

Searching for Notes Like a Mushroom Hunter

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARTIN SMOLKA

Martin Smolka is one of the leading Czech composers of today. Here, we present our first interview with him in several years. At first, this dialogue (conducted by two other composers, Ian Mikyska and Adrián Demoč; the latter also studied with Smolka) set off along the standard path of a long-distance, email-only dialogue. However, a few days in, the idea materialised that we might take a more unorthodox approach: something like a personal dictionary of Martin Smolka. The following text is an amalgam of this dictionary approach with the answers that resulted from the first part of the process.

– CONCEPT, METHOD

You asked about various compositional decisions, intentions, and the like.

In that respect, I have to say I am incapable of thinking something up, making a compositional decision, and then actualising this. I can't do it – it just won't allow me to continue. Rather, it's about asking what the composition I am creating needs, what belongs in it and what doesn't. That goes for notes and sounds but also methods of developing them; putting them together; composing them together. As Bohumil Hrabal once wrote, "I burrow with my finger".

I search, feel (with my fingers, my ears, my voice), weigh in my hand. Then, I try assembling; combining. But I cannot command.

It has been a fashion for a long time now to wrap a piece up in a clever concept.

To perform a brilliant intellectual pirouette – a made-up example: organising the musical material in a pattern taken from the structure of nanoparticles in the stomach of an endangered sea cucumber in Sumatra. This does not entice me. I don't think composition consists of demonstrating how clever we are.

Nor how politically correct and engaged we are. To paraphrase a few words by the poet Ivan Wernisch I read years ago: the sense of poetry lies in the fact that what results is a poem.

