

EXTRACTING SOUND FROM SILENCE

AN INTERVIEW WITH COMPOSER SLAVOMÍR HOŘÍNKA

You can hear his music performed by the Czech Philharmonic in Prague's Rudolfinum, but also in the church in Ludgeřovice near Ostrava in the far east of the Czech Republic, where the Prague Philharmonic Children's Choir will sing his psalm settings. He spends most of the year teaching young composers at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, but he also spent several weeks lecturing in Jerusalem whilst also leading workshops in refugee camps. He is among the favourite composers of the progressive contemporary music ensemble, Berg Orchestra, but he also collaborates with early music ensembles such as Capella Mariana or the Tiburtina Ensemble. As part of a university grant, he is participating in a research project exploring sound in space, but he also finds time to lead composition workshops for children. Welcome to the exceptionally multi-faceted world of composer Slavomír Hořínka, whose music you will find on the CD attached to this edition of our magazine.

I know you as someone very open to everything new, so I was struck by a statement I found in some older interviews – ten years ago, you spoke of the edge of bearable music. Is your position different now?

Well, I certainly wouldn't say that today. What might have changed is that all the more, I see music as something omnipresent. As if the entire universe were one infinite composition and I – or someone else, though I can't speak for others – simply listen to it differently. This position is liberating for me – to a certain extent.

Liberating how? You mean you're not responsible for what you write?

No, I am responsible for the perspective I bring. But everything is possible. I just need to look at it with my own ears. I started working with things that weren't





PHOTO: KAREL ŠUSTER

quite *mine*, but they were very important for me. First came Gregorian chant, because it was a huge experience for me to sing it. And through that, I began thinking about its potential.

Is chant tied to liturgy for you, or is it simply musical material?

I definitely wouldn't have gotten to it if there weren't a connection to liturgy. And of course, all manner of things are sung and played during liturgy. But chant was something that struck me; touched me somehow

And how do you work with it? Do you simply quote it?

It varies. You can just take it – you know I've done it on a number of occasions, it's not something I'd consider wrong, but it's also probably not what I most enjoy about this kind of work. I enjoy finding an experience, something that impresses you; enthral you, and then you search for something describable that could draw you to it. And then you can reflect these describable things – consciously or unconsciously – in your own composing.

Do you expect the audience to realise you've used Gregorian chant, and do you therefore count on the associations this will bring?

Not necessarily. In principle, working with chant is the same thing for me as working with sound analysis or ethnic music. It's a source; something I relate to. And the chain of decisions which accompanies the creative process is sometimes very long – at the end might lie something which seems to have no relation to the beginning at all. But it gives me a certain security, a pillar – that I am internally relating everything to something else. It's not necessary that the source is detectable in my music. When I was writing for children's choir with the motivation of bringing Gregorian chant closer to the practice of children's choirs, I used both Latin texts and complete chant melodies which I placed in new contexts. I find it very exciting when I start hearing chant melodies or chant intonations in something that has nothing to do with chant – something that might be sonically much more complex. I simply find it entertaining. In *A Pocket Guide to Bird Flight*, for instance, all the chant melodies are derived from a recording of the flight of a hummingbird.

You are often spoken of as a composer of spiritual music. How do you feel about this label?

Well, first, we have to say what spiritual music is. I don't label music spiritual or secular. It's up to me whether I consider something music or not, and if it does something to me, touches me, transforms me, then I consider it spiritual. Of course, we can talk about liturgical music as a category that has its own requirements; rules; determinations, but I'd say that's something else. Sometimes I do that too, but it's like writing incidental music. You consciously insert yourself into a particular context which has a specific use. If you want to do it, that's absolutely fine. But music as such – all real music – has to be called spiritual, or it is not the music at all.

To what extent do you take into account the fact that you are writing a piece that will be performed somewhere and someone will listen to it?

I write music because I want to learn. I learn about the world, I think about something that is important to me at that point. For me, it's easiest to do this through creation. And of course I invite others to participate in it afterwards, but I'd say this isn't the primary motivation. On the other hand, I think it would be dishonest to say I'm not glad when someone listens to a piece of mine and likes it, or when they hear in it something I did not even think you could hear, because music is purely abstract and yet it strikes us in the most intimate ways. So when this happens, it's kind of like a vitamin injection. Lately, I've been thinking a lot more about the space a piece will be played in, and I often consider a specific place an active participant in the performance. For me, the most significant feature of spiritual music is that it can shift our perception in a number of directions.

