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Martin Smolka

Opera Premieres

Tomáš Brauner

Jiří Carolides

DEAR READERS,

we greet you amidst an exceptionally uncertain time for Czech culture. Not only are we unsure what will happen in a few months, or next season: we don't even know what will or will not happen tomorrow or the day after that. Throughout the month of September, as we all nervously followed news of the rapidly deteriorating epidemiological situation in the country, virtually all artists experienced multiple instances of a phenomenon known as "COVID limbo": tomorrow's rehearsal is "on hold" as we wait for the cellist to receive his test results and (not) go into quarantine, and Saturday's concert might be cancelled as events for over ten people standing up are now banned...

All these complications notwithstanding, there is still much excellent music being made. Boris Klepal's article on recent operatic premieres displays the surprising vitality displayed by Czech opera this year, while conductor Tomáš Brauner reflects on how the spring time quarantine gave him the time to sort through all those boxes mentally marked "maybe one day" – and get lost in some Wagner scores along the way. Our "experimental interview" with Martin Smolka is more timeless, or, as we say in Czech, *nadčasový* ("above time"), providing a rare glimpse into the thinking of a fascinating composer. Finally, the second instalment in our series on music and culture in the Czech Lands before the Battle of White Mountain and two shorter texts by Lukáš Vytlačil and Matěj Kratochvíl reflect on the historical legacy we can turn to when opportunities for making music in the present are drastically reduced. We hope that however much time you have to spend at home in the coming months, you have enough good Czech music to comfort you and not too many worries clouding your mind.

Wishing you a pleasant autumn,
Ian Mikyska
editor

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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.

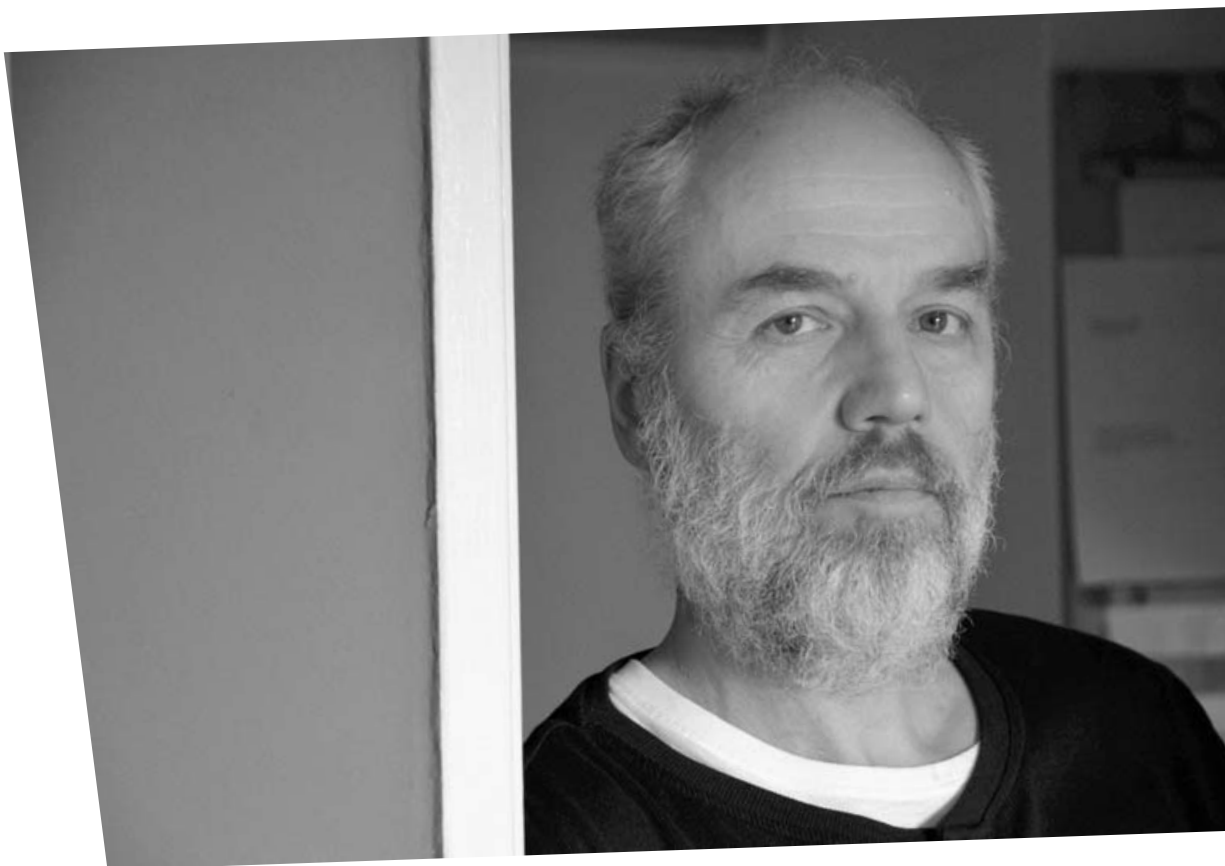


PHOTO: JAROMIR TYPLT

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” (*antiinspirativní*), 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

50 [mle - v/2]

1 KMEN STRUNATCI POKMEN OBRAŤLOVCI TRÍDA JAVCI POTRÍDA PLACENTÁLOVÉ RÁD PRIMÁTI ČELÍŠ HOMONIDE
 2 KMEN STRUNATCI POKMEN OBRAŤLOVCI TRÍDA JAVCI POTRÍDA PLACENTÁLOVÉ RÁD PRIMÁTI ČELÍŠ HOMONIDE
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56 *poco accel.* [1460] Vivaldissimo

1 ROD ČLOVĚK DRUH HOMO JAPENSI PODPRUH HOMO JAPENSI JAPENSI
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 4 ROD ČLOVĚK DRUH HOMO JAPENSI PODPRUH HOMO JAPENSI JAPENSI

62 Bartókissimo Vivaldissimo Bartókissimo 3

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 impractical), 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 orchestrion, 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)

In Spite of the Quarantine: Six Czech Operatic World Premieres in the Year of Corona

Marko Ivanović: *Monument*



This year was so hard for artistic life that the Czech cultural scene will need years to recover. Among the postponed and irreversibly cancelled events, however, we can notice an unexpected phenomenon that can best be described as the “2020 paradox of Czech opera”. From January to August, Czech theatrical and alternative venues hosted four world premieres of operas by Czech composers and two more are planned before the end of the year. The Czech scene has not witnessed such a harnessing of musico-dramatic capacities in decades.

The number of new operas presented this year by Czech ensembles and festivals is partly due to the fact that in the Czech Republic, the first wave of the pandemic was fairly moderate and hygienic restrictions were soon lifted. The fifth edition of the **New Opera Days Ostrava** biennial could therefore take place two months later than originally planned and in nearly the originally planned form. Limited travel possibilities, however, brought about the predominance of works by Czech artists – the productions from abroad have been moved to later editions of the festival. Ostrava saw world premieres of an opera by composer and librettist Marek Kepřt titled *Hibiki, hibiki, vzhmot!* and a sonic-theatrical collage, *A Study of Aphasia*, by composer Michal Rataj and librettist Katharina Schmitt.

In February, before the start of the corona-crisis, Brno's Janáček Theatre saw the world premiere of *Monument* by composer Marko Ivanović and librettist and director David Radok. February also saw the pre-premiere of an operatic site-specific miniature *Hra o Malinu (A Game of Raspberry)*, performed in Prague's Řehor Samsa Bookshop by the Brno-based collective Hausopera. This same group should add another small production to our list in the autumn, *Věčná slečna Bledá (The Eternal Miss Pale)*, this time in Zeman's Sweet Shop in Brno. In December, also in Brno, Ensemble Opera Diversa is to present the world premiere of the opera *Druhé město (The Second City)*, which the central composer of the ensemble, Ondřej Kyas, composed to the eponymous novel by Michal Ajvaz.

Monument: How to be an Artist without Selling Out to Evil

The subject matter of the opera *Monument* takes us back to the 1950s, when, following a design by the sculptor Otakar Švec, an enormous monument to Joseph Stalin was erected, towering over Prague. It was demolished in 1962. Composer **Marko Ivanović** and librettist **David Radok**, however, created more of an allegory than a historical opera. The individual characters in their work and their actions do arise from real persons and events, but the characters have no specific names and the monument itself never appears on the stage. Artistic integrity and a responsibility towards oneself and society is a theme Radok has explored in depth in the past, and he gave it a clear scenic form as the librettist and director of *Monument* too.

Ivanović, the composer, also served as musical director and conductor. He had this to say about his collaboration with Radok: "I met David Radok in 2014, when we were working on a production of Janáček's *The Makropulos Affair*. On that occasion, David mentioned his attraction to a topic arising from the fates of the sculptor Otakar Švec and his monument, and that he'd love to adapt this as an opera. He even had a specific idea of how it could all look. I realised this was a good opportunity, and this encounter led to a project that has now, finally, become the opera *Monument*. However, we collaborate regularly: after *The Makropulos Affair*, I did my best to bring David's productions to Brno, name a double bill of Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* and Schoenberg's *Erwartung* as a coproduction with the Göteborg opera. This was followed by another recent coproduction, a combination of Poulenc's *The Human Voice* and Martinů's *Three Fragments from the Opera Juliette*, once again directed by David and conducted by me."

Monument is an effective production that uses the traditional means of operatic theatre in grand dimensions. The orchestra has three or four of each

woodwind, as well as a piano, organ, and numerous percussion instruments. The vocal ensemble includes thirteen character parts while two mixed choirs and a children's choir are needed for the mass scenes. These extensive means, however, are used functionally in *Monument* – mostly as a source of multifarious expressive possibilities.

Marko Ivanović's musical stylisation succeeds already by the fact that it avoids quotations and parodies of period music – even where Radok's text suggests just that. This way, the team avoided turning the libretto simply into a proclamation of ideological positions or an embarrassing "retro" piece – both could easily have happened.

The opera is divided into ten scenes and an epilogue which begins and ends with a group scene on a city square. The opening scene makes it clear this is not an attempt to imitate or parody the "constructor's songs" (*ideological socialist anthems – editor's note*) of the 1950s. Ivanović himself mentions the opening scene of Modest Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, and one could hardly come up with a better analogy. It is certainly not an imitation, musically speaking – rather, it is a related mix of grandioseness, the mass worship of a single authority, the forced devotion of the mob, and the intoxicating atmosphere of the moment.

From the perspective of operatic history, a comparison with Hector Berlioz's *Benvenuto Cellini* is close at hand: its eponymous protagonist is also an excellent sculptor and a terrible character, but he does not betray his talents and the work ends with the casting of a statue of Perseus and Cellini's artistic success. The sculptor in *Monument* is Cellini's inverse image: he is ashamed of his work; he stops believing in himself and accuses himself of total failure. In the end, he does not even live to see the monument unveiled (Švec committed suicide in 1955), and anyway, the monument was blown to pieces soon after that following a new political decision. Cellini's *Perseus with the head of Medusa* has stood on the Piazza della Signoria in Florence since 1554.

The world premiere of *Monument* took place at the Janáček Theatre in Brno (National Theatre in Brno) on the 7th of February 2020.

Hibiki, Hibiki, vzhmo! – Japanese Whisky and Sensory Resonances

Composer **Marek Kepřt** described his piece *Hibiki, Hibiki, vzhmo!* as a gustatory-olfactory chamber (non) opera. Its mysterious and playful title refers to a brand of Japanese whisky, Hibiki, which interested Kepřt not so much for its flavour as for the marketing bubble that surrounds it. A single bottle of this serially produced

liquor can cost several thousand Euros, generating rumours about its unavailability and exceptional quality. The conflict between the consciously induced – and probably exaggerated – expectation and the real sensory experience is a fundamental level of meaning in Keprt's opera. However, we must also keep in mind that in Japanese, *hibiki* can also refer to echoes or resonances.

Hibiki, Hibiki, vzhmoť! is Keprt's first fully fledged composition for the stage. The composer considers his earlier foray into this field – a 2003 piece titled *Blumfeld, starší mládenec* (*Blumfeld, the Older Bachelor*) – an operatic sketch, but he also emphasises that he often makes use of theatrical space in other compositions. "I work with the direction from which a sound rings out, with rotations of the individual sounds, and sometimes with a particular illusion during which the listener is unsure who is playing what," says Keprt of his compositional method. Sometimes, he'll complement a vocal piece with a "secret" instrumental component, at other times, he asks instrumentalists to whisper texts. "The opera brought together several partial ideas I had applied in previous works even though these were not intended for the theatre," he adds.

