

czech music | interview

by Ian Mikyska



PHOTO: RADOŠLAV TŘESA

THE NAME OF MICHAL WRÓBLEWSKI WILL, BY NOW, BE WELL KNOWN TO FANS OF CZECH IMPROVISED AND JAZZ MUSIC, BUT ALSO TO AUDIENCES AT CONTEMPORARY MUSIC CONCERTS AT THE OSTRAVA DAYS FESTIVAL AND ELSEWHERE.

Searching for Freedom

an interview with composer

Michal Wróblewski

IN THIS INTERVIEW, WE DELVE INTO MICHAL'S BACKGROUND, THE VARIOUS SCENES IN PRAGUE, OSLO, AND BERLIN, AND THE NEED FOR MUTUAL SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGEMENT AMONG MUSICIANS.

On the day when me and Michal were to meet to do this interview, saxophonist Michal Hrubý posted the following update on social media: “I had a dream today in which Michal Wróblewski participated in a cycling race. He was in the lead by one day and six hours. When I asked him how he had managed it, he said he had driven part of the race by car.” This dream, however, has no real basis in reality, as Michal can certainly not be accused of taking “the fast track” – quite the contrary, seen retrospectively, his career manifests a tireless work ethic, whether this means countless of hours of honing instrumental technique (first in a jazz framework, later in terms of sonic exploration of the saxophone); leading groups, writing for them, touring and organising; a relatively late change of focus to the world of contemporary composed music; or, more recently, organising a concert series, acting as dramaturg of a jazz festival, and co-running a record label.

Do you come from a musical family? What was your path to music?

I'm not from a musical family at all – my granddad played in a wind band as an amateur. In preschool, I saw that the girls would attend recorder classes and I wanted to join them. I was

om and Development

mposer and saxophonist

about four years old and the teacher didn't want to teach a child that young, but I managed to convince him somehow. I then switched to the clarinet because he was a clarinet player. Me and the other clarinetists in his class attended a wind band that also had a big band attached to it, and the big band needed a saxophone player. My teacher tried to convince me not to play the saxophone, because he thought I would ruin my clarinet embouchure. But in the end, the bandleader – Antonín Keller, former trombone player in the FOK Prague Symphony Orchestra – convinced my parents to have me learn the saxophone as well. A few months later, I was completely immersed in the instrument.

How old were you then?

Twelve. And about half a year after that, I discovered that there was something called a conservatory, somewhere I could attend high school and dedicate myself to music, so I began preparations for the entrance exam to the Jaroslav Ježek Conservatory.

So you were focused on jazz from the age of twelve?

Essentially, yes. I had two excellent teachers, Jan Koliha on saxophone and Michal Matzner on clarinet, the latter of whom unfortunately died prematurely. Jan was interested in jazz, he had friends at “Ježkárna”, he'd lend me records, so that was where I first heard Miles Davis' Kind of Blue, Charlie Parker... I tried transcribing these recordings by ear and I was really into it all. I was working exclusively on jazz before starting at Ježkárna, and even the first two years of study, I was mostly learning the style of Kenny Garrett (a saxophone player in the post-bop and fusion idioms – editor's note).

And you studied the full six years at the Jaroslav Ježek Conservatory?

Yes, but during the last two years, I was also studying at the Higher Specialised School appended to the same conservatory.

And then you went straight to the jazz department at the Janáček Academy of Performing Arts (JAMU) in Brno?

Yes. My mum convinced me to do that, because everyone in our family has at least one university degree. I think she might even have filled in the application form for me. But what motivated me to go to JAMU was that I was thinking about doing an Erasmus exchange, travelling abroad and trying something else.

At one point in your studies did your interests shift from Kenny Garrett to, shall we say, “different” music?

Around my third year at the conservatory, when I put together a band called Mocca Malacco. Dan Panchártek, who played bass in the band, brought us loads of music on DVDs that I hadn't heard of before, especially the majority of Dave Holland's discography as a leader, all the way back to the 1970s. That was where I heard the recordings of Holland's quintets: the first with Steve Coleman and Kenny Wheeler on saxophone and trumpet and the second with Chris Potter on saxophone. That was our greatest inspiration for Mocca Malacco. And it was through them that I got to older recordings, John Zorn and the New York Downtown scene, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, and others.

