

CONTEXTS APPEAR GRADUALLY **VÍTĚZSLAV MIKEŠ** ON CONTEMPORARY MUSIC AND CZECH-LITHUANIAN RELATIONSHIPS

Musicologists are not your typical candidates for presidential honours. This July, however, one Czech musicologist received such a recognition from Lithuanian president Dalia Grybauskaitė. The musicologist was **Vítězslav Mikeš**, and the Cross of the Knights of the Order for Merits to Lithuania was to mark his long-term work in championing **Lithuanian music** in the Czech Republic. This, however, is only one part of his activities. In recent years, he has mostly been active in “invisible” but essential positions as a musical dramaturg, first at the **Music Forum Hradec Králové** festival, then at the **Exposition of New Music festival** in Brno, and since 2012 at the **Brno Philharmonic** and at the **Moravian Autumn festival** in the same city. During his tenure in Brno, we have begun to see brave but thought-out combinations of 20th century music and brand new works with Classical and Romantic repertoire. He also supplements the dominance of western music with pieces by so-called post-Soviet composers, but also music from Asia, for example. Additionally, he also writes about music (e.g. for this publication or HIS Voice) and prepares broadcasts for Czech Radio Vltava. He is among those helping music on its way from the artists to the listeners, remaining more or less hidden himself. In this interview, then, we will at least partially disrupt this inconspicuousness.



What was the path that led you to discover Lithuanian music?

At the beginning was a hitch-hiking journey to a country I knew practically nothing about, but which charmed me immediately. I will sketch the next steps only in bullet points: amazement with Lithuania – its landscapes, culture, history, language, people... – and a difficult to describe feeling of a second home (professor Giedrė Lukšaitė Mrázková, a Lithuanian harpsichordist and organist living in Prague later remarked that I must have been a Lithuanian in a previous life); getting to know the artistic and musical works of Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, on whose piano music I later wrote my master's thesis; studies of Lithuanian at Charles' University in Prague, with the possibility to go for two- or three-month stays in Vilnius every year; gradually becoming acquainted with contemporary music, in which I was substantially aided by Daiva Parulskienė and Linas Paulauskis from the Lithuanian Music Information Centre (Linas is still at said institution today and continues to be of help in getting material – I would like to

thank him for that!); popularising Lithuanian music through articles and radio broadcasts... The culmination was totally falling for the music and personality of Bronius Kutavičius, on whose settings of the poet Sigitas Geda I wrote my doctoral dissertation. And gradually, opportunities began appearing to present Lithuanian music live in the Czech Republic.

What is the situation of contemporary art music in Lithuania today and the relationship of the state with this field? Can we find inspiration in the Baltics as to how we approach more marginal areas of culture?

Contemporary music certainly has a more significant position than in the Czech Republic. It has great support in the continually developed tradition of Gaida, a large festival which has taken place every year since 1991. Many Lithuanian premieres were presented there (including orchestral ones), as well as commissions by Lithuanian – and recently also international – composers. For contemporary electronic and electroacoustic music, the Jauna Muzika festival is an important platform. The truth is that in recent years, Lithuania has also seen a diversification of forces – smaller festivals are established, with lesser or greater uncertainty as to their long-term functioning. But the large events are certainly not languishing. The Lithuanian Music Information Centre plays an important part, publishing sheet music, CDs (profile albums, selections of the most interesting pieces in Lithuanian music in a given period, etc.), running an information-packed website, developing various projects aiming to publicise Lithuanian music at home and especially abroad, and so on and so on. They have six employees there – just compare that to our own Czech Music Information Centre.

The general support of contemporary works – not only in Lithuania but also in the other Baltic republics – might very well arise out of the absence of internationally renowned classical composers. We have Smetana, Dvořák, Janáček, Suk, Martinů, and that is in fact quite enough for repertoire. They do not have such composers in the Baltics, which is why they invest their efforts in promoting contemporary composers. Another area we shouldn't fail to mention is the strong field of choir singing – even amateur choirs in Lithuania are of a high standard, and they often perform contemporary music written for them by renowned composers. And ultimately, the distinctive folklore is also a moving force and contemporary music still draws rich inspiration from it, displaying a capability to use its potential even in the most avant-garde of contexts.

