

**Music under the Sediment of Ideology:
Development of the Reception of the Work of Otakar Ostrčil**

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Introduction

Otakar Ostrčil (25 February 1879 – 20 August 1935) was a Czech composer, conductor and organizer of music life. He was born in Prague, where he graduated from the Philosophical Faculty in the fields of Czech Philology and German Philology, then he became head of the Orchestral Association and from 1920 until his death was director of the Opera of the National Theatre. His era there was distinguished by a systematic dramaturgy and advancement in Czech opera interpretation. In composition he was a pupil of Zdeněk Fibich and is grouped with the so-called first generation of Czech musical modernism, together with Leoš Janáček, Josef Bohuslav Foerster, Vítězslav Novák and Josef Suk. Because of his many activities he only wrote twenty-six opuses. He inclined toward larger forms, and composed five operas: *Vlasty skon* [The Death of Vlasta, also translated as Vlasta's Passing], *Kunálovy oči* [Kunala's Eyes], *Poupě* [The Bud], *Legenda z Erinu* [The Legend of Erin], *Honzovo království* [Johnny's Kingdom], among his symphonies the most noted ones are the *Suite in C minor*, *Symfoniette*, *Léto* [Summer], *Křížová cesta* [Calvary, also translated as Stations of the Cross], and he also composed songs, choir music, and melodramas.

His activity in music life and his role of the dramaturge, conductor and director of the opera house is assessed relatively positively but the appraisal of Ostrčil as a composer is somewhat divided. While most influential Czech historians and theoreticians of music and critics praise the quality of his music, the wider audiences are reserved, and his works enter the programme of concerts and opera performances much less often than the works of his contemporaries. In abroad Ostrčil has met without any acclaim.

The evaluation of Ostrčil's music in Czech culture and music literature is often mixed with extramusical aspects and these ideological or political views have led to a distortion in the understanding of his compositions. In the following text we shall trace the development of the reception of Otakar Ostrčil as a composer, and the influences affecting it in the 20th century. To Ostrčil's compositions, various interpretations or motivations were attributed and some of these interpretations are so much based on the desires and views of the critics that they appear, in particular from today's stand, somewhat excessive and tell more about the authors and their era than about Ostrčil's music.

Hope of Czech music

When Ostrčil joined the music life he met with enthusiasm and in this reception the wide audiences and professional critics were in agreement. It was the opera *The Death of Vlasta* on the libretto by Karel Pippich, which previously had been rejected by Smetana, Dvořák and Fibich. Ostrčil took over the libretto from Fibich and started composing after Fibich's death in 1900. The premiere of the opera took place in the National Theatre in 1904. The enthusiasm was due to the situation in Czech opera at that time, when after Smetana, Dvořák and Fibich a representative of a new generation was expected who would develop their legacy. The music of the then twenty-five-year-old composer was on a higher level than the Czech opera repertoire of the day, comprised of works by Hanuš Trneček, Karel Kovařovic, and Váša Suk. It reached the stage of the National Theatre earlier than operas by Foerster, Novák and Janáček. The success of Ostrčil's opera brought many honours to him and gave him an opportunity to play a greater role in cultural life. Over the next few years Ostrčil was seen as a hope for new Czech music and that is why he was chosen as the first from the generation of Czech artists whose work was described in a small monograph, published in German for the promotion of Czech culture.¹

From the beginning of Ostrčil's career his main promoter was Zdeněk Nejedlý, his friend already when they were university students. Nejedlý with his authority in Czech culture and later with his political influence² considerably set the trend in discussions on Ostrčil's music. Nejedlý gave Ostrčil an important place in his interpretation of the development of Czech music. This interpretation was based on his notorious division of music into a progressive and a conservative stream, represented in Czech music by Smetana and Dvořák, respectively, and by their followers, sometimes chosen by Nejedlý according to his likings rather than according to facts. Nejedlý regarded Fibich and his successors Foerster and Ostrčil as Smetana's continuers. This assessment also appears in the conclusion of his book *Česká moderní zpěvohra po Smetanovi* [Modern Czech Opera

¹ Otto Payer, *Ottokar Ostrčil und die tschechische Opernbühne unserer Tage* (Prague, 1912).

² After the liberation Nejedlý held many state offices: 1945–1946 he was minister of Education, 1946–1948 Minister of Labour and Social education. From February 1948 up to 1953 he was again Minister of Education, then Deputy Prime Minister and up to his death a minister without portfolio. In 1946–1954 he was a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

since Smetana],³ which ends with the motto “The Bride of Messina – Eva – The Bud”, referring to the operas by Fibich, Foerster, and Ostrčil. For Nejedlý the backward line was represented by Dvořák, followed by Novák, Suk, Nedbal, and Karel. This made the public divided into two camps, each with its own forum, the journal *Smetana* (founded in 1911) and *Hudební revue* [Musical Review] (1908).

