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“Ideologically progressive art” meets Western avant-garde

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Shortly after Victorious February—the 1948 Communist *coup d'état* that put a definitive end to the democratic Masaryk era of Czechoslovakia—Prague hosted the Second International Congress of Composers and Music Critics. Its final proclamation, entitled the Prague Manifesto, became the basis of the future direction of musical culture in Communist countries. The Manifesto called for a way out of the deep crisis in music and musical life of the day. Classical music was criticized for excessive individualism, subjectivity, complexity and artificial arrangement of form. Both classical and popular music represented “two sides of the same harmful cultural state,” meaning the state of leveling cosmopolitanism. Participants in the congress officially joined the struggle against formalism in music, announced by Andrei Alexandrovich Zhdanov in his address to the congress of the USSR All-Union Communist Party (*Vsesoyuznaya Kommunisticheskaya Partiya (Bolshevikov)*) in February 1948. In September the same year, the first Working Congress of Composers and Musicologists was held in Prague, following up on the conclusions of the international congress and declaring the political role of music, which henceforth should seek creative support in the principles of Socialist Realism. The newly established Union of Czechoslovak Composers (UCC), closely tied to the ruling Communist Party, became the governing body for the implementation of Zhdanov’s principles. The Union held sufficient financial assets and decision-making authority, and its directives declared the “value of a work of art”—its thought content, progressiveness, folk character and comprehensibility. The organizational structure developed over the course of the first decade, only to be finally subdivided into three sections—composer, musicological, and performer sections—while the field offices in major Czech and Slovak towns and cities were being established. An independent Union of Slovak Composers also existed as of 1955. The Union’s voice was the only music periodical published at the time, *Hudební rozhledy* (Musical Perspectives), through which the general public was meant to be formed as regards their ideas and taste.¹ While the first post-Victorious February years were

¹ Petar Zapletal, “Československý svaz skladatelů [Union of Czechoslovak Composers],” *Český hudební slovník osob a institucí* [online], last modified March 7, 2013, http://www.ceskyhudebnislovník.cz/slovník/index.php?option=com_mdictionary&task=record.record_detail&id=5881.

focused on establishing domestic musical culture and the application of ideological themes in music, external presentation of the ideologically approved musical culture of the young people's state became the Union's mission as of the mid-1950s. The Union organized tours of artists abroad, initially to allied socialist countries. Later, the Union began sending its ideologically proven officials to the West. And it was there that ideologically progressive art was directly confronted with Western musical avant-garde. This article will outline how this encounter with the international post-war musical avant-garde was reflected by the official representatives of Czechoslovak musical culture in the 1950s and 1960s. Key sources of information include, in particular, archival documents unprocessed to date, among which I was able to use the minutes of the meetings of the Central Committee of the Union of Czechoslovak Composers. Their authenticity is confirmed by verbatim stenographic notation of the main officials' speeches and discussions of other members, revealing the mindset of the time as well as individual qualities. Other available sources include reports from international conferences and contemporary music festivals, published in *Hudební rozhledy*.

In Czechoslovakia, the first doubts about the validity of Zhdanov's principles arose even prior to the fatal twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, after which gradual de-Stalinization and overall relief of tensions also took place in Czechoslovakia. The introductory speech at the Extraordinary meeting of the Central Committee of the Union of Czechoslovak Composers in 1955 was given by Antonín Sychra, a musicologist and aesthetician, but also an influential official and ideologist of the Union. In the speech, he voiced an opinion, apparently widespread among Union members, that Socialist Realism was a regressive and dubious approach and an oversimplification. Sychra expressed this using a metaphor, also somewhat simplistic, "that in the time of jet airplanes we force composers to ride in stage coaches." He argued that socialist enthusiastic themes were receding into the background, that composers were beginning to experiment with music procedures, and that there was talk about the need to turn to the West. Sychra had concerns about the declining interest in people's artistic upbringing, this being the main mission and pillar of the Union's activities. At the same time, he announced a strategy to penetrate into the West, which involved any and all places "where they have not yet taken us into account, or refused to do so," that is, composers' festivals in Edinburgh, Lucerne, Brussels, etc., or scientific congresses where no Czechoslovak representatives had been invited so far.²

