

ADRIÁN DEMOČ

“I WRITE MUSIC
BECAUSE I ENJOY DISCOVERING IT
FOR MYSELF AGAIN AND AGAIN”



Composer Adrián Demoč is a subtle force on the field of experimental composed music in Central Europe. This native of Slovakia studied at the Janáček Academy of Performing Arts in Brno, first with František Emmert and later with Martin Smolka. During his time in Brno, he travelled to Romania and Lithuania as an exchange student, and he has now settled in a small town in Spain. In the Czech Republic, we have heard his music principally at the Ostrava Days festival, which he visited several times as a resident, but also at the MusicOlomouc festival (which commissioned his piece *A Luca Marenzio*) and as part of the Czech Philharmonic's composition competition. *A Luca Marenzio* is also one of the pieces featured on his profile album *Žiadba*, published at the end of 2019 by the Yorkshire-based label Another Timbre. Given the distance between us, it was only over e-mail that we sat down to discuss composing, inspiration, and emotion.

Did you grow up in a musical family?

My parents weren't that musical, but they tried to make sure all three of their children received an elementary musical education. We had a piano at home; my sister was quite a good pianist.

When did you develop a greater interest in music? And what music was it?

My interest in music began early on. I attended piano lessons from a tender age, but my real “musical life” took place at home thanks to my older brother, who was a great fan of metal. I absorbed his enthusiasm. I remember posting lists of our cassettes and CDs;

travelling to buy records. In elementary school, I often bothered our English teacher, trying to get her to help me translate the letters I was writing to my favourite bands (most of them were in Norway). I remember our attempts to create our own black metal band - imitating our models, I tried to write the texts in such a way that they would evoke the “Slavic spirit”. I therefore began listening to Slovak folk music with new ears. And all the while, my sister was practicing the piano at home. In addition to metal and recordings by fujara players (*the fujara is a traditional Slovak overblown flute traditionally played by shepherds - editor's note*), the playlist at home included Debussy, Brahms, Rachmaninoff, and at night, jazz on the second channel of Slovak television.

Was the choice of studying at JAMU in Brno an obvious one? Or were you hesitant? Have you ever doubted this choice (or the decision to become a composer)?

I got to Brno by accident. My girlfriend at the time had an uncle there and we saw the entrance exams as an opportunity to go on an adventure. My original intention was to study in Banská Bystrica, a city near my home town in Slovakia. But when I got a letter stating I had been accepted, I was uncertain. I didn't really want to leave the land of my childhood, but I ended up choosing Brno for "cultural reasons" and I harbour no regrets. I hold in high regard the friendships I made there, both with teachers and students.

I don't spend much time thinking about a composer's career and hardships - these terms are too abstract for me. After all, I've never been a freelance composer who lives from commissions or scholarships.

I have, on occasion, doubted "my path", particularly when I moved to Spain, where I had no musical or artistic connections. At the time, I often thought of moving to a larger cultural centre. Performances of my music virtually ceased for a few years, and yet I continued writing it. This experience was definitely crucial for me. I write music because I enjoy discovering it for myself again and again. I don't spend much time on some general doubts. It's more about compositional doubts.

For several years now, your music has been growing quieter and calmer. Did quietude lead you to quiet music or the other way round?

It's hard to say. Even as a student, I felt the need to concentrate my writing - both in terms of the resultant sound (calmer, quieter, less tense), but also in terms of composition (greater focus on detail and an overall clarity of form).

Perhaps in recent years, I have gotten a little closer to the desired concentration and patience. However, I also search for the necessary immersion and patience in compositions whose resultant sound is considerably more aggressive, like in *Struny: steny, zhluky, sny* (*Strings: Walls, Clusters, Dreams*) for string orchestra (2018). However, it's true that quiet music prevails. And with it, perhaps, an internal silencing.



PHOTO: FERNANDO GIMENO, JULIÁN VEVERICA (opposite)

However, I have no clue where my next steps will lead me.

I'm interested to know what your compositional practice is like. How long do you spend on pre-compositional planning? Do you write at the piano? Go on walks? Sit in silence? What does immersion in the material mean to you?

