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The Inconcievable in Combination

Vit Zouhar on the Postmodern

by Matej Kratochvil

Vít Zouhar is active in several fields of music. A composer, he also works as a teacher at both the Palacký University in Olomouc and the Institute for Electronic Music in Graz in Austria. He writes on the theory of music, particularly contemporary music, and is the author of articles on Arvo Pärt, minimalism and postmodernism. He is sometime labelled the one and only Czech minimalist composer, but for Zouhar minimalism has always been linked with other influences, historical or exotic.

Most of your pieces are written for specific performers. Does that have an influence on your work?

When I look back over the last ten years, I can see that actually all the pieces I've composed in this period were written for specific performers. They are a great inspiration to me. On the one hand I know their characteristics, and on the other they way they interpret music and communicate with is something that speaks to me. All these aspects are the invisible boundaries that mark out a space for new compositions. Whether we're talking about DAMA DAMA, the Damian Ensemble or other groups, I find the collaboration very beneficial and pleasant.

Is that the case with your orchestral pieces as well?

When I was writing Brána slunce [Gate of the Sun] or Blízká setkání zběsilostí srdce [Close Encounters of the Madness of the Heart], I knew what kind of orchestra would be playing these pieces, who would be conducting and where and in what circumstances they would be presented. All this together had an effect on their form. By the way, both pieces were premiered by the conductor Petr Šumník and both were performed first in the same place.

The second pole of your own original music is electronic music. Do you think in different ways

when composing for instruments and for electronics?

I would tend to say no. The basic material is completely different, but my approach is very similar in both cases, especially recently. I want the same things - energy charge, emotional experience and direct communication - from both media, I mean from acoustic music and electro-acoustic music. The creative process is very much the same in both cases, and it's only the means of production that is different. The concept naturally has to be a little different given that with electronic music I'm responsible for the final product. Whereas with instrumental music I create a score that will be interpreted and performed by someone else.

Do you use acoustic instruments in combination with electronics?

In a sense. In my electro-acoustic pieces there are recycled layers of both acoustic instruments and acoustic compositions. I don't in fact have anything purely electronic, with all the sound materials created just by electronic methods. On the contrary, I enjoy finding points in common between things that seem apparently quite unrelated to each other. This is why I use both concrete but also in some way shifted sounds, and also electronic sounds that distantly resemble concrete sounds. I choose from both these worlds, or rather I try to adapt them to make it clear what they have in common, so that electronic sounds acquire associations with something very concrete, and conversely, the acoustic sounds take on a more abstract form, even though their source is very concrete. It is precisely this inter-penetration and ambiguity that I enjoy. It's the same with acoustic music, where again I often use the same kind of ambiguities, with the concrete material going beyond its context. In one context it works, but in another it is inconceivable, or conceivable only as contrast or conflict. And what interests me is just the inconceivable in combination and not in conflict.

What is your view of the problem of concert performance of electronic pieces?

Just last week in Graz I listened to a new presentation from students of the Institute for Electronic Music and Acoustics. In the institute there's a place called the Cube in which you can simulate any kind of acoustic space with any number of acoustic sources. Nonetheless, when some pieces were played there they seemed to be a missing some other medium. Maybe it was because they were played in an entirely dark room, where the almost absolute darkness excluded any visual element and concentrated all attention on the sound production. By saying this I definitely don't mean to claim that electronic music should always be presented in some visual context, but this specific experience reminded me that there are certain pitfalls associated with purely reproduced music, whether acoustic or electro-acoustic. Certain types of music can undoubtedly benefit from visualisation, while elsewhere such interaction can interfere with one element or even both elements at once, but the same is true of absolute rejection of the interaction. It's something that interests me, but that I have only thought about on a conceptual level. When making sound material for some pieces, for example, I was also interested by what was going on the screen. I planned these programmes to flash, light up and function like a very simple animation of what was happening in the sound. On the other hand these were just games and experiments with mainly comic results and for the time being I have left the problem there.

