

SOMETHING WHICH SEEMS UNIMPORTANT PROVES TO BE QUITE INTERESTING IN TIME

THE S.E.M. ENSEMBLE AT 50

The year 2020 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the S.E.M. Ensemble, the oldest continuously operating ensemble for new music in the United States. It was established by the Czech-American flutist and composer Petr Kotík almost immediately upon his arrival to the US in 1969. As Kotík says, the global COVID-19 pandemic is a good time to look back, as it has become impossible to look forward. But in the case of the S.E.M. Ensemble, we would no doubt be looking back over an eventful fifty years in adventurous music making even if no such reason were forced upon us.

It is impossible to discuss the S.E.M. Ensemble without discussing in detail the life and work of Petr Kotík, its founder and director for over fifty years, who also composes for SEM, conducts, and performs on the flute.

Historically, composers were also performers, instrumentalists, vocalists, and conductors. From Vivaldi and Bach through Mozart and Haydn to Liszt and Chopin, composers were intimately involved in the entire process of making music. However, the 20th-century process of professionalisation initiated by the establishment of the European conservatoires in the 19th century led to a gradual division of the roles of performers and composers.

This process culminated after the Second World War, finding two differing institutional frameworks in the main geographic centres of contemporary music – Western Europe and the United States. In Europe, composers

were supported by commissions from public access radio stations, often also working in the electronic music studios operated by these stations. In America, where no comparable publicly-funded broadcasting existed, composers found their new home in academia, teaching composition and music theory in universities and colleges across the country.

John Cage once famously remarked that composing, performing, and listening to music were three entirely different activities that have nothing to do with each other. Petr Kotík, however, received training in flute playing as well as composition, and performance and composition have remained intricately connected in his artistic mentality over the last sixty years: “I look at myself first and foremost as a musician. As a musician, I compose music and I perform music. Both are equally important. I cannot imagine composing without performing, and I cannot imagine performing something other than what I am truly interested in doing – which is

my music, music by those I associate with, and music by composers who have some kind of significance, for me or for music.”

1959–1970:

Before America – Musica viva pragensis

The first of the two groups which Petr Kotík founded in Prague was Musica viva pragensis. This is how the composer described the establishment of the ensemble: “I started Musica viva pragensis while I was in my last year at the Prague Conservatory. During a break in our orchestral teaching, we went to the conservatory canteen to eat something. We were completely disgusted by what went on in the orchestra class. Šrámek was there –” Vladimír Šrámek was a composer and Kotík’s mentor at the time, “– and we said: why don’t we start an ensemble? Šrámek was excited and came up with the name Musica viva, and then we added pragensis. It was him who inspired me to compose. When we started the ensemble, I was a total beginner, so to suggest that we perform my music was out of question. But I was connected to Šrámek and also to Jan Rychlík, another important composer with whom I began studying. Rychlík was a close friend of my parents. In fact, it was my father who suggested that I start taking composition lessons with him. So, when I decided, together with my friends, to form an ensemble, Rychlík and Šrámek started to compose pieces for the first concert.”

Another key player in the early years of Musica viva pragensis was the composer Rudolf Komorous, who later emigrated to Canada just a year before Kotík’s move to America. Komorous settled in the west of Canada, taking up a position at the University of Victoria, where he fostered many generations of experimental Canadian composers. What is less well known, however, is that he was a bassoon virtuoso first. In 1957, he was Czechoslovakia’s representative at the Concours International d’Exécution Musicale in Geneva, and to everyone’s surprise, he won the competition.

Based on his Geneva Gold medal, he was invited to teach bassoon at the Beijing Conservatory, which he did from 1959 to 1961. Immediately after his return, he joined Kotík in planning their new ensemble – Komorous main interest was, after all, the newest and most adventurous music. His star status, however, made possible that MVP stopped using conservatory players – “we wouldn’t get anywhere that way,” Komorous told Kotík right at the start. “He brought the best players from the Czech Philharmonic and other leading Prague musicians.” Things started moving quite fast and soon, even Kotík’s flute professor from the conservatory, the first chair at the Czech

Philharmonic, František Čech, joined the group, conducting a performance of Cornelius Cardew’s *Autumn ’60* – “imagine that,” Kotík remembers.

