

"IF IT DOESN'T SOUND THE SAME AS IT DID THIRTY YEARS AGO, THAT'S A SUCCESS."
an interview with dramaturg
JOSEF TŘEŠTÍK



PHOTO: IVAN MALÝ – PRAGUE SPRING FESTIVAL

Though Josef Třeštík originally studied composition, he spent several years working as a journalist at Czech Radio, after which he became the dramaturg (programme director) first of Contempuls, a leading contemporary music festival, then of the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra, and finally the Prague Spring festival, the largest musical event in the Czech Republic. We spoke to Josef about prestige, conservatism and innovation, independence, and strict music teachers.

How did you first become involved in music? Do you come from a musical family?

Not quite a musical one, but an artistic one, yes. Both my parents are conservators. There are also some translators and writers in the family. My uncle Vojtěch Saudek was a composer, but I didn't have a chance to talk to him about music very much. There was always music at home – my parents owned many records and cassettes of classical music, and we had an upright piano that my mother played. A crucial musical influence for me was Eliška – Líza – Kleinová, sister of composer Gideon Klein. When I was about thirteen, I began studying piano with her. She was an important musical pedagogue and author of music exercise books. She was a close friend of our family – she had dated my grandfather, the translator Erik A. Saudek, before the war, and they remained friends. She taught most of my grandfather's children, including my mother, so when I became seriously interested in music, I became her last pupil. I would visit her in her apartment on Arbesovo náměstí, and what was important for me was that she was the first person that took my interest in music absolutely seriously, working with me in earnest and quite strictly, too – not like I was some child learning the piano. And she also let me play music that I really loved, like Ravel. It was a great fit.

So you were around thirteen when you became more deeply involved in music?

Around that age, yes. Before that, I had studied the violin at music school, but I was never ever good at it. I wanted to be a composer, so I went to the musical section of the Jan Neruda Grammar School (now the Grammar School and Music School of the Capital City of Prague), meaning I received a rigorous academic education as well as a musical one. I studied the piano and composition, later switching instruments to the organ.

The school has a reputation for being quite demanding in combining the curricula of an academic high school and a conservatory. Many of its graduates either become professional musicians or else abandon music for good. What was your experience?

It was certainly demanding – we spent long hours in school and you were also expected to practice a lot. But it gave me so much. We had excellent teachers for both academic and musical subjects: music history, for instance, was taught by musicologist and theorist Jaromír Havlík – it was great to experience someone of this calibre at that age. My composition teacher was Jiří Smutný and he gave me a lot of care, even beyond what the school prescribed.

I then went on to study composition at HAMU (the Music and Dance Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague), and as part of my studies, I took an Erasmus exchange to the Royal College of Music in London. After I graduated, I also took private lessons with Louis Andriessen for some time, whom I would visit in Amsterdam.

When did the switch from composition to other forms of musical activity take place?

It wasn't really a switch. I had a long creative block as a composer –

During your studies, or afterwards?

It started at HAMU and continued after graduation. I struggled with it for several years and could not find a way to resolve the issue. Right after graduation, I began working full time as a music editor at Czech Radio Vltava. And as for the transition from composer to dramaturg or journalist, I was always the type who bought masses of CDs and listened to tonnes of music from the Middle Ages to today. When I was about fifteen, I had my first summer job working in a corner shop, and I spent all of my wages on CDs.

So you became a music editor at Czech Radio Vltava – the public broadcaster's classical music station. An ideal job for a CD-head!

I began as an extern, selecting the music for Mozaika, an interview format with guests from the world of art and culture. Then I prepared a few programmes for Vltava, still externally, after which I was offered a full-time position. This involved writing, preparing, and recording the programmes, but also assuming responsibility for many other programmes, planning them, arranging on their production with externs, recording them, etc.

So a combination of dramaturgy, editing, writing, preparing.

Exactly. Officially, I was an editor for contemporary and early music, but in reality, everyone often worked on everything. I also did some interviews, which I found interesting. It was through Czech Radio that I first met Hans Abrahamsen, who later came to Contempuls Festival.

But I feel that this is still true today, in your case – a greater interest in contemporary and pre-Baroque music.

There was certainly a long period like this, but I'm not sure that's still true. I appreciate music of the Classical and Romantic eras too.

You stayed at Czech Radio for many years.

