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# IRENA TROUPOVÁ

## *and her musical curiosity*

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*At first, soprano Irena Troupová gives off the impression of a somewhat more fragile figure from a Gustav Klimt painting. Her musical soul is also reminiscent of these artworks: varied, full of character and an inner radiance. But while the painter was indelibly linked to Vienna, Irena Troupová's career has so far outlined the trajectory České Budějovice-Prague-Berlin-Prague, incorporating a huge number of impulses in almost all directions, complemented by a clearly conceived reflective approach. Hence her concerts are often full of listening discoveries and new challenges. Simply put, her stable audience knows that they'll never be bored.*

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*Looking at your career so far, I see a clear predominance of early music in its beginnings, while now, music of the 20th and 21st centuries makes up the majority of your repertoire. Czech critics recently called this a fairly unusual phenomenon. Do you agree?*

I suppose I do. My encounter with early music determined my trajectory for many years and it was difficult to extricate myself from that. That is why I was excited about every change, like when I was approached by pianist Tomáš Spurný, who works intensively on 19th-century German-speaking composers in the Czech lands (Joseph Maria Wolfram or Václav Jindřich Veit, for instance) with a plan for performing their music. This was already during my stay in Berlin, where I spent fifteen years. During this time, I had the opportunity to perform several interesting 20th century pieces, but ultimately, it was very few.

When I returned to Prague, by a happy coincidence, I had the chance to record Bohuslav Martinů's opera *Le jour de bonté* and perform a beautiful arrangement

of Mahler's early songs for soprano and wind ensemble at the Rudolfinum. I thus entered Czech musical life in a manner entirely untypical of me. And – again by coincidence – I was introduced to the composer Marek Kopelent at a concert with harpsichordist Monika Knoblochová, who soon after that needed to find someone at short notice to perform one of his pieces, and he chose me. Since that time, I have had a pleasantly varied concert life: both chamber and operatic Baroque music, Classical-era songs accompanied by the fortepiano, more traditional 20th century music (songs with piano or orchestral accompaniment), and truly contemporary music.

*It sounds like you'd long desired a greater range of repertoire, but you had to wait for it.*

Already in České Budějovice, I discovered early music thanks to the leading musicologist Martin Horyna, who filled me with enthusiasm for renaissance polyphony. Then Pavel Klikar – one of the first Czech proponents of historically informed performance – heard me sing, and one thing led to another. Pavel had an immense knack for connecting people: shortly after I was turned away from studying musicology in Prague for political reasons, I received a position at the Music Department of the National Library, quickly found accommodation, became a member of his ensemble Musica Antiqua Praha, and he also recommended a music teacher, Mrs Terezie Blumová.

*The second time around, you passed the examination to study musicology. Did the examiners simply forgive you your negative political profile?*

I think that to my good fortune, someone else was sitting on the panel. I guess the evaluation was also different thanks to the people from the library, who stood behind me. I even remembered the author of a Soviet piece and the beginning of the text, so I passed the entrance examination.

*What was it that made you so politically unacceptable in the eyes of the regime?*

My mother was formerly a teacher of religion, and my father a former member of the PTP, i.e. the Technical Auxiliary Battalions (Pomocné technické prapory), where so-called politically unreliable persons were sent for re-education in the mines or on construction sites.

*Was your interest in styles older than the Baroque awakened at Prague's musicology department?*

I certainly had an interest: there were many interesting scores in the musicology department's library and I wanted to study as much as possible, as well as to become acquainted with the music on a practical level. As far as modern music was concerned, I mostly imagined music like that composed by Petr Eben. I also met composer Svatopluk Havelka, but when he began writing something for me, I left for Berlin. I had a lot of work there, mostly concerning early music. I was also allowed to travel to the Schola Cantorum in Basel. Moreover, Germany had a very ingrained system of stylistic pigeon-holing, so nobody thought of offering me – firmly entrenched in the early music category – any other projects. Something would come through occasionally, but not as much as I would have liked.

*You really became involved with contemporary music after returning to Bohemia. What do you most enjoy about it?*

I can't say. I'm simply attracted and allured – my curiosity is piqued.



***How do you select pieces? Do you have any criteria?***

To tell you the truth, if I refuse something, it's usually for time management reasons, because at this point, I'm interested in every contemporary composition and I'm curious about everything that turns up. I take it as a challenge. Sometimes I also turn something down because of range. I remember, for example, meeting Arvo Pärt in Berlin several times. He wanted me to sing in his piece, but it was almost entirely in a low register, and it couldn't be transposed because of the violin parts, which were mostly played open strings. I think it was *Es sang vor langen Jahren*.

***At the beginning is your curiosity, but how can you be sure if a contemporary piece is worth it?***

Only when I study it in detail and really learn the piece. Otherwise I have no chance of knowing what it really holds inside; whether it is good or not.

