestingly, Knížák's texts for Aktual appeared in a propaganda programme made by Czechoslovak Television in the Seventies when the Plastic People were being tried. It presented Knížák's texts as the work of Hlavsa's band. And the title of the programme? "Assassination of Culture" Twenty years after the break-up of Aktual, Knížák's texts have inevitably changed. His ringing rhetoric has not entirely disappeared, but it has been supplemented by intimate

lyrical, self-critical, fairytale and biblical motifs. Today Knížák brings us verses that would have sounded banal in the era of Marienbad agitprop, and does so in a softer more feeling voice. Nor is he afraid of wobbling on the edge of kitsch ("Wrapped up in my coat, I'm going to drink away my wages, and finally dissolve in a grey cloud..." – *Grey Dog*). Knížák personifies his feelings in fairytale games (*The Tender Dwarf*), and plays lightly with rhyme and stylises himself into all kinds of characters (cabaret entertainer, member of the lumpenproletariat in *How Life Went On*). He uses biblical motifs mainly in the form of paraphrase (the cyberpunk *Nový zákon* [New Testament]) and exploits the associations of well-known sayings and pictures.

And what is Knížák like as a singer? His voice and its range are not specially impressive, and since he is well aware of the problem he tries to make up for it in terms of expression and sincerity. In most cases he is successful, since authenticity is often more valuable than faultless performance when a composer is singing his or her songs. Sometimes, however, he is tempted into exalted passages which reveal small logopaedic faults, and given that he gives precedence to content over rhythm, his phrasing is sometimes problematic as well. These faults were lost in the noisy roar of Aktual production, and on the *Ceremony of Burning Mind* album the rich accompaniment covered them up less, but still adequately. The album *I Propose Rats* is the most acoustically economical, however, and therefore shows the faults the most.

Crucify crabs, you human chickenshit...

The album *I Propose Rats* was recorded a year after *The Ceremony of Burning Mind*, but had to wait for its release until the winter of last year, when it was taken up by Anne Records and Jaroslav Riedel. It differs from the variegated double album both in texts – it is much less playful – and musically. Since there was not enough money for live musicians, the whole recording was made on two synthesizers manned by Knížák and Vašák. Apart from these two main protagonists the album also features the voices of Marie Knížáková and Věra Špinarová.

The synthesizer parts are more or less an unobtrusive accompaniment to the voice and sound completely modern. While in places they evoke strings, a harpsichord or choir, in most cases they form just a transparent web of droning little motifs. It all seems to be playable live, and there's no trace of empty effects. Independent instrumental passages appear only in the form of short preludes, and the songs themselves are short and entirely subordinate to the needs of the text. Balancing in this fragile net, Knížák's voice is much more "exposed" than before and many more lapses can be detected. On the other hand, given the gently gloomy atmosphere of the album this does not hurt too much. The strongest places in the album are those



where the text is completely (even monotonously) rhythmic and Knížák's voice meets the voice of one of the woman singers (*Je škoda spát* [It's a Pity to Sleep] and *Dívka s vlasy smutnými jak svět* [The Girl with Hair as Sad as the World]). In the first of these, Špinarová sings the arched refrain, and in the second Knížák's wife half-whispers dreamily. One song that deviates from the overall mood of the album is the a capella track *The New Testament* with choral refrain and Pokemonesque distorted recitation in verses, while the concluding song *Do víka nekopat* [Don't Kick the Cover] is a wry, ironic piece reflecting on Knížák's social role in the Nineties ("People will be relieved when they finally cover me with clay..."). Although on a first hearing this disk is less attractive than the preceding double album, it has a much more consistent atmosphere and in terms of texts it marks a return to a more serious level.

Conclusion

In my view at least two of Knížák's musical realisations are of international significance and pioneering in character. These are his destroyed music and the work of the Aktual Band. Manipulation of the gramophone is having a boom today both in consumer dance music (DJs) and in the more sophisticated work of experimental composers of progressive electronics, such as Christian Marclay and Philip Jeck. While in its use of non-musical sources Aktual was drawing on trends in New Music (already foreshadowed by the Futurists), the fusion of these expressive techniques with rock, resulting in Industrial, was not to occur until some years later in Britain – at the end of the seventh decade. At that point the pioneers were Throbbing Gristle, SPK, Test Department and many others.