Besides, Nejedlý systematically promoted Ostrčil in the journal *Smetana*, wrote his monograph, which starts: “Otakar Ostrčil is a very complex phenomenon. With his culture he is one of the most progressive, diverse of our musicians, which makes him an avant-garde of our modern music.”⁴ In this book he deals with Ostrčil’s life and work up to 1919, thus covering only about one half of his career, up to his appointment as dramaturge to the opera of the National Theatre. The last fact mentioned in the book is *The Legend of Erin*, whereas the supreme symphonic compositions, and the opera *Johnny’s Kingdom*, as well as the whole period when Ostrčil was head of the opera of the National Theatre are not included. The monograph was clearly influenced by the author’s enthusiasm and his personal fondness of the composer. Nejedlý discusses Ostrčil’s music in most general terms only, without any analysis. For him it is an irrefutable fact that the work of Otakar Ostrčil is guided by “artistic laws of truth and progress”.⁵

Nejedlý in his bibliography had scores of items on Ostrčil and he promoted him in other ways as well. Due to his position of a cultural authority, a man active in adult education, and especially holding the post of lecturer in Musicology at Charles University, Nejedlý’s opinions were influential. His pupils absorbed the views he presented in his lectures and later they themselves took an active part in public discussions. “Through them Nejedlý’s scholarly work came again to the fore in the era of the building of socialist society and scholarship”.⁶

Fighter and builder?

Ostrčil was a fairly moderate man in the expression of his political or other opinions outside music. His creed was formulated in the spirit of Christian humanism, in the words: to resist evil by goodness, love, work. These general ideas are in contrast with the vocabulary of those who regarded Ostrčil both as an authority in music and a moral authority, who tended to give each of his acts and each piece of his music the quality of a moral or artistic manifesto and political proclamation.

³ Zdeněk Nejedlý, *Česká moderní zpěvohra po Smetanovi* [Modern Czech Opera since Smetana] (Prague, 1911).

⁴ Zdeněk Nejedlý, *Otakar Ostrčil: vzrůst a uzrání* [Otakar Ostrčil: Growth and Maturation] (Prague, 1935), p. 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 36–38.

⁶ Robert Smetana et al., *Dějiny české hudební kultury 1890–1945* [History of Czech Music Culture 1890–1945], vol. 2 (Prague, 1981), p. 120.

Vladimír Lébl for instance interpreted the style of Ostrčil's early opera *The Death of Vlasta* in this way: "The idea of the work stands on Fibich's ground; we should not forget, however, that Fibich was already dead by the time the opera was composed and that the fate of his work was for a long time uncertain., Then we shall understand that Ostrčil's inclination toward Fibich was not a comfortable turning toward traditional values, on the contrary, it was a most active feat, a sort of combative manifesto."⁷

In particular one of Ostrčil's most highly appreciated works, the symphonic variations *Calvary*, inspires an explanation of its motivation. Ostrčil composed it in 1927–1928, when because of the scandal around the staging of Berg's opera *Wozzeck* he became a target for attacks.⁸ No wonder then that the composition was put into connection with his situation, which at that time was far from easy, as is shown for instance by Vladimír Lébl: "Ostrčil's moral profile was, however, indomitable. His human response was his brave decision to remain the director of the opera of the National Theatre... His artistic response was in two works: the symphonic variations *Calvary*, in which he symbolically compared his life in the past few years to Christ's martyrdom, and the music drama *Johnny's Kingdom*, which became the composer's summary confession, giving answers to the most serious and urgent issues in ethics, society and politics."⁹ This interpretation of the *Calvary* is repeated in nearly all texts about it, including the reviews published abroad. They are e.g. a review of the Supraphon recording of the *Calvary*, with the Czech Philharmonic and conductor Václav Neumann, written by Raymond Lyon for the French journal *Le Courrier du Disque microsillon* in 1960. One of the few musicologists who rejected the biographical analogy put into the *Calvary*, was Vladimír Karbusický, who in 1980 devoted a long study to this work. In its summary he says: "During the Second World War the idea took hold that he had expressed in his work his personal sufferings occasioned by the *Wozzeck* affair. The historical evidence and musical and aesthetic considerations, however, do not support this opinion and reveal it as an instance of sociological over-interpretation."¹⁰

Most foreign reviewers highly appreciate the *Calvary*, though occasionally some very critical comments occur, e.g. in another review of the *Calvary* by the British critic Deryck Cooke. He argues against the Czech presentation of Ostrčil as it is found in the text accompanying the recording and says that "...he was a bad composer (judging from this work). He may have been a most sincere and forward-looking artist (...), but there is

⁷ Vladimír Lébl, "Dramatická tvorba Otakara Ostrčila a její jevištní osudy" [Dramatic Work of Otakar Ostrčil and its Fate on the Stage], *Divadlo* [Theater], 9 (1959), p. 295.

