by Ian Mikyska

WHAT REMAINS A BEAUTIFUL MYSTERY

an interview with **JAKUB RATAJ**

PHOTO: MICHAL ADAMOVSKÝ

COMPOSER JAKUB RATAJ IS ONE OF THE MOST VISIBLE NAMES ON THE CZECH CONTEMPORARY MUSIC SCENE, AND ALSO ONE OF THE MOST ADEPT AT ESTABLISHING INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIONS, AS EVIDENCED, FOR EXAMPLE, BY HIS 2024 PROFILE ALBUM, KRATZER. WE MET UP WITH JAKUB TO DISCUSS HIS PATH TO NEW MUSIC, HIS COMPOSITIONAL METHODS, AND HOW HE APPROACHES SOUNDS ON THE SPECTRUM BETWEEN MUSIQUE SATURÉE AND RADIOHEAD.

WHAT KIND OF MUSICAL ENVIRONMENT DID YOU GROW UP IN, AND WHERE?

Until the age of five, I grew up in Chodov, a village near Karlovy Vary. Then, just two months before the Velvet Revolution, my family – somewhat ironically – decided to emigrate to Germany, specifically to Heddesheim, a small town halfway between Mannheim and Heidelberg. I started school there, attending first and second grade. However, it soon became clear that we no longer needed political refugee status, so we returned to Czechoslovakia.

WHY DID YOUR FAMILY CHOOSE TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY SO LATE?

I only discovered the full truth as an adult. My dad – an excellent driver who raced cars – was involved in a traffic collision; a drunk man suddenly fell in front of his vehicle at night. Although it was clearly not his fault, the authorities decided otherwise. This incident set everything in motion. He also had two best friends: one family had emigrated to Hawaii, and the other to Rastatt in Germany, and he had already considered leaving before, so this was simply the final straw.

SO YOU STARTED SCHOOL IN GERMANY?

On the first day of school, I could only say "Guten Tag" and "Schnitzel". It's strange how a child's brain works: there is no point I can remember when I couldn't understand something – suddenly, I was dreaming in German; it had become my second language. Soon, we returned to Chodov, and when I was fifteen, my mother and I moved to Karlovy Vary.
It was there, about a year later, that I began learning the guitar on my own. As a teenager, I started a band with my friends, but I also began taking private lessons from another friend of mine, Jan Psohlavec. I had decided to study

PHOTO: MICHAL ADAMOVSKÝ

Chinese, but I just missed the cut-off point in the entrance examinations, so I decided I would go to China on my own. Two months before I was due to depart, I had a lesson with Jan when he received a call from his teacher at the conservatory – Jan mentioned he had a talented student with him. Suddenly, I was at home practising the guitar every day, with the exams only two months away.

SO, MUSIC HADN'T BEEN THAT ESSENTIAL TO YOU UP TO THAT POINT?

Music has always been essential to me! Throughout my childhood, I would come home from school and immediately start cycling through our tape collection. When we returned from Germany, I received my own tape player and would constantly make mixtapes. I'd spend the afternoon listening to the radio, and whenever a favourite song came on, I would record it. I would lull myself to sleep by singing for an hour. Sometimes, my dad would take out his guitar and sing, and, of course, my mum sang to me as well.

BUT YOU DIDN'T ATTEND MUSIC SCHOOL OR TAKE ANY LESSONS?