***Did it ever happen that you were disappointed in the end?***

Of course. Sometimes, it can be summed up as "unnecessarily difficult", i.e. too much effort for minimal effect. Other times, the performer is somewhat unsure about the piece, but the audience is ecstatic. After all, there are many factors at work in a live performance.

***This is why I ask, because as soon as you are to interpret a new work, you have to believe in it. Otherwise, its strength is considerably reduced.***

That's absolutely true. But I always say it's up to me to discover and understand the meaning of every given work – that's my job.

*In the chamber concert repertoire, your most regular recent collaborator is Jan Dušek, who seems to be an ideal musical partner for you. How did you meet?*

We met when a singing substitute was being sought for his piece *Chalomot jehudi'im*. Someone recommended me, Jan like my recordings very much, so we rehearsed the piece with the Berg Orchestra. During consultations on the modern Hebrew text, when it was necessary that I try out the pronunciation while singing, he sat down at the piano. After a while I said: "Well then, our musical understanding is ideal!" Then we collaborated on a project that featured pieces by composers spurned by the Nazis, which was initiated by a German agency. We started rehearsing and it was obvious that that wasn't the end of it. We have been performing for over six years now.

*Together, you were the first to record the complete songs of Czech-Austrian composer Viktor Ullmann, whose Jewish origin led to his deportation to Terezín (Theresienstadt) and later to Auschwitz, where he was murdered in a gas chamber. How did you come across this composer?*

Already during my musicology studies in Prague, I came across an extensive collection of scores by the Terezín composers, i.e. those deported to the Terezín ghetto, and I always planned to prepare them for performance. But I didn't do it before leaving to Berlin, and there was no time to do it there. When I returned to Prague, I said to myself that I really had to look at the music. I took out Ullmann and read through it. I was utterly immersed in the music. It was an incredible discovery for me.

*Why?*

It's hard to explain. I won't give you a deep analytical explanation, but I'll tell you it's wonderfully colourful music with strong emotions. Some people think that seeing as the composer was in Terezín, his music will be pure depression, and they're then surprised at how varied and diverse the music is – not everything was written in Terezín, many pieces were composed much earlier.

*If we look into the fates of the composers that were deported to concentration camps, from where they often did not return, these narratives are so strong it is often neither easy nor pleasant to go through them. How is it for you?*

As for Viktor Ullmann, he himself suffered from depression, which he also passed on to his children – for him, it was not simply the psychological strain of being persecuted by fascism. In his case, however, I rather had images on my mind from the First World War, in which he took part voluntarily. These are reflected in his songs on Chinese poetry, for example, and that's truly depressing. In his Yiddish songs from Terezín, you can feel he is trying to come to terms with his Jewish roots, and there – I'll admit it – it really got me down.

*At the 2018 Prague Spring, you and Jan Dušek introduced listeners to another Terezín composer, Hans Winterberg, whose name is completely unknown to most.*

I came across him in the academic literature. Through my own intensive research, I found Peter Kreitmeir, a direct descendant of this composer. I got in touch with him through social networks. Peter was very obliging and allowed us to rehearse his grandfather's songs. He even came to our concert in Prague. When I went through the entire story, I was deeply struck by it.

*If I am not mistaken, Winterberger's compositions were stored in an archive in Germany, bound by a contract to remain off-limits to the public until 2031?*

Yes, that is the case. Peter Kreitmeir managed to have this contract annulled in 2015. Since then, Winterberg's oeuvre has been open to exploration.

*Could you say a little about the work of this newly discovered composer?*

Hans Winterberg was born in Prague to a Jewish family whose relationship to Czech and German identity was very ambivalent – sometimes they wrote his name as Hans, sometimes as Hanuš. He passed through the standard Czech-German education system, but he grew up without a closer relationship to the Jewish community. He studied music with Alois Hába.

He married Prague German pianist Maria Maschat, and if it weren't for the rise of Hitler, they would have had a normal married life. They faced huge pressures to divorce, which they resisted almost until the end of the war. They were only divorced at the end of 1944, most probably following a mutual agreement. Winterberg was then deported to Terezín, which he survived.

After returning to Prague, they weren't sure if he was a German or a Jew: his ex-wife, a German, was expelled. He wanted to search out not just her, but also his scores, so he requested a passport in order to travel to Germany. I think it's quite strange that he wanted to go there so soon after the war and everything that had happened. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that he wasn't treated very well here. He left and reunited with his wife. They lived together for some time, but the relationship no longer worked. He was then married another three times, and he adopted a son from the last marriage. This partnership was dominated by a terrible fear of anyone discovering he was a Jew.

