



**To Experiment,
To Be Wrong,
To Try New Things.**

PHOTO: MARTIN WIESNER 2x

Composer **Pavel Zemek Novák** and his Journey to Complexity

Starting out as an oboe player in an operatic orchestra, Pavel Zemek Novák arrived at his own compositional style, one that programmatically renounces any external lustre. His compositions bear no trace of the opulence of the grand operatic theatre. Instead, the unison takes centre stage. For the sixty-three-year-old Moravian composer, however, the unison does not necessarily represent a trajectory towards simplicity – rather, it aims at what is

musically and spiritually essential. His pieces are a reflection of his way forward: indirect, meandering, full of decelerations and silences that resonate with memories of both the ancient and recent past.

The first milestone in Zemek's unison works was the 2005 composition *The Prophecy of Isaiah*. In the autumn of 2020, the Brno Contemporary Orchestra and its conductor Pavel Šnajdr made the first ever studio recording, for Czech Radio, which was which was published by the Czech Music Information Centre and which you will find attached to this issue of CMQ. This was the perfect opportunity to speak to the composer about how the piece and Zemek's thinking about music has changed over the past fifteen years, and why Puccini, Verdi, and Mozart are all important for him.

Do you choose the subject matter of your pieces, or do ideas come to you by themselves?

Sometimes, it's the former, sometimes the latter - it usually has to do with a particular occasion or opportunity. With *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, the inspiration came from the text, which had been sitting in my memory for as long as I can remember. The musical occasion only came later. Connections between the music and the text began appearing, and over the course of a year's work, both components became intertwined. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* was thus composed from both sides at once, as it were: the Book of Isaiah influenced the musical component, which in turn influenced my perception of the text foundation.

Did you only begin sketching the music once you had received the commission, or had it begun taking shape prior to that?

It only really materialised with the commission, and it was accompanied by a third element: my ideas about unison at the time. This was a period of utter fascination and excitement - I was discovering entirely unknown connections across European music. I don't want to speak of a complete elimination of verticality, but through its reduction, I kept arriving, more and more often, at the shape of the melodic line of Gregorian chant. This created connections - bizarre ones, from my point of view - which were then realised in the score itself and mirrored in the messianic poem of the Book of Isaiah.

It really isn't true that you've completely done away with verticality in music - after all, that is practically impossible, unless one were to compose using single pure sine tones.

I often encounter the criticism that I write music without verticality. But in reality, all I am doing is an intervallic reduction to the unison, octave, double octave, and

so on within the space music makes available to us. In addition to this general verticality, there is another, a hidden verticality, contained in the linearity – a succession of tones might reveal triads and their inversions that are both audible in the music and discernible in the score.

Did it ever happen that you were rereading the Book of Isaiah and found that it was speaking to you directly in music?

No, never – the process was a combination of my knowledge of the text, my direction in music, and the commission, which tied it all together. Another important aspect was my euphoric response, at the time, to the discovery that the unison technique can work musically and can therefore be used to construct extended pieces musical. For me, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* was the first experiment on a larger scale concerning temporal spans in musical form.

Who commissioned the piece?

The composer Jaroslav Štátný, who often uses the pseudonym Peter Graham, played an important role. He was the dramaturge of the Exposition of New Music festival in Brno, which commissioned the piece. Thanks to him, I also received the support of the Ministry of Culture and was able to collaborate with the MoEns ensemble, who performed the world premiere in 2005.

Fifteen years later, the Brno Contemporary Orchestra recorded the piece in a Czech Radio studio. Does it help the piece to “stay on the shelf” for that long?

I cannot be the judge of that, but it certainly pleases me, and that’s important too.

Did you make many changes to the score before the recording?

I certainly did. Thanks the patience of the MoEns ensemble, I had made many corrections before the first performance, particularly as regards the colour of the melodic line, as well making certain segments shorter, as the temporal scale is very demanding considering the level of musical invention that the piece contains. Fifteen years later, we can hear the original shape of the piece, but many details – as well as extended sections – have been reworked or completed, particularly regarding musical colour.

You used to be an oboe player in the Brno opera orchestra. What did this experience give you as a composer?

My memories of this time are wonderful in all respects. The most useful aspect, however, was the insight I got into the woodwind and brass instruments. I also observed the problems in the strings that were addressed by the conductor and concertmaster. I got a sense of which sections were difficult for the orchestra and had to be repeated many times in rehearsal; where the borders of calm and concentrated coordination are located and where rising demands increase the pressure on the musicians to an unbearable degree. I also left the orchestra with a number of lifelong friendships.

So the orchestra provided you with an opportunity to understand music better both practically and technically?

Precisely. My time at the Brno opera coincided with the tenure of Václav Nosek as dramaturge of the company. We performed new productions of Martinů, Stravinsky, Janáček... I could explore how it all sounded, how the parts were written. I was often surprised by how some canonical composers who are not among my favourites and whom I wouldn't usually listen to intentionally (Puccini, for instance), had scores that were worked out with precision and a beautiful sense of colour. I think this was a positive influence.

Composing in unison, colour becomes, of course, an enormously important means of expression. Since you mentioned Puccini, I'll say that if there is a musical element that typifies him, it is the use of unison in duets. I thought this might have caught your attention.

