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Forfest Impressions

by Laurence Sherr

Arriving for the first time in Kroměříž, a picturesque Moravian town in the eastern part of the Czech Republic, one is met with many surprises. Impressive architecture, visual art masterworks, and an arts festival and colloquium focused on the spiritual and the avant-garde. The latter is known as Forfest, an annual festival organized for the 24th time [last] summer by Vaclav and Zdenka Vaculovič, a visual artist/musician and violinist, respectively, who reside here year-round.

Renaissance and Baroque architecture dominate this town that was rebuilt after being destroyed in the Thirty Years' War, but it is a pleasant discovery to find a Jugendstil façade on the main square, above whose roofline the twin spires of the neo-gothic Church of St. Maurice are silhouetted by the sunset. Chateau Kroměříž (Archiepiscopal Castle) is a magnificent palace just off the town square, the summer seat of the Bishops and Archbishops of nearby Olomouc, the sixth largest city in the Czech Republic. Therein are located numerous galleries, with paintings by European masters such as Titian, Van Dyck, Brueghel, and Veronese. The Chateau hosted Forfest concerts in one of its upper galleries, and in the Assembly Hall, a cavernous space of highly ornate Rococo interior design.

Forfest is unique in its two foci: recent music and art that explores new and experimental trends, and equally, the connection between spirituality and art. Vaclav and Zdenka Vaculovič feel that both of these are vitally important for the arts in contemporary society. The majority of Forfest events this year spanned several weeks in late June and early July, and included concerts and gallery openings in Kroměříž and surrounding sites like Olomouc and Hodonín. At the center of the festival is a three-day biennial international colloquium. Incorporating multi- and interdisciplinary perspectives, participants address spirituality and developing trends in music, art, and culture, and the threat to spirituality in contemporary society. My one-week stay was occupied with eight concerts and three full days of colloquium activities. While there is not space to reflect on each event, perhaps highlights will provide some festival flavor.

Concerts and Art Displays

The 25 June Chateau gallery concert, featuring Aisling Agnew, flute and Matthew McAllister, guitar, was a stunning exhibition of virtuosity and sonic coloration that was notable for how the artists superseded performance flair to deliver each composers work with conviction and integrity. Their interwoven solo and duo repertory was also part of their intentional aesthetic, comprised of composers with whom they had established personal relationships. As Agnew noted, "We feel that it is a very alive format...We're building relationships and working partnerships [with composers] around the world. Music should be alive, and evolving."

Two different concerts filled the evening of 26 June. In the Assembly Hall, Czech cellist Štěpán Filípek and Slovak pianist Ondrej Olos tackled a challenging program of works by living Czech composers, all of whom were in attendance. Filípek handled the sudden shifts of musical landscape, technical playing, and dissonant passages with aplomb. Composer František Emmert, the dean of Czech composers, had two cello and piano works on the program. Two solo cello compositions balanced Emmert's contributions, including the world premiere of a 2012 work by Jan Hajiè. While Assembly Hall's 25-meter ceiling with three paintings occupying 400 square meters is visually impressive, the diffuse acoustics may have led listeners to lose clarity in some of the pieces.

The darkened interior of the Church of St. Maurice was the scene of the second concert of new music that evening, a contemporary concept in a neo-Gothic setting that was a welcome surprise. Projected onto a large screen at the front of the nave was a slide show of charcoal designs by living Czech artist Petr Štěpán, the abstract lines and shapes to which Czech organist Jaroslav Tůma created similar sonic designs through masterful improvisations on the church's Romantic-era organ. They sought a connection between the fixed shapes of the artist and the impermanence of the musician's spontaneous creations.

Featured on the next evening's concert was the work of Massimiliano Messieri, a composer from the Republic of San Marino. (For the curious, the Republic of San Marino is a very small independent country surrounded by Italy, similar to Vatican City.) His solo piano work *Echi di voce umana* fused modern harmonic language with subtle timbral shadings that were superbly expressed by Slovak pianist Elena Letňanová. The second half of the program featured the collaboration between Messieri and Italian

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cellist Nicola Baroni in the form of 21 movements of individual character for cello and electronics, or hypercello, the term used for the electronic extension of Baroni's acoustic sound. Baroni skillfully realized a wide range of timbres and textures, with the hypercello departing most radically from the acoustic sound in the final, culminating movement.

The Ad Libitum Ensemble, based in Budapest, Hungary, arrived for the 29 June evening concert, which once again took place in the Chateau Assembly Hall. The quartet of Ildikó Szakács, soprano, Peter Kazán, clarinet, Ibolya Nagy, cello, and Ferenc János Szabó, piano, presented a program of mixed duos, trios, and quartets. They champion contemporary Hungarian and Slovak composers, and most of the works on their program were performed for the first time in the Czech Republic. The young players gave strong and convincing performances of this repertory, which included the world premiere of an arietta for the whole group by Luboš Bernáth. In their concert, the acoustics of the hall worked in favor of the singer, who at one point, in György Urbán's set of songs for voice and piano, gave an upward sweep of her head as she launched her note out into the hall. With the piano momentarily out, this musical expression worked quite effectively as one could hear the note reflect and spread into the space. The ensemble made a wise choice in programming Robert Muczynski's Fantasy Trio for clarinet, cello, and piano as the final work. Muczynski wrote masterfully for this combination of instruments, and the players skillfully interpreted his composition to provide a fitting culmination to the evening.

