

# A Point from Which Everything is Close By

## AN INTERVIEW WITH COMPOSER JANA VÖRÖŠOVÁ

The music of Jana Vöröšová includes many colours, from gentle tone-painting and the restrained use of various extended instrumental techniques (and occasionally electronics) to dramatic waves and sections powered by raw energy. Her activities currently seem to take place along two paths. One of them includes performances of her music by contemporary music ensembles both at home and abroad, appearances at international festivals, and awards at various competitions.

Recently, her work has also been successful in more conservative waters: in 2019, she became a finalist of the Czech Philharmonic's composition competition, and that same year, the Prague Spring festival commissioned a new piece. These occasions saw the creation of *Písně vrbového proutku* (*Orpingalik's Songs*) for soprano and orchestra and *Atlas mraků* (*Cloud Atlas*) for saxophone quartet and accordion.

In addition to the public musical scene, Vöröšová also applies herself to music as an activity related to communal life, where group music-making is more important than official assessments. In Roztoky, a small town on the Vltava river a few kilometres north of Prague, she leads a children's choir for which she also composes, as well as participating in probably the most important event of local social life: the carnival (*masopust*).



Every February, the tradition – established over twenty years ago – fills the streets of Roztoky with masks and music of various genres. The carnival procession culminates with a gathering on a nearby hill, which is followed by an evening’s entertainment. In 2020, carnival celebrations included the premiere of Vöröšová’s composition *Kdo je živý, tomu hop (Jump if You’re Alive)* in the circus tent, which brought together amateur and professional musicians, soloists in folk costumes, and the carnival masks of Death, the Bear, and the Cock. .

PHOTO: JAKUB SOUČEK

*What is your compositional process from the initial idea to the final score? Which phase do you find most difficult?*

It varies from piece to piece. I probably chisel away until I have the form. I put an idea down in notation – there might be blurry passages where I only have a kind of feeling of what it might be like. There is a moment when the notes start living their own lives and begin moving away from my ideal notions.

*Is this move away from ideal notions an impulse to tame the notes, or to follow them instead and wait how it all develops?*

Both.

*Do you compose by hand or on the computer? Do you think the working method impacts the result?*

First I come up with ideas and write them down by hand on various strips of paper. Only then do I move to notation and finally, I put it all in the software.

*What is the story behind Kdo je živý, tomu hop, your piece performed at the carnival in Roztoky? How is it related to the local tradition of carnival celebrations?*

The piece came with a precise commission. It had to include a parade of masks, a mapping of the carnival day from the morning alarm, provided by the huge Cock at 5 am, through the introduction of the Queen and her entourage, all the way to the encounter with Death. Every year, someone else represents the queen. Last year, it was Anežka; the bride: a violinist and folk music teacher – all this was reflected in the piece. The groom was an excellent clarinetist. The most beautiful section of the piece is an improvisation between the bride and groom.

The piece was created following an invitation from Jitka Tichá, the heart and mind of the Roztoč association and the entire carnival. Several years ago, Roztoč commissioned me to write a series of fanfares to open the carnival. And last year, they came up with the idea of bringing together enthusiastic amateurs with musical professionals who take part in the carnival. Then we arrived at many more elements: the set design, the dance/acting performance by the Queen – the bride of the carnival, the Groom, the Cock, the Bear. We also gradually added musicians and singers.

*The carnival, taking place before lent, is a celebration that includes many elements and meanings and the regional variants can be considerably different from one another. It is also a universally attractive festivity, which has become clear at Roztoky's carnival in recent years. What interests you about the carnival and is that imprinted in this piece?*

For me, *masopust* always seemed like a strange mix of celebrations, something between a carnival, a rural celebration, and a festival of gluttony. The Roztoky *masopust* allowed me to see all this from a different perspective. I now understand it as an encounter between Heaven and Earth. A point from which everything is close by. A possibility to look in the mirror or arrange the mirror to reflect someone else; something else. What's more, the masks in Roztoky are gorgeous, made tastefully and with a great deal of craft, and they give the entire procession the wholeness of an aesthetic experience; a great show. The number of bands and styles of music is incredible, it's essentially a multi-genre festival. And it's always different – there's a new surprise each year.

*The piece was performed by MASYE, which, if I understood correctly, is an occasional group mostly composed of local musicians. Do you need to write differently for such an ensemble than a standard symphony orchestra?*

At first, I wanted to take this into account and write some conducted aleatoric music, but what resulted was a more or less classically notated form, sometimes demanding and difficult,

rhythmically quite complex in places. The choir extends from a unison to a six-part texture whose top voices are highly exposed, and the choristers also provided various sound effects – it was all great fun.

The title MASYF was actually the original source of it all – we just really liked the idea of the Masopust Symphony Orchestra (MASYF). The original idea really was to involve all kind of amateurs and write a piece that anyone who so desired could play or sing in, even if they had no experience performing in larger ensembles. We put out a call and what assembled was a truly bizarre orchestration. We rehearsed diligently in the evenings. But the piece was scored for a classical symphony orchestra, so the remaining positions were filled with professional musicians. We succeeded in having a team made only of good friends and good players who gave the performance the lustre and shine of a symphony orchestra. The amateur musicians and the choir provided an enormous amount of joy and energy. Everyone's level of engagement was breathtaking. The performance was conducted by Tomáš Brauner.

