

Music as a Single Entity

LUBOŠ MRKVIČKA HAS BEEN A STRONG PRESENCE ON THE CZECH COMPOSITIONAL SCENE FOR MANY YEARS, BOTH AS AN ACTIVE COMPOSER AND AS A PEDAGOGUE. HIS MUSIC AND COMPOSITIONAL APPROACH HAVE A HIGH DEGREE OF INNER CONSISTENCY – HE IS A DEDICATED THINKER EXPLORING IDEAS AND TECHNIQUES IN DETAIL OVER TIME. IN THE CD ATTACHED TO THIS ISSUE, YOU CAN EXPLORE HIS MOST RECENT MUSIC, BUT THIS INTERVIEW – CONDUCTED BY COMPOSER AND ONE-TIME STUDENT OF LUBOŠ IAN DAVIS – DELVES DEEPER INTO THE THINKING BEHIND THE MUSIC, LUBOŠ’S RELUCTANCE TO GIVE HIS PIECES TITLES, AND THE DETAILS OF HIS COMPOSITIONAL PROCESS.

Can you tell us a little bit about your upcoming release with the Czech Music Information Centre?

The CD will include pieces I wrote between 2014 and 2021. Two of them are composed for large instrumental ensembles and three for solo piano. They represent two extreme positions in terms of instrumentation, but from a musical point of view, like all my compositions, they are very closely connected. They address similar compositional problems, although they do so in slightly different ways.

What kinds of “compositional problems”?

Okay, well, I see that I ran into this question, although I admit I was trying to avoid it entirely. Specific examples would certainly be outside the scope of this interview, so I will at least try to give a more general answer. By “compositional problem” I mean some aspect of musical structure that can relate to basically anything. In my first compositions this primarily involved harmony; later the treatment of different types of pulsations in connection with changes of time signature



(this was mainly based on the idea that written and sounding music do not exist separately, but are closely related to each other); then an increasing focus on the linear aspects of the musical structure, which eventually resulted in working with separate simultaneous layers (the result of these most recent tendencies are all the compositions from recent years, i.e. also all the compositions on the CD). Although it can seem rather abstract and complex when I put it this way, in reality the “compositional problem” is always something very simple and straightforward. Even the seeming complexity that I sometimes arrive at in my compositions (and, unfortunately, almost always when I start discussing in more detail the technological side of my compositions) is only a consequence of proliferation of the original, simple idea. And without a doubt, it is also a consequence of the fact that, as a composer who writes extremely continuously, it usually happens to me that the moment I “solve” a specific compositional problem for myself, I simply take over and repeat this solution in the following composition, and the “compositional problem” becomes something else. This, I think, is also one of the main reasons why my compositions, in a certain sense, are becoming more and more complex, even though their starting points still remain extremely simple.

In the liner notes you write that “since [you] first began composing, [you] felt a reluctance to give [your] pieces titles”. Can you tell us a little bit about your earliest experiences with composing? What did these pieces sound like that you were reluctant to give titles to?

The issue, I think, isn't so much how the pieces sounded, as the fact that I've never written music that directly refers to any extra-musical content. Even though I don't want to lie to myself that the way I write music has not been influenced by anything from my (that means also non-musical) life, trying to make any direct connection would seem completely contrived to me. I find the creation of both poetic names on the one hand and “technologically-structural” names on the other to be ridiculous.

Have you ever seriously considered leaving your pieces untitled? What do titles facilitate for a composer?

Not only have I seriously considered this eventuality, but I feel as though I am essentially doing just that. The way I mark the compositions is not actually a title, but just a kind of “catalogue” designation describing both the instrument(s) for which the composition is written (For...) and then an indication of whether I have already written pieces for the given instrument(s) (Part A, B, C etc.). What role the attribution of titles plays for other composers is an issue that, certainly thanks to my total limitations in this area, has simply never really interested me.