Then you spent three years at JAMU.

I applied for the Erasmus programme in my third year, but I wasn't accepted anywhere. When I applied again, it worked out, so I intermitted my studies so that I could go to Norway on Erasmus. Once I was there, I formally concluded my studies in Brno and applied straight to the master's programme at the same school in Oslo – the Norwegian Academy of Music.

It's been eighteen years since you began studying at the Jaroslav Ježek Conservatory. How do you think the Czech scene of experimental music with a jazz foundation has developed?

The transformation is enormous. Back when we started Mocca Malacco – and mind you, that wasn't a particularly experimental band; most of the solos were based on a harmonic progression or a groove, and though there were moments when we played “freely”, we didn't really know that's what we were doing – there weren't many bands like that in our generation. Or rather, no one really took any paths other than imitating American groups. There weren't many opportunities to hear different approaches in the generation above us, either, with the important exception of Vertigo (formerly the Vertigo Quintet

– editor's note), which we considered the most experimental music on the scene, and NUO, Nuselský umělecký orchestr (Nusle Art Orchestra), so generally musicians around saxophonist Marcel Bárta and keyboard player Vojtěch Procházka.

Since then, the situation has changed completely. There are more and more students as old as we were back then that are interested in this music, and they often have a much better technical foundation than we did. And I think this change has mostly taken place over the last five, seven years.

How much do you think this has to do with the creation of jazz departments at two art universities – first at JAMU in 2010 and then at HAMU (the Music and Dance Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague) in 2016?

When I attended the Higher Specialised School at the JJC, there were a few people who were interested in experimenting: the Slovak guitarist Michal Matejka, for instance, or Marian Friedl, who was very open to everything. When I came to Brno, the scene there was very interesting. I met musicians I'd never known about, like saxophone players Radim Hanousek and Pavel Zlámal or composer Jaroslav Šťastný (Peter Graham). They were also closely tied to JAMU, a school that was attended by students with an interest in improvisation and experimental music, even though this was not the focus of the school.

As for Prague: the Higher Specialised School at JJC has a crucial influence on the development of this form of music, and HAMU is really only continuing in this tradition – a lot of students come to HAMU from the Higher Specialised School, where they'd already encountered free improvisation or other forms of experimentation, so they are open minded and the school can serve as a further extension.

One of the ways in which you support the development of the improvised and experimental music scene in Prague is through the Hybrid Session, a concert series that also includes an open jam that you organise along with George Cremaschi, an American double bassist who has been central to the improvised music scene in Prague for years.

The Hybrid Sessions are a continuation of Solo Wednesdays, the series we organised with you and George at the Scout Institute on Old Town Square. Both series are inspired by what I saw abroad, especially in Norway. The way Hybrid Sessions works is that the evening begins with a duo set by two invited musicians, followed by several sets of open free

improvisation. We write down a list of names and try and distribute them into groups – usually four groups, with three to six members in each one – so that we bring together people who haven't played together much before (or at all). The series is frequented by musicians from different scenes (improvised, jazz, classical, experimental) and we try to choose the duos to also bring different worlds together and instigate new encounters. We sometimes succeed in creating really bizarre instrumental combinations across genres.

The aim of this series is to interconnect the scene – Prague hasn't had an open improvisation session for years – the last I know of was Improvising (Ob) sessions, organised by guitarist Petr Zelenka. The series takes place in Hybernská 4 (hence, partly, Hybrid Sessions), a relatively new space in the centre of Prague administered by Charles University, and they have a great cohesive function for the scene, serving as a platform where the experimental music community can meet, where new projects can come to life, where musicians can become passionate about exploring these types of music. Personally, I find the greatest joy in the fact that many classically trained musicians attend the sessions, some of them regularly. I am also glad that the event has found such a receptive community, so we don't really need to worry about promotion and we still get lots of arrivals (both musicians and audience members) who enjoy the evenings immensely.

