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# Forfest
## A Second Impression

by Laurence Sherr

In June 2014, I arrived for the second time in Kroměříž, a Moravian town in the eastern Czech Republic, for the arts festival known as Forfest. It is the 25th anniversary of this annual festival organized by Vaclav and Zdenka Vaculovič. My article about the festival and colloquium last year included background about the history, architecture, art, and performance spaces here, and since it is available online www.forfest.cz/?id=1&action=seznam&presenter=Review, this article will focus on selected performances and exhibitions that I attended this year.

All but two Forfest events this season were concentrated into 12 consecutive days in late June and early July in Kroměříž and the regional city of Olomouc. The concerts that were not part of this cluster were also separated geographically; the first took place in mid-June in Prague, and the last will occur in September in Bratislava. That first concert featured the Austrian Duo Polyzoides, a brother-sister violin and piano grouping whose familial affinity extended to tight ensemble playing even in extremely challenging passages from contemporary literature. The programming of mostly 20th century works included an adventurous solo violin work by the Czech conductor and composer Karel Reiner, one of the few composers who survived Nazi imprisonment in Terezín, the ghetto/camp near Prague that served as a propaganda vehicle during the Holocaust. Even more complex were *Lieder Ohne Worte* of Heinz Holliger, which the Duo handled with aplomb. Two living Czech composers, Vojtěch Mojžíš and Jan Grossman, were in attendance for the performance of their works, and, as the concert took place in the Smetana Museum on the banks of the Vltava (Moldau) River, a work by that paragon of Czech musical culture rounded out the program. Full program listings for all 2014 Forfest events can be seen at the festival website: www.forfest.cz/data/doc/programy/forfest_2014.pdf.

The opening concert in Kroměříž featured the violin-piano duo of Pavel Burdych and Zuzana Berešová performing in the gilded Assembly Hall of Chateau Kroměříž, one of the main concert venues of the festival. The highly reverberant acoustics of this cavernous Rococo hall can work to advantage for quiet and delicate passage, but to disadvantage for thick, loud textures and fast passages. Burdych and Berešová adjusted their performances to these acoustics for their varied program of works by 20th and 21st century composers that included two world premieres and one Czech premiere, the latter being my Four Short Pieces for solo violin.

There were three events the following day, including a vocal and organ concert in the Church of St. Maurice, and an Assembly Hall performance by Ensemble Damian from Olomouc. Ensemble Damian gave an uninterrupted concert, a continuous performance of the compositional work of its apparent leader Vít Zouhar. Zouhar performed mainly on a very small keyboard, as did the other players in various segments of the work. These keyboards were sounded by air blown by the player through a mouthpiece and tube. All the players sang in certain sections, so that sections of homogeneous timbres alternated with heterogeneous ones. The instruments in the ensemble included viola, trombone, and percussion, and the audience was treated to effective spatial modulation when the players sang/played while moving through the space and around the audience. The composition seemed to have sections with precise relationships of pitches and rhythms, and others where the players improvised within rhythmic or melodic structures suggested by the composer. Repeated and evolving musical cells were representative of a tonal, minimalist style, but with a particular Czech twist.

Over the next few days' openings of art exhibitions alternated with concert events. On a pleasant Sunday afternoon, guests gathered at the Rotunda of the Flower Garden for a display of the large-scale triptychs of Vaclav Vaculovič along with the glass sculptures of Marek Trizuljak. The covered space under the Baroque dome provides shelter in the middle of the large formal gardens, and space for about a dozen of Vaculovič's three-paneled paintings in rooms radiating out from the central space. Descriptions of the works by the artist revealed his concern with the human psyche, spirituality in music and art, and monumental themes. Soprano Stella Maris, who sang superbly in the Church of St. Maurice organ concert the evening before, joined violinist Zdenka Vaculovičová for several short works to kick off the event. On a smaller scale, and appropriate to the intimate display space at the Gallery Artuš Kroměříž, were two types of work by Czech artist Hana Stehlíková Babyrádová–etchings and ceramic containers filled with plant life.

*Continued on page 6*

# Forfest *Continued from back page*

Percussion dominated the first Monday of the festival in Kroměříž. Students from a nearby music school gave a performance at the Kroměříž Museum, led by their teacher Ludmila Daňkova. Regular, found, and specially crafted percussion instruments figured prominently in my lecture on 20th century experimental American composers. The evening Assembly Hall concert featured the OK Percussion Duo of Martin Opršál and Martin Kleibl from Brno in a concert of works written for them, including ones by Karel Husa and Vit Zouhar. The two gave a stunning display of virtuosity on an amalgamation of instruments centered around marimba and vibraphone. Opršál performed again the next evening with organist Irena Chřibková in the Church of St. Maurice.

