

I Want to Develop the Czech Tradition

CONDUCTOR TOMÁŠ BRAUNER

We had originally planned to speak only of music. About future plans. About Tomáš Brauner. But the world turned upside down. So this interview – conducted at the end of May 2020, a few days before Tomáš's concert with the Prague Symphony Orchestra at the Prague Spring – had to begin with some notes on the exceptional months that preceded it.

Where were you when concerts were cancelled and how did you experience this period?

I was rehearsing with the Pardubice Philharmonic and Václav Hudeček. We were getting ready for the opening concert of the Pardubice Summer of Music festival, which was to take place the following day. The abrupt cancellation was a surprise, of course. At the time, no one expected this would last several months. As for a general evaluation – I didn't count how many cancellations there were. But there's the subscribers' concerts with the Bohuslav Martinů Philharmonic Orchestra in Zlín, two evenings with FOK (the Prague Symphony Orchestra) performing Dvořák's *Svatební košile* (known in English as *The Spectre's Bride* – editor's note), and others too... and cancellations are still coming in. After the initial shock, I tried to get my bearings. Me and my wife, of course, had to work out the family; children – school and kindergarten. That kept us busy for a while. When we discovered there would, in fact, be a lot more time, I started de-cluttering my agenda, my score collection, and my household. I spent a lot of time on this! I had always looked forward to the activities falling under the label “when I have some free time”. Of course, I ended up making my life more difficult, as I kept finding scores left in boxes from our recent move. Like Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, which I began studying immediately. Then I found *Parsifal*, that set me back a few hours too. Maybe it's score study I'll never get to use, but that's really not a problem with Wagner. I wasn't really dragged down into depression by this break, as I still have the vision of future seasons in front of me. We have much to look forward to. And what's more – and this is even more important – I could spend more time with my beautiful family and settle down a little.





PHOTO: PETRA HAJSKÁ

Do you study scores you aren't actively planning to perform during normal operation?

Sometimes, I'll look through some of the more complex scores up to a year in advance. I might not study them regularly after that, but I know my way around. Even a few years later, these pre-preparations are a great help. I have to say I have quite a decent musical memory. When I used to play oboe in various orchestras, I'd usually remember what I'd played. Not just the oboe part, but the entire score, which I always had tucked away somewhere. I was interested in the entire context of the piece. That above all else, in fact. I kept looking under the conductors' hands. You could even say I studied the oboe with a view of conducting.

When did you decide to become a conductor?

I remember it exactly. I was ten years old, I was at home, and we were watching Leonard Bernstein's legendary programme with the New York Philharmonic. He was explaining to his young audience how it all worked. And, most importantly: how to play the orchestra. Like a huge instrument. I liked that a lot. My parents convinced me to

learn a smaller instrument first. I was already taking piano lessons, but we decided I'd try a wind instrument too. So I chose the oboe - I had the closest relationship to it thanks to my father, Jiří Krejčí. My parents, however, were not exactly over the moon. Beginning on the oboe is a long and arduous process. That's why I think so many oboists become conductors. As we make our reeds, we have time to think...

There was another event that was decisive for my career as a conductor: I was seventeen and I went to the Viennese State Opera to see Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*. As we had virtually no money, it was a great adventure. Donald Runnicles was conducting. I was fascinated by the ceremony of getting into the theatre: five hours waiting outside, then two hours inside, and - in the case of Wagner - five hours standing on the gallery. We had tickets in the corners of the side boxes, so we saw nothing. Except the conductor - and I didn't take my eyes off of him for the duration of the performance. I was utterly charmed by the sound, as well as the entire atmosphere. This experience was decisive! And it's part of the reason why I so enjoyed returning to Vienna as an exchange from the Prague Academy,

where I was studying conducting with Professor Radomil Eliška. I just love the atmosphere in Vienna: the Philharmonic, the Opera... When I was there during the 2007/2008 academic year, I saw over sixty operas and thirty concerts. And I attended many public dress rehearsals too, as well as rehearsals of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra – I had an arrangement with Fabio Luisi, the chief conductor at the time. My studies were hugely important for me. I was considering continuing at postgraduate level, but I got an offer from Plzeň (Pilsen) to act as assistant to the chief conductor of the opera – I was recommended from Vienna by the conductor Ivan Pařík.