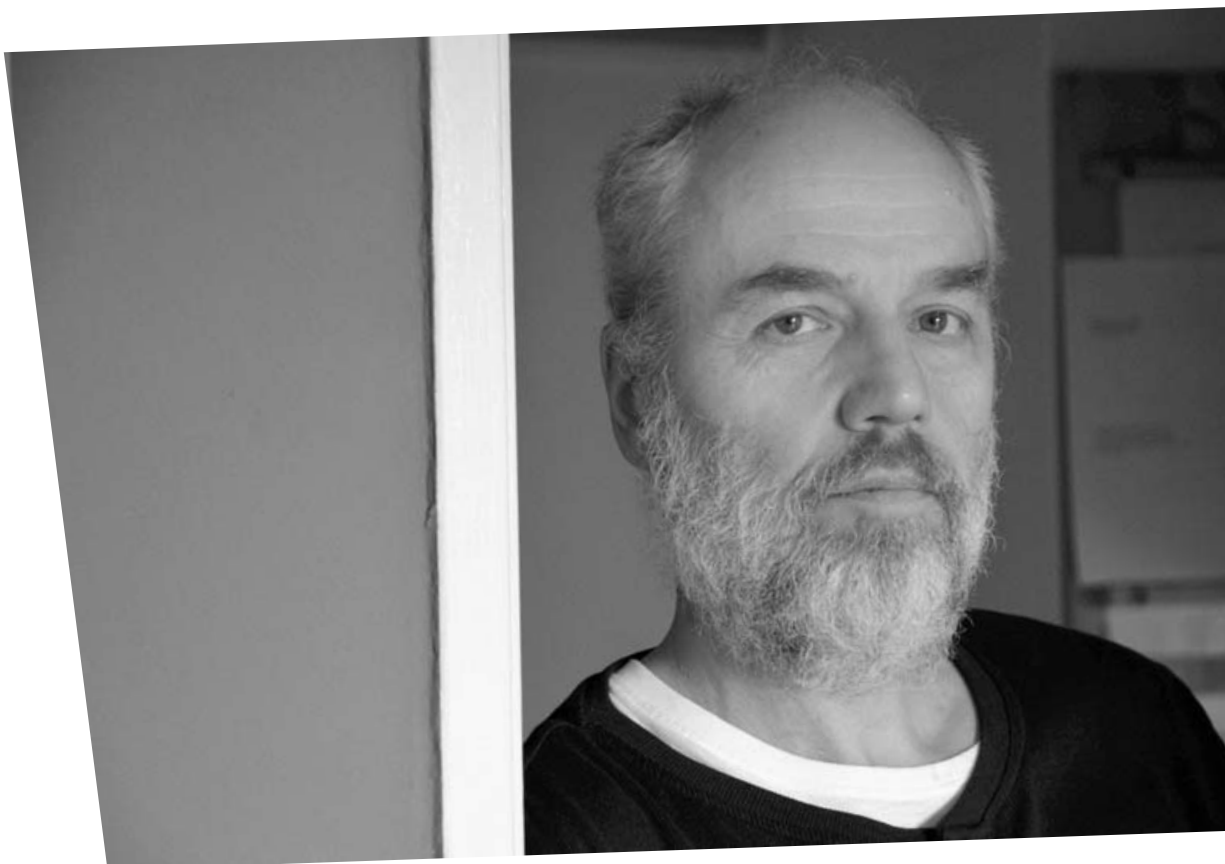


PHOTO: JAROMIR TYPLT

When I teach, I use words like structure and material. But I avoid them when I'm sketching - they are anti-inspiring. Brrr, "anti-inspiring" (*antiinspirativni*), another repulsive word. To find a way of working with it, I'd have to start playing around immediately - aspirin and tintinnabuli? -, find a shape for it; a scent; a gleam. Or perhaps leave out the consonants to discover how the vowels make the word neatly dichromatic, the "a" and "i" sounds rhythmicised in an orderly manner. Or I could observe the "n" and "t" sounds instead, to discover that they are arranged as if in a mirror, taking light, dancing steps.

- INNOVATION, DIFFERENCE

During my first, say, fifteen years as a composer, I was full of a desire to make music differently; my own way; to uncover possibilities that had not been discovered yet. I wanted to belong to Western New Music and the Polish school, and yet my heart and hearing attracted me most to what was in a polemical relationship with the avant-garde (Reich and the minimalists, the new simplicity of Pärt, Górecki, and others), independent of the avant-garde (Nancarrow, Partch, Scelsi), or which grew from the avant-garde towards quietude and a Zen-like peace (Feldman, late Cage). This list suggests a certain level of fandom; collecting recordings, scores, and impulses. I still have this today, though in a different form. And when I began producing some "different" music, it was usually sensory, intuitive - a sound fascinated me, appealed to me, charmed me. What I enjoyed most was a certain duality: sounds that were simultaneously unheard of and familiar. Familiar and therefore evocative, awakening deep memories or dream-like fantasy.

It was a great help that I could (secretly) try out piano preparations at home - we had a short grand piano. And that during my studies, some friends brought me along to an improvised theatre session, where I provided the musical... it wasn't really accompaniment - rather, counterpoint. I travelled to many Czech cities with the Vizita theatre. The halls had pianos in various states of disrepair, and we enjoyed scouring the backstage area and bringing in other instruments and sound objects. Sometimes, I performed on two pianos, more or less detuned and decomposed, and a large bass drum to boot. Other times, I sang into a tuba. I was bringing along more and more preparatory appliances and various pieces of percussion, gaining experience, cultivating my hearing. And this aesthetic of a bizarre sonic junk shop necessarily permeated into my pieces and developed further when I wrote for the Agon Orchestra and performed in it, especially in the 1990s, when it became a sort of "trademark" of mine. I wrote pieces like *Netopýr (Flying Dog)*, *Rent a Ricercar*, or *For Woody Allen*, and for each of these, we would drag in and install more and more wacky appliances. We took it to absurd levels, spending an hour blowing up balloons in Budapest which were then popped in five seconds at the concert; we hauled my old ski case, full of rusty scaffolding tubes, over the ocean to New York.

- SIMPLICITY

When I left the Agon Orchestra towards the end of the '90s, my writing changed considerably. It really changed by itself - I couldn't say I *chose to* change it. In a joyful onset of new energy, I began re-examining the basic building blocks of music. *Eight Pieces for Guitar Quartet*: short, transparent, quiet abbreviations - one contains a single tone, the second a single chord, the third a four-note melodic fragment; one of the movement begins in the middle of the previous, as if two stone blocks were laid over each other. In other pieces, I wrote a lot of monophonic material alternating with exclamations of solitary chords, often awfully out-of-tune versions of the most common major and minor chords. I put together a collage of chords from famous symphonic pieces (often shorter than a second) and when there was nothing more to collage, I let flow an exaggerated Romantic cantilena (all the strings wailing away in one position, the lament enhanced by quarter-tone deformations of the sweet intervals, a hysterical vibrato alternating with a steely, cold non-vibrato, etc.), and finally, I "experimented" with unplayably fast tempos (*Remix, Redream, Reflight* for orchestra). I felt good in utter ordinariness, simplicity, like when artist František Skála assembles objects from sticks and stones. And to this day, I use elements (chords, diatonicism, repetition) that have been hopelessly compromised by pop culture, with the hope that (perhaps, hopefully) I manage to sand down all the layers of lacquer and remind listeners of their ordinary beauty.