⁸ The opera was staged under the presence of the composer in 1926, that is one year after the world premiere. Soon protests appeared in one part of the public against the "Jewish-Bolshevik" opera. In detail these events are dealt with in *Dějiny české hudební kultury 1890–1945*, vol. 2 (Prague, 1981), p. 145–146.

⁹ Vladimír Lébl, "Dramatická tvorba Otakara Ostrčila a její jevištní osudy", *Divadlo*, 9 (1959), p. 295.

¹⁰ Vladimír Karbusický, "Der Kreuzweg Otakara Ostrčila: ein sozologischer Beleg zur Wozzeck-Rezeption?", in: *Das Hamburger Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft*, 4 (1980), p. 225.

nothing complex or daring about this music at all: it is just empty late-romantic rhetoric, bolstered up by a certain amount of twentieth-century dissonance.”¹¹

The opera which most tempts us to give it an ideological interpretation was *Johnny's Kingdom*, written after a short story by Lev Nikolajevich Tolstoy. In it the devil tries to seize the rule of the world and take possession of the soul of the good, hardworking Johnny (Honza in Czech), which nearly leads to a war. The premiere of the opera was in 1934 in Brno, that is soon after Adolf Hitler rose to power in Germany.

While some musicologists emphasized the artistic values of this work, its generally pacifistic and humanist character, and found in it a coherent continuation of Ostrčil's development as a thinker and composer, others went further in their political interpretation of the opera. Leftist journalists found in it a model for the future structure of society and at the same time a turning point in Ostrčil's development, a sort of seeing through, whereas the rightist press branded the opera as a political provocation.

To some degree such interpretations can be explained by the political and social situation in the thirties, which is summed up by Josef Hutter's thoughts responding to the uproar brought about by the Prague premiere of *Johnny's Kingdom*.¹² He says that in the days of the crisis and approaching war the putting of intentions into a work of art is understandable but still “if someone intended to suppress the artistic values of the work, by purposefully stressing the tendency, clearly biased by party politics, war should be declared against it.”¹³

The death of Otakar Ostrčil on 20 August 1935 prevented him from entering the discussion about his opera so that later various interpretations and speculations arose. An extreme case of the view of this last opera by Ostrčil was the book by Jiří Válek, *Vznik a význam Ostrčilovy opery Honzovo království* [Origin and Importance of Ostrčil's Opera Johnny's Kingdom], written in 1949. Its ideological bias is clear from the preface, in which we can read:

Today, when we can lean on the invincible power of the Soviet Union, when by building up socialism we consolidate the power of our people's democracy, in which we build a happy life for our people and help peace to win in the world, our music receives a new important role. We demand from it that it should speak clearly to the widest masses of our people, that it should create truthful, captivating pictures of the reality, and with these pictures help our people in their struggle for socialism, open distant perspectives for them, have them sing of love and hate in our people, and become a fiery weapon in our struggle for peace. These tasks were set by Ostrčil already in his work from the thirties. That is why I decided to write this study of Ostrčil's

¹¹ Deryk Cook, *The Gramophone*, 4 (1960), p. 52.

¹² The Prague premiere of *Johnny's Kingdom* was on 3 April 1935 in the National Theatre, conducted by the composer.

¹³ Josef Hutter, “V Honzově království” [In Johnny's Kingdom], *Národní sjednocení* [National Reunion] (Prague, 25 April 1935).

life and work. The book was written in 1949 as a gift for the Ninth Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.¹⁴

Effortlessly, Ostrčil became a music hero for the Communists, which for years influenced the reception of his work. This relation maybe persisted even after the fall of the Communist rule. Naturally, no major conclusions can be made from the responses to the opinion poll in the daily press but it is worth noting that when Miloslav Ransdorf, the Czech Deputy (on behalf of the Communists) in the European Parliament was asked about his summer holidays, he replied: “Summer does not favour politics, summer should be a period of contentment, like in a symphonic composition by Otakar Ostrčil. This year I will get inspiration from my favourite composer.”¹⁵

