


czech music | interview  
by Michal Wróblewski

# Positive

PHOTO: JURA TROS



**Michal Nejtek (born 1977) is a composer and pianist who draws inspiration from and works in genres including contemporary concert music, jazz, and alternative rock. He was recently commissioned by the Prague Spring festival to compose *Die Hintergedanken* for Ensemble Modern for this year's Prague Offspring. We spoke to Michal not only about this piece, but also about his approach to working with text and the intricacies of the creative process.**

## **Ulterior Motives**

### **an interview with composer Michal Nejtek**

***In your programme note for *Die Hintergedanken*, you write that one can find joy in not being alone and that the creative process is, in its very essence, impossible to grasp, impossible to explain, and very painful. Does this pain arise from solitude?***

Since I never have a creative process prepared in advance, I always have to invent it anew. This search is painful in itself because, for a long time, I find nothing of value. Then I must choose a path, knowing that I might discover a week later that it leads to a dead end. That's exactly what happened with this piece – I ended up with much more “waste material” than usual. This made me somewhat uncertain, and I tried various ways to overcome the problem. One approach was working with the text by Kafka. I would repeatedly find a motif or possibilities for working with it, only to realise two weeks later that it was not functional at all. So I had to start over and persevere. But that's normal – some pieces I write quickly and am satisfied with almost immediately, while others take a long time and require many rewrites.

***What defines “waste material”?***

The fact that I stop liking something and the feeling persists. In this piece, it happened with the opening, for which I created several versions. The foundation was a rhythmic framework that I ended up keeping, accompanied by a simple harmonic sequence. For me, simplicity usually indicates that something can work, but in this case, it did not. After two weeks of hearing it in my head, I realised that the simplicity had become boring and banal. I had to come up with something else using the same principle. So “waste” is not defined by anything external; it reflects my feeling of being in a cul-de-sac – I no longer want to listen to the material or engage with it.

***“Perhaps at the moments when we make decisions, it is good – or even the best – to listen to the secondary thoughts and hidden intentions that infiltrate your mind while you feel like you’ve struck a golden vein,” your programme note continues. Let’s talk about the title itself.***

“Hintergedanken” means “ulterior motives” or “hidden agenda”. It has negative connotations, I have a more positive view of ulterior motives, because I believe we never fully understand what we are doing from beginning to end, nor do we know our minds well enough to perfectly analyse ourselves and predict where we are headed. For me, it is important to remain alert throughout the compositional process – open and ready for anything that might arise. And if a recurring idea or notion emerges while I write, one that I would never have thought of at the outset, I take it as a signal to pay some attention to this idea and explore whether it might lead the piece out of a vicious circle or steer it in an entirely new direction.

***What is the beginning of the process like? How do you come to terms with the reduction of everything?***

The very beginning is probably the same for everyone. I start by planning the structure of the piece, representing it graphically in some way. The difference is that my colleagues often begin by examining external material – any kind of sound source – which they analyse using software and then perhaps use the resulting graphics. I work the old-fashioned way: I improvise, and when I hear something I like, I do not go asking about its sonic structure. At other times, something appeals to me physically; tangibly, and it begins to follow me around like an intrusive thought. I interpret this as a signal that I could start working with the idea. Occasionally, there are multiple motifs at the start, but usually, I begin with a single one. I find it important to hold it in my hands, spending considerable time sensing and feeling it to understand its essence. Once I pass through this stage, the motif itself seems to ask to be developed or offers connections and connotations. The more connections and networks that spread out from the motif, the more interesting I find it. At the beginning, there is one motif that I must sit with for a long time before I start weaving nets towards other structures. These, however, only emerge as the work progresses.

***In the new piece we are discussing, you use complex rhythmic patterns. I am interested in how you generate them and how you think about them – what is your method for working with rhythm?***

The entire first movement is based on the juxtaposition of three mostly independent layers. The rhythmic-harmonic structure is central: individual points, *secco* chords, *tutti*, which are separated by pauses of varying durations. These durations are not determined by any external factors; they are a compositional choice. The principal aim is for the individual points to be spaced far enough apart so they do not seem like a repetitive pattern, yet the listener can still recognise their correlation. We also hear shorter entries that appear as if in different tempos, but they are always just different phases of the same material. At the opening, for instance, we hear a treble motif played by the piccolo, first violin, piano, and marimba. It returns half a minute later, shifted into another phase of development. The complex rhythmic structures you mentioned might

be present, but everything is composed and conceived more or less intuitively, with the original structure returning in the reprise in a compressed form and accompanied by a kind of caricature of itself. The result is a polyrhythm that is quite complex within the context of my music.

