

Adventures in the Microworld

– An Interview with Tomáš Šenkyřík

Lately, the Czech sound artist Tomáš Šenkyřík has been on a roll. His albums, usually created in collaboration with other artists, have piqued interest both at home and abroad. *306*, published by okla records, *1m²* and *Vstal* with Manja Ristić, both released by the Brno label Skupina, serve as aural invitations to worlds of sound that are often overlooked and seemingly unassuming. Tomáš, always passionate about such sounds and the means to capture them, can easily draw listeners into his vision and poetics – if they allow him to. In our video interview, we discussed his recent projects, his upbringing, his work at the Museum of Romani Culture, and his consistently curious and sensitive approach to both music and ecology. But first, we spoke about Tomáš's second life – that of a local politician.

You are calling from your office in the town of Židlochovice, near Brno, where you serve as deputy mayor. What's new in your political life? What projects are you currently working on?

There are too many things to mention, but what I personally find most interesting are projects related to water – we are currently discussing a water treatment plant. The standard procedure is for the purified water to flow directly into rivers, where it disperses like cars on a highway, as a friend of mine described it. This is a nationwide practice that concerns me greatly, because in many cases it would be better to retain the water within the landscape – particularly when the plant is near a drying floodplain forest. This is precisely our situation: we lose around 250,000 cubic metres of water each year. That is why we have developed a project to help us retain the water. We have purchased a plot of land where we plan to create pools and meanders so that some of the land can remain waterlogged. We are also addressing legislation and intend to propose an amendment to the existing laws.

What does the amendment specify?

Even when water undergoes an advanced purification process, the law still classifies it as wastewater, which cannot be retained. In collaboration with MENDELU, the Mendel University in Brno, we will be working on quaternary water treatment, as opposed to the standard tertiary treatment.



PHOTO: SONA SOMMEROVA 5x

This fourth stage removes micropollutants such as antibiotics, anti-epileptic drugs, and similar substances. The aim of the amendment I mentioned is to allow the retention of water that has undergone quaternary treatment in the landscape.

My role in the project involves conducting a time-lapse observation of biodiversity. I will use field recordings to map the terrain, which will gradually accumulate increasing amounts of water. I hope this will enable us to clearly demonstrate how water influences biodiversity and how this is manifested in the soundscape.

This is not the first time you have created new bodies of water near Židlochovice. Do your fellow citizens welcome these projects?

A few years ago, we created a small marsh. At the time, there was significant opposition – people complained about how many mosquitoes there would be and so on. However, once it was completed, people realised how that previously inhospitable plot of agricultural land had been transformed into a welcoming space. The project’s fiercest critics now take their dogs for walks there. Following this experience, the larger project has encountered no resistance; we even have mayors from neighbouring towns visiting to seek inspiration. It truly makes a difference when you can see and experience the results. I really cannot complain about our region – all the mayors are supportive of ecological projects.

Would you get involved in projects like this one even if you didn’t have experience with field recording or a fascination with sound?

Probably. If you are a thoughtful person, when presented with data and laboratory results, you cannot remain indifferent to what is happening to nature, or, in this case, to our water. Without a background in field recording, I would probably miss a broader context that allows me to understand these issues, and I am very grateful for that.



The Long Struggle

Do you remember your earliest formative experience related to sound?

What I heard on the radio, including the noises and buzzes between stations, and tapes, of course – we didn't have a record player. I would record the theme songs from various TV shows and, later, some of my own tinkering. I was fascinated by how the sound seemed to “dip down” when I played it back.

Where was this? Where are you from?

I am from Holešov, near Zlín. I also grew up in Rusava and, naturally, was drawn to the surrounding nature. It is all forested, and as children, we spent all our time outdoors. It was there that I first began making field recordings, although I had no idea how to go about it and lacked the appropriate equipment.

So your teenage years were occupied not with microphones and gear, but with a traditional musical education?

I studied flute and later started playing guitar and electric bass. I only began experimenting with sound and field recording when I was hired as an ethnomusicologist at the Museum of Romani Culture in Brno.

Was that while you were a student of aesthetics and musicology at the Faculty of Arts at the Masaryk University in Brno?

It was later than that. In 1997, I finished school and then did my military service, which was still

mandatory at the time. I didn't feel like strutting around with a machine gun, so I managed to arrange civilian service at the Husa na provázku Theatre, which of course made me very happy at the time.

