

# Encountering Inspiration

PORTRAIT

## An Interview with Tomáš Vášek

Tomáš Vášek (1957) began to play the piano when he was eight years old. At the Prague Conservatoire and later at the Academy of Arts he was a pupil of Valentína Kameníková, Josef Páleníček and Zdeněk Jílek. While a student he was successful in several Czech and international competitions: he won the Janina Nawrocká Special Price (Chopin Competition in Warsaw 1975), 2nd Prize and Prize for the Interpretation of Smetana (Smetana Competition in Hradec Králové 1978) and 2nd Prize in the five-discipline competition at the 1992 Vienna International Music Competition. His most recent successes include 2nd Prize and J. S. Bach Prize at the "Ibla Piano Competition" in Ragusa, Sicily (1994) and 5th Prize at the "Concours Milosz Magin" in Paris (1995). He has performed in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Egypt, Hungary, Russia, Bulgaria, Germany, France, Holland and Austria.

What do you regard as the summit of your concert career so far?

"My appearance last year in the Prague

Spring Festival with the recital 'Alois Hába, his Pupils and Interpreters' and the recital in the Strings of Autumn Cycle. These are the most important concerts I have given on home ground as yet. As far as concerts abroad are concerned - my appearance in the Vienna Musikverein. I played a Grieg programme there two days running."

Your autumn recital was also part of the *Musica Iudaica* Festival, which features exclusively Jewish composers. Recently, you seem to have been focusing deliberately on the music of Jewish composers. How did that come about?

"Shortly after November [The Velvet Revolution], in 1990, I received an offer to perform at a concert in Paris as part of a series of appearances by Czech artists for Radio France. In fact, it was because someone had dropped out, but I had never had a recital in the west before, and so despite the murderously short notice I agreed. The organizers had specific demands for repertoire - particular works by Jewish composers. That was how I got to know the superb sonatas of Gideon Klein,

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Viktor Ullmann and Karel Reiner...Offers then slowly began to pile up in 1992 and it all led to presentation of Schulhoff's *Jazz Partita* at the first year of the *Musica Iudaica* Festival, and later to studio performance of all Schulhoff's jazz-inspired piano works for Supraphon."

What is your attitude to Schulhoff?

"For me, Schulhoff for a long time meant simply a composer inspired by jazz. It was only in connection with the recordings for Supraphon that I began to consider his music a little more deeply. In the 1920s Schulhoff 'dashed off' three piano sonatas relatively quickly, one after the other. I say 'dashed off' because he was also a concert pianist, and in some places the approach is

pretty mechanical. But it is still wonderful music. The first sonata is a kind of shaggy neoclassicism, and the other two more impressionist. The third was inspired by Moravia, and it's probably no coincidence that this was one of the three of his piano compositions published here. To the sonatas we added suites. Schulhoff wrote three of these, too,



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but the first has not been found yet, and so the recording includes the second, relatively simple suite, in a neoclassical spirit similar to the first sonata, and the third, which was written for the one-armed (left-handed) Czech pianist Otakar Hollmann. It is very rewarding and communicative music, but since the prime necessity is for the music to be strongly played, and for one hand it is immensely difficult to be continually flying up and down the whole keyboard, on the CD we honestly admitted that it was 'played with both hands'. A third title, just coming out now, has completed recording of Schulhoff's piano works from 1919 to his death. It contains compositions from various phases and is very diverse in terms of style; for example one cycle for which there wasn't enough room on the title with music inspired by jazz, and the works that Schulhoff wrote at the time when he was completely committed to communism - *Optimistic Composition* and *To the Czech Workers*. It is interesting that in these pieces the polyphony is very mechanically conceived, while in compositions from the period inspired perhaps by Schoenberg as well, and also the neo-baroque - in the cycle *11 Inventions* - the polyphony is beautiful. We also included two cycles that Schulhoff himself only played once in his life. He scrawled them down illegibly and the Schulhoff's biographer Josef Bek has painstakingly reconstructed them. Luckily we know how to work out a solution for disputed places in the music, because we know, for example, that Schulhoff, however original he was, loved repeating himself, literally. I think that the reconstruction was worth it. Even though it is the third recording, it doesn't give the impression of scraping the bottom of the barrel, but is musically coherent."

*What is about the music of Jewish composers that attracts you?*

"There are very particular intonations in it, a little like Gypsy music, and often progressions of a minor harmonic order. It is immensely melodious, and full of warm feeling. I am very emotional myself, I incline towards romanticism, especially, and so it's obvious that such music should resonate in my soul."

*You are well known for always putting everything you have into the study and interpretation of music. What motivates you?*  
"I try to do everything I do properly, and to fight for the music I play."

