

## **Petr Pokorný (1932 – 2008)**

by Petr Matuszek

On 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2006 Petr Pokorný's Lyrical Symphony had its first performance at the Dvořák Hall of the Rudolfinum as part of the Prague Premières International Festival. At the end of about three quarters of an hour of that stream of music, there reigned several minutes of stunned silence; only then did spontaneous ovations break out, shouts of "bravo" echoed from all over the hall and the applause went on and on.

Soon afterwards discussions got under way in the Rudolfinum's corridors: how did that vast work of Petr Pokorný's fit in his output? For it was a wonderful, magnificent piece of music... And no wonder: to those who liked to listen to Peter's music (and I mean "normal" listeners unencumbered by any need for passing an expert opinion) he had seemed a subdued, introverted composer displaying frailty and vulnerability in his works. But now, where had that mighty emotional upswelling come from? That wave that swept the audience off its feet as it listened to the Lyrical Symphony?

In order to understand Petr Pokorný's *oeuvre* one has to take an analytical look at two fundamental mental and "spiritual" currents that helped to form his musical language. Yes, it is of course possible to describe his music broadly as an isolated case of "musical poetism". It would, however, amount to but a narrow, one-sided view, even though a palpably characteristic and most easily understood one.

Petr was socially a very active person, engaging in many areas of public cultural life. Let me mention the most important of these activities during recent years: He was a co-founder of Prague's Musica Iudaica international festival, the Franz Schubert Society and the composers group Ateliér 90; he took part in the work of commissions and governing boards of the Ministry of Culture, the Czech Music Fund and the OSA performing rights organisation, wrote for music periodicals and contributed to music colloquia. The music of a composer so active in public life can hardly be just introverted in its character – it, too, must have been a vehicle for his effort to express his actual view of the world.

In the Lyrical Symphony we find Petr professing clearly and publicly the ideals of humanism, but also feeling equally clearly the need to embrace a universal "spiritual oneness". We could of course say that the work simply steps out of the orbit of the introverted character of the rest of his output, and be done with it. On closer examination, however, we find his ideas of such a "public profession" encoded in many other of his works of approximately the last ten years, even though they do not lend themselves to analysis so easily. Thus we obtain a rather different picture of his music of at least the last ten years of his life.

Let me first deal with some general points about Petr Pokorný: He was born in 1932 in Prague to a partly Jewish family. During the Nazi occupation many members of the family died in concentration camps. That horrible experience then remained forever in his music in the form of a quiet, below-the-surface sorrow. After the war he graduated from a "classics gymnasium" (secondary school with humanities bias) and went on to study piano at the Prague Conservatoire. To the communist regime he was a class enemy and as such was barred from studying musicology at the Philosophical Faculty of the University. He therefore studied composition privately with Dr Miloslav Nedbal and Prof. Pavel Bořkovec. Eventually, the regime notwithstanding, he at any rate managed to study natural science and went on to work as a chemistry teacher right up to 1990. Earlier, in the 1960s, he organised evenings



of contemporary music and poetry, his own compositions among others being played by the legendary Musica viva pragensis ensemble. This activity of course ceased with the invasion of the country by the Warsaw Pact troops in 1968, Petr's name during the subsequent "normalization" re-appearing on the official blacklist.

Things turned round in 1990 and his works could once again be performed. He began working as a musical organiser and publicist, beside devoting himself entirely to composition. His works were played at festivals like The Prague Spring, Musica Iudaica, The Old Testament in the Arts, Contrasts Lvov, Mozartstädte Salzburg, Forfest Kroměříž, and at concerts in Great Britain, The Netherlands, USA, Germany, Romania, Hungary and Italy. They were performed by outstanding Czech as well as foreign soloists and ensembles and have been issued on two CDs devoted entirely to his music and on many other discs. At the time of his death in February 2008 he had plans for a great many new works and several concerts and first performances.

*"In his music Petr Pokorný is an essential lyricist. Moulded by cultured Jewish environment and marked by cruel experiences of the Holocaust, as well as "social realism" he leans towards brittle, introverted confession, with deep sorrow being everpresent. The vulnerability and sensibility of his music, as well as its peculiar nostalgia looking back towards the time of his parents' youth, is making Petr a unique type of musical loner."* (The composer Jaroslav Šťastný writing about Petr Pokorný's style – abridged.)

In his theoretical essays Pokorný dealt primarily with music's impact on the listener, viewing the question from many different angles. He often took his cue from the ideas of the pianist and "music dissident" Tomáš Tvaroh: *"I think we get the greatest experience from such art that describes accurately what has in some less well defined form been developing inside us...words 'to understand' and 'to feel' are tied up with it. It is possible to grasp any art, as long as one's intelligence is equal to the task, while to feel it is only possible if the art chimes in with our own innermost self."*(1)

(1)From Petr Pokorný's correspondence - accurate bibliographical reference not available as yet.