Yes, I suppose this is what I was getting at in asking this question; that titles, for any composer, facilitate record keeping and the building of an archive. It's interesting how hard it is to avoid giving a piece a “title” and even more interesting that you've felt ambivalent about titles from early on. I appreciate the system that you've arrived at which makes the chronology of your work immediately apparent. It reminds me a bit of the street addresses in Queens which tell you the nearest cross street or avenue in the building number - you always know where a building is just by looking at the address.

You speak of “an immediate, almost physical pleasure in musical detail”, for you, is that “musical detail” something visual, auditory, conceptual, or some combination of these?

This is a very interesting question, although, to be honest, I have never thought about it before. I'm guessing that it will be a combination of something auditory and visual in the first place, but I would like to add for myself, even though it might sound a little strange, something tactile, olfactory or gustatory. However, it seems to me that an immediate, almost physical pleasure in musical detail is something I can hardly imagine in connection with something conceptual. I can quite easily imagine falling in love with a concept (in fact, this has to happen if I'm going to start writing anything new at all), but that immediate tantalising effect you were asking about is, I suppose, simply not of an intellectual nature to me.

You write “I have always had a tendency to see all music as a single entity, as something that is, despite its structural variety, still essentially the same thing”. In my understanding, you're talking about maintaining perspective on an artist's entire output rather than thinking of one particular piece in isolation. I wonder if you could speak a little bit about context and personal growth in relation to this “single entity”? In other words, music exists in several forms; the score, the recording, the live performance, memory - where does this “entity” exist and does it ever change or do we just change in relation to it?

In my view, it is not only a question of a kind of targeted focus on the entire work of a given composer, and not only on an individual composition (it can certainly happen even to me that I like a composition by an artist of whom I know nothing else). I would not in the least want to create the impression with this statement that I am trying to create some kind of guide on how to arrive at a given perception of the world. This statement was not based on something that I had been working towards for a long time, and certainly not on the basis of something that I had once set as my goal in the past. Far more, it simply describes a way of seeing that I did not arrive at, but which, as it seems to me from today's point of view, I simply always had, only without articulating it in any way in the past. It is a description of an, I would say, extremely self-centred way of seeing which, try as it may, finds the same things everywhere it looks. And I say this with the full knowledge that, as Friedrich Nietzsche put it, the ability to see similarities between things is not a sign of good eyesight. However, this "same thing" remains very unarticulated even for me, and by mentioning it, I am committing a logical fallacy and demonstrating considerable pretentiousness, as I am talking about something that I am not capable of talking about. Therefore, I am unable to tell you anything about the question of where this "entity" exists. Perhaps it's just that I don't perceive this "entity" as something that exists outside of me, but rather I myself am this "entity". I suppose it must be clear from what I have already said that I am far from thinking of this "entity" as something unchangeable.

We met in the fall of 2009 when I was a wide-eyed college student experiencing Prague for the first time. I had studied classical music since I was six years old, but I grew up in the American education system and within an American musical culture and I remember feeling like I had wide gaps in my formal compositional training (I still do!). You also teach at the Academy of Performing Arts (HAMU) working with mostly Czech and European students. I wonder if you could talk about your relationship to teaching more broadly, how it is connected or separated from your compositional work? What is your experience working with young composers from different parts of the world and the different perspectives that you've observed?

Before I say anything else, I just want to state the oft-repeated statement that I, too, do not believe that composition can actually be taught. Only the craft of composition can be taught, however: a) from the teacher's point of view, this is the least interesting part of their activity; and b) a teacher is not really needed if you want to acquire these skills. The relationship between student and teacher is completely equal within the university environment (what's more, it often happens that some students, even though they are less experienced than their teachers, surpass them in many respects). Although teaching and composing are different activities, I believe that – for many reasons – it is more than beneficial for the teacher to be an active composer as well. Perhaps not because they primarily teach their students to compose in the same way as they themselves compose (unfortunately, this happens mostly in the case of less interesting composers – although the opposite excuse can also be used by teachers who are bad composers themselves), but rather because compositional technique has not become something closed; something ready-made which could simply be passed on with ease. Of course, teachers who are active as composers themselves but approach technique as something closed and write routinely – they can be as active as composers as they want, but the damage they can cause is comparable to that done by teachers who are



not active composers. Therefore, I believe that composing itself should be related to teaching primarily to the extent that it helps the teacher approach compositional technique, the craft, as something living, constantly changing and constantly being created. As for the difference between students from different parts of the world and the different trainings and perspectives that I have come into contact with over the years, I feel that, considering the extreme individualism which is an integral part of compositional activity, I am unable to make any general observation worth noting.

