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**Jiří Rožeň**

**Prague Offspring**

**MicroFest Prague**

**Hába's Serbian Legacy**



**Profile recordings of  
Czech composers**  
**Composer Portraits series**  
**available in full  
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## DEAR READERS,

We greet you as spring turns to summer in the Czech lands, reviving both nature and (musical) culture. This issue presents reflections on (and the products of) two important events that took place in the capital in April and May: Jiří Slabihoudek reviews the second edition of the Prague Spring festival's contemporary music intensive, Prague Offspring, and an interview with three organisers explores the background and future of MicroFest, a conference and festival for microtonal music. Furthermore, we decided to introduce on these pages one of the conference papers: Nikola Komatović's exploration of the links between Serbia and Czechoslovakia in establishing avant-garde Serbian music between the two world wars. Our featured interview in this issue is with up-and-coming conductor Jiří Rožeň, and Michael Beckerman rounds out the principal texts of the issue with an extended review of a new publication on music in the Terezín ghetto. All in all, an inspiring collection of reading. We hope these texts and Czech music more generally make good company during a restful summer.

Ian Mikyska  
*deputy editor-in-chief*

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**Czech Music Information Centre**  
Besední 3, 118 00 Praha 1, Czech Republic  
fax: +420 257 317 424, phone: +420 257 312 422  
e-mail: info@czechmusicquarterly.com  
www.czechmusicquarterly.com

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# 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

## JIŘÍ ROŽEŇ



PHOTO: ILONA SOCHOROVÁ

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.



PHOTO: ILONA SOCHOROVÁ

*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.

# Roller Coasters and Staircases – a Prague Offspring Weekend



Peter Rundel and Klangforum Wien

PHOTO: PRAGUE SPRING FESTIVAL - IVAN MALÝ

Jiří Slabihoudek, who recently received the Vinyla award for music journalism, reviews the second edition of what is now the largest contemporary music event in the Czech capital city: the Prague Spring festival's Prague Offspring weekend. Following an exposé of this year's international programme, he explores in depth the six new Czech compositions premiered at the DOX+ hall in May, and the context of new music in Czechia more broadly.

Last year, the Prague Spring introduced its new format, Prague Offspring (see CMQ 2/2022), an ambitious project whose aim is to present world-class new music in Prague. The well-planned event included two evening concerts, masterclasses, reading lessons, discussions, and one film screening. The resident ensemble was the world-renowned specialised ensemble for contemporary music, Klangforum Wien, conducted by

Peter Rundel. While the group's residency lasts for three years, the resident composer changes every year: last year, Olga Neuwirth, this year, Georg Friedrich Haas. Of most interest to us, however, are six world premieres by Czech composers of the middle and young generation. This year, the festival commissioned Jana Vöröšová (see our interview in CMQ 4/2020) to write a twenty-minute piece and five further composers – Michaela Pálka Plachká, Matouš Hejl, František Chaloupka, Pavel Šabacký, and Šimon Voseček – to write short compositions of up to five minutes. The manner in which Klangforum Wien rehearsed and performed these pieces is a testament to the fact that under the right conditions, the newest Czech music works excellently, at a level comparable to music produced in the countries where financial support is much more favourable in the long term.

## Why Is It So Special?

It is good to remind ourselves that there is no stable professional ensemble or festival of contemporary music in Czechia that could operate without going through a demanding process of applying for funding every year. There are simply no sources of funding with which to reliably pay top-class performers, so Czech ensembles

(the most significant among them being the Berg Orchestra) do not have a stable instrumental line-up and still operate, more or less, as pick-up ensembles. To be confronted with Klangforum Wien in such a context is an exceptional experience for most participants. Prague Offspring thus operates on several layers within the Czech “infrastructure of contemporary music”, as festival dramaturg Josef Třeščík so aptly put it last year. The audience hears the works of respected international composers excellently performed (in addition to Haas, this edition featured György Ligeti, whose centenary we celebrate this year), as well as a numerous world premieres by Czech composers. The composers acquire new experiences and contacts, an excellent entry in their biography, and space for communication and networking of all kinds – not just for composers, but also for organisers, journalists, fans, and young musicians.

Like those that participated in two masterclasses with members of Klangforum Wien. Cellist Alessandro Mastracci played Henri Dutilleux’s *Trois Strophes sur le nom de Sacher* for Andreas Lindenbaum – in fact, they made do with the first of the three stanzas for the duration of the forty-five minute masterclass. Lindenbaum focused on the infinite variability of articulation (types of pizzicato, vibrato, and so on) in contemporary composition and the difficulties in determining the best option for performance in each particular part of every piece, a process that often includes understanding deeply both the composer and context of the piece.

Christoph Walder’s coaching mostly focused on pauses on how to include the need to breathe in one’s interpretation when playing the horn. This discussion was instigated by horn student Dorota Šimonová, who performed (for Walder and several dozen listeners) Olivier Messiaen’s *Appel interstellaire*, a difficult piece that serves as a rite of passage for many horn players.

One of the most original elements of Prague Offspring are the reading lessons, during which Klangforum Wien performs in a smaller line-up (flute, oboe, clarinet, violin, viola, and cello), sight-reading short pieces by composition students at the academies in Prague and Brno. This year, the composers were Milica Modrá, Noemi Savková, and Matej Sloboda. One of these three students is then selected to write a short piece for Klangforum to be performed at next year’s edition. During the reading lessons, Sloboda was the only one capable of deftly responding to suggestions and questions from the conductor and players. While Modrá and Savková are still in the early stages of their composition studies, Sloboda, who describes himself on his SoundCloud profile as a “composer / conductor / improviser from Slovakia interested in experimental arts”, is currently a doctoral student in Brno and has also studied in Vienna, Graz, and Berlin. (*Sloboda is also the conductor and artistic director of Ensemble Spectrum,*

*the ensemble that performed one of the two concerts of this year’s MicroFest Prague; see our interview with the organisers in this issue – editor’s note.*) It therefore comes as no surprise that it is Sloboda’s music that we will hear at next year’s festival. Congratulations!

In a radio interview, festival dramaturg Josef Třeščík mentioned that the reading lessons are “special” also for Klangforum Wien, and the six players in question clearly enjoyed the process immensely.

## Microtones and Politics

The main international guest of this year’s Prague Offspring was Georg Friedrich Haas, with Klangforum Wien performing two pieces of his: *Wer, wenn ich schrie, hörte mich...* (*Who, if I cried out, would hear me...*), named after a line by Reiner Maria Rilke, and *in vain*. The latter piece, a musical odyssey for twenty-four instruments lasting over an hour, was written in 2000. It received rave reviews and made Haas’s name. As the title suggests, the piece uses musical means to explore feelings of fruitlessness, futility, and frustration. Haas uses the so-called Shepard scale, a well-known aural illusion of infinitely rising or falling cascades of notes. The second kind of material used in the piece is more static: pulsating, slowly shifting microtonal chords. This primarily concerns two passages that should, ideally, be performed with the concert hall plunged into total darkness.

Darkness plays both an aesthetic role and a very literal one. Haas wrote *in vain* in response to the rise of the far right on the Austrian political scene. In recent years, Haas has attempted to distance himself from such political gestures. “I think in a certain sense, all my political pieces failed. The repetition in *in vain* is too beautiful to illustrate the desperation I was trying to capture,” the composer told me in conversation. It was a surprise to hear this, as few contemporary composers attract as many discussions about music, politics, and the personal vs. the public as Haas. In 2016, a New York Times article contained his coming out about his sexuality, including the fact that he lives in a BDSM relationship (in a dominant role) with his wife, the author and performer Mollena Williams-Haas. Williams-Haas was also present at the festival, and the first evening concert was followed by a screening of *Hyena*, a film in which she discusses her struggle with alcoholism, with her monologue accompanied by her husband’s hypnotic music.

## Invitation to a Roller Coaster Ride

Hungarian composer György Ligeti would have celebrated his hundredth birthday this May. He entered the canon of 20th-century music already during his lifetime and two pieces of his – the *Chamber Concerto*

The image shows a musical score for four parts: Perc 1, Perc 2, Horn, and Piano. The score is written in 7/2 time and features complex rhythmic patterns, including quarter notes and rests, with some measures containing multiple notes. The notation is dense and detailed, typical of Ligeti's style.

Trajectory of movement  
(IV. Ferris Wheel,  
measures 14–16)  
Ill. 1 / Jana Vöröšová

from his sonically radical period in the late 1960s and the *Piano Concerto* from the 1980s, during which time Ligeti developed a personal synthesis of styles, genres, and forms – were heard at the first concert, on Friday May 26th.

The *Chamber Concerto* is a perfect piece for an ensemble like Klangforum Wien. It is *de facto* a work for thirteen soloists who have plenty of opportunities to demonstrate their virtuosity. The soloist in the *Piano Concerto* was the Finnish pianist Joonas Ahonen, a full-time member of Klangforum who seemed to play with more attention aimed at the whole than at his solo performance. His “egoless approach” brought out the multi-layered nature of the score, with whose composition Ligeti struggled for several years. The same concert also featured *Lunapark* by Jana Vöröšová. This five-movement, twenty-minute visit to a musical and sonic Prater was awash with instrumental tricks, sound painting passages, quick cuts, exciting runs, and a “diegetic” parody of a funfair waltz. A graduate of the Prague Conservatory and HAMU, Vöröšová is a sought-after composer: in 2018, she won the Czech Philharmonic composition competition with *Píseň vrbového proutku* (*Song of the Willow Branch*) for soprano and orchestra, and the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra is preparing the premiere of her *Chlapeček a dálka* (*The Little Boy and Distance*) for its 2023/24 season. Vöröšová regularly opts for illustrative titles; situations. In 2019, she was commissioned by the Prague Spring festival to write *Atlas mraků* (*Cloud Atlas*), and she has also written pieces such as *Echoes of the Sea*, *While I Am Taking a Bath*, *Slyšíš ty ptáky* (*Do You Hear the Birds*), and *Tři sirény* (*Three Sirens*). The activities that take place in Vöröšová’s *Lunapark* are described in the titles of the movements: Autodrom (Bumper Cars), Labutě (Swans), Střelnice (Shooting Range), Velké kolo (Ferris Wheel), and Horská dráha (Roller Coaster). The first movement, marching along confidently in common time, signalled to everyone in the hall that this piece would be quite different from the ensemble’s standard repertoire. The composer attempts – and I consider this a positive trend appearing in the work of numerous

contemporary composers – to capture her ideas in notation in the most direct and comprehensible manner possible. And when she says that she wasn’t interested in “anything serious” in this piece, this certainly does not mean that she gave up on depth and detail. In a short video to promote the festival, she spoke about the “trajectories of movement” that the amusement park rides possess, and this principle is illustrated well by the composer’s graphic sketches, which are often created first and later transferred to notation (ill. 1). “I consider thinking in notation to be a great danger,” Georg Friedrich Haas said a day after the premiere of *Lunapark*, and Vöröšová would probably agree.

“Flashes of happiness and suspected fears”, as the composer put it in a short, poetic programme note, were created by members of Klangforum not only on their instruments, but also through the use of paper, slide whistles, bamboo whistles, and the popping or releasing of inflated balloons – not to mention the barrage of percussion instruments. The group of leading new music experts apparently enjoyed these non-standard effects so much that in the central movement, Shooting Range, the developments in the background were a little overshadowed. Observing this joyful activity, however, both the conductor and the composer decided it would be best not to change anything.

While in the Shooting Range or Roller Coaster movements, Vöröšová works with techniques of editing and montage, the even movements are more compact. Swans begins with two “lamenting” clarinets, probably symbolising the honking call of the swan, and leads to a suggestion of hockey. The structure of the fourth movement (Ferris Wheel) is built on a slowly developing and shifting loop: quarter notes in a 7/2 metre sway from side to side while the winds sustain static chords.

Thanks to Vöröšová’s sonic refinement and imagination, the audience heard combinations it had probably never heard before. The playful and casual nature of the piece introduced an element that is rarely present in contemporary compositions: accessibility



### Sudden impulses at various speeds (measures 30–36)

#### Ill. 2 / Michaela Plachká

for children. “Of course I wanted my children to like it,” the composer told me, laughing, when I confided in her with this observation. And she certainly succeeded.

### Orchestral Canapés

The five miniatures were performed in the first half of Saturday’s concert, with conductor Peter Rundel introducing them with only short breaks between each piece (all five composers came to take a bow together at the end). A lot happened in a short time, and the second half of the concert continued with a stellar performance of Haas’s *in vain*, with highly impressive light design. *in vain* was truly an experience, and it somewhat overshadowed the Czech miniatures. Pavel Šabacký, one of the composer’s and the successful participant in last year’s reading lessons, put it this way: “Hearing *in vain* was a strong experience that seems to have erased the first half of the concert from my head.” All the more reason, then, to explore these pieces in greater detail.

#### I

“I was inspired to write this piece by a view I sometimes see in the mornings from our bedroom window,” said Michaela Pálka Plachká, who lives with her husband (the composer Tomáš Pálka) and their children at the foot of the Bavarian Alps. She studied composition in Prague and Vienna, she is a member of the Konvergence composers’ association, and she has a long-standing interest in Klangkunst and peripheral fields of art in which music or sonic structures are organically connected to other forms of art. *Pět barev alpské mlhy* (*Five Colours of Alpine Fog*), however, is a relatively conventional score inspired by a piece of natural theatre lasting five minutes, during which the rays of the sun illuminate thick, mountain fog that gradually clears, until it suddenly disappears and gives way to a view of “the well-known shapes of forests and meadows”.

Pálka Plachká was the only one of the five composers to have only a single page of performance instructions – the piece uses very few unusual techniques. Three distinct musical “images”

make use of breathing sounds, transitions from exaggerated vibrato to no vibrato at all, and sudden impulses in repeated tones in the winds (ill. 2). According to the composer, Klangforum’s performance of this clear and transparent score was in complete accordance to what she had imagined during the composition process.

