

## Spiritual inclination in Petr Pokorný compositions in recent years

The composer Petr Pokorný, just as many other artists who were uncompromisingly confronted by the absolutistic real socialism regime for their free minded ideals, was among others concerned with the theory of the impact of music on listeners. Let's consider, for example, the ideas of „musical dissident“ Tomáš Tvaroh, to which Pokorný refers in his thoughts: “I think that the biggest experience is given to us by such art that defines what was already developed in ourselves in some amorphous appearance...This is connected with the terms „to understand“ and „to experience“. Any art can be understood if man has sufficient intelligence, however, experienced can be only the art that somehow chimes with our core.”

To effectively understand all aspects of Pokorný's work, we have to realize that we are not speaking of an isolated individual preoccupied by his creative spiritual mysteries, but of a man socially active and fully involved in his current cultural surrounding, who seriously considers artistic production and reacts to the actual impulses of his time. If we want to get to the spiritual statement of Petr Pokorný's compositions, we firstly have to distinguish what we will imagine when speaking about this term. If we take as a guidance the musicalization of a specific spiritual or even better liturgical text, we can choose from only five of Pokorný's compositions, these being Srpnový žalm (August Psalm) op. 13 for mezzo-soprano, flute, clarinet, violin and alto, based on extracts from the Psalms from 23rd February to 10th March 1969 (still written in the Obuch notation), Marnotratný syn (Prodigal Son) op.13 for baritone and organ based on the text by Josef Kostohryz from 1991, next the cycle from 1994-95 Tři duchovní zpěvy (Three Spiritual Chants) op. 50 for solo voice (or more precisely, for soprano, alto, contrabass, piano and percussion, sometimes also collectively performed as Večerní zpěvy (Evening Chants)) based on texts from the book of prayers, the cantata Josefova smrt (Josephs Death) op.51 for soprano, baritone and strings based on his own text from 1995, and the duet for solo baritone and basso Libera me (Save Me) op. 66 from 1998. At the beginning, it is obvious that it will be unlikely for us to find the emphasis of Petr Pokorný's work here; firstly, these compositions make up a very minor part of all the composer's works (which runs into hundreds of titles) and secondly, only some of them can be considered genuinely spiritual: for example, Srpnový žalm (August Psalm) is first of all a reflection upon the events in unsettled time after the August invasion in 1968 and the text here serves only as an equivalent to his own hidden expression; Libera me is then rather a concertante composition based on mutual communication of the Czech and Latin text version. Tři duchovní zpěvy (Three Spiritual Chants) are on the contrary a purely inner spiritual statement of which mainly the first song, Přikryj mne nocí (Cover Me With Night), based upon a prayer text from Ghana, is of all of Pokorný's works the only composition that could be called a private prayer in the form of quiet harmonious integration of the human heart with God's substance.

I will leave this point of view now and I will search in two directions that in my opinion are crucial to understanding the spiritual inclination of Petr Pokorný's work:

The first level is some universality of public statements in compositions from recent years. Here we already draw near to an understanding of the spiritual substance of Pokorný's work, because here we can decipher the distinct need for a spiritual public confession. We would seek this in vain as a particular text or musically-quote expression, but we find it hidden in harmonic structures, in the formal scheme (this is excellently legible in some of the author's adaptations of older opuses!) and in the overall sounding directing over all obstacles to the need of universal integration with the unity of god's comprehension and thereby with universal harmony. The author didn't, however, understand the desire for spiritual integration as primarily a personal matter but as a complex matter, of the whole of society and its spiritual and intellectual needs. For Peter Pokorný, the individual is for God too minor an element to be concerned with, but every individual co-creates a picture of society in itself, which then comes forward as a complex to God's face.

The composer's need for spiritual declaration (even though hidden) came hand in hand with his identification with some elements of humanistic ideals, which we can find for instance in evolutionary work with motifs and topics that in their ideological (and even partly creational) process evoke Beethoven.

To decode these structures means of course to comprehend the creative work of the composer, his production and mainly the context and continuity of the evolution in his work. It would certainly be very interesting to immerse oneself in a more profound analysis and detailed discovery of these structures.

The second level of the spiritual area in Pokorný's work is much more internal: it is a purely private statement free of the needs of any ideological thoughts and all-society integration. Could there be traced and especially continually distinguished such "motif" in the compositions of Petr Pokorný?

