

Tradition as a Conversation with the Past

AN INTERVIEW WITH JAKUB HRŮŠA

Jakub Hruša is, without a doubt, the leading Czech conductor today. He is the principal conductor of the Bamberg Symphony and principal guest conductor of the Czech Philharmonic and the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome. In addition to performing the well-known works of Czech composers like Dvořák and Smetana, he is also a faithful interpreter of the music of Josef Suk, as well conducting the international repertoire and contemporary music. This interview is based on an episode of Philharmonious, the podcast of the Czech Philharmonic, which is also available for streaming

We just met up at the Václav Neumann Salon, which is right next door to the Václav Talich Salon. Then there is Rafael Kubelík, Karel Ančerl, Jiří Bělohlávek - what is your relationship to the Czech conducting tradition?

Subconsciously - immense. And consciously, I'm always trying to balance my constant inner conversation with them, especially when I perform pieces that were typical for that generation of Czech conductors, and particularly pieces that they premiered, like Talich in the case of Josef Suk. At the same time, it is not my task to imitate anyone, so when I am on stage, be it in rehearsals or in concerts, I don't think about them anymore. But in the process of preparation, in reading, listening to the recordings and so on, of course, it's a complex dialogue with previous generations. In fact, that's what I think tradition is: not an imitation but a conversation with what was important for previous generations, and potentially carrying forward those timeless values, which matter in any time to the public, orchestras, and the music-loving community.