His opera requires a rather more sweeping use of the theatrical space, but the orchestra is much smaller than the symphonic standard and is to be divided into several groups located far away from each other. The instruments often serve as soloists and connect into the necessary colours in small groups that are created throughout the opera. Three violins correspond to three sopranos for whom they serve as instrumental guides. In an ideal performance, these vocal-instrumental duos should be distributed on three sides of the theatre: one soprano on the gallery and one in each side box; left and right. The quartet of singers is rounded out by a bass accompanied by a trombone; both are located near the left exit on the ground floor. The other instruments (violin, viola, cello, double bass, piano, celeste, and two percussionists) are located in the orchestra pit as usual. The piano has three prepared strings and otherwise plays with a standard sound. The compositional imagination rests in chiseled sound-colours that rotate through the space of the theatre, creating a somewhat confusing environment in which it is unclear where the sound is coming from and what instrument or voice is emitting it.

The composer wrote his own libretto, which contains playful instigations for the orchestral music rather than a narrative or situation. These are really created mostly in the instruments and voices – the words themselves are carried along by their sound. Shifts in meaning and wordplay make these into a commentary that has no clear meaning (intentionally so). What's important is the playfulness combined with an uncertainty as to how the source phrase will develop.

Keprt's (non)opera was performed convincingly by conductor **Petr Kotík** and the **Ostravská banda** chamber orchestra. The vocal parts were interpreted by **Markéta Israel Večeřová**, **Vendula Černá**, **Helena Kalambová**, and **Michal Marhold**. The stage action for the Ostrava premiere was created by director **Petr Odo Macháček** and its seemingly separate world related to the music through relationships with the light design, via economical movements, but also through the naive directness of the prop of the blue rabbit or a vigorous wood-chopping section – Keprt's music, after all, is more than just vibrant and gentle and the percussion instrumentation is considerably rich for such a small ensemble. The performance took place on a set designed by **David Bazika**.

The world premiere of *Hibiki, Hibiki, vzhmoť!* took place on the 28th of August 2020 in Ostrava's Antonín Dvořák Theatre as part of the fifth edition of the New Opera Days Ostrava Festival (August 28th – 30th 2020).

A Study of Aphasia: When Elektra Loses Her Voice

The second world premiere at the festival was *Nauka o afázii* (*A Study of Aphasia*), a collaborative work by composer **Michal Rataj** and librettist **Katharina Schmitt**. There is much talk in relation to the Ostrava festival about an exploration of the borders of the operatic genre, but in this case, these descriptions are accurate. The principal part in this musically theatrical piece, as the authors describe their work, is written for an actress whom Schmitt, in her directorial role, led towards an expressively stylised performance. A direct relation to the music, however, was hard to find. Singing was only heard occasionally, but even so – particularly in ensemble entries by the nurses –, it had a striking effect and drew attention to itself as the sonic centre-point of the entire performance. What connects *A Study of Aphasia* most directly to opera is the fact that it can work as a standalone musical composition. Listeners could confirm this for themselves three days after the premiere, when an audio-only version was broadcast on Czech Radio Vltava.

The simple narrative concerns an opera singer – portrayed by the Hungarian mezzo-soprano **Katalin Károlyi** – who suffers a breakdown during a performance of Richard Strauss' *Elektra*. She has a laughing fit, loses her sense of orientation and capacity for articulated speech, and, finally, her voice. Her *doppelgänger* (and adversary) is a nurse, performed at the premiere by the excellent **Ivana Uhlířová**. Her actions concentrate the broader reactions of those around us when we are suddenly unable to establish contact and it is unclear what the cause is. The nurse runs through various phases of behaviour: from a disinterested description of various forms of aphasia



Michal Rataj, Katharina Schmitt: *A Study of Aphasia*

(i.e. loss of the faculty of speech), through attempts to capture the patient's attention and convince her to cooperate, to fits of powerless rage. A quartet of nurses enters the story in the penultimate section, singing onomatopoeic poetry imitating elocution exercises for children. At this point, the vocal ensemble music turns to the beginnings of opera around the year 1600. Something finally awakens in the mute diva and she sings her final, unclear message on individual phonemes, only to finally dance off the stage in a pair of tap shoes belonging to the nurse.

In *A Study of Aphasia*, Rataj and Schmitt focus not on perfect singing, but on a character who has lost the capacity to sing, and particularly on the reactions of those around her. The voices of both protagonists are complemented by pre-recorded voices that include a doctor, a radio broadcaster, and extracts from an old radio version of Sophocles' *Electra*. The sound of the opera is mostly created by electronic sounds performed by the composer – the multichannel sound surrounded the audience from all sides. The only live performer was the cellist (and occasionally also percussionist) **Andrej Gál**. Despite its narrow range, the mezzo-soprano part passes through a number of expressive transformations, from dramatic operatic singing through Schoenbergian *Sprechgesang* to emotional sighs and whispers in the style of Salvatore Sciarrino. A huge pile of sand with a few props stood at the centre of the production, while only

the mute patient stood out among the interchangeable costumes and identities of the hospital staff.

The world premiere of *A Study of Aphasia* took place on the 29th of August 2020 at Důl Hlubina, Ostrava.

The Wedding, the Cosmos, the Garden – Czech Premieres in Ostrava

This year's New Opera Days also included three Czech premieres of several operas or stage compositions: *Svadba/Wedding* by the Serbian-Canadian composer **Ana Sokolović**, *Muž ve skafandru (The Man in a Space Suit)* by Slovak composer **Miroslav Tóth**, and *No. 50 (The Garden)* by the British composer **Richard Ayres**, who is based in Amsterdam.

Wedding, written for six female voices, is a succession of tableaux reflecting the marriage rituals of Serbian women. The composer wrote her own libretto in Serbian on a foundation of folk poetry. The sound of speech itself gives the purely vocal composition rhythm and a sonic charm. During the opera, the bride and her five bridesmaids pass through various phases from joyful and angry farewells to freedom, all the way to a yearning anticipation of the future. **Jurij Galatenko**, the choir master of the Ostrava opera, served as musical director, and all six singers (**Markéta Schaffartzik**, **Patrícia Smoláková**, **Eva Marie Kořená**, **Ivana Ambrúsová**,



Lucie Hubená, and **Tetiana Hryha**) gave phenomenal performances under his direction. Tóth's *Man in a Space Suit* is an apocalyptic vision of the Earth after it has deviated from its orbit. The composer **Miroslav Tóth** and his librettist – **Michaela Rosová** – were inspired by the true story of the astronaut Eugen Andrew Cernan – an American with Czechoslovak roots, who visited Vysoká nad Kysucou, a village in northern Slovakia where his ancestors came from, several times during communist rule. Tóth and Rosová transformed his conflict with the communist authorities and his search for his ancestors into the situation of a person who is looking for their place on an Earth doomed to extinction. The musical and dramatic layers of Tóth's composition corresponded perfectly to the multi-storied spaces of the former compressor hall at Důl Hlubina (Hlubina Mine) in the Lower Vítkovice area. The cast – **Andrea Miltner** and **Pasi Mäkelä** – was excellent. The music for three trombones, bass guitar, harpsichord, and electronics was conducted by the composer.

The last performance at the Ostrava festival was a stage rendition of Richard Ayres' *No. 50 (The Garden)*. Bass **Joshua Bloom** excelled in this theatrical installation by **Jiří Nekvasil** and **David Bazika** and the "home ensemble" **Ostravská banda** played excellently under the leadership of conductor **Bruno Ferrandis**. Ayres' poetic and humorous composition is a clear parallel to his earlier "concert come alive", *No. 42 (In the Alps)*,

which the festival presented four years ago. In *No. 50*, the composer added electronic sounds and wrote all the parts for a single performer. The Czech premiere took place on the 30th of August 2020 in Ostrava's Jiří Myron Theatre.

Coffee, Books, Opera: Small Dramas in Functionalist Scenery

Hausopera, a collective based in Brno, focuses on staging site-specific operas composed directly for particular spaces. It will soon complete its *Trilogy for the City*, dedicated to significant functionalist buildings in Brno. The first in the trilogy was the opera *Poslední pólo* (*The Last Polo*) by composer **Marko Ivanović**, whose world premiere took place in September 2018 in a pool at the public spa on Rašínova Street in Brno. This year, the group continued with a staging of *Hra o Malinu* (*A Game of Raspberry*) by composer **Lukáš Sommer**, which was pre-premiered as part of Prague's Festival of Musical Theatre Opera 2020 in the Řehoř Samsa Bookshop. The premiere proper is to take place on the 16th of October in Brno's Michal Ženíšek Bookshop, for which it was originally composed. The same day will also see the world premiere of *Věčná slečna Bledá* (*The Eternal Miss Pale*) by **Markéta Dvořáková** and **Ivo Medek**. The director of both of this year's premieres is **Jiří Nekvasil**, set and costumes are by **Zuzana and Tomáš Rusín**. The librettist for all



Richard Ayres: No. 50 (*The Garden*)

three operas in the trilogy is **Josef Škarka**, founder of Hausopera.

Second City: An Alternative Reality for Introverts and Outsiders

In the Czech context, composer **Ondřej Kyas** stands on the margins of musical life, but he cannot complain about the frequency with which his works are performed. In the vast majority of cases, however, his stage and symphonic compositions are presented by **Ensemble Opera Diversa**, which he established over twenty years ago along with the playwright, librettist, and theatre researcher Pavel Drábek. In its early days, the ensemble clearly defined itself against operatic conventions and first became popular through productions of mini-operas presented on the staircase of Spolek, a café in Brno. Kyas and Drábek created a number of operatic sketches together, as well as five evening-length operas and two radio plays.

Kyas began working on *Second City* some six years ago. The eponymous novel by Michal Ajvaz fascinated him from the moment he read it, he says, and he began working on the opera without a clear idea of who would perform it and where. It seems almost mad that he did not even ask for the author's permission to adapt his novel. With a smile, Kyas likens this to the opera Šárka, which the young Leoš Janáček composed on a text by

Julius Zeyer – also without the librettist's knowledge. Zeyer, however, did not give his permission even *ex post*, and waved off the then-unknown Janáček with a high degree of arrogance. Unlike Zeyer, Ajvaz was accommodating and the score of the opera is now ready for performance.

The opera *Second City* creates a situation in which it is not entirely clear whether things are happening in reality or in a dream, whether its environments are real or only metaphorical, and where its protagonist – called simply A – is going. Kyas likens his journey through alternative realities to his own outsider position and introverted personality. The weighty libretto was assembled by the composer himself, making this his first foray into the world of opera without the aid of Pavel Drábek. Kyas set the text as a recitative, without large melodic arches, arias, and ensembles. We might describe it as similar to various operas composed in Florence around the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries, but Kyas names the Slovak rock musician Dežo Ursiny (1947–1995) – specifically his settings of poems by Ivan Štrpka – as his model for working with text. Kyas likens the dream-like atmosphere of *Second City* to the Martinů's opera *Juliette*.

Ensemble Opera Diversa will present the world premiere of *Second City* on the 16th of December 2020 as a staged concert in the Mozart Hall of Brno's Reduta Theatre.

I Want to Develop the Czech Tradition

CONDUCTOR TOMÁŠ BRAUNER

We had originally planned to speak only of music. About future plans. About Tomáš Brauner. But the world turned upside down. So this interview – conducted at the end of May 2020, a few days before Tomáš's concert with the Prague Symphony Orchestra at the Prague Spring – had to begin with some notes on the exceptional months that preceded it.

Where were you when concerts were cancelled and how did you experience this period?

I was rehearsing with the Pardubice Philharmonic and Václav Hudeček. We were getting ready for the opening concert of the Pardubice Summer of Music festival, which was to take place the following day. The abrupt cancellation was a surprise, of course. At the time, no one expected this would last several months. As for a general evaluation – I didn't count how many cancellations there were. But there's the subscribers' concerts with the Bohuslav Martinů Philharmonic Orchestra in Zlín, two evenings with FOK (the Prague Symphony Orchestra) performing Dvořák's *Svatební košile* (known in English as *The Spectre's Bride* – editor's note), and others too... and cancellations are still coming in. After the initial shock, I tried to get my bearings. Me and my wife, of course, had to work out the family; children – school and kindergarten. That kept us busy for a while. When we discovered there would, in fact, be a lot more time, I started de-cluttering my agenda, my score collection, and my household. I spent a lot of time on this! I had always looked forward to the activities falling under the label "when I have some free time". Of course, I ended up making my life more difficult, as I kept finding scores left in boxes from our recent move. Like Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, which I began studying immediately. Then I found *Parsifal*, that set me back a few hours too. Maybe it's score study I'll never get to use, but that's really not a problem with Wagner. I wasn't really dragged down into depression by this break, as I still have the vision of future seasons in front of me. We have much to look forward to. And what's more – and this is even more important – I could spend more time with my beautiful family and settle down a little.





PHOTO: PETRA HAJSKÁ

Do you study scores you aren't actively planning to perform during normal operation?