Kotík also has some rather surprising things to say about Czechoslovakia in the 1960s: “People’s essential needs were more or less taken care of. Money wasn’t very important – it didn’t have much value and there wasn’t much you could buy with it anyway. I don’t remember ever worrying about how to pay these musicians, and these were the Prague’s leading players. There wasn’t all that much to do, everyone’s employment was guaranteed, so intelligent people welcomed the chance to do something interesting and entirely different from what they were used to.”

When you look up Musica viva pragensis, you will find the dates of the ensemble listed as 1961–1973. By then, Kotík had already been in the US for several years, and the concert programmes seem to suggest that he had left Musica viva pragensis while he studied in Vienna (1963–1966). When asked about his departure, Kotík shared the following story:

“My compositions never belonged anywhere. And the music, especially with a new piece, caused more confusion than any other reaction. This has never been easy – most musicians (along with everyone else) scratched their heads and had no idea what to make of it. When MVP performed my piece *Kontrapunkt II* in Vienna, in the autumn of 1963, no one liked it – *no one*. Komorous thought that I still have to work on it – mainly to cut it down. Then, we were invited to the Warsaw Autumn festival and the question was: which composition of mine should the ensemble perform there? The musicians did not want to perform *Kontrapunkt II*. When they learned that I was composing a new piece, everyone was relieved. But the piece, *Music for 3 in Memoriam Jan Rychlík*, was even longer than *Kontrapunkt II* and the performance in Warsaw caused a big scandal. About a third of the audience left the hall in protest. The official delegation of the Czechoslovak Composers Union led by the composer Ctirad Kohoutek stormed the backstage and assaulted the musicians as they came off the stage, screaming ‘What was this supposed to mean! How dare you!’ In Prague, the Composer’s Union didn’t leave it without repercussions. And of course, it was unthinkable for the musicians to stand up for the music, so I left the group. The composer Marek Kopelent was chosen to smooth things over and he then took over the ensemble.”

Kotík recalls that almost no one spoke to him for some time afterwards. There was another detail, he remembers: “The night before, Xenakis had a large



*The S.E.M. Ensemble in Buffalo in 1972
(Julius Eastman, Roberto Leneri,
Jan Williams, Petr Kotík)*

orchestra piece performed at the philharmonic hall. Part of the audience booed and whistled, another part applauded. Xenakis was a striking figure, athletic and elegant, impeccably dressed. He went to take a bow in front of the booing and whistling audience. And all the time, he had one hand in his pocket. This made a huge impression on me. So the next day, when I went to take a bow – of course, many people in the hall cheered and applauded – I stuck *both* of my hands in my pockets. And that really made a lot of people angry.”

Xenakis also influenced the young composer in other ways. Kotík sent a recording of his *Kontrapunkt II* (the piece no one in the ensemble liked) to Xenakis' address in Paris. And suddenly a letter back came from Paris. “I still have the Xenakis letter,” Kotík remembers, “he sort of congratulated me, wrote ‘you crossed the Rubicon’ and that I should keep him up to date with what I was doing. That was the first important encouragement – a very important moment for me.”

The QUaX Ensemble

Soon after *Musica viva pragensis* was taken away from him, Kotík left to study music at the University for Music and Performing Arts in Vienna. After concluding his studies in Austria and returning to Prague, Kotík immediately started a new group, the QUaX Ensemble. This was a very different type of ensemble, heavily influenced by the ideas of experimental music that Kotík had been pursuing for several years by then (as opposed to the Darmstadt-influenced avant-garde). His time in Vienna was important in this, as well as all the connections he was able to establish during the Warsaw Autumn festivals, which he attended every year from ‘61 to ‘64.