I wanted to use the Prague scene and Hybrid Sessions as a means of getting to a theme I find interesting in relation to your work: Prague, Czech culture, the writing of Bohumil Hrabal, beer drinking... What does this mean for you, as a person, as an artist?

My relationship to that component of Czech culture is somewhat ambivalent. I'd say some musicians around me are much more influenced by it, like Marcel Bárta or the trombonist and composer Jan Jirucha, who really live this "Czechness" and for whom the culture you're talking about – and particularly in Prague – is a powerful life-force. I also have a soft spot for all this, and it's clear to me that I can never quite get rid of it, but some elements of it seem dangerous at times: sometimes it has a tendency to small-town thinking, refusing outside influences, keeping to one's own, or fear (of course, I am not talking about the people I mentioned).

I don't think this aspect is particularly important for my work or my thinking about music or culture. But I love it, which I best realised when I lived in Norway.

If I had stayed in Czechia, it would probably have gotten on my nerves after a while – before I left, I was the biggest critic of Prague and the Czech Republic in general. But in Norway, I realised that I feel more and more invested in it; that it's far more useful for me to be here than in Norway or on another scene that already has a lot of momentum. What's happening here now is much more interesting to me than scenes full of internationally famous superstars, like Berlin or New York.

More interesting how?

You can have elitism even within improvised and experimental music – a hierarchy within the scene, the "stars" who have more of a reputation by their name than by the interesting things they're doing now. The same is true of jazz, contemporary music, or any other genre. There's nothing like that here, of course, because we are entirely unknown to the world. In a way, this is what makes the scene interesting – the projects emerging here are really different. It's not like it was when I was fifteen, with everyone trying to play like the American musicians we knew, but when they came over, everyone would just go home, open-mouthed, to practice harder, and even so, it was never – barring a few exceptions – at the same level as the American bands. But now, there's music happening here that can be – not in all cases; we're definitely at the beginning of the journey – interesting to anyone, anywhere. I used to have this problem: I was travelling or playing abroad and people asked me to recommend them some music from the Czech scene – I had to think hard and there wasn't much to choose from. I'd think of someone – they're a fantastic musician. But then I realised that there are fantastic musicians in every country. You need something more, character, personality, something you can't find elsewhere. And Czech-ness can project into that.

Do you think, then, that there is greater freedom here in comparison to larger, more developed scenes?

Definitely. But that doesn't mean – particularly regarding the future – that the scene should be closed off. I think it might just be a matter of time before it begins opening up – also through the contacts young musicians made at various exchanges and studying abroad – and when Czech experimental music starts being interesting for international festivals.

I'd like to now talk about a turn in your career that happened some four or five years ago – a transition from being an improvising and composing musician who leads his own experimental groups with a jazz foundation

to a composer of contemporary music whose pieces are performed by other musicians. What motivated this change and how did it work, practically speaking?

It happened in Norway, although I wasn't really involved with contemporary music while I was there. I studied a master's programme called Improvised Music, within which you are free to work on pretty much everything, though there is a tendency towards non-artificial music: folk, improvised, noise, even popular music. The transition started happening because I realised more and more clearly that composing is, in fact, the most important thing for me.

More important than playing the music?

In a way, yes. Maybe you can't say that, though - it's just something else. But it was a component that was becoming more and more important for my development. It was clear to me that it had to progress somewhere, beyond the idioms I was operating within before then. Beyond writing something that would sound good when I played it with my band. When I returned to Czechia, I knew I needed something that would push me further and give me a good reason to justify coming back from Norway and still moving forward. I wanted to do a PhD and this seemed like a good way to explore composition, so I applied to JAMU in Brno. Although I originally applied with material that was essentially my attempt at imitating something that sounded like contemporary music, thanks to lessons with Jaroslav Štátný, encounters with composers at the Ostrava Days festival, and intensive listening, I progressed relatively quickly. I was twenty-eight at the time and I felt that I have to learn fast, that I have to use what I already know about music to reach what I want to express through this form.

