

Zuzana Vojířová and the socialist realism thesis

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Introduction

Zuzana Vojířová belongs without any doubt among the great distinguished operas of the Czech cultural scene of the second half of the 20th century. The opera has been performed many a time by almost all the Czech opera theatres and also saw through a film rendition. After the "Velvet Revolution" on 17th November 1989, Pauer's production has disappeared from the opera scene and concert halls completely. The reason to this is Pauer's active membership in the Czechoslovak Communist Party. If some of his works are currently being performed, it is more likely to be abroad. Let us concentrate particularly on the time aspects of the opera to determine, whether it is a biased work, tributary to its time and régime, or if it does deserve our attention even today. In other words, let us confront the opera with ideas of socialist realism.

Zuzana Vojířová

The opera *Zuzana Vojířová* is based on a play of the same name by Jan Bor. Pauer composed the opera during the years 1954–1955. Preview of the opera took place on 30th December 1958 in the National Theatre in Prague, the premiere of the final version being held on 9th January 1961 in the same theatre. The opera has five acts.

Brief summary of the opera:

Miller's daughter, little Zuzana Vojířová, is to be married to one of her peers, peasant Ondřej Zachar. However, Zuzana still has doubts before the wedding and furthermore, last of the Rožmberks, Petr Vok, has invited her to his castle in Bechyně, where he lives, not as happily and without any children, with his spouse Kateřina. Zuzana gives Petr Vok the desired son Petříček, but the legitimate wife Kateřina takes care that the child disappears from the castle. So Zuzana loses not only her son, but soon after even Petr Vok for some time, as he takes up the function of a hetman and fights the Turkish army. The life of Zuzana in the adversary castle environment was far away from romantic dreams, even though under the patronage of Petr Vok it was bearable. However, immediately after Vok's death, Zuzana is banished out of the castle and ends her life as a begger, *whom the fate still grants to meet* not only her former almost husband Ondřej, but more importantly her son Petříček – Petr Vojíř. In the end, Zuzana dies happy that the kin of the five-leave Rožmberks rose continues even after Petr Vok's death.¹

The composer wrote the libretto himself. As a librettist, he omitted the fourth, sixth and the seventh act of Bor's play. Newly, he created the fourth act after Bor's motives. The omissions contributed to a more appropriate plot cadence. Furthermore, some of the many plot episodes were omitted, the secondary characters being reduced. A grate change was made in the final of the opera. In Bor's play, Zuzana does not meet her son again, whereas in Pauer's libretto, she does. It is necessary to mention, that Bor's play and Pauer's libretto differ significantly from the real historical matter. *Zuzana Vojířová* is, thus, only a historicist

¹ URL: < <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/151071-zuzana-vojirova/>
Zuzana Vojířová [Plot Summary]. Česká televize. [online], [2012-05-01].

novella – a dramatic ballad.

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The situation in Czechoslovakia after 1945 was very complicated. The goal of this chapter is not to describe the known historical facts and afterwar political scene into depth. However, it is necessary to realize, that all the events of this period significantly influenced the development of the musical culture, even the arts in general. Art was under the thrall of political powers, as it often became a direct instrument of the system.

The state of Czech music after 1945 is not easy to describe. After the occupation by the German army, an intervention for the development of the musical culture was needed. Major changes took place, and a great effort was made to transform our music into a musical culture, the so called "socialist" culture. Significant events took place. The Czech Philharmony was nationalised, it received the historical building of Rudolfinum, which also became the seat of the Academy of Performing Arts. Changes did not avoid the school system either: music colleges were set up, as well as The Janáček Academy of Performing Arts in Brno (1947), and the College of Performing Arts in Bratislava (1949). In the area of lower musical education, foundations were laid for its complete transformation from the private and community ownership to the public sector. Nationalising also took place in the cultural industry branch: the Gramophone Works were founded, Jan Seidl becoming their programme director.

International music festivals have been established. In 1946, the Czech Philharmony celebrated its fifty years anniversary. On this occasion, the international music festival Prague Spring has been established, running every year until today. Opera theatres met with the same fate as well. Places, where the Czech opera had been staged only occasionally (e.g. Liberec, Ústí nad Labem, Opava and České Budějovice) were to receive permanent scenes. Opera of the National Theatre started its production after 1945 with new leadership. Otakar Jeremiáš, composer and conductor, stood in the lead. The theatre performed a few new Czech pieces: for example *Pozdvižení v Efesu* (Uprising in Efes) by Iša Krejčí, *Maryša* by E. F. Burian, *Enšpígl* by Otakar Jeremiáš, etc. The patriotic and pro-fascistic works from the occupation period were also staged. Due to understandable circumstances, a major part was played by Soviet artists as well, who became prominent in the Czech Republic.