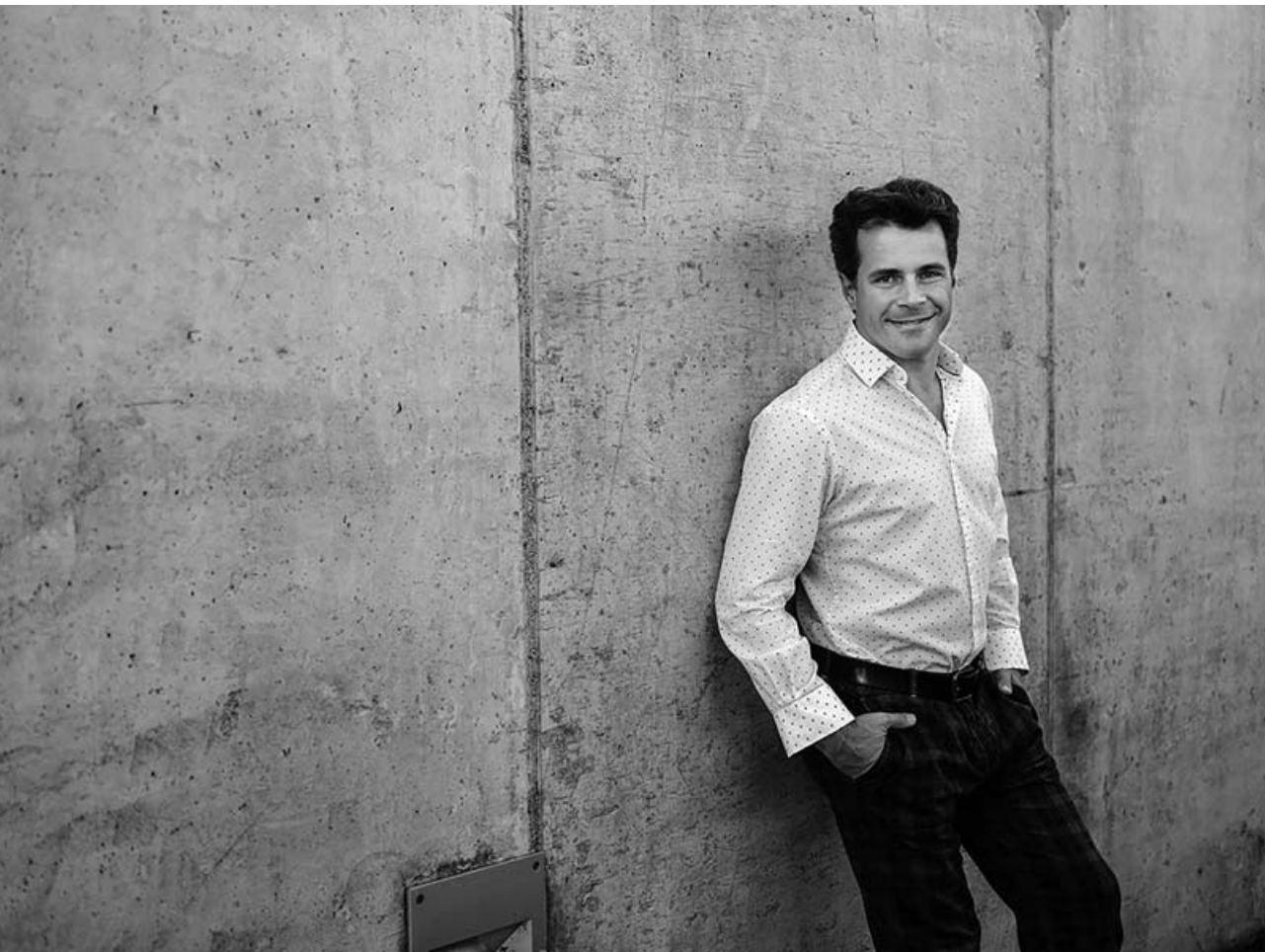


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Did you ever feel the need – perhaps during your studies, or earlier in your career – to consciously depart from that tradition, to study conductors from the German, Italian, or French traditions and find your own way through this terrain?

I understand your question, but this has never been a theme or topic to me. I am certain that if one does something with conviction and with a personal voice, with full involvement of body, mind, soul, and everything that belongs to it, there is no danger of imitation. Imitation, or the need to detach oneself from something strong and powerful, only comes in when you are insecure in some way. That's not to say that I have never been insecure. Of course, all of us are at times in a process of searching for the right answers and finding one's own voice – that's normal. But I think that with people who occupy themselves too much with these things, it can become a bigger problem than it necessarily needs to be. Both the public and the orchestra – which is, in fact, the first recipient of my ideas and feelings – want an independent voice. They want someone authentic and not someone who is there to represent something from

the past. At the same time, to be totally ignorant of what was great in the past is stupid. So I'm trying, once again, to find the right balance.

The situation is different in regards to repertoire, however. There, I admit that I sometimes need to say, quite consciously: okay, maybe with this orchestra, or in this city, I've already done so much Czech music, because that's very much wanted from me, that this time I should insist on doing something else. And in fact, I've never had any problems with that either. It's only the first, almost subconscious choice, one made without thinking, that leads the presenter abroad to say, okay, an important Czech conductor, so it would be great to have a Czech programme with Czech pieces. And I love it, because you very often discover something which is not so well known to those people and become an ambassador to your own culture. At the same time, it's good for our profession to communicate constantly with the mainstream repertoire or to make discoveries of other kinds. For example, I love doing contemporary music written by composers from the country where I am performing. Not even necessarily contemporary, either – generally speaking, if I'm going to Britain, say, it's great to challenge myself to do not just Czech music or the mainstream German repertoire that everyone does everywhere in the world, but maybe the local music – British music. I remember at Glyndebourne, the summer opera festival, one of the nicest experiences I had – for a peculiar reason, but beautifully peculiar – was as I was conducting Britten's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and I realised I was literally the only one in the whole cast who wasn't British. That was a challenge, you know, not only the language and the tradition, but generally this subconscious reception of the previous traditions and previous generations was something I didn't have, but it was beautiful to for me to learn from those knowledgeable people and for them to have a fresh point of view. That's why also in the field of Czech music, it's great if foreign conductors and performers perform it, because we here with our subconsciously received traditions can learn from this freshness, I think.

You've partly answered my second question, which is how you feel as a "Czech conductor". It feels as though it's a balance that you're constantly working out – you might get invited because of this, but then you can change the conversation and present other music. So it sounds this isn't a problem for you; it's not a label you're stuck with.

At least not in the last ten years, I'd say. At the beginning of your career, you have to think about it a little bit more, with the intention of balancing it well. But I think I've developed into someone who is welcome at all institutions to present Czech music because it's something extraordinary for them, and they feel – rightly, I hope – that they are getting an authentic, truthful, and meaningful way of presenting this music. Then there is the other half of my activities, the mainstream repertoire. And it has developed into something of a pattern, when I am visiting some orchestras regularly, like the Berlin Philharmonic, the Chicago Symphony, or the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, I usually go from one programme emphasising Czech or Slavic music, let's say, to another programme that is independent of it.