When did you definitively choose conducting over the oboe?

It happened while I was studying at the Academy. I had to intermit my oboe studies for health reasons and the recommended convalescent period was quite long. Returning to the oboe after two years, at the level demanded by the school, was hard. Decision time came and it certainly wasn't easy, even though I was basically counting on this since the start. I gradually began getting more opportunities to conduct. After Vienna and Plzeň, I became a guest conductor at the Prague State Opera. At thirty years old, I could conduct the masterpieces of Verdi and Puccini. I accepted it all with gratitude. Then I became the principal guest conductor of the Pilsen Philharmonic and later its principal conductor. But making ends meet at the beginning of my conducting career was difficult: I worked as a driver for the Prague Spring festival or as a night-time hotel receptionists.

And your first symphonic concert?

That was while I was still at the academy in Prague. From the second year onwards, every year would end with a symphony orchestra concert, with orchestras from Pardubice, Teplice, České Budějovice, Plzeň, Olomouc, or Ostrava. Priceless experience. For the first time in my life, I could put together an evening-length programme – and I still remember what it was. In my second year, with the Pardubice Philharmonic, I performed Mendelssohn's first symphony in C major, Bohuslav Martinů's *Rhapsody* for viola and orchestra with Jiří Pinkas, and Petr Eben's *Pražské nokturno* (*Prague Nocturne*). I later worked with the Czech Chamber Philharmonic and the Czech National Symphony Orchestra. I did a beautiful concert with them nine years ago for which I could select the programme myself: Ives' *Unanswered Question*, Ravel's *Piano Concert for the Left Hand*,

and Rachmaninoff's second. That was my premiere in the Smetana Hall of the Municipal House.

What's your dream programme? Except for Wagner's operas, that is.

That's an awfully difficult question. Especially as I keep enriching myself with new repertoire. There are more and more options. But I'll admit I feel an affinity for late Romanticism; the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. I always enjoyed programming composers of this period. But there are many names on that list! I'd hate to offend someone by leaving a name out. Of Czech composers, I have to name Bohuslav Martinů, Josef Suk, Josef Bohuslav Foerster, Zdeněk Fibich – composers that aren't played here as often as they should be. Antonín Dvořák, Bedřich Smetana, and Leoš Janáček are, of course, a Czech conductor's dearest duties. Not only their selected works, but everything, including the chamber work (though of course, that doesn't concern conductors). I also have a passion for Russian music, its rawness and nostalgic atmosphere, as well as the complex historical context. On the opposite end of the spectrum, I admire French and American music – Charles Ives, for instance, who really gets minimal recognition here. As we're talking of contexts, I am fascinated by the fact that Dvořák and Ives wrote during the same period. How amazingly different their work is!

Let us turn to conducting technique. You get a score you've never done. How do you start? With the music or the extra-musical context?

I'll take Schönberg's *Verklärte Nacht* – which I just did with FOK for Prague Spring – as an example. First, I was interested in the circumstances under which the piece was created. The information just piles up: the date of composition, the reworking – that's the foundation. Then I arrived at Richard Dehmel's poem *Two People*. I was "happy like a little boy" when I found it in a secluded little secondhand book store in Prague for thirty crowns. An edition from 1927 to boot! Even Zdeněk Tlamichaj's introduction is a work of literature: the circumstances of production; the mystery of the text; various translational problems. So I started with the book. I took the time to read the poem properly. The narrative is different – Schönberg took only what he needed and what spoke to him. This helped me a lot in understanding the score. We played the 1943 string orchestra version, but of course, I was also interested in the original sextet – I studied the differences in detail. It's a difficult, detailed score. And this is how I study every time. You could say I start from the preface.

However, I'm rarely satisfied, as there are many information channels and I always miss something.

Does studying the texts help you in rehearsal?