Sometimes, I'll look through some of the more complex scores up to a year in advance. I might not study them regularly after that, but I know my way around. Even a few years later, these pre-preparations are a great help. I have to say I have quite a decent musical memory. When I used to play oboe in various orchestras, I'd usually remember what I'd played. Not just the oboe part, but the entire score, which I always had tucked away somewhere. I was interested in the entire context of the piece. That above all else, in fact. I kept looking under the conductors' hands. You could even say I studied the oboe with a view of conducting.

When did you decide to become a conductor?

I remember it exactly. I was ten years old, I was at home, and we were watching Leonard Bernstein's legendary programme with the New York Philharmonic. He was explaining to his young audience how it all worked. And, most importantly: how to play the orchestra. Like a huge instrument. I liked that a lot. My parents convinced me to

learn a smaller instrument first. I was already taking piano lessons, but we decided I'd try a wind instrument too. So I chose the oboe – I had the closest relationship to it thanks to my father, Jiří Krejčí. My parents, however, were not exactly over the moon. Beginning on the oboe is a long and arduous process. That's why I think so many oboists become conductors. As we make our reeds, we have time to think...

There was another event that was decisive for my career as a conductor: I was seventeen and I went to the Viennese State Opera to see Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*. As we had virtually no money, it was a great adventure. Donald Runnicles was conducting. I was fascinated by the ceremony of getting into the theatre: five hours waiting outside, then two hours inside, and – in the case of Wagner – five hours standing on the gallery. We had tickets in the corners of the side boxes, so we saw nothing. Except the conductor – and I didn't take my eyes off of him for the duration of the performance. I was utterly charmed by the sound, as well as the entire atmosphere. This experience was decisive! And it's part of the reason why I so enjoyed returning to Vienna as an exchange from the Prague Academy,

where I was studying conducting with Professor Radomil Eliška. I just love the atmosphere in Vienna: the Philharmonic, the Opera... When I was there during the 2007/2008 academic year, I saw over sixty operas and thirty concerts. And I attended many public dress rehearsals too, as well as rehearsals of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra – I had an arrangement with Fabio Luisi, the chief conductor at the time. My studies were hugely important for me. I was considering continuing at postgraduate level, but I got an offer from Plzeň (Pilsen) to act as assistant to the chief conductor of the opera – I was recommended from Vienna by the conductor Ivan Pařík.

When did you definitively choose conducting over the oboe?

It happened while I was studying at the Academy. I had to intermit my oboe studies for health reasons and the recommended convalescent period was quite long. Returning to the oboe after two years, at the level demanded by the school, was hard. Decision time came and it certainly wasn't easy, even though I was basically counting on this since the start. I gradually began getting more opportunities to conduct. After Vienna and Plzeň, I became a guest conductor at the Prague State Opera. At thirty years old, I could conduct the masterpieces of Verdi and Puccini. I accepted it all with gratitude. Then I became the principal guest conductor of the Pilsen Philharmonic and later its principal conductor. But making ends meet at the beginning of my conducting career was difficult: I worked as a driver for the Prague Spring festival or as a night-time hotel receptionists.

And your first symphonic concert?

That was while I was still at the academy in Prague. From the second year onwards, every year would end with a symphony orchestra concert, with orchestras from Pardubice, Teplice, České Budějovice, Plzeň, Olomouc, or Ostrava. Priceless experience. For the first time in my life, I could put together an evening-length programme – and I still remember what it was. In my second year, with the Pardubice Philharmonic, I performed Mendelssohn's first symphony in C major, Bohuslav Martinů's *Rhapsody* for viola and orchestra with Jiří Pinkas, and Petr Eben's *Pražské nokturno* (*Prague Nocturne*). I later worked with the Czech Chamber Philharmonic and the Czech National Symphony Orchestra. I did a beautiful concert with them nine years ago for which I could select the programme myself: Ives' *Unanswered Question*, Ravel's *Piano Concert for the Left Hand*,

and Rachmaninoff's second. That was my premiere in the Smetana Hall of the Municipal House.

What's your dream programme? Except for Wagner's operas, that is.

That's an awfully difficult question. Especially as I keep enriching myself with new repertoire. There are more and more options. But I'll admit I feel an affinity for late Romanticism; the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. I always enjoyed programming composers of this period. But there are many names on that list! I'd hate to offend someone by leaving a name out. Of Czech composers, I have to name Bohuslav Martinů, Josef Suk, Josef Bohuslav Foerster, Zdeněk Fibich – composers that aren't played here as often as they should be. Antonín Dvořák, Bedřich Smetana, and Leoš Janáček are, of course, a Czech conductor's dearest duties. Not only their selected works, but everything, including the chamber work (though of course, that doesn't concern conductors). I also have a passion for Russian music, its rawness and nostalgic atmosphere, as well as the complex historical context. On the opposite end of the spectrum, I admire French and American music – Charles Ives, for instance, who really gets minimal recognition here. As we're talking of contexts, I am fascinated by the fact that Dvořák and Ives wrote during the same period. How amazingly different their work is!

Let us turn to conducting technique. You get a score you've never done. How do you start? With the music or the extra-musical context?

I'll take Schönberg's *Verklärte Nacht* – which I just did with FOK for Prague Spring – as an example. First, I was interested in the circumstances under which the piece was created. The information just piles up: the date of composition, the reworking – that's the foundation. Then I arrived at Richard Dehmel's poem *Two People*. I was "happy like a little boy" when I found it in a secluded little secondhand book store in Prague for thirty crowns. An edition from 1927 to boot! Even Zdeněk Tlamicaj's introduction is a work of literature: the circumstances of production; the mystery of the text; various translational problems. So I started with the book. I took the time to read the poem properly. The narrative is different – Schönberg took only what he needed and what spoke to him. This helped me a lot in understanding the score. We played the 1943 string orchestra version, but of course, I was also interested in the original sextet – I studied the differences in detail. It's a difficult, detailed score. And this is how I study every time. You could say I start from the preface.

However, I'm rarely satisfied, as there are many information channels and I always miss something.

Does studying the texts help you in rehearsal?

Certainly – I saw it clearly when we were rehearsing Suk's *Asrael* with FOK. It helped us to talk about inspirations. It was a form of guide for how to read the work correctly. The specifics of sound are our livelihood, but it's also important to feel beyond them – in the case of *Asrael*, to feel when the "angel descends from the heavens and carries the soul away". When I share this with the orchestra, I feel I'm saving myself a lot of words. Returning to Schönberg: the score to *Verklärte Nacht* is conceived in such a maximalist way that there isn't much room for discussion. We can contemplate on the tempi the composer wrote. In this regard, it's interesting to listen to composers performing their own works. Gustav Mahler playing his Fifth on piano, for instance? He barely adheres to the notation... It's sweet. So perhaps we can bring something of our own to the table too.

Returning to Suk's Asrael: do you consider it your fateful work?

I do. But there are others, too! Shostakovich's eighth, for instance, or Mahler's ninth and Strauss's operas. But I still remember when *Asrael* really entranced me. I was driving home one day and, as I approached my destination, *Asrael* began playing on the radio. I parked the car, but I only made it home an hour later. I was utterly incapable of extricating myself from the music.

You are now mostly an orchestral conductor, but you started with opera. How do these two worlds coexist in your life today?

I started with opera because that's the offer that came in the post. But it soon balanced out with orchestral conducting. And I was happy for it. Today, I mostly work with symphony orchestras, as attested to by my positions as principal conductor. Unfortunately, time constraints prevent me from dedicating more time to opera. I miss it often. I love inhaling the atmosphere of the theatre; that fragrance. I grew up in it – I was surrounded by opera in Vienna. But I'm not pushing for operatic work. I try to be humble enough to accept the offers I get. I always liked that conductors took opera as a natural component of their profession. The division wasn't that strong. Now I feel it quite palpably. There are conductors who don't want to conduct opera, which I don't quite understand. But let's take Kirill Petrenko, who went

from the Bavarian Opera to the Berlin Philharmonic. Operatic and orchestral conducting are clearly not in opposition. They naturally complement each other.

Over the last few months, we have witnessed more concerts online than in person. How do you compare the two?

The main difference is that you can't rewind a live concert. This unique, unrepeatable nature of a live performance is miraculous. I certainly make use of the opportunity to watch concerts around the world thanks to streaming services and online archives. I am always interested in different interpretations. I have a rich recording collection at home and I work with that. I have quite a good memory – I only need to hear a concert once to know what was different. It's a good work tool for me. But in streamed concerts, I lose the general feeling; the atmosphere; the reactions of the audience. Though we should certainly be grateful for streaming in these complicated times, it will never replace live performances. Although it might not seem that way now, I believe that a hunger for community and a unique, unrepeatable experience will persevere. The number of likes on Facebook, for instance, is terribly misleading. They don't mean anyone saw the entire concert; experienced it. A reaction to a live performance, whatever it may be, is always more valuable. The experience is key. We all need it. That's the mission of live art in general. And the personal confrontation, too – video really doesn't allow for that. I can't imagine people sitting down for an hour and a half in front of their computer, calm and ready to forget their everyday worries. In the concert hall and the theatre: you're immersed; absorbed. You *want* to perceive fully, to na extent, you *have* to, and that's effective treatment; mental cleansing. That's why people will always attend cultural events. At least I hope so.

Do you have any rituals before and after a concert?

I recently realised that I do: I'm always in my dressing room long in advance and I have a walk around the stage while it's still empty. I did this in the theatre and I do the same at concerts. I walk to the conductor's podium, I look at the empty auditorium and I breathe in the space. I also make sure that everything is in order. Then, it's just technical preparations: arrangements with the soloists (including practical things, like whether we walk on from the left or the right); we remind ourselves of some details in the score. This is all about an hour and a half before the concert. I try to be strict in this respect. After the concert, I usually drink a litre of water and go sit down somewhere

– if we're not repeating the same programme the following day, that is. It's not as established a ritual as before the show, but I'm always so full of the music that I can't go to sleep. I think back to the concert. I revisit particular moments. It's all reverberating inside me – sometimes longer than I'd like! It's unthinkable for me to go to the hotel shortly after the performance. I intentionally try not to rush my departure from the dressing room. Everything takes a while. And as for the possible reprise, one needs to be on guard. The feeling of greater ease can be deceptive. After all, we have a new audience, new reactions, a new atmosphere. It's all new!

What do you carry with you from your previous symphonic positions?

With the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra, apart from the beautiful concerts, I have to mention the recording experience, particularly the complete set of Martinů piano concerti. Thanks to this cycle, I had the opportunity to acquaint myself with the concerti that aren't programmed very often, like the first piano concerto or the concerto for two pianos. And I had the chance to perform both works in Plzeň and Zlín, too! In fact, the same is true of his overtures, like *Thunderbolt P-47* or *Half-Time*, which I performed with the Slovak Philharmonic and also in Zlín. I also recorded with the Pilsen Philharmonic. Recording sessions there are not as abundant as with the Radio Symphony, but it's still part of the orchestra's profile. In Plzeň, I recorded Martinů's complete cello concerti with Petr Nouzovský. And I performed the *Concertino* and the First Cello Concerto several times after that. In Plzeň, we also applied ourselves to mapping composers of the region, such as Karel Pexidr, Jiří Bezděk, and others. It's quite a substantial compositional community, but I focused on Pexidr: I recorded a lot of his symphonic music, as well as the piano and violin concerti. He is not only a composer, but also a lawyer, man of letters, and philosopher. And a hunter too! He turned ninety last November. The last position I can judge is in Zlín. I also try to programme works and composers who have not been played there in the past. The dramaturg there is supportive of these intentions. Next season, we'll perform Ives, Ligeti, and a world premiere by Lukáš Sommer.

And your vision for the FOK Prague Symphony Orchestra?

I'd like to grasp and develop the Czech tradition and thus follow in the footsteps of the Czech principal conductors of FOK who were the true builders of the ensemble. They all left a deep and

significant footprint, whether in the archive or in the recordings that, I think, I know quite well: Smetáček, Bělohlávek, Kout. I'd like to breath new life into the orchestra, opening up new possibilities in the programming. Not violently, of course – gently. Incidentally, I've had ties to FOK since my childhood, as my mother took me to concerts, and my father, who knew Václav Smetáček very well, would often relate many anecdotes about him. And I also feel something connects me to Jiří Kout. We both worked at the theatre in Plzeň. I often think about the conductors of FOK and I have immense respect for them all. I'd like to use the orchestra's potential to the full; to place it safely among the best ensembles in Czech and European cultural life. This, of course, doesn't just depend on the principal conductor. The responsibility lies with the entire team, which should work like a perfect Swiss watch. I believe we'll manage to maintain this position and bring the audience unique experiences and a feeling of absolute devotion to a single calling for which we, as musicians, live to the fullest.

