

## REHEARSAL OF THE ORCHESTRA - A BRIEF HISTORY

By Petr Kadlec

### 2012/13

October 2012 was the first time that the Czech Philharmonic performed under the baton of Jiří Bělohlávek with Marek Eben as the host. The first programme, written by Alice Nellis, was titled „It could have sounded completely different“ and both the protagonists focused on a part of Mahler's *Seventh Symphony* and the overture to *Die Fledermaus* by Strauss. With Mahler, some interesting forms of instrumentation were explored. „When I was preparing for today's concert,“ Marek Eben noted, „I was listening to the recording and thought, what is that noise? I asked and the conductor told me, that there was no rattling sound. And then it turned out it was a...“ – „We call it *col legno* in Italian, which means that the musicians are playing on the strings not with the bow hair, but with the stick of the bow,“ Jiří Bělohlávek explained and *col legno* was then demonstrated in all its glory. An unforgettable moment came, when the musicians - after curious questions from Marek Eben whether they could play at least a short bit of some music by memory - the orchestra launched into the beginning of the overture to *The Bartered Bride*. And can you tell what piece is to be played just by the conductor's gesture? The Philharmonic musicians managed to do it when they recognized that Jiří Bělohlávek was conducting the opening parts of the Czech national anthem, which famously begins on the second beat. The chief conductor also turned out to be very knowledgeable of Strauss's operetta *Die Fledermaus*, even singing some parts to the audience! In addition to his unforgettable summary of the rather batty plot, Marek Eben also expressed one wish: „I don't think anyone has ever heard the end of this overture played slowly.“ His wish was granted, but then the orchestra played *Die Fledermaus* at the originally intended tempo.

### 2013/14

„You may be surprised to learn that the members of the Czech Philharmonic also wear normal clothes. It's really the case, they don't always wear black,“ Marek Eben noted to open the second programme in spring of 2014, as the musicians were entering the stage in casual outfits. And what was on that day? Parts of Suk's *Fairytale* as well as Dvořák's *Romance* and *Mazurek*. Before Jiří Bělohlávek arrived, the musicians' home practice was examined, including that of the tuba - an instrument which stands alone in the whole orchestra. „I've gotten used to my solitude,“ noted the tuba player, Karel Malimánek. Tuba practice comes with challenges. „It's not only about *what* to practice, but also *where* to practice. Tuba isn't exactly the type of instrument which fosters good neighbourly relations. That means I have to practice at the Philharmonic, where I feel quite safe.“

The conductor's preparation, as it was described by Jiří Bělohlávek, consists of several fundamental decisions. The first concerns the tempo. For Suk's *Playing at Swans and Peacocks*, which is essentially a polka, the author prescribes 108 beats per minute, but upon the audience's request, the Czech Philharmonic also tried a very swift tempo of 168. „I would like to see the lady in the audience dance to that,“ smiled Jiří Bělohlávek.

The next decision involves dynamics and balancing the sound intensity of different instrumental groups. There are instruments which are inherently disadvantaged compared to others. The harp probably comes to mind for most people, but: „how fond are the violas of the brass section?“ Marek Eben asks. „I guess we envy them a bit,“ Pavel Ciprys answers, „because whenever *they* decide they want to be heard, they *will* be. When we

wish to be loud, we can wait for one of our melodies, which are quite plentiful, but they tend to be faint... Or there's the other option: we cut in somewhere during a rest.“

And does the famous solo in the 1st movement of Suk's *Fairytale* always have to be played by the violin? Not at all! We tried the English horn, the tuba and even the timpani!

The concert concluded with the exploration of the relationships between the orchestra, the soloist and the conductor who can help each other, but also hinder one another. The orchestra, for example, can cause trouble to the soloist by „pulling him back“ if they are playing slower than him, so much so that the sound of the poor soloist eventually gets „strangled“. Even the different forms of musical expression were discussed. First, a part of Dvořák's *Mazurek* was played in a very bland fashion, then over the top, until finally the soloist, Josef Špaček, played upon the audience's request with the expression of a „dead lover“. Lying on the stage!

## 2014/15

The Rehearsal of the Orchestra in May of 2015 belonged to modern classical music, which is associated with a certain degree of dread. „You can best see it,“ Marek Eben described, „when you try to invite someone to such a concert. If you're inviting them to a pop concert, they say: 'I'll ask my wife and I'll call you.' When you're inviting them to a classical music concert, they say: 'I'd love to, but my wife's at work and I have to bring the kids from summer camp.' And when you're inviting the same person to a concert of modern classical music, they say: 'That's a no-can-do, my wife's at work where she's just gone to labour and my kids are at summer camp where there's a measles outbreak, and if I'm being honest, I'm not feeling very well myself...' We are all the more excited that you managed to overcome all these adversities and you're here.“ The programme included excerpts from Prokofjev's suite *The Love for Three Oranges*, the overture to Janáček's opera *From the House of the Dead* and a composition by Petr Eben titled *Vox Clamantis*. „It's a piece I deeply admire and I consider it to be one of the author's finest,“ said Jiří Bělohlávek. „In it, Petr Eben employed various compositional innovations. For example aleatorics, a technique which, at the time of the composition's origin in 1969, belonged to the hot new trends. It's a method which works with chance. Alea means dice in latin. When you throw dice, you never know what numbers you'll get. Aleatoric music works similarly. The composer gives partial or even complete freedom to the performers. The beauty of the music is in that it allows everybody to ask themselves questions, which matter to them, also offering the answers. Modern music especially is very generous and free in that regard.“

## 2015/16

For concerts in February 2016 – soon before his seventieth birthday – Jiří Bělohlávek chose two operatic pieces of music. A suite from Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* and the finale of Janáček's *The Cunning Little Vixen*. Strauss managed to capture in his music the spirit of the Austrian capital at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, including the distinct atmosphere of Viennese cafés. „We are now having a bit of trouble with those... cafés...,“ noted Marek Eben, referring to certain presidential matters at the time. „Couldn't we somehow get rid of the café and turn it into a mediocre pub?“<sup>1</sup>

Just for the fun of it, the

Czech philharmonic and their chief conductor performed even such a version.