In 1946, the Syndicate of Czechoslovak Composers was formed. This syndicate joined both the classical music composers, as well as the composers of music for entertainment and dance, lyricists, music scientists, and critics. Folk art started to be significant as well, beginning to form, first, among the youths. Afterwards, competitions in the folklore dance and music sprang to life. Traditional singing choirs, working-class ensembles and youth ensembles also played a part in the development of musical culture. The folk song and folklore in general brought along an energy boost, while, at the same time, new songs emerged.

The second break came in February 1948; it was marked by the establishment of new norms and new aesthetic ideals. On 11th April 1948, the Meeting of National Culture took place. Political situation pressed the whole artistic spectrum towards a decision: should the individual artists lean towards the side of the ruling regime, or will they openly or secretly stand against it. This dualism of the so called official and illegal art remained until 1989. At the Meeting, major speeches were pronounced by the representatives of the Communist Party and the government: Gottwald, Nejedlý, Kopecký and Štoll. During this time, revolutionary songs were written, for example Jan Stanislav's *Zpátky ni krok* (No step back),

and Jan Seidl composed one of the most famous mass songs *Kupředu levá* (Forward the left) directly for the Meeting of the National Culture. On the festive concert dedicated to the Meeting, Dobiáš's cantata *Československá polka* (Czechoslovak Polka), later renamed as *Buduj vlast, posilíš mír* (Build your country, strengthen the peace), was also performed. Dobiáš received the International Peace Prize for this composition. Revolutionary February set the problematics of arts, especially art's relation to reality and its active social role, as a priority. Selection of new contemporary topics was thought to be essential. The goal was to support creative folk ensembles, mainly those dealing with composition of new songs. The basic theses were "folksiness" in music, its comprehensibility, and innovation of ideas pertaining to "combative socialist" content in the music. Other theses was the creative unity of music of our prominent progressive composers with tradition, and a fight for new, consciously directed, music with content targeted to the new social effect. Resolution of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which then included also our country, was not to be neglected. It formed basic principles of production in socialist-realist spirit, likewise the problematics of ideology in music. This resolution started off some stormy debates.

The year 1948 is noted as a new episode in the field of our musical culture, described as an episode of ambivalent and dramatic fight for the Czech socialist music.

From 1948 to 1950, structures of musical establishment were completely transformed, and new forms originated that enabled growth of socialist musical culture. As far as concerts are concerned, forms of private-capitalistic enterprise were definitively disposed of, and the Music Artistic Headquarters was set up (Hudební artistická ústředna – HAÚ).

An important element for the further development is September 1948. In this month, first congress of the Syndicate of Czechoslovak Composers (Svaz československých skladatelů – SČS), musical scientists and critics, was held. It was an organisation of an ideological kind.

Equally important element is the inception of the music magazine *Hudební rozhledy* (Music Horizons), the first number of which came out on 15th October 1948, its first editor in chief being Miroslav Barvík. The magazine was supposed to unify our composers ideologically in the effort for music of socialist realism. *Hudební rozhledy* later became the magazine of the Syndicate of Czechoslovak Composers.

In this period, when the cultural fight for socialism was gaining in strength, more than fifty "constructive" compositions were created, one of them being the composition by Jiří Pauer *Malá kantáta* (Small cantata), lyrics by S. K. Neumann (1948).

The Syndicate of Czechoslovak Composers began to hold productions of new compositions. First of them took place in April 1950, the second following in November 1951. Furthermore, under the SČS, various conferences were held, as well as other events.

Very important role in the field of musical composition was played by film scores as well. Among the prominent composers belongs Jan Kapr, who was honoured for the music for the film *Nové Československo* (New Czechoslovakia); songs from the movie became very popular even in the Soviet Union. The highest honour, however, was granted to Václav Trojan, who worked with Trnka on marionette movies, wrote music for various movies, etc.