Which Lithuanian composers or musicians would you recommend to someone looking to educate themselves on the local music?

It would be typical for me say something like “that’s a difficult question” and then continue with a random listing of many names and pieces. But you won’t catch me out. Without hesitation, I’ll say that I consider the oratorio *The Last Pagan Rites* by Bronius Kutavičius the key work of Lithuanian music. When I first came across this oratorio on CD and in a graphic score, I could not get away from it. What a simple work. But how thoroughly planned out, strong, and impressive! I dreamt of a performance in the Czech Republic, but for whatever reason, given the recording and the composer’s instructions, I was under the impression that the work was practically impossible to realise live. However, Linas Paulauskis recommended I contact the Aidija choir and its choirmaster Romualdas Gražinis,

who came to the Music Forum Hradec Králové festival in 2012 and presented *The Last Pagan Rites* in collaboration with the local Jitro children's choir, as well as two other oratoria by Kutavičius. I realised that all you need for a performance is a choirmaster with a flawless knowledge of the score who is capable of creating a choreography for the movement of the choirs in the space. In 2017, the oratorio was produced again, this time at the Moravian Autumn in Brno, where Aidija once again collaborated with a local children's choir (Kantiléna). The reaction of the audience was the same in both performances – a long silence after the choirs left the church and the final organ choral had subsided, and then interminable and rapturous applause. It was also an intense experience for both the Czech children's choirs. In fact, I don't understand why Aidija does not make this into their flagship export project.

But lest I stay with a single piece... All of Kutavičius' oeuvre merits much attention. And if I were to approach the matter vaguely chronologically, I would recommend Čiurlionis' piano compositions, the works of the first two Lithuanian avant-gardists Vytautas Bacevičius (brother of Polish composer Grażyna Bacewicz) and Jeronimas Kačinskas (a student of Alois Hába at the Prague Conservatory and a pioneer of microtonal music in Lithuania). The music of Julius Juzeliūnas is also wonderful, of Kutavičius' contemporaries we might mention Osvaldas Balakauskas and Feliksas Bajoras, from the younger generations, I'd like to name Onutė Narbutaitė, Šarūnas Nakas, Rytis Mažulis, Antanas Jaseška, Artūras Bumšteinas. There is much originality in the work of Justė Janulytė, Egidija Medekšaitė, Žibuoklė Martinaitytė, and the list goes on. Incidentally, the concentration of female composers is undoubtedly noteworthy – all the composers I mentioned also managed to secure a place on the international scene.



Receiving the Cross of the Knights of the Order for Merits to Lithuania from president Dalia Grybauskaitė

What is the current state of the musical relationships between the Czech Republic and Lithuania, as well as the other Baltic countries?

These relationships have gradually developed over the last two centuries and were certainly notable, although they seem to have made more of a mark with the Lithuanians – incidentally, Rūta Prusevičienė has thoroughly mapped Czech-Lithuanian musical relationships in her diploma thesis. She is now the director of the Lithuanian National Philharmonic Society. There are few in the Czech Republic who know that in the 19th century, major contributions to Lithuanian musical life were made by two Czech musicians and pedagogues, Rudolf Liehmann (the son of Dvořák’s teacher Antonín Liehmann) in Rokiškis and Josef Mašek in Rietavas (there is a legend in Lithuania that it was Mašek who first recognised Čiurlionis’ talent. In our own country, though, knowledge about Lithuanian and Baltic music has improved considerably in recent decades, given by the rising international reputation of several composers. Composers like Arvo Pärt, Erkki-Sven Tüür, Pēteris Vasks, or Bronius Kutavičius have appeared repeatedly on our stages, and that’s only the tip of the iceberg. Often times, these are crucial events – we could mention the performance of Šarūnas Nakas experimental work *Žiqquratu II* in the 1990s at the Marathon of New Music; of Kutavičius’ pieces other than *The Last Pagan Rites*, we have heard his score to Dreyer’s film *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (thanks to the Berg Orchestra), or his symphony *Epitaphium temporum pereuntii*, performed two years ago at the Prague Spring by the Lithuanian National Symphony Orchestra. Erkki-Sven Tüür was the resident composer for the Moravian Autumn festival in 2015 (which also presented Justė Janulytė’s evening-length project *Sandglasses*), and the Janáček Philharmonic Ostrava selected Pēteris Vasks as its resident composer in 2016/2017. Not to mention the frequency of performances of Arvo Pärt. And I’m sure I’ve missed out a number of important performances anyway...