Tomáš Brauner

is among the most sought-after conductors of his generation. Starting in the 2020/2021 season, he is the principal conductor of the FOK Prague Symphony Orchestra. He has held the post of principal conductor of the Bohuslav Martinů Philharmonic Orchestra in Zlín since 2018, as well as acting as principal guest conductor at the Pilsen Philharmonic, where he was principal conductor from 2013 to 2018. From 2014 to 2018, he was also the principal guest conductor of the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra. He regularly collaborates with leading symphony orchestras and opera houses including the Czech Philharmonic, PKF – Prague Philharmonia, Münchner Symphoniker, Deutsche Radio Philharmonie, Nürnberger Symphoniker, the Cracow Philharmonic, National Radio Orchestra Romania, and the Slovak Philharmonic. He began his opera conducting career at the J. K. Tyl Theatre in Plzeň. 2008 saw his debut at the Prague State Opera: Verdi's *Otello*. This was followed by Massenet's *Don Quichotte*, Rossini's *Barber of Seville*, Puccini's *La bohème* and *Tosca*, Verdi's *Nabucco*, Mozart's *Magic Flute*, and Bizet's *Carmen*. Brauner was born in Prague in 1978. He studied oboe and conducting at the Prague Conservatory. In 2005, he graduated from the conducting programme at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. This was followed by an exchange trip to the Viennese Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst.

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CZECH MUSIC EVERYDAY

EVENTS AT HOME AND ABROAD

IN THE SUMMER OF 2020

Except for large popular music festivals, concerts in the Czech Republic this summer ran more or less without restrictions despite the ongoing global pandemic. In response to the improving situation, most protective measures – like compulsory physical distancing between audience members or face masks indoors – were lifted. Listeners, having been confined exclusively to internet-streamed and radio-broadcast concerts, returned in droves to our concert halls to enjoy live sound and a direct interaction with the performers.

The first group of new Czech pieces was presented at the thirty-first edition of the International Festival of Contemporary Art with a Spiritual Orientation, Forfest. These were followed by premieres at Smetana's Litomyšl, Kuks Musical Summer, Theatrum Kuks, Dvořák's Prague, and the Haydn Music Festival. A key event for contemporary music in the Czech Republic, the New Opera Days Ostrava festival, took place two months later than originally planned, offering two premieres of works by Czech composers: *Hibiki, Hibiki, vzhmo!* by Marek Kepř and *A Study of Aphasia* by Michal Rataj and Katharina Schmitt. As for the successes of Czech music abroad, we must point out *move04*, written by Miroslav Srnka as a compulsory piece for the finals of the prestigious Gustav Mahler Conducting Competition in Bamberg.

Whether this musically eventful summer will be succeeded by an equally stimulating autumn remains to be seen. September has been marked by constantly rising infection numbers, news of the inevitable second wave of the pandemic and the related restrictions, throwing all plans into uncertainty. Let us wish good luck to Czech music and especially Czech musicians, who find themselves in an unenviable situation.

19 June 2020, Church of St John the Baptist, Kroměříž. Forfest. **Martin Wiesner: *Miniature*, Josef Adamík: *Monologue*, Jana Vöröšová: *On the Surface* (world premieres).** Jiří Mráz – clarinet.

20 June 2020, Orlovna Gallery, Kroměříž. Forfest. **Jan Vrkoč: *A Silent Prayer* (world premiere).** Jakub Sršeň – baritone, Czech Philharmonic Quartet.

20 June 2020, Orlovna Gallery, Kroměříž. Forfest. **Ivan Boreš, Vojtěch Vrtiška: *Introduction; Outro* (world premieres).** Sanity Guitar Duo.

21 June 2020, Church of St Maurice, Kroměříž. Forfest. **Jiří Gemrot: *Angel Apparition, a scene for violin and organ*, Karel Hiner: *Holy Spirit Meditation* (world premieres).** Bohuslav Matoušek – violin, Karel Hiner – organ.

22 June 2020, Orlovna Gallery, Kroměříž. Forfest. **Vít Zouhar: *Descensus*, ISHA trio: *Beaute*, Vít Zouhar: *Seufzer* (world premieres).** ISHA trio.

27 June 2020, Church of St Maurice, Kroměříž. Forfest. **Karel Martínek: *Improvised Triptych* (world premiere).** Karel Martínek – organ.

JUNE-SEPTEMBER



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Jan Kučera: *The Gingerbread House*

1 July 2020, Lhotka outdoor swimming pool, Prague. Music for Sirens... micro-concerts with the emergency siren test. **Petr Wajsar: *Develooper* (world premiere)**. Concept/music: Petr Wajsar. Petr Wajsar (Develooper) – electronics, Štěpán Janoušek – trombone.

1 July 2020, church of St John the Baptist, Kroměříž. Forfest. **Michal Rataj: *Ars Acustica Choralis* (world premiere)**. Jiří Hodina – vocals, Petr Kalfus – saxophone, bass clarinet, Michal Rataj – live electronics.

4 July 2020, Konzerthalle Bamberg, Bamberg, Germany. The Mahler Competition: final. **Miroslav Srnka: *move04* (world premiere)**. Bamberger Symphoniker, conducted by the competition's three finalists: Finnegan Downie Dear, Thomas Jung, and Wilson Ng.

5 July 2020, Piarist Church of the Finding of the Holy Cross, Litomyšl. Smetana's Litomyšl.

Jiří Gemrot: *No Promises. A cycle for mixed choir* (world premiere). Martinů Voices, conductor: Lukáš Vasilek.

17 July 2020, Atrium na Žižkově, Prague. VoicET. **Ian Mikyska: *Bare*, Petr Hora: *Verbal Shapes*, Anna Vtípilová: *Broken Shadows* (world premieres)**. Ensemble Terrible.

1 August 2020, Church of the Holy Trinity, Kuks. Kuks Musical Summer. **Jiří Gemrot: *Variations on "Přelud"* (world premiere)**. Vilém Veverka – oboe, Kateřina Englichová – harp.

5 August 2020, Institute of Organic Chemistry and Biochemistry of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague. Music for Sirens... micro-concerts with the emergency siren test. **Petr Cígler: *Siren 2020* (world premiere)**. Kamila Motková, Anna Škreptáčková – oboe, Lukáš Motka, Stanislav Penk – alt trombone, Lukáš Brabec – percussion, conductor: Peter Vrábel

13 August 2020, U Salvátora Church, Prague. **Hanuš Bartoň: *Timelessness* (world premiere)**. BERG Orchestra, conductor: Peter Vrábel

23 August 2020, Church of the Holy Trinity, Kuks. Theatrum Kuks 2020. **Peter Graham: *Música de oscuridad y luz* (world premiere)**. Aftas y levadura.

28 August 2020, Antonín Dvořák Theatre, Ostrava. NODO. **Marek Keprt: *Hibiki, Hibiki, vzhmo!* Gustative-olfactory chamber (non)opera (world premiere)**. Libretto: Marek Keprt, directed by: Petr Odo Macháček, music director: Petr Kotík. Cast: Markéta Israel Večeřová, Vendula Černá, Helena Kalambová – soprano, Michal Marhold – bass, Zdeňka Brychtová, Matěj Kohout – actors, Michaela Raisová – dance, Ostravská banda.

29 August 2020, BrickHouse (Důl Hlubina), Ostrava. NODO. **A Study of Aphasia. (world premiere)**. Composer and music director: Michal Rataj, librettist and director: Katharina Schmitt. Cast: Katalin Károlyi – mezzosoprano, Ivana Uhlířová – actress, Tiburtina Ensemble, Andrej Gál – violoncello, percussion.



PHOTO: ANEŽKA MEDOVA

Tomáš Reindl: *Seirénes*

2 September 2020, Invalidovna / Studio ALTA, Prague. Music for Sirens... micro-concerts with emergency siren test. **Tomáš Reindl: *Seirénes* (world premiere)**. Helena Velická – violoncello, Anna Kellerová – double bass, Tomáš Reindl – electronics.

5 September 2020, New Stage, National Theatre, Prague. Dvořák's Prague International Music Festival.

Jan Kučera: *The Gingerbread House* (world premiere of a children's opera). Libretto: Ladislava Janků Smítková, directed by: Tereza Petrášková, music director: Anna Novotná-Pešková. Children's Opera Prague. Further performances: 5 Oct, 21 Dec, and 10 Jan 2021.

7 September 2020, Convent of St Agnes, Prague. "Solo for Viola and Piano". **Zbyněk Matějů: *Virus, concerto for viola and chamber orchestra* (world premiere)**. Jitka Hosprová – viola, Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra, conductor: Chuhei Iwasaki.

15 September 2020, Galerie Kvalitář, Prague. **Ian Mikyska: *Coincidences – Six Pieces for Jiří Matějů* (world premiere)**. Ian Mikyska – viola da gamba, recorders, banjo, Michal Wróblewski – bass clarinet, Milan Jakeš – violin.

15 September 2020, Chapel of the Old City Prison, Brno. "Unclear Contours: Concert with Milan Paľa".

Pavel Zemek Novák: *Homage to Saint Francis for strings* (world premiere). Ensemble Opera Diversa, conductor: Gabriela Tardonová.

18 September 2020, Chotěšov Monastery. Haydn Music Festival. **Martin Hybler: *Kickdown for solo oboe, strings, and jazz rhythm section* (world premiere)**. Vilém Veverka – oboe, Ultimate W Band.

19 September 2020, Floating Stage on the Moldau, Slavonic Island, Prague. Strings of Autumn.

Jiří Slavík: *Moldau on Moldau (after B. Smetana)* – world premiere. Daniel Hope – violin, Epoque Orchestra.

20 September 2020, Chateau, Velké Meziříčí. Cententus Moraviae. **Milan Slimáček: *Trio for flute, violoncello and harpsichord* (world premiere)**. Jan Ostrý – flute, Petra Machková Čadová – violoncello, Barbara Maria Willi – harpsichord.

21 September 2020, NoD, Prague. "let-it-flow". **Michaela Pálka Plachká & Tomáš Pálka: *Rustles, Episodes* (world premiere)**. Michaela Pálka Plachká, Tomáš Pálka – percussion.

23 September 2020, Chapel of St Apollonia, Měcholupy u Předslavi. Haydn Music Festival. "Inspiration: Bach". **Václav Špíral: *Partita no. 2 for violin solo* (1996, world premiere)**. Soňa Bařtípánová – violin.

24 September 2020, Reduta, Olomouc. **Marek Kepř: *Opeření, opelnění, okluznění, zmotýlnění – acoustical fan for the 75th anniversary of the establishment of the Moravian Philharmonic Orchestra* (world premiere)**. Moravian Philharmonic Orchestra, conductor: Jakub Klecker.

26 September 2020, in front of Josef Pekař's native home, Malý Rohozec. Celebration of the 150th anniversary of the birth of Josef Pekař. **Martin Hybler: *A Look into Antiquity, op. 49 for brass quintet* (world premiere)**. Absolute Brass Quintet.

Kelly St. Pierre: *Bedřich Smetana – Myth, Music, and Propaganda*

A nation becomes a nation in large part through its symbols, and music can be one of these symbols. And so too the Czech nation has its musical symbols, one of the most popular being Bedřich Smetana – both his music and his character. The day of his death traditionally inaugurates the Prague Spring festival, the number four at the end of his year of birth and death served as inspiration for celebrations of the “Year of Czech Music”, the fanfares from his opera *Libuše* signal the arrival of the president of the republic, the opening of his symphonic poem *Vltava* welcomes travellers after they land at Prague’s airport or after they arrive at the central railway station. Even those with a minimal interest in classical music are therefore confronted with Smetana as an embodiment of musical Czech-ness.