What I cannot get rid of – nor do I want to – is my general feeling at home in the Central European region. I admit that I am much more at home not only in the Czech repertoire, but also German, Austrian, Hungarian, Polish music – Bartók, Kodály, Lutosławski, and also composers from previous times, when nationalities were not considered as important. It's a slightly different story when one speaks about principally and primarily, say, *French* musical culture.

Of course, I love doing that as well because I think the boundaries or borders should not really exist. As I said about other people doing Czech music, I think when I do

French music, it's equally relevant. But I feel I need to work harder to get closer to that language. Not only working hard in my own idiom and habits, but also on my understanding. So I have to provoke myself to do more research and listen to other recordings and compare other pieces of music and maybe read literature that is connected to those cultures and so on. I still do it, but I am aware of a little more of a distance between that culture and my own. It's natural, and it's also geographical.

We've been talking so far about conducting, about the artistry of interpretation, but I would also like to talk about orchestras. There's a lot of talk about the Bohemian sound and the Bohemian strings and so on. Is this something you believe in? Or is it something that you can achieve playing Dvořák whether you're in London, Rome, or Bamberg?

There is no way to achieve a sound typical for the Czech Philharmonic, say, in the United States or even in Great Britain, and it doesn't make sense to try either. I think that's not what's interesting. I believe there is an a relevant option to cultivate and keep that local tradition alive. And in fact, I'm very proud and happy that the Czech Philharmonic has a local tradition that is still relevant. I guess artists from abroad can recognise it even more palpably than I can, because for me, that kind of playing is like mother's milk - we hear it constantly. And I think it's something which is missing more and more in our world, so I think there's a good reason to be positively proud of it and cultivate it.

At the same time, I don't think it should become some kind of overwhelming motto which is more important than anything else. In fact, I think what is important to do is to get trustworthily - or simply authentically - as close as possible to the language of the composers we play. And I think composers of all times expected various ways of people understanding and feeling their own music. Janáček, for instance, would actually be - and was, in fact! - very tolerant and curious about what his music would sound like in Berlin, or Vienna, or elsewhere. He didn't want to conserve one option of his music's life forever. That's a little more typical of our time - the conservation of some product in one way or another.

All of that is the sound, but what I think is much more relevant is the spirit. Even more than the letter; than the text - of course, the text must be taken seriously, but the spirit, the understanding, the personal style, and maybe a local style if that person is very important for the local music - like Janáček, for example, or Josef Suk as a student of Dvořák and a representative of a particular kind of musicality of the first half of the 20th century here in Prague - to understand that with all your efforts is, I think, crucial.

It seems that some orchestras are a little more fit to fulfil expectations of this or that music, but I think all orchestras, if they approach great music with great intentions, will also achieve great results. I'm absolutely sure of that. In Bamberg, for example, where I am the chief conductor, there's a lot of talk about this Bohemian sound because of the orchestra originally came from Prague - they were the German Philharmonic in Prague and later went to Germany and founded the Bamberg Symphony. I'm always a little hesitant to speak about that too much in words, but when other people discuss that phenomenon, I intuitively know exactly what they mean, but it's not something I could consciously work on - you know, I have never yet stood in front of the orchestra and said, "Okay guys, let's work on the Bohemian sound now". That wouldn't make sense. But I aim for certain results - not just in Czech music, but in other music as well - and suddenly, this sound that is called Bohemian appears. It's important to say that this term is used in the German context - for us Czechs, the notion of the Bamberg Symphony



PHOTO: ANDREAS HERZAU

having a Bohemian sound is a little strange. But in the context of other German orchestras, Bamberg is linked to the musical culture that is typical for Bohemia. And suddenly I'm doing Schubert or Bruckner or Mahler, and people point out that passage really sounded like Bohemian music. But I'm not doing it because I *want it* that way. Similarly, take the example of Rafael Kubelik's Mahler. His Mahler clearly sounds closer to our local traditions here, because that was his life, his roots, his education - he was surrounded by that culture. So why should one ignore it?

In the end, I think knowledge, study, and hard work are important. But ultimately, the freedom of the spontaneous decision is the most relevant thing. Without study, it has no roots and perhaps turns into anarchy. But if it's based in study, then I'm very happy to allow myself simply to express who I am, because every person is unique and the public is interested in the uniqueness of every performer.