As a journalist and dramaturg, you explore the music of various regions of the ex-USSR. Is there something that connects these countries musically? Is there anything like a “post-Soviet music”?

As a journalist, I really am drawn to the east. As a dramaturg, I aim for territorial balance and I hope that’s the external appearance as well. As far as “post-Soviet music” is concerned: I once used this term, but these days I try to avoid it. Earlier, I concentrated mostly on the compositional generation that came into its prime in the 1960s, and it seemed to me that composers like Alfred Schnittke, Sofia Gubaidulina, Arvo Pärt, Bronius Kutavičius, Pēteris Vasks, Giya Kancheli, Valentin Silvestrov, Tigran Mansurian, and others, i.e. the most significant figures of this generation in their respective countries – and of course authors of entirely different compositional styles – were connected by something. Even despite the cultural variety of their countries, which were all part of the Soviet Union. We might mention their enthusiasm for western modernism, seen early on in their careers as a protest against socialist realist aesthetics. Or, on the contrary, their later departure from a complicated musical language in favour of simplification and spirituality, which could again be construed as a protest against the atheisation of Soviet society, as well as an attempt to dive deeper into their spiritual heritage; the spirituality of the nation in question. This generation, then, already managed to extricate itself from the Soviet contexts, not to mention their successors. That is why

I consider the term “post-Soviet music” more than problematic, not to mention that it will always have negative connotations for the countries themselves. Let us speak today of Lithuanian music, Estonian, Latvian, Ukrainian, Armenian, Russian...

Over the last few years, which you have spent as the dramaturg of the Brno Philharmonic, you have mixed classical repertoire with more contemporary works and brand new pieces. Do you have a key which you use when searching for current but also audience-friendly repertoire?

I don't have a single key – that would soon lead to clichés. Behind every programme is a lengthy thought process involving the links between the pieces. I certainly try to avoid the “sandwich method”, which I think does contemporary music more harm than good – the listeners are given a “taste” of contemporary music in the form of a ten-minute piece, and then they “get what they want”.

It is my firm belief that intelligent combinations and apparent or hidden connections can help listeners with challenging programmes. Place the following next to one another: Tchaikovsky's *Symphony Pathétique* and Alfred Schnittke's cantata *Seid nüchtern und wachet*. Or Sofia Gubaidulina's flute concerto *The Deceitful Face of Hope and of Despair* and Mahler's *Song of the Earth*. Or *The Map*, Tan Dun's cello concerto, and Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The connections appear, even if the works are a hundred years apart and have an entirely different musical language and context. I look at music without dividing it into classical and contemporary. I do not scorn popular classical works because it is not their fault that the music industry made them into what they are. Even these works, in a novel combination, i.e. a new context, sound different, new, alive. This approach then creates a certain balance which I am after when putting a programme together. I don't think it's something unusual – internationally, it's standard procedure. Only perhaps in our somewhat rigid musical waters is this still considered dramaturgical progress...

What influence will the Brno Philharmonic's new chief conductor have on the dramaturgy?

The influence is crucial, which is logical and appropriate. For me, it is essential that Dennis Russell Davies and I are on the same page. He, of course, has his own vision of what he'd like to perform, but he is open to discussion, doesn't mind taking advice, and is open to new impulses. Thanks to his natural authority and enormous experience, the more courageous components of the dramaturgy are easier to communicate not only to the audience, but also to the orchestra. I am honoured to have the opportunity to work with someone of his stature, and I feel blessed that he considers me an equal partner when preparing the Brno Philharmonic's seasons.

Vítězslav Mikeš studied musicology at the Palacký University in Olomouc and Lithuanian at Charles University in Prague. He was a production manager with the Berg Orchestra and the Hradec Králové Philharmonic and dramaturg at the Music Forum Hradec Králové and Exposition of New Music festivals. Since 2012, he has been the dramaturg of the Brno Philharmonic. As a journalist, he works with institutions such as HIS Voice, Czech Music Quarterly, Harmonie, or Czech Radio.