#### II

Matouš Hejl’s *Kývání* (*Pendulation*) had an entirely different aesthetic. The composer was inspired by the nature of the double pendulum, “one of the most simple systems to exhibit chaotic behaviour”. According to the instructions in the score, the three-minute miniature is supposed to symbolise both the connected pendulums and their relationship, which moves suddenly from a relatively regular movement to a wild and unpredictable motion. “There is a paradox here,” the composer muses: “the model is precisely described by formulas, but a slight change in the input conditions, similarly to the ‘butterfly effect’, leads to the system behaving unpredictably.”

Hejl’s piece was a swaying mix of delicate colours balancing on the border between noise and pitch: a mix defined by various forms of striking the strings, air noise in the winds, rasping and whispering into the brass instruments (consonants “sh” and “kh”, ill. 3), and their mutual interactions. In this context, every little shred of melody – most often performed by the bass clarinet and flute – drew accentuated attention.

The swaying lasted for only three minutes, but the composer’s refined sense of sound transformed these three minutes into a memorable affair. The use of partially performative elements reflected Hejl’s experiences with installation art and music for film and theatre. In 2022, he made *Opera Ibsen* with the independent theatre group JEDL, which was successfully performed both in Prague and at the New Opera Days Ostrava festival. He is also a double nominee for a Český lev (the “Czech Oscars”) for his film music. Hejl’s sense of combining music and words is highlighted by an extract of T. S. Eliot’s poetry that he included

**The horn “rasps”, the trumpet “whispers” (measure 29)  
Ill. 3 / Matouš Hejl**

in the programme note: “Do I dare / Disturb the universe? / In a minute there is time. / For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.”

**III**

Each year, the Vienna Philharmonic New Year’s concert introduces the mystery of the waltz and the orchestra’s unique talent to capture the unwritten yet omnipresent spirit in the music of Johann Strauss and others like him. Prague Offspring’s resident ensemble is also from Vienna, though we usually do not relate their sound and instrumental talents to the waltz. This is not true of František Chaloupka, who subjected the flare of the Viennese waltz to an original analysis in his *Spectral Waltzer*. While in the classic waltzer, slowing down before the beat and other tempo changes are a collective affair, in Chaloupka’s waltz, everyone performs the “molto rubato” by themselves. By alternating synchronous and asynchronous sections, the composer created a charmingly crumbling,

**Flexibility and plasticity (measures 96–100)  
Ill. 4 / František Chaloupka**

constantly fluttering, and harmonically fragile Waltzer that also contains the sentimentality so typical of the genre. A hard-to-describe sense of nostalgia was generated by a combination of the mutual “asynchronous” listening within the ensemble and the rising scalar patterns that would often end on the leading tone. “It is interesting that we approach the terms ‘classical’ and ‘avant-garde’ in such a matter-of-fact way,” Chaloupka writes in his programme note. His waltz synthesis provided a different and valuable response to this question.

A preference for tradition was also reflected in the fact that Chaloupka used no microtones or tuning specificities in *Spectral Waltzer*. “After the concert, Georg Friedrich Haas told me he thought the score included microtones and that he was surprised this was not the case,” Chaloupka stated. “The flexibility and plasticity of tuning [particularly in the Coda; see ill. 4] is the accent that creates both form and meaning in my scores.”

Chaloupka’s 7-minute piece was one of the most difficult to perform in the set. “I was surprised,” the JAMU graduate wrote to me, “by how quick the players were to complete the piece through their performance; how they grasped it in a collective understanding and interpreted truly as an ensemble – as a whole. They relished in the unusual dynamics and expressive sonorities.”

**IV**

Pavel Šabacký, the youngest of the five composers and a recent graduate of composition at JAMU, where he studied with Martin Smolka (the composer of last year’s longer piece), also challenged Klangforum Wien to use variable dynamic and expressive means. He decided to fill his five-minute window up to the brim with energetic, transformative, restless music that did not shy away from monumental gestures (ill. 5) and whose spontaneity made it seem highly intuitive. In *Ishan’t*, Šabacký worked with a clearly determined conception, at least as far as the tonal material was concerned: “I drew the pitch material from the prime numbers between 1 and 101 in the harmonic series on an E flat fundamental, which I divided and approximated in tuning to tempered notes,



**An unexpected and fearless E flat minor followed by a virtuosic clarinet solo (measures 32–34)**

III. 5 / Pavel Šabacký

sixth-tones, and quarter-tones. I contrast melodic fragments, harmonic and inharmonic chords, and purely timbral sections.” Other exceptional aspects of this piece included the rich instrumentation, which sounded truly symphonic despite the short duration and limited forces, and the clarinet solo, performed magnificently by Ettore Biagi.

The word “Ishan’t” sounds almost biblical, but it is merely a contraction of the words “I shan’t”. This pun is a reference to Antonín Dvořák’s *Biblical Songs*, specifically the words “Nebudu míti nedostatku” (“I shall not want”) from the fourth song, “Hospodin jest můj pastýř” (“The Lord is my Shepherd”), whose melody is quoted extensively in the piece. And why this reference? Šabacký dedicated the piece to his grandmother, the opera singer Věra Šabacká, who loved the *Biblical Songs*. Can one imagine anything more wholesome?

Pavel Šabacký’s broadly sweeping and thoroughly enjoyable piece contained enough ideas and material for a twenty-minute work. What will this talented representative of the youngest generation of composers do next? We can only look forward to finding out.

**V**

Šimon Voseček has lived and worked in Vienna since 2002. In humorous fashion entirely in keeping with the composer’s style, he provided, in place of a programme note, selected literal quotations from the Wikipedia entry on flies, focusing on their “great manoeuvrability during flight” and the fact that “[f]lies can be annoyances especially in large numbers, buzzing and settling on the skin or eyes to bite or seek fluids”.

At the opening of the piece, the flies flew furiously and also buzzed woefully (ill. 6), while the remaining components of the piece were soon added by the accordion and percussion. Sometimes, wings rub against the halteres in the form of horn runs, at other times, it is the powerful bass of the trombones rattling against the wings. Microtonal deviations in the string entries (and later also in the brass and winds) lend *Flies*. *Dipterans for ensemble* an aptly nervous and irritating quality.

Since his studies at the Prague Conservatory, Šimon Voseček has maintained an ardent relationship with opera. He graduated with the chamber opera *Soudničky* and composed his following opera, *Biedermann a žháři* (*Biedermann and the Fire Risers*) without a commission.

In 2016, the Wiener Kammeroper premiered his opera *Hybris*, which tells the dark, grotesque story of Dr. Kross, who became entangled in the trafficking of human organs. During the course of the opera, he takes bribes and gives people false hope in exchange, even though he knows the transplants are doomed to fail. *Flies* also have an expressionist streak in which one can hear the grotesque and a kind of cynical curiosity in what society in general considers repulsive.

All five composers handled their five-minute lot with honour. To have worked with Klangforum Wien is a wonderful achievement, and all six artists confirmed that their collaboration with this eminently professional ensemble was of great import to them and fulfilled their expectations (which were, we might well add, already very high). In an interview with Wanda Dobrovská, Voseček mentioned that when he mentioned the commission in the company of his Austrian colleagues, they “nodded their heads in appreciation and spoke of being ‘knighted’”. The mosaic of five short pieces thus works as a “showcase” of development on the Czech scene and also an experimental workshop at a particularly high level. And perhaps this aspect of the Prague Spring format will become a test for future musicologists researching Czech music of the 2020s: without a knowledge of the context, they might wonder why an entire generation of composers wrote five-minute virtuoso pieces for large ensemble.

**Where does Escher’s Staircase Lead?**

One of the inspirations for the aural illusions in Haas’s *in vain* are M. C. Escher’s famous prints of a staircase that leads in one direction or the other depending on how you look at it. Pursuing contemporary music in Prague is also a somewhat illusory affair, and

Left to right:  
 Šimon Voseček,  
 Matouš Hejl,  
 Pavel Šabacký,  
 František Chaloupka,  
 Michaela Plachká



PHOTO: PRAGUE SPRING FESTIVAL - PETRA HAJSKA



**Furious flight (strings) and woeful buzzing (winds)  
 (measures 8–10)  
 III. 6 / Šimon Voseček**

the direction of the staircase is likewise uncertain. The Contempuls festival operated in the city for a number of years, but its energy seems to have run out. Large and small ensembles specialising in contemporary music survive from project to project or year to year, with a large fluctuation of members to whom they cannot offer a stable position of any kind, so the musicians depart for opportunities of greater security.

The mastery of Klangforum Wien derives not merely from the talent of its instrumentalists, but also from the conditions and means they have at their disposal. The second edition of Prague Offspring proves what such conditions bring – to both listeners and the protagonists themselves.

“The Prague Spring is a brand with its own history, continuity, and international reach. The fact that it created a weekend-long format for contemporary music is a clear signal that contemporary music is here and that it plays an important role in our culture. This also influences, of course, the promotion of the concerts, which we can see was successful, as both evening concerts were totally sold out,” wrote Michaela Pálka Plachká in response to my questions about contemporary music in Czechia. František Chaloupka added: “It is excellent that the Prague Spring is reflecting an interest in contemporary music, and to have an ensemble like Klangforum Wien to do it is simply world-class. I would like to thank those in the festival organisation team responsible for the event – composer Miroslav Srnka, dramaturg Josef Třeštík, and festival director Pavel Trojan Jr.” Yes, thanks are certainly in order. The efforts of the team behind Prague Offspring successfully set the figures walking on Escher’s staircase in motion – and they are walking upwards.

# Microtonal Music Must be Felt in the Body – an interview with the organisers of MicroFest Prague

The MicroFest is an idea that first started in New York in the 1980s, spearheaded by bassoonist and composer Johnny Reinhard. It was later taken up in Helsinki by composer Juhani Vesikkala, who then transplanted it to Prague when he moved to the Czech Republic to undertake his doctoral studies at HAMU (the Music and Dance Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague). We spoke to Juhani and the two other principal organisers of the conference: Iva Oplištilová, who is the head of the Music Theory Department at HAMU, and Lucia Maloveská, who is a doctoral student there, about the first two editions of MicroFest at the school and their plans for the future. Do not miss Nikola Komatović's contribution to this issue, which began as a talk at MicroFest.

**Juhani, what were the ideas that led you to organise the MicroFest?**

**Juhani Vesikkala (JV):** Back in October 2018, I was starting my doctoral studies at HAMU. At the time, I was already involved in microtonal activities in Helsinki – a year earlier, we had started an organisation there focused on microtonal practice. What me and my colleagues in Finland shared was a teacher, Juhani Nuorvala, which gave us a shared language and approach to microtonal music. Also in 2018, I organised MicroFest Helsinki – I had just moved to Prague and had to travel back to Finland immediately for this festival. Iva heard about this festival and we started discussing microtonality and my plans for my PhD, which at the time seemed to revolve around microtonality, though it later turned out differently. As I had just arrived in Prague, I did not know what the scene was like here for microtonality, but it seemed like there wasn't much of it around. It was very helpful to be able to consult with Iva, to discuss what was needed, what would be interesting for local audiences, and so on.

**Iva Oplištilová (IO):** When Juhani arrived in Prague, he quickly found a producer to make the festival happen, and the first edition mostly featured his contacts from Finland. For me, microtonality was a topic that I was interested in but not something I was terribly active in. In addition to teaching in the music theory department, I also have another position as head of the contemporary music department, so I suggested we apply for a two-year grant under Long-Term Conceptual Development of the Research Organisation supported by the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport. That first edition was very rushed and a little chaotic; we had to change producers, we had to adapt our plans to the budget several

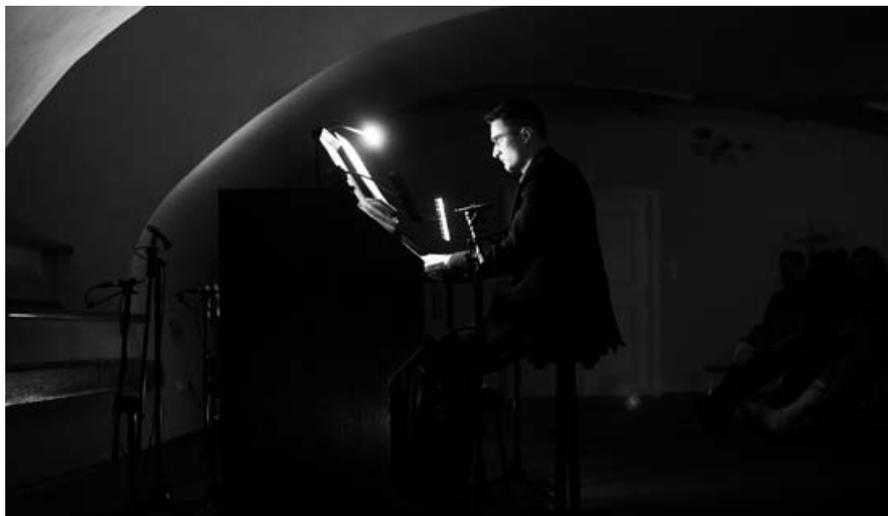


PHOTO: ALEXANDRA CHUDÁ, JUHANI VESIKKALA, BARBORA HAMÁČKOVÁ

*Miroslav Beinhauer  
at the sixth-tone harmonium*

times, and when everything was finally prepared, the covid-19 pandemic started. We therefore changed the format to online, with most participants managing to make their own recordings. There were three online conference sessions of about three hours, and what was immediately clear was how broad the interest was – Juhani made a map of participants after the conference and we really covered all continents. It was especially interesting to me see the interest from the Arab world, which we in the Czech Republic are not in contact with at all. The reason why we decided not to give up on the online component this year and run the festival in a hybrid format instead was due to the interest expressed by all participants at the end of the conference.

### **Do the benefits of meeting “live” at the hybrid conference outweigh the global connectivity afforded by the online format?**

**JV:** Ultimately, we are still speaking about acoustic phenomena, and microtonal music has to be felt in the body; corporeally. It cannot just be discussed through notation or heard through Zoom-quality audio. A lot of the peculiarities of microtonal music are lost through online communication. On the other hand, of course, the reach of the online format is much greater and it allows the discussion to be much more egalitarian. I also think it's very valuable to make high-quality recordings that can then be accessed at a later date, which is the purpose of our archive.

