

Alena Hron



Two Conductors Taking

The Czech Republic has had its first-ever chief conductor since the 2024/25 season: **Alena Hron**, who took up the post at the South Czech Philharmonic. Since the start of this season, the West Bohemian Symphony Orchestra Mariánské Lázně has also appointed its first chief conductor, with **Michaela Rózsa Růžicková** at the helm. To offer our readers a closer look at contemporary musical life in the Czech Republic, we invited both of them for a conversation. The paradox, however, is that the most interesting way to interview the country's first two female principal conductors is not to make it an interview about the country's first two female principal conductors. So we set aside the question of women on the podium and took the conversation in a rather different direction.

Michaela Rózsa Růžicková



the Long View

THE PROFESSION

To begin with, could you explain the difference between a conductor and a principal or chief conductor? How do you understand that distinction?

AH: For me, the essential difference is one of responsibility. As chief conductor, I'm much more responsible for the overall quality of the orchestra and the institution as a whole than I would be as a guest conductor. That being said, the scope of that responsibility varies from one orchestra to another. In some places the chief conductor decides almost everything; elsewhere the role is largely confined to looking after their own concerts. It's also a much bigger commitment. A chief conductor wants to grow with the orchestra, live up to expectations, and build something together.

MRR: A conductor joins an orchestra for a particular project; a chief conductor builds a long-term relationship with it – and stays long enough to live with the consequences of their decisions. It isn't simply a conductor with a bigger baton, but one with a longer horizon of responsibility. Alongside preparing concerts, the chief conductor helps shape the orchestra's artistic identity, its programming, and its way of working,

often contributes to personnel decisions, and represents the orchestra externally. A guest conductor can bring a powerful impulse; a chief conductor has to turn those individual impulses into a coherent story.

At the same time, the role of a chief conductor isn't just about music – it's also about working with people. Do you have any background in psychology, communication, or leadership that helps you work with an orchestra whose members are often highly sensitive and perceptive people? If you had to give a rough estimate, what proportion of a chief conductor's work is music, and what proportion is interpersonal relationships?

AH: I don't have any formal training in psychology, but this aspect of my work has always fascinated me, and I explored it in my final projects both at the conservatoire and at HAMU (the Music Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague). I do have to say, though, that it played a much bigger role in the amateur ensembles where I started out. That's where you really build a collective, and I loved that. I thought I'd be able to carry the same approach into professional orchestras. In reality, though, I hit a wall at first. I was used to directness and a fairly irreverent sense of humour. Suddenly I found myself in an environment where people seemed to take themselves very seriously, where many things were taken personally, and where I realised I had to become quite a diplomat. I came to understand that it's a completely different mindset when you spend hours rehearsing every day than when you meet friends once a week to make music together. Being too personal isn't really desirable in rehearsals with a professional orchestra – it's very thin ice. That doesn't mean I stop perceiving the people in front of me, but I connect with them more non-verbally, through gesture and eye contact. And when I speak, I speak only about the music and the things directly related to it. With professional orchestras, you're often only there for a short time, so there isn't much opportunity to build personal relationships. I usually spend about five days with an orchestra. As chief conductor, of course, it's different – I keep coming back, and we gradually get to know each other on a more personal level. That's lovely, but it also requires a certain amount of caution, so that, for example, rehearsal discipline doesn't begin to slip.

MRR: I studied psychology and pedagogy at HAMU, and I still draw on both these courses in my work. I've also been involved in the international Comenius leadership programme for almost fifteen years, and I've long been interested in psychology, communication, and group dynamics. Then, of course, there's everyday practice – an orchestra is an extraordinarily precise, highly amplified detector of ambiguity, insecurity, and ego. What percentage is music, and what percentage is interpersonal relationships? I'd say a hundred and a hundred. (smiles) You can't make music without people, and you can't work well with them unless you have a clear musical vision. Excel wouldn't be happy with that, but it holds true in practice. (laughs)

I am much more interested in the generational dimension of the relationship between an orchestra and a conductor than in gender. Do you think an orchestra responds differently to a young conductor than to an older, more experienced one?