More and more, I realise that composing is something I fundamentally need and that the music I want to write within this world is radically different from the music I perform myself. The process itself is completely different. I was used to always doing everything quickly - I spent years living in a world where it was common practice to sketch something down quickly on manuscript paper, bring it to a rehearsal, and then something would happen to it. I was very influenced by two scenes: the Chicago scene around Anthony Braxton and the AACM on the one hand, based mostly in free jazz and the jazz idiom more broadly, and the New York Downtown scene on the other, represented most emblematically by the music of John Zorn, his extreme film-edit compositions, and a particular brand of bizarre humour. And suddenly, I was listening to very different music, thinking about what I was missing in my own

expression for me to be satisfied with myself as an artist. And that's a completely different kind of music. I am still educating myself in composition and enjoying this development immensely. Although it might not look like that to others - and it usually doesn't look like that in my diary - it's the most important thing for me right now.

Could you explain a little further the motivation that leads you to want to compose such and such music to be satisfied with yourself as an artist?

Perhaps it fills in my personality, which I don't think is particularly free-jazzy or wild. I'm suddenly making music by poring over it for six months and thinking at the smallest level of detail (which is a skill I had to learn, a process much aided by encounters with composers who work this way). And I'm discovering that this is exactly what the music needs. I used to not think about details much. I counted on them being magically resolved on the spot - which they often are, in certain kinds of music. What I enjoy about composition is the relatively high level of control. Something you sit on until it hatches. It becomes like a meditation - work you become completely immersed in. I often work with notation software that has the capacity to play things back, and it often happens that I feel that truly new music is being created - whenever I listened to the music I used to make in the past, it was immediately clear to me that I had written it, and this was also clear to people who knew me. There was always something that prevented me from surprising myself in the composition process - though there were new ideas, the concept was still similar. I suddenly began writing music that would allow me to make discoveries as I wrote it. Music that did not flow from me in the intuitive manner. I learned to think about it more. But even so, the core of these pieces is, in comparison to the work of many other composers, highly intuitive. The element of improvisation is very important, which is partly due to the fact that my education in composition is not that extensive.

How do you compose? At your instruments? At the piano?

I barely write any music at the piano any more (even for my bands). I used to, and it would always lead me in some way. That can be useful too, but it never seemed too successful to me in the context of contemporary music.

So you try to hear everything in your head, write it down as precisely as possible, and then check the results in a notation programme on your computer?

Exactly.

Doesn't the software then become an instrument, leading you in some way?

It certainly does. But that's only one compositional method – the other path I take is more experimental, sometimes almost aleatoric. I try out a system which I then radically edit based on my taste and an idea of what I want to hear. I've been using this process more and more recently, even when writing “jazz” music. This is nothing new and explains why these compositional techniques were created – because the path starts somewhere else and not in my subconscious, I can arrive at something that surprises me.

From what you've said, it seems that composing and playing – whether improvised music or music in bands you lead and write for – are fairly separate worlds for you.

Essentially, yes. Or, rather, I used to be much more steadfast in that conviction than I am now. I visited the Ostrava Days Institute twice as a resident. The first time I went, in 2019, I felt that the two worlds are completely different and that I might do well to stop playing for an extended period and dedicate myself fully to composition, because otherwise I wouldn't be able to catch up; that it couldn't be combined with the other things I do and they wouldn't contribute anything to it. During my second stay at Ostrava Days, I realised the opposite: first off, experience in jazz and improvisation are important for what I compose and lend my music specific elements that other composers don't have, and secondly, I found out that if we're talking about composition, you could well say that a band playing a concert is one composition – most of my bands work that way, with the entire concert operating as a single piece, without breaks between the pieces. In a way, it doesn't matter to me whether it's improvised; whether there are song forms, compositions, or experimental notation. That band, that evening – or even that band as such – is something like a composition. A composition created by several people with me participating in a partial capacity. I approach most things I do in this manner. Creating the dramaturgy of a music festival can also be like a composition.



PHOTO: MARTIN ZEMAN

So to you, composition is not merely about sovereign authorship and control but also contribution?

What's composition? Shaping a musical experience in time. That time can mean years working with a band or six months sitting in front of a computer screen.