And, as is often the case, symbols are maintained in the general consciousness through stereotypical repetition, not through critical analysis. All the more so, an analysis of this kind is useful every once in a while. While our own musicologists often focus on detailed analyses of compositions and historical circumstances, a view from outside can help us understand the mechanisms that make the composer and his music into these national symbols. Czech music has (or had) several long-term “observers from outside”; academics who devote continual attention to it. Let us mention the recently deceased John Tyrrell, and also Brian Locke and Michael Beckermann, whose article *In Search of Czechness in Music* (19th-Century Music, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1986, pp. 61–73) is among the most commonly cited texts on the topic of the national character of Czech music. These ranks have now come to include the American musicologist Kelly St. Pierre with her book *Bedřich Smetana: Myth, Music, and Propaganda*, published at the end of last year as a follow-up to the author’s 2012 doctoral dissertation. As the title suggests, St. Pierre’s interest is in the process through which the myth of Bedřich

Smetana as national composer was established. It is therefore not a complex monograph – though the composer might well deserve one, as the only monographs about him published in English are from the 1970s; one by Brian Large and another by John Clapham. St. Pierre divided her work into two central questions: in the first, split into three chapters, she examines the context in which Smetana worked in the 19th century and the role played by *Umělecká beseda* (Art’s Group), an organisation established in 1863 for which he served as the first president of the musical section. The second question, addressed in two chapters, focuses on the 20th century, analysing the manner in which Smetana was written about and how his reputation was constructed. A central role in this section is played by Zdeněk Nejedlý, a man whose activities in bringing together art, science, and politics significantly impacted Czech culture in the second half of the 20th century, and the musicologist Vladimír Helfert. The first three chapters show how the relationship between national and world culture was perceived in the second half of the 19th century and how opinions on the character of Czech

BEDŘICH SMETANA

MYTH, MUSIC, AND PROPAGANDA



KELLY ST. PIERRE

music were formed. Smetana was described as a cosmopolitan composer, which was supported – among other things – by his relationships with Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner. One chapter in the book is devoted to each of these composers, both of whom exerted a significant influence on Smetana. Thanks to her command of Czech, the author could base her work on a rigorous study of primary sources and secondary literature. In the three chapters exploring the 19th century, she reconstructs scenes from the life of Smetana and his contemporaries, analysing motivations, and demonstrating how Czech-ness was perceived at the time. She describes two basic forms: horizontal and vertical. The first emphasises catching up with the world and a certain degree of cosmopolitanism, and, in musical terms, an affinity for the compositional approach of Richard Wagner. The second insists on national distinctiveness and differentiation from other cultures, pointing to folk music as a primary inspiration for its musical symbolism. While *Umělecká beseda* presented Smetana as a Czech but nevertheless cosmopolitan composer bringing together the best of Wagner and Liszt, Helfert,

Nejedlý, and the Hudební klub (Music Club) they established rejected this conception as reactionary, emphasising instead the composer's independence from external sources of inspiration. On the example of Helfert's text *The Motif of Smetana's "Vyšehrad"* from 1917, Kelly St. Pierre demonstrates how important it was for Smetana's apologists to bring together the music and the events of the composer's life. The symbol is the Vyšehrad motif and the question is whether Smetana arrived at it at the moment he lost his hearing, before it, or after it. The author shows that Helfert emphasised the similarity between this motif and a motif from the opera *Libuše*, while he avoided possible relationships to similar motifs from Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*. The final chapter is devoted to the figure of Zdeněk Nejedlý, but placing his Smetana-focused works into a broader context: first the debate on the meaning of Czech history, whose most significant participants were Tomáš Masaryk and Jaroslav Goll, and then the postwar ideologisation of Czechoslovak culture. Helfert and Nejedlý shared a tendency to present Smetana as a national prophet or martyr and this chapter analyses their rhetoric. With Nejedlý's return from the Soviet Union and the beginning of his active participation in communist politics, Smetana becomes an inspiration for the officially sanctioned doctrine known as socialist realism. The conclusion of this chapter briefly demonstrates how the symbolic value of the composer gradually disappeared after the fall of the communist regime, while research and publishing activities surrounding his work were allowed to develop more freely. Of course, many of the arguments in the book can be contested, which is determined already by the nature of its topic. However, there is no denying that following a detailed study of her sources, Kelly St. Pierre asks questions that stand on the edges of the interests of Czech musicology. And the stereotypes are kept alive. For proof, we need only look to the event mentioned in the introduction to this text: the Year of Czech Music. In 2014, the organisers pronounced proudly on their website: "Music is a representative part of Czech cultural identity. Names like Antonín Dvořák, Bedřich Smetana, Leoš Janáček, Bohuslav Martinů, Josef Suk, Jan Dismas Zelenka, and others are reliable markers which people worldwide recognise as 'Czech'." Confronted by slogans like this one, we should ask why, how, when, and by whom any music is recognised as Czech.

Antonio Rosetti

The Short Life of a Talented Musician

According to a (rather hyperbolic) saying, in the 18th century, the Czech Lands were the conservatory of Europe. When we consider European musical history of this period in more detail, we find records of rather a large number of musicians and composers from Bohemia – particularly as the Classical style became more firmly established – in positions around the continent, from Great Britain to Russia and from Italy up to the shores of the Baltic Sea. What was known as the Czech musical migration was, at the time, truly an important element of artistic life and development in Europe. The work of some of these figures has survived in concert halls to this day, though they are often not programmed very often and the work of many of these composers remains unknown to the broader musical public. Among those composers whose works continue receiving performances today is Antonio Rosetti. He was among the important and revered figures whose popularity with listeners placed him boldly along the name of such giants as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Joseph Haydn.

From the North of Bohemia to Germany

Antonio Rosetti, originally Franz Anton Rössler (sometimes known today by the Czech variant of his name, František Antonín Rössler-Rosetti) was born in 1746 in the northern Bohemian town of Mimoň. The exact date of his birth is unknown, but records at the local parish register tell us he was baptized on the 26th of October. From the age of seven, he studied in the seminary in Prague – probably the Jesuit college – where he was also educated in the art of music. He accepted the ordination in 1765, but he later asked the Roman Curia to release him from priestly service in order to allow him to devote himself fully and professionally to music.

In the early 1770s, Rössler was probably in the service of the Russian Count Alexey Grigoriyevich Orlov-Chesmensky (1737–1808) as a musician in his regiment. At the time, Orlov was experiencing a rapid societal ascent after having crushed the Ottoman fleet at a naval battle near the island of Chios in July 1770. In 1773, Rössler accepted employment at the court of Count Ernst von Ottingen-Wallerstein (1748–1802). If we consult the court accounts, we find the composer

listed from November 1773 onwards as a servant, and from July of the following year as double bassist. It was around this time that he began using the Italian variant of his name, Francesco Antonio Rosetti, or Antonio Rosetti for short.

For Rosetti, his stay in the Ottingen-Wallerstein band marked his establishment as a respected and well-known composer in the countries of central and western Europe. Since 1776, copies of his works were on offer from the Leipzig-based publishing house Breitkopf & Härtel. His music was also popular with audiences, which was reflected in the demand for printed publications of his compositions. The first, in 1779, was a set of three symphonies by Rosetti put out by the Paris publisher Le Menu et Boyer, followed in the 1780s by publications with other renowned publishers including André, Artaria, Hummel, Bossler, and others. Even though he was bound by his duties as a double bassist at the Count's – and, after the year 1774, Princely – court in Wallerstein, he spent extended periods elsewhere. In the spring of 1775, he spent three weeks at the margrave's court at Ansbach, in 1781, it was five months in Paris, during which time his symphonies became part of the stable repertoire

of the renowned concert cycle *Le Concert Spirituel*. He attained renown at the Wallerstein court and was named court *Capellmeister* of the Princely orchestra in 1785. The following year, his works were highly successful in London, where they were included in concert cycles organised by Johann Peter Salomon (1745–1815), the celebrated musician and impresario who later – after Rosetti’s death – ensured the enormous English success of Joseph Haydn (1732–1802).

After being absolved of his priestly duties, Rosetti did not choose to remain celibate for the rest of his life, and instead married Rosina Neher on the 28th of January 1777. She bore him three daughters.

Despite all his success, Rosetti was constantly in financial trouble. He therefore decided to leave Wallerstein, and in 1789, he entered the services of Duke Friedrich Franz I von Mecklenburg-Schwerin. This was during a brief spell when the court of the Mecklenburg-Schwerin Dukes was located at the imposing chateau in Ludwigslust. The orchestra here was not composed only of instrumentalists – it also included a large choir. Rosetti, who had mostly composed instrumental music prior to this post, moved his focus to vocal music. In 1792, the Prussian Prince Friedrich Wilhelm (1770–1840) invited him to Berlin, where he conducted a performance of his oratorio *Jesus in Gethsemane* at the court, as well as the German cantata *Hallelujah*. Shortly after this concert, on the 30th of June 1792, he died in Ludwigslust of chronic breathing problems at the age of only forty-five.

The Story of Rosetti’s Requiem in E flat major...

During his life, Rosetti composed many pieces that were similarly popular to those by Mozart and Haydn. A significant portion of these are instrumental compositions: fifty-one symphonies, seventy-six concerti for various instruments (twenty-four for one or two horns, thirteen for flute, nine for violin, oboe, and bassoon, five for clarinet, four for piano, one for viola, and two concertante symphonies for two violins), twenty-nine wind ensembles, fifty-two other chamber works, and sixty-eight piano pieces. The horn concerti seem to have inspired Mozart (1756–1791) to write his four concerti for the instrument.



Antonio Rosetti, an engraving by Heinrich Eduard von Winter

The vocal oeuvre consists of one hundred and nine songs, twelve choral works (including two oratorios, six cantatas, and one vaudeville), and forty-one liturgical pieces. Among these, the most often found are settings of the mass ordinary, followed by Rosetti’s settings of the text for the mass of the dead, i.e. the requiem. A special place among them is reserved for the Requiem in E flat major, Murray H15. This piece was first heard on the 26th of March 1776 at the funeral of Maria Theresa, the wife of Prince Ernst von Öttingen-Wallerstein, who died on the 9th of March of that same year aged only nineteen while giving birth to their first child. The time constraint – two weeks – imposed on Rosetti is reflected in the pragmatic formal structure. The individual parts are relatively short and the emphasis is mostly on the flow of the set text. The original version did not include the Benedictus and Agnus Dei, which were probably replaced from other sources for the first performance. Another point of interest is that in place of setting the usual offertory *Domine Jesu Christe*, Rosetti opted for *Cur faciem tuam abscondis*.

The work became highly popular, as attested to by the copies surviving in various archives. By comparing them, we can follow the changes later made to the Requiem, including edits by the composer himself. For the Czech context, there is a particularly important version surviving in the collection of musical materials of the Loreta pilgrimage church near Prague Castle, now part of the Lobkowicz Library and Archive at the Nelahozeves chateau. It is linked to the musician Johann Joseph Strobach (1731–1794), who served as choirmaster at the Church of St Nicholas in the Malá Strana district of Prague and was also a violinist

and the bandleader of the orchestra of the Italian opera. In this last position, he successfully performed a number of works by Mozart and worked directly with the composer on rehearsing the premieres of the Symphony in D major, “Prague”, and *Don Giovanni*. When Mozart died in 1791, the people of Prague organised a requiem mass on the 24th of December at the church of St Nicholas. Rosetti’s Requiem in E flat was performed at the mass, conducted by none other than the local choirmaster Strobach. He is probably the one who edited (and creatively completed) the original Wallerstein version. The instrumentation underwent some changes too, however. The two oboes were replaced by clarinets, the solo in the offertory, originally for tenor voice, was moved to the soprano. It remains unclear, however, whether these changes are the result of Rosetti’s revisions or of Strobach’s modifications.

... and its New Edition

It is the Prague version described above that became the main source for a new critical edition, prepared for publication by Roland Biener and published as the 41st instalment in the edition *Musik zwischen Elbe und Oder* (*Music Between the Elbe and Oder Rivers*) in the German press ortus musikverlag in 2020 (catalogue number om272/1, ISMN 979-0-502341-77-0). In this manner, the form of the piece performed at Prague’s requiem mass for Mozart makes its way to a broad spectrum of users ranging from the academic community through to practical musicians.

Biener discusses the work and its history in detail in the foreword (printed in both German and English), which is followed by a German-language critical note including a description of sources, an edition of the text, and two facsimile samples of the manuscript from the archive of the Princely Öttingen-Wallerstein collection, preserved today in the Augsburg university library. Unfortunately, the foreword makes apparent the somewhat bleak situation regarding the availability of archival materials in the Czech Republic. Biener only had access to the Prague manuscript through microfilm, as he was granted access to the original in the Lobkowitz Library and Archive.

The score itself is eminently legible and user friendly. Editorial adjustments are marked in the usual manner, i.e. square brackets and dotted lines. In addition to this large-format score, the publication also includes complete performance parts, so the new edition can be immediately used for performance. This is therefore an important impetus for new reception of a remarkable work by Antonio Rosetti, one closely linked to Prague’s musical life in the 1790s and the city’s Mozartian cult.

Petr DANĚK (ed.)

Ludwig van Beethoven,

Piano Concerto no. 1 in C major op. 15.



Facsimile of a period transcription of the piano part from the funds of the Broumov Monastery, Broumov 2020, 31 pages, ISBN 978-80- 907208-7-9

Distinguishing between cultural history and the specialised disciplines of art history is a perennial problem. How do we find and define the border beyond which only an indirect influence remains of the broad historical paradigm and the meaning of the sources is useful only or predominantly for the specialised disciplines? This small edition of a Broumov copy of Beethoven’s piano concerto – discovered by Petr Daněk, an eminent Czech researcher in the history of music during his continual research into the surviving torso of the enormous library of the Benedictine monks of Broumov, who kept acquiring new materials until the middle of the 20th century – is, no doubt, interesting to musicologists in and of itself. An educated musician and member of the order, P. Bernhard Matauš OSB, made – probably in the early 1830s – a highly graphically developed calligraphic copy of the “Concerto per il Forte Piano di Luigi van Beethoven”, published in print in 1801. Matouš knew his way around the piece well: with a view to the needs of the performer, he shifted the solo entries so they always begin on a new page and also corrected some factual mistakes in the original print, such as the instrumentation of the sixteen-piece orchestra. From a historian’s perspective, the crucial aspect is that this work of Beethoven’s thus takes its place among other identified works by the composer that the order had copied for their own internal, secular music-making. This took place in the monastery in addition to extensive performances of liturgical and otherwise religious music. This in itself is an interesting cultural moment, as well as an impulse to explore more systematically the monastic life of the 19th century, still shrouded in mystery today. However, it is also proof of the unusually lively interest in Beethoven’s music in the Czech non-aristocratic environment in the first half of the 19th century – for a considerable period, the composer’s oeuvre was confined to the aristocratic salons of Prague and Vienna.