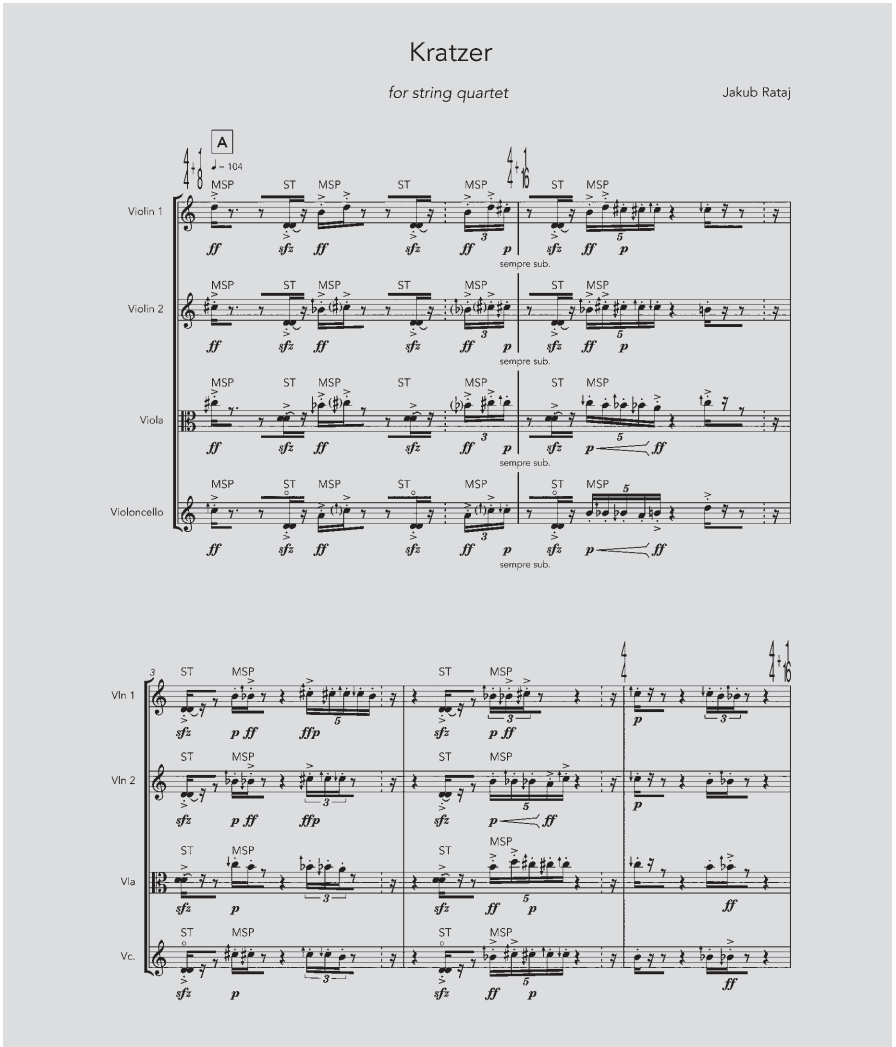
No, not at all.

SO STUDYING AT THE CONSERVATORY WAS REALLY A COINCIDENCE?

Absolutely. For me, attending a conservatory meant starting at the age of five and practising hard, but it turned out I wasn't the only one at the conservatory to begin after finishing secondary school. After I completed secondary school, I spent several months travelling through Central America and Europe with a guitar on my back. I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do – I loved languages and music too, but I didn't think I was good enough. When I had a band as a teenager, we also had a violin and cello, and I enjoyed bringing it all together; singing their parts for them. So, as soon as I started at the conservatory, I chose composition as my second subject. It wasn't long before I realised that I much preferred spending hours and hours composing rather than practising.

HOW WAS YOUR EXPERIENCE STUDYING AT THE TEPLICE CONSERVATORY?

It was a very close-knit community – not much happens in the city, apart from the Teplice Philharmonic concerts every other Thursday, so we had a wonderful group. Personally, I was incredibly motivated by the fact that I had been accepted – it felt as though I had jumped straight in at the deep end, and I immediately knew that this was it; this was the right path, and everything seemed to fall into place. It was a joyous discovery of a new world.



YOU ALSO MET SOME PEOPLE THERE WITH WHOM YOU ARE STILL IN TOUCH TODAY.

Yes, primarily composers Michal Nejtek and Petr Hora, but also crucial for me was the unintentionally Zen-like approach of my composition teacher, Václav Bůžek – his motto was "keep writing". I might have been working on something for a week and would take the piece to him, excited that we would analyse it together, and then, after a pause, he would say: "Keep writing." He never pushed anyone into anything. Although his own compositional world was more neo-classical and conservative, he was open to all ideas from all students. On one occasion, I was riding the elevator with him, and he said: "No, you're not a guitarist – you're a composer." This resonated deeply with me at the time and led me to apply to the composition department at the conservatory while still studying guitar there.

