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# Vítězslav Novák in the Context of Czech Music as a Whole: Thoughts about the Composer's Fate

## Vítězslav Novák v kontextu češke glasbe kot celote: Nekaj misli o skladateljevi usodi

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## IZVLEČEK

## ABSTRACT

Razprava se posveča vlogi Vítězslava Nováka v okviru češke glasbe okoli 1900. Vítězslav Novák (1870-1949) sodi med tiste skladatelje, pri katerih se v številnih ozirih kažejo značilna nasprotja, ki jih je mogoče opisati s funkcijami *centralno-obrobno*, *globalno-lokalno*, *heterogeno-homogeno*. Nakazane kategorije pa niso kakšne naravno dane konstante. Prav tako ne predstavljajo kategorij, ki bi si jih Novák sam „predpisal“, temveč izhajajo iz diskurza o Nováku vsaj v češkem okolju.

Discussion is devoted to the role of Vítězslav Novák in the frame of Czech music around 1900. Vítězslav Novák (1870-1949) is one of the composers where the characteristic contrasts can be found in many respects that can be described with functions *central-marginal*, *global-local*, *heterogeneous-homogeneous*. But indicated categories are not naturally given constants. They also do not represent categories that had been prescribed by Novák himself but that spring from the discourse on Novák at least in Czech environment.

I present this paper as a reflection on the reception of Novák's oeuvre, a composer who played a prominent role in 20<sup>th</sup> century Czech music and whose music is not heard in concert halls these days. Vítězslav Novák is the type of composer whose development is marked by a dynamic change in aesthetic norms. In his oeuvre there are canonical (classic) works and works that do not contribute to his process of development and overlooked and forgotten works worthy of our attention. Such distinctions are obviously undergoing vast changes.

A side note by way of introduction: when Jiří Fukač pondering in an article the reception and further possibilities for Novák's music, he chose an apt title: "Novák's Time Will Still Come."<sup>1</sup> Fukač's title was allegedly inspired by a quote from Kurt Blaukopf, who said it on 5 September 1989 during a coffee break at a Mahler conference in Hamburg. Lest this prognosticating proclamation be forgotten forever, I'd like to use it as the main thesis of my paper.

I owe a foreign audience an answer to an important question: Who is the composer whose "time will come?" Vítězslav Novák (1870-1949) composed 79 opuses, which cover a wide range of genres from opera to large orchestral and vocal compositions to small chamber works. Together with Josef Suk and Otakar Ostrčil, Vítězslav Novák belongs to a generation of composers that was later termed Czech musical modernism. These composers had the difficult task of extending the tradition of Czech nationalist music of Bedřich Smetana and Antonín Dvořák while at the same time seeking their own path. Novák took up this task beautifully and after 1896 Novák's music was the greatest phenomenon on the Czech music scene.

Novák studied composition under Antonín Dvořák. With Dvořák came the first institutionalized Czech school of composition and he became the most renowned Czech composition teacher second only to Dvořák. Novák trained numerous Czech composers in addition to a whole generation of Slovak composers. Even many of Janáček's students left Brno for Prague in order to perfect their compositional craft. Further, Novák trained a handful of German and Yugoslav composers. In 1912, he applied for a professorship at the Viennese Academy. Later he received numerous honors and awards both at home and abroad (France, Yugoslavia, Italy, Sweden). Premieres for his works were notable social occasions and each of his life anniversaries are publically celebrated. But even though Novák belonged to the renowned giants of Czech music, he was no longer able to overcome a creative crisis, which had begun in 1918. It was apparent for instance at the Prague festivals of new music (ISCM), where he remained in the shadows of other composers (Suk, Janáček, Martinů, Hába).

As a representative figure of the late nineteenth century, he did not share the strong optimism of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century avant garde composers. Novák shared a fate with a whole generation of composers who were uncertain how to proceed as the avant garde was beginning. Novák was too old to learn a new expressive language and too young to cease composing. A similar fate met Sibelius and Busoni, among others. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Novák imitated canonical works of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, so after World War I he was criticized by avantgardists for his traditionalism (some even found fault with his technical prowess). The prime metric by which artworks were judged was innovation worthy of the *Zeitgeist* of the early twentieth century.

