



Work and Performance: A few Comments on the Czech Modern Music

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I.

To the destiny of today's musicologists belongs a pleasant but trying obligation of writing reviews on variety of texts of different levels and specializations which are connected to music. Also if musicology is to remain a science about music, it must consider phenomena which has not yet been given sufficient attention.

Recently, I got my hands on a habilitation thesis of one of my colleagues from the University of Technology. Even though its name *New methods of encoding and reproduction of surround sound* may sound intimidating, it proven itself to be an interesting contribution to the discussion devoted to capabilities of technical innovations. They ultimately also affect the music and its reception. This statement is sort of a positional preamble, explaining the reasons why I got into reading the aforementioned work.

Things such as musical events of national cultures or regions, eminent composers, the genesis of the styles and the processes of creating individual creative poetics, the matters of individual musical genres traditionally find themselves within the research interest of musicologists. The activity of musical associations, companies and institutions also became the topic of works focused on newer music. Not only the work of art itself but also the form of its reception or the organization of musical life became a predicative report about the nature of musical production. The historical knowledge was, fairly recently, appended by an intensive study of specific aspects

of a musical piece composition, which lead to constitution of “new musical theory”, musical analysis and the theory of interpretation (in the broad sense of this term).

The reasons why I began reading the aforementioned work were also personally motivated. Recently I requested a partnership on the upcoming project focused on performance practices in the 19th and 20th centuries at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Communication at Brno University of Technology where the habilitation thesis was written. Task of my colleagues from the “Technical faculty” is to prepare a program suitable to analyze an audio recording of an analysis of recorded music. We are inspired by some foreign works. In the plethora of current production we were intrigued mostly by the book of Nicholas Cook, *Beyond the Score. Music as Performance* (2013) and the activity of authors concentrated around the Centre for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music (CHARM).¹

While this topic is often discussed in the anglo-american musicology on a local scale this topic is rather marginal. A rare exception is the work of Milan Kuna, Miloš Bláha *Time and Music. About the dramaturgy of the resources in the musical and interpretative performances* (1982).

II.

The analysis of sound recordings is still a relatively new discipline of musicology although the approximate 120 years history of the musical data recording offers a wide range of possibilities. Musical recordings are preferable to live production in terms of the description of time resources in music for they allow more detailed and repeated measurement of time periods. The effort of musicology research is to find objective parameters and data from typically sound and time complicated musical recording or production in real time, which can be clearly and distinctly documented, analyzed and compared. The acquisition of this data in musicology research has always been the domain of a music theorist in the role of a listener of a live production or a recording, registering noticeable quantitative parameters of the music stream. In the early stages the authors gathered the time data using a stopwatch and careful acoustic verification. Such measurements are

1 About this topic more: José Antonio Bowen, “Tempo, duration, and flexibility: Techniques in the analysis of performance,” *Journal of Musicological Research* 16, 2 (1996): 111–156; Hermann Danuser, *Die Musik des 20. Jahrhunderts [= Neues Handbuch der Musikwissenschaft, 11]* (Laaber: Laaber, 1992). Anders Friberg, “Generative rules for music performance: a formal description of a rule system,” *Computer Music Journal* 15, 2 (1991): 56–71

inextact because of reaction of the measuring person. (Studio tape recorders brought possibility of more precise measurement using the lengths of the tape at a constant speed with a resolution of up to 20ms. However, obtaining detailed and repeated measurements is a very challenging task even in this case.)

The claim that from the beginning of the 20th century the development of musical genres is also shaped by the relationship to sound recording, gramophone records or radio broadcasts will certainly not sound surprising. The abrupt development of mass media especially radio and sound film influenced the production of composers and gave future direction to modern performance tradition. Critical discussion on the topic of technical innovations and their incursion into musical practice has been happening in musicology for several years which influenced the choice of subject matter of variety of works and also a production focus (radio broadcasts and music for radio, changes in tempi and dynamics, analysis of interpretative performance etc.) Also the effort to add the possibility of a sound recording analysis (interpretative performance) to the methods of musical theory belongs to current trends in foreign and domestic musicology.

III.

My approach to this task, however, is not purely technical. Interpretation research is an overarching term for a variety of approaches and methods. We can for example examine deviations from the established ideal, such as the transformation of the tempo or dynamics, within a single work. We can also describe the historical background on which these changes take place.

