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**Dvořák's solo piano works**

**Forfest Festival**

**Josef Suk: *Epilogue***

# If You Hear of the End of the World, *Take Up the Chisel and Create*

An interview with the organisers of **Festival Forfest Czech Republic**

Since 1990, the **Zdenka Vaculovičová** and **Václav Vaculovič** have organised the Forfest Festival in the Moravian city of Kroměříž. Zdenka is primarily a violinist, having premiered a number of chamber and solo works by contemporary Czech and Slovak composers, while Václav works mostly as a visual artist, and the festival – unique on a global scale – is a meeting of contemporary music and art with a spiritual focus. We spoke to them about the ideas behind the festival, its history and development, the changing perception of Czech and Eastern European art by the West between the 1990s and today, and their plans for the future.

Zdenka Vaculovičová and Václav Vaculovič: We are leading this interview at a time when war has broken out in nearby Ukraine. We would like to support all our friends in Ukraine, the USA, and the Czech Republic with a quote from an early Renaissance sculptor: “If you hear of the end of the world, take up the chisel and create” – Donatello (Donato di Niccolò di Betto Bardi)

**The festival officially began in 1990, but its history reaches back to the 1980s, when you began organising what became known as “Sedánky” (literally sittings; an adequate translation might be “Salons” or “Lounges”).**

During Communist rule in the 1980s, Czechoslovak unofficial culture was unbelievable rich and varied, almost to the point of being labyrinthine, which is why it has not yet been mapped to the present day. We have to realise that practically all truly creative people worth their salt (composers, visual artists, writers) were outside the official unions. After the Velvet Revolution, they became significant co-creators of renewed democracy in our country. The “Sedánky”, in brief, were meetings of non-conformist artists who had no desire to participate in the general decay of official culture – instead, they wished to follow in the work of free art in the West.

**Was it clear to you at the time that these were, in fact, prequels to a festival of the scale you began organising in 1990?**

Of course no one could know when the regime would collapse. It was more of a premonition that it would one day happen. In the 1990s, the West was enormously interested in unofficial art of the Eastern Bloc countries. It was relatively easy to dispatch exhibitions of considerable size to the Western metropolises, or to



*Zdenka Vaculovičová and Václav Vaculovič*

establish a reciprocal arrangement for smaller chamber or solo concerts. These were hectic times. We joined various important European organisations – to mention one of the many examples, the European Conference of Promoters of New Music, now the European Conference of Popular New Music (ECPNM).

We first met ECPNM founder Chris Walraven at a summit in Bratislava in the early 1990s. The atmosphere at the conference was magnanimously informal – Jaroslav Štátný was there representing the Exposition of New Music festival in Brno, wishing us the best of luck. We spoke in what must have been terrible English. Throughout our “presentation”, Chris was smiling, nodding his head, and then immediately accepted us as members. He was a remarkable man. The ECPNM General Assembly would take place in a different European city each year, and for us, this was like feeling the air of a bigger world. Henk Heuvelmans, who later spent years leading the ECPNM, really met us half way in all kinds of ways. At the time, bound brochures were published that included the full programmes of all thirty-two participating festivals. These would then be distributed across Europe – Forfest would thus be in the vicinity of festivals like the Warsaw Autumn or the Gaudeamus Festival in Amsterdam. From today’s perspective, the relatively low member count of only thirty-two festivals suggests that this was an exceptionally elite affair. We are not alone...

**It seems that you work as a highly compact duo – after all, even the responses to this interview come from both of you.**

Simply put, we are an artistic partnership, which is also how we are perceived by our collaborators abroad. Although we produce a festival we established three

decades ago, we are neither managers nor anyone’s employees in relation to the festival – we also make our own work and teach at art schools. Everyone in Czechia today knows that no one can make a living here in contemporary music and fine art. Only one thing is important here: how the festival presents Czech music and art to the international context.

**Why did you choose the city of Kroměříž, a city of under thirty thousand inhabitants approximately halfway between Brno and Ostrava?**

This UNESCO city became our destiny. It is a city with enormous creative potential. The local castle contains a large picture gallery of European significance, boasting paintings such as Titian’s *Apollo and Marsyas* and works by Paolo Veronese and others. The castle music archive attracts specialists from around the world with its manuscripts of Pavel Josef Vejvanovský, Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber, W. A. Mozart, or Ludwig van Beethoven. There are concerts held in the beautiful settings of the Assembly Hall of the castle. We have been asked many times how the Baroque settings connect with new music. We believe the Baroque is an excellent complement to music of the 20th and 21st centuries, as attested to by significant works in music of the 20th and 21st centuries around the world, but also in Czechia, such as the relatively recent neo-Baroque operas made by the creative duo of composer Vít Zouhar and composer, performer, and director Tomáš Hanzlík (*Coronide*, 2000; *Endymio*, 2001), presented at the castle as part of the festival and then reprised in Prague and Brno.