AH: As I suggested earlier, the difference really is considerable. Young conductors are in a very difficult position. They stand in front of an orchestra of professional musicians who have played with many other conductors and have had opportunity to build up a wealth of experience. The young conductor doesn't have that experience yet, but the job still requires them to bring something that will inspire and motivate the musicians; convince them musically. Yet conducting is the only way to gain that experience. It's a catch 22! That's why it's so important to find opportunities for young conductors while they're still studying and give them as much contact with the realities of the profession as possible.

MRR: I think the main difference is how much authority the orchestra grants you at the outset. An older, more experienced conductor may be given a certain amount of trust on credit; a young conductor has to "earn" it – and very quickly at that. But neither age nor youth is automatically an advantage or a disadvantage. Experience can bring calm, perspective, and economy; youth can bring energy, openness, and the courage to try things differently. In the end, an orchestra quickly senses whether you can hear what's happening, whether you know what you want to achieve, and whether you respect its time. At that point, your date of birth ceases to matter.

What is the most common mistake young conductors make at their first rehearsal with a professional orchestra?

AH: I think young conductors can be held back by two things. Either they try to win the orchestra over by appearing too self-assured, or they cannot help but make their uncertainty all too obvious. Finding the right balance is enormously difficult. You need humility – towards the musicians in front of you and the music you're going to perform together – but you also need to project confidence, or the musicians won't follow you.

MRR: I notice the excessive self-confidence much more: the urge to show the orchestra how much they know. Young conductors often feel they have to put every piece of knowledge on display. They talk a lot, stop the music too often, and correct things that would have sorted themselves out on a second run-through. A professional orchestra doesn't need a lecture on the score. It needs a clear musical vision, a precise gesture, and information that will actually change the sound. The first rehearsal isn't a job interview, even if it sometimes feels like one.

And what makes an orchestra trust a conductor after the first five minutes of a rehearsal?

AH: I think it's precisely the combination I just described. A conductor must be completely authentic and utterly convincing, and thereby motivating and inspiring. They also have to be able to communicate their vision clearly through their gestures. You really can tell within a few minutes.

MRR: Preparation, calm, and the ability to really listen. It quickly becomes clear whether a conductor's gestures match what they're asking for, whether they stop at

the right moment, identify the real problem, and offer a solution that works. It's also important to let the orchestra play, because trust isn't built through the sheer number of words you say. And then there's ordinary human decency: precision without humiliation, high expectations without theatrics, and the ability to take responsibility when something doesn't work. Authority that doesn't need to make a show of itself is often the most convincing.

So, a young conductor sets aside their ego and uncertainty, and a kind of musical chemistry develops with the orchestra. But there's still a great deal of work ahead of them that most audiences never realise is involved...

AH: That mountain of work is the hardest part. People have some idea that conducting isn't just waving your arms about. But they probably don't realise how much study this work demands before the first rehearsal with the orchestra. The conductor has to hear the finished result in their head before that rehearsal. Of course, it takes shape during rehearsals, but by then, the conductor needs to know everything that's happening in both the music and the score. I use those two terms deliberately: the score, the written notation, is one thing – reading every note and every kind of instruction. The music is another; it has to be born from the score, to emerge from it. (smiles) Simply playing the notes isn't enough.

MRR: For me, the hardest thing is hearing what's actually happening while holding an ideal version of the music in my head. At every moment, you're comparing what you hear with what you want to hear. You're reading several bars ahead, communicating with your hands, eyes, and breath, and deciding which of ten problems matters most right now. The audience sees someone waving their arms. Inside, it's a bit like air traffic control, except that instead of planes, you're coordinating rhythm, colour, psychology, and emotion. And perhaps the hardest thing is carrying your doubts without letting them become the orchestra's problem.