I did. I wanted a change and couldn't see a path within the institution at the time, so I left. Soon after that, I was approached by Petr Bakla with the offer of becoming the dramaturg of Contempuls, a Prague-based festival of contemporary music, and Jakub Čížek, who had at that time just been named director of the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra (Symfonický orchestr Českého rozhlasu – SOČR), who offered me the post of dramaturg with the orchestra. I dove right in, as this was an extremely attractive proposition. Particularly in the past, I had this nagging feeling: why are the concerts in Prague so similar to each other, often unimaginative and conservative in their programming? So when I got this offer, I knew I would have to try, at least.

And, in a sense, it was a return to practice, after the “secondary” work at Czech Radio.

That's true, although – barring few exceptions – I don't usually deal directly with sheet music as such.

But it's an opportunity to influence what happens.

Certainly, but it's much more of a collective activity. In addition to practical aspects (like the budget), it's a team effort, and in order for it to be convincing, it has to be the right people playing the right music – you can't force something on someone. It's the musicians (and especially conductors in the case of orchestras) that bring the music to life, and more and more, I am convinced that you have to choose the right people to collaborate with, and then avoid forcing them into anything. Set up the situation as best as possible. Of course it's always good when the people you're working with are open to things, but the result is always created in dialogue.

The term dramaturgy has only entered the English-language context in recent years (particularly through German theatre) – although your position at Prague Spring is listed as programme director in English, there are perhaps some specificities that the definition of “dramaturg” brings to the table.

The fashionable term right now in English is “curated” – everything is “curated”, including collections of belts in high-end boutiques, but I feel that curation involves an even stronger degree of an individual, authorial input.

Precisely – “curator” magnifies the individual aspect, whereas “dramaturg” emphasises the connective function: assessing and setting up the situation and its individual components, helping them communicate among each other...

Because dramaturgy always involves a large number of different people, and you have to bring them together if you are to avoid a “fail” (which can happen too). And by “fail”, I don’t mean that someone is dissatisfied, but that something is not convincing – that’s what I take as a failure. It could also be that the concert is excellent but no one turns up to see it – that’s a failure too, but perhaps not on my part. For me, failing simply means a bad concert.

Such as...?

That used to happen, perhaps, when I first started out. It would involve a conductor agreeing to something without really knowing what they were getting themselves into, and that’s never good. So now I know I need to explain much better in advance what it will be – because I want them to dive in, with me, otherwise it won’t end well.

How are all these elements different in the three organisations where you work as a dramaturg – Contempuls, SOČR, and the Prague Spring festival?

Contempuls is an independent organisation in terms of not being under the patronage of any large institution (although of course, independence is a questionable term, as the festival is certainly dependent on financing from various sources). It is independent, though, in that no one else has a say in the programming, though the limits set by the small team and limited budget are considerable. However, when I took over from Petr Bakla, the festival already had a reputation abroad, so when you invited a relatively well-known ensemble, they would look at who had performed at the festival in the past, and if their calendar allowed it and we could afford them, they would gladly come and play. The most difficult thing about Contempuls was the uncertainty in planning – every year, we had to apply for funding again, but at the same time, you simply cannot plan events six months in advance if you’re hoping to invite ensemble recherche or Hans Abrahamsen.

As for SOČR, the cooperation with director Jakub Čížek was crucial. When he took over in 2015, he wanted to shift the orchestra towards a more international character, as well as chiselling out a clearer profile in terms of repertoire. A significant change in this respect took place when Alexander Liebreich took over as chief conductor and artistic director. When I started, I had the ambition – perhaps a little insolent – to turn SOČR into the orchestra with the most interesting dramaturgy in Prague. Partly because this is usually how radio orchestras work internationally, partly because I was personally invested in this goal. So we agreed to compose the repertoire of a combination of the standard programming, carefully selected and seldom performed pieces from the past that are worth presenting, and a greater proportion of contemporary music. This was around the year 2016.

It’s hard for me to judge how it looks from the outside, as I am an “insider” in these institutions, but it seems to me that the scene has changed considerably since then. Even a few years ago, the large institutions were really much more conservative than they are now. All the orchestras (perhaps with the exception of PKF – Prague Philharmonia) had really conservative programming, and since then, it is not only the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra that has shifted, but also the Prague Symphony Orchestra (Symfonický orchestr hlavního města Prahy FOK) and the Czech Philharmonic.

