

# The East of the West: The conditions under which electroacoustic music existed in Czechoslovakia, 1948-1992

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## I. Introduction - Facing Socialist Realism (1948)

The history of electroacoustic music (EM) in Czechoslovakia started rather later, than it did in Western Europe. Unlike the situation in West European countries, it was not until halfway through the 1950s that EM was first mentioned in the Czech musical press, and it took almost ten more years before this movement diffused into Czechoslovakia on a practical level.

This situation was caused by the political isolation of Czechoslovakia and above all by its affiliation to the Eastern political bloc led by the Soviet Union. After 1948, when the Communist party took over power in Czechoslovakia, Zhdanov's theses on socialist realism became compulsory for every type of artistic production. A special organization for the control of official doctrine observance was established – the Czechoslovak Composers' Union – in 1949<sup>1</sup>. This union was directly answerable to the state, and no official artistic existence was possible outside the union.

The secretary of the central committee of the Soviet Union, Andrei Zhdanov, published his theses in 1946 and they very soon became the only possible guidelines for artistic production in the USSR and its satellite countries<sup>2</sup>. They were compulsory for artists, writers and every type of intellectual.

As Christopher Norris points out, „*its applications have ranged from the largely descriptive to the downright prescriptive and dogmatic, their common factors being a realist (mimetic) theory of representation and a belief that art can promote human emancipation by offering a truthful yet affirmative vision*”<sup>3</sup>.

The official doctrine of socialist realism, which was taken over from the Soviet Union meant a big step back in the post-war development. If Czechoslovakia had been able to keep up with the interwar European avant-garde, whether from Paris, Vienna or Berlin, than this „new“ official dogma of socialist realism meant a retreat at least in part. From this point of view the EM was very suspect as an autonomous movement opposing the official doctrine. And as such it was persecuted.

## II. Close encounters (1950-60)

Diffusion of foreign artistic movements and contemporary developments was very restricted and delayed mainly owing to the impossibility of travelling freely behind the “iron curtain” and acquiring knowledge of the newest music.

For these reasons the idioms of the New Music movement (centred in Darmstadt), of *musique concrète* in France and of electronic music in Cologne penetrated very slowly and with certain difficulties into local production. The main sources of knowledge of EM for Czech composers were “underground” private listening seminars with discussions held in the flats of composers

and their friends. Not until the 1960s was there any possibility of direct contact with *musique concrète* and electronic music in a global context.

The first references to *musique concrète* and electronic music started to appear in the Czech press in the middle of the 1950s and they provided very basic information about this phenomenon.<sup>4</sup>

The possibility of personal acquaintance with EM emerged, when The Warsaw Autumn festival (Warszawska Jesien) was founded in 1956 by the Polish Composers' Union (Związek Kompozytorów Polskich)<sup>5</sup>. This was possible thanks to the thaw that followed the Stalinist era. The Warsaw Autumn was for a long time the only venue based on contemporary music in the Central and Eastern Europe. And as such it served as a bridge between West and East.

### III. From Rite of the Spring to Spring fever (1960s)

Important changes appeared in the reception of EM in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s. The sudden détente of the political situation in Czechoslovakia was caused by Khrushchev's Report on the Stalin Personality Cult in 1956. During the 1960s reformist currents appeared in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. In this short period of liberty the most prominent representatives of EM were able to visit:

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In 1961 L. A. Hiller came to Czechoslovakia.

In 1966 Pierre Schaeffer, François Bayle, and Guy Rebeil visited Prague. Groupe des Recherches Musicales followed by a practical seminar of *musique concrète*.

In 1968 K. Stockhausen was a guest of the seminar at Smolenice in Slovakia

In 1969 Luigi Nono came to Prague.

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In the beginning of the 1960s several experiments in EM were undertaken in “home-made” conditions under the aesthetic influence of surrealism. Methods of collage and montage were used for the earliest compositions, such as *Smích* (Laughter; 1962) by Vladimír Šrámek on the poem of Jiří Kolář or *Geologie, aneb jak jsme zabíjeli tatínka* (Geology, or how we were killing Dad; 1963) by Ladislav Novák.<sup>6</sup>

At an institutional level a first attempt was undertaken in 1963 at creating a Cybernetic committee, led by the musicologist Vladimír Lébl, within the official Czechoslovak Composers Union. Lébl was also the author of the first important publications on EM. In 1958 he published an overview on EM and *musique concrète* and in 1964 he edited two anthologies called *New Paths of Music* (Nové cesty hudby), which provided the first consistent information in Czech on the New music movement as well as on EM music.