Certainly – I saw it clearly when we were rehearsing Suk's *Asrael* with FOK. It helped us to talk about inspirations. It was a form of guide for how to read the work correctly. The specifics of sound are our livelihood, but it's also important to feel beyond them – in the case of *Asrael*, to feel when the "angel descends from the heavens and carries the soul away". When I share this with the orchestra, I feel I'm saving myself a lot of words. Returning to Schönberg: the score to *Verklärte Nacht* is conceived in such a maximalist way that there isn't much room for discussion. We can contemplate on the tempi the composer wrote. In this regard, it's interesting to listen to composers performing their own works. Gustav Mahler playing his Fifth on piano, for instance? He barely adheres to the notation... It's sweet. So perhaps we can bring something of our own to the table too.

Returning to Suk's Asrael: do you consider it your fateful work?

I do. But there are others, too! Shostakovich's eighth, for instance, or Mahler's ninth and Strauss's operas. But I still remember when *Asrael* really entranced me. I was driving home one day and, as I approached my destination, *Asrael* began playing on the radio. I parked the car, but I only made it home an hour later. I was utterly incapable of extricating myself from the music.

You are now mostly an orchestral conductor, but you started with opera. How do these two worlds coexist in your life today?

I started with opera because that's the offer that came in the post. But it soon balanced out with orchestral conducting. And I was happy for it. Today, I mostly work with symphony orchestras, as attested to by my positions as principal conductor. Unfortunately, time constraints prevent me from dedicating more time to opera. I miss it often. I love inhaling the atmosphere of the theatre; that fragrance. I grew up in it – I was surrounded by opera in Vienna. But I'm not pushing for operatic work. I try to be humble enough to accept the offers I get. I always liked that conductors took opera as a natural component of their profession. The division wasn't that strong. Now I feel it quite palpably. There are conductors who don't want to conduct opera, which I don't quite understand. But let's take Kirill Petrenko, who went

from the Bavarian Opera to the Berlin Philharmonic. Operatic and orchestral conducting are clearly not in opposition. They naturally complement each other.

Over the last few months, we have witnessed more concerts online than in person. How do you compare the two?

The main difference is that you can't rewind a live concert. This unique, unrepeatable nature of a live performance is miraculous. I certainly make use of the opportunity to watch concerts around the world thanks to streaming services and online archives. I am always interested in different interpretations. I have a rich recording collection at home and I work with that. I have quite a good memory – I only need to hear a concert once to know what was different. It's a good work tool for me. But in streamed concerts, I lose the general feeling; the atmosphere; the reactions of the audience. Though we should certainly be grateful for streaming in these complicated times, it will never replace live performances. Although it might not seem that way now, I believe that a hunger for community and a unique, unrepeatable experience will persevere. The number of likes on Facebook, for instance, is terribly misleading. They don't mean anyone saw the entire concert; experienced it. A reaction to a live performance, whatever it may be, is always more valuable. The experience is key. We all need it. That's the mission of live art in general. And the personal confrontation, too – video really doesn't allow for that. I can't imagine people sitting down for an hour and a half in front of their computer, calm and ready to forget their everyday worries. In the concert hall and the theatre: you're immersed; absorbed. You *want* to perceive fully, to na extent, you *have* to, and that's effective treatment; mental cleansing. That's why people will always attend cultural events. At least I hope so.

Do you have any rituals before and after a concert?

I recently realised that I do: I'm always in my dressing room long in advance and I have a walk around the stage while it's still empty. I did this in the theatre and I do the same at concerts. I walk to the conductor's podium, I look at the empty auditorium and I breathe in the space. I also make sure that everything is in order. Then, it's just technical preparations: arrangements with the soloists (including practical things, like whether we walk on from the left or the right); we remind ourselves of some details in the score. This is all about an hour and a half before the concert. I try to be strict in this respect. After the concert, I usually drink a litre of water and go sit down somewhere

– if we're not repeating the same programme the following day, that is. It's not as established a ritual as before the show, but I'm always so full of the music that I can't go to sleep. I think back to the concert. I revisit particular moments. It's all reverberating inside me – sometimes longer than I'd like! It's unthinkable for me to go to the hotel shortly after the performance. I intentionally try not to rush my departure from the dressing room. Everything takes a while. And as for the possible reprise, one needs to be on guard. The feeling of greater ease can be deceptive. After all, we have a new audience, new reactions, a new atmosphere. It's all new!