AH: You put that very well, Miša!

We live in an age of considerable acceleration, which also affects how we listen to and perform music. How has the conducting profession changed since you were students? From the outside, there seems to be less hierarchy and more communication, partnership, and dialogue. Is that really the case?

AH: That's a fairly accurate description. I'd add modern leadership, based on positive motivation and a collaborative approach, in place of the directive, power-based model of the past. It's interesting to see what different orchestras are used to and what they respond to. I think that varies not only over time, but also from place to place. Further west, what I call modern leadership is beginning to work much better.

MRR: Exactly. The hierarchy has changed, and there's more dialogue, which I think is right. Authority no longer comes simply from standing on the podium; it has to rest on competence, consistency, and trust. Partnership doesn't mean putting every phrase to a vote, though. A conductor should listen, respond, and make space for others, but ultimately, they have to make decisions and take responsibility for them. The scope of the profession has changed, too: alongside the music, there's

more planning, communication with audiences, education, media work, and public representation. It used to be enough to study the score. Now you're sometimes expected to study it, explain it, make a video about it, and ideally look natural while doing so. (smiles)

VISION

You've both worked abroad. What professional habits or sources of inspiration have you brought back, and what would you like to bring into the Czech musical environment?

AH: I don't think it's possible to generalise like that. Every country is different, and orchestras abroad vary considerably. I also see major differences between orchestras here. What is more common abroad, though, is the positive, collegial style of leadership that people there respond to. Unfortunately, some orchestras here have yet to move beyond the conservative model in which they need someone to be rather hard on them to bring out their best. Of course, that doesn't apply across the board, and I think much of it is subconscious – this authoritarian model is simply ingrained in us from our earliest years at school, and often from our upbringing at home, too. As for habits I'd like to bring into the Czech musical environment, it would be wonderful if everyone – not only the conductor, but every player – arrived at the first rehearsal fully prepared. I sometimes miss that here, though again, it certainly doesn't apply across the board. I've experienced what happens when everyone is prepared: the rehearsal process immediately moves to another level, and by the concert we can get much further than when technical and other problems that could have been dealt with individually hold us up at the start.

MRR: Working internationally has taught me above all that there's no universal code of communication. What sounds pleasantly direct in one place may sound harsh in another; what is polite in one culture may be difficult to read in another. You have to learn to express what you want clearly while remaining aware of whom you're speaking to. What I'd like to bring into the Czech musical environment is a combination of high standards, efficiency, and psychological safety: the freedom to take risks, ask questions, and make mistakes without lowering the bar. Respect and high expectations are not mutually exclusive. They need each other.

In five years' time, what would you like people to see as the defining qualities of the South Bohemian Philharmonic and the West Bohemian Symphony Orchestra?

AH: I'm now beginning my third and final season at the head of the orchestra, so its future direction isn't entirely in my hands. Throughout my time there, however, programming at the South Bohemian Philharmonic has remained the responsibility of the institution's management, which aims to offer a varied and unusual repertoire alongside popular composers and better-known works. I've tried to strike that balance in my own concert programmes, too, covering as broad a range of musical genres as possible – in my case, primarily within classical music.

MRR: I'd like people to say of the West Bohemian Symphony Orchestra: here is an orchestra with a long history that isn't stuck in the past. Its defining qualities should

be a refined, vibrant, flexible sound, a clear and opinionated programming, and a close relationship with its audience. I want local people to feel that it's their orchestra, visitors to see it as one of the city's most distinctive voices, and the musicians to feel that we're writing together the next chapter, rather than guarding a museum.

That naturally leads to your repertoire priorities. What are they?

AH: I've tried to programme lesser-known music that deserves to be heard and recognised. Among Czech composers, this has included Vítězslava Kaprálová, Jan Novák, and Ervín Schulhoff; from abroad, Alfred Schnittke, Grażyna Bacewicz, and Ottorino Respighi.