The answer is yes: It is here and there symbolic, here and there a literal motif of a pilgrim, pilgrimage, way....We find this reference to the archetype of ancient Gnostic texts in concrete form even in the chamber cantata *Hadí královna veršů* (Snake Queen of Verses) op.18 from 1983, later in the monodrama *Krajinou prochází pištec* (Fifer Walks Across the Countryside) op. 40 from 1991, in the music scene *Putování* (Pilgrimage) op. 55 from 1999 and in many others vocal compositions.

It could be said that the motif of the "eternal lonely pilgrim" continually goes through the work of Petr Pokorný and in the last 15 years has become more and more clear and fundamental. The composer here uses the texts of his favorite poets, Josef Kostohryz, Paula Ludwig, Rainer Maria Rilke, Jaroslav Švadlena and others, to cope with their help with basic existential tasks, with artistic (here and there even human) loneliness and so on. Very often the pilgrim personage is connected with the personage of the "Fifer" who represents a clear autobiographic element in the work of Petr Pokorný; his motif appears when the author's statement is so fragile that it needs a mediator for its expression.

Allow me one larger quote from the poetry of Petr Pokorný that certainly explains best the symbology of the author's musical expression:

"They captured me and put me in a well. While sitting at its almost dried bottom I observed in the twilight – as the well was deep – progressively ascended weight of stones on the wall, dried grass bunches and tiny insect between lumps of crusted mug. Spreading weight of my then world – and this was my world – surrounded my, overwhelmed me, grew through me. I found great beauty in the unmoved comprehension of causal routes. And I completely forgot that only a very poor light leaked to me while I was admiring the perfectness of the well laws.

Thus happened that Ruben came to the well edge. But he did not spread his hand to me and he did not force me to come out of the well even though he was strong and courageous. Could he know that coming out I would pity the lost of my world standing in mighty brightness blind and unable to see the way? He bent over the wellpoint and spoke to me. He spoke of four-way that is the crossing and center, which divides and connects everlasting gardens of spirit for ages. Of the four-way which is frigidity and ardor, brightness and darkness. Then I longed to immediately ascend the highs and descend to the foggy depths, to walk immediately in those gardens. Then I longed to step out of the well at the moment but Ruben made me stay. I still lived in the swelling weight of my world for long time, but its perfection started to fill me with impatient perception of bright spaces. After that, after I got rid of all impatience, after that I finally understood, that Ruben allowed me to experience developing conversion of every stone, of every grass-blade, of every insect wing vein, of my world, by keeping me from stepping out of the well. Gradual brightening of single elements

casted this way in one large brightness that fulfilled the whole interior of the well. And then I realized the well walls did not keep me from moving anymore in anyway and that – without stepping out of the well – I walk. I walk on the road. On the road of leaving and returning, on the road of approaching and withdrawing. (from prose by Petr Pokorný Josef a Ruben).”

We mustn't of course target the vocal compositions only; if we used them as a key and the text as a clue to the comprehension of the composer's musical language, we would discover that some particular inertly fragile statement is often encrypted in the character of the used melodic and rhythmical material. This we find then in many other instrumental compositions, especially from the author's recent creative period. And among others, just thanks to “acceptance” of characteristic musical elements, recent years' work of Petr Pokorný have shown more intelligibility and simplification of musical language in all aspects.

We can gradually find these musical expressive “hints” in almost all chamber compositions from the recent period. They are most legible then in the compositions for solo piano which became part of the author's “intimate diary” after 1995.

The copingstone of these inner spiritual statements is the three-sentence piano composition *Tristia* op.79 from 2003-2004, which Pokorný considered his most important work of all. It is for the first time when composer copes consciously with the most painful topic of his life, with the Nazi holocaust.

If we connect these views to the spiritual direction in Pokorný's work, we will get to the synthesis in the two already mentioned last big orchestra compositions, that is, in *Lyrická symfonie* (Lyrical Symphony) op.75, and in *Madrigaly léta* (Summer Madrigals) op. 86. The idea of the “lonely pilgrim” is the basic line for both compositions.