**IO:** The quality of the recordings wasn't particularly good, but this also has to do with the fact that it was a last-minute change and the musicians were not prepared for this situation. On the other hand, I think the input from people from distant countries that we

are not usually in touch with was extremely valuable and it brought a new spirit to the discussion. At this year's in-person conference, there was a much stronger community feeling; a sense of strong bonds established. And I absolutely agree with Juhani about the need to hear microtonal music directly – it was wonderful to present two concerts this year. Having said that, however, I also think it's important that we made high quality recordings that we will share online along with all the recordings of the conference papers. The plan is to then give several weeks for everyone to become acquainted with the material, after which we will have an online follow-up to the conference to discuss everything.

**JV:** I think this is particularly valuable in the case of microtonality, as in some cases, people need a few weeks to really grasp what the talk is about and only then can they field relevant questions. I felt like this year, we didn't have quite so many questions from the audience.

**IO:** Especially in the case of Marc Sabat's lecture, I myself would like to listen to it and be able to stop it every two minutes.

### **To read a book that will help you catch up...**

**IO:** Exactly (*laughs*). This is a huge benefit to having these talks online: allowing people to do their own research in their own time and really learn as much as possible from the material presented.

**I think this combination really allows for the best of both worlds: you have a community that has developed in person and can continue online – I think everyone who participated will now be**



*Ensemble Spectrum  
conducted by Matej Sloboda*

**more motivated to join the online call simply to see everyone again.**

Lucia Maloveská (LM): I am curious to see how that will work now – during the pandemic, we were all used to doing things online, whereas now people are shying away the online space, but this is such a valuable thing to be able to do in your own time that I think it will work.

**It is not completely standard for an academic conference on music to put on concerts, much less to create open calls and inspire the creation of new works.**

JV: All the MicroFests since the 1980s in New York have included concerts as an integral part of the event. When Johnny Reinhard started the format, he played a bassoon recital himself and commissioned pieces from his friends – that's where the tradition started. The open call is something we started in Helsinki, where we shared the call on a website that would reach most composers who would be interested – not necessarily composers that work with microtonality, but who would be open to a challenge. The first call was only for the glissando flute, but we had many entries. It seemed to me like this was a good way to move the community forward and to get more people interested in microtonality.

The open calls also inspire better performer-composer interaction, and it's also more democratic – it is not just us, the organisers, commissioning pieces as we see fit: the jury also includes external judges as well as the performers themselves. Furthermore, all the pieces were signed by pseudonyms, making the process more transparent. The aim, as I see it, is to get as many people involved in the community as possible whilst being as egalitarian as possible.

IO: I would add that the concerts are something we have to defend as part of the project – as you mentioned, it's not all that common at academic conferences. The project is for the conference and for research, and the outcome has to be a study in a peer-reviewed journal. The concerts are conceived as applied research and we really do get a lot of precious information on compositional systems, styles, and notation from the calls for scores.

As for the juries: not only did they include the performers, but the performers also had the main say. We had a very transparent system for assigning points for the commissions, and these were the start of the decision-making process, but then the performers had input on whether the music was playable, and would then also decide how many pieces to play: the “winning” pieces (determined by the points awarded by the jury members) would be there, of course, but the inclusion of others would depend on the dramaturgy, the space, and so on.

Finally, speaking as a music theorist, this was very valuable research into notation for particular instruments, but also general styles that are in the air at the moment: there was one stream that included adapting folk styles to these European instruments, others had a story or an introduction. There were also conceptual pieces, some of them very vague to be easily adjusted to any conditions, such as: play one note until it is necessary and do not forget it is microtonal. I have to admit I gave such pieces zero points: from my point of view, that's cheating. It was interesting to see the range of people that were interested in taking part and what microtonality means to them. Some would just include a few microtones to make the piece “fit the bill”, while others had developed very interesting systems.

**What do you think is the position of microtonal music or its specific manifestations, such as Just Intonation or equal divisions of the octave, both within academia and in contemporary music more generally?**

**JV:** I'm not too deep in the academic conversation about microtonality, but I think there is a bit of a disconnect – not many microtonal practitioners write academic articles about their work. I think this divide is, perhaps, getting smaller, but it's still there. There is also a strong division between Just Intonation and equal divisions of the octave, which I'm not too happy about as a composer, as my aim is to combine both.

**IO:** In the academic context, I think it's really down to individual cases. If there is someone at a school who can teach about microtonality, or they have an instrumental practice, or a class where microtonality can be part of the syllabus, it works. And that's what many people at the conference are doing. I think it makes absolute sense for microtonality to develop within academia, as it is a field that is currently undergoing a lot of development and that development often takes the form of systematic knowledge, which makes this knowledge easy to include within the academic debate.

From seeing all the open call scores and lectures, I wouldn't say the scene is particularly divided – generally, everyone is open to and interested in connecting systems; bridging the gaps. Of course, Just Intonation is more “sexy” right now (*laughs*), it's a coherent, self-contained approach, but I think it can be connected with the equal-distance approach – and I also don't know of many people working exclusively with equal temperaments.

It was very interesting to hear Nikola Komatović's talk about Alois Hába's Serbian students in Prague in the 1930s. Áron Szatmári, a Hungarian music journalist who wrote a review of the festival for Jelenkor, mentioned in conversation that he considers Czech Republic or Czechoslovakia the heart of Central European experimental music. Personally, I would never think about it this way. But from his perspective, this started with Hába and the conditions for experimentation that existed here between the two World Wars.



**LM:** I attended the Prague Offspring contemporary music section at the Prague Spring festival last weekend, with Georg Friedrich Haas as the main guest, and he mentioned Hába repeatedly. He spoke about how happy he was to be in Prague and how much he admired Hába's work. So I think doing this in Prague, researching the work of Hába and his students, it all makes sense, despite the fact we sometimes need people from abroad to remind us of this.

**IO:** I sometimes get the feeling that they think about it more than we do. I don't feel like people around me, at least, are talking about Hába and continuing his tradition.

**You have anticipated my next question, which is what it means to do this festival in Prague. We have already mentioned Hába and the instruments he built – the sixth-tone harmonium, the quarter-tone piano, trumpet, clarinet... However unique that tradition might have been at the time, it's also true that it did not continue: there weren't students of Hába's that continued his work, continued writing music in his style. And what's happening now is really a new tradition developing on these foundations.**

**IO:** It's like when Americans discovered that they have Charles Ives. Of course, we know about Hába, we learn about him in theory lessons, but his music isn't really performed all that much. I think the problem is that he was much more experimental in tuning systems that in form and aesthetics. And learning to play his new instruments takes a lot of work. Whereas now, when people have experiences of other microtonal approaches and the freedom that this brings, they can approach these instruments in new ways and within new aesthetic paradigms. And we're back to the direct bodily experience, the knowledge that we have from the compositional procedures of spectralist composers, for instance.

**Juhani, how do you feel about this coming from Finland?**

**JV:** As a foreigner, I was a little too idealistic: I imagined that there would, in fact, be a living Hába tradition here. But when I arrived, I discovered the texts were mostly in the archives and people weren't very well versed in this tradition. So I'd say that what we're doing is actively reviving Prague as a platform for microtonal music.

**Juhani mentioned the importance of accessibility. For me, a crucial aspect of the festival was the concert by EnsembleSpectrum, or rather what preceded it: several days spent with Marc Sabat, who taught them how to understand, hear, and play Just Intonation music. I feel like that's education along a slightly different path to expert academic conferences or commissioning pieces by composers who work with these approaches – this was about training musicians on a practical level. Is this a stream that you want to explore further, perhaps with music students at HAMU?**

**IO:** We are currently working to set up an intensive weekend workshop with Marc Sabat for the autumn, with instrumental training in the morning (singing; listening) and theory in the afternoon. I was talking about the project to a violin student at the school. When I asked her at first who else among the students would be interested, she gave me a few names – only a few. But as soon as I explained that it wasn't about playing in difficult systems; that it was about tuning, listening, understanding your instrument, she began suggesting a different group of people – at first, it was the group that would be interested in contemporary music. The second list was much longer. It's generally my experience that once people encounter this kind of music, they like it. They just need to have the option to be exposed to it.

**JV:** I also wouldn't rule out the possibility of there being a course of study specifically aimed at performing microtonal music at HAMU, though of course, this is far in the future. Our task, however, is to make the threshold as low as possible. To make it possible for people – in terms of technique, aesthetic, and thinking – to access the world of microtonal music. For composers, this would include introducing them to tools such as those found on Marc Sabat's website, which make it very easy to engage with microtonal practice. I'm not sure what this would mean specifically with instrumental students.

**IO:** My experience with students is that if someone they respect from the common practice music scene includes something microtonal in their repertoire, they feel a lot more comfortable trying it out – this is one of the most useful bridges we have. That's why I want to start with Marc: yes, there is lots of rational thinking and mathematics behind his approach, but the first challenge that the students get at the workshop is to try and sing it; experience it. After that, they will be happy to stay and listen to the theory behind it. It has to come through experience, through the ear, the body, not through studying.

**Are there plans to continue MicroFest in the future?**

**IO:** There are. I almost feel obliged to do it: the interest from around the world makes it clear that there really aren't that many institutions working on this topic. The grants of this scope available through HAMU will always be research-oriented, so we will probably stay within the existing format. I would like to invite Ivan Boreš, a guitarist who has performed some of Hába's music for quarter-tone guitar, to the next edition.

**JV:** Though I am based in Helsinki for the foreseeable future, I think the momentum that we've built up here is very valuable and I look forward to developing the third edition of MicroFest Prague some two years from now. I think we have a good balance between music and outreach, which we would like to maintain. As Iva mentioned, it would be good to diversify the instrumental focus, and I would also like there to be more integration between the lectures and the concerts, and perhaps new activities, like workshops that would be embedded in the structure of the festival. I would also like to foster deeper connections between microtonal musicians and composers in Finland and the Czech Republic.

# HÁBA'S LEGACY: THE IMPACT OF THE PRAGUE CONSERVATORY AVANT-GARDE ON SERBIAN COMPOSITION STUDENTS

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**One of the most interesting contributions to this year's MicroFest Prague was a paper by Nikola Komatović. The independent Serbian music theorist and researcher presented his exploration of a group of avant-garde composition students who travelled to Prague from Serbia between the two world wars and were considerably influenced by having studied there with Alois Hába, and we are delighted to be able to share it with you in this issue.**

## CHALLENGES AND SOURCES

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To write an article about the first generation of Serbian avant-garde composers is both a grateful and challenging task. Our biggest problem was finding a starting point, as there were many unknowns in the equation of Serbian composers who studied in Alois Hába's class. The first unknown in that formula is that no sheet music is currently available. Our primary sources for this work were the monograph on Ljubica Marić by Dr. Melita Milin from the Musicological Institute and email correspondence with Dr. Milin, several scholarly articles on Milan Ristić, Dragutin Čolić, and Vojislav Vučković, and a detailed interview we conducted with Dr. Borislav Čičovački, a musicologist and oboist who was also a friend of the late Ljubica Marić.

According to Dr. Milin, Ljubica Marić allegedly burned virtually all of her student compositions, including the microtonal works. This was a result of her particular character and unflinching perfectionism. The whereabouts of the legacy of Dr. Vojislav Vučković are unknown, so at this

point, we have no idea where his microtonal works are. Milan Ristić supposedly preserved his legacy, but it remains in the possession of his family. Although the composer was an academician, his son did not submit his manuscripts to the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts archive. Finally, two student compositions by Dragutin Čolić have been preserved at the Musicological Institute of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, but no microtonal works exist at this time.

Therefore, all the information we have available about these works are data on their creation and details about concerts performances. However, we cannot completely exclude the possibility that some microtonal works still exist. Also of use are several scholarly articles on this topic.

## SERBIAN MUSIC STUDENTS IN PRAGUE

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Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia entered the historical stage as sovereign states at the same time and - perhaps sadly - almost concurrently disappeared from it less than a century later.

However, there were numerous reasons why many

Serbian music students chose Prague as their destination for study.

Serbian-Czech music relations date back to the first half of the 19th century and, in Serbia, are often celebrated as crucial for establishing musical life in the period that preceded national independence. In this regard, one name that is certainly worth mentioning that of Robert Tolinger – he was responsible, along with other Czech musicians, for establishing the first Serbian music institutions, schools, orchestras, etc.

By the end of the First World War, no music higher education institutions existed in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (which later became Yugoslavia). However, in 1922, Zagreb established its Music Academy, which, as a young institution, was not attractive to Serbian students with high aspirations. Belgrade would eventually get its own Music Academy in 1937. When discussing connections between Serbians and Czechs, we should certainly mention Emil Hájek. A student of Antonín Dvořák among other things, Hájek was a Czech pianist and composer whom the Yugoslav government employed to teach piano at the Stanković Music School in the 1920s. Thanks to him, Stanković was elevated to the level of a conservatory, and he was later instrumental in establishing the piano department at the Music Academy. He edited and published numerous editions of piano works by great composers, still used in teaching today.

Josip Štolcer Slavenski (1896–1955), an ethnic Croat and self-proclaimed Yugoslav who would become one of the first regional avant-garde composers, was the first to decide to pursue his studies in the Czechoslovak capital in the early 1920s. Slavenski was followed by others born at the beginning of the 20th century, but the true “rush” followed at the end of the 1920s. During the interwar period, favourable intergovernmental agreements provided Yugoslav students with virtually free education in Czechoslovakia. This may have been the key reason why a three-digit number of graduates from music schools from the Balkan country would travel to Prague every year. Of course, there were many instrumentalists and vocalists among them. Still, in the usual discussion today, when discussing the so-called “Prague Group”, the general consensus is primarily to think of composers and a slightly smaller number of conductors. It is perhaps unnecessary to say that the composers also studied conducting, and vice versa – conductors also studied composition (an example of the latter case



Ljubica Marić

is the famous Yugoslav conductor Oskar Danon, 1913–2009).