MRR: The Classical and Romantic repertoire forms a firm foundation for me, including the waltz and operetta traditions. People rightly expect that of a spa orchestra – just as they expect Viennese orchestras not only to play their traditional repertoire often, but also to play it exceptionally well. It's the foundation of our identity and the music through which an orchestra can best develop a shared language and sound. Alongside this repertoire, I want to make sustained room for twentieth- and twenty-first-century music, Czech and Slovak repertoire, less frequently performed works, and music by living composers. I'm drawn to music that breathes, tells a story, and has a theatrical quality – that's where my experience as a conductor and singer naturally meet. Family and educational projects should also be an important part of our identity: not a compulsory sideline, but a genuine investment in future audiences.

Since you've both mentioned composers whose works are rarely performed, I have to ask: if you could choose one composer whose music deserves to be heard more often, or rediscovered, who would it be?

AH: Sláva Vorlová (*see our interview in this issue of CMQ – editor's note*). She was an exceptionally prolific composer in the 20th century who is almost unknown, quite unjustly. I'd like to explore her work more deeply.

MRR: Eugen Suchoň. He's an essential figure in Slovakia, of course, but his orchestral music is performed surprisingly rarely outside the Slovak context. It has striking colour, strong architecture, dramatic momentum, and a language deeply rooted in its own culture without sounding provincial. I think a fine performance of his *Metamorphoses*, for example, could reach a much wider audience than people often assume.

Conversely, if you could remove one work or composer from concert programmes worldwide for five years, who or what would you choose?

AH: Oh, I wouldn't dare to do that. (smiles) It's wonderful that music is so varied and that everyone can find something they love in it. I could mention a personal dislike, but I can't even think of one at the moment. I usually find something to appreciate in any music. Perhaps I'll eventually have my fill of something, but right now I feel as though I'm soaking it all up like a sponge.

MRR: I wouldn't remove any composers, but I'd happily send what I call "programming on autopilot" on a five-year creative sabbatical. I mean the habit

of returning to the same handful of works simply because they're safe choices and sell out the hall. Beethoven, Dvořák, and Tchaikovsky usually aren't the problem – the problem is performing them without asking why this work, why now, and why in this particular combination. Great works aren't tired. Sometimes it's only our reasons for playing them that are.

Let's leave any dislikes aside, then, and return to your favourite composers. Give your imagination free rein: if you could invite any composer, past or present, for a glass of wine, who would it be, and what would you want to talk about?

AH: That's a difficult question for me. I usually think of things I'd like to ask particular composers while I'm studying their works. I'd certainly like to talk to Vítězslava Kaprálová – I've studied her music quite closely, and there are many things I'd like to discuss with her over the score. But I'd also be fascinated just to chat about life. Then there's Antonín Dvořák. From what I've learned about him through books and his music, I feel quite close to him in temperament, and I'd simply like to spend some time in his company. And I'd find a conversation with one of the great masters of an earlier age enormously interesting. Beethoven, for instance. I'd love to know what he would make of the near-deification of his music and its supposed untouchability. What would he think of the different interpretations that have appeared over the years and continue to appear? Would he insist on one particular approach, or welcome the variety? That brings a host of other questions to mind, but we'd be here all day. (smiles)

MRR: I'd invite Mozart, but instead of wine I'd serve him properly chilled champagne – I have a feeling a drink with bubbles and a touch of cheekiness would suit him. First, I'd ask him about tempos, articulation, and how much freedom he really expected performers to take. Then I'd want to know how he managed to write female operatic characters with such astonishing psychological precision. After the second glass, of course, we'd get on to all the Viennese gossip. It would be a shame to waste an opportunity like that on professional conversation alone. (laughs)

GENDER

The fact that, within a few months of one another, you became the first women to lead professional orchestras in Czechia cannot be overlooked. Do you see this primarily as a historic milestone, or would you rather it ceased to be a talking point in a few years' time?