Nevertheless, Novák was later considered a composer of primary significance. In 1970, on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Novák's birth, Czech musicologist Jaroslav Volek called him in an article a "pivotal figure of Czech music."<sup>2</sup> In comparison

<sup>1</sup> Jiří Fukač, "Novákova doba musí ještě přijít (V. Novák – problémy stylu a recepcie)" [Novák's Time Will Still Come (Style and Reception Problems)], in *Zprávy společnosti Vítězslava Nováka* 15 (1989): 23–32.

<sup>2</sup> Jaroslav Volek, "Novák – 'osová' osobnost české moderní hudby" [Novák – "Axial" Personality of Czech modern music], in *Národní umělec Vítězslav Novák – studie a vzpomínky k 100. výročí narození*, ed. K. Padrta – B. Štědroň (České Budějovice, 1972.), 21–42.

to other composers and considering Novák's pedagogical activity, these words are certainly true.

At the same time, we cannot overlook the polemical tone of Volek's article. What is the truth about Novák? *Will Novák's time actually come?* Kurt Blaukopf was not announcing an historical thesis, but rather an aesthetic judgment, which has clear biographical connotations. Blaukopf played Novák's string quartets in his youth and this fact forever determined his opinion of the composer. Blaukopf of course overlooked the substantial difference in the reception of Mahler and Novák. In the 1960s, when Mahler's music was finding its way into concert halls around the world, interest in Novák's music began to decline.

Right now I don't want to reflect on the many causes for the lack of interest. The fact is that his compositions remain on the periphery of Czech musical art. Time and historical remove is one of several factors in the judgment of classical works that plays in Mahler's favor. His music seems "timeless," to use the misleading category aesthetic platonism. By coincidence Blaukopf made his statement at a conference dedicated to Mahler's oeuvre, so a comparison of the two composers suggest itself.

Vítězslav Novák tried to summarize his relationship to Mahler's music in his memoirs:

*"To use Dvořák's words, I like Mahler, but I cannot stand him. What do I like about the music? His sincerity. Whichever mood he expresses, everything is intensely felt. Mahlers second positive trait is his talent for melody. His expositions never rest on choppy motives. Some of his themes I would call songs without words. [...] One more thing I like about him: Mahler as a person. As director of the Hamburg and later Viennese opera houses, he didn't compose a single opera, even though he had the compositional talent and promotional possibilities. He made up for it with several of his symphonies, even those non-programmatic. [...] What do I dislike about him? The lack of self-criticism. He rarely ends at the right time. Whether he is mourning or exulting, he knows no limits. The result of this excess is the listener's fatigue. In addition to their length, these works increase the fatigue with their insufficient rhythmic interest and modulation. Mahler often persists in the same rhythm and sometimes even tempo for the whole movement, in stark contrast to Richard Strauss. [...] With a fleeting glance at Mahler's score we find whole sections in one key without deviation. The key signatures make things easier for us."*<sup>3</sup>

Words intended for Mahler, as if they boomeranged back to their speaker. They appear to reveal weaknesses in Novák's own music. Novák also liked to cite other works, and anyway, the use of stylistically foreign "precomposed" material is typical for music around 1900. With Mahler began a system of units—Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht called it *Vokabeln*—which make a musical work polystratified.<sup>4</sup> Novák worked similarly as Mahler did, and yet at the same time differently. The source of the heterogenization of structure are quotes of various provenance and notational level—folk song, melodic thoughts of choral character, citations from his own works. Novák does not use quotes in a superficial manner—they go deep into the structure. From a technical point of view, this is done by means of thorough motivic-thematic development and counterpoint. Novák weaves

<sup>3</sup> Vítězslav Novák, *O sobě a o jiných* [Of His Self and of the Other] (Prague: Supraphon, 1970), 64–65.

<sup>4</sup> See Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht, *Die Musik Gustav Mahlers* (Munich: Piper, 1982), 67.

his new thoughts into a complicated tapestry of voices—the intellectual character of his music comes from this. Novák's oeuvre this way takes on a clear biographical cast. In relation to the “tonal environment” in the structure, these elements are foreign objects. Their borrowing does not have anything in common with quotes like those found in Mahler's music, where the mutual connection of low and high evoke a feeling of modern existential alienation.