***Die Hintergedanken also contains sections that incorporate elements of indeterminacy. Why use chance? What is your objective? Is the motivation connected to player psychology?***

It does relate to the musicians' psychology, as well as to my enjoyment when a piece – to use a popular cliché – steps out of its comfort zone. You have a piece in a particular mode; the form and structure are fixed, and at a certain point, there is a rupture, a breaking point, and the piece transforms into something else, the form of the narrative changes. The goal is for something qualitatively different to occur. It is not merely a different kind of instructions – rather, the aim is for the players to engage with the material in a new way. The closest parallel for me is dream optics, deceleration, trance, strange interactions and bizarre counterpoints, a different sense of timing, something I couldn't compose. In two places, the piece is intended to transcend itself, creating a somewhat incomprehensible episode reminiscent of the poetics found in Buñuel's late films.

***The piece concludes with such a passage – a courageous decision.***

It's a risk, but I hope I'll be able to explain this philosophy of deceleration and acceptance of chance to the musicians.

***Did you work with narrative techniques when composing the piece?***

The piece contains three texts by Franz Kafka, but even the title specifies that it is written *with* and not *on* or *setting* texts by Franz Kafka, which is important because I like working with text in a slightly different manner. Moreover, I began writing the piece without knowing it would contain any text. After a month or two, following the idea that the piece should transcend its own framework at some point, outside the playing field, I arrived at the need for a breaking point, which could be either performative or textual. I began searching for an appropriate source. The goal was to find a text that doesn't tell a story, doesn't narrate, that isn't poetry. A text that speaks of creation itself and the operation of the artist or author in the world. In the end, I returned to Kafka, whom I always wanted to set to music. I remember in my first year at the academy, when I came to my teacher, Svatopluk Havelka, excited about Kafka like every twenty-year-old, he gently dismissed me and told me everyone sets Kafka. This was truly the case in his experience, as after the 1963 "Franz Kafka conference" at the Liblice chateau, where Kafka's work was rehabilitated, the door opened, and all progressive composers began using texts by Kafka. And so it happened that I never worked with Kafka and now, after this long search, I discovered it was exactly what I was looking for – his diaries and aphorisms contain passages that precisely fit my feelings and the challenges of creative work in general. I selected three texts, two longer pieces and a shorter one, which are used in the original German. They serve as intermezzos – they do not provide narrative as such. About halfway through the piece, there is a pseudo-theatrical scene in which



the pianist Hermann Kretzschmar stops playing, turns to face the audience, and begins reading one of the texts while accompanying himself on an out-of-tune zither. This episode might evoke someone sitting in their kitchen after dinner playing songs, as zithers used to be common in many households. So it's a simulation of domestic musicking, but he is reading a text that is relatively expressive and concerns a slightly different topic, resulting in a strange, somewhat surreal situation.

***You explain various extra-musical meanings in the score, which I find interesting. Why do you consider it important to convey this information to the conductor and why is it significant to you?***

This was essentially my first time attempting something like this. I believe an ensemble of this kind requires virtually no technical explanation – they can really play virtually anything. My notation contains nothing mysterious or unplayable, except perhaps quarter-tones. Seeing as they could easily sight-read the music and most things would be ready after the first rehearsal, I wanted them to have the opportunity to think about something, for the piece to develop in a different direction. I knew I would attend the rehearsals, but there is always precious little time in those situations. Therefore,



PHOTO: ZUZANA LAZAROVÁ

I wanted to share a bit about the background of the piece with the musicians, although it was nothing extra-musical. It was about describing the given situation and perhaps subtly influencing their thinking and phrasing. That's why I provided this information to both the conductor and the ensemble. I wanted to offer them an open space for interpretation – they can play differently from what I imagined, and yet it can be better or just as good.

***We'll stay on the topic of text a little longer. Your programme note includes a quote by Robert Bresson stating that image and sound must not support each other; each works in its own space, like in a relay race. You often work with text and even say it saved you during this compositional process. Why is it so important to you?***

Perhaps because it is a different structure, it also has a different narrative. I find thinking about music through the prism of text purifying, and it is one of the ways I move forward in my compositional thinking. It's not that I use text every time, but I use it often and almost always try to treat it with an emphasis on it being a separate structure that maintains its autonomy in relation to the music. When text is set to music, the problem often is that both the music and the text suffer, with the structural elements of both components weakened in the final result. What interests me much more is the space between the two; the distance between text and sound, rather than the effort to simply append notes to letters.

***It seems that you often select texts by decadent authors or literature that explores themes of futility. This might include Kafka, the enfant terrible of 20th-century Czech poetry Egon Bondy, or your collaborations with the legendary dissident group The Plastic People of the Universe and the British trio The Tiger Lillies. Do you have a natural inclination toward darker forms of expression?***

Probably, but I don't really see a shared language there. Kafka is very different from Bondy. I think the texts I use are connected by a different element: they tend to summarise, inform, or rely on hyperbole. I'm not really referring to Bondy here, but perhaps to the opera we made with Jiří Adámek Austerlitz, *Rules of Polite Behaviour in Modern Society*, for which the libretto is simply a list of more or less absurd etiquette rules. The great advantage of this text is that it creates a structure, which is therefore mostly determined in advance. It also has no connotations, no narrative, nothing that could disrupt the musical code or the musical form of narrative. The only impression one might have while listening is that it is absurd, which arises from the contrast between the dry form of narration and the bizarre or even horrifying consequences that follow. For me as a composer, this kind of text is an advantage, because I can provide contrasting music that illuminates it from a different perspective.