Kroměříž is now listed in overviews of contemporary music around the world – the city is well on its way to a great future. Much has been written about decentralising art everywhere in the world. Creative

people are moving – along with their studios and studies – outside the large cities, for many reasons. Russian composer Sofia Gubaidulina (born in 1931), many of whose pieces we have presented in Kroměříž, now works in the German countryside. Without phones, emails, the hustle and bustle of technological civilisations – she probably knows why...

### **How did you regard the influx of “new spiritualities” after the Velvet Revolution?**

Thankfully, that influx is now well beyond any kind of rational consideration – they were simply sifted out. Members of various sects agree on one thing: they dislike any form of art, whether classical or new. We are interested in true makers. And in today’s globalised world, they can draw on many sources of humanity. Mahatma Gandhi was once asked which religion is the best. His response? The one that makes you a better person. Since its very inception, we intended for the festival to serve as an ecumenical platform for spiritually focused art in the broadest possible sense of the word. We see countless trends in contemporary music around the world that relate to the spiritual realm in some form or other. All that’s needed is to put them to good use. To name one example, for the past twenty-five years, we’ve had a beautiful friendship with Daniel and Dolly Kessner, who have both taught at the California State University in Los Angeles for years. We premiered Daniel’s vocal-instrumental composition *In the Centre* with texts by Angelus Silesius, Walt Whitman, and Javier Allas. The work was excellently performed by the Moravian Quartet and soprano Kristýna Valoušková, with Dolly Kessner playing the piano. The piece was published on a CD of Daniel’s compositions by Capstone Records in New York. We also have an archive of over four hundred CDs, while other recordings number in the thousands.

### **What is the extent of the musical archive of the festival?**

The creation of an official archive of contemporary music and art with international connections here in the festival city is one of the dreams we are yet to fulfil. A project like that would have to involve a professional team and extensive copyright management. The costs would be considerable, but they would also be well worth it – this would result in the creation of a centre of contemporary art outside the large cities. To discuss such matters today, in the centre of a Europe threatened by war, is only seemingly naive – once current threats pass, international connections will be the order of business,

including representation of the country. After all, Czechia has the potential to compete with developed Western countries precisely with its music and art.

### **What is it like to run a festival of spiritual art in what is often referred to as “the most atheist country in the world”?**

The label of “the most atheist country” is precisely that – *just* a label. Let us not forget that surveys in this area are not effected to discover the objective truth but so that results can be purposely manipulated. From this perspective, our country seems a little more likeable as a member of the global community. Church restitutions have finally progressed (after thirty years), and as part of this process, the Olomouc Archdiocese received the local castle and gardens. The historically progressive efforts of the archbishops of Olomouc in the 19th and 20th centuries are undebatable – they innovated in practically all fields, including industry, agriculture, forestry, and also, of course, culture and art. For years, the Olomouc Archdiocese has approved all the church concerts of our festival, including experimental projects, which is its own calling card for the future. The scales seem to have turned: mainstream society is now more conservative than ever before, while on the other side of the scales is the courage to risk a new step, a step that has long been tested and confirmed by the interest of crucial institutions around the world.

### **How important is the colloquium that runs adjacently to the festival?**

After years of organising this international event, we have made it a conference at at least the European level, although it is always an economical affair with a well thought-out number of participants. Over the years, we have participated in a number of art and culture conferences abroad, and our feeling is that mass events generally do not lead to effective results. The subtitle of this year’s conference will be “Art in the Times of a Pandemic”. The aim is to capture remarkable creative feats and to relay a message on the situation in a field as sensitive as contemporary art; contemporary music. The focus is on current interchanges between music and visual art corresponding to the orientation of the festival and reflecting the atmosphere of the times. The colloquium has become – among other things – a natural connective element between different fields, which is still fairly uncommon in the Czech environment.

### **When you received a special award from the Czech Music Council in 2015, the justification included**

**the following words: “The festival supports not only the frequently emphasised element of innovation but also a more traditional knowledge on the need for the informal cultivation of society through art.”**

This recognition, of course, also goes out to the hundreds of top-class performers and composers from both the Czech Republic and abroad who passed through the festival and selflessly promoted and supported Czech music and Czech art in both Europe and beyond. We often remember our inspiring collaboration with the American percussionist Amy Lynn Barber, who taught at the Prague Conservatory for five years (during which time she learned to speak perfect Czech) and carried out an enormous amount of work for the Czech music scene (for which she was awarded the prize of the Czech Music Fund). We often reminisce about our time with French composer of Georgian origin Nicolas Zourabichvili, thanks to whose generous support we presented the work of many Czech composers in France. We also often think of our Slovak colleagues in Bratislava (Roman Berger, Vladimír Bokes, Ilja Zeljenka, or the pianist and musicologist Elena Letňanová, or art historians Vladislav Grešlík, Marián Paukov, and others), without whose participation we would not have a permanent collaboration with the Slovak music and art scenes. We must also mention our frequent reviewers (including composers Jan Vrkoč, Jan Grossmann, Vojtěch Mojžíš, and Daniel Kessner, or Elena Letňanová), who have helped promote a less common vision of contemporary art in both Czech and international publications.