In this sense, Novák's relationship to folk music is clear. A connection to folksong is something that makes him similar to (and distinguishes him from) Janáček. Around 1900, Janáček was the prototype of a “homegrown” composer who attempted to create a Moravian variant of Czech national music. Janáček stopped composing in the 1890s and devoted himself to the collection and study of folk music, which meant for him protection from the influences of Neoromanticism. At this time, however, Novák developed a new canon of European modern music. If Janáček's (like Hába's) relationship to folk culture was experienced, it was led so to speak from below (*von unten*), while Novák's relationship to folk culture was mediated (*von oben*). Or in other words, Novák does not flee the center for the periphery in order to avoid the stream of late Romantic music, but rather to give tradition new strength. Novák came to Moravia from the salon, and this statement is true both figuratively and literally. Like Dvořák before him, Novák wanted to enrich Czech music with new “exotic” idioms. For a composer who came from one of the important centers of a monarchy, this was at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and at the threshold of fin-de-siècle modernist art a quite expected “attempt.” Novák, who used authentic folk melodies in a method similar to that of Beethoven's or Brahms's thematic work, was long acknowledged as a discoverer of a meaningful stylistic direction for Czech modern music. Janáček chose another way. He simplified and freed musical structure; his music did not strictly maintain contrapuntal lines and voice independence. He avoided direct citation of folk songs and took inspiration there only in the most general manner into the areas of tonality, modality, and rhythm.

Folk inspiration of Novák and Janáček found many critics. Among the most strident was Zdeněk Nejedlý, whose aesthetic judgments were determinative for Czech music in the first third of the twentieth century. Nejedlý's negative opinion of “folk music” had several causes. One was his perception of such music as a return to an older aesthetic; another could be described as an ethical problem.

Novák's and Janáček's musical styles were at first hearing distinguishable from each other, and Nejedlý also saw their folk inspiration and development in different ways. With Janáček he found a regressive style coming from the periphery. In Janáček's opera *Jenůfa* (*Její pastorkyňa*, 1903), he saw a clear similarity to an older Romantic aesthetic of the 1860s, where the character of the work was consciously determined by the quoting of folk songs and reaching out to a wider folk public. (I would like to note here that Janáček does not quote, but in certain places in the opera he places melodies that paraphrase melodic types of Moravian folk music.) From this point of view, “pre-Smetana” Janáček seemed typologically regressive.<sup>5</sup> This judgment also reflects the public's reaction. For

<sup>5</sup> Zdeněk Nejedlý, “Leoše Janáčka *Její Pastorkyňa*” [*Jenůfa* by Leoš Janáček], *Smetana* 6 (1916).

Moravian patriots, *Jenůfa* was the model for Moravian opera and was perceived this way during its performance in Viennese Hofoper (Hofoper, 1918).

On the other hand, criticism of Novák's interest in "falsified citations" of folk song and in too naturalistic descriptiveness sounds much more muted. For Nejedlý, Novák's music is on a developmentally higher level in its involvement with folk music. If aesthetic and stylistic qualities of such music differ from work to work, this "unusual compositional style" certainly enriched Novák's music with new material qualities.<sup>6</sup> Nejedlý's critical view of both composers' use of folk music has two clear causes. Here Nejedlý develops T.G. Masaryk's notion of the function of folk culture in a national context. At the very least at the beginning of the 1920s Nejedlý distinguishes between folk culture and its use between the art of a particular composer and the tastes of the wider public. The concertgoing public is in its essence conservative. A truly progressive composer is not supposed to cater to the whims of this public. Despite the suffering that the composer endures, he is able to resist public pressure and to develop his musical individuality.

It would of course be interesting to compare Nejedlý's rhetoric with Adorno's critique "Blut und Boden Musik," as it appears in *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (1949). According to Adorno, late Romantic music lost its national character, for which it paid a necessary price. Overcoming alienation, the music entered the realm of nationalist reactionary ideology. Progressive tendencies of occidental music appeared without the "shameful stain" only in the exterritorial music of Janáček and Bartók.<sup>7</sup> If Janáček survived Adorno's critique, Novák certainly failed. Adorno would likely pronounce Novák's music as nationalistically reactionary—affirmative and holding to tradition.