“Composers and musicians of my generation in Europe, meaning those who started in the late ‘50s and early ‘60s, they were all very attached to what had happened in Darmstadt from the early ‘50s onwards. Darmstadt represented this new wave of... everything – composition as well as music-making. Stockhausen, Boulez, Nono, Pousseur, etc. As I was performing this music more and more, something happened that started to turn us away from it. By the mid ‘60s, I was studying at the academy in Vienna and my closest friend there was Kurt Schwertsik. He would say ‘Ich hasse das’ [I hate it] – I wouldn’t be as harsh, I didn’t hate anything, but I was becoming more and more sceptical about this whole scene. And something else happened at that time: the arrival of John Cage. And I don’t mean as a personality – he certainly wasn’t a star at the time. It was John Cage’s ideas that made a huge impact on me, and on the scene in Prague around me at that time.”

QuAX began improvising and performing graphic scores or text-based pieces, including by composers such as Cage, Cornelius Cardew, and Frederic Rzewski. The line-up was no longer composed of top classical players from the leading orchestras. Instead, it included big-band leaders like Václav Zahradník and jazz musicians like Josef Vejvoda and Jan Hynčiča.

Darmstadt vs. Cage?

The turn from avant-garde to experimental was slow and gradual, coming from various sources, one of them rather wonderfully coincidental. Kotík reminisces: “In September 1960, Luigi Nono drove his Volkswagen Beetle from Venice to the Warsaw Autumn festival with his friend, the composer Giacomo Manzoni. Nono was always very interested

"At the start, in America, in 1970, the founding of the S.E.M. Ensemble was sort of a bridge between all the activities I did in Europe, going back to early 1960s. This is important to realise: I came to the U.S. from Prague, Czechoslovakia, which at the time was a tightly controlled society – things were either allowed or not; things were supported or they simply didn't happen. Gradually, during the '60s, this regime started to liberalise and open up, which in the case of Czechoslovakia evolved into a very open society in 1968. Open to such a degree that the leading power of that political block, the Soviet Union, could not tolerate it anymore and came in with its army to stop it. Fortunately for me and many others, the changes happened gradually. For some time, everyone pretended that things would continue as they were before. Why I say it's good for me is because I was able to leave Czechoslovakia more than a year after the Soviet invasion. It's important to realise is that I did not come over to USA from this restricted regime to 'finally' be able to do new and interesting things. In fact, the change for me from working in Prague and then in New York was practically seamless."

in visual art, so when they came to Prague, he visited some galleries and was disgusted by what he saw. In Warsaw, his Polish friends told him that if he wanted to see interesting art, he had to go artists' studios, not the galleries. They gave him a list of names and addresses. At the top of the list was the name of my father, the artist Jan Kotik. When he stopped in Prague on the way back, he rang the bell at my father's studio. It so happened that he was still there (it was late at night) and they met. My father called our home phone. I remember it like it was yesterday – I picked up the receiver and he

said: 'Guess who's here? Luigi Nono. Come over.' So I came over and he gave me the Darmstadter Beiträge – a Darmstadt publication that contained lecture transcripts. It must've been the 1958 edition, the first year that Stockhausen and Boulez couldn't make it. They recommended to the director, Wolfgang Steinecke, that he invite John Cage. This was the 'American year' at Darmstadt and it caused a lot of upheaval: Edgard Varése, Christian Wolff, David Tudor, and Cage were all there. And the publication included transcripts of lectures by Cage and others. When I first leafed through it, I was looking for texts

Thursday, April 16, 1970

DOMUS CENTER

Ensemble Audience in Retreat

By HERMAN TROTTER

An audience of 17, including wives and other relatives, remained out of an original 100 attendees, at the conclusion of Wednesday evening's performance of the newly-formed SEM Ensemble in Dorcus arts center, setting some sort of local record, though no guy from the back row threw his overshoes onstage, as he did at one of these things in January.

Members are percussionist William Furloro, flutist and director Petr Kotik, soprano Gwendolin Sims, bassist Miroslav Vitous and percussionist Jan Williams.

The major offering was to have been Cornelius Cardew's "Treatise," played simultaneously with John Cage's "Aria & Fontana Mix" and Mr. Kotik's "Music for 3." However, Mr. Vitous, necessary to the Kotik work, was unable to appear, so Cardew and Cage had to go it on their own.

