

Jiří Bělohlávek's Legacy in Recordings

In 2017, the music journal Harmonie published Bohuslav Víttek's text discussing Jiří Bělohlávek's major recordings released to date under various labels. That is why this text does not present any recordings released after this date. The most complete list of his recordings was assembled by Alexander Goldscheider in 2022 in a text released by Romantic Robot, which was shortly released also on Jiří Bělohlávek's webpage.

While meeting Jiří Bělohlávek in the last weeks and months of his life and noticing with worries his deteriorating health, it was impossible for most of us not to be reminded of the first encounter with this man, be it face to face or seeing him conduct at concerts. Some of us may have remembered his interpretation of Smetana's *Má vlast* (My country) performed at the Mladá Smetanova Litomyšl Festival in 1977 in the riding hall of the Litomyšl Chateau. The author of these lines considers this performance one of the best he has ever heard. The Brno Philharmonic was conducted by this young conductor with such freshness and vitality, far from any pose or pathos often heard in performances nowadays. The success was such that it asked for an unusual encore – the Brno Philharmonic played *Šárka* once more! Following such an experience many listeners have longed to keep this memory for ever on a recording. It did not happen then – recordings of Smetana's famous symphonic cycle were offered only under some kind of "official" supervision at the time, albeit the recordings were of high artistic quality. Other versions were not released. What was considered official at the time was the stereo-recording of Karel Ančerl, while Talich's memorable mono-recording was slowly falling into oblivion. Jiří Bělohlávek had to wait until 1990, when he became the chief conductor of the Czech Philharmonic, for his first recording of *Má vlast* to be made. Neither this recording produced in March 1990 in the Vladislav Hall of the Prague Castle (Rudolfinum was being reconstructed), however, was born under a lucky star – just a month later it was overshadowed by Kubelík's legendary live recording at the Prague Spring. And what more, Bělohlávek's newer recordings were not to become a part of the promising anthology of Czech national music produced by the Decca label. However, we believe that one day we might be lucky enough for them to be released, the recording of the opening concert of the Prague Spring 2014 exists and – together with many other promised titles - is still waiting for commercial release. *

Jiří Bělohlávek's career finished all too soon. And so did his impressive discography. It is not our goal to map out all its major projects. Such effort, including evaluation and analysis of its characteristic features, would require an extended publication. Let us here content ourselves with just a glance. And since even this would put us into danger of being inexact and random, let us divide this sound archive into various periods that correspond to Bělohlávek's eras leading different orchestras. First and foremost, we must acknowledge that one could come across Bělohlávek's name at

least two decades prior to his becoming the chief conductor of the Czech Philharmonic in 1990.

At that time, the only two Czech labels *Supraphon* and *Panton* immediately recognized this young conductor's exceptionality and started inviting him to studios. Bělohlávek himself always considered his first great era to be his engagement with the Brno Philharmonic (State Philharmonic Orchestra as it was known then, with Jiří Waldhans as the chief conductor), which started in 1972. Early on he was invited with the orchestra to the *Supraphon* studio to record popular compositions by Aram Khachaturian - with youthful zest, perfect rhythm and colourful melodies. In 1973, he stood in the *Panton* studio for the first time conducting the Czech Philharmonic in Bartók's *Divertimento* and Ravel's *Pavane*. This LP was released within the popular *Debut* edition whose aim was to present various Czech conductors and Bělohlávek's colleagues. Bělohlávek's engagement with the Brno Philharmonic was crowned by his two outstanding but less-known recordings of Janáček's *Sinfonietta* and *Taras Bulba*, also under the *Panton* label. Jiří Bělohlávek would return to Brno in later years, making here several interesting recordings (Fibich's *Symphony No. 3*, Russian popular orchestral works, concerts with Valentina Kameníková etc.).