- IMPRESSIONISM

I spent one long summer (2008) in a single room with a cello. I spent so many hours polishing harmonics and open strings (I couldn't really do normal tones) that I found a strange, somewhat breakneck technique for playing three-note chords, which, when they are bowed far away from the bridge, can be left unarpeggiated. And when you add a careful mix of bow pressure and swiftness

of movement, what takes place is a kind of animate metamorphosis, a flowering, as if the strings were ringing and sonic sparks were flying. Writing it down is not enough – not even meticulously precise introductory notes will do the trick. I have to find it together with the performers. These are pieces for smaller ensembles, *Die Seele auf dem Esel* (*The Soul of the Donkey*) and *Rinzai a vodoměrky* (*Rinzai and Water Skaters*).

I extended this exploration of the uncertain terrain on the borders of euphony and creaking to further magic with three-note chords on strings. Even in Bach, when the solo violin plays a chord, it begins with a rattling impact before we are placated by a G or A minor. I began stacking these chords in cascades, and this rattling with a radiant finale became an adventure reminiscent of the incoming surf. In quieter moments, there is a contrasting element: harmonics – I prefer the naturally detuned sort –, and, from the harmonics, various spidering lines and misty planes. I really had a field day with these in *Blue Bells or Bell Blues* for orchestra and *Squeaking Wings* for ten string instruments, but you can find similar approaches (cascades; moments of light) in pieces for choir (*Poema de balcones*) and choir with orchestra (*Annunciation*).

Another sonic fondness I keep reworking, trying to find an even stranger rendering, is the imitation of the behaviour of bells. The emphasis is on the behaviour. When you listen to the ringing of any church, after the strike, the pitch of the bell goes down a tiny bit and then slips back up – we hear it swinging. I transferred this behaviour to large sound masses – an orchestral chord, a choral chord, or parallel asynchronous swinging of parts of these ensembles. This was enough for long sections in my choral prayer *The Name Emmanuel*, and in the orchestral piece *Quand le tympan de l'oreille porte le poids du monde* (*When the Ear Drum Bears the Weight of the World*), almost every sound sinks and bends in this way, including a flock of Beijing opera gongs, which bend their sounds themselves, and large gongs that the players submerge in water. Incidentally: I love mysterious coincidences such as the one that took place at the premiere of this undulating music – the concert hall of the Monte-Carlo Philharmonic Orchestra stands on pillars in the sea.

– STYLE, CONSTANTS

For the sake of clarity, I forced myself to arrange my works into three periods, but this division is certainly contentious. Some of my inclinations and desires come back cyclically, like mimicking the sounds of the world or imprinting their behaviour. In the 1990s, I listened to trains, their hooting; the nocturnal song of wheels and breaks; the rattle of the railway bridge. I tried the rustle of the Šumava forests too. Later, the sea – waves, surf, the murmur of overturned stones. And today, the bells. However! This is no report on reality, rather, they are “openers” (I love this metaphor, taken from a sermon by Svatopluk Karásek); openers for the imagination.

So I have my constants. Melodies, probably always modal, set out again and again from the tonic note. Chords tower around them, like milestones, like pillars that call and weep. I prefer rounded sounds (flutes and tubas over trumpets and oboes); I am fascinated by the high ranges of low instruments (as if an elephant in love were singing); I use low, booming sounds sparingly... Other examples would surely be found if we dug deep enough, and we'd find so many common

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Martin Smolka, Jiří Adámek: *The Lists of Infinity* (2016)
 A spoken opera for 4 actors, countertenor, harp, piano and string quartet (score excerpts)

denominators it would all look markedly meagre and lacking in imagination. However (how unpractical), I can't just use my inventions again. I tried that years ago and I then marvelled at how the fascinating sounds had lost all of their charm. I have to search, listen, test, consider, dig - again and again.

I think that uniqueness is more important than constancy. What is different in every piece - even if it is only different by virtue of standing "in a different field". When, deep in concentration, I consider as if on an apothecary's scale whether the necessary course of action is a quarter-tone or a sixth-tone, that's when I feel that something substantial is close by. Gentle nuances, gentle nuances, gentle nuances! Read this out loud (quietly) and you'll hear music.