You mentioned creating a festival programme, which in your case means the Jazz Goes to Town festival in Hradec Králové, a regional centre some 120 kilometres east of Prague. What was the festival like when you took over as dramaturg and how has it developed?

Jazz Goes to Town has a tradition that I only registered partially at the time. The festival was created by Martin Brunner, and though I performed there occasionally and attended some concerts, it is only now that I'm really learning how wide its scope is – guests have included many musicians from the New York Downtown scene; the Art Ensemble of Chicago played at the very first edition of the festival. Programming a concert like that for the first season of a regional jazz festival seems almost incredible to me. Zdeněk Závodný, director of Divadlo 29 in Pardubice (a city nearby), then took over as dramaturg, and

the festival started becoming highly experimental for the standards of Czech jazz audiences. I'm trying to continue this lineage, but just like Zdeněk, I aim to avoid the programme being all about experimental music – it should reflect the jazz scene in Czechia as a whole. I was talking to Jaroslav Štátný about this recently, who told me something I hadn't fully realised before then: we often invite bands to the festival that aren't that well known in Czechia, or even internationally – rather, they form part of a local scene within which they are known. I often try to avoid “luring” audiences in with a big name; catching their attention at first sight. I'd rather try to introduce them to music that I believe is among the best of what's happening right now – and music with which they have no chance of finding this out for themselves, other than coming along to the concert. I find it important not to do a festival that only invites legends who have been doing the same things for year – my aim is to introduce the scene in various forms and offer music that is progressive and responds to the times we live in. To prove that jazz isn't a boring genre or dead music, that it can be interesting to people who follow any trends in any kind of contemporary music. That there are still many spaces to explore, and that there are bands here who are playing music they simply could not have played ten years ago.

This year, the festival included an orchestral concert with premieres by composers Heiner Goebbels, Michal Nežtek, and Peter Graham (Jaroslav Štátný) featuring the improvising soloists Sofia Jernberg, Susana Santos Silva, and Frank Gratkowski accompanied by the Hradec Králové Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Marko Ivanović. I see this concert as a dramaturgical connection of two musical worlds that are rather divided in your own musical practice.

That's right, and the connections can really work marvellously. It's a shame when these worlds are closed off, and, after all, there have been many artists bringing them together for years now. The Chicago scene, for instance, has long felt the injustice of Western contemporary music viewing them as less than equal partners, although they share many principles with American avant-garde composers in particular. It's a natural connection for me, because I live both in the world of jazz and improvised music and in the world of contemporary music, and I am equally interested in both.

Let's talk about another supportive activity of yours. At the end of last year, you co-founded Ma Records, a label for experimental music. How did that happen?

It all started when I was leading accordionist Vojta Drnek's master's project at JAMU, where I teach part-time. Our consultations were mostly about compositional questions, but we also discussed other things, like the scene and what it needed. Vojta has an almost incredible talent for organising – he's really great at taking projects all the way and being thorough; much more so than I. We also discussed labels and the fact that it isn't easy to put out a jazz record that is even a little more complex, let alone any music that's more “out there”. At the time, I'd tell my friends that I'll definitely start a label one day, only it would take a while, as I definitely can't spare the time to do it right now (laughter).

In our discussions with Vojta, I was of the opinion that a label like that needn't be based on subsidies and grants, putting out physical releases that cost huge sums of money, but that it could instead be an online platform that would still serve a very important function. And since we started the label, the most important function for me is how the label builds a community, unifying the scene and bringing it closer together. Although we're all friends in the Czech community of jazz and improvised music, we enjoy seeing each other and so on, I'm missing that struggle for a common goal. The scene is set up so that everyone has to fend for themselves. Abroad, I saw scenes operating in less competitive ways – musicians mutually support each other so that they can make a breakthrough.

The second motivation for the creation of the label was that I would often meet musicians abroad interested in similar music, and they'd tell me I was the first Czech musician they'd met. They know where Czechia is, they've all been to Prague on holiday, but almost no one has played here (if they haven't played in Punctum) and they don't know any local musicians. In order for this to change, we need something bigger than a really popular band that will lift the scene up.

