

# I Enjoy Making Banality Ironic

## AN INTERVIEW WITH COMPOSER MILOŠ ŠTĚDRŮŇ

MILOŠ ŠTĚDRŮŇ (\*1942) IS AN IMPORTANT FIGURE ON THE CULTURAL SCENE OF BRNO AND, BY EXTENSION, THE CZECH REPUBLIC. HE IS A LECTURER AT BRNO'S MASARYK UNIVERSITY, A MUSICOLOGIST, COMPOSER, AND MUSIC EDITOR. THOUGH HE HAS WRITTEN OVER FOUR HUNDRED PIECES OF CLASSICAL MUSIC, HE IS ALSO HIGHLY SOUGHT-AFTER AS A COMPOSER OF INCIDENTAL AND MUSICAL THEATRE WORKS AND HAS HAD AN EXTENSIVE CAREER AS AN EDITOR OF THE WORKS OF LEOŠ JANÁČEK.

*The number of fields you work in is extensive. What is your role as a professional composer?*

“Composer” as a profession? I’d be wary of that. It’s something that exists but also doesn’t. We fight for it practically every day. I “admire” those who can subscribe to it openly: “I am a composer”, “writer”, etc. It’s something I can think about myself, but it’s also possible that it hasn’t been true for a long time. But what is truth? How did Pontius Pilate put it? And he knew what he was talking about, because there are plenty of those truths to go around...

*Attached to the September edition of this magazine is your profile CD. What pieces did you select and what do they mean to you?*

My selection mostly consists of younger pieces, with perhaps three older relics - *Panychida Pasternakovi (Memorial Ceremony to Pasternak)*, *Jazz Ma fin*, and *Trium vocum*. The *Memorial Ceremony to Pasternak* is musique concrète - highly atypical of my general oeuvre. I worked in an electronic studio for years. I wanted to recall



PHOTO: PAVEL ZATLOUKAL

the only piece of musique concrète I created myself – apart from this composition, we mostly worked in teams. The *Memorial Ceremony* was created in the Brno studio of electronic and concrete music between 1968 and 1969. This studio began operation thanks to the efforts of the conductor and radio director Jiří Hanousek. It produced and broadcast over two hundred works. I took part in these activities within the framework of the experimental music studio, which JAMU (the Janáček Academy of Performing Arts) ran in collaboration with the Czechoslovak Radio, with the only graduates being me, Rudolf Růžička – the doyen and most knowledgeable expert on Brno’s electronic music –, and Arnošt Parsch. The course was cancelled in 1971, I think. I spent more than a year working on this *Memorial Service* for my beloved writer Boris Leonidovich Pasternak in the studio. Then an informant’s letter arrived in Prague from an officer at the South Moravian Regional National Committee, claiming that it was an anti-Soviet and generally reactionary piece. The composer Ladislav Kubík, an important dignitary at the Czechoslovak Radio and the Czechoslovak Union of Composers (from which I, along with many others, had been expelled by that time), set a meeting with me when I came to Prague, showed me the letter, and destroyed it in front of me.

*Jazz Ma fin* is a piece from my youth, when I was a great admirer of the Gustav Brom Orchestra. It is based on Guillaume de Machaut's canon *Ma fin est mon commencement* – a brilliant bit of wordplay transferred into a musical structure. In 1967, as a youth of only twenty-five who had great admiration for Brom and his big band, I conceived the piece as Machaut's response to first hearing jazz: "The beginning of jazz is my end and the end of jazz is my beginning". I don't know whether bandleader Gustav Brom registered this and whether he knew who Machaut was, but he made a fantastic recording of the piece. Finally, *Trium vocum*, which is also from the late 1970s. It connects three phenomenal performers in a Third Stream approach: flautist Jiří Stivín, cellist Michaela Fukačová, and percussionist Alan Vitouš.

From the younger pieces, I selected *Čarování (Witchcraft)* for voice, flutes, and guitar, a piece that makes use of my decades of experience with the magical performer and composer Iva Bittová. I also selected the cantata *Lupi*, written for the Affetto vocal group. It makes use of a classification of wolves created by Milíč of Kroměříž, one of the forerunners of Jan Hus. I wrote *Affetti banalissimi* for the phenomenal Trio Aperto, and I used – as I have done many times in the past – my favourite method of confronting banal segments with a different background.

Austerlitz for four cellos was originally a piece for Jan Škrdlík and other cellos played back from magnetic tape, then I returned to the material in orchestral form, and this is the resultant reduction. *Villanelle per Willi* – throughout my life, I have written villanelles as a light form. This series was written for my friend, the excellent musician and currently dean of JAMU, Barbara Willi, who is leading this art university to achieve European standards. The *Madrigals and Villanells on Švejk* are a homage full of admiration for the genius of the writer Jaroslav Hašek, author of *The Good Soldier Švejk*, whom I have revered since I was a boy. I have returned to his texts many times, always with the knowledge that *Švejk*, this brilliant World War I novel that is in fact not humour but existentialist, cannot be set to music in full, only as a collage of the individual situations. The madrigal and villanelle seemed most fitting to the task at hand.