- TEXTS

Five years ago, an interview conducted by Jaromír Typlt about my approach to text was published in the literary revue *Tvar*, accompanied by a page of programme notes. That's a specialty of mine: in place of the usual tedious texts, I write these little poems in prose. With these, I provide possibilities for what could be imagined along with the music.

Choosing texts to set to music – it’s a labyrinth. My search is intuitive: sparks have to fly. And then another set of sparks as I search for how these words can be set into the music. This first spark, the meaning and expression of the text itself, floats up above somewhere – we can hardly imagine that the reader will be hanging on to the singer’s lips, overcoming all unintelligibility, and put together the meaning of the words that reach him (as is typical for music) at a very slow rate. It’s possible, but how much attention does that leave for the music?

So I look for more organic connections. Words, after all, also sound – sometimes almost too euphonic (Karel Hynek Mácha, Karel Hlaváček), sometimes clumsy and dissonant (Vladimír Holan), sometimes indistinct or divergent. They have rhythm. As you sing them, some open your chest, other close it up; suffocate.

There are words that sing, others that scrape along like gravel, others that hiss – all this depends on the constellation of consonants. The tempo at which we spill out the text or unveil it gradually is a fascinating instrument. That’s the labyrinth; that’s where the simultaneous chess begins.

As a passionate reader, I’m always pre-selecting texts for possible settings as I read. I recently made a list of all the texts I’ve set and I was surprised by how few poems there were. And where there are poems, they are cut down to only a few lines, like the fifteen minutes of choral singing in *Poema de balcones*, which uses only three lines by Federico Garcia Lorca. In other cases, I set very short poems, like a haiku by Matsuo Bashō or a similarly brief piece by Li Po. I spent months with Thoreau’s *Walden*, with those long, almost Beethovenian-arched sentences, only to extract a few words, *de facto* lines of poetry (with a modern conciseness). In other words: While I was alone, there was a great economy – texts were shaved down to their bare bones, sometimes only a few keywords. I revelled in harmonic arrangements, amassing (like I used to with flute and horn notes) round phonemes, like the “L” and “B” and “V” in the word “revelled” (*liboval*).

But then came my collaborations with the word-churners, Jaroslav Dušek (the *Nagano* opera, 2001–2003) and later Jiří Adámek (three pieces between 2012 and 2019), and the simultaneity became even more complex. Thanks to Adámek, I could go much further in kneading words and their parts into plastic formations that allow for the repeated transfer and permeation of the effect of the meaning of a word and its sound (the sounds of particles, word counterpoint, and an amassing of clouds and heaps of speech). All this in harmony with other dimensions – light, the actors’ movement, and sound design.

– THÉÂTRE MUSICAL

I wrote *The Lists of Infinity* (*Seznam, otevři se* – literally “List, Open Up”, a play on the Czech form of “Open Sesame”: *Sezame, otevři se* – editor’s note) with Jiří Adámek. Our interaction gave rise to a libretto, my music, and a production directed by Jiří. It is a form of musical theatre in which speech and music merge and constantly pass from one to the other. The notation often specifies the rhythm of speech, its pitch and loudness, while the actors intuitively created (and perfectly memorised) microtonal harmonies that would be impossible to read on paper but fall perfectly between the quarter-tones and sixth-tones I wrote for the instrumentalists. Incidentally, an actor’s memory is a total mystery: people who have not undergone rigorous musical ear training save – somewhere in their muscles, in their general bodily feeling – a pitch, and they can coax it out through this feeling again and again as if they had perfect pitch. It is quite likely that this is only true of the actors in Adámek’s group Boca Loca Lab. They’ve been working with Jiří for years on a particular type of acting that is focused on sound and extremely precise.

The Lists of Infinity (*Bludiště seznamů* – literally “The Labyrinth of Lists”; both versions share the same English title) is a chamber version of this piece, but also a new work. We used the opportunity of preparing the new version to perfect the form, deepening the assimilation of all components into a musically theatrical newspeak. The piece received many performances and we later made a studio recording in Czech Radio, with a significant contribution by sound-creator Ladislav Železný. This magician can record every phoneme seventy different ways and then patiently choose the right one, the only one that belongs in our invisible labyrinth.