## **And Bondy?**

It's true that with Bondy, I mostly chose short rhyming poems. Bondy himself called them "říkanky", or nursery rhymes, and said they had no value. The advantage there – which is also present in the music of the Plastic People with lyrics by Bondy – that the text is so banal and naive it seems almost absurd to analyse it at a deeper level. When you add music that is complex and dark, the result is quite an interesting contrast. What I appreciate is when words and music operate in separate realms, as Bresson suggests, allowing for multiple interpretations.

## ***You often find inspiration in traditions beyond European art music. What do you hope to achieve when classically trained performers play this music?***

There is definitely an inspiration, but I can't quite say what it is anymore, because I loved jazz long before I even knew what "contemporary classical music" was. I dare say it runs deeper within me than Tchaikovsky and Mahler combined. Moreover, many of these inspirations have been so thoroughly filtered over the years that I can, I hope, present them as my own music. The only direct musical reference I make in the notes to this new piece is that the secco chords in the first movement should sound like Thelonious Monk. This is intended as an inspiration for the players – a particular way of phrasing, somewhere between tenuto and staccato, very sharp. Most of my inspirations probably come from other genres, but I no longer perceive them that way – for me, this is filtered material. It's like when the sea washes up a piece of wood that looks completely different from the original that fell into the ocean on the other side of the planet.

As far as the performance is concerned, I have no concerns regarding Ensemble Modern. A composer should begin with what the players are able to play. When writing for inexperienced musicians, it is not appropriate to expect them to play offbeats or swung eighth notes, that's obvious. But Ensemble Modern consists of musicians who have experience with diverse musical styles. The music is not intended to sound like jazz; there are no improvised solos or chord symbols. It is only in the phrasing that they occasionally venture into unfamiliar territory. For example, two weeks ago, they collaborated with the NDR Bigband in Hamburg, not only performing but also contributing compositions. Sadly, the group's trombonist, Uwe Dierksen, passed away this year – he was a phenomenal jazz musician, as you can hear on their albums dedicated to the music of Frank Zappa. Therefore, with this ensemble, I have no concerns at all.

## ***Do you aim to cultivate a personal style, and is this important to you? Where would you place yourself on the Smolka-Šťastný axis, with Martin Smolka representing a composer with a clearly recognisable style and aesthetic, while Jaroslav Šťastný aka Peter Graham consciously avoids stylistic consistency?***

I believe I can say, without false modesty, that after all these years, I have developed my own musical language. However, I did not consciously set out to create it. Rather, it emerges naturally from certain compositional patterns and my working methods. I also strive to continuously disrupt my style. I used to love a book by Lev Shestov,

*The Apotheosis of Groundlessness*, in which the Shestov uses short aphorisms to describe the creative process and the nature of artistic thinking. He makes a radical claim: as soon as a writer develops a style that readers can immediately recognise, it marks the beginning of the end. While it is impossible to constantly change one's language, there is some truth to the idea that when a composer begins recycling their work and writing the same pieces without any internal drive, it becomes evident in the music. At that point, the work becomes a serialised product, and the artist's creative journey is effectively over. Nevertheless, I do have some established methods which, when considered together, can be regarded as a style. Regarding the axis, I think that two decades ago, I was closer to the Smolka end, whereas today, I find myself nearer to Šťastný.

***How have your methodology and approach evolved over the past twenty years?***

I don't believe my approach has changed in any fundamental way. Perhaps I try to be more diligent. During my conservatory days, I wrote pieces heavily influenced by my compositional heroes – Reich, Ligeti, Bartók. After I began studying at HAMU (the Music and Dance Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague) with Professor Havelka, I entered a purification phase that I still consider a great inspiration to this day. Havelka was very focused on this process. He never forced me to write in styles I found uninteresting. His principal idea was to write simply – focusing only on what is essential and removing anything superfluous, working with silence and interstices, with harmonic and melodic purity. This is more complicated than it sounds because, to avoid producing something utterly banal, you have to work quite hard. I still adhere to this mindset, but over the years, I have tried to fulfil it using more heterogeneous music. However, I continue to work with a limited number of motifs – there is even a cut-off point after which I introduce no new material and only develop relationships between elements the listener has already heard. I increasingly of the opinion that it is not important for a piece to be stylistically unified in the sense of homogeneous material. I can have four building blocks, each completely different from the others, and still create a cohesive piece. What matters is thoroughly examining each block to ensure it is exactly what I want to write.