We recently spoke about complexity in music and how despite the fact that you yourself have complex elements in your own compositions, you can experience an aversion to complexity in other music when it feels disingenuous, flashy, or unnecessary. How might a composer establish a genuine relationship to complexity? In other words, how might a composer know that they need to use complex means in order to realise something genuine and not just caving to a certain pressure that to be taken seriously as a composer, one must do complex things?

Yes, we were speaking about complexity at the time, but one that is first and foremost a manifestation of the composer's virtuosity, the type of virtuosity that I would call a manifestation of technical skills. This virtuosity can manifest itself in various ways, but it is true that complex scores are probably the most common result. In short, I don't like when virtuosity flaunts itself in order to hide the fact that the piece of music is just an inflated bubble that actually has no solid core, and therefore has nothing to say at all. That's also why I have a tendency, despite the way my music often looks, to surround myself to a much greater extent with music that would more likely be described as raw, harsh, lo-fi, and so on. On the other hand, I am very well aware of the fact that a certain type of virtuosity can be part of that sensory complex we talked about a moment ago, namely the complex that is the source of an immediate, almost physical pleasure in musical detail. As for how to behave in order to prevent the complexity which eventually occurs

from being just a shiny, inflated bubble, I am unfortunately unable to give any guidance on that. I think the reality is actually very simple: either the composer has something to say or they don't. Whether the result will be complex or not has nothing to do with it. I don't believe that a good composer chooses whether his music will be complex or not, although some of them are able to pretend - and even convince themselves - that they have decided for this or that. In fact, it is simply the old saying "making a virtue out of necessity" at play, because good music is primarily the result of processes that are completely beyond our control. And worrying about social pressure (what a composer should look like in order to be taken seriously), which in the end is primarily pressure we put on ourselves, I consider a waste of valuable energy.

We were also talking about intuitive composing versus a more structured approach. I was struck by what you said - and I'm paraphrasing - about the freedom that you find in setting boundaries for yourself. How have the parameters you set for yourself become an integral part of your practice rather than, as you said, merely a "tool" that you use to compose?

It seems to me that the need to experience a certain sense of freedom while composing is a fairly common theme with many composers. I have often heard from those around me statements like "so many rules and restrictions make me unfree, I need to feel freer to be able to create anything at all". I assume that the aforementioned feeling of freedom is related to the feeling of a kind of creative power that occurs at the moment of finding the "right" path; finding the best possible option. But the question is whether the feeling of freedom is experienced more by the one who makes a decision among a thousand options, or by the one who chooses among a far more limited number? I have a feeling that someone who can do everything has no idea about the feeling of freedom at all. That is why I believe that a certain reduction of possible paths must necessarily occur for all composers, regardless of whether this takes place with the help of predetermined rules or thanks to - perhaps even unconscious but nevertheless existing - limitations that we accept before we start composing the piece itself. If we consider Morton Feldman, for example, who liked to claim that he never set any rules in advance, it is quite obvious that the number of possible paths is quite limited within his style. So the way we approach the rules is crucial. Feldman and others like him do not like them, because they sense alienation and perhaps even violence in them. As far as violence is concerned, I believe that across all artistic disciplines we can find artists who are more oriented to force than others, and among those I count myself. These artists are those who do not avoid "violence", or perhaps better said, resistance, but on the contrary, they seek it out, because it is thanks to overcoming resistance that they are able to experience that feeling of creative power, i.e. creative freedom. These artists very often like to work with various types of restrictions; rules that they impose on themselves. The key question for this type of creator, I think, is how to ensure that the aforementioned alienation does not occur by setting the rules. The fact that the rules have to be set in advance, played with, and rationalised creates a far greater danger than in the case when one works in the so-called purely intuitive manner - after a while we begin to realise that the rules we are working with are not ours, but as if they belonged to somebody else, that they are completely external to our music. If we continued to work despite this feeling, the result of such an effort would be pure and utterly