Our aim was to make new music part of the season: not just a premiere here and there, but outwardly presenting this as a process of new music being created on a commission from SOČR, not hidden away in a marginal concert cycle, but presented in full view. The international

dimension is also important: now that I see it from the inside, it is clear that if you want to include international soloists or conductors in your season, who the orchestra's principal conductor is plays a much larger role than I had previously thought.

Prestige, then.

Exactly – awareness too, perhaps. Whether the artists (and agencies) know who the conductor is and whether they have (to use the standard phrase) an international profile. That plays a huge role. When Alexander Liebreich became chief conductor, a lot changed – he had already collaborated with many excellent musicians, who would then gladly come to Prague. And now, with Petr Popelka, the orchestra's new chief conductor, this trend continues.

It's an interesting contrast to Contempuls, where the chief constraint is financial: here, in the world of "grand classical music", the limits are set by the prestige of participants.

In Prague, there are three large symphony orchestras and one excellent chamber orchestra, so it's a different kind of struggle. Some conductors will say "I'll only perform with the Czech Philharmonic, not with the Radio Orchestra" – that happens too.

At the Prague Spring, the situation is very different. In the case of SOČR, everything is performed by the orchestra, which is constructed in a particular way, it has its own system – some things are easy and natural, some things less so.

To an extent, you are responsible for what the orchestra performs. Do you have a personal relationship with the ensemble?

Yes and no. My relationship is with the artistic board, as it's not quite possible to have direct contact with an orchestra of ninety people. And, of course, with such numbers, not everyone will like everything – that is simply a fact. However, I certainly aim to take relevant ideas and opinions from the orchestra on board.

But do you feel that the orchestra has changed or developed during your tenure?

Very much so. What's truly crucial, however, is the conductor: if the orchestra accepts and respects the conductor, then most things are easy enough. The most important moments are whether the programme fits the conductor and whether the conductor fits the orchestra.

Whereas the Prague Spring...

The Prague Spring festival has no resident ensemble and a dramaturgy stretching from the Middle Ages to the present. It is a remarkable platform – the only one in Czechia that can invite certain orchestras and ensembles. The festival has a great name internationally, so everyone wants to perform there. The only real limitation is that the festival only lasts three weeks. It's often difficult to find a date that works – in an orchestral season, you can offer your guest one date in September, one in February, and one in May. This can be difficult, particularly in the case of conductors and opera singers – opera productions are planned up to five years in advance.

The Prague Spring has a strong artistic board. When Jiří Bělohlávek, then the chairman of the artistic board, died in 2017, the second term of the board was coming to an end. Roman Bělor – festival director – decided to assemble a new one, which led to a considerable generational change – most of the members were then in their 30s and 40s. The board consists of Jana Semerádová, Marko Ivanović, Ivo Kahánek, Jakub Hruša, Michal Kaňka, Adam Plachetka, Miroslav Srnka, Clemens Hellsberg, and Tomáš Hanus. This was after the death of Antonín Matzner, my predecessor as programme director, when the festival had no dramaturg for some

time, and I believe it was an initiative by this new artistic board to renew the position. The board then chose me from among several participants in a closed selection process. The way I see it is that I was charged by the artistic board to carry out this position. At the same time, however, the board has a lot of interest in discussing the dramaturgy with me, as well as providing their own impulses, but all this from a position of experience with the international concert world – it's not as if they would force their selections upon me, and I myself like consulting with them. Particularly in the case of Prague Offspring, which was an initiative first suggested by Miroslav Srnka, who has been working on the idea since before I joined the festival team. So I consider the artistic board more of a partner than a supervisor and I hope they would agree.

What would you say about your vision for the festival and how it has been realised so far?

It's hard to talk about realisation, as due to the covid-19 pandemic, 2022 was my first edition of the festival that has actually taken place as planned. In addition to this being an enormous relief and providing a sense of fulfilment at seeing the fruits of one's labour, it is also the first opportunity for feedback; seeing all the things I planned live. I'm happy with this festival edition so far, though time will provide a better perspective.

