

NOT A FAN OF THE DESPOTIC APPROACH – AN INTERVIEW WITH CONDUCTOR

JIRÍ ROŽEŇ IS ONE OF THE MOST UP-AND-COMING CZECH CONDUCTORS OF THE MOMENT. SINCE HE SIGNED WITH THE PRESTIGIOUS HARRISON PARROT AGENCY IN 2018, HE HAS TRAVELLED THE WORLD CONDUCTING BOTH SYMPHONIC CONCERTS AND OPERAS. WE MET IN A CAFÉ NEAR THE STATE OPERA IN PRAGUE TO DISCUSS HIS RELATIONSHIP TO THE CZECH CONDUCTING TRADITION, THE VARIOUS REHEARSAL STYLES IN CONTINENTAL EUROPE AND THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING WORLD, AND HIS PLANS FOR THE FUTURE.

You developed a keen and active interest in music very early on in your childhood. Was there a particular moment at which you decided you'd be a musician by profession?

Since I was little, my parents took me to symphonic and operatic concerts, and of course these were fantastically strong experiences for a child. I sang in choirs, attended lessons... I don't remember a time when I *didn't* want to be a musician.

And when did you decide you wanted to be a conductor?

That I remember quite clearly, and it's perhaps both more interesting and more important. I was around eleven years old and I was performing as a soloist, playing a piano concerto with a chamber orchestra. It was a very important week - that was when I decided I wanted to be the person standing on the podium, holding a baton and putting it all together, working on the music, stopping

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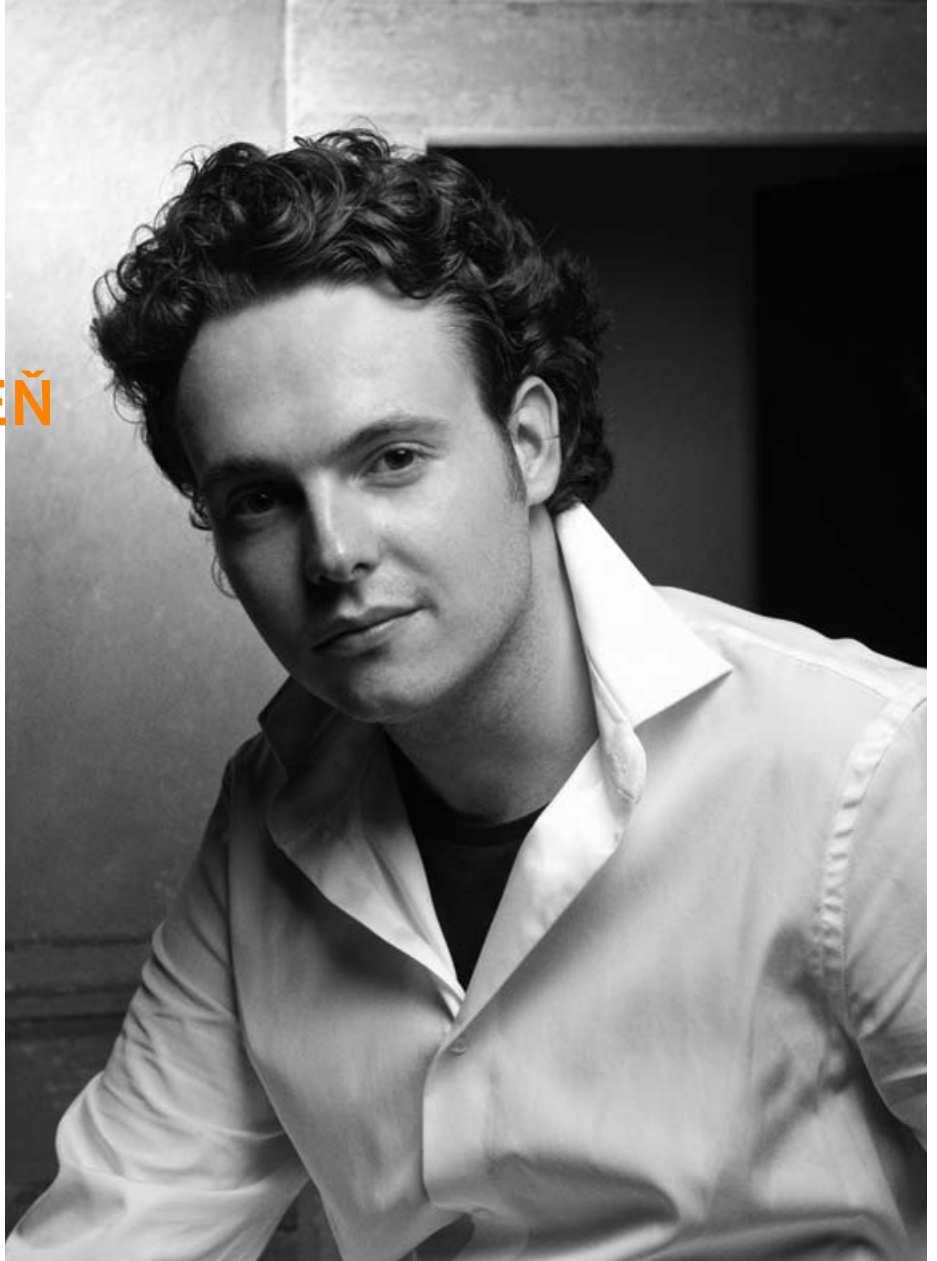


