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Republika

The Sacred and the Profane in the Organ Music of the Czech Lands in the 19th and 20th Centuries

Sakralno in profano v orgelski glasbi čeških dežel v 19. in 20. stoletju

Prejeto: 1. januar 2013
Sprejeto: 27. marec 2013

Received: 1st January 2013
Accepted: 27th March 2013

Ključne besede: orgelska glasba, romantika, češke dežele, glasba 20. stoletja

Keywords: organ music, Romanticism, the Czech lands, the 20th century music

IZVLEČEK

Članek se posveča orgelski glasbi na Češkem in Moravskem v 19. in 20. stoletju. Prinaša pogled na vlogo orgelske glasbe v cerkveni glasbi in na razvoj obrti izdelovanja orgel. Avtorica podrobneje opazuje tudi nekaj kategorij orgelskih del, skupaj s skladbami različnih ustvarjalcev, ki jih ilustrirajo.

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the organ music of Bohemia and Moravia the 19th and 20th centuries. It describes the situation in the area of both church music and organ building. Furthermore, several categories of organ music are dealt with. Finally, several composers are characterized as examples of these categories.

In the 19th century, the organ loft of the local church was still an important focus of musical life, and the majority of composers took it for granted that they should concern themselves with liturgical and extra-liturgical church music. What is more, at this time the profession of organist and director of the church choir still enjoyed high artistic and social prestige. Worship services in the large cities were accompanied by significant musical production. In smaller cities and villages, the organ loft was still the focus of musical and, indeed, cultural life.

As the secularisation of social life gathered momentum in the first half of the 19th century, secular music began to work its way into churches. The aforementioned secularisation was gradual, and was a natural feature of European culture. In music this led

to the establishment of secular institutions for the education of professional musicians. These raised the level of musical culture, but also facilitated the influence of secular music on sacred music. The reaction against this situation took the form, in 1826, of the *Association for the Improvement of Church Music in Bohemia (Jednota ku zvelebení církevní hudby v Čechách)*, which founded the organ school in Prague four years later. In Moravia, the parallel *Association for the Improvement of Church Music in Moravia (Jednota ku zvelebení církevní hudby na Moravě)*, formed on the initiative of Leoš Janáček, did not appear until 1881.¹

Starting in the second half of the 19th century, however, liturgical music was slowly pushed to the edge of the field of interest of composers and artistic life in general, in step with the weakening of religious belief in the more educated classes of society. The prestige of the church organist, choir director also fell significantly and organ schools declined in importance. Church music proper became a conservative branch of music, into which ever fewer of the latest developments in music could penetrate. But at the same time, more and more “spiritual” works appeared which were intended to be performed in the concert hall. These works could be personal and original expressions of their composers, not bound by the requirements of the liturgy.²

In this epoch of decline in church music, with operatic melodies and other favourite pieces popping up in the organ loft, there arose a movement for reform, calling for a renewal of church music – the *Caecilian Movement*, called *Cyrlism* in the Czech cultural milieu. This movement, however, did not contribute to the development of music for organ solo.

Now for a brief history of the organ in our era. Baroque, or more precisely Classical organ specifications were still the norm in the Czech lands for a very long time, essentially up to the mid-19th century. Romanticism in music had little influence, and changes were gradual. The transition to a Romantic sound was made mostly starting in the 1870s under the influence of the Caecilian reform, which was widely supported and implemented in the Czech lands. Scores of historic instruments, especially in the cities, were rebuilt, leaving few instruments in the Czech lands in their original dispositions. Romanticism and the influence of the reform lasted much longer in the Czech lands than in surrounding areas, even into the first half of the 20th century. Starting in the 1940s, there was an attempt to return to Baroque ideals, especially in the disposition of registers, but less with respect to intonation. It was mostly thought that the ideal organ was a polyvalent one with a universal sound, one which nevertheless lacked any unique characteristics.³ After the arrival of communism, organ firms were nationalised and large factories came into being which often engaged in building enormous instruments. Numerous historic organs were ruined by inappropriate modifications.⁴ After the change of regime in 1989, small organ workshops reappeared, most of them out of

1 Petr Vít, “Doba národního probuzení (1810–1860)” in *Hudba v českých dějinách: od středověku do nové doby* (Praha: Supraphon, 1989), 308–309.

2 Vladimír Lěbl, Jitka Ludvová, “Nová doba (1860–1938)” in *Hudba v českých dějinách: od středověku do nové doby* (Praha: Supraphon, 1989), 364–365.

3 Milan Šlechta, *Dějiny varhan a varhanní hudby v Evropě* (Praha: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství, 1985), 57–60.