YOU WENT ON TO STUDY AT THE FACULTY OF MUSIC AND DANCE AT THE ACADEMY OF PERFORMING ARTS IN PRAGUE (HAMU) – WERE YOU MORE "IN THE KNOW" BY THEN? DID YOU ALREADY KNOW WHOM YOU WANTED TO STUDY WITH IN PRAGUE?

Yes, thanks to Michal Nejtek and Petr Hora – Petr was studying with Hanuš Bartoň, so I went to consult him. Naturally, I was delighted – Hanuš was a wonderful person.

HOW OLD WERE YOU WHEN YOU WENT TO STUDY UNDER HANUŠ BARTOŇ?

I was twenty-five, I think, when I started at HAMU. It was another dream come true – I could hardly imagine studying at the academy just four years after I had started learning to read music. Those first few years were incredibly intense – I was like a sponge, and there seemed to be no end to what I could absorb. I later experienced the same feeling at the Paris Conservatoire – everyone was always working on their scores, carrying them around, analysing them together...

WHAT WAS YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH PERFORMERS LIKE, AT HAMU, IN PARIS, TODAY...?

I think it was immensely helpful to start out in a band where I had to explain everything verbally – that form of communication is an integral part of the creative process for me. After spending so much time at home, isolated with your thoughts, ideas, and imagination, the second phase, when you go out and start materialising this abstraction into something concrete, is truly beautiful. I was fortunate to have great friends who were also wonderful instrumentalists, both at HAMU and later.

HOW ABSTRACT IS YOUR COMPOSITIONAL PROCESS? DO YOU WORK DIRECTLY WITH SOUND MATERIALS, OR IN A MORE DETACHED MANNER?

If we are to follow the old adage that composers are either sculptors or painters, I believe I am more of a sculptor. I need to have a clear idea of the overall form. The structure, the process, the development – all of these are essential. Continuity versus discontinuity. What I find most captivating is the question of perception: how you, as a listener, discern relationships within a discontinuous form; how the development – though it may seem fragmented – still maintains a sustainable drive or pull. Gérard Grisey describes this in relation to Gestalt theory: the human brain is able to fill in a missing fragment of a process or shape, much like the famous unfinished triangle from Gestalt theory. These temporally perceptual moments are something I find fascinating.

HOW DO YOU TRY THEM OUT; SEARCH FOR THEM?

The ultimate test is always the performance. When I create a structure, I use simple calculations, and it all makes sense to me – what would not make sense is to make minor alterations, perhaps to make one bar sound a little "nicer". I think more about whether a passage might be too short or too long, and whether the architecture of the structure can sustain itself. Yet, the performance always clarifies the boundaries between what you can plan and sketch out and what remains a beautiful mystery.

The level of abstraction is the greatest adventure: I never know what the initial moment of inspiration will look like – sometimes it is a process, sometimes it is the entire form and I discover the processes later, sometimes the process contains a model of the form, and sometimes I do conceive of a "motif", so to speak – a sounding shape. Given how I work, though, I understand these sounding shapes as atoms within the whole piece. So, even if I have an idea that lasts only four seconds, I try to find a form that emerges from it – seeking to uncover the processual direction that might be concealed within.

HAS THIS EMPHASIS ON PROCESS AND A STRONGLY CONCEPTUALISED FORM ALWAYS BEEN PART OF YOUR COMPOSITIONAL PROCESS, OR DID IT DEVELOP LATER?

It solidified during my time at HAMU, I think – my work at the conservatory was mostly intuitive. And even though my formal thinking might be quite clear and planned out, I'm still always working from the fact that I love picking up an instrument and playing it. Waves, frequencies – they're physical phenomena. Something resonates. I don't want the structure to be the only important thing – in very simple terms, I have to like it; enjoy it. If I were to create a piece that was formally perfect but did not satisfy me sonically or musically, I would consider it an empty gesture. I need both layers to be equally present, and finding this balance

PHOTO: MARTIN POPELÁŘ

Jakub Rataj and Bruno Ferrandis, Ostrava Days 2025

is great fun – how to maintain a degree of animality or corporeality, which might seem superfluous in the work of hyper-conceptual composers. Musicality, I suppose – a musical gesture. I still want that – it's at the root of my relationship with music.