In 1977 Ladislav Šíp, the director of the Prague Symphony Orchestra FOK, invited the then 31-year-old Jiří Bělohlávek to become the chief conductor of this highly regarded orchestra. Many people voiced their concern if this step was not premature. However, it became clear very soon that this was one of the most successful steps of modern-day Czech music management. Jiří Bělohlávek was given a wonderful opportunity that he used well for both his and the orchestra's benefit. And *Supraphon* kept up with it. Although the recording company had cooperated with the new chief conductor of the Prague Symphony Orchestra FOK before, only now did real recording prospects open. Among others, a new project was initiated that cannot be surpassed – to record the orchestral work of Bohuslav Martinů. In the 1970s, *Supraphon* finally began to pay the debt to the composer whose work – notwithstanding the ambiguous official opinion – was performed and included in concert programmes and recording plans, but by far not enough. Jiří Bělohlávek was the person who contributed with the essential recordings of Martinů's works released on LPs at the time. Among these, the recording of *The Miracles of Mary* (1984) and *Epos of Gilgamesh* (1976) are true feats. Both recordings feature the Prague Symphony Orchestra and a representative choice of the best singers of the day. And more Martinů's scores appeared on recordings for the first time and therefore became known - *The Butterfly that Stamped* and *Who is the Most Powerful in the World?* and the almost-forgotten *Czech Rhapsody* with its monumental climax evoking Saint Venceslav. During his time as FOK's chief conductor and his engagement with the Czech Philharmonic (from 1982), Bělohlávek made many recordings of the fundamentals of Czech national music – the first non-philharmonic recording of Dvořák's cello concerto with excellent Michaela Fukačová as the soloist, a selection of popular compositions by Bedřich Smetana and Antonín Dvořák – all

that with the Prague Symphony Orchestra FOK. Many recordings were made with the Czech Philharmonic, too – a new recording of *The Parables, Tre Ricercari. Sinfonia Concertante for Two Orchestras* appeared on a CD, along with *Les Estampes, Overture* and *Concerto Grosso*. Martinů's complete piano concertos with Emil Leichner on the piano was highly acclaimed at the time. Bělohlávek's complete recording of Johannes Brahms' symphonies, piano concertos (with Ivan Moravec) is truly masterful. Following a break in recordings of Brahms' work - caused by the fact that Karel Ančerl could not finish his Brahms project due to political reasons at the end of the 1960s and Václav Neumann did not study the composer's work systematically – Jiří Bělohlávek returned to this crown of Romantic music in his first years with the Czech Philharmonic. It is regrettable that this amazing project was left unfinished (with the violin concerto and double concerto missing) and unsatisfactorily appreciated. In comparison to the excellent and exceptional version of Karel Ančerl, Bělohlávek's version is more lyrical than masculine, colourful in sound and technically perfect. One can speak in the same manner about his recording of Dvořák's *New World Symphony* and *Carnival* from the close of 1989. At that time, it was already clear that Bělohlávek was going to be the future chief conductor.

The change on the post of the chief conductor of the Czech Philharmonic took place in the free political atmosphere of the 1990s. Jiří Bělohlávek took up this post with his natural responsibility and ambition and was considered by the public as Václav Neumann's ideal successor. He recorded Smetana's *Má vlast* already in 1990 and soon after the Czech Philharmonic released itself from the obligation of exclusivity with the *Supraphon* label. *Chandos*, a fresh label then, began to cooperate intensively with the orchestra. In a short period of time a very nice archive was created that can be compared to the present project of the *Decca* company. *Chandos* was hindered by the lack of a suitable recording space, as the Rudolfinum was closed for reconstruction at the time. The Smetana Hall of the Municipal House where the Czech Philharmonic found a temporary home was not suitable for recording. The recording company therefore chose the slightly unsatisfactory Spanish Hall of the Prague Castle and produced some very interesting recordings (e.g. Bohuslav Martinů, Leoš Janáček, Josef Suk, Dvořák's *Stabat Mater*) that reflect the artistic qualities of the orchestra and to a degree characterise the conductor who was gradually gaining his individual character in the form of his detailed attention to the scores and lyrical rather than too expressive approach. Discipline and attention to detail became one of the crucial attributes of Jiří Bělohlávek's interpretation of orchestral music. Bělohlávek's recordings with the Czech Philharmonic, the Prague Symphony Orchestra FOK and to a certain extent with the newly created Prague Chamber Philharmonia (1994) pleased their listeners with their perfect discipline which gave them the feeling of certainty and definitiveness. It had its positive sides as well, nevertheless some discussion appeared. Concerning Voříšek's *Symphony in D major* with Prague Philharmonia, many critics missed the impressive explosiveness known from the much older recordings of Prague Chamber Orchestra or still older recording