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the orchestra, guiding them through the music. I often think back to this moment – it was since then that I began directing my energy, in a fairly straight-forward manner, to becoming a conductor.

Do you remember what it was that so charmed you? Was it the control; the opportunity to shape the resulting sound?

All of that and more – the possibility of creating the sound, although of course, it is the musicians who ultimately create the sound, but one can model the sound, inspire the musicians. I also loved the preparation process; score study, which was

something I began doing very soon after this initiating experience as I got ready for the conservatory entrance exams.

You mentioned that although you can model the sound, it is, in fact, the musicians who create the sound, which adds an important social dimension. Do you consider yourself a “people person”; a team player? Is the human aspect important?

It is, and I think it absolutely should be – if it weren't, one would really have to be a conductor of genius to be invited by orchestras despite problematic behaviour. I think it's a crucial component of the conductor's skill set: we work with people. Audiences do not hear us – unless we accidentally hit the stand with the baton. But the human element, the psychology of the rehearsal is a crucial aspect of the profession.

Who are the conductors that most influenced you?

I had quite a lot of conducting teachers both at the Prague Conservatory and at the Mozarteum in Salzburg, and then only a single teacher in both Zurich and Hamburg. And in Glasgow, where I had a two-year fellowship at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, they would invite many conductors for masterclasses. I also served as an assistant to Thomas Dausgaard and Donald Runnicles at the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, so I really had many inspirations. It was always my aim to try and identify the most positive aspects of their style and then try to take that on myself. I don't like when I watch a conductor and see that his hands are a copy of Claudio Abbado or another famous conductor. I think one should be oneself, full of character, without trying to copy anyone in particular.

Despite what you just said, are there any conductors from previous generations who have had a marked influence of you?

Definitely Rafael Kubelík and the entire Czech conducting school: Karel Ančerl, Václav Neumann, Václav Talich – unfortunately, I did not have the chance to see any of them conduct in person. I did have the good fortune to attend master classes with Bernard Haitink and David Zinman, two conductors whose gestures and recordings I love, and I think they also influenced many young conductors through masterclasses and their general devotion to artists who are starting out. The fact that someone is a great conductor doesn't necessarily mean that they are interested in teaching, or that they have the skills to do so.

One of the interesting things about the Czech conducting tradition is that thanks to the Prague Conservatory and the Music and Dance Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts (HAMU), this tradition has also been established academically since the end of World War II. The reasons for going abroad to study, I think, are fairly self-explanatory, but did you also consider studying at HAMU for these reasons?

The fact that one goes abroad does not mean that one becomes removed from the tradition. I grew up in Prague attending Czech Philharmonic concerts since I was little, so I can feel that sound; it's in my blood. Later, at the Mozarteum, when we looked at Dvořák or Smetana, I was in a completely different situation to my colleagues, who were seeing the music for the first time.

