

It Was Always Natural for Me to Listen to Everything

An interview with Jan Bartoš

JAN BARTOŠ IS BEST KNOWN AS A CONCERT PIANIST, HIS PUBLIC RECORDINGS INCLUDING MUSIC BY MOZART, BEETHOVEN, JANÁČEK, OR SMETANA. HE STUDIED PIANO IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC, THE NETHERLANDS, AND THE UNITED STATES, WITH HIS TEACHERS INCLUDING SUCH DISTINGUISHED NAMES AS IVAN MORAVEC, ALFRED BRENDEL, ZENON FISHBEIN, AND LEON FLEISHER. HOWEVER, HE IS ALSO THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF PRAGUE MUSIC PERFORMANCE, A BOLD FESTIVAL AND EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTE WHOSE PROGRAMME TAKES PLACE IN THE CAPITAL CITY THROUGHOUT THE YEAR. THE FESTIVAL, ITS DEVELOPMENT, AND ITS FUTURE WAS THE PRIMARY SUBJECT OF OUR CONVERSATION.

At the time when you started Prague Music Performance (PMP), your career as a concert pianist was already developing promisingly. What made you enter the field of organising and producing?

When I studied in the United States and the Netherlands, I discovered how much students in the Czech Republic lack contact with the international scene. It might seem incredible today, but when I was a student at the Music and Dance Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (HAMU), from 2001 to 2007, only a single masterclass took place at the school, with an attendance of five people. The students were not used to this concept at all, but when I was abroad, I saw this was a standard component of a university education in the arts. In 2010, I founded a summer school along with Zenon Fishbein, my teacher at the Manhattan School of Music. We had over a hundred students attend in just three years, including



those coming from famous institutions like the Juilliard School or Yale University, with the roster of teachers including names like Ivan Moravec, Alfred Brendel, Leon Fleisher, Tamás Vásáry, and others. Twelve years ago, this was a sensation. Today – thank God – most significant festivals and orchestras have educational programmes, but in 2010, the situation was very different.

What was the original idea behind the festival when you first started out and how has it changed in the course of the past twelve years?

At first, Zenon Fishbein and I only planned to organise the summer school. But when he died unexpectedly in 2013, I was faced with a question: What to do next. I wanted to continue our work, but I also wanted to transform Prague Music Performance into something different, something more open and bold. First, I wanted to get rid of the limitation of the summer season, spreading the programme out to encompass the entire year in order to be able to invite the most interesting artists. Seven years later, during the covid pandemic, this turned out to be a huge advantage. Many festivals now work throughout the entire year, and I believe this is a logical reaction to how the world and society have changed. Few people have the opportunity to attend ten concerts in a row.

Prague Music Performance also began reflecting the variety of my interests – over the years, we organised not only concerts of music of all kinds, but also film festivals, multidisciplinary projects connected to visual art or dance, and other projects. Alfred Brendel, an annual guest, also grew to love the richness of our programme. Together, we brought into existence projects that bring music together with film or poetry.

How did you come to know Alfred Brendel? Was it through Prague Music Performance? I feel like being a festival director who is also active as an artist can be a fruitful position for establishing valuable relationships both artistic and human.

When we first invited Brendel in 2013 for two lectures as part of our summer school, I had no idea what an essential and precious relationship would develop between us; that he would become my mentor for many years. Alfred Brendel always fascinated me with the breadth of his interests and his complex approach to music. I consider his books some of the best writing on music ever committed to paper. Even a few years ago, however, not a single book of his had been translated into Czech. In 2016, Prague Music Performance joined forces with Volvox Globator, a Prague-based publisher, and put out four books over the course of the following four years: Brendel's complete essays, complete poetry, A Pianist's A-Z, and one of his final books, *Nach dem Schlussakkord (After the Final Chord*, rendered in Czech as *Když dozněl potlesk; When the Applause Ends*). We also organised three film festivals that Brendel curated. And he dedicated one evening to a joint favourite of ours, the surrealist film-maker, animator, and visual artist Jan Švankmajer. Brendel also gave five lectures and led six masterclasses over the years.

This is the most valuable aspect of my work. Meeting exceptional personalities and collaborating with them on our festival programme. I aim for exclusive formats, not only single concerts. I prefer projects that span a number of years and reach into educational areas.

How do you see the various kinds of audiences that attend Prague Music Performance events? Are there interconnections, with listeners whom the festival draws in for a specific kind of music then attending totally different concerts?

Absolutely. I still remember the first concert that brought together diverse audiences in this way. The first part of the evening featured French violist Garth Knox and his ensemble, who played Hildegard of Bingen and György Ligeti. Next up on stage were the post-punk experimentalists Pere Ubu with David Thomas. The evening ended with long-haired rock fans, touched, buying CDs of medieval music, and fans of classical music picking out the key Pere Ubu albums. Pure joy!

The festival, however, has offered such a variety of genres for a number of years now. Do you also feel that there is a specific audience developing? One for whom connections between Hildegard of Bingen and Pere Ubu are nothing strange? Do you feel like PMP is following a general trend, or is it still a struggle?