It depends - sometimes I write quickly, other times it's a slow and laborious process. However, in recent years, I've relaxed a little in general. I write my pieces using a kind of "diary method" - I put things down on paper, play them back, fill in, erase.

p = 68

Handwritten musical score for the first system, featuring a treble clef, 5/8 time signature, and various chords and notes with dynamic markings like "pp".

Handwritten musical score for the second system, including a "simile" marking.

Handwritten musical score for the third system.

Handwritten musical score for the fourth system.

Handwritten musical score for the fifth system, featuring "quasi legato" and "pp cresc." markings.

Handwritten musical score for the sixth system.

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Žiadba in the original version for the "milanolo" (extract from the manuscript score)

Luca Francesconi divides composers into two main types based on their working method: “sculptors” chisel away at the stone (they remove material from a pre-prepared block), while “painters” begin by considering the empty canvas which they fill in and edit. If I were to put myself in one of these groups, I’d say I’ve been more of a painter in recent years.

Pre-compositional planning is so linked with composing itself that I am incapable of telling them apart. Rather, I can recognise the moment when I move from sketches to clean copy. And the immersion I mentioned happens when you are so in sync with the music you are working on, so tuned in that you really fell where and what you need to remove, shorten, add, change, and so on. You are in harmony with it. But of course, this is highly subjective. I usually write at an instrument. Playing the music back on a piano helps me get into the music; to inscribe it in my body in a more physical way than simply through abstract mental playback. I have to imagine the deviations from standard, equal-tempered tuning, though I sometimes play them on guitar or fujara.

More than pre-compositional planning, I remember certain breakthrough moments in the process of writing. When writing *Neha* (*Tenderness*, 2019), for instance, the key moment included removing entire passages because I felt the piece was “asking for” something else. *Strings: Walls, Clusters, Dreams* was originally quiet music, but I felt the piece needed a strong contrast. So the situation was exactly the opposite as in *Tenderness*. Decisions like these can sometimes be painful.

Last year, you participated in the Czech Philharmonic’s composition competition with Tenderness - you made it to the final round along with Jana Vöröšová and Matouš Hejl. We can probably agree that quiet music has a certain “performance practice”; a certain sensitivity, delicacy, a feeling for silence and stillness. How was your collaboration with the Czech Philharmonic and how happy are you with their interpretation?

I am satisfied with their interpretation. They gave a good performance despite the fact that they lack this practice. However, this practice is gained through experience, and now they’ve had their first. This music demands maximal concentration even though the score makes it look like there’s “nothing there” (which, in itself, is an uncommon situation for classical performers).

Overall, they were professional at the concert. The conductor didn’t have much faith in the piece - he probably didn’t know what he should chisel, perfect, and extend. He didn’t spend much time on it in rehearsals, but the concert went a lot better than I thought it would during rehearsals. It’s excellent and admirable that the Czech Philharmonic put this initiative together, taking a crucial step into the future. I hope similar projects will take off in Slovakia too.

How is the life of a two-metre Slovak composer in a small Spanish city?

It’s good. I am kept busy by everyday obligations (family, work, composing). I’m happy.

Do you not miss being in touch with a living cultural centre (if that’s how you saw Brno)?

I missed live contact with a musical and cultural centre at the beginning, after we moved here, when I began living a completely different life: family life. However, I was always a bit of a rover - I often escaped from Brno, either on exchange trips or to go home to Slovakia. I didn’t create roots strong enough in Brno that they would force me to stay there for good. However, I’m still regularly in touch with some friends and former teachers. These connections remain very important to me. Thanks to the internet, I am also in touch with artists from other cities and countries, so I can’t complain about insufficient impulses or communication.

Last year, the Yorkshire-based label Another Tímbre, which focuses on quiet contemporary music, put out your profile album, Žiadba. Were some of these pieces written specifically for the album?

Only a new version of the title-track, *Žiadba*, for standard violin. Originally, the piece is scored for the “milanolo”, a five-string instrument built for Milan Pala, a long-standing collaborator of mine.

And the other pieces?

The other pieces were commissions. As it happens, they were all premiered in the Czech Republic: *Kvarteto* and *Septett* (or rather the latter’s arrangement for standard instruments) in Ostrava, *Modré kvety* (*Blue Flowers*) at Forfest, *A Luca Marenzio* in Olomouc. Only *Žiadba* (in the original *milanolo* version) was premiered at the music biennial in Zagreb, Croatia. The original version of the *Septett* received its first performance in Germany.