In the theatre orchestra, I had the opportunity to experience some very interesting unison structures – with Puccini, the brass unisons are also remarkable. I was also surprised to find this in Verdi: I remember playing a less popular opera of his, *Simon Boccanegra*, which contains beautiful, delicate unisons for the clarinet, oboe, and flute. Taking part in these unisons is among the most beautiful experiences I take away from my operatic practice. I'm sure I was influenced by them, just as I was influenced by the unisons I heard in the Classical repertoire – Mozart is rich in unisons – followed by Bruckner and others in the Romantic period.

Looking at your list of works, it is somewhat surprising how little you compose for solo melodic instruments.

It's a question of opportunity. It just depends on whether I am approached by a soloist – like I was recently approached by the Slovak violinist Milan Paľa. If an ensemble commissions a piece, I can highlight the solo instrument, but the fabric of that specific ensemble is more important. I've written more pieces for solo woodwinds, but that's just down to the soloists – sometimes, I'm approached by a member of an ensemble after having worked with the whole group. I enjoy reminiscing on my twenty years collaborating with the cellist Jiří Bárta, and, over the course of the last ten or fifteen years, with the clarinet player of the Konvergence ensemble, Jiří Mráz.

Were you ever tempted to write pieces for oboe and perform them yourself?

You're talking about a dangerous moment that is usually referred to as "capitulating to the instrument". When I began studying at the Janáček Academy of Performing Arts in Brno, my composition teacher Miloslav Ištvan told me: "And no writing for oboe!" There was a deep meaning in that and I'm still thankful to him after all these years – pieces by composing virtuosos often leave me with an unsatisfactory feeling.

Do you hear unison music "in colour" as you're composing it?

Over time, I discovered – thanks to revisions of older pieces – that the colour component is the most sensitive and needs to be worked out in the greatest detail. I corrected or completed the metro-rhythmic structure to an incomparably lesser extent, and the same is true of the melodic lines. At the beginning, the composer establishes – either intuitively or consciously – an intensity of colour that he must sustain and develop. Every incompleteness, every less-than-adequate reduction

unanimously participates in the decrease in tension of the melodic line, meaning this must be completed after the performance. After twenty years of working with the unison technique, my imagination has a lot to do with my experiences. At the moment, I am trying to focus on the unison and nothing else – in the past, I combined it with standard textures. But my imagination is developing too, of course. It often happens that I hedge my bets safely by applying a relatively high dynamic, only to discover – two or three years later – that this is also not ideal, because what results is the opposite of inappropriate reduction: inappropriate excess. I then attempt to continue on the basis of these experiences and comparisons.

The choice of instrumentation is also closely related to colour. Do you sometimes feel limited by what is available?

I find that the most interesting instrumentations are those that contain reverberation, because it often creates unexpected and generally richer relationships in the melodic line – spatially, this works by separating the instruments by the interval of an octave. In the texture of the piano, for instance, thirds and tenths are very different, the latter rings out better, and if everything moves an octave or two into the bass, the difference becomes enormous. On an excellent piano, a bass note at the very bottom of the range, articulated *forte*, can ring out for thirty seconds or more.

Recently, however, after several performances of my pieces and extensive work, I discovered that my path in future works is to stop making my life easier by using the piano pedal, as well as the celeste and metallophones in the percussion section, all of which can work utter miracles. I am attempting to write extended scores without these instruments, as well as reducing the number of pizzicatos in the lower strings. All the time, I am focusing on colour, but also on the shape of the melodic line: I work by developing the metro-rhythm, which I call the “time drum”. I have come to realise this is a more demanding way of working, but it definitely makes sense to me to experiment, to be wrong, and to try something new.

If you're trying to disengage from instruments with long reverberation times, does that mean a further reduction of (or perhaps the creation of a greater transparency in) the vertical structure?

Because of this reduction, most of the means available to me have tend towards complexity. The path to simplification and reduction is, it would seem, natural for our field of work and leads to the culmination of the creative path. Further work in the future represents, for me, further disengagement, reduction, and simplification – all this, however, is always connected with the risk that the unison line will fall apart. It might mean cancelling the premiere of a piece that simply isn't working out. Return, reduce, complete, and continue towards a clearer expression. It's a nice journey, and I don't think there's any other kind for me.

It seems that whenever you are spoken of or written about, the phrase “composer of sacred music” comes up. Are you a spiritual person?



I can only hope that I am.

One cannot avoid religious themes in your pieces.

Not at all. It seems this is related to me, and I would hope it is an innermost link that creates this, rather than the mere wish to stylise myself in a particular manner and exhibit that to the outside world. I wish for it to be a true manifestation.

Is this something you think about a lot, whether in the form of meditation, prayer, or rational thought?

It is. I have to admit these are difficult subjects that I struggle addressing using specific terms. But this is an everyday concern for me - an area I discover again and again and to which I retreat.

At the beginning of our interview, you mentioned that the Book of Isaiah has been part of your memory for as long as you can remember. Do you read the Bible every day?

A younger friend of mine once told me to read one chapter from both the Old and New Testaments every day. I'd never thought of that before, but for several years now, I've been returning to both books in this manner. I am very happy that this way, I am beginning to attain a different - and, I hope, better - understanding of the unique whole that arises from these two volumes, which includes things that remain difficult for us to understand. I'm referring primarily to the various military histories of the Old Testament. Through frequent returns, however, something more important than external phenomena and events begins arising from the texts. The other planes, which are present in several layers, become clearer by a millimetre.