*What does that mean?*

"There are works that as it were play themselves. But there are others that don't offer themselves so easily. A friend who likes and admires you dedicates a piece to you, asking you to play it, or you study

a compulsory piece for a competition, or you have to perform a specific work requested. In these cases you have to find some inner structure or beauty for yourself, and if it sometimes happens, for example with pieces for a competition which are not usually of the highest level, that you can't find anything, then you have no choice but to try and create beauty there. You have to try and merge with the composition and grasp it. There's also an element of the artist's honour in making something of the work even at the price of putting something more into it than the composer did himself."

*Although romantic works predominate in your repertoire you are known as a performer willing and able to devote himself to contemporary music as well, often of a kind that is very distant from romanticism. In your time you have played with the Agon Orchestra.*

"That was a brief and not very important episode. It was one of those fulfilments of a dream. As the Czech poet Jiří Wolker said, we kill dreams by fulfilling them, and I even had a bad conscience about it, because I had the feeling that Agon was a group of enthusiasts, while I was not enthusiastic about that music and I felt as though I didn't belong there."

*But it looked as if you were engaged in it body and soul.*

"That was a matter of the 'fighting for music' that I mentioned. I have to look like that; it is my obligation to the public. But the truth is, that my cultivation of 20th-century music was the most visible thing about me over the last ten years. During my studies, with very rare exceptions I scarcely approached contemporary music at all, and it took me a relatively long time before I could manage it. After graduating from the Academy of Arts (1984) I couldn't find a position in Prague, and like many other Czech artists I had no choice but to go and teach in the provinces. I spent three years at the conservatoire in Teplice and during that time I was completely forgotten in Prague. Pragoconcert, which was the monopoly concert agency in this country then, wasn't interested in me. But I knew that I couldn't exist without playing on the podium. Since nobody was interested in classical or romantic music from me, the only thing for which I could get engagements was contemporary Czech music. When I was leaving Teplice, I was glad to be able to play anything. It didn't matter to me what I tried to play as well as I could, 'to fight for the music' that I played. And because I played well, I didn't lack offers. Most of it was seriously modern. It was said of me that I could perform sight-reading, and learned quickly. They were compositions for one-off performance, and I was a one-off

performer. Nobody ever invited me on the television chamber music programme or the House of Artists, and I only had one concert-discussion in my entire life! I was just a labourer of contemporary music and I longed more and more for romanticism and consonances. Also, when a man is getting near to forty, there's a danger of burn-out syndrome, isn't there? I played many pieces in which I had to invest more energy than I ever got back out of them."

*Do you mean that there's no vital energy in contemporary music?*

"In the best works, yes. But I didn't usually play the best works."

*Last year you played Cage at the Festival of Music of Extended Duration.*

"I consider Cage to be one of the most original phenomena of the 20th century, but I had never inquired much into his music. This was a very demanding composition from the rehearsal point of view. The performer must do everything for himself - choice of note lengths, keys etc. - from points, figures and pieces of staff notation scattered all over the paper. I worked on it in the evenings and I was pleased when the Cage specialist Joseph Kubera told me that he himself could not sight-read it either, and had the same problems with it as I did. If somebody said they would arrange a tour of America for me on condition that I played only Cage, I wouldn't accept."

*Why did you accept in Prague?*

"I wasn't working for nothing. But I couldn't do it all the time. At a certain moment a man has to decide which music he can do better without, and which music he needs, which music resonates with his heart."

*Which music do you like best?*

"My first piano teacher Pavel Svoboda led me very quickly straight to Schumann, Mozart, and Bach, and then in the second year to Chopin and Beethoven. I return to this music more and more often. I have started to devote myself properly to Chopin, and thanks to their anniversaries, also to Mendelssohn, Brahms and Schubert, and I've even gone back to Schumann. I would also like to play Liszt. I certainly will one day, but here I come up against a prosaic aspect of life: his music, like Mussorgsky's *Pictures* can't be underplayed. The whole piano thunders when you play it - how can I organize practicing so as to disturb other people as little as possible?"

*What about Czech music?*

"I include it in almost every recital. Among the early romantics my favourites are Václav Jan Tomášek and his *Eclogues* and the *Melodic Etudes* of Jan Ladislav Dusík. I am looking forward to Voříšek. From later



Czech music, Smetana, of course, or Dvořák's piano cycles (at the moment I am working on his concerto). I once got to play Fibich's *Moods, Impressions and Reminiscences* and his cycle *From the Mountains* on the basis of a concert order, and I shall be playing a lot of Fibich now since the year 2000 will be his double anniversary. The music of Vítězslav Novák, for example his piano concerto, is underrated. It is full of feeling, and already aiming toward the 20th century. But it cannot be studied for performance too

person, perhaps a man rather than a woman. In it the piano becomes more like a percussion instrument."