It is important to remember that contemporary Serbian musicology and music history emerged from the fragmentation of a broader overview of the discipline, namely Yugoslav music history. In that sense, it should be noted that musicians from other parts of the country, primarily Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia, were also present in Prague, and some of their names will be mentioned later in the text.

It must be pointed out that the name “Prague Group” is an identifier created *ex post* by Serbian historical musicologists in the second half of the 20th century; therefore, the artists educated in Prague were not aware of that name at the time of their studies. Moreover, according to Borislav Čičovački, Ljubica Marić despised the term. Generally speaking, Serbian composers who studied in Prague from the second half of the 1920s to the second half of the 1930s can be divided into right- and left-wing groups.

The right-leaning students were more conservatively oriented. Stylistically, they leaned towards neoclassicism. Officially, they attended classes with different teachers, including Karel Boleslav Jirák (1891–1972), but what they had in common was that they usually continued their postgraduate studies with Josef Suk (1874–1935). This group includes names like Mihajlo Vukdragović (1900–1986), Mihovil Logar (1902–1998), Predrag Milošević (1904–1988), and Stanojlo Rajčić (1910–2000).

The left-wing students were the first avant-garde group of creators in Serbian music history. Their common denominator was their attraction to the avant-garde art of their era and composers like



Dragutin Čolić



Milan Ristić



Vojislav Vučković

Arnold Schoenberg and his twelve-tone system. They also attended classes with different composers, but what they had in common was that they all found themselves studying with Alois Hába in the 1930s.

Chronologically and in terms of their year of birth, Dragutin Čolić, Milan Ristić, Ljubica Marić, and Vojislav Vučković belong to the “left wing” of the Prague Group.

To be an avant-garde composer in interwar Serbia was a strange occurrence. Generally, as already noted, the development of the “classical” music scene in the country began only in the mid-19th century. In aesthetic-technical terms, the first-generation educated composers who appeared in the final decades of the 19th century were, at best, Romantics. It is necessary to say that certain institutions of high culture, such as a philharmonic orchestra or opera, were founded in the Serbian capital only after the end of the First World War and thanks to the large influx of Russian post-revolutionary émigrés. If the new state’s capital, Belgrade, reminded some of a provincial European town, the situation in the actual provinces of the country was even less favourable. An individual who wished to pursue music could, at best, count on singing in the local church choir, learning an instrument from a private tutor (most often an amateur), and, in very exceptional cases, performing in a small military or firefighters’ ensemble.

However, as soon as it became apparent that a particular person was extraordinarily gifted, they would receive a scholarship to continue their education in Belgrade. This could be done at one of the two music schools at the time: the Serbian

Music School (today’s Mokranjac Music School) or the Stanković Music School.

In extraordinary cases, exceptionally talented pupils would also receive a scholarship for studies abroad, as was the case with one of the founders of the modern Serbian music scene, Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac (1856–1914). All the more surprising is that of the four composers whose work we are addressing, only one was born in Belgrade, while the others came from relatively distant provincial towns. Therefore, we will proceed with a few general sentences about each of them.

## INDIVIDUAL COMPOSERS

Although all four composers were born within three years of each other (1907–1910), Dragutin Čolić was the oldest, and as such, he was the first to go to Prague and return home. He was born in Požega, near the western Serbian city of Užice. In his early youth, he moved to Belgrade, where he completed his music education, and then travelled to the Czechoslovakian capital. He first studied with Karel Boleslav Jirák and Josef Suk and then continued his education with Alois Hába. According to the author Sonja Cvetković, when Čolić arrived in Prague, he was already enthusiastic about Schoenberg’s stylistic and technical inclinations. Hába himself opined:

*Čolić understood the melodic and harmonic principles of twelve-tone music, for which the works of Schoenberg are our model. His task will be to explain in detail to the Yugoslav music community the principles we are trying to achieve together; and in this way, give a new, vivid basis, stylistic and sonorous, to the further development of European music. (Cvetković 2007: 24)*



Vojislav Vučković's plate in Pirot

Although Hába emphasises Čolić's obsession with new techniques, according to Sonja Cvetković, the young composer was much more enthusiastic about Schoenberg's pre-twelve-tone, free atonality, at least in the initial phase. However, by the early 1930s, his first twelve-tone and then microtonal works appeared: *Tema con variazioni for piano*, *First String Quartet*, and *Concertino for Quarter-tone Piano* (probably the first ever Serbian microtonal work). As noted above, we do not know where these works are now, whereas we know that his remaining microtonal compositions, including *String Sextet*, *Wind Quintet*, and *Two Suites for Quarter-Tone Piano*, are permanently lost. Unfortunately, or perhaps not, Čolić's stay in Prague ended in 1932, when he returned to Belgrade and became a professor of theoretical subjects, first at the Stanković music school and eight years later at the Music Academy. The Belgrade environment was entirely conservative, still essentially oriented towards Romanticism, and avant-garde works were not frequently performed. Čolić had to be content with working as a critic and columnist until the outbreak of World War II, alongside his pedagogical work. Chronologically speaking, the second member of the "left-wing" group was Milan Ristić. Born in 1908, he was the only Belgrade-born of the four. He received his first piano lessons in his home city, after which he travelled to Paris with his high school friend, the well-known poet Oskar Davičo, where he studied composition with a certain J. Pierson (more information about him has so far proven

hard to track down). At the time, the nineteen-year-old Ristić moved in a circle of young Serbian and French surrealist artists that included both painters and poets. However, he soon returned to Belgrade, where he studied composition at the Serbian Music School (later the Mokranjac Music School), first with Miloje Milojević (1884-1946), a composer of Romantic provenance, and then with Josip Slavenski, who was already showing expressionist tendencies. His father died in the late 1920s, so Ristić was forced to support his family. Intriguingly, he did so by playing in the jazz band Jolly Boys, one of the first such groups in the Kingdom (although jazz in Yugoslavia at the time was an inclusive term that also included popular music more generally and did not have the same meaning as it does today). After some time, he went to Prague, where he joined Hába's class. That was where he first encountered the extensive use of athematic material, atonality, and microtonality. Ristić's early works were atonal: *Symphonietta*, *Violin Concerto*, *Piano Preludes*. He then created his first microtonal compositions under the influence of Hába, including the *Suite for Four Trombones* and *Septet* - all of these works are most likely lost.

Although only a year younger than Čolić, Ristić spent a much longer time in Prague (until the Nazi invasion in 1939, when he returned to Yugoslavia with Vučković and Ljubica Marić). Although we have no direct evidence to support this, we can presume that as one of Hába's teaching assistants, he was able to secure a more stable income. Upon their return to Belgrade, Vučković and Ristić were fortunate to find work. Specifically, in 1938, the older-generation composer Petar Krstić left his position as the music editor of Radio Belgrade. Ristić immediately filled this post and brought Vučković in as his deputy. Due to the pro-Nazi tendencies in the new government, however, Ristić and Vučković were fired at the outbreak of World War II in Yugoslavia in 1941 - more on that later. Of the "left-wing" quartet, Ljubica Marić probably had the most exciting and complex life and creative path. The composer, whom many musicologists and critics today consider the most significant creator of Serbian modernism, was born in 1909 in Kragujevac, central Serbia. She received her early musical education during the Bulgarian occupation of Serbia during World War I (1915-1918) in the western Serbian city of Valjevo (where she first learned the violin) and then continued her education in Belgrade. At the Serbian Music School, she followed a similar path to that of Ristić. She first attended a composition course with

Miloje Milojević but soon switched to lessons with Josip Slavenski, where she first encountered an expressionist musical language. She graduated in 1929, earning the title of “graduate composer” and becoming the first Serbian female composer with a diploma – albeit a high school diploma. In the same year, Marić went to Prague, where she enrolled in studies with Josef Suk. With outstanding results from Belgrade and a letter of recommendation, she was immediately accepted into the postgraduate (master’s) program. In 1931, her most significant work to date, the *Wind Quintet*, was created, written in the style of free atonality. It was performed at an international composition festival in Amsterdam, where it was praised as “the most original”.

After completing her studies in 1932, she began a period of travel and wandering that lasted several years. Marić first went to Berlin, where she studied piano and conducting at the Hochschule für Musik. However, she interrupted her studies to attend the master’s school of the famous conductor Hermann Scherchen (1891–1966) in Strasbourg. After spending some time in Yugoslavia, she finally returned to Prague in 1936, becoming a student in Hába’s class and one of his assistants. Her three works reliably known to have been written in a microtonal system are *Suite for Quarter-tone Piano* (1936–1937), *Canon for Quarter-tone Piano* (1936–1937) and *Quarter-tone Trio for Clarinet, Trombone, and Double Bass* (1937–1938). As mentioned, unfortunately, the composer herself destroyed all of these works. In 1938, Marić returned to Yugoslavia, but unlike Ristić and Vučković, she did not go to Belgrade first but to Zagreb, where she offered to organise a seminar on microtonal music at the local academy. Although the dean expressed interest in her idea, for unspecified reasons, it did not materialise. Marić then returned to Belgrade and took over the position of professor of theoretical subjects at the Stanković Music School. It is possible that she filled the vacant position previously held by Dragutin Čolić. Still, Stanković, officially a conservatory, lost much of its staff when the Music Academy in Belgrade was founded. Marić remained in that position throughout the duration of the Second World War.

Finally, the youngest and probably the most tragic personality of the “left-wing” group is Vojislav Vučković. He was born in 1910 in Pirot, in southeast Serbia. He came to Belgrade after World War I, where he received his early music education. He attended a composition course with Miloje Milojević, which he completed with a piano

miniature in an impressionistic style titled *Train Platform*. On Milojević’s recommendation, he went to Prague, where, like his predecessors, he first attended a course with Josef Suk, then with Alois Hába.

After arriving in Prague, Vučković composed his *First Symphony* and, somewhat later, a *String Quartet* written in the technique of free atonality. However, when it comes to microtonality, the only work that can be said to have been written entirely in this language is the lost *Quarter-tone Trio (Suite) for Two Clarinets and Piano*, whose whereabouts are unknown. However, despite being the only composer with no background in Romanticism, Vučković’s later work is the most heterogeneous of all the “Praguers”. His work simultaneously displays elements of folk expressionism combined with microtonality but also a turn towards something that would later become the aesthetics of socialist realism (as in the choral cantata *Illuminated Path*).

Since we have already mentioned Vučković’s aesthetic orientation, perhaps this is the appropriate moment to address the question of the ideology of these composers.

## IDEOLOGY

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The fact that Serbian musicologists chose the term “left-wing” for avant-garde composers is not entirely coincidental. Čolić, Ristić, and especially Vučković were what is commonly referred to as “pre-war communists”. This term had a lofty position in the post-war communist value system, as most of the later members of the Communist Party joined during World War II or immediately following its end. Therefore, it is believed that the “pre-war communists” were in the party out of genuine conviction. On the other hand, according to Čičovački, Ljubica Marić was not a communist, nor did she identify as one after the war. Still, she was at least a sympathiser and supporter of their work for collegial reasons.

Dragutin Čolić became a member of the Communist Party in Prague and transferred his membership to Yugoslavia after returning to the country. During this time, he was one of the correspondents and co-authors of several music and general culture magazines, and also secretly founded and published the *Communist* newspaper under a pseudonym.

In the spring of 1935, the most dramatic scene in the ideological-political life of the group took place. The Yugoslav police in Zagreb arrested Marić and Vučković, claiming they were “for communism”. In Belgrade, they also took Čolić into custody.

At the intervention of his father, Vučković was quickly released, but since he did not help Ljubica Marić, the previously harmonious relationship between the two was disrupted. Čolić was released from prison only after several months. However, the most profound political-ideological imprint was left by Vojislav Vučković. It is not known precisely when he became a communist (some sources say it was during his stay in Paris in the early 1930s, others mention Prague). Still, it is known that he joined the then-illegal Communist Party of Yugoslavia as early as 1933. His ideology is also believed to have influenced some aesthetic decisions (a turn towards socialist realism, perhaps influenced by the cultural politics of the USSR). Upon his return to Belgrade, Vučković proved to be a practical communist. He conducted workers' choirs, organised radio programmes on modern and avant-garde music and a series of free lectures in the Kolarac concert hall in Belgrade, resulting in several volumes of published articles. It is also recorded that an illegal meeting of the Communist Party, which included left-wing intellectuals and the future Yugoslav leader, Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980), was held at his house in 1938.

## RADIO CONCERT

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The most significant event related to the “left-wing” group occurred on May 20th, 1938, in the Dvořák Hall of the Rudolfinum. That day, a concert of Hába's students was held in a combined broadcast by the Czechoslovak and Yugoslav Radios. According to the programme, Vučković's *Suite for Two Clarinets and Quarter-tone Piano*, Čolić's *Concerto for Quarter-tone Piano and Wind Sextet*, and Ljubica Marić's *Suite for Double Bass, Trombone and Quarter-tone Piano* were to be performed (the last quote is incorrect, as the programme actually included her *Trío for Clarinet, Trombone and Orchestra*). The concert was initially scheduled for March 29 but was postponed due to complications the performers encountered when preparing for the concert. In the end, in addition to the works of four Slovenes (then Yugoslavs), Slavko Osterc, Radoslav Hrovatin, Demetrije Žebre, and Franz Sturm, works by Milan Ristić (*Duo for Violin and Viola* and *Suite for Four Trombones*) were also performed, as well as some additional works by Čolić (*Concertino for Piano and String Sextet*), while only the “Allegro” from Vučković's suite was performed. It is notable that Ljubica Marić's works were not performed. To this day, it is not entirely clear why. Dr. Čičovački believes that the reason could have

been the lack of preparation of the performers for quarter-tone music, but this does not explain why they were ready to perform the works of other composers. Given that Marić was preparing to offer a quarter-tone music seminar in Zagreb then, the fact that her works were not performed further frustrated her, as she felt that they jeopardised her engagement (which ultimately failed to materialise). Her mother, Katarina (who lived with her daughter in Prague), wrote to Hába and asked why her daughter's works were removed from the repertoire, justifying the possible delay in submitting materials with her daughter's excessive workload. It is not known whether Hába responded to the letter. He did write to Ljubica Marić, however, claiming that the clarinetist and double bassist had not prepared their parts, promising a new concert for the following year, and praising the suite. Unfortunately, due to the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia, this concert never took place. We mention this concert primarily due of the possibility that it was recorded (so far, we have not found out whether such a recording exists in the Radio Belgrade Archive, but we know that that institution was affected by the wartime events of 1941). We cannot exclude the possibility that it was recorded in Prague and that recording might still exist in the archives.