The first seminar of Electronic Music was held at the Czechoslovak Radio Broadcast Station in Plzeň in 1964. It was organized by the Cybernetic committee and Research Institute of Radio and Television in Prague, both new established institutions. For this rare event the special equipment had been installed in Plzeň studios<sup>7</sup>. There were created special laboratories for sound synthesis, complex sound analysis and processing of the pre-recorded electronic sound and for recording of

concrete sounds. In the seminar took part 57 participants, including 19 composers and 10 musicologists, sound engineers, researchers, technicians and other guests<sup>8</sup>.

In the role of experts appeared composer Miloslav Kabeláč (1908-1979), Eduard Herzog and Vladimír Lébl. Following topics were discussed: acoustic, technology of sound processing, EM notation etc. At the listening seminar participants had become acquainted with Stockhausen's *Kontakte* and *Gesang der Jünglinge*. It seems to be interesting that in these discussions the studios of GRM Paris and WDR Cologne were already considered to be a 2nd class category compared to laboratories in München or Music University Illinois possessing programmable synthesizers and computers.

EM in Slovakia developed under the same cultural-political conditions as did the Czech music. First attempts in area of EM in Slovakia made composers Ilja Zeljenka and Roman Berger with one tape-recorder at the break of 50s and 60s. Further usage of EM appeared in the context of Czechoslovak television studio in Bratislava as a sound part of movies and documentaries. This studio and its equipment were used as a basis for all following experimental works. Nevertheless most of the production was functional music used with films or theatre pieces (I. Zeljenka: *The Sun In the Net*, 1962; R. Berger: *Uprising in the Sycamore Street*, J. Malovec: *A Cross Switch*). Further progression of the studio was made in cooperation with Research Institute of Radio and Television in Prague.

Besides studios in Bratislava and Plzeň another studios were making its first attempts in EM. The most important impulse for development of the Electronic music studio in Brno was the visit of the Groupe des Recherches Musicales in Prague in 1966 followed by practical seminar of the *musique concrète*<sup>9</sup>. In the same year appeared the first crucial publication in Czech: *Electronic music* by Vladimír Lébl. Electronic music studio at Czechoslovak Radio Broadcast Station in Brno was founded thanks to its contemporary leader Jiří Hanousek<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless at the beginning it was unthinkable to manage the studio officially. There was a strong aversion against electronic music on the part of artistic and political institutions representing official communist doctrine. This music was felt as something subversive and suspect, and moreover – coming from the West.

Activities of the Electronic studio Brno culminated at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s. In 1969 a first year of the *Exhibition of the experimental music* took part in Brno. It was just one year after the invasion of so called “friendly forces” of the Eastern block into Czechoslovakia on 21. August 1968. Only two years of this rare festival of contemporary music had been organized in 1969 and 1970, before it was banned. Exhibition of the experimental music brought into Czechoslovakia still practically unknown German and French compositions: *Kontakte* and *Gesang der Jünglinge* by K. Stockhausen, *Violostries* by Parmeggiani, *Jazzex* by L. Ferrari etc. In 1971 the leader of the Electronic Music Studio in Brno Jiří Hanousek was sacked. He left the country and the studio of electronic music was closed.

In better position existed the Sound studio at the Music Academy in Prague which was founded quite late (in 1970) and was surprisingly supported by the high officials. First compositions – *Etudes* by Ivan Kurz – were set up already in that year.

#### **IV. «A bout de souffle» (1970s)**

During 1970s and 1980s the production of EM was slowly decreasing. There were two main reasons:

1) Firstly, as Carl Dahlhaus pointed out, about 1970 EM already lost its attraction (both negative and positive) and became a marginal phenomenon:

„The electronic music lost its horrors but also the passionate sympathy, which it had gained in its early times. After it had been pulled into the center of New Music by excited press, it became a marginal phenomenon. And we feel today it is difficult to recall the uproar caused by the earliest electronic compositions.”<sup>11</sup>

2) Second reason was the political restriction of the EM production in the conditions of “normalization”. This political praxis of censorship and repression of the public life followed the events of the “Prague Spring” in 1968. This hostile political situation was immediately reflected in the works of EM. For example by Miloslav Ištvan: *Avete morituri* (1968) or Miloš Štědroň: *Aparatus* (Aparát, 1970; chamber opera on Franz Kafka) etc.<sup>12</sup>

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#### **Volume of the EM production in Czech Republic (1960-1992) (Dohnalová 2001):**

- until 1964: 5 compositions a year
- about 1970: almost 30 pieces a year
- 1981: almost none
- 1991: more than 35 a year
- (1993-1997: relative stagnation, about 15 compositions/year)

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#### **V. Future of the History (1989-)**

The next crucial breaking points in the history of Czechoslovakia, which determined the political and artistic situation came in November 1989 - “Velvet Revolution”, which meant the end of communist era – and in 1993 splitting the Czechoslovakia into two autonomous states. This turbulent period was also reflected by several EM compositions, as those by Martin Marek: *Fence stake* (Kůl v plotě, 1996) – parody on the last speech of the central committee secretary Miloš Jakeš or audiovisual composition by Alois Piňos and Dalibor Chatrný: *Grate* (Mříže, 1970, 1991).