Winterberg's compositions finally made it to the Sudeten-German Archive in Regensburg, and there could be no mention of him being a Jewish composer. Then a direct grandson, Mr Kreitmer, appeared and took over this heritage. The Nazis' influence on future generations is attested to by the fact that Mr Kreitmeier only learned about his musical relative about six years ago. For me, this is a truly incredible story.

*And it would certainly make a good film. I'd like to ask you a little about your singing technique. Your voice remains fresh, light, it sounds very natural, yet retaining a specific colouration. How do you take care of it?*

I keep attending supervisions – that is immensely important for me. Sometimes one despairs, of course, sometimes more rest is needed, as well as a reassessment, but it is good to always have an external “ear” available, not only in terms of aesthetics, but also vocal technique. A singer needs someone to point out that something is not right with the voice; that something is going on. There can be as much expression as technique allows, expression can sometimes greatly support technique, but they need to be balanced. Sometimes, it might happen that a singer allows emotion to overcome them; they can be moved by the piece at the expense of quality. That does happen sometimes, but an internal red flag should go up immediately: take a step back.

*Are you capable of this also because of Terezie Blumová's special technique, which you experienced at the beginnings of your career?*

First of all, I am grateful to Terezie Blumová for helping me accept my vocal identity. As a child, I had quite a deep voice, and for a long time, it was not clear that after

mutation – which was more distinct than it usually is in girls – I moved to a soprano range: the lows remained, but there was no longer any colour. I kept my voice low even though I was in fact no longer satisfied with it. Mrs Blumová connected all my registers, discovered new regions in my voice, and thus pushed me in the right direction. It took quite a long time, but it worked.

I'd compare her method to physiotherapeutic procedures, more specifically the so-called Vojta's Method, where certain points are held on the body, which is then moved into positions that are unpleasant, and so one must produce a certain counter-pressure. This activates certain regions in the body which it would otherwise be impossible to activate. The connection is not only in the muscles – it is also neurological, and Mrs. Blumová did something similar: during her teaching, she would hold certain points on the neck in order to activate the breath, the inhalation, and so on in a particular way. If the teacher has excellent control of this method and the student understands it, fantastic results can be achieved. If it is not done quite right, in the worst case, it can harm you, transmit bad habits, or teach you nothing. But I suppose this is the case with every method.

### *Do you teach this method yourself?*

I wouldn't dare – I realised I did not quite get into its depth and foundations. Moreover, it isn't quite pleasant for me to touch someone while they sing, and I know this is also true of many students. There are a number of singing methods which involve the teacher touching the student's diaphragm, but it's not for everyone. In Berlin, I took classes with singer Maria Corelli. Nothing of the sort took place there, the teaching was classical, Italian, but Mrs Blumová's method helped me in situations that brought me to my wit's end. Much later, I met Mrs Pavla Zumrová here in the Czech Republic, who teaches following this method, continues developing it, and can also explain it. Thanks to her, I filled in a lot of gaps in my knowledge. So if someone comes to me and wants to follow this method, I'll do it, but I don't offer it to all my students automatically. I still feel a certain humbleness in the face of it.

### *I think that in your case, this won't be quite a cliché question: What are you planning for the future?*

I'm looking forward to new pieces which are being written right now – I can say no more, because they are in their early stages. And of course I'm also excited about the early music concerts, particularly the summer operas in the Baroque theatre in Český Krumlov, and then interwar-themed recitals, concerts with the Brno Contemporary Orchestra at home and abroad – it's so much beautiful music!

*Soprano Irena Troupová first gained notoriety in the field of historically informed performance of early music. Beginning in the 1990s, when she lived in Berlin, she has performed on stages around Europe, collaborating with Thomas Hengelbrock, Howard Arman, Joshua Rifkin, the Orpheon ensemble, and in the Czech Republic with Jaroslav Tůma, Barbara Maria Willi, Petra Matějová, Monika Knoblochová, and groups such as Ensemble Tourbillon, Musica Florea, and others. She gradually expanded her musical range to include romantic and, especially, contemporary works (both song and opera). Vocal works by 19th-century German composers of the Czech lands and interwar composers have a special place in her repertoire. She has performed with the Czech Philharmonic and other Czech orchestras, as well as several ensembles for contemporary music (Berg Orchestra, Prague Modern, Konvergence, Brno Contemporary Orchestra) and composers including Marek Kopelent, Jiří Teml, and Jiří Kadeřábek. She participated in the internationally renowned recording of Bohuslav Martinů's opera *Le jour de bonté* for the Arco Diva label, where she also published the complete songs of Viktor Ullmann (*Schwer ist's, das Schöne zu lassen*). Last year, she recorded a newly discovered song by W. A. Mozart for Czech Radio. In addition to her concert and stage career, she also teaches at JAMU in Brno and at international courses.*