What was your official job title there?

I was a prop manager, but at Provázek, everyone does a little of everything – the stage manager was putting together an opera, I wrote the songs. One time, I even had to go on stage wearing a wig, but I was awfully embarrassed – that's not for me... The theatre had a wonderful, friendly atmosphere. One time on my way home, I met a friend who told me that the Museum of Romani Culture has a huge sound archive and no one to manage it. It caught my attention and I offered myself up for the job. I ended up staying for almost a decade, from 1999 to 2008.

Was it in this job that your attraction to field recordings began?

Exactly. I worked with Eva Davidová, the most significant Roma scholar in Czechia, collecting Romani music. When I then listened back in my office, I was fascinated by how the environment they play and sing in is inscribed in their music. When we recorded Wallachian Romani in Kendice in the east of Slovakia, I realised how three-dimensional the situation is. Marinka Hlubová sang a slow Wallachian song, glasses clinked, a bin was closed – a complex sonic narrative began developing, something you can hardly ask Romani musicians to reproduce in the studio. The multi-sensory experience, in the field, so difficult to replace, seemed more truthful (though we know what a fickle



thing truth is). For this reason, I always carried two or three recording devices. This allowed me to be quick in resolving unexpected situations – this isn't a context in which anyone is interested in "sorry, I forgot to press record".

During these expeditions, I was often covered in spillages of various vodkas and spirits, but the atmosphere was always excellent, and thanks to Eva, we were warmly welcomed everywhere. It would often happen that the local white people would warn us not to visit the camp, but as soon as the local Roma saw Eva, they accepted us immediately. They knew from their elders that this was "our Eva", and I could pretty much start recording in five minutes.

You began making your own work while you worked at the museum?

I'd try something here and there, but to tell you the truth, I spent years recording only for myself and had no plans to share the results on the internet or anything of the sort. I was often frustrated, as I was unable to transfer the feelings connected to attentive listening and experiencing of the given site into the resultant recording, which I would listen to at home after the fact and be disappointed by. At the time, I began reading lots of texts by and interviews with my personal heroes, Chris Watson and Jana Winderen, but that provided little encouragement when I found out how much all their equipment costs. It seemed unattainable and the results incomparable to my walks in Rusava, during which I was unable to capture how the wind rustles the leaves of a birch tree as I didn't have any

protection against the wind. Without it, I just had leaves knocking into my microphones. It was a long struggle.

When did you break through?

My first proper recording device, for which I saved little by little from my wages at the Museum, was a Fostex FR-2 from the United States, brought over by my friend, musicologist and music therapist Petra Gelbart. That was around 2009. I had made some sonic attempts a little earlier – sometimes, I would have the museum equipment at home overnight due to travel arrangements for our field research, and before I brought it back in the morning, I would record some material I later used in music for theatre. The museum had a higher quality "dead cat" and the quality of the material was reasonable.

I have a feeling that these forays into original sound might have come about because someone approached you and said "try it".

You're right, I've just had a hidden memory resurface – Ladislava Košíková, choreographer and founder of the dance sector of Hradištan, a folk music ensemble, approached me and asked me for sound to accompany a choreography, composed entirely of sounds of the wind, because she knew I was exploring this territory. That was the start of it all, around 2011, 2012.

Friendship, Beer, and Photosynthesis

I'd now like to skip ahead to the present. You've collaborated on many interesting projects

in recent years. In 2024, you released *Vstal*, an album created with Serbian sound artist Manja Ristić. It's something of a sonic conversation between the wetlands of South Moravia and the Adriatic Sea. How did this communication take place?

We agreed that each of us would explore a particular soundworld within our respective environments. It was all made possible by CENSE, the Central European Network for Sonic Ecologies, an informal network of similarly minded artists principally in Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe. CENSE was established in 2018 at a conference in Budapest, which is where I met Manja. We struck up a conversation on the staircase on our way to one of the seminars and hit it off right away. We've been in contact continuously since then.

She later suggested we could do a project together, but we spent around a year just writing emails, sending photos, updating each other on our lives. One Easter, which I always spend in Rusava, I spent the period between Maundy Thursday to Easter Sunday making recordings - hence the title, "vstal" ("he has risen"), in the sense of the resurrection. This led to the eponymous track on the album. Then it continued in the way you described: we sent each other the soundscapes we found ourselves in and created a new, fictional soundscape.

