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Pavel Haas: “Janáček’s Most Talented Student”

Pavel Haas: »najbolj nadarjeni Janáčkov učenec«

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IZVLEČEK

V dvajsetih in tridesetih letih dvajsetega stoletja si je Pavel Haas (1899–1944) v širši kulturni zavesti priboril sloves izvirnega skladatelja in Janáčkov-ega »najbolj nadarjenega učenca«. V specifičnem kontekstu češke glasbe prav tako slovi kot inovator, čeravno je hkrati globoko ukoreninjen v tradiciji.

ABSTRACT

In the course of the 1920s and 30s Pavel Haas (1899–1944) earned a reputation for himself in broader cultural consciousness as an original composer and Janáček’s “most talented student”. In the specific context of Czech music he likewise has the reputation of an innovator but is considered to have been strongly rooted in tradition as well.

The exhibition, *Janáček’s Most Talented Student*, which opened on 18 November 2014 in Brno, served to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the death of the Czech composer Pavel Haas. Although this was not a completely new idea, one should nevertheless begin by recalling the tradition which the exhibition concerns.

Haas’ personal and professional life is almost exclusively linked with Brno. This city which was supposed to become the second musical centre in Bohemia and Moravia after Prague, developed like the capital city on the basis of a division of two nationalities. This situation is not surprising of course. It can actually be viewed as one of the characteristic features of the national situation in the Austrian Monarchy in the last third of the 19th century. This was also expressed in an emphasis on the political role of

both language and art. This state of affairs lasted, with varying changes, up to the year 1945. While German composers, who tended to identify with the wider German and Austrian context, came from a tradition involving traditional approaches, the Czech modern music consisted of a specific style. This was represented, first and foremost, by Pavel Křížkovský (1820–1885) and Leoš Janáček (1854–1928) up to the year 1918. After this date, the musical scene was profoundly influenced by Janáček and his students.

The Moravian composition school was professionally institutionalized for the first time in connection with Janáček's teaching activity at the Brno *Organ School*¹ and later with the masterclass at the *Prague Conservatory*. Janáček was crucial for the emergence of both institutions which served the need for professional educational institutions. A similar role had been played much earlier in Prague with the Prague *Organ school* or conservatory.

A group of authors also arose out of the circle of Janáček's students and founded the *Club of Moravian Composers* [*Klub moravských skladatelů*] in the year 1922 with Pavel Haas also being an active contributor. Along with the Czech *Association for Modern Music* [*Spolek pro moderní hudbu*] and the German *Literary-Artistic Association* [*Literarisch-künstlerischer Verein*], the *Club of Moravian Composers* made up the Czechoslovak section of the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM) as of the year 1923.² Janáček's students inherited the difficult task of developing the tradition of Moravian music, building upon the distinct expressive language of their teacher while at the same time seeking out their own paths. Apart from compositional skill in terms of the craft, a distinctness of style also speaks of the quality of the composer. The period canon of expressiveness viewed distinctness as a definite advantage. Janáček's influence, however, only fully made itself apparent with the generation of composers whose work is linked with the 1950s and 1960s, where a life parallel can also be seen with the work of Pavel Haas.

References to the valuable influence of Janáček as a model teacher can be seen in period concert reviews as well as in specialized music literature. Domestic critics make reference to Haas in connection with Janáček's compositional school from as early as the 1920s. When, somewhat later, Vladimír Helfert in *Czech Modern Music* (1936) speaks of Haas' orientation on Stravinsky and Honegger, he also points out an inspiration connected with the influence of Janáček involving "a remarkable individualization of the compositional method leading in the direction of a courageous constructivism and insightful sound ingenuity".³ He did not neglect to critically mention in this connection that many of his pieces sounded like experiments (Fata morgana 1923, string quartet, Op. 7, entitled "From the Monkey Mountains 1925), Introduction and *Psalm XXIX*. 1931".⁴

1 *The Organ School* [*Varhanická škola*] was founded by means of the Union for Celebrating Church Music in Moravia which emerged at the instigation of Janáček in the year 1881. The instruction at the Organ School was begun a year later in the year 1882.

2 The *Club of Moravian Composers* was part of ISCM up to the year 1933. Spain (a Madrid section and a Catalan section) and Sweden (a Stockholm section and Southern Sweden section, this being the historical province Scania which broke away from Denmark and became part of Sweden at the end of the 17th century) also had doubled sections.

3 Helfert, Vladimír: *Czech Modern Music: A study of Czech musical creativity* [*Česká moderní hudba. Studie o české hudební tvořivosti*] (Olomouc: Index, 1936), 147.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 147–48.