Consonant with the festival theme, Czech organist Hana Ryšavá presented a liturgical music concert at the Church of St. Maurice on the 30 June afternoon concert. It featured the music of four women composers, the best representation of female music creators of the festival. She opened with Jeanne Demessieux's *Velikonoční responsoria*, whose atmospheric texture just before the end provided an unexpected sonic delight. The following work, by festival organizer Zdenka Vaculovičová, was the Ordinary form of the Mass, set for soprano and organ. It ably demonstrated that this weighty and often large-scale historical form can be successful with moderate performance forces and length. Smart programming was accomplished by having Eva Marie Houben's organ chorale framed by two monophonic works, Messiaen's *Monodie* for organ, and František Emmert's *Propria* for soprano. The highlight of the program was Russian composer Sofia Gubaidulina's *Hell und Dunkel*, which utilized clusters, sustained seconds, and other compositional devices to provide a unique sonic landscape, different from all the other works on the program and engaging in its originality. Arvo Pärt's *Trivium* concluded the organ part of the concert, and was followed by a recording of Czech composer Michal Janosik's *AMEN*, a large work for chorus and orchestra. While the work fit the liturgical theme of the performance, listening to the recording from the pews seemed a disjunct coda to the live performances that afternoon.

We returned to the Church of St. Maurice that evening for a recorded presentation of 24 Preludes and Fugues for piano by Czech composer Pavel Zemek, who had arrived to be one of the instructors in the POSTFEST composition master classes and workshops. The listener was able to maintain focus and interest through the duration of this monumental work because of the effective use of contrasting textures, speeds, intensities, and rhythms, combined with idiomatic piano writing and harmonic language that was modern yet not overly saturated with dissonance. Delicate and nuanced passages were particularly welcome respites to the more rhythmic and clangorous sections.

Two art events were woven into the main week of Forfest. The first was the opening of an exhibition by Czech photographer Petr Baran at the Gallery Artuš Kroměříž, where multiple photographic shots combined in a single frame gave the viewer an interesting new perspective on the composite. A timbrally creative solo violin work by Petr Vaculovič, ably performed by his mother Zdenka Vaculovičová, provided an apt complement to the photos. At the end of the week, there was a showing of large canvases by festival founder Vaclav Vaculovič at his home studio. Vaculovič discussed an important theme in his work: the encapsulation of human spirit, or energy, and its dissipation into, or merger with, nature and the infinite. He also noted Czech musical influences on his painting.

Colloquium

The Forfest Colloquium 2013, officially titled "Current situation - Global threat for art as a cultural phenomenon: Growing threat for the spiritual identity of today's man," took place during three intensive days, from 24-26 June. Papers and presentations from the fields of music, visual art, and culture were given in the Kroměříž Museum, in Czech and English, by presenters from Europe, America, and the Middle East, reflective of the international and interdisciplinary nature of the festival.

The colloquium started with a presentation by British composer David Matthews, who questioned whether spirituality in music was still possible in the 20th and 21st centuries with the decline of belief and the rise of agnosticism. After observations about 19th century precedents, such as Beethoven's quest for meaning in sonata form, he spoke about 20th century examples such as Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* and Mass, and Stravinsky's connection to the Russian Orthodox Church, and also of Messiaen's ecstatic passages celebrating Catholicism. He noted that the timelessness in composers like Górecki, Pärt, and Taverner seeks to restore Christianity, and an artist could follow a path like that of poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose verse was sometimes bleak, but who still achieved ecstatic vision because of his belief in Christianity. After demonstrating some of his own spiritual works, Matthews concluded that music expressing the spiritual is still possible.

The participants then moved to the gallery at Chateau Kroměříž to view a large-scale masterpiece by the Italian artist Titian (Tiziano Vecellio), *The Flaying of Marsyas*. Art historians explained the significance of the various figures in Titian's rendering of a scene from the myth about Marsyas and Apollo, and commented on the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of the scene.