The disc concludes with *AD: Allegria e Nostalgia*. My tribute to Antonín Dvořák's genius. For twenty years, I have been working on Dvořák, trying to bridge the gap brought about in Czech scholarship by the hagiographical and somewhat stale activities of Otakar Šourek (obviously highly praiseworthy in their time), confronting them with the English, American, and German literature (Michael Beckerman, Klaus Döge, John Clapham), as well as new Czech studies (Veronika Vejvodová). I think I now understand Nejedlý<sup>1</sup> a little better – attack was aimed much more at the dilution of Dvořák by his students and epigones than at the essence of the work itself. For me, Dvořák remains the highest expression

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1/ Zdeněk Nejedlý (1978–1962), an influential and controversial musicologist, historian, and journalist. After the communist putsch in 1948, he accepted the post of minister of culture in the Stalinist government and helped define the aesthetics of Socialist Realism in Czechoslovakia.

of Czech musicianship, described by the composer Karl Michael Komma as “Das böhmische Musikantentum”. The occasions are few and far between when someone has interpreted a solo piano part with as much perfection and invention as the pianist Dagmar Pančochová.

*During the time of your studies at JAMU in Brno, the school witnessed copious experiments with New Music. Many Brnoese composers created their own compositional systems. Unique “team compositions” were created. What are your reminiscences of this period?*

I was truly absorbed in New Music. In fact, I never passed through the traditional, conservatory training in composition, which was then considered – the clue is in the name – highly conservative. Miloslav Ištvan, Josef Berg, and Alois Piňos became my gurus and I followed all their activities. I never missed a single concert by the Musica nova ensemble (Josef Horák – bass clarinet, Oldřiška Vaňharová – flute, Branko Čuberka – piano, and Jan Novák – percussion, plus a number of guests). For only a short time, I succumbed to dodecaphonic mysticism and believed that serialism would save us. Then I understood that it is – as always – the refuge of eclectics who rely on salvation through rows as something self-saving. Thankfully, my teachers at JAMU did not fall prey to this kind of thinking. Alois Piňos was an original thinker and his monograph *Tónové skupiny* (Tone Groups), if it had been published at the time in German, French, and English, would be at the level of some grand book on dodecaphony. Unfortunately, this did not come to pass. As a composer, he enthralled me more and more, from *Karikatury* (Caricatures), *Zkratky* (Shortcuts), and *Konflikty* (Conflicts) all the way to great works like *Dvojkonzert* (Double Concerto), *Trojkoncert* (Triple Concerto), the *Ars amatoria* cantata and other pieces. Ištvan enraptured me with his cantatas *Já, Jákob* (I, Jacob) and *Hard Blues* and many other pieces. In 1980, we worked together on completing the evening-length version of *Johanes doktor Faust*, an opera by Josef Berg. We met daily all summer and worked on the score. The teaching methods of both these composers were fascinating. These were not the prescribed two hours of composition theory, but entire afternoons and evenings. No imposition or lecturing – merely the opportunity of observing how they do it. Dress rehearsals, work on the score, consultations with conductors, etc. And the sneers of the orchestra, which was, at the time, convinced that in aleatoric music, everyone can play what they like, so what we mostly heard was the old musician’s adage of C D E C D E... When Piňos’s *Concerto for Orchestra and Magnetic Tape* was to be recorded, we heard dozens of these remarks. František Jílek, the conductor on that recording, suddenly cut the hubbub short and said: “So far, I’ve heard a lot of remarks, but I haven’t heard what is written down in the score. Now play it as it stands in the music and then you can criticise.” So they did – and there was silence. Piňos’s music was thrilling... The years passed, I was formed anew by the theatre, but every once in a while, I return to this “modernism” and call it my “seconda prattica”, following Monteverdi’s famous modernist phase.

*What was the creative process like with the team compositions?*

That was a joint idea of ours, to make team compositions. I have no idea how it came about, it might have been totally random, but it was probably due to

the fact that we wanted to be together. Alois Piňos was the leader, followed by Arnošt Parsch, then me and Rudolf Růžička. We began writing by inventing a methodology – different for every piece. The first evening-length team pieces were *Peripetie* (*Peripeteias*), *Divertissement*, and *Ecce homo* (which will be performed soon by the Brno Contemporary Orchestra). In *Peripetie*, we first used the method of composing in layers. That is the first, immediate idea that comes into one’s mind, and the critics understood it too – when the premiere took place in Germany, a critic for the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung wrote: “Team aus Brno – mache du Geige, ich mache Bläser” – you do the violins, I’ll do the winds. We made many of these team pieces. It would be worth making a summary.