* * *

"TREATISE," in its Wednesday version, was an interminable succession of episodes shifting gradually from strings to brasses to recorders, by turns noodling, sustained, or brutally distorted sounds. The pattern was continually punctuated by percussion, piano, amplified scrapings of various instruments and objects.

In the middle of all this, Cage's brief opus was introduced. Miss Sims' gorgeous voice was heard singing part-scat, Hebrew chant, spiritual and Schoenbergian intervals, with a taped mix of generated noises and snippets of radio programs in the background. When Cage expired, Cardew continued to the counterpoint of customers' footsteps, growing fainter.

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THE ENTIRE procedure consumed an hour and 50 minutes, enough time to perform the last three Beethoven String Quartets or Act I of "Die Gotterdammerung," the longest act in operatic history.

By contrast, the second half of the program was exactly two minutes long.



Many Many Women recording session, 1980

by Boulez and Stockhausen – my heroes. And there were some. But suddenly, out of the blue, the most interesting ideas were in the texts by Cage. And that was his emergence on my scene. *Silence* was published shortly afterwards... The combination of going away from Darmstadt-style music and the encounter with ideas coming from America – not just Cage, but this whole American way of looking at music – influenced me very much. And so when I came over to Buffalo, which was more or less still based in a Darmstadt-style avant-garde, I didn't feel very comfortable – not in terms of the environment but just because of the concert programming. I felt I should be doing something else. And this was the impetus to start the S.E.M. Ensemble."

We might be tempted to see Kotík's position in an ideological context, but this is not the case: he continued performing composers of the Darmstadt avant-garde periodically. His criteria for the music he chooses to program are simple: the music has to be authentic and there has to be a reason to perform it. In his own words: "Why would I do something that twenty other ensembles are already doing and doing well? If there were a lot of good performances of music by Cage on the same level as people perform Boulez or Nono, I would never play it. Why should I?"

The Move to America

Petr Kotík did not come to the United States as a political refugee. He was invited by the Center of the Creative and Performing Arts at the State University of New York at Buffalo. This institution was established by Lukas Foss and Allen Sapp with a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation and existed from 1964 until 1980. A document put out by the university informs us of the following:

"The creation of the Center of the Creative and Performing Arts was the result of fortuitous timing that brought together Allen Sapp [the chairman of the University's Department of music] and Lukas Foss [the chief conductor of the Buffalo Philharmonic], at a time when funding was available to support their plans. Allen Sapp (1922–1999) came to Buffalo in 1961 to chair the Music Department just as the University of Buffalo was about to become part of the State University of New York system. The completed merger in 1962 resulted in funding from New York State that had not been available when the University was still a private institution. (...) The Center survived until 1980. Approximately 120 musicians came to Buffalo as Creative Associates from 1964 until its close. They presented about 700 musical works on 124 Creative Associate recitals and



The Orchestra of the S.E.M Ensemble performing John Cage's Atlas Eclipticalis and Winter Music (David Tudor - piano), Carnegie Hall, 1992

more than 400 works on 173 Evenings for New Music concerts.”

Petr Kotík was invited to become one of the Creative Associates. Preparations had already begun in 1968, and the process took more than a year, because at the time, Kotík was drafted to serve in the Czechoslovak army (from 1968 to 1969). To arrange all the formalities, Kotík could legally travel to the United States as early as the fall of 1969. Like many others, he benefited from the fact that the process known as “normalisation” – which reversed the liberal policies of the Dubček era of socialism and marked the end of Prague Spring politics in favour of a more restricted and Moscow-approved programme – only took hold gradually. Had he made his request to travel to America a year later, it would certainly not have been allowed.

It is perhaps a little surprising how smooth this transition was for Kotík, almost as if it could not have gone any other way. “If I had been invited for a fellowship in Germany or France, I would have come back to Prague,” he says. “But this was America: you get off the plane and you’re automatically an American. I can’t imagine living somewhere as a guest; as a second-class citizen.”