In 1957, the Union succeeded in re-establishing Czechoslovak membership in the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM), suspended after the Communist coup, while, at the same time, musicologists joined the French Société

² National Archives [Národní archiv (NA)], Union of Czechoslovak Composers [Svaz československých skladatelů], box No. 9, Stenographic minutes of the Extraordinary meeting of the UCC's Central Committee, September 21, 1955, Antonín Sychra's paper presented at the Extraordinary meeting of the UCC's Central Committee.

Internationale de Musicologie and the German Gesellschaft für Musikforschung. This participation was defended within the Union as a possibility to establish a critical attitude toward the West and strengthen the position on the social function of music, although criticism of this international direction grew stronger, especially among officials closely associated with communist ideology. They stated that while “middle-class, decadent music” had been silenced after 1948, revisionist tendencies were now growing: competing with the West, composers were taking more interest in composing techniques than in whether or not their music served the people.³

Officials therefore endeavored to express criticism of the artistic experiences from their trips abroad. Upon returning from his first trip to a festival organized by the ISCM in Zurich in June 1957, Sychra denounced the performance of Schoenberg’s opera *Moses and Aaron*, which he saw as a metaphor for the crisis of Western civilization. Music must be communicable and establish a link with something that resonates in people, Sychra wrote for *Hudební rozhledy*, adding that Schoenberg is unable to express positive qualities of life, he is only able to “instinctively heat up and harrow.”⁴ An ideologically similar evaluation of a man living in the conviction of socialist optimism, in which art serves the masses, was expressed by Zdeněk Bartoš, who attended the next edition of the ISCM festival in Venice. He concluded his paper with the following statement: “No, I have not brought enthusiasm and joy from the festival of contemporary music in Venice, or even the exaltation I experience upon encountering any great work of art.” Bartoš was particularly critical of the closing concert, a digest from the works of Igor Stravinsky, conducted by the composer himself, which opened with Stravinsky’s sacred cantata *Threni*. The Union’s official was embittered by the subjects of the works dealing with the four last things of man: “It was the very bleakness of this music, played this night as well as some previous nights, that—despite expressing joy—is grey, desolate and sad. Who is it intended for? Where is the human sentiment? Where is this art heading, what does it want, whom does it serve?”⁵

The peak international event of 1958 was the seventh Congress of the International Musicological Society in Cologne. The Czechoslovak delegation was once again led by Antonín Sychra and included, among others, Jaroslav Jiránek, musicologist, editor-in-chief of *Hudební rozhledy* and member of the Union’s presidium, whose communist conviction was close to fanaticism at the time. Jiránek

³ NA, UCC, box No. 13, Stenographic minutes of the Meeting of the UCC’s Central Committee, February 15, 1958, Main paper of UCC secretary Antonín Hořejší presented at the meeting of the UCC’s Central Committee.

⁴ Antonín Sychra, “Experiment nebo umění? Na okraj festivalu Mezinárodní společnosti pro soudobou hudbu v Curychu [Experiment or art? On the margins of the festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music in Zurich],” *Hudební rozhledy* 11 (1957): 608–609.

⁵ Jan Zdeněk Bartoš, “Festival soudobé hudby v Benátkách [Festival of contemporary music in Venice],” *Hudební rozhledy* 11 (1958): 796–797.