*You are a renowned expert on Leoš Janáček, as well as a connoisseur of the oeuvre of Claude Monteverdi. How did it happen that these two diverse worlds find a connection within you?*

I’ve grown out of Janáček. Since my childhood, I was in the claws of my uncle, the musicologist Bohumír Štědroň, who fed me Janáček since I was five years old. I saw *Jenůfa* for the first time when I was six, and then another thirty times. I saw everything. My uncle taught me about Janáček through everything he published. He taught me in a complex manner – he was a bachelor, and every day, he would rush into our apartment, eat dinner there, and teach me everything. I had to write reviews, study history, play the piano. Then he wanted me to begin playing the violin, so I did. At about age ten, I was ripe for a breakdown, so my mother had me study with her old teacher, Anna Holubová, who was a professor at Janáček’s organists’ school. I played Janáček with a running commentary by her. She would always say: “That Janáček, he’s a genius, but he always spoils everything and cuts it short. He just does it in 5/4 time.” And I would say: “But, professor, that’s exactly what’s so gorgeous about it.” At age twelve, I knew all of Janáček’s operas. In 1958, there was a festival in Brno that presented all of Janáček’s dramatic works. I was sixteen and I attended the world premiere of *Osud* (*Destiny*) with my uncle. And then came early music. That was around the years 1962 and 1963, when the conductor and dramaturge of the Brno opera, Václav Nosek, had a tendency towards balance, so the stable dramaturgy, which mostly consisted of Martinů, Prokofiev, and Janáček, came to include Händel, Lully, and Purcell.

*How did Monteverdi enter the world of Janáček?*

Before 1968 was the peak of New Music in my own composing practice – I did not believe in anything else. In 1967, I attended the international Darmstadt New Music courses, and that was a breaking point. There came a need to balance out New Music, and then came bass clarinetist Josef Horák, who kept asking me for arrangements: “Miloš, we can’t play Schönberg in Jánské lázně [a spa town in the Hradec Králové Region]. We need some early music!” So I began searching for tablatures and making arrangements of the Levoča tablature, Lublin, and others. And that gradually led me to a greater and greater interest in early music.

Around the year 1971, and totally by chance, I met the Prague Madrigalists (Pražští madrigalisté). Their artistic director, Miroslav Venhoda, had similar demands to Horák: “Write something for the Madrigalists that would bring modernism together

Seconda pratica IV / Passacaglia-Folia/

$\text{♩} = 112-116$

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The first system of the musical score is written for organ. It consists of a grand staff with a treble clef on the top line and a bass clef on the bottom line. The music is in 4/4 time. The top staff contains a complex melodic line with many accidentals (sharps, flats, naturals) and some slurs. The bottom staff contains a bass line with various chords and intervals. There are some handwritten annotations above the top staff, possibly indicating fingerings or articulation.

Two empty musical staves, each with a double slash across it, indicating a section break or a measure rest.

The second system of the musical score continues the piece. It features a grand staff with treble and bass clefs. The music is highly rhythmic and complex, with many accidentals and slurs. The bass line is particularly active, with many eighth and sixteenth notes.

Two empty musical staves, each with a double slash across it, indicating a section break or a measure rest.

The third system of the musical score includes a guitar-style chord diagram in the treble staff. The diagram shows a barre across the first five frets, with specific fingerings for the strings. The rest of the system continues with complex textures in both staves, including many accidentals and slurs.

with the madrigal.” So I wrote a madrigal cantata on the tomb of Gesualdo and four other pieces for the Madrigalists. From 1975 to 1981, me and Arnošt Parsch began realising early operas. We did Monteverdi’s *L’incoronazione di Poppea* for the chamber opera of Miloš Wasserbauer (formerly the JAMU Opera Studio, later an autonomous theatre), Caccini’s *Euridice*, and others. The university library had a complete edition of Monteverdi in about thirty volumes. I gradually went through all of this, marinating myself in Monteverdi for about four years. Miroslav Venhoda saw that I was deep in Monteverdi, and suddenly I get a phone call and he says: “I’ve arranged for you to write a small monograph on Monteverdi for Supraphon”. So I went even deeper and wrote one chapter after another.

*In addition to producing old operas, you later also edited and prepared for publication the works of Leoš Janáček.*

That came with my position at the university. When I started at the faculty, they immediately made me the secretary for the complete critical edition of Janáček. This was terrible work. I was constantly arguing with Supraphon. Me and Leoš Faltus would visit Jarmil Burghauser, who had written – along with Milan Šolc – the editorial principles for publishing Janáček and acted as something like a general guarantor all for Janáček editions. Burghauser was a true expert – he was excellently skilled in reading Janáček’s manuscript scores. Me and Faltus gradually acquired the same skill, so he trusted us. He stood behind us when we discovered Janáček’s violin concerto.

