

IVAN ACHER WHAT REALLY KEEPS ME GOING IS THE **JOY** **OF THE WORK ITSELF**

Ivan Acher (* 1973 in Liberec) is a Czech composer, musician, carpenter, and forest worker. His name is tied to the legendary Prague Chamber Theatre (Pražské komorní divadlo) led by director Dušan Pařízek, which was active at Prague's Komedie Theatre between 2002 and 2012. He has also worked at the National Theatres in Prague, Brno, and Bratislava, as well as having composed the music for several dozen documentaries and feature films. He has composed over twenty orchestral pieces for the Agon Orchestra, with whom he has collaborated since 2002. His opera **Sternenhoch** was recently successfully premiered at the National Theatre in Prague. Acher often works with electronics, as well as singers of popular music, positing himself as one of the most flexible musicians and composers working in both concert and theatre music in the Czech Republic today.

At the beginning of your creative career, technologies were of paramount importance, specifically software from IRCAM in Paris, which could synthesise sound from visual input. This was when you were studying textile design at the Technical University in Liberec?

This is mostly true, but it was another crucial situation that was really an awakening and an infection. For me, a Neanderthal from the borders, this was a miracle! My high school friend Karel Korous used his clever head to switch the heads on a Tesla reel-to-reel so we could record double stereo - adding a second layer to a track! So this IRCAM-led entry into the organisation of sound - which we can now call



PHOTO: TOMÁŠ VODNÁNSKÝ

composing - was not as simple as it might seem at first. Of course, I was also playing instruments, I experienced traditional band-on-tour life with Venca Václavek and the progressive bigband NUO (the most beautiful of boys), but that wasn't really my flowerpot. I stopped growing even though there was no lack of water. I took the entrance exams to study design, and there was the possibility there of generating sound through visual means thanks to the powerful Silicon Graphics computers the school had at its disposal. That was a great adventure. So great I even slept in the studio, spending weeks on end composing and drawing like a maniac. I didn't finish art school, paradoxically, because of all the time I spent in the studio.

To what extent are instruments - including electronic instruments - and responsive, live sound the centre of composing for you? Or do you often think things through, go on walks, work on paper?

Hearing what you're writing right away performed by mock-ups of real instruments might seem tempting, but it's not my path. The resultant sound (with minimal

exceptions) always was - and probably always will be - repugnant. Hearing it three hundred times a day, then, is mildly deadening. The basic idea, an instant construction without decoration - if it is not too sonic - is still linked in my mind to composing at the piano and writing on paper - PDF paper, that is. Some time before that, I sing while I walk, which creates truly dangerously seductive starting modules.

As concerns inspiration from non-musical sounds, created both on classical instruments and on home appliances produced especially to emit interesting sounds, that's a different story. At least half the time, sampling these sonicities is the starting motor for composing. If responsive sound means what I think it means, this compositional method is prevalent in my work, and the ensuing shaping and cutting down leaves its marks on the resultant piece. Some remain only roughly outlined like the unfinished totem on the coast near Seattle, if they are strong enough even in this state. With some, I file away with so much detail I might be carving a cameo. Deciding when to stop is in fact the most difficult part.

What has not coming from a traditionally musical environment given you?

The question, I suppose, is what you can achieve despite this initial handicap. First and foremost, if you expect nothing and work purposefully, you can go for a long time simply for the joy the work brings you. It took ten years before someone happened to notice that I was doing something. In ten years, you can make a lot of music without the ambition of showing someone something or achieving any kind of success. Complete freedom and the necessity of setting one's own rules.