Ver dom Gesetz, our third, three-year collaboration on this particular field, was composed directly for ensemble ascolta, a group of virtuosic performers of contemporary music who also interpret works by composers of the Fluxus group and the most varied new compositions involving performative elements. We travelled to Stuttgart for workshops, working with texts by Franz Kafka in German, surrounding the performers with extra instruments and sounding objects. Some functional playerly movements were magnified to a strange choreography, some vocal strategies aimed more for the colour of the sound than the text – we even took the risk of using not-quite-correct German pronunciation. You asked about the sonic make-up that reminds you of my youthful compositions. I think I reached not so much for particular sounds, but for a certain character, a kind of mischief, and more in the lineage of Franz Kafka. I found a key in his short story *The New Advocate*, where shortly after the opening, an insane egregiousness is said in an entirely humdrum manner and is developed – in deadpan style – into utter absurdity. (The New Advocate was

once the warhorse of Alexander the Great.) In my piece, the direct equivalent is the quasi Romantic melody in the cello, some stanzas in which the individual notes are occasionally replaced by an unexpected, bizarre sound (a fairground party horn, a water nightingale, a bicycle bell, a rattle, a percussive effect known as a lion's roar, a chord on a mouth organ...), these humorous failures in the gentle melody multiply until they result in an awful chain of discordant sounds, entirely deafening at their peak (a punk guitar riff, truck horns...). In another passage, there is a similarly absurd clanging of seven pairs of cymbals that not only sound remarkable (the fascinating, deafening battering and its spectral transformation as it decays), but also looks beautiful: what resulted was a choreography of flashes of gold, within which Jiří Adámek noticed and supported a moment when the cymbals around the players' heads look remarkably like an elephant's ears.

- SILENCE, PIANISSIMO

Quieting, disappearing - when it works, it's beautiful. It's tense. Magical. Finally, something's happening! Pianissimo broadens the colour scale; opens the ears to gentler nuances. Pauses build tension, awaken curiosity about what's coming next. Multiple times, I made use of a loop with gradually more erasures - the ear has the opportunity to learn the mechanism of the loop and observe its reduction as a plot; a story.

When we were in Ostrava rehearsing for our opera/non-opera, I kept getting on the musicians nerves by wanting to rehearse dynamics, searching - along with them - for the gentle shades of pianissimo on long tones. Their arguments were logical: the theatre hall has different acoustics and they would have to play louder anyway. Today, I know what I should have answered: All the more reason to get the quietude under your skin; that strange, fragile expression at the borders of audibility, so you can induce this feeling in a different acoustic at a different dynamic.

A few times, I tried a complete abyss, rift, fissure. Silence suddenly rings out across the hall, nothingness and non-life hang in the air. This is how it is in my piece for two tubas and orchestra, *Zátíší s tubami aneb Ticholapka (Still-life with Tubas, or, Silence Hiding)*. The piece contains several sections in which silence is constructed by gradual diminishing, making it both logical and suspenseful. But shortly after it begins, the third movement suddenly stops in its tracks - there is even an instruction in the score asking the musicians to remain motionless. I am always shaking with anticipation before this moment arrives and I am transfixed for its duration - I will probably never find out how it works when it is unexpected.

- QUARTER-TONES

When I first used a quarter-tone (in some compositional etude as a student of Marek Kopelent), I had a ceremonial feeling. As if I had done something essential and courageous, like tearing a canvas. Twenty years later, as I was writing an essay on my use of microtones, I was surprised by the various forms and motivations I had amassed. Since then, I've learned a lot more about microtonal deviations in the harmonic series (like the sixth-tone on the seventh harmonic) or interference.

In my conception, micro-retunings are an adjustment of tone, like when a glassmaker bends glass to narrow down a vase. Such a reshaped tone can be a unison or part of a dyad, or else an entire tonal organisation can be deformed, like a triad (that is the topic of my ensemble piece *Oh, my admired C minor*). Or else I can “fill in” a narrow interval – say, a minor third – using a cluster (a quarter-tone cluster or an even denser one). It keeps something of the third (the minor-ness?) and gains a noisy quality: a thicket of interferences begins buzzing (*Blue Bells or Bell Blues* for orchestra, *The Lists of Infinity*). I usually work with the fact that the given structure reminds us of something and the microtone makes something more intense. It might be a lament one time, a comical aspect on another occasion, and then a certain wildness. I consider it a particular success when a dual, conflicting expression is achieved, say a bitter lament that pricks your ears so hard it’s also grotesque (*Semplice* for old and new instruments). And wildness? When I manage to mix a chord from pure and detuned intervals into a thickly screaming and interfering amalgam, what results can be conceived as a peculiar variant of guitar distortion (*Rush Hour in Celestial Streets* for eighteen instruments). In all these examples, there is a complex co-action between the power of the sound, its colour, as well as its mass, penetration, overlapping, and so on. It’s hard to say how much of this is thanks to the microtones. Microtones are a gentle element I usually use sparingly in a transparent musical situation so that they act as an oddity. I always do this for expressive reasons and I always choose with the help of the meticulous and repeated process of listening in. I spend a lot of time retuning my guitar and cello and playing harmonics. Harmonics ensure a greater precision of tuning than, say, frets, and are generally acoustically simple, almost like sine waves. Sometimes, I sit at the piano with my guitar in my hands and I feel like I need more hands. Electronics, on the other hand, are no help at all. Synthetic tones seem to freeze and alienate the expression – suddenly, I have nothing to hang on to and intuition fails.