I WOULD STILL LIKE TO KNOW MORE ABOUT HOW YOU SELECT THE MATERIALS YOU WORK WITH – HOW YOU SEARCH FOR THEM AND WHAT QUALITIES YOU SEEK.

I usually know the instrumentation I am writing for, and if I do not, I try to consider which instruments I would enjoy composing for and the overall "colour" of the piece. I try to push the boundaries of my imagination and explore a new sound world for the instrument – not so much in the Helmut Lachenmann sense of extended techniques, but rather within the development of the piece. This process often encounters the practical limitations of performance.

JUST TO MAKE SURE I UNDERSTAND: YOU SET UP A PROCESS THAT CONCERNS INSTRUMENTAL TECHNIQUE AND ITS DEVELOPMENT, WHICH THEN LEADS INTO UNPLAYABLE TERRITORY. IS THAT CORRECT?

Exactly – the problems generally concern rhythm, register, dynamics, and subtle forms of articulation. I was recently rehearsing an older solo violin piece, *Capriccio*, which is based on rapid changes of pressure between natural harmonics and open strings. The sonic balance gradually shifts: the sharp full notes are progressively transformed by the natural harmonics, and making that change come through in the way I had imagined is technically extremely demanding. "Unplayable territory" is an ephemeral term, much like white spots on a map – eventually, someone discovers them, and that's part of the adventure!

I STILL FEEL AS THOUGH YOU ARE AVOIDING MY QUESTION ABOUT MATERIALS. IF WHAT LIES AT THE CORE IS THE ENJOYMENT OF A PHYSICAL EXPERIENCE OF SOUND, WHICH SOUNDS DO YOU ENJOY OR HAVE A PREFERENCE FOR?

For me, the most important element is tension and release, both at the level of the atom, gesture, or note, and also in the overarching development of the piece. Creating a certain kind of pull, followed by a release. This takes many forms, so it is difficult for me to answer directly by saying I am looking for rough or sharp sounds – although I do enjoy working from the imagined sound of an electric guitar running through a crackling tube amplifier with distortion. I like to imagine this sound performed by an entire ensemble. But even when I work with gentler sounds, I strive to find the tension within them.

That too, but perhaps even more importantly, it's about the physicality of music; the body of sound. When you listen to the orchestral works of Iannis Xenakis, for instance, you are faced with a mass of sound that you do not merely hear with your ears; you experience it with your entire body. In Paris, I had the opportunity to hear

all of Grisey's *Les Espaces acoustiques*, and it felt like being at a Depeche Mode concert.
And it's not just about loud and quiet, either – sound masses arriving at high pressure and dynamics also possess a very rich inner life. Pragmatically speaking, they are full of higher harmonic partials, which I frequently use to create a pitch structure.

HOW DO YOU USE THE HARMONIC SERIES TO GENERATE HARMONIC MATERIAL?

It is not solely harmonic material. I will use the example of Countermass, a concerto for bass clarinet and ensemble performed by Martin Adámek and Ostravská banda at the Ostrava Days festival this year. I use several fundamental pitches, with each pitch also determining the tempo of its respective section. For instance, if a quarter note is set at 54 BPM and you convert this tempo into frequencies, doubling it repeatedly, you arrive at a B-flat. This is one of the methods I use to connect the various elements of the structure.
Harmonically, I create a series of notes, and the way I work with them determines the structure. The row can be static, vertical or horizontal; it can keep rising upwards, remain within the range of a small segment, or consist of several rows.

LET US MOVE ON TO THE THEME OF YOUR DOCTORAL THESIS AT HAMU: PHYSICALITY AND CORPOREALITY IN MUSIC. WHEN DID YOU FIRST BECOME CONSCIOUSLY INTERESTED IN THIS TOPIC?