## AFTERMATH – CONCLUSION

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Although members of the “left-wing” group split before World War II, mainly for professional reasons, Yugoslavia's entry into the global conflict marked the definitive end of the group. In April 1941, the Luftwaffe horrifically bombed Belgrade and the Axis powers subsequently occupied and partitioned the country. The Communist Party immediately began preparing for an uprising, and Vučković was involved in these plans. However, the Gestapo and the secret police of the Serbian puppet government immediately blacklisted him and his wife, the Croatian painter Fani Politeo. Therefore, he was first forced to flee his home and hide in various locations across Belgrade. However, after a year and a half, they were betrayed, and the secret police arrested them and beat them to death. Vučković was only thirty-two at the time. It was a tragic end for what was probably the most energetic personality on the Serbian music scene. Ljubica Marić withdrew into a sort of anonymity. Although music education barely functioned during the occupation, she retained her position

as a teacher of theoretical subjects at the Stanković Music School. During this time, she secretly began to familiarise herself with elements of Serbian and Byzantine church music. Generally speaking, however, she did not compose much.

There are few historical details about where Dragutin Čolić and Milan Ristić spent the war years. His official biography states that Čolić became a professor of theoretical subjects at the Music Academy in 1940, a position he held until his retirement in 1977. The Music Academy functioned with difficulty during the occupation, so whether he participated in its work or perhaps joined the Partisan movement at some point is unclear. Similarly, not much is known about Milan Ristić, but he returned to the public scene in the fall of 1944 when the partisans and the Red Army liberated Belgrade. At that time, he again took on the role of music editor of the newly restored Radio Belgrade.

In terms of style and genre, the members of the Prague Group continued to diverge in the years after the war. As the new authorities looked up to the Soviet Union as a model, modernist tendencies, which were already barely accepted in the pre-war period, were now rejected. Most composers were forced to embrace the aesthetics of socialist realism. Ristić and Čolić were happy to do so, and of course, this process was all the more natural in the case of the “right-wing” group. Ljubica Marić tried to experiment with different stylistic and technical solutions until the end of the 1940s, but then decided to withdraw from the creative scene in the early 1950s.

Interestingly, just when she withdrew, there was a historic political break between Tito and Stalin, and there was a second turn and gradual acceptance of modernist achievements.

During the course of the 1950s, Ristić and Čolić returned to the big stage, composing essentially modernist works, although certainly not as avant-garde as those written during their years in Prague. Ristić wrote his *Second Symphony* in a neoclassical style, with a greatly expanded tonality, and about ten years later, his *Third Symphony*, in which he returned, to a certain extent, to socialist realism (probably due to the occasion, the twentieth anniversary of the partisan uprising in Serbia), but with noticeably modernist elements. With his *Piano Concerto* (1954), he went beyond neoclassicism and returned – to an extent – to free atonality and modernist influences. With a symbolic nine symphonies under his belt, Ristić is considered one of the greatest Serbian symphonists.

Throughout the 1950s, Čolić continued to seek stylistic compromises, but in the 1960s, he returned to dodecaphony with his piano triptych *Prelude, Fugue, and Postlude*. Besides his creative and pedagogical work, he was a music editor at the daily newspaper *Borba*.

During that time, Ljubica Marić studied closely the Byzantine chant system known as the Octoechos. Finally, she returned to the big stage in 1956, first publishing the cantata *Songs of Space* and then, two years later, the famous piano piece *Byzantine Concerto*. In the 1960s, she composed *Passacaglia* and the cantata *Threshold of Dreams*, thus completing her “Byzantine cycle”, also known as “Songs of Space” in its entirety. It is stylistically and technically based on an amalgam of the Byzantine Octoechos with a modernist atonal musical language.

By the 1960s, the decades-long career issues of the members of the “left-wing” group had been resolved: Dragutin Čolić was already a professor of theoretical subjects at the Music Academy, as was Ljubica Marić, while Milan Ristić was a member of the programming council of Radio Television of Belgrade. Additionally, Marić and Ristić became members of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

The remainder of the “left-wing” group had one last encounter with their student days in 1963, when Alois Hába visited Belgrade as a guest of the extraordinary congress of the Union of Yugoslav Composers. The author of a report from that congress, Zijo Kučukalić, highlights information from Hába himself that his music was not performed in Czechoslovakia during Nazism and Zhdanovism. Kučukalić noted that he observed Hába meeting with Čolić and Ristić and that the three of them had a conversation in Czech. Still, interestingly, he does not mention Ljubica Marić. Of course, it is possible that Kučukalić did not notice Hába’s encounter with her. Still, considering her specific temperament, it is also possible that she declined to meet her former mentor.

Milan Ristić passed away in 1982 (aged seventy-five), and Dragutin Čolić in 1987 (aged eighty-one). Ljubica Marić, with her mental faculties fully preserved despite her advanced age, continued to create during the 1980s and 1990s, even revising some of her earlier works.

In 1986, she wrote a composition called *Asymptote* for violin and string orchestra. The first movement of the piece contains elements of microtonality, which can be understood as a postmodern reference to her personal creative past.

Incidentally, the work was dedicated to the Dušan Skovran String Orchestra and its artistic director at the time, the violinist Srđan Grujić, to whom Marić gave her violin as a gift after the premiere. At this point in time, *Asymptote* is the only existing work by any member of the Prague Group that contains elements of microtonality.

Ljubica Marić, the last surviving member of the “left wing” of the Prague Group, passed away in Belgrade in September 2003 at the age of 95. A few words about the Prague Group and their heritage are probably due.

While the members of the right-wing were institutionally somewhat more dominant in the post-WW2 period (Stanojlo Rajičić turned out to be the ur-professor of the whole composition department at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade today), theorists, musicologists, and especially the young students were always more excited to study the techniques of the left-wing students.

In the second half of the 20th century, neoclassicism became the shaping language of young composers. However, atonality and experimentation with sound became the new standard by the turn of the century. The authors of this paper might share their personal impression that not even the entrance examination at the composition department could be passed without using at least some techniques taught by Alois Hába or his Serbian pupils.

While stylistically, the music of the 21st century moved away from the microtonality of the 1930s, Hába’s techniques are still considered avant-garde in Serbia today.

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*The photos were kindly provided by the Institute of Musicology of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts*

# CZECH MUSIC EVERYDAY

## EVENTS AT HOME AND ABROAD

### IN THE SPRING OF 2023

The list of new compositions by Czech composers premiered this spring is agreeably extensive. New works were heard at numerous festivals and concert series in cities including Prague, Brno, Ostrava, Olomouc, and Kroměříž. In addition to the usual venues, there were also concerts at spaces tied to the world of science and innovation. The Brno Contemporary Orchestra presented *Splavné proudy (Navigable Streams)* by Edgar Mojdíl at the VIDA! science and entertainment centre, while the Berg Orchestra situated their May concert in the newly opened Technology Center of the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague. This concert featured a new project by Jiří Lukeš with an electronically generated score based on a dialogue between musicians and technology.

Interest in supporting new music was also reflected at the Prague Spring, the largest Czech classical music festival. The Austrian ensemble Klangforum Wien premiered Jana Vöröšová's *Lunapark*, in which the composer aimed to create a musical world where "everything squeaks, you can see it's all flaking away, you can see it's all a facade, just make-believe," and on the following, five compositions by Czech composers of the young and middle generations (see Jiří Slabihoudek's article on pp. 9–15). Festival curator Miroslav Srnka then had two international compositional triumphs of his own: a solo trumpet premiere at the philharmonic in Paris and *Superorganisms*, premiered in Tokyo.

1 April 2023, Het Concertgebouw, Amsterdam. **Leoš Janáček: *The Cunning Little Vixen* (concert staging)**. Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra, Netherlands Radio Choir (choirmaster: Martina Batič), conductor: Karina Canellakis.

3 April 2023, Church of St. Augustine, Brno. Easter Festival of Sacred Music. **Slavomír Hořinka: *With All Your Might for three male voices and three baroque instruments* (world premiere)**. Capella Mariana.

11 April 2023, Evangelical Church of John Amos Comenius, Brno. Easter Festival of Sacred Music. **František Fiala: *Mysterium Paschale, Easter oratorio* (world premiere)**. Lucie Laubová – soprano, Petra Vondrová – alto, Stanislav Předota – tenor, Josef Kovačič – bass, Ludmila Netolická, Irena Hůrková, Sakura Ito, Jan Rybka, Kristýna Jungová – violin, Klára Kunc Hegnerová, Julián Veverica – viola, Lukáš Svoboda, Radan Vach – cello, Marek Švestka – double bass, Petr Hojač – trumpet, Šimon Pavlík, František Jeřábek – trombone, Marek Paň – organ, Martin Opršál – vibraphone, percussion, Kantiléna, choirmaster and conductor: Michal Jančík.

13 April 2023, St. Agnes Convent, Prague. **Zbyněk Matějů: *Virus. Concerto for viola and chamber orchestra* (world premiere)**. Jitka Hosprová – viola, Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra, conductor: Pavel Snajdr.

17 April 2023, Poklad House of Culture, Ostrava-Poruba. Jantar Awards 2022. **Daniel Skála: *Virtual Surreality* (world premiere)**. Daniel Skála – cimbalom, Jitka Svobodová – clarinet, Ján Garláthy – French horn, Juraj Bajús – double bass, Ivo Morys – piano.

17 April 2023, Conference and Social Center "House for Professed", Prague. **Eliška Čílková: *Trio for Clarinet, Cello, and Piano* (world premiere)**. QUASI TRIO.

18 April 2023, Church of St. Lawrence, Prague. 658th Tuesday of Umělecká beseda. **Anna Ptáková: *Waltz for Wind Sextet* (world premiere)**. Quintetto sine nomine, Jan Pták – alto saxophone.

18 April 2023, Venuše ve Švehlovce, Prague. Music in Contexts. **Jan Rybář: *Two Worlds* (world premiere)**. Fisher's Chamber Orchestra, conductor: Jan Rybář.

MARCH-JUNE



PHOTO: MICHAEL YU

*František Chaloupka: The Witch Waltzers*

21 April 2023, Bohemian National Hall, New York. **František Chaloupka: *The Witch Waltzers* (world premiere)**. Ostravská banda & S.E.M. Ensemble, conductor: Jiří Rožeň.

20 April 2023, Löw-Beer Villa, Brno. **Kateřina Szymeczková: *Triologue* (world premiere)**. Trio Aperto.

24 April 2023, VIDA! science centrum, Brno. **Edgar Mojd: *Navigable Currents for BCO and Interaction with Vida* (world premiere)**. Brno Contemporary Orchestra, conductor: Pavel Šnajdr.

28 April 2023, Gallery of the Academy of Performing Arts, Prague. MicroFest. **Ian Mikyska: *Interstices* (world premiere)**. Miroslav Beinbauer – sixth-tone harmonium.

28 April 2023, Opéra de Lyon, Lyon, France. **Leoš Janáček: *Katja Kabanova* (premiere of a new production)**. Directed by: Barbara Wysocka, music director: Elena Schwarz. Following performances: 2, 4, 7, 9, 11, and 13 May 2023.

30 April 2023, *Großes Haus*, Hessisches Staatstheater Wiesbaden, Wiesbaden, Germany. Internationale Maifestspiele: Janáček-Double. **Leoš Janáček: *The Makropulos Affair* (premiere of a new production)**.

Directed by: Nicolas Brieger, music director: Johannes Klumpp. Following performances: 14 May, 2 Jun, 11 Jun, 28 Jun, and 7 Jul 2023. **Leoš Janáček: *From the House of the Dead* (premiere of a new production)**.

Directed by: Nicolas Brieger, music director: Johannes Klumpp. Following performances: 14 May, 10 Jun, 23 Jun and 6 Jul 2023.

2 May 2023, Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design Technology Center, Prague. **Jiří Lukeš: *re:~generator~* (world premiere)**. Jiří Lukeš – electronics, BERG Orchestra, conductor: Peter Vrábel.

3 May 2023, Church of Sts. Simon and Jude, Prague. **Marek Cimbál: *Das Knie* (world premiere)**. Kühn Mixed Choir, choirmaster Jakub Pikla.

5 May 2023, Reduta, Olomouc. **Kateřina Szymeczková: *Under the Water for Harpsichord and Symphony Orchestra* (world premiere)**. Ján Fic – harpsichord, Moravian Philharmonic Orchestra Olomouc, conductor: Marek Madeja.

9 May 2023, František Drtikol Gallery Příbram. Antonín Dvořák Music Festival. **Kateřina Horká: *String Quartet no. 2 "Icelandic Landscape"* (world premiere)**. Wihan Quartet.

9 May 2023, Corpus Christi Chapel, Art Centre of Palacký University, Olomouc. **Marek Keprt: *Traumeswirren č. 2 „Aufschwung/Vzlet“* (world premiere)**. Marek Keprt – piano.

10 May 2023, Academy of Performing Arts, Prague. Prague Spring International Music Competition, viola category, II. round. **Ondřej Štochl: *Il sogno fragile* for viola solo (world premiere)**. Performed by the 12 semi-finalists.

11 May 2022, National House of Vinohrady, Prague. Prague Spring International Music Competition, trombone

MARCH-JUN



PHOTO: JAKUB JOCH

Michal Neješek: *The Stone Colony*

category, II. round. **Jan Kučera: Prague Bagatelle for trombone and piano (world premiere)**. Performed by the 12 semi-finalists.

11 May 2023, Bethlehem Chapel in Žižkov, Prague. Prague Premieres of Duo Beautiful Strings. **Jiří Gemrot: Prague Apparitions (world premiere)**. Duo Beautiful Strings.