And then, there's the question of what makes the "school": they were all successful around the world and they were all Czech, but when you look at their gestures, their musical approach, you discover they were all completely different.

We already touched on this when we discussed the importance of the conductor's character and interpersonal skills, but how do you see the current state of the position of the conductor and its development in contrast to historical models?

The difference is in the overall approach. When you listen to recordings of Arturo Toscanini and how he screamed at his players, like that famous recording of him shouting at the double bassist, for instance – if you did that today, you'd be done. And not just with that orchestra, either. Those times are gone and I think that's good – I'm not a fan of the despotic approach, as I think you can hear how the fear and the tension comes through in the sound. I don't think that's the right way forward.

Of course, it's all about respect, but it's also about discipline in the ensemble. If there is an important rehearsal, perhaps leading up to the premiere of an opera, and the discipline is insufficient, then one has to be resolute and tough, but still within limits.

When you are invited abroad, you are often asked to do Czech repertoire. How happy are you with the label "Czech conductor"? Do you sometimes wish you could just be a "conductor"?

Earlier, you asked whether going abroad set me at a distance from the Czech conducting tradition, but the fact that these orchestras invite me to perform Czech music is, I think, proof that this isn't the case. And I have no problem with that at all – quite the opposite. I adore Czech music, especially Bohuslav Martinů, whom I conduct fairly often, and of course Dvořák and Smetana. Usually, the orchestras themselves ask me whether I want to do Czech repertoire. They usually want a Czech symphony or overture, but they usually don't ask for a Czech piece to be second on the programme. Now that I think about it, that's quite interesting... I should change that! (*laughs*)

Talking about the Czech conducting tradition and Dvořák's popularity around the world, a fascinating phenomenon are Marek Štryncel's recordings of Dvořák's symphonic oeuvre on period instruments with a historically informed performance practice. This seems to me like a new development within this conducting tradition (which is already historical in itself) – what do you think about it?

I am extremely positive about it! (*laughs*) I, too, believe that we should attempt to perform the pieces closer to what they sounded like when they were written. I was just reading a book by the British conductor Christopher Seaman, and he mentioned that when he conducted Brahms with the New Queen's Hall Orchestra London that performs on period instruments, he virtually never had to say a single word about balancing dynamics. Especially the brass instruments have developed considerably from what they were like in the late 19th century, so generally speaking, the dynamics are one step louder than how they were originally played. So with Romantic scores, one has to spend a lot of time working on making the sound balanced.



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Do you have a systematic approach to this? For instance, whenever it's Romantic-era symphonic music, you rewrite all the forte sections in the brass to mezzo-forte?

Not quite. Conducting in America, you can prepare the parts yourself and make changes of this nature, as there's so little rehearsal time that the time you save this way is highly valuable. But usually, I'll just say "Watch out for this spot, the central melody is in the solo violin and if we play it *fortissimo* like that, we won't be able to hear anything". So it's more of a case-by-case situation. And also - you can't keep telling the brass and percussion "play less, play less!" (*laughs*)

You've already mentioned that in the English-speaking world, there is generally much less rehearsal time than in continental Europe. Which of the two models do you prefer?

I've become quite accustomed, especially, to the British model. Sometimes there is only a single rehearsal day - like in Manchester, where I had to do the Sibelius Violin Concerto, Dvořák's Seventh, and Wilhelm Stenhammar *Excelsior!* - a demanding programme. Now, of course, the Hallé is an excellent orchestra, everyone had learned their parts, we rehearsed the programme, the concert went well - but there's not enough space to go deep enough into the piece. And in the case of American orchestras, the schedule is usually an afternoon rehearsal on day one, then a full day of rehearsals, and finally the dress rehearsal and concert on day three. If the orchestra is prepared - and they are usually excellently prepared, as well as prompt, alert, and responsive - you don't have to focus that much on technical issues. You have the space to focus on interpretation.

And this model - a day and a half of rehearsals - gives you enough time to really sink your teeth into the piece?

Well, that first play-through is of such quality that it often trumps what you can get to with a slightly lower-level European orchestra after two days of rehearsals. The preparation is crucial - how ready the players are at the first rehearsal.

Whereas in Europe, you can't always rely on the orchestra having looked at the music before the first rehearsal...