***How do you view your older pieces? Do you see any progress? Are you making a step forward with each new piece?***

Sometimes it's progress; sometimes it's regression – every piece is certainly not a step forward. Rather, I view them retrospectively as a series. Three or four pieces share something in common, and then I move on to new territories, although I occasionally return to a principle I haven't used in twenty years. It varies. There are pieces I do not wish to hear at all, and some I enjoy revisiting – this also depends on the quality of the performances and recordings. Some pieces were played only once, with an unsatisfying performance – bad luck. I frequently return to pieces that were performed well.

***As a lecturer at HAMU, do you observe any trends among your students? How do they differ from how you were as students?***

A few years ago, I felt that my teaching colleagues and I in the composition department shared something in common. Several pieces were written that had something in common, and that made me happy – I believe that if a group of composers today emerged with a common style, it would be something of a miracle and it would bring me joy. I do not observe a shared style among our students, but they are far more advanced in notation. We emphasise good engraving practice in our teaching, and the students are generally much more precise than we were, even if their music is different. When I began studying at HAMU, I still wrote by hand, and it took years before I mastered certain aspects of notation. We rarely discussed this with Havelka, as we had other priorities. Our students often use extended techniques they discover themselves, and they frequently find their own sound sources. Recently, several pieces that work with homogeneous material; events separated by silence in a very concentrated manner. I see this as a continuation of repetitive music, or perhaps Feldman. However, this might only reflect the past few months; something different may emerge with the new cohort of students.

***Do you feel that the Czech contemporary music world is unique in some way, distinct from the rest of the world?***

I'm not sure. I don't have enough data to make a comparison – I do travel occasionally, but these are random probes rather than a coherent, overarching perspective. I do think our scene is very democratic; everyone writes something different and we respect each other despite these differences. I find this variety at HAMU very beneficial – there is certainly no dominant opinion, as well there shouldn't be. I think this is a healthy state.

***We began by discussing the futile and intangible nature of the creative process. How do you see the role of the composer of contemporary or experimental music in today's world? Do you feel compelled to express your views on the state of the world? Do you believe that music is keeping pace with society and responding to its problems?***

I believe most of us reflect on current events to varying degrees. The challenge is that music takes a long time to create, so this reflection requires time, whereas contemporary developments – partly due to social media – are highly dynamic and accelerated, making it impossible to respond in real time or with only a short delay. For me, it is important to reflect on contemporary developments in a structural and compositional manner, much like Heiner Goebbels does. For example, by incorporating unrelated parallel narratives that occur simultaneously at certain points in a piece. I find it fascinating to explore the relationships between such narratives – I find this a highly relevant approach. That is why I think a composition can encompass multiple worlds without losing coherence or functionality. I express my commentary on the contemporary world structurally and internally. While I have no objection in principle to writing a piece based on a text that addresses a topical theme, it feels more natural for me to first experience something and then incorporate it into a work. Consequently, the piece may no longer be topical by the time it is completed.

***What is your relationship with experimentation? How do you perceive the role of the experimental composer? Is it important for you to create something entirely new?***

I believe experimentation is an indispensable component of creative work, but it can take various forms. For me, experimentation does not necessarily mean using scientific methodology to discover something new. Instead, I explore relationships between elements that initially seem unrelated and strive to think contextually. I am not a conceptual composer and likely never will be. I am unable to create anything extra-musical because I feel that music cannot narrate anything other than the music itself; the inter-relationships between musical structures. If these are governed by something external, it could potentially harm them. To me, experimentation involves transplanting various idioms or structures into new contexts and attempting to establish new relationships between them. Sometimes this succeeds; other times, it does not. Experimentation is certainly an important aspect of creative work, but it is also clear that it does not always result in something entirely new. Experiments are called experiments not because they always yield results, but because they allow you to try. Even if it fails, it remains a vital part of experimentation.

***Western art music has always responded to specific demands and social contexts. Do you think it still holds significance today? How do you see the future of contemporary concert music?***

That's an excellent question. I cannot make any predictions, but it is clear that the composer's role is changing radically. Composers today occupy a different position than those a century ago, no question. This means the relationship to concert life as such is also changing. I don't think concert life should cease to exist, nor do I believe that will happen. There will still be many people who want to listen to symphony orchestras or chamber ensembles, and there will also be many programming directors who will continue spicing up the Classical-Romantic tradition with something new. Nevertheless, I feel that a composer is no longer limited to writing for these types of ensembles. A composer can also be a sound engineer, a performer, or a sonic artist who uses the studio creatively. We are no longer dependent on concert life – there are many ways to be a composer, and these roles can also be combined. I dare not make any predictions about where this broadening of possibilities will lead us in the future.