

**Unfaithful Marijka – an “Independent” Film,
B. Martinů’s Contribution to the Czech Film Music
Die untreue Marijka – der „unabhängige“ Film,
Beitrag B. Martinů zu der tschechischen Filmmusik,
Marijka nevěrnice – „film na svobodě“,
příspěvek B. Martinů české filmové hudbě**

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“I am here to make some money, films etc.” Martinů wrote this line from Prague to his friend Rudolf Kepl exactly one year after the premiere of the film *Unfaithful Marijka* – the only feature length film which Martinů composed the film music for. Martinů was in contact with the medium of film throughout his entire life – both passively as a viewer and actively as a creator of film music and later as an author of television operas. In the 1920s, he expressed his openness towards all new things – his musical language included jazz influences and the avant-garde artistic trends influenced his musical dramatic works (the dada-opera *Tears of the Knife* H. 169 and later surrealism in the opera *Juliette* H. 253) and so it was only a matter of time before he would also meet up with the film phenomenon. This article endeavours to answer to what extent the Martinů was involved with film music and which part of his work he dedicated to it. Much will be illuminated by his correspondence with his family and friends, his own literary works and the testimony of his contemporaries.

The reflexes of film immediately pass through several areas of Martinů’s work. In 1925, he wrote a piano cycle entitled *Film en miniature* (H. 148), followed by the ballet *On tourne* (H. 163, 1927) and the opera *Les Trois souhaits* (H. 175, 1928/29). In these two works, Martinů reckoned with film projection – part of the ballet set under the sea was to have been depicted on the screen. In the opera *Les Trois souhaits*, the making of a film constitutes the main framework of the plot. The third act contains an entire enclosed passage of film music.

Martinů’s first order specifically for film came in 1922. It involved the composition of music to accompany the scenes from a documentary film entitled *Folk Dances and Customs in the Slovácko Region* (H. 134) as they were projected on the screen. The Moravian Museum in Brno has a preserved manuscript with a number of short piano works which Martinů composed for this silent documentary. According to a monograph by

Miloš Šafránek, Martinů contributed to the music for the French “talkies” film *Melo* (H. 223) dating from 1932, but this manuscript has not been preserved. *Unfaithful Marijka* was followed by a commercially oriented documentary on the manufacture of shoes in Tomáš Baťa’s factories. This short film, entitled *The Slipper* (H. 239) with a length of eight minutes is a highly successful example of Martinů’s “film” work. In the spring of 1935, he also completed the music to another short documentary film entitled *City of the Quick Water: Mariánské Lázně* (H. 240) – in this case, the music accompanied pictures of a drive through the city. The last domestic order came at the beginning of 1938 from the Luxor Company for a film entitled *Different Air* (*Jiný vzduch*) by the director Martin Frič. In February of 1938, Martinů wrote home to Polička about a new order for film music, but the order eventually went to Julius Kalaš. As no known manuscript sources have been preserved, it is difficult to say if Martinů even began the composition of the work for *Different Air*.

Film is mentioned only rarely within the framework of Martinů’s publication activities in the inter-war period when he provided the Czech press with reports on French culture. Martinů knew the film work of Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Jacques Ibert and Maurice Jaubert. Even though he admired Arthur Honegger, Martinů did not consider his music for the film *Napoleon* (1927) by the director Abel Gance to have been a success. Honegger created 36 film compositions with inventive dramaturgical effectiveness and comprehensibility for the audiences. Jacques Ibert wrote the music for the films *Don Quixote* (1934) and *Golgotha* (1937). He managed to maintain the balance between vulgarity and refinement and he elegantly assimilated jazz and entertaining music in much the same way as Darius Milhaud. Milhaud contributed, for example, to the music for Jean Renoir’s film of *Madame Bovary* (1933). Germaine Tailleferre mainly dedicated herself to music for documentary films. A distinct personality in the area of musical dramaturgy was René Clair – his film *Quatorze Juillet* (*Fourteenth of July*) dating from 1932 introduced the innovative and functional interconnection of music and pictures. The music was the work of the talented Maurice Jaubert.