When Kotík got on the plane over the Atlantic, however, there was no certainty that he was travelling to the country he would call home for the next fifty years – in fact, the issue wasn’t even on his mind. As he says, he only thinks about things once these thoughts

are practically applicable, and in this case, that was when his then-wife, Charlotta Kotíková (curator and great-granddaughter of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the first president of independent Czechoslovakia) and their first son Tomáš finally made it over the pond. If they had remained in Prague, Kotík would have returned.

The Creative Associates programme generally consisted of scholarships extending a period of one or two semesters, but Kotík’s fellowship was extended to two years, after which he held a part-time teaching position for another two years. “The university in Buffalo defined two of the most important moments in my life: first, allowing me to relocate from Prague to America, and then, firing me. If they had offered me a full-time position, I would never have been able to do all the work I did. Since then, I have made my living as an independent musician and composer.”

Beginnings of the S.E.M. Ensemble

The first concert of the S.E.M. Ensemble took place on the 15th of April 1970, produced by the Center for Creative and Performing Arts. More concerts followed shortly afterwards and soon, the ensemble settled on a quartet of core members – Julius Eastman, Roberto Laneri, Jan Williams, and Petr Kotík.

Even this first concert in April 1970 belies the brazen, uncompromising nature of Kotík’s programming – and the first review reflects this. The evening included a short piece by Rudolf Komorous, Kotík’s *Music for*

Three, and John Cage's *Aria* and *Fontana Mix*, but the centre-piece of the event was a two-hour version of Cornelius Cardew's *Treatise*, which Kotík had previously performed in Prague with QUaX. At the SEM concert, it was performed simultaneously with some of the other music on the programme. In the words of a review published in a local paper: "The entire procedure consumed an hour and fifty minutes, enough time to perform the last three Beethoven String Quartets. By contrast, the second half of the program was exactly two minutes long. There were a hundred audience members in attendance at the start of the concert, but only seventeen remained at the end."

If you visit the S.E.M. Ensemble's website, you will find in the "Reviews" section a collection of early reviews and extracts. Not only are they humorous, but they also attest to the perseverance and tenacity with which Petr Kotík champions the music he finds worthwhile. It also further supports his claim that he makes music (as both composer and performer) that "doesn't really have a home anywhere" – and in the fifty years that followed this first, rather controversial outing, the S.E.M. Ensemble has provided a home for a great deal of exploratory, original and often strange music.

Is There an S.E.M. Ensemble?

Generally, the S.E.M. Ensemble works on a project-by-project basis, meaning that there isn't a stable instrumental line-up and performers are invited based on the repertoire selected for any given concert. This might suggest that musicians are considered replaceable, but the opposite is true. Petr Kotík explains: "Every time I compose a piece of music, every time I put notes down on paper to be played by somebody, I always imagine a particular musician playing them. It may change and in the end, someone else might perform the piece, but that is not important. In the act of creating the music, I simply have to have a vision of a particular musician. I simply cannot compose – just like that, in the air, here is my piece, somebody please take it and perform it."

One such musician to influence Kotík was one of the founding members of SEM, the composer Julius Eastman, also a fellow at the Center in Buffalo. Up until the mid-70s, Eastman was Kotík's very close collaborator. A great personality, Eastman was a singer, pianist (graduate of Curtis Institute of Music), dancer, and actor. He died in near obscurity in 1990, but in recent years, his music has received a much deserved reappraisal, with revived or discovered pieces appearing with greater and greater regularity. Naturally, the S.E.M. Ensemble plays an important part in this Eastman revival, notably through the 2016 CD

release featuring SEM's original recording of Eastman's *Feminine* or the inclusion of *Joy Boy* in the SEM 50th anniversary concert.

Back in the 1970s, however, Julius Eastman inspired Kotík to begin composing for voice. He maintained this interest even after Eastman's departure from the ensemble and continued working with other vocalists. This ultimately led to many major compositions for voices that Kotík composed during the '70s. One of them, *Many Many Women*, is a six-hour colossus of a piece for six singers and six instrumentalists setting a novella by Gertrude Stein. Recently, Kotík returned to Gertrude Stein, using her writings for his first opera *Master-pieces*, which has been performed in Ostrava, Prague, and New York.