What do you carry with you from your previous symphonic positions?

With the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra, apart from the beautiful concerts, I have to mention the recording experience, particularly the complete set of Martinů piano concerti. Thanks to this cycle, I had the opportunity to acquaint myself with the concerti that aren't programmed very often, like the first piano concerto or the concerto for two pianos. And I had the chance to perform both works in Plzeň and Zlín, too! In fact, the same is true of his overtures, like *Thunderbolt P-47* or *Half-Time*, which I performed with the Slovak Philharmonic and also in Zlín. I also recorded with the Pilsen Philharmonic. Recording sessions there are not as abundant as with the Radio Symphony, but it's still part of the orchestra's profile. In Plzeň, I recorded Martinů's complete cello concerti with Petr Nouzovský. And I performed the *Concertino* and the *First Cello Concerto* several times after that. In Plzeň, we also applied ourselves to mapping composers of the region, such as Karel Pexidr, Jiří Bezděk, and others. It's quite a substantial compositional community, but I focused on Pexidr: I recorded a lot of his symphonic music, as well as the piano and violin concerti. He is not only a composer, but also a lawyer, man of letters, and philosopher. And a hunter too! He turned ninety last November. The last position I can judge is in Zlín. I also try to programme works and composers who have not been played there in the past. The dramaturg there is supportive of these intentions. Next season, we'll perform Ives, Ligeti, and a world premiere by Lukáš Sommer.

And your vision for the FOK Prague Symphony Orchestra?

I'd like to grasp and develop the Czech tradition and thus follow in the footsteps of the Czech principal conductors of FOK who were the true builders of the ensemble. They all left a deep and

significant footprint, whether in the archive or in the recordings that, I think, I know quite well: Smetáček, Bělohlávek, Kout. I'd like to breath new life into the orchestra, opening up new possibilities in the programming. Not violently, of course – gently. Incidentally, I've had ties to FOK since my childhood, as my mother took me to concerts, and my father, who knew Václav Smetáček very well, would often relate many anecdotes about him. And I also feel something connects me to Jiří Kout. We both worked at the theatre in Plzeň. I often think about the conductors of FOK and I have immense respect for them all. I'd like to use the orchestra's potential to the full; to place it safely among the best ensembles in Czech and European cultural life. This, of course, doesn't just depend on the principal conductor. The responsibility lies with the entire team, which should work like a perfect Swiss watch. I believe we'll manage to maintain this position and bring the audience unique experiences and a feeling of absolute devotion to a single calling for which we, as musicians, live to the fullest.

Tomáš Brauner

is among the most sought-after conductors of his generation. Starting in the 2020/2021 season, he is the principal conductor of the FOK Prague Symphony Orchestra. He has held the post of principal conductor of the Bohuslav Martinů Philharmonic Orchestra in Zlín since 2018, as well as acting as principal guest conductor at the Pilsen Philharmonic, where he was principal conductor from 2013 to 2018. From 2014 to 2018, he was also the principal guest conductor of the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra. He regularly collaborates with leading symphony orchestras and opera houses including the Czech Philharmonic, PKF – Prague Philharmonia, Münchner Symphoniker, Deutsche Radio Philharmonie, Nürnberger Symphoniker, the Cracow Philharmonic, National Radio Orchestra Romania, and the Slovak Philharmonic. He began his opera conducting career at the J. K. Tyl Theatre in Plzeň. 2008 saw his debut at the Prague State Opera: Verdi's *Otello*. This was followed by Massenet's *Don Quichotte*, Rossini's *Barber of Seville*, Puccini's *La bohème* and *Tosca*, Verdi's *Nabucco*, Mozart's *Magic Flute*, and Bizet's *Carmen*. Brauner was born in Prague in 1978. He studied oboe and conducting at the Prague Conservatory. In 2005, he graduated from the conducting programme at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. This was followed by an exchange trip to the Viennese Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst.

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