4 Bohumil Plánský, “České a moravské varhanářství v druhé polovině 20. století”, in *Varhany a jejich funkce v Čechách a na Moravě 1600–2000*, ed. Jan Vičar, Kritické edice hudebních památek V (Olomouc, Univerzita Palackého, 2003), 97–104.

love and enthusiasm for organs, and some of these are even doing work outside of the Czech Republic. Significantly greater attention is devoted to restoring historic instruments, something which can be done only by competent craftsmen. In this way several outstanding instruments have been saved.⁵

Now we will look at the situation with music for the organ. In the 19th century organists, choir directors, and pedagogues all wrote music for organ, but this was not enough to provide them a living. The vast majority of the composers who wrote for organ occupied relatively low positions, and today they are little known or even completely unknown names whose music is played only sporadically at best. Only a few organists became renowned performing artists.

The organ was not the centre of attention for Czech composers in either the 19th or – with a few exceptions – the 20th centuries. It is significant that the most important and today most oft-played 19th- and 20th-century composers applied themselves to organ music only sporadically, either during their studies or younger years when they were searching for their own compositional language, or later in their lives as the result of an inner impulse, either personal or historical.⁶

Bedřich Smetana (1824–1884), when young, wrote 6 short preludes for organ. During his studies at the Prague organ school, Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904) wrote 8 pieces for organ, which he called *Composition Essays* (*Kompoziční pokusy*).

Leoš Janáček (1854–1928) is another example of a composer for whom – like for Dvořák and Smetana – the organ was not the most convenient medium of expression. His first three organ compositions are from the time of his studies at the organ school in Prague. Two more short pieces from 1884 are lacklustre improvisational works. Thereafter, Janáček did not return to the organ until near the end of his life, when he trusted the organ with the intermezzo and above all the *Organ Solo* (traditionally called *Postludium*) in his Glagolitic Mass (1926), an effective, ever growing monothematic stream of music.

Nor was the organ an important medium for the expression of the thought of Vítězslav Novák (1870–1949), who wrote only two compositions for organ: the *Prelude on a Wallachian Love Song*, based on a secular melody and thus remote from the style of most organ pieces, and the *St. Wenceslas Triptych*. In this second composition, the 71-year-old Novák turned to the organ, in a time of war, as a way of symbolically invoking the patron saint of the Czech lands. The work is a demanding, masterly composition with a vigorous toccata, a painfully intensifying ciaconna, and a contrapuntally complicated fugue, which does not renounce the composer's orchestral way of thinking. Indeed, Novák would orchestrate the work in the very year of its composition (1941).

Bohuslav Martinů (1890–1959) was another composer who sought other instruments and combinations of instruments for his artistic expression, and other expressive possibilities than those offered him by the organ. It is revealing that he turned to the organ only in the last year of his life, when he began his only work for solo organ, *Vigil*, and was unable to complete it before dying. Martinů dedicated the work

5 Petr Koukal, "K současným problémům péče o fond historických varhan v České republice", in *Varhany a jejich funkce v Čechách a na Moravě 1600–2000*, ed. Jan Vičar, Kritické edice hudebních památek V (Olomouc, Univerzita Palackého, 2003), 69–76.

6 Following survey of Czech composers is taken from: Jana Michálková Slimáčková, *České země, in Skladatelé varhanní hudby*, manuscript to be published.

to Bedřich Janáček, a Czech organist living in Sweden. The work was eventually completed by that very Bedřich Janáček.

With the two exceptions of Josef Klička and Bedřich Antonín Wiedermann, who were also outstanding organists, there were no significant representatives of organ music in the Czech lands until the middle of the 20th century.

It is well known that Josef Klička (1855–1937) was the temporary head of the Prague Conservatory during Dvořák's time in America, and that he, after Smetana, was the second conductor of the Provisional Theatre. But above all, he was a celebrated organist, choirmaster, and teacher at the organ school and later at the conservatory. His works for organ demonstrate to what degree the ideal sound for the instrument in the 19th century was an orchestral one, and are considered to be the only Czech parallels to the French organ symphonies being written at that time. With his late-Romantic musical language, he normally does not strive for particularly dramatic expression, but his works are nevertheless marked by well-thought-out musical logic. Klička's most often-played work, the *Fantasy on Bedřich Smetana's Symphonic Poem Vyšehrad*, will clearly never be close to the heart of the musical purist. It is, however, not just a fashionable period piece, but attractive to listen to even today. The *Concert Fantasy on the St. Wenceslas Chorale* is far longer, and also has a much more weighty conception. Klička also composed, among other works, three more concert fantasies, the extended *Sonata in F-sharp Minor* and the *Concerto for Organ and Orchestra in D minor*.