authored a detailed report on the conference, published in the magazine.⁶ Not all who wanted to attend the congress succeeded; the congress organizers rejected, for instance, a paper by the Union's secretary, Antonín Hořejš, entitled "The influence of the masses on musical life in Czechoslovakia," which Jiránek saw as relating to the overall atmosphere and ideological direction of the host country. Jiránek also harshly criticized the general concept of Western musicology of the time, being infiltrated, in his opinion, by a spirit of individualism that brought "what is repugnant to us almost instinctively, this personally conceived 'splendid isolation,' called 'private' by the Brits with a grain of pride, which for us, socialist people, actually means the deep solitude of man—the individual."⁷ Jiránek took a feeling from the congress that historiography only paid attention to the study of the Gregorian chant and then to dodecaphonic music, but disregarded what was in between, i.e. the essence of European culture, in his opinion. Nevertheless, Jiránek was aware of the need to cooperate with Western musicology, albeit stranded in shallow water that could only be surmounted "through creatively experienced and understood Marxist gnoseology." A discussion that flared up during a visit to the Electronic Music Studio of the West German Radio in Cologne was described as a small victory of "rational" Marxist musicology by Jiránek as well as another congress participant, Antonín Sychra.⁸ The studio's production was demonstrated by its founder and director Herbert Eimert. Although the description of this discussion by the Czechoslovak delegates is somewhat inconsistent (their language proficiency and the resulting level of understanding clearly differed), it is apparent that there was a clash between T. W. Adorno and Karlheinz Stockhausen on the one hand and East German musicologists Harry Goldschmidt and Georg Knepler on the other. Stockhausen was allegedly trying to persuade the others that people who listen to his music, even those who reject it, widely understand its meaning—for instance, the expression of abhorrence of nuclear war. Stockhausen was faced with reproaches that the means he and similar composers were using to express fear were incomprehensible to other people, but that he was indifferent to this fact. Knepler and Goldschmidt reportedly succeeded in disproving Adorno's belief that electronic music is a way of free expression of artistic individuals in the free world, and the argument of the East German musicologist was well received by West German students. This was allegedly the moment that flabbergasted Adorno so much that he expressed very deep regret about the fact that even in the Western, free world, there were people who do not understand the right of an artist to individual freedom of expression and who have in them a seed of susceptibility to totalitarian regimes such as Nazism

⁶ Jaroslav Jiránek, "Kongres v Kolíně nad Rýnem [Congress in Cologne]," *Hudební rozhledy* 11 (1958): 608–613.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 609.

⁸ See Sychra's paper at the 34th Meeting of the UCC's Central Committee. NA, UCC, box No. 13, Stenographic minutes of the Meeting of the UCC's Central Committee, July 3, 1958.

and Communism. Czech attendees interpreted this discussion patronizingly, with a feeling of ideological supremacy and convinced that the Western camp's spokesmen and advocates of electronic music were successfully put on the defensive.⁹ They ironically appreciated that Stockhausen, for instance, was trying to artistically react to the darker side of the Western world, but in a manner unacceptable to a socialist artist who never encountered decadence leading to decline.¹⁰

In his article, Jiránek also analyzed a festival concert with late tonal works of Schoenberg and Webern, Wolfgang Fortner's twelve-tone composition *Mouvements* for piano and orchestra, and Luigi Nono's *Il canto sospeso*. Jiránek's criticism was aimed predominantly at Fortner's composition, labeling it "formalist, abstractly grey, pitifully non-individual in the personal and ethnic sense."¹¹ He believed such artistic expressions had to be condemned as "bourgeois formalism is programmatically esoteric and aristocratic, but in socialist conditions, there is no place for art that is not programmatically popular, democratic, and ambitious, one that does not intend to become a powerful social force of the socialist cultural revolution of the broad masses." Jiránek also condemned Nono's composition, undoubtedly compatible with communist ideology thanks to its anti-fascist subject, but in his view the reality represented was not rendered truthfully. The musical means used, i.e. a serial technique applied to the vocal component, resulted in the fact that many parts "are flatly repugnant, inhuman, disturbed," unsuitable for portraying the world of heroes. Jiránek was irritated by the rejection of the natural vocal technique as well as the "formalist deformation of the natural musical declamation."¹² The Union was very ambivalent toward this Italian composer. In the early 1960s, Luigi Nono expressed an interest in cooperating with Czech composers. The minutes of the Union's proceedings contain information about Nono's criticism, in which he stated that the Czechoslovak party insufficiently reflected the good political work of Italian Communists (Nono was a prominent representative of the Italian Communist Party). And conversely, the Union blamed the Italian composer for not recognizing the works of Czechoslovak composers. Václav Dobiáš, the Union's president and a consistent implementer of Socialist Realism ideas (his most famous work is a cantata entitled *Build Up Your Country, Strengthen Peace*), made the following statement after attending a meeting with Luigi Nono, during which Nono played his and Bruno Maderna's works: "We were dismayed by this music. His political views are entirely forward-looking, he sees everything around him in the right way, but the contradiction between his views and his music is beyond comprehension for us."¹³

⁹ Jiránek, "Kongres v Kolíně nad Rýnem," 612.