The first analysis of performance and recommendations on performance practice come from Heinrich Schenker (1868–1935). He is the author of an extensive study *Die Kunst des Vortrags*. Even though he was working on it since 1911 it was never finished and was only maintained through handwritten notes. It was released in 2002 under the name *The Art of Performance* by Heribert Esser.

Subsequent interpretative style then significantly transformed. The conservative tradition that Schenker represents was replaced by the emerging performing practice. The situation after 1918 is characteristic in this respect. A category of artists who specialized on contemporary music appears. Such type was in many ways unique. Its novelty became evident in the choice of repertoire (most of these compositions were heard only once). The style of their interpretative execution was restrained and deprived of

flashy gestures, it resigned on the popularity with wider audience. These artists have demonstrated extraordinary service to new production (new music). They were able to study a large amount of music and interpret it selflessly aside of the public interest. Many of these artists belonged to the circle of compositional schools and had songwriting ambitions themselves. The situation among the authors who belong to the circle of students and friends of Alois Hába is characteristic.

For example Alois Hába (1893–1973), composer and pianist Erwin Schulhoff (1894–1942), Karel Reiner (1910–1979), pianist and musicologist Václav Holzknecht (1904–1988), cellist Váša Černý (1900–1982) and clarinetist Milan Kostohryz (1911–1998) and expressed their opinions on the topic of interpretation. (The same can be observed in the circuit pupil and friend of Arnold Schoenberg.)

The mentioned authors published a series of studies which are dedicated to the issues of performance practice of new music, not only Hába's but also works of other authors. They focus primarily on the way of phrasing and a technique of control of traditional or new (quarter-tone) instruments. All the listed authors are also the authors of the studies dedicated to the performance practice of new music.² Authors of new music then connected the fates of their work with newly formed ensembles. Zika-Quartet and Czech Nontet are among the most significant.

Sound recordings are a testament of the level of interpretation of new music. The first ones come from the record company Esta which distributed them for Czechoslovak market in years 1930–1946 (between the two wars there were also other companies on the Czech market: His Master's Voice, Odeon, Parlophon, Ultraphon, Telefunken, Polydor). The most represented author of the contemporary music is Alois Hába with his quarter-tone pieces (besides the String Quartet No. 2 in the quarter-tone system, op. 7

2 See Váša Černý, "Čtvrttóny na violoncellu (K provedení Hábovy čtvrttónové fantázie pro violoncello)," [Quarter-tones for Cello (On the Performance of Hába's Quarter-tone Fantasy for Cello)] *Klíč*, ii (1931/32): 162–164. Karel Reiner, "Technika hry na čtvrttónovém klavíru," [Technique on a Quarter-tone Piano] *Klíč*, iii (1932/33): 22–25; repr. *Rytmus*, iv, 1938/39, 51–53. Karel Reiner, "Interpretace nethematické hudby" [Interpretation of Nonthematic Music], *Klíč*, iv (1933/34): 46–48. Erwin Schulhoff, "Wie spielt man auf dem Vierteltonklavier?," *Der Auftakt*, vi (1926): 106. Václav Holzknecht, "Problém atonality v klavírní technice (Na okraj Hábovy Symfonické fantázie pro klavír a orchestr)," [The Problem of Atonality in Piano Technique (Some Remarks on Hába's Symphonic Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra)] *Klíč*, i (1930/31): 9–14.

(1921) its suites and fantasias for the quarter-tone piano performed by Karel Reiner).

IV.

In the frame of *interpretation research* we can also compare the interpretative style of individual personalities, bodies or generations, so-called “interpretative schools” whose specificity is determined by the technique or the method of training, however increasingly more the ability to enlighten about (adequately get across) certain (national) repertoire from a certain complex interpretative point of view.

In the 20th century the ideal of performance individualization was approached by the requirement of adequate portraying of author’s periodic compositional style. The demand for the stylistic purity is applied especially categorically when introducing domestic music (works of the so-called classics of one or another national music).