In the afternoon, three presentations explored themes of Jewish artists and composers of the last two generations. My presentation examined themes of sorrow, redemption, and the universal in the Nelly Sachs poetry that is the basis for my Holocaust memorial composition *Flame Language*, and featured a video of the work from a 2011 Holocaust Remembrance concert in Prague. In the second presentation, bassoon and cello duo Friedrich Edelmann and Rebecca Rust (Germany and USA) performed a duo and cello solo by Hans Gál, informing the audience about how this German-Jewish composer fled to Great Britain after persecution by the Nazis. They concluded with a duo by Israeli composer Max Stern, who then gave the third presentation. Stern played a DVD that presented his work *Perek Shira*, explaining that it was a series of 18 variations for narrator and orchestra "in which all the animals and all of nature sing a song of praise to the creator." The DVD presented an interesting interlacing of two sequences: nature and animal scenes correlated to the narrator's text, and Stern in the studio conducting members of the Israeli Philharmonic for the recording of the work.

The second day of the colloquium began with remarks by Aisling Agnew, flute and Matthew McAllister, guitar, the duo who had given a stellar performance the evening prior. They recalled that when they started performing together 12 years earlier, as students at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, they immediately began to explore music by contemporary composers, at first their fellow students and later expanding to international connections. They prefer to work with composers with whom they can have direct contact, and with whom they can collaborate to further to refine pieces if they like.

Dr. Elena Letňanová, Slovak pianist and musicologist, spoke about the life and teaching of Juraj Beneš as "one of the most important Slovak composers," noting his encounter with dodecaphony under Communist rule, and his perception that serialism was a kind of bureaucracy, incomprehensible to some listeners. When she interviewed the composer just two weeks before his death, he spoke about three types of musical time used in his compositions; he termed these dramatic, lyrical, and objective time. Recordings of his *Haiku* concluded her presentation. Dr. Ivo Medek, Czech composer and Rector of the Academy of Performing Arts in Brno, then gave a paper that dealt with the importance of funding art, along with science, in contemporary society.

Professor Vladimír Bokes, Slovak composer and teacher, spoke about poet Daniel Simko from Bratislava, his childhood neighbor. Simko emigrated to the U.S. and died at the age of 46 in New York. A CD recording of *Departures*, Bokes' cycle of 6 songs for bass and chamber orchestra on poetry of Simko, was heard after Bokes praised singer Sergei Kopčák, the featured bass soloist and a singer who has championed the music of Slovak composers.

The Association Přítomnost and its place in the history of Czech music culture was the topic of remarks in Czech given by composer Dr. Vojtěch Mojžíš, of the Czech Museum of Music in Prague, and Dr. Olga Mojžíšová, director of Smetana Museum in Prague. This generated an involved discussion by colloquium participants.

The final day began with two thought-provoking presentations examining spiritual aspects of art and music. The first was by Dr. Hana Stehlíková Babyrádová, Czech artist and art historian of Masaryk University in Brno. Babyrádová described her method of haptic painting, where clay, sand, and dust pigments are shot onto the canvas as a means of realizing a tactile relationship between artist and art. She also referred to the spiritual aspects of working with dust pigments, noting Judaic precedents regarding dust as the eventual form of our corporeal beings. This connected with the Holocaust memorial music presentation I gave, where Nelly Sachs addresses the soul of her dead lover with the line "Your dust distinctly calls to life eternal." An animated slide show of Babyrádová's work played as she spoke.

The second presentation, by Republic of San Marino composer Massimiliano Messieri, had the provocative title "Chaos, when the machine becomes God's interlocutor." Messieri questioned the role of the spirit and human inspiration by playing a series of piano works that started with very highly organized structures in the total serialized works of Stockhausen and Boulez, progressed to composers using algorithms to compose, and ended up with a composition created by a computer, the latter not entirely dissimilar from the former. It reminded one of the discovery that certain aleatoric compositions had achieved as much departure from traditional tonal, rhythmic and harmonic patterns as had total serialization. Massieri wisely left open the question of whether a machine can match a divinely inspired human.

Dr. Matěj Kratochvíl, a music journalist and ethnomusicologist, gave the final colloquium presentation. Kratochvíl is Chief Editor of the music magazine HIS VOICE in Prague (HIS is an acronym for the Czech information center). He spoke about the increased need for composers writing new music to find funding outside of state support and posed questions about relationships between the arts and state funding. As an example, he referred to his recent interview with composer Philip Glass, who has received almost no direct government funding. Though noting that new music advocates may have a greater challenge in today's political and economic climate, Kratochvíl was optimistic about the development of new venues, such as clubs and restaurants, where contemporary music is now being heard.

The richness of the arts in Kroměříž, and the intensity of activity during the main week of Forfest, while a pleasant surprise for the first-time visitor, are certainly not unexpected by Vaclav and Zdenka Vaculovič, who have been planning and working assiduously since the previous year's festival. Their cumulative effort over the past 24 years has built loyal local audiences, promoted Kroměříž as a center of art and culture, and engaged musicians, artists, and thinkers internationally. In this regard, they have seen the synergy from the dual festival foci–progressive music and art, and spirituality in art–impact creators and audiences far beyond their city and region. In support of their vision, we wish them well as they plan for the silver anniversary festival next summer.

Laurence Sherr is Composer-in-Residence and Professor of Music at Kennesaw State University in Atlanta, GA