For Philip Guston

One of the S.E.M. Ensemble's signature pieces is Morton Feldman's monumental *For Philip Guston*. Indeed, the rather unusual line-up – flute, piano, and percussion – has recently become one of the SEM's most recognisable chamber formations, featuring musicians that have been working with Kotík for several decades: Joseph Kubera at the keyboard and percussionist Chris Nappi on various tuned and untuned instruments. It was this same trio that recorded the piece for its 2000 4-CD release, produced by the Paula Cooper Gallery (New York) on its label Dog W/A Bone.

The story of how *For Philip Guston* came into the SEM's repertoire is rather remarkable. First, in the 1970s, both Kotík and Feldman lived and worked in Buffalo at the same time (in 1971, Feldman became a professor at the university there, a position he held for the rest of his life). In 1973, Feldman composed *Instruments I* as a commission for SEM. When Kotík and SEM relocated to New York City, there was a pause in their relationship, until about 1985, when Kotík asked Feldman to compose a new piece for the group. Feldman agreed and the new piece was announced as part of SEM's 1986/87 New York season. However, Feldman died before he had the opportunity to compose the work, so Kotík searched in his catalogue for a replacement piece to perform. There were three trios that would fit the ensemble's instrumentation and Kotík chose *For Philip Guston*, because out of the three pieces, it was the only one that did not require the bass flute, an instrument Kotík did not possess at that time. Only when the music arrived did he realise the scale of the composition – performing *For Philip Guston* takes five hours.

And so the group played it at their concert series at the Paula Cooper Gallery in February, 1987. This is

how Kotík remembers the event, a rather fitting and rewarding comparison to that first concert in 1970: "The hall was full. When performing pieces of this duration, we tell the audience it's okay to leave and come back. The piece doesn't really have a beginning or ending anyway. Spatially, we sit in a triangular position so that we can clearly see and cue each other. I always sit with my back to the audience. When we finished the performance, I thought that perhaps half of the audience would be gone. But imagine my surprise when I turned around and saw that *everyone* was there. And Alex Ross, who wrote the review for the New York Times, was sitting in the third row, holding the score."

Orchestra of the S.E.M. Ensemble

Another breaking point came in 1992, more than thirty years after Kotík had begun his professional concert career in 1961. Throughout all of this time, his interest in the orchestra was negligible: "I had serious doubts about orchestras. The pretentious vibrato and the conductors, most of them writhing like worms in front of the musicians. As a performer, I know exactly how easy it is to fake all these emotions. The self-serving mindless vibrato playing always repulsed me, particularly in the string section. I never had the least bit of interest in the orchestra."

This was true until Kotík began putting together a performance of John Cage's seminal work *Atlas Eclipticalis* as a tribute to Cage's eightieth birthday. This piece doesn't follow the idea of a conventionally synchronised orchestra. Instead, it is a combination of eighty six solos that are to be performed independently. The only ensemble element is time, followed by everyone and determined by the conductor. The preparations took the form of individual rehearsals involving Kotík and each of the orchestra musicians. After two months of rehearsing, the Orchestra of the S.E.M. Ensemble performed the piece at Carnegie Hall in a premiere of the complete two-hour version, with the pianist David Tudor simultaneously performing the solo piece *Winter Music*. Tudor had been a close collaborator of Cage since the early 1950s and all the pieces Cage composed from that time up until about 1970 were written either directly for Tudor or with Tudor in mind. "Throughout the 1950s and '60s, Tudor was perhaps the greatest and certainly the most famous virtuoso in the world of new music," says Kotík.

Kotík describes the transformative event in these words: "So, all of a sudden, I am standing on the stage of Carnegie Hall, conducting this huge orchestra for the first time in my life, two hours and eighty-six musicians. The orchestra has three (!) sets of timpani, nine large percussion setups, three harps, and so on.

We could barely fit on the large stage of Carnegie Hall. And this did something to me. When we finished, I thought to myself: 'There is nothing more important than working with an orchestra. This is what I should be doing.' It changed my life."