Literature

Knížák, Milan: *Nový ráj* – Selection of work 1952–1995 (Galerie Mánes, Museum of Applied Arts Prague 1996) – Catalogue of retrospective exhibition containing texts about Aktual, destroyed, sensed, architectonic, traditional music, scores etc.
Knížák, Milan: *Bez důvodu* [No Reason] (Litera, Praha, 1996) – some texts and scores
Knížák, Milan – Riedel, Jaroslav – Machovec, Martin: *Písně skupiny Aktual* (Mafá, Praha, 2003). Aktual Band Songs
Petr Kofroň, Martin Smolka: *Grafické partitury a koncepty* [Graphic Scores and Concepts] Audio Ego, Miracle 7, Votobia, Společnost pro novou hudbu, Olomouc 1996) – contains a CD including realisation of the piece *n!*

Discography

Broken Music (LP, Multipla Records, 1979)
Broken Music (CD, Ampere, nedatováno)
Traditional Suite (SP, Museo Mudima Foundation, 1991)
Obřad hořící mysli (2LP, MC, CD, Condor, 1991)
Ars Acustica (contains compositions by M.K. Bossa Nova Suite, EBU Electronics, 1991)
Navrhují krysy (CD, Anne Records, 2002)
Aktual: Atentát na kulturu (CD, Anne Records, 2003)

all linked by common thread



Although V.R.R.M. has only been playing together for a relatively short time, the sound of the band has changed strikingly. Is this the result of your desire for a new sound?

After René Pařez left we created a new repertoire. The sound grew out of the change in the V.R.R.M. line up, I mean the arrival of Ivan Acher and Marcel Bárta. Marcel had worked with us as a guest, and played with us at about eighty percent of our concerts. Ivan and I knew each other, and I knew his musical ideas. Ivan mainly did music for theatre and had never played live anywhere for any length of time.

How did V.R.R.M. come into existence?

For some years I did a lot of travelling and scarcely ever played at home in this country. I had some songs ready and new ideas that had matured in my head. I was keen to put together a new band and that was the reason for V.R.M., where René Pařez and Miloř Dvořáček played at the beginning. And then as I said, the line-up changed to V.R.R.M.

It is also a group where you are doing more with electronics and electronically modified vocals...

I don't listen only to one kind of music and essentially I don't care where music gets to me from. And so with electronic it wasn't planned, but happened thanks to the arrival of Ivan Acher, who loves these things and works with them. I think his singing and Miloř's singing complement each other brilliantly, I just add a bit of mumbling if I feel like it.

Can you say how the sound of the band will be developing in the future?

It's hard to say. Certainly it will be a little harder, but we don't have an advance plan of the music. It's better to keep looking and searching, and feel the sense of adventure in it. For me music is a matter of searching and I've already managed the first step, which is connecting up to myself.

What is your attitude to improvisation?

At the moment we improvise relatively little, and then mainly at concerts, where as saxophonist and clarinetist Marcel probably has the biggest scope for it, as well as himself coming from the jazz scene and having an affinity for this type of playing. I would be pleased if we played more freely in the

future. It's beautiful that it's a thing of the moment when it happens and it doesn't matter if the result is sometimes stupid and embarrassing, because tension when something new is being born is stronger.

Do you improvise on the basis of a previously created structure, a model, or is your improvisation free?

The structure is given beforehand, and we sometimes just draw it out or reduce it. But with Klar we sometimes went on stage not knowing what we would play. That was really free improvisation.

I have a feeling you are gravitating to a music in which a repeated structure reveals itself to the listener. Is this your concept of minimalism?

Yes. That's probably true. Obviously I've heard minimalist music, but it's more that I feel what is inside me and gravitate to that. Repetition is a certain bridge that allows you to reach a trance state. You connect yourself up to the lower currents of music, things that are outside notes, and radiate the most.

Have you been attracted to this from the beginning?

Yes.

an interview with vladimír václavek

Vladimír Václavek is a musician who needs no introduction in the Czech Republic. It is enough just to mention the names of the groups in which he has been involved – Dunaj, E, Rale, Klar, Domáci lékař, Čikori, and VRM and it is clear that we are dealing with one of the key figures in Czech music of the 1980s and 1990. All these groups, like his solo recordings, share a share a common thread – a unique Václavek signature recognisable at once to any experienced listener. He is currently giving concerts with his present group VRRM and planning a new CD.



What kind of music did you grow up on, folk music?