But any good music does that – it doesn't have to be called spiritual at all.

Precisely! That's why when a piece strikes me, when I like something about it, I try to notice how I perceive it. It's the same with the moments in which I have a spatial listening experience that enraptures me. That's what inspires me, what

brings me joy. When I feel like I've uncovered some mechanism, I want to try it myself. Simply repeating it, however, would not be enough. To make a study of this kind would be nice, and when I'm writing a piece, I'll often do that, but simple replication is not enough for me. In *Trust in Heart*, for instance, I start off from my own experience of a transformation in my perception of a complex sound of bells, but the piece uncovers the mechanism as if in reverse. I, in time and in a particular space, began perceiving sound differently. The performer of my piece begins to experience and measure time differently once he begins timing sections following his own breath.

You often use non-European instruments. These might be tied to other religions, or used in particular roles, but the Latin titles of your pieces suggest a connection to Christianity. Do you not feel a contradiction?

But this has been essential to Christianity from its inception; to adopt and transform elements that were pagan in their original context, or which come from other religions! All of St Paul's theology is essentially pagan discourse transferred into a Christian context. So I'm really not bothered. Of course, I think about it; it's not that I don't care, but it certainly doesn't seem like an obstacle.

What I'm getting at is that when I hear a particular instrumental colour, certain shapes and movements also come to mind. If these are ethnic instruments, I also imagine the people playing them in their environment, which can be quite distracting if I don't understand the connection with other extraneous elements. Are you simply after the colour?

I'm definitely also interested in the sounds' original contexts. It's not that I use these colours in an arbitrary way - I define myself in relation to these questions. But let me give you an example. I have a work in progress now; I call it the Jerusalem project. I made recordings in several churches in Jerusalem over Easter. The concept is that whatever passes through the church walls and sounds within the church's acoustics is sacred sound. I don't want to categorically claim anything, it's more of a personal motivation - I want to find out what this will lead to. In my acousmatic piece, *Prayer Inside*, there is a section in which a Romanesque church in the Old City of Jerusalem resonates with the evening prayer of all the Muslims living in its vicinity. This prayer is extracted from a nearly inaudible recording, creating a beautiful harmony. For me, this is a Christian sacred sound - all the Muslims in the area praying. This is my idea of Christianity's potential and capacity to remould and transform.

What brought you to this concept?

This idea has had quite a long incubation period. I wrote two pieces specifically for the Church of St Salvator by Charles' Bridge. The first, *Magnificat*, included a relatively complex choreography for the movement of the performers, and while I was writing the piece, I'd go there to think it through. I walked through the musicians' paths, imagined the music, and tried to imagine how it would sound down there, but also up here; how the ensemble would coordinate. At the very beginning, I needed to find out if the players would have time to move. But the more time I spent there, the more I realised that the church is located in an incredibly busy place.

Trams, cars, tourists...

All of that. It's only when you sit down there to be in "silence" for an hour that you start listening to what's around you. And I realised that the entire surrounding world would necessarily enter into my piece and that there was no point in trying to make it disappear. And if you take part in liturgy at a church like that, are these sounds distractions, or are they part of the liturgy? Ultimately, I opted for the latter option. And a year later, I was in Jerusalem for some lectures and workshops, and when I entered various churches – for mass, or simply to sit and listen – I realised how similar it was to St Salvator. The very first idea was to record the sound in these churches at night during Easter, and then materialise it somehow – through instrumental stylisation – in St Salvator in Prague.

To relocate the sound?

Yes. But not so that the listener finds themselves transported to Jerusalem for a certain time. Again, there are several filters through which the original material passes, and the result is something that sounds different at first listening – but I know that it is integrally related to the beginning. I see a parallel to the mystery of the Eucharist. You're in a specific church at a specific time, but you're also in Jerusalem in the year 33.

If we take the other perspective: you try to understand perception – so to what extent are you willing to manipulate the listener?

Well, almost everyone does that, don't they?

Not everyone admits it. And they really don't like hearing it.