Area that appears most suitable for processing is chamber music and particularly one specific part, so called Czech Quartet School. It is the area of music which has its tradition within the local music culture. It is one of few artistic activities in the field of Czech musical culture where we can observe the continual development (presumption of development of interpretive tradition, if we still believe in interpretive tradition) with all eventual divides and deviations. The founding significance belongs to the Bohemian Quartet. In the beginning of the 20th century it was primarily the Ševčík-Lhotský Quartet, Zika’s (Czechoslovak) and Prague Quartets. Interpretation of the Bohemian Quartet especially began to change with the inventions of the phonograph (roll) and a gramophone record.

The fact that music can be written not only in the sheet but also as a sound, not only its progression but also qualities elusive in the notation, redirects the attention to topical and currently ongoing flow of music. Here we can also find the impulse (which is often overlooked) of the development of new interpretive tradition. (Herbert von Karajan for example perfectly adapted to the gramophone industry.)

We encounter a particular phenomenon in the first recordings of the Bohemian Quartet: individual musicians are highlighting contemporary clichés, especially glissando when changing positions, rapid changes in tempo and dynamics. However on the contemporary sound recordings remarked with technical imperfections they sound artificial and amateurish. Similar characteristics also apply to the recordings of violinists Jan

Kubelik (1880–1940), František Ondříček (1857–1922) and singer Emmy Destinn (1878–1930). Such an approach may resemble theatrical facial expressions and diction which with the onset of the film became dull (or perhaps comical). Each such recitation (interpretation) is significant, has its own semantics.

Study of the audio data offers wide possibilities for the study of performances and their mutual relations. Production and distributing of music media has one more audible effect. The artists from the second half of the 20th century who have the opportunity to easily compare their own performance with the recordings of their colleagues usually present a homogenous interpretative style while the individuality and diversity are considered to be dominating feature of older records.

V.

In this context I would like to remind that the interpretation of the work was (and partially still is) considered as secondary in the history of music. Even the designation performing culture represents certain classification. Performance is only a reproduction, simple performance, standing against serious compositional work. For example Johannes Brahms said:

*“If I perform something from Beethoven I am suppressing my own individuality and reproduce what the author has prescribed. Still, I have a lot of work to do.”*³

Also the Austrian theorist Heinrich Schenker considered “individual contribution” of the artist to be unnecessary. Therefore, is the interpreter really just a mere executor of the musical text as claimed by Stravinskij? These ideas stem from the unequal ratio between the significance of the score and its execution (interpretation). Within the European tradition the term *work* is bound especially to its fixation (composition recorded in the notation), finality (the work is complete and other authors cannot make any input) and uniqueness (singularity; the work is tied to the author as to the unique creative personality).

We must still have the multilayer nature of music on our mind for its perceivable form is added only by its execution. Composer’s notation is a precursor of the artifact of music not the music itself. The score itself is not

3 Heinrich Schenker, *Der Tonwille. Flugblätter zum Zeugnis unwandelbarer Gesetze der Tonkunst einer neuen Jugend dargebracht*, Heft 6 (Wien: Universal-Edition, 1923), 37.

yet, and cannot be, a subject of admiration. For a parallel to this claim we can look into the theory of the theatre. In 1931 Otakar Zich wrote in his work *The Aesthetics of Drama*:

*“The dramatic text is the beginning of a long and difficult march through which the dramatic work in the form of theatre performance is executed”.*⁴

But back to the music, is the artist really a mere executor of the musical text? Hardly, after all, the musical writing has to be realized. The score is a guide to action, however, it does not choose the means by which the action is carried out. There is a freedom of choice concerning the musical instruments and this detailed specification is missing from the notation. For example fingering and the way of realization of technical and execution specifications (*espressivo*, *legato* etc.) belong into the arsenal of viable means. The similar case are the passages of the same prescribed dynamics, for example in prescribed *forte* not all tones of a passage may be played with the same intensity.

Criteria of the quality of musical interpretation are seen in relatively perfect execution of notation, perfect delivery, the level of virtuosity and individuality of expression. This is associated with both, capturing the composer's individuality and also the exercise of the performers own approach.

I also owe you an answer to a comment stated in the beginning. The task of my colleagues from the “Technical faculty” was to prepare suitable software that would note down tempo and dynamics of a musical record and then convert them into a clear chart. They didn't yet achieve it. It is therefore necessary to be patient. Probably it is not necessary to create sophisticated software; much more important is the method of reading the results. Register necessary data is one thing, searching for the meaning in them is second and justifying them as an performance style of certain time period is third.

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