11 May 2023, DOX+, Prague. **Luboš Soukup: Scandinavian Impressions (world premiere)**. Luboš Soukup – saxophone, David Dorůžka – guitar, Thommy Andersson – double bass, Kamil Slezák – percussion, Concept Art Orchestra, Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra, conductor: Bastien Stil. **Vít Kříšťan: Mandala, suite for piano, voice and extended orchestra (world premiere)**. Veronika Harcsa – voice, Vít Kříšťan – piano, Robert Balzar – double bass, Kamil Slezák – percussion, Concept Art Orchestra (production Štěpánka Balcarová), Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra, conductor: Bastien Stil.

13 May 2023, Prague Exhibition Grounds. Book World Prague 2023. **Lesklá nijaká chvílka, co se rozpadá. Composition with improvisation elements using Petr Borkovec's recent prose (world premiere)**. Petr Borkovec – spoken word, Prague Quiet Music Collective.

13 May 2023, Philharmonie de Paris, Paris. **Miroslav Srnka: Orion Arm for solo trumpet (world premiere)**. Simon Höfele – trumpet.

15 May 2023, National Technical Museum, Prague. Prague Spring. A concert of jury members of the Prague Spring International Music Competition in trombone category. **Ondřej Motka: Fight of Sliders (world premiere)**. Zdzisław Stolarczyk, Zoltán Kiss, Fabrice Millischer, Oliver Siefert, Jeremy Wilson – trombone, The Czech Philharmonic Low Brass Ensemble, conductor: Jan Kučera.

15 May 2023, on the Vltava river underneath the Charles Bridge, Prague. NAVALIS Saint John's Celebrations. **Kryštof Marek: Five Stars of Saint John of Nepomuk (world premiere)**. Lyrics: Kryštof Marek, Miroslav Herold, Peter Strenáček, Gabriela Vermelho, Natálie Hatalová, Alena Třískalová, Jakub Ekstein, Jonáš Mrklas – voices, mixed choir, orchestra.

17 May 2023, Atrium na Žižkově, Prague. New Music in the Atrium. **Milan Knížák: Mostly Fast Piano Sonata, Piano Sketch, The White with a Bit of the Grey, Sadness Intruding, Piano Miniature, Tramp Sonata, Jelly, Stolen from Ježek and Satie (world premieres)**. Miroslav Beinbauer – piano

26 May 2023, Chapel of St. Romedius, Choltice Chateau. Pardubice Music Spring. **Lukáš Sommer: Dance on the Strings (world premiere)**. Siempre Nuevo.

26 May 2023, DOX+, Prague. Prague Spring. **Jana Vöröšová: Lunapark (world premiere)**. Klangforum Wien, conductor: Peter Rundel.

27 May 2023, DOX+, Prague. Prague Spring. **Matouš Hejl: Pendulation; František Chaloupka:**

**The Spectral Waltzer; Michaela Pálka Plachká: Five Colours of Alpine Fog; Pavel Šabacký: Ishan't, Šimon Voseček: Flies. Dipters for ensemble (world premieres).** Klangforum Wien, conductor: Peter Rundel.

28 May 2023, X10 Theatre, Prague. **Petr Hora: The Theatrical Stroll of a Diamond Spider. Music theatre performance (world premiere).** Gabriela Vermelho, Vendula Holíčková – voice, Jakub Švejnar – percussion / voice, Jana Jarkovská – flute / voice, Martin Debříčka – saxophone / voice, Anna Romanovská – violin / voice, Štěpán Drtina – cello / voice.

3 June 2023, New Town Hall, Prague. International Shakuhachi Festival Prague. **Vlastislav Matoušek: Corona Mundi & Corona Spinis (world premiere).** Akihito Obama – shakuhachi, Anežka Matoušková – voice, Rudolf Kvíz – recitation, Balázs Adorján – cello, Žaneta Vítová – accordion.

4 June 2023, St Wenceslas Cathedral, Olomouc. Forfest. **Karel Martínek: Pentecost Mass for Organ (hommage à O. Messiaen), Nine Meditations on the Mystery of the Holy Trinity – world premieres.** Karel Martínek – organ.

5 June 2023, Concert Hall of the Faculty of Arts, University of Ostrava, Ostrava. Musical Present. **Pavel Nesit: Verses. A song for soprano, oboe, violin, and piano on text by Vojtěch Martínek; Markéta Dvořáková: I Want to Stop the Time. Three songs for soprano and oboe on texts by Daniela Džorova-Waldhans (world premieres).** Marlen Vavříková – oboe, Eva Dřízgová-Jirušová – soprano, Petr Maceček – violin, Eliška Novotná – piano.

5 June 2023, Studio Hrdinů, Prague. International Shakuhachi Festival Prague. **Jonáš Starý: A Page of Madness – new music for the eponymous Japanese silent film (world premiere).** Akihito Obama – shakuhachi, BERG Orchestra, conductor: Peter Vrábel.

10 June 2023, Atrium na Žižkově, Prague. **Haštal Hapka: Veni Creator Spiritus (world premiere).** Mariia Prokofeva – violin, Oleg Cingarski – cello, PUNKT, choirmaster Igor Karpilovskij.

12 June 2023, BrickHouse DOV, Ostrava. Leoš Janáček International Music Festival. **Sylva Smejkalová: Linden Leaves (world premiere).** Karel Dohnal – clarinet.

12 June 2023, Gallery of the Academy of Performing Arts, Prague. **Darja Kukal Moiseeva: ...ash is in the air; Kateřina Slaběňáková: Lov šadráce (world premieres).** Ensemble Terrible, conductor: Patrik Kako

13 June 2023, Mozart Hall, Reduta Theatre, Brno. **Karel Boleslav Jirák/Vojtěch Dlask: Sextett op. 14 instrumented for alto, strings, and celesta (1917/2023) – world premiere.** Kateřina Hebelková – alto, Patrik Červák – celesta, Ensemble Opera Diversa, conductor: Gabriela Tardonová.

16 June 2023, Besední dům, Brno. Exposition of New Music. **Pavel Zlámal: Great Glory (world premiere).** Pavel Zlámal Contemporary Ensemble.

18 June 2023, Stone Colony & Besední dům, Brno. Exposition of New Music. **Michal Nejtěk: The Stone Colony (world premiere).** Brno Contemporary Orchestra, conductor: Pavel Šnajdr.

19 June 2023, Museum of the Kroměříž Region, Kroměříž. Forfest. **Dan Šotkovský: I Walk Through the Valley of the Shadow of Death (world premiere).** Trio Lumae.

20 June 2023, Löw-Beer Villa, Brno. **Vojtěch Dlask: Three Palimpsests for wind trio and piano (world premiere).** Trio Aperto, Tamara Bláhová – piano.

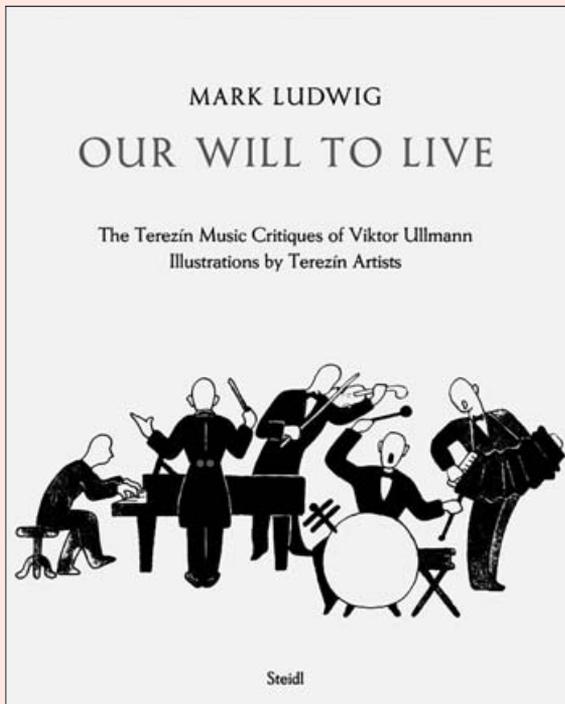
21 June 2023, refectory of the Emmaus Monastery, Prague. Prague Premieres of the Duo Beautiful Strings. **Simonne Draper: Dolorosa for violin and harp, Canzonetta dell' Acqua for violin and harp (world premieres).** Duo Beautiful Strings.

24 June 2023, Church of St. John the Baptist, Kroměříž. Forfest. **Vit Zouhar: ROZ JA SNĚNÍ (world premiere).** SJ Laptop Ensemble.

27 June 2023, Tokyo Opera City Concert Hall, Tokyo, Japan. **Miroslav Srnka: Superorganisms for orchestra (world premiere).** NHK Symphony Orchestra, conductor: Yoichi Sugiyama.

# A Feast of Sight, Sound and Criticism

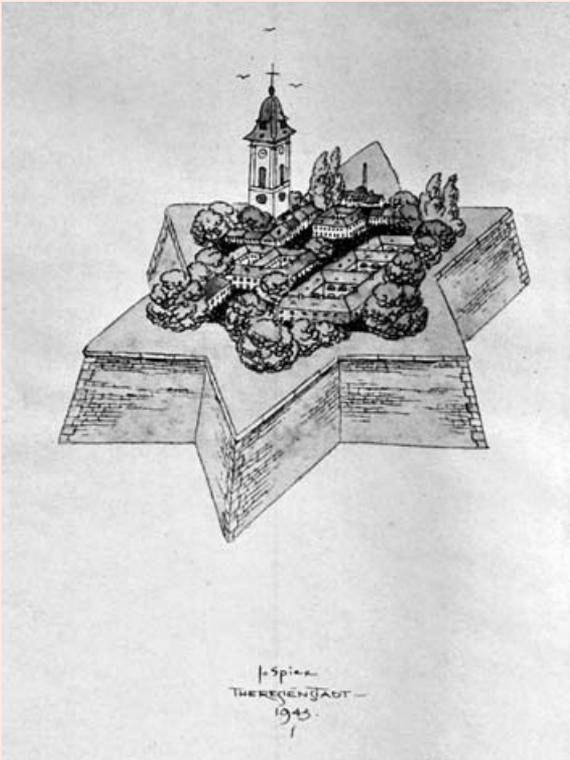
## – Mark Ludwig's *Our Will to Live* and the Terezín reviews of Viktor Ullmann



Mark Ludwig: *Our Will to Live: The Terezín Music Critiques of Viktor Ullmann*, 328 p., Steidl, Gerhard Druckerei und Verlag, 2021

*Mark Ludwig's publication *Our Will to Live*, published in 2021, presents music reviews by the composer Viktor Ullmann and other supplementary material. In this extended review, musicologist and Czech music specialist Michael Beckerman shares his perspective on the book along with selected examples.*

Mark Ludwig has produced a remarkable volume! More scholarly and authoritative than any coffee table book, and offering the kinds of visual (and aural) richness rarely – if ever – found in a scholarly work, *Our Will to Live* is an important contribution to the literature on Terezín. The book is itself a kind of introduction to the musical life of Terezín, but at its core are a series of twenty-six translations of the concert reviews Viktor Ullmann created in the ghetto, as well as a series of free recordings accessible through a QR code.



"Theresienstadt"  
A drawing by Joseph Spier, 1943

While Ullmann's reviews have been available in German, and portions have been translated, the complete reviews in English have never appeared together before and are important and fascinating documents. There are many possible viewpoints one could take about Ullmann's activity as a Terezín critic, of which I will mention three: first, the dominant narrative, that in keeping up a semblance of public cultural life, with concerts and reviews in a god-awful place like Terezín, Ullmann was a brave and noble force showing that as long as human beings had breath they would be concerned with the higher things in life. The most oft-quoted and powerful testimonial to this are these words at the end of his essay "Goethe and Ghetto":

I would only like to emphasise that my musical work was fostered and not inhibited by Theresienstadt, and that we in no way merely sat around lamenting by the banks of Babylon's rivers, and that our desire for culture was equal to our will to live. And I am convinced that all those who have endeavored in both life and art to wrest form from resisting substance would agree with me.

The second, somewhat opposing view would be to turn those very words on their head, arguing that Terezín, like many other such places during the war, was what Primo Levi called a "Grey Zone," a place in which nothing was normal, no one knew which end was up, and where ethics and aesthetics were horribly skewed. Performers in a concert one evening might be on a train to Auschwitz the following morning. Thus, behaving in a "normal way" under such circumstances might be considered, at best, somewhat loopy.

The third view, more equivocal than either of the preceding two, is that we are not in any way in a position to judge any of the choices individuals made in such places, that at the very least, those involved were simply doing their very best in unprecedented circumstances, and deserve the benefit of the doubt. Different readers will come to different conclusions about such matters.

While it seems clear that Ludwig endorses the first of these viewpoints, he has also been able, for the most part, to traverse what is sometimes a chasm between the rhetoric of memorialising, with all the psychological weight (and sometimes distortion) it involves - whether in scholarship or performance - and the need for the kind of scholarly detachment that does justice to those who were victims of the Nazis precisely because it avoids sentimentality. Terezín was a place of extraordinary complexity, and in order to get a fuller sense of this, it is recommended that *Our Will to Live* be read alongside Anna Hajková's recently published *The Last Ghetto: An Everyday History of Theresienstadt*.

Viktor Ullmann seems to have been one of those figures who, despite the fact that he was imprisoned in what was, in effect, a German concentration camp, nonetheless retained the deepest respect for pre-war German culture and cultural life. Although Terezín must have been confusing for him, as someone who was baptized Catholic, served in the Austrian army, and had no interest in anything Jewish (he eventually left the church and became an acolyte of Rudolf Steiner), he quickly adapted, contributing not only the concert reviews featured in *Our Will to Live*, but several exceptional compositions, including *The Emperor of Atlantis*, a string quartet, several piano sonatas, Lieder, and the powerful melodrama *The Lay of the Love and Death of the Cornet Christopher Rilke*.