During Forfest 2014, many of the featured composers were in attendance, and several gave public explications of their works. These included Daniel Kessner, Nicolas Zourabichvili de Pelken, Jan Grossman, and Vojtěch Mojžíš. Kessner, Zourabichvili and Grossman all spoke on the day of the flute and piano concert by Kessner and his wife Dolly that comprised works by these three composers. At that Assembly Hall event, the two performers alternated in solo works by Kessner, and combined in his *Alto Rhapsody*, an effective and engaging dialogue between the two instruments. The delicate voice of the bass flute, a favorite instrument of Kessner's, was excellently enhanced by the resonance of the hall in his solo work for that not often heard instrument. For me, the standout composition of all that I heard at Forfest 2014 was the premiere of Zourabichvili's *Façi*. An upward sweep of notes in the piano served as the opening gesture and unifying element in the uniquely colored sound universe Zourabichvili created. Grossman's suite *Natalis Solis Invicti*, like the other works on the program, benefitted from the expert and highly sympathetic interpretation by the Kessners. The relationships between the Kessners and the composers were established by mutual participation in previous Forfest festivals, and nurtured by many years of subsequent Forfest interactions. More about this phenomenon below.

The Czech clarinet, viola and piano group Trio Actaeon appeared the following evening in the Assembly Hall, presenting a concert in which all but one of the works were Czech or world premieres created by Austrian, Italian, German, and Canadian composers. A number of the works had been written for the trio; the concert thus displayed the group's commitment to music of our time, and to living composers. The works on the program displayed a variety of avant-garde styles, which were handled with aplomb by the fine players in the group. In the trio by Michele Trenti, spans of high, loud, and dissonant playing provided an unrelenting intensity that were emphasized by the more than ample resonance in the hall. A surprising twist came at the beginning of Maximilian Kreuz's work, where a blues-inflected line was taken up by each of the instruments in imitation; this recurred later in the work. The Canadian creators of the final two works, who had traveled to Kroměříž for the concert, introduced their compositions. In one case, Alexander Rapoport explained how his work made reference to Mozart's *Kegelstatt Trio*, ostensibly the best-known historical work for the peculiar combination of clarinet, viola, and piano. Like many titles added by publishers or others, *Kegelstatt Trio* has come to identify the work even though Mozart apparently was not making reference to the bowling game named by this title. In response, Rapoport explained how his work included embedded signifiers of bowling in each of the movements.

A number of listening sessions punctuated Forfest's main week in Kroměříž, leading to further musical discoveries. For this writer, one such find was Czech composer Miloslav Kaveláč's 30-minute orchestral work *Mystérium Času* (*The Mystery of Time*). As the work unfolds, a clarinet and string texture is punctuated by timpani, the effect being the demarcation of segments of time that become more condensed as the work reaches its animated central section, followed by a reversal of the process as the piece returns to more calm and spacious textures. Skillfully orchestrated and compelling, the work made a strong impression.

Two concerts were offered on the second Friday evening of the 10-day festival in Kroměříž. The first featured Slovakian pianist Elena Letňanová and festival co-director Zdenka Vaculovičová on violin. Vaculovičová opened with an apt performance of Křička's *Preludio a Fughetta,* reminiscent of Bach's solo violin sonatas. Both solos and duos followed, including the world premiere of Pavel Zemek's *Ukolébavky* for violin and piano. This minimal and serene work let us hear another side of this highly active Czech composer, who was present for the performance, and whose contrasting works were heard throughout the festival. The highlight of the concert was a solo piano work by Slovakian composer Juraj Beneš, whimsically titled *Alice Was Beginning To Get Very Tired of Sitting Next to Her Sister on the Bench and Having Nothing to Do.* The opening theme undergoes continuous metamorphosis that gives a sense of the unfolding of geologic time. It received a sensitive and deftly tactile interpretation from Letňanová, who had interacted with the composer before his passing.

The second concert was a multi-media event featuring voices, acoustic and electronic instruments, found objects, recorded layers, and, in the darkened Assembly Hall, a large, visually engaging projection that eventually covered a large section of the wall behind the usual performance space. The single work was *Soundscapes*, created by the Czech composer/performer collective Ensemble Marijan. Both the visual and audio components started minimally, and evolved to greater complexity as the piece progressed. The rotating 3-D image during the final section of the work was skillfully realized and manipulated.

I regretted that I did not get to hear the final Saturday–Tuesday events. Two unique ensembles appeared on Saturday, an orchestra of found objects, and a harp quartet from Italy. The former featured world premieres of new works by Petr Vaculovič, whose notated scores were realized by the Industrial Philharmony of Hodonín. For the latter event, the Adria Harp Quartet presented an entire concert of world premieres, including works by two Italian composers in attendance, Massimiliano Messieri and Nicola Baroni. The premieres of new works by Messieri and Zemek punctuated the Sunday performance by Opera Diversa from Brno. On the program were also string

orchestra works by Gideon Klein and Pavel Haas, two of the noted Czech composers imprisoned in the Terezín ghetto, both of whom died after deportation to concentration camps in Poland.