¹⁰ Antonín Sychra's paper at the 34th Meeting of the UCC's Central Committee.

¹¹ Jiránek, "Kongres v Kolíně nad Rýnem," 611.

¹² *Ibid.*, 611–612.

¹³ NA, UCC, box No. 3, Stenographic minutes of the 26th meeting of the Presidium of the UCC's Central Committee, November 21, 1961.



Figure 1. Karlheinz Stockhausen and Luigi Nono at the 7th Congress of the International Musicological Society in Cologne. Reprint from *Hudební rozhledy* 11 (1958): 611.

The success of the Czechoslovak pavilion at the Brussels World Fair in 1958 opened the door abroad for Czechoslovak art, with touring of Czechoslovak orchestras and theatrical companies increasing in general. In his introductory speech at the 35th meeting of the UCC's Central Committee, the Union's president Václav Dobiáš spoke about the growing interest in Czechoslovak music worldwide, admitting he was receiving requests from the US to send Czech works to be performed, and that he was a frequent guest at embassies of Western countries: "All of a sudden, they are interested in meeting and greeting you, even saying hello in Czech." Dobiáš also provided a political explanation to this change. In his opinion, if Western countries wanted to find a way to the socialist camp, Czechoslovakia as a partner was less dangerous for them than the Soviet Union. He further elaborated on his theory as follows: The West had lost its commercial outlet in socialist countries as they had become economically powerful and self-sufficient, and therefore the West has to resort to the ideological struggle. Dobiáš provided an example of an occasion when a Czechoslovak cultural front entity "swallowed the bait given by the West." In the summer of 1958, Prague's National Theatre was invited to the Royal Opera in Brussels. "We thought: Brilliant, they must really like us, why is that? Maybe because some Belgians had been in a concentration camp with us." In the end, the entire undertaking was very unprofitable. "Comrades, we paid sixty francs a day for this generous gift." The invitation came for a period after the end of the season, a time when no one really attended opera, and the theatre was almost empty at the Czechoslovak performances, as Dobiáš explained the dishonest behavior of the Western institution to his Union colleagues.¹⁴

¹⁴ NA, UCC, box No. 13, Stenographic minutes of the Meeting of the UCC's Central Committee, November 17, 1958. Introductory speech of the president of the UCC, Václav Dobiáš, at the 35th

The Union's officials were required to report on the seamy side of Western culture, but also on the successful representation of the people's democratic culture, naturally motivated by efforts to curry favor with the governing body, the Communist Party, which funded the trips. In his account of the International Congress of the Canadian League of Composers, Dobiáš tried to convince readers of *Hudební rozhledy* that his contribution to the discussion, in which he introduced the Union's activities to the Canadian audience and assured them of the Union's excellent economic possibilities, was a "bombshell," to use his own words.¹⁵ In light of frequent complaints about budget problems discussed at the Union meetings, this international presentation by Dobiáš seems almost laughable.



Figure 2. Václav Dobiáš (left) at the International Congress of the Canadian League of Composers (1960). National Archives, Fond of the Union of Czechoslovak Composers, box No. 3, sign. Dobiáš, folio 117.

The Union of Czechoslovak Composers nevertheless generously sponsored large delegations of its "observers" to the Warsaw Autumn festival that became a sort of Darmstadt for the people's democratic republics soon after its foundation in 1956. The festival, organized in a brotherly socialist country, distinctly departed from Zhdanov's doctrines from the very beginning, presenting the latest works of Western avant-garde composers. Even the Polish composing school broke the chains of Socialist Realism, and this fact was reflected in a very negative way by

meeting of the UCC's Central Committee in Brno.