These, then, were the two primary motivations. The rest is Vojta's work – he really does a lot more in terms of organising, logistics, and technical matters. Our plan was to put out five or six records a year. Instead, we've published thirteen albums this year, because the interest was simply enormous and all the proposals we received were excellent and interesting. A lot of these recordings wouldn't have seen the light of day without the label – if you have a recording and nowhere to publish it, what can you do with it?

Before we finish, I'd like to return to your compositions within the context of contemporary music. We've discussed motivation already, but I'm interested in what techniques, topics, and directions specifically interest you in this domain.

I've recently been more and more interested in various forms of experimental notation, particularly text notation - forms that represent a step towards improvisation, but theoretically still represent a type of composition (at least for me). Technically speaking, in the realm of jazz composition, I ran into the blind alley of harmony, which I avoided by writing predominantly in a contrapuntal manner - most of my music doesn't have a foundation in harmonic thinking. The world of formally determined jazz, jazz standards, and so on, has put me off this a little - even though I love the music, I don't know where one could take it further, and I usually find contemporary jazz that develops the complexities of jazz harmony rather irritating, because I don't understand it (that, for me, is "intellectual jazz" in the pejorative sense). But when I discovered the world of alternative tunings beyond twelve-tone equal temperament, it provided a way out of this blind alley. I've been studying tuning for the last two or three years and I am trying to discover these elements and use them in my pieces so as to create verticalities that I find interesting.

What tuning system or approach to microtonality do you work with?

Mostly Just Intonation, but not exclusively. This is also a field in which I am working quite hard on educating myself.

As for other elements, I've spoken about one of them already: I always worked with edits and cuts, sharp changes, music that isn't really processual, develops quickly, and in which the logic of form is not created horizontally, specifying a trajectory from here to there, where something will move you yet further - instead, it works in blocks, with the individual blocks only making sense in hindsight.

That was also how I wrote music when my interest shifted to contemporary music, and many of my pieces were conceived in this way, only using different means. I wanted to try going entirely against that: writing music that develops slowly and that creates a whole that is meaningful as one listens, but every time I tried to write music like that, it still had elements of my sharp-cut thinking. In the last few months, I've realised that perhaps, it doesn't quite make sense to try and rid myself of something that comes naturally to me,

that arises from my personality, and that I enjoy when I listen to music. But I'd like not to be as radical - to work with movement and stasis in subtle ways; less directly.

And that, essentially, is all of it. I tried to create sonic wholes in which I always primarily consider how they move and when they stay still, when they slow down or speed up so that it all contains as little specificity as possible. The music I grew up in was very direct rhythmically and harmonically aimed for greater and greater complexity. So I try going against that - not that I don't enjoy that, but it has no place in the music I want to make. Often, when I hear contemporary music that is, in my perspective, rhythmically banal, which means that it corresponds to the "grooves" I know from other genres, I'm a little put off. I'm not a big fan of cross-overs of this kind.

Finally, could you end by recommending to our readers some of your favourite albums from the Ma Records catalogue?

Jungle Debris - That's a blast. All three members of the trio are amazingly talented, and they play so tight together as a band. I was there when this album was recorded, and it really reflects the spontaneous atmosphere of the session, capturing the band almost like how they play live.

Uthando - Since the entire band are represented on the album as composers, the music is amazingly diverse. It's a trip to all kinds of places. Uthando is also a perfect example of where the scene has progressed to and where young Czech musicians are headed (particularly around the jazz department at HAMU). The youngsters have created up (laughter). I like how pleasant and positive the whole record is.

I could go on like this about other bands whose albums we put out this year: TokDat, Tryptych, Endemit, JWQ, Meandér, and Pavel Zlámál PQ are all original ensembles whose music I can honestly recommend, which is also true of our latest release, Interference, by accordionist Žaneta Vítová and vocalist Annabelle Plum. All these formations are also worth hearing live.

In addition to these working bands, we also put out a special edition this year, MiniMa, which presented four solo projects - by Radim Hanousek, Vojta Drnek, Ondřej Galuška, and Ian Mikyska - and serves as a demonstration of how full albums can function like compositions.