I think the Prague Spring should remain as broad in its conception as it is now, offering music from the Middle Ages to the present. But I also think that between these two extremes, there are many things taking place abroad that aren't as well-known here: for a long time, what carried most favour in the Czech Republic was the absolute stardom of established artists whose name everyone recognises when they come to Prague. But I think there are many first-rate musicians of the middle generation who have never been to Czechia, or perhaps once, ages ago, and not many people here know them. This year, for instance, it was conductor François-Xavier Roth with two orchestras, Les Siècles, a period-instrument orchestra, and the Gürzenich Orchestra Cologne. I want the programming to remain open and demand the highest level of quality without conserving the festival in the safe zone of booking only the most established names. The Les Siècles concert is a great example: they performed Debussy and Franck on early 20th-century instruments and I think it really showed these works in a completely new light.

Is there any tension between the programming you want to do and the demands and entrenched processes of the world of classical music?

There is, I suppose – it's more difficult, on several levels, to invite someone who is not well known here. It has to be carried through, presented well... Perhaps it's connected to Contempuls and the fact that I studied composition, but I still have a reputation for being focused on new music. But in reality, it simply takes a lot more work to push through a concert of new music, and that's why I spend so much more time talking about it. Programming a Dvořák symphony is much easier than organising the premiere of a new work.

A good example is the festival's opening concert: Bedřich Smetana's *Má vlast* (*My Country*) is always performed, it is a very public affair, also closely watched internationally, many people want to perform at the concert – but how can you approach this event so that it still makes sense artistically and ideally shows the work in a new light? This year's opening concert, for instance, where *Má vlast* was performed by the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, was attended by former president Václav Klaus. I could not resist visiting his website afterwards, where I found a short text lamenting the fact that people were not dressed as well as they used to dress, and stating that he almost couldn't recognise *Má vlast* – apparently, he felt as if this was not his *Má vlast*; not his country. One of my aims is for the work to be alive, to offer new interpretations, so if it doesn't sound the same as it did thirty years ago, that's a success.

Let's move on to Prague Offspring, the project premiered this year. It certainly stands out in the festival dramaturgy – most are single concerts, whereas this is a weekend-long event that will take place every year. The first three editions will include Klangforum Wien as ensemble-in-residence, and will involve numerous commissions of new music by Czech composers, as well as other supporting activities. As far as I understand, the project was initiated by Miroslav Srnka?

When Roman Bělor approached Miroslav and asked him to join the artistic board, Miroslav agreed, but he didn't just want to sit on the board – he wanted to develop new format dedicated to contemporary music and establish a platform within which the Czech contemporary music scene could develop. As soon as I joined the festival team, Miroslav introduced me to the idea and we began developing it. He also introduced me to Peter Paul Kainrath, the intendant of Klangforum Wien, and we began working out the idea together.

To what extent did Klangforum Wien take on the project as their own?

Absolutely. We developed the programme of the two-day format together. Klangforum offered us all their knowledge and experience, as well as contacts with composers they have established over the years. The collaboration is on a much deeper level when you are planning such a complex programme lasting over three years than it would be if they simply travelled to Prague for a single concert. One of the really crucial things about their visit was that when the ensemble arrived in Prague, they demonstrated absolute professionalism and virtuosity, but also total openness.

And forthcomingness.

Exactly. They came to Prague and essentially said: "For these two days, we are here for you, and we'll try and give you the best of everything – concerts, master classes, feedback for composers". It was crucial for me to see this live. You spend years planning, but there's nothing that can replace the actual experience. I think it was also clear that the musicians took the project as their own and it made sense to them too. It's also true that their management team would not decide on anything without them – they are a highly democratic institution, which has to do with the fact that they call themselves an ensemble of soloists, which is related both to the instrumentation, of course, and to the fact that they are all highly skilled musicians capable of performing solo (which they also did on several occasions at the festival). But more importantly, it means that everyone is responsible for the result. They all have to know what they're doing and be on board with it.

What do you consider the most beautiful part of the work of a dramaturg?

Two things: first, collaborating with interesting people – mostly the musicians themselves. Ideally those that are the best at what they do and also intelligent and open people. Related to this is the privilege of travelling – I often visit another country, see a concert, and then meet the musicians we are planning to work with, thus giving me an insight into the musical world abroad and an opportunity to learn from these musicians. This is a great motivation.

The second is when the concerts finally happen and go as well as one could hope. When the preparation involves giving so much energy and effort, it all comes back when the result comes off. I feel that even more after the pandemic, when we would often spend so much time cutting programmes down, changing them, only for the concert to be cancelled anyway. I now feel an almost irrational thankfulness for something I used to consider a matter of course – the fact that we can organise and attend concerts.