At home in Czechoslovakia, Czech film production was rich from both the point of view of the number of films made and the varied genres. Here too, a strong group of proven film music composers formed. The most frequently used authors in the 1930s were Jára Beneš (he created the music, for example, for the director Karel Lamač’s film entitled *The Imperial and Royal Field Marshal* [*C. a k. Polní maršálek*] dating from 1930), Karel Hašler and Miloš Smatek (their collaborations gave rise to, for example, the music for Martin Frič’s film entitled *At the Empty Shop* [*U snědeného krámu*] dating from 1933) and Eman Fiala (he wrote the music for Svatopluk Innemann’s comedy *Men Offside* [*Muži v offside*] dating from 1931). It is also not possible to overlook the work of the members of the Liberated Theatre (Osvobozené divadlo) – the films of Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich with music by Jaroslav Ježek. The significant personalities of film music included Otakar Jeremiáš, Julius Kalaš, Jiří Srnka and František Škvor. The composition of film music became the “daily bread” for this group of composers. The name Martinů never appeared in the credits for any commercially successful films. One of the reasons was the fact that

Martinů mainly lived in Paris from 1923 and working with a composer based abroad put many film makers off. Martinů usually returned to Czechoslovakia during the summer holiday period and upon the occasion of the premieres of his works.

Somewhat outside the framework of the period production were those films, whose representatives attempted to achieve greater artistic invention and placed greater demands on their audiences. These included the film *The River* (*Řeka* – 1933) by Josef Rovenský which encapsulated a lyric lovers' conflict filmed outdoors along the River Sázava, the psychological drama *Ecstasy* (*Extáze* – 1932) by Gustav Machatý or the ethnographically oriented film *Land of Song* (*Zem spieva* – 1933) by Karel Plicka, which was worked on by the excellent film editor and documentarist Alexander Hackenschmied.

Unfaithful Marijka is also one of the remarkable works of Czech cinematography. The film's plot takes place in Koločava in Sub-Carpathian Russia and Ivan Olbracht chose the characters from among the local inhabitants. The film's director, Vladislav Vančura, stood out for his unconventional film work realised independently of any official film studios. Two years before, he had impressed the critics and audiences with his film *Before Graduation* (*Před maturitou* – 1932), the film music was written by Emil František Burian. Jindřich Plachta played one of the roles in this psychological film about the lives of secondary school students. Vančura's next film work was supported by significant writers and scientists of the day, such as Vítězslav Nezval, Roman Jacobson and Miloslav Disman. The film *On a Sunny Hillside* (*Na Sluneční straně* – 1933) was about the modern way of bringing children up collectively. It connected bold means of expression with Vančura's experiments, but it suffered from audience non-comprehension. The following film project also brought together several literary personalities: Vladislav Vančura, as the director, Ivan Olbracht and Karel Nový who worked on the script. Olbracht drew on his previous supreme prosaic works *The Golet in the Valley* (*Golet v údolí*) and *The Bandit Nikolai Shuhai* (*Nikola Šuhaj loupežník*). Ivan Olbracht also appeared in the film several times in the role of a Czech hiker. The cameraman was Jaroslav Blažek, while the editor was Jiří Slaviček, the son of the painter Antonín Slaviček. Bohuslav Martinů was approached as the future composer of the film music for this project by one of the film's producers, Ladislav Kolda. In 1933, Martinů attended the premiere of the ballet *The Chap-Book* at the National Theatre (September 19 1933) and as such he was able to meet with the creators of the film.