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#### **EM Institutions in Czechoslovakia (1960-92):**

- **1961 TV studio Bratislava**
- **1964 Czechoslovak Radio Studio Brno**
- **1965 Experimental Studio of Czechoslovak Radio Bratislava**
- **1965 Research Institute of Radio and Television in Prague**
- **1967 Experimental Studio Plzeň**
- **Exhibition of the experimental music (1969-70) /  
Exhibition of the New Music (1990-)**
- **Musica Nova – International EA Music Competition (1969-70, 1989-)**
- **1970 Sound studio of Music Academy in Prague**
- **(1989-) Society for the Electro-acoustic Music**
- **Audiostudio (1990-95) – in 1995 transformed into Studio F**

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In this optimistic time new institutions were founded: *Society for the Electro-acoustic Music* (in 1989), which provided International EM Competition *Musica Nova*, *Audiostudio* in Prague (1990) was five years later transformed into *Studio F*. Finally, the *Exhibition of the New Music* in Brno was restored in 1990 developing the tradition of 1960s' *Exhibition of Experimental Music* until today.

## VI. The East of the West - Conclusions

Historical conditions under which EM existed in Czechoslovakia were highly paradoxical, mainly due to a political situation. A big delay in diffusion of the new trends into our territory caused the enormous reduction of time for EM development. The space between contemporary West European art development and the development determined by the political situation in Czechoslovakia was so small, that EM remained a minor movement in the whole volume of art production. Once the political obstacles had been eliminated in 1989, the volume of the EM production quickly attained the same or even higher level than it did in the "golden era", i.e. on the turn of the 1960s and 1970s. Nevertheless the political obstacles were replaced by economic ones<sup>13</sup> and the interest in EM slowly dissolved in the mass production. The experimental EM returned back to places where it came from more than 30 years ago – to homes and small studios of curious musicians and composers.

## References

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<sup>2</sup> Ždanov, A. *O umění*. Praha : Orbis, 1950.

<sup>3</sup> Norris, Ch. *Socialist Realism*. Grove Music Online, ed. L. Macy (Accessed 20 May 2008), <[www.grovemusic.com](http://www.grovemusic.com)>

<sup>4</sup> Matějček, J. *Poznámka o elektronické a konkrétní hudbě*. In *HRo*, p. 294-295.; Novotný, M. *Hudba očima techniky : Tak zvaná „konkrétní“ a „elektronická“ hudba*. In *HRo* 1958, p. 364-68.; Lébl, V. *O hudbě budoucnosti a budoucnosti hudby*. *HRo* 1958, p. 696-700.

<sup>5</sup> Warsaw Autumn 2007, (Accessed 20 May 2008), <<http://www.warszawska-jesien.art.pl>>

<sup>6</sup> Lébl, V. – Mokrý, L. *O současném stavu nových skladebných směrů u nás*. In *Nové cesty hudby : Sborník studií o novodobých skladebných směrech a vědeckých pohledech na hudbu*. Praha : Státní hudební vydavatelství, 1964, p. 11-35.

<sup>7</sup> Bokůvková, V. *O elektronickém studiu v Plzni*. In *Hudební rozhledy*, Praha, 1972, p. 161-167.

<sup>8</sup> Bláha, M. – Mandík, M. *I. seminář elektronické hudby v ČSSR*. In *Rozhlasová a televizní technika*. vol. 5, no. 4. Praha, December 1964. On-line version: (Accessed 20 May 2008) <[www.radioart.sk](http://www.radioart.sk)>

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<sup>9</sup> Lébl, V. (1966) *Elektronická hudba*. Praha: Státní hudební vydavatelství.

<sup>10</sup> Hanousek, J. ,O začátcích a konci Brněnského elektronického studia‘.(Accessed 20 May 2008), <<http://www.radioart.sk/avr/visuopage.php?id=142>>

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<sup>13</sup> Zajíček, L. History of Electroacoustic Music in the Czech and Slovak Republics, *The Leonardo Music Journal*, vol. 5, 1995, p. 39–48.