A comparison between Janáček and Haas also became an easily comprehended parallel for Lubomír Peduzzi, Haas' student and the author of the monograph *Pavel Haas: Life and Work of a Composer* (1993). He speaks of Haas as a remarkable figure, who although not ranking among the most interesting or most popular, nevertheless inherited the style of Janáček's music in a singular fashion. He is not, however, Janáček's mere copier, but instead his successor.⁵

The entry "Czech Republic" in the *Grove Music* dictionary celebrates Haas over the rest of Janáček's students: "Only Haas and Harašta, who explored a method of modal composition and the rhythmic layering of structures, productively assimilated Janáček's compositional technique."⁶

Who was this greatly talented student of Janáček's who we are talking about? Pavel Haas was born 12 June 1899 in Brno in the family of the tradesman Zikmund Lipmann Haas (1871–1944) and Olga Epstein (1874–1933) the attractive daughter of a Russian clerk in a steamship company from Odessa. The above-mentioned book by Lubomír Peduzzi relates that Haas' father owned a prosperous shoe shop named "Obuv českého průmyslu U Zajíce", that they spoke Czech at home and that Pavel's interest in music began to appear at an early age. His musical expression and talent was apparent and became his future calling. Music was his only genuine interest allowing him to overcome his struggles with irregular school attendance. His interest in music brought him to the Brno Association Music School in the academic year 1913/14. Here he began to study harmony, later counterpoint and additional music theory subjects. These were taught by Janáček's student and close cooperater Jan Kunc (1883–1976). Haas' first preserved musical pieces date back to this period. A chamber song from texts by German authors has been preserved. Two incomplete orchestral sheet music on Old Testament themes *Jonah* (1914) and *The Exodus of Israel from Egypt* (1915) are of particular interest amongst his juvenalia.

Haas, along with his brother Hugo, entered the newly established Brno conservatory in the year 1919 where he was once again a student under Jan Kunc. Haas completed his first compositions marked with opus numbers under his supervision. They have maintained their quality up until the present with *String Quartet* No. 1 in C minor op. 3, indicating the remarkable talent of the future composer. The composition achieved its final form, however, after adaptations in Janáček's masterclass. He began his studies with Leoš Janáček in September 1920.

Janáček not only introduced his students to the methods of his own composition work, but also with the specific poetics of folk music and finally with current compositional approaches and theoretical starting-points. Under the supervision of the successful composer and experienced instructor, Haas obtained the needed skill required for coming to terms with the musical material in the current musical development which was emerging at the time. He obtained a rhythmic structure and the principles of instrumental figuration from Janáček which served to make up not only the character of

5 Peduzzi, Lubomír, *Pavel Haas: Life and Work of a Composer* [*Pavel Haas. Život a dílo skladatele*] (Brno: Muzejní a vlastivědná společnost v Brně, 1993).

6 Pukl, Oldřich, Smaczny, Jan, *Czechoslovakia 1918–45, in Czech Republic, in Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online* [cited 10.5.2010] Available from: <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/40479>>.

the melodic treatment, but also the macro-structural consequences involving a linking of the varying in terms of tempo sections into a smooth flow. Although Janáček at this time only acknowledged his own defined style, he allowed Haas to fully develop his own distinct creative potential. Under Janáček's supervision, Haas composed *Chinese Songs* for a medium voice and piano op. 4 (words by Kao Shi, Tsui Hao, Thu Fu, 1921) or *Scherzo triste for orchestra* op. 5 (1921).

In this song cycle, the composer made use of his experience with the piano stylizations of Moravian folk songs and attempted a distinct Impressionistic colourful expression of texts by ancient Chinese poets. Despite an attempt at spontaneity, used in order to overcome a range of technical deficiencies in the compositional work, the artistic value of the cycle is low. The second named composition, however, exceeds in terms of importance mere school work. He graduated from the masterclass, however, with the older piece *String Quartet* No. 1, op. 3.

If we are interested in explaining the principle of qualitative transformations in the acquired compositional habits and inspirations within Haas' biography, we have to make mention of a point wherein this aspect began to be cultivated and developed. In a paradoxical fashion this took place at a time when the conditions for ongoing compositional work were actually limited by a marked change in his life conditions, upon completion of the masterclass school.⁷ Haas attempted to find work as an occasional performer, composer and instructor, but met with little success in these areas.