„For me, the main motif of both the compositions is farewell,“ Jiří Bělohlávek continued on a more serious note. For Strauss it's on a personal level, with two people saying goodbye to each other. The Marschallin, who realizes that her desire to keep a relationship with young Octavian is only theoretical and that sooner or later she would have to let him go. It is difficult for her and Strauss conveys the ache of her soul with great compassion.

For Janáček, the farewell takes on a more universal meaning. At the close of the opera,

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's note: Miloš Zeman, who served as president of the Czech Republic between the years 2013 and 2023 famously spoke against the culture of Prague cafés, labelling it as too liberal and elitist.

the Forester is moved by the forest and the constant cycle of renewal present in nature. He begins to reflect on his life, which appears before him as a complete arc.

The Forester was portrayed by the legendary singer Richard Novák, who had celebrated his eighty-fourth birthday not long before. He revealed that Janáček wrote a very important aria in *The Cunning Little Vixen*, celebrating Brno. “When the Forester enters the pub at Páseks’, shortly before the end of the opera, and sees that the innkeeper is not there, he asks: ‘Where is your husband, Mrs. Pásek?’ – The hostess, being very busy, simply replies: ‘He’s in Brno.’ – And that is the aria through which Brno entered the history of world opera. It is also proof of Janáček’s sense for brevity.”

For Richard Novák as well, the theme of farewell is strongly present in Janáček’s opera. “It’s in the moment when the Forester leaves the pub, where the mood is rather gloomy. The schoolmaster is sad because Terinka has married, the priest he liked is absent. The Forester simply can’t bear it there any longer, so he says: ‘I’ll pay and go.’ – And then he starts singing what I consider a beautiful farewell. It’s nothing harsh, nothing existential: ‘Where? To the forest and then home. I left the dog at home, his legs hurt him. He has to rest. He’s getting old, schoolmaster, just like us. It’s a long time ago when we were young and foolish! Now we are glad to lie down for a rest and don’t even feel like going out.’”<sup>2</sup>

## 2016/17

For Rehearsal of the Orchestra at the end of January 2017, Alice Nellis came up with the idea of having two conductors from different generations: alongside the chief conductor was then twenty-five-year-old Jiří Rožeň. “The Czech Philharmonic naturally incurred some expenses by engaging two conductors,” commented Marek Eben, “so we had to find some compensation somewhere. That’s why you’ll hear only one piece, but several times.” Jiří Bělohlávek’s choice was Dvořák’s overture *Othello*, which he had first conducted in February 1987 with the radio orchestra in Saarbrücken. In later years, he brought it on stage with orchestras in Oslo, Tokyo, Vienna, Washington, and with the Czech Philharmonic on a tour of England. Did his interpretation change over time? “I sincerely hope so, because if I had done it the same way for 30 years, it wouldn’t be a very good sign as far as my artistic development is concerned.” And what was your very first approach to the piece? “I certainly stuck very closely to everything written in the score, because as a young conductor I was full of academic enthusiasm and obsessed with everything being exactly as the composer intended it.”

Jiří Rožeň, who had only conducted *Othello* once before – in Plovdiv, Bulgaria – was asked if there was any particular part he feared. “Perhaps at the very end of the piece, where Dvořák indicates *accelerando*, meaning it should become even more vigorous. It’s the moment after *Othello* decides to take his own life. The music has enormous dramatic momentum, and if the conductor’s hands were to stiffen up at that point, it wouldn’t help the orchestra push forward, and the piece wouldn’t reach the proper climax.” – “From that,” commented Marek Eben, “I understand that the most important thing is for the conductor not to stiffen up before *Othello* does.”

## 2017/18

The Rehearsal of the Orchestra in April 2018 was the first without Jiří Bělohlávek, who had passed away in May 2017. “We got to know him not only as an excellent conductor but also as a very brave man,” said Marek Eben as he opened the evening. “We thought it would be nice to dedicate the first piece to our chief conductor – a part of Bach’s *Oboe Concerto*. It’s beautiful, spiritual music, rising straight to the heavens, so I believe it will find

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<sup>2</sup> Translator’s note: the translations of the *Cunning Little Vixen* libretto were taken from a translation by Soňa Vávrová from the year 1990

its addressee up there.” After the piece faded away, some members of the Philharmonic shared memories of Bělohlávek. We heard some of his characteristic remarks to the orchestra: “Gentlemen, this sounds too credencious, give me a different version,” – this comment was aimed at the percussionists. And to the whole orchestra, on another occasion: “In this section, try to feel like you’re taking a warm bath...”

Jiří Bělohlávek was also one to support the Czech Philharmonic’s efforts in seeking out young musical talents. One of them was the thirteen-year-old horn player Jan Vobořil, who performed with the Czech Philharmonic not only in a short piece by Camille Saint-Saëns, but also in an *Intrada* he had composed in just a few days and performed together with his father, solo hornist Jan Vobořil. The concert concluded with the finale of Tchaikovsky’s *Fourth Symphony*, where many orchestral groups have solo opportunities; the showcase of orchestral virtuosity was conducted by Jiří Rožeň.