How was working with Apartment House and their director, Anton Lukoszevics? I assume this combination was concocted by Simon Reynell, director of Another Timbre?

Yes, their participation in the making of this CD is Simon's work – a few years ago, he made an agreement with the ensemble, settling on a long-term partnership. Apartment House is currently the resident ensemble at the label. Even before we shook hands on the album, however, Apartment House performed *Modré kvety* at a concert in London. So in my case, it was a pleasant coincidence – Anton Lukoszevics already knew about my music and was interested in performing it.

Our time with the ensemble was fast and intense. Three pieces were recorded in a single day. Mira Benjamin recorded *Žiadba* for violin in my absence. With Simon Reynell, our collaboration was intense but much longer. We spent several months fine-tuning sonic details on the recording, discussing the order of the pieces, and so on.

*If you'll allow me a critical remark, it seems that Apartment House in general sometimes let the tuning go a little bit, which is clearly audible on your album. In *Kvarteto I*, for instance, the passage from 3:50 to 4:05 is quite out of tune – I'm assuming these aren't microtones?*

For most of its duration, the first part of *Kvarteto* is a strict canon at the unison, with the individual parts' entries being delayed by a sixteenth note. The instruments play arpeggios across very wide intervals. This part is already complex for the clarinet, and much more so for the cello. Although I ask the musicians for as much precision in tuning as possible (this part of *Kvarteto* is the only portion of the album not to use microtones explicitly), I also count on a certain out-of-tune quality which covers the purity of the melodic line with a cloth of a very particular colour. Technically, I support this by alternating the entries of more easy-to-tune instruments with those more sensitive to tuning deviations (piano first, violin second, clarinet third, cello last).

The piece has been performed by four ensembles so far. The Plural Ensemble from Madrid even took it on a small tour of Spain. The cellists' reaction has always been the same: rage and curses at first, but then, they take it as a challenge. Apartment House is planning to perform this piece again in London in April. I'm curious to hear what they'll do.

I am very happy with Anton's interpretation. The ensemble recorded the other chamber pieces (the second part of *Kvarteto*, *Modré kvety*, and *A Luca Marenzio*) with precision and without hesitation. It was clear that they understood the music and that they have the performance practice we were talking about under their belt. This is in no small measure down to Anton, whose tuning (and sound) in these more static sections is excellent.

A Luca Marenzio is a piece which naturally connects a logical compositional element with an emotional charge. Do you think about materials in these terms? Or do you not think about materials at all?

Can you not think about materials? Yes, of course, I also consider how the music sounds; what it radiates. This might sound exaggerated, but I try to invest myself into every sound as fully as possible. I can lead the music that is created in a particular direction, but I also try to respect it rather than struggling with it on the basis of some plans prepared in advance. I try not to let my "composition" (plans, ideas, resolutions) triumph over that which I think the music "asks for".

And your general approach to composing? What inspires you? Do you imagine the music in your head or do you start from a conceptual foundation?

I think each of my pieces has a certain amount of conceptual background. But I can only really get the piece moving once I have found the adequate sonic material; when the result satisfies me musically. Sometimes, though, it's the opposite – I have a few musical ideas that I can only get moving when I start getting a clearer idea of what should happen to them conceptually.

It is somewhere around here that inspiration is born, but I think I have nothing new or surprising to say on this topic. I'd just be repeating Stravinsky and others. But what I need in order to work is peace and an unchecked daily schedule. Especially after starting a piece or when I get "composer's block", I need to run off and be alone for a few days.

Do you miss playing live, improvising?

At the moment, not really. I still play for myself – when I sit down to compose or when I'm tired, occasionally as a bit of sonic therapy. However, I need more and more quiet – I've got more than enough sound around me.



Music Behind an Expanding Wall
(page 22 from the manuscript score)

How has your relationship with the emotional dimension of music changed? When you were younger, you liked black metal, Slovak folklore, and jazz – wild, unchained music. Later, you were given an LP by your art teacher at school, thanks to which you discovered the emotional charge contained in the music of Stravinsky, Lutosławski, and Górecki. Later still, Feldman and Pärt showed you the possibilities of a more peaceful mode of expression. What are your preferences now?