**Do you know of the establishment of a festival that provides a similar connection of contemporary and spiritual art? Thirty (and twenty) years ago, you were probably the only such event in the world.**

There is now a similar festival in San Marino. It is organised by composer Massimiliano Messieri, who teaches at the conservatory there, and his inspiration came directly from our festival. We have run reciprocal activities for fourteen years now, activities that lead to a real enrichment of both our national cultures. Everything that is worth anything in art is built on personal contact. The impersonal managerial apparatus we can now encounter across Europe produce very little that is new – they merely multiply existing material.

**How do you perceive the festival within the coordinates of the local and the global? The festival takes place in a small city but it hosts many international artists, while exhibitions and concerts connected to Forfest take place around the world.**



*Images from several editions of the Forfest Festival*

The contemporary art of today is a global village in which there is no way of measuring success. In New York, apartment concerts of avant-garde music took place long before the pandemic began. Private spaces become recording studios with a sometimes marginal, sometimes considerable impact on public life. This is simply part of the state of affairs – the greatest revolution in the history of art (the first impressionist exhibition) took place in a private studio. Without our journeys abroad, the festival would not be what it is today. What the future will be like, considering the pandemic and the tense international situation – we have no idea. Of course we will continue to perform, compose, and paint within the possibilities of our little country and hope that Czech art survives these terrible times.

**How do you manage to bring together organisational activities with your own artistic endeavours and other work (teaching, for instance)?**

It would be unlikely if we replied that we have a tested recipe. Josef Suk had to combine demanding international tours with the Bohemian Quartet whilst also working on the enormous scores of his peak symphonic works such as *Zrání (Ripening)* or *Asrael*. He was able to compose anywhere, apparently, in trains, hotels... But it must have been a difficult struggle for his survival as a creative person – creativity never stops and never wavers, a fact that will never be understood by functionaries of all stripes.

**Do you feel that the level of international interest in Czech art and culture has decreased since the Velvet Revolution?**

A small nation like us will probably have to struggle repeatedly for its place in the limelight – the entire musical world knows our greats (Dvořák; Martinů; Janáček), but few remember that they were Czech. During our state at the California State University, we admired the multitude of recordings of works by these composers in the musical archive, as well as the number of times their music was performed.

**What is the relationship between the festival and the inhabitants of Kroměříž, or, by extension, with the city's educational, civic, and artistic institutions?**

We described the merits of the city above, and after all, contemporary music struggles in Prague, too. It is up to all of us to cope with the highly unfavourable conditions. Contributing to this reality is the general atmosphere in today's global society. In tourist

brochures abroad, Prague is praised as a paradise for tourists – meaning primarily those who come to Prague for refreshments in the local bars: no mention of the Czech Philharmonic, any music festivals, or the National Gallery. The state-run CzechTourism organisation, based in Prague, has treated this situation with indifference for over thirty years.

**Every year, the festival has a rich and diverse programme. What dramaturgical criteria do you apply? What leads you to select the individual performers, composers, artists...?**

The festival is open to soloists, chamber ensembles, and vocal groups performing compositions of the 20th and 21st centuries in the field of art music. Programmes that include premieres are given preference. At least one of the pieces on the programme should contain a significant spiritual orientation. The festival programming arises from what is on offer, but it avoids established models, applying fantasy as well as a certain internal order. Like every thorough piece of work, it is created slowly by searching for a form that is as natural as possible yet still original.

**What are you personally most looking forward to in the next edition of the festival?**

Its entire course of progress, which each year brings not only powerful experiences at the individual events but also many unexpected dramaturgical moments and surprises that one must react to quickly and appropriately. Even after thirty-two years, making the festival happen is always a new adventure. We also look forward to written responses to the colloquium in the press both at home and abroad.

**What about plans for the future – for you and the festival?**

In the present situation, complex as it is, we aim to maintain our position as an open opportunity for the performance (or installation) of newly created works by Czech and international artists of different generations. To support the searching and experimentation of young artists whilst also programming late works by mature artists. To provide young professional musicians and chamber and vocal ensembles the space for a more clearly defined focus on contemporary music and to help listeners and spectators find a way to contemporary art.