AH: Perhaps it could be a milestone precisely because it will cease to be a talking point. (smiles) We're in a slightly awkward period: the attention is needed so that people get used to seeing women in these roles and stop treating it as something exotic, and so that other women are encouraged to pursue conducting. At the same time, we don't want to be known or covered in the media simply because of our gender. We want that recognition to come from our artistic qualities, our achievements, and so on – the same reasons male conductors are known. Those two things pull somewhat against each other, which is why I call this period awkward, although I'm fully aware that we have it much easier today than women conductors did in the past. But we need to go through this stage to change how people see the profession.

MRR: As Alena says, both can be true at once. It is a historic milestone, and it makes sense to label it: the first person to take on any role shows others that the door really does exist and can be opened. At the same time, I'd like this fact to become a footnote as soon as possible, rather than the main definition of our work. I'm proud of it, but I don't want "woman" to be the most interesting adjective before "conductor". The ideal result of breaking new ground is that, after a while, it stops looking groundbreaking and starts looking like ordinary life.

Let's give our imaginations free rein again and picture the year 2040. Czech orchestras are led by men and women, and nobody finds it remarkable. What had to change for a conductor's gender to cease to be a talking point?

AH: It would have taken a certain amount of effort in the 2020s and 2030s, and some attention paid to the profession and to the women working in it. I think it's a little like any other campaign. I don't want this to sound as though I'm asking for attention – I'm not particularly comfortable with it, and I'd much rather spend my time entirely with my family or at work. But I do think it's important to talk publicly about my profession, partly to help people understand it, as we're doing in this interview. It's also important that we remain as natural and authentic as possible in these roles. We're still not very used to seeing a wide range of personalities on the conductor's podium, regardless of gender. If things really are that good in 2040, then the conditions for combining the profession with motherhood and family care must also have changed – childcare options, flexibility around rehearsal schedules, and so on. In any case, it would be lovely! I'm a little afraid you're being too optimistic, but I very much hope I'm wrong. (smiles)

MRR: Above all, there would have to be enough women conducting for it to become unremarkable. One woman leading an orchestra is an event; ten women are part of the profession, and each can finally be judged as an individual rather than as a representative of their entire gender. We need visible role models, fair opportunities, ordinary conditions for combining a career and family life, and the same standards applied to ambition, decisiveness, and making mistakes. The language needs to change, too: a girl with a baton should not automatically be described as a brave exception, but simply as a conducting student.

If I may, I would sum it up thus: "Gender doesn't matter. Gender does matter. The aim is for it not to matter one day." And I'll end with a slightly provocative question: if you listened anonymously to an audio recording of a rehearsal, with no picture, do you think you could tell whether the conductor was a man or a woman?

AH: No. Unless you could hear the conductor's voice during the rehearsal, that is. (smiles)

MRR: I'd also answer "no", but if I may, I'd like to expand on that a little. I think we can recognise an individual performer's style, but not their gender. Beethoven sounds different with Karajan, with Dudamel, and with Marin Alsop – not because two are men and one is a woman, but because each brings a different temperament, experience, and perspective. There are gentle men, authoritative women, and restrained and theatrical people of every kind. We may hear a conductor's personality in a recording, but I don't think we can tell whether that person is a man or a woman.



Alena Hron

has been chief conductor of the South Bohemian Philharmonic since the 2024/25 season, becoming the first woman in history to lead a Czech professional symphony orchestra. She studied in Prague, Oslo, and Zurich, holds a prestigious Taki Alsop Conducting Fellowship, and regularly guest conducts leading orchestras both in Czechia and abroad.



Michaela Rózsa Růžicková

is a conductor and coloratura soprano. She assumed the post of chief conductor of the West Bohemian Symphony Orchestra Mariánské Lázně in the 2026/27 season. Alongside her concert work, she is extensively involved in studio productions. Her experience as a singer shapes her conducting, particularly her approach to phrasing, breath, and musical drama. Her work naturally brings together the classical repertoire, new ideas, and educational projects.