Kotík continues: "We did not sell out the hall, but it was quite full and there was quite an elite audience. Right after the concert, I had to pay all the musicians, so it took some time for me to leave. When I was finally on my way out and the elevator door opened on the ground floor, Rudolf Firkušný was standing there with his wife Tatiana – they had waited all that time to congratulate me. I'll never forget this; I was very touched. There was an after-concert party at the Paula Cooper Gallery. When I arrived, David Tudor said to me: 'There was one problem with this performance.' What was it? I asked. 'No mistakes,' he replied."

This was the start of The Orchestra of the S.E.M. Ensemble – Kotík himself admits this is "a rather absurd name, but all names are absurd until one gets used to them." After all, the name S.E.M. Ensemble contains a Duchamp-like absurdity itself: the three-letter acronym, rather than representing the first letters of any three significant words, is merely the "middle part" of the word enSEMBle.

An invitation to a festival in Berlin followed the Carnegie Hall concert. Petr Kotík's response to the organisers' invitation is typical of his negotiation style: he replied that he is not really interested in repeating the same programme, but if a *second* programme were organised, say one that would include the New York school composers plus Edgard Varèse, perhaps he would be amenable – and he requested a solo concert for David Tudor, too.

Here is Kotík again: "Pieces of art – true artworks – are all created intuitively, not with the slightest calculating intention. Many times – perhaps almost always – artists really do not know what they're doing. It is only discovered *ex post*. We are now, or perhaps for the past hundred years, going through a substantial change – a change that began in the 1920s and '30s. In the theatre, for example, it was Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in the early '50s that ended the era of the Shakespearian dramatic narrative (in music, we might consider the concept of the classical sonata form a certain type of dramatic narrative). The focus has turned from drama to situation: it's about nothing, it does not go anywhere, but it is *something*. Perhaps this partially explains why I have always been attracted to music of the Baroque and earlier periods: the artistic content is, in fact, similar to what is going on today. It is



Petr Kotík performing with Roscoe Mitchell, Thomas Buckner and Ostravská banda, 2017

contemplation, focus, getting deeper into the thing one is doing. This is what I have been aiming for throughout my life as artist.”

Involvement with the AACM

Both the S.E.M. Ensemble and Kotík personally have a long-standing association with the composers and musicians of the AACM – the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. This group was founded in 1965 in Chicago to help African American avant-garde jazz musicians who were struggling to find support and audiences for their courageous and experimental music making, which was steeped in jazz but reached out to free improvisation, graphic scores, avant-garde techniques in both playing and composing, and influences from various ethnic musical traditions.

Particularly in relation to recent developments surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement, one might be tempted to frame these activities of Kotík’s ideologically, especially as the musicians of the AACM often have closer links with the jazz and improvised music scenes and are rarely represented on orchestral podiums or within the contexts of new composed music. However, Kotík is quick to dispel any such interpretations:

“One of the attributes of what I strive to do in Ostrava or in New York, what I’ve been doing my entire life, is a complete absence of ideology – not promoting a particular aesthetic. In fact, I completely reject any sign of ‘aesthetics.’ For me, the idea of aesthetics equals ideology. The criteria I have for deciding to do something are straightforward and follow a simple set of questions: Is it for real, or is it fake? Is it trying to

position itself somewhere? Is the work authentic or is it trying to impress someone; striving to succeed? This is what I ask myself first and it opens, unpredictably, to a lot of things for me. I don’t really plan things much in advance – things have to develop organically. In the mid-’90s, the AACM, led by Muhal Richard Abrams, received a grant to commission its members to compose orchestral music. So, they needed an orchestra, and someone recommended the S.E.M. Ensemble. And after the first concert we did together, they all became very enthusiastic about continuing the collaboration. That was the beginning of my work with AACM. The relationship developed organically and once again flowed back into what we do in Ostrava.”

One of the manifestations of this collaboration were repeated visits by Muhal Richard Abrams and Roscoe Mitchell to Ostrava Days Institute and Festival. They worked with the students there and had pieces performed (including orchestra compositions), performed a concert improvisation (billed as the AACM Trio with trombonist George Lewis), and also took part in the festival’s improvising ensemble, led by vocalist Thomas Buckner.