We were preparing the *Danube Symphony* for publication when I got a call from Svatava Přibáňová, whom I had worked with for nine years, and she said: “Miloš, what about a violin concerto? We found the score – it had been laying around at Bakala’s for twenty years.” When Janáček died, the conductor Břetislav Bakala received all the materials pertaining to the opera *From the House of the Dead*, which also included this concerto. He understood this did not belong to the opera, so he simply put it aside and it stayed with him. After four days of working on the concerto, we understood that the sixty-page score had had about fourteen pages ripped out. What to do? And I had an idea: let’s look at the *House of the Dead*. And there it was. Janáček, in a frenzy, used the pages he needed – he didn’t even cross out the page numbers. We put it together – it was logical, tie to tie, so it fit. That was a fantastic feeling. The concerto was then premiered by Jan Stanovský, after which it was performed excellently by Josef Suk and a number of other fantastic violinists.

*You have written for many top-class performers. The most extensive list belongs to Due Boemi di Praga (Josef Horák – bass clarinet, Emma Kovárnová – piano). Was your encounter with bass clarinetist Josef Horák – and, by extension, Due Boemi di Praga – crucial for your composing career?*

Certainly. In the 1960s, I was enraptured with the Musica nova ensemble, as I already mentioned – I attended all of their concerts. I was introduced to Josef by the ensemble’s pianist Branko Čuberka. I wrote Josef a *Meditation for Bass Clarinet*, and three months later, he wrote me a letter: “I performed your *Meditation* at the festival in Warsaw, take a look what the press wrote about you”. And some

reviewer had written: “the Czech Varèse”. At the time, I had no idea who Varèse was. That was how I began composing for Sonatori di Praga and, later, for Due Boemi di Praga. Josef Horák and Emma Kovárnová – my lifelong duo. I have written almost a hundred pieces for them as a duo and as soloists. For the rest of my life, I will never forget my friend, the Paganini of the bass clarinet, and his partner...

*What other collaborations do you remember fondly?*

As far as ensembles go, I remember with gratitude BAS – the Brno Academic Choir with choirmasters Lubomír Mátl and Petr Altrichter, the Brno Madrigalists with Josef Pančík, the Prague Madrigalists with my great supporter Miroslav Venhoda, the Moravian Quartet, the DAMA DAMA percussion ensemble, the Gustav Brom Big Band, for whom I wrote over a dozen Third Stream compositions, BROLN – the Brno Radio Orchestra of Folk Instruments, for whom me and Arnošt Parsch wrote almost twenty pieces (both as a team and individually). I also cannot forget Jiří Stivín, the Graff Quartet, harpsichordist Barbara Willi, guitarist Vladislav Bláha, percussionists Martin Opršál and Martin Kleibl, harpsichordist, organist, and conductor Robert Hugo, though there were many others too...

*For most of your professional life, you have been active both in the academic world and the world of theatre. Are these two different worlds, with one allowing you respite from the other, or do they mingle and complement each other?*

I always and proudly subscribe to the operetta *Mam'zelle Nitouche*. I am Célestin and Floridor – the boring, theoretical Célestin, who resides in the convent, is replaced by his alter ego, the perennially joyous Floridor. That is my discipline! In the 1970s, I was at this horrific faculty, with a meeting every two days where they would tell us how awful it all was and how they'd throw us all out as soon as quality political cadres were available... Those were the times. There was nothing of the sort when I worked at Husa na provázku (Goose on a String Theatre). That was a commune – a world unto itself, closed from morning to night. We were always rehearsing. And I came to this commune – they took me as a sparring partner. I was writing for people who couldn't read music, they would step on the sheet music, but when I brought them pieces, they sung them with gusto, they performed my productions, and I was happy. I never heard annoyed comments from musicians about what they have to play. I realised that if I had written an opera for the state theatre – and I probably could have gotten it performed after 1980, with an enormous amount of effort – it would leave scores of people angry and annoyed.

*What are you working on now? And when can we look forward to hearing it?*

I finished a chamber opera, *Magnum mysteriu* – the great mystery of the title is the story of Gregor Mendel and the half-hour chamber opera is intended for the Mendel bicentenary (2022). I also recently finished another chamber opera, *Delirium*. It describes the journey of army chaplain Otto Katz back home in a delirium, with the assistance of Švejk and other characters. But looking forward to a performance? I'd prefer not to. The opera houses I have approached so far are making excuses. I take this naturally, with humility. This is the Weltlauf – the running of the world – and thank God for the fact that it is so...