Apart from the key XX. Congress of the Communist party of the Soviet Union in 1956, three speeches by Zdeněk Nejedlý were also important. In 1948, he declared: "We are living in times that are very poor when it comes to music." Furthermore, in the same year, he said: „Our today's musical and composing collective can do much more as a whole.“

Those were words that started the establishment of SČS as a functional whole, aiming to create an integral unity of music people, joining in further fights and efforts for

creation of something new. This connection and unity have no doubt proven functional in the future and helped to achieve good results.

At the II Congress of SČS in 1949, Zdeněk Nejedlý reproached the composers that they are still focused on our classics, claiming he does not find it suitable to relate only to their work. He emphasised that the composers must go on, otherwise the whole art would lose its own real vivacity. Music should serve the people, he stated. Zdeněk Nejedlý referred to all the main problems of new pieces of music. He analysed problems of folksiness, nationality, and programme. Apart from that, he points out other problems of music in radio and film. In the end of his speech, he encourages the composers to create new musical culture based on the foundations of our great classical culture.

Nejedlý saw the core of problem in the unification of music powers of both Czech and Slovak composers. Here, Nejedlý probably contradicted himself slightly, as in the introduction of his speech, he strongly preaches cutting off from our classical tradition, and emphasises the creation of the new one. However, in the end, he changes his mind and suggests necessity of connection with the classical tradition.

At the II statewide working plenary meeting of SČS Central Committee (ÚV SČS) on 4th February 1951, Zdeněk Nejedlý made one of his most important speeches. He said: "Learn to speak through music!" That was the elementary thesis of the whole speech. This remark had a crucial importance for our music at that point. A problem was arising, how to connect musical truth – truth about life, reflected with specifically musical means – through the message of music. Life's truth appeared to be complicated and complex, although good composers were able to communicate this fact in advance. However, the listener was not able to receive the message. Therefore, editing was needed, so that it became comprehensible and absorbent for the listener. In this way, Nejedlý's remarks were embroidered on and translated by contemporary propaganda.

In the spirit of general appraisal of the folklore, folk song and culture, as well as some not precisely distinguished "folksiness", renaissance of folk culture and creativity of a special kind came to flourish. Great festivals of folk creativity were held in Líšeň and Strážnice. New pieces of music were composed, and folk songs were newly arranged. Not only were the youth ensembles taking part, but also the professional ones. However, even this situation had its downside, as the passive folklore was carried over and symphonic music was folklorized. Through overestimation of folklore elements in symphonic music, archaism and eclecticism came into being. What used to be only material for their own conceptions in Smetana or Janáček's music, it became the only purpose for these composers.

From 14th to 26th February 1956, the XX Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union took place. From its concepts even our XI Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (held 18th–21st June 1958) came out. One of its theses related to music was the "completion of socialist cultural revolution". Not to underestimate aesthetic and musical education of the people was one of the theses that were defined there. The Syndicate of Czechoslovak Composers dealt with the question how to make the work of cultural institutions better, as they perform mass influence on the society (that is television, radio, gramophone works, etc.). Aesthetic education was underrated at schools in comparison with the polytechnic at that time. The effort was to cultivate the creative talents. Fight for the so called socialist conscientiousness of musical critique comes to the forefront, wide discussions being held about socialist realism.

We could pinpoint some basic theses and claims from the text that we are going to use in critical analysis of *Zuzana Vojířová* in the context of contemporary ideologies and aesthetical norms:

1. folksiness in opera
2. connection to the classical traditions
3. the ability to speak through music
4. the creation of the „new“ in music
5. the promotion of socialist movement

Ad 1) Folk elements appear in *Zuzana Vojířová*, but probably never under the influence of principles of socialist realism. We can find dialect there, and the whole the structure of the libretto is often adapted to fit the natural human speech of common people. Another such element is the melody that often consciously imitates folk song with easily remembered motives and with typical attributes of folk tunes. It is possible to see an element of folksiness even in the story itself, when the common girl of peasant roots comes among the gentry. All the above mentioned denotations are not, however, presented in this opera as an assertion of the socialist realism doctrines. On the other hand, it is necessary to keep in mind the fact, that Pauer meant his work as a “folk opera“. That did not have to be necessarily related to the contemporary trend and dictated style. Patriotic elements and elements of pure character, that are trying to defend the country in hard times, appear. We could rather find this opera patriotic, more than a work propagating the principles of a then regime. The connection of a patriotic and nationalistic slant has bearing on with the precedent protectorate period and stances of defence, as the Czech musicology already noted at the end of the 20th century (J. Fukač, M. Kuna).