George Lewis, a composer and improviser who has become the AACM’s chronicler, published a history of the group, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, with the University of Chicago Press in 2015. Lewis, who is also a frequent guest at the Ostrava Days festival and whose opera about the history of the AACM, *Afterword*, was premiered at Ostrava’s National Moravian-Silesian Theatre in 2015, contributed the following comment to the 50-year anniversary concert – which, given the coronavirus pandemic, had to take place online:

“What is it that’s so special about the S.E.M. Ensemble? First, the S.E.M. Ensemble is a long-standing community of practice that has brought the most extraordinary diversity of music to life. Second, there’s a familial aspect about the S.E.M. Ensemble – everyone is in it together, and even if the music director can be a bit irascible at times, that’s because of his tenacity and deep love of music, performance, and the people who make it. Finally, when a vision like SEM lasts for that long, what you get is a kind of feedback loop, where the power of new music comes not so much from any external force but from new music itself.”

Extension into Ostrava Days

In 2001, Petr Kotík organised the first edition of the Ostrava Days of New Music, a biennial festival that soon became the most important event for new music in the Czech Republic, but also a remarkable occasion in the context of Europe and the world. The Ostrava Center for New Music was established and later came

to include not only this festival, but also the New Opera Days Ostrava festival (NODO), another biennial, which alternates with Ostrava Days. The S.E.M. Ensemble often performs at both festivals, and the resident large chamber ensemble, Ostravská banda, is composed of a mix of players from Europe and the U.S., with many members overlapping with the S.E.M. Ensemble.

There is a remarkable continuity in Kotík’s activity, accompanied by a certainty of intention: there is, in his mind, not a great deal of difference between his motivations and activities in 1960s Prague, 1980s New York, or 2000s Ostrava. The aim is always the same: to find a home for music that otherwise wouldn’t have one, and to find musicians who are heavily invested in approaching this music as responsibly as possible. Everything else – the musicians, the venues, the festivals, the pieces – seem to flow around Petr Kotík, reaching a point at which, as George Lewis put it, “the power of new music comes not so much from any external force but from new music itself”.

The New York School

The New York School was a group of experimental composers active in New York from the early 1950s that included John Cage, Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, and Christian Wolff. To a certain extent, these composers followed in the footsteps of Charles Ives in creating music that was less dependent on European conceptions of history whilst also focusing much more directly on the materials of sound, providing a counterweight to the over-intellectualised approach of much of the “Darmstadt school” – the terms *avant-garde* (Darmstadt) and *experimental* (New York) are often used to describe these two approaches. SEM is one of the few ensembles that have a direct historical link with the New York school and continues championing its music.

Here is New York music journalist Kurt Gottschalk:

“Just as the New York School doesn’t get the recognition it deserves, SEM doesn’t get the recognition it deserves. The ensemble manages a high profile concert every two or three years, due in very large part (it seems to me) to Petr Kotík’s tireless work. A big part of that has to do with the fundraising he does in order to present concerts free of charge. The S.E.M. Ensemble performing those important works, and doing so free of charge, is what keeps Brown and Wolf in particular on the city’s cultural landscape. (...) Is the New York School connection as distinct as it once was? No, I don’t think it is. Part of SEM’s significance lies in how few orchestras in the city focus on contemporary work, or even work from the latter half of the 20th century. When I speak of the importance of the New York School connection, my comments in no small part reflect my own interests. I can easily imagine Kotík saying, ‘This is not important, we simply play what is needed at the time.’”

Economy and Beauty

“Beauty is economy. A piece of beauty does not have a trace of redundancy – there is nothing unnecessary or superfluous. It does not have a simple, smallest portion that is not needed. This is why, in every creative process, the ultimate struggle is to avoid superfluous redundancies – the redundant nature of imitation is the reason for its failure. A failure to economise turns the work into kitsch. Kitsch is an ornament, full of redundant parts. It is often regarded as beautiful, and it is this kind of ‘beautiful kitsch’ that, initially, makes a true piece of art look ‘ugly’.”

Petr Kotík, March 30, 2020