What was therefore the main plot line of the film for which Martinů was required to write suitable music? In an interview for the press, the director Vančura described it in these words: "The motif? The film tells of the situation of workers hired to work as lumberjacks – the story is two-thirds authentic. The love drama takes place between three individuals, Marijka, her lover and her husband. He finds out his wife's infidelity, he deliberately lets go of the steering oar during the floating of the wood, the raft breaks up, his adversary dies, the husband returns, the woman kneels at his feet, says nothing and lives on."³¹⁵ Apart from the lover Danilo and Marijka's husband Petro Birčák, the

³¹⁵ Olbracht, I. – Nový, K. – Vančura, V.: *Unfaithful Marijka* (*Marijka nevěrnice*). Prague, Odeon 1982, p. 231.

director neglected to mention one other significant character from the film, Olena the crone, Petro's mother who betrays Marijka's infidelity. Vančura revealed the following of his plans for the direction of the film: "The film will show all of the layers of the citizenry in Carpathian Russia – Russians, orthodox and reform Jews, Czechs – the social motif takes up the most room, the love affair is not emphasised (...) The actual direction will be sparing, we will look for parts of actions in such a way so that we can place them in a calculated series. A selection of documents, reports."³¹⁶

It is difficult to say to what extent Martinů was interested in the artistic intentions of the film's creators or whether this order mainly represented the securing of a source of financial income for him. In a letter home dated October 1933, he wrote: "I have been very busy and I have various concerns. I have received an order for the music for a film which is called Marijka and is set in Sub-Carpathian Russia. Of course, I will have a lot of work with it, but at least I will also earn a few shekels from it. I will have to find a small room with a piano so that I can work in peace – there will be a lot to write. I will receive 15, 000 CZK for it and it has to be finished by the middle of December."³¹⁷ Originally, Martinů was also supposed to attend the recording of the music, but he had to leave for Paris in January 1934. The recording work was assigned to the conductor František Škvor and the National Theatre Orchestra. The last mention of the film appeared in a letter at the turn of February and March 1934: "I had lost a lot of time with that film and I had to hurry back so that I could work again. Apparently the music has already been recorded (...) and apparently they liked it a lot. I don't know when the premiere will be yet."³¹⁸

The film's premiere took place on March 2 1934 at the Prague's cinema Kotva. On the eve of the premiere, Ivan Olbracht tried to "prepare" the filmgoers with the following words: "It is surprising how the people from Verchovina got into the roles which the very lively dramatic plot gave them. And a great majority of them had never even seen a theatre or a cinema and it was not even possible to explain to the excellent actress, Olena the crone, what a cinema actually is and until her visit to Prague she continued to believe her original impression that she had been engaged by the circus. (...) The speech of the mountain folk is also natural: they speak in their own way. The people from Verchovina speak in their own dialect, the Jews speak Yiddish, German and Czech, the Czechs speak Czech, all speak in the linguistic gibberish which exists there."³¹⁹

The work on the feature length film was a new intensive experience for Martinů. He had to adopt the specifics which go together with work on film music as E. F. Burian summarised them in his work on film music: "If we consider music in the 'talkies', we must

³¹⁶ Ibid., p. 232.

³¹⁷ The manuscript of the letter is deposited in Památník Bohuslava Martinů in Polička, signature PBM Kr 118.

³¹⁸ The manuscript of the letter is deposited in the Památník Bohuslava Martinů in Polička, signature PBM Kr 125.

³¹⁹ Olbracht, I. – Nový, K. – Vančura, V.: *Unfaithful Marijka (Marijka nevěrnice)*. Prague, Odeon 1982, p. 234–235.

especially proceed from the assumption that this involves so and so many metres of sound which dynamically and rhythmically resolve the various areas in the strip of film.”³²⁰

The composers sketches (the only source which is available today) include textual notes and time details on the length of the musical sections for the individual scenes (for example “work on the wood” 9 seconds, “the crone is going into a shop”, etc).