That was in Paris. For a class in electroacoustic composition, I was working on a piece called *Mezi* řečí (*Between the Words*). I recorded a poem by Vladimír Kokolia, read by the author and also translated into Chinese, which served as my source material. I extracted all the words and worked only with the sounds heard before the word is spoken – the preparation, the tension, the pull – and those that follow – the exhalation, the release. As I spent hours working with the material in the studio, I found it really affected me physically. When working with the pre-word sounds, I genuinely felt tension in my body; stress. Then, as I moved on to the exhalation, the calmer material, my physical state changed, completely altering how I perceived what I heard.
The fascination continued through the work of Gérard Grisey – his *Tempus ex Machina: A composer's reflections on musical time* struck a deep chord within me, explicitly naming something I had felt subliminally: my fascination at the time. This really helped me to rationalise the entire affair, and I realised that this dimension of physicality is something I find deeply compelling. I try to reach the very core; to the essence. Something I was never interested in was imitating the sound of breathing on instruments. Rather, I sought to achieve the same sort of tension through acoustic phenomena and incorporate it into a larger structure.
We use music and sound to tune our bodies – it is what ancient shamans did, and it is also what modern club DJs do over the course of an evening, changing the pulse to alter our physical experience.

IN THIS CONTEXT, HAVE YOU ALWAYS BEEN HAPPY WITH THE CONTEXT OF NEW MUSIC – TEN- TO TWENTY-MINUTE PIECES PERFORMED IN RELATIVELY FORMAL CONCERTS? OR HAVE YOU EVER FELT LIKE CREATING MUSIC FOR SITUATIONS THAT ARE A LITTLE LESS CONVENTIONAL, SUCH AS AN ALL-NIGHT CONCERT?

But that is the greatest challenge, the finest adventure: to draw the listener in, dressed in their suit and tie, into the piece; into the process. How to accelerate or slow down the inner clock; the extent to which sonic and structural details or complex sound masses can change the listener's perception and make them forget about the watch on their wrist.

I'D LIKE TO TALK A LITTLE ABOUT "MUSIQUE SATURÉE", A RELATIVELY RECENT DEVELOPMENT IN FRENCH CONTEMPORARY MUSIC THAT DOES NOT SEEM TO RECEIVE MUCH AIRTIME IN CZECHIA. WHERE DID YOU FIRST COME INTO CONTACT WITH IT? IN PARIS?

It was in Paris, yes, and there is no point in trying to claim that I wasn't enchanted by it – a young composer discovers a new style that seems closely related to what he has always enjoyed (in my case: distortion, electric guitars, crackling). But even before then, I had a sense that the noise element – the complexity of tone – is always present, and it is all about balance. Immersion in the world of instrumental saturation opened up a number of questions concerning the transformation and handling of extremely complex sonic structures over time. It touches on the significance of musical gesture or of complex textural fields in which I am not concerned with pitch, but rather with sound quality, the distribution of frequencies, temporal proportions, the rawness of the material, and the accentuation of "parasitic" noises that we usually try to conceal. These are questions that continue to resonate with me. At the same time, I have realised that the relationships between specific frequencies and the potential of so-called pure tones will probably never cease to interest me as a composer, nor fail to attract me as a listener.

COULD YOU GIVE A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF MUSIQUE SATURÉE?

Imagine singing into a microphone and completely saturating it with signal; over-saturating it. In musique saturée, we are not interested in the source signal but in the saturation itself – that's the quality we seek: saturation as an autonomous phenomenon. It is the manifestation of complex sonorities pushed to their limits.

WHAT DOES THAT MEAN IN PRACTICE, COMPOSITIONALLY?

The fundamental principle of instrumental saturation is the excessive use of at least one musical parameter within the context of a given composition. The saturation of one or more musical parameters leads to the emergence of new sonic material and, from a broader perspective, a new musical quality. There is a certain hierarchy that begins with an initial gesture on a solo instrument. For example, with string instruments, extreme bow pressure, erratic accents, and tremolos are used to emphasise the noise component of the sound and the complexity of the initial gesture. As we progress further along this hierarchy, in combination with other instruments, we observe the treatment and development of this gesture within the larger whole. It is not only the gesture itself that is important, but also the transformation of dynamics and temporal proportions.