Keeping up the legacy

Otakar Ostrčil is usually called by Czech musicologists one of the foremost representatives of Czech music, no matter whether it is opera, symphonic music, melodrama or songs. In this spirit he is described in the representative volume, *Dějiny české hudební kultury 1890–1945* [History of Czech Music Culture 1890–1945].¹⁶

During Ostrčil's life, his work was studied the leading representatives of Czech musicology, Zdeněk Nejedlý and Vladimír Helfert.¹⁷ A little later are the studies of his style by Jaroslav Jiránek¹⁸ and Vladimír Hudec.¹⁹ The influence of Gustav Mahler on Ostrčil and other Czech composers from the beginning of the 20th century was explored by Miroslav

¹⁴ “Dnes, kdy opření o nepřemožitelnou sílu Sovětského svazu upevňujeme plněním úkolů výstavby socialismu moc naší lidově demokratické vlasti, kdy budujeme šťastný život našeho lidu a pomáháme zvítězit věci míru na celém světě, dostává i naše hudba nové důležité úkoly. Žádáme od ní, aby hovořila jasnou řečí k nejširším masám našeho lidu, aby vytvářela pravdivé, uchvatně krásné obrazy skutečnosti a aby těmito obrazy pomáhala našim lidem v boji za socialismus, aby jim otvírala daleké perspektivy, aby zpívala o lásce a nenávisti našeho lidu, aby se stala plamennou zbraní v našem boji z mír. Tyto úkoly si stavěl ve svém díle Honzovo království již v třicátých letech O. Ostrčil. Proto jsem se rozhodl o Ostrčilově životě a díle napsat tuto studii. Kniha vznikala v roce 1949 jako dar IX. Sjezdu KSČ.” Jiří Válek, *Vznik a význam Ostrčilovy opery Honzovo království* (Prague, 1952).

¹⁵ “Politici a léto? Milenky, manželky, koupaliště i spaní pod širákem” [Politicians and Summer? Lovers, Wives, Swimming Pool and Outdoor Sleeping], in: News server *iDnes.cz*, 31. 8. 2007 (Accessed 20 August 2009) <<http://www.idnes.cz>>.

¹⁶ Robert Smetana a kol., *Dějiny české hudební kultury 1890–1945* (Prague, 1972, 1981).

¹⁷ Vladimír Helfert, *Česká moderní hudba* [Czech Modern Music] (Olomouc, 1936), p. 76–78.

¹⁸ Jaroslav Jiránek, “Ostrčilův stylový přínos a jeho vnitřní polarita” [Ostrčil's Contribution in Style and its Inner Polarity], in: *Hudební věda*, 6 (1968), p. 548–569.

¹⁹ Vladimír Hudec, “Stilwandlungen im Schaffen Otakar Ostrčils”, in: *An der Epochen- und Stilwende* (Brno, 1985), p. 82–87.

K. Černý²⁰ and Vladimír Lébl.²¹ A comprehensive article about Ostrčil was published in the magazine *Harmonie* by Vlasta Reittererová in a series devoted to the “Year of Czech Music 2004”.²²

Especially in the last two decades, fairly detailed comments about Ostrčil are found in foreign musicological literature. His operas were analyzed by John Tyrrell in his book *Czech Opera*,²³ his melodramas by Judith Ann Mabary in a monograph on Czech melodrama,²⁴ and the situation in the Czech opera around the National Theatre was discussed by Brian Locke.²⁵ Vladimír Karbusický, since 1968 resident in Germany, wrote, beside the study on the *Calvary*, referred to above, a paper on *Johnny's Kingdom*.²⁶

In connection with the Ostrčil anniversaries, during the second half of the 20th century papers regularly appeared which more or less repeated some common ideas, in harmony with Nejedlý's interpretation of Ostrčil's legacy. On the same occasions, Ostrčil's compositions found their way into the repertoire of Czech orchestras, where otherwise they were seldom found. This can be illustrated by the dramaturgy of the Prague Spring Festival. Ostrčil's music was on its programme in 1946–1960 thirteen times, from 1961 to 2004 four times.

The new century seems to have brought a change. In each year of Prague Spring in 2005, 2006 and 2007, one performance was on the programme. Ostrčil's compositions were performed in recent years at concerts, in Plzeň (Pilsen) in 2002 the opera *Kunala's Eyes* was staged, his songs were sung by Dagmar Pecková and recorded on a CD by Soňa Červená. The Czech Radio broadcast the still unpublished scores: the orchestral version of the melodrama *Balada o mrtvém ševci a mladé tanečnici* [The Ballad of the Dead Cobbler and the Young Dancer] and the orchestral versions of the song *Osiřelo dítě* [The Orphaned Child]. The score of the *Calvary* was reprinted in Germany in 2007.