And how did you mix long distance?

We shared sounds on the cloud. At first, I wasn't sure how it would work, so I was surprised at how fruitful this mode of collaborating was. This constant sharing of and commenting on our recordings also contained a lot of friendship, too. I consider the dimension of the affection people have for each other very important.

What else have you gained from the CENSE initiative?

I am currently not active at all due to limits on my time, but I am watching from a distance - the conferences are tempting; there is one coming up in Poland soon. Miloš Vojtěchovský did a great deal of work for CENSE. And even now, when I am not so active, I consider it a great inspiration in my everyday life: I get an email occasionally and you can see that people who think alike are being connected and it works great. In addition to Manja, I should also mention Anamaria Pravicencu, a sound artist from Bucharest who prepared a collective CENSE release I also participated in: *CENSE Dawn Chorus, 2021*, which included recordings by artists based in Czechia (Šárka Zahálková, Polina Khatsenka,

Michal Kindernay, Ladislav Železný, and myself) and elsewhere in Europe.

Another recent success is an album titled 306, which you made with Brno-based saxophonist Pavel Zlámal. It was recently praised, among others, by The Quietus. The genesis of this recording seems to have a lot to do with Bedřich Smetana and drinking beer...

Pavel approached me in 2018, when the centenary of the independent Czechoslovak state was approaching. He liked my recordings and wanted to find a way of approaching the event sonically and creatively. He mentioned my underwater hydrophone recordings, so we decided to start with a liquid - we went with beer. I immediately thought it would be wonderful to record it foaming. Pavel came up with a happening: numerous members of the symphony orchestras in Prague and Brno came to Besední dům, as well as some members of the Brno Contemporary Orchestra. They brought their instruments, but they didn't play. Instead, they had to drink one hundred beers, one for each year since the republic was established.

And you recorded it.

I distributed various microphones throughout the space. The result is a fascinating sonic image: everyone arrives sober, but in the second half, the recording features a rising intensity of laughter, shouting, the tap whirring, and so on. And as everyone liked it, Pavel decided to repeat the event in 2024, with 306 beers drunk in 90 minutes: 106 for every year since Czechoslovak independence, and 200 for the bicentenary of Bedřich Smetana. On this occasion, the musicians were really a little tipsy by the second half, but in a good way - the atmosphere was excellent. Although I think there was only a single audience member in attendance.

When I listened back at home, it seemed like a series of sonic photographs. I heard in them the history of Besední dům, echoes of visits by Janáček and Dvořák... I called Pavel and told him we should turn it into a release. We made around five versions, we chose one and decided it was finished. But soon, I began missing something and realised that Pavel, the soul of the project, should be audible too. And so we went to the "Besedňák" one more time and I recorded Pavel's saxophone improvisations in a highly unusual manner.

But if I understand correctly, the saxophone was originally not a part of the project?

Right - though Pavel was the anchor and driving force behind that somewhat Cagean happening,

but he didn't use his saxophone at all. When we went there together, he roamed freely throughout the space. It was important for me to capture not only his playing, but, especially, the acoustics of the spaces he was moving about in. If a sound engineer had seen my setup, he would have thought I was mad - it wasn't conventional, but it worked for our purposes. I needed to manipulate the recording in various ways so that they worked well with the happening documentation. These recordings featured not only Pavel, but also a common wood pigeon who followed us around and cooed at us from various trees. We created a sonic collage that we liked, but we didn't expect much from it. I was very surprised by the responses, many of them from abroad.

In contrast to both *Vstal* and *306, 1m²* is a solo project, related closely to underwater sounds.

I have long had a propensity towards underwater sounds. I bought my first hydrophones in 2016 and have since been trying to achieve one specific goal: to capture the sound of photosynthesis. This is something that field recordists in Sweden and Great Britain have done, but no one in Czechia has explored this in depth to date. I had all but up on that dream, when I went to a marsh on a beautiful sunny day thinking it might work out. At the time, I was reading David Haskell's highly regarded book *The Forest Unseen: A Year's Watch in Nature*, in which he develops a relatively banal but I found amazingly inspiring: a detailed exploration of a small area. I decided to transfer this principle to the marsh, where I selected a portion of the water and spent two months recording there. In contrast to my other project, this one was very biological, non-aesthetic.

What do you mean by that?