Ad 2) *Zuzana Vojířová* is ranked without any doubt among the pieces of music of the 20th century that is not trying to negate tradition nor to create new concepts *a priori*, but to link itself to the traditional development of the musical culture, and move it onwards. A work with such ambitions always stands in front of many problems: mainly, how to connect the “old” with something “new“. Here Pauer smoothly connects development of form with the opera through motivic-thematical work (he works on the themes by means of applying the principles accomplished in romanticism), using tonal principles (more on the level of modality with often changed, but always easily defined, tonal centre), and finally through the usage of easily remembered, comprehensible melodic motives that are not alienated from the listener. Not the least, he also allocates single characteristic motives to certain persons or situations.

Ad 3) “Learn to speak through music” – this thesis, presented as one of the central thoughts of the speech, is by itself only a purposeless abstract declaration that is possible to be explained in many ways. From the musical and theoretical point of view, however, it does not say anything: whether Pauer used this idea is not possible to empirically prove or displace. We need to state, and that in thorough objectiveness, that a lot of the theses presented by socialist realism did not have a clear meaning, often they were just empty phrases, this one being of them.

Ad 4) Together with the idea of connection with the musical tradition, it was requested to bring something new; in other words, create a work that is not only a copy of already made up and used principles. In *Zuzana Vojířová*, these, let's say original thoughts, are represented by the way the tonality (modality) is handled, masterful instrumentation using the whole sound-coloured spectrum of grand orchestra, building of melodic phrases on the base of musicality of human speech, though transformed into musical material that avoids conventional schemes and uses modality in a completely different way than for example folk music does, and, last but not least, harmony that widens principles of harmony functions by far, and is marked by usage of many atypical chord connections (apart from other, frequent usage of chords with and without an underlying scale, tetrads or pentads), which, however, appears to be highly logical and natural in the general context.

Ad 5) After a thorough study of the whole opera and ideological theses from the postwar period, we can state that *Zuzana Vojířová* in no obvious way propagates ideals of socialism, nor does it stand in any other way for „official“ purpose art with the intention to serve as a tool of any system.

Conclusion

Zuzana Vojířová was composed with the intention to create a folk opera accessible to the wide public. At the same time, the author managed to strengthen the elements of national self-awareness that had a crucial importance in the postwar era (this is, after all, indisputable until today). From the development of musical culture viewpoint, this work has fulfilled two major requests that are put upon art in general: to bring something new, original, and also to mediate this thorough a comprehensible form to the listener. The fears that the work should have a political character and should serve the totalitarian regime, have also proven wrong.

By choosing a historical topic, Pauer weakened the expected advances of the so called socialist realism which more and more proves to be only an ideological fiction and facade of something what remained outside the ideological control – particularly in those cases, when it touched upon a historical subject matter. If the matter with a revolutionary theme did not directly ask at least for an outside implementation of the usual and expected phrases, works could arise, that followed the time-proven type of older historizing opera that was only enriched materially with some contemporary methods (mainly modality).

More than two decades since the change of the regime have passed and it now appears that the contemporary situation is not escalated single-mindedly against Pauer's operas anymore. Jiří Pauer's identity as a functionary and important personality of cultural politics and musical scene of Czechoslovakia from the 50s to the 80s of the 20th century is starting to fall behind and to the forefront comes, again, the problems of his individual opera works as such. Their skilfully and instrumentally swiftly grasped structure destines them to be in the spotlight of the music editors. Comic operas are, naturally, the most rewarding material, but even *Zuzana Vojířová* has a new chance for appearing as a late revivalist opera with a patriotic topic that in its times still followed the pathos of the protectorate. As a facade of this situation, then phrases were used and, thus, an impression of a downright socialist-realism opera was created.

If we are closing this argument with the wish that mainly *Zuzana Vojířová* will become an object of interest for the contemporary opera dramaturgy, we are also aware, at

the same time, that it is useful and necessary to read the late works of Nejedlý and to replace the black and white rhetorics by detailed and erudite analysis to find, how does Pauer continue with this phraseology and how he follows the problems of Czech opera poetics after Smetana.

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