Not at all. When I was learning to play the guitar, then first of all, of course, it was tramp songs (Czech campfire songs, often based loosely on American Country music). The classic beginning. Then I learned to read music and play electric guitar and I jumped right into big beat. I listened to Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin and similar bands, but I was most influenced by the King Crimson record, Discipline. I only discovered folk music later. When I played with Dunaj, we wanted to hear our roots, and also we were from Moravia. It may sound banal but that was how it was. But with E too we wanted to be close to folk music, the south of Moravia. It didn't mean that with E we actually quoted folk music. It was more that we felt the connection with it. Vladimír Kokolia, Josef Ostřanský and I. It was also only later that I realised how strong a feeling I had for eastern poetry as well.

You and Vladimír Kokolia seem to share a love of Eastern cultures.

We've been very much influenced by them. Both of us love koans, for example and haiku poetry.

What fascinates you about it?

It's impossible to talk much about it, but I'll try. People generally think that a koan is a paradoxical sentence, which you think about a great deal in order to grasp its full depth, but I think the koan is something slightly different. When you put all your strength into looking at the koan and into the koan, it is like looking into a mirror. It leads us to ourselves, and through it we can see things as they have never yet been seen. The paradox turns out to be only apparent. It's the same in life.

And the haiku?

That is a little different from a koan. It is poetry of crystalline precision, but as I have said, the koan leads us to ourselves. The two cannot be compared, even though there is a similarity as a result of the joke that is present in both disciplines. For me it's the same with music, because in music I return to myself. It is not just a question of picking up the guitar and getting notes out, but a process of searching, getting to know yourself, although this doesn't mean that music can't be entertaining. On the contrary, it has to be hugely entertaining.

Tell me about your relationship with poetry? You have set poems by Bohuslav Reynek, Antonín Přidal, and Jan Skácel to music, and you write poetry yourself.

The text is exceedingly important for me. When I'm looking for a text for a song it always takes me a very long time, because there mustn't be any false or wrong element in the relationship between the music and the text. My new album, a song album, will have poems from more than one poet – Antonín Přidal, Garcia Lorca, Bohuslav Reynek and something by me. I don't know what to say about my own poetry, since it's too personal a matter. Generally, a poem is a crystallised inner feeling, an inner understanding. For me poetry is above all something very precise and it even ought to be more precise than science. But that is something it has in common with music. Music too has to be connected to emotion and all forms of perception, and everything has to be in unity and sincere. When there is an imbalance in music, a dishonesty or dishonour to music itself and life, we can always feel it.

LUKÁŠ JIŘIČKA

graham melville-mason at seventy

MILAN SLAVICKÝ



March 2003 sees the 70th birthday of Graham Melville-Mason, President of the Dvořák Society in London and a major promoter of Czech music in Great Britain.

He studied in Edinburgh, where he also devoted himself to practical music-making – as a bassoonist and conductor of larger wind ensembles. Later he was to keep up his contacts with Edinburgh even when he moved to London, and for many years he was involved in organising the Edinburgh Festival. He also put his learning, practical and organisational experience to good use in his long-term position at the BBC in London, where he headed the department of contracts in the arts. After 1989 he put his experience at the disposal of Czech musical life, above all the Prague Spring Festival, with which he is still involved. In the early post revolutionary years he gave invaluable help to the management of the festival. In the last decade he has also contributed greatly to British-Czech relations with lectures at music academies in Prague, Brno and Bratislava.

As a committee member and then for many years as Chairman of the Dvořák Society in London Graham Melville-Mason has done much not just to propagate Czech music in Britain, but also to strengthen the community of kindred spirits from both countries, including the younger Czech musicians. Publishing bulletins and yearbooks, organising lectures, concerts and tours, and most recently help for the Czech music institutions hit by the floods – all of this is part of the packed agenda of a friend to whom we wish many happy and active returns!



tilia

**Petr Vyrůbal, Jaroslav Krček, Otmar Mácha
Arco Diva**

The inclusion of the songs *Nepij, Jano* at the beginning of this CD is a mistake that may well put off listeners who would otherwise find the rest of the album interesting. It is a CD on which TILIA, an ensemble of graduates of the Plzeň Conservatory, present their view of how to treat inspirations from folk music. Apart from arrangements of Czech and Moravian folksongs it offers original (although folk inspired) pieces by Petr Vyrůbal (the leader of the group), Jaroslav Krček and Otmar Mácha. Vyrůbal is also the author of the arrangements of the songs, which are the most debatable part of the CD. In terms of harmony and instrumentation they retain the simple techniques of the folksong, while simply taming the spontaneity of folksong. Not even the trained voice of singer Marta Dunová – otherwise very good – improves the result, since it only points up the irresolute balancing act between authenticity and stylisation. While with the older songs (*Píseň Toblášova* [The Song of Tobias]) on a hymn by Comenius, *Smrtí tanec* [The Dance of Death] from the 18th century) this indecisiveness is not disruptive, with the others and especially the Moravian songs it is worse, and the first two tracks are the weakest place.