As if Czech music could not do anything other than cultivate some sort of local historical hypothesis of a composer whose time has long ago past. Although I like the aforementioned quote from Adorno's work, I am not completely certain of the correctness of such a characterization. Novák's style did not allow full use of archetypes of folk music, as is the case with, for example, Janáček.

His music also does not approach Bartók's authentic rawness. The aforementioned composers of course cannot be the measure of the greatness of Novák's music; that would be at a minimum historically incorrect, because Novák worked in a different way with folk music.

What is today's role of a composer in the context of Czech music? Novák distinguished himself only marginally among the standard-setting classics of Czech or central European music of the early twentieth century (in some cases this evaluation can sound optimistic). In artworks there is a differentiation between canonical and overlooked works. A work does not enter the canon on the basis of its timeless qualities alone. Classicization or canonization is an historical process in which on the basis of a tendentious reshuffle of values a group of works and composers is chosen, a group which represents the prevailing and enduring stylistic norm. Novák's position in the register of "important works" has gone through notable changes over time. The result was not always that Novák's works were seen as timeless or himself as a prevailing composer. Even though reception of Novák's works was never without controversy, we can hope that no aesthetic norm

6 Zdeněk Nejedlý, *Vítězslav Novák – studie a kritiky* [Vítězslav Novák: Studies and Reviews] (Prague: Melantrich, 1921), 40.

7 Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 41.

is forever. Can Novák's time still come? Possibly. At least Blaukopf's memory from his youth—a private history of a type—can give us that hope.

## POVZETEK

Razprava se posveča vlogi Vítězslava Nováka v okviru češke glasbe okoli 1900. Vítězslav Novák (1870-1949) sodi med tiste skladatelje, pri katerih se v številnih ozirih kažejo značilna nasprotja, ki jih je mogoče opisati s funkcijami *centralno-obrobno*, *globalno-lokalno*, *heterogeno-homogeno*. Nakazane kategorije pa niso kakšne naravno dane konstante. Prav tako ne predstavljajo kategorij, ki bi si jih Novák sam »predpisal«, temveč izhajajo iz diskurza o Nováku vsaj v češkem okolju.

Vítězslav Novák sodi skupaj z Josefom Sukom in Otakarjem Ostrčilom v generacijo skladateljev, ki so jo pozneje poimenovali češka moderna. Ti avtorji so stali pred zahtevno nalogo, kako nadaljevati dediščino češke glasbe Bedřicha Smetane in Antonína Dvořáka, pri tem pa poiskati svojo lastno pot. To nalogo je vzorno rešil Novák in njegova glasba predstavlja po 1896 osrednji fenomen češke glasbe. Novák se je kompozicije učil pri Antonínu Dvořáku. Pri njem je češka kompozicijska šola prvič postala profesionalna institucija, Novák pa je po Dvořáku postal njen najbolj ugleden učitelj. Poleg vrste čeških skladateljev je Novák izučil tudi

celo generacijo slovaških skladateljev. Tudi Janáčkovski študenti so zapustili Brno, da bi si pridobili kompozicijskega obrtnega znanja v Pragi. O tem priča tudi nekaj imen nemških in južnoslovanskih skladateljev. V letu 1912 je Novák kandidiral celo za profesuro na dunajski akademiji. Pozneje je prejel vrsto priznanj, tako v tujini (Francija, Jugoslavija, Italija, Švedska) kot doma. Izvedbe njegovih del so predstavljale poseben socialni dogodek in praznovali so vsak njegov jubilej. Čeprav je Novák sodil vse do konca svojega življenja med prepoznavne velikane češke glasbe, ni zmozel premagati ustvarjalne krize, ki je bila po 1918 vse bolj vidna. Posebej jasno se je to videli na primer na Praškem festivalu nove glasbe (ISCM, 1924, 1925), ko je ostal v senci drugih skladateljev (kot Suk, Janáček, Martinů, Hába). Pri tem ni težko najti razloga, ki je veljal za celotno generacijo. Kot otrok 19. stoletja je Novák doživel protisloven razpad liberalno-meščanske kulture, pri čemer ni mogel deliti suverenega optimizma z avantgardisti 20. stoletja. Novák je delil usodo celotne generacije skladateljev po nastopu glasbene avantgarde. Bil je prestar, da bi spremenil svoj glasbeni jezik, obenem pa premlad, da bi prenehal skladati.