Personally, it was always natural for me to listen to everything. Classical musicians often listen to non-classical music to relax. I never really understood that. When you listen to John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*, for instance, it can be many things, but

it's certainly not relaxing... Many of my friends listen to different kinds of music and it's common for them as well, and I don't think it's a highly exceptional "social bubble". PMP follows a trend that has been normalised globally, but it seems like the situation is still a little complicated in Czechia.

A very clear dramaturgical thread in PMP's programming – and one that's particularly rare in this part of the world – is the presentation of American avant-garde composers and performers from the circles of the Art Ensemble of Chicago and the AACM. Why did you decide to dedicate such energy over an extended period of time to presenting this music? Why is it important to you?

This music attracts me because it is uncompromising and wild. I believe the absence of anything likeable and kitsch-like in their overall approach to creativity is absolutely essential and also highly relevant in these times. Two central figures of this scene, Anthony Braxton and Roscoe Mitchell, are virtually unknown in the Czech Republic. Not even music journalists know them. Even though they are both around eighty, they are still in excellent form and are constantly trying out new things. In connection with the radical nature of art, I cannot help but think of Jean-Luc Godard, who died yesterday – there are fewer and fewer figures of this kind.

Also remarkable are the educational activities of the PMP Institute, especially various versions of the PMP Orchestra, which combines, in different proportions, experienced musicians and students in performing improvised, jazz, and experimental music. Why is it important for you to combine high-profile concerts and musical education?

I believe there is a deep meaning in this combination. Young talented people need many opportunities to develop their talents. And talents are best developed when you collaborate with people who are better than you. When world-renowned orchestras have their academies, it's the same principle – young players can develop so that they can later replace their more senior colleagues. While this principle is long established in classical music, musicians working with experimental and contemporary music do not have as many opportunities of this kind. And that's why I established the PMP Orchestra, which fills me with enormous joy. We have a wonderful principal conductor, the Swiss conductor and composer Roland Dahinden, who is developing the ensemble at an incredible speed. The orchestra was invited to the opening night of the Darmstadt Summer Courses for New Music in August of 2023, where we will introduce a conducted improvisation based on Anthony Braxton's Language Types Music. We were also invited to record the world premiere of Braxton's opera *Trillium X*, with the recording led by the composer. Great things lie ahead.

What are some of the other educational activities of the PMP Institute? What are your visions of this component?

I have many visions and I hope they gradually come to fruition. This year, we are starting our own publishing house to put out both books and music. It will serve as the home for the PMP Orchestra and associated artists. Also important is the establishment of the Ivan Moravec Academy for young pianists and chamber ensembles. I was Professor Moravec's last student and we had a beautiful

relationship imbued with a deep friendship. I had the rare opportunity to collaborate with him on preparing his master courses and radio programmes. Along with the Czech Philharmonic, we'd like to continue in this tradition, regularly reinstating Ivan Moravec in living memory. The teachers for this year's edition are Alfred Brendel and Boris Giltburg.

As we discussed some moments ago, the programme of Prague Music Performance is highly varied, often presenting combinations of musicians or musical worlds that do not often meet on the concert stage. Are you not interested in participating in one of these “cross-overs” yourself, as a performer?

“Cross-over”? In my mind, that's a vulgarism! So far, I feel happy and free in my classical world, as the piano literature is so rich that I would need several lifetimes to play everything I am interested in, and it still wouldn't be enough. Sometimes I feel that even works that have been performed and recorded hundreds of times still haven't been played the way they deserve to be played. Not to speak of Czech composers – half of the oeuvre of Miloslav Kabeláč (1908-1979), for instance, is still lying in wait in the archives. How many people know the Czech post-war avant-garde? And it's also hard to believe how many amazing living composers we now have in the Czech Republic.

Are you planning, then, to spend more time on music of the 20th and 21st centuries?

Definitely. In terms of 20th-century composers, I am most strongly drawn to Arnold Schönberg and Béla Bartók. I love the American avant-garde – Morton Feldman, John Cage, La Monte Young, but George Crumb too. Of the living classics, I'd mention György Kurtág or Helmut Lachenmann. And like I said, Czech composers of the middle generation are immensely interesting, and several of them are better appreciated abroad than at home.

How do you see the position of the festival within the Czech musical and cultural world? Financing culture is not a particularly easy affair in the Czech Republic – how do you manage to put together such large-scale events? And to what extent do you consider Prague Music Performance a local or international project – is the aim to enrich the Czech cultural scene or to go beyond the local context thanks to inventive programming?

Over the years, it has changed for the better. Ten years ago, the funding committee at the Ministry of Culture did not award us grants in the classical music category because we also dared to organise jazz concerts! When I studied in Amsterdam, it was normal to spend one evening at a Pierre Boulez concert, another listening to Schubert with Bernard Haitink, and the third day of the week hearing the Wayne Shorter Quartet at the same hall. And it was also completely common in New York. In this respect, the situation in Czechia long seemed desperately provincial to me, and one still has to fight the conservative foundations of Czech audiences, which are manifested at all levels. At the same time, however, our activities certainly go beyond the local context – as an example, take the invitation to Darmstadt that I mentioned before, to record the world premiere of Anthony Braxton's new opera, or regular collaborations with artists from the New York downtown scene.