

Miroslav Pudlák belongs to the generation of composers who came onto the scene just as the old social orders were beginning to fall apart. In the 1980s, he was one of the figures behind the creation of an ensemble, Agon, which continuously applied itself to performances of contemporary music. In the 1990s, Pudlák's path led from Agon to Mondschein Ensemble, later renamed MoEns, where he is still active as a conductor.

COMPONERE = PUTTING TOGETHER

Miroslav Pudlák on his new CD and the transformations of the musical scene

During his studies, Pudlák's music began with experiments with elements of American minimalism and their transfer into a highly personal form. While *Otisky (Imprints, 1985)* might be influenced by the methods of American minimalism, it aims for dreamy and colourful planes, not mechanical repetition. From the '90s onwards, his compositions have brought together a contemporary sound and compositional techniques with material referring to musical history, wherein Pudlák's view of the music of the past and its clichés is a mix of admiration and light irony.

In the new millennium, he ventured onto the field of musical theatre twice, once in a chamber form with the opera *Ve stínu klobásy (In the Shadow of the Sausage)*, and once in a larger format with *Sasíci v Čechách (Saxons in Bohemia)*. He was part of Why Not Patterns, an ensemble combining composition with improvisation and the energy of jazz. Pudlák has also taught at several institutions in Czechia and published countless articles. For many years, he was the director of the Czech Music Information Centre, this magazine's publisher.



PHOTO: KAREL ŠUSTER 2x

Let's start with a recapitulation, seeing as we're surrounded by "30 years since the Velvet Revolution". Starting in the 1990s, you've operated on the Czech music scene in several roles: composer, co-founder of several ensembles and festivals, pedagogue, director of the Czech Music Information Centre, radio editor, and director of contemporary music programming at the Prague Spring Festival. Perhaps that entitles you to some assessments and generalisations: how has the local contemporary music scene changed in thirty years?

Just yesterday, I was at a concert of works by Iannis Xenakis [5th November 2019, Prague]. It was sold out and hugely successful. I realised that even twenty years ago, a concert like that would go by without notice and with only a few audience members in attendance. That says something about the transformation of the audience. As for performers, there are now more contemporary music specialists on a professional level. These thirty years were spent dealing with the previous decades of cultural isolation. And I always tried to contribute to this with my activities.

I'd say that today, there isn't an essential difference between western and eastern Europe in terms of perception of contemporary music. The difference, however, is in the institutional environment and funding – public institutions give us much less support than in the West. In this, we are better prepared for the future developments that will happen around the world. In some senses, you could say we're up ahead.

In the '90s, it seemed that “everything would work out”, that demanding art would always find its support. With the new millennium came disillusionment – the support of the state dwindled and private donors were still nowhere to be seen. Have you noticed any reasons for optimism in the last few years?

We'll never have a donor situation similar to that in, say, the US. Here, it is the state which traditionally has the role of supporting the arts, and for some time at least, it must keep it. Recently, I feel like the people in responsible positions are beginning to understand this.

But the difficult work of a composer can take many shapes and I think it can also live on the independent club scene where funding doesn't play such a big role. Now, this environment is more populated by improvised music, but that can change, giving more space to composition. So my optimism is more connected with an idea of some kind of transformation of musical life, rather than maintaining the old model of supporting music. Those expensive projects with well-paid compositional commissions are certainly the source of interesting and valuable works, but in the future, this sphere will not lead to the creation of anything essentially innovative. This because the institutions producing these scenarios are based on the old model, which only works due to inertia, cut off from social reality.

And how has your music changed during that time?

It's always changing. I'm not a composer who cultivates some personal style, I want to try all kinds of things. But ultimately, in hindsight, the pieces are similar in some ways. Zygmunt Krauze once said that a composer doesn't do what he wants – he does what he can. The way I understand this is that you can learn to use various styles and techniques, but only in some of these do you experience that feeling of certainty, of making the right decision when choosing one of the possible solutions. That's why you learn to hold on to the world you have mastered, which means that the stylistic range is not that broad

In an interview with Tereza Havelková in HIS Voice fifteen years ago, you said that you weren't trying to get famous through music, only to “entertain yourself a little”. Is personal entertainment still the central motif of your compositional work?

That was a witticism with which I rationalised my outsider position on the Czech music scene. However, it's true that a lack of ambition in one's approach to art is liberating, to an extent. When I write something, it's always the realisation of a dream – a dream which might spend several years with me before it matures. I don't like pulling ideas out of thin air just to make a deadline. The disadvantage is being cut off from top-class performance. This is then reflected back into the work. My music was always naivistic (perhaps naive), based on simple ideas and their counterpositions. I like concise and straightforward utterances. Whenever I embark on working out complex and – in my opinion – superfluous details, I feel awkward.

(Like now, as I needlessly stretch out the answer to your question.) But this naive music is not a challenge for the most virtuosic ensembles, so they don't seek it out. This means it doesn't make it to the festivals where contemporary music is played today.

Do you have an established working method from the first idea to the finished score? Or do you find a new method for each piece?

First, I always try to write as if improvising – from the beginning to the end. As if I were expecting some angel to send down inspiration and dictate the piece to me. But that will never happen. So in the second phase, I move on to the usual method: I work out dozens of material studies and sketches. I throw most of these out. I turn what I found interesting into some form or shape. Then I cut the fragments I want to use out of the manuscript paper. I spread them out on the floor in front of me, changing the order, wondering what can and can't follow what else, gradually building a form. And I always realise again and again why it's always been called *componere* – to put together. Composed music doesn't evolve like a continuous thread – it is composed of ideas which are hung on the thread like beads on a necklace.