¹⁵ "Na mezinárodním kongresu v Kanadě. Rozhovor s Václavem Dobiášem [At the international congress in Canada. Interview with Václav Dobiáš]," *Hudební rozhledy* 13 (1960): 721–724.

the Union, this being documented by numerous critical texts published in *Hudební rozhledy*. In the early 1960s, even the Union's officials had to admit that a lack of knowledge of the new composition techniques was becoming a serious handicap for Czech and Slovak composers, especially when meeting Polish composers, as one attendee informed his colleagues: "The Poles take pride that their works are being performed in the West, and they view us as uneducated and obsolete. They don't see us as their partners, and this became apparent in the discussions."¹⁶ He tried to persuade the others that it was a mistake not to be able to educate Czechoslovak musicians in these directions, and that if this music were discussed to a greater extent, it would cease to be a forbidden fruit. The view that composers should be allowed to attend the festival in Warsaw, but also the one in Darmstadt, was also voiced at the Union's meeting in 1961.

The process of gradual loosening of the rigid 1960s atmosphere was slow and reluctant in the magazine *Hudební rozhledy*, i.e. the Union's official mouthpiece. This decade also saw a sharp increase in the number of trips abroad, as indicated, for instance, in the plan of such trips for 1963. Its compilation and approval had to be preceded by numerous negotiations with the relevant officials of both the Communist Party and the Union in the individual sections.¹⁷ The Union's officials increasingly talked about the importance of maintaining international contacts, ensuring Czechoslovak participation in international congresses and seminars, delegating judges to international competitions, and building an "outward musical offensive," to use the rhetoric of the time.¹⁸ The West also played a major role here. The composers' interest, however, in presentation abroad and gaining professional experience was limited by the low foreign exchange resources available to the Union, but primarily by the complicated approval process, as the trip of each delegation or individual members had to be decided by the supreme party body, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Within the 40-year era

¹⁶ NA, UCC, box No. 3, Minutes of the 23rd meeting of the Presidium of the UCC's Central Committee, September 11, 1961.

¹⁷ NA, UCC, box No. 4, Minutes of the meeting of the Presidium of the UCC's Central Committee, November 6, 1961.

¹⁸ For instance, in 1963, the Union sent the following works of Czech composers to the ISCM competition held in Copenhagen: Jan Rychlík's *African Cycle*, Jarmil Burghauser's *Seven Reliefs*, Viktor Kalabis's String Quartet No. 2, Josef Berg's *Nonet*. Slovak compositions included Peter Kolman's String Quartet and Miroslav Bázlik's *Five Songs on Chinese Poetry*. The Union also attempted to present Czech composers in the US, an effort to be arranged by Miroslav Košler, a conductor who then worked as assistant to Leonard Bernstein in New York (the following selection of works was sent to the US: Lubort Bárta: *Piano Concerto*; Svatopluk Havelka: *Symphony*; Otmar Mácha: *Night and Hope*; Vladimír Sommer: *Antigone*; Jindřich Feld: *Concerto for Flute and Orchestra*; Viktor Kalabis: *Symphony No. 2*; Jaromír Podešva: *Symphony No. 2*. See NA, UCC, box No. 4, Report on the activities of the Presidium of the UCC's Central Committee between the Fourth and Fifth Meeting of the Central Committee, not dated [1963].

of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia, the 1960s were a period during which ideological arguments in art receded into the background, music became a genuine instrument of diplomacy and a tool to promote closer ties between the two worlds separated by the Iron Curtain. The democratization process in society, culminating in the Prague Spring of 1968, was violently cut short, however, by the invasion of Warsaw Pact forces. The so-called normalization, which took place in the 1970s, once again returned Czechoslovak musical culture to isolation. The Union's officials became increasingly conscious of the lack of continuity in Czechoslovak contemporary music in the face of the world stage, realizing it was pointless to ideologically comment on events occurring in Western New Music and continually contrast it with "our healthy core."

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