Within the framework of the film, the music is divided into larger enclosed passages which join several scenes and which are alternated with relatively long sections without any music at all. The most dramatic scenes – the lumberjacks’ revolt and the looting of Rosenthal the Jew’s shop – were left with only the authentic sounds and no musical background with the intention of making them as realistic as possible. All of the exteriors were filmed in Koločava, where four fifths of the film was made. The interiors and dialogues were recorded in a studio in Prague. The creators did not have sufficient technical equipment available and therefore they brought all of the main characters to Prague so that they could re-record their dialogues and the other sounds for the film in a studio.

Vančura most certainly also chose most of the non-actors under the influence of Soviet film. For this reason, they have the minimum of text – they are filmed in their natural everyday activities (cutting wood, building a house, caring for livestock). The director deliberately avoided lyrical situations. The language of Martinů’s music was required to express the emotions between the protagonists of the film. The common scenes with Marijka and her beloved Danilo have no words and are coloured merely by music and it is these passages of the film which are the most musically successful. For example, the scene when Danilo and Marijka run away from Olena the crone and go to collect the hay is combined with jump cuts to tree felling in the forest where her husband Petro is working to make them a living. The singing motif of the violins in parallel sixths with the accompaniment of the piano alternates with a string tremolo with a four-tone motif in seconds. The most effective musical section is the accompaniment to the floating of the wood, during which Petro stages the accident and kills his adversary Danilo.

The music is also incorporated into the film’s plot and it sounds authentic in the scenes, for example in the long passage of the celebration before the joint departure of the lumberjacks to work where the local band of village musicians plays to accompany the dance. The massive a cappella vocals of the folk songs *Červená ruža* (*Red Rose*) and *Ciganka moja* (*My Gypsy Girl*) were subsequently recorded in the Prague studio by the film’s Ukrainian actors. Upon the basis of this, Martinů’s authorship of the music in these authentic passages appears to be very sparing, even though there is no direct mention of this in the literature. The sounds for the mass scenes (for example the lumberjacks’ revolt and the looting of the Jew’s shop) were also subsequently recorded in the Prague studio. However, these passages sound very acoustically implausible in the film. In one scene, however, Martinů unfortunately did not manage to avoid excessive musical descriptiveness. Olena the crone secretly observes Marijka as she is getting ready for a meeting with

³²⁰ Burian, E. F.: *Not only about Music*. Texts 1925–1938 (selected by J. Paclt). Prague, Editio Supraphon 1981, p. 132.

Danilo. The threatening string tremolos accompanying the negative figure of Olena are too forcibly and inaccurately alternated with the love idyll of Marijka and Danilo.

"A film without music is like a person without a head." The conclusion once again contains a quote from the texts of E. F. Burian which is highly apposite with regard to the films of V. Vančura. Despite the fact that his film most certainly did not fit the mould of the contemporary production, Martinů did not deviate towards any experimentation in the composition of the film music. Indeed, the opposite is true – the film music is in the spirit of his music language of the time. In the same year, he worked on *Mariken of Nimègue*, the second part of the folklore inspired opera *The Plays of Mary* (H. 236), and the music to Marijka also foreshadows some of the procedures used in the later cantata *Bouquet of Flowers* (H. 260). The hand of Martinů can be seen in the used instruments where the piano and the accordion could not be absent (also used, for example, in the opera *Tears of the Knife*, H. 169). The richness of the musical material for the film is based on work with several short, but melodically distinct motifs. Thanks to this extraordinary elaborateness, the lyric scenes are always accompanied by a modified melodic motif. Martinů was not satisfied with the mere repetition of a "leitmotif" for each emotively charged scene as is often the case in film music.

The film music and the camera received favourable reactions from the critics, but the direction and editing fared worse. The critics did not like the weak plot structure of the story and the inadequate knowledge of film technique. Only the attempt to realistically depict the life of a simple person in his authentic environment was acclaimed as a contribution to Czech film.