I try and stay informed on what's going on in "new music". And there is so much music I love – the list would be too long. It's been a long time since I experienced the positive shock of discovery – the last piece to really grip me was Cassandra Miller's *Duet for Cello and Orchestra*. I was also very glad to hear about the release of music by Zygmunt Krauze and Tomasz Sikorski on Bólt Records. I often return to these recordings. I sometimes listen to Bach (performed by Glenn Gould and Milan Paľa) or Haydn (Glenn Gould).

I am also a big fan of returning to one's favourite composers. I recently spent a few months listening to the oeuvre of György Ligeti. Or Stravinsky's *Petrushka* – that's holiday music for me. I regularly listen to music of the *ars subtilior* tradition performed by the ensembles Ferrara and Mala Punica. Recently, I've been listening with open ears to Japanese traditional music (koto), whose balanced and unexaggerated emotion has a strong effect on me.

Probably the last important composer I discovered was Jürg Frey. I only came to know his music a few years ago and it was a very strong impression. Not only due to its beauty, but also given its poetics, which are closely related to what I'd been aiming for in some of my pieces. So it was also an encouraging discovery – that I'm not walking this path alone, so to speak.

There is a striking similarity between your music and Jürg Frey's compositions, particularly on this newest album. Have you met? And do you feel some relation to the entire Wandelweiser composers' collective of which Frey is a member?

I think I can agree we have a similar aesthetic. But you yourself know older pieces of mine, like *Ozvena* (*Echo*, 2008), which I wrote years before I'd even heard of Frey. Even back then, I was working with simple, slow moving, bare triads. I had to return to these through an extended "cluster period".

As for Frey, I am most impressed by his pieces from the turn of the millennium – the second string quartet, for instance. Fascinating music – something like a composition for ghosts. Some fifteen years ago, I tried to write a similar piece for clarinets. I wanted to compose a chorale played on "tuned breath/noise", but it didn't work as I had imagined it would at all and I withdrew the piece after the first rehearsal. When I heard Frey's piece, I couldn't help but shake my head: he managed to whisper, to breathe this beauty out of string instruments – a genius idea!

We haven't met personally, though we communicate over e-mail and send each other pieces. I am also in touch with Antoine Beuger, co-founder of the Wandelweiser collective. However, I do not feel a particular connection to the entire group. I have a critical view of a lot of the production. In my opinion, some of the concepts or pieces seem a little unfinished, or they rely too much on the interpretive tradition we discussed earlier. The music of some

composers – like Manfred Werder and Mark Hännesson – is work I prefer reading (as poetry or as impulses to think and to listen to the world around oneself) over playing from recordings. But of course, this is the case with every aesthetic movement. That said, I observe the activities of Wandelweiser members much more closely than those of “Neue Musik” publishing houses.

Before we finish, I'd like to talk a little bit about poetry, which I know you read avidly. What does poetry bring to your life? And what does poetry in music mean to you?

Poetry brings many things: sometimes it is the pleasure of language, at other times of “method”, composition, arrangement, sometimes even things like the “tempo” which the poetry suggests – for instance, reading the excellent verse of Ján Ondruš, I often have a difficult-to-describe feeling of falling. I enjoy reading, but I can't say whether this has any impact on my music. I've tried several times (always unsuccessfully) to set words to music. And poetry in music? It's hard to verbalise.

Poetry doesn't just have to be an evocation of the divine Parnassus. I enjoy the “poetry” of Alvin Lucier or Peter Ablinger (though his “poetics” are quite distant from my own). I feel that these are joyous meetings of the scientific and the poetic – their concepts, often based on acoustic phenomena, encountered an idea which is poetry in and of itself. But I dare not try to encapsulate all this in a few sentences. I find the work of Paweł Szymański highly poetic musically, though I'm sure to some, his music will seem more like an evocation of the visual world of M. C. Escher.

I also find myself thinking of Martin Smolka. Incidentally, while I was still studying with František Emmert, Martin gave me several clearly defined tasks of a rather technical nature, but he also appended a condition: not to “avoid poetry”. I think he meant the same thing: a technical idea and solution needs the poetic spark; elegance. Just like chess or science. By the way – I didn't complete the tasks.

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Choir

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LUKÁŠ SOMMER
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