I barely did anything to the recordings - no modification or layering. It's not very musical, more raw. In hindsight, I think I could have intervened a little more, but there was so much material - miles upon miles of recordings to process. It was a bit much and I was starting to get lost in it.

Can you please explain how recording photosynthesis works?

When you hear the pitch slide lower, this means that Sun is behind clouds and the organisms are responding to that. I am currently trying to come up with a sound installation that would also capture photosynthesis visually, because it adds a lot and could work well in a gallery.

You mentioned galleries: you recently presented an exhibition called *Zvukové krajiny Brna* (*Soundscales of Brno*) at the Brno House of Arts, featuring both human and non-human sounds - a unique project in the Czech context, and very well received.

I am very grateful to curator Lenka Dolanová, who does a lot of work in this field. We met at lectures she organised in Jihlava at IGLOO, a sound gallery she ran at the Regional Gallery of Vysočina where Miloš Vojtěchovský was also curator. I presented an installation at IGLOO and liked the medium. I find field recordings in an exhibition space very powerful. A few years later - by this time, me and Lenka knew each other quite well - I tried to approach her with a bigger project, which turned into *Soundscales of Brno*. I didn't really expect it to lead to anything, as I know how busy the space is and the kinds of artists that exhibit there. But, to my surprise, they liked the idea and the exhibition took place the following year.

I wanted to discuss various projects to capture the breadth of your work. We've spoken a lot about field recordings, but you also make electronic music and record saxophones and violins. How would you describe your approach as an artist and composer to someone who doesn't know your work?

I'll try to unravel it all. When I start working on something, it often begins with field recordings. By going into an environment, selecting it, setting up microphones before tying them down - all this is already part of the process. There is also a personal element: I often record for my own pleasure, like when I suddenly feel like listening to a Eurasian blackcap, whose vocalisations I find entrancing. I know well where in Rusava they are, and I am happy when I set up a parabolic mic and hear their song in my headphones. And now it looks as though these spontaneous recordings of mine will be used in a project I am making with a friend in Berlin, Jan Solčáni, curator of the Skupina label. The vinyl is set to be released in June. You could call it an ornithological album. We follow the idea of how birdsong develops as an evolving loop and can put one in mind of electronic music. Oslo-based drummer Michaela Antalová is also involved in the project, and her husband, Adrian Myhr, is a brilliant double bassist, which should add a more musical dimension.

That is one approach, focusing purely on field recordings. Sometimes I feel like working with them in a more compositional manner, connecting them

to other sounds. My compositional approach is based on the character of the sound I recorded. 306, the album we made with Pavel Zlámal, contained highly manipulated material, but the manipulation was based on the principles of the sound and the acoustics of the space. Non-manipulated material then worked as an excellent contrast – like the pigeon I mentioned. Although the pigeon itself sounds like a musical instrument – as if someone were playing a bass flute. These are the kind of inspiring contrasts I enjoy working with.

Some of your other projects, like the older album *Hajú*, feature the violin. Who is playing it?

My good friend Pavel Rajmic. His father is Jan Rajmic and his uncle Karel Rajmic, both legends of folk music in the Uherské Hradiště region. Pavel is a wonderful, clever guy, a violinist, folk music scholar, and also a maths professor. He's the type of musician I can connect with quickly. He is able to join me in my search for the resultant form, and when I fail to find it, he's never blocked; never takes it as an affront that I try and direct him in a particular direction. He also brings his own into the process and you can feel a little folkish phrasing in his playing. We also play for the joy of it, and that was also the case with *Hajú*. Of course I am delighted that James Murray, curator at the London-based Slowcraft label, wanted to publish it. I consider him an important figure in British ambient music.

Drawing Attention

When you make field recordings, do you feel more like a witness or an agent who is communicating with the environment?

When I arrive in an environment for the first time, my recordings are more or less tests. The first recordings are usually not very good – you can tell I don't know the environment and maybe the environment doesn't know me: it doesn't open up to me fully, does not reveal certain sounds. But I have some experience and, in a way, I feel you have to deserve it a little. And of course, I try to disturb as little as I can – the organisms always know about you. Sometimes, I practice listening without pressing record – just getting to know my surroundings. My primary aim is to listen in and find my way around the sonic material and think about what the given environment is saying, what I can hear and what I can transmit to those who might listen to it later. Sometimes it happens – and the decision is usually intuitive – that I decide to record something using conventional stereo microphones, other

times, I choose microphones whose pattern is omnidirectional and balanced. I also frequently press record and go for a walk. Sometimes, this allows me to hear the flapping of wings or the movement of various animals very close to the microphone.