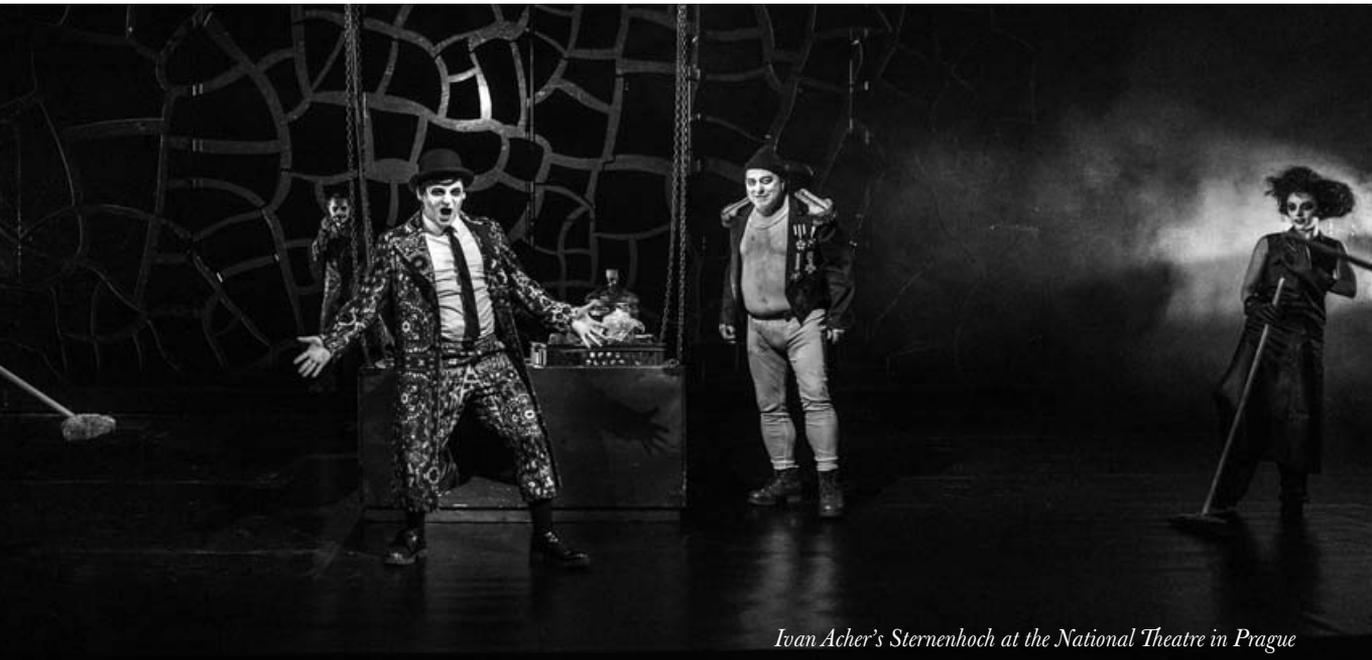
If such a thing as the development of quality in private without arbiters exists, it consists mostly of giving oneself tasks in the sense of surprising oneself, avoiding repetition, setting traps for one's weaknesses both in terms of craft and emotion. That visual trajectory I had lined out, heading for the beautifully continual career of a regional graphic designer and Sunday painter, was not all in vain, however. The form of talent I use today to materialise music is not entirely of musicianly origin. At least half the ideas are visual at first.

What do you work for today, then? For sheer joy? To make a living? Ambition? Have your motivations transformed over time? And does this influence the kind of commission you're likely to accept or reject?

That's a painful question. I certainly do not act with maximal prudence as concerns remuneration. I have four children and this is really an aspect I should be rigorous about; including financial considerations when deciding whether or not to take on a job. But usually, I don't think about it. I often only ask "How much?" during the finishing stages.

What really keeps me going is the joy of the work itself. When I wake up and listen to something I recorded at night, and it works on me as if it had been done by someone else, that's IT, and there's enough euphoria guaranteed to keep me going up to the next slump.





Ivan Acher's Sternenhoch at the National Theatre in Prague

Sometimes, the challenges – a piece for the Prague Spring, an opera for the National – have the character of a path of courage; a battle at Thermopylae. So there's also a bit of a bloke-ish challenge or provocation. I have had the good fortune to receive beautiful and dignified offers and adventurous challenges. The fact that no other offers come my way is probably thanks to the fact that I continually reject projects that stink of any kind of small-mindedness. Though of course I stepped into cow-dung a few times. But never in sandals!

What does your working environment look like today? Do you work in one place, or are you forced to work on the road?

The important things are born at our mill under Oybin Castle: I can see Töpfer mountain over the treetops of a three-hundred-year-old oak alley – it just pours out there. My brain works like a Christmas candy machine. Recently, though, I am forced to travel due to my work for theatre.