Jiří Pešek

HUMANISTS IN RENNAISSANCE BOHEMIA AND MUSIC II.

JIŘÍ CAROLIDES (1569-1612): *The Poet and Composer Who Travelled Little*



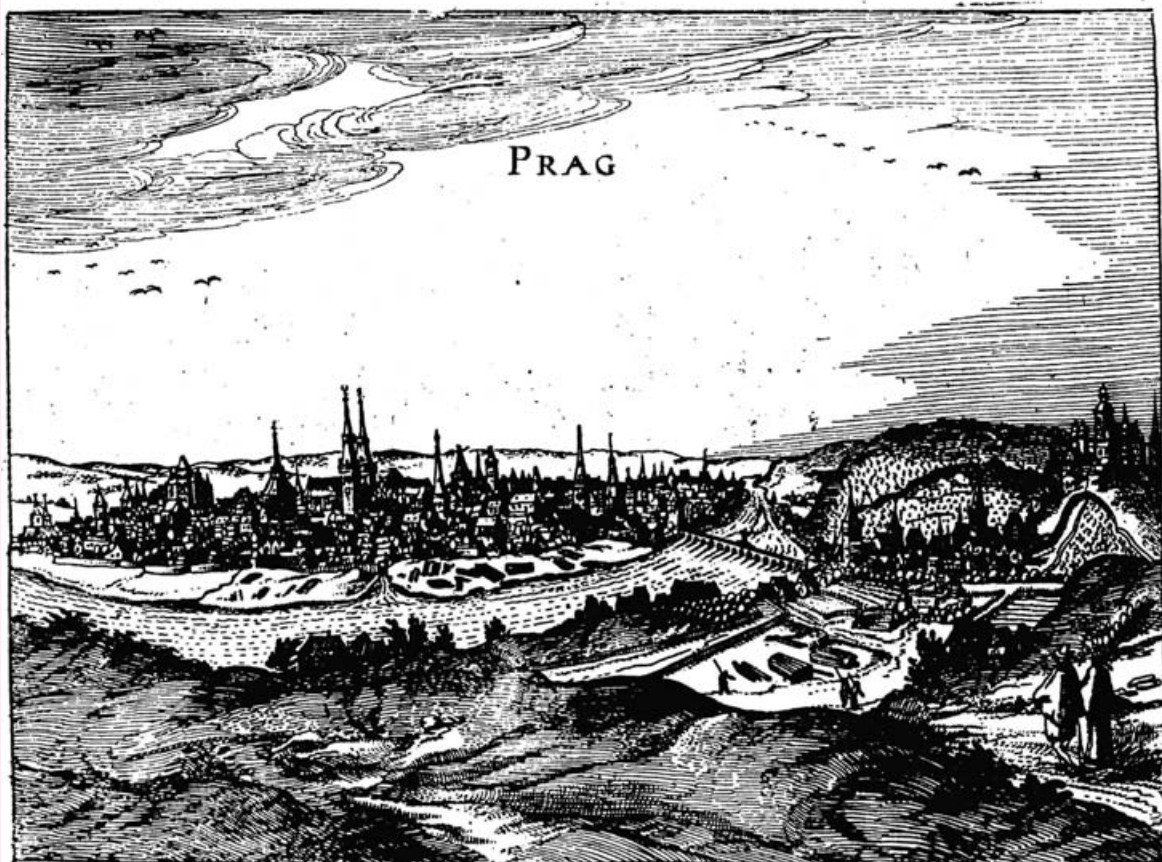
*Cæsarea Lauro Sophiag₃, oriúq₃ Parentum
Carolides, claria notus & arte Lyra,
Hac facie expressum fueram, trieteri'e juncti
Lustra evi septem quum mihi lapsa forent.
Nova fave, ut vitam, quaecunq₃ futura sequetur,
Te duce, victrici sub cruce, liber agamus*

*Portrait of Jiří Carolides
from a print of Sophonias propheta
(Prague: Jonata Bohutský of Hranice)*

Not many Czech poets and musicians of the high Renaissance found employment at the imperial court. Jiří Carolides was one of the lucky few, and what's more, he managed not to lose touch with the civic society from which he rose. His rank as the “poet laureate”; a crowned poet, marked him out for participation in the literary activities of scholars at the imperial court, but he was also well respected in the society of Czech non-Catholic urban intellectuals. After his links with the court were weakened through the influence of several contributing factors, he retained his authority amongst Czech intellectuals as an excellent poet. We know much less of his musical activities, despite the fact that music – and liturgical music in particular – was important to him since his youth and his first known individual work in this area was undertaken during his time at the university.

1) Centre for Classical Studies at the Institute of Philosophy,
Czech Academy of Sciences

2) Institute of Art History, Czech Academy of Sciences



Between the Imperial Court and the New Town of Prague

Carolides' father, as suggest by his Latin name (Carolides is the son of Carl or Karel) was the architect Karel Mělnický (1536–1599), from whom Jiří seems to have inherited his poetic gifts. Mělnický composed verse in Czech, some of which has survived in his son's works. After preparatory studies at one of Prague's Latin schools, Jiří Carolides studied at the city's university. Before being awarded his master's degree, he completed teacher training at the city school in the south Bohemian town of Písek, as was traditional at the time. Unlike most of his educated contemporaries, however, Carolides never travelled for education and we don't know much about his journeys around the Czech lands either. Following his graduation, he remained in Prague until his death. He became a scribe for the New City of Prague and later also an imperial scribe. He was married twice. He died at the relatively young age of forty-three.

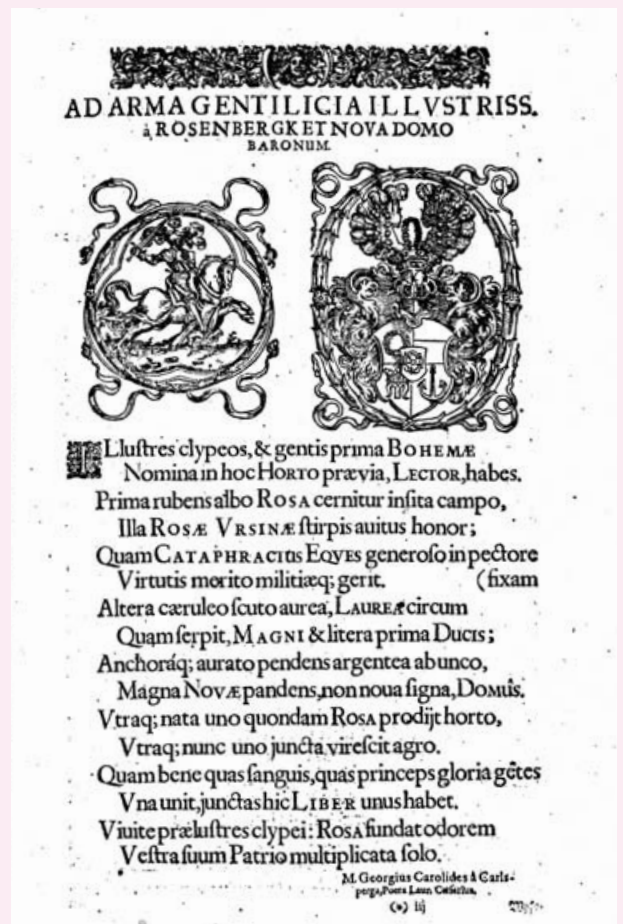
In addition to Latin and Czech, Carolides also had an excellent command of German (his grandmother was a native of Eisenach), probably knew ancient Greek, and, it seems, also spoke a little Italian. He owned an extensive library, of which his will says it contained "Latin, Greek, and Czech" books. Some survive to this day: in the National Library and the Library of the Royal Canonry of Premonstratensians at Strahov. Characteristic for Carolides are his close relationships with Prague's

*A veduta of Prague by Petrus Bertius,
Commentariorum rerum
Germanicarum libri tres
(Amsterdam: Janssonius, 1632), p. 642*

printers, including Daniel Adam of Veleslavín, Jiří Nigrin, Jonata Bohutský of Hranice, and Jiří Závěta. He dedicated his poems to them and even wrote a separate verse-form eulogy to the craft of printing. Even though he travelled little, he remained in touch with humanists abroad, mostly through exchanges of letters, books, and poems. Since his youth, he maintained such a relationship with the Altdorf professor Konrad Rittershausen. In his most “famous” period, he collaborated with the court humanists (most notably Hieronymus Arconatus), participated in the laureation ceremonies of new poets organised by the imperial court chaplain and eleemosinarius (*an almoner; the official distributor of charity, or alms – editor’s note*) Jacob Chimarrhaeus, and contributed to various occasional anthologies for the Rudolfinian courtiers. Among the recipients of his poems were the Polish alchemist Michael Sendivoj and the English poetess Westonia. The dedicatees of his poems included important Czech noblemen. Among local intellectuals, Carolides was closest to the Lutheran priest Jiří Dikast and the Žatec notary Sofoniáš Rosacius, whom he met as a student. He also had many literary friends among the intellectuals in the New Town, where he spent his entire life.

Carolides as Poet and Translator

Despite his short life, Carolides was a highly prolific author, publishing several extensive collections of poems and many minor occasional poems. As *poeta laureatus*, he enjoyed great popularity, and other writers often asked him for introductory



*Poetry for the coat of arms of the Rožmberk (Rosenberg) Family
in a 1596 edition of Mattioli's herbal*

poems to use at the beginning of their collections in order to make them more glamorous through the addition of his name. He was gradually replaced in this role by the younger Jan Campanus, whose oeuvre overshadowed the elder poet even though he was never crowned poet laureate.

In addition to occasional texts, Carolides specialised in short poetic forms, most often moralising or satirical epigrams. Following the example of Bohuslav Hasištejnský, he composed an extensive verse satire of contemporary society. His religious poetry includes poems about the prophets Jonas and Zephaniah. He elaborated on various topical themes, including the construction of the church in Litič or the fire of Jičín. He created a number of so-called “symbola” for his friends and various well-known figures. In his poetry, he paints a picture



A poem for the insignia of Jacob Chimarrhaeus in the motet collection of Franciscus Sale, *Salutationes ad beatissimam dei genitricem* (Prague: Jiří Nigrin, 1598), Jagiellonian Library, Cracow, S 97

of himself as a virtuous moralist, but even so, we sometimes get glimpses of other tableaux of his life: mentions of drinking parties, banquets, and the like. A number of his texts intended to be set to music have also survived.

Carolides translated both prose and verse from Latin into Czech. He translated Wilibald Pirckheimer's *In Praise of Gout* for the consolation of all those suffering of the disease. He published his pedagogical treatise, *Praeparatio pueritiae*, in both Latin and Czech. It also contains the bilingual *Song of King Matyáš* and *A Dispute between the Soul and the Body* following the medieval *Visio Philiberti*.

Carolides and Music

Even though Carolides was a well-known figure in Rudolfinian Bohemia, we find no unambiguous or significant mentions – either in his own literary works or in secondary literature written by his

contemporaries – that he was an active musician or even composed music himself. But if we dive deeper into the period sources, we discover that his relationship to music was intense and also included practical music making. It is also clear that for Carolides, this art was linked to a deep piety. We know from his poetry that he had personal contact with literary brotherhoods in a number of Czech cities that were the main centres of urban musical culture. To the Klatovy literary brotherhood, for instance, he dedicated his collection *Sententiae LVI salubria et vitae humanae... continentes* (1597). That same year, he dedicated the collection *Aureae XXII sententiae* to the brotherhood in Domažlice. There is also proof of his contact with the literary brotherhood in Prague's Church of Our Lady Before Týn. Among Carolides' epigrams, epitaphs, poems in *insignia*, funeralia, and symbola dedicated to his contemporaries, we also find dedications to Czech composers and musicians. These are leading exponents of urban musical life at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries, including Pavel Jistebnický Spongopeus, Jiří Tachovský, Jakub Romanides Bydžovský, and Václav and Jiří Rychnovský.