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Ullmann's reviews range in size and character, and vary from those that praise unequivocally, those that quibble

with one aspect or another, and a few complete pans. In the first category, for example, we have this comment on Pavel Haas's *Four Songs on Chinese Poetry*:

Haas's songs are full of life and relevance; once heard, one can no longer do without them and wants to live on more intimate terms with them. It is only in this manner that over time new art catches on: it becomes "house music" and an indispensable friend, just like a good book, just like everything one earns by practicing.

And further, he notes perceptively that "stylistically the Haas songs are too personal to be described as part of the Janáček school; however, the physiognomy of the mighty lion flashes in the distance".

Ullmann also raves about Rafael Schächter's performance of the Verdi *Requiem* which he considers to be fully "at the level of a metropolitan standard": "Rising above the technical, Schächter shapes the spirit of the work (...) with economical yet evocative gestures. The choir is not only precise, but dynamically impeccable."

There are other reviews which, while generally positive, include some strict criticism of performances: speaking about an evening of piano trios, including the Brahms B Major op. 8 and the Beethoven op. 70, no. 2, he notes that: "a certain indulgent pampering of the Classical-Romantic style is noticeable in the strings, which stands out all the more in this case because of Gideon Klein's fresh, assertive playing. Apparently, our promising young musicians don't have quite the right conception of how to play the music of the old - of the 'good old' - times, which they imagine as too idyllic and conventional and like the Biedermeier period."

The young Czech wunderkind, Gideon Klein, appears in several reviews, but again, while Ullmann is enthusiastic, he also has some reservations:

Gideon Klein is without doubt a very important talent. His style is that of the new youth - cool and objective; one may wonder at this precocious stylistically confident interpretation. The pioneers of 1770, the avant-garde of the Ars Nova of their time, were "*Stürmer und Dränger*." Our youth has strong intelligent brains; hopefully they can lift the heart up into the head.

Another pianist, Alice Herz-Sommer, who he was extremely fond of, he nonetheless chides for her choice

of programming: "(...) this great petit artist and justly admired pianist" performed all of the Chopin etudes in one concert and while he praised her pianism he sniffed at the program saying that there is, "no justification for performing them in one evening as if they were a single work of art consisting of connected and interrelated pieces".

And then there are the unequivocally negative assessments, sometimes revealing a sharp sense of humor. For example, while he considers Haydn's symphonies and operas unjustly forgotten, he states that "his *Creation* is a vastly overestimated work. Imagine Michelangelo's fresco in the Sistine chapel painted by Watteau or Fragonard and then you have Haydn's *Creation*. With few exceptions this music has about as much to do with Genesis - with its sublime images and symbols, with its majesty and mystery - as a cute little rococo cottage has to do with the Cheops pyramids".

In other writings he provides a menu of composers who he believes should be performed:

(...) there are a large number of composers who deserve our interest, not only because they are Jews, but also because they have talent and genius and are still not performed in the surrounding world. I will name Mendelssohn, Karl Goldmark, Paul Dukas, Arnold Schönberg, Ernest Bloch, E.W. Korngold, Wilhelm Grosz, Erwin Schulhoff, Kurt Weill, Hans Eisler, Carol (Karol) Rathaus, Egon Wellesz, Ernst Toch, Paul Pisk - I could name many more, and I haven't even mentioned Theresienstadt composers. And I think that all of them have written interesting works for piano.

Finally, he is capable of writing chilling, pungent prose, as in this comment about *Fledermaus*: "We take a sip of this champagne - but we remain sober."

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Ludwig believes that that it is likely that Ullmann "wished to chronicle and in a sense tragically memorialize many of the doomed artists around him". Of course, no one can say definitively what was on Ullmann's mind, and he may have had different responses according to what was happening in the Ghetto at a particular time. But to me, his writings do not read as memorials, nor does it seem that Ullmann knew or felt that the artists were doomed. For better or not, Ullmann was behaving

as if having critical standards and applying them fairly but strictly was in and of itself a positive thing. With such a rich and valuable volume so filled with gorgeous images and compelling prose it seems inopportune to quibble. But even though the core of the prose part of the volume consists of translations of Ullmann's writing, there is no full translator credit given. In a section at the end titled "A Note on Translation and Annotation", Mark Ludwig makes it clear that the translations were done as a kind of joint effort, something he confirmed to me recently in personal communication. In his words, the project "evolved into a collaboration with a uniquely qualified group of people," and he goes on to mention their names. If we consider the amount of work involved in producing the volume, Ludwig certainly deserves full authorship. However, I would have liked to have seen the names of the co-translators more prominently displayed at the beginning of the volume, those Terezín survivors who worked with the author to create this special volume: Edgar Krasa, Dr. George Horner, Zuzana Růžicková, Dagmar Lieblová, and Eliška Kleinová.

Because of the nature of this project, based as it is around Ullmann's reviews, there are inevitably some things missing, and this simply cannot be helped. However, to the extent that the volume also serves as a kind of history of music in Terezín, it is worth mentioning that Ilse Weber, whose songs, though on a small scale, are as extraordinary as anything else written in the ghetto, and have become part of the musical afterlife of that place, deserves a little more than the annotation that she was "a nurse in Terezin who wrote poems and songs for the children".

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As we have indicated, Ullmann's reviews are compelling in so many ways. And yet, if anything, they are almost overshadowed by the incredible wealth of visual images here presented; for another anomaly is that Terezín, this awful place, comes across at least in part as a feast for the eyes, with gorgeous posters, concert programs, and sketches. All together there are a staggering 238 illustrations, some of these absolutely exquisite, and if we have seen many of them before, we have never seen them together in the pages of a single volume. The very first illustration is both an exquisite drawing of Terezín by Jo Spier, and a powerful symbolic rendering, since the walls of the ghetto take the form of a Star of David. The book is replete with opera and concert programmes. Oswald Pöck's utterly charming poster for *Broučci* (*Fireflies*) is reproduced in glowing colours, and has an earthiness and an element of personal definition absent from Jiří Trnka's more famous illustrations, eerily

created around the same time (we may note that Pöck also created a beautiful but devastating Monopoly board titled "Ghetto"). Charming and revealing is the poster for the Stadtkapelle ensemble, conducted by Carlo Taube, featuring the bandstand in the central square populated by the musicians. The artist, Walter Heimann, was also responsible for the famous poster of *Brundibár*. And then there is the charming Art Deco poster for Gideon Klein's piano recital, where the "K" in "Klavier" becomes Klein himself sitting at the instrument, while the second "K," in "Konzert" forms the back leg of the grand piano. Also included throughout the volume are reproductions of Ullmann's original typewritten or handwritten notes.

In addition to Ullmann's valuable reviews and the wealth of images, it is important to say a word about the musical examples. What art historians have been able to do already for centuries, that is to include images with their discussions, still cannot be done by those who write about music between hard covers, as it were. Yes, despite all the massive innovations in technology, books don't make sounds. Ludwig's solution here is ingenious. He provides a QR code that links up with the Terezin Music Foundation website page offering thirty-four musical examples. Normally, there would be massive copyright issues around the use of recordings, but since so many of them feature Ludwig himself, and the Hawthorne String Quartet of which he was a member, this is no problem at all. While one might still hope for the day in the future where books actually can make sounds, this solution is both bold and attractive, and adds immense value to the volume.

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We may close by mentioning another way in which Ullmann provided insight into his world, and that is through his poetic writing, which reveals some of the darkness invisible in his concert reviews. Included at the end of the book is a poem that Ullmann penned on the death of the composer, Zikmund Schul, *While Looking Upon Schul's Coffin*. Here is a short fragment from the poem:

O, short are the arts and long are lives  
And meagre is the harvest, as hard as we strive.  
What do the sounds want, what makes me so afraid?  
We search for the songs of forgotten angels

It is rare to find a publication that is so beautiful, and at the same time raises such troubling issues. The dissonance between these things, and the sounds that accompany them, make *Our Will to Live* as stimulating as any volume in recent memory.



**Petr Bakla**  
**Late Night Show**  
*Piano Concerto No. 2,*  
*Major Thirds, No. 4*

**Miroslav Beinbauer - piano.**  
**Brno Contemporary Orchestra,**  
**Pavel Šnajdr - conductor.**

Produced by: re-set production,  
 Czech Radio. Recorded: Jun. 2020,  
 Feb., Jun. 2022. Published: 2023.  
 Text: EN. TT: 61:57. 1CD Sub Rosa  
 SR553

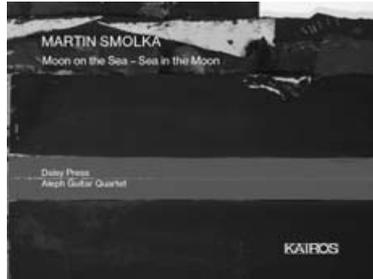
The album *Late Night Show* featuring three pieces by **Petr Bakla**, is the second physical manifestation of the composer's collaboration with **Miroslav Beinbauer**. In this young pianist, Bakla has found an excellent performer for his particular brand of music, which always demands considerable self-discipline. Their preceding release, *Usableness of the list / Portfolio*, demonstrated Bakla's approach to the piano as an ideal instrument on which to develop music as the systematic organisation of tones. The three pieces on this new release by the Belgian label Sub Rosa mostly continue the thinking present in *Portfolio*, of which Bakla said: "It is based on a really old idea that I first used in 2010. It has accompanied and haunted me ever since - it is, in a sense, the only deep idea I have ever had." For two thirds of the album under review, Beinbauer is accompanied by the musicians of the **Brno Contemporary Orchestra** conducted by **Pavel Šnajdr**. The title of the previous album referred to lists or portfolios as files containing a particular material. It is matter-of-fact and contains a certain reserve; distance. Now, we are invited to a "late night show", which of course directs our imagination in an entirely different direction. However, the titles of the compositions, as is customary with Bakla, are strictly descriptive. We begin with *Piano Concerto No. 2* from 2021. The soloist is accompanied by an unusual and colourful ensemble of bass clarinet,

bassoon, bass trombone, tuba, two cellos, and two double basses. The solo part consists of rising lines of quick notes articulated gently and neutrally, with the exception of occasional accents that suggest melodic motifs. After about three minutes, the other instruments join this mechanical foundation with vigorous strikes. The ensemble imbues the music with a strange kind of energy. On first listening, I even had John Adams on my mind. In actual fact, the music is, of course, far removed from popular minimalism, but even so, the piece is surprisingly catchy and absorbing, perhaps more so than any other pieces of Bakla's that I have heard in the past. Bakla describes the instrumental accompaniment as the source of physical coordinates within which the music takes place. "The ensemble gives the piano a sonic background and surrounds it physically. The notion that it is the source of a particular 'specification of place' of the resultant music kept coming back to me and guiding me throughout the composition process. I don't know where I heard or read about the idea that music is a place. Proust says that true paradises are the paradises that we have lost. I'll try: my idea of writing music is the search for a lost place." The music flows by without significant breaks, the relationship between the piano and its instrumental environs are transformed subtly; we only notice the changes a few moments after they happen. The second piece on the album was written in 2016: *Major Thirds*. Unsurprisingly, the foundational material of this music is the interval of the major third, which is used both in the piano and in the accompanying part for string quartet. Unlike the kinetic energy of the piano concerto, the mood here is dreamy and melancholy. The piano and strings develop motifs in dotted rhythms, sometimes in unison, sometimes moving away from each other and thus allowing the music to mist over. The twenty-minute piece is divided into several sections, but once again, it is

a sense of fluency that prevails, along with the feeling that this music could continue for a considerably longer time. The disc concludes with a solo piano piece titled simply *No. 4*. It was written in 2013 and marked the beginning of the collaboration between Bakla and Beinbauer. As in the opening piece, the piano has a mechanical energy, but the figures are more wrinkled and rhythmically complex. At first listening, it might seem that there are in fact two pianists playing: the music takes place in two layers, each of them occupying an extreme register of the instrument, the bass notes creating a dense foundation above which broken chromatic runs develop in the upper register. Petr Bakla usually discusses his music matter-of-factly and attempts not to suggest any interpretive frameworks and extra-musical meanings. This might suggest an absence of emotions. He rebuts this in the interview quoted above, however: "I am, in fact, a hopeless romantic - all my pieces are very personal, practically biographical. But that is something that no one needs to know about, and shouldn't, as this would needlessly limit possible perceptions of the music; limit its possibilities." Of course, we never find out what personal meanings are hidden behind the three twenty-minute pieces on *Late Night Show*. Even so, this is indisputably emotional music, which manifests differently in each of the three pieces. Just like other pieces by the composer, these three make do with the "normal" tones of classical instruments, turning them into a wholly original result.

Matěj Kratochvíl

(Petr Bakla is the director of the Czech Music Information Centre, the publisher of Czech Music Quarterly)



**Martin Smolka**  
**Moon on the Sea – Sea in the Moon**  
**Aleph Guitar Quartet – guitars,**  
**Daisy Press – soprano.**

Text: EN, GE. Recorded: Feb., May 2020, ZKM Kubus, Karlsruhe, Germany. Published: 2022. TT: 53:37. 1 CD Kairos 0022007KAI.