His attempts at finding employment in the branch of music brought him to Saarbrücken for the position of répétiteur in a local theatre. He left the job due to financial troubles after only a few months and returned back to Brno where he became a partner with his father in the shoe company for more than ten years. He did not, however, stop composing at this time. This need for financial stability did contribute to his partial exclusion from the profession of a composer. The musical work from this period came about slowly and without the ease apparent in the work of other composers. The preserved documents, however, testify to the numerous creative ideas. Orchestral sheet music and opera plans with mere skeleton structures have nevertheless been preserved. He completed and had performed only four chamber compositions and one male choral piece over the years 1923–1930. If certain aspects of his style are later overemphasized as being typical, they have their basis in this period. Also of essence is the fact that from this period Haas often composed with a view to the concrete possibilities of performance. The fates of his works were additionally linked with selected performers and troupes. (Along with the Moravian Quartet or PSMU, this also involved the newly established Moravian Brass Quintet).

The first independently completed composition was *Fata morgana*, a piano quintet for tenor, 2 violins, viola, cello and piano op. 6 (words by Rabindranath Tagore, 1923). This was followed by a *String quartet* No. 2, op. 7, entitled "From the Monkey Mountains". This work met with marked confusion upon its premiere. Apart from onomatopoeic puns and an excessive suggestiveness, period critics objected to the inclusion of a group of percussion instruments into the final movement which apparently

7 His diploma from the masterclass school is dated 28 June 1922. The signatures by teachers include Leoš Janáček and the chancellor Vítězslav Novák.

insensitively affected the stylistic purity of the chamber music. Haas immediately abandoned the percussion instruments after the premiere either due to the criticism or for operational reasons.⁸

The song cycle *The Chosen One* op. 8 for tenor, flute, horn, violin and piano (1927) with the texts of the poet Jiří Wolker followed with a long time gap. This was succeeded by the small chorus *Carnival* op. 9 with the text from the Brno poet Dalibor Chalupa (1928/29). He also completed at the same time *Wind Quintet*, op. 10 for flute, oboe, clarinet, horn and bassoon (1929). The first movement contains a melodic turn which makes reference to Jewish synagogue singing. These motifs will begin to enter into his work in an increased fashion at the end of the 1930s.

In all probability as a commission from the composer's close friend and Janáček's student Břetislav Bakala, Haas composed *Overture for Radio*, op. 11 for small orchestra and small voices (1930/31) Along with his brother Hugo Haas (the author of the texts) he created here a short work designated for a small orchestra, a male vocal quartet and reciters, which is akin to a cantata in terms of genre. The cooperation between the two brothers had already manifested itself in theatre work when Haas at his brother's request had worked on the music for several theatre plays. The successfully developing acting career of his brother gave opportunity for Haas to compose music for films in the 1930s: *Life Is a Dog* [Život je pes] (1933), *The Little Pet* [Mazlíček] (1934) and *Mother-Hen* [Kvočna] (1937).

During travels around Germany carried out by the composer immediately after the premiere of *Overture for Radio* in the summer of 1931, a sketch for a planned organ concert came into being. One of the preserved sketches is connected with this composition where, modeled upon Janáček, he depicts the peal of the bells of the cathedral in Cologne. The author's original intentions were later changed and the work was completed under the name *Psalm XXIX*, op. 12 (1931/32). The composition designated for a baritone, female chorus and a chamber orchestra with an organ, puts in its second part the text of the 29th Psalm from the Kralice Bible to music. The *Suite for piano*, op. 13 came about in the year 1935 for the Brno pianist Bernard Kaff. The brilliant and effective stylization for listeners guaranteed a positive response for this work as early as its first performance in a concert abroad of the Club of Moravian Composers on 10 February 1936 in Vienna.

Haas was already working at this time on the composition of a tragic-comic opera in three acts (seven scenes) *The Charlatan*, op. 14 (1936). Haas took the basis for the actual libretto from the novel *Doctor Eisenbart* by Josef Winckler (1881–1966), which was based on the life of the traveling surgeon Johann Andreas Eisenbarth. During the work on the opera the six movement orchestral *Suite* op. 14 came about which was supposed to draw attention to the opera under preparation. After the composition of his most ambitious work, Haas selected the charlatan theme which was popular amongst the domestic artistic avant-garde as far back as the 1920s (E. F. Burian). An analysis of the style reveals the definite inspiration of Janáček along with, however, an attempt at a stylistic blending. In contrast to Janáček, who chose the theme of a full

8 It did not meet with a very positive response in the Brno premiere by the Moravian Quartet on 16 March 1926 and the troupe only kept the quartet version of the composition in its repertoire.

temperament and passion for his crowning opera which he consequently set to music in a realistic manner, Haas conceived his opera as a theatrical genre with the primary emphasis on play and with the stylization making more of a reference to Igor Stravinsky. Haas kept the name of the author of the original piece a secret for political reasons, since cooperation between a German writer, living additionally in a mixed marriage with a Jewess, and a Jewish composer was problematic in the Germany of the 1930s. He removed everything from the libretto which made reference to a German environment and Czechified all of the characters.