If we are to assess the work of Bohuslav Martinů, we will certainly not find its focal point in the composition of music for films. It is only possible to consider how the offered collaboration with the director Martin Frič on the film *Different Air* (1938) would have turned out. It is also a rarity to come across Martinů's film music in concert halls or cinemas – it was only thanks to the initiative of the Bohuslav Martinů Foundation that *The Slipper* was performed at the Bohuslav Martinů Festival in 2002 and *Unfaithful Marijka* was played at the Laterna Magika Theatre within the framework of the Bohuslav Martinů Festival in 2003. The name of Martinů has, however, also been connected with film in the present period – his music was successfully used by Aleš Březina in Andrea Sedláčková's film *Victims and Murderers* (*Oběti a vrazi* – 2000). This did not happen by chance, a more thorough acquaintance with the music of Bohuslav Martinů (with the exception of his very early pieces) often shows a kinship with the structured musical language of film music. The substantiation of this would, however, require a more thorough analysis.

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Note sources

- Unfaithful Marijka* – the sketches kept at the Bohuslav Martinů Memorial in Polička.
- The Slipper* – a copy of the manuscript kept at the Bohuslav Martinů Institute in Prague.

Zusammenfassung

Das Thema des Beitrags befasst sich mit dem Verhältnis Martinůs zum Film und zur Filmmusik. Die aufbewahrte Korrespondenz und die Artikel des Komponisten beweisen sein großes Interesse für das mit dem Film verbundene Geschehen, die konkreten Aufträge waren aber für Martinů eher eine Quelle finanziellen Einkommens. Der Beitrag bringt einen Überblick über das Filmschaffen Martinůs, vor allem über den abendfüllenden Film *Marijka nevěrnice* (Die untreue Marijka). Die Filmmusik zu *Marijka nevěrnice* stellt das umfangreichste Werk innerhalb von Martinůs Filmmusik dar. Im Kontext der damaligen Produktion gehört dieser Film des Regisseurs V. Vančura, dessen Absicht eine authentische Darstellung des ukrainischen Landlebens war, zum nicht-offiziellen Schaffen avantgardischer Prägung. Die erhaltenen autographen Skizzen und Analysen der ausgewählten Filmszenen beweisen Martinůs besonders sorgfältige Ausarbeitung der Partitur. Typische kompositorischen Kennzeichen sind Einflüsse aus der Folklore, ausgearbeitete Instrumentation, die für Martinů typische Besetzung mit Klavier und die motivische Arbeit. Der Beitrag beschäftigt sich aber auch mit einigen grundlegenden Fragen wie der Lückenhaftigkeit von Martinůs Autorschaft in einigen authentischen musikalischen Szenen des Filmes und dem Umstand, dass eine autographe Partitur bis heute nicht nachweisbar ist.

Resumé

Téma příspěvku je zaměřeno na Bohuslava Martinů a jeho vztah k filmu a k filmové hudbě. Dochovaná korespondence a novinové články B. Martinů dokládají skladatelovo zaujetí pro dění v oblasti filmu, konkrétní zakázky byly pro Martinů však především zdroj finančního příjmu. Příspěvek v základních rysech představuje tvorbu skladatele spjatou s mediem filmu, především hudbu k celovečernímu filmu *Marijka nevěrnice*, která je nejucelenější a nejrozsáhlejší ukázkou jeho tvorby pro film. V nastíněném kontextu dobové filmové tvorby se film V. Vančury řadí v rámci neoficiální filmové tvorby k pokusům o autentické zachycení života na Podkarpatské Rusi. Na základě popisu dochovaných autografních skic a popisu vybraných scén je dokládáno skladatelovo řemeslně precizní vypracovávání hudební složky k filmu. Základní skladatelské postupy B. Martinů odkazují na vliv folklóru, vypracovanou instrumentaci s – pro Martinů typickým – obsazením klavíru a motivickou prací. Získané poznatky přinášejí s sebou ale i otázky týkající se autorství hudby k autentickým hudebním scénám ve filmu, jakož i hledání stop po existenci doposud nezvěstného rukopisu.