In contemporary music, it's almost a cliché that the central weight rests in chamber ensembles which allow for better collaborations between composers and performers. In practice, this is of course also – perhaps predominantly – an economic question. If financial conditions were not an issue, would you prefer working on orchestral music, or is work with smaller instrumentations more interesting for you?

The orchestra is a fascinating instrument and it's every composer's desire to try it out. In practice, however, they discover that they're entering an environment conserved within a 19th century model in which they are entirely unwelcome. There are support programmes, calls, commissions, and grants, all aiming to overcome this conflict. They lead to excellent compositions, but you can still feel the collision of two disparate worlds. With specialised chamber ensembles like MoEns, on the other hand, or with chamber orchestras like Berg, who approach this work with enthusiasm, I feel positive energy, a friendly approach, a sense of captivation – that's more valuable to me than conquering orchestral sounds and playing at today's Mahler.

From time to time, your pieces include non-musical sounds. Sometimes these are mediated through electronics, a few years ago, you used copies of intonarumori, the noise instruments of the Italian futurists. The Opening Performance Orchestra played these replicas in your Intonarumori Concerto. What interests you about noises as a composer?

The Bruitists inaugurated a new era of music working with “non-musical” sounds, which soon migrated into the field of electronics, and continue through a “refinement” of the material of electroacoustic music. However, I always found it more interesting to explore what you can create directly on stage through the use of mechanical toys, rather than in the studio or on a computer. There is a rawness, unpredictability, and a certain musical “dirt” which makes it all the more human. So when I found out there was an ensemble in Prague playing the *intonarumori*, I had one of those dreams which I had to realise. My piece for *intonarumori* and orchestra is a combination of graphic scores for three players on these instruments with sheet music written out in detail for the orchestra. The result is tension between noise and harmony, between randomness and determination.

The Futurists built intonarumori to imitate the noise of the modern world. Today, these instruments have a status similar to that of historical objects – almost like Baroque violins in historically informed performance. Did you use them as “representatives of today’s noisy world” in the spirit of the Futurists, or simply as autonomous musical instruments?

For me, they’re a nostalgic reminder of a period of revolutionary artistic radicalism. That time is long gone, but it emanates a kind of ethos which still feeds our artistic energy today. And they’re also charming sound sources – sources of real, scruffy, unpredictable sound. I let them try and “sing” beautiful melodies against the orchestra’s harmonies. They stand out like an ugly duckling among swans, eliciting emotion through their dignified clumsiness.

You have two operas to your name. One of chamber proportions, the other rather grand. But it’s been a long time. Is musical theatre still attractive to you? Or any other confluence of music and other arts?

I used to compose quite a lot of music for theatre, but I gradually dropped out of that practice. If I’m interested? Definitely – I’m interested in everything. But my introverted character isn’t a good fit with the collective creative process demanded by these scenic forms.

A music of your CD is coming out. Is this format of presenting music today something more than a collection of pieces that could otherwise be posted somewhere online? Is there a thread running through the album from Encore to the Intonarumori Concerto?

Mostly older pieces from the previous decade were selected for the CD (with one exception), because Czech Radio has recordings of these pieces. People say they sound traditional (though I don’t see it that way) because I work with harmony. This is because I always wanted to find some new harmonic system. Not to dismiss harmony as such, but to give it its own rules. I tried creating algorithms for harmonic processes and writing chord progressions based on these. This seems more interesting to me than what most composers do today, remaining satisfied with achieving a particular type of sound.

What do the pieces have in common? A kind of irony, perhaps. When I read the English translations of the programme notes with which I furnished the pieces on the CD, I realised that their irony is lost in translation. Perhaps it’s the same with the interpretation of music: the composer intends something as a musical joke, but it reaches the listener as a lyrical piece. Well, at least he likes it.

What kind of a listener are you? What paths does new music take to get to you?

I know composers usually don’t listen to their colleagues’ music – except for concerts where their own pieces are played. I’m an exception to this rule. I’m interested in everything, first as information and then as repeated experience. And I’m continually discovering that it’s better to listen to contemporary music live than in recording, so I’m an avid promoter of attending concerts.

You're a pedagogue at the department of musicology. What are the possible imports of this field today?

Musicology, just like all fields in the humanities, are experiencing a huge rise in importance, specifically in these times. The world is becoming more technologically complex, people can no longer understand it. Labour will soon be shifted to robots and people will increasingly become involved in social issues, which means they will turn to the social sciences and the arts. I thus have no fear for the future of any one of my favourite fields.



Miroslav Pudlák (*1961) studied composition at the Prague Conservatory and musicology at Charles University in Prague and at the Université de Paris. As a composition student, he took parts in compositional courses in Darmstadt, Kazimierz, and Amsterdam. In 1985, he established Agon, an ensemble for contemporary music in which he served as artistic director until 1990. Since 1995, he is the artistic director and conductor of the ensemble MoEns. He was director of the Czech Music Information Centre from 1996 to 2015. He is the director of the Contempuls contemporary music festival. He is a lecturer in musical theory at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University, the Faculty of Music at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, and at New York University Prague. He prepares programmes about contemporary music for Czech Radio.