There's a lot of pressure towards uniformity - once we have recordings and the internet and you know how every orchestra in the world sounds, it's much easier to achieve a standardised sound. You, however, seem much more interested in the specific sounds of every orchestra in every country.

You are right. And as with all things, the line is very thin. You don't want to standardise anything, but let's admit it - there is, in our world, so much pressure to make everyone into some kind of mould of what is expected. And recently much more than in the past, I'm afraid. You know, that there's so much pressure on what you *should* say and you *shouldn't* say and what kind of humour is to be appreciated, what kind of humour isn't, and what kind of sensitivity you should have to all endless kinds of minorities and so on. It's all very relevant and important, but sometimes I feel like now I can't really be myself. Or - unless I change myself, I don't have really have the right to express myself fully. Humour is often the most relevant field where one can see it. And when it gets ill, that is a very dangerous signal. Certain countries, certain regions have a very specific kind of humour - the Czech Philharmonic, for example, has a very particular sense of humour that is also present in their communication with the conductor.

What is that humour like?

There's a lot of irony, perhaps it's even a little cynical. It's interesting, I've learned to read differently what, for someone who is not used to it, sounds almost like an offence to the artistic work. Today, for example, I was working on something very serious. And I tried my best to deliver that message about the serious contents of the music we were

rehearsing. And I did that, maybe also with a little grain of “Sorry, now it’s going to be very serious”, because you know, it’s very strange – it’s a bit like school, all teachers know that if you get too serious, the students will suddenly not accept what you’re saying. You should be on top of it. So I tried that. I think I delivered the message. I saw that many people took it really beautifully. And then there are some who *need* to add some cynical comment. But I’ve learned not to mind, because I think to change the mind of the orchestra too much, to want to change who they are is exactly the zone I don’t want to go to, because these are particular people. Every orchestra is *people*. It’s not an institution made up of machines, or at least it shouldn’t be. And if there’s too much of a unified, engine-like reaction in the orchestra – when the conductor says A and B, the orchestra should do A and B and never C and D – I’m not interested in that. It’s *boring*. What is beautiful is to have a real partner who might sometimes be a little bit difficult, to win that partner over for a beautiful common goal, to really find a connection with such a partner and then go on that journey together, which then unifies those two – this is one of the most charming aspects of my job, in fact.

So I am much more interested in otherness than in some kind of simplification or unification. I always try to advise young people when they ask me what to do and what not to do. I tell them: work hard, but don’t have overly specific expectations. If you want just this, and nothing else, you can only be disappointed, because you will never get it. But if you if you aim to connect to other people in order to find the most beautiful result together, there’s a very good chance the work will always be satisfactory, because there’s no result which you are fixed to, but only this general desire to discover something new. And you discover something new only in dialogue with other people. You cannot discover anything entirely new on your own. It’s basically impossible. So the openness in my work is everything, in fact. You have to be really very alert, present, open, and spontaneously yourself.

You once mentioned in an interview that you decided a long time ago that you wouldn’t shout at the orchestra, and it seems like you haven’t had a reason to doubt that decision at any point.

Even that has its downside. Recently, I realised it’s not so bad – if you really feel that you have to shout, and there’s no other way to solve the situation, and if you are not lost in your temper, if you’re on top of it, at least partially, it’s okay. I think it’s humanity that interests me, so if there is a good intention behind the shouting, people sometimes take it even more positively than pretension; when you pretend that you are in a state of Zen-like calm and nothing can disturb you, and it’s not true. No one buys that. It’s not to be followed by anyone.

And going back to the idea of uniqueness, perhaps there are orchestras that simply play better when they are shouted at than when they are faced with calm.

That’s right. In fact, the healthier the collective of musicians is, the less need there is for any apparent power to be applied. However, every orchestra, because it’s a huge group of people, needs guidance. The recipe of letting everyone contribute as they please sounds very alluring, very beautiful, but it doesn’t work. But the feeling that it’s *almost* like that is a good thing to try and achieve. And for that, there needs to be a leading voice. By nature, orchestras contain members who are a little more independent-minded, but also a greater amount of people who feel good being part of a group of people, and those people actually feel comfortable if they’re given clear instructions. That’s the charm of leadership, isn’t it? Those who need the freedom to be happy in the collective need to get it and those who need stronger leadership or guidance also need to have that feeling. So the truth is somewhere in between.