Electronics in music seems already to have reached a very high level of perfection. Do you expect something more from the next phase of technology?

To be frank, I don't know, but I don't really think so. The equipment I use is about five years old and I'm still extremely satisfied with it. Generally I have the slight feeling that the whole situation in the field has changed since the end of the Eighties and beginning of the Nineties, when every new model meant a very fundamental step forward in quality and the opening up of new possibilities. Now the changes are less visible. My feeling is that now our expectations are all focussed on is being done or can be done with the equipment and how to exploit it. The status of technology is changing and it is turning into a natural

medium. In any case, very interesting things have been created even on very simple pieces of equipment. Another consideration in my case is that my existing equipment makes it completely possible for me to do the things that I want to do.

You work in the Czech Republic and in Graz in Austria. What is the difference between the Czech and the Austrian approaches to contemporary music?

Diametrically opposite. I never stop being surprised at how completely different the two cultures and aesthetics. When I arrived in Graz in 1991 Professor Preßl took one look at my pieces and said: "das ist eine ganz andere Ästhetik". I wondered what he was talking about, but he meant it in a very friendly spirit. This doesn't mean that a Czech performer cannot play their music or that an Austrian performer can't play what is written in this country, but it indicates the difference between the two cultures. In Austria the whole microworld of contemporary Austria is utterly different. It is also differently organised, differently financed, and differently perceived. This is not just a problem peculiar to contemporary music, but relates to the whole concept of the artist, as it is perceived in Austria and the Czech Republic. In this country if I go around claiming to be an artist, people will think that I've escaped from some psychiatric clinic or that I'm trying to create some weird image for myself. If I say that I'm an artist in Austria on the other hand, it is taken as a completely natural statement and nobody wonders about my motives, since an artist is just the same as a teacher, a doctor or a butcher. The Austrians see the field of art quite differently. One consequence is that when some festival of new music appears, it is covered in the media and are regarded as real events. We also have festivals of contemporary music that have acquired a reputation, but they have had to fight for it, and the public response to the whole scene is quite different.

Is the difference also obvious in relation to music students?

In Graz I have taught composers computer music on an individual basis, while in Olomouc most of my work is collective teaching of the history of 20th-century music or analysis, and so the two groups are not entirely comparable. On the other hand I was surprised by how similar the atmosphere was at the end of the Nineties, when students in this country - and here I am thinking more of the JAMU students (The Janáček Academy of Performing Arts in Brno) - and in Graz all had the same feeling of a kind of over-saturation with technologies. In Graz this resulted in protests against compulsory practice in electronic music, and in Brno to a preference for acoustic music.

You are a composer, teacher and musicologist. Are the three people compatible?

Certainly. These roles often complement each other well. For example, thanks to the students the courses I teach in Olomouc give me a more complex and refined view of the themes that interest me as a musicologist. And when I am working on Arvo Pärt, for instance, his work obviously also speaks to me as a composer. The duality of his pieces, their acoustic form on the one hand and complex structure on the other - two diametrically opposed worlds - are all very inspiring for me. And so I talk about it in my courses and my different activities feed each other.

One of your themes is the post-modern. How would you define it in music?

I have been interested in the post-modern since roughly the end of the Eighties. At the beginning I made intense efforts to discover what exactly the post-modern means in the music context, but of course I never reached any clear and definitive conclusion. The idea was naturally naive, but it was a useful process for me. Today the concept of the post-modern in relation to music is understood as a package of certain characteristics and features each defined in ways that are often contradictory and diametrically opposed and all to a great extent derived from other fields where the post-modern was defined earlier and rather more precisely. It therefore seems to me more useful - and here supporters of the Lyotardian concept will be furious with me - to see the postmodern primarily in terms of time, as a period of roughly the last three