Given my obsession with being present and finishing off details on the show (because seeing images while you work is of course a triumph), I haven't been home for almost a month now. So I have a "hotel set-up": a small keyboard, a small guitar without a body, one condenser microphone for singing – even now I'm also writing this interview on a laptop with all these decorations plugged in and set up for my work on *War and Peace* at the Slovak National Theatre. They're all around me. I woke up at 5 in the morning, while my voice was still deep, I recorded the basis of an Orthodox chorale in the darkest timbres, then I'll go to the rehearsal. In the afternoon, when the trains quiet down in Klíny, I'll record the tenor voices, and then mix it all after

dinner. I've been taking pictures of my hotel sets around the world, which I think would make for a great complement to this interview.

How much time do you spend in theatres? What is your relationship to that environment?

I've more or less answered that responsibly, let me just add that the possibility of creating an artificial world on the stage, of being able to experience the feeling that I have an influence on something in the movement of things on Earth; that I can fortify these and leave an imprint of the kind only music can leave – all this is enormously precious and I am thankful for this gift of fate.

Which of the projects you worked on do you value the most in retrospect?

You can't really make a list. I am thankful for my stint with the Prague Chamber Theatre: this gave me a feeling that even a group of adults can meaningfully spend entire nights rehearsing purely thanks to their desire to make the show perfect; the feeling that we're part of something extraordinary and that it makes sense. I'm thankful to Dušan Pařízek, David Jařab, and Jan Nebeský for trusting me enough to let me work freely.

I'm thankful to various bands for allowing me to travel around Europe for free. Where I once struggled to hitch a ride, we now enjoyed the luxuries of hotels and multivans. Those tours might have made us just about enough money to get an ice cream at the Rozvadov border crossing, because audiences for progressive approaches to music were washed down by the 2002 flood, but it was beautiful.

My theatrical travels also range across Europe, so the trips continue. The good thing is that as a composer, I hand over a more or less fixed work, which I can influence until the very last moment, so I don't get so stressed about accommodation, sound engineers, fees... in the wild years of band tours, it would sometimes happen that we performed a concert for five hundred people in the middle of a vineyard in Tuscany, but the owner was nowhere to be found. We did our own sound, there was no fee, and we had to sleep in an outhouse on carpets from the bar. But even that was glorious – the morning! The villa-farm stood on a hill in the middle of the wavy vineyard ocean... so we loaded the crate of beer we got as a fee and on we went to Civitavecchia. So far, I've been lucky. And I now realise how often I mention gratitude in this interview. Yes, I am grateful.

How do you see your position in relation to various cultural scenes? Drama and experimental theatre, contemporary art or popular music?

Given the reactions my work has garnered, I am more certain now after twenty years of composing and researching that I have found where I belong. I can vouch for my work, and so if the creative teams' favour lasts, I will gladly and eagerly continue composing for the theatre. I avoid terms like incidental or scenic music, because my aim is to make this genre more autonomous and rid it of the musical public's unfair label of a second-rate genre with a stigma of complementarity.

Every month, the theatre gets me to a new world: not just thanks to travelling, but also in discovering the micro-climate of every theatre. This way, the journey never ceases to amuse me; thanks to the flight through the literary preparations, it's always



Vanda Šípová (as Helga) and Sergej Kostov (as prince Sternenhoch)

new. The orchestral and jazzband projects are currently in the fridge given how hard it is to keep large ensembles afloat in recent years. So NUO and the Agon Orchestra are hibernating for now.

Thanks to the - very surprising - success of *Sternenhoch* at the National Theatre with both the critical and general public, I have received a number of new offers for operatic and orchestral commissions. First, however, I have to carefully consider the energy which *Sternenhoch* needed. I have to breathe for a little longer. So far, though, a sense of relief predominates and everything looks bright. My diary looks like Pavarotti's (humour) and hopefully I'll continue getting work. But I have to be at 110% all the time. There are no indulgences reserved for a visual immigrant in the musical world, and "self-taught" sounds worse than a diploma tube slammed against the table. There is a short euphoria at every premiere: now I am finally certain I can do anything. It is immediately replaced by a feeling that I still know nothing.

What are your plans for the future?

The most immediate plan is to survive this hectic end of the season. In the autumn, a break in productions at the National will allow us to tour the opera abroad and avoid losing continuity. I'm getting ready to experience the adventure of travelling around theatres with the same excitement I've had up to this point. The premiere-weeks have so far been merciful in how they layer themselves onto my Google calendar, so hopefully it won't be too stressful. Hopefully. And then I need to layer this roast with the music to two greasy films. It's hard to bite off more than three layers of this lasagne... but when you intersperse them with aubergines...