In my compositional thinking, complex sonic components are either part of a specific process or function as one of several musical layers within a given structure. Despite my fondness for often raw and saturated sounds, I do not consider myself a composer belonging to any particular style – especially not one that I have not discovered or defined for myself.

I KNOW YOU ENJOY LISTENING TO A WIDE VARIETY OF MUSIC. I RECENTLY READ A PROGRAMME NOTE BY COMPOSER LUBOŠ MRKVIČKA, IN WHICH HE MENTIONED THAT THE MUSIC HE ENJOYS LISTENING TO IS ENTIRELY SEPARATE FROM THE MUSIC HE COMPOSES. WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THIS?

I definitely do not try to write the kind of music that I listen to. Radiohead recently got back together, which made me happy, but that does not mean I am going to write music like theirs.

SURE, BUT IS LISTENING TO RADIOHEAD FUNDAMENTALLY A DIFFERENT ACTIVITY FROM LISTENING TO THE MUSIC YOU CREATE?

Above all, it depends on one's inner state while listening to music such as Radiohead. I can listen to their songs while driving or doing almost anything else, which provides me with a particular kind of musical experience – an experience that is immediate and on the surface. At the same time, especially with some of their pieces, it is also possible to listen to this music in a manner akin to contemporary classical music, noticing the polyrhythmic structures and the development of the piece within a relatively short time span.

By contrast, the music I write does not really lend itself to that first mode of listening – the straightforward or superficial kind. Such listening holds little meaning for it. My music demands complete attention; it is impossible for my focus to wander to something like making a cup of tea.

YOU WORK AS A SOUND DESIGNER AT CZECH RADIO AND ARE ALSO HIGHLY SOUGHT AFTER AS A FILM COMPOSER. ARE THESE AREAS ALSO SEPARATED FROM YOUR PRINCIPAL COMPOSITIONAL PRACTICE? THESE FIELDS

are distinctly separate in my mind. When I am writing a piece, I have complete creative control, whereas in the case of a film, I am always considering one component within a larger Gesamtkunstwerk. Much of what I most enjoy searching for and discovering is determined in advance. Time-wise, film work is far more compressed and fast-paced than composing. That said, I have been very fortunate to work with directors who trusted me and granted me complete freedom, allowing me to explore– even within this Gesamtkunstwerk – spaces that are mysterious and fascinating to me.

YOU RECENTLY ASSUMED THE ROLE OF ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF CONTEMPULS, A CONTEMPORARY FESTIVAL IN PRAGUE THAT HAS BEEN DORMANT FOR THE PAST FEW YEARS. IN WHICH DIRECTION DO YOU PLAN TO TAKE THE FESTIVAL?

For me, the Contempuls Festival represented the most compelling event on the Czech contemporary music scene ever since I first attended it as a first-year student at HAMU. Shortly after Jan Ryant Dřízal, Marek Šedivý, and I founded Ensemble Terrible, Contempuls invited us to collaborate with the French bassoonist Pascal Gallois from Ensemble Intercontemporain. A few years later, I composed a piece for Contempuls and Trio Catch, which gave me the opportunity to work closely with the ensemble. This friendship and collaboration continue to this day – *Countermass*, the bass clarinet concerto we discussed earlier, was written for Martin Adámek (Trio Catch, Ensemble Intercontemporain), and next year I will begin working on a triple concerto specifically for this trio. I realise that I have been given many opportunities that have profoundly shaped my artistic path, and I now feel a need to pass this joy forward. I mention this because I have always regarded Contempuls as a highly active and dynamic platform whose mission was to connect the Czech contemporary music scene with the international one, to open doors for composers, and to present leading international performers alongside Czech artists. At the same time, the festival regularly introduced very fresh works – both in terms of their recent creation and their artistic originality. These are the essential qualities I wish to continue: bold and distinctive programming, commissioning new works by Czech composers, fostering connections between the Czech and international scenes, and creating a concentrated festival that invites listeners to push their own boundaries – to embark on a beautiful adventure.