of the Czech Philharmonic with Karel Ančerl. What, however, cannot be disputed is the dramaturgy of Bělohlávek's archive. Besides the already-mentioned fundamental titles, we can find there many recordings of contemporary, and especially Czech, composers (Klement Slavický, Milan Slavický, Vladimír Sommer, Viktor Kalabis, Jan Hanuš, Jaroslav Krček, and Lukáš Hurník from the younger generation to name but a few).

Recordings of the Prague Philharmonia made to date represent a specific chapter and as far as the chamber orchestra repertoire is concerned, they resemble the discography of Prague Chamber Orchestra, which got its renown for playing without a conductor and thus in a specific chamber-music manner.

PKF - Prague Philharmonia, however, proved that such a rare approach does not have to be beneficial only. Its conductors' intentions and inspirations (Jiří Bělohlávek and later Jakub Hrůša) are manifested in the recordings (first, under the *Clarton* label, later *Supraphon*) and contribute to greater and characteristic artistic ideas. With this young orchestra, Bělohlávek also focused on music of younger date. At the time, Classical and Baroque music started to be performed in the authentic style of interpretation anyway. Jiří Bělohlávek therefore focused more on the Romantic scores, especially the Czech ones, including the fundamental compositions (serenades and suites by Dvořák, Suk and Novák), which shined through their freshness and lovely chamber-like sound. Bělohlávek's dramaturgy with the orchestra was unorthodox and therefore very beneficial (let us name composers of the close of the century, composers active in the Terezín ghetto etc.).

Jiří Bělohlávek broke up with the Czech Philharmonic at the beginning of the 1990s in an adverse atmosphere. Such situations are not rare, and in most cases, break-ups of this kind would be for ever. It is therefore admirable and of historic importance that in this case it was otherwise. The Czech Philharmonic played under the baton of various chief conductors while keeping Jiří Bělohlávek close by, inviting him to conduct concerts both at home and abroad. He would return to the orchestra, with no bitterness and all generosity so typical of him. Agencies and recording companies abroad understood that it was best to choose a Czech conductor, who had Czech music so close to his heart, to work with the Czech Philharmonic when playing the music of their native country. And Jiří Bělohlávek and the Czech Philharmonic was considered the ideal combination even at the time of their separation. That is why several recordings were made even before he returned to the orchestra for the second time. Most notably they began to record the complete symphonies of Bohuslav Martinů for the *Supraphon* label. However, due to the conductor's strict and critical artistic nature, he did not allow the first and second symphonies to be released at the time. Luckily it seems that it will be possible to make the series complete due to later recordings. The complete Martinů was nevertheless released without any obstacles and with great success in London. Jiří Bělohlávek held the position of the guest conductor with the BBC Symphony Orchestra in the 1990s, later between 2006 and