*You mentioned aleatoric approaches (imprecise or statistical forms of notation – editor's note). How important is it for you to balance your authorial idea and the amount of freedom you give the performers?*

What I've had good experiences with is writing my idea out in notation, however complicated and difficult it is, and only then explaining it doesn't have to be exactly like that, telling the performers what mood it should have, and so on. That's the fastest way of rehearsing a piece for a larger ensemble.

*You lead the children's choir in Roztoky. Do you also compose music for children?*

Of course. We basically sing folk songs and my own songs – that's the simplest way for me. I don't enjoy grinding out the same repertoire every year, so we're always singing new material. It's lively.

*Writing music for children is a specific discipline. Is it easier or harder than your "adult" compositions?*

It's easier for me, but that follows from the technical facts – simpler textures; shorter sections. And children can manage all kinds of things. They're not encumbered by prejudices as to what can and cannot be played or sung. When you do a good job of explaining what you're after, they are excellent performers. Particularly the little ones.

*In recent years, Roztoky has garnered the aura of a place that has an intense community life. Does music play a significant part?*

I don't live in Roztoky and I basically only take part in the events organised by Roztoč. During the twenty years they have existed in Roztoky, Roztoč has gathered a considerable amount of know-how relating to the events it organises, and they're still perfecting it. Wonderful dramaturgy, a high level of quality, good ideas, originality, artful workmanship, humour, outreach, collaboration, excellent refreshments – these are all things you'll find at all of their events. And music? There's never one without it. Many bands were formed from teachers at Roztoč. The carnival is a festival of excellent groups and soloists.

*This year's epidemiological restrictions have hugely affected cultural life, essentially freezing it in place. Some optimists, however, claim this could serve as inspiration to search for new approaches. Online concerts are produced. Are you an optimist or a pessimist in this respect? Have you taken part in any online musical activities?*

I think those are statements made from necessity. Of course, the situation will force opponents of modern technology to learn to work better in the spheres of sharing,

preparation, communication, transmission, etc. But personally, I haven't succumbed to the charm of the online concert – perhaps the opposite, actually. I've also taken part in many online projects, but I see no advantages other than the fact that you can play back the result anywhere at any time. And I even doubt *this to be an advantage, as I believe the charm of the moment possesses a great deal of magic. And human consciousness and memory have the capacity to transform beautiful things to their own image.*

*On the website of Czech Radio Vltava, I found a programme in which you introduce your favourite poets. What attracts you about poetry and what influence does it have on your music?*

Crucial. Many of my pieces were directly inspired by poetry. I enjoy the space between the words that every poem has. I think poetry is very similar to music. It has the capacity to quickly lead you anywhere in time and space.

*What kind of listener are you? How do you find new music?*

I'm an awful listener. I always say to myself that I'll listen to this and that, but I either fail to completely, or I fall asleep. The idea of sitting down in the morning and listening attentively, perhaps even with the score – that really doesn't happen. But I can't wait for a time when it can happen.

*You've composed music for several short films, you recently wrote an overture to the digitally restored version of Gustav Machaty's 1933 film Extase, you included a dance component in your piece Havran a moře (The Raven and the Sea), and the carnival piece also has a scenic element. Are connections of music with other forms inspired by specific people and a desire to work with them, or are you interested in these intersections more generally?*

Of course, the link is almost always bound to specific places and people, otherwise it wouldn't make sense for me. And I'm already thinking about an opera.

*You mentioned in an older interview that you play the cimbalom. What lies behind your interest in this instrument?*

The cimbalom is the most beautiful instrument I know. On the one hand, it's indelibly linked to folk music, but on the other hand, it can produce a huge number of sounds of an almost industrial character. It's an ocean – I enjoy getting lost among its strings. I think it's still undervalued, waiting for composers to discover it fully.

*In 2019, you were a finalist in the Czech Philharmonic's composition, while Cloud Atlas was commissioned by the Prague Spring festival. Do these successes, which grant you greater "media exposure", have any impact on your compositional career?*

Speaking about a composer's career in the Czech Republic seems comical to me. That's probably why none of the composers do it.

**Jana Vörösová**

Born in 1980, Vöröšová first studied at the Prague Conservatory, followed by composition studies at the Musical Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts. In 2006, she completed an exchange at the Koninklijk Conservatorium Brussel, where she became acquainted both with the most cutting-edge technologies of electronically processed sound, and various techniques of sonic analysis. She took part in workshops by various international composers and regularly attended lessons by leading Belgian teachers. She has taught at the Duncan Centre dance conservatory. Since childhood, she has been active as a choral singer. She is currently a member of the Prague Cathedral Choir, which focuses on music of the Renaissance and Baroque periods. She established and led the La Folia children's choir for four years and now directs the children's choir in Roztoky.