Translated by Jaroslav Peprník

²⁰ Vladimír Lébl, “Pražské mahlerovství let 1898–1918” [Mahler's Music in Prague in 1898–1918], in: *Hudební věda*, 12 (1975), p. 99–135.

²¹ Vlasta Reittererová, “Otakar Ostrčil a Národní divadlo” [Otokar Ostrčil and the National Theatre], in: *Harmonie* (2004), No. 2. Published also in English: Vlasta Reittererová, “Otokar Ostrčil” in: *Czech music* (2004), No. 3, supplement p. 2–7.

²² John Tyrrell, *Czech Opera* (Cambridge, 1988). Published also in Czech: John Tyrrell, *Česká opera* (Brno, 1992).

²³ Judith Ann Mabary, *Redefining Melodrama: The Czech Response to Music and Word* (Saint Louis, MO, 1999).

²⁴ Brian Locke, *Opera and Ideology in Prague: Polemics and Practice at the National Theater 1900–1938*, (New York, 2006).

²⁵ Vladimír Karbusický, “Die Ihnmacht und unliebsame Macht des Pazifismus: Otakar Ostrčils Hansens Königreich”, in: *Das Hamburger Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft*, 17 (2000), p. 123–137.

²⁶ Soňa Červená, *Pěvecký portrét* [Singer's Portrait], (Prague: Supraphon, 2005).

Musik unter der Schicht der Ideologie: Die Entwicklung der Rezeption des Schaffenswerkes von Otakar Ostrčil

Zusammenfassung

Gegenstand der vorliegenden Studie ist einerseits die Entwicklungsgeschichte der Rezeption des Werkes von Otakar Ostrčil als Komponist, andererseits sind es die Einflüsse, von denen die Rezeption im Laufe des 20. Jahrhunderts geprägt wurde. Otakar Ostrčil (1879–1935) war tschechischer Komponist, Dirigent und Organisator des musikalischen Lebens. Seine Ära im Nationaltheater, wo er fünfzehn Jahre lang die Stellung des Operndirektors innehatte, zeichnete sich durch systematische Dramaturgie und gleichzeitigen Aufschwung der tschechischen Operninterpretation aus. Von großer Bedeutung war sein kompositorisches Interesse, das vor allem dem Gebiet der Oper und der symphonischen Werke galt. Bei der Ermittlung des Stellenwertes der Musik von Ostrčil in der tschechischen Kultur und der musikalischen Fachliteratur kamen nicht selten auch außermusikalische, ideologische bzw. politische Aspekte zur Geltung, man wollte in seinen Kompositionen verschiedene Bedeutungen bzw. Motivationen gefunden haben. In einigen Auslegungen standen jeweils die subjektiven Wünsche und Einstellungen der Interpreten im Vordergrund. Insbesondere heutzutage muten ihre Deutungen einigermaßen zugespitzt an, als Aussagen, die ihrer Zeit verpflichtet sind und eher von den Verfassern zeugen als von der Musik dieses Komponisten selbst. Der Ton, der die Debatten über das Œuvre Ostrčils in nicht unwesentlichem Maße beherrschte, wurde von Zdeněk Nejedlý, der zeitgenössischen Autorität im kulturellen Leben mit späterem politischem Einfluss, angegeben.

Hudba pod nánosem ideologie: Vývoj recepcce díla Otakara Ostrčila

Shrnutí

Tato studie se zaměřuje na vývoj, jímž prošla recepcce Otakara Ostrčila jako skladatele, a na vlivy, které se na ni v průběhu 20. století podepsaly. Otakar Ostrčil (1879–1935) byl český skladatel, dirigent a organizátor hudebního života. Jeho éra v Národním divadle, kde působil po patnáct let jako šéf opery, se vyznačovala systematickou dramaturgií a zároveň vzestupem české operní interpretace. Do české hudby významně zasáhl i jako skladatel, především v oblasti opery a symfonické hudby. Do hodnocení Ostrčilovy hudby v české kultuře a hudební literatuře nejrůzněji zasahovala hlediska mimohudební, ideologická či politická, jeho skladbám byly připisovány různé významy či motivace. V některých interpretacích se natolik projevovala přání a názory vykladačů, že se jejich výklady jeví, zvláště z pohledu dneška, jako poněkud vyhocené a vypovídající spíše o pisatelích a jejich době, než o Ostrčilově hudbě. Vzhledem ke své pozici kulturní autority i pozdějšímu politickému vlivu do značné míry udával tón debatám o Ostrčilově díle Zdeněk Nejedlý.