In addition to these courtesy poetic activities to honour Czech men of letters, there are also pieces of music surviving in Bohemian manuscripts for which Carolides is labeled as the author. The anthology of the Rokycany brotherhood attributes the following motets to Carolides: *Lord of All Nations* (*Pane králi všech národů*) and the coupled *Rejoice Oh Christians / Therefore Every Man* (*Veselte se křesťané / Protož každý člověče*). The unique collection of compositions in the property of the Rakovník literates includes a coupled funeral motet, *Cantio funebris*, whose music and probably also the text was written by Jiří Carolides. An extraordinary piece of evidence for Carolides' active relationship to music is a collection of voice books surviving in the National Library in Prague – according to the *ex libris*, they hail from Carolides' personal book collection.

This is a binder's volume of two music prints and manuscripts of eighteen Latin and Czech motets. The prints are from the Nuremberg workshop of Katharina Gerlach and represent a form that was highly popular in its time, a successfully distributed anthology of motets for the entire liturgical year,

mostly containing works by popular Italian composers of the time (Palestrina, Claudio Merula, Severin Cornet, Jacobus Corfinus, Andrea Gabrieli, Giovanni Gabrieli, Luca Marenzio, Tiburzio Massaini, and others). The anthology, known as *Sacrae cantiones cum quinque, sex et pluribus vocibus de festis praecipuis totius anni* (1585, 1588) was prepared for publication by the German Evangelical composer and publisher Fridericus Lindner (1542–1597) and was among the most popular and sought-after collections among performers in Central Europe. Carolides was evidently the first owner of these Nuremberg prints, as he inscribed his name on the title page (“Geor: Carolides”). He also bound several loose pages with pre-lined staff notation to the collection, which could later be filled with further polyphonic compositions according to the selection and skill of the user of the volume.

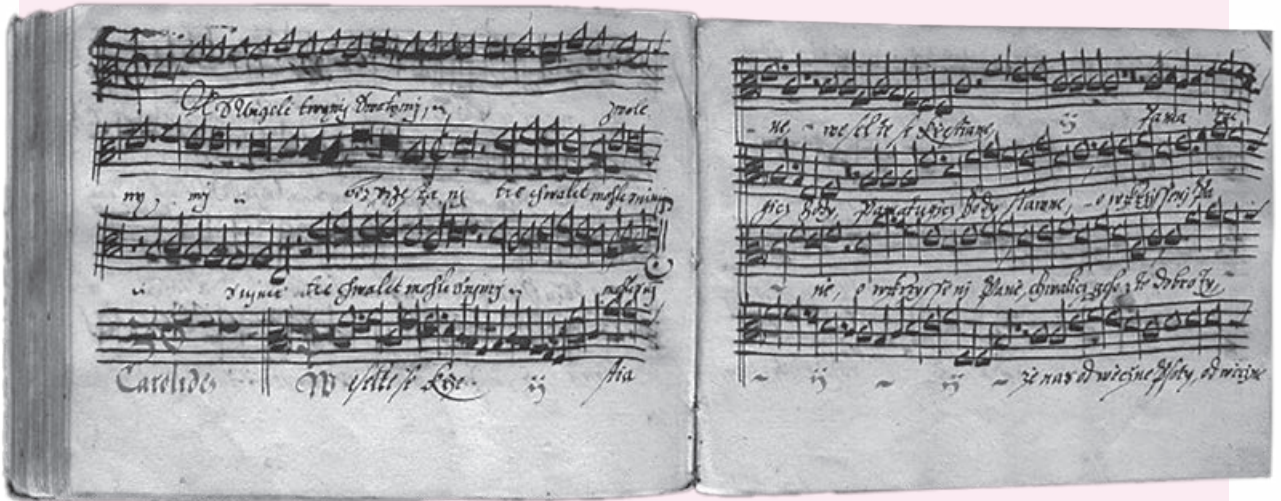
Though most of the pieces written in this manuscript bear no marks suggesting authorship, by comparing them with other period sources, we find that the owner and user – who was certainly Jiří Carolides – selected interesting, often representative pieces, and was certainly able to choose high-quality, exceptional works. He clearly had a preference for the two-choir and eight-voice pieces that were popular towards the close of the 16th century – fashionable, even. In this short selection, we find compositions by Charles Luython, Giovanni Croce, Ruggiero Giovannelli, Orlande de Lassus, Dominic Phinot, and Christopher Clavius. Among the composers of foreign provenance, whose compositions are notated accompanied by a Latin text that is sometimes complemented by a new text in Czech, the manuscript portion of the binder’s volume also contains two eight-part motets attributed to Carolides. They are competent pieces and Carolides’ name doubtless signifies his attribution as composer, as the first of this pieces sets the 30th and 31st verses of Psalm 109, *Confitebor Domino nimis in ore meo*, an oft-used text. In the case of the second



Franciscus Sale, Salutationes ad beatissimam dei genitricem (Prague: Jiří Nigrin, 1598), Jagiellonian Library, Cracow, p. 97, title page

motet, it is highly likely that Carolides is the author not only of the music, but also of the text. It is an eight-voice wedding motet in two parts, *Augustine sacros thalami/Tu quoque Elissa*, probably composed in 1598 on the occasion of the marriage of Jan Augustin Malinovský of Hlaváčov and Alžběta Písecká (Elysabetha Piscena), who lived in Rakovník. The manuscript addendum also contains other motets of Czech origin, setting texts that attest to the longevity of the tradition of Jan Hus in Rudolfinian Bohemia. They are the anonymous motets *Salve sancte civis; V naději boží mistr Hus Jan* (In Hope, Godly Master Hus Jan), and *Jubila felix Boemia*, confirming the Utraquist confession of the bounder’s volume’s owner (the Utraquists were one of the moderate factions of the Hussites in the 14th century and later became the dominant group of the Hussite religion – editor’s note).

In the musicological literature, Jiří Carolides is often cited as the author of the introductory poem in the posthumous



Manuscript of Jiří Carolides' composition *Veselte se křesťané (Rejoice, Oh Christians)*, alto voice, Rokycany

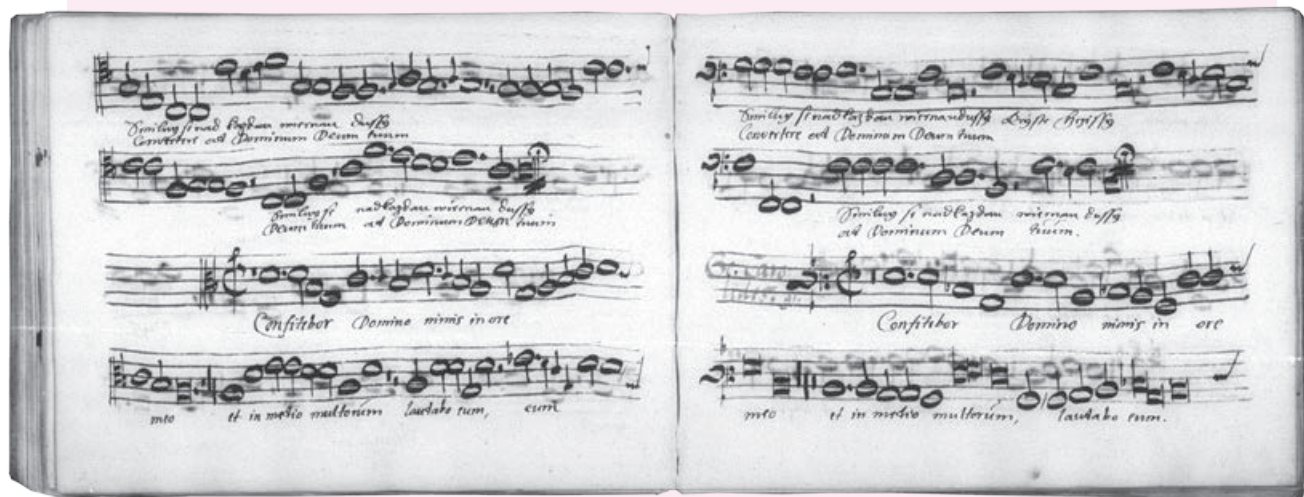
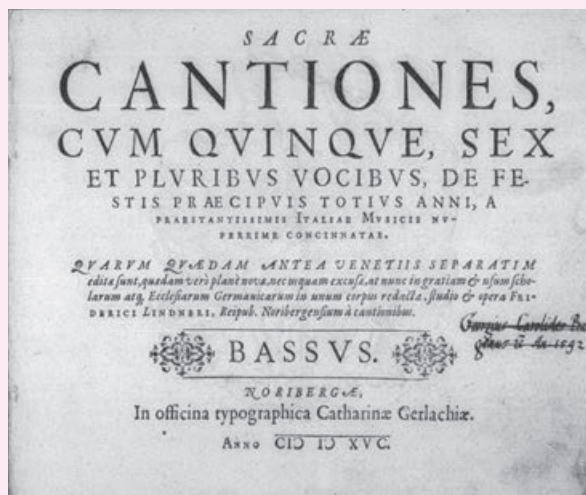
collection of the eminent composer of the Renaissance, Jacobus Gallus (1550-1591), *Moralia* (Nuremberg, Alexander Philipp Dietrich, 1596): *Ad cantorem modulorum Handeli.* Additionally, he is consistently but mistakenly referred to as the author of the text for Jacobus Gallus' *Chimarrhae tibi io*, a celebration of the imperial court chaplain Jacob Chimarrhaeus, whom I mentioned at the opening of this text. Carolides' authorship of this laudatory text is not confirmed by the sources. The same is true of any closer personal ties with Jacobus Gallus. Carolides did, however, know Chimarrhaeus personally in relation to his holding the title of poet laureate: Carolides celebrated the chaplain with his poem *In insignia R. D. Iacobi Chimarrhaei*, printed in the introduction to a collection of Marian Motets by the imperial singer Franciscus Sales (1543-1599), *Salutationes ad beatissimam dei genitricem ac Virginem Mariam* in the Prague press of Jiří Nigrin in 1598. The nobleman-composer Kryštof Harant of Polžice and Bezdrůžice (1564-1621) asked Carolides for a similar service in relation to the publication of his *Putování aneb Cesta z Království českého do Benátek a odtud do země Svaté (Pilgrimage, or, A Journey from the Czech Kingdom to Venice and then on to the Holy Land*, Prague: Heirs of Adam of Veleslavín, 1608).

In addition to Carolides' celebratory occasional poems, which served to increase the prestige of the author or addressee of the dedication for a particular print, there are also texts that were clearly intended to be set to music. Probably the oldest evidence of Carolides' activities as poet and composer is a five-part composition that pays tribute to the memory of Master Jakub Codicillus. It was written during Carolides' studies at Prague's university. The fact that Carolides kept his love for music until the end of his life is attested to by *De S. Remigio ad Harmoniam musicam*, a piece included in his last collection of poems, *Sophonias propheta* (1612). However, no notation for these pieces survives. Other poems by Carolides prove his active participation

in musical life as a choir member. He also penned an epigram titled *Musica* in which he praises music as an art that is to serve God and a godly mind, not Bacchus and Venus. In another poem, *Vita cœu harmonia*, he likens the order of human life to a perfect harmony among voices.

The Importance of Jiří Carolides for Czech Culture before the Battle of White Mountain

If we were searching for a figure in the nationally, culturally, and socially diverse society before the Battle of White Mountain whose life and work could represent the Czech contribution to the unique character of the Rudolfinian period, we might well choose the story of the humanist, poet, man of letters, and composer Jiří Carolides



of Karslperk. Unlike many of his contemporaries, who were of similar origins, education, and social standing, he managed to live his (relatively short) life to the full. His poetic talents and a disposition to use his knowledge of Latin to create humanist poetry made him a well-known figure during his life time, appreciated not only within the circles of city society but also at Prague's imperial court and among the Czech nobility. His contacts abroad then allowed him to step beyond the restraints of life lived in Czech cities at the time. And a knowledge of *ars musica*, including its interpretation and composition, placed him in the company of those creating the musical culture of his time.

Title page of the binder's volume and manuscript from the library of Jiří Carolides, National Library, Prague Se 1337

Manuscript of Jiří Carolides' composition Domino nimis in ore meo, alto and bass voices, National Library, Prague Se 1337



Bedřich Smetana Libuše

**Marie Podvalová – soprano,
Stanislav Muž – baritone,
Vilém Zítek – bass, Czech
Philharmonic,
Václav Talich – conductor.**

Text: EN, GE, FR, CZ. Recorded: 1939.
Published: 2020. TT: 54:24.
CD Supraphon SU 4279-2.