The original compositions are undoubtedly the most interesting. Petr Vyrůbal is represented here by three pieces, in which he permits himself to go further as composer than as arranger and harmonically and rhythmically enriches the folk melodies. It is clear that he draws inspiration from the music of Jaroslav Krček (who is also named on the jacket as musical director), but the results are rather simpler. This impression is confirmed by Krček's own *Tři tance ve starém slohu* [Three Dances in the Old Style], which are not only more layered but have a more effective, indeterminately historical atmosphere. The combination of folk inspirations with the rhythms of Renaissance or Medieval dances has become something of a Krček trademarks, but it has yet to lose its capacity to charm. At eighty last year, Otmar Mácha is the oldest of the composers but paradoxically the biggest modernist. His *Zpěvy Horňácka* [Horňácko Songs] does not cover up the rawness of the basic material but transforms it into the idiom of a serious music that is not afraid of dissonance and more complex structures. In the first song *Hojačky* a simple song is wrapped up in a different accompaniment with each repetition, but when you listen carefully you can identify typical figures used by the Horňácko fiddlers concealed in the contrapuntal relationships. Surprisingly the complexity does not inhibit the players from performing with verve.

studio title.

MATĚJ KRATOCHVIL

the human tragicomedy

Miloš Štědroň

On the 23rd of March 2003 a new opera was presented in Prague as part of the cycle "Banging on the Iron Curtain". It had little of the advance publicity, and met with little of the reaction in the media that an event such as a new opera deserves. One reason is that the composer Miloš Štědroň the younger was not working with famous names. Nonetheless, the good attendance at the Estates Theatre showed that public interest was far from small. It was an opera performance with all the accoutrements (choir, ballet...) but everything was adapted to the conditions of the "Banging" cycle, meaning that the composer had to put everything together himself with only a modest budget and on a scaled down stage. The small orchestra was in a small orchestra pit that took up part of an already small stage and so on. Štědroň had not taken the path of simple chamber opera (which would have been more suitable) but that of miniaturising a major opera. The spectator (it is often spectators that go to the opera) naturally judges what he or she actually sees, and doesn't usually take the trouble to imagine it done in proper style at the National Opera. Reviewers from the daily press can take this line as well, and so in this sense "Banging" may be something of a trap for composers. In our case, however, we only judge the music, and believe me when I say that the music is the most fundamental thing in opera. The music of Miloš Štědroň (1973), testifies to his undoubted talent, and has greater potential for the genre of opera than any we have as yet heard from new opera composers. The music for the Human Tragicomedy is not strictly defined in terms of style and extends from new music to jazz and minimalism. In a stage genre this elasticity is an advantage – the music is definitely varied and rich in different levels of expression, and has drama and theatricality. Anyone who is keen on purity of style will probably be unimpressed by an over-sized minimalist insert, interrupted by nervous attacks of Jazz rhythm, set in the context of technically well composed "new music". On the other hand, perhaps this is precisely the way to capture the spirit of the text written by Ladislav Klíma, the Prague philosopher and drunk, in whose works ideas of genius are thrown up by a flood of confused mental ramblings. This brings us to the most problematic aspect of Štědroň's opera – the choice of theme. Experiment in opera today undoubtedly involves testing out unconventional types of libretto. Nonetheless, something tells me (a conservative) that the point of the existence of opera (if one has to defend the absurd combination of theatre and music) is a strong story or message that music can enhance. I am afraid that Ladislav Klíma's text offers little by way of opportunity for this, and so I shall simply look forward to a new stage work from Miloš Štědroň, this time with a more suitable libretto and more made to measure for the theatre involved.

Miloš Štědroň jr. – *Lidská tragikomedie* [The Human Tragicomedy], an opera based on a play by Ladislav Klíma using poems by Jakub Deml, libretto: Miloš Štědroň, staging and costumes: Dušan Šoltys, choreography: Petr Šimek, singers: Jakub Tolaš, Marek Olbrzymek, Zdeněk Plech, Zoltán Korda, the Iuventus paedagogica women's choir, ballet: pupils at the Private Dance Conservatory in Prague 2.

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