For Large Ensemble Part C (2017)

Luboš Mrkvička

$\text{♩} = c. 110$

2/4

Flute
fff sempre

Oboe
ff *fff* *ff* *fff* *ff* *fff*

Clarinet in B \flat
ff *fff* *ff* *fff* *ff* *fff*

Bassoon
ff *fff* *ff* *fff* *ff* *fff*

Horn in F
fff sempre *fff* (open) *fff* sempre

Trumpet in C
Straight mute
fff sempre *fff* *ff* *fff* sempre *fff* sempre

Trombone
fff sempre *fff* *fff* sempre *fff* sempre

Tuba
fff sempre

$\text{♩} = c. 110$

2/4

Glockenspiel
fff sempre

Marimba
fff sempre

Harp
fff sempre

$\text{♩} = c. 110$

2/4

Violin 1
fff *p* *fff* *p* *fff* *p*

Violin 2
f *fff* *f* *fff* *f* *fff* *f*

Viola
f *fff* *f* *fff* *f* *fff* *f*

Cello
f *fff* *f* *fff* *f* *fff* *f*

Double Bass
fff *p* *fff* *p* *gliss.* *p*

Detailed description: This page of a musical score is for Part C (2017) for Large Ensemble. It features a full orchestral and concert band arrangement. The score is divided into three systems, each starting with a tempo marking of approximately 110 beats per minute and a 2/4 time signature. The first system includes woodwinds (Flute, Oboe, Clarinet in B-flat, Bassoon), brass (Horn in F, Trumpet in C with straight mutes, Trombone, and Tuba), and a Glockenspiel. The second system adds the Marimba and Harp. The third system features the string section (Violin 1 and 2, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass). Dynamics range from fortissimo (fff) to piano (p), with various articulations like accents, slurs, and glissandos. The score is written for a large ensemble, with multiple parts for each instrument.

despicable academicism. For composers who work in a deterministic way, therefore, it is important to create a sense that the set of rules they apply is entirely their own, and are thus an integral part of their music. This needs to happen even when this is not true, that is, when the composer steals (in the end, no one can avoid a certain degree of stealing). It is necessary for such a composer to make a certain type of appropriation, acquisition, in short, to be a thief with a clear conscience. Needless to say, the value of a composer is certainly not determined by the degree of purity of their conscience – there are many epigones who do not know about their plagiarism at all, and there is undoubtedly also a handful of authentic composers who from time to time doubt their authenticity and thus unnecessarily complicate things for themselves. In any case, I am of the opinion that the lack of a clear conscience in its consequence can be a great obstacle to the achievement of what we might call authentic art.

Regarding the second part of your question, how the parameters I set for myself have become an integral part of my practice rather than merely a “tool” that I use to compose, I would say this: There are composers (perhaps the majority) who most definitely think about the things I just talked about, that is, about issues of technique in general, only to the extent that the technique is merely a means to create a composition. They usually devote their compositional life primarily to searching for the most efficient possible way of achieving a result that is, more or less, known in advance. Such thinking is completely foreign to me. For me, technique and result are not two entities that are only loosely related in a utilitarian way – I believe that one directly determines the other. However, I am far from turning the situation upside down and, like some other artists of a structuralist bent, consider the way in which a given composition is made to be the core of the composition, and thus elevate the technological side of things to a pedestal where it simply does not belong.

Can you talk about your relationship to instrumentation? Are there specific instruments that can more readily convey your musical vision than others?