Some historical events become so exceptional and emotionally crucial that they pass into the realm of legend and myth. Many of these moments, especially as they sink further back into the past, are often aggrandised (despite all attempts at objectivity). What's more, they can hardly ever be substantiated, as their participants are no longer among the living. Much of this might be true for the First Prague Musical Mayday, which took place in the spring of 1939. If we speak to the survivors, they describe the incredibly powerful emotions elicited by the concerts organised by the conductor of the **Czech Philharmonic, Václav Talich**. After performances of *Libuše* and *Má vlast* (*My Country*), the auditorium sung the national anthem, and so these evenings at the National Theatre – taking place only a few weeks after the beginning of the German occupation – became manifestations of national sentiment. References to these events appear to this day in various historical publications. But it is direct audio or video recordings that provide the most truthful and convincing evidence of these events. Of course, this possibility was not a matter of course at the time and few people believed the recordings could still exist. An unexpected coincidence was needed for the sound evidence to “be found”. The first took place in 2009, when recordings of *Má vlast* and the second series of the *Slavonic Dances* performed by the joint orchestras of the Czech

Philharmonic and Radiojournal from the Prague Musical Mayday in 1939 appeared on a CD published by the Czech Philharmonic seventy years later. They were also later put out by Supraphon. It was the Norwegian public broadcaster whose archive stored this historical document for us, and the Swedish musicologist Carl-Gunnar Åhlén, who made the discovery, accompanied the modern album with a detailed and enlightening programme note. So too the publication of the third act of *Libuše*, which appeared on CD this year, is thanks to a certain degree of chance. Radio recordings of these concerts were discarded and deleted for various reasons, and the rediscovery of the third act at least could only take place thanks to the estate of the deceased actress **Marie Podvalová**, who sung the title part, and her distant relative **Miloš Guth**, who professionally reconstructed the practically unusable recording and accompanied it with a knowledgeable text. Listening today, we discover the applause far exceeds any notions we might have harboured. We can only suspect the desperation and patriotic determination our ancestors must have experienced at a time when we had lost both our freedom and our national autonomy. In *Má vlast*, the applause before the national anthem is sung is shortened. In the case of *Libuše*, it is heard almost in its entirety. Before the anthem is heard in the hall – after almost five minutes of applause – many calls of “Sláva!” (“hurrah” or “glory”) are heard among the audience. Furthermore, musical aficionados have in their hands the only proof of Talich's mastery in the field of opera. Of course we are primarily interested in Talich's approach to an operatic whole of which we have, as of yet, only read. It is a shame there are no complete recordings of his operatic conducting. With him, *Libuše* is not simply a “festive tableaux”, even though the relatively static character of Act III invites this interpretation. The joyous celebratory chorus of *Skončen je svár* (*Strife is at its End*) is a riveting image of enthusiasm and joy. How dynamic and

interesting the conflict between the two brothers in Act I must have been, or the burial mound scene and the harvest festival in the second act. However, not all passages can be digitally corrected and in all instances of noise removal, a high degree of attention is needed to avoid distorting the sound of the original. In the passages with faults that proved impossible to remove (particularly the last scene and the prophecy), we might feel like this is more of a historical document than an artistically arresting recording. But if the listener focuses on the music, they cannot miss Talich's construction of each individual scene. In a beautiful monologue by Libuše after the act opening, we can admire the fresh, firm voice of Marie Podvalová, as yet without any trace of her future problems, indelibly linked to the merciless advance of old age upon this unique, as-yet-unsurpassed star of the title part. The strange, now unusual timbre of **Stanislav Muž** excels in its strength, and – by virtue of its energetic character – acts as a complete opposite to the Přemysls of the future (Václav Bednář, Jindřich Jindrák, Václav Zítek, Vratislav Kříž, etc.). An adornment on both recordings, however, is the mighty bass of **Vilém Zítek**, who, unfortunately, left behind only precious few recordings. This entire recording – though incomplete – evokes a number of further thoughts and contemplations. The 1945 accusation against Václav Talich for having collaborated with the Germans is famous enough. Even though he was later cleared by a national court, for those famous performances of *Libuše*, he had to hand over the baton to Otakar Jeremiáš. Supraphon deserves praise and thanks for this edition, but most should be reserved for Miloš Guth, who is among our leading renovators of historical sound recordings. It would certainly be worthwhile to make use of the valuable results of his praiseworthy work in further published editions.

Bohuslav Vitek



Milan Paľa Mieczysław Weinberg

**Milan Paľa - violin,
Ladislav Fančovič - piano.**

Text: CZ, EN. Recorded: Oct. 2019
Besední dům, Brno. Published: 2020.
TT: 2:23:22. 2 CD Pavlík Records,
PA 0183-2-131.

The life story of Mieczysław Weinberg (1919-1996; his name is sometimes listed as Mojsej Samuilovič Vainberg) would be excellent material for a cinematic drama – it is a surprise no one has chosen to adapt it yet. He escaped from Poland on foot after the Nazis murdered his entire family. He arrived in the Soviet Union, where he gradually discovered that even in his new, adopted home, he – as a Jew – was not safe. His father-in-law was murdered on Stalin's command and Weinberg was imprisoned. He spent only a month in prison, partly thanks to Stalin's death, partly thanks to the help of his friend, Dmitri Shostakovich. The two composers were brought together not only by friendship and a mutual musical influence but also through a variable relationship to the communist regime. Before his arrest, Weinberg was a prominent member of the Union of Soviet Composers, a kind of "display Jew"; a specimen to demonstrate how well this group was treated in the Soviet Union. Weinberg was an exceptionally prolific composer, and apart from his operas and symphonic and chamber music, he also made a significant mark on the history of Soviet film music. Despite the abundance and quality of his work, his oeuvre spent a long time cut off from the West. It was only in the new millennium that more artists began exploring his work and discovering its uniqueness, which certainly stands comparison to his more famous contemporaries. Weinberg's musical language seems to reflect his rugged life story: strongly emotional

music with many dynamic changes and distinctive melodies that betray the multicultural mix of Eastern Europe through its Jewish, Polish, and Russian melodies. Perhaps an ideal entry point into this narrative are the six sonatas for violin and piano in which the drama is reduced to two instruments and the sound colours do not draw attention away from Weinberg's melodic and harmonic inventiveness. The first five sonatas were written between 1943 and 1953, the sixth in 1982. Weinberg's fundamental stylistic context was neoclassicism, which he applied in forms that other composers had mostly abandoned at the time. However, his neoclassicism is highly expressive and imbued with an unmistakable melodic invention. The recording released on Pavlík Records, featuring violinist **Milan Paľa** and pianist **Ladislav Fančovič**, was recorded at last year's edition of the Moravian Autumn festival, whose dramaturgy included a celebration of the centenary of Weinberg's birth. The duo's interpretation further highlights the emotional peaks and troughs of these compositions. In the dynamic sections, we hear the bow scraping across the strings (and we can almost hear the horseshair flying off, it seems), while in the quiet passages, the music seems to disappear somewhere up towards the heavens. The pianist is not simply an accompanist, but rather a fully fledged partner in a stormy dialogue, and, in many passages, also an effective motor pushing the music along. The intense impression is also aided by the recording technique, thanks to which Milan Paľa's breathing becomes a new instrument in addition to his violin. It isn't easy, of course, to set aside two and a half hours to listen to the recording in a single sitting. But it's definitely worth it – once, at least. Listening in this way, the six sonatas come across as a single whole: one that's constantly transforming and yet remains coherent.

Matěj Kratochvíl



Jana Semerádová Chaconne pro princeznu (Chaconne for the Princess)

**Jana Semerádová - flute,
Erich Traxler - harpsichord.**

Text: EN, GE, FR, CZ. Recorded:
2020. Published: 2020. TT: 67:56. 1 CD.
Supraphon SU 4277-2.

This new album by **Jana Semerádová** is doubtless one of the most anticipated events of the year in the field of early music. Even just the portfolio of this performer on various types of Baroque flutes would be enough for a weighty diploma thesis. Her work in the ensemble **Collegium Marianum** is valuable and inventive, as is her research in archives both in the Czech Republic and abroad. But most importantly, anyone who knows Jana Semerádová and has seen her perform knows well that she is an excellent performer who feels music at an existential level, experiencing it emotionally and feeling the subtlest nuances of expression. The long-awaited project is presented under the heading *Chaconne for the Princess*, which is also the title of this new CD. The album features pieces by two late Baroque masters, Georg Friedrich Händel and Jean-Marie Leclair, dedicated to Anne, Princess of Orange, who was herself an excellent harpsichordist. Semerádová is accompanied here by the German harpsichordist **Erich Traxler**, a respected performer of early music. *Chaconne for a Princess* includes Baroque music in an instrumentation of flute and harpsichord, as well as solo harpsichord (Händel's *Suite in D minor*), and in one case, an arrangement of Händel's *Gavotte* for two flutes made by Michel Blavet. As the booklet lists no other flutist, I assume Jana Semerádová recorded both parts herself. The recording also includes a detailed and enlightening historical commentary by the musicologist



Jana Franková – its qualities are such that it could easily be presented at an international musical conference on early music. But even so, this time, the music didn't quite grip me as much as other projects by Jana Semerádová. The reason is the musical communication between both artists, which I believe has its limits. Some sections seemed uncertain in their agogics. I often felt Semerádová wanting to go forward, to draw on a greater rubato, but the harpsichord failed to provide the requisite space. The German player also performs solo, and it is clear that Traxler has excellent technique and much knowledge of early music performance. But as for the capacity to build a phrase transparently, with elegance, with a feeling for its natural pulsation, I often found myself questioning his choices. I missed the artistic vitality of harpsichordists such as Mahan Esfahani or Martin Hroch. Jana Semerádová's interpretation, on the other hand, left marks of deep understanding inside me, not only to this specific music and its stylistic period, but also to its contemporary conception and its fulfilment. Semerádová's playing betrays an aristocratic profile, something that gives her excellent ornamentation and dynamic phrasing something extra. Furthermore, the flutist has a charming charisma, suggesting that the role of the "princess of the Baroque flute" was created directly for her. On the recording, successful moments predominate. Blavet's arrangement of Händel's *Gavotte* is excellent, and it must have been extraordinarily difficult to record this with a single soloist. Of the two Leclair sonatas included on the disc, I personally preferred the second, in E minor. A true cherry on the imperial top is the final *Chaconne in A major*, which survived in a collection written by Händel for the wedding of Princess Anne in 1734. Its music and performance manifest strong emotions of joyful expectation, cheer, and unspoiled optimism. This CD by Jana Semerádová and Erich Traxler is a pleasant enrichment of contemporary

Czech productions of early music. We can approach it as a valuable historical document or with the mind of a random listener who can be pleasantly refreshed by this music.

Milan Bátor

Krumpholtz & Dušek Works for Harp

Barbora Plachá – harp.

Text: EN, CZ. Recorded: Nov., Dec. 2019, Studio Domovina, Prague. Published: 2020.

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ARCODIVA UP 0216-2 131.

This album, presenting the first ever Czech recording on an original 1779 single-action harp by Czech harpist **Barbora Plachá**, offers an entirely new experience with the sound of our ancestors' harp. Plachá is among our most sought-after and revered artists – she has performed at many significant venues in Europe and elsewhere and has won several important competitions. She first developed her talents at the conservatory in Prague, then in Brussels (under the tutelage of Jana Boušková), and later at the Norwegian Music Academy in Oslo with the French harpist Isabelle Perrin. It was this last teacher who directed Plachá towards the unique French instrument known as Louis XVI, which was probably used at the king's court, perhaps even by Marie Antoinette herself (who was an expert harp player). The single-action harp, the most modern type at the time, whose improvement was probably aided by the Czech harpist and composer Jan Křtitel Krumpholtz (sometimes known under the French variant of his name, Jean-Baptiste), was carefully renovated in the workshop of the German harp-maker Rainer Thureau. Not only

has the field of historically informed performance allowed Plachá to make use of her considerable talents as a performer: it is also a field that brings together her extensive research with performance on an exceptional instrument whose tone bears no comparison. The selection of pieces therefore includes pieces of this period and compositions by Czech composers who were close to the harp. Jan Křtitel Krumpholtz (1747–1790) was more than just an excellent harpist – his compositional oeuvre is devoted almost entirely to this instrument. Krumpholtz devoted great care to perfecting the harp technically, so it was in part thanks to him that the technical parameters and sonic possibilities of the harp made considerable advancements. Of his fifty-two harp sonatas, Plachá selected works from his prime. These pieces, which charmed the salons and halls of the highest echelons of Parisian society, making Krumpholtz one of the most sought-after stars on the imperial court, are performed by Barbora Plachá on her debut album with exceptional sensibility for the beautiful sound of the single-action harp. Both the Harp sonatas op. 13 afford the artist the opportunity to apply the gentle finesse which this meticulously renovated instrument is capable of. Rhythm, melodic feeling, and virtuosity are Plachá's foundation for a natural interpretation that is rich in both technical mastery and expression. She gives every detail the requisite space. Jan Ladislav Dusík (1760–1812), sometimes also spelled Dussek, was most renowned as a piano virtuoso and his composer's legacy is therefore predominantly centred on the piano. Of his few pieces for solo harp and chamber ensembles including the harp, Plachá selected two virtuosic pieces from the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, both interpreted on the two-hundred-and-forty-year-old instrument with elaborate dynamics and a feeling of lightness.

Marta Tužilová

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