In order to understand Petr's work in all its aspects we have to bear in mind that we are not dealing with an isolated figure engrossed in his creative spiritual mysteries, but with a man socially active and fully involved in the contemporary cultural milieu, pondering deeply on creative work and reacting to the stimuli of the time. As has been said, two basic spiritual currents can be traced in his compositions. The first is the "brittle musical poetism" – a characteristic niche, truly his own, which he himself described, sometimes symbolically and at other times literally, as a theme of the voyager, of journeying, of the road. This archetypal reference to the old Gnostic texts takes on a solid form quite early in Petr's chamber cantata The Snake Queen of Verses (Hadí královna veršů) Op.18, dating from 1983, and later on in the monodrama A Piper Walking Through the Landscape (Krajinou prochází píštec) Op.40 (1991), in the musical *scena* Wanderings (Putování) Op.55 (1999) and in many other vocal compositions.(2)

(2)The already mentioned Lyrical Symphony of 2000-2001 is yet another Pokorný composition with the "lonely wanderer" idea for its main theme.



One could say that the “eternal lonely voyager” motive had run quite continuously through Petr’s work and that during the last 15 years it became more and more pronounced and principled.(3)

(3)One cannot help seeing parallels with Schubert’s Winterreise cycle to verses by Wilhelm Mueller or with Josef Čapek’s The Limping Pilgrim (Kulhajíci poutník)

The figure of a wanderer is often bound up with that of a “Piper” – a clear autobiographical reference, since it appears whenever the composer’s confession becomes so brittle that there is a need for another “person” to tell it.

Let me quote at some length from Petr Pokorný’s own poetry which can throw some light on the symbolism of his musical language:

*They grabbed me and put me in the well. As I sat down on its damp, almost dry bed in the dark – for the well was deep – I saw shapes gradually materialise: the bulk of the stones in the wall, the dry tufts of coarse grass and little insects among the lumps of hardened mud. The spreading mass of my world – and it was my world – was enveloping me, pressing me down, sprouting through me. I was finding great beauty in the stilled intelligibility of the trajectories of cause and effect. In my amazement at the perfection of the laws of the well, I had completely forgotten that only a trickle of light was reaching me.*

*And so it happened that Ruben came to the edge of the well. But he did not reach out to me and did not press me to come out, though he was strong and brave. How could he know that if I came out I would regret the loss of my world, standing in the powerful brightness blind and unable to see the way? He leant over the rim and spoke to me. He spoke about a four-way cross, both a crossroads and a hub, which from time immemorial divides, as well as joins the spirit’s limitless gardens; about a four-way cross which is both cold and hot, bright and dark. It was then that I longed to rise at once to the bright heights and plunge into the misty depths, at once to stroll through those gardens. It was then that I longed to step out of the well, but Ruben made me wait. I then continued for a long time to live in the frothy physicality of my world, but its perfection began to be invaded by an impatient feeling of bright spaces to come. Only after I had rid myself of all the impatience did I understand how Ruben, having stopped me leaving the well, had made it possible for me to live through the gradual metamorphosis of every rock, every blade of grass, every little vein in an insect’s wing, the whole of my world. The slow brightening of each thing began to coalesce into one great stream of light, filling the inside of the well. It was then that I realised that the walls of the well were no longer restricting my movement and that – though not stepping outside the well – I was walking. I was on a path. A path of leaving, as well as coming back, a path of nearing, as well as receding. (From “Josef and Ruben”, the prose writings of Petr Pokorný)(4)*

(4)The literary output of Petr Pokorný was not large, just some 14 titles of prose poems, as well as prose as such. The pivotal work is a large-scale epic poem in the form of fictitious diary entries, entitled Cestář (Road-Mender). All the texts are imbued with the unifying motive of a “road”, here a carrier of both perception and spiritual awakening.



We must not of course focus solely on Petr's vocal works; but by using them as a key, and his text as a pointer, to an understanding of his musical language, we find that a tangible sort of testimony of the inwardly frail kind is often encoded within the qualities of the melodic and rhythmic material he employs – qualities that we then discern in many of his instrumental compositions, especially those of his last creative phase. Perhaps it is due precisely to this vocal-instrumental cross-fertilisation that the works of Petr Pokorný's last period are more approachable and his musical language simpler in all its aspects.

