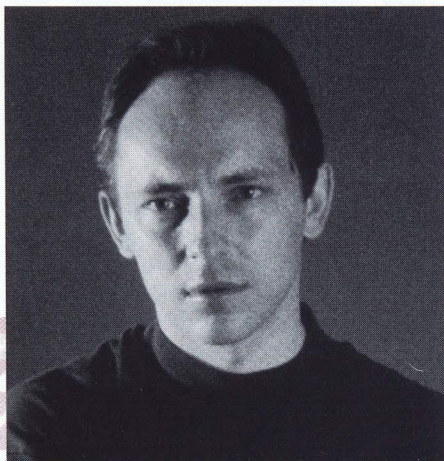


YOUNG CZECH SINGERS & CONTEMPORARY MUSIC



PETR MATUSZEK

In Bohemia and Moravia there are 5 conservatories and 2 academies where singing is taught. Since each of these schools produces at least 2 graduates a year (the real figure is much higher), we ought to be experiencing a flood of young trained vocal performers. Where are they? And if we find any, how useful are they for contemporary music?

I have heard plenty of beautiful voices and manifest singing talents that somehow disappear after two years of expert training. What is the problem? The lack of good teachers? Or the overall system of vocal teaching in this country? There is no simple target for criticisms and accusations. The real problem is much more complex and I don't feel called or qualified to tackle it on every level. The truth remains, however, that singing is a notably individual discipline, where vocal and physical dispositions are more fundamental and crucial than in other disciplines, and can be diametrically opposite in different students. To put it briefly – Peter Schreier couldn't sing like Plácido Domingo, or to put it better – an outstanding choral singer would find it hard to sing opera – and vice versa. The great majority of Czech singing teachers refuse to acknowledge the fact, and almost all the official efforts of singing teaching at our music schools are directed towards the training of opera singers. Other fields remain undeveloped, and at worst deliberately suppressed. Instead of students being helped to develop naturally according to their dispositions, we often see them being artificially moulded into the image of the teacher. The results are very hard to reverse and so young singers often sing in a way that

is unnatural, sometimes to the point of brutal distortion.

The curricula at music schools also fails to take into account singing careers other than in opera. It is hopeless listening to a fragile eighteen-year-old voice struggling with the compulsory opera repertoire.

Also debatable is the choice of singing teachers at some music schools. There is an ingrained and mistaken idea that a good opera singer must make a good teacher. In fact there are many people who have what might be called "God-given" singing talents, who don't have to worry too much about technique and are guided largely by instinct. This is a huge vocal gift, but for a teacher it is a misfortune, since the teacher needs to have learnt his craft thoroughly from basic principles. Only in this way does he acquire knowledge that he is able (given sufficient pedagogic talent) to pass on.

I could continue – about how students do not learn chamber and ensemble singing, and teachers at schools are often selected with reference to their best student (often only one) rather than their average results... But it is not my aim to conduct a depth analysis of the teaching profession in singing. Instead I want to discuss how usable new singers are for the performance of contemporary music.

Without a good basic training, of course, no "additions" are possible. And for any young singer the music of contemporary composers is undoubtedly an "addition".

The reasons are the following:

The first reason is general rather than specific, and is that for most music schools contemporary music is just "Double Dutch". I shall not go into why that is in this article, although it is a very urgent theme. It is very hard for a young musician to develop knowledge or affinity a kind of music he encounters only on the margins of his studies, and often only as a necessary evil. Most teachers of the main disciplines have only a minimal knowledge of post-war music, and so it's hard to expect their students to do any better in this respect. And here I'm not even speaking of the (today already classical!) experimental music of Cage, Scelsi, Stockhausen and so on, which students at best encounter as a theoretical curiosity rather than being taught to listen to it and to understand it.

The second reason is shortcomings in the technical and musical training of singers. Once again the principle "Like teacher

(in the great majority of cases), like student" applies. It is very naive and (excuse the harsh word) uneducated of any teacher to think that all contemporary music can be sung like an opera aria. As it happens, some of our "leading" teachers are also remote from any understanding of the interpretation of Baroque music and lieder, which certainly rank as foundations of vocal education – but that is just a little "marginal" note...

Contemporary music is usually so complex in its idiom (or sometimes in its very simplicity), that it requires maximum sympathy and understanding from the performer. This in turn requires both a secure and natural (!) voice technique which is not a brake but a perfect means of achieving artistic purpose, and considerable musical intelligence and erudition. The performer must have a perfect knowledge of musical script (not only notation, since parts can often be written down in highly unconventional form), orientation in the musical field, excellent intonation – sometimes micro-interval intonation, and so forth.

Another prerequisite is to have mastered the greatest possible range of expressive elements and techniques – how to hold a thin even note, vibrato, and how to use facial expression or cries without damage to the voice...

These are properties that rarely just fall into a singer's lap, and to acquire them means large doses of hard work, searching, concentrated studies... and even if a singer wanted to try, who has the time for all that today? After all, effective results in this area take much longer to achieve than results in the classic vocal (and especially opera) repertoire.

All this means that contemporary composers looking for singers often turn to people trained elsewhere than at our official secondary and higher music schools. They turn to people concerned with Baroque music, lieder repertoire, jazz and so forth. These singers are not only more ready and willing to tackle the problems of contemporary music, but most of them have a much more flexible voice technique, are used to team work, and are more open and prepared to look for new directions.