The most important and most prolific Czech composer for organ since the 18th century was Bedřich Antonín Wiedermann (1883–1951). He was a church organist who taught at the Prague Conservatory and at the Academy of Performing Arts. He performed regularly, and gave concerts before services in the church of the Emmaus Monastery in Prague. Starting in 1920 he gave Sunday matinee concerts at the Obecní dům, and performed in the Czech countryside and abroad (both in Europe and the USA). Alongside his performances and teaching activities, he also devoted himself to composition and wrote more than 300 works, including 85 for organ. His musical language is late Romantic with elements of modern harmony and above all with a modern instrumental feel. The larger works demand considerable virtuosity. He is fond of traditional forms and church modes with chorales or vocal melodies. He wrote extended concert works, as well as smaller idylls and more than 200 chorale preludes.

During the 20th century there was a gradual rise in the level of music for the organ. More valuable compositions began to appear in connection with technical improvements in organs themselves, developments in organ-playing technique, more frequent appearances of the instrument in concert, and better understanding of the possibilities of scoring for organ. Nevertheless, most composers still had their hearts in orchestral or chamber music. Music for organ was – and still is – composed mostly by organists and musicians having a personal connection to the organ, or by those who symbolically turned to the organ in certain stages or situations in their lives.

Without a doubt, the most important and the most frequently played of Czech composers for the organ in the 2nd half of the 20th century, both at home and abroad, is Petr Eben (1929–2007). He discovered the organ as a child, but at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague he studied piano and composition. He gave concerts not

only as a pianist, but also as an organ improviser. For Eben, the organ was the instrument with which he could express himself most personally. He often communicates a deep message, even an extramusical programme, citing Gregorian chant, Lutheran chorales, or Czech folk melodies. *Sunday Music* (1957–1959) is his most oft-played and most beloved cycle of works for solo organ. Among the most extensive of Eben's philosophical and spiritual cycles, inspired by literary themes, are *Faust* (1979), originally conceived as incidental music for Goethe's play as performed at Vienna's Burgtheater; *Job* (1987), based on the story from the Old Testament; and *Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart* (2002), originally an improvisation on a text by Jan Ámos Komenský. Among Eben's other works worth mentioning are his *Hommage a Dietrich Buxtehude* (1987), written for the anniversary of the North German composer's birth and incorporating citations from Buxtehude's music. *Biblical Dances* (1991) presents – as the name would indicate – dances as they appeared in the Bible, accompanied by a choreographic portrayal. Eben also wrote two concertos for organ and orchestra.

Other 20th-century composers of significant organ music include Miloslav Kabeláč (1908–1979); his *Two Fantasies* op. 32 of 1958 are often played, and the second of them was written for the international competition of the Prague Spring Festival. Miloš Sokola (1913–1976) is another, who has written several pieces on the B-A-C-H theme. The best-known organ pieces by Otmar Mácha (1922–2006) are his *Three Toccatas* (*Funeral Toccata*, *Wedding Toccata* and *Christmas Toccata*). Jiří Teml (1935), a former radio producer in Prague, composed organ music from the late 1960s; his pieces include a *Fantasia appassionata*, a programmatic *Mysterium sacrum* on the life of Christ, and a *Fantasietta: Hommage a Buxtehude* for the tercentenary of the death of the North German composer. There were two composers of organ music, both working in Moravia, who had been fellow-students of the organ at the Brno conservatory: the op. 1 of the first, Zdeněk Pololáník (1935), was a set of *Variations for Organ and Piano*, which won high praise abroad, and which was followed by many other pieces; from the 1970s he wrote in a more popular style. The other, Milan Slimáček (1936), composed for organ in his youth, and then again in the 1980s, including his frequently-performed *Fantasy on the B-A-C-H theme*, of 2005. Radek Rejšek (1959), who is not only an organist but also a carillonneur, and as a music producer at Czech Radio has recorded many historic organs, has composed (for example) a *Ludus spatii* for two organs, of 1990.

It is now possible for us to come up with a typology of works for organ and a separate typology of composers for the organ, and to see where the two categories overlap. For composers, we can set up the following categories: composers of church music; actively composing organists (often virtuosi); composers having a more or less intensive (often personal) relationship to the organ; and finally composers who wrote only the occasional piece for organ just as they may have for any other instrument. For compositions for organ, we can set up these categories: compositional studies; liturgical works such as preludes, interludes, postludes (these compositions are the most numerous, often being of moderate or even inconsequential length); a good number of works with organ accompaniment; and other works of which far fewer were written, like solo concert works, works for organ with other instruments, either chamber ensemble or orchestra, organ concertos with orchestra (a form which appeared very in-

frequently in Czech music), and in the 2nd half of the 20th century, experimental works which are played mostly at special concerts for contemporary music.