When people are reading at the first rehearsal, you're really starting from zero. In the United States, when the orchestra is prepared and the players are good, the first playthrough already contains about fifty-five or sixty percent of what you want, and the remaining day and a half serves to get you as close to a hundred percent as possible.

Especially since you signed with the HarrisonParrott agency in 2018, you have had a very busy international schedule. Are you not tired, perhaps looking for a more stable engagement somewhere?

I'm not tired, no. The travelling, of course, is demanding, but starting last season, I've been conducting more opera. And when you have two productions in a year, which I will have next year, that means being in one place for five weeks, which of course brings the travel down a bit - I'm doing *Káťa Kabanová* in Bergen in the autumn, which again takes me away from my home in Prague, but at the end of the season, I'll be conducting György Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre* at the State Opera in Prague, so I'll be home for over a month. I'm very much looking forward to that: it will be demanding, I'm sure, but this work will finally be heard in the Czech Republic!

You mentioned Ligeti's Le Grand Macabre, but you also regularly conduct other contemporary works. What is your relationship to the music being composed now?

Very positive, I'd say. Of course it's beautiful to perform all the existing music - it's a wonderful repertoire that we have available, but the music has to develop; it has to go on. We have to provide space for new pieces to be performed and then performed again, and time will tell whether the piece falls to the wayside or continues being performed, ideally becoming part of the repertoire.

How did your collaboration with the Ostrava Center for New Music begin?

I first worked with them in the summer of 2021, and the collaboration was so positive - by which I mean both with the musicians and the management - that I have since done several other projects with them: Petr Kotík's birthday concerts, then the Czech premiere of Luigi Nono's *Prometeo* at the New Opera Days Ostrava festival, another important milestone (it was the Czech premiere), and several chamber concerts in New York this April. I'll be back for the Ostrava Days festival this summer, where I will be conducting four concerts.

How different is it to conduct in grand opera houses and philharmonic halls compared to these new music concerts?

The management team in Ostrava is absolutely fantastic. They always accommodate all my wishes, sort everything out – perfect. When you go somewhere as a conductor and you see this approach and this behaviour, you feel good – and you want to come back. And if you do your job well, they want you to come back too. And that’s what I feel with Ostrava.

What are some of the specific demands that these types of production place on you in comparison to opera houses or symphonic concerts?

Nono’s *Prometeo*, for instance, was very demanding: there are four small orchestras spread around the space, as well as a second conductor, a choir, soloists, electronics – it’s really quite tough to keep it all together. And I also remember the heat: we were in the Karolina Triple Hall and we were on these raised industrial platforms that brought us even closer to the glass ceiling. That was the only concert I’ve ever conducted in a short-sleeve black T-shirt. And the last, I hope.

Why is it important to you to conduct in a shirt, jacket, or tail-coat?

I never conduct in a tail-coat: usually, I wear a collar-less, Mandarin-style shirt. I believe that etiquette and the tradition that we are working from are important. But in this case, having the performance go well was much more important than etiquette.

Do you feel like you, as a conductor, have the chance to influence how often new music is performed by orchestras?

Sometimes. If the orchestra gives me free reign in what to choose, I always try to “smuggle in” something modern. In the United States, it is quite common that every programme includes a contemporary piece. In Utah, for instance, I conducted Ana Sokolović’s *Ringelspiel* without any problems – neither for me, the musicians, nor the audience. It’s really all about habit: if this music isn’t performed, then the aversion and rejection will continue.

Finally, I’d like to ask not about your plans, but rather about any dreams for the future that you might have.

I’d say that for me, it’s more about pieces – I don’t think in terms of “I want to perform with this orchestra or at this opera house”. If one develops as an artist and works hard, it will all come. I would, however, like to find a good balance between symphonic and operatic conducting. I really love opera and I’m enjoying it more and more, but it does mean that you’re away from home and family for weeks and weeks on end. This forces me to think not only in musical or artistic terms, but also as a human being.

And are there any pieces or operas that you haven’t yet had the chance to conduct?

In opera houses, I am often invited to conduct more recent, modern music. I would also like to try my hand at Italian opera of the 19th century.