To summarise, I feel like a person who loves nature and reveres what goes on inside it: someone who asks what all of this is telling us, what a heavenly gift it is, a beautiful symphony that is played every morning. I feel like an admirer. I hope it doesn't sound too esoteric!

Definitely not – it's an inspiring spiritual perspective. By the way, I asked that question in order not to use the term "sound hunter", which evokes something aggressive and invasive.

We were talking about *rm²* earlier, and your question put me in mind of something I heard from a professor, who, as a scientist, is incredibly excited by the existence of hydrophones, as it is one of the few non-invasive methods of measuring biodiversity. In the past, you would simply go there, walk in the marshes. Even today, I sometimes see photographers moving around in places where moor frogs breed; a species of frogs that turns blue during their mating period. I was recently surprised by an amateur ornithologist in Rusava, who saw me and asked me if I played recordings and sounds to force the animals to act in some way. Such approaches are totally foreign to me.

You once mentioned in writing an experience with a yellow-bellied toad and an aeroplane. You weren't interested in the sound of the plane at first, but you ultimately discovered it creates an interesting dialogue with the toad, and have since then been more open to sounds that many consider intrusive. This anecdote brings us to the dangerous term "authentic". How do you experience the tension between recording a sonic reality and manipulating it?

It is important to say that over ninety percent of the recordings sound like a disappointment when I listen to them in the studio. It is impossible to evoke the atmosphere of the place, where you can smell the grass, the humidity; a fly might buzz past your ear; you hold on to something. It's a whole range of sensory data and it's just never as good on speakers. You then have to search for an information channel through which to communicate it and what to find in it, a third dimension that is able to bring listeners closer to what I experienced on site. At a lecture I once gave, a lady asked me why I am even recording these sounds if she can hear

them in the forest. This was an apt remark and entirely true – my only response is that I consider these recordings a kind of photograph. When you look through photographs, you can become aware of many new contexts you might not have noticed in the real world. This is how I think about the activity: I want to use my recordings to capture and draw attention at the sonic level to contexts that most of us miss when we go for a walk in the woods. Like the interaction between a blackbird and the sound of a bell, with the blackbird changing pitch a little as the bell is struck, which you only hear when listening back. It's about searching for adventure in the micro-world and in the tiniest details.

That brings us to one more question. How do you think about the balance between the documentary aspect of your field recordings and your own artistic production.

Like I said earlier, there is some stylisation even in how you set up your microphones. When you put two microphones in the water, you are working with stereo, which determines the character of the recording. And then you place them further apart, which creates a delay – a kind of rhythm, an accelerated pulsation. I often think about this and I realised I cannot say what a dry, documentary field recording is and how it sounds. Even when listening to ornithological documentation I made, which has descriptions such as “Eurasian blackcap, common chiffchaff in the background”, I hear my decisions about where to mark the edit, which frequencies to cut to get rid of unwanted sounds, and so on.

To what extent do you interact with animals? Do you think there can be interspecies communication purely on a sonic foundation?

There is certainly a form of communication – with the birds in my garden rather than during recording sessions. We had a lot of apples last year, so I left some of them out and I had many blackbird visitors – I saw as many as eight at once. I also put out sunflower seeds – recently, they ate up a whole bucket in about ten days. And I believe that they know that I put this out for them. When I open the window into the garden, I immediately notice the blackbird starts singing more distinctively, signalling to the others that I am approaching or that the cat is gone.

It seems you are an adept communicator. We began our conversation talking about local politics. It is clear that your job as deputy mayor influences how you think about sound and

vice versa, but I am interested in whether you consider your art political?

It's hard to say what we define as politics, because as a local politician, your work is very different from that of parliamentarians – you are dealing with practical issues and every decision means getting grilled in the pub for hours. You have to be able to explain your decisions responsibly, and no ideological talk will help you there. So there is that.

If my work has a political dimension, it probably consists in drawing attention to the fact that even the smallest effort you make for the landscape you live in can lead to positive results. I consider my recordings possible inspiration for such ideas or actions. Going back to the marsh we spoke about earlier, it was their lived experience that made people change their minds. Through my recordings, I offer a listening experience through which sound tells us something about our behaviour. And that probably does have a political and social dimension.