They both bring more joyful tones to the music of Petr Pokorný, which had been rather difficult to listen to up till then. Music becomes pure and formally and harmonically clearly graspable. The composer claimed here the specific secession orchestra sound with a clear sequence of Gustav Mahler or even rather of Alexander Zemlinský, freed from any pomposity as well as without any inclination to eclecticism; the composer built consciously on these bases his own compact and original compositional style which is fresh, novel and colorful. It is understandable and well arranged even though it doesn't court popularity. These two quite different compositions have in their result a clear common gradation defining an almost Beethoven - like revolution against mortality and the inevitability of fate which leads to a catharsis of harmonious reconciliation in the idea of universal spiritual union.

His recent symphonic compositions take a special place in the work of Petr Pokorný: the composer here introduced a new style of manuscript, i.e. simplifying the musical language and clarifying harmonic –melodic thinking. They have also brought to his hitherto rather gloomy (yet always very poetical) work more brightness, simplicity and joy. It is just a pity that death did not give the author the possibility to further develop this new direction in his work (and his life).

While *Lyrická symfonie* (Lyrical Symphony) had its premiere at the international festival Prague Premiers in the Dvořák hall in the Rudolfinum on 23rd March 2006 and the composer was rewarded during the “encore” with long applause, *Madrigaly léta* (Summer Madrigals) still await their performance – and let us hope that they will experience it. *Lyrická symfonie* (Lyrical Symphony) has affected many music-conscious listeners as a vision. That is why it would be a pity if the following orchestra epilog would not get to listeners anymore.

Allow me at the end one more pregnant quote from Pokorný's literary work:  
"Eternal, eternally secret are the gardens of art. There are no good and bad ways, main roads or bystreets; there is no lasting direction of pilgrimage. Creative fogs welter endlessly, they become thicker and thinner, they create whirls. They break instantly and lo: shiny meadows smells by strawberries and hay, dark thickets glow wet cold of the ancient ferns, deep wells shine moon lightly by the muggy splashes and salty spray of the stormy seas embeds pungently on the face, on the hands..."

And all approaches and withdraws constantly under lights and shadows that are emitted by the pilgrims soul."

I have prepared the fifth sentence of the above-mentioned *Lyrická symfonie* (Lyrical Symphony) as a musical illustration. The beginning of the text could be liberally translated as: "He flew in from abroad – he will return there again..." The author expressed here the helplessness of standing up against fate with a new hitherto unused harmonic element, namely a minor common chord with added pure fourth laid always at the first two beats of a five-beat rhythm. The recording is taken live during its premiere on 23rd March 2006 in which performed: Gabriela Eibenová (soprano), Václav Lemberk (tenor), Jiří Bárta (violoncello), Pražský komorní orchestr (Prague Chamber Orchestra) (with temporary aid) conducted by Jaroslav Kyzlink. Thank you for your attention.

MgA. Petr Matuszek - singer, pedagogue /CZ/

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1. I found this quote in Petr Pokorný's correspondence but so far it has been impossible for me to find exact bibliographic data.
2. These aspects could be found mainly in his last symphonic compositions, such as *Lyrická symfonie* (Lyrical Symphony) op.75 for soprano, tenor, violoncello and orchestra based on the words of Paula Ludwig and Ivan Goll from 200-2001, *Madrigalli dell' Estate* (Madrigaly léta (Summer Madrigals)) op.86 for voice and chamber orchestra based on the texts of Italian secession poet Gabriele d'Annunzia from 2006, but also in his last saxophone quartet and other chamber compositions of the late creative period (even in *Galantní písně* (Gallant Chants) op. 91 based on the poems of Václav Lucemburský from 2007 among others, where a man would hardly seek this kind of secret statement in advance.
3. Also the above-mentioned *Lyrická symfonie* (Lyrical Symphony) from 200-2001 is one of the compositions where the idea of a „lonely pilgrim” is the basic line.
4. It places it is obvious the ideological similarity with the parallel motif in the song cycle *Zimní cesta* (Winter Way) by Franz Schubert based on poems by Wilhelm Müller or in the book by Josef Čapek, *Kulhající poutník* (Limping Pilgrim).
5. Literate work of Petr Pokorný is not too large, altogether 14 titles of poems in prose and prose. The main is large epic poem in form of fictional diary notes called *Cestář*. The unifying element is motif of „way” that goes through all texts and it bears the acknowledgement of spiritual awaking.
6. Till that time, Petr Pokorný had written only one composition for piano and that was *Umlkání* (Silencing) from 1969 (later, the author gave it opus

number 13a), which was affected partly by the shock of the Soviet occupation and partly by Jan Palach's self immolation.