This album of four compositions by **Martin Smolka** was published at the end of last year, but as often happens in contemporary composed music, the lack of advertising means that news about its release has not travelled fast. Smolka's music is presented here in quite a specific instrumentation – string quartet and soprano voice. The guitar in classical music often tempts composer to various expressive clichés that aim to exploit as much as possible its timbral possibilities. Smolka, however, avoids these clichés in all the pieces on this disc, instead transforming the four guitars into a magical orchestration of unusual sound colours. Though the pieces were made across the span of over two decades, the collection has a relatively homogenous sound. The oldest piece on the disc is *Eight Pieces for Guitar Quartet* from 1998. Thus began the composer's collaboration with the **Aleph Guitar Quartet** from Germany. Eight short movements (the fifth and sixth are played as one) are partly an exploration of the sonic possibilities of the guitar quartet and partly a series of variation studies. Smolka was interested in a particular paradox – “the softer you play, the richer a sound you achieve”. We thus cycle through microtonal variations of a single tone, a chord, a cluster, etc. Most of the material sticks to the lower end of the dynamic range and the top part of the range of the instruments. The same sonic characteristics also apply to the newer pieces on the album, including the copious use of harmonics, variously muted strings, and so on. We rarely hear the strings ring out fully. Two of the pieces that feature soprano **Daisy Press** are inspired by poetry from the Far

East, with the names of the poets serving as the titles of the pieces. *Bashō* (2012) refers to the 17th-century Japanese poet, while *LiPoLied* (2014) sets the words of Li Po, the legendary poet of 8th-century China. The Japanese poetry is sung in English translation, the Chinese in German. *Bashō* is most famous for his haiku and several of these short forms are used here (including the famous “frog” song: “Old pond / frog jumped in / sound of water”). The vocal entries, however, rarely overlap with the instrumental passages. They serve as an introduction, interlude, and postlude in the form of clean melodic lines that the guitars rarely join (the composer also specified the possibility of performing the piece without the vocal part). The music is based on delicate sonic colours, with notes sometimes falling apart into fragments and solitary plucks surrounded by silence, while at other times, they acquire rhythmic regularity and the mechanical rattle of an old music box. The reverberating harmonics lay into one's ears as the four guitarists pluck away in rhythmic waves. *LiPoLied*, on the other hand, is a “true song”, with the voice backed up by a rhythmically stable guitar accompaniment that is constantly changing in colour. The combination of the German language and a vocal line that slides smoothly from one tone to another puts us in mind of Arnold Schönberg's *Sprechgesang* technique, but in comparison to works like Pierrot Lunaire, we are in a much more emotionally balanced world; one without wild cries and screams. The voice seems to copy the curves of the birds in flight described by the poem. Nestled between Smolka's pieces is *Music for Marcel Duchamp* (1947) by John Cage, which Smolka arranged for four guitars. This snippet of music originally written for film reflects Cage's fascination with Asian music and Erik Satie. The sounds once intended for prepared piano naturally translate to various guitar shadings, once again offering up a vision of a music box, perhaps playing in a Rococo Japanese-style salon. The spirit of orientalism is present across the record-

ing. It is understandable both in relation to the choice of texts to set, and in connection to the sound colours of the guitars, which, when played with particular techniques, have a sound reminiscent of Chinese or Japanese instruments. This binds well to Smolka's characteristic brand of melancholy, which manages to avoid kitsch despite repeatedly balancing on its edge. The combination of unusual colours in the four guitars and a particularly taciturn form expression makes the album a dreamy experience that can easily be listened to in a single sitting.

*Matěj Kratochvíl*

**Miroslav Kabeláč**  
**Eight Preludes for Piano, op. 30,**  
**Motifs from Exotic Lands**

**Bedřich Smetana**  
**Dreams**

**Jan Bartoš – piano.**

Text: CZ, EN, GE, FR. Recorded: Jan., Nov. 2019, Dvořák Hall, Rudolfinum, Prague. Published: 2023. TT: 71:08. 1 CD Supraphon SU4324-2.

**Jan Bartoš** has been on the Supraphon label for six years now. His first disc there – which featured Mozart's Piano Concertos nos. 12 and 20 – was published in 2017. It was followed in 2018 by a representative double album of Beethoven, then came a complete set of Janáček and, in 2020, a remarkable project featuring the music of Jan Novák. All four recordings garnered very positive reviews, and I have no doubts as to the fact that critics and listeners will also be charmed by Bartoš's newest CD, which Supraphon released in February. The six-movement *Dreams* are among Smetana's most significant piano works. The movements bear programmatic titles: 1. *Zaniklé štěstí* (*Faded Happiness*), 2. *Útěcha* (*Consolation*), 3. *V Čechách* (*In Bohemia. A Rural Scene*),

4. *V salóne (In the Salon)*, 5. *Před hradem (By the Castle)*, and 6. *Slavnost českých sedláků (Bohemian Peasants' Festivities)*. Its instrumental texture is unabashedly virtuosic and demonstrates the influence of Franz Liszt (especially in the first, second, and final pieces). Bartoš is wonderfully equipped for “grand Romanticism”. His technique is excellent, his tone is firm and steady, and his sense for a singing melodic line unerring. He is inspired when working with rubatos, dynamics, sound colours, and subtly shaded moods. In his interpretation, the individual pieces in the cycle cannot be seen any other way than as highly effective tone poems. Miloslav Kabeláč is one of the most distinctive modern Czech composers, and his cycles of *Eight Preludes* op. 30 and *Cizokrajné motivy (Motifs from Exotic Lands)* op. 38 are among the most significant works in the Czech piano literature of the second half of the 20th century. In the *Eight Preludes*, the listener is charmed by what a fascinating musical structure, often verging on the magical, Kabeláč was able to create using a bare minimum of compositional means. Bartoš performs Kabeláč's *Preludes* with unusual suggestiveness and breathtaking imagination, drawing us into the composer's remarkable world so intensely that we are likely to forget everything going on around us. The opening *Preludio ostinato* has an almost ghostly atmosphere, the weighty *Preludio meditativo* contains something pressing and anxious, the fragile melody of the *Preludio sognante* is underpinned by gentle gusts of wind, the strict chorale-like bassline of the *Preludio corale* is accompanied by strangely aggressive tremolos, the charmingly melancholic *Preludio notturno* introduces bird song, the *Preludio volante* flies by like a storm, and the idyllic *Preludio arioso* supports a fragmented soprano melody with harp-like arpeggios that alternate with mysterious step-wise motion in the bass. The final *Preludio impetuoso* then holds our attention with unusual sound effects and excites us with a perfectly developed build-up. Kabeláč had a keen interest in non-European music and exotic influences permeate many of his works, including the ten-movement cycle on this disc. The movement titles themselves suggest where the composer searched for inspiration: *Indiánská válečná píseň (Indian Motif. Battle Song)*, *Malaijské pastorek (Motif from Asia Minor)*, *Tichomořská pohřební píseň (Pacific Motif. Burial Song)*, *Javánská slavnost (Javanese Motif. Ceremony)*, *Východoasijská flétnová improvizace (East Asian Motif. Flute Improvisation)*, *Eslymácká ukolébavka (Eskimo Motif. Lullaby)*, *Arabský tanec (Arabian Motif. Dance)*, *Brazílské zaklínání (Brazilian Motif. Incantation)*, *Indická loutnová improvizace (Motif from India. Lute Improvisation)*, *Africké černošské bubny (Central Africa Motif. Black Drummers)*. The piano writing across the cycle is striking

and colourful, with Kabeláč approaching the musical material even more economically and rationally than in the *Eight Preludes* (the touching *Eskimo Motif. Lullaby* consists of only ten measures, with the accompaniment to the simple melody consisting only of a slow ostinato on a single note). Bartoš presents Kabeláč's *Motifs from Exotic Lands* with enormous inner dynamics, drawing up such magic with the sound colours that I was astounded by how “exotic” this instrument, so distinctively European, can sound. With this recording, Bartoš has once again confirmed that he is an artist of exceptional quality. Piano aficionados will certainly find much to enjoy on this disc.

Věroslav Němec

**Sergei Rachmaninoff**  
**Piano Concertos,**  
**Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini**  
**for Piano and Orchestra op. 43**  
**Lukáš Vondráček - piano,**  
**Prague Symphony Orchestra,**  
**Tomáš Brauner - conductor.**  
 Text: CZ, EN, GE. Recorded:  
 Feb.-Oct. 2021, Smetana Hall,  
 Municipal House, Prague. Published:  
 2023. TT: 78:17 + 79:44. 2CD  
 Supraphon SU 4323-2.

**T**he four piano concertos and *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* by Sergei Rachmaninoff are among the most demanding and effective pieces in the repertoire for piano and orchestra. Their demands on technique and expression are truly enormous. **Lukáš Vondráček** is one of the few pianists on the planet whose repertoire contains all five of these famous pieces. He made a complete recording of them with the **Prague Symphony Orchestra** and its principal conductor **Tomáš Brauner** between February and October 2021. In 2023, we celebrate a double Rachmaninoff anniversary: the composer was born on April 1st, 1873 and died on March 28th, 1943. This year, then, marked a hundred and fifty years since his birth and eighty years since his death. Supraphon timed the release of its Rachmaninoff complete set between these two dates: the album release took place on March 29th, 2023 at the orchestra's subscriber concerts, with the first part consisting of Vondráček performing the *Rhapsody*. The album booklet contains a transcript of a conversation between Vondráček and the orchestra's dramaturg, **Martin Rudovský**. In addition to much interesting information, we also



find out that Vondráček first performed Rachmaninoff's first piano concert (G minor, op. 30) at age fourteen (!). When he was nineteen, he moved on to the second (C minor, op. 18), two years later, the *Rhapsody*, then the fourth concerto (G minor, op. 40), and at twenty-two, he included in his repertoire the third concerto (D minor, op. 30), generally considered one of the most difficult piano concertos in existence. Today, Vondráček is among the brightest stars on the global piano scene. Every performance of his is an unforgettable experience and his recordings of Rachmaninoff can also be discussed purely in superlatives. He has perfect technique, often chooses extreme tempos, and he performs the most difficult passages lightly, seemingly without any struggle. Thanks to his technique, Rachmaninoff's music - often dark and sonically opulent - acquires a surprising degree of transparency. The composer does not spare any emotions in any of the five works - nor does the pianist. The dramatic passages seem to float on emotion, and in the tensest passages, we often glimpse in Vondráček's performance something almost demonic. In the lyrical passages, on the other hand, it seems as though the music of the spheres is emanating from his piano. The performer's creative imagination seems boundless on this recording - the artist often surprises us with original ideas and unusual sonic effects. Tomáš Brauner and the Prague Symphony Orchestra are excellent and empathetic partners to the pianist. Rachmaninoff orchestrated all five pieces with a great degree of invention, and Brauner made the most of the scores. He is inspired in how he leads the orchestra and makes maximal use of its possibilities in terms of colour. The interplay between the soloist and orchestra is perfect, even in the most daring rubatos performed by Vondráček. In short - this is a magnificent recording that is sure to delight even the most demanding listener, and I also believe it will attract appropriate attention in the international context.

Věroslav Němec



**Gustav Mahler  
Symphony No. 2 in C Minor**

**Czech Philharmonic,  
Semyon Bychkov – conductor,  
Christiane Karg – soprano,  
Elisabeth Kulman – alto, Prague  
Philharmonic Choir,**

**Lukáš Vasilek – choirmaster.**  
Produced by: Robert Hanč (CF),  
Renaud Loranger (Pentatone).

Recorded: Nov. 2018, Rudolfinum,  
Prague. Text: EN, GE (libretto only).

Published: 2023. DDD. TT 86:52.  
Pentatone Music PTC 5186 992.

It is a joy to see how purposefully and masterfully the Pentatone label is building up its first Mahler cycle, which features the **Czech Philharmonic** and its principal conductor, **Semyon Bychkov**. Anyone following releases around the world will know that shortly before assuming his position at the head of our leading orchestra, he enriched both his own discography and the orchestra's with a complete set of Tchaikovsky's symphonies of orchestral music on the Decca label. After recordings of the fifth and fourth, Mahler's second is the third instalment in this nascent set. It is no secret that the Czech Philharmonic and Bychkov have already recorded other Mahler symphonies that will be published in the future. We hope that Pentatone will be able to realise the entire cycle even in these economically uncertain times, thus enriching the global market with recordings that absolutely cannot be considered anything like a provincial edition. The recording of Mahler's second symphony is the oldest among those published thus far. It was made in 2018 at Bychkov's inaugural concert as the Czech Philharmonic's principal conductor. It seems that it is a work that has accompanied him at important junctions throughout his career

– he chose the same work in 1989 when he became the head of the Orchestre de Paris. Discussions about the possibilities of realising the whole cycle from the perspective of a 21st century conductor has been discussed for years. Now, as it is being effected, let us believe that after its completion, we will have the opportunity to confront Bychkov with Václav Neumann, whose complete set was published between 1976 and 1982. We can already notice some clear differences between the two sets. It is rare that we are alerted to so many interesting details in the original notation. Already in the opening bars, we are captivated by the dynamic responses of the vigorous and perfectly cohesive unisons in the lower strings. But this is only the beginning. Throughout the symphony, we are repeatedly surprised by a range of other minute details in the rich orchestral texture, which are often hidden (in other performances) by the thick orchestral sound, and so we rarely notice them. The contrasts between the dramatically charged passages and lyrically captivating ones are enormous, and even in today's tough competition of dozens of recordings, we will be hard pressed to find anything similar. The conductor can rouse the orchestra to a furor with unparalleled dramatic passages (e.g. certain bizarre moments in the 3rd movement and the tempest at its conclusion), but even at the most exposed points, the texture is completely legible. On the other hand, we are also charmed by numerous lyrical passages in which we can admire the mastery of both the individual members and the instrumental groups of the orchestra (such as the beautiful horn-section answers to the solo voice in the fourth movement). The conception of the latter sections is not pompous, as sometimes happens in other performances – quite the opposite, it is sonically economical and is always headed, with strict concentration, towards the convincing finale. The dynamics are a chapter unto

themselves. Their scale is boundless, from barely audible pianissimo to the devastating strength of the orchestral tutti. We must set an adequate volume in advance in order to avoid being disturbed by turning the knob down (or, more often, up). The technical quality of the recording is perfect and fully corresponds to contemporary demands. Both the soloists are renowned agents on the contemporary global operatic and concert scene. They are a wonderful selection, partly due to their similar timbre, and especially due to the stylistic perfection and perfectly developed colour scale. **Elisabeth Kulman**, whose solo alto is dominant here, has been a stable fixture in the opera world for some time, though she has mostly performed on concert stages in the last few years. **Christiane Karg**, though currently a soloist at the opera in Frankfurt, performs all around the globe. She is an experienced operatic diva who has had considerable success in operas by Mozart, Debussy, Strauss, and others. In the final section, the **Prague Philharmonic Choir** confirmed its global reputation. After three successful editions that can certainly bear global comparison, we can justly look forward to a complete Mahler set for the 21st century.

*Bohuslav Vitek*

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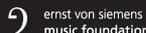


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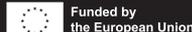


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