What is the solution? I see two paths.

One consists of an educational campaign – course, lectures, programmes in the media... to try to find a way for contemporary music to reach listeners, so that it has someone to play to, and performers, to convince them that they need to play it. To generate a lively and open musical ferment, and inspiring conditions that would encourage and provoke performers to creative effort.

CZECH MUSIC 2001

Not to let contemporary music close itself up and become something only for the intellectual "elect" who are able to understand it. Not to undersell contemporary music, but to open up and communicate. And to do so in collaboration with other fields of art such as modern theatre, literature and painting. It is also essential to make contemporary music visible and understandable, and not something locked up in the anonymity of obscure music groups. It is precisely here that performers face a great challenge, since it is performers who by their individual approach and choice of repertoire can bring a certain order to what non-specialist audiences see as the undifferentiated jumble of contemporary music and composers. Look at Agon, Tomáš Ondrůšek, Mondschein, DAMA DAMA, and others that are emerging... Why are their concerts usually packed? Because each of them has a distinctive face and audiences know more or less what sort of thing they are going to hear. We need to create the kind of environment for young players and singers that would inspire them to try and develop their own interpretative idiom and face as a performer. We need to stimulate them to use this idiom and face to emerge from the anonymous crowd of musicians for hire and consciously join in the creative process – to provoke in them the need to seek and to create. The need is particularly urgent in the most conservative and least flexible disciplines, and that definitely includes young singers.

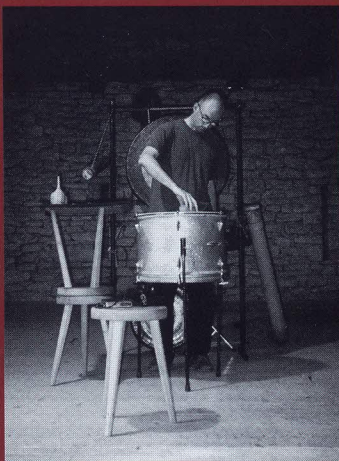
The second path I recommend is undoubtedly that of change in the whole singing teaching system in this country. Given the truth of the adage that "You can't teach an old dog new tricks", there is nothing for it but to develop systematic pressure: an educational campaign, with singing courses, seminars and concentrated attempts to persuade conservatories and higher music schools of the need to teach other vocal fields such as choral singing, historically authentic singing of early music, performance of modern music, non-traditional musical script, intonation of micro-intervals, new and unconventional vocal techniques...

The task is not easy and is a bit like tilting at windmills. But if enough Don Quixotes get together and apply pressure on all fronts, there must be some results. I was delighted by the news that Tomáš Ondrůšek is starting a percussion department at the Music Faculty of the Prague Academy of Performing Arts. I believe that the ice will one day start melting even in the frozen glacier of singing teaching.

TRSTĚNICE

Percussion Workshop (No. 5)

IVO MEDEK



The Trstěnice International Summer Courses for Composers and Percussionists have taken place for the fifth time, making 2001 a small jubilee year for an event that has become famous at home and abroad.

As before, this year an unusually interesting company of composers and percussionists from several European countries gathered at Tomáš Ondrůšek's picturesque farm. Alongside the main programme of courses, which again

consisted of the student-composers working with student-percussionists to create and perform short pieces

for selected sets of percussion instruments, the daily concerts and guest lectures proved particularly good this year. The permanent course lecturers M. Steinauer, T. Ondrůšek and I. Medek were joined at Trstěnice by three of our leading composers – Ivana Loudová, Hanuš Bartoň and Miloš Haase – and two world famous musicians – the Russian composer Yuri Kasparov and the German percussionist Christian Dierstein. For the first time the courses involved a meeting with a representative of the youngest generation of composers (similar meetings are planned for future years) – this year Michal Nejtek was chosen.



The first evening concert included an appearance by members of the Marijan Ensemble, which works on the border between improvised music and composed music and makes ample use of EAM and elements of different types of stage event. The well-known Japanese marimba player Mutsuko Aizawa (who played at the Prague Spring this year), performed pieces by Johannes Fritsch and Ivo Medek. The final concert consisting of pieces composed during the course was as fascinating as ever.

The high point, however, was the concert given by one of the most celebrated of European percussionists, Christian Dierstein from Hamburg. He vividly demonstrated the difference between the merely good and the outstanding performer. In the course of a single concert he showed a whole range of interpretative approaches all with the same effortless technical perception. He played Otto's piece for various kinds of shoes lined up as a kind of keyboard, with recitation and stage action, and Apergise, in which each sound in the text is assigned a particular colour, and his own version of Cage in the form of a piece for small drum and complex multipercussion. It was the kind of experience one is rarely lucky enough to have.

To put it in a nutshell – this year's Trstěnice courses confirmed their high standard, and those attending had the chance to meet remarkable people and have individual consultations with them on their compositions and performance. Let us hope that the Ministry of Culture, the Czech Music Foundation, the OSA Music Foundation and the Czech-German Mutuality Fund will have sympathy and financial support for these clearly useful and interesting events in the years to come.