*Do you think there's an essential difference between women and men's playing?*

"With Liszt or Mussorgsky, the energy that you invest comes back to you with the melodies and harmonies of the music. In 20th-century compositions this often doesn't work so well, and you have to invest a terrible amount of your potential in the music. You're always seeing directions that

are wholly exceptional in Liszt: *fff, brutalmente, tempestuoso, tumultuoso*. There are women who can manage it, but it is more a male matter. In Ježek's 'classical' piano works there is huge power, but you yourself also need huge *physical* power to play them. Your eyes need to be in good condition, too, in order to read such complicated, densely written parts and then to play them as if it were effortless."

kind it's best when we don't know the piano too well. If I have a choice, which is rare, then I prefer pianos with a slightly heavier touch, which don't scream too loud and deafen people. In my view the king of pianos is the Steinway."

*Do you prefer the role of soloist or of chamber or concerto performer?*

"Jointly creating something in chamber partnership on the podium is wonderful, but it suits me best when I can speak for myself. Even as a soloist on the podium I am engaged in dialogue, like it or not, with the public, and even if I can't see the public, I can feel a kind of current. I am having a dialogue with the composer, and with the instrument too. As far as playing with an orchestra is concerned, that is fantastic, so long as you have a conductor who understands you. In the score there are places where the orchestra must lead and places where the piano leads. It's a question of mutual understanding, feeling and ability to agree - even non-verbally - between the soloist and the conductor. When it works, it is probably even more beautiful than solo playing. I give priority to solo appearances alternating with playing with an orchestra. Other things, including 'the crazy stuff' are useful just as spice."

*/Tomáš Vášek interviewed by Wanda Dobrovská/*

quickly, since that would be superficial. *Spring* by Josef Suk is in my view the most beautiful piano composition of all. So far I have not studied it, since it gets badly abused at the conservatoires and I don't want to contribute to that. I have a special relationship to Suk. Once I had a long barren interval in music, and it looked as if I might never be able to play again, but then suddenly a concert offer dropped out of the sky and I chose Suk's *Cycle op. 7*, which begins with the *Song of Love*. This was the way I came back to music and for me Suk has remained a personal symbol of a time of return. I also enjoy playing the only three surviving compositions by Suk's wife (and Dvořák's daughter) Otilie. Among the Czech classics of the 20th Century I naturally love Martinů and I am preparing a whole programme of his music. For a long time I was afraid of Janáček. I didn't perform his *Sonata* until I was in my thirties, but I think that the delay was worth it. I regard Jaroslav Ježek as a very underrated composer. Last year I played his *Etude* at the festival in Český Krumlov. It is superb music, but terrible difficult. It demands the whole

*are given for any concert. Do you have particular requirements for pianos?*

"Usually you go somewhere where there's only one piano, for which the organizer can't do more than apologize, and that's all either he or you can do about it. I don't test pianos in any special way. At most I check whether the operation of the keys is lighter or heavier, the depth of the right pedal, and how much the left pedal damps. I let myself be inspired by a piano that I've never played before, and try to correspond with it. Using all the possibilities at my disposal at that moment, I try to communicate what I want to communicate. And I enjoy doing that so much. I can't imagine driving my own instrument round with me."

*Ivan Moravec apparently did that.*

"He tried to do it. Michelangeli did it; he used to bring his Petrof. He was one of those artists who think through his conception to the last detail, keep it constant and don't want to change it. But I am the kind who thinks through everything and prepares it all, and then, at the concert, wants to encounter inspiration. And for that

● **The Zdeněk Fibich Jubilee Celebrations** which will culminate in the year 2000, exactly 150 years after his birth and 100 years after his death, have already started this year with the issue of a complete recording of Fibich's piano cycle "*Nálady, dojmy a upomínky*" [*Moods, Impressions and Reminiscences*] performed by Marián Lapšanský on 10 Supraphon CDs. A Fibich Competition in the interpretation of melodramas is being organized and preparatory seminars and courses for the national round of the competition are already underway. Memorial plaques and busts of Zdeněk Fibich will be placed in the precincts of the National Theatre and on Zofín Island in Prague. On the 12th of May, at the opening of this year's Prague Spring Festival, there will for the first time be an act of remembrance at the Fibich monument in addition to the annual ceremonies at the graves of Antonín Dvořák and Bedřich Smetana. Among many other planned jubilee celebrations, we should mention at least an international musicological conference on Fibich and a staging of his melodramatic trilogy based on Jaroslav Vrchlický's text "*Hippodamie*".