2012 he was the orchestra's chief conductor. This implied he recorded with the orchestra substantially. Among the recordings from this time, we find also recordings of Czech music, e.g. by Josef Suk, but most importantly the afore-mentioned complete recording of Martinů's symphonies. It is interesting to observe how individual and idiosyncratic sounding this recording is, despite the cosmopolitan character of this renown and excellent orchestra which is known for being able to interpret skilfully any score. It is true we find here some more and some less distinct nuances – which can be heard in comparison to the Czech Philharmonic recordings of the same work, whose sound is more mellow, sweeter at times, closer to Martinů's lyricism, sometimes possibly at the cost of its dynamic range. The BBC Orchestra is convincing in its vigour and force, however controlled intensively by Bělohlávek. We arrive at a similar feeling when confronting the recordings of Suk's work made by Bělohlávek's "predecessor" Libor Pešek – when comparing the recordings of the Czech Philharmonic with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic. Bělohlávek and the BBC Symphony Orchestra recorded much more than Martinů. There are many live recordings. Bělohlávek, the great proponent of less-known works of Czech authors, initiated among others a recording of Josef Bohuslav Foerster's violin concertos with Ivan Ženaty as the soloist. And what must be highlighted in this respect are the recordings of his live concert performances of Czech operas with Czech soloists, English choirs and the BBC Symphony Orchestra at the Barbican Centre. These were recorded by the BBC and were released under its label or in co-production with other labels: *The Bartered Bride* (Harmonia Mundi), *Excursions of Mr. Brouček* (Deutsche Grammophon), *Dalibor* (BBC-Onyx).

Let us step back into the past for one more moment. When we look at the amazing yield of Bělohlávek's collaboration with the Czech Philharmonic from the time when he was not their official conductor, our attention is drawn to an exceptional recording, which – alas! – is not commercially available. It is the almost complete (reduced slightly for performance reasons) score of Dvořák's oratorio *Saint Ludmila* – it is the live recording of a Prague Spring performance, which was to honour the Year of Czech Music 2004. This recording was made by the festival itself. It was an event representational both in the perspective of interpretation and of society. The level of the performance is set extremely high, especially due to the Prague Philharmonic Choir and two soloists – Eva Urbanová as Saint Ludmila and Bernarda Fink as Svatava. Stanislav Matis's performance of the serious role of Bořivoj was somewhat weaker (possibly due to the soloist's health condition). Nevertheless, it is an exceptional, one may say historic, recording. The *Saint Ludmila* oratorio extends the series of other of Bělohlávek's live recordings of Dvořák's masterpieces made earlier with the Prague Symphony Orchestra FOK – *Stabat Mater* and *The Spectre's Bride*. How regrettable that the recording of Dvořák's *Requiem* planned for this year's Dvořákova Praha Festival was not possible anymore. We could otherwise boast ourselves with complete recordings by one conductor of Dvořák's orchestral work.

It is hard to pick other dominant recordings from Bělohlávek's vast discography. One could choose important recordings of contemporary music, especially that of Czech origin; or one of the countless recordings made with prominent soloists who collaborated with Jiří Bělohlávek closely and successfully - Ivan Moravec, Rudolf Firkušný, Justus Franz, Gerhard Oppitz, Václav Hudeček – who together with Bělohlávek had recorded the fundamental violin concerto repertoire, Dagmar Pecková, Radek Baborák, Ludmila Peterková, and from later years Josef Špaček and many others.

Jiří Bělohlávek had gained his world-wide fame many years ago, which later he solidified and crowned with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and the Czech Philharmonic. The Czech Philharmonic must be grateful to him for initiating the collaboration with the world-leading label – *Decca*. The paths to this destination are not easy and demand a discipline and effort lasting for years. For a long number of years, we had witnessed wonderful editions of Czech music performed by world-leading orchestras and artists. We had felt a little sorry about that as many of the recordings did not match the quality of local performances. This changed with Jiří Bělohlávek and his Czech Philharmonic. A wide range of new recordings were released and Jiří Bělohlávek became the guarantee for the label and more importantly its listeners of the right style and authenticity. We trust that this unique legacy will continue to be expanded in the future!

Bohuslav Víték (2017)

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The recording of Jiří Bělohlávek's festival performance of *Má vlast* from 2014 was indeed released – soon after this text was published. Many more albums got released including the edition that crowns Bělohlávek's recorded legacy – Antonín Dvořák's complete symphonies and concertos.