decades of the last century that runs without a break into our century and brings with it certain changes in West European and North American musical thought. It is associated above all with the loss of the historical perspective, as Helga de la Motte-Haber puts it, for example. Any kind of material is becoming equally accessible and equally appropriate, which is a state of affairs never possible in any earlier historical age, Earlier the use of alien material worked as a gesture of elevation, alienation, caricature, irony or the expression of distance. In the post-modern these different kinds of material can be used side by side and create an entirely natural whole without summoning up mutual confrontation. Even though - and here we hit a problem: there is hardly a postmodernist theorist, with the exception of Charles Jencks, willing to admit the possibility of the continuing viability of the whole...

In what sense is your music post-modern?

I would rather not get too involved in that question. Still, the fact is that I became interested in the theme of the post-modern precisely because the post modern, at least for me, has brought so many conceptual impulses and new connections and seemed to me much more open than anything that preceded it. By taking this view this I was of course being very un-post-modern - strictly modern one might say - but I didn't care in the slightest. Nonetheless, ambiguity and multiple meanings interested me and still interest me, and this is definitely directly related to the post-modern. Things that work in different contexts and that when placed next to each other neither mutually exclude or confront each other but on the contrary emphasise common points. This is a theme to which my piece Close Encounters with the Wildness of the Heart. The title combines the titles of two films, David Lynch's Wild at Heart and Steven Spielberg's Close Encounters of the Third Kind. What was important for me here was not these two specific films but the combination of the different aesthetics, which these films represent and which are very strong in their contexts but mutually hardly compatible. In the music this was expressed for example by common points between neo-Baroque elements, the sound quality of a Berliozesque orchestra and minimalist techniques.

Do you still find minimalism interesting even today?

Rather than saying "still" interesting, I would almost say interesting "once again". I was always captivated by pieces such as It's Gonna Rain, Come Out (Steve Reich), and Music In Twelve Parts (Philip Glass). What fascinates me was not so much the minimalist techniques in themselves but above all the particular pieces and the effect they had on me (and still do). They have surrounded me for almost twenty years and still continually speak to me again. Of course, this could be proof positive of my rigidity.

What are your plans for the near future?

There are going to be more performances of the opera Coronide at various festivals including the Janáček May festival in Ostrava, and in May DAMA DAMA will be presenting my Gates of the Sun again with conductor Tomáš Hanus and the Karlovy Vary Symphony Orchestra. I'm also working on a CD of Gates of the Sun with Dan Dlouhý, My most recent completed piece still has last year's date stamp. It was Dan Dlouhý, leader of the DAMA DAMA ensemble who asked me to write it, and I was delighted to accept. The piece is called Petite sirene. It is for four drummers and indirectly refers to the novel Sam's Fall by the Irish, post-modernist (of course!) novelist Richard Kearney. It was successfully premiered last year and this year it should be performed again by DAMA DAMA. My most recent project is musicological rather than a matter of composition. It is a reconstruction of the original three-dimensional form of Poeme électronique by Edgar Varese, and I am collaborating on it with Robert Höldrich and Josef Gründler. The technological resources of the Cube hall that I mentioned earlier in the Institute for Electronic Music in Graz are making it possible for us to realise the original spatial conceptions offered by Xenakis and Le Corbusier's Pavillon Philips. The results of the project will include a live performance, a publication incorporating source materials previously unavailable and a DVD recording. Poeme électronique is one of the fundamental compositions of electronic music, but has only been presented in its original spatial form at EXPO ´58 in Brussels. There are a number of stero versions, but not a single spatial presentation corresponding to the original plan. At the end of the

Eighties the piece was reconstructed in Den Haag, but only with a limited number of acoustic sources. The original version with roughly 350 loudspeakers was last presented in 1958. This is one of the motors behind the project. Furthermore our colleagues from Karlsruhe are planning a virtual reconstruction of the original Philips Pavilion from EXPO 1958, and we are aiming to put the two projects together.

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