Haas composed further compositions in quick succession at the end of the 1930s: *String Quartet* No. 3 op. 15 (1938), a series of Moravian Slovak songs *From Evening to Morning*, op. 16 (1938), *Suite for oboe and piano*, op. 17 (1939), *7 Songs in Folk Style* op. 18 (1940).

Several key events came about in Haas' personal life in the 1930s. He met the Russian physician Soňa Jakobsonová (maiden name Feldman), the wife of the linguist Roman Jakobson who was teaching at the time at Masaryk University in Brno, in the year 1932. This acquaintance later grew into a love affair and after her divorce in the year 1935, Soňa and Pavel Haas married. Their daughter Olga was born in the year 1937. Immediately after their marriage, his wife Soňa took over a significant part of the material worries concerning the family and Haas was able to focus full-time on composition and private instruction of music theory.⁹

The war was, however, the final stage which brought a tragic end to his life and work. Haas shared the tragic collective fate of the Jews along with Erwin Schulhoff (1894–1942), Viktor Ullmann (1898–1944), Gideon Klein (1919–1945), Karel Reiner (1910–1979), Hans Krása (1899–1944), etc. Haas was transported among the first groups to Theresienstadt in the year 1941. After a period of initial depression, he involved himself in the cultural life of the concentration camp with certain compositions for Theresienstadt musicians and troupes. Apart from certain documented works which have not been found as yet or which have remained in mere fragmentary form, the male choir piece *Al s'fod* [*Do Not Lament*] (1942), *Study for string orchestra* (1943) and *4 Songs on Chinese Poetry* for bass (or baritone) and piano (1944) have survived. Haas was deported to Auschwitz in the autumn of 1944 and perished on the day of his arrival 17th October.

At the end of this overview of the life pilgrimage of Haas, we can ponder on the composer's place within the context of domestic musical culture. Haas' example is in a sense a kind of boundary line and serves to demonstrate Janáček's direct influence on his students. Haas was viewed as one of the most interesting and at the same time most faithful of Janáček's students both during his life and after his death. Despite this statement it should not be forgotten that Haas held a critical position in relation to his teacher. Haas only accepted certain compositional approaches of his teacher and attempted to carry out a synthesis of period styles. Haas was a type of composer, who more than Janáček's other students, reacted to impulses which found their way into Czech music from abroad, these being first and foremost from the French Modern.

9 His students included Karel Horák (1909–1988), Richard Kozderka (1908–1994) and Lubomír Peduzzi (1918–2008).

This is reminiscent of to a certain extent the focus of other Czech composers (Martinů, etc.). Despite these minor syntheses, Haas did not actually create his own unmistakable style. An essential aspect of Haas' type of composition is also the fact that he only contributed in more of a tangential fashion to the future development of domestic music. The reasons for this can be varied. A number of them are mere practical reasons. Haas did not compose music in a systematic manner and his teaching activity was also limited in scope. Knowledge of the music of Haas was limited to only several chamber compositions long after the war.

POVZETEK

Po koncu pregleda Haasovega življenjskega romanja lahko premislimo o skladateljevem mestu znotraj konteksta nacionalne glasbene kulture. Haasov primer na nek način kot tudi za prikaz Janáčkovskega neposrednega vpliva na svoje učence. Haasa se dojema kot enega najbolj zanimivih in hkrati najzvestejših Janáčkovskih učencev. Kljub tej navedbi ne smemo pozabiti, da je Haas do svojega učitelja ohranjal tudi kritično držo. Haas je sprejel od mentorja zgolj določene kompozicijske prijeme in želel uresničiti sintezo periodičnih slogov. Haas je tiste vrste skladatelj, ki se je bolj kot katerikoli drugi Janáčkov učenec odzval na impulze, ki so

našli pot v češko glasbo od zunaj – zlasti iz francoske moderne. To do določene mere spominja na to, na kar so se osredinjali tudi drugi češki skladatelji (Martinů idr.). Navkljub tem manjšim sintezam Haas ni uspel ustvariti lastnega nezamenljivega sloga. Ključni vidik Haasovega tipa kompozicije je prav tako dejstvo, da je k nadaljnjemu razvoju nacionalne glasbe prispeval zgolj v tangencialnem smislu. Razlogi za to so mnogoteri. Številni od teh pa so praktične narave. Haas glasbe ni komponiral sistematično in njegovo pedagoško delovanje je bilo prav tako omejeno. Poznavanje Haasove glasbe je bilo še dolgo po vojni omejeno na zgolj nekaj komornih skladb.