That's one of the things I consider when I write. Oftentimes, my aim will be to achieve a particular moment, and this moment is preceded by a strategy which I choose to achieve this moment. We're not in the field of like-dislike, but in wanting to achieve a particular effect. But on the other hand, when I work with students, I often emphasise – and they're always surprised – that it's good when a piece contains something of which the outcome is unknown.

A few moments ago, you admitted to very internal, emotional motivations, and yet you work very rationally, or if not rationally, at least consciously – and you even observe yourself doing it.

But these are communicating vessels! I feel that in certain respects, I work very intuitively, but in order to achieve what I want to achieve, it's necessary that I also think through larger units. And when I need to create strategies for longer time scales – in order to attain certain effects – I simply cannot avoid planning. And what's more, I enjoy it. It's not some necessity, something you can't do without – like I said, I think the two are connected.

Are you influenced by the fact that you teach? You have to put things into words, you go through your students' pieces with them...

I wouldn't say so. Sometimes people ask you – especially non-experts – about inspiration. And you don't know what to say. But what these questions helped me realise was that pieces generally occur to me as a whole. That I don't develop some detail – rather, I have a feeling about a whole and then I look for ways to express it, to phase it out in time.

POZADÍ 20.05: akordy (77'12) - muzom'star

A sketch of "A Pocket Guide to Bird Flight"

I sense two significant modes in your work: on the one hand courage, joy, and on the other calm, reconciliation. Are these opposing poles?

I haven't thought in terms of these categories. Rather - both in music and in life - I tend to connect things. It's not about categories like traditional, new, innovative, or stereotypical, but if I do think of (what a nasty term) theoretical concepts in music, I often think of music of all kinds, without focusing on a stylistic period or cultural environment. I don't listen to music to relax, for example - I prefer silence or going to the forest alone, but actively, I listen quite a lot.

And do you have any favourite composers?

It really varies a lot. What I enjoy most is listening to new things. When I'm writing texts, for example, or something else I have to do and don't particularly enjoy, then I spend my breaks browsing SoundCloud, letting myself be led on by the automated chain. I might be taken by some author I've never heard of, I'll have a look at what he "liked", and I'll get to something I would never otherwise have found. Or we had this period with Hanuš Bartoň when we spent nights doing school paperwork. We'd send each other links to all sorts of stuff – Zelenka, Baroque and Renaissance music, whatever we found. Sometimes I discover that music which never appealed to me now does. I used to hate Smetana, for example, and now I like him.

Why is that?

I was always annoyed by these pieces because of the coating one encounters from first grade onwards. What's more, I went to a school with "extended musical education", so we really had mighty doses right from the start.

What coating?

People telling you how things should be – how you should listen to which piece, what it means – yuck!

Meaning that you can't like compulsory reading and recommended pieces?

Precisely. But now, discussing string quartets in instrumentation class with my students, I discovered that Smetana's 2nd string quartet is music that's incredibly mentally fresh; quite constructivist.

And do you think that if you didn't have experiences with such diverse music that you'd be capable of getting rid of the coating and hearing the old differently now?

Probably not.

You should say that to performers who are scared of contemporary music...

But I feel that the problem isn't really that classically trained musicians don't play contemporary music, but that they don't play much early music, particularly pre-Baroque. I'm missing a wider scope. It reminds me of a doctor who only operates on eyes. He is a fantastic expert in just that one thing.

Seeing how you combine things and that you want to create and communicate a deep experience, I'll ask: how are you with performers?

Really well.

Because you choose them yourself?

It's more that I'm lucky, I guess. To an extent, it's given by the fact that my peers – those who now play my pieces – are people with whom I studied or performed. For a long time, I was an active performer myself. I spent years playing violin in the Berg Orchestra and in other ensembles. At one point, I made extra money by helping out in Pardubice, Hradec Králové, the National Theatre, anywhere, so the musicians know me and they're willing to give my pieces time.

That means it's not quite luck - you have people around you who want to play your piece as best they can. And when someone you don't know plays them, are you usually happy with how they understand them?

Not always, of course. A few times I even cancelled a performance completely. I used to think I'd never do that.

What was the problem?