My second impression of Forfest was one of a deeper understanding of the wider significance and impact of the Festival. While the festival's commitment to contemporary music and art, and the connection of the arts and spirituality, had created a strong impression the previous summer, the living connection between the artists, composers, and performers who met at Forfest, and their continued artistic collaborations beyond the geographical and temporal confines of the festival, left an indelible second impression. The legacy of Forfest as an international locus for the presentation of new works that were created by artists who had first encountered each other there is magnified as these works reach audiences worldwide and join the canon of contemporary art. While the manifold cross-cultural cases are too numerous to convey here, examples range from American composer Theodore Wiprud's chamber orchestra work based on a painting by Czech artist Vaclav Vaculovič to Slovakian pianist Letňanová's Czech and Slovakian performances of works by Italian composer Messieri to the aforementioned interweaving of friendship and artistic collaboration as American performers Daniel and Dolly Kessner gave voice to new works by French and Czech composers Zourabichvili and Grossman. This far-reaching impact may be one of the lasting legacies of the festival, and Vaclav and Zdenka Vaculovič certainly deserve recognition for 25 years of creating a festival where contemporary art can flourish, and where artists become enriched through their connections with each other, and in turn, offer the world new art that may not otherwise have come to light. We celebrate the silver anniversary of Forfest, and wish it many more years of success in presenting new work to the public, and in providing an environment conducive to engendering artistic collaboration.

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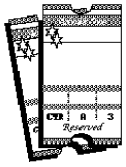
*The opera Tawawa House by Zenobia Powell Perry was edited, reconstructed, and orchestrated by NACUSA member Jeannie G. Pool.*

# Premiere of Zenobia Powell Perry's Opera

**by Deon Nielsen Price**

***Concert Review***



"The opera was thrilling – the very first time I have ever been to an opera!" responded a young woman of color as we left the theater when I asked how she enjoyed *Tawawa House*. I had, myself, eagerly anticipated attending this premiere fully staged production of Zenobia Powell Perry's opera, reconstructed and orchestrated by Jeannie Gayle Pool and produced on May 2 and 4, 2014 by the Townsend Opera at the elegant Gallo Performing Arts Center in Modesto, California.

Throughout the opera the words and musical style reflect the social and geographical setting—a site on the Underground Railroad in the 1850's. The libretto and song titles include symbols of slavery—*Jumping over the Broom*" (getting married), and escaping to freedom—*Follow the Drinkin' Gourd* (big dipper with north star). The historical Tawawa House was a hotel resort in Xenia Springs, Ohio, where freed and runaway slaves lived and worked, and white slave owners vacationed with their slave mistresses and children. The success of the resort was a result of the unusually collaborative relationship of whites and blacks. Disrupted and closed during the Civil War, it became Wilberforce College, the first African-American owned and managed university in the United States. Its graduates became key personnel and teachers in the establishment of colleges throughout the nation.

The powerful choral and production numbers caused many audience members to tear up. The marvelous voices of the soloists were superior and breathtaking. Each character sang with authority and deeply soulful understanding. I envision the same leading artists bringing this opera to receptive audiences through triumphant national and international tours.

The staging and musical direction, costumes, sets, and all dimensions of the production were professional and delightful. The orchestra sounded convincing and the orchestration supportive and colorful. The total length of the thirty-three titles performed was audience friendly but I would like to attend an indulgent future production that includes all forty-seven titles.

The composer, Zenobia Powell Perry, was born in 1908 to a well-educated family— her father a black physician and her mother Creek Indian. Many innovative and advanced musical passages in the opera reveal the influence of her extensive studies and assistantships with R. Nathaniel Dett, William L. Dawson, and Darius Milhaud. Perhaps her most poignant heritage was from her grandfather, a former slave who sang the Spirituals to her that she later wrote down and that are sprinkled throughout the opera, such as the stirring *Sinner Man* and *Hallelujah to the Lamb*. Zenobia's daughter, soprano Janis Peri, who sang in the amateur, shoe-string production in 1985, attended the Townsend Opera production and called it her mother's dream come true.

Jeannie Gayle Pool, a Los Angeles composer, historian and musicologist, met Ms. Perry in 1979 and became her biographer and publisher, and maintains a web site about her: zenobiapowellperry.org. From a large box of penciled manuscript, Dr. Pool in the last year, rewrote and streamlined the libretto, created 300 pages of piano-vocal score, orchestrated the entire two-hour work, and prepared 360 pages of score and 1400 pages of instrumental parts for performance, a loving but astounding task! It is rare to find such a variety of requisite musical skills in one person.

Bringing a new opera into the repertoire for the first time is a challenging and noble venture for any opera company. The General and Artistic Director, Matthew Buckman, writes that the Townsend Opera is particularly proud to introduce an opera with such powerful cultural and historical themes that look beyond well-established racial and cultural divides. He says, "If people did it 150 years ago at Tawawa House to secure the freedom of their fellow man, then people all over the world can do it to solve the challenges we face today."