At present the organ is not among composers' most popular instruments, and what was said above still holds true: the composers who write for the organ are those who have a personal relationship to it as a church instrument and who have studied it, or from an external stimulus (a commission, or a request from a performer).

It is a shame that the works of the older generation of composers (e.g. those from the 1950s and 1960s) are hardly played at all nowadays, and were heard only at the time they were composed. But there are grounds for optimism in the fact that today's younger generation of organists is showing interest in until recently forgotten composers of church music, whose works were not at the forefront of stylistic developments, and who also composed works for organ, especially in the 19th century and in the 1st half of the 20th century; there is even interest in composers who worked outside of the mainstream. They are now being given attention by performers and musicologists. This is invaluable especially because these composers give us a base against which we can compare the work of musical giants like Smetana, Dvořák, Janáček, Martinů and Novák, or outstanding organists like Klička a Wiedermann.

POVZETEK

Članek prinaša pregled orgelske glasbe na Češkem in Moravskem v 19. in 20. stoletju. V 19. stoletju je bil glasbeni kor krajevne cerkve še vedno pomembno središče glasbenega življenja, zato je bilo za večino skladateljev samoumevno, da so se posvečali tudi skladanju liturgične in izvenliturgične cerkvene glasbe. Ko se je začela v prvi polovici pospešena sekularizacija družbenega življenja, je z njo v cerkve prodrla tudi posvetna glasba.

Od druge polovice 19. st. naprej je bila liturgična glasba vedno bolj na obrobju zanimanja skladateljev, pa tudi glasbenega življenja nasploh. Proces je potekal skladno z upadanjem vernosti med predstavniki bolj izobraženih družbenih slojev. Cerkevna glasba je postajala vedno bolj konservativna glasbena vrst, v katero so redko prodrla novosti sodobnega glasbenega razvoja. Na drugi strani pa so začela nastajati dela »duhovne glasbe«, namenjena izvedbi v koncertni dvorani. Tovrstna dela so bila individualne in izvirne stvaritve skladateljev, neomejene s potrebami liturgije.

Organisti, zborovodje in učitelji so v 19. st. sicer ustvarjali glasbo za orgle, vendar se s tem niso mogli preživljati. Večina jih je zasedala sorazmerno neugledne službe, tako da danes malo vemo o njih, čeprav se morda njihova dela občasno še izvajajo. Le redki so postali sloviti izvajalci.

Orgle niso bile v središču pozornosti čeških skladateljev 19. in – z redkimi izjemami – 20. stoletja.

Zanimivo je, da so se tudi najpogostejše izvajani skladatelji tega časa orglam posvečali le občasno, bodisi v času študija, ko so še iskali svoj glasbeni jezik, ali pa kasneje zaradi notranjih spodbud, osebnih ali zgodovinskih.

Primeri so Bedřich Smetana, Antonín Dvořák, Leoš Janáček, Vítězslav Novák, Bohuslav Martinů. Z izjemo dveh, ki sta bila izredna orglavca, Josef Klička in Bedřich Antonín Wiedermann, v čeških deželah do sredine 20. st. ni bilo pomembnih orgleskih glasbenikov.

V 20. st. se je začel postopen dvig ravni orgelske glasbe. Nastajati so začele pomembnejše skladbe, tudi zaradi postopnega uveljavljanja tehničnih inovacij pri gradnji instrumentov, izpopolnjene tehnike igranja nanje, pogostejšem vključevanju v koncertne sporede in boljšim razumevanjem izkoriščanja zvočnih zmožnosti tega instrumenta. Glasbo za orgle so – in jo še – pretežno skladali organisti in glasbeniki, osebno povezani z instrumentom, ali pa skladatelji, ki so se v različnih življenjskih okoliščinah ukvarjali z orglami zaradi njihovega simbolnega pomena.

Najpomembnejši ter doma in v tujini najpogostejše izvajani češki skladatelj za orgle druge polovice 20. st. je Petr Eben. Med drugimi pomembnimi skladatelji za orgle 20. st. velja omeniti tudi imena, kot so Miloš Kabeláč, Miloš Sokola, Otmar Mácha, Jiří Teml, Zdeněk Pololáník, Milan Slimáček in Radek Rejšek.

Prevod naslova, izvillečka in povzetka Aleš Nagode.