As a composer, I am very inflexible in many ways, but in the area of instrumentation I think I am pretty flexible. Basically, I like every commonly available instrument of Western provenance, and particularly all their possible colour combinations. It would be a bit more complicated for me if I had to write a solo piece for just one of them. In such a situation, with the honourable exception of the piano (!), I usually don't feel completely comfortable. Not to mention the various exotic instruments, although I might like them very much as a listener.

Can you talk about the headspace that you need to be in before you compose and how you access that state?

Composing for me tends to have two main phases that flow into each other at a certain point, the first usually taking place outdoors in nature and the second indoors in the workroom. The first one is shorter, but (and maybe that's why) more painful, the second one is much longer, but I would dare to say that it's utterly joyful. I like to compare the whole process to the following image: at the beginning, I see the piece from far away, only its outlines, but gradually, I get closer to it, I start to see its details, until the moment when I am so close that I can start

For Piano

Part L (2016)

♩ = c. 130

Luboš Mrkvička
(*1978)

*) All dynamics are approximative and serve as "points of orientation". Decresc. in parentheses does not mark abrupt dynamic changes but only the overall tendency. The whole piece is conceived as a large single decrescendo divided into eleven gradually decreasing dynamic "waves".

**) With much pedal; all accented notes should be played distinctly and should always be sustained (with pedal or/and with hand) until the next accented note.

**) In all accented three-note chords the top note should always be played extra markedly.

****) Small notes in parentheses may be omitted.

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writing the notes, which marks the aforementioned transition, i.e. the beginning of the second phase. However, both phases are necessarily preceded by a moment when – as David Lynch put it – I fall in love with an idea. This idea is usually some partial aspect of the musical structure, something I called a “compositional problem” earlier, that I am able to see, at that particular moment, in a light in which I had never seen it before. This moment, in fact, is the driving force of the piece. Unfortunately, I can’t even imagine that without this “falling in love” I would see any point in writing a new composition, which I perceive somewhat painfully from time to time, because, as is known, the ability to fall in love usually decreases with age. As I already mentioned, the entire first phase tends to be quite painful at times. To keep the feeling of being in love and to find the right framework in which the composition will later stand is a very uncertain and cautious activity. In addition, it is not at all clear how much time this activity will ultimately take, so it is impossible to plan your work schedule in advance at all. One has to hold the idea, be with it very intensely, and yet not think about it too much. If the idea were forced into a frame that was not its own, it would be lost. It’s all the more difficult because that framework (in musical terminology we could refer to it as a form, as a boundary within which the idea will develop) is something very general, something that has already been used a million times by someone else before you. Therefore, it is imperative to tread very carefully to avoid the alienation I spoke of earlier. This first phase usually consists of a lot of walking, sitting, and lying down (ideally somewhere in nature) and, as they say, “staring into space”. At a certain point, when I can see the composition from a sufficient distance, I start occasionally sitting down at the computer to define that frame in more detail. At that moment, gradually and slowly, the skeleton of the composition is created using the restrictions that I talked about in general terms earlier. When these constraints reach the desired degree of grip, in other words when the “pitch is lined up” and the rules of the game are set, I can finally proceed to write the music itself, fully and undisturbed, because I don’t have to deal with anything else – I can immerse myself in the musical moment, indulge in the musical detail. Phase two begins, which unfortunately takes place entirely in a closed space at the computer and not outside in beautiful nature, but I still consider it very joyful.

I know that I probably got away from your question a bit, because you were more interested in what I do before I even start composing than in the composition process itself. In other words, how I get myself in the state of mind to be ready and able to fall in love with that initial idea. I have – like many other composers, I suppose – a variety of different activities and inactivities that I believe are beneficial in this regard (from lifestyle to what and who one surrounds oneself with). However, I believe that these matters (to what extent are we even capable of controlling them at all?) are extremely fragile and volatile, so if we start to talk about them, it could well happen that they stop working. Not to mention that in most cases, talking about them would feel rather awkward and out of place.