– CONCLUSION

Seeing as I’m a composer, we might well finish this off with a nice chord. A few years ago, I wrote these nine commandments of a composer for some occasion I no longer recall. These are rules that I follow when I write:

- Do not give exposure to evil (not even through protest songs).
- Search for tones like a mushroom hunter.
- Think things through like a chess player.
- Know your notes like the palm of your hand.
- Only beauty.
- Anything can be beautiful under a particular set of circumstances.
- You can compose from anything.
- You are obliged to love all of your notes (even the ones that hurt).
- You decide nothing.

And thanks to this interview, I have an idea for the final, tenth commandment:
Say nothing about music.

Born in 1959 in Prague, **Martin Smolka** entered the world of music in the early 1980s when he and Miroslav Pudlák (later joined by Petr Kofroň) founded Agon, an ensemble that soon became the most significant mediator of the world’s

musical avant-garde on the Czech scene, which at the time was dominated by the officially backed domestic pseudo-modernism. From the very outset of his career as a composer, we can discern Smolka's having been influenced by post-Webernism, minimalism, American experimental music, and the Polish School.

In the early 1990s, Smolka was interested in bizarre instrumental techniques and sound sources (deeply under-tuned strings, old gramophones, various objects as percussion, etc.). He made use of these objects as a stylisation of sounds observed in nature and the city. He refers to some of his compositions dating from this period as "sonic photographs" (e.g. *L'Orch pour L'orch*, written in 1990, which is in part a "portrait" of nocturnal sounds at a shunting yard). Smolka selected real sounds in terms of their expressive charge, stylising them to attain a certain emotional sonic result (eloquent is, for instance, the title of one of Smolka's strongest pieces: *Rain, a Window, Roofs, Chimneys, Pigeons, and so on... and Railway Bridges, Too*).

Metaphorically speaking, Smolka's music oscillates around two poles: 1) Cracked, buoyant conviviality, music of a hobbling orchestration, symptomatic civilisation sounds, a folk or brass band playing, out of tune if possible; 2) Melancholic memories, aching desire, the nostalgic echo of the sounds of point 1). Corresponding to this is the usual structural strategy of Smolka's compositions: they almost invariably form juxtapositions of inwardly homogeneous and sharply contrasting form segments, which, through their opposition (slow - fast, joyous - sad, tumultuous - gentle, etc.), correspond to traditional sonata form: first subject - second subject. Smolka, however, frequently works with jarring, film-like cuts; evolution is suppressed, seams admitted, dynamic and textural differences foregrounded, with repetition serving as the basic organising principle.

The fundamentally emotional tone of Smolka's compositions also relates to the application of micro-intervals serving the composer, on the one hand, to evoke real sounds, on the other, to "detune" traditional harmonic and melodic formations - the motivation for this fundamentally subversive seizure of the inherited material is the further amplification or re-awakening of its emotional potential (e.g. *Solitude* for ensemble). In the late 1990s, Smolka focused his attention on this "recycling" of elements of traditional music deformed in microtonal terms and arranged as a collage (*Remix, Redream, Reflight* for orchestra and *Blue Bells or Bell Blues* for orchestra). Furthermore, over the past decade or so, Smolka has developed a keen interest in vocal music, especially for choir (*Poema de balcones* for choir, *Psalmus 114* for choir and orchestra, etc.).

Martin Smolka's music has mainly been performed outside the Czech Republic. Those to have commissioned Smolka's compositions include the most renowned European ensembles and festivals. In Prague, he is best known for his opera *Nagano*, for which he received the Alfréd Radok Award. Since 2003, he has taught composition at the Janáček Academy of Music and Performing Arts in Brno. He studied composition at the Music Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, but private studies with Marek Kopelent were also very important for his development.

(Petr Bakla)