In my experience, if I work with performers systematically, or if I feel that there's a process, an effort, then I'm willing to be satisfied even with a less-than-ideal performance. In fact, I don't mind these shortcomings. But I feel much worse when something is done at the last moment, half the performers are absent at the dress rehearsal, or indeed the dress rehearsal is their first rehearsal. They might execute it well technically at the concert, but I get no joy from it. This perspective is much more important to me. It happened that a performer wrote to me - everything is great, fine, all good. And then a day before the concert, I discovered they barely knew half the piece. These are situations in which I am inclined to a certain severity, I'd say. In teaching, I see it the same way. When you see a student who puts a lot of effort into their work and the result is perhaps not that excellent, it's different from someone who puts in nothing, simply sends you the finished product, and isn't interested in working on it together. It's about understanding, about sharing.

Do you feel like you manage to put everything you need in the music?

I try to put as much in the music as possible. On the other hand, as a performer myself, I know that it's better *not* to write some things in; that it can be counterproductive. I suppose one's own player psychology plays a part.

You use a variety of colours - not only tones, but also noises, various kinds of sound. But for me, these aren't just sounds, they're also tactile and situational perceptions. What does colour mean to you?

In simplified terms, one could say colour is the carrier of some emotion.

You could also say it's a sound spectrum.

But that's in terms of physics!

Exactly, both are possible.

I think that once again, the two are connected. I want to achieve something, so I found out how it's done physically and I try to achieve a similar synthesis using different means. If you're referring to the pinecones in *Čtvrtek a Odpuštění Pánbůh* (*Thursday and May the Lord Forgive You*), there I found it compositionally interesting to resynthesise the sound of fire. To resynthesise it through the use of objects that are connected to Christmas in my mind: pinecones, wrapping paper, hay, walnuts. I spent hours recording various fires and analysing them. It's similar to sitting at the piano and improvising - you have a sound and you just play around with it.

Why not use the recorded sound directly? Why do you transfer it to acoustic means which seem to come from a fairy-tale? For me at least, this brings a lot of added value.

In this piece specifically?

Yes, but I think you usually opt for live interpretation, don't you? When you start from a spectral analysis, do you simply stay with synthesis and create an electroacoustic track?

Not really. I work with soundscapes, and perhaps over time, I'll get to this. But it's not really a focus right now. There are sound recordings in *Songs of Immigrants*, but they function as aural documents. They're essentially unchanged, and all of the transformation of material takes place in the string quartet.

Is it important to you that the audience sees the musicians creating the individual sounds?

It's important to me to work with a live medium. So much so that it outweighs the negative aspects and imperfections that can be created. I'm really excited by setting a challenge, by overcoming something. Why should I play back the recorded sound of a fire – that's nowhere near as fun as reproducing it with pinecones and paper. It's another moulding, stylisation – whatever the filter is. Some things pass through me as a filter, or through something else, it can be the instrumentation or the walls of the church, and it is this moment of transformation that I find most interesting. Perhaps this is also because I still feel more like a student in electroacoustic music. Maybe it'll change over time.

Your pieces tend to remain at lower dynamic levels. You reduce the means at your disposal. But this music also has its pitfalls: it's sensitive to where it's played, and what the audience is like – whether they cough, disturb the performance...

That's certainly true. In Orthodox spirituality, there is a movement called hesychasm – the spirituality of silence. The way I think about this, it doesn't necessarily mean that everything has to be quiet. It's something that leads you towards silence. So even in my pieces, there are loud moments, but they usually lead to a quieting down.

For me as a listener, concert performances of such pieces are very demanding. If the music draws me in, these are usually beautiful experiences, but this might not happen because the music is too fragile and I'm nervous that something might destroy it.

I'm not so bothered by that. I have more of a problem with recordings. When a piece like that is recorded, it has such a huge dynamic range that the quiet things are completely inaudible. Such a recording has to be compressed, but you can't do it mechanically – mixing it is essentially compositional work. I stylise it so that it comes to my ears in a similar way to the live performance. So it's not a recording, it's a new artistic artefact.

So you don't like recording live performances?

No, that's not what I'm saying. I just realise that in performance, it's extremely crucial whether you see the source of a sound or not.

That's why I was asking about the player's movement. As soon as I see too objects coming closer to each other, I'm primed to hear something, and if I see the objects, I can calibrate myself to a particular kind of sound. And if I saw nothing, I might not even have noticed that there was a sound.

That's exactly how I feel about recordings – that something isn't there and you have to find it again. Like when you record silence in a church and then you have to extract what's inside it.