The process can be traced in almost all of the chamber works of Petr's final period. Most easily understood are his cycles for solo piano – an instrument that after 1995 became something of an "intimate diary" of his.(5)

(5)Up to that time Petr Pokorný had written only one piece for the piano, *Umlkání* (Silence Descending) of 1969 (classified later as Opus 13a), which was influenced on the one hand by the shock of the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia, and on the other by the self-immolation of Jan Palach. In writing the piece down Pokorný used the Obuchovov notation, in combination with graphics.

A culmination of these innermost spiritual testimonies is the three-movement piano work *Tristia* Op.79, dating from 2003-4. Petr considered it his most important work. In it he for the first time consciously sought to come to terms with the most painful theme of his life, the Nazi Holocaust.

The other "spiritual" current in Petr Pokorný's work is a certain universally valid type of open testimony in the compositions of his final creative period. We can discern in them a clear need to make a public spiritual confession – a confession which of itself still remains a closed book to many a listener. It would be futile to look for some specific textual or musical quotation of it, but we do find it hidden in harmonic progressions, the formal layout (beautifully demonstrated in some of Petr's own arrangements of his earlier works) and in the general tone, the goal being a need for universal one-ness with the shared perception of God and thus with universal harmony. Petr did not see a longing for spiritual unity as something primarily personal, but something which concerned us all, which concerned humanity and its intellectual needs. As far as he saw it, an individual was far too negligible a unit for God to worry about, but each individual was a co-creator of the image of humanity which then as a totality stepped before God's face. Though hidden, the composer's need to make a spiritual declaration went hand in hand with his identification with some of the elements of humanistic ideals: we can see it, for instance, in his motivic and thematic work reminiscent – in its ideas and partly also its creative process – of Beethoven. It follows that to "decipher" these processes means to understand the composer's creative work, his output and, most importantly, the context and continuity of the development of his writing.(6)

(6)These aspects of Petr Pokorný's writing are most visible in his late symphonic compositions, such as his *Lyrical Symphony* Op.75 (dating from 2000-1) for soprano, tenor, violoncello and orchestra to words by Paula Ludwig and Ivan Goll, his *Madrigalli dell'Estate* (Madrigals of Summer) Op.86 (2006) for voices and chamber orchestra to texts by the Italian



art-nouveau poet Gabriele d'Annunzio, and in his last Saxophone Quartet, as well as other chamber works, e.g. his Gallant Songs Op.91 (2007) to poems by Václav Lucemburský in which it would be difficult for the uninitiated to seek a priori any kind of hidden testimony.

In combining the two views of the spiritual direction of Petr Pokorný's work, we arrive at a synthesis in his last two large-scale orchestral compositions, the already mentioned Lyrical Symphony Op.75 and his Madrigals of Summer (Madrigali dell'Estate) Op.86. In both the idea of a "lonely wanderer" is key. Here Petr's hitherto rather "heavy" music is lightened by a more cheerful tone, becoming transparent, its form and harmony clearer to grasp. Petr takes the side of the specific art-nouveau (Sezession) sound, with obvious links to Gustav Mahler or perhaps even more so to Alexander Zemlinsky, but free of any pomposity and without any attempt at eclecticism. On these foundations Petr builds his own compact, original style which is fresh, free of clichés and full of colour. It is intelligible and lucid, without trying to court popularity. These two works, though rather different as such, share the effect of a clear definition of Beethoven-like rebellion against mortality and inescapable fate, leading to a catharsis of harmonious reconciliation within universal spiritual unity.

Petr's last two symphonic compositions occupy a special place in his *oeuvre*. They present a new style – a simplification of his musical language and a more transparent approach to harmony and melody. At the same time they bring to his hitherto rather dark, though always poetic music a great measure of brightening, simplicity and joy. Sadly, death took away the chance for Petr to step out further along this new direction in his work, as well as life. While the Lyrical Symphony has had its première, his Madrigals of Summer are still waiting to be performed – hopefully in the near future. The Lyrical Symphony has, to many listeners well versed in contemporary Czech music, been a revelation. It would be a pity if the subsequent composition, Petr's orchestral epilogue, were to be left unheard.

Let me finish with one more telling quotation from Petr Pokorný's literary writings:

*"Eternal, eternally mysterious are the gardens of art. There are in them no good or bad paths, no main nor side paths, no permanent course of travel. Mists of creation for ever roll, thickening and thinning, making eddies. Suddenly they break up, and lo: sun-drenched pastures smell of strawberries and hay, dark thickets breathe the damp coolness of fern, deep pools sparkle with moonlight beside muddy puddles and salt spray of stormy seas settles on the cheeks, on the hands...*

*And it all forever comes